

THE 33<sup>rd</sup>  
Baba Nyonya  
CONVENTION  
ISSUE

KUEH  
BARU!

THROUGH  
YOUNG EYES

# Reinventing Our Culture

THE MATRIARCHS LEAD THE WAY FORWARD







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## THE 33<sup>rd</sup> Baba Nyonya CONVENTION ISSUE



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### ON THE COVER

THE DOYENS OF THEATRE  
IVAN HENG AND GT LYE COME  
TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST  
AND ONLY TIME TO STAGE THE  
MATRIARCHS, A PLAY SPECIALLY  
PRODUCED FOR THE 33RD  
BABA NYONYA INTERNATIONAL  
CONVENTION.

Photograph by Carlos Monforte.

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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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# Everything's Possible

**D**ON'T YOU JUST LOVE our cover shot of Ivan Heng audaciously perched next to GT Lye? Who would have thought this possible – the two doyens of theatre dressed in their Peranakan best, performing together, on one stage for a virtual audience around the globe?

Yet they did. Spectacularly so, and with superb chemistry, in the one-time-only play, *The Matriarchs* which opened the 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention hosted by Singapore in 2021. Organised by the very competent General Committee led by

Baba Colin Chee, the Convention was delivered immaculately, receiving accolades all round. Baba **COLIN CHEE** tells us how *The Matriarchs* was a beautiful dream that came true, while Baba **EMERIC LAU** presents an overview of the Convention and pertinent excerpts of papers written by an erudite lineup of minds at the Symposium.



Photograph by Raymond Wong

The conclusion of the Convention to Reimagine and Reinvent Our Culture spells hopes of limitless possibilities given the will. Our designer Nyonya **JOANNE LOW** looks at how some very creative undergrads have upended tradition with their refreshing new ideas on recreating the *kueh*.

For the longest time I have wanted to have Nyonya **PAT LIN**, who is based in the US west coast, write for us on aspects of baba nyonya culture. Pat is a great-great-granddaughter of Tan Tock Seng and a vast resource of precious photographs and 'inside' information on the Tan clan.

We are most fortunate that in this issue, we have not one but two contributions from Pat – a feature on the unique *baju koon* that largely eluded history books and another for *Amek Gambair*, on her grandparents' era where the Straits Chinese stood out as fashion trendsetters fusing the east and west in most interesting ways.

Anything is possible too when you never think you are too old. Our youngest writer, Baba **BILLY TAY** tracks down Singapore's oldest batik tailor, 95-year old Ang Kum Siong, the owner of Wellie Batik at Holland Village.

100 years ago, tourism was already pretty organized. Our little island was the gateway to exotic destinations 'afar': By rail to Johor, ferries to Penang and more. We know all these, from the fascinating *Visitors' Guide-book to Singapore* published in 1922. The handbook was restored by Baba **ALEX TEOH** who undertook a mid-career change in his 40s, training in the UK to become a sought-after conservator.

We are very pleased to deliver to you this special Convention issue to usher in the Year of the Water Tiger. **JOANNE TAN-DE ZILVA** talks to 'Tigers' young and old and gets some smart answers while **BRYAN TAN'S** tale of two tigers has a couple of fiery nyonyas battling it out.

Slamat Taon Baru Harimo!

*Lu*



Linda Chee  
editor@peranakan.org.sg

## LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT



CONGRATULATIONS to Baba Colin Chee and his team on work well done for the 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention! We do appreciate the mind-boggling logistics involved and it went without a hitch. *Kamsiah*.

I was just having breakfast with a Hokkien-speaking friend the other day. Along came an old friend and true-blue baba and we had our usual banter in 100% baba patois since we were of that generation where three generations lived together. My Hokkien-speaking friend suddenly remarked "eh, why you both speak Malay?". I felt that was a very poignant question.

Later that night, my true-blue baba friend remarked over the phone, "Doesn't your friend know that people like us exist?" That was a very

profound question. I think situations like this do make me think how invisible our culture has become to the mainstream community. Apart from *sarong kebaya* and *buah keluak*, our culture seems somewhat misunderstood. Why this is so, I'm really unsure despite our fabulous museum and the "Little Nyonya" on screen. Our culture is at most exotic or worse, esoteric to the mainstream community and considered something that belongs to the annals of a bygone era, certainly to the mainstream.

We can think about how the community could be deeper engaged. Most important is, how do we make them WANT to engage?

Richard Wee

BABA RICHARD IS A RETIRED ART AND DESIGN LECTURER.

## Under the Sun

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president's message

# Reimagine & Reinvent

**D**EAR NYONYAS & BABAS, *Kamsiah banyak banyak* for supporting our hybrid 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention on 20 November 2021. We could only fit up to 132 people in a 533-seat auditorium because of safe distancing measures. But on the bright side, we reached a global audience of nearly 660 in total, based on SISTIC's final count.

## Another Renaissance?

The record participation across the world was unexpected but welcomed. We had viewers from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia, China, Japan, Australia, USA, UK, France, and Norway – besides Singapore. The power of the internet! This is further confirmed by my monthly President's Letter of 30 November 2021 on the Convention which posted nearly 29,000 views, a new record.

No doubt, the historic once-only bilingual play, *The Matriarchs*, contributed significantly to the convention's reception. The Symposium also upped attendance with its stellar cast of keynote speaker, moderators and panellists. We received a total of 65 very thoughtful questions from forum participants which we have addressed.



SCAN THIS QR CODE TO VIEW THE ASSOCIATION'S RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS RAISED AT THE SYMPOSIUM.

Most importantly, the convention has focused the association's mind to facilitate and serve as a platform for the **REIMAGINING** and **REINVENTION** of our culture as it evolves to sustain or perhaps, advance towards another renaissance.

## Succession is Critical

The last scene of *The Matriarchs* lingers with Emily surreptitiously sidling up to her mother-in-law's armchair to sit on. The scene hints at Emily's succession as the next matriarch of the Gan household. If the life cycles of a culture are to persevere, they should be unbroken. The passing of the baton from one generation to the other must take place in a timely manner.

Similarly, leadership cycles have their continuing seasons. This year's Annual General Meeting (AGM) will elect a new General Committee (GC) for the next two-year term from 2022 to 2024. The incumbent GC has already served two terms since May 2018.

I have had the singular privilege and honour to be part of this highly competent and united team of volunteers. They have given their time, talent and passion to serve and to help reshape the organisation and hopefully, in the last year, to reset its direction.

Whether this new vision that has been set - to help the Peranakan community reimagine and reinvent its culture - is shared and adopted by future



The General Committee, from left: Sylvia Peh, Bryan Tan, Ronney Tan, Gwen Ong, Tony Tan, Elizabeth Ng, Colin Chee, Raymond Wong, Yip Wai Kuan, Philip Yeo, Josephine Tan, Ngiam May Ling, Peggy Jeffs, Theresa Tan. Photograph by Carlos Monforte.

GCs and, more importantly, whether the community itself wants it, remains to be seen.

Our hope is that they will see the wisdom of our choice and stand on our shoulders, as we have stood on the shoulders of those who came before us.

## Finding a successor

Succession planning is never easy. How does one ensure that the torch will continue to be carried by individuals with a passion for the community and culture, and who would work as a team towards a common goal?

To be honest, we have tried very hard since 2018 to look for a successor for the association's presidency. Several who we approached turned us down for personal reasons - mainly the commitment of time and competing needs. Having done what we can, we will leave it to the community to decide who it wants to lead them going forward.

## Kamsiah Banyak Banyak

I would like to thank all the Babas and Nyonyas and other supporters who have stood solidly by me to serve you better. They are too many to be listed here.

I am compelled to mention them by grouping: TPAS's GC of which I am a part; The Peranakan Voices; the Editorial Committee and Advertisers; our many volunteers; our friends who have never failed to come alongside us when we raised funds for our activities; the Federation of Peranakan Associations and their members in the region. Last but not least, our many Partners and collaborators, and all of you.

On behalf of the GC, I wish all a Blessed Lunar New Year and a wonderful and safe 2022. 🍀



God Bless,

**Colin Chee**

President

Reimagine & Reinvent  
[president@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:president@peranakan.org.sg)





LOOKING TO THE FUTURE:

# Embracing Evolution

Baba Emeric Lau reflects on the sentiments raised at the 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention held in Singapore on 20 November 2021

**E** VOLUTION could very well be the keyword of the 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention, held at the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre auditorium and attended by over 700 delegates both in person and online.

The morning began with an opening address by TPAS President Baba Colin Chee and the arrival of the Guest-of-Honour and Singapore's President, Mdm Halimah Yacob, who struck a gong three times to officiate the Convention's opening. Mdm Halimah was then presented with tokens of appreciation, comprising a framed *panton* that was engraved on a plaque by Baba Chan Eng Thai and framed beaded embroidery by Nyonya Jackie Sam.

This was followed by the marquee attraction, *The Matriarchs*, a specially crafted theatre production based on Stella Kon's seminal monologue, *Emily of Emerald Hill*. For the first time, two titans from different generations of Singapore theatre were united onstage: Baba Ivan Heng played the titular Emily and attentive daughter-in-law to Mrs Gan Eng Swee, performed by *wayang* Peranakan doyen GT Lye in Baba Malay.

Directed by Baba Alvin Tan, *The Matriarchs* was a dramatic triumph for Baba Colin that took 10 years from dream to fruition, notwithstanding the challenges of the pandemic. The hour-long production enraptured the audience and drew praise from Mdm Halimah, who thoroughly enjoyed it. Concluding with Emily seating herself in

the elder Mrs Gan's blackwood and mother-of-pearl chair, the play highlighted the theme of succession - a pressing and overarching concern for the future of Peranakan culture.

The play led seamlessly to a keynote address by historian Baba Kwa Chong Guan and three forums addressing Peranakan identity and traditional cultural practices covering language, writing, rituals, fashion, food and theatre. The panellists exchanged passionate views on hybridity and the search for new, self-actualising terms.

Our community was noted to have evolved from being "Babas and Nyonyas" and "Straits Chinese" to being "Peranakans", "Southeast Asians", "Post-Chinese" and "Post-Peranakans" - this last term being coined on-the-spot by Baba Kennie Ting. In parallel, there is now great flexibility in how everyone can self-identify, including using the markers of ethnicity and nationality. Being Peranakan is a cultural identity which links one to a wider social environment, yet it also informs and changes in response to how far we assimilate with "mainstream society" or "universalise" the culture and its values: a natural, in-built flexibility we have owing to our own hybrid origins.

In line with this, Peranakans have licence to "artistify", commercialise and continue building brand equity for their culture, as these are quite possibly the only ways our tangible arts and other practices can find sustainability and value going into the future. Heritage and cultural associations can serve as platforms for the gathering of narratives both old and new, and as resources of education for the next generation.

To paraphrase forum panellist Baba Christopher Tan, traditions should not become tethers; instead, they can serve as anchors upon which we flourish in tandem with the tides and times.

The consensus is clear: Peranakans should and must embrace evolution. 📌



## 33<sup>rd</sup> BABA NYONYA INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION



- 1 President of Singapore, Mdm Halimah Yacob, struck a gong three times to officiate the opening.
- 2 Symposium in session.
- 3 The VIPs and Guest-of-Honour: From left: Ms Chang Hwee Nee, CEO, National Heritage Board; Baba Alvin Teo, President, Gunong Sayang Association; President of Singapore, Mdm Halimah Yacob; Baba Colin Chee, President, The Peranakan Association Singapore; Baba Ponso Kalastree, President, Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore; Mr Low Sze Wee, CEO, Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre.



- 4 GT Lye expresses hope for the Baba Malay language to survive.
- 5 Presentation of beaded gift made by Nyonya Jackie Sam.
- 6 From the control room: All set for the first-ever hybrid Convention.
- 7 Sidestage technicals: Tuck Hong the videographer (seated left) is set for live streaming while Tony Tan (seated right) is ready to field questions from the audience using the pigeonhole app.

Photographs 1-5 by Carlos Monforte, 6-7 by Josephine Tan.



# THE MAKING OF The Matriarchs:

THE UNTOLD STORY UPDATED

TPAS President *Baba Colin Chee* shares his 10-year journey to a dream come true.



Photograph by Carlos Monforte

**M**Y STORY BEGINS 10 YEARS AGO in March 2011 when I was captivated, for the second time, by the dramatic flourishes of Ivan Heng's hip-swivelling Emily of Emerald Hill. We were stepping out of Esplanade Theatre when I turned to my wife Linda and said, "Wouldn't it be great to see Ivan play opposite GT Lye as Emily's mother-in-law?"

Little did I know then that I would be breathing life into this wistful idea in late 2018.

## A Serendipitous Moment

Soon after our election as the new General Committee (GC) of The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) in May 2018, we started to plan for our 120th anniversary regional Baba Nyonya Convention which was to be held in November 2020.

I casually tossed the idea to the team, suggesting it as a one-hour play to anchor the day-long event. "The play will be the signature for the anniversary Convention and can kick off the regional Symposium, arts festival, bazaar, heritage tours and grand closing dinner," I had said. "It will bring in the crowds."

The team and Gwen Ong, our Events Head and my co-organiser for the Convention, were optimistic it could be done except for one thing: we were not in the least sure we could bring the two Peranakan theatre giants - Ivan and GT - together.

Or even to get award-winning Peranakan playwright Stella Kon to buy into the idea. *Emily of Emerald Hill* was her play, already a modern classic. We would need her assent above all else. How would we convince Stella to accept a second character beside Emily in her one-woman monologue?

I nursed this project not knowing how or when I would act on it. The first move had to succeed. For months I was in inertia. All it needed was for any one of the three protagonists to say "no" and the idea would bomb. Much prayer went into it.

Then, in early 2019, I received a text from Alvin Tan of The Necessary Stage (TNS), "Baba Colin, can we meet to discuss a possible collaboration with the Peranakan Association?" Alvin was, and still is the

much-respected Cultural Medallion recipient and founder and artistic director of TNS.

Over lunch at Chinese Swimming Club's Man Zhu Café, I decided to bounce the play's concept off Alvin in the context of the anniversary Convention. He loved it. Perhaps the audacity of it. An inner voice urged me: Ask him. Now. "Alvin, would you like to direct this play?" Without any hesitation he replied, "Yes. I would love to. I know all three of them - Stella, Ivan and GT."

Until that juncture I had not thought about who would direct the play. It was a serendipitous moment. We now would have four celebrated Peranakans involved in the play if we could persuade the other three to join Alvin. He instinctively gave me the play's unforgettable ending, how the two characters would come together. Just like that. Instantly. To close the play while subtly conveying the message of succession, as the play would kick off the Symposium themed, "Keeping the Culture Alive".

Alvin's intuitiveness drew from his "more than 30 years of directing plays." He reminds me of the Chinese brush master who captures in a single stroke a lifetime of experience and creative thought.

ALVIN'S CLEVER  
DIRECTION,  
SUBTLE USE OF  
THE ACTORS'  
POSITIONS AND  
DEFT CHANGES  
OF STAGE  
LIGHTS WOVED  
THE SCENES  
TOGETHER  
SEAMLESSLY  
AND CREATED  
MAGICAL  
MOMENTS.

## An Accidental Reinvention

With the trigger pulled, I wasted no time. I called Ivan Heng, also a Cultural Medallion Award winner, a few days later and explained the concept of the play. I told him Alvin had agreed to direct it. Given his heavy year-end theatre season, would Ivan play the role of Emily opposite GT as Emily's Baba Malay-speaking mother-in-law? "For just half an hour one November morning?"

"Yes, of course!" was his immediate reply.\* Ivan was to dramatically capture this moment in his Facebook post of 8 September 2021 when TPAS launched the sale of tickets to its 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention. By then, Ivan's quiet persistence and Alvin's gentle prodding had finally convinced me to have

the play restructured. My original idea was 25 minutes of Emily's role in English followed by a second half of 25 minutes of Emily's mother-in-law speaking Baba Malay. Then to close with 10 minutes of them together. A neat division for various reasons.

Ivan's resolve to me: "Every Emily I perform must always be different and better than the last. Restructuring the play to one in which Emily and her mother-in-law get to interact for the very first time will bring a different perspective." Voila. With this structural change, *The Matriarchs* became an accidental reinvention of Stella Kon's beloved classic, *Emily of Emerald Hill*.

Looking back now, I am most thankful. What I imagined to be disparate scenes cutting into one another was put to rest. Alvin's clever direction, subtle use of the actors' positions and deft changes of stage lights wove the scenes together seamlessly and created magical moments.

Even more remarkable is the fact that Ivan Heng and GT Lye only had TWO rehearsals together - the first time offsite at Wild Rice's Funan Mall studio on 11 November 2021 and the second on set at Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) on 16 November - just a day before the full-dressed filming of the play on 17 November. We sneaked in a third rehearsal on 19 November.

So few rehearsals together. Yet their formidable experience and on- and off-stage chemistry came into full bloom when they paced and covered each other on the day of our Convention on 20 November.

## Freedom to Fly

Back to early June 2019. After getting Ivan to join us, I called GT, not wasting time or momentum. Linda and I had known GT for many years already. We had shared meals as friends do and would hang on to his fascinating stories of the many shades of Peranakans, especially what their matriarchs did to while away their time during Singapore's early post-war years.

**NOTE** \*On 27 February 2021, at the first reading of the play with both actors at my home, Ivan placed a weathered red journal on the dining table. I asked him what it was. Looking at me and then turning his gaze to GT next to him, Ivan humbly asked, "Do you remember I went to Melaka to interview you extensively before I played Emily for the very first time? I learnt a lot about the matriarchs from you." Flipping through the pages, Ivan read out his notes from the journal. GT was astonished.

\*\* On 12 January 2021, when I had selected the scenes for Emily's role, Alvin, Emeric, Linda and I met with GT to discuss his lines. Before our very eyes, GT 'transformed' into Mrs Gan, Emily's mother-in-law. We had to hold him back to record his spontaneous Baba Malay monologue on my iPhone 8 for the next two hours, with timely interruptions as Alvin and Emeric suggested changes to his lines, highlighting the dramatic moments. Linda then transcribed his voice recording and translated the Baba Malay into English.



GT said: "It is too great an honour for me. I pray it will happen. I don't have many years left. I will give my very best ever for the culture, you and Linda and TPAS."

He added: "As for writing the Baba Malay script, I really do not know what is expected. Also my vision is bad. But I think if someone can write my lines in English, I can deliver them in Baba Malay."\*\*

I assured him that I had already lined up Alvin and Emeric Lau, who is trained in theatre studies, to write the mother-in-law's script in English. Linda, who is proficient in Melaka Baba Malay, would translate.

Both Alvin and I realised from the start what our biggest challenge was going to be – how to get GT to stay on script.

**C**onferred the Steward of Intangible Cultural Heritage award in 2020, GT is the doyen of *wayang* Peranakan matriarchs. In that wonderful folk theatre tradition, the great actors of a past era are given to improvisation on stage. They do not have a prepared script; just a plot to play to. They are unlike contemporary theatre actors trained in method acting to faithfully and creatively deliver their prepared lines.

This explained why I wanted to keep the two matriarchs' monologues separate. If GT did not stick to his script and was free to play to his feelings now and again, he would not unsettle Ivan's flow.

How to give GT the latitude if he were to feel "boxed" up with Emily in the restructured play? We had no ready answer. No matter, GT tried his best to follow the script that he himself wrote. But Alvin and I felt GT was not at his best throughout his early rehearsals. GT felt it even more and it showed in his disquiet.

During the car ride to SCCC on 17 November to film the play, Alvin and I assured GT: "Baba, don't be anxious. If you have forgotten the lines, use your own words



At the Wild Rice studio at Funan Mall to rehearse their lines and positions with director Alvin Tan and stage production manager Lee Yen Miin (in white) and her assistant Elizabeth Goh. It was the first time the two actors had met to rehearse.

Photograph by Colin Chee.

**SO FEW REHEARSALS TOGETHER. YET THEIR FORMIDABLE EXPERIENCE AND ON- AND OFF-STAGE CHEMISTRY CAME INTO FULL BLOOM WHEN THEY PACED AND COVERED EACH OTHER ON THE DAY OF OUR CONVENTION ON 20 NOVEMBER.**

to describe what you want to say. Feel free to leave the cage but come back in again when you remember the next lines." GT remained silent but thoughtful. At the filming onstage, he delivered his most powerful performance in recent years. And he replicated it at the Convention. In his new-found freedom, he flourished. Part of the reason for GT's heart-rending performance must also be that we let him create his own dream matriarch. He had told me he always wanted to portray a matriarch who is firm but fair; one who would reach out to her family and not browbeat them into subservience; a matriarch who would be respected not out of fear but for her kindness. "There are such matriarchs too you know," he had said.

### A Selfless Sharing

Now to Stella Kon. After I had approached GT, we were just a few weeks away from TPAS's first Baba Nyonya Literary Festival on 20 - 21 July 2019. Stella was to be one of our headline readers at the event and GT, as our special guest, to perform *dondang sayang*. I had planned to approach Stella then.

With three icons - Alvin, Ivan and GT - happily in the boat, the only missing crew was Stella. She was pivotal. Without her in, there would be no play. I was a little apprehensive, partly because I did not know her. But Alvin and Ivan had described Stella as "a lovely person" and as "reasonable



"Mr Chee! So glad you can come!" Stella Kon surprises Colin Chee with an actual line from her play, reading at the Baba Nyonya Literary Festival in 2019. Photograph by Benjamin Tan.

although fiercely protective of her Emily." It was understandable.

I did not have to worry. At the festival, Stella suddenly stepped up to me reading Emily's actual lines in the play: "Mr Chee! So glad you can come! I am just waiting for you to be the guest of honour at the table. Ah yo Mr Chee, no more 'little Em-lee,'.." It broke the ice. How clever of Stella to dramatise it as a felicitous surprise!

At tea break, Ngiam May Ling, GC member and organiser of the Festival, introduced GT and me to Stella. I wasted no time telling her excitedly about the proposed play and that Alvin, Ivan and GT had all agreed to be a part of it. Would she allow us to use Emily of Emerald Hill as the basis for the yet unnamed play? Perhaps sensing a seminal adaptation in the making, she spoke the magic words: "Of course you can".

"But I can't speak or write Baba Malay. Someone else has to do that. You must promise to safeguard the integrity of the play." I said I did not speak Baba Malay either but that would be taken care of. I also assured Stella we would not disrespect Emily. She is selfless and courageous in her love for the culture.

Shortly after, Stella shared with me the scenes from the play in which Emily's mother-in-law featured. I picked three – when Emily joined the Gan family as a young bride; the Lunar New Year when Emily used tradition to confirm her position as the most senior daughter-in-law; and when Emily's husband Kheong strayed.

I decided to leave out the part where Emily's favourite son, Richard, died. It would be too tragic for the Convention. I wondered though, what GT as Emily's mother-in-law would have said about such an eventuality. Could it have been foretold in her lifetime?



Encores for an outstanding performance. From left: Stella Kon, Ivan Heng, Colin Chee, Alvin Tan and GT Lye. Photograph by Carlos Monforte.

### A Beautiful Dream

When I shared the good news with the GC shortly after, our Hon Treasurer Ronney Tan wrote: "This must be a dream come true for all *wayang* Peranakan die-hards. If Ivan and GT develop the right chemistry, this once-only performance deserves to be recorded for posterity. Imagine the Baba English and Baba Malay exchanges between the *Neo* and the *Menantu*."

On 13 November 2021 during a WhatsApp exchange about *The Matriarchs* with Koh Bee Bee of Wild Rice, Ivan's right arm, Bee Bee remarked: "It is a beautiful dream. Thank you."

On Saturday 20 November 2021 at 9.15am, this beautiful dream came true. 🍀



At the rehearsal onstage. Being masters of their craft, Ivan and GT only had to rehearse twice. Photograph by Colin Chee.



# Symposium Insights



PLEASE SCAN THIS QR  
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FULL ESSAYS ONLINE.

These excerpts from the essays  
of various forum panellists provide  
much grist on the continuing evolution  
of Peranakan culture.

## CHANGE AND THE CULTURAL RESILIENCE OF THE PERANAKAN CHINESE

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HISTORIAN  
BABA KWA CHONG GUAN



KWA CHONG GUAN

I SUGGEST THE ANALOGY of Peranakan culture and lifestyle as inherited by The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) to be like an old and stately mansion Tan Jiak Kim and his friends built in 1906. Into this mansion Mr Tan and his friends brought a style of life and things from older homes, including ancestral altars and an eclectic mix of traditional red lacquered and gold gilded Chinese furniture with Victorian chairs and cabinets. Tan's family home on River Valley Road, Panglima Prang, typified this eclectic mix of Chinese and European styles that define the Straits Chinese in both architecture and contents.

This "mansion" has been renovated several times. Right at the start, Dr Lim Boon Keng tried to redesign the ancestral altars and dress of the residents of the house. Sir Song Ong Siang brought more English books into the house, slowly replacing the volumes of Baba Malay literature. Art Deco armchairs competed with Brown and Gold chairs for space.

TPAS under the leadership of Baba Colin Chee is starting another cleaning and renovation of the mansion they inherited. The ancestral altars have been removed or reduced in size and their batik altar cloths have become collector's items<sup>1</sup>. The kitchen turns out cuisine that blends Southern

Chinese food with local cooking<sup>2</sup>. The stone tools like the *cheng-k'u* or mortar and pestle, the *batu giling* or grindstone and the *cheok bo* or millstone are now displayed in our dining rooms where they serve as talking points over dinner.

More important is that the mansion Tan Jiak Kim built is not only a home for Straits-born Chinese, but for anyone who has an interest in its contents and lifestyle. Decoupled from their ethnic, historical and cultural context, the material culture of the Straits Chinese is now available for anyone to appropriate, replicate and commercialise.

What is the relevance of our grandparent's *barang-barang* for globally-connected Millennials and GenZ? The future of Peranakan culture may be more about its reinvention and commodification for creation of a distinct local Singapore culture in a globalised world.

The symbols of Peranakan culture, the dress and its accessories, the cuisine and more, will survive to the extent that they can be reinvented and commodified to become new symbols of who we are as Singaporeans today.

The challenge for TPAS is to ensure that the "Peranakan" origins of these commercialisations, reinventions and appropriations into the general Singapore lifestyle are not forgotten.



WANG GUNGWU

## BABA-NYONYA AS NATIVE CHINESE

HISTORIAN  
BABA WANG GUNGWU

I WAS INTRIGUED by the extraordinary way the Baba had adapted to the Malay world while keeping their identity as Chinese. Many Babas stressed their Hokkien origins, but other factors downplayed dialect differences, especially the Malay patois that enabled different groups of Chinese to communicate.

The culture that the Baba had developed was recognisable as practices originating in China and displayed in rituals and festivals. Their artefacts were admired and could be described as the "thick" culture unique to the community up till the first half of the 20th century. Happily, the culture's quality has impressed all who have encountered it. Parts of it, when presented as "thinner" manifestations, have proved universally appealing. This is a success of reinvention.

It is easy to discern the innovation in clothing, footwear and jewellery and obviously, in culinary arts. As a historian, I was attracted not so much by that hybridity as by the Baba's willingness to evolve. The community has shown considerable adaptability.

I suggest that the central image of the Baba is of local families with their lineages rooted in Southeast Asia, recording hundreds if not thousands of members wherever they may be and identifying this land as home. It rests on the creativity of our younger generations to continue the universalising of Baba-Nyonya culture and pursue what Baba Kwa Chong Guan so imaginatively envisages.

## EVOLVING HYBRIDITY IN SINGAPORE AND THE MALAY PENINSULA

ANTHROPOLOGIST  
NYONYA VIVIENNE WEE



VIVIENNE WEE

HYBRIDITY IS RELEVANT because people whose ancestors came from China are not re-migrating to China. The ethnic Chinese of Singapore and the Malay Peninsula will never be citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC). A hybrid future is their only possibility.

Will Peranakan-ness be part of future hybridity? Peranakan-ness itself is heterogenous. Take *buah keluak* (Pangium edule) for example. This supposedly iconic ingredient of Peranakan cuisine is renowned in Singapore

## BECOMING LOCAL AND COMING HOME:

ASSIMILATION AND THE  
JAWI PERANAKAN OF  
SOUTHEAST ASIA

HISTORIAN  
BABA FARISH A NOOR



FARISH A NOOR

AMONG THE MANY different hybrid communities that exist in Southeast Asia, the Jawi Peranakan – those who profess a shared heritage and identity that combines local Southeast Asian (Malay, Javanese, Bugis, Banjarese, etc.) ancestry along with South Asian and Arab – are perhaps among the most interesting, by virtue of how they have assimilated into the mainstream native communities of the region.

Over centuries the Jawi Peranakan – itself a term that cannot be reduced to simple singulars – emerged as a broad category denoting those of mixed Southeast Asian-South Asian-Arab ancestry, and the fact that many of these early travelers were themselves merchants explained why the Jawi Peranakan community were known for their capital accumulation and commercial prowess.

The gradual demise of the economic power of the Jawi Peranakan was amplified by events such as the Great Depression of the 1930s. Many of them would enter the colonial civil service in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, though even then they would be among the pioneers of modern vernacular education in their respective countries.

While some Peranakan communities in the region may wonder aloud as to whether their communities may survive to the next generation, the same has not been articulated by the Jawi Peranakans today. It can be argued that the evident success of the Jawi Peranakans in the process of cultural immersion and assimilation is rare in a world that is presently beset by the phenomena of hyper-nationalism and exclusivism.

and Melaka but largely unknown in Penang. It entered Peranakan cuisine in Singapore and Melaka from Java, but its use did not spread northwards (Sarah Benjamin 2021: personal communication). Peranakan food is not the same everywhere.

The parts of Peranakan-ness likely to continue into the future are aesthetic – cuisine, theatre, embroidery, clothing and beading. Interestingly, in Singapore, there is a small but robust number of Japanese students who love beading. Peranakan arts may thus continue in the wider world.

Can Chinese-ness be formed outside China? Chinese essentialism does not exist, nor are the "Chinese" of the Malay Peninsula likely to be concerned about what Chinese-ness means vis-a-vis Mainland China's definitions. Perhaps they should regard themselves as post-Chinese Malaysians with Southeast Asian kinship connections.

The term "post-Chinese" acknowledges ancestry from China, while indicating that we are neither "Chinese", as patrilineal ancestors were, nor "overseas Chinese", as claimed by the PRC Government.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Lee & others, *Auspicious Designs: Batik for Peranakan Altars* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Tan Chee-Beng, ed., *Chinese Food and Foodways in Southeast Asia and Beyond* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2012) on the continuing embedding and fusing of Southern Chinese foods with Southeast Asian cuisine, creating additional hybrid forms.





JOSEPHINE CHIA

### IS PERANAKAN LITERATURE RELEVANT?

PERANAKAN AUTHOR  
NYONYA JOSEPHINE CHIA

**I**N ITS SIMPLEST FORM, literature comes from telling a story. The writer has the scope to flesh out ideas in the characters and make them play out in certain settings to bring out the essence of the culture's ideologies and challenges. That is why literary prose is such an important tool through which we can understand society and the challenges of a particular era.

I believe a well-written literary book can provide information, not in an intrusive manner, but with subtle language that will showcase a particular culture. If we don't want our culture to disappear, we need to keep on talking about it. I feel a strong conviction to preserve our culture and heritage through my books, as much as possible.

### IT AIN'T WHAT YOU OWN, IT'S THE WAY THAT YOU OWN IT

FOOD AUTHOR  
BABA CHRISTOPHER TAN YU WEI



CHRISTOPHER TAN YU WEI

**T**O TAKE BUT ONE EXAMPLE from my own field of concern – food – the concept of cooking *buah keluak* with spices and meat has existed in our region for a century at minimum: the 1925 edition of the Groot Nieuw Volledig Oost-Indisch Kookboek, a Dutch-language Indonesian cookbook first published in 1903, records a recipe for *rarawon* (rawon) and also one for *sambal keluak*.

Framing the earthy character of *buah keluak* in different settings is a sterling culinary idea that Peranakan cooks have long explored and today are taking in new directions, such as Candlenut restaurant's *buah keluak* and chocolate ice cream. While the process of cooking and eating in and outside the home may change radically over the years, with styles and conventions coming and going, what persists is the Baba-Nyonya spark of creativity and culinary wit, the openness to innovation, the gastronomical daring which makes both classic *babi buah keluak* and modern *buah keluak* ice cream

possible. It is mores and outlooks like these that we ought to instill in the younger generations. We also ought to spur them – as we do ourselves – to internalise these intangible heritage values and mindsets, and then express them in ways relevant to their own milieu. This is a crucial feature of a blossoming, enduringly vibrant culture – intelligent, mindful and sensitive culture-making by all generations, together.

Let us treasure heritage as a compass, not a boundary wall; a passport, not a restraining order; an anchor, but not a tether.

A living culture must be practised. A living culture must engage with the world around it, transforming it and in turn being altered. A living culture must adapt and evolve, must give and take. A living culture is never "perfected", but can attain ever greater and richer heights of meaning and spirit. Here's to life.

### LIVING TRADITIONS AS INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

HERITAGE RESEARCH BY DIRECTOR  
BABA JOHN TEO



JOHN TEO

**I**NTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE (ICH) is defined as "traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, societal practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts". (UNESCO. 2011)

One inevitable aspect of any living, evolving culture is reinvention. For example, Singapore has seen a new generation of chefs who blend traditional with contemporary fine-dining techniques.

What then, is "essential" or core? How much space is there for innovation, or reinvention of traditions? When does something stop being "Peranakan" and start being "Mod Sin" (Modern Singaporean) instead?

While government support is important, local communities of interest are critical to engender real ownership. Something may only be considered ICH if it is recognised as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it.

Traditionalists have long been sounding the death knell for a particular brand of "Peranakan" identity that they feel has been on the decline since the 19th century. Yet is there reason for optimism? "A certain degree of heritage destruction and loss is not only unavoidable, but can indeed be desirable in order to accommodate fairly as many claims to that heritage as possible." (Holtorf, Cornelius. 2006) Engaging creatively with the past and the present transcends the traditional discourse of preservation and endangered traditions, to better reflect the contemporary identities of this vibrant, living (and thriving) community.



KENNIE TING

### PERANAKAN CULTURE & COMMUNITY:

CHALLENGES, PITFALLS  
& OPPORTUNITIES

MUSEUMS GROUP DIRECTOR  
BABA KENNIE TING

### PERANAKAN INDIANS (CHITTY MELAKA):

A FADING HERITAGE FROM  
THE 15TH CENTURY OR STILL  
A UNIQUE EVOLVING HYBRID  
CULTURE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY?

CHITTY MELAKA  
BABA PILLAY P KRISHNAN



PILLAY P KRISHNAN

**T**HE PERANAKAN INDIANS or Chitty Melaka are probably the oldest community in Singapore and Malaysia to have evolved from mixed parentage and thus encapsulates the unique character of embracing multiracial, multicultural and multilingual realities with a high degree of comfort and pride.

We are experiencing a Golden Age of revivalism or reinvention in the 21st century. The launch of Samuel Dhoraisingam's Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka: Indian Babas and Nonyas-Chitty Melaka in 2005, formation of the Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association that same year, and the special exhibition at the Indian Heritage Centre, "Chetti Melaka of the Straits - Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities" (Sep 2018 - May 2019), prompted many Peranakan Indian families to rekindle ties and rediscover their roots. The Chitty Melaka's signature *Lauk Pindang* dish was just featured in the October 2021 edition of National Geographic magazine!

We look forward to sharing more of our distinctive and integrative culture at the upcoming permanent exhibition of the refreshed Peranakan Museum and with the NHB-supported Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Cookbook. We continue on a trajectory of "Constant Reinvention" – our forefathers have taught us well and we will certainly pass down their legacy.

**I**NTEREST IN PERANAKAN CULTURE, whether local and global, is at an all-time high, and there is significant opportunity for Singapore and the local Peranakan community to capitalise on this interest. But capitalising on culture is never a straightforward affair.

Against the backdrop of growing mainstream interest in and commercialisation of Peranakan Chinese culture, the Baba-Nyonya community is itself conflicted and, naturally, concerned with questions of authenticity, appropriation and survival.

For the Chinese Peranakan community, a major pitfall to avoid is to see Peranakan culture as the domain of the Chinese Peranakan alone, and to present said culture as existing in a vacuum, disassociated

with its strong and undeniable Malay and Southeast Asian roots.

Opportunity for cultural rejuvenation could perhaps lie in an approach that embraces inclusivity and engagement with other communities in the context of furthering exploration of port city heritage.

The question I wish to pose is this: how may we re-frame "Peranakan culture and community" as concept and practice, keeping in mind the bigger picture opportunities, challenges and pitfalls articulated, while, at the same time, remaining true to the essence of that which is Peranakan – by which I mean a culture anchored in the Nusantara, that is quintessentially hybrid, open to other cultures, and continuously evolving.

How do we re-define "Peranakan" for the future?

### WITHER OR WEATHER CHAKAP PERANAKAN?

LINGUIST NYONYA NALA LEE



NALA LEE

**I**S THERE A FUTURE for Baba Malay in Singapore?

At the heart of the matter is change. While it was the language of the home domain for a period, the Peranakans shifted to English as they began to send their children to English medium schools that were set up following the British settlement of Singapore in 1819.

How tightly do we want to interweave Baba Malay with the Peranakan identity? Would someone who is not Peranakan be encouraged to learn and speak the language? Additionally, given that Baba Malay-speaking Peranakans are also predominantly bilingual in English in Singapore, and that conversations are more often than not marked by code-switching, how much Baba Malay is required in a conversation for it to be a Baba Malay conversation?

While my job as a documentary linguist encouraging the maintenance and revitalisation of Baba Malay requires that I accord special status to the language as it is spoken by generations of *ma-mah* (grandmothers) and *cho-cho* (great-grandmothers), because there is unmistakable value in that sort of variety, whether the language lasts into perpetuity in all likelihood depends on its ability to evolve and how open we are to constant dialoguing and negotiating as a community.



# Kueh

# Baru!

Our magazine designer *Nyonya Joanne Low* marvels at a reinvention of our culture through young eyes casting art & design with the traditional *Kueh*.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STACEY YIP AND CLARISSA YU.

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN the Division of Industrial Design (DID), Culinary Institute of America (Singapore campus) and the NUS Baba House, this studio explores the technique of casting — the casting of *Kueh*.

The practice of casting in moulds is highly prevalent within Peranakan cuisine. We use wooden moulds to shape *Ang Ku Kueh*, metal moulds for *Kueh Pie Tee* shells and pandan leaves for wrapping our *Ba Zhang*. They allow us to replicate with finesse.

With the guidance of Hans Tan and Stacey Yip from DID together with Karen Lim, curator of NUS Baba House, who mooted the project, the students were tasked to look at the technique of casting coupled with the tradition of *Kueh*

making. They have brought us a new way of looking at, tasting and experiencing *Kueh*.

It was a visual and textural extravaganza. The Porcelain *Kueh* was made of mochi and filled with nuts. The *Xiang Kueh* started with an image of a golden crane and revealed a different blessing on every layer. The *Shan Jian Kueh* invites the participant to squeeze a pipette of osmanthus syrup resulting in a flavour explosion in one's mouth.

The outcome of this project is the perfect example of a reinvention of our culture. As our culture moves through the ages, there might be a tendency to hold on to the nostalgia. However, we could also extend nods to new techniques, textures, or even combinations of flavours. A symphony of the old and the new, taking us forward. ♦



- 1 Porcelain *Kueh*: a mochi kamcheng filled with nuts.
- 2 *Kueh Batu* builds atop one another, symbolising the foundation of society.
- 3 A different blessing upon every peel of *Xiang Kueh*.
- 4 *Tou Kueh* are inspired by the iconic Peranakan tile.
- 5 Subtle flavours of sweet potato, red bean and ginger beaded together.
- 6 *Shan Jian Kueh* with the fragrance of osmanthus.
- 7 The stretch marks on the surface of the *Kueh Zi* represent fertility.



# New Year Revelry with Tiger Peranakans

Nyonya Joanne Tan-De Zilva asks Peranakans of different generations and ages born in the Year of the Tiger how they relate to the striped feline's character, what they love about the Lunar New Year and their wishes for 2022.

BATIK TIGER: DETAIL OF A BATIK SARONG FROM THE MR AND MRS LEE KIP LEE COLLECTION.

## BABA Christopher Justin Chua

4TH GEN • BORN IN 2010

Like the Tiger, I am determined and I love my freedom. And I love receiving *angbaos*, eating oranges and watching the lion dance. I wish that I will get good exam results, that there will be no more Covid and that I will get a pet snake.



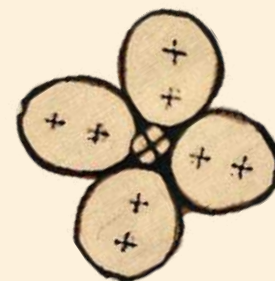
## BABA Keith Chee

11TH GEN • BORN IN 1986

I'm fun-loving. That's both a blessing and a curse since school grades take a backseat! I love Peranakan food! I look forward to my annual overdose of *itek tim* at my Kim Poh's (grandaunt's) house on the first day of the Lunar New Year, and two more lunches at other homes. I wish that we'll be allowed to go visiting with masks off! It's been a trying two years.



LEFT: Keith with his wife, Melinda, also a Peranakan, and sons Micah, 5, and Levi, 2



## NYONYA Gwen Ong

5TH GEN • BORN IN 1962

I'm a Tiger mum - in a good way! I have the maternal instinct to be protective towards my cubs. To me, family comes first.

I recall the heady smell of the embers in the morning! We used charcoal to make *kueh kapit*, *kueh bolu*, *kueh koya* and *kueh bangkit*. The family would come together to cook Lunar New Year dishes over such stoves. We would grumble about the heat, yet we would persevere. It was the multi-generational bonding, gossiping and life lessons imparted, that are most memorable. The smell of firecrackers and roads covered in red - such are my nostalgic memories of Lunar New Year celebrations past.

I wish that family ties will be ever-binding and we all get to meet one another once again across continents.



RIGHT: Jamie looks forward to more fun times with his niece (Isabelle, 7) and nephew (Isaac, 9).



## BABA Jamie Tan

6TH GEN • BORN IN 1986

I can be annoying and loud! I remember visiting *Mama* (grandmother) to see her make *kueh bangkit* and *kueh tart*. I didn't help but was happily the taster! Maybe I did help to pinch the tops to make the patterns but the memory is vague. What I do recall is the heavenly aroma once the *kueh* came out of the oven. I also remember having to *soja Mama* and *Ah Kong* on the first day of the Lunar New Year. In recent years, I just enjoy meeting family and friends. I wish to lose weight!



## NYONYA Rosie Tan-Peckal

5TH GEN • BORN IN 1950

I can be fierce and aggressive if I need to! I adored my mother's cooking. Her signature dishes were *babi pongteh*, *buah keluak*, *tepong tauhu*, *ikan assam pedas*, *babi ati bungkus* and *papaya titek*. She would also make delicious *kueh* like *kueh bangkit* and exchange them with relatives before the Lunar New Year. I wish good health and *panjang umur* to all!

## BABA Paul Kwek

5TH GEN • BORN IN 1950

Like the *harimau*, I'm independent, private and prideful! I fondly remember the tradition of praying to the dead with a feast of Peranakan dishes in the early morning in our pyjamas and eating the food thereafter. We would visit the relatives on my father's side first. There would be dishes like *babi pongteh* and *buah keluak*. I also looked forward to the smoked or preserved ham that my father bought. He would preserve it with salt and soak it in brandy before wrapping it in a gunny sack. We children would try to hijack some when the adults were drunk! Nowadays, I just look forward to eating good food and chatting with relatives. I wish good health for all my *sedara* (relatives), young and old.



## In MELBOURNE with REV NELSON KOH

My earliest recollection was the sound of busy feet thumping the wooden floor of the corridor in the early hours of Lunar New Year. I grew up in a strong Peranakan extended family environment in Kuala Lumpur. We had to first *soja-soja* (kneel) to my granny, *Mak Gemuk*, and the grand-aunties. Following the customary *panjang-panjang umur* 'chants', I would receive my much-awaited *angpows*. My *cucus* (grandchildren) to this day would dress in their traditional garb and line up for their *angpows* before me and my wife and their parents to wish us Happy New Year, if not "*panjang panjang umur* (long life).





# A Tale of Two Tigers

Baba Bryan Tan tries to make peace between two embittered neighbours who are at each other's throats.

THE ANCIENT CHINESE PROVERB SAYS, "TWO TIGERS CANNOT SHARE ONE MOUNTAIN."

ONCE UPON A TIMELESS TALE, there was an estate on sloping ground called Emerald Hill. Two tiger mothers lived there as neighbours. They were bitter rivals. They constantly vied to outdo each other in every way possible, and their disagreements never failed to stir alarm in their neighbours. More than once, they even made the news with their very unneighbourly squabbles.

You could hear Bibik Arimo (tiger) before you saw her. Her lusty, stentorian bellow would assail your ears before she stomped into view, her face an indignant shade of beetroot which would soon be shoved into yours before asking, "Eh, *adah baik* (how are you)?"

Eric, her round and tubby 12-year old would often be found clinging to her *baju panjang*, striped in banners of vivid colours (her clothes were just as loud) flapping in the wake of her breezy stride, manek beads popping off her shoes as she strode forth and extolled her righteous gossip to all who cared to listen.

"Gua betol tak senang tau, pantat chebok pun tak habis (I'm so busy I've not even the time to wash my behind)!" would be her clarion refrain as she stormed through her house in a constantly harried pace, either pounding chillies, cleaning vigorously or berating her browbeaten husband and child.

Living right beside her was Bibik Belang (stripes), whose mannerisms could not be more diametrically opposed to Bibik Arimo's. Always clad in a spotless *kebaya* which unfortunately did nothing to accentuate her stick thin silhouette, Bibik Belang had a magisterial dignity which spoke volumes instead; she had an icy gaze that could freeze the blood in your veins if you visited her house without bearing gifts.

Unlike Bibik Arimo's well-lived in house which was always haphazardly filled with clutter, Bibik Belang's was organised methodically like a regimented tetris game. Each piece of furniture was positioned only after countless spot checks and precise calculations.

Naturally, the two ladies took to each other like oil and water. Bibik Arimo's constant yelling and loud, mahjong games would get on the nerves of her neighbour. In turn,

Bibik Belang would make her daughter practise on the violin well into the night.

The constant, pungent fragrance of *belachan* wafting from Bibik Arimo's house would also make Bibik Belang pinch her nose in disgust. In retaliation, a fortified wall of *bunga rampay* (scented flowers) was erected between the two houses.

The two neighbours were only similar in the sense that they believed in the culturally superior notion of absolute parenting, in which their children would be raised and bred for success, much like how Queen Elizabeth II did with her racing horses.

Bibik Arimo would nag at Eric constantly, hovering around him to ensure that his homework was done, packing his school bags for him and making grand declarations of how he would become a President's Scholar and Singapore's next Prime Minister.

Bibik Belang would hear her neighbour's bragging but would make no such counter claims. In her own quiet rigidity and disciplinarian style, she would devise intricate timetable spreadsheets for her daughter Helen, dictating the young girl's waking hours, violin and ballet class timings, homework and revision periods, and even the recommended amount of sleep.

Their children went to the same school. Once, a heated shouting match erupted between the two mothers during a parent-teacher session over whose child was the 'model' student (neither child was anywhere close, Eric was as gregarious as his mother and Helen was deeply shy and reticent).

Bibik Arimo was proud of her authentic style of cooking and would often mock Bibik Belang's almost non-existent culinary skills bettered by her domestic helpers. The latter would respond with barbed remarks on how lovely Bibik's Arimo's *gemok babi* (hideously overweight pig, no doubt referring to Eric) would look in a *pongteh*.

It was easy to forget that as the bays of two apex predators echoed through the mountain, other creatures down the food chain were astir as well. While some would barricade their windows and shut their doors, *Nya Kancil* (mouse deer) would stick a twitching nose out hers, sniffing

**NATURALLY,  
THE TWO LADIES  
TOOK TO  
EACH OTHER  
LIKE OIL  
AND WATER.**



Illustration by Nyonya Anastasia Zenia.

cautiously at the air and observing silently as she had been doing for many years.

One fine day the demure and timid Nya Kancil decided to put all her years of careful planning to action, to end the vexatious conflicts once and for all.

Eric was often bullied for his enormous size. Although his booming voice and great bulk could have easily fended off his tormentors, his soft heart could not. One afternoon after school, a thin masked lady smelling of *bunga rampay* pounced on the hyenas who accosted him for lunch money and drove them away with a *tongkat* (stick).

The large fellow no doubt reported back to his mother, saying that their neighbour had done him a kindness, to which Bibik Arimo glared suspiciously over at the scented wall that demarcated their contested territories.

On another blustery day, Bibik Belang's fastidiously arranged laundry blew off their bamboo poles and littered the path leading to her neighbour's. But according to her servants, the stray laundry had managed to fold themselves mysteriously onto the front of her porch, reeking slightly of pungent *belachan*.

The emaciated authoritarian's narrowed eyes and pursed lips conveyed all her skeptical distrust, knowing that none of the other residents nearby would dare encroach on her turf.

These acts of random kindness would continue to

repeat themselves throughout the next few months — the crows that attacked Bibik Arimo's prized dragonfruit would be found strangled near the walls that separated the two houses, and delicious *kueh* would be found in Helen's school bag, given to her by a large masked lady dressed in an immense colourfully striped caftan.

One day, the residents of Emerald Hill were pleasantly surprised to hear, well, nothing at all. There were no odorous smells emanating from the cluttered lair, nor were there the warbling strains of a shrieking violin lasting all day and late into the night.

Bibik Arimo was instead spotted looking rather prim and modest outside her neighbour's porch, a *tengkat* (tiffin carrier) in hand and a ribboned gift in the other, waiting for Bibik Belang to open her door.

In her modest but spick and span dwelling, Nya Kancil sipped tea contentedly with her friends, *Bibik Zirafah* (giraffe) and *Nya Gajah* (elephant). They looked at each other knowingly, inwardly pleased that their valiant efforts had begun overtures for a hopeful long-lasting peace.

Maybe two tigers can live on a mountain after all, with just a little bit of help and courage from those who also inhabit the mountain. ♦

BABAS AND NYONYAS OF OLD WERE RENOWNED FOR HAVING NICKNAMES WHICH WERE REMEMBERED FOR LIFE, TO THE EXTENT THAT THEIR ACTUAL NAMES BECAME INCONSEQUENTIAL.



# THE Baju Koon MOMENT

*Nyonya Pat Lin rediscovers a glorious period of glamour that has all but disappeared from Peranakan fashion history.*

**B**ETWEEN 1899 AND THE END OF WORLD War One in 1915 lies a brief moment in Peranakan fashion history that has all but disappeared from cultural memory. I have chosen to call it the *Baju Koon* Moment and to link it to important flashpoints in Peranakan fashion history and culture.

The *baju koon* or *kun*, as the garment was called, evolved from a fusion of styles: the traditional Chinese tunic and skirt as well as the Malay *baju panjang* and sarong, but with several significant differences. The fabric used, the detailing and accessories were all important hallmarks of a major turning point in Peranakan history so that it transcends being merely a passing fashion trend.

The two-piece Chinese dress that consisted of a long tunic and wide skirt had existed since the Zhou Dynasty. Known as the *pien fu* 弁服 (or *biànfú* in pinyin), it was the standard common attire of Han Chinese men and women all the way to the Qing Dynasty a thousand years later. It was sometimes known as the *ruqun* 襦裙, with *ru* being the upper garment and *qun* or *kun* as the skirt.

In Peranakan culture, the Hokkien term, *koon* has been retained while the Malay word *baju* is a loan word to describe the upper garment. At the height

of its popularity, this fashion trend swept through Singapore, Malaya, Thailand and Indonesia as nyonyas in their *baju koon* gladly preened in front of the camera to capture their stylish moments. Numerous photos of entire families of women can be found in official archives and private collections. Yet surprisingly, nothing has been chronicled to glorify this extraordinary landmark in fashion history.

My own grandmother Leong Lai Tho, who was born in 1893, was photographed several times in different styles of *baju koon* at the Lee Brothers Studio in Singapore. The wives of prominent *towkays*, community leaders and society grand dames were captured on camera dressed in their best, and the best of that period was what the *baju koon* signified for the fashionable woman of the time.

The *baju koon* was significant for a single fact: It was usually white and the fabric was imported lawn, a finely woven cotton. It was always laboriously handsewn. The cotton was grown in India and sent to Europe, notably Lyon, to be woven. Hence the term “lawn”, derived from Laon, the town in northern France that mass produced this sheer textile.

Because it was light and airy, this extremely soft and luxurious fabric was widely used by women the world over for underwear and dresses for warm weather. Advances in milling and weaving enabled mass production. Cotton lawn was exported to Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia and became widely available with the opening of large department stores such as Whiteaway



CENTRE: As the wife of Tan Kwee Swee, a scion of the Tan Tock Seng/ Tan Kim Ching clan, the baju koon worn by Pat Lin's grandmother, Leong Lai Tho, was in the style of elaborate Art Deco, with extensive piping, smocking and pin tucks. Lee Brothers Photo Studio. Circa 1910. Courtesy of Pat Lin.



Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.



FABRICS INTRODUCED DURING THE BAJU KOON MOMENT WOULD, OVER THE FOLLOWING DECADES, BECOME THE STANDARD FABRICS IN THE GENESIS OF THE MODERN KEBAYA.



Laidlaw, Robinson's and independent retailers that stocked the fabric especially to the wealthier in high society.

Among the local ladies, fine fabrics such as lawn, voile and batiste had the prestige of being imported items. Incidentally, these fabrics introduced during the *Baju Koon* Moment would, over the following decades, become the standard fabrics in the genesis of the modern *kebaya*.

The plain quality of white lawn welcomed lavish embellishment in the form of elaborate needlework that reached extraordinary levels of bravura. According to my grandmother, all *baju koon* were hand stitched with seams bound by small, even stitches. That, and the amount of fine decorative needlework made the *baju koon* extremely expensive. Tiny pin tucks, shirring, smocking and ruffling were *de rigueur*. The outfit itself became a signifier of a woman's prized economic status: The more elaborately embellished her outfit, the more evident it was that she could afford the cost of its creation.

Photos of women wearing the *baju koon* reveal imported and hand-crocheted lace, embroidery and buttons sometimes piled onto the basic tunic and long skirt. Most of the *baju koon* stylistically retained the high Chinese collar, although sometimes the jackets were paired with the popular European 'mutton chop' sleeves and ruffles.

The *koon*, as an analog of the Malay sarong, was usually where the skill of the seamstress was demonstrated. In these modern times, the art of what was known as 'fabric manipulation' has all but disappeared. By definition, fabric manipulation involves changing the surface of a fabric by using needlework techniques such as shirring, tucking, smocking, pleating, etc. The light, soft cotton lawn fabric was the basis of the *koon* as it was a particularly suitable material for skilled artisans to work their wonders. Perhaps one of the most significant fashion turns that accompanied the *baju koon* moment were the accessories and hairstyles.

Abandoning the traditional nyonya *sangol* or *chignon*, fashionistas of the time readily embraced the popular

Edwardian hairstyles, as attested by the numerous photographs of society women coiffed with "Gibson Girl" hairdos. Hats began accompanying the hybridised east-west *baju koon*.

The accessibility of goods imported from Europe, most notably jewellery, also meant that the semi-European *baju koon* required a different mode of accessories. Notably, many jewellery styles and designs ascribed today as Peranakan jewellery are in fact the offshoots of Edwardian pieces that flooded the Asian market at the beginning of the 20th century.

Starburst designs known as the *bintang* or star, closely identified with Penang Peranakan nyonyas, originated from the popular diamond stars that were marketed and snapped up all over the world, as were moon and star pins, art nouveau-style necklaces and drop earrings.

Fashion magazines shipped over from the United States, United Kingdom and France played an important role in the transitions of fashion that led to the *baju koon*. Interestingly, this was also the time in the west when popular culture embraced "Orientalism" where everything from interior design, music, art and fashion bore the imprint of the so-called 'exotic' east.

In a phase that ran parallel to the *Baju Koon* Moment, European designers such as Doucet, Poiret and Fortuny began designing styles that strongly reflected the traditional attire of the Far East into their two-piece outfits.

For the fashionable nyonya in the years before the end of World War One, the adoption of the hybrid *baju koon* represented an emergent awareness of a world beyond the sartorial possibilities of the previous era. Hybridisation and integration, the key characteristics of Peranakan culture, were uniquely demonstrated in a brief fashion moment. Its impact on the development of the Peranakan aesthetic, although brief, is indelibly imprinted on future iterations of Peranakan fashion. ♦



CENTRE: Leong Lai Tho at the height of the *baju koon* trend.

Lee Brothers Photo Studio. Circa 1908-1910. Courtesy of Pat Lin.

US-BASED PAT LIN IS PROFESSOR EMERITUS, GENDER, ETHNICITY AND MULTICULTURAL STUDIES, AT CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, POMONAS.

Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.



# Passion Made Possible. in

Baba Alex Teoh discovers historical gems while conserving a 100-year-old tourist guide book.

ALL GUIDEBOOK PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLIN CHEE. VISITORS' GUIDE-BOOK TO SINGAPORE IS FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION.

THE VISITOR'S GUIDE-BOOK TO SINGAPORE was a handy-size booklet published in 1922 by Koh & Company. The booklet introduces tourist attractions and provides necessary information to visit Singapore. From its premises at 90, Bras Basah Road in the Raffles Hotel Building, Koh & Company was a bookstore with a Peranakan flavour<sup>1</sup> and more. It was established in 1905 by Baba Koh Hoon Teck (1878-1956) who was renowned for his musical talent, poetic flair and community spirit.

Koh was one of the founding members of the Cornwall Minstrels, a musical troupe which included several young Babas. He was also a founding member of the Gunong Sayang Association. His entrepreneurial character, love for *panton* and commitment to the Peranakan community has been described in the article, *Remembering Baba Koh Hoon Teck*, written by Baba William Gwee Thian Hock for *The Peranakan magazine*.<sup>2</sup>

His creativity drove his business as well, as he was described as a pioneering and entrepreneurial Baba. Koh & Co was a bookseller, printer, newsagent (for many English and foreign magazines), stationery store, rubber stamp maker and general commission agent. The company also marketed perfumery and toiletries including the popular jasmine-scented lotion, Bunga Melor.

Besides trading, Koh & Co also published *panton dondang sayang*, *syair* and *cherita* (Baba Malay poems and stories). Five volumes of *Panton Dondang Sayang Baba Pranakan* were produced from 1911 to 1916, with subsequent second and third editions. Other publications include *Cherita Abu Nawas dan Cherita Rampay Rampay* and

*Syair Silam Bari*.<sup>3</sup> Today these publications are rare and highly collectible.

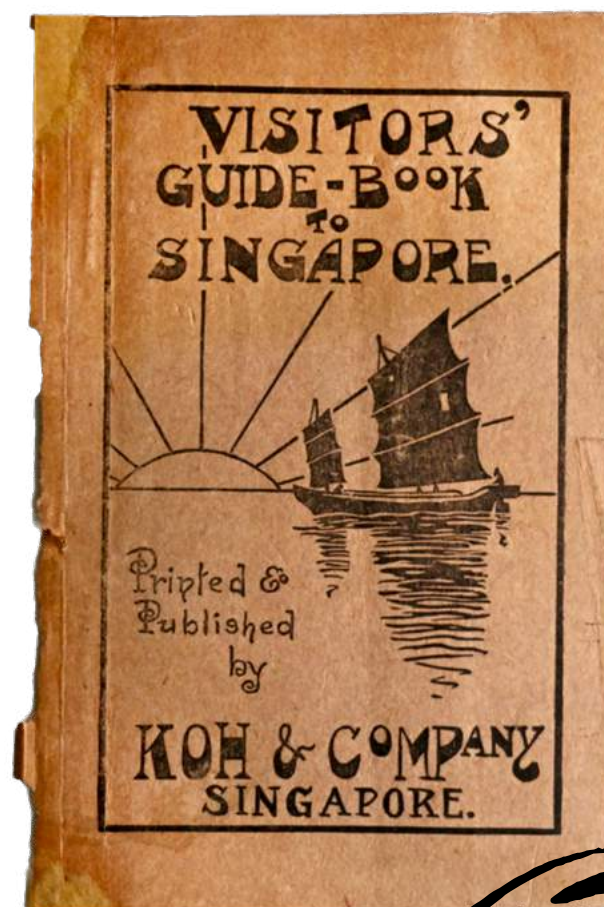
Koh & Co was also known for their postcards. Numerous beautiful and colourful postcards featuring Singapore landmarks, natives and fauna were popular among tourist and collectors.<sup>4</sup> Feeding the interest in postcard collection, the company published monthly photographic magazines named the Post Card Exchange Register from 1907. In February 1909, they organised a postcard exhibition and competition that was held in Raffles Hotel.<sup>5</sup>

## CONSERVING THE GUIDE-BOOK

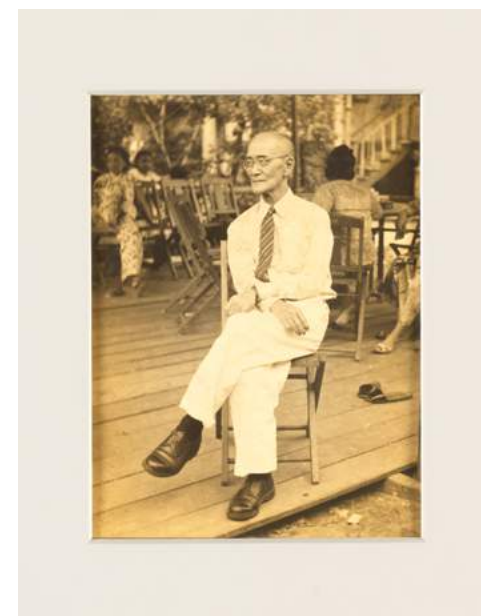
It was a pleasant surprise for me to see this publication and I was glad to learn that Koh & Company had also ventured into the tourism sector. In the early 20th century, tourism into Singapore grew with the arrival of European cruise liners or rather, passenger steamships such as the SS Chusan.

Even though there were a few earlier issues of tourist guides<sup>6</sup>, there must have been a demand for updated locally produced guides. To find out more about this title, a check with our local library revealed that this publication was not in their collection. Through an internet search, I learnt that the first edition of Koh & Co's *Visitors' Guide Book* to Singapore was produced and advertised in 1914.<sup>7</sup> However, there was no record of the number of copies printed.

Being a guide book that has probably served its function, it suffered from torn and detached covers. Its back cover is missing. The text block consists of 46 pages of printed text, 10 black-and-white photo pages and many advertisements.

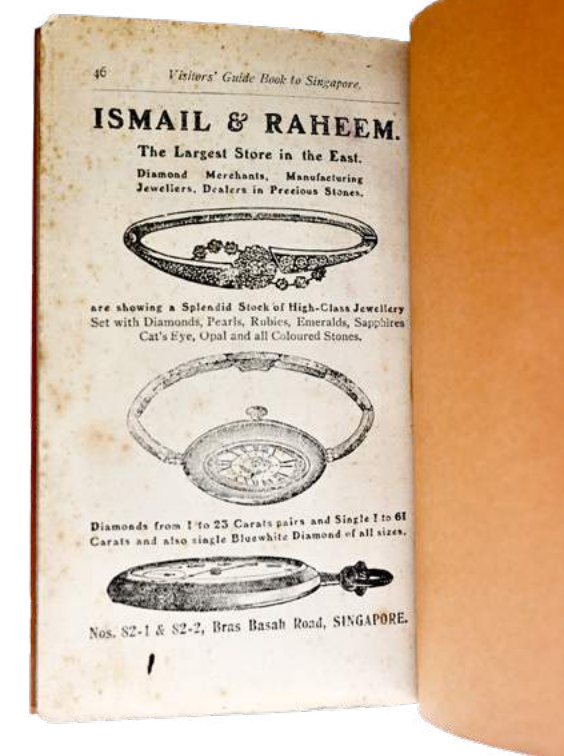
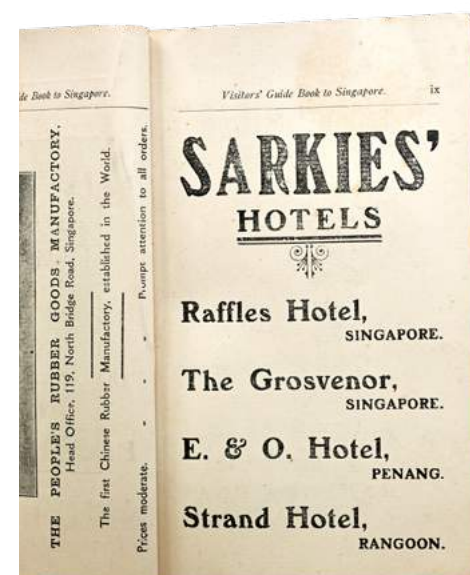


PRINTED IN 1922 with the illustration of a Chinese junk sailing towards the rising sun.



The PUBLISHER of the guidebook, **BABA KOH HOON TECK**, was an entrepreneur with many talents.

Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Mr John Koh, in memory of his grandfather Mr Koh Hoon Teck.



<sup>1</sup> Passage of Time: Singapore Bookstore Stories 1881-2016. Chou Sing Chu Foundation. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Gwee, T H V. Remembering Baba Koh Hoon Teck. *The Peranakan magazine*. 2007 July – September p. 21 – 22.

<sup>3</sup> Advertisements, Column 3 (1919, April 8). *Malaya Tribune* p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>4</sup> Cheah J S (2006). *Singapore 500 Early Postcards*. Editions Didier Millet, Singapore p. 11.

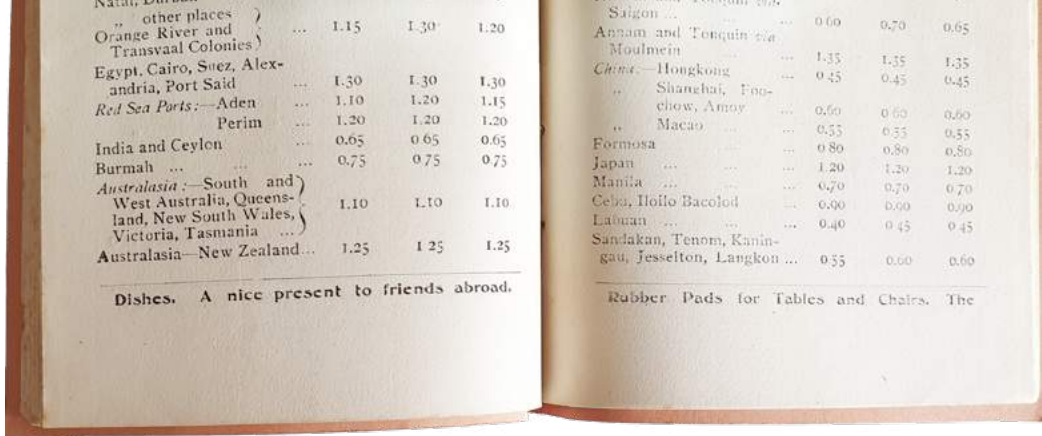
<sup>5</sup> Hong Regina, Ling Xi Min and Shimazu Naoko (2020).

Postcard Impressions of Early 20th-Century Singapore: perspective from the Japanese community. National Library Board. Marshall Cavendish, Singapore.

<sup>6</sup> Tan Bonny. Early Tourist Guidebooks to Singapore: The Guidebook to Singapore (1892). *Biblioasia* 2010, 1 April. p. 33 – 37.

<sup>7</sup> Advertisements, Column 1 (1914, May 30). *Malaya Tribune*. p. 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.





**OF INTEREST** is the unique format of “running scrolling” advertisement text at the footnote of every printed page. If you flip the pages to read continuously from page 1 to page 22, the message text would run as follows (copied verbatim): “TEOH ENG HOCK, The People’s Rubber / Goods Manufactory, 119, North Bridge Road, / Opposite the Cathedral. The People’s / Rubber Goods Manufactory makes all kinds / of Rubber Goods. Rubber Soles of all sizes / Rubber Heels of all sizes, Rubber Heels / (Ladies). Passing the Cathedral, you will / find the big Building where they sell / Rubber Tyres, for Ricksha Rubber Tyres, for / Gharry every Rubber, Rubber Gas / Tubing, Rubber Piping, Rubber Fancy Soap / **Dishes. A nice present to friends abroad. / Rubber Pads for Tables and Chairs. The** / People’s Rubber Goods Manufactory makes / Rubber Belting for Hair Dressing Saloon. / When in Singapore, don’t fail to visit The / People’s Rubber Goods Manufactory and also / their works. It is worth seeing”. (This text then repeats in the pages that follow, till the end of the book.)

Unfortunately, the text block was held by two iron staples that have long rusted and stained the paper pages. On closer inspection, the pages of paper are with chain lines<sup>8</sup> and reveal a watermark of crown design. Other than some yellowing of the paper, the condition of the text block is relatively stable, without any evidence of insect infestation damage, major tears, dirt or mould stains.

The text contains information on the various government departments, transport options (jinrickshas, hackney gharries, motor cars), telecommunication facilities, varieties of amusements, list of foreign consulates, banking services, glossary of common Malay words, suggestions for sightseeing tours and train schedules. The advertisement pages feature a variety of merchandisers and services such as Raffles Hotel, Ismail & Raheem Jewellers and G H Kiat & Co bookshop.

The discipline of conservation aims to minimise the threat of further deterioration and to stabilise the artefact (book) for suitable research, exhibition and safe storage. With the existing condition of the book, a conservative and cautious treatment option was applied.

To address the rusty metal binding, the metal staples were removed, the pages were surface cleaned and then sewn with unbleached cotton thread. The sewn text block was subsequently protected with matching colour, acid-free end papers. The front cover was surface cleaned, tears along the edges repaired with toned Japanese tissue and then protected in archival sleeve. Both the cover and text block were assembled and wrapped in acid-free tissue for safe handling and storage.

Even though this title is a relatively simple guide book, it was an honour to conserve this precious historical gem, considering it was published almost a century ago by the famous Koh Hoon Teck, who was recently honoured as one of the 50 Remarkable Personalities by The Peranakan Museum in Singapore. ♦



# THE NONAGENARIAN TAILOR

Baba Billy Steven Tay discovers one man's lifelong passion for Indonesian batik.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILLY STEVEN TAY.

<sup>8</sup> Chain-lines, or chain lines, are the prominent, wide-spaced, parallel lines in laid paper, used in both manuscripts and printed books. ... <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199576128.001.0001/acref-9780199576128-e-0151?rkey=OYUZEZ&result=141>



**I**T'S WELL OVER 9PM but the sound of a sewing machine motor emanates from a modest flat in Serangoon. While most people are calling it a night, 95-year-old Ang Kum Siong, or Wellie to his customers from all around the world, is just getting started. He has to sew on the straps for a few dresses to sell the next day. Working briskly, he finishes two dresses within half an hour, before turning to me and sharing his life story.

#### LIFE OF BATIK

Born in Singapore in 1927, Wellie spent the first five years of his life here before he left for Fujian in China. He went to school until the age of nine, then worked on a farm before he turned 17.

*“Life was tough. Famines were common growing up and we often encountered tigers in the wild which could kill us. As farmers, we grew our own grapes to survive.”*

Wellie returned to Singapore with his parents after World War II ended in 1945. His father became a secondhand dealer for clothing. Visiting pawnshops with his father, Wellie encountered Indonesian batik. His father died shortly after, leaving Wellie to be the sole breadwinner.

#### TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

*“I had to provide for six siblings, three children and my mother. Ten mouths to feed. Every day I would ride my trishaw to the night markets with the textiles and go from place to place to set up. My mother needed five dollars daily to feed everyone. On days when there was no business everyone would go hungry. Those were really tough times.”*

One day Wellie met a fruit seller who had a lorry. The kindly soul allowed him to hitch a ride on the way to the night markets. That made life easier than pedaling a trishaw. But without a licence, Wellie had to be fleet-footed to flee with his goods whenever the *tehu* (authorities) raided the illegal street stalls.

Eventually, when permanent market centres were built to keep hawkers off the streets, Wellie managed to secure a stall. But his problems were far from over.

*“At Angsua (Redhill ABC Brickworks Market), hooligans would roam around to collect protection money. They demanded \$36 a month. Of course, we refused. So we met with the big boss to try and settle the issue. But at the Thomson Road market they carried guns to threaten us.”*

Despite these run-ins, business was good for Wellie in the 1960s.

*“I used to camp out at Boat Quay near the river to wait for the boats to bring in the batik sarongs from Indonesia. When they docked, everyone would chiong (scramble) and grab whatever they could. First come, first served - depending on the designs you got, you could become very rich. We used to sell our batik to the Burmese. And they were rich. Every time they came they would pay us in US dollars.”*

At Woodlands, Malaysians would cross the border to buy Wellie's batik. Plying his trade from market to market seven days a week, life eventually became more stable.

#### TO THE VILLAGE

In the 1970s, expositions and fairs gave Wellie other avenues to sell his textiles. At one exposition, he met a fellow merchant, Eng, who told him about a new commercial development.

*“She said it was called Holland Village Shopping Centre. In 1978, the government didn't want us in the streets anymore. She had secured a unit for herself and thought that I might want to open a shop there.”*

Scraping together a princely \$5,000, Wellie made a downpayment for a unit and Wellie Batik Fashions was born. His offerings also widened. Wellie no longer sold only fabric. He was now bringing in pre-cut dresses, pillowcases and more. He saw an opportunity.

*“The dresses came from Indonesia. I took them apart bit by bit and saw how they were stitched. I thought it was something that I could do.”*

More than four decades later, self-taught Wellie continues to sew his own pieces. His youngest son, Erick, returned from working abroad and joined the business in 2013 with with one of his sisters. Wellie's seven other children have their own careers.

#### THE NEXT GENERATION

Erick traded in his business shirts and cufflinks for a batik shirt and jeans. Making the switch was not easy.

*“We really had different ways of thinking. My dad has always been a one-man show. He only wanted to take cash payments, while I wanted us to be able to accept credit cards. He was afraid that he couldn't handle the machines, so I pasted stickers on the buttons to guide him. Sometimes we laugh, we talk it out - it's always a learning experience both ways.”*

#### PIVOTING IN A PANDEMIC

Wellie and Erick were not spared from the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. With no tourism and events cancelled, demand plummeted. Online orders helped but these dwindled soon too. Erick knew that he had to think of something fast.

*“A customer came up to me just before things got bad. He suggested that I make masks. That was a good idea. But I couldn't just make regular masks. My sister had this idea to make a rectangular mask that you could insert a surgical mask into.”*

The Ang family came together to save the business. Erick would handle the orders, Wellie would cut the patterns, and his sister would sew the rectangular masks. By the time Singapore went into a circuit breaker, they had sold 1,000 pieces. The father-and-son team also worked tirelessly from home to sell their goods online with Erick posting masks for sale. They also live-streamed on Facebook to promote Wellie's dresses, shirts and other batik items.

*“With the shop closed, we managed to get back 10% of our total sales - just enough for us to survive. We have our grumbles about COVID, but life still goes on, right?”*

#### A LIFELONG DEVOTION

As the interview drew to a close, I realised that I had taken up over an hour of Wellie's sewing time. Erick joked about how his father's working hours are really from 7pm to 11pm every night. Before taking my leave, I asked Wellie about what keeps him going, night after night.

*“I have been working all my life. I cannot just sit around and do nothing. Ever since my wife passed on, I've been pretty much alone. I'd rather spend my time and energy on my passion, as I've done for the past 40 years.”*

As my taxi drove away, I saw that all the windows in the block were dark, save for one. Wellie's room. The night is forever young for the oldest tailor in Singapore. ♦



**1** Wellie operating his temporary pop-up stall at a night market in the 60s. **2** In the 70s: He brought in a myriad of batik designs for customers to pick and choose from. **3** In the 80s: His range widened, all hand-made including clothes and cushions. **4** The fruits of his labour after 70 years. Wellie was hesitant to be photographed not wearing his trademark batik shirt. **5** Custom shirts and dresses are still made to measure. **6** Father and son: The practical contrasts with the stylish in their choice of pandemic masks.

**7** At 95, Wellie still threads his own needle with steady hands. **8** Wellie's original Chinese marriage certificate. **9** The family, circa 1960s. With so many heads to care for, Wellie had to work doubly hard. **10** Wellie works quietly and conscientiously to late-night Chinese radio in his spartan bedroom.



# Global MADE Local

IS IT A QUESTION OF APPROPRIATION OR ACCULTURATION?

*Baba Ong Jin Teong* examines the origin of soupy desserts that have been adapted and often enhanced by the Peranakan Chinese in Southeast Asia. He also explores snack foods that originated in China and India and were modified in Malaysia and Singapore.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY ONG JIN TEONG. THIS FEATURE COMBINES THE FINAL TWO INSTALMENTS OF A THREE-PART STUDY ON DESSERTS AND SNACK FOODS.

## Soupy DESSERTS

THE ADAPTATION OF MANY SWEET TREATS IS very localised, so there are significant variations across Southeast Asia. Several Malay *kuih* and Indonesian *kue* were adapted by the Peranakan Chinese, and some were enhanced using Chinese ingredients or handiwork.



### Pulot Hitam & Bee Ko Moi

One example of enhancement is *pulot hitam* to which the nyonys added dried longan. *Pulot hitam* is a relatively simple dessert like the English semolina or rice pudding. It is also known as *bee ko moi* (black rice porridge) in Penang Hokkien. Dried longan brings a fresh taste to this dessert. I like serving *pulot hitam* topped with ice cream or with the traditional *santan*, or coconut milk.



### Nyonya Pengat & Bubor Cha Cha

*Cha cha* evolved from *pengat*, a traditional Malay sweet dish cooked with coconut milk, *gula melaka* and only one item from an assortment of fruits and root vegetables. For instance, there is *pengat pisang* using banana, *pengat labu* with pumpkin, and *pengat keladi* with yam. The nyonys adopted this dessert and, combining bananas, yam and sweet potatoes, simply called their version *pengat*.

*Pengat* is a festive nyonya dessert like *kueh ee*, consumed during Chap Go Mei, the 15th day of the Lunar New Year. Thus, much care was taken in cutting the yam and sweet potatoes into precise shapes and sizes.

Some nyonys do not consider it proper to serve *pengat* at other times of the year. That is probably why *pengat* was modified to become *cha cha*, a dessert that can be eaten any day of the year.



### Chendol & Bee Tai Bak

Versions of *chendol* are found all over Southeast Asia. *Chendol* is thought to have originated in Indonesia, from the Javanese / Sundanese word, *jendol*, which means 'bump' or 'bulge', presumably referring to its shape.

The Thais call it *lot chong*, or 'gone through the hole'. The Vietnamese call it *banh lot*, and Cambodians simply, *lot*. In Myanmar, it is *mont let saung*. Peranakans have a dessert called *bee tai bak* which literally means 'rice sieved through the eye'.

To the Chinese, a short rice noodle has the same name, *bee tai bak* in Hokkien, or *lao shu fen* in Mandarin, because it resembles rat droppings or the animal's tail. In Hong Kong and Taiwan it is also known as silver needle noodles. *Bee tai bak* was probably introduced to Java by the early Chinese settlers many centuries ago and evolved to become *chendol* as a dessert using local ingredients.

*Bee tai bak* is made by swiping a ball of ground rice dough over a perforated metal sheet into boiling water below. *Chendol*, in contrast, has dough that is cooked into a viscous liquid and then pressed through the sieve into ice-cold water. *Chendol* is mostly made of ground rice in Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia and to some extent, Indonesia. In Malaysia, the Malays tend to use rice but the Peranakans use ground mung bean mixed with a little tapioca or *sago*.



### SAGO GULA MELAKA

*Sago gula melaka* is a simple pudding made from sago, served with *gula melaka* syrup

and coconut milk. Cookbook writer Wendy Hutton described it as a favourite dessert after an expansive curry tiffin, much loved by the colonial British. The nearest English equivalent is semolina pudding or rice pudding. The recipe appeared in one of the earliest cookbooks published in Malaya in 1920, called *The "Mem's" Own Cookery Book* by Mrs W E Kinsey. This was meant to advise the "Mem" - European expatriate ladies of the house in colonial times - on how to manage their kitchens. Mrs Kinsey substituted local ingredients for the original European ingredients that were in short supply post-war. I wonder if she modified her semolina / rice pudding or picked up the recipe from her kitchen helpers.



# Snack FOODS

MUCH CONFUSION SURROUNDS the names of related *kueh* with Chinese origins like *kueh tutu* and *ban chien koay*. Also with snacks that have Tamil origins like *putu piring* and *apom* or more commonly known as *apong* locally.

It could be the way the Malays, nyonyas and Indians have adapted one another's dishes in what was Malaya. Some dishes are learned from their neighbours while others are learnt from hawkers without much help regarding the recipes, and so are not likely to be absolute reproductions of the original. To the non-Chinese, *ban chien koay* would be quite a mouthful to pronounce. So it became *apong balek* – a Malay or nyonya patois description of the dish. *Putu piring*, *apom* or *apong* and *putu mayam* are the more familiar Tamil foods adopted as snacks by the communities of Malaya.



## Putu Mayam

*Putu mayam*, sometimes called *putu mayong* by the Chinese, is made in a similar way to the beehoon used in Penang and Singapore laksa. The thick beehoon can be found in all the countries of Indochina, Burma and in Yunnan, China. I have wooden moulds used for *putu mayam* and for thick laksa beehoon, and they are very similar except for the size of the holes at the bottom of the moulds. The holes for *putu mayam* are much finer. Both doughs are made from rice. The Chinese connection here is *ban chien koay*, largely made from wheat flour.

The Tamils of southern India and Sri Lanka have a type of pancake made with fermented rice and coconut called *apom*, *apong* or *appam* which has no filling, other than egg, at least in the version that I grew up with. Batter is poured into a claypot sitting over a charcoal fire then swirled around in the pot. Another claypot filled with charcoal is placed on top to bake the pancake.



rice and glutinous rice. The method for the preparation is similar.

Ground rice is mixed with water and salt, and sometimes sugar, in some recipes, into a fine crumbly mixture.

The mould is partially filled with the rice mixture, the filling is added and then it is topped up with the rice crumble, without being compressed.

Otherwise the cake will be hard. This crumble and filling is steamed in a mould for *putu piring* but for *kueh tutu* it is formed in a mould and transferred to the steamer using a muslin cloth.

In Melaka and Singapore, *putu piring* is sold by the Malays and the Chinese but in Penang is mainly prepared by the Indians.

The Tamil *putu* is traditionally steamed in bamboo cylinders. The cylinder is first filled with grated coconut and a thicker layer of the rice crumble, then another thin layer of grated coconut, a thicker layer of rice crumble and finally a thin layer of grated coconut. Sometimes sweet fillings are added. A half coconut

shell has also been traditionally used for steaming.

Nowadays aluminium tubes have replaced the traditional bamboo. The *putu* is a breakfast dish commonly eaten with curry. It is also taken as a snack with *gula melaka* or sugar and grated coconut by the other races.

The name *putu piring* reflects the local adaptation of the Tamil *putu* with piring, which means saucer in Malay. The *putu piring* is about three inches in diameter and half an inch thick. We used to eat it with grated coconut. There is jiggery, an unprocessed brown sugar or *gula melaka* steamed within the *putu piring*. Variations of *putu piring* can be found in Indonesia and the Philippines.

*Kueh tutu* is very much a Singaporean adaptation of a Fujian version of the *song gao* from Shanghai. *Song gao* is a large cake made from ground rice similar to *putu*. It has fillings of red beans and red dates, and steamed for about 45 minutes because of its size. *Kueh tutu* only needs a few minutes to steam.

The main difference between *putu piring* and *kueh tutu* is the filling. *Kueh tutu* has more fillings such as *gula melaka*, grated coconut cooked with *gula melaka*, red beans and the inti used in *pulut inti*. *Kueh tutu* comes in more petite sizes than *putu piring*.

## Apom / Appam, Ban Chien Koay and Apong Balek

The Sri Lankans or Ceylonese as they were known then, arrived as immigrants in Malaya to take up positions in the Malayan Civil Service. Most of them were Tamil. That's how we have *apom* or *apong*. The Chinese brought *ban chien koay*. The main difference is *apong* uses ground rice while it is wheat flour for *ban chien koay*.

*Ban chien koay* is a sweet pancake originating from Fujian Province. A similar soft and fluffy pancake called *apong balek* by the nyonyas of Singapore and Melaka is often confused with *ban chien koay*. *Balek* means 'backwards' or 'upside-down' in Malay, referring to the fact that *apong balek*, like *ban chien koay*, is folded into a half-moon shape. The reason for the mix-up is probably because the Chinese name is difficult to pronounce in Malay.

The Tamils of southern India and Sri Lanka have a type of pancake made with fermented rice and coconut called *apom* or *appom*. It has no filling other than egg, at least in the version that I grew up with.

## Putu Piring & Kueh Tutu

*Putu piring* originated from the Tamil *putu* from Sri Lankan and South India; it is also known as *pittu* in Sinhalese. *Kueh tutu* most probably originated from the Shanghainese *song gao*, literally translated as 'loose' cake. The word 'loose' is significant in the preparation as well. Both use ground rice, although some *song gao* recipes use both ground

The sweet *apom* or *appam* is often mispronounced as *apong* by non-Tamils. The Malays and nyonyas of Melaka and Singapore have added local products like ground rice, coconut milk, coconut water and *gula melaka* to the wheat-flour based *ban chien koay* and called it *apong balek*; this version is smaller but thicker than *ban chien koay*. Fillings can include banana, durian and jackfruit.

The Penang *apong balek* is traditionally cooked in brass moulds similar to *apong bekuah*, which is another *kueh* related to *apong* since the main ingredient is ground rice. *Bekuah* means that it comes with a thick gravy or rich sauce cooked with sliced *pisang raja*. *apong bekuah* is served with

a sort of banana *pengat* in Singapore and Melaka but with a plain sauce in Penang. Indonesia has a similar *serabi*. Interestingly, *serabi* is traditionally cooked in a claypot.

*Bekuah* is often mispronounced as *bokwa* - I had wondered what happened to the *bowka* (papaya in Hokkien)! ♦





# Dinner is served

in a pretty *tengkat*.



The Peranakan Dinner 2021, our first ever virtual *makan makan*, almost did not happen because of the pandemic. Happily, it exceeded expectations. The delightful 11-course Peranakan *Tok Panjang* dinner, carefully prepared by chefs from Shangri-La Singapore, was sent to the homes of guests, enjoyed in comfort with family and friends\*. The specially-curated dinner by *Nyonyas Violet Oon* and *Sylvia Tan* and *Baba Christopher Tan* proved so popular that we decided to request some recipes from them that our readers can try out at home.

ALL THE DISHES HERE WERE PREPARED AND PLATED BY SHANGRI-LA SINGAPORE CHEFS. PHOTOGRAPHS BY LINDA CHEE.  
\*SEE PAGE 53 ON HOUSEBOOUND DINNERS, HEARTFELT SUPPORT

## APPETISER



## Achar Chilli

STUFFED GREEN CHILLI ACHAR

IN HONOUR of the late President and Mrs Wee Kim Wee. Inspired by the recipe from the cookbook, *Cooking For The President*, by their daughter Ms Wee Eng Hwa. Recipe transcribed by Violet Oon. This appetiser involves several steps to prepare the chillies and the papaya filling before the final step of packing the papaya into the chillies. It should be prepared at least a week before it is ready to be served.

## Ingredients

### FILLING

2.5 kg green papaya  
2 tbsp salt

Peel and finely julienne papaya flesh. Rub with the salt and leave aside for 30 minutes. Put into a muslin bag and squeeze out all the excess water. Sun dry or dry in a fan oven without heat to be totally dry. Pack and set aside in the chiller till ready to use.

### REMPAH KUNING (yellow spice paste)

90g ginger  
150g old turmeric root  
7g dried red chillies, soaked in boiling water till soft  
150g garlic

Grind all ingredients till very fine.

### PICKLING LIQUID

515ml Chinese rice vinegar  
320g sugar  
1.8 litre water  
2/3 tsp salt

1 tsp *belacan* powder  
150ml oil

Mix all ingredients of the pickling liquid together, set aside. Fry the rempah in the hot oil and when fragrant, add the *belacan* powder and stir fry briefly. Add the pickling liquid, bring to the boil, and simmer for 10 minutes. Cool and remove oil on top. Makes 2.5 litres of liquid.

35g dried prawns, washed, drained and ground till fine. Then dry fry till dry and aromatic.  
20g deep fried garlic, chopped

### CHILLIES

800g large green chillies, trim away most of the stem, massage chillies, cut a slit 2/3 along the length, remove seeds and inner stem  
1 tsp *kapor* (optional)  
2 litres water

Dissolve *kapor* in the water. Soak chillies in the liquid for 45 minutes to render them *crisp* (*renyah*). Drain and set aside.

**Method** Mix the dried papaya, dried prawns and garlic. Add the achar chilli liquid till enough to wet the mixture. Soak till the mixture swells up (*kembang*). Use chopsticks to stuff the papaya into the chillies and press in gently till compact. Put the chillies into a glass jar stacked side by side. Pour in the remaining pickling liquid and leave to pickle in the fridge.





# Kerabu Kacang Botol

WINGED BEAN SALAD

INSPIRED BY A FAMILY RECIPE from the late Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee. Recalled, transcribed and tested by Violet Oon.

## Ingredients | 4 – 5 PORTIONS

130g winged beans  
50g beansprouts, remove roots  
15g or 2 red chillies  
25g or 2 shallots  
15g torch ginger (*bunga kantan*)  
5 prawns, peeled and deveined

### SAUCE

2 tsp calamansi lime juice  
¼ to ½ cup coconut cream  
½ tsp salt  
2 tbsp dried prawns, soaked and pounded till fine  
1 tbsp sugar

**Method** Lightly blanch the prawns and chill in cold water. Mix the sauce ingredients well and set aside. Trim the winged beans and slice on the diagonal into thin slices about ½ cm thick. Finely julienne the red chillies. Finely slice the shallots lengthwise. Finely shred the torch ginger using only the top 2 cm of the pink bud. Mix all salad ingredients in a bowl and toss with the sauce. Top each individual serving with a prawn.

## Ingredients | SERVES 8 – 10 PEOPLE

1 cup coconut milk  
1 tsp cornflour, made into a paste with a little water  
Pinch of salt

2 cups *kimchiam* or dried lily buds  
2 cucumbers  
8-10 medium prawns  
1 tbsp *sambal belacan* (chilli and shrimp paste)  
1 tsp salt or to taste  
1 tsp sugar or to taste  
Juice from 2-4 limes or to taste  
8 *belimbing*, sliced, optional  
4-5 shallots, peeled and sliced  
2 red chillies, sliced

**Method** Place coconut milk in a small pot and heat over a gentle fire. Add a little water to cornflour to make a paste. Add paste into coconut milk, stirring till it thickens. Add a pinch of salt. Rinse dried lily buds and soak in warm water till they soften. Snip off the hard tips of the stalks. Squeeze dry and leave aside. Peel cucumbers and remove soft cores. Cut lengthwise into four and slice on a slant to get thick slivers. Boil prawns in a small pot of water till they turn just pink. Cool and peel. Keep stock for another use. Add *sambal belacan*, either homemade or bottled, to softened lily buds and mix well. Add salt, sugar and lime juice to taste. Place a layer of cucumbers on a plate and top with dressed lily buds. Garnish with shallots, *belimbing*, chilli and boiled prawn. Pour the coconut cream over and toss just before serving.

# Sambal Kim Chiam

SPICY LILY BUD SALAD  
BY SYLVIA TAN



# Udang Goreng Assam

TAMARIND PRAWNS BY SYLVIA TAN

AN EVERYDAY DISH, the influence here is probably Portuguese with their predilection for curing foods in vinegar. Don't throw away the oil left over from frying; toss it with hot rice for a cook's treat!

## Ingredients | SERVES 6 – 8 PEOPLE

500g medium-sized prawns  
2 tbsp tamarind puree  
(1 tbsp tamarind paste, dissolved in 2-3 tbsp water)  
1 tsp salt  
1 tsp sugar  
3 tbsp oil

**Method** Peel prawns leaving on the heads and the tails. Remove the black vein running down the back. Rub tamarind, salt and sugar well into the prawns and leave for a couple of hours in the fridge to marinate.

Heat 3 tablespoons of oil in a wok. When smoking hot, lift the marinated prawns from the marinade and fry, searing the outsides. When evenly browned, remove and serve with white rice or coconut rice.

## STARTERS

## Ingredients | 12 – 15 PORTIONS

120g *ju her* or dried cuttlefish, julienne, wash and drain at once – leave to dry  
120g pork belly without skin, boil till soft, julienne, and SAVE pork stock  
150g cabbage, julienne  
400g *bangkwang* or jicama, peel and julienne  
70g carrot, peel and julienne  
3 (10g) dried mushrooms, soak in cold water till soft, squeeze dry, remove stalk and julienne  
200g large onion, slice lengthwise

20g garlic, chopped finely  
50g shallots, sliced finely  
10g mashed *taucheo* (fermented soyabean)  
¼ tsp sugar  
1 tsp light soya sauce  
salt to taste  
oil for deep frying

### GARNISH

Spring onions, sliced finely  
Chinese celery  
Serve individually on a small romaine lettuce leaf

**Method** Heat 1 cup oil in a wok, add cuttlefish in very hot oil and fry till it crackles and is crispy. Drain. Leave 2 tablespoons oil behind. Add the garlic, shallots and *taucheo* and stir fry till fragrant. Add mushrooms and stir fry till fragrant. Add the pork belly and fry well. Add the onions and stir fry well. Add the carrots and *bangkwang* and fry well. Add the cabbage and pork stock. Finally add the *ju her*, setting aside some for garnishing. Simmer till cooked. Spoon the mixture onto the lettuce leaf. Garnish with the *ju her*, spring onions, Chinese celery and serve.



# Ju Her Char

FRIED DRIED CUTTLEFISH JULIENNED WITH VEGETABLES BY VIOLET OON





# Satay Ayam Panggang

SATAY CHICKEN  
BY SYLVIA TAN

THIS ROASTED VERSION has no relation to the Malay satay which relies on trade spices such as coriander and turmeric. The nyonya *satay* relies on just three ingredients - chilli, onion and *belacan* (shrimp paste) - but is still rich and full-tasting, thanks to the coconut milk. Together with kaffir lime leaves and lemon grass, it makes for an aromatic spice paste for meat or fish, which is roasted or grilled, rather than sauteed as called for in the traditional recipe.

While the coconut milk gives a rich creaminess to the sauteed dish, it is conveniently used to baste the meat when roasting or grilling. Do save the drippings to make a delicious sauce for the *satay ayam*.

## MAIN COURSE

### Ingredients

SERVES 10 PEOPLE

10 chicken legs, separated into thighs and drumsticks  
4 red chillies  
2 tbsp *belacan* (shrimp paste)  
2 large onions  
250 gm packet coconut cream  
1 tsp salt, or more to taste  
1 tsp sugar  
2 stalks lemon grass, bruised  
4-5 kaffir lime leaves  
1 tbsp vegetable oil

**Method** Make the spice paste by grinding or pounding the chillies, *belacan* and large onions into a fine paste. Rub spice paste, tossed with the kaffir lime leaves and lemon grass stalks, well into the chicken and under the skin, too. Season with salt and, if preferred, with a little sugar.

Add half of the coconut cream. You can do this the day before and leave the marinated chicken covered in the refrigerator overnight.

Heat fan-assisted oven to 180°C. Just before cooking, add a spoonful of vegetable oil to the marinated chicken so that the pieces will not stick to the pan.

Place marinated chicken on the pan and cook till burnt in parts. Check after half an hour. If not done, cook for another 15 minutes. Turn down the heat if necessary. The chicken needs a slow fire, so do take time over it.

Remove chicken from the oven. Add a cup of water to the tray to mix in the remnants and cook over the hob, to make a sauce. Add the rest of the coconut cream at the end to obtain a creamy sauce to pour over the chicken. Taste and adjust seasoning as preferred.

# Orang

In this second of a two-part series on Baba Malay, *Baba Ronney Tan Koon Siang* examines the provenance of words that are neither Malay nor Hokkien.

### SHELLABEAR ON BABA MALAY

In 1913, Revd William Shellabear, a noted scholar and missionary in British Malaya, referred to Baba Malay as the language of the Straits-born Chinese. He had also translated the Bible from English to Malay. Shellabear observed that Baba Malay was derived from a “low Malay used in the Netherlands East Indies to describe the language employed by Europeans, Eurasians, Chinese and other foreigners in Java as a common means of communication between themselves and the other inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago\*\*”.

The colonisation of China, India, Indo-China and the Malay Archipelago by the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British cumulatively lasted almost 450 years, influencing the evolution of languages in the region. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, recognised the value of the trade language we now use as Baba Malay. When he first set foot on St. John’s Island on 28 January 1819, he asked some local fishermen in Malay: “Are there any Dutch around”. The next day, he landed in Singapore and the rest is history. \*\*

More words came from East Java. This is because of maritime trade links between the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Melaka and Penang) and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), in particular, Surabaya, Semarang, Bali and Jakarta (ex-Batavia). Among relatives, we talk about the “*ijor*” or “*hijau*” in Malay as a familiar reminder that our ancestors had once traded in that part of Java where communities of Chinese migrants had settled over a period of at least 600 years. In Eastern Indonesian Malay,

*pergi* becomes *pi*, like in Baba Malay. Various words also came from Arab and Indian traders. Historical accounts of Nusantara for hundreds of years revealed intermarriages with local women to create unique communities called the Peranakan Jawi and



Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, was known to speak the trade language similar to Baba Malay.

Peranakan Chetty. From time to time, the Peranakan Chinese witnessed inter-marriages with members of these two Peranakan communities.

### ANECDOTAL ORIGINS

My regular barber, an Indian Muslim, related this interesting story about *minggu*. Apparently, during the Portuguese colonial era, a priest named Santo Domingo was popular in addressing confessions from his congregation. Later, he regularly set Sunday aside to hear people’s problems. Over time, that regular day became known as *hari minggu* or Sunday. In my younger days as a student in secondary school, my mother used to

# Cheena

check with me before I stepped out of the house: “*Ada shilling tak?*” or “*ada duit tak?*”. She was concerned whether I had the small change to pay the bus fare or buy food at recess time. “*Duit*” is a Dutch word. “*Shilling*” is English.

When I was visiting Croatia, a signboard outside a public building said “*sekolah*”, which means school in Malay too. This word originated from the Greeks. ♦

### SOME COMMON BABA MALAY WORDS DERIVED FROM NON-MALAY AND NON-HOKKIEN INFLUENCES

<b>PORTUGUESE</b>		<b>buyong</b>	pot
<i>aloji</i>	watch	<i>garpu</i>	fork
<i>almari</i>	cupboard	<i>nyela</i>	window
<i>bangku</i>	bench	<i>kreta</i>	car
<i>biola</i>	violin	<i>lampu</i>	lamp
<b>DUTCH</b>		<b>bas</b>	bus
<i>rokok</i>	cigarette	<i>buku</i>	book
<i>arloji</i>	watch	<i>choklat</i>	chocolate
<i>bola</i>	ball	<i>duit</i>	cash
<i>belanda</i>	Dutch	<i>Eropa</i>	Europe
<b>ENGLISH</b>		<b>HINDI</b>	
<i>biskut</i>	biscuit	<i>roti</i>	bread
<i>lori</i>	lorry		
<b>ARABIC</b>		<b>PERSIAN</b>	
<i>halal</i>	permitted	<i>baju</i>	clothes
<i>jawab</i>	answer	<i>bandar</i>	town
<i>masjid</i>	mosque		
<b>TAMIL</b>		<b>SANSKRIT</b>	
<i>kapal</i>	ship	<i>agama</i>	religion
<i>kuda</i>	horse	<i>bahasa</i>	language
<i>mangga</i>	mango	<i>gajah</i>	elephant

\*Baba Malay. An Introduction to the Language of the Straits-born Chinese: W. G. Shellabear, Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society No. 65 (December, 1913), pp. 49-63  
Baba Malay evolved with colonisation  
\*\*Stories of Early Singapore: H F Pearson.

# Bukan

# Cheena



# The Straits Chinese Beau Monde



## MARRIED INTO THE CULTURE

**1905** Leong Lai Tho as a 13-year-old girl. My grandfather, Baba Tan Kwee Swee, was the grandson of Tan Kim Ching, who was the son of Tan Tock Seng. He was a carefree divorcee when he set first eyes on 13-year-old Leong Lai Tho in Penang. He was smitten. Born in Macau of mixed Portuguese ancestry, her mother was an inveterate gambler who fled from debtors to Penang where a branch of her family had already settled. Great-grandmother took her two youngest daughters with her but they had to survive by doing needlework. Both sisters would probably have been sold had it not been for Great Grandma parading them on the Esplanade on Chap Goh Mei night!

Precious photographs kept by *Nyonya Pat Lin* of her own grandmother and extended family showed that babas and nyonyas were quite the fashionistas at the turn of the 20th century. The women were not the only trendsetters. The men in the prominent Tan Tock Seng/ Tan Kim Ching clan were equally dandy Anglophones living lavish lifestyles as loyal subjects of the British Empire. California-based Pat presents a fascinating sartorial record of her family from that time.



### 1910s This is how privileged and fashionable families dressed their little children.

Daughter Maggie Tan, the future Dr Maggie Lim, in 1913. She is dressed in the latest of party dresses for little girls: lighter fabrics or pastels, and cut for freer movements. The Peranakan touch? 24 carat bangles. Son John Tan Thoon Lip in Lord Fauntleroy fashion and holding one of the first Teddy bears. The bears made in honour of American President Teddy Roosevelt were made in Germany by the Steiff company around 1907. There was a worldwide teddy bear craze. Steiff bears are worth over \$100,000 today!



### 1914 John Tan Thoon Lip and his sister Maggie.

Grandma Leong married at the age of 14 years and had all her three children by the time she was 18. Grandma was known for her looks, but she really brought the brains into the gene pool. Highly intelligent, she was a voracious reader and well-versed in Chinese classics. Both her children John and Maggie excelled in their studies and were Queen's Scholars. Upon marrying into the family, Grandma was groomed by Grandpa's stepmother with whom he was close, and educated in English and Baba Malay by tutors he hired. The gossip was that Grandma had used *koon tau* or black magic on him, and she never got over being referred by the establishment *bibiks* as "*Macau*" (a derogatory term for loose women) but also for the fact she was born in Macau. She became a model nyonya to a fault. Her close relationship with Mrs Seow Poh Leng, the daughter of Grandpa's brother, Baba Tan Boo Liat, also helped her gain acceptance. In the end, both her children brought a kind of redemption.



### 1935 A family photo with Grandma seen in a crisp white *baju koon*.

This photo was taken in the orchid garden of their home at 5 Mount Elizabeth where the hospital now stands. Her skill as a horticulturist - growing and selling orchids - enabled the family to supplement their diminishing income in the challenging years before the war.



# Nyonya Molek



BEAUTIFUL LADY

**Grandma wore imported Edwardian jewelry** – a diamond starburst pendant, chain and watch. The pendant was one of a set of diamond star pins the King of Siam gave as gifts to her and Mrs Seow Poh Leng.

**Grandma in a simple baju shanghai** and heels. Grandpa is holding his *topi* (sun helmet) and a walking stick that was part of a gentleman's accessories.



**1930s In sporty flapper style.** My mother Maggie and Grandma were among the first to cut their hair in the early 1930s flapper "bob" style. Grandpa Kwee Swee was livid with Maggie for cutting her hair but shut up when Grandma also sheared her hair.



**BECAUSE  
Grandma  
WAS AN  
"Outsider"**

and not born a *nyonya*, she adapted so completely to the demands of the culture. Here she is seen in traditional *baju panjang* with the *kerosang ibu* set and a thick gold chain, and a pair of *gelang kaki* on her ankles. The gold chain was one of the pieces of jewellery that was sold during the Great Depression to keep the family alive. As with many of the local *towkays*, Grandpa lost the immense wealth of past generations and the family was forced into living in much reduced circumstances.



**1948 From the 1930s – 50s, the preferred fashion** in Singapore was the *cheongsam* or *baju Shanghai*. With the *cheongsam* came rolled hair and open-toe shoes. Grandma Leong (left) is carrying my sister Gillian and Mrs Seow Poh Leng (right) is holding baby Lim Su Min. With the two grandmas are Stella Kon (right) and Pat (left).



# The Dandy BABAS

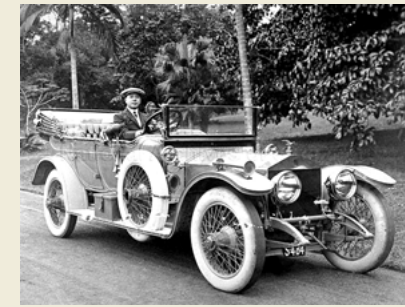


Tan Kwee Swee

**1890s Kwee Swee** (centre) was the fourth of five sons whose mother died when the boys were all under 10 years of age. All of them were 'farmed' out to different caregivers. While Kwee Swee is formally dressed in a Western bowtie and jacket, his two younger brothers are already trendsetters way ahead of their time, sporting brooches with *baju lokchuan* when the fashion for men wearing *kerosangs* was not yet widely practised even then. What a discovery!



**Grandpa Kwee Swee's brother, Tan Boo Liat**, suavely turned out in top and tails. Both brothers were educated at Raffles Institution.



**Dressed for driving.** Cousin Tan Wi Yan in his famed Rolls Royce.



**A dandy-looking young Kwee Swee** in boater hat, cummerbund and walking stick.

*Gila taik kuda!*

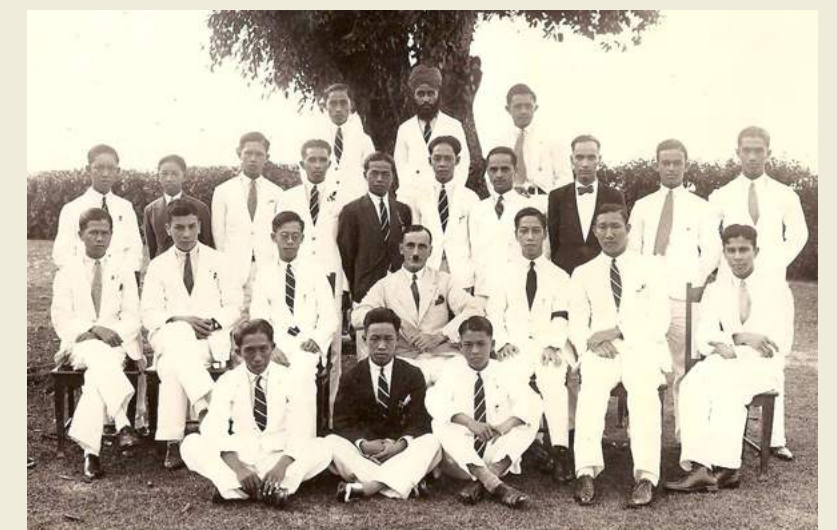


**A young Kwee Swee on horseback.** Both he and Boo Liat shared a passion for horses.

OR  
**Crazy for Horse shit!**  
my Grandma used to scoff



**Kwee Swee's cousins** Tan Chay Yan (who was to become the "Rubber King of Malaya"), Wi Yan and Tat Yan. This photo shows a further hybridisation of clothes and accessories worn by Babas. They are trendsetters in stiff white collars and bowties from British fashion, but worn beneath open-buttoned *lokchuan* a la jackets. Chained watches and a boater hat complete the studio shot.



**1920s Prefects at Raffles Institution.** Kwee Swee's son, John Tan Thoon Lip (seated third from left), was head prefect. Here he is photographed with fellow prefects and Principal Mr D A Bishop. John was to become the first local Registrar of the Supreme Court in Singapore.



# Lie Pa-toe Nio:

A Portrait, A Name  
and A Journey of Discovery

Nyonya Diane Chee gains  
insights on Peranakan Chinese  
womanhood and interestingly,  
divorce, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Java.



LEFT: Lie Pa-toe Nio was  
the descendant of three  
generations of Chinese  
officers.  
Batavia, circa 1900.  
Hand-coloured photograph  
2020-00456

**L**AST YEAR, THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM acquired a hand-coloured photograph from circa 1900 of a Peranakan Chinese woman wearing a silk damask skirt and blouse with elaborate gold embroidery. Little was known of the subject except her name, Lie Pa-toe Nio, and the fact that she was from a prominent Peranakan Chinese family in Batavia.

In researching the woman in the portrait, her family and community, a journey of discovery followed for both myself and Dr Seng Guo Quan, Assistant Professor, History at the National University of Singapore.


At an ACMtalks lecture in August 2021 hosted by the Asian Civilisations Museum and supported by the Kris Foundation, Dr Seng presented a fascinating insight into Lie Pa-toe Nio's family and the nature of Peranakan Chinese womanhood in late 19th century Java.

By accessing the Kong Koan Papers from the Chinese Council of Batavia, now held at Leiden University in the Netherlands, he was able to establish that Lie Pa-toe Nio was the descendant of three generations of Chinese officers. Her father was Lie Tjoe Hong, 3rd Majoor der Chinezen Batavia, who held the most senior Chinese position in the colonial civil bureaucracy of the Dutch East Indies. An 1884 marriage registration from the same archive documented her marriage to

Gouw Kiang Djan, himself descended from a family of Chinese officers.

Using information from divorce trial records also maintained by the Chinese Council of Batavia, Dr Seng discussed the expectations the Peranakan Chinese women had of their husbands and revealed the measure of autonomy that they had over their marriages. Divorce was by and large accepted in 19th century colonial Java, with 60 to 80% of divorce suits filed by women. Interestingly, middle-class Peranakan women were less likely to tolerate polygamy and more likely to initiate divorce, while women like Pa-toe Nio were very unlikely to divorce, despite their husbands being more likely to foster concubines.

The acquisition of this ancestral portrait is part of the Museum's mission to explore the diverse Peranakan communities of Southeast Asia. The portrait joins the Museum's collection of artefacts illustrating the rich material culture of the Peranakan Chinese communities of Dutch colonial Indonesia. During the same lecture I highlighted examples including a red velvet blouse and skirt that are strikingly similar to the outfit worn by Pa-toe Nio; a pair of embroidered boots that would have been worn at the turn of the 20th century by Peranakan Chinese women in Java on formal occasions; and a rare wooden carriage likely used for a ceremony known as *Tedun*, marking a child's first year (or first steps).

This portrait, along with the boots and the carriage, will be displayed in the new Museum permanent galleries. We hope that you will come to see them when the museum re-opens in early 2023. Until then, they are available to view on the National Heritage Board's Roots.sg website. 

NYONYA DIANE CHEE IS ASSISTANT CURATOR OF THE  
PERANAKAN MUSEUM.

# A Diversity of Webinars in 2021

Slightly more than a year since the Association organised our first webinar in December 2020, we grew our capacity in 2021 with different livestream platforms to accommodate the widening participation. We also experimented with live and recorded presentation methods. Nyonya Theresa Tan reports.

FOR THE LATEST INFORMATION ON MORE ONLINE TALKS, FOLLOW US ON OUR FACEBOOK PAGE AT [HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/THEPERANAKANASSOCIATIONSINGAPORE](https://www.facebook.com/theperanakanassociationsingapore) AND SUBSCRIBE TO OUR YOUTUBE CHANNEL [HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/C/THEPERANAKANASSOCIATIONSINGAPORE](https://www.youtube.com/c/theperanakanassociationsingapore)

On  
**9 OCTOBER,**

Prof Wang Chaolong and Prof Roger Foo from the Genome Institute of Singapore, Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A\*STAR), shared their groundbreaking findings from their DNA testing of 177 self-identified Peranakan subjects. In *The Peranakan Identity – What's in Your Genes?* webinar, world-renowned geneticist Prof Wang presented the science, methodology, conditions, results and the conclusion of his project. Many Peranakans were intrigued by the findings and many volunteered to be test subjects, should there be another similar project.

THE PERANAKAN IDENTITY

On  
**25 SEPTEMBER**

morning, Baba Alexius Wong generously shared his cooking tips all the way across the Pacific from the United States, despite the time difference. Wong demonstrated in detail two dishes in his *Making Dinner with Pineapples – udang lemak masak nenas and sambal nenas timun* – where he gave advice on how to remove the skin and 'eyes' of the pineapple, and how to choose pineapples.

MAKING DINNER WITH PINEAPPLES

On

**25 JULY,** Baba

Shawn Seah spoke on *Seah Liang Seah – King of the Streets*, where he shared the fascinating life story of his forbear Seah Liang Seah (1850 – 1925) and some colourful stories from Bendemeer House (formerly Whampoa's house) where lavish parties were held for the local elite. In the Zoom chat window, the audience responded with their own stories of times past (some of their own and some stories told to them by their parents or grandparents).

SEAH LIANG SEAH – KING OF THE STREETS

On

**8 AUGUST,** we set

up a live *Cherki* game session with Nyonya Benita Fong and her volunteer player Baba Bryan Tan. This was a tutorial on the history and rules of *Cherki*, a card game popular among Peranakans in the early 20th century. Prior to the day's session, we mailed out *Cherki* cards to the audience so as to facilitate learning. The location became a 'film studio' with multiple cameras pointed at the players, the cards and the overall game setup.

Our association volunteers spent the whole morning on the technical setup and testing, so as to ensure a smooth and enjoyable experience for all to learn how to play the game, read the cards and count the scores.

CHERKI

On

**28 AUGUST,**

art historian Dr Lesley Pullen from the Victoria and Albert Museum presented her research on *Patterned Splendour – Textiles evident on medieval Javanese sculpture*. The session was moderated by museum and art consultant Lee Chor Lin. The audience was delighted by the beautiful photographs and detailed line drawings of complex patterned textiles on these ancient sculptures, supported by similar 20th century textiles. Dr Pullen and Lee's passion for the topic, respect for each other's work and the discourse around this aspect of art history, held the audience's attention way beyond the planned duration.

PATTERNED SPLENDOUR







One step forward for ethnic chic. Designer Ratianah (left) leads the way with various embroidered kebaya tops matched with hand-drawn batik. At the fashion show, Eunice Chua (centre) wears an all-lace baju panjang or long tunic flashing the three-pin kerosang and batik sarong. Melissa Sidek wears a baju Melayu batik set and drapes a lace selendang or scarf over her styled chignon.



Batik fashionista Harris Zaidi turns men's traditional batik wear upside down with his elegant and witty combinations. He puts on the "Manpao," a modern version of the male Chinese jacket (chanson) from designer LaiChan, and wraps a vintage batik sarong with ease. Harris anchors his inimitable style with a chain of pearls (why not?), a silk camellia, gold cuff or star-burst diamond brooch. He declares his love for precious stones and jewellery without a blink of the eye.



Locating the signature of fine tulis (hand-drawn) batik makers is a revelation for the amateur collectors. During the show-and-tell sessions conducted by Lee Chor Lin (right). Cynthia Wee-Hoefer (centre) looks on as Giam Cheng Han traces a prized centrepiece cloth to Oey Soe Tjoen from Kedungwuni.

**W**E COULD ONLY FEAST with our eyes on the Heritage Festival at Design Orchard. The pandemic restrictions meant no singing or eating. Only shopping for a wide range of Singapore-based items.

The programmes were engaging, different and popular though trimmed down to a handful of participants. Thanks to the *Batik Sayang* group that I co-founded with Suhaimi Lazim on Facebook, we roped in our network of batik lovers and textile collectors to conduct dressing styles, unveil precious fabrics, demonstrate their art and impart their Peranakan heritage.

Our string of events kicked off with ChorLin Lee, expert on Southeast Asian textiles and author of *Batik: In Search of an Identity*, with show-and-tell clinics. Guests brought their precious batiks for ChorLin to assess and share her knowledge of the batik and sulam of their *kebayas* (right).

In a zoom conversation with Peter Lee, we chatted about his search for batik wear for his late

parents Elizabeth and Lee Kip Lee, a former president of The Peranakan Association Singapore. Peter explained that meeting friends from Jakarta proved to be the turning point that led him to batik workshops, inner sanctuaries, textile academics, authors and friendships spanning countries.

Violet Oon and Peggy Jeffs hosted several intimate shopping sessions. Eunice Chua and Shirley Tay were gracious ambassadors dressed in *sarong kebaya* and ethnic apparel. Daniel Tendean shared on his prized collection of batiks. Equally absorbing was contemporary batik painter Tumadi Patri, who talked about his art while Harris Zaidi, HanLi Hoefer and Suhaimi Lazim showed off their dressing flair. The Festival was a huge success despite the pandemic. 📌

**THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE WAS AN OFFICIAL PARTNER OF THE HERITAGE FESTIVAL AT DESIGN ORCHARD, 23 JULY - 31 AUG, 2021.**

# Heritage comes to Orchard

*Nyonya Cynthia Wee-Hoefer highlights the curated activities at the Heritage Festival at Design Orchard.*

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER.



## Housebound Dinners, Heartfelt SUPPORT

**O**UR ANNUAL GRAND SOCIAL BASH for the year became a unique virtual Peranakan Dinner in which an 11-course *Tok Panjang* meal was delivered to the homes of guests on 25 September 2021.

The feast was conveyed by Shangri-La Singapore in delightfully colourful *tengkats* that enhanced the generous servings of appetiser, starters, main course and dessert, accompanied by champagne and sake from generous sponsors. Guests were entertained with an hour-long fashion and jewellery parade via video link.

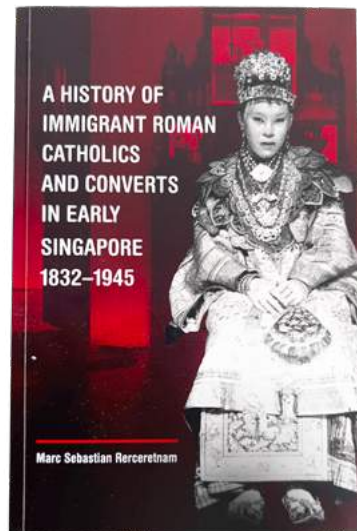
The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) expresses its gratitude to our members who have stood by us and given their unwavering support in these challenging times despite our being unable to meet in person. 📌





## THE STORY OF Teochew Catholic Peranakans

Baba Colin Chee reviews a unique period in Singapore's early Roman Catholic history



BACK IN LATE 2019, Baba Marc Rerceretrnam told me passionately that he had already started writing a book about possibly Singapore's first "indigenous" Peranakans - the Teochew Roman Catholics. It would be based on his extensive research into the marriage registers of the Catholic Church in Singapore and his interviews with members of his own extended family and others.

"One would be surprised by the depth and historic detail of the data collected by our churches," he had remarked to me then. I merely nodded my head at the time, impressed by the thought of it, but not quite grasping what it really meant. Until I held Marc's book in my hands in September this year.

Marc had, after all, given a very interesting talk on the subject in 2019 to a group of 50 fascinated listeners at Baba House on Neil Road. And then again in December 2020 during a TPAS webinar in which he spoke from Sydney on the historical

convergences between the Straits Chinese community and the beliefs and practices of Christianity.

While he may have begun to write about the Catholic Teochew Peranakans, the layers of data that came his way got him thinking and writing about several other compelling narratives. One of these would be the evolution of a truly multi-racial community in colonial and post-colonial Singapore and the accidental but overarching role of the Catholic Church in enabling this evolutionary mix.

In his preface to the book, Rev. Monsignor John Paul Tan, Chancellor of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, writes: "...the Catholic Church is a melting pot of many races, cultures, languages, social classes and educational backgrounds. This is true both in colonial and modern-day Singapore."

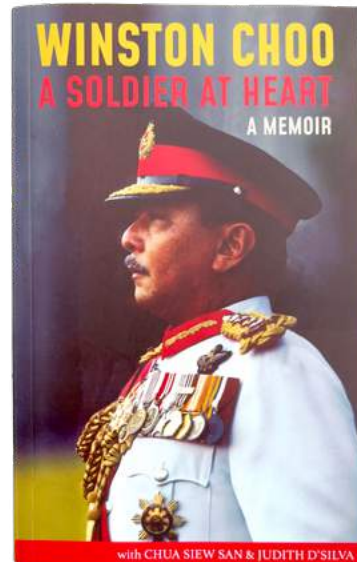
In his foreword, Baba Peter Lee, Marc's primary school mate at St Michael's, observes: "The church has been a very important conduit for one of colonisation's by-products - hybrid cultures, mixed marriages and multiracial communities."

As Marc sees it: "The island of Singapore has long thrived on the fusion of trade and culture, and this history goes back at least 700 years; a tradition which continues into Singapore's immediate past. Beginning in 1832, this story is about the meeting of different cultures, who are united under a newfound faith."

"While most other communities at this time were bound by some degree of clan, racial affiliation or language, the Roman Catholic community was different. From its early days, it was an amalgam of people from different backgrounds. It is possible that divisions did exist, but there were also more opportunities to overcome them than previously recognised. In effect, this community predates modern concepts of multicultural and multiracial Singapore by at least a century."

In his earnest style of writing, Marc's in-depth research comes alive as he narrates story after story. These are what you will want to look out for in the book - one savoury sliver at a time. ♦

"A HISTORY OF IMMIGRANT ROMAN CATHOLICS AND CONVERTS IN EARLY SINGAPORE 1832-1945" IS AVAILABLE FOR SALE ONLINE FROM SGBOOKSHELF AT [HTTPS://WWW.SGBOOKSHELF.COM](https://www.sgbookshelf.com)



## Soldier with a Heart

Baba Colin Chee as a pioneer NSman, is touched by Gen Winston Choo's memoir

I WAS ONE of Singapore's first pioneer graduates, along with most of my faculty mates, hauled into National Service (NS) in 1971 immediately after graduating from the then-University of Singapore.

I say "hauled" because prior to full-time NS in the armed forces for the next two and a half years till 1973, we were the forty-niners who had by then done three years of part-time NS in the Police Force or Vigilante Corps while in university from 1968.

We were fuming then - complaining about the unfairness of it all and the lost career opportunities. Looking back now, we saw the necessity of it. Britain had announced in January 1968 that it would fully pull out its armed forces from Singapore by 1971 and the government had to fill a defence and national security vacuum, quickly. We barely had an army then.

General Choo's remarkably open record of the SAF's evolution is a detailed and fascinating behind-the-scenes account of the organisation's challenging formative years.

However, simply and sensitively written by Nyonyas Chua Siew Min and Judith d'Silva, using careful transcriptions by Irene Kan, it is clear "A Soldier at Heart" is more than a story about the maturation of the SAF.

For me, there are also two big narratives that come through in the general's memoir. The first is his, his wife Kate's and their children's commitment to the well-being of Singapore and the sacrifices they made to ensure this. The second, the ever-present lasting and trusting network of relationships the general built with his peers in and out of Singapore from his early years in the army right through his long 18 years at the head of a now formidable and fully integrated defence force.

It is fitting that General Choo dedicated the last chapter of his book to his wife Kate and his children. Because without their patience and understanding it is hard to see how this essentially family man could have dedicated his life to building up the SAF. The biggest "gift of my life", he says of his wife Kate.

"His greatest strength was his people skills. He could reach out and connect with anyone: soldier, sailor, and airman; private and general; Sultan, President, and Minister; military spouse and the children,"

Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean.

The strongest assurance he got must have been this: "It moved me most deeply when my children said: 'Pa, you may not have an army anymore, but you still have us,'" and Kate said, "Yes, you still have me." "

"His greatest strength was his people skills. He could reach out and connect with anyone: soldier, sailor, and airman; private and general; Sultan, President, and Minister; military spouse and the children," writes Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean.

Many of these relationships which he nurtured carefully and skilfully were of great value not just to the SAF but also to Singapore. But, I suspect, also not least to himself as an ordinary man and as a soldier. ♦

"A SOLDIER AT HEART" IS AVAILABLE IN MAJOR BOOKSTORES IN SINGAPORE.

## THE LEGACY OF Bibik-Ni Mak Nenek\*

\*An almost affectionate colloquial term for busybody

Baba Ronney Tan Koon Siang enjoys bantering in the vernacular with first-time author Bibik Rosie Tay over English tea



Photograph by Colin Chee.

ROSIE TAY dedicates her book to her father Tay Kim Chuan. The name rang a bell. One of the four photographs inside showed his Melaka seaside villa, Appleton. Pure serendipity. It was the house built by Kim Chuan's father, Tay Boo Siew, the best friend of my great-grandfather Tan Jin Ann. And a relative by marriage.

Based on hierarchy, Rosie is my new-found Kim Poh or grand aunt.

Another discovery. The book is written completely in Baba Malay; a collection of short stories cherry-picked and crafted from her 81-year memory bank. Rosie was a student and later teacher at the Malacca Methodist Girls' School. She moved to and also taught in Singapore before living abroad for many years.

Over English tea at her well-furnished apartment, Rosie was every bit the elegant, *senonoh*-to-the-hilt educated *bibik* and every inch a Peranakan *jati*. Her diction and articulation came across impeccably without a hint of Singlish. Surveying her spacious home, I tried to find signs of Chinese decor. There was none. Even the grand piano was graced by portraits of Queen E and Prince Philip. The quintessential Anglophile *bibik*.

*Bibik-Ni Mak Nenek* has a print run of only 300 copies. Rosie was not even sure the book would sell. But by the time I finished writing this review, the book was absolutely sold out.

A cautionary reminder to any reader. One should understand Baba Malay and grow up in a household that spoke and lived the Peranakan Chinese way of life. Otherwise, some of the content may appear

incomprehensible. And having William Gwee's A Baba Malay Dictionary at hand would certainly help.

I needed Rosie on what part of the book tickled her fancy. Her delighted reply was page 229: "... *kalu antu bantal dah masok klambu...*". Her giggle intimated some sly innuendo which I understood perfectly.

Her book has 14 chapters with idiomatic titles such as "*Sekoh Ulat Tak Mati Lapair*" which may sound suitable for a *wayang* peranakan. I picked a chapter at random. *Bukan Peranakan Chelop* was about eating at a *tok panjang*. All the nuances, twists and turns of language were there. I was transported to a time in my pre-adolescent years when visiting Melaka. Boisterous talk in the kitchen when the ladies would banter with coquettish affection.

Among the gems were the *charot* (expletives) and *panton* (poems) interspersed throughout. I actually read aloud to test my own command of Baba Malay. There were times when I had to correct my intonation.

The book has satisfactorily captured the essence and delight of Baba Malay.

My challenge to the community: draw inspiration from Rosie and stage these short stories and anecdotes.

The National Archives of Singapore and the National Library Board should come in to preserve this seminal (and last) attempt to record the language as it was actually used.

Reading *Bibik-Ni Mak Nenek* warms me up with reminiscences; The life that babas and nyonyas led ... it's all in this book. ♦





Goh-Kopoh (in wheelchair) with her best friend, Ven Sek Bao Tong. Goh-Kopoh was giving a speech at the 80th Anniversary of the Buddhist Union.

Photograph of Ven Sek Bao Shi courtesy of Buddhist Union.

Baba Benedict Khoo fondly remembers Ven Sek Bao Shi, who led the Buddhist Union for 20 years

“Panjang panjang umur, Kopoh Botak!”

cousin Nicholas enthusiastically though innocently, wished our grandaunt during a Lunar New Year visit. My Goh-Kopoh, paternal grandfather’s fifth sister, did have a shaved head. She was a Mahayana Buddhist nun known as Venerable (Ven) Sek Bao Shi.

Only after her death on 19 March 2021 did I discover that Goh-Kopoh had played a major role in the Buddhist community and the wider society in her lifetime. She had been the Religious Adviser of the Buddhist Union (BU) temple at Jalan Senyum since 1986 and was the President and Trustee of the BU since 2000.

Goh-Kopoh was born in 1941 as Amy Khoo Chwee Neo, the seventh child of Khoo Guan Chiang and Tan Siew Kee. Like most nyonyas of that era, she was educated at the



Goh-Kopoh Amy (centre) with her sisters, Nancy and Shirley, and a neighbour in 1950. She was very close to her family, especially her parents. Courtesy of Benedict Khoo.

Convent of Holy Infant Jesus. She was a fervent worshipper at Novena Church. She worked as a clerk at the Public Service Commission at the Old Supreme Court and National Library where she met her best friend, “Auntie Wong” as we would call her, who later

on also became a nun known as Ven Sek Bao Tong.

Goh-Kopoh wanted to become a Catholic nun but the death of her parents within six months of each other in 1969 devastated her. Out of great love and filial piety, she made offerings to her deceased parents, whose ashes are at the BU Columbarium, on the *Chay It* (first) and *Chap Goh* (15<sup>th</sup>) days of the lunar months.

She found solace in Buddhism. Through regular visits, she learnt the philosophies of Buddhism and Dharmas from the Head Abbot of the BU, Ven Seck Kong Poh (Baba Tan Kim Teck), who succeeded Ven Dhammasukha (Baba Tan Keng Lock) the founder of the BU organisation in 1938. Many English-speaking Peranakans were devotees of this particular temple and the land for the current temple was donated by Nyonya Wee Beng Kim in 1952.

Goh-Kopoh and Ven Sek Bao Tong were active temple volunteers. Ven Sek Bao Tong told me they both had the desire to find a greater and deeper meaning in life and wanted to do more to assist the needy. In 1981, after 17 years in the civil service, Goh-Kopoh was ordained as a nun at Kong

Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery.

Reciting *sutras* was a struggle as they were all written in Chinese. She was English-educated and grew up speaking Malay and Hokkien with her family. She memorised each Chinese character and slowly, could read entire passages. Some doubted if she understood the sutras but that did not affect her as she knew such talk was untrue. A fighter by nature, Goh-Kopoh miraculously defied death after being critically ill twice. She became more resolved in her mission to propagate Buddhist teachings.

I vividly remember her wide, sincere smile on visits at Lunar New Year to *soja* (pay respect) to her. She would give us children a one-dollar coin for luck and prosperity, and I would grab a bunch of sweets from the candy basket beside her. She would respond with a handful more to fatten my pockets.

Although a nun, she upheld her Peranakan traditions strongly. She would often cook her favourite dishes, *buah keluak*, *chap chye* and *mee nyonya* which she adapted to

her dietary obligations. The *keluak* nuts were stuffed with mushrooms instead of meat and the *rempah* or spice mix excluded shallots and garlic. Apparently, she often cooked huge batches of *buah keluak* and quietly delivered them to various temples to share with other monks and nuns who loved this dish.

Goh-Kopoh succeeded Ven Seck Kong Poh after his death in 1986 and made many contributions. A life member of the Inter-Religious Organisation, she co-founded the *Sakyadhita* (Daughters of Buddha) association for Buddhist women in 1994 with Ven Sek Bao Tong and was instrumental in setting up the Sakyadhita-NKH Dialysis Centre three years later. She served many years in the Singapore Buddhist Federation and Buddhist-affiliated schools such as Manjusri and Maha Bodhi and championed not only support for the female monastic community but also the vulnerable groups of society.

Her cremated remains revealed various Śāriṃ, pearl or crystal-like

objects found in her skull that are deemed as relics of Buddhist spiritual masters. These are encased in glass at the Dhammasukha Memorial Hall



The Buddhist Union main premises at 28 Jalan Senyum was founded by Ven Dhammasukha in 1938. Photograph by Benedict Khoo.

opposite the main temple, along with her dearly held items such as prayer beads and trophies she won as an athlete at CHIJ.

I will always remember my Goh-Kopoh for her dynamic yet down-to-earth personality and her passion for peace and kindness. I hope that her story will inspire others to be courageous and yet never forget their cultural roots. ♦

## Custodian OF THE Chetti Culture

Baba Cedric Tan pays an affectionate tribute to Melaka’s *panton* doyenne Meenachi



Meenachi handing out angpows at the annual Semayang Dato' Chachar in 2018. Photograph by Cedric Tan.

ON 5 JUNE, 2021, the *panton* doyenne and elder of the Chetti Melaka community, Nyonya Meenachi A/P Genasamy or Achi Meenachi as I fondly addressed her, left us at the ripe old age of 88.

In the eulogy written in the The Chetti Voices Facebook page upon her demise, she was described as “... a woman ahead of her time – towering in her dreams for her family, steadfast in her beliefs and deeply passionate about our culture”. As the community’s cultural icon, she worked tirelessly to impart the values of respect and perseverance so that the oral traditions of the Chetti Melaka can be transmitted to the next generation.

Meenachi was renowned for her spontaneous *pantons* and was featured in one of Malaysia’s longest running sitcoms, Baba Nyonya, where she

bantered *pantons* with the character Bibik Kim Neo played by the late Datuk Kenny Chan.

Here, I share this profound *panton nasehat* which Meenachi composed on the spot for me, during one of my unplanned visits to the temple near her home:

**Kalo mo belajair baca kitab**

To read the holy texts

**Mesti kenal alif ba ta**

One must comprehend the alphabets

**Kalo mo belajair cara beradab**

To display one’s chivalry

**Mesti kenal adat budaya**

One must comprehend the custom and culture (of the community)

She is survived by her three wonderful daughters: Lecturer Indrani Pillay who is working on a recipe book on Parchu (Chetti ancestral worship) dishes, USA-based Ganga Haris who lauded her mum as “spicy, colourful, loud, strict, diligent, critical and often misunderstood” and Amu Pillay, the serving Assistant Hon. Secretary of the Sri Poyatha Vinayagar Moorthy Temple in Melaka.

May *Achi* find peace wherever you are now. *Aum Shanti* (peace be with you). ♦



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## APA KHAIR?



19 - 20 MARCH 2022

### 2ND BABA NYONYA LITERARY FESTIVAL

THE POD, LEVEL 16, THE NATIONAL LIBRARY BUILDING,  
SINGAPORE 166064

This is the second edition of the Baba Nyonya Literary Festival which aims to showcase the written works of both Peranakan and non-Peranakan writers to propagate Peranakan culture. The festival will be a physical-cum-virtual event. The line-up of renowned names for the festival include Khir Johari, Sylvia Tan, Josephine Chia, Lee Geok Boi, Sanjay Kuttan, Christopher Tan, Desmond Sim, Walter Woon, Robert Yeo, Loh Kah Seng, Peggy Jeffs and Azizah Ali.

TICKET SALES WILL BE LAUNCHED IN THE SECOND WEEK OF JANUARY 2022.

22 JANUARY 2022

### DESIGN A HARIMO (TIGER) LANTERN & win prizes!

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# THE GRANDDEST CHRISTMAS PARTY on Heeren Street

**H**EEREN STREET was abuzz with excitement and activity. Christmas had arrived. And with a lot more pomp and circumstance than usual.

Every lamp post was adorned with mistletoe and miniature wreaths, and the pavement had fake, styrofoam snow scattered all over in small heaps resembling *kelapa parot* (shredded coconut).

One house on the entire row was alight with a brilliant glow. The Soh family was having a grand party and everyone on Heeren Street was invited. That night, the creme-de-la-creme of Melaka's high society had arrived at the home of Soh Bee Neo in their finest accoutrements, appropriately styled in a Christmas theme of course.

Molly Yeow looked around the sprawling compound with no small trepidation, as the elegantly garbed folk glided about sipping chilled lemongrass tea infused with *bunga telang* (blue pea flower), their polite, tinkling laughter filling the air.

Ever since the last uncomfortable confrontation Molly had with her *ko po chik* (grand aunty), she had braced herself for an all-out Cold War with the much-feared matriarch of the family. Imagine her great surprise when an intricately embossed invitation card in red and green came sliding out of her mailbox which expressly invited her and her husband Willie to the grandest Christmas party ever to grace the lofty and dignified court that is Heeren Street.

Willie had absolutely no interest in grand parties and socialising, so he had politely declined the invitation, feigning sickness.

A string quartet on a raised platform in the middle of the grounds played Beethoven's *Molto Adagio*. The guests mingled and clinked glasses as

a tuxedoed waiter offered Molly and her friend Daisy a smoking aperitif.

"Aiya Molly, don't look so nervous, you're putting me on edge too!" tittered Daisy, who was sheathed in a *kebaya* of brightest yellow splashed with sunflower sulam embroidery and already somewhat tipsy.

"Ada banyak orang kaya, look at all these rich people!" exclaimed Daisy as she sloshed her bubbly all over the perfectly manicured lawn.

"Everyone on Heeren Street is here - the advertising Laus, the wholesale Tans, and even the banking Chees! Look Molly, you see that man



Illustration by Eileen Chan.

over there?" Daisy's voice dropped to a whisper.

"Orang cakap dia memang gila urat (people say he's a serial womaniser), the whole world knows," She pointed at an elderly gentleman hunching over a cane, a wrinkled paw caressing the bottom of the lady next to him.

Molly nodded sagely, and wondered if the geezer even had the energy to lift himself from the bed to the bathroom, let alone flirt with women half his age.

"That's *Inchek* (uncle) Gatal, he owns an empire of rubber, gambier, cotton and has five wives and countless mistresses," cackled Daisy, who was obviously enjoying herself immensely.

"Once, his first wife caught him in bed with another woman who wasn't

Baba Bryan Tan indulges in a bit of juicy gossip and bubbly with Molly and Daisy at grand aunty Soh Bee Neo's ostentatious party.

a wife or even a mistress. You should have seen her, *muka dia sampay merah macham pantat monyet* (her face became as red as a monkey's bottom)," Daisy had a glazed, blissful look.

"I remember that day. She came over to my house looking like she had eaten a whole *bakol* (basket) of *chili padi*, yelling for a pair of *gunting* (scissors) because her household help wouldn't let her near one," cackled Daisy.

"Did you lend it to her?" "The lady barged into my house, grabbed one and ran off, what was I supposed to do? What she did after got the whole street talking..."

Molly started imagining the unpleasant things that were going to be cut in two.

"*Inchek Gatal*'s wife started tearing up all the pillows and cushions in the house, the feathers flooding the entire inside of his house and spilling out onto the streets. *Amboi*, I thought winter had come to Melaka, *kus semangat* (goodness)!"

An enormous palanquin suddenly cut into their view, lifted by four men in elvish costumes. The two ladies hastily jumped out of the way to let the gilded procession through.

Molly caught a furtive glimpse of the figure laying sprawled on the palanquin's settee. Daisy had to brace her arm to keep her from falling.

"Molly, you look like the ghost of Christmas past! *Lu baik tak, mau dudok sikit* (are you okay, do you want to sit down)?" It was the corpulent figure of the Soh family's ancient enemy and Soh Bee Neo's arch nemesis, Ong Poh Geok, who sat astride the ostentatious cathedra, copious folds of paunch overflowing from her being. ♦

IN THE NEXT CHAPTER, DISCOVER SOH BEE NEO'S INTENTIONS IN INVITING HER WORST ENEMY AND HER GRANDNIECE MOLLY TO HER EXTRAVAGANT PARTY. WHAT DOES THE SCHEMING MATRIARCH HAVE IN MIND FOR THEM?



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

### ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

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

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

### SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL

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

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

## LANDMARKS

### THIAN HOCK KENG

The oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore was founded in 1821 although the present structure, built without nails, was completed only in 1841. The temple is dedicated to Mazu, the Daoist goddess of the sea and protector of all seamen. Many of the temple's patrons were Peranakan pioneers, such as Tan Tock Seng, who donated \$30,000 for renovations. He also founded the hospital named after him. The Hokkien Huay Kuan, a community organisation for Hokkien people in Singapore was housed at the temple and also helmed by Peranakan pioneers.

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



### AMOY STREET & TELOK AYER STREET

One of the first Peranakan enclaves, now occupied by restaurants and offices. Many Peranakans from Melaka moved to this area as soon as the East India Company began to lease out land for sale.



### EMERALD HILL ROAD

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

### BLAIR PLAIN

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

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

### TAN SI CHONG SU

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

**Address** • 15 Magazine Road Singapore 059568



### KATONG & JOO CHIAT

Once the nerve centre of Peranakan life in Singapore. In its heyday it was the site of nearby grand seaside villas and elaborate Peranakan terraced houses. The latter can still be seen in a walk along Koon Seng Road. 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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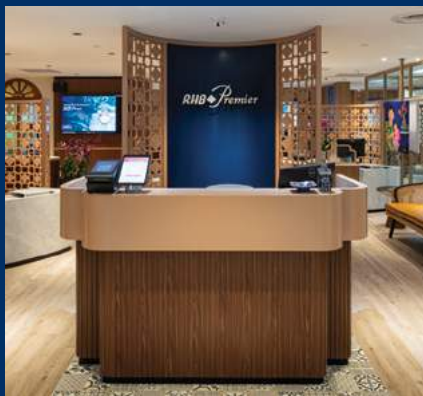
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