THE BEHIND THE WAYANG PERANAKAN ISSUE

INSIDE THE HEART OF A STAR
GT LYE UNMASKED

SCENES THE WAYANG PERANAKAN ISSUE

MISTRESS OF MIMICRY
BABA IN KEBAYA TELLS ALL

BOLD BIBIK TAKES THE STAGE
MEET THE STAR YOU NEVER KNEW
ON THE COVER:
Francis Hogan (right) with a group of female impersonators from the unique Peranakan play, Nasib Anak Tiri staged in 1958. See page 8.

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

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 kiasu 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 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.

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
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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 Punggel 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 dandang 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.

“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 Kwee Peng Kwee, was a rubber broker and a prominent dandang 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.

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 managed to cover my rent. Sometimes I was so desperate 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.

GT Lye (2015), Oil on canvas by artist Alvin Ong.
Early in his acting career, GT shadowed a group of professional performers in Melaka to improve his knowledge of pantom and donang sang. 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, Cahi It Chap Cik (First Fifteen Days of the Lunar New Year) in 2000. He went on to write three more plays for GSA: Hujan Balek Ke Langit (The Impossible) in 2001, Kipas Oternana (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 Belok Roda Hidup 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 Bilih Mala Muh (Mother’s Pet) staged in 1989, is his favourite.

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

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.

For his stage role in Kain Chik Dua Mungka (2017), GT wore a spectacular set of kerosang 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 tumpah (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, they seem 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 hunts 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.

GT Lye (left) in Bilih Mala Muh (Mother’s Pet) in 2005.

GT Lye in Kain Chik Dua Mungka (2017) wearing a set of diamond and gold kerosang valued at $30,000. The set of three brooches was loaned to him by an adoring fan.

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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 Sewo 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 went up 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. *Kerihidupan Si Babi* (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, a famous sanggek 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.

The 1960s to the 1980s, an era of rapid economic development, was a lull period for *wayang Peranakan*. Performances during this time were rare, until the 1980s when there was a rise in interest in the traditional art. Francis found work as a shipping clerk in a famous soap company, but as soon as a chance came along, “I would jump on it,” he says. “My day job was Monday to Friday, and I worked on Saturday at the theatre.”

Despite the performers being a tight-knit community, “like family”, they were always on the lookout for the next opportunity to perform. Francis had been working as a shipping clerk for 15 years when he was asked to perform in a musical, *Bibiks Behind Bars*. He 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 4 during the filming of the hit drama series, *The Little Nyonya*. He also works as a consultant to Mediacorp Channel 8 for the Peranakan Arts Festival in 2015.

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 CT Lye. Amongst the next generation of female impersonators, he identifies Kelvin Tan (better known as KT) who performs under the auspices of *wayang Peranakan*. 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 BIBIKS RISE AGAIN

Serenipitously, 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.

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, *Sakura*, and a Hokkien ditty, *Ai Pa Jia Eh La* (Gotta Rush To Win). There was a huge audience, and they danced along with me! That made me so happy.”
**MATCHING UP TO THE MAID**

NYONYA NATALIE CHEAH DELVES INTO THE WORLD OF THE STAGE MAJIE

The 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 nyonya 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 nyonya 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 gleaned 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 nyonya Peranakan are veterans such as the late Baba Chee Hood Siong and Nyonya Sally Cua, as well as Nyonya 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.

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**Timeless Treasure**

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**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

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“Power belongs to you, God, and with you. Lord is unfruitful love”: and.

Psalm 62:11 NIV

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“A thing God has spoken two things I have heard:”

Psalm 40:5 NIV
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. Her exaggerated reactions never fail to elicit laughs from the crowd.

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 pohlat (a strong (Chinese) accent). The running joke being that they work until they pengsan (faint)! Always chapak pohlat, kena tekun (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 (M): I was inspired by the late actress, Nyonya Sally Gan. To me, she was the best majie in wayang Peranakan.

Kelvin Tan (KT): I played a majie for the first time in Kain Chik Dua Mangka 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.

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.

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

KT: Oft 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.

Majas are rare these days. It’s heart warming that these fiercely loyal, well-meaning but sometimes meddlesome, devoted helpers live on in our Peranakan world... even if it’s for just an evening of fun and drama.
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, “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.

Irene says that this is her favourite part of her house, where she brings out a precious scrapbook of newspaper clippings she shares the story of someone close to her heart. Excitedly, she feels “happy and relaxed”. It is fitting that this is where Irene 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 angling Pramakan 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 Institute) 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.

“My mother was very musical, but she focused on singing like Baba William Tan, Georgie Lee and Francis Hogan, so to take to the stage. All the female roles were played by men those days, it wasn’t considered “proper” for nyonyas to act. But in the 1950s, 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.

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 Frances 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 Perankan play.

Daisy 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 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.

Kerhidapam 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 ko lo me 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 Boonmee Road. I was 10 years old at the time and was roped in to play the ankle-removing (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 sampoh um (mistress of ceremonies in a Peranakan wedding) who directed the play.
**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 nyonyas during that time doing such things. It was a big deal to appear on TV back then!” exclaims Irene proudly.

**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 reconnect 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.”
Mama, kooping saya sakit skali.
Oy! Chu-chu sayang! Nanti serkerjap,
Mama p eyg per tek da-on kooping
Perah ayer dia masok kooping sayang.

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

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

Mama! Ng-kua saya kena lung-gah siong terok
Oy! Chu-chu sayang! Mesti pi pertek da-on ahroda
Yang da-on dia ahloos-ahloos tahpee bah-oh boosak skali
Toombok da-on amek ayer dia minohm.

Mama! Mama punyia chik-chik bahdan ada manyk ahngin
Oy! Chu-che sayang! Mesti jaga ahuak baik-baik
Kasi-lah dia minohm ayer da-on poh-ho
Da-on keroom sama da-on kermahngi poon pookohl ahngin.

By Nyonya Aileen Lau Guck Lin, 5 October 1993
Aileen’s poem is presented here with the Baba Malay spelling in which it was published.
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

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

Kim Choo’s Nyonya rice dumplings have been a fave amongst Singapore’s diverse races and communities since 1946.

Today, Kim Choo offers a wide variety of products and services which help preserve Peranakan culture and capture the spirit of Nyonya.

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Ready-made and bespoke kebayas & kebaya kancang for the discerning Nyonya!

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For inquiries, please contact us at info@kimchoo.com or via SMS 98443186
Dawn Marie Lee (DML): Where are we now, just over three months since the new General Committee (GC) was elected?

Colin Chee (GC): 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 sure I can 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: Has the GC begun to fulfill the objectives stated in your election manifests?

GC: 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 anditerate TPAS’s reputation as the champion, authority and voice of Peranakan culture.
2. Have a comprehensive youth outreach and general membership drive, locally and online.
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 PPDPA (Personal Data Protection 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.

Milestones to Celebrate

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 Juk Kim, Seah Liang Seah, Lim Boon Kong and Song Ong Siang to represent the Straits Chinese community in Singapore.

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.

1966

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

For the same historical reason, as an analogy, Singapore is celebrating its Bicentennial (200th Anniversary) next year. Although we gained full independence as a Republic on 9 August 1965, we have always traced modern Singapore’s beginnings to 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a trading post.

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

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Being Inclusive

DML: What else is on your mind?

GC: 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?”.

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 30 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.
Baba Leonard Lim’s pure talent in Ikebana, or the art of Japanese flower arrangement, has brought him where no other non-Japanese has been. In April 2018, the top student in the 600-year-old Ikebana school was given the rare honour of arranging white chrysanthemums at the annual flower offering ceremony known as Hana Kuyo. The traditional ceremony 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 Ikebana 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 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 Leonard’s lessons was presented from corporate giants, entrepreneurs, scientists and innovators to artists, contrasted with Su Kim’s cultural discourse. TED talks — to spread the spirit of powerful ideas — are “a brilliant way to spread the spirit of powerful ideas”, Su Kim said. “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.”

 genome project update

T he 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 ~3X. 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, Malay 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, 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.

artist shows at iconic london gallery

S ingapore artist, Alvin Ong, 30, had the prestigious honour of having a solo show titled “Charlie, my good friend”, which 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.

About Giving the Most Formidable Talk of Her Life

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 behind, and with a timer in front of notes, no comfort of a lectern to stand on. 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 conversing 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 artists, contrasted with Su Kim’s cultural discourse. TED talks — to spread the spirit of powerful ideas — are “a brilliant way to spread the spirit of powerful ideas”, Su Kim said. “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.”

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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 1960s in a rented SIT flat near 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 only 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 ways of contraception to prevent conception, this was what they said grumpily: “How can you enjoy eating a banana with its skin on?”

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

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 tam pui (chamber pot) anymore.” To which her mother wistfully said, “Imagine if we had flush toilets, I wouldn’t have to 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. Education gave Josephine’s family a better future, so that we no longer had to tolerate the disgusting, horrid smelling jambu (outhouse). “...To which her mother wistfully said, “Imagine if we had flush toilets, I wouldn’t have to speak English and were not learned. They might be ignorant, but they were never stupid. They simply lacked opportunities and choices.”

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 – Getong 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.”

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.”

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 aligbat pot (to do menial work), mashohor (famous), and firebeloh (to suffer greatly).

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.
ODE TO THE COCONUT

BABA ONG JIN TEONG WAILES 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 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 tree, let alone a 20-metre tall coconut tree!

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 15 cm 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.

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 (palmyra 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 palm and nipah palm which is common in Indochina and India.

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 for my mother at the toddy store in Pulau Tikus, Penang. I vividly 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.

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.

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

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

Different coconut varieties

Vamavata Tall
Malaysian Yellow Dwarf
Malaysian Tall
Taucson Tall
(Taiwanese)
Taucson Green Dwarf
(Philippines)
Kappadam Tall
(India)

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 kus. If the grated coconut is to be squeezed for santan for cooking, the dark layer is left intact.

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, shave 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 kapitan, onde-onde, kueh lapis and ubok ahok. Slowly-fried grated coconut is used for kerisik and sosayan. Inti, grated coconut cooked with gula melaka, is a filling for many nyonya kueh such as putak inti and kuch buah, a Northern nyonya kueh similar to kuch bangkung.

When the grated coconut is squeezed we get santan - a liquid similar to diary cream. It is an important ingredient for preparing kuehs like putak inti, kuch buah, kuch napia and lupa (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 chickens curry, curry kapitan and laksa lemak. Santan is a crucial ingredient in the nyonya laks and for desserts like sago pudding, putut hitam and chendol.
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 preparing satay sticks and brooms. These midribs, which are still used today as brooms, were made from bamboo. In the past, the midrib of the coconut leaflet obtained by stripping away the leafy parts was called sapu lidi and was used to weave mats for drying food and to weave lidi, the midrib of the coconut leaflet, has many uses including satay sticks and brooms.

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 was a surplus of coconuts, they were partly paid in kind.

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HARVESTING COCONUTS

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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.

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.Selap sekali!

SERONDENG GERAGO

(Coconut & Krill Garnish)

BABA IAN YAP SHARES ONE OF HIS FAVOURITE COCONUT RECIPES WITH NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE

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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
- 2-3 tablespoons of cooking oil

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.

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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 hired his staff in portraiture. The young lady in this photo adopts a typically Western pose; her feet are planted together and elegantly outwards; it indicates that her pose was contrived by the photographer. This fascination with foreign cultures and adopting debonair poses, went both ways: many photos from the late 19th century onwards show young babas attired in Western fashion and adopting elaborate poses, in an embrace of more cosmopolitan lifestyles, such as this portrait of Baba Oei Tiong Ham.

As it was in 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 to European tourists to take home!

The photographs in Amek Gambar certainly reveal and uncover many aspects of the Peranakan lifestyle, such as this portrait of Baba Oei Tiong Ham.

From the earliest photographs to the current trend of instant ‘live’ photos, we take 20 photos and select the best one to print or post on social media. 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.

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Engaging visitors

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In the lobby, one encounters a curious looking giant leopard (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 Ghoo Ling and Larry Kwa have employed the idea of surveillance to engage 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

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 depictions of colonialism as its subject.

Sherman says, “For me, the art of female impersonation is always imbued with a sense of longing, melancholy and tragedy, posing for an ideal when on stage and grappling with reality off stage. My work with Francis, as the whimsy of his art, who delves into a hidden aspect of roman ties 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 beggs further question - who lies 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 Kong 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?

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CULTURAL SNAPS

BABA EMMET LIAU GRAPS THE BIG PICTURE AT AMEK GAMBAR, AN EXHIBITION ON PERANAKANS AND PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM

Young Nyonya in Baju Panjang by John Thomson, Singapore, 1862-1863

While visiting Amek Gambar, I was immediately reminded of the irresistible 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 850 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.

J ust 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 850 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.

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

**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

**WHO ARE THE CHERTIS?**

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.

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 Anam Chitty (fondly known as Mak Kechik) from the Chetti Melaka community. After finishing this 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 Mustafa) and his younger daughters, Krishnavaini and Patama.

**SUPPIAH VILLA**

Title: Ramasamy Suppiah and family at Suppiah Villa in the Upper Serangoon area

Date & Region: 27 November 1940, Singapore

On loan from SM Pillay

**SUPPIAH VILLA 27-11-1940**

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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.
MARKING A DECADE IN STYLE

NYONYA LINDA CHEE IS WOODED BY PPBNKL5S 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 of the PPBNKL5S (Perusahaan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur Selangor). Held on 4 August 2018 at the Royal Lake Club in Kuala Lumpur The fast-paced, homely entertainment by a troupe of its own members regaled all who came for the highly colourful evening. Amazing instruments by Indonesian ensemble, Kerongkol Eljaspe, 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!

From a stagy set for a grand birthday to a brilliant 28-strong opening song-and-dance led by PPBNKL5S president, Baba Cedric Tan (in black), no one had a chance to be bored that whole evening.

“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 marked with a new ‘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 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 Grils’ (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 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 Yuki.

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!
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, Burung Kakat 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 Kapri, 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. Amen! "Macham celebrity"! We were all so happy with the turnout and positive response.

By Peggy Lee

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.

Beneath the skylight of The Peranakan


Beneath the skylight of The Peranakan and mamas. We is based on my son Ethan, while the little nyonya character 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 kancil/chong symbolises love and relationships.

The protagonist, Johnny, I wrote the book in 2013 for my four children to remind them of their Peranakan heritage. 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. 

By 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.

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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 plaster’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 santon 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.)

By Baba Colin Chee

Baba Peter Wee over the 40 years that we have been friends. 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!”

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Baba Peter Wee enjoying The Peranakan magazine.

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During a clerk session (a Peranakan card game) at the home of Nyonya Saw Hai Choo, renowned for her Peranakan cuisine, the destiny of a handsome young baby 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 had more imagined that decades later, these two young people would become the President and First Lady of Singapore. They married in 1936.


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 not 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 laging 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 the Wee Family taken in 1952 by David Photo Studio.

Left to right: Front row: Daughters Wee Kheng Hua (4th born), Wee Hock Neo (2nd born), Dr & Mrs Wee Kim Wee, and Wee Hock Seng (1st born). Back row: Daughters Wee Kim Tee (3rd born), Wee Hong Neo (6th born), Wee Eng Hoo (5th born). "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 cheongsam (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.”

Gratefulness was of utmost importance to them. One of my mother’s favourite expressions was: “Jangan lepas jembatan huang tangkat. Jangan throw away the walking stick after crossing the bridge.” My parents never forgot people who had helped them.

We do not forget how, during WW2 and in the post-war years, our parents, 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 the kek (one kek being equivalent to 600g), you should try to give back at least six (four falis, equivalent to 150g).”

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 ruy” (do not be boastful).
OF BIRTHDAYS AND BLOODYLINES

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

A

h Wong’sStonecountenance wasbetrayedonlyby a bead of sweat running down her greying forehead. Her eyes were red and her panting was heavy. 

“Mummy, you wouldn’t have died just because of me! I know you’re not dead! You’re just a ghost!” cried the nine-year-old, Ai Cheong, as she screamed and wailed in pain. 

Bee Neo, the matriarch of the Grand Aunty Soh clan, was in a state of shock. She had just discovered that her youngest daughter, Ai Cheong, was alive and well. 

Bee Neo turned slowly towards Ah Wong, a strange look upon her face. She had never been able to forgive Ah Wong for the wrongs he had done to her family. But now, she realized that Ah Wong was not the enemy she had thought him to be. He had been a victim of circumstance. 

Bee Neo thought to herself, it was time for history to repeat itself. 

Her mistress was plotting something. Perhaps after all, Bee Neo was not so furious, her face was bright red! Ah Wong thought to himself. He knew that he had made a mistake, but he didn’t know how to undo it. 

Gentle Reminder to Overseas Members 

We would like to gently remind all overseas members to email us at our Aunty Soh Secretary, Agnes Ng at actuarially@peranakan.org.my, for 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 so we do not collect subscriptions as income. Your cooperation 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 email to Dawn Marie Lee at dawnmarielee@peranakan.org.my

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

Illustration by Eileen Chan

Chakap Habis

Thais 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. The party was still going on, but it seemed as if 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 naive mat salit (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 Empire’s civil service. It was a family saga that 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 gambler, rubber and tin in the opium trade. Eventually, the Ongs came to a head in Melaka, where all the prominent families built their palatial mansions on Heeren 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 firm. 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 were alight with excitement. She realized 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 an uncle write them all?*

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See the world's first national Peranakan Museum, located in the historic Sun Yat Sen Villa. 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.

**Address:** 37 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874
**Website:** www.acm.org.sg
**Tel:** 6227 5731

**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 history 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
**Email:** nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg
**Tel:** 6332 7951

**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 Philip Lee Caven Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, steel boxes and some porcelain, 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 2862
**Website:** www.acm.org.sg

**Indian Heritage Centre**

Chetti Melaka of the Straits

Rediscovering Peranakans

Indian Communities

7 Sep 2013 – 5 May 2019

This exhibition celebrates the unique culture of the Chettis. From fashion and cuisine, to rituals and festivals, it often visits 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

**Baba House**

French owned by the Woe family (whose ancestor Woe Boon was a mid-19th century shipping magnate) since 1913. 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.wanqingyuan.org.sg

**Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall**

The old Sun Yat Sen Villa reopened in October 2017 after extensive renovations with a new name. Fitting tribute is given to the former owners of the houseensively Teo Eng Hock, even 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 great moment of world history. Intimate photos of the family life and of Teo Eng Hock’s enmory mother, Mrs Tan Lee née Tan Poh Siao (granddaughter of the kapitan of Mentok), add charm and a Peranakan angle to the experience.

**Address:** 12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 328764
**Website:** www.sunyatsennanyang.org.sg
**Tel:** 6226 7567

**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 Astor by Kyrilla Peranakan Tze Gallery at 168 Telok Ayer Street for the widest selection of both antique and new Peranakan tiles.

**Address:** 138 Telok Ayer Street, Singapore 088633
**Tel:** 6233 4616

**Thian Hock Keng**

The oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore was founded in 1821 although the present structure, built without nails, was completed only in 1861. 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 Teck Seng, who donated $50,000 for new altars.

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:** 138 Telok Ayer Street, Singapore 088633
**Website:** www.nus.edu.sg/

**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 Kampung Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms.

**Address:** 66 Spottiswoode 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 Kam Ching, son of Tan Teck Seng, and Tan Bee Swee, the son of Tan Kim Seng. The first president of the temple, Tan Kim Tan, 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 soaring ceramic roof tiles makes this one of the most elaborate Chinese temples in Singapore, quietly located amid the gleaming towers of the financial district.

**Address:** 15 Magazine Road, Singapore 089968

**Emerald Hill Road**

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

**Address:** www.mypoochiat.com

**Katong and Joo Chiat**

Once the nerve centre of Peranakan Lilo in Singapore. In its heyday it was the side of nearby grand seaside villas and elaborate Peranakan terraced houses. The latter can still be seen in a walk along East Coast Road. Also visit Peranakan shops such as Katong Antique House (298 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.

**Address:** www.mypoochiat.com

**Voy Ruey Teakwood Bowls and Gold Stash Kinaru Table**

**Peranakan Museum**

The Peranakan Museum is a museum dedicated to the Peranakan culture and history. It is located in the historic Sun Yat Sen Villa. The museum features a wide range of artefacts and photographs that showcase the history and culture of the Peranakan community. Peranakan culture is a unique blend of Chinese and Malay influences, and the museum aims to preserve and celebrate this rich heritage.

**Address:** 37 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874
**Website:** www.acm.org.sg
**Tel:** 6227 5731

**Katong and Joo Chiat**

Katong and Joo Chiat are areas in Singapore known for their traditional Peranakan architecture and history. These areas were once the centres of Peranakan life in Singapore. The district is known for its traditional Peranakan houses and restaurants.

**Address:** 12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 328764
**Website:** www.sunyatsennanyang.org.sg
**Tel:** 6226 7567

**Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall**

The Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall is a museum in Singapore dedicated to the Chinese revolutionary leader Sun Yat Sen. The museum features a wide range of artefacts and photographs that showcase his life and legacy.

**Address:** 12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 328764
**Website:** www.sunyatsennanyang.org.sg
**Tel:** 6226 7567

**Thian Hock Keng**

Thian Hock Keng is a historic temple in Singapore dedicated to the Chinese goddess Mazu. The temple is a prominent landmark in Singapore and is known for its elaborate architectural features and furnishings.

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