



## THE MIDAS TOUCH

TRACING CHEE SWEE CHENG'S  
GOLDEN LEGACY

## GUO PEI

NYONYA GOLD  
INSPIRES CHINA'S  
TOP COUTURIER

## EARLY MIXED MARRIAGES

NEW FINDINGS  
ON SINGAPORE  
PERANAKANS

*Tracing Threads  
of Gold*



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THE  
PERANAKAN  
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SINGAPORE

ISSUE 2 • 2019



### ON THE COVER:

A Penang Peranakan bridal dress from the 1930s. The robe, trimmed with rabbit fur (symbolising fertility) is "Pinang orange", referring to the colour of *pinang* (areca nut) used in betel chewing favoured by the nyonias. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum. This robe inspired Chinese haute couture designer, Guo Pei, to develop a love of Peranakan culture and motifs. Read the story on page 4.

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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.*



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# Tracing Threads of Gold

“GOLD is the colour of my soul.”

THIS QUOTE by Chinese haute couture designer, Guo Pei, has stuck with me ever since I visited the fabulous exhibition of her work at the Asian Civilisations Museum in early July. No other substance inspires awe like gold.

Revered for its brilliant colour and shine that rivals the rays of the sun, gold has fascinated humans since the beginning of time. Vast empires rose and fell because of the precious metal. Wars have been fought over lands with rich deposits of aurum. Explorers and treasure hunters have spent lifetimes in search of it, in turn inspiring storytellers to spin incredible tales of lost cities of gold.

In Peranakan culture, gold is present from birth to death and even in the afterlife. When babies turn one month old, they are traditionally given their first haircut, dressed in fine clothes and gifted with trinkets of real gold – bracelets, anklets, necklaces and pretty little charms – during their *Mua Guek* (First Moon) celebrations. Not all may be born with a silver spoon in the mouth, but to begin one's journey in life blessed with gold is considered auspicious.

In a Peranakan wedding, gold is seen in abundance in the nuptial costumes, richly embroidered with gold thread, and jewellery of both bride and groom. In his book *A Nyonya Mosaic*, Baba William Gwee, describes a Peranakan bride in all her glory:

*“What at a distance may appear to be a crown was actually made up of over a hundred gold hairpins, each with a floret, stuck into her top-knot so close to one another that they gave the appearance of being joined together. Upon her chest was the best of grandma's jewellery. There were so many of them that they literally covered her whole chest which glittered brilliantly.”*

A Peranakan bride in traditional garb is indeed a formidable sight. With her golden chest plate of jewels, crown of gold, stacks of gold bangles on both her wrists and thick gold anklets, she looks more like a glittering goddess than a timid maiden.

The groom, not to be outdone, would wear a large gold and diamond *bintang* (star) brooch on his wedding cap or lapel if he was dressed in a suit. If he wore the *baju tutup* (a white coat buttoned all the way up to the collar), real gold buttons would be used. Aristotle's Golden Mean does not apply to a Peranakan wedding where too much is never enough!

The Peranakan love affair with gold continues in the afterlife in the form of *kretair mair* or *kin chua* (gold paper for religious rites). These paper squares, gilded with gold leaf, are deftly folded into the shape of ingots, hundreds at a time, and burnt as offerings for the gods or ancestors.

In this issue, read about how gold thread embroidery on an antique Peranakan bridal robe inspired the top Chinese fashion designer to weave elements of Peranakan culture into her work. Discover the life story of Baba Chee Swee Cheng, the man with the Midas touch. Learn how fresh historical evidence throws new light on the early Peranakans in Singapore. Wander down the halls of the imaginary Ministry of Peranakan and have a good chuckle. After all, many say that laughter is the golden ticket to good health! Enjoy!

Dawn Marie Lee  
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No.2- Jawi Peranakan Mansion  
No.3- Seven Terraces  
No.6- Muntri Mews  
No.25- Muntri Grove

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



# RESPLENDENTLY CHINESE, & PERANAKAN

BABA EMERIC LAU REVIEWS THE EXHIBITION ON GUO PEI: CHINESE ART AND COUTURE  
*All photos by Russel Wong, courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum unless otherwise stated.*

IT IS NO SECRET that this exhibition faced some controversy from the start. At the launch on 14 June 2019, Kennie Ting, Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) and the Peranakan Museum, shared that he faced flak from Museum supporters as well as from members of the Heritage Board. There were concerns that the Museum was pandering to commercial interests. A viewing of the show, however, should convince one of its relevance, even as it throws up diverse views.

Guo Pei's 大金 (Magnificent Gold) dress took 500 artisans 50,000 hours to complete.

Guo Pei came to global prominence when she dressed pop superstar Rihanna in an outlandishly massive, embroidered, fur-lined, egg-yolk yellow silk opera coat complete with platform footwear and headpiece for the Met Gala in 2015.

The designer herself is petite and in her dressing appears to totally eschew the elaborate and over-the-top couture creations that her workshop, Rose Studio, turns out. In interviews, she has consistently explained that her output is an effort to showcase the best of Chinese history and culture. Indeed, her artisans study and attempt to replicate ancient embroideries, alongside imagery and the use of traditional colour palettes including gold, imperial yellow, red, and blue-and-white.

But to understand her dedication and passion in crafting the detailed gowns, all of which take thousands of hours to assemble, we must note Guo Pei grew up against the backdrop of Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-77). Nearly everyone wore the same simple 'Mao suit'. When she pursued fashion at the Beijing School of Industrial Fashion Design in the early 80s, no one in China understood that being a fashion designer and a seamstress were different occupations. She rallied against ignorance and easy monetary gain by founding her own brand.

## A BEAUTIFUL MIND

Nyonya Linda Chee is charmed by the unaffected nature of China's top couturier

**G**uo Pei can be easily missed in a crowd. Dressed simply in plain black, the diminutive designer does not demand attention like a diva or surround herself with sycophants. Her welcoming smile, when we spotted her walking among the towering mannequins, is like meeting an old friend you grew up with who never changed.

Despite the enormous global recognition since that Rihanna moment, Guo Pei warmly obliges anyone who wants a photograph with her, and makes eye contact when she speaks. Her passion for Chinese culture is sincere in her tone of voice. It is obviously the inspiration that drives more than 500 artisans in her Rose Studio to realise her opulent fantasies in embroidery, bead and silk. Guo Pei is today the only Chinese member of the prestigious Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, showcasing her works at the most coveted events in the fashion world.

The mother of two who never had a wedding of her own was one of the first in China to push for the comeback of the Chinese traditional bridal dress. The challenge was, she could hardly find any at home. She searched outside China and found what she was looking for, of all places, in a Paris museum. Guo Pei was enthralled. "I was taken by the beauty of the Peranakan wedding outfit - its breathtaking colours, details and accessories brought out the art of everyday life." The Chinese influences, she says, were evident in its shape, intricate embroidery technique and symbolic auspicious images. Yet it was uniquely "a cross-cultural artwork that was both Chinese and South-east Asian".

"I was greatly inspired and encouraged by this exhibition (in Paris). It had a particularly significant impact on the design of my entire Chinese brides collection," says Guo Pei. She is just as fascinated with Peranakan beadwork which is "so extremely exquisite that, even today, we find it difficult to reproduce."

Guo Pei continues to keep connected with Singapore and the Peranakan community. Since discovering the Peranakan Museum in 2010, "I have made sure I visit it at least once on every visit to Singapore." Singapore was the first country Guo Pei chose to travel to in the 1990s and she feels the affinity as we "share the same ancestry and cultural heritage", remarking that "some traces of China's seemingly lost culture can be seen in Singapore, so I do have a special love for Singapore." ♦



Scan the QR Code to watch a video of Guo Pei speaking about her design philosophy.



Guo Pei considers her pearl bridal gown - inspired by the kasot manek at ACM - as one of her finest pieces. It took 8,000 hours to complete and has 465,756 real pearls including large South Sea pearls, and 250,000 beads. Photos by Colin Chee.



Peranakan Chinese culture is, in Guo Pei's words,

**“a gold thread flowing from Chinese culture”.**



This 1930s Penang Peranakan bridal robe (in the background) from the Peranakan Museum's collection, inspired Guo Pei to create her own version (seen in the foreground). She said that the goldfish and lotus gold thread embroidery on the Penang robe is the best that she has ever seen.

Today, her gowns are a tribute to China's rediscovery of its own history and heritage, after more than a decade of a government-sanctioned purging of the past. Guo Pei's couture is a frenzied, feverish proclamation of Chinese identity. It is a celebration of thousands of years of artistic and cultural achievement. These are magnificent creations that negate the identity of their wearer, and instead proclaim loud and proud: China has arrived.

#### THE PERANAKAN CONNECTION

As a Peranakan, I can relate to Guo Pei's sentiments. When a people or community find they are separated or cast adrift from their roots, it is a natural tendency to cling to, cherish and celebrate their sense of culture and identity with greater-than-normal fervour. This appears to be why so many mainland Chinese are fascinated by the Peranakans. Despite the irony that many Peranakans do not speak Mandarin fluently, our

## KINDRED SPIRITS

Exhibition Curator and book author **Jackie Yoong** shares with **Nyonya Linda Chee** her impressions after working with Guo Pei

**S**erendipity set in motion the chain of events leading to the Guo Pei exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). In 2017, Curator Jackie Yoong had emailed Guo Pei with trepidation. Two years before, she had spotted the resemblance of Angelababy's wedding outfit to a 1930s wedding ensemble from Penang that she curated, embellished with goldfish and lotus motifs and rabbit fur trims.

Jackie's instinct was spot on. Paris-based Guo Pei had seen the Baba Bling travelling show at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2010, and was struck by the bridal set on display. Guo Pei followed up with trips to The Peranakan Museum (TPM) in Singapore, incognito, to fill the gaps on the lost years of her culture.



Left to Right: Exhibition curator Jackie Yoong with Guo Pei (centre) and ACM Director, Kennie Ting.

With the connection made online, ACM Director Kennie Ting and Jackie explored a Guo Pei-ACM collaboration. "Personally, the discovery of the Peranakan and Paris connection is very encouraging - it was the first exhibition I worked on when I joined ACM-TPM and I often wondered who visited," reflects Jackie on coming full circle, as she adds: "I am struck by how a bridal dress exported from Shanghai for the Chinese diaspora (a Penang Peranakan bride) almost a century ago has inspired China's leading couturier to create a version worn by a prominent Chinese celebrity bride today".

Devouring any bit of material about Guo Pei that she could lay her hands on, Jackie made three trips to Rose Studio in Beijing to work with the designer and gather more material for the 2019 exhibition and book. Jackie is grateful to Guo Pei for her generosity of time and "her trust in granting me a lot of curatorial freedom" to choose 29 dresses and pair them with 20 Museum artifacts, to show the relevance of Chinese art today. "She was particular though about mannequin poses as she believes they should reflect the spirit of her works - she selected every single pose in this book," Jackie smiles.

Back in Singapore, nearing the launch date, celebrity photographer Russel Wong, aptly a Peranakan himself, was approached to "breathe life and personality in every mannequin shot". He "exceeded all expectations to produce the



**GOLD**  
is the colour  
of my soul.

Guo Pei, who hopes her imperial-inspired creations are like the sun, sending out positive energy.



**ON THE LEFT**

**TOP LEFT:** Guo Pei working at Rose Studio, her atelier in Beijing where she employs more than 500 staff.

**TOP RIGHT:** This gown, named Palace Flower (宫花), took 10,000 hours to create and features 5,500 handmade vintage silk peonies. In Peranakan culture, the peony is a much loved motif which symbolises wealth, rank and honour.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Detail of Guo Pei's Courting Phoenix (凤求凰) bridal ensemble. The embroidery and Cloud Collar are inspired by two Peranakan bridal dresses which she saw in the ACM's Peranakan collection.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** The team from ACM installing Guo Pei's "egg yolk" dress, made famous by singer Rihanna when she wore it to the Met Gala in 2015.

practices and values are repeatedly recognised as being more aligned to traditional Chinese culture, as a diaspora that left China before Mao came to prominence.

Guo Pei herself found inspiration when she visited the Peranakan Museum's travelling show, *Baba Bling* at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2010. Captivated

by the craftsmanship, in 2012 she created two bridal dresses in response. Appropriately, weddings are occasions to emphasize one's heritage, and these outfits meld statement-making workmanship with purpose and function. Her bridal line aims to revive Chinese bridal dress as heritage and heirloom items. ♦

*The Guo Pei: Chinese Art and Couture exhibition runs from 15 June to 15 September 2019 at the Asian Civilisations Museum. Admission charges apply. For more information, please visit [www.acm.org.sg](http://www.acm.org.sg).*



Guo Pei's Blue-and-White Porcelain gown which was inspired by Chinese ceramics and handpainted before being embroidered.

beautiful photos of our book," and for his patience. The project teams struggled with the delicacy of the embroideries, the weight of some the dresses - the heaviest being 50 kg! - and heels that shot up to an ankle-breaking 40cm.

The exhibition design for the bridal dress section - the first time they are shown outside China - revolves around the concept of a Peranakan home, celebrating the reunion of Guo Pei's maiden bridal collection with their Peranakan inspirations from the Museum's collection.

Through Guo Pei's works, Jackie sees "not only the remarkable quality and finesse of every stitch and embellishment, but also the spirit of devotion, experimentation and determination they carry".

"As a person and an artist, I was struck by how humble and kind Guo Pei is, and her sincerity in connecting people across time and cultures with true beauty and craftsmanship". Even more so, Jackie adds, by "how she is equally spirited in wanting to reinvent and reinterpret age-old traditions for the present and the future".

"With this common goal, we worked incredibly well together and developed a friendship that I hope to keep for many years," says Jackie fondly. Having personally known Jackie since the time she joined TPM, and her equally kind and gracious nature, I have no doubt that her friendship with Guo Pei will span a lifetime. ♦

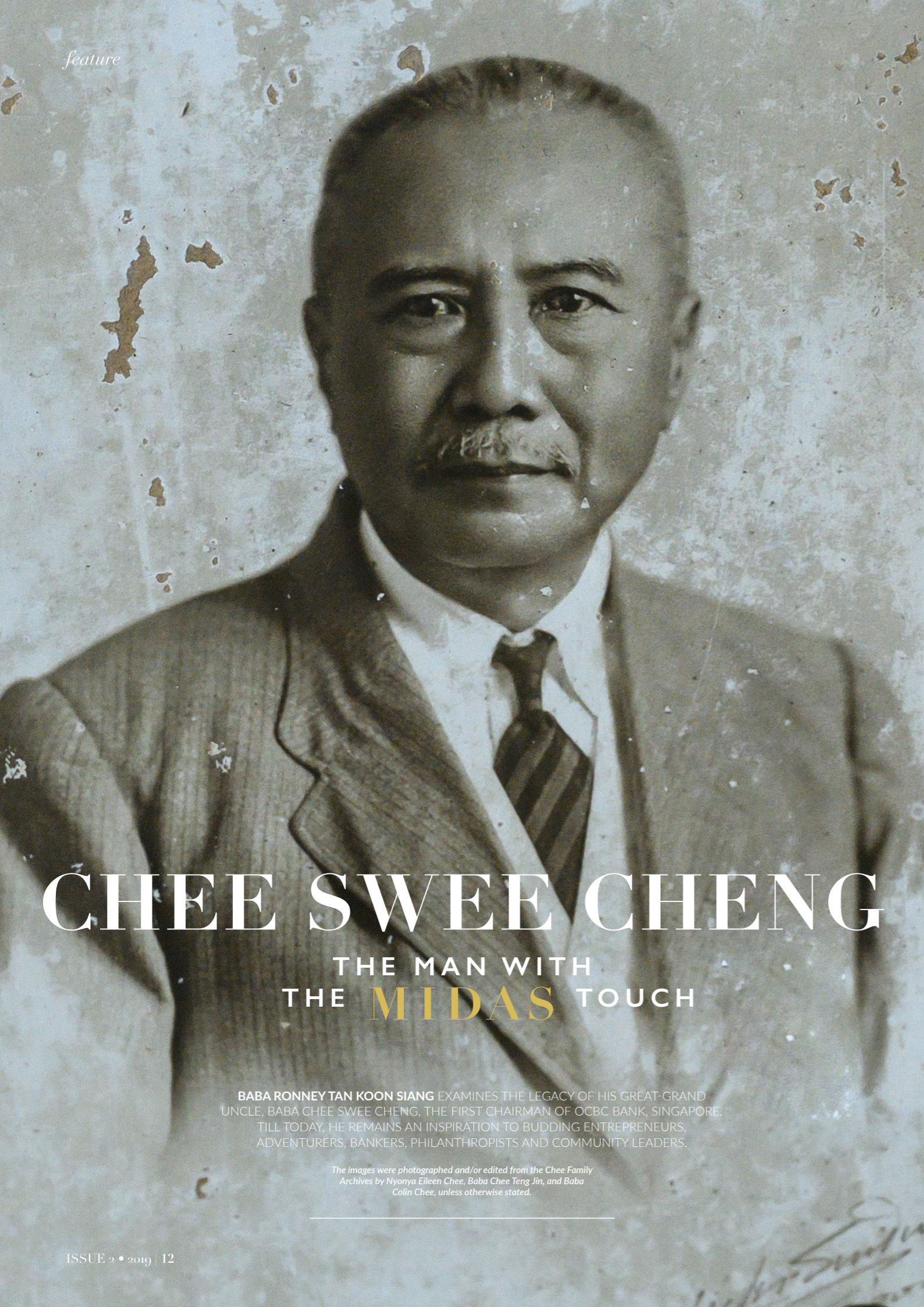
**GUO PEI: CHINESE ART AND COUTURE**

Authored by **Jackie Yoong**, Curator of Asian fashion and textiles, and Peranakan art at the Asian Civilisations Museum and The Peranakan Museum



By pairing ACM's Chinese art objects with Guo Pei's dramatic creations, the book encourages readers to contemplate the influence of the past on the present, and how traditions evolve. Jackie interviews Guo Pei at length on couture and Chinese art today in her own words. Another interview with leading fashion historian and Director of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) Museum Valerie Steele, provides insight on Guo Pei in the world of art and museums today.

*Guo Pei: Chinese Art and Couture is available on order at [selectbooks.com.sg](http://selectbooks.com.sg) and at major bookstores.*



# CHEE SWEE CHENG

THE MAN WITH  
THE **MIDAS** TOUCH

BABA RONNEY TAN KOON SIANG EXAMINES THE LEGACY OF HIS GREAT-GRAND UNCLE, BABA CHEE SWEE CHENG, THE FIRST CHAIRMAN OF OCBC BANK, SINGAPORE. TILL TODAY, HE REMAINS AN INSPIRATION TO BUDDING ENTREPRENEURS, ADVENTURERS, BANKERS, PHILANTHROPISTS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS.

*The images were photographed and/or edited from the Chee Family Archives by Nyonya Eileen Chee, Baba Chee Teng Jin, and Baba Colin Chee, unless otherwise stated.*

*Swee Cheng would present himself every Chinese New Year at the stately Chee Yam Chuan Ancestral House on Heeren Street, Melaka. There, he would hand out new clothes and hong baos to the poor. In business, he had an uncanny sense of sussing out the next big trend. As a family man, he was filial and loving; even in death, he made sure he visited the new house that he had built for his extended family, to ensure that all was well.*

## ROOTS

Baba Chee Swee Cheng was born in Melaka on 6 January 1868. At the time, the Chee family was already among the wealthiest on Heeren Street. He was the first-born son of a distinguished six-generation Straits Chinese entrepreneurial family whose progenitor was Chee Soo Chan (also known as Chee Soo Sum).

In the early 1700s, Soo Chan migrated to Melaka from the Zhangzhou (or Chiang Chew) province in China during the Dutch Occupation. The Dutch ruled Melaka from 1641 to 1795. He married Nyonya Tan Boo Soh, a Melaka-born woman. Her father was Baba Tan Teng Ko, whose grave is on Bukit Cina. Soo Chan became a successful rice merchant. His descendants affectionately refer to him as "Chee No. 1".

Soo Chan's family eventually settled on Heeren Street, known in earlier times as *Kampong Belanda*, or Dutch Village. "Heeren" is Dutch for "gentleman". It was an apt description of a location where the upper crust of Melaka society aspired to live. The street soon gained the nickname of Millionaires' Row because of the very wealthy Peranakan families who lived and intermarried there. Today, Heeren Street is called Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

The Chees married descendants of Baba Tan Tock Seng, Baba Tan Kim Seng, Baba Seet Hoot Kee and Baba Tan Hay, all powerful and outstanding individuals active at the time of Stamford Raffles' arrival in Singapore in 1819. They were the "Malacca Chinese", often grudgingly admired for their shrewd trading practices.

Even today, the descendants of these families do business with one another.

## THE EARLY YEARS

Baba Chee Swee Cheng inherited not only wealth but good genes. His engaging personality, private

and corporate, was the stuff of legend - a man with the Midas touch.

He studied English at the elite Melaka High School, which at the time, was the equivalent of Eton in England. At 16, Swee Cheng moved to Singapore where he learnt the ropes at Lim Tiang Wah & Co, where his father was a partner. Four years later, he moved to grandfather Chee Yam Chuan's partnered firm, Leack Chin Seng & Co, where he remained for another four years. He then joined Chop Soon Tye, general merchants, as a manager.

He used his affable charm, personality and proficiency in Hokkien, English and Baba Malay to learn and move up the corporate ladder.

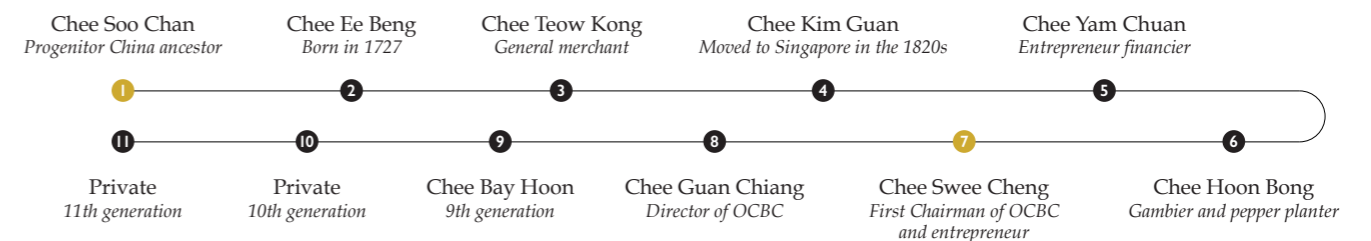
## MERCHANT, PLANTER AND ENTREPRENEUR

In 1900, at age 32 years, Swee Cheng ventured to the British protectorate of North Borneo (now Sabah) as Chop Soon Tye's partner in and manager of the General Spirit and Opium Farm. There he was invited by the Governor to start large-scale planting. He was offered 5,000 acres of land which he used to grow rubber. He soon leased and operated opium and spirit farms in the protectorate with his brother, Baba Chee Sim Cheng. They opened a sawmill as timber was becoming a major industry. Sim Cheng was an almost constant partner in Swee Cheng's various business ventures.

Among Swee Cheng's contributions to Sabah in the first two decades of the 20th century was the introduction of ice and electricity to the people through Jesselton Ice and Power Co, where he was a leading director.

Established in 1913, Jesselton Ice and Power was to become the dominant supplier of electricity in North Borneo by 1922 under the oversight of British administrators, specifically, the Electricity

## 11 GENERATIONS OF THE CHEE FAMILY LINEAGE





Advisory Board (EAB), which bought the company in 1949.

Incidentally, a year earlier in 1912, Swee Cheng had co-founded Atlas Ice Company in Melaka. Atlas Ice is today one of the largest tube ice manufacturers in Southeast Asia.

He wanted to make ice affordable to the local population and to break the monopoly the European-owned ice manufacturers enjoyed in the market. The latter were making huge profits by selling their products at high prices. Clearly, there was an active cross-fertilisation of entrepreneurial ideas wherever Swee Cheng set foot for business. He would bring successful business ideas wherever he went.

He travelled extensively for business and leisure. In 1916, Swee Cheng visited India, China and Japan. He went around the world in 1927. He even had a 1936 referral letter to the Consul General of the USA requesting assistance. It was signed by Baba Tan Cheng Lock, his relative and good friend.

**S**wee Cheng became a leading business pioneer during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the British held sway over Malaya (including Singapore), North Borneo, and Burma. He would have created an impression of a young man in a hurry, filled with opportunistic ideas during those golden years. He engaged in a diverse swathe of businesses that included plantations such as rubber, tapioca, coconut and spices; trading and general merchandising; timber and sawmills; opium and spirit farms and gaming; pawnbroking, banking and insurance; property and equity investment; amongst other business interests such as the manufacture of affordable ice and aerated water.

There must have been strong business synergies and opportunities for Swee Cheng to look at. His business partners and friends were equally prominent pioneers. They included,



**OPIUM**  
Because of their involvement in opium which brought economic benefits to the economy along with its social ills, the family was "advised" by temple consultants that well-placed philanthropy would provide a mitigatory balance. To this day, the Chee family is still actively engaged in social philanthropy and corporate sustainability projects. FRENCH ETCHING OF AN OPIUM DEN, 1896. SOURCE: WIKICOMMONS



Scan the QR code here to read about Chee Yam Chuan.

among others, Baba Tan Cheng Lock, Baba Tan Chay Yan, Lee Kong Chian, Lim Peng Siang, Baba Lim Boon Keng, Baba Seow Poh Leng, and Baba Lee Choon Guan. However, two areas of businesses appeared to have engaged Swee Cheng's undivided

attention. One was banking and the other, a persevering and unshakeable belief in real estate or property investment.

### THE BANKER

His grandfather, Baba Chee Yam Chuan, had contributed greatly to the development of Kuala Lumpur by financing the opening of new tin mines, and also revived the family's fortune. Similarly, Swee Cheng had an eye on the lucrative business of banking. He could have been inspired, perhaps, by Yam Chuan who was known for his close links to the Selangor royal family to whom he was a major creditor.

Starting as an agent for the Singapore-based Chinese Commercial Bank in 1915, he soon became a director of Ho Hong Bank, which was incorporated in Singapore in 1917.

In 1918, after almost two decades of making inroads into Sabah, Swee Cheng finally returned to Singapore to concentrate on banking. During these post-World War I years especially, local Chinese banks, supported by Chinese rubber magnates, tin mining giants and successful traders and shipowners, grew in standing relative to their European competitors.

However, by 1931, the world was in the throes of the Great Depression. Businesses and banks collapsed. Thousands lost their jobs. Ho Hong Bank was most affected when Britain left the Gold Standard in 1931. Heavy foreign exchange losses caused a drain on its cash flow.

Three local Chinese banks at the time - Ho Hong Bank, Chinese Commercial Bank and Oversea-Chinese Bank - saw a great need to merge their resources to ride out the economic slump. Swee Cheng led Ho Hong Bank into an amalgamation in 1932 with the two other local banks to become Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, Limited.

Swee Cheng became the first Chairman of OCB from 1932 to 1938. His last annual general meeting as chairman of the bank was on 23 May 1938. According to a report in the Malaya Tribune of 24 May 1938, he presided over the bank's annual general meeting held at the bank's registered office at China Building, Chulia Street. Again, in a bank advertisement in the 16 August 1938 edition of the Malaya Tribune, Swee Cheng was identified as the incumbent Chairman of the bank's Board of Directors. Swee Cheng passed away a few days later on 22 August 1938.

### ON THE RIGHT

#### TOP: 1907 Family Portrait.

Standing Left: Baba Chee Swee Cheng. Right: Baba Chee Sim Cheng. Seated Front: Nyonya Goh Him Neo, Baba Chee Yam Chuan's stepmother. Two children: Unidentified

#### BOTTOM: Endogamy

This 1930 picture epitomises the practice of powerful baba families marrying one another. The Chee, Chua, Tan and Ee families were all related through these symbiotic and strategic unions. Mdm Chua Wan Neo (seated centre), Chee Guan Chiang (standing left) and Robert Tan Hoon Siang (standing second from right) were all descendants of leaders of the Chinese communities of Singapore and Melaka. The Babas of Melaka were a close-knit community. The age-old tradition of preserving wealth within the family perpetuated a practice similar to that of the erstwhile Dutch colonial masters who gave up Melaka to the British in 1795. Families and business associates married their offspring to one another. The practice has almost died out today. Western influence has reversed family combinations that had continued for at least ten generations. This decline has led to the gradual disappearance of the Baba Malay language and many cultural axioms identified with the Babas.





He was a conservative yet strategic banker. These traits seem to have become the hallmarks of the bank's management style. In 1934, two years after the merger, when the world economy seemed to be on the road to recovery, Swee Cheng still set aside as reserves, rather than disbursed to shareholders as dividends, \$500,000 out of an annual profit of \$600,000 in 1933. He said that, in the absence of certainty, the bank should safeguard depositors' interests as a matter of priority.

**PROPERTY TYCOON**

Rich old families have more often than not made a fortune investing, holding and sometimes trading in land and properties. Chee Swee Cheng followed this tradition.

As a property investor, he was as superstitious as any Chinese towkay. He loved the number 13 which in Cantonese means ever prosperous. He bought properties with number 13 when superstitious owners disposed of them in a hurry. He always saw opportunity when others did not.

Not surprisingly, his family home in Singapore was on 13 Devonshire Road. Swee Cheng's grandfather, Chee Yam Chuan, had already amassed a large and valuable portfolio of properties for the family clan. Swee Cheng added significantly to it by steadily acquiring more properties and other commercial land in Singapore, Melaka and other areas of Malaya, and North Borneo. Among these are two worth mentioning here, because of the stories behind each of them.

**THE CHEE MANSION**

The Chee Yam Chuan Ancestral House, better known as the Chee Mansion or the Chee Temple, is the most majestic building on Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, once Melaka's "Millionaires' Row".

You simply cannot miss it strolling or driving down the narrow tidy street. It is a breathtaking Dutch era architectural gem, complete with its own watchtower. Its design, however, blends Dutch, Portuguese, British and Chinese influences. A Dutch resident and family friend, Josiah Bartholomeus Westerhout, was asked to design the iconic building.

It was first built by 1907 by Chee Swee Cheng and his uncle Chee Lim Bong with donations from Chee family members including themselves. By 1924, the then Trustees of the temple (Swee Cheng was one of the Trustees then but not Lim Bong) rebuilt and renovated it.

Today, the Chee Temple functions as the family's ancestral home or *rumah abu*. It serves as a gathering place for the extended Chee family whose members live not only in Melaka but as far away as Australia and USA. Steeped in Chinese traditions but accustomed to thinking outside the box, Swee Cheng ventured far beyond the vision of his ancestors.

He set up the Chee Yam Chuan Temple Trust. He and several of his relatives injected

many properties into the Trust Deed which today serves, almost a hundred years later, as a reserve of wealth for the Chee family in its 11th generation. Swee Cheng alone injected 16 properties. Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock was once known as Heeren Street.

**THE HEEREN**

In 1931, Chee Swee Cheng engaged the famous Shanghai-based architect firm of Keys and Dowdeswell to design the Heeren Building at the junction of Orchard Road and Cairnhill Road, Singapore.

This firm was also responsible for Singapore's Fullerton Building, the Capitol Building, Singapore General Hospital and King Edward VII College of Medicine. For many years before redevelopment, this landmark on Orchard Road had served as a "pre-modern day shopping centre". Its tenants carried on businesses as varied as a hair salon, tailoring, carpets, and the well-known Beethoven Record House which was a go-to place for classical music enthusiasts and record collectors.

Redevelopment of the old building into a new iconic shopping centre-cum-office building started in 1992. On 17 June 1997, The Heeren was officially opened by then Singapore cabinet minister George Yeo and the late Baba Chee Bay Hoon. Bay Hoon was the eldest grandson of Swee Cheng and was then the Chairman of Chee Swee Cheng & Company Private Limited. Adopting green building technologies, The Heeren has incorporated the best practices in environmental design and construction.

The Heeren today is the crown jewel in the family's Singapore property portfolio, located in the heart of Singapore's premier shopping and lifestyle street.



**Emblems & Decorative Details**

A few reminders of the beautiful classical style of Keys & Dowdeswell were retained. These include the Zoroastrian-like winged emblem which was incorporated into the old building's design, and two torch sculptures which presently flank the entrance staircase leading to The Heeren's office tower. The winged emblem has survived as the logo of the Chees' businesses to this day.



Scan the QR code here to read about the cryptic logo.

**ON THE LEFT**

**TOP:** Monogram on the gate of the Chee Temple.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** The Chee Mansion stands on grounds large enough for three terrace houses.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** The new Heeren building on Orchard Road as it stands today.

**FAMILY MAN AND PHILANTHROPIST**

Swee Cheng travelled extensively on business, no doubt having to split his time between Singapore, Melaka and North Borneo. This did not stop him from being a caring family man.

When his first wife Nyonya Chew Poh Chee passed away during childbirth, Swee Cheng made sure their only child, Nyonya Chee Kiow Joo, was raised properly and married off well.

Swee Cheng remarried. His second wife, Nyonya Lee Siok Tin, was a daughter of Melaka community leader and towkay, Baba Lee Keng Liat. In 1897, she bore Swee Cheng his heir, Baba Chee Guan Chiang.

of him because he was truly a philanthropist. Swee Cheng set up scholarships in the name of his father Baba Chee Hoon Bong in St Joseph's Institution and Anglo-Chinese School. Other school scholarships were also created in Labuan, North Borneo.

He also donated towards many causes, both small and large, and was listed often as a major subscriber. Among his donations were aeroplanes for England to use in the First World War. The assistance he gave to his private brotherhood association, Keng Teck Whay, speaks volumes of his selflessness. A red plaque presented by Keng Teck Whay to his father Chee

“

*In July 1935, the Malacca Guardian paid a tribute to him: Mr Chi Swee Cheng is a remarkable man in many ways. His charity, magnanimity, breath of vision, foresight and unbound energy make him a unique personality. He is typical of the Malacca pioneer of old.*

”

**G**uan Chiang married Nyonya Tan Chong Choo Neo, the daughter of the famed Baba Tan Chay Yan, the first rubber planter in Malaya. Eventually, they had a son, Baba Chee Bay Hoon, who became Guan Chiang's successor. Four years earlier, childless, they had adopted one of the daughters of Kiow Joo and her husband Baba Ong Cheng Tam. Her name was Nyonya Chee Lak Neo.

At one time, Swee Cheng, Siok Tin, Guan Chiang, Choo Neo, Bay Hoon, Lak Neo, Kiow Joo, Cheng Tam and other family members lived together as an extended family in two bungalows in Singapore's Devonshire Road area.

During this period, the only clues we have of Swee Cheng the family man come primarily from his grand-daughter Lak Neo, as recollected by her daughter Nyonya Yvonne Khoo: Mum loved her grandfather deeply. She used to say that every time he came home from his business travels he would ask after her and how she was doing. There are only two anecdotes she shared with me which I hope I'm recalling accurately.

As a little girl she would save her weekly pocket money to buy stamps for her stamp book. When Swee Cheng saw my mother with her stamp book and asked to look at it she became terrified thinking she had done something wrong. Instead, she was told that he was very proud of her and told her he was going to contribute to her book every month.

The next story is about his Chinese New Year practice of receiving queues of people from the poorest in the community, coming to their home in Melaka to receive *hong baos* and new clothes. Swee Cheng would task the children to help. She spoke often of how proud she was

Hoon Bong around 1895 praises Swee Cheng as a man of the people and a great man of virtue. He was Keng Teck Whay trustee during the last years of the 19th century.

**A LIFE WELL LIVED**

Chee Swee Cheng lived a full and purposeful life. A well-loved philanthropist, he supported education, healthcare, children's welfare and other social needs.

In business, he worked hard, spotted opportunities, leveraged on partnerships and still found time to make life easier for the common man. He had an uncanny sense of sussing out the next big business trend and investing in real estate that would bear fruit over time.

As a family man - a grandson, a father, a grandfather and husband - he was filial and loving, despite having to travel extensively on business. He provided for his immediate and extended families. He died on 22 August 1938 at the ripe old age of 70. He had intimated that he wanted to be buried in Melaka.

A special train was chartered to bring his body home. Because of his death, the house on 25 Grange Road, which was going to be his new home, was never to be lived in. His wife was too sad to occupy it and so she returned to Melaka (See sidebar story on facing page.)

My late father, Baba Louis Tan Tiang Hong, had always recounted the aspiration of many a Baba: "If one lived life having achieved longevity, riches and progeny, one has had a perfect life".

Chee Swee Cheng lived a perfect life. ♦

THE STORY OF BABA CHEE SWEE CHENG IS PART OF THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE'S CONTINUING SERIES FEATURING PROMINENT AND INTERESTING PERSONALITIES WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO OUR COMMUNITY.



Photo of Wellington House

**MYSTERIOUS APPEARANCE IN AN UNLIVED HOUSE**

Story by Nyonya Yvonne Lee-Khoo, daughter of Nyonya Chee Lak Neo

Many years ago, my mum, Nyonya Chee Lak Neo, shared with me her memories regarding a house which she called "Wellington House" on 25 Grange Road. Her grandfather, Baba Chee Swee Cheng, had commissioned it and the family was to move from their home on 13 Devonshire Road to Wellington House. I have two stories to share here to explain why the family never got to live in this villa.

**The Shape and Name of the House**

The first story relates to the house's name - Wellington House.

My mum's brother, Baba Chee Bay Hoon, and she would often accompany their grandfather to the site while it was under construction. One day, he pointed out the shape of the house to them. He told them that it resembled the largest sea creature in the ocean, the whale, and when it opened its mouth, it would swallow any evil spirit from the graveyards below.

It is probable my great-grandfather Swee Cheng was referring to the old Teochew cemetery where Ngee Ann City is now situated. My great-grandfather was explaining to my mum and uncle why he had named the building "Wellington House". The name "Wellington" begins with "Well" which means "good" and sounded like "wealth".

I remember showing my mum a Straits Times feature on old abandoned buildings. It referred to Wellington House as Chee Guan Chiang House. My mum insisted it couldn't be! Her reaction was vehement, "Bukan! Salah!" She was certain her grandfather, Swee Cheng, had named it "Wellington House". It was only very recently that I discovered that the monogram 'WH' can be found all along the balustrades on the outside of the house as well as on the grand staircase inside the house.

The next story is even more unusual.

**THE SPIRIT OF KONG CHO (GREAT-GRANDFATHER) VISITS WELLINGTON HOUSE**

The Chee residence was on 13 Devonshire Road. It was 1938 and Wellington House, on 25 Grange Road, was near completion. Invitations to a grand Open House in the 8th month of the Lunar calendar, were ready. Mum said that even the fine table linen for the banquet had been delivered. An auspicious date had already been selected.

It happened one evening in the 7th month of the

Lunar calendar. Mum was 19 years old then and it was her duty, after dinner, to sit beside her grandfather who would be resting on his *balai balai* (the rattan recliner - or planter's chair) to fan him. That evening, while fanning him, mum noticed that he had passed out. He had had a stroke. Her father, Baba Chee Guan Chiang, called for the family doctor and family estate manager who lived on nearby Killiney Road.

There was a security guard, a Sikh jaga, employed to watch Wellington House. He would have lived on the premises of 25 Grange Road. While the family waited for the doctor and estate manager to arrive the jaga appeared at the gates of 13 Devonshire Road, agitated.

He had come to tell my grandfather, Guan Chiang, that the Tuan Besar (referring to Chee Swee Cheng), had come to see the new house, had felt ill and asked to lie down. The jaga said he had left my great grandfather there in Wellington House and had come to get help.

When told that my great grandfather was lying right there in Devonshire Road having had a stroke, the jaga became hysterical and fainted. When he recovered, he went on to describe that Tuan Besar had arrived at Wellington House earlier and had instructed him to turn on all the lights in the villa as he had wanted to be sure that everything was in good order. The jaga said he had done as he was told but that later, Tuan Besar did not feel well and asked to lie down. So the jaga had come running to Devonshire Road to inform the family.

Kong Cho passed away, aged 70 years, in 1938. The family was in mourning for three years. Tradition forbade any celebration during this period. War broke out in 1941 and the family lived out the war years in Melaka. According to mum, my great-grandmother (Mrs Chee Swee Cheng) then declared that she would never move into Wellington House. I recall a conversation with my mother, in 2004, after I had gone exploring the grounds of the villa and showed her photographs I had taken. She asked if the 'beautiful stained glass' she remembered was still there. I had said that I had not seen it because I had only explored the grounds of the villa and was not able to get in.

It was only in 2012 that I was shown photos of the beautiful stained glass, two storeys high, taken from inside the villa. I wish that I had known it was still there. Mum would have been so happy. Mum was even able to point out where her elder sister's and her bedrooms were to be. A year later, in 2005, mum and her brother, Bay Hoon, passed away within 100 days of each other. She was 86 years old.



Family photo including Nyonya Chee Lak Neo and beloved brother Baba Chee Bay Hoon together. Standing from Left to Right: Baba Chee Guan Chiang, Nyonya Chee Kiong Lee, Chee Bay Hoon, Chee Lak Neo, Baba Choa Chin Wan. Seated from Left to Right: Nyonya Chee Swee Lee, Nyonya Tan Chong Choo Neo, Nyonya Lee Siok Tin, Baba Chee Swee Cheng, Nyonya Chee Yean Joo, Nyonya Chee Siew Lee Seated alone: Baba Choa Kong Guan

**WELLINGTON HOUSE**

# SINGAPORE PERANAKANS: THE BIRTH OF A COMMUNITY

DR MARC RECERATNAM DISCOVERS NEW EVIDENCE THAT SUGGESTS THE CREATION OF A SINGAPORE PERANAKAN COMMUNITY WITHOUT ROOTS TO MELAKA OR PENANG

The history of the Chinese Peranakan communities is well documented in local folklore and history books. While much of the origins of the various Peranakan communities is still shrouded in relative mystery, it is an accepted fact that Chinese settlers were established in Southeast Asia from the 1600s. Melaka appears to hold the earliest evidence of a Chinese presence, with mentions of a Hokkien settlement from the early 1600s.

One point that is not disputed, is that most Peranakan communities can (usually) trace their lineage back to a male progenitor from either China, India, Europe or the Arab world. However, to date, the origins of these communities are largely attributed to specific areas or cities, such as the Dutch East Indies, Penang, or Melaka.

Current research does not directly acknowledge a Peranakan presence in Singapore prior to 1819. With the lack of information about Peranakans in Singapore, scholar Jurgen Rudolph (1998) speculates Chinese Peranakans in Singapore originate mainly from Melaka, Indonesia and Penang.

## SINGAPORE PERANAKANS

However new evidence reveals a fresh story. If Peranakans are a culmination of procreation or intermarriage between foreign-born and a local-born native persons, then a new discovery has been made.

A spate of early intermarriages between China-born, Teochew males and local or regionally-born native females, starting from 1833 and continuing consistently over a twenty-

five year period, have been discovered. These marriages took place within the multiracial congregation of the then newly established Roman Catholic church on Bras Basah Road.

The new findings tie in with Song Ong Siang's 1923 observation that Singapore Peranakan families only go back up to 3 or 4 generations before descending from a pure Chinese progenitor.

In 1832, French Roman Catholic missionaries opened a chapel on 5 May 1833. This was located on Bras Basah Road, at the site of the present-day Singapore Art Museum. The congregation grew quickly, when in-roads were made with the conversion of large numbers of China-born Teochew settlers. Archival records show the majority of the early lay congregation was made up of Roman Catholic Melakans from the Peranakan Kristang communities in the 1830s. The Roman Catholic church in the nineteenth century did not discourage intermarriages and even facilitated marriage between its racially diverse congregants.

In my earlier research in 2012, I discovered church records dating back to the latter half of the nineteenth century which show such interracial marriages took place with assistance from related church facilities such as the orphanage at the CHIJ on Victoria Street. Nevertheless, I thought that this occurrence was 'relatively rare', until the second or third decade of the twentieth century. However with access to earlier records, my new research distinctly shows intermarriage taking place within the racially mixed congregation as early as 1833. This was especially prevalent between newly arrived China-born Teochew males and females from the old Peranakan Kristang community.

These mixed Teochew-Peranakan Kristang marriages dominated between the years 1833 to approximately 1858. During the earliest batch of marriages that took place between 1833 and 1843, eight marriages involving China-born men, were celebrated. During this 10-year period, the vast

majority of these marriages were between China-born males and members of the Melakan-born Kristang Peranakan community.

One married a local woman of Orang Asli descent and only one marriage involved an ethnic Chinese partner. By the mid-1840s, women from the Peranakan Kristang community still feature significantly in unions with China-born Teochew males, however among this number include a few local-born Chinese women from Singapore, Riau, Lingga and the neighbouring region. Among this number are a few Malays (possibly orphans), a Melakan Chinese (possibly) Peranakan woman, and an Indian girl from Bengal.

Over the twenty-five year period between 1833 and 1858, there were a total of 125 marriages celebrated under the auspices of the French-mission of the Roman Catholic church in Singapore. Of this number, 42 instances or 33.6 percent of marriages involved mixed-race couples between 1833 and 1858. Of these 125 marriages, 25 instances or 20 percent appeared to be first generation Peranakan unions.

This figure is significant, as no other multiracial entity is known to have existed within colonial Singapore at the time. It also should be noted how in colonial society, especially among males, many often knew 'no racial or class barrier' when it came to sexual relations. It therefore can be assumed, at a sexual level, many of these men were already familiar with the concept of multiracial society.

While the significance of these mixed marriages is important in colonial Singapore, the numbers reported are still low, especially seen in relation to the overall size of the congregation. No official statistics are available of the size of these early congregations, however estimates exist. In 1833, a year after the establishment of the Catholic mission on Bras Basah Road, the congregation was assessed to be around 300. By 1851, this climbs marginally to 340 (150 of whom are located to the Bukit Timah church site).

## THE EIGHT LOCAL BRIDES

Between 1833 and 1846, within the China-born community, there were eight marriages, which means that many more did not get the opportunity to marry, a point acknowledged by local priest Fr. Jean Marie Beurel in July 1847, when he wrote how marriage among the resident Chinese "rarely happens at least in this island". What was so special about these original eight (1833-1843) China-born men to enable them to find wives within the local Peranakan Kristang, Malay or indigenous communities? What did these eight Chinese men have to offer the consenting families?

The Peranakan Kristang community had the luxury of being the most established of the various church communities in Singapore. Established in Melaka since the 1500s, they were not only the largest grouping within the new

church, and like most of their fellow Peranakan community counterparts, benefited from a decent gender ratio, something the China-born Teochew community did not possess.

New immigrants seeking a spouse had to take time away from employment and travel back home (to China); this was an expensive exercise. The only other option was to find an appropriate and willing female partner locally. Marrying a local woman was made more difficult by the low ratio of women to men, a problem not overcome until the 1930s. In 1823, the ratio of women to men in the Malayan archipelago was 1:8, by 1850 1:12 and in 1860 1:15.



An illustration showing where the first Catholic chapel in Singapore was built in 1833. It stood on Bras Basah Road, diagonally across from where the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd stands today. It later became the site of St Joseph's Institution, seen here in the background. Chapel sketch by Colin Chee. Illustration by Joanne Low.

These numbers were echoed in Singapore with 1 Chinese woman to 15 Chinese men in the mid-1860s, improving slightly in the 1880s, to one woman to nine men. Similar dynamics are observed within the rural-based St. Joseph's Church community in Upper Bukit Timah. Since most of this community comprised poor farmers, they had no financial enticement to offer potential brides. Opportunities for marriage were far lower than their city-based brethren at Bras Basah Road. There were a mere 71 marriages held at the Bukit Timah parish between 1847 and 1880.

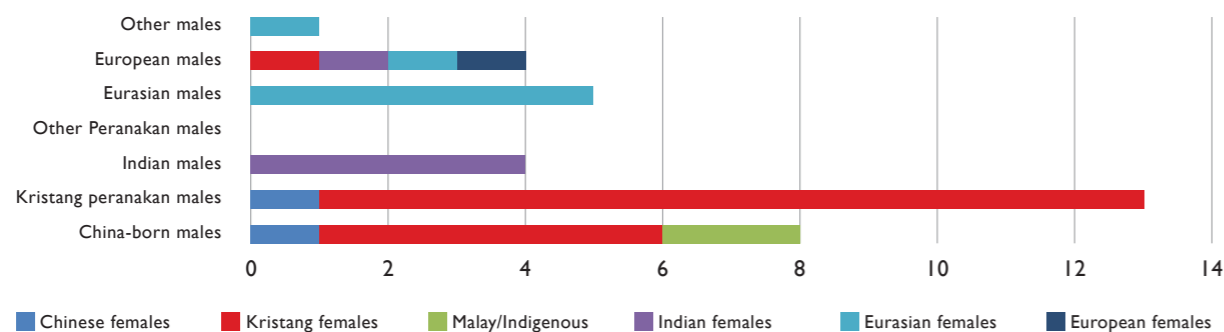
The options open to these newly arrived, China-born men were therefore daunting. In Singapore, they could not seek wives with the resident Peranakan Chinese community. For this period (1830s to 1860s), there is little to no evidence, which indicates the existence of a pre-existing Roman Catholic Chinese Peranakan community in Singapore. Secondly, if they did exist, these Peranakan Chinese communities were unlikely to accept lowly China-born 'sinkeh' men within their ranks. Exceptions were made if one was already established, regarded as industrious or possessing potential.

There are occasional references to a very small number of individual locally-born Chinese women; those born in Melaka are particularly suspect of coming from a Peranakan background. However, this too is very rare at this stage. Song did observe in his 1923 book how a majority of Singapore Peranakan families only go back three to four generations before descending from a pure Chinese progenitor which ties in with the findings from this study. Significantly, these early intermarriages with Melaka and local-born Peranakan Kristang, Malay and Indigenous women with China-born men are therefore the start of a Singapore-specific Peranakan community. ♦

THIS ARTICLE IS BASED ON RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY THE DR RECERATNAM AS A LEE KONG CHIAN RESEARCH FELLOW WITH THE NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD (NLB), SINGAPORE. IT IS AN ABRIDGED VERSION OF AN ARTICLE THAT WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE NLB MAGAZINE, BIBLIOSIA.

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### INTERMARRIAGES BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE CONGREGATION



### BRAS BASAH ROAD CHAPEL 1833—43

*Jika tidak kerana bintang,  
Tak mungkin bulan terbit tinggi.  
Jika tidak kerana sayang,  
Tak mungkin saya datang ke mari.*

# Poetry and THE PERANAKAN

**BABA DAVID BOK**  
WAXES LYRICAL ABOUT  
THE ART OF PANTON

**B**RITISH COLONISATION and the creation of the Straits Settlements in 1826 have had a far-reaching influence on the cultural evolution of Singapore and Malaysia up till today. Many of us grew up reading classic English literature. Those over 50 years old, like myself, are probably more familiar with Enid Blyton, Arthur Conan Doyle and Shakespeare than about the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Sejarah Melayu* or the *Bhagavad Gita*.

From my school days, I will never forget the elegiac simplicity of Wordsworth's, *My Heart Leaps Up*. Or the dramatic symbolism of William Blake's famous lines, "Tiger, Tiger, burning bright, In the forests of the night," and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's phantasmagoric poem, *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner*.

## THE PANTUN & ITS FRENCH CONNECTION

While English poetry was popular because of our colonial history, poetry is a part of every culture. Communities in Southeast Asia went through many stages of cultural evolution over 500 years of colonisation by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the culture and language that connected this region from the Philippines to Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and south Thailand, was essentially Malay, spreading through the powerful Malacca Sultanate that prospered under the rule of Parameswara.

Perhaps the most popular literary form that arose was the Malay *pantun*. This oral literary tradition evolved to its current form in the 16th century, when Malay literature blossomed with

classics such as the *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. Here is an example of a popular Malay *pantun*.

*Jika tidak kerana bintang,  
Tak mungkin bulan terbit tinggi.  
Jika tidak kerana sayang,  
Tak mungkin saya datang ke mari.*

If it weren't for the stars above  
Would the moon rise so high?  
If it weren't for you, my love,  
Would I ever venture nigh.

The Malays of old used *pantun* in social settings, in love and romantic courtships, and to mark formal occasions like wedding proposals and court functions.

A fascinating historical segue is that a number of Frenchmen were so enthralled by the Malay *pantun*, probably because it reflected French ideals so well.

The *pantoun* (French) was introduced into French literature by Victor Hugo in *Les Orientales* (1829). Another Frenchman, Francois Rene Daillie, who wrote *Alam Pantun Melayu - A Study of The Malay Pantun* (1988), said, "If one of the assets of poetry at its best is the magic and beauty accomplished by language, the Malay *pantun* can be placed among the highest achievements in this form of art ... The Malay *pantun*, as one of the fixed forms of poetry ever devised by man, can vie with such famous genres as the Japanese haiku or the European sonnet".



## BABA & CHITTY PANTON

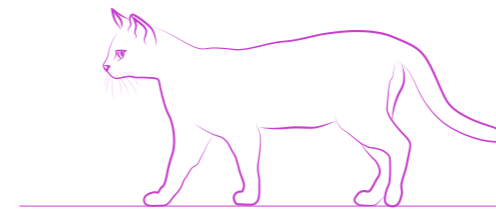
Both the Chinese Peranakan (Baba) and Indian Peranakan (Chitty Melaka) evolved as hybrid cultures of the Straits Settlements, adopting the Malay language and its popular poetic expression, the *pantun*. (Editor's note: In Malay, the term is *pantun*, while in Baba Malay, it is written as *panton*.)

In terms of the writing and recording of the *panton*, the Chinese Peranakans who conversed in Baba Malay were more prolific than the Indian Peranakans who spoke Chitty Melaka Malay. This was due largely to the more extensive spread of Baba Malay, its social use, literary compositions and linguistic documentation. The *panton* thus became the creative writing opus of the Babas. In Chitty Melaka culture, the *panton* remained primarily an oral tradition.

Some other differences may be seen. Generally the Babas composed and improvised *panton* whereas Chitty Melaka memorised and recited the *panton* as part of their Malay language heritage. For the Chitty Melaka, the *panton* seemed to be the domain of the women, whereas among the Babas it was primarily the men.

Here are two well-known Chitty *pantons* that have been recited and sung by a few generations of Chitty Melaka women, including my mother. They originated from Malay culture, and because they were simple to remember and dealt with familiar, everyday things, they were easily transmitted down the generations. ♦

*Baba David Bok is actively involved in the preservation of Chitty Melaka identity and culture. He can be reached at: bagend48@gmail.com*



## DUA TIGA KUCING BERLARI (TWO OR THREE CATS ARE RUNNING)

*Dua tiga kucing berlari  
Manakah sama sikucing belang  
Dua tiga boleh ku cari  
Manakah sama abang seorang*

Two or three cats are running  
Which is the striped one?  
Two or three people I can find  
But who is as unique as you?

## PISANG EMAS (GOLDEN BANANAS)

(This *panton* was once used by Mr Sidek Saniff, former Minister of State, in his eulogy for former Singapore Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, to describe his thoughtfulness and consideration towards Mr Saniff.)

*Pisang emas dibawa belayar  
Masuk sebiji didalam peti  
Hutang emas boleh di bayar  
Hutang budi di bawa mati*

Bananas are brought by ship  
Put one in the box.  
A debt of gold can be repaid  
But a debt of kindness is carried to the grave.



Baba Chan Eng Thai has written many *pantons* to mark significant events in the Chitty Melaka community. Here he presents a *panton* that he composed to Baba Ponso Kalastree, President, Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association at their association's Dinner and Dance on 4 May 2019. With them are members of the Chitty association and Guest-of-Honour, Madam Chang Hwee Nee, CEO of the National Heritage Board.



Scan this QR code to read *pantons* written by Baba Chan Eng Thai for the Chitty Melaka.

# THE MINISTRY OF PERANAKAN

BABA BRYAN TAN TOURS THE HALLOWED  
HALLS OF AN IMAGINARY MINISTRY | Illustration by James Tan.

**“Welcome to the Ministry of Peranakan. I am Bibik Wee Kim Neo, a Senior Director Bibik in the Prime Matriarch’s office,”**

puffed the immaculately coiffed lady in fuchsia kebaya.

“As the representative of the Peranakan Association and a guest of my superior in the *tu baju* (cabinet), you get the full tour of our Ministry,” clucked Bibik Wee. She leads me into an elevator, which goes up to the second floor.

As the doors open, sweet aromas of *gula melaka* (palm sugar) and coconut mingled with the sour tang of *assam* (tamarind) and piquant *sambal belachan* (chilli and fermented shrimp paste) waft through. Bibik Wee breathes in deeply and a blissful smile spreads across her face.

“This is the *Dapor* (Kitchen) Department, where every single Peranakan dish is cooked and catalogued.” The department is a massive kitchen in which at least a hundred female chefs labour over various ovens, woks and mortar and pestles.

“We must archive the authentic recipes of old lest they be forgotten. For instance, *babi pongteh* (pork stew) should be made with bamboo shoots and not potatoes!” Bibik Wee declared with an air of authority. “But excuse me ma’am, *babi pongteh* can also have both potatoes and carrots. That is the Melaka style,” piped a chef meekly.

The withering glare that came from her made the chef shrink back in dismay. “Excuse me? I am Bibik Wee from the Prime Matriarch’s office! Who are you to tell me that you know better? I will have you know that our *Merepek* (Nonsense) Bill prohibits this kind of falsehood and fake news! I suggest you think carefully before you speak!”

“The next floor is where we keep our performing arts alive,” says Bibik Wee, striding back to the elevator. I scamper behind her, mouth

full of *kueh dadar*. The wailing sounds of *seroni* (Chinese flute) pierced our ears as the doors opened. Bibik Wee yells over the cacophony, “Here we have the Wayang Wing, where the finest musicians, female impersonators, dancers and *dondang sayang* singers gather to hone their craft!” She waves to a rotund lady who was attempting to conduct a choir of squawking nyonias, wailing instruments and off-key ululating.

On the next level, Bibik Wee twirls excitedly as she exits the elevator. “This is my favourite place in the whole Ministry, the Bureau of *Baju* (Clothes)!”

Floor to ceiling stacks of batik were lined up in neat rows. Beside them, stood mannequins in exquisite *kebaya* and *baju panjang*. Seamstresses paced back and forth methodically in a rhythmic dance over the clacking sounds of Singer sewing machines.

A most wondrous contraption sat in the centre of the ordered chaos: a gigantic machine churning out *manek manek* (faceted glass beads) of every hue into large mason jars. The jars were then transported on a conveyor belt to a seamstress who tapped on a little handheld screen on her workstation. Bibik Wee beams with pride, her chest puffing out like *putu piring* (steamed rice cake). “*Embok-embok mia kreja alus sama seronoh juga!* (Nyonya craftsmanship must be refined and proper!)”

On the fifth floor, a wave of musty, yellowed paper gushed into the elevator the moment the doors opened. “*Kus semangat* (Good grief!)” Bibik Wee cried out in frustration. “I’ve told these scribes so many times to tidy up! “*Chikek dara* (It makes my blood boil!)”

Harried looking nyonias scurried about, aquiver, clutching tattered old tomes and scrolls. Hand painted family trees cover the walls, jostling

for space alongside dusty oil paintings of famous businessmen and philanthropists.

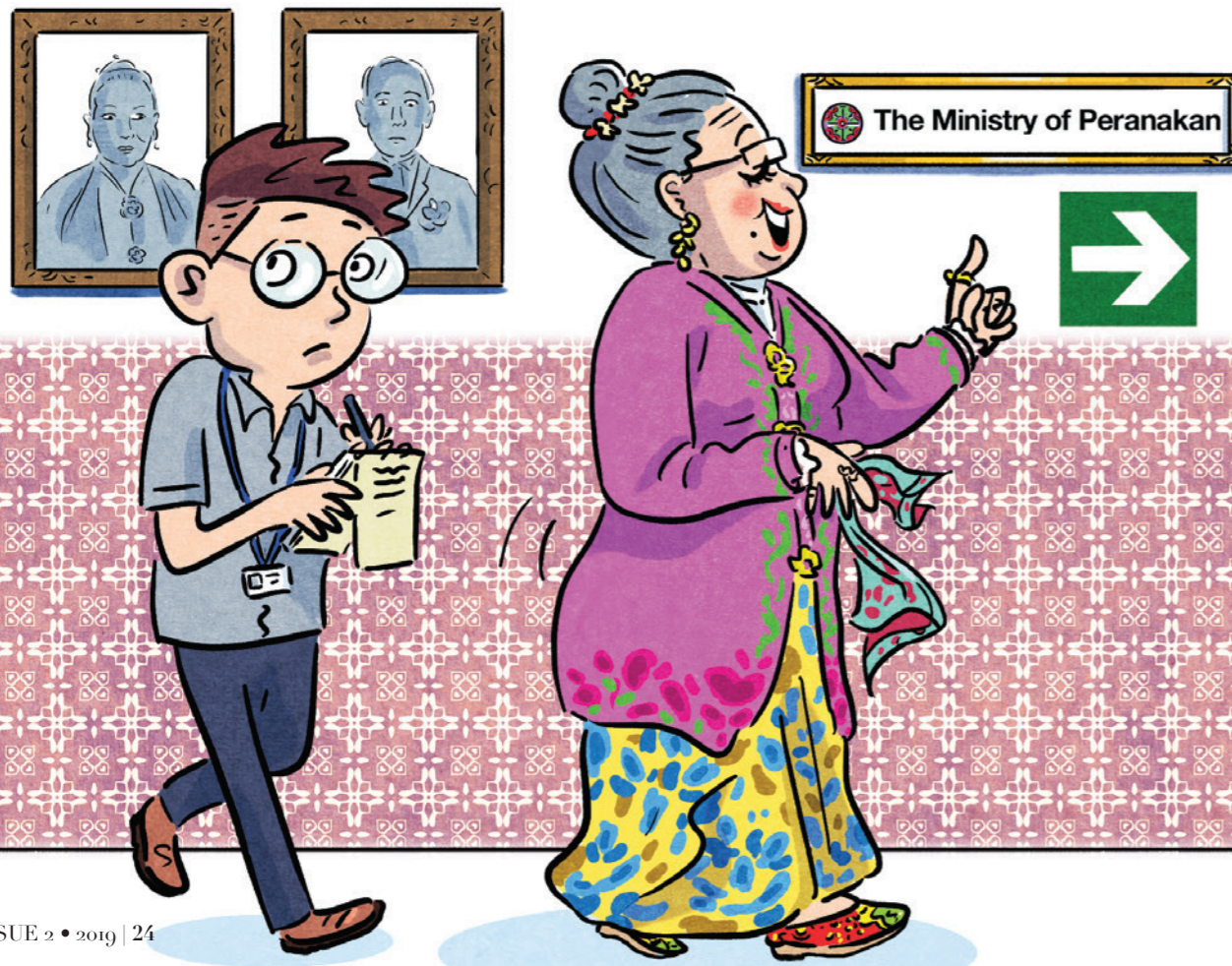
“Here at the Board of *Baba Melayu* and *Dulukala*, we have renowned historians, scholars and archivists who record our language and the history of our ancestors,” Bibik Wee exalts. “It is the most important department in the Ministry as it comprises the Genetic Guardsman Annex – where samples of the most precious Peranakan DNA are kept. Yes, someday we may be able to clone our illustrious ancestors!”

**Bibik Wee suddenly quips, “You must be wondering where all the Babas are. Every department we’ve visited so far only has nyonya staff because...”**

Before she could finish, the elevator doors opened and everyone gasped. A tall, noble and heavily rouged *bibik* clad in a pale pink floral kebaya and fuchsia sarong swept out with an austere entourage of muscular Babas in tow. Bibik Wee curtsied so low that she almost fell over. “Madam Matriarch! What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

The tall *bibik* turned to an aide who swiftly replied, “The Prime Matriarch is going to pay respects to her ancestors at the *rumah abu* (ancestral altar) in the Annex. Please make way.” Bibik Wee leapt back instantly to allow the entourage to pass.

As the retinue made their way past us out of earshot, I curiously asked, “Bibik Wee, the Prime Matriarch...is a man right?” ♦





THIS POPULAR FOLKTALE HAS BEEN TRANSLATED INTO A BABA MALAY VERSION BY **BABA KEN CHAN**  
Illustration by Aisha Ramat, courtesy of Ken Chan.



THIS STORY IS FROM **CHRITA CHRITA BABA, A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES BY BABA KEN CHAN WHICH WILL BE PUBLISHED LATER THIS YEAR.**

If you are keen to attend the book launch on Sunday, 6 October 2019, please contact Ken at: [kennethykan@babamalay.com](mailto:kennethykan@babamalay.com), Phone: 92708174

## SHALLOT AND GARLIC

(Si-bawang Merah, Si-bawang Puteh)

Once upon a time, there was a rich widow called Bik Lau Kwi. She had a daughter named Si-Bawang Merah, who was very spoilt. She also had an adopted daughter who was very demure and proper, called Si-Bawang Puteh. Bik Lau Kwi did not treat her daughters equally. Si-Bawang Puteh was always forced to do all the household chores. Bik Lau Kwi and Si-Bawang Merah however, lived a life of ease and did not do any work at all.

One day, when Si-Bawang Puteh was washing clothes by the river, her sarong fell in. She quickly ran after the sarong but lost it to the swift flowing river. Soon after, she stumbled across a wooden hut on stilts by the riverbank. An old woman called Bibik Sungei appeared from the hut.

The bibik said she had found Si-Bawang Puteh's lost sarong and would return it if Si-Bawang Puteh was willing to clean her home and prepare some dishes for dinner. Si-Bawang Puteh immediately agreed. She lost no time in cleaning Bibik Sungei's entire house before cooking a delicious dinner.

Bibik Sungei was impressed by the young lady's domestic skills. Without hesitation, she brought out the sarong that Si-Bawang Puteh had lost. She also asked Si-Bawang Puteh to choose between a large and small gourd as a gift to bring home. Si-Bawang Puteh chose the smaller gourd.

When Si-Bawang Puteh reached home, her stepmother instructed her to cook the gourd. As she cut it open, lo and behold, a treasure trove of diamonds, rose-cut diamonds, pearls, gold and silver spilled out before their astonished eyes.

After Si-Bawang Puteh told them how she acquired the gourd, Bik Lau Kwi quickly instructed Si-Bawang Merah to throw her sarong into the river. She wanted Si-Bawang Merah to get a precious gourd too.

Just like before, Bibik Sungei promised to return Si-Bawang Merah's sarong if she would clean her house and prepare dinner. But unlike Si-Bawang Puteh, Si-Bawang Merah detested the tasks as she was not used to doing housework. She demanded a gourd from Bibik Sungei who refused to give her anything. Si-Bawang Merah ignored the old lady and snatched a large gourd.

When Si-Bawang Merah returned home, her mother immediately grabbed a cleaver to cut the gourd. To their horror, it was full of venomous snakes. At that moment, Bik Lau Kwi and Si-Bawang Merah realised their folly - they had long mistreated Si-Bawang Puteh and asked her to forgive them. After that day, the two sisters and their mother lived happily together in peace for the rest of their lives. ♦

## SI-BAWANG MERAH, SI-BAWANG PUTEH

(Shallot and Garlic)

**B**awang Merah Bawang Puteh (Shallot and Garlic) is a popular tale based on Malay/Indonesian folklore. It is said to have originated from Nusantara (Malay Archipelago). The story involves two sisters with opposing characters, one good and one bad, and a wicked stepmother.

Dulu-dulu ada satu embok bujang kaya nama Bik Iau Kwi. Dia ada satu anak prompuan nama Si-Bawang Merah yang dia horkan. Dia jugak ada satu lagi anak prompuan angkat nama Si-Bawang Puteh yang lau sit sama seronoh. Bik Iau Kwi timbang daching berat sebelah; dia sayangkan dia mia anak sendiri sia. Tak macham Si-Bawang Merah, Si-Bawang Puteh selalu kena paksa bikin suma kreja kat rumah. Si Iau Kwi sama Si-Bawang Merah pulak, selalu dapat thiong kat rumah. Jorang toksa bikin apa-apa pun.

Ada satu ari, bila Si-Bawang Puteh ada chuchi kain baju di-tepi sungei, dia terlepas satu kain sarong dalam sungei. Dia terus kejaikkan tu sarong ikot arah sungei. Tak berapa kemudian, dia sampay kat satu rumah papan berkaki di-tepi sungei. Bila Si-Bawang Puteh mo sambong pi charek sarong ilang tu, satu Bibik tua keluair dari rumah papan. Ni Bibik Sungei janji dia nanti pulangkan Si-Bawang Puteh mia sarong yang ilang, kalu Si-Bawang Puteh boleh bersih dia mia rumah; lepair tu, siapkan laok makan malam. Si-Bawang Puteh terus setuju. Dia pun bersihkan Bibik Sungei mia rumah, kemandian siapkan laok makan malam yang sedap-sedap.

Bila Si-Bawang Puteh sua bersihkan Bibik Sungei mia rumah, Bibik Sungei pun rasa puair ati sama dia mia kreja. Lepair Bibik Sungei sua chobak Si-Bawang Puteh mia masakan, dia jugak rasa puair ati. Abis, Bibik Sungei pun pulang kain sarong yang Si-Bawang Puteh ilang tadik. Tambah, dia jugak mo kasi Si-Bawang Puteh satu labu. Dia kasi Si-Bawang Puteh pileh satu labu dari satu yang besair, ato satu yang kechik. Si-Bawang Puteh pileh kechik mia labu.

Bila dia sua bawak tu labu pulang rumah, dia mia mak tiri suroh dia masakkan labu. Tapi bila Si-Bawang Puteh potong belah tu labu, banyak barang-barang harta tumpah keluair: batu belian, batu intan, muntiar, mair, sama perak. Sumua orang kat rumahtangga terchengang tengok barang harta tumpah keluair sampay ayer tak di-mulot.

Lepair Si-Bawang Puteh chrita-kan amcham dia dapat ni labu, Bik Iau Kwi suroh Si-Bawang Merah champak satu kain sarong dalam sungei jugak. Dia mo Si-Bawang Merah chobak dapatkan satu labu jugak.

Macham dulu, Bibik Sungei janji dia nanti pulangkan tu sarong, kalu Si-Bawang Merah bersihkan dia mia rumah, kemandian siapkan laok makan malam. Tapi, tak macham Si-Bawang Puteh, bila Si-Bawang Merah bikin kreja, dia naik jarki, pasair dia ujong kuku tak basah. Dia terus suroh Bibik Sungei kasi dia labu. Tapi Bibik Sungei tak mo kasi dia apa-apa barang pun. Si-Bawang Merah tak pedulikan Bibik Sungei. Kemandian amek besair mia labu pulang rumah.

Bila Si-Bawang Merah sua pulang rumah, dia sama dia mia mak terus amek piso parang belahkan tu labu. Tapi bila labu sua belah dua, jorang tak jumpa apa-apa barang harta pun. Tu labu penoh sama ulair-ulair bisa. Tu jam, Bik Iau Kwi sama Si-Bawang Merah baru sedair Si-Bawang Puteh sua lama kasi jorang kok tok. Kedua-dua Si-Bawang Merah sama Bik Iau Kwi mintak ampon kat Si-Bawang Puteh. Lagikan tu jam, jorang suma tinggair rumah tangga sama peng ann seumor jorang mia idop. ♦

## SERVING UP A PERANAKAN CULINARY ODYSSEY

**NYONYA CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER**  
INTERVIEWS CHEF PHILIP CHIA ON HIS ROLE IN THE REMAKE OF THE LITTLE NYONYA  
Photo courtesy of Baba Philip Chia.

In October 2018, Chinese production House Changxin Pictures, G.H.Y Culture & Media (Singapore) and iQiyi, the Chinese online video streaming giant

announced that it would remake the popular MediaCorp drama series, The Little Nyonya (2008). Baba Philip Chia, who is a consultant to the series, believes that this remake will thrust Peranakan culture onto the world stage.

"The remake has a deep focus on Peranakan food; it may place our cuisine onto the world map, similar to what Korean drama series *Dae Jang Geum* (A Jewel in the Palace) did for Korean food," said Philip.



Baba Philip Chia with Singaporean actress, Xiang Yun, who stars in China's remake of *The Little Nyonya*.

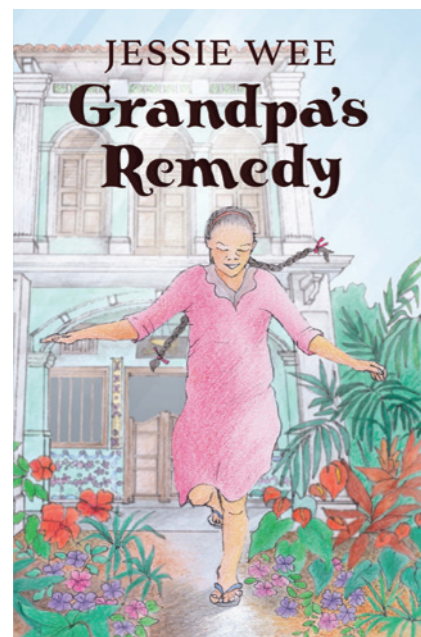
The new production follows the same plot and characters of the Singapore TV series about a Peranakan family from Malacca and Singapore in the 1930s through to the '50s. The Singaporean writer of the original series, Ang Eng Tee, also penned the script for the remake and worked with Executive Director Guo Jingyu, also of

The Little Nyonya (2008). The remake has a new cast, with only veteran actress Xiang Yun, and actors Dai Xiang Yu and Jeffrey Xu appearing again. As this Little Nyonya remake emphasises the authenticity of the cuisine, all the cast and crew members crammed themselves into Philip's kitchen to train and record the process of cooking Nyonya dishes a fortnight before actual filming commenced last October.

"The dishes were mainly taken from my cookbook, *Peranakan Heritage*, and include *Ayam Buah Keluak*, *Ikan Pari kuah lada*, *Ayam Pedas Siam*, *Chap Chye*, *Babi Pongteh* and *the kueh-kueh*. I cooked every dish and styled each one for the camera. I had to make sure that the proportions, quantity and colour of each dish looked correct on camera," said Philip.

Filming took place at Pinewood Studios Iskandar in Johor Baru, then moved to Penang and finally Shanghai in January 2019. In all, Philip and his manager, Adrian Han, estimate that at least 500 people including the cast were involved in this S\$30 million drama series.

There were challenges aplenty: in Malaysia, it proved difficult to locate certain brands of sauces and spices, while in Shanghai, they had to film in freezing winter temperatures. ♦



**TOP:** Grandpa's Remedy is a collection of exciting stories where crises of suspense, such as a purported ghost in the attic, to the curious case of bringing back a tortoise to life are solved through easy and natural methods.

**BOTTOM:** Secret of the Malacca Cabinet continues with the children's exploits in their home and the exploration of their neighbourhood, ranging from the discovery of a dilapidated house, to an unfortunate accident with a rickshaw.

## A HEARTY DOLLOP OF DAYS GONE BY

NYONYA JOANNE TAN  
REVIEWS TWO SHORT  
STORY COLLECTIONS BY  
JESSIE WEE

Jessie Wee's stories provide our children with a glimpse into a time when life in Singapore was easier and seaside outings were the norm. Her narratives are page-turners till the very end. Adult readers can reminisce about the days gone by, using her stories as jumping off points to sojourn back in time to recall their own childhood memories.

Her two new books, *The Secret Malacca Cabinet* and *Grandpa's Remedy*, bring a touch of nostalgia into our lives with their familiar characters, settings and storylines. In these short story collections, she delivers a hearty dollop of the days gone by, of large Peranakan family homes with sprawling compounds, where fruit trees flourish amidst a boisterous family with the youngest generation literally a litter of many cousins always up to mischief.

She brings back poignant moments like playing amongst drying laundry and getting scolded for dirtying it (*Attack!* in *Grandpa's Remedy*). Sunny Singapore of the late 1960s was a time of boundless imagination when children fashioned weapons from bamboo sticks, brooms and pans.

Who doesn't remember all the *pantang* (superstitions) like not crying under the banana tree lest it stop bearing fruits (*Vampire Aunt* in *Grandpa's Remedy*) or playing with prized spiders (*Biba* in *The Secret of the Malacca Cabinet*) and keeping them in matchboxes?

Her stories are exciting in that they tug at our heart strings with vignettes from our past, of times gone by, when aunts prepared to deliver a reprimand by rolling "up the sleeves of her kebaya, hitched up her sarung..." before despatching a resounding whack with either their bare hands or a household implement, where children used to take a peek through tiny peepholes on the floor, and all problems were solved with *kueh* and tea.

Whether you grew up in a Peranakan family or not, these two books will delight with its universal themes of love and family bonds. ♦

Both books are published by Landmark Books, 2019.



Author, Jessie Wee.

“

... of large Peranakan family homes with sprawling compounds, where fruit trees flourish amidst a boisterous family with the youngest generation literally a litter of many cousins always up to mischief.

”

“Aiyah, what's so important about being Peranakan? Peranakan is just *chap cheng*. Mixed blood. Why claim to be part of a culture that's dead?”

## ON LOVE AND LOSS

BABA COLIN CHEE  
REVIEWS A NEW  
NOVELLA BY NYONYA  
JOSEPHINE CHIA

The story's protagonist, Eric Teo, makes this interesting comparison between his Indian friend's homemaker mother, Mrs Devan, and his own very successful banker mother, Clara.

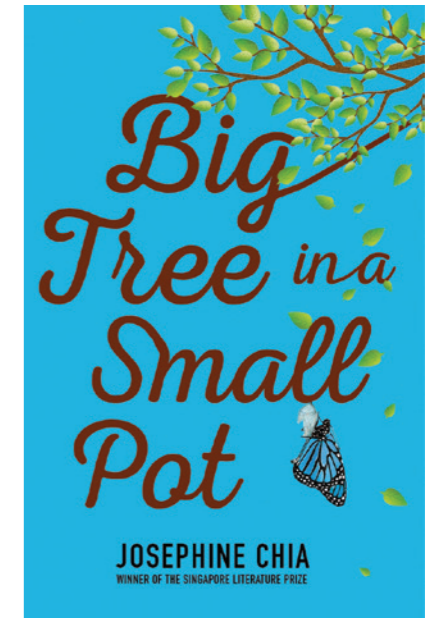
Throughout Josephine Chia's novella, we see the stark differences in the lives of the two families. On one hand, we have an upper-middle class but quite dysfunctional Chinese family living in a luxurious private condo; and on the other, a middle-class Indian family living in a typical HDB estate.

One family is constantly riven with negativity, whereas the other is uplifted with love.

Josephine has pieced this story together from discussions with young adults, combined with a good dose of her own imaginings. Her young friends spoke about broken lives and inspiring comebacks from their perspective, and their sharings have been skillfully woven into the narrative fabric. This offering is quite unlike her bestseller about her idyllic Potong Pasir *kampong* days, but the language and the turns of phrases are the same: you won't miss the smooth yet tart observations that are her hallmark.

Adding a further dimension to the story is that it is also about a young boy growing up oblivious to his Peranakan roots, until his father suddenly tells him about his Melaka heritage, and about his paternal grandma who is still alive.

To Clara, Eric's mother, being Peranakan means nothing, "Aiyah, what's so important about being Peranakan? Peranakan is just *chap cheng*. Mixed blood. Why claim to be part of a culture



that's dead? ... Better to just be Chinese. We have thousands of years of history." Yet to Eric's father, Benson, his nyonya mother cooks the best *ayam buah keluak* "this side of Malacca".

Do these sentiments sound familiar? When a Baba marries out of the community and his wife has no appreciation for his heritage, the cultural link is lost. The same is true the other way around, or when Peranakan families decide to jettison their heritage and, instead, focus on what works economically for the future of their children.

It is a theme that resonates not only with us, but also with Eric's best friend, the blind Rajah, who says, "...one's heritage is important. Family is crucial. It's as significant as a country's history. If our young people are not interested, we lose a part of ourselves. This is about where we come from. It's difficult to know why people think they can saw off their past..."

Josephine has layered her story well. Her poignant insights creep up on you.

When you boil it down, this book is all about relational estrangements - estrangement between mother and son, son and parents, husband and wife, father and mother - with one's heritage becoming a casualty in this star-crossed mix.

Yet it is also about an enduring friendship between two young adults that ends tragically, and a trusting love that binds a family to a total stranger. ♦

*Big Tree in a Small Pot* by Josephine Chia is published by Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2018.



## TAN KIM SENG A BIOGRAPHY

**BABA RONNEY TAN KOON**  
SIANG REVIEWS VIVIENNE TAN'S  
BOOK ON SINGAPORE PIONEER,  
TAN KIM SENG

As a fellow history buff, I welcome this modest 148-page tome into the local history canon of early Singapore pioneers. Vivienne Tan writes as an insider from the family of Tan Kim Seng, her husband being a direct descendant. He egged her to write this biography which she began writing in 2006 when she retired from the corporate world.

This is only the second attempt by anyone to write a proper history of the three most powerful merchants of mid-19th century Singapore: Tan Kim Seng, Tan Tock Seng and Seet Hoot Kee. Author Kamala Dhoraingam had sadly passed away before she completed her book about Tan Tock Seng, but her husband Samuel carried on her legacy and published the book in 2003.

In this Bicentennial year, it is hoped that more such books will be written to record the work and lives of the people who made a big difference to Singapore's early history.

Vivienne shared with me that valuable advice on her writing came from history guru Prof Wang Gung Wu, a name that needs no further mention. Write "on the man and what mattered to him and not just his achievements."

The book was published by Landmark Books, whose publisher Goh Eck Keng has championed local books.

The readable and compact biography runs 148 pages, generously illustrated with archival pictures, family trees and important historic documents.

Laid out in a readable format and big font, the book takes the reader from Kim Seng's ancestors in Eng Choon Prefecture in Fujian Province, China up to his grandson Tan Jiak Kim who died in 1917. In between, Vivienne writes on how business was conducted by Kim Seng, his public-spirited deeds, his standing in the community, his influence with the colonial administration, a respected mediator, his views on womenfolk, his last will and its celebrated failure in court.

In the early days of Singapore, many fortunes were made from opium trading. Tan Kim Seng was a rare exception. He did not want to profit from the misfortunes of opium addicts. ♦

*Tan Kim Seng – A Biography by Vivienne Tan is published by Landmark Books.*



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Here is another illustration Jesus used:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches.

Matthew 13:31-32 NLT



As Singapore commemorates its Bicentennial, we are grateful for all the seeds sown in Singapore by our founding fathers and heroes of this nation. We pray that Singapore will grow and expand its influence across the nations, bringing comfort and shelter to all in need.

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# Tea FOR A Duchess

**NYONYA LINDA CHEE**  
RELISHES A GENTEEL  
AFTERNOON PARTAKING  
OF ENGLISH TEA LIKE  
THE ORANG PUTEH  
Photograph by Colin Chee. Food  
styling by Linda Chee.

## A TEA TIME RITUAL

*My idea of a languid afternoon tea à la anglaise is to have it at the balcony of my apartment at the Grand Duchess in Katong, literally looking down on a conserved 1910 Victorian-style bungalow. It is but a humble emulation. The dainty crockery was made in Japan, bought from a junk shop in Changi, which apparently sourced it from the old Red House in Katong when it closed down.*

*Purists would swoon. The proper English tea requires leaves to be steeped using a tea strainer. I use a teabag in the tall coffee pot that came with the Japanese set, as a tea pot was absent. My embroidered white tablecloth was bought from a convent in Pondicherry, India, stitched by orphans cared for by French nuns. A practical adaptation as we are Peranakan, yes?*

*To partake of traditional tea at 4.00 pm like an English Duchess, do include quarter plates, napkins, finger bowls and a slop bowl to pour any remains in a teacup before a refill. Have thin lemon slices available in a matching bowl or saucer, and an additional tea pot for hot water should anyone want a refill or dilute the strong tea. A tea cosy too. Cake or kueh kueh are most welcome, carted on an elegant tea trolley and consumed in small bites with dainty cake forks in the sitting room.*

*You can save the trouble by making a reservation for a hearty "high" tea at a hotel to cover an early dinner; such tea was originally for the lower classes who worked (unlike Duchesses).*

**f**OR MANY OF US growing up in Singapore as a British colony, the epitome of "macam orang puteh", or being like the white people, was shopping at Robinson's at Raffles Place. It was the retail bastion of the *orang got-got* or *ada-ada*, terms that we still use to reference the 'richie rich' including wealthy Peranakans. Stocked with imported goods, Robinson's was the nearest place to jolly cool England in the 1960s. It was the first department store in the Far East to chill out its shoppers with air-conditioning.

I recall Robinson's had a plush café patronised by the *orang puteh* and *orang kaya*. It was the perfect rendezvous to indulge in cream cakes, sponge cakes, pies, tarts and dainty finger sandwiches, and sip a cup of tea.

We could ill afford such anglophile extravagance on my father's small planter's wages. Any notion to sip like a crazy rich Asian was dashed on 21 November 1972 - a huge fire gutted Robinson's. The burnt-out shell that remained resembled the London Blitz. Nine people perished, eight of them trapped in the store's lift.

The sandwich recipes here are my way of remembering the upper crust dame of Raffles Place glory. Cool cucumber sandwiches are easy to prepare for a balmy afternoon tea. And although Robinson's did not serve *sambal* sandwiches, they will surely please the spicy Peranakan palate while enjoying an *atas* pastime. ♦

## CLASSIC CUCUMBER SANDWICHES

A square loaf of sliced soft, white bread  
1 even-sized *timun* (cucumber)  
Small tub of cream cheese  
Plain butter  
Salt & white pepper to taste  
Optional: Finely chopped mint

Use cucumber with small seeds, ideally the organic ones or imported from Holland. Peel and slice very thinly into rounds. Dry between paper towels as the damp cucumber will render the sandwich soggy. Butter both sides of the bread to the edges. While not traditional, I like to spread a thin layer of cream cheese on one side. Overlap the cucumber slices in neat rows.

Add a dash of salt and pepper and sprinkle with mint if you like a more refreshing taste. Pat the two slices together gently and slice off the crusts with a long wide-bladed, sharp knife. Cut into four triangles. Serve immediately.

## SAMBAL UDANG KERING OR HAYBEE HIAM (SPICY DRIED SHRIMP) FILLING

350g *udang kering* (dried shrimp)  
150g *assam* (tamarind) paste  
300 ml water  
2 *daun pandan* (leaves)  
8 tbsp oil  
4 tbsp sugar  
1 ½ tsp salt  
10 *lemo perot* (kaffir lime) leaves

**Rempah** (spice paste)  
4 stalks *serai* (lemongrass)  
30g *chilli kering* (dried chillies)  
4 cloves *bawang puteh* (garlic)  
150g *bawang merah* (shallots)  
16g *kunyit* (fresh turmeric)  
23g *belachan* (shrimp paste)

Remove any residue shells from the dried shrimp and soak until soft in just enough water to cover; for at least half an hour. Blend until you get a coarse mixture, and not too fine to ensure some bite to the sandwich. Remove the stalks from the chillies and the seeds as well if you prefer it less spicy. Soak until soft for at least half an hour. Slice coarsely. Peel the garlic, shallots and turmeric. Remove the outer leaves of the lemon grass. Slice all coarsely. Cut the *belachan* into a few slices. Blend all the ingredients together into a fine paste. Use your fingers to *ramas*, or mix the tamarind with water. Sieve. Julienne half the kaffir lime leaves into very fine strips.

Control over the fire is very important during the entire process of making the *sambal*. Use a metal spatula for best results, to scrape the sides of the wok. Add oil to the wok and turn to high heat. When hot, stir in the *rempah* for about three minutes then lower to medium. Keep stirring until fragrant and when the oil separates from the mixture. This takes about 15 - 20 minutes.

Add the dried shrimp, mix well then stir in the tamarind water. Add the sugar and salt. Press into a paste-like mixture, taking care not to let the pasty mixture stick on to the wok. If that happens, pour a little water to prevent any burning. Keep breaking and stirring the paste for about half an hour over a medium then low fire at the last stage, in order to release all moisture from the paste. Drop in the whole *lemo perot* and pandan leaves. Fry until you achieve a very dry, light and crumbly texture like breadcrumbs. Remove the leaves.

Cool completely on a tray and sprinkle all over with the *lemo perot* strips. Transfer into clean, airtight glass jars. It is best eaten fresh but can keep well for up to a couple of months in the fridge. Use sliced square white bread to make the sandwich. Spread a thin layer of butter to the edges of the two slices. Spread the *sambal* mixture evenly on one slice. Pat the two slices together gently and slice off the crusts with a long wide-bladed, sharp knife. Cut into four triangles. Serve with freshly sliced cucumber to counter the heat.



AROUND

## DANCING

SINGAPORE'S PAST COMES ALIVE IN AN EVENING OF DANCE REPORTS **BABA EMERIC LAU**  
Photos courtesy of Dance Ensemble Singapore.

Commissioned by the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre and produced by Dance Ensemble Singapore (DES), *Whispers from the Dragon's Teeth Gate* is an artistic interpretation of the past 700 years of history about the island we now call Singapore.

Ms Yan Choong Lian, Founder and Artistic Director of DES, lists the various monikers Singapore has held across time in her programme message: Dragon's Teeth Gate, Temasek, Sit Lat Po, and Sin Chew. This is a result of Singapore having come under the administration and radar of various cultures, each one making its own unique contribution to the land.

The same multi-faceted quality is evident in this production, with elements of theatre and dance from a number of genres woven into a two-hour narrative that dips in and out of the island's past. Scriptwriter Edmond Wong was inspired by the rocky outcrop near Labrador Park that early sailors called Dragon's Teeth Gate. The story follows the journey of three hapless modern-day Singaporeans who get zapped back in time when they touch a fragment of the rock on exhibition at a museum. Played by Baba Alvin Oon, Abdul Rahim and Hang Qian Chou, their characters prove to be the comical foil to the often epic and sweeping tempo of the dance sequences, executed with finesse by the DES dancers and Sri Warisan Som Said performers.

The dance sequences were choreographed by Ms Cai Shiqi and Goh Yan Dan, both from DES. Their strength lies in adapting the stylistics of contemporary dance into the narratives of escape, strife, celebration and harmony. One had hoped, however, for more evidence of Choreographer Didik Nini Thowak's work, given his expertise on the traditional dances of the Indonesian archipelago. The overall result is a slick production that exudes a dominant – and sometimes heavy-handed – Nanyang quality.

**LEFT:** Singapore's history is depicted in a series of well-choreographed dance sequences.

**RIGHT:** Alvin Oon, Abdul Rahim and Hang Qian Chou punctuated the narrative with their comic flair.



## HISTORY

This was further underscored with musical arrangements by Dayn Ng, whose forte is the Chinese Orchestra.

It must be said that *Whispers* is not a history lesson, but a series of dance sequences inspired by historical events. There are moments of gravitas, such as the Palembang queen's sacrifice of her life, yet these are tempered with light-hearted, even slapstick moments, including having Sang Nila Utama chance upon a Chinese New Year lion dance (rather than a real lion as the legend goes), and thus naming the island Singapura – Lion City. Many key figures and events in Singapore's history, like Sir Stamford Raffles, Colonialism and World War Two, were simply omitted, or received the briefest of mentions. Setting the interests of sponsors and supporters aside, this reviewer felt that the production would have benefitted from a more balanced telling of history. The first half of the show depicts the grand legend of Sang Nila Utama and his royal descendants, whereas the second half takes an abruptly granular approach, delving into the minutiae of the lives of fishermen, coolies and samsui women, before suddenly returning to present-day cosmopolitan Singapore.

Singapore today is built upon an accretion of past narratives, and in so doing, we must be wary of the dangers of erasure, for hegemonic aims or sheer convenience. With some reworking, this production could deliver a lot more bite – hopefully, a second iteration will be staged in the near future. ♦

## A TRIUMPHANT TALE OF FAMILY

**BABA BRYAN TAN**  
REVIEWS AYER DI  
TETAK TAKLEH PUTUS  
BY THEATRE GROUP,  
PERANAKAN SIBLINGS  
Photo courtesy of Peranakan Siblings.

To weep tears of blood, tear out your hair in anguish, and yet have a shoulder to lean on in times of desperate need; that is family. *Ayer Di Tetak Takleh Putus* (Blood is Thicker Than Water) explores the familial notions and nuances that are both intimate and mercurial to us, some of which makes bile rise in our throats and yet also that which enfolds us like a warm encompassing embrace.

Beloved *wayang Peranakan* doyen, Baba GT Lye, took to the stage and brought the house down to a standing ovation at the Drama Centre Theatre on 21 and 22 June 2019. The play is the sixth production of the Peranakan Siblings, written by GT Lye, and scripted by Nyonya Irene Ong.

Produced by Baba Benjamin Seck and directed by Serena Ho, Resident Artist of The Necessary Stage and the director of plays such as *Geylang* by Wild Rice, the play is a heart-warming, yet cautionary tale of three sisters who grew up together and are now in their later years, who love each other deeply yet often take hilarious pot-shots at each other about their comical family situations.

The sets and costumes were changed after each act, reflecting the wealth and large houses of the sisters Bibik Besair (GT Lye), Bibik Tengah (LB Keng) and Bibik Bongsu (Irene Ong), replete with ornate furniture, lavish *baju panjang* and glistening *kerosang* the size of *piring tau yew* (sauce dishes).

Widowed early from the ravages of World War II, Bik Besair deeply cherishes her one and only grown-up son, Khoo Hock Seng. Yet, she laments long and laboriously about how he has married Helen played by Yap Yi Kai, who plays with convincing acrimony the controlling wife who often berates her mother-in-law. In Bik Besair's mournful exasperation, she calls Helen *arimo* (tiger), a mocking term bandied about by her sneering sisters. GT Lye's inimitable flair and style is brandished like a keen blade in his soliloquy; the strains of his voice tempered by age, yet flowing unabatedly with dynamic emotion. His *dondang sayang* duet with Baba

From left to right: The three sisters played by Baba GT Lye, Nyonya Irene Ong and Baba LB Keng.



LB Keng is a rare and unadulterated moment, perfectly embodying the sophisticated essence that so characterises *wayang Peranakan*.

Bibik Tengah played by Baba LB Keng is the wealthy second sister, convivially called the 'Christmas tree' for all the glittering diamonds, *kerosang* and *cocok sanggul* (hairpin) that bedeck her tall figure in *baju panjang*. It was LB Keng's maiden role as a matriarch. Indignity resounds in Bik Tengah's strident voice, hands on hips as she rebukes her sisters fiercely in defense of her beloved grandson, Poh Chye who lingers in the background, usually sewing *manek manek* beads or doing some knitting. Poh Chye is often the butt of jokes, criticised for always hanging out with his male friends and not looking hard enough for a wife.

Raised by Pungot the *majie*, played by Allan Wan, Poh Chye remains wilfully unperturbed; even singing a cheerful little ditty while giving out roses. Pungot, who was plucked out from an orphanage and brought into the family by Bik Tengah, chastises him for his antics, knowing that his grandmother would be terribly upset if she heard that Poh Chye was proving his gossiping relatives true.

Dwayne Ng plays the slender and effeminate Poh Chye, is just as soft as his on-stage persona, with silky voice and delicate mannerism, enhanced by his gentle good looks. Alas, the singing was unfortunately eclipsed by a somewhat inadequate musical score, for although Allan and Dwayne were assigned beautiful solos, they were unable to realise the full extent of their range and show off their singing chops.

Bibik Bongsu, played by Irene Ong, is the scheming widow who has married elderly husbands twice over and was been left with their immense fortunes when they passed on. Bik Bongsu's current paramour is Antonio, an Eurasian man who dazzles her with promises of love and affection.

Irene plays the middle-aged cougar with self-assured ease, justifying her ideologies of romance flippantly to her sisters, while letting their teasing of her for becoming a caretaker of elderly men to a witless pursuer of a penniless *serani grago* (Eurasian) slide off her silken kebaya like water off a duck's back.

Everything comes to a head when Bibik Besair's unfilial son Hock Seng forces her to sell her house, in order that he and his wife may move to the UK for her to continue her further studies; drawing loud gasps of outrage and tears of empathy from elders in the crowd. Bibik Bongsu's *serani* lover Antonio betrays her after she gives him a large amount of money, which was intended to placate his eight children to allow her to marry him.

The sisters weep and seek solace in each other's arms, realising that even after all the vicious jabs, back-biting and gossiping, it is only with family where they feel safe and cared for. It also comes with a realisation that no matter what relationship you have with the people you call family, we should always triumph over the trials and tribulations together, no matter how insurmountable they may seem. ♦



## A PERANAKAN PARTY FOR ALL

**NYONYA JOANNE TAN AND BABA COLIN CHEE DELIGHT IN A PERANAKAN SEASON OF ARTS AND MUSIC AT THE SCCC**  
Photo courtesy of Baba Alvin Oon.

**I**N JUNE 2019, the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) presented a three-week long Cultural Extravaganza to showcase Singapore Chinese culture, of which Peranakans are a part.

SCCC's remarkable cultural showcase aims to discover Singapore's evolving and contemporary Chinese culture. This year, the SCCC featured Peranakan elements including a beading workshop, a tile colouring workshop and Peranakan Sayang in concert. Our Baba Nyonya culture is very much a part of the Singapore Chinese identity, though we appear uniquely different in our ways.

On 2 June, Peranakan Sayang held their first ever solo concert. Peranakan Sayang is a musical group which advocates Peranakan culture through music and *joget*. Helmed by Baba Alvin Oon, this was the first time the group put on a full-fledged concert. The 90-minute line-up of folk songs were jived up with modern beats.

Said Baba Alvin Oon, "SCCC shared our excitement in presenting the very first Peranakan concert as it wanted to feature a vibrant and

innovative Peranakan cultural performance on stage. SCCC asked for a unique approach in sharing the culture with exciting and energetic performances that would appeal to all age groups."

And how absolutely brilliant they were that evening! Resplendent in their sarong kebayas and nifty batik shirts, Peranakan Sayang's nyonyas and babas sang their hearts out to the cheers and sing-alongs of their largely Peranakan audience. By the end of the concert, the audience were on their feet and dancing!

Crowd favourites included *Burung Kakak Tua* injected with the infectious beat of Bruno Mars' musical style and *Rasa Sayang* given a modern spin with influences from The Black Eyed Peas! The songs were sung in English, Malay and Chinese. A total of 1,000 guests attended the two shows that Saturday. Baba Alvin said, "We are very pleased with the two performances and we are overwhelmed by the accolades, support and love from the audience."

He promised, "With this inaugural concert under our belt, we hope to be able to stage more such shows in the future." ♦

The effervescent musical group, Peranakan Sayang, got crowds dancing at their first ever solo concert on 2 June 2019 during the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre's Cultural Extravaganza.



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# A ROUND-UP OF EVENTS

ORGANISED OR SUPPORTED BY THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE

MARCH —  
JULY 2019

15 & 16 MARCH IN COLLABORATION WITH THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM  
**ARMENIAN STREET PARTY**



Before the Museum closed for a two-year renovation, Armenian Street was turned into a fairyland venue for two evenings featuring a Peranakan wedding procession, fashion show, a specially curated bazaar and entertainment.

17 MARCH  
**GEM NEW START CENTRE CHARITY GALA DINNER**  
The Peranakan Voices performed at GEM's Charity Gala Dinner to raise funds for its many programmes including vocational training for female ex-offenders.

25 MARCH HOLIDAY INN EXPRESS ORCHARD  
**THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE'S SILVER ANNIVERSARY DINNER**  
The magazine celebrated its 25th anniversary with a dinner for its content contributors, advertisers, supporters and Editorial Committee members, both past and present.

31 MARCH JOO CHIAT COMMUNITY CLUB AUDITORIUM  
**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**  
At the Association's AGM, members approved the resolution to create a Junior Membership Category and others to regularise AGM processes.

13 APRIL CO-ORGANISED WITH NUS BABA HOUSE  
**CHENG BENG (清明): TALK ON ANCESTRAL WORSHIP PRACTICES**



Heritage consultant, Baba Cedric Tan explained the rites of ancestral worship practised by Peranakan families during Cheng Beng, the Chinese Tomb Cleaning Festival. He re-enacted semayang abu rituals (prayers for ancestors), with an elaborately prepared altar and explained the symbolism of each type of food offering.

23 APRIL  
**GUIDED TOUR OF THE HERITAGE CONSERVATION CENTRE (HCC)**  
Association members enjoyed a guided tour of the HCC, a conservation facility for over 200,000 artefacts in Singapore's National Collection. Conservators showed how artefacts like photographs, paintings, textiles and furniture are restored and preserved.

26-28 APRIL SERANGOON GARDENS COUNTRY CLUB  
**SGCC FOUNDER'S DAY ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS**  
The Peranakan Voices performed at SGCC's Founder's Day Anniversary Dinner and the Association curated the Peranakan Marketplace at the clubhouse over a weekend.

18 MAY CO-ORGANISED WITH NUS BABA HOUSE  
**CHARACTERISING STRAITS CHINESE CUISINE**  
(TALK WITH COOKING DEMO)



Heritage food author, Dr Ong Jin Teong, discussed the distinct regional differences of Nyonya cuisine from Melaka, Penang and Singapore, then demonstrated how to make ondeh-ondeh.

25 MAY CO-ORGANISED WITH NUS BABA HOUSE  
**CHRISTIANISED PERANAKAN COMMUNITIES IN EARLY SINGAPORE, CIRCA 1830-1900**  
Historian, Dr Marc Rerceretnam, spoke on early Christianised Peranakans in Singapore and presented new findings which he discovered. Baba Chan Eng Thai, a practising lawyer and active member of the Peranakan community shared how he blends age-old Peranakan worship rituals with his Catholic faith to keep his heritage alive.

5 JUNE A COLLABORATION WITH THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE  
**BICENTENNIAL ISTANA OPEN HOUSE**  
The Association, together with Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore, showcased aspects of Peranakan culture on Istana grounds during the Open House.

7 JULY THE YARDS | A COLLABORATION WITH THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION  
**JOO CHIAT 60<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY FIESTA**  
The Association curated a special bazaar (comprising largely specialist food vendors) and several workshops, including Peranakan beadwork, to complement the various activities during the Fiesta.

13 JULY MARY'S KAFE  
**TALK ON FEMALE SONS: SILK, PATRIARCHY, MARRIAGE & THE MAJIE**  
Historian, Dr Ang Chin Siew, spoke on the majie (or amahs), loyal and treasured domestic helpers who raised several generations of Singaporeans. She explored the connection between the Confucian ideals of "female," Cantonese patriarchy, majie links to silk production in the Canton Delta, their resistance to marriage, their roles as female sons and arrival in Singapore.

18-21 JULY MARINA BAY SANDS EXPO & CONVENTION CENTRE  
**SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL JEWELLERY EXHIBITION 2019**  
For the second year running, the Association was invited to be a community partner of SIJE, an annual international jewelry exhibition. This collaboration provides benefits for Association members.

20-21 JULY THE PERANAKAN GALLERY  
**BABA NYONYA LITERARY FESTIVAL**



Conceptualised and created by the Association, the inaugural Baba Nyonya Literary Festival may possibly be the smallest literary festival in the world. Writers, Readers and Moderators included Stella Kon, Lee Su Kim, Josephine Chia, Kenneth Chan, Chan Eng Thai, Goh Eck Kheng, Lim Kay Tong, Shawn Seah, Christopher Tan, Sylvia Tan, Vivienne Tan, Ila Tyagi, Walter Woon, Robert Yeo and Ovidia Yu. Local publishers Ethos Books, Landmark Books, Marshall Cavendish and Pansing were present.

## Events Calendar

TBC\* — TO BE CONFIRMED

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

AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER
2   Peranakan Identity Forum at the Asian Civilisations Museum	11   Emily of Emerald Hill by Wild Rice – A Special Evening for TPAS 14   Cherki for Beginners 21   Dressing A Peranakan Home With Ikebana (Demo & Workshop) at NUS Baba House	12   Dalam Dapor with Nyonya Violet Oon
NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY
3   Joget Siang Tea Dance 22-24   32nd Baba Nyonya Convention (Melaka)	28   Malam Jolly Western Dinner & Dance (Joyden Hall)	TBC   Dondang Sayang talk and performance at NUS Baba House

## Welcome

A warm welcome to our new members!

Dr Andrea Hooi  
Aaron Ng Shen Chiang  
Adrian Huang Ming Yau  
Adriel Nicholas Seah  
Amelyn Anne Thompson  
Alan Lee  
Alex Teoh Eng Kean  
Alex Woh Yu Ker  
Alice Chong Siew Lan  
Ambrose Poh Kheng Boon  
Angeline Koh  
Angeline Lee Poh Choo  
Angela Leow Joon Mei  
Ang Siew Gek Andie@Ann Ang  
Anne Gan Hock Lian  
Anne Than Li Juan  
Anup Kumar  
April Tan Lee Kheng  
Audrey Koh Ling Tin  
Benne Ho  
Calvin Tan Cheng Siew  
Carolyn Tok  
Catherine Tan Gek Choo  
Cecilia Chan  
Cecilia Yip Siew Wan  
Cheryl Lee Ching  
Cheryl Tan Sze Yue  
Christine Seet Keng Hua  
Chua Poh Geok  
Clarence Louis Ling Li Tien  
Cristelle Chow Chu Tian  
Daniella Koh Me Li  
Esther Ng Suan Suan  
Eugene Lim Kim Cheng  
Evelyn Ng Yi Lin  
Evonne Chia Siew Lyn  
Gracie Tan Bee Hwa  
Irene Tan  
Irene Wee  
Jack Lin Bing Wei  
Jade Lim Shu Xian  
Jadin Ong Guek Lian  
Janet Johanna See Lin Choo  
Jenny Lam Sek Fong  
Joanne Tan Kim Lian  
John Teo Hock Seng  
Johnson Koh Kok Peow  
Jonathan Yun Ten Tzu  
Judith Kelly Ang

Julia Millicent D'Silva  
Julie Yeo Su Lin  
Dr Kaori Shinozaki  
Dr Kevin Tan  
Kaela Ng Montgomery  
Kenneth Chan Yinn Kinn  
Khush Chopra  
Koh Jin Kit  
Krystle Huan Sze Lynn  
Lau Joon Nie  
Dr Lee Su Kim  
Dr Lee Tong Soon  
Lillian Chow Ling Li  
Lim Swee Kim  
Lynda Sonya Eaw  
Dr Marc Sebastian Rerceretnam  
Mabel Lee Kiu Sim  
Magarita Hale  
Matthew Tan Sye Kian  
Maureen Teo Sock Meng  
Mollie Nah Lee Kiang  
Novie Djayayanti Tjoa  
Queenie Chin Siew Kuen  
Rachel Seah Jia Hui  
Rachel Tang Poh Hong  
Rebecca Chan Wai Peng  
Rebecca Min-Lee Xavier  
Sakthivel Karuppiyah  
Samantha Lee Yuen Yun  
Samantha Sheryl Tan Yun Ling  
Seraph Azrael Tan Yong Peng  
Shaelyn Kang Phuai Ngor  
Sharon Tan Kheng Huay  
Shawn Seah Li Song  
Shelley Siu  
Simon Kwek Swee Boon  
Sripeni Puspasari  
Stacey Geoffrey Tay Jun Wei  
Susan Thompson  
Tan Poh Geok  
Tan Soon Im  
Tay Lee Neo  
Teoh Ai Keong  
Terence Tan Wei Ming  
Tristina Lee Yuen Yeng  
Victor Yue  
Vivienne Wong Pui Pek  
Yvonne Yip Choi Heng

## Obituary

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

Joe Conceicao  
Chua Ji Nio  
Phyllis Alvin

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 Federation of Peranakan Associations

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# INTO THE LAIR OF THE DRAGON

LIKE A CHICAK ON THE WALL, **BABA BRYAN TAN** CAUTIOUSLY SPIES ON THE MATRIARCHS OF TWO RIVAL HOUSES | Illustration by Eileen Chan.

**S**oh Bee Neo cast her gaze to her surroundings. So hideous, she grimaced inwardly. The interior of the house was akin to the enormous cave of a treasure-hoarding dragon. Gold and silver covered almost everything, from the furniture inlaid with ivory, to the decorative ceramics and the ornate frames of the oil paintings from which grim ancestors glared out bleakly; even the ancestral altar groaned from the weight of several gargantuan golden censers. The Ongs were never shy about showing off their great wealth, but never did Bee Neo imagine such a vulgar display.

Unbeknownst to her family, she had left her house without saying a word, not even having her trusted housekeeper Ah Wong accompany her. It was something she felt she had to do alone, a wrong that only she could correct. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and her husband who had grown increasingly concerned about her bitterness, must never know what she was plotting.

Across Bee Neo sat the mother dragon. Ong Poh Geok glowered at Bee Neo with wet beady eyes. A rivulet of red oozed from her lips, which moved slowly but inexorably, chewing some *sireh* (areca nut shavings and betel leaves). While Bee Neo was willowy and fair, the matriarch of the Ong clan was immensely corpulent and bronzed even as she approached her hundredth birthday. Layers of wrinkled jowls hung from her cheeks like glistening layers of oily *kueh lapis* (layer cake). Her *baju panjang* could barely contain her bulging mass, which spilled out of the golden recliner in which she lay.

Dragon? *Macham buah plum kering gua ingat.* (More like a dried prune, I think.) Two lines of servants stood rigidly to attention by the walls, but made no move to offer Bee Neo a seat or a cool drink of lemongrass water. Every fibre of her being was repulsed being in the presence of this repugnant woman, but she fought back the great urge to make a hasty exit.

"*Tachi ada baik?* (How are you, elder sister)?" And almost as an after-thought added, "*Tachi sua makan* (have you eaten)?"

**Poh Geok spat out her sireh with contempt, her beady eyes narrowing. Dia kata gua gemuk (she's saying I'm fat)!**

"*Lu toksa chakap chakap sedap tau.*" (Spare me the pleasantries). Our families have not gotten along since time immemorial. Not once in all these decades has a head of the Soh clan ever set foot in

Ong territory." A maid stepped forward, using a large embroidered handkerchief to soak up a river of sweat from Poh Geok's forehead.

There was one exception, when our heads met to promise never again to use poison against each other, thought Bee Neo wryly. It was her grandfather, the mining tycoon, Soh Kim Seng, who had negotiated the truce which had lasted thus far.

"*Gua tau, tachi* (I know, elder sister). I have come with rather unpleasant business which concerns your daughter, Lee Lin. It is also about your great-great grandson."

There was a dramatic convulsion from the golden recliner. Bee Neo smirked. *Either the old hag already knows, or she's about to get a heart attack* "What...? Who?"

"You don't have to hide it anymore, *tachi*. It seems that my grandniece was not the only one to have an illegitimate pregnancy."

Bee Neo continued without waiting for a reaction. "What's more, your daughter heartlessly gave away that poor child. I'm quite sure that you are aware that in England there are two generations of *mat salleh* (Caucasians) with your blood in their veins." The wrinkled old matriarch pulled herself upright from her recliner with surprising speed, pointing savagely with a gnarled finger. All the servants in the hall jumped at this sudden movement.

**"Kenapa lu tau (how do you know)?" Poh Geok screeched wildly at her servants and Bee Neo, her beady eyes ablaze with displeasure. "Which one of you tikus (rats) with loose lips has spread lies and gossip about my family?" Bee Neo remained impassive. "Tachi, I am not here to ruin your reputation. I want to do the opposite in fact." Poh Geok paused. "Why would you do this?"**

"Your great-grandson, Daniel Wright, has married into my family. In order to maintain the dignity of our two families, you must summon him to you and explain everything. Tell him that if he does not divorce my grandniece Vera at once, their child will lose his entire inheritance from the Sohs and not a single cent of your Ong money will ever go to him either!"

*In the next issue: For love or money - which will mat salleh baba Daniel choose?*

# The Peranakan Guide Singapore

## MUSEUMS



The Peranakan Museum is closed for renovation and will re-open in mid-2021.

### PERANAKAN MUSEUM

**Address:** 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941  
**Website:** www.peranakanmuseum.sg  
**Email:** nhb\_pm\_vs@nhb.gov.sg  
**Tel:** 6332 7591

### 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 exhibits show 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  
**Tel:** 6256 7377

### 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  
**Tel:** 6227 5731

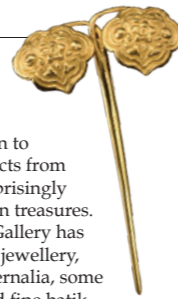
Visits are by guided tours. Please call the house for details.



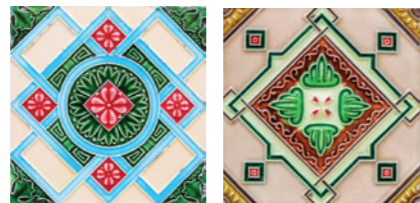
### ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

The first museum in the region to display a wide range of artefacts from across Asia, the ACM not surprisingly has some important Peranakan treasures. The Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, 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



## LANDMARKS



### 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.

### 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



### EMERALD HILL ROAD

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

### 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



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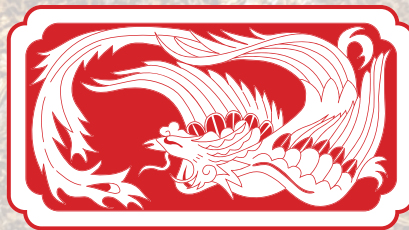
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