



Global Intricacies

**THE REAL BABAS OF
HEEREN STREET, MELAKA**

Chetti Melaka Wedding Rites
and Harvest Festivals

Tracing the Origins of Laksa

*Remembering the
fabulous Elizabeth Lee*



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THE
PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE

www.peranakan.org.sg

ON THE COVER

• A delicate edible peony beautifully created out of marshmallow fondant by nyonya baker, Yenna Susanty. Peonies are auspicious symbols for the Peranakans.

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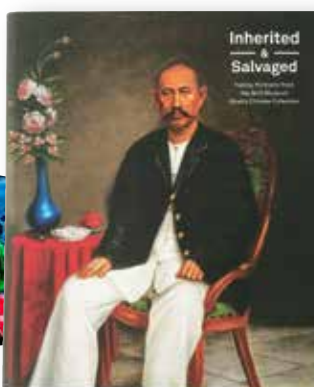
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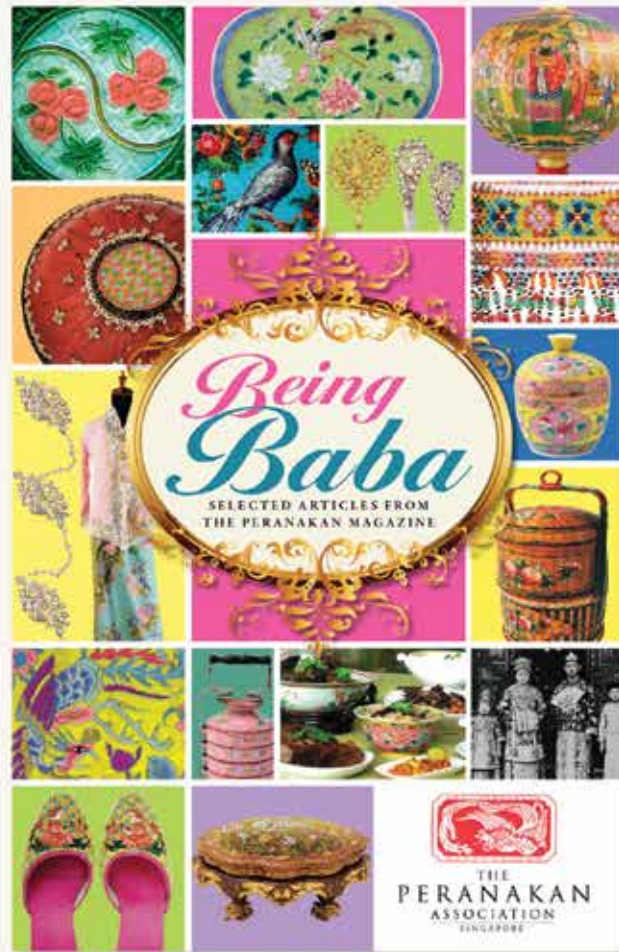
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Exclusive Offer

Being Baba will be launched at the Peranakan Festival 2015.

Members of The Peranakan Association Singapore can purchase the book at a special price from the Marshall Cavendish booth at the Festival BaBazaar.



Being Baba presents specially selected articles on Peranakan culture seen through the eyes of contributors to *The Peranakan* magazine. Compiled for the first time in the magazine's 20-year history, the articles in this 352-page book capture the essence of Peranakan culture — from its history, traditions, material culture and lifestyle to its rich cuisine, language and even theatre.

Being Baba is richly illustrated with full-colour photographs and is the definitive compilation of all things Peranakan.



We are family!

2015 is a special year. It is Singapore's 50th Anniversary, our Association's 115th Anniversary, the inaugural year of the Peranakan Arts Festival, and when Singapore plays host to the Baba Nyonya Convention. These follow a very successful Peranakan Ball at the grand Fullerton Hotel.

Come 6-8 November will be our 28th Convention. Indeed, every year is a milestone of unity in the Federation of Peranakan Associations which is seeing continual growth as more associations join us. Our Convention will be held at the historical Empress Place, a lovely location by the Singapore River. The area will be abuzz with community performances, bazaars and *wayang* Peranakan staged at the newly-restored Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall.

How apt, as we gather in Singapore from so many cities, for us to revisit with seventh generation Nyonya Caroline Tan, a place where many of our forefathers came from Melaka. For decades known as the Sleepy Hollow but now a bustling town replete with touristy shops and chill-out bars, Melaka, or Malacca, can be said to be the core of ancestry, culture and tradition for the Peranakan diaspora. Older babas and nyonias will remember *Kampung Belanda* a neighbourhood of Dutch-era terraced houses encompassing Heeren Street, Jonker Street and Tranquerah Road where Peranakan families settled and intermarried within a tight circle of relatives and friends. Through the generations, this has resulted in a phenomenon that we Peranakans call *bau bau bachang*; everybody is related to everybody!

Today, our small community has extended around the globe, including London, New York and even San Diego! In these cities, nyonias and babas feel the comfort of home as they speak Baba Malay and partake of familiar food, customs and habits. The Tay family in Tauranga, New Zealand, observes the ritual of *semayang abu*, or ancestral worship. In Kuala Lumpur, a young Chetti Melaka baba called Jeeva decides to get married the traditional way. And in Singapore, Yenna, a bubbly Indonesian nyonya,



uses her artistic skills to bake; you can see her breathtaking edible creations on our cover and inside pages. In New York, nyonya Sharon Wee, homesick for Peranakan food, has found the best *makan* places to satisfy her cravings for *laksa*, *popiah* and more. Where do you think '*laksa*' comes from? Not Singapore, Malaysia or even Indonesia, as our intrepid etymologist baba Peter Lee discovers.

We mourn the passing of a wonderful soul, the irreplaceable Elizabeth Lee, wife of our Life President Uncle Kip. Auntie Liz, all of us miss you. Terribly.

Linda Chee, Editor

The Main Committee of TPAS looks forward to welcoming all delegates to the Convention!
(From left) Front: Linda Chee, Chan Eng Thai, Peter Wee, Alan Koh, Zan Ho (partially hidden), Gwen Ong and Adrian Tan. Back: Edmond Wong, Raymond Wong, Ee Sin Soo, Angeline Kong, Emeric Lau, Monica Alsagoff.

Akan datang in 2016...

We plan to organize a day trip to Johor Bahru for Chinese New Year shopping and *makan makan*. Watch out for more details in our website or through email. You may also email secretariat@peranakan.org.sg to register your interest and for future correspondence.

LETTER

I refer to your report, "Awards and Accolades" in issue 1/2015, which states that Association president Peter Wee was "feted with a Pioneer Generation Tribute Award". It would perhaps help to clarify the situation to note that the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) had on that occasion on 27 January in fact honoured a total of 160 people. They include several Association members such as Mrs Lee Li-Ming, Ms Agnes Tan, Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee, Ms Stella Kon and Mrs Tan Shook Foong, as well as luminaries of the Arts such as Mr Edwin Thumboo, Mr Tan Swie Hian and Mr Iskandar Jalil.

- Peter Lee, Singapore

The
28th
Baba
Nyonya
Convention

6 - 8 November 2015 Singapore.



THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION
Peranakan
ARTS FESTIVAL
 Singapore 2015

4 to 8 November 2015
www.peranakanfest.com

6 Events • 5 Days • 4 Exhibitions
 3 Seminars • 2 Theatre Plays • 1 Bazaar

Yes! It's countdown to the Peranakan Arts Festival! Join us at the Festival and celebrate everything Peranakan from Thursday to Sunday 4-8 November at Empress Place, Singapore

The 28th Baba Nyonya Convention

(6 - 8 NOVEMBER 2015)

Join babas and nyonys from South-east Asia and Australia for a 3-day Peranakan-packed convention from Friday 6 Nov to Sunday 8 Nov! The 28th Baba Nyonya Convention kicks off with a pre-show Peranakan dinner and VIP seats to watch *Bibiks Behind Bars*, *Kena Again!* at the Victoria Theatre. The Saturday schedule opens with 3 Seminars in the morning, followed by lunch after which there's lots of time to explore the Peranakan Ba-Bazaar and enjoy cultural interludes at our outdoor stage. An exclusive Tok Panjang dinner awaits all conference delegates



on Saturday evening under the chapiteau on the new Empress Lawn. The conference officially closes with a Peranakan Lunch on Sunday. So join us, make new friends and spend the weekend learning and sharing the Peranakan culture and heritage!

For tickets to the 3-day Convention, please send an email to secretariat@peranakan.org.sg. This Convention is organized by The Peranakan Association Singapore in conjunction with the Peranakan Arts Festival and is open to everyone.



CULTURAL INTERLUDES & BA-BAZAAR

A kaleidoscope of Peranakan demonstrations and performances will be staged for free throughout the Festival from Thursday to Sunday. Experience a full line up of Peranakan music, batik painting, songs and dances, even jazz and wine pairing with Peranakan food! Check www.peranakanfest.com for a schedule of performances at the Cultural Interludes Stage!

Showcased by:



THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE

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SULAM EMBROIDERY WORKSHOP

Join us for a very special Sulam Embroidery Workshop held at the Peranakan Museum during the Festival. Each session is hands on and limited to 20 participants per session. Workshops are held between 1pm and 5pm, Thursday 5 Nov to Sunday 8 Nov. To reserve your place, please send an email to info@peranakanfest.com. \$20 per person.



Bibiks Behind Bars Kena Again!

5-8 NOVEMBER 2015 VICTORIA THEATRE

Yes! The Bibiks of Katong are back in action and crazier than ever! Catch this fun filled musical comedy for the whole family and ... kena again!

Starring Shirley Tay, Melvyn Chew, Catherine Sng, Francis Hogan, Richard Chia, Jackie Pereira, Reggie, Matheus Ting, Dennis Heng, Adriana Tanubrata, Amanda Germaine Lee.

Guest Starring **Koh Chieng Mun.**

Directed by **Baba Richard Tan SG.**

Music Director and composer **Babes Conde.**

Tickets at \$85 / \$55 (evening show) \$75 / \$45 (matinee show)

Showtimes Thursday 5 Nov, 8pm | Friday and Saturday 6,7 Nov

3pm & 8pm | Sunday 8 Nov 3pm.



Pintu Pagar

4 - 8 NOVEMBER 2015, VICTORIA CONCERT HALL

"The Best Love Stories are often told... Apart..."

Catch the world premiere of Desmond Sim's latest English play of Peranakan proportions.

Starring Henry Heng, Nora Samosir, Nicholas Bloodworth and Kimberly Chan.

Directed by **Baba Desmond Sim** Music Director **Elaine Chan**
Character Design and Makeup **Joseph Ng**

Tickets at \$75 / \$45 (evening show) \$55 / \$35 (matinee show)

Showtimes Wednesday 4 Nov, 7:30pm | Friday 6 Nov 2:30pm & 7:30pm | 7, 8 Nov Saturday & Sunday 11:00am

ART Expressions

A showcase of original paintings by 3 celebrated Peranakan artists.



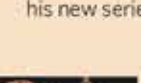
ADELINE YEO "Ardour"

Adeline Yeo's art is an expression of intense thoughts and deep emotions. Come and see Singapore's top finger-painting artist as she plays out her passion for life and love.



DESMOND SIM "Neo-Nyas!"

"Neo-Nyas" is playwright Desmond Sim's long-awaited artworks created specially for the Peranakan Arts Festival. Surprise your senses with his new series of paintings.



CAROLYN LAW "My HERitage"

Carolyn Law's paintings are a connection to her roots and philosophy in life. Observe her remarkable attention to details as she showcases her heritage.



Rare Vintage Photo Corner

Relive the glamorous and fashionable lifestyles of our Babas and Nyonyas from the 'Golden Era' of the days gone by.

Some paintings exhibited during the Peranakan Arts Festival 2015 are available for private sale and collection. For private viewings or reservations, please email us at info@peranakanfest.com or check www.peranakanfest.com for updates.

BOOK YOUR TICKETS TO THE SHOWS NOW!

Tickets to *Bibik Behind Bars Kena Again!* Friday 5 Nov show at 8pm is reserved for Convention delegates. **For registration to the 3-day convention and best show seats at special prices** please send an email to secretariat@peranakan.org.sg.

For information about the Festival, including participation in the Bazaar, workshops or the community stage, advertising or sponsorship opportunities, please send an email to info@peranakanfest.com. Contact **Joyce at 9366-3986.**

For tickets to all other shows for *Bibiks Behind Bars, Kena Again!* and *PINTU PAGAR*, please book at www.sistic.com.

feature

On the streets where

NYONYA CAROLINE TAN DISCOVERS A WEB OF INTERWOVEN LIVES BEHIND THE DOORWAYS OF MELAKA'S ANCIENT STREETS. HER NEPHEW, **BABA TAN KOON SIANG**, AND HIS SISTER, **NYONYA LINDA CHEE**, JOIN IN THE ATTEMPT TO UNRAVEL THE CONVOLUTED CONNECTIONS AMONGST THE FAMILIES

“Heeren Street”.

These words were often uttered with wisps of nostalgia by my maternal grandmother, Seow Geok Bee. She grew up in Heeren Street (now Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock) before moving to Singapore in the mid-1950s. She passed on 14 years later at the age of 70. From her and my mother, Cherry, I heard fascinating accounts of life in colonial Malacca.

In early 2015, my generation of relatives in our 50s and 60s started chatting about our roots after forming a WhatsApp chat group to connect with more cousins from all over the world. Old photos, Chinese names, who was whose cousin, brother, sister, maternal, paternal – these appeared at dizzying speed. We were left mentally tangled or rather, mangled – everyone seemed connected in one way or another. I was curious to find out



more. Who lived where? Who married who? After hours of researching the archives and aided by an indulgent husband, Dennis Mok, who drove me to Melaka to traipse through old streets and quiz my elder relatives, I now understand a tad more of the interwoven lives of my ancestors at Heeren Street.

Heeren Street in the mid-20th century.



Heeren Street today is a busy one-way street called Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, with carparking allowed on one side. Photo by Linda Chee.

Heeren Street is a short stretch, just a little over two kilometres, in old Malacca town. From 1641 to 1795 the thriving port known as *Malakka* was governed by the Dutch, the longest period of time it was under foreign control. Merchants from all over the world docked to trade including my ancestors from China who settled there at least seven generations ago. No, we are not part of that romantic princess Hang Li Po story. What led my ancestors there was purely the spirit of adventure and money.

Heeren is a Dutch word that means lords or noblemen. The houses they built had narrow facades but extended deep, earning the reference of *rumah panjang* (long house). Apparently the quantum of property tax was based on the width of the façade. Hence the design by creative architects. From the entrance to the backyard, through numerous halls and courtyards, it could be as long as 100 metres.

they lived . . .

The arrival of the Straits Chinese

By 1795, political and commercial tides in the South East Asia region had changed direction. Britain had invaded Malacca and trade was re-directed by the Dutch East India Company to Batavia. The exodus of Dutch traders from Heeren Street saw the void filled largely by Zhangzhou Hokkien merchants like my ancestors. They had assimilated into the local community, forming a hybrid sub-culture known as the Peranakans (local born). Some built fortunes and lived charmed lifestyles quite different from their forefathers in China.

Although political treaties of 1814 and 1824 sealed the Dutch-British colonial boundaries, the founding of Singapore in 1819 provided the catalyst for the new migrants named by the British imperialists as the Straits Chinese. They would dominate the business world of the Straits Settlements up to the Second World War.

The Straits Chinese were loyal British subjects, some of whom could speak English, and who differentiated themselves from the later Chinese immigrants labelled as *sinkeh* or *cheenagerk*. My ancestors were traders and businessmen who planted tapioca, gambier, sago and fruit. In 1863, my maternal great-great grandfather Seow Koon Gum leased from the British East India Company a piece of jungle land at Bukit Beruang, outside Malacca town. He cleared the land and cultivated tapioca and fruits such as *durian*, *chempedak*, mangosteen and pineapple. By all accounts the plantation was profitable as his son, my great grandfather Seow Tiang Lock, could afford to live in one of the houses on Heeren Street. Later, many of them switched to become rubber planters, thanks to Tan Chay Yan who pioneered commercial rubber planting. He was the grandson of Tan Tock Seng and son of Tan Teck Guan.

Orang ada ada

By the late 19th and early 20th century, at least three-quarters of the houses on Heeren Street were occupied by Straits-born babas and nyonyas. It was the gentrified residence of the *orang ada ada* (people of means). They lived lavishly. Their



(Above) A grand wedding at Heeren Street in 1936. Peranakan families were neighbours and intermarried within a tight circle of relatives and friends.



(Left) The sons of wealthy Babas adopted Anglophile lifestyles. Tennis was a favourite pastime during the 1920s. From left: Chan Seng Kee, Seet Chee Pheng, Tan Eng Chye, Koh Kim Chiang. Photo courtesy of Tan Koon Siang.

(Below) Caroline's grandfather Tay Kim Yong being transported on a sedan chair by coolies to his rubber plantation.



homes were furnished with elaborate marble and blackwood furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl, elaborate Dutch lamps, Venetian mirrors and other imported fittings. They dined often in high style, using colourful nyonyaware commissioned from China, crystal ware and silver cutlery from Sheffield, England. Their extravagant parties for numerous

THE STRAITS CHINESE ENCLAVE

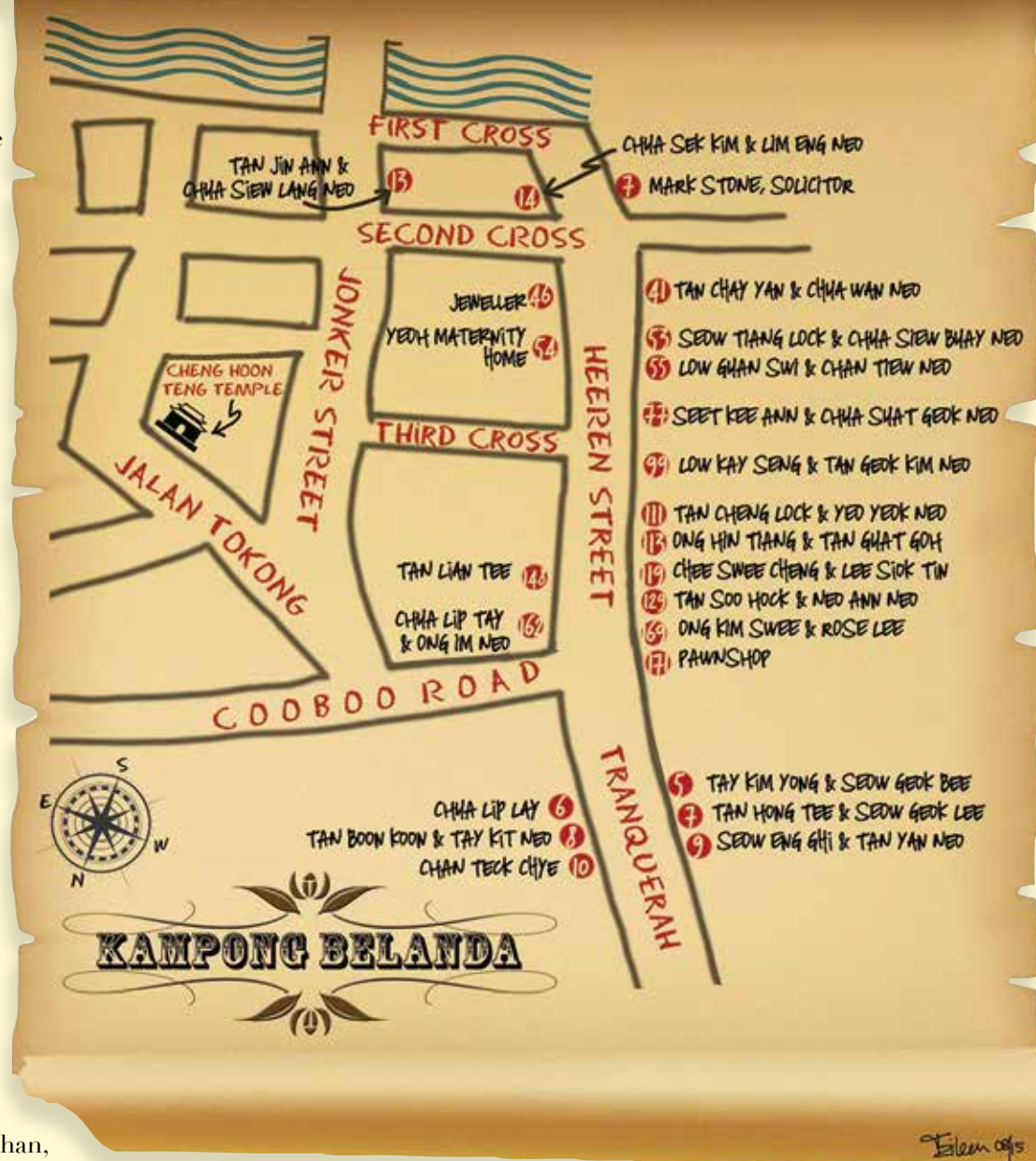
Heeren Street then was like the Queen Astrid Park of Singapore. The other streets were like the Holland and Bukit Timah areas. The whole neighbourhood of Dutch-era terraced houses became known as Kampong Belanda.

Ada Bau Bau Bachang (the fragrance of *bachang*)

The *bachang* is a variety of local mango with a distinctive fragrance that is pervasive. Relatives near and far are all connected as long as you can get a whiff, a trace of that fragrance. If you go down Heeren Street, Jonker Street, Tranquerah Road and all the way up to Klebang Besar knock on the doors of the Chua, Chee, Chan, Goh, Low, Lee, Lim, Ong, Seet, Seow, Tan, Toh and Yeo families – practically every Straits-born Chinese household in those days, *pergi balek* (going back and forth), somewhere, somehow, were all linked either through bloodline or marriage.

For children, the intermarriages meant a small fortune of ang pows at Chinese New Year. From dawn till after dusk, they would be taken from one house to another to pay their respects to so many relatives. So you can imagine their pockets were stuffed full by the end of the day!

Editor's note: The houses were lived in by different occupants at different points in time as they changed hands many times over the generations. The information shared here is from oral history and archived records before 1942.



(Above) Taken from the 1926 passport of Caroline's maternal grandmother, Seow Geok Bee, and her husband, Tay Kim Yong. She lived at 5 Tranquerah Road but her rumah abu (ancestral hall or family home) was at 53 Heeren Street.



*Tan Jin Ann and his wife, Chua Siew Lang Neo, of 13 Jonker Street, shown here at 22 Shanghai Road in Singapore to attend their daughter's wedding, circa 1919. Siu Lang Neo was the daughter of Lim Eng Neo. Jin Ann is the paternal great grandfather of my niece Linda Chee, the editor of *The Peranakan* magazine. Photo courtesy of Robert Lee.*

(Left) Matriarch Lim Eng Neo, who lived at 14 Heeren, with her son, rubber trader Chua Lip Sian and his family; circa 1913. His first wife, Tan Tek Hoon Neo, is seated at right. Photo courtesy of Charles Seet.

engagements and weddings were widely reported in the newspapers.

Weddings were arranged unions between families. It was not uncommon for the bridegroom's family to choose a bride from another well-heeled family of the same status. A person who married into the family would almost always recommend a sister or niece as suitable candidates. These endogamic practices were meant to keep the wealth and property within the family. However, that was not to be. The fortunes of many families were inevitably depleted after three generations, as the old saying goes.

Heeren residents

My great grandparents, Seow Tiang Lock and his wife Chua Siew Buay Neo, lived at 53 Heeren Street. Their daughter, Geok Bee, was born in 1900. She was a beauty whom they called "the belle of Heeren Street". Grandma Geok Bee told me about the busy social calendar of her extended family, who were living mostly along the same street. Her grandmother, Lim Eng Neo, lived at 14 Heeren with husband, Chua Sek Kim, the son of a gambler planter called Chua Yan Keng. Geok Bee's uncle, Chua Lip Tay, was at 162 Heeren. An aunt, Chua Suat Geok Neo, was at 77 Heeren and was married to Seet Kee Ann. Another aunt, Chua Siew Lang Neo, lived around the corner at 13 Jonker Street (now called Jalan Hang Jebat) and was married to Tan Jin Ann, a rubber planter.

Jin Ann's best friend was Tay Boo Siew, another rubber planter, who lived at Klebang Besar. It was surely not by chance that my grandmother Geok Bee married Tay Kim Yong, the son of Boo Siew. Jin Ann and Boo Siew had been specially handpicked by another prominent rubber planter, Ong Kim Wee, at that time one of the richest men in Malacca - to be friends with his son, Hin Tiang, as he was very careful about the company his young son kept. Hin Tiang lived at 113 Heeren.

Serving a charmed lifestyle

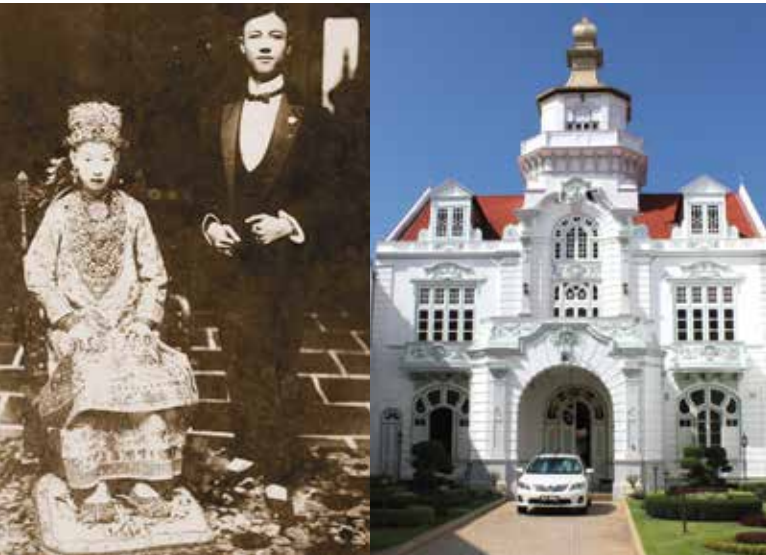
The wealthy Straits-Chinese residents of Kampong Belanda were well served by businesses that moved into Heeren Street to cater to their needs. A Ceylonese jeweller, M A Babaihamy, was at 46 Heeren, just a few doors away from my great



*(Above) The sisters of Robert Tan Hoon Siang (standing second from right), the only son of Chua Wan Neo (seated, centre), married into the families of Chee Yam Chuan, Chua Yan Keng and Ee Kong Guan. Chua Wan Neo took over the business left by her husband Tan Chay Yan on his demise in 1916. Her cousin-in-law, Tan Jin Ann, helped her run Nyalas Rubber Estates. Photo from the book, *Sarong Kebaya*, by Peter Lee, page 272. Collection of Sharron Chee.*

grandparents' place. He would fashion the most elaborate *kerosangs* and then come to the house with a bag of diamonds for the womenfolk to choose. There and then he would set up his mobile worktable and fix the diamonds into the casings under their watchful eyes (so there was no risk of him swapping the diamonds for cheaper stones!). A goldsmith was farther down at 96 Heeren along with several more at Jonker and Cross streets. A candle maker was also available from whom they could buy candles for daily prayers to the household deities and ancestors or to worship at the Cheng Hoon Teng temple on Jalan Tokong.

Several law firms set up in the area to handle the extensive real estate matters, wills and law suits that were often published in the newspapers. A law firm at 7 Heeren was run by a British solicitor, Mark Stone. Other solicitors included Goh Tiow Wan at 20 Jonker nearby. He was the son-in-law of Tan Jiak Choo of 114 Heeren. There was also another law firm, Rogers and Sons at 40 First Cross Street. At the end of Heeren Street was even a pawnshop, Chop Foh



(Left) Tan Jin Ann's son, Tan Eng Chye, was matchmade to Chee Kim Puay, the daughter of Chee Yang Cheng from the Chee Yam Chuan family. His London-style tuxedo is in contrast to her traditional wedding attire. Photo courtesy of Tan Koon Siang. The newly-wed couple lived for a year at the palatial Chee Temple, the rumah abu for the Chees, at 117 Heeren. The Temple was conceived by Chee Swee Cheng who lived next door at 119.



(Right) The well worn-out signage at 43 Heeren depicting card games where current resident, Soh Eng Keng, now in his 80s, recalls his mother hosting cherki parties. Photo by Caroline Tan.

Cheong, at 171 Heeren. Perhaps it served nyonys and bibiks who lost at their card games and could pawn a hairpin or two until the next winning! Just next door is 169 Heeren, where my Auntie Rose Ong, the daughter of magistrate Lee Teck Chang, still lives today and makes her famous curry powder.

At 53 Jonker there was another pawnshop, Chop Tai Lee. Or if you won a punt, you could deposit your winnings at the branch office of the Ho Hong Bank at 181 Jonker. Ho Hong Bank was the first Chinese bank to engage in international banking. It eventually became part of OCBC. There was also a motor shop called Lee & Co on Jonker Street that

sold car accessories and provided repair services to the dapper Anglophile babas with their fancy automobiles such as the Oldsmobile, Crossley, Ford and Morris.

Charitably disposed

The Straits-Chinese were “charitably disposed”, a term that harks back to the Straits Settlements. They supported education wholeheartedly and contributed generously. Philanthropist Chee Swee Cheng gave out scholarships and school grants, as did Chua Wan Neo, the wife of Tan Chay Yan, and her father-in-law, Tan Teck Guan. In 1911, the Tan

Prominent Straits Chinese who served as Municipal Commissioners

All the four babas in this 1907 photograph lived in Heeren Street. From left to right: Ong Kim Wee, Seet Kee Ann (son of Seet Moh Guan), Tan Chay Yan and Chan Koon Cheng.

The Municipal Commission was set up to oversee local urban affairs such as matters relating to drainage, building regulations and street conditions. They were responsible for the management of the municipal water cart which watered the street to control the dust, imposed a speed limit for motorists driving through town, and arranged for the installation of an electric flash-light signboard at the lamp post at the corner of Heeren Street and First Cross Street. This was to warn speedsters to slow down as the road turned, lest they end up in the river! When the road surface at Heeren Street was changed from laterite to granite, and the road and motor taxes went up, these were met with much objection. The babas felt that the street was in poor condition with sharp points of granite sticking out here and there, and were extremely injurious to their expensive car tyres.

Apart from being Municipal Commissioners, these babas were successful and prominent businessmen. Chay Yan had been given rubber seedlings by Henry “Mad” Ridley, the director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. From these “mad” seeds grew the worldwide rubber industry that made the Straits



Chinese prosperous. Chay Yan and Koon Cheng were the world's first commercial rubber planters. Koon Cheng was the first President of Malacca's Chinese Chamber of Commerce, formed in 1912, but died just weeks after his appointment. He has a bridge and road named after him in Malacca.

Chay Yan too, unexpectedly passed away in 1916. Upon his death, his widow, Chua Wan Neo, appointed Tan Jin Ann, the husband of her first cousin Chua Siew Lang Neo, to take over the running of Nyalas Rubber Estates. It was a working-for-relatives tradition that continued with his son, Tan Eng Chye, and grandson, Louis Tan Tiang Hong (Linda's father).

Photo from the book: 20th Century Impressions of British Malaya, 1907.



(Far left) Appleton, the tropical-style home of Geok Bee's parents-in-law at Klebang Besar, where the extended family often held gatherings and grand parties. Its location is beside the famous coconut shake stall and you can still see the original Appleton kitchen roof.

(Left) Geok Bee and her daughter, Cherry Tay (Caroline's mother) in front of Appleton.

Teck Guan Scholarship was awarded to my uncle Tan Eng Chye (see wedding photo on page 10), who later became a Municipal Commissioner along with Tan Cheng Lock and many other prominent Peranakans. When the St Francis School needed a new wing in 1914, a subscription fund list garnered contributions from many Heeren residents.

These babas made sure that their daughters learnt not only to cook and sew but to speak, read and write English. They were renowned for their contributions to the missionary schools that were set up in Malacca, including the Methodist Girls' School that my grandmother, Geok Bee went to and the French Convent that my mother, Cherry attended. Until 1916, the French sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus mission operated an elementary convent school out of one of the houses along Heeren Street for nyonya girls. Even back then, there was tuition! My mother's tutor was Mr Cyril de Vries, a Eurasian of Dutch ancestry, whose wife was a teacher in the French Convent at Banda Hilir.



Home was 53 Heeren

For Geok Bee, Heeren Street was the place she always returned to, even after she married and moved less than half a kilometre away to Tranquerah Road, where she lived at no.5; her beloved sister, Geok Lee at no.7; and brother Eng Ghi at no.9, all in a row. Later she moved to "Appleton", a bungalow at Klebang Besar that belonged to her parents-in-law, Tay Boo Siew and Tan Guek Neo.

Geok Bee had her babies delivered at her parents' home at 53 Heeren. So did her sister Geok Lee. By 1930, Dr Ong Bak Hin, who married Neo Yap Neo from the Neo Ong Hee family at 87 Heeren, had set up a maternity home at 54 Heeren. When it was Geok Bee's daughter - my mother - Cherry's turn to have a baby, it was "modern times" already and Geok Bee urged her to deliver my eldest brother, Thomas Tan (a former 2nd VP of The Peranakan Association Singapore), at the Ong Maternity Home. He was delivered by Dr Yeoh Cheng Hoe, who was Dr Ong's brother-in-law and the son-in-law of Ong Hin Tiang.

Dr Yeoh later on took over the expanded practice, changing the name to Yeoh Maternity Home. You can still see the sign if you visit 56 Heeren today. Dr Yeoh was a Queens Scholar of 1925 and at first worked in Singapore but was called back by Ong Hin Tiang to serve the family.

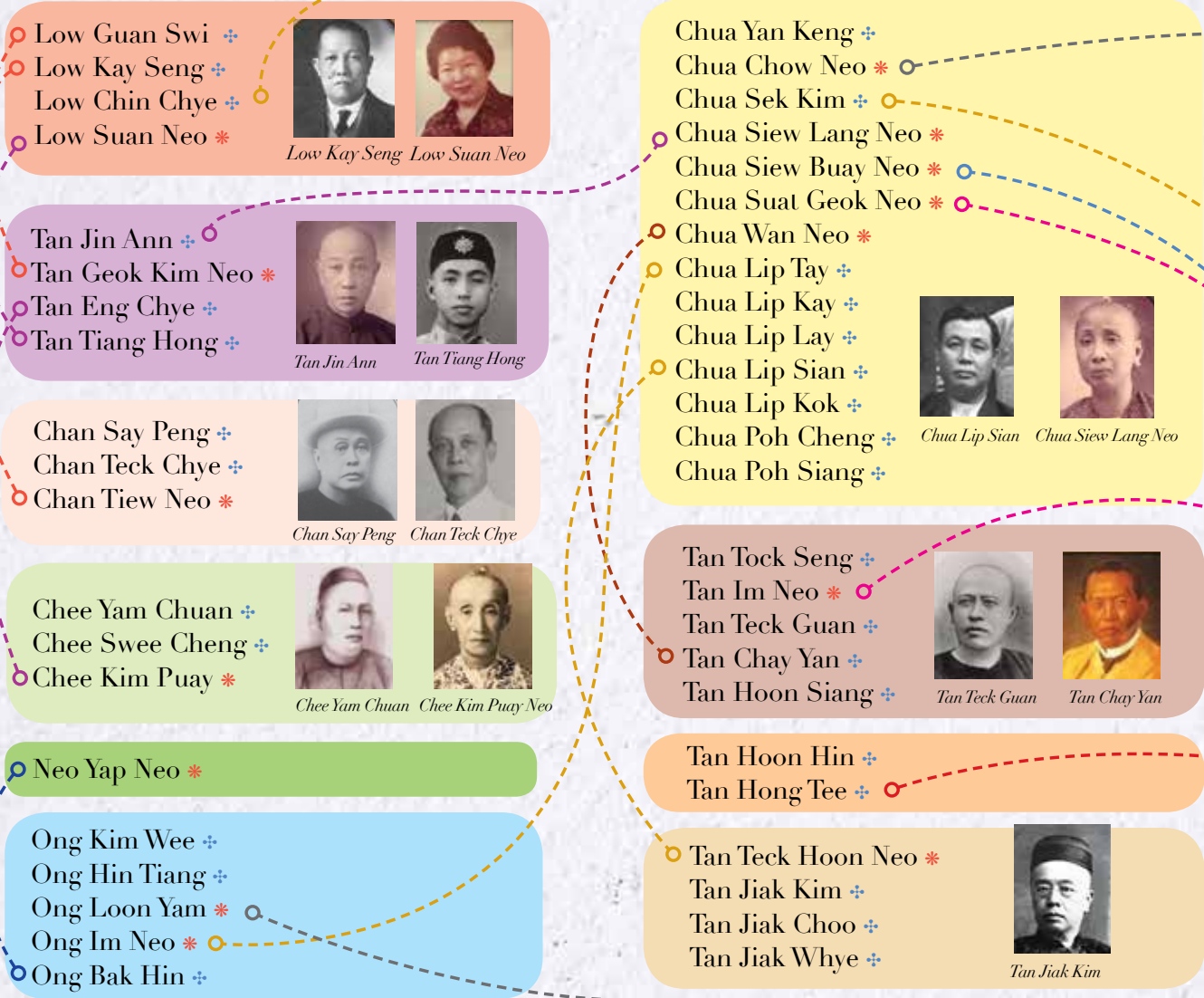
(Above) The former Yeoh Maternity Home at 56 Heeren. It was donated to the National University of Singapore by Ms Agnes Tan and is being used as a resource centre.

Indeed Heeren Street has had a colourful history. It has rightfully earned the label of a protected UNESCO World Heritage site. If you go there, drop by at 8 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock (as Heeren Street has been renamed after its famous resident at no.111). If you get a chance to meet Colin Goh at the Heeren Street Heritage Centre, spend some time with him. He is an engaging and passionate Malaccan who will freely share about that special street. You will come away inspired to find out more about your Straits Chinese heritage. And understand why today, generations later, those who originated from Heeren Street would, if we probe hard enough, likely be related many times removed.

Editor's note: We hope that you too will start on the quest of tracing your roots if you have not done so. If you have pictures of old Heeren Street or the residents that lived there before World War II, or if you have information that differs, please share them with us. It will help to build on this repository of information we currently have about the residents of the area and their lives. Please email your information and send your scanned photographs to thestrainschinese@gmail.com.

KAHWEN SEDARA (Intermarriages)

- The tangled web of just some family connections from Heeren Street



Birds of a feather flock together, as Tan Koon Siang points out

This proverb speaks volumes of the practice of endogamy which played a central theme in the lives of the Straits Chinese before the War. So much so that practically everyone who lived in the Heeren, Jonker and Tranquerah areas of Malacca was related to one another.

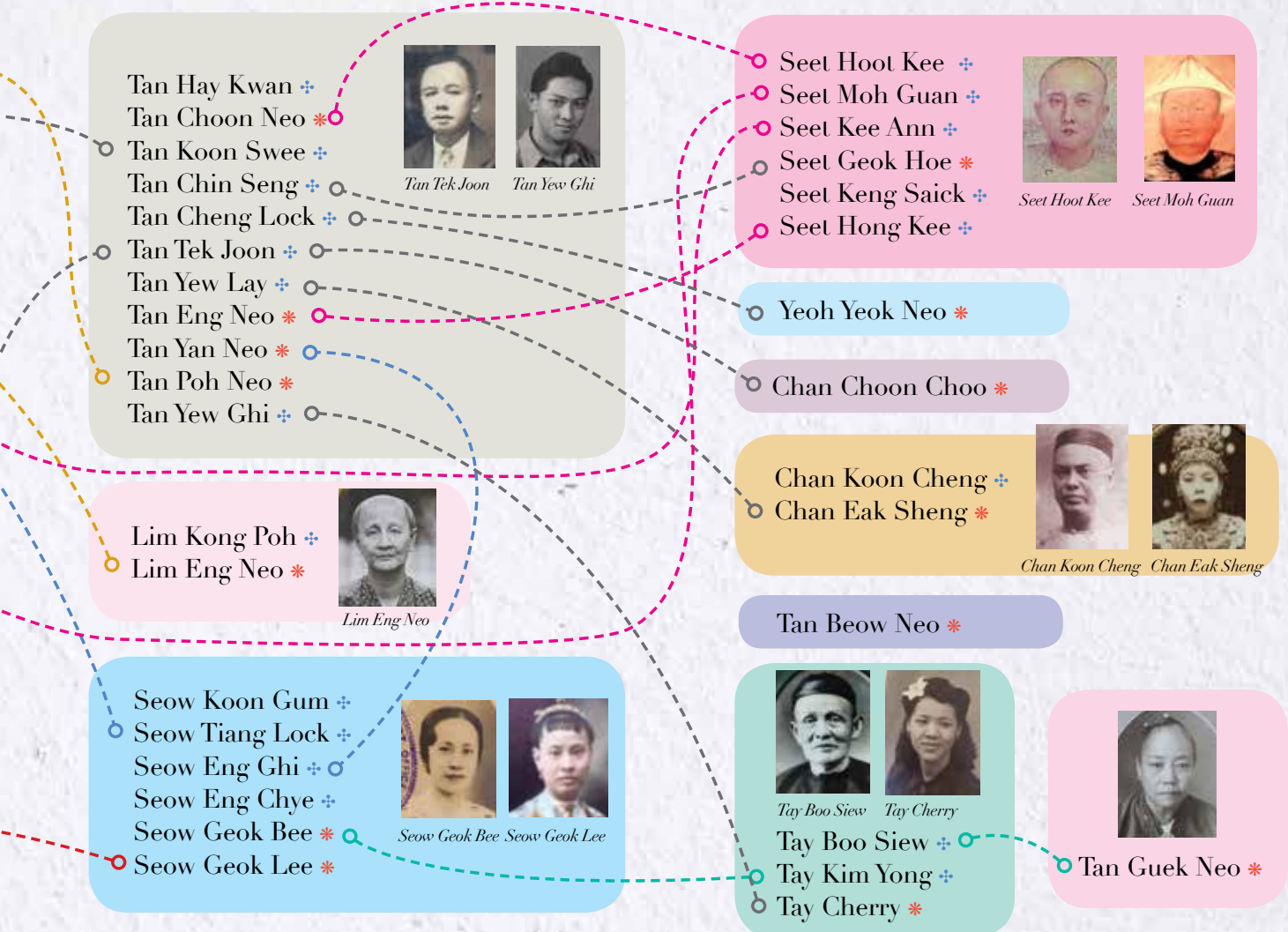
As much a custom or a tradition, it encapsulated the deep-rooted clannishness of Chinese society and the practicality of class consciousness. For example, in my own family, my great grandfather Tan Jin Ann promised his sister Tan Geok Kim Neo that one of his grandsons would marry one of her grand daughters. So, it is that my father and mother share the same great-grandfather!

To boost the gene pool, matrilocal marriages evolved where the bridegroom would move in with his wife after marriage. It helped save many a flagging family business by attracting promising non-Baba young men. Though common a century ago, it quietly thrives today.

Caroline's paternal grandfather, Tan Tek Joon, with his wife, Chan Choon Choo, and son, Yew Lay. Tek Joon was the grandson of Tan Koon Swee and Chua Chow Neo of 143 Heeren Street. He was the manager of United Malacca Rubber Estates, a company founded by his relative, Tan Cheng Lock, who lived down the street at 111 Heeren.



among relatives)



Explanatory notes:

- This chart shows some members of certain family groups as mentioned in Caroline’s article
- While there is no time period stated, the generations of families are listed broadly in descending order
- The colours of the connecting lines stem from the family of the male
- ♂ = male, ♀ = female

These practices would seem traditional but were more of a necessity as marriages between business partners and cousins seemed to ensure the continuity of Baba family fortunes and the propagation of customs and practices, such as language, cooking and a distinct social class for entertainment and sport.

Usually, second and third cousins would be the ideal candidates for arranged marriages between families. It was not just anecdotal but practical that many Baba families before the Japanese Occupation intermarried among each other when the going was still good.

Though daughters and wives were excluded from distributions of family wealth, there were exceptions. I have seen the will of a very rich and enlightened merchant who died in 1847. He gave each of his daughters a house. And in another family, it was the mention of a distribution to a “faithful mistress” and an illegitimate daughter.

Thus today, where many families have altogether ceased the practice of endogamy, I believe the Straits-born culture has had its days numbered. Love marriages have replaced arranged ones as we re-assimilate back into the Chinese mainstream. By marrying non-Straits born brides, many elders regret that their grandchildren do not speak Baba Malay and cannot cook the way grandma did.

It is a reality that we cannot turn the clock back. 🇲🇾

Mintak ampun (Please forgive us)

Any errors, omissions and mis-attributions are purely unintended. Our hope is that this article can be the starting point for some Nyonyas and Babas to find common links to their Straits-Chinese ancestry.

A Chetti wedding extravaganza

TRADITIONAL PERANAKAN WEDDINGS STRETCHING OVER 12 DAYS ARE RARE. A CHETTI MELAKA NUPTIAL IS EVEN MORE SO. **BABA DAVID NEO**, BASED IN KUALA LUMPUR, IS ENTHRALLED BY THE FIRST TRADITIONAL CHETTI MELAKA WEDDING IN A DECADE

The topic of “The Lost Tribe of Chetti Melaka” was not lost on T Sithambaram Pillay, better known as Jeeva. At last year’s Peranakan Indian symposium on 4 October in Singapore, he extended an open invitation to everyone to attend his wedding in Malacca the following month, in November.

I was intrigued and floored by his generosity and audacity. My urbanized mind could not fathom an invitation of such magnitude. I found out later that the last traditional Chetti wedding was performed 10 years ago, making me realise how much more significant this wedding was. My students and I spent four days, from 20 to 23 November in Malacca, warmly welcomed and hosted by Jeeva’s family.

I only witnessed the events after the *Hantar Sireh Kuil*. The wedding on 22 November did not lack colour. Jeeva and his bride, Chong You Wen, were resplendent in their finery. He spared no cost for the wedding, sourcing what was needed from Singapore and India. The Peranakan and Malay influences were evident in, for instance, the bride’s

An old coconut coloured with kunyit (turmeric) powder and fragrant jasmine flowers are part of the gift offerings to the bride for the engagement.

chochok sanggol (chignon) and the fact that all the female relatives were in *kebayas*.

Both bride and groom were supposed to be part of the *berarak* (procession) and converge at the *kampung* (village) temple (Sri Maha Maraiamman). However, it poured so the couple was driven there. Their entry into the temple was raucously heralded by *kompang* (a drum beaten with a stick for Malay weddings) and traditional Indian music. It was a grand affair. By the time the official wedding ceremony had concluded in the temple, the rain had also stopped. Guests moved to the community hall to feast and were entertained by contemporary Indian music performed by local artistes, and later, the inevitable *ronggeng* and *joget* session! One of Jeeva’s relatives appropriately interpreted the rain as an outpouring of abundant blessings.

The wedding weekend was exhausting for me. I can only imagine how much more so for the bridal couple. Regardless, *kita suma berjolly dan hibor ati* (all of us had a great time)! I was totally at home with the Chetti Melaka community, conversing in *patois*. I couldn’t help but chuckle to see that Jeeva’s family were Indian in so many ways, particularly in the wedding rituals, yet did not know how to speak Tamil nor communicate with the Hindu priest. Like *Cheena buta* (the ‘blind’ Chinese) me, they are *Keling buta* (the ‘blind’ Indians)!

I was most impressed by their strong sense of community and how the wedding proceedings

bound the family together. I then realized the significance and inclusive *kampung* spirit of Jeeva’s invitation to all who would come to his wedding. Thank you, Jeeva and family, for the hospitality and generosity. May God deeply and richly bless your union! •



Elaborate Customs and Rituals

BABA DAVID NEO AND CHETTI JENNIFER RATHABAI OUTLINE THE CEREMONIES INVOLVED IN THE TRADITIONAL CHETTI MELAKA WEDDING



The Chetti Melaka wedding is unique in incorporating elements from Malay, Peranakan Chinese and Southern Hindu Indian cultures. The community traces its origins from merchants mostly from South India who traded in the bustling port of Melaka in the 15th century. They married local women and settled down in Melaka, assimilating the local culture while retaining elements of their own Hindu practices and customs, particularly of the Saivite sect, one of the largest and oldest.

The traditional wedding is richly symbolic with rituals based on the Hindu *vedas*. It is a glorious celebration of the bride and groom as being one in soul and spirit. Meticulous attention is paid to the details of the rituals, decorations and attire before, during and after the wedding, similar to the 12 days of extended celebrations in the Peranakan Chinese wedding. Other similarities include the wedding entertainment such as *ronggeng*, *dondang sayang* and playing *cherki*.

Before the wedding

Masok Meninang or Merisik (To make enquiries. Sometimes, is described as ‘spying!’) – a matchmaker or *waneng* visits the potential bride’s home to convey the groom’s interest. The *waneng* will *tengok jodoh* or *jadagam*, to determine the compatibility of the couple by comparing their horoscopes. Jeeva and You Wen knew each other as friends a decade ago so it was not necessary.

Buang Suara (literally translated as ‘throwing voice’) – the groom visits the bride’s family to ask for her hand in marriage.

Upachara Masok India (conversion/initiation into Hinduism) – at the temple, a priest will initiate the non-Hindu partner into the religion as a Saivite Hindu. In You Wen’s case, she was given the name, Priyanka.

Sandangu (Tamil for ‘coming of age’) – a ceremony at the girl’s home upon reaching puberty. It was necessary for You Wen as she just became a Hindu. In a ritual called *lumur kunyit*, the girl is covered with *kunyit* (turmeric) paste and then bathed clean as a sign of purification. She then dresses in a *baju panjang* and *sanggol nyonya* to symbolize that she is now a woman. A Hindu priest conducts the ceremony with five married women who will bless the bride-to-be by waving their hands in circular motion with a sprinkle of rose water. She is presented with sacred white powder made from dried cow dung ash, a pot of water, rice, a pestle, rice again, *putu piring* (string hoppers), bread and finally, an oil lamp. At the end of the ceremony, Priyanka takes a bite of the *putu* sweetened with brown sugar.

Nicchiyadharatham or Tukar Chinchin (exchange of rings or engagement) – the *berarak* or procession to the bride-to-be’s house happens about two weeks before the wedding, complete with *bunga manggar* (mango flowers) - coconut reeds wrapped in tinsel and inserted into a pineapple, as

(Left) At both Priyanka’s and Jeeva’s homes, a tent is erected with coconut leaf ornaments and banana trees tied to the gateposts, announcing to all that there will be a wedding.

(Right) The *thali* is tied between Priyanka and Jeeva to unite them in a ceremony called the *mageiyum*.



in a Malay wedding procession – and the loud beats of the *kompang* (drums).

Jeeva's entourage carried seven trays. These contained an old coconut covered with *kunyit*, bananas, *sireh pinang* (betel nut), rose water, *bunga rampay* (potpourri), rock sugar, dates, sweets, a *saree*, bangles, talcum powder, jasmine flowers and fruit.

At Priyanka's house, Jeeva was received and the trays were accepted. Priyanka then donned the given *saree*. During the ceremony, *duit tetek* (bosom money) was presented to the bride's mother and jewellery to the bride. A Hindu priest presided over the ceremony where the couple exchanged rings. They then sought the blessings of the elders from both families.

Hantar Sireh Kovil Pathiram (sending the invitation cards to the temple for blessing) – three trays of invitation cards, betel leaves and nuts, flowers, rose water, flower garlands, fruit and an old coconut were presented at the Sri Poyatha Vinayager Morrthi Temple to be blessed before distribution.

Naik Tiang (literally means raising the pole) – three days before the wedding, a 'wedding tree' is raised at the groom's home in a ceremony presided by a Hindu priest. A tree stump is covered with *kunyit* paste and 'planted' in the front compound of the groom's house with nine types of seeds. Milk is poured and a lamp lit. As the days follow, the seeds sprout, symbolizing blessings and abundance.

Naik Khemah or Panthal (putting up the tent) – this is usually done at both the groom's and bride's homes three days before the wedding. A tent is decorated with coconut leaf ornaments and banana trees are tied to the gateposts, announcing to all that there will be a wedding.

Semayang Thali (blessing of the *thali*) – the *mangalasutrum* or *thali* is consecrated in the temple by the priest on the eve of the wedding. It is a

(Above) In the *nalangu*, the married women line up to touch the couple's shoulders and thighs with the pestle to symbolize fortitude against life's challenges.

necklace to be given by the groom to the bride, who will wear it to show that she is married. It holds the same significance as the wedding ring. The *thali* is usually a gold pendant strung from a yellow thread dyed with turmeric that is tied around the neck of the bride by her husband. The wife will wear it until her husband dies.

Malam Berinai (henna night) – is also held on the eve of the wedding, after the prayers, at both homes. Married women of the family help with the *berinai*, where the couple's fingertips and toes are painted with freshly made henna.

The Wedding Day

Berarak (Wedding Procession) – both the bride and groom's parties will process from their respective residences and converge at the temple where the wedding couple will pay respects to their parents. The ceremony of the *chinchin kaki* (toe ring) begins, where milk will be poured over the bride's foot and a ring will be placed on her toe. The groom then puts the *kumkum* (consecrated red powder) on the bride's forehead and the *thali* is tied between the couple to unite them in a ceremony called the *magelyuim*. The *kumkum*, toe ring and *thali* symbolize a married woman.

Next is the *nalangu*. The couple will be blessed by married women of the family who will put turmeric paste on the couple's foreheads, sprinkle water and then touch their shoulders and thighs with the pestle to symbolise fortitude to face life's challenges. Finally, they are blessed with camphor. This ceremony is usually held a few days before the wedding but the Chetti community has incorporated it into the wedding ceremony.



The most significant part of the wedding is when the couple circles the sacred fire, called *agni*, three times. They pray for strength, mental, physical and spiritual balance, abundance, joy and respect for their marriage.

Agni or the fire god is considered the main witness to the marriage. This is followed by the exchange of garlands between the couple and family members, symbolizing the acceptance of the marriage. The families then play games like the *chongkak* to 'break the ice' between both sides.

After the wedding ceremony, the *Santi Muhoortham* is when the couple consummates their union.

All these ceremonies are set in accordance with the Indian almanac.

(Above) The couple circle the sacred agni to get the blessing of the agni, or fire god.

(Right) The newly-wed couple with female Chetti relatives dressed in auspicious red kebayas for good luck.

After the wedding

Mandi-mandi (showers of blessings) – the day after the wedding, a large *tempayan* (basin) of *ayer bunga* (scented water) is prepared, containing *kunyit* powder and flowers, at the groom's home. At Jeeva's *mandi-mandi* ceremony, ice was added as a playful ploy at the expense of the couple.

The parents of the couple begin the ritual by pouring buckets of *ayer bunga* on the couple to bless them, followed by the relatives in ranking order and then the rest of the *kampong*, culminating in a merry water fight to drench one another. ●

(Below) Fun and games after the solemnization as family members play chongkak to 'break the ice'. The loser is stuffed with a banana! This took place earlier at the wedding of another couple, Nadarajan Raja and Wenila Wira, in 2008.

(Right) The Chetti berarak procession, where the newly married couple and their families leave the temple after the ceremony; heralded by traditional Indian music.



Ponggal, Oh Ponggal!

AFTER ATTENDING JEEVA'S CHETTI WEDDING, **BABA DAVID NEO** IS INVITED BY JEEVA TO WITNESS THE HARVEST FESTIVALS AT KAMPONG CHETTI MELAKA

Ponggal, or the Harvest Festival, was held on 15 January in the lunar calendar in 2015. The *Bhogi* Festival was the day before, and is unique to the Chetti Melaka. The other Hindu communities do not observe *Bhogi*.

Everyday during *Margali* which is the month preceding *Ponggal*, the Chetti family would rise before dawn. After their baths, an elder of the family will pray and place red hibiscus buds on either side of the main and rear doors of the house. When the sun rises, the buds will open and he or she will throw them onto the roof – this symbolizes the sun helping the hibiscus buds to bloom, metaphorically acknowledging the importance of the sun in ripening crops and making them ready for harvesting.

The *Bhogi* and *Ponggal* festivals therefore, are thanksgiving festivals. The significance of throwing the hibiscus on the roof symbolizes the deity, Lakshmi, who will bestow blessings on the home. The blooming flowers signify boundless joy at the sight of the sun; hence, this ritual venerates the sun. The red hibiscus also represents Shiva, the flame-red Lord of the Dance. Its five petals signify water, earth, sky, ether and wind. The flower is said to have both male and female parts, as Shakti is ensconced in the left half of Shiva, symbolizing his limitless grace and energy. This daily ritual for a month ends at *Bhogi*, on the eve of *Ponggal*.

Ancestral worship - *Bhogi*

A week before *Bhogi*, they will *semayang kubor* - similar to the Peranakan Chinese who observe *Cheng Meng*, where the ancestors' graves are cleaned. Traditionally Indians cremate their dead and do not bury them. I asked my Chetti friend, Jeeva who said that for as long as he could remember they have always buried their dead, although one could always opt for cremation.

Similar to the *semayang abu* (ancestral worship), *Bhogi* is when the Chettis will offer food and pray to their ancestors. The offering is called *parchu*, done in odd numbers of 1, 3, 5 or 7 banana leaves laid on the floor on which *nasi lemak*, *ikan parang*, *udang*, *ayam*



(Above) The entrance leading to Kampong Chetti at Gajah Berang, Melaka.



(Left) *Parchu*, or food offerings to the ancestors; Uncle Pillay lights the red candles similar to Chinese Peranakans at the altar.

and *kambing goreng chilli kunyit*, together with *laok pindang*, *sambal telur ikan* and *sambal timun* are served. This is unlike the Peranakan Chinese whose food offerings are laid out in multiples of

4 and everything pertaining to death must be in even numbers (and everything pertaining to *semayang datok* must be in odd numbers).

An Indian friend found it strange for meat to be offered, as usually all Indian offerings are vegetarian. Besides a *dulang* of fruit, Peranakan desserts are offered - *wajid*, *dodol*, *seesargon*, *kueh belanda*, *kueh bangket* and *kueh kanda kasturi* (uniquely Peranakan Indian, made from green beans and deep-fried).

As the women cook, they are not allowed to taste anything because the ancestors must be the first to taste the food. Salt is part of the offering should the ancestors find that lacking. Tea and coffee, and often alcohol and cigarettes, are offered. At the head of the offerings is the *pelita dudok* (brass lamp), a pair of red candles, *bunga rampay*, clothes and personal items belonging to the ancestors of the family such as



(Left) Milk frothing and boiling over, symbolizing abundance.



(Right) Mattu Ponggal, commemorating the cow which contributes to man's welfare. The cow is urged to eat the fruit offerings, so that blessings will be showered upon the family.

spectacles, jewellery and even dentures!

The male head of the family will lead the ceremony. When he is done, each family member according to ranking will pay their respects to the ancestors by waving the receptacle of *kemenyan* (burning incense) in an anti-clockwise motion and prostrating. The ancestors are then left to partake of the offering. Similar to the Peranakan Chinese, the *pak poey* (Chettis toss coins) is performed to determine if the ancestors are done with their meal. The guests who have been invited for *Bhogi* will be served separate food from the *parchu*. After the ceremony, they are also invited to partake of the *parchu*.

Good fortune overflowing Thai, Mattu and Kanni

The *Chetti Melaka* celebrate three types of *Ponggal*: *Thai Ponggal*, *Mattu Ponggal* and *Kanni Ponggal*. Central to the concept of *Ponggal* is the cooking of *nasi susu* (milk rice), where milk is boiled until it froths and overflows from the pot. Rice is then added, along with other ingredients. The idea is the symbolic and metaphorical overflowing or an abundance of harvest. When the milk overflows, all must shout, “*Ponggal, Oh Ponggal! Ponggal, Oh Ponggal!*” As cutely explained by one of Jeeva’s aunties (who endearingly calls me “Ba”), “*itu macam huat lah, mesti mo kasi dia menidi abi huat keluair lah...*” (“you must boil the milk until good fortune overflows...”).

Unlike the Indians who perform *Ponggal* at home, the Chettis observe *Thai Ponggal* together at the Sri Kailasanathar Temple in Gajah Berang.

Venerating the cow

Mattu Ponggal, the next day, commemorates the cow. Aside from being a beast of burden, the cow provides milk and is considered sacred. They are venerated for their contribution to the welfare of man. *Mattu Ponggal* is dedicated to Shiva and Shakti, the virtuous mother of benevolence to the cows. Jeeva said that although the Chetti community has moved away from

agriculture for their subsistence over a century ago, they still observe this festival even though the cows cost RM 700 to rent for the day.

The cows are bathed and decorated. Then the *nasi susu* is prepared. The cow is brought to the homes in the *Chetti kampong* to be fed with the offerings prepared by the household, after which each family member seeks blessings from the cows by paying homage to them (I cannot help but think of the *lang sai*/lion dance of the Chinese as an equivalent).

On the last day is the *Kanni Ponggal*. *Kanni* means young unmarried girls or *anak darah*. In the evening, the *anak darah* dress in their *kebaya* finery and gather at the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple to offer prayers and seek blessings from the deity, Mariamman, by cooking the *nasi susu*. They pray to be blessed with suitable husbands, to be better daughters and have opportunities for better education. This was traditionally also an opportunity for eligible bachelors



and their families to scrutinize the young women as prospective wives and daughters-in-law, much like casting oranges over the bridge for the Penang Peranakan Chinese.

Kanni Ponggal, with the anak-anak darah (unmarried women) displaying their nasi susu.

It was a fascinating experience to observe the unique Harvest Festival of *Kampong Chetti Melaka*. My heartiest thanks to Jeeva, Uncle Pillay and Auntie Jasmine (Mr and Mrs S Kanagalingam Pillay), and Auntie Periachee for your patient explanations and generous and lovely hospitality!

Happy *Ponggal!* 🍎

Semayang kiwi-style

BABA BRYAN TAN FINDS OUT HOW HIS AUNT'S FAMILY KEEPS ALIVE THE PRACTICE OF SEMAYANG ABU (ANCESTRAL WORSHIP) IN THE LAND OF THE LONG WHITE CLOUD.

When my aunt Florence Tay from New Zealand visited us in Singapore, I was deeply impressed and surprised when she showed me photos of her family practising *semayang abu* (ancestral worship). Originally from Melaka, she and her three brothers and their mother moved to Tauranga in North Island many years ago. Yet they still observe Peranakan rituals as part of their family tradition.

The extended family *semayang abu* twice a year during *Ching Ming* and Chinese New Year. It is a show of respect and filial piety by the family to their ancestors. A curious formality of consent must be sought beforehand: the male members from the paternal side of the family have to give permission for the rite to be held.

My aunt shared photos of the offerings on her mobile phone screen. She was remarkably meticulous in sharing the details. Food and drink are offered and two candles are placed at either end of the table as a form of invitation for the ancestors to come and partake. Bowls filled with rice are placed opposite the candles and joss sticks are set within them in even numbers, two for each ancestor.

Her family would lay out every row in even numbers of four, eight or twelve, with the first row containing small cups of liquor, glasses of water and handkerchiefs for the ancestors to 'wipe' their mouths. The second row has cups of tea and chopsticks for the ancestors to use to 'consume' the food. The third row would be the only row which does not have to be set in even numbers, consisting of condiments and seasonings such as *achar* (spicy mixed vegetables), the prerequisite *sambal belachan*, sweets that the ancestors were fond of, and sliced chilli.

If the first few rows comprise appetisers and *hors d'oeuvres*, then the fourth row has to be the main course. The family would cook trademark dishes such as *ayam buah keluak* (chicken cooked with nuts from the *kepayang* tree), *itek tim* (duck soup), braised pork and *babi pongteh* (stewed pork with fermented soya bean). For dessert, fruit and cakes would be laid out beyond the fourth row, all in even numbers as well. Smaller fruit would be set in bigger





numbers, if not merely to be more substantial. I salivated as she went on about the food and wondered if my family could also host a *semayang* sometime.

The desserts were the most impressive. All home-made, they ranged from the crispy love letters and *kueh bijan* (sesame cashew nut cake) to *tapay* (fermented glutinous rice) and *kueh lapis* (layered cake made with flour, coconut and sugar).

If an ancestor smoked, an ashtray would be provided. If a particular ancestor liked flowers, a vase of her favourite blooms would be displayed as well. I chuckled when my aunt explained this; I could imagine putting 4D magnum toto papers out for my grandfather who loved to gamble. The family would also lay down a basket of dried *mee* tied with a string and cuttlefish to symbolize a takeaway option - the ancestors could *dabao* (takeaway) leftover food!

For the *pak poey* ceremony, the family uses coins instead of a pair of kidney shaped red wooden discs. The *pak poey* is done to see if the ancestors have finished their meal. My aunt explained that two coins would be tossed onto the floor three times at regular intervals during the ritual; at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. Before commencing, the coins are tossed during prayers to invite the ancestors to come and partake. After one and a half hours, the coins would be tossed again to determine their mood. Two heads expresses the ancestors' happiness. Two tails would mean that the ancestors are angry, and one head and one tail would signal that the venerable spirits are done with their meal and the living could proceed to clear it.

Silver joss paper is also burned afterwards to send the ancestors away with money. The more you burn, the more money you give and the more filial piety you show!

It was an eye-opening experience for me to catch a glimpse of *semayang* in New Zealand. Every family has its own tradition of *semayang*, and my aunt's Kiwi version appeared authentic. What matters is that the ritual is conducted with the best of intentions. ●

The extended Tay family at their 'tok panjang' lunch after the semayang.

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THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE



*Peter Wee's grandfather, Tan Chung Kee, JP.
Images courtesy of Alvin Ong, 2013.*



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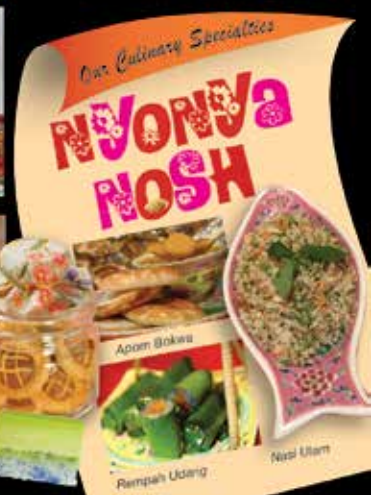
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Homesick for nyonya food?

NEW YORK-BASED NYONYA SHARON WEE SUSSES OUT SINGAPORE RESTAURANTS SERVING PERANAKAN FOOD IN THE BIG APPLE

As a young professional who had just relocated to New York in the 1990s, I was introduced to a restaurant known as *Penang*. It was tucked away in hip Soho which in those days, did not have the garish, uber-touristy big chain stores that you can spot along the US highways.

Penang was a phenomenon then, decorated to evoke the *kopitiam* atmosphere we have back home in Singapore. It was acceptably close to what we wanted our comfort food of *char kway teow*, chicken rice and *nasi lemak*. A few years later, its relative called *Nyonya* was started by a branch of the same Malaysian family that founded *Penang*. Soon, we migrated there.

Nyonya appeals to the more discerning taste buds of those who are looking for food that resemble what we can find at our Singapore hawker centres or local coffeeshops. To this day, it is still 'home' to many students on a humble budget, especially the large contingent of Singaporeans studying at nearby New York University.

For the jaded New York immigrants like me, we *tapau* (doggy bag) boxes of *char kway teow*, Hainanese chicken rice, *ayam curry*, *beef rendang* and such. The nyonya in me gravitates towards my favourite *assam laksa* and *satay tofu* (actually *tauhu goreng*) while my husband, a Taiwanese-American Baba wannabe, relishes the *roti prata*, *kangkong belachan* and *satay*, along with a house favourite

termed the *sarang burung* (bird's nest) which consists of a ring of mashed yam filled with a stir-fried *chop suey* (mix) of diced chicken, shrimp, bell pepper, corn, onions and shitake mushrooms.

My friend Peggy and I once had a girls' night out there, feasting on finger-licking chilli crab, *sambal stingray* and *o-luak* (oyster omelet) with large pendants of American oyster to boot.

These days, *Nyonya* has its competitors. One can now find frozen *roti prata*, *popiah* skin as authentic as from the shop at Joo Chiat Road, *hoon kway* flour, Malacca *belachan*, *keropok* and *gula Melaka* in the supermarkets in Chinatown.

My friends and I, old-timers that we are, make it a point to check out the newer joints. *Laut* has its hits and misses, *Chomp Chomp* cannot distinguish between *bubur cha cha* and *bubur terigu*, a sure disappointment for a *kaywat* (fussy) nyonya like me who would mutter "*tak sepekah*" (below standard). Sure, the name *bubur cha cha* sounds a lot more exotic. But that is the misleading representation faced by our local food culture when we live in an outpost where foreigners still rave about the "Singapore noodles" which does not even exist back home. So we always settle back to our tried and trusted hangout, *Nyonya*. 🍷

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Nyonya Sharon Wee is the author of Growing Up in a Nonya Kitchen published by Marshall Cavendish.

The award-winning Nyonya Restaurant, tried and trusted by many including students on a humble budget.



LAKSA — how a Persian

BABA PETER LEE TRACES THE ORIGINS OF A BELOVED PERANAKAN DISH

Everyone loves to eat, and perhaps nothing resonates more deeply than home-cooked food, or food we grew up with. Unfortunately we also have a bad habit of asserting cultural or ethnic ownership over what we eat. Among Singaporeans the boundaries separating what is Peranakan, Malay and Eurasian cooking are certainly not as clear as we think, and often we imagine boundaries when none exists. On an international level the assertions become much more ferociously defended, and newspapers and social media fan the flames of nationalistic claims over what we all grew up eating. The point is, why must any thing be the unique property of one community or nation only? When you just scratch the surface of any such claim, what you in fact discover is a very long and interconnected history of shared heritage.

Perhaps nothing makes a better example than a dish that is part of several Southeast Asian cuisines, and yet embedded in the Peranakan soul — *laksa*, the intensely flavoured concoction comprising rice noodles in a spicy broth. As much as Peranakans love to claim it as their own, *laksa* resonates as something innately familiar to every Singaporean and Malaysian and to many Indonesians as well.

I always like to start any cultural investigation with the history of words. The internet is awash with speculation concerning the origin of the term *laksa*. One theory suggests that it is derived from *lakhs*, the old Sanskrit term for a hundred thousand, which found its way into several languages including Malay, where *laksa* has a similar but more diminutive meaning (that is, for *ten thousand*). The other oft-heard suggestion is that it is derived from the Persian term for noodles. Well, it is time to be definitive about this: the word *laksa* undeniably has Persian origins.

According to a dictionary from 1829, *lakchah*, *lakshah* and *lakishah* are terms for “vermicelli, or slices of paste put into broth” (John Richardson and Franciszek Meninski, *A Dictionary; Persian, Arabic and English*, 1829, p. 1253). The word travelled westward and, according to Gil Marks in his book *The World of Jewish Cooking* (1999, p. 230), entered the Yiddish language as *luksh* (or *loksh*, plural *lukshen* or *lokshen*), and the Slavic languages as *lokshyna*. The Miriam-Webster dictionary informs us that *lokshen* is derived from the Russian *loksha*, and ultimately from Turkic *lakča* — all mean the same, noodles. These are almost certainly derived from Persian as well.

Because of trade and travel, Persian words entered the vocabularies of several languages in Asia. It is often assumed that Islam was the sole reason many

Persian words became part of the Malay language. However, as I attempted to indicate in my book *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World* (2014), Persian words such as *kebaya* appear frequently in Portuguese and Dutch colonial documents and books from the 16th to 18th centuries but cannot be found in any Malay text of the same period. Therefore through the Portuguese and Dutch some Persian terms became part of the Malay vocabulary. The Dutch were likely to have picked up the Persian word for noodles on their way east, and it entered the Malay language during the Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia.

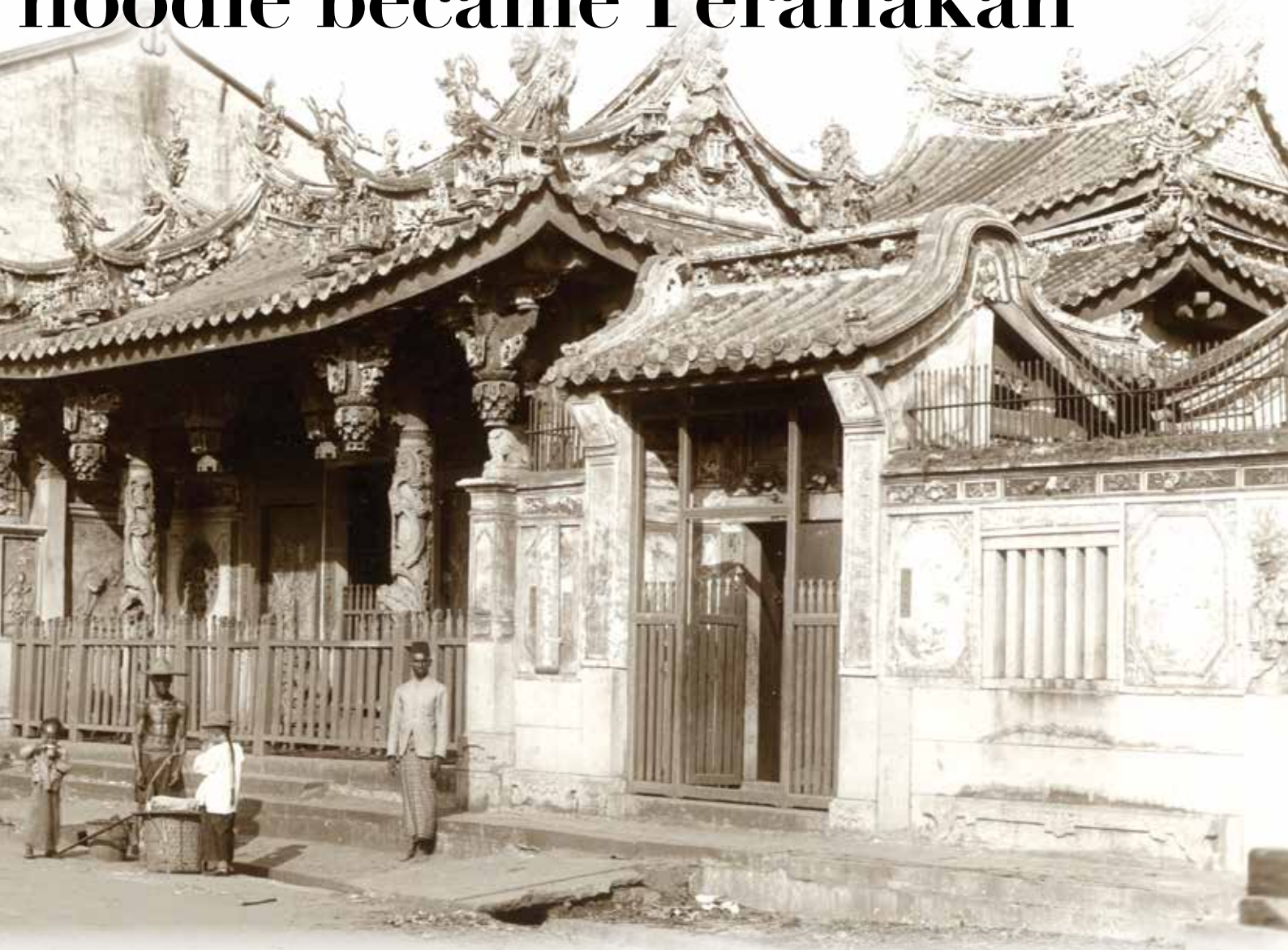
The word *laksa* was perhaps originally a generic term for a noodle. It does not exist in any Malay text prior to the 20th century, but can be found in older colonial texts. The earliest reference that I could find appears in an English letter written way back in 1719 by Chan Jamqua, a Baba from Malacca, to an Englishman, John Scattergood. The letter concerns business matters but a post-script at the end has a most striking and odd request. Baba Chan asks Mr Scattergood to “Be kind enough to bring on my account two *picos* (piculs) of *Misoa*, called in that land *Laqasi*, for incidental expenses.” *Misoa* could refer to *mee sua* (面线), Hokkien for fine wheat noodles), and *laqasi* might be *laksa*. This suggests at that time it might have been a general term for any noodle.

Earliest reference

Perhaps the earliest reference to *laksa* in Dutch appears in an entry in the colonial Ordinance Book



noodle became Peranakan



of Batavia (Jakarta) for 24 December 1765, concerning regulations for “tenants who sell *laksa* and other edibles” (*Plakaatboek* vol. 8, p. 93). Over the decades, as noodles in Asia were usually associated with the Chinese, the term developed a different nuance. In a later entry in the Ordinance Book dated 11 December 1801, there is a reference to “sellers of *bakmi*, *laksa* and other Chinese edibles” (*Plakaatboek*, vol. 13, p. 377). An 1838 article in Dutch describes *laksa* as “a kind of noodle, made from rice flour” (*Tijdschrift voor Nederlands Indië*, vol. 2, 1838, p.301). These references therefore seem to suggest a more specific meaning by the early 19th century: a Chinese noodle made from rice flour, differentiated from *bakmi* (which is a popular dish even today in Indonesia, made from egg noodles).

A finer differentiation can be found in early Singapore newspapers. *The Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register* reported on 30 January 1834 that a Portuguese ship named the *Esperança* had arrived from Macau with goods including 5½ boxes

of vermicelli and 5 boxes of *laxa* (*laksa*). Vermicelli would be what we know today as *bee hoon* (米粉, Hokkien for fine rice flour noodles). *Laksa* might then have referred to the coarser rice flour noodle (粗米粉, or *chor bee hoon* in Hokkien) used today in *laksa*. That they were shipped in boxes suggests the noodles were in the dried forms. The same newspaper also reported on 3 December 1836 that *laxa* was exported from Singapore to Bombay (12 piculs), Batavia (22 piculs) and Semarang (36 piculs), revealing that it was very much a commodity traded across Asia. There are of course variations of the thin rice noodle throughout Asia: the *khanom jin* and *sen mi* of Thailand, *bún* and *banh hoi* of Vietnam, *kya zan* in Myanmar, and *semiya/semiyan* in India, for example.

An 1845 Dutch colonial cookbook, written in

A street hawker outside the Po Chek Kiong, also known as the Tan Si Chong Su, on Magazine Road, c. 1900. His two young Baba customers — one dressed smartly in his Chinese baju, homburg (with his tochang or queue dangling beneath it), and fine leather shoes — are perhaps enjoying a bowl of laksa.

Malay and published in Batavia, provides a fascinating glimpse of the *laksa* recipes of that era. There are five: *laksa Bali* (Balinese *laksa* with a prawn stock), *laksa goreng* (fried *laksa*), two versions of *laksa Portugis* (Portuguese *laksa*, both using butter), and *laksa China* (Chinese *laksa*). Apart from the fried version, all use *santan* (coconut milk). The language used is quaint and the method is rather haphazard. Interestingly what is described as *Chinese laksa* is already full of South-east Asian spices and coconut milk (see recipe on right). *The Oost-Indisch-Kookboek* (East Indies Cookbook), published in Dutch in the 1860s, has four different recipes for curry *laksa*, and one for “*laksa Palembang*”, again all using *santan*. One of them is for the soup of a fish-based *laksa* (see below right).



The best-selling *Oost-Indisch-Kookboek* (East Indies Cookbook), with “More Than 800 Recipes” in Dutch, was published in Semarang, Surabaya and The Hague in the 1860s, and was printed in multiple editions until the early twentieth century:

Laksa Tjiena (1845) in original Malay

Inie laksa poenja boemboe ada koenjiet tamboes, sere, langkwas, djac, bawang mera, bawang poetie, trasi, kamierie, kalapa bakar, katoembar djientan, lada njanja, daoen djeroek poeroet dan tjabe; abies gilieng aloes samoeanja, kaloe soeda aloes, toemies; dan taro satoe ajam biang njang goemok sekalie; pake isinja sama sama, dan doeloe robek robek, abies taro aijer santan, daoen bawang moeda, kamangie, koetjai dan telur reboes njang soeda die bela bela, rendam doeloe itoe laksa njang maoe di pake, sama aijer panas; dan kaloe soeda lembek angkat toemboek doeloe itoe oedang krieng, dan oedang basa njang maoe di pake, abies toemies sama sama boemboenja; kaloe maoe makan miestie taro ketjap, dan lagie perasin djeroek tiepies.

Chinese Laksa

The spice paste for this *laksa* has toasted turmeric, lemongrass, galangal, ginger, shallots, garlic, *belachan*, candlenut, roasted coconut, coriander, cumin, pan-toasted pepper, lime leaves and chilli. Grind everything finely and tumis (fry until fragrant). Put in a very fat hen, and use the innards as well, but shred everything first, then add coconut milk, spring onion, candlenut, Chinese chives (*kuchai*) and sliced boiled egg. Soak the required amount of *laksa* in hot water, and remove when limp. Pound the required dried and fresh shrimp, and fry with the spice paste. When served, add soya sauce and also lime juice.

Curry Laksa (translated from Dutch)

One takes 1 teaspoon cumin, 2 teaspoons coriander, 1 small piece ginger root (*temu kunci*), 1 piece aromatic ginger (*kencur*), 3 pieces lemongrass, 3 pieces turmeric the length of a finger, 10 pieces candlenut, 1 teaspoon garlic, 2 tablespoons shallots, 3 pieces kaffir lime leaf, a small piece of toasted *trasi* (*belachan*), a small piece of kaffir lime peel and ¼ coconut (grated). After everything is dry roasted, pound together with 2 teaspoons salt. Boil a murrel (*ikan gabus*), dispose of the bones, shred the meat finely and mix in the pounded spices; then boil the milk from the remainder of the coconut, stirring so it does not curdle; then when boiling properly, add the fish with a bay leaf (*daun salam*) and let it simmer for some time; to make the curry with chicken instead, first cook the chicken then cut it into pieces but do not mix in the spices, as with the fish, but rather, put only the pounded spices into the boiling coconut milk, and after a while add the chicken and boil it together with the broth.

(Oost-Indisch-Kookboek, pp. 146-147)



Laksa recipes in Romanised Malay from the Kitab Masak Masakan India, printed in Batavia (Jakarta) in 1845.



Recipes for laksa in Dutch, from the Oost-Indisch-Kookboek.

A market in Singapore with hawkers serving food cooked in belangas, or earthenware pots, photographed by G.R. Lambert in the early 1900s.



By the mid-19th century *laksa* had many versions and interestingly most had soups laden with coconut milk. The more interesting point is that *laksa* clearly referred specifically to the rice noodle and not the dish. An evocative description of *laksa* and its street vendors can be found in a newspaper report in 1912:

A familiar dish with the Chinese coolie and Straits schoolboy is "laksa". The vendor of this compound, vermicelli, "rat's ears" (mushrooms) and other things in a kind of soup, shouts out every now and then, "Laksa a wun!" (its full Chinese title), and many who taste it declare that it is A1.

(The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 9 October 1912, p. 1.)

Rat's ears is also an ingredient in the 1845 fried *laksa* recipe mentioned previously, and a translation of the Malay term *kuping tikus*, which is a local fungus (*Auricularia Bulliard*) related to the wood ear fungus (known in Hokkien as *bokji*, 木耳).

The Baba financier Seow Poh Leng (1883-1942) was one of the champions of the rights for hawkers to ply their trade. In 1931, while campaigning for this cause, he composed a poem, inspired by news of the suicide of a 25-year-old Chinese *laksa* hawker who had been jailed and fined for trying to eke a livelihood as a hawker. Two stanzas in particular are insightful:

*By four o'clock each morning when you are all abed
The 'laksa' I'm preparing that people may be fed
I grind some rice to powder and knead it to a dough
Then press it through a sieve to a boiling pot below.
This stringy mass of flour which hardens as it boils
Is made up into lumps of tiny snow-white coils;
Then served with tasty gravy and a pinch of fragrant spice
My 'laksa' finds more favour than the ordinary rice.
In woven bamboo basket made up in several tiers*

*Are placed my tooth-some wares and the necessary gears.
In gourd-shaped earthen vessel the 'laksa' simmers low,
All day aboiling gently on charcoal burning slow.
From street to street I wander, my pace a steady trot,
And bear my loaded basket as well as the steaming pot.
The noon day trade I seek and with luck — oh rare!
Avoid the stern police who ask a certain share.*

(Seow Poh Leng, "A Hawker's Lament", Malayan Saturday Post, 16 May 1931, p. 18)

These two news articles suggest the noodles were still handmade, and that Chinese hawkers had been peddling *laksa* for over a century. Several newspaper reports of Malay *laksa* sellers in Penang and Singapore from the 1930s onwards indicate that *laksa* had truly become hawker fare with multiracial vendors (*The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 6 September 1934, p. 3).

Fast forward to the present. *Laksa* has become a global phenomenon. Thanks to the many restaurants serving it in Australian cities, *laksa* has become popular with a new wave of Australian chefs, who have made it international. Nowadays *laksa* on a Western menu can mean any kind of noodle in spicy broth. Celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver and David Thompson have *laksa* recipes. Even though the Thais do not have *laksa*, they also have recipes for 'Thai *laksa*'.

What gives *laksa* the kind of mystique that has seen its popularity grow over the centuries? It must be the secret ingredients. The use of earthworms has become urban legend in Singapore. But this is hardly *Fear Factor*. In the 1838 Dutch report about *laksa* mentioned earlier, its author described what actually went into the version he saw being prepared in the mountains of Java — the flesh of two kinds of deer plus the anteater, porcupine and squirrel, with some snails and prawns thrown in for good measure! ❶

art

A labour of love

BABA EMERIC LAU ENCOUNTERS A NYONYA BAKER WITH A PENCHANT FOR THINGS PERANAKAN



The dragonflies on this elaborate birthday cake have transparent hand-painted gelatin wings and bodies made of marshmallow fondant. The lens and screens of the camera are fashioned from homemade candy.

Looking at Yenna Susanty's elaborately decorated confections her *kebaya*-inspired cake was shared on our Association's facebook page and swiftly drew over 300 'likes' to date one might easily imagine that she has devoted a substantial portion of her life to the art of baking, or at least, cake decorating. I was surprised to learn that she has only been creating cakes for a little over three years.

"The first time I baked a cake was to impress the boyfriend it was a disaster, but he ate it all, so I'm marrying him! And I never thought about decorating cakes until February last year (2014), when I baked cupcakes for my niece's birthday. I enjoyed it so much I haven't stopped since," the 30-year-old baker candidly shares.


It is nonetheless a passion/obsession that takes much effort to perfect. A graphic designer by training, Yenna once crafted a mushroom-house cake that took over a solid week of work. Her now-famous *kebaya* cake(above) took about two days, being a more recent effort, and she has become much more efficient in her skills.

By default, Yenna's cakes require research. She sketches various options and decides on the final design before picking up the rolling pin. This helps her visualise the end result. She also considers texture and colour as she wants her cakes to be evocative for the viewer. Surprisingly, she admits to never having taken any "proper" baking courses, but having refined her work simply through the process of trial and error. Yenna has a talent for drawing and painting, and applies similar techniques using edible materials. She also watches youtube videos and consults online tutorials.

Query her on using the Peranakan culture as a source of inspiration, and she turns philosophical: "I see every Peranakan art piece as a labour of love. A cake does not need to be very well decorated to

be enjoyed, yet putting the care and attention to make it personal would amplify the meaning of a cake from food into something that marks a precious occasion. It becomes an experience to be treasured."

Yenna recalls that her grandmother always dressed in sarong kebaya back in Banjarmasin, Indonesia and sold *kueh* to support the family; her cake was inspired by the memory of her grandmother's attire.

It therefore comes as no surprise that while Yenna understands that baking is a science, it has too much heart for it not to be an art as well. She advises everyone who is keen to just try even if you fail, you can eat some cake! 



Check out Yenna's creations at www.facebook.com/onlyYdesignercakes, and visit <http://www.threadcakes.com/entries/view/1747> where she details the process and challenges of baking a cake called "The Observer" (a cake in the form of a steam-punk accessorised *kuching*!).



The Singapore House. 1819-1942

BABA COLIN CHEE REVISITS LEE KIP LIN'S STUDY OF SINGAPORE'S EARLY ARCHITECTURE

This is a very popular book with local architectural students and historical buffs of Singapore's pre-war architecture. It was first published in 1988, followed by a first reprint in 1995. Long out of print, this latest is a facsimile edition published earlier in 2015.

The late Lee Kip Lin's *The Singapore House* is a detailed and historical study of the evolution of local architecture. It traces the gradual push outwards for land as economic and demographic pressures organically shaped the city and its urban fringes, roughly following a city plan Raffles had put in place. It also identifies and describes some of Singapore's major buildings from the time of Raffles to just before the Japanese Occupation.

Writes the late Kip Lin's son, Lee Pen Hui, in his introduction to this latest reprint:

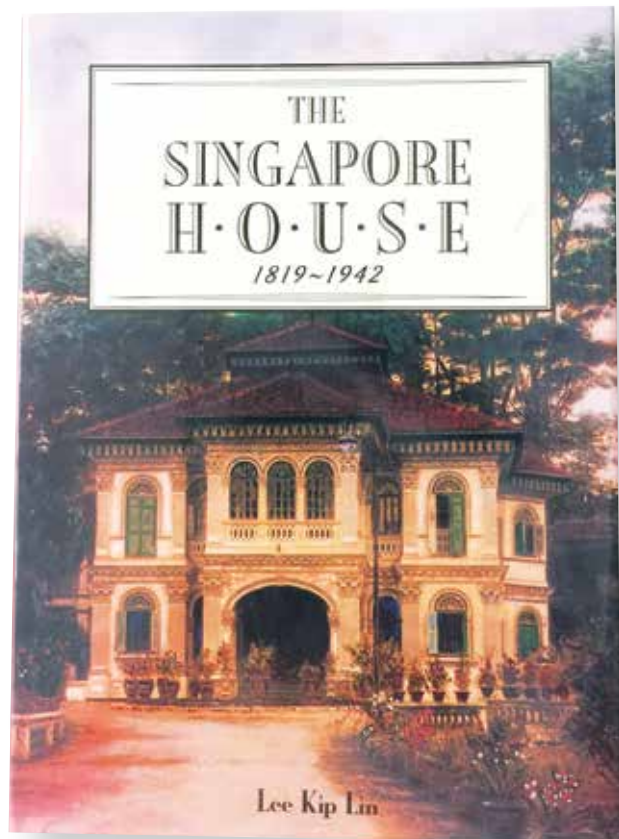
"My father was born in 1925, just after the high noon of the British Empire, and grew up surrounded by the houses described in this book.... Having spent years abroad studying and visiting the architectural wonders of Britain and Europe, he returned to Singapore to find that there were marvelous things around him which either everyone took for granted or dismissed out of hand. When he started photographing and researching the houses and buildings of Singapore, almost nobody was interested in such things. His efforts were timely.... Many of the buildings depicted in this book are long gone."

Now many of these magnificent offices and edifices survive only in this book.

When Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore on 29 January 1819, there were recorded only two villages along the coastline from Tanjong Pagar

to Tanah Merah. More of these Malay and Orang Laut settlements were later discovered around the island. Further inland, there were 20 gambier plantations already

The bungalow of a Chinese family; circa 1910 (page 111).



owned and run by Chinese. The rest of the island was uninhabited virgin jungle.

But the trading post that Raffles established did not take off overnight. Only in 1824, however, when the Dutch exchanged its claims on the Malay Peninsular and Singapore for Java and Sumatra, and the Johor Sultan agreed to cede the entire island to the British, was Singapore's future secured.

The next boost to development came in 1867 when the Straits Settlements government was established, ending the authority of the East India Company. It also helped that the Suez Canal was opened in 1869.

The first British arrivals built for themselves houses of timber, attap roofs and walls of waterproofed matting. Later, bricks made in Penang and Malacca were gradually introduced.

With this new building material came architectural designs closer to the grandiose Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian buildings in the United Kingdom and the older colonial cities of India.

It was also inevitable that prominent Chinese and Arab merchants, in dealing with their colonial masters, began to adapt and adopt the latter's way of life from attire to homes. •

Published by Marshall Cavendish.

Inherited & Salvaged

PORTRAITS TELL STORIES, AS
BABA COLIN CHEE DISCOVERS

NANYANG PORTRAITS

The National University of Singapore Centre For the Arts (CFA) has a well-curated art collection and a delightful museum. They are like exquisite gems half-hidden in the Centre's spacious and well-landscaped grounds.

The latest book on the museum's collection of Straits Chinese family portraits has readable essays by Peter Lee, Daphne Ang, Ng Shi Wen and Foo Su Ling covering various aspects of Southeast Asia's portraiture among the Nanyang Chinese, especially the Peranakans.

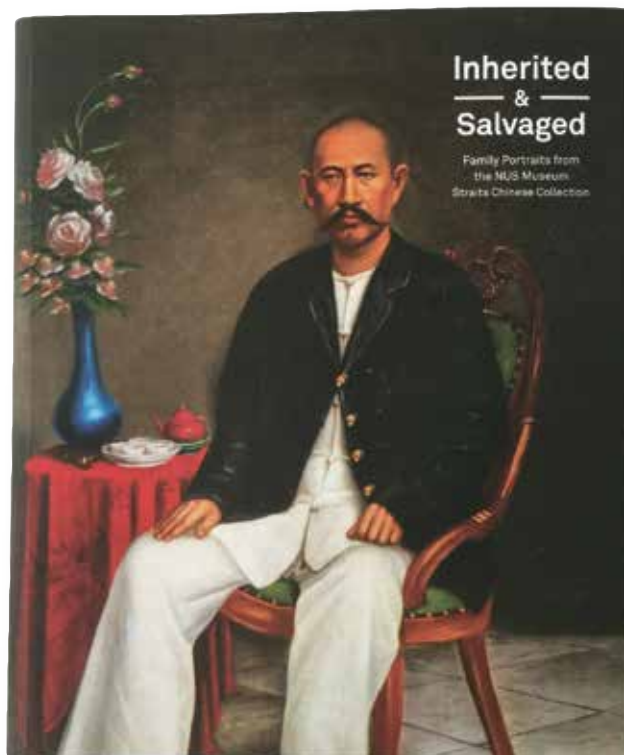
The essays are painstakingly researched. However, personally, I found the 60 full-page plates of paintings and photographs of Peranakans as well as the pictorial insertions in the rest of the book of greater interest.

The portraits were used by the Chinese largely "to facilitate ancestor veneration rituals. The cultural tradition of filial piety emphasizes the duty of family members to respect and care for an elder during his or her lifetime as well as the spirit which is believed to endure after death." So writes Foo Su Ling.

But they were also used as social markers. Portraits, especially commissioned ones, generally accrue to their subject sitters particular status, social position and achievement. And they would dress the part as scholars or as imperial Qing officials.

As technology crept into the region, photography turned portraiture into popular culture. Suddenly every man could have a part of the action as long as he could afford it.

And so portraiture evolved: From simple ink brush



paintings on scroll paper by itinerant Cantonese painters, to oil on canvas first by European, especially Dutch, painters and later Chinese painters, to black and white photography from the West, then hand-painted photography on glass, and finally in full colour produced by predominantly Chinese studios which could produce these cheaper and faster than European ones.

There is another aspect to this evolution. When one's portraits were treasured as family heirlooms and seen only by a select few in the family and society, they soon became vague remembrances of ancestors that merely hung on the walls of family homes. Then they were tossed out to the *karang guni man*, who would eventually sell them to collectors. Later, when gifted or loaned, to be hung on the walls of museums or recorded in the pages of books.

These portraits do have a life of their own. ■

Published by NUS Baba House, 2015. Edited by Foo Su Ling and Grace Chew.

Melaka museum's first book

Melaka's Peranakan community celebrated a grand milestone at the 30th anniversary of the Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum with the official launch of its first publication on 2 September. The coffee table book highlights the background of the family who lived in the home, detailed descriptions of the house, its architecture and interior.

The event was graced by dignitaries, leaders in the Peranakan and arts communities from Singapore, Indonesia, Kuala Lumpur and Melaka, and members of the family who used to live there. Opened in 1985, the house is one of Malaysia's earliest private museums and is today a well-established landmark both locally and internationally.

(From left) The Chief Minister of Melaka, Datuk Seri Hj. Idris bin Hj. Haron; Baba Henry Chan Kim Cheng, Managing Director of the Museum; the Governor of Malacca, Tun Datuk Seri Utama Mohd Khalil Yaakob, who launched the book; and Baba Chan Kim Sinn, Director of the Museum.



in memoriam

Elizabeth Lee

1935 - 2015

*You'll never
know just how much
we love you...*



BABA ALAN KOH, THE FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT OF TPAS, REMEMBERS A JEWEL OF A NYONYA

I joined The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) in 1994 during Dr George Tay's presidency. After a couple of years, Lee Kip Lee, or Uncle Kip as we call him, took over as President when I was already in the main committee as the Dinner & Dance chairman. With the quiet, unassuming president that he was came the larger-than-life president's wife!

Elizabeth Lee, or Auntie Liz, was always a ray of joy, a bundle of laughs, the formidable hostess! At every Peranakan Ball, she was able to graciously host and charm the VIPs, Presidents of Singapore Wee Kim Wee and S R Nathan, and the rest of the guests. She was so elegant when entertaining, making guests she hosted, whether formally or informally, comfortable. Auntie Liz would be resplendent and dazzle all of us with her jewellery and stunning *sarong kebayas* during our official functions. Yet she had a humble heart of charity for the less fortunate, serving and giving generously to old age homes and children's charities.

If there was any thing she was not so happy with, she would most kindly tell us in the true spirit of making it better. Never a chiding tone or ridicule. That was why everyone did our best because we loved to see Auntie Liz happy with our work.

She pushed Uncle Kip quietly when she felt an issue was a small matter to worry about, and to just go with it. She never imposed her opinion but gave her comments in a fleeting way and left it to the committee. We would always take heed.

I remember Auntie Liz walked into one of our long association meetings and said, "Aiyah why don't we have good Chinese food for a change." We were then

having great problems finding a five-star hotel that could prepare a decent Peranakan dinner, because there were perpetual complaints about the food ... "tak sedap, tak chukop asin, tak chukop rempah," etc. But Uncle Kip insisted, "We are a Peranakan association, our D&D must have Peranakan food."

As it turned out, both of them were right. The Peranakan Ball was then conceived

to be a grand fund-raising project where the guests could be non-members and non-Peranakans. The original D&D was retained with a homier ambience for members. So we ended up with a Ball that served Chinese food with Peranakan inspirations and another D&D that dished out Peranakan food. What a wonderful compromise!

Auntie Liz was an expert when it came to the choice of food. So we always consulted her on the hotel and the menu. The hotel chefs would believe every word she said.

Our committee meetings at Uncle Kip's home in Binjai were ever so long, starting at 7.30 pm and many a time ending way past midnight. Strangely, no one ever left early and no one ever complained. I always suspected it was because we all knew there was going to be a surprise "supper". Auntie Liz would unfailingly charge her brilliant helpers

to prepare one or more of her specialties. These were truly memorable dinners. Our former Hon Secretary, Geok, is a vegetarian. Auntie Liz always remembered to have a portion specially prepared

A portrait of a young Elizabeth, in a mixed media work on paper entitled Yours Affectionately No.1, executed by her son Dick in 2013 for an exhibition at Galerie Belvedere. Image courtesy of Dick Lee and Galerie Belvedere.



Portrait taken in New York by Elizabeth Lee's youngest son Andrew, 2012.



for her - what a thoughtful host! Sometimes, Geok's special dish was so *shio*k (delicious) that we all joined in and ate her leftovers.

Our meetings were never ever short of snacks. Aunty Liz made sure there were bottles of *emping*, *keropok*, nuts and always some unusual munchies for us to try. Come to think of it, Aunty Liz never sat or barged in to our meetings. She had an uncanny timing that alerted her when a meeting was ending. Only then would she come in to the room and say something humorous that sent us into stitches, like a breath of fresh air to defuse any tension that may have built up during our sessions.

Only once did Aunty Liz interrupt a meeting. That was when she rushed in to call us to see what was on television. I was surprised. It turned out to be a plane flying into a high-rise tower in New York. September 11.

Aunty Liz was someone I could always approach with ease and comfort. She said what she thought and had a treasure of jokes up her sleeve. There was never a dull moment with her. She held herself up with grace and dignity, even when she was not well. To me, she was a wonderful example of a *nyonya*. She would usually be in her special room watching a Korean drama or painting, or knitting or doing embroidery or even singing... she would burst into a radiant smile for all who entered the room to say hello.

Aunty Liz was called to the Lord on 13 July. She was a strong lady with impeccable taste. She had a big generous heart for all, a boisterous laugh and a great sense of humour. A love for life, family, friends and all she knew. An optimist! Thank you, Aunty Liz, for all the wonderful times. Thank God for you!

Behind a successful man is a woman. Behind our President Uncle Kip was wonderful Auntie Liz. She was a huge part of TPAS and we miss her dearly. ●

(Above) Elizabeth Lee at the 'Peranakan Rhapsody' gala, seated with President Wee Kim Wee and NHB CEO Lim Siam Kim, 1996.

(Below) Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee at the 'Phoenixes and Flowers' gala, celebrating the Associations 102nd anniversary; with committee members Bebe Seet, Lim Geok Huay and Shia Ai Lee, 2002.

Missing Aunty Liz!

Members of the main and magazine committees remember:

“Her silent love and understanding each time I met her.”

- Peter Wee, President



“A very elegant lady, always warm and generous, with a great sense of humour and a big hearty laugh.”

- Angeline Kong, Treasurer



“Her generosity and magnanimity.”

- Ee Sin Soo, Honorary Secretary



“Her zest for life and irreverent humour.”

- Emeric Lau, Assistant Editor and Main Committee Member



“Her kindness and humour across the dining table.”

- Edmond Wong, Webmaster and Main Committee Member



“A loving wife, devoted mother and a wonderful friend. I'm truly blessed to have enjoyed Aunty Liz's charismatic company, generous spirit, friendship, humour and fabulous hospitality.”

- Monica Alsagoff, Main Committee Member



“Auntie Liz was a wild, wild card. You could never predict what would come next from her. But you would want to hang around her anyway. Because you somehow knew she would be all Love, all Fabulous Food, all Raucous Laughter and Merriment, all Giving, all Fun, all Generosity, all Funny Unheard-Of Dirty Jokes, all Unconditional Friendship, and all Care. To miss all of these is to miss Auntie Liz. Terribly.”

- Colin Chee, Magazine Committee Member



“We looked forward to every editorial meeting at Binjai. It was probably more for the feast that awaited us. Everyday dishes were prepared in Aunty Liz's special way and laid on the huge dinner table with the largest lazy susan ever and a lovely centrepiece of fresh flowers arranged by her. A meal was never without her delicious double-boiled soups. I always left the table with wonderful cooking tips and happy from laughing at her non-stop jokes! At one meeting, Sebastian Tan a.k.a. Broadway Beng, joined us for dinner. He surrendered to her and asked to learn Hokkien jokes from her. Aunty Liz, you are unbeatable.”

- Linda Chee, Editor and Main Committee Member

A Jubilee Evening

The Peranakan Ball 2015 was a grand affair, celebrating Singapore's Jubilee as well as the 115th Anniversary of The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS)

The Ball was held at the Fullerton Hotel on Friday, 21 August, with Guest-of-Honour His Excellency Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, President of Singapore and Mrs Mary Tan in attendance.

Themed *50 Remarkable Peranakans* to honour the leading babas and nyonyas in Singapore's history, it was appropriate that President Tony Tan was a descendant of Baba Tan Jiak Kim, the first president of the Singapore Chinese Business Association, the predecessor of TPAS.

Guests who arrived early browsed the various *ketak ketik* stalls set up at the reception area, and were also tempted by a selection of precious items up for silent auction, including a painting of a young Mr Lee Kuan Yew by award-winning artist Alvin Ong.

The Ball was officiated with the cutting of a beautiful cake contributed by Yenna Susanty, which featured a phoenix and intricate *kebaya* motifs.

Dinner and musical delights followed, with several renowned personalities from yesteryears taking to the stage including Koh Chieng Mun, Clement Chow, Babes Conde and Ding Mercado. Artist Nyonya Adeline Yeo drew gasps by completing her painting, *On the Wings of Love*, while blindfolded. Another highlight was a special preview of the upcoming musical *Bibiks Behind Bars, Kena Again!* which hinted at a rollicking great time. The Peranakan-inspired dinner was complemented with sachets of *bunga rampay* (potpourri) at each table, and substantial lashings of the most piquant *sambal belachan* for dipping. *Sedap skali!* (Most delicious!) 🍴

(Right) The Facebook posting by President Tony Tan.



Dr Tony Tan shared their album.

22 August at 12:18 · 🌐

My wife and I were delighted to join The Peranakan Association Singapore at its annual ball last evening to celebrate the association's 115th anniversary. At the event, the Association also paid tribute to our Peranakan pioneers, who made significant contributions to Singapore's growth and development over the years.

We are pleased to note that the Association has been active in promoting Peranakan culture, which is a unique part of Singapore's heritage, and reflects the diversity and multiculturalism that Singapore stands for. As we modernise and progress as a nation, our cultural heritage serves to keep us rooted to our community and gives us a sense of identity. I wish the Association continued success in its work to promote and sustain the rich culture of our Peranakan community.

TT



A big thank you!

TPAS heartily thanks our sponsors and supporters for your contributions, and all who attended for your support of a worthy cultural cause!

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Raymond Wong

Cousins reunite... 40 years on

BABA TAN KOON SIANG DELIGHTS OVER A REUNION WITH NEWFOUND ARAB PERANAKAN RELATIVES

We had last met as teenagers in 1975 when our grandfather Low Chin Chye passed away. He loved life with a zest which the cousins emulated. We combed the beach, gobbled jackfruit and I drove my uncle's car into a lamp post at Tanjong Kling beach in Melaka from which my sister, Linda, 'grew' an extra 'eyebrow', a scar that extended from her right eyebrow.

It would be 40 years before we all met again.

We had Whatsapp-ed for a year before Teresa decided she would schedule Melaka as part of her family holiday. She was hardly out of her teens when we cousins 'dated' and saw the awesome



The homecoming in Melaka. Family news, secrets and gossips were all served up at lunch, with a 'Memories' show thrown in.



(Above) My sister, Linda Chee, started a Whatsapp chat group in March 2014 called "Melaka Cousins" with this profile of a few cousins visiting the National Museum. From left: Diana Low, Kenny Tan, Audrey and Teresa Low, Tan Koon Siang and Linda.

gymnast Olga Korbut at the Singapore Badminton Stadium.

Life went on. Teresa took an overseas flying job. She met a charming Saudi


and happily produced six of her best from home in Saudi Arabia.

On 23 August, cousins, spouses and children from the extended Low clan in all, 30 of us converged in Melaka from Yanbu, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur to catch up on lost time.

Bagus skali. It felt good seeing each other again. 🍷



The cousins today, with Teresa (extreme right) who flew in from Yanbu. Audrey, not in the picture, stays in London.


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NSW 2122 Australia

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Website: peranakanaustralia.org

Email: evelyn.peranakan@gmail.com

welcome

A warm welcome to
our new members!

1. Anthony Tan Beng Wah
2. Anastasia Tjendri Liew
3. Catherine Ee Gek Kim
4. Catherine Khoo Poh Lin
5. Eva Wong
6. Judy Gan Hock Choo
7. Joyce Lim
8. Joshua Timothy Ong
9. Jenny Wong Lee Yuen
10. Kim Chua Loo Huang
11. Marybeth Tan
12. Mathew Heng
13. Wong Loong Tik

The Yeows go to sunny Singapore!

BABA BRYAN TAN JOINS MOLLY AND WILLIE YEOW ON THE WAY FROM MALACCA

Ahmad whistled tunelessly, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel to Kartina Dahari crackling from the ancient radio. The row of cars in front stretched on interminably, inching forward every so seldom. He shifted his feet on the brakes and scratched at the mole on his nose while peering into the rearview mirror. Ahmad had been ferrying the Yeows to and fro in Malacca for decades, so they naturally chose him for their maiden trip to Singapore.

“Molly, why you look so glum? *Apa sua jadi* (what happened)?” Ahmad queried. “Your daughter *mengandung* (pregnant) so you should be happy!”

Molly sat listlessly behind him. Her back was bent in dejection, her head bowed. All she could hear was the ringing voice of grand aunty Bee Neo who had stormed out after dinner that night in a haughty huff.

You gave birth out of wedlock, now your daughter is doing the same, Bee Neo had frothed with disdain. The wine had given Bee Neo a ruddy glow, and her contempt was almost comical. *The other elders will hear about this, you just wait and see*, she had squawked before turning on heel and leaving promptly with children and husband in tow.

Molly sighed deeply for the hundredth time. Willie was oblivious and stared eagerly out the window. It was their first time arriving in Singapore, and he wasn't going to let his wife dampen his mood.

So many cars coming in and out of the Woodlands checkpoint! Willie nodded to himself. 1986. Singapore was the country to be in now; he was proud of his eldest daughter. She had chosen well to build her career in such a vibrant metropolis.

They drove past schools with excited students, past skyscrapers that soared into the sky in an area Aman proclaimed to be the ‘CBD’. Branded cars plied the roads; there were no *mat rempit* (motorcycle gangs) zooming about on clunky motorcycles belching black smog.

Molly however, was deeply fixated on her grief towards grand aunty and ignored everything else. *I will come back and make things right once Vera beranak* (gives birth), her brows furrowing deeper at the thought.

Mercedes, Ford, BMW, PAP... Ahmad rattled off names that sounded ridiculously foreign to



Illustration by Eileen Chan.

the increasingly bewildered Molly. *Alamak. Such a complicated country; I kepala pusing* (head spinning). After an hour or so, the boneshaker Datsun screeched to a halt.

“Ok, *kita sua sampay* (we have arrived),” hollered Ahmad, as he unloaded their luggage at the foot of the Tanjong Pagar HDB flat.

Willie took his wife by the hand and gently led her out. Molly had donned her finest *kebaya*, although her topknot was beginning to unwind after the long journey.

She looked apprehensively around. People walked too fast and talked too loudly. She clutched at her husband tighter, her anxiety turning to melancholy. She resented her station in life, the elders who looked down on her, her rumpled but innocent husband, and her daughter for getting pregnant out of wedlock.

Yet, all her pent up emotions evaporated the moment she arrived outside Vera's door, when Willie pressed the doorbell and her eldest daughter answered the door, cradling her round belly awkwardly.

“(Mum) Mee, *sua datang* (you're here)!”

A tall figure emerged beside Vera and extended a long arm towards them. “Mister and Missus Yeow, what a pleasure it is to finally meet both of you!”

Molly's jowls sagged, turning her mouth into an ‘O’.

“Aiyee, *kusmangat*” she squeaked, turning pale. “M...*mat salleh* (Caucasian)!”

In the next issue, the Yeows get to know Vera's husband!

Disclaimer: 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 Email: 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, *sireh* 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.

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/dds2b/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. 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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