



the peranakan

ISSUE 1 • 2011



 *Slamat Taon Baru Kuching Belanda* 
Everything's Coming Up Rabbits!
Ti Kong's Birthday  Reunion Recipes  Wee's Wonder Women
 Hopping Around Joo Chiat, Melaka, Phuket, Yokohama & New York! 

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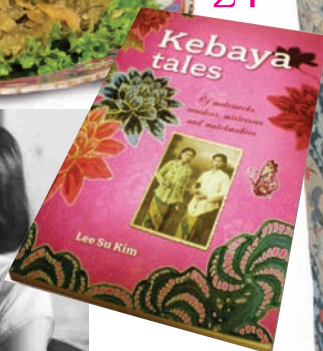


THE
PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE

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LIFE IS FULL OF SURPRISES

Working on each issue of *The Peranakan*, I correspond with many people through the email. Deadlines are stressful. I am always thankful and relieved when I get speedy responses. “Wah chepat!” (so fast) was my appreciative email to one prompt response recently. Within minutes, the sender shot another email. It was an unexpected *panton* on being *cepat*:

**Pagi pagi pergi ke pasar
Beli pulak ikan sepat
Mak slalu ada pesan
Kalu bikin kerja mesti cepat cepat
Going to the market in the morning
A mud fish is bought instead
Mother's advice is always
To be quick in doing your work**

Victor Goh, thank you for the surprise repartee. Victor is, by the way, the President of Gunong Sayang Association, the Peranakan folk theatre group.

Perhaps we can take a leaf from Victor. In the fast, harried pace of our lives, take a few moments off to do something different, something surprising. Connect with your creative soul or may I suggest, with the Peranakan soul. You can start by referring to our new listing of Peranakan associations (see Notice-board, page 39) to make the connections with our regional network.

Who would guess that after a few centuries, in a déjà vu of sorts, our Peranakan culture is sailing from the Straits back to the ‘motherland’ of our ancestors – China. “Nyonya Fever” (*The Straits Times*, 29 December 2010) is gripping China, triggered in no small way by the success of Mediacorp’s *Little Nyonya* serial shown

there. No surprise though, that much of the attention is on Peranakan cuisine. Even fast food giant KFC is cashing in the fad with coconut and curry-flavoured “nyonya chicken wings”.

I hear too that Peranakan is becoming hip in France, especially after the *Baba Bling* exposure in Paris. Japan caught the craze quite a few years back, interest sparked by Baba Dick Lee’s *Mad Chinaman* music album. Just nice, that in this issue we feature two *Nippon Nyonyas* absolutely besotted with all things Peranakan.

Our New Year (*Taon Baru*) issue has lots to keep you connected in the Year of the Rabbit. Among them, find out why the Babas refer to the Year’s zodiac animal as the *kuching Belanda*, and the proper way of greeting relatives when visiting them in this once-a-year tradition. Also observe one Melaka Peranakan family’s elaborate *semayang* Ti Kong (Jade Emperor).

Newbies and good Peranakan cooks alike are recommended what I call the Great Peranakan Cookbook dedicated to our beloved late President Wee Kim Wee. It is a compendium of Mrs Wee Kim Wee’s recipes and authored by his daughter Wee Eng Hwa, who is interviewed in *Chakap Chakap*. We also review a new offering from a talented writer, Dr Lee Su Kim, who happens to be the first nyonya president of a Peranakan association. Read too about how one homesick nyonya in New York has created her own Peranakan enclave far from home. And we fondly remember the brilliant Nyonya Kwa Geok Choo, wife of Minister Mentor Baba Lee Kuan Yew, who passed on in October 2010.

The year closed with numerous celebrations, including our Association’s first lower-priced dinner & dance, Gunong Sayang’s centenary dinner and the grand Peranakan convention in Phuket. Finally, we take a sneak peek into a major exhibition on masterpiece *sarongs* and *kebayas* from over five centuries, coming up in April at the Peranakan Museum.

Panjang panjang umur, selamat Taon Baru China! ❄

Linda Chee, Editor



EDITOR'S NOTE

Please note for the previous Issue 4, 2010 of *The Peranakan*, in a feature on *Kinship Convention* on page 12, the following revisions to the chart on the collective terms of reference:

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Eldest sister | Spouse |
| Tachi Besair | Chau |
| 2. Eldest Brother | Spouse |
| Tua Hia/Hia Besair | Tua Soh/Ng So Besair |
| 3. Youngest Paternal Uncle | Spouse |
| Ng Chek Chik | Ng Chim Chek Chik |
| 4. Youngest Maternal Uncle | Spouse |
| Ng Ku Chik | Ng Kim Ku Chik |

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MESSAGE

HOPPING INTO A YEAR OF OPPORTUNITIES

TPAS President Baba Peter Wee views the many opportunities the Year of the Rabbit promises

On behalf of The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS), I would like to thank the many fellow members, committees, volunteers, businesses, foundations and government agencies who have contributed to and given their support in making 2010 a success for the Association in so many ways.

In particular, I would like to acknowledge the strong support and harmonious relationships that TPAS enjoys with the National Heritage Board, National University of Singapore, Singapore Tourism Board and Joo Chiat Community Club. TPAS will continue to closely collaborate with them in joint events and programmes which I am sure will be strongly supported by the Peranakan community, so that our culture and heritage may be better understood and appreciated by the public.

With 110 years behind it, TPAS remains guided by pragmatic and prudent principles. In the new year, the Association will explore new and innovative ways to promote Peranakan heritage and the love of the past, especially among the younger generation. We also aim to address the issues and challenges in engaging and strengthening connections with our local and regional communities.

My wish is for all members, supporters and friends to enjoy a year of calmness and tranquility.

The characteristic traits of the Rabbit are creativity, compassion, strength and resilience. Let us use these positive aspects to seize upon opportunities in the new year for bridge-building and refinement. Here's wishing you a happy and prosperous Lunar New Year. *Slamat Taon Baru China.* *



“TPAS remains guided by pragmatic and prudent principles. In the new year, the Association will explore new and innovative ways to promote Peranakan heritage and the love of the past, especially among the younger generation. We also aim to address the issues and challenges in engaging and strengthening connections with our local and regional communities.”

**– TPAS President
Baba Peter Wee**

RABBITS IN RHYME

Baba Christopher Lim pens four *pantons* for *The Peranakan*

*Kuching belang sekumpul di-taman,
Makan rumpul sama sayuran.
Taon ini mintakan peng-ann,
Sekeluarga sama kawan-kawan.*

*Rabbits gather in the garden,
Feasting on grass and fresh greens.
In this new year we invite peace upon,
The whole family and our friends.*

*Ucapan keong hee datang kembali,
Taon baru suah lagi.
Kuching belang binatang sunyi,
Taon ini hock khee dia kasi!*

*The auspicious greeting is upon us,
As it is another new year once more.
Although the rabbit may be a quiet creature,
It has arrived bringing great prosperity!*

*....and in Penang Hokkien
Tah-tah nee thñee poh phee,
Ciak kah lau tua hock khee.
Jip sin nee keow keong hee,
Kñiah oo how tuañh sim phñee!*

*Every year we are bestowed heavenly blessings,
In the form of longevity and prosperity.
Wishing all prosperous greetings as we usher in the new year,
With your children's display of filial piety.*

*Amah, Ah Kong cheo lee lee,
Cheng seen sñah than tua cñhee.
Seang kah thor cheak chñeehncñeeh,
Sñeh kñiah soon cheen tua thñee!*

*Our elders are greatly happy,
Dressed in new clothes and receiving lots of bounty.
It is akin to the rabbits happily eating fresh greens,
Surrounded by their large progeny.*

SIGHTING THE KUCHING BELANDA (RABBIT)

Born in the year of the rabbit, Nyonya Cynthia Wee-Hoefer recounts her fascination with the rabbit in the moon.

When you look at the moon, especially a luminous full moon, what do you see? I see a rabbit in the moon. It is unmistakable - the two ears slightly askew and fore paws held up.

It could have been conditioning as a child. Sitting by my mother's side while she ironed my father's shirt and narrated what she had been reading, I grew up with stories from the *Jatakas*, a series of charming fables that describe the previous incarnations of the Buddha.

My mother was not schooled in the traditional sense. She had two years of formal lessons before fate made her an orphan and curtailed her learning ambitions. She taught herself to read the romanised Malay narratives of the time and related lovely stories such as *the Journey to the West* about the Buddhist monk Xuan Zang, the Monkey God and his comrades, as well as other Chinese classics translated into Baba Malay.

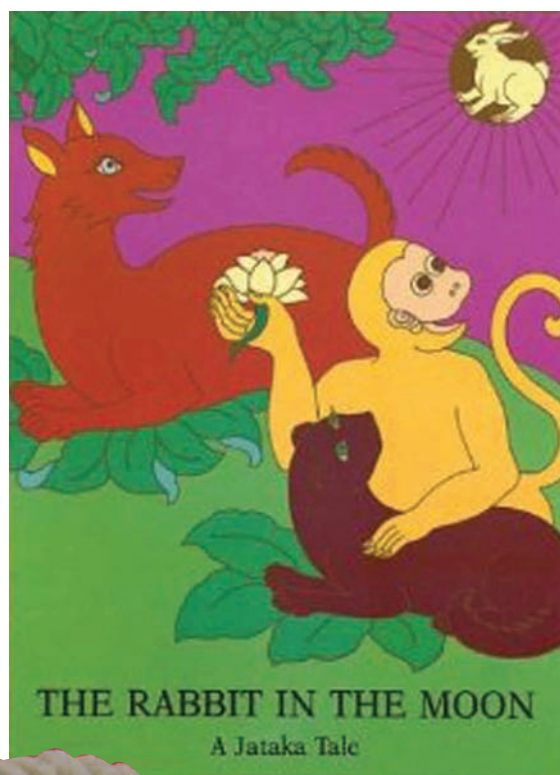
Born in the year of the rabbit, I was particularly mesmerised by the tale of the rabbit in the moon.

In one of the Buddha's previous incarnations, he was born a rabbit in the town of Varanasi by the Ganges River. He had three friends - a monkey, an otter and a jackal. One day, on a full moon, the rabbit told his friends to make an act of charity by giving food to the poor.

The monkey climbed a mango tree and plucked ripe mangoes. The otter fished in the river and had a good haul. The jackal went into a hut and stole a pot of curd. The rabbit searched all over and realised that he could only offer grass.

He then resolved to give his own flesh. His friends were surprised and discouraged him. The rabbit ignored their pleas and began preparing a fire. At this moment, Lord Indra, the king of deities, appeared as a traveler. He tested the virtue of the rabbit by declaring that he was hungry.

The rabbit offered himself. He shook his body to rid of any fleas and leapt into the fire. The Lord



snatched him out of harm's way and in honour of the rabbit's great charity and sacrifice, imprinted its image on the moon. That fable left a lasting impression on me. To this day I see a rabbit in the moon.

A Mexican folktale has a similar story of a rabbit giving his flesh to an Aztec god who placed the rabbit in the moon and then took it back to earth leaving a tracing of the animal to immortalise its noble act. The *Jatakas* have also entered Chinese, Korean and Japanese mythology.

The theme Rabbit in the Moon pops up as the name of a gastropub in New York City, a rock band, a web site for *anime* fans and the title of a memoir of a Japanese American interned in camps during World War II.

So the next time you look up into the night sky searching for the shiny orb, make it a point to notice this honourable rabbit. ✱

The *Jatakas* are fables that tell of the previous incarnations of the Buddha.

A rabbit-shaped kueh koya.



EMBRACING THE *BELANDA*

Baba William Gwee checks out the Baba attachment to things Dutch

Babas know the rabbit as *kuching Belanda* ('Dutch cat'), a word they share with Malays who also name the rabbit *arnab*. They share three other words with *Belanda* - turkey is *ayam Belanda* ('Dutch fowl'), pearl barley is *berair Belanda* ('Dutch rice grains') and the soursop fruit is *durian Belanda* ('Dutch durian') which had earned the name durian probably due to its soft pliable spiny rind that resembles the thorns of the durian.

The Dutch, during their occupation of Malacca from 1641 to 1825, must have first introduced these four items to the country which had then resulted in both the Babas and the Malays crediting them by attaching the word *Belanda* to each of the items.

The Baba vocabulary possesses another four more objects described as Dutch. The *kueh Belanda* ('Dutch cake') is the love letter wafer which is a popular snack served during the Lunar Chinese New Year celebrations. It may have its origins as in a Dutch pastry which had later been modified. *Paku Belanda* ('Dutch nail') describes a tough and unyielding attitude. Again, the Dutch may have originally introduced a hard and tough quality nail to Malacca which had eventually inspired this Baba idiomatic expression. To the Babas, the British-made Sheffield palette knife which they use to cut *popiah* (spring roll) is the *piso Belanda* ('Dutch knife').

Strange that a British Sheffield product had been credited to the Dutch. Perhaps the Dutch had introduced this type of knife to the Babas and when the British brought along their Sheffield version after colonising Malacca, the Babas continued to use the original name. After all, the Babas have a specific word for Dutch (*Belanda*) but none for the British who were referred to as *orang puteh* (white people), a general term including other white people such as the Americans and the Europeans.

The fourth word, *Belanda bosted* ('Dutch bosted') has nothing to do with the Dutch: it is a different way some Babas have of pronouncing the word *bandela bosted* to describe a fat and round person. There are two possible origins for this expression. Some Babas have claimed that, in the early days of British colonial rule, Boustead & Company (a



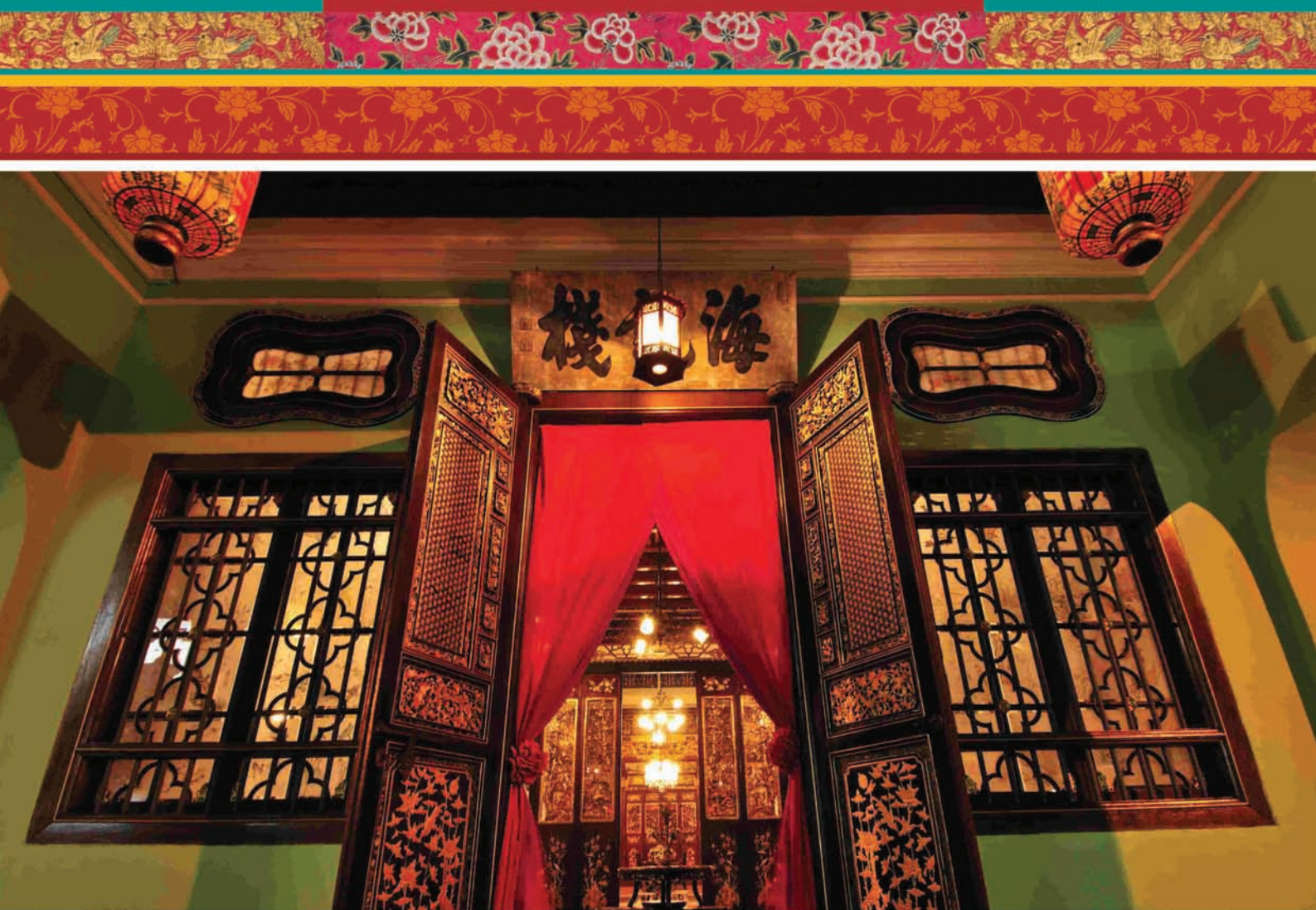
Kueh Belanda, or love letter, may have evolved from a Dutch pastry.



Was the tangy soursop introduced by the Dutch?

British trading company) used to import goods into Singapore in big round wooden crates. Hence, a rotund person could be compared to such a crate and the name Boustead had been corrupted to bosted.

Others have said that Boustead imported white cloth in thick round bales. The Malay word for bale is *bandela*. This had resulted in the term *bandela bosted* which is sometimes pronounced as *bandera bosted* by some members of the Baba community. I have once even heard it being pronounced as *banda bosted*. Trust us Babas to be creative with words and pronunciations! ❄



DISCOVER THE PERANAKAN LEGACY



THE PINANG PERANAKAN MANSION TAKES YOU BACK TO THE TIME OF THE BABAS AND NYONYAS, SET IN THE HOME OF ONE OF PENANG'S HISTORICAL PERSONALITIES, KAPITAN CINA CHUNG KENG KWEE.

Depicting the typical home of a rich Baba of more than a century ago, the opulent lifestyle of these locally acculturated Chinese is recreated in the Pinang Peranakan Mansion to offer a glimpse of their many customs and traditions. More than just a Baba-Nyonya museum, this century-old stately mansion of eclectic design and architecture incorporates Chinese carved-wood panels with English floor tiles and Scottish iron-works. Built at the end of the 19th century by one of

local history's famous personalities, the 'Hai Kee Chan' or Sea Remembrance Store had once served as the residence and office of Kapitan Cina Chung Keng Kwee.

At the Pinang Peranakan Mansion, the legacies of the Peranakans are not only commemorated but the restoration of this building complex also heralds the preservation of Penang's unique architectural history.

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LOCATION MAP



THE ANNUAL SOJA, SEMBAH AND KERTAIR MERAH

Baba Tan Kuning explains the custom of visiting relatives during Chinese New Year

Many New Year traditions of the Peranakan Chinese have become outdated. However, one that remains very much alive is the practice of visiting parents and close relatives during the first 15 days of the Lunar New Year.

It is a good tradition that helps to maintain kinship ties and does not appear too intrusive in these hectic times. The typical Peranakan family in Singapore makes it a point to go visiting during the first two days of the New Year. In a festive mood, they would shake hands, exchange greetings and say “Happy New Year” in English. Sometimes an elderly host is heard saying, “*Datang se taon sekali saja!*” (“You visit me only once a year!”). In the old days such a remark might appear as a reproach to the younger guests who were expected to visit more frequently. Today such a remark would be regarded casually with a response such as “*Hari hari tak senang, di office ada banyak kerja!*” (“Everyday is so busy, there is so much work in the office!”)

Traditionally, soon after entering a house the guests would invite the elder host to be seated (*dudok*) to pay their respects, referred to as *soja orang* (for the man) or *sembah orang* (for the woman). To *soja* is to stand about a foot away from the elder, then stretch both hands out, clasping the right hand over the left, and bowing to wish a happy new year. The woman would *sembah* by kneeling, raising her hands in an *anjali* (an Indian word for putting both palms together as if praying) gesture, fingers pointing towards the elder, before citing the greeting.

The elder must be appropriately addressed according to his kinship ranking. For example, the father’s eldest brother would be greeted with, “*Tua Pek boleh panjang-panjang umur*” (“Long life to uncle”). The elder’s response would be, (Nephew’s name), *lu pun boleh panjang-panjang umur* (“same to you”). The nephew’s wife would *sembah* to her husband’s *Tuapek*.

The responses made by the elders would vary. To a newly-wed woman, it may be, “*Nya, lain taon boleh dapat anak jantan*” (“Nyonya, I hope you will give birth to a son next year”). A grandmother might wish her grandson, “*Ba, lu boleh panjang umur dan boleh tengok Ma punya tua*” (“May you have long life and look after me in my old age”). The implication is that he should also attend her funeral. Children between the ages of five and eight would get a response like, “*Lu boleh kwai kwai, lekas lekas besair, pandeh pandeh surat.*” (“Be a good boy, grow up quickly and be clever in your studies”).

After the *soja* and *sembah*, *ang pows* (red packets containing money) would be given to young children and the unmarried men and women (optimistically referred to as *anak dara*, literally virgins) in their late 20s or 30s. The common remark could be, “*Ini kertair merah saja, amek buat wee sit*” (“This is only a red packet, take it as a token of good luck”). Newly weds would start the practice of giving *ang pows* to the children after paying respects to the aunts and uncles.

The wish for eligible bachelors and young ladies may be “*Kasi ang pow ini boleh ringan-ringan jodoh*” (“May this ang pow bring you good luck to get a life partner”), with the hope that a match maker or a candidate would turn up soon. *Ringan-ringan jodoh* literally means to lighten one’s fate in love and marriage which makes for a happy marriage without burden. Marriage is fated, as the belief goes.

After the greetings, the guests would be invited to *chobak* (taste) the homemade *kueh* and served with aerated soft drinks, home-made rose syrup or *ayer mata kuching* (longan and red date drink).

The ladies may engage in conversation about their new *kebaya*s or jewellery. All eyes would be on the *kerosang* (brooches) and *gelang* (bracelet), whether *intan* or *berlian*, old or new. Before leaving, the young guests would be reminded to visit again during the year. The newlyweds would be given a pair of red candles about three feet long and weighing about one *kati* (slightly less than one kilogram) to bring home.

In the old days, elders about 50 years or older would remain at home during the first four days of the New Year for younger relatives to visit. Their own married children would visit them first thing in the morning before visiting relatives. The elders would visit one another from the 5th to 15th day. After the new year period, the avid women gamblers would resume their routine of going out for privately organized gambling sessions. The men would start work usually on the third day.

If there is death in the family, members should not go visiting during the first year of mourning. Neither would people like to visit a family that is mourning the death of a patriarch or matriarch, until a year had passed. ❄

Newly weds would start the practice of giving ang pows to the children after paying respects to the aunts and uncles.



SEMAYANG TI KONG

Baba Ee Sin Soo joins the Ong-Loo family of Melaka in observing the Jade Emperor's birthday



1



2



3



4

1: Side view of the sam kai altar. Standard candles are used on the table while extra long candles are tied to the side of the altar for covenants made to Ti Kong.

2: Back view of the adjoining tables of the sam kai altar being prepared.

3: Bundles of gold paper offerings folded to resemble lotuses.

4: Uncle Ban Hoe, his son, Andy, and godson, Kelvin, place the heavy oil lamp onto the sam kai altar.

The celestial Taoist pantheon is headed by Ti Kong (also known as the Jade Emperor), who is chief of the vast heavenly bureaucracy of ministries governing every aspect of life possible and populated by a hierarchy of gods and goddesses.

The Jade aspect of Ti Kong appears to be more an attribute than part of his name. Confucius likened jade with the best of human attributes. Its smoothness, strength and glossiness were among qualities that denoted attributes such as benevolence, intelligence and righteousness. Ti Kong being omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent could grant to and imbue the Peranakans with such attributes.

Ti Kong's birthday is on the 9th day of the first lunar month of the Chinese New Year. Peranakan households begin celebrations on the evening of the 8th day when the family, relatives and their friends pray together and give thanks for the blessings and protection received and renew or make new vows.

As Confucianism is important to Peranakan culture, the Peranakans believe that to worship Ti Kong, they were obliged to watch their own conduct, do good deeds and practise filial piety. The way of worship has its own traditions and a deep connection

to the Peranakan psyche. It is a celebration of being Peranakan and yet Chinese.

A large majority of Peranakans value their special relationship with Ti Kong due to its religious, historical and traditional representations to their identity. The preparations, set-up and elaborate altar offerings are unparalleled, as seen in the annual *semayang* (prayers) Ti Kong of the family of Mr Ong-Loo Ban Hoe of Melaka. I was privileged to observe their strong sense of duty. The whole family cleaned up and scrubbed the floor where the *sam kai* altar was to be placed, even resting the altar table legs on gold incense paper. Vegetarian offerings and treats were laid out meticulously in Peranakan porcelainware. Even the distance between each offering and accessory was measured to perfection.

The celebration began with the head of the household, Mr Ong-Loo, lighting the *sam kai* altar candles with the flame from the oil lamp and, later, the other candles of the respective household altars. This was followed by personal and familial prayers. The highlight of the evening was a lion dance to usher in good luck, culminating in the burning of bundles of carefully folded gold incense paper.

Happy Birthday, Ti Kong! ❄



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12

5: Uncle Ban Hoe and wife Auntie Mabel start the celebration by lighting the candles at the sam kai altar.

6, 7, & 8: Uncle Ban Hoe lights the respective household altars.

9: Uncle Ban Hoe commences semayang Ti Kong.

10: Son Andy, his wife, Esther, and his son, Brian, take their turns in praying.

11: The "lions" enter the house to usher in good luck for the New Year.

12: The "lions" skillfully peel mandarin oranges and pomelo, arranging the fruit in auspicious numbers and greetings.



13



14



15

13: Front view of the sam kai altar in full splendour with the chernap as the centrepiece.

14: Setting the incense paper aflame and stirring with sugarcane stems to ensure the paper burns thoroughly. The sugarcane is also burned later.

15: After the extra long covenant candles have finished burning, the sam kai altar is dismantled. The adjoining altar tables with offerings are brought into the house. The food is later consumed by the family.

REUNION RECIPES

Nyonya Noreen Chan suggests a few festive foods to welcome the Lunar New Year

For traditional Peranakan families like mine, the Lunar New Year was the most important festival of the year. It had to be celebrated “properly” i.e. respecting all the customs, so as to ensure good luck and prosperity for the coming year. The house had to be thoroughly spring-cleaned, sometimes repainted, and new clothes made or purchased. Families practising Taoist traditions would “bathe” the deities on the household altar, and those with a *Datok Dapor* or Kitchen God would “bribe” the deity by smearing *kueh bakol* (steamed New Year *kueh*) on his mouth, so that he would give a good report of the family on his yearly ascent to Heaven.



All dressed up for the occasion c.1916. My grandmother Elsie Chia, next to her elder brother Chin Tiong (in the bow tie), sister Grace and cousin Seow Sian Chye.

It was also a time of great activity in the kitchen preparing all the festive treats, mostly to be given away to friends and relatives. Mama Elsie, my grandmother, used to relate how, as a young bride in Melaka, she had to bake as many as 20 cakes in the run-up to New Year. Her father-in-law's relatives and business associates would send *bakol siah* (tiered baskets) of oranges which the family would *balas balek* (reciprocate) with oranges and a home-made cake.

Mama never made *kueh bakol* although she knew how. She felt there were too many *pantang* or taboos to be observed (such as not having a menstruating woman in the kitchen) and it was said that if the batch of *kueh bakol* did not turn out well, some misfortune would befall the family that year.

Mama enjoyed baking. She was a whizz at *kueh belanda* (love letters). She did the festive baking well

into her 70's. When she “retired” she supervised the younger ones. We would make half a dozen kinds of cookies, storing them in recycled Horlicks glass bottles to give away. We also made large quantities of *achar awak*, Penang-style *achar* using a recipe from my *Tuah Kim Poh* and most of this would be delivered to eager fans.

Then there was the cooking to be done, especially for the Reunion Dinner on New Year's Eve. We also had to cook extra for the first day itself as we would be too busy then with visitors. Peranakans did not adhere to the Chinese custom of having steamboat, or auspicious foods like *fa cai* (*hanyu pinyin* for the black hair-like fungus that symbolises prosperity). Rather they would cook favourites which varied from family to family.

The Chan family Reunion Dinner might look something like this:

Ngoh Hiang

Ayam Buak Keluak (occasionally substituted by Curry Devil)

Hati Babi Bungkus

Hee Pio Soup (or *Pong Tauhu* soup)

Udang Goreng Asam

Chap Chai

Achar

Although *Chap Chai* is primarily a dish offered at death anniversary prayers and consumed by family members, in our family it crept into the New Year menu. We also liked to cook an extra soup dish which could be refrigerated and reheated in a day or two, usually *Itek Tim*, as a foil to the rich food of New Year's Eve.

My father used to insist on *Perot Kambeng*, hot and sour mutton tripe soup, prepared by Hainanese Peranakan restaurant and caterer Cheng Heng (now sadly defunct). He was so fond of this dish that my mother would start calling Cheng Heng in December. She would deliver a large blue enamel pot (labelled with her name) to them a month in advance. Regular reminders by telephone would follow, until New Year's Eve when the precious cargo could be picked up.

With time, some dishes have been omitted as the Reunion Dinner has gotten smaller; where the extended family would gather when my grandfather was alive, now it is just the immediate family. But the spirit of the occasion remains. It is a time to celebrate with loved ones, to give thanks for the year gone by, and to look ahead with optimism.



The labour-intensive Hati Babi Bungkus.

RECIPES

HATI BABI BUNGKUS (Minced pork and liver balls)

This is a labour-intensive dish rarely found outside a Peranakan home. Even so, it is only prepared once or twice a year on festive occasions. Made with minced liver and pork wrapped in caul, its distinctive Peranakan flavour is derived from the generous use of *ketumbar* or ground coriander seed. It is meant to be slightly sweet, similar to Nyonya *kueh chang*.

The caul wrapping helps to give a *garing* or crisp finish while keeping the meat moist. It has to be thoroughly washed in several changes of water before use. The richness or *jelak* of the dish is counteracted by a pickle made with julienned mustard greens (*luak chye* or *sawo sawi*), salted and the excess water squeezed out. Sugar, vinegar and powdered mustard are added to taste.

The two versions of *hati babi* below are extracted verbatim from my grandmother's recipe collection. The first is an older version, in Baba Malay. The second is from her last "edition" of transcribed recipes, when she translated the instructions into English and added some measurements.

HATI BABI BUNGKUS BANGSEK (version 1 in Baba Malay)

1/2 kati hati babi, 1 bangsek, 1 kati esee babi, 1 kati minyak babi. rempah ketumbar goreng halus.

Esee babi chin chang halus, sedikit minyak babi potong kechil champor sama esee.

Tumis bawang merah, masok hati babi sudah potong sekerping² abis tuang rempah panas atau ketumbar bia rata. Suda sejok, potong kechil². Champor sama esee semua,

tarok gula, garam, lada, abis bungkus satu² sama bangsek baru goreng. Makan sama luak chye.

Luak chye:

Sayor sawi di chuchi bersih, abis rawot sayor, daon dan batang lain kan. Alia di iris masok kan. Ramas sayor sama garam bia lecho abis peras ayer nya keluar. Ramas batang juga sama garam abis peras ayer nya. Bukak kan di tangok bia kering.

Tumbok bawang puteh, halia bia halus, tarok mustard powder, sugar sama chuka, sedikit ayer makan abis masok kan sayo semua bia rata.

HATI BABI BANGSEK (version 2)

800g minced lean pork

400g liver, steam, dice finely and retain water

300g pork fat – diced and minced

3 *chee mong yeow* or caul (pork membrane)

2 small + 6-8 big *kai choi* (mustard greens) for the *luak chye*

Fry 5 tablespoons of ground shallots in a little hot oil until a nice aroma emerges. Add diced liver, mix well, add a little liver water, stir fry and put aside. In a big container mix together the minced pork, liver, pork fat with 2 teaspoons pepper, 1½ teaspoons salt, 14 teaspoons sugar; 1 cup fried *ketumbar* powder, 1 teaspoon 5-spice powder. Mix well. Make into balls the size of a ping-pong. Wrap each one with the pork membrane. Repeat until all is finished. Steam for 5-6 minutes. Cool and freeze if made in advance. Before serving, thaw. In a hot pan fry the balls, turning over occasionally until evenly browned, continue until all are finished. Serve with *luak chye* or with tomatoes and cucumber around the plate.

TALAM CHEOK-WAH

This traditional New Year jelly has all but disappeared. It was a specialty of my paternal great-grandmother Mrs Chia Keng Chin (Mdm Lim Kim Neo) who was known as Mak Cho Payong. She was a great cook, in fact my father used to reminisce all the time about her *ayam chilli garam* (which annoyed my mother no end!). She used to gather the seaweed from the beach behind their weekend home in Padang Terbaka (near present day Bedok) and painstakingly prepare the *agar agar*.

Extracting the gelatine from the seaweed was extremely tedious as it required repeated washing, then boiling and straining to remove any dirt or particles. The final result had to be crystal clear and pale golden. Skill was needed to get the proportions of sugar and *agar agar* right. Mak Cho Payong used to “compete” with her daughters to see who could make the best *cheok-wah* every New Year.



Talam cheok-wah is traditionally set in a rabbit-shaped mould.

Cheok-wah is supposed to be clear, a pale golden (or whisky) colour and while firm, it should “shiver” when you touch it. Traditionally made in a rabbit-shaped porcelain mould, it is also tooth-numbingly sweet, but we children had to have a thin slice to ensure good luck. Kong-Cho’s (great grandfather’s) house, named Fairwinds, was always the first stop on our New Year visiting rounds. After we had *soja* (paid our respects to) the elders, we would troop into the kitchen for the obligatory *cheok-wah* and other goodies.

The recipe here comes from Mama’s handwritten collection, verbatim. The amount of sugar is no

mistake! The unprocessed *agar agar* is boiled to extract the gelatine, strained, washed, mixed with sugar and cooked (all the while scooping off the scum) until it reaches the desired colour and consistency. Very time-consuming!

CHEOK-WAH (AGAR AGAR) (in Baba Malay)

1 kati *agar*², 4½ katis gula pasir, 1 kati gula batu, Essence of Rose

*Agar*² di chuchi bersih dan rendam ayer beras. Bila mau masak, chuchi lagi abis tarok di grengseng sama ayer bia ahchup. Kasi mendidi dan kachor sekerjup2 sampai keluar kar nya, tapis. Ambil kain poeti jarong, pintal kasi keluar kar di dalam paso. Ampas nya tarok ayer lagi boleh masak, tapis buat no. 2 punya. Kasi kar nya sejok sampai besok baru masok, chuchi itu cheok-wah, ramas di dalam grengseng sama gula abis naik kan masak, api bia plahan. Ambil sendok angkat busa nya, bia menidi sampai tuah agak aroma whisky. Tarok Rose di tempat *agar*² abis tapis cheok-wah di tempat kain poeti, kasi di melaylay, sendok busa nya kalu ada turun.

(in English)

600g *agar agar* (in the old days this would be seaweed strips known as *chaiyan*)
2700g granulated sugar
600g rock sugar
Essence of Rose to taste

Wash the *agar agar* clean and soak in rice water. When ready to cook, rinse a final time and place in a *gerengseng* (large brass cooking pan) with sufficient water to cover. Bring to the boil and stir until the gelatine starts to separate, then strain. Place the gelatine on a piece of

clean white cloth, gather up the ends and twist (*pintal*) to strain out the gelatine into a pot (like squeezing coconut milk). Add more water to the residue and cook again, repeat the process to do a second extraction.

When the gelatine has cooled, return to the pan with the sugar and mix thoroughly, then cook again over a high flame. Skim off the foam with a spoon, and boil until the colour turns golden and the mixture smells a little like whisky. Add the Rose Essence. Strain the mixture through a cloth into a mould, letting it drip, all the while skimming off any foam. Cool until set. *

FOUR ON FOUR: SWEET SAUCE

Baba Emeric Lau spends an evening getting saucy and then some

This is the third in a series of four reports on a food-tasting session organised by *The Peranakan*.

We gathered four noted gourmets – Mr Anthony Heng and Nyonyas Bebe Seet, Elizabeth Lee and Helen Lim – and also trawled the supermarket aisles for various food items commonly used in Peranakan cooking. The aim was to sample these condiments in as objective a fashion as possible to uncover their merits.



Left: Anthony Heng is all smiles as he samples the sauces.

Right: Elizabeth Lee records her impressions of the tichio.

Far left: Nyonyas Bebe Seet and Helen Lim examine the sample sauces.

The products were tasted blind; our tasters then graded each one according to a set of criteria, and were also asked to include additional comments as they fancied. The tasters were not privy to one another's evaluations until after the tasting session. In between each sampling, white bread, water and ground coffee was used to cleanse the palate and nasal passages.

Four products were selected: dark soya sauce (*tauyu*), soya bean sauce (*tauchio*), sweet sauce (*tichio*) and rice vermicelli (*bee hoon*). In this issue, we disclose the results of the sweet sauce (*tichio*) tasting.

Four sweet sauces were sampled. They were, in the order of tasting:

- 1: Buddha Brand Sweet Flour Sauce
- 2: Kwong Cheong Thye Sweet Sauce
- 3: Sin Sin Sweet Sauce
- 4: Tai Hua Sweet Sauce

The four were graded by colour, smoothness, sweetness, consistency and overall taste.

Anthony Heng shared that the different qualities of sweet sauces would make each one complement certain dishes. He awarded average scores to Sauces 2, 3 and 4 in the various categories. He found Sauce 2 ideal for eating with Hainanese roast pork, while Sauce 3 was deemed best for *char kway teow*. Sauce 1 was ranked above average in all categories, and was Anthony's personal favourite as it was not too dark in colour. He felt Sauce 1 would be good as a dip when eating *ngoh hiang*.

In contrast, Bebe Seet found Sauce 1 a little too pale for her liking and ranked it as average in all categories. Sauce 2 was noted for its fragrance, while Sauce 3 was graded excellent for its sweetness, consistency and overall taste. Sauce 4 scored above average for its colour and smoothness, but was otherwise unremarkable.

Elizabeth Lee also selected Sauce 3 as her favourite, stating that it would be good for eating with *popiah*, *char kway teow* (in agreement with Anthony Heng) and chicken rice. She found Sauces 1, 2 and 4 good for use as dippings, and also concurred with Anthony that Sauce 2 would be

good for roast pork dishes. Sauce 1 would go well with deep fried food, whereas Sauce 4 could be consumed with fried carrot cake and *char kway teow*.

Helen Lim selected Sauce 4 as her favourite. She found Sauce 1 a bit too watery for her liking. She listed Sauce 2 as ideal for use in *char kway teow*, Sauce 3 for *soon kueh* and Sauce 4 for *popiah*.

In sum, the panel appeared divided on which sweet sauce would be ideal as a dipping for various dishes. It appears that our tasters have rather different preferences when it comes to their "sweet" tooth! ❄



Buddha Brand

Kwong Cheong Thye

Sin Sin

Tai Hua

NIPPON NYONYAS

Nyonya Linda Chee goes beyond Japan Hour to discover more than just *sakura* and *sashimi*

Below: Midori has attended three Peranakan conventions to-date and loves the culture for its beautiful things. "It is not the same as South East Asian culture".

Of Bunga Hijau and the Mad Chinaman

While attending the Peranakan Convention in Phuket, I chanced upon a lady with short-cropped hair whom I had bumped into a couple of times at previous Peranakan events in Singapore. This time she looked so demure, as our nyonyas do, in a *sarong kebaya*!

Midori Nukumizu's love affair with the Peranakan culture began with a passion for Singapore food on her first trip here 16 years ago. She travelled northwards and added Malaysian and Thai cuisine to her list of favourites. After a year, in 1995, Midori opened *Bunga Hijau* (Green Flower) South East Asia Cooking Studio in Kyoto to "teach the Japanese people".

In 2007 she caught the screening of Royston Tan's movie, *881*, in Osaka. "I wrote to the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to tell them why I liked the movie. After two months I received a call from the STB Osaka office, saying 'Congratulations, you have won the first prize to fly to Singapore by SQ!' I was so lucky to be able to visit Singapore again," Midori related.

Her preparations included research on The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) website, which showed a Convention was to be held in Melaka. "I wrote to Mrs Lim (Geok Huay, TPAS honorary secretary) and told her I wanted to join the Convention but was not a member. She wrote back and said OK, you can join."

After the second visit, Midori told herself to realize her dream to not just visit, but live in Singapore. Then she could immerse herself in the Peranakan culture which she had first heard from Baba Dick Lee's *Mad Chinaman* album (which won him a big following in Japan) but did not understand "the meaning".

"I never gave up in my search for a job in Singapore. It took me two years." She finally landed a position as a Japanese restaurant manager last

July and started work in September. "I am very happy and lucky".

Midori plans to hone her Peranakan cooking skills and write a book on the cuisine and culture in Japanese and English. "My family, students, friends, they are very interested in everything Peranakan." Midori has six *kebaya*s and 10 *sarongs* in her wardrobe, and collects new and antique *batik*. "I wear the *sarong kebaya* better than the *kimono*," she laughed.

Peranakan Chic

Chie Iwasaki can be arguably described as one of Japan's foremost ambassadors of Peranakan culture. After moving to Singapore from New York, she became fascinated by Peranakan food and the depth of the culture during her four and a half years here as a writer. She moved back to Tokyo in 2002 to focus on her work as a food writer-cum-publisher, returning often to Singapore to refresh her "roots" in her adopted heritage.

The Keio University art history major actively



Right: Says Chie: "Peranakan culture is very sophisticated." She owns six *kebaya*s.



promotes Peranakan culture in her country whenever the opportunity arises. Three years ago, Chie authored a book written in Japanese, titled “*The Beauty of the Peranakan Culture in the Malay Peninsula*”.

In February 2007, Chie co-created with another Peranakan proponent, Miki Tampo, a dedicated Japanese language website peranakan.tuzikaze.com (with English translation) which is an amazing resource on all things Peranakan. Titled *Peranakan Chic*, the site provides reviews on books and articles and is a storehouse of information on the history, customs, cuisine, costumes, ceramics and other aspects of our culture. The three leading Peranakan hubs – Malacca, Penang and Singapore – are profiled at length while hyperlinks to related websites abound.

Chie was approached by the Singapore Embassy in Japan recently to help in organising the Singapore booth at APEC Japan 2010 in Yokohama (see page 35). The booth proved very popular with visitors who were especially fascinated by the skill in creating Peranakan art and craft. “It was my chance to introduce Peranakan culture to more Japanese people. We displayed beautiful *kebaya* and sold many Asian sweets including Peranakan foods.” ❖



Chie authored a Japanese language book titled “*The Beauty of the Peranakan Culture in the Malay Peninsula*”.



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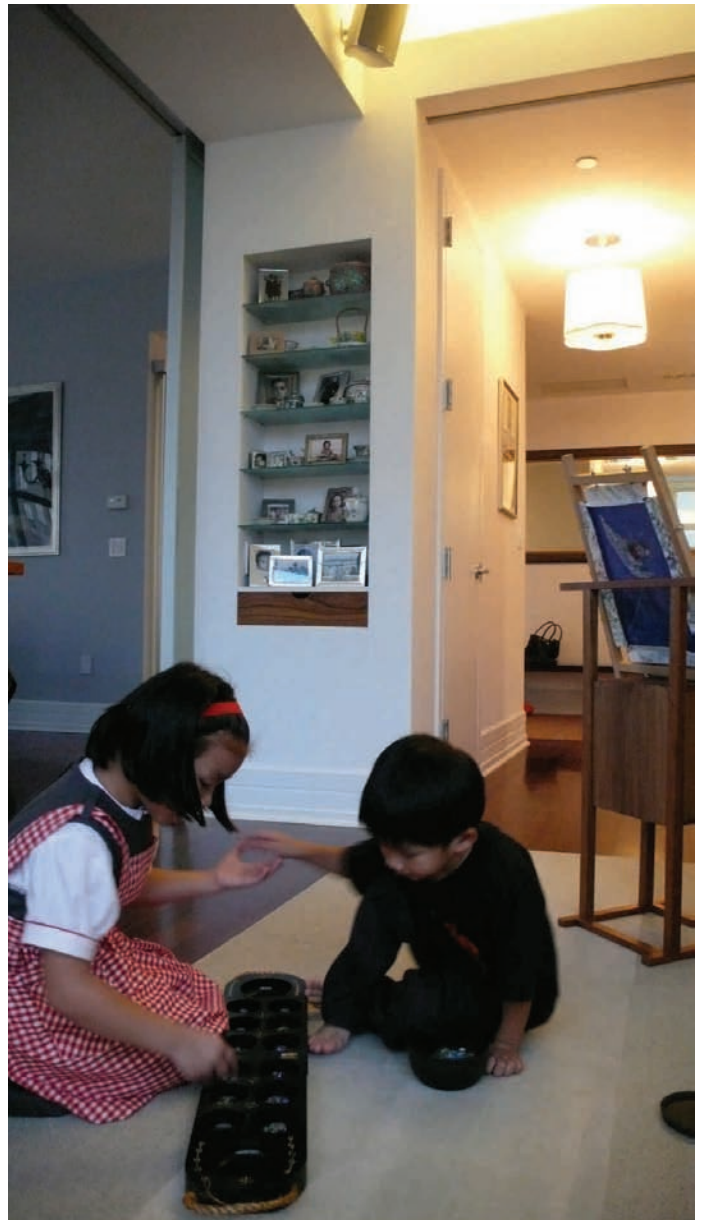
A NOSTALGIC NYONYA IN NEW YORK

Nyonya Sharon Wee creates her own Peranakan household in the Big Apple

There were three instances in my life which made me profoundly aware of my Peranakan roots. The first was an identity crisis of sorts when I was in primary school at Opera Estate. My mother had lovingly made an array of colorful nyonya *kueh* for Teachers' Day. Yet, I was ashamed to tote the *kueh* from our Siglap home to school because I did not think that anyone would know how to eat them, except for the few teachers who spoke the odd Malay lingo like my mother. Strangely enough to me, they were grateful for my mother's painstaking efforts.

The second instance occurred when I was posted to China. I had to confess to my English boss that my Mandarin language skills were short of proficient. He could not fathom why if I was technically Chinese. I lent him *The Babas* by Felix Chia and *Baba Wedding* by Cheo Kim Ban to acquaint him with my culture. He read both books with great interest and cheerily concluded that we Peranakans were the "last of the big spenders".

My last distinct experience was an awakening and a turning point for me. As I lived midway through what has now been 18 years abroad, I began to crave for more understanding of all things Peranakan. I started compiling my mother's recipes, hoping to learn cooking from her. Sadly, she passed away after a quick decline in health. It dawned on me that I had taken many things for granted and had never truly appreciated the beauty and richness of my heritage. Now settled in New York City and married to a Chinese-American, I recognise that I will remain mostly in the US because of my young family. However, my mother's passing opened up a newfound quest to research and preserve my Peranakan heritage. I converted her handwritten recipe measurements from *katis* and *tahils* and learnt the different *daons* and *rempahs*. I began collecting Nyonya cookbooks and books about Straits Chinese furniture,



Nyonya Sharon's children playing congkak at home. The alcove in the background holds precious reminders of home and family in Katong.

porcelain and embroidery.

Whenever I came back to Singapore, I would buy more books than clothes to proudly display in my burgeoning library. I also transported back my mother's old wooden and brass *kueh ku* moulds from her 'nineteen-nought-belum' collection. Alas, with the seasonal change in weather, the wood started to warp and the brass began to turn green. I had to bring them back to Singapore.

Gradually, I grew fearless with what I could

cart back to the US. I literally began to smuggle in ingredients that were hard to find. For several years, I deftly maneuvered my way around the strict US Customs by pretending that I could not comprehend their English instructions. At the height of the bird flu, I arrived at the airport and a Singapore Airlines official assisted me because I was pregnant and travelling with a toddler. She led me to the queue for X-raying food, much against my will, thus exposing my smuggled *lap cheong* in the process! My contraband of fresh *pandan* leaves, grated coconut, *popiah* skin from Joo Chiat, *ngo hiang* powder from the Bedok *sinseh* (Chinese doctor), *laksa* and curry leaves, AND my precious *buah keluak* were confiscated. It took the officers half an hour to scour through a 500-page 'Allowed Foods' manual to check for *buah keluak*. It was the first time that they had ever seen these nuts. I was given a lengthy lecture in place of a fine but a stranger stole my suitcase right there and then!

The Asian supermarkets in Chinatown have started stocking up *belachan*, *chap chai* ingredients in a pack, *chincalok* and even *buah keluak* pulp. I buy my *buah keluak* in Singapore and snail-mail them to myself at three times the cost in Singapore and delivery several weeks later.

Shopping for ingredients for our cuisine entails trekking down to Chinatown by subway with a large shopping trolley, sometimes in the wake of a snowfall. It is not as easy as driving to the nearest NTUC supermarket to stock up on sago flour or buying freshly grated coconut from the wet market. Fresh chili also seems to be seasonal and cannot be found easily during winter. All this has made testing recipes a challenge.

I practise by cooking for friends. One Chinese New Year, I single-handedly created a *tok panjang* that included *ngo hiang*, *satay babi*, *hee pio* soup, *pong tauhu* soup, *chap chai* and chicken curry. It went down well with my guests but I was exhausted and sick for a few days. It made me truly respect my late mother for having the energy and discipline to cook year after year all by herself, twice as many

dishes and thrice the quantity.

My young children are becoming more aware of our Peranakan roots because of familiar objects around the home. Over the years, my collection has extended beyond books to furniture and art. I shipped in three Peranakan paintings by Martin Loh and Desmond Sim. They now hang in my daughter's bedroom. I also picked the subjects of the paintings based on my own childhood. One Desmond Sim painting has a *kebaya*-clad lady holding a plate of pineapple tarts, *kueh ku* and *serikaya* – desserts that my mother used to make frequently. Another by him is of a little girl in *baju panjang* catching fish into a large Horlicks

bottle – something I vaguely remembering doing myself. Martin Loh's painting hangs opposite my daughter's school uniforms. It features a nyonya pulling her daughter's ears and dragging her to school.

When we moved to our new home, I also imported a *kopitiam* table and four matching stools to fit into our cosy kitchen corner. We have our meals there instead of at the dining table. Every water mark on the marble surface provides memories of

Nyonya Sharon beading a slipper front while watching TV.



when and what my children did to cause them. Yet, these are minor compared with the chip when the table first arrived. In my enthusiasm, I had packed into the same crate a *batu giling* which I hunted down in Little India. The incredibly clunky stone slab landed on and cracked the wooden table stand. I had to order another stand.

I decided that if I truly wanted to display my *tok panjang* skills, I should have the proper dinnerware to complement the food. So I ventured to the Peranakan Museum to study the table setting display and ordered the different-sized plates accordingly. They came in partial shipments. Three bowls broke into fragments and these were conveniently handed over in time to my daughter's school for their fundraising gala. The fragments were incorporated into a large ceramic vase with those of other broken plates. Believe it or not, the vase sold for US\$2,500 and I am so proud that it includes some beautiful Peranakan images.

Another watershed was admittedly when the

INTERNATIONAL

Little Nyonya TV series came on. My sister had told me about it over the phone. I was quick to add that it would be great for my five year-old daughter to watch, assuming from the title that it was an educational series that would teach her to speak the patois. "Oh no, cannot! It's got rape and cruelty!" she exclaimed. What began for my husband and me as an initial viewing very quickly consumed our nights. We got addicted and preferred it to *Grey's Anatomy* and *Desperate Housewives*. We passed the DVD to a Jewish friend and he too got intrigued by the storyline. Both Jewish and Baba families are matriarchal but he was confused by the family structure with stepmothers and adopted children. I recommended the series to another Singapore nyonya friend who has lived in New York even longer. Her sister came to visit and both of them holed up with a marathon viewing for three days and nights straight. We all depended on the English subtitles.

As a result of this TV phenomenon, I became

more interested in *kasot manek*. I joked that if I was a potential bride, the prospective mother-in-law might have disqualified me because of my lack of embroidery skills. So on my next trip back to Singapore, I badgered busy Bebe Seet of Rumah Bebe to give me a crash course on *kasot manek*. I lugged home the wooden table to fit the sewing frame and now it sits in our library. I sew while watching TV at night but at the rate I am going, my sister would pass another decade before she gets the *kasot* as a birthday present.

At Rumah Bebe, my daughter asked to have her own *sarong kebaya*. She wears it in New York whenever we have friends over for dinner. My son absolutely loves pineapple tarts and can gobble up a dozen at a time when I make them. We come back to Singapore twice a year to spend time with my 84-year-old father. Their big thrill is having Kim Choo's mini *kueh chang* for breakfast and Bengawan Solo's *kueh kueh* as a midnight snack when they are jetlagged.

Sadly, I am uncertain how my children can fully realize their Peranakan potential when they live so far from its epicentre. Because my husband is of Taiwanese descent, my children learn Mandarin in addition to the Spanish or French offered in school. There is not much space left for the Baba patois. I am rueful that when dinner is ready, I cannot quite shout "*Makan!*" ("*Eat!*") like my family does in Singapore. But it is not for want of trying. Slowly but surely, their vocabulary now includes *obat* for medicine and *baju*, broken down into office *baju* which daddy wears, and house *baju* for pottering around the house. These days, they pretend to speak 'Scribblin' which is their imitation of the patois I use with my sisters when I am actually talking about them in their presence.

During our vacations in Singapore, we would visit the Peranakan Museum. I have not stopped hauling new books and objects to add to my Peranakan collection. Yet, there is still something that I do not have the courage to bring back to New York. This is the nyonya jewellery which my mother left me when she died. Each time, my sister would nudge me to take them. They are so precious because of the sentimental value that I cannot bear the thought of losing them in transit or having them stolen. This all seems analogous to how I feel about living abroad. I may bring 'all kinds of lovely things' back with me to where I now reside, but a precious part of me will always stay behind in my true home in Katong, Singapore. ❖



COOKING FOR THE PRESIDENT

Nyonya Wee Eng Hwa, author of *Cooking For The President – Reflections & Recipes of Mrs Wee Kim Wee*, sets aside time to talk to Baba Colin Chee about the book, her parents and her family's recipes

The recent release of Wee Eng Hwa's long-awaited 544-page cookbook was a phenomenon. Some book stores ran out of copies shortly after it hit the shelves. The first one fifth of the book is devoted entirely to the lives of Eng Hwa's Peranakan parents – her late father, the much loved former President of Singapore, Baba Wee Kim Wee, and her homemaker mother, Nyonya Mrs Wee Kim Wee nee Koh Siok Hiong. It is an intimate, expansive and touching record of their lives together. The rest of the book is a generous and almost encyclopaedic sharing of a Peranakan family's usually closely-guarded home recipes.

Eng Hwa, how did you and your mother conceptualise this book together? How long did it take, to final publication, considering your father had already typed a foreword way back in March 2005?

It has taken me about half a century. My mother first expressed to me in the mid-1950s her wish for a book of her family recipes. I was then about 15 years old. It was only in mid-1989 that I felt ready to take on the challenge. My law practice was more settled and I felt I could devote some time to learning the ropes from my mother. I did not envisage then that it would take over 21 years to complete, and become such a monumental project. Its publication has fulfilled my mother's dream to record the Peranakan dishes as her maternal grandmother, Saw Hai Choo, had cooked. My mother considered her a culinary genius.

Every process took a long time. I had to learn from scratch. We tested and retested every recipe many times. The actual production work for printing took three years. There were some months of delay, when our family had to come to terms with the loss of my father. My only regret is that he did not live long

enough to see it. The book is dedicated to the memory of Wee Kim Wee.

The book is a treasure trove of information about the family. Were there any initial reservations on your mother's part and even among family members about sharing the more intimate details?

None whatsoever. We have many things to laugh and cry and be thankful about. Like sharing food, it was natural and spontaneous for us to share them. And as food, cooking, home management, entertaining and friendships featured significantly in our family's activities and were so intertwined, I thought that I could bring the recipes "alive" by integrating them within the context of a story about a humble Peranakan family.

I would describe my parents as two ordinary people who are extraordinary. It is not meant as a boast. I hope readers will not take it in that light. As I wrote their story, I saw that there were many pointers in their lives that others could relate to and apply them to

find meaning and hope, especially youths who are facing life's challenges.



Mrs Wee and daughter Eng Hwa in their garden. In the foreground are bowls of bubor trigu, the best Baba Colin has ever tasted.

CHAKAP CHAKAP

For example, my father had always lived by the Christian principle of contentment he had learned as a youth. He was never covetous. Combined with the wisdom of knowing when to cut losses, he was able to weather the storms in his life, keep his sanity and move ahead. One important principle my dad displayed is forgiveness. He never harboured hatred for people. Disappointment yes, but I have never heard him speak a harsh word about who had done him wrong. He had that innate quality of compassion. He understood people and empathised with them.

My mother is the embodiment of a caring woman: always giving, always sharing. She held the family

“What is the Peranakan way of life? It means all things refined, from attitude towards people - respect for elders, good manners, considerate towards other people’s feelings – to refined pleasures for the senses - food and hospitality, clothing (the *sarong kebaya*), jewellery, furniture and porcelain ware.”

- Wee Eng Hwa



Photography by Roger Syn.

Our beloved late President, Baba Wee Kim Wee, at the Istana with his wife, Nyonya Koh Siok Hiong, and daughter, Nyonya Wee Eng Hwa. together during all those hard times, and was a tower of strength for my dad. At critical points in their lives, my parents had been blessed to meet many kind and helpful people. My parents often reminded us about them, and always showed gratitude. They never fail to show kindness and empathy towards people and were sensitive towards other people’s feelings. It came naturally to them. I remember we would get an instant ‘rap on the knuckles’ if we showed any signs of callousness by our words or actions.

To the Peranakans, good manners are ultra

important. My parent made sure that *kurang ajar* (discourteousness) would not be tolerated in the family. Respect for the elders was expected.

Did you suffer from writer’s block? Did you envisage that the book would turn out to be such a huge enterprise in time and content? You must have also obtained permission from many of your family friends and relatives to publish their testimonies in the book?

I never knew I could write, until I put my pen on paper. I prayed constantly. It was not easy at first. Then, as I gained momentum, it got easier. In life, you will not know that you are capable of doing something until you try it. When I got a mental block, I would stop and do something different. Then, fresh ideas would come in.

After my father passed away, the book took a fresh turn. People whom I approached to write a few words just naturally came to my mind. Also, chance meetings arose when some friends literally appeared at my doorstep when, for example, I was busy writing. Their reflections of my parents represent different periods and aspects of my parents’ lives. So it all fell into place. I am very thankful to them for sharing.

What were your biggest challenges in putting the book together?

Time. I was a lawyer by day and a writer, cook and photographer by night. Burning the candle at both ends, you might say. But I managed. I had strong constitution. Fortunately too, I had a law firm partner who was so tolerant of me applying flexitime and working from home.

I wanted so much to ensure that I could place the book in my mother’s hands for her to enjoy it. My mother is 94. I had put complete trust in the Lord Jesus to help me accomplish this. Presenting

her with the first copy at the book launch on 15 November 2010 (see page 31) was my most joyful moment.

Another big challenge was space constraint. The intention was to limit the book to 450 pages. But there was so much to put in. I wanted it to be a comprehensive book – the Escoffier of Peranakan cuisine – set in the context of a Peranakan family's story. It is meant to be read with ease for practical use. I remember my mother would constantly remind me to “keep the recipes simple, or people will not use them”. My sister Hong Neo would also remind me: “Don't be long-winded. Keep it short”. I had to exercise much discipline keeping each recipe to one page, including the photos. Even then, the book grew to 544 pages. It meant time and additional production cost.

Obviously your father was very supportive. Was there anything he said or suggested that made a material difference to the way the book eventually evolved?

Every dish I cooked, based on the recipe my mother and I had worked on, went through rigorous tasting by a “high council” consisting of my parents and family members who would give their critical comments. My father's mother was a good cook, and so he was used to good cooking. He gave valuable input for recipes such as *pong tauhu* (beancurd meatball soup), *itek sioh* (ketumbar braised duck) and *pulot tatair* (glutinous rice with coconut).

My father had no hand in the biographical section. When he passed on, I had only finished working on the recipes and was about six months into photographing the dishes. The idea for a biographical section was hatched later.

Your mother is clearly an intelligent and innovative cook. She has adapted dishes from other ethnic and dialect groups to the Peranakan palate such as the Malay *sayor lodeh*, the Cantonese *sa por fan*, the Indian *wadeh*, and Hokkien *lor bak*, to name a few. What advice did she give you about being a sensitive and good cook?

My mother would always advise me not to overdo things, meaning, even though an ingredient is *wangi* (fragrant), do not add too much of it. To her, it is important to maintain a balance in the tastes, while ensuring the required dominance of a certain fragrance or taste of the dish.

Generally, she does not favour strong spicy or herbal flavours. She is conservative in the use of spices and strong herbs.

Her other principle is authenticity of a dish, in terms of the character, texture, taste and look of a dish.

“To the Peranakan cook, the way an ingredient is cut and presented is important. Therefore, how *alus* (fine) or *kasar* (rough) an ingredient is to be cut goes to make up the genius of Peranakan cuisine. Taking care of detail is vital. ”

- Wee Eng Hwa

What is the number of recipes in the book? You mentioned that your mother had all of them in her head. Were there occasions to re-tweak some of the recipes?

There are nearly 230 recipes plus their variations. Except for the few western-style biscuits and cakes which she learned from friends, my mother never needed a written recipe. She had them all in her head. It is an amazing feat. I had to run around with a note pad, when I was with her in the kitchen.

Of course, when we had to weigh everything, we had to retry each recipe several times to ensure accuracy. Our aim was always to capture the true Peranakan taste, passed down from her maternal grandmother.

You have taken over the family's chief chef mantle from your mother. How do you feel? Are you responsible for the family's reunion dinners now?

Yes, I am so very glad that I am able to do it for my mother. However, she still calls the shots. Her mind and taste buds are still so sharp, she is my consultant. She is already thinking about what we need to do for the coming Chinese New Year Open House. Every year, with the help of my loving sisters, I would mastermind the cooking. Sok Hiong's *mee siam* (spicy rice vermicelli) is the savoury centrepiece. *Kueh wajek durian* (durian glutinous rice fudge), is a firm favourite with many of our friends.

Are you planning a sequel cook book?

Oh, no. What my mother and I have given is just about everything that we have cooked at home, barring a few Western-style dishes I have perfected which the family enjoy. Undaunted by the pressure of time and advice of many people, I refused to entertain the idea of having a two-volume book project. We have given it all. We hope that this book will encourage people to cook Peranakan food well at home and keep true Peranakan cuisine alive.

My mother was fantastic in home and kitchen management. She cooked with love. She could cook for hundreds, almost singlehandedly. I believe that, had she the opportunity to open a Peranakan restaurant, it would have been a great success. ❀

Click on peranakan.org.sg under the Broadcast section to watch the videolink of an interview with Wee Eng Hwa.

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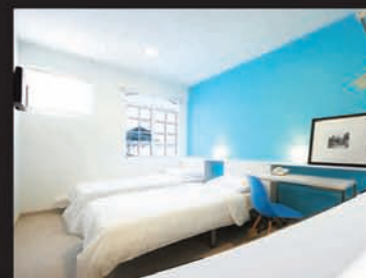
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OLD TOWN, NEW HANGOUT

Baba Colin Chee checks out Hangout@Jonker in old Melaka Town

I had not been back to Melaka for a good seven years. Everyone told me how much it had changed. Some said it had become very commercial. Others said for the better.

The last time I was there in 2003, Melaka was still quaint. There were hints of change for the better. The weekend night market on Jonker Street was having its first tentative start. The *kueh-kueh* and home-made trinket stalls would start to emerge at five o'clock in the evening. A hesitant bustle would accompany it.

Then, the old craft, goldsmith and antique shops were still there and appeared to be thriving. And although Jonker Street had been renamed Jalan Hang Jebat and Heeren Street became Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Melakans continued to stick affectionately to the old iconic names.

Returning to this old town in November 2010, I could sense and see the changes that had taken place. Not all for the better.

Some of my favourite eateries and craft shops have disappeared or had relocated. More land has been reclaimed from the Malacca Straits for poorly built buildings that are unoccupied. The large green Padang has become a huge shopping complex opposite the Mahkota Parade, Melaka's first shopping centre. And traffic has grown thick and heavy in Melaka's

once charming narrow streets.

Still, not all of the town's *kampung* feel have been lost. Several of the older buildings have

been carefully refurbished as cosy boutique and budget hotels, without loss to their heritage charms. The 22-room Hangout@ Jonker, for instance, is a smart conversion. The no-frills budget hotel for the value savvy traveller has largely minimalist Scandinavian decor and surprising elements of Peranakan.

I visited the Hangout twice while in Melaka. Each time I was received with a youthful cheerfulness. After a walk in sweltering heavy heat, a smile and a genuine welcome are a relief. Strategically located at the junction of Jonker and Heeren Streets, it is just over the bridge from the Stadthuys, the Red Square built as an administrative centre for the Dutch in the mid 1960s.

The Hangout is therefore in the centre of a 500-meter radius of all that's good to eat in old Malacca town – pork *satay*, chicken rice, *chendol*, Portugese cakes, Peranakan cuisine, chilli crabs, *mee sua* soup, Teochew cuisine, and a whole lot more! And good shopping too.

Its rooftop terrace opens wonderfully to vistas of the old town and river mouth. In the evenings, this would be a wonderful place to be. The hotel will appeal to the young and those with an eye on value. However, be warned: there are rooms without windows, although this is well compensated by their cleanliness, nice and bright decor and ambient lighting. ✱



Above and bottom right: Sweeping vistas of Malacca River and the Old Town from the roof terrace of the boutique hotel.



Left: A stylized facelift for an old building.

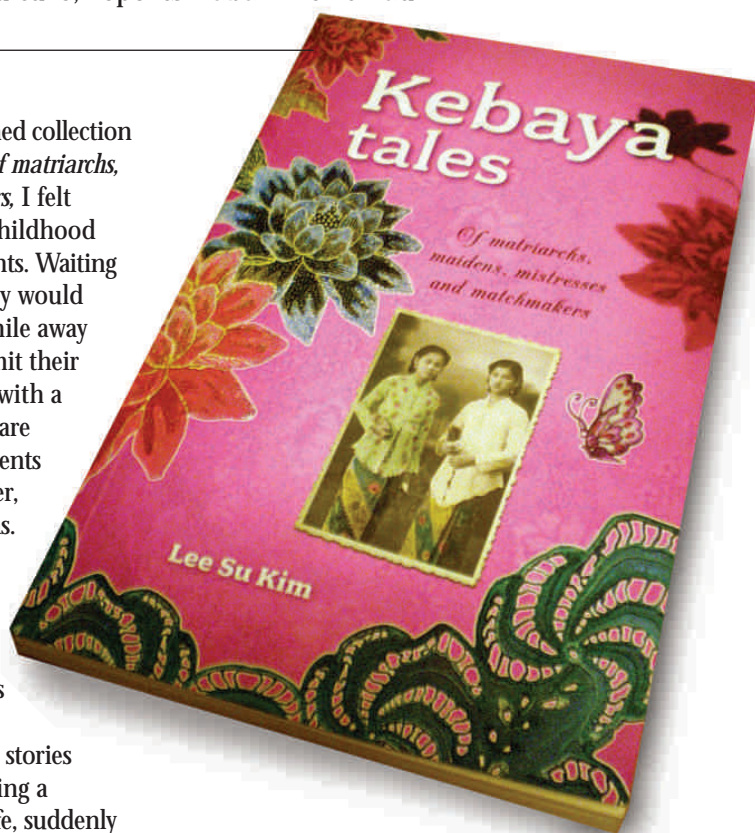
TITILLATING TALES

Nyonya Lee Su Kim's latest offering shines a light on many forgotten narratives from the heyday of Peranakan culture, reports Baba Emeric Lau

Reading Lee Su Kim's newly-published collection of short stories, *Kebaya Tales – Of matriarchs, maidens, mistresses and matchmakers*, I felt transported back to the many languid childhood afternoons spent with my own grandparents. Waiting for my parents to return from work, they would often tell me stories from the past to while away the time. If only I had bothered to commit their words to paper, I might have ended up with a similar collection of gems. Lee's stories are indeed based on or inspired by real-life events which she has collected from her mother, grandmother and other bibiks and nyonys.

Laced with gentle humour and candour, the stories cannot fail to draw the reader in - I completed the book in a single sitting, and found myself thirsting for more! Crafted around events and memories scandalous, momentous, heart-rending and even supernatural, the stories sparkle delightfully like the *intan* adorning a nyonya's *kerosang*. There's the boastful wife, suddenly widowed and then having to face, in the flesh, evidence of her husband's indiscretions at his wake in front of all and sundry. How about a poignant vignette from World War Two on a Japanese officer's unlikely friendship with a Baba and his family? Or an insight to the blithe ignorance of the young when they attempt to pack some food that the spirits of an island deem as contraband?

Cleverly interspersed between the stories are breathtaking pictures of Lee's collection of kebayas and jewelry.



Besides these and many other compelling stories, Lee also deftly captures moments that reflect our changing cultural mores, even down to delicate matters of the bedroom: brides everywhere can thank Feminism for no longer needing to present their mothers-in-law with the crimson evidence of their maidenhood! But I'll leave off sharing the stories here, lest I let slip more spoilers. Suffice to say that on the merit of its wit and insight alone, this book comes fully recommended.

Yet, like bonus tracks on a music CD, Lee has added a simple introduction about Peranakan culture and the lifestyles of the babas and nyonys. Further interspersed between the stories are breathtaking photos featuring Lee's gorgeous *kebaya* and jewellery collection, old black and white prints from her family albums and even a specially written *panton* from our Association Committee Member Baba Chan Eng Thai. An elegant layout, complemented by easily legible typefaces, ensures that this book delivers pure reading pleasure from start to finish.✽

Kebaya Tales – Of Matriarchs, Maidens, Mistresses and Matchmakers is published by Marshall Cavendish Editions and is now available at all good bookstores.



TREASURES FROM THE NYONYA'S WARDROBE

Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion and its International Sources
1 April 2011 to 26 Feb 2012. Major Rotation, Early October 2011
Peranakan Museum, Singapore

Come April, a spectacular showcase of rare and early *kebaya*s and *batiks* will go on display at the Peranakan Museum, including 400 items donated by our Association Life President Baba Lee Kip Lee and Mrs Elizabeth Lee plus masterpieces on loan from three Dutch museums.

Baba Peter Lee is the external curator of this special exhibition, titled *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion and its International Sources*. It traces the history and development of the *sarong kebaya*, and attempts to set it in its proper art, historical and stylistic context, based on new research and previously unpublished textiles and garments.

The story spans an extensive period of five centuries and a vast geographical area, linking 15th century Goa in western India where the first East-West cross-cultural communities emerged through Portuguese colonisation in Asia, to 17th century Batavia and finally to the 20th century Malay Archipelago.

The exhibition promises to be a visual feast, displaying pieces that are of high quality, condition and rarity, most which have not been displayed before. The Museum will also display additional stunning examples from its own collection of Indian trade textiles which as antecedents to the Peranakan sarongs were traded to Southeast Asia for over 500 years.

Visitors will learn how the aesthetics and style of dressing of the creolised communities evolved, became influenced by, and in turn exerted influence on, the dress of the indigenous and other immigrant communities through the ages.

A major rotation of up to half of the artefacts displayed is planned halfway through the 10-month long exhibition period to encourage repeat visits. ✽



Batik baju panjang (long robe) with a stamped pattern and a hand-drawn batik sarong, both from the north coast of Java, for a Peranakan Chinese lady, c. 1900.

Baju panjang: Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee, Peranakan Museum collection.

Sarong: On loan from Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

Kebaya with appliqué motifs and a trim of broderie anglaise, and a hand-drawn batik sarong by Tan Sin Ing, Sidoarjo, for a Peranakan Chinese lady, c. 1920.

Kebaya: Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee, Peranakan Museum collection

Sarong: On loan from Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

A PHUKET-FUL OF WONDERS

Nyonya Linda Chee is wowed by the cultural wealth of the Thai Peranakans

The rich Thai Peranakan culture, hospitality and graciousness were spelt out in capital letters the moment we arrived at the Pearl of the Andaman for the 23rd Peranakan Convention from 20 -22 November 2010. It was only the second time Phuket



The TPAS "coolies" (labourers) Alan Koh and Tony Quek hamming it up.

was hosting the annual gathering of Peranakans from the region.

We were warmly received at the airport by *kebaya*-clad Thai nyonyas who ensured nothing and nobody were amiss when we arrived at mid-day. The warm weather suited a quick noontime snooze in the coach, on the way to quaint Phuket town. Refreshed, I was pleasantly surprised to be confronted with so many familiar faces and happy hellos in the crowded hotel lobby.

No wonder. The convention, and perhaps the resort attraction too, had drawn one of the biggest, if not the biggest turnouts ever, with more than 200 overseas delegates including about 70 from Singapore, more than 40 each from Kuala Lumpur and Melaka, and eight precious members all the way from Melbourne.

The Thai Peranakan Association had pulled out all stops to leave a memorable impression. At the Royal Phuket Marina, participants were treated to a feast of Thai culture. These included an orchestra playing the Thai King's own compositions, classical dances, and highly skilled dragon dance and puppetry performances, all to mark the grand opening of the convention - no less by the Governor of Phuket Province, Khun Tree Ackaradecha. The audience was also wowed by a bevy of well-dressed Thai nyonyas who sashayed onstage to display glittering tiaras, beautifully hand-made from silver and gold thread, as part of the conference on the second day.

Both convention evenings were equally festive in

colour and revelry. At the welcome dinner on Saturday evening, the various associations from Phuket, Melaka, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Melbourne and Singapore presented songs and dances that created much merriment at a charming pierside restaurant lined with giant trees fronting Chalong Bay.

The dinner depicted the theme of the convention, "*From Quli to Bong Tao*" ("from coolie to towkay"), to represent the Peranakans in Phuket whose families had risen through the 19th century from poor migrants from China to become wealthy tin mine owners there. Some babas, among them our First Vice-President Baba Alan Koh and actor member Baba Tony Quek, chose to dress as labourers from China just landed at Phuket Bay. All the nyonyas there had a shoo-in role, to show off their finery as the beloved daughters of the tin miners. As in all happy endings, the performers and audience gamely took to the floor to *ronggeng* and *joget* the night away.

The gala dinner on the second and final evening took us to the Thai Village Park. As it so happened with the clever organisers, our convention was timed to coincide with the *Loy Krathong* Festival on 21 November. The convention's *Loy Krathong* Pageant had members of the various associations furiously buying roses for charity, in a raucous competition to give their own contestants the most roses to win the title. The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) emerged the highest bidder and our radiant Angeline Kong was Miss *Loy Krathong*!

I was enchanted by the evening finale. By candlelight, many participants trooped down to the lakeside to float their own lotus *krathong*. Others lit candles in three-feet high rice paper *kome loy* (lanterns) which, like graceful white angels, gently floated up before disappearing into the ink-black sky.

The Thai Peranakans in balmy Phuket did themselves proud in staging an excellent show. As voiced by many, Penang would have a hard act to follow for next year's convention.

Loy Krathong Festival

Loy Krathong is held on the full moon night of the 12th month in the Thai lunar calendar. *Loy* means to float and *krathong* a raft. The floating of a *krathong* symbolises dispelling ill fortune and bringing good luck, as well as honouring the Goddess of Water, Phra Mae Khongkha. ✽



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1&2: Merriment at the welcome dinner along Chalong Bay.

3: A full turnout at the grand opening of the Convention.

4: Thai Peranakan Association Vice-President Pranee Sakulpipatana introducing all the association chiefs onstage at the Convention.

5: The cultural performances were a visual feast.

6: The parade of Thai nyongas in their unique finery, including glittering silver and gold thread tiaras.

7: Miss Loy Krathong, Nyonya Angeline Kong from TPAS (middle), flanked by the runners up, Evonne Yeo from Melaka (in blue) and Lilian Tong from Penang (in red).

8: A giant krathong glowed as if to greet Loy Krathong contestants who led the lakeside floating of krathongs for good luck.

9: The glowing kome loy (lanterns) that floated gently into the night sky.

EVENTS

EAT, DRINK AND DESSERTS ARE ON THE BALCONY!

Baba Emeric Lau reports on the new approach to TPAS Dinner & Dance

Furniture giant IKEA's philosophy is a good parallel to the revised objectives of The Peranakan Association of Singapore (TPAS) Dinner and Dance (D&D) committee in organising this year's celebration on 2 December 2010.

Aiming to be more inclusive than before, the committee boldly decided to lower the price of its D&D tickets to an unprecedented \$38 for Association members and \$58 for non-members. The event was then guided by what this lower price could best procure. Just like IKEA, some frills were clipped, but without cutting corners overall. With great resourcefulness, the ballroom of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry was secured as the venue at a reasonable cost. Long-time caterers Guan Hoe Soon provided a delectable buffet spread of *nyonya* favourites including *ngoh hiang* and *bakwan kepiting*. Even though a tight space meant that the buffet service had to be



cleared quickly to make room for everyone to *joget*, savoury desserts of *pulut hitam* and *chendol* were doled out in generous portions on the ballroom's balcony!

Doyen G.T. Lye and Nyonya Mabel Lee entertain with their comedic repartee.

It was full house at the D & D.



EVENTS

The party vibe was not in the least dampened. Seven-piece band, The Locomotions, performed up-tempo favourites and guests needed no prompting to turn the stage front into their dance floor. Entertainment also came in the form of a light-hearted repartee between doyen G.T. Lye and Nyonya Mabel Lee and a medley of songs from the Peranakan Voices.

This being TPAS' 110th anniversary, it was also a time to take stock of how far the community had come, and thank all our loyal supporters. Guests included representatives from the Singapore Tourism Board and the Joo Chiat Community Club Peranakan Interest Group, both of whom TPAS is proud to be able to count as its partners in cultural promotion.



For 2011, the D&D committee will organise two dinners. The Peranakan Ball will be held on Saturday 9 July 2011 from 7:30pm at the Grand Ballroom of the Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel, 392 Havelock Road. This Ball will be a fund-raising project for TPAS, and it is hoped that members will donate generously through the purchase of dinner tables.

The 111th D&D will be held later in the year, along similar lines as 2010's. Ready your stomachs for not one, but two opportunities to eat, drink and *buat lao jiat!* ❄

Guests joget as The Locomotions play familiar favourites.

CHAN MALI CHAN OI OI!

It was joget, ronggeng and twist for Nyonya Mary Lee of The Peranakan Voices

Eager to put up a good show, our choir, The Peranakan Voices (TPV), arrived early at the TPAS D&D. When our turn came, we started off with a *Nona-Chan-Katong* medley which was well received by an appreciative crowd. The choir then sang two verses of the song *Baju Panjang* as an introduction to the hilarious skit by Wak Wak G. T. Lye and TPV member Nyonya Mabel Lee.

Our team fanned out across the room to rope in guests for a sing and dance session. Familiar classics like *Sayang Sayang*, *Enjoy Yourself*, *Forever and Ever*, and *Hi-Lili, Hi-Lo* evoked much nostalgia especially among the seniors. On occasions like this, the true Nyonya and Baba spirit of expressing joy in life clearly shone through.

Later on in the month, on Friday 10 December, TPV performed at the RSVP's (The Organisation of Senior Volunteers) Volunteers' Appreciation Night Dinner. The repertoire included *Teh Sama Kopi*, *Baju Panjang* and the Singapura Medley comprising *Geylang Sipaku*, *Geylang*, *Rasa Sayang*



and *Dayung Sampan*. Special mention must also be made of Mr Robert Fernando, who performed and exchanged witty banter with the audience.

The PVs charm guests with their songs.

The Peranakan Voices welcomes members who would like to join them! Please email pv@peranakan.org.sg for more information.

Would you like The Peranakan Voices to perform at your event or function? Please email The_Intan@hotmail.com. ❄

EVENTS

PANJANG PANJANG UMOR, PERSATUAN GUNONG SAYANG!

Baba Emeric Lau attends GSA's most glamorous do yet

Key members, supporters and associates partake in a symbolic 100th anniversary cake-cutting ceremony.

It was an evening of heartwarming 'live' musical entertainment, spontaneous line-dancing and joget at what Gunong Sayang Association's (GSA) President, Baba Victor Goh, appropriately termed the "jewel in the crown" of its centennial celebrations – GSA's 100th Anniversary Dinner and Dance on 20 November 2010. Despite a slightly late start and rumbling stomachs all round, Baba Victor made it a point to graciously thank GSA's many supporters and sponsors



Above: The Bibik Singers open the evening with a hearty rendition of GSA's theme song.

Right: Hosts K.T. and Ming, resplendent in their kebayas.

in a succinct but touching speech that kicked off the evening's revelry.

Held at the Hilton Hotel's Grand Ballroom, about 300 guests tucked into a sumptuous Chinese-style dinner surrounded by posters of stars from yesteryears that evoked the night's *Down Memory Lane* theme. Yet the mood was anything but sedate! GSA's resident Dendang Irama Band ensured a flow of lively music from



decades past, causing many guests to exclaim in delight, "Wah! I haven't heard this song since I was a little girl..."

GSA's members proved irrepressible as they lined up and took to the stage to serenade the ballroom with love songs and jazz standards. On the dance floor, numerous couples and groups of friends line-danced, waltzed and did the *joget* to their heart's content in between courses.

Indefatigable hosts K.T. and Ming kept the energy bubbling over as they greeted guests, outlined the programme and conducted the lucky draw. The warm ambience made for a most

enjoyable party. It was a fitting bash that reflected the dedication, passion and indeed *sayang* aplenty that all GSA members share in abundance.

*Selamat seratus taon, GSA – Congratulations on your first 100; here's to the next 100! **

EVENTS

WEE'S WONDER WOMEN

Baba Peter Lee reports on the launch of a book conceptualised by the wife and daughter of the late Wee Kim Wee

On Monday 15 November 2010 at the Raffles Hotel, a wonderful cross-section of Singaporeans came together to witness the launch of *Cooking for the President: Reflections and Recipes of Mrs Wee Kim Wee*, authored by Nyonya Wee Eng Hwa, the daughter of our beloved and late former President.

The event was graced by the presence of none other than President S.R. Nathan and Mrs Nathan. The book has so far raised over \$1 million for Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee Legacy Fund (which supports the institute's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information), as well as Girl Guides Singapore, Jamiyah Home for the Aged, Life Community Services Society and Trybe Limited (formerly Save the Children Singapore).

A constellation of Singapore's Who's Who, among whom were some rarely seen members of the political and social Old Guard, as well as ordinary Singaporeans from various walks of life attended this event.

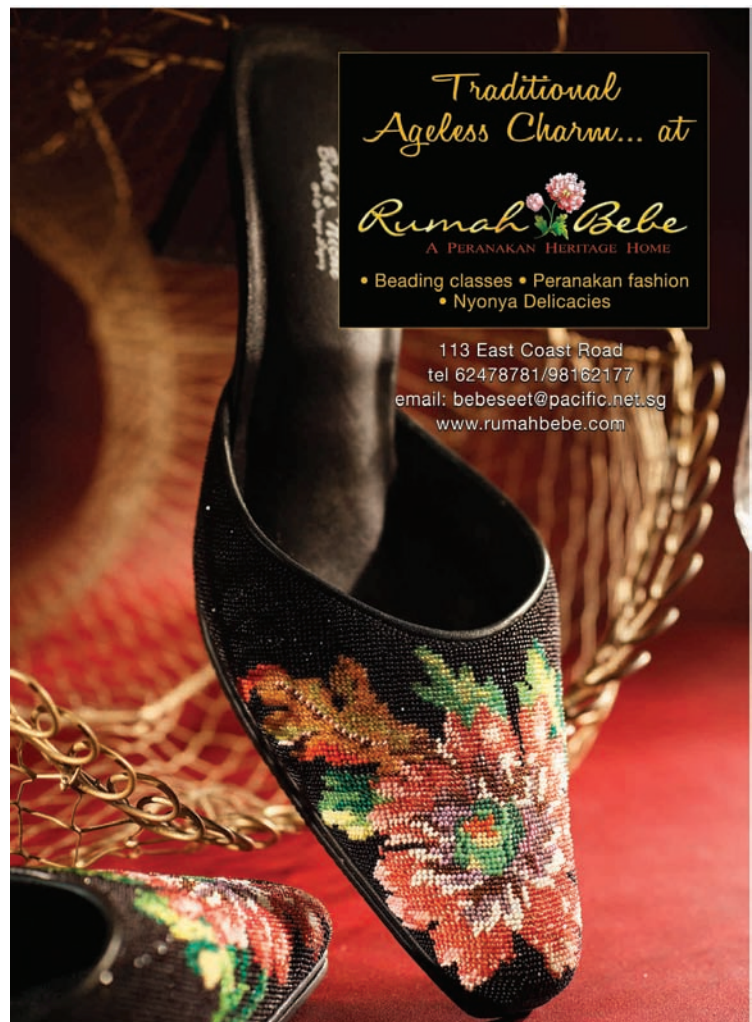
Nyonya Eng Hwa hosted the afternoon together with her mother and siblings, and managed to radiate the special charm so characteristic of her father President Wee, by making such an important occasion feel like a warm and intimate family gathering.

Some Association members came forward to support the book with substantial donations, including Mrs Anastasia Liew (Bengawan Solo), Dr Lee Suan Yew, Ms Agnes Tan Kim Lwi and Mrs Lee Li-ming. The afternoon ended with Peranakan high tea and a book sale, both of which had enthusiastic responses. ✽



Mrs Wee Kim Wee (in wheelchair) with her daughter Wee Eng Hwa, Anastasia Liew (holding the book) and President Nathan at the book launch.

Photographs courtesy of Nanyang Technological University.



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BEYOND JUST MAIN MAIN (PLAY PLAY)

Main Wayang looks ahead confidently as a viable performing and outreach group

The Main Wayang Company (TMWC) has grown from strength to strength, now maturing into its seventh year! Since it began in 2004, the performing group has successfully garnered more active volunteers and youth participation for events big and small.

2011 looks all set for an even more diverse range of renewed activities and a series of cultural exchanges locally and overseas.

Its focus for 2011 is to reach out to a greater, wider community through a series of innovative programmes and collaborative events, culminating in a major musical revue concert at the end of the year, all in the spirit of promoting and keeping relevant the unique Peranakan culture and heritage.

Already in the pipeline are private bookings for *toa seh jit* birthday parties in January, wedding pageants and overseas cultural exchange shows in April, and the *Anak Anak* (Children's) Peranakan



Workshops from May to June. TMWC's School Outreach Programmes will coincide with Heritage Month in July. Possibly in August, it will launch its fourth music CD and then it is more overseas cultural exchange events in September and the year-end musical revue in November.

Artistic Director Baba Richard Tan said, "*Kita sudah ada banyak kreja kat sini.* (We already have a very busy year ahead.) I would like to thank our active MW Kakis & Kawans (volunteers) and our faithful and ardent supporters all these years for believing in us, and in making our Peranakan dreams come true.

"While we keep the old and traditional, we will also explore and evolve fresh new ways for the future. Together, we can unite and transform our Baba culture and heritage into a vibrant and relevant modern lifestyle for the world to appreciate." ✱

Our Taiwanese client (standing, in baju panjang with sanggul) was game enough to dress up as the bibik for the day!



A very lively showcase of the Peranakan wedding pageant at the APEC Summit at the Esplanade, Singapore in 2009.



Our budding young performers at the Chingay Festival.



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HITTING IT OFF IN YOKOHAMA

TPAS member Chie Iwasaki revels in the popularity of Peranakan culture at the APEC Japan Summit

The APEC Japan Summit 2010 last November was an excellent opportunity to showcase to the Japanese a relatively undiscovered Singapore attraction - the Peranakan culture.

The Singapore booth at the Summit was undoubtedly one of the most popular booths. The various APEC member countries showed off their own unique cultures at a six-day exhibition at the Akarenga Souko, a converted warehouse.

Among the Peranakan exhibits were antiques, replicas of nyonya ware and pairs of *kasot manek*. Visitors could purchase the beautiful embroidered items. The live demonstrations on kebaya embroidery and Peranakan beading attracted many visitors. Many people were intrigued by the sight of a Japanese lady doing the beading. She was Ms Mikiko Shigemori, who had studied the craft when she was living in Singapore. *



Japanese schoolgirls were fascinated by the skill shown in creating intricate kebaya embroidery (sulam).

STRUTTING OUR STUFF

Baba David Neo does his bit to promote the culture academically

The word 'thrilled' was truly an understatement when I learned that I was one of only 11 selected across Australia for the three-day Cultural Research Network (CRN) Masterclass hosted by the University of Queensland (UQ).

Last September, amidst the madness of teaching and making the final amendments to my PhD, I said to myself, "I have nothing to lose, I will just send in a proposal to look at the material culture of the Peranakans". I thought nothing of it after that. As I am trying to branch into research on the Peranakans as a way of giving back to the culture academically, this coveted seat was a perfect opportunity.

The masterclass from 29 November to 1 December 2010 was to be conducted by Professor of Anthropology at University College London, Daniel Miller, whose expertise is in material culture. His recent book, *Stuff*, published in 2010, engages with material culture and analyses clothing, among other things. His description of how the *sari* wears the Indian woman was most intriguing!

Lugging my books on the Peranakans to Brisbane, I also decided to don a *baju lok chuan*, *kerosang sarong* and my Tio^h Kong's *kasot jong* to show off our rich material culture as I did my presentation. Prof Miller had not encountered a Peranakan before!

He was fascinated with the aesthetics, colours and truly hybrid nature of the culture. He found the colours of the mourning period intriguing (black, white, blue and green) as well as the appropriation of pearls and jade into nyonya jewellery that relegates them to a lower status when they are the most prized precious materials to the Chinese.

The workshop was eclectic. It looked at topics from Australian feminist memorabilia to Filipino nationalism and religious iconography. Not only did I enjoy Brisbane and networking with my peers, it opened up prospects and perspectives for further Peranakan research. It was my first time in Brisbane and taking the ferry each morning to UQ was glorious – we all commented that we could certainly deal with travelling to work like this every day.

Prof Miller was especially encouraging in reassuring us of the value of our work, for which we fledgling researchers are all profoundly grateful. *



Materials from the rich Peranakan culture that were presented at Prof Daniel Miller's masterclass at UQ.

EVENTS

HERITAGE GOES TO THE GRASSROOTS



Peter Wee showing the everyday items in a Peranakan household.

An intimate but keen crowd gathered at the Joo Chiat CC Theatre on 17 December 2010, for a talk on the Peranakan Heritage by our TPAS President, Baba Peter Wee. Over 90 minutes, he shared many aspects of the everyday lives most Peranakans led.

Baba Peter also brought with him several household items including a child's patchwork quilt and a *sireh* set from his personal collection of artifacts. While these modest items appear to pale when compared to the more dazzling items such as



the embroidered *kebaya*s and beadwork that Peranakans are renowned for, they were nonetheless made with much care and could stand a lifetime of use.

The evening also featured a performance by The Peranakan Voices and concluded with simple refreshments. This event is another in a series of ongoing collaborations and initiatives that TPAS is jointly organising with the Joo Chiat CC Peranakan Interest group. ✱

A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES

Peranakan beaded items, silver, early photographs, out-of-print books, advertising signs, clocks, cameras, tin toys and many more exciting finds



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SINGAPORE'S NYONYA

Nyonya Ch'ng Kim See pays tribute to the extraordinary Nyonya Kwa Geok Choo

Mrs Lee Kuan Yew, nee Kwa Geok Choo, was born on 21 December 1920 and died on 2 October 2010, a little more than three months short of her 90th birthday. She had suffered and recovered from her first stroke in 2003, only to be struck down by a series of attacks in 2008, leaving her in a vegetative state.

A woman of extraordinary qualities, Mrs Lee exemplified the proverbial 'woman behind the successful man'. It is evident from the hundreds of eulogies published since her demise, accounts from family members and admission by her husband, Minister Mentor (MM) Mr Lee Kuan Yew, that Mrs Lee walked softly but wielded the baton on the domestic front as well as in her legal profession. She was the indispensable partner to MM Lee.

Indeed, Mrs Lee embodied the qualities of a typical nyonya brought up to be strong and able to take on the challenge of raising a family and providing steadfast support to the husband. The nyonya mother and wife is accomplished and endowed with all the necessary virtues of quiet talents and sobriety, staying in the background, holding her peace but intervening ever so subtly when the occasion demands it. This was Mrs Lee who, brought up in a conservative Peranakan family, was understated and unassuming. Yet beneath this veneer was a brilliant, exceptional and tough woman.

Mrs Lee married MM Lee 'secretly' in 1947 when both were studying law at Cambridge



*Mrs Lee Kuan Yew
nee Kwa Geok Choo,
1920 – 2010.*

University. She had been awarded the coveted Queen's Scholarship. After both obtained first class honours in Law, they returned to Singapore and remarried 'openly' in 1950. In 1955, the couple, together with MM Lee's late brother, Mr Dennis Lee Kim Yew, set up the law firm Lee and Lee. Mrs Lee remained a founding and senior partner until she semi-retired in the 1990s, becoming its consultant.

She ran a tight ship, avoiding non-deserving or potentially scandalous cases. She eschewed influence-peddling, especially with government departments, so that Lee and Lee was beyond

reproach. Mrs Lee's gainful employment allowed MM Lee to leave the firm to focus full-time on politics in 1959.

Three children were born: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 1952, Dr Lee Wei Ling, Director, Institute of Neurological Science, in 1955 and Mr Lee Hsien Yang, Chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore, in 1957. They have one granddaughter and six grandsons.

Although Mrs Lee worked full-time at Lee and Lee, she managed to strike a perfect work-life balance. She did not socialise, but reserved all her lunches for

*A perfect union of
two brilliant minds.*



IN MEMORIAM

her children when they came home from school. She would go home early to have dinner with them and to help them with their homework. Although she would dote on the children, and later the grandchildren, she was a strict disciplinarian and would not spare the rod, though infrequently. She took particular care of the family's diet, opting for fish, vegetables and fruits.

Mrs Lee led by example. She advised the children to live an honest and honourable life, and to be egalitarian in their outlook. Also, she had a love for European classics, literature and philosophy. Her interest in botany was credited for the lush landscape in the Istana where MM Lee has an office, and where the family would spend many leisure hours in the gardens, playing sports, games and swimming.

As a companion to MM Lee, Mrs Lee was often seen at his side, but always unobtrusive, discreet and gentle. However, she was known to have politely chided her husband whenever he was too demanding of and impatient with his staff, and smoothening

their feathers when they were treated too harshly. Her dignified behaviour and non-intrusive attitude was the role model for all political spouses to follow.

All told, it was indeed a tough act for any married working woman to emulate. But Mrs Lee seemed to have performed it effortlessly. Determined and having made a commitment that she would not let her legal training and mind go to waste, she simultaneously fulfilled her duties as an involved mother, and a supportive and intellectual wife.

Mrs Lee was called upon at various critical moments by MM Lee to draft important documents, one of which was the water agreement appended to the separation agreement with Malaysia. She edited his speeches, tightening them with simple direct sentences, replacing his convoluted style. She would sit up with him till four o'clock in the morning when he drafted his memoirs (two volumes of 'The Singapore Story') and held 'endless arguments' with him on points of facts and style.

Mrs Lee travelled with her husband on official and unofficial trips, selected his clothing and packed his luggage. She would stay behind in the hotel until he had left for his appointments in case he needed something, and waited for him to return in the evenings so that he could brief her on his day. Poignantly, in her last two years when she was incapacitated, she would wait up for him to recount his day and read her favourite poems.

MM Lee sought her counsel often not only in politics, but on the ways of the world. Mrs Lee had an uncanny ability to judge character, and was prescient in her pronouncements about events. Anecdotal accounts testify to Mrs Lee's negative opinion of political personalities that was borne out, and that the merger with Malaysia would not last.

Mrs Lee was the quintessential wife, mother, grandmother and the grande dame of Singapore. She had a strong influence on MM Lee, their children and grandchildren. She quietly and effectively devoted her whole life to her husband, MM Lee, and to her three successful children, one of whom is serving as Singapore's Prime Minister.

Nyonya Kwa Geok Choo truly lived a life of service. *



Mrs Lee doted on her children and later, her grandchildren.



The devoted Peranakan couple, Minister Mentor and Mrs Lee Kuan Yew.

NOTICEBOARD

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THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

26 March, Saturday, 3.00 pm,
Ixora Room, Peranakan Museum, Armenian Street.
Strictly for members only.
Please call Mrs Lim Geok Huay at 65 62550704 for
enquiries.

WE WELCOME OUR NEW MEMBERS

Ms Agnes Choo Geok Chin
Ms May Lee Siu Cheng
Ms Bernadette Low Yan Fen
Mdm Gloria Ng Kheng Imm
Mr Vincent Song Jianliang
Ms Janice Yap

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Our deepest sympathies to the family of our member
who has passed on:
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MUSEUMS



Peranakan Museum. See the world's first national Peranakan Museum with the most comprehensive and finest collection of Peranakan artefacts. Be delighted by the vibrant and colourful culture of the Babas and Nyonyas. Singapore's newest 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.

Peranakan Museum, 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941.

website: www.peranakanmuseum.sg

Email: nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg

Tel: 6332 2982.

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 at 157 Neil Road opened on 4 September 2008. Go back in time to 1928 and experience what a grand Peranakan terraced house would have been like. Owned by the Wee family (whose ancestor

Wee Bin was a mid-19th century shipping magnate) since 1910, the house was sold in 2005 to the National University of Singapore and is now run by NUS Museum. Funds for the purchase and restoration were donated by Agnes Tan, in memory of her father Tun Tan Cheng Lock. *Baba House 157 Neil Road, Singapore.*

Tel: 62275731. Visits are by guided tours.

Please call the house for details.

<http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html>

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

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555,

Tel: 6332 2982, Opening Hours: 9am to 7pm

(Tuesdays to Saturdays), 1pm to 7pm (Mondays).

Admission \$8 (adults), \$4 (senior citizens and students). <http://www.acm.org.sg>

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/ddsb/blair/study/Blair.html.

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



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

Peranakan restaurants in the neighbourhood. *http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what_to_see/suburban_living/katong.html. <http://www.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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