

# *Selamat Taon Tikus!*

...

HAPPY YEAR OF THE RAT!







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In Chinese culture, rats are seen as a symbol of wealth and surplus. The Rat is the first of all the animals in the Chinese zodiac. Read the story of how the rat came first in the great zodiac race on page 6.

Photo by Colin Chee.  
Styling by John Lee.

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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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## SELAMAT TAON TIKUS!

The rat is the first of 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac, so this *Taon Baru* (New Year) is especially auspicious for new beginnings and embarking on new journeys. It is special for me because I have my own little rat at home...my son Julien who was born 12 years ago. I am excited to see him enter the next cycle of his life.

Unlike Western culture where the rat has the unfortunate reputation of being a dirty little food thief and portent of disease, in Chinese culture, the rodent is viewed quite positively.

In ancient China, rats were admired for their intelligence, industriousness and exceptional fertility. (Rats can produce as many as 2,000 babies in one year!)



The Lunar New Year folktale, *The Rat Maiden's Wedding*, is depicted on this late 19th century Chinese export silver box.

### THE RAT MAIDEN'S WEDDING

In many parts of China, people still set aside the third day of the Lunar New Year to honour the rat. Rats are not chased out of the house nor trapped and grains of rice and kitchen scraps are left out for them. Children are urged to go to bed early so as not to disturb the rats during their feast.

*The Rat Maiden's Wedding* (老鼠嫁女) is a popular folktale associated with the Lunar New Year. Chinese folk artists often portray a merry wedding procession of rats taking advantage of this night, with rats playing horns and cymbals and carrying a bride in a palanquin. A cat lurks somewhere in the procession. This festive scene appears in red paper cuttings, woodcuts and paintings which are used as New Year decorations.

The story goes that ambitious rat parents hoped to find the most powerful match for their daughter. (Rats are traditionally associated with

money, so the rat parents' interest in a powerful son-in-law fits that stereotype.)

They consider the sun, but then realise that the sun can be hidden by a cloud, so is not that powerful. They propose marriage to the cloud, but then clouds can be blown away by the wind, so they choose the wind instead and so on. In the end, the most powerful match turns out to be a cat, so the rat maiden is married off to a feline who promptly eats her up on the wedding night! The moral of the story is that blind ambition often ends in disaster.

In China, the third day of the New Year is also when a newlywed woman returns to her parents' home where she is received as a guest and no longer a family member.

The last *Taon Tikus* in 2008 was a milestone year for Peranakan culture in Singapore. On 25 April, the Peranakan Museum on Armenian Street opened its doors. It was the world's first museum dedicated entirely to our rich culture.

In September, the NUS Baba House on Neil Road opened. Built in the 1890s, it was owned by the Peranakan family of Wee Bin, a 19th century shipping magnate. It is one of my favourite places, not just because I am a volunteer docent there, but because it is the only intact Peranakan townhouse in Singapore that has beautiful, authentically restored interiors.

In November 2008, *The Little Nyonya* (小娘惹) aired on local TV station Mediacorp's Channel 8. The Mandarin television series was an instant hit and spurred great interest in all things Peranakan, even as far away as China.

Perhaps 2020 will see a new generation of Peranakans take on a more active role in keeping the culture vibrant in this new decade.

In this issue, Baba Bryan Tan re-imagines how the rat came first in the Great Zodiac Race, Baba Andy Gwee meticulously details traditional Peranakan *Taon Baru* practices in his family, Nyonya Natalie Cheah takes a fresh look at *baju taon baru*, Nyonya Linda Chee shares her recipes for New Year favourites, *hee-pio* soup and *ngo hiang* in Dalam Dapor and Nyonya Joanne Tan celebrates the New Year *kuehs* we love. ♦

Happy New Year everyone! *Manyak banyak jereki!*

**Dawn Marie Lee**

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





2020

## AN APPRECIATION

**T**HIS YEAR WE CELEBRATE our Association's 120th Anniversary. It is a special celebration. What makes the Association tick at this ripe old age are its committees from the past and present, and its supportive members.

Most importantly, *how* we inspire and excite our members, collaborate honestly with our partners towards a clearly defined vision, and keep ourselves relevant, will help us overcome disruptive socio-economic forces.

An organisation can only be as good as the people who run it and who want it.

How time has slipped by! In April 2020, we will elect a new General Committee (GC).

Imagine, only one and a half years ago, on 27 May 2018, the current GC was formed with tremendous challenges ahead. I told my team: "Let's hunker down. Look at our challenges. Prioritise. Set a timetable to accomplish each of them."

And we did just that.

We also tapped on one another's strengths and wove them painstakingly into a beautiful tapestry. Pulling together a diverse team of experts is never an easy thing. There were ups and downs as we set to work with one another, but we started bonding, with mutual respect for different perspectives.

In the process, we transformed the way we organised and administered the Association. We harnessed technology. Our membership database was digitalised. We updated our database as best as we could. As a result, we have almost eliminated wasteful return mails.

A proper organisational chart addressing task responsibilities was drawn up - this greatly clarified the roles and responsibilities of each GC member. We built up a list of subject experts we could seek advice from. Greater emphasis was put on governance, efficient work processes and privacy protocols.

We also transformed the way events were planned and delivered. We continued to adopt the principle that all events must, as far as possible, be self-funding and affordable.

We decided how we delivered these events is as important as delivering them - with integrity, fairness, and respect for our members and partners.

We sought out partners who shared the same vision and passion to sustain our culture, and collaborated with them. It was not easy trying to

seek a balance between the diverse interests of our members, but I believe we have.

Scrupulous accounting has always been the bane of many organisations. TPAS is no different. Fortunately, we have been able to find experienced volunteers to ensure our accounts are always reconciled at the end of every month.

Understanding and matching line after line of small-sum receipts and payments can be an extreme exercise in investigative patience! We are now studying ways to do this better and less painfully - through community-based service providers.

For all these reasons, I have many thanks to give. Firstly to my wife Linda, who has been a listening ear for all my rants and raves.

I must pay tribute to my incumbent GC members who stayed with me through thick and thin and who made things happen.

I would also like to thank The Peranakan Voices who have served steadfastly for the past 20 years.

Not forgetting our many non-GC volunteers like our Webmaster, volunteer photographers, designers and helping hands at events.

For their support, I thank our partners the Gunong Sayang Association, Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore, The Peranakan Museum, NUS Baba House, National Heritage Board, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre, People's Association, National Library Board, Genealogy Society Singapore and many more.

Our heartfelt thanks, too, to all our sponsors and donors who have given generously when we needed them to, and those who wish to remain anonymous.

I will never forget what two of them said to us, separately: "Giving money is easy. But we really appreciate that you volunteer your time and effort to serve the community and to keep our culture alive." It has encouraged us. ♦



*Kamsiah banyak banyak!!! God bless.*

**Colin Chee**

*President*  
The Peranakan Association Singapore  
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# HOW THE RAT CAME FIRST IN THE RACE

BABA BRYAN TAN RE-IMAGINES  
THE GREAT ZODIAC RACE  
Photo by Baba Colin Chee

THIS IS THE TALE OF HUMBLE NYA TIKUS, who came to great fame because of her excellent culinary skills, but more importantly, her perseverance and wit. Quiet, reticent and inconspicuous, Nya Tikus, like any good and obedient nyonya rat, spent her years in her grandmother's kitchen honing her skills with the *tumbok lesong* (pestle and mortar) and *wok chuan* (spatula). • Her neighbour, Bibik Kerbo (ox), would lean on the fence separating their houses and salivate over the wonderful aromas that wafted out from Nya Tikus' kitchen. Every afternoon, Nya Tikus and her husband Ba Kuching (cat), trundled their cart with two great pots of food to peddle in the *kampong* where they lived. • Baba Anjing (dog) with his keen sense of hearing and smell would always be the first to buy her food. Be it *udang masak nenas* (pineapple prawn curry) or *chap chye*

(mixed vegetables), he could always tell what scrumptious dishes Nya Tikus had prepared. Soon, other neighbours came along – Bik Kuda (horse), Baba Kambing (goat) and Bik Ular (snake). They smacked their lips and sang praises of Nya Tikus' cooking with big smiles and sated bellies.

Alas, Nya Tikus' idyllic life was not to last. Her beloved grandmother passed away and her husband, struck by a deadly plague, soon followed. Fraught with grief, Nya Tikus pressed on, working doubly hard all by her lonesome self. She could not trundle her cart out as often as it required much heavy work. Dark circles ringed her once bright eyes as she continued to toil alone in her kitchen.

To make things worse, Nya Tikus' *neo* (mother-in-law), Mak Kuching (cat), who lived in another village, moved in with her, claiming that her presence would help the young widow cope. But the sly old cat had no good intentions. Mak Kuching bared her claws at Nya Tikus and made her wait on her from dawn to dusk. She allowed her only to cook her favourite dishes: *ikan assam pedas*, *ikan sumbat sambal* and *perot ikan*.

This went on for many months. Though Nya Tikus did her best to endure the torment from her cruel *neo*, she was reaching the end of her tether. Bibik Kerbo lamented to her husband in distress,

prepare her for the Great Race.

Nya Tikus dutifully obeyed, but this time with a glint in her eye. She had secretly cooked up a brilliant plan to rid herself of her overbearing mother-in-law. She planned to win the race.

The night before the Great Race, Nya Tikus whipped up a grand feast for Mak Kuching to express her 'gratitude' for all the care and support she received from her. Mak Kuching devoured everything without one word of thanks and slept through the night in a heavy stupor.

To prevent Bibik Ayam from crowing the next morning and waking Mak Kuching, Nya Tikus placed some corn in a paper cone smeared with glue and lured her into it. The poor chicken was immobilised.

Bibik Kerbo waited for Nya Tikus by the river. The rat hopped onto the ox's head and together they made their way across. The treacherous currents threatened to sweep up the duo, but Bibik Kerbo was determined to help her dear friend and swam with all her might.

As they neared the riverbank, an angry meow came from behind them. It was Mak Kuching hot on their heels! She leapt from rock to rock in pursuit across the river, her eyes livid with fury. She had woken up to find Nya Tikus gone, and the Great Race had already begun. With a furious hiss and a pounce, she sought to clamber

“

...as they neared the river bank  
an angry meow came from behind them.

It was Mak Kuching hot on their heels,  
leaping from rock to rock in pursuit across the river,  
...her eyes livid with fury. ”

“*Lepair laki dia mati jatoh susah kena bawa naseb.* (After her husband's death, she has fallen into hard times and has to fend for herself) *Kesian* (I pity her)! If only there was something I could do to help her!”

As chance would have it, a ray of hope soon shone down on the young rat in the form of Inche Kuching Belanda (Uncle Rabbit), the Jade Emperor's imperial messenger. He put up an announcement on the village notice board that proclaimed: “His High Eminence the Jade Emperor calls for a Great Race of all his beloved subjects to be held three days from now. The first twelve to cross the river and navigate the forest to reach the Jade Palace will be rewarded with great riches and grand accolades. The first subject to reach the Emperor will have one wish of his or her heart's desire granted. Let this be known.” As soon as she read this, Bibik Kerbo rushed to inform Nya Tikus.

The proclamation caused great excitement in the little *kampong*. Everyone wanted to take part in the Great Race. Unsurprisingly, the greedy Mak Kuching could only think of the great riches in store. She immediately demanded that Nya Tikus rise earlier daily to prepare special tonics for her, cook more food and give her more massages to

onto Bibik Kerbo's back with outstretched claws. Nya Tikus squealed in fright.

Without a second thought, Bibik Kerbo flicked her strong tail at Mak Kuching and flung her back onto a rock mid-pounce. Another kick from her cloven hooves square to the forehead sent the bad kitty flying into the churning river with a great splash.

When they reached the riverbank, Bibik Kerbo collapsed, winded by her efforts. In her belaboured state, she motioned for Nya Tikus to go on without her.

This was how the rat came first in the Great Race. She received a majestic welcome by the Jade Emperor. He had known of her prodigious culinary skills and had kept a watchful eye on her over the years. Nya Tikus had made her specialty dish, *hati babi bungkus* (liver wrapped in pig's caul fat) which she presented to the Jade Emperor as a gift.

Just one taste was enough to make the Jade Emperor exclaim in ecstasy that he would grant her any wish. Nya Tikus had only one – to be able to cook for him for the rest of her life. And of course, the rest is history.

Now you know why cats hate rats, and why they hate water too! ♦



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# PANTON TAON TIKUS

TO WELCOME THE YEAR OF THE RAT, **BABA GT LYE** HAS COMPOSED THIS PANTON  
FOR THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE | Photo by Chris Yap Woi-Hoe

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Gelang emas harga nya tinggi,<br>Beli dari Pajak Gantong.<br>Taon Tikus datang lagi,<br>Umor panjang bertambah untong. | The gold bangle is priced high,<br>It was bought from the pawnshop.<br>The Year of the Rat returns,<br>Bringing long life and good fortune.                    |
| Nyala kan api naik kan kawa,<br>Kachor dodol di kaki lima.<br>Ikot resmi Tikus Sawah,<br>Kompol padi makan dia lama.   | Start a fire to heat the cauldron,<br>Making dodol by the five-foot way.<br>Adopt the traits of the paddy field rat,<br>It hoards rice to eat for a long time. |





# BAJU TAON BARU REVAMPED

NYONYA NATALIE  
CHEAH LOOKS AT BATIK  
FASHION FOR MODERN  
BIBIKS AND BABAS  
Photos provided by each label.

**SELAMAT TAON BARU!**  
With the Lunar New Year just around the corner, many of you (like myself) might be on the hunt for something new to wear. I've found five designers who create stylish and contemporary batik clothing. They all share a common objective – to interpret this traditional fabric into modern designs. Will the age-old textile win over new fans? ♦



1

## BAJU BY ONIATTA

**O**niatta Effendi weaves a story of education and design flair with her label, *Baju by Oniatta*. She has a fervent passion for batik and hopes to continue educating herself and consumers on the intricacy and beauty of batik creation by skilled artisans.

When she started her eponymous label in 2016, it began "out of an obsession for the fabric and a fascination with traditional motifs." She started selling her clothes at pop-up stalls in unusual places – like a sports hall in Bedok. Now she has a lovely boutique, Galeria Tokokita which carries clothing for both men and women, set in the heart of Joo Chiat where she invites people to come in and appreciate batik.

She is particularly conscious about educating her customers to differentiate between *batik cap* (hand stamped) and *batik tulis* (hand drawn) to help them appreciate the techniques and skills that go into creating a piece of batik.

She continues to cultivate and nurture her relationships with batik artisans, wanting to preserve and enhance their ecosystem. Oniatta shares that for her "batik is sacred" and that "how you wear it honours the fabric and its makers".

With her clients, she believes that "you don't have to buy ten pieces, but just one" to appreciate the beauty of the fabric. This ties in with her keenness in developing the batik narrative in fashion.

Her next collection will feature more hand stamped pieces that are friendlier on the wallet, making her clothes more accessible. She is currently obsessed with *kemben* (torso wraps) that have been long forgotten and hopes that she can reinvent how they can be worn with modern clothing.

f BajubyOniatta  
i BajubyOniatta

**Oh Sashiko!** celebrates a time-honoured tradition through the craft of batik making.

Sashiko (literal translation: little stabs) is a form of decorative reinforcement stitching from Japan that started out of practical need during the Edo era (1615-1868). Traditionally used to reinforce points of wear or to repair tears with patches, making the piece ultimately stronger and warmer, this running stitch technique is often used for purely decorative purposes in quilting and embroidery.

Batik Sashiko is a labour of love, pioneered by batik craftsman Pak Muji Susilo. Driven to create something that is new in the market and trendy, Pak Muji combines the simple style of the sashiko stitch with geometric patterns, using traditional batik hand-stamping method (*batik cap*).



2

## BILLA CLOTHING

**P**ricilla Nurtanio began *Billa Clothing* in 2016 when she wanted to curate her own label after more than 20 years of working experience in retail. She shares that *Billa* was born out of her "passion for Indonesian textiles, especially batik. It represents my culture and is so beautiful."

Priscilla says that her clothing label grew over time as her customers became friends. She started small, but they encouraged her to expand as they all shared a common love of batik. Her desire is to have batik enjoyed by both young and old.

*Billa* garments are simply cut with clean lines to let the bold prints and colours of the batik stand out. Priscilla hopes her designs will "bring out the best in each piece of batik" so that her clients will "feel confident" when wearing her clothes.

With Chinese New Year festivities in mind, she has created a *Timeless Oriental* collection that is modern and stylish yet comfortable and easy to wear to accommodate all the new year visiting and feasting.

bit.ly/billabatik





The perfect matching set for sisters or best friends. Maxi cheongsam dresses with an attached cropped front design.



3

## YEOMAMA BATIK

**Y**eoMama is a label by a mother-daughter pair who were inspired by their roots. Wenny Tan, was in Yogyakarta on vacation where according to her daughter Desleen Yeo, “she chanced upon a lot of batik and casually called me to ask if we should sell batik in Singapore. At that time I replied rather unexcitedly “Ok lor” but it eventually grew into something bigger”.

With the duo’s different sense of style and clothing needs, YeoMama designs are friendly for all ages, shapes and sizes. The duo like using the same batik fabric to design clothes catered to both younger and more mature customers. They love “twinning” or dressing alike - very often, their fashion shoots feature both Desleen and her mum wearing the same fabric but in differently cut garments. Twenty-something Desleen shares, “Sometimes we design chic granny tops and even have customers in their 80s!” The label also offers batik shirts for men.

When asked how they hoped their customers would feel when wearing their designs, Desleen replies playfully, “Happy and *batikful*! Batik looks quirky and more fun when you pair print on print. It’s about being bold, being *batikful*, being yeoself.”

🌐 yeomamabatik.com  
📷 YeoMamaBatik

Yeomama is decked in a gorgeous midi length flowy cheongsam dress in a burst of poppy red perfect for the New Year.



## 4 ELNADYAH

**N**adyah Azman is a lovely young woman who started *Elnadyah* through her passion for sewing. “When I first started, I only knew how to sew simple dolls and bags. Because I wanted to sew dresses, I enrolled myself into Taf.tc, a renowned fashion school, to learn more about sewing and fashion design. This eventually led to the launch of *Elnadyah*.” She shares that for her “every piece of batik has a unique identity and is

like a puzzle for me to work on.” She wants people who wear her clothes to feel “happy, beautiful, proud and confident” as “I aim to add joy to the surroundings of each person who wears my outfits”. Nadyah currently sells her clothes online on Instagram, through her website, and in pop-ups all over Singapore. She designs clothes for both men and women.

🌐 www.elnadyah.com  
📷 elnadyah



The batik trousers comes in a variety of designs and colours that will go with the theme of New Year.



5

## VESPERTINE

**V**espertine is the brainchild of Emma Chiau. With formal training in the visual arts and over a decade’s worth of experience in fashion under her belt, Emma knew that she would eventually start her own label. “I often think that Vespertine is an homage not just to modern women, but a celebration of their relationships, especially between mothers and daughters in the circle of life.”

*Vespertine* has a special *Back to Batik* series that showcases how the allure of batik has not diminished over the centuries.

Emma shares that it was her French mother who instilled in her a passion for batik. Her mother fell in love with batik after moving to Asia in the late 1970s. She says, “As a child I was literally swamped in batik – from dresses to tablecloths, bedspreads to cushion covers – all because of my mother’s love of the fabric.”

*Vespertine* is Emma’s attempt to share with others “a blended culture of timeless fashion underpinned by French artistry, visually expressed through batik, and made possible through good craftsmanship”.

Emma hopes that her pieces will allow women to feel “empowered, feminine, distinctive and is a celebration of our multi-cultural age”.

🌐 vespertine.com.sg  
📷 vespertine\_sg



This Salome 2-way Kimono Chemise is Japanese inspired. A two way front wrap that would pair well with a long skirt or some chic bottoms.



## REMINISCING THE

# ANGIN TAON BARU

I REMEMBER GRANDMA looking towards the sky with a slight squint while pronouncing sagely, “*Angin taon baru!*” (New Year wind!) when there were stronger-than-usual breezes towards the end of the year. This memory is associated with the devouring of delicious white and red marble-size glutinous rice flour balls in pandan-flavoured syrup. These *kueh ee* (glutinous balls), prepared by Mum and Grandma, symbolise unbroken harmony in the family, heralding a trouble-free cycle for matters domestic in the year to come.

They were also offered in prayer at the *Tai Seng Yah* (Monkey God) and *Chow Kong Kong* (Kitchen God) altars in our home. Consuming them also indicates that a person has grown a year older.

A white and red *kueh ee* would be stuck to the back of our front door to keep out evil and attract good fortune, whereas another pair would be attached above a red paper label on our huge clay rice urn, with the *beras* (uncooked rice) within filled to the brim. This was to indicate that the year had been swell or “full”, and to have such “fullness” continue into the forthcoming year.

DELVE INTO THE  
HEART OF PERANAKAN  
CHINESE NEW YEAR  
RITUALS WITH **BABA  
ANDY GWEE**  
*Photos courtesy of Baba Andy Gwee.*

TWO  
MONTHS  
BEFORE

## PREPARATION BEGINS

*Kueh ee* is consumed during *Tang Chek* (the Winter Solstice Festival), normally celebrated on 22 December. The date also signals the beginning of a roughly two-month period spent preparing for Chinese New Year. Family members, especially Mum and Grandma, would busy themselves with spring cleaning, ensuring that the household altars were immaculate, and the preparation of New Year *kueh* (cakes) got underway.

My mother would start churning out *kueh bangket* (tapioca-flour cookies), *kueh belanda* (love-letter wafer), *kueh tair* (pineapple tart), *kueh lapis* (multi-layered cake) as well as her own inventions. She also baked coconut cookies and peanut butter cookies, storing them all in tins. Other creations included *kueh wajek* (glutinous rice candy) and *chok wa* (jelly) which would be made closer to Lunar New Year’s Day. No one was permitted to assist or distract Mum, as her recipes demanded precise preparation and baking times.

Relatives and friends also dropped in during this period, bearing gifts of more cookies and assorted *kueh*. We received *kueh koya* (green pea flour cookies), *kueh bolu* (sponge cake), *kueh bakol* (steamed glutinous rice flour cake), as well as *chok wa* (seaweed jelly in the shape of a rabbit), all largely home-made.

ONE  
WEEK  
BEFORE

## RAISING THE RED BANNER

About a week before Chinese New Year, the *chai ki* (a red bunting for festive occasions) would be hung above the main entrance to our home as a sign that we had been blessed with good fortune, and that we looked forward to receiving more blessings in the coming year. We would also cover the tables with tablecloths of white lace, and the chairs with white lace covers secured with red ribbons. All this was done amidst the never-ending dusting, sweeping, scrubbing, mopping and washing that our big, old-fashioned bungalow in Joo Chiat of over 12,000 square feet demanded.

This frenzy of activities accelerated as Lunar New Year neared, with Grandma nagging, and then scolding, anyone within earshot. The family would acquiesce to our matriarch, persevering with our respective duties.

*The hall and dining room in Baba Andy Gwee’s family home decorated for the Lunar New Year.*



## NEW YEAR'S EVE

## FEEDING THE GODS AND ANCESTORS

Around mid-morning on New Year's Eve, prayers would be offered to the Kitchen God, the Monkey God, and also at our ancestral altar which held framed photographs of my great-grandmother and great-grandfather. It was customary to "invite" one's ancestors home (from the "other world") to join in the upcoming merriment.

The prayers included food offerings, the most significant being a trio of boiled meats known as *sam seng*, which comprised a whole chicken, a whole duck and a slab of lean pork. Other typical dishes were *babi pongteh* (pork stew), *ayam sio* (chicken in spicy stew), *pong tauhu* (beancurd meatball soup), *chap chye* (mixed vegetable stew), *itek tim* (steamed duck), *hati babi bungkus* (pork liver balls) and *achar* (pickles).

A pair of long sugar cane stalks was placed indoors, one at each side of our front entrance (it may have been two pairs, but the memory eludes me). They were adorned with a slip of serrated red paper. The sugar cane commemorates an aspect of ancient Chinese history: during the Han Dynasty, the Han king and his subjects, in the course of fleeing their enemies, hid within a sugar cane plantation. It was dusk when their attackers arrived at the plantation, and they mistook the sugar cane stalks for spears in the fading light. Thinking that they were looking at a vast army, they retreated, and the Hans lived to fight another day.

In the evening, we would open all the doors and windows and keep the lights switched on, as the family gathered for the customary New Year's Eve reunion dinner, a tradition that symbolises the solidarity of kinship.

We then consumed many of the dishes from the prayer offerings earlier, and offered toasts of F&N soft drinks like cherry, ice-cream soda or sasaparilla (more commonly known as Sarsi) as we wished one another. (See sidebar for *Baba Malay New Year greetings*.)

After dinner, Mum and Grandma prepared *ang pows* (red packets), to be given to children and unmarried visitors over the next 15 days. The rice urn, sugar jar and water vessels were all refilled to the brim in anticipation of a "swell" year ahead. Towards bedtime, the doors would be locked to signify the closing of the old year, after which no one would be permitted to leave or enter until the morning of the New Year.



## NEW YEAR'S DAY

## SAMBOT TAON

Early the next morning (Chinese New Year's Day), Grandpa would literally "throw open" our front doors at a designated time, after which he would light joss sticks and pray to *Ting Kong* (Heavenly King, also known as the Jade Emperor) to *Sambot Taon* (welcome the Chinese New Year), followed by the Monkey God and the Kitchen God, as Dad observed and assisted him.

Grandma had checked with the temples for the exact timing of the start of the New Year, and this varied each time. Grandpa and Dad have welcomed the New Year at such odd timings like 5.23am, 7.08am, 3.47am, 6.39am, and even as early as 2.48am!

Sometime in the 1970s, Grandma consulted a medium we knew as *Datok Mak Ee* and was told it was not necessary to follow the timings dictated by the temples; 7am would suffice. Thereafter, we ushered in the New Year at 7am every year.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: ANDY'S FATHER, BABA WILLIAM GWEE THIAN HOCK WROTE ABOUT THIS SAME MEDIUM IN AN ARTICLE FOR OUR OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2008 ISSUE. IT WAS ALSO FEATURED IN THE BOOK BEING BABA - SELECTED ARTICLES FROM THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE, ON PAGES 45 - 46)

NEW YEAR GREETINGS  
IN BABA MALAY

In Singapore today, "Gong Xi Fa Cai" has become the ubiquitous Chinese New Year greeting uttered by most. Why not use these Baba Malay New Year greetings instead?

**SELAMAT TAON BARU** • Happy New Year!

**MANYAK MANYAK JEREKI** • May you have abundant fortune.

**PANJANG-PANJANG UMOR** • Wishing you a long life.

**BADAN BOLEH KUAT-KUAT** • May you have good health.

**PENG AN PENG AN** • May you have peace.

**PANDAY-PANDAY SURAT** • May you have scholarly success.

**OOK HAU MAK BAPAK** • Always respect your parents

## SOJA

## PAYING RESPECTS TO ELDERS

After the prayer ceremony, Dad would drive Grandpa to his mother's (my great-grandmother's) grave at Bukit Brown to pay respects. Upon their return, our family assembled in new clothes. Grandpa would take a seat, and then we would each wish him "*Selamat Taon Baru, Ah Kong*". Males stood, bowing slightly, whereas females would curtsy slightly. Grandpa would reply with "*Panjang-panjang umur*", "*Badan boleh kuat-kuat*" and "*Panday-panday surat*" and hand each of us an *ang pow*. Then, Grandma would be seated, and the ritual would repeat itself. The younger children would simply wish one another by shaking hands.

## WELCOMING GUESTS

Breakfast was an indulgence of the cookies and *kuehs* prepared all those weeks before. These treats were placed in glass containers on our verandah table as well as on a long table in the hall. Guests started arriving from mid-morning: an endless stream of relatives and friends. Children (like me) would receive *ang pows*, and Mum would reciprocate.

Our guests were entreated to partake of our home-made snacks:

"*Makan lah, tachi, toksa segan ...*"

(Eat lah, elder sister, don't be shy ...)

A typical reply would be:

"*Baik lah. Kamsiah, adek.*"

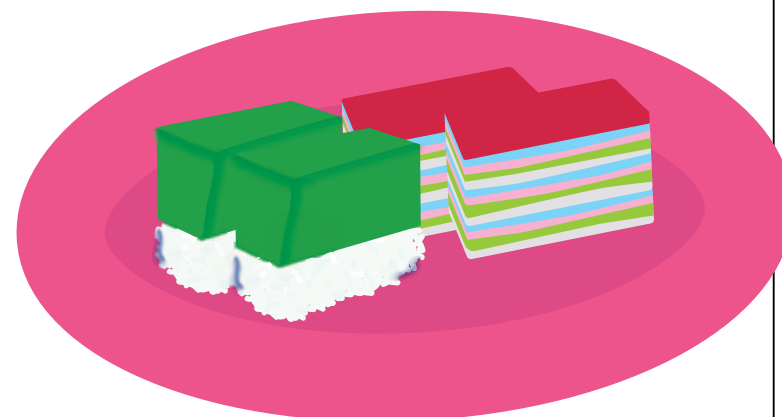
(Ok lah. Thank you, younger sister [or younger brother].)

Alternatively, the response might be:

"*Toksa! toksa! Gua baru makan, kenyang lagi.*"

(No need! No need! I have just eaten, still full.)

The house was filled with animated conversation, while kids like myself played in the garden. Most guests would stay for just under an hour, before leaving to visit other homes. Such bustling would continue unabated throughout the day until our last guest departed, usually late at night.



## SECOND DAY

## MORE VISITING

The second and following days would find my parents, my brother and I *pai chia* (making visits) to my maternal grandparents' and several of Dad's colleagues' and friends' homes. Many lived in bungalow-style houses somewhat similar to ours, and equally many in semi-detached, terrace and kampong houses. There would be visitors to our home too, though less than on the first day.

## FOURTH DAY

## WELCOMING THE KITCHEN GOD BACK

The fourth day of the Lunar New Year would find our family praying in front of the Kitchen God altar, as that day is "*Hari Datok Turun*" or "*Hari Datok Balek*" (Day the God Returns). This ritual welcomed *Chow Kong Kong* back into our home, politely informing him that we hoped he had submitted a favourable report for our family.

On the fourth day too, we would remove the *kueh ee* which we had attached to the main door and rice urn. I do not know why it was done on that particular day, for I have noticed that some families keep them behind their doors many months after the Lunar New Year. The sugar cane would be removed from the front doors. I vaguely recall chewing on the sweet, finely-cut pieces of the canes that my mother had chopped up.

My father recalls Grandma telling him our family used to celebrate *Ting Kong Seh* (the Jade Emperor's Birthday) when living in Cuppage Road (before our family moved to Carpmal Road, Joo Chiat in 1940). This observance required the setting up of the *Tok Sam Kai* (special two-tiered altar) with vegetarian food to be offered in prayer. All the crockery had to be "clean", meaning that no meat had ever been placed on them. As such, a set was specifically kept for this ceremony. However, we stopped this practice after our family moved, as we found the necessary preparations too tedious.

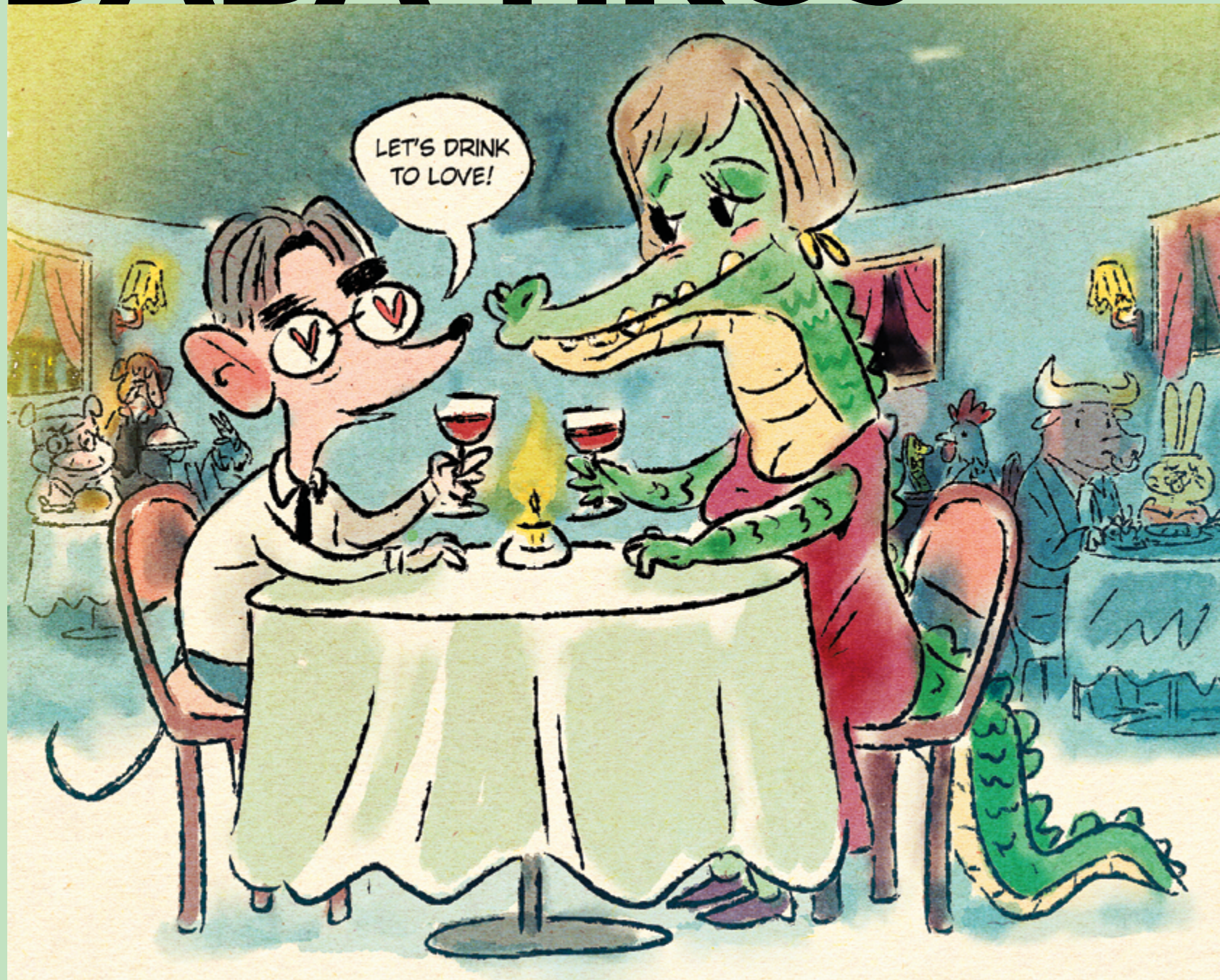
The air of festivity and merriment would diminish over the next few days, weeks and months, until almost a year later, when Grandma would abruptly stop whatever she was doing to observe a particularly strong breeze, and with an air of sagely wisdom, reverently proclaim, "*Angin taon baru!*" ♦



Owing to space constraints, this is an abridged version of Baba Andy Gwee's report. To read it in full, including how his family's Chinese New Year practices evolved into the 1980s and beyond, please scan this QR code to access the online link.



# BABA TIKUS



# CHAREK BINI

BABA BRYAN TAN TRIES  
TO FIND A LOVE MATCH  
FOR THE VERY BANAL  
BABA TIKUS.  
*Illustration by James Tan.*

## BABA TIKUS (Mr Mouse) was an unassuming man.

He was neither old, nor was he very young. There was nothing particularly special about him. You could pass him on the MRT or in a hawker centre and you wouldn't take any notice of him at all. He was of small stature, had a nondescript face framed by bushy eyebrows which bristled outwardly over a rather small pointed nose which twitched in mild apoplexy whenever he had to answer the phone or speak to a cashier or anyone at all for that matter.

It was also unfortunate that Baba Tikus was a very lonely man. Since the flowering of his youth, he yearned dearly for a partner to share his life, his dreams and his aspirations. He so desperately wanted to connect with someone that in spite of his aversion to people and socialising, he would nervously and reluctantly set himself up on blind dates.

Unfortunately, he seemed to meet the most bizarre women on these dates. Recently, Baba Tikus and his date, Nya Puteh (Miss White) were chatting over dinner about what they thought was important in a potential partner. Nya Puteh, (who had enough whitening make-up on her face to put a Teochew opera doyen to shame) waxed lyrical about how the man who wanted

She was well-read, elegant and ambitious. She then proceeded to take issue with everything Baba Tikus had to say, even with the weather. Nya Ayam seemed hell bent on proving that she was the finest sophist on earth, especially to the waiter as she tried to correct his pronunciation on a French dish. *Don't work in a fancy restaurant if you can't pronounce the names of dishes*, she insisted imperiously at the blubbing waiter, who looked like he was still in polytechnic and paid seven dollars an hour.

Nya Ayam proceeded to order the most expensive items on the menu to showcase her mastery of the French language, and then taking an age to rummage in her handbag before declaring that she had left her wallet at home. Baba Tikus ended up paying for the exorbitant bill, and never heard a peep from her ever again.

*Ti-kus semangat*, sighed Baba Tikus heavily. He always greatly dreaded the family get-togethers during Chinese New Year, Christmas and Mama's birthdays when his aunts from the entire extended family would take turns to lob pointed remarks at his single-ness.

*So handsome, why still single? Is there something wrong with you? Aiya, we are all collecting dust waiting to get ang pow from you. Maybe his thing cannot stand?* The old witches would cackle wildly and rattle their false teeth at him. Baba Tikus would grimace awkwardly and imagine himself

SO HANDSOME, WHY STILL SINGLE?  
IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH YOU? AIYA, WE ARE ALL  
COLLECTING DUST WAITING TO GET ANG POW FROM YOU.  
MAYBE HIS THING CANNOT STAND?

to be her boyfriend was to propose to her on bended knee with a Cartier ring.

*Boyfriend?* Baba Tikus tried to clarify. *Not husband? Boyfriend*, Nya Puteh confirmed with absolute surety. Baba Tikus could only stare at her blankly as he asked for the bill earlier than he had hoped to. Having mentally calculated the price of such a ring, he was set on scurrying as far away from this woman as soon as possible, before a lifetime of incalculable suffering ensued.

His next date, Nya Semilang (catfish) arrived looking absolutely nothing like the picture in her profile. Baba Tikus, assuming the role of the unruffled gentleman, tried not to stare at her or sigh too much at his misfortune, as he went through the paces of social obligations that polite company dictates with gritted teeth.

It was then a great relief that she deliberately double booked herself into a play right after dinner, with a half-hearted overture of pretence asking him along. Baba Tikus found himself inclined to decline.

Nya Mulot Pantat Ayam (chatterbox) or Nya Ayam for short, proved to be a turning point in Baba Tikus's esteemed dating career.

curling up in a little hole six feet under.

But it did seem like they were genuinely concerned. One of his cantankerous and dessicated *po chiks* (aunt) had arranged a blind date a week earlier without his knowledge and insisted that they meet up. She didn't have a photo when asked, and complained noisily about how technology was too complicated.

Who goes on blind dates in this day and age? thought Baba Tikus, grumbling inwardly. *She's probably going to be nasty, far too thin or way too fat if po chik picked her.* He could not have been more wrong. Nya Buaya (Crocodile) was tall, slim and had a cute button nose. She was curious about Baba Tikus, of which she had heard much from *po chik*. She was elegant and very attentive towards Baba Tikus, who found her snorting laugh very endearing.

It was that very moment that Baba Tikus knew he had found his *raison d'être*; for he looked deep into Nya Buaya's radiant, perfect face and strangely, felt no attraction at all. Yet, he knew that she was The One. He would marry her so that his gossiping aunts would shut up during Chinese New Year. 💍



## TIONGHOA

## COMICS:

A LEGACY  
OF LAUGHS

NYONYA DAWN

MARIE LEE LOOKS AT  
THE LIGHTER SIDE OF  
CHINESE INDONESIAN  
LITERATUREPhotos courtesy of Alex Teoh and Didi  
Kwartanada unless otherwise stated.

**A**SK ANY PERANAKAN IN SINGAPORE OR MALAYSIA to name a recent book written in the Peranakan language and chances are that they'll be stumped. Apart from dusty copies of *Chrita Dulu-kala* (Stories from Ancient Times) inherited from our great-grandparents, most of my generation has never seen or read literature in Baba Malay. • *Chrita Dulu-kala* books first appeared in Singapore in the late 1800s and were bestsellers until the late 1930s. They were stories of Chinese folklore, legends and historical epics such as *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West* and *Water Margin* adapted into Baba Malay by popular local authors such as Chan Kim Boon. • These epic tales were serialised into many slim volumes and sold at \$1 each. They were very popular among babas and nyonyas, the majority of whom could not read Chinese. • My parents' generation, the baby boomers who grew up in the 1950s and 60s, were much more familiar with English literature than Baba Malay books because that's what they were taught in school and read for leisure. It is no wonder that Peranakan literature had disappeared in Singapore by the 1950s. • Over in Indonesia, it was a quite a different story. Like many former colonies in Southeast Asia, Indonesia sought independence after the Second World War and gained self-rule after almost 300 years of being a Dutch colony. • In the 1950s and 60s, the newly independent nation experienced a period of civil unrest. The *Orang Tionghoa* or ethnic Chinese Indonesians, fell under suspicion for having Communist ties and were purged from political, social and economic life. • Under the New Order government, Tionghoa identity was suppressed in favour of assimilation. For the next three decades under Suharto's authoritarian rule, cultural practices such as the celebration of the Lunar New Year were banned. *Orang Tionghoa* were pressured to drop their Chinese names and adopt Indonesian-sounding names.

## SIE DJIN KOEI:

## TANG DYNASTY ZERO TO HERO

Surprisingly, it was during this turbulent period that Tionghoa literature flourished – in the form of the humble comic strip.

Baba Hendrik Chang, a Tionghoa who grew up in Indonesia in the 1960s fondly remembers the popular comics of his youth.

"Nothing embodied our Tionghoa culture more than the comics we read. I was introduced to Chinese classics like *Sam Kok* (*The Romance of Three Kingdoms*) and *San Phek Eng Thay* (*Journey to the West*) through these comics. I could hardly wait for a new instalment to be published every week."

Some say that there is always some level of politics in art. With their public identity dismantled, perhaps it was through these illustrated stories and comics that the Tionghoa in Indonesia could embrace their Chinese culture.

Hendrik, who now resides in California, shared, "One of my favourite comics was the *Sie Djin Koei* series about a man who lived during the Tang Dynasty. He rose from humble beginnings to become a great general renowned for his strength and bravery. It was so exciting to read about his adventures."

*Sie Djin Koei* is the story of a labourer who could carry five times his weight. His magical strength and high spirits caught the attention of a wealthy noble who then employed him in his household. Later, the nobleman's daughter fell in love with him and they eloped. He joined the military and fought bravely in many battles, eventually rising to the rank of general. *Sie Djin Koei* was created by Siau Tik Kwie, a Tionghoa artist who drew inspiration from epic Chinese folktales and legends. Siau was born in Surakarta in 1913.

Siau created *Sie Djin Koei* with the help of martial arts writer, Oey Kim Tiang, who translated the stories from the original Chinese script into Bahasa Indonesia. Unlike the *Chrita Dulu-kala* books published in Singapore and Malaysia, which were text-heavy with few illustrations, Siau presented his historical tales in the form of a comic storyboard, making them instantly more appealing to both young and old.

His illustrated stories were published in *Star Weekly*, a family magazine very popular among Tionghoa, making Siau a household name in the 1950s and 60s. His popular comic strip came to an end when the New Order government banned expressions of Chinese culture. Years later he resumed his work briefly under the pen name Otto Swastika ("Swastika" was a reference to his initials "STK") He passed away in May 1988.



Siau Tik Kwie, creator of the *Sie Djin Koei* comics.







Put On comic. ©Kho Wan Gie/Sin Po

## PUT ON:

### EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE BUMBLING BABA

Another iconic Tionghoa comic was *Put On* by Kho Wan Gie, the first Tionghoa cartoonist to gain prominence. He was born in Indramayu, West Java in 1908.

His cartoons first appeared in 1930 in *Sin Po*, a Malay-language newspaper for the ethnic Chinese. A year later, he launched the *Put On* comic strip, which was published on Fridays and Saturdays.

The title character, *Put On* was inspired by Jiggs from George McManus's American comic strip, *Bringing up Father*.

Many believe that the name "Put On" is derived from a Hokkien term meaning "an active man". However, Kho stated that the title originates from two English words, which conveys his hope that the comic strip would always be "on top" of the reading list of middle class Indonesians of Chinese descent.

*Put On* follows the exploits of a tubby young Tionghoa baba who lives with his mother, Nee Nio. He comes across as clumsy, bumbling, and often faces mishaps in life but always comes away with a smile on his face. He is a jolly chap who takes life's ups and downs in his stride.

The comic strip also features a supporting cast - his younger brothers Si Tong and Si Peng, his friend On Tek, his girlfriend, Dortji, is a Dutch-mannered ethnic Chinese, as well as first-generation immigrants A Liuk and A Kong.

Didi Kwartanada, a scholar of Chinese Indonesian history, explains *Put On*'s universal appeal. "He's very likeable; always humorous and candid even when faced with *swee-siao* (misfortune). The comic is also satire - it pokes fun at social stratification and snobbery among some Peranakan Chinese Indonesians during that era."

Journalist, Agus Dermawan T. of The Jakarta Post writes: "*Put On* is helpful, empathic and mingles with all ethnic groups. He loves Indonesia despite the government's discriminatory regulations against people of Chinese descent. In one comic strip, *Put On* shows his willingness to help Indonesia regain West Irian Jaya (now Papua) from the Dutch in 1961. *Put On* was such an iconic figure that people often used the term "Koh Put On" (Brother Put On) to describe an overweight and naïve man."

*Put On* was first published in the 1931 and remained popular for over thirty years. However, the beloved comic strip came to an end in 1965 following the Suharto government's purge of ethnic Chinese. Prominent Tionghoa artists and figures became targets. Although Kho wasn't engaged in politics, he withdrew from producing comics. Kho passed away in 1983.

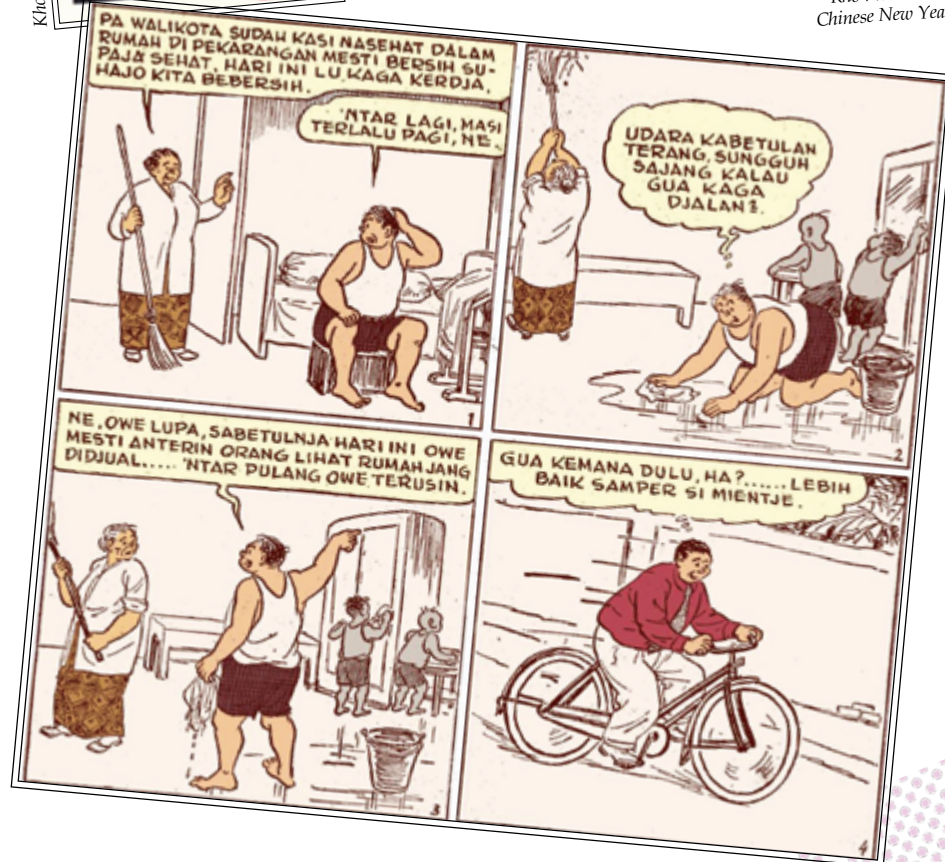
*Put On* has inspired similar comic strips, such as *Si Tolol* (The Fool) in *Star Magazine* and *Oh Koen* in *Star Weekly*.



Put On comic strip. ©Kho Wan Gie/Sin Po



Kho Wan Gie, creator of Put On.



Goei Kwat Siong, creator of Si A Piao.



Kho Wan Gie and Goei Kwat Siong would create a special comic series yearly for Chinese New Year, which sometimes featured both Put On and Si A Piao together. ©Kho Wan Gie and Goei Kwat Siong/Star Weekly

### A NOD TO THE FUTURE

In July 2019, The Peranakan Association Singapore organised the inaugural Baba Nyonya Literary Festival. Tickets sold out almost instantly and the 2-day festival was a great success. In October, Baba Kenneth Chan published *Chrita Baba*, the first work of fiction in Baba Malay to be published in almost 100 years. Could there be a renaissance for Peranakan literature? ♦

## SI A PIAO:

### THE CLUELESS SCHOOLBOY

*Si A Piao* is a comic strip by Goei Kwat Siong, a school teacher who was born in 1919 in Pekalongan on the north coast of Java.

*Si A Piao* was published in the children's section of *Star Weekly*. The main character, a schoolboy named A Piao, is a kind and helpful boy who loves to read, but is sometimes forgetful. He is so caring and lovable that it puts him in amusing situations - like watering plants in the rain.

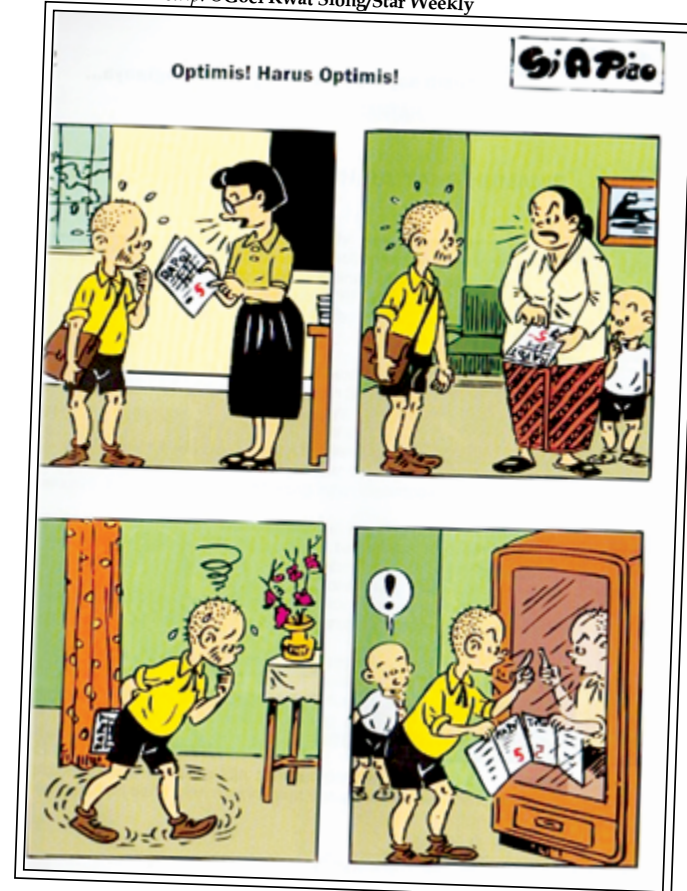
Unlike *Sie Djin Koei* and *Put On*, *Si A Piao* comics did not have any dialogue. Goei did this on purpose so that even young children could enjoy the comic. The lack of text added to its appeal, making it very popular among adult readers as well.

It has been suggested that Goei was inspired by *Sanmao* (Three Hairs) a popular Chinese cartoon character created by Zhang Leiping in 1935, and *Henry*, an American comic strip first published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1932.

Interestingly, both Kho Wan Gie and Goei Kwat Siong would always present special comic strips of *Put On* and *Si A Piao* for the Lunar New Year - from the first day of the New Year until Chap Goh Meh (the 15th day of the New Year). In times of political suppression, this was perhaps their way of reaching out to their Tionghoa brethren to add a little cheer during the holiday season.

*Si A Piao* came to an abrupt end in 1960 when *Star Weekly* was banned by the Indonesian government during the purge of ethnic Chinese culture.

Si A Piao comic strip. ©Goei Kwat Siong/Star Weekly





# finding gems in a forest

NYONYA JENNIFER LIM

UNCOVERS HERITAGE  
TILES IN BUKIT BROWN  
CEMETERY

Photos by Finbarr Fallon.

**M**ILKMAIDS, JAPANESE landscapes and mythical Chinese creatures are some of the surprising vintage images uncovered in the Singapore Heritage Tile Project which I launched in May 2019.

My family and I moved to Singapore in 2012. Like many newcomers, I first admired decorative tiles on conserved shophouses in areas such as Katong and Emerald Hill.

I then spotted some on a shophouse previously occupied by my great-grandfather Lim Nee Yam before discovering similar examples at the Lim Clan Nine Dragon Hall Mutual Help Association on Cantonment Road, established by Hokkien and Peranakan members including Lim Boon Keng in 1928. However, it was the exhumation of my great-grandfather at Bukit Brown Cemetery that triggered a serious study of these intriguing objects.

Inspired by vintage tiles found during an exploration of my Peranakan heritage, I wanted to learn more about these tiles from the Industrial Revolution. My research has found a rich mosaic of styles and subjects, particularly at spaces connected to the Straits Chinese in Singapore.

An eclectic blend of different styles might be said to be one hallmark of Peranakan culture. The wide variety of imported tiles I've found certainly seem to reflect a strong local affinity for European aesthetics. The use of these decorative surfaces on some homes, temples and tombs of Straits Chinese shows an openness to outside trends, and the ability to adapt foreign applications to suit local customs.

Bukit Brown Cemetery may seem an unusual place to view antique tiles, but the large number of tiled tombs I've come across makes me consider it somewhat of an 'outdoor museum'.

The cemetery was one of the first public burial sites for all Chinese regardless of their

dialect group and opened in 1922. From my field trips, I estimate that around 5% of some 100,000 tombs there are decorated with tiles imported from England, Belgium, France and Japan up until WW2.

The earliest tiles at the cemetery are single colour 'transfer' tiles from about 1914 and represent the style of the Arts and Crafts Movement (1880-1920). Technical developments later enabled multiple colours to be rendered in mostly floral or highly ornate stylised designs. The availability of Japanese tiles during the interim wartime period enabled greater affordability, and many of these tiles were inspired by the tombs of this era tend to feature organic designs of Art Nouveau (1890-1910). Unlike shophouses, where renovations were often carried out in stages, tombs provide a relatively accurate dating of the tiles or at least a record of when the tiles were installed.

The tomb of my Peranakan great-grandfather, who passed away in 1939, has tile panels depicting popular images of peacocks, landscape, ducks and goldfish. Other unusual motifs include fairies, farmyard animals, cranes and cockatoos. Japanese tile makers tailored their products to include traditional Chinese scenes and symbolic fruit such as peaches, pomegranates and Buddha hand finger citron. Alongside traditional Chinese tomb architecture, the discovery of tiled panels of Japanese farmhouses and Dutch windmills has been a fascinating find.

I believe that these tiles represent a strand of Singapore's complex and multicultural DNA. Their popularity in some of the most intimate spaces of the living and the deceased also shows an enduring love of beauty. The international story of heritage tiles can help connect people from around the world, and it's my hope that the tiles of Bukit Brown Cemetery will continue to be a source of inspiration and pride for Singapore. ♦



Scan this QR Code to learn more about Jennifer's Singapore Heritage Tile Project and watch a video about uncovering tiles at Bukit Brown.

AUSTRALIAN-PERANAKAN ARTIST JENNIFER LIM IS THE AUTHOR OF AN UPCOMING BOOK ABOUT SINGAPORE'S HERITAGE TILES AND CAN BE REACHED AT: WWW.JENNIFERLIMART.COM



1 This pastoral scene, found on a tile panel of a Bukit Brown tomb, features a milkmaid at work. Such themes seem to reflect a strong local affinity for European aesthetics.

2 Australian-Peranakan artist Jennifer Lim at her great-grandparents' tomb in Bukit Brown Cemetery. Inspired by the tiles she found on this grave, she launched the Singapore Heritage Tile Project in May 2019.

3 A large panel depicting cockatoos in flight found on the altar table of a Bukit Brown tomb.

4 Floral tiles such as these Art Nouveau tiles found on a grave in Bukit Brown Cemetery were popularly used to adorn both homes and tombs.

5 Could this be Mount Fuji? This mountain scene is one of the eclectic images found on tiled tombs.





OVER A DECADE AGO, WHILE WORKING ON our PhDs at La Trobe University in Melbourne, my friend Sheau Shi, her husband and I, had many conversations about the nyonys. Feminist Sheau Shi was fascinated by the power that the nyonys wielded in the narratives of my family. When *The Little Nyonya* was released in 2008, I urged Sheau Shi to publish a paper with me on the TV series. This has finally materialised.

We interviewed nine nyonys aged 30 to 90 years old in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. The parents of all the respondents were Peranakan. There was some resistance to the stereotype of the *garang* (fierce) nyonya, yet we observed that narratives of feisty nyonys emerged in all the interviews.

Borrowing from Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer's (2012) work, *Gender and Popular Culture*, we explored the cultural meanings and constructions of the Nyonya by identifying gendered patterns, identities and discourses. We identified three cultural constructions of the nyonya: *garang/li hai* (crafty, manipulative), *toh tiap* (bullied and victimized) and *poon su* (resourceful) from the *The Little Nyonya*, and asked our respondents if they could relate and discern these cultural constructions in their families.

The interviews were replete with narratives of these characterisations, particularly with the older respondents who experienced or witnessed concubinage—the *cherita rumah tangga* (household tales) of the extended Peranakan family living under one roof.

I was told that when my *Kong Cho's* (Great-grandfather's)

will was read, my Mama (Grandma) stormed out cursing, "*Anak sundal suma dapat harta! Suma tak selamat!*" (Children of whores who have inherited the estate! All of you will know no peace)!"

All she wanted was her mother's *kerosang piring*. Mama was the eldest and only child of the *kahwin sam kai*, the legitimate traditional Peranakan marriage that was officiated before the altars of *Ti Kong* (the Jade Emperor of Heaven).

Concubines had no such nuptials. *Kong Cho* calculatingly brought his last concubine into our *rumah* on Neil Road in Singapore when his mother died, making him the patriarch of the house. Mama was the eldest child, but as a daughter, she anticipated that she would not get a share of her father's estate. She had hoped to at least inherit a piece of jewellery, but the *kerosang piring* eventually went to Mama's half-brother, the eldest son born of the first concubine. For my *tachi's* (sister's) wedding, Mama borrowed the *kerosang* from *Ku Kong* (maternal granduncle) to wear. My friends were dazzled, they said, "Wah! Your Mama is glittering!"

This family story is not in the paper, but the narratives from our interviews have similar threads. Employing Sylvia Walby's theoretical framework of private and public patriarchy, specifically through the structures of household production and culture, we analysed the situation of the nyonys, arguing that they were privileged in Peranakan matrifocal culture. Our argument is that the nyonys were not so much oppressed by men but by women—by the nyonys themselves—working within systemic patriarchy.

One respondent articulated: History repeats itself. Women: we are our worst enemies. The Babas left the women to run the home, [they] were the breadwinners and didn't care what happened between the females at home... These marriages were match-made and not for love. The woman's role was to reproduce and to bring up sons. Love [as we now know it], where there is care and mutual respect, was not something that featured in their lives. The woman was there to be the mother, to make sure the surname lives on... Mothers-in-law would [abuse] their daughters-in-law [because their own] mothers-in-law gave them hell.

Khoo Joo Ee writes in *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History*:

While the public domain was dominated by the Babas, the home was more often ruled by a strong-willed nyonya... She was managing director par excellence... of the Baba Nyonya residence. Upon marriage, the demure young Nyonya... found herself thrust into a responsible position which increased in difficulty as she embraced motherhood. Added to the family duties were social obligations befitting her status in society. By the time she became a mother-in-law and grandmother, she would have acquired confidence in social matters. When she rose to the position of matriarch in charge of running an extended family, the Nyonya would have emerged as an assertive, even bossy, woman... The matriarchs assumed precedence over their sons upon the death of their husbands. While wielding authority, Nyonya mothers doted upon their sons, and the result was that many a mature Baba, though he had status and was respected in the outside world, often continued to submit to an uncompromising mother at home.

The hidden supposition behind this image of the poised Nyonya is the practice of concubinage, of which little is spoken.

Concubines fulfilled the role of bearing sons to continue the patrilineal family lineage. But reality is more complex. In my family, both the legitimate nyonya principal wife and the favoured Cantonese concubine produced only one daughter each, yet my Mama inherited nothing whereas the concubine's daughter's son was treated as a *chu-chu tulang* (patrilineal grandson), when he was really a *chu-chu-kulit* (matrilateral grandson) – he enjoyed dividends from the estate for life; all my Mama wanted was her mother's *kerosang*.

Whether one is a first or second class citizen in a Peranakan household depended not only on your parentage, but on one's appeal in the eyes of the patriarch. Therefore, being *garang/li hai, toh tiap* and *poon su* were necessary. Whenever we visited the family home, we *mesti masuk pintu belakang tak boleh masuk pintu depan* (we had to enter through the back door and not the front) – class distinction was a familial reality!

These realities are captured in *The Little Nyonya*. My friends have asked, "Isn't it a bit far-fetched?" I know all too well otherwise. Popular representations bear out the nyonya matriarch as an indomitable force – from Queeny Chang's *Memories of a Nonya*, to *wayang Peranakan* matriarchs, to the iconic *Emily of Emerald Hill* who all embody the cultural constructions of the a nyonya.

This paper is inspired by Mama's memories and legacy. One compliment that I'll always treasure is from an aunt who tasted my cooking and pronounced, "Your Mama would be proud of you!" ♦



Scan the code to read Baba David Neo's full paper.

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# LAGU

## for the Soul

NYONYA RACHEL ONG LEARNS ABOUT HER PERANAKAN HERITAGE THROUGH ETHNOMUSICOLOGY  
Photos courtesy of Rachel Ong

I BELIEVE MANY OF US are quite familiar with discovering our Peranakan roots at a certain point in our lives. It often happens serendipitously and is accompanied by a yearning to preserve the culture itself. We have seen many chefs recreating their family recipes, collectors gathering knowledge about material culture, and memoirs about growing up in a Peranakan home.

I am a fifth-generation Peranakan from Melaka. Growing up, I was taught that Malaysians are categorised into three main races - Malay, Chinese and Indian. I never gave much thought about my Peranakan heritage apart from feeling ashamed that my Baba Malay was 'wrong', as opposed to speaking 'proper' Bahasa Malaysia in school.

The interest and self-discovery of my Peranakan heritage started when I was pursuing an undergraduate degree in music at the University of Malaya. I was exposed to subjects that dealt with music and cultural studies which opened my worldview to understanding the meaning of music-making in different cultural contexts.

This spurred me to explore the Peranakan music culture. I discovered Ethnomusicology, and married my interest in music and cultural studies, while learning more about my heritage. My research examines the cultural identity representation of the Peranakan community in Melaka through their musical activities.

### PERANAKAN MUSIC THROUGH THE AGES

I interviewed different groups of people in the community and attended Peranakan events to learn more about music in Peranakan culture. Apart from the material aspect, the intangible heritage of Baba Nyonya culture lies in the music, song repertoires, the love for *joget* (dancing), singing and philanthropic efforts.

All these are encompassed into choir groups, dance groups and a contemporary pop-band with five to six members performing at Peranakan and non-Peranakan events.

This has become the norm for the Peranakan community, not only in Melaka but also in

Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang. But why have these groups only cropped up in the past three decades?

Studying old photographs, newspaper articles, and interviews with community members helped me understand that in the early 20th century, social dancing and involvement in musical bands such as minstrel groups like The Nightingales, orchestras and string bands that played to the latest Anglo-European hits, *keroncong*, and *ronggeng* music were part of the community's social life.

Their taste in music reflected their cosmopolitan identity in the British Straits Settlement. However, I was not the first to look into this aspect of Peranakan musical culture.

Singing and music-making has always been part of Peranakan gatherings, private or public. Through my study, I learned that although old swing bands and *keroncong* bands are long gone, through the Peranakan song repertoire, the new performing traditions such as choir groups, band music, and dance groups are actually a continuity of the past heritage.

### CONTINUING A MUSICAL LEGACY

For example, the songs *Burung Kakak Tua*, *Rasa Sayang*, *Trek Tek Tek* were popular music from the early 20th century. They have now become standards in the Peranakan song repertoire.

The oldest Peranakan association in Melaka, Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) eventually became the subject for my case study. The association plays an important role in the representing Peranakan identity in Melaka. It acts as a focal point for the congregation of the dispersed Peranakan community to perform their cultural expression in the form of musical activities and performances.

This is done through its three groups: the BaNya choir (1993), The Melodians band (1997), and newly formed D'Bunga Rampay dance group (2016). As the song repertoire grew, new lyrics were written and paired with popular tunes such as the Indonesian hit song Oh Papa, Dja. As the songs provided familiarity, a setting

of new lyrics in Baba Malay, further enforced the Peranakan identity.

Another interesting aspect I discovered about the musical culture in PPCM is that genealogy acts as a pillar in the formation of the musical groups and song repertoire.

The members of the now disbanded Melodians band, and ex-conductor of the BaNya choir share family relations. Their genealogy can be traced back to the first President of PPCM (then known as Straits Chinese British Association, Melaka), Mr Lee Keng Liat.

Apart from that, I also learned that socio-political factors affect the way the culture is presented publicly. The BaNya choir and the Melodians band from PPCM have been performing for many Peranakan and non-Peranakan events such as state events, private parties and corporate events. Later, another dance group called Kebaya was formed in 1996. They performed solely for government events to represent the Peranakan identity.

The declaration of Melaka as a UNESCO Heritage Site has pushed Peranakan culture into the limelight through tourism and more state-sanctioned activities. The increasing popularity of Peranakan culture led the community to adopt dance performance as a way to publicly represent their culture and identity.

It is clear that nostalgia is the driving force for the search of Peranakan identity in the present day. Peranakan identity is now popularly presented through music and dance as these make the culture accessible to a wider audience.

A researcher who writes on Peranakan music culture told me, "Peranakan culture is always evolving, so why shouldn't its music evolve too? That is what makes the culture unique and adaptable through time."

Through this ethnographic journey, I have been privileged to learn so much and I'm glad to document more of our musical past for the preservation of our heritage. ♦

Peranakan dance group, D'Bunga Rampay delights the crowd with their graceful movements.



The BaNya choir during a Chinese New Year performance.



The Melodians Band were invited to perform at the first anniversary of the Peranakan Museum in Singapore with Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong as Guest of Honour.



Melakan Peranakan minstrel group, The Nightingales in 1935. Peranakan music during the colonial era was heavily influenced by Anglo-European hits.



NYONYA RACHEL ONG RECENTLY COMPLETED HER MASTERS OF PERFORMING ARTS (MUSIC) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA. MAJORING IN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY, SHE CAN BE REACHED AT: RACHEL.ONG7189@GMAIL.COM



NYONYA LINDA  
CHEE CELEBRATES  
THE RICHNESS  
AND VIBRANCY OF  
TRADITIONAL RECIPES  
Photos by Colin Chee.  
Food Styling by Linda Chee.

# COLOURS OF THE NEW YEAR

**I**T IS THE TIME OF THE YEAR TO CELEBRATE. Every *Taon Baru* (Lunar New Year) brings an air of anticipation and a feeling of joy. Brightly-lit wet markets packed to the gills near midnight, stalls overflowing with produce, the cackles of haggling, the riot of vibrant blooms and pails full of pussy willow – this once-a-year spectacle never fails to thrill me!

Since I was young, after-dinner trips to the wet markets to load up for cooking, or just to soak up the festive mood, has been an entrenched ritual. As a child brought up in the kitchen, I was the *sous chef de cuisine* to my dearest Mummy the executive chef, who passed on in 2016. She entrusted me to prepare the ingredients so that she could cook our New Year *makan besair*. Plating the food was my responsibility. Each and every dish was garnished to provide a feast for the eyes.

To my dearest Daddy who managed the decor, I was the assistant decorator. I trained under him to arrange the flowers, tie the red *chai ki* and cut the red paper. He was an orchid hobbyist and our backyard provided the bounty – brilliant spider and tiger orchids, sunny oncidiums, dendrobiums, vandas and the occasional cattleyas, and feathery asparagus ferns that grew wild in between the orchid pots.

New curtains, cushion covers, coasters, tablecloths...the colours of the New Year translated into an absolutely beautiful house. It was an upbringing that was ingrained into my nyonya psyche.

The early years of my life are reflected in three traditional dishes I have chosen for this New Year issue of Dalam Dapor – *hee pio* or fish maw soup, *ngo hiang* or five-spice meat roll and egg salad. They are a good combination for a small *makan*, partnered with the right chilli sauce. This is a balanced meal: meat, seafood and vegetable, all in. It is not possible to include the other traditional dishes that make up the New Year *tok panjang* or long table in just four pages – I would have to write a book! ♦

## SAMBAL BELACHAN

### INGREDIENTS

½ kg fresh red chillies, chopped roughly  
2 slices *belachan*, dried in the sun or dry-fried in a pan  
4-5 *lemo perot*, or leprous lime leaves, washed,  
wiped dry and torn into smaller pieces  
10 *lemo kasturi*, or fresh limes  
Pinch of salt

### METHOD

Blend the whole mixture if you want to save time. Otherwise, blend halfway and transfer to a mortar and pound with the pestle to finish off the process. Make sure you smash the seeds to add flavour and bite to the *sambal*. If you like your *sambal* fiery, add a few bird's eye chillies. Squeeze in the lime juice and mix in well. Store in a bottle or spoon into little ziplock bags to freeze until you need to take out a portion. Or you can leave out the juice and serve the *sambal* with freshly cut limes each time you have it with a meal. *Shiok!*

## HEEPIO (FISHMAW) SOUP

The ingredients in *hee pio* or fish maw soup present an attractive flotilla of colours, with rich flavours in a robust stock. While my late mother, Low Suan Neo used only pork stock, I have combined the delicate chicken with the robustness of pork to create the umami depth in the soup. This recipe takes much time to prepare. The meatballs and stock can be made days earlier.

### INGREDIENTS

1 large fish maw, about 8 inches long, soaked overnight until soft  
½ head cabbage, cut into large pieces  
2 carrots, sliced thinly  
4 eggs, beaten  
300 gm fish paste, fresh from the wet market (enough for 3 egg rolls)  
1/2 kg pork bones for stock  
2 chicken carcasses for stock  
1-2 tbsp white peppercorns  
At least 20 small meatballs,  
using the same meat mixture as in the *ngo hiang* recipe  
At least 20 small fishballs, fresh from the wet market (optional)  
Salt and pepper to taste  
Chinese parsley to garnish

### STOCK

Bring a big pot of water to boil. Put in the pork bones and chicken carcasses and boil for a minute. Pour out the water. This 'rinse' will help to get rid of the impurities and porky smell. Another trick is to include half a green apple in the next boil.

Refill with enough water to cover the bones. Bring the stock to boil then simmer over low heat till you see only little bubbles. Cover the pot. Simmer for at least 2 hours until the bones are soft. Press down the bones with a potato press to get the full flavour out of the bones. Strain the stock into another clean pot, using a muslin cloth (or best, a cotton baby napkin) instead of a sieve to get very clean stock without any sediment.

### EGG ROLLS

Beat the egg. Add a dash of pepper. Using a flat frying pan with just a little oil, pour in enough egg to make a crepe-like omelette over medium heat. You should be able to make 4-5 crepes. Cool completely.

Dab the crepe with a kitchen towel to make it as dry as possible. Spread the fish paste over the entire crepe to the perimeter with a long palette or flat knife carefully so as not to break the skin. Roll from one end and press firmly but gently to make the paste stick to the skin. Steam in a wok for about 10 minutes until cooked. Cool completely before cutting diagonally into thick slices.

### SOUP

Bring the stock to the boil. Add white peppercorns in a white tea bag for convenience so that you can scoop them out easily instead of having to fish out the little seeds before serving. Cut the fish maw into bite-sized pieces and add to the soup. Bring to boil and simmer over low heat for about a couple of hours until the fish maw is soft.

When the fish maw is tender, add the meatballs, carrots and cabbage to the soup and cook for another 10 minutes. Add the fishballs and turn the heat off when they float to the surface. Add salt and pepper to taste. The soup is ready. Add the slices of egg roll into the soup or place them on top of each serving.

Serve piping hot and garnish with parsley.  
Best enjoyed with *sambal belachan*!





## NGO HIANG (MEAT ROLLS)

Ngo hiang is one of my husband Colin's favourite dishes that I learnt from my late mother-in-law, Ada Law. Her version was chockfull with prawns, hand-chopped pork for the bite, water chestnuts and aromatic five-spice powder that she lovingly prepared herself. While I've specified quantities for the filling, you can *agak agak* or estimate as desired.

### INGREDIENTS

1 packet beancurd sheets

### MEAT MIXTURE

1 kg *ngor huay bak*, or shoulder pork, coarsely minced or chopped  
500g small prawns, deveined and cut into pieces  
10-15 water chestnuts, peeled and diced  
5-10 shallots, finely sliced  
5 garlic, finely chopped  
1 red chilli, diced  
4-5 tbsp spring onion or scallion, chopped

### SEASONING

4 tbsp light soya sauce  
1 tbsp sesame oil  
1 tsp sugar  
1 tsp salt  
1 tsp white pepper  
4 tbsp cornflour  
1 tsp five-spice powder

### METHOD

Using a deep bowl, mix the meat mixture well with the seasoning. Wipe each large beancurd sheet with a clean and slightly damp dishcloth to remove some of the saltiness. Using a sharp knife, cut into three smaller sheets. Spoon out enough meat onto one end of a sheet. Spread evenly across. Roll a bit to cover and fold in the sides. Wrap neatly like a springroll. Dab a little water along the edge to stick well.

Steam over high heat in a wok for about 10-15 minutes until meat is cooked. You will see the skin looking a bit shrivelled. Remove from wok and leave it to cool and dry out. Fry lightly till golden brown in a flat non-stick frying pan. Cut diagonally into thick slices and serve with garlic chilli and plum sauce.

*Ngo hiang* can be made in advance. Freeze in a ziplock bag for up to a month. Pan fry before serving.

## GARLIC CHILLI

### INGREDIENTS

1kg fresh red chillies  
½ kg garlic  
½ kg coarse white sugar  
900ml rice vinegar  
4tsp salt  
6-8 fresh *lemo kasturi*, or limes for juice

### METHOD

Blend the chillies and garlic finely until they form a thick mixture. Put all ingredients into a cooking pot and simmer over low fire until little bubbles appear.

The colour of the chilli mixture will turn darker as the sugar caramelizes slightly. This should take about 10 – 15 minutes. Cool completely. Transfer into sterilised glass bottles and refrigerate.

Keeps well for at least 2 months.

## EGG SALAD

The egg salad was a favourite of my late father, Louis Tan. It was the closest thing to an Anglophile salad in those days. Slices of egg, tomato and onion are properly layered on a folded square of local salad leaf, topped off with a button of red cut chilli. When serving, drizzle over with sourish Worcestershire sauce. Sprinkle fried *heybee* (dried prawns) for the crunch.

### INGREDIENTS

3 eggs, hard boiled, sliced with an egg slicer  
3 large red tomatoes, sliced evenly across  
1 large purple onion, sliced evenly into circles  
1 fresh red chilli, sliced into circles  
1 dozen even-sized fresh local salad leaves, washed, drained and dabbed dry  
½ cup *heybee*, soaked and finely blended  
1 cup oil

### SAUCE

4 tbsp Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce  
2 tbsp water  
2 tbsp mirin (optional)

### METHOD

Wipe each salad leaf dry. Slice off the whitish spine and cut off a portion from the stalk end. Fold the leafy end into a square. Layer with a slice of onion, tomato and egg. Continue with the rest to fill a plate. Top off each stack with a slice of chilli.

Heat up the oil in a wok over a high fire. When hot, fry the *heybee* and stir constantly. Lower the heat to medium and continue to stir to dry out the foam. Lower the heat further if necessary to prevent burning. When the *heybee* is golden brown, which should take less than 5 minutes, switch off the fire. Drain the fried mixture in a sieve.

When ready to serve, sprinkle the *heybee* over the salad and drizzle the sauce over. Or leave aside to spoon over the salad individually as desired.





# KUEH KUEH

## WE LOVE YOU

NYONYA JOANNE TAN LOOKS AT THE  
QUINTESSENTIAL KUEH TAON BARU  
Photos courtesy of Nyonya Elizabeth Ng unless otherwise stated.

TRADITIONALLY, MAKING *KUEH* forms a very integral part of the Peranakan DNA, more so with Chinese New Year around the corner. Armies of grandmas, mothers, aunties and daughters assemble as early as two months before the Taon Baru to prepare these bite-sized treats. 🍷



KUEH TAIR

(PINEAPPLE TARTS)

A Chinese New Year staple, *kueh tair* is symbolic of wealth and prosperity. The Hokkien term for pineapple, *ong lai*, literally means “luck come”. So load up on luck by consuming these delicious morsels. You’ll find it hard to stop at one!

Pineapple tarts these days come in all shapes and sizes and are enjoyed by all, not just Peranakans. But what makes the nyonya *kueh tair* stand out is the effort that goes into the *alus* (refined) presentation. The traditional nyonya pineapple tart has a latticed pattern made from carefully crimped, fine strips of butter pastry.

Veteran kueh maker, Nyonya Elizabeth Ng remembers that New Year *kueh*-making was like an assembly line with each person doing one task. The more the merrier, with incessant chatting going on. Making these crimped pastry strips was very tricky and when it was her turn to make them, she learnt the hard way by having her knuckles rapped for making strips that were too thick.

KUEH



BANGKIT

Made of coconut cream, sugar and tapioca flour, this chalky white *kering kueh* (cookie) is a must-have in Peranakan households for the Taon Baru. Because white is not an auspicious colour for the Peranakans, a red dot is often added for luck.

Originally made with wooden moulds and pinched into shape, today cookie cutters are used and the dough is clipped to get pretty designs. Either way, this is a delicately crispy cookie that melts in your mouth.



KUEH BELANDA OR KUEH KAPIT (LOVE LETTERS)

*Kueh kapit* mould from Penang. Photo by Baba Christopher Tan.

There are variations of this *kueh*, which is essentially a paper thin, crispy, flat waffle cooked with iron tongs over a charcoal fire. A master *kueh belanda* maker can handle eight pairs of tongs at once! Singapore and Melaka Peranakans roll the hot waffle into a cigar shape before it cools and call it *kueh belanda* (literally, Dutch cake) as Dutch *rollechies* are believed to be the inspiration for this *kueh*. Penang Peranakans fold the flat waffle into quarters and call it *kueh kapit*, *kapit* being the Malay word for “pressed together”.

Elizabeth has been making *kueh belanda* since she was a child and fondly remembers her grandma pouring the batter onto both faces of the iron tongs because as a young girl she had neither strength nor patience to press the tongs tightly enough to ensure that there were no air bubbles.

The *kueh* was cooked over a charcoal fire, with embers from the burning coals flying everywhere. Elizabeth used a hand-held fan to fan away all the *abok* (soot and embers). Once the batter was cooked, her grandma used a knife to gently lift the waffle from the tongs, and quickly rolled it before it set.

KUEH BOLU

OR KUEH BAHULU

Photo by Nyonya Joanne Tan.



This *kueh* is similar to the French *madeleine* and Portuguese *queque*. It is a bite-sized sponge cake cooked in a brass mould on a charcoal stove. After the eggy batter is poured into the mould, it is covered with a heavy lid and hot coals are placed on top, so the batter is cooked from both top and bottom. The perfect *kueh bolu* is crisp on the outside yet light and fluffy on the inside.

Elizabeth remembers whisking the batter by hand with a conical wire whisk - a surefire way to build strong arm muscles!



KUEH

BAKOL

*Kueh bakol* is the most important of the Taon Baru *kueh* because it is food for the gods. It is offered to the Kitchen God before the Lunar New Year in the hopes that he will make a good report about the family to the Emperor of Heaven. It is believed that bad report would result in bad luck for the coming year.

*Kueh bakol* gets its name from the little baskets in which the *kueh* was traditionally made. The baskets are lined with many layers of blanched banana leaves before the glutinous rice flour batter is poured in and steamed for over 12 hours.

There are several *pantang* (taboos) which are still observed today when making this sweet and sticky *kueh*. The *kueh* is often prepared by a single person without the help of others. There must be no talking in the kitchen while the *kueh* is being made. A pregnant woman or one who is menstruating must not make this *kueh* nor touch any of the ingredients or utensils. Some offer fruit and light joss sticks to appease the Fire God of the stove so that the *kueh* will turn out well.

In Singapore, *kueh bakol* is also commonly known as *nian gao* - literally, New Year cake. The words *nian* and *gao* are homonyms for a “high year”, meaning great success in all endeavours.

KUEH



KU MERAH

Literally translated as ‘red tortoise cake’, this *kueh* is a must for auspicious occasions as it symbolises longevity and good luck. It is used for prayers and eaten on the Jade Emperor’s birthday on eighth night of the Lunar New Year, and also during celebrations such as a baby’s first moon and birthdays. The *kueh* is Hokkien in origin but is also very popular among other Chinese communities.



KUEH SEMPERIT

This pretty flower-shaped cookie must be one of the simplest *kueh* to make. Simply mix all the ingredients together then pipe it out using a scallop-edged cookie mould which looks like a giant syringe. Embellish with a tiny piece of glazed cherry and bake. The result is a crispy, buttery flower-shaped cookie which is lovely to look at and nibble on.

Elizabeth reckons that this *kueh* was inspired by Scottish shortbread, which is very similar in taste and texture. Unable to pronounce shortbread, the locals in the former Straits Settlements created their own version of this cookie and called it ‘semperit’ instead.



# PERANAKAN WEDDINGS IN MELAKA

**BABA DAVID NEO**  
REVIEWS THE LATE  
CHARLES K.K. CHUA'S  
BOOK ON WEDDING  
RITES AND RITUALS

PUBLISHED  
POSTHUMOUSLY,  
Baba Charles K.K.  
Chua's book, *Baba  
Nyonya Heritage:  
Peranakan Weddings  
From a Malaccan*

*Perspective* is the personal story of his family weddings over several decades. The traditional 12-day Peranakan Chinese wedding was once a lavish occasion for the community to re-visit age old rites and traditions.

A sixth-generation Peranakan, Charles was the caretaker of his family's ancestral home, responsible for maintaining the physical building, as well as keeping Peranakan traditions alive. A retired architect, he had an eye for artistic detail, which is evident in this beautiful coffee table book filled with archival photos of the Chua and Ee (his maternal family) weddings. He would restore, repair and even create items used in Peranakan weddings.

The book is divided into seven chapters: The Family; Japanese Occupation and the Decline of the Babas; Pre-Wedding; Wedding Day; Post-Wedding; Staged Weddings; and *Biar Mati Anak, Jangan Mati Adat*.

It fills in the gaps of Baba Cheo Kim Ban's *A Baba Wedding* with many meaningful anecdotes

and descriptions of long-forgotten practices. For example, in Chapter Three, Charles describes how two coins are placed under the four legs of the *ranjang loksan* (wedding bed) to bless the newlyweds with prosperity.

I found the first chapter, which describes the Chua and Ee families, intriguing. The second chapter on weddings during the Japanese Occupation is doleful. Even such an auspicious occasion is marred by the sombre reality of war. Charles describes how the traditional 12-day festivities are truncated to one day for his cousin's wedding on 10 January 1942 for obvious and practical reasons.

While traditional Peranakan weddings had become rare by the 1970s, Charles writes in Chapter Six about the joy of "renewing" his vows to his wife as they staged a Peranakan wedding for Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh, when they visited Malaysia in 1972.

Through this book, Charles leaves us his legacy of first-hand knowledge of Peranakan weddings. Many artefacts found in the book including the impressive family collection of Peranakan wedding paraphernalia can be viewed at the Malacca Heritage Centre which he had set up. My favourite is an exquisitely crafted *sireh darah* (seen on page 127) that Charles created himself. ♦



The *sireh darah* made by  
Baba Charles K.K. Chua.

BABA NYONYA HERITAGE:  
PERANAKAN WEDDINGS FROM  
A MALACCAN PERSPECTIVE  
BY CHARLES K. K. CHUA WAS  
PUBLISHED IN 2019 BY THE  
AUTHOR'S FAMILY. TO PURCHASE  
THE BOOK OR VISIT THE MALACCA  
HERITAGE CENTRE, EMAIL: MHC@  
MALACCAHERITAGE.COM.  
FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT:  
WWW.MALACCAHERITAGE.COM



## CHRITA CHRITA BABA

**NYONYA NATALIE  
CHEAH** REVIEWS  
THE FIRST BOOK OF  
BABA MALAY FICTION  
PUBLISHED IN ALMOST  
100 YEARS

*CHRITA CHRITA BABA* is a collection of short stories by Baba Kenneth Y.K. Chan, written in both Baba Malay and English, and presented side-by-side on facing pages.

I first met Ken at the *Mari Kita Chakap Baba* class by the Gunong Sayang Association. Both he and his wife Amelyn are language teachers and have a deep interest in Baba Malay. Little did I know that they would author what would eventually become the textbook for the class. When I heard that his next book would feature folklore from Southeast Asia, I was thrilled. No book in Baba Malay had been published for almost 100 years!

The stories are adaptations of familiar fairytales with a twist. For example, a story reminiscent of *Little Red Riding Hood* has a cheeky yet horrific twist that includes a village uprising.

As with many folktales, the stories revolve around teaching a moral lesson. *Chritha Chritha Baba* may be seen as a successor to the *Chritha Dulukala* novels published in the early 1900s, adaptations of Chinese folktales and legends translated into Baba Malay to appeal to Peranakan readers.

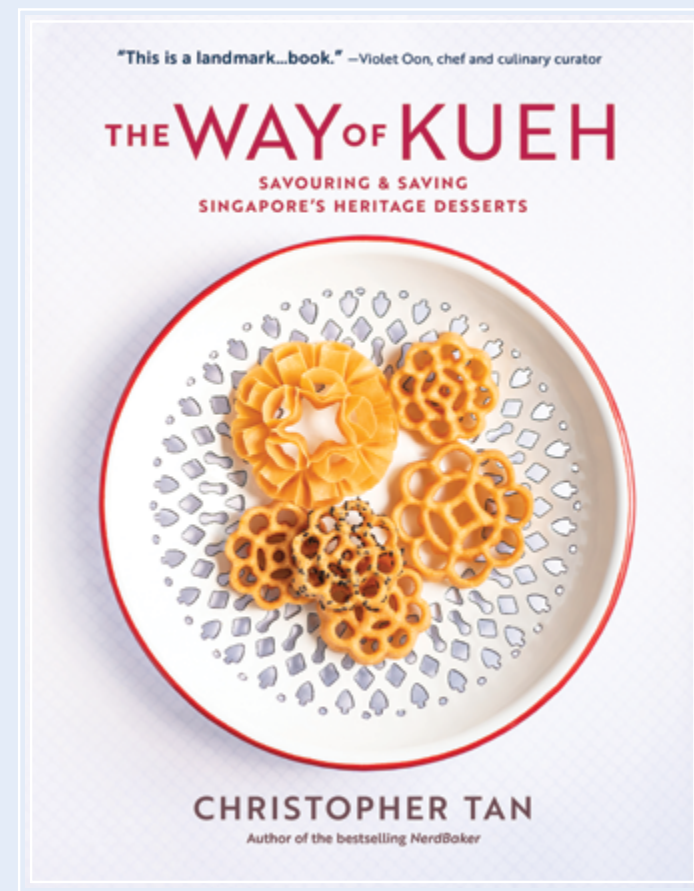
Ken shared his motivations in writing the book at the launch at the National Library on 6 October 2019. He estimated that there are fewer than 1,000 fluent speakers of Baba Malay in Singapore and felt that he had to revive the language before it became extinct. He wanted to produce a text that made the language accessible to a younger generation. I'm grateful that Ken has documented these folktales in two languages as it truly allows learners of Baba Malay to appreciate the nuances of the text.

Much thought has been put into the design of the book – from the smart leather binding to high quality paper and beautiful illustrations by Aisha Ramat. This is a book that every learner of Baba Malay must have, and certainly one to pass down the generations. ♦

CHRITA CHRITA BABA BY KENNETH  
Y.K. CHAN, 2019 IS AVAILABLE AT  
MAJOR BOOKSTORES AND ONLINE  
AT: WWW.BABAMALAY.COM  
KEN CAN BE REACHED AT:  
KENNETHYKCHAN@GMAIL.COM

# THE WAY OF KUEH

**NYONYA JOANNE  
TAN** SPEAKS TO BEST-  
SELLING AUTHOR, BABA  
CHRISTOPHER TAN ON  
HIS NEW BOOK.



Baba Christopher Tan is an award-winning cookbook writer, culinary instructor, food stylist and photographer. His latest tome, *The Way of Kueh* is a comprehensive encyclopaedia of those delicious morsels that we Singaporeans so love. It gives in-depth insights on numerous recipes, their historical origins and even tips on good *kueh*-making. More than a cookbook, this *kueh* bible features interviews with heritage *kueh*-makers and is peppered with anecdotes that make the book a breezy read. ♦

**JOANNE TAN (JT):** What is your favourite Peranakan *kueh*? Why?

**CHRISTOPHER TAN (CT):** I've never met a *kueh* that I couldn't eventually learn to appreciate! But *kueh tair* (pineapple tarts) are special to me, as I've been making and gobbling them since I was young. Also *kueh sarlat*, because my mum made it.

**JT:** What is your earliest memory of baking at home?

**CT:** When I was a kid I had the Ladybird Books classic, *Learn About Cooking* – it was probably the cheese straws.

**JT:** What is always in your fridge/pantry?

**CT:** Butter, eggs, sambals of various kinds, good soya sauce, dark chocolate.

**JT:** Did you find out anything interesting about the Peranakan way of *kueh*-making in your research?

**CT:** It was fascinating to study how old traditions are connected. For instance, our association of *kueh belanda* (love letters) with New Year goes all the way back (via Indonesia of course) to their Dutch origin – rolled wafers or *rolletjes* are also traditionally made in the Netherlands for New Year celebrations.

Also, making *kueh tair* using pastry made with all or part lard, as many Peranakans did back when butter was relatively much more expensive, really gives them a different flavour and texture. Perhaps a bit of an acquired taste if you're used to all-butter tarts, but delicious in their own way.

**JT:** What obstacles did you come across while putting together this book?

**CT:** Some *kuehs* like *kueh karas* and *kueh cucur*, are so rare in Singapore that I was not able to directly observe anyone making them, so I had to start from first principles and figure out the finer points of making them by myself. I think the most challenging thing was the sheer volume of work involved in creating and testing 102 recipes. As a culinary instructor, I have a working process for developing recipes, but rarely does it go into such overdrive!

**JT:** Which of your cookbooks is your favourite and why?

**CT:** I generally only take on projects that will allow me to discover something new. All my cookbooks are special to me, each one for different reasons, so I don't rank them in my head. That said, *NerdBaker* is my most personal book, as it is a memoir of sorts – it is perhaps the clearest expression of my food philosophies and culinary approach. Also, *The Way of Kueh* is definitely my longest cookbook – it has more recipes and took longer to research and write than any of my other books.

**JT:** What advice would you give aspiring bakers who are far from home without access to the necessary ingredients for *kueh*?

**CT:** Learn to use what you can get. Substitutions will only get you so far, and seldom all the way to your desired end, so rather than waste time lamenting about what you can't get, instead celebrate and use what you do have to the fullest!

THE WAY OF KUEH IS PUBLISHED  
BY EPIGRAM BOOKS, 2019.  
IT IS AVAILABLE AT MAJOR  
BOOKSTORES AND ONLINE AT:  
HTTPS://SHOP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG



# MERE GLIMPSES OF A MAGNETIC PERSONA

BABA EMERIC LAU SHARES WHY LIM BOON KENG THE MUSICAL MISSED THE MARK

MORE THAN 60 YEARS after his passing, Lim Boon Keng's great-granddaughter, playwright Nyonya Stella Kon, has wrought a musical about his life story. Kon shares that she began writing in 1990 "to vindicate him, to rescue his reputation from darkness".

The creative team and cast comprise many arts scene veterans, with Jeremiah Choy in the director's seat. The narrative was based on the last moments of Lim's life when presumably memories flood the mind. It accounts for the musical's episodic quality.

Sebastian Tan's interpretation of Lim is superhero-like: steadfast and righteous in his beliefs. While likeable, such a portrayal becomes intolerably boring. The flawless man is this musical's key flaw. Lim's accomplishments are certainly worthy of recognition, but any engaging theatrical experience demands that the audience is granted some access to a protagonist's foibles and motivations.

In this musical, Lim is frustratingly mechanical, especially in his interactions with his wives, Margaret and Grace, played respectively by Audrey Luo and Celine Rosa Tan (whose outstanding dulcet voice wrung staid lyrics for every ounce of pathos).

Also failing to hit the mark were the songs, which had tepid melodies and unmemorable lyrics. Kon's continued collaboration with

Desmond Moey has again failed to deliver. The early 1900s through to the 1950s in which the action takes place was an era where 'live' entertainment flourished: Singapore and China



While the cast sang admirably, tepid melodies and poor scripting let the production down.

were virtual goldmines of musical genres that should have been marshalled to embody the spirit of the times (the lush, brassy show tunes of Shanghai Jazz for example), and yet there was no attempt to acknowledge the milieu musically, which is a massive missed opportunity.

Still, Director Jeremiah Choy stated that the musical is a "first production draft", and that he expects more rewrites and restaging. Taking Lim Boon Keng's tenacity of spirit to heart, one looks forward to an improved production in the near future. ♦

# EMILY IN CLOSE UP

BABA EMERIC LAU REVISITS IVAN HENG'S EMILY OF EMERALD HILL



A GREAT SENSE OF CELEBRATION permeates this production. After almost two decades, Wild Rice has finally scored a theatre to call home within the spanking new Funan Mall, customised with a thrust stage (à la the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in England) and a wall featuring wooden planks that were once used as the stage for a Singapore wayang (street theatre) troupe.

This reviewer has seen Baba Ivan Heng portray Emily twice before, at Jubilee Hall and at the Esplanade Theatre. Throughout all the runs, including this one, Heng is consistently vivacious, enacting the matriarch's life experiences for the audience like a consummate hostess.

The thespian shines in bringing to life Emily's various roles: as a young child singing to entertain her father; as a teenage bride, submissive to her mother-in-law; as a wife in charge of household matters; as a lifetime friend to her schoolmate Bee Choo; and as a domineering mother to her son, Richard.

Heng's flair for code-switching and instant transitions keep the energy and action zipping along, even during the intermission when Emily makes an appearance and mingles with the audience.

Being slightly older, Heng manages to essay a more convincing portrait of Emily in her dotage. The matriarch's need for validation, so that the "screaming girl-child" within will be assured that she does not get thrown "into the gutter", the tragic outcomes of Richard's suicide and her husband's refusal to see her on his deathbed lay bare the vulnerability behind her armour.

The intimate proportions of this theatre allowed for an experience that was far more up close and personal than in previous productions, and the standing ovations Heng received stand as testament to his success in inhabiting Emily fully. ♦

Ivan Heng shines as Emily once again in the intimate setting of the new Wild Rice theatre.

# trolling down melody lane

BABA CHARLES CHAN LOOKS BACK ON 20 YEARS OF THE ASSOCIATION'S CHOIR, THE PERANAKAN VOICES  
Photos courtesy of Nyonya Angeline Kong.



The choir performed at the Summer Youth Olympics hosted by Singapore in 2010. 3,600 athletes from 204 nations participated in the prestigious 12-day event.



Some choir members in baju panjang for a publicity photo shoot for the musical, Bibiks Behind Bars, 2002. The choir was coached by Babes Conde and performed in the musical.



The choir performed at the opening of the Peranakan Museum in 2008.

WALK PAST JOO CHIAT Community Centre on a Tuesday evening and your ears might pick up the faint harmony of babas and nyonyas singing lively tunes about life's simple pleasures.

A verse in a favourite tune, *Teh Sama Kopi* goes: "*Teh kosong dua kasi, nyonya minum pagi pagi, tarok gula celup roti kaya.*" (Early in the morning, a nyonya orders two cups of plain tea, in which she dips her kaya toast.)

The description may seem mundane, but is incredibly relatable and endearing – typical of traditional Peranakan songs. A later verse even mentions *cherki*, a popular card game among Peranakans. Formed in July 2000 by Nyonya Ruby Ng and Baba Richard Tan, The Peranakan Voices (TPV) has helped to preserve our culture by presenting such glorious melodies at community events.

"Most Peranakan songs relate to our cultural practices, daily life, values, food and clothing," says Baba Francis Chia, current head of the choir.

Many of the tunes that the choir performs were written and professionally arranged by musicians in the choir's early days. Choral directors were also invited to train choir members and grouped them into *alto*, *soprano*, *tenor* and *bass*. For the musical *Bibiks Behind Bars* in 2002, the choir was coached by renowned music director, Babes Conde.

As the first Peranakan choir in Singapore, The

Peranakan Voices has performed at numerous events in Singapore and abroad over the past twenty years. Among the audiences were former presidents of Singapore, Dr Tony Tan and the late Mr S. R. Nathan, as well as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his wife Madam Ho Ching.

In October 2010, the choir was invited to France to perform at the opening of the *Baba Bling* exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. The choir performed *Singapura Medley*, which blends together popular local tunes such as *Rasa Sayang* and *Dayung Sampan*.

For every performance, the nyonyas dress up in elegant and elaborate sarong kebayas embroidered with colourful motifs. The babas are no less dashing and dignified in their smart batik shirts. This choir definitely stands out from the crowd!

Today, the choir has 25 singers who practise weekly. The group also has a 'live' band to accompany them during their performances.

As The Peranakan Voices celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2020, Francis is grateful to the pioneers of the choir and those who have contributed through the years. He hopes to see the group flourish with younger generations of Peranakans joining in to spread Peranakan culture to the wider community.

The songs representing Peranakan culture are precious. The Peranakan Voices hope to continue sharing the culture through music for many years to come. ♦



# HEATH YEO'S MACHINE

**BABA BILLY STEVEN  
TAY** REVIEWS *ONE  
MACHINE, ONE STITCH,  
ONE MAN* – AN  
EXHIBITION ON THE  
ART OF SULAM.  
*Photos by Suki Tor, Dawn Marie Lee  
and courtesy of DKPO Collective.*

**I**N THE WORLD OF SARONG KEBAYA, there is no artist more synonymous with the art form than Heath Yeo. Having seen his latest exhibition at The Arts House in October 2019 titled, *One Machine, One Stitch, One Man*, I felt compelled to speak to the artist who manages to evolve the intricate art form, while remaining rooted in tradition. Heath creates breathtaking works of art surfeit with hand-stitched motifs from a bygone era. The garments on display represent his growth as an artist and the constant evolution of his personal style.

## FANCY FOOTWORK

"This exhibition is not about who the better kebaya designer is, or who does the most beautiful embroidery. It's really to show the beauty of what the humble sewing machine can do," says Heath.

Heath insists on using a treadle (foot pedal) sewing machine to maintain the quality of his work. He says that a manual machine gives him more control over the *sulam* (embroidery) – when the stitches need to be heavy or light, the foot responds accordingly.

"I fell in love with the beauty of this manual machine. You're doing all of the work yourself. And after using this machine for years, somehow it's just different from other electric machines. You just fall in love with it. It's this love that makes you want to keep it going."

## PUSHING BOUNDARIES

The first piece that caught my eye was a black and white kebaya, titled *Nouveau*. Working with more somber colours was a challenge for Heath who shared, "I was struggling with two things; whether the Peranakan community would accept this kind of colour on a kebaya

(which is usually associated with mourning and considered inauspicious), and whether I could balance my creative thinking with this piece."

Inspired by Art Nouveau, Heath pushed past his comfort zone to evolve as an artist. "My mentor, Madam Mok once told me that I have to inject my own identity into my kebayas, so I try to get my inspiration from everywhere."

The centerpiece of the exhibition was a Swiss voile wedding kebaya that features traditional motifs with an elegant train. It took him four times longer to create than a regular kebaya. As with most of the works on display, it was made for his personal collection.

"Currently, many nyonias only wear the traditional form of kebaya. I thought, what about something for the future?" Heath hopes this innovative gown will showcase Peranakan culture to the world.

"If there's an occasion for a nyonya to be out of Singapore for a wedding, she can put on this gown and say with a sense of pride: This reflects my heritage, my culture." With the dress heavily lauded, Heath feels encouraged by the support from the community. On preserving the art form of *sulam*, Heath hopes that organising more workshops and small classes will spark interest in the art form. However, he is aware of the challenges that lie ahead for the craft in today's world of fast fashion.

"My type of *sulam* is 100% handcrafted work. It takes a lot of time. We all know that today everything happens with a click of a button – online shopping for clothes is very popular because it's cheap and easy. But I believe that we must continue to raise awareness among the young, to educate them in the finer arts and plant a seed for the future." ♦

HEATH YEO CAN BE CONTACTED  
THROUGH THE DKPO COLLECTIVE  
AT: [DKPOCOLLECTIVE@GMAIL.COM](mailto:DKPOCOLLECTIVE@GMAIL.COM)



**1** Heath Yeo insists on using a manual sewing machine to create his work - the way his mentor, Madam Mok Tai Ee of Kim Seng Kebaya, taught him.

**2** Detail of a Chinese Nativity scene on one of the kebayas from the exhibition.

**3** Heath was inspired by the small, yellow flowers commonly found in parks and gardens in Singapore to create "Maiden's Jealousy".

**4** Heath likes to experiment with different techniques, like using appliqué on this pair of cranes on a kebaya.

**5** This "Arabian Lilac" kebaya is reminiscent of vintage kebayas which are more subtle in colour.

**6** The tiny flowers embroidered on "Nosegay" add to the simple elegance of this kebaya in organza.



AUG - DEC 2019

# A ROUND-UP OF EVENTS

ORGANISED OR SUPPORTED BY THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE

2 AUGUST | ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

## FORUM ON PERANAKAN IDENTITY



The closed-door Forum was at full capacity, attended by almost 200 guests where results from the 2-year Peranakan Genome Project were revealed and a panel of four academics discussed Peranakan identity.

**L to R:** Profs Wang Chaolong and Roger Foo (Principal Researchers, the Peranakan Genome Project), Associate Prof. Lim Beng Soon (Singapore University of Social Sciences), Moderator, Dawn Marie Lee (Editor, The Peranakan magazine), Baba Colin Chee (President, TPAS), Nyonya Josephine Chia (award-winning author), Prof. Leo Suryadinata (ISEAS-Yusok Ishak Institute), Assistant Prof. Seng Guo-Quan (National University of Singapore). Photo by Ben Tan.

11 SEPTEMBER | WILD RICE NGEEN ANN KONGSI THEATRE

## EMILY OF EMERALD HILL

A special evening by WILD RICE for the Association.

14 SEPTEMBER | NONYA NONYA RESTAURANT

## MARI MAIN CHERKI



TPAS members Nyonyas Benita Fong and Heather Ong taught 32 participants how to play cherki, the Peranakan card game popular with nyonyas of the past. Photo by H.C. Tan.

21 SEPTEMBER | CO-ORGANISED WITH NUS BABA HOUSE

## IKEBANA IN A PERANAKAN HOME

Ikebana master, Dr Leonard Lim, demonstrated to 30 participants how Peranakan design elements can be applied to floral art with symbolic flowers and nyonyaware.

12 OCTOBER | VIOLET OON SINGAPORE @ BUKIT TIMAH

## DALAM DAPOR WITH NYONYA VIOLET OON



Doyenne of Peranakan cuisine, Nyonya Violet Oon taught 13 participants The Art of Pound and Peel – the essentials of Peranakan cooking. Photo by Linda Chee.

18 OCTOBER | SINGAPORE CRICKET CLUB

## PERANAKAN BAZAAR AND THE PERANAKAN VOICES

The Association curated a Peranakan Bazaar and our choir performed at a Peranakan-themed evening at the Singapore Cricket Club.

16 NOVEMBER | CO-ORGANISED WITH THE NUS BABA HOUSE

## INTRODUCTION TO A PERANAKAN HOUSE FOR JUNIOR MEMBERS



At this first event for TPAS Junior Members conducted by Nyonyas Dawn Marie Lee, Gwen Ong, Cheryl Lee-Cheang and Theresa Tan, 16 children and their families enjoyed an introductory talk on Peranakan culture, a short tour of the NUS Baba House adapted for children with an accompanying activity booklet, and a hands-on craft activity where they made a baba/nyonya origami bookmark to take home. Photo by Linda Chee.

22-24 NOVEMBER (REPORT ON FACING PAGE.)

## 32<sup>nd</sup> BABA NYONYA CONVENTION IN MELAKA

30 NOVEMBER | ST PATRICK'S SCHOOL

## TALK ON PERANAKAN WEDDINGS

45 participants attended Baba Lim Eng Leong's talk on traditional Peranakan Chinese weddings in Melaka.

14 &amp; 15 DECEMBER | NATIONAL LIBRARY SINGAPORE

## CHINESE GENEALOGY WORKSHOP

Co-organised with the Genealogy Society Singapore. An expert on Chinese genealogy, Dr Philip Tan conducted this 2-day talk and workshop on tracing one's family tree. He revealed how those not proficient in reading Chinese characters could still successfully trace their ancestry.

28 DECEMBER | JOYDEN HALL

## MALAM JOLLY WESTERN

263 guests kicked up their heels to *buat lao jiat* at the Association's annual dinner and dance, which had a Country Western theme this year.

# THE MELAKA CONVENTION



**1** Malaysia Boleh! Thank you PPCM for a well-organised event that saw 520 delegates from various countries congregate at the Ramada Plaza hotel in Melaka to celebrate Peranakan culture with the theme Chrita Dulu Kala – Memories That Shaped Us.

**2** A refreshingly young panel of Melakan speakers shared their perspectives on what defines the Peranakan identity. The Symposium panelists included (L to R) Nyonya Rachel Ong, Nyonya Melissa Chan and Baba Lee Yuen Thien. The ever-capable Baba Cedric Chan moderated the session.

**3** TPAS General Committee members Baba Ronney Tan Koon Siang (center, holding sign) and Nyonya Ngiam May Ling (far right, standing) with some of the 85 TPAS delegates who attended the convention.

**4** Leaders of the 14 associations in the Federation of Peranakan Associations. The Kelantan association was inducted this year.

**5** A team of dedicated volunteers is the heart of every Baba Nyonya Convention. Nyonya Abbe Seow serves up a thirst-quenching sweet drink of Tai Bak to the delegates.

**BABA COLIN CHEE** REPORTS ON THE 32<sup>ND</sup> BABA NYONYA CONVENTION IN MELAKA. | Photos courtesy of Linda Chee, Angeline Kong, Cedric Tan and Ronney Tan Koon Siang.

**H**ELD IN MELAKA from 22-24 November 2019, all the key elements of the 32nd Baba Nyonya Convention were there. The Symposium, the Bazaar, the *makan-makan* and fellowship that reached a crescendo at the Gala dinner. This year, the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Kelantan (PPCK) was inducted as the 14th member of the Federation of Peranakan Associations.

Kudos to our hosts, Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM), for a well-coordinated weekend event that left many of us in a very happy mood. ♦

**SAVE THE DATE!**  
The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) will host next year's 33rd Baba Nyonya Convention from 20 - 22 Nov 2020.



TBC\* — TO BE  
CONFIRMED

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

## Events Calendar

### JAN/FEB

**12<sup>(JAN)</sup>** | Jalan Jalan, Makan  
Makan in Johor Bahru  
**TBC<sup>(FEB)</sup>** | The Art of  
Sarong Tying

### MAR

**14** | Chakap Chakap Pantan & Dondang  
Sayang by Babas GT Lye, Cedric Tan  
and Chan Eng Thai  
**21** | Junior Members event (TBC)

### APR

**11** | Peranakan Food and Wine Pairing  
with Baba Daniel Chia  
**TBC** | Dalam Dapor with Baba Matt Tan  
**26** | Annual General Meeting and  
Election of General Committee 2020-2022

### MAY

**TBC** | Batik Tour to  
Pekalongan, Cirebon, Semarang

### JUN

**TBC** | Peranakan Jawi:  
A Historical & Literary  
Perspective

### JUL

**18**  
**THE PERANAKAN BALL**  
at Shangri-la Hotel,  
Island Ballroom

### A WARM

## Welcome

### TO OUR NEW MEMBERS!

Mrs Alice Lee nee Mdm Yeo Hwee Tiang  
Adeline Elena Liew Jia Ying  
Amelyn Anne Thompson  
Angelyn Triza Kum Puay Hoon  
Catherine Liew Jia Mei  
Cecilia Yeoh Kim Heoh  
Christopher Immanuel Goh Teong Kang  
Corinne Chia Gek Kim  
Damien Chua Tian Choon  
Diane Chee Sui Yen  
Gerriet Leong Tien Wei  
Goh Li Eng  
Jacqueline Ong  
Jane Foo Lay Ping  
Jonathan Tan Chu Chze  
Joy Chia Li Fen  
Kelvin Ling Yew Jin  
Khush Chopra  
Dr Koh Keng We  
Lau Joon Nie  
Dr Lee Yuit Hoy  
Lim Kheng Wee  
Louisa Ong Gek Hwa  
Mariko Nakagawa  
Mathew Ho Choon Ann  
Melvin Lee Bing Yi  
Nelson Koh Chwee Eang  
Ng Lee Ing  
Ng Wenjun  
Ong Tiong Meng  
Pan Xing Hua  
Patricia Hansen  
Pauline Chan Gek Chan  
Peck Teck Neo  
Richard Toh  
Salome Tan Guet Lin  
Seema Shah  
Serene Tan  
Shaun Yee Keng Jin  
Shirley Tan Gek Lian  
Sivon Phang See Wei  
Stephanie Laura Oei Lay Hoon  
Sunita Pong  
Teo Ee Ling  
Thaddaeus Aaron Tan Yong Zhong  
Dr Vic Pearly Wong  
Yap Choon Seng  
Yoko Yoshinaga

### OUR NEW JUNIOR MEMBERS

Alexander Connor Chua  
Amelia Ng  
Benjamin Wesley Chua  
Bryan Seet Ky Loong  
Chloe Annabelle Mahachai  
Chloe Chan En Ting  
Chloe Fu Hui'en  
Christopher Justin Chua  
Emmanuel Ng  
Julien Andre Chassin  
Kelly Tan Mui Kwan  
Natasha Lynn Lee Xuan  
Olivia Fu Hui Zhen  
Rowena Joy Eber  
Simone Stephanie Tan Ai Ling  
Sophie Lim Qin Yi  
Tay Kye Lin



**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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Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya  
Malaysia (PERANAKAN)

Hon. Secretary | Mr Lee Yuen Thien  
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BABA BRYAN TAN UNCOVERS SUBTERFUGE AND SABOTAGE IN THE SOH CLAN  
Illustration by Eileen Chan.

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PETER SOH CHENG KOON’S SLENDER FINGERS folded around his Waterman fountain pen with practised ease, bringing it across the papered surface with long delicate strokes. The elegant looping whorls of his handwritten characters betrayed no hint of his clouded mind, etched plainly and deeply on his furrowed brow. Pausing briefly in hesitation, he brought his smoking pipe to his mouth and gripped it by the teeth, inhaling deeply.

The second brother of Sir Francis Soh and current patriarch of the esteemed Soh family, Peter had none of the regal dignity and confident flair of his late elder brother, may he rest in peace. Instead, his myopic eyes were framed by thick horn-rimmed glasses, which squinted in distaste at the letter that he was about to write. His elder brother Francis collected business cards and influential contacts, always with a broad grin and solid handshake; Peter collected ancient furniture from around the world, dusty Chinese scrolls which he could not read, and held brushes to paintings of landscapes or penned academic essays to professors of great renown on heritage. Perhaps the only things that the brothers shared in common were their noble height, and their great love for their grandniece Molly.

Thinking of her made him sigh and take another deep puff of his pipe. The feud between his grandniece and his younger sister Bee Neo had persisted for decades, even before Molly was born. *Dia ulawan macham kucing dan anjing* (They fight like cats and dogs!), he chuckled in bitter amusement. Peter had rejoiced when his great-grandnephew was born.

As a scholar, archivist and historian, he had engaged genealogy experts to trace his family’s illustrious line to form a tapestry, and it was almost complete. With the arrival of a new addition to the family, he’d secretly redirected his efforts towards his grandnephew’s lineage in Britain, hoping to surprise Molly with his findings.

But what he discovered shook him. It was not the fact

that Daniel’s bloodline led Peter to a distinguished Peranakan family who lived down Heeren street from the Soh family, but the means and deceptions which had been taken to conceal that fact. That, and the revelation of the Ong family, whose rivalry with the Soh family lasted centuries, dating back to ancient China. Ancient feuds did not bother him, he had no use for them.

But his younger sister Bee Neo was unnaturally preoccupied with these things. Money and power had gone to her head, which she used and abused to further her nefarious schemes against anyone she despised, particularly Molly. Bee Neo had a streak of cruelty and possessed unfettered tyranny even as a young girl. She bullied her *majie* (Chinese nanny) mercilessly which almost resulted in her death, and terrorised the entire household staff; even mother could not control her. Their father was an easy-going Baba, and gave in to all her flightiest whims and fancies. Eventually, she had gotten her way and married into one of the richest families on Heeren Street.

There was a knock on the door of his study, and the door opened. Peter smiled and rose from his desk as Thiam Hin walked past the threshold. “*Thiam Hin, sua datang! Ada baik?*” (Thiam Hin, you’ve arrived! I hope you’re well?) His brother-in-law sank heavily into the armchair across Peter, waving a dismissive hand.

“Let’s get this over and done with. My wife has gone far enough and I don’t want any more of this farce to go on. *Apa lu mau gua bikin* (what do you need me to do)?”

Peter picked up his pen and resumed writing. “I’m sending this letter to Roland, our family lawyer. To remove Bee Neo as a beneficiary of Papa’s trust fund; all you need to do is sign here.” ♦

\*IN THE NEXT ISSUE: WILL CLIPPING THE WINGS OF AN EAGLE HALT ITS WRATHFUL DESCENT? OR WOULD AN ENRAGED BEE NEO PURSUE HER SINGLE-MINDED QUEST FOR REVENGE? FIND OUT IN THE NEXT INSTALLMENT!



# 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](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)  
**Email** • [nhb\\_pm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg)  
**Tel** • 6332 7591

### ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

The first museum in the region to display a wide range of artefacts from across Asia, the ACM not surprisingly has some important Peranakan treasures. The Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, sireh boxes and 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  
**Website** • [www.acm.org.sg](http://www.acm.org.sg)  
**Tel** • 6332 2982

### 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](http://www.wanqingyuan.org.sg)  
**Tel** • 6256 7377

## LANDMARKS

### THIAN HOCK KENG

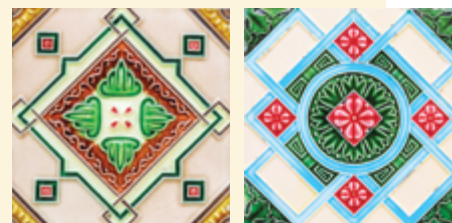
The oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore was founded in 1821 although the present structure, built without nails, was completed only in 1841. The temple is dedicated to Mazu, the Daoist goddess of the sea and protector of all seamen. Many of the temple's patrons were Peranakan pioneers, such as Tan Tock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



### AMOY STREET & 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.



### EMERALD HILL ROAD

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

### 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



### KATONG & JOO CHIAT

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

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



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