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THE
PERANAKAN
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ON THE COVER • *The Edwardian-style mansion that was built to inform research. Above the pintu pagar is the signboard with the Chinese characters of the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony. Story on page 4. Photograph by Colin Chee.*



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THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE • *Editor:* Linda Chee • *Assistant Editors:* Emeric Lau, Dawn Marie Lee • *Creative Advisor:* John Lee • *Associate Editor:* Elisabeth Chan • *Editorial Committee Members:* Colin Chee, Bryan Tan • *Webmaster:* Edmond Wong • *Designer:* Michelle Yap • *Advertising Manager:* Ngiam May Ling
• For advertising enquiries, please contact Ngiam May Ling at +65-97410610.
The Peranakan is published by The Peranakan Association Singapore, Raffles City PO Box 1640, Singapore 911755.
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Entering the Peranakan World

Ever heard of the term, Peranakan *chelop*? In my definition, it is literally about ‘dipping’ oneself into the culture. This can occur when someone ‘outside’ the community attempts to become a Peranakan (sometimes referred to as a wannabe) or is identified as one by marriage.

Older Peranakans of generations past, our parents or parents’ parents, would recoil in horror should a baba or nyonya dilute their ‘pure blood’ by marrying an outsider. A *cheenagerk* (common Chinese people) would be looked upon with disdain because he or she did not possess the refinement of a Peranakan upbringing or high status in society.

Such times are long gone. Does it matter now to be a *chelop*?

I dare say these days we take pride that non-Peranakans want to imbibe our culture. In a much-welcomed way, they contribute to sustaining it.

One fine example is the mansion that Dr Lye Wai Choong built to house his fabulous collection of Peranakan artefacts. Although he calls himself a *chelop*, this grandson of a nyonya has made it his calling to collect items that will inform research, as you will read.

We also take a delightful journey to observe how others have participated in and built on our heritage. Australian-Peranakan Jennifer Lim does it through her art. Louis Chan cooks his way to his roots. The students of Singapore Chinese Girls’ School identify with the culture through their studies in the Humanities. Three married couples – the Chassins, Grunenfelders and the Wongs – share on coping in a Peranakan household. Peter Lee gives tips on building your own family tree.

The past months have been a buzz of activity. Our association hosted the inaugural Peranakan Arts Festival and 28th Baba Nyonya Convention last November. More than 300 overseas delegates gathered with locals over three dizzy days on the lawn of the stately Victoria Memorial Hall and were



entertained in the newly refurbished Victoria Theatre. Recently in March, the first Armenian Street Party was organised by the Peranakan Museum in the fashion of partying, or *lao jiat*, by the Peranakans. Our culture has also travelled to Fukuoka!

Many thanks to our association members who turned up at the association’s AGM in late-

April to vote in the next main committee. We are heartened that four new faces have been voted in: Koh Hwei Ling, Angela Kek, Khong Swee Lin and Tan Koon Siang. We also welcome three new members to the magazine team – Dawn Marie Lee, Victoria Chanel Lee and Ngiam May Ling. Their respective involvement will bring fresh perspectives and ideas to the association and the magazine.

Enter the world of the Phuket Peranakans from 24 – 27 November this year, when they play host to the 29th Baba Nyonya Convention. Look out for more details in our website or by email. •

Linda Chee, Editor

The newly-elected TPAS committee for the next two years. Story on page 40. Pictured here are most of the committee members. Front row, from left: Angeline Kong, Alan Koh, Peter Wee, Raymond Wong, Ee Sin Soo. Middle: Khong Swee Lin (arm on banister), Tan Koon Siang, Edmond Wong, Zan Ho. Last row: Linda Chee, Emeric Lau, Adrian Tan.

Fit for a queen

Even Queen Elizabeth II is ‘wearing’ our culture! She has been seen and photographed wearing a modern Peranakan *kerosang* (brooch) designed and crafted by Singapore’s own Foundation Jewellers at least 10 times since it was presented as a gift to her, on the occasion of her Diamond Jubilee in 2012. Besides official engagements, the much-beloved Royal has worn the Jubilee brooch with a Bird of Paradise motif for personal occasions, including the 2015 christening of her great-granddaughter Princess Charlotte. The listings

of the occasions when she used it can be seen at queensjewelvault.blogspot.com/2012/10/the-gold-filigree-brooch, a blog dedicated to chronicling the jewels worn by the Queen. •

The Jubilee brooch worn by Her Majesty was designed by Thomis Kwan of Foundation Jewellers.



The Hall of the Phoenix and

NYONYA LINDA CHEE IS ENCHANTED BY ONE MAN'S DREAM COME TRUE

For about five years after he started collecting in 1993, Dr Lye Wai Choong focused only on porcelain. As time progressed, his passion widened into all things Peranakan – from metalwork, furniture, embroidery and beadwork to documents and literature.

“I believe I have the collecting predisposition in my genes because I have collected one thing or another since I was a child,” says this self-professed Peranakan *chelop* whose tenuous link to the culture was his maternal nyonya grandmother. His interest was first sparked not by a search for his roots but by the perceived beauty of the colourful nyonya porcelain.

Dr Lye’s focus later shifted as he became “more interested in the stories behind what I collected, their historical significance and how these things were used.” His pursuit transformed into a continuous scholastic exercise: “I wanted to be more categorical and certain about what defines Peranakan material culture.”

By then, he had amassed a vast collection of artefacts. His apartment in Penang came in useful to store furniture acquired there. In Singapore, he rented warehouse space.

At a dinner with fellow collectors, one of them, Johnson Tan, asked about plans for his furniture. Dr Lye replied, “I might just build a house for it when I retire in my 60s or 70s. Johnson laughed and jokingly said, ‘I hope it will not be a paper house’. He also advised me to give enough time ‘for my project to mature and that I should give myself more time to enjoy it’.”

Dr Lye thought this piece of advice made a lot of sense. Enthused, he began looking in 2005 for a period building of the 1920s for his “project” which was to dedicate an entire house for research, documentation and to enhance international recognition of the Peranakan material and social culture.

“I did not want to create another terrace house

museum because there was already one in Malacca, and the NUS Baba House was in the process of being established.” As a child growing up in Penang, he had been impressed by Lim Lean Teng’s mansion called

Woodville, along Northam Road, which “was always so beautifully lit up during Chinese New Year.” His nyonya grandmother called such mansions *ang moh lau* although they were mostly the grand abodes of wealthy Penang babas. “I remember saying that I would like to have a house like Woodville when I grow up, and my mother told me that we would never be able to afford it.”

The HSBC dome

Fortunately, Dr Lye’s profession as a medical specialist afforded him his dream. He scoured Katong and Mountbatten without success. Chancing upon a flat plot of land in the Holland area, “Woodville immediately came to my mind.” Lim Lean Teng had specified to his architect, Charles Miller, that he wanted a dome “like the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank building” in Penang. Dr

Lye flew to Penang with an interior designer friend to take measurements of the house, and built his own “mansion” exactly to Lim’s specifications. Incidentally, Lim Lean Teng was about as baba as Yap Ah Loy, a *singkeh* who married a nyonya.

Architect Jon Lim described Woodville as a “castle mansion with Edwardian features.” The project took four years to complete and was built around the dimensions of a heavily carved wooden partition in the main hall. All the rooms were meticulously designed to fit his furniture. “We had to get the approval of the Urban Redevelopment Authority for extra height allowance for the dome so that the building would not look disproportionate.”

Courtesy of Dr Lye Wai Choong.



The airwell with its stained glass depiction of the phoenix and peony.

Peony

*Dr Lye's
Edwardian
period mansion
adapted from
Lim Lean
Teng's 'castle'
in Penang.*

Photo by Colin Chee.



The front hall with its intricately-carved partition and walls lined with blackwood mother-of-pearl furniture.



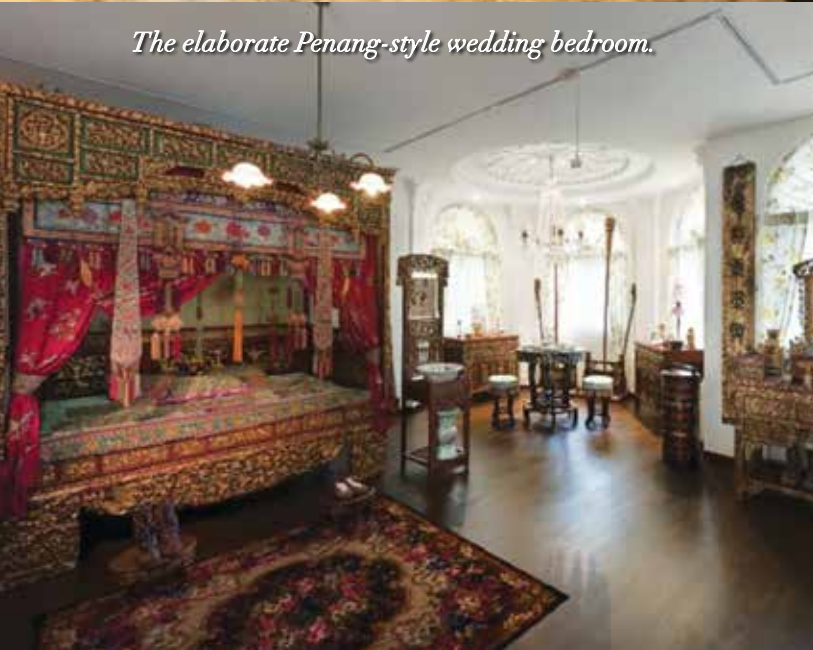
The porcelain collection room.



The textile room with sliding drawers in the basement.



The elaborate Penang-style wedding bedroom.



The progress was fraught with problems. The basement had condensation issues because of the local humidity. The air-conditioning ducts and wiring had to be intricately placed to properly conceal literally “thousands of switches” that controlled lighting, temperature and other functions. Hoisting heavy panels of glass to form the ceiling of the airwell was no easy task. Columns and cornices had to be accurate to the last detail. Dr Lye credits his interior designer, Geoffrey Law, and his collector-partner, Daniel Lea, “who ensured that everything was properly executed.”

Dr Lye’s aim was to “exhibit in context” for the artefacts to be better appreciated: “We tried to re-create the rooms according to the period from 1900s to the 1930s using old photographs and postcards.” Special collection rooms were meticulously designed to display porcelain, metalwork and jewellery. He found the basement ideal for displaying textiles in an atmospherically controlled environment. Swathes of embroidered coffin covers even found their own pride of place.

The ‘project’ is aptly named the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony, which are significant motifs in Peranakan material culture. Dr Lye declares he has no commercial interest in his project and doubts his collection will ever be dispersed. “The advantage of having a vast amount of material is that it enables one to handle, compare and study different objects, he says, adding that “my doors are always open to researchers, scholars, students and serious collectors”, but not to the general public because “this is my home.”

Having absorbed considerable knowledge of the culture, Dr Lye gives talks to regional societies on Peranakan porcelain. He also collaborates with the Peranakan Museum “whenever I can be of help” and is “particularly excited” to work with researchers. Dr Lye laments the dearth of scholarly material on the culture’s “short history”, praising in the same breath well-researched tomes such as *Sarong Kebaya* by Peter Lee and Cheah Hwei Fen’s beadwork thesis, *Phoenix Rising*.

Dr Lye hopes for students of social history to take up masters or doctorates to thoroughly research on Peranakan material culture. “We need to gather as much knowledge as possible and it is beyond one or two or a few people to do it.” The good doctor feels that if Peranakan culture and history are to survive and be recognised, “we need to present the facts, and be as accurate as possible, so that internationally it will become a recognised regional history of this part of the world.”

One thing continues to pique Dr Lye. “The item which epitomizes the Peranakan world, no matter if of little monetary value is likely to be my most prized item.”

“I am still wondering what it is.”

Photos on these pages courtesy of Dr Lye Wai Choong.

The French Baba and his *Bini*

JEAN-FRANCOIS CHASSIN SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE OF MARRYING INTO A PERANAKAN FAMILY

Before I met my wife, Dawn Marie Lee, I had never heard the word “Peranakan.”

I had lived in Taiwan for five years. Then I moved to Singapore. So I was familiar with Chinese culture. But I soon discovered that the Peranakans are very different from other Chinese.

After a year in Singapore, I was courting Dawn. I was impressed by how fluently she switched between English, Malay and Chinese when speaking to different people. She told me that she had learnt Malay from her grandmother and father. I was puzzled why a Chinese girl would speak Malay at home, and that’s when I found out she was Peranakan.

My late father-in-law, Raymond Lee Hock Kee, was a true Baba. He was very proud of his culture and spoke Baba Malay to his siblings. He was jovial, easygoing and warmly welcomed me into the family. I find that this is a trait that many Peranakans share so welcoming of other cultures.

I remember the first Chinese New Year that I was invited to Dawn’s home for the reunion dinner. It was a feast: *buah keluak*, *ayam sio*, *chap chye* and *bakwan kepiting*, as well as the pickles that I really enjoy – *achar*! I could eat a big bowl of *achar* alone, just like a salad.

My father-in-law jokingly said to me, “You know, Jean-Francois, we are not like other Chinese. We belong to a special tribe called Babas and we love to eat this poisonous black nut. If you don’t eat this, you can’t marry Dawn.” Luckily, I really enjoyed the taste and still do!

On our wedding day, he said to me, “Now Dawn is your *bini* and you are her *laki*.” I thought he meant ‘lucky’, so to this day I tease my wife that she is lucky to have me.

The French and Peranakans are very much the same. Food and family meals are so important to us.



We often talk about food during a meal and what we will have for the next meal! Many are proud of their cooking skills, more so the Peranakans because their dishes take much effort to prepare.

My observation though,

Seven-year old Julien is rewarded with an angpow after kneeling down to soja to his parents Jean-Francois and Dawn at Chinese New Year.

Photo courtesy of Jean-Francois Chassin

is that Peranakan cooks tend to be quite critical of other Peranakan cooks. I have often heard complaints that someone else's dish is cooked wrongly or doesn't taste authentic.

In France we like to end the meal with something sweet; be it a dessert, a small piece of chocolate, or small cakes we call *mignardises*. Peranakans have the same thing in *cuci mulut* (washing your mouth), a term which I find to be very charming.

Both my French and Baba families love to talk and laugh. Large family gatherings can get very boisterous! Peranakans are very expressive when speaking and tend to gesticulate a lot with their hands. Christmas and Chinese New Year gatherings with Dawn's family remind me of my family gatherings in France because it gets so noisy with multiple conversations going on all at the same time!

The Peranakans have a deep appreciation of refinement and beauty, not only in their material culture but also in their daily lives and behaviour.

Most babas and nyonyas take much care to dress neatly and present themselves well. The *sarong kebaya* is very feminine and flattering. We say in French, "*La beauté est sa raison d'être*", which means that beauty can be (an object's) reason for existing. For example, the *kasot manek*, a functional pair of slippers, has been elevated to an art form with the thousands of hand-stitched glass beads.

After we were married, Dawn and I lived overseas for seven years. We moved back to Singapore at the end of 2013. Since then I have learnt so much more about my adopted culture. We belong to a Peranakan culture group that meets once every two months. Through these outings, I have learnt to play *cherki*, visited Peranakan museums, and even learnt about *intan* (unfaceted diamonds) jewellery. I treasure the *intan bintang* (star) brooch which my *bini* gave me for Christmas. I wear it often with my batik shirts.

I'm glad that I have become a French Baba! •

A Marriage of Harmony

BABA BRYAN TAN FINDS OUT WHAT IT'S LIKE WITH THE GRUNENFELDERS

Marrying into a Peranakan household in the past may have had its challenges with their many colourful and somewhat rigid traditions. I sat down with Katherine and Carl Grunenfelder over tea to find out more.

Katherine explains, "My parents are definitely from the conservative generation. My mother's side, the Lee family, has a very long history spanning seven generations. I got married much later in my life in 2001 when I was 41, and they had sort of evolved and were more accepting."

Although there were general stigmas and perceptions in marrying *mat sallehs* or foreigners, Katherine's parents only voiced certain concerns. "Then, the Peranakan families were worried that if you were to marry someone out to a different race or even a person of a different religion the ancestral tablets wouldn't be taken care of."

"Initially, my mother did warn me that people from the west can be somewhat flirtatious," she laughs heartily, "and she told me to be careful." Carl, who is German, used to live and work in Switzerland. He relates, "It was in Japan when we first met. Then I came to Singapore to work. I didn't know about Peranakan culture until I came here. I thought it was merely a Chinese sub-culture."

Carl thoroughly enjoys Peranakan traditions and food. "If I were expected to follow the traditions every day then I would have rebelled. But participating in Chinese New Year once a year is fun," he chuckles. Carl enjoys most of the traditional dishes, especially Katherine's family's *babi buah keluak*, which is made with pork instead of chicken.

"During our wedding though, my parents did insist on some rituals," Katherine adds. "Like the tea ceremony where we wore traditional costumes. Although Carl is Christian he did them. Not because he was forced to, but out of respect and willingness."

It is wonderfully clear that Peranakan traditions and food have provided many nostalgic tales and warm memories for the couple in their loving marriage. •

The Grunenfelders have been married for 15 years.



Photo courtesy of the Grunenfelders.

Keeping it in the Family

BABA EMERIC LAU SPEAKS TO MRS HELEN WONG AND HER DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, CAI SHIJI, ABOUT ADAPTING TO A PERANAKAN HOUSEHOLD

As the wife of TPAS committee member Edmond Wong, one would expect Ms Cai Shiji to have much knowledge of the culture. However, this was not true when the couple first met in 2013. “I guess, as with many Singaporeans in my generation, I initially thought Peranakans were simply the descendants of Chinese and Malay inter-racial marriages,” she reflects. But what the couple did share was a common flair and respect for culture.

An accomplished dancer and choreographer, Shiji is heavily involved in the running of her family’s Chinese dance school. She first met Edmond when he approached the school to discuss organising dance classes for underprivileged children. “I liked his candour and how eager he was in wanting to help the children.” Days later, when Edmond gave her a lift to shuttle her between appointments, they started chatting and romance blossomed. Amidst a whirlwind courtship, she watched episodes of MediaCorp drama *The Little Nyonya*, and was relieved to find Edmond’s family far removed from the scheming antics portrayed by the families in the series. They married just a little over two months after meeting, and are busy raising their son, Matthias, on top of tending to their family businesses.

For Shiji, it has proven to be a meeting of like minds and value systems. “Both of us are heavily invested in terms of time and commitment to our careers, which are culture and heritage related.” Their lifestyle is one of discipline as they often work 24/7,

which does ironically mean that they are unable to properly partake in the cultures they promote.

For her wedding to Edmond, the couple had performers from the dance school put on a few numbers in celebration, and also staged a traditional Peranakan wedding procession. However, there was certainly nothing that approached the 12-day

Left to right: Mr & Mrs Wong, Edmond & Shiji. Photo taken at Edmond’s wedding.



traditional wedding as documented in the Peranakan Museum: “We had a church wedding, a tea ceremony, and wedding dinners at the Conrad over two nights, but that was all.”

Shiji now lives with Edmond’s family in Telok Kurau. “This is a warm and welcoming household,” she affirms. Both their families actually joined forces for *Songs of the Wind*, a cultural dance production in 2015 that explored Nanyang culture. “Raymond (Edmond’s brother) actually sewed 50 Peranakan-inspired costumes for the dancers. He’s amazing!”

Amazing is a word that could also apply to Mrs Helen Wong and her late mother-in-law (THE original Kim Choo) with whom she credits for imbuing her and indeed, their whole family, with the strong work ethic by which they have lived and prospered. She readily shares how Kim Choo ran the business from a tent under a banyan tree at the junction of Joo Chiat Place and Everitt Road in the 1940s and 1950s, before saving enough to purchase a shop unit at the same address.

“We were up at 3 every morning to mix and make the dumplings, and then would return home slightly after 7am to rest, while the husbands would arrive to open the shop and entertain customers. You know, shift work! My mother-in-law could make everything all the *kuehs* – *ang ku kueh*, *tee kueh* ...but of course, her biggest seller was the nyonya *chang* for which we are

known,” Helen recalled.

She married into the family in 1977 at just 19 years of age. Fortunately, she had a natural passion for cooking and was already adept in the kitchen, having come from a large family where she cooked for her siblings. “I had to learn the food business very quickly, being the eldest daughter-in-law.” She was taught how to prepare all manner of nyonya food, and endured to absorb the meticulous culinary practices that Peranakan cooking requires.

To this day, Helen uses massive pots in the kitchen, as she has always cooked for the whole family besides catering to Kim Choo’s numerous customers. “If we cannot finish the food, it can just be stored and reheated for the next meal!” The family employs a team of workers to prepare dumplings, but nonetheless, all hands are on deck when demand peaks, typically around Chinese New Year and the Duanwu Festival each year.

It is a strict life, but also a fulfilling one. “My children have it much easier now, the business and all the processes are set up, they just have to be determined to continue and develop it.”

The family’s success is testimony that sharing common values ensures continuity and harmony through the generations, no matter one’s culture or background. 📌



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“The land yields its harvest; God, Our God, Blesses us.” Psalm 67:6

“The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.” Psalm 85:12

“Even now the harvest workers are receiving their reward by gathering a harvest that brings eternal life. Then everyone who planted the seed and everyone who harvests the crop will celebrate together.” John 4:36

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

Drawing From Her Roots

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE SPEAKS TO AUSTRALIAN-PERANAKAN ARTIST, NYONYA JENNIFER LIM, ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF HER PERANAKAN ROOTS

When Jennifer Lim dons her *sarong kebaya* and steps out of her Toa Payoh flat, she often gets curious glances from people who wonder what this *ang moh* nyonya is doing in a HDB heartland; even more so when her flame-haired daughter tags along.

Born in Sydney to a Singaporean Peranakan father and Australian mother, Jennifer grew up with little exposure to Peranakan culture. “I was always aware that my dad was a Chinese from Singapore who spoke English well. I only realised that he was a little different from other Chinese when my mother brought home some books about Peranakan embroidery,” says Jennifer.

“Growing up, I felt annoyed when people asked me why I didn’t speak Chinese. After learning that my father’s first language was Baba Malay, I now understand why he wasn’t active in teaching us Chinese.”

In 2012, Jennifer and her husband Geoff moved to Singapore. They have two children, Sienna, 5, and Louis, 2. The couple bought a HDB flat in Toa Payoh and their children attend a local pre-school. “My husband and I both feel that Singapore is a good place to explore our Chinese ancestry,” says Jennifer.

Jennifer is a professional artist with a degree in Visual Art and Japanese from the Australian National University. Her recent artwork explores the themes of identity influenced by her personal connection to Peranakan culture.

Since moving to Singapore, she has done extensive research into her Peranakan roots. Her paternal grandfather, Lim Chong Lay, is Hokkien and her grandmother, Tan Im Neo, is Peranakan.

With the help of community volunteers known as “Brownies”, she managed to trace her ancestors to the Bukit Brown cemetery. Jennifer shares that her father once took her to the street in Kembangan where he grew up. He told her that his grandmother lived in a plantation a 10-minute walk away from that street. “My Dad said that she lived on a hill with 100 steps leading up to a colonial style house,” says Jennifer, adding that, “I later discovered her grave at Bukit Brown and learned that she (Ong Leong Neo) died in 1966 at age 83. Few of my living relatives knew this.”

Most recently, Jennifer discovered that her Hokkien great-great grandfather, Lim Hong Eok (born in 1855), is also buried at Bukit Brown. His son, her great-grandfather Lim Nee Yam, was a lighter boat operator on the Singapore River and owned several properties including a shophouse at 42 Club Street. Jennifer joined the Lim Clan Association and discovered that her great-grandfather’s donation helped build the clan house on Cantonment Road.

As an artist, her search for her Peranakan roots has influenced her recent artwork. “In my *Victorian Voyage* prints, I was drawn to heritage floor tiles as they are a common feature in colonial era architecture of the region. I find the popularity of these typically Victorian patterns within an Asian environment very interesting”, says Jennifer.

She also researched relief wall tiles popularly known as Peranakan tiles in Singapore. Featuring fruit, flowers and animals considered auspicious in Chinese culture, these tiles were designed by local artists, then sent to Japan to be manufactured. They were popular among the Peranakan Chinese in Singapore and adorn houses in areas such as Joo Chiat and the Blair Plain district. Jennifer has reinterpreted these designs and created a series of Japanese woodblock prints titled *Trade Tile*.

After making these two print series, Jennifer was amazed to discover similar tiles on her ancestors’ graves and property. “I felt that my interest in Peranakan tiles was no longer just an appreciation on an aesthetic level, but a much deeper one that was directly connected to my personal heritage,” says Jennifer.

Jennifer with her husband Geoffrey Quong and their children Sienna and Louis.





Where is My Heart, 2015 - a collage referencing heritage tile motifs and Singapore place names.

Jennifer shares that her urge to embrace her Peranakan identity is a recent one. “It’s only recently that I’ve felt confident enough to wear the *sarong kebaya* out. I have a greater sense of pride and desire to promote the culture following my father’s severe stroke two years ago.”

She is keen to help her children appreciate and understand their Peranakan roots through dress, food and music. “My daughter Sienna actually used to think that ANY beautiful dress was called a *kebaya*!” laughs Jennifer. She is happy that Sienna has been very enthusiastic about her heritage. “For Chinese New Year, I dressed her in a *sarong kebaya* for her school party and she loved it.” She adds that their recent mother-daughter visit to Rumah Kim Choo



A woodblock carving to print her Trade Tile artwork.

and Katong Antique House has inspired Sienna to produce numerous drawings featuring tiles and shophouses.

Later this year, Jennifer will launch a new print series based on traditional *kebaya* designs. “I’m looking for *kebaya* enthusiasts who are willing to share images of their antique *kebayas* with me in exchange for my work,” says Jennifer. “I hope that these hand-made prints will allow a wider audience to enjoy the beauty of this wonderful garment and help to ‘spread the love’ of Peranakan design,” she adds.

If you would like to find more about Jennifer’s artworks or share your photos of antique kebayas for her upcoming Kebaya series, she can be contacted at info@jenniferlimart.com Website: www.jenniferlimart.com

Photos courtesy of Jennifer Lim



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Raymond Wong

Tales of a Peranakan Heritage

NYONYA JOY QUEK KOOI LIAN, A LONG-TIME TEACHER AND FORMER STUDENT OF SCGS, SPELLS OUT AN ANNUAL TRADITION OF THE SCHOOL

Every year, all the Secondary One pupils of Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS) make a three-day pilgrimage to Malacca. Their mission: to acquaint themselves with the historical town of their institution's heritage as a Peranakan school.

Mrs Florence Phuah, previously a student and a retired vice-principal of SCGS, shared that when the school became independent in 1989, it sought a holistic range of enrichment programmes to boost the curriculum and make learning interesting. Lessons would go beyond the classroom, "so we started local and overseas heritage tours, social etiquette, camps, and so on."

Malacca afforded the young ladies a chance to be away from home, out of their comfort zone, to learn culture, heritage and history. This, revealed Mrs Phuah, "was when we built and capitalised on the story of SCGS, its Peranakan roots and created the *kingek** image." Tan Tock Seng was one of the earliest Peranakans who came to Singapore from Malacca. His descendant, Tan Hoon Siang, was the SCGS Board chairman for many years. His son, Tan Jiew Hoe, remains a member of the Board.

This annual tradition to bring SCGS *kingeks* out of Singapore has carried on since 1990, long before it was fashionable for schools to do so. At the end of term one in early March, some eight classes of students - about 240 girls in all - troop up north to visit the stronghold of Peranakan culture.

Programmes vary, depending on whether the English or History Departments are leading the visits. The girls could be visiting the museums, the Stadthuys, tasting the cuisine, attending cooking lessons, or even meeting up with the Chetti Melaka community (Indian Peranakans who speak Malay but practice Hinduism and don the *kebaya*).



**Kingek* (gold and jade in Hokkien): An accomplished young nyonya of good character is like jade encased in gold. Every piece of jade is unique. The SCGS philosophy, started by former Principal Ms Rosalind Heng, is to accentuate the best qualities of each and every *kingek* entrusted to their care. 📌



The kimgkek touch

After the trip to Malacca, the students would document the history of cuisines, festivals and architecture, or even research on topics such as special foods for pregnancy. I recently discovered some former students' works that are precious to the school. Their project (as seen here) was to rewrite fairy tales with a Peranakan twist.

And so we have Cinderella as a nyonya learning to cook and beading slippers, a modern-day nyonya who goes through a time warp to her grandmother's era, the sufferings of an infertile first wife in a Peranakan household and other tales, captured in charming illustrations and even hand-stitched felt fabric (top right).



Family Tree and Me

BABA PETER LEE EXPLORES HOW GENEALOGY CAN BE A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

Genealogy has always been a critical form of knowledge for me. Knowing who my ancestors were, and hearing their stories, inevitably led me to understand more about myself. I am always reminded of the painting with the theme of the family tree by Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, which perfectly expresses the complexities of personal family history and the self.

I was first exposed to genealogy through the entries of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which my father had acquired for us. In the 1960s it comprised over 20 volumes and was pedantically filled with the genealogies of the interconnected noble families of Europe. This interest led me naturally to investigate my own tree, and my father who always encouraged any kind of hobby I had, arranged meetings with my grandmother, when pen and notebook in hand, I would chart names she remembered. All the collated information has been put online for family members, a project started by my cousin Jeffrey Lee and myself some years ago.

The raw data of course created a simple factual network of names and dates. However it was when I began to investigate deeper that things became really interesting. Through conversations, family letters and documents, fascinating stories emerged. For example, I discovered that the deep bond between my granduncle Lee Chim Tuan and his younger brother, my grandfather Lee Chim Huk, completely affected our lives. Their letters, even their shared bank accounts, reveal a deep trust and affection. This granduncle was known as Dick among his contemporaries, and he took care of all of us. My eldest brother was named after him.

A family, a culture, a country, would be nothing without memories. Family trees can really help structure such memories. Here are some of the resources I found useful.

Starting a family tree

The simplest way to start a family tree is by talking to the people closest to us. One has merely to ask parents or grandparents the names and birth dates of their immediate forebears. Conversations with them about the past will help add context and dimension. Searching the digital archives of newspapers is one of the best ways to start building family trees (<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/default.aspx>). It was not uncommon in the past to announce births, deaths and marriages in the newspapers. Then there were legal announcements, advertisements and even court cases where family members could have been



mentioned. I learnt so many family secrets and even a granduncle's murder through these accounts! Another useful resource is the website of the National Archives of Singapore: <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline>.

Tombstone treasures

Tombstones inscribed in Chinese record a lot of important information about people, including the name of the ancestral village in China, the names of children, and the date of interment. Ancestral tablets (*sinchi*, 神主) also record such information, as well as birth and death dates, and occasionally even some other biographical information. One has to be familiar with the Chinese style of names used in such records, for example a person has a personal name (*mia*, 名), a coming-of-age name (*ji*, 字), a fancy name (*ho*, 號), then there is the personal name of a deceased person (*hui*, 諱) and a posthumous title (*si*, 諡). The name inscribed on a tombstone is usually the posthumous title, rather than the personal name, which can be confusing. One has also to be familiar with the imperial reign dates and the Chinese cyclical dating system, used for all old biographical data.

**Frida Kahlo (1907-1954),
My Grandparents, My
Parents, and I (Family
Tree), 1936.**

New York, Museum of
Modern Art (MoMA).

Oil and tempera on metal
panel, 30.7 x 34.5 cm.

Gift of Allan Roos, M.D.,
and B. Mathieu Roos.

Acc. n.: 102.1976.

© 2016. Digital image, The
Museum of Modern Art,
New York/Scala, Florence

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Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F.

In the past it was usual for clans to keep genealogical records, which were periodically published as *chokpoh* (族譜). Many such books have survived and have been published online, but accessible to those who can read and search in Chinese. Sometimes visiting the clan associations (*hway kwan*, 會館) can also result in useful information, but you would need to know the village and area where your ancestors came from. Turning up in the village in China can also be surprisingly useful, as my own experience has shown (see 'Of Bohea and Bakol Siah', *The Peranakan*, Jan-Mar 2009, and 'Eng Choon Revisited', *The Peranakan*, Apr-Jun 2009).

Online resources

The National Library has published a useful resource guide: *Roots: tracing family histories* (2013), with information on where one can search for information. Increasingly amateur genealogists are publishing their research online, creating trees not only of their own families but of others as well. The danger of these online sources is that the information is often unreliable, merely copied and pasted from other sites without verification. The Bukit Brown saga over the past few years has engendered enormous interest in genealogy, and the posts on the people buried there has become another treasury of information (although again, usually unverified).

Software sites

There are several types of family tree software available to the public. My cousin and collaborator Jeffrey Lee uses *My Heritage Family Tree Builder* (www.myheritage.com/family-tree-builder). He tells me it is a free software and that it is written in Unicode, which apparently allows the input of Chinese characters. The best format, he advises, is the GEDCOM (genealogical data communication) format developed by the Mormon Church, which allows the exchange of data between different types of software.

Relative recollections

Linking up with like-minded relatives through email and social media is also an effective way to build data. The most visible of such groups is the Tan Tock Seng clan. In 2008 it presented the Peranakan Museum with a family tree spanning nine generations, with 1,368 names and a length of 19 metres.

Coming back to my own family research, ironically my mother was adopted, and had no information about her parents. She never expressed any interest in this subject, and I always felt frustrated that I had no access to the other half of my family history. I do however have one final trump card. A DNA test. Who knows what the results will reveal. And what I might find out about myself. 🍡





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A set of 999 gold kerosang rantay (top) from Lee Kong Chye Goldsmiths, commissioned by Louis' grandmother in the 1950s. He says that the pins of the gold kerosang are too soft to pierce the cotton voile fabric of the kebaya. It was fashioned after the same silver set (bottom) in her collection.

Nothing Like Living It Out

NYONYA LINDA CHEE IS AMUSED THAT BABA LOUIS CHAN PRACTISES WHAT HE COLLECTS

Lawyer Louis Chan speaks Baba Malay, loves to cook authentic Peranakan dishes with his utensils, bakes pineapple tarts, makes his own *belachan* (fermented shrimp paste) and *achar* (pickles), and even beads Peranakan slippers!

"I have that natural affinity to collect artefacts connected with food. Some of the utensils I collect, like the *batu lesong* and cookie and jelly moulds, help to create nostalgic culinary results. My wooden *kueh koya* (mung bean cookie) moulds were used by my grandmother. It excites me that I am replicating something she had done so well," says Louis brightly, adding that most of the utensils are too fragile to be used now.

A pair of lau chian kasot manek that belonged to his grandmother. The slipper faces were sent to the cobbler just before the outbreak of World War Two but miraculously, the cobbler kept and delivered them to her after the war ended.



Photos by Colin Chee

Louis took seven weeks to bead this clutch bag with tiger and rabbit motifs in 1995.

Peranakan artefacts are practically stuffed into every cabinet, shelf and cupboard in his apartment, where he lives with his wife and three children. "None of them is interested but I hope they eventually will be," Louis says. Meanwhile, he happily carries on collecting anything that is Peranakan. He loves furniture, but laments that he can only squeeze in a few large items because of the space constraint.

Collecting since he was 10 years old, Louis declares a keen interest in social and cultural history. "Since I was young, I like to chat with the older folks about the way of life of my ancestors. My *tua ee* (eldest maternal aunt) gave me many things like old jewellery, crockery, photographs and clothing. These *barang dulu kala* (things of the past) intrigue me because they tell many stories about my family and a community."

Even as the Peranakan culture is fast evolving, he notes that it is often being re-interpreted with little semblance to its origins. This is something that he disagrees with: "Even if you like to modify and create modern interpretations of Peranakan dishes, which I do not, it is still essential to know how those dishes were actually prepared in the past." ■

Digital Dondang Sayang

NYONYA VICTORIA CHANEL LEE IS FASCINATED BY THE COSMIC FUSION OF DONDANG SAYANG AND ELECTRONICA

What happens when you marry culture and heritage with electronic music? This unconventional union was explored in *Digital Dondang Sayang* at the NUS Arts Festival 2016, and is likely one that young Peranakans can identify with.

Benjamin Ang (Cosmic Ben) of the electronic pop duo, Cosmic Armchair, had inherited a folder of *panton* (Baba Malay poems) written by his great-grandfather, Ang Kay Teong. They had never been performed or published. Keen to explore his roots, Ben conceptualised *Digital Dondang Sayang*, giving the *panton* a new lease of life through electronic music.

The show on 18 March was a journey back through time. Portraits of grim-faced patriarchs and matriarchs gazed down on us as they performed within the walls of the NUS Baba House. Frederick Soh and Jessie Cheang of the Gunong Sayang Association opened with lively and witty banter. They sang Ang Kay Teong's *The Pestle and the Pound* in Asli style and *Find a Boat* in Inang style.

Benjamin and Jane of Cosmic Armchair then took over with their wired interpretation of *Who is this Man?*, *Kitten Climb Up a Coconut* and *Words on Paper*. The duo layered on e-pop rhythms, creating a unique rendition of repetitive *dondang sayang* melodies. Although the lyrics were translated into English, the meaning and messages of the original lyrics were retained. Jane's mellifluous vocals paired beautifully with the rhythmic music from Ben in the background.

The other young performers from the NUS Electronic Music Lab - Kester Tan, David Phoon and Timothy (Timbre) Tan - further challenged the



Above: Traditional Dondang Sayang performed by Frederick Soh and Jessie Cheang from the Gunong Sayang Association.



Left: Computer sounds and conventional music combined.



Electropop Digital Dondang Sayang by Benjamin (right) and Jane (left) of Cosmic Armchair. Photo courtesy of Joshua Pwee Photography.

notion of cultural music. Timbre literally typed a computer programme that generated an avant-garde mash of peculiar e-sounds from the keyboard. It was a thought-provoking process as we watched the letters of the alphabet being translated into sound.

As Cosmic Armchair closed with *About You*, tracing their digital adventure with *dondang sayang*, I wondered: Would this experiment usher in the next wave of Peranakan music? 📌



Songs of Nostalgia

NYONYA PEGGY LEE SHARES HER TPV JOURNEY IN KEEPING OUR CULTURE ALIVE

It has been four years since I joined The Peranakan Voices (TPV). Compared to many of the other members, my journey has not been long. But I still remember very fondly the 'fateful' day when I graduated from my docent course at the Peranakan Museum.

The PVs were invited to sing and perform for us at our graduation. I was mesmerised. Their performance of songs that are a part of my growing-up years warmed my heart. Shamelessly, I immediately asked to be allowed to audition to join the group and was admitted!

As I understand, in 1999, a group of nyonyas and babas decided to come forward and volunteer their time practising Peranakan songs. TPV was born. This 17-year-old group has strengthened with passion, even though we have aged! The choir members hail from all over Singapore, meeting on Tuesday evenings from 7.30pm - 9.30pm to rehearse under the guidance of a qualified teacher. They are grouped into altos, sopranos, tenors and basses. The sessions are always accompanied with lots of laughter and camaraderie and sometimes with a gentle reprimand from the teacher. But it is all in an evening's work!


Over the years, TPV have accumulated a string of landmark performances. To name a few: Singing for the Presidents of Singapore (Mr S R Nathan and Dr Tony Tan); the opening of the Baba Bling exhibition in Paris at the Musee du Quai Branly; and showcases at the Esplanade and River Hongbao Festival.

The choir has also performed at numerous charity

functions, seniors' homes, country clubs, for birthday parties, heritage festivals, plays and dramas. We have enjoyed media coverage on television as well as in the newspapers.

With each performance, the stage explodes into a riot of colour. Our nyonyas are adorned with ornate accessories. Their beautiful sarong kebayas

with richly embroidered motifs including flowers, leaves and birds complement their 'perfect shapes'. The babas look dignified in their batiks. We all sing songs of nostalgia in harmony. While lifestyles have changed, the Peranakan culture continues to leave its mark.

TPV's latest aspiration is to add a 'live' band alongside the choir, as we continue to spread the Peranakan culture through music. 

Come join the TPV and enrich our vocals or be a part of our band. Please contact Angeline Kong at 97618840 or angelinekong@yahoo.com.



The Peranakan Voices in 2004.

The Kupang Kids make Magic

NYONYA JOYCE LIM REALISES HER DREAM PROJECT IN JAKARTA

Being creative seems to come easily to Peranakans, who count as many of the best talents in the local arts community. What can be better than to channel some of our creativity to a good cause?

Four babas and one nyonya, that is yours truly, are the driving force behind *The Heart of the Dragonfruit Flower*, a new theatre production written by Baba Desmond Sim that will premiere in Jakarta in early September. The difference with this production is that the entire cast - between 6 to 24 years old - is from the Roslin Orphanage in Kupang, in West Timor, Indonesia.

The Heart of the Dragonfruit Flower is a story about Mungil, a lost ant who meets Kenak and Keru, a bumblebee and ladybug. They take Mungil on an adventure to the farm where he experiences a life completely different from

The creative force behind the Kupang Project: From left: Damien Lim (foreground), Joyce Lim (middle with thumbs up), Desmond Lim (waving) and Richard Tan (waving) with the children from the Roslin Orphanage.



Richard Tan (middle with tee-shirt) choreographing the dance movements.

the routine he is used to growing up in an anthill.

This original musical, inspired by life at the Roslin Orphanage, is a heartwarming story about friendships, insecurities, life, love and leadership. The production features 65 children from Roslin. They have been training for various roles over the last few months. Over 10 original songs have been written for the musical.

The production is part of a creative education programme

casually known as The Kupang Project, which was conceptualised and delivered over the last year. The idea has since grown into a more ambitious four-phase programme that includes a new orphanage and university for the children in Kupang. Phase one comprises the creative programme designed to teach and empower the children through theatre, dance, music and the visual arts.

Besides myself as the producer, the Kupang team comprises Baba Richard Tan as the artistic director, Baba Desmond Sim as the visual arts educator and scriptwriter, Baba Damien Lim as the hand bells and percussion educator, and Baba Clement Chow as the composer of the music for the show.

The Heart of the Dragonfruit Flower premieres at the Ciputra Artpreneur Theatre in Kuningan, Jakarta on 3 & 4 September, 2016. Tickets are available from July at www.kuppro.com. If you would like to be part of this project or support the Roslin Orphanage, please email info@kuppro.com. If you wish to sponsor a child to watch the show, special "sponsor a child" tickets are available at S\$50.00 each. More details from www.kuppro.com or email info@kuppro.com for information.



Photos courtesy of Joyce Lim.

In Good Spirit

BABA EMERIC LAU ATTENDS *SI WANGGEH*, A UNIQUE CROSS-CULTURAL PRODUCTION BY THE PERANAKAN SIBLINGS



A company of curious maidens must come together to summon the spirit of *Si Wanggeh*, a fairy princess. So too has a pool of talent been assembled to bring this show to its fruition. Producer Benjamin Seck has curated an intriguing mix of artists including the Malay performing arts group, Sri Warisan Som Said Academy, the Sylvia McCully School of Dancing and ASPN Tanglin School, on top of a veritable who's who of Peranakan theatre.

The *Si Wanggeh* souvenir programme makes for a most significant collectible - it documents the myriad expertise that has worked on the show. Also within its pages, playwright and composer Baba William Gwee reveals that he wrote the script back in 2001, and traces his close involvement with the evolution of contemporary *wayang* Peranakan. His message is a must-read for local theatre lovers.

The musical drama's premise is simple enough: a

modern-day nyonya enlists the assistance of her peers to conduct a séance, invoking the spirit of *Si Wanggeh*. While in an apparent trance, she time-travels to 1939 and helps resolve a family dispute.

The cast of veterans and fresh faces proved to be a potpourri of enthusiasm. Particularly memorable were Francis Hogan as Bibik Gek Neo, who wept for her dead dog Blackie, and Rahim as Wak Itam, whose comical aplomb and timing captured attention whenever he was onstage. Compliments are also due for Saedah Samat-Alkaff, who arranged immensely pleasing melodies for Baba William Gwee's compositions. The audience was treated to ballet, pantomime, cross-dressing burlesque, multi-media art, *a cappella* and traditional dance, all within two hours!

Above all, *Si Wanggeh* is an example of the possibilities for Singapore's community theatre scene - there is much yet to be explored in collaboration. This reviewer certainly can't wait for more!



Rahim as Wak Itam.

Photos courtesy of Peranakan Siblings.

Was Love Really All She Wanted?

BABA EMERIC LAU IS AMBIVALENT ABOUT THE RE-IMAGINING OF EMILY AS A MUSICAL

It occurred to me five minutes into the performance that I would definitely be biased in my review of Musical Theatre's production of *Emily the Musical*. Emily the play has a very special place in my heart, as I have fond memories of accompanying my late Aunt Aileen Lau into rehearsals in 1992 when she played the titular matriarch to raise funds for St. Theresa's Convent. That was one of my first experiences seeing theatre come together, and the genesis of what is now a lifelong love of the stage. I have also seen Margaret Chan and Ivan Heng portray Emily. Each interpretation has had its merits. So I had come with expectations – and I believe, overhearing divided opinions from various members of the audience during intermission and as they exited after the curtain call, that I am not alone in this dilemma. Singapore loves Emily; she occupies a seminal if not sacred position in local theatre.

Stella Kon's "re-imagined Emily", as she terms the character in her programme message, is played by three actresses – Melissa Wei-En Hecker as a child, April Kong as an adult and Karen Lim as an old lady. Hecker, in particular, gives an unforgettable turn as a wide-eyed child who is just learning the ways of the world. Karen Lim and April Kong both deliver credible portraits of Emily, although the brevity of many scenes interspersed with musical numbers meant the loss of emotive subtlety, which the original monologue allowed actors to hone, generating pathos and poignancy for the matriarch.

In this musical, the action zips back and forth across time with no fewer than 28 scenes. Collectively, they form a series of vignettes about life at Emerald Hill at various points in the 20th century. Emily, her

family and their associates sing their way through music composed by Desmond Moey, and there are a few melodic gems including *Wild Bird* and *Mother and Child*. Audiences expecting flourishes of traditional tunes (like Dondang Sayang) or instruments (like the *keronchong*) could come away disappointed.

Nonetheless, the award-winning Moey cannot to be faulted for his work: his tunes are polished and memorable. I learnt his initial background lay in Gospel music, and that he had drawn inspiration from Latin rhythms for a few numbers. The jury is still out, therefore, on whether he makes for the most suitable choice as composer for Emily.

By far, my biggest bugbear is with the musical's theme song, *Love Was All I Wanted*. This is Emily's finale and THE tune that one leaves the theatre humming. As lyricist, Kon has fixed upon Emily's need to be loved as her *raison d'être*. Certainly, love is a key impetus for Emily, but I found its overt proclamation sadly reductive: it may work as a convenient summary, but not as a resolution. It's all too saccharine to bear. Emily could have been far more engrossing if she'd danced and sung about everything but her true motivation – leave the audience to infer and interpret, to revel in the complexity of what it means to be a daughter, wife and mother. Emily's love is not spoken, nor is it tender or harmless: it cradles, it nurtures, it smothers, it kills – it manifests in a woman's determination to master her household, in her son's suicide and her husband's flight into the arms of his mistress.

I find Emily far more compelling when left as an enigma than as proprietor of a boutique hotel – which is how this musical ends. ■



The three Emilys. From left: Karen Lim, Melissa Wei-En Hecker and April Kong.



The cast of Emily the Musical.

Photos courtesy of Musical Theatre.

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The Kinship of *Kaya*

BABA PETER LEE TRACES THE ANCESTORS AND COUSINS OF EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE COCONUT CUSTARD

Nothing evokes memories of my 1960s childhood more than *kaya* on toast. *Kaya*, (also *srikaya* and *serikaya*), a kind of double-boiled coconut custard, was in that era prepared at home by my grandaunt. A vestige of a different era, she became part of the extended family as an orphan girl without a Chinese name or surname, and was given the Malay name Selat. A gentle bibik always attired in a *baju panjang*, everyone affectionately addressed her as Nenek. She had looked after my father ever since he was a baby, and when he got married and moved into his own house, she was naturally included as part of his new family.

Nenek was meticulous and refined in her cooking. My mother was her adoring disciple, and much to my father's joy and relief, they got on like a kitchen on fire. Nenek's *kaya* was firm and set like a heavier version of *crème caramel* or *panna cotta*. It was served at home at breakfast or teatime as a fairly thick slice on buttered white toast, which was a modern take on the traditional way of serving it with sweetened glutinous rice. After Nenek passed away, our cook and nanny, Yip Ching Sim (or Ah Sim as we all called her, now at the venerable age of 105), was left in charge of preparing *kaya*, which took time and full concentration.

Although Nenek passed away a long time ago, and my dear mother only last year, her legacy still remains in our kitchen, where our Filipina chef Alona Alejandrino masterfully prepares Nenek's *kaya* to this day. I am embarrassed to say I witnessed the preparation of *kaya* for the first time in my life only while preparing this article. It took me 53 years to fully understand the love and attention that goes into making it. The key processes involve finely straining the egg and *santan* mixture a few times. The repeated straining creates an unimaginably smooth texture, something that is lost in the versions that are stirred or processed into purées or pastes. We use a super fine metal strainer that is older than me. Modern strainers are not as fine and perhaps the best ones today would be those made in Japan. In the old days a fine muslin was perhaps used. Stirring also has to be gentle to prevent froth and air bubbles. The other key technique involves carefully preventing water from

dripping onto the *kaya* while it is being cooked in a bain-marie. For my mother the recipe was a closely guarded secret, and I am relieved Alona learnt the methods of preparation from her, and it is now time to share it, in tribute to all the great ladies who have kept this wonderful legacy alive (See Nenek's *Kaya* recipe on page 27).

Origin and evolution

Firstly let us be clear about one obvious and basic fact: a dessert using a heap of eggs is clearly not of Asian origin, but more about that later. Its name however, is certainly of Sanskrit origin. *Sri* in Malay is a Sanskrit-derived honorific title for a royal person and *kaya*, probably from Persian or Sanskrit, can mean *wealthy* or *almighty*. Put the two words together and they mean something like *the almighty* or *the wealthy one*. *Srikaya* (The One who was Born as Wealth) is also one of the many names of Lakshmi, the Hindu Goddess of Wealth.

The oldest reference to *srikaya* can be found in the *Cerita Kutai* (Chronicles of Kutai) dating to the 1620s, in a passage listing a number of desserts including *dodol* (steamed coconut and rice flour roll) and *madumongso* (black sticky rice roll), as well as tea and coffee. The inclusion of the latter two

indicates the international sources of delicacies prevalent already at that time. The reason behind such an unusual name is suggested by the fancy names of some of the other desserts mentioned in this chronicle: *puteri mandi* ('bathing princess', glutinous rice balls in a sauce of palm sugar and coconut milk) and *ratu berkurung* ('confined queen', unknown dessert, but perhaps something wrapped). It was therefore fashionable in that period to have desserts with poetic names somehow associated with royalty or the divine.

Buah srikaya is also another name for *buah nona* (*annona squamosa*), or custard apple, and the close association with custard suggests that *buah srikaya* might have been named after the dessert.

The *Kitab Masak Masakan India: Indische Kookboek* (The Indies Cookbook), published in Batavia in 1845, has a good recipe for *srikaya* (See 1845 recipe in next page). It also places emphasis on straining the egg



Nenek and Peter Lee, aged 3, 1966.



and coconut mixture, and on preventing water from dripping onto the *kaya* during the steaming process. A later recipe in Dutch, included in the *Oost Indisch Kookboek* (East Indies Cookbook) of 1866, shows some significant simplifications, missing out, for example, the straining of the egg and coconut mixture (See 1866 Colonial's Dutch recipe on page 28).

Regional favourite

Srikaya is a local favourite all over Southeast Asia, and every nation and ethnic group has laid claim to this dessert: you therefore read about Singapore *kaya*, Malaysian *kaya*, Indonesian *kaya*, Thai *sangkhaya*, traditional Malay *kaya*, nyonya *kaya*, Hainanese *kaya*, and the local version of every town, such as Makassar *kaya* and Medan *kaya*. In Indonesia it is often known as *selai kaya* or *selai srikaya*, *selai* being the word for jam, derived from the Dutch word *gelei* (pronounced 'je-lai', jelly or jam). In Thailand it is usually served as a steamed pumpkin stuffed with *kaya*. *Sang*, like *sri*, is also an honorific prefix to the name of a deity or ruler (as in Sang Nila Utama), and *sangkhaya* is therefore clearly an etymological variant of *srikaya*. Through the Thai connection the dessert is also prevalent in Laos (*sangkhaya*) and Cambodia (*sangkhya*).

In Thailand the origin of *sangkhaya* has in popular culture been ascribed to the eighteenth century (Ayutthaya period), and specifically to a certain lady, Maria Guyomar de Pinha. She was the daughter of a Japanese Christian mother and a Portuguese-Japanese-Bengali father from the Portuguese colony of Goa in India, and wife of Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek minister in the Siamese court of King Narai at Ayutthaya (talk about hybrid!). The attribution is almost certainly apocryphal but the Portuguese colonial link is probably not.

Portuguese link

In fact the Portuguese connection is critical to this story, which takes us back to the subject of eggs. Desserts using a copious number of eggs are typical of Portuguese cooking. I strongly suspect that *srikaya* was invented perhaps in the sixteenth century by a lady of mixed race in a Portuguese colony in Asia. Sometime in the past, the dessert was taken back to Portugal, where it was baked rather than cooked in a bain-marie, and became known as *sericaia*. It is now a much-loved



staple of the Portuguese menu. From there it spread to Brazil, where it is also considered a traditional sweet. A Portuguese-English dictionary from 1813 describes *siricáya* as "milk mixed with sugar; eggs etc." (Anthony Vieyra Transtagano, *Dictionary of the Portuguese and English Languages*, London, 1813).

A Portuguese dictionary published a century later is even more telling, describing *sericaia* as "a delicacy of Malacca" (*iguaria de Malaca*, Candido de Figueiredo. *Novo Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*. Lisbon, 1913). *Sericaia* is particularly associated with the Alentejo region. A Filipina friend of mine, Patricia Ortega (whose husband Pedro Encarnação is from Alentejo) has kindly supplied this family recipe for Portuguese *sericaia*, which is conventionally served with plums in syrup (See Encarnação family recipe on page 28).

Central America

Another unexpected region where *srikaya* has made its appearance is in Central America, especially Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras. Known as *chiricaya*, this egg custard often has no flour (but sometimes cornflour, or even crushed biscuits) and is cooked in a bain-marie as well. However *chiricaya* has cinnamon, like the Portuguese *sericaia*, as well as vanilla, nutmeg and a good dash of muscat or wine. There are differences between the *chiricaya* recipes of the three central American countries. Strangely, Cantonese-style savoury steamed egg with pork and shrimp is known as *chiricaya china* (Chinese *chiricaya*) in Costa Rica. In Mexico *chiricaya* is called *jericaya* and sometimes *jericalla* (pronounced 'heri-kaya'), and is somehow known as a traditional dessert of Guadalajara, where it is believed several hundred years ago a nun from an orphanage there invented it. For some idea of the differences, search youtube for the many regional recipes.

These global connections of *kaya* warn us against articulating culture as something about uniqueness and individuality. Rather, in our deeply divided world today, they should encourage us to think of what connects and unites people across all national, ethnic and religious boundaries. After all, this is what being Peranakan truly means. ■

Left: My nanny Yip Ching Sim and me, 1980.

Right: My mother prompting me to blow my birthday cake, 1967.



NENEK'S KAYA

10 eggs

600g sugar

6 pandan leaves (tied into two bunches)

Santan from 1 coconut (first squeeze)

Place the eggs and *santan* in a super-fine metal strainer and stir it with a plastic spatula until the mixture passes through (A). Discard any residue that will not go through (B). Repeat the process two more times. Then gently stir in the sugar, making sure to create as little froth as possible. Pour the mixture into a pyrex or enamel container and add the pandan leaves.

Prepare the bain-marie. Place the container in a pot on a metal stand and fill the wok with hot water until it reaches the halfway level of the container, which should be the same level as the mixture (C). Make sure the container is raised and not in contact with the bottom of the wok. Heat the wok until the water lightly simmers and gently stir the mixture with a wooden spoon or spatula for about 20 minutes in one direction until it turns golden yellow, then remove the pandan leaves (D). Leaving the pandan in the mixture too long will result in a greenish tinge, which is considered undesirable. During this process, be careful not to allow the bubbling water to splash into the mixture.

Prepare two kitchen towels, one layered on top of the other, with two sheets of kitchen paper in between. Wrap and securely tie the layered towels around the cover of the pyrex or enamel container for the *kaya*. The towel must be tight and must not sag, and the kitchen paper should be positioned directly above the container. This prevents water droplets from falling onto the mixture, which would



A



B



C



D



E



F



G

create a pock-marked and discoloured surface. Cover the container (E) and the pot (F). Gently simmer for two and a half hours, and ensure the water level is constantly the same.

The cloth for the pyrex cover must only be damp and never wet, and therefore will have to be changed two or three times during the cooking process. Practically this requires checking every 10 to 15 minutes. When ready the texture should be firm and smooth like set custard, and the surface a glossy, golden yellow (G).

Photos by Wai Lee. Styling by Anton Kilayko.

1845 RECIPE FOR SRI KAYA WITH GLUTINOUS RICE

Take a coconut-shell-full of glutinous rice, and wash it thoroughly, and after that, soak it for an hour, and then wash it again, then steam it, but only until it is half-cooked. Remove from steamer and add *santan* (coconut milk) to the glutinous rice, leaving it to rest for 15 minutes before steaming it again until well-cooked. Remove it immediately (from the steamer) once it is cooked. Take seven chicken eggs and beat the egg whites well, then grate half a coconut, and add it to the egg white. Take some palm sugar and pound it finely. Measure half a teacup, and mix it (the palm sugar) into the egg (white), then knead the whole mixture evenly, then sieve (squeeze) it through a muslin, then add water to the paste, and squeeze it again. Then add it (the squeezed liquid) to the egg (yolk). After that take a bowl (i.e., pour the mixture into a bowl) and place it on a steaming tray. Then fill up a steel *kwali* (wok) with water. Put the bowl in the steaming tray and cook it. While you are cooking it, be careful not to allow water to drip into the bowl. When it is ready, serve it with the glutinous rice.

KETAN SIRIE KAIJA

Ambil ketan barang satoe batok, dan tjoetjie bresie sekali; — kaloe soeda bresie, rendam barang satoe djam, — abies angkat dant tjoetjie bresie kombalie, — abies koekoes; satenga koekoes; angkat, dan ambil aijer santan taro die itoe ketan, dan kasie tinggal saprapat djam; kaloe soeda liewat saprapat djam, koekoes lagie sekali sampe matang; — kaloe soeda matang, miestie lant as angkat. — Ambil telur ayam barang toedjoe biedjie dan pekoel poetienja baik baik, abies poekoel baik baik, ambil kalapa sebela, abies paroed dan tjampoer sama itoe telur; — kaloe soeda, ambil goela aren dan toemboek aloes, dan abies takar sama satoe mangkok tee, dan tjampoer sama itoe telur, abies remas smoeanja sama sama, tapies sama satoe serbeta, dan dia poenja ampas boleh taro aijer dan remas kombalie, abies remas, tapies lagie, dan taro sama itoe telur njang tadie; — kaloe soeda, ambil satoe mangkok, dan taro atas lekar; abies ambil satoe kwalie wadja, dan iesie dengan aijer — itoe mangkok kassie masoek dalam itoe wadja, abies masak; — kaloe lagie masak miestie djaga, djangan sampe masoek aijer dalam itoe mangkok; — kaloe soeda matang, angkat — dan makan sama itoe ketan. —

Kitab Masak Masakan India: Indische Kookboek, Lange & Company, Batavia, 1845, pp. 87-88

1866 COLONIAL DUTCH RECIPE FOR KUEH SRI KAYA

Take 12 eggs with the whites, add Javanese (palm) sugar according to taste (the eggs must first be beaten well), *santan* from half a coconut, and a piece of *daon pandan* (pandan leaf), put it (the mixture) into small cups and let it steam in a pan of hot water in a *langseng* (steamer); one eats this custard with *ketan* (glutinous rice) which is cooked with *santan*.

Kwee sierie kaja

Neem 12 eieren met het wit, doe er javaansche suiker in, naar den smaak (de eieren moeten eerst goed geklopt worden) santen van een halve klapper en een stukje daon pandan, doe het dan in kleine kopjes en laat het koken in een pan met warm water in de langzing; men eet deze vla met ketan die met santen gekookt is.

Oost Indisch Kookboek, G.C.T. van Dorp, Semarang, 1866, p. 133



THE ENCARNÇÃO FAMILY RECIPE FOR PORTUGUESE SERICAIA

½ litre milk
1 cinnamon stick
1 lemon peel
12 eggs
450g sugar
125g flour
Ground cinnamon

Heat the milk, cinnamon stick and lemon peel in a pan until it starts boiling. After boiling let it cool down.

Separate 12 egg yolks. Whip



Portuguese sericaia with plums.

the egg yolk and sugar until creamy. Dissolve flour in the milk then add the egg yolk and sugar. Slowly stir. Cook slowly in low heat until it thickens. Take out the cinnamon stick and lemon peel and let it cool down.

Beat the 12 egg whites until they are firm and fluffy. Slowly mix the egg white with the milk and egg yolk mixture. Transfer the mixture to a round, baking pan that is buttered and floured. Sprinkle cinnamon powder on top.

Pre-heat oven at 200°C. Bake for 20- 25 minutes until the top is well puffed and firm and even cracked in a couple of places. Leave to cool and settle, then carefully transfer to a serving plate. Serve with plum jam or plums in syrup.

PLUMS IN SYRUP

700g plums
3 tablespoons caster sugar
1 tablespoon honey
3 tablespoons port wine
3 tablespoons water
20g butter
3 sticks cinnamon

Pre-heat the oven to 200°C. Halve the red plums and remove stones. Place the plums inner side facing up in a baking dish. Sprinkle with sugar and drizzle the plums with honey, port, and water.

Daub soft butter on each plum. Bake the plums for about 15 to 20 minutes, until they are nicely roasted but still firm. The pan should be bubbling with the mixture of juices and syrup. Serve hot with *sericaia*. 🍷

Gilded Dreams

BABA COLIN CHEE REVIEWS NELSON LIM'S INSIGHTS ABOUT BED ORNAMENTS

Whichever way you look at it, clearly, *Gilded Dreams* is a young man's labour of love. What could have inspired him to write about his Peranakan collection?

"It is for the love of culture that this book has been pieced together, and it has been a fulfilling experience," Nelson Lim writes in his *Afterword*. "The collection... has given many insights into the past... and can have positive influences on other aspects of our lives."


This is the first of several books that Nelson is planning. It is about bed ornaments. He shares his observations and insights about motifs found in these ornaments. He adds, "These insights should not be conclusive, but should form the basis for further questions."

This makes the book a little more interesting. It is not prescriptive but welcomes your thoughts as well. His first draft focused on the technical and factual aspects of his collection. Later, and rightly so, he felt this would not do and, instead, he chose "to put more of himself into the book."

So it reads in a very personable manner. Nelson does not propound his insights like a scholar or an

expert of antiques. He comes across as the boy next door who does not mind sharing what he knows or thinks may be the case.

He writes simply about bolsters and pillow ends: "The use of bolster and pillow ends to embellish bolsters and pillows may have originated from Chinese customs. However, the Chinese bolster and pillow ends of the Qing Dynasty were usually silk embroideries in contrast to the silver or gold plates used by the Peranakan Chinese. The Peranakan Chinese crafted their pillow ends out of silver, gilded silver or even gold plates to exhibit their wealth."

Little gems like this are sprinkled throughout the book. If you bother to search among the photos of silver plates, embroidered bolster ends, even porcelain pillow ends, you may come away feeling richer for the experience. 

Published by Lingzi Media Pte Ltd.



THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE



*Portrait of Tan Keong Saik by Ahm Ong, 2012.
Images courtesy of the artist.*



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When a Flower Dies

NYONYA VICTORIA CHANEL LEE FINDS CHIA'S NOVEL SIMPLY POETIC

After a writer's residency in Gardens by the Bay, Teochew Peranakan writer, Josephine Chia, is back with *When a Flower Dies*, a novel about memory and loss.

Nyonya Pansy Chan returns to Singapore from the UK after her husband's death. As she grapples with her grief and the struggle to re-assimilate into an unrecognisable modern Singapore, memories resurface. A glimpse of a flower or tree triggers recollections of her beloved George, her childhood in colonial Singapore and her married life in seasonal England.

Daffodils in the Gardens by the Bay remind Pansy of her time as a pupil in St Theresa's Convent memorising Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud". Their scent transports her back to England and to George.

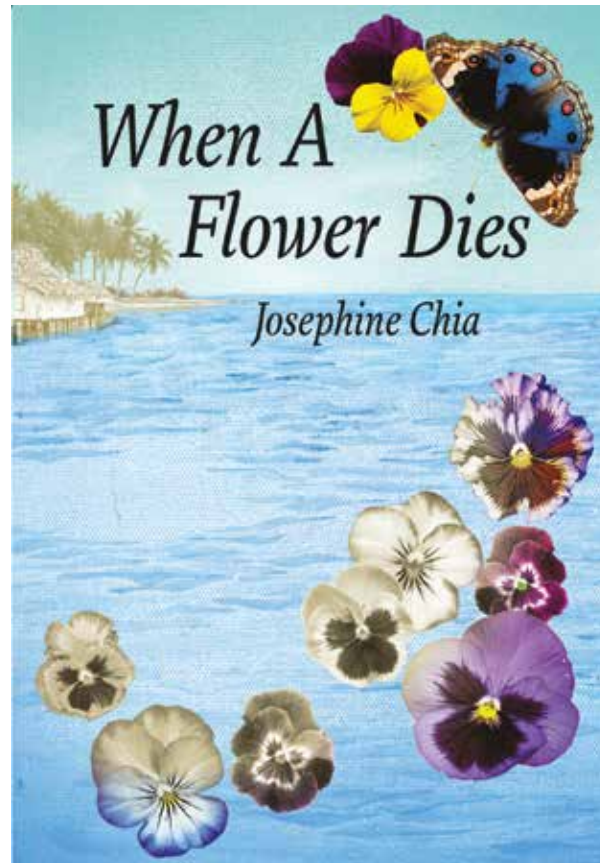
Pansy mourns the loss not just of her life partner but the loss of a culture.

The novel addresses issues of literature, the declining use of dialect, and of heritage preservation. Sister Catherine, Pansy's literature teacher explains, "Literature is not just about a particular place like England, it's about a place within us that we can't easily reach."

The question of Singaporean identity is also explored through a conversation between Pansy and a taxi driver. Pansy laments that her grandchildren can speak neither Teochew, Malay nor Baba Malay. As she does not speak Mandarin, she communicates with them in English.

The taxi driver exclaims, "What a waste! All that heritage gone! If our children and grandchildren do not know our traditions, our culture is dead. Without culture how can we have a national identity? What does it mean to be a Singaporean?"

The novel truly stands up for what Pansy and the taxi driver debate. I was blown away by how skilfully



Nyonya Josephine must be the first to hike up to the cliff-hanging Tigers' Nest Monastery in her sarong kebaya! In August 2015, she received a grant from the National Arts Council to attend the Mountain Echoes Literary Festival in Thimpu, Bhutan. Josephine wore the sarong kebaya throughout the festival.

it deploys Baba Malay. A preface from the editors at the beginning reads: "We made the decision not to italicise terms and references that are at home in Peranakan culture...The act of italicising words from one's own culture is also an act of dispossession..."

This is admirable because their inclusion in the font used indicates such terms and expressions are part of the culture and identity of Singapore.

The novel also observes the state of Peranakan culture in Singapore. When Pansy's granddaughter, Goldie, wants to learn more about her Peranakan heritage, Pansy suggests, "Join the Peranakan Association. It will put you in touch with all things Peranakan." This clever piece of product placement in the book was a meta moment for me.

Chia's deeply felt novel will move readers of all ages as well as admirers of Wordsworth's poetry. It is a wonderful read that brought me, a young nyonya, on an emotional journey inspiring much reflection.

When a Flower Dies is a Singapore novel that deserves to be read by all lovers of Singapore literature. ●

Published by Ethos Books.

Great Balls of Fun!

PERANAKAN MUSEUM CURATOR NYONYA MARIA KHOO
JOSEPH REPORTS FROM THE FIRST ARMENIAN STREET PARTY

Peranakans have long been synonymous with parties. Accounts abound from the mid-19th century of lavish balls and parties organised by the Peranakan elite in Singapore.

Song Ong Siang's *One Hundred Years History of the Chinese in Singapore* cites the first Chinese ball as organised in 1852 by pioneer Peranakan merchant and philanthropist, Tan Kim Seng. It was held in one of Tan's large godowns which was converted into a magnificent banquet hall for the evening.

The Armenian Street Party, from 11 to 12 March, was conceived by the Peranakan Museum to echo the long history of partying by the Peranakans. The event provided a great opportunity for the Museum to collaborate with partners along the street.

On the nights of Friday and Saturday, Armenian Street was closed to vehicular traffic. Food trucks set up station to tempt visitors with tasty treats. An eclectic mix of performances entertained the crowds. The festivities were well received by visitors and helped to reach out to people who might not have otherwise bothered to visit the Peranakan Museum. 📍

Upside Motion, a Pilates studio along the street, provided two sessions of free X-tend Barre exercise classes to kick start the evenings.



Peranakan performances featured in the Museum and at its verandah, courtesy of the Main Wayang Company and Peranakan Siblings. The latter was performing excerpts from their play, Si Wanggeh (A Spiritual Entity).



Motifs: Traces, a performance by Dance Ensemble Singapore, inspired by the narrative of nyonyaware production for the regional Peranakan market.



Bands from our neighbours, Timbre and Singapore Management University, provided alternative entertainment.

The alley between the Peranakan Museum and the Substation was converted into a garden lane, complete with park benches and swings, for people to relax while being entertained.

Nyonya Fashion goes to Japan

PERANAKAN MUSEUM CURATOR JACKIE YOONG REPORTS FROM FUKUOKA

The Peranakan Museum's first travelling exhibition focusing on Peranakan fashion opened in Fukuoka on 17 April as part of SJ50, celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations between Singapore and Japan.

Co-organised with the Fukuoka Art Museum (FAM), the showcase is inspired by an earlier exhibition held in Singapore in 2011 called *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World*. Art historian Baba Peter Lee guest curated the exhibition, which features approximately 40 combinations of sarongs and kebayas exploring the evolution of the style over 200 years.

FAM Chief Curator Etsuko Iwanaga carefully tailored parts of the exhibition to target the Japanese audience. The display included a rare kimono under-robe made of batik fabric identical to that found in nyonya *baju panjang* from the collection of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee; and a *kain Hokokai* (batik originating from the time of the Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia, with Japanese-inspired designs) from the Eiko Kusuma collection at FAM.

Renowned singer-composer Dick Lee represented the Lee family at the Fukuoka opening. The exhibition travels to the Shoto Museum of Art, Tokyo, on 26 July. An exhibition catalogue in Japanese was produced. The exhibition was made possible by generous donations of sarongs and kebayas by Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee to both museums. ❶



Top: Signboard announcing the exhibition outside the museum.

Middle: The *baju panjang* and kimono under-robe reveal a surprise - both are made using batik of similar print.

Left: Curator Peter Lee interacts with guests at the exhibition.

What a Grand Affair!

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE COVERS THE 28TH BABA NYONYA CONVENTION AND INAUGURAL PERANAKAN ARTS FESTIVAL 2015



The colourful cast of Bibiks Behind Bars, Kena Again!



TPAS President Baba Peter Wee sounds the opening gong.

The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) was honoured to host the 28th Baba Nyonya Convention in Singapore. A record 300 overseas delegates from 11 Peranakan associations attended the event that ran from 4 to 8 November 2015. The Convention rotates among various host countries. The last convention in Singapore was five years ago.

Welcoming Peranakans from Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia and Thailand, Convention Chairman Raymond Wong invited participants to “collectively make a grand toast to our future”. A series of interactive seminars about *Realising Peranakan Possibilities* explored language and identity, the business of being Peranakan, and the Peranakan Wish List, where participants shared their hopes for the future of our community.

A *tok panjang* dinner saw babas and nyonyas dressed in their best batiks and kebaya excitedly meeting old friends and making new ones. Australian Merilyn Pynor who hails from Hay, a small farming town with a population just a fraction of Katong’s, said that she felt so warmly welcomed. “When my friend Lynn Curtayne and I arrived at the Convention, we were surprised at how many people wanted to take

photos with us. Maybe they were amazed that we had embraced Peranakan culture and came all the way to Singapore to be a part of this event.”

The first Peranakan Arts Festival

For the first time, a Peranakan Arts Festival was also held in conjunction with the Convention in and around the historic Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall.

A collaboration between TPAS and GenerAsia, the exciting event line-up included four exhibitions, numerous live performances, cooking demonstrations, fashion shows, a bustling bazaar and two world premiere theatre plays.

The two plays, Baba Richard Tan’s *Bibiks Behind Bars, Kena Again!* and Baba Desmond Sim’s *Pintu Pagar*, enthralled audiences with much humour, drama and colour.

In Baba Richard’s musical comedy, the *bibiks* of Katong were up to mischief and unwittingly run foul of the law. “I hadn’t laughed so much in a long time!” said Nyonya Roselind Lee who watched it with her daughter. “The cast was really talented and I loved all the Baba Malay jokes which are so seldom heard these days,” she added.

In contrast, the romantic drama *Pintu Pagar* left audiences in a reflective mood. Set in the colonial days, it is a poignant tale of two lovers who swing by at close quarters but never quite connect. Their hit-and-miss 40-year love affair was heartwarming to watch. Written in English, the play made Peranakan theatre accessible to those not fluent in Baba Malay.

There was something for everyone at the Festival. From Peranakan tile painting to woodblock printing, jazz and *joget*, batik painting and handbell performances. Even the most jaded palates were tickled with innovative *buah keluak* ice cream! ■



Koh Chieng Mun as the flamboyant Judy Lui, Goddess of Fortune.



Bibik Bella Chan (Melvyn Chew) caught at the Joo Chiat Police Station.



Nora Samosir as the acid-tongued nyonya in Pintu Pagar.



A live batik painting demo.



A little nyonya enjoys Peranakan tile painting.



Shopping for kebayas at the Ba-Bazaar.



Chef Phillip Chia in action.





The Melbourne Peranakans performing their versions of classic Baba tunes.



Singers from the New South Wales Peranakan Association.



Delegates from Australia.



Lovely to have Life President, Baba Lee Kip Lee (third from left) joining us.



Our counterparts from Indonesia.



A lighter moment.



Joyful joget at the tok panjang dinner.



Partying the night away with jazz and joget.



Laughter all around as the masterful moderator Baba Ivan Heng heats up the lively discussions during the seminars.



Delegates from the region, including Melbourne and Phuket, in a bonding moment.



From left: Seminar panelists Zan Ho, Linda Wee and Thomis Kwan.



A grand finale shot for the KL delegation against the backdrop of Sir Stamford Raffles' statue and the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall.

Natgeo's Into Our World Too!

BABA CEDRIC TAN BRINGS THE TV CHANNEL UP TO SPEED

Last February and March, three separate television crews from National Geographic television descended on Melaka. They came to cover our celebrated Peranakan cuisine and identity.

Gok Wan, the affable award-winning fashion and lifestyle presenter from BBC's Channel 4, visited as part of a series he hosted, called *Gok's Chinese Takeaway*. The programme focuses on Chinese food and its creolized form in various countries around the world. He wasted no time in immersing himself in baba culture over five days, with some of us Peranakans chipping in to bring him up to speed. On the final day we were



Top, Host Gok Wan (centre with shawl) with Cedric (second from left) and his friends at Cedric's ancestral home during the filming of the semayang abu (ancestral worship) at the Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum. The portrait behind is of Cedric's granduncle, Baba Tan Gim Ann. Photo courtesy of Cedric Tan.

Left, Shooting the sumptuous lunch session hosted by Gok Wan. Photo by Lee Yuen Thien.

rewarded with a lip-smacking Gok-style nyonya luncheon.

The other Natgeo teams stayed on for more than three weeks traversing Penang, Phuket, Singapore and finally Melaka to discover more about the Peranakans. Among them was the Singapore-based anthropologist and writer, Dr Julian Davison. As the host of a new Natgeo programme called *In Search*

of the Straits Born, he is focussing on the formation, development and decline of the Peranakan communities, including the Chetti Melaka, as well as the survival and future of our customs, rituals and practices. ❶

The programmes will be aired on the Natgeo channels this summer.

In the Footsteps of Cheng Ho

BABA LEE YUEN THIEN CHAKAP "HUAYI" WITH THE BEMUSED PM OF CHINA

The Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum in Melaka was recently graced by the visit of the Prime Minister of China, Li Keqiang. Despite his tight schedule, the PM had taken a three-hour diversion to Melaka on 22 November 2015 as part of his official trip to the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur. His lightning visit was to view our Museum as well as the Cheng Ho Museum, and to meet with Peranakans from Melaka to "continue the harmonious relationship" started by the acclaimed Chinese admiral centuries ago. PM Li said he had wanted to see first-hand the "fruit" from the "seeds" that Cheng Ho had planted.

I was showing him around as the Manager of the Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum when he stopped for a moment to ask if I was a Baba. I was stumped for





Yuen Thien shows PM Li around the Melaka museum.



PM Li pens a commemorative message.

a second and spontaneously spouted a "Yes!" PM Li added that I must be very fluent in the Malay language as it is my mother tongue. In good humour, he asked, "How is it that you can speak Mandarin as well?" I think my parents, who sent me to a Chinese school for education, had never expected that the day would come when a Melaka Baba would be explaining our Peranakan heritage in Chinese to the Premier of China! ❶

Photos courtesy of Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum.


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Taking TPAS Forward to 2018

THE ASSOCIATION'S AGM SAW A NEW TWO-YEAR COMMITTEE ELECTED

“The next two years will be a time for introspection, after the buzz of hosting the 28th Baba Nyonya Convention and showcasing the inaugural Peranakan Arts Festival in 2015. We also want to mentor and assemble the younger committee members, so that they will be in a position to take over the running of TPAS by the end of the next term in mid-2018.”

With that declaration, First Vice-President Alan Koh set the tone for the focus of the Association's AGM, which was attended by over 50 members at the Peranakan Museum's Ixora Room on 24 April 2016.

TPAS President, Baba Peter Wee, thanked everyone for attending. He expressed gratitude to the various supporters of the Association, and also to the immediate past Committee for their hard work. Honorary Secretary Ee Sin Soo shared that TPAS relies on volunteers, and appealed for members to step forward in offering their time and service. Honorary Treasurer Angeline Kong summarised the statement of accounts, which was deemed healthy.

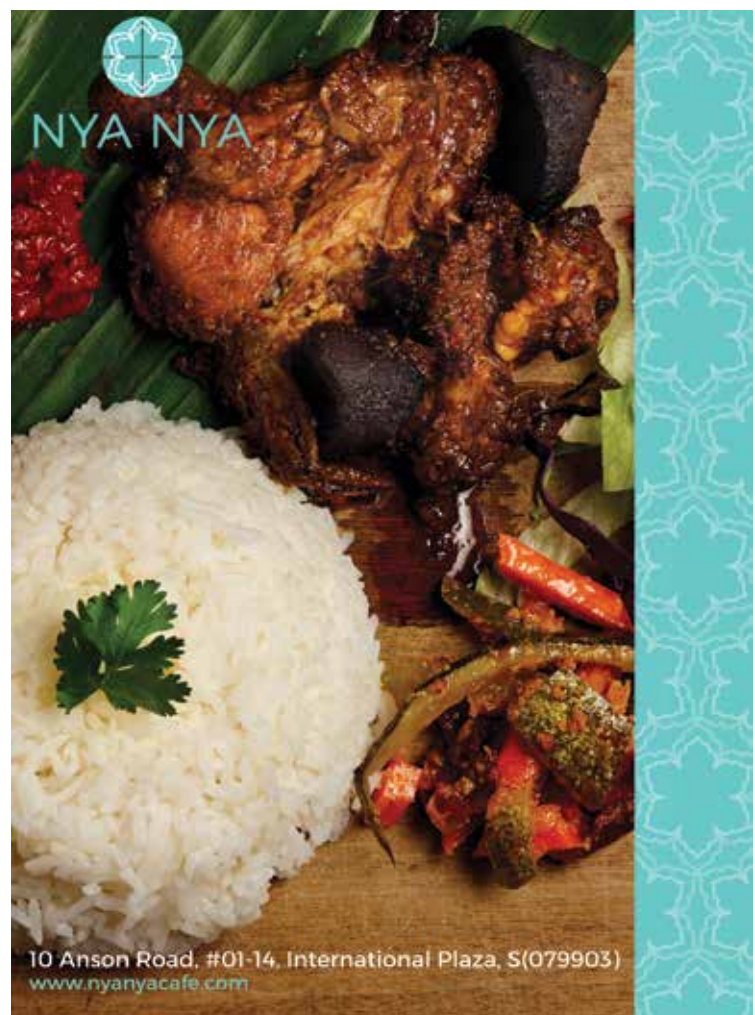
David Ong was reappointed as the Association's Honorary Auditor. 

Photo by Angeline Kong.



2016/2017 TPAS Committee

<i>President</i>	: Peter Wee
<i>1st Vice-President</i>	: Alan Koh
<i>2nd Vice-President</i>	: Raymond Wong
<i>Honorary Secretary</i>	: Ee Sin Soo
<i>Assistant Secretary</i>	: Koh Hwei Ling
<i>Treasurer</i>	: Angeline Kong
<i>Assistant Treasurer</i>	: Angela Kek
<i>Committee Members</i> (in alphabetical order by surname):	
Monica Alsagoff	Emeric Lau
Linda Chee	Adrian Tan
Zan Ho	Tan Koon Siang
Khong Swee Lin	Edmond Wong



Remembering Lee Seng Gee

1921 – 2016

TPAS 1ST VP BABA ALAN KOH RECALLS BABA LEE SENG GEE AND HIS GENEROUS SUPPORT



Photo courtesy of Peter Lee.

I joined the committee of The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) in 1995, when the late Dr George Tay was president. I remember we had about 200 members and not more than \$5,000 in our bank account. There was hardly any interest in the Association and a general lack of knowledge about Peranakan culture. The committee had an uphill task ahead.

When Lee Kip Lee became President of TPAS in 1996, one of the primary missions was to raise its social and cultural profile. Another was to create greater visibility and interest for Peranakan heritage.

The committee set out to preserve and promote the Peranakan culture and to revitalize the image of the Association. We organised events like the annual Peranakan Ball, participated in the Baba conventions, and supported the Peranakan galleries and programmes at the then-Asian Civilisations Museum at Armenian Street. We hosted dinner talks, created The Peranakan Voices choir and The Peranakan magazine.

In 2000, we had the task of organising the Baba Convention in Singapore. As chairperson of this event, my committee came up with a huge and exciting programme. Besides the usual three-day-two-night series of events, we included a bazaar and an ambitious play, *Bibiks Behind Bars*. The committee accepted the proposal as it would help the Association

achieve its objectives in one consolidated event. All this was wonderful except that we just did not have the financial means to pull it off!

Baba Lee Kip Lee, or Uncle Kip as he is affectionately called, then asked me to assemble a detailed programme of the event, complete with cost breakdowns, and to state our aims and objectives. He then set out to raise the funds.

He mustered his old connections: Dr Lee Seng Gee was his primary school classmate and at the helm of the Lee Foundation; he instantly agreed to support us! He and his wife Dr Della Lee also attended many TPAS events. He was a gracious and humble person who took time to speak with committee members and to understand how his support had nurtured our cultural programmes.

TPAS has 2,000 members today and a healthy bank balance. If it were not for the generous support we received from Dr Lee, who passed away on 10 May, we would not have been able to survive. TPAS extends our deepest sympathies to his wife and to his family on their loss, with our heartiest thanks for believing and trusting in us. ●

Lee Seng Gee (right), together with Mrs Lee Kip Lee (wife of then-Association President Lee Kip Lee), and Former President of Singapore, Dr Wee Kim Wee and Mrs Wee, at TPAS' 101st Anniversary ball at the Mandarin Hotel on 2 November 2001.

The Federation of Peranakan Associations

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 phujh@gmail.com.

PENANG

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

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)

Address: PO Box 3151, Pusat Serahan Subang Jaya, 47509 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.
Contact: Nyonya Nancy Peng, Hon. Secretary
Email: peranakan_kl@yahoo.com.my
Tel No: +6012-3151451
Website: <http://www.peranakan-kl.org/>
Facebook page: PPBNKLS
To contact President, Baba Cedric Tan please email cedric_cctan@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: Thaipranakan.com

INDONESIA

Association of Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia (Aspertina)

Hero Building II Suite 902,
Jl. Jend. Gatot Subroto 177A
Kav. 64 Jakarta 12870, Indonesia
Contact: President Mr Andrew Susanto / International Liason Officer Mr Hendi Handadi
Tel +6221 8317751
Fax +6221 8317731
Email: info@aspertina.org / hendihandadi@aspertina.org
Website: aspertina.org

Peranakan Tionghoa Warga Indonesia (Pertiwi)

Yayasan PERTIWI c/o KING'S EEC
Jalan Baharudin No. 8

Tangerang 15111

Banten Indonesia

Contact: Mr Udaya Halim, President

Tel: +62215523880/ +62215526748

Email: info@pertiwi.org / info@bentengheritage.com

AUSTRALIA

MELBOURNE

Peranakan Association Australia Inc

P.O. Box 1278, Hawksburn, Victoria, Australia 3142
Contacts: Joseph Then, Secretary, at email j.then@bigpond.com
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

Welcome

A warm welcome to our new members!

1. Chua Li Yong
2. Alicia Chew S. Lim
3. Andrew Cheng Lloyd
4. Koh Hwei Ling
5. Rebecca Kool
6. Hetty Lie Schricke
7. Doreen Lim
8. Sharon Lim Ming Chu
9. Ngiam May Ling
10. Celine Ng
11. John Joel Seow
12. Angelin Tan
13. Yee Wai Wai

The Yeows Discuss Marriage Over Dinner

BABA BRYAN TAN IS CONSUMED BY A PLAY OF PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Molly sniffed and muttered to her utensils incomprehensibly in the kitchen, all the while moving with the precision of a surgeon to chop up onions and stir the *kuah* (broth). “*Pien kim* (cost of being a bride)... *belanja kahwen* (marriage expenses)... *surat kahwen* (marriage agreement),” she chanted under her breath, gritting her teeth as she pulverised fresh chilli in the blender. Does this *mat salleh* even know what it means to marry a Peranakan woman?

Clutching a *buah keluak* kernel, she proceeded to crack it open with two deft knocks from the back of a cleaver. Despite being preoccupied with her trepidation, Molly took comfort in the fact that the kitchen was her domain. For now, it seemed like the only place where she could still exercise some sort of control.

Willie potted about the flat, marvelling at how small it was. He felt completely at ease, with his daughter nattering in his ear about the stresses of working in a foreign bank, and the fragrance of his wife’s cooking wafting throughout the house. He thought nothing of his daughter’s unplanned pregnancy. Willie was beside himself over becoming a grandfather. He paused and smiled deeply at the thought, casting a glance at his future son-in-law. Daniel was cleanly shaven with a mop of dark curly hair, and hailed from London. Vera said he possessed what the English called, a ‘stiff upper lip’.

Willie wondered if it was a facial defect. He deliberated at length until Daniel explained patiently that it was a characteristic of the British for self-restraint and mental fortitude. Willie grinned sheepishly at him, nodding. Daniel was a military man, a graduate from the prestigious Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst and a former Major in the British Armed Forces. Both men bonded immediately after that, with Willie waxing lyrical about his stint as a *Sarjan* (Sergeant) in the *Kor Armor DiRaja* (Royal Armoured Corps) in the Malayan Armed Forces.

Molly had likewise been disarmed by Daniel’s clipped English accent and utmost courtesy. His contrite earnestness in acceding to her every request tempered her feelings of bitterness and resentment towards him; she felt he was a foreigner who had almost driven a wedge between her and her daughter. Despite



Illustration by Eileen Chan

this, Molly was determined that the Peranakan marriage tradition be followed, even if *nasi sudah jadi bubor* (rice had become porridge, referring to Vera’s pregnancy).

Dinner was, needless to say, an extravagant affair. Vera stared open-mouthed at the spread across her tiny table. Her mother had never pulled out all the stops before, not even for the elders in the extended family. Willie grinned and smacked his lips. His wife was testing their new son-in-law. Learning to appreciate the uniquely acquired taste of the cuisine was always the first step for anyone marrying into a Peranakan family. *Babi pongteh*, *ayam buah keluak* and even *hati babi bungkus* (liver wrapped in pig’s caul) sat steaming alongside Molly’s signature *sambal belachan*.

Daniel had to be instructed by Vera on the various dishes and how to eat them. The Englishman tried every dish gingerly, followed closely by three sets of scrutinising eyes. To their surprise, he ate with tremendous gusto, and even finished all the *sambal belachan*. Molly nodded approvingly, but the edges of her eyes remained hard.

“Let’s have the *Cheo Thau* (sealing of the marriage ritual) ceremony next week,” Molly stated flatly, when most of the food had been demolished.

“Mummy!” protested Vera. “We’re not living in that age anymore, you know!”

Molly sighed. “That’s the only way to be approved. I spoke to grand aunty Bee Neo yesterday. She will agree to give her blessing to the marriage. But only if you follow the rules of *Cheo Thau*, and only if you have it at her house, back in Melaka!”

In the next episode: The *kawen besar*!

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. 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941. website: www.peranakanmuseum.sg Email: nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg Tel: 6332 7591.



Nyonya Needlework: Embroidery and Beadwork in the Peranakan World

24 June 2016 to 26 March 2017, Peranakan Museum

This special exhibition celebrates the art of nyonya needlework, a vibrant part of Peranakan Chinese heritage. Some of the finest examples from the Peranakan Museum and major international collections will be displayed. Discover the ingenuity and skill embedded in the art, the importance of tradition, and the innovations inspired by the dynamic, multicultural environment of the region.



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 sirih 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: 6332 3659, 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>

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, *sirih* boxes and other paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine batik textiles from the north coast of Java, all made for the Peranakan market. 1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555, Tel: 6332 2982, Opening Hours: 9am to 7pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 1pm to 7pm (Mondays), Admission \$8 (adults), \$4 (senior citizens and students). <http://www.acm.org.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, 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.

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