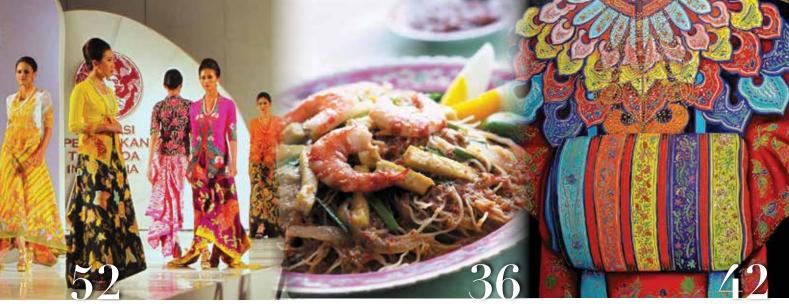




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ON THE COVER • Lee Kuan Yew (detail), 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 45 x 55cm. Photo courtesy of the artist. Specially painted for The Peranakan by Alvin Ong.



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The Peranakan is published by The Peranakan Association Singapore, Raffles City PO Box 1640, Singapore 911755. Email:secretariat@peranakan.org.sg • Printer: Lithographic Print House Pte Ltd.

MCI (P) 138/10/2014

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Peter Wee's grandfather, Jan Cheng Kee, JP Images courtesy of Alvin Ong, 2013.



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a brilliant 50!

Peranakan of our early independence years: our founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who passed away on 23 March. Coincidentally, Mr Lee was a member of the Golden Jubilee Committee of the Straits Chinese British Association (forerunner of our Association) back in 1950 and also served as Honorary Secretary for one term.

Since the founding of Singapore in 1819, Peranakans have made significant contributions in many fields including politics, law, business and the arts. We highlight eight of the 50 pioneers selected by the Peranakan Museum. The Association will also honour these remarkable babas and nyonyas at our Peranakan Ball on 21 August.

Early November promises exciting times. The Association will showcase the inaugural Peranakan Arts Festival and also host the 28th Baba Nyonya Convention.

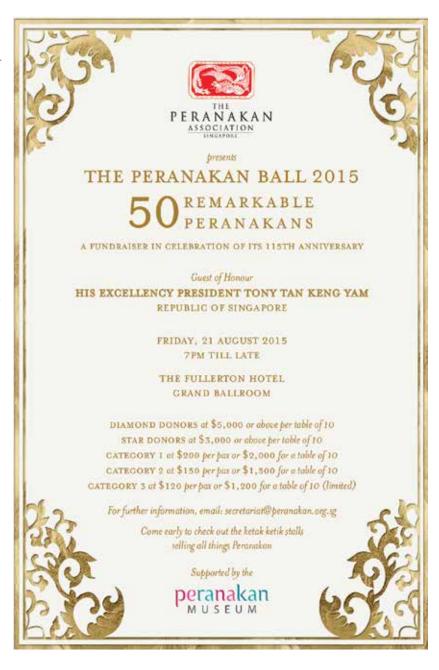
As you turn the pages, read about the 50 things that we consider most iconic to our culture. And how home cooks managed to expand our repertoire in the past 50 years.

Thank you for your patience in waiting for this issue. In the previous issue, we had announced our intention to take a breather and to produce two issues instead of four in 2015. Our committee comprises volunteers. We hope you understand.

Happily, we welcome two new members to our team: Elisabeth Chan, who joins us as Associate Editor to enhance copy, and Melissa Yeow, who will help manage our administrative tasks. We hope more babas and nyonyas will step forward to help our magazine or to contribute articles of interest.

Enjoy our bumper issue!

Linda Chee, Editor



awards & accolades

ick Lee has composed a new National Day Parade (NDP) theme song, *Our Singapore*. This adds to the classic *Home* which has become a much-loved song for all Singaporeans. *Our Singapore* looks



into the future and pays tribute to the pioneers of Singapore and founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Dick is also the creative director for this year's NDP.

Peter Wee, our TPAS President, was feted with a Pioneer Generation Tribute Award from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth on 27 January 2015. This was in



recognition of his contributions to the Arts & Heritage Sector in Singapore. On 4 November 2014, leading author Josephine Chia was awarded the Singapore Literature Prize for Non-Fiction 2014 for her book, *Kampong Spirit, Gotong Royong: Life in Potong Pasir 1955 to 1965.* This is



the first time that Singapore's most prestigious literary prize has been handed out to works of non-fiction.



1 Festival • 2 World Premieres • 3 Seminars • 4 Exhibitions • 5 Days



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Starring Shirley Tay, Melvyn Chew, Catherine Sng, Francis Hogan, Richard Chia, Jackie Pereira, Reggie, Matheus Ting, Dennis Heng, Adriana Tanaburata and Amanda Germaine Lee.



"THE BEST LOVE STORIES ARE OFTEN TOLD... APART..."

Catch the world premiere of Desmond Sim's latest play. For a limited run only! Starring Henry Heng, Nora Samosir, Nicholas Bloodworth and Kimberly Chan.



Tok Panjang Dinner

Celebrity chef Philip Chia spices up the Festival with his culinary expertise. Join us at an exclusive traditional Tok Panjang dinner on 7 November as Philip entices you with his finest dishes.



FESTIVAL MAGAZINE

Get your exclusive copy at the Festival while stocks last.



Workshops

If you are interested in any of these workshops, please send us an email and include your name and contact number.

*Subject to change,

Sulam Embroidery Workshop

Learn traditional sewing methods from the experts!



Mari Masak!

Discover cooking tips and Peranakan cooking secrets not found in cookbooks.



Join us in a fun and interactive sing-along and discover the inspirations behind these songs.



Festival Location:

Empress Place, Victoria Theatre & Concert Hall

Festival Hours:

Wednesday 4 November to Sunday 8 November 2015 10am to 9pm

Admission:

The Bazaar, Exhibitions and Cultural Shows are free to the public. Please refer to the Festival website for the show schedule.

Theatre Shows & Convention Forums: Get your tickets at WWW.SISTIC.COM from July 1, 2015!

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The 28th BABA NYONYA CONVENTION 6-8 November, 2015

Join babas and nyonyas from South-east Asia and Australia for a three-day Peranakan-packed convention including theatre, seminars and dinners! For details of the full convention package, please contact the Secretariat of The Peranakan Association Singapore at secretariat@peranakan.org.sg.

THE PERANAKAN SEMINARS

Apa lagi? Mana pergi? (What now? Where to?) Saturday, 7 November

Challenge your minds and engage your hearts at three important Seminars hosted by leading Peranakans.

SEMINAR 1: 9:00am **Baha Patois: Today & Tomorrow**

What does the future hold for the Baba Malay language? Weave through discussions on the relevance of patois in everyday communications.

SEMINAR 2: 10:15am The Business of Being Peranakan: Authenticity & Sustainability

today's fast-paced business environment, how does consumerism affect the Peranakan culture? Is the value of our culture being displaced?

SEMINAR 3: 11:45am Adulation, Subjugation or Misplaced Identities?: The essence of being Peranakan, 50 years forward.

How do we continue the Peranakan legacy? Do we reinvent ourselves? Gather your thoughts on the future.

ART Expressions

A showcase of original paintings by 3 celebrated Peranakan artists.



ADELINE YEO "Ardour"

Adeline Yeo's art is an expression of intense thoughts and deep emotions. Come and see Singapore's top finger-painting artist as she plays out her passion for life and love.

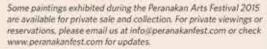
DESMOND SIM "Neo-Nyas!"

"Neo-Nyas" is playwright Desmond Sim's long-awaited artworks created specially for the Peranakan Arts Festival. Surprise your senses with his new series of paintings.



CAROLYN LAW "My HERitage"

Carolyn Law's paintings are a connection to her roots and philosophy in life. Observe her remarkable attention to details as she showcases her heritage.



Rare Vintage Photo Corner

Relive the glamorous and fashionable lifestyles of our Babas and Nyonyas from the 'Golden Era' of the days gone by.



BaBazaa

Browse through a unique range of new and previously loved Peranakan merchandise on sale - from books to baju, jewelry and sarongs. Come early to get the best buys! A limited number of book titles will be available, including Chef Philip Chia's new cookbook and Desmond Sim's compilation of Peranakan plays. We have also allocated areas for antique lovers and collectors to display their selections for sale and exchange - so come participate and enjoy the BaBazaar laojiat!



A kaleidoscope of Peranakan cultural performances will be staged free for everyone! Highlighting our colourful diversity, enjoy performances from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia and local Peranakan groups. Enjoy original and traditional songs and music including Keronchong, Dondang Sayang, comedy skits and joget with us. A vintage fashion exhibition will showcase the golden era of Peranakan fashions and the lifestyle of our forefathers. Check our website for an updated schedule of performances.

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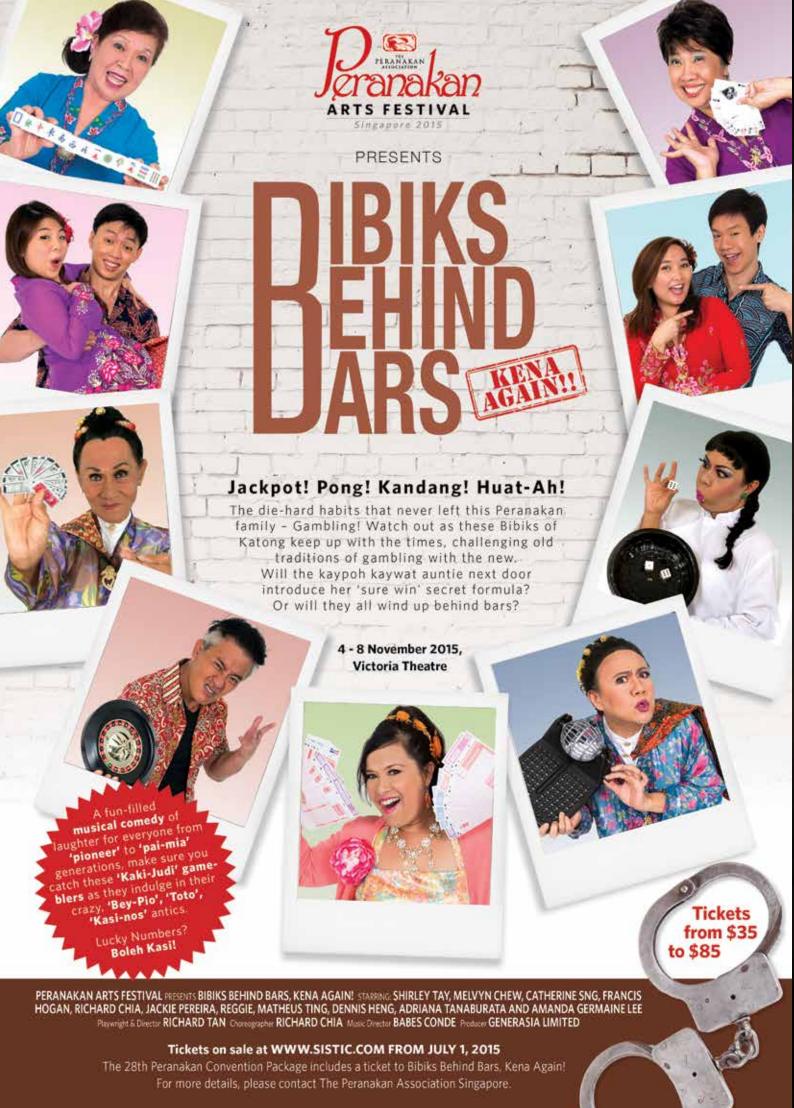


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A Peranakan Heritage

ingapore's late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) was born at home at 92, Kampong Java Road, on 16 September 1923. He was the eldest son of Peranakan parents. LKY's father, Lee Chin Koon, came to Singapore at the age of five; he was brought from Semarang by LKY's grandfather, Lee Hoon Leong, who had been appointed by sugar king Oei Tiong Ham to manage his shipping business in Singapore. Lee Hoon Leong was a Hakka Peranakan from Singapore. His wife, Ko Liem Nio, was an Indonesian Peranakan from Semarang. LKY's mother, Chua Jim Neo, was a Hokkien Peranakan born in Singapore. She was the daughter of Chua Kim Teng, a Singapore Peranakan whose family came from Malacca.

Growing Up in Colonial Times

Both of LKY's grandfathers, Lee Hoon Leong and Chua Kim Teng, were fashionably dapper in the colonial style. They favoured dressing in three-piece suits and hats despite the tropical climate. Lee Hoon Leong was especially westernized and spoke English fluently. He went to school to Raffles Institution and worked as a purser on British ships.

Not surprisingly, he gave LKY an English name, Harry, when he was born.

"Lee Hoon Leong never went to England. But through his business dealings with the British in colonial Singapore, he realised the British respected you if you spoke their language and followed their customs. They would look down on you if you were too *chinchai* (easygoing) or spoke patois (Baba Malay), "says Dr Lee Suan Yew, the youngest of three brothers and a sister. "The nyonyas and babas then spoke proper English and adopted an anglicized lifestyle, although they were very Chinese in their values."

LKY's father, Lee Chin Koon, was brought up in a well-heeled upper middle-class environment. As a young boy, he wore short pants with a jacket and handkerchief. He spoke with a crisp English accent. His genteel European manners were carefully nurtured.

The fortunes of both families were adversely affected during the Great Depression. Fortunately, Lee Chin Koon had a secure job as a storekeeper at Shell Oil Company. He was well regarded by his employers and worked his way up to eventually become a depot manager. Dr Lee relates, "My father



was given a car, a chauffeur and a house, where we sometimes stayed during weekends."

In 1945, Mr and Mrs Lee Chin Koon set up home in a rambling bungalow at 38, Oxley Road. The house was to become LKY's residence for the rest of his life.

As a teenager, LKY spoke only proper English to his family. He was 10 years older than Dr Lee and was regarded with brotherly respect. "He was not a *chinchai*

66 He was always *kuai*... precise, prim and proper. 99

Dr Lee Suan Yew

(easygoing) person," Dr Lee says, adding that, "He was always *kuai* (well behaved). The rest of us were more playful. We played *chatek*, *chongkak* and marbles. LKY, on the other hand, was already serious. He was studious, precise, prim and proper."

Eventually, the other Lee siblings Freddy, Dennis, Suan Yew and sister Monica also spoke less and less patois. They realised that speaking good English in school, during those years when students sang *God Save The King* at morning assembly, was "important".

The elders, however, continued to communicate

in patois. When it came to reprimanding the children, "my paternal grandmother Liem Nio scolded us in very flowery terms, like *kurang ajar* and *sial*," smiles Dr Lee.

Filial Piety

"We were raised as Peranakans when we were young. During Chinese New Year, we would *soja* (kneel down) to wish our father and mother. Then we got our *ang pows* (red packets). My father would wear the silk *baju* with Chinese cloth shoes. When we grew older, however, we shook hands," Dr Lee recalls.

The first cousins from the maternal side at the wedding of Dr Lee Suan Yew's son, Lee Kern Tzen to Adelaine Manzano in 2009 at the Shangri-la Hotel. Seated from left: Jimmy Seet, Vivien Seet (Mrs Lian). Irene Seet (Mrs Ooi), the late Freddy Lee, the late Lee Kuan Yew, Monica Lee (Mrs Chan), Dr Lee Suan Yew, Chia Hian Neo (Ah Qui), Chia Cheng Neo and Chua Gek Choo. Standing from left: Arthur Seet and the late Chua Choo Lim.

"My father kept up the ritual of ancestral worship. He stopped this tradition after the Japanese Occupation when we moved out of 28, Norfolk Road. A number of us became Christians later so we would not touch joss sticks. My father respected our religious preference."

While Baba Lee Chin Koon was the stern

feature

disciplinarian, his nyonya wife Chua Jim Neo was the loving, nurturing mother. LKY was "very close to her."

LKY's 1998 memoirs, *The* Singapore Story, give a glimpse of his quiet admiration for his mother during his growing up years and how, perhaps, he took after her in many ways: "A strong character with great energy and resourcefulness... Had she been born one generation later and continued her education

beyond secondary school, she could easily have become an effective business executive.

Throughout the interview, father and daughter would uphold etiquette (adat) in relation to older members of the family. Dr Lee refers to LKY as Kor (elder brother) while Shermay uses Tai Pak (eldest uncle). She refers to her grandmother as Mak, grandfather as Yeye and aunty as Ku Ma. For ease of reading, this article uses English terms as far as possible.

"She devoted her life to raising her children to be well-educated and independent professionals, and she stood up to my father to safeguard their future. My brothers, my sister and I were very conscious of her sacrifices; we felt we could not let her down and did our best to be worthy of her and to live up to her expectations.

"As I grew older, she began consulting me as the eldest son on all important family matters, so that while still in my teens, I became de facto head of the family. This taught me how to take decisions."

Dr Lee's daughter, Shermay,

recalls her grandmother as a person who was "very capable, loving, wonderful, unbeatable, exceptional - she's part of the reason why our family is what it is today, and he is who he is," referring to LKY.



"Mak (grandmother) loved unconditionally. She helped many people from all walks of life."

Shermay says proudly "Mak's IQ and EQ were very high. My grandfather's mother was a good cook, so Mak had to learn to cook

to prove her self-worth and capability. She did very well in whatever she decided to do."

Shermay points out that LKY and her grandmother "had similar values and mindsets as problem solvers. They were both very family-oriented".

Above, Lee Kuan

visiting his brother

Lee Suan Yew, then

a medical student

at Cambridge

University.

Yew in London

Dr Lee remembers his mother going to the wet market, and young boys carrying her bags to the taxi. She would say, "Why do you do this? You must study hard." And she would help them get jobs.

He adds that LKY was *uhau* (filial) to his parents. Chua Jim Neo died in 1980 and Lee Chin Koon passed away 17 years later in 1997.

Senior Lee was well looked after at the Oxley residence until his august years. When he was in his late 80s, he moved in with Dr Lee's family. Being in private practice, it was also easier for Dr Lee to take care of their father.

After the move, LKY and Mrs Lee would visit his



Dr Lee Suan Yew.

A Fine Peranakan Palate

Our interview with Dr Lee was held over a large dining table where his daughter, Shermay had organised a delectable afternoon tea on nyonyaware. Shermay is herself a well-known Peranakan chef and food consultant.

"Come, let us eat. We can work later. *Makan first*," invites Dr Lee. Babas and nyonyas are known to never let their guests go hungry.

I decide to try all three types of finger sandwiches on the platter egg, bakwa (sweetmeat) and sambal lengkong (spicy fish floss). Dr Lee urges me to try the sandwiches with the chilli chuka (vinegar). I spoon out chilli sauce from

a bottle of *Shermay's Cilicuka* into a little dish. "Squeeze the lime first, it gives the extra kick," he advises. The combination is delicious. "The lime *(lemo kasturi)* is from my garden." Just like a Peranakan home, to have lime, *pandan* and *belimbing* growing in the garden.

Dr Lee brings over a large plastic bottle from a side table laden with bottles and tins of nyonya cookies. "Have some *keropok*," with a broad smile on his face.

The most Peranakan trait about the family, says Dr Lee, is eating. He remembers the lively family gatherings when nyonya aunties father at least once every month on Sundays, always at teatime about 5 pm, to "chitchat" and ask after his father's health. Our father was very pleased that his eldest son came to visit him regularly."

When their mother was alive, LKY would, "busy as he was, send one red packet to her every month." "He never forgot. My mother wouldn't tell us how much it contained. It was *uhau*."

Education and Charity

As a young boy, LKY lived with his paternal grandfather Lee Hoon Leong, whom he much admired, in Katong. He pleaded with his mother to transfer him out of a Chinese school to Telok Kurau English School in primary one. "Mandarin was totally alien to me, and unconnected with my life," LKY had said in his memoirs.

Consistently a top student, he entered Raffles Institution where he continued to excel. His brothers went to Anglo-Chinese School (ACS). Dr Lee explains, "My mother had consulted Yap Pheng Gek, who was a teacher at ACS before he became a banker. He advised

her to send her other sons to ACS because of its Christian values."

"My mother was very perceptive. Besides patois and English, she spoke Hokkien, but not Mandarin. Way before my brother realized the importance of learning Mandarin, she had said to me, 'you are Chinese so you had better learn some Mandarin to keep your Chinese culture'." Before he turned 16, Dr Lee attended Mandarin classes at Prinsep Street three times a week for a few years.

LKY was compelled to learn Mandarin at 32, when he was in politics. It was a tough call as an adult but he persevered. Dr Lee says with admiration: "My brother was such a brilliant linguist English, Japanese to interpret during the war, proper Malay and Hokkien. Later he told us that 'to unite Chinese Singaporeans we must speak

Below left, Mrs Lee Chin Koon (Chua Jim Neo) with three of her grandchildren. From left: Sherlyn Lee, Lee Wei Ling and Lena Lee.

Below right, Mr Lee Chin Koon at his birthday celebration at the home of his son, Dennis. From left: Mrs Gloria Lee, Monica Lee, Lee Kuan Yew and Sherlyn Lee.





would present their best dishes for everyone to enjoy.

LKY's Peranakan favourites were his mother's *mee siam*, *gado gado* and *achar*, all of which his sister Monica is able to replicate.

For many years LKY went light on Peranakan foods because he was careful of the rich fat content in the santan (coconut milk). "At one time he steered clear of mee siam because it has a lot of starch." Disciplined to a fault, LKY adhered to a more restricted diet of 'western' fare such as roast chicken and steaks. And sashimi, noticing that the Japanese lived longer, healthier lives.

"When he grew much older, however, his palate remembered Peranakan food," adds Dr Lee. "The memory of my mother's food, the flavours, came back.

"He would ask my sister Monica, 'what have you got?' She would send across nyonya food. Until he said, 'It's troublesome, I don't want to call you all the time.' He sent his maid over to her, to learn to cook Peranakan dishes."

Disciplined as he was about what he ate, LKY was known to have a sweet tooth. He could resist *kueh lapis* (layer cake), which he considered too sweet and rich. However, he made an exception with *sugee* cake "because he loved almonds," reveals Dr Lee. It was an indulgence at every Lunar New Year celebration.

That was when the extended family

would gather on the first day to savour his mother's Peranakan food, and catch up over her freshly-baked *sugee* cake, *sugee* cookies, *kueh belanda* (Dutch cake or love letters) and *lidah kuching* (cat's tongue). In later years, Shermay would send over *sugee* cake to LKY's house. His appreciation was expressed in a simple "thank you."

Shermay regarded LKY as a food connoisseur. "My aunt Monica said he had an 'astute tongue'. He had a fine palate just like any good Peranakan. A lot of people aren't aware of that. For health reasons as his priority was nation building, he followed an austere diet. Later on in life when he was relaxed, he was more nostalgic for the flavours of his mother's dishes."

feature

in a common language, Mandarin. All races must master their own language. English would be the common language in Singapore'."

"My brother had foresight. He also asserted that Mandarin was essential to do business in China - this was his thinking many years before China opened its doors to the world."

The Mandarin language was to become LKY's lifelong passion. Up till his last days in hospital, he continued with Mandarin lessons. "His mind was always working. He wanted to learn all the time."

Choo, the Nyonya Wife

Dr Lee recalls with amusement one loving aspect of the special relationship between LKY and Mrs Lee. "My sister-in-law was ever so diplomatic. If he was eating chocolate cake, which he loved, she would say, 'Harry, I think it's too much. Can you give me half?' She never said don't eat."

Mrs Lee, or Kwa Geok Choo was the third daughter of OCBC banker Kwa Siew Tee, a Peranakan from Semarang, and Wee Yew Neo, a Singapore nyonya. Dr Lee remembers that Mrs Lee could cook nyonya food: "Before she got married she was using Ellice Handy's cookbook." Mrs Handy was the principal of Methodist Girls' School where Mrs Lee had been a student.

Dr Lee says his brother's love for his alma mater Raffles Institution and Fitzwilliam College in Cambridge University - was "very deep". LKY was "a very loyal person" and donated to these two institutions and also to education and charity.

"A lot of people did not know. He gave quietly."

After LKY's death, Fitzwilliam College conducted a memorial service for him. 200 Singaporean students studying in Cambridge attended, including Christopher Eng,

the grandson of LKY's brother, Dennis. Dr Lee's wife, Pamelia, and their two grandchildren who happened to be in London, were also present.

"He was very frugal. But when it came to education and charity, he gave generously," says Dr Lee, citing a donation of more than S\$10 million for learning the Chinese language. "He believed in education."

A Strong, Caring Brother

LKY was always the leader.

However, he was more than an older brother to his siblings. "He sometimes talked like a father. But he was never condescending. Instead, he advised us and he was always practical."

For instance, LKY had suggested that Dr Lee take up law at the Inns of Court in England and finish within three and a half years. "My brother tried to save my mother's money. But my passion was medicine." Dr Lee made it to Cambridge University.

LKY influenced his youngest brother to become an elocutionist. "I was 17 then. I was keen on public speaking and was chosen to represent ACS at interschool contests. I had training from my teacher, the Reverend Doraisamy, who later became the bishop of the Methodist church."

Dr Lee says one experience was particularly memorable. In 1951, the US daily Herald Tribune sought student representatives from various countries to meet President Harry S Truman at the White House. The ACS principal then, Mr Thio Chan Bee, selected him to compete against the other local students for the golden opportunity to visit New York and Washington.

Dr Lee consulted his brother, who was already back from London and practising as a lawyer. LKY thought political questions would be fielded and prepared him with knowledge on Nehru and Mao. "I still remember the hour-long that in our living room." Unfortunately,



Left, The newlyweds after registering their marriage in Singapore in 1950, with Kwa Geok Choo's mother Wee Yew Neo.

Right, Mr and Mrs Lee at the home of his brother, Dr Lee Suan Yew during one Christmas Eve in the early 1990s. Between them is the portrait of his great grandfather, Lee Bok Boon.



66 He was very frugal. But

when it came to education and

charity, he gave generously. ??

politics was not fielded at the interview. He lost to a student from Saint Joseph's Institution. When the dejected student came home, LKY smiled encouragingly: "You can't win every time you know, you've got to lose sometime."

LKY and his bride, Kwa Geok Choo also took Dr Lee out every now and then in his navy blue Studebaker. "He wanted a change of diet. So he said 'Come, let's go to Johor'. At that time we were one country. We used to frequent the food market in Johor Bahru, which was famous for its *satay* and *mee rebus*. He just loved this combination."

The Final Lap, With Family

LKY was very close to his wife, children and grandchildren. He made it a point for the extended family, including the families of his siblings, to come together during the eve and first day of the Lunar New Year. *Chap Goh Meh* (the last day of the New Year) was the occasion to meet up with his cousins when he was available.

Dr Lee says that having meals together on festive

occasions and birthdays were "the best days of our lives together. LKY would be most relaxed when he was with the family."

Sitting back in his dining chair, Dr Lee smiles

thoughtfully, "When he was at my home, we made sure to have food he enjoyed, like sashimi and cordyceps soup. The last time he was here he saw us eating roast beef. We dared not offer him in case of indigestion. But he said, 'Can I have a piece of that please?' And he enjoyed it. He finished a whole piece with no after effects."

Dr Lee says happily, yet with a tinge of sadness, "We had a marvellous time at my 81st birthday last October at Four Seasons Hotel. He stayed for much of the evening. He was in a jolly mood. He was in good form. Towards the end of his life he had his good days.

"Then he came to my home last Christmas Eve for a family reunion. His grandson, Yipeng, was here too. We had a lovely time. My brother would not miss it. He could eat selectively." Dr Lee shows us a photograph of LKY at the head of the dining table, with a large platter of sashimi served to him. "He took his time to savour every slice with sips of fine Riesling."

An Exceptional Character

LKY's serious, no-nonsense demeanour belied his dry wit.

In a recent facebook posting by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong that went viral, he showed his father's telegram in 1958 using the word "battleship" instead of "steam boat" for dinner, to save words and money. It caught the public's fancy and "battleship" became, for a while, the new moniker for steam-boat. Dr Lee nods, "His humour was not the friendly banter but he had sharp and intelligent wit. My brother was not given to small talk."

Above left,
Celebrating Lunar
New Year at a lohei
dinner with siblings
and their spouses.
Clockwise from left:
Dr Lee Suan Yew,
Mrs Eleanor Lee,
Kwa Geok Choo,
Lee Kuan Yew,
Freddy Lee, Mrs
Pamelia Lee, George
Chan, Monica Lee
and Mrs Gloria Lee.

Above right, Lee Kuan Yew with his granddaughter Li Xiuqi as a toddler at his Oxley Road home one Lunar New Year's Eve.

Dr Lee says that as Prime Minister then, LKY was allowed to stay at Sri Temasek within the Istana. But

he only used the place to exercise or meet people for lunch. "He was very careful about using state money."

LKY never believed in building up a personality

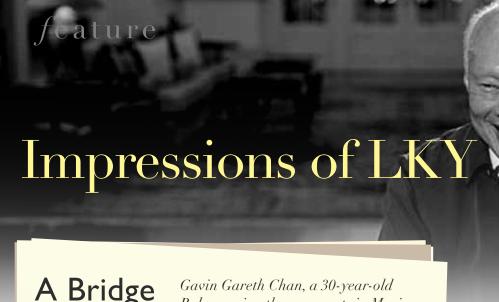
cult. Dr Lee vouches that "he just believed in doing good for Singapore and he and Rajaratnam couched it into the pledge: One nation, one people. Now, the young say, 'Wow, he did all that for us'."

Raised as a Peranakan, the English-educated LKY stayed true to his traditional Chinese roots till the end. He had lived out by example the Confucian values that were instilled in babas and nyonyas from young—values such as family unity, filial piety and education, which he believed were essential building blocks for a strong, cohesive nation.

I ask why LKY never admitted to his cultural identity as a Peranakan. Dr Lee feels it was his way of expressing his cultural and even religious neutrality for nation building, adding that, "Even when it came to religion, he said, 'Don't try to convert me'."

He was above all interests, a Singaporean.

All photographs copyright of Dr Lee Suan Yew.



A Bridge Between Two Worlds

Gavin Gareth Chan, a 30-year-old Baba serving the grassroots in Marine Parade and Joo Chiat, reflects on his encounters with LKY

knew him as Minister Mentor Lee. He was larger than life; more of a concept and an institution that I

held in awe. Until I met him in person.

It was in 2007. I was a university student at a ministerial forum with LKY. His first order of business was to establish which school I came from. Catholic High School, I replied. 'A good school that embraces bilingualism. Young man, how is your Chinese?' He quizzed. Sheepishly I answered that I seldom spoke it. 'Work on your Chinese, it will be very important in your future,' he added.

At another chance encounter several months later,

LKY remembered our conversation. He quizzed me about my Chinese once again. I replied to him in Mandarin. I might have imagined it but I thought he gave a nod of approval. That was the last time I would meet him in person. I would catch fleeting glances of him during public engagements but did not have the chance to speak to him again.

What struck me the most about LKY was how he sought a personal connection with those he came into contact with.

Even though he was the former prime minister, he treated all as though we were his grandchildren. A little distant, yet warmly affectionate. At the same time, his questions dug deeper and belied his concerns - education of the young, for the future of Singapore. And the unyielding conviction to be, at least, bilingual.

Just like our Peranakan forefathers, LKY emphasized the significance of having the ability to communicate with the West and East. He spared no effort to impress upon the younger generation the importance of being a bridge between two worlds. He had the foresight and moulded Singapore to exemplify the best of both worlds." **66**All the maternal (Chua) cousins are very close. LKY was our eldest cousin, nearly 20 years older than me. His mother used to host the Chap Goh Meh dinners for all her brothers and sisters, their children and spouses. After my mother, who was the last sister, passed away, LKY insisted that the cousins continue with the Chap Goh Meh gatherings. When he was the Prime Minister it was a challenge for him to join us. We were so pleased that after he retired and became Minister Mentor he could finally join us. He was a very warm, family man. 99

Mrs Irene Ooi, first cousin to LKY

66 I was 20 and a medical student in 1965. I remember Lim Yew Hock and David Marshall as possible leaders but doubt they would have been able to accomplish what he did. The Plen and other communists, first in the PAP and then the Barisan Socialis, would have driven us in a different direction.

What I admire most about him is his intelligence reflected in his analysis of situations, political and administrative. He had the ability to do what was necessary to meet his goals. Sometimes the cost could be high but as a leader he knew the buck stopped with him. For that I respected him even when I did not always agree with him. 99

Dr Jenny Lee Soon, retired public health professional

66 It was sometime in the 1980s when LKY was flying out of Singapore. The aircraft had an engine snag. LKY had to wait in the VIP room instead of going straight into the aircraft as usual. I gave him the facts and updated him continually during the 20-minute delay. He accepted it and did not make a fuss. It struck me that if you did your work well, there was nothing to be fearful of him. 99

Sally Chan, then-Chief of Passenger Relations, Singapore Airlines

66 My parents have always described LKY as a great man, a great leader of Singapore. And I grew up (I was 11 years old in 1965) listening to his fiery speeches. I was in awe of him. It's because he was tough on everyone that we became so disciplined, so self reliant and so successful.

Knowing that he was a Peranakan struck me with nostalgia. I realized that LKY must have relished his mother's *sambal* dishes. She would probably be calling out in Baba Malay to come get some *kueh* she just finished steaming, and he would be replying in our patois! ??

Mrs Yvonne Khoo, a nyonya who grew up in Singapore

66 He was an exceptional individual. One of a kind. As a Peranakan I would like to believe the cultural environment of his upbringing had a lot to do with what he became. Naturally the community is proud to claim him as our most outstanding Peranakan. He was certainly not perfect, and I think he stayed in politics far too long for Singapore's good, but Singapore is what it is because of him and his team of national pioneers, many of who were also Peranakan. 99

Peter Lee, independent scholar and honorary curator of the NUS Baba House





PIONIOUS LIVES

WE JOIN THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM IN CELEBRATING OUR REMARKABLE PIONEERS – HERE'S A SELECTION FROM 50 LIVES

b. – born d. – died

TAN JIAK KIM (Singapore b.1859-1917d. Singapore)

Tan Jiak Kim was the grandson of pioneering philanthropist Tan Kim Seng. He joined Kim Seng & Company and served on the Straits Legislative Council, the Municipal Commission and the Chinese Advisory Board. In 1900, he founded the Straits Chinese British Association (now known as The Peranakan Association Singapore) and served as its first president. A strong ally of the British, Tan helped to organize the Straits Chinese volunteer division and generously donated to the British military. He attended the coronation of King George V in 1911 as a representative of the Straits Settlements. In 1912, he was made Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George. Tan was also a strong supporter of education. He contributed \$12,000 to help start a medical school in Singapore.

TAN TOCK SENG (Malacca b.1798-1850d. Singapore)

Born in Malacca, Tan Tock Seng arrived in Singapore in 1819, the year it was established by the British. He began as a produce seller before building his fortune as a land owner. Tan was a leader of the Hokkien community in Singapore and, in 1839, led the establishment of the Thian Hock Keng (Temple of Heavenly Blessings), the oldest Chinese temple in Singapore. In honour of his public service, Tan became the first Asian Justice of the Peace. He is most remembered as the founder of Singapore's first hospital for poor Chinese, contributing \$7,000 at the request of Governor William Butterworth. The hospital was re-named in his honour in 1850.

OEI TIONG HAM

(Semarang, Java b. 1866 - 1924d. Singapore)

Oei Tiong Ham took over the running of his father's company Kian Gwan and expanded it into the Oei Tiong Ham Concern. The conglomerate had a diverse portfolio, though much of its profits in the 1890s came from the opium trade. Oei later acquired a number of sugar cane plantations and mills, and by 1900, his company was the leading sugar producer in the Dutch East Indies. In 1920, Oei moved from Semarang to Singapore. His charitable contributions included \$150,000 to Raffles College, and in 1910 he donated the land for the building of Tao Nan School.



Tan Jiak Kim.

LOW KWAY SONG (Singapore b. 1889–1982d. Singapore)

Low Kway Song was a self-taught artist who was known for his portraits of prominent members of society in Singapore and Malaya. As a member of the Singapore Amateur Drawing Society, he organized and participated in exhibitions in Singapore and Malaya. He was also a cartoonist for the Eastern Illustrated Review. He was reportedly the first Singapore artist to receive a four-figure sum for a commission, the portrait of Oei Tiong Ham in 1927.



Dr Lee Choo Neo.

Low was also a founding member of the Merrilads Musical and Dramatic Association, a popular Peranakan performing arts group started in 1923.

SONG ONG SIANG (Singapore b.1871–1941d.Singapore)

Song Ong Siang was the first Straits Chinese from Malaya to receive a British knighthood (1936) and was committed to reformation within the Chinese community in the Straits. He was the second Queen's Scholar from Singapore, studying law in Cambridge. Song was a member of the Straits Legislative Council and represented the colony at Edward VII's coronation in 1902. In 1894, he started the first romanized Malay newspaper in Singapore, Bintang Timor, which lasted only one year. Together with fellow Peranakan Lim Boon Keng, Song was responsible for several progressive projects, particularly the Straits Chinese Magazine and the Singapore Chinese Girls' School. One of his most ambitious publications was One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore, a detailed survey of Chinese life in Singapore and a key source for researchers today.

LEE CHOO NEO (Singapore b.1895-1947d. Singapore)

Lee Choo Neo was the first female physician in Singapore. She was notable for breaking away from the traditional domestic roles of Peranakan women at the time. Educated at the Singapore Chinese Girls' School and Raffles Girls' School, she was the first Straits Chinese woman to obtain a Senior Cambridge Certificate in 1911. She would go on to study medicine at the King Edward VII Medical School in Singapore and opened her own clinic in 1930. Lee also took a keen interest in Malay drama, and in 1912 she wrote, co-directed, and acted in the three-part comedy Mustapha, presented at a Red Cross benefit in Victoria Theatre. Together with other prominent Peranakan women of the day, Lee co-founded the Chinese Ladies' Association (now known as the Chinese Women's Association).

TAN CHIN TUAN (Singapore b.1908 –2005d. Singapore)

Tan Chin Tuan was a notable banker, taking on important leadership roles at the Overseas-Chinese Banking Corporation, which was an amalgamation of Chinese Commercial Bank, Ho Hong Bank and Oversea-Chinese Bank. Tan was responsible for developing OCBC's successful strategy of blue-chip investments during periods of economic uncertainty. As a public figure, Tan worked closely with the British government for gradual self-government, served as Municipal Councillor in 1939, and was appointed to the Advisory Council of the British Military Administration in 1945.

MRS SEOW PECK LENG, NÉE IRIS CHUA SENG KIM (Singapore b.1911-2007d. Singapore)

Iris Chua (Mrs Seow Peck Leng) was the country's first female opposition member of the Legislative Assembly, serving one term from 1959 to 1963. She also founded the Siglap Girls Club (now known as the Singapore Women's Association) to help underprivileged girls, and served as its president for 37 years. Mrs Seow was educated at Singapore Chinese Girls' School and Raffles Girls' School, and was a teacher and principal for a great many years. She represented the Mountbatten constituency for the Singapore People's Alliance (SPA) and in her time there, proposed legislation to outlaw polygamous marriages. This eventually led to the passing of the Women's Charter in 1961. In 1965, she retired from politics to concentrate on social work.

Text for this article is derived from the catalogue of Great Peranakans: 50 Remarkable Lives – an ongoing exhibition at the Peranakan Museum. See page 56, The Peranakan Guide.

Tan Chin Tuan. Song Ong Siang. Iris Chua Seng Kim (Mrs Seow Peck Leng).

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To mark Singapore's jubilee in our own way; The Peranakan magazine identified 50 things that embody our multi-hued culture. We came up with a veritable feast for the five senses. Nyonya Linda Chee mulls over our choice picks THINGS OUINTESSENTIALLY PERANAKAN

the taste of ambrosia With so many naysayers out there, choosing just ten of the most iconic Peranakan foods is like opting to walk on a bed of nails! We closed our eyes and vouched for our favourite dishes here.

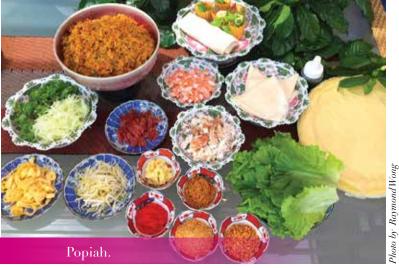
Photo and dish by Keith and Melinda Chee



Ayam buah keluak

This is a classic Peranakan dish that is so *sedap!* (delicious!). The first spoonful hits your palate all at once—spicy, salty, tart, slightly sweet and umami. Every family claims to have the best recipe. Some say the original dish had pork ribs and not chicken, as Peranakans ate mostly pork. Perhaps it first appeared in Indonesia, where we get most of our nuts from, and later became popular in Malacca when Javanese Peranakans married into Malacca families. An anthropological study would be most valuable.







Babi pongteh (stewed pork with gravy)

 Belly pork, potatoes, bamboo shoots and black mushrooms are cooked with a sauté of fermented taucheo (soyabean) and garlic to create a full-bodied stew. Some families add chicken. The gravy can be soupy or thick and dark, almost like a sauce. The best way to eat pongteh is to tear a green chilli into it and stir a touch of sambal belachan into the gravy. Chelop (dip) a slice of crusty French loaf and pop the gravy-soaked morsel into your mouth. Heavenly!

<mark> Popiah</mark> (spring rolls)

No other dish compares with *popiah* for community bonding. The whole of Malacca and Singapore comes together to help out with the peeling, slicing, chopping, frying...preparing from morning till evening for days, before we come together for just as many days to break the eating record *lu makan berapa biji?* (how many did you eat?) The Peranakans are unique in using crepe-like kulit telor (egg skin wraps). Except for my family and our close relatives, I have not seen anyone else serving popiah with home-made buay cheo, a sweet sauce made from flour, gula Melaka and dark soya sauce.

Bakwan kepiting (crab meat ball soup)

If small flower crabs (kepiting lenjong) are used, their red shells are a pretty sight floating in this wholesome, yet delicate soup. It was always a treat when I was a child when my mother would serve this dish on festive occasions. The day before, my two brothers and I would be at the dining table, busily shelling freshly-steamed crabs and in between, stealing a morsel or two of the sweet, white flesh. We helped to mix the minced pork with the crabmeat, stuffing half the amount into the crab shells and shaping the remaining half into balls. Such are the delicious memories shared by siblings.

Pong tauhu (tofu ball soup)

Pong tauhu is said to be the everyday, more economical, variation of the bakwan kepiting. Malacca nyonyas sometimes call this tepong tauhu. Mashed tauhu (firm tofu) and minced pork or prawns are mixed and shaped into balls and cooked in a soup made with sautéed taucheo and garlic. Belly pork (samchien bak) strips are added to enrich the soup. My family uses fresh fish paste instead of pork it is a healthier and no less enjoyable variation that I have been enjoying since childhood.



ltek tim (braised duck soup)

My father just loves *itek tim* served with generous lashings of brandy (the anglophile touch), torn green chilli (local) and freshly squeezed *lemo kasturi* (Malay). This is a robust duck and pork trotter soup which the Teochews call kiam chye ark (salted vegetable duck) and add serngboey (preserved plum) for tartness. We Peranakans have been clever to add assam poey (tamarind skin) and belimbing for the extra tang. Itek Tim.

feature



Chap chye (mixed vegetable stew)
After the heavy feasting on Chinese New Year's eve, chap chye is our comfort food the morning after, for overworked tummies. The very economical cabbage is the dominant ingredient in what was originally a Hokkien stew. Chap chye uses many dried foods such as black mushrooms, bok jee (wood ears), kim chiam (lily buds), taukee (soya bean sticks) and sometimes tanghoon (glass noodles). Nyonyas cook it with sautéed taucheo and garlic, adding prawns, belly pork and fish balls.

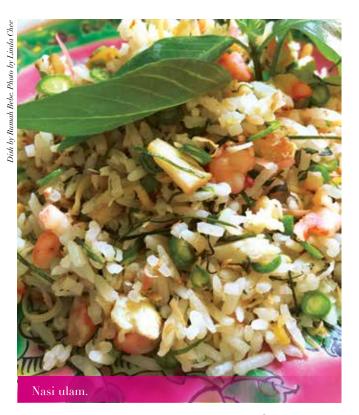
My Makmak's (maternal grandmother) hati babi bungkus was the best. No one made it like she did. She had a secret recipe for rempah panas (spice powder) that elevated her hati babi to ambrosial heaven. This cute little old lady who smoked and drank brandy until her late 80s also made the best tapeh (sweet glutinous rice wine). Once a year I would spend the whole afternoon with Makmak in the kitchen to chop pork and dice pig liver, wrap the mixture into 'pingpong' balls with pang sek eu (pig's caul), then steam and fry them into cholesterol-filled wonders - a heart patient's nightmare!

Sambal jantong pisang (banana 'heart' salad) Peranakans are practical and make good use of what comes from the garden, like jantong pisang - actually the banana flowers found beneath the bract of the whole inflorescence that constitutes a giant banana bud. The jantong is steamed and tossed with a gamut of ingredients including sambal belachan, lime, cucumber, belimbing, serondeng (toasted shredded coconut), fried garlic and shallots, prawns and sliced red chillies. Finally, a luxurious topping of coconut cream. The poor man's version is sambal timun (cucumber salad).

10 Nasi ulam (rice with raw vegetables)
The seriously classical nasi ulam is reputed to contain 17 different kinds of fresh aromatic herbs according to a Malacca Peranakan lady, but in Singapore terms it is usual to muster only about







seven or eight herbs. They include daon kunyit (turmeric leaf), daon lemo perot (kaffir lime leaf), serai (lemongrass), bunga kantan (torch ginger bud), timun (cucumber), kachang botol (wing beans) and kachang panjang (long beans). Nasi ulam is adapted from a Malay dish. White rice is spiced with sambal belachan and tossed with the herbs. Flaked fish - chencharu, selar or parang - is usually included. Prawns are also sometimes added. Meats are absent.

colourful insights Peranakan culture is renowned for its rich palette

of colours, textures and extravagant finishes.



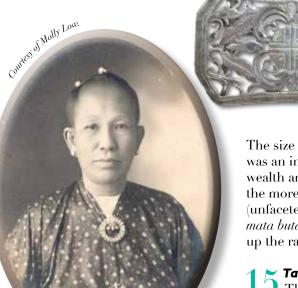
Kasot manek

Sarong kebaya

To the uninitiated, wrapping the sarong and pinning the kerosang (brooches) onto the kebaya is a notoriously sweaty challenge. Tips from inexpert users: Wrap the sarong around and create two or three deep pleats at the inner end or the fit will not enable you to walk comfortably. Hold your breath and tie an old nylon stocking around your waist if you are not confident that the sarong will hold up. Then secure tightly with the tali pinggang (silver belt). Secure your kebaya front with three large baby safety pins before replacing each one with a *kerosang*. Practice makes perfect.

Batiks The best batiks are known to originate from Indonesia. The colours and motifs distinguish the specific village they come from and even the master batikmaker who designed it. Many books have been written about batiks. The latest is Peter Lee's tome, Sarong Kebaya (see page 46). Indeed batiks have a fascinating history!

Nasot manek Come to the east coast and visit Rumah Bebe or Rumah Kim Choo. You will see students of all ages and races learning to stitch kasot manek (beaded slippers). Intricate patterns are brought to life by fine needles looping tiny faceted glass beads onto canvas or cotton fabric. The colours are jewel-like. The motifs can range from traditional, like flowers, to unconventional like Mickey Mouse.



Kerosang

serong.

Kerosang In the old days, the nyonya's baju banjang, like that of my great grand-aunt Tan Geok Kim Neo (above), had no butang (buttons) and was fastened by three *kerosang serong* (brooches). The size of a *bibik*'s gold *kerosang* wealth and status. The bigger and mata buta! (blinding!) - the higher

Tali pinggang.

Photo by Linda Chee

was an indicator of the family the more embellished with intan (unfaceted diamonds) - sampay up the ranking.

Tali pinggangThe *tali pinggang* (chainlink silver belt) has intricate patterns that are totally concealed when worn under the baju panjang. But with the more revealing *kebaya*, the buckle peeps out at the waist, continuing from the kerosang the ostentatious display of ornamentation. Once in a while you may spot an outsized gold buckle and wickedly wonder if the nyonya had benefitted from

an unknown inheritance.

feature



NyonyawareGone are the days when hard-pressed Peranakan families sold their inheritance in baskets to the karang guni man. Good pieces of original Peranakan porcelain are hard to come by these days. Prices have reached exorbitant levels for rare artifacts. Kamchengs, chanaps, plates, cups, vases... reproductions are being made in China to meet popular demand. Some are of very high quality.

Gelai tutop

In the old days, gelai tutop (glass bell jars) enclosing glittery metallic tinsel and figurines were popular among wellheeled anglophile Peranakans. They purchased or made these ornaments for the bridal chamber. Inside the glass are English or Chinese figures of animals, flowers, fruits and foliage arranged in a whimsical manner. Gelai tutop are still collected although they are rarely seen in Peranakan homes these days.

Bedak sejok This square box of bedak sejok (literally, cold powder) with a fair skinned beauty on the lid has been in production since the late 19th century. It is still produced in Tangerang, Indonesia, using magnesium



Weddings Elaborate 12-day wedding celebrations to signify wealth and status are a thing of the past in our *chepat chepat* (fastpaced) lifestyle. Where can you find the elaborate sedan chairs and bearers these days? However, Peranakan-themed weddings with the couple in traditional costume are in vogue as babas and nyonyas become aware of their heritage. The simplified celebration usually lasts not more than three days.

The tarnish comes off instantly,

like magic!



Bedak sejok.



Shophouses Different cultural influences merge in the ornate architecture of over 6,000 conserved shophouses (tiam chu in Hokkien) and residential terrace houses (pai chu) seen in certain parts of Singapore. Popularly associated with the Peranakans, many were also lived in by other ethnic groups such as the Arabs, Banjar and Chettiars. These houses typically feature high ceilings, airwells and wooden upper floors as 'cooling' buffers against our tropical climate.



the **fragrance** of home
Did someone mention that Babas like to *kentut* (break wind) around the house? From the pungent to the sweet-smelling, our culture takes the prime position.

Bunga rampay (potpourri) 21 Bunga rumpa, The bunga rampay comes from a Malay custom. Peranakans like to have bunga rampay as a traditional touch at weddings and other festive occasions or in the room for a nice fragrance.

It is essentially a potpourri of many wangi (sweet-smelling) materials. These include shredded pandan (screwpine) leaves and flowers such as jasmine, rose and chempaka, additionally scented with perfume, patchouli being a popular fragrance. Shredded lemo perot (kaffir lime) rind lends a fresh, citrusy smell.

22 Aromatic herbs

Peranakans use plenty of herbs to produce complex flavours in their foods. Imagine plucking fresh from your herb garden daon lemo perot (kaffir lime), bunga kantan

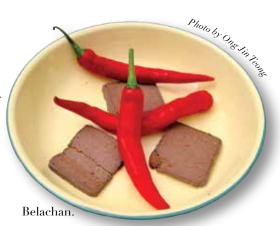
(torch ginger bud), daon kesom (laksa leaf), daon kemangi (basil leaf), daon kunyit (turmeric leaf) and daon salam (bay leaf) for sambals, curries and nasi ulam. Just a few sprigs of any herb when steaming white rice would be divine!

Belachan Aiyee, kusmangat, lu nyonya tak tau makan sambal belachan? (you are a nyonya but don't eat sambal belachan?) Aunties and uncles look in mock horror at my niece for not being true to her heritage. Indeed, Peranakans from Malacca or Penang also fiercely dispute the merits of their hometown belachan, a.k.a. Peranakan 'cheese'. Made from fermenting crustaceans or

Bunga kantan.

udang geragau, belachan should be roasted or dried in the sun before use. But beware of upsetting your neighbours. The *bau amis* (stink) spreads for miles.

Chinchalok 4 Fried fish never tasted so good without this appetite enhancer. My father could polish off a couple of deep-fried ikan chencharu sumbat chilli bawang puteh (stuffed with chilli paste and garlic) and plenty of white rice when he had his chinchalok served with sliced shallots, red chillies and lime juice. Some Peranakans spike this concoction of fermented udang geragau, dry cooked rice and salt with brandy. Lagi shiok!







Tumis rempah (stir-frying 40 the spice paste) Rempah to the Peranakans is like pesto to the Italians, only more potent. The strong aroma of the rempah frying in hot oil never fails to make me sneeze. A good nyonya cook is discerned by the way she uses the ladle to *tumis* (stir fry) rempah. A sizzle must be heard when the rempah mentah (raw) is poured into the *kuali*, instantly absorbing the oil. The rempah is just about ready when it pechah minyak (throws out the oil, that is, when the oil exudes to the surface). She knows when the *rempah* is ready by the garing (crispy) smell when the fragrance rises.

26 Kentot busok, kenching kuning (smelly fart, yellow pee) aptly describes the potency of these bright green almond-sized antioxidants also known as stink beans. Peranakans love their petai raw or tossed into a rich sambal gravy to be eaten with plenty of rice.

27 4711 Eau de Cologne

My 87-year old father used to splash this German-made "water from Cologne" on his face and neck, every morning before work and every evening before dinner. A throwback to British colonial times, it was one of the imported-from-England toiletries popular among anglophile Babas for its fresh, cooling fragrance.

Sambal petai.

28 Brylcreem
For that all-day shine and hold, use Brylcreem! Sounds familiar? This clean-smelling old-school grooming pomade gave virile, young Babas visions of achieving the desired silver screen Clark Gable hairstyle. Remember your father and uncles in their high-waisted long pants and starched white shirts with rolled-up sleeves? They slicked on sticky pomade until not a hair was out of place. Then after a shower, wet hair towel-rubbed, they would look

29 English lavender talcum powder

Both my nyonya mother and mother-in-law insisted on using only Yardley talc and soap by Yardley of London in their younger days. Women of their generation loved the refinement of English-made toiletries.

20 Joss sticks

electrified!

These bring back delightful memories for me when children could stay up late on the ninth day of the Lunar New Year to pai Ti

Kong seh (pray to the Jade Emperor on the deity's birthday). The altar table set up in our garage would be laden with colourful fruits and Peranakan food served in even more colourful

nyonyaware. The sandalwood joss sticks emanated a woody fragrance throughout the house, later overpowered by the metallic smell of firecrackers that were joyfully set off.

4711 Eau de Cologne.

a **touch** of dexterity

The babas and nyonyas have a certain deftness of hand, whether it be in gambling, embroidery, or reining in the recalcitrant young.



Cherki cards.

Cherki Cherki was so popular for gambling that the British colonial government outlawed the game at the turn of the 20th century. Many bibiks were cherki addicts who neglected their families. They pawned jewellery and lost small fortunes. Those caught gambling were hauled to jail in Black Maria vans - a sight that inspired the hugely successful 2002 theatre production Bibiks Behind Bars (see page 6). Cherki was modified by the Peranakans from an old Chinese leaf game known as daun cherki. The cards have many Hokkien and Baba Malay words.

99 Chongkak

Growing up in 1960s Singapore, our cousins would converge in our house—a large bungalow in a rubber estate - during the holidays. The mothers cooked and fathers enjoyed a tipple. The children played endless games. We became *ninjas* (remember Shintaro?) darting around the rubber trees,





rubbed rubber seeds to 'burn' each other, or played *chongkak*. Instead of glass marbles, we used cowrie shells. *Chongkak* was a popular pastime among Malays and Peranakans up to the 1970s.

Batu giling and batu lesong (granite roller and mortar & pestle)

In the old days, every Peranakan kitchen had its own set of raw granite 'appliances'

the batu giling and batu lesong - to grind wet spices. Today, few local households use the heavy batu giling to grind rempah. I have turned mine into a décor item. But I still use the lesong to crush ginger, peppercorns and salt. Somehow, the food tastes better. The unevenly crushed spices release more flavour than ingredients cut finely in a blender or processor.

Polishing blackwood furniture

When we were younger, my brothers and I had to clean our blackwood living set a week or so before the Lunar New Year. We had a system. First, wrap a lightly damp cloth around a chopstick. Then poke the 'mini-mop' through every gap in the intricate carvings to remove the dust. Give a good overall wipe - your chair is clean, ready to be applied with beeswax or *tung* oil and polished twice till glossy.

Sulam (embroidery)

I remember my mother skillfully pedalling her treadle Singer sewing machine every afternoon when I was a young girl. As I watched over her shoulder, the needle would dance effortlessly, threading exactly over the traced *sulam* (embroidery) patterns. Colourful flowers and butterflies would come alive within the wooden hoop. Delicate net-like patterns emerged as she carefully snipped out the fabric. Like her, young nyonyas made their own *kebayas*. Sadly, that era has passed. Working mothers like me neither inherited the passion nor the skill.

Carving chanap flowers
This is a vanishing art in
Singapore and Malaysia. Happily,
young Lee Yuen Thien (below) of
Bukit Berendam, Malacca, who is
only all of 28 years old, has been
conscientious enough to acquire
the skill and demonstrate it to
others willing to learn.



Photo from Lee Yuen Thi

Eating with fingers

As children, we would eat with our fingers at home like the Malays. Forks and spoons were reserved for special occasions when we had guests. The correct etiquette is to put the food at the tips of the fingers and push it towards the mouth daintily. Simply putting the food into the whole of the hand and stuffing it into the mouth is not considered *halus* (refined).



38 Siseh rambot, chochok sanggol (combs and hairpins)

Bibiks used to comb their hair back so tightly over their scalps until their hairlines receded. The sanggol (chignon) was the crowning glory of every bibik. Never attempt to touch a bibik's hair she has spent much time gelling it. I remember my paternal grandmother, Chee Kim Puay Neo (left), poked three large gilt hairpins into her tiny greying chignon.

Paper folding

Peranakan women recycled their *cherki* cards after these became worn out from frequent play. When they were not gambling, bibiks and nyonyas would skilfully fold the cards with origami-like precision to produce pretty paper lanterns, flowers and animals to present to their friends.

Rotan (the cane)

Siap pantat! (Prepare your butt!) Every baba remembers mother's lethal weapon from their boyhood days. From experience, the thinnest rotan produces the deadliest whack (rembat or sebat). TPAS president Peter Wee, now in his 70s, admits being caned for disobedience. TPAS first vice-president Alan Koh, 61, laughs over his many canings "I was quite naughty". Richard Tan, 60, creative director of Main Wayang, vividly remembers the *rotan* was always "gantong kat blakang pintu dapor" (hung behind the kitchen door)...on standby!" Kuala Lumpur Peranakan association president Cedric Tan, who turns 50 in June, says of the *merah merah* or 'red' stripes on his legs: "Depending on the crowd...it was shameful with the girls and relatives or cool with your schoolmates.

the **sound** of the **nyonya** Baba David Neo's

love of patois rings deep in his thoughts. Bantering from Kuala Lumpur...

Patois or Baba Malay

After living two and a half decades abroad, my ear aches to hear Baba Malay! It was great to converse in patois with lain orang embok-embok when I was helping to start the Peranakan Association of Australia (PAA) in Melbourne some years ago. Now that I am based in Kuala Lumpur, and Malacca being just two hours away, speaking patois never fails to liven me up. It makes me feel so at home.

🕦 Accents (Baba Malay versus Bahasa Malay)

Dengair baik-baik yeh (listen carefully): Learning Bahasa Malay in school, I came home and asked my grandmother, "Mama, mana pisau (where is the knife)?" She responded swiftly: "Pisau...lu apa? Anak Melayu, yeh?" ("What are you? Son of a Malay?") At my cousin's Malay class, her che'gu (teacher) wrote on the board: ULAR (snake in Bahasa Malay) and pronounced it; my cousin raised her hand and said, "salah, Che'gu. Ulair..."

Melatah and charok (exclamations, usually of vulgarities

when startled, and swearing)

As a little boy, I used to creep up behind my grandmother with a blown up bag and pop it just to hear Mama melatah and *charok*, which a well brought up, bertapi-tapi (refined) Baba such as I daren't repeat! But gone are the days when one would have a good chuckle over the unabashed



bibiks' brazen charok-charok banter it still tickles me when they come to mind!

The nyonya's sharp wit and tongue

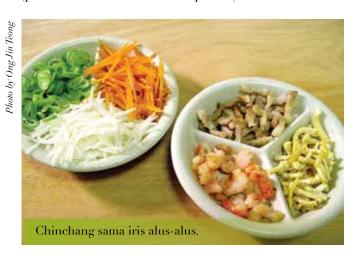
It used to irk me when I could not find something and asking my mother, her response would be: "lu charek barang pakay mata ka pakay mulot (do you look with your eyes or your mouth)?" Her (and the nyonyas') wicked sarcasm and wit are what I miss terribly these days. I still vividly remember her critical comment of a newsreader on television: "Tengok mulot dia macham geledak abis idung dia pesak sekali!" (Look at how wide her mouth and flat her

nose is!" This exclamation gets lost in translation). Or, her remark of the mother of my sister's ex-boyfriend singing in church: "Dengair mak dia nyanyi macham itek gila (His mother sings like a crazy duck)!"

Tumbok lesong (pounding of the mortar and pestle) I used to hear and read that nyonyas of old could gauge your culinary skills by just listening photo by Ong Jin Teong. to how one *tumbok* lesong. I could not comprehend this logic until I heard a non-Peranakan Chinese (whom we referred to as Cheena gerk) tumbok lesong! Now I know betol tak ada (there is no) rhythm mia! Tumbok lesong.

Chinchang sama iris alus-alus (chopping and slicing finely)

If you grew up in an extended Peranakan family, you would be used to the hustle and bustle in the kitchen. It was always heartwarming to be involved in the communal cooking at Botan House (my mother's rumah abu, or ancestral home on Neil Road, mentioned in Lee Kip Lin's *The Singapore House* pp. 172-173). But my Ee (maternal aunty) begged to differ, remembering the melodrama she often witnessed: "The nyonyas are full of colour... they will laugh and cry in the kitchen!" Laugh and cry in the kitchen we did. As children it was horror to our ears when my mother decided to masak poh pia sama chia satu dunia (cook popiah and invite the whole world)! The next three days entailed endless chopping and slicing for the rempah popiah (filling) that would fill a periok satu budak kechik boleh masok (the huge aluminium pot that could fit a little child)! There goes our playtime... Even my blind Dad was recruited to persiang taugeh (pluck the roots off the beansprouts)!



Cherita dulu kala (stories from the olden days)

Sam Pek Eng Tai (Butterfly Lovers) and the Sam Kok (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) were two great Chinese classics that were translated into Baba Malay and became very popular. Sam Pek Eng Tai is the tragic folktale about star-crossed lovers who became united as butterflies only in their afterlife.



Cherita dulu kala.

It was beautifully adapted for the stage by the late playwright Felix Chia in the 1980s.

and lembut (directly translated) as 'soft', an aesthetic valued by the Malays and Peranakans that captures agility and form) than lagu-lagu (tunes of) keronchong, which used to lull me to sleep. In vogue from the



1920s through 1960s, this genre of music originated in Indonesia and till today is much loved by the Peranakans.

Panton (poems)

I miss Kong Cho's (great grandfather's) grand birthday and ronggeng (dancing) parties at Botan House when Mama would always sing the dondang sayang and engage in repartee with clever verses in panton... She had a book of panton that she would faithfully consult to keep her mind sharp.

Ramay-ramay, laojiat-laojiat (gather together and make merry again, somewhat lost in translation)

For me, the greatest thing about being Peranakan is the hospitality. To ramay-ramay, laojiat-laojiat at the slightest excuse is what we live for, especially having grown up with Kong Cho's (great grandfather's) lavish parties... I can't afford to throw such costly parties but I find every excuse to masak (cook) and chia orang makan (invite people for a meal) so that we can ramay-ramay, laojiat-laojiat sama makan sampay gila (and eat like mad)!