

# the Peranakan

ISSUE  
1 | 20  
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BUMPER  
ISSUE

CELEBRATING

25

YEARS

WINNER  
SPECIAL INTEREST  
MEDIA of THE YEAR  
MPAS AWARDS  
2018



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ON THE COVER:

A watercolour painting of peonies by artist Gabby Malpas. Peonies are commonly found on Peranakan material objects and symbolise wealth and honour in our culture. Read about Gabby's Peranakan connection on page 58.

Gabby is represented in Singapore by Utterly Art LLP.



Fondly Yours at 25

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Keys to the Past Sangketan jewellery re-discovered.

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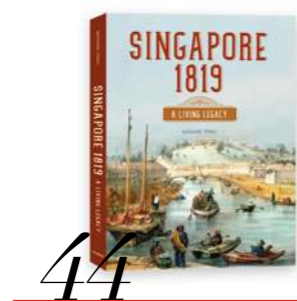
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The Peranakan magazine house style reflects the Baba Malay spelling found in A Baba Malay Dictionary by Baba William Gwee Thian Hock.



# CELEBRATING 25 Years



Can you remember what you were doing in 1994? Looking back at the past can be bittersweet. The year that *The Peranakan* magazine was first published, Singapore won the Malaysia Cup. Singapore football fans brought the Kallang Roar to the brand new Shah Alam stadium in Selangor and cheered our Lions on to a glorious 4-0 victory against Pahang. I remember the shouts of joy that rang in unison throughout my neighbourhood each time a goal was scored.

That year, there was much public debate and grumbling when the Goods and Services Tax was introduced (at a rate of three percent). Also in 1994, Singapore became a talking point in international news when American student Michael Fay was sentenced to four strokes of the *rotan* for vandalising cars with spray paint (which is a crime in this country). We gained both support and loathing from the international community.

1994 was also the year that local theatre company, The Necessary Stage, put up its very first Peranakan play - *Mari Kita Main Wayang*. Written by Baba Felix Chia and directed by Baba Alvin Tan, the play had a six-day run at the Jubilee Hall in the Raffles Hotel.

In the programme booklet, Alvin wrote, "I believe I have been moulded by my parents' responses to the Peranakan lifestyle...going through life as Peranakans in modernising Singapore...Sometimes self criticisms were made - very "thought through" comparisons of what is old and what is new, often leading to their more "open/modern" behaviour especially towards their children's world and interests."

Alvin's words resonate with me. Introspection, vision and a willingness to accept new ideas will bridge the older generation and the new. These are the principles that will propel this magazine into the next 25 years.

While putting together this special Silver Jubilee bumper issue, I've come to realise that 25 years is a long time in the life of a print magazine. Especially when younger generations no longer rely on magazines as a reference point or to express opinions. In this age of Instagram where content costs nothing and social media satisfies the need for new stories, images, contacts, and creativity, coupled with the high cost of publishing, producing a magazine really is a luxury. So why do we continue to do it?

The past and present editorial committees of *The Peranakan* and our contributors will agree that this magazine is a collective work by a group of creative people who are passionate about Peranakan culture, believe in the

artistic value of the print media and share a similar vision. *The Peranakan* magazine exists to inspire, educate and document our culture.

In November last year, *The Peranakan* clinched the title of Special Interest Media of the Year (Bronze) at the Media Publishers Association Singapore (MPAS) Awards 2018 where magazines are judged by a jury of industry leaders.

Winning titles are selected for excellence in content and design.

I am proud to say that our magazine was in competition with dozens of titles from publishing giants - household names that you will find on newsstands. Our magazine was the only winning title that is run entirely by volunteers and is distributed free of charge, not only to members of The Peranakan Association Singapore, but to the community at large. All the hard work by editorial committees past and present over

the last 25 years has made us what we are today - an award-winning magazine that Peranakans can be proud of.

I hope that you will enjoy this bumper issue. Read former editor Nyonya Linda Chee's love letter to the magazine in *Fondly Yours*. The youngest member of our editorial committee, Nyonya Natalie Cheah, writes about 25 things she loves about Peranakan culture. In celebration of our Silver Jubilee, we invited our readers to share the stories behind their favourite silver items. In *Keys to the Past*, Baba Alex Teoh uncovers the fascinating history about a little-known colonial-era silver item that was influenced by the chatelaine. Baba Colin Chee writes about the Chitty Melaka community, who have been overlooked in history books for far too long. Of course, no issue of *The Peranakan* magazine will be complete without a feature on delicious food! Try out the pork recipes shared by Baba David Neo in a tribute to his *Kim Kim*. Don't forget to scan the QR codes for all the bonus content - from music to video.

On behalf of the editorial committee, I would like to say, "Kamsiah banyak banyak!" to all our contributors, advertisers, our families for their patience and understanding in allowing us to spend countless hours working on the magazine, and to you, our loyal readers. Happy Silver Jubilee!

**Dawn Marie Lee**  
Editor  
editor@peranakan.org.sg



# 32<sup>nd</sup>

# Baba Nyonya

# CONVENTION Malacca, Malaysia

## Chrita Dhulukala memories that shape us

Sungguh lebat daon kari  
Dimasak kari lagi wangi  
Sedara sahabat semua ke mari  
Kasi laujiat sama huahee



22 - 24  
NOVEMBER  
2019



PERSATUAN PERANAKAN CINA MELAKA



# fondly Yours, at



NYONYA LINDA CHEE WRITES A LOVE LETTER TO FAITHFUL READERS OF THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE ON ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY



*Dear Good Babas and Nyonyas,*

For those who do not know me, I was the Editor of *The Peranakan* for half its 25-year life since it began modestly in June 1994 as a four-page newsletter.

Sometime in September 2004, when I said “yes” to then-Editor Peter Lee to join him, was the moment of my cultural awakening as a Peranakan.

After 12 enriching years of growing *The Peranakan* brand, I put to bed my last issue as the Editor in 2016. I have handed over the Editor’s job to a younger and more tech savvy Dawn Marie Lee, and am gladly the Editorial Adviser for a new season.

Dawn can attest that putting together an issue of *The Peranakan* is like giving birth. Mothers out there will know what I mean. We never remember the pain. Somehow our brains are wired to only remember the happy moments.

Looking back on those hectic years, I marvel at how an editorial team of volunteers managed to produce a quarterly for so many years till we scaled down to two issues in 2014 due to cost reasons. You never get tired of what you love, yes?

Ours was, and still is, a shared passion to put our culture into print. With new ideas, ways and means of making our magazine better each time. Just like our ever-evolving culture, gaining traction for its uniqueness.

### IT’S THE TEAM!

As *yaokwee* Peranakans, our editorial team bonded very well over food. A highlight of our lives was the fabulous home dinners hosted by Elizabeth Lee, our incomparable Aunty Liz! She was entertainment personified, dishing out cooking tips across her enormous dining table, and hilarious Hokkien jokes - which Broadway Beng gave up competing - while a doting Lee Kip Lee, our Honorary Life President, looked on approvingly. Aunty Liz passed away in July 2015 and Uncle Kip passed away in December 2018. We miss them both so very much!



Our beloved Aunty Liz who fed us well. Photo by John Lee.

Each team member brought his or her own strengths to the production floor. I had my journalistic, editorial and corporate background in brand-building. Art historian Peter imparted to us his wealth of knowledge of the Peranakan culture, the community and at times, did clever illustrations. He had formatted that very first newsletter for the founding TPAS editorial team, led by Uncle Kip. I truly enjoyed my initial years as Co-Editor with Peter, who had helmed the magazine since 1995.

My dearest husband Colin Chee, the current President of TPAS, was and still is my faithful Leica man and writer since 2005. Emeric Lau joined us in 2006 as Assistant Editor, bringing his gorgeous writing style and flair for amazing coverlines. Young Bryan, now TPAS



The single cyclostyled sheet called The Peranakan Association Newsletter was renamed The Peranakan in September 1996.



Baba Peter Lee’s talent extended to humorous illustrations for Chakap Habis.

Treasurer, came onboard in 2014 while in his 20s and found his calling in the spoofy *Chakap Habis* page. All of us are still involved!

To check blind spots in diverse stories, I often turned to my 'sounding board', Elisabeth Chan – she who could spot a wrong turn of phrase or word in a jiffy. I would chuckle at things that I missed, like 'knel't' not 'kneeled'.

Or 'frigidness' although not wrong, was "better replaced" with 'frigidity'.

Sharing the toil of production was designer Michelle Yap, my unseen partner-in-crime for midnight work after office hours. She started designing *The Peranakan* way back around 2000 with creative advisers John Lee and Ian Yap, both of whom were her colleagues at work. Michelle transformed our stories into elegantly laid out pages. She introduced rich palettes of colours that visually described our culture.

Outside editorial, ever-dependable Administrative Manager Low Whee Hoon efficiently organised meetings, neatly documented and did the worrying for us, from 2005 until 2014. Alvin Yapp

was our Advertising Manager from 2005, followed by Alvin Sng in 2012, and Ngiam May Ling from 2016 till November 2018.

**WRITERS BLOC**

Besides our editorial team, the magazine has been truly fortunate to have other excellent contributors - writers, artists and photographers - who volunteer *pro bono*, which is important in keeping to the spirit of the magazine.

Notably, Tan Kuning, William Gwee, Cedric Tan and theatre doyen, G T Lye, are a class of their own in recalling precious traditions and stories of the past. The skeletons in the cupboard which "eh, tak boleh, cannot" be revealed, lest they cause uproar in our Peranakan community, will remain with me forever.

*Dalam Dapor* was brought to life in 2004 by Noreen Chan. Remember the handwritten recipes from her grandmother Elsie's little notebook? Pencilled in cursif, the quaint mixture of English and Baba Malay was so



Then-Editor Nyonya Linda Chee and then-Designer Michelle Yap with two of their favourite covers. Photo by Colin Chee.

“

The skeletons in the cupboard which “eh, tak boleh, cannot” be revealed, lest they cause uproar in our Peranakan community, will remain with me forever.

”



The distinctly exuberant covers over the years.

characteristic of Peranakans of old.

Josephine Chia's recollections of growing up in Kampong Potong Pasir spun off memories that led to a book, *Kampong Spirit: Gotong Royong*, which won her the Singapore Literature Prize in 2014.

From Desmond Sim, David Neo, Norman Cho, Ong Poh Neo, Chan Eng Thai, Cynthia Wee-Hoefer, Sharon Wee, Christopher Lim, Ee Sin Soo, George Putrasahan and Robert Yeo to Eileen Chan, Maria Joseph and Jackie Yoong....the contributors' list is too long to mention all, so forgive me if I highlight only a smattering of frequent contributors. Thumbing through earlier copies, in the years before I joined, I spotted Maureen Lim, Anthony Oei, Heather Ong, Claire Seet in the editorial committee listings, with Shia Ai Lee and Rita Tan handling advertising.

We have advertisers who have stood with us through the good and lean years – like Foundation Jewellers, Guan Antique, Timeless Treasure, Rumah Kim Choo, Katong Antique Shop, Aster by Kyra and Jan Tan & Chan. Hopefully, more will come onboard to be associated with our brand.



One of our year-end Contributors' Dimmers, in 2014. Photo by Edmund Wong.

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE PERANAKAN MASTHEAD**





MEMORABLE ISSUES

1

2011 | ISSUE 3

Saluting our babas and nyonyas in contemporary theatre. This issue is most memorable for its cover photograph of Singapore icons who are Peranakan. Miraculously, all the Top Five candidates polled on facebook - Neo Swee Lin, Ivan Heng, Dick Lee, Alvin Tan and Glen Goei - were available one Sunday for a teatime shoot by artist-photographer Chris Yap Wooi Hoe.

4

2015 | ISSUE 1

The fastest issue to run out was the 60-page Silver Jubilee Issue. For the cover story on Singapore's greatest Baba, Mr Lee Kuan Yew - who never admitted he was one - I interviewed a most amiable Dr Lee Suan Yew, the younger brother of Mr Lee. I commissioned artist Alvin Ong to paint the portrait of a young Mr Lee. Alvin completed the work in England while studying for his Masters' at Oxford University. It was auctioned off at our Peranakan Ball to raise funds for TPAS.

2

2012 | ISSUE 4

Another favourite cover is a magnificent golden brown bird clad in *daon lemo perot*, *kesom*, *kemangi* and little else, on a bed of edamame, *belachan* and pea rice. Anton Kilayko was brilliant in food styling and photographing Sylvia Tan's fusion Peranakan turkey for *Dalam Dapor*. Sadly, Anton passed away in October 2018.

3

2014 | ISSUE 3

*The Exposed!* featured sartorial images, or the lack of it, from the olden days. Taken from Peter Lee's collection, a few salacious photographs are on show at the *Anek Gambar* exhibition at the Peranakan Museum. We had a bit of concern about losing our license then. Thankfully all was quiet. Only one of our committee received an earful from some scandalised bibiks.

5

2016 | ISSUE 2

A doubly meaningful cover for me was *Chicken Feat*. It was my last issue as Editor; I was born in the Year of the Rooster. The dramatic cockerel with its Freddie Mercury strut was taken by Baba Ernest Goh for his photographic book, titled *Chickens*. Little wonder birds roost well with me.

MORPHING INTO A MAGAZINE

I hauled out of storage the pile of issues I had. They weighed a hefty 7.7 kilos. Like my grandson when he was a year old. Flipping through the pages, prying open some stuck from humidity, I raked up many milestones and memories.

The original monotone newsletter of June 1994 became a thematic 32-page, full-colour magazine at the end of 2005. Expanding the issues became a thrill and challenge by itself. At end-2006, we bumped up to 44 pages and Peter initiated the Singapore Peranakan Guide to showcase our cultural landmarks. Our covers became more ambitious as the compliments rolled in from readers. In 2011, I initiated the listing of the Federation of Peranakan Associations to present a visual idea of the larger community that shared our culture. It started with seven associations and has nearly doubled to 13 listings.

As early as 2007, I insisted that our glossy-looking publication should be referenced as a magazine. It took time, much reminding and nagging to change mindsets used to the 'newsletter'. I dare say I have succeeded. The recent award by the Media Publishers Association of Singapore (MPAS) in November 2018 marks an official recognition.

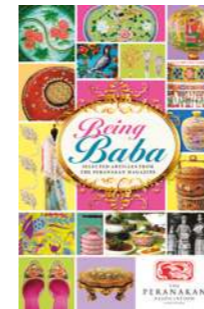
UNEXPECTED LOYALTY

My most precious takeaway as the Editor of *The Peranakan* is the amazing engagement and devotion of our readers. That so many of you have come to me to say you love the print magazine, collect every issue, and some even bind them in volumes, have been truly worth our team's blood, sweat and my eye bags. "Don't you dare go online!" was one threat.

Before I take my leave, thank you to the founding editorial team that started it all - Lee Kip Lee, David Ong, Helen Tan and Lim Geok Huay - at the urging of the first Peranakan President of Singapore, the late Dr Wee Kim Wee. You set the page for us.

BEING BABA

BEING BABA, A COMPENDIUM OF THE BEST ARTICLES FROM THE PERANAKAN



I was gently prodded by Baba Peter Wee one day at his Katong Antique Shop: "Linda, we have so much wonderful material in our magazines. Why don't we have a nice book to show it at our first Peranakan Arts Festival in 2015?" Baba Melvin Neo from Marshall Cavendish and I worked intensively over six months to produce *Being Baba*, a 350-page compendium of selected articles.

BEING NYONYA?



From left: Nyonyas Dawn Lee and Linda Chee with their spouses, Jean-Francois Chassin and Baba Colin Chee, respectively, and Baba Cedric Tan, a regular contributor of articles on tradition. Photo Courtesy of Dawn Marie Lee.

TO A NEW SEASON

As *The Peranakan* turns a robust 25, I happily celebrate a precious purveyor of our heritage that I know will go more places with a strong, younger team led by Dawn. *Hati gua betol hua hee*, I am happy!

To our readers, thank you for making our work so much lighter with your love.

Cheers to our culture. ♡



Some past editorial members. From left, sitting: Honorary Life President Baba Lee Kip Lee and Nyonya Helen Tan. Standing: Babas Anthony Oei, Alvin Yapp, Ian Yap, Peter Lee and Nyonyas Noreen Chan and Shia Ai Lee. Photo by Chris Yap Wooi Hoe.

Linda

# A Culture of Interconnections

CO-FOUNDING EDITOR, **BABA PETER LEE**,  
REFLECTS ON 25 YEARS OF THE PERANAKAN  
Photo by Baba Colin Chee



Founding Editors  
of The Peranakan  
magazine, Peter Lee  
(left) and Lee Kip Lee.

“

The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.

Rabindranath Tagore

”

The *Peranakan* magazine began in 1994 as a four-page photocopied newsletter. It was conceived by my father Lee Kip Lee, and laid out in a very amateurish fashion on a Mac Classic computer by me. Prior to that, information to members was regularly disseminated in the form of a letter from the main committee.

The editorial team expressed their aims in the newsletter's opening sentence: "We hope this new format will attract greater interest among our readers and that it will serve as a practical means of communication between all our members."

Underlying this aim was a strong belief in promoting the values of what it means to be Peranakan. For my father, who not long after became the President of the Association in 1996, this was deeply centred on spiritual and ethical principles, rather than all the trappings of Peranakan culture.

He was immensely proud of the visionary achievements of the community, in creating a better Singapore, one that unconditionally embraced people of all ranks, religions and races.

The newsletter and magazine expressed these values, in trying to achieve excellence in humble ways, by conscientiously and meticulously improving on scholarship, journalistic qualities, and promoting inclusiveness, maintaining social relevance, among others.

It was important for the magazine to transcend what a good friend rightly described as excessive "navel gazing", and focus on pride of our humanistic values, and on what we do best: drawing people together.

I am immensely proud to have been involved in almost every issue in some way, and that the magazine continues to thrive under a new team. *Panjang Panjang Umor!* ♦

By awesome deeds in righteousness you will answer us, oh God of our salvation.

Which by His strength sets fast the mountains being girded with power,

Which stills the noise of the seas, the noise of their waves and the tumult of the people.



You crown the year with your goodness and your paths drop abundance.

The pastures are clothed with flock; the valleys also are covered with corn; they shout for joy and sing.

- Psalm 65

*Timeless Treasure*



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# 25 Things I Love

NYONYA NATALIE CHEAH CELEBRATES HER FAVOURITE THINGS ABOUT PERANAKAN CULTURE | Illustrations by Nyonya Joanne Low

A question I'm sometimes asked is if being Peranakan is still relevant to someone my age. (I'm a year younger than this magazine!) What makes us unique? Is it the food? Intriguing places? Baba Malay phrases that pepper our everyday speech or breathtaking *baju* (clothes)? In celebration of *The Peranakan* magazine's Silver Jubilee, here are 25 things I love about being Peranakan.

## FOOD

Come Christmas or New Year in my household, we don't look forward to log cakes or big roasted turkeys. My extended family gathers at the *tok panjang* (long table) for our festive meal. It is one tradition we always observe even when it is difficult to make time for everyone to come together. Often, as there are many of us, everyone will wait their turn to eat at the table, starting with the eldest in the family and eventually down to the little ones.

As I lived with my grandparents for a period, I have vivid memories of my grandmother and relatives cooking up a storm for such celebratory feasts. A delicious aroma

would waft through the living room for days before such celebrations. My Kong Kong always says, "Peranakan food tastes better if kept a day or two after cooking. Don't eat straight away. It tastes best on the third day!"

But I could never wait. I would sneak into the kitchen hoping for a taste of something. My grandmother would shoo me away while she squatted at the back of the kitchen pounding chili in a pestle and mortar. Someone would be preparing the black nuts for *ayam buah keluak* and another would be watching over a simmering pot of *babi assam*. So much love and care goes into the preparation, you can taste it in the food.



1.

### Babi Assam

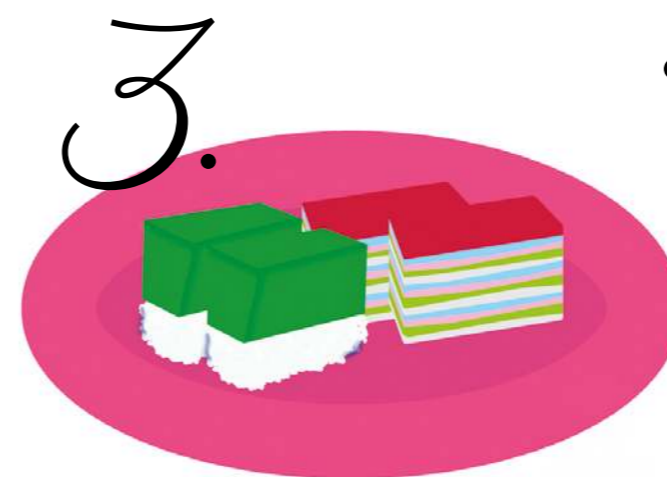
According to some recipes, the *babi* (pork) has to be marinated for three hours, but if you truly want to bring out the flavor, you're going to need three days!



2.

### Buah Keluak

A dish mostly associated with ayam (chicken), but some families like it with babi. Did you know that the black nut is poisonous?



3.

### Kueh

Who can resist a myriad of rainbow hues on a platter? There are up to 36 types of them! An Instagrammer's dream!



4.

### Chap Chye

Did you know that flowers are used in this dish? It's a mixed vegetable stew of cabbage, strips of *tau kee* (dried soybean), black fungus, *tang hoon* (glass noodles) mushrooms and lily buds tied into a knot.



5.

### Kiam Chye Ark

An amazing pickled vegetable and duck soup that gets better by the day! A splash of brandy adds some kick to the soup.

**PLACES**

When people look for Peranakan places on our little red dot, one of the first things they zoom in on are the colourful houses along Koon Seng Road in the Joo Chiat area where I live. However, there are many other Peranakan places to seek out in Singapore and if you're in the mood for a short getaway, in Malaysia too.



6.

*Blair Plain conservation district, Singapore*

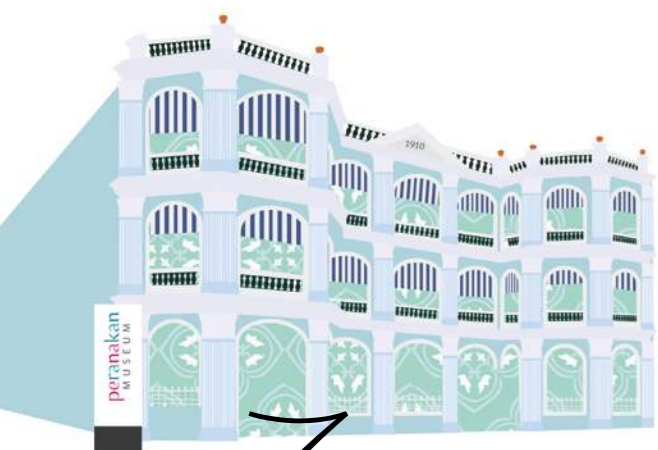
Visit the NUS Baba House on a free guided tour, then stroll around this picturesque neighbourhood. The *pintu pagar* (half-height fence doors) and decorative tiles fronting many of the houses are exquisite! Did you know our late Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew once lived in this area at 147 Neil Road?



10.

*Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia*

Visiting this UNESCO World Heritage Site is like taking a walk back in time. Penang Peranakan food is quite different from what we are used to in Singapore. Don't miss the delicious kerabu!



7.

*The Peranakan Museum, Singapore*

A must visit. The museum is a treasure trove of all things Peranakan. It was the first of its kind in the world!

**LANGUAGE**

Elders in our community lament that Baba Malay is a dying language. It's true, many Peranakans of my generation do not speak it, but that doesn't mean we give up hope! The phrases that I grew up hearing my grandparents and relatives utter evoke strong feelings of joy, anger, sadness, surprise, shock and so on. Yes, there are equivalents in English, but the essence and nuances of these phrases are lost in translation. I hope that more of my generation will retain at least a few of them in our daily speech. Here are a few phrases that I like.

11.

**OHPOCHOK!**

Our favourite thing to shout when we are startled.



8.

*The Intan, Singapore*

An independent museum tucked away in Joo Chiat Terrace. The owner (who lives in the house) will gladly show you his beautiful collection amassed over the last 30 years.

12. **Kus Semangat!**

This is often uttered on stage in *wayang* Peranakan, especially by the *majies* (maids) who say it when they've heard something shocking or juicy.

13.

*Amboi!*

An interjection to express wonder or surprise. (Not to be confused with *ambon*, which is a delicious kueh!)

9.



*Melaka, Malaysia*

Melaka is a must for foodies! Nyonyas, it's hard to leave without getting a *kebaya* or pair of *kasot manek* (beaded slippers) made-to-measure.

14. *Sedap sekali!*

If you don't say this to your grandma when you eat her food, you *mati* (die) already!

15.

*Ari besair*

This phrase means a special day like a holiday or a festival. It can also be used for birthdays, weddings or important celebrations.

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Now, when a *ari besair* comes around, entertainment is expected! Everyone knows that they must keep their guests happy and entertained. As we celebrate this magazine's Silver Jubilee, let's look at some ways that Peranakans have fun.

17.

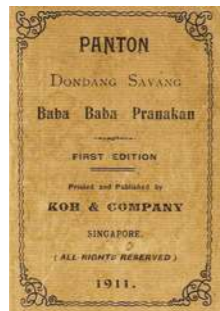


*Wayang Peranakan*

A *wayang* is a special treat. In the past, rich *towkays* (businessmen) would hire a troupe to perform on *ari besair*. Today, a *wayang* performance is a time for the community to come together, reminisce and enjoy a good show.

19.

*Panton*



Have you ever received a love letter in the form of a *panton*? *Pantons* are quatrains that are composed from the heart. Themes may vary, but they are often used to mark an occasion or sentiment. If you have had one composed just for you, consider yourself lucky!

16.



*Main Cherki*

Once a daily pastime for *bibiks* of old, this card game can be puzzling at first, but when mastered, is a lot of fun to play! Beware of playing with money, the *mata-mata* (police) may come and catch you!

18.



*Dondang Sayang*

Call it Peranakan rap if you like! It's a form of poetic banter often sung at parties by a pair of singers. The singers have to be masters of Baba Malay to come up with witty replies to delight the audience.

20.

*Joget-joget*

No Peranakan party is complete without dancing!



**WARDROBE**

Last but not least, with all this talk of parties and celebrations, I must include the colourful *baju* which babas and nyonyas love. Our *sarong kebayas* and *kasot manek* have become an outward expression of our Peranakan identity. I wear mine with pride!



21.

*Kasot Manek*

If Cinderella was a nyonya, this is what she would have worn. These beautiful shoes made with thousands of miniscule, faceted glass beads. In the past, a nyonya bride-to-be had to sew at least one pair for herself and one for her groom before the wedding. Thank goodness it's not a pre-requisite today or I might go blind!

22.

*Nyonya sarong kebaya*

A very feminine outfit which makes nyonyas young or old look elegant. It's no wonder that the *kebaya* is enjoying a revival nowadays. The *kebaya* blouse, which has no buttons or zips, is usually made of swiss voile and has beautiful *sulam* (embroidery).

23.

*Batik sarong*

I think some young nyonyas like myself might find it daunting to tie a *sarong* properly, but learning different techniques allows you to express your creativity and wear a *sarong* or *kain lepas* in many variations! The next time you are shopping for a *sarong*, look out for a *pagi sore* design which is rather special - you get two *sarongs* for the price of one!

24.

*Kerosang*

A beautiful piece of jewellery which some families pass down the generations. Today the *kerosang rantay* (three brooches linked by chains) is most popular and used to fasten a *kebaya*. It can be tricky at first to pin it on properly, but it's worth the effort because the effect is stunning. I prefer *kerosang* set with intan (rose-cut diamonds) rather than modern brilliant-cut diamonds as they have an understated charm.

25. *Batik shirt*

The men are not left out when it comes to dressing up in full Peranakan regalia. Batik shirts today have fresh, hip and modern designs which will please many young babas. Last year, even a global Japanese retail chain launched a range of contemporary batik shirts.

Beyond the material things that make us Peranakan, I feel that one of the most crucial elements to keeping our culture alive is our attitude towards change. Peranakan culture has always been one of change, forever evolving and incorporating multi-cultural influences. Every generation adapts the culture and our heritage becomes richer. While we respect tradition and study history, we must not be obsessed with the past, but look forward to the new chapters that we will write. Happy Silver Jubilee! ♦

# BABA \*CONUNDRUMS

BABA TAN KUNING RECALLS AMUSING RIDDLES FROM HIS CHILDHOOD

When I was six years old, one of my milk teeth began to shake. To save on the dentist's fee, my father thought of a way of pulling it out. On a Sunday when we were all at home, he gathered the children into his room – my two elder brothers, my younger sister, two cousins and myself. He cracked jokes and made us laugh. While my mouth was wide open, he took a piece of thread and tied it to the shaky milk tooth. A moment later, he yanked the thread and out came my milk tooth, dangling from the string in his hand. We all roared with laughter. In our eyes, magic had happened!

There was a ritual I had to observe when throwing my extracted tooth away. Both my feet had to be placed together properly, otherwise, the new tooth would not grow in line with the other

teeth. The tooth also had to be thrown over a roof so that the new tooth would grow upright. Fortunately, there was a small canopy roof over the washing area near the bathroom to provide shade for our Cantonese *majie* (maid) who did our laundry there every day.

To make us laugh, my father amused us with some conundrums which none of us children could answer.

I am now 85 years old. To younger readers today, these riddles may seem unsophisticated. For me and perhaps those of my generation, they bring back memories of simpler times.

I can only remember those three riddles from my childhood. I would like to encourage readers who can remember anymore Baba conundrums to send them in to this magazine, lest we forget. Please email: [editor@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:editor@peranakan.org.sg) ♦

## HANTU TETEK

There are many myths about the Hantu Tetek. She was believed to use her large and long breasts to suffocate her victims. It was thought that she preyed on small children and young men at dusk. Once they were caught, they were never seen again. Some say that the Hantu Tetek is the demon spirit of a woman whose baby died while it was still of nursing age, which explains her pendulous breasts. To us children, the thought of meeting this ghost was terrifying!

## Riddle 1

### Sorong sorong makan

(Pushed away from you, it eats)

### Tarek tarek pun makan

(Pulled towards you, it also eats)

### Apa itu?

(What is it?)

**Jawab:** Gergaji  
**Sebab sebab:** Gergaji di sorong abok kayu ter keluar. Gergaji di tarek, abok kayu pun ter keluar. Ada orang kata orang lawyer pun macham gergaji, orang kala pun bayar dia duit. Orang menang pun bayar dia duit. Kala atau menang, mesti bayar lawyer duit!

**Answer:** A saw blade  
**Explanation:** Push a saw blade and it will cut wood. Pull a saw blade and it will also cut wood. There are people who say that a lawyer is like a saw. When you lose the case, you have to pay the lawyer, even if you win you still have to pay the fees!

## Riddle 2

### Ulor ulor putus

(Push and push, it will break.)

### Apa itu?

(What is it?)

**Jawab:** Taik  
**Sebab sebab:** Taik orang bila di tran tran, taik putus.

**Answer:** Human stool  
**Explanation:** When you strain the stomach, human stool breaks and drops off.

## Riddle 3

### Hanya pada malam dapat dilihat

(Only at night can this be seen.)

### Ada rambut panjang

(It has long hair.)

### Apa itu?

(What is it?)

**Jawab:** Hantu tetek  
**Sebab sebab:** Hantu tetek boleh dilihat sedang perayaan Chetti Hindu. Biasanya buddak buddak sedang bermian sembunyi, di tegor, jangan main lama lama nanti jumpa hantu tetek.

**Answer:** The Breast Ghost with long hair and long breasts.  
**Explanation:** The Breast Ghost may be seen in a Chetti Hindu procession. When evening comes, children should stop playing outside and return home or the Breast Ghost may catch them.

# PANTON TAON BABI

## Year of the Pig Poems

BABA CHAN ENG THAI CELEBRATES THE YEAR OF THE PIG WITH THESE TWO ORIGINAL PANTONS | Illustration by Gabby Malpas

*Hati babi bungkus sama luak chye,  
Pongtey ada rebong kantang,  
Taon babi suma huat chye,  
Lama keluar baru datang!*

Liver balls, fermented vegetables,  
Stewed pork, bamboo shoots, potatoes,  
A prosperous Year of the Pig to one and all,  
Out with the old and to new beginnings!

*Kueh bangit kueh koya,  
Perah santan kelapa muda,  
Taon baru jereki kaya,  
Keluagar peng an suma ada!*

Rice flour and green pea cookies,  
Freshly squeezed coconut milk,  
New Year's good fortune aplenty,  
Harmony and peace to all families! ♦



This image has been adapted from an original watercolour painting by artist Gabby Malpas with her permission. Gabby is represented in Singapore by Utterly Art LLP.

# A Bowl of Babi Brown

BABA BRYAN TAN TELLS THE TALE OF A YOUNG NYONYA WHO COOKS UP A DISH BEST SERVED COLD | Illustration by James Tan



Cousin Stella, born in the Year of the Pig, was the embodiment of her Chinese zodiac sign. No, she wasn't cute, pink and plump. Rather, a tangled mat of dirty long hair draped over her face, which was always smeared with whatever she ate for her last meal. The kids in school pulled her hair, made fun of her and screamed, "Dirty pig! Sadako, Sadako\*! Dirty pig!" and ran away giggling. (\*Sadako is the name of the murderous, long-haired ghost in the Japanese horror film, *The Ring*.)

When I asked Mama about Stella, she would make clucking noises with her tongue and shake her head. "*Dia sikit gila gua ingat. Kesian sekali!* (She's got a screw loose I think. So pitiful!) Be nice to her okay?"

## STELLA THE SETAN

Stella would always smile when she saw me, revealing a set of crooked brown teeth, cracked and chipped from the numerous objects she had chewed on. Stella seemed to be possessed by an insatiable need to chew. In between meals, Stella would chew on anything she could get her hands on – books, clothes, toys and even furniture! I sighed quietly as I watched Stella mutter to herself and chew on the tablemats, a thin string of saliva drooling into a small puddle on the floor. It didn't help that her mother, Aunty Swee Keng, had four other young children and had no time to spare for Stella the *setan* (devil), a nickname coined by furious relatives who had their things mangled by Stella's unrelenting jaws. Stella's appetite for food was no less voracious.

Despite being constantly frazzled by a bawling baby and an active toddler, Aunty Swee Keng was renowned in our extended family for her *babi* (pork) dishes and always managed to squeeze in time to cook for the family. With her clothes perpetually stained by baby spit and splatters from whichever *rempah* she was pounding, she was like a decorated general, the kitchen her battlefield.

When Aunty Swee Keng was at work, incessant pounding of the *batu lesong* (pestle and mortar) emanated from the kitchen. Then, the frenzied chops of deft knife work, like machine guns being fired in quick succession. The clash of iron and steel of *wok chuan* (metal spatula) on wok would follow the roar of a mighty gas flame, and after, the low resounding whine of the electric blender.

No one would guess that it was in the kitchen, amidst all the ordered chaos that Stella would find her true calling in the divine sumptuousness that is Peranakan cooking. In halting speech, she would recite to me and anyone else who would listen, a list of her mother's delicious pork dishes. *Babi pongteh*, *babi buah keluak*, *babi sio*, *babi assam*. Despite her speech impediment, the names of dishes would flow like *kuah* (gravy) from her lips, wet with drool.

"*NI BABI MIA BUDAK!* (This pig of a child!)" Aunty Swee Keng would erupt in apoplectic fit as Stella scampered away, making off with a hunk of *sio bak* (roast pork) in her greasy paws, dripping pork fat onto the floor in her mad rush to avoid her mother's searing hot *wok chuan* making contact with her buttocks.

As punishment, the pork thief was often sent to bed without dinner. In school, Stella daydreamed obsessively about pork dishes and doodled on her notepad during lessons. An irate teacher inevitably snatched away her drawings, and held them up for the whole class to see. The children howled with

laughter. "Sadako drew a flying pig! She should just sit on it and fly away. Smelly, dirty pig!" Her classmates pinched their noses and edged their chairs away from her. Stella's head hung low. Through the curtain of matted hair that shielded her from the mockery, resentment blazed in her black eyes.

## DIRTY PIG TRANSFORMED

As Stella grew into a teenager, she went through a transformation. She stopped chewing on inanimate objects. Cooked food placed on the kitchen countertop remained unmolested until mealtime. Stella became quiet, withdrawn and even stopped muttering to herself.

One evening, Stella suddenly turned up in the kitchen and started pounding the necessary ingredients for *rempah babi buah keluak* with the *batu lesong*. Aunty Swee Keng was shocked that her daughter had selected the correct ingredients in the right proportions. She was wary at first but rejoiced inwardly when Stella asked if she could help out in the kitchen everyday. Her daughter wanted to learn the ways of culinary warfare from her! Aunty Swee Keng taught Stella patiently and earnestly, aware that in these modern times it was rare for a young girl to want to learn Peranakan cooking, which was tedious and

required hours of preparation. Her friends' daughters were more interested in shopping online for pretty dresses than at Tekka Market for *buah keras* (candlenuts) and *kunyit* (turmeric).

Stella came home one day with a letter from school – an invitation for students to prepare and sell food at the school's annual Food & Fun Fair. Stella excitedly told her mother that she wanted to contribute her favourite pork dishes. Aunty Swee Keng beamed with pride and readily agreed.

## PIGS CAN FLY

On the day of the fundraiser, Stella's classmates were stunned and slack-jawed. They could not imagine that Stella 'Sadako' Ng was capable of cooking up such mouth-watering Peranakan dishes like *babi pongteh* (pork stew) and *hati babi bungkus* (minced pork and liver meatballs wrapped in pig's caul).

The queue for Stella's food stretched the whole length of the canteen. Within an hour her food was completely sold out. Even the principal had queued up to buy Stella's food after hearing how delicious it was. Everyone wanted to meet Stella, the unexpected culinary genius, but for some reason she was nowhere to be found.

As the Food & Fun Fair came to a close, murmurs of consternation could suddenly be heard. People started jogging, then running down the hallways in urgent panic clutching at their stomachs. There was a stampede for the toilets. An all-out melee ensued, a battle-royale for the bathrooms, a competition for the can.

It was pandemonium. Brown ooze stained skirts and trousers, dribbling down legs onto the floor. Those who were not fortunate enough to reach the latrines in time had to sit on top of trashcans to relieve themselves. The rest just sat on the floor or leaned against walls sobbing, discharging and retching helplessly in brown puddles, parents, students and teachers alike. The smell was unbearable. It was like a pigsty on a sweltering day, a herd of swine wallowing in their own filth.

Stella watched and laughed maniacally from her hiding place in the Art Room. Her spirit soared with sweet revenge. Now, who said pigs can't fly? ♦



A char kerosi in a Peranakan home. Photo by Baba Fred Soh.

### ANTIMACASSAR – A COLONIAL RELIC

Ap-itu? During Chinese New Year visits, I've always wondered why some Baba households have white crocheted fabrics, called *char kerosi*, placed on the backs of chairs. When I asked what the purpose was, no one really knew. The standard reply would be, "Because Mama always did it this way for the Taon Baru (New Year)."

Recently I found out that this cloth is called an antimacassar. It is placed over the back or arms of a chair to prevent soiling of the upholstery fabric underneath.

From the early 1800s to the 1900s, Macassar Oil was a must-have in every European gentleman's grooming kit. It was popularised by Alexander Rowland (1747-1823), a famous London barber who claimed that his hair oil was obtained from a relative living in the Celebes (now known as Sulawesi) in the Dutch East Indies.

He gave it an exotic sounding name and marketed his hair oil aggressively with exaggerated claims of its effectiveness. Macassar Oil was often made from coconut or palm oil combined with ylang-ylang and other fragrant oils.

Within two decades, it had become hugely popular all over Europe. Even princes and kings had Rowland's Macassar Oil sent over from England. The name "Macassar Oil" was registered as a trademark by A. Rowland & Sons in 1888.

The fashion for oiled hair became so widespread in the Victorian and the Edwardian period that housewives began to cover the arms and backs of their chairs with washable cloths to prevent the upholstery from being soiled. Around 1850, these cloths started to be known as antimacassars.

The original antimacassars were usually made of stiff white crochet-work, but towards the end of the 1800s, they became simpler, usually a small square or rectangle of fabric in wool or silk.

It is well known that the Babas were heavily influenced by European tastes and fashions during the colonial era in the Straits Settlements. The antimacassar made its way into Baba homes with a Peranakan twist – because the crocheted fabric was all white (which is associated with mourning) a red ribbon was added. I wonder if some households really knew what the antimacassar was meant for because quite often, they were placed on wooden chairs that had no upholstery.

Through the decades, the *char kerosi* lost its functional purpose after hair oil fell out of fashion. However in some Baba homes, it is still used as a decorative item for special occasions.

# Did You Know?

AFTER THE FRENZY OF TAON BARU FESTIVITIES HAS ABATED, **NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE** PONDERES ON SOME ITEMS WITH A FORGOTTEN PAST



In the past, Peranakans did not give mandarin oranges during Chinese New Year visits. Photo by Dawn Marie Lee.

### MANDARIN ORANGES

Giving mandarin oranges has become a customary Chinese New Year practice in Singapore. The oranges symbolise gold and an abundance of wealth.

But did you know that in the past, Peranakans did not give mandarin oranges during New Year visits?

Instead, many hosts would serve nibbles and desserts with auspicious meanings. For example, my late *Ee Poh* (grandaunt) would always serve us homemade red date and longan sweet tea because *ang chu* (red dates) would make things *ban soo ho* (go smoothly), so she said.

Groundnuts were another favourite New Year snack because *chiak tor tau* (eating groundnuts) would enable one to live till *lau lau* (a ripe old age).

### HOMEMADE ANG POWS (RED PACKETS)

In my lifetime, as far as I can remember, ang pow packets have been easily available and given out free – from banks to supermarkets and even petrol stations – in the weeks leading up to Chinese New Year. Nowadays, *ang pows* come in all colours of the rainbow, not just the traditional red. In the past however, *ang pows* were homemade from red paper and were less than one-third the size of modern ones.

My mother tells me that when she was a child in the 1940s and 50s, the whole point of giving an *ang pow* was not the money inside, but the red paper itself which was meant to bring luck to the receiver. The red paper used to make these homemade *ang pows* was not colourfast. Quite often, my mother and her siblings had their fingers and clothes stained red, especially if the *ang pows* were handled with their little hands damp from guzzling down cold glasses of *hor lan chui* (Holland water, the colloquial name for soft drinks). Fizzy drinks like F&N orange squash or ice cream soda were a luxurious treat that children simply could not resist during Chinese New Year visits.



Homemade ang pows made with red paper. Photo by Dawn Marie Lee.



Nasi Sambot Taon is prepared on New Year's Eve and left on the altar for three days before the "fortune" is read. Photo by Baba Benjamin Seck.

### NASI SAMBOT TAON – FORTUNE TELLING RICE

The preparation of *nasi sambot taon* is a Chinese New Year tradition practiced by Peranakan families. It represents bringing wealth forward to the new year. Some believe that it is a predictor of the family's fortune in the year to come.

On New Year's Eve, after a pot of rice has been cooked for the Reunion Dinner, the very first scoop of rice would be placed into a bowl. The rice is then decorated with a stalk of spring onion (symbolising growth), and a sprig of *bunga siantan* (ixora flower, symbolising abundance and fortune). The spring onion stalk must have the roots intact and must be as straight as possible. The *bunga siantan* should be of a specific variety that has rounded (not pointed), orange-red petals.

The *nasi sambot taon* is left on the altar for three days. On the fourth day of the New Year, it is believed that Kitchen God has descended with his "verdict" from the Emperor of Heaven, which will determine the family's fortune for the year.

By this time, mould would have formed on the rice. Some believe that the colour of the mould has different meanings. Yellow, orange or pink mould signals good fortune for the year, but black or dark coloured mould is a hint that misfortune or even death may befall the family in that year. Those I spoke to who prepare the *nasi sambot taon* have different explanations for why the colour of the mould varies. Some believe that it could be due to how hot or cool the weather is during the three days that the rice is left out. Baba Benjamin Seck gave me a clever tip. "I suspect that it is the way the rice is handled that causes black mould to appear. Always wear disposable gloves even when washing the rice. Never handle the cooked rice with bare hands when shaping it into a mound." ❖



Handkerchief jewellery with decorative keys, bells, tobacco boxes and lockets shaped as fans, pumpkins, peach, pomegranates, each enhanced with figured appliqué and granulation. The keys are decorated with a pair of dragon-snake (naga) rings. Photo by Baba Alex Teoh.



Two Chinese women and a child from Timor, Woodbury and Page. Java, around 1870. Albumen print. The woman on the left (standing) has handkerchief jewellery attached to the handkerchief slung around her neck. It appears to have three containers of various shapes and a ring of keys. Photo courtesy of Leiden University Library (30527).

# Keys TO THE PAST

BABA ALEX TEOH HUNTS DOWN A FORGOTTEN SILVER TREASURE

Years ago while browsing through an antique collection, an unusual silver object stood out. It was a Straits Chinese *ganshu konchi* (silver keyholder) attached to an assortment of various charms, figurines, lime paste case, tobacco box and a set of keys.

Made of silver and metal alloy, the unique item did not look like a grooming kit or portable *sireh* (betel chewing) set. The keys also appeared very similar in design, suggesting that they were not functional, but decorative. I was intrigued! What could this object be? My mind would not rest until I found out.

I delved into various books such as *Straits Chinese Silver - A Collector's Guide* by Dr Ho Wing Meng, where a great variety of Straits Chinese silver objects are photographed and described. The closest comparison I found was described by Dr Ho as "a Peranakan style silver keyholder". He wrote, "I have often wondered about the origins of such Straits Chinese keyholders because I have not seen keyholders of Chinese or Malay origin which might have served as archetypes of these articles." There was also a mention in the *Peranakan Museum Guide* about a *ganshu konchi*, a Baba Malay term for a silver keyholder.

I sifted through old photographs and consulted the senior (and wiser) generation about such objects. After many months, a breakthrough came when Baba Peter Lee shared with me a Dutch publication describing this artefact. Published in the early twentieth century, a series of five books, *De Inlandsche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlandsch Indie* (The Indigenous Arts and Crafts of the Netherlands East Indies) was authored by J.E. Jasper (Johan Ernst Jasper, 1874-1945), a colonial administrator of Dutch and Indonesian descent, and Mas Pirngadie (1865-1936), a member of the Javanese aristocracy from Purbalingga who was an artist for the colonial government. The comprehensive and richly illustrated set of books have become a standard reference for studies about the arts and crafts of Indonesia.

To my delight, in the volume about silver, *De Goud En Zilvermeedkunst* (1927), I found photos of the silver keyholders with an assortment of charms attached, just like the one I had seen! The text reads, "It is an old Javanese custom for both men and women, to attach these items to

the end of a handkerchief which they carry with them when they go out. These silver *sangketan* (handkerchief) jewellery are decorative and indicate the wealth and good taste of the one carrying it".

It further adds, "These *sangketan* jewellery are frequently used by Chinese ladies in West Java and Batavia. They are beautifully moulded (or cast) decorative keyholders with a hook to which different charms (*anak sangketan*) are attached. The charms are embellished with small welded figures (*puhwa*) and some are dyed red with Chinese paint (*gincu*). The same embellishment is also applied to containers for fragrance, in the form of fruits, fish, crabs, etc." The *sangketan* jewellery in the book were from Yogyakarta, Batavia and Bogor.

In a more recent book, *Butterflies and Phoenixes - Chinese Inspirations in Indonesian Textile Arts* (2006) features a batik handkerchief with similar handkerchief jewellery attached. It states, "Young Chinese ladies of high standing in the nineteenth century were taught to carry a beautifully decorated square of cloth in each hand and to wave them gracefully back and forth as they walked with tiny steps, to give the impression of floating... Indo-European ladies in nineteenth-century Indonesia tied their house keys into end of a batiked handkerchief that they slipped into their waistbands, when wearing the kain-kebaya costume."

In 1996, at a Christie's auction in Singapore, a "fine gold and diamond belt hook" was listed. It was described as "rose-cut diamond-set gourd-shaped keyholder suspending various charms designed as keys and lockets shaped as fans, pumpkins and peach, each enhanced with figured applique and granulation, with one charm further embellished with rose-cut diamonds, all stained red, one chased and repoussé charm detached. Approx. 14cm long." It was auctioned for SGD\$7,000.

Over time, the use of the handkerchief diminished and *sangketan* jewellery fell out of fashion. Nevertheless, it still remains a beautiful artefact to treasure. ♦

(Many thanks to Baba Peter Lee and Prof Dr. Jan van der Putten for their help.)



Chinese couple, W.J. Olland. Java, around 1870. The lady has a batik handkerchief with handkerchief jewellery of various containers attached to a long chain, slung around her neck. Photo courtesy of Leiden University Library (100988).



This gold keyholder set with rose-cut diamonds was auctioned by Christie's in Singapore for S\$7,000 in 1996. Photo by Baba Alex Teoh.

Johan Ernst Jasper (1874-1945), the Dutch colonial administrator who wrote *De Inlandsche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlandsch Indie* with Mas Pirngadie. The set of five books have become a standard reference for studies about the arts and crafts of Indonesia. Jasper was the Governor of Yogyakarta when this photograph was taken. Photo courtesy of Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (RV-15069-1).



## SILVER

IN CELEBRATION OF OUR SILVER JUBILEE,  
READERS SHARE THE STORIES BEHIND  
THEIR FAVOURITE SILVER ITEMS WITH  
**NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE**

**BIRD BELT**

*From the collection of Baba Nelson Lim. Photo by Frankie Toh.*

This rare silver belt has eighteen individual panels carved with different species of birds indigenous to Indonesia.

Each panel features a different bird with its name engraved. One may recognise familiar names like the *burong kakatua* (cockatoo), *burong tiong* (mynah), *burong kipas* (fantail), *burong merak* (peacock) and many more.

The *pendeng* (belt buckle) shows a pair of *burong bayan nuri* (long-tailed parakeets). The belt was likely commissioned for a special occasion and is believed to be the only one of its kind.

**MAKARA WEDDING BED ORNAMENTS**

*From the collection of Baba Nelson Lim. Photo by Frankie Toh.*

The *makara* is a mythical sea dragon that has its origins in ancient India and appears in Hindu mythology. *Makara* images have been found on artefacts as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E). The *makara* also appears as carvings in ancient temples in Java such as Borobudur and Prambanan, where *makaras* can be found flanking the staircases.

In the Chinese legend, *Journey to the West*, a *makara* swallowed the precious Buddhist scriptures that the Monkey God, Sun Wukong and his friends had obtained during their epic journey. To make the *makara* regurgitate the scriptures, the Monkey God knocked it hard on the back. Today, Buddhist monks still use sticks to tap on wooden blocks shaped like the *makara* while chanting Buddhist scriptures.

This pair of silver *makara* ornaments (gilded in gold) was hung on a Peranakan Chinese nuptial bed to ward off evil spirits.





**TIONGHOA SILVER TRAY**

*From the collection of Baba Ken Yap. Photo courtesy of Baba Ken Yap.*

This 19th century Straits Chinese silver-plated tray which the owner acquired from London auction house Bonhams is flanked with leaf-form handles and bears inscriptions in both Chinese and old Javanese.

The Chinese script describes an autumnal lakeside scene about a lady selling river perch and is signed "Liang Tee".

The inscription in old Javanese reads:  
*Atas nama pendoedoh Tionghoa  
 Kendal, Kaliwoengoe, Tjepiring, Pegandoen  
 Di gerakan oleh  
 Tan King Sien, Ko Tiang Hien  
 Tan King Tjioe, Kho Soen Biauw*

*(In the name of the Tionghoa (Chinese) community from Kendal, Kaliwungu, Cepiring, Pegandon, initiated by Tan King Sien, Ko Tiang Hien, Tan King Tjioe, Kho Soen Biauw.)*

Kendal, Kaliwungu, Cepiring and Pegandon are in the Kendal Regency, along the coast of Central Java, close to Semarang, where there is a sizeable Chinese community.

**VELVET SLIPPERS WITH SILVER CHARMS**

*From the collection of Baba Ken Yap. Photo courtesy of Baba Ken Yap.*

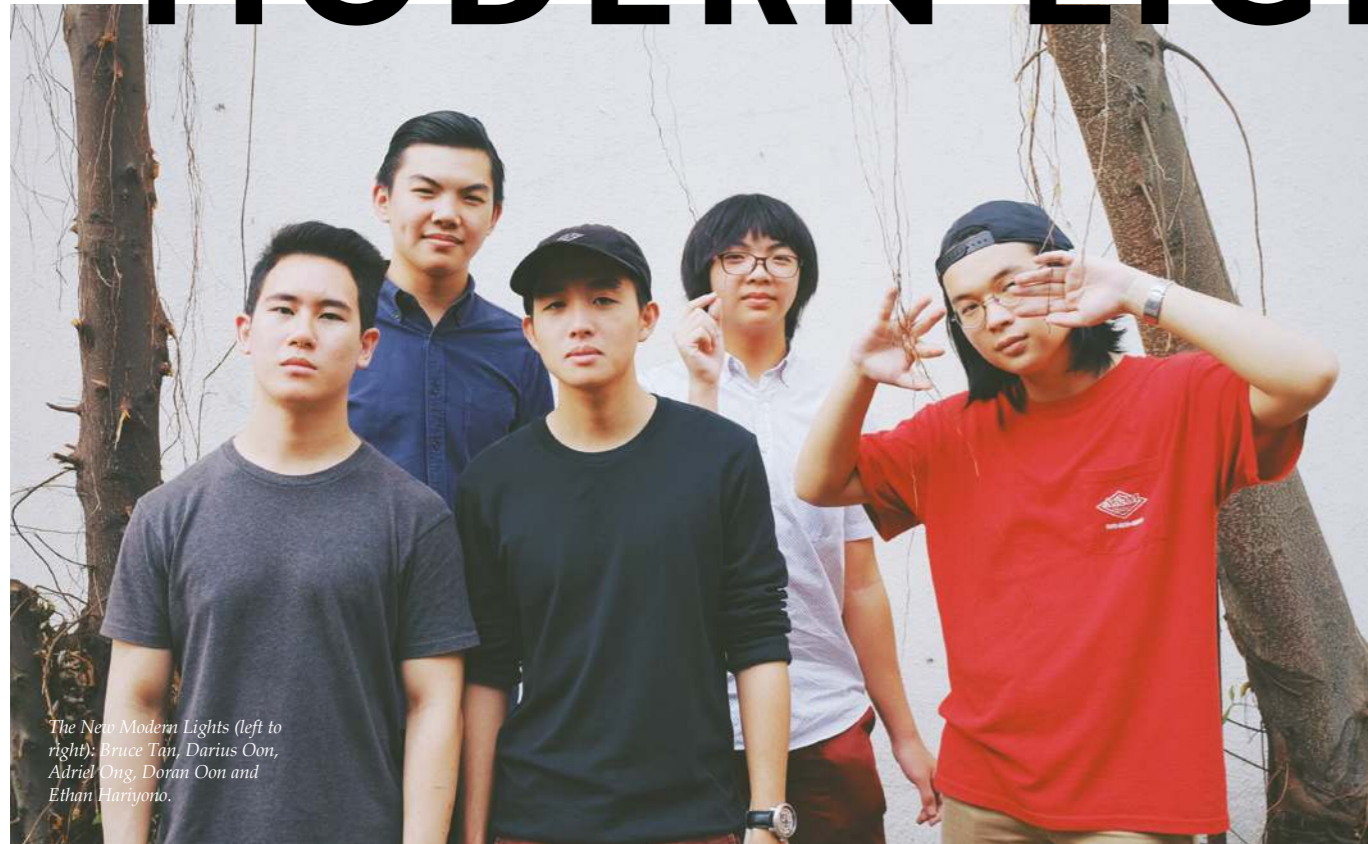
*Kasot tongkang* slippers like these were early designs of Peranakan Chinese footwear. They were so called because the shape of the shoe resembled river bumboats (*tongkang*). They were not very comfortable, as the shallow front of the shoe could not fully cover the wearer's feet.

This pair of velvet *kasot tongkang* was likely made for a wedding. It is adorned with silver charms in the shape of tortoises, fish, prawns, crabs, peonies, birds and butterflies – all auspicious motifs to bless the wearer.

It is widely known that the tortoise is regarded as a symbol of longevity in Chinese culture because it has a long lifespan. Quite often, other motifs are considered lucky not because they allude to the qualities of the living creature, but because they are homonyms. For example, the Chinese word for crab (蟹) and the Chinese word for harmony (协) are both pronounced "xie". The word for fish (鱼) sounds similar to (余) which means abundance. ❖



# THE NEW MODERN LIGHTS



The New Modern Lights (left to right): Bruce Tan, Darius Oon, Adriel Ong, Doran Oon and Ethan Hariyono.

**BABA EMERIC LAU**  
ENGAGES A YOUNG  
BABA BAND ABOUT  
THEIR MODERN  
MUSIC

Photos courtesy of Baba  
Darius Oon

Think of Baba bands and immediately traditional music like *keronchong* or *dondang sayang* comes to mind. This group of young Babas is changing that mindset with their new music that sounds more like The Cure and Coldplay than *keronchong*.

Brothers Darius, 20, and Doran Oon, 18, are the sons of the effereverscent, multi-talented Baba Alvin Oon of Peranakan Sayang. Alvin is well known as a performer, musical composer and an active member of the Peranakan community.

As with the adage that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, Darius and Doran are also musically talented, albeit with more contemporary musical interests than their father. Both Darius and Doran are pursuing a Diploma in Music at LASALLE College of the Arts. The young Babas are part of The New Modern Lights, a five-man alternative rock band that is influenced by post- and alt-punk musical styles.

**Emeric Lau (EM):** Your band comprises four babas and an Indonesian. When and why did you start playing together?

**The New Modern Lights (TNML):** Darius, Doran, Adriel (20) and Bruce (20) are Peranakan. Ethan (20) is of Indonesian heritage. We were all playing together in a band when we were students in St Andrew's Secondary School. We share a passion for similar styles of music.

**EM:** Which instruments do you all play?

**TNML:**  
Darius Oon - Guitar & vocals  
Doran Oon - Synths, back vox & tambourine  
Adriel Ong - Bass  
Ethan Hariyono - Guitar  
Bruce Tan - Drums

**EM:** What were the first tunes you learned?

**TNML:** We started off playing Coldplay and U2 covers. Our first tune was probably the iconic song *Yellow* by Coldplay which was released in 2000 when we were just toddlers. (Doran wasn't even born yet!) We have since written, composed and arranged our own songs and have released them publicly on Spotify (the world's largest music streaming service) and performed them at live concerts.

**EM:** Would you say that Baba Alvin Oon and/or other family members have been a strong influence in developing your passion for music?

**TNML:** Definitely! All of us grew up with music always present at home. Our families have influenced our musical tastes based on what we heard as children. We've also influenced each other by sharing music that we like with one another.

Baba Alvin Oon's musical interests mainly lie in the music that he grew up on (mostly 80s music) as well as Peranakan cultural music which he presents with his group, Peranakan Sayang. While we also love 80s music and are supportive of traditional music, we are more into new bands and local indie bands.

Darius and Doran have taken formal music lessons and are both studying music at a diploma level. Baba Alvin Oon, on the other hand, is self-taught. As musicians, we still learn a lot from him, especially in the areas of composition and arrangement.

**EM:** I listened to your original compositions *Runaway*, *OK* and *16*, and were struck by how much you sound like a punk rock band. Which famous musicians do you admire? Why are they your favourites?

**TNML:** We're inspired by some of the post-punk bands from the 70s/80s (when our parents were teens!) such as Joy Division, Echo & the Bunnymen. We're mostly inspired by alt rock and indie rock bands such as Radiohead, Foals, the Strokes, Arctic Monkeys and we're also inspired by local bands such as B-Quartet and Wormrot.

Besides that, we have our personal tastes. For example, our drummer Bruce is into heavier styles of music such as metal and he incorporates that into the drum parts that he writes for our songs.

**EM:** Who was your first music teacher?

**TNML:** That would be Ms Deborah Gan, our music teacher in St Andrew's Secondary School. She was very supportive of students who wanted to perform and would lend us the music room and the school's equipment for rehearsals. So a big thank you goes out to her!

**EM:** How strong is your knowledge of Peranakan culture and heritage? Do you think being Baba has influenced your decision to pursue music?

**TNML:** Among us, Darius and Doran are the most familiar with Peranakan culture. The Peranakan emphasis on arts and culture definitely contributed to our motivation to pursue music, and we view the contributions made by Peranakans in Singapore to the arts industry as foundations for us to build upon.

**EM:** Tell us about some of your public performances.

**TNML:** Most of the work in our band goes towards rehearsing for live performances. We've been playing at numerous venues and events in Singapore since 2016.

Some notable appearances include LASALLE College's inaugural Rock and Indie Festival in 2017 and Christopher Owen's concert in the same year where we opened for the artist. We also play at open mics and underground shows.

**EM:** Where do you hope to see the band in a few years' time? Any future plans you can share?

**TNML:** We are currently recording our original songs and plan to release them in the form of an EP in 2019. We hope to play bigger shows in Singapore as well as around the region.

**EM:** How do you balance your music with other obligations - friends, family, studies?

**TNML:** It's challenging. Adriel was sitting for his 'A' Levels and is now doing his National Service, but we get around by shifting schedules and just spending more time on meeting up, though not necessarily for practices. At the end of the day, our friendship is what keeps us together. ♦

Follow The New Modern Lights!

Facebook: [thenewmodernlights](https://www.facebook.com/thenewmodernlights)  
Email: [thenewmodernlights@gmail.com](mailto:thenewmodernlights@gmail.com)



Scan this QR Code to listen to the band's latest single *Runaway*.



Aneng Ponno Kalastree, 72, and his wife Dora in their home.

# THE CHITTIES of MELAKA

BABA COLIN CHEE DELVES INTO THE WORLD OF INDIAN PERANAKANS | Photos by Baba Colin Chee

## CHITTY

“Chitty” is the preferred word that Peranakan Indians use to describe themselves, as it is an Indian word, compared with “Chetti”, which is a corruption of the word “Chitty”.

The Chitties refer to their young ladies as *Nyonya*, and their older ladies as *Achii* which is derived from the Peranakan Chinese word, *Tachi*, which finds its roots in the Hokkien word for elder sister, *Tuachi*.

Similarly, the Chitty young men are called *Babas*. The older male members of the Chitty family are called *Aneng*, which is derived from the Indian word *Alneh* meaning big brother.



ANENG PONNO KALASTREE, 72

PRESIDENT, PERANAKAN INDIAN (CHITTY MELAKA) ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE

For the longest time, a small group of Indians have escaped public notice in Singapore. They are a very special community, linguistically and perhaps even culturally different from other Indians. Over the past several years however, especially after the seminal work, *The Chitties of Melaka* by Karen Loh and Jegatheesan Velupillay, was published in 2017, the community of Peranakan Indians has come into its own. Today, at Singapore’s Indian Heritage Centre in Little India, a beautifully curated exhibition on Singapore’s Peranakan Indian community is on-going until 5 May 2019.

According to writers, Karen Loh and Jegatheesan, “Though the Chitty community is a small one, its practices are alive in Melaka. Chitties living elsewhere in Malaysia and Singapore return to their families in Melaka during festive occasions.”

In a nutshell, the Chitties are descended from South Indian traders who came to Melaka to trade from as early as the 15th century and married the local women. In the centuries that followed, their offspring assimilated. The Chitties had intermarried with Malays, Chinese, Portuguese, and Dutch. Many of them may look like South Indians but they they speak a Malay creole, their cuisine is largely Malay influenced, they dress like Malays with the women in *sarong kebaya*, but they are largely Hindus and celebrate the Hindu festivals.

**Colin Chee (CC):** What motivated the name change from Chetti Melaka Singapore to the present one?

**Ponno Kalastree (PK):** The association’s previous name had more emphasis on “Chetti Melaka” giving it the connotation that you must have been born and lived in Melaka. However, the change of name is to more correctly include all descendants of early Indian settlers in the Straits Settlements. Most of our members have been in Singapore for more than two generations.

**CC:** How many members does the association have today?

**PK:** We have around 200 members. Our Association owes its beginning firstly to Mr Samuel Doraisingam, a historian who wrote the first book on the Chitty Melaka. The book was published by ISEAS with a forward by the former president of Singapore, Mr S R Nathan. He was instrumental in launching the book and mooted the idea that an Association must be formed to preserve and promote the unique culture of the Peranakan Indians.

A committee was formed and several meetings were held with Mr Nathan. Soon the vision of having an Association became a reality. Since the formation of the Association, Mr Nathan was always supportive and present at all our major events. In fact, when we had our Symposium in October 2014, he attended the event even though he was in a wheel chair. Sadly, he passed on in 2016. The Association has been active since, promoting our Chetti culture and encouraging interaction with other Peranakan associations.

**CC: To what extent has the current exhibition educated Singapore's Indian community to the Chitties?**

**PK:** The ethnic Indian community has always looked at the Chitties as misfits – neither Indian, nor Chinese nor Malay due to our mixed heritage. The Chitties do not speak the Tamil language, although they are predominately Hindus and have similar religious practices as the other Indians. Also, our dressing and food confuse the Indians. The current exhibition showcases the various aspects of our culture that is similar to other Indian cultures. Perhaps it will enable us to be better understood by the Indian diaspora.

**CC: Do Chitties in general, consider themselves to be ethnically Indian?**

**PK:** Yes, we do! Officially we are also recognised as Indians by the Singapore government. That's our dilemma – Indians but not Indians!

**CC: Much like our Peranakan Chinese OCBC dilemma eh? Orang cina bukan cina! (Chinese but not Chinese)**

**CC: How do the majority of young Chitties below 30 years old see themselves?**

**PK:** The young Chitties are also confused about their identity. They would have seen their grandparents, especially their grandmothers, wearing *sarong kebaya*, speaking Malay and also eating dishes similar to the Malays and Chinese together with Indian dishes. Most of their parents, on the other hand, dress more like Indians and speak Tamil. So, the question in their minds is: Are we Indians or Chitties? The correct answer

would be that they are Peranakan Indians. We hope that through this current exhibition young Chitties will discover their heritage and identity.

**CC: Are they interested in the culture at all?**

**PK:** Yes. They participate in all of the festivals such as Deepavali and Pongal that are celebrated by the Chitty community alongside ethnic Indian, but with some variations. For example, some Chitties will practice ancestral worship during Pongal. Many young people are also interested in the sarong kebaya which is fashionable again!

**CC: How often do you interact with fellow Chitties in Melaka and KL?**

**PK:** In recent times, interaction has been as often as we can travel to Melaka to participate in some of the activities and festivities there. The Chitties from KL also go to Melaka for these festivities. In fact, recently, the Chitties in Melaka and KL held a dinner for the larger Chitty community. It attracted over 1,000 Chitties from around the world.

**CC: What are your thoughts on the question of integration by new communities in an established society?**

**PK:** I feel that all immigrants, especially those from India and China, wanting to be PRs or Singapore Citizens must look at us Peranakans who have adapted local culture and practices and learn to integrate with all races. Peranakans are an example of how to live together in harmony without discrimination. I am proud that our community, being essentially Indian, has embraced some Chinese and Malay cultural practices.



Achii Premia Daisy Jacobs, 58, says that Chitties are, by nature, loud, fun-loving and can find humour in most situations.

**ACHII PREMIA DAISY JACOBS, 58**

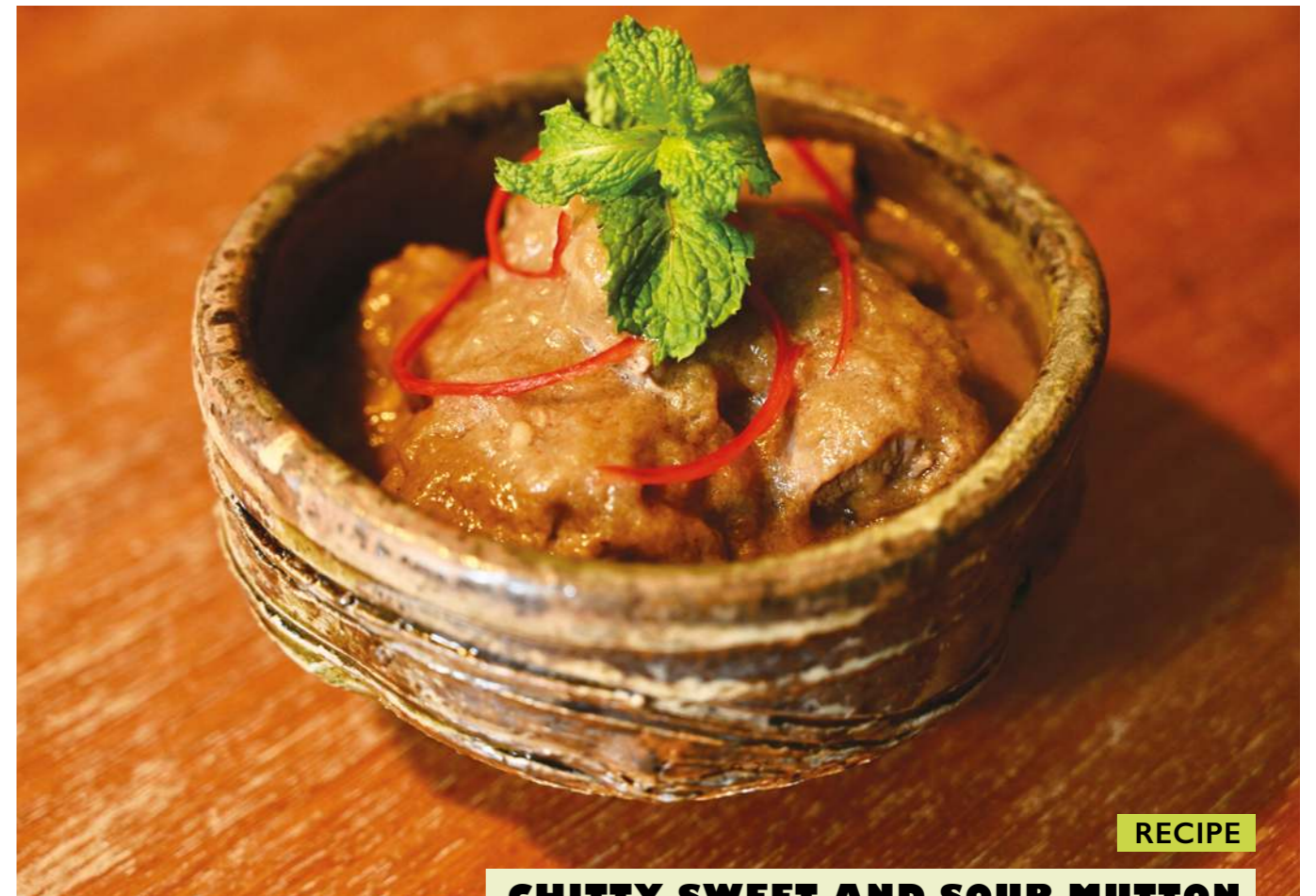
SOUTH INDIAN HERITAGE

My parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were all of Tamil descent.

I was born and baptised a Catholic as my mother had converted when she married my father who was a Catholic. After my father passed away when I was eight, we lived with my maternal grandparents who were Hindu. This meant that I had both a Catholic and Hindu upbringing. I became a Shridi Sai Baba devotee 38 years ago. I remain one to this day.

I am still able to hold a conversation in Chitty creole as you never forget your mother tongue. It has become second nature. It is not something I was taught but that was how we spoke at home to my great-grandmother, grandmother and my Chitty aunts. My mother's two brothers were matched and married to two Chitty Melaka sisters.

To me, the best part of being a Chitty is being able to enjoy food from all four cultures – Indian, Malay, Chinese and not forgetting British cuisine – in our own Chitty cuisine, with a side dish of *sambal belachan* (a pungent paste of fermented krill and chillies) of course!



RECIPE

**CHITTY SWEET AND SOUR MUTTON**

FROM ACHII PREMIA DAISY JACOBS

**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 kg mutton
- 1 kg *bawang merah* (red onions)
- 1 ping pong ball-size *asam* (tamarind paste)
- 1 medium packet of coconut milk
- 1 teaspoon of sugar
- Salt to taste

**METHOD**

- Cut the mutton into cubes.
- Place the meat into a large pot for stewing. (An enamel pot is best as stainless steel will react with the *asam*.)
- Fill the pot with water until the liquid just covers the mutton. (You don't want the meat swimming in water.)
- Pour the packet of coconut milk into the pot.
- Squeeze the *asam* with your fingers in two cups of water, remove the seeds and add to the pot.
- Roughly chop the onions and add to the meat.
- Simmer on low heat for two-three hours until the meat is tender, stirring from time to time to prevent burning.
- Once the oil visibly separates from the gravy, the dish is done.
- Sprinkle salt to taste and stir in one teaspoon of sugar to finish.
- Let the meat rest and serve after 15 minutes.

Our great-grandmothers, grandmothers and our mothers were great cooks. *Chili padi udang*, (prawns with fiery bird's eye chillies) sweet and sour mutton, two-day old fish curry, *chap chye* soup, crispy fried *selar kuning* (yellow stripe scad) with *sambal belachan*, all eaten with steaming hot rice. I can go on and on!

Every weekend and public holiday, our entire extended family would gather in our home. During school holidays my cousins stayed for as many days as they could. We ate till we were stuffed. We played, laughed, cried, we even fought sometimes, and our parents played music, sang and danced. Even my grandfather used to play the violin. As the Chinese Peranakans say, *hua hee, hua hee, buat lao jiat!* (Be joyful and merry, let's party!)

I still remember my cousins and I didn't want our time together to end. If only we could always stay together! Now that we are grandparents ourselves, we treasure the precious time we have with each other.

We are, by nature, loud, fun-loving and can see the funny side in most situations. I am proud to be a Chitty, a Peranakan Indian, because we play hard, we live to eat and we love deeply, give generously and care tremendously!



Achii Thanam Muthusamy, 58, needs her sambal belachan every day.

## ACHII THANAM MUTHUSAMY, 58

SOUTH INDIAN, MALAY AND DUTCH HERITAGE

My grandmother told me that we have Malay, Indian and Dutch blood. She's probably right, because she had light grey eyes, and one of my cousins has green eyes.

I know that my father prayed to Buddha but my mother did not have a fixed religion. When my grandmother and mother were ill or if they felt that they were under spiritual attack, they would turn to *Nenek Kong Kong* for holy powder or water to consume to cleanse their inner selves of whatever was troubling them.

They would also go to the mosque for water that has been prayed over. The person whose spirit is troubled must then bathe in the water which is mixed with flowers. We call this *bunga mandi* (flower bath). My family also visited the *bomoh* (spirit doctor) who would give them amulets to wear as a form of protection.

But the predominant religion at home was Hinduism as the men in my family carried the *kavadi* (ceremonial sacrifice), practised ancestral worship and prayed to the deity who was the protector of the family.

Though I used to be a staunch Hindu, but through my own search to connect with God, I became a Christian when I was 12 years old.

It was only through connections that I made with the members of The Peranakan Association namely, Baba David Bok, that I began to understand how I, as a Christian, can still take part in Chitty cultural practices. I began to appreciate that a Chitty Melaka cannot be separated from his or her cultural roots. Because of my interactions with David, I am learning how I can navigate my way through the various practices and be very much a part of the Chitty Melaka community instead of isolating myself.

I certainly can understand Chitty creole because I grew up hearing my grandmother and mum converse in a type of Malay that was so different from that which my Malay friends spoke. One of the things I enjoyed as a child was to be able to speak in Chitty creole with my cousins. It is a strange feeling speaking Chitty creole because we are Indians, and yet feel a strong and intimate affinity to this un-Indian language we speak at home.

Chitty cuisine is very different from Indian food. Without a doubt I need my *sambal belachan*! I grew up having to help my mum pound the *belachan*. We had it every day without fail. I love my *tauhu sambal*, *asam pedas*, *sayur lodeh*, *petai ayam*, *ikan kichap masak merah*, *achars* and Malay-influenced cakes and cookies like *kueh wajek*, *kueh dahlia*, *kueh makmur*, *kueh rose* and *kueh koswi*.

Our family gatherings were large and loud. Deepavali was always the main celebration for us. The women, like my grandmother and mum, would always be resplendent in their *kebayas*.



### RECIPE

## KUEH WAJEK

FROM ACHII THANAM MUTHUSAMY

### INGREDIENTS

- 600 gm glutinous rice
- 1/2 cup water
- 300 gm gula melaka (palm sugar), cut into small pieces\*
- 60 gm granulated sugar
- 3 pandan (screwpine) leaves
- 2 cups of thick coconut milk (from 2 fresh coconuts, grated)
- A pinch of salt
- \* adjust sweetness according to taste

### METHOD

- Soak the glutinous rice overnight.
- Put water, palm sugar, granulated sugar and screwpine leaves in a saucepan.
- Stir over low heat until sugar dissolves.
- Strain syrup and leave aside.
- Line the base of a steaming tray with a piece of muslin and place a few extra strips of screwpine leaves on the cloth.
- Spread glutinous rice over screwpine leaves and steam for 45 minutes to 1 hour (checking to see if rice is cooked).
- Mix the steamed rice with coconut milk and strained syrup.
- Cook over low heat, stirring continuously till the mixture becomes thick and a rich oily brown.
- Spread mixture on an 18 X 28 cm (7 X 11 Inch) tray.
- Level the top of the mixture to make it even.
- Allow to cool and harden.
- Cut into 4 cm (1 1/2 inch) squares.



Thanam's grandmother's handwritten recipe for kueh wajek.

This *wajek* recipe was passed down from my grandmother, Meenatchi. My aunt, Letchmi, and my mum, Neela, used to cook them in big *dulang*s (enamelled trays) in the *Kampong Wayang Satu* and Tampines during the 1960s and 1970s.

When the rich oil glaze glistens on the surface of *wajek* being prepared over a fire, you know the dessert is fully cooked because the aroma of *pandan* (screwpine) leaves and *gula melaka* (palm sugar) would permeate the whole house with a rich, sweet fragrance that would linger on for hours.

*Wajek* is made at every festive occasion – a must for Deepavali, for *Paruchu* (prayers for the ancestors), for puberty ceremonies, and for funeral prayers. Even since my conversion to Christianity, I continue to prepare *wajek* besides other dishes such as *empat* (steamed fruitcake). I make many batches of these two desserts as my uncles, aunts, cousins and friends request them. For festive occasions, many Chitties have moved on to ordering cookies and sweets from vendors. So it is always a pleasure for my relatives to have homemade *wajek* as it is a taste of nostalgia.

*Wajek* is a satisfying dessert which I daresay, is an all-time favourite for all Chitties.

Aneng Sanasee Philips Roy, 66, remembers his mother preparing food for parachu (ancestral worship).



Want to hear Chitty melodies? Scan the QR Code or go to [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)

## ANENG SANASEE PHILIPS ROY, 66

SOUTH INDIAN HERITAGE

I was born in July 1952. It was the year of Queen Elizabeth's coronation. This was why my father named me Philips after the Duke of Edinburgh. My Indian name was meant to be Rao, but the registrar made a mistake.

Both my parents came from Melaka. My father came to Singapore to look for a better job in the late 1940s.

It was through Uncle Odiang that Dad got a job in the Port of Singapore Authority. After he settled in his job, he returned to Melaka to marry Mum and brought her to Singapore. Hence, our ties to Melaka are very strong.

During the school holidays we would return to Melaka, without fail. There I would mingle and play with our cousins and friends from the *kampong*. I spoke Chitty creole with our relatives and almost everyone in Melaka. I can still speak fluent Chitty creole. I remember helping out with the cows at the *kandang lembu* (cattle pen). We played many games and exchanged many stories. There was always laughter, songs and *joget* (dance) sessions in the evenings after dinner, when everyone got together.

While the children played and the menfolk went out to work, the womenfolk would cook up delicious food like *curry pindang ikan*, *masak lemak*, *assam pedas*, *nasi lemak*, chicken and mutton curries. My favourite is *nasi lemak*. Nyonya *kueh* was always served up at teatime. There would be *kueh wajek*, *pulot enti*, *kueh dodol*, and many more mouth-watering *kueh kueh*.

Back home in Singapore, without fail, we would observe all the important Hindu festivals. I have been a practising Hindu from the time I was young.

In December, Mum would start observing the *Bulan Bunga* ritual which would end with *Pongal* (the harvest festival) after the *Bhogi* prayers on the eve. The *Parachu* (ancestral worship) was a must. Food of all varieties would be offered to our ancestors. Our relatives in Singapore, and their entire families, would attend. After the offerings, there would be much feasting and laughter.

Today, I am grateful to be able to serve the local Chitty community through our association.

## NYONYA ARATHI PHILIPS ROY, 29

SOUTH INDIAN HERITAGE

When I think about what it means to be Peranakan Indian, I think about my late paternal grandmother, my *Nenek*. I was always mesmerised by her colourful *sarong kebayas*. She spoke Chitty creole and cooked delicious Peranakan food. My *Nenek* was a typical Peranakan matriarch. I fondly remember looking forward to eating chicken *rendang* at her house on Deepavali. I was very excited when she made *kueh*. Her *kueh kapit* (love letters) *pulot tekan*, *kueh bangkit* and *kueh dadar* are my favourites.

When I am asked about my heritage, I say that "I'm a little bit of everything. A mix of this and that." The question that often follows is: "What does that mean?"

I often struggle to articulate my *campur* (mixed) identity. Since little is known about our community and culture, it is difficult for others to understand what a Peranakan Indian really is.

Yet, the idea of a hybrid culture is enticing because it makes me feel like I'm part of every major community in Singapore - Indian, Malay, Chinese and Eurasian. This synthesis of culture is special to this region. The Peranakan Indian culture is a convergence of multiple ethnicities, languages and traditions. I am proud to be part of this rich and complex culture.

My generation has the onus to learn about Peranakan Indian culture from our parents and grandparents. I would like to try my hand at making the *kuehs* that my *Nenek* used to make for us. ♦



Arathi Philips Roy, 29, says that her *campur* (mixed) identity is special because it makes her feel like a part of every major community in Singapore.



### RECIPE

## CHITTY CURRY

## PINDANG IKAN

Achii V Sitypamah (Aneng Anasee Philips Roy's aunt)

### INGREDIENTS

*Rempah* (Spice paste)  
7 pieces dried chilli  
4 shallots, chopped  
3 stalks of lemon grass  
3 cloves of garlic  
1 teaspoon of tumeric powder  
(or 1 teaspoon of freshly grated tumeric)  
1 big onion  
1 big fresh chilli  
1 small piece ginger (about 1/2 inch)  
100 ml *assam* water

### Other ingredients

5 pieces of *batang* fish (spanish mackerel)  
(Ask the fishmonger to cut into round slabs.)  
750ml of watery coconut milk  
150 ml of *santan* (thick coconut milk)  
2 tablespoons of cooking oil  
Salt to taste

### METHOD

- Clean and wash the fish. Pat dry.
- Blend the *rempah* ingredients into a paste.
- Heat 2 tbsp of oil in pot and add the *rempah*.
- Stir fry until fragrant (about 3 minutes).
- Add the watery coconut milk and stir into a gravy.
- Bring to boil.
- Turn heat down, add the fish then the thick coconut milk.
- Simmer over slow fire until fish is properly cooked.
- Turn off the heat, add salt to taste
- Serve with rice or bread.

“  
When I am asked about my heritage, I say that “I’m a little bit of everything. A mix of this and that.”  
”

# Guardians

## OF A LOST ERA

NYONYA CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER IS MOVED BY THE CRUMBLING CHINESE HOUSES IN LASEM & REMBANG, INDONESIA.

Photos by Baba Colin Chee & Nyonya Claudine Chan

There is something about Lasem and Rembang that makes me woeful. Both are within an hour's drive of each other. Rembang, now the capital of the regency in the northeast coast of Java, is said to be the first landing point of early Chinese traders before the epic arrival of Admiral Cheng Ho and his fleet in 1403. I visited these two places during a trip organised by PERTIWI for the delegates of the 31st Peranakan Convention held in Tangerang in November 2018.

As we walked along the tree-lined streets of Lasem and Rembang, we saw a wealth of Chinese houses and Dutch colonial-style mansions that hinted of a glorious past. Today these dwellings are in a sorry state. Many houses are in stages of decay, some seemingly abandoned. A handful have been renovated, and some still have descendants of the original owners residing in them, like guardians of a lost era.

We visited the Lie family home that was built in the 17th century. There, we met a sixth generation descendant of a Tionghoa (Indonesian Chinese Peranakan) family whose ancestors had settled along the coast and grew prosperous from growing sugarcane and other crops.

### WINDS OF FORTUNE

In the past, traders from China who sailed into the northeast coast of Java with the monsoon winds had to wait for the winds to change before sailing back to China. They invariably took on local-born wives. These Chinese traders were known for their sturdy ships that could travel far even when fully loaded with goods.

Our group visited an archaeological site near Lasem where an ancient *perahu* (wooden boat) was resurrected, carbon tested and restored. Astonishingly, the findings from

this site suggest that the Chinese sea wanderers arrived in Java as far back as the 7th century. Tang dynasty coins, tools and a sculpted head of a woman were found near the site. Equally amazing was the fact that the timber used to make this ancient boat did not come from China.

### UNDER DUTCH RULE

During 18th and 19th centuries, Lasem generated tremendous wealth from trade and became an affluent town. The remnants of such riches can still be seen in the Chinese areas of Lasem. When new Chinese migrants arrived in the 19th century, they integrated with the local Tionghoa community and held on to their rites, religion and culture.

Under Dutch colonial rule, the Tionghoa were regarded as a separate ethnic group from the Javanese (as were the local-born Indians, Arabs and Jews). The Tionghoa were segregated within the city limits and forbidden to do business in rural areas. They benefitted as intermediaries for the Dutch in trade and toll-collection, and many Tionghoa families became wealthy. However, this also made the Tionghoa unpopular with the indigenous people.

### FORCED TO ASSIMILATE

From 1966, under President Suharto, the Tionghoa community were made to assimilate with the majority of Indonesians and had to change their names to Indonesian-sounding names. They were discouraged from learning and speaking Mandarin and were generally forbidden to practice their faith and culture. Even celebrating the Chinese New Year was banned.

In 1998, Indonesian President Abdul Rahman Wahid lifted the decree against the celebration of Chinese New Year and practicing Chinese arts. Unfortunately, the Asian financial



A mural showing the family surname.



A Chinese-style roof can be seen on the main house in the Lie compound.

crisis happened that same year and Tionghoa businesses, buildings and people became the target of protests and riots in Jakarta and other cities.

### THE LIE HOUSE

Back to the Lie house. The compound has a tall gateway with timber beams typical of Chinese architecture. A large, green, wooden door with *pintu pagar* (saloon-style fence doors) opens up to the front courtyard flanked by single-storey buildings. The side buildings could have been used by the servants, the Lie sons and daughters, or the son's families.

The main house with a Chinese-style roof seems to have been boarded up for a long time. On the large front verandah, a forlorn looking sofa sits against a wall covered in peeling paint and patches of mold. A motorcycle is parked just a few feet from the sofa. A marble topped round dining table is oddly matched with metal frame chairs from a different era. A television antenna sticks out from the battered roof.

The quarters to the left of the gate appear to be inhabited by someone with a collection of woven baskets for fighting



Portraits of the family's female ancestors.



The matriarch of the Lie family.

cocks. Even then, just a lone rooster struts about in a pen. I can't help but wonder what happened to the rest.

An elderly lady in a floral housedress sits on a bench, bemused by the strangers invading her home. A framed photograph of the family at a wake (dated 2004) hangs on the wall of the main house. The lady seated in the centre of that photo is the same one before us. She is possibly the matriarch. Elsewhere, portraits of the family's female ancestors look down solemnly at us. Only one of them appears to be smiling.

As I walk around the house, I get the sense that every floor tile, door and window belongs to the original structure. Exposed brick in the kitchen area speaks of centuries of wear and tear. A clump of banana trees thrive amid a heap of dark mud, dead branches and broken glass. There is scarce attempt to tidy up, repair or even provide a new coat of

paint to walls stained with age. It is as though the family has given up completely on this ancient dwelling.

I wanted to stay longer and discover the history of the Lie house, but our visit was fleeting. Maybe one day someone will come along and breathe life and dignity into this grand dame. ♦

**Authentic Peranakan Tiles**

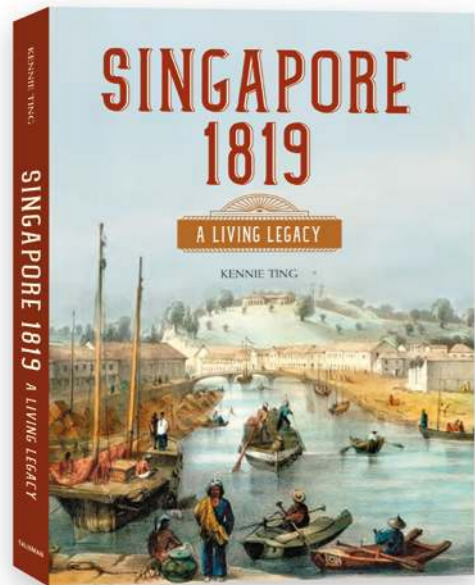
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# SINGAPORE 1819

## A LIVING LEGACY

BABA COLIN CHEE REVIEWS KENNIE TING'S ODE TO SINGAPORE  
Photos courtesy of Kennie Ting and Talisman Publishing



When our editor Dawn Marie Lee first asked if I would like to review Kennie Ting's latest book, I asked myself, "What? Another history book about Singapore?" At the time, a few months ago, the only thing that preoccupied my mind was what our Association was going to do to help celebrate Singapore's

bicentennial this year! 1819 – the year that marks the founding of "modern" Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles. So, in a way, the book's title struck a chord.

This book is Kennie's second after *The Romance of the Grand Tour – 100 Years of Travel in Southeast Asia*, published in 2015.

In a very readable writing style, Kennie has managed to weave an interesting patchwork of Singapore's heritage covering its history, people and places, monuments and architecture, cultures and communities, arts and leisure, and flora and fauna.

In his introduction to Singapore the port city, Kennie writes, "In recent years, heritage conservation efforts have extended to the realm of intangible heritage, meaning the diversity of cultures, rituals, traditions and forms of arts and leisure of the many ethnic communities in Singapore. Thought is now being placed onto how best to ensure that these more ephemeral traces of the past do not disappear in the pursuit of the contemporary."

In many ways, this magazine, *The Peranakan*, has over the last 25 years, been documenting the intangible heritage of the diverse cultures of Singapore for posterity.

Unsurprisingly, the trained historian in him has led Kennie to well-researched stories that can catch you by surprise. The stories are supported by a wealth of archival illustrations, maps and photographs. He knows where to look!

One thing that caught my attention was a mention of what Singapore was before it was "discovered" by Raffles. In one chapter, Kennie quotes a letter from Raffles to the Duchess of Somerset:

"...this is the spot, the site of the ancient maritime capital of the Malays, and within the walls

of these fortifications, raised not less than six centuries ago, on which I have planted the British flag..."

Kennie points out that "since the 1980s, sporadic but sustained archaeological digs on and around Fort Canning and the Singapore River have unearthed a wealth of artefacts dating back to the 14th century."

Singapore clearly has an empirical history, besides the legendary story of the Sumatran prince, Sang Nila Utama and the lion. Perhaps this is why there has been much public discussion about our bicentennial celebrations.

Kennie notes in his personal blog that "there is an increasing discomfort with anything that is colonial, and an unwillingness to re-examine this aspect of our past critically to extract values and glean learning points that will prove to still be relevant today."

He writes that "it's a shame because...we have stood apart from every other nation-state in Asia in reconciling ourselves with and assimilating the colonial past as part of our past. This acceptance of the East-West character of our history and our identity is what has made us an exception and exceptional in Asia, and even the world."

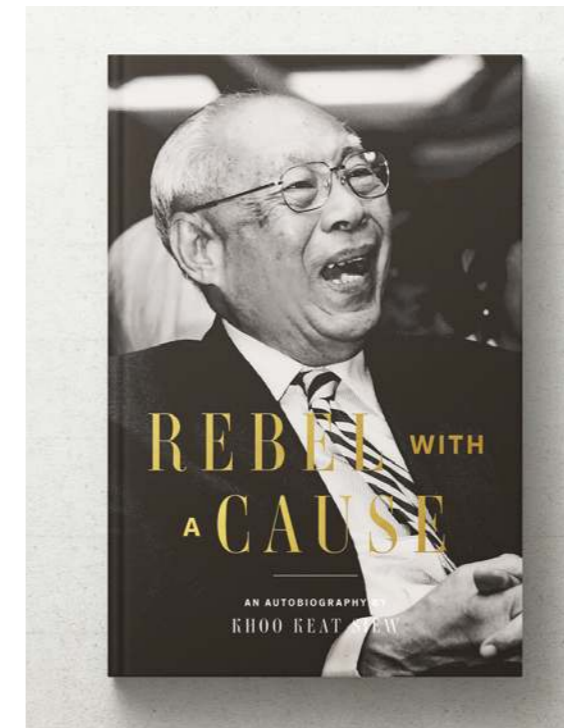
Kennie describes this book as a "big-picture take on Singapore history and heritage". Indeed, it is inclusive. To my greatest relief, I found a section on Peranakans, under the chapter on Cultures & Communities. It is carefully tucked away after the sections on Malays, Chinese, Indians, Arabs and Eurasians. Other sections in the book also include the Armenians, Jews and other Europeans.

This book offers readers a look at Singapore through a "global, cross-cultural and art-historical lens". History books can sometimes have a one-sided narrative. This one is anything but. ♦



Author, Kennie Ting is the Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Peranakan Museum.

**SINGAPORE 1819 - A LIVING LEGACY** by Kennie Ting is published by Talisman Publishing, 2018.



# REBEL WITH A CAUSE

DR LIM BENG SOON REVIEWS DATO' SERI KHOO KEAT SIEW'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY | Photo courtesy of Jonathan Luen

I have known Dato' Seri Khoo Keat Siew for well over twenty years. Over time, our friendship has blossomed and deepened. Dato' Seri Khoo has enriched my life and those of countless other Penangites. This book traces his life story and how he has always championed causes for the good of society.

The title hints at a life well-lived and indeed, as one thumbs through its pages, the exploits of the author are richly described and is satisfying to read. *Rebel With A Cause* is not just a treasure trove of historical information but also a chronicle of Peranakan society in Penang.

The book starts with a chapter on the author's early years as the son of businessman and philanthropist, Khoo Sian Ewe, CBE, (1886-1964), who was the doyen of Penang Peranakan society. Dato' Seri Khoo recounts his childhood years in Penang, law studies in England, his marriage to Datin Seri Daisy Yeow and the birth of their three sons.

Unlike other autobiographies, *Rebel With A Cause* is not developed in chronological order. Each chapter focuses on the causes that the author has championed in his lifetime.

One chapter describes the author's long

history with the Po Leung Kok (PLK), which was founded in 1878 in Hong Kong to help women and young girls who had been abducted or traded into unpaid service as domestic workers or prostitutes.

PLK Penang was established in 1889 and was one of the first Anglo-Chinese welfare organisations on the island. It later expanded to other British colonies in the Straits Settlements.

Dato' Seri Khoo led the PLK Penang until its closure in 1976. He ensured that the legacy of the PLK continued to live on through the Council for the Welfare of Women and Girls as its founding president. Under his leadership, the Council evolved into a diversified organisation in line with social and economic changes over time.

By the late 1970s, Dato' Seri Khoo had already established a name for himself in charity work. He was called upon by the wife of the then Governor to set up a Cheshire Home in Penang. He plunged into this new calling with gusto and has been actively involved ever since.

As Penang developed, new challenges faced its society. Incipient with the rural urban drift, large numbers of young migrants moved to Penang for work where they lived a lonely life without close family.

Dato' Seri Khoo responded to the plight of the desolate youth by forming Befrienders Penang in 1978. The organisation provides a confidential support service to anyone who is troubled.

Also detailed in the book is Dato' Seri Khoo's long relationship with the State Chinese Association of Penang. Founded in 1920, the Association promotes and preserves Peranakan culture. Dato' Seri Khoo initiated the first Baba Nyonya Convention in Penang in 1988.

He is also actively involved in many cultural and religious organisations. He is a trustee of the Khoo Kongsi, President of the Penang Buddhist Association and Chairman of the Board of the Goddess of Mercy Temple.

I am impressed that Dato' Seri Khoo not only helps the less fortunate through his charity work but also channels his time and energy to promote the cultural and spiritual well-being of our community.

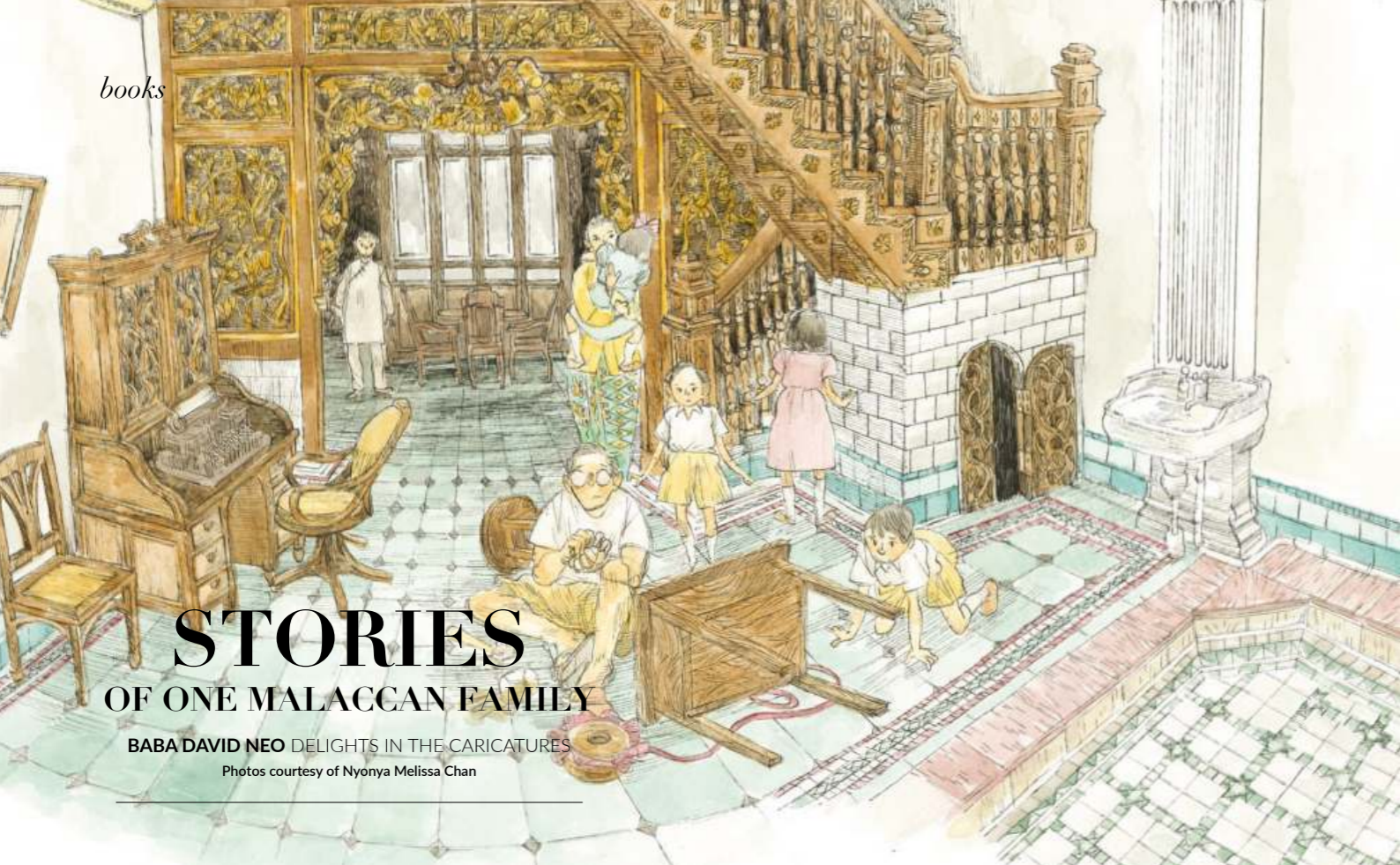
In short, Dato' Seri Khoo, the rebel who champions good causes, exemplifies this quote from Winston Churchill: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

I challenge young Peranakans to take a page out of the life of this fine Peranakan gentleman! ♦

Dr Lim Beng Soon heads the Malay Language and Literature Programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

**REBEL WITH A CAUSE** by Khoo Keat Siew was published in 2018.





## STORIES OF ONE MALACCAN FAMILY

BABA DAVID NEO DELIGHTS IN THE CARICATURES  
Photos courtesy of Nyonya Melissa Chan

**S**tories of One Malaccan Family written by Nyonya Melissa Chan with her father, Henry Chan (a retired architect) and illustrated by Preethi Nair is an illustrative, anecdotal book of the Chan family, who run the Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum, the first Peranakan museum in the Melaka that opened in 1986.

The book essentially tells the story of a Peranakan family over the last century from 1918, starting with Chan Cheng Siew, affectionately called *Towkay Chermin Mata* (Bespectacled Boss). He built the three houses on Heeren Street where the museum now stands.

The book has taken Melissa five years to put together and is loosely based on anecdotes that her family shared, including intriguing tales about her grandmother's jewellery and an uncle who joined the Japanese army during the war. The book is divided into three parts: Before The War, During The War and After The War. Each chapter opens with imagined narratives from family members, followed by a section that contextualises the focus of the chapter and ends with relevant snippets from various personalities. Visually, the book is imaginatively illustrated. Each chapter ends with a photograph of memorabilia, paraphernalia and artefacts that are related to the stories in that chapter.

I found the second part, During The War, most moving as it shows how no one escaped the tragedy of war—both the rich and poor, young and old, suffered.

Ho Joo Suan, who married Chan Seng Kee (of the second generation) had moved into the family's stately colonial house in Klebang Besair before the war. During the Occupation, she was

forced to turn their garden into a farm. Her eldest son, Kim Lay, relates how the family scurried into hiding when the Japanese called at the house.

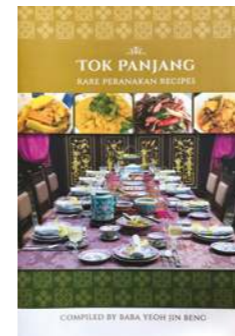
This book is easy to read and has quite charmingly captured caricatures of Peranakan family life. It also gives glimpses of Melaka in the last century—from its sleepy seaside culture to the Capitol Theatre that was established in 1931, to the floods that plagued the city.

Very few books of Malaccan families have been written and this is certainly a significant pioneering effort by a prominent family. I can't help but think of the echoing words of Chan Kim Sinn (of the third generation) from the book: "The whispers and the occasional outbreak of laughter among us kids is still in the air. The plans my older brothers make to sneak somewhere linger in our ears as we hope they would include us too."

The book launch was held at the museum on 13 Oct 2018, which was well attended with the presence of Dato' Yean Yoke Heng, Deputy Secretary General (Management) from the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia. As with all Peranakan parties, it ended with good *makan* (food) and *joget* (dancing)! ♦



Author Melissa Chan (far left) with Dato' Yean Yoke Heng (second from left) and her father, Henry Chan (third from left) and guests at the book launch.



## TOK PANJANG

BABA DANNY SENG SHARES A BOOKLET  
OF RARE PERANAKAN RECIPES  
Photo courtesy of Baba Danny Seng

**T**ok Panjang – Rare Peranakan Recipes is a booklet compiled by Baba Yeoh Jin Beng and will be given away free to anyone who wants a copy. (Details at the bottom). This booklet is the first part of an ambitious project to capture authentic Peranakan recipes which have been lost or forgotten.

Baba Yeoh hopes that by accurately recording and sharing these recipes, younger generations of Peranakans will learn to appreciate our heritage food and even prepare it for their own children.

*Tok Panjang*, which is an amalgamation of the Hokkien word for table, "tok", and the Malay word "panjang", literally means "long table". It is a perfect reflection of Peranakan Chinese culture.

In the past, a *tok panjang* meal was a must for important occasions such as Chinese New Year, weddings and *tua seh jit* (milestone birthday) celebrations. A long table is lavishly laid out with 12 to 20 dishes and guests are welcome to feast to their heart's content.

Peranakan hospitality dictates that guests must not leave feeling hungry, so food is constantly replenished during the feast, ensuring that everyone can eat as much as they want. "*Tak chukop makan*." (There was not enough to eat.) is the phrase that

no Peranakan host ever wants to hear about their party!

Food is so integral to Peranakan culture, so it's a shame that a *tok panjang* feast is rare these days. Many younger Peranakans have never experienced one or don't even know what the phrase means. This special part of our cultural heritage has been diminished with the passage of time.

In producing this booklet, and many more to come, Baba Yeoh hopes that authentic Peranakan recipes for the *tok panjang* will be documented. It is a mammoth task which will require many more interviews and hours spent recording not only recipes, but also techniques. As we all know, the best Peranakan cooks use the "*agak agak*" method to measure quantities of ingredients and cooking time because they are already so experienced in the kitchen!

I had the privilege of interviewing the late Baba Peter Wee last March and he readily contributed his recipe for *kiam chye ark* (salted vegetables cooked with duck), revealing his secret ingredient. It is a fact that we will pass on in life, but our knowledge must be shared for the culture to live on. On this note, my heartfelt thanks to Baba Harry Teo's mother, Nyonya Nancy Chua who was called to the Lord after sharing with us her recipe for *babi masak toh hay*.

At this stage of the project, the first booklet covers only nine recipes. Baba Yeoh and I hope to collect many more and continue to share them. So if anyone has a rare recipe to contribute, we will be very happy to hear from you. ♦

**We do not seek financial reward.**

Baba Yeoh has underwritten the cost of printing and a copy of the booklet is available to anyone one who wants one. Just send your mailing address to: [Amazingbizalliance@gmail.com](mailto:Amazingbizalliance@gmail.com)



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Sek Bak goes well with hard-boiled eggs and braised tau kwa.

## A BELLY FULL OF PORKY GOODNESS

BABA DAVID NEO REMINISCES ABOUT HIS KIM KIM'S DELICIOUS PORK DISHES | Photos by Baba Sherman Ong

I was delighted when Dawn, the editor, asked me to write about *babi* (pork) recipes for the *Taon Baru Babi* (Year of the Pig). I immediately thought of my *Kim Kim* (mother's brother's wife) Sally Lee, who incidentally or *naseb – beranak taon babi* (according to the stars) is born in the Year of the Pig.

I lost my mother in my teenage years. Neither my *tachi* (elder sister) nor I had learned to cook from Mum. Determined not to lose our heritage, I made sure that I learnt from *Mama* (my grandmother). As with most Peranakan cooks, she was exacting in her standards – her cooking and food presentation had to be *alus* (refined).

I lived in fear whenever I had *Mama* over, especially when I made *popiah* (fresh spring roll). I imagined her deriding remarks – *Lu apa? Anak kan chia yeh?* (Are you a son of a rickshaw puller?) implying that my culinary skills were unrefined.

But *Mama* never once *hiam* (criticised) my cooking. I think she was happy to see that a boy was so interested in cooking. *Kim Kim*, who was *Mama's menantu* (daughter-in-law) was of course in the background helping me. It was she who really did all the hard work! *Kim Kim* too, was impressed with my interest in cooking. She patiently taught me to how to *bungkus* (wrap) *kueh chang*, which I remember practicing with paper before moving on to the real thing.

While I was pursuing my undergraduate degree in Canada,

I was always working and counting pennies to save up for the next semester's tuition fees, which meant that I didn't make a trip back to Asia for almost a decade. After my studies, I moved to Australia, and it was more affordable to make trips back home. Sadly, by then *Mama, Tua Ee* (mother's sister) and *Ku Ku* (mother's brother) *sudah jadi orang alus* (had passed on).

My *Kim Kim* was one of the few elderly relatives that I had left, so I wanted to spend more time with her. I flew her over to Melbourne, where I was living, as often as I could. We had great times together cooking and laughing and I learnt forgotten recipes from her. What I treasured the most was hearing her stories of life on Grandfather's rubber plantation in Lengkok Tiga.

When I moved to Kuala Lumpur, I had *Kim Kim* over more frequently and we had great fun in the kitchen with so many local *ulam* (fresh herbs and vegetables) easily available. *Kim Kim* once remarked as I was cooking beef that she had never cooked beef in her kitchen – *selalu masak babi saja* (only cooked with pork). Of course poultry is also very much a part of the *nyonya* kitchen, but beef and mutton are hardly used, possibly because of religious reasons as many of our ancestors followed a mix of Taoist practices. She told me stories of her uncles' hunting expeditions that yielded wild boar and even bat curry that she remembers her aunt cooking.

I noticed during *Kim Kim's* last visit in December 2016, her memory had begun to fail. She would repeat her questions every ten minutes. When we went marketing and decided what to cook, she would forget the menu we had planned by the time we got home. I enjoyed these cooking sessions with her but she became tired easily. Sadly, age had caught up with her.

As the saying goes, "It takes a village to raise a child". Those of us who grew up in an extended Peranakan family will see the truth of this saying. To *Kim Kim*, I was not just a nephew but like another son, especially after my mother passed away. *Kim Kim* will be 84 this year, having gone through seven cycles of the zodiac. These *babi* recipes that I share are a tribute to her. She has deepened my understanding of why filial piety and ancestor worship are so important to us – because we owe so much to those who came before us. ♦

## SEK BAK (BRAISED PORK BELLY)

500g *sam chan bak* (belly pork)  
 100g *bawang merah tumbok* (pounded shallots)  
 3 cm *lengkuair* (galangal slightly pounded)  
 1 *kayu manis* (cinnamon)  
 5 *bunga cengkih* (cloves)  
 3 *bunga pekak* (star anise)  
 2 tablespoons *tau yu* (dark soya sauce)  
 2 cups *ayer* (water)  
 1 *kiam chye* (preserved mustard) (*Rendam ayer - soak in water for 10 mins and discard water*)  
 3 *tau kwa* (tofu)  
 3 *telor rebus* (hardboiled eggs)

*Turnis bawang merah* (fry shallots). *Tarak kayu manis, bunga cengkih, bunga pekak dan lengkuair* (add cinnamon, cloves, star anise and galangal), *goreng sampay wangi* (fry till fragrant). *Tambah ayer dan tau yu, menglidihkan* (add water and dark soya sauce and bring to boil) *dan masak sam chan bak* (and add belly pork). Lower heat and simmer *sampay bak lembut* (till pork is tender), *masokan kiam chye, tau kwa dan telor rebus* (add preserved mustard, tau kwa and hardboiled eggs). *Serap satu malam* (leave it overnight for taste to develop).

Cut the eggs into halves, slice and cut everything into bite size pieces and serve with *Chilli Chukar*.

## BABI ASSAM GARAM (TAMARIND PORK BELLY)

500 g *sam chan bak* (belly pork)  
 2 tbs *assam* (tamarind)  
 1 cup *ayer* (water)  
 1 tsp *garam* (salt)  
 1 tsp *gula* (sugar)

*Ramair assam dengan ayer* (mix tamarind pulp with water), *dan buang biji assam* (remove seeds). *Perap* (marinate) *sam chan bak* overnight. Next day, bring it to a boil—*kalo tak chukop ayer tambah ayer* (if there isn't enough water add water). Lower heat and simmer *sampay bak lembut* (till pork is tender). Cool and slice, and do a quick stir-fry so that it is served hot. *Kalo puchat, tarak sekit tau yu* (if it requires colour, add a dash of dark soya sauce when stir-frying).

*Babi Assam Garam* can served with *timun potong* (sliced cucumber), and eaten with *Chilli Chukar* and *bawang puteh tumbok* (pounded raw garlic).

## CHILLI CHUKAR

5 red chillies  
 1 stalk *seray* (lemongrass)  
 1 tablespoon *chukar* (vinegar)  
 1 teaspoon *chincalok* (fermented shrimps)  
 0.5 teaspoon *gula* (sugar)

*Tumbok chilli dan seray sampay alus* (pound chillies and lemongrass until fine), *champur chukar, chincalok dan gula* (add vinegar, fermented shrimps and sugar).



Babi Assam is best eaten with chilli chukar and raw pounded garlic.

# The Kitchen Horse

## AND OTHER GRATE STUFF

BABA ONG JIN TEONG EXAMINES SOME TRADITIONAL GRATING TOOLS IN ODE TO THE COCONUT (PART 2)  
 Photos by Baba Ong Jin Teong unless stated

Ask any nyonya and she will tell you that food presentation must be *alus* (refined), even down to how finely individual ingredients should be sliced. Older nyonys especially, will say that not all grated coconut is equal. Different tools are used to determine the fineness of the coconut strands depending on what the grated coconut will be used for.

### EDITOR'S NOTE: THE KUKUR



Beautifully carved antique kukur kelapa at the Muzium Negara in Malaysia. Photo by John Ang.

In the past, this utilitarian tool was beautifully carved to look like a horse or a four-legged animal; some bore motifs of leaves and flowers. There was a folk belief that a *kukur* was either male or female. It is unclear how the gender was determined. Some believed that women were not allowed to use a male *kukur* during major festivals.

Interestingly, in *Spirit of Wood*, a book by Dr Farish A. Noor and Eddin Khoo about woodcarving in the Malay world, the authors write that wood, being a natural element, was thought to possess *semangat*, a natural vital force "that could easily go out of control and thus upset the fragile social balance and harmony in a domesticated setting". Wood that was used to make items for domestic purposes (such as the *kukur*) was therefore "necessarily of lesser value and 'weaker' *semangat*", probably to give the user better control over the tool.

### THE KITCHEN HORSE

Coconut is traditionally grated using a *kukur kelapa*, the Malay name for a scraper shaped like a small wooden horse with a serrated metal grater attached to its neck. The *kukur* was once a very important kitchen tool as coconut is an essential ingredient in Malay cuisine, which has heavily influenced nyonya cuisine.

To use a *kukur* you sit astride the wooden block with the metal grater in front. Holding half a coconut in your palms, scrape the kernel against the grater. *Kukur* were originally carved out of a single block of wood. Today, these graters are designed to fold up and be packed flat.



A modern kukur that can be packed flat.

### THE PARUT

Some older nyonys feel that coconut grated using a *kukur* is too kasar (coarse) for desserts. Instead, they prefer to use a *parut* (similar to a mandolin), which is a wooden block with short thin brass wires implanted in it. One version of the *parut* which can still be bought today, uses galvanized steel wire with barbs. Coconut flesh is removed from the shell using a curved blade and cut into 1-1.5cm thick pieces which are grated using the *parut*. Great care should be taken to ensure that the fingers do not get grated!



This parut belonged to the writer's maternal grandmother.

### ELECTRICAL GRATERS

Modern cooks may not have the time (or the tools) to grate coconut at home, so many buy it from a market. Most market stalls today use an electrical grater. The coconut is broken into halves then the flesh is pressed against a rotating grater. The trick is to cease grating before the grater touches the coconut shell which is black. In recipes which call for raw, grated coconut (for example in *kueh koswi*), we do not want the black bits. Younger coconuts are preferred for *kuehs* because the shell next to the kernel is yellow instead of black and the kernel is less oily.



An electrical rotating grater.

### MAKING COCONUT OIL FROM SCRATCH

Coconut oil is used in curry recipes in nyonya cuisine. My mother used to make her own coconut oil from the *santan* of older coconuts which are not so fresh. These are the coconuts which have germinated – when the embryo called haustorium (*tombong* in Malay) starts growing within the coconut but is not so firm.

The *santan* is heated in a wok over a low fire until the liquid has evaporated, leaving behind a clear yellow and fragrant virgin coconut oil. The heat must be kept very low to ensure that the good acids in the coconut oil are not destroyed. Homemade coconut oil is very different from the commercially produced oil sold at the *chai tiama* (provision shop) in the old days. Commercial coconut oil is made from copra.

### COCONUT WATER

Fermented coconut water is traditionally used as a rising agent for various nyonya *kuehs* like coconut candy and *apom bekuah*.

Young coconuts make excellent drinks. Chilled coconut water served with the scraped, jelly-like flesh of a young coconut is heavenly. The Thai variety of young coconuts that we commonly find in supermarkets have very hard shells compared to the local or Malaysian coconuts. I suspect that these Thai coconuts are specially selected for export otherwise the coconut will burst before it reaches supermarket shelves. Mature coconuts have thick flesh of 1cm or more, while young coconut flesh is only about 1-2mm thick.

Recent studies suggest that fresh coconuts are good for health. The high lauric acid in virgin coconut oil builds up the body's immunity. 64 percent of the saturated fat in coconut consists of medium chain fatty acids which are broken down to provide energy and are seldom deposited as fat in the body. So eat up, drink up and enjoy coconuts!

### SANTAN: HEADS OR TAILS?

Another common use for grated coconut is to extract the milk called *santan*. The grated coconut is put in a cloth bag and squeezed to obtain *pati santan* (thick coconut cream from the first squeeze). In the old days the cloth for this purpose was recycled from a cotton flour bag (*meehoon thay* in Hokkien). The thick, creamy *pati santan* is prized, much like extra virgin olive oil which is from the first pressing of olives. *Pati santan* is served with desserts like sago pudding and *pulut hitam* (black glutinous rice).



Pulut hitam dessert served with pati santan.

Salt is traditionally added to the *santan* so that it will not go sour. After the *pati santan* is extracted, more *santan* can be recovered from the grated coconut by adding hot water and squeezing a second or third time to yield thin, watery coconut milk. Nyonys refer to this watery liquid as *santan boey* (boey is tail in Hokkien), while the liquid from the first squeeze is also called *santan thau* (head).

### HOMEMADE GRATER

On a trip to Cambodia, I came across a lady at a market stall using a simple grater. She allowed me to try it out and I was intrigued. When I came home, I made one for myself from beer bottle cap and a wooden handle. It works very well! ♦



Baba Ong's homemade grater from a bottle cap.

These scrapers can be used to get long, tubular strings of coconut flesh.



Scrapers used on young coconut flesh are curved and scalloped.



## RAFFLES in Southeast Asia

ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM  
Photo courtesy of ACM

What do we really know about Sir Stamford Raffles and his role in 19th-century Southeast Asia? Co-curated by Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) and The British Museum, *Raffles in Southeast Asia: Revisiting the Scholar and Statesman* illuminates the different sides of this famously enigmatic figure and his role in the region.

Visitors will see some 240 objects that show what aspects of Southeast Asian history most intrigued Raffles and the British – but also some parts that they missed, or refused to acknowledge. This will also be the first time that pivotal objects pictured and discussed in Raffles' *The History of Java* are brought together from different parts of the world in one venue.

Through displays of sculpture, architectural and natural history drawings, wayang puppets and masks, gamelan instruments, krises, and royal regalia of Indonesian sultans, this exhibition at the ACM seeks to showcase the rich artistic and cultural heritage of Java and the Malay World.

Director of the ACM, Kennie Ting explains, "There are two main intents for this exhibition. The first is to objectively address the figure of Raffles, presenting him as a complex and multifaceted personality, rather than the mythical, one-dimensional "founder figure" most Singaporeans "know" him as. He was a scholar and avid collector of natural and cultural heritage, but also a ruthless statesman and colonial opportunist. We hope to inspire visitors to look beyond the conventional origin story of modern Singapore; to place this story against larger historical and geopolitical developments in the region."

"The second, equally important, intent is to showcase the rich artistic and cultural heritage of Java and the Malay World. The exhibition takes the visitor on a virtual tour of the great empires of Java – from the 9th century, when the great Hindu-Buddhist monuments of Borobudur and Prambanan were built, through to the 18th and early 19th centuries, to explore the origins of today's still-thriving central Javanese royal courts of Yogyakarta, Surakarta, Mangkunegaran, and Pakualaman. The tour ends off in the lands of the former Johor-Riau-Lingga Sultanate, allowing the visitor to delve deeper into Singapore's own roots in the Malay world." ◆

### Raffles in Southeast Asia: Revisiting the Scholar and the Statesman

1 February to 28 April 2019

Asian Civilisations Museum  
1 Empress Place  
Singapore 179555  
www.acm.org.sg



Of Cups & Kueh part 1 (2019) by artist Chris Yap.

## GLOSSARIES

### NUS BABA HOUSE

Photo courtesy of NUS Baba House

**G**lossaries of the Straits Chinese Homemaking is a presentation conceived to complement the interpretative displays in the NUS Baba House. Materials and texts are organised around aspects of the Straits Chinese material and social histories, and contemporary perspectives that may complicate them.

To support these connections, elements are drawn from past projects developed by the House since 2007, and accompanied by primary sources that help underpin contexts and complexities.

The materials from these preceding artist projects, exhibitions, and conferences bring to attention the continuing cultural negotiations that exist within the dynamics of heritage, which are further shaped by positioning, institutionally mediated constructions, and responses.

The terms, phrases, names, and events mobilised across the galleries propose interconnections and enact relationship potentials, yet each sustains its own agency and independent scrutiny. ◆

### NUS Baba House

157 Neil Road Singapore 088883  
https://babahouse.nus.edu.sg  
Suitable for ages 13 and above.  
Visits by appointment only.

Visits are available for online booking from the 15th of every month, two months ahead.  
Register at <https://peatix.com/group/15343#>



## AYER DI-TETAK TAKLEH PUTUS

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE  
PREVIEWS A NEW WAYANG  
PERANAKAN PLAY

Photos courtesy of Peranakan Siblings

**A**yer Di-Tetak Takleh Putus (*Blood Is Thicker Than Water*) is new play that will be staged by the theatre group, Peranakan Siblings in June 2019. Based on a story by the doyen of Peranakan theatre, Baba GT Lye, the play is set in the post war years of the 1950s and 60s.

Scripted by Nyonya Irene Ong, this wayang Peranakan play gives insight into how the Japanese Occupation of Singapore affected the Peranakan community. Many Peranakan families lost their men as the Japanese suspected them of being spies for the British since many were English educated and had close ties to the colonial government. The women were left to fend for themselves and became heads of their respective households.

Bibik Besair (played by Baba GT Lye), Bibik Tengah (Baba LB Keng) and Bibik Bongso (Nyonya Irene Ong) are sisters. Bongso is the child of the



Hock Seng (left) is caught between his mother, Bibik Besair (centre) and his wife, Helen (right)

second wife, but all three of them grew up in the same household and are very close.

Bibik Besair has only one son, Khoo Hock

Seng (Baba Chan Eng Thai), who is married to Helen Sim (Yip Yi Kai), a Teochew lady, who graduated from a university in London. Bibik Besair was widowed early in her marriage and raised her son by herself. Hock Seng is a very filial son. When he married Helen, he is torn between his wife and his mother as Helen does not get along with her mother-in-law.

The second sister, Bibik Tengah, also has only one son. Both her son and daughter-in-law died in an accident, leaving behind their only son, dim-witted Tan Poh Chye, in the care of Bibik Tengah who dotes on her only descendant.

Bibik Bongso, is a widow. She is childless and inherited a fortune when her husband died. The three sisters face various problems, but take comfort in their close bond and rely on each other to overcome their trials and tribulations. Although they bicker with one another, they realise that in the face of adversity, blood is thicker than water.

Says Baba GT Lye, "It is one of the most beautiful stories I have created, and you will not regret coming to watch this play." ◆

*Ayer Di-Tetak Takleh Putus (Blood Is Thicker Than Water)* will be staged at the Drama Centre on 21 & 22 June 2019. Tickets are available from SISTIC. ([www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg)).

To enjoy a 20% discount, book before the end of April 2019.



To watch a video of the cast, scan the QR Code or go to [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg).



# FORGET THIS NOT

BABA EMERIC LAU BELIEVES THAT *LU SIAPA?* RANKS AMONGST GUNONG SAYANG ASSOCIATION'S (GSA'S) MOST MEMORABLE PRODUCTIONS | Photos courtesy of GSA

Anyone familiar with the tropes of *wayang Peranakan* may use adjectives such as "domineering" and "stern" to describe a typical portrayal of a matriarch. She is the anchor of the family, steadfast and bold, with resourceful solutions for every household problem.

Yet, matriarchs are but human, and *Lu Siapa?* (*Who Are You?*) staged by GSA in September 2018 at the Drama Centre, lifts the lid on the somewhat taboo topic of infirmity by examining how one family copes when their beloved matriarch is afflicted with dementia.

While Singapore is gradually squaring up to the challenges of an aging population, this is really an overripe issue for Peranakans - most of us have grappled with the needs of elderly parents and the passing on of loved ones.

All of 80 years young, Jessie Cheang plays

the role of Bibik Tan Swee Neo, a matriarch who has dementia. She ably portrays the symptoms of the disease



Veteran actress Jessie Cheang in a tender moment with Sebastian Sim who plays her son.

- forgetfulness, confusion and place-time disorientation. Credit must be given to playwright Veronica Tan Lyann who drew from her own experience of living with elderly parents, as well as researching and interacting with dementia patients. This

made for a string of relatable vignettes - from keys inadvertently left hanging on the front door

to forgetting familiar recipes, and finally being unable to recognise one's own kin.

The rest of the cast turned in equally impressive performances as Bibik Tan's family members. As her dementia worsens, her erratic behaviour takes a toll on them, culminating in an ugly squabble as they try to figure out the best course of action. Ultimately, her only son, Ben, played by Sebastian Sim, takes on the responsibility of looking after her. He hires an Indonesian maid, Yanti (Lee Yong Ming), who succeeds in delivering a fine performance melding pathos and comedy. The play's other comic character is Ah Soh (KT), a loyal friend and neighbour of the Tans, but also a busybody who gets on everyone's nerves. KT brought on the laughs with his signature brand of comic timing and hilarious accent.

Dementia takes its toll on both patient and caregivers. Ben and his wife Ruth (Christina Wee) had many in the audience sniffing through a series of touching and heartbreaking moments as they realise their mother/mother-

in-law is no longer herself. Ruth tenderly embracing Bibik Tan as she explains to the latter that it is late at night and therefore inappropriate to head out, and Ben's tears as he allows his mother to lead him in a dance she recalls from her youth are two indelible scenes that tug at the heartstrings.

Unwittingly, the theme of mental decline also makes this production exceed the sum of its parts. As the onstage action unfolded, I found dementia to be an applicable metaphor for the state of Peranakan culture today. While some elements survive, like our food and craft, other aspects, such as language proficiency and knowledge of cultural traditions, are becoming hopelessly lost as our elders pass on.

Still, we must cherish and rally around the fragments that remain, just as the Tans determinedly celebrate Chinese New Year and *soja* (pay respects to) their beloved matriarch in the concluding scene. This honouring of our past is essential, or we may eventually look at one another and ask, "Lu Siapa?" ♦

Bibik Tan's (played by veteran actress Jessie Cheang, in red kebaya) family gathers around her on a ari besair (festive occasion).

# EXPLORING the Roots of Peranakan

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE REPORTS ON THE 31ST PERANAKAN CONVENTION  
(23-25 NOVEMBER 2018) | Photos by Nyonya Angeline Kong



Host association, PERTIWI went all out to arrange beautiful Javanese cultural performances such as this Kuda Lumping dance.



Performers at the street party in Lasem.



Who wants to have fun? Hands up! Delegates joget the night away at the Raffles Night in Semarang.



The delegation of TPAS members attending the 31st Peranakan Convention was so large that the whole group could not fit onto the stage to be photographed.



TPAS General Committee members and advisor at the Convention.

From left to right: Brand advisor, Nyonya Linda Chee, Baba Philip Yeo, President Baba Colin Chee, Nyonya Gwen Ong, 2nd Vice-President, Baba Raymond Wong, Nyonyas Agnes Ng and Dawn Marie Lee.

In November 2018, a 90-strong delegation of Association members led by The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) president, Baba Colin Chee, and some General Committee members headed to the 31st Peranakan Convention in Tangerang, Indonesia.

Themed *Exploring The Roots of Peranakan*, the convention was hosted by Peranakan Tionghoa Warga Indonesia (PERTIWI). Over 500 delegates from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia, USA and The Netherlands participated in the three-day event which featured a myriad of activities and opportunities to bond with fellow Peranakans.

Participants enjoyed lively cultural performances, engaging talks by leading academics on Peranakan culture, batik and heritage cuisine workshops and interesting cultural visits. Our TPAS choir, the Peranakan Voices, gave a rousing performance at the gala dinner.

After the Convention, many delegates enjoyed tours to Semarang, Lasem, Borobudur and Yogyakarta organised by PERTIWI. PERTIWI volunteers worked tirelessly to ensure that everyone had a safe and enjoyable trip. Participants enjoyed visits to world heritage sites, were introduced to Javanese culture, enjoyed a street party, learnt more about batik making and received 2kg of *buah keluak* as a gift from PERTIWI.

TPAS congratulates PERTIWI president, Pak Udaya Halim and his team of volunteers who have made this convention a success. The 2019 convention will be held from 22-24 November in Melaka, Malaysia. ♦



Some members of the Gunong Sayang Association enjoying batik shopping during the street party in Lasem.

From left to right: Nyonyas Lilian Chua, Audrey Tan, Baba Fred Soh, Nyonyas Christina Wee and Jacqueline Tan.



Hats off to our convention liaison, Nyonya Gwen Ong (left of frame), who meticulously co-ordinated all the arrangements for our TPAS delegates. The straw hats were a welcome gift from PERTIWI to tour participants when they arrived in Semarang.



Post-convention tour participants from Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand visiting a Tionghua Chinese temple in Lasem. They were guided by the young Javanese lady in the centre (in hijab).

# Beautiful Peranakan Colours

## ART WORKSHOP

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE REPORTS ON A TPAS EVENT FOR YOUNG ARTISTS | Photo by Gwen Ong



Gabby Malpas (standing, in green floral dress) with the little nyonyas and babas proudly showing off their artwork.

The gloomy November rain didn't dampen the excitement of the little nyonyas and babas who enjoyed a lively afternoon of art with artist Gabby Malpas at the Peranakan Museum. Gabby is a New Zealander whose work features Peranakan themes and colours.

Organised by TPAS, General Committee member, Nyonya Gwen Ong, began the workshop on 18 November 2018 with a brief introduction to Peranakan culture and explained the meaning behind motifs and colours commonly found in the Peranakan world. Next, artist Gabby Malpas guided the participants to create their own vibrant artworks based on her designs. The effervescent Nyonya Jackie Pereira delighted the group with an impromptu musical performance.

TPAS would like to thank all who came, and our generous sponsors who enabled us to present each participant with a little gift. A big kamsiah to the Peranakan Museum, Baba Victor Lim of Aster by Kyra Peranakan Tiles and Mr Eric Ang of Katong Antique House for sponsoring the gift pack. ♦

Find out more about Gabby Malpas and her artwork at: [www.gabbymalpas.com](http://www.gabbymalpas.com). Gabby is represented in Singapore by Utterly Art LLP.

### GABBY'S NUT

ARTIST GABBY MALPAS MUSES ON HER AFFINITY FOR ALL THINGS PERANAKAN

In 1988, I left New Zealand to travel through Southeast Asia en route to the UK. It was my first time outside of Australia and New Zealand. The heat of the tropics, the smells, sounds, sights and customs seemed very strange but also mysterious and exciting. As an artist, I was drawn to the art of the region, especially Indonesian batiks with delicate floral patterns on pastel coloured backgrounds in pinks and turquoise.

Within the first few days of my trip, I found a nut on a beach in Bali. I had never seen anything like it. I was drawn to its shape and strange grooves. It rattled when I shook it.

A couple of months later, I arrived in Singapore via Sumatra on my way to Malaysia. I saw brightly coloured ceramics and wondered why. I saw brightly painted shophouses and wondered why. I heard the word 'Peranakan' and saw strange food on menus and wondered why.

Over the next twenty years from London, I would travel to Southeast Asia on holiday or on the way to spend time with family in New Zealand. By the time I settled in Australia in 2003, I had amassed a little collection of items and fabrics bought in markets and antique stores from many parts of Asia. After doing some research, I realised that my collection consisted of items that were mostly Peranakan! And on my window sill or worktable wherever I lived, would be the strange little nut I picked up in Bali.

In November 2018, I tasted ayam buah keluak in Singapore for the first time. It was delicious. Only then did I discover that my little nut from Bali from 30 years ago was a buah keluak seed of the kepayang tree, an essential ingredient in that iconic Peranakan dish! ♦



The mysterious nut Gabby picked up from a beach in Bali over 30 years ago. Photo by Gabby Malpas.

# God of Wealth

## TALK

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE IS ENTRANCED BY LITTLE KNOWN TALES OF THIS FAMOUS DEITY | Photo by Dawn Marie Lee.

The God of Wealth is an affable deity who has appeared in Chinese folklore and is today still popular among Singaporeans, especially around the Chinese New Year period as he is thought to bless people with good fortune during this time. But did you know that one of his origin myths has an Arab connection?

On 16 February 2019, TPAS co-organised a talk with the NUS Baba House about the God of Wealth and the changing identity of Chinese religious practices in Singapore. The talk was very well attended by TPAS members and guests of the Baba House.

The speaker, Esmond Soh, is a final year undergrad pursuing an Honours degree in History at the Nanyang Technological University. In this engaging presentation, he reviewed literature about the different gods of wealth in Chinese culture and examined the historical context that has popularised the worship of these deities, namely the growth of commerce in the Song and Ming dynasties in China. Closer to home, he discussed the popularity of the Sembawang God



Speaker Esmond Chin regaled the audience with his lively presentation on the God of Wealth.

of Wealth temple in Singapore. In closing, he examined why Singapore's neoliberal economy has contributed to the God of Wealth's popularity. The session ended with a lively Question and Answer session. ♦

Esmond Soh's research interests include the effects of modernity on Chinese religious institutions and the history of religion in general. He may be contacted at: [sohc0015@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:sohc0015@ntu.edu.sg)

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# Potong Kertair Merah DEMONSTRATION

A FAST FADING CRAFT FINDS NEW LIFE AT A TPAS WORKSHOP  
REPORTS NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE | Photo by Colin Chee



Eager participants learning potong kertair merah from TPAS volunteers, Linda Chee, Samantha and Simone Tan.

In preparation for the Lunar New Year, TPAS co-organised a *potong kertair merah* (red paper cutting demonstration) on 19 January 2019 together with the NUS Baba House. This workshop was the first of a series of joint events to be held in partnership with the NUS Baba House.

Red paper cutting is a Chinese folk art originating in the 6th century. These paper-cuts make especially favourable decorations or gifts, as they usually feature motifs that symbolise luck, well-wishes, and happiness for the year.

The craft was expertly demonstrated by TPAS volunteers, Nyonya Linda Chee, in her early sixties, and teenage sisters, Nyonyas Samantha and Simone Tan. Linda had learnt her craft from her late father who would paper-cut intricate designs to be pasted on gifts of Chinese New Year cookies and *kueh kueh* which he had ordered from Melaka. The sisters, on the other hand, learnt the craft by browsing the Internet. Although the three nyonyas are of different generations, they share a deep appreciation of the craft and a passion for its continuance. Participants learnt a simple yet thoughtful way to embellish their gifts with an auspicious flourish. ♦



# Christmas MALAM JOLLY

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE ENJOYS A VERY MERRY EVENING  
Photos by Baba Colin Chee, Nyonya Angeline Khong and Nyonya Dawn Marie Lee



Baba Colin Chee and Nyonya Agnes Ng (both on stage with musicians) in a surprise duet with the TPAS choir, The Peranakan Voices.



Little baba, Micah, eyes the action with his mum.



Baba Lionel Chia and Nyonya Irene Chew dance up a storm.



Baba Bryan Tan and other GC members served guests from the buffet.

Malam Jolly, The Peranakan Association Singapore's annual soiree, was held at the Chinese Swimming Club on 21 December 2018.

210 TPAS members and guests were treated to an evening of delicious food, song and dance including musical sets by our choir The Peranakan Voices, Elvis Tribute artist, Romito Mendoza and The Merrilads band. As a surprise, TPAS president, Baba Colin Chee, took to the stage with Assistant Hon. Secretary, Nyonya Agnes Ng and serenaded the crowd who cheered the duo on during their rendition of favourite Peranakan songs. TPAS would like to thank emcee Baba Alvin Yeo whose lively banter kept guests entertained and

heightened the festive mood of the evening.

Since this year's Malam Jolly was held on Tang Chek, the day the Winter Solstice is celebrated by Peranakans, Baba GT Lye and Baba Tan Kuning composed a panton each for this special occasion. In Peranakan tradition, guests enjoyed *kueh ee* (balls made of glutinous rice powder and served in a fragrant syrup) that evening to mark Tang Chek.

The Malam Jolly organising committee, headed by our youthful Treasurer, Baba Bryan Tan, managed to get over 50 prizes sponsored for the raffle draw. The top prize, a strand of South Sea pearls valued at \$1,100, was won by Dorothy Tessensohn. It was an enjoyable evening with smiles all around. ♦





# Lee Kip Lee

## 1922 - 2018

BABA COLIN CHEE REMEMBERS A TRUE BABA GENTLEMAN  
Portrait by Colin Chee. Other photos courtesy of Peter Lee

At his 62nd birthday concert in August 2018, Baba Dick Lee, Singapore's entertainer extraordinaire, dedicated a song to his father, Baba Lee Kip Lee. Bunga Sayang, composed in 1994, is a much-loved song with a beautiful melody and lyrics that touch the heart. Playing the piano, Dick sang movingly and plaintively in the tribute to his father.

“  
In every village by the sea  
There stands a tall and ancient tree  
That shelters from the sky above  
A tree of hope, a tree of love  
”

The first time I heard about Baba Lee Kip Lee was when I read his book Amber Sands – A Boyhood Memoir. He was a good writer. Uncle Kip (as he was fondly known) was born in 1922. Amber Sands vividly describes a bucolic life by the sea on the East Coast of Singapore during the pre-war years and life during the Japanese Occupation. It still is a very good read and has been used in schools as required reading for Literature classes.

Uncle Kip was called to the Lord on 29 December 2018. At 96 years old, he had lived a long and fulfilling life. He ran a successful stevedoring business in Pulau Bukom and retired in the 1990s. During his 14 years as president of TPAS from 1996 to 2010, he brought renewed vigour to our Association. Membership increased three-fold during his term and he actively ensured funding for TPAS activities by engaging Peranakan and non-Peranakan business leaders to take an interest in TPAS. He started a newsletter for members in 1994, which has since evolved into our award-winning magazine, *The Peranakan*. Our choir, The Peranakan Voices, was also formed in 2000 during his term. Long-time choir members fondly remember him as “a learned man with a gentle soul whom we will miss dearly”.

Uncle Kip was a quiet person. He listened and observed more than he spoke and was uncomplaining. But I was told by our Association's First Vice-President, Baba Alan Koh, that Uncle Kip could also be firm and stern when needed. During his time as president, he was very clear on the role of the Association, on how the General Committee should operate and would not broach any nonsense. With Uncle Kip at the helm, the Association gained a reputation as the go-to resource for all things Peranakan. After he stepped down in 2010, he was made Honorary Life President by the Association for his many contributions to the community.

Uncle Kip was an advocate for heritage and culture. He and his beloved wife, Elizabeth Tan (dear Auntie Liz, who passed on in 2015) were ardent supporters of our Singapore museums. Baba John Teo, General Manager of The Peranakan Museum says: “Lee Kip Lee and his wife Elizabeth have made an immeasurable contribution to heritage and the arts in Singapore, through major artefact donations to various cultural institutions, including the National Heritage Board's various

museums. The Peranakan Museum, in particular, was close to his heart, and received many significant gifts, including 600 rare textiles, 2,500 photographs, silver, porcelain and furniture, collected by his son Peter. Together, the Lee family's support has broadened and deepened the national collection. In recognition of their generosity, Mr Lee and his wife received the Patron of Heritage award in 2011, 2014 and 2017.”

Uncle Kip was an frequent contributor to the Straits Times Forum section. General Committee member, Ngiam May Ling, remembers that he had “a very strong sense of civic consciousness” and would not give up on issues that mattered to him. She recalls: “One of his letters called for the sharp blades attached to grass cutting machines to be hidden so that passers-by would not be accidentally injured. The government was slow to take this up but Uncle Kip refused to cease and desist until finally, the government took steps to replace such blades. He also championed the welfare of construction workers long before it became fashionable. He had a heart for society at large.”

I remember the many sumptuous dinners we had at the Lees' Bukit Timah home. The editorial committee of *The Peranakan* would meet there quarterly to discuss and plan each issue of the magazine. Uncle Kip and Auntie Liz would always make all of us feel welcome. Auntie Liz would lead the banter during dinner. Uncle Kip, sitting to her right, would simply look on lovingly at her, with a gentle smile on his face.

In his golden years, his sons - Dick, John, Peter and Andrew - looked after their father with much love and attentive care. It is Uncle Kip's spirit of generosity, graciousness and kindness that lives on in his family. All of us who have known him will never forget him.

Rest in peace, Uncle Kip.  
We will always love you and Auntie Liz. ♦



As a boy in 1930.  
Mother, Tan Guat Poh, and father, Lee Chim Huk, with sisters Joo Lee (back), Joo Har (front), Kip Lee (centre) and brother Kip Lin (right). Youngest sister Joo Leng was living in Malacca at that time.



With friends at Raffles College, late 1940s.  
Back row: Teo Cheng Guan (Teo Chee Hean's father), Un Hon Hing, Cheong, Kun Fatt.  
Front row: Lee Kip Lee, Oon Beng Soon (Violet Oon's father), Cheang Moh Yun, Lim Kee Loo (father of Lim Kay Tong and Lim Kay Siu).



With his family at his mother's home in Katong, 1958.  
Top row: Wife, Elizabeth Tan, Lee Kip Lee, eldest son Dick  
Front row: John, Peter, Kip Lee's mother Tan Guat Poh (younger sister of Tan Cheng Lock) holding Andrew, and daughter, Patricia.

# The Federation of Peranakan Associations

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Western Australia 6149, Australia

The Peranakan Community of Western Australia, INC

President | Mr Kenneth Lim  
bcfernand@outlook.com

Secretary | Christine Fernandez  
perthperanakans@gmail.com

## Events Calendar

### JANUARY

19 | Red paper-cutting workshop with NUS Baba House

### FEBRUARY

16 | God of Fortune talk with NUS Baba House

### MARCH

15 & 16 | The Peranakan Museum closing street party

31 | TPAS Annual General Meeting

### APRIL

13 | Talk on Cheng Beng practices by Baba Cedric Tan with NUS Baba House

23 | Tour of the Heritage Conservation Centre

27 & 28 | Peranakan Bazaar at Serangoon Gardens Country Club

### MAY

18 | Demo and talk on the heritage cuisine of Singapore, Melaka & Penang by Dr Ong Jin Teong

### JUNE

5 | Singapore bicentennial celebrations at the Istana Open House (With the Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association.)

29 | Forum on Peranakan Identity

### JULY

TBC\* | Joget Siang tea dance with the People's Association

TBC\* | Singapore International Jewellery Expo 2019 (TPAS will be a community partner)

27 | Baba Nyonya Literary Festival

TBC\* — TO BE CONFIRMED

\* Schedule and events subject to change as circumstances dictate.

## Welcome

A warm welcome to our new members!

Alvin Yeo See Wei  
Andrew Lin Woei Jyh  
Anita Tan Siew Tin  
Annie Yeo Sim Teck  
Benne Ho  
Caroline Lee Chwee Lan  
Catherine Ferrer Ann Ramos  
Charlotte Lim Hiong Seik  
Chee Soo Leng  
Christina Teh Lai Meng  
Christine Lee Peek Sze  
Clarence Goh Say Beng  
Daniel Tan Chin Tiong  
Delicia Tan Siok Chin  
Dr Kevin Tan Yew Lee  
Eunice Chua Leng Leng  
Eve Lim Cheng Hian  
Fraci Ngau Sin Soon  
Geraldine Goh Jessamine  
Henry Ong Lay Hong  
Irene Goh Phaik Chin  
Isabelle Chantel Lee Yie Sze  
Jacky Koh Soo Chor  
Jacqueline Ong Soh Gwek  
Jilian Corina Tan-Reisig  
Joseph Ong Peng Koon

Katherine Chua Eng Guat  
Kevin Lim  
Lim Bee Hoon  
Lim Quee Lin  
Michel Tan Li Yin  
Nathalie Laque  
Nenly Chan  
Pamela Charles Menon  
Pei Pei Goh Kim Ling  
Raymond Khoo  
Richard Toh Soo Beng  
Sandra Chia Marie Pei Pei  
Serene Tan Huay Yong  
Sherry Foo  
Sheryl Shi Hui Wong  
Shirley Wee Geok Lan  
Dr Silvio Moreira De Sousa  
Sonny Yap Boon Keng  
Sophie Koh Gek Hiang  
Suresh Menon  
Tan Boon Lan  
Tan Poey Cheng  
Theresa Tan Chin Chin  
Veronica Yeow Ling Swee  
Yip Wai Kuan

## Obituary

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

### Mr Lee Kip Lee

President, The Peranakan Association Singapore  
1996-2010

## ERRATUM



In 2018 Issue 2, page 6, we identified the gentleman on the far left in this photo (in the safari suit) as Baba William Gwee Thian Hock. This is incorrect. He is Baba Yeo Kim Swee, an accomplished *dondang sayang* singer from Melaka. Many thanks to Baba Chan Eng Thai for bringing this to our attention.

## CALLING ALL CREATIVES!

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



## The Rubber Magnate's Daughter

BABA BRYAN TAN GOES BACK IN TIME WITH MOLLY YEOW TO VISIT THE SOH FAMILY'S SPRAWLING RUBBER ESTATE | Illustration by Nyonya Eileen Chan

Molly smiled fondly as she ran a hand over a faded portrait in an ornate frame. The man in the painting was unmistakably regal. Sir Francis Soh's noble carriage was apparent in his three-piece suit, double half-hunter pocket-watch in hand and a *pince-nez* nestled into a furrowed brow.

Kong Kong was a first among equals, a gentleman who exemplified *adat* (*decorum*) and a man of the people. He was born into privilege, *cuci kaki naik ranjang* (literally: to get into bed after washing your feet, a phrase used to describe a scion of a rich family), but he had a heart of gold, always ready to help the local *kampong* (*village*) folk of Melaka.

The late Ah Lim, Sir Francis's *majie* (Chinese maidservant) would frequently recount to her stories of her mother, Peck Neo, as a young girl, strolling through the sprawling rubber estates with Molly's grandfather. Peck Neo would watch as he directed the workers, amazed that he was able to remember the names of every single person who was in his employ. They would put their right hand to their breasts and bow their heads respectfully, stopping whatever they were doing to greet him as he passed. In turn, Sir Francis treated them well - building homes for them, sending his personal doctor to treat them when they were ill, and even paying for their children to attend the local school.

The house that the Soh family lived in was palatial, but Peck Neo knew every nook and cranny of the manor. Her knowledge came in handy when she needed respite from her overbearing mother, especially for a hyperactive young girl with a tendency towards clumsiness. "*Tak seronoh! Mana tu monyet?* (So rough and clumsy! Where is that monkey?)," Peck Neo's mother would yell as she raged through the hallways with a broom, eventually catching and punishing her by poking her hands and feet with the broken shards of whatever she broke.

When Peck Neo came of school-going age, she sorely missed her carefree days spent with her beloved papa on the rubber estate. She would wail bitterly when Ah Lim tried to pry her from Sir Francis' leg to get her ready for school. Her father would kneel down to wipe away her tears, take her by the shoulders and tell her firmly but not unkindly, to brush her hair and put on her uniform. She realised that papa would not yield on this, and reluctantly did as she was told. Peck Neo's school, the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) in Banda Hilir was a good half hour walk away. Although Sir Francis had a driver and several fine automobiles, he insisted that his daughter walk to school daily.

Peck Neo would don a wide-brimmed straw hat over her ponytails and clutch at her sling bag with dread as she made the trek with Ah Lim. How she missed those days spent with her

father, the rustle of the rubber tree leaves in the wind, the damp soil between her bare toes and the blood-racing hunts that she would join her father on to rid the estate of wild boars who loved gorging on rubber seeds.

Sir Francis' home was the epicentre of social events. Wealthy businessmen and their wives would attend his lavish dinner parties. Famous politicians often visited to seek his advice and even the occasional Malayan princeling would grace their home when passing through Melaka, staying for a night or two. British diplomats, foreign ambassadors and local tradesmen were all welcomed at the Soh mansion.

As Peck Neo bloomed into a nubile young *nyonya*, matchmakers and matriarchs started calling, seeking her hand in marriage. Peck Neo was indeed a beauty; her delicate doe-shaped eyes had an impish twinkle to them, her lithe legs supple from brisk walks by her father's side in the rubber estate.

The sweet monotony of life as Peck Neo knew it ended abruptly and jarringly when Japanese troops arrived on the Straits of Malaya. The local villagers fled to the Soh family's rubber estate in panic, hoping that Sir Francis' reputation would save them

from the invaders. Thankfully, no battles broke out in Melaka, but the Japanese still occupied the city.

One fateful night during the Occupation changed the fate of the Soh family forever. Sir Francis had forbidden everyone to leave the house in the evenings, especially Peck Neo who was a young mother with a baby girl, Molly. Every member of the household had to stay indoors except the servants who were tasked to distribute rations throughout the rubber estate to the influx of displaced villagers.

Being cooped up did not suit free spirited Peck Neo, and in the dead of the night she crept out to the rubber

estate. The fearful eyes of the Malay villagers peered out at her from under hurriedly built makeshift shelters. As she wandered through the scattered camps of refugees giving reassuring words to the families, a scream cut through the air from the outskirts of the estate. She raced towards the sound.

Ah Lim crawled in the dirt, sobbing piteously beside a bag of tattered rice copiously spilling its contents - a Japanese soldier on her heel. Her clothes were torn and bloody from bayonet gashes, and her usually impeccable braids in disarray. The soldier had a maniacal glint in his eye, and was in the midst of undoing his trousers.

Peck Neo leapt out of the undergrowth where she was hiding and ran towards the soldier without a second thought, a stick in hand. Her footsteps alerted him to her presence. Cursing, the officer fumbled for his rifle which lay on the

ground. A crack of gunfire shattered the still of the night. Before Peck Neo could register what had happened, a flower of red blossomed on the forehead of the Japanese soldier, spattering her clothes and the ground between them. She looked up and saw her father a distance away. Sir Francis held a smoking pistol in his right hand, only to let it fall to the ground as the weight of his act dawned upon him. Her Koko (paternal aunt, father's sister) Bee Neo stood a few meters behind him, her face as white as *tepong pulot* (rice flour).

Although decades had passed since that fateful night, the shooting was as clear as day in Soh Bee Neo's mind, as she stood before the great gilded *pintu pagar* of the Ong mansion, a silver dragon entwined with a phoenix carved into the polished lacquer; the crest of her family's deadliest rival. *If not for that wretched girl Peck Neo, my brother would still be alive!* She gritted her teeth. *And now I have work to do.* Bee Neo's nails dug into her palms, before reaching out to knock. ♦

In the next issue: *Crouching dragon, hidden phoenix! Who will come out on top in the battle of the bibiks?*

“Kong Kong was a first among equals, a gentleman who exemplified *adat* (*decorum*) and a man of the people.”

“Peck Neo was indeed a beauty; her delicate doe-shaped eyes had an impish twinkle to them, her lithe legs supple from brisk walks by her father's side in the rubber estate.”

# The Peranakan Guide Singapore

## MUSEUMS



### PERANAKAN MUSEUM

See the world's first national Peranakan Museum with the most comprehensive and finest collection of Peranakan artefacts. The boutique museum examines the centres of Peranakan culture in Melaka, Penang and Singapore, and traces its links as far as Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand.

**Address:** 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941  
**Website:** [www.peranakanmuseum.sg](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)  
**Email:** [nhb\\_pm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg)  
**Tel:** 6332 7591

*The Peranakan Museum will be closed for renovations from 1 April 2019 and re-open in mid-2021.*

### INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

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

7 Sept 2018 - 5 May 2019

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



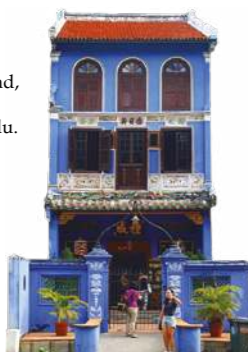
**Address:** 5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924  
**Website:** [www.indianheritage.org](http://www.indianheritage.org)

### BABA HOUSE

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

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

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



### ASIAN CIVILISATION MUSEUM

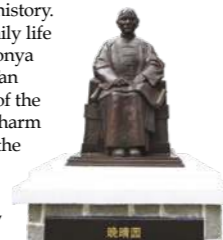
The first museum in the region to display a wide range of artefacts from across Asia, the ACM not surprisingly has some important Peranakan treasures. The Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, sreh boxes and some paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine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



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

### SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL

The old Sun Yat Sen Villa reopened in October 2011 after extensive renovations with a new name. Fitting tribute is given to the former owners of the house especially Teo Eng Hock, a son of Teo Lee, one of the pioneer Teochew merchants in Singapore, together with his nephew Lim Nee Soon, were among the loyal supporters of Sun Yat Sen's bid to overthrow the Qing government. The exhibition shows how Singapore and the Chinese community here played an important part in this pivotal moment of world history. Intimate photos of the family life and of Teo Eng Hock's nyonya mother, Mrs Teo Lee née Tan Poh Neo (granddaughter of the kapitan of Muntok), add charm and a Peranakan angle to the experience.



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

## LANDMARKS

### KATONG AND JOO CHIAT

Once the nerve centre of Peranakan Life in Singapore. In its heyday it was the site of nearby grand seaside villas and elaborate Peranakan terraced houses. The latter can still be seen in a walk along Koon Seng Road. Also visit Peranakan shops such as Katong Antique House (208 East Coast Road), Rumah Kim Choo (109 East Coast Road) and Rumah Bebe (113 East Coast Road) as well as the great variety of Peranakan restaurants in the neighbourhood.

**Website:** [www.myjoochiat.com](http://www.myjoochiat.com)



### AMOY STREET AND TELOK AYER STREET

One of the first Peranakan enclaves, now occupied by restaurants and offices. Many Peranakans from Melaka moved to this area as soon as the East India Company began to lease out land for sale. Visit the Aster by Kyra Peranakan Tile Gallery at 168 Telok Ayer Street for the widest selection of both antique and new Peranakan tiles.

### THIAN HOCK KENG

The oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore was founded in 1821 although the present structure, built without nails, was completed only in 1841. The temple is dedicated to Mazu, the Daoist goddess of the sea and protector of all seamen. Many of the temple's patrons were Peranakan pioneers, such as Tan Tock Seng, who donated \$30,000 for renovations.

He also founded the hospital named after him. The Hokkien Huay Kuan, a community organisation for Hokkien people in Singapore was housed at the temple and also helmed by Peranakan pioneers.

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



### BLAIR PLAIN

A typical Peranakan residential area around Spottiswoode Park, Blair Road and Neil Road which is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms.

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

### TAN SI CHONG SU

Built in 1878, Tan Si Chong Su is the ancestral temple of the Tan clan, and was founded by prominent Baba philanthropists Tan Kim Ching, son of Tan Tock Seng, and Tan Bee Swee, the son of Tan Kim Seng. The first president of the temple, Tan Kim Tian, was a well-known Baba shipping tycoon. The temple consists of shrines for the ancestral tablets of Tan clansmen, as well as altars to the clan deities. The elaborate stone and wood carvings as well as the swooping ceramic roof finials makes this one of the most elaborate Chinese temples in Singapore, quaintly located amid the gleaming towers of the financial district.

**Address:** 15 Magazine Road Singapore 059568



### EMERALD HILL ROAD

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

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# GUAN ANTIQUE



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PERANAKAN  
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