

the Peranakan

ISSUE
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21



The pairing of jade & gold is auspicious in Peranakan culture, bestowing an abundance of blessings. Jade symbolises beauty and strength, and is believed to protect the wearer. Gold represents good fortune.



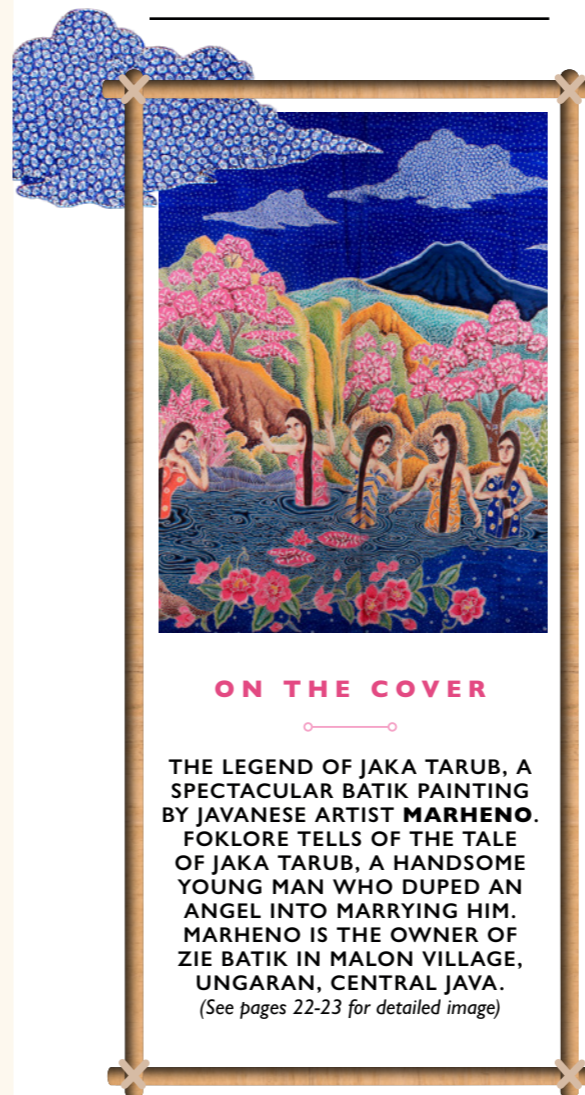
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The gradual process of acculturation over time, by adapting other cultural practices and adjusting our way of living, has resulted in the wonderful hybridity of Peranakan culture.



ON THE COVER

THE LEGEND OF JAKA TARUB, A SPECTACULAR BATIK PAINTING BY JAVANESE ARTIST MARHENO. FOKLORE TELLS OF THE TALE OF JAKA TARUB, A HANDSOME YOUNG MAN WHO DUPED AN ANGEL INTO MARRYING HIM. MARHENO IS THE OWNER OF ZIE BATIK IN MALON VILLAGE, UNGARAN, CENTRAL JAVA.
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The Peranakan magazine house style reflects the Baba Malay spelling found in A Baba Malay Dictionary by Baba William Gwee Thian Hock.



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editor's letter

A Glass Half Full



RETURNING AS EDITOR of The Peranakan magazine, after a less active role as adviser for four years, has been an eye-opening experience. With the help of technology, an amazing tool called Adobe Creative Cloud allows me to edit the magazine online and review every editorial and design feedback and change in real time. Also, the marvel of high-tech printing: Oxford Graphic digitalises processes so all you need is one skilled person to oversee printing and it's done within a few hours.

No more overnight slogging! It is almost miraculous for this editor, who manually checked and proofread our beloved magazine with pen on paper for 13 years before editing her last issue in 2016, or so I thought.

It is so refreshing to welcome new faces - young blood stepping up including volunteers like **Anastasia Zenia** with her wonderful illustrations and **Benedict Khoo**, our new-gen genealogy super-mind. Ana, as I call her, is a nyonya with origins in Semarang, Indonesia, studying for her Master's Degree in design at LaSalle, having been in Singapore for the past eight years. Ben is a local Master's architectural student at NUS with a passion for tracing family lineage. An old soul in a young man, indeed.

I would like to introduce two new sections. **TELL US YOUR STORY** gives an opportunity for members to express personal views on topics close to their heart. Keep an open mind on whether their insights may be controversial or stir new thoughts. We are encouraging this because the world's new discoveries and inventions have often been unexpected. As our culture evolves, it may need to explore the edges of our times and adapt to new ways of thinking and doing things.

The second new section is **AMEK GAMBAIR**. "Mari, amek gambair!" - don't Peranakans just love to take pictures? We can discover new things all the time just by scanning the photos, like many of us did at The Peranakan Museum's successful exhibition, *Amek Gambar*, from 2018 to 2019 with the tome of the same name edited by Peter Lee.

Our inaugural Amek Gambair focuses on a talking point among many - the never-ending ties of blood and marriage, *macham bau bau bachang*. I bet some of us may recognize faces and 'acquire' unexpected cousins just by looking at the pictures of old families on pages 44-49.

From pages 10-39 are a host of stories from various writers that look at two sides of the Peranakan coin: appropriation (claiming something that is not yours) versus acculturation (adapting from others) for one's own use.

I dare say we have adapted from many cultures and dialect groups - as in our stories by **Ken Yap** on nyonyaware, **Ronney Tan Koon Siang** on the Hokkien language, **Tony Sugiarta** on coastal batik, **David Neo** on the *Wangkang* festival, **Ong Jin Teong** on the origin of *kueh kueh*, and yours truly on *nasi ulam*. Even the bakchang, or dumpling, has its place in our great hall of acculturation.

There's so much to gain from exchange and enrichment moving forward, if we opt to see the wonderful hybridity of Peranakan culture as a glass half full.

We have a lot happening for the rest of 2021, as the following pages will inform you. **Emeric Lau** shares on The Virtual Peranakan Dinner on 25 September, **Ngiam May Ling** on the 2nd Baba Nyonya Literary Festival on 11-12 December, and **Colin Chee's** President's Message outlines the 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention on 20 November. Colin cannot contain his excitement about the Symposium featuring intellectual luminaries like **Kwa Chong Guan** and **Prof Wang Gungwu**; and a once-in-a-lifetime play directed by **Alvin Tan** in which **Ivan Heng** and **GT Lye** come together for a unique staging of *The Matriarchs*, adapted from *Emily of Emerald Hill* by special permission of playwright **Stella Kon**.

I am so pleased with how beautifully this issue has turned out. I cannot thank our creative duo enough for continuing with us to work their magic on the magazine - designer **Joanne Low**, who joined us in 2018 and is absolutely awesome with her outstanding layouts, and adviser **John Lee**, the mastermind behind the cover masthead design all these years, with his brilliant final touches that instantly lift and transform pages to catch a reader's eye.

Naysayers spend so much time looking at negatives. Where I work (yes, I have a day job), one of our board directors, Cecil Wong, retired recently before he turned 99. What a blessed life, with good health and a sharp mind. Indeed, I am inspired by his lifelong belief that we should look at our glass not as half empty, but as half full.

God bless, stay safe and see you at our events.



lc

Linda Chee
editor@peranakan.org.sg



At a Crossroads

IS OUR PERANAKAN CULTURE destined to descend into total oblivion, be dulled into a stupor or remain as romantically nostalgic, vibrant and beloved for some elements of the culture? Since the 1960s, many have predicted the decline and demise of Peranakan Chinese culture. It is true that the rich traditions and ways understood and practised by our forebears have diminished, pared down by relentless socio-economic and demographic changes after World War II.

Peranakan culture has never been mainstream. Nor is the baba nyonya community that created and nurtured it. But, for almost a hundred years from the second half of the 19th century, the community was prominent economically and politically and its culture pre-eminent.

As a community, we have not so much shrunk as become more diffused or *chelop*. More Peranakan Chinese are in union with non-Peranakans from different dialect groups and even other races as Singapore becomes increasingly a melting pot of ethnicities and cultures.

The Daoist-centred practice of ancestral worship is in decline among Singapore's Peranakan Chinese. Many do not have time for the elaborate rituals or have converted to Christianity. Even so, while ancestral worship may not be the order of the day, honouring one's parents and elders remains a dearly held community value.

Baba Malay as a Peranakan vernacular or mother tongue is now hardly spoken at home or socially. This is partly because the community has become more 'diluted' as more marry out and mothers work, which means traditions are rarely transmitted at home. Baba Malay is also rarely spoken socially now. But gladly, a younger generation appears eager to learn and speak the language.

While there were and are naysayers, many in the community feel our culture is far from collapse. I am heartened to declare that there are elements in our tangible and intangible cultural heritage that are very much alive and flourishing – food, artefacts, wayang Peranakan, literature and a sense of style.

Against All Odds

To my fellow babas and nyonias who feel angst over the futility of keeping the culture alive, allow me to draw an analogy closer to home as Singapore celebrates 56 years of nationhood. In August 1965, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia. In January 1968, the British announced a withdrawal from Singapore. Overnight, the newly-minted country was stranded with a sizeable unemployed

population. The world waited for Singapore to fail. But, we did not. Today, Singapore is admired as one of the world's modern economic miracles. Why? Because we had no choice and hung on to hope with a great deal of heart and grit.

Our culture is at a crossroads. We babas and nyonias can choose to keep our culture and identity alive. Or simply joget away until the music stops.

Dare we reimagine and reshape the future of our culture? If culture dies, so will identity.

Dato' Seri Khoo Keat Siew, former president of the State Chinese Penang Association, sadly passed on in Penang last June. He seeded the idea of an annual convention for the region and inaugurated it in his hometown, Penang, in 1988.

Our culture is at a crossroads.
We babas and nyonias can choose
to keep our culture and identity alive.
Or simply joget away until
the music stops.



Since then, the convention has been hosted annually by sister Peranakan associations until 2019. Each convention had always been anchored by a symposium. In 2020, The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) postponed the convention in the wake of COVID-19. It was the first time the convention had been suspended in its 33 years.

For the very first time, and perhaps not the last, the 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention will be a hybrid physical-cum-virtual experience. On behalf of the TPAS General Committee, I thank you wholeheartedly for your solid support in the nearly four years of our two terms. See you soon at the 33rd Convention! ♦



God Bless,

Colin Chee

President

Keeping the Culture Alive

The Peranakan Association Singapore
president@peranakan.org.sg

HIGHLIGHTS

The 33rd Baba Nyonya Convention

SATURDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2021

SINGAPORE HAS THE PRIVILEGE OF ORGANISING THE 33RD BABA NYONYA INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION IN 2021. IT IS BEING PRESENTED AS A HYBRID PHYSICAL-CUM-VIRTUAL EVENT TO PROMOTE THE PERANAKAN CULTURE TO A GLOBAL AUDIENCE. IN SPITE OF THE CONSTANTLY CHANGING CHALLENGES LAID BY THE PANDEMIC, THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE HAS LINED UP AN EXCITING AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING EVENT TO BE GRACED BY THE PRESIDENT OF SINGAPORE, HALIMAH YACOB, AS ITS GUEST-OF-HONOUR.



The Symposium

Anchored by the theme of Keeping the Culture Alive, the symposium will gather some of the best minds and practitioners of Peranakan culture. Their foremost aim is to take stock of the Peranakan culture that our forebears knew and practised. Then, to identify the green shoots that will help sustain our culture for generations to come.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

HISTORIAN AND SCHOLAR KWA CHONG GUAN ON CHANGE & THE CULTURAL RESILIENCE OF THE PERANAKAN CHINESE.

FORUM 1

PERANAKAN CULTURE & COMMUNITY: CHALLENGES, PITFALLS & OPPORTUNITIES

Moderator: Kennie Ting

Panellists: Prof Wang Gungwu, Kwa Chong Guan, Dr Farish A Noor, Dr Vivien Wee

This forum will shed light on how the cultural identities of marginal communities can be easily lost, sustained or even flourish. Distinguished historian Prof Wang Gungwu will crystal ball the future of the Peranakan culture, based on his vast historical understanding of the Chinese diaspora.

FORUM 2

FADING HERITAGE? LANGUAGE, LITERATURE & RITUALS

Moderator: Asst Prof Nala H Lee

Panellists: GT Lye, Josephine Chia, Kenneth YK Chan, Pillay P Krishnan

This may well be the most challenging session. Is Baba Malay doomed to extinction? Are Peranakan rituals trapped within Daoist-Buddhist rites? Can private enterprise replace the patronage of wealthy families to drive the creative impulse? We can either accept demise as a fait accompli or rethink revival.

FORUM 3

LIVING TRADITIONS: STYLE, FOOD AND WAYANG

Moderator: John Teo

Panellists: Dominic Low, Raymond Wong, Christopher Tan, Alvin Teo

This session will brim with optimism because style, food and wayang, as cultural markers of our heritage, are the most vigorous and vibrant elements of Peranakan culture today. Our artistic and material culture have borrowed influences but they also inspire others. The real challenge is to keep the good times rolling.

The Matriarchs

This historic one-hour play promises to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience! It will NOT be posted on any social media platform after the performance.

The Matriarchs will bring together, for the very first and ONLY time, two of our most outstanding Peranakan actors. Baba Ivan Heng, the darling of Singapore contemporary theatre, will reprise his epochal English-speaking role as Emily (of Emerald Hill). Also performing will be Baba GT Lye, the iconic doyen of wayang Peranakan in the region. GT will appear as the feisty Baba Malay-speaking Mrs Gan, Emily's mother-in-law. Mrs Gan's character, scripted entirely by GT himself, has been specially created for the convention and is adapted from Nyonya Stella Kon's enduring play, Emily of Emerald Hill, with the celebrated playwright's blessing.

This play extraordinaire is directed by the award-winning Baba Alvin Tan of The Necessary Stage and produced by TPAS.

DO NOT MISS THIS LANDMARK 33RD CONVENTION! BOOK YOUR TICKETS NOW!

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR THE STRONG SUPPORT FROM OUR TPAS MEMBERS AND FRIENDS BOTH AT HOME AND ABROAD.

THE RESPONSE TO TICKET SALES FOR THE CONVENTION - PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL - HAS BEEN ENCOURAGING.

TICKETS FOR THE PHYSICAL CONVENTION ARE SOLD OUT BUT VIRTUAL CONVENTION TICKETS ARE STILL AVAILABLE AT SISTIC. PLEASE CHECK OUR FACEBOOK AND WEBSITE FOR THE LATEST UPDATES.

THE 33RD BABA NYONYA INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION WILL COMPLY WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S SAFE MANAGEMENT MEASURES AT THAT POINT IN TIME.

What's for Dinner?

THE VIRTUAL PERANAKAN DINNER • SATURDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER 2021

AS THE BIG DAY APPROACHES, **BABA EMERIC LAU** LIFTS THE LID ON THE PERANAKAN DINNER 2021, A VIRTUAL FUND-RAISING, FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND-EVENT FOR THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE (TPAS)

THE POWER of THREE

THE PERANAKAN DINNER 2021 is curated by three renowned chefs - the pioneering cookbook author on Peranakan cooking and chef restaurateur, Nyonya Violet Oon; the prolific The Modern Nyonya cookbook writer, Nyonya Sylvia Tan; and Baba Christopher Tan who authored the classic heritage desserts cookbook, the *The Way of Kueh*.

The feast will be a unique 11-dish *tok panjang* meal of eight appetisers and starters, two main courses and dessert. It will be prepared by the chefs of the Shangri-La Hotel and home delivered in a four-tray *tengkat*, together with door gifts, sake and champagne.

Three starters will be a tribute to the former President of Singapore and the previous two TPAS Presidents. They are, respectively with spouses, Mr and Mrs Wee Kim Wee's **STUFFED GREEN CHILLI ACHAR**; Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee's **KERABU**



The 11-dish meal will be delivered in a four-tray *tengkat*.

KACHANG BOTOL (four-cornered bean salad) and Mr Peter Wee's **IKAN MASAK TEMPRA**.

Other bite-size favourites are tantalising **UDANG GORENG ASAM**, hard-to-find **ROTI BABI** (meat patty on fried bread) and **JU HER CHAR**, a classic from up north. Fusion additions include a spicy tuna dip redolent with chilli, *belachan* and coconut cream, and **SAMBAL KIM CHIAM** on cucumber.

The main courses of **AYAM PANGGANG** in a *lemak* sauce and **BUAH KELUAK FRIED RICE** will be rounded off with dessert - **KUEH TART PERANCIS**, a pineapple and spiced almond frangipane with fresh fruit, and **LEMO PEROT KERABU** - a truly memorable finish!



SCAN TO DISCOVER SYLVIA TAN'S HOPES FOR THE FUTURE OF PERANAKAN CUISINE



Bridging cultures, **MASAKI AND ADELINE YEO-MATSUZAKI** are sponsors of two exquisite sakes: Jyunmaishu from the Chiyonosono Brewery in Yamaga City, Kumamoto; and Momoiro Nigorizake from the Toyonotsuru Brewery in Isumi District, Chiba. Nyonya Adeline is an acclaimed Singaporean finger painter whose specially created label art adorns sake bottles.

The pale peony pink hue of Momoiro Nigorizake is reminiscent of the pink

in nyonyaware. Its 17th-generation master brewer, Mr Toyohiko Tajima, welcomes the bond of heritage between his brewery and Peranakan culture. When Chiyonosono Brewery revived Jyunmaishu in 1967, a large vermilion sake cup or shuhai, was used to commemorate the occasion. Hence this signature sake is also called Chiyonosono Shuhai Jyunmaishu.



We also celebrate with champagne, namely Louis Roederer Brut Nature 2012. Brut Nature was created in 2006 and is dry with high acidity, pairing well with Asian cuisine. It is produced only in years deemed suitable. The bottle sports a quirky label designed by Philippe Starck.

Top: Exquisite sake. Bottom: 2012 Brut Nature champagne.



CELEBRATORY PAIRINGS



A NOTE FROM CHAIRPERSON, **GENEVIEVE PEGGY JEFFS**
1ST VICE PRESIDENT, THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE

Having chaired charity galas for almost 20 years, this event has been one of the most challenging due to the pandemic. However, our Peranakan Ball Committee decided to meet this challenge head-on. We quickly pivoted to home delivery and hosting a virtual programme. I am truly grateful to everyone participating in our Peranakan Dinner for persevering and believing in the spirit of fundraising.



THE DINNER PROGRAMME

A VIRTUAL EVENT SPECIALLY PRODUCED BY TAKENOVER PTE LTD

WELCOME SPEECH BY PERANAKAN DINNER CHAIRPERSON, NYONYA GENEVIEVE PEGGY JEFFS

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE, BABA COLIN CHEE

INTERVIEWS WITH OUR SPONSORS

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- + Two bottles Sakura Japanese craft gin
- + Design Orchard shopping vouchers
- + Takashimaya shopping vouchers



STAY at HOME, in STYLE

+ The virtual fashion showcase will feature **RAYMOND WONG** of **RUMAH KIM CHOO** injecting modern zest into the traditional sarong kebaya, positioning the kebaya not only as an art form but contemporary, easy-to-wear attire that is unmistakably Peranakan.

+ **LAI CHAN** is known for his heritage-inspired, figure-flattering designs with a focus on cut and quality. His work reflects culture and tradition yet infuses modernity that is perfectly tailored.

+ **BELINDA CHUA** from **FLOWER DIAMOND BOUTIQUE** takes inspiration from the vivid colours and motifs of manek designs with two pairs of diamond-studded earrings that represent the essence of Peranakan culture: exquisite and beautiful while evolving with the times.

+ Not to be missed is **FOUNDATION JEWELLERS**, long renowned for its alluring heirloom quality pieces. Foundation is masterful in incorporating modern elements into traditional Peranakan design. Their legacy jewellery will surely be passed down for generations to come. No less than Queen Elizabeth has been photographed wearing a Foundation brooch!

KAMSIAH MANYAK MANYAK

SHANGRI-LA SINGAPORE • VIOLET OON, SYLVIA TAN & CHRISTOPHER TAN • LAI CHAN & RAYMOND WONG • FOUNDATION JEWELLERS & FLOWER DIAMOND BOUTIQUE • TAKENOVER • MASAKI & ADELINE YEO-MATSUZAKI • RISIS • QUEENMARK • TEXTILE & FASHION FEDERATION (SINGAPORE) & DESIGN ORCHARD • LIM KOK ENG • HISTORY OF WHOO • LAVENDER CRAFTING CORNER • DONORS WHO HAVE ASKED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS

All our guests, supporters & volunteers who have helped to make the dinner possible in these trying times.

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE • SINGAPORE TATLER



AN EVENT BY
THE PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE

The 2nd Baba Nyonya Literary Festival

11 & 12 DECEMBER 2021

THE 1ST BABA NYONYA LITERARY FESTIVAL, FROM 20 TO 21 JULY IN 2019, SOLD OUT ON BOTH DAYS. THE STELLAR LINE-UP OF BESTSELLING AUTHORS PROVOKED DEBATE, LAUGHTER AND ENTHUSIASM. CULTURE, IDENTITY AND WHAT DEFINES THE PERANAKAN VOICE WERE THE OVERARCHING THEMES. WITH THE BUZZ CREATED, IT IS NO SURPRISE THAT THE SECOND EDITION FROM 11 TO 12 DECEMBER 2021 IS MUCH ANTICIPATED.

FESTIVAL PRODUCER
**NYONYA NGIAM
MAY LING**
PREVIEWS A UNIQUE
CELEBRATION
OF PERANAKAN
CULTURE AND THE
WRITTEN WORD,
AND LOOKS BACK
FONDLY ON THE
INAUGURAL FESTIVAL
IN 2019.

Photography by Benjamin Tan.

THE FESTIVAL RETURNS this year, bigger and better! Fully ticketed, it will be both physical and virtual to reach out to as many interested attendees as possible.

We are proud to have received a grant from the National Arts Council to help defray costs and honoured to count the National Library Board (NLB) and the Bendahari, a cultural and creative hub in Melaka, as our partners.

The Festival will be publicised on NLB's social media channels and likely be held at the National Library Building. The Bendahari intends to broadcast the event and will carry all the book titles at its premises.

One panel for this year's Festival is on the lifestyles of Peranakans in the past. It will centre around *Memories of a Nyonya* by the late Queeny Chang (Genevieve Peggy Jeffs, her granddaughter, will represent her); *90 Years in Singapore* by Irene Lim and Loh Kah Seng; and *Chia Ann Siang and Family – The Tides of Fortune* by Ruth Chia, Linda Kow and Soh Tiang Keng.

Another panel will comprise Christine Ong, author of *Nyonya Kebaya: Peranakan Heritage Fashion*; and Norman Cho and Chris Loh, author and designer of *The Bejewelled Lives of the Peranakans*. The moderator here will be Raymond Wong, one of Singapore's foremost Peranakan *kebaya* makers. Attendees will be invited to bring their sarong *kebayas* and jewellery for the panellists to examine



1 Stella Kon brings 'Emily' to life to peals of laughter from the audience as she reads to TPAS President Colin Chee. 2 Panellists (from left) Christopher Tan, Ovidia Yu, Walter Woon and Lim Kay Tong. 3 The Peranakan Restaurant owner Ray Khoo (left) who sponsored the venue and refreshments, with panton writer Chan Eng Thai.

THE FESTIVAL RETURNS THIS YEAR, BIGGER & BETTER!

We are excited to see how we can be a partner in Malaysia, crossing bridges to be part of this Festival with Singapore, without having our borders open yet.

MELISSA CHAN, STEWARD OF THE BENDAHARI IN MELAKA

“There is no such thing as 'Peranakan literature'. There is literature in which the leading characters happen to be baba and nyonya. The baba and nyonya community is inextricably interwoven into Singapore society and our literature should reflect this.

WALTER WOON, RETURNING TO TALK ABOUT THE DEVIL'S CIRCLE

To me, this Festival is important as it promotes not just local literature, but also helps to keep our heritage and culture alive.

SHAWN SEAH, RETURNING AS A MODERATOR



4 Books galore. 5 A full crowd on both days. 6 Laojait over a sumptuous spread at the break.



Nyonya writers (left) Josephine Chia and Lee Su Kim resplendent in their kebayas.

I believe the Festival to be the first of its kind in the world. Though small, like *chili padi*, it made a huge impact.

NYONYA JOSEPHINE CHIA,
SINGAPORE LITERATURE PRIZE 2014 WINNER

THE FIRST FESTIVAL WAS A SUMPTUOUS TOK PANJANG OF LITERARY DELIGHTS. DELICIOUS, DIVERSE, INSPIRING, CREATIVE AND MOST ENJOYABLE. IT ALSO FELT LIKE BEING AMONGST FAMILY.

NYONYA LEE SU KIM,
AWARD-WINNING MALAYSIAN AUTHOR



and share tips and ideas on matching their outfits and accessories.

No Festival will be complete without the celebration of food. For one of the 'Food' panels, Christopher Tan, author of *The Way of Kueh*, and Khir Johari, author of *The Food of Singapore Malays* (to be published) will discuss the influence of Malay cuisine on Peranakan cuisine.

We also look forward to a *dondang sayang* recital by panton writer Chan Eng Thai and Kenneth Chan, the author of *Chrita-Chrita Baba*, a collection of short fiction drawn from Southeast Asian folklore. ♦



7 Husband and wife, actor Lim Kay Tong and cookbook author Sylvia Tan, with Festival producer Ngiam May Ling. 8 Robert Yeo autographs his book for attendee, Ronney Tan Koon Siang. 9 Theatre doyen GT Lye with Baba Malay author Kenneth Chan. 10 GT Lye, the centre of attention, with the Association organisers. 11 Writers and organisers get together for a parting shot.

POSSIBLY THE SMALLEST LITERARY FESTIVAL IN THE WORLD

The year 2019 was momentous for me, due in large part to the launch of the inaugural Baba Nyonya Literary Festival.

I have always supported Southeast Asian authors fervently. When I realised there was a substantial body of work on Peranakan culture that was of exceedingly high standards, I felt it imperative for the community to know this, for their enjoyment. Many Peranakans are geared towards, and excel in the arts.

I conceived the Festival with the vision to congregate Peranakans and non-Peranakans to showcase their written works to propagate Peranakan culture. The event became a reality with the full, unwavering support of the General Committee of The Peranakan Association Singapore.

We intend to make the Festival an annual event with the aim of scaling it up in the future by inviting writers from overseas, or even hosting it overseas with possible venues being Kuala Lumpur, Penang or Melaka where there are growing Peranakan communities.

Peranakan culture was of importance to the Singapore literary scene once upon a time. We hope that our Festival will go some way towards reviving Peranakan culture in the literary world - it is yet another small step to keep our culture alive which incidentally, is the theme of this year's Festival.

NYONYA NGIAM MAY LING,
PRODUCER OF THE BABA
NYONYA LITERARY FESTIVAL

HOKKIEN HOME-COMING Orang

**Orang Cheena Bukan Cheena (OCBC), literally Chinese but not Chinese, is a demeaning reference that shares the same acronym with a well-known local bank whose first chairman was a Peranakan.*

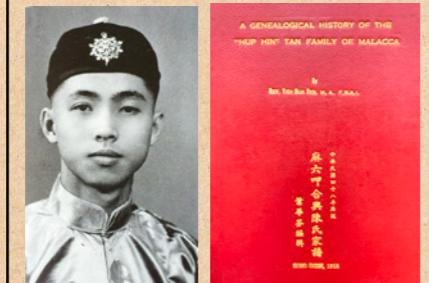
IN THE FIRST OF THIS TWO-PART SERIES ON HIS MOTHER TONGUE, **BABA RONNEY TAN KOON SIANG** PROBES THE PRESENCE OF HOKKIEN WORDS IN THE BABA MALAY THAT HE SPOKE DURING HIS GROWING UP YEARS. HE CONCEDES BEING PUBLICLY TAUNTED AS "ORANG CHEENA BUKAN CHEENA". All photographs courtesy of Ronney Tan Koon Siang.

RECENTLY, AT AN association committee e-meeting, I related how my father loved to *charot* a certain Baba Malay expletive which I thought was Grandpa's original. To my great surprise, a Teochew committee member proudly claimed it belonged to her dialect.

My, we babas borrow from the unlikeliest places. As with food, manners, song, culture, dress, etc. I grew up as a first-generation Singaporean speaking Baba Malay with my parents. Both of them were from old Peranakan families dating back more than 220 years in Melaka. Mum was the one who imparted most of the "good" vocabulary while Dad added the occasional unmentionables.

I had tried for many years, without success, to figure out the provenance of the many Hokkien words and expressions found in conversational Baba Malay. The sporadic academic treatises on what I consider my mother tongue, mostly written by non-Straits born and non-native speakers, did not quite grasp the nuances of a language which many now consider a dying one.

Dad Louis Tan learned English at ACS Malacca and a smattering of Hokkien from friends because it was hardly spoken at home. Great-grandfather Tan Jin Ann spoke some Hokkien but Baba Malay was largely spoken at home and with relatives. So, Dad spoke mostly Baba Malay and English. Today, I consider every Hokkien loan-word in Baba Malay precious! Yet, the term "loan-word" is something of a misnomer.



My grandfather Tan Eng Chye (top), was a Tan Teck Guan and Diamond Jubilee scholar in 1911 and 1912 respectively. A Justice of the Peace in Melaka, he commissioned the red-cover Tan family genealogy book of which my father, Louis Tan Tiang Hong (above left), kept two copies.

JOURNEY TO CHOON BEE

In October 2019, Mr Ng Yew Kang, president of the Genealogy Society Singapore, kindly accompanied me on a trip to my ancestral village. Earlier, I had provided information handed down from my grandfather Tan Eng Chye who in 1939 initiated the publication of a book on my family's history and genealogy.

A document attributed to my progenitor, Tan Siang Long, revealed that he came from a village called Choon Bee in Longhai prefecture (formerly Haiteng), within Zhangzhou province (then Chiang Chew). He had indicated a commune where they reared cattle. I felt a sense of homecoming to see cattle grazing across the river. Behind them was the mountain village of my ancestors.

We spent just two days in Zhangzhou but it was a huge and emotional eye-opener for me. That precious bit of genealogy enabled a local scholar to identify the village where my family came from. Researchers in China had recorded that the villagers, which included my relatives, dispersed from Choon Bee to Chuan Chew, Xiamen and even Taiwan. A big disappointment: no *zhupu* (family surname genealogy tree) could be found anywhere. But I discovered a fun fact: at that time, if you left China, you should return within a year, or the law mandated your beheading.

TODAY, I CONSIDER EVERY HOKKIEN LOAN-WORD IN BABA MALAY PRECIOUS! YET, THE TERM "LOAN-WORD" IS SOMETHING OF A MISNOMER.

Bukan

Cheena

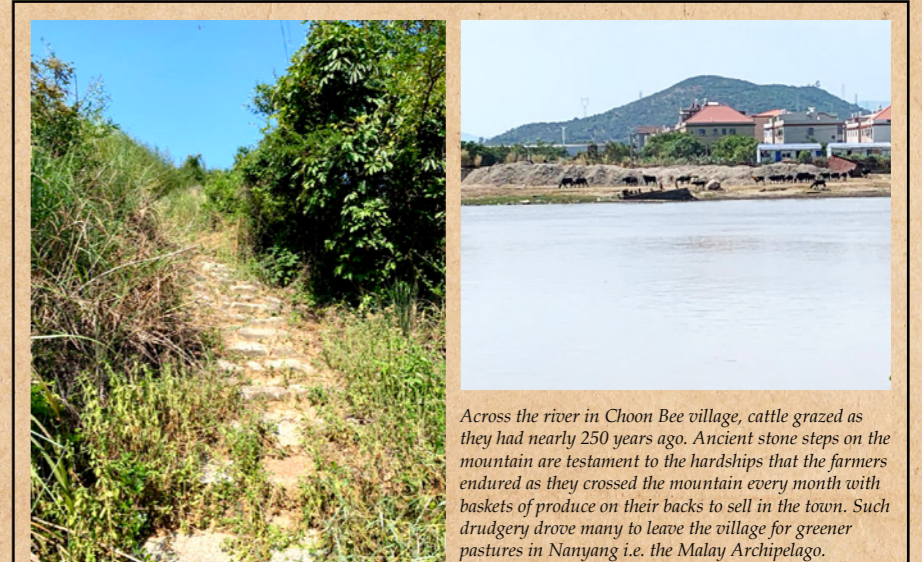
THE FIRST MIGRATION

Family folklore tells of Tan Siang Long leaving his village at the age of 16 and setting sail from Moon Harbour in Longhai. He arrived in Batavia (now Jakarta) in the Dutch East Indies and made a small fortune. After some years he settled in Melaka where he built a few houses in Bandar Hilir, and raised a family of eight children including five sons. His gravestone still stands proudly in a private plot at Ayer Leleh Road.

Tan Siang Long had his first daughter in Melaka in 1797 after marrying a Chinese lady named Teo Ho Neo. He was 39 while she was a mere 20 years old. I suspect from his age that he could have left another family in Batavia to exploit the commercial advantages presented by the first (second in 1824) peaceful British takeover of Melaka from the Dutch in 1795. Taking more than one wife in different port locations was standard practice in those days. They were active traders in this region.

My short time at Choon Bee village did reveal an important fact: my relatives had mostly left the village to escape the hardships of farming life. They usually left the village at around 16 years of age.

When I visited the ancestral temple there, I was told that Tan Tock Seng's ancestors too had performed their ancestral ceremonies at these premises. The Choon Bee Tan fraternity is descended from the eldest son of Tan Choon Hwee, a 14th century Yuan Dynasty scholar. Some years ago, I also discovered from a Chua ancestor's will that my great-great grand aunt Chua Tan Neo had married Tan Tock Seng's eldest son Tan Kim Ching. Small world indeed! Her large grave in Singapore is located next to her father-in-law Tan Tock Seng's grave at Outram Hill.



Across the river in Choon Bee village, cattle grazed as they had nearly 250 years ago. Ancient stone steps on the mountain are testament to the hardships that the farmers endured as they crossed the mountain every month with baskets of produce on their backs to sell in the town. Such drudgery drove many to leave the village for greener pastures in Nanyang i.e. the Malay Archipelago.



Original village houses in Choon Bee and the bagua above the door for spiritual protection.



Overseas Chinese adviser Tan Ho Peng points to the Chinese characters that spell out the Choon Bee 俊美 Tan fraternity.

Cheena

What bugged me for years is the Hokkien dialect spoken among family and friends in Singapore and Melaka. At my ancestral village, they spoke mostly Mandarin to me (I understood about half). I confirmed with Tan Ho Peng, a Kuala Lumpur-based overseas Chinese adviser, that the Hokkien dialect spoken today has not changed very much from the time Tan Siang Long left his village around 1776.

Hence the Hokkien loan-words we have today probably arose from a blending, rather than a borrowing, of two tongues, Hokkien and Baba Malay. Coincidentally, Ho Peng's ancestors also came from the Choon Bee area, which meant he was my distant relative.

**WE
ARE
CHINESE.**



Great-grandfather Tan Jin Ann.

If there is one sentiment I would proudly carry back from China, it is this: Everywhere I went, Chinese people would tell me, "It doesn't matter if you can't speak Chinese. Your roots are from China. We recognise you as Chinese". This resonates with what great-grandfather Tan Jin Ann said in 1939 in my Tan family genealogy book: "We are Chinese, and must not forget that we are such, and that we are always to be Chinese in the real sense of the word".

PART TWO, IN THE NEXT ISSUE, WILL EXAMINE OTHER INFLUENCES ON RONNEY'S MOTHER TONGUE WHERE HE WILL EXPLORE THE SURPRISE INCLUSIONS OF KRISTANG, BAHASA INDONESIA, TAMIL, HINDU AND ENGLISH.

The opinions expressed in this article publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of The Peranakan Association Singapore or its members.

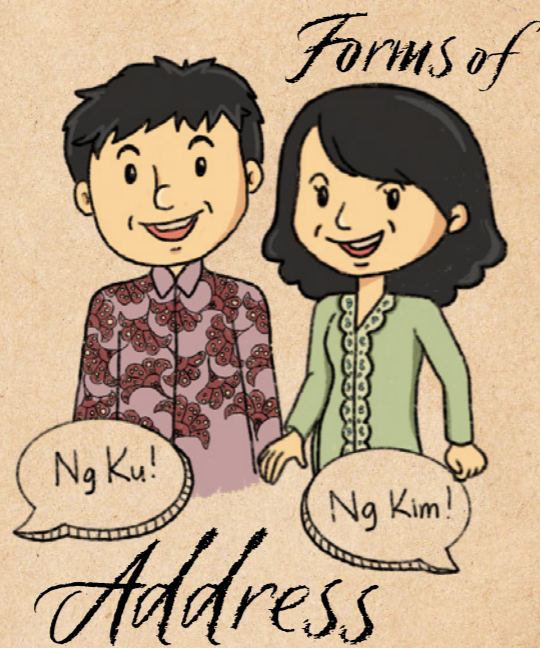
A SAMPLER OF Hokkien IN Baba Malay

Illustrations by
Anastasia Zenia

IT IS MY BELIEF that our ancestors dropped the use of Hokkien and picked up Baba Malay because it was not merely the relevant economic language but the lingua franca of the whole Malay Archipelago. Through natural attrition and usage, certain Hokkien words became permanently "inscribed" into Baba Malay.

In the Baba Malay Dictionary (2006) by Baba William Gwee Thian Hock, he states: "At home they communicated in a language they developed - one made up of an admixture of commonly used Malay words combined with Hokkien Chinese dialect words because the migrant settlers had mostly come from the Hokkien-speaking part of China. Being unschooled in either literary Malay or Chinese, they were naturally only familiar with the oral tradition of these languages. Therefore, in the language they created, a large number of Malay words were absent in their vocabulary and words of Hokkien origin which had been incorporated into their dialogue were limited and confined mainly to terms not normally found or associated with the Malay home and society. This then was the mother tongue they transmitted via mother's milk they passed on to their children and descendants."

The last word on Baba Malay should be from GT Lye, doyen of Peranakan theatre: "The Peranakan language is not Malay; it is a mixture of English, Malay and Hokkien."



Bila sampay rumah sedara, misti ada adat; teriak orang tua, Ng Ku ka Ng Kim ka.

Elder sister Mary Sanong is an expert on preparing *sambal jantung*, a popular dish.

The children love to play with **eldest uncle** Hock Beng because he is a childlike adult.

When visiting relatives, we should be respectful and address our elders, be they **Uncle** or **Aunty**.



Ba Bongsu pakay baju orang puteh nampak **toa pan** skali.

Master Bongsu looks so **elegant** in a western suit.

Mak slalu pesan: "bila bikin barang, misti bikin betol betol, jangan **chin chai bo chai**".

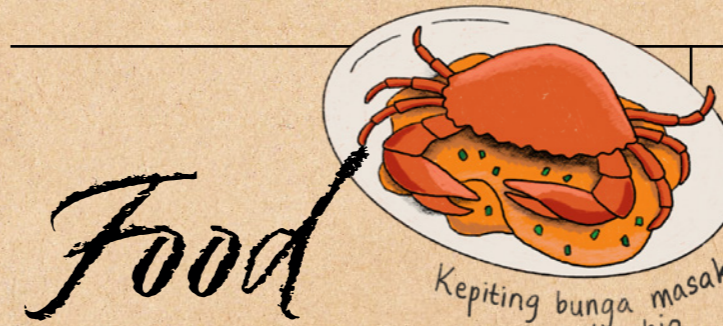
Mother always advised, "Do things properly, don't be **slipshod**."

Ah Kong dulu kala suka naik darah, kita panggeh dia **Si Pai Piak**.

As grandpa got agitated easily, he was nicknamed **The Bad-Tempered One**.

Manyak tachi sama bibik suka kay poh paseh jorang banyak chekek senang.

Some Nyonya ladies love to be **busybodies** because they have a lot of time on their hands.



Nanti kalu da senang, tolong kopekkan **taugeh** boleh masak laok ni malam.

If you are free, can you please help to pluck the **bean sprouts** for tonight's dinner.

Kepiting bunga masak sama **tauchio** gaul sama nasik betol sedap.

The **flower crab** cooked with **fermented soyabean paste** is so delicious when eaten with white rice.

Kuah **itek tim** betol sedap; lagi simpan satu hari lagi serap.

The **duck and salted vegetable soup** is so tasty; it gets even tastier when kept overnight.

Patut **chap chye** laok taon baru, tapi ni jam bila bila pun boleh makan.

Chap chye used to be a traditional Chinese New Year dish, but now it can be eaten any time.

Jadi orang misti **chin chai**, kalu tak ah nanti jadi berkelai.

It is good social behaviour to be **easy going**, if not quarrels may ensue.

Kita adek bradek ada duit tak pakay, boleh **kongsi** beli satu keping tanah habi naikkan rumah boleh juair untong besair.

We siblings have ample savings, let's **pool together** and buy land to develop properties for sale at a good profit.

Kamsia lah ba pinjam gua duit tak kira bunga.

Thanks for the interest-free loan.

Seh Low mia rumah tangga ajair anak anak misti ut hau mak bapak.

The Lows take great pains to instil **values of filial piety** in bringing up their children.

Dulu tempoh nenek moyang, jantan boleh kawin sebarang orang; kawin cha boh kan pun ada.

In the days of old, men could marry whoever they liked, so even married their **female slaves**.

Orang tua tua kalu hidop umur sampay sembilan puluh boleh bikin **chiah tua** seh jit tok panjang.

Septuagenarians can celebrate longevity by **throwing a big birthday celebration**.

Towkay Melaka Tan Tock Seng **chut mia** skali kat Selat paseh bila dia sua jadi kaya, dia kasi duit naik rumah sakit kat Singapore.

After the Melaka merchant Tan Tock Seng became wealthy and **famous**, he made a major contribution to the setting up of a hospital in Singapore.

Household

Bila taon baru, gantong **teng** depan pintu bikin rumah terang.

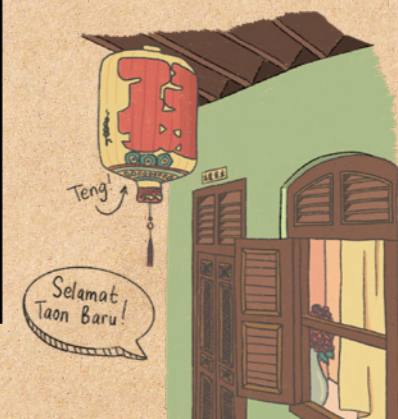
Come Lunar New Year, it is fitting to hang a lit **lantern** at the entrance to the house.

Kat rumah baba baba, slalu ada gantong **ji ho** atas pintu rumah.

Traditional Straits-born Chinese houses have a **Chinese signboard** hung above the front door to indicate the family name.

Bila taon baru, bapak tentu gantong **chai kee** kat pintu.

To usher in the Lunar New Year, father hangs a **red bunting** over the front door to herald good luck.



FIND OUT MORE USES OF HOKKIEN IN BABA MALAY!

Did the Peranakans create Nyonyaware?



The stamp at the bottom of this phoenix-design porcelain bears the name of its owner Madam Xie Bai Xue. Madam Xie Bai Xue (Cheah Phaik Suat Neoh in Hokkien) was born on 20 April 1875 and died on 19 July 1936. She was the eldest daughter of Cheah Chen Eok, the famous Penangite and loyal British subject who erected the landmark clock tower dedicated to Queen Victoria upon the occasion of her Diamond Jubilee, at King Edward's Place.

DO THE PERANAKANS HAVE SOLE PROVENANCE OVER THESE BEAUTIFULLY (OR GROTESQUELY) COLOURED CHINA WARE THAT SEEMS ENDEMIC TO SOUTHEAST ASIA, ESPECIALLY MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE? IS NYONYAWARE REALLY UNIQUE TO THE PERANAKAN CHINESE? **BABA KEN YAP** HAS ISSUES BELIEVING THAT THE PERANAKANS ORIGINATED A PORCELAIN GENRE OF THEIR OWN LIKE THE CLASSIC PHOENIX AND PEONIES MOTIFS, MUCH AS THE THAIS DID WITH BENCHARONG WARE OR THE EUROPEANS WITH ARMORIAL WARE. All photographs courtesy of Ken Yap.



THE VICTORIA PATTERN by the famous Herend Porcelain Manufactory of Hungary debuted at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. It featured Chinese-inspired butterflies and flowers. Queen Victoria was reportedly so taken with it that she ordered a dinner set for Windsor Castle. Henceforth this iconic style bore her name.

Did a similar thing happen with classic phoenix nyonyaware because at least four Peranakans put their names to it? I prefer to think that their names represented some kind of personal stamp - like a monogram - on an existing design, and not because they had actually designed it!

As far back as the Song and Ming dynasties, porcelain agents researched prevailing trends and had popular designs produced in China.

Nyonyaware was often gifted by well-to-do parents as wedding presents to their offspring. However, the earliest phoenix pieces were on white ground with white borders, a colour generally avoided, that matched only their underclothes! It could be that white represented purity and virginity - so important if you wanted your *tempat sireh* to stay in its *tempat*.

The Melaka Peranakans called their nyonyaware "paso Shanghai" and the Penangites, "Shanghai por oowa". Essentially, it was Shanghai ware or export ware, named after the port city which overtook Canton as China's main export emporium after the Taiping Rebellion ended in 1864.

By not calling it nyonyaware that they supposedly designed is further proof to me that Peranakans were merely consumers, like Queen Victoria was with her Herend dinner set.

However, I believe that the Peranakans had a great part to play in the evolution of nyonyaware, by their buying patterns and requirements in their quest for one-upmanship. This probably resulted from dialogues between customer, agent and factory.

“BY NOT CALLING IT NYONYAWARE THAT THEY SUPPOSEDLY DESIGNED IS FURTHER PROOF TO ME THAT PERANAKANS WERE MERELY CONSUMERS, LIKE QUEEN VICTORIA WAS WITH HER HEREND DINNER SET.”



The mark on the base of this plate states: "Made in China - Jiangxi Yue Min Xuan Chu Pin - Imported by Handicrafts Mart Inc. New York, N.Y." It is further proof that buyers in the US also imported such wares from China.



These three stamps at the bottom of separate phoenix-design porcelain bear the names of their owners (from left) Chen Jin Long, Qiu Zhen Ming and son-in-law Wu Kai Di.



Left: These two coffee pots were acquired from the Parsi community in Bombay. They show that other cultures also bought nyonyaware. Though similar in shape, the coffeepots were made separately in Germany (bottom) and China (top).

Oral history points to some Peranakans placing orders through local agents while others went to the source country to procure direct. In the absence of proof like sketches, invoices or bills of lading, I believe they were shown sample motifs and colours, and it was left to the workshop to 'bake the cake'.

I rather fancy that the original white pieces were restricted solely to basic tableware such as spoons and spoon rests, condiment dishes, plates, bowls, covers, cups and saucers.

The more elaborate later pieces, all of the coloured variety, probably started with a pink border on the original white-ground wares and a white ogival panel on the coloured wares. If this is proven to be incorrect I will happily eat my kueh pie tee.

Though I have no qualms with the nyonyaware labelling, I have great difficulty believing unsubstantiated claims that they were made only for the Peranakans. Adjectives like "exclusive" and "unique" do not appeal to my brand of logic and common sense, except for the sets which bear their personalised marks.

Consider the plight of a workshop owner whose aim is to maximise profits. If you were the owner of Herend porcelain, would you deprive others of buying the Victoria pattern? Indeed, it is still being produced to this day and is a hot collector's item.

Even though the Peranakan community might buy more nyonyaware, why should any other culture not find a spectacular bird surrounded by luscious

THE MORE ELABORATE LATER PIECES, ALL OF THE COLOURED VARIETY, PROBABLY STARTED WITH A PINK BORDER ON THE ORIGINAL WHITE-GROUND WARES AND A WHITE OGIVAL PANEL ON THE COLOURED WARES. IF THIS IS PROVEN TO BE INCORRECT I WILL HAPPILY EAT MY KUEH PIE TEE.



blooms encircled by exotic lotus buds and mysterious beribboned Oriental symbols equally desirable? The classic bird-and-flower design was globally popular in the Victorian era and remains an evergreen.

Indonesia has its *Peranakan Tionghoa* culture and Phuket, its *Babas* and *Yayas*. Nyonyaware is also found in Bangkok, identified by their owners simply as Qing dynasty ware with no clear link to Peranakans. Nyonyaware has even been seen used as flowerpots by Filipino Chinese *mestizos* and *koros* (incense burners) by the Japanese.

The term 'nyonyaware' is indicative of the design, and qualified by timeframe. Quality is relative and often too subjective. The notorious fakes of recent years – shunned by museums and scorned by renowned collectors – have been ironically taken as precious heirlooms and praised beyond belief.

Nothing has changed on its provenance. Peranakans still buy new nyonyaware to use on festive occasions, for ancestral worship, and to show them off on social media.

The only difference is that many more tourists than before buy the same new nyonyaware; previously, the antique pieces were more likely acquired by expatriate collectors, missionaries and military personnel.

Incidentally, there is a family-run concern – Shun Tai Xiang – established prior to the Sino-Japanese War, which had a kiln in Jingdezhen plus shops in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Yunnan, Singapore and Hong Kong. The Singapore branch – Soon Thye Cheang – was opened in 1927, with a further branch established in Penang after that. Starting off with the humble spoon and moving on to restaurant ware – and also nyonyaware for their rich clients – they cornered the Singapore and Malay markets and also sold to Indonesia. Shun Tai Xiang is still in Hong Kong today and Soon Thye Cheang is in Singapore's Chinatown area. ♦

KEN YAP'S FULL ARTICLE QUESTIONING THE PROVENANCE OF NYONYAWARE CAN BE READ ON HIS BLOG [HTTPS://BBDDUCK.WIXSITE.COM/WEBSITE](https://bbdduck.wixsite.com/web-site).

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Right: A collection all bearing the mark "Shi Le Yu Xing Long zao". The old informal name for Singapore was "Shi Le Po", while selat in Malay means Straits, as in "Selat Melaka". Yu Xing Long must have been the name of the shop or factory. As a point of interest, the teapot was from a "Chinese" family in Vietnam who migrated to Germany.



Coastal Extravaganza

BABA TONY SUGIARTA
BRINGS US ON A BIRD'S-EYE 'JOURNEY'
THROUGH THE COASTAL TOWNS OF JAVA
TO DISCOVER THE EVOLUTION OF BATIK FROM
MIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION.
*All photographs courtesy of Tony Sugiarta unless otherwise stated.
Illustration by Anastasia Zenia*



BATIK PESISIR, OR COASTAL BATIK, refers to the colourful textiles produced by numerous batik towns along Java's northern coast. Since maritime trading routes opened centuries ago, the coastal trail, which spans over 14 kilometres from the east to west of Java, is dotted with entry ports welcoming immigrants and traders from all over the world, including Europe, China, India and the Middle East. • Many seafarers and traders made Pekalongan, Lasem and Tuban home. For generations, they adapted and assimilated their cultures to the habits and customs of the locals, including how they use textiles and the design ornaments. For example, many Chinese Peranakans used batik *tokwi* altar cloths and included oriental motifs such as *banji* or mythical creatures such as phoenixes and dragons into their batik designs. Some others, like in Kedungwuni, refined elements from other cultures including *batik hokokai* and added Sakura flowers too! • While the designs may look similar at first glance, a result of adaptation and acculturation, each batik town has its own speciality however so very subtle these may be. Before the borders reopen post-pandemic, allowing us to visit the artisans directly, let us take a quick visual 'trip' to several renowned batik towns along the northern coast of Java, to learn what their signatures are through their batik cloths.

Batik wit with extremely fine lines.



Batik keraton, or royal batik, absorbed external influences to include motifs such as flowers and animals.

Cirebon

THE OTHER ROYAL BATIK

Cirebon is the home of *Mega Mendung* (Cloudy Skies). It is a Chinese-influenced design often seen on artefacts brought by a Chinese princess, Ong Tien, when following her heart to marry Sunan Gunungjati, the king of the Sultanate of Cirebon, in the 15th century.

Like most inland batik, Cirebon batik first thrived within the royal palace compounds. With multiple external cultural influences, the range of *batik keraton* (royal batik motifs) has extended with motifs such as *Singa Barong Paksi Naga Liman* (a mythical creature that combines elements of a lion, a bird, a dragon and an elephant) and *Taman Arum Sunyaragi* (The Royal Garden).

Away from the Royal Palace, 10 km westward, is Trusmi Batik Village in the Plered district. Hop on a trishaw and head to the back of the village to see the studios of Hajjah (Hj) Masina's children or Pak Katura. Bapak Masina and Pak Katura are two of the early batik champions in Trusmi.

Marvel at the beauty of making *batik wit*, the speciality of Cirebon batik. It has extremely fine lines produced by applying wax to all parts of the cloth, except thin cracklines, allowing dye to seep in to form the delicate outlines.



The Chinese-influenced batik *Mega Mendung*, or cloudy skies.

Pekalongan

EVERYTHING ABOUT BATIK



Top: The signature butterfly motif of famed batik maker Oey Soe Tjoen. The butterfly motifs are an adaptation by Chinese workshops based on the tale of Sam Pek Eng Thai, or the Butterfly Lovers.



Top: Batik pagi sore with one side showing *Pelo Ati*, or gizzard and liver patterns, and the other with the grid-like *Nyah Pratin* pattern.
Right: A rare batik *gentongan* with its distinctive indigo blue colour.



PEKALONGAN was one of the bustling port cities which has now transformed into the hub of batik-making in Indonesia. Ask for anything batik, they have it all! From tool-making villages to a batik museum and a university, you can visit and interact with the artisans in the whole batik eco-system in Pekalongan. You can experience the full spectrum of batik workmanship too – from commercial and affordable batik *cap* to the finest batik art.

Many immigrants settled in this once thriving fishing port, lending new ideas and inspirations for batik motifs. There are European *batik kompeni* and batik portraying fairy tales, Japanese-style *buketan* or *batik jlamprang* cloth that was inspired by Indian *patola* cloth.

Religious influences are also evident such as in the Batik Rifaiyah from Batang Regency where they believe in the teaching that forbids the depiction of living things as a whole. For example, the *pelo ati* (the gizzard and liver) motif actually depicts a bird.

With Pekalongan city as our hub, we venture out to Kedungwuni sub-district where descendants of renowned batik makers such as Oey Soe Tjoen and Lim Ping Wee are currently keeping up the legacy of fine batik art, such as *batik hokokai*, using the very fine size 00 canting. A canting is a copper vessel with a wooden handle and small spout used to form lines or filler dots. The smaller the spout, like size 00, the finer the lines and dots.

Batik Hokokai was a style of batik developed during the Japanese occupation, named after the organisation Jawa Hokokai (ジャワ奉公会) which organised the “Greater East Asia” indoctrination campaign in Indonesia. They ordered batik for Indonesians who were deemed instrumental in forwarding their propaganda. Inspired by the kimono, *batik hokokai* features floral motifs in bright colours such as orange, turquoise or pink.



A Japanese-inspired Batik Hokokai with white cranes in winter.



Dyeing using the brush technique, or *colet*.



Batik bang biron, or red and blue batik.



A bold Chinese-inspired batik with the dragon and other symbols.



Batik with Chinese characters and the fine *isen isen*, or filler motifs.



Fine work using the canting, a pen-like tool to apply liquid hot wax.

Lasem

A STROLL BACK IN TIME

Lasem is known for its famous *getih pitik*, the deep and signature Lasem ‘chicken-blood’ red resulting from the optimal water quality to extract red dyes from the roots of the *morinda citrifolia*, *mengkudu* or *noni* as it is better known.

While this traditional natural dye technique is not often practised, Lasem has a strong visual identity from the use of their *isen* (filler) and background motifs that are inspired by daily life such as *latohan* (sea-grapes), *serit* (comb) or *gunung ringgit* (loosely translated as money mountain).

Lasem used to be dominated by Chinese-owned workshops and many are still producing in their ancestral houses. We can enjoy the hospitality of these atelier owners serving *urap latoh* (sea grapes salad tossed with spiced coconut) or *kopi lelet* (a signature Lasem coffee) at the front porch of an old-world Chinese house adorned with Christian art while watching the batik artisans gracefully hand-draw the wax from memory, without any pencil outline.

Of course, new workshops managed by young owners have sprouted, such as in Jeruk or Pohlandak villages in Rembang regency. They experiment with new techniques and bold motifs to complement the traditional Lasemese batik signatures.

Using the canting to produce batik *getih pitik*, recognised by the chicken blood-red background, a signature of Lasem.





The Legend of Jaka Tarub

THE LEGEND OF JAKA TARUB (2017) is a storytelling batik painting by Marheno, the owner of Zie Batik in Malon Village, Ungaran, Central Java. This is a scene from the folklore found in the literary text of *New Java*, Babad Tanah Jawi.

JAKA TARUB WAS A HANDSOME YOUNG MAN who, when hunting, stumbled upon a group of seven angels taking a dip in a lake. Mesmerised by their beauty, Jaka Tarub desired to marry one of them. He hatched an idea to steal a shawl, or *selendang*, from one of the angels. He stole the *selendang* that belonged to Nawang Wulan, the youngest of them all, without which she was unable to fly back to heaven.

Panicking in the middle of the jungle, Nawang Wulan vowed to marry any man or take as a sister any lady who helped her. Jaka Tarub returned with his stepmother's clothes. Nawang Wulan was grateful and married Jaka Tarub.

Storytelling batik is not new. It was first seen in the 19th century in the form of *batik kompeni* (batik depicting scenes during the colonial times) or *batik legenda* (fairy tale batik) such as Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood, produced by Indo-European workshops. A storytelling batik could present the whole tale

across a full-length batik or highlight a memorable scene from the story.

Marheno was inspired by fairy tale batik and used local folklore such as The Legend of Jaka Tarub.

The full-length cloth of 2.5 metres by 1.15 metres on Primmissima cotton features a combination of batik and painting techniques. "This is to make the characters look more alive," commented Marheno on adding shades with brushes on the facial features instead of drawing them with canting and hot wax.

Spoiler: the story of Jaka Tarub did not exactly have a happy ending. Nawang Wulan found out that Jaka Tarub stole her *selendang*. Furious, she flew back to heaven, never to return.

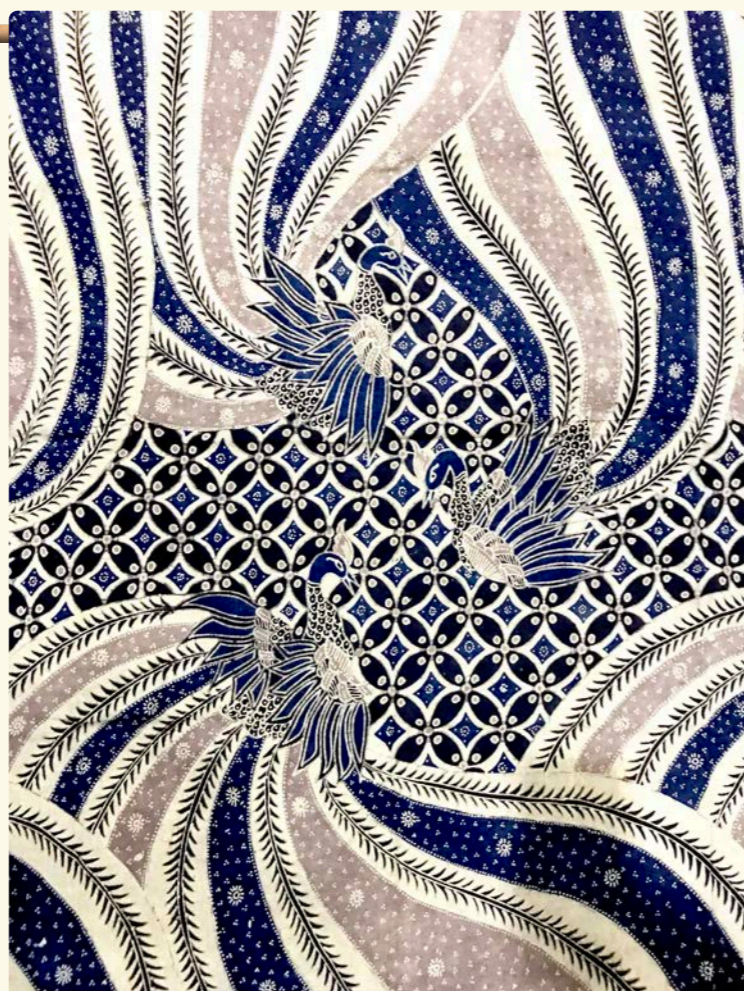
Nonetheless, through this scene imagined in vibrant colours, Marheno has captured one magical moment that showcases the adaptation and assimilation of different cultures and techniques in a single piece of batik cloth.



Chinese influence is evident from the frequent use of the lokcan, or birds with widespread wings.



Batik tenun gedog is batik on woven cloth, named after the sound made by the loom.



Batik Tuban with peacocks and Chinese coin motifs as the background.

Tuban

FROM COTTON SEEDS TO BATIK MASTERPIECES

Tuban is another bustling port city where textile trades and gift exchanges have been prominent since the 11th century. Within the Tuban regency, Kerek district is unique as it is the only place in Indonesia that practices both batik making and weaving within the same village.

Batik tenun gedog from Tuban is named after the sound made by the backstrap loom when the beater is activated. The Tubanese grow their own cotton, spin the yarn, weave the cloth and finally adorn it using batik waxing and dyeing techniques. Tuban batik motifs tend to be bigger. The outlines are what many batik aficionados described as 'rustic' due to the waxing on the uneven surfaces. The Lokcan (birds spreading their wings with thread-like primaries and secondaries) is one of the most common Batik Tuban motifs and one that has a Chinese influence.

& many other batik pit stops

Cirebon, Pekalongan, Lasem and Tuban are some of the bigger batik towns along Java's North Coast. They have been reviewed often in literature and symposiums. Here are some of the smaller batik towns with their signature motifs for quick pit stops along your future North Coast batik trails: **Indramayu** is known for its *cocohan* pattern. Wax is applied to the cloth to create a white background (*nembok*). Using a tool made from a wooden handle and a row of nails, they carefully poke through the wax to create a soft dotted background against the main motif. **Malon Village in Ungaran**, about an hour from Semarang city, is a new batik centre where the artisans develop capabilities in natural dyes using *indigofera* leaf, *secang* tree bark or *jelawe* fruit peel. They combine inland

Soaking the batik in natural dyes.



batik motifs, such as *wayang* and *lerengan* or experiment with storytelling batik painting (see previous page, *The Legend of Jaka Tarub*). *Kretek* (unfiltered cigarettes of tobacco and clove blend) slowly took over the town of **Kudus** in the 1960s, resulting in the closure of many batik workshops. Many batik makers are reviving the batik kudus which combines the beautiful flora and fauna of coastal batik with the subtle brown colour of inland batik.

Not along the main island of Java, **Madura** island has been deemed to be where the "future of batik" will be. One of their signature styles is *batik gentongan*, where the cloth is soaked inside a fermented dye vat, mostly indigo, for months to create a strong and long-lasting colour on the cloth.



Batik wayang kulit using beautiful tones of natural dyes.



Batik Kudus is enjoying a revival.

Using the canting to produce Batik Madura with its characteristic bright colours.



The Soul of Batik

We always refer to the styles of the 'North Coast batik' towns as those full of vibrant colours and of elegant flora and fauna motifs.

As time progresses, popular batik motifs are being frequently replicated by other batik towns to meet market demand, resulting in what seems to be a homogeneous batik culture. However, nuances in the little details become the 'soul' and the signatures of the different batik towns.

With borders currently closed, this is a good time to savour your batik collections, if you have not already, to observe the fine *isen* details and imagine new stories and memories with your mind's eye. ♦



Gentongan or vats used to soak the cloth with dyes.

TONY SUGIARTA IS THE FOUNDER OF ANERDGALLERY, AN 'ART-GALLERY' THAT SPECIALISES IN PRESENTING NEW NARRATIVES AND WORKS RELATED TO THE CONCEPT, TECHNIQUE OR MEDIUM OF INDONESIAN BATIK OR TENUN WOVEN CLOTH.

BABA RAYMOND WONG
OF THE KIM CHOO KUEH
CHANG FAMILY HAS LIVED
AND BREATHED BAKCHANG
ALL HIS LIFE. HE SHARES
STORIES OF HIS PIONEERING
GRANDMOTHER WITH
NYONYA LINDA CHEE
*Photographs courtesy of Edmond Wong
unless otherwise stated.*

Herstory in the Making



IT ALL STARTED with one determined nyonya who did not want to lose a child. Angry with her son-in-law for wanting to give his daughter away in faraway Terengganu, she instructed her son to make a trip there and bring her grandchild to Singapore. She adopted the girl as her own daughter, passing on the finer points of making nyonya bakchang, or dumplings, to her. That child was Lee Kim Choo.



Middle, from left: Bibik Tok Siew Neo and Nyonya Lee Kim Choo. Photo screenshot from a video.

Kim Choo was born in Terengganu in 1933 to a dried seafood trader surnamed Lee. He thought she brought bad luck because his business did badly and he fell into ill health. Fortunately for Kim Choo, she had a stable and happy childhood under the care of her grandmother, Tok Siew Neo, in Singapore. "She had a strong bond with my great-great-grandmother who we

referred to as our Cho Cho," said Kim Choo's grandson, Raymond Wong.

BIBIK KUEH BAKOL

A close family friend, Victor Goh, fondly remembers Tok Siew Neo who was his mother's close friend, living in a small kampong behind what is now the Fei Fei coffeeshop. "She was a simple Jane," says Victor. "Always in her sarong and a three-quarter sleeved *baju dalam*."

Victor, who was formerly president of the Gunong Sayang Association, says the junction of Everitt Road and Joo Chiat Place was an open-air breakfast hub where the kampong folks would gather. "Siew Neo was called Bibik Kueh Bakol because in the 1950s and 60s she was known for making the best *kueh bakol* (sweet cake or *ti kueh*) in Joo Chiat.

Grandma Kim Choo told Raymond that his Cho Cho Siew Neo's "beautiful *kueh bakol* stayed nice and shiny, like a mirror, for many weeks". In the 1960s, many nyonias in Katong made *kueh* for sale from their homes to earn precious income. Kim Choo was the only nyonya on the streets, selling nyonya chang under a banyan tree.

Raymond feels fortunate that his grandma stayed 15 years with his family at Telok Kurau until 2013, during which "she shared many interesting stories about her past." Kim Choo died in 2015.

KEBAYA MAMA

Cho Cho had wanted to match Kim Choo to wealthy young men, but the strong-willed Kim Choo declined. When she was caught sneaking out of the

house to meet Wong Yee Dee, a "very handsome" young worker at Wong Ai Guan, the corner coffeeshop at 59 Joo Chiat Road, Cho Cho was compelled to marry the 17-year old teenager to him.

Wong was a hardworking Hockchew who also spoke Malay and Tamil. But he brought little home. Kim Choo bore the heavy responsibility of keeping her extended family together and raising her five children, one of whom died very young.

At home, Kim Choo spoke Baba Malay with her children. But her Hokkien-speaking husband insisted that all their children be educated in a Chinese school along Koon Seng Road. "When it came to my generation," says Raymond, Chinese was heavily emphasised in school. So we all spoke Mandarin with my grandparents. My brothers Edmond, Desmond and I had a lot of tuition because we always failed in Mandarin, except for my sister Gladys who is super at the subject," he laughs.



Kim Choo and her husband at their son's wedding.

Practice makes perfect and today, Raymond considers it as a blessing that he had to learn Mandarin.

"Cho Cho's family did not have the luxury of giving a dowry for my grandmother's marriage," so when young Kim Choo was hawking bakchang, she envied the nyonias who wore *kebayas* because she could not afford them. Perhaps to make up for the deprivation, Kim Choo wore two *kebayas* on the same day, for the first time in her life, at her eldest son Sin Min's marriage to Helen Lim on 1 April, 1976 - one at the tea ceremony and the other at the wedding dinner.

The family business prospered in the 1970s after Kim Choo moved from under the banyan tree to the shop unit



beside it at 60 Joo Chiat Place, where they have stayed since. In 2011,

"my grandma asked me to make a *kebaya* for her," remembers Raymond, who was fast gaining a reputation as a *kebaya* designer. "It was her first and only *kebaya sulam* (embroidery) made by me. She said she wanted to be dressed in the *kebaya* when she died." Raymond was taken aback, but when the time came, "we fulfilled her wish."

KAMPONG JOO CHIAT DAYS

Raymond's father Sin Min spent his childhood in Kampong Joo Chiat helping Kim Choo "to cut wood for the fire. She would throw Chinese coins into the steamer water so that when it came to a boil, the coins would jiggle with the bubbles and make a tinkling noise. Then she would have to *tambah ayer panas* or add water. It was her timer. My dad remembers because he had to help her top up the water."

The Dumpling Festival was one of the four main festivities of the year for the Chinese, Peranakans included. "Cho Cho would buy lots of glutinous rice from the market about a month before the festival," and task Kim Choo to pick out the white rice grains. "Kueh chang abu (kee chang) made with glutinous rice will be very *lembut*, or soft. It will spoil easily if there is any white rice in it."

The Dumpling Festival takes place on the 5th day of the 5th Lunar month at the beginning of summer, known as the Summer Solstice (夏至), the day being the longest and hottest of the Lunar year. "Cho Cho would hang a bunch of keechang from the first batch at the front door to herald the coming of the festival, plus a bunch of dried *daon aroda* (rue herb)."

Who would have thought chang was folk medicine? "On the day itself, Cho-Cho would boil the *daon aroda* with red or green beans, with the keechang cut into smaller pieces, to make a sweet dessert. It was said to 'cool' the body from the intense warm weather at that time of year."

A family photo with Kim Choo, middle, in the *kebaya* made by her grandson Raymond. She is flanked by her son, Sin Min, and daughter-in-law Helen. Standing from left are grandchildren Edmond, Raymond, Desmond and Gladys.



Keechang or kueh chang abu.

CUTTING THE GREASE

"If we indulged in two or three bakchangs at a time, Grandma would advise us to take one keechang at the end of the meal to ease the bloated feeling. I assume it is the alkaline nature of the keechang," Raymond figures, as the rice is soaked in lye water for many hours before the wrapping. "It does work, somehow."

After cooking the bakchang, the alkaline keechang water can be used to wash the grease out of the pots and clear the oil from the drainpipes. "Very effective! Even now, we do it in our shop. Cook keechang last and clear the oil."

During Kim Choo's younger days, Cho Cho and she "would make lots of extra keechang during the Dumpling Festival to share with Malay neighbours who

likewise shared their fare during Hari Raya and other festivals".

The keechang would be presented with *gula melaka* syrup with grated coconut sprinkled over.

"Grandma said the Malays could relate to this lovely treat as it was very similar to their *kueh lopes* (a triangular glutinous rice cake wrapped in banana leaves) which they would remove and coat in grated coconut."

Keechang is enjoyed any time of the year. "Come the durian season, Cho Cho would buy cheap durians to cook *pengat* - durian pulp stewed with *gula melaka*, slices of ginger and fragranced with pandan leaves." Surprisingly, without coconut milk. "Grandma would make this soupy treat once in a while to reminisce times with her own grandmother Tok Siew Neo, as it was their favourite way of enjoying keechang. She would say, '*leng ko ka ho chiak*', or 'tastes better when cold'. The last time she made it was when she was staying with us, 20 years ago."

"It's my favourite too," says Raymond. Taste, it would seem, is passed down the generations as well. ♦





BAKCHANG EVERYWHERE

BABA RAYMOND WONG GIVES THE INSIDE STORY ON THE DELECTABLE DUMPLING.



NYONYA BAKCHANG

The basic filling for nyonya bakchang is diced pork with dried winter melon, which Raymond's grandma said lends the juiciness missing from the dryness of the diced lean meat. "Nyonya chang in Singapore differs from Melaka and Penang which, based on most recipes I have seen, have coriander seeds or *ketumbar* and pepper as the main ingredients. The Singapore nyonya chang is filled with a variety of spices that are Chinese, Malay and Indian – Singapore being a port centre, a lot of spices came through here, so I believe Peranakans added on, like fennel and cumin (Indian), star anise (Chinese), and cloves (Indonesian)."

TEOCHEW SHUANG PING BAKCHANG



This is a cross between Hokkien and Cantonese chang, thus its name *Shuang Ping*, meaning two elements combined. The rice is white but the filling is meat, mushroom, chestnut and mung bean. "On the map, you have Guangzhou (Canton), further up is Swatow (Teochew) and after that is Fukien (Hokkien), so this is the *chang* found in between the two cities," Raymond explains.

CANTONESE BAKCHANG

The older generation of Cantonese locals favour mung bean paste wrapped with *pang sek yew* (caul) for the traditional taste, along with cubes of fried lard! "Cantonese chang is very hard to find in Singapore. Now and then, we get an order or two to make it as a flavour of the past." In Hong Kong, the chang is wrapped in dried lotus leaves. Unlike the Hokkien version, Cantonese chang is white without dark soya sauce and five-spice seasoning.



Photo by Colin Chee.

HOKKIEN BAKCHANG

Hokkien bakchang is dark brown because of the soya sauce and five-spice powder. The basic filling is meat, mushroom and chestnut. "We started making XO Hokkien chang in recent years because some customers requested traditional Xiamen dumplings – adding salted egg, dried scallop, whole *haabee* or dried shrimp, and dried oyster. These ingredients were used probably because Xiamen was a seaport which even now sells all the dried seafood ingredients. The Xiamen version is slightly bigger than Hokkien *chang*." During the Baba Nyonya Convention in Tangerang in 2019, Raymond visited a wet market in Pulo, outside Jakarta, to eat Chinese food. "There, I saw bakchang similar to our Hokkien *chang*, wrapped in bamboo leaves with meat, mushroom and chestnut. I believe this is because of the huge Hokkien community in Jakarta. We spoke to them in Hokkien too!"



HAKKA BAKCHANG

The Hakkas traditionally use glutinous rice flour "made into a dough then wrapped in bamboo leaves". The filling is meat, mui chye or preserved radish, and dried shrimp. "It is like eating *kueh kochi* or *mochi*".

ELSEWHERE...

Raymond's staff from Shangdong "are not used to eating our dumplings. Their chang is white glutinous rice wrapped with red dates". The Taiwanese use Japanese rice, "so the chang is gelatinous like jelly, very soft after steaming for a very long time." "Anywhere there are Chinese people, there will be a version of dumplings," Raymond concludes.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

COOKBOOK AUTHOR **BABA ONG JIN TEONG** EXPLORES THE VARIED ORIGINS OF SELECTED NYONYA KUEH IN THE FIRST OF A THREE-PART FEATURE ON FOOD.
Photographs courtesy of Ong Jin Teong.

WHEN I STARTED researching for my second book, *Nonya Heritage Kitchen – Utensils, Origins and Recipes*, I thought most nyonya *kueh* had origins in the Malay Archipelago. I soon found that many localised recipes had been brought in from other continents, for example, Europe and South America, and adapted with locally available ingredients. We go back several centuries to the trade routes among China, India, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and colonisation by the Portuguese, Dutch and British; to a lesser extent, influences from Spain, America and Japan. Many Chinese foods that were introduced by the early immigrants from China evolved into different versions in the former Straits Settlements, namely Singapore, Melaka and Penang. And then later to Malaya, which subsequently became the two independent nations of Malaysia and Singapore.

KOAY, KUEH, KUE & GAO

Koay is in Hokkien what *kueh* is in Malay, *kue* in Bahasa Indonesia and *gao* in Mandarin. Except for one, the other three sound similar. No surprises that the three are inter-related. The Chinese were in Southeast Asia well before Admiral Cheng Ho's voyages to Nanyang in the 15th century, so it was very likely that they brought in *koay* which evolved into similar local forms using local ingredients like rice, coconut milk, gula Melaka and pandan for flavouring and colouring.

with grated coconut cooked in gula Melaka, wrapped in banana leaves and steamed. *Mochi* and *koci* sound similar, they are most probably related!

Ondeh ondeh gets its green colour and flavour from pandan leaves. It is filled with gula Melaka, boiled then rolled in grated coconut. *Ondeh ondeh* and *kueh kochi* could have evolved from *tang yuan* brought over by the early Chinese settlers to Southeast Asia. Over time, local ingredients like coconut and gula Melaka were used. This sweet is called *klepon* in Indonesia



Kueh kochi santan.

and *mont lone yay paw* or *baw* in Myanmar, which is in closer proximity to China. The Indonesian *onde onde* is larger, covered with sesame seeds and fried. The same sesame ball is called *jian dui* in Chinese. It was most probably brought over to Indonesia by the early Chinese settlers.

Many types of food have significant variations between countries and even within each country. Instead of bickering, we should be celebrating our diversity.

Interestingly, I found that the early *ondeh ondeh* from Penang is covered with both grated coconut and toasted sesame seeds. Most of today's *ondeh ondeh* do not have sesame seeds. So *kueh kochi*, *ondeh ondeh* and *tang yuan* are all related.



Kueh kochi.

Kueh kochi santan is probably an enhancement of *kueh kochi*. In its simplest form, it is a batter of ground rice and *santan* wrapped with a single *kueh kochi* in banana leaf and steamed. The more elaborate variety from the Northern states of Malaysia and Southern Thailand has two mini *kueh kochi* embedded in the batter and wrapped like *kueh*

MOCI, KOAY EE, TANG YUAN, KUEH KOCHI, ONDEH ONDEH & ONDE ONDE

Many types of *kueh* made from ground glutinous rice can be found not only in Southeast Asia but also in China, Japan and Korea. Traditionally a *cheo bo* (stone mill) was used to grind the rice. In Japan, *mochi* requires a spectacular process of synchronized pounding of the dough by two people. No pounding is required for *koay ee* (or *tang yuan*), *ondeh ondeh* and *kueh kochi*.

Traditional *koay ee* made for the *Tang Chek* (Winter Solstice) festival has no filling. It is served in plain syrup or flavoured with ginger.

Mainstream Chinese *tang yuan* has fillings like black sesame seeds, peanuts, yam and red beans. The Teochew *ah balling* in Singapore is actually *tang yuan*. *Kueh kochi* is filled



Ondeh ondeh.

jongkong. Kelantan and Terengganu have something similar called *kueh puteri dua sabilik* or two princesses in a room. *Kueh jongkong* seems like a simpler version of *kueh kochi santan*; they probably have different roots. Only gula Melaka is used as the filling. Another version uses just the grated coconut filling, also without the dough used in *kueh kochi*. Unless special precautions are employed, *kueh jongkong* can appear messy. The brown sugar from the filling seeps into the surrounding *santan* as it is not enclosed in dough.



KOW CHAN KOAY & KUEH LAPIS

The *kueh lapis* from Indonesia has Dutch origins. In Hokkien, *kow chan koay* means 'nine layer cake'. The nine layers have symbolic associations to *bubu gao sheng*, or 'promotion', and *bu buzhang jin*, which means 'growing up' or 'developing

maturity'. In Chinese, the pronunciation of the number nine sounds similar to the character for 'long' or 'old' suggesting longevity. As such, the diamond-shaped *kow chan koay* was often served at the sixtieth birthday of a patriarch or matriarch, especially in Penang. The Peranakans could have adapted the *kow chan koay* by using local products like coconut milk and sago or tapioca flour.



KUEH BOLU, KAI TAN KO, KAY NUI KO & KOAY POLU

Kueh bolu is a sponge cupcake that is crispy on the outside and soft on the inside. It is traditionally served during Malay festivals and ceremonies like weddings and Hari Raya, and during Chinese New Year. Its origin may be European since wheat flour is not native to Southeast Asia. The name is apparently derived from *bolu* which means 'cake' in Portuguese.

Similarly, the French have madeleines. In South China the Chinese have sponge cakes called *kai tan ko* in Cantonese and *kay nui ko* in Hokkien - either steamed or prepared using a version of waffle iron which has shapes of animals within, as well as large individual moulds which are called *koay polu*. The Japanese version is round or moulded into the shape of fishes. I wonder whether the Chinese versions are linked to the Portuguese.



Bingka originated from South America. Tapioca is native to Brazil and was carried to different parts of the world, including Asia and the Philippines, by Spanish and Portuguese colonisers. *Bolo de Mandioca*, a traditional Brazilian tapioca cake made with grated tapioca, tapioca flour, coconut milk and eggs, is almost identical to *kueh bingka ubi kayu*.

The origin of the name *kueh bingka*, however, is more convoluted. *Binka* and *bibinka* refer to the Filipino tapioca cake, made from a similar recipe as *kueh bingka* but using milled glutinous rice instead of ground rice. It is poured into a special clay pot lined with banana leaves and baked in a charcoal oven. *Bibinka* is also the generic name for rice cakes in the Philippines.

A traditional Indian 16-layer pudding from Goa is called *bebinca*, which was brought to Portugal. With the Iberian union of the Portuguese and Spanish crowns between 1580 and 1640, the name to identify cakes generally could well have been introduced to Spanish Philippines.

The Peranakans in Penang also make *kueh bingka* with ground rice, without tapioca. It is white but sometimes coloured purple and served at weddings.

KUEH BINGKA, BIBINKA & BEBINCA

ON DIASPORA & DIETS

ISSUES OF ACCULTURATION and cultural appropriation are very complex especially with food. Like elsewhere in the world, where discussions are plentiful on appropriation of immigrant dishes, it is no different with Peranakan Chinese food culture - mostly a fusion of Malay and Hokkien cooking going back several centuries.

For a long time now, there have been periodic exchanges especially on social media around Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia as to who owns a particular dish. Interestingly, Indonesia does not seem to face any cultural appropriation problems over Peranakan Chinese food or ingredients like *bakso*, *kecap*, *tauhu*, *mie*, *kwetiau*, *siomay* and *tauco* which are considered mainstream Indonesian cuisine.

I feel that the main problem lies in the lack of understanding of one another's culinary culture. Fostering a better understanding between the Peranakan Chinese and Malay culinary communities, and to people outside these two communities, is more helpful.



Baba Ong Jin Teong using a tub of smouldering charcoal to make crisp *kueh kapit* before folding them to store neatly in recycled biscuit tins.

KUEH KAPIT, KUEH BELANDA, KUE SAPIK & KOEKJESIJZER

Kueh kapit or love letters is also known as *kueh belanda* and *kue sapik* in Indonesia. *Sapik* or *sepik* in Bahasa Indonesia have the same meaning as *sepit* in Malay - to pinch, squeeze or clamp. *Kapit* in Malay means to press together from both sides. These two words give a clue as to how *kueh kapit* is made. *Belanda* is Dutch in Malay, clearly indicating that *kueh kapit* is of Dutch origin.

The original Dutch moulds called *Ijzerkoekjes* were made of cast iron or *ijzer*. The Dutch have much shallower grooves compared to the Belgian or American waffle irons. The present *kueh kapit* moulds have even shallower grooves which result in a thinner waffle, known as *kniepertjes* (little pinches in Dutch).

The waffle called *koekjesijzer* or iron cake was probably adapted in Indonesia, Malaya, Sri Lanka and India to what we know today as the *kueh kapit* mould. The original Dutch waffle was made from a dough. However, the colonial version in Sri Lanka and India is in a batter form, and uses rice flour and coconut milk instead of wheat flour.

The iron moulds were probably adapted to become thinner in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. I suspect the brass moulds came in later. Today the moulds are mostly made of aluminum.

PULUT INTI



Pulut inti is prepared by steaming glutinous rice with coconut milk and eaten with a generous amount of the *inti* or filling in Malay. The *inti* is made from grated coconut and gula Melaka. In the Peranakan adaptation, *bunga telang* flowers are used to colour the rice blue.

In Penang the rice is wholly coloured blue while in Singapore and Melaka the rice is only partially coloured blue. I remember finding black-eyed beans among the rice in *pulut inti* in my younger days in Penang. You get a new experience when you bite into the black-eyed beans!

Piecing the Jigsaw Puzzle

While we are not able to work out the exact origins of our kueh, we are able to piece together enough of the jigsaw to appreciate that their present forms contain multiple influences. We must treasure our shared culinary heritage and celebrate its diversity rather than take the antagonistic stance of cultural appropriation. Do share your thoughts - I welcome feedback. Write to me at penangfood2000@yahoo.com.

BABA ONG JIN TEONG IS A RETIRED ENGINEERING PROFESSOR WHOSE PASSION IS DOCUMENTING AND COOKING PERANAKAN FOOD, ESPECIALLY FROM PENANG. HE HAS PUBLISHED SEVERAL COOKBOOKS. PART TWO IN OUR NEXT ISSUE WILL COVER HIS RESEARCH ON THE 'MULTI-RACIAL' APONG AND SOUPY DESSERTS LIKE CHENDOL AND BUBUR CHA CHA. PART THREE WILL LOOK AT SAVOURY FOOD SUCH AS ROTI JALA.

Unveiling the Wangkang Mystique

UNLIKE THE CACOPHONIC HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF PAST WANGKANG FESTIVALS IN MELAKA, THE 2020 WANGKANG FESTIVAL WAS SEDATE AND SCALED BACK. STILL, ACADEMIC **BABA DAVID NEO** CONCLUDES THAT ITS ELABORATE PAGEANTRY WAS NOTHING SHORT OF SPECTACULAR.
Black-and-white photographs by courtesy of Daniel Ang. Colour photographs by courtesy of Yong Chuan Tian Temple unless otherwise stated.



The "Royal Barge" is set ablaze, sending away evil spirits responsible for epidemic scourges and chaotic conditions of the world.

THE WANGKANG FESTIVALS in Melaka have traditionally been commissioned by one of the *Ong Yah* or princes, whose spirit is usually manifested through its respective miniature chair. Directives for Wangkang are usually given a year ahead. But Wangkang 2020 was commissioned three years ahead in 2017.

No one had then anticipated the Covid-19 pandemic, but past Wangkang festivals have coincided uncannily with the Spanish Flu, SARS and H1N1! In retrospect, it was necessary for the divine directive to have been issued three years before. With the disruptive MCO, it would not have been possible to build the barge and prepare the Wangkang within a year.

Amidst the pandemonium of a pandemic, and with

restrictions on movements, my research team had to seek laborious authorisation from both the University Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and the police to attend the Wangkang festival. But this difficulty was anticipated as the Wangkang is meant to eradicate society of malevolence.

WANGKANG 2020

Under the auspices of the Yong Chuan Tian (Court of Bravery) Temple, the theme of Wangkang 2020 which ran from 7 to 15 November was 国安號 (national peace and prosperity). The festival theme was accompanied by a couplet, "游王代天護馬國，池爺巡狩萬民安". This translates into "the touring prince protects Malaysia in Heaven's stead, Lord Tee' is in procession,



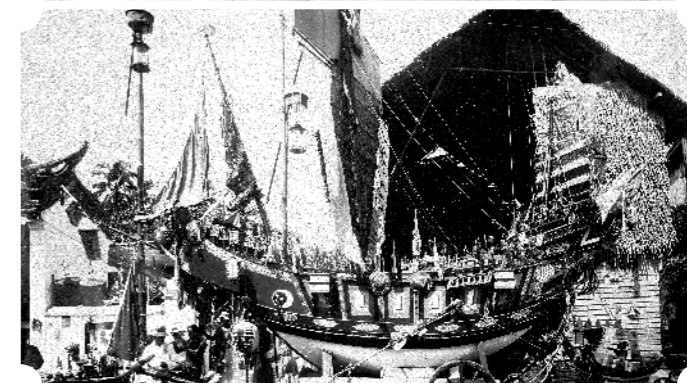
Top: The Ong Yah manifests spiritually through its chair. Middle: Prayers at the Yong Chuan Tian Temple for peace and prosperity in the world. Bottom: The Wangkang barge by the river to prepare for its 'departure'.

the myriad subjects are at peace" - which was divinely declared during the manifestation of Ong Yah.² The 2020 festival *zhulim* or director was a Peranakan - Dato' Ronald Gan, who is also the President of the Persatuan Peranakan Baba-Nyonya Malaysia. Baba Ronald brought greater involvement from the Peranakan community who had entrenched this unique festival in Melaka since the 1800s. However, their involvement has waned, corresponding with their economic position which was adversely affected in the post-War years.

The Yong Chuan Tian Temple was splendidly festooned with lanterns, embroidered pennants and paper effigies. Three 15-metre bamboo lamp posts were raised to inaugurate the festival, invoking and heralding the realms of heaven, earth and hell that the Wangkang would be in procession, and calling all devotees to pray for the salvation of mankind.

The week ensued with prayers,

¹The Tee Hoo Ong Yah deity was the host of Wangkang 2020.
²The Ong Yah are, to the Fukienese communities, generally pestilence deities and protectors of communities against plague and epidemic (Stevens 1989).



Top: Performers called *chai lian* who beckon the wandering souls to board the barge. Circa 1919. Bottom: The Wangkang barge built in an attap shed (background) at Bandar Hilir. Circa 1933.

MELAKA'S WANGKANG FESTIVALS

Wangkang festivals in Melaka were initiated by the Peranakans and can be traced back to the 1800s. They were apparently held in intervals of 5, 8 and 14 years. In the 20th century, Wangkang festivals were held in 1905, 1919 and 1933 (see page 48, Wangkang Melaka). There was a 68-year lapse before the Wangkang was resurrected again in 2001, 2012, 2017 and 2020. The festivals were recognised as a national cultural heritage of Malaysia in 2012. Then on 17 December 2020, the festival was inscribed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (ICH) by UNESCO. The next Wangkang has been commissioned to take place in 2031.

THE ROYAL BARGE

Wangkang translates into "Royal Barge", with *kang* meaning Chinese junk. The concept of the Wangkang is to apprehend evil spirits responsible for epidemic scourges and chaotic conditions of the world, and to send them away in the Wangkang barge. At the same time, devotees pray for peace and prosperity in the world. • The Wangkang festival in Melaka revolves around the worship of five Ong Yah (also known as "Five Sworn Brothers"). By descending seniority, they are named Choo Hoo Ong Yah, Hoon Hoo Ong Yah, Tee Hoo Ong Yah, Lee Hoo Ong Yah and Pek Hoo Ong Yah. • The founding myth tells of an emperor seeking to test the powers of a Taoist priest, Teo Tian Soo. As a consequence, 360 *chin soo* or scholars were decapitated. These souls demanded reparation for their lives. To appease them, they were canonised as "Ong Yah" or princes with the title of Tye Tian Soon Siew (power of an Imperial Justice). The worship of Ong Yah was brought by the Hokkien people in Chiang Chew and Chuan Chew in China, to Melaka state in Malaysia.



Tan Jin Hoe as a wangkang *chai lian*, circa 1933. Courtesy of Roy Tan, his son.

TO BE APPOINTED BY THE ONG YAH TO ORGANISE THE WANGKANG FESTIVAL IS INDEED AN HONOUR FOR ME. I BELIEVE THE DEITY CHOSE A PERANAKAN TO ORGANISE THE FESTIVAL THE WAY IT HAS BEEN DONE SINCE MORE THAN TWO CENTURIES AGO - SERONOH MACHAM ADAT ORANG DULU KALA - CONFORMING TO TRADITION.

WE HAD BEEN PREPARING FOR THIS EVENT FOR THREE YEARS, WHICH ALSO INVOLVED A SERIES OF PROGRAMMES SINCE 2018 THAT LED UP TO THE ONE-WEEK FESTIVAL IN 2020. I COULD NOT HAVE DONE IT ALONE. THE SUCCESS OF THE WANGKANG IS DUE TO ALL THE BABAS AND NYONYAS AS WELL AS THE ONG YAH DEVOTEES WHO TIRELESSLY HELPED OUT IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.

OUR UNIQUE WANGKANG ACHIEVED GLOBAL RECOGNITION WITH UNESCO ICH STATUS ON 17 DECEMBER, JUST A MONTH AFTER THE FESTIVAL ENDED. MELAKA WILL GAIN MUCH AS MORE VISITORS COME FOR THE EXPERIENCE.

— RONALD GAN
WANGKANG FESTIVAL ZHULIM (DIRECTOR)



Festival Director, Baba Ronald Gan, standing next to the head of the Wangkang monument at the Melaka Gateway at Pulo Melaka.



Top right: Festival Director, Baba Ronald Gan, installed a Wangkang monument at the Melaka Gateway at Pulo Melaka, where the Wangkang was sent off. He is also building a Wangkang museum with a 120-seat auditorium, which is nearing completion. Middle right: The feast of 108 Peranakan dishes for the imperial banquet of the Ong Yah regiment. Bottom right: The grand altar.



Top: Dotted the eye of the dragon. Middle: The Wangkang barge at Pulo Melaka. Bottom: The "Royal Barge" is set ablaze, sending away evil spirits responsible for epidemic scourges and chaotic conditions of the world.

chanting and daily *poh oun* sessions where devotees could seek blessings and healing, purchase indulgences and make donations towards the Wangkang festival.

On the second day, water was symbolically drawn from the well of the Poh San Teng Temple at Bukit China³ to set the anchor of the Wangkang and also to beckon it back to Melaka. This was followed by *tiam gan* or the 'unveiling of the eyes' - fowl blood is mixed with red powder and the eyes of idols are dotted to infuse life to these representations. This act was done to all the images that were found on the barge.

The grandest display was the *sam kai*⁴ altar. Scaffolds were built behind the main door of the temple and beautiful paper palaces were elevated for Ti Kong. An altar table was laid with offerings of *bunga rampay* (potpourri), sweetmeats, fruit and vegetables,⁵ meticulously and beautifully decorated. These offerings were refreshed daily.

On the evening of the seventh day, we congregated at Pulo Melaka to release water lanterns. It was an ethereal experience as we watched lights set in clay vessels floating out to sea, to urge wandering souls to board the Wangkang barge.

On the eighth day, the grand feast for Ong Yah was held at noon. Baba Ronald Gan had rallied the Peranakan community to cook 108⁶ dishes for Ong Yah and their regiment. Bibik Lan Neo and Bibik Chap Neo in their *baju panjang* entertained the audience with humour and provided a commentary on the extensive nyonya menu.

In the afternoon, another elaborate *ho hia ti* (wandering souls) feast of 48⁷ dishes of *laok semayang abu* (ancestral worship) was spread out.

A few days into the festival, a stricter movement control order (MCO) by the Malaysian government was announced; so the Wangkang procession had to be cancelled. Therefore, on the ninth and concluding day, at dawn, the *sai kong* (Taoist priest) and his entourage with two small boats, without the usual *berarak* or procession, scoured the streets. At several major points in Melaka, they performed their rituals to gather wandering souls onto the small boats, to be transferred onto the Wangkang barge.

At 10 o'clock that night, the Wangkang barge made its way to Pulo Melaka. There, it was spectacularly set ablaze, burning ferociously yet sedately in comparison to past Wangkang.

I was instructed to throw tea leaves⁸ at the purgative site of the burning barge and to walk away, not looking back. ♦

OUR RESEARCH TEAM WISHES TO THANK THE GENEROSITY AND HOSPITALITY OF BABA DATO' RONALD GAN AND SOR BOON CHAI OF THE YONG CHUAN TIAN TEMPLE; AND THE HALL OF THE PHOENIX AND PEONY, DAVID TAN AND UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA (UiTM) (PROJECT CODE: 600-UITMSEL (P.1 5/4)(GS)(001/2020)) FOR FUNDING AND FACILITATING THIS RESEARCH PROJECT TO DOCUMENT THE WANGKANG FESTIVAL.

³Bukit China, or Chinese Hill is where the *Perigi Raja*, or the King's Well, is at the foot of the hill, next to the Poh San Teng Temple. This well has been reputed to have never dried up even during droughts. Bukit China is also known to be one of the largest Chinese cemeteries outside of China, with graves dating as far back as the Ming Dynasty.

⁴*Sam kai* refers to an altar specifically set up for *Ti Kong* or the Jade Emperor; the Peranakans set up this altar on two occasions — the birthday of *Ti Kong* (ninth day of Chinese New Year) and at weddings as nuptials are performed before heaven.

⁵Vegetarian offerings are usually made to *Ti Kong*.

⁶The Ong Yah regiment consists of 36 heavenly generals and 72 soldiers. The total of these numbers gave significance to an imperial banquet of 108 dishes.

⁷There were 12 dishes of *laok mangkok* (soup-based); 12 dishes of *laok piring* (non soup-based); 12 different *kueh-kueh*; and 12 different types of *buah-buah* (fruit).

⁸Salt, rice and tea leaves seem to be symbolic cleansing and restorative agents.

GENERATIONS OF PERANAKANS HAVE ENJOYED THIS FLAVOURFUL AND ELABORATE RICE SALAD TOSSED WITH AROMATIC HERBS. IN THE DAYS OF OLD, PREPARING THIS LABORIOUS DISH WAS A FAVOURITE TIME OF THE DAY WHEN THE NYONYAS OR EMBOK EMBOK WOULD GATHER TOGETHER TO COOK AND GOSSIP AT THE SAME TIME!



NASI ULAM

NYONYA LINDA CHEE LEARNED PERANAKAN COOKING FROM HER MELAKA-BORN MOTHER AND GRANDMOTHER. SHE SHARES HER FAMILY RECIPE FOR NASI ULAM AND SHOWS HOW IT CAN BE ADAPTED TO SUIT VARIED PALATES.

Photography by Colin Chee. Food styling by Linda Chee.

THE PERANAKANS ARE LARGELY local born-Chinese who adopted many facets of Malay culture through many generations of living in Southeast Asia. My own deep Peranakan roots date back over nine generations from Melaka where my parents were neighbours, as well as cousins, in the Peranakan enclave at Heeren Street (now Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock). Our forefathers were likely to have taken local Malay women as wives or life partners.

A very important aspect of our culture is food, in which we share a love of spicy flavours and raw herbs in our cooking. Peranakans have developed our own version of *nasi ulam* which is essentially a beloved Malay dish. Every family would tell you that theirs is the best!

Generations of Peranakans have enjoyed this flavourful and elaborate rice salad tossed with aromatic herbs. In the days of old, preparing this laborious dish was a favourite time of the day when the nyonyas or *embok embok* would gather together to cook and gossip at the same time!

The marvellous thing about *nasi ulam* tossed with leafy herbs and vegetables is that it combines so many flavours and textures. It is all at once crunchy to the bite, soft, aromatic - a truly multi-sensory experience.

Even better, the traditional herbs have health benefits and are renowned as folk medicine for treating anything from diabetes, arthritis, inflammation, pain, nausea, indigestion, depression, fatigue, high cholesterol, cramps and worms to dandruff. Most are high in anti-oxidants, are anti-bacterial and some even have anti-cancer properties.

Here, I share my family recipe for *nasi ulam* using ingredients available at wet markets and supermarkets. *Nasi ulam* can be simple or very elaborate for more complex flavours. You can add on herbs as you please. Busy cooks or vegetarians can omit the seafood or even the pungent *belachan*.

You can adjust the amounts to your taste. The traditional way of Peranakan cooking that was passed down to me, and as many in our culture would attest to, is to *agak agak* or cook by estimation. Experiment and taste to discover a mix that suits your preference. (Recipe overleaf)

THIS RECIPE WAS FIRST FEATURED AS THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE TO THE SINGAPORE HERITAGE FESTIVAL 2021.



The multitude of ingredients that are meticulously sliced by hand. The finer the results, the more respected would be the hands that prepared them.



VISIT THE SINGAPORE HERITAGE FESTIVAL 2021 AND ACCESS RECIPES THERE THROUGH THE LINKS IN THE QR CODE.

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 4-5 PERSONS

- 2 cups white jasmine rice
- 3 stalks pandan leaves, knotted
- 1 ikan *chencharu* (torpedo scad fish) or *ikan selar* (yellowtail)
- 300g fresh small prawns, shelled
- 50g salted *ikan kurau* (threadfin)
- 1/3 cup dried shrimp (*hae bee*)
- 1/2 cup fresh grated white coconut
- 200g shallots
- 1 1/2 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp white pepper
- Cooking oil for frying

A tasty option, or substitute for fresh fish if you are pressed for time, is freshly fried *ikan bilis* (dried anchovies).

SAMBAL TUMIS

STIR-FRIED PASTE

- 1/2 thumb-length *belachan* (fermented shrimp paste)
- 50g shallots
- 20g garlic

HERBS & VEGETABLES

- 2 stalks lemongrass (*serai*), use only the white stem
- 2 young turmeric leaves (*daun kunyit*)
- 4 young kaffir lime leaves (*daun lemo perot*)
- 1/2 cup Vietnamese mint or *laksa leaves* (*daun kesom*)
- 6 pods winged beans (*kachang botol* or four-angled beans)
- 1 torch ginger flower (*bunga kantan*)
- 3 long beans (*kachang panjang*)

More herbs can be added, as you like, including *daun kemangi* (lemon basil), *daun kadok* (wild betel), mint, young *galangal*...the list goes on.



Leprous lime leaves (*lemon perot*)



Wild pepper leaves (*daun kadok*)

METHOD

1 — Blend or pound the ingredients for the *sambal tumis*. Heat about 3 to 4 tablespoons of oil in a wok over medium heat. Fry the mix, stirring continuously for about 5-10 minutes until fragrant. Set aside. The *sambal tumis* can be made in advance and stored in the refrigerator.

2 — Cook the rice with the fragrant pandan leaves. Discard the leaves after cooking. Cool the rice and set aside.

3 — Finely slice the shallots and add a pinch of salt. Fry until light brown and drain well on kitchen paper. Cool completely. Set aside. You can also prepare this in advance and store in the refrigerator.

4 — Soak the dried shrimp with enough water to cover, for about half an hour. Drain and blend coarsely. Fry over medium heat in about 4 tablespoons oil, stirring continuously until golden brown. Drain off the oil. Alternatively, toast the shrimp, cool then blend or pound finely. Set aside.

5 — You can either deep fry or grill the fish. Remove the skin, debone and flake the fish carefully. Set aside. Fry the salted fish, cool completely then pound finely. Set aside.

6 — Bring to boil enough water to cover the prawns and cook for about 2 minutes or until the prawns turn pink. Cool and cut into segments. Set aside.

7 — In a dry wok, toast the grated coconut over low heat until slightly brown. Stir continuously to prevent burning.

8 — Julienne or slice all the herbs and vegetables very finely. Remove the centre vein from the leaves before cutting. Set aside.

9 — Put the rice in a large mixing bowl. Stir in the *sambal tumis* and mix evenly. The most effective way of mixing is by hand. Add the salted fish, flaked fish, herbs and vegetables. Add salt and pepper, adjusting to taste. Finally, mix in the toasted coconut. Serve with *sambal belachan* on the side.



SAMBAL BELACHAN

- 6 fresh red chillies
- 1/2 thumb-length *belachan*, toasted
- Pinch of salt
- 1 tbsp lime juice

The best flavours are derived from pounding the chillies and *belachan* by hand in a mortar and pestle until finely blended. The *sambal* keeps well in the freezer where it can last for a couple of months. Squeeze lime juice and mix well to introduce a tangy flavour to the *sambal*. A true *nyonya* or *baba* will tell you they cannot survive without having *sambal belachan* at every meal!

PAIRING FOR A PERFECT MEAL

NYONYA NICOLA LEE RECOMMENDS PAIRING NASI ULAM WITH AN ELEGANT CHAMPAGNE OR REFRESHING WHITE FROM CATALUNYA *Photographs by Nicola Lee.*

PERANAKAN CUISINE, with its myriad aromas and robust flavours, makes wine pairing a bit of a minefield. Happily, here are two recommendations that work.

Bright medium yellow in colour, this vintage 2008 champagne from legendary Dom Perignon is bursting with beautiful aromas of apricots, brioche and hazelnuts. The palate is rich, yet has an elegant mouthfeel with a long finish. It is still in its infancy. So do not be in a rush to

drink it up if you have some bottles in the cellar. Made from 50% Chardonnay and 50% Pinot Noir, this is a classic champagne that will go well with almost any cuisine, or even on its own.

If bubbles are not to your liking, pick up a bottle of the easy drinking *Vina Esmeralda*, made by the famed Familia Torres who produce some of the best wines from Spain. Named after the emerald green colour of the Mediterranean, *Vina Esmeralda* is perfect for



Classic vintage 2008 champagne from legendary Dom Perignon, made from 50% Chardonnay and 50% Pinot Noir.

the tropics and pairs extremely well with *nasi ulam*. Aromas of rose petals, jasmine and peach greet you on the nose. It is clean and refreshing and very fruit-driven. Made from 85% Muscat of Alexandria and 15% Gewurztraminer from Catalonia in Spain, this wine is best well chilled. The aromatic Muscat, combined with the spicy Gewurztraminer, results in a wine which is floral, attractive and easy on the palate.

Selamat makan!



Aromatic *Vina Esmeralda* from the famed Familia Torres, made from 85% Muscat of Alexandria and 15% Gewurztraminer from Catalonia in Spain.

NICOLA LEE IS A WINE SCHOLARSHIP WINNER AND WINE & FOOD PANELIST IN SINGAPORE. SHE IS STILL TRYING TO FIND THE RIGHT RHYTHM OF THE BATU LESUNG, OR STONE MORTAR AND PESTLE.

The BABA of MELAKA

SECOND TIME AROUND

BABA COLIN CHEE REVIEWS PROFESSOR TAN CHEE-BENG'S MODERN CLASSIC

AFTER 31 YEARS, Prof Tan Chee-Beng's long out-of-print classic, *The Baba of Melaka*, is finally back in print as a second edition in 2021.

It so happened we were chatting on the phone earlier this year and I remarked I was unable to buy his book anywhere in Singapore. He said: "Not to worry. I will mail a copy each to you and Uncle William (Gwee). It has just been reprinted."

For those of you who have yet to read and reflect on *The Baba of Melaka*, this is your chance to acquire a copy. It will only be available online. This reprint is not different in substance from the original edition first published in 1988. Only in presentation - with further copyediting and clearer explanations of terms used.

It is still very much a classic work, spawned from a full year of immersive study in 1977. Back then, Prof Tan was a young anthropology student on a motorbike. As a non-Peranakan, Prof Tan succeeded in building a network of close friendships with Peranakan and non-Peranakan families living in Bukit Rambai, and maintaining them until today. To fit in, he had to learn Baba Malay and live with a Peranakan family in this rural multi-racial linear village some 10 km from Melaka city. Prof Tan visited the village again before the book's reprint. Many of his close Baba contacts there had passed on. But he connected with their children.

Over the years, economic and social changes have left their mark on the

village. But the community's traditions have remained largely resilient - "...the Baba Malay dialect, customs and religious rites as well as kinship systems."

This book is precious not just for Prof Tan's very comprehensive research on the history of the Peranakan community in Southeast Asia, especially in the former Straits Settlements of Melaka, Penang and Singapore. It is also a reminder that cultural continuation is only possible if actively practised and ownership is real. When this happens, culture will stay relevant to each succeeding generation, flourish and the cultural baton continually passed on.

The adoption of Peranakan identity is more a result of a person's own socialisation than the fact that one's father or mother is a Peranakan.

The biggest danger to this sense of cultural ownership is when, "...through interactions with individuals of other ethnic groups, some young Baba experience the inconvenience of assuming their Baba identity, and they may slowly drop that identity and assume only their Chinese identity."

How true this is! It brings to mind an encounter in 2019 which I had with someone now prominent in government. I had

asked him: "Are you a Peranakan?" He replied: "No, I am not. But I remember my grandmother wearing baju panjang and speaking Baba Malay."

"Then that makes you a Peranakan," I said. "Oh, really?" he replied.

For Prof Tan, one interesting key finding from his study of Bukit Rambai's

Peranakan families is that "the adoption of Peranakan identity is more a result of a person's own socialisation than the fact that one's father or mother is a Peranakan." This is revolutionary!

Yet it is common sense. His observations are that, "If a person is raised as a Baba and speaks Baba Malay, he is likely to grow up and identify himself as a Baba. If only one of the parents is Baba,

whether a child will grow up identifying themselves as Baba depends on the extent of cultural influence their Baba parents and close Baba relatives have on the child."

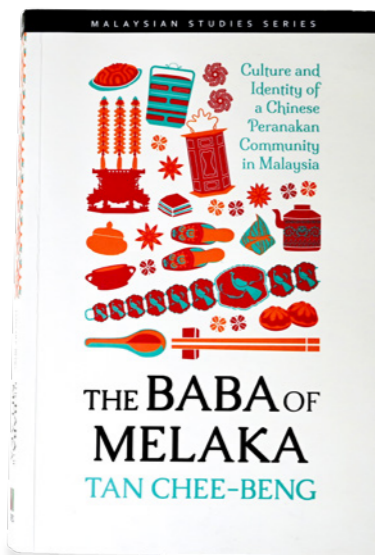
In other words, Peranakan society is a product of how well its cultural markers are socialised and imbibed, and not simply for biological reasons. Cultural attributes are what make for Peranakan identity.

Prof Tan also noted in his study that "one does not have to be a descendant of early Chinese settlers in order to be a Baba. One becomes a Baba through socialisation at home and with peer groups. One should note that the Baba who have a short history of settlement are not necessarily less Baba than those who can claim to be fifth- or sixth-generation Baba."

This is an astute observation that might just elicit debate. ♦

WHERE TO BUY?

THE BABA OF MELAKA (2021) IS A SECOND EDITION. PUBLISHED BY STRATEGIC INFORMATION AND RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT CENTRE, PETALING JAYA, SELANGOR, MALAYSIA. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE ONLINE AT GERAKBUADAYA@GMAIL.COM OR THE PUBLISHER'S LINK AT WWW.GERAKBUADAYA.COM



WATERFRONT HEIRLOOMS

REFLECTIONS OF THE KAMPONG CHINA PERANAKAN

BABA COLIN CHEE REVIEWS NYONYA ROSITA ABDULLAH LAU'S SECOND CULTURAL TOME ON THE CHINESE HERITAGE OF TERENGGANU

At the tender age of 19 I left my beloved hometown of Kampong China in Kuala Terengganu to get married. ”

IT WAS SOME 50 years ago. With this simple opening for her second book on the heritage of her home state, Rosita Abdullah Lau launched into possibly Terengganu's most detailed, in-depth and fascinating documentation of Peranakan Chinese heritage in one of Malaysia's oldest coastal village communities.

Folk history has it that Kampong China was a transit stop for the Ming Dynasty's Admiral Cheng Ho's immense armada as early as the 15th century. This is plausible because, by the early 18th century, European traders in their writings consistently tell of a vibrant Chinese settlement on the banks of Sungei Terengganu's estuary.

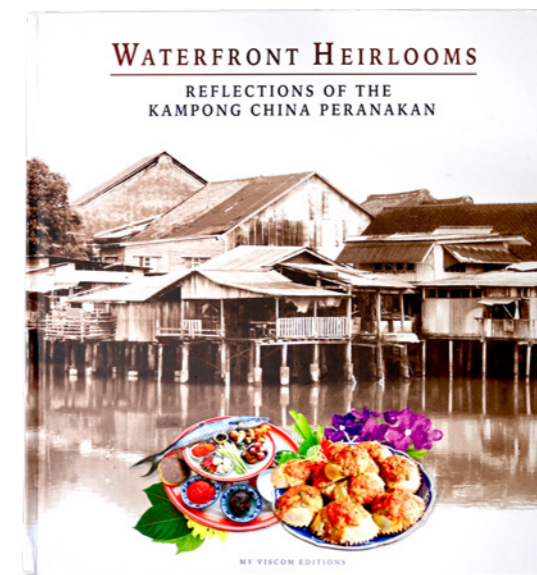
Rosita and her creative team from affiliate company Viscom Design Associates started their eight-year research for *Waterfront Heirlooms* in 2010 after the launch of their first project, the multi award-winning *Kulit Manis: A Taste of Terengganu's Heritage*.

It was a painstaking process during which priceless oral archives were garnered from many of Rosita's relatives, friends and long-time Kampong China residents on the community's unique Peranakan heritage. Their stories and remembrances are like golden threads woven into a multi-ethnic cultural tapestry of long-ago years alongside old and new photographs, illustrations, and grandmothers' recipes of traditional foods

and *kuays* prepared in home kitchens.

They are all captured within 288 pages, categorised under five chapters detailing Kampong China's beginnings, its cuisine, embroidery arts, festivals, and rites and rituals through the cycle of life.

Rosita was born and raised in Kampong China. As a young adult, she left to marry into Terengganu's royal family, not returning home until half a century later to fill a longing in her heart.



She reminisced, "... your feet may leave but your heart will always be."

In those halcyon days, Kampong China was a country village consisting of two facing rows of single and two-storey houses on an 800-metre long street, from end to end.

A forlorn nostalgia inevitably drifts into Rosita's narrative, "The rapidity of change saw much land and a large part of our beloved river reclaimed, burying its unique and quaint riverfront character and its long history which seemed to have run its course." Perhaps there is some life yet for the pioneering village. Kampong China was designated a heritage site by the state government in 2004. Rosita directly made references to a research study on the village by

scholars from the Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman - Professor Pue Giok Hun, Dr Ong Puay Liu and Dr Lee Hong Chuang.

They discovered in 2017 that the Peranakan residents in Kampong China never referred to themselves as "Peranakans" until only recently. Instead, they have always called themselves *Cheng Mua Lang* or sarong-clad people to distinguish themselves from the *Teng Sua Lang* or China people in their midst.

The study also makes this observation: "There are Peranakan communities within every racial category in Malaysia to date - Jawi Peranakan, Hindu Peranakan (Chetti), Eurasian-Portuguese (Serani), and Chinese Peranakan.

"Other little known Peranakan communities include Peranakan Samsam and Peranakan Sikh. In short, Peranakan identity as in other social phenomena, has been and will always be a work in progress, according to circumstances in time and space."

"I am a simple housewife," laughed Rosita in my phone call to her. "What do I know of ethnic and cultural identity? Best left to scholars and experts to discuss it ... my only contribution is to try my very best to capture all the stories of our heritage from those who have lived through those past years and can still recall them before they are gone."

But one thing Rosita is sure of: even if the Peranakan Chinese in Kampong China were to lose many of their cultural traits because of the inevitability of social change, there is one hope

to cling to which will remain alive. That is their cuisine. She has devoted more than 50 pages of *Waterfront Heirlooms* to the culinary secrets and heritage recipes of the Peranakan Chinese of Kampong China.

To wrap it all up, the book's beautiful and inspiring title was created for Rosita by award-winning Singapore author Nyonya Josephine Chia as they sailed along the shoreline of Kampong China in a chartered boat while breathing in the essence of its history. ♦

WHERE TO BUY?

WATERFRONT HEIRLOOMS - REFLECTIONS OF THE KAMPONG CHINA PERANAKAN (2019). PUBLISHED BY MY VISCOM EDITIONS SDN BHD, MALAYSIA. FOR ENQUIRIES AND BOOK PURCHASE, PLEASE EMAIL NYONYA KUAN LIN TAR AT LINTAR.EDU@GMAIL.COM, OR CALL DIRECT +65 9108 6515



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Wayang Peranakan doyen Baba GT Lye shares stories and his version of hae bee hiam, or dried shrimp sambal.

BEYOND THE MUSEUM WALLS

NYONYA DIANE CHEE SHARES ON CURRENT ONLINE AND OVERSEAS PROGRAMMES SHOWCASING PERANAKAN CULTURE BEFORE THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM REOPENS IN EARLY 2023. Food photographs courtesy of the Peranakan Museum. Exhibition photograph courtesy of JR Nagoya Takashimaya.

WHILE DOORS TO THE Peranakan Museum remain temporarily closed as it undergoes a revamp, members of the public interested in learning more about the rich artistic and cultural traditions of the Peranakan communities in Southeast Asia can still do so through its outreach activities. Aimed at both local and international audiences, these programmes offer insight into the distinctive world of Peranakans through various digital formats and an overseas display.

A distinctive feature of the Peranakan intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is its cuisine. *Recipes & Stories* – an ongoing digital cookbook series – spotlights some of this food heritage through personal recipes

and stories of food and family as told by Chinese Peranakans, Arab Peranakans, Chitty Melakans and Jawi Peranakans. Accessible via the Museum's Instagram page, these stories reveal the rich and diverse hybrid cultures of the various Peranakan communities.

Peranakan ICH is also explored in *I Say You Do*, a collaborative digital series now available on the Museum's Facebook page, where an expert shares knowledge of a Peranakan craft or practice with an amateur. The Museum team worked closely with representatives from the Arab Network@Singapore, the Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore, and The Peranakan Association Singapore to develop these videos which showcase living traditions like the making of *ma'amoul* cookies and *kopiah*, and the wearing of sarong kebaya.

Overseas projects also help take the understanding and appreciation of

Peranakan culture beyond Southeast Asia. In June 2021, JR Nagoya Takashimaya – one of the department store's biggest branches in Nakamura-ku, Nagoya – collaborated with the Museum to launch a pop-up exhibition for the Singapore section of their Asia Fair event.



The pop-up showcase at JR Nagoya Takashimaya's Asia Fair event.

The panel display highlighted the diverse origins of Peranakan communities and introduced some of the well-known aspects of the vibrant material and food cultures. It showed some of the finest Peranakan artefacts from the collections of the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Peranakan Museum, reiterating the roles of both museums as key nodes in the global network of museums.

The Peranakan Museum is set to reopen in the first half of 2023. Until then, visit www.nhb.gov.sg/peranakanmuseum or follow it on Facebook (facebook.com/PeranakanMuseumSingapore) and Instagram ([@peranakanmuseum](https://instagram.com/peranakanmuseum)) for more information on ongoing programmes.

NYONYA DIANE CHEE IS ASSISTANT CURATOR OF THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM.



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bau bau bachang

WE CELEBRATE OUR RICH PERANAKAN LEGACY WITH A NEW VISUAL FEATURE CALLED **AMEK GAMBAIR** WHICH CAN TELL STORIES OF THE GENERATIONS AND PRECIOUS IDENTITIES THAT MAY BE LOST TO TIME. All photographs, except for the Laws of Sarawak on page 49, were restored on soft copy by Benedict Khoo.

THE PERANAKAN COMMUNITIES OF SINGAPORE and Melaka are famously known to be related by a labyrinth of connections through blood and marriage ties, as seen from the generations of families here. Genealogy buffs Babas Ronney Tan and Benedict Khoo string together familial linkages with Ronney's sister, Nyonya Linda Chee (nee Tan) and her husband, Baba Colin Chee. Benedict is a paternal relative of the Tan siblings through seven generations of the lineage of Seet Hoot Kee. Colin is related to Linda through a Melaka relative. Who knows, you may just find familiar kith and kin amongst the pictures here. ♦



>In Melaka

ACROSS THREE GENERATIONS, THE CHUAS OF HEEREN STREET

Heeren Street is now known as Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

Matriarch Lim Eng Neo, centre, the widow of Chua Sek Kim, was Ronney and Linda's paternal great-great-grandmother. She lived at 14 Heeren Street, Melaka with her four sons, seen here in traditional baju lokchuan and towchang with kopia, or hat. Their surroundings are not elaborate. From left: Chua Lip Lay, Chua Lip Sian, Chua Lip Tay and Chua Lip Tat. The two young boys were her grandchildren Chua Poh Cheng (left) and Chua Poh Siang (right) from her son, Lip Tay, who is wearing Chinese shoes. Fashion was in transition at the turn of the 20th century, as seen in the leather shoes worn by the other brothers. The girls are unidentified, the youngest of whom is in an elaborate baju panjang and wears an outsized amulet to protect her from evil spirits. The Chuas are descended from Chua Su Cheong, a Dutch-era Kapitan China. Photograph courtesy of Ronney Tan.

1898

The bachang, or horse mango, is a globular fruit with a seductive aroma similar to the chempedak. As the saying goes, *bau bau bachang dari jaoh jaoh pun boleh chium*. It means one can smell the bachang from very far away - an apt description of the connections within the Peranakan community.



1920 Chua Lip Sian's eldest son Poh Boon, 21, married his first cousin, Tan Yang Neo, 19, daughter of Lip Sian's sister, Chua Siew Lang Neo and her husband Tan Jin Ann (see page 16. "We are Chinese"), who was Ronney and Linda's paternal grandfather. Their first-born son did not survive infancy and a second son grew up a deaf mute. This condition was thought to be attributed to too-close blood ties. They lived with an extended family at 22 Shanghai Road, Singapore. Poh Boon died in 1944 during the Japanese Occupation. It was said the stress of supporting a household of 10 people finally took a toll on Poh Boon. Photograph courtesy of Charles Seet.

1929 The marriage of Chua Lip Sian's youngest son Poh Chuan, captures the glory of baba culture before the War. Their elaborate attire depicts an elevated status as orang ada-ada (people with means). The grand wedding was held at 6 Tranquerah Road, the house of Chua Lip Lay, in dark suit, on Sunday 16 December. It was covered the next day by the local media. Lip Lay hosted the event on behalf of his late brother Lip Sian. To the right of Lip Lay are his nephew Seow Eng Chye and Lip Sian's eldest son, Poh Boon. Standing behind them is Lip Sian's nephew, Tan Eng Chye, who is Ronney and Linda's paternal grandfather. Standing from left, are brothers Poh Kim, Poh Siang and Poh Koon, the sons of Lip Tay. Seated extreme left is Tan Yang Neo, Poh Boon's wife. The young girl sitting cross-legged on the right was Irene Chua, who lived at 22 Shanghai Road which is now a condominium. Photograph courtesy of Ronney Tan.





1913 Matriarch Lim Eng Neo with one of her sons, the prosperous rubber trader Chua Lip Sian and his family in high sartorial fashion. His wife, seated at right, was Tan Teck Hoon Neo, a cousin of Tan Jiak Kim, the founding president of the Straits Chinese British Association (now The Peranakan Association Singapore). Lip Sian's daughter, Chua Swee Him, has an English name, Margaret. She uses Peranakan jewellery, including a large kerosang, or brooch. Her outfit is a stylised combination of Chinese and Western elements. Standing from left is Lip Sian's younger brother, Lip How, and his eldest son, Poh Boon. His younger sons in jackets and boots are Poh Boo (extreme left) and Poh Chuan (middle). Photograph taken at the Lee Brothers studio at Hill Street, Singapore. Courtesy of Charles Seet.

>Melaka Wangkang



1899

Baba Benedict Khoo's paternal great-grandfather Guan Chiang, standing at left, was the youngest of the eight children of Khoo Swee Yeow and Tan Geok Lin in Singapore. Guan Chiang's third brother on right was Thiam Swee. The boy's fedora hat indicated the Babas' Anglophile lifestyle at the turn of the 20th century. The clock confirms the evolution of a "look to the West" trend that was starting to take hold as more Babas went to English-medium schools like Raffles Institution, St Joseph's Institution and Anglo-Chinese School (ACS). The trend accelerated in the 1860s. Patriarch Swee Yeow spoke English and enrolled his sons at ACS to be proficient in English and Hokkien. Photograph courtesy of Benedict Khoo.



>In Singapore THE KHOOS



1895

A gentlemanly relative of Chua Lip Sian, name unknown. He has deliberately defied convention and crossed his legs. It was seen as uncouth by elders in that era. Contrary to Western poses, the crossing of legs was considered uncivilized and disrespectful in Chinese custom, which the Babas strongly adhered to. To sit with legs apart in a formal manner reflected high social status. Children were trained from very young that it was rude to cross your legs in the presence of adults. As seen by the baba with his British bowler hat, they were trying to copy the clothes and manners of their English colonial masters. The cane and hat are just two examples of cultural appropriation even if he was still dressed in the Chinese baju lokchuan. Photograph courtesy of Charles Seet.

The scions of leading Melaka families in the 1933 Malacca Wangkang Procession organising committee (see page 33, Melaka's Wangkang Festivals). This photo is interesting for the fact that all except

1933

one, Ho Eng Wah, are related by blood or marriage ties. The familial network in associations of the past produced a vast web of family connections, as illustrated by a sample of linkages spelt out below. Standing from left: Seow Eng Chye, Lee Ewe Aik and his father-in-law Chee Hong Chiang, and Chee's nephew Tan Eng Chye who is Ronney and Linda's paternal grandfather. Eng Chye married Chee Kim Puay, the niece of Hong Chiang. The Chees were part of the huge Chee clan that owned the magnificent Chee Yam Chuan ancestral house at 117 Heeren Street. Seated from left: Chua Poh Cheng, Ho Eng Wah, Ong Kim Kiat (Eng Chye's uncle by marriage to Tan Luan Inn Neo), Chua Poh Siang (Poh Cheng's brother. The brothers were second cousins to Eng Chye. Poh Cheng married Eng Chye's sister, Tan Choo Kim Neo). Photograph courtesy of Ronney Tan.

>In Sarawak THE LAWS



POST
1911

Baba Colin Chee's maternal great-grandparents were the Christian couple, Law Kon En and Alice Lai (both seated) from Kuching, Sarawak. Alice, with her deepset eyes and high cheek bones, was said to have had Dayak blood. Standing second on left is Colin's grandfather, John Law Hock Boon. The family portrait was probably taken after 1911 when Chinese men could cut off their towchang, or queue. Note the mix of Western-style as well as traditional Zhongshan suits worn by the men, and baju panjang and sarong kebaya by the women. Colin's last surviving aunt, See Ee Lily Law (4th aunt, now in her 80s) remembers patriarch Kon En, her grandfather and her uncles in this photo with their long hair styled in queues. Photograph courtesy of Kenneth Chee.

AMEK GAMBAIR WITH US

The Peranakan Association Singapore welcomes our readers to send soft copies of original prized heirloom pictures which they own, to be showcased here. The pictures of people, be they photographs, portraits or paintings, should represent an outstanding remnant of the past that can celebrate our heritage and stories into the future.

Broadly, the pictures should relate to the history of this region from the 1700s to the post-colonial 1970s when many countries in this region attained independence. These may be pictures of individuals, families, social events, places and more.

PLEASE EMAIL YOUR PICTURES TO AMEKGAMBAIR@GMAIL.COM. EACH PICTURE MUST BE AT LEAST 1 MB OR MORE IN FILE SIZE AND BE DESCRIBED IN A MAXIMUM OF 200 WORDS. FACTS OR OBJECTS OF INTEREST WILL BE APPRECIATED. PLEASE INCLUDE THE NAMES OF THE PERSONS, YEAR OR ESTIMATED PERIOD, AND THE SOURCE. THE EDITOR RESERVES THE RIGHT TO SELECT PICTURES AND EDIT COPY FOR PUBLICATION IN THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE.

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WHEN PASHMINA MEETS PERANAKAN

NYONYA JOANNE TAN-DE ZILVA ENTHUSES OVER THE EXQUISITE SARTORIAL PAIRING OF TWO ASIAN CULTURES
Image by courtesy of Rajul Mehta

THINK OF PASHMINAS and you would usually visualise silky soft shawls wrapped gracefully over your shoulders either for modesty or to protect from the chill of Singapore's super-cold air-conditioned malls.

Spun from the fine down or undercoat of the Changthangi cashmere goat native to Ladakh, India, the word pashmina comes from *pashm* which means the raw wool of these goats. Artisans painstakingly take anything from four months to a year or even longer to weave intricate designs onto pashmina shawls.

Sarongs are another beautiful form of wrap although few would have thought of blending the two different Asian materials. Yet the **Pashmina Meets Peranakan** workshop organised by The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS), showed the pairings can work quite nicely.

Over four sessions at Design Orchard on 6 May, Rajul Mehta, owner and founder of Queenmark, a Singapore-based luxury pashmina brand, deftly showed 22 TPAS members and their friends the various styles of using richly-embellished pashminas to complement their sarong *kebaya* or even using them as beautiful 'sarongs' on their own. The pairings of appliquéd shawls, with motifs of tendrils and millefleurs that bore striking similarity to the *kebaya sulam*, turned out simply exquisite and elegant. ♦



Wraps from two different worlds that complement well.



HERITAGE GOES VIRTUAL

NYONYA THERESA TAN RECOUNTS TPAS' ONLINE EVENTS OVER THE PAST YEAR

THE PANDEMIC has catalysed our move to digital channels. Our members' overwhelming support for last August's online screening of *Bibik Behind Bars, Kena Again*, motivated us to mount a series of online talks via Zoom.

On 12 December 2020, we co-hosted **Christianised Peranakan Communities in Early Singapore**, Circa 1830-1900 with NUS Baba House. The talk was delivered by Dr Marc Rerceretnam, a renowned historian studying the role of religion within colonial Singapore. He shared his research on the historical convergences between the Straits Chinese community and the beliefs and practices of Christianity.

27 March 2021 saw us return with Baba Cedric Tan's talk on **RAISING THE TOK SAMKAI – THE ART OF SMAYANG TIKONG**. This time, we recorded the



session for posterity. Scan the QR code below to view the recording. The *Smayang TiKong* (or *Pai TiKong*) ritual is conducted on the ninth day

(or the night of the eighth day) of the Chinese New Year as an annual thanksgiving to the Jade Emperor. Baba Cedric showcased a delightful spread of lavish artefacts and lovingly prepared offerings used in the ritual. He cautioned that the ritual is not an ostentatious display; rather, its artistic expression and beauty reflects the respect and gratitude accorded to the King of Gods for the most valuable gift – the Gift of Life.

Our next online talk, **SACRED SIRIH – TRADITIONS AND SYMBOLISM IN NUSANTARA**, was held on 1 May and maxed out

at 100 attendees. An avid collector of *sirih* (betel) sets, Baba Khir Johari presented his research on *sirih*



boxes and led us through the beliefs and place of *sirih* in Nusantara civilisation, including its medicinal properties and role in traditional wedding ceremonies. (By request of the speaker's publisher, this session was not recorded; but do look out for Baba Johari's upcoming book.)

To cater for more attendees, we increased our Zoom capacity and added Facebook livestream for



Baba Chris Ong's online talk on **PENANG RESTORATION OF HERITAGE HOTELS** on 22 May. It garnered over 100 participants! Scan the QR

code below to view the recording. With years of experience restoring properties from Sri Lanka to Malaysia, Baba Chris delighted the audience by sharing plenty of beautiful photos. Many participants in turn spoke about their lovely experiences at Baba Chris' hotels.

On 26 June, Baba Lee Yuen Thien spoke on **THE PERANAKAN IDENTITY** and how the community is staying relevant

in today's fast-changing world. Scan the QR code below to view the recording. We had 80 participants interacting in our Zoom session and more than 100 views on the concurrent YouTube livestream. There were lively discussions as participants shared their experiences. ♦



SCAN THE QR CODE FOR THE RECORDINGS OF THE TALKS

FACEBOOK.COM/
THEPERANAKANASSOCIATIONSINGAPORE
YOUTUBE.COM/
THEPERANAKANASSOCIATIONSINGAPORE

APA KHABAIR?

PERANAKAN CALENDAR

25 SEPTEMBER, 10AM

COOKING WITH BABA ALEX WONG

WEBINAR



25 SEPTEMBER, 7PM

THE VIRTUAL PERANAKAN DINNER 2021

23 OCTOBER, 2PM

THE DNA PROFILE OF THE PERANAKAN CHINESE

JOINT WEBINAR BY THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE & GENOME INSTITUTE OF SINGAPORE



20 NOVEMBER, 9AM

33RD BABA NYONYA INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

SINGAPORE CHINESE CULTURAL CENTRE



11-12 DECEMBER, 1PM — 6PM

2ND BABA NYONYA LITERARY FESTIVAL

NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD



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VOLUNTEER YOUR TALENT.
IF YOU HAVE A PASSION FOR PERANAKAN CULTURE AND WOULD LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE A GOOD STORY, WRITE FOR US, ILLUSTRATE OR TAKE WONDERFUL PHOTOGRAPHS FOR THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE, WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU. PLEASE DROP A LINE TO LINDA CHEE AT EDITOR@PERANAKAN.ORG

WANTED

OBITUARY

Our deepest sympathies to the family of **Dato Khoo Keat Siew** who passed away peacefully on 10 June, 2021 at the age of 91. In 1988, Dato' Seri Khoo mooted the idea of a convention to forge a common bond among the Peranakan diaspora in this region. In 2011, he forged the vision of Peranakans coming together to form a Federation of Peranakan Associations. This year the Baba Nyonya International Convention celebrates its 33rd year. The Federation has grown from just three members to encompass 14 Peranakan associations from Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Australia. Dato Khoo will be dearly missed. (For the full story, see In Memoriam, page 54)

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DATO' SERI Khoo Keat Siew

1930-2021

BABA CHAN ENG THAI PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE PENANG
BABA WHO MOOTED THE IDEA OF THE BABA CONVENTION

DATO' SERI KHOO KEAT SIEW was a visionary and pioneer of the Peranakan community. He was the president of the State Chinese (Penang) Association (SCPA) for almost 30 years until he stepped down in 2010. He leaves behind his wife, Datin Seri Daisy Yeow, three married sons and six grandchildren. Datin Seri Daisy was a vice-president of the SCPA and Dato' Seri Khoo was its patron until his demise.

His passing on 10 June, 2021, at the age of 91 marked the closing of a chapter representing the early years when the Peranakan diaspora in this region began coming together to forge a common bond through the traditions and cultural practices of their unique community.

In 1988, Dato' Seri Khoo mooted the idea of a convention for the three Peranakan associations of the former Straits Settlements - Singapore, Malacca and Penang - to meet annually. On 28 July 1988, a landmark meeting amongst the representatives of the three associations as well as the Gunong Sayang Association agreed to his proposal. The 1st Baba Convention, themed "Peranakan Heritage Week", was held in Penang five months later, in December.

The successful event led to a tacit understanding that the annual event would be rotated among the three associations. Its main aim was to foster closer ties among the communities besides giving a better understanding and appreciation of the Peranakan culture. It has since evolved to become the Baba Nyonya Convention, open to all who

have an abiding interest as well as appreciation of our unique culture.

Dato' Seri Khoo attended all the 28 conventions since 1988, only stopping when advanced age slowed him down. His vision of Peranakans coming together once a year to share and enjoy each other's company at the Convention resulted in the Peranakan associations of Malaysia,



Top: Dato' Seri Khoo and Datin Seri Daisy Yeow as they appeared in late 2020 in an article in the Malaysian Newspaper, Free Malaysia Today, on Dato' Seri Khoo's life. Middle: Dato' Seri Khoo Keat Siew at the 24th Baba Convention in Penang in 2011. Bottom: Dato' Khoo giving festive aid to representatives of 17 non-government organisations in an article in The Star newspaper.

Thailand, Indonesia and Australia coming together to form a Federation of Peranakan Associations (FPA) in Phuket in 2011, of which he was its first patron.

A barrister-at-law by training, Dato' Seri Khoo had his own law practice in Penang. He was born in 1930 to Khoo Sian Ewe, a renowned Penang businessman as well as philanthropist and civic leader. Like his father, he contributed widely to Penang's civic and cultural societies. Amongst others, he was the President of Penang's Cheshire Home and the head of the Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi. He also founded the Befrienders of Penang and headed many Chinese temple committees in Penang, among them the Kwan Im Temple at Pitt Street and the Thnee Kong Tua or the Temple of the Emperor of Heaven. ♦

The Peranakan Association Singapore pays tribute to Dato' Seri Khoo Keat Siew with this *panton* below.

*Durian dari Balik Pulau,
Buah nya besar isi nya manis,
Keturunan Khoo semua tau,
Khoo Keat Siew paling waris.*

*Untuk antara Nyonya Baba,
Kerja kuat biar pun lapar,
Di-Shorga dia dah tiba,
Baik dia tidak-kan lupa!*

The durians of Balik Pulau,
Are big, fleshy and sweet,
Among the Khoos, we all know,
Khoo Keat Siew,
an outstanding heir!

For all the Nyonyas and Babas,
Forgetting hunger,
he laboured on,
To Heaven He has reached,
His Goodness,
we shall not forget!

A Grandmother's Courage

BABA BRYAN TAN TAKES
A BRIEF RESPIRE WITH
NYONYA MOLLY YEOW
AND HER GRANDUNCLE
AT GENTING HIGHLANDS
AS TROUBLE BREWS AFAR
Illustration by Eileen Chan.



MOLLY YEOW looked on with glowing pride as her *chuchu's* (grandson's) squeals of delight echoed through the garden pavilion where she had settled herself down for some tea. Yet, she couldn't help feel a brooding sense of unease as a dark spot appeared in the horizon, clouds twisting like angry-looking *kueh kochi* (a glutinous rice dessert with palm sugar and grated coconut).

Her husband Willie chased after James, who had just turned two, pushing past potted plants and garden figurines with reckless abandon in his quest to seize a Lacewing butterfly and stuff it into his mouth.

*Dia mia chuchu jantong hati dia.
Apa chuchu mo, dia turutkan* (he really spoils his favourite grandchild), Molly chuckled to herself, as her husband tried to distract James with a stick of Taichung sweet corn ice cream.

"Molly, *toksa kuatir* (don't worry), eh? I can read the worry all over your face, you know," said Peter Soh across the table, obscured by a fully unfurled Financial Times newspaper. Molly's granduncle had invited the couple to retreat and relax at his expansive country villa high up on Genting Highlands. The sprawling estate

had breathtaking views of the cool mountainous landscapes that stretched out for miles around.

"*Chek Kong* (granduncle), it's not that I'm worried. I'm not sure what to expect. Koh Poh Chik has been silent for so long. I had hoped to visit her to ask for forgiveness and her blessings once more. I'm also not sure if what you did was right, cutting her out of Sir Francis' will like that..." Elegant puffs of smoke floated out from behind the newspaper.

"It's true. I cut her out of my *Ah Koh's* (elder brother) will. I have no regrets, Molly. The only thing I regret was to not come home from Britain sooner, after Thiam Hin (Bee Neo's husband) called me multiple times on her account," the newspaper rustled as a page was turned.

"My younger sister always had her way. Papa spoiled her rotten. She has never treated anyone with respect. You don't have to worry, Molly. But I ask that you be ready for what might come." Peter's glasses glinted in the afternoon sun as he stared off into the distance where the swirling clouds were gathering.

Willie had given up trying to catch James. Worn out, he rested on an overturned garden pot. The toddler had managed to wrest the ice cream from his

grandfather and happily lapped it up as the cold sweet smeared all over his face and romper.

"Bee Neo may be spoiled, but she is resourceful," Peter continued. "Even if her purse strings are cut, she'll find a way to get back up and back at you."

Molly stiffened her back at those words. Her family was under threat. Despite being the daughter of a mistress to one of the most powerful men in Southeast Asia, pride and dignity welled deep within her.

Unlike her *Koh Poh Chik* (grandaunt) Bee Neo, Molly had paid her dues as a true nyonya. Both her mother and mother-in-law had taught her how to be the Peranakan woman of the house. Under their strict and unforgiving guidance, her cooking, sewing and *cherki* skills were second to none.

If Molly had to pluck up the same grit and courage to defend her family from a vengeful matriarch, who would stop at nothing to defame and bring her low, Soh Bee Neo would get a lot more than what she bargained for. ♦

NEXT ISSUE: MOLLY AND BEE NEO CLASH IN A WAR OF WORDS. WHO WILL TRIUMPH? IN THE SHADOWS, PETER SOH AND HIS ESTRANGED SISTER-IN-LAW SOH CHENG KIM, THE WIDOW OF THE LATE FRANCIS SOH, MEET FOR THE FIRST TIME IN DECADES.

THE PERANAKAN GUIDE SINGAPORE



MUSEUMS

The Peranakan Museum is closed for renovation and will re-open in 2023.

PERANAKAN MUSEUM

Address • 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941
Website • www.peranakanmuseum.sg
Email • nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg
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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
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
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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. Other Katong attractions include Peranakan icons such as Katong Antique House (208 East Coast Road), Rumah Kim Choo (109 East Coast Road), Rumah Bebe (113 East Coast Road), Straits Enclave (318A Joo Chiat Road) and The Intan (69 Joo Chiat Terrace). Google the names for more information and walk along this route to sample the great variety of food in the neighbourhood.



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