

# the Peranakan

ISSUE  
2|20  
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## Chicken Feat!

WE HERALD THE YEAR OF THE ROOSTER



### *The KILLER INSTINCT*

REVEALING THE FOWL PLAY  
BEHIND YOUR CHICKEN TONIGHT

**CHEEP THRILL**  
*Ernest Goh on shooting chickens*

### AYAM FIREBRANDS

*An interview with our  
oldest and youngest roosters*

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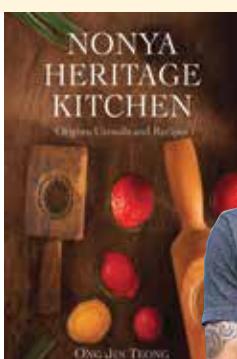
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THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE

[www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)

ON THE COVER • We celebrate the Year of the Rooster with a majestic flourish, as portrayed by a Serama fowl. The photograph is by the kind courtesy of visual artist Ernest Goh from his book, *Chickens*. See page 4 on 'Rooster Rhapsody'.

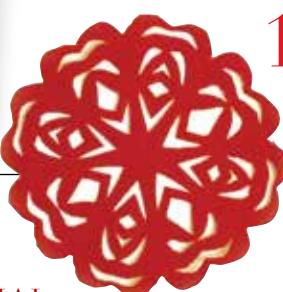


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## HIGHLIGHTS

Announcement of winning bid for  
an original watercolour painting  
by Gabby Malpas.



The painting may be viewed at Katong Antique House. A minimum bid of \$800 is required. All bidders must email their bids and contact details to [secretariat@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:secretariat@peranakan.org.sg) before midnight on 7 December 2016. TPAS reserves the right to accept or reject bids received, and the Secretariat may contact bidders directly to confirm their intentions.

# Hail the Rooster!

This issue is special to me. I was born in the Year of the Rooster. My daughter, Olivia, is also a Rooster. You can imagine how, in cackling moments of contention, we would nip at each other to prove our points. But these finicky family moments are soon forgotten, just seconds later. Such are human foibles. Photographer Baba Ernest Goh has succeeded in capturing some of them, in animal form, in his amazing book called *Chickens*. We proudly feature four fowls from his photo gallery.

As the Zodiac progresses from the Monkey to the Rooster, Bryan Tan entertains with various ways to prepare a chicken for the pot, while Tan Kuning advises on compatible Zodiac signs that do not *cheong* (conflict) in marriage and other life circumstances. Dawn Marie Lee talks to the youngest and oldest 'roosters' from our Association, born over 70 years apart.

We have a Rooster *pantan*, spontaneously composed in Baba Malay by GT Lye, the doyen of *wayang* Peranakan. GT, now in his 70s, is our very own living cultural icon. He has contributed much to our community's theatre heritage. In preserving our heritage, we also demonstrate how to cut the traditional *kertair merah* (red paper) and fold the *kim chua* (gold paper).

The second part of the magazine focuses on young and older Peranakans rediscovering their roots whether after marriage, in school, work and even the after life.

This issue marks my eleventh year, and my final issue as Editor of *The Peranakan* magazine. It is

timely to hand over to a younger generation that is savvier with social media, and who can explore new dimensions to promote our culture especially among our youth. Dawn, in her early 40s, will work with our younger Peranakans such as Emeric Lau, Edmond Wong, Victoria Chanel Lee and Ngiam May Ling. I will be Adviser to the team and continue to contribute as a writer.

Eleven exciting years have passed in the wink of an eye. In 2005, I was persuaded to head the magazine by the very erudite Editor then, Peter Lee, who has been a joy to work with, a generous champion of the magazine, and a lifelong friend ever since. Peter continues as a fellow Adviser. John, his brother, chips in with creative direction. My husband Colin also continues as the photographer-cum-writer-cum-book reviewer. In moving to the backbench, I declare that Colin and I have *naik pangkat* (been promoted) to become grandparents to baby boy Micah, born on 19 October.

Thank you to all our readers, writers and contributors, both local and overseas, who have been such an encouragement and pleasure to work with, and with whom I have cemented lovely friendships. Please give our younger team members your strongest support.

We also thank our Association's Main Committee for being the silent sponsor of our association's magazine and always trusting us to do the right thing for our Peranakan community.

All glory to God.

**Linda Chee, Editor**

## Sulam Goes to the White House

A shawl created by TPAS' 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice-President Raymond Wong was presented recently to the First Lady of the United States, Mrs Michelle Obama. Made of teal green Swiss voile, (the same fabric traditionally used to make nyonya *kebayas*), the shawl is embroidered with Singapore's national flower, the Vanda Miss Joaquim orchid, and Singapore's national butterfly, the Common Rose butterfly. The shawl was a personal gift from Madam Ho Ching to Mrs Obama during Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's state visit to the United States in August 2016. •



## Mari Main Cherki!

The Association will be starting *cherki* (a traditional card game) sessions in early 2017. Learn how to play *cherki*, then practise and have fun with a *Main Cherki* group. TPAS members who already know how to play *cherki* are welcome to join the group.

Location: To be announced  
Contact Khong Swee Lin, (TPAS Committee Member, Social Events) to register your interest at [sweelinkhong@yahoo.com](mailto:sweelinkhong@yahoo.com) •

NYONYA LINDA CHEE  
DISCOVERS THE PASSION  
OF NATURALIST BABA  
PHOTOGRAPHER, ERNEST GOH

# Rooster



I first met Baba Ernest Goh when I was writing a book on master potter Iskandar Jalil in 2011. His role in our book team was to document Iskandar's works inspired by his travels. Ernest's compositions turned out stunning, capturing the quiet but at times boisterous spirit, soul and humility behind the works of Che'gu (teacher), as we respectfully called him.

Ernest has steadily been winning accolades for his photography. The Goldsmiths College Masters alumnus is obviously passionate about animals. Who would wait minute by minute, eyes glued to the lens, to capture in a split second fishes and chickens in their human best?

His photographic books on ornamental chickens, namely the Serama - called supermodels of the chicken world - have been internationally lauded as spectacular and magnificent. The reviews roll in from none other than BBC, CNN, The New Yorker, Huffington Post, The Observer UK, The Weather Channel, amongst others. His whimsical, humorous and bold portraits of human-like personalities belie the gentle artistry behind the shots.

Ernest humbly diverts to his affinity with animals while growing up in his grandmother's *kampong* (village) in Siglap. "I believe that everybody's relationships with animals are formed during childhood."

He admits that capturing the animals with amazing expressions and postures requires a "fair" amount of patience. He quips that, "human subjects

require more patience". Capturing a brilliant moment is "like tasting a brilliantly cooked *ayam buah keluak* at dinner where everything falls nicely in place - the gravy,

# Rhapsody!

the *rempah*, the fragrant *keluak*" filling.

Ernest's Peranakan lineage draws from his paternal grandparents who were both Peranakans. His Malay is restricted to the "conversational kind to get by, when I order *mee bakso* in Indonesia and *roti canai* in Malaysia."

Asked about his Peranakan upbringing, Ernest's immediate response is, "Food! That is the first thing I identify with the culture. It is probably the closest thing to my heart about being a Baba. Because my favourite home-cooked Peranakan dishes appear every Christmas and Chinese New Year at my aunt's home. And it is at the dining table where everyone gathers to not only share the food but also our joys, heartaches and memories."

He does not regard himself as being particularly Peranakan, "but my siblings and cousins are a pretty passionate, hard-nosed bunch who will give as much as they take."

The most rewarding moments about being a photographer are when people, especially children, "learn to better appreciate" the animals that he photographs. As a professional, "I found that with a camera people were willing to let me into their lives and share their hopes and dreams with me. It is a privilege that I always remind myself to not take for granted."

"When people allow a photographer to photograph them, they are giving the photographer many things - their time, their attention, their dignity. Those are very precious things."



*We are the champions,  
my friend...The Freddie  
Mercury strut by Serama  
'warriors' from Ernest's  
Chicken book. These pint-  
sized chickens are bred to  
compete in 'beauty pageants'  
up in Malaysia.*



Ernest Goh's works includes Altered Land, a photo documentary of the aftermath and recovery of Aceh, Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami; and Beyond Mask, a book documenting poignant scenes during the height of the SARS outbreak in Singapore. Ernest has authored three books on fish and chickens. He came in second in the Nature & Wildlife category at the 2013 Sony World Photography Awards (Professional Competition). He is also the creative director of The Animal Book Co, which works with animal welfare groups through photography. View the short film, Cocks – Chicken Beauty Pageants, at <https://vimeo.com/74638927>. More of his works can be viewed at [www.theanimalbook.com](http://www.theanimalbook.com).

Ernest regards himself as a photographer and also an artist, designer, mechanic (to his Land Rover) and cook, in that order.

He feels gratified to have many good mentors in honing his professional skills. Iskandar, his former lecturer at Temasek Polytechnic, especially made a "huge" impact on Ernest's creative path. "Mr Iskandar's wit, humour and discipline stayed with me throughout the years."

One of Ernest's current projects is a permanent public artwork for a HDB development designed by renowned architectural firm WOHA. Here, he explores again one of his pet subjects - *kampong* animals.

Incidentally, Ernest was born in the year of the Goat. •



A clownish Silkie chicken peers curiously into the photographer's lens.

# Five Ways to Kill a Chicken

BABA BRYAN TAN RELUCTANTLY EXPLORES THE DARK UNDERBELLY OF PERANAKAN COOKING

The wizened old lady sits cross-legged across cushions on an ornate mother-of-pearl dais. She looks almost 90. The glint in her eyes belie her frailness and great age. Tendrils of smoke puff crookedly out of the varnished pipe in her mouth, the scent of tobacco and cinnamon choking up my nostrils.

"Come closer, child," the old lady beckons with a crooked arthritic finger, completely gnarled.

"Poh Chik (aunty), why do you have dead chickens hanging in your living room?" I inquire politely.

The old hag's mouth widens into a splotchy, blood-stained grin. There is a gilded box of *sireh* by her side. "My chicken recipes are the best, most delectable in the world," she croons, closing her eyes in ecstasy, a dribble of red flowing down her chin. "But how do I make them, *lu tau tak* (do you know)?"

"No Poh Chik, I don't." I hear a faint *tink...tink...* sound as the fluids from the hanging fowl around me drip into a metal container beneath their lifeless forms.

Her eyes fly open. A flash of lightning brightens the room, reflecting off cluttered and dusty silver ware.

"Ayam Pongteh, Ayam Buah Keluak, Inchi Kabin, Kari Ayam," she chants in a manic frenzy. "Do you know what they all have in common?"

"Ayam?" I gulp, wiping away her flecks of scarlet spittle on my cheeks.

"Yes!" Poh Chik waves her pipe in an all-encompassing arc, leaping off her dais and landing neatly like a gymnast.

"Lima macham lu boleh kasi ayam mati! (You have five ways to kill a chicken!)", she breaks out in Baba Malay, her five knotted fingers in my face. Poh Chik points at the dead bodies. She unsheathes her gleaming carving knife.

"First is the way of the *kampong*...the little old lady does a pirouette, making a swishing sound at her neck using the back of the knife.

"You shouldn't do that, Poh Chik. It's dangerous to play with knives," I caution.

"If you don't hold tight, it will run away. So you better *tangkap* (catch) properly! Or hold it upside down", she nods sagely.

"Dua. This is the *dulu kala* style, sometimes still in



Illustration by James Tan.

use." She cackles, switching the carving knife to an axe. "You grip the *ayam* on the chopping block, then... chop!"

I nod my head, and scribble a note. "Third is when you have nothing to kill it with. Sometimes people in the army do this." Her hand flips and a batik cloth appears.

"You cover its head, then you pull down hard and twist!" She tugs the batik with both hands. "If you don't do it properly you have to pull two or three times, then *tak baik* (not good) already," she clucks disapprovingly.

"*Empat*, this is in farms and places where you need to kill many to sell. You have a machine that lines up all of them, and when they go in..." a bright flash of lightning crackles, illuminating Poh Chik's dentures, stained scarlet. "Electric!"

"Electrocution," I correct her.

"Ya, electric!" She flaps her arms at me, before suddenly settling back onto her dais in a deathly silence.

"The last one is my family secret," she whispers, giggling girlishly. "You want to know? Come closer." I sidle over hesitantly. The batik cloth concealed a tube-like object. A fruit or vegetable, I concluded. A banana, perhaps?

"You hold down the chicken with one hand, and then..." Poh Chik makes a hole with her forefinger and thumb, "you *sumbat* the *pantat sama timun!*"\* wheezing with mirth till her face turns blue.

I flee and never look back. ▶

\*You thrust a cucumber into its 'behind'?

# Animal Magic Unlocked

WITH THE TAON BARU FAST APPROACHING, BABA TAN KUNING MUSES ON THE CHINESE ZODIAC

The Lunar New Year or *Taon Baru* is one of the most important festivals for Chinese Peranakans. It closely occurs with the start of a new zodiac year. If you know some knowledge of the Chinese horoscope, the zodiac becomes a useful astrological tool with many hidden secrets.

Each year is named after an animal. Legend has it that the Emperor of Heaven called the animals to him and named each year after the order in which they arrived. A complete cycle of the Chinese zodiac is 12 years.

When I was seven years old, my grandmother taught me a *panton* about the Chinese horoscope. It is recited in Hokkien and helps me to remember the order of the zodiac signs. Baba Malay is peppered with Hokkien words, especially when referring to Taoist or Buddhist religious terms, and the names of Chinese gods and goddesses.

#### Age in animal years

Among the older Peranakans, zodiac signs were often used to indicate a person's age. When two nyonyas met for the first time, they would ask each other about their age.

The younger one would say, “*Tachi, taon apa?*” (Elder sister, in what year were you born?)

The older lady would reply, “*Saya taon monyet, tiga puluh tuju taon sekarang.*” (I was born in the Year of the Monkey. I am 37 years old now.)

The younger nyonya then respond, “*Saya pulak taon anjing, dua taon muda tachi.*” (I was born in the Year of the Dog, two years younger than you, elder sister.)

#### Clashing animals

Some elderly nyonyas such as matchmakers had the Chinese horoscope at their fingertips. Each animal sign has specific traits which are believed to shape a person's character.

Instinctively, the matchmakers knew that a man and a woman born six zodiac signs apart should not be introduced to one another.

## THE 12 ZODIAC SIGNS IN RUNNING ORDER

| HOKKIEN   | ENGLISH                               | BABA MALAY      |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
|    | It chu<br>One is for Rat              | Tikus           |
|    | Ji gu<br>Two is for Ox                | Kerbo           |
|    | Sah hor<br>Three is for Tiger         | Arimo           |
|   | Si toh<br>Four is for Rabbit          | Kuching Belanda |
|  | Gor leng<br>Five is for Dragon        | Naga            |
|  | Lak chua<br>Six is for Snake          | Ular            |
|  | Chit beh<br>Seven is for Horse        | Kuda            |
|  | Puek yeo<br>Eight is for Goat         | Kambeng         |
|  | Gao gao<br>Nine is for Monkey         | Monyet          |
|  | Chap kuay<br>Ten is for Rooster       | Ayam            |
|  | Chap it kuan kow<br>Eleven is for Dog | Anjing          |
|  | Chap ji ter boh<br>Twelve is for Pig  | Babi            |

Their zodiac signs would *cheong* (be in conflict) and they would not enjoy wedded bliss.

Similarly, it is said that business partners born under conflicting zodiac signs would not be able to co-operate successfully. Parents and children, as well as siblings, would not get along either if their zodiac signs *cheong*.

### Conflicting Zodiac Signs

Rat and Horse  
Ox and Goat  
Tiger and Monkey  
Rabbit and Rooster  
Dragon and Dog  
Pig and Snake

### Taboos in Marriage

- If the bride and groom are both born in the Goat year, they will have an unhappy marriage.
- A couple born in the Snake year should not marry, as it is believed that snakes do not stay together after mating.
- If two people born in the Dog year marry, it is said that there will be no offspring from the union. The logic is that husband and wife will be fierce to each other, which will affect the woman's fertility.
- A woman born in the Tiger year is feared as a spouse because she might *makan* (dominate) her husband. However, if she weds a man born under a compatible zodiac sign such as a Horse or a Tiger, they will make a perfect match.

### Lucky and unlucky birth hours

Lucky and unlucky hours of birth are inferred from real life traits of animals. For example, it is unlucky for an Ox man to be born in the wee hours of the morning. It is said that he will have a hard life because this is the time when oxen are brought to the fields to toil.

Whereas a person born in the Year of the Rat will have a good life if he is born in the Rat period, 11.00pm-12.59am (2300-2459 hours). This is when rats easily take food from a kitchen when the household is asleep. Among the twelve animals, the Rat is said to attract wealth.

A man born in the Horse year will be successful in his career because the horse is a strong animal that is full of energy.

**"The different Zodiac signs are said to influence a person's character and relationships. As long as there is no *cheong* (*conflict*) between two signs, life can be happy and peaceful."**

### Hours of the day

According to the Chinese zodiac, 24 hours in a day can be divided into twelve 2-hour periods, each represented by an animal.

|         |           |  |
|---------|-----------|--|
| Rat     | 2300-2459 | When rats actively look for food.  |
| Ox      | 0100-0259 | When oxen begin to stir and plough the fields.   |
| Tiger   | 0300-0459 | When tigers hunt for food.   |
| Rabbit  | 0500-0659 | According to Peranakan mythology, this is when the rabbit on the moon starts pounding herbs with a pestle. |
| Dragon  | 0700-0859 | In Chinese folklore, this is when dragons start marching westwards.  |
| Snake   | 0900-1059 | When snakes leave their holes.   |
| Horse   | 1100-1259 | When sunshine is the strongest during the day, horses remain active while many other animals have to rest. |
| Goat    | 1300-1459 | The best time for goats to graze.  |
| Monkey  | 1500-1659 | When monkeys become very lively.   |
| Rooster | 1700-1859 | When roosters return to their coop.  |
| Dog     | 1900-2059 | When dogs are most alert to guard homes.   |
| Pig     | 2100-2259 | When pigs are safely sound asleep.   |

The Dragon, the strongest animal in the zodiac, is the ultimate symbol of luck and prosperity. It is believed that those born in the Dragon year will become rich. A family that has three dragons among them will enjoy windfalls like striking the first prize in lotteries. Among siblings, the Dragon will be the most prosperous one.

People born in the Year of the Monkey and the Rooster are determined by nature. They can be stubborn, but once they set their minds on something, they will get what they want. Monkey folk are naturally mischievous.

Dogs are faithful to their masters. People born in the Dog year are loyal to their bosses and sincere to their friends. They can never betray others.

### Born on festive days

It is believed that people born on certain festive days will have many

problems in life and may live in poverty.

The days are:

- Chinese New Year's Eve
- New Year's Day
- Cheng Beng (the third day of the third month)
- Kueh Chang Day (the fifth day of the fifth month)
- Eve of the seventh month
- First day of the seventh month (the Hungry Ghost month)

### *Puah guek*

In every year, there is one month known as *puah guek* the wasteful month, which varies from year to year. In the Year of the Monkey, *puah guek* is the fourth month of the year.

Men and women born during *puah guek* will spend extravagantly. However, a man who has no fortune of his own should seek to marry a woman born during *puah guek*. It is said that she will unlock his fortune, which she can then also enjoy. ☺



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***“She is a Tree Of Life to those who take hold of her, those who hold her fast will be BLESSED” Proverbs3:18***



# *Timeless Treasure*

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# Panton Taon Ayam

## (Rooster Year poems)

THEATRE DOYEN BABA GT LYE COMPOSES BABA MALAY POEMS  
SPECIALLY FOR THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE

*Daon kenchur sayor bayam  
Masak lemak chilli padi  
Monyet undur datang nya ayam  
Kita sambot sabesair hati*

Aromatic ginger and spinach leaves  
Cooked with bird's eye chilli in coconut milk  
The Monkey has left, the Rooster arrives  
We receive with open hearts

*Di-tepi kolam dua beradek  
Tambahkan minyak terang pelita  
Taon ayam taon yang baik  
Riang gembira tak terkata*

Two brothers by the pool  
Add oil to brighten the lamp  
The Year of the Rooster is a good year  
It brings happiness without end

*Wangi mangga tak sama kwini  
Bila membeli perhati-hati  
Taon ayam sepanjang ini  
Rezeki bertambah tak henti-henti*

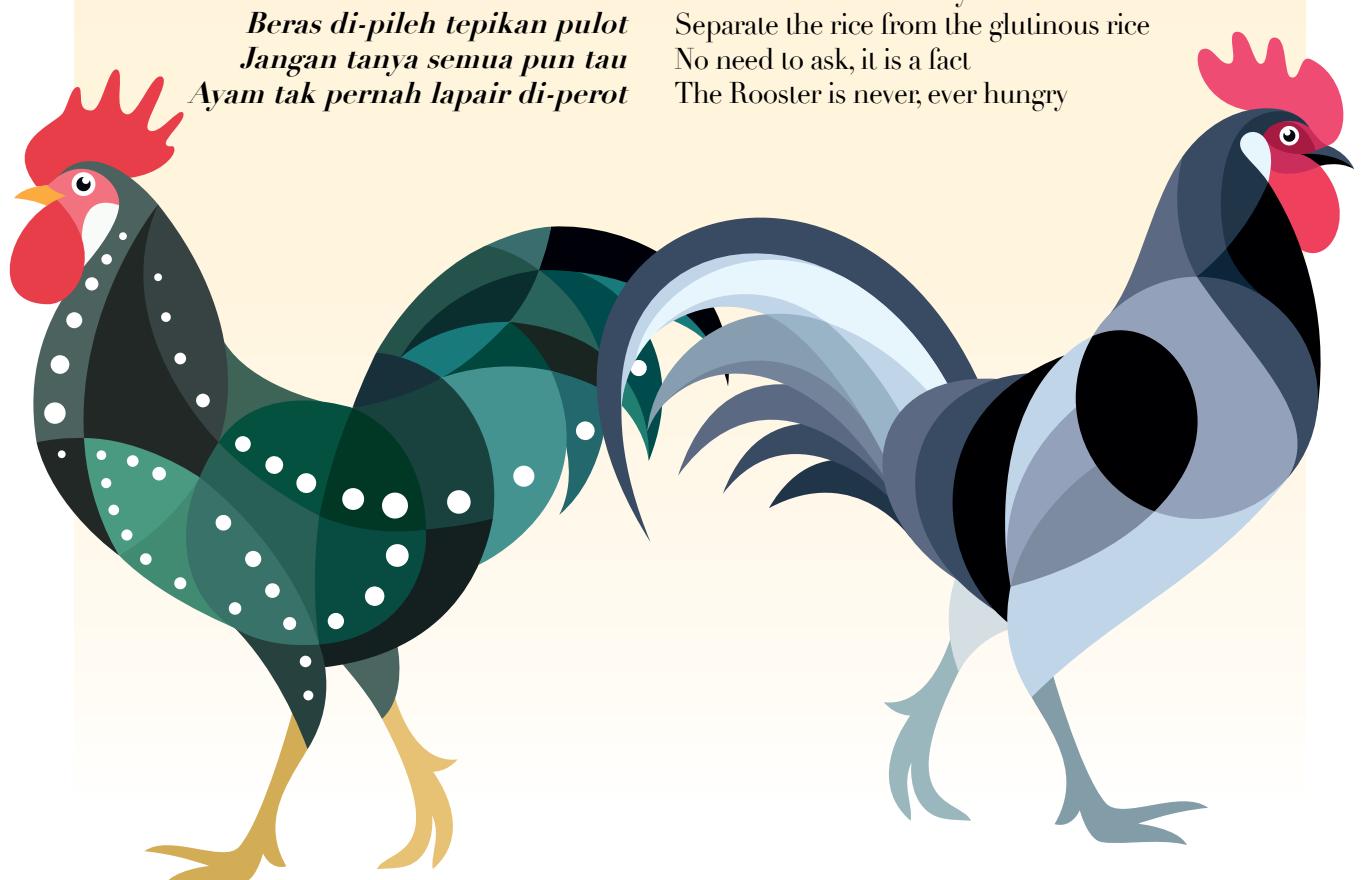
Different mangoes have different fragrances  
Be alert when you buy them  
All year round, the Year of the Rooster  
Flourishes with luck never ending

*Sangat chantek si-kuching Siam  
Buntot panjang macham kemocheng  
Berumah tangga taon ayam  
Turunan bertengkat ke-chichit oneng*

The Siamese cat is very handsome  
Its tail is bushy as a feather duster  
With a new home in the Year of the Rooster  
The family will flourish through many generations

*Tarok mari dalam neru  
Beras di-pileh tepikan pulot  
Jangan tanya semua pun tau  
Ayam tak pernah lapair di-perot*

On a woven bamboo tray  
Separate the rice from the glutinous rice  
No need to ask, it is a fact  
The Rooster is never, ever hungry



# Meet Our Oldest and Youngest Roosters

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE MEETS THE YOUNGEST AND OLDEST MEMBERS OF OUR ASSOCIATION, BORN 72 YEARS APART IN THE YEAR OF THE ROOSTER



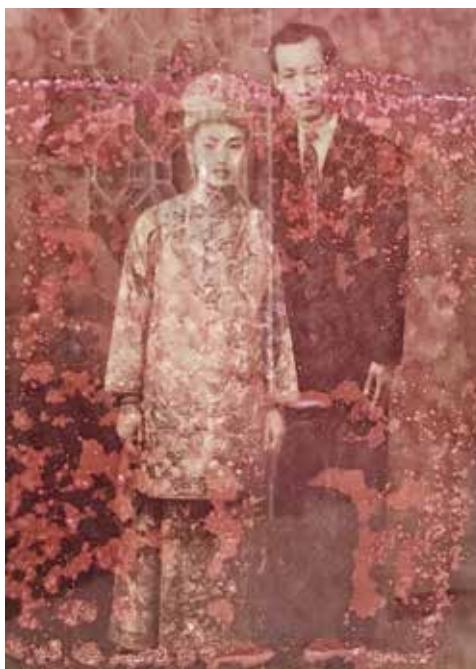
## NYONYA LIM SIEW CHENG, 96

In 1944, while Singapore was suffering from the ravages of the Japanese Occupation, a young nyonya donned her bridal robes and prepared for a new life during a time of great suffering and uncertainty.

"I have been very fortunate in my life," says Nyonya Lim Siew Cheng. Born in 1921 as a British subject of King George V, she has witnessed history in the making.

Siew Cheng enjoyed her childhood during the Golden Age of the Peranakans in Singapore in the 1920s and 1930s. She lived through the Japanese Occupation where she lost her father and got married, witnessed the birth of an independent Singapore in 1965, saw the first colour television broadcast in 1974, and has lived a full and busy life without the Internet or a mobile phone.

When asked about her childhood memories, she



Above: Nyonyas Bernadette Low and Lim Siew Cheng.

Left: Siew Cheng's wedding photo, taken in 1944 when she was 23 years old.

fondly recalls visiting her grandfather at his godown in Boat Quay. "He was in the trading business and liked to smoke opium. When we grandchildren visited him, he was usually lying down and smoking a long pipe. He called out to us and asked us to greet him properly; addressing your elders correctly was very important at that time, and then he

would give us each a few cents, which in those days could buy some nice *makan!*" (In the 1920s, *samsui* women in Singapore were paid 50 cents for a day's



Siew Cheng's in-laws' bungalow at Still Road.

labour, and dancing 'taxi girls' at the cabarets were paid 8 cents per dance.)

"When I was growing up, nyonyas were not allowed to go out on our own until we got married. I attended school, but after lessons I stayed at home unless I went out with my family members," says Siew Cheng. "I didn't like to sew or do embroidery but I liked making *kueh*, especially before Chinese New Year. We girls would all sit in a row and each of us had a task to do in making the *kueh*, it was like a conveyor belt!" she remembers.

She married Baba Teo Chin Seng in 1944, during the war. "My father was killed during an air raid, so my mother felt that I should quickly find a husband. Actually, I knew my husband before the war – he was my cousin, but he married another girl. His wife was also killed during the war, so that's how we ended up getting married."

Her mother-in-law, Mrs Tan Bee Luan, was also her maternal aunt who lived in a sprawling bungalow on Still Road. "She was a very good nyonya cook. I learnt many dishes from her," says Siew Cheng. "Her recipes have been complied by my grand-niece and grand-nephew into a cookbook." Titled *Chiak Png*, it was published in 2010 by teenage sister-and-brother team, Bronwen and Benjamin Harbinson, in memory of their *Chocho*. Apart from their great-grandmother's handwritten recipes, the book is filled with precious family photographs, making it a meaningful keepsake.

Those born in the Year of the Rooster are said to

love being up and about. This is true of Siew Cheng who still does gardening daily. Like a gardener, she deftly removes brown leaves from a plant when I asked if I could photograph her in her garden.

Asked for her secret to longevity, Siew Cheng proudly replies, "I have been doing yoga every day for the last 30 years." She learnt yoga in the 1980s at the Tanglin Club, where she still attends classes every Monday. "Yoga, and a happy mind. Keep your mind free and clear," says the nonagenarian.

## NYONYA BERNADETTE LOW, 24

Nyonya Bernadette Low has a deep appreciation for her heritage. "Growing up, my mum, Judy Low, shared her love of our culture with me. She is active in the Peranakan community and has sewn dozens of *kasot manek*, which she proudly displays in our living room. She even made me tiny pairs of *kasot* and matching handbags when I was a child."

Bernadette is a graduate of Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan, where she lived for four years. She will begin her Masters in Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore in January 2017.

When asked to describe those born in the Year of the Rooster, she replies, "Resilient, persevering, eager, ambitious and outspoken."

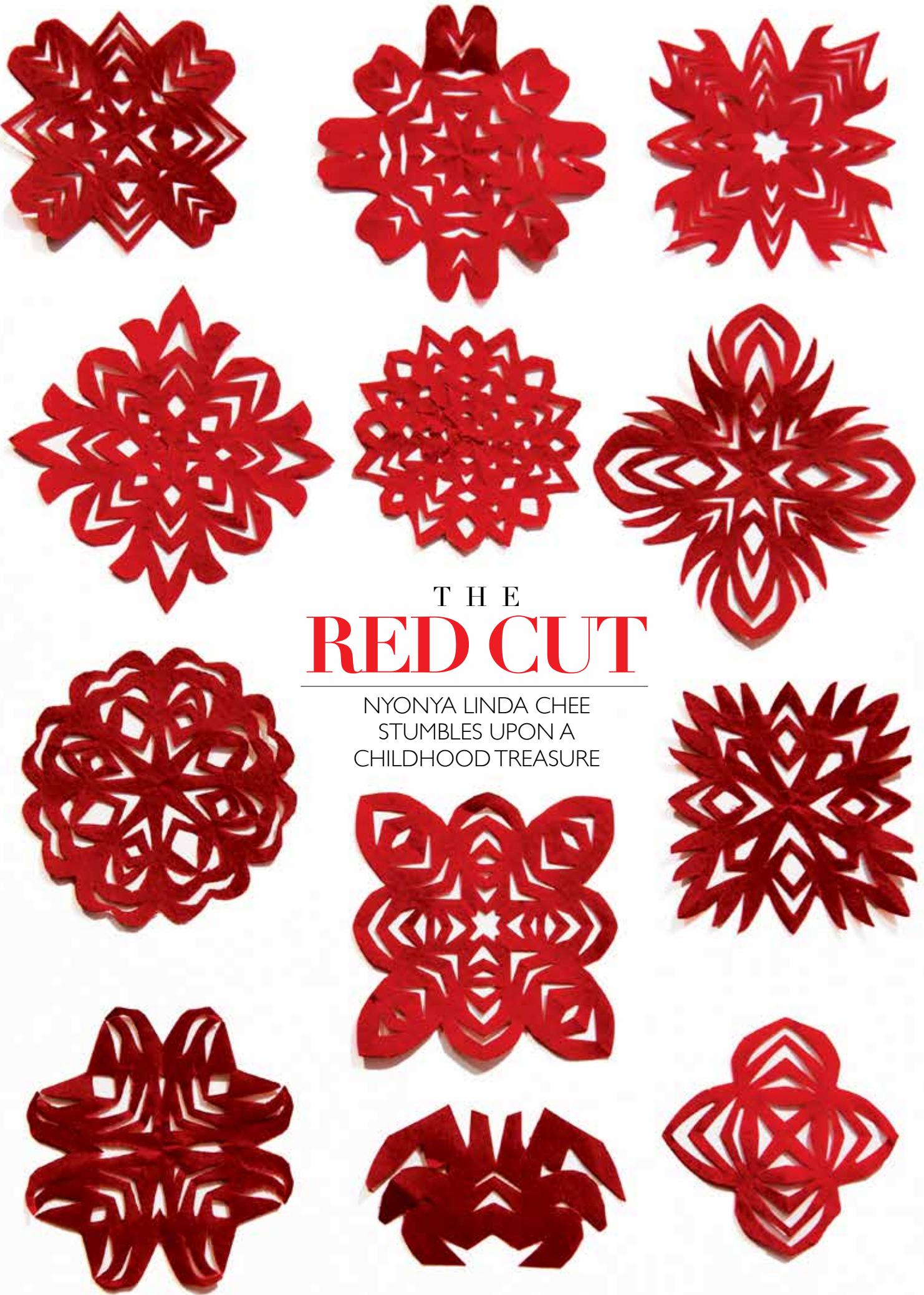
"Living alone abroad for four years wasn't easy. I didn't have any family or friends with me and was forced out of my comfort zone in a country where hardly anyone speaks English. I became fluent in Japanese very quickly in order to survive...and I'm proud that I did!" She not only survived, but also graduated in the top 5% of her university cohort.

Proud to be a Peranakan, she hopes to host a dinner party and prepare all the dishes herself. "I love *ayam buah keluak* and *assam pedas*. Whenever I receive a new issue of *The Peranakan* magazine, I would search out the food features and read those first!" The foodie reveals two things she cannot live without – the Internet and *sambal belachan*. "I would pack large jars of my aunt's *sambal* to bring back to Japan each time I came home for the holidays," she confesses.

"I cannot imagine that Siew Cheng has lived most of her life without the Internet. To me it is a necessity. It keeps me in touch with friends and family. Plus, the vast array of knowledge it opens up to anyone, anywhere in the world is a dream!" says this next-gen nyonya. ♦



Four year-old Bernadette holding a beaded bag and *kasot manek* made by her mother, Judy Low.



# T H E **RED CUT**

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NYONYA LINDA CHEE  
STUMBLES UPON A  
CHILDHOOD TREASURE

*Paper cuts by Linda and her father, circa 1970s.*

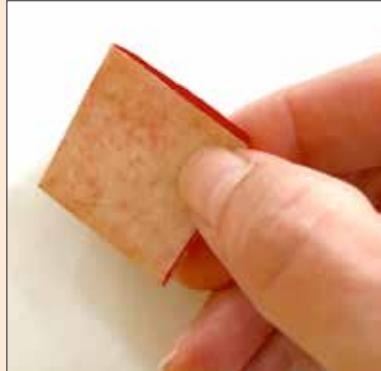
Last August I chanced upon an old *Horse Brand Hygienic Bird's Nest* box while clearing my late father's bedroom. In the plastic box were stacks of red paper cuttings. Some were in tattered envelopes. Lo and behold, my dear father, Louis Tan, who was called to the Lord on 22 July this year, at the age of 88, had left behind a precious heirloom.

The box contained my childhood years of sitting next to Daddy, as I called him, cutting *kertair merah* or red paper, into pretty decorative paste-ons. He had taught me this traditional craft. Each pattern became more intricate with a praise from Daddy. I was also his assistant to starch and paste the *kertair* neatly on the covers of tins of home-made *kueh belanda* and





**1** A sharp pair of pointed scissors is essential. Cut a square of red paper.



**2** Fold over twice, or three times to produce a more intricate pattern.



**3** Cut into a quadrant to get a round shape.



**4** From these cuts....



**5** ...this elaborate pattern is unfolded.



**6** The simple beauty of the *kertair merah* is in the symmetry of design when unfolded.

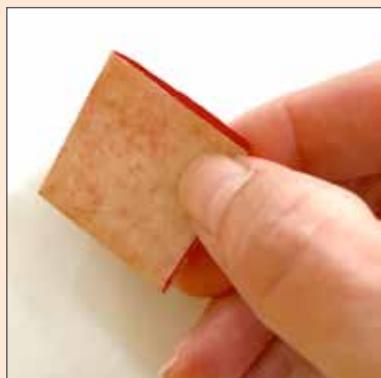
achar jars. These were to be presented to relatives and friends during the customary Chinese New Year tradition of visits.

I remember thinking that the gifts looked so 'high class' adorned with these auspicious chilli-red emblems of good luck. Even the Kim Hock Guan *bakwa* (barbecued sliced pork) box received a nice paper cut. All the effort put in was

an aesthetic expression of our appreciation to the recipients of our annual gifts. It was part of our Peranakan culture.

This tradition stopped after my marriage, when I moved to my own home in 1980. Perhaps finding the bird's nest box is my father's way of telling me to continue what we shared. •

## HOW TO CUT KERTAIR MERAH



**4** From these cuts....

**5** ...this elaborate pattern is unfolded.

**6** The simple beauty of the *kertair merah* is in the symmetry of design when unfolded.

# A Tradition Fit for an Emperor

BABA LEE YUEN THIEN TAKES ON *LIPAT KERTAIR* (PAPER FOLDING) FOR TI KONG'S BIRTHDAY

As every December approached, my grandmother, Bibik Lam Ah Moi would bring out *kim chua* (gold paper) that she had meticulously selected from the joss paper supplier. She would then sit for hours folding every sheet into various forms. At the sight of this I would know that preparations for the Lunar New Year had officially begun!

She would make sure every fold was perfect, piling the folded offerings neatly in a box. After school I would volunteer to 'help' her; she gave me the 'rejects' to play with.

Eventually, we would amass a few thousand pieces. She called them *Udang* (prawn), *Kapal* (boat) and *Kopiah* (hat) because of their resemblance to these objects. After such supreme effort, we would burn all the pieces as offerings in prayer (*semayang*) to the celestial Ti Kong (Jade Emperor) on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the New Year.

As I grew older, I took over the bulk of this interminable folding exercise. I remembered, out of tedium, asking her why we needed to fold with such perfection when everything would become ash later. I was gently chided, "Lu ingat ni main main? (You think this is for fun?). Ti Kong gets only the best!"

My grandmother is now 95 years old. Her *lipat kertair* ritual has become mine to continue. I no longer see it as a chore but more of a tradition and duty handed to me in good faith. •



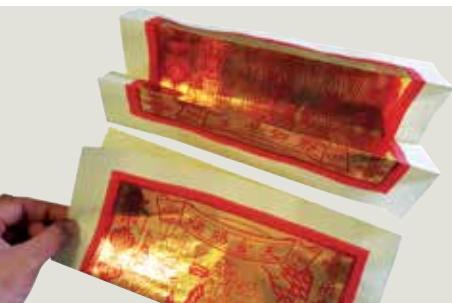
Top, Baskets of folded kim chua.

Right, Aflame to honour Ti Kong.

Below, The Kopiah (hat).



## FOLDING THE KAPAL (BOAT)



**1** Take two *kim chua* (gold paper) sheets. Fold the first sheet into half. Fold the second sheet into four as shown.



**2 & 3** Insert and interleave the first sheet neatly into the second sheet.



**4** Open the bottom sleeve of the folded paper.



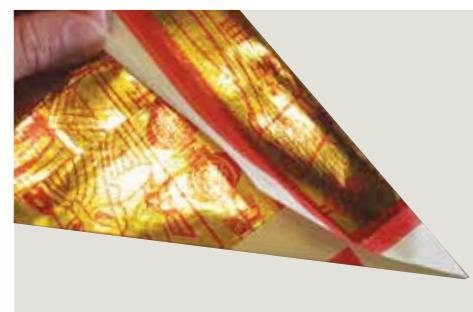
**5** Fold the end of the upper paper to form a triangle. Fold the other end in the same manner.



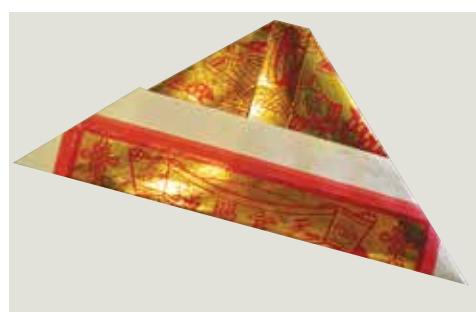
**6** Fold the bottom sleeve inwards.



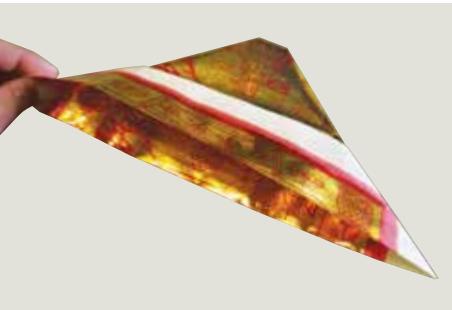
**7** Fold the sleeve opposite to form another triangle.



**8** Close the bottom sleeve.



**9** Repeat steps 9 to 11 on the other side, and you will get a somewhat triangular form.



**10** Open up the base of the triangle. Gently blow the opening at the tip.



The fully puffed up gold ingots.

# Next Generation Nyonyas

BABA EMERIC LAU DISCOVERS HOW TWO YOUNG LADIES WITH A PASSION FOR TEXTILES ARE INFUSING THEIR WORK WITH PERANAKAN-DERIVED TECHNIQUES

## CHERYL TEO, 22

Fashion graduate Cheryl Teo was a student of Nanyang Junior College, but she eschewed taking the typical route into one of Singapore's universities. Instead, buoyed by her passion for textile and design (and thankfully with the blessing of her family), she enrolled in LASALLE College of the Arts, where she graduated with a B.A. specialising in Fashion Textiles in May 2016.

Her expertise includes textile print designs, surface manipulation and embroidery. She loves bright and bold motifs, and cites European designer Mary Katrantzou as one of her inspirations. However, she isn't one to merely ape others. "I love relatively new techniques like digital printing and laser cutting, because they open up fresh possibilities for fabrication. I combine these processes with traditional methods which require handcrafting – and it's in that where you will see elements of *sulam* and other artisanal methods at play." Her experiments with techniques include thread sketching, eyelet making, satin stitches,



Young textile specialists Cheryl Teo (seated) and Devi Honami.

ribbon and *kerawang* or cutwork embroidery.

The fabric samples she totes along for her interview with *The Peranakan* reveal a love for intense, vibrant colour, much like those seen on *sarong kebaya*. A closer inspection reveals the inclusion of refined traditional techniques – evidence of a budding couturier at work.

Cheryl continues to experiment and refine her craft. She acknowledges certain parameters, "For digital printing, colours are best reproduced on 100% polyester, and there are width restrictions owing to the size of the printing press we can feed the fabric through. Still, I love how



Cheryl's textile design (middle) inspired by the traditional batik parang motif (above).



creating fashion textile designs allow me to express myself and tell a story through the work I produce.”

For her graduate collection, she collaborated with her classmate, pattern cutter Agnes Citto, and created a brand called ARYL CTTO. The collection features motifs derived by pixelating traditional batik patterns such as the Javanese *parang* motif. The pieces were well received both in Singapore and at the London Graduate Fashion Week, and can be viewed and pre-ordered at <http://arylctto.wixsite.com/fashion>. The duo’s pieces were even selected for a TANGS department store pop-up retail concept.

“If things go well, I may take the brand further and do it full time. Alternatively, I would love to work as a fashion textile designer in an established firm to gain more insight and experience.”

*An example of Devi's intricate handiwork.*

## DEVI HONAMI, 20

Fashion student Devi Honami is a second-year student at LASALLE College of the Arts. Originally from Surabaya, Indonesia, her family is involved in both hospitality and garment manufacturing. She decided on her course of studies on advice from her brother, and arrived in the Lion City two years ago, “I love how Singapore is so safe and clean, and public transport is very reliable and comfortable here.”

Devi reflects her strong appreciation for Peranakan motifs and craft in the pieces she has designed. “I want to raise more awareness of this South East Asian culture among my peers. It has been a journey to learn more about my roots as well. The younger generation needs to start appreciating and preserving this culture, because it is truly ours,” the self-identified *Tionghua* says.

She is also sensitive to the variations between regions, “Peranakans in Indonesia and Singapore have some similarities and also differences. I am learning and applying all the different techniques into my work.” Devi notes how items of diverse global origins, such as European lace, Indonesian batik, and Chinese colour palettes and motifs have come together to create the sarong kebaya we know today.

Devi experiments with *sulam* and beading techniques and is prolific at handiwork – flashing elaborate A4-sized handiwork samples, taking no longer than a couple of days to complete each item. She even managed to complete beading one *kasot manek* slipper face in just eight hours! She likes floral motifs, in particular those on *batik enchim*, but is content to work on a neutral white palette for the moment, refining her stitching skills, as she wishes to become an excellent embroiderer and beader first of all.

Devi eventually hopes to work with a designer like Peggy Hartanto, whose strong, clean lines and almost architectural construction of her garments belies the fact that the pieces employ traditional techniques and design inspirations. She shares, “I want to get adequate work experience and familiarise myself with the business side of things as well. It is my dream to one day start my own clothing brand in Jakarta.” ①

# For the Love of Leather

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE MEETS WITH A GROUP OF YOUNG MEN WHO REVIVE AN OLD CRAFT WITH PATIENCE AND PASSION

Long before the recent hipster movement came into vogue, Peranakans already had an appreciation for all things bespoke and beautiful. Elaborately customised designs were outward signs of status and success. It is not surprising then that Baba Joel Ong, 28, literally took things into his own hands when he could not find a leather item that was distinctively original.

Seven years ago, Joel (whose paternal grandmother is a nyonya in her 90s) was looking for a well-made, long leather wallet. He and his friends, Gary Chng, Clement Foo, Benny Tan and Ryan Choy (all 28), were avid fans of Japanese rock music and had formed a band called 79 Tribal Nation. Joel explains the unusual name, “79 because we loved eating Burger King’s Hershey’s Sundae Pie which weighed 79 grams. Tribal Nation because our style has Japanese and Native American influences.”

To complete their rocker look, they searched for long wallets with specific designs, but could not find

any in Singapore. “We found some online from overseas sellers, but they were either too expensive or were poorly made, so we decided to teach ourselves leather craft and create our own wallets,” says Joel.

*The members of 79 Tribal Nation. Left to right: Ryan Choy, Benny Tan, Gary Chng (centre), Joel Tan and Clement Foo (standing).*



Gary adds, “We are lucky that technology and the Internet have made valuable information easily available. What were once trade secrets are now shared online. Anyone who wants to learn leather craft can look it up and watch instructional YouTube videos. But to truly master leather craft, you must spend hours working with your hands, handling the leather and making mistakes. It’s a long process.”

After months of experimentation, pricked fingers and singed leather patches, the group was pleased with the results. Their leather wallets were so well made that they received many requests from friends. They decided to create a brand, TRIBUTE® by 79 Tribal Nation, to make bespoke leather items. Their client base has grown by word of mouth.

Today, 75% of their sales come from customers in Japan, Thailand and Taiwan. Long leather wallets and key pouches are most popular. The rest are orders from local clients for bespoke watchstraps, ladies’ and men’s bags, belts, passport holders and pouches. Most recently they produced a large order of bags for a well-known online retailer.

## 100% handmade in Singapore

All the items are fully made in Singapore by themselves. Theirs is a conscious decision to hand stitch everything instead of using sewing machines. “Hand-stitched leather is stronger. It’s less likely to come apart even after years of use. A well-made leather bag or wallet is always special and loved. You will want it to last a long time,” explains Clement.

The young artisans initially worked with cow leather when they started TRIBUTE®, but have since expanded their range to include goat, lambskin and even exotic leathers such as crocodile and python. “Because our items are handmade from start to finish, our clients have control over the design, size, colour and even the type of hardware on an item. Typically, we take 20 hours to complete a watchstrap and 40-50 hours to make a clutch bag. We have also custom dyed leather ourselves to get an exact shade that our client wanted,” says Gary. He adds, “Personally, I prefer to work with vegetable tan leather as it ages with a beautiful patina.”

The group has even made bags with intricate manek (beadwork) panels for local nyonyas and Japanese clients. “This year was the first time we were asked to craft bags

with beadwork panels. I remember my grandmother wearing similar beaded slippers,” says Joel. He adds, “I was surprised and awed at the amount of work that goes into beading such items. It is an honour that we were trusted to turn such intricate handwork into bags. We made sure that we put the same amount of care and detail into our work. The result is a fully handmade, one-of-a-kind bag.”

### Turning passion into profit

With the exception of Benny (who has a job in finance) the rest of the group make a living from their work with leather. They have been able to turn their passion into profit.

Last year, they moved from a 350 square feet shop space in Beach Road to a 1,800 sq ft workshop in Sembawang. They also run a web and design services business, TRIPOD® by 79 Tribal Nation, to supplement their income.

Speaking candidly, they reveal that they do not make “big money” right now, but have been able to cover expenses and draw a sustainable income for each member of the group. These are not rich kids doing it as a hobby. All of them come from modest family backgrounds. Their parents include a delivery driver, shipyard worker and a mechanic.

Gary explains, “Most of us have been friends for 15 years, since we met in Naval Base Secondary School. We understand and trust one another. We each had different jobs after graduating from polytechnic, but we decided to focus on our leatherwork and do it full-time. It gives us a great sense of satisfaction, and we are determined to make our business succeed.”

For the past two years, the group has been invited to participate in Kimono Kollab, a design initiative spearheaded by Noriko Collins and veteran fashion consultant, Daniel Boey. Each designer was asked to create items using vintage kimono fabric. The

*A manek clutch in dove grey saffiano leather made for a Japanese lady who had beaded the panel herself.*



*Right, Punching holes by hand before stitching.*

*Below, A gold saffiano leather clutch with vintage obi fabric made for a local client.*



project saw creations by iconic Singapore fashion designer, Thomas Wee, kebaya maker Heath Yeo, as well as other

upcoming local designers exhibited and sold at Takashimaya.

Says Benny, “The response to our products in Kimono Kollab was quite good. It also gave us exposure to the fashion world and a different aesthetic. This helped us to diversify the style of products we craft.”

Recently, the group began conducting leather craft workshops where participants are taught to make their own cardholders or passport covers by hand.

When asked about their future plans, they are optimistic. “We are all committed to what we do. We are constantly learning different techniques to improve our work and we want to grow the business,” says Gary. Benny adds, “Each of us brings different strengths to the business. For example, although I currently have a job in finance, I’m learning skills that will help the group with business planning and financial management.” Joel concludes, “I have to admit that in the past, I’ve not really asked my nyonya grandmother much about Peranakan culture, but since we worked on those beaded bags, it has made me want to re-discover the old crafts. There is so much we can learn from the past for our future.” ■

*The group can be reached at: contact@79tribalnation.com*

*An embossed leather pouch and cardholder, and a vegetable tan leather pouch, all with beaded accents.*



# In Search of My Kong Kong

BABA NORMAN CHO SEARCHES FOR HIS PATERNAL ROOTS IN THE BUKIT BROWN CEMETERY AND CONNECTS WITH NEW MEMBERS OF HIS EXTENDED FAMILY

During Cheng Beng, the Chinese tomb-sweeping festival, my family and I visit the tombs of my maternal ancestors every year. However, we had never visited any ancestral tombs from my father's side. My curiosity was aroused. According to my grandmother, my paternal grandfather, Cho Kim Leong (1902 – 1945) was buried in the Bukit Brown Cemetery, but she could not recall the exact location of his grave.

News of the government's plan in 2011 to exhume a portion of the graves at Bukit Brown gave me the opportunity to locate my grandfather's grave. Based on his date of death, I trawled through the Bukit Brown Burial Registry at the National Archives to determine the grave plot which Singapore's "Tomb-Whisperer", Raymond Goh, used in locating the grave. It was an unmarked grave and there was no tombstone. As his death on 16 December 1945 came just a few months after World War Two, my penniless, widowed grandmother had no means to construct a tomb for him. He was left forgotten for more than 66 years.

In May 2012, more than six decades after his death, I constructed a tomb for my Kong Kong (grandfather) and became the first person to visit his grave in all that time.

Not much was known about Cho Kim Leong. Most of the family members who lived during his time had passed on. My dad lost his father when he was only 10 years old and

*Photo courtesy of Richard Brockett.*



*The Cho Boon Poo family, circa 1926.*

did not have many memories of him. To discover the man, I had to interview his eldest living child then – my 89-year old aunt Rose Cho. I obtained the name of his father (Cho Poo) from aunt Rose shortly before she died and was fortunate to retrieve some results from the newspaper archives. These gave me clues about his childhood.

My Kong Kong was born into a wealthy Malaccan Peranakan family at 84, Hereo Street in 1902. His father, Cho Boon Poo (Cho Poo), was a plantation owner of tapioca, gambier and rubber who had once owned 5,000 acres of tapioca in Seremban during 1890s. My Kong Kong was the third son and had four brothers. While his eldest brother managed his father's business in Seremban, Kong Kong managed the rubber plantation in Johore which he eventually inherited in 1935. He married at the



age of 20 in 1922. That marriage brought him three children. Alas, his blissful family life was short-lived when his wife of 12 years passed away at the young age of 28 in 1934. Needing a life companion, he decided to re-marry.

A family friend introduced him to a young nyonya from Singapore, Yeo Koon Neo (1913-1995) my grandmother. They were married in 1934 and settled in Malacca. They had two sons. Grandmother dreaded life in the sleepy hollow that Malacca was known as. When her mother-in-law passed away, she persuaded Kong Kong to resettle in Singapore in 1936, close to her own family.

The family moved into a modest bungalow at 421, Joo Chiat Road. Unfortunately, World War Two soon broke out and Singapore came under Japanese Occupation in 1942. Grandmother's extended family of 13 came to stay with them. Kong Kong became the sole provider. With commodities rising at black-market prices, his money was fast running out.

In May 1945, he reluctantly sold the rubber estates, not knowing that the war was about to end. When the war ended, he had lost his inheritance and was left with heaps of worthless Japanese Banana banknotes. The frail man died broken-hearted in December 1945. His penniless widow, with two young sons in tow, hurriedly buried

him and left. Writing about Kong Kong and my experiences to uncover my family history in the Bukit Brown Blog has helped me to keep his memory alive. It was most rewarding when an unknown relative from Australia made contact with me after reading my stories. He shared a portrait of Cho Poo's family, taken in 1922 in the family home in Malacca. It is the only known image of them.

Another unknown relative from Australia also contacted me. He flew into Singapore in 2014. More clues to Cho Poo's tomb in Malacca were uncovered from an aunt who last visited it over 50 years ago. Using these clues, I found the site within a week! In June 2014, we paid our respects to the patriarch of the Cho clan. ▶

*This article is adapted from Norman's story in the book, **World War II Bukit Brown**, published by the Singapore Heritage Society and Ethos Books. Read a review of this book on page 29.*

Want to know more about Bukit Brown? All Things Bukit Brown conducts free guided walks on weekends, including Peranakan-themed walks. For more information, please follow **Bukit Brown Events** on Peatix at URL: <http://peatix.com/group/16067#>. For groups of 15 persons or more, please email [a.t.bukitbrown@gmail.com](mailto:a.t.bukitbrown@gmail.com).



## Tiles

# PERANAKAN TILES

If you appreciate the beauty of Peranakan art, here's a way to preserve it. Aster by Kyra is ready to adorn your home, whether your walls or furniture, with these decades-old tiles that feature exquisite motifs of birds and flowers commonly found in old Peranakan homes.

Aster by Kyra recovers original Peranakan tiles from old buildings, and restores them to be sold individually or as wall features. Customisation of these tiles are also welcomed.



168 Telok Ayer Street,  
Singapore 068619  
[www.asterbykyra.sg](http://www.asterbykyra.sg)  
Tel: 6684 8600  
Open daily from 12pm to 5pm



# From Arabia with Love

MARRIED TO A SAUDI, TERESA LOW (OR YASMIN, HER NAME IN ARABIC) REDISCOVERS HER PERANAKAN ROOTS AFTER A HIATUS OF NEARLY 40 YEARS. NYONYA LINDA CHEE CATCHES UP WITH YASMIN, WHO IS HER SECOND COUSIN, IN MELAKA.

*Nyonya Teresa Low was a pretty, vivacious stewardess flying with Gulf Airlines in 1979. Ghassan, a handsome, genteel Arab pilot, was smitten when he first saw her. After a seven-year courtship, she finally said yes to him in 1986. They raised six children in the industrial city of Yanbu in Saudi Arabia, losing all contact with her Peranakan relatives.*

## Q1. Yasmin, what do you remember about your Peranakan childhood growing up in Melaka?

A1. Quite a bit. Festivals like Chinese New Year, early mornings visiting my paternal grandparents, going through the rituals of wishing the eldest to the youngest and of course, receiving *angpows*, which was the highlight of the day!! Next came the Peranakan food - *pongteh*, *popiah*, *kueh bangkit*, love letters, *achar*, curry captain....yummy.

I remember vividly the blue, green, and yellow nyonyaware taken out for use at the family gatherings. We chatted in the Baba Malay that I used to love listening to, as the sounds were so lilting and comforting.

We used to have loads of family gatherings in my Uncle Hock Hoon's house where the grown-ups chatted, played mahjong or cherki. We, the kids, ran amok around the house. In Singapore we gathered at my Uncle Louis and Aunty Suan Neo's house or my Uncle Hock Siew and Aunty Rosie's house. Those were the days.



## Q2. When did you start reminiscing about life in Melaka?

A2. I have lived away from Melaka for 37 years while raising my family in Yanbu. Sad to say that when I visited my mother in Melaka I did not have much contact with the family. I started missing my roots after my second child was born because I was wishing that they could get to know about the Peranakan culture.

*The ladies with their new sarong kebayas in Melaka. From left: Basmah, 23, a software engineer; Naamah, 21, a physics undergraduate; mother Yasmin; Marwah, 17, in her last year in high school; and Zeinah, 20, an information systems undergraduate. Not in the photo are Mohamed, 13, a grade 8 student; and husband, Ghassan. The eldest daughter, Nismah, 29, is married. She is a surgeon in Jeddah.*





The family on holiday in Malaysia.

**Q3. How did you retain your fluency in Baba Malay after all these years?**

A3. I guess it is all etched in my mind. Being around my extended Peranakan family again after not seeing them for nearly 40 years just brought it back to the surface.



Grand daughter Aya, age 3.

**Q4. When did your children start becoming aware of their Peranakan culture?**

A4. It was difficult to bring any semblance of my culture to my family growing up. We were living in a totally different culture. My children realised they had another side to themselves in Asia when we went back to Malaysia for the summer vacation in 2015. They were so excited and happy to meet with their mother's people in Melaka: the Lows, Tans, Chees, Seets, Yeos, so many! Everyone got on quite famously. Not surprising, my *kepala pusing* - who is connected to who, which side...

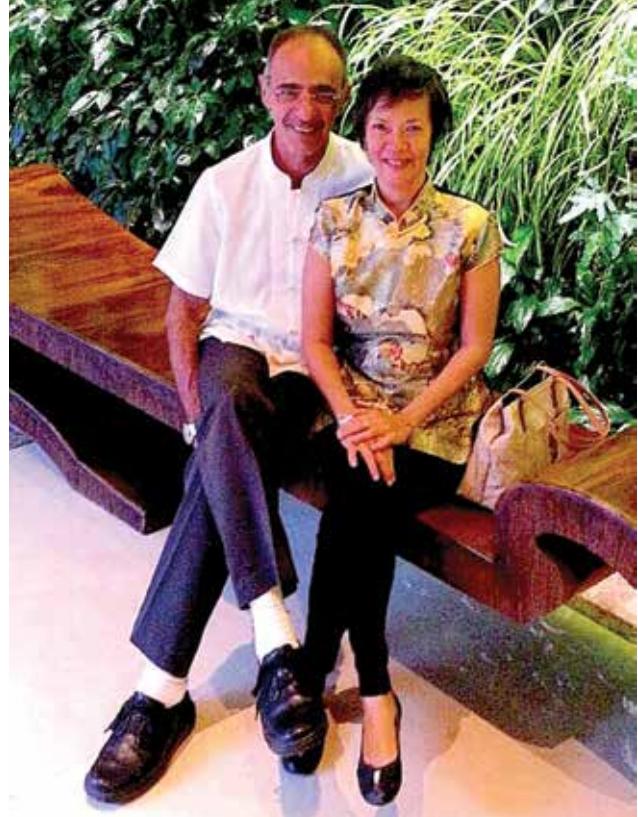
At our second homecoming this year, we felt so much more at ease and as if we had known each other for a long time. I felt a little sad for all the lost years. Better late than never, I guess. My children are now connected to their Peranakan cousins on mobile chats.

**Q5. What are the differences and similarities of Arab and Peranakan culture? Is it any different for you bringing up your children the Arab way, in Yanbu?**

A5. The love of food is the same. The basics of bringing up children are the same. Life in Yanbu is not that different from the rest of the world. The lifestyle is just as advanced, with the uniqueness of



Banana boating in Dubai.



Yasmin and Ghassan in Singapore this year. He retired last year as an engineer with oil MNC, Aramco.

Islamic shariah religion blended into it. We live in a five-bedroom bungalow with a swimming pool and an indoor garden due to the high temperatures. We have huge shopping malls, everything is there.

The girls are accomplished divers. They love the sea. We make it a point to travel out as a family to expose them to other cultures.

**Q6. How are you and your family building on your Peranakan roots?**

A6. This second trip we started building up our wardrobes with *sarong kebayas* and *baju lokchuan!* My girls love their colourful *kebayas*. My grand-daughter gets one too! ☺

# An Instinct for Cooking

BABA COLIN CHEE REVIEWS A LABOUR OF LOVELY RECIPES AND ANECDOTES BY ONG JIN TEONG

I enjoyed browsing through this book by Jin Teong. I plan to spend more time carefully mining it for his many personal stories and observations, cooking tips, and traditional ways of preparing Penang *kuehs* and snacks.

This is a hefty 275-page hardcover on how to prepare nyonya *kueh* and dishes like *kiam chai ark* (salted veggie duck soup). Running parallel to Jin Teong's description of his wife's second auntie's recipes, are his descriptions of traditional kitchen utensils and how they were used to prepare the dinner feasts and desserts we were once familiar with.

The book is well conceptualised. It is as much a recipe book as a nostalgic personal journey into Penang's foodscape. It is well designed and illustrated with luscious and unpretentious photos of *kueh kueh* and kitchen utensils like *daching* and homemade coconut scrapers!

Let's start with the recipes. They originate from the late Nyonya Lim Say Choo, Jin Teong's mentor for nyonya *kueh* and his wife's Jee Chim or second aunt.

Says Jin Teong: "Jee Chim did not write down her recipes... (and her) instinctive method of cooking made the process of recording and fine-tuning the recipes a long and challenging one." Aren't we all familiar with this *agak agak* style of nyonya home cooking and baking?

Not surprisingly, the book has been many years in the baking (so to speak) and is dedicated to the memory of Say Choo, who passed on in 2014.

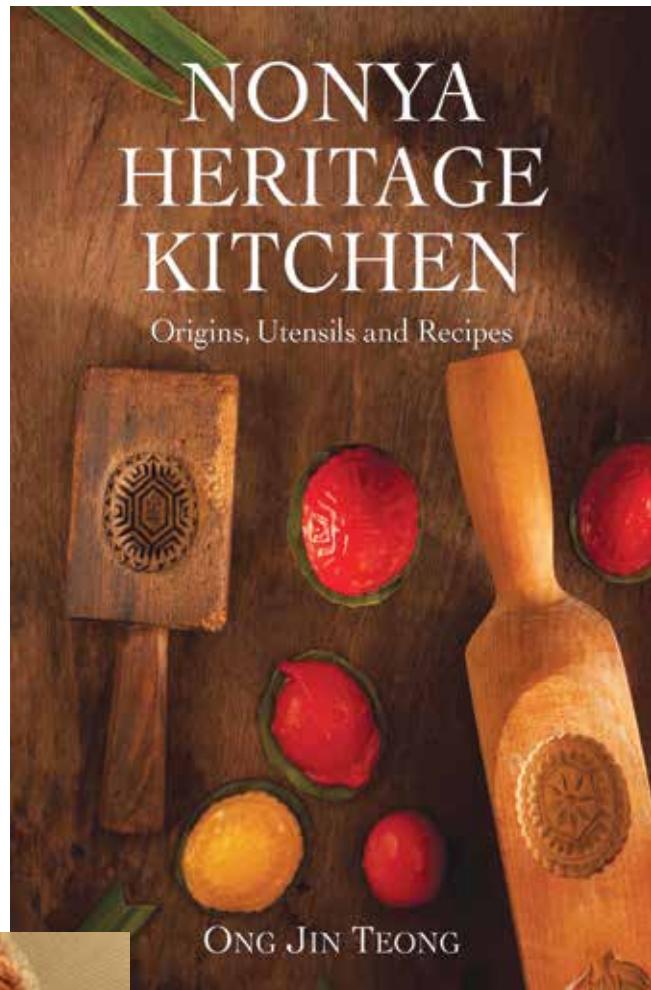
You will find many recipes for the usual assortment of *kueh kueh* and snacks like *kuith kosui*, *ondeh ondeh*, *nyonya chang*, *bubur cha cha*, *ang koo kueh*, *apong balek*, *sugee cake* and many others.

There are also recipes for what I would describe as possibly quintessentially Penang *kueh* and snacks. These include grilled *jui hu*, *acar awak*, *ice ball*, *kueh kochi*, *sesargon* (sugared desiccated coconut), *ban chian koay* (crispy peanut pancake) and *cheak bee soh* (vegetable puffs) amongst others.

For the main *makan makan* recipes, we have *satay*, *nasi kunyit*, lamb or chicken curry, *kiam chyai ark* and steamboat.

I found useful tips like how to break open a coconut or extract its refreshing water.

I was recently given a husked nut to cut open for



Scraping the coconut flesh with a traditional wooden scraper.

the water inside. I tried some pretty imaginative manoeuvres with all manner of tools. I wish I had read this book then, to look like an old expert as much as I am an old uncle. We 'modern' folks have gotten so used to having our coconut water delivered to us in a bottle or iced glass!

Here is what Jin Teong says: "Take a *parang* or chopper. Lop off the top of the coconut where the stalk is, which is also the fatter side of the coconut and the softest part of the shell.

"Here you will see the three markings that look like two eyes and a mouth. Use a chopper or a small knife to make a hole near the mouth to extract the water." *Senang, lah!*

If this has not got you ready to go and buy the book, I don't know what will! ☺

Published in 2016 by Landmark Books.

# A Memoir 90 years in the Making

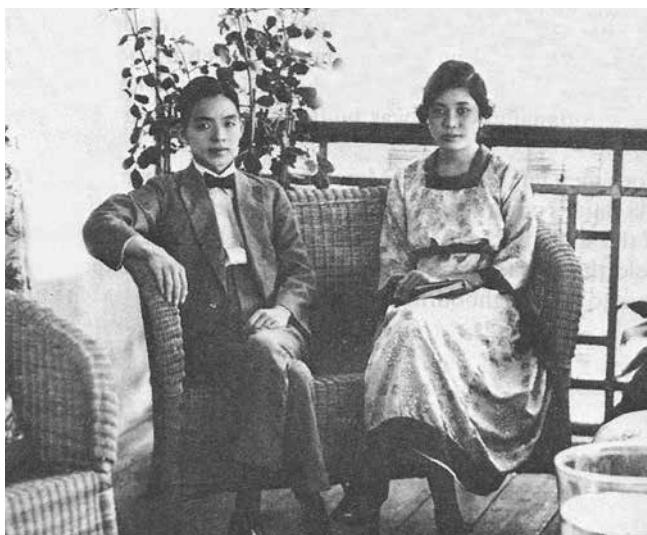
QUEENY CHANG'S LIFE AND TIMES MAKE FOR AN ENgrossing READ, AS BABA COLIN CHEE REVEALS

This is a second re-print of the late Queeny Chang's biography first published in 1980.

Queeny lived almost a century from 1896 to 1986. Her life spanned a period that arguably traces the pinnacle of the Peranakan community and its culture under Dutch and British rule respectively in Indonesia and the Straits Settlements. It also crossed into the Peranakans' rapid decline after the Japanese Occupation in the first half of the 1940s.

If ever there is a local equivalent of *The Great Gatsby*, the 1925 novel by F Scott Fitzgerald, this could be it.

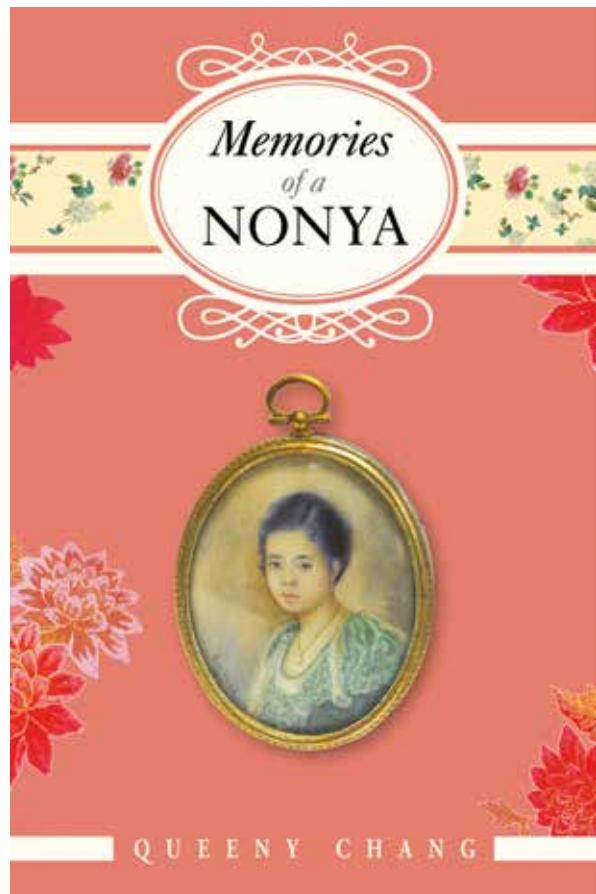
Of course I exaggerate. But Queeny's easy-reading, rich and fascinating biography gives the reader invaluable glimpses of a woman's lot in an extended



The author and her husband at their home in Medan.



Queeny with a copy of the original book.



Chinese family with geographic ties in Medan, Penang and Singapore.

There are many take-aways from the book for me. The first that struck me is carried in the book's early pages. Page 24 describes her father's ambition to escape the tough living in China to seek his fortune in Nanyang.

*"All passengers, young and old, had different destinations and different trades. But they had one common aim – to seek a fortune. Some old-timers who had already settled down in various parts of the new world, like Borneo, Java, Malaya, Singapore and Sumatra, had many stories to tell about the hardships they had to endure before attaining what they now held – money earned with blood and sweat... My father listened to their stories with eagerness. He knew that even in the land of golden dreams, one could not succeed without hard work. Money did not grow on trees ready for the picking; the tree itself had to be cultivated first before it could bear fruit."*

In our rosy taken-for-granted Singapore, how easy it is for our young to assume that everything will go their way without ever having to lift a finger. Such are the 'strawberries', molly-coddled from the time they are plucked off the forbs to the time they are delivered to the supermarkets of the real world and then easily bruised.

There is much about *Memories of a Nonya* that merit mention in any review. I will refrain from doing that.

Instead, I highly commend the book to our readers, and even to our schools if they have not yet included it in their reading lists or even as part of their school's curriculum. ①

Published in 2016 by Marshall Cavendish International (Asia).

# The Colourful Life

BABA COLIN CHEE SHARES THE JOY OF VIBRANT PERANAKAN LIVING

This is an imaginative book.

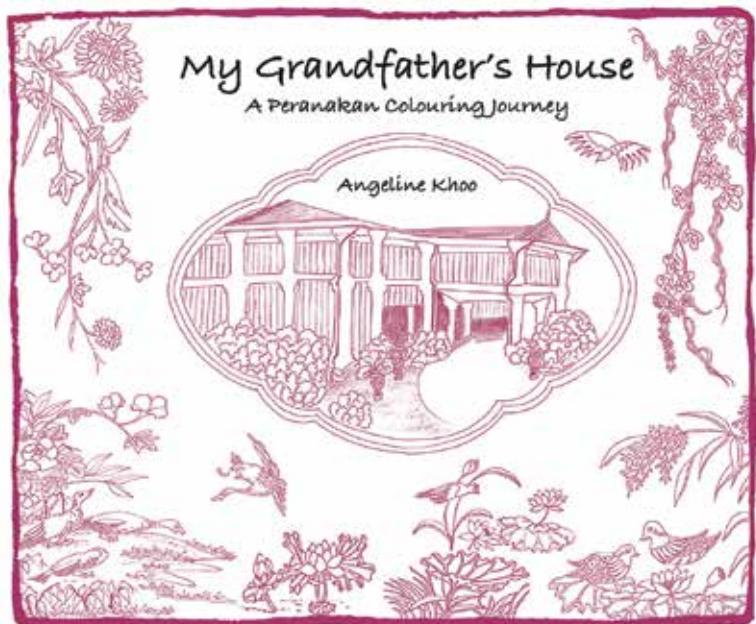
*My Grandfather's House* is actually a colouring book but formatted in a clever and charming way.

Its pages lead you into the lives of the author's grandparents lived out in a sprawling bungalow. Angeline takes you first through the front gates into the garden, then through the hall and bedrooms, and finally to the bungalow's courtyard and kitchen.

The unpainted drawings are of items and motifs found in objects in various corners of the family home.

It is an interesting way to learn a little about the Peranakan way of life and their material culture, while at the same time adding hues and shades to them according to your fancy. ♦

Published in 2016 by Marshall Cavendish International (Asia).



NYA NYA

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## THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE



Portraits of Tan Keong Saik by Alvin Ong, 2012  
Images courtesy of the artist



208 East Coast Road Singapore 428907  
Tel: 63458544 Fax: 63451220

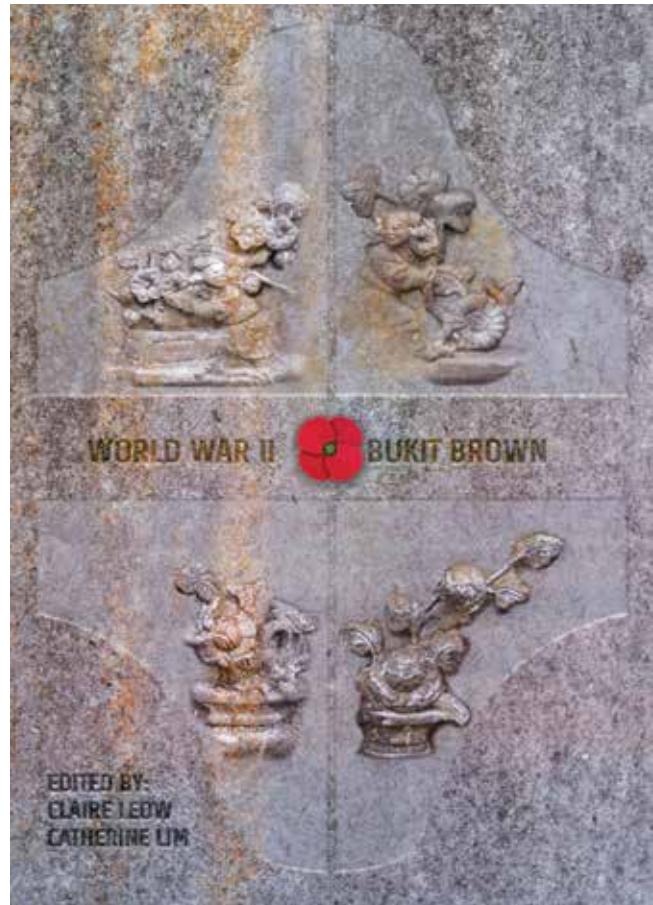
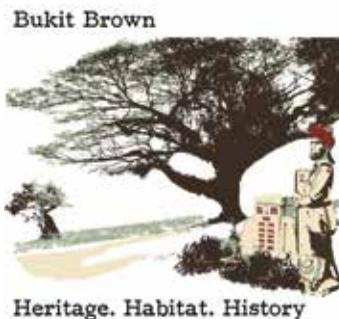
# An Ancestral Anthology

BABA COLIN CHEE UNCOVERS TALES OF COURAGE IN THE FACE OF WAR

This book is a fascinating read. It is an anthology of stories largely written by descendants of people buried in Bukit Brown. The stories are about Bukit Brown and also Singapore during World War Two.

Editors of the book, Claire Leow and Catherine Lim, are co-founders of the advocacy group, All Things Bukit Brown. They have achieved an admirable task putting together a compilation that is not just informative but also sometimes intense, tragic, hopeful and compassionate.

As the editors wrote in their Note: “*We are not historians or academics; what we as a community endeavour to do is to reflect the stories from the ground, and allow the voices of ordinary people to be heard,*



*in their own words. Descendants have entrusted their stories to us, and we have chosen to present them in this book to safeguard their memories but also to reach out to members of the public to help families flesh out their stories.”*

Dr Chua Ai Lin, the current President of the Singapore Heritage Society, wrote in her Foreword to the book: “*Bukit Brown remains the largest cemetery in Singapore for the war dead in situ, and there are many untold stories of bravery, resilience, tragedy, survival and, amid the darkness, hope... This book offers new material and insights into the human tragedy of war...”*

It certainly has. The book germinated when the National Heritage Board invited *All Things Bukit Brown* to include their war-themed guided walks as part of the annual nation-wide World War Two commemoration in February next year (2017).

It is a gallery of untold stories - some lovingly and even painfully crafted as memorials to lost family members, some told matter-of-factly about the war, and some perhaps fated coincidences like the one that led to collaborations between our Singapore explorers and a determined Scottish battlefield archeologist. ■

*Published by Singapore Heritage Society and Ethos Books.*

# Threading Heritage: Nyonya Needlework

BABA JOHN TEO, GENERAL MANAGER OF THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM, SHARES HIS TEAM'S REFLECTIONS ON THE NYONYA NEEDLEWORK EXHIBITION, NOW ON UNTIL 26 MARCH 2017

**A**bout five years ago, the museum engaged guest curator Cheah Hwei-sen, who has researched nyonya needlework extensively and is a foremost scholar on the subject. Under her guidance, the assembled exhibition of some 200 objects presents the richness and diversity of nyonya needlework, including rare examples such as those made with the drawn-thread technique.

Painstakingly hand-stitched from millions of tiny cut glass beads, and lavishly embroidered with gold and silk threads, these works of art reflect how Peranakan communities incorporated the varied cultural influences they encountered. More importantly, the pieces are manifestations of the values of openness, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. This is particularly important for a multi-racial society such as Singapore, where for centuries communities have experienced exchanges brought about by trade, colonisation and other forms of intermingling.

Peranakan needlework often borrowed and 'translated' designs and techniques from the Malay world, for both embroidery (termed interchangeably as *sulam* or *suji* in Malaysia and Indonesia) and



beadwork (referred to in Baba Malay as *sulam manek*). The overlaps in regional styles convey a shared sense of identity; at the same time, this diversity expresses their local connections. Indeed, in the absence of clear provenance, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish whether pieces are nyonya or Malay, since the traditions were so widespread, dynamic and closely interrelated.

*Embroidered panel. Malacca or Singapore, late 19th century. This piece may have been produced by professional embroiderers who worked with different colours and materials to create variety in otherwise formulaic designs.*

We are fortunate that Singapore holds the largest public collection of nyonya needlework – the result of more than 30 years of collecting by the museums. This is complemented by loans of some of the earliest documented pieces, from the Rijksmuseum and the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands. We also borrowed some spectacular pieces from private collectors. Together, these help us to tell a more complete story of nyonya needlework from Indonesia and the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore.

The Peranakan Chinese in Southeast Asia are part of a dynamic, multicultural and multi-ethnic world. Our material culture is a reflection of this hybridism and cross-fertilization. We hope visitors will enjoy the refinement and details of this cross-cultural art form. ☺

*Guided tours of the Nyonya Needlework exhibition are available. Please email Nyonya Khong Swee Lin (TPAS Committee member and also a docent for the Peranakan Museum) at: sweelinkhong@yahoo.com*



*Woman's ankle boots. Java, late 19th century. Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee. These boots are embroidered with traditional Chinese auspicious symbols, but their shape follows European boots fashionable in the 1880s.*

# Port Cities: Multicultural Emporiums of Asia

BABA PETER LEE CURATES A NEW EXHIBITION  
AT THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

Traders and migrants, jewellery and multi-coloured cottons, languages and commerce – port cities mix people, merchandise and ideas. This exhibition spotlights the lives of people, the networks of migrant communities across Asia, the distribution of goods, and the array of outcomes when different people meet.

The various themes are explored through photographs, paintings, fashion, luxury goods and everyday objects. Disembark at ACM for a view of hybrid cultures, ingenuity and early global trends in these cosmopolitan centres, and how Peranakan art and Singapore as a multi-cultural city actually have very old historical antecedents in Asia. •

ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM  
4 November 2016 to 19 February, 2017  
Daily, 10 am to 7pm, Friday, 10 am to 9pm  
Singaporeans and PRs: \$6, Foreigners: \$15  
Website: <http://acm.org.sg/>



Above: A Brahmin woman. Goa was perhaps the first city where the cultures of Europe and Asia mixed in such an intense manner. The result was a complex and sophisticated hybrid culture, expressed in the fashions of this woman from Goa, portrayed in an oil painting from the late 18th century. Private Collection, Portugal



Above: An inner robe made of luxurious, imported Indian cotton chintz from the Coromandel Coast for a Japanese gentleman of the Edo period (17th or 18th century). This robe has never been displayed outside of Japan. Matsuzakaya Collection, Japan

Left: Woman in a rocking chair. A painting in oil on canvas by Jan Daniël Beijnen, painted in Batavia, 1869. This enigmatic portrait of a young Eurasian lady in a sarong kebaya by one of the most well-known Eurasian artists of Batavia, expresses the complexity and refinement of port city life in the late 19th century. Jan Veenendaal collection

# Life with Music and Food

NYONYA NGIAM MAY LING RECORDS MUSICIAN LYNNETTE SEAH'S ALTER EGO

**V**iolinist Lynnette Seah needs no introduction in the world of classical music. Awarded the Cultural Medallion for Music in 2006, the co-concertmaster and founding member of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) strives to inspire the musicians to play to the best of their ability.

While music provides Lynnette with emotional fulfilment and nurtures her soul, she also believes in nourishing her body, and she does this with her cooking. As a child, daily, Lynnette would be ensconced in a room with only a clock and her violin and piano for company, and would not be allowed out of the room until she had practised the violin and the piano for at least an hour each.

After this ascetic ritual, she would be allowed free rein in the kitchen. She started out with pounding chillies and graduated to more difficult tasks over time, her progress in the kitchen matched only by the rate at which her ability to play the violin and piano improved.

She gladly attributes much of her prowess in the kitchen today to the innumerable practice sessions, and to the influence of her Peranakan great aunt, a nyonya who had married into the Seah family.

Through Lynnette's Kitchen, her private dining service, Lynnette has prepared dinner for scores of people. Friends who were enamoured with her cooking thought it deserving of a wider audience and had convinced her to start a private dining service. The Peranakan menu is a favourite amongst diners, typically comprising *buah keluak* fried rice, *assam fish*, *babi pongteh* and *beef rendang*.

As the year of the Rooster is almost upon us, Lynnette shares her favourite dish here. •



## REBONG LEMAK

(Chicken with bamboo shoots and coconut milk)

1 kg chicken, cut into pieces  
500 gm organic fresh bamboo shoots  
1 packet coconut milk  
1 litre chicken stock  
3 tbsp raw sugar  
3 tsp sea salt

*Rempah* (finely pounded into a paste)  
12 slices fresh galangal  
1 thumb size fresh turmeric  
15 shallots  
7 cloves garlic  
4 dried chillies (soaked in hot water, deseeded and chopped)  
10 buah keras (candlenuts)  
1 tbsp belachan  
2 tbsp coriander powder  
1/2 tbsp white pepper  
2 stalks lemongrass (remove white part of stalks)



Heat a big wok, add 120ml rice bran oil. When hot, fry the *rempah* for 2 mins till fragrant. Stir in 1 tsp salt and 2 tbsp raw sugar, followed by chicken pieces and bamboo shoots (sliced). Add stock and coconut milk. Season to taste with salt and sugar. Stir and simmer for 25 mins.

# A Nanyang Sojourn

BABA EMERIC LAU SPENDS AN EVENING WITH THE SINGAPORE CHINESE ORCHESTRA (SCO)

**W**ith its vision to be a “world renowned Chinese orchestra with a uniquely Singaporean character”, it is indeed fitting that the SCO decided on a Peranakan theme for a concert in celebration of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In collaboration with Baba Dick Lee, the SCO presented a world premiere oratorio on 4 November 2016. The Journey of Lee Kan traces the story of Dick’s ancestor who arrived in Melaka and made his fortune, before returning to Yong Chun, his home village in China.

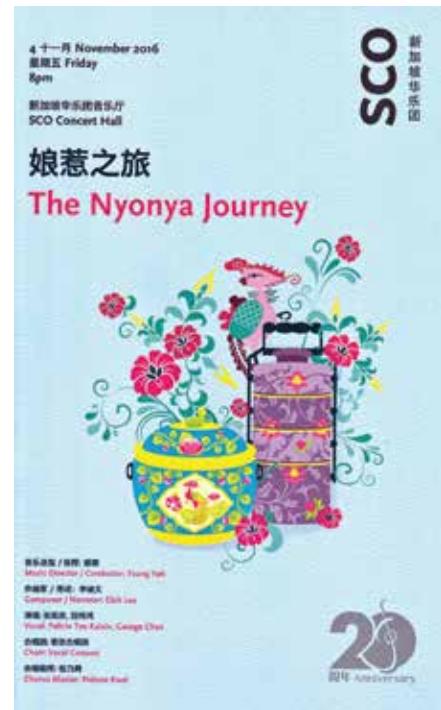
Comprising four parts, the evening began with Conductor Tsung Yeh deftly navigating the orchestra through performances of musical pieces all inspired by Peranakan culture. Entitled *Colours, Tok Panjang* and *Celebration of Faith*, the compositions were mesmerising and felt at times to be grand immersive soundscapes – lyrical distillations of cross-cultural musical motifs. Of particular note was the placing of selected musicians amongst the audience for *Celebration of Faith*, from which a band of six percussionists paraded across the hall, evoking the mood of a Peranakan wedding procession.

Dick’s composition featured Tenor George Chan and Soprano Felicia Teo Kaixin, ably playing the roles of Lee Kan and his Malacca wife Tuan Neo respectively, along with choir, The Vocal Consort.

As narrator, Dick spoke of how Lee Kan, once a new immigrant from China, found favour with a successful Melaka businessman, went on to make his own fortune, and eventually

married the man’s daughter! He affectionately dubbed his ancestor the “first Mad Chinaman”. I couldn’t help but hear shades of Dick’s musical, *Forbidden City*, during the overtures and in some musical interludes. Nonetheless, the poetic lyrics proved to be a heartfelt and elegiac tribute to his Peranakan heritage and roots.

As the evening ended with curtain calls and rapturous applause, I came away with the reflection that the SCO was, in a way, a descendant of Lee Kan – Chinese at heart, but very much open to exploring the wider world. Long may its works continue to evolve and inspire. ■



# Our Nippon Nyonya Fans

PERANAKAN CULTURE IS GARNERING INTEREST IN THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN, REPORTS MIKI TAMPO

Tokyo was treated to a number of Peranakan events over the summer of 2016! Most notably, in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of Singapore-Japan Diplomatic Relations (SJ50), a *Sarong Kebaya Exhibition* was staged at Shoto Museum, Shibuya, curated by Peter Lee with the generous donation of antique pieces by Mr Lee Kip Lee and the late Mrs Lee. Another *Peranakan Exhibition* was held on 5-7 August at Shinbashi, organised by the ASEAN-Japan Centre, and of which I am proud to have played a part.

My first book, *Malay Peninsula – The Beautiful Realm of Peranakans*, had attracted a strong following among Japanese. Many Japanese travel magazines and guidebooks started writing about the culture. My talks were also very popular. I was delighted when the ASEAN Centre requested my assistance to organise a Peranakan-themed event.

Most of the fans of Peranakan culture are ladies. I believe the bright Peranakan colours which are

somewhat feminine are a big attraction, as they sync well with Japanese *kawaii* culture. The ladies are especially drawn to the handicraft such as *sulam* (embroidery). We now have *manek* and *sulam* classes in Japan.

*The Peranakan Exhibition in Shinbashi, Tokyo, was organised by the ASEAN-Japan Centre.*

Our exhibition comprised talks, workshops and displays. Kyoko Shirota, who has a collection of Pekalongan batiks, used to be a docent for the National Museum Singapore. She runs a group called Kumpul for batik lovers. Kyoko contributed 20 examples of Pekalongan Buketan batiks, including some fine pieces by Eliza van Zuylen.

Another exhibitor was Sachiko Shimoyamada, who brought *manek* shoes and other bead embroideries, and also held two workshops. She has visited Singapore many times and learned the art during a trip in 2008. She designs her own patterns and teaches many students in Japan. Her works are popular, and she is collaborating with a major Japanese online craft shop to sell her DIY kits for nyonya bead embroidery!

A Peranakan food lover, Chef Hiroko Hiraoka, also joined us. Hiroko used to live in Singapore and learned Singapore cooking over 30 years. She runs a cosy restaurant called *Makan Makan* in Kanagawa Prefecture. It is not easy to get the right ingredients for nyonya cuisine in Tokyo. Herbs such as *bunga kantan* and *daon kesom* are not available; even ‘normal’ chillies common in ASEAN are scarce.

My co-writer, Chie Iwasaki, and I arranged the displays of nyonya ware, *sarong kebayas* (provided





*Sachiko Shimoyamada (middle) teaching beading to eager students.*



*Miki Tampo (left) and Chie Iwasaki conducted two seminars covering our culture, history and the variety and diversity of Peranakan cuisine.*



*Chef Hiroko Hiraoka (right) held two cooking workshops. Her menu comprised ang ku kueh and bubor kachang for dessert, pineapple gulai and her original sambal tuna sandwich. She also brought homemade achar for everyone to sample.*



*All photos by Yusuke Abe.*

by Kim Fashion, Penang), and a photo-exhibition by the award-winning photographer Yusuke Abe. We also organised two seminars. Many Japanese are not familiar with the terms “Peranakan” and “Baba” so we decided to focus on these points. We also compared Peranakan groups such as the Jawi Peranakans of Penang, Chetti Melaka, Kelantan Peranakans, etc. For Peranakan cuisine, we started with Hokkien and Malay cuisine, because even these foods are not common in Japan, where Chinese food means Sichuan and Northern China fare. After that, we distinguished the cuisine in Malacca/Singapore and Penang, and recommended some restaurants and signature dishes.

This event was completely put together by Japanese. We had great help from Mikiko Shigemori, Keiko Miyake, Hisayo Goto, Kazumi Hirose, and Meiko Enosawa, all ex-docents of the National Museum of Singapore.

Many ladies came in their own sarong kebaya; they were so happy to have the opportunity to wear it in Japan. We truly appreciate all the kind support rendered to us and the warmth from Singaporeans and Malaysians. I hope all of you can join us next time; Peranakans are most welcome in Japan! ☺

*Miki Tampo is a writer and coordinator for the Japanese media. During her 15-year stay in Singapore, she researched the culture and history of Peranakans in the region. In Penang, where she now resides, Miki has been appointed a conservator at George Town World Heritage Inc. She is in charge of historical artefacts including documents and architectural drawings of Penang. Miki has published three books on Peranakans, Malacca and Penang, and a Singapore food guide.*

# Our Heritage in Rhythm and Rhyme

IN JULY AND AUGUST, BABA TAN KOON SIANG AND YOUNG NYONYA VICTORIA CHANEL LEE ATTENDED THE MAINTAINING HERITAGE WORKSHOP SERIES AT THE NUS BABA HOUSE, ON THE ANCIENT ART OF THE BABA MALAY PANTON. THESE ARE SOME OF THEIR REFLECTIONS.

**KOON SIANG:** *Wayang Peranakan* doyen, Baba GT Lye, and Baba poet laureate, Chan Eng Thai, spoke on the arcane world of ‘punning’ *panton*. Eng Thai demonstrated his flair for writing quaint quatrains while the theatrical GT showed he was very much a draw, spouting examples of his many unpublished *panton* in perfect rhythmic meter. Such verbal jousting dated back to the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century, and was an extension of normal conversation.

Baba Frederick Soh from the Gunong Sayang Association and Baba Terry Lim demonstrated how the written *panton* was incorporated in the singing form as *dondang sayang*. It was sung by either a duo or trio, testing their wit in inspired banter. A clever turn of phrase would be recognised by the audience with fits of laughter and applause. The excitement generated is akin to a boxing match. Four musicians accompanied in relaxed tempos. The *dondang sayang* performances would enhance celebrations like the New Year, birthdays, weddings or anniversaries.

Dr Pitchay Gani Aziz drew on his upbringing in Kampong Glam. He shed academic reserve and clearly enjoyed singing Malay *pantun* that was usually spoken. Of ancient origin, the Malay *pantun* has retained its role as a thriving expression of Malay lifestyle and culture. In the audience was the well-known English language poet, Baba Robert Yeo. Comparing Malay *pantun* to the Western verse, Robert sparked off a lively exchange of views and spontaneous recitations.

In a later session, Dr Ding Choo Ming spoke of the popularity of *pantun* in South East Asia from the 1890s to the 1950s. His research took him to even obscure islands in Indonesia where the *pantun* enjoy vivid popularity as simple entertainment in small towns and kampongs. He read several rare *pantun* in such loving tones that one could empathise how devoted he was to preserving the beauty of the *pantun* for posterity.

**VICTORIA:** Eng Thai and GT made fascinating use of imagery such as the beetle and jasmine flower, in melodious rhyming forms. Every session proved to be an indulgence in nyonya *kueh* as well!

Frederick and Terry shared the nuances of the *panton* in *wayang* Peranakan which originated in Indonesia. They performed *dondang sayang* in the Asli and Inang styles, plus a *joget* routine in Mambo! Terry was most captivating when he exclaimed, “It is the same music



Photo by Tan Koon Siang

*Dr Gani and GT Lye: A good panton comes from the heart.*



Photo by Angeline Pei-h Yue

*Frederick Soh and Terry Lim singing dondang sayang.*

but different lyrics; it is alive, you know!”

The next two sessions were more academic. Dr Pitchay pointed to the *pantun* as being “100% uniquely Malay”, devised by the common people without Arab influences. The vocabulary and nuances of the Malay and Baba Malay forms reflect their different cultures and philosophies; for example, Baba Malay *panton* drew words and imagery from Hokkien deities and festivals.

Dr Ding told of the difficulties he faced in funding the cataloguing of his *pantun* collection from all over the world. As “a symbol of identity for ASEAN,” he said the *pantun* had imbibed regional flavours over the centuries. •

The Peranakan magazine house style makes the distinction of spelling the Baba Malay poem as *panton*. The Malay form is retained as *pantun*.

*Victoria graduated from the Nanyang Technological University this year and is currently pursuing her postgraduate diploma in education.*

# Native Flower: The Beauty of Baba Malay

BABA TAN KOON SIANG JOINS THE CHATTER AT THE MARI KITA BERBUAL-BUAL FORUM

Sunday, 25 September saw a well-attended forum organised by the Select Centre, a non-profit organisation aimed at promoting Singapore's multi-cultural tapestry through readings, workshops and related programmes.

*Mari Kita Berbual-bual* (Let's Chatter) drew a fair representation from the baba cognoscenti. Among them were actors KT and Tony Quek, Peranakan Material Culture enthusiast Norman Cho, Yik Han from Bukit Brown Brownies, and heritage activist Sharon Ong. All the panellists were Peranakan *jati*: actor Fred Soh, lawyer and Baba poet laureate Chan Eng Thai, and linguists Dr Anne Pakir and

## Baba Malay

*Unique & Distinct!*

*"Bila nio lalu pun tak sedair"*

It is so amazingly delicious that one is completely oblivious even when your mother-in-law passes by

*"Jin buang anak punya tempat"*

A desolate and out of the way place

*"Dia ada chuai it gua ada punya chap goh"*

He had his day, my day will also come



From left: Panellists Chan Eng Thai, Dr Nala Lee, Fred Soh and Dr Anne Pakir.

Dr Nala Lee. It was an interesting session of *che�at meleteh* (intense chatter) on various issues facing our community. Among them, the irrelevance of Baba Malay as an economic language, the surprise rejuvenation of all things Peranakan through the commercialisation of theatre, the *sarong kebaya*, porcelain and jewellery.

Moderator Fred Soh expressed surprise over the longevity of the Peranakan revival. The late Felix Chia had, in the 1980s, predicted a quicker demise of the baba and nyonya eclectic. Today, Gunong Sayang Association is enjoying interest among the Y generation through enjoyable cultural song-and-dance activities. The Peranakan Association Singapore promotes the culture through annual Baba Conventions and its excellent magazine, which many Peranakans around the world love to read for pleasure and reference.

The session ended with a lively Q&A directed at the declining use of Baba Malay and how best the decline of the Peranakan community could be arrested. There was an unsaid feeling that our community would survive by attrition, evolution and innovation. ■

Contributed by Chan Eng Thai

# Peranakan Essence

BABA TAN KOON SIANG ATTENDS A ONE-DAY SERIES OF TALKS ON PERANAKAN MATERIAL CULTURE

For Baba Norman Cho and museum docent Angeline Peh-Yue, the *Essentially Peranakan* event proved a fitting crown to the efforts of the Peranakan Material Culture group in bringing together collectors, foodies and history and genealogy buffs.

These two culture-motivated individuals joined forces with the National Heritage Board one Saturday, on 8 October at the Asian Civilisations Museum, to present nine speakers giving us great insight to key elements of the nyonya and baba landscape.

Among the wide range of topics addressed were jewellery, nyonyaware, cooking, family, conservation, ancestral worship, *kebayas*, art, beadworks and poetry. The other speakers included Sharon Ong, Matt Tan, Cedric Tan, Tina Tan, Giam Cheng Han and Frederick Soh. ■

Four nyonya speakers: From left: Giam Cheng Han, Angeline Peh-Yue, Sharon Ong and Tina Tan.



Photo by Tan Koon Siang

# Chee-Djie Reunion After 200 Years

BABA CEDRIC TAN REPORTS FROM THE CHEE MANSION IN MELAKA

Chee Soo Chan (徐仕讚) left his village in Fujian, China, for Malacca in 1720. Little did he know that his grand-nephew, Djie Kang Pien (徐江濱), would embark on an equally perilous journey a hundred years later to land in Semarang, Indonesia. Their descendants proliferated and prospered but were unaware of each other's existence.

Fast forward to 2015. After several attempts to link the Indonesian and Malaysian lineages, Eric Djie finally met the trustees of the Chee Yam Chuan Temple Inc. and planned for a grand reunion for both families. About 50 Indonesian Dgies arrived from all over the world to Melaka to join the local Chees to celebrate and rekindle family ties.



Above: Alfred Chi (with microphone), who curated the photo gallery, addresses the Chee-Djie reunion participants at the Chee Mansion on Friday. Photo by Deric Chi.

An elaborate four-day programme was planned from 21- 24 July. Seminars were held and a photo gallery was launched at the Chee Mansion. The photo gallery is an archive of the Chee family history, dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, for the benefit of future Chee generations and to signify the continuation of ancestral worship.

On Saturday, the Chee-Djie group joined other nyonyas and babas to *laojiat* at the Peranakan Festival dinner & dance. The celebration ended with a Peranakan high-tea-cum-kebaya fashion show on Sunday. The events were held at King's Green Hotel, owned by the Chee Yam Chuan Temple Inc. ☀

The Chee Mansion is not open to the public. Those interested to visit it may contact Tel: +6018 252 7902 or email: alfchi@yahoo.com.au



Photo from Alan Wan.

Making merry at the dinner.

# Melaka Food Fair a roaring success

The weekend of activities in Melaka culminated in a Charity Food Fair organized by the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) on Sunday, 24 July. It was a roaring success. The gamut of mouth-watering dishes, all home-cooked, mostly sold out before noon, way before the 3 pm closing. More than RM20,000 was raised for the Association. ☺



Photo by Angeline Kong

# Community Voices

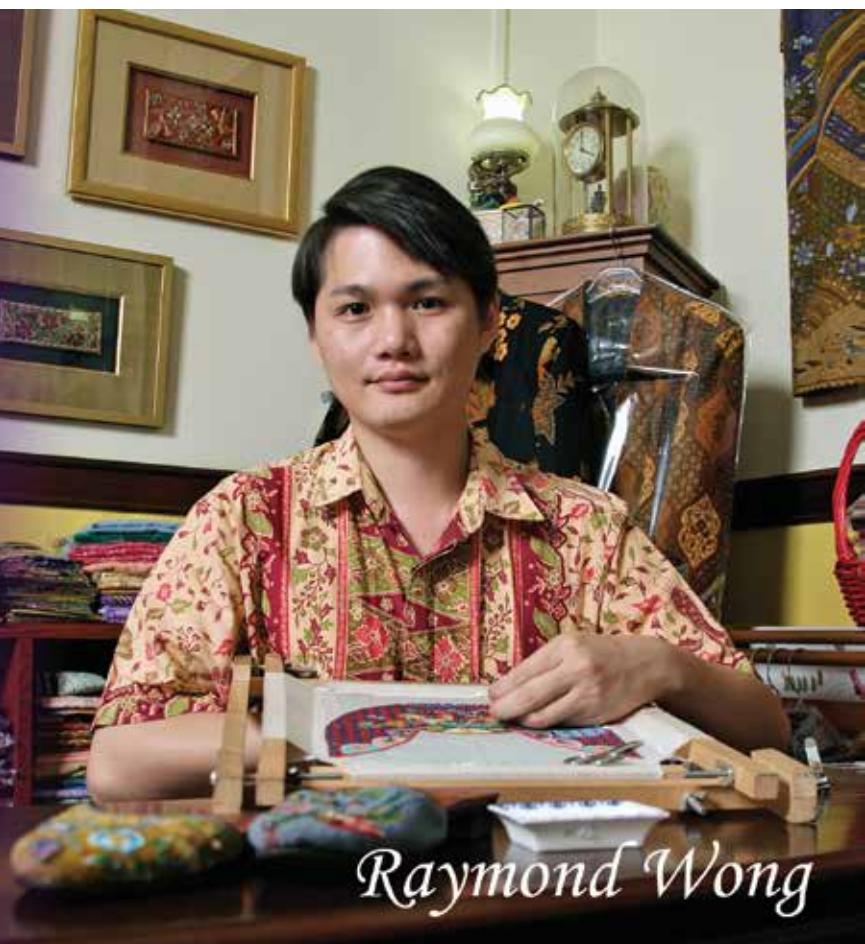


It has been a season of reconnecting with the community at a grassroots level, as our Peranakan Voices performed at two neighbourhood events: The Siglap South CC Peranakan Cultural Night on 11 September, and again a month later at the Marine Parade CC's Malam Peranakan on 8 October.

Our choir is proud to share that their line-up now includes full 'live' band abilities, in the form of their Baba members who have created the "Merry Lads" band, after an erstwhile group of the same name. At the same time, their repertoire has expanded to include a selection of evergreen hits in addition to the folksongs. All in, diners at both events enjoyed a toe-tapping great time, with many breaking out in spontaneous joget and line-dancing by our ever-enthusiastic nyonyas. ☺

  
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Luak Chye

Hati Babu Bungkus

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Baba Wins' Peranakan Cuisine is well-known for three things.... It's "home-style" dishes, long-forgotten and near-extinct dishes, all from family secret recipes that will make you exclaim "wow!" at first taste!

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To receive our 2017 Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner Menu of Heritage Food (*vanishing dishes*), please whatsapp 9735 9178 with your name and email address and we will email the menu to you.

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Assam China - An extinct dish revived by Baba Wins



Otak Jantan - An extinct dish revived by Baba Wins



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*in memoriam*

# Remembering SR Nathan

*Former President of Singapore*

3 JULY 1924 - 22 AUGUST 2016

**TPAS Treasurer Angeline Kong is thankful for Mr Nathan's enduring support of Peranakan culture**

I first met Mr S R Nathan at the Istana in 2001. It was one of several official visits he initiated for the Peranakan community. He had invited our Association choir, The Peranakan Voices, to perform as well. Always smiling and friendly, he would put all of us at ease. He was very humble and approachable, a fatherly figure whom you would have no fear of sharing your stories with.

During his tenure from 1999 to 2011, he never turned down our invitations to be the Guest-of-Honour at our annual dinners. Mr Nathan also made it a point to support our cultural milestones, for example, opening the restored 150-year old Baba House in 2008. He will be fondly remembered as very caring, unassuming and a true Peoples' President.



*A family portrait. Mr Nathan's Peranakan Indian mother, Abirami, and father, Sellapan (standing). He is the smallest boy. Circa 1920s. The family moved to 139 Ceylon Road in the 1950s.*

**“Mr Nathan recognized the role of minority groups and the part they played in building the nation.”**

*Baba Alan Koh, First Vice-President, The Peranakan Association Singapore*

**Chetti Melaka Association President, Baba Ponno Kalastree remembers the greatest champion of the Indian Peranakans**

Our beloved Mr Nathan was instrumental in reviving the identity of the Chetti Melaka, one of the scarcest communities in Singapore. He made us proud of our existence. He had stronger Peranakan ties than imagined – his mother was a Peranakan Indian. I was related to him through my late Uncle, Kannoo Sutheyvall.

Fluent in Baba Malay, Mr Nathan encouraged and supported the formation of the Association of Chetti Melaka (ACM) through Mr Samuel Dhoraisingam, who wrote a book on our culture. He officiated at the inauguration of the Association in 2008 and accepted all our invitations. He opened our Chetti Melaka symposium in 2014 even when he was in a wheelchair.

Mr Nathan had the greatest respect and commitment to our unique minority. He knew the contributions of the Chetti Melaka to colonial Singapore and Melaka, as teachers and clerks. He always regarded us as indigenous, the descendants of South Indian merchant pioneers who were in South-east Asia before the British.

I am very honoured that our community produced a remarkable man who embraced people from all walks of life, races and cultures. ♦



*Mr Nathan strongly supported the formation of the Association of Chetti Melaka.*



*Mr Nathan with the TPAS committee at the Istana.*

## 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 phuajh@gmail.com.

### PENANG

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

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

### KUALA LUMPUR & SELANGOR

#### **Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (PPBNKLS)**

Address: P.O 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 Sakulipatana at email: Pranee81@yahoo.com, mobile: +66 81 693 3576; or Piyarat Kulvanich at email: kpiyarat2000@yahoo.com or mobile: +66 81 719 0967.  
Fax: +66 76 258179  
Tel: +66 76 258124  
Website: Thaiperanakan.com

### INDONESIA

#### **Association of Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia (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@pertwi.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](http://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](http://www.peranakanaustralia.org)  
Email: evelyn.peranakan@gmail.com

## Gentle Reminder to Overseas Members

We would like to gently remind all overseas members to email to our Asst Hon Secretary, Koh Hwei Ling at [nownextc@gmail.com](mailto:nownextc@gmail.com), your local (Singapore) postal address for us to mail your copy of the magazine. Posting overseas is too huge a cost for your Association to bear as we do not collect subscriptions as income. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

## Calling All Creatives

We are looking for writers, photographers and illustrators with a passion for Peranakan culture. If you would like to contribute to *The Peranakan magazine*, please write to Dawn Marie Lee at: [dawnmarielee@gmail.com](mailto:dawnmarielee@gmail.com)

## Welcome

A warm welcome to our new members!

Anthony Chan  
Namiko Takahashi Chan  
Alison Chong Nyuen Yin  
Jessica Keong  
Hedy Lim  
Christina Seet  
Soh Say Guan  
Bryan Tan  
Tracy Yeo Lin

## How Vera Inconvenient!

BABA BRYAN TAN ATTENDS A TRADITIONAL PERANAKAN WEDDING WITH THE YEOWS

Molly, mother of the bride, dabbed her forehead with a handkerchief. Beads of sweat slicked profusely down her brow. Her silk kebaya had begun to stick to the small of her back. Husband Willie stood proudly by her, beaming from ear to ear. Their eldest daughter was finally getting married, most importantly, with the blessing of *Kohpoh Chik* (grand aunty).

The supreme matriarch of the family, *Kohpoh Chik*

Soh Bee Neo presided over the *cheo thau* (coming of age) ceremony with her husband, Thiam Hin, and sisters flanking her. A frosty glint in her eye, she welcomed relatives and friends with imperial grace, determined that no *pantang larangs* (taboos) be committed in this most sacred Peranakan tradition.

To elevate the importance of her blessing, all of Bee Neo's neighbours from *Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock* (formerly Heeren Street) were invited. They included the Tans from the Tan Kim Seng and Tan Chay Yan families, and the Chees of the Chee Swee Cheng family, whose OCBC Bank was jokingly referred to as *Orang Cina Bukan Cina* (Chinese people but not really Chinese).

The household was abuzz with loud chatter and festivity. Servants rushed to and fro from the kitchens, serving up lemongrass water and snacks of *kueh pie tee* (canapes) and *kueh sarlat* (glutinous rice with pandan kaya). Molly had no appetite, wondering desperately what *Kohpoh Chik* had said to the *mat salleh* (Caucasian) groom-to-be, Daniel. The interrogation had exceeded two hours. Molly could not recall when a foreigner had successfully married into a Peranakan family without any hiccups.

Thiam Hin heralded the start of the first ritual, *Pasang Lilin* (lighting the candles). He offered a prayer to the God of Heaven and *moyang* (ancestors), lighting tall red candles on a *samkai* (altar) covered

Illustration by Eileen Chan.



by a *tokwee*, a beautifully embroidered table front. A band of musicians started playing traditional *seronee* music, announcing the arrival of the wedding couple.

Molly could not help but stifle a gasp. Vera and Daniel emerged, accompanied by a *sangkeh em* (chief mistress of ceremonies). The couple was resplendent in their embroidered Peranakan bridal costumes. Molly fixated intently on her daughter. If anything showed, there was only slight discomfort, perhaps from the heavy headdress Vera wore. Her swollen belly was hardly noticeable. Daniel was grinning in amusement and curiosity.

Everyone gathered around to watch the next ritual. The couple kneeled before the heads of the household, Bee Neo and Thiam Hin, to *soja* and offer tea in respect. Daniel had obviously won over the imperious matriarch, thought Willie happily. The frigidity in her eyes had softened to a fond gaze.

A shriek pierced the room. The *seronee* wail halted, open-mouthed. Sophie, Bee Neo's bedraggled daughter, had noticed a queer reddish liquid trailing from the bride's hem.

Willie gasped, his eyes wide open: "Vera's water bag has broken! Call the ambulance!" •

\*Next issue: The Yeows celebrate the newest addition to the family!

# 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](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)  
Email: [nhb\\_pm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto: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 sireh sets, as well as the magnificent carved wood hearse of Tan Jiak Kim, which is considered one of the 11 Treasures of the National Museum. National Museum of Singapore, 93 Stamford Road, Tel: 63323659, Opening Hours: 10am to 6pm Daily (Singapore History Gallery), 10am to 9pm Daily (Singapore Living Galleries), Admission \$10 (adults), \$5 (senior citizens above 60), \$5 (students, Nsmen). Free admission to the Singapore Living Galleries from 6pm to 9pm. <http://nationalmuseum.sg>.

**Baba House.** This heritage house goes back in time to 1928. Experience what a grand Peranakan terraced house would have been like. Formerly owned by the Wee family (whose ancestor Wee Bin was a mid-19th century shipping magnate) since 1910. 157 Neil Road, Singapore. Tel: 62275731.



Visits are by guided tours. Please call the house for details. <http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html>

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

## Port Cities: Multicultural Emporiums of Asia

4 November 2016 to 19 February 2017  
Asian Civilisations Museum

This exhibition spotlights the networks of migrant communities across Asia, the distribution of goods, and the array of outcomes when different cultures meet. Artefacts from various hybrid cultures reveal ingenuity and early global trends in these cosmopolitan centres, and how Peranakan art and Singapore as a multicultural city have historical antecedents in Asia.



## 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](http://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](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](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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