



BEHIND

THE

SCENES

THE WAYANG PERANAKAN ISSUE

**INSIDE THE  
HEART OF A STAR**

GT LYE UNMASKED

**MISTRESS  
OF MIMICRY**

BABA IN KEBAYA  
TELLS ALL

**BOLD BIBIK  
TAKES THE STAGE**

MEET THE STAR  
YOU NEVER KNEW





Joyful Phoenix™

**ON THE COVER:**  
Francis Hogan (right) with a group of female impersonators from the wayang Peranakan play, *Nasib Anak Tiri* staged in 1958. See page 8.



**Kerboon Mama**  
Discover the secrets of Grandma's Garden.



**EDITORIAL**  
3 Behind the Scenes

**FEATURES**  
4 Inside The Heart of A Star: *GT Lye Unmasked*



**4**  
8 Mistress of Mimicry  
13 Matching Up to The Maid  
16 Daisy Chan: *The Star You Never Knew*  
20 Kerboon Mama

**CHAKAP CHAKAP**  
24 Forging Ahead with Team TPAS

**NEWS**  
26 Dedicated to an Ancient Art



**26**  
26 The Kebaya Goes to Tedx  
27 Artist Shows at Iconic London Gallery  
27 Peranakan Genome Project Update

**BOOKS**  
28 Relive Bittersweet Kampong Memories  
29 Mari Chakap Baba

**DALAM DAPOR**  
30 Ode to the Coconut



**30**  
**MUSEUMS**  
34 Cultural Snaps: *Amek Gambar*  
36 Rediscovering the Chettis

**THEATRE**  
38 Lest We Forget



**36**  
**EVENTS**  
40 Celebrating 10 years of PAA  
40 Marking a Decade in Style  
41 Yishun's Baba Heritage  
41 Peranakans on Parade  
42 Sharing Songs and Stories

**IN MEMORIAM**  
43 Keeping our Culture Alive: *Baba Peter Wee*  
44 Two Lives Less Ordinary: *Dr & Mrs Wee Kim Wee*

**NOTICEBOARD**  
46  
**CHAKAP HABIS**  
47 Of Birthdays and Bloodlines



**47**  
**DIRECTORY**  
48 The Peranakan Guide Singapore

**THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE** • Hon. Life President Lee Kip Lee • President Colin Chee • First Vice-President Alan Koh • Second Vice-President Raymond Wong • Honorary Secretary Ronney Tan Koon Siang • Assistant Honorary Secretary Agnes Ng • Treasurer Bryan Tan • Assistant Treasurer Elizabeth Ng • Committee Members Monica Alsagoff, Christine Ang, Dawn Marie Lee, Ngiam May Ling, Gwen Ong, Josephine Tan, Philip Yeo.

**THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE** • Editor Dawn Marie Lee • Assistant Editor Emeric Lau • Editorial Adviser Linda Chee • Creative Adviser John Lee • Editorial Committee Members Colin Chee, Bryan Tan, Victoria Chanel Lee, Natalie Cheah • Webmaster Victoria Chanel Lee • Designer Joanne Low • Advertising Manager Ngiam May Ling • For advertising enquiries, please contact Ngiam May Ling at +65 9741 0610, advertising@peranakan.org.sg

The Peranakan is published by The Peranakan Association Singapore, Raffles City PO Box 1640, Singapore 911755  
Email | secretariat@peranakan.org.sg • Printer | Oxford Graphic Printers Pte Ltd

MCI (P) 139/12/2017

All reasonable efforts have been made to identify and contact copyright holders but in some cases these could not be traced. If you hold or administer rights for materials published here, please contact the publishers. Any errors or omissions will be corrected in subsequent editions. Copyright is by the publisher. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher. The Peranakan Magazine and The Peranakan Association Singapore disclaim all responsibilities in the articles herein, and state that the views expressed in them, if any, are those of the writers and not theirs. They assume no responsibility for unsolicited materials or articles published herein and state that the writers are wholly responsible for the veracity and authenticity of their articles.

The Peranakan magazine house style reflects the Baba Malay spelling found in *A Baba Malay Dictionary* by Baba William Gwee Thian Hock.



George Town Heritage + Hotels

Evocative



Experience your heritage stay with us in George Town.

[www.georgetownheritage.com](http://www.georgetownheritage.com)

e: [booking@georgetownheritage.com](mailto:booking@georgetownheritage.com) • t: +604-261 8888



TripAdvisor 2018  
Travellers' Choice Awards  
Top 10 Small Hotels  
No.1- Seven Terraces  
No.3- Muntri Mews

TripAdvisor 2018  
Travellers' Choice Awards  
Top 25 Hotels for Service  
No.2- Jawi Peranakan Mansion  
No.3- Seven Terraces  
No.6- Muntri Mews  
No.25- Muntri Grove

TripAdvisor 2018  
Travellers' Choice Awards  
Top 25 Hotels for Romance  
No.7- Seven Terraces  
No.11- Muntri Grove



editorial



## BEHIND THE SCENES



Scholars have written about *wayang Peranakan* as a cultural expression of Peranakan identity and as a cultural institution. However, many young Peranakans today don't speak Baba Malay, have not lived the culture, let alone watched a *wayang Peranakan* play. So is the art form still relevant?

their elderly mother's dementia. After the show, he told me that he wanted to learn Baba Malay so that "I can fully understand what's going on." His remarks tell me that *wayang Peranakan* still matters today, even to the young who don't speak the language.

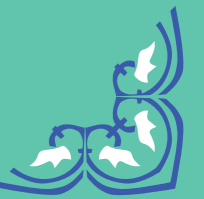
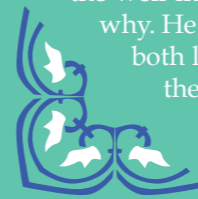
As I write this, my family and I have just come home from watching *Lu Siapa?*, staged by the Gunong Sayang Association (GSA). GSA has a long history of involvement in the Peranakan arts, and I dare say that they are the only theatre group that performs *wayang Peranakan* annually in Singapore today. My son, who is nine, made some interesting observations about the show. "Mummy, are all Peranakans old?" he remarked after a quick scan of the audience and performers on stage. "Why are there no children here?" he asked. Although he did not understand Baba Malay, he was captivated by the strong emotions displayed on stage and said that his favourite character was "the man-girl who acted as the neighbour". (He was referring to female impersonator KT, who played the well-meaning but *kaypoh* neighbour.) I asked him why. He said it was because the character made him both laugh and cry, and feel like he was really in the living room with the family dealing with

In this issue, we go behind the scenes to discover the untold stories of *wayang Peranakan*. The legendary Baba GT Lye, whose talent in Peranakan theatre is nonpareil, speaks about his childhood. Well-known female impersonator, Baba Francis Hogan who has been involved in Peranakan theatre for over 60 years, tells all in his interview with Baba Emeric Lau. Read the story of Nyonya Daisy Chan, the first nyonya to take to the stage in a Peranakan play in the 1950s. Our youngest and newest member of the editorial team, Nyonya Natalie Cheah, looks at the *majie* or *amah*, a quintessential character who appears in most Peranakan plays. I hope that you enjoy this issue as much as we have in putting it together!

Dawn Marie Lee

Editor

[editor@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:editor@peranakan.org.sg)



**CHRISTMAS**  
*Malam Jolly*

Laojiat at our first ever Christmas Malam Jolly!  
Celebrate "Tang Chek" at the same time ...  
Mari joget joget maqan maqan hoa hi sama sama kita semua.

- **Invite** your family and friends for a great time
- **Enjoy** the mini-bazaar of ketak ketik, perfect for Xmas gifts (cash payment only)
- **Win** attractive prizes from the raffle draw, proceeds to charity

**Date** : Friday, 21 December 2018  
**Time** : 7.00pm  
**Venue** : Chinese Swimming Club Ballroom  
34 Amber Road, Singapore 439870  
**Tickets** : \$78 (TPAS members), \$88 (Non-members)  
Donation tables available at \$2,500 each

**Get your tickets today!**

Contact **Bryan Tan** at [treasurer@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:treasurer@peranakan.org.sg) or **Gwen Ong** at [events@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:events@peranakan.org.sg)

# Inside the Heart of a Star

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE GOES BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE LEGENDARY BABA GT LYE

Portrait by Alvin Ong. Photos courtesy of the Gunong Sayang Association

Polaris, the North Star, is widely regarded as the brightest star in the sky. Because it occupies a special position in relation to the Earth's axis, Polaris remains in the same spot in the northern horizon year-round, high above the other stars that circle around it.

Similarly, Baba GT Lye is undeniably the brightest star in *wayang Peranakan* today. His portrayal of the archetypal Peranakan matriarch is legendary. Since he took on his very first female role in 1985 in *Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih* (Let Bygones Be Bygones), he has honed his art over the last three decades to become a master of his craft and an authority on *wayang Peranakan*.

I met GT one afternoon for tea, to unmask the man behind the matriarch. At 79 years old, his mind is still razor sharp. Nothing passes him unnoticed and he always seems to be in the know. I recall the first time we met one evening a few years ago at a talk on *dondang sayang*. When I went up to him and introduced myself, he smiled and said, "I know who you are Dawn Marie." In our brief chat, he didn't miss a beat.

"What do you want to know?" GT asks me after we settle in a quiet corner of the cafe. So many column inches have been published about GT Lye the actor (GT Lye is his stage name), so I wanted to dig deeper. I ask him about his childhood.

GT comes from a generation where domestic abuse was not spoken about. A firm belief in superstitions provided a convenient excuse for physical or psychological abuse in the home. The victims, who are often children, are shamed to believe that they are at fault and deserve such punishment. The emotional trauma haunts them for a lifetime. As GT tells me about his early life, I discover that the troubles he endured in his childhood have defined who he is today.

## THE BROKEN CHILD

He speaks vividly about his upbringing and describes details as though the events took place just yesterday instead of 70 years ago. GT was born in October 1939 at 27 Cuppage Road into a wealthy Peranakan family. His father, Baba Gwee Peng

Kwee, was a rubber broker and a prominent *dondang sayang* performer. He was a famous female impersonator and a master of *pantons* who became the President of the Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) in 1956.

When GT's mother was pregnant, a fortune-teller told her that the child she was carrying would bring great misfortune to the family. Her fears were reinforced when she started hemorrhaging at his birth. "I am the seventh born in my family. My mother was 27 when she had me. Instead of loving her newborn son, she hated me, right from the start," says GT with much emotion.

Soon after his birth, GT was sent away to live with a distant relation who was given an allowance of \$10 a month to raise him. "My adoptive mother was poor, so life was hard. Just after the war in 1945, when I was six years old, I had to help her sell fruits near Lorong Marzuki, off Changi Road," shares GT.

When he was ten, GT's family moved from Cuppage Road to Carpmael Road in the Joo Chiat area. GT's older sister brought him home to live with them but he was treated like an outcast. "My natural mother still resented me. She encouraged everyone in the house to treat me like a servant. I had no bed and was made to sleep on the floor in front of the altar. Fortunately, my father allowed me to attend school. But after school, I had a lot of work to do at home. I had to polish shoes, sweep the floor, *tumbok* (pound) *sambal belachan* and also take care of our 12 cats, five dogs and chickens. If I didn't do my work properly, I was punished.

Sometimes I was so terrified that I would sleepwalk at night." As he says this, his lips quiver and I hear the hurt and anger in his voice. I notice that his eyes have turned moist. I get the sense that perhaps, this may be someone who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the past, it was believed that PTSD manifested only in soldiers who have been to war. However today, modern psychiatry has established that there are many causes of PTSD, including domestic abuse.

Despite the hardship he faced at home, GT completed his studies at Telok Kurau English School. He then attended Bartley Secondary School where he graduated with a Senior Cambridge certificate in 1956.

## A QUIET MAN IN DESPERATE TIMES

"After I finished school at 17 years old, I got my first full-time job as a dispenser at the Singapore Medical Hall. After that, I worked for my father as a typist in his rubber brokerage. He paid me \$130 a month, but I had to give him \$100 for my food and lodging at home," recalls GT.

"My father threw me out of the house when I was 23. I was on my own and frantic. I had no money and nowhere to go. I had a friend staying in Kampong Bahru Hill near Chinatown, so I begged him to let me stay there for a while. I was so desperate to find work that any job would do. I washed plates in Chinatown, and also worked as a salesman," says GT in a voice tinged with bitterness as he recalled his desperate days. He adds, "At that time I was *gila duit* (mad for money). I just wanted to work and work. I even took an extra job as a driving instructor so that I could earn more money."

GT reveals how he cleverly managed to cover his rent during those hard times. "I rented an entire flat, but I used only one room and rented out the rest at a higher rate. With the extra rent I collected, I could cover my own rent." In the 1960s, he found a stable job as a personal assistant to two Members of Parliament and worked in the civil service for 15 years until he left to start his own travel agency.

GT Lye (2015),  
Oil on canvas, by  
artist Alvin Ong.



GT Lye (second from right, in white baju lok chuan) in his first stage role as the father in *Pileh Menantu* (1984). Next to him is Director, Nyonya Cecilia Ong (far right, in white kebaya), sangkek um, Choong Ah Moi (wearing glasses, seated in the middle), Baba Peter Wee (second from left), who provided the props, and Baba William Gwee Thian Hock (far left in safari suit), who managed the wedding pageant. GT was billed as "Henry Lye" in this play.

## ENTER THE MATRIARCH

GT's start in Peranakan theatre came in 1984 when he was 45 years old. He responded to a newspaper advertisement looking for amateur actors and was cast as the father in *Pileh Menantu* (Choosing A Daughter-in-Law). It was the first *wayang Peranakan* play to be staged in 25 years and was commissioned for the Singapore Arts Festival.

"The President of GSA, Baba Quek Choon Juan, was impressed with my performance in *Pileh Menantu* and he invited me to join the show committee for *Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih* in 1985. We could not find a suitable actress to play the matriarch, so I volunteered to take on the role. Many committee members were against the idea. They felt that cross-dressing would not be appreciated," says GT. However, Baba Quek supported GT and allowed him to play the role. "I thought that there might be controversy, so instead of my real name, I created the stage name GT Lye from my initials. I have used it ever since."

GT wanted to prove the naysayers wrong, and he did. He was meticulous in his preparation for the role and gave a flawless performance. Another stage veteran shares with me that "everyone was shocked when they saw GT on stage. Some who had never watched *wayang Peranakan* before even thought that he was a real *bibik*! He was so convincing."

GT shares that since he was a young boy, he has always "admired and closely observed the nyonyas with their immaculate hairdos and crisp, perfectly ironed *baju panjang*". "They were very fastidious not only in their appearance, but their speech too," he adds.

He tells me that the matriarchs were masters of wordplay, and could effortlessly manipulate their speech and mannerisms to achieve the desired effect on the person they were speaking to. Whether they were provoked to *melatah* (lament hysterically), showering praises or hissing curses, they could reduce one to tears with a calculated phrase. He speaks like someone who has perhaps, been hurt many times with such verbal slingshots.

Emotional trauma is a pernicious thief who steals joy from the soul over a lifetime. I wonder if the hurt that GT endured in his early life may be what makes him such a formidable matriarch on stage. In psychiatry, a type of treatment for emotional trauma suggests that the trauma can be unlearned by telling the story of it over and over again. The patient is asked to close his eyes, put himself back in the moment of trauma and recount the details of what happened. Perhaps subconsciously, this is what GT does - drawing on his memories, living them out on stage to slowly erase the pain by the sheer strength of his spirit.

## THE STAR RISES

Early in his acting career, GT shadowed a group of professional performers in Melaka to improve his knowledge of *panton* and *dondang sayang*. By the 1990s, he had become a well-known figure in the Malay entertainment scene. He was invited to perform at charity shows and appeared on radio and TV programmes to share insights on Peranakan culture.

He wrote his first script, *Cheh It Chap Goh* (First Fifteen Days of the Lunar New Year) in 2000. He went on to write three more plays for GSA: *Hujan Balek Ke Langet* (The Impossible) in 2001, *Kipas Chendana* (The Sandalwood Fan), in 2003, and *Belom Mati, Belom Tau* (Not Dead, Not Known) in 2005.

GT tells me that traditionally, *wayang Peranakan* plays were loosely scripted; the actors had to ad lib to flesh out their roles. That was when he realised that he had a gift for improvising and coming up with impromptu verses.

Arts practitioner and Cultural Medallion recipient, Baba Alvin Tan, says of GT, "He shines when he performs on his own, in a monologue. GT Lye is undoubtedly a master of Peranakan theatre and should be given the freedom to improvise instead of being held ransom to a script. Traditional Peranakan theatre is very much like the Commedia dell'Arte, the Italian form of unscripted theatre where an actor's performance is the result of the moment's inspiration. The actors have to heighten, vary or embellish their parts to make the tears flow or the laughter ring. This is what GT does best. It means that every GT Lye performance is unique because he responds to the audience differently each time."

In 2009, GT starred in *Bilek Roda Hidop* staged by The Peranakan Association Singapore. Baba Alvin Tan directed *Bedrooms*, the English version of the play which was staged at the same time.

By then, GT was widely regarded as an authority on Peranakan arts. He has performed in plays for more than 30 years, of which he says *Bijik Mata Mak* (Mother's Pet) staged in 1989, is his favourite.



GT Lye (left, in striped baju panjang) with the former president of Singapore, Mr S.R. Nathan (middle), and actress Nyonya Sally Gan (right).

GT counts presidents and ministers among his fans. Singapore's former presidents, Dr Wee Kim Wee, Mr S.R. Nathan and Dr Tony Tan have all attended his performances. "Even when my shows were sold-out, they still wanted to see me on stage. The producers had to scramble to specially arrange seats for each presidential entourage," GT reveals. Puan Noor Aishah, widow of Singapore's first president, Mr Yusof Ishak, is also a fan.

For his stage role in *Kain Chik Dua Mungka* (2017), GT wore a spectacular set of *kersosang* valued at \$30,000. The set of three brooches was loaned to him by an adoring fan who had them custom-made. Each brooch, the size of *piring tauyu* (sauce dishes), is studded with thick, high-domed *intans* (rose-cut diamonds) set in 18K yellow gold - jewellery suitable for a star.

Baba John Teo, General Manager of the Peranakan Museum, says of GT, "He is a living national treasure of Singapore and the Peranakan community. Unlike Peranakans of my generation, who are now trying to rediscover aspects of our heritage, he has lived the culture. His mentorship and guidance have been an invaluable asset to the museum and its curators. In our collective efforts to preserve Singapore's intangible cultural heritage, GT is one of the last remaining authorities, an irreplaceable expository agent of the customs, traditions and practices of a bygone era."

To me, GT's mystique lies perhaps, in the fact that the ways of the Peranakan matriarchs, who are long gone, come alive through his performances. "The good, the bad and the ugly, I have seen them all," says GT of the matriarchs of his youth.

Science tells us that celestial stars shine because they burn from within. Perhaps for GT too, the hurts and disappointments that he has endured are what fuel his stellar performances. Once an unwanted child who yearned desperately to be loved, GT Lye has become a star adored by many.



To read more about *Pileh Menantu*, the play that launched GT Lye's stage career, scan the QR Code here or go to [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)

GT Lye in *Kain Chik Dua Mungka* (2017) wearing a set of diamond and gold *kersosang* valued at \$30,000, loaned to him by an adoring fan.

# THE MISTRESS *of* MIMICRY

BABA EMERIC LAU ENGAGES FRANCIS HOGAN ON HIS LIFE AS A FEMALE IMPERSONATOR  
Portrait by Baba Colin Chee. Other photos courtesy of Francis Hogan and the Peranakan Museum



Francis Hogan in the corridor outside his flat, with his beloved dog Brandy.



Francis with his mother, a nyonya, in the 1940s.



As a young man, Francis wondered how he would look in a dress, so he drew one onto this photo.



Francis as a young man in the 1950s.



Francis Hogan is scuttling about his spick-and-span flat in Marine Parade, deftly producing vintage photos, newspaper clippings and theatre programmes. A fair number date from the 1950s, yet all the items are in immaculate condition. There are pictures of Francis as a dapper young man about town, attired in a crisp shirt and high-waist trousers. Other gems from his album show him dressed up as a nubile young nyonya in *sarong kebaya*, an innocent young bride on her wedding day, or shrewd *bibik* in *baju panjang*: alter egos he has embraced throughout his career as a female impersonator.

Francis reveals that in his teens, he was curious about cross-dressing. "One day, I grabbed a black pen and drew a dress onto one of my photos so that I could see how I would look!" he giggles. At 82 years young, the petite *wayang Peranakan* actor exudes the vitality of a person decades his junior. There is a mischievous, elfin quality about him – Prospero's sprightly spirit of the air, Ariel, from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, comes to mind. His eyes twinkle as he recalls various anecdotes from his life onstage - one that spans 60 years and counting.

"I've been singing for as long as I can remember, ever since my student days when I performed in school concerts." Francis attended the Presbyterian Boys' School in Koon Seng Road in the early 1950s. "Yes, I have been living around Katong my whole life!" he exclaims.

A Eurasian, he is nonetheless able to sing in various languages, including Baba Malay, Japanese, Mandarin and several Chinese dialects. "I just listen to the tunes and memorise the lyrics. If I'm not sure, I practice the songs and get friends to tell me if my pronunciation is okay."

## FROM SONG TO STAGE

In the 1950s, the young talent came to the attention of the Oleh Oleh Party, a music and drama group that staged regular revues. One of its members was the renowned female impersonator, the late Baba William Tan. He invited Francis to join them as a singer. "I put on a *cheongsam* and sang a song called *Papa Loves Mama*, an old Chinese ditty," Francis recalls.

Soon after, the troupe wanted to stage a play. Francis was asked to star in it and wrote his first full-length script, *Nasib Anak Tiri* (Fate of a Step-Child). He drew inspiration from the tale of Cinderella. The play was staged in March 1958 at Happy World, directed by *wayang Peranakan* veteran, Baba Seow Peck Swee, with Francis playing the lead role of an abused and long-suffering stepdaughter. "It was my first starring role. It was so emotionally demanding, because I had to weep throughout the play from start to finish," said Francis.

*Nasib Anak Tiri* was a hit. Audiences were so deeply moved that they wept along with Francis. At 22 years old, Francis had made his mark. His parents encouraged him to continue acting.

Inspired by his stage success and full of confidence, Francis immediately wrote and starred in another play barely two months later. *Kerhidopan Si Buta* (A Blind Girl's Fate) was staged by the Singapore Pranakan Dramatic Party in May 1958 in aid of the Red Cross Society Hospital. This time, Francis was the playwright, producer, associate director and lead actor (playing the titular blind girl).

The wedding costumes, including an elaborate bridal headdress and real jewellery "costing several thousand dollars", were borrowed from the collection of Madam Ah Bee,



Cast onstage at the Garden Hall of Great World Park performing *Janda Kaya*. Singapore, 15 March 1959. Gelatin silver print.

Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Francis Hogan. (2015-00126)



The female impersonators of *Nasib Anak Tiri*.

Clockwise:  
Eddie Lim (in a dress),  
Timmy Tay (in samfoo),  
Francis Hogan (in kebaya),  
Gan Teck Hock (seated)

Singapore, 1958. Gelatin silver print.

Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Francis Hogan. (2015-00122)

a famous *sangkek um* (mistress of ceremonies in a Peranakan wedding), who also directed the play. "I loved wearing the bridal outfit, especially the real jewellery and headdress," says Francis. "It was the real thing, and very heavy! I couldn't turn or tilt my head at all. Nowadays, when couples want to re-create a traditional Peranakan wedding, the outfits and accessories are mostly modern day replicas made in China - all very light!" he chuckles.

Francis went on to star in a few more productions, including *Janda Kanda* (The Wealthy Widow) in 1959 and *Ayer Mata Ibu* (A Mother's Tears) in 1960. Sadly, an important supporter and patron of *wayang Peranakan*, Dr Essel Tan, passed away in the early 1960s. With his passing, the funding for plays dried up.

Despite the performers being a tight-knit community, "like a big family", everyone eventually had to go their separate ways. Some actors, he recalls, took cross dressing one step further. "One of my fellow male cast mates who is three years older than I, went through with gender reassignment. She fell in love, married a European man and emigrated. I have no idea if she is still alive now," he recounts wistfully while gazing at photos in his album.

The 1960s to the 1980s, an era of rapid economic development for Singapore, was also a lull period for *wayang Peranakan*. Performances during this time were rare, until *Pileh Menantu* was staged in 1984. Francis found work as a shipping clerk at the Port Authority of Singapore. He held the position for a full 40 years before retiring in 2002.



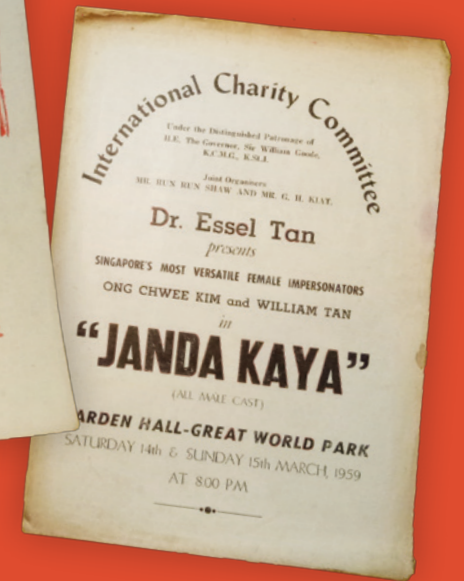
1958



1960



1958



1959

## FAKING WITH FINESSE

From the very first female stage role he took on, he was determined to play a *nyonya* with finesse. For Francis, achieving authenticity for each performance starts with getting into character through make-up and costume. He always readies himself at home, never backstage at the theatre. "At my age, I cannot rush. If the performance is at 8pm, and call time is 3pm, I start preparing at home at noon!"

He takes a leisurely two hours to get into costume, while playing with his beloved dog, Brandy. Mentally, this helps him relax and transition into the role of a *bibik*. He painstakingly combs his *sanggol* into a neat chignon, carefully applies make-up and leisurely selects a suitable *baju panjang* to wear. Francis has about a dozen *sarongs* and *baju panjang* in his wardrobe. "They're all I need since I only play *bibiks* now." He always takes a taxi to the performance venue. He doesn't change out of costume until he returns home.

Always humble and affable, Francis commands the respect of younger actors. "Some of the younger impersonators receive flak because they come across as crass and vulgar. To me, the art of female impersonation means to be truly convincing as a woman on stage, not a caricature." He adds, "At the end of the day, all of us in theatre are friends. We must support one another."

He is effusive in his praise for the talent of another contemporary, doyen Baba GT Lye. Amongst the next generation of female impersonators, he identifies Kelvin Tan (better known as KT) who performs under the auspices of Gunong Sayang Association, as the closest the Peranakan theatre scene has to a successor. He hopes that the younger generation will be given more opportunities to perform and hone their craft.

"My favourite roles are the *bibiks* I play now. I like to entertain the audience and make them laugh. At my age, I can also flirt with them without fear; it is all good fun and everyone goes home happy!"

## THE BIBIK RISES AGAIN

Serendipitously, upon his retirement, he was invited by The Peranakan Association Singapore, through Baba Richard Tan, to star in the musical, *Bibiks Behind Bars*. Francis was more than eager to tread the boards after a long hiatus from stage. He played the role of Bibik Tau Yew beautifully. The musical was a success and a sequel, *Bibiks Behind Bars, Kena Again!* was staged at the first Peranakan Arts Festival in 2015.

Over the past 15 years, Francis has re-established himself as a veteran of the Peranakan theatre scene. Being an experienced female impersonator, the nuances of how *nyonyas* move and conduct themselves comes naturally to him. He was a consultant to Mediacorp Channel 8 during the filming of the hit drama series, *The Little Nyonya*.

Aside from *wayang Peranakan*, he frequently performs at community events and Peranakan-themed functions. Earlier this year, Francis performed for the Singapore Heritage Festival 2018 at Armenian Street, in celebration of the Peranakan Museum's 10th birthday. "I sang a Japanese song, *Sukiyaki*, and a Hokkien ditty, *Ai Pia Jia Eh La* (Gotta Rush To Win). There was a huge audience, and they danced along with me! That made me so happy."



# Timeless Treasure



3 in 1

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

2 Corinthians 13:14 NIV

19 Tanglin Road #03-47, Tanglin Shopping Centre, Singapore 247909  
Tel: 68352235 • HP: 96720713 • Email: timetng@singnet.com.sg  
Like us on Facebook: facebook.com/TimelessTreasureTanglin

feature

## MATCHING UP TO THE MAID

NYONYA NATALIE CHEAH DELVES INTO THE WORLD OF THE STAGE MAJIE

Theatrical photos courtesy of the Gunong Sayang Association. Majie photos courtesy of Nyonya Sharon Ong



An impish, instantly likeable, petite woman peeps out of the kitchen doorway. She rushes out to attend to the matriarch of the household who is tapping her foot impatiently, her no-nonsense demeanour is reflected in her tight *sanggol* (chignon) and impeccable *baju panjang*. In contrast, the petite woman seems flustered. She hurriedly smooths down her *samfoo* - pair of loose dark trousers and a plain white blouse - and pulls her long braid to the back. Then she smiles and fine lines crinkle on her face, betraying her true age.

The petite woman is Ah Nui, the *majie* (female domestic helper) or *amah* played by Nyonya Jessie Cheang in *Bibiks Behind Bars*. I was seven years old when the show premiered in 2002. Many other *wayang Peranakan* plays have been staged since then, but this one always remains close to my heart. My grandfather has the video because his daughter (my mother, Nyonya Cynthia Lee) played the dragon lady, Molly, in the show. I enjoyed it so much that I would repeatedly ask *Kong Kong* to play it for me over and over again.

Three female characters often appear in many *wayang Peranakan* plays: a formidable matriarch (the *bibik*), her daughter-in-law and a *majie*. From their banter, one can deduce that the *bibik* and *majie* enjoy a close camaraderie even though they are mistress and servant. The *bibik* confides in the *majie* as though she is her "right hand" woman.

When I first watched *Bibiks Behind Bars* as a child, the stark contrast between the colourful, elaborate *kebayas* of the *nyonyas* compared to the *majie* Ah Nui's simple black and white *samfoo* left no doubt that she was an employee in the household. Even the way Ah Nui spoke was different from the *nyonyas* - her Baba Malay had a strong Chinese accent. While serving the *nyonyas* their *kueh* and tea over many *cherki* games, Ah Nui is seen covertly listening in to the latest gossip. The information she gleans is often used for either humorous or damning effect. She comes across as the resident *kaypoh* (busybody) and all of the household get their news from her. She is very much the grapevine itself! Through Ah Nui, the audience learns that the darling niece of the matriarch, Bibik Kim Choo, is secretly dating the neighbour boy from upstairs, Bibik Tau Yew's grandson. To me, Ah Nui is like a facilitator between audience and cast. Her reactions to all the drama that goes on in the household suggests to the audience that it is what we should be feeling too.

Some actors who have played *majies* in *wayang Peranakan* are veterans such as the late Baba Chee Hood Siong and Nyonya Sally Gan, as well as Nyonyas Jessie Cheang, Irene Ong, Mary Leong and Carol Lye. Female impersonators Babas Kelvin Tan (KT) and Lee Yong Ming (Ming) have also played memorable *majies*.

Nyonya Sharon Ong as a toddler with her amah at their family home in Chancery Lane, 1969.





Veteran actress, the late Nyonya Sally Gan as a majie.

## THE MAJIE AS A THEATRICAL TOOL

On stage, a *majie* injects comic relief into a play. Often, she is the only one who knows the whereabouts of everyone. While characters like the *bibik* are only ever seen in the living room or bedroom, the *majie* is seen in and out of the house running errands for her mistress, eavesdropping behind doorways or tidying up after someone. Many times, she is the last one to exit a scene. This is when she launches into a soliloquy, revealing new information about the plot and hints at what to expect in the following scenes. *Aiyee! Kus semangat!* Her exaggerated reactions never fail to elicit laughs from the crowd.



Baba GT Lye and Nyonya Irene Ong (as the majie in samfoo) in *Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih* (2004).

In *Kain Chik Dua Mungka* staged by GSA in 2017, female impersonator KT played one of the *majies*, Ah Man. Ah Man is on her way to the market when she spies the *bibik's* cherished daughter-in-law behaving intimately with the family driver. Once they exit the scene, Ah Man is left on stage to voice her outrage to the audience. She swishes her handkerchief wildly and laments about how she will tell her mistress about the illicit affair. In every play,

the relationship between audience and *majie* becomes very tangible because they follow the *majie* from scene to scene.

## PLAYING THE MEDDLESOME MAID

GSA's Baba Terry Lim, who grew up with a *majie*, tells me that the hardest part about playing one is getting the language and accent right. "A *majie* always speaks Baba Malay with *pehlat* (a strong (Chinese) accent). The running joke being that they work until they pengsan (faint)! Always *chakap pehlat, kena tekan* (speak with an accent and get teased)." The *majies* in plays have been consistently described as faithful and meddlesome.

I spoke to female impersonators Baba Lee Yong Ming, 61, and Baba Kelvin Tan, 49, who shared with me their experiences playing *majies* on stage.

**NATALIE CHEAH (NC):** How did you feel about acting as a *majie*?

**LEE YONG MING (LM):** I wasn't thrilled at first. I have been acting for 33 years, but have only played a *majie* for three years. I knew the role would be challenging role because my Cantonese was not so strong and I had to speak Baba Malay with *pehlat*. The *majie* also has to have good comedic timing because she injects humour as a *kaypoh* to endear the audience to the character.

**NC:** Did you have any role models that inspired your portrayal?

**M:** I was inspired by the late actress, Nyonya Sally Gan. To me, she was the best *majie* in *wayang Peranakan*.

**NC:** Baba Kelvin, how did you come to play a *majie*?

**KELVIN TAN (KT):** I played a *majie* for the first time in *Kain Chik Dua Mungka* last year. The role was originally intended for another actress, but she was not as fluent in Cantonese as I was, so we swapped roles. I have been acting with GSA since 1996. Previously I played a *nyonya* or the matriarch.

**NC:** Tell me how you prepared for the role.

**KT:** As an actor, I need to be versatile in being able to take up different roles. I have been exposed to Hokkien and Cantonese, so the language was not an issue for me. Usually the *majie* is the one who knows everyone's secrets, so I reminded myself to appear helpful yet nosy at the same time. This is what I remember of *majies* from old movies as well.

**NC:** What were your personal experiences of *majies*?

**KT:** Growing up, I would see *majies* at my aunt's house, at family gatherings and prayer sessions. They were very devoted and fastidious in their work. Watching Aunty Sally Gan and Baba Chee Hood Siong act as *majies* were references for me as well.

**NC:** Describe the rapport between you and Ming when you both played *majies* last year.

**KT:** Oh we had a good time and many laughs! Our characters, like the real life *majies*, were supposed to be like sisters who share each other's secrets, ups and downs. Ming and I would be in cahoots all the time during rehearsals.

*Majies* are rare these days. It's heart warming that these fiercely loyal, well-meaning but sometimes meddlesome, devoted helpers live on in *wayang Peranakan*...even if it's for just an evening of fun and drama. ♦



Female impersonators, Babas KT (left) and Ming (right) as *majies* in *Kain Chik Dua Mungka* (2017). Actress Cynthia Lee looks on.

# WHO WERE THE MAJIES?



Traditionally, the *majie* (妈姐), also commonly known as *amah*, was a single Cantonese female who took a vow of celibacy and worked as a domestic helper exclusively for one family. The Chinese characters in the term *majie* (*ma cheh* in Cantonese) literally mean mother (妈) and elder sister (姐); likely in reference to their work as trusted servants who took care of the children or as an indication of their spinsterhood. *Majies* donned a distinctive uniform of loose black trousers and a white *samfoo*, and often wore their hair in a single braid down the back, or in a neat bun.

In the past, many Peranakan households employed *majies* as they were renowned for their loyalty. It was common for a *majie* to work for three generations of the same family during her decades of long service. She devotes her life to the family and is treated as a family member. She is tasked with raising the children, and therefore has the right to scold or *sayang* (love) them as she sees fit, even when they have become adults. She is far more than just a mere servant and holds a unique position in the household.

# DAISY CHAN: THE STAR YOU NEVER KNEW

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE DISCOVERS THE STORY OF A BOLD BIBIK WHO TOOK TO THE STAGE | Photos courtesy of Nyonya Irene Poh



Precious souvenirs of a star: some photos from Daisy Chan's scrapbook. On the left, is a portrait of her as a young woman.



A scene from Kerhidopan Se Buta. The blind girl (Francis Hogan, kneeling) comforts her crying sister (Daisy Chan).



Members of the Singapore Pranakan Dramatic Party gathered in front of their President, Baba Tan Kim Lim's (seated in the front row, far right) home. Daisy Chan (in glasses) stands directly behind the bride (Francis Hogan); next to her is Nancy Ong, mother of theatre maven, Ivan Heng. Baba Lim Kim Geok stands in between the bride and groom.



The playbill of Kerhidopan Se Buta.

In the seven centuries since the word “inspire” came into the English language, it has had a number of related words, including several for “one that inspires”. “Inspirer”, “inspirant”, and, if you’re feeling a bit fancy, “inspirator”. There is also the rarely used “inspiratrix” which means “a woman who inspires”. The late Nyonya Daisy Chan was one such woman. My search to uncover her story, which has never been told, led me to her daughter, Nyonya Irene Poh, who has been singing with our Association’s choir, The Peranakan Voices, for nearly two decades.

I meet Irene at her spacious home in Serangoon Gardens. She greets me warmly and we settle into a cosy alcove – a canopied timber deck with a generous daybed, filled with colourful throw cushions and surrounded by a lush garden. Irene says that this is her favourite part of her house, where she feels “happy and relaxed”. It is fitting that this is where she shares the story of someone close to her heart. Excitedly, she brings out a precious scrapbook of newspaper clippings and black and white photos, many of which are bent and worn at the edges. The scrapbook was her mother’s and is falling apart, making the contents all the more precious.

“My mother was born in 1928 and grew up in Kampong Amber. She came from a traditional Baba family, but she was never afraid to follow her heart,” says Irene. “When my mother first got involved with *wayang Peranakan* in the 1950s, she was already a married woman with a full-time job and family responsibilities.” Irene’s mother, Daisy Chan Chye Neo, was a manager at the NAAFI (Navy, Army, Air Force Institutes) shop. NAAFI was the official trading organisation of Her Majesty’s Forces, providing retail and leisure services to the British Armed Forces stationed in Singapore. “It was a one stop shop that sold everything from furniture to electronics and clothing”, shares Irene.

“Mum loved to sing and was very keen on acting, but in those days, it wasn’t considered “proper” for nyonias to take to the stage. All the female roles were played by men like Baba Willam Tan, Georgie Lee and Francis Hogan, so she focused on singing *dondang sayang*, which she was very good at. She was very witty and good with the Peranakan language, so she could banter effortlessly”, recalls Irene.

## A RADICAL ROLE

In the 1950s, Daisy joined the Singapore Pranakan Dramatic Party, an amateur theatre group headed by a wealthy baba, Tan Kim Lim. Her big break came in 1958 when she was asked to take on a role in *Kerhidopan Se Buta* (A Blind Girl’s Fate), a stage play written by Francis Hogan, who had the starring role of the blind girl. Back then, even the Gunong Sayang Association was a strictly all-male group. Daisy was the very first nyonya to act in a wayang Peranakan play.

Irene proudly shows me a newspaper clipping from 1958 that states, “For the first time in a “baba” Chinese play, a feminine role will actually be acted by a woman...Daisy Chan who has not acted before, will take the part of one of the sisters of the blind girl.” Also in the production, were other women who played minor roles including Nyonya Nancy Ong (Daisy’s colleague at NAAFI), the mother of theatre maven, Baba Ivan Heng.

*Kerhidopan Se Buta* had an initial two night run on 29 and 30 May 1958 at the Happy World Stadium. The play was staged by the Singapore Pranakan Dramatic Party in aid of the Red Cross Crippled Children’s Home Fund. Tickets were sold for \$5, \$3, \$2 and \$1. (Editor’s note: For comparison,

a bowl of *kolo mee* in those days cost 30 cents, and a plate of *rojak*, 20 cents.) The cream of Peranakan society was in attendance, including prominent socialite, Mrs Lee Choon Guan, the “Diamond Queen of Singapore” (then 80 years old), who was seated in the front row in a silk *cheongsam*, bedecked in her customary diamonds.

“My mother told me that everything was put together in a rather short time. Although most of the cast had full-time jobs, they were very dedicated and had many rehearsals, which were held at the home of their group’s president, Baba Tan Kim Lim, at Boscombe Road. I was 10 years old at the time and was roped in to play the *anak kemanteng* (page girl) to the bride, played by Francis Hogan,” recalls Irene. As fate would have it, Irene and Francis would share a stage again 44 years later in *Bibiks Behind Bars*.

There was an elaborate Peranakan wedding procession in the play, and the cast wore heavy silk wedding robes including the phoenix collar, an authentic bridal headdress and real gold and diamond jewellery worth thousands of dollars, on loan from Madam Ah Bee, a *sangkek um* (mistress of ceremonies in a Peranakan wedding) who directed the play.



Daisy Chan performing in the 1960s. She sang on radio, TV and regularly performed at parties and charity events.



The audience watching Kerhidopan Se Buta at Happy World Stadium (1958). Among them, prominent nyonya socialite, Mrs Lee Choon Guan (front row, 4th from left) who was then 80 years old.



Kerhidopan Se Buta was a huge success and played to a full house.



Daisy Chan (standing) on stage scolding her sister in the play (Francis Hogan, kneeling).

## THE BUDDING STAR

"Although it was my mother's first time acting on stage, she played her role so well that a newspaper published a special tribute to her titled *A Budding Star!* I was so thrilled and proud to see my mother's photo in the newspaper," says Irene. Daisy was quoted in the same article saying, "It is hard for Straits Chinese women to come forward to act, but I hope that more will come forward to support us."

Another newspaper clipping that Irene shows me reported that the initial run of the play "was a tremendous success" and due to popular demand, was staged again on 27 June 1958.

Buoyed by her stage success, Daisy continued to sing and act. She starred in a weekly radio show produced by Ibrahim Isa where she sang *dondang sayang* "live". At these sessions, she often sang with Baba William Tan and Baba Lim Kim Geok (popularly known as Inche Geok), who was toothless and sang in a lady's voice. She also appeared regularly on television, singing *dondang sayang*. "There were no other nyonias during that time doing such things. It was a big deal to appear on TV back then!" exclaims Irene proudly.



The wedding entourage in Kerhidopan Se Buta (1958). Daisy Chan's daughter, Irene Poh, is the page girl to the left of the bride (Francis Hogan) and groom (Walter Koh). The sangkek um, Madam Ah Bee, stands on the extreme left, in baju panjang.

## LIVING A MOTHER'S LEGACY

"I admire my mother's talent. She was a fantastic singer and I am nowhere near as good as her," says Irene. "I am ashamed to say that unlike my mother, I was not involved in the Peranakan circles at all for many years, especially after I got married as my husband is not Baba. I was busy raising my family and lost touch with the culture. I didn't teach my children any Baba Malay."

Irene says with deep regret that it was only after her mother passed away at 69 years old in 1997 that she felt the urgency to re-connect with her roots. "I felt that I had lost my chance to learn more about my heritage from her. I had to do something. Her death prompted me to join The Peranakan Association and the choir too. It was my way of holding on to her."

"When I joined the Peranakan Voices, I started my journey to rediscover my roots. I recaptured memories of my mum's singing. From the traditional Baba Malay and English songs we practice, to the old sayings and *pantons* that I share with my choir mates, all these have kept my memories of my mother alive."

Irene says that she has "lots of regrets that for many decades, I was not in tune with my mother's love for everything Peranakan", but she quickly adds that her mother would be "so proud if she had the chance to see me in my kebayas now, singing and doing the *rongeng*".

In 2002, Irene was reunited on stage with Francis Hogan in *Bibiks Behind Bars*. "He had not seen me for over 40 years, since I was that little page girl in *Kerhidopan Se Buta*. When I told him that I was Daisy Chan's daughter, he remembered me immediately. He was very sad to hear that she had passed on."

Irene shared that one of her "most treasured momentos" is a recording of her mother singing *dondang sayang* with Baba William Tan and Inche Geok at a Chinese New Year show. "When I listen to it, it is as though she is with me again. She is my special star who will shine on forever." ♦



To listen to Daisy Chan singing *dondang sayang* with William Tan and Inche Geok, scan the QR Code here, or go to [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)



# KERBOON MAMA

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE DELIGHTS IN THIS ENDEARING POEM BY NYONYA AILEEN LAU ABOUT A BIBIK'S GARDEN, FULL OF MEDICINAL HERBS THAT SHE USES TO HEAL HER FAMILY

Mama, kooping saya sakit skali.  
Oy! Chu-chu sayang! Nanti serkerjap,  
Mama p ergi pertek da-oon kooping  
Perah ayer dia masok kooping sayang.

Mama! Kenapa saya batok macham lama berloam baik lagi?  
Oy! Chu-chu sayang! Mama pi pertek  
Da-oon kerpa yang ahrohna ijoh sama perpahru  
Rerboos sama goola china kasi sayang minohm.

Mama! Neo saya punya tah-ngan selalu naik kerootan  
Oy! Chu-chu sayang! Kat kerboon mama  
Pergi-lah amek da-oon ahleepahn  
Kasi neo pahkay kerootan dia boleh baik.

Mama! Ng-kua saya kena lung-gah siong terok  
Oy! Chu-chu sayang! Mesti pertek da-oon ahroda  
Yang da-oon dia ahloos-ahloos tahpee bah-oo boosoak skali  
Toombok da-oon amek ayer dia minohnm.

Mama! Mama punya chik-chik bahdan ada banyak ahngin  
Oy! Chu-che sayang! Mesti jaga ahnak baik-baik  
Kasi-lah dia minohm ayer da-oon poh-ho  
Da-oon kersoam sama da-oon kermahngi poon pookohl ahngin.

By Nyonya Aileen Lau Guek Lin, 5 October 1993

Aileen's poem is presented here with the Baba Malay spelling in which it was published.

# GRANDMA'S GARDEN

Grandma my ear aches badly  
O my beloved grandchild, just a moment  
I will pluck the medicinal ear leaf  
To drip the juice into your ears.

Grandma! Why I cant recover from my bad cough?  
O my beloved grandchild, Grandma will pluck  
The green and maroon coloured kerpa leaf  
To boil with Chinese rock sugar for you to drink.

Grandma! Why are my mother-in-law's hands always numb  
O my beloved grandchild, go to grandma's garden  
And get the centipede leaves  
Apply on her hands to get rid of the numbness

Grandma! My father-in-law has been badly injured in an accident  
O my beloved grandchild, Pound the ahroda leaves  
Those leaves are so tiny but smell so bad  
Pound them and let him drink the juice.

Grandma! Your great grandchild has lot of wind in his body.  
O my beloved grandchild, you must take good care of the baby.  
Let him drink the mixture of mint,  
Laksa leaves and basil leaves to rid his body of wind.

English translation by Baba GT Lye.



## HERBS IN GRANDMA'S GARDEN



**Daon Kuping**  
Earlobe leaf  
(*Anthurium crystallinum*)



**Daon Kepah**  
Moses-in-the-cradle  
(*Tradescantia spathacea*)



**Daon Alipan**  
Devil's Backbone  
(*Euphorbia thymaloides*)



**Daon Aroda**  
Common Rue  
(*Ruta graveolens*)



**Daon Pok-Oh**  
Peppermint  
(*Mentha piperita*)



**Daon Kesom**  
Laksa leaves  
(*Polygonum minus*)



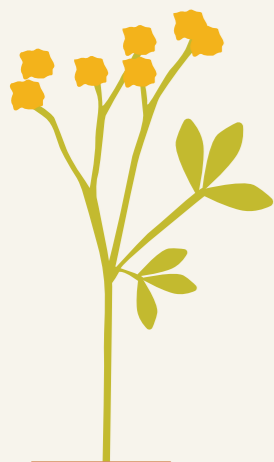
**Daon Kemangi**  
Sweet Basil  
(*Ocimum basilicum*)



Nyonya Aileen Lau passed away on 10 April 1994 at the age of 44.

Nyonya Aileen Lau's collection of poems, *Face to Faith*, was written during her two-year battle with jaw cancer. During this time, she became blind in one eye, lost the ability to speak and her hearing was also impaired. Throughout all this, she never gave up hope for life. Aileen was proud of her Peranakan heritage and was an active researcher of Baba Malay, which was the subject of her dissertation for her Master's Degree in Linguistics and English Language Teaching. ♦

*Face to Faith* is available from Ethos Books at [www.ethosbooks.com.sg](http://www.ethosbooks.com.sg)



*Rumah Kim Choo*  
111 East Coast Road, Singapore 428801

Ready-made and bespoke kebayas & kasut manek for the discerning Nyonya!

Visit us today for a free fitting session with our Fashion & Boutique Director

**Raymond Wong**



Kim Choo's Nyonya rice dumplings have been a favourite in Singapore's diverse epicurean tapestry since 1945.

Today, Kim Choo offers a wide variety of products and services which embody Peranakan culture and capture the spirit of Nanyang.



[ Website ] <https://www.kimchoo.com> [ Hotline ] +65 6741 2125

Do enquire about our private tours and Tok Panjang sessions too!



## Authentic Peranakan Tiles

ASTER BY KYRA RECOVERS ORIGINAL PERANAKAN TILES FROM OLD BUILDINGS AND RESTORES THEM TO BE SOLD INDIVIDUALLY OR AS WALL FEATURES. CUSTOMIZATION OF THESE TILES ARE ALSO WELCOME!



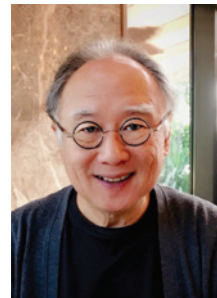
168 TELOK AYER STREET, SINGAPORE 068619 | [WWW.ASTERBYKYRA.SG](http://WWW.ASTERBYKYRA.SG) | TEL : 6684 8600 | OPEN DAILY FROM 12PM TO 5PM



# FORGING AHEAD WITH TEAM TPAS

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE SPEAKS TO NEWLY-ELECTED TPAS PRESIDENT, BABA COLIN CHEE, ON HIS THOUGHTS AND PLANS FOR REVITALISATION | Photo by Nyonya Linda Chee

**DAWN MARIE LEE (DML):** Where are we now, just over three months since the new General Committee (GC) was elected?



TPAS president, Baba Colin Chee was elected on 27 May 2018.

**COLIN CHEE (CC):** Much of my time has been spent rebuilding relationships and refining connections. It has been worthwhile. What is most gratifying is that members have started stepping up to volunteer their time after following our monthly postings on the TPAS Facebook page, website and email updates.

Our latest membership audit shows that one-third of our members are

above 70 years old. Our concern is that many of them may not be using the internet and may not be receiving our communications other than this print magazine.

I encourage the use of digital channels - Facebook, TPAS website and email updates - as it is the best way to keep in touch with members. I urge members to help us pass our online information to other members who are not conversant with technology, especially information about activities and upcoming events, like our Christmas Malam Jolly. We want to cast our net as widely as possible. If you have missed our online updates, I am pleased to report that since being elected, the GC has achieved a good portion of what it set out to do in these early months.



## Steadily Moving Forward

**DML:** How has the GC begun to fulfill the objectives stated in your election manifesto?

**CC:** A great deal of time and effort in these recent months have been spent on *unifying* and *stabilising* TPAS. We have:

- 1 Successfully and smoothly transitioned from the previous to the current GC, thanks to the hard work of the teams involved.
- 2 Reached out to estranged parties and started rebuilding bridges of understanding.
- 3 Almost fully reconciled our membership database through digitalisation.
- 4 Started to ensure that workflows satisfy our standards of efficiency, governance and compliance with government regulations.
- 5 Set up an organisational structure to allow for efficiency and accountability.
- 6 Started harnessing technology in our work, communications and to eventually allow for joint programmes with partners to benefit members and grow our membership.
- 7 Started renewing relationships with our key partners and stakeholders.

We have just started focusing on *growth*, through to the end of our term in early 2020. These include plans to:

- 1 Reinforce and iterate TPAS's reputation as the champion, authority and voice of Peranakan culture.
- 2 Have a comprehensive youth outreach and general membership drive, locally and overseas.
- 3 Review our Constitution to enable all of the above.

## Updating our Member Database

This has not been an easy task as details were often missing from old records. For example, many of our senior members joined TPAS when mobile phones or email was not yet in use.

I would like to thank Nyonya Koh Hwei Ling from the previous GC, and Nyonya Agnes Ng in our current GC, for doggedly working to update our membership database. Our Membership Database Reconciliation Sub-committee, headed by Baba Philip Yeo, has also helped in the process.

We have a little more way to go, including digitalisation of the database while respecting the parameters set by Singapore's PPDA (Personal Data Privacy Act). I strongly urge all members who have not updated us with your current contact details to do so. Help us to keep in touch with you.

**DML:** What are you most excited about right now?

**CC:** I am really excited that we have a good team in the GC, our magazine and our choir. We all share the same vision to keep our Peranakan culture alive, and the same mission to educate and enrich the lives of our members, both Peranakans and non-Peranakans alike. I am also invigorated that the same enthusiasm is catching on with more TPAS members who have agreed to volunteer their time. This is something I totally did not expect - that members would respond to our digital posts and come forward!

## Milestones to Celebrate

We have a string of anniversaries to look forward to.

In 2019, TPAS will celebrate the Silver Anniversary (25 years) of our beloved magazine, *The Peranakan!*

In 2020, the Peranakan Voices will turn 20, and TPAS will be a grand 120 years!

TPAS was registered with the Registrar of Societies on 23 February 1966. However, the conversation about our lineage and pedigree goes further back in history.

### 1900

We can proudly trace the origin of TPAS back to the formation of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) on 17 August 1900. The SCBA was founded by Peranakans Tan Jiak Kim, Seah Liang Seah, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang to represent the Straits Chinese community in Singapore.



SCBA's first president, Baba Tan Jiak Kim.

### 1964

The SCBA was renamed Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association (SCPA) on 7 December 1964 after Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.



Baba Ong Tiang Wee, President, 1948-1992.

### 1966

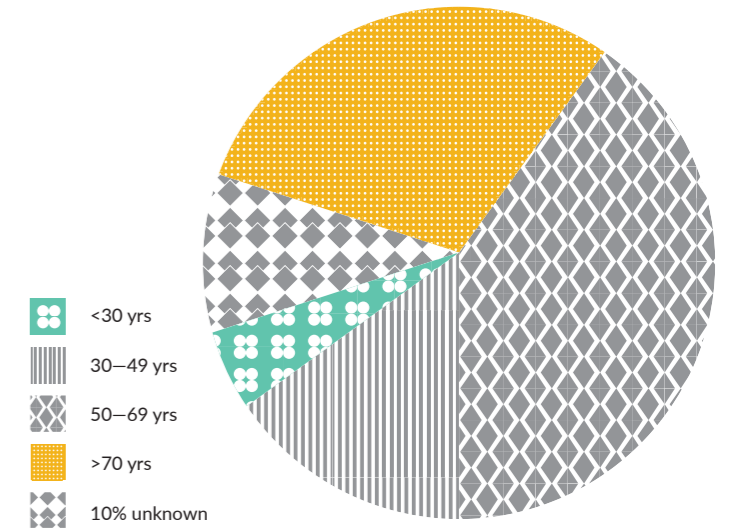
SCPA transitioned into The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) on 23 February 1966, six months after the split with Malaysia.



## Biggest Concerns

**DML:** What are your chief concerns?

**CC:** Funding is a big issue, but I am most concerned about our ageing membership profile.



As at mid-August 2018, we have 1,916 members - 33 percent are over 70 years, 41 percent are between 50 and 69 years, 15 percent are between 30 and 49 years, 1 per cent are below 30 years. For the remaining 10 per cent, we do not have details of their age at the time of registration nor date of birth.

This profile sends a very clear message: How do we make our culture relevant to interest our young? If we cannot attract our youth into our ranks, TPAS membership will erode with attrition. Our culture will become a casualty as well.

In my casual conversations with young nyonyas and babas, and non-Peranakan youths, the key take-away is not disinterest, but the lack of active engagement. We have hope! Our Constitution may need to be amended to allow youths to join the association. Currently, the minimum age for membership is 18 years.

## Being Inclusive

**DML:** What else is on your mind?

**CC:** Before the elections in May, I heard comments and questions from members to the effect, "Is he a true-blue Peranakan? He can't even speak Baba Malay!", or "She is not Peranakan, so why is she in the GC?".

Let's put this to rest. TPAS is not exclusively for Peranakans alone. TPAS has always endeavored to be an inclusive association. Our Constitution is very clear that TPAS membership is open to all - Peranakans and non-Peranakans from Singapore and the world. TPAS, as a heritage and cultural association, is chartered to promote our Peranakan culture to anyone who has an interest in it. If we wish to see Peranakan culture endure, we must all play a part to keep it vibrant and alive! ♦

## Activities for Members

### JUNE

Our choir, the Peranakan Voices (PVs), performed at the Peranakan Museum's FilterLife festival.

### JULY

TPAS partnered with the Singapore International Jewellery Expo to provide members with privileged access to the fair.

### AUGUST

Our Jogjakarta and Solo Batik Tour was well received.

The PVs performed at a fund-raising dinner for the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore.

### SEPTEMBER

A tea to welcome new members.

### NOVEMBER

ATPAS delegation of 70 members will attend the annual Baba & Nyonya Convention hosted by Pertiwi in Tangerang, Indonesia.

An artist will conduct a Peranakan-themed Children's Art Workshop.

### DECEMBER

Our first ever Christmas Malam Jolly will be a super-festive *laajiat* on the same auspicious day as *Tang Chek*, for members, their families and friends.

# DEDICATED TO AN ANCIENT ART

NYONYA LINDA CHEE APPLAUDS A RARE RECOGNITION OF TALENT IN KYOTO | Photos courtesy of Baba Leonard Lim

Baba Leonard Lim's pure talent in ikebana, or the art of Japanese floral arrangement, has brought him where no other non-Japanese has been. In April 2018, the top student in the 600-year old Ikenobo school was given the rare honour of arranging white chrysanthemums at the annual flower offering ceremony known as Hana Kuyo. The traditional ceremony



A great honour: Leonard arranging flowers at the Hana Kuyo ceremony at the Rokkakudo Temple.

was held in downtown Kyoto at the Rokkakudo Temple, which is renowned as the birthplace of ikebana in Japan.

Leonard's romance with the ancient Ikenobo art form continues to be as fresh as the day he started lessons 29 years ago in Singapore. Then, Japanese professors flew down regularly to teach students at a small "culture room" in the C K Tang department store. Where I dropped out of ikebana classes after three years, Leonard continued apace and has qualified to teach students. He recently completed four years of general studies in Kyoto, in between juggling his work as a dentist, graduating in February this year at the top of his cohort.

Leonard is now onto a three-year advanced course in Rikka. This is the



A traditional Rikka-style arrangement using local floral materials.

most traditional of floral forms, which he will study under the tutelage of Professor Nishida Haruka, also known as "The King of Pine". At the time of print, Leonard was preparing to fly to Johannesburg to demonstrate the art. His ambition is simply to be an international "ambassador" for ikebana. "It will be my retirement career too," he quips. ♦

**IKENOBO LESSONS** with Baba Leonard are generally on second and fourth Fridays of the month at the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) Centre at 96 Waterloo Street. Please contact Leonard at [leonardlim.48@gmail.com](mailto:leonardlim.48@gmail.com) or on his mobile at 96895549.

# THE KEBAYA GOES TO TEDx

NYONYA DR LEE SU KIM TELLS NYONYA LINDA CHEE ABOUT GIVING THE MOST FORMIDABLE TALK OF HER LIFE

She is no stranger on the world stage. But Nyonya Dr Lee Su Kim said her greatest challenge was when she gave a TEDx talk on Peranakan culture, recorded for a global audience, in Kuala Lumpur on 28 October 2017.

The stage was at Dewan San Choon in Wisma MCA. Su Kim had to look cool, composed and articulate while engaging an audience of over 1,500 people. She spoke with no notes, no comfort of a lectern to stand behind, and with a timer in front of her "ticking the minutes away". She made split-second glances at two floor prompters who switched her slides, all the time looking natural and at ease, but not stepping out of a circular red carpet lest she moved out of the camera frame.

Such were the fraught demands of that 15-minute slot in which Su Kim's pink kebaya and chili-red sarong took centre stage.

It was all well worth it, after it was over, for the sake of "sharing the beauty" of a unique living culture that embraced a myriad of cultures. "I was invited by TEDxPetalingStreet to talk about the Babas and Nyonyas to an audience that did not know much about the Peranakans. The TEDx curators told me so little is known about this fascinating sub-culture of the overseas Chinese in South-east Asia

and its origins," relates Su Kim. Her presentation was to a largely Mandarin-speaking audience of Malaysians who were conversant in English and Malay as well.

"What an incredible journey and experience!" she declares. "I gained a better understanding of a segment of society I did not interact much with." The "excellent line-up" of speakers, ranging from corporate giants, entrepreneurs, scientists and innovators to artistes, contrasted with Su Kim's cultural discourse.

TED talks - to spread the spirit of powerful ideas - are "a brilliant way of empowerment", Su Kim says. "The audience was energetic, responsive and very appreciative, lapping up the ideas thrown up by the speakers. Inspiration flowed both ways."

She spoke with so much verve that a YouTube viewer commented, "The passion shines through". ♦



Su Kim presenting Peranakan culture on a global stage.



**TEDxPETALINGSTREET** is an independent Malaysian offshoot of the TED conference programme which posts talks online in more than 100 languages for free distribution. Nyonya Su Kim's talk was officially released in March 2018 on YouTube. At time of print, it has chalked up over 19,000 views. To watch Su Kim's talk, scan the QR Code here or go to the TPAS website, [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)

# ARTIST SHOWS AT ICONIC LONDON GALLERY

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE COMMENTS ALVIN ONG ON A RECENT HONOUR | Photos courtesy of Alvin Ong

Singapore artist, Alvin Ong, 30, had the prestigious honour of having his work shown at the National Portrait Gallery, London from June to September 2018. Founded in 1856, the National Portrait Gallery has one of the world's most extensive collections of portraiture. Alvin is one of only two Singaporean artists who have had their work shown at the gallery.

Alvin's work, titled *Charlie Masson*, was one of the 48 artworks selected in the esteemed BP Portrait Award out of a total of 2,667 entries from 88 countries. The annual competition represents the "very best in contemporary portrait painting". The oil portrait, described by TimeOut London as "trippy take

on Van Gogh's post-impressionist aesthetic", is of Alvin's friend and studio-mate, Charlie, whom he met while in residence at the Royal Drawing School, Scotland. The residency allowed Alvin to review his practice away from familiar surroundings and also meet alumni of the school, including Charlie. The portrait was made in Charlie's studio on the last day of Alvin's residency and is a souvenir of their friendship.

A graduate of the Ruskin School of Art, Alvin's work has been seen in group exhibitions in Singapore, Sydney and London. He is currently preparing for a solo show in Singapore which opens during Art Week in January 2019. ♦



Charlie Masson by Alvin Ong.

READ MORE about Alvin's work at [alvin-ong.com](http://alvin-ong.com) and on Instagram @alvinongjl!

# GENOME PROJECT UPDATE

DR ROGER FOO SHARES SOME INITIAL RESULTS FROM THIS GROUNDBREAKING STUDY

The Peranakan Chinese are descendants of early Chinese immigrants who settled in the Malay Archipelago between the 15th and 17th centuries. Peranakan culture is a unique mix of Chinese traditions with strong Malay cultural influences. Yet, whether genetic admixture co-occurred with the cultural mixture is debatable even among the Peranakan community.

To answer this question with solid genetic evidence, the A\*STAR Genome Institute of Singapore and the National University of Singapore initiated the Singapore Peranakan Genome Project in June 2017. DNA samples were collected from 177 Singapore Peranakan participants and whole genomes were sequenced at ~15X. About 94% of the participants are Peranakan Chinese, and 60% are females. At time of print, we have analysed 79 Peranakan genomes together with additional whole genome data of Chinese, Malays, and Indians in Singapore, as well as Southern Chinese and Northern Chinese from an international public dataset generated by the 1000 Genomes Project.

## STRONG GENETIC EVIDENCE OF MALAY ANCESTRY

Using a statistical technique called principal component analysis, our preliminary analysis results show that Peranakan Chinese (compared to the general Chinese population in Singapore) have a small, but noticeable shift of genetic similarity toward Malays, indicating

potential mixed ancestry from Malays. Using population genetics methods, we further estimated the Malay ancestry proportion is  $\sim 0.110 \pm 0.009$  (mean  $\pm$  s.e.m, standard error of the mean) in Peranakan Chinese, which is substantially higher than the estimated Malay ancestry in Southern Chinese ( $\sim 0.032 \pm 0.004$ ) and Northern Chinese ( $\sim 0.008 \pm 0.003$ ). These preliminary results provide strong genetic evidence to support the hypothesis that genetic admixture co-occurred with cultural mixture in the formation of the Peranakan Chinese community.

## MALAY ANCESTRY PROPORTION



We look forward to analysing the full dataset of 177 Peranakan DNA samples collected. We plan to include more ancestry reference populations, such as Europeans, and use more advanced analytical techniques to reveal the admixture history of Peranakans, including when the admixture happened and whether the intermarriage occurred more frequently between Chinese males and Malay females. Our study, when completed, will provide genetic insights to the history of Singapore Peranakans. ♦

# RELIVE BITTERSWEET KAMPONG MEMORIES

BABA COLIN CHEE REVIEWS NYONYA JOSEPHINE CHIA'S LATEST BOOK

Nyonya Josephine Chia's book, *Goodbye My Kampong! Potong Pasir, 1966 to 1975*, resonates with me. I spent some of my childhood years from the late 1950s in a rented SIT flat next to a large Chinese *kampong* (village) (where my best friends lived) at the foot of Bukit Gombak. During the school holidays, I would roam the Chinese and Malay *kampongs* of Joo Chiat.

Josephine's simple, intimate yet effective prose succeeds, perhaps unintentionally, in rekindling forgotten feelings and memories of childhood hurts, fears, tears, anxieties, hunger, simple joys and fast friendships.

She recalls the stories of her childhood with an uncanny sense of humor mixed with stark reality. She shares an anecdote about Singapore's overly successful attempt at family planning: "Maternity and health clinics were quickly built, especially in rural areas, where it was not uncommon for families to have eight or more children. The rural folks were not easy to persuade. When they were taught the use of condoms to prevent conception, this was what they said grumpily: "How can you enjoy eating a banana with its skin on?"

She writes about her family's excitement over flush toilets: "...we were beside ourselves with joyous anticipation at the thought that we might get flush toilets in the very near future, so that we no longer had to tolerate the disgusting, horrid smelling *jamban* (outhouse)..." To which her mother wistfully said, "Imagine if we had flush toilets, I wouldn't have to empty the *tam pui* (chamber pot) anymore."

Also in the book, are poignant stories about her poverty-stricken friends in Potong Pasir, and how she resisted her father's plans to marry her off soon after puberty.

In the early years of PAP rule in the 1960s, our first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, saw

universal education as the great equalizer to help poor families improve their lives. For many though, it came too late. As Josephine observed, touchingly: "Education gave us a precious key to opportunities which we did not have before. But people like Abu, Fatima and our dear, departed friend Parvathi, had missed the boat. I got upset when

people called my kampong friends stupid because they could not speak English and were not learned. They might be ignorant, but they were never stupid. They simply lacked opportunities and choices."

While Josephine's father wanted to marry her off after puberty (for that was what many Chinese families did back then), her mother saw to it that she received a proper education. She paid for her daughter's school fees by doing laundry for neighbours and selling *nasi lemak* door to door. With her mother's support, Josephine finished her Cambridge School Certificate (today's 'O' Levels) and found a job as a dental nurse. A good education meant that Josephine's years of hunger would be over; when her family of eight had to share a single piece of mackerel, or plain rice with just one egg and soya sauce.

For many in my generation, these memories may hit too uncomfortably close to home.

Josephine says that this book, which is a sequel to her earlier, *Kampong Spirit - Gotong Royong*, "is my final goodbye to my own kampong, to all the kampongs in Singapore, and a now extinct way of life." But she observes, "To revive the kampong spirit, we don't have to give up our flush toilets or the Internet. All we need to do is to set aside our smartphones and make some quality time to gather family and friends, and talk, face to face." ♦



GOODBYE MY KAMPONG! POTONG PASIR, 1966 TO 1975

by Nyonya Josephine Chia is published by Ethos Books and available on [www.ethosbooks.com.sg](http://www.ethosbooks.com.sg)

# MARI CHAKAP BABA

BABA KENNETH CHAN TALKS ABOUT HIS COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO BABA MALAY | Photo by Baba Alvin Oon

The *Mari Chakap Baba* book came about after my wife Amelyn and I took an interest in reconnecting with our roots. This led us to participate in the *Mari Kita Chakap Baba* class run by Gunong Sayang Association (GSA). It was an incredibly enlightening experience, and we wanted to help.

The Baba language has only an estimated 1,000 speakers left in Singapore (and maybe another 1,000 in Melaka), making it an endangered language. As such, there was an immediate need to preserve and revitalise the language. Unlike the material aspects of Peranakan culture like clothing, cuisine and porcelain that have continued to gain interest within and beyond the community, the non-material culture such as rituals, beliefs, and language, is at tangible risk. We felt that something had to be done to promote the use of Baba Malay.

Both Amelyn and I have a background in anthropology and linguistics, and are both language teachers by profession, so we were naturally interested in looking at a study of Baba Malay in a way that formalised the grammatical rules of the language.

We soon became more involved with GSA, and I offered to write a book. We engaged with members of the community, who were always willing to help as we endeavoured to get information from a variety of sources. We were especially fortunate to have Inchek William Gwee guide us through some of the finer details and particularities of the language during our research. Inchek Gwee was always willing to explain the more obscure terms, and never shies away from correcting any errors I may have made in our conversations, or my attempts at writing my own panton. Some of the words that I have chosen to use in the book include a small selection of more obscure ones that, possibly, contemporary users may be unfamiliar with. These include terms such as *angkat pot* (to do menial work), *mashohor* (famous), and *terokshen* (to suffer greatly).



The book itself is aimed at learners who have little or no knowledge of the language and to bring them to a level of fluency where they can independently use the language in most everyday situations. The book also comes with audio recordings voiced by veteran *wayang* (theatre) actors from GSA such as Audrey Tan, Lee Yong Ming, Kelvin Tan, and Cynthia Lee - which lends a certain authenticity while bringing alive the characters in the dialogue sections found in the book.

Ultimately, the book was a labour of love for the Baba culture. While it is by no means perfect, we hope that this book will spark a greater interest in the Baba culture, and the revitalisation of the language. ♦

## MARI CHAKAP BABA

may be purchased from GSA. Please email [ken@gsa.org.sg](mailto:ken@gsa.org.sg) or call Nyonya Jacqueline Tan at +65 91097585.



# ODE TO THE COCONUT

BABA ONG JIN TEONG WAXES LYRICAL ABOUT HUMBLE KELAPA IN PART ONE OF THIS TWO-PART SERIES | Photos by Baba Ong Jin Teong

Would you risk your life for a fruit? As children, my elder brother and I spent a lot of time at our aunt's house in Penang where there were many coconut trees, abundant with fruit. The promise of sweet, cool coconut water on a hot day was too tempting to resist, so we quickly learned to climb up the tall coconut trees by trial and error.

Climbing a coconut tree is no easy feat. Unlike other trees which have multiple branches to help you ascend, you need to "hug" a coconut tree trunk with strong arms and feet to scale it straight up from ground to crown. It was hard work, but it was worth it! My brother and I would thirstily gulp down the sweet coconut water and savour the tender flesh by using a small piece of the hard shell as a scoop. We were barely 10 years old then. I wonder how many parents today would allow their children to climb a tree, let alone a 20-metre tall coconut tree!

## NUX INDICA

One of the earliest descriptions of the coconut was recorded by Marco Polo in 1280 while on a voyage in Sumatra. He called the fruit Nux Indica (Indian nut). It is generally accepted that the origins of the coconut can be traced to the India-Indonesia region. In South East Asian cuisine, coconut is one of the most indispensable ingredients after rice. Nyonya cuisine would be vastly different if there were no coconut trees in the region.

In Part One of this article, I will discuss the parts of the coconut that can be used with food. The grated flesh and the *santan* (coconut milk obtained by squeezing grated coconut) are essential to nyonya dishes. I will describe how the inflorescence is tapped for *gula melaka* and *toddy*. Coconut leaves are traditionally used to wrap food like *otak-otak*, *ketupat* and the midrib stem for *satay*.

## COCONUT VARIETIES

At one of my cooking demonstrations, I was asked what variety of coconut should be used. This made me ponder. Nowadays, we are not given a choice when buying coconut at the market. Many varieties of coconut exist, but unfortunately most are not commercially available.

Two common varieties are the traditional tall trees and the dwarf coconut trees. The dwarf varieties produce fruit of different colours, ranging from green to yellow, orange, brown and even red. The dwarf variety fruits earlier compared to the tall variety, and the coconut water inside is sweeter. There are also coconut varieties that have a pandan flavour.

Coconuts range in size from about 12 cm to 25 cm in diameter and about 15cm to 30 cm in height. They grow in bunches of about ten coconuts. Coconuts are commonly sold in markets with the husk (mesocarp) already removed, leaving just the hard shell (endocarp). The size and shape depends on where the coconut originated. In South East Asia, most of the husked coconuts for sale are nearly round. In British supermarkets, you find elliptical shaped coconuts from Africa and round ones from Sri Lanka or India.

### DIFFERENT COCONUT VARIETIES



## EDIBLE PARTS OF THE FRUIT

The hard shell of the coconut encloses the coconut flesh (endosperm). The endosperm is initially suspended within the coconut water. The young embryo is commonly known as *tombong kelapa* in markets. As the fruit develops, cellular layers of endosperm deposit along the walls of the coconut, becoming the edible coconut flesh.

There is a dark thin layer surrounding the flesh. This layer is normally removed if the grated coconut is to be served fresh with *kueh*. If the grated coconut is to be squeezed for *santan* for cooking, the dark layer is left intact.



Tombong kelapa (coconut embryo) found in a coconut.

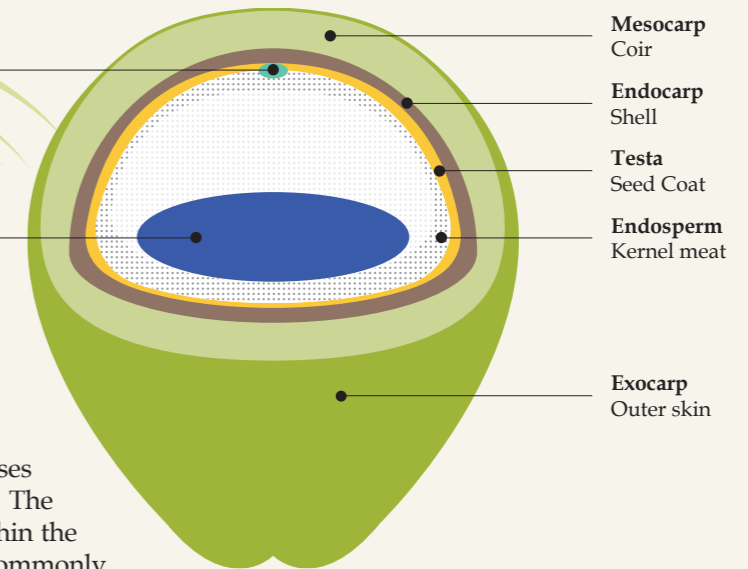
The volume within the kernel contains the coconut water. In a young coconut, it is completely full. The amount of water inside decreases as the coconut matures. If you are selecting a mature coconut, shake it to check if it has a good amount of water in it. If there is no water it is likely to be a rotten coconut.

Fresh grated coconut is an essential ingredient for nyonya kuehs such as *kueh koswi*, *onde-onde*, *kueh lopes* and *abok abok*. Slowly fried grated coconut is used for *kerisik* and *sesagun*. *Inti*, grated coconut cooked with *gula melaka*, is a filling for many nyonya kueh such as *pulut inti* and *kueh kochi*, a Northern nyonya kueh similar to *kueh bongkong*.



Fresh grated coconut is used for *onde-onde* and *sesagun*.

When the grated coconut is squeezed we get *santan* - a liquid similar to dairy cream. It is an important ingredient for preparing kuehs like *pulut tatair*, *kueh bengka*, *kueh lapis* and *kaya* (coconut and egg jam). *Santan* is also used in cooking rice to give it the *lemak* (creamy) texture in dishes such as *nasi lemak* and *nasi kunyit*. Similarly coconut milk is added to certain curries like chicken curry, *curry kapitan* and *laksa lemak*. *Santan* is a crucial ingredient in the nyonya *laksa* and for desserts like sago pudding, *pulut hitam* and *chendol*.



## GULA MELAKA & TODDY FROM INFLORESCENCE

The inflorescence or coconut sap collected from incising the tip of the flower clusters of the coconut tree can be made into several edible products like *gula melaka* (palm sugar), *toddy*, *arrack*, *vinegar*, and yeast. The fresh sap is boiled to reduce the water content to obtain a syrup or boiled further and traditionally poured into sections of bamboo to solidify into cylindrical blocks. This dark brown sugar is *gula melaka*. Similar products can be obtained from the palmyra and nipah palm which is common in Indochina and India.



The sap of coconut flowers is used to make *gula melaka* and *toddy*.



Blocks of *gula melaka*.

If left to ferment slightly, the coconut sap would become *toddy*, an unpleasant smelling sour brew which was once popular as "poor man's alcohol". During colonial times, *toddy* used to be sold at government-controlled establishments all over Malaya and Singapore. In Malaysia today, shops selling *toddy* can still be found.



Bottles of commercial *arrack* (coconut spirit) sold in Sri Lanka.

*Toddy* was used in place of yeast as a rising agent in many old recipes. I recall buying *toddy* for my mother at the *toddy* store in Pulau Tikus, Penang. I vividly remember trying to avoid the customers who had too much to drink! Interestingly, my cousin had the same experience in Singapore. Further fermentation of *toddy* produces *vinegar*, while *arrack* is the alcoholic spirit obtained from the distillation of *toddy*.



Lidi, the midrib of the coconut leaflet, has many uses including satay sticks and brooms.

## COCONUT LEAVES & LIDI

Coconut trees have leaflets on either side of the leaf stalk. The different parts of the coconut leaves are used in the preparation of Malay and nyonya foods like satay, *ketupat* and *otak-otak*. The young, yellowish green leaflets are used for wrapping rice in *ketupat* and for weaving.

In Singapore, the mature coconut leaflets are used for wrapping *otak-otak* and pinned together with *lidi*. In Penang, nyonya *otak-otak*, *kueh kochi santan* and *rempah udang* are wrapped in banana leaves, which are pinned together using short lengths of *lidi*. Coconut leaves are also used to weave mats for drying food.

*Lidi* (pronounced 'lili' by the Penang Hokkiens) is the midrib of the coconut leaflet obtained by stripping away the leafy parts.

Our younger generation may not know that the original *satay* sticks were made from *lidi* because virtually all the *satay* sticks nowadays are made from bamboo. These midribs, when bunched together, are still used today as brooms, called *sapu lidi* especially for use in gardens and wet areas.



A *belangah* (earthen pot with round base) held upright by a *lekar* (pot holder) made from *lidi* (midrib of the coconut leaflet).

The *lidi* can be woven into baskets, fruit trays and pot holders known as *lekar* (in Malay) and *bok keng loak* (literally, earthen pot down) in Hokkien. The earthen pot or *belangah* used for cooking curry has a round, curved base like a wok, so the *lekar* is necessary to hold the pot upright. Both the *belangah* and *lekar* are still used in my kitchen.

## HARVESTING COCONUTS

In the early 1950s, my family moved away from the city to what was then an *ulu* (rural) area in Pulau Tikus, Penang. There, we had several coconut trees in the garden.

We had regular visits from two Indian coconut gatherers who would climb up the coconut trees to harvest the coconuts and then remove the husks for us. Sometimes we paid them with money, but other times, when there is a surplus of coconuts, they were partly paid in kind.



A coconut de-husker.

Interestingly, we have in our family home a whole range of tools used to harvest coconuts: the curved knife used to cut the stalk of a bunch of coconuts, the spears used to gather coconuts that scatter everywhere when the whole bunch is thrown onto the ground from the tree, and the coconut de-husker, which looks like a fat spear. These implements must have come from my maternal grandfather's estate in Batu Gantong.

As I have watched the Indian coconut gatherers using these tools, I have learnt to remove the husk from a whole coconut using the de-husker. Nowadays, at home in Singapore, I de-husk a coconut using a chopper. ♦

Look out for Part Two of this article in the next issue of the magazine!



Ong Jin Teong's daughter, Kim, using a coconut de-husker.



**Baba Ong Jin Teong** is the author of cookbooks on nyonya and Penang heritage food. His most recent cookbook, *Nonya Heritage Kitchen* was published by Landmark Books in 2016.

# SERONDENG GERAGO

(Coconut & Krill Garnish)

BABA IAN YAP SHARES ONE OF HIS FAVOURITE COCONUT RECIPES WITH NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE  
Photo by Baba Ian Yap



Just as the Japanese have *furikake*, the dry seasoning that magically adds zest to plain rice, the Peranakan cook will tell you that *serondeng* is a handy garnish to have in your kitchen. Baba Ian Yap tells me that any curry or rice dish like *nasi ulam* can be topped with this savoury garnish. It can also be used with *lontong*, *mee siam*, *mee rebus* or just on plain white bread with butter. *Sedap sekali!*

### Ingredients

200 gms grated or desiccated coconut  
200 gms dried *gerago* (krill)  
2-3 tablespoons of cooking oil  
1 pandan leaf cut into 2-3 slices  
1 tablespoon of chilli powder

### Rempah (Spice paste)

8 shallots  
4 cloves of garlic  
2 chili *padi* (bird's eye chillies)  
5 big red chillies  
1 slice *lengkuas* (galangal)  
1 slice ginger  
1 thumbsized piece of *kunyet* (fresh turmeric root)  
1 tablespoon of roasted *belachan* (fermented shrimp paste)  
3 buah *kerair* (candlenuts)  
1 tablespoon of finely sliced *seray* (lemongrass)  
4 *lemo purot* leaves (keffir lime leaves)

### Method

1. Finely grind all *rempah* ingredients.
2. Heat wok with oil and *tumis* (stir fry) the *rempah* till fragrant.
3. Add the coconut and stir fry till dry. Once dry and slightly crispy, toss in the dried *gerago* and pandan leaf. Dry frying must be continuous to maintain consistency.
4. Sprinkle chilli powder for colouring. Can be cooled and frozen for later use.

Check out other delicious dishes from Ian's kitchen on Instagram @mryaphomedining

# CULTURAL SNAPS

BABA EMERIC LAU GRASPS THE BIG PICTURE AT AMEK GAMBAR, AN EXHIBITION ON PERANAKANS AND PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM | Photos courtesy of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee

Just like our beloved *kueh lapis*, there are multiple layers to this exhibition. I'll admit I was initially less enthusiastic about the theme of photography than, say, a previous exhibition like *Baba Bling* that showcased Peranakan jewellery. However, attending a curator's tour by Baba Peter Lee quickly changed all of that. *Amek Gambar* was made possible by a donation of some 2,500 photographs from Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee. The brilliance of this exhibition lies not in contemplating sparkling jewels, but in the myriad ways the photographs on display can be analysed.

## PHOTOS DON'T LIE. OR DO THEY?

"The photos that capture us at our most natural are often the ones we hate the most," observed Peter. He was making a point that we prepare, or at least, pose for photos. We smile, we choose to look into the lens (or not), we include other people or objects in our photos, we take 20 photos and select the best one to print or post on social media, and so on. Conversely, we relegate to the trash bin photos of ourselves that capture double chins and bulging bellies, or with our eyes shut and hair blown askew. The images in photographs are therefore, in a way, performance art. They show off an idealised version of the subject, often with enhancements from the photographer.

A case in point is an albumen print in a visiting card format titled *Young Nyonya in Baju Panjang* by Scottish photographer John Thomson. He began his career in 1862 in Singapore, where he set up his first studio and honed his skill in portraiture. The young lady in this photo adopts a typically Western pose - her feet are planted together and elegantly angled towards the side. This is atypical of the Peranakan fashion, where women are seated with their legs set apart and feet pointing outwards; it indicates that her pose was contrived by the photographer.

In paying attention to the way the subjects in the photos are portrayed, we gain insight to both the person in the photo as well as the photographer, the trends of the era, and even points of idiosyncrasy.

**Amek Gambar:**  
*Peranakans and Photography*

Till 3 February 2019

The Peranakan Museum,  
39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941

Daily 10am to 7pm,  
Fridays 10am to 9pm

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

*Young Nyonya in Baju Panjang* by John Thomson, Singapore, 1862-1865

As it was an era before anyone considered issues of intellectual property and copyright, the studios that took these photos would make a few prints for the subject, but often profited from making many more prints and selling these images of exotic Far Eastern locals as souvenirs for European travellers to take home!

This fascination with foreign cultures went both ways: many photos from the late 19th century onwards show young babas attired in Western fashion and adopting debonair poses, in an embrace of more cosmopolitan lifestyles, such as this portrait of Baba Oei Tiong Ham.




Portrait of Oei Tiong Ham by R. Schütz, Semarang (Indonesia), 1887  
Albumen print (cabinet card format)

Oei Tiong Ham (1866-1924) was arguably the most influential Peranakan in Southeast Asia in the late 19th and early 20th century. Born in Semarang, he helmed Kian Gwan, a diversified multinational conglomerate involved in opium, sugar, shipping, and banking, among other industries in the region. He was also a great philanthropist. Late in life when he lived in Singapore, he supported many causes, including donating \$10,000 towards the building of the Tao Nan School on Armenian Street, current home of the Peranakan Museum. He was 21 years old when this photograph was taken. He is dressed in Western fashion and poses in a nonchalant, informal manner, most probably under the direction of the photographer. This is probably one of the earliest images of a Peranakan in Western dress.

## ENGAGING VISITORS

In today's image obsessed world, it would be remiss if an exhibition on photography did not include some ways for visitors to put themselves within a frame - literally! Visitors can have their own vintage-style portraits taken at Amek Gambar & Co., a studio setting that is inspired by old-time photography studios.

In the lobby, one encounters a curious looking giant *berlian* (diamond). This is *We Stop To Watch The World Go By*, an installation inspired by the camera obscura. Visitors enter the mirrored dome to observe an inverted 'live' feed of the atrium above projected on its floor. Artists Sarah Choo Jing and Larry Kwa have employed the idea of surveillance to encourage us to take a closer look at the mundane and unnoticed moments in our lives.

From the earliest photographs to the current trend of instant 'live' photos, *Amek Gambar* shows us that photography continues to inspire and spark our imagination. 

# PEELING BACK LAYERS

BABA DAVID NEO LOOKS AT A NEW DIPTYCH THAT WILL DEBUT AT AMEK GAMBAR IN OCTOBER 2018  
Photo by Baba Sherman Ong. Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee



Part of Baba Sherman Ong's diptych, *The Nightjar Pines for the Moon*, 2018.

As part of Amek Gambar, award-winning photographer and filmmaker, Baba Sherman Ong, has created a diptych inspired by the art of female impersonation in wayang Peranakan, with doyen Francis Hogan as his subject.

Sherman says, "For me, the art of female impersonation is always imbued with a sense of longing, melancholy and tragedy, pining for an ideal when on stage and grappling with reality off stage. My work with Francis, as the mistress of his art, also delves into a hidden aspect of nyonyas whom we will never see photographed in their inner garments."

The photographs in Amek Gambar certainly reveal and uncover many layers of Peranakan culture. Sherman's work, titled *The Nightjar Pines for the Moon*, peels back yet another layer, that of appearances and masks. His work begs further question - who lives behind the mask of female impersonation?

A reference to colonialism (the Art Deco furniture and the leopard rug) is yet another interesting layer to the work. According to Sherman, the leopard was killed during a Baba hunting expedition in the jungles of Lim Chu Kang during the pre-war years. This makes us think about the relationship between Peranakan culture and colonialism.

Art provokes thought, and it raises questions. But will we like the answers?



To take a sneak peek at some new photos that will be added to Amek Gambar during the exhibit rotation in October 2018, scan the QR code here or go to [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)

# REDISCOVERING THE CHETTIS

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE PREVIEWS A NEW EXHIBITION ABOUT THE CHETTI MELAKA COMMUNITY | Photos courtesy of the Indian Heritage Centre

The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), in collaboration with the Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore, proudly presents *Chetti Melaka of the Straits – Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities*, a showcase of the unique Chetti culture. The exhibition establishes the long history of this community from its roots in Melaka to the present day.

It is estimated that there are 5,000 Chettis in Singapore. Over 250 artefacts and photographs collected from the Chetti Melaka community in Singapore and Melaka will be on display. From fashion and cuisine, to rituals and festivals, this exhibition offers visitors a rare experience of this little known aspect of Singapore's cultural heritage. P



## Chetti Melaka of the Straits

*Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities*

7 September 2018 – 5 May 2019

Indian Heritage Centre  
Special Exhibition Gallery, Level 2,  
5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924

Open Tuesday – Sunday at 10am.  
Varied closing times. See website for details.  
Closed on Mondays

[www.indianheritage.org](http://www.indianheritage.org)

### WEDDED BLISS

**Title:** AS Pillay and Suppummal on their wedding day  
**Date & Region:** 18 January 1945, Melaka, Malaya  
On loan from SM Pillay

The bride and groom are dressed in the typical Chetti Melaka style. They are accompanied by two girls, possibly serving as their page girls, as well as the fan-like decorations used for weddings and other celebratory processions.

### WHO ARE THE CHETTIS?

The Chetti Melaka are descendants of Tamil traders who settled in Melaka during the reign of the Melaka Sultanate (15th-16th centuries) and married local women of Malay and Chinese descent. Predominantly Hindu of the Saivite (followers of Shiva) denomination, the community speaks a unique combination of Malay, Tamil and Chinese that has been called Chetti Creole by scholars. They trace their roots to Kampung Chitty in Gajah Berang, Melaka.



SUPPIAH VILLA  
27-11-1940

### SUPPIAH VILLA

**Title:** Ramasamy Suppiah and family at Suppiah Villa in the Upper Serangoon area  
**Date & Region:** 27 November 1940, Singapore  
On loan from Ponnosamy Kalastree (President of the Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore)

Ramasamy Suppiah Naidu was born in Malacca at the turn of the last century. He was the first son of his Telugu father from Andhra Pradesh, India, who married Katai Amal Chitty (fondly known as Mak Kechik) from the Chetti Melaka community. After finishing his studies in Melaka, he moved to Singapore with his wife in 1920, where he joined the police force and rose to the position of detective sergeant-major. He was decorated with a medal by then Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Cecil Clementi. In the post-war years, he became the contracting supervisor who built Frankel Estate. Before he retired, he owned a fleet of 10 taxis that he rented out. He passed away in May 1967.

Ramasamy Suppiah Naidu initially lived with his brother-in-law, Arumugam Supramaniam Chitty, at Chitty Road, later moving to a large house, Suppiah Villa, at Highland Road, off Upper Serangoon Road.

This photograph shows members of Ramasamy Suppiah's family. Seated in the back row (left to right): Ramasamy, his sons Kalastree and Rajoo (later known as Yusof), his sister-in-law Vangathammal (fondly known as Atha Sandy), his wife Kathai Amal (nicknamed as Mak Kechik, or Nenek Ki), and his daughters Janaki (called Akka Bai) and Letchemee. Among the children in the front row are Ramasamy's youngest son, Narayanasamy (later known as Mustafā) and his younger daughters, Krishnavaini and Patama.

# LEST WE FORGET

BABA BRYAN TAN GOES ON A SPELLBINDING JOURNEY WITH DANCE ENSEMBLE SINGAPORE'S MULTI-CULTURAL EXTRAVAGANZA  
 Photos courtesy of Dance Ensemble Singapore

Dancers representing the katong turtles struggling to return home.



The Singaporean cultural identity has always been a hotly debated topic. Be it the Speak Mandarin campaign or the perpetual squabble over authentic recipes for favourite local dishes, Singaporeans simply cannot agree to disagree over what defines us as a people.

Enter *Lest We Forget*, a production by Dance Ensemble Singapore (DES) that made its gala debut at the Esplanade on 21 April 2018. Its premise stems from an old tale about the *katong*, a species of leatherback turtles that used to spawn on the beaches of Tanjong Katong (which literally means “Turtle Cape”). At first, the production may seem to be only about Peranakan heritage, but it is in fact a powerful reminder of the history of Nanyang and the entirety of the Straits Chinese lineage, using Joo Chiat and Katong as a focal point.

Conceived by Artistic Directors Yan Choong Lian and Cai Shiji, together with scriptwriter Edmond Wong (Cai’s husband), *Lest We Forget* was initially meant to be a dance production. However, the trio later decided to script in acting roles, which gave the production depth and cohesiveness.

The visuals were stunning right from the start: diaphanous fabric cascaded from the set, mimicking the rolling, undulating quality of waves. The choreography was exquisite. Dancers in lavish costumes by Baba Raymond Wong, hoisted high above the stage by other performers, coiled and contorted through the “waves”. They represented the leatherback turtles in their ceaseless struggle to return to the beach of their birth, Tanjong Katong.

What is truly remarkable about *Lest We Forget* is the collaboration between multiple entities that makes it so compellingly cogent. In between dance scenes, veteran actors Baba Alvin Oon, Rozalynn Lim and Abdul Rahim provided comic relief that was met with guffaws from the audience. The chemistry between the three actors was effortlessly entertaining. Later, when I asked Alvin, he explained that the trio had worked together before in Haw Par Villa as performers for a good number of years. Similar to the *agak-agak* (rough estimation) method of experienced Peranakan cooks, the actors sometimes ad-libbed and strayed slightly off script. Yet the audience was none the wiser and hungrily lapped up their humorous antics.

Like the melting pot of Singapore, *Lest We Forget* brings together artists from different disciplines, ethnicities and backgrounds, resulting in a stunning fusion of dance genres. DES dancers brought the history of Joo Chiat and Tanjong Katong to life with their fluid, contemporary dance style, while dancers from Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd added fast-paced rhythm with their staccato footwork and edgy isolations. To everyone’s surprise, skateboards were used in one of the scenes, where dancers held weaves of filmy material and floated across the stage, eliciting giggles from amused theatregoers.

Ultimately, *Lest We Forget* reminds us that although rapid modernisation has brought Singapore far and fast, our past (embodied by the leatherback turtles of Tanjong Katong) will always continue to define who we are. Despite being a young independent state, we have deep cultural roots. For me, *Lest We Forget* exhorts us to achieve a better understanding of where we’ve come from and what it truly means to be Singaporean. ♦

Slowly but surely, we build on our roots to find our identity.



Dancers in lace kebayas represent the cultures of Singapore, connected by a common thread.



Weaving the fabric of our nation from a shared past.

# CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF PAA

BABA JOSEPH THEN REPORTS ON THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION AUSTRALIA'S 10TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS | Photo courtesy of PAA

On Saturday, 24 March 2018, the Peranakan Association Australia Inc. (PAA) celebrated our 10th anniversary with a big bang. The celebration was held at the Chinese Association of Victoria clubhouse, a spacious venue with a good-sized dance floor located in the outskirts of Melbourne. Tickets were sold out a month before the final deadline.

Peranakans from Singapore, Jakarta and Sydney flew in to celebrate with us. As PAA President, Doreen Wong, welcomed guests, gasps of surprised delight were heard around the room as red-coloured eggs were served as starters - an auspicious must-have for Peranakan celebrations. We had 220 guests that evening despite our membership being only about 140 strong. Guests were delighted by the sumptuous spread including a spicy *sambal* made by one of our *nyonyas* to complement the catered food.

Emcees Margaret de Silva, Douglas Cheong and Harry Teo skilfully bantered with guests and kept the mood light and enjoyable. Halfway through the dinner, the pioneers of the PAA were invited to mark the occasion with a special 10th anniversary cake. PAA was gifted with tokens of appreciation from the Indonesian, Singaporean and Sydney delegations.

Guests received Peranakan themed door gifts and a beautifully designed commemorative magazine depicting PAA's 10-year history, from inception to present day, as well as messages of encouragement from past presidents and our patron, a feature on the Melbourne Peranakan Chorus and a reflection on our youth, fondly referred to as our Peranakan Possums.

Entertainment for the evening included a Mauritian singer who showed his versatility across seven

musical instruments, an Elvis impersonator who packed the dance floor, a jazz singer who belted out crowd favourites, a pair of ballroom



The Melbourne Peranakan Chorus making harmonious melodies.

dancers who gracefully demonstrated the President's Daughter's waltz and our very own Melbourne Peranakan Chorus who performed a song and dance routine. Needless to say, everyone had a blast! ♦

The Peranakan Association Australia Inc. is a community supported by the City of Whitehorse in Victoria, Australia.

# YISHUN'S BABA HERITAGE

MRS CORINNE KWAN REPORTS ON A COMMUNITY PROJECT BY HUAMIN PRIMARY SCHOOL FOR THE NHB'S CHILDREN'S SEASON 2018

Huamin Primary School (HMPS) was invited to participate in the National Heritage Board's Children's Season 2018. Together with The Intan, an award-winning Peranakan home museum, HMPS students promoted Peranakan culture with a special focus on Baba Lim Nee Soon, a respected Peranakan Chinese community leader whom the residential town of Yishun is named after. He contributed to the development of the area by providing jobs and donating money to schools. (Editor's note: Lim was commonly known as Bah (Baba) Soon.)

Over two days at Northpoint City shopping mall, 40 student ambassadors and 70 teaching staff shared Peranakan culture to more than 100,000 mall visitors. We put up a display of Peranakan material objects on loan from The Intan, engaged visitors with a variety of hands-on

activities and performances by our Angklung Ensemble.



A portrait of Baba Lim Nee Soon.

"I enjoyed learning and sharing with visitors how Lim Nee Soon was able to make a difference in many peoples' lives," said 12-year-old Karen Lor. The event reminded students to appreciate the contributions of their forefathers

and pioneers who made Singapore what it is today.

Visitors were equally enthusiastic about the showcase which deepened their appreciation of Yishun's community heritage. "I have been living here for 26 years and I never knew about Lim Nee Soon or the history of this area. This event is a great way for us to discover our town's roots," said Mr Terence Teo, a Yishun resident.

HMPS has partnered with The Intan before - to raise funds for the less fortunate during Project Intan 2017. "It's always nice to involve the community when sharing the Peranakan story. Together with HMPS and partners like Northpoint City, we are extremely grateful to NHB's Museum Roundtable Association for allowing The Intan to share Peranakan culture in such a unique way" said Baba Alvin Yapp, owner and founder of The Intan. ♦

# MARKING A DECADE IN STYLE

NYONYA LINDA CHEE IS WOWED BY PPBNKLS'S RIP-ROARING 10TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER | Photos by Nyonya Linda Chee

Our Federation counterparts in KL pulled out all the stops and dazzled with their show of music, song and dance at the 10th anniversary celebration dinner of the PPBNKLS (Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor), held on 4 August 2018 at the Royal Lake Club in Kuala Lumpur.

The fast-paced, homegrown entertainment by a troupe of its own members regaled all who came for the highly colourful evening. Amazing instrumentals by Indonesian ensemble, Keroncong Eljasqee, was the highlight of the evening's entertainment.

We were spellbound by the melodious strains of the ukulele, double bass and violin. What a treat! The evening was clearly a huge success that made all the sweat and toil of past months well worth the effort. ♦



Legendary wayang Peranakan actor, Baba G T Lye, flanked by 'matriarchs' Lan Neo (Baba Simon Tan) at left and Chap Neo (Baba Aaron Loo).



From a stage set for a grand birthday to a brilliant 29-strong opening song-and-dance led by PPBNKLS president, Baba Cedric Tan (in black), no one had a chance to be bored that whole evening.



TPAS president, Baba Colin Chee (middle), enjoys the conga dance with KL nyonyas.

# PERANAKANS ON PARADE

BABA ALVIN OON SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE OF PERFORMING WITH SCGS STUDENTS AT CHINGAY 2018 | Photo courtesy of Baba Alvin Oon

"The Chingay Parade is never the same without the Peranakans," quipped Madam Lim Ah Yoke, a veteran organiser who has been involved in Singapore's Chingay Parade since its inception in 1973. This year's parade was themed 'Cultural Fantasy' and Peranakan Sayang was invited to perform.

It is indeed an honour to represent our culture at such a major event. However the challenge is always to find committed volunteers with time for rehearsals, and the energy to perform the entire stretch of the 1.5km parade route. Our young friends from the Singapore Chinese Girls School (SCGS) seized the opportunity to volunteer in honour of their school's Peranakan heritage. SCGS was founded in 1899 by a group of Straits Chinese leaders including Sir Song Ong Siang and Dr Lim Boon Keng, who believed that girls should have a formal education.

Thirty-two 'Kim Geks' (how SCGS girls are referred to in Hokkien), supported by their teachers, took part in Chingay. There were initial concerns. "The rehearsals were quite challenging as the hours were long and sometimes, we had to change our choreography on the spot," said 14-year-old Gladys Ong.

As the girls grew confident in the routine choreographed by Nyonya Jackie Pereira, they began to enjoy themselves. They learned better time management and many even did their school work during breaks. "It became a way for me to relax and just have fun," said 15-year-old Erica Quah.

Besides the full dress rehearsals, there were three nights of parade performances. It was amazing to see these young ladies transformed into beautiful *nyonyas* in their sarong



Baba Alvin Oon (far left, kneeling) with the Peranakan contingent at Chingay 2018.

kebayas and flowers in their hair. "Being a part of this contingent gave me a new sense of identity. For the first time, I felt like a *nyonya*!" enthused 15-year-old Wong Yuk Yi.

Our 60-strong Peranakan contingent was awarded the 'Outstanding Display Award for Travelling Dance' by the parade organisers. Madam Lim was right. Chingay with the Peranakans really is something special! ♦

# SHARING SONGS AND STORIES

NYONYAS PEGGY LEE AND BENITA FONG REPORT ON TPM'S FILTERLIFE WEEKEND FESTIVAL | Photos courtesy of Nyonya Benita Fong

**PEGGY LEE:** Beneath the skylight of The Peranakan Museum (TPM), our TPAS choir, The Peranakan Voices (PVs), performed at the Filterlife Weekend Festival on 23 and 24 June 2018, in conjunction with the on-going *Amek Gambar* exhibition. The festival had something for everyone, with Peranakan-inspired performances, photography related activities, film, crafts and much more.

The PVs belted out nostalgic tunes that pleased the crowd. Our sing-along sessions were a hit with both young and old. Song sheets in hand, the audience gamely sang along to familiar favourites like *Rasa Sayang*, *Burong Kakak Tua* and *Chan Mali Chan*. It was heartwarming to see many of our friends and family members who had come to support us, often with three generations in tow. Parents encouraged their young children to hum and dance along to the tunes, while the *mamas* and *kong kongs* enjoyed nostalgic renditions of *Nyonya Manis*, *Teh Sama Kopi*, *Blue Heaven*, *Singapore Medley* and *Joget Java Jive*. We were pleasantly surprised when some visitors came up to chat with us, wanting to know more about our choir. Some visitors even requested to take photos with us. *Amboi! Macham celebrity!* We were all so happy with the turnout and positive response.

**BENITA FONG:** I love telling stories, especially when it gives me a chance to share my Peranakan heritage with others. During the last weekend of the June school holidays, I participated in TPM's Filterlife Weekend Festival as a storyteller. I roped in my vivacious 84-year-old mother, my precocious 10-year-old daughter and my niece to help me out with the story telling sessions. I conducted a total of four sessions based on my Peranakan children's book, *Johnny Can Dream: A Visit to a Peranakan Place*.

I wrote the book in 2013 for my four children to remind them of their Peranakan heritage. The protagonist, Johnny, is based on my son Ethan, while the little nyonya character



Nyonya Benita Fong and her daughter Sophie (left, both in kebaya) with visitors during a storytelling session.

was inspired by my daughter, Sophie. Bibik Belachan, the matriarch, has the traits of my mother, a nyonya who grew up in Melaka. In the book, the *kamcheng* symbolises love and relationships.



After each of my storytelling sessions, the audience was given the opportunity to do some Peranakan-inspired art and craft. I enjoyed meeting visitors from Peru, South Korea, Greece, the United Kingdom, Australia and many Singaporeans who were curious about Peranakan culture.

They asked me many questions about nyonya favourites like *kueh tair* (pineapple tarts), *kueh chang babi* (glutinous rice and pork dumplings) and other dishes highlighted in the book. The whole experience was very enjoyable for my family and I, and I'm glad that my daughter and niece had a chance to actively promote our culture. ♦

## JAN TAN & CHAN

ADVOCATES & SOLICITORS

COMMISSIONER FOR OATHS

NOTARY PUBLIC

---

Jan Tan & Chan provides advice and representation in the Law of Contracts, Estates, Trusts, Wills, and Family & Commercial Litigation. We also offer corporate secretarial and oath services.

Our Commissioner for Oaths & Notary Public is conversant in English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Malay, and Bahasa Indonesia.

133 New Bridge Road, #15-10  
Chinatown Point, Singapore 059413  
Tel: 6538 8280 | Fax: 6538 8281  
Email: JanTChan@singnet.com.sg

# KEEPING OUR CULTURE ALIVE

BABA COLIN CHEE REMEMBERS BABA PETER WEE



Baba Peter Wee and Baba Colin Chee at Katong Antique House in May 2018.



Baba Peter Wee was the president of TPAS from 2010 to 2018. He served on the GC for 24 years, first as a committee member in 1994, then later as Treasurer and Vice-President before being elected President in 2010.



Baba Peter Wee enjoying *The Peranakan* magazine.

A few days after our TPAS annual general meeting in May, I called on Baba Peter Wee at Katong Antique House (KAH). He looked gaunt and weak. When he saw me, he tried to pull himself up from the planter's chair where he was resting, to greet me. I rushed to his side to tell him there was no need to get up.

My late mother used to say that you can tell the breeding of a man by the little courtesies he shows to others. "*Orang tu di besair kan chukop sopan santan chara kita. Sikit pun tak boleh hiam.*" (That person is well brought up according to our Peranakan ways. You cannot find fault in his manners.)

Human nature is so complex and full of contradictions. There is light and dark in us all. We try our best to be good, but without realising it, we may sometimes lose our way. Baba Peter's later years were tinged with controversy, whether deserved or undeserved; but always, he worried about the state of our Peranakan culture and did his best to preserve it.

My wife Linda and I had many random conversations with Baba Peter over the 40 years that we have been friends. "Our culture is dying," he would always lament. We would reassure him by saying, "Maybe it is the culture that our grand-parents have known and traditionally practised which is dying. In itself, there is a renewed interest in Peranakan culture, especially since the hit TV series *The Little Nyonya!*"

That afternoon when I sat next to him, our conversation casually drifted back to this thread - how can we make our culture relevant to our young? I assured him that the new General Committee (GC) is full of zeal and energy, ready to engage our youth and keep our culture alive. He nodded slightly and smiled, then closed his eyes for a brief respite.

Rest in peace, Baba Peter Wee. ♦

# TWO LIVES LESS ORDINARY

NYONYA WEE ENG HWA REMEMBERS HER PARENTS, DR & MRS WEE KIM WEE | Photos courtesy of Nyonya Wee Eng Hwa

During a *cherki* session (a Peranakan card game) at the home of Nyonya Saw Hai Choo, renowned for her *laok embok-embok* (Peranakan cuisine), the destiny of a handsome young baba and a beautiful young nyonya was sealed. That was the genesis of the fruitful union of my parents, Wee Kim Wee and Koh Sok Hiong.

There were many parallels in my parents' lives before they met. My father had lost his own father when he was nine years old, and my mother lost hers at 12. My father was from a poor branch of a financially successful family. Once wealthy, my mother's family lost their fortune to absconders of her father's properties after his death. My father left school to find a job at 12 years old while my mother entered school at nine.

When my parents met in 1934, he was a 19-year-old junior clerk, helping his family survive poverty. She, then 18, was still at school, and hoped to one day become a teacher. She

had been managing her family's household of 10 people since she was 12. The matchmakers who introduced them could not have imagined that decades later, these two young people would become the President and First Lady of Singapore. They married in 1936.



Dr & Mrs Wee Kim Wee on their wedding day on 12 April 1936.

My father, Wee Kim Wee, was a determined, self-taught young man keen on sports. He founded the Useful Badminton Party in 1932 and, through sheer hard work and determination, became Singapore's junior badminton champion in 1938. He later rose to become President of Singapore Badminton Association. Whether he was a clerk, journalist, diplomat or President, integrity was a value that shaped my father's career and helped him to withstand the vagaries of life.

My mother, Koh Sok Hiong was gifted in cooking, which she learnt from her maternal grandmother, Nyonya Saw Hai Choo. She often entertained my father's friends and colleagues who were impressed by her superb culinary skills. Warm hospitality and delicious food became my parents' hallmark.

My mother was a woman of many talents who saw to our every need. She was a pillar of support to my father who

struggled to bring home the bacon. She ensured that we had a healthy balanced diet. She cut our hair, sewed our clothes, bathed us, brushed our teeth and played doctor when we were sick.

My parents loved children. In the midst of suffering, sweat and tears they found great joy in raising their seven children, and later, doted on their 13 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren.



A rare photo of the Wee Family taken in 1952 by David Photo Studio.

Left to right: Front row: Daughters Wee Kheng Hua (4<sup>th</sup> born), Wee Bee Neo (7<sup>th</sup> born), Wee Hong Neo (6<sup>th</sup> born), Wee Eng Hwa (5<sup>th</sup> born) Back row: Daughters Wee Kim Tee (3<sup>rd</sup> born), Wee Hock Neo (2<sup>nd</sup> born), Dr & Mrs Wee Kim Wee, son Wee Hock Kee (1<sup>st</sup> born).

## GIVING WITH COMPASSION

Both my parents had lived long, fulfilling lives. My father was 89 when he passed away on 2 May 2005, and my mother, 102 when she passed on 7 July 2018.

I believe that my parents were ordinary people who lived by godly values throughout their lives, and that made them extraordinary. They had tasted poverty early on in life, and had struggled to make ends meet. Their experience helped them to understand and appreciate other people's problems. They were compassionate and always placed great importance in helping others. People were naturally drawn to them because they were trustworthy.

Having seen the ravages of tuberculosis, my father spent time and effort volunteering at the Singapore Tuberculosis Association (SATA) from 1957, and later became its Chairman. His long association with SATA continued to the end of his life. My mother was also very active in charity work, supporting my father's voluntarism principally through her cooking.

Whenever she talked about old times, my mother would reflect with pity on the slave girl who had lived with

her family when she was a child. (Back then, it was not uncommon for wealthier families to have young girls who did menial work around the house. They were not paid, but were given food and lodging.)

In the post-war years, when life was still hard, my mother could never pass a beggar without thrusting a coin or two into their outstretched hands. The *karang goni* (rag-and-bone) man passing our house would always get a cup of hot coffee and a piece of cake from her.

Through their compassion and empathy, my parents made many friends, and this enriched their lives.

## COOKING FOR THE PRESIDENT

In 2010, after half a century of reminding me to help her to produce a cookbook, *Cooking For The President* was born. My mother approached cooking as an art, not a mere functional task to feed her family. To her cooking was a means to share love and spread joy. She wanted so much to keep her grandmother's nyonya cuisine alive for later generations. *Cooking For The President* is my mother's legacy to all Singaporeans and to anyone who wants to learn to prepare nyonya food the way she did.



A rare photo of Mrs Wee in sarong kebaya, 1950. In the late 1940s, the couple learnt ballroom dancing and loved it. They waltzed and foxtrotted many weekends at the Raffles Hotel, The Adelphi and Seaview Hotel.

It was during this time that Mrs Wee decided to wear the cheongsam regularly as it was less restrictive on the dance floor than the sarong kebaya.

My mother loved cooking so much that in the 1960s, she wanted to set up a restaurant, but it was not to be. As Deputy Editor of the Straits Times, my father required her to accompany him to many functions. Moreover, the labour situation in the early 1960s was far from ideal for would-be entrepreneurs!

Over the years, her desire for me to help her with the cookbook became even more insistent. In later life, as former patron of Girl Guides Singapore (GGS), she supported their efforts to spread the learning of creative cooking through the Wee Kim Wee Challenge, a GGS initiative.

## WITH A GRATEFUL HEART, ALWAYS

My parents always taught us to be humble, no matter what our station in life. They would chide my siblings and I if we "talked big" to demean others or put ourselves on a pedestal. My mother would counter our brashness with the chorus "*mai tai eyat*" (do not be boastful).

Gratefulness was of utmost importance to them. One of my mother's favourite expressions was: "*Jangan lepas jembatan buang tongkat*. (Don't throw away the walking stick after crossing the bridge)." My parents never forgot people who had helped them.

We do not forget how, during WWII and in the post-war years, our friend, Samy, an Indian wireman, gave up his room at the Singapore Harbour Board quarters in Kampong Bahru for us, whilst he slept under the staircase. We treasure how our neighbours helped our mother while she had to leave our room to cook or wash our clothes. This value of gratitude was constantly instilled into us. My mother used to say: "If someone gives you *che koon* (one *kati*, equivalent to 600g), you should try to give back at least *see new* (four *taels*, equivalent to 150g)."

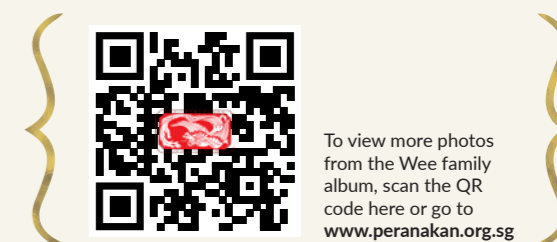


Mrs Wee Kim Wee in October 1989, on her way to meet Queen Elizabeth on an official state visit to Singapore. She is wearing a gold necklace (a wedding gift from her husband), and a set of kerosangs on her cheongsam.

My parents taught us about contentment. My father never failed to talk about this topic to the young. He wanted to impress upon them that, if they had tried hard and did their best, they should not feel troubled, worthless or envious of others even if they did not succeed.

My younger sister Maureen once bought my father a beautiful leather wallet. Although he was pleased with her gesture, he could not resist telling her: "I have one wallet, why would I need another?" He had the same attitude towards food. To him, "eating three simple meals a day is enough for me".

He learned the value of contentment in his youth from Sir Ong Siang Song at the Presbyterian Church on Prinsep Street. Sir Ong Siang taught my father and other promising young people the importance of speaking and writing good English, the appreciation of literature and other godly values to live by. My parents never felt that they had to "keep up with the Joneses". They were contented people ever conscious of the fact that "we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out". ♦



To view more photos from the Wee family album, scan the QR code here or go to [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)



# The Federation of Peranakan Associations

## SINGAPORE

**The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS)**  
Raffles City PO Box 1640, Singapore 911755  
www.peranakan.org.sg  
Facebook: ThePeranakanAssociationSingapore

President | Mr Colin Chee  
president@peranakan.org.sg

**Gunong Sayang Association (GSA)**  
80 Joo Chiat Place, Singapore 427797  
www.gsa.org.sg  
Facebook: GunongSayangAssociation

President | Mr Alvin Teo  
info@gsa.org.sg

**Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore**  
5001 Beach Road  
#08-09 Golden Mile Complex, Singapore 199588  
Facebook: Chetti Melaka of Singapore.Official FB

President | Mr Pono Kalastree  
p.kalastree@mainguard-intl.com.sg  
+65 6297 1229 / +65 9678 1767

## MALAYSIA

*Melaka*  
**Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM)**  
149 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock (Heeren Street),  
75200 Melaka, Malaysia

Hon. Secretary | Ms Chin Siok Hoon  
+60 12 6218 909 / +60 6 2837 215

**Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Malaysia (PERANAKAN)**  
243 Jalan Tengker, 75200 Melaka, Malaysia  
Facebook: Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Malaysia (PERANAKAN)

Hon. Secretary | Mr Lee Yuen Thien  
yuenthien@gmail.com  
+60 196081558

*Penang*  
**State Chinese (Penang) Association / Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang**  
13 Jalan Perak Road,  
10150 Penang, Malaysia  
+60 604 2269 560

President | Dato' Tan Gin Soon  
ginsoon@hotmail.com

*Kuala Lumpur & Selangor*  
**Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (PPBNKLS)**  
Unit B-8-3A, Block B, Menara KIP, No.1, Jalan Seri Utara, off Jalan Ipoh, 68100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
www.peranakan-kl.org

President | Baba Cedric Tan  
cedric\_cctan@yahoo.com

Hon. Secretary | Mr Wong Mun Yee  
peranakan\_kl@yahoo.com.my  
+60 12 3151 451

## THAILAND

*Phuket*  
**Thai Peranakan Association**  
www.phuketbaba.com  
124 Yaowarat Road, Taladyai, Muang,  
Phuket 83000, Thailand

President | Dr Kosol Tanguthai  
kt3784005@gmail.com  
+66 818927014

Ms Piyarat Kulvanich  
kpiyarat2000@gmail.com  
+66 817190967

Ms Pranee Sakulpipatana  
pranee81@yahoo.com  
+66 816933576

Ms Orasiri  
orasiri@hotmail.com  
+66 816911955

## INDONESIA

**Association of Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia (Aspertina)**  
Hero Building II Suite 902, Jl. Jend Gatot Subroto  
177A, Kav. 64 Jakarta 12870, Indonesia.  
www.aspertina.org

President | Mr Andrew Susanto  
International Liason Officer | Mr Hendi Handadi  
info@aspertina.org  
+6221 8317751

**Peranakan Tionghoa Warga Indonesia (Pertiwi)**  
Yayasan PERTIWI c/o KING'S EEC, Jalan Baharudin  
No.8, Tangerang 15111, Banten, Indonesia

President | Mr Udaya Halim  
info@pertiwi.org / info@bentengheritage.com  
+6221 5523880 / +6221 5526748

## AUSTRALIA

*Melbourne*  
**Peranakan Association Australia Inc. (PAA Melbourne)**  
PO Box 1278 Hawksburn, Victoria, Australia 3142  
www.peranakanaustralia.org  
Facebook: Melbourne Peranakans  
Facebook: Peranakan Association Australia Inc

Vice-President | Mr Joseph Then  
j.then@bigpond.com / gekkiml@yahoo.co.uk

*Sydney*  
**Peranakan Association Australia Inc. (PAA NSW)**  
PO Box 3810 Marsfield, NSW, 2122 Australia  
www.peranakanaustralia.org

President | Ms Evelyn Tan  
enquiries@peranakanaustralia.org

*Perth*  
**The Peranakan Community of Western Australia Inc.**  
PO Box 385, Bullcreek,  
Western Australia 6149, Australia  
Facebook: The Peranakan Community of Western Australia, INC

President | Mr Kenneth Lim  
bcfernand@outlook.com

Secretary | Christine Fernandez  
perthperanakans@gmail.com

## Welcome

*A warm welcome to our new members!*

Benita Fong Siew Yee  
Catherine Lim Guay Neo  
Cai Shiji  
Desmond Wong Sin Guan  
Danny Poh Chye Seng  
Dolly Low Kim Lian  
Esther Koh  
Gareth Tan Jiawen  
Gladys Tham  
Irene Goh Ah Dek  
Jacqueline Gwee Siok Chuan  
Jean-Francois Chassin  
Jeevan Ratnam  
Joanne Low  
Justin Neo Ji Shu  
Lawrence Poh Beng Huat  
Lim Meng Kee  
Magdalene Ho Suat Im  
Margaret De Silva  
Michael Lim Heong Hai  
Michelle Yeo Kim Neo  
Nicole Koh Shu Fang  
Nicole Liang Wei Yi  
Ng Boon Chye  
Peter Tan Kian Chew  
Raymond Tham  
Rosalind Ng Kim Hong  
Selina Mary Gan née Sahetapy  
Selyna Lai King Hong  
Serena Ho Cin Ching  
Shelly Low Swee Lian  
Sylvia Han Kim Neo  
Victoria Chanel Lee Yei Hsinn  
Yang Kok Wah

## Obituary

Our deepest sympathies to the families of our esteemed members who have passed on.

Mdm Tay Poh Choo  
Mrs Wee Kim Wee née Koh Sok Hiong

## Gentle Reminder to Overseas Members

We would like to gently remind all overseas members to email to our Asst Hon Secretary, Agnes Ng at [secretariat@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:secretariat@peranakan.org.sg), 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 [editor@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:editor@peranakan.org.sg)

# OF BIRTHDAYS AND BLOODLINES

BABA BRYAN TAN IS EMBROILED IN THE SCHEMING WAYS OF GRAND AUNTY SOH BEE NEO

Ah Wong's stony countenance was betrayed only by a bead of sweat running down her greying hairline, the perfectly tied bun at the nape of her neck trembled ever so slightly as her gaze shifted from her mistress, Bee Neo, to the guests who were chit-chatting gregariously and eating without restraint. It was the matriarch's grand birthday party and the cream of Melaka society had gathered to celebrate.

*Kohpoh Chik* (grand aunty) Soh Bee Neo was ablaze in full regalia; her scarlet *kebaya* glittered with huge *kerosangs* (brooches) the size of *piring tauyu* (sauce plates) embedded with diamonds and rubies as fiery as her temper.

"Happy *lapan puloh tua seh jit tachi!* (Happy 80<sup>th</sup> grand birthday older sister!) *Panjang panjang umur!* (Wishing you a long life!) *Lu baik ya?* (I hope you are well?)" Bee Neo smiled thinly at the portly *nyonya* dressed in a tight-fitting bright green *sarong kebaya*, which gave her the appearance of a walking *buah nangka* (jackfruit). Bee Neo barely registered the greeting. Sensing that something was off, the well-wisher bowed and retreated hurriedly. As Ah Wong watched her mistress smiling at the guests, she was reminded of Bee Neo's true mood when she noticed her tightly clenched fists – the woman was seething on the inside.

"*Madam naik marah sampay muka padam merah!*" (Madam is so furious, her face is bright red!) Ah Wong thought to herself. Just a few days earlier, Ah Wong was in the kitchen stirring a pot of *kuah* (gravy) when a huge crash came from the audience room. In a fit of murderous rage, Bee Neo had toppled the great phoenix porcelain plate that once stood there. Ah Wong had to physically restrain her as Bee Neo reached out for something else to smash. In all her forty years of service to the Soh family, Ah Wong had never seen her mistress lose her composure like this before.

As elegantly dressed guests fluttered about the grand hall like exotic, colourful birds, Bee Neo retreated to a corner to sulk. Her mind was elsewhere. *Chilaka!* (Damn it!) Bee Neo fumed inwardly. "How dare she make a mockery of me! Going to my *Ng Ko* (older brother) and using him against me! That Molly Yeow is shameless!" Her embroidered handkerchief scrunched into a ball as her grip tightened, blood-red talons digging deeper into her palm. "Shouldn't you be entertaining your very important guests dear?" A voice came from behind her shoulder. Bee Neo whirled around and glared poisonously.

Thiam Hin, Bee Neo's husband emerged with a snifter of brandy in hand, his face glowing slightly. "*Sudah lah sayang.*

(That's enough dear.) I haven't said anything about how you treat Molly, but I won't sit idly by as you plot your revenge. *Kesian dia.* (I pity her)" Thiam Hin said breezily, taking a sip of the aged amber liquid. Bee Neo stared at him, mouth gaping like a fish out of water. It was rare that her husband had anything to say about her side of the family. "It's your *tua seh jit*. You shouldn't be sitting in a corner and sulking like the world has ended."

"*Amboi! Hoon Siang, sua datang!* (Hoon Siang, you've come!)" Thiam Hin brushed past his wife, greeting his guest with boisterous laughter. Crystal snifters clinked loudly as the two men raised a toast in Bee Neo's direction. She nodded stiffly as her mind was working furiously. All she needed was time to prove her older brother wrong. She refused to believe her *Ng Ko* that Molly's son-in-law, that naïve *mat salleh* (Caucasian) Daniel, was descended from an esteemed Peranakan bloodline, and from a rival family at that!

The Ongs and the Sohs had been rivals for generations. Their bitter feud extended all the way back to the Qing dynasty, where they vied for top positions in the Emperor's civil service. They had dispatched assassins disguised as maids to take out the heads of each other's families, and even sent poisoned buns during the New Year season with mock greetings of good health. When their clans descended on Malaya after the collapse of the dynasty, they immediately set about growing their immense fortunes in gambier, rubber and even in the opium trade. Eventually, things came to a head in Melaka, where all the prominent families built their palatial mansions on Hereen Street.

The two rival families had made sure to build their mansions as far away from each other as possible, surrounding themselves with lesser families as satellites and forming factions of buffers between them. Now, their fragile truce was about to be undone. Centuries of hate and bitterness threatened to embroil both houses once again. According to Ng Ko's sources, a relative of the Ongs had sailed to England three generations ago and set up a family. If that quack of an investigator he had hired was right, then Daniel was descended from the Ongs!

Bee Neo turned slowly towards Ah Wong, a strange look upon her face. Ah Wong's eyes widened. She recognised that look. Her mistress was plotting something. Perhaps after all, Bee Neo thought to herself, it was time for history to repeat itself. ♦

*\*In the next issue: Will the two fiery families clash again? Or will one anak unite them all?*



Illustration by Eileen Chan

# 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 Melaka, Penang and Singapore, and traces its links as far as Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand.

**Address:** 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



### Amek Gambar: Peranakans and Photography

*Till 3 February 2019*  
 The Peranakan Museum  
**Daily 10am to 7pm**  
**Fridays 10am to 9pm**

This exhibition explores the multifaceted role of photography in the lives of Peranakans. It presents early photographs of Peranakans, including the oldest example in Singapore's National Collection: a portrait of a Peranakan family taken in the mid-1800s.

### Asian Civilisation 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, siren boxes and some paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine batik textiles from the north coast of Java, all made from the Peranakan market.

**Address:** 1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555  
**Tel:** 6332 2982  
**Website:** [www.acm.org.sg](http://www.acm.org.sg)

### Indian Heritage Centre

**Chetti Melaka of the Straits**  
*Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities*

*7 Sept 2018 - 5 May 2019*

This exhibition celebrates the unique culture of the Chettis. From fashion and cuisine, to rituals and festivals, it offers visitors a rare experience of this little known community. Over 250 artefacts and photographs collected from the Chetti Melaka community in Singapore and Melaka are on display.

**Address:** 5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924  
**Website:** [www.indianheritage.org](http://www.indianheritage.org)

### Baba House

Formerly owned by the Wee family (whose ancestor Wee Bin was a mid-19th century shipping magnate) since 1910. This heritage house goes back in time to 1928. Experience what a grand Peranakan terraced house would have been like.

**Address:** 157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883  
**Website:** [www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html](http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html)  
**Tel:** 6227 5731

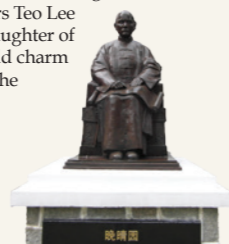
*Visits are by guided tours. Please call the house for details.*



### 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 the 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.

**Address:** 12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874  
**Website:** [www.wanqingyuan.org.sg](http://www.wanqingyuan.org.sg)  
**Tel:** 6256 7377



## LANDMARKS

### 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), Rumah Kim Choo (109 East Coast Road) and Rumah Bebe (113 East Coast Road) as well as the great variety of Peranakan restaurants in the neighbourhood.

**Website:** [www.myjoochiat.com](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 Melaka moved to this area as soon as the East India Company began to lease out land for sale. Visit the Aster by Kyra Peranakan Tile Gallery at 168 Telok Ayer Street for the widest selection of both antique and new Peranakan tiles.

### 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.

**Address:** 158 Telok Ayer Street Singapore 068613  
**Tel:** 6423 4616



### 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.

**Address:** 66 Spottiswoode Park Rd Singapore 088655

### 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 Bee 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.

**Address:** 15 Magazine Road Singapore 059568



### Emerald Hill Road

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

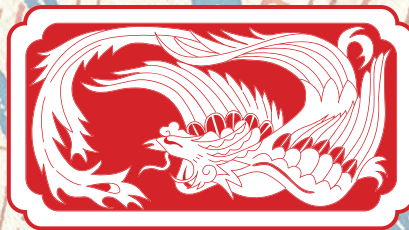
WE SPECIALISE IN PERANAKAN ANTIQUES SUCH AS BEADWORK, EMBROIDERY, FURNITURE, EPERGNES, PHOTOGRAPHS, NYONYAWARE, SILVERWARE, JEWELLERY

*We also purchase Peranakan and all types of antiques at fair and attractive prices. Call us for a quote.*



Very Rare Teakwood Brown and Gold Sam Kai Altar Table

# GUAN ANTIQUE



THE  
PERANAKAN  

---

ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE