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20



EDITORIAL

- 3 Ancestry in Motion

FEATURES

- 4 Remembering Ancestors
8 Rediscovered Relations
13 My Ah Kong's Hometown
16 600 Years of the Ongs
17 The Ancestors' Way or
the Highway
18 Ancestral Feasts

CHAKAP CHAKAP

- 20 Collecting For
Future Generations

SHOWCASE

- 22 Harmonious Offering

BOOKS

- 23 Bittersweet Secrets

DALAM DAPOR

- 24 Blooming Cuisine

EVENTS

- 27 Picturing Peranakans
29 Good Fortune For All
High on Sunshine

NOTICEBOARD

- 30 Peranakan Associations
in the Region

DIRECTORY

- 31 The Peranakan Guide,
Singapore

CHAKAP HABIS

- 32 *Siapa Kong Mama Lu?*

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ANCESTRY IN MOTION

Put a few babas and nyonyas together in the same room and chances are they will end up talking about their parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, the numerous intermarriages amongst families and eventually, how one another could be related by marriage or even blood ties, no matter how distant! Have you heard the term *bau bau bakchang* (the aroma of glutinous rice dumplings) being used as an expression of the pervasiveness of blood ties among Peranakans?

I know of many Babas with the remarkable memory for names and how so-and-so's grandmother's second sister was married to so-and-so's eldest brother whose offspring was some prominent person, and so on. Among such Babas are my brother, through his pure passion for genealogy, and my father who, despite his moderate dementia, maintains an encyclopaedic memory with regard to a person's family relationships. My father is not the exception. His was a generation where archival memory was probably the only means of passing down knowledge of the complex web of relationships spun out from paternal and maternal bloodlines.

In recent years there has been much interest in genealogy amongst Peranakans both old and young. Many families have historical records of both males and females, but in some families it was only the men who were counted for. There is one Baba I know who is investigating the lineages of the lost women in his family. I do not know whether he has succeeded. But it must have been no mean task tracking down wives and daughters.

In this issue we look at the investigative efforts of three Peranakans to find their roots, making new discoveries either by serendipity or through dedicated searches in China, the ancestral origin of most Peranakans. We also focus on the Confucianist principle of filial piety towards the living and the dead, articulated in numerous forms which to the extreme, involved cannibalism and even infanticide! Such is the significance of ancestry that respect for the dead stretches from the daily prayer at the household altar to elaborate rituals such as the *semayang abu* which you can learn about in the following pages. We also feel the angst of one Peranakan who was tasked with the duty of



Photography by Colin Chee

exhuming his ancestors' graves at Bukit Brown, sacrificing what was thought to be their final resting place, for a multi-lane highway.

Like Bukit Brown, our own family history is our precious heritage. Take a moment or two to think about your forefathers. And the women behind them.

Linda Chee, *Editor*

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Remembering



*Detail of the
Jee Chap See Hao
(二十四孝, Ershisi Xiao).
The tenth paragon of filial
piety, Tong Hoo Jin, feeds
her own breastmilk to her
mother-in-law.*

ANCESTORS

BABA PETER LEE muses on an ancient concept lying at the heart of the Peranakan universe

Perhaps no principle was more fundamental and important to a Peranakan family of old than that embodied in the Hokkien term *hao* (孝, *xiao*) or filial piety. *Hao* encompassed devotion, duty and respect towards one's family's elders, living or dead. One of the greatest compliments one could give to a person was to praise him or her as *ut hao* (有孝, *youxiao*), or filial. From

Jee Chap See Hao (二十四孝, *Ershisi Xiao*), or *Classic of the Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety*, a painting on silk by Soh Gee, Singapore, 1917, mounted on a teak screen. Collection of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee, Singapore.

the Confucian perspective, filial piety is the basis for not only understanding one's place in family and society, engendering universal harmony, but ultimately, of the cultivation of *teck* (德, *de*) or virtue, and *jin* (仁, *ren*) or benevolence. Practically, it was the basis for so much good in Chinese history and society, but it was also the root of an equal amount of evil. Every Peranakan family dysfunction can perhaps be traced to an obsession with filial piety. Filial piety and all its Confucian connotations have had a tough time in the 20th century. Mao made it a crime to enact ancestral rites. In Singapore, it just lost relevance in the early years of the republic, as everyone abandoned any sense of family history. Look at all the abandoned graves at Bukit Brown, like Angkor Wat, with banyan trees growing on tombstones. Seems like the only kind of piety that can excite a Peranakan these days is *kueh pie tee*.

A classic on filial piety

The reason for this terrible decline can perhaps be attributed to a ghoulish Chinese book. The bible of the populist approach to filial piety is the *Jee Chap See Hao* (二十四孝, *Ershisi Xiao*), or *Classic of the Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety*. Written by Kwek Kee Keng (郭居敬, Guo Ju Jing) a Hokkien official during the Yuan period (1260-1368), it is the most terrifying compilation of the most extreme forms of devotion to parents. It is the veritable bible of family emotional blackmail. The "morally uplifting" tales of these 24 individuals in fact read like twisted, macabre horror stories, involving infanticide, cannibalism, galactophagia and even coprophagia (google these last two terms yourself). For example, paragon number 10, the noble Tong Hoo Jin (唐夫人) or Lady Tang, is remembered for her great devotion to her mother-in-law, who enjoyed

daily squirts of Lady Tang's breast milk during a period of illness when she could not consume anything else. Now, dear lactating nyonya readers... imagine approaching your *neo* (mother-in-law) in her bedroom, removing your kerosangs, then your *kebaya*, followed by your *choli* (bra), then gently drawing your *neo*'s head towards your chest, and sweetly whispering to her, "*Neo, makan?* Breakfast time, *eh*." Oh, what better way to win your *neo*'s affection. Just pray she has no teeth.

Then there was the dreadful "hero", the impoverished Kwek Kee (郭巨, Guo Ju), paragon number 13, who decided to bury alive his only child, a young boy, so that he could take care of his elderly mother. The toddler was miraculously saved by a pot of gold unearthed while Kwek was digging the little hole in the ground! But the paragon who, literally, *takes the cake*, as well as the global, historical, all-time fear factor award, must be none other than Jee Keen Loh (庾黔婁, Yu Qian Lou), who willingly tasted a lovely dollop of his beloved father's excrement. Doctors needed a life-or-death answer to the question about whether daddy's brownie was sweet or bitter, which would determine the correct life-saving treatment. Well, after giving it a good swirl in his mouth, Jee declared that it was sweet. And how absolutely sweet of him too. Now, would you do something like that for *your* father?

Ways of commemorating

Beyond the expression of love and devotion to living parents, filial piety extended to commemorating deceased forebears, embodied in the term *twee wan* (追遠, *zhuiyuan*), remembering ancestors. This term is a reference to a line in the *Analepts of Confucius* (1:9):

慎終追遠，民德歸厚矣

To be prudent in mourning, and to reflect on those who have passed away; is to enhance the virtue of the people.



This tradition goes back to the dawn of Chinese civilisation. The *See Keng* (詩經, *Shi Jing*) or *Classic of Poetry*, which has odes dating to the early Zhou dynasty (c.1046-256 BC), makes reference to ancestral sacrifices. For example, the closing lines of the poem *Thick, thick the thistle* (楚楚者茨, no. 209) suggests that those who performed appropriate offerings to ancestors in the form of music, wine and food, would be blessed with long life and generations of descendants:

神嗜飲食，使君壽考。孔惠孔時，維其盡之。
子子孫孫，勿替引之

The spirits enjoyed the drink and food, and thus his lordship will enjoy longevity. All will be successful and good, because the rites were performed to the utmost. Sons' sons, grandsons' grandsons, long will the bloodline continue.

Peranakans have held very profound feelings for the departed. One of the reasons for the establishment in the early 17th century of the Cheng Hoon Teng and the Bukit China cemetery, was a sense of compassion for those who died without heirs to perform ancestral rites. A passage from an inscription dated 1795 at the Poh San Teng in Bukit China, Malacca, expresses these sentiments:

因我唐人遠志貿易羈旅，營謀未遂，殞喪厥軀，骸骨難歸，盡瘞於斯。噫嘻！

Because our countrymen from China perish while roaming distant lands for trade, and do not see their ambitions come to fruition, it is difficult for their remains to be returned home, and they end up buried here. Alas!

Although funerals and mourning periods were probably the most elaborate articulations of filial piety (a topic in itself), the various commemorations of the deceased were more intrinsically part of daily life and the cycle of the year. There were several ways ancestors were remembered. In homes during the good old days, a carved and lacquered plaque inscribed with the characters *twee wan* was usually placed in the ancestral hall, above the *kam* (龕), or shrine housing the *sinchi* (神主) or spirit tablets of the deceased ancestors, expressing the mission of every family ancestral altar. Incense sticks were lit daily and placed before the altar; fruit and *kueh* (cakes) were offered on the first and 15th day of the month. A special meal of 12 dishes was prepared for the birthdays (冥忌, *beng kee*) and death anniversaries (死忌, *see kee*) of the ancestors, on new year's eve, on Cheng Beng (清明), ancestors' day, which usually falls on 5 April, on the fifth day of the fifth month (Mid-Autumn Festival, or Dragon Boat Festival, known as *Pe Cun* in Indonesia), as well as during the lunar seventh month (the so-called 'Hungry Ghost Month'), and on Tang Chek (冬至), the winter solstice. Offerings were also made before ancestral graves at Cheng Beng. The kinds of dishes were very specific, and even the kinds of porcelain used

Genealogical information was traditionally compiled in chokpoh, or clan books. This page from the chokpoh of the family of the wealthy businessman and philanthropist Tan Kim Seng, records all the necessary genealogical information about him, such as birth and death dates, place of burial, spouses and children.



Painted portrait of Wee Boon Teck by the artist Lim Kim Swee, painted posthumously in 1899. Collection of NUS Baba House. Gift of Wee Lin.

were particular to such occasions (see article by Tan Kuning in this issue, p. 18; and Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, *Rumah Baba: Life in a Peranakan House*, 1998, pp. 56-69). For example, the stewed

vegetable dish known as *chapchai* was prepared only for such occasions to commemorate the dead, and would never have been served at the birthdays of the living. Families also often included items favoured by ancestors in their lifetimes, such as cigarettes, and even durian. At weddings, the bride and groom had to pay obeisance before the ancestral altar.

Families who could afford it established trusts for the maintenance of graves and the enactment of ancestral rites, funded by rental from property owned by these trusts. These rites were costly, and if you came from a long line of many generations, you could end up with a *see kee* every week! Every household had some form of shrine; those with the tablets of several generations of ancestors were known as *rumah abu* ('ash house'). Wealthier and larger families established clan temples, which housed the tablets of several related lineages.

Ancestral portraits were also a key way of remembering; clan temples and *rumah abu* have walls filled with paintings

and photographs. Even the poorest families would have at least a photograph of their deceased parents simply hung on the wall or placed above a makeshift shrine in a prominent area of the house. Intriguingly, the most senior female ancestor takes pride of place in several of the oldest households in Malacca, indicating a strong matriarchal element in what is supposed to be a very patriarchal, Confucian tradition. The function of such portraits as ancestral mementoes is underlined by the fact that



Photograph portrait of Khoo Guan Koo of Penang, with the kind of biographical information inscribed in Chinese and English around it, which suggests it was displayed in an ancestral hall. Collection of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee, Singapore.

most painted portraits were executed posthumously. Some elderly people went as far as to have a special portrait taken of themselves for their own funeral! Another way of remembering was of course, keeping records. Biographical data were documented in the *chok poh* (族譜, *zupu*) or clan genealogical register, at the back of the *sinchi*, on the gravestone, and sometimes on an inscribed plaque beside the ancestral altar. The genesis of every clan is some ancient emperor or other, so there is nothing at all to feel special about! Information provided usually included birth and death dates, colonial and imperial titles (if they had been conferred, or paid for, one), names of spouses, children and grandchildren, place of burial, and the name of the ancestral village in China.

Complicating matters is the fact that a Chinese person typically had several names during his or her lifetime.

There was the *beng* (名, *ming*), the name given by parents, then the *jee* (字, *zi*), a courtesy or adult name given at the age of 20, then also a *ho* (號, *hao*), or fancy/poetic name that an adult may give him or herself. Complicating matters even further was the fact that there was a completely unique vocabulary for deceased people. For example, a deceased father was referred to as *khoo* (考, *kao*) and a deceased mother was a *bee* (妣, *bi*). A grave was often euphemistically referred to as a *keh seng* (佳城, *jiacheng*) or 'glorious citadel'. The *beng* or name of a person was referred to as his or her *hwee* (諱, *hui*). Furthermore a deceased person was given a *see* (謚, *shi*) or posthumous name, which would be the name carved on the

tombstone instead of the name the person was commonly known by. Reading genealogical records can therefore get anyone very confused.

The simple truth, however, is that most people never even knew the names of their parents and forebears; only by their family relationships. And the irony of it was that because parents and children were often discovered to have incompatible horoscopes, many Peranakans were not allowed to address their parents as "mother" and "father", but rather, as "aunty" and "uncle".

Web of Memories

The internet has engendered a resurgence in an interest in genealogy. The National Library has helped tremendously by digitising archival issues of newspapers from the early 19th century, and making them not only available to the public, but also easily searchable (<http://newspapers.nl.sg>). They have also published a very useful book: *Roots: Tracing Family Histories. A Resource Guide* (2013). The National Archives is also another mine of information (<http://archivesonline.nas.sg>). Song Ong Siang's 1921 classic, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, a treasury of information on famous and infamous Peranakans, is also now available for reading online: <https://archive.org/stream/onehundredyearsof1braduoft#page/n0/mode/2up>.

Bloggers and genealogists have taken full advantage of these resources now that there is so much information available. Several clans have also set up private and public family tree websites. The Bukit Brown issue has certainly created a massive interest in the history of those buried there, although it is rather a pity that the focus remains so narrow. What about other pioneers not buried there and members of other communities? What about the other great cemeteries? And surely even the unknown bricklayer and carpenter were pioneers? This wave of interest in local history is certainly encouraging, but there is an uncomfortable undercurrent of Chinese chauvinism, and an obsession with the rich and famous of yore.

Ancestral hall of the Wee family. Hanging above the kam or ancestral shrine is a lacquered plaque inscribed with the words twee wan (zhuiyuan), 'remembering ancestors'.

Navel gazing

There is a fine line between passion and knowledge on the one hand, and obsessive *geekdom* on the other, in the quest for family history and genealogy. The most constructive criticism given to me about The Peranakan Association is that it ventures into too much navel gazing and self-congratulation. Yet in a sense, these are very much parts of the mission of the Association: to promote and preserve the Peranakan heritage. It is true that without balance, purpose and depth, and a mission to connect and unite people of all races, history can be misused to inflate a false sense of self-importance. The key thing is to not lose sight of the reasons for remembering the past. As the Nobel Prize winner and author Elie Wiesel once declared in a short essay, 'A God Who Remembers' (2008): "Without memory there is no culture. Without memory there would be no civilisation, no society, no future." 📌



Photograph courtesy of NUS Baba House.



Rediscovered RELATIONS

*My father, Lee Kip
Jin (1913-1971) in
military uniform.
He had borne arms
against the enemy in
World War Two
and his values were
centred on God,
family and country.*

*BABA CHRISTOPHER LEE
recounts the unexpected
outcomes of a birthday
gathering*

I grew up not knowing anything about my ancestry. But my mother's 80th birthday in March 2010 triggered a series of events that connected me to my family's past. The birthday of Tina Ong Peik Choo was celebrated as a Peranakan-themed *tua seh jit* (important birthday), attended by *anak* (children), *chuchu* (grandchildren) and *chichit* (great grandchildren).

This was the first gathering of my maternal cousins and paternal first cousins from five Lee brothers — Kip Jin (my father), Kip Lay, Kip Tee, Kip Hiang and Kip Soo — in decades! Seated in rows of *tok panjang* (long tables), the family was a splendid sight, with the womenfolk adorned in *sarong kebaya* and menfolk decked in batik shirts. Old ties were rekindled and new family members introduced, as the party progressed. After a sumptuous meal of Peranakan dishes, my daughter Sheena and son Leon joined in for some of the Peranakan songs performed by a group from the Main Wayang Company. With pictures taken and memories created, the experience left many feeling that we had affirmed our shared Peranakan identity.

Born the ninth of 10 children in Selangor to Lye Siew Onn and nyonya Lian Eng Neo, my mother was given away to her maternal aunt in Kuala Lumpur. Her adoptive family relocated to Singapore in 1948 to seek refuge from the communist insurgency. Between two suitors found by a matchmaker, she chose my father, who was a Christian, because she wanted to go to church, unfazed that he was a second-time widower. My father was in service with the British-trained Singapore Military Force, precursor to the post-independence Singapore Armed Forces, when my parents got married. Nine years later he passed away suddenly, leaving five sons and two daughters. When my mother consented in 2009 to the marking of her 80th birthday with a party, she did not expect a celebration of the scale and character that it eventually took. None of us knew that this was to be the first of many *tak sangka* (unexpected) events.

In late August 2010, my cousin Molly (daughter of Kip Soo) received email spam from my email address that I did not send, inviting her to join an online social network. In her reply to 'my' email, she expressed a wish to find the village in China where our forefathers came from. The serendipity of this spam email triggered an enquiry about our ancestry. Even though we only had the name

of our grandfather Lee Chim Hock to start with, and none of our relatives had ever spoken of ties to China, this struck me as a worthy pursuit. Not surprisingly, a Google search for genealogy records of Lee Chim Hock and Lee Kip Jin was futile, but there were many hits on Lee Kip Lee, then president of The Peranakan Association Singapore, and his celebrity son Dick Lee.

In the reading list of a primary school was a book written by Lee Kip Lee, *Amber Sands: Memoirs of a Childhood Memory*. I borrowed *Amber Sands* from the National Library a few days before I left for Malacca with my wife Ai Leng and our children to participate in the 110th anniversary celebrations of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) from 11 to 12 September 2010. In the book were the names of four of the six sons of Lee Keng Kiat: Chim Huk (father of Kip Lee and Kip Lin), Chim Tuan, Chim Teck and Chim Sian. Although Chim Hock was not named, it was beyond a reasonable doubt that my grandfather was one of the two other sons, making Lee Keng Kiat my great-grandfather, and Lee Kip Lee my father's first cousin. My new-found uncle's *memoirs* had introduced the wider Lee family that I did not know about.

The final activity before we departed for Singapore was a lunch reception at the PPCM clubhouse in Jalan

Tun Tan Cheng Lock. This being my first visit to

PPCM, I was intrigued that the founding

President was Lee Keng Liat, a name

curiously similar to Lee Keng Kiat

that I had just learnt of a few

days earlier. Gazing at a picture

of Lee Keng Liat, I wondered

whether this could be a great-

granduncle. I approached the

PPCM Secretary Robert Seet

to inquire whether the PPCM

held family records of Malaccan

Peranakans, with the intention

of returning a few months later

to investigate the matter further.

Robert identified Lee Keng Liat as his

great-grandfather and affirmed that Keng

Liat and Keng Kiat were brothers, sons of

Lee Quee Lim who founded the Eng Choon



*My mother, Tina Ong
Peik Choo at her 80th
birthday party.*



Left: Malacca, September 2010. Left to right: New-found cousin Robert Seet, my son Leon, nephew Daniel Ang, myself, my daughter Sheena, and wife Ai Leng.



Below: Singapore, the Lee family gathering, March 2012. Seated left to right: Uncle Lee Kip Lee with wife Elizabeth, my mother Tina Ong (Mrs Lee Kip Jin). Standing left to right: Raymond Lee (son of Kip Tee) with wife Winnie and daughter Lois, Peter Lee (son of Kip Lee), Peggy Lee (daughter of Kip Hiang), my wife Ai Leng and daughter Sheena, myself Christopher (son of Kip Jin) with son Leon.

Hway Kwan (an association for people from Eng Choon, or Yongchun County in Fujian province) located just across the street. Robert shared the Lee Keng Liat family tree with me, which contained the genealogy trail to Eng Choon village from which ancestor Lee Kan left for Malacca and extended the Lee family beyond China. A family gathering quickly formed as Ai Leng, Sheena and Leon met my newly-acquainted cousin Robert, his sisters Shirley and Alice, his nephew Daniel, and other cousins Jeffrey and Victor.

Unfamiliar with the names found in *Amber Sands* and the Lee Keng Liat family tree, my perplexed mother responded “*Berapa pulo taun suma tak tau, amcham lu boleh charek?*” (How were you able to find out what the whole family did not know for decades?) “*Gua pun heran*” (I too wonder). Over the following weeks, I mulled over the strange course of events and felt that a switch had been flipped after my mother’s *tua seh jit*.

The Baba Convention held the year before in November 2009 was my first time participating in an event organised by The Peranakan Association of Singapore (TPAS), motivated by the preparations for my mother’s birthday celebrations. Bizarre as it was, I was oblivious throughout the three-day event in Singapore that the TPAS president Lee Kip Lee was my uncle. Astonishing and no less bizarre, I had met someone in Malacca I did not know was my cousin, resulting in the surprising revelation of the village where my ancestors came from, in fulfilment of another

cousin’s wish that came to me just weeks ago in response to an email I did not send. Could Keng Liat have been looking down to this world and identified his brother Keng Kiat’s great-grandson? How would Keng Kiat know who his great-grandson was if Chim Hock had not told him? Did Chim Hock recognise his grandson by the middle name Hock? This fanciful imagination about the ancestors having a conversation in the afterlife seemed like the stuff of a Peranakan *wayang* (play).

With the realisation that we were part of a very large clan, the consensus among cousins was for each family of the five ‘Kip’ brothers to compile their respective family trees by end 2010. Since my daughter Sheena had drawn up the Lee Kip Jin family tree some years earlier, my attention was focused on looking up archival records of *The Strait Times* and other sources, where I found my father’s other cousins, as well as connections of the Lee family to other Peranakan figures and families. While catching up with unread issues of *The Peranakan* magazine published by the TPAS, I was delighted to learn that cousin Peter Lee (son of Kip Lee) had found the Lee ancestral home and met our relatives in Eng Choon village. In January 2011, I requested the TPAS to connect me with Peter who is about my age.

Shortly after our introductory meeting, cousin Peter arranged for me and my nephew Norman to meet up with uncle Sunny (as Kip Lee is known to family members) and another aunt, Koh Manis (Ong Guat Ong), who shared



Above: British Army medals awarded to Warrant Officer Lee Kip Jin.

Right: At the Lee ancestral home in Eng Choon village, China, October 2012. From left to right: Cousins Li Zhao Yi and Li Zhao Ming (China), cousin Susie Lee; my wife Ai Leng, cousins Peggy Lee, Molly Lee and Peter Lee (Singapore); Li Sheng Yu (China); and myself.



their memories of their uncle Chim Hock, and their male cousins who they knew as Rose (my father, who was given this name so that ravenous malign spirits would not know that the firstborn was male, thus evading their attention), Charlie, Johnny, John and Jimmy. A few days later, Norman called to say that he had contacted Travis with whom he had gone to school, after discovering from these investigations, that they were cousins. This was the first of many reconnections and introductions of other kinfolk in both Singapore and Malacca.

The Lee family was so large that a family tree became a necessary *aide memoire* on my smartphone for me to recall who I had met, or to identify whom I was introducing others to. The experience showed that a family tree is about living relatives who share a legacy and not a mere documentation of the past.

My mother's *tua seh jit* would not have been complete without remembrance of my father's three-fold legacy

Peranakan, Christian and military. These reflected his values centred on God, family and country. He was very interested in family ties but was prevented from connecting to his own paternal cousins because of an old family misunderstanding. His feelings about family found expression in concern towards my mother's side of the family. For example, in the late 1960s, he took my mother back to Kuala Lumpur to reconnect with her mother and birth siblings whom she had not seen since her childhood.

“A family tree is about living relatives who share a legacy and not a mere documentation of the past.”

The custody of my father's medals that were awarded by the British Army passed from my mother to me in 1989 when, as a regular SAF officer, I recognised from the medals that he was decorated for having borne arms against a real enemy. She was visibly moved when I informed her that my father's medals would be brought out to symbolise his presence. At her birthday party, I shared with the family that for service during World War Two he was awarded campaign medals *1939-1945 Star*, *Pacific Star*, *Defence Medal* and *War Medal 1939-45*; for the Malayan Emergency he was awarded *General Service Medal Malaya 1948-1960*. He made repeated donations to the War Fund before the war, and was a marked man who could not find employment during the Japanese occupation as a result. There were smiles all around when it was said that the families represented were the legacy of the five brothers who made it through the war together.

The family of Lee Chim Hock represented by cousins Peggy and Susie (daughters of Kip Hiang), Molly with son Max, and my wife Ai Leng and me made a trip to Eng Choon village in October 2012, with cousin Peter as guide for the visit to the Lee ancestral home. This was, incidentally, the month of my father's birthday. My mother Tina's 80th birthday that sparked the rediscovery of our roots and reconnections with the wider Lee family had come around to the 100th birthday (Chinese age) of my father, Rose, the firstborn. *Tak sangka.* 📌



My dear Ah Kong, Kua Tèng Poh, who came from China.



MY AH KONG'S

In 1917, my maternal grandfather, or my dearest Ah Kong, journeyed with his father from southern China to Thailand when he was eight years old. His hometown was an island called Nan-ao (Nam-or in Teochew), off Shantou in Guangdong Province. I was the eldest of his 20 grandchildren. I grew very close to him because he helped my parents with the family business on weekdays. Every Friday evening, I would take a bus with him back to his house and it was family tradition that all grandchildren spent weekends at his place.

When China started opening up in the 1970s, many overseas Chinese in Thailand went back to visit their relatives (*tam ching* in Teochew). So did my Ah Kong. In the 1970s Nan-ao was under very strict military control as the island is close to Taiwan. Only islanders or those who were approved by the local Police Bureau could enter

Nan-ao. Ah Kong did not get permission on his first trip, so he ended up in Shantou, which is the closest port. My mainland cousins went to meet him there. On his second trip in 1982, restrictions were eased and I was allowed to accompany him to see his home town. I was then 17 years old. We had to cross the border at Shenzhen, take a train to Guangzhou and stay overnight, before making our way by bus to Shantou to board the ferry. Today, Shantou is served by direct flights.

I remember the local Nan-ao people looked at me and spoke to each other in Teochew as they were wondering if I was a woman or a man due to my short hair. I recall the blue sea in front of me after crossing a little green hill. I enjoyed the peaceful and charming ambience there. Six months after that trip, my beloved Ah Kong passed away.

It was 28 years later in April 2010 that I returned to



The Kua ancestral house with a courtyard beyond the entrance.

HOMETOWN

NYONYA ANGKANA
KOELNSPERGER from Thailand
recounts her rewarding
sojourn to Shantou

Nan-ao. My dream to take my mother to Nan-ao island to see her father's hometown became a reality because of the inspiration I had when I came across an article, "*Of Bohea and Bakol Siah – Memories of a Baba's Visit to the Land of His Ancestors*" by Peter Lee, in *The Peranakan* magazine, where he found his ancestral village in Yongchun, Fujian, with the help of letters collected from relatives over the last 40 years. I only remembered the name of my Ah Kong's hometown, but I believed there was a way for me to find my relatives. After Ah Kong passed away, no one kept contact with them. I was discouraged by my relatives in Thailand who did not support my mission of searching for our roots. I sought help from the Teochew Association in Singapore but it did not have any information on the island.

Placing our faith in the serendipitous, my mother, brother, five-year-old daughter and I flew to Shantou.

From Shantou a ferry runs almost every hour to Nan-ao, a journey of 45 minutes. With whatever little Teochew and Mandarin I could muster, we reached the island and checked into a hotel at about 3pm. Leaving my mother and my daughter at the hotel, my brother and I set out to find my lost relatives in Nan-ao.

We were clueless! I bought a local map from the hotel and we just started walking, looking for elders whom I could enquire about my Ah Kong. We spotted a very old lady and thought that she was probably old enough for us to try our luck. She said if Ah Kong was still alive, he would be 100 years old and she only in her 70s. She was not even born when Ah Kong left for Thailand. But she was kind enough to lead us to another lady whom she thought might be of help. No luck. The other lady was only 60 years old. I smiled at the way both women declared their age with such

grace. But they said there was no proper birth registration in those times.

We were discouraged and decided to head back to the hotel. Just when we thought our search was in vain, we walked past a little shop where four men were sitting and chit-chatting. My brother said to give a last try as four heads were better than one. Not surprisingly, none knew about Ah Kong but one of them recalled someone with the same surname, Kua (Ke in Mandarin). He wrote down the name of a shop. Was that a wee light at the end of the tunnel?



Searching In Vain

On the way to the shop, we found a private rental car waiting for customers at the roundabout. Arranging with the driver to use his services the next day, I asked him about the whereabouts of the shop. After trying to explain to me, he gave up and offered to drop us there without any charge. Of course, we did not refuse his help. Out of curiosity, he asked about why we were in town. Upon reaching the shop he asked a man who seemed to be the owner and told him about my mission. He shook his head and said he did not know about my grandfather. "BUT..." Hearing this word, my heart jumped. "My father might know." He sent someone to find his father and told us to go upstairs to the living room. Ah Lao (old) Jek the father listened to my story quietly and very attentively. He asked for Ah Kong's name. "Kua Teng Poh," I said. He jumped up from the sofa, shouting, "Si liao, si liao" (Correct, correct). He kept on



Top: The Kua genealogical book with narratives and illustrations.

Left: An excited Ah Lao Jek and the documents that he retrieved from under the bed.

Below, left to right: Myself, Angkana, my mother, Tua Hiah's mother, Ah Lao Jek, Tua Hiah Kua Boong Hiak and his cousin, Kua Boong Ek.



saying, “lai, lai, lai” (come, come, come).

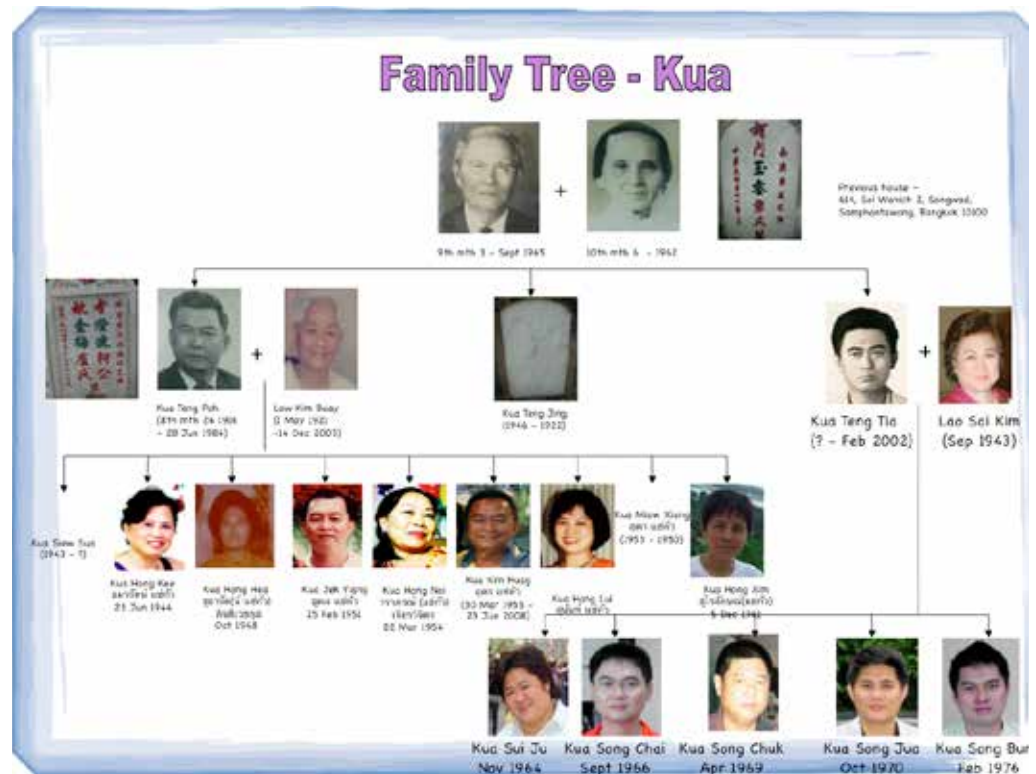
I looked at my brother, dumbfounded. He led us out of the shop, almost running towards his house, which was in a little lane behind the shop. The house is in the traditional style where family members lived in rooms flanking a courtyard. We followed him to his tiny room. Without saying a word, he retrieved some documents from under his bed, and went upstairs to bring more. They filled his bed and spilled over to the desk.

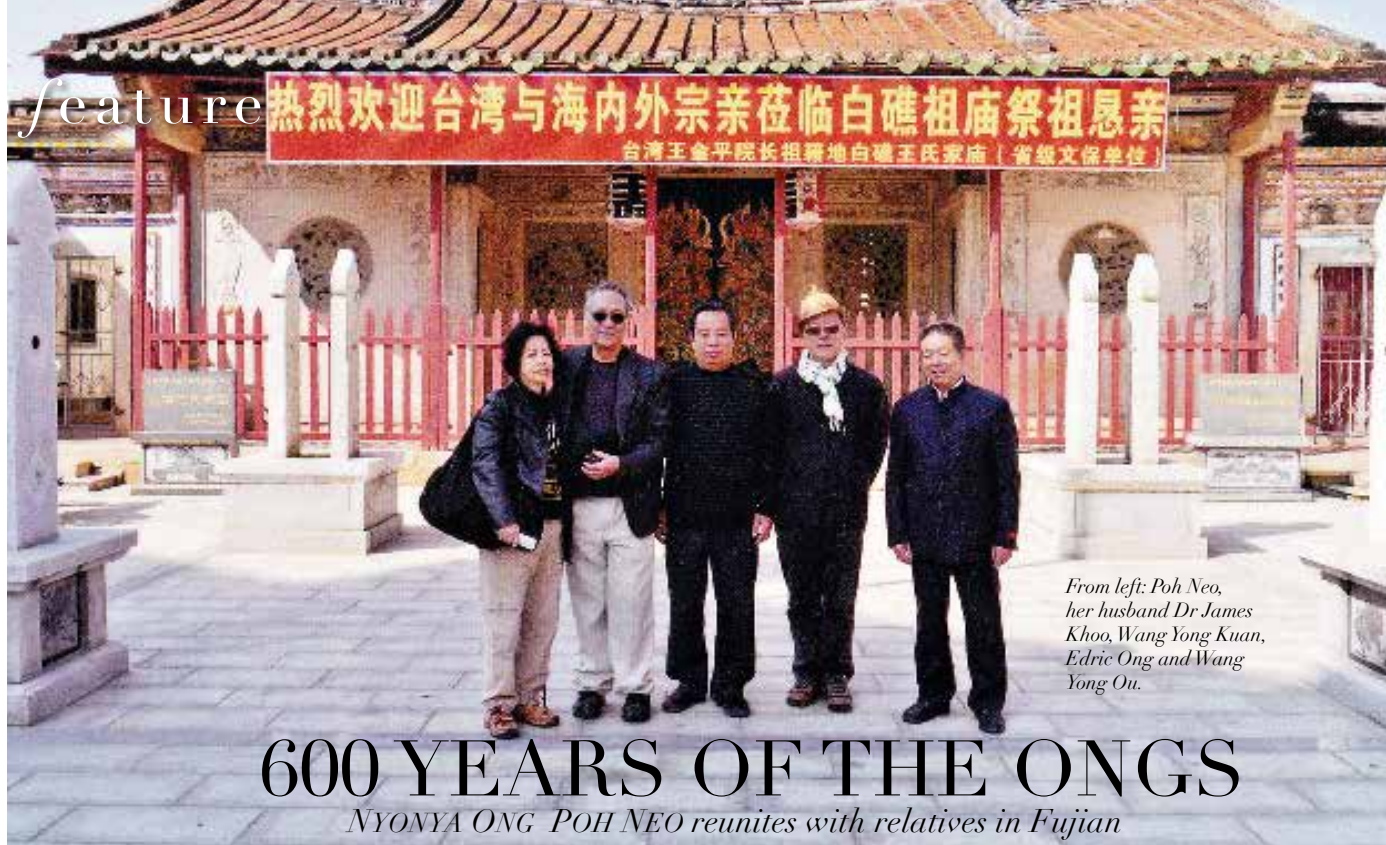
Family Tree Found

He pulled up one document - the family tree of Ah Kong, bearing his and his brother's name! It noted that they were in Thailand. Ah Lao Jek confirmed that only two Kuas left China for Thailand - my great grandfather and grandfather. Ah Kong's brother was born in Thailand after great-grandmother went there. He started to explain the family tree, members of each lineage, the cross-relations and their occupations. He brought us through the little lanes where he introduced us to three families. They were surprised to receive unexpected guests from Thailand. We were also shown where our great-great-grandfather lived.

It was almost four hours since we left the hotel. Knowing that my mother would be worried, I asked Ah Lao Jek if we could return to the hotel first. But he was so excited he did not pay attention to my request. He led us to see the clan house and one more “last” house where he said, were my closest line of relatives. The eldest brother (*Tua Hiah*) was not at home. Ah Lao Jek left a message that we should meet that evening. At the family gathering, *Tua Hiah* brought out our genealogical book to show us how the clan had extended. It was truly a memorable moment!

After we left Nan-ao, we communicated via email with the assistance of online technology, Google Translate! Nine months later, a cousin from China, Kua Boong Hang, and his family visited us in Singapore. A few weeks after returning home, I dreamt of my grandfather. In my dream, we were taking a walk together, hand in hand. Then I told him, “Ah Kong, I have taken Mother to Nam-or.”





From left: Poh Neo, her husband Dr James Khoo, Wang Yong Kuan, Edric Ong and Wang Yong Ou.

600 YEARS OF THE ONGS

NYONYA ONG POH NEO reunites with relatives in Fujian

The Ong ancestral hall (above) is located in Bai Qiao, a village some 40 minutes' drive from Xiamen. The hall celebrated its 600th anniversary on 22 December 2013 (the winter solstice). I had the good fortune to be the sole Singaporean representative, alongside some 200 Ongs from clans in China, Taiwan (the hall's most generous supporters) and Malaysia (two representatives).

It was a bright, clear day of sunshine, and the attire we had to wear, comprising a brilliant blue satin smock with a bright red sash and garland of plastic flowers added to the general gaiety. A red banner



spanned the entrance to the hall, which is under the capable guardianship of two Ong brothers, Wang Yong Ou (elder) and Wang Yong Kuan. The morning's ceremony brought back memories of my father and brothers kneeling and kowtowing at the altar table facing portraits of Ong Tiang Soon and his son Ong

Kowtowing to the ancestors.

Hood Hin at Sarawak Villa, our sea-front bungalow at 313 Upper East Coast Road (later renumbered as 320). The Breeze by the East condominium now occupies the site. Bai Qiao's Confucian priest, arrayed in yellow robes, conducted the rites. All the Ong groups took turns to pay their respects at the altar.

The Ong clan is descended from three princes from northern Shanxi province way back in the Tang Dynasty (618–906 AD). They had fled after a battle and settled in Bai Qiao. The eldest was Wang Chao, the second brother, Wang Shen Gui, and the youngest, Wang Shen Zhi. Their portraits preside over the hall, and three idols representing them stand alongside various Ong tablets on the altar table. Documented data shows that I am of the 36th generation in the line of Ongs.

I spied a portrait of my great-great-grandfather Ong Ewe Hai (1830-1900) fixed on the right wall of the hall. He married Yeo Swee Kim, and had returned to Bai Qiao several times as a benefactor and supporter of the Ong clan.

After the rituals, a sumptuous 14-course lunch was served on tables



The elaborate ancestral altar.

spread out in the sunny courtyard, behind which was a large graveyard including seven

commemorative tombs laid out along a semi-circular line. In the centre was the tomb of a royal Ong (Wang) prince, and to the left were those of ancestors whose descendants had fanned out to Southeast Asia and even West Asia; to the right, those of ancestors whose descendants left for Taiwan and East Asia. On the extreme right end was a granite tablet commemorating Ong Teng Cheong's ancestors, a mark of respect towards the late Singapore president, who visited Bai Qiao in search of his roots some decades ago.

As a non-Hokkien- and non-Mandarin-speaking Singaporean, I was only able to converse with the Malaysians. I am grateful to Edric Ong of Kuching who is the great-great grandson of Ong Ewe Hai and to my husband, Dr James Khoo, for helping with Mandarin interpretation. For the most part, I was content to be alone with my thoughts, reassured that the Ong heritage was well preserved and indisputably safeguarded in Bai Qiao, Xiamen.

THE ANCESTORS' WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

*How does it feel to exhume your ancestors for a new road?
BABA ALVIN SNG resigns himself to the inevitable, and provides
a stark account of a December morning at Bukit Brown*

My grandparents Sng Teck Hoe and Koh Poh Choo - were to be exhumed on 30 December 2013. Days and weeks before the exhumation, a flurry of thoughts ran through my mind and lingered almost daily until the dreaded day came. On that morning, I drove to Bukit Brown. It was past 8:30am. Some of my cousins and nephews were already there. I took a visitor's pass and walked straight to my grandparents' graves, which were next to each other. Grandfather was a Buddhist but grandmother became a Catholic before she died. Even then she was buried there, below a somewhat Buddhist/Taoist tombstone.

The two diggers were already working tirelessly, sweating profusely.

Nearly an hour and a half into the digging, one of them called to say he had seen a coffin. It was badly crushed by soil erosion and the roots of a tree growing beside the grave. He immediately called for a tarpaulin to shield the remains, picking up some remnants of the bones. I felt excited and frightened all at once. Peering closer, I could see her dentures and one shoe.

Half an hour later, my grandfather's coffin was found some eight feet underground, way deeper than my grandmother's as he died in 1941, 30 years earlier than my grandmother. His coffin - in the traditional shape of a Chinese ingot - was intact. The gravediggers had to use a chainsaw to cut it open.



His dentures and one side of his spectacles were found. I walked away from the grave when the diggers, with their bare hands, scooped up the bones and placed them inside a plastic bag. I am a little superstitious about these things.

The remains of my grandparents were sent to Mandai Crematorium for immediate cremation. We went there two hours later to pick up the ashes and place them in an urn, then headed to the columbarium for their next resting place. Who knows how long they will be allowed to remain there.

I did not feel good. My grandfather had bought the burial ground for himself and his wife to rest there for eternity. It was his wish, and it was not to be. ❶

A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES



*Peranakan beaded items, silver, early photographs,
out-of-print books, advertising signs, clocks, cameras,
tin toys and many more exciting finds*

THE HERITAGE SHOP

93 Jalan Sultan #01-01 (opposite Sultan Plaza)
Tel/Fax: 62237982 HP: 96861071
Email: theheritageshop@gmail.com

THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE



Family Picture of
Peter Woo's Grandparents and Father

208 East Coast Road Singapore 428907
Tel: 63458344 | Fax: 63451220



ANCESTRAL FEASTS

BABA TAN KUNING
introduces the food offerings
and rites related to paying
respects to ancestors in the
Peranakan household

Photography by Lee Yuen Thien.

Maintaining an ancestral shrine, or *simpan abu* (keeping the ash) was a common practice in Peranakan homes in the old days when Christianity was not yet widespread in the community. Today, this very Chinese practice is not found in many households as members have either converted to Christianity or have ceased maintaining shrines at home for various reasons, including the lack of time and resources. Those who continue with this tradition usually simplify the whole process by, for example, reducing the quantity of offerings.

The main component of an ancestral altar is a wooden 'spirit tablet' (*sinchi*), said to possess the spirit of the deceased, which has the name of the ancestor inscribed on it. These are housed in wooden shrines that are constructed to look like a miniature pavilion. Placed in front of this would be an urn for joss sticks. The *abu* in the term *simpan abu*, may literally refer to the ash from burnt joss sticks. But *abu* in this context refers to the spirit of the ancestors. Sometimes this is referred to as *melekat* from the Malay word *melaikat*, which means angels. *Semayang melekat* or *semayang abu* means making offerings to ancestors as acts of filial piety, in accordance with Confucian teachings.

SPECIAL DAYS

Four special days in a year are set aside for important ceremonies. They are the *Semayang Siki* on the death anniversary of the ancestor; *Semayang Cheng Beng* on the Chinese equivalent of All Souls Day; *Semayang Bulan Ti Ju* on any day from the first to the 15th day of the seventh month in the Chinese lunar calendar; and *Semayang Taon Baru* on New Year's Eve.

Two other days for prayers are for *Semayang Kueh Chang* on *bulan lima, hari lima* (the fifth day of the fifth month) to celebrate the beginning of summer, and *Semayang Tang Chek* on 22 December to usher in the winter solstice. *Semayang*

Kueh Chang involves offerings of glutinous rice dumplings. The Dragon Boat Festival is also held at that time. Two types of glutinous rice dumplings are made – the *kueh chang abu* (dumpling coloured yellow by lye water), and *kueh chang babi* (pork dumpling), which is also known as *kueh chang nyonya*. On *Tang Chek* (the winter solstice), offerings of *kueh ee* (red and white balls made from glutinous rice flour; served with rock sugar syrup) are made.

ELABORATE OFFERINGS

In the old days, the *semayang abu* in a home was very elaborate. Customs varied according to household, but today, few enact the requisite number of offerings as in the past.

The most important offering is the *sam seng* (the three sacrificial meats). For the Peranakans these were one steamed chicken, one steamed duck and a foot-long piece of steamed pork belly (*sam chian bak*) that is about two inches thick. The chicken and duck must be offered whole with the head and the feet intact. The feet should be twisted backward and stuck neatly into the body (*kilair ayam*), a skill that every *nyonya* is expected to know. In some households, the chicken is topped with a round piece of coagulated chicken blood and accompanied by a plate of the fowl's gizzard, liver and heart. Other households would add a piece of dried squid (*ju hi kering*) and a piece of fried fish, which would then comprise the components of the *ngo seng* (five sacrificial meats). Other important food items are a plate of uncooked yellow noodles and steamed crab.

PORK, PORK AND MORE PORK

According to ancient Hokkien customs, a whole roasted pig must be offered complete with the internal organs. In some cases, the climax of the *semayang* was to slaughter a live pig in front of the altar table! The Peranakans adapted

by offering 12 dishes including chicken, duck and every part of a pig. In those days, an extra chef (*chong poh*) could be hired for a day to cook them. Before refrigerators were invented, a pork seller would come to the house at 4.00 am to deliver the provisions needed for the *laok semayang* or cooked dishes served as offerings, to be cooked and ready for prayers by 11.00 am.

LAOK SEMAYANG

According to tradition, there are 12 kinds of *laok semayang*: *itek tim* (braised duck soup with salted vegetable), *ayam buah keluak*, chicken curry, *pong tauhu* (beancurd balls in a soup flavoured with *taucheo*, or fermented soybean paste), *babi pong teh* or *babi chin* (stewed pig's trotters or pork belly in *taucheo*), *cha tihi* (stir-fried pig's lungs), *hati babi bungkus* (pork liver balls), *kuah perot babi* (pig's stomach soup), *chap chai* (braised mixed vegetables), *itek sio* (braised duck flavoured with coriander seed), *bakwan kepiting* (crab balls in a clear soup) and *sop perot kambing* (goat's stomach soup). Again, the kinds of dishes may vary from family to family.

APPETISERS

Eight appetisers are traditionally offered. These are selected from a range of pickles and drier cooked dishes, for example, pickled vegetables (*achar*) such as *achar timun* (cucumber), *achar chilli hijau* (green chillies), *achar chilli merah* (red chillies), *achar lobak merah* (carrots), *luak chai* (pickled mustard greens), *lobak manis* (pickled white radish), *udang goreng asam* (prawns fried with tamarind), and a piece of fried *ikan tenggiri* (mackerel).

DESSERT

Dessert comprises an array of cakes and fruits. The cakes may include *kueh kochi* (steamed glutinous rice flour and coconut dumplings wrapped in banana leaf), colourful *kueh mangkok* (steamed rice cakes), *kueh ku merah* (red tortoise-shaped steamed glutinous rice cakes), *kueh ku hitam* (black tortoise-shaped steamed glutinous rice cakes), *pau* (steamed buns with fillings), *kueh bantal* (steamed pillow-shaped cakes), *kueh wajek* (a sticky brown glutinous rice dessert cooked with palm sugar and coconut milk), and *kueh dodol* (toffee-like glutinous rice cakes also cooked with coconut milk and palm sugar).

Homemade *tapeh* (fermented glutinous rice) was a specialty that every family was proud of. A well-done *tapeh* would be sweet, soft and spongy, and not soggy and sour! It should not have grains of hard rice (*tapeh berati*)

tasting like sand. It was important therefore to *pileh pulot* (select the grains, removing the impurities, such as rice and grit), which could take days to complete.

The fruit would typically include combs of bananas, grapes, rambutans, chempedak, apples, oranges and pineapple, as well as sticks of sugar cane, each about a foot long.

The five candies, also known as the *teh liao* (tea condiments) comprise red and white candies, *ang cho* (red dates), *tang kweh* (dried winter melon) and peanut candy to bless the family with unity.

TOK PANJANG

In a typical ancestral commemoration set up in a house, the offerings are laid on the *tok panjang* (long table) in front of the ancestral altar. A row of eight glasses of rice wine would be placed up front, followed by a row of eight cups of Chinese tea. In between these are placed eight pairs of chopsticks. Beyond these would be a row of eight small bowls (*mangkok*) of cooked rice, each pressed into shape (*pichit nasi*) like a mountain. In the centre of the table is the *samseng* or *ngo seng*. Around the *samseng* are placed the 12 dishes. The fruits are placed on one side and the *kueh* on the other. At the other end of the table is the *hio loh* (joss urn), flanked by a pair of copper candle stands for tall red candles. The *teh liao* is placed in front of the urn.

PRAYERS

The *semayang* session may last about two hours after which all the food is taken away for the family to consume. The *semayang* begins when the eldest son

lights two or four joss sticks to invite the spirits of the ancestors to partake of the food. This is the first invitation to the spirits. Then wine and Chinese tea are offered. These must be topped up twice at half an hour intervals, each time with prayers by a family member to invite the spirits to partake the feast.

To close the session, the eldest son would perform the *puak puey* ritual by throwing a pair of kidney-shaped red wooden blocks onto the ground (each with one side curved and one side flat). This is a method of seeking the ancestors' approval to end the *semayang*. The approval is shown when one of the wooden blocks lies convex side facing up and the other with the flat surface up. This means that the spirits are satisfied and done with the feasting. Finally, incense paper folded into the shape of Chinese ingots are burnt as offerings to the ancestors. ■



SEMAYANG ABU AT THE KENG TECK WHAY

Ancestral offerings are regularly laid out at the Keng Teck Whay, which was founded in 1831 by 36 Malacca merchants who settled in Singapore. Its *semayang abu* practices remain largely unchanged since the days of its founding fathers. A collective offering is presented to the 36 founders, comprising 36 glasses of rice wine, 36 cups of tea and 36 bowls of rice laid out with the 12 dishes and *ngo seng*, as well as dessert and fruit. After the prayers, the *puak puey* ceremony and the burning of incense paper; members (all descendants of the 36 founders) partake of the offerings, or take portions of the food home.

Photograph courtesy of the Keng Teck Whay

COLLECTING FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

NYONYA LINDA CHEE speaks with Penang-born Baba Professor Cheah Jin Seng, an avid collector of things Peranakan, who recently donated a significant part of his collection to the Peranakan Museum. Prof Cheah has been collecting all his life, particularly porcelain, silver, and furniture. He is also a philatelist and deltiologist (collector of postcards), specialising in material from Singapore and Malaysia. By profession Prof Cheah is a physician and endocrinologist, an emeritus consultant at the Department of Medicine, National University Hospital, Singapore, and a Professorial Fellow at the National University of Singapore.

Prof, you have varied interests in collecting. When and how did you get started on collecting Peranakan artefacts? What was collecting like then, compared with now?

I have been collecting all my working life. I started with stamps and things related to the postal history of the Straits Settlements: Malaya, Singapore and Borneo. One day, about 40 years ago, when I visited a stamp dealer he showed me some nyonya ware. I bought a milk jug from him and that was how I started my nyonya ware collection. I read all the books I could find on Peranakan porcelain and visited many dealers and collectors in Singapore, Malacca and Penang. Other than porcelain I also collect some furniture, silver, and embroidery, amongst other collectibles.

In those days there were more opportunities to buy and the prices were relatively modest. Today the commercial aspect of collecting is much stronger. I have always maintained the view that one collects for the love of the items and not for their commercial potential.

How did you sustain your interest in Peranakan collectibles through the years, despite your busy schedule as a physician? How do you reconcile this with your passion for postcards, books and stamps?

A collector is able to sustain interest in collecting so long as one loves the items one collects. The more one knows about the artefacts one collects, the greater the interest is sustained. The Peranakans love beautiful, ornate and colourful objects. Stamps and postcards are equally beautiful and colourful.

What spurred you to donate a part of your Peranakan collection to the Museum?

Nothing belongs to the collector forever. One is a mere custodian. You merely keep them for the next generation. There is no better way to preserve these items you collect lovingly than to donate them to the museum where they will be well kept, allowing future generations to admire them. I consider it a great honour for the museum to accept my items.

What did you donate to the Peranakan Museum?

I have donated 32 items, mainly Peranakan porcelain plus a few pieces of silver, to the Peranakan Museum and Asian Civilisations Museum. This is a small part of my collection, albeit some of my best items. Among the nyonya ware is my favourite pair of mirror-image, large kamchongs, 12 inches in diameter, each with nine goldfish painted in bright iron red on the body and cover. This is a unique pair from a well-known family in Penang. I grew up in a Peranakan family in Penang, hence my liking for Peranakan antiques. But I have also made other gifts. In 2006 I donated 500 early picture postcards, as depicted in my book, *Singapore: 500 Early Postcards*, to the Singapore Philatelic Museum.

What other aspects of Peranakan material culture still interest you? Are you still collecting them or other things?

I still look for porcelain, silver, etc., but opportunities to buy good items at reasonable prices are getting less and less. This is because there are more collectors today while genuine antique items on the market are getting increasingly scarce.

What is your focus now?

For the past 10 years I have been focusing on collecting the early picture postcards of Singapore, the Straits Settlements, the Malaya States, North Borneo and Sarawak. I have written the following five books on early

postcards, published by Editions Didier Millet. These are Singapore: 500 Early Postcards (2006), Malaya: 500 Early Postcards (2008), Perak: 300 Early Postcards (2010), Selangor: 300 Early Postcards (2011) and Penang:

Prof Cheah was conferred the title of Dato by the Sultan of Selangor, Sharafuddin Idris Shah, last December.



500 Early Postcards (2012). More books are in the pipeline.

In your view, why is Peranakan material culture not as globally appreciated as Chinese art of the Ming period, for instance?

When nyonyaware was made in China from the 18th to 20th century for export to the Malay archipelago, they were described as porcelain for the barbarians. In contrast, refined Chinese porcelain made for the emperors and nobility were described as imperial and scholar wares. Hence collectors of Chinese porcelain value imperial wares and do not care for nyonyaware, which they consider export ware. But attitudes are slowly changing as imperial wares become too expensive and rare, and export wares become more collectible.

What are the types of nyonyaware worth collecting now?

The valuation of nyonya ware is based on several factors. In general, items with coloured backgrounds are worth more than those with white backgrounds; background colours that are valued most are indigo blue, yellow, coral red and pink. The fineness of the designs is also of consideration. The condition of the item is very important - avoid items that are flawed with hairlines, chips, flakes or broken. Uncommon sizes, either very big or small, also affect the value. A rare item is worth more than the value of many mediocre items combined. Always look for a fine and rare item.

What about Peranakan mother-of-pearl and teakwood furniture? Is the market for this category of collectibles rather limited?

I admire Peranakan furniture. I think red and gold wedding cupboards are rightly the most sought after. The fine ones are those made in Fujian, China. Beware of the inferior ones made in the Dutch East Indies or Indonesia. Teak furniture (brown and gold or brown) can be very beautiful and desirable. I also like mother-of-pearl furniture: They have been neglected recently as they are bulky. Beware of those made recently in Vietnam. I think Peranakan furniture is now being appreciated. Fine items are now difficult to find and the prices have risen sharply.

What advice would you give to budding collectors of Peranakan artefacts?

There are three requirements for forming a meaningful collection: you must love the items, you must have a good knowledge of them, and you must have some spare cash! Always remember that one good item is worth more than many mediocre ones! When one collects for the love of the items then one would enjoy collecting. If you collect with the aim of making a profit then you will generally be disappointed. And if you do make a profit at the end of the day, then it is a bonus! 📌



IN THE MUSEUM

These three artefacts are among the many treasures recently donated by Prof Cheah to the Peranakan Museum. According to the Museum, the artefacts were likely to have been commissioned in the late 19th century by the family of Cheang Hong Lim, as evident from the mark of 苑生 (Wan Seng, the name of his company). The gilded blue-and-white pieces are unusual and were probably reserved for special occasions. They feature the *qilin* and phoenix, and are among the finest blue-and-white pieces with a Peranakan provenance. Most porcelain used by the Peranakans do not feature the *qilin*, a Chinese mystical creature.



Cheang Hong Lim (1825-1893) was highly regarded in the Singapore Hokkien Chinese and Peranakan communities as a merchant and philanthropist. He was appointed Justice of Peace in 1876 and contributed generously to the funding of the Cheang Hong Lim market (1882), Cheang Wan Seng School (1885), and numerous other charitable causes. Two places in Singapore are named after him: Cheang Wan Seng Place and Hong Lim Park.

Photographs courtesy of the Peranakan Museum.





HARMONIOUS OFFERING

This celadon offering dish has a fluted rim and is raised on a high footring. It is decorated with a butterfly, phoenix and peonies at the centre. The butterfly is a symbol of marital harmony while the phoenix and peonies are often paired together in Chinese art as symbols of feminine beauty.

The auspicious Eight Buddhist emblems decorate the inner rim of the dish.

Offering dishes like this, along with bowls, dishes and other porcelain vessels, were used on

the altar for religious offerings such as meals to the ancestors and household deities. Yellow enamelled wares were reserved for use on the *Sam Kai* altar while famille rose porcelain was most likely to have been used at the ancestral altar, where elaborate offerings of food were made at least four times a year.

This dish was displayed in the travelling exhibition, *The Peranakan World: Cross cultural Art from Singapore and the Straits* at the National Museum of Korea last year. It will also be featured in the Peranakan Museum's upcoming exhibition on batik altar cloths, opening 10 April, 2014.

Porcelain offering dish, China, early 20th century; gift of Agnes Tan

BITTERSWEET SECRETS

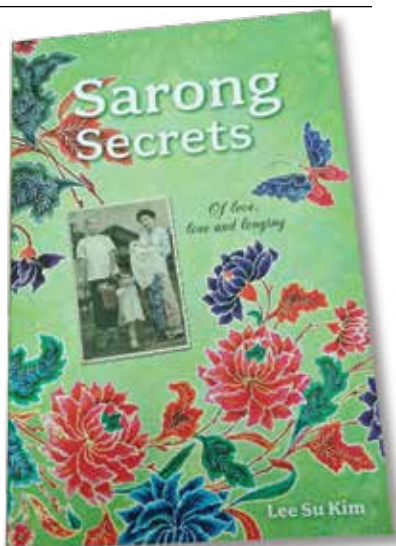
BABA EMERIC LAU reviews a second book of short stories from the author of Kebaya Tales

Lee Su Kim's follow-up to *Kebaya Tales* features 12 piquant stories of love and its complexities: there are passion, humour, greed, sacrifice and above all, a sense of tenderness. Do not expect contrived plot twists or pulsating drama; reading *Sarong Secrets* is akin to sitting down to tea with a confidante


or perhaps an elderly aunt and steeping yourself in her reflections and recollections. These are finely crafted, but totally plausible vignettes of significant moments, encounters and revelations in the lives of the characters.

While Su Kim's narratives are the key attraction, the book begins with a summary outlining the theories about the origins of baba and nyonya or Peranakan culture, touching on locales, cultural assimilation and incorporation, cuisine, dress and the community that still exists today. The stories are interspersed with a selection of photographs of Peranakan artefacts, covering attire, porcelain, jewellery and beaded accessories with a focus on the sumptuous motifs found on batik, especially the vibrant sarongs from Pekalongan, a favourite with the nyongyas. There are also pages dedicated to Baba Malay poems, idioms and expressions, which lend a certain depth and dimension in allowing the reader to better grasp the inherited social mores, values and literary cadences against which the contemporary settings of the tales play out. The author also shares vintage photographs from her family albums, granting readers a glimpse of a Malayan lifestyle from the early to mid-20th century.

Readers will find many of the personality types in the stories familiar – there is the desperate housewife who reaches breaking point; the distant husband hiding a secret; the questionable tenant who finds a tawdry way to repay her landlady; the alienated parent, lost in a foreign land where his child is riding a stratospheric career path. Su Kim cocoons each moment with pathos, deftly reminding us that all too often, our lives are truly charted at moments we would much rather forget. The strength of her writing is its gentle but unremitting candour in revealing often painful scenes. These are the moments we usually draw the curtain of charity over: here, the screens come off and lessons are learnt. In this way, we are drawn into a circle of confidence; we uncover the secrets behind the sarong.



NYONYAS' LOVE FOR INTAN AND BERLIAN

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Photographs courtesy of Sylvia Tan

BLOOMING CUISINE

NYONYA SYLVIA TAN shows how the durian can be more than just its thorny fruit

Unlike the spiky durian fruit, its flowers are not prickly, though quite showy when in full bloom! They are creamy white and delicate, with a sweet subtle scent. After blossoming, showing off to their full glory, maybe a fruit or two will emerge. I have an old durian tree, which has borne much fruit over the years. In full bloom, there are hundreds of buds, some even hanging very low on the branches.

But I never took much notice of the cycle of flower-to-fruit, taking this for granted until recently when friends bugged me for an idea as to when the fruit would come. So I watched the buds become flowers and waited to see if they would turn into fruit.

After much discussion on my facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/SylviaTanMadAboutFood>) as to how the flower turns into fruit, a botanist friend finally gave me an informed answer. The durian flower is self-pollinating, but you can help things along by using a soft brush to spread the pollen around. The natural process has fruit bats doing the work, but I do not really see them around nowadays.

He also told me that only about 10 per cent of the flowers develop into fruit although in my garden the problem has not been about fruit formation but rather the squirrels, which gnaw at the fruit when it does form, until it falls, all hollowed out!

But still, the splendid fact is that the fallen blossoms themselves can be eaten. I only discovered this when my neighbour sent over her helper one year to ask if she could pick the fallen flowers to cook.

Curious, I asked her what recipes needed durian flowers. More curious was her answer: durian flowers are cooked up, not as a sweet dessert, but in a savoury *sambal*!

I decided to experiment on my own, and fried the flowers in a *rempah titek*, that is, a spice paste of onions, chilli, *belachan* and *buah keras* or candlenut, the same way as one would do *kangkong sambal*. Another batch was

cooked in a *lemak* (coconut milk) gravy with pork.

Both were surprisingly delicious: the flowers turned out to be sweet and nutty with a pleasing texture and crunch. There was also a slight bitter aftertaste, which was not unpleasant, easily counterbalanced with a bit of sugar. This bitterness came from the pollen, which is why you should remove the pollen tips (the knobbly bits at the end of the stamen) before cooking the flowers.

Opinions vary as to whether the petals should be used: I prepared the dishes twice, once with the petals and the other, without. It appeals to my sense of husbandry to include the petals in the dish; the flowers are not that large or many anyway. But admittedly, the crunchy texture is lessened by the softer petals.

You can also mix the flowers in a salad, which apparently the Thais do, or even *tempura* it, coated in batter!

I am not sure if the flowers are sold in the market. But if you can gain access to a blooming tree, do check the ground beneath several times in the day, as the flowers fall copiously throughout the day, and especially towards evening. The petals begin to brown within a few hours of falling, so do be quick!





SAMBAL DURIAN FLOWERS

(For 6-8 people)

- 4-5 cups durian flowers
- 100g small prawns, peeled, optional
- 3 tbsp oil
- 1 tsp salt or to taste
- 1 tsp sugar or to taste

Spice paste (*rempah*):

- 15 *bawang merah* (shallots), peeled
- 1 tbsp *belachan* (shrimp paste)
- 2-4 red chillies (de-seeded if you want it less spicy)
- 4-5 *buah keras* (candlenuts)

METHOD:

Quickly gather the fallen flowers before they turn brown. Wash them lightly in a basin of water then cut off the hard bits such as the stem. You also need to remove the anthers (which hold the pollen) from the stamens to remove the bitterness from the flowers.

Gently pull off the anthers from the stamens with your fingertips. Discard all the flower parts except the stamens and the yellow petals. Wash and drain. The flowers are now ready for cooking. Dry and leave aside.

To make the spice paste, soak candlenuts in water for a little while to soften. Then process the shallots, *belachan* and candlenuts in a mortar or food chopper till fine.

Heat oil in a wok and fry the spice paste over a low fire, sprinkling some water now and then to prevent burning, till the oil rises again and the paste is fragrant.

Turn up the fire and add the prawns, then the durian flowers and toss to ensure an even mix. Season with salt and sugar to taste, and serve immediately.



DURIAN FLOWER MASAK LEMAK

(cooked in coconut milk) (For 6-8 people)

- 1-2 tbsp oil
- 1 stalk *serai* (lemon grass), bruised with the back of a knife
- 3-4 *lemo perot* (kaffir lime) leaves
- 300g pork, cut into even-sized pieces
- 4-5 cups of durian flowers, prepared as in the previous recipe
- 1 cup coconut milk
- 1 tsp salt or to taste

Spice paste (*rempah*):

- 4 dried red chillies, softened in water
- 1 tbsp *belachan* (shrimp paste)
- 1 cup shallots, peeled
- 3 slices *lengkuas* (galangal)
- 4 *buah keras* (candlenuts), softened in water
- 1 tsp *kunyit* (turmeric) powder
- 1 tbsp coriander powder

METHOD:

Place the spice paste ingredients into a food

processor or mortar and process till fine.

Heat oil in a pot large enough for the gravy. When hot, lightly *saute* the spice paste, together with the lemon grass and kaffir lime leaves, till fragrant. Sprinkle water from time to time to prevent burning.

Brown the pork in the spice paste. After a few minutes, add enough water to reach half the level of the meat. Bring the gravy to the boil then simmer. When the pork is tender, add the durian flowers and coconut milk, stirring all the time over low heat. Season with salt or to taste.

Suggestion: When I am pressed for time, instead of making the spice paste from scratch, I rely on a heaped tablespoonful or two of bottled nyonya *sambal belachan*, and adding the spice powders, to obtain an acceptable alternative. 🍴



AN OPPORTUNITY FOR YOU TO CONTRIBUTE YOUR PERANAKAN FAMILY PHOTOS TO KEEP OUR CULTURAL LEGACY ALIVE!

As part of Main Wayang's 10th anniversary,
we're producing a special book of
photographs from Peranakan families.

WE NEED YOUR HELP!



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So if you have old photos of weddings,
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that reflects the life and times of our
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Send your scanned high resolution
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or a short story about the photo to our
E-mail : peranakan@mainwayang.com

BY MAY 2014

for consideration to be included
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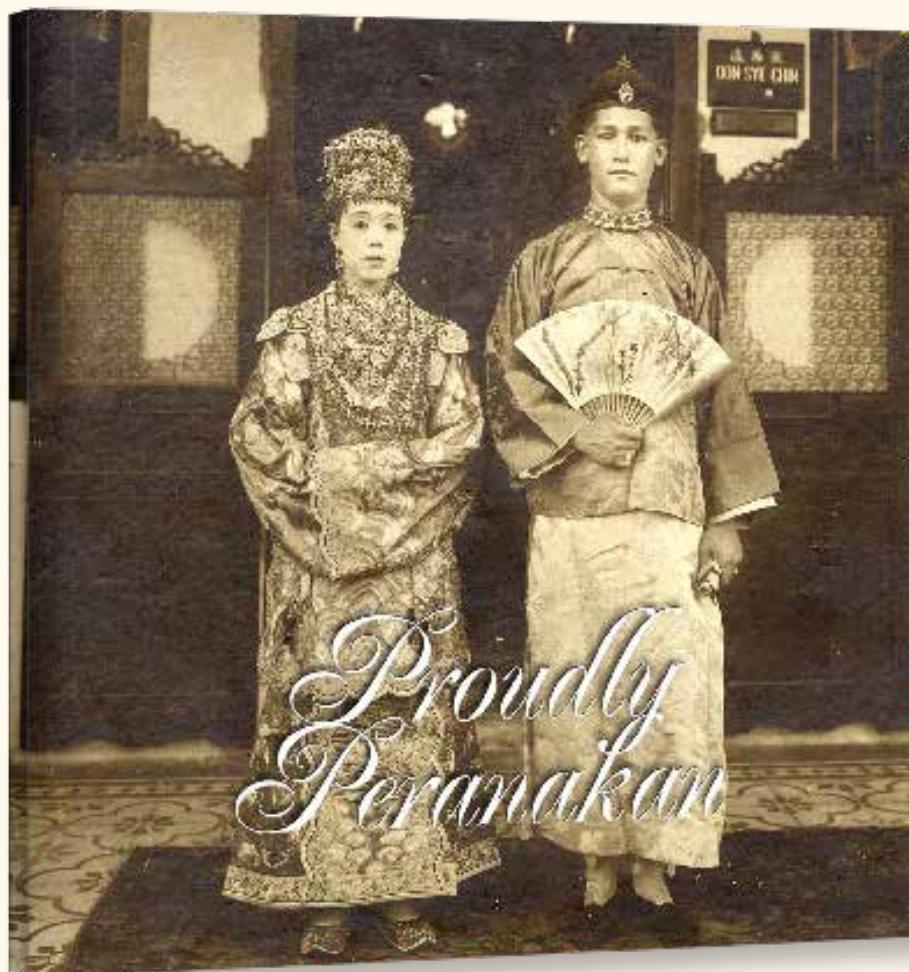
The Main Wayang Company

www.mainwayang.com E-mail : peranakan@mainwayang.com

Find us on YouTube and Facebook

PICTURING PERANAKANS

Main Wayang wants your old photographs! BABA ALVIN OON tells why



Photograph courtesy of Main Wayang

We believe that everyone agrees on the importance of making a conscious effort to keep Peranakan culture alive and thriving. Still, what can an ordinary Peranakan do besides dressing traditionally and attending Peranakan-related events or visiting the museums?

The Main Wayang Company (TMWC) would like to give all babas and nyonyas an opportunity to contribute towards the promotion of our culture as part of our 10th anniversary celebrations!

We invite you to share your personal Peranakan family portraits and vintage photos – a selection will be published in a special photo book alongside captions and anecdotes. We hope this allows future

generations to better appreciate and understand our culture.

Do leaf through old photo albums and scan high resolution versions of interesting photos. Email them, together with a short description, to us at peranakan@mainwayang.com stating that you are submitting these images for consideration for this book. TMWC is excited to be producing this commemorative book which showcases the splendour and rich heritage of Peranakan families. It will be special as its content will cover Peranakans from all walks of life.

We look forward to making this publication happen with your contributions. *Kamsiah!* 📌



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Raymond Wong



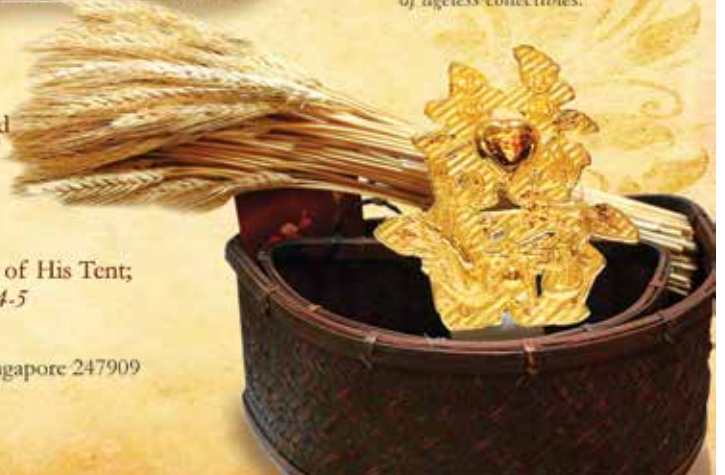
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of memory with you from our range
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*"One thing have I asked of the Lord,
That will I seek after:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life,
To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
And to inquire in His Temple.
For He will hide me in His shelter
In the day of trouble; He will conceal me in the cover of His Tent;
He will lift me high upon a rock." Psalm 27:4-5*

*19 Tanglin Road #03-47, Tanglin Shopping Centre, Singapore 247909
Tel: 68352235 • HP: 96720713
Email: timetng@singnet.com.sg*



GOOD FORTUNE FOR ALL

NYONYA PEGGY LEE welcomes the Year of the Horse

The Peranakan Voices (PVs) welcomed the Year of the Horse with a performance at the River Hongbao 2014 on 8 February. The event was officiated by Mr Lawrence Wong, Acting Minister for the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Baba Chan Eng Thai led the PVs and delivered an introduction about the Peranakans. The appreciative crowd comprised a mix of locals and tourists and a massive mechanical God of Fortune statue that smiled and seemed to nod his approval at the nostalgic tunes from our choir. P



Photographs by Angeline Kong

Baba Chan Eng Thai introducing the PVs at River Hongbao 2014.

HIGH ON SUNSHINE

NYONYA GWEN ONG gets charitable



The Peranakan Voices (PVs) were involved in a community project on 24 November 2013 through the Project Sunshine cum Community Day organised by the Joo Chiat Community Centre (CC), for the elderly and under-privileged. The PVs present on that day felt happy and grateful that they had been invited to participate in such a meaningful project. There were

close to 140 guests at the lunch event.

It was indeed rewarding to see guests enjoying themselves through the rendition of familiar songs. Memories came flooding back for some and many would have liked the group to have gone on a little longer. They rounded off the afternoon with the Joo Chiat CC ladies exercise group doing the *joget*. P

LET'S PARTY IN MALACCA!

3 days / 2 nights 15 - 17 August 2014

The Peranakan Association Singapore is organising a trip to Malacca. Highlights include a visit to the Portuguese Settlement and a gala Dinner & Dance featuring the fabulous Melodians!

Fares • S\$288 per person (twin share) and S\$368 per person (single).

The hotel does not permit triple sharing. All meals are included.

The return trip package includes transport on a 40-seater coach and accommodation at the Kings Green Hotel at 28 Jalan Tun Perak. Passports must be valid six months from the date of travel, a valid Malaysian entry visa if required, and personal travel insurance.

For registration form and other enquiries, please contact :

Ms Gwen Ong at 97266082 •

Email: gwen1011@hotmail.com

Please make cheques payable to The Peranakan Association Singapore and mail cheques and registration to:

Melaka 2014, 208 East Coast Road, Singapore 428907.

The closing date is 30 May 2014.

PERANAKAN ASSOCIATIONS IN THE REGION

SINGAPORE

The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS)

Raffles City PO Box 1640,
Singapore 911755
Contact: Peter Wee, President
Email: peterwee@peranakan.org.sg
Tel: 65 6345 8544
Website: peranakan.org.sg

Gunong Sayang Association (GSA)

50 Lorong 24A, Geylang Road,
Singapore 398574
Email: gunongsayang@hotmail.com
Fax: 65 6441 1569
Website: gunongsayang.com

Association of Chetti Melaka (Peranakan Indians) Singapore

5001 Beach Road #08-09
Golden Mile Complex
Singapore 199588
Contact: Mr Pono Kalastree
Office: 6297 1229
Mobile: 9678 1767

MALAYSIA

MALACCA

Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM)

149, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock
(Heeren Street), 75200 Melaka
Contact: Ms Chin Siok Hoon, PJK
(Hon Secretary)
Email: admin@ppcm-melaka.org
Website: www.ppcm-melaka.org
Tel: 012 6218 909
Fax: 06 2837 215
To contact the President, Datuk Phua Jin Hock, please email phuajh@gmail.com.

PENANG

State Chinese (Penang) Association / Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang

13, Perak Road
President: Datuk Tan Gin Soon
Contact: 604-2269560
Email: ginsoon@hotmail.com

KUALA LUMPUR & SELANGOR

Persatuan Peranakan Baba

Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (PPBNKLS)

63 Jalan Telawi, Bangsar Baru, 59100,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Contact: Cedric Tan, Hon Secretary

Email: peranakan_kl@yahoo.com.my

Tel: +6012-3151451

Website: peranakan-kl.org

To contact the President,
Dr Lee Su Kim, please email
sukim25@yahoo.com.

KELANTAN

Association of Peranakan Chinese, Kelantan

Lot 2344 Kampong Wakaf Stan,
Kubang Kerian,
16150 Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia
Contact: Law Awang
Tel: 609-7652261 Mobile: 012-9815688
Email: law_awang@yahoo.com

THAILAND

Thai Peranakan Association

61 Satul Road, Muang District,
Phuket 83000, Thailand
Contacts: Dr Kosol Taenguthai at
email: k_tanguthai@hotmail.com;
Ajan Pranee Sakulpipatana at email:
Pranee81@yahoo.com, mobile: +66
81 693 3576; or Piyarat Kulvanich at
email: kpiyarat2000@yahoo.com or
mobile: +66 81 719 0967.
Fax: +66 76 258179
Tel: +66 76 258124
Website: ThaiPeranakan.com

INDONESIA

Association of Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia

Hero Building II Suite 902,
Jl. Jend. Gatot Subroto 177A
Kav. 64 Jakarta 12870, Indonesia
Contact: Chairman Mr Andrew
Susanto
Tel +6221 8317751
Fax +6221 8317731
Email: info@asptina.org
Website: asptina.org

AUSTRALIA

MELBOURNE

Peranakan Association Australia Inc

P.O. Box 1278, Hawksburn, Victoria,
Australia 3142
Contacts: Joseph Then, Secretary, at
email j.then@bigpond.com
or Ivy Lee Gek Kim, newsletter
editor, at email gekkiml@yahoo.co.uk.
Website: www.peranakan.org.au.

SYDNEY

Peranakan Association Australia (PAA) NSW Inc

P O Box 3810, Marsfield,
NSW 2122 Australia
Contact: Evelyn Tan, President
Website: peranakanaustralia.org
Email: evelyn.peranakan@gmail.com

Upcoming auction of
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May - June 2014
Check for more details at a later date

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Email: JanTChan@singnet.com.sg

THE PERANAKAN GUIDE • SINGAPORE

MUSEUMS

Peranakan Museum. See the world's first national Peranakan Museum with the most comprehensive and finest collection of Peranakan artefacts. The boutique museum examines the centres of Peranakan culture in Malacca, Penang and Singapore, and traces its links to as far as Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand. Peranakan Museum, 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941. website: www.peranakanmuseum.sg Email: nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg Tel: 6332 7591.



National Museum of Singapore. The museum's Singapore History Gallery pays tribute to the contributions of the pioneering Peranakans. On view are some outstanding artefacts, including the oil portrait of Lim Boon Keng, old photographs, jewellery and sireh sets, as well as the magnificent carved wood hearse of Tan Jiak Kim, which is considered one of the 11 Treasures of the National Museum. National Museum of Singapore, 93 Stamford Road, Tel: 63323659. Opening Hours: 10am to 6pm Daily (Singapore History Gallery), 10am to 9pm Daily (Singapore Living Galleries), Admission \$10 (adults), \$5 (senior citizens above 60), \$5 (students, Nsmen), Free admission to the Singapore Living Galleries from 6pm to 9pm. <http://nationalmuseum.sg>.



Baba House. This heritage house goes back in time to 1928. Experience what a grand Peranakan terraced house would have been like. Formerly owned by the Wee family (whose ancestor Wee Bin was a mid-19th century shipping magnate) since 1910. 157 Neil Road, Singapore. Tel: 62275731. Visits are by guided tours. Please call the house for details. <http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html>

Kebon Indah. This exhibition presents the *Malam Di Jari Kita* series of artworks arising from the collaboration of two contemporary artists, Samantha Tio (Mintio) and Budi Agung Kuswara (Kabul), and batik makers of the Sido Luhur group from the central Javanese village of Kebon Indah. From 27 September 2013 to 30 September 2014



Asian Civilisations Museum. The first

museum in the region to display a wide range of artefacts from across Asia, the ACM not surprisingly has some important Peranakan treasures. The Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, *sireh* boxes and other paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine batik textiles from the north coast of Java, all made for the Peranakan market.

NUS Museum.

Inherited & Salvaged: Family Portraits from the Straits Chinese Collection
28 November 2013 – 6 July 2014,
free admission



See over 50 painted and photographed portraits dating from the 19th to early 20th centuries. These are some of the earliest visual representations of Peranakan Chinese in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. The exhibition explores early portrait making in the region, the social and cultural context sustaining such artistic patronage, and contemporary motivations in collecting and preserving these works. University Cultural Centre, 50 Kent Ridge Crescent, National University of Singapore, Singapore 119279. Tel: 6516 8817 Email: museum@nus.edu.sg

Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

The old Sun Yat Sen Villa reopened in October 2011 after extensive renovations with a new name. Fitting tribute is given to the former owners of the house, especially Teo Eng Hock, a son of Teo Lee, one of the pioneer Teochew merchants in Singapore, together with his nephew Lim Nee Soon,



who were among the loyal supporters of Sun Yat Sen's bid to overthrow the Qing government. The exhibition shows how Singapore, and the Chinese community here played an important part in this pivotal moment of world history. Intimate photos of family life, and of Teo Eng Hock's nyonya mother, Mrs Teo Lee née Tan Poh Neo (granddaughter of the kapitan of Muntok), add charm and a Peranakan angle to the experience. 12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874. Tel: 6256 7377, Opening Hours: 10am-5pm daily. Website: wanqingyuan.org.sg.

LANDMARKS

Blair Plain. A typical Peranakan residential area around Spottiswoode Park, Blair Road and Neil Road which is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms. http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/SOA/design_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html.

Emerald Hill Road. Another interesting residential district showcasing the best of eclectic Peranakan residential architecture, just off Orchard Road.

Katong and Joo Chiat. Once the nerve centre of Peranakan life in Singapore. In its heyday it was the site of nearby



grand seaside villas and elaborate Peranakan terraced houses. The latter can still be seen in a walk along Koon Seng Road. Also visit Peranakan shops such as Katong Antique House (208 East Coast Road) and Rumah Bebe (113 East Coast Road) as well as the great variety of Peranakan restaurants in the neighbourhood. http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what_to_see/suburban_living/katong.html. Also <http://www.myjoochiat.com>.

Amoy Street and Telok Ayer Street.

One of the first Peranakan enclaves, now occupied by restaurants and offices. Many Peranakans from Malacca moved to this area as soon as the East India Company began to lease out land for sale.

Thian Hock Keng.

The oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore was founded in 1821 although the present structure, built without nails, was completed only in 1841. The temple is dedicated to Mazu, the Daoist goddess of the sea and protector of all seamen. Many of the temple's patrons were Peranakan pioneers, such as Tan Tock Seng, who donated \$30,000 for renovations. He also founded the hospital named after him. The Hokkien Huay Kuan, a community organisation for Hokkien people in Singapore was housed at the temple and also helmed by Peranakan pioneers. Thian Hock Keng, 158 Telok Ayer Street, Tel: 6423 4616.



Tan Si Chong Su.

Built in 1878, Tan Si Chong Su is the ancestral temple of the Tan clan, and was founded by prominent Baba philanthropists Tan Kim Ching, son of Tan Tock Seng, and Tan Beng Swee, the son of Tan Kim Seng. The first president of the temple, Tan Kim Tian, was a well-known Baba shipping tycoon. The temple consists of shrines for the ancestral tablets of Tan clansmen, as well as altars to the clan deities. The elaborate stone and wood carvings as well as the swooping ceramic roof finials makes this one of the most elaborate Chinese temples in Singapore, quaintly located amid the gleaming towers of the financial district. Tan Si Chong Su, 15 Magazine Road.



SIAPA KONG MAMA LU?

LAWYER BUROK makes the case for blood relations claiming their share of an estate

Siapa lu punya Kong? Mama lu dulu tinggal kat Spalain depan rumah Bibik Jambol? Bapak lu ya bukan si Baba Eng Siang punya adek nombor tiga? (Who is your grandfather? Did your grandmother live at Sepoy Lines last time opposite Bibik Jambol's house? Isn't your father Baba Eng Siang's third younger brother?)

Those were the typically interrogative questions put forth by the *bibiks* and at times by the *babas* when meeting a young *enche* or *nyonya*.

The answer given usually went along these lines: "Kong gua si Koh Hoon Teck, dulu dia suka nyanyi *dondang sayang*. Dia ada tulis jenis panton buat satu buku nama *Panton Panton Peranakan*". (My grandfather was Koh Hoon Teck, he used to love singing *dondang sayang*. He wrote a book on Peranakan poems).

Invariably the exclamation would be, "Oh, si Baba Koh Hoon Teck, dia tu paling choot miah nyanyi *dondang sayang*. Dulu dia tinggal kat Carpmael Road dekat Joo Chiat. Gua nya Kong sama Enche Koh ada chin sikit, Enche Koh nya bini nya Ngku kawen Kong gua punya Ko, so we are related lah!" (Oh, Baba Koh Hoon Teck was a famous *dondang sayang* singer. He used to stay at Carpmael Road near Joo Chiat. My grandfather and Mr Koh were a bit connected, Mr Koh's wife's uncle married my grandfather's auntie, so we are related lah!)

The Peranakan community was a small and closely-knit one, and intermarriages were common among the prominent Peranakan families and even the humble relatives.

Hence many were interrelated. In the news recently, an estate of a *bibik* who passed away in 1939 included a bungalow which though dilapidated, was sitting on land valued at \$4 million, attracting many who claimed to be her descendants. However, to be entitled to a share of that cache, one needed to produce proof of being a blood descendant of that *bibik*.

She had stipulated in her will that the bungalow was not to be sold, in order to house her family from generation to generation. The clause in her will was deemed to be invalid



Illustration by Peter Lee; Inking by John Lee.

by the Rule Against Perpetuity. Therefore her estate, including her bungalow, was ordered to be sold and distributed to her beneficiaries.

Before the Rule Against Perpetuity was effected, there could be a clause in a will stipulating that a property of the estate should not be sold until the last offspring of the ruling sovereign of the British Empire dies. The children or grandchildren of the person who had such a clause in his or her will, would, in all likelihood, never get their share of the estate; in the parlance of the Peranakans, "*tungguh macham buah tak jatoh*" (waiting for a fruit that never drops) or "*tungguh sampay bejanggot*" (wait until you grow a beard).

In cases where a person dies intestate (without making a will) then the law of intestacy governs the estate of the deceased, which shall be distributed according to the Intestate Succession Act.

If the deceased did not make a will and was unmarried, everything would go to his parents; if married with no child, then half to the parents and the other half to the spouse; if married with a child or

children, then half to the spouse and the other half to the child or children equally.

To be entitled to the intestate deceased's estate, the spouse, child or children **MUST** be the legal wife or legitimate children. There were cases in the Straits Settlements Law Reports where secondary wives and their children were entitled to an intestate deceased's estate. **BUT** that was before the enactment of the Women's Charter in Singapore, which stipulates that there can be only one valid subsisting marriage between a man and a woman.

Some folks would like to parade their ancestry, linking themselves to past luminaries such as Tan Kim Seng, or Lee Choon Guan, or Lim Boon Keng, as their ancestors. And rightly so, because their ancestors had made significant contributions to the Peranakan community in the past.

Many of us do not have the privilege of having such illustrious ancestors, but in my opinion, as long as you have a Peranakan as one of your ancestors, you are justified in feeling proud, because *orang Peranakan ia lah orang Singapura dari dulu!* (Peranakans are Singaporeans from long ago!) ●

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