

# learning to cook in post-indep

NYONYA LINDA CHEE REMINISCES ON GROWING UP WITH CUTTINGS AND COOKBOOKS  
NEXT TO HER STUDY TABLE

Singapore was in dire straits after independence in 1965. The young nation had been cast out of Malaysia. The British armed forces were moving out East of Suez, threatening high unemployment. Money was tight for the local populace during those early years. It was a luxury to dine in the few fancy restaurants like Troika or Cathay. Schoolchildren invariably went home for their meals before hawker centres made eating out affordable decades later. Home cooking was thus an essential routine of daily life. English-educated Peranakan housewives and their daughters, or sons who liked to cook, honed their culinary skills largely from local cookbooks, magazines or newspapers. It was also a time when girls learnt the domestic sciences in school.

“Where’s your sugar?” a stern Mrs Wan remarked as she bit into the rock bun. My partner, Teo Lee Huang, and I were mortified. We had overlooked this essential ingredient. Our eyes fell to the ground. Three golden rock buns dotted with dark raisins fell from the corner of my tray onto the cold floor. None broke. Our shortcrust wonders were rocks indeed. Lee Huang and I muffled giggles but quickly shut up. Mrs Wan was not amused.

So much for beginner’s luck. It was my first cookery lesson at Raffles Girls’ Secondary School (RGS). I was in Secondary One in 1970. But I was undeterred by that humbling start and loved my cookery classes every Tuesday. Our bible was *Let’s Learn to Cook*, authored by Mrs Christina M C Fones in 1970. Our principal was the cultured Miss Evelyn Norris, much feared and much loved by many.

All Secondary One and Two classes had to undergo domestic science training. We had to become proficient in skills that would make us good wives. From the single-storey Home Economics Block along Anderson Road, long demolished since, Mrs Fones and Mrs Wan taught gingham-aproned teenagers how to cook, sew and keep the house and kitchen in proper order. For reasons that I had no clue then, we also attended technical class, where we commuted to Swiss Cottage Secondary School for two years to do woodwork and metalwork. It was fun sawing and drilling, and probably good for nation building. But to me it was largely a waste of time.

I was more interested in cooking. Armed with our orange compendium, my classmates and I learnt to cook local favourites such as chicken

porridge, curry puffs, *bubor cha cha*, banana *hoon kueh* and a Eurasian curry called fish *moolie*. But for the most part, we were taught how to prepare English food. In anglicised fashion, we cooked our first French toast; fried eggs sunny side up; and baked marble cake, scones and shortcrust biscuits, where we rubbed lumps of butter into flour with cool fingers until they looked like breadcrumbs. We learnt how to cream butter and sugar until glossy with a wooden spoon, in a Green’s mixing bowl made in England.



*Just a small pile of the recipes I had amassed over 40 years.*

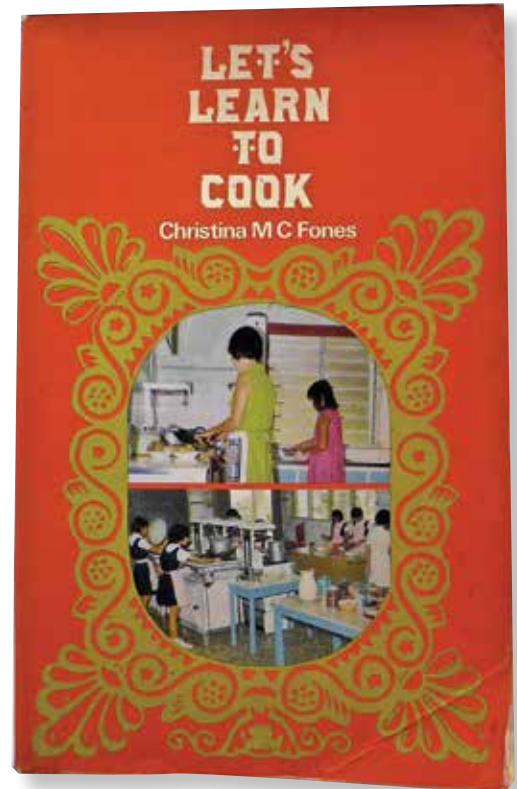
# Independence Singapore

I opted for domestic science as a subject for my 'O' levels. Instead of struggling with the pure sciences like physics and chemistry, I breezed through two years of planning menus and cooking lavish meals. It was a joyous episode of building up my foundational skills in Western-style cooking. I discovered that successful roasts and bakes depended on precise ingredients and temperatures, in contrast with the *agak agak* (estimating) style of Peranakan cooking that I picked up from my mother, Low Suan Neo.

I had found my element with the oven. Swiss rolls, sandwich cakes, doughnuts, éclairs, blanchmange and the spiffy trifle – these mouth-watering *ang mo* desserts were demystified in the school kitchen. Western cooking was so methodical. Even with sauces. To this day, whenever I cook a stew, I still see in my mind's eye Mrs Wan stirring flour into melted butter in a saucepan to demonstrate a *roux*. As she added the milk a little at a time over gentle heat, keeping the *roux* perfectly smooth, the girls would be covertly admiring our elegantly dressed teacher, standing between the

ring stoves in her straight-cut cheongsam and pumps.

My copy of Mrs Fone's classic was long gone when we moved house. The one you see here is a dog-eared collectible kindly lent to me by my friend, Low Whee Hoon. Thumbing through the pages and reminiscing her French toast days, Whee Hoon is inspired to try out at least a couple of recipes, like our famous rock buns!



Who can forget Let's Learn to Cook, with its brilliant orange cover?

## Yellowed Cuttings

My apprenticeship at home began at my mother's side as her *sous* chef. I assembled ingredients and sliced them meticulously – a must! – before I could graduate to frying *rempahs* and cooking whole dishes. Besides the home kitchen and formal study at RGS, I had few



A smattering of yellowed recipe cuttings that remind us of the lifestyles in post-independence Singapore.

# dalam dapur

other avenues to learn to cook. Black-and-white television aired news, comedies, wrestling and the Andy Williams Show. I could not understand cooking programmes in Chinese on Rediffusion. If my mother did not venture to community centres for cooking classes, neither did I.

Our treasure trove came from magazines and newspapers. I have to thank my mother for instilling in me a passion for collecting recipes. Since I was a toddler, she had been subscribing to the UK-based *Woman's Own*, *Woman* and the local *Her World* magazines, later adding *Female*. After poring over them from front to back, she would cut out the recipes neatly and compile them in plastic files. Or paste them in large foolscap exercise books, the ones that came with speckled black covers taped in red at the spine.

My mother copied recipes in cursive British-style longhand, in a mix of patois and ungrammatical English that only Peranakans could understand. With measures like *genggam* (handful), *jari* (thumb-sized) and *mangkok* (cupful). "Aiyee, ya juga," she would say as she gleefully recorded cooking tips or short cuts revealed by this auntie or that grandauntie from Singapore and Malacca.

Holidays were the best time of the year. We cousins would bunch together and play the whole day or *persiang taugh* (pluck the roots off the bean sprouts) while a cacophony of our nyonya mothers gossiped as they prepared *popiah* or *mee siam* in the backyard of our house.

I have duly documented my mother's precious versions of Peranakan dishes, many of which were handed down from my grandmother. I have also kept important recipes from my late mother-in-law, Ada Law (Mum Ada), such as for curry powder, *rendang* and butter cake, which is my husband Colin's all-time favourite.

Before the days when half of Singapore flew out



during school holidays, we had plenty of time on our hands at home. I designed my own recipe book when I was 13 years old. The cover was lovingly wrapped in Reynold's aluminium foil with a giant cut-out of a doughnut in the middle, surrounded by smaller cut-outs of dishes. Many

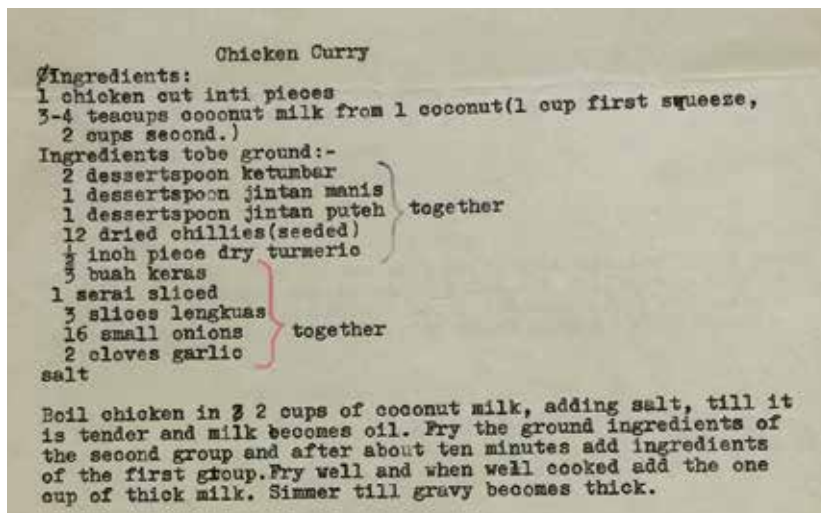
*Cuttings from Her World in the 1960's. Ellice Handy was perhaps the first local celebrity chef.*

of the recipes were copied by hand. Just the other day I dusted it from a corner of my bedroom. The foil has discoloured and deteriorated with age. It looks amateurishly silly now. Still, my book was a carefree schoolgirl's work of art.

Every long holiday break until I was in Secondary Four, I would be at the verandah of our terraced house using my father's white Olympia typewriter to copy recipes from the magazines. In the process I mastered speed typing, later becoming the fastest on the keyboard at the School of Journalism in Times Organisation (now Singapore Press Holdings).

While thinking about what to write for this article, I remembered keeping a pile of cuttings hoping that I would try out a recipe or two when I had the time. Trust a working mother to say that. Fortunately, Colin did not send them to the recycle bin. One of my yellowed *Her World* cuttings, dated November 1961 (when I was just three years old), carries Ellice Handy's famous Siamese Curry recipe to "whet your appetite", along with recipes for Boiled Vegetable and Coconut Milk Sambal, Crab Curry and Dried Curried Chicken (Malayan style).

*Her World* was then known for its extensive spread of local recipes. One important column that carried on for many years in the 1960s was "Malayan Kitchen".



*Female* magazine was also very popular among home cooks. Its recipes commanded such influence that a host of annual cookbooks were spawned for more than a decade. These were eagerly snapped up as soon as they rolled off the press.

*As a schoolgirl, I copiously typed out recipes from British magazines. It was a great way to practise typing.*

The Straits Times and New Nation as well as their Sunday editions, are equally to be credited for rolling out thousands of recipes for home cooks through the decades. These newspapers brought fame to numerous regular contributors, many of whom went on to author cookbooks. Besides the doyenne Ellice Handy, they included Joan Frois, Elizabeth Jay, Aloyah Alkaff, Wendy Hutton and Peranakans such as Terry Tan, Tan Lee Leng, Violet Oon, Lee Geok Boi, Margaret Chan and Sylvia Tan.

### Iconic Cookbooks

Ask any ardent home cook about Peranakan recipes and chances are that she or he would own a copy of the iconic *Mrs Lee's Cookbook* by Mrs Lee Chin Koon, who was none other than the mother of our founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (see pages 11 and 36). It was first produced in December 1974 and reprinted over a dozen times by popular demand. Hers was probably the first compilation of traditional nyonya recipes in an easy-to-follow style for budding cooks. Another timeless classic first produced in the 1970s, in two thick volumes, is *Singaporean Cooking* by Mrs Leong Yee Soo, who happened to be the sister of Mrs Lee Chin Koon. Besides Peranakan recipes, her book added household staples from Chinese, Eurasian, Malay and even Indian kitchens.

But way before Mrs Lee's or Mrs Leong's books appeared, culinary history was made when the seminal *My Favourite Recipes* was published by Ellice Handy in 1952 to raise funds for Methodist Girls' School where she was the principal. Mrs Handy pioneered Singaporean

Photo by Tan Koon-Siang



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Tiles

# PERANAKAN TILES

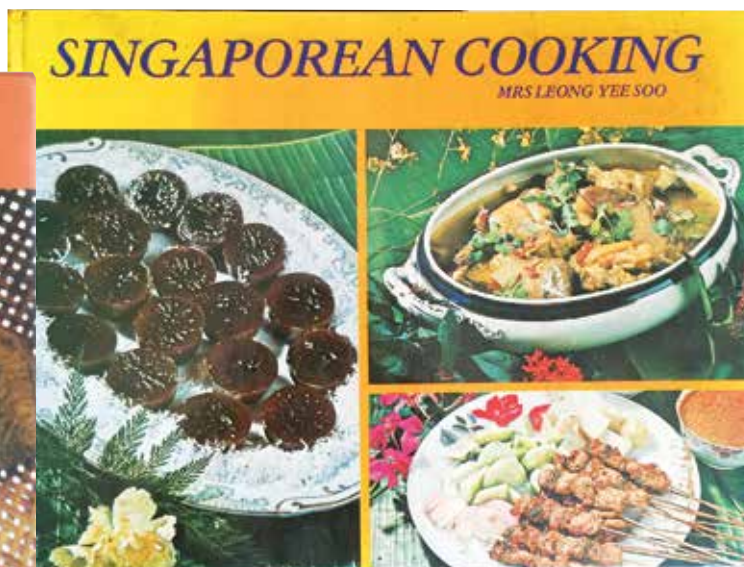
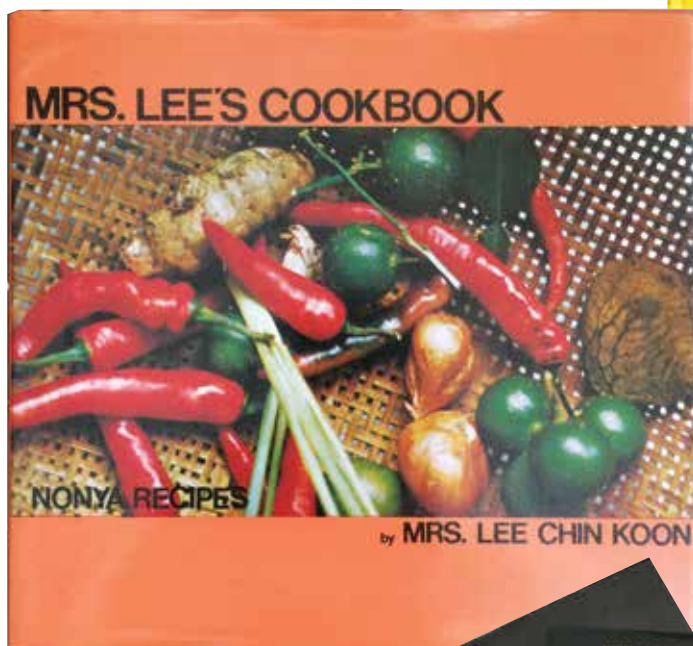
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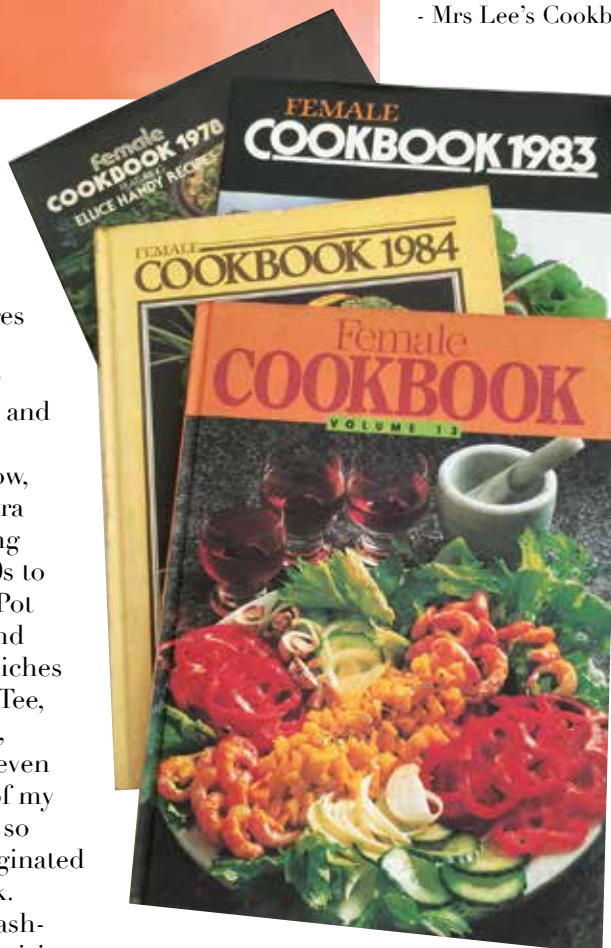
Iconic titles that are a must-have for every Peranakan cook - Mrs Lee's Cookbook and Singaporean Cooking.

recipes that were inexpensive, nutritious and unpretentious. She was said to be the first to give accurate measures and timings. Her only book is a gem prized by grandmothers, mothers and their daughters.

A best seller even now, Mrs Handy's colonial-era recipes reflect the eating lifestyles from the 1930s to the 1950s: From Duck Pot Roast, Date Chutney and Savoury Brinjal Sandwiches to Coconut Candy, Pie Tee, Curry Devil, Mee Siam, Fried Curry Puffs and even Fish Ball Soup. Many of my mother-in-law's dishes so loved by our family originated from Mrs Handy's book. When Mum Ada was cash-strapped in the 1970s, raising a young family, she modified Mrs Handy's aromatic curry powder into her own version and sold them in packets. I am sure that like Mum Ada, Mrs Handy's book has blessed many other people in more ways than one. I know of at least one Peranakan culinary celebrity who still swears by her recipes such as Hainanese *babi panggang* (spiced roast pork).

### The Next Generation

I have not found any need to replicate Mum Ada's curry powder with my trusty Sumeet grinder.



Female magazine was renowned for its annual series of cookbooks featuring recipes from a plethora of sources including home cooks, restaurants and hotels.

It is so convenient to buy curry powder from many sources in Singapore and Malacca now. Her recipe will be passed down to my son, Keith, and daughter-in-law, Melinda, who makes the world's best French onion soup. They are well matched - he does the mains, such as excellent steaks, and she, the starters and dessert, like raspberry *panna cotta*.

Keith learnt much from watching celebrity chefs who show their mettle on food channels on television and clips on google and youtube. These chefs cook from anywhere around the world and are highly entertaining as well. For tasting the actual food, he can pop into any of the fine restaurants that are commonplace in Singapore the global city. Melinda is a hospitality management graduate from Adelaide trained in the classroom kitchen. Married for over a year, the young couple has begun working together on Peranakan staples such as *babi pong teh* (see page 20), *sambal timun* and *bakwan kepiting*. My daughter Olivia, who works in Brisbane, recently concocted a mean *sambal jantung pisang* using ingredients available from Chinatown and the Vietnamese markets. She posted an image of the dish (see page 22) on one of our Peranakan food chat groups on facebook, earning much praise from aunties and uncles there. As a *nyonya* mother, I am gratified. ●

# a much-loved legacy

Even the most experienced nyonya cooks swear by *Mrs Lee's Cookbook*. The late Mrs Lee Chin Koon (Chua Jim Neo) authored this Peranakan classic in 1974 when she was already 67 years old. She had a mission to pass on to "the younger people in Singapore" recipes that were handed down for several generations within her family. We reproduce her recipe for *Mee Siam*, a favourite dish of her eldest son who was Singapore's founding Prime Minister, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew.



## **Mrs Lee's Mee Siam** (Fried rice noodles served with a spicy coconut gravy)

As retasted by Mrs Lee's granddaughter, Shermay Lee.

- 600g (1 packet) *beeoon* (rice vermicelli)
- 600g medium-sized prawns
- 150g *kuchai* (chives)
- 400g (2 pieces) *taufua* (firm tofu)
- 10 *lemo kasturi* (calamansi limes)
- 160g *udang kering* (dried prawns)
- 300 ml oil
- 8 eggs
- 570 ml water
- 600g *taugeh* (bean sprouts)

### **Rempah:**

- 300g *bawang merah* (shallots)
- 15 red chillies or 60 dried chillies
- 3 tbsp *belachan* (shrimp paste)
- 3 tbsp oil

### **Gravy:**

- 300g *taucheo* (salted soy beans)
- 800 ml *santan* (coconut milk, using 150g grated coconut and sufficient water) = 1 small pkt Heng Guan Coconut 'Cream' (250 g)
- 1 medium-sized onion
- 4 tbsp sugar

### **Preparation**

If dried chillies are used for the *rempah*, soak them in hot water. Soak the rice vermicelli (in cold or tap water) for 15 minutes then drain.

Add prawns to boiling water then simmer for 10 minutes. Set aside to cool. Shell, devein then halve prawns lengthwise. (Freeze the shells for use in other recipes).

Hardboil the eggs. Remove and allow to cool. Shell then slice into wedges.

Cut chives into 2 cm lengths.

(Discard the light green and white portion, which is about 5 cm from the base).

Cut the firm tofu into 3 cm strips and halve the limes. Pound/grind the dried prawns until finely minced.

Rinse the bean sprouts. Remove roots, leave the caps.

Prepare the *rempah*. Deseed then roughly chop the soaked fresh chillies. Peel and roughly chop the shallots. Pound/blend together with the prawn paste and oil. It should have a creamy orange texture.

Prepare the gravy. Lightly pound the salted soybeans, if whole beans are used. Peel and thinly slice the onions.

Prepare the coconut milk by soaking the grated coconut in the water for a few minutes and squeezing the pulp dry through a muslin cloth or sieve.

### Method

In a pot, add salted soybeans, coconut milk, onions and sugar. Place pot over the stove, but leave the flame off.

Heat a wok over a high flame until it smokes. Add the oil. Add the tofu then lower the flame. Stir-fry in batches until light golden brown but still soft in the centre. (Avoid overcooking as it will become rubbery). Remove and drain.

Leave about 200 ml oil in the wok then stir-fry the *rempah*. After 5-10 minutes, add the dried prawns and continue frying for 1-2 minutes.

Remove 4 tablespoons of the mixture and set it aside in a small serving dish. Serve it on the side for those who want their *Mee Siam* spicier.

Stir-fry the mixture for about 15-20 minutes or more, until it turns a deep golden brown and the oil has separated.

Scoop out 5 tablespoons of the *rempah* and place it in the pot with the gravy ingredients. Over a medium flame, allow the gravy to simmer (uncovered) for about 30 minutes. Once it has thickened slightly, keep it warm over a very low flame.

Add 570 ml water to the remaining *rempah* in the wok. Stir thoroughly and bring to boil. Add the bean sprouts and cook for a further 2-3 minutes.

Add the rice vermicelli then lower the flame. Using cooking chopsticks or tongs (to prevent the vermicelli from breaking), turn the rice vermicelli and bean sprouts over in the wok. This helps the rice vermicelli to cook evenly and mixes all the ingredients.

Dish the rice vermicelli out onto a large serving plate or onto individual plates. Garnish with the fried tofu, chives and prawns. Arrange the sliced eggs and limes around the edge of the dish.

Serve the gravy in a separate bowl. Pour the gravy over the rice vermicelli just before eating. ●

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chakap chakap

# characteristic

**You have been acting since 1974. Has being a Peranakan influenced you to become an actor?**

I'm not conscious of any overt Peranakan influence on my decision to become an actor. I would call my parents - my father was born in China and my mother was a seventh generation Peranakan - modern, being the first in their families to go to university. There were always books, overseas newspapers and magazines around the house. And there was music, my dad being an audiophile. But being modern meant dispensing with tradition, which meant I was never infused with either Chinese or Peranakan culture.

The closest I got to that is a visual memory of what my grandparents wore. My father's Hokkien parents wore flared floodwater pants and Chinese tunic tops. My mother's Peranakan parents couldn't have been more different. Grandfather usually wore a white *baju tutup* outfit and Mak (grandmother) would always be in a *sarong kebaya*. So my DNA is somewhat fused between the two. I'm really not sure where my inner urge to become an actor came from. All I know was I discovered a buzz going on stage which was both physical and intellectual.

**Do you feel Peranakan and in what aspects?**

I feel Peranakan because of my almost total inability to speak Mandarin or Hokkien! Now that must be in the blood.

**Do you think our culture is sustainable?**

In my life and family, it's almost

all gone. I have no knowledge of Baba Malay or any decent knowledge of Peranakan culture. A lot of this stems from my father's belief that his Chinese roots were a thing of the bad old past and that English was the language of the future. Here was a man who could speak Mandarin as well as all the dialects. I'm not sure how my mother felt. Of course my mother spoke to Mak only in the patois and with her siblings as well. So the patter was always within earshot, but never spoken to me. There was never pressure to learn the Peranakan vernacular.

Only my wife, Sylvia, has hung onto a few traditions. Every time there is a wedding in the younger generation, she insists on a *tok panjang* ('long table' feast) during the celebrations. The Peranakan Association Singapore is doing a fine job. Perhaps it is the conduit for passing down the traditions.

**How do you feel about receiving acclaim for your performances?**

Acclaim is a side issue, because it is only accorded by the eye of the beholder. I am critical about what I do, so I take praise very cautiously and find criticism more useful for the future. I try to be very objective



*In the 2004 movie Perth, Kay Tong's lead performance as deranged taxi driver Harry Lee won wide acclaim from film critics.*

about a performance. What is important is my own appraisal of what I've done, what I can improve on, what was good, what was bad. I'm only interested in getting better and that will continue for a lifetime.

**What motivates you as an actor? Who is your inspiration?**

At this time of my life, what matters is an interesting role, and if possible something different from what I have done before. Rather than emulate anyone, the inspiration for a

part comes from within - which is a strange mix of learnt technique, work and life experience and imagination.

**Which medium do you enjoy most - stage, television or film?**

Television and film have more of a place for me. Stage, when you're young, gets your adrenalin going. But film and television are more intimate. I enjoy the interior work required for the screen. Stage work has to be projected, so there's a barrier to the character's inner life. The camera tries to pick up what's inside a person.

**What was it like acting in the long-running serial Growing Up (1996 -2001)?**

*Growing Up* was one of the best times I had in my career. Working

*Dubbed as Singapore's Robert de Niro, character actor Lim Kay Tong has turned in scintillating performances in all three mediums - television, stage and film. He has starred opposite Sean Penn and Pierce Brosnan in his long film career and is a board member of Theatreworks, which he co-founded in 1985. The ex-rugby national is happily married to popular cookbook author, Sylvia Tan.*



*Above, Kay Tong as our late founding Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, in the famous press conference scene from the SG50 movie, 1965. (Photograph is by courtesy of Blue3 Pictures and mm2 Entertainment).*



*Left, The Tay family in the award-winning serial, Growing Up, set in the 1960s to 1980s.*

*Above, Kay Tong and Sylvia at their tok panjang wedding dinner at home in 1983. Next to them is playwright Michael Chiang, who first introduced Kay Tong to Sylvia.*

regularly day in and day out for six years taught me much about screen acting and building a character for the medium. If there is another worthy series I would not hesitate. I have, post-*Growing Up*, enjoyed working on *The Pupil*. But it only lasted two seasons, even though it picked up a couple of awards at the Asian Television Awards.

**You were once a journalist in *The Sunday Times* and *New Nation*. Would you have made a good journalist if you were not acting?**

I was a journalist for nearly five years and I enjoyed the writing. Perhaps I was fortunate the press was going through a tough time - the Anson by-election, the rise and fall of the Singapore Monitor. My

wife could see I was getting frustrated and urged me to strike out full time as an actor.

That was the best advice and show of support I could only have dreamt of, but it was real! My marriage and being an actor are all I can ask for. Maybe if the acting work dries up, I will return to writing. But then this is someone who loves Samuel Beckett!

**What advice can you give to aspiring local actors?**

From my experience as an actor - work very hard on your audition piece. Strive to be better than anyone else going for the part and get the job! Easier said than done and luck does play a part, but you have to make the most of that when it does come your way.

**As a founder of TheatreWorks, are you satisfied with how theatre has progressed in Singapore?**

The theatre scene has developed tremendously. However performance standards vary. I think a proper apprenticeship is necessary to get the basics right. But we are always in a hurry. Aspiring artists want to get somewhere fast without dwelling too long on the fundamentals.

We started TheatreWorks to give ourselves work and it's heartening to see so many more practitioners doing so much more. What is deeply encouraging is that I meet young actors who have bravely ventured out and are earning a living from acting in the most pragmatic way - doing both commercial and artistic work. 📍

art

# a young painter's



*The Holy Family (150 x 200cm) is painted in acrylic and oil on linen. It was commissioned to be a stunning visual compendium of cultural references: the poh kia ee, the Virgin's kasot manek, her udang galah tinted sarong kebaya, Joseph's sarong, a mother-of-pearl chair; the belimbing tree and the potted plants.*

# promise

BABA BRYAN TAN SITS DOWN WITH ALVIN ONG TO DISCUSS HIS INFLUENCES AND ASPIRATIONS AS A PAINTER

When I heard I was to interview Alvin Ong, a prodigious local painter and youngest winner of the UOB Painting of the Year award in 2005 at the age of 16, I immediately imagined someone who had been cooped up for too long in a room without showering. Someone who always had smudges of paint pigments on his fingers and clothes. But the person who turned up at my doorstep was quite something else.

As a fellow contemporary aged 27, Alvin is the perfect depiction of the boy next door. Affable and unassuming, he smiles seriously as he recounts his humble beginnings growing up.

“I’m not Peranakan by descent, but I spent a lot of time with my godparents and their extended family who are Peranakan. I assimilated a lot of aspects of the culture growing up with them,” he recalls. “My paintings are a record of social memory, stories that I think are worth preserving.”

One of his earlier sketches featured the living room



of his godparents’ house. “This place has a special place in my heart, because it holds many memories of family events. It was very organic and eclectic. Antique furniture and photos sat casually next to their modern counterparts. For me it is a way in which memories are layered on top of one another.”

Fast-forward to the present, and Alvin describes a recent privately commissioned piece, *The Holy Family* for a Peranakan home. Looking past the religious subject matter, one discovers the painting to be a stunning visual compendium of cultural references:

the *poh kia ee*, the Virgin’s *kasot manek*, her *udang galah* tinted *sarong kebaya*, Joseph’s *sarong*, a mother-of-pearl chair, the *belimbing* tree and the potted plants. All of these combine to conjure a world perhaps only familiar to an older generation.

Alvin talks about the Bukit Brown cemetery; witnessing its subsequent redevelopment prompted him to interrogate his roots and the price we pay for development. *In Search of Tanah Airku* is a recent work in which many of these thoughts come together. This work features what seems to be an exhumation amongst a gathering of figures.

I probe into its slightly dark and morbid elements and he nods wryly in acknowledgement, “My paintings may seem a bit melancholic and nostalgic, but sometimes I think death and loss isn’t something to be *pantang* (superstitious) about, because they are part and parcel of life.”

When asked about the parallels to Peranakan culture, whether discovering what is past and forgotten is a way to move forward, Alvin wholeheartedly agrees. “Culture and

*In Search of Tanah Airku* (125 x 180cm). Painted in oil on canvas in 2015, it features what seems to be an exhumation amongst a gathering of figures.

tradition are our anchors in a changing world,” he muses. “But at the same time not static, because of the people who inherit it and continue to sustain it.” Alvin is now reading fine art in Oxford. ❶



# a love affair with canvas

FINGER PAINTER NYONYA ADELINE YEO CELEBRATES THE BEAUTY OF LIFE IN THE VIBRANCY OF HER WORKS. SHE ALSO PAINTS BLINDFOLDED, AS NYONYA LINDA CHEE MARVELS

Meeting Adeline Yeo recently for the first time was like chancing upon a ray of sunshine in your living room. Her effervescence brims over. She squeals with giggly delight. And holds your arm like an old friend. I cannot help but smile at her brightness. Her personality dominates her works: exuberant, confident and joyful.

Adeline's transition from public relations consultant to full-time painting was fast-tracked, and serendipitous to discovering her roots. Her first painting was of a phoenix, as part of a fashion show that was Peranakan influenced. It became the design motif for a gown. That was in 2010. The trendy fashionista felt a calling to follow her passion for art.

Adeline has not looked back since. Her five solo exhibitions as a finger painter promptly sold out. She often paints blindfolded for charity. Her works are inspired by themes of love, journeys, dreams, visions and her own life.

Adeline is quick to declare that her path to success has not been a bed of roses. "You need to be very, very strong mentally and you need to have friends who support you in many ways." Adeline's strong network has been crucial "and I do everything myself. My sixth sense, intuition, efficiency. And most of all, the presence of a higher being. Art is spiritual. I am Christian but I understand what *fengshui* means."

Her works have surpassed a rather unusual benchmark. "Chanel has always been my inspiration. She once said, 'My passion will challenge convention. I told myself that one day, my art will be the same, or if not more, than the price of a Chanel suit. I have achieved that.'"

Adeline hopes to "build an empire and a legacy". Her ambition is to "be globally recognized and to be a highly valued stock in the marketplace." By then, she smiles, "every single stroke would have to be measured in its entirety."



*Chandelier (36x36 inches in acrylic on canvas) was done while blindfolded. Showing her dare, Adeline once completed a blindfold painting in one minute.*



# an eye for detail



Nyonya Carolyn Law never really was in touch with her Peranakan self until about two years ago.

She says: "I was always surrounded by the culture. But I did not take notice of it until I recently reconnected with a few family members whom I never knew existed. After the start of my studio ARThaus, I also got to know more people who showed me how colourful Peranakan culture is."

It helped too that when Carolyn was a child she was already exposed to the culture. "I was brought up by my nanny who was a Peranakan. She would make traditional *kueh kueh* (desserts) during Chinese New Year. She wore the *sarong kebaya* and cooked traditional Peranakan food. These are memories that will stay with me forever.

"When I was older and lived with my parents, family gatherings on my dad's side were always interesting. They all spoke in a smattering of English, Malay, Hokkien or just simply Baba patois," says the young and earnest painter, who is armed with a masters in Fine Art majoring in oil painting.

BABA COLIN CHEE IS IMPRESSED WITH ART TEACHER NYONYA CAROLYN LAW'S LATEST WORKS



*Carolyn painted Genesis - a couple in Peranakan wedding costumes - in oil on canvas on two panels, each 48 x 18 inches. Her current series of artworks on a Peranakan theme has sold very well.*

Looking at her paintings of the Peranakan bridal couple and *kamchungs*, Carolyn muses: "I particularly like extremely detailed work. Peranakan ceramics, clothing, fashion accessories and even Peranakan cuisine are replete with minute details and flavours, and are laborious to produce. Peranakan colours are striking yet subtle in their blends."

Her art is remarkable in the very fine details that she has managed to painstakingly document on canvas. In the flowers, the animals, birds and geometric patterns.

Carolyn started Arthaus, an art school in June 2011. Her students read like the United Nations: Brazilian, Indian, Japanese, Dutch, German, French, Swiss, Australian and British, amongst others. The youngest is four years old and the oldest, about 65.

Carolyn is busy planning for an exhibition in 2016 featuring only contemporary Peranakan works.

## the adoptee as artist

THE SERENE FLORALS OF SYDNEY-BASED ARTIST GABBY MALPAS' PAINTINGS BARELY HINT OF THE STORIED LIFE SHE HAS LED AS A TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEE, BABA EMERIC LAU DISCOVERS.



"The road less travelled" is a phrase often used by artists to describe the course of their lives. For Gabby Malpas, however, that choice was made for her.

Malpas was born in 1966 in Auckland, New Zealand. She lived in the United Kingdom for 14 years and has been in Sydney since 2003. Ethnically, she is "100% Chinese" although the revelation that she wasn't white, like the rest of her adoptive family, occurred fairly late: "I did not see myself as Asian at all until I hit my late teens". Hers was a "closed adoption", meaning that there were no real avenues for the adoptee or birth family to contact each other.

After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, Malpas was reunited with her birth mother - also an artist - in 2004. This was the start of a healing process that continues today.

Knowing her full ethnic heritage has made a huge difference in her artwork and life attitude: Malpas'

work has exploded with "Asian-ness". She terms it *Chinoiserie*, in reference to the romanticised, Western view of Asia that was initially developed for Europeans.

Malpas is fascinated by the fusion or rather, profusion of Eastern and Western elements in Peranakan culture. She first encountered Peranakan objects in Malaysia, and was also introduced to Indonesian batiks which she finds the most beautiful fabrics in the world. She purchased a Peranakan teapot in Penang and it stars in many of her paintings. Cross-cultural elements permeate Malpas' artwork in a manner that may seem jarring to purists; quite unwittingly thus, she challenges stereotypes.

She would love to exhibit in Singapore and is keen to see how an Asian audience reacts to her work.

*Titled "I Will Not Love You Long Time", this vibrant setting with nyonyaware combined watercolour, gouache and pencil on Arches paper. 57cm x 76cm.*





# moving across images

AWARD-WINNING SHERMAN ONG EXTOLS TO AMIT PRITAM HIS LOVE FOR THE CAMERA AND THE THEMES THAT MOTIVATE HIS WORK

Photography, filmmaking and storytelling: Sherman Ong expertly uses these mediums to express and showcase his interest in the human condition and its surrounding environments.

Sherman was born in 1971 in Malacca. Growing up as a seventh generation Peranakan, he fondly recalls his time in school and how his classmates used to describe him. “They used to call me *orang China, bukan China* or OCBC because of my mixed descent and the fact that I didn’t speak Chinese. I found it strange for a short time but eventually, I just got used to it.”



Sherman had cultivated an affinity for capturing visuals through the lens after his father presented him with his first Kodak camera when he was 10 years old.

“My interest in imagery started when I started taking photographs of my pets including dogs, cats and fish. Photographing them was also a way for me to understand them and nature better,” he muses.

As he grew older, Sherman gained further

momentum through photographing people. “They are more complex as emotionally layered people compared to animals and nature,” he clarifies pensively.

Sherman subsequently developed an interest in videography and filming moving images. He was exposed to world cinema when he volunteered as an usher at the Singapore International Film Festival. “I started to have an interest in films and how I could use the power of moving images to tell my own stories.”

Sherman’s visual style is focused on forming narratives based on the themes of origin, migration and diaspora. His work, which has been showcased across the world, touches on the human aspects of life, death, love, hope and the relationships which people forge owing to their particular environments.

Sherman has travelled the world and honed his craft in artist residences from Hanoi to Fukuoka to Dar Es Salaam. In 2012, he won the prestigious 2012 ICON de Martell Cordon Bleu Photography Award for outstanding achievement in his field of art. His current showcases include a series of documentary video installations, titled *Islands in Between*, that can be viewed at the National Library Building as part of the Geo|Graphic series.

*The photograph above is part of Sherman’s Spaces series and was shot at the Basel zoo in Germany during winter where the elephants are brought indoors to protect them from the cold. It was part of a series of works that won for him the prestigious 2012 ICON de Martell Cordon Bleu Photography Award.*

# bespoke *sulam*

BABA HEATH YEO LOVES TO EXPERIMENT – HIS ONE-OF-A-KIND KEBAYAS ARE WEARABLE FANTASIES. BABA EMERIC LAU INTERVIEWS THIS DEDICATED EMBROIDERER.



Baba Heath Yeo struggles to qualify himself when asked if he is Peranakan. His paternal grandmother is *tionghoa* Peranakan from Indonesia, but his mother is Singaporean Chinese, “so I guess I’m half”. His growing-up memories include seeing the sarong worn often at home, listening to the adults converse in patois and inhaling the aromas of nyonya cuisine wafting out from the kitchen.



When he was enrolled at St Anthony’s Primary School, his parents selected Malay as his second language. But he was “reunited” with the Chinese class after his mother gave up, as he “cried and cried, wondering why I was singled out to learn Malay.”

Heath studied Fashion Design at Lasalle College of the Arts. When working as a designer of formal and evening wear, he started to learn embroidery techniques. Each design had to be hand-drawn to fit the garment, and he was charmed by the simplicity of how needle and thread could render various

*Above, an elaborate two-sided sulam (embroidery) of goldfish - an auspicious motif - embellished with kerawang, or fine ‘cutwork’ embroidery where holes are cut out after the embroidery work to create a lace-like effect.*

*White cotton voile with scallop lace applied in layers for a wave effect.*

motifs, richly shading them into life. Technically speaking, embroidery was but one method of garment embellishment, alongside beading, lacework and applique. What made it special was his recollection of his late grandmother donning her beautifully embroidered (*sulam*) *kebayas* and how different the effect was when compared with its use on more contemporary fashion. Heath embarked on a journey of sorts – researching books, museums, antique stores and even consulting friends who had vintage *kebayas*. Sadly, his grandmother’s *kebayas* had been buried with her.

Heath found a teacher in Madam Moi of Kim Seng Kebaya who imparted the art of embroidering *kebayas* to him.

He experiments with designs. His facebook wall sports a photo of supermodel Christy Turlington printed on a *kebaya* – a commendable attempt to evolve away from traditional expectations.

Heath believes that the *kebaya* form will change. He has a strong affinity for traditional

methods, including *sulam* produced on a manually-operated Singer sewing machine for its singular uniqueness, but also acknowledges that industrial-scale machines can embroider *kebayas* at a faster pace and in ever more sophisticated designs.

“*Kebaya sulam* deserves its place alongside traditional techniques such as Indian embroidery and hand-embroidered Chinese silk – above all, it is unique to us.”





# SARONG KEBAYA: Peranakan Fashion in an Intercon

BABA COLIN CHEE EXPLORES THE HYBRID WORLD OF THE NYONYAS AS TOLD BY BABA PETER LEE

I can only describe Peter Lee's tome as monumental. Monumental in its singular, passionate pursuit of the *sarong kebaya*. Monumental in its research. Monumental in the rarity and subject of its illustrations. Monumental in its 352 story-telling pages in a weighty volume. And a monumental nine years to write and produce.

For the past five years, the editorial team of *The Peranakan* magazine had asked the author each time they met at his Bukit Timah family home, "Are you finished with the book yet, Peter?"



His coy reply would be, "Not yet. There's so much to do." The next thing we knew he would be away in the Netherlands, Portugal, India, Malaysia or Indonesia in feverish pursuit of some fabled holy grail.

It has been a worthwhile long wait for those in the know. The book is easily one of the best, if not the best, researched and

illustrated books about the *sarong kebaya* to date.

## Sarong Kebaya, a Dying Community or What?

The book is one man's private journey to discover the origins of his Peranakan community. The journey may have started with a simple search for the story behind this once iconic attire for the Peranakan nyonya in Southeast Asia—the *sarong kebaya*.

But his intellectual curiosity and "dissatisfaction with the histories of the Peranakan world, and by the way the Peranakan community describes itself" like *Peranakan jati* or pure Peranakan—sparked a search that extended the initial study of the *sarong kebaya* into an evolved history of the Peranakan community from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to 1950.

And what is Peter's conclusion from this search?

He challenges, "Can any community ever be characterized as having a fixed set of characteristics?"

When did social history become a branch of biology?"

If this is true, then perhaps there

is hope yet for the Peranakan community.

It will not simply die away as its DNA gets diluted through marriages with the larger community, as many Peranakan elders fear (see review of Mr Felix

Chia's book *The Babas* on Page 50). Instead, will it simply evolve like a resilient social organism through its assimilations with other cultures, as it did in the past, into something different yet the same because it has retained parts of its cultural uniqueness and peculiarities?

Only time will tell.

In the meantime, simply enjoy this well-written if scholastic book.

As a reader aptly describes, "the book itself is a heroic endeavour with a lot of references for the scholastically minded to follow up. Not every theory put up will meet with agreement but any critic will have to plough through the references to nit pick with any credibility."

## What is in a Name?

Indeed, as the author will have it, a name is nothing to fuss about.

Peter writes, "As words travel and mutate between cultures, as they have over centuries across the Indian Ocean, they leave significant trails."

Except that they do have "complicated histories." Words like *baju*, *kebaya* and *sarong*, which describe a nyonya's dress in Baba Malay, are actually the results of the "circulation and shifting semantics mirroring the cosmopolitan and cross-cultural conditions that created the Peranakan *sarong kebaya*."

He discovered that Malay and Portuguese were the dominant languages in the Indian Ocean in the early centuries. They facilitated the spread of ideas and words.

Malay, as a trading language, was spoken in the Cape of Good Hope, western India and along the Chinese coast. As for Portuguese, the language of invaders during

*A Eurasian family, Java, ca 1920s. Gelatin silver print.*

# nected World

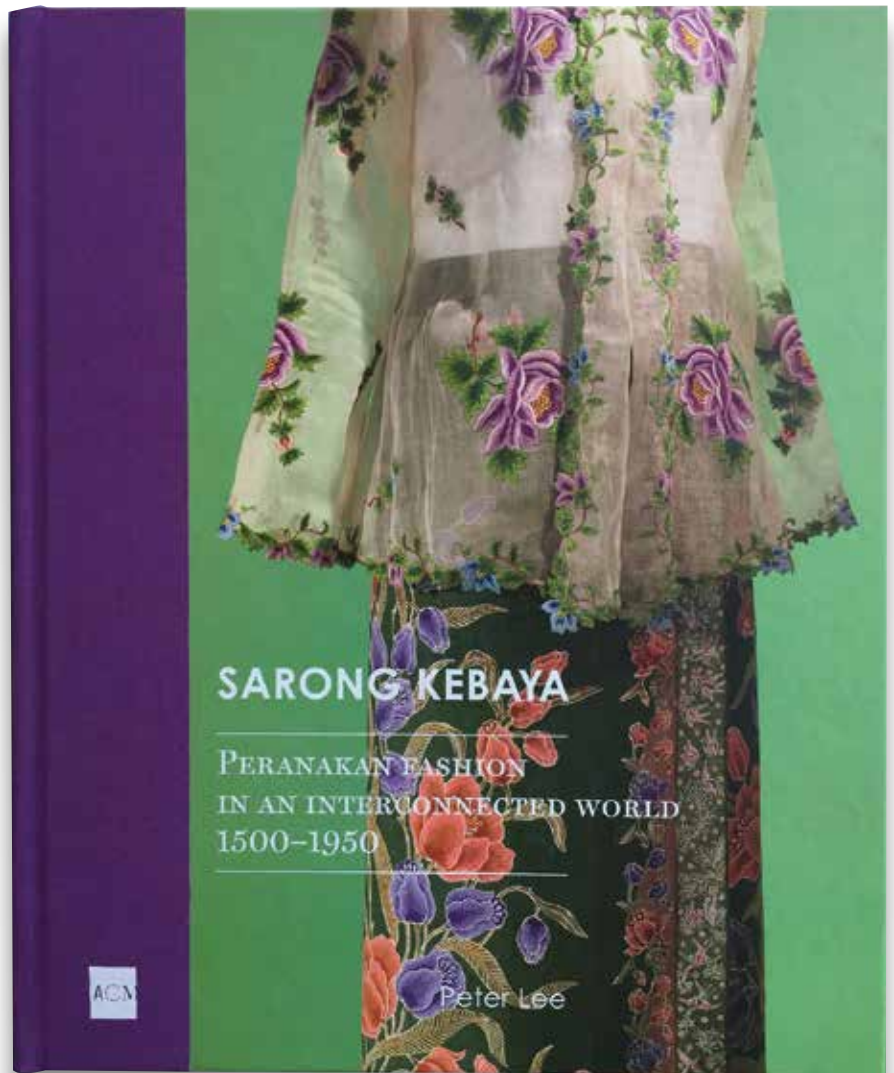
the sixteenth century, variants of it continue to be spoken as *Papia Kristang* in Melaka.

Along with the spread of these languages, sartorial fashions and references of the time gained geographical traction.

Allow me to condense the histories of the three Peranakan fashion words in Peter's book.

*Baju* - which today refers to clothing in general - was once used to describe tailored garments for the torso or upper body. The word has references in Persian, Portuguese, Indian, Sri Lankan, Chinese and Malay texts. Because the word *baju* also appears in the oldest Malay word list found in an early 16<sup>th</sup> century Chinese text in which various types of attire have clear Arabic and Persian origins, it is assumed the word *baju* has the same Arabic and Persian roots.

The word *kebaya*, however, seems to have a less complicated



story. Today it describes the short lace trimmed variant of the top once worn by Dutch women in Indonesia, and Malay and Peranakan women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They are still worn in a variety of styles and materials. The word was existent during Dutch colonial times and it was probably derived from the Portuguese colonial word “*cabaye*” which was used to describe a coat. Indeed, the Portuguese creole that was spoken in Sri Lanka soon saw “*cabaye*” transliterated

*Instructions accompanying a tracing paper pattern for kebaya embroidery; issued by Clarke and Company of Paisley; Scotland, 1950s.*

into “*kebaya*” in Sinhalese, with both words referring to coat. Then the Dutch came east and *kebaya* became what it is today.

*Sarong* is one of

a few Malay words that has spread into the vocabulary of other world languages. It originally referred to any kind of sheath or covering, such as *sarong bantal* (pillow cover) or *sarong kris* (kris scabbard). Unlike the *kebaya* which appeared in European colonial records much earlier, *sarong* is found in Dutch records of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Batavia or today's Jakarta. These days, *sarong* refers to the ubiquitous wrap around or body dress for the quintessential Malay and Peranakan woman.

Indeed, the *sarong kebaya* first came into its own as a symbol of tropical colonial life during the Dutch rule of the East Indies. But it is not unique to any particular community. It is a marvelous result of hybridity as cultural currents criss-crossed one another over time. Peter aptly quoted art



*Sarong kebayas dating back to the 1930s-40s. The kebayas were tailored in Indonesia. The sarongs were painted by renowned batik artists from Kedungwuni and Pekalongan. From the Peranakan Museum.*

*Photographed by Chris Yap*



Above, Chua Wan Neo (seated centre), widow of the pioneer rubber planter Tan Chay Yan, with her children and their spouses. Toyo Studio, Singapore, 1931. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Sharron Chee Guek Kee.

historian Finbarr Barry Flood who described the phenomenon as the result of “people and things having been mixed up for a very long time”.

Like an intricate batik design with its minutiae of whorls and curls.

### The Nyonya

“An understanding of the development of Peranakan fashion is impossible without first gaining clarity on certain critical issues about the Peranakans that have, to date, remained nebulous, even within the Peranakan community. At the centre of these is the identity of the Peranakan woman. Who is the *nyonya*? When and how did she come about?”

Right, Li Lihua, legend of Shanghai and Hongkong cinema, in the Chinese film *Nyonya and Baba, Cathay*; 1956. The sarong and kebaya had been strategically fitted to accentuate her figure.



By asking these questions at the start of the chapter on *Slave Girls and Heiresses; Mothers of All Peranakans*, the author bravely gave his answer.

He starts by controversially demolishing a long-held and much-loved belief:

“Indeed the very origins of the Peranakan community are imprecisely perceived, and

therefore myths have held sway in the popular imagination. For example, one of the quasi-historical narratives about the origins of the royal family in Malacca, as recorded in the *Malay Annals*, perhaps written around 1612, has been appropriated to explain the origins of the Peranakan Chinese. Hang Liu, an imperial Chinese princess, was said to have arrived in Malacca with a retinue of five hundred young men and women, who converted to Islam en masse... She herself married the sultan. This union is not corroborated by Ming histories...”

Peter carries on:

“Exactly how Peranakans have “mixed blood” has been imperfectly understood. That native-born

Chinese women were a rarity outside China until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is well established. Therefore the wives of the pioneering Chinese migrants to the Malay Archipelago must have belonged to other ethnic groups.”

Peter went on to quote travelogues,

books, references, studies of the day to show that in days of old our Chinese pioneers married slave girls and local women from the archipelago including Bali, Celebes, Sulawesi, Java, Sumatra, and Guinea. From these pragmatic beginnings, he builds the case for a community that started to look inward but grew in wealth, sophistication and social status, in the milieu of growing urbanization and colonial exploitation of the region’s natural wealth, fast adapting to changes and even transforming itself to ever changing social and economic environs.



“Citizen living in Batavia, with his wife”, 1670s. Georg Franz Muller. Watercolour on paper.

Sarong Kebaya is published by the Asian Civilisation Museum. Available at the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Peranakan Museum and Select Books.

# the babas live on

BABA COLIN CHEE EXAMINES THE REPRINT OF A CLASSIC TITLE  
BY BABA FELIX CHIA

This is the third print of the late Felix Chia's book, *The Babas*, which was highly sought after when it was first printed in 1980. A reprint was made in 1993, titled *The Babas Revisited*, where the author revised substantial parts of his original text. The revisions accommodated feedback on his first book, provided clarifications and expositions on lines of thought and opinions taken, and expanded on material in the original text that he thought was necessary.

Said a feisty Mr Chia in the Introduction to his 1993 reprint: "To retain the essence and charm of the previous edition, I have chosen only the most interesting of the old text and improved it with the addition of new information.... Upon recollecting the opinions and criticisms of my books recently, I realized that it would not be a bad idea if I were to conduct an 'autopsy' on them and spearhead further discussion."

Mr Chia's book provides a fairly comprehensive and rare glimpse of

Peranakan life as it was lived in Singapore and Malacca during the late pre-war and early post-independence years. He takes the reader breezily through most aspects of life then.

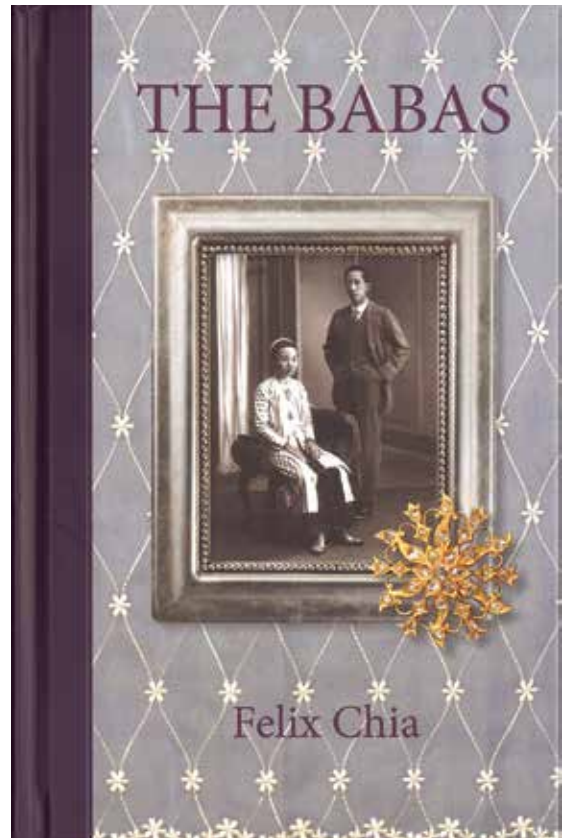
Many years from now this single book will serve as a basic reference or record of what is and how the Peranakan community evolved, flourished and declined. More importantly, it was written by one who lived that life. Mr Chia wrote with a passionate interest in the community.

In Mr Chia's last chapter on *The Future*, he unabashedly predicted the community's eventual extinction in Singapore. In 1993, he may have been pessimistically prescient:

*"What of the present-day Babas? There is no future for them as a community; for they are fast disappearing with each generation. The Babas who marry Nyonyas today do so more out of love than for the propagation of Babas and Nyonyas.... A minority race which keeps dwindling cannot hope to survive. The sad fate of this dwindling race is perpetuated by the ignorance of Baba culture among the young.... The lot of the Singapore Baba now is to be assimilated by those around them; to continue in their inherent nature of integrating into different cultures, as their forebears had so wisely done."*

Unfortunately, Mr Chia didn't have the benefit of experiencing the impact

*Baba Felix Chia's paternal grandfather, Baba Chia Hood Sang, and his daughters – Choo Neo 'Lau Cute' and Poh Neo.*



that the mega-hit TV series *The Little Nyonya* had on kick-starting interest in the culture outside this dwindling community. Nor did he foresee the establishment of Singapore's Peranakan Museum and privately-owned Peranakan museums that have sprouted up in the region. Or the subtle influence of *The Peranakan* magazine inside and outside the community.

He also did not live to see the formation of a federation of Peranakan associations in Southeast Asia and as far away as Australia. Neither could he have anticipated the success of commercial enterprises such as Main Wayang in mass-popularizing the culture in schools and the corporate world.

In an innocuous way, the success of social media, particularly facebook communities such as *The Peranakan (Nyonya and Baba) Clan*, *Perot Rumah – Peranakan Food Culture*, and *Peranakan Material Culture*, has brought the community across the world a lot closer to their cultural roots and to each other.

The late Mr Felix Chia, I am sure, would breathe a sigh of relief for this extension. ❶

*The Babas* is co-published by the Estate of Felix Chia and Landmark Books.

# the LKY musical. not to be missed.

THE LOVE STORY OF LEE KUAN YEW AND KWA GEOK CHOO



The Marina Bay Sands' MasterCard Theatres will host its first local musical from 21 July this year for a limited season only.

The LKY Musical by Metropolitan Productions has been three years in the making. It tells the love story of our late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his late wife Kwa Geok Choo. It also cleverly weaves in the socio-political drama of Singapore's early independence years.

Baba Dick Lee composed the music, with London-based Laurence Olivier Award winner Stephen Clark providing the lyrics. Veteran London director Steven Dexter, who last directed *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*, has

*Baba Dick says the music for the multi-million dollar production is his "best score to date."*

returned to direct this musical. The creative team includes playwright Tony Petito and

writer Meira Chand.

Playing the key roles are local actors Adrian Pang as Lee Kuan Yew; Sharon Au in the coveted role of Mrs Lee; Sebastian Tan as rickshaw puller Koh Teong Koo who saved Mr Lee's life during the Japanese Occupation; and Benjamin Chow in his debut as activist Lim Chin Siong.

At the musical's introduction to the media on 13 April, Dick said he was at first unsure how to pitch his music. It could not be just like his usual musicals. He told *The Peranakan*: "Working with such a serious subject matter, I had to approach the writing carefully. Music is used to convey emotions and situations. This story had plenty of that, so it was wonderful to craft a dramatic score where I could write from my heart without too many considerations of commercialism."

Sebastian Tan said in jest at the media conference that he would look like a well-fed rickshaw puller. ▶

## come discover the hidden truth

GSA'S NEW PLAY PROMISES A REVELATION

For their annual *Wayang Peranakan* and to mark its 105<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) is presenting a new work written by Alvin Teo. *Udang Sebalik Batu: The Hidden Truth* promises an evening that will tug at the heartstrings even as it delivers a potpourri of amusing gags.

The plot centres around young lovers Daisy Tan and Jeff Koh, who have known each other since they were children. Jeff was brought up by his single mother, Lian Neo, who logged all her life so her son could have a bright future. Eventually, Jeff secures a scholarship to study in England and has to be separated from Daisy. Daisy's stepmother, Bibik Guek Neo, plots to split the young couple due to their class difference and is determined to

do all she can to marry Daisy into the wealthy Lim family with the help of matchmaker Bibik Taik Lalat. How does she cause the split? Did Daisy really marry into the Lim family? Who exactly knows *The Hidden Truth*?

You'll have to go watch to find out!

The *wayang* is directed by Tony Quek. The cast includes Audrey Tan as Daisy, Eugene Tay as Jeff and a host of other experienced actors including Lee Yong Ming, Jessie Cheang, Christina Wee, KT, Cynthia Lee, Jeannette Chan, Frederick Soh, Alvin Teo, Ameline Goh



and Matthew Chen.

It is performed in Peranakan patois with English subtitles.

*Watch the intrigue to split young lovers.*

There are just three shows at the Drama Centre from 30–31 October so book your seats early. Tickets are available at all SISTIC outlets from August 2015. ▶

# the thrill of conventions

KL ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT BABA CEDRIC TAN IS ENTHUSED BY THE JAKARTA CONVENTION



When Aspertina (Association of Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia) was announced as the Jakarta host for the 27<sup>th</sup> Baba Nyonya Convention 2014, I was eager to sign up. Having attended almost 20 conventions, I can conclude with confidence that inaugural events are usually remarkable.

First of all, it is proof that the Peranakan community is truly diasporic and diverse. Secondly, the new host is likely to spare no expense to create an excellent first impression. Personally, it was the first time for me leading delegates from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor as President of the PPBNKLS (Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor).

On Friday, 28 November, we arrived in Jakarta and proceeded to dinner. The highlight was the traditional *Wayang Potehi* or puppet show featuring the story of *Seet Jin Kwee* performed by young and upcoming masters of the trade, and to live music. The evening continued with

performances by the participating Peranakan associations and closed with delegates dancing the night away.

The opening ceremony the next day at the host hotel, Grand Sahid Jaya, was followed by simple-to-digest introductions into the heritage of the local Peranakans. Bapak Joseph 'Aji' Chen Bromokusumo whetted our appetites in his talk on Peranakan cuisine while Bapak Hartono Sumarsono enthralled us with a visual feast of his vast batik collection. Prof Abdullah Dahana covered the history of Peranakan culture in Indonesia. During the break, delegates shopped at the bazaar and left satiated with bags of batik, *kebayas*, books and handicraft.

Aspertina staged a spectacular fashion show. Renowned Indonesian fashion designers were roped in to share their Peranakan-inspired creations, such as Samuel Wattimena, Poppy Dharsono, Itang Yunasz, Geraldus Sugeng, Afif Syakur and HENDY WIJAYA.

On the third and final day, we

visited north Jakarta for a whirlwind tour of the old city and port. After the convention ended, some delegates headed to Tangerang where the

Persaudaraan Peranakan Tionghoa Warga Indonesia (Pertiwi) had prepared a three-day programme covering historic Benteng, Bogor and Ciputat. In Benteng, I saw rare batik masterpieces by doyen Oey Soen Tjoen in the Heritage Museum. At Roemah Boeroeng we were feted with an astounding 111 types of local appetizers, mains, desserts and fruits. I recalled familiar dishes like *masak chin*, *masak sio* and *masak buah keluak*.

My experiences in Indonesia have reaffirmed my commitment to attend future conventions. I love the thrill of stepping into an unexplored room without any inkling of what I will find within, and the 'wow' moment when something awesome sweeps by. ●

*From left to right, The Peranakan-inspired fashion show at the gala night.*

*The Wayang Potehi dolls on display.*

*Javanese-style Chinese-icons in wayang kulit.*

# virtually peranakan

BABA NORMAN CHO EXPERIENCES THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR...WELL, SOCIALISING!

“Why don’t you start a Facebook Group on Peranakan material culture?” a friend who knew my passion for Peranakan artefacts cajoled me. With my experience and knowledge from almost 30 years of collecting Peranakan antiques, she thought I deserved a wider audience! This was how the *Peranakan Material Culture*


facebook group was conceived in 2012.

To my astonishment, there are over 2,000 members registered in my virtual group today. I have discarded the notion of *bibiks* behind the *kuali* with ladles in hand; instead, the *bibiks* of today are more often found surfing facebook on their mobile phones. A few members are in

fact octogenarians! Topics range from food to antiques to customs and practices.

Earlier last year, someone posted an online review of the top 10 Peranakan restaurants in Singapore. This prompted our group to organise a food outing. Our first meeting was at the Candlenut restaurant on 4 October 2014. Already acquainted virtually, it was effortless to warm up to one another’s company. There were 20 of us in all.

We have had three other outings since: To the Peranakan Museum followed by dinner at True Blue Cuisine next door on 15 November; the Eurasian Association on 7 February where I gave a talk on Peranakan jewellery, followed by dinner at Quentin’s; and the latest on 18 April at Rumah Kim Choo where 30 members – including one from Malacca and two from Kuala Lumpur - learnt how to play *cherki*.

The Peranakans’ penchant for parties and good food has never been a secret. We can look forward to more socialising and camaraderie through social media! 

*Learning to play cherki at Rumah Kim Choo.*




## christmas joy at peacehaven



On 19 December 2014, The Peranakan Voices (TPVs) brought Christmas joy to over 400 residents and their families at the Salvation Army Peacehaven Nursing Home for elderly patients. To witness joy in the faces of those in need of care was a truly meaningful way to end 2014, offering a timely reminder for us to cherish and celebrate precious moments with our loved ones. 

## chingay spectacular



Chingay 2015 in Singapore’s jubilee year was the grandest parade ever organized! The Main Wayang Company and the Eurasian Association combined with the Vintage/Classic Cars Enthusiasts Group to present an enthralling spectacle on 27 and 28 February. Over 100 babas and nyonyas young and old dressed in traditional costumes took to the streets to showcase the Peranakan culture. This mega multi-cultural event involved 11,000 performers. 



# THE FEDERATION OF PERANAKAN ASSOCIATIONS

## SINGAPORE

### The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS)

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### Gunong Sayang Association (GSA)

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Fax: 65 6441 1569  
Website: gunongsayang.com

### Association of Chetti Melaka (Peranakan Indians) Singapore

5001 Beach Road #08-09  
Golden Mile Complex  
Singapore 199588  
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Office: 6297 1229  
Mobile: 9678 1767

## MALAYSIA

### MALACCA

### Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM)

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(Hon Secretary)  
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Website: www.ppcm-melaka.org  
Tel: 012 6218 909  
Fax: 06 2837 215  
To contact the President, Datuk Phua  
Jin Hock, please email phujh@  
gmail.com.

## PENANG

### State Chinese (Penang) Association / Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinaang

13, Perak Road  
President: Datuk Tan Gin Soon  
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## KUALA LUMPUR & SELANGOR

### Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (PPBNKLS)

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## THAILAND

### Thai Peranakan Association

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81 693 3576; or Piyarat Kulvanich at  
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mobile: +66 81 719 0967.  
Fax: +66 76 258179  
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## INDONESIA

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Website: [aspertina.org](http://aspertina.org)

### Peranakan Tionghoa Warga Indonesia (Pertiwi)

Yayasan PERTIWI c/o KING'S EEC  
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Tangerang 15111  
Banten Indonesia  
Contact: Mr Udaya Halim, President  
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Email: [info@pertiwi.org](mailto:info@pertiwi.org) / [info@bentengheritage.com](mailto:info@bentengheritage.com)

## AUSTRALIA

### MELBOURNE

### Peranakan Association

### Australia Inc

P.O. Box 1278, Hawksburn, Victoria,  
Australia 3142  
Contacts: Joseph Then, Secretary, at  
email [j.then@bigpond.com](mailto:j.then@bigpond.com)  
Website: [www.peranakan.org.au](http://www.peranakan.org.au).

## SYDNEY

### Peranakan Association Australia (PAA) NSW Inc

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NSW 2122 Australia  
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Website: [peranakanaustralia.org](http://peranakanaustralia.org)  
Email: [evelyn.peranakan@gmail.com](mailto:evelyn.peranakan@gmail.com)

## welcome

A warm welcome to  
our new members!

1. Melissa Chan Bee Cheng
2. Grace Katherine Kiong  
Min Li
3. Carolyn Law Yu Lin
4. Radiance Lee Kim Hong
5. Wong Hon Seng

## durians galore!

The association is organising a day trip to Johore for members to feast on durians. Eat to your heart's content!

All meals are included. You will also visit a mushroom farm and a noodle factory and still have time for shopping.

Date : 27 June 2015 (Saturday)  
Time : 7.00 am  
Pick-up point : Newton car park  
Meals provided : Nasi lemak breakfast / Foochow noodle & fishball lunch / seafood dinner  
Cost : S\$80.00 (inclusive of travel insurance and guide/driver tips)

Please email [secretariat@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:secretariat@peranakan.org.sg) to register.

# grand aunty makes an entrance

BABA BRYAN TAN JOINS THE YEOWS FOR A NIGHT OF DINNER AND GOSSIP

Molly was not the kind to be easily frazzled. Despite spending her days juggling cleaning, gardening, cooking and berating her reticent husband, nothing could interrupt her regimented schedule which she could not vary. It was 1985; she was in her prime and dressed to the hilt. She turned from the window and glared at Willie, who had managed to rumple his *baju lokchuan* and sat woolgathering on the sofa.

“Willie! *Toksa dudok lagi* (don’t sit around anymore), come and stand here!” she hissed. At that moment, three loud raps came from the door. Smoothing down her *kebaya*, Molly pulled open the door with a beatific smile on her face. “*Kohpoh Chik, sua datang* (you’re here)! Please come in!”

As a daughter born of a mistress, Molly felt an unconscious need to present a faultless image to a member of the main family. Grand aunty had never looked upon her favorably, and had only grudgingly accepted her invitation to dinner. “*Bok Neo, how long has it been? Your kebaya chantek* (pretty) *lah*, I must say,” she eyed Molly up and down.

Soh Bee Neo was tall and willowy at 74 years. Her eyes however, had the glint of frosted steel in them, and glanced around imperiously for any signs of shabbiness.

“*Oowa, kinajeet lu pasang kuat eh* (you’re all dressed up), Willie?” She nodded coldly at Molly’s husband, her permed silver curls bobbing, subtly rolling her eyes at his creased *baju*. She stepped into the house. “*Thiam Hin, take off your shoes and masok* (enter),” she clucked sharply. Grand aunty’s husband was also very tall. He greeted Molly and Willie jovially.

“Grand uncle, how are you?” Molly enquired pleasantly. “*Ko ko* (older brother) Jimmy, long time no see! Cousin Florence and Sophie, you must be hungry.”

Grand aunty’s children were just like her in image and mannerism, but for one. Sophie was an oddity. Her hair was slightly tangled, her nails looked chewed on and she refused eye contact with everyone.

They gathered around the dining table to admire the feast Molly had prepared.

“*Bok Neo, baik* (good) *lah*, you remember *gua suka makan hati babi bungkus*” (I like to eat wrapped pig’s liver). She observed approvingly, her tone softening. Molly bowed her head demurely.

Grand aunty took her place at the head of the table. “So how are your children? I heard Vera went to Singapore to *kerja* (work).

“*Betul Kohpoh Chik* (that’s right), she *charek* (looking for) a good job and a good man. But sad for me *lah*, all my *anak-anak* (children) leaving me one by one to go overseas,” Molly sighed.



Illustration by Eileen Chan

“*Tapi baik lah* (but it’s good), Singapore is a better place to live in. Jimmy is being posted to Germany; I think he is to be promoted soon,” said Bee Neo smugly. “You know *ah*, my poor Sophie is the only one who won’t leave me. Do you know any *laki kawan* (male friends) who wants to marry?” Sophie had managed to get *ayam buah keluak* on her *kebaya* and was sucking the *kuah* (gravy) off her fingers.

“It’s ok *lah* dear, Sophie will *kawen* (marry) eventually,” grand uncle interjected peevishly.

Grand aunty was delighted with the food, and a glass of wine kept her spirits up. Even Sophie, who was usually sullen, ate voraciously and thanked Molly.

A phone chimed from somewhere in the house. Molly excused herself from the dining table and disappeared into a room. An abrupt moment later, a shriek came piercing through. Everyone stood up.

“*Aiyee kusmangat. Dia nampat hantu ah* (goodness, did she see a ghost)?” Grand aunty Bee Neo wondered out loud. Molly came out looking as pale as death.

“Vera... Vera is pregnant!”

\*In the next episode, Molly Yeow makes a trip down to Singapore!

**All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.**

# THE PERANAKAN GUIDE • SINGAPORE

## MUSEUMS

**Peranakan Museum.** See the world's first national Peranakan Museum with the most comprehensive and finest collection of Peranakan artefacts. The boutique museum examines the centres of Peranakan culture in Malacca, Penang and



Singapore, and traces its links to as far as Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand. 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.

## Great Peranakans: Fifty Remarkable Lives

23 May 2015 to 31 March 2016, Peranakan Museum.

This exhibition celebrates the achievements of 50 Peranakans such as Tan Tock Seng, Lim Boon Keng, and Goh Keng Swee. Merchants, statesmen, philanthropists, and writers they have shaped Singaporean life in significant ways over the past two centuries. Moreover, they have connected Singapore with the region. Peranakans have also been involved in some of the most controversial chapters in our history, from opium dealing and secret societies, to the political struggles around independence. Their stories and the almost 200 objects from their lives will help visitors understand the evolving identities not just of the Peranakans but also of Singapore as a whole.



**National Museum of Singapore.** The museum's Singapore History Gallery pays tribute to the contributions of the pioneering Peranakans. On view are some outstanding artefacts, including the oil portrait of Lim Boon Keng, old photographs, jewellery and sreh sets, as well as the magnificent carved wood hearse of Tan Jiak Kim, which is considered one of the 11 Treasures of the National Museum. National Museum of Singapore, 93 Stamford Road, Tel: 63323659, Opening Hours: 10am to 6pm Daily (Singapore History Gallery), 10am to 9pm Daily (Singapore Living Galleries), Admission \$10 (adults), \$5 (senior citizens above 60), \$5 (students, Nsmen), Free admission to the Singapore Living Galleries from 6pm to 9pm. <http://nationalmuseum.sg>.

**Baba House.** This heritage house goes back in time to 1928. Experience what a grand Peranakan terraced house would have been like. Formerly owned by



the Wee family (whose ancestor Wee Bin was a mid-19th century shipping magnate) since 1910. 157 Neil Road, Singapore. Tel: 62275731. Visits are by guided tours. Please call the house for details. <http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html>

**Asian Civilisations Museum.** The first museum in the region to display a wide range of artefacts from across Asia, the ACM not surprisingly has some important Peranakan treasures. The Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, sreh boxes and other paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine batik textiles from the north coast of Java, all made for the Peranakan market. 1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555, Tel: 6332 2982, Opening Hours: 9am to 7pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 1pm to 7pm (Mondays), Admission \$8 (adults), \$4 (senior citizens and students). <http://www.acm.org.sg>

**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 exhibition shows how Singapore, and the Chinese community here played an important part in this pivotal moment of world history. Intimate photos of 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. 12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874, Tel: 6256 7377, Opening Hours: 10am-5pm daily. Website: [wanqingyuan.org.sg](http://wanqingyuan.org.sg).

## LANDMARKS

**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. [http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/SOA/design\\_studio/ds2b/blair/study/Blair.html](http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/SOA/design_studio/ds2b/blair/study/Blair.html).

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

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



of Peranakan restaurants in the neighbourhood. [http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what\\_to\\_see/suburban\\_living/katong.html](http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what_to_see/suburban_living/katong.html). Also <http://www.myjoochiat.com>.

## Amoy Street and Telok Ayer Street.

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

**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. Thian Hock Keng, 158 Telok Ayer Street, Tel: 6423 4616.



**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 Beng 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. Tan Si Chong Su, 15 Magazine Road.



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THE  
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# Peranakan

## ARTS FESTIVAL

*Singapore 2015*

**4 to 8 November 2015**  
[www.peranakanfest.com](http://www.peranakanfest.com)

**Festival Location:**  
Empress Place,  
Victoria Theatre  
& Concert Hall

**Festival Hours:**  
Wednesday  
4 November to Sunday  
8 November 2015  
10am to 9pm

**Admission:**  
The Bazaar, Exhibitions and  
Cultural Shows are free to the  
public. Please refer to the Festival  
website for the show schedule.

**Theatre Shows &  
Convention Forums:**  
Get your tickets at  
[WWW.SISTIC.COM](http://WWW.SISTIC.COM)  
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