

the Peranakan ISSUE 2 | 2020

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CELEBRATION  
ISSUE







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 ARTIST GABBY MALPAS,  
 SPECIALLY PAINTED FOR  
 THIS CELEBRATION ISSUE OF  
 THE MAGAZINE TO MARK  
 THE ASSOCIATION'S 120<sup>TH</sup>  
 ANNIVERSARY.

GABBY IS REPRESENTED IN  
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**Jane Goh of R.I PAPER**  
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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.



THE  
 PERANAKAN  
 ASSOCIATION  
 SINGAPORE



## PERANAKAN THEATRE DOYEN WINS HERITAGE AWARD



Baba GT Lye performing *dondang sayang* at the awards ceremony.

Baba GT Lye receiving the award from Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth.

**NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE** CONGRATULATES BABA GT LYE ON HIS WELL-DESERVED ACCOLADE  
*Photos courtesy of the National Heritage Board*

**B**ABA GT LYE IS A HOUSEHOLD NAME in the Peranakan community, with presidents and celebrities among his fans. On 11 December 2020, his dedication to his craft was publicly recognised when he was honoured by the National Heritage Board as a Steward of Singapore's Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The Award, launched in October 2019, aims to recognise practitioners of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) who are dedicated to the promotion and transmission of ICH elements, and have made outstanding contributions in their field.

Baba GT has been a wayang Peranakan practitioner for 36 years since his first foray into theatre in 1984 in Baba Felix Chia's *Pilih Menantu* staged during the Singapore Arts Festival. The play was a landmark event in wayang Peranakan which sparked a revival of Peranakan theatre. Before that, no Peranakan play had been staged in Singapore since 1958.

In his next role in 1985, Baba GT played the Peranakan matriarch for the first time – a role which would shape and define his career in Peranakan theatre. The strength of his performances stem from his personal experience and careful study of the speech and mannerisms of these matriarchs who have long since disappeared.

Over three decades, he has not only starred in 23 wayang Peranakan plays but has also contributed to the art form as a scriptwriter, co-director, dialogue coach and mentor to young wayang Peranakan actors. His mastery of the Baba Malay language is nonpareil. The bulk of his performances were in plays staged by the Gunong Sayang Association. There is no other living wayang Peranakan actor who has displayed the level of mastery of the art form like Baba GT Lye has.

Baba GT has also brought Peranakan culture abroad on cultural missions to France, China and Korea. I had the honour of preparing and submitting Baba GT's nomination to the National Heritage Board on behalf of The Peranakan Association Singapore. Apart from compiling his extensive resume and highlighting his mastery of skills and practice in

his field, I approached members of the Peranakan community who know him and have worked with him to write letters of support for his nomination. ♦

The Association is deeply grateful and sincerely thanks the following individuals and our sister associations for their written support of Baba GT's nomination:

**BABA COLIN CHEE**  
FOR THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE

**BABA ALVIN TEO**  
FOR GUNONG SAYANG ASSOCIATION

**BABA PONNO KALASTREE**  
FOR PERANAKAN INDIAN (CHITTY MELAKA) ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE

**BABA IVAN HENG**  
CULTURAL MEDALLION RECIPIENT, FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, WILD RICE

**BABA ALVIN TAN**  
CULTURAL MEDALLION RECIPIENT, FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, THE NECESSARY STAGE

**BABA ROBERT YEO**  
AWARD-WINNING POET, PLAYWRIGHT AND AUTHOR, BBM (PUBLIC SERVICE STAR) FOR DISTINGUISHED PERFORMANCE IN THE ARTS.

**BABA PETER LEE**  
INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER AND SCHOLAR OF PERANAKAN CULTURE, HONORARY CURATOR, NUS BABA HOUSE

**NYONYA CYNTHIA LEE**  
WAYANG PERANAKAN PERFORMER

**BABA KELVIN TAN**  
WAYANG PERANAKAN PERFORMER (FEMALE IMPERSONATOR)

**BABA CHAN ENG THAI**  
WAYANG PERANAKAN PERFORMER

**BABA RICHARD TAN**  
ARTS PRACTITIONER AND EDUCATOR, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, GENERASIA

**NYONYA JOSEPHINE CHIA**  
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF EIGHT BOOKS, WINNER, SINGAPORE LITERATURE PRIZE (NON-FICTION) 2014



SCAN THE QR CODE TO WATCH NHB'S AWARDS VIDEO OF BABA GT LYE.

*To Everything  
There is a Season.*

### DEAR READERS,

This is my hardest letter yet because it is my last. I joined this magazine as assistant editor in 2016 and wrote my first editor's letter in 2017.

In the 5 years I have helmed the magazine, it has been a great pleasure to meet contributors of diverse backgrounds, all with a common goal - to document and promote Peranakan culture - which is the ethos of this magazine.

It has been my privilege and joy to edit their articles. Our editorial team and contributors are all volunteers, myself included, which makes this magazine all the more special. I read with great fascination, stories about cultural practices that have disappeared long before I was born, and how some of them are being revived by a younger generation.

It was with deep sadness that I edited **Baba Tan Kuning's** final article for the magazine (*Yok Tua: Chinese Medicinal Prescriptions*, page 20). Baba Kuning, a long-time contributor of *The Peranakan* magazine, passed away at the age of 90 on 11 March 2021. I recall the times that I visited him and our long chats. He had a wealth of knowledge about Peranakan cultural practices. I'm glad that we have documented them through his articles.

I learnt new things about my own culture which I didn't know about, such as Monkey God worship and the Peranakan roots of a little temple in Tiong Bahru. (*Serving the Monkey God*, page 28) As a former Journalist, I'm still thrilled by working the ground, meeting and interviewing people, sharing their stories which have never been told.

I've enjoyed so many moments of laughter working on hilarious tales with some young writers. Notably, **Baba Bryan Tan** whose wit and wry humour come across in his columns (*Pintu Jagong Merah*, page 50 and *A Widow's Wrath*, page 66). I've enjoyed plotting incredulous stories and fabricating fictitious family trees with Bryan for his long running *Chakap Habis* column. Our long-

time Illustrator, **Nyonya Eileen Chan** has faithfully brought his characters to life in every issue.

**Baba Emeric Lau**, our Assistant Editor, has always been of great help to me, and for this I thank him. His knack for coming up with catchy headlines and cover lines is truly a gift. Read Emeric's take of Peranakan hygiene habits in *Coming Clean*, page 16.

These are tough times for print magazines. Even the most respected titles have gone entirely digital or ceased to exist. So the fact that this volunteer-run magazine is still in print, and is distributed free of charge says something about the dedicated team behind it.

I am so grateful to my mentors, former Editor **Baba Peter Lee** and Creative Adviser **John Lee**, who have given me invaluable guidance in producing the magazine. Many thanks to our Designer, **Nyonya Joanne Low**, whose wonderful graphic work brings all the stories and images together like magic.

For me, my role as editor has been all-consuming. My family can attest to that. Many long days and sleepless nights; lugging my laptop along on family holidays to work on stories for this magazine...something that I don't even do for my professional work as a copywriter. What can I say? Love is blind.

I have always hoped to leave this magazine better and stronger than when I arrived. My goal was to groom and inspire new writers and nurture in them a love and appreciation of Peranakan culture.

In this spirit, I leave you with this beautiful panton composed by **Baba GT Lye**:

*Sudah chut mia Gunung Daik,  
Nampak dari tanah di rantau,  
Kalu sudah benair dia baik,  
Jatoh di laot jadi pulau.*

*Mount Daik is extremely famous,  
It can be seen from overland regionally,  
If the origin is good, the result will be good,  
If it falls into the sea, it will flourish into an island.*

*Dawn Marie Lee*

EDITOR  
DAWNMARIELEE@GMAIL.COM



## President's Message

Dear Babas and Nyonyas,  
I last shared a roadmap with you in the 2018 Issue 2 of this magazine. In the time since, we elected a new General Committee (GC) in July 2020. And in light of this magazine's delay, we would like to simply highlight the roadmap until April 2022.

### Keeping the Culture Alive & Peranakan Identity

The most important challenge facing our Peranakan community today is keeping our culture alive and sustaining it. A critical first step to ensure this is to better define our identity.

We can start by asking ourselves whether we are indeed a distinct community. We ARE Peranakans, right? No, not officially at least. In the Singapore Population Census 2010, under Glossary of Terms and Definitions, we are buried somewhere under "Chinese" alongside dialect groups including "Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, Hockchia, Foochow, Henghua, Shanghainese, etc." Are we Chinese then?

Our forefathers' evolving culture was an amalgam of practices from their homeland, China, and heavily influenced by the cultures of the Malay archipelago - Bugis, Batak, Balinese and more - whose women they married or brought into their households from as far back as the 15th and 16th centuries. To a lesser extent, there were influences from the Indian, Arab, Portuguese, Dutch and British communities with whom they mingled and did business with.

Despite these external influences our forefathers saw themselves as essentially ethnic Chinese.

But, culturally, they identified themselves as babas (the men) and nyonyas (the women). They even took pains to set themselves apart from the *sinkeh*s - new migrants from Southern China who sailed to Southeast Asia looking for work. The babas and nyonyas achieved immense wealth and social standing especially in the British colonies. The 1820s through to the 1930s were the golden years of Baba Nyonya culture.

As their culture reached a crescendo, they sought to preserve their dominance and exclusivity through carefully arranged endogamous marriages.

Not surprisingly, the leading babas of the day formed the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) on 17 August 1900 in Singapore to present the community as worthy subjects of the British Empire. The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS), traces its origin to the SCBA.

The Great Recession and the Second World War destroyed much of the community's wealth and influence. Scores of Peranakan scions also lost their lives during the war. After the war, Peranakans started marrying outside of their network of "approved" families and into other ethnic groups.

With an increasingly Western education, Peranakan families became more secular and Christianised, cut off from the traditional worship rituals and practices of

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Ancestral worship and ritual practices became less important in the home.

The national emphasis on English and Mandarin, as languages to make a living with, eroded the use of, and need for, Baba Malay - a lyrical creole of Malay and Hokkien - as our mother tongue. Baba Malay was bypassed as a living language, no longer passed down orally by our elders. As a result, Peranakans have been shedding their traditional identity for several decades now.

At last year's Bicentennial Istana Open House, when our Association was invited to showcase our culture, we were asked, "How does one recognise a Peranakan?"

We do not even know how many of us are left in Singapore, or anywhere else in Southeast Asia. We do not exist as a statistic.

### Our Own Census

Now at the cusp of a seeming decline in our numbers, we should more clearly define our own identity and conduct a census of our own. Technology will enable this. We will embark on this challenge during this term of office.

What would be the purpose? To give us at least a tenuous reference to build on and move forward.

### Our Culture is Still Alive

Fortunately, our deep and unique cultural roots, both tangible and intangible, are mostly still visible and intact. Thankfully, it is in many ways still evolving.

We were given an unexpected lift with the Peranakan Museum's opening in April 2008 as it sparked a revival of interest in the culture. This blossomed

with the success of a Mandarin TV Channel drama serial, *The Little Nyonya*, in November the same year. In September 2019 we crossed a milestone in our history when the Association opened its doors to our *anak babas* and *nyonyas*.

This Junior Membership category was created to introduce



Peranakan culture to our children and grandchildren when their minds and hearts are most receptive and welcoming.

A living culture has to be lived and transmitted to the next generation to continue. This is what the Association must set out to do, together with the community rallying around it, with a shared passion, and with our like-minded partners.

### Our Identity, Vision & Mission

In this 2020-2022 term, the GC has adopted the slogan, "Keeping the Culture Alive".

It will steer our vision to unite and represent the Peranakan community in Singapore, to be a beacon of Peranakan culture, and to celebrate the diversity of our unique identity, culture and heritage.

It will also drive our mission to enrich the lives of members, both Peranakan and non-Peranakan, and Singapore's multi-racial community, through diverse partnerships and programmes.

### Highlights of the Virtual Annual General Meeting in July 2020

#### Finance – \$43,600 Surplus

For the full year ending 31 December 2019, TPAS turned in a surplus of \$43,600. Membership subscriptions accounted for a large portion of this surplus. Squirreling small surpluses from our various activities and prudent spending made up the balance.

To manage our funds prudently, the new GC will decide whether to top up our current fixed deposits to \$320,000 from the existing \$293,000. We must always ensure our finances are sound. Our strong cash reserves will allow adequate working capital to support our many activities.

#### Events – 34 in 22 Months

In the 22 months we were in office - May 2018 to March 2020 - we organised a total of 34 events. Our choir, The Peranakan Voices, gave nine performances.

The high points included our inaugural The Baba Nyonya Literary Festival; The Peranakan Identity Forum: Who Am I?; our *Dalam Dapor* Workshop with Nyonya Violet Oon; the return of our afternoon tea dances called *Joget Siang*; our popular topical talks and re-enactments of key Peranakan practices like *semayang abu*; and not forgetting our special tie-up with Wild Rice for *Emily of Emerald Hill*.

#### Membership – 2,101 Members, Increase of 212

With higher activity levels, membership grew from 1,889 members in May 2018 to 2,101 at end December 2019. This

is a jump of 212 life members during the 19-month period. Junior membership was introduced in September 2019 and by the end of the year we had 19 junior members. Presently, membership stands at 2,145.

#### Our Biggest Fixed Expense – the Magazine

We used to spend \$60,000 a year on our magazine *The Peranakan*, which was then a quarterly publication. In 2015, we pared it down to two issues a year. This halved the cost of publication and also allowed the magazine's all-volunteer editorial team to take proper breaks in-between issues.

Even so, \$30,000 is a large annual fixed overhead. Fortunately, this cost has been partly covered by our loyal advertisers. We thank them for their steadfastness. Since 2019 we have also had a generous sponsor for the magazine to whom we are most grateful.

Can such largesse be sustained? We cannot ever do away with *The Peranakan* magazine. If the Association is to continue its role as the champion, documenter and historian of our culture and community, this magazine is our instrument of faith.

*This is why we will begin to prepare, during this term, the infrastructure for a fully digital magazine in the event that we have to take this route.*

#### Digital Platforms for Timely Communications – Quarter Million Views Annually

Our Facebook page and website have become our main means of communication with members and friends. Our website, in particular the magazine archives, is already the go-to resource for researchers of Peranakan culture.

The aggregate annual viewership of a quarter-million is not insignificant. The website attracts a viewership of 45,000 annually, while our FB page attracts 180,000 views annually. Our FB post in August 2020 to pre-order a cookbook attracted a reach of 13,000 in three days. Our President's Monthly Letter of December 2020 on Peranakan Identity garnered a record 12,000 views.

We are planning to do more with our digital platforms. We have started a TPAS YouTube page and encourage you to sign on as subscribers. It will be activated soon. We are targeting 1,000 subscribers and are presently at nearly 900.

To reach out to our young, we are actively looking at initiating an Instagram platform run by the young for the young. Thank you for your continued support dear members and friends. Stay safe. *Kamsiah banyak banyak!* ♦



Blessings,

**Colin Chee**  
President

The Peranakan Association Singapore  
president@peranakan.org.sg



The members of the first committee of the Straits Chinese British Association, formed on 17 August, 1900. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Seated left to right: Ho Yiang Moh, Tchan Chun Fook, Tan Chay Yan, Song Ong Siang, Tan Jiak Kim, Seah Liang Seah, Low Cheang Yee, Wee Kim Yam. Standing left to right: Seah Eng Kiat, Dr Lim Boon Keng, Chia Keng Chin, Tan Boo Liat, Tan Hap Seng, Wee Theam Tew. Absent: Seah Peck Seah (Honorary Treasurer), Gan Gnoh Bee (Penang), Chid Cheng Eok (Penang).

# FOUNDING FATHERS

IN THE 120<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OF THE FOUNDING OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE, SIBLINGS NYONYA LINDA CHEE AND BABA RONNEY TAN KOON SIANG OPEN A WINDOW TO THE FOUNDING OF THE STRAITS CHINESE BRITISH ASSOCIATION



THE STRAITS CHINESE BRITISH ASSOCIATION (SCBA) was formed in Singapore on 17 August 1900 to represent the social, economic and political interests of some 800 Straits-born Chinese in the Straits Settlements, and to pledge allegiance to Queen Victoria, matriarch of the British Empire. The Melaka branch was formed the next month and Penang, 20 years later. In its 120 years of history, SCBA has endured the departure of the British colonial masters and two world wars to morph into its present form as The Peranakan Association Singapore.

Most of the SCBA founders were descended from Melaka Chinese merchants who were encouraged by



Was this Union Jack-like motif the original brand of the SCBA? Seen here with committee member Tchan Chun Fook, as featured in the book "One Hundred Years of the Chinese in Singapore" by Song Ong Siang. Public domain.

Colonel William Farquhar, at the behest of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, founder of Singapore, to help kickstart the fledgling island-economy of Singapore.

With their propensity for business and fluency in languages, these early pioneering Chinese families steadily increased their fortunes and gained the confidence and respect of the British colonial administration. The Straits Settlements started off in 1826 but the British had earlier flown the Union Jack in Penang, Melaka and Singapore in 1786, 1795 and 1819 respectively. In 1837, some of these Straits Chinese were described in the Free Press as "the principal merchants" of the colony.

**THE CHINESE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME** Fast forward to the 1890s, the golden age of the babas. It was when the designation "British Chinese" appeared. But the babas were quick to realise that within the colonial configuration, they would at best be seated at the furthest table during a fancy British ball or other social events.

Starting from the mid-1850s, merchants like Whampoa Hoo Ah Kay, Tan Kim Ching and Seah Eu Chin would represent the Straits Chinese crème de la crème. By the 1890s, Tan Jiak Kim and Seah Liang Seah had become legislators and municipal commissioners. The mood within the Chinese upper class was to agitate for more "benefits" in colonial Singapore. While the Straits Chinese mostly remained loyal to the British crown, there were others who supported the Ching court in China. From 1877 onwards, some bought fancy titles and wore elaborate Manchu costumes.

The more strait-laced English-educated Chinese thought they should have their own sports or social clubs



The visit of TRH the Duke and Duchess of York in 1901 was commemorated by a specially-built SCBA Pagoda on the old gaol site opposite the former St Joseph's Institution. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Note: The original photograph has been cropped for this article.

and associations to represent the up-and-coming Straits Chinese bourgeoisie, and to protect the welfare of the largely uneducated China-born worker classes.

With almost a century of contribution to society, the Straits Chinese were ready to ask for a louder voice in the social, economic and political spheres of colonial Singapore. One thing led to another. On 17 August, 1900, the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) was born with about 800 members. It was an elite body tasked to look after the interests of not just the wealthy Chinese but also the less well-off China-born workers.

Today's millennials may react incredulously to the once-true British nationality of their forefathers. In the colonial milieu, the babas were indeed British subjects born in the Straits Settlements which lasted till 1946. In 1963, with the merger of Singapore and Malaysia, the SCBA dropped the "British" to become the Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association. In August 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia to become an independent sovereign state and in February 1966, the association was renamed The Peranakan Association Singapore.



## THE TOWCHANG CONUNDRUM

The Ching Dynasty from 1644 to 1912 saw the Han Chinese subjugated by the Manchus, who compelled them to plait their hair long in a queue, known as the towchang. Unwittingly, the conquered mistook the towchang as iconic of their Chinese identity. The towchang prevailed until the fall of the Ching Dynasty, after which the National Assembly of the Chinese Republican government decreed that Chinese all over the world be obliged to cut off their towchang. • But even before the Nationalist decree, two prominent young Straits Chinese – Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng - had done away with their queues in 1899 in a dismissal of the derisory "pigtail". Lim Boon Keng had condemned the towchang as "inconvenient and useless". This incensed the founding president of SCBA, Tan Jiak Kim, who opposed the two young upstarts on this 'hairy' issue. Believing in the towchang, he steadfastly held on to his prominent coiffure till his dying day in 1917.



# T H E F I R S T

OF THE STRAITS CHINESE

# C O M M I T T E E

BRITISH ASSOCIATION



**TAN JIAK KIM**

The son of Tan Beng Swee and grandson of Tan Kim Seng, he was the scion of a distinguished Melaka family who carried on the family tradition of public service, philanthropy and business. He was an outstanding community leader who answered the call to duty as a legislator and municipal commissioner. Tan Jiak Kim spoke up for the rights of low wage earners as well as the needs of the Chinese community, be it the Straits-born or the China-born Chinese. He fought for the retention of the Queen's scholarship and set up educational scholarships for locals. He and Seah Liang Seah raised funds to set up the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore. A loyal British subject, he contributed liberally to the war funds, including \$37,000 (about \$683,500 in 2021) for the Prince of Wales Relief Fund and \$19,200 to buy a fighter plane for Britain's battle with Germany.



**SEAH LIANG SEAH**

The second son of tycoon Seah Eu Chin, he made his fortune in gambier planting and commercial trading. Seah Liang Seah was prominent as a legislator and municipal commissioner. Educated at St Joseph's Institution, he donated generously to many causes including 400 silver taels to a drought relief fund in China and the British war fund. He had three wives and 12 children. His three brothers, including Seah Peck Seah, also distinguished themselves in business and social circles. Four streets in Singapore are named after this famous Teochew family.



**DR LIM BOON KENG**

He won the Queens Scholarship in 1887 to study medicine at Edinburgh University. There, he was asked to read a Chinese banner. Ashamed of being unable to read Chinese, he pledged to read and write Chinese and became more Chinese than the Chinese. He even organised Mandarin night classes for whoever wished to learn the language. Dr Lim wrote books, practised medicine, became a legislator, co-founded the Straits Chinese Magazine and was the first Chancellor of Xiamen University. With his extensive connections to the colonial masters, the Chinese Republican government and the Singapore merchants, the social reformist was very busy connecting many dots and rendered service in many societies beyond the call of duty. He remained modest and never took a leadership role.



**SONG ONG SIANG**

The son of Song Hoot Kiam, an early Singapore Chinese Christian, he agitated for social reforms together with his good friend, fellow Queens Scholar Dr Lim Boon Keng. They both studied at Raffles Institution and founded the Singapore Chinese Girls' School in 1899 in a building next to the present Central Fire Station at Hill Street. Song Ong Siang also edited the huge tome "One Hundred Years of the Chinese in Singapore" which is still used today as the standard reference text on the history of the Chinese in Singapore up to 1919.



**HO YANG MOH**

The cashier with the Chartered Bank is remembered for his sharp eye for detecting forged \$500 bank notes in 1877. He was active in the Straits Chinese Recreation Club and the Celestial Reasoning Association which promoted the mastery of the English language through debating and literary study.



**TAN HAP SENG**

The eldest grandson of shipping tycoon Tan Kim Tian, he was brought up in the lap of luxury. After taking over the mantle of the family shipping business from his cousin Tan Beng Wan, Hap Seng managed one of Singapore's largest shipping companies. But his inexperience in business and inability in the Chinese language led to a poorly-judged deal. Overnight, the company collapsed in debt. He remained an undischarged bankrupt for 26 years. Once the toast of high society, he died without any fanfare in 1934.



**WEE THEAM TEW**

A high-flying lawyer whose fortunes turned south after he was jailed for misappropriating a client's funds. He died a broken man in an asylum in 1918. His family library provided reading material for the younger Lim Boon Keng. Theam Tew himself was fortunate to study law in England with the help of Gan Eng Seng's sponsorship. Although he went down the slippery slope, his nieces, the daughters of his banker brother Wee Thiam Seng, married well. One of them married Tan Chin Tuan, long-time chairman of OCBC Bank. Another became the mother-in-law of Lee Kuan Yew.



**TCHAN CHUN FOOK**

He was manager of Whampoa & Co for 40 years before starting his own business. With his engaging personality and sense of humour, he was popular socially. He was a Justice of the Peace who believed in "the study of the spiritual world".



**CHIA KENG CHIN**

A nephew of Chia Ann Siang, he joined Ann Lock & Co as a merchant after his two uncles passed on. He was a founder of the Straits Chinese Recreation Club and a municipal commissioner. He was fortunate to be part of the Singapore delegation that attended the coronation of King Edward VII in 1901.



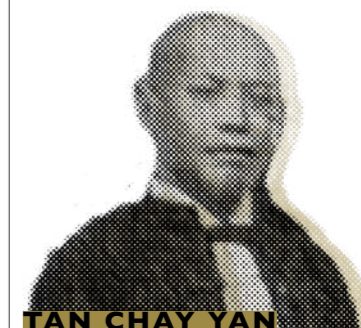
**WEE KIM YAM**

A son of Wee Ah Hood, he was an opium and spirit farmer in the 1880s. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace and was active in public affairs, serving zealously on the committee of Tan Tock Seng Hospital.



**LOW CHEANG YEE**

His father came from China and built a business dealing with gutta percha and other produce. He schooled at Raffles Institution where his schoolmate, Lim Thean Geow, was Lim Boon Keng's father. Like Seah Liang Seah, he was a prominent Teochew merchant much respected by European merchants.



**TAN CHAY YAN**

The grandson of Tan Tock Seng, he was born wealthy and pioneered the commercial planting of rubber. His efforts boosted the economies of the Straits Settlements especially Singapore and Melaka. He had earlier been encouraged by Lim Boon Keng to use the free rubber seeds given out by Henry Ridley, director of the Botanical Gardens. He worked tirelessly to roll out the first rubber sheet in 1904. By 1907, the mass production of the Ford Model T vehicle created a huge demand for rubber tyres. In 1916, he died suddenly, leaving a huge fortune to his wife Chua Wan Neo. She delegated the running of the rubber estates to Ronney's and Linda's great-grandfather Tan Jin Ann till his retirement in 1934.



**SEAH ENG KIAT**

Grandson of Seah Eu Chin. He was a director of the Singapore United Rubber Plantations Limited formed in 1916. He loved horse racing.



**TAN BOO LIAT**

A nephew of Tan Chay Yan and great grandson of Tan Tock Seng, he was the last Straits Chinese head of the Hokkien Huay Kuan. A man of diverse interests, he was well known in racing circles for his cup-winning horse, Vanitas, in 1898. The prize money: 100,000 Straits dollars. His illustrious grandfather, Tan Kim Ching, was anointed with ministerial status by King Mongkut of Thailand. His daughter Polly Tan was the inspiration behind the play Emily of Emerald Hill. Tan Boo Liat was a strong supporter of Sun Yat Sen, considered the father of modern China.



# TAN JIAK KIM

A MAN FOR THE PEOPLE



BABA RICHARD TAN TIANG TECK REMEMBERS HIS GREAT GRANDFATHER, AS TOLD TO BABA RONNEY TAN KOON SIANG. Photographs courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

RICHARD REMEMBERS HIS GROWING UP YEARS. A huge portrait of Tan Jiak Kim hung prominently in the living room of Panglima Prang (meaning “war admiral”), the huge house that Richard’s great-great-great grandfather, Tan Kim Seng, built in the 1850s. Six generations lived in the house. The airy 10.5-acre estate had many fruit trees of rambutans, durians and mango. A landmark colonial-styled house along River Valley Road, it was torn down in 1983 to make way for a condominium, Yong Ann Park. Richard, 79, is modest about being the descendant of very wealthy forebears. “We still worked for a living”, Richard remarks, adding that growing up in the house was “a constant reminder of the huge heritage and contributions” of

his ancestors. He felt the portrait was that reminder “looking down on all of us.”

“I had never met the man. What I know of him is through my father, Tan Eng Chiang, who was told by my grandfather, Tan Soo Bin,” who was the only surviving son of Tan Jiak Kim. Richard is “extremely proud” of his *kong cho*.

“He was a man for the people, serving in the public domain with absolute faith and conviction to bring betterment to the ordinary man in the street.” It was befitting that he became the founding president of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA).

Tan Jiak Kim cared deeply for the Chinese community. He agitated for the installation of water standpipes for rickshaw pullers to cool themselves after every run. After the Second World War, these rickshaws were phased out by 1947.

In social reform, Tan Jiak Kim was strong on abolishing opium and was the only Asian on an all-colonial panel in 1908, when the Anti-Opium Commission was formed. Yet he was reluctant to contribute to education for women. Like Seah Liang Seah, he was very traditional; boys came first. He was constantly at odds with “the young reformers,” Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng, who were the prime movers for opening up education to girls.

Richard remembers his great-grandfather as a devoted family man imbued with traditional Chinese values. Yet he was also pro-British and spoke fluent English, Baba Malay and Hokkien. On hindsight, Tan Jiak Kim was caught in the transitory phase of the Straits-born Chinese, in adapting from traditional customs to the modern European-influenced era of the 20th century. Unlike his cousin Tan Boo Liat who supported Sun Yat Sen, Tan Jiak Kim focused his allegiance to Queen Victoria and later, King Edward VII and then King George V.

Acknowledging his stellar contributions to the community, the British colonial government awarded Tan Jiak Kim the Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) in 1912.

“One of the SCBA’s reforms in 1900 was to abolish the queue, but he would



Tan Jiak Kim with his third wife, Ang Geok Lan, and grandsons Tan Eng Chiang (right) and Tan Eng Wan (left).

have none of it. He was proud of his queue and kept it to his grave.” This fact was confirmed in print by Richard’s older brother, the late Tan Tiang Leong. While Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng advocated the change to Western suit, Tan Jiak Kim refused to yield and wore the Chinese costume until he died in 1917.

In the era of arranged marriages, he dutifully married Ang Geok Hoe when he was 19 years old. After she died at childbirth, he remarried her sister, Ang Geok Hean. They sailed to England in 1911 to attend King George V’s coronation, but she died during the visit. He remarried another sister, Ang Geok Lan, who eventually outlived him. Marrying the sister of the deceased spouse was a traditional practice known as “*tukar tikar*”, literally meaning changing the floor mat!

“He was a traditional man with traditional ideas on how a Straits-born Chinese baba should conduct himself. Exactly as any nyonya mother would pesan or instruct: *senonoh, ada adat* (well-behaved and polite),” remembers Richard.

Richard has followed in the family tradition of public service, contributing many years of time, effort and money to various charitable projects. His “proudest moment” was on being conferred the Pingat Bakti Masyarakat (PBM) by then-President Wee Kim Wee in 1990. He is presently the Chairman of Pelangi Home.

I asked Richard whether he would pass down to his two grandchildren, aged five and seven, the stories his father told him. “I will, but will tell much more when they are a bit older,” he smiles warmly. In the evening of his life, as he takes walks at the Botanic Gardens, he is comforted by memories of the “luxuriant foliage and fresh air of Panglima Prang.”

# SEAH LIANG SEAH

KING OF THE STREETS



NYONYA LINDA CHEE DISCOVERS FROM BABA SHAWN SEAH THE ‘CRAZY RICH BABAS’ OF YESTERYEAR.

Photographs courtesy of Shawn Seah and the Seah family unless otherwise stated.

FOUR GENERATIONS AGO, LIFE WAS MUCH DAZZLE and spectacle with the Seah brothers, Liang Seah and Peck Seah. They were, as researched by descendant Shawn Seah, “incredibly wealthy business people who lived at Orchard Road and Boat Quay, in beautiful houses surrounded by flowers.”

Shawn, 34, is the great-great-grandnephew of Seah Liang Seah, a co-founder and vice-president of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), and the great-great-grandson of Seah Peck Seah, the SCBA honorary treasurer.

Upon Liang Seah’s death, he reportedly left behind real estate consisting of 87 acres of land in Serangoon Road; 84 acres of rubber land at Thomson Road; seven houses in North Bridge Road; two houses on North Boat Quay; one house in River Valley Road; his sons’ properties consisting of 230 acres of land off East Coast Road

all the way to Bedok; and other lands scattered throughout Singapore.

The Seah family played such prominent roles in Singapore society that many streets were named after them: Seah Street, Liang Seah Street, Peck Seah Street and Eu Chin Street, named after their father, Seah Eu Chin. This was a fact that fascinated Shawn since he was young.

“My father, Simon, would occasionally talk with much passion about the prominent pioneers we were descended from. This inspired me to find out more about them.” His aunt Florence also regaled him with stories about the famous Seah brothers. Shawn was intrigued by, as he describes, Liang Seah’s “most unusual will” after he passed on in 1925. It stipulated that his estate could only be distributed 21 years after the death of King George V’s last surviving child. In 1996, 71 years after his death, Liang Seah’s estate with a value of about \$13 million was finally distributed.

Shawn’s curiosity about his forefathers led to a decade of research in earnest. “I found out most of the significant and comprehensive details on my own.” These uncovered facets of a lavish, extravagant lifestyle.

Both brothers were Anglophiles and loved parties. Shawn discovered Liang Seah to be “a colourful character



Top: The Seahs were fabulously wealthy. Shawn here is the entrance to the palatial home of Seah Eng Kwang, son of Seah Peck Seah. Bottom: The front gate to the residence of Seah Eng Kwang.

who was a consummate diplomat.” Bilingual in English and Chinese, he organised many “prominent and well-attended wedding parties” (as he had six sons and six daughters from three wives) where bands and *wayang* Peranakan entertainment were standard fare. The ostentatious display seemed never-ending. Seah Liang Seah hosted royalty in his magnificent home called Bendemeer House. It had a huge ballroom, a four-storey tower and sweeping grounds. Shawn elaborated: “He would have driving competitions, miniature rifle-shooting, and guessing games with one person whistling a tune with a biscuit in his mouth while his hapless teammates would be trying to figure out what the tune was. He also sported clock golf, croquet, driving competitions and even a merry-go-round once!”

Notwithstanding his vast wealth, the St Joseph’s Institution alumnus was far from being a feckless degenerate. He was a high-ranking community leader who was well respected by both the British and Chinese. He gave generously to charitable causes.

Inspired by his forefathers, Shawn has published three local history books since 2017. These are titled, Seah Eu Chin: His Life and Times; Leader and Legislator: Seah Liang Seah; and My Father’s Kampung: A History of Aukang and Punggol, published in 2020.

The Seahs meet at a Singapore Seah Clan Association, of which he is an Executive Committee member and also the head of their youth group, or *qing nian tuan*. The Association has an annual gathering. There is also an active

Facebook group online called *Seah Eu Chin Descendants*. “I love this online group, because I am able to communicate with many people who are interested in searching for their roots.”

“I have gathered digitally along with many members of my extended family. Through these offline and online activities, I am constantly reminded that I

have a family and it helps me remember my roots: Where I came from, and who I am,” says Shawn on a thankful note.



# SONG ONG SIANG

OF INTEGRITY AND DUTY



director of the now-defunct Asia Commercial Banking Corporation, through his high standards of integrity." Dr Chew had told Patricia that while some of his peers were corrupt and accepted bribes from bank customers to enrich themselves unjustly, he would not stoop to do the same. Patricia is especially proud of her granduncle's legacy of empowering Straits-born females to be educated by co-founding the Singapore Chinese Girls' School. Sir Song and his wife, Lady Helen Song, adopted two daughters, Lily Nancy who remained single, and Darling, who married but died leaving no issue.

Left: Portrait of Song Ong Siang, knighted in 1936, as painted by Julius Wentscher. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Right: Song Ong Joo, his wife Lim Hean Neo and their brood of 10 children lived in a bungalow owned by his elder brother, Song Ong Siang, at 400 Orchard Road, where Orchard Towers now stands. Note the interesting toys that the children played with and the close resemblance of Song Ong Joo to his brother.

CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHOR NYONYA PATRICIA CHEW SPEAKS WITH NYONYA LINDA CHEE ON THE PROFOUND INFLUENCE OF HER ILLUSTRIOUS GRAND UNCLE, BABA SONG ONG SIANG

All photographs courtesy of Patricia Chew unless otherwise stated.

A great name is more desirable than great riches, to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.  
— Proverbs 22:1

THIS BIBLE PASSAGE WAS QUOTED often by Sir Song Ong Siang, as related by his niece, Beatrice Song, who brought up her daughter, Patricia Chew, with stories of the illustrious Christian lawyer. The first Malayan Chinese to be knighted by the British, Sir Song was a brilliant lawyer who started a legal practice with his classmate, James Aitken, calling it Aitken & Ong Siang.

"I didn't hear much about his business acumen, but rather the integrity in which he conducted himself and his very good command of the English language, such that people would go to him to get their legal documents drafted," says Patricia, whose grandfather was Sir Song's younger brother, Song Ong Joo.

"He also impacted me and my late father, Commendatore Dr David Chew, who was previously the managing

The "prominent bigwig and successful lawyer" invested in several properties in Orchard Road. One of them was 400 Orchard Road, a rambling bungalow on spacious grounds near the Thai Embassy, which has since been sold and redeveloped as Orchard Towers. "It was big enough to accommodate my grandparents, my mother and her nine other siblings gratis. My grandparents at that time didn't own any properties and had many mouths to feed." Beatrice often crossed the road from her home to visit her uncle and aunt, and they would give her sweets or fruits.

"My mother would say that although he went out dressed like a quintessential Englishman or 'the King's Chinese', at



Left: Song Ong Siang and his wife, Helen, adopted two daughters, named Lily Nancy and Darling (left).



home he would be at ease wearing a simple sarong and shirt just as any other baba. That completely floored me! I suppose it destroyed my perceptions of an old Chinese gentleman perpetually having tea at home, and dressed to the nines," says a bemused Patricia.

Sir Song died about six months before the outbreak of Second World War in Feb 15, 1942. He was given a gun salute. "My mother said that his widow Lady Song fainted several times during the funeral."

From the wealth of information on him that was fondly shared by her parents, Patricia was inspired to become a lawyer. "A seed was planted in me from the time I was about 12 years old." Sir Song's exemplary life continues to impact Patricia even now. It inspired her to write "Tony Tapir and Friends", a series of four children's books that she authored to emphasise the importance of integrity in leadership.

Patricia Chew and her late mother, Beatrice Song.



# DR LIM BOON KENG

THE SOCIAL REFORMER



BABA LIM KOK LIAN\* HAS FOND MEMORIES OF HIS GRANDFATHER, AS TOLD TO NYONYA PAT LIN\*\* IN CALIFORNIA AND LINDA CHEE IN SINGAPORE. Black-and-white photographs by courtesy of Lim Kok Lian.

DR LIM BOON KENG LED A REMARKABLE LIFE amidst the turmoil of his generation. He was also bountifully blessed. When he drew his last breath on 1 January, 1957 at the age of 88, he left behind seven children, 30 grandchildren, and numerous great- and great-great-grandchildren.

Eleven of his progeny became medical doctors. They include Dr Lim Kok Kian, Kok Lian's elder brother - both are the sons of ace racing car driver Lim Peng Han, whose mother was Dr Lim Boon Keng's second wife, Grace Yin Pek Ha.

Growing up, Kok Lian, 78, was "very conscious" of his grandfather's fame and accomplishments. "Being his grandson often placed me in the situation of being in a fish bowl - watched constantly for any signs of not living up to the standards set by the great man who was both a prominent civic leader and a polymath." Family and teachers "would frequently admonish me to live up to some of these abilities whenever I fell short of expectations". Kok Lian's most memorable childhood days were spent with his grandparents over weekends and school holidays in their two-storey home,

set on two acres of land at 1, Paterson Hill. It had 7,000 sq feet of rambling

rooms and was one of the last mansion-sized wood-and-attap houses dating back to the 1860s. "My most vivid memory is seeing him on his plantation lounge chair with book and cigar at hand."

As he became less agile with age, "it was my job to escort him down the stairs to make sure he didn't fall down." Kok Lian would also accompany him in his humpback 1940s Dodge, driven by a Malay chauffeur, to spend time at the City Club on Cecil Street or the Ee Ho Hean Club at Bukit Pasoh Road. "My job, as grandma insisted, was to place my hand over his head as he either entered or emerged so that he would not scrape or bump his somewhat thinly covered pate."

In the 1950s, the "old man in a white suit", would go for one of his favourite walks aided either by his walking stick or "wobbling rather dangerously while crossing the road" to visit his neighbour, Dr Hu Tsai Kuen, at 2 Paterson Hill. Dr Lim often stayed the afternoon till dinnertime and the two men "apparently shared much in common" even though Dr Hu was nearly 30 years Dr Lim's junior. "It was also likely that his neighbour was more liberal with the beer than what grandma permitted at home." Many years later, Dr Hu's family would be immortalized in the movie, 'Crazy Rich Asians'.

At meals, grandpa "fidged frequently with his ill-fitting dentures", which fascinated Kok Lian as "both upper and lower sets of teeth would be removed and sat alongside him throughout the meals. All meals were also not complete without his favourite side of chili belachan."

The cigar-smoking Baba enjoyed his shot of Johnny Walker whisky every night "for medicinal purposes" and would return home "from banquets guided by an obviously irate grandma, loudly singing, and shakily going upstairs on none too steady legs,"



Dr Lim Boon Keng and his grandchildren at his estate. Lim Kok Lian is the toddler in white overalls, second from left. The other children are, from left, his cousin, Dawn Teh, his brother, Dr Lim Kok Kian, and Dawn's brother, Teh Ee Keng, a Queen's Scholar.

remembers Kok Lian. "While happily fueled by the rounds of 'yam seng' at banquets, grandpa was also prone to engage in his favorite mode of humour, where he would pun in several languages. One of his oft-repeated puns was the Japanese word 'arigato' (thank you) which he would twist into the Hokkien 'giah ee giah toh' (carry chair, carry table). In his darker moods, his intoxicated rants would run into phrases such as 'goa ai si, buay si' (want to die but cannot die)." In more cheerful times, he said it was strange that the Hokkien word for equines was "horse" but "tiger" in Hokkien is "hor[se]."

Comparing notes on play rituals with his niece, Stella Kon, and the others, Kok Lian recalls "grandpa's usual attempts at friendliness to the very young was to slip one of his cigar rings onto the finger of whichever child he happened to encounter."

When Kok Lian reached adulthood, he realised his famous grandpa "was far from wealthy". After leaving Xiamen and bequeathing their beautiful home on Gulang Su to Xiamen University, Dr Lim returned to Singapore financially depleted and homeless, impacted by the Depression and World War Two. "The



Dr Lim surrounded by his family in mourning. His widow Grace Yin looks on, at the head of the coffin.

somewhat shabby old mansion grandpa lived in on Paterson Hill was afforded to him through an old friendship with the Tan Chay Yan family, whom grandpa had helped in the rubber industry."

Dr Lim became much of a recluse in his august years. Towards the end of 1956, he fell very ill. Cancer was suspected. On New Year's Day, he passed on.

A huge crowd attended Dr Lim's burial in Bidadari Cemetery. Kok Lian says in reflection that his grandpa "had lived across two centuries and by the sheer force of his activism and personality, he had changed the lives of many as well as the course of history in no small ways." ♦

\*LIM KOK LIAN WAS THE HEAD ADMINISTRATOR OF THE KAISER PERMANENTE MEDICAL CENTER IN RIVERSIDE BEFORE HE RETIRED IN 2009. \*\*PAT LIN IS PROFESSOR EMERITUS, GENDER, ETHNICITY AND MULTICULTURAL STUDIES AT CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, POMONA. BOTH ARE BASED IN CALIFORNIA.



# COMING CLEAN

INSPIRED BY THE PANDEMONIUM OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, **BABA EMERIC LAU** EXPLORES THE HISTORY, HABITS AND HYSTERIA OF PERANAKANS' HYGIENE PRACTICES

The typical bibik is fastidious about cleanliness, and my grandmother was no exception. “*Cuci berrr-sssih!* (Wash thoroughly!)” she would exhort our helper; “*Mesti pakai Brrrasso!*” (Must use Brasso!) she exclaimed if she saw the slightest tarnish on a brass object or bit of chrome hardware. As a result, I associate trilling r's and hissing s's with a frenzied hubbub of scrubbing, polishing and washing. How did our fanatical devotion to always shining like freshly minted coins come about?

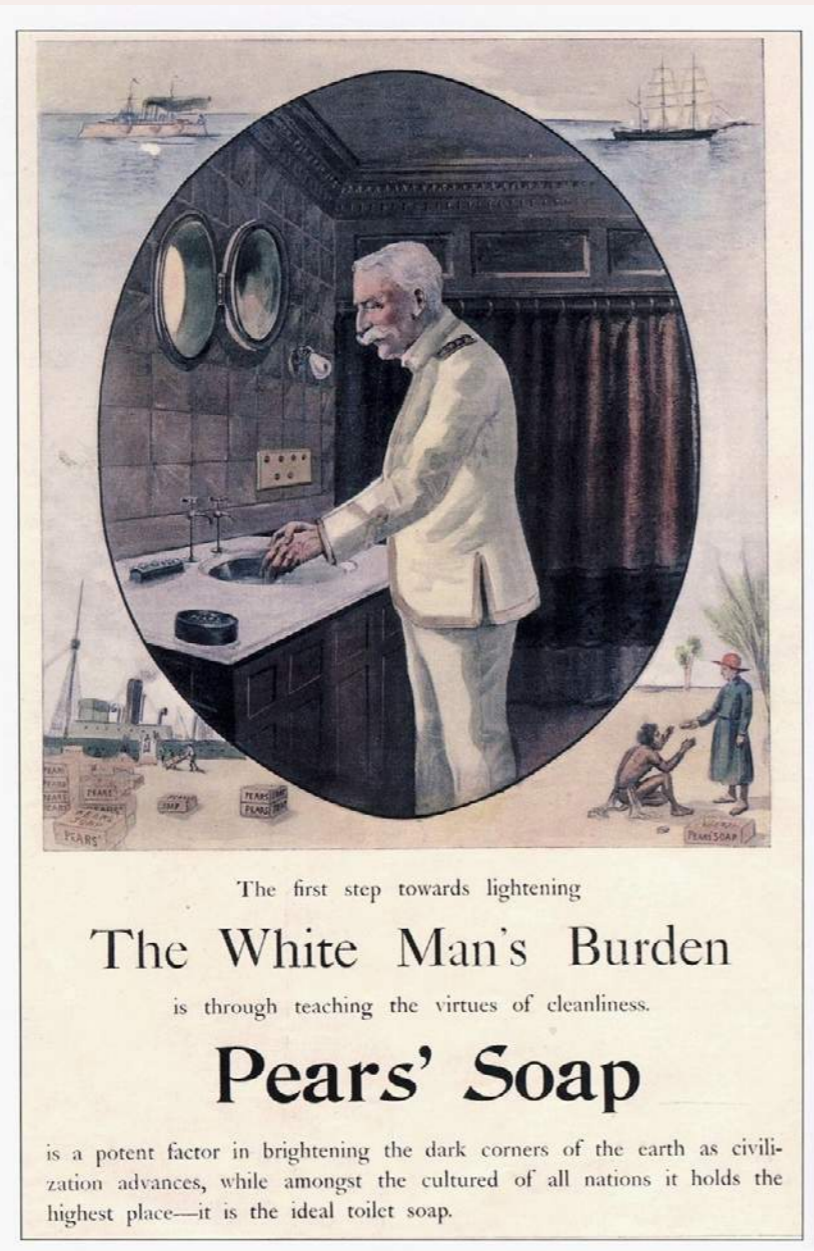
## CLASS & COLONIALISM

Let's turn back the clock to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when the first Europeans arrived in tropical Southeast Asia. At the time, the concept of bathing was rather alien to westerners, and Dutch historian De Haan noted a high degree of “hydrophobia” that lasted at least one generation, before the new arrivals took to immersing themselves in the manner of the locals at the nearest convenient riverside pool.

Describing life in Batavia in the middle of the 18th century, he writes that both Dutchmen and the Portuguese detested bathing. They left this to the ladies, who were of local or mixed descent. Jean Gelman Taylor also notes that European men in Batavia “refused to adapt to the Asian custom of frequent bathing”. Instead, the Europeans simply donned clean clothes regularly.

The founder of modern Singapore, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, praised the Javanese for their cleanliness and meticulous care of physical hygiene. The common Javanese who bathed, Raffles wrote, once a day or once in two or three days were “more clean than the Chinese and even the European”.

With advances in science and medicine over the 19th and early 20th century, washing, especially with soap, became regarded by the Western world as a marker of civilisation. When exported to the colonies, using soap “made natives white” in a metaphorical sense. By the same token, the “unwashed masses” reeked with bodily odours whereas the nobility was portrayed as freshly scented. Missionary Christians invested their congregations with the idea that the cleaner or purer one was, the closer to God, giving rise to the phrase “cleanliness is next to godliness”.



Pears' Soap advertisement, 1890. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Pears' Soap was promoted as “brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, whilst amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place...”

Many Peranakans, modeling themselves as the King's Chinese, were quick to convert to Christianity. Their desire to differentiate themselves from the *sinkeh* or new Chinese migrants drove them to adopt upper class European practices, including maintaining a state of exemplary cleanliness in both body and home. Soaps, detergents, perfumes and other cleanliness-related sundries were all incorporated into an already syncretic and holistic Asian culture of general



Buah Lerak, or soapberry, a natural detergent. Photo by Dawn Marie Lee.

wellbeing that encompassed one's health (both corporeal and spiritual), hygiene, housekeeping and happiness.

At this juncture, we should mention the *buah lerak* (soapberry). Its husk contains pure saponin, a gentle soaping agent. This natural detergent is softer on fabrics than synthetic soap, penetrating cloth softly to tease out dirt, making it a favourite of bibiks who use it on their delicacies and coloured *kain*. Native to South and East Asia, natural saponin is eco-friendly and totally hypoallergenic, meaning it won't irritate sensitive skin. In a 21<sup>st</sup> century reversal, the Western world has cottoned on to the benefits of the soapberry, packaging it as an organic laundry detergent!

## NOURISHMENT



Some common ingredients used in rempah include candlenut, garlic and chillies.

### REMPAH

A diet rich in antioxidants and immunity boosting ingredients can help ward off diseases. It was reported that none of the Indians who were evacuated from Wuhan were found to have contracted Covid-19. The Indian diet of curries and spicy foods may have something to do with robustness - high levels of turmeric, galangal, garlic, onions and chillies. The same ingredients are found in nyonya *rempahs*. The humble tapioca is known to help guard against stomach cancer, while ginger helps to ward off “heatiness”, and is easy to include whether cooking chicken, pork or fish dishes. Be careful though, as ginger may induce flatulence, causing one to “break wind” as a result of “beating wind”!

### SIREH

The practice of chewing *sireh* (betel leaves and areca nut) was once a ubiquitous habit of the nyonias. Aside from being a mild hallucinogenic, betel leaves do bring some health benefits. They are believed to reduce the level of sugar in the blood, thus treating diabetes; they reduce body fat by increasing the metabolic rate; and they inhibit carcinogens that cause oral cancer by maintaining the levels of ascorbic acid in saliva. When applied externally, the leaves help to heal wounds and provide relief from headaches.

Top: Mortar and pestle used for pounding the rempah. Bottom: A ceramic Tong Luda or spittoon. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum. Nyonias used two types of spittoons. The first type, like this piece, was tall with a flared mouth and foot that resembled the archaic 'gu'-shaped vases used on altars in China. They were placed on the floor and within the washstands in bridal chambers. The second type was the jar-shaped table spittoons of various sizes, which were more portable and shared between nyonias at social gatherings.





## BATHING & CLEANSING

Traditionally, the right hand is used to bring food to one's mouth, whereas the left hand is applied to "the other end", that is, for washing one's backside (*cebok*). Wiping down with toilet paper just can't beat a refreshing rinse. The phrase "*cebok pantat tak habis*" which means "incessant bum washing", is a crude way to commiserate that one's chores are never-ending. Hence, the hands are indelibly associated with opposite ends of the human body: the mouth and derriere.

Across cultures, bathing or immersing in water is regarded as an act of physical and spiritual cleansing, from the rite of baptism in Christianity to the practice of *mandi lulur* (bathing with fragrant flower petals) in Indonesia. The latter includes a ritual of scrubbing the body with a paste of purifying herbs and spices like turmeric, rice, ginger and cumin. Once reserved for royal brides, *mandi lulur* has been adapted as a part of contemporary spa treatments all over Southeast Asia. Some also believe that it helps to rid the body of spiritual possession.



*Mandi lulur* – a ritual flower bath. Photo: Unsplash

In everyday life, grandmothers often espouse that the outdoors is full of *kuman* and *jangkit* or germs and infections, and they will insist that young children take a bath upon returning home: "*Gosok betol-betol, ayer sama sabun*. (Scrub up properly, using water and soap.)" And don't even think of sitting on the bed in one's street clothes. Their "anti-bacterial" finishing touch would often be a liberal splash of 4711 Cologne.



4711 Cologne was popular because of the refreshing feeling on the skin in the tropical heat.

## WOMEN'S MATTERS

Life in a *kampong* was not all hardscrabble. The women would seek regular massages from a *makchik* masseur, and such sessions included various herbal remedies and compresses to *pukol angin* (rid one of flatulence), address *perot sakit* (stomachache), cramps and other discomforts.

Pregnancy requires particular care. Hormone changes can be erratic, causing perspiration or dry skin. Good hygiene practices minimise the risk of infections. Ladies may apply *bedak sejuk* immediately after showering to keep their skin soft and supple. A study in 2016 found a high concentration of phenolics in the rice powder, which are a source of antioxidants, are anti-inflammatory and are easily absorbed into the skin.

The Asian practice of confinement helps the body recuperate and recover from childbirth. This typically includes staying indoors for 30 days, along with consuming foods to purge "wind" and promote blood circulation for increased strength. There is usually no washing of the hair or body, although some do practice bathing in heated water with herbs; it is a must to avoid contact with anything cold. All movement is to be minimised, with bed rest being the ideal way to pass one's time.

During both pre and post-natal phases, the new mother may opt to have *Jamu* massages. After delivering, some women engage in belly binding or *bengkung*. A long strip of cloth is wound and secured tightly around the abdomen to support the womb. Its corseting effect also helps to slim the ribcage, belly and hips. These measures



*Bedak Sejuk* is a fermented rice based powder that was popular with *nyonyas* of the past. It is still produced today in parts of Malaysia.



*Bengkung* - The traditional way a postpartum belly is bound.

yield both physical and psychological benefits, enhancing one's recovery.

FEELING NAUSEATED?  
TRY SNIFFING A FEW DROPS OF MINYAK KAPAK ON A 20 CENT-COIN ENCLOSED WITHIN A KNOTTED HANDKERCHIEF.



A popular brand of *minyak kapak* commonly found in Singapore and Malaysia.

## PERSONAL WELLNESS

These are countless, ranging from the pragmatic to idiosyncratic. Feeling nauseated? Try sniffing a few drops of *minyak kapak* on a 20 cent-coin enclosed within a knotted handkerchief.

Stay clean in both body and soul with the simple practice of *cuci kaki* (washing one's feet) before turning in for the night. This stops malevolent spirits sharing the bed. Even better, one should *cuci kaki* upon arriving home.

## DOMESTIC PRACTICES

Separate dishcloths should be used when wiping surfaces that could be oily, like the kitchen and dining tables; and non-oily ones, like coffee tables and study desks.

Woe betide the ignorant helper or daughter-in-law who doesn't know the difference and uses the same cloth. "*Aiyee! Satu kain lap semua?*" (You're using one rag for every purpose?) Nor

would they escape rebuke should the wiping be deemed unsatisfactory: "*Apsal lu mia kain lap macham tok po?*" (Why is your wiping done as though with a mat (i.e., non-absorbent rag)?)

While household chores demand meticulous attention, they are supplemented by a myriad of apparently superstitious practices. Keeping dirt at bay also includes identifying and ridding one's home of bad energies and evil spirits.

A simple method to purge negative vibes is to slice onions into halves and place them at various parts of the house. The onions will "absorb" undesirable elements, turning black after some time, and can then be discarded. However, if the onions turn black in under 48 hours, it is a sure sign of the presence of evil spirits, which may warrant a medium's services! Some Malays use *buah kundo* (wintermelon) in a similar fashion: the

millennia in many societies, and have proven medicinal benefits. They are known to kill harmful bacteria, mould and parasites, and purify the air. If ingested, they have antiseptic, anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties. Often done on *Malam Jumaat* (Thursday nights) when spiritual presences are believed to be strongest, *Asap rumah* is adapted from the sinicized Malay practice of *keramat* (shrines to holy men) worshipping, also known to the Chinese as *Datok Kong*, a ritual that was once common all around the Malacca Straits.

When attending a wake or funeral, one should soak a few stalks of *daon delima* (pomegranate leaves) in a small pail of water, and place it outside the home. Upon returning, douse the face and hands with this water prior to crossing one's threshold. This act will vanquish any unwanted spirits that may have latched onto the attractive aura of



*Kemenyan* for smoking the house. Photo by Colin Chee.

fruit is sliced into halves and placed on the floor at the four corners of room. If it rots quickly, then the house may be hosting a malevolent presence or else someone has placed a hex on the premises.

There is also the cleansing ritual called *asap rumah* or smoking the house with incense (*kemenyan*) which may be composed of frankincense, myrrh, benzoin or gum benjamin. These resins, derived from the gummy sap of several tree species, have been used for

living persons at the scene of sadness and vulnerability.

Let us apply our wealth of knowledge towards wholesome lifestyles and staying in the pink of health - *badan kuat kuat!* ♦

CONTRIBUTORS:  
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NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE  
NYONYA AGNES NG

NYONYA ROSALIND TAN  
BABA ANDY GWEE  
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BABA RICHARD TAN



# YOK TUA

CHINESE MEDICINAL PRESCRIPTIONS

**BABA TAN KUNING** RECALLS SOME TRADITIONAL CURES FROM HIS CHILDHOOD, AND HIS SON RECORDS THEM FOR OUR READERS.  
Yok Tua transcribed by Dr Michael Stanley-Baker, Huang Wenqin

## TRADITIONAL PERANAKAN CURES

I GREW UP IN THOMSON Road, in a house surrounded by a two-acre garden. My grandfather, nicknamed Pisang Raja (King Banana), bought it in 1911 and it was the family home for the next sixty years.

Pisang Raja passed away one year before I was born. My best memories centre around the years growing up under the watchful eyes of my grandmother, the matriarch of the house, along with a host of relatives. It was a time when age-old Peranakan traditions were still upheld, even in the midst of many significant developments in Singapore. As a young boy, the days were carefree and happy, except during the times when I fell sick.

Back in the 1930s, many people believed in traditional cures for ailments. There were few trained doctors, and a visit to the clinic would be a costly affair. One would go to hospital only when absolutely necessary. Only the critically or terminally ill sought treatment at hospitals, which was regarded as a death knell.

Traditional cures continued to be widely used in the 1940s, during the Japanese Occupation, with all its privations, and in the subsequent post-war years of recovery and re-building.

For Peranakans, being at the nexus of three different cultural traditions meant that we could turn to Western, Chinese or Malay medicine. Some Western-trained doctors were popular among Peranakans and were household names, but many Babas and Nyonyas still turned to traditional cures. The *wak urut* (elderly massage lady) was a frequent visitor to many Peranakan households. They provided massages to the young Nyonyas during their post-natal confinement period, helping them to regain their shape after childbirth. They also

helped soothe the aches and pains of elderly bibiks.










For oral medication, most Peranakans turned to *obat sinseh* (medicine from a Chinese physician). Typically, this was a mix of different dried herbs, usually leaves, but sometimes including insects. The exact ingredients and the proportion of each ingredient depended on the nature of the illness, and the prescription would be written in Chinese.

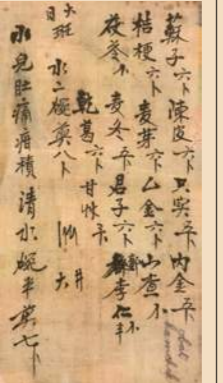
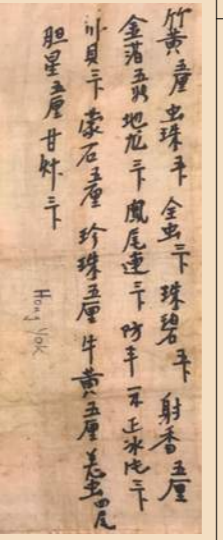

Each prescription was recorded in what the Peranakans called a *yok tua* (*yok* - the Hokkien word for medicine, *tua* - record). Since most Peranakans could barely speak dialects, let alone read Chinese characters, the purpose of each prescription would usually be added in Baba Malay e.g. "*obat batok*", but occasionally in English too e.g. "cough medicine".

Many Nyonyas were literate, having attended 'sekolah Boon Keng' or Singapore Chinese Girls' School as it was referred to then by the Peranakans. (Lim Boon Keng, a medical doctor, was one of the founders of SCGS).

My grandmother carefully kept the *yok tua* in a box. When anyone in the family was ill, the appropriate prescription would be taken out and brought to the *keday obat Cina* (Chinese medicine shop). The shopkeepers prepared the mixture, then packed it in paper for a customer to take home and brew.

I was told that in mainland China, the prescriptions were written on silk, but in Singapore, white cotton was used. Cloth, whether cotton or silk, would keep better than paper, suggesting that the *yok tua* were meant to be handed from one generation to the next, as they represented the valued knowledge from the past.

SOME INGREDIENTS	PEARL					
	GOLD LEAF					

1	<b>HONG YOK</b>	<p>Besides <i>angin</i> (wind), <i>kamchek</i> was another common problem. Children usually suffered from <i>perot kamchek</i> (flatulence), believed to be due to <i>cha ching</i> (worms) in their stomach. With better hygiene and nutrition, we rarely hear about children suffering from <i>perot kamchek</i> these days. In the past, kids tended to be skinny, but parents wanted them to be cute and chubby, making regular de-worming a must. Today, rising affluence has resulted in the opposite problem of obesity among children (and adults too).</p>		<p>BABA TAN KUNING INHERITED A BOX OF YOK TUA FROM HIS GRANDMOTHER. HE SHARES FIVE OF THEM HERE.</p>
1a	<b>HONG YOK</b>	<p>We have two prescriptions for <i>angin</i> or 'wind'. Many Peranakans believed that 'wind' was an underlying cause of many illnesses, making it imperative to <i>pukul angin</i> (beat the wind away). Following the beautiful calligraphic script, written in ink, my grandmother used a ball point pen to add the words 'Hong Yok' (medicine for wind). Interestingly, 'Hong Yok' is written on the left - perhaps the Peranakans were aware that Chinese characters then were written from left to right, with the prescription thus ending on the left, where the annotation was then added.</p>		<p>TRANSLATION OF INGREDIENTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>天竺黄 Shiraia bambusicola (a parasitic fungus growing on specific species of bamboo twigs)</li> <li>虫珠? Literal translation: Insect pearl/beat</li> <li>淡全虫 Scorpion</li> <li>珠碧? No translation</li> <li>麝香 Musk</li> <li>金箔 Gold leaf (Fig 6)</li> <li>地龙 Earthworm (Fig 8)</li> <li>野黄连 Onychium Japonicum (a species of fern)</li> <li>防风 Saposhnikovia divaricata (Chinese Parsnip Root)</li> <li>天然冰片 Natural Borneol</li> <li>川贝母 Fritillaria cirrhosa (Himalayan Fritillary) (Fig 3)</li> <li>蒙石 Lapis Micae Aureus</li> <li>珍珠 Pearl (Fig 1)</li> <li>牛黄 Ox gall</li> <li>白僵蚕 Silkworm larvae</li> <li>胆南星 Gallstones from Ox, Sheep, Pig or Goat</li> <li>甘草 Licorice root (Fig 4)</li> </ul>
2	<b>HONG YOK BUDAK</b>	<p>The second prescription for 'wind' is for children - the words 'Hong Yeok budak budak makan' have been added, this time in pencil.</p>		<p>TRANSLATION OF INGREDIENTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>天竺黄 Shiraia bambusicola (a parasitic fungus growing on specific species of bamboo twigs)</li> <li>蒙石 Lapis Micae Aureus</li> <li>牛黄 Ox gall</li> <li>地龙 Earthworm (Fig 8)</li> <li>珍珠 Pearl (Fig 1)</li> <li>白僵蚕 Silkworm larvae</li> <li>全蝎 Whole Scorpion (Fig 2)</li> <li>麝香 Musk</li> <li>胆南星 Gallstones from Ox, Sheep, Pig, or Goat</li> <li>金箔 Gold leaf (Fig 6)</li> <li>冰片 Borneol</li> <li>琥珀(珍珠和琥珀?) No translation</li> <li>防风 Saposhnikovia divaricata (Chinese Parsnip Root)</li> <li>川贝母 Fritillaria cirrhosa (Himalayan Fritillary) (Fig 3)</li> <li>野黄连 Onychium japonicum (a species of fern)</li> <li>甘生草 Licorice root (Fig 4)</li> <li>虫朱? Literal translation: Insect pearl/beat</li> </ul>





3	F O R	P U B E R T Y	<p>Apart from medicine for ailments, a prescription for nourishment was also found. For example, when a child reached puberty, a set of herbs would be brewed with chicken. Back then, chicken was a luxury item, usually consumed only during Chinese New Year and other festive occasions, or to nourish the sickly and weak.</p> <p>A note behind the <i>yok tua</i> indicated that prescription was for children turning 15, suggesting that puberty came later in those days compared to present times. It could be consumed by both boys and girls, so that they would become strong and healthy adults. Brewing time was measured in the time taken for two joss sticks to burn out.</p>		<p>TRANSLATION OF INGREDIENTS</p> <p>生地 Rehmannia Root                  苏木 Sappan Wood                  当归 Angelica                  金不换 Stephania Sinica                  赤芍 Red Peony                  正红花 Safflower (Fig 5)                  桑寄生 Mulberry stem                  正杜仲 Parasitic Eucommia bark                  怀牛膝 Achyranthes root                  桔梗急 Platycodon grandiflorum                  性子 (Chinese bellflower)</p> <p>Instructions from the Taoist priest: Take these herbs with a chicken that screams (i.e. rooster), add half wine and half water and simmer for the time it takes two josssticks to burn out.</p>
4	O B A T	C M A T A  EYEWASH	<p>One of the prescriptions is an <i>obat chuchimata</i> (eyewash). The various ingredients would have to be brewed first before the cooled liquid was used to rinse the eyes.</p>		<p>TRANSLATION OF INGREDIENTS</p> <p>正川连 Coptis chinensis (Fig 9)                  白菊花 White Chrysanthemum                  龙胆草 Gentiana scabra Bunge (Fig 7)                  炉甘石 Lapis calminaris, Calamine                  胆矾 Chalcantithum</p>
5	O B A T	P A R A T  FOR A SORE THROAT	<p>There is also a <i>yok tua</i> for sore throat, loss of voice and cough. It would come in powder form, to be blown directly at the throat. Interestingly, this prescription was not written on cloth, but on paper with the letterhead of the Hong San Si Temple, a temple that was once popular with Peranakans.</p> <p>The address of the temple is also given – at 5 ½ milestone of Changi Road. It was standard practice then to refer to the location of places in terms of milestones. Changi was very far from where we lived in Thomson (at the 3rd milestone), especially since the transport network was not well-developed. This makes the <i>yok tua</i> particularly precious.</p>		<p>TRANSLATION OF INGREDIENTS</p> <p>大冰片一钱 Large Piece of Borneol 3.7 g                  真牛黄一钱 Large ox gall 3.7 g                  露蜂房五钱 Wasp's Nest 18.5 g                  熊胆二钱 Bear gall 7.4 g                  硼砂二钱 Borax 7.4 g                  正老青黛二钱 Authentic Indigo naturalis extract 7.4 g</p>

## a Healing Garden at Home

*Obat sinseh* (medicine from a Chinese physician) is usually bitter and strong smelling. On the other hand, medicinal plants used by the Peranakans can be fairly pleasant.

Since we had a huge compound, my mother maintained a small herbal garden. Beside the herbs were fruit trees, with their seasonal offerings. There was also a spice garden, with ingredients used daily in Peranakan cooking, such as *lengkuas* (galangal), *seray* (lemongrass), and *daon lemo perot* (kaffir leaves). But whenever common ailments struck, it was the plants in the herb garden to the rescue.

T W O	P L A N T S	F O R	C O U G H	<p>INDIAN BORAGE</p>  <p><i>Daon kapor baru</i> is known as Indian Borage, Cuban Oregano or Mexican Mint (scientific name: <i>lectranthus amboinicus</i>). The thick, fuzzy leaves are aromatic and have a minty flavour. They can be pounded to extract the raw juice or boiled in water to drink as an infusion.</p> <p>RUE</p>  <p><i>Daon aroda</i> is the common Rue (scientific name: <i>ruta graveolens</i>). The small leaves have a strong smell and bitter taste. The bitter taste is what gives the herb its common name, "Rue", which means regret. The leaves are boiled with water. <i>Daon kapor baru</i> was used to treat a simple cough. However if it got worse, <i>daon aroda</i> was used. I still grow both herbs in flower pots from my grandmother's garden.</p>
<p>Just like <i>obat sinseh</i>, <i>daon kapor baru</i> and <i>daon aroda</i> are hardly used for medicinal purposes now. These days, most prefer a visit to the doctor or pharmacy for Western medicine.</p> <p>There has been a resurgence of interest in natural remedies, especially among some who believe that we have become too reliant on antibiotics. However not everything herbal is always safe. Some herbs can even be toxic if prepared wrongly or consumed in the wrong dose. Nonetheless, there is wisdom in traditional cures used by our forefathers. We can use them to complement modern medicine in beneficial ways. ♦</p>				
<p>EDITOR'S NOTE</p> <p><i>Baba Tan Kuning passed away peacefully on 11 March 2021. Many of the terms written on yok tua are written in old Chinese script and very specific to Traditional Chinese Medicine, which a layman may not be able to understand. It was a huge challenge to decipher and translate the Tan family yok tua. Many thanks to Dr Michael Stanley-Baker and his colleague Huang Wenqin who helped us with the translation.</i></p> <p>DR MICHAEL STANLEY-BAKER SERVES AS THE VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL ASIAN MEDICINE. HE HOLDS A PHD FROM UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON IN MEDICAL HISTORY, A MASTER'S DEGREE IN LITERARY CHINESE FROM INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON, AND A CLINICAL DIPLOMA IN CHINESE MEDICINE FROM RUSSETO COLLEGE, BOULDER, COLORADO.</p>				



# Heroines

OF WAYANG PERANAKAN

WE PAY TRIBUTE TO **FOUR FEMALE STARS** OF PERANAKAN THEATRE FROM THE 1940S TO PRESENT DAY.



Nellie, the anak dara, 1950.

**NELLIE THE STAR**

*Bintang Nellie*

**BABA RONNEY TAN KOON SIANG** TAKES HIS AUNT, NYONYA NELLIE TOH, BACK TO POST-WAR MELAKA AND SINGAPORE WHEN SHE WAS A STAGE STAR. All photos courtesy of Nellie Toh unless otherwise stated.

was a shooting star who gave it all up at the height of her fame.

Since boyhood I had always been enchanted by Aunt Nellie's charming, intelligent and urbane personality. I visited her in 2017 with Baba GT Lye, the doyen of wayang Peranakan, who is still an ardent admirer of Aunt Nellie. He recounted how enchanted he was with her grace and beauty when he first set eyes on her in 1950. The 17-year old anak dara (teenage girl) had won a Talentime



MISS NELLIE TOH, the only girl winner in the recent Talentime series sponsored by Radio Malaya at Malacca.

Winner, Talentime Contest 1950. Image from The Singapore Standard (public domain)

a tall and handsome businessman. The dashing Anglophile sold top-end luxury motorcars in the 1920s.

**MALACCA CHINESE DRAMATIC ASSOCIATION**

Nellie grew up with musical roots. Her maternal granduncle, Tan Soo

FROM 1947 TO 1958, Nyonya Nellie Toh was a household name within the Straits-born Chinese community for her singing and acting in post-war wayang Peranakan. She

Ghi, conducted his own orchestral band. Her businessman father, Toh Seng Watt, was the organiser of the Malacca Chinese Dramatic Association (MCDA) and worked with renowned actor/director Yeo Joay Tee.

The MCDA was made up of volunteers helping out for the love of wayang Peranakan. Her father ran errands and made sure everything was in order. Her uncle, Toh Seng Yam, lent his expertise on the sound equipment as he was a soundman working in the Malacca Department of Broadcasting. Other volunteers designed and sewed costumes, and helped with lighting and other stage work.

Back then, the wayang Peranakan cast usually consisted of three or four actors. The diminutive Baba Joay Tee directed and acted in the plays, almost always taking on more than one female role, usually a housewife, maid or even mother-in-law.

Aunt Nellie explained that ladies were barred from performing onstage as it was considered tak senonoh (uncouth) by their grandmothers. In those days, an anak dara had to be chaperoned by her brother or another male family member if she stepped out of the house.

In 1954, Nellie sang at the Youth Festival of Music and Ballet at the Capitol Theatre, Melaka. It featured budding pianists, instrumentalists, dancers and singers.

Her maternal uncle, playwright, singer and songwriter Tan Eng Ann, was her main influence. He became blind at the age of nine but he never let his handicap stand in the way of his love for music and theatre. Baba Eng Ann was prolific in writing Baba Malay plays.

Residing nearby, he would come over to her house at Klebang (the Melakan equivalent of Singapore's East Coast Road with its upper crust villas). He coached her in singing and acting. Nellie was his prima donna.

When his first play, *Sapu Tangan Yang Putih* (The White Handkerchief), was staged in 1955, he acted and sang with Nellie, who sang the theme song *Sapu Tangan* with so much emotion that she shed tears. The sad love story was so touching that the audience wept. The play sold out in its week-long run in Melaka and two-week run in Singapore.

In 1957, she starred in another play, *Bunga Teratai*, also directed by Yeo Joay Tee. After a successful run in Melaka, it was a sell-out show during the Easter holidays when it was staged as a charity performance at the Singapore Badminton Hall.

Humble and modest about her gifts, Aunt Nellie never hankered after a career in show business. "Like that lah. I just enjoyed singing and performing."

Nellie had many admirers. In 1958, at the height of her fame, an eligible bachelor, Baba Ee Hong Guan, wooed

her away from the world of wayang Peranakan into domesticity. They were married within the year. The arrival of a baby girl the following year left Nellie's theatre career on the backburner... permanently.



Nellie dressed as a Burmese maiden in a 1947 charity performance, as reported in the local daily, the Singapore Standard.



Nellie today, at 86. She is blessed with a family of two daughters and two grandchildren.

**NYONYA LINDA CHEE INTERVIEWS THE DIMINUTIVE WAYANG PERANAKAN STAR WHO CHARMED A PRESIDENT**

That was in 1986 when Jessie made her debut in theatre. Baba playwright Henry Tan was scouting for actresses for the seminal play, *Menyesal* (Regret). He chanced upon Jessie's uncle, Baba Peter Kenneth Cheo Kim Ban, at Baba Peter Wee's Katong Antique House. Kenneth suggested his niece. "So I went to meet Henry and the director, his cousin William Tan. I read the lines and got in straightaway," Jessie recalls.

*Menyesal* was a production of Gunong Sayang Association to be staged at the now-defunct World Trade Centre Auditorium. Her co-stars were Babas GT Lye and Lee Yong Ming, and Nyonyas Cynthia Lee, Jeanette Chan and Rosalind Goh. Jessie

was to act as the *kaypoh bibik*, or the nosey parker friend who questions the unfilial daughter-in-law, played by Cynthia, with the quoteworthy line: "Mengapa menantu kasi neo makan bubor sama tau eu?" ("Why does the daughter-in-law give plain porridge and soya sauce to her mother-in-law?")

Though her stage debut was 34 years ago, Jessie remembers feeling lost like it was yesterday: "I was so nervous. I didn't know any of the cast." She had to grapple with tying her sarong and fixing the *kersang* on to her kebaya. Worst, "the *sanggol, pengan!* (hairpiece, faint!) *Macam taik lembu ka belakang!* (like cowshit at the back of my head!) I was so afraid my *sanggol* was going to drop."

Jessie was mentored by Baba William, the legendary doyen of *dondang sayang*, renowned for his witty and spontaneous melodic repartees. He encouraged her to "belajar" or learn the poetic art form of singing that Peranakans had adopted from Malay culture. Jessie dutifully obeyed. "Gua tak pernah nyanyi *dondang sayang*," although she was quick to memorise the lyrics, "by heart lah," she recalls.

But timing her cue was tricky for this newbie. William used a clever device: "Lu dengair baik baik. Bila gua chakap mmh, lu masuk". So she sang after he said, "mmh" to cue her in. "It was my first *dondang sayang* performance

onstage with GT and Uncle William," says Jessie happily.

From that finger-biting start was born one of Singapore's most versatile actresses in wayang Peranakan, at the height of what some called the Peranakan Revival. For over three decades, Jessie was to perform at virtually all the theatres in Singapore - WTC, Victoria, Kallang, Jubilee Hall, Drama Centre and the University Cultural Centre - as an auntie, friend, mother, wife, daughter and even maidservant.

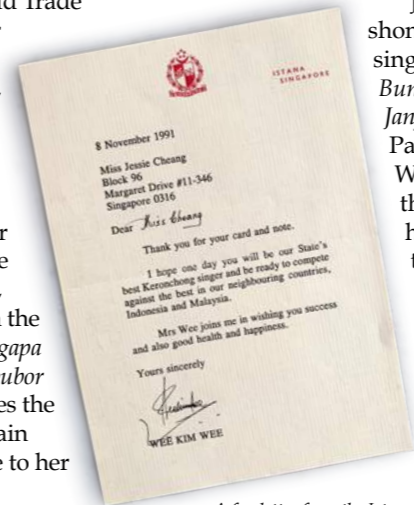
Baba Cedric Tan, who had performed with Jessie in *Pagar Makan Padi* (Unreliable) in 2010, describes her as "one of a rare breed" of Peranakan *dondang sayang* performers. He remembers Jessie for her demure personality and for her "smooth, melodious style and stellar one-line repartees".

Jessie's vocal talent shone as the original singer of *Di Kebun Bunga* in the 1999 play, *Janji Perot* (Pre-birth Pact), written by Baba William Gwee. Playing the role of the mother, her lilting voice won the hearts of the audience, notably then-President Wee Kim Wee who was one of her biggest fans. He wrote her many letters to compliment her singing and acting.

As she nears 82 years, she the Methodist Girls' School

alumna considers herself fortunate. "I was approached because they were looking for Peranakans." Her lineage draws from Melaka and Sumatra; she spoke only Baba Malay with her parents at their family home in 16, Hoot Kiam Road.

Jessie relishes acting as it brings out a different personae in her: "I am shy but onstage it is different. I



A fan letter from the Istana, 1991. Jessie received much encouragement from the then-President of Singapore, Baba Wee Kim Wee.



The late playwright, Baba Henry Tan (seated) with the cast of a 1987 play, *Zaman Sekarang* (Times have changed). The actors are household names in Peranakan theatre. They are: (from left) the late Sally Gan, Rosalind Goh, Jessie Cheang, GT Lye, Julie Chua, the late Mabel Lee, Gerald Yeo, Lee Yong Ming and the late Patrick Foo.

**When traditions clash with modern ideas**

JURIM TAN previews the new Peranakan play which will be staged at the Victoria Theatre from Friday to Sunday, and interviews the oldest member of the cast.

Jessie's vocal talent shone as the original singer of *Di Kebun Bunga* in the 1999 play, *Janji Perot* (Pre-birth Pact), written by Baba William Gwee. Playing the role of the mother, her lilting voice won the hearts of the audience, notably then-President Wee Kim Wee who was one of her biggest fans. He wrote her many letters to compliment her singing and acting. As she nears 82 years, she the Methodist Girls' School alumna considers herself fortunate. "I was approached because they were looking for Peranakans." Her lineage draws from Melaka and Sumatra; she spoke only Baba Malay with her parents at their family home in 16, Hoot Kiam Road. Jessie relishes acting as it brings out a different personae in her: "I am shy but onstage it is different. I



Jessie Cheang at home. Photograph of Jessie by Colin Chee.

*Di Kebun Bunga Lama Jessie*  
IN THE GARDEN WITH JESSIE





Nyonya Cynthia in costume

Cynthia Lee

WAYANG PERANAKAN'S FAVOURITE MENANTU (DAUGHTER-IN-LAW)

**"Today, I am significantly more fluent than when I first started acting. Through wayang Peranakan, I learned so much more about the culture and I was able to support Gunong Sayang Association in that manner."**

**NYONYA NATALIE CHEAH** WRITES ABOUT HER MOTHER'S PROLIFIC ROLES IN PERANAKAN THEATRE Photos courtesy of Cynthia Lee.

**N**YONYA CYNTHIA LEE'S FIRST ROLE in wayang Peranakan was as a daughter-in-law.

In 1984, at just 24 years old with no acting experience, Cynthia was cast in the landmark play, *Pilih Menantu* (Choosing a Daughter-in-Law) in the title role. The play sparked off a revival of Peranakan theatre in Singapore. Her most vivid memory of the show was playing a wishful girl, plucking rose petals and dreaming of being a perfect daughter-in-law.

Maybe her wish came true. Looking back on her acting career, Cynthia found that she has played the daughter-in-law or daughter most of the time. "Baba GT Lye usually played my mother-in-law or mother," she says.



Nyonya Cynthia with her idol, late Mabel Lee

As a young actress, she looked up to "mother figures" on stage: Sally Gan, Mabel Lee and Jessie Cheang. They were masters of the Baba Malay language and tended to ad-lib in the middle of scenes. Cynthia recalls, "When I was still new, I faithfully memorised my lines. When they ad-libbed, I would have to 'gabra' my way through the scene, hoping that another actor would respond with some words to bring us back to the script."

Cynthia confesses that *Bilek Roda Hidop* (Bedrooms) staged by The

Peranakan Association Singapore in 2009 was the hardest play for her to do. The dialogue was heavy, and Cynthia's command of Baba Malay was still very shallow. She thought the script was "so *cheem*" (complex) but she took it in her stride and used the opportunity to improve her Baba Malay.

"Today, I am significantly more fluent than when I first started acting. Through wayang Peranakan, I learned so much more about the culture and I was able to support Gunong Sayang Association in that manner."

In her off-stage career, Cynthia started out in social work before moving to human resources and now finds herself in a social service agency.

When I ask what is special about wayang Peranakan, she immediately says it's about "building rapport with the audience and adapting to the environment". In the old days, audiences were full of *bibiks* who expected slapstick moments or tearful scenes that they could heartily laugh or cry along to. "I miss the audience participation and ambience of wayangs in the past. There was so much more enthusiasm in the 1980s and 90s compared to now."

Cynthia feels that today's audiences expect a different level of sophistication in the script and acting. "Even though the younger crowd may not fully understand



Nyonya Cynthia and her co-stars, Christina and Fred



Nyonya Cynthia (right, in pink) in Mari Kita Main Wayang, 1994

Baba Malay, they are drawn in by the social themes and the use of surtitles."

She plans to keep on acting for a long time, and hopes to grow into roles that her mentor Mabel Lee would do. "I would be happy to play the doting aunt on the stage, dishing out good advice. But I also love playing the nasty character. There's so much more room to express emotions!"

"I love being on stage and interacting with the audience. The character simply takes over you and you get to relive the younger days."

**NYONYA NATALIE CHEAH** SPEAKS TO NYONYA CHRISTINA WEE ABOUT HER FAVOURITE STAGE ROLES Photos courtesy of Christina Wee.

**L**OUD. BRASH. **SOMBONG.** (Conceited). Nyonya Christina Wee is most well known for the

villainous female roles she plays. She is so convincing that her stage manager once overheard some *bibiks* in the audience swearing, "Wah, if I see her, I'm going to slap her face!"

I laughed out loud when she related that anecdote during our interview. "It's not difficult for me to portray such roles. I have a fierce looking face and people believe that I'm genuinely upset or that the character is truly vicious", says Christina. Her husband and fellow wayang Peranakan actor, Baba Fred Soh, chimes in, "Her face is for real. That fierceness is the signature of a matriarch. She really lets her inner bitch out in such a role!"

When I asked Christina if I could interview her for this article, she frankly replied, "I have a very short term memory. After each show, I throw everything out of my mind - the script, the characters, even the title of the play. I honestly forget!"

Christina began her acting career in the Gunong Sayang Association's play, *Chueh It Chap Goh* in 2000. Due to her parents passing, she did not act again until *Mama Rosak* (2006), when she was asked to take over a role just one month before the show started. "It wasn't easy. *Bo pian* (I had no choice) the show must go on, so I stepped in", she said. Since then she has played different roles, but is most recognised as the feisty, sassy daughter-in-law who is always in conflict with the family.

Although she usually plays the rebel on stage, in real life, Christina is a happy-go-lucky fifty-something who works in Communications and Community Relations. She grew up in a Peranakan family and uses her experience to flesh out her stage characters. Her mother and grandmother were both matriarchs and she studied their behavior and expressions closely. In

preparation of her roles, Christina would also watch Baba GT Lye's repeatedly. Christina loves dramatic roles and says her "naturally loud voice" helps her play these brash characters with ease.

She confides that it's also "very easy for me to cry". "I don't have to use Eyemo to fake the tears. I will just think of something very sad and the emotions come through."

Behind the scenes, Christina likes to release stress with silly antics and joking around with the cast and crew. However, just before the show opens, she still gets butterflies in her tummy. "One of the most challenging things for me is when I have many quick costume changes, especially when the sarongs are tied so tightly!" she confides.

She relates an incident from *Kain Chik Dua Mungka* (2017) when she had just minutes to change from her tight sarong kebaya into a modern dress. Fred, who was in charge of her wardrobe, had tied the sarong with a



Nyonya Christina's many expression in Kain Chik Dua Mungka



Nyonya Christina with the cast members of Kain Chik Dua Mungka

dead knot. Frantic and intent on getting the sarong off quickly, Christina grabbed a pair of scissors backstage and cut it off. "I later found out that it was an antique sarong that Fred bought!" she gasps. "But that's a good lesson for him lah, in future don't tie so tight! Just use a sarong with a zip!" she giggles.

Looking to the future, she hopes that she can try out "softer" roles that the audience can empathise with. She also hopes to groom younger Peranakans like her daughter, for the stage. "We wayang Peranakan actors are all getting older. Who will take on the younger roles? I will act as long as GSA will have me," she concludes. ♦



Nyonya Christina with her daughter Nyonya Crystal



Nyonya Christina in Pagar Makin Padi, 2010

WAYANG'S SASSIEST STAR

Christina Wee



# SERVING THE MONKEY GOD



The Monkey God was commonly referred to by Peranakans as Tai Seng Yah.

ESMOND SOH AND NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE TELL THE FASCINATING TALE OF DEVOTION TO THE TAI SENG YAH  
Photos by Kathy Anne Lim unless otherwise stated.

## WHO IS THE MONKEY GOD?

**THE GREAT SAGE EQUAL TO HEAVEN** is popularly known as the **MONKEY GOD**. He is the protagonist of the 16th century Ming dynasty Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*, authored by Wu Cheng'En.

Born from a sacred stone on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits, the Great Sage was taught the secrets of immortality by the sage Subhuti.

After becoming immortal and undergoing a series of trials and tribulations, the Great Sage was tasked with escorting the venerable monk Tripitaka on a pilgrimage to India. When his task was completed, the Great Sage was promoted to Buddha-hood, where he took on the title of the Buddha Victorious in Countless Battles. In Singapore and other parts of Southeast Asia where communities of the Chinese diaspora have gathered, the Great Sage was – and still is – worshipped as a powerful exorcist and protector of the needy.

**T**HE MATURE HOUSING ESTATE OF TIONG BAHRU has plenty of sights and sounds to offer curious visitors interested in the enclave's Peranakan past. Right at its heart is a temple on Eng Hoon Street dedicated to Great Sage Equal to Heaven (齐天大圣), popularly known as the Monkey God or Tai Seng Yah in Hokkien. The Qi Tian Gong (齐天宫) temple (which means Palace for the Great Sage Equal to Heaven) was frequented by many Peranakan Chinese.

According to an estimate by one of the temple's leaders, at least 75% of the temple's worshippers were Peranakans in 1965. One of these Peranakans who was eventually selected to become a censer-master of the temple was a wealthy Baba who lived in Emerald Hill where the old Singapore Chinese Girls School (SCGS) once was.

Once a *tang ki* (spirit-medium) temple, Qi Tian Gong's history can be traced to the early-1900s.



Baba Goh Kim Choon (holding the flag), the founding spirit-medium of the Qi Tian Gong temple. Photo courtesy of the Qi Tian Gong temple.



The Qi Tian Gong temple at Eng Hoon Street in Tiong Bahru, all decked out to celebrate the Monkey God's birthday on the 16th day of the first lunar month. In the past, over 75% of Monkey God devotees at this temple were Peranakans.

## SAVED BY A TWIST OF FATE

In 1910, Baba Goh Kim Choon, a third generation Peranakan whose ancestry could be traced to Zhangzhou (漳州), Fujian province, China, became a spirit-medium for the Monkey God in exchange for the deity's help in curing his ailing mother. He was just 16 years old at the time.

Kim Choon's father had died early, leaving his mother to raise four children on her own. The family was very poor and Kim Choon had to support them by selling flowers. When his mother fell seriously ill, he could not afford to pay for treatment with his meagre income and became desperate. He contemplated suicide and went to a cluster of trees near the *kampong* to hang himself.

However, fate had other plans for him. While he was preparing to hang himself, elsewhere in the *kampong*, a *tang ki* dedicated to the services of Kwan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, went into a trance. In this trance, the Goddess informed her aides of a suicide attempt and instructed them to intervene. Her aides saved Kim Choon in the nick of time and brought him before the Goddess.

She offered him a cure for his mother's illness if he agreed to become a spirit-medium of the Monkey God. Desperate for his mother to be cured, he accepted.

In the following years, Kwan Yin's *tang ki* initiated and guided him through the process of becoming a spirit-medium of the Monkey God.

Interestingly, Kim Choon's mother had a small Monkey God statue (which is still in the Qi Tian Gong temple today). With this statue, the family started to service the community from an attap hut within a taro garden.

By the 1920s, the Qi Tian Gong had gained a significant following and was very popular among the Peranakans. The number of devotees and worshippers had swelled

significantly over the years, so in 1938, the temple moved to its current location at Eng Hoon Street.

The first floor was used for the spirit-medium practice, where images of the Monkey God and other divinities drawn from the pantheon of Chinese religion were displayed and worshipped. The second floor was used as a residential space where Kim Choon and his family lived for the next few decades. At least two of his grandchildren were born there.

In 1961, Kim Choon passed away on the eighteenth day of the eighth lunar month. Although his son Goh Geok Suan was originally chosen to continue in his father's footsteps as a *tang ki* (spirit-medium) of the Monkey God, he resisted.

Ultimately, the Monkey God decided to search for another suitable candidate, who turned out to be Soh Teow Peng. He served the Monkey God for 42 years until his retirement from spiritual service. Till today, the temple remains without an active spirit-medium.





1



2



3

WAYANGS & RONGGENG FOR IMPORTANT FESTIVALS

The 16<sup>th</sup> day of the first lunar month (the Monkey God's birthday) and 16<sup>th</sup> of the eighth lunar month are important festival dates for the Qi Tian Gong. Large and elaborate celebrations take place. *Wayangs* or street opera would be performed for the Monkey God, other deities and guests. The *wayangs* were performed in different dialects, depending on the sponsorship from devotees. Because there was a large following of Peranakan devotees in the past, the temple even had *ronggeng* (Javanese style dancing popular with the Peranakans) sessions during these festivals.

There was also a procession through the streets of the neighbourhood. Many of the devotees placed temporary altars outside their houses to welcome the Monkey God. The procession was also meant to bless and cleanse the *kampong*. The Monkey God's *tang ki* (spirit-medium) would go into a trance and visit the devotees' homes or shops to bless them or give consultations.

These celebrations still take place today and are very colourful affairs with a riot of sights and sounds, carrying of sedan chairs and palanquins with lion and dragon dances and a drum and gong percussion troupe, known as *Kong-Kuan* in Hokkien.



Temple assistants hanging up paper offerings from devotees for the festival. Each paper robe is taller than a man.

A CAPRICIOUS BUT BENIGN DEITY

Temple elders relate many interesting anecdotes about the Monkey God. It was said that during festivals, when the Monkey God came (through his spirit-medium, Baba Goh Kim Choon), he would climb up a betel nut tree and swing onto tall coconut trees growing just opposite the temple. He would repeat that stunt from tree to tree in the neighbourhood.

As a teenager, Kim Choon thought that he could play truant and avoid going into trance to give consultations. The Monkey God found a way to teach his young spirit-medium a lesson. Once, while Kim Choon was in a trance, he climbed up to the top of a tall coconut tree. Just as he was about to pluck a coconut, the Monkey God left him. He was left clinging on for his dear life!

CHAP JI KEE

In the past, *chap ji kee* (the Hokkien name for a lottery using 12 numbered sticks) was especially popular among the poor. It was said that the headquarters of the *chap ji kee* operator was in Johor Baru, but there were agents in most *kampongs* in Singapore where people could place bets and collect winnings. The agent "earned" money when people lost their bets.

So, when the Monkey God came, some of his devotees begged him for a good number to win some quick money. The Monkey God decided to give them a set of two numbers. The devotees quickly placed their bets with their local agent in the *kampong*. When the results were announced, all the punters who

- Clockwise from top left:
- 1 Wayangs (street operas) are sponsored by devotees and offered for the entertainment of the Monkey God and other deities.
  - 2 To prove that the Monkey God had fully possessed his *tang ki*'s (spirit medium's) body, these skewers were smeared with lard and pierced through the man's flesh while he was in a trance. The Qi Tian Gong temple today has no *tang ki*.
  - 3 A gong and percussion troupe known as *Kong Kuan* (in Hokkien) entertains the Monkey God during the festival.



Ping Pong bottle used to signal the presence of the Monkey God. Photo courtesy of Romni Pinsler.

THE 'PING-PONG' BOTTLE & GREAT SAGE WORSHIP

The *ping-pong* (also known as *pong-pong*) bottle is a unique ritual instrument associated with the worship of the Great Sage in Singapore. Although the original *ping-pong* that belonged to Qi Tian Gong was broken, the temple continues to keep two *ping-pongs* beside the Great Sage's altar till today.

Alan J. A. Elliot, in his monograph *Chinese Spirit-medium Cults in Singapore*, describes the *ping-pong* as: "...an ordinary bottle filled with 'twelve o'clock' water', water drawn from a tap or well at midday. Into the neck of the bottle is fitted with a funnel-like piece of glass-ware open at the lower end of the funnel, which dips into the water but completely closes at the top."

Devotees believe that the Great Sage's presence leads to the agitation of water stored in the *ping-pong* bottle. When the Great Sage is about to arrive, bubbles are created at the bottom of the *ping-pong* bottle. As the bubbles force themselves upwards and into the funnel-like glass, they give off a 'ping-pong' sound that signal the Great Sage's arrival. This onomatopoeic phenomenon thus gives the *ping-pong* bottle its name. Unfortunately, and despite the ubiquity of these bottles as markers of Great Sage worship in Singapore and Malaysia, the origins of the *ping-pong* bottle is lost to history.





1



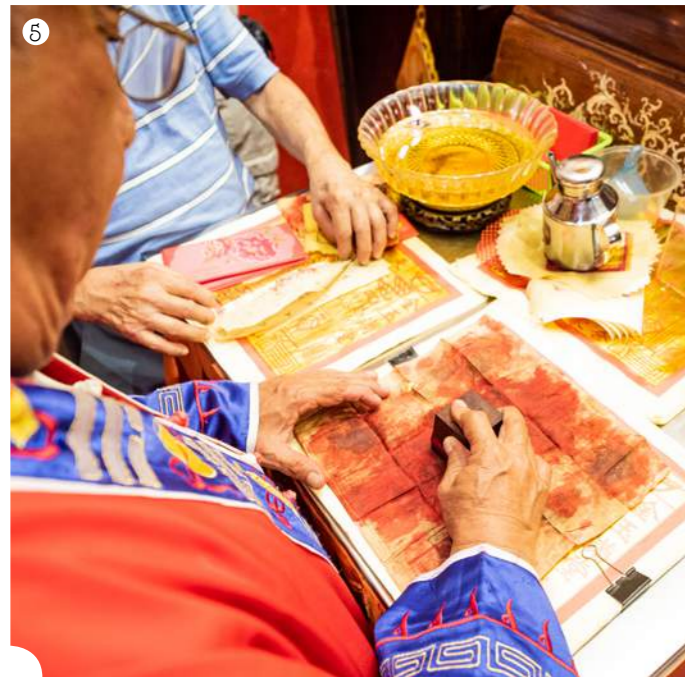
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6



3



5



4

had bought the numbers given by the Monkey God won! The agent had to pay out a huge amount to the winners. The next day, a woman came to the Qi Tian Gong temple, crying and wailing loudly. She said that her son, who was the betting agent, had committed suicide because he was penniless after having to pay off all the winning bets. Since then, the Monkey God decided that he would not give out any more winning lottery numbers.

## GAO SNG

In the past, *gao sng* was a mysterious phenomenon that afflicted young children from the age of 6 months. These children seemed to stop growing and would crouch and act like monkeys. At that time, doctors were not able to identify the cause of the problem. It was said that the child of one of the doctors at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) was afflicted with this problem and no cure could be found. Some *amahs* (female orderlies) working in SGH at that time had their dormitories in Tiong Bahru. They would pass the Qi Tian Gong temple daily on their way to and from work. One of them mentioned the case to the temple and asked for a cure for the doctor's child.

The Monkey God had taught his *tang ki* (spirit medium) to identify and treat cases of *gao sng*. But when the cases were deemed severe, only the Monkey God himself could treat it.

The medium could determine the severity of the case by looking for nodes underneath the child's armpits. For three nodes or less, the medium could treat the child with a Monkey God talisman and an elaborate process. The wife of the medium also learnt to treat such cases.

First, the *tang ki* had to seek approval for treatment from the Monkey God by tossing a pair of *pak puay* (divination blocks). When tossed, the blocks had to show a three-time affirmation, all in succession, before treatment was approved. This was indicated by the blocks appearing with one smooth side facing up and the other with the rounded side facing up.

A course of treatment took 49 days to complete. The child had to go for treatment every 3rd, 6th and 9th day of the lunar month. It was said that the treatment involved using *gui sai kou* (wet chicken dung) spread on a *pong bnia* (a sweet Chinese biscuit) and steamed over the child's clothing which had to be all white. The child would then wear the clothing so that the smell would chase the mischievous monkey spirit away. In addition, the child would also be required to bathe in a tub of water mixed with a smelly Chinese herb known as *gui sai ding*. This smelly herb was believed to chase the mischievous monkey spirit away.

During treatment, the child was to avoid bright lights, fruits and be kept indoors for 49 days. The child was not to be exposed to "red" and "white" matters - red meaning happy occasions such as weddings or full moon celebrations for newborns, and



Colourful "well-fed" paper horses (complete with extra hay) are offered for the Monkey God's use.

white, meaning death or funerals. For protection, the child must also become a godchild of the Monkey God.

For more severe cases where four or more nodes were found under an afflicted child's armpit, the Monkey God had to view the child in person and personally prescribe the treatment.

## MONKEY GOD WORSHIP TODAY

Until today, some of Baba Goh Kim Choon's descendants continue to assist with the smooth running of the temple's festivities, although none are spirit-mediums.

Interestingly, before *en masse* redevelopment and relocation of Singapore's *kampongs* had taken place in the 1970s, the bulk of the Qi Tian Gong's devotees were mostly Peranakan, although not all of them lived in the vicinity.

The temple was to have its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020, but due to COVID-19 safe distancing restrictions, the celebrations could not take place.

Today, most Peranakans no longer pray to the Monkey God. Nor are they aware that the temple's history is intertwined with that of the Peranakan community in Singapore. Hopefully this article will help more to learn about the Qi Tian Gong and its Peranakan past. ♦

THE AUTHORS WISH TO THANK VICTOR YUE FOR GENEROUSLY ALLOWING US TO USE SOME MATERIAL PERTAINING TO QI TIAN GONG'S HISTORY PUBLISHED ON HIS BLOG "CHINESE TEMPLES: CREATING A TRAIL OF CHINESE TEMPLES IN SINGAPORE." WE ARE ALSO DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO OUR INFORMANTS FROM THE QI TIAN GONG TEMPLE WHO WERE PATIENT AND FORTHCOMING DURING OUR FIELDWORK RESEARCH AND COVERAGE OF THE FESTIVAL IN 2020. FINALLY, MANY THANKS TO PHOTOGRAPHER, KATHY ANNE LIM, FOR GENEROUSLY GIVING HER TIME TO DOCUMENT THE FESTIVAL IN DETAIL.



NYONYA  
DAWN MARIE  
LEE CELEBRATES  
CENTENARIAN  
NYONYA AGNES TAN  
Photos courtesy of Peter Lee.

# AGNES

*One hundred  
and One  
& counting*



Left: Agnes in the 1940s. During the Second World War, the family lived in Bangalore, India from 1942-1946.

Right: Agnes in the 1990s.

**B**ORN IN MELAKA in 1920, Nyonya Agnes Tan Kim Lwi, is the second oldest member of The Peranakan Association Singapore. She recently celebrated her 101<sup>st</sup> birthday in February. Agnes had a sheltered childhood growing up in a conservative Melaka Baba family. The youngest of Baba Tun Tan Cheng Lock's five children, she was affectionately known as Su, short for *bongsu*, a Baba Malay term of endearment for the youngest child. As with most *anak dara* (young ladies) of her era, she was not allowed to leave the house unaccompanied. She grew up in her family's ancestral home on Heeren Street, built by her great-grandfather Baba Tan Choon Bock, founder of the Straits Steamship Company (which became part of Singapore's Keppel Corporation in 1983). Heeren Street has since been renamed Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock. Agnes was closest to her sister Alice. As children, they

spent many happy days in the family's seaside villa at Klebang, a Melaka suburb. When Agnes was 15, the family lived in Europe for four years before returning to Melaka. During the Second World War, they fled to Bangalore, India and lived there for four years from 1942-46. Both she and Alice were thrilled to escape the rigidity of Melaka life and spread their wings. After the war, the sisters decided that they wanted to study abroad. With the help of their brother, Siew Sin, (who became Malaysia's longest-serving Finance Minister), they persuaded their father to let them sail to America where they enrolled at the University of Oregon in 1946. They then went on to study in London. Agnes returned to Melaka in 1959 to care for her ailing father who passed away in 1960. For ten years she was chairman and executive director of her family's company, UNITAC,



# A tradition of Philanthropy



**Top:** Agnes (far left) with her siblings and father Tun Tan Cheng Lock at the family's seaside villa in Klebang, Melaka. **Bottom:** Agnes (seated, in a teal silk jacket with cheongsam and pearls) with her relatives at her 100th birthday party in February 2020. Left to Right: Chan Chin Choo, Tan Siok Lee, Chan Leong Cheng, Tan Siok Eng, Mrs Lily Chan, Datin Paduka Tan Siok Choo, Mr Jimmy Koh. Seated next to Agnes: Daphne Chan.

which managed over 20,000 acres of rubber estates. After her sister got married in 1970 to Marcus Scott-Ross, Agnes moved to Singapore in 1972. The two sisters lived next door to each other until Alice passed away in 2002.

Agnes carried on the family tradition of philanthropy and donated generously to academic funds in her father's name. In 1995 Agnes and Alice donated \$16 million to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) for a graduate scholarship trust.

The Tun Dato Sir Cheng-Lock Tan MA Scholarship is offered annually to support local students with the opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies. Among the 45 recipients of the scholarship to date are Members of Parliament Baba Jamus Lim (1996-1999, London School of Economics) and Pritam Singh (2003-2004, King's College London).

In a 1995 issue of this magazine, Agnes explained that the scholarship trust was set up in her father's name because he did not have the opportunity to further his studies due to his financial situation.

Baba Tan Cheng Lock's grandfather, Tan Choon Bock, felt that his four sons were unworthy of inheriting his empire and locked up all his assets in a family trust for 84 years after his death in 1880. Cheng Lock's father, Tan Keong Ann was given an annual allowance of \$130 Straits Dollars,



Agnes (right) with her sister Alice in London, 1950s. The sisters continued their studies in London after graduating from the University of Oregon, USA.



from which he had to support his own family. So although Cheng Lock was a brilliant student, he could not further his education.

In 2005, Agnes donated \$5.5 million in her father's name to the National University of Singapore to purchase and restore heritage houses in Singapore and Melaka. The residential townhouse at 157 Neil Road, once owned by a wealthy Peranakan shipping family, the Wees, is now the NUS Baba House which is open to the public by appointment. The two Dutch-style houses at 54/56 Heeren Street in Melaka were purchased and bequeathed to the NUS Department of Architecture for conservation studies.

Agnes' other generous donations include 63 artefacts including important portraits and calligraphy scrolls to the NUS Museum.

She also made various donations in support of preserving Peranakan heritage including \$50,000 in 2009 for the 22nd Baba Nyonya Convention in Singapore.

Even in her golden years, Agnes' generosity and grace continue to touch the lives of many and carries on her father's legacy of support for the community and Peranakan heritage. ♦



# chakap budak chakap budak

**BABA BILLY TAY AND NYONYA JOANNE TAN-DE ZILVA**  
MEET OUR LITTLE BABAS AND NYONYAS  
*Photos by Billy Tay.*

For the first time in the Association's 120-year history, we have junior members. With the launch of our Junior Membership for youths aged 6-18, we hope that more young people will join us to learn about our rich heritage and culture. We speak to some of our young members here. ♦



Little Nyonya  
**SIMONE  
STEPHANIE  
TAN**

17

**HOBBIES:**  
Crocheting,  
drawing &  
reading

I love wearing the **SARONG KEBAYA**. It's so versatile. I'll wear it at any time, not just for special occasions. The delicate *sulam* (embroidery) on the kebaya is eye-catching. When people admire it, I tell them I'm Peranakan and explain what that means. I'm proud of my culture and love sharing it with others.

**HOBBIES:**  
Sports, reading,  
playing the  
guitar, drums and  
keyboard



Little Nyonya  
**ROWENA  
JOY EBER**

14

I'm amazed at how Peranakans love to decorate everything. Even a simple **TINGKAT** (tiered food carrier) is transformed into a pretty piece of art. Its layers remind me of the many delicious flavours that make Nyonya food so good!

Little Nyonya Natasha with her family's *chupu*.



Little Nyonya  
**NATASHA  
LEE**

11

**HOBBIES:**  
Drawing,  
baking, stamp  
collecting

My friends call me 'Nut'. I want to be a vet when I grow up because I love animals. But not snakes! Eeee! Meeting one would be the worst thing that could happen to me. The best thing so far was getting 10/10 for my spelling.

I love art and drawing, so when I saw my grandaunt's **CHUPU**, it was love at first sight because of the colours and pretty peonies. The shape is also quite special. When I asked her about it, she said that in the past, brides used a *chupu* to serve homemade soups to their husbands. That's so sweet.



My parents call me 'Baby Girl'. I love my family the most and like spending time with them. I surprise my mummy with a big hug and kiss when she says goodnight to me. When I grow up, I want to be a doctor but also continue to dance ballet.

I also like playing **CONGKAK** with my grandma. It's a fun game that lasts a long time. I don't like it when my brother, Emmanuel, fights with me over the TV when it's my turn to watch my shows.

Little Nyonya Amelia Ng with her family's *congkak*.



Little Nyonya  
**AMELIA  
NG**

10

**HOBBY:**  
BALLET



Little Baba Bryan Seet holding his favourite dessert, the Kueh Salat



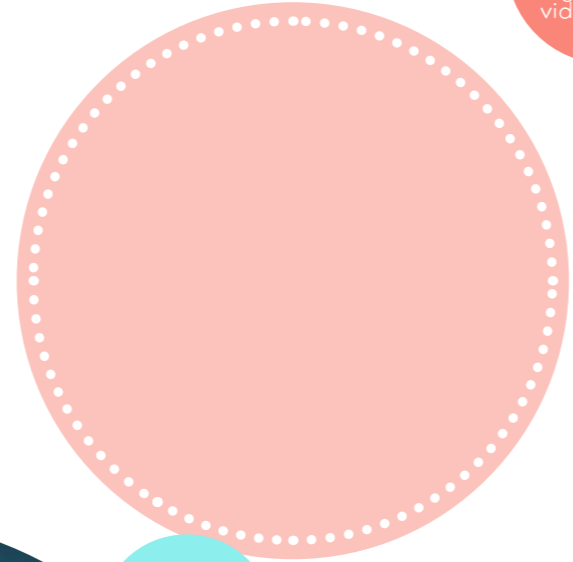
**HOBBIES:**  
Playing basketball, darts, skateboarding, art and computer games

12  
Little Baba  
**BRYAN SEET**

I feel so hot in this shirt and jeans. At home I wear my holey singlets and shorts...so comfortable! I'm quite good at card tricks and making scrambled eggs. I can't stand **TAU GAY** (beansprouts) in my noodles. Yucks.

When I grow up, I'd like to be a Formula One driver and an architect. My motto is to never give up and to fight for what I believe in. Sometimes I think the world may be very different when I'm an adult. Maybe by then lobsters will have hair, fish will have legs and horses will have wings. Who knows? My worst fear right now is if a meteorite strikes Earth.

Being Peranakan means I get to eat a lot of **KUEH SALAT**. It's my favourite! The sticky rice and kaya together are just so good...like having two desserts at the same time.



**HOBBIES:**  
Drawing, playing with Lego, playing video games

11  
Little Baba  
**ALEXANDER CONNOR CHUA**

If you need to eat quickly, this is the perfect meal. It has rice and meat all in one dumpling. I could eat **KUEH CHANG** everyday. My brothers Benjamin and Christopher love it too. Is it hard to make?

**HOBBY:**  
Playing Brawl Stars



10  
Little Baba  
**CHRISTOPHER JUSTIN CHUA**

My parents forced me to come.. I think they are Peranakan.. can I go back to my Brawl Stars game now?

My grandma (Nyonya author Josephine Chia) taught me how to play *congkak*. This is a wooden boat-shaped board with holes and we use marbles or seeds to play. I really like playing it with her because she showed me how to win! My favourite snack is **KUEH PIE TEE**.

When I grow up, I want to invent something to make traffic jams disappear. My mummy is my best friend and I listen to her. The naughtiest thing I've done was in Primary One when my teacher threw a ball into a dustbin, I picked it up and kept it. My happiest days are when there's no homework. I don't like it when my sister Amelia annoys me.



**HOBBY:**  
Table Tennis

11  
Little Baba  
**EMMANUEL NG**

**HOBBY:**  
Playing Brawl Stars



8  
Little Baba  
**BENJAMIN WESLEY CHUA**

**KUEH CHANG** is my favourite food! I like the sticky rice.





# MODERNISING THE KASOT MANEK

**NYONYA JOANNE TAN-DE ZILVA**  
SPEAKS TO **NYONYA JADE LIM**, FOUNDER OF JAZELLE CO. A HANDMADE JEWELLERY BUSINESS WITH PERANAKAN ROOTS  
*Photos courtesy of Jade Lim.*

**W**HEN SHE'S NOT BUSY treating sick animals, or looking after her family, veterinarian Nyonya Jade Lim crafts handmade beaded jewellery as a tribute to her Peranakan heritage. Her hobby has become a thriving business. She works with precious stones and seed beads to create beautiful, intricate, modern jewellery that is affordable and highly wearable.

Using a bead weaving technique, Jade has transformed *manek manek* (seed beads) into contemporary pieces of jewellery that can be customised to suit the wearer's mood. The pieces are interchangeable, giving the wearer countless options to play with. (Scan the QR code at the end of this article to watch how the pieces can be used.)

Inspired by her late grandmother's Peranakan heritage, her collections feature intricate pendants, bangles and necklaces reminiscent of nyonya beadwork. Jade's grandmother, Nyonya Grace Ho, passed away at 90 years old in 2019 after Jade's twins were born. ♦

**JOANNE TAN-DE ZILVA (JT-DZ): YOU STARTED YOUR JEWELLERY LINE, JAZELLE CO. WITH PRECIOUS STONES. WHAT MADE YOU CREATE A PERANAKAN-INSPIRED BEADWORK COLLECTION?**

**JADE LIM (JL):** I was looking at my mother's Peranakan display cabinet, which was passed down from my grandmother. It suddenly hit me that my children won't know much about our Peranakan heritage if I don't pass it on. I felt an urgent need to do something related to my heritage for my kids to see as they are growing up. Hopefully, it will get them interested in the culture.

My grandmother was a lady who took great pride in her appearance, especially with what she wore and accessorising her outfits with jewellery. One of her favourite sayings was, "When getting dressed, there are three

important things other than clothing and jewellery that a woman must pay attention to. Brows have to be neat and well-drawn, blush should be used sparingly and lipstick is a must".

She would always don the sarong kebaya for special occasions. She had many different sets in all colours, with jewellery to match. She would have a new set tailor-made for occasions like for weddings or for her grandchildren's graduation ceremonies.

Her passing made me even more driven to continue my bead weaving work as I want to ensure that my kids will learn about their great-grandma's pride in her culture.

**JT-DZ: JAZELLE CO'S PERANAKAN-INSPIRED COLLECTIONS, "TRULY PERANAKAN" AND "BLISS" ARE ALL HANDMADE USING BEAD WEAVING. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE TECHNIQUE USED?**

**JL:** 'Truly Peranakan' is a frameless pendant that takes about 6.5 hours of continuous bead weaving to complete. These pendants are made with Japanese Toho seed beads. I wanted to create something that was closely related to nyonya beadwork. What I didn't realise was how tedious and stressful it is on the eyes!

In the past, our nyonya ancestors commonly used glass seed beads to sew *kasot manek*. The beadwork technique used on shoes is quite different from bead weaving. Bead weaving was used to make items like curtain ties, fringes and decorative hangings. In bead weaving, the beads are not sewn onto any fabric. The entire item itself is made of just beads woven together. While there are some

nyonias who still sew *kasot manek* today, the art of bead weaving has somewhat been lost among our community.

Learning and practising bead weaving made me even more connected to my heritage, which is why I named this collection "Truly Peranakan".

For the "Bliss" collection, which is a series of beaded charms, I wanted to create something that would appeal to younger Peranakans, something they could wear everyday that would remind them of their heritage.

These charms are made using Delica beads which are flatter than the beads used in the 'Truly Peranakan' range, so that the centre of the charm can be easily removed from the toggle and changed to a different design. This range has been very popular with younger clients.

**JT-DZ: WHICH IS YOUR FAVOURITE PERANAKAN-INSPIRED ITEM THAT YOU HAVE CREATED AND WHY?**

**JL:** The "Enchanted" bangle with interchangeable charms. I particularly enjoy wearing a nice piece of jewellery on my wrist because it is something you can look at when it's worn, compared to say a pair of earrings. The wrist is also something people will notice when you gesticulate.

**JT-DZ: WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE WITH YOUR PERANAKAN-INSPIRED COLLECTIONS?**

**JL:** My goal is to incorporate Peranakan flavour into pieces of modern jewellery. This way, Singaporeans and even tourists might be interested to learn about our culture.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT JADE'S CREATIONS CAN BE FOUND ON JAZELLE CO'S INSTAGRAM PAGE AND WEBSITE.

instagram  
**JAZELLE.CO**  
website  
**JAZELLE.CO**



SCAN THE QR CODE TO WATCH HOW THE PIECES CAN BE USED





# JODOOH

(DESTINY)

AN ORIGINAL SHORT STORY  
WRITTEN BY AWARD-WINNING  
AUTHOR, **NYONYA JOSEPHINE**  
**CHIA** SPECIALLY FOR THE  
PERANAKAN MAGAZINE.  
Illustrations by Benedict Khoo

**D**IANA CHOI-LUMIERE SKIED down the gently undulating snow-covered mountain in Hokkaido, in sheer joy. Her husband Louis, who acquired his ski legs in his native French Alps preferred the more challenging black or even double-black diamond pistes. But she herself enjoyed the green trail where she could relax and simply revel in the beautiful snowscape rather than frightening herself to death on the difficult, steep runs. As a lawyer, she had enough ups-and-downs at work, so she didn't need more on her holiday. She loved the sight of the fir trees, their boughs laden with heavy snow.

The snow scene felt very Christmassy. Their twin girls, Marie and Sophie, were with their snowboarding instructor in a special class for ten-year-olds. They were all scheduled to meet up for lunch at the log-cabin restaurant half-way up the mountain before they resumed their afternoon of skiing.

Arriving early, Diana took off her skis and placed them upright in the mound of snow outside the restaurant and found herself a table on the outside balcony so she could watch Louis and the girls on their approach towards the cabin. She took pleasure in recognising their bright ski-suits and the trail they cut coming downhill. Meanwhile, she logged onto the restaurant's wifi and checked her phone important messages and emails. She noticed several missed calls from Auntie May in Singapore and was alarmed. So, she immediately called her back.

"Sorry to disturb you on holiday," Auntie May said. "Your *Por Por* (grandmother) is back in hospital. Another relapse. She's in a lot of pain. Doctor thinks that this time, she will not make it. She seems very troubled and keeps saying she must see you. Can you come back straight away?"

It must have been very serious for Auntie May to request her return. Diana's ninety-three-year-old paternal grandmother, Jennifer Choi, had raised her ever since she was five; after her own mother had abandoned her.

"I'll get on the next flight out," Diana said. When Louis came in, his face was flushed from his exertions down a Black Diamond piste. He was thrilled to have conquered a piste that had been used for the Winter Olympics some years back. As he was taking off his gloves, Diana hurriedly told him the news.

"But there's no reason why you should all come back with me," Diana quickly added. "The kids' snowboarding lessons have been paid for. Plus *Por Por* is not exactly your favourite person."

"You know why," Louis said, "I don't like the way she manipulates you."

"But she raised me," Diana sighed.

"The less said the better," Louis said in a resigned voice.

"But I'll go back with you if you want because I want to support you."

"No, darling. The girls will be disappointed. I insist that you all finish the holiday," Diana said.

Auntie May picked Diana up from Changi Airport and drove her straight to Mount Sinai, Singapore's top private hospital.

Diana's father, Patrick Choi had got his mother a First Class single room.

When Diana entered the spacious room that looked more like a hotel suite, she saw her father's other sister, Betty, holding her mother's hand. Although she had been heavily sedated with morphine, Jennifer Choi was groaning in agony. The pain was unbearable.

"Aiiyoh! Aiiyoh!! This is my punishment," the old lady cried out.

Diana was shocked by her grandmother's weak appearance and tortured face.

"*Por Por*, I'm here," Diana said gently, as she put her hand on her grandmother's withered arm.

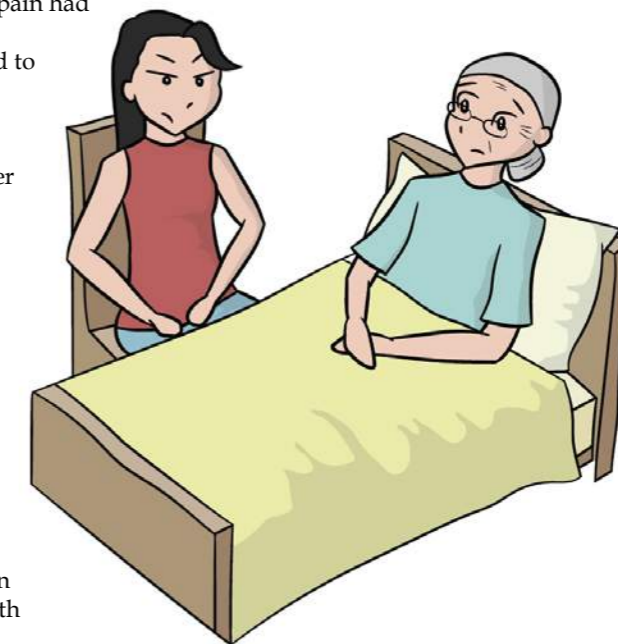
"Thank God you're here!" Jennifer said with imploring eyes; then turned to hiss at her two daughters. "Leave us! I need to talk to Diana alone."

With puzzled looks, the two ladies left the room.

"I'm being punished. I'm being punished," Jennifer lamented.

"All this pain is tearing my insides out. If I

**"POR POR, I'M HERE,"  
DIANA SAID GENTLY,  
AS SHE PUT HER  
HAND ON HER  
GRANDMOTHER'S  
WITHERED ARM.**



But after years of listening to *Por Por* and Pa telling her that her mother had abandoned her, Diana began to believe the lie and started to hate her.

Now *Por Por* was resurrecting her tormented feelings but with a changed premise. The hostility she felt for her mother was based on a lie!

Diana stood up abruptly. Jennifer pulled at her wrist.

"Diana, say that you'll forgive me, please! I did what was best for you."

Diana felt trapped. Here was the woman who had brought her up, on her death-bed...but she had also lied to her for her whole life.

"I must go and see Pa," Diana said in as cool a voice. She didn't want to say anything she would regret later.

Patrick Choi's legal firm was located at the new suites of Chambers at Maxwell Road. Diana stormed into her father's office, which was down the

corridor from her own, her high heels clacking on the tiles. His assistant tried to stop her but she barged in nonetheless. Her father was seated in his high-backed leather chair his sparse hair combed over carefully to hide his bare scalp.

"How could you have done this to me?" Diana barked at her father as she slammed the door shut.

don't confess, I will not go to heaven."

"*Por Por*, confess what? Do you want a priest?" Diana asked anxiously, concerned that the pain had made her grandmother delirious.

"I can't keep the secret anymore! I need to confess to you to die in peace..."

"Diana, your mother did not abandon you...she..."

Jennifer's words were halted by another spasm of pain.

"She wanted to take you with her. But your father submitted false affidavits that claimed she was a bad mother. We wanted you for ourselves. We...we couldn't bear losing you."

"What?!" Diana exclaimed, not expecting to hear this.

All her life, she had hated her mother for deserting her. Her father and grandmother had told her repeatedly that her mother, Angelina Tan, did not love her and did not want her. They told Diana that her mother abandoned her when she was five years old to start a new life with another man.

The insecurities Diana had suffered as a child stemmed from being abandoned. She clung to her grandmother with a fierce devotion because she was afraid that she too would leave her.

Diana felt as if she had been hit with a sledgehammer. The enormity of *Por Por's* revelation was too much to take. Diana slumped in the chair, gasping, as if she was deprived of air.

"I did it out of love for you. Now I need to hear you say you will forgive me so that I can die in peace," Jennifer begged.

"Love? What kind of love would deprive me of my own mother!" Diana screamed. Trillions of thoughts rushed through her mind. Had her whole life been a lie?

**H**er father and grandmother believed that after they cut Angelina out of Diana's life completely, she would eventually forget her mother because she was so young.

But she didn't. The little she remembered of her mother lingered in her mind. She missed her mother's soft hands caressing her brow as she sang her to sleep. She missed the scent of the *bedak sejok* (cosmetic powder) she used, her voice, her laughter.

After her mother left, she cried herself to sleep for so many nights.

**DIANA FELT  
TRAPPED.  
HERE WAS THE  
WOMAN WHO  
HAD BROUGHT  
HER UP, ON HER  
DEATH-BED...  
BUT SHE HAD  
ALSO TO HER  
FOR HER WHOLE  
LIFE.**



"I need to know the truth! Now!"

"What, what, what?" He stammered, unprepared for her emotional assault.

Diana spilled out her grandmother's words.

"Your mother was unfaithful. She betrayed me!" Patrick said in defence. "What kind of life would you have had with her and that man? I did it to protect you!"

"Or did you do it to get back at her? You of all people should know about equal custody!

In all the divorce cases we've handled, we've always fought for both parents to have access to their children. And yet, you denied me this!"

He brooded silently for a while as she went on with her tirade.

"Alright! Alright!" Patrick said. "I was angry with her and wanted to punish her."

"Have you not even considered that you were also punishing me? All my life, I grew up believing I was not good enough to be loved by my own mother! That she just dumped me and walked away! Do you know how much pain you've caused me? In fact, she did try to see me, didn't she?"

"Yes," Patrick said so softly, it could hardly be heard.

"What's that you say? I want to hear it aloud."

"Alright! Alright! Yes! Yes! She begged to see you."

"How could you be so heartless to deny a young mother from seeing her child? I remember telling you that there was a woman in a *sarong kebaya* lurking outside my kindergarten and primary school trying to get my attention, and you said I was imagining it."

"Yes, that was your mother. She's Peranakan."

"You mean to say that all this while, I'm half Peranakan and you didn't even tell me? You've robbed me of my heritage!"

"What's the big deal about being Peranakan anyway? Chap-cheng (half-caste) people! Neither here nor there! Being Chinese is not good enough for you is it?"

Diana recognised her father's typical lawyer's strategy of acting defensive and jumping to another topic more advantageous to him.

"Don't try to evade the issue Pa! How can you go to church every Sunday, knowing that you have ruined lives? My mother's and mine!"

"Why is your life ruined? You have everything a girl would want. I gave you everything. A comfortable life, a good education and you'll inherit this prestigious law firm. What more do you need? And why

would she have suffered? She left because she wanted another man. It was her choice!"

"I cannot believe that you're so obtuse! She left YOU Pa! Not me! She WANTED me! But you and Por Por stopped her!" Diana yelled as she stormed out of her father's office.

"If he was not my father, I would have wrung his neck!" Diana said afterwards to Louis during their video call.

"Are you okay? Your voice sounds different," Louis asked with

his usual concern. She had not been okay. She had gone home and howled in the privacy of her own room. All those wasted years.

But a new thought had emerged in her mind, "I've not been abandoned. My mother loved me!"

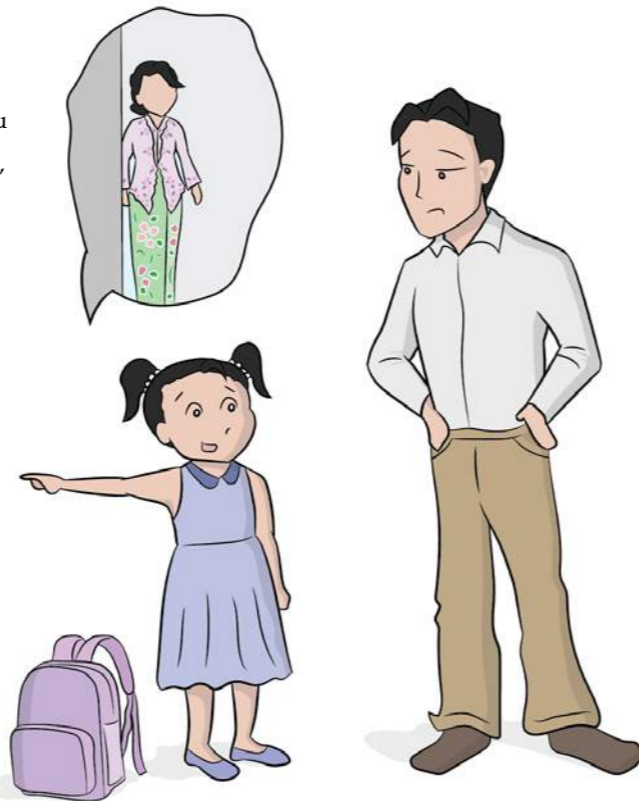
"I'm okay now," she said to Louis. "The revelation was just so shocking. It took a while to digest the news. I've hired a private investigator to locate my mother. I miss you, darling. I can't wait for all of you to be back."

"How's your grandmother?"

"Still alive," Diana said coldly.

After their call, Diana was about to turn on the TV to de-stress, when she noticed the *kamcheng*

“WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT BEING PERANAKAN ANYWAY? CHAP-CHENG (HALF-CASTE) PEOPLE! NEITHER HERE NOR THERE! BEING CHINESE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU IS IT?”



she had bought while on holiday in Melaka. She glanced round her living room, and saw that there were many pieces of nyonyaware and Peranakan objects on display. That was incredible! It dawned on her that although she hadn't known she was half Peranakan, perhaps at a deep level, she had connected with the culture and had been drawn to all things Peranakan.

It soothed her tremendously to realise this. But does collecting Peranakan artefacts make her Peranakan? How does one know that one is a Peranakan and not Chinese? What really constitutes being a Peranakan? Would wearing a *sarong kebaya* turn her into a nyonya? Must she know how to cook *buah keluak*?

She decided to do a quick search online and was astonished to learn that there were not only Peranakan Chinese but Peranakan Indians as well. She knew so little and hungered to learn much more about the heritage that had been kept from her.

It was not a dead culture. Far from it, Peranakan culture was still alive and thriving. Various organisations were doing their best to showcase the culture through multiple ways - The Peranakan Museum, Baba Nyonya conferences, books, magazines and entertainment through dramatic plays and songs.

A feeling of pride rose in Diana. These were her people! Her culture! She wanted to get involved and play an active part in keeping the culture alive. On impulse, she signed herself and her daughters up as members of the various Peranakan associations. It was part of their heritage too. "Marie and Sophie must not be deprived of their heritage as I was," she thought.

When the private investigator she had hired finally located her mother, Diana didn't even know if she would be welcomed. She finally plucked up the courage to call her.

Angelina Tan was overjoyed, choking on emotion as she spoke to her long lost daughter on the phone. Both women shed tears over the years of estrangement. They had so many years to bridge. So much pain to knit over.



At least, now, they had re-connected. Angelina expressed regret at their lost years but did not convey any sense of blame or resentment towards her ex-husband.

Diana decided to meet her mother on her own first before introducing her family. They had swapped photos and stories via WhatsApp. She had learnt that her mother's second husband had succumbed to cancer.

Angelina was anxious to see her daughter and invited her to her flat in Bedok. Diana's heart was thumping as she rang the doorbell. A white-haired woman in *sarong kebaya* opened the door, and for a moment, Diana was stunned.

In her mind's eye, her mother was still the pretty young woman she remembered from her childhood, with long, shiny black hair that Diana liked to twirl around.

Yet, there was a familiarity about the elderly lady which could not be erased. Diana caught a whiff of the scent of *bedak sejok*. She was surprised that after all these decades, her mother still relied on her favourite cosmetic, a fermented rice-based powder used to cool and whiten the skin.

"Oh *sayang!*" Angelina cried, using the

WHAT REALLY CONSTITUTES BEING A PERANAKAN? WOULD WEARING A SARONG KEBAYA TURN HER INTO A NYONYA? MUST SHE KNOW HOW TO COOK BUAH KELUAK?



Peranakan endearment. "I have dreamt of this day for years!"

"Hello.... Mum...." Diana stammered, as though the word had rusted in the throat.

"You can't imagine how long I have yearned to hear you say that," Angelina said, weeping with sheer happiness. "At last I get to hear it before I go to my grave!"

Without hesitation, she folded Diana into her arms. Diana had not been hugged like this since she was a child, enveloped in her mother's love. It took her by such surprise that she was completely unhinged and wept uncontrollably. Angelina soothed her daughter's brow and uttered comforting words.

Angelina's flat felt cosy. It was tastefully decorated with colourful Peranakan mosaic tiles, scattered with items like an old tempat sireh (betel nut chewing kit) and a beautiful antique pintu pagar (half height fence doors) which cordoned off the corridor to the rooms.

Angelina had prepared a longan and red date tea with some kueh-kueh for her very special guest.



"You were only a child. They poisoned your mind. I'm relieved that we got to meet at last."

"Sayang, there's a Peranakan proverb that goes:

*Asam di atas gunung  
Garam di dalam laut  
Kalau ada jodoh  
Jumpa juga di dalam periok."*

"What does it mean?" Diana asked.

"Tamarind on the mountain

Salt in the sea

If it is destiny

We will meet in a cooking pot.

"You see the tamarind tree grows far away, like on a mountain. Yet in our Peranakan dishes, like Assam Pedas, the tamarind will unite with the salt that comes from the sea. So, it means that if it is *jodoh* (destiny), you will meet, no matter how far apart you are."

"So, we are like the tamarind and the salt," Diana said thoughtfully. "Is there anyone teaching Baba Malay? I want to learn. For my kids too. Oh, I haven't told you that you've got two beautiful

grand-daughters, my twin girls, Marie and Sophie. They are ten this year."

Angelina's eyes teared, "I have missed so much!"

"I'm sorry I didn't make more effort to find out the truth. I hate my father and grandmother for deceiving me..."

"No! Never hate! Hate and anger are very corrosive! See what they have done to you because of it? The Buddha once said, Anger is like holding a hot coal in your hand and you are waiting to throw it at somebody but you are the first to get burnt."

"I have missed you so much Mum!"

"And I you. I wanted my love for you to be a beacon that brought you home to me. There is so much for you to learn about our Peranakan culture, but take it slowly. Yes, I can put you in touch with someone who's teaching Baba Malay."

"The moment I found out I was Peranakan, I joined the various associations and made my children members too!"

"That's marvellous! You are sixth generation Peranakan in our family. Your children will be seventh..."

"They're half French. My husband is a French doctor."

"I can't wait to meet them."

"Oh, Mum," Diana said, reaching out to embrace her mother. "I used to feel that part of me was hollow. Now, I've become whole. I've finally found you and my real roots."

Diana was worried that Angelina would ask her to cut off ties with her father and grandmother for their cruelty, but surprisingly, she was magnanimous.

"Life is not black and white," Angelina said. "Just because you love me doesn't mean you can't love your father and grandmother as well. There is no need to cut off a limb to spite your face. They're still your family. Without them, you cannot be truly whole. Though I cannot condone their behaviour in cutting me off from you, I have to accept that my choice of another man angered and hurt them."

"I have incurred this karma for myself. I fell in love with someone else. That was solely my fault, my doing. But I never chose to leave you."

"Ultimately, it was you who had to suffer the pain and loss. For that, my sayang, I am deeply sorry."

"Was my father bad to you? Is that why you left?"

"That is between your father and I. He knows why I had to go. I will not disparage him to justify

my actions. His love for you never wavered."

Angelina took Diana in her arms once more. Diana was taken back to her childhood days when she had smelled the scent of her mother's *bedak sejok*, the security of her mother's warmth, so intimately close to her.

Without doubt now, she could feel her mother's love pouring into her. A great weight had been lifted from her heart and now she felt healed.

Diana drove to Balestier for that special *tau sa piah* that her *Por Por* loved.

The bakery was famous for its deliciously light and flaky Teochew sweet bean-cakes.

There was a long queue as usual, but it was worth the wait to see the happy expression on her grandmother's face. With all the medicine that she had to consume, a sweet bean-cake would help take away the bitterness from her mouth.

When Diana walked into her grandmother's hospital room, her father and aunts were there. The old lady's face lit up when she saw her cherished granddaughter.

"I've met up with my mother," Diana said.

Everyone fell silent and froze in fearful anticipation, as if a time-bomb was about to explode.

The tension eased when Diana smiled and said, "*Por Por*, Pa, I understand that whatever you did, you did out of love for me."

"Now I can die in peace," her grandmother sighed.

"What's all this talk about dying," Diana said. "See what I bought for you *Por Por*."

As Diana opened the box, the fragrance of freshly baked tau sar piah filled the air. Her grandmother's rheumy eyes gleamed with pleasure. ♦



NYONYA JOSEPHINE CHIA IS AN AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR WHO HAS PUBLISHED 13 BOOKS. SHE WON THE SINGAPORE LITERATURE PRIZE (NON-FICTION) IN 2014.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT HER WORK AT [WWW.JOSEPHINECHIA.COM](http://WWW.JOSEPHINECHIA.COM)



# PINTU JAGONG MERAH

DOOR  
CORN  
RED

**BABA BRYAN TAN**  
TAKES SOME OF BIBIK  
WEE'S ADVICE ON  
HOW TO WEATHER  
AN EMBARRASSING  
BEHAVIOURAL  
PANDEMIC  
Illustration by James Tan



THE CHEPAT (FAST) NEWS Network (CNN) logo flashes across the screen. A smart looking anchorwoman tugs on her suit lapels and smooths down the creases on her blouse.

"Good evening. I'm Nyonya Swee Neo. Today on *Mulut Tak Mati* (The Mouth Never Dies) we have a special guest from the Ministry of Peranakan to discuss the dire situation that has been affecting many of our Baba Nyonya brethren. Bibik Wee, thank you for taking time off your busy schedule to be with us."

An immaculately dressed lady pats her *sanggol* (hair bun) and adjusts her *batik tulis* (hand drawn batik) facemask. "Hello everyone. I am Bibik Wee, Senior Director Bibik in the Prime Matriarch's Office (PMO). It is my pleasure to be here, *kamsiah banyak* (many thanks) for having me at CNN."

"Bibik Wee, from the Ministry's perspective, what can you tell us about this pandemic which has swept the nation into a crisis?" Bibik Wee adjusts her glasses surreptitiously.

"You know, we must try to avoid using alarming words like 'crisis'. We

throat. Swee Neo shifts in her seat uncomfortably, discreetly raising a handkerchief to cover her face.

"We call it Kopi-19. Why? Because some Baba Nyonya have been behaving as though they have gulped down 19 cups of *kopi* (coffee)! They rush out to the shops and panic buy toilet paper, *kueh kueh*, *buah keluak*...everything! I simply cannot understand this irrational behaviour. Peranakan people have no use for toilet paper, *tau tak* (don't you know)? We use our left hand and some water to *chebok pantat* (wash our bums).

You can't hoard *kueh kueh*, because *kueh* doesn't stay fresh for more than a day or two. Everyone knows that!

I assure you all, Babas and Nyonys, that we have more than enough *buah keluak*\* in our national stockpile to last for months. (\**Buah keluak* is the poisonous seed of the pangium edule tree used to make a popular Peranakan dish.) Many years ago, the Ministry had the foresight to diversify our suppliers so that we will never run short of this precious commodity. We even have suppliers in Papua New Guinea.

"Bibik Wee, can you tell us more about the symptoms of this virus?" The bibik clears her throat again. The anchorwoman frowns, inching away ever so slightly.

"*Kalu lu ada* (if you have) Kopi-19, the first symptom is an uncontrollable urge to panic buy. Especially after the Prime Matriarch makes a public address. People stampede to *Until-Lu-Si*, Sing Song and *Besair* (Giant) to panic buy all sorts of things. This is deadly. You might *si* (die) from being *penat* (exhausted), *lari sini lari sana* (running here and there). The older babas and nyonys are susceptible to this, *badan dia tak boleh tahan* (their bodies cannot take the strain)."

"What are the another symptoms?" "Oh, that's very easy to spot - spreading fake news! You know very well, that we at the Ministry have enacted the *Merepek* (nonsense) Bill to prevent falsehoods from spreading. Read only official news from our *ApaApp* (WhatsApp) and Ministry channels."

"Thank you for enlightening us, Bibik Wee. Are there any other symptoms?"

"Yes, *ada satu lagi* (there is one more). Those who have Kopi-19 have difficulty staying away from other

IF THEY COME NEAR, TELL THEM *JANGAN DEKAT* (STAY AWAY) AND SHOW ONE FINGER TO THEM TO INDICATE ONE METRE. YOU CAN USE WHATEVER FINGER YOU WANT.

at the Ministry call it the 'CB' - *Chochok Banyak*, many little pricks which cause us some pain, but nothing that can't be swiftly dealt with.

Yes, we understand that the situation can be very frustrating for our citizens, but to date, not a single one has asked for an apology. Doesn't that prove that we are doing an excellent job of handling the CB? The Ministry is doing its best to *thau tak* (manage) this problem, but it seems like this strange behavioural pandemic is here to stay for a while."

Swee Neo nods in agreement.

"Is that why the nationwide *Sial Sekali* (deadly embarrassing) Alert was raised from orange to red?"

"Ya, betul juga. (Yes, precisely.)"

As such, the Ministry has declared a state of *Pintu Jagong Merah* (Door Corn Red). Everyone is encouraged to *duduk rumah* (stay at home) to avoid becoming infected with the virus."

"Could you explain what is this virus about?" Bibik Wee clears her

All of you need to calm down. Every single day, my colleagues and I are inundated with reports of panic buying all over the island. *Aiyoh!* Because of this, *gua betol tak senang tau*, *pantat chebok tak habis* (I have been so busy that I don't even have time to wash my bum)! We have had to mobilise the army to re-stock the supermarket shelves overnight! Those poor *botak* (bald) boys haven't had a proper night's sleep in weeks."

A photo showing rows of empty shelves in an *Until-Lu-Si* supermarket appears on the screen behind Bibik Wee. "Empty, you see!"

"*Pintu Jagong Merah* means everyone should stay at home and put a ear of corn painted red on their door. This is to remind us that our supermarkets are well stocked and there is no need to be *gila* (crazy). If you go out to a crowded place and meet more than five people, you might catch the Kopi-19 virus."

people and they refuse to wear masks. They will get very close to others and cough and sneeze in their faces. *Geli gua* (I'm disgusted)! They do not heed any of the safe distancing measures and claim they are sovereign. What madness is this? The only sovereign we recognise is the Queen of England!

The Ministry *sua kata* (has already said) that everyone must stand or sit at least one meter apart, and always wear a mask. If they come near, tell them *jangan dekat* (stay away) and show one finger to them to indicate one metre. You can use whatever finger you want. It is also useful if you are being pestered to take surveys or buy insurance."

The anchorwoman nods sagely and turns to the camera.

"That's all the time we have for now. Thank you so much for the information Bibik Wee."

"Not at all, *kamsiah banyak banyak* (thank you very much)! Everyone, don't forget to wear your masks!"



# chia<sup>n</sup> orang kah semayang? (HAVING A PARTY OR PRAYERS?)

NYONYA LINDA CHEE SERVES UP THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CELEBRATION AND ANCESTRAL WORSHIP FOODS

All photographs by Colin Chee. Food styling by Linda Chee.



SAMBAL TIMUN

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, while chatting over the dinner table with a dear friend, Baba GT Lye, what he said stunned me right down to the *gerago* in my *sambal belachan*. As any baba or nyonya who love their food would tell you, if you do not know how to eat *sambal belachan*, you are not a Peranakan.

“Linda, do you know that *babi pongteh* and *chap chye* are *laok semayang* (prayer dishes)? They are not for celebrations.”

I was piqued. Both my beloved parents were Peranakans from Melaka – the land of my *sambal belachan* heritage, tracing back nine generations. How could I not know? I had grown up without questioning what my mother dished out every year for Chinese New Year, or for praying to our ancestors, the gods, and for birthdays and weddings. Neither did she tell me.

My mini-identity crisis resurfaced when I consulted my cousin from Kuala Lumpur, Baba Cedric Tan, the Melaka-born authority on our culture, on what was *popiah*. “Oh, it’s a snack.”

What? This grand treat of all treats was just a snack?

I confess I take much pride to be born a *jati* Peranakan. But it was a humbling experience to be *that* ignorant of tradition. Asking around, I realised I was not alone. Poring over recipe books did not tell me much. I concluded that gathering data on our food culture, as opposed to passing down recipes, remains very much an oral tradition.



The lines too have blurred on this huge gastronomic aspect of our culture. Especially in fast-paced Singapore, many Peranakans have married out of the community, are chasing more worldly pursuits with education and travel, or ancestral worship has become

a contradiction to their religion. Socially, like at parties, there is rarely the luxury of space or time for communal home cooking unlike the old days, where our *embok embok* would come together to cook up a feast while they *melatah* and gossip.

The *tok panjang* of old meant placing consecutive sets of 14-15 dishes across a very long table at one sitting. Now, entertaining guests is to sit around a smaller dining table or at restaurants where we select from standard menus. By and large, the traditional symbolism of our food culture has given way to pragmatism.

Addressing the concern of what to serve and when, I consulted cousin Cedric again. Compared with Singapore, food traditions are still very much a living culture practised by the bigger Peranakan communities up north.

IN THE MELAKA TRADITION, THE GENERAL RULE FOR JOYOUS OR FESTIVE OCCASIONS IS TO SERVE DISHES WITH:

 More **EXPENSIVE** ingredients like crabs, prawns or *heepio* (fish maw) 

**FIERY RED REMPAH** as in *sambal* dishes (*laok merah*) for its auspicious colour. In this case, *rempah gerang asam* and *rempah chilli bawang* (or *titek*), using red chillies. *Ayam buah keluak* is cooked with *rempah gerang asam*, thus it is a 'red' festive dish despite its almost blackened gravy. It has become acceptable as a prayer dish

 **ROAST MEATS** like roast chicken, which I think must be our Anglophile leanings, or crackling roast pork

The appropriate birthday dish is *telor meesua* or egg with vermicelli in rock sugar, served first thing in the morning to the person on his or her birthday.

And oh, *popiah* is a festive snack.





## Prayer Dishes

*Laok semayang* or prayer foods, are laid out plentifully on the altar table for ancestral worship or to the gods. They appear dull or sombre, mostly brownish. This is because *taucheo*, or salted fermented soy beans, is a key ingredient.

The 'feast' includes *itek tim*, *itek sio*, *babi sio*, *pong tauhu*, *babi pong teh*, *ayam chin*, *babi chin*, *tee hee char rebong*, *chak bek*, *hati babi bungkus*, *kua perot babi masak pek kuay*, *chap chai*, *chap chai bulat*, *char angkuak* and *mee nyonya*. The main courses are served in multiples of four bowls (*laok mangkok*) and crowned with spring onion florets.



## Celebration Dishes

You will not go wrong with this non-exhaustive list of celebration dishes:

**PORK:** *Satay babi*, *sek bak* (bottom right), *babi asam garam*, *babi asam*, *ngoh hiang*, *kua hee pio*

**CHICKEN:** *Ayam* (or *tulang babi*) *buah keluak*, *chicken curry*, *satay ayam*, *ayam panggang*

**SEAFOOD:** *Sambal udang petai* (top right), *udang masak nanas*, *udang goreng asam*, *bakwan kepiting*, *ikan goreng asam*

**VEGETABLE:** *Terong pachelis*, *lobak masak lemak*

**STAPLES:** *Telor meesua*, *nasi ulam*, *nasi kemuli*, *nasi kunyit*, *nasi lemak*, *macaroni soup*

**SIDE DISHES AND APPETISERS:** *Sambal timun*, *sambal jantung pisang*, *egg salad*, *sambal belachan*, *achar*, *chili chuka*, *luak chai*, *asam sinting*, *chinchalok*



SAMBAL UDANG PETAI



SEK BAK

## Contradictions

Misconceptions or seeming contradictions are inevitable as no one family practises exactly like another over time:



For practical reasons, some festive dishes like *ayam buah keluak* and chicken curry are served at both the reunion dinner and for ancestral worship on the eve of the Lunar New Year.



The mundane-looking *chap chye* is often served on the first day of the Lunar New Year to counter the richness of the grand reunion feast the night before.



*Babi asam* is a festive dish that can 're-use' the cooked slab of belly pork after it has been offered for ancestral worship.



*Mee nyonya* with its accompanying *rojak timun nanas* (cucumber and pineapple relish) is not a celebration or birthday dish. It is served during funeral wakes and after prayers.



# From One Generation to Another\*

To mark the 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Peranakan Association Singapore, Linda Chee shares three traditional celebration recipes for a balanced meal. These family recipes were passed down from her Melaka-born grandmother, Tan Poh Neo, to her mother, Low Suan Neo, and then to her in the *agak-agak* (estimate) tradition of Peranakan cooking. She has measured the ingredients but the final arbiter is your own taste buds. ♦



*Ingredients continued*  
2 thumbs *lengkuas* or galangal, sliced  
2 sticks *kayu manis* or cinnamon  
5 *pek kak* or star anise  
¾ cup cooking oil  
1 litre water  
1 cucumber, peeled and sliced

## Method

Marinate the pork with the soya sauce and salt. Heat the oil in a wok over high heat. Fry the blended shallots, galangal, cinnamon and star anise and stir continuously. When the shallot mix is fragrant, lower the heat to medium low.

Add the pork strips. Stir to mix well and add the sugar. Fry for about 5 minutes. Add water to the sides to prevent burning. Pour in the water and raise the heat. Bring to boil then simmer over very low heat, with little bubbles appearing, for about two hours or until the pork is very tender. Remove the pork and set aside. Simmer the gravy to reduce it to a pouring sauce. Add the tofu puffs and braise for about 5 minutes to soak in the sauce. Test the pork with a fork or skewer. Add more sugar and salt to suit your taste; the gravy should be sweet but not cloying.

To plate the dish, cut the pork into thin slices. Cut the tofu puffs into four. Slice the eggs using sewing thread or unscented unwaxed dental floss – tie one end to a fixed point and hold the other end to slice. Lay the cucumber on the base or around the plate. Lay the *sek bak* ingredients and ladle the gravy across. Serve with *chili chuka* (see recipe from *Dalam Dapur*, Issue 2, 2019).

## Sek Bak

SPICED BRAISED PORK

*Sek bak* is rarely featured in recipe books. A traditional ingredient is pig lung or *teehee* which is no longer available in Singapore wet markets.

## Ingredients

1 kg *samchien bak* or belly pork, cut into 2 strips  
10 squares *taupok* or tofu puffs (the flattish type)  
8 eggs, hard boiled  
5 tbsp dark soya sauce  
1 tsp salt  
100g white rock sugar  
300g *bawang merah* or shallots, blended coarsely



## Sambal Udang Petai

SHRIMP & STINKBEAN IN CHILLI GRAVY

This dish uses the basic *rempah chili bawang*. You can substitute the prawns with hard boiled eggs.

## Ingredients

1 kg medium-sized prawns, peeled and marinated with some sugar and pepper  
1 packet *petai* beans, optional



## Sambal Timun

CUCUMBER SALAD

My late father, Louis Tan, loved the crunch of fresh cucumber and would have it daily with his meals. On special occasions, we would prepare a more elaborate cucumber salad with belly pork tossed in a *sambal belachan* mixture.

## Ingredients

1 medium-sized cucumber  
200g *sam chien bak* or belly pork  
1 *taukwa* or soya bean cake (optional)  
2 tbsp *heybee* or dried prawns  
1 *bud bunga kantan* or pink torch ginger

*Ingredients continued*

1 big onion, sliced thinly  
2 pieces *asam keping* (tamarind skin)  
1 big knob *asam jawa* or tamarind pulp, dissolved in half a cup of water and strained  
½ cup oil  
2 tbsp palm sugar  
1 tsp salt

## Rempah chili bawang

10 dried chillies, soaked in hot water  
3 fresh chillies  
30g garlic  
300g shallots  
1 slice *belachan*  
2 *buah keras* or candlenuts (optional)  
pinch of salt

## Method

Remove some seeds from the chillies if you prefer your sambal to be less fiery. Grind all *rempah* ingredients together finely.

Heat the oil in a wok over high heat. When slightly smoky, pour in the *rempah* and stir constantly. If necessary, add more oil to fry well. Lower to medium fire and stir until the *rempah* is fragrant and the oil separates from the mixture. If necessary, add water to the sides to prevent burning. Stir in the onions and tamarind skin for 2-3 minutes. Add the tamarind water, sugar and salt. Bring to boil and add the prawns. Simmer for 3 minutes until the prawns are just cooked, not overcooked. Stir in the *petai* then switch off the fire. Serve hot.

*Ingredients continued*

3-5 *lemo perot* or leprous lime leaves  
3 *lemo kasturi* or limes  
½ slice *belachan*  
1 handful fresh chillies  
1 tsp sugar (optional)

## Method

Rinse the dried prawns and cover in enough cold water. Leave to soften for about half an hour. Grind until semi-coarse. Cut the belly pork into 1- 1½-inch strips. In a small pot, add enough water to cover the pork, add a pinch of salt and bring to boil. Simmer for about half an hour over low heat till tender. Cool and slice thinly. Set aside. Keep the sweet stock for other purposes.

Cut the *taukwa* into half and then cut again into thin slices. Fry lightly just to cook through with no crusty edges. Peel and slice the cucumber lengthwise into quarters. Slice off the seeds. Slice diagonally.

Slice the torch ginger and leprous lime leaves very finely. Pound or blend the chillies and *belachan* to make *sambal belachan*. Squeeze the lime juice into the sambal. Mix in the sugar. Toss in the dried prawns, torch ginger and leprous lime leaves. Mix in the cucumber, pork and *taukwa*. Serve immediately while the cucumber is crunchy.



# OUR MAMAS' RECIPES

NYONYA LINDA CHEE REVIEWS A COMPILATION OF TRADITIONAL PERANAKAN DISHES FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS

## Who cooks best? Mama, of course!

**T**HIS EXCLAMATION RINGS loud and clear in *Our Mamas' Recipes*, a collection of fondly remembered dishes that stir up memories of how dear grandmother, grandaunt or mother cooked them like no one else could. An adjunctive “our” in the book title lends a gentle tone of ownership to the recipes.

Produced in March 2020 to commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya

Kuala Lumpur dan Selangor (PPBNKLS), the sell-out book is already into its third print. The publication was mooted by the association's then president, Cedric Tan, “to leave a lasting legacy, a testament to our respected female forebears who ensured that we always had the most delicious dishes at every meal.”

I do not recall any other single cookbook that has compiled such a diversity of recipes from nyonyas who once ruled the kitchens in Peninsular Malaysia, mainly from Melaka and Penang.

The Peranakan women of yesteryear not only had culinary prowess but also dispensed wise counsel, good values and morals to those who adored their food and learnt how to cook from them. Notably, they also passed down to the younger generation food traditions that till today are being observed and practised.

As Cedric writes in his President's Message: “In a typical Baba-Nyonya home, certain dishes are prepared for specific events and a well-trained Nyonya will never be caught with her apron down in this regard.” Anecdotes and footnotes are included to “avert such *faux pas*”, so that the right dishes will be served with the proper arrangement and conduct befitting of the occasion.

Browsing through, I felt warmly

nostalgic as the contributors reminisced and shared colourful accounts of their childhood. Symbolic recipes are as simple as the *telur mee suah* for grand birthdays. Two dishes were unusual to me. One is a Chitty Melaka ancestral worship dish called *Ikan Parang Masak Pindang* (Wolf herring in a spicy, sour creamy gravy). The other is a Terengganu Peranakan celebration dish called *Chim Kue*, which packs an ultra-rich filling of crab meat and lard into the crab shell for steaming, topped off with creamy egg yok and roe.

There is an honest-to-goodness feel about this publication. The recipes cover home cooking for daily meals as well as occasions ranging from festivals, wakes and ancestral worship. A baby's full moon (one month) is celebrated with *kueh koo merah*, yellow rice and red eggs. Perhaps the cookbook can also be named Traditional Peranakan Dishes for All Occasions. 

### WHERE TO BUY?

OUR MAMAS' RECIPES IS AVAILABLE AT RUMAH KIM CHOO, POPULAR AND KINOKUNIYA BOOKSTORES, ONLINE AT [HTTPS://SINGAPORE.KINOKUNIYA.COM/](https://singapore.kinokuniya.com/)



# AMEK GAMBAR

## Taking Pictures: Peranakans & Photography

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE REVIEWS THE COMPANION BOOK TO THE 2018 EXHIBITION AT THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM.

Photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

**T**HIS LONG-AWAITED BOOK was published in November 2020 without the pre-COVID-19 fanfare that would usually accompany a tome of such importance. *Amek Gambar – Taking Pictures: Peranakans And Photography* is a hefty, 420-page, hardcover tome that will delight anyone interested in photography and life in colonial Singapore and Southeast Asia.

It features rare photographs of Singapore and Peranakans from the 1800s to the 1900s. The book is a companion to the exhibition of the same name held at the Peranakan Museum from May 2018 to February 2019. Curated by Babas Peter Lee and Dominic Low, it featured a selection of the 2,500 photographs donated by Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee to the museum.

The book charts the early history of photography in Singapore, from European travellers Jules Itier, Fedor Jagor, August Sachtler, G. R. Lambert, and John Thomson to pioneering Chinese and Japanese studios in the region. Informative essays and more than 400 photographs, ranging from the 1840s to 2009, make this book a valuable historical resource, and fascinating to read.

The arrival of photography in Singapore can be traced to the 1840s when French Customs Officer Jules Itier (1802-1877) transited on the island for a month en route to a trade mission in China. It is believed that the daguerreotype by Itier of Boat Quay along the Singapore River taken from Government Hill is oldest surviving image of Singapore. (Seen on pages 22 and 88 in the book.)

An essay in this book by academic and visual artist Giles Massot relates a fascinating anecdote from Itier's journal that reveals how Singapore was already perceived as “clean and efficient” in the 1840s:

“ 4 JULY 1844. ON THIS SHORE WHERE LESS THAN TWENTY YEARS AGO STOOD JUST A FEW MALAY HUTS, HALF FISHERMEN, HALF PIRATE, STANDS TODAY A GREAT CITY AND ITS HARDWORKING POPULATION. HERE ARE THE SUMPTUOUS PALACES AND THEIR GARDENS REACHING OUT TO THE SEASHORE; HERE THE EXPATRIATE COMES TO RELAX IN THE EVENING, ALONE, WITHOUT WEAPON, SAFE FROM THE TIGERS THAT HAVE RETREATED INTO THE DISTANT JUNGLE AND THE MALAY BANDITS CONTROLLED BY A VIGILANT POLICE CORPS.”

The Peranakans were one of Asia's earliest adopters of photography. As such this book provides a rich insight into how they presented and captured their personal and social lives on film.


AMEK GAMBAR Taking Pictures Peranakans and Photography



The Peranakan community used portraiture to fulfil many social functions: as an expression of self, family, status, community, ancestral and cultural rites. Detailed photos of elaborate ancestral altars, playful photos of grown men on a see-saw, family and wedding portraits give the reader a glimpse into the rich and diverse lives of the Peranakans.

For me, one of the most intriguing photographs in this book is the one of the fearless nyonya on page 295, looking absolutely confident and bold in nothing but her birthday suit and iconic *cucuk sanggol* (hairpin). The platinum print is believed to have been taken in Singapore around the 1910s. She is standing tall, looking directly at the camera, one hand on hip and the other on her thigh. This image is a delightful contradiction to the popular perception of nyonyas of that era as meek, subservient and conservative. This photograph was on the cover of a 2014 issue of this magazine.

Perhaps it is the very hybridity of Peranakan culture which accounts for the willingness to embrace new ideas and mediums.

Peter Lee writes: “Like many migrant communities in colonial urban environments, the Peranakans are characterised by a broad, mixed, and fluent spectrum of cultural practices. They are also characterised by a broad spectra of social and commercial concerns. This kind of hybridity expressed through photography - itself such a hybrid medium - compounds the complexity of the relationship between Peranakans and Photography. If one were to take the term “peranakan” beyond the conceptual realm of a community and use it as a metaphor for the hybrid, then in a sense, photography is Peranakan.” 

### WHERE TO BUY?

AMEK GAMBAR – TAKING PICTURES: PERANAKANS AND PHOTOGRAPHY, EDITED BY PETER LEE IS PUBLISHED BY THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM AND AVAILABLE AT THE MUSEUM SHOP. ISBN: 978-981-14-2625-4



# 90 YEARS IN SINGAPORE

**BABA COLIN CHEE** REVIEWS NYONYA IRENE LIM'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY WHICH UNFOLDS HER LIFE OF 90 YEARS IN SINGAPORE

**N**EVER DID I imagine I would review an autobiography by a 90-year-old nyonya raised in Singapore! Yet there I was, on a chilly afternoon flipping through some 230 pages of the book, compelled to pause every now and then to reflect on rich glimpses of Peranakan home life from the early 1900s to the 2010s.

I heard whispers of local history from our pre-war days through to the Japanese Occupation and into the roar of Independence in the 1960s. I savoured remembrances of street corners and neighbourhoods from Katong to Geylang, Oxley Road to Upper Serangoon, then Holland Road and back to the city's fringes right into the 2010s.

This is a book with an incredible minutiae of daily life of a Peranakan family through Singapore's formative years. Interestingly, from the perspective of an upper middle-class English-educated nyonya.

It is a difficult to put the book down. It is in part revelation of street life during Singapore's growing-up years, in part ghost stories, in part Peranakan home culture with all its grandeur and idiosyncracies, while relating the author's family history all the way to Kuala Lumpur and Bukit Mertajam in Province Wellesley!

This book is Nyonya Irene Lim's Singapore history since the early 1900s. It is based on her memories of her family and friends during our nation's almost forgotten eras. It is not the staid dusty story of a small little island as would be told by scholastic historians.

It is more the street story of a feisty nyonya with a vivid and phenomenal memory, one who has lived through the passing ages of modern Singapore - as a well-to-do British colony, as an occupied territory during the Second World War, as a self-ruled island and, later, as a fully-fledged independent nation which came of age as one of the world's more prosperous city states.

Irene writes in the preface: "I have always been interested in other people's personal stories and life experiences. I like listening to them in conversation... Today, families do not seem to spend much time together, especially across generations. So many other activities, including those available on electronic devices, compete for scarce time. Thus, past ways of life are not shared, and they become lost and forgotten."

Precisely because of this deep concern

The author now and as a child.



that something would be lost if her story were not told, has she told it.

At the urgings of her daughter, Nyonya Professor Linda Lim, nonagenarian Irene started recording her memories 30 years ago - starting in 1989 - "bits and pieces about what I remember from the dim past...". But it was her encounter with Singapore historian Baba Dr Loh Kah Seng that got her to write and publish her recollections.

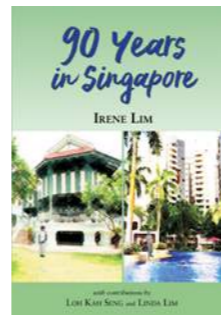
Dr Loh writes in his prologue to the book, "Irene's story offers a glimpse of Singapore from the perspective of an ordinary Singaporean." Yet, a palpable sadness threads through Irene's account of Peranakan life. It sounds like a distant dirge for the passing of a once grand culture through the passage of time.

Irene's daughter, Linda, adds in her epilogue to her mother's memoir, "Nearly all of these tangible spaces have disappeared or been transformed beyond recognition, and with them the intangible emotive echoes of Singapore's rich and diverse history, heritage and identity. Recorded memories, like Irene's and others', are nearly all we have left of how life was experienced by our ancestors, in this ever-changing place we call home."

Fortunately for us, history has shown, time and again, that as long as a culture is lived and evolves adroitly with changing circumstances while keeping to its roots, it can survive the chaos of socio-economic changes. It can even flourish. ♦



SCAN THE QR CODE TO READ BABA COLIN CHEE'S INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR, IRENE LIM.



#### WHERE TO BUY?

90 YEARS IN SINGAPORE (2020), PUBLISHED BY PAGESSETTERS, IS AVAILABLE AT KINOKUNIYA BOOKSTORES AND OTHER MAJOR BOOKSTORES. ONLINE AT KINOKUNIYA AND AND VIA SGBOOKSHELF AT [HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/Y88Q8THQ](https://tinyurl.com/y88q8thq)

Deer motif kerosang



Bee motif kerosang



## THE BEJEWELLED LIVES OF THE PERANAKANS

**BABA COLIN CHEE** REVIEWS COLLECTOR BABA NORMAN CHO'S BOOK ON PERANAKAN JEWELLERY

**I** LIKE BABA NORMAN CHO'S new book, *The Jewelled Lives of the Peranakans*. It is honest and unpretentious. The author makes no claim to having published the next best thing to Baba Edmond Chin's out-of-print but still much sought-after pioneering tome on Peranakan jewellery, *Gilding the Phoenix*, released in 1991.

Yet it may just come close. In its own way. This potential is not lost to scholar curator Baba Peter Lee. He described it in his foreword as "...a jewel of a book that I believe will embellish the understanding of general readers and specialists alike."

The book boasts 220 gorgeous pages designed by my sister-in-law, Nyonya Chris Loh, with 300 sumptuous photographs of Norman's 400 jewellery pieces captured meticulously by Baba Barry Ng. A few pieces, also showcased in the book, were contributed by collectors Nyonyas Bebe Seet and Chris Loh, and Babas Benjamin Seck and Roy Hui. The design of the book is deliberately understated. This has made it possible to display the full extravagance and opulence of the jeweled Baba Nyonya heritage.

For author Norman, it is a lifetime project that nearly never got off the ground. Several publishers had turned it down, until Nyonya Chris Loh saw the design possibilities, offered her services, and spurred him on. She is also the publisher of the book.

Norman has a modest goal for self-publishing this coffee-table companion in both soft and hard covers, "I hope this book will not only enlighten readers but will also inspire new collectors. While the vintage and antique pieces in my 30-year-old collection do not represent the best or the rarest in the range of Peranakan jewellery, it is an excellent showcase of the items the Nyonyas would use to embellish themselves at various stages of their lives."

I asked Norman if he ever worried that the jewellers of today would "borrow" the beautiful and perhaps "lost" designs of some of his vintage pieces when they are published. He generously said it is for them to do what they will.

Peranakan jewellery has been a facet of the author's cultural identity and heritage from a young age. He fondly recalls his paternal grandmother, the late Madam Yeo Koon Neo, often calling him into her bedroom to pick the jewellery she had strewn on the bed to be worn for an evening out.

Norman's love affair for Peranakan jewellery started there and then. It is time we rekindle or start ours. ♦



#### WHERE TO BUY?

THE BEJEWELLED LIVES OF THE PERANAKANS BY NORMAN CHO (2020) IS AVAILABLE AT KINOKUNIYA; TRUE BLUE CUISINE AND TRUE BLUE SPACE ON ARMENIAN STREET; ASIAN ARTISTRY FINE JEWELLERY AT #01-246 JEWEL CHANGI AIRPORT; RUMAH BEBE AT 113E EAST COAST ROAD; AND WEBSITE [HTTP://THEBEJEWELLED.COM](http://THEBEJEWELLED.COM)





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# crafted heritage



*This 19th century mesh bracelet of gold, enamel and diamonds is from Aceh. Goldsmithing in Aceh is centuries old. Historically, gold was mined in the hills between Pidie and Meulaboh, west of Aceh. Fine filigree, granulation, enamelling and red staining of gold are exceptional hallmarks of Achenese jewellery. During Aceh's golden age in the 16th and 17th centuries, royal patronage of the arts flourished, and 300 smiths were employed to make jewellery and other valuables. Gift of Mr Edmond Chin.*

NYONYA DAWN MARIE LEE CELEBRATES ALL THAT IS GOLD, WHITE AND BOLD IN THE ACM'S NEW GALLERIES  
All photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM (ACM), Singapore's premier museum of Asian antiquities and decorative art, unveiled re-vamped third floor galleries in 2020.

The third-floor galleries are focused on decorative art, and are collectively themed Materials and Design. The two new galleries, Fashion and Textiles, and Jewellery, together with the refreshed Ceramics gallery, comprise a display of over 300 precious and finely crafted masterpieces, telling stories of Asian identities, histories, and cultures.

The Jewellery gallery is the first permanent gallery in the world to spotlight island Southeast Asian jewellery, exhibiting its varied and complex styles, forms, and uses through a showcase of objects from the Neolithic period to the 20th century.

The Fashion and Textiles gallery presents a diverse range of fashions and textiles through periodically changing displays, showing how identities and cross-cultural exchanges are revealed through dress.

The Ceramics gallery presents a comprehensive survey of the wide range of Chinese ceramic production, featuring masterworks from the Neolithic period through the Qing dynasty. In particular, a large selection of ACM's excellent collection of white Dehua porcelain – commonly known as blanc de chine – will be on display.

Mr Kennie Ting, Director of the ACM and Peranakan Museum, explains, "The new galleries are literally the crowning glory of the museum, housing our most visually captivating pieces. As visitors admire pieces displayed, we hope that they gain a better understanding of the questions




*This early 20th century Peacock belt from the Straits Settlements has 18 linked panels with 75 carats of diamonds. The buckle is detachable and can be worn as a brooch. It was likely made by South Indian craftsmen, who are known for their expertise in setting diamonds using the "a jour" technique (diamonds set in hollow frames). This technique reduces the amount of gold needed and allows more light to pass through the stones. Gift of Mr Edmond Chin.*

surrounding culture and identity. Fashion and jewellery are markers of community and personal identity whether in historical times, or today.

For example, the ways in which individuals from a wide range of communities choose to clothe and adorn themselves are more than just demonstrations of vanity, they are nuanced reflections of identity. At the same time, how people choose what they wear is impacted by and emblematic of a larger social context, and a particular time and place, very much like today.

We want Singaporeans and visitors to be able to step into a museum with some of the best objects anywhere, and to leave with a deeper understanding of the long-standing traditions of craftsmanship that go into making these beautiful objects; traditions that are very much part of our collective Asian heritage."

The diverse collection of magnificent works of art within these new galleries was made possible largely through the support of ACM patrons, notably long-term patrons Edmond Chin, who contributed a generous gift of funds and Southeast Asian jewellery in honour of his parents, Mary and Philbert Chin; and Chris Hall, owner of most of the pieces in the first display of the Fashion and Textiles gallery, where much of his collection is on long-term loan to the museum. 



*This 19th century plum blossom tree with figures is a fine example of Dehua "blanc de chine" porcelain. Plum blossom trees were popular pieces created by Dehua potters during the 18th and 19th centuries. This example is one of the largest and most complex, with gnarly roots, a craggy rock, and two women enjoying themselves. Gift of Dorothy Chan in honour of Pamela Hickley.*



# APA KHABAIR?

## A WARM WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS!

Ang Nancy  
 Bathija Hans Girdhari (Tan Soon Hing)  
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 Bong Shereen Loy Chin  
 Bong Florence Soon Choo  
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 Kong Lai Kham  
 Lau Jonathan Francis Shan Yu  
 Lee Kheng Yew Leonard Hector  
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 Low Sze Wee  
 Low Gladys  
 Low Tian Heng  
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 Malpas Gabby  
 Ng May Keng  
 Poon Anna Lai Chun  
 Sng Pearlina Bee Hong  
 Soh Kim Neo Amy  
 Song Kuok Hui  
 Srinivasan Vyjayarani (Rani)  
 Tan Danny Wai Mun  
 Tan Kenneth Kok Meng  
 Tan Jin Yi Clement  
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 Tan Jeffrey Whye Lee  
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 Tan Samantha Shu Juan  
 Tay Bok Neo  
 Tay Regina Sok Cheng  
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 Trog Natalie Nurra  
 Wong Hsien Loong Derek  
 Wong Mey  
 Yee Anthony Kum Choo  
 Yeoh Pui See  
 Yong Jie Le Gerald



### OUR NEW JUNIOR MEMBERS

Mahachai Ariel Isabelle  
 Soh Ava Yixin



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

### Obituary

Our deepest sympathies to the family of **Baba Tan Geok Koon** who passed away peacefully on 11 March 2021 at the age of 90. He was a long-time contributor to this magazine and wrote under the pen name *Tan Kuning*. **Baba Geok Koon** had a wealth of knowledge about Peranakan culture and practices. He will be dearly missed.

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Secretary | Christine Fernandez  
[bcfernand@outlook.com](mailto:bcfernand@outlook.com)



# A WIDOW'S WRATH

**BABA BRYAN TAN** IS PRIVY TO A SECRET MEETING OF THE MOST POWERFUL WOMEN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

Illustration by Eileen Chan.



**T**HE SOH FAMILY'S country house was more of a fortress than a pleasant holiday home. Jutting out atop a hill, it had sweeping views of the nearby beach and surrounding landscape. Built by Sir Francis Soh as a seaside retreat to escape the sweltering heat of Melaka's city, it was extensively remodelled by his younger sister, Soh Bee Neo, after she had inherited it from him.

Originally, the mansion was constructed to allow the cool sea breezes to flow through the house. The large rooms were once bright and airy. Now, most of the windows had been walled off. On the few that remained, heavy, double-lined damask velvet curtains blocked out all sunlight. Dark oil paintings and tapestries

hung from the walls, adding to the air of grandiose gloom that permeated the interior. Within its forbidding depths, the household servants were abuzz. The matriarch was holding court with some very important guests. Afternoon tea had been laid out in the salon.

"Ladies, it was in this very room that *Ng Ko* (eldest brother) was conferred the highest honour in the land by the Malaysian king himself," purred Soh Bee Neo, nibbling on a black Corinth grape.

"He was awarded the *Seri Pahlawan Gagah Perkasa*, or the Grand Knight of Valour, for his service to the country during the second World War."

"Unfortunately, he was not alive to receive the award. His funeral was held here, and the king himself presented the award posthumously. *Kalu boleh, dia chukop puas hati dapat nama besair.* (He would have been so happy to receive the award.)"

Her words trailed off as her gaze landed on a gleaming silver medallion

wrought with the 14-pointed star of Malaysia, glinting on a tray of deep blue velvet entombed by a bevelled glass case etched with Sir Francis' monogram.

Placed beside it, on the antique *huanghuali* table, was a 17th century carved rock crystal vase (its twin in the Museo del Prado, Madrid) that held majestic sprays of white *Cattleya* orchids that were replaced daily.

Queen Victoria's Head Gardener had cultivated this particular hybrid in 1890 exclusively for a Soh patriarch as a royal gift in appreciation for his loyalty to the Crown. Since then, the orchids were grown exclusively at the Soh family retreat in the Cameron Highlands.

The ladies gathered around the table, tittering in impressed undertones, sipping their oolong tea from eggshell thin *blanc de chine* teacups, transfixed by the posthumous award, which formerly adorned the body of someone, so celebrated. "*Ya juga, tachi* (That is true,

elder sister). He would have thrown a grand party and invited half the state to come. *Bila dia ada, dia mia kong lo banyak sama gua.* (When he was alive, I owed him a lot for his kindness.) May he forever rest in peace. It was Sir Francis's kindness that helped my husband build his business," intoned one of the women.

"*Kamsiah lah gua dapat orang puji, nya* (Thank you for your kind words)," Bee Neo nodded graciously.

**N**yonya Lim Swee Cheng returned the gesture, her ears glittering with diamonds the size of quail's eggs. Her husband Beng Ho had been Sir Francis' right hand man. While the tycoon rubbed shoulders with the cream of society, Beng Ho, dealt with the scum.

He would pay off the local gangsters to protect Sir Francis's holdings, edge out smugglers trying to flood the black market with goods

that Sir Francis had an eye on for trade and supplied highly trained guards to protect his master.

Now, Beng Ho ruled over an empire of his own which comprised of largely illicit dealings in alcohol, gambling and prostitution. He had taken in the mobsters from many states, and used them in his security firm as a front for his activities. Beng Ho owed a debt of blood to Sir Francis for paving the way for his success.

"But *Ng Ko* should have been alive to receive this award," Bee Neo continued. "He should not have died at the hands of *orang Jepun* (Japanese) for the sake of a lowly servant!" her eyes flashing with anger.

Bee Neo paused and turned to the two other ladies present. The shorter one, Nyonya Koh Eng Neo, was the wife of one of Sir Francis's business partners, Koh Chin Siang. Palm oil, spices, rubber and tin were his trade, and his fortune

was enhanced infinitely by Francis's expansive network of contacts with Malaysian royalty, British aristocrats and wealthy traders.

"*Mau buatpa kasih gua tau saja.* (Just let me know what needs to be done)," said Eng Neo, as she lifted her tenth madeleine to her lips. Bee Neo nodded in acknowledgement.

It was the last lady whose support Bee Neo needed most desperately for her plan to work. She glanced at her imploringly.

Unadorned except for a single strand of lustrous Mikimoto pearls and clad in an exquisitely-cut, ankle length, slate grey, Shantung silk cheongsam, Sir Francis Soh's elderly widow stood ramrod straight and unmoved.

Lady Alice Soh Cheng Kim had remarried a banking magnate of unparalleled wealth, who owned several private islands and large estates in at least a dozen countries.

Her favourite home was in Balmoral, Scotland, where she spent most of her time enjoying her gardens and dogs. When her next-door neighbour was in residence, she would be invited over for tea. Elizabeth's chefs made the most scrumptious scones and strawberry jam.

In spite of the decades that had passed since Francis' death, the spectre of her late husband still hung about her like a lingering perfume. How does one forget a first love?

Like many Peranakans of their generation, Francis and Alice had an arranged marriage. But they fell deeply in love as soon as they wed. His death had caused her so much pain that she had wanted to end her life.

She would never admit it, but deep down, a part of her blamed her wilful daughter, Peck Neo, for foolishly sneaking out into the rubber plantation to *makan agin* (have a breather) that fateful night during the war. If the stupid girl had just stayed at home, Francis would still be alive.

During her night-time jaunt, Peck Neo spied a Japanese soldier who was about to rape a servant girl. She attempted to rescue the servant and charged at him with a stick in hand, but he grabbed his rifle. Francis saw the commotion and instinctively shot the soldier to protect his daughter. Days later, he was arrested and executed.

Lady Alice turned to her sister-in-law, Bee Neo. "Tell me your plan," she said without emotion. ♦

*\*In the next issue, Molly uncovers the tangled web of her chu chu's (grandson's) family secrets. What will she do next?*



# THE PERANAKAN GUIDE SINGAPORE



## MUSEUMS

The Peranakan Museum is closed for renovation and will re-open in 2022.

### 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, siren boxes and some paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine batik textiles from the north coast of Java, all made for 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)  
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## 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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