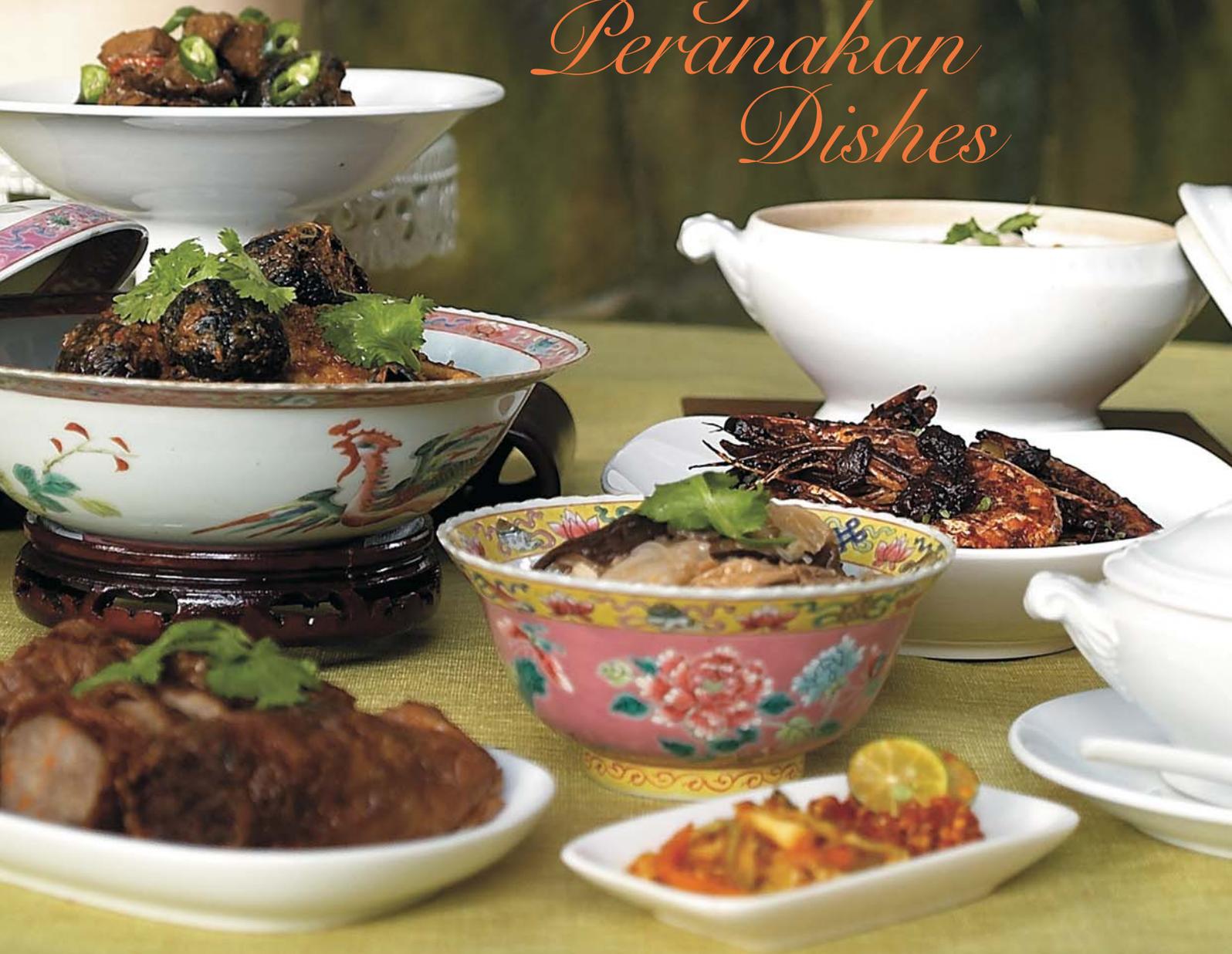




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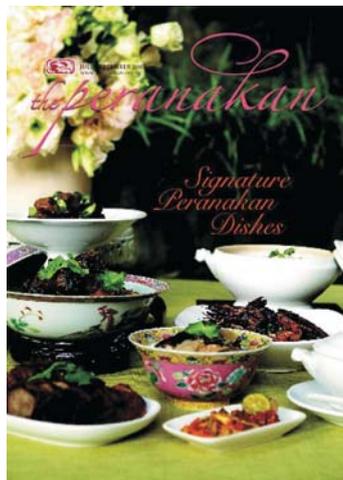
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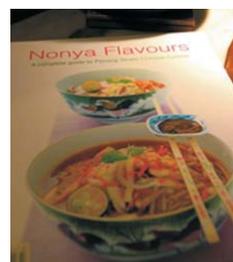
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**P**eranakan cuisine is one of the defining elements of our complex culture. Its scents and flavours express our historical links with China, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain. They evoke especially our memories and feelings about our families, triggering off feelings good and bad, about love, intrigue, indulgent matriarchs and other older relations, favouritism, superstitions and arcane beliefs, home remedies for ailments physical and mental, and of extravagance and excess as well as want and privation.

Food is so much part of the soul, and often nothing gets closer than comfort food. For my father, that will always be a plate of steaming rice, topped with a fried egg doused in treacly, black *tau-yu* or soya sauce and garnished with fresh green *chilli patah* (green chillies snapped into pieces by hand, and not cut with a knife). It was his favourite lunch prepared when he was a young boy by the family Hainanese *chongpoh* (chef) Ah See.

In the family especially among the women folk, food and the providing of it was of course an expression of love, and many Babas and Nyonyas will have their stories about the loving preparation of meals by the family matriarch. In a darker sense, food at home was also used to impose rank and status within the family – favourites had the choice bits, the rest ate at what was left over. Food was used to remember the deceased and to celebrate religious events, and was presented as offerings of elaborate meals. Special dishes, pastries and menus marked not only life-cycle rituals concerning birth, marriage and death, they also marked the seasons of the calendar, such as the *kueh chang* during the fifth month and the *kueh ee* during the winter solstice. With regard to the special new year *kueh bakol*, there are amusing anecdotes told to me by my elders about the extent to which some bibiks went in order to produce the perfect cake (midnight nudity and all).

Food is such an unending topic of discussion, so it is not surprising we have so many stories for this issue. Firstly we have Noreen Chan's investigations about what constitutes the archetypal Peranakan meal. With so much to order, her findings certainly help to solve the confusion when one looks at or plans a menu.

As a common complaint about Peranakan food is about the excessive inclusion of fatty meat and coconut milk, we attempt to create some balance with articles on vegetarian alternatives by Gavin Ooi and Ee Sin Soo. A wine enthusiast, Wong Adlena Radzie, presents interesting recommendations on how to pair Peranakan dishes with suitable wines. Christopher Lim takes us on an insider's tour of Penang's hawker stalls, especially those serving Peranakan-influenced dishes. Chan Eng Thai highlights an important and increasingly neglected part of dining — good manners at the table.

In our chronicles section we have two important contributions. The eminent William Gwee Thian Hock remembers his granduncle, Koh Hoon Teck, the pioneer of Baba publishing, and author of several works in Baba Malay. Norman Cho records his family's memories about growing up in Joo Chiat and the colourful characters that frequented the neighbourhood.

Finally we have reports on the many events taking place in Singapore, Malaysia and even Australia, showing how great the interest has become in Peranakan culture and heritage.

We hope this issue will awaken all your senses in the same manner as a wonderful Peranakan meal. As Chan Eng Thai would insist I should say before you turn the next page, "dear readers, *makan, eh?*"

**Peter Lee**

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## SAMAK BUKAN SAMA

The April-June issue of *The Peranakan* makes interesting reading. Kindly permit me to discuss a point regarding a *panton* in Tan Kuning's article 'At The Parties'.

I refer to the *panton*:  
*Kulit lembu chelop sama*  
*Mari di buat tapak kasot*  
*Harta dunia jangan tamak*  
*Kalu mati tidak di-ikot*

You will notice that the last word in line 1 (*sama*) does not rhyme with the last word of line 3 (*tamak*) when it actually should. This has been probably due to either typing or printing omission. The last word in line 1 should have been *samak*.

To us Babas & the Malay people, *samak* refers to *buah samak*, the persimmon fruit. Babas also refer to this fruit as *pisang kaki*.

To the Malay people, *samak* also refers to the bark of a mangrove plant used for tanning raw hide into leather. I was introduced to *samak* bark by a Malay friend about 33 years ago when he learned about my younger son's passion for kite fighting at that time. According to him, soaking the thread for kite flying in *samak* solution followed by lacing the thread with glass powder will improve the 'cutting' quality of the thread during kite fighting. He obtained the bark from Pulau Tekong's mangrove swamp for me but, frankly, my son and I did not detect any appreciable improvement in the glass-laced thread after the *samak* treatment.

Incidentally, my younger son was about 7 years old at that time and he was unofficially considered a very good kite fighter after having time and again cut the kites of Dr Armstrong, the then legendary kite fighting King. Who taught my son all about kite fighting, and even prepared the glass-laced thread for him? Not me, but my mother! If you read my book *A Nonya Mosaic* you will understand how my mother became an 'expert' in kite fighting.

**William Gwee Thian Hock**

Editor's note: The typographical error was the editor's and not the author's. *Pisang kaki* is literally the 'kaki banana'. *Kaki*, interestingly, is the Japanese term for persimmon.

## JINGGLING JEWELS

Many thanks for producing the 'Glossary of Peranakan Jewellery Terms' in the last issue of *The Peranakan*. Reading the glossary brought back many warm memories of my childhood, when many Peranakan women were constantly bedecked with jewellery for daily wear, for special occasions and even during mourning. I would like to share some of my knowledge, which I hope will add to the understanding of the glossary.

The glossary mentioned the *gelang jingle*, and the explanation was 'see *gelang tengkat*'.

Why is the *gelang jingle* also the *gelang tengkat*? The *gelang jingle* is a gold bangle that is thin and hard, shaped like a rubber band. Because the *gelang* is thin, it is hardly ever worn singly; there would be at least two *gelangs*, sometimes up to five or even six. When the *gelangs* rubbed against one another, they would give out a jingling sound!

Another type of gold *gelang* popular with Peranakans was the *gelang mair ikat rotan*. Literally translated, it means 'twisted rattan bangle', although it would be more accurate to describe the bangle as a band of twisted ropes.

The ear stud with a claw setting, mentioned in the glossary, can also be called the *kerabu ikat ramay*. Such a setting is in stark contrast to the *kerabu mata satu*, the solitaire ear stud.

The *kerosang tuaha* was noted in the glossary as one of the many different types of kerosangs. In the old days, the mourning period lasted two calendar years (although the term is *tuaha tiga taon*, mourning for three years). It is like adding a year to a person's age according to the Confucian and Taoist way of calculation. During this time, wearing of gold ornaments was disallowed. Thus, jewellery during the mourning period (*barang barang tuaha*) had to be set in silver. They came in the form of plain silver-ornaments (*barang barang perak*), pearls set in silver (*barang barang mutiara ikat perak*) and jade set in silver (*barang barang gek ikat perak*). This led to items such as the *kerosang perak*, *kerosang mutiara ikat perak* and *kerosang gek ikat perak*.

Jade items set in gold were also popular for daily wear. Such ornaments (*barang barang gek ikat mair*), served as cheaper alternatives to *intan* and *bellian*. Pearl items set in gold were widely worn too. Common items included the pearl ring (*chinchin mutiara*), pearl pendant (*loket mutiara*) and the pearl ear-rings (*anting anting mutiara*). Interestingly however, it was rare to see the pearl *kerosang* set in gold.

Some jewellery pieces were even given pet names, such as *kerosang Mama* or *Grandma's kerosang*, with only family members and close friends knowing what that really was! Perhaps some of the older readers might have memories of Peranakan jewellery to share too.

**Tan Kuning**

## MORE JEWELS!

You did a good job for the glossary of jewels. May I contribute some terms from a Malacca perspective:

Wedding earrings are known as *olek* only (not *olek olek*). They can be set with *intan* or *yakut* stones as well, and are mostly chandelier drop earrings.

For bracelets and bangles there is also the *gelang papan*, a stiff bangle with stones set in a row or two.

There is also the *bunga sunting*, filigree flowers, set *en tremblant*, protruding from the temples of the bride.

A particular men's jewel is the *kepala kopiah* — a filigree or solid gold hat finial often embedded with *intan* or *bellian* for the bridegroom's cap.

The *rantay panjang* is a long gold or gilt silver chain worn by the bride.

Mourning or *tuaha* accessories especially with pearls in silver are known as *barang mutiara*, and include *kerosang mutiara*, *kerabu mutiara*, etc. Similarly ornaments with jade are referred to as *barang gek*.

The *semat rambut* is a hairpin especially the one with the central side spike which slid into the base of the chignon. They came in pairs or single pieces.

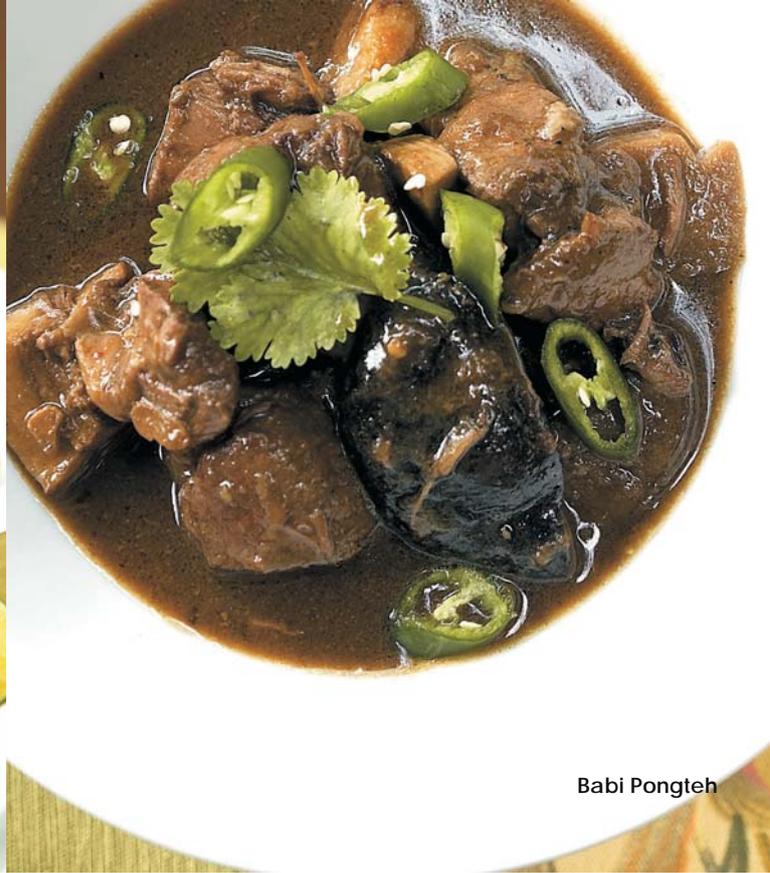
The *bunga tanjong* is of a floral shape with slightly curved or rounded petals, mostly seen in earrings and rings\*, and is different from the *bintang*, or star shape which has pointed ends.

**Cedric Tan**  
 Malacca

\*This shape is often referred to as a 'cluster' in Western jewellery terminology.



Ayam Buah Keluak



Babi Pongteh

# *Mari Makan—Let's Feast!*

*A Spread of signature Peranakan Dishes*

By Noreen Chan



Nyonya Chapchai



Itek Tim

While the days of the classic *tok panjang* (literally 'long table' in Malay) are past, Peranakan families continue to celebrate special occasions with the serving and sharing of food. When I was asked to suggest a *tok panjang* menu for this magazine, I thought long and hard about how to approach it. How do you choose? Should it be based on popularity, or rarity, or uniqueness? That in turn led me to a survey of Peranakan cookbooks to see what dishes were featured most frequently. From my selection of Singapore and Malaysian publications – not comprehensive of course, but hopefully representative – I compiled a list of 'popular' dishes. Then – since it is the author's prerogative – I added a few dishes because I think they are truly typical of Peranakan cuisine.

Others may disagree, but my own rules for planning a menu would be the following:

1. The dishes are meant to be eaten with rice, therefore no 'one-dish meals' like *nasi lemak* or *mee siam*, as they would distract from the spread.
2. There should be a variety and balance of dishes, both meat and vegetable, spicy and non-spicy, dry and gravy; a soup of some kind is important. But beware the temptation of 'the more, the merrier'; too many dishes will be overwhelming for your guests.
3. If it is a birthday celebration, then festive dishes like *mee sua tow* (or any noodle dish to signify longevity) should be included.
4. After such a heavy meal, dessert should not be kueh kueh (which are more for teatime anyway), but instead a variety of cut fruits or at the most, with the addition of a dessert like *bubor pulot hitam*.

Peranakan cooking is sometimes difficult to characterise because it is a fusion cuisine with many influences. Dishes like *chapchai* and *itek tim* (or *kiamchai arp*) have clear Chinese origins, as would many Peranakan dishes with pork. *Nangka masak lemak* (young jackfruit in spicy coconut gravy), *nasi ulam* (herbal rice) and *mee siam* would be recognisable to any Malay, and the *Nonya curry ayam* is very similar to a Madras curry. In fact my Koh Poh in Malacca used to make her own curry powder and always had it ground in an Indian shop along Wolferton Road; we would bring the ingredients in a tin tub and carry home the freshly ground powder in the same receptacle, sneezing all the way back! Then we would carefully pack used ketchup bottles with the golden powder,

and I would get some to bring home to Singapore.

So what would my dream menu be like? I'm going to assume we have at least twenty to thirty guests and a small army of cooks. The diners would be a mixed lot, some true blue Peranakans who would view every morsel critically, as well as those unfamiliar with the hidden treasures of our cuisine. The menu would be similarly mixed, with well-known classics jostling with rarities, a spread representing the range and depth of influences that have enriched our food and our culture.

And like *tok panjang* gatherings of old, the eating would be in relays, with the seniors going first, followed by the younger generations. The food would be replenished as supplies ran

low, and the meal liberally seasoned with conversation and laughter. If it was a very important occasion, then we would have a band, so that there would be *dondang sayang* and *joget*. And we would be well fed in all respects, filling not just our stomachs but also our senses, hearts and memories.

#### The Menu:

**Starters :** *ngor hiang* (or *lorbak*) and *hati babi bungkus* (minced pork and liver balls). If it's a large crowd, one can add *otak-otak*; I prefer the steamed version known in Indonesia as *blotok*, or, if you have the requisite herbs, *pais ikan* or *udang* (steamed banana leaf parcels of fish or prawn with a variety of *puchot* or young herbs such as *daon kunyit*, *kadok* and *buas-buas*).

**Condiments/pickles :** *Nonya achar*, *sambal belimbing* or *sambal penchuri*, of course *sambal belachan*.

**Vegetables :** *Nonya chapchai*, *sambal timun*, *masak titek* (papaya, tauhu or bamboo shoot);

**Soup :** Anyone of the four classic Peranakan soups – *itek tim*, *hee piow soup*, *pong tauhu* or *bakwan kepiting*. Choice depends on what else is on the menu, and personal preference.

**Main Courses (meat and seafood) :** *ayam buah keluak*, *udang masak pedas nanas*; *ikan masak gulai*; *babi pongteh*; *ayam* or *itek sioh*.

If there is a feeling that there are too many *laok kuah* (gravy dishes), the seafood can be replaced by *udang goreng asam* (fried tamarind prawns) and/or fried fish e.g. *goreng ikan sumbat chilli* (fish, usually *ikan selar* or wolf mackerel, stuffed with *rempah* and fried).

**Dessert :** *chendol* (no durian and no red beans please), *bubor pulot hitam* – one cold, one hot dessert for guests to choose from. Alternatives include the Malacca specialty *tai bak*, or *bubor terigu*, or *apom berkuah*.



Ngor Hiang



Otak Otak



Udang Goreng Asam



Ayam Buah Keluak



Bakwan Kepiting, Itek Tim

**Notes on featured dishes:**

**Hati babi bungkus.** In my family we called them 'sweethearts', these small balls of minced pork and chopped liver, flavoured with ground coriander seed, and wrapped in pig's caul. Nice to eat, but not nice to make. It was a slow and tedious process. The pig liver had to be finely diced and lightly steamed, then mixed with minced pork and flavourings, shaped and wrapped in pieces of caul (which itself had to be thoroughly cleaned) to be steamed. Just before eating, the balls were browned quickly in hot oil, and served up with pickled shredded *luak chai* (mustard leaf). No wonder it was seen as a special treat.

**Pong Tauhu.** This soup dish has Chinese roots, even though it is very typically Peranakan. I used to help my grandmother and mother make the balls of mashed *taukwa* (beancurd) and minced pork. We flavoured these with salt, pepper and fried minced garlic; I remember Mama (grandmother) would save the oil used to fry the garlic, and rub her palms with them to prevent the balls from sticking. She would gently throw the balls against the tabletop to firm up the texture. We always lightly fried the balls first and let them cool, so that when they were later added to the soup, they would not expand or break up. Sometimes we couldn't wait and would sneak a few away to enjoy with *sambal belachan*!

**Masak Titek.** This dish is based on *rempah titek*, the quartet of chilli, *belachan*, *buah keras* (candlenuts) and *bawang merah* (shallots) that is also known as *rempah chilli bawang*. The *rempah* or ground spice mix is slowly and gently fried, before a prawn-based stock is added. The final touch is some *kiam hu kut* or salted fish bone, and not just any salted fish, but the *ikan kurau* variety that many aficionados buy from Penang. The common variations of this classic Peranakan dish are barely ripe papaya, bamboo shoot or *tauhu* (soft beancurd, usually with minced pork balls). Not quite a soup, not quite a stew, nonetheless the gravy is light enough to *hirop kuah* (slurp the gravy).

**Ayam / itek / babi sioh.** If there ever was a Peranakan cuisine Hall of Fame, this dish would be inducted immediately. The *keluak* (*kluwek*) nut – the fruit of the *kepayang* tree or *Pangium edule* – is little known outside its native Indonesia, and even there it is used in *rawon*, a beef stew. Nobody knows how this unattractive nut – which is poisonous unless treated by burying in volcanic ash – came to be transformed into this rich alluring mix of flavours, but it is an innovation for which we are forever grateful.

**Ayam / itek / babi sioh.** This dish is interesting



Chendol

for several reasons. It employs two cooking methods – slow braising then frying (or grilling) – which we see in Malay or Indonesian chicken dishes like *opor ayam*. It also makes liberal use of ground coriander seed or *ketumbar*, a spice that features strongly in classic Peranakan favourites like *kueh chang babi* and *hati babi bungkus*. Fussy cooks would dry roast the coriander seeds themselves before grinding, as stale or 'old' seeds would either have no fragrance, or worse, have *bau apak* (have a musty smell).

**Chendol.** This dessert has Indonesian connections and some would dispute whether it is truly a Peranakan dessert at all. While a few families - mine included - made their own *chendol*, many others would buy it from a roadside vendor. Be that as it may, this cold dessert has become firmly associated with Peranakan cuisine. One can hardly pass through Malacca nowadays without seeing a sign advertising *chendol*, or one of its varieties like *durian chendol* or 'eight treasures' *chendol*.

The 'true' Peranakan *chendol* does not have red beans or other furbelows, just *chendol*, coconut milk and the best gula Malacca you can find. The green colour should come from a combination of three kinds of leaves, *daon pandan* (*Pandanus amaryfolius* or screwpine), *daon pandan serani* (a small-leaved variety) and *daon puchot manis*. The flour mixture should contain green bean flour (*tepong hoon kway*) which gives the right consistency, described as *kenyal*, or having a certain firmness, and will not become brittle even after a few days in the refrigerator. †

**Cookbooks surveyed:**

- 1 *Mrs Lee's Cookbook*, by Mrs Lee Chin Koon, edited by Mrs Pamela Lee Suan Yew, foreword by Mr Wee Kim Wee, Eurasia Press, Singapore, 1974.
- 2 *The New Mrs Lee's Cookbook*, updated by Shermay Lee, Times Editions, Singapore, 2003
- 3 *The Best of Singapore Cooking*, by Mrs Leong Yee Soo, Times Books International, 1988
- 4 *Nonya Specialties (The Best of Singapore's Recipes)*, by Mrs Leong Yee Soo, Times Editions, Singapore, 2004.
- 5 *Irene's Peranakan Recipes*, by Elaine Yeo, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2007
- 6 *Ways of the Matriarch Cookbook*, Marshall Cavendish, Singapore, 2005.
- 7 *Secrets of Nonya Cooking*, by Florence Tan, Times Editions, Singapore, 2001.
- 8 *Nonya Flavours. A complete guide to Penang Straits Chinese Cuisine*, by the ladies of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang, Star Publications, Penang, 2003.
- 9 *Nonya Favourites*, by Lee Geok Boi, Periplus Mini Cookbooks, Singapore, 2001.

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# THE WORLD ACCORDING TO A VEGETARIAN PERANAKAN

By Gavin Ooi

*“...The central question about vegetarian diets used to be whether it was healthy to eliminate meat and other animal foods. Now, however, the main question has become whether it is healthier to be vegetarian than to be a meat eater. The answer to both questions, based on currently available evidence, seems to be yes...”*

Jane E. Brody  
New York Times News Service

When I was first asked to write this article, I asked myself, what am I getting into? Take a flip through the many different Peranakan recipe books, you would be hard pressed to find any true vegetarian dishes, that is, until one reaches the desserts sections of most of these books. Even our *sambal kangkong* in all its variations has *belachan* in it, which is essentially made from prawn (for those who don't know). So I thought, as a start, I should share what I know about being a vegetarian.

## Do we really know what is good for us?

Most of us would profess to know where to get the best food or who cooks the best dishes. But very few of us are true counsels to our own body. If we asked our body what it liked, you would be surprised that meat is not top of the list. Which brings us to the central question — is the human body better suited to a vegetarian diet or one that includes meat? Let's start with the basics. We humans lack the sharp, scissors-action like teeth of most carnivores to shear and tear meat. Our teeth, with its flat molars, are designed for grinding and chewing like all herbivores on this planet. Even when we have any kind of food in our mouths, we tend to grind and chew it first before swallowing. Carnivores tear and swallow the meat whole.

Nothing about our human anatomy says we ought to go out and eat meat. Instead of sharp claws, our hands with their opposable thumbs are best suited for harvesting fruits

and vegetables than killing prey. Our intestinal/digestive tract is far too long for the consumption of meat. The average adult has an intestinal/digestive tract that is usually 27 to 29 feet long. It is interesting to note that the lion has a relatively short gut (on average 8 feet long). Meat simply does not stay in the body very long. Our stomach's hydrochloric acids tend to be 20 times less strong than those of the carnivore. What this means is that the meat stays in our body too long and causes poisonous wastes to be produced within the body. Subsequently, our bodies are poisoned and under stress from trying to dispel the poisonous waste. This in turns leads to other complications. There are ample information and papers that state that the root cause of many diseases and cancers is the high meat diet. This is just the very tip of the iceberg concerning the one activity that we do daily beside drinking water. It doesn't take rocket science for one to recognise these truths. And it is never too late to have a vegetarian meal. Just make it your next meal. This issue, I thought I would talk about the little known facts of the green papaya.

## Go Green

Did you know that the green unripe papaya is a natural digestive aid? “Of course it is you may say, after all everyone knows that papayas are great for digestion”. Well that is almost correct. Very few of us realise that there are two very important enzymes found in papayas: papain



## ■ FOOD FEATURE ■

powerful digestive actions and are most concentrated when the fruit is picked green. As the fruit ripens, the enzymes dissipate. Hence, ripe papayas contain very little or none of these enzymes at all! That is why an unripe papaya is a much more effective digestive and regulatory aid than a ripe papaya. In addition to this, evidence also suggests that eating unripe papaya regularly minimises the formation of stomach ulcers. So remember, if you want to get the full benefits of the papaya, go green. While still on the vine, the papaya's enzyme concentration increases, reaching its peak levels when the fruit is fully-grown and before it ripens.

The powerful effects of the papain and chymonpapain enzymes found in unripe papaya together with the full range of phytonutrients delivers a powerful and effective natural digestive combination. The enzymes are stable in the same range of acidity as the human gastric environment (1.0 to 1.8 pH). Unripe papaya is a natural and powerful tool with which we can use to regulate and improve the digestive system. †

### Why are Enzymes important?

Enzymes are the catalytic 'sparks' of life found in all living beings. They are responsible for digestion, transportation and transformation of nutrients and also conduct energy to the cells, tissues and systems of living beings. Vitamins and minerals are known as coenzymes that assist the enzymes to carry out their important functions. Such supplements even need enzymes to be metabolized! Ill health and weaknesses are indicative of and evidence of low levels of enzymes. Even taking a breath requires enzymatic activity.

There is strong and compelling evidence that raising one's digestive enzyme levels can help restore balance to the immune system. Enzyme-rich sources tend to be fresh and raw. The current modern diet is far too enzyme deficient comprising food mostly cooked, stored, processed and preserved. When we eat the latter, the digestive and metabolic enzymes are depleted and our immune system is overworked. Eating enzyme rich food like unripe papaya can alleviate the strain on the internal organs, supply additional nutrients, and help restore balance to the body's enzyme levels.

### Famous Vegetarians

Sir Isaac Newton (Scientist), Steve Jobs ( Founder of Apple Computers), Vincent Van Gogh (Artist), Plutarch (Philosopher), Ralph Waldo Emerson (Poet), Albert Einstein (Scientist), Benjamin Franklin (Scientist/President of the USA), George Bernard Shaw (Playwright), HG Wells (Author), Henry Ford (Founder of Ford Motors), John Wesley (Founder of the Methodist Church), Leonardo Da Vinci (Sculptor/Artist/Scientist), Mahatma Ghandi (Humanitarian), Billy Jean King (Tennis), Carl Lewis (Track), Gary Player (Golf), Martina Navratilova (Tennis).

Famous Peranakan Vegetarians - None

### GREEN PAPAYA SALAD

This is a popular but simple Thai salad with chilli-lemon dressing. Choose a hard, raw papaya with white flesh (green papaya). Even a slightly ripe papaya with orange flesh is not suitable for this salad. Add light soya sauce so that the salad is not discoloured. Serves 4-6 persons.

#### Salad

3 cups grated hard unripe papaya  
1 tomato (Cut into four pieces and deseeded, cut into small square pieces)  
1/2 cup tender green beans (french beans) blanched - slice finely

#### Dressing

1 teaspoon light soya sauce  
3 tablespoons lemon juice  
4 tablespoons Thai palm sugar syrup or to taste  
1/2 teaspoon red chilli flakes or fresh chilli padi to taste  
1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt or to taste

#### Garnish

1/4 cup roasted peanuts - crushed coarsely  
chinese parsley  
1/4 slices of Thai green lime

#### Method

Blend the dressing thoroughly and to taste. Toss the salad adding the dressing a bit at a time until both are thoroughly mixed. Last, transfer salad to a flat plate and sprinkle coarse nuts and Chinese parsley on top. Serve with slices of Thai green lime.

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# TEMPLE OF PERANAKAN CUISINE

Surprising dishes from a Penang nunnery

By Christopher Lim and Ee Sin Soo

Penang's Tai Guan Tong Nunnery is an oasis of culinary treasures and a favourite among devotees and visitors. It has an extensive, eclectic range of creative and delectable vegetarian dishes that blends Penang Peranakan and Hokkien influences, with specific menus for the various religious observances and celebrations. When we were recently invited by Ee Ee (the last remaining resident nun) for lunch there, it was with some skepticism that we accepted the invitation. We were not sure what to expect.

A characteristic of Chinese vegetarian food is the use of vegetable-based substitutes for well known meat dishes, and in local English parlance, the use of the word mock has become current. One therefore has *mock duck*, which is made from gluten, etc. Buddhist vegetarians renounce the killing of animals for food, but not the imitation of meat textures and flavours. Some vegetarians decry this principle as impure, but one supposes that to a Buddhist, if the act of killing has been avoided there is no sin or harm in making meat substitutes.

On a previous occasion, Ee Ee had also invited Baba Christopher Lim and the Youth Group of the State Chinese Penang Peranakan Association (Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang) to the nunnery for fried *bee hoon* with mock *sambal belachan* (the main ingredient of *belachan* being shrimp), mock pork curry, stir-fried mix vegetables, mock sweet and sour fish, mock ground pork winter melon soup, chilli *sambal* with *tauchio* (bean paste), and for dessert, papayas from the garden, *agar agar* and green bean soup. He assured me that it would be a delight to the senses for vegetarians and meat eater alike, and the 'back-to-basics' dining would be at its best in a huge and airy kitchen at a historic temple.

Choo Ee, the chief cook, prepared for us a feast: mock roast duck, mock omelette, *achar awak* (vegetable pickle, similar to our Nyonya *acha*), bola puffs (deep fried bean curd skin puffs), spring rolls, *chapchai* (mixed vegetables), *chai bueh* (salted vegetables), mock *muah yew kweh* (chicken in sesame

oil), mock *perot ikan* (sautéed fish stomach), mock sweet and sour chicken, and for dessert, *pek kweh* (gingko nut) soup with water chestnuts. Coming up with rich, flavourful dishes with minimal salt and oil did not come easy for Choo Ee. Choo Ee has been cooking with dedication and passion for years to perfect her recipes, using very basic pots and pans, and assisted by a few volunteers. She has created the ultimate vegetarian versions of many local dishes including *mee rebus* and *lam mee* (fried egg noodles akin to our Hokkien mee). One key to her success is the use of fresh, quality ingredients that are as appealing to the eye as they are to the palate.

Choo Ee had done what one would never expect could be done with vegetables, beans and gluten. There was consistent quality throughout — fresh flavours, natural sweetness, and never cloying nor oily. The *achar awak* was rich and laden with peanuts. The crispy and crunchy *bola* puff, apparently every kid's favourite, was served with traditional chilli sauce. Of course, once I had taken a big bite of this *keropok*, I was hooked on to it. Meat substitutes such as deep fried beancurd skin for duck and gluten for chicken may not replace their meaty counterparts seamlessly, but they can still be delicious. I was swayed by the omelette, which looked and tasted like the real thing, although I could not tell what it was made of. The *pek kweh* soup was the ultimate comfort food. Suffering from the sniffles? Feeling blue? Choo Ee would inevitably make you a bowl of this magical sweet broth to cure your ills.

Imaginative and finger-licking good, the meal was washed down with a homemade wheat tea. We left Tai Guan Tong feeling very satisfied. Comparable to servings from a top Penang Peranakan restaurant, the delicious meal and the serenity of the nunnery made for an exceptional dining experience.

*Vegetarian meals are served to the public on many Buddhist feast days. Meals can be ordered on request for a donation. For enquiries, please call Mr Loh Seong Hooi, mobile 017-473 8925 or (office) 04-229 5716 (Malaysian country code +60).* †



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# NYONYA INFLUENCE ON PENANG HAWKER FOOD

Christopher Lim

**P**enang is synonymous with great hawker food, found in almost every street corner. Penangites know where to go for the best dishes and, most important of all, when the hawkers operate.

Itinerant hawkers still ply Penang's streets. As a child, I remember how I waited anxiously for the sound of a steel spoon clanging on a porcelain bowl, heralding the arrival of the hawker's *wantan mee* for afternoon tea. Another hawker on his scooter would pass by my home, tempting me sorely with his multi-coloured homemade *kueh*, prawn and beancurd fritters, fried spring rolls served with *chilli chuka* and piping hot asam laksa. Something special for me was the Chinese *satay babi panggang* served with sweet potato sauce and toasted wedges of *roti Bangkali* (old-fashioned crusty white bread) off Bangkok Lane in Pulau Tikus. From as early as eight in the morning, I would have no qualms joining the long queue at the hawker stall, snaking its way past the colonial townhouses.

## What makes Penang hawker food so special?

The rich historical make-up of a multicultural population, liberally borrowing from each other to enhance and modify dishes, has produced today's Penang dishes. Being a culinary melting pot, its people have naturally learnt and shared with each other, giving birth to its distinctive kind of cuisine. Penang still offers old world charm, affordable food and a slower pace of life – where you can sip your *cuppa* chatting with friends or just simply watch the world go by!

Penang hawker food also has strong influences from our Peranakan cooking and ingredients. For example, the Penang Hokkien prawn noodle's soup stock is enriched with a combination of sautéed crushed prawn shells, buah keras (candle nut), chilli paste and shallots. Although Hainanese in origin, Penang's famous chicken rice has *gula melaka* among its ingredients. Our Peranakan style of preparation, cooking and garnishing has had a hand in these dishes. Our special love for spicy, tangy food and the liberal use of coconut milk in our curries, *kerabu* (salads) and desserts have found their way into the hawker food too.

Penangites, like the Peranakans, enjoy good food as part of a lifestyle. Let me share with you Penang Nyonya food, sold as hawker fare and where to get it.



## ASAM LAKSA OR LAKSA LEMAK

Penang *laksa* or *asam laksa* is sold everywhere but for the best *laksa*, you should head to:

**Air Itam Market**, business opens from lunch time till evening.

**Coffeeshop next to Balik Pulau Market**,

business opens from late morning, offering both *asam* and *laksa lemak*.

**Coffee shop opposite Pulau Tikus Police Station**, offering Thai *asam* or *laksa lemak* and business opens from the afternoon.

**Kek Seng Coffeeshop, Penang Road.**

**Sar Chew Café at Cantonment Road, Pulau Tikus.**



## PASEMBOR

This is the Nyonya version of the Indian *rojak*, locally called *pasembor*. It has a lighter orange sweet potato sauce, which is served liberally on the salad, garnished with freshly blanched *jiew hu* (cuttle fish). Go to

**Padang Brown Oval Hawker Centre** at the junction of Anson Road and Perak Road. They open from mid afternoon onwards.



## LO BAK

*Lo bak* (*ngo hiang*) is commonly sold with *he chi* (crispy prawn fritters), *tau kua chi* (deep fried bean curd squares), *sotong* (boiled squid), *pi tan* (century eggs), *chean hu bak* (fried fish fillets). Roadside stalls are

set up beside Chinese opera stages especially during the Chinese Festival of Hungry Ghosts. It is served with chilli sauce and a sweet blackish brown sticky sauce called *lor*. Nyonya restaurants also offer this dish but it is never the same as having it in the coffeeshop or roadside stall. Go to:

**Coffeeshop at the junction of Sri Bahari Road and Penang Road** (opens from morning to afternoon).

**Coffeeshop at the junction between Malay Street and Carnarvon Street** (opens whole day).

**Kek Seng Coffeeshop, Penang Road** (opens from late morning to afternoon).

## POPIAH & CHUN PIAH

Our Penang version of *popiah* is served with gravy, crab meat, salad leaves, fried beancurd, different sauces, stir fried *bangkwang* (yam bean) with pork, all rolled into this tea time snack. Go to:

**Padang Brown** (open from mid afternoon)

**Prima Tanjung's Sun City coffeeshop at Fettes Park, Tanjung Tokong** (open from late afternoon)

*Chun piah* has a slightly different filling compared to the regular *popiah*, it is fried until golden brown and served with Worcestershire sauce mixed with sliced chillies, shallots, tomato and chilli sauce. It makes a perfect snack or can be served as an appetiser at a Nyonya lunch or dinner. Go to: **Senior Citizens Association** at Jalan D.S. Ramanathan (formerly Scotts Road), Pulau Tikus: Opens for lunch till dinner. Closed on Mondays.



## PEROT IKAN

This tangy medley of mixed vegetables, herbs, spices, seafood and preserved fish stomach (*perot ikan*) is a typical Penang Nyonya dish which comes in two cooking styles: either in an *asam* version or in a *lemak* version. Go to:

**Pulau Tikus market** or another stall outside the market in the mornings.

**Sar Chew Café, Cantonment Road, Pulau Tikus.**

## FOOD FEATURE



### LAM MEE / NYONYA SEH JIT MEE (NYONYA BIRTHDAY NOODLES)

*Lam mee* is prepared by Penang Peranakans to celebrate birthdays. The ingredients include yellow egg noodles, bean sprouts, pork, prawns, fried dried sole pieces, crab meat,

spring onions, chives, shredded omelette (sometimes dyed red), and other garnishings. They symbolise longevity and prosperity. *Lam mee* is best eaten with *sambal belachan*. On this special day, multi-tiered *uanh chans* (tiffin carrier or *tengkat*) are filled with these colourful ingredients and despatched to different homes of relatives. Usually, the recipients will return an *angpow* to convey their thanks and good wishes. Go to: **Hooi Kee Coffeshop**: junction of Leandros Lane and Burmah Road (coffeeshop beside Belisa Row in Pulau Tikus), business opens from morning.

**Bee Hooi Coffee shop** (opposite Hooi Kee and Belisa Row in Pulau Tikus). Business opens from morning till evening.



### JAWA MEE

*Jawa mee*, a Nanyang inspired version of the Indian *mee rebus* has a similar appearance but differs in taste and ingredients. First, the soup stock is made up of mashed sweet potatoes, tomato puree, pork bones and prawns. Its garnishing consists of

local lettuce, sliced *char siew* (Chinese barbeque meat), hard boiled egg slices, potatoes, prawns, fried shallots, fried beancurd slices and fresh lime. It is sweet, sour and spicy, served hot with chilli paste. The 'dry' version, where the noodles and ingredients are fried, is also garnished in the same way. Go to: **Coffeshop next to Tanjong Bungah Market**, opens in the morning till late morning.

**Padang Brown Oval Hawker Centre**, at the junction of Anson and Perak Roads. Opens in mid afternoon.



### CURRY MEE

It has strong Peranakan influence. The stock is curry with coconut milk, *jiiew hu* (cuttle fish), bean sprouts, *taupok* (crisp diced beancurd), pudina mint leaves, pig's blood cubes, prawns, clams and sautéed chilli paste. When served, it looks

creamy but when mixed with chilli paste before eating, the soup stock turns reddish in colour.

Go to:

**Fettes Park Market** at Mount Erskine Road, Mount Erskine. Opens in the morning.

**Nanning Street junction coffeshop**. Opens from late morning till afternoon.



### ROTI BABI (FRIED PORK SANDWICH)

Although offered as part of Penang's Hainanese food, *roti babi* had its genesis in the Peranakan household kitchen with Hainanese cooks, where western dishes were modified to suit the Peranakan palate. The filling has stir-fried ground pork,

vegetables and spices. It is stuffed into sliced bread, rolled in egg and deep fried. Served with Worcestershire sauce and eaten with a fork and knife. Go to:

**Senior Citizens Association** at Jalan D.S. Ramanathan (formerly Scotts Road), Pulau Tikus: Opens for lunch till dinner. Closed on Mondays.



### NYONYA KUEH

During World War II, in order to supplement income for the family, Nyonyas would make colourful *kueh* at home and have Indian labourers sell their products, on foot, on a tricycle or later by motorcycle. Go to:

**Lane behind Penang Plaza** at Bawasah Road (business opens from 1.30 - 2.00pm).

**Road in front of Prima Tanjung** at Fettes Park, Tanjong Tokong (from evening).

**Lorong Masjid** off Chulia Street.

**Penang Road**, next to Ong Kongs, opposite KOMTAR.

**Trang Road** off Jalan Kampug Jawa Lama.

**Eaton Bakery** at Jalan Tan Sri The Ewe Lim.

### CHENDOL / CHEN DOY

No description is required for this dessert as everyone enjoys it very much and it is widely known. Go to:

**Stall outside of coffeshop at Lorong Kheng Kwee**, off Penang Road. Opens from late morning. Branches at Plaza Gurney, Gurney Drive.

**Stall at Great World City's hawker centre**. Opens from late morning.

**Tony's Ice Kachang and Chendol stall** at Medan Selera, Jalan Sungai Kelian, off Tanjong Bungah Road. Opposite Choporne Hotel. Opens from 6.30pm. †

## KRIS DECOR

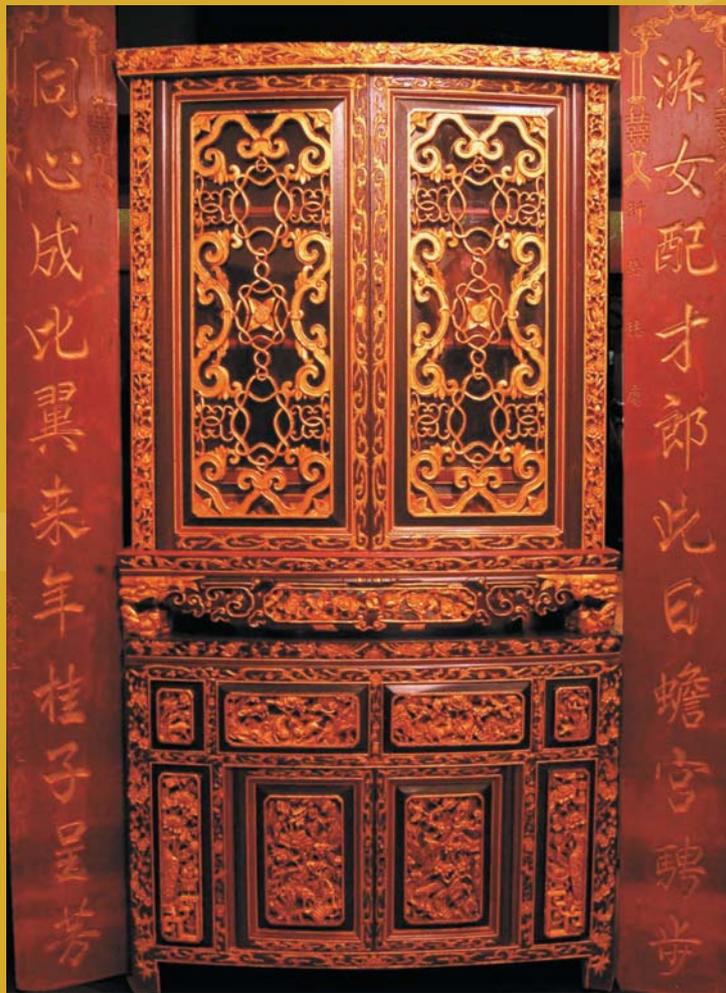
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# MAMA KONG-KONG MAKAN

By Chan Eng Thai

The most frequent instructions that we had from our parents were to verbally invite our grandparents and elders to partake of the meal once we were seated at the dining table. "Mama, Kong-Kong makan," ("Grandmother, Grandfather, please eat") would be uttered by the younger generation.

A cultural tradition of the Peranakan Chinese family was always to acknowledge the presence of the elders at the table and to let them have precedence at meal times. Alas, that tradition seems to be lost. I see many young persons get on with their meal without even acknowledging the presence of their elderly relatives or even their parents.

In previous times the young ones had their meals earlier than their elders. They would be seated at a smaller table and food in smaller quantities was set aside for them. Before they tucked into their food the 'ritual' to *pangge* or *teriak* (to call or address) the elders who happened to be near the dining table would begin.

This tradition was a time-honoured one when the Peranakan community lived in extended households, with two or three generations living under one roof. Children were schooled from young to *pangge* their elders before meals or even when meeting them casually in the course of the day.

When the children joined their elders for meals on festive occasions, they would invariably be seated together at one end or a side of the big table, and the *pangge* ritual would begin before the meal commenced.

As this was an age-old Chinese tradition where each member of a family had a particular rank and title, I remember that at times my cousins and I were stumped as to what to *pangge* a particular older person, and our parents or an aunt or uncle would help us with the correct title. The elders would always be served first, however often they would have the best of the *laok laok* (dishes) directed to the children.

The meals that my cousins and I had together with our elders were usually those after the *semayang* (prayers) to our ancestors, when the food offerings were removed from the altar and shared by family members. It was at such meals that we were treated to a full spread of *babi pongtay*, *ayam buah keluak*, *curry ayam*, *tepong tauhu* or *bakwan kepiting*, *kuah hee ploh*, *mee semayang* (with very thin slices of the *sam chien bak* from the *samseng*) with its accompaniment, *sambal timun*.



Illustration: John Lee and Peter Lee

After the *semayang* meal we had the range of *kuehs* as dessert, called *kueh chuchi mulot*; and for dinner we had almost the same things again! We were never *jelak* (bored) with such food.

We were instructed as youngsters that we should not place our hands on our cheek during meals as it was a *termenun* gesture which would bring bad luck to us. Shaking ones legs during meals was frowned upon as it meant chasing the *jereki* (luck) away. Polishing off every grain of rice would be good as it would mean that your future spouse would not be *bopeng* (pock-marked) and young girls were told not to drink too much soup at meal times as it would mean that the rain would pour on their wedding day!

Such superstitious beliefs were transmitted by the elders to us

children and I in my turn pass such remarks on to my sons, nephews and nieces when I have meals with them!

I am of the opinion that the time-honoured tradition to *panggal* the elders during meals and to acknowledge their presence is a good practice and should be encouraged (not preserved, as preservation denotes that the practice is dead and hence be showcased) in this present fast paced lifestyle of the modern Peranakan family.

A meal is to be enjoyed amongst respectful company. The fact that the young ones respect their elders, and show it at meal times is a good start to an enjoyable meal whether that meal is a sumptuous one or a simple one.

Respect begets unity, unity begets happiness and happiness begets love, which all families yearn for, and meal times for the family, especially the small family unit that we have in Singapore, would benefit greatly by following this hallowed tradition metamorphosed into the modern "Daddy, Mummy, makan."

*Enche Bah Chik pergi ke Pekan,  
Mau beli sayur pakis,  
Anak beranak berkompol makan,  
Hormat berhormat bersuka manis.*

Bah Chik went to Pekan,  
Looking here there for the *pakis* plant,  
The family comes together for a meal,  
Mutual respect and love aplenty. †

## PERANAKAN PAIRINGS

By Wong Adlena Radzie

It is no longer uncommon these days to step into a Peranakan restaurant in Singapore – say, places like Guan Hoe Soon at Joo Chiat Road, Chilli Padi or Blue Ginger – and be asked if you would like wine to go with your food. Some will even have glassware set if you bring your own bottle.

The next question is “what wine with what food?” Because of the mix of Chinese and Malay influences, Straits Chinese food is very distinct. So, to find spices like coriander, nutmeg and tamarind in dishes such as the Peranakan staples *ayam buah keluak* and *asam pedas* pomfret, is a given. The strong flavours, however, make wine pairing a daunting task. The weak-willed might succumb and settle for a glass of iced-water or *calamansi* juice. For the wine lover determined to find the perfect combination though, these fail-safe tips, according to some of the food and wine experts we consulted, may make your next Peranakan meal even more *sedap!*

1. Size matters. If you have high-alcohol or high-tannin wine that packs a flavourful punch, like Penmara’s Five Families Shiraz (\$32), avoid plain light dishes.

**Pairing:** *ikan bawal asam nanas pedas*, or a one-dish meal like *mee siam*.

2. Get the balance right. Acidic wines are not necessarily bad, especially with rich, creamy food that will defuse the high pH level in a wine, like Sine Qua Non Whispering E 2003 (price unavailable).

**Pairing:** *sayor lodeh*, or a one-dish meal like *otak otak*.

3. Matchmade in heaven. Caustic tannins can cut through the gumminess found in food with a high fat content. Try Bouchard Pere & Fils L’Enfant Jesus 2004 (\$110).

**Pairing:** *babi pongtay*, or a one-dish meal like *nasi ulam*.

4. Opposites attract. If drinking a complex and exceptional wine like Château de Beaucastel’s Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2005 (\$150),



make sure it is not overpowered by having a dish that is simple and mild instead.

**Pairing:** *chapchai* or a one-dish meal like vegetarian *popiah*.

5. Get your just desserts. Generally fruity wines like Spanish sherry Gran Barquero Pedro Ximénez (\$45) or Rieslings from Gunderloch Nackenheim Rothenberg (\$65) will go well with sweet Peranakan desserts without overwhelming your palate.

**Pairing:** *chendol* or *kueh salat*.+

All wines are available at Booze Wine Shops (open Monday to Fridays, 10am to 7pm) at: Capital Tower, 168 Robinson Road, #01-04, Tel: 6435-1900; and Republic Plaza, 9 Raffles Place, #01-11, Tel: 6532-6700.

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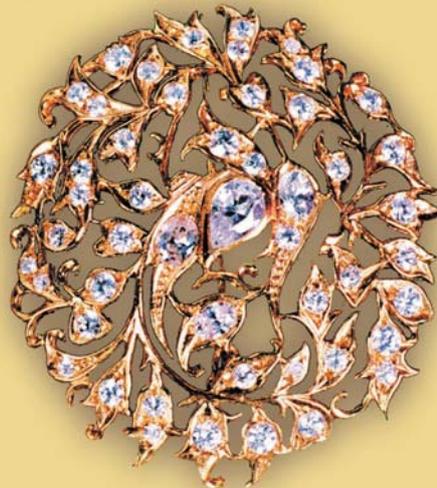
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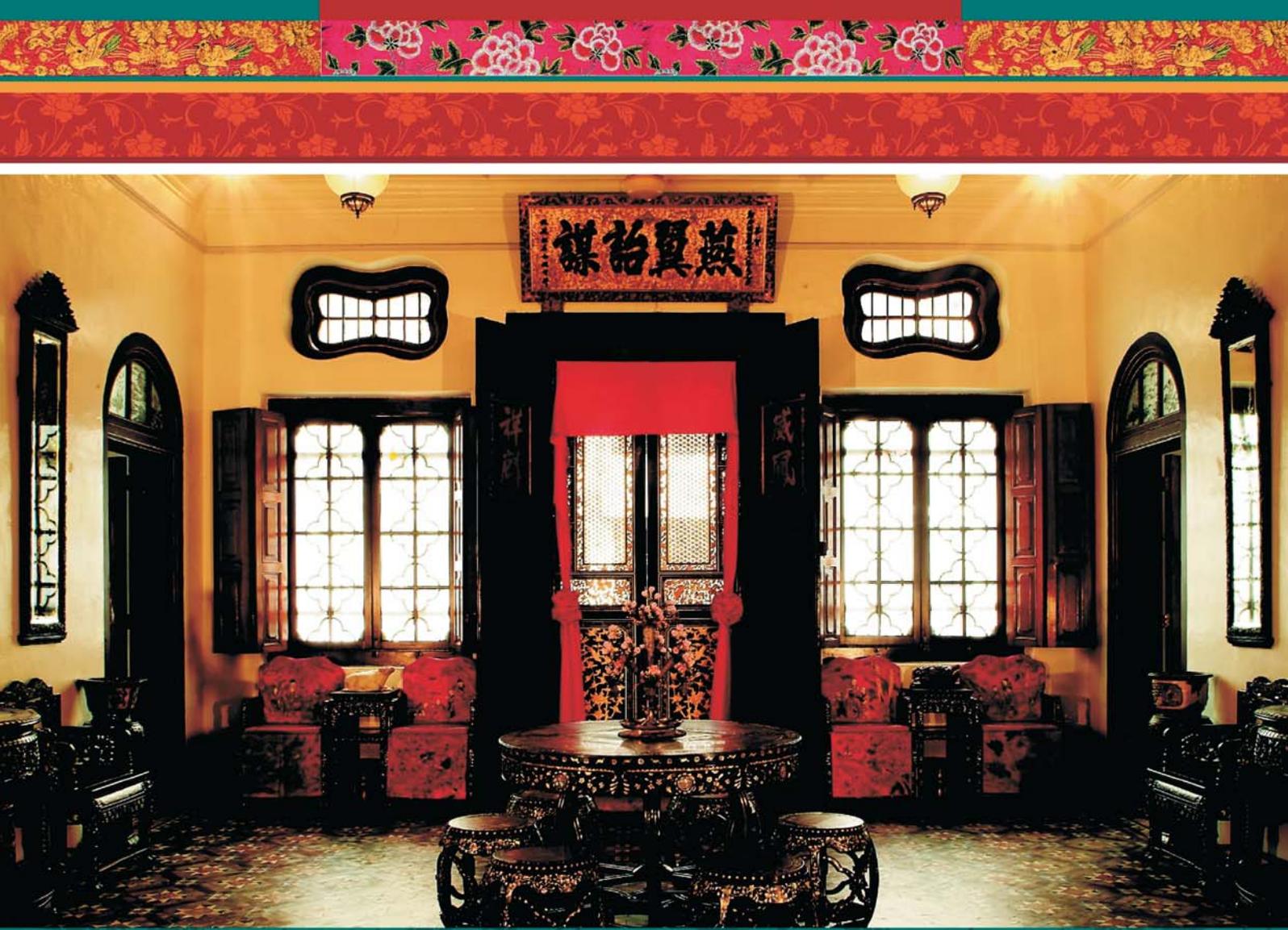
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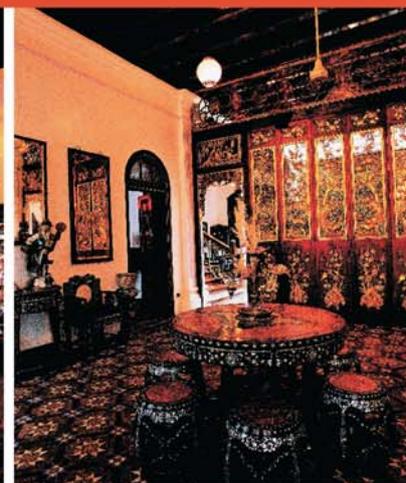
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LOCATION MAP

# REMEMBERING BABA KOH HOON TECK

## A PIONEERING BABA ENTREPRENEUR

By William Gwee Thian Hock

My earliest encounter with Koh Hoon Teck occurred in 1940 when he was among the first visitors to our new home at Carpmael Road. He later became our family's regular guest throughout the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), and the early post-war years. I continued to see him at the Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) premises in Ceylon Road where Babas gathered every weekend to sing *dondang sayang*. I was not there as a participating singer but as a young adolescent fan who occasionally contributed to the singing session by temporarily manning the gong when the person playing it needed to respond to the call of nature.

Koh Hoon Teck was, in fact, our distant relative and was addressed as *Ku Kong* (maternal ganduncle) by me and *Ng Ku* by my parents. Mother had addressed his mother as *Ee Poh* or *Poh Poh* (when mother was very young). My maternal great grandmother had addressed her as *Ee*. He was the only son of Mr and Mrs Koh Lian Gee. Mother was unable to provide me with his mother's name. The furthest she managed to was *Ee Poh Chin*. Obviously, there must have been a 'Chin' in her full name. Koh Lian Gee and his wife were said to have doted more on their only daughter rather than their only son. Mother only remembered the daughter by her nickname, *Ang Lo* (a charcoal or firewood-burning stove), apart from the fact that she chewed the betel vine leaf (*sireh*) quid with a wad of tobacco tucked between her lips and cheek. It is not surprising that most Nyonyas were unable to provide each other's true name because they were generally referred to by their nicknames or as the wife of so-and-so.

The Koh Hoon Teck I was familiar with was a soft-spoken typical gentle elder Baba who spoke only the Baba language. He was the violinist of GSA as well as its *dondang sayang* stalwart. He possessed a couple of peculiarities which I as a young lad, found amusing. During the singing of *dondang sayang* he had to stop playing the violin for the duration of his turn to sing. With the *rebana* (small hand drum) and gong players following suit, the musical accompaniment was interrupted. At that time, he was fitted with an upper denture that had already become loose either because of poor fitting or gum shrinkage due to age. More often than not, he had to hold on to his denture with a finger when struggling to sing in order to prevent it from falling out of his mouth. Strangely, he did not seem to experience this problem when talking. Considered an expert among GSA's

senior singers, he mentored my father in this art of panton repartee. Father subsequently developed into Singapore's top exponent of *dondang sayang*.

During the lunch break, all the Babas at the Club (as GSA was referred to by their members) would patronise the itinerant Malay *satay* seller who arrived around noon. After a hearty feast of *satay* and *ketupat* (coconut-leaf packet of cooked rice), Koh Hoon Teck would inevitably ask me to bring him a bowl of rice from our home a couple of doors away to round up his lunch. Some elderly peer members would ask him why he still needed rice after having consumed so much *ketupat*. His

standard reply was he must have rice with every meal and the *ketupat* did not look like rice. Unfailingly, this resulted in sniggers behind his back from all present. He was immortalised by our family. Whenever we came across anybody who insisted on rice during a meal we would comment, "Here's another Ku Kong Hoon Teck" or for variety, "Ku Kong Hoon Teck number 2".

According to my parents he was a contrast to his wife whom I never met. While he was reputedly timid and slim in build, his wife was bold, plump and very well endowed which earned her the obvious nickname in our language. It was said that, once on a visit to an amusement park, she had expressed a desire to ride

the Ferris wheel. He would have none of it. Undeterred and not taking no for an answer, she dragged him to it. Many sources had claimed he covered his eyes throughout the ride. His wife bore him six sons and four daughters. Tragically, three of his sons and a son-in-law fell victims to the infamous extermination campaign, termed the Sook Ching, when the victorious Japanese army slaughtered thousands of young male Singaporean Chinese a few days after their conquest of Singapore in February 1942.

In later years, I learned more of his early life. The more I discovered of him, the more impressed I became. In Song Ong Siang's *100 Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, Koh Hoon Teck was among the four names mentioned as the mainstay of the Cornwall Minstrels, a musical troupe founded in 1904 that had provided musical entertainment at wedding dinners, private parties and charity shows in Singapore, Malacca and Kuala Lumpur. It had gained the distinction of winning several silver trophies over the years. Similarly his wife had also earned mention among the Singapore Chinese ladies who had collected \$6,000 to help the British Empire and its allies in World War I.

Father related that Hoon Teck had established Koh and



Group photo of singers and musicians at the Gunong Sayang Club, Ceylon Road, c. 1955.

Seated from left: Koh Hoon Teck, Chia Kim Teck, the author's father Gwee Peng Kwee, Ibrahim Shawal, Neoh Toh Chwee. Standing from left: Boon Kim Yew, the famous chanteuse Mak Dara, Wee Kim Chin, Kak Minah (who had a beautiful voice), unknown, unknown, Atan Dolmat (violinist, son of top *dondang sayang* singer Dolmat)

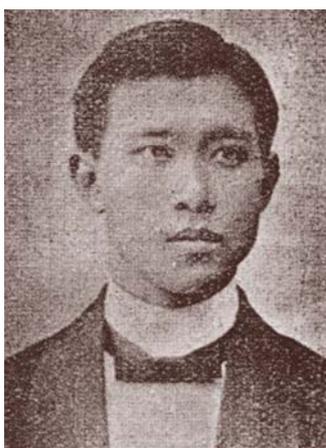
## ■ CHRONICLES ■

Company at Bras Basah Road selling books and stationery. After I began collecting books authored, translated and published by Babas in their own language spanning the 1890s to 1950, I acquired *Cherita Abu Nawas* ('Tale of Abu Nawas'), *Cherita Abu Nawas Dan Cherita Rampay Rampay* ('Tale of Abu Nawas & Miscellaneous Tales') and *Pantun Dondang Sayang*, Vols. 1 to 3, all of which were published by Koh & Company between 1911 and 1917. Obviously he was a writer apart from a *panton* composer and was not a mere bookseller. The Company was founded in 1905 and was situated at 90 Bras Basah Road in the Raffles Hotel Building. It was a bookseller, stationer, draper and a publisher of postcards of Singapore. Among my modest collection of old Singapore picture postcards are those printed by his Company. Cheah Jin Seng's recently published Singapore, *500 Early Postcards* provided me with further information on Koh & Company and his postcards.

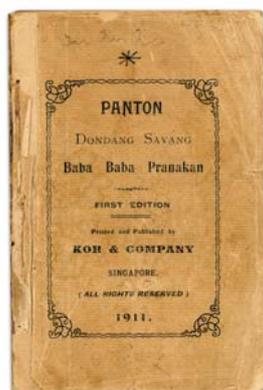
An informative photographic magazine Postcard Exchange Register was also a product of this Company for collectors. I have in my collection other postcards of that era as evidence of the vogue for postcard collecting at that time. Mother remembered the company for the popular range of perfumery it produced such as the stangee (combination of fragrant incense) and the *bunga tanjong* (a very fragrant flower, *Mimusops elengi*).

A distant uncle also pointed out to me that Koh Hoon Teck was among the Babas who had financed and pioneered the import of *bangsawan* opera troupes from the then Dutch East Indies into Singapore and it was such shows that had eventually inspired the local Baba theatre, the *wayang Peranakan*, that has remained popular with the Baba community to this day. Koh Hoon Teck must have been well known in those days and enjoyed high standing too. Another account claimed that there was even a gramophone recording of a comedy skit entitled *Inchek Hoon Teck Punya Hari Jadi* ('Uncle Hoon Teck's Birthday'). Despite the fact I have not been able to substantiate these claims, I have little reason to doubt their veracity.

Unfortunately, he was not blessed with success in his varied commercial undertakings, which floundered after a brief existence. As a true blue Baba his lack of business acumen might have been the cause but certainly not from want of trying. When hard times came upon his family, mother would often see his wife in the early 1920s walking the streets daily to persuade friends and relatives to patronise the *cherki* (Nyonya card game) session at her home where she implemented a *punggot tong* (levy a charge for gambling purposes) to help supplement the family income. Whenever anybody asked her where she was going, her standard reply was, "*Mo pi charek duit*" ('I'm going to search for money.'). Gone were the diamond *kerosangs* (brooches) that once adorned her *kebaya*; in their place were simple safety pins. Nevertheless, she typified



*Koh Hoon Teck, in a portrait published in his magazine, Postcard Exchange Register, June 1909 (courtesy of Cheah Jin Seang)*



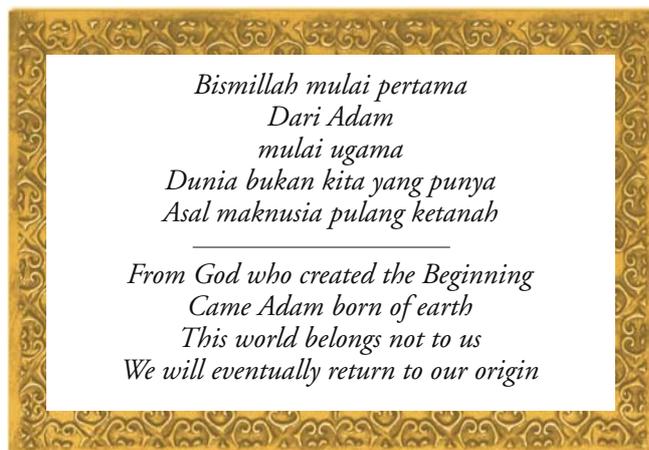
*Pantun Dondang Sayang Baba Baba Peranakan (1911), one of the many books published by Koh & Company.*

the loyal Nyonya wives who, despite their lack of education, rose to the occasion to help her husband and family when in financial need.

With advancing age, Koh Hoon Teck's visits to our home and the GSA gradually lessened. In the early 1950s I saw very little of him in my busy undergraduate days. On Tuesday, 14 February 1956, father brought home the sad news that Koh Hoon Teck had passed away at the age of 78. This would have placed his birth year to be theoretically in 1876. I never discovered whether an additional three years had been added to his age at his death as most Babas do or one year had been added to his Gregorian calendar birthday because of the nine months he had spent in his mother's womb before birth.

Father informed us that Koh Hoon Teck had earlier made two wishes. Firstly, he wished to be buried in the 7-tiered Ming Dynasty funeral costume with all the elaborate rites and rituals to be performed by his surviving family members. These requests were acceded to the full by his family. Secondly, he wished his hearse to be accompanied by the singing of *dondang sayang* on its way to the Bukit Brown cemetery. This was similarly acceded to and father was entrusted the task of organising it. I was there among the crowd outside his house when Koh Hoon Teck left his Carpmael Road home for the last time. Among the vehicles forming the funeral entourage was an open lorry on which sat the *dondang sayang* singers and band. The singers sang their farewell tribute to their stalwart. Amidst non-stop tears and with choking voices they sang *pantons* so dear to the heart of Koh Hoon Teck right up to his final resting ground. The local media covered the sad event in full. The honour of singing the

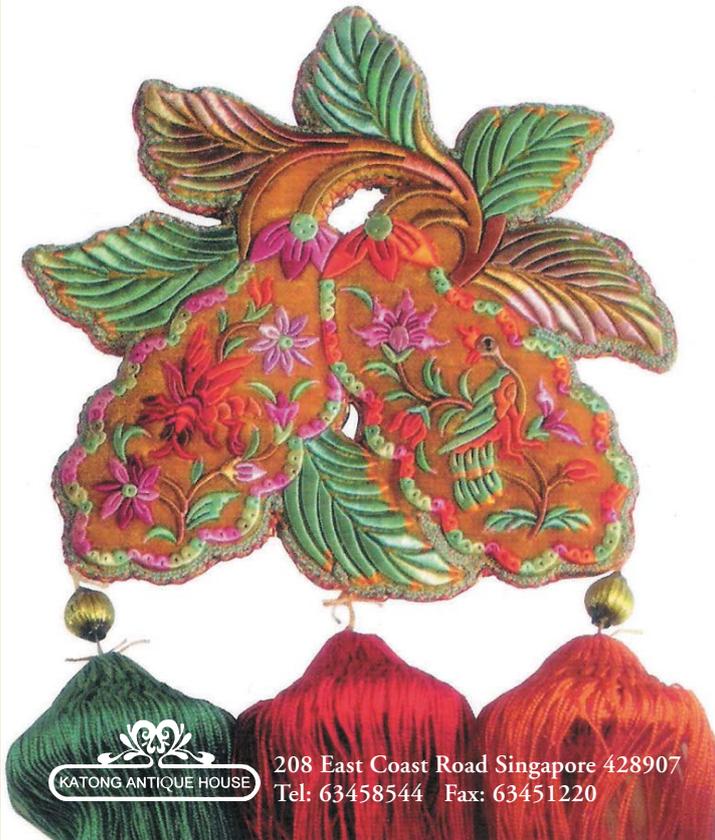
final *panton* in tribute to this old guard of the Baba community belonged to my father who sang this composition:



A very fitting tribute. Though long gone, Koh Hoon Teck is not forgotten. †

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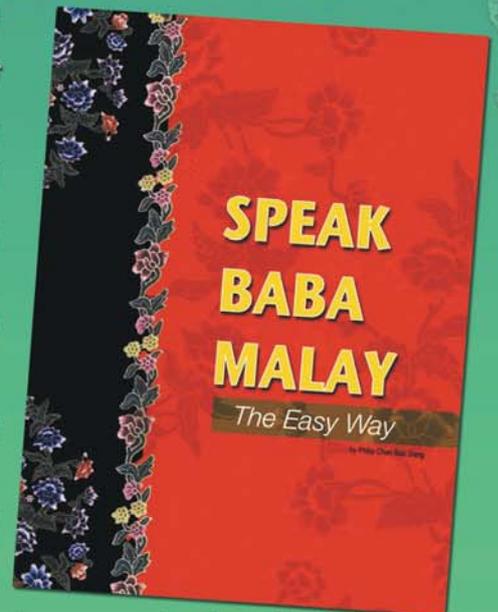
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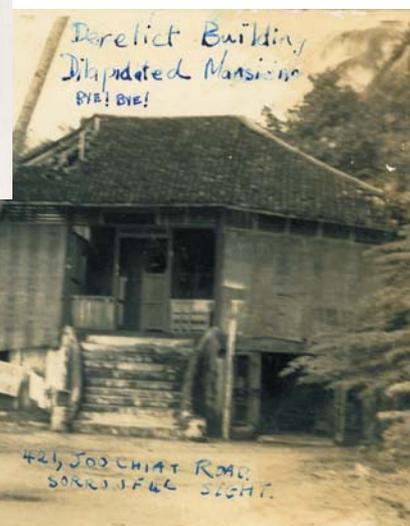
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# MEMORIES OF 421 JOO CHIAT ROAD

By Norman Cho



Left: The Cho and Tay families at our house, 1938. My grandmother is seated at the centre in her white kebaya, while my grandfather stands behind her. My Si Ee Poh is seated at extreme right, with her husband standing behind her. In the background is Joo Chiat Rd, where shophouses can be seen.



Left: My father, Charles, with his younger brother and a cousin at the main staircase leading to the entrance of the house. A karung guni man is also in the picture in his white topee.

Like many Peranakan families, my paternal grandparents made Katong their home. At 421 Joo Chiat Road, to be precise. My *kong-kong* (grandfather) hailed from Malacca while my mama (grandmother) was born and raised in Singapore. Soon after they were married, grandfather whisked her off to Malacca.

My metropolitan grandmother was not used to the conservative lifestyle in Malacca and convinced *kong-kong* to relocate to Singapore where she could be close to her family. So, a year later, they found themselves back in Singapore.

Not intending to settle in Singapore permanently, *kong-kong* thought that it would be wiser to rent a house instead. With the help of *mama's* fourth sister, they found a bungalow at 421 Joo Chiat Road. This was in early 1937 and my father was barely over a year old.

Joo Chiat was a rustic suburb in the 1930s. It had numerous coconut palms in the neighbourhood. Not surprising because Joo Chiat was then part of a major coconut plantation. The bungalow was fronted by a small yard and Joo Chiat Road, beyond which were a row of shophouses, mainly residential.

Backing the bungalow was an open compound with clusters of other bungalows of varying sizes, with Tembeling Road beyond.

The surrounding areas were sandy. The street lamps were dim and far apart. It could be very eerie when night fell, especially since the whole house was lit only by kerosene lamps. Very often a thud followed by a metallic rattle could be heard at night, as a coconut fell and rolled down the roof. This would send the little children scurrying into the bedrooms. Even during the day, the streets were rather quiet. Other than a few passing vehicles and trishaws, or the voices of occasional street vendors hawking their wares, a general quiet prevailed.

The house stood on concrete stilts, with wooden walls and a thatched roof. Its huge staircase led to the main hall. There were four bedrooms upstairs and two bedrooms downstairs. The house was reputedly haunted but there were no paranormal experiences while our family was there.

By the late 1930s, the local economy had deteriorated badly. As a consequence *Si Ee Poh's* (4th grandaunt's) husband had to travel extensively to Malaya for business.

## ■ CHRONICLES ■



Above: Annie, Seratus Bab, in a white kebaya.

Below: Annie again, in a white kebaya.

Left alone with her seven children, she came to stay indefinitely, seeking her sister's company. Imagine the din made by her seven children and my grandmother's two. The house was almost a kindergarten! Coconut trees, canals and sandy fields served as playground to these children.

During the war years, at one stage, there were almost twenty occupants in the bungalow. It was a time when families found unity by staying close to one another for mutual support. Great-grandma, fifth grandaunt and her god-sister, eldest granduncle and youngest granduncle also came to stay. Memories of this time were most deeply etched in my seven-year-old father's memory.

There were the air-raids. As soon as the siren howled, the children, all nine of them, would huddle under the bungalow's massive concrete staircase for refuge.

The war years were tough times for the family. Almost everyone was jobless. Luckily, *kong-kong* had revenues from his rubber plantation in Johor and a property or two in Malacca. These were gradually sold parcel by parcel, to feed everyone in the house as the war progressed. The womenfolk supplemented the household income by making and selling *kueh-kueh* (cakes). The resilience of the *nonyas*! When the war ended, *kong-kong* was left with heaps of worthless 'Banana Notes' (currency issued by the Japanese). In poor health, he died in a bout of depression soon after the war. By then, we had lost at least three of the men in the family.



A short three years but a life-long trauma!

Fortunately, the colourful life in this suburban neighborhood soon returned. Fifth grandaunt's Batavian god-sister, Annie, started a stall at a corner of Joo Chiat Road selling Chinese rojak. She was a popular character at Joo Chiat Road.

Cheerful and glib-tongued, Annie had a fiery temper. She was known as the *seratus bub* ('one hundred watt light bulb') to the residents. Her brightly lit stall earned her this nickname, but I suspect it was her charisma that lit her up to her patrons.

Great-grandma was back to her old gambling ways again. One of her frequent cherki (Peranakan card game) *kaki* (players) was known as *Wakwak* (honorific term for elderly *nonyas*) Open Coat. Strange name for an old lady with an equally eccentric habit of not fastening her *baju panjang* with any *kerosangs*! Clad only in her *baju dalam*, she used her *baju*

*panjang* as a jacket of sorts. Another memorable character in the vicinity was *Wakwak Sumpah-sumpah* ('the curser'). Almost every other day of the week, she was to be found along the road, with hair undone and holding a plate of rice over her head, she would publicly start to invoke curses upon those who antagonised her. My father had always thought she was a witch!

Our family was evicted soon after part of the roof collapsed. We moved out of the house in 1952 with heavy hearts and left vivid bitter-sweet memories behind. The vibrant people and colourful atmosphere of old Joo Chiat could most certainly not be replicated again. †

## THE SEVENTH MONTH: CASTING LIGHT ON THE RITUALS

The 7th month of the lunar calendar is upon us again. *Tan Kuning* clarifies the various terms related to Chinese Peranakan religious practices during this period.

Chinese Peranakan religious practices are not homogeneous. They often have both Taoist and Buddhist origins. During the seventh month, the various ceremonies have lately been regarded as part of the same religious practice, but that is really not the case.

### Ullambana Offerings

*Ullambana*, a Sanskrit word meaning 'upside down', refers to the misery of hungry ghosts. 'Hungry' does not mean 'hunger for food' but it alludes to the sense of deprivation that hungry ghosts experience. According to the *Ullambana Sutra*, these hungry ghosts roam the earth once a year for a period of one month during the seventh month of the lunar calendar. Ullambana offerings can only be made in Buddhist temples or in the open, and the event has to be presided over by Buddhist monks. The offerings, including food, robes and shoes, are gifts for the monks. Merits acquired by the donors would be transferred to hungry ghosts who, by the grace of the Buddha, would be released from the realm of the hungry ghosts and reborn in the heavenly realms.

The act of *Ullambana* offerings is closely linked to filial piety. The Buddha's chief disciple,

Maudgalyayana with his visionary power, saw his mother suffering in the realm of the hungry ghosts owing to her bad Karma. Unable to save her, Maudgalyayana turned to Sakyamuni Buddha for help. Maudgalyayana was told to perform the *Ullambana* ritual. Subsequently, his mother was reborn in heaven. *Ullambana* offerings must be made on the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

### Phor Thor

*Phor thoris* of Taoist origin. Food and paper money, among other things are offered to hungry ghosts to relieve them of suffering. *Phor thor* is a public event that is often organised by a group of shopkeepers, businessmen or neighbourhood residents, who make offerings to hungry ghosts who have no children of their own to pray for them. As hungry ghosts are not related to the worshippers, the *phor thor* offering is made out of compassion and not filial piety.

It is believed that at such offerings there would be hundreds of hungry ghosts rushing for the food. To quell the chaotic situation, the figure of Tai Su Yah is placed near the offerings. Tai Su Yah, commonly known as the King of the Devils, is not a devil himself. He is a manifestation of Compassion, in the form

of a devil to deal effectively with hungry ghosts.

As a mark of respect hungry ghosts are called *ho hia ti* (a Hokkien term for 'brother' or 'comrade') by many Hokkien people throughout southeast Asia. The *ho hia tee* is a spirit of the dead who has no children.

### Semayang Bulan Tuju

In Peranakan culture, *semayang bulan tuju* refers to offerings made to the spirits of the dead during the seventh month. There are two categories. The first is *semayang abu bulan tuju* or *semayang kong ma bulan tuju*, where offerings are made to the spirits of one's own deceased parents and ancestors. Usually it is the filial duty of the first son to perform the *semayang*. It should be done in the morning on any day from the first day up to the fifteenth of the seventh month. On the evening of the *semayang*, his siblings gather together to enjoy the food used as offerings. The second is *semayang ho hia ti bulan tuju*. This is done out of compassion because the *ho hia ti* is not related to the family. This *semayang* must be done in the afternoon on any day from the fifteenth to the end of the seventh month. This is not a public event and it thus cannot be called *phor thor*. †

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# BOOKS GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT

By Colin Chee

I walked up to the cashier at Page One in VivoCity with the slim cookbook in hand. "Oh, you are buying this too? Many customers have been asking for it."

I figured I was on to a good thing. The slim, simply designed Irene's Peranakan Recipes, bereft of the usual glossy mouth-watering shots of curries and *sambals* that you find in cookbooks, seemed like a pretty authentic Peranakan read. I flipped through the pages and ran my eyes down the recipes. They looked like the real thing alright. Compiler Elaine Yeo wrote of her mom, "Girls have to do girls' things." When you start a book like that, it brings back memories of our nyonyas who were raised to perfection in the domestic arts.

The recipes aren't entirely Malaccan Peranakan. There is a sprinkling of Penang Peranakan as well, like the *ikan gulai* and *deep fried char siew*, including a fairly interesting list of Padang dishes like *rendang Padang* and *ayam masak merah*. I suspect Elaine's mother, Irene, was also given to experimentation. We Peranakans all know that no two Peranakan recipes are the same. Irene's recipes show her own variations. Her recipe for *ayam buah keluak* for instance has *ayam*, minced pork and pork ribs. The latter probably gives Irene's *buah keluak* a certain *lemak* (rich) oomph.

Then I came across Rosaline Soon's *Grandmothers' Recipes - Tales from two Peranakan Kitchens*. Instantly I recalled having Rosaline's Peranakan intoxications in a very unlikely named Ming's Cafe & Pub along that stretch of two-storey shophouses on Upper Thomson Road after Lakeview HUDC Estate and Yew Lian Park. Rosaline had quite a regular

dinner crowd in that little cafe that became a pub after 10pm. The very amiable Rosaline used to work in one of our old Big Four banks until the entrepreneurial itch got the better of her.

Featuring what is described as true-blue home-made recipes from Singapore and Penang, Rosaline's almost three dimensionally illustrated — the photos just jump out at you — Peranakan favourites look simply irresistible. The reading makes for a sumptuous meal, on its own. The salted fish bones tofu soup reminded me of days long ago when our 'black and white' *amah* whipped up something similar back in our family kitchen — good quality salted fish bones, tofu, pork bones, ginger, brandy and some sesame oil.

Then there's Rosaline's spicy pig's trotters and pig's tail. Imagine sinking your teeth into the well-stewed, soft, gelatinous meat of pork knuckles and pig's tail and feel the sweet, sour, spicy mix of soya bean paste, soya sauce, sugar and vinegar envelope the palate. Then there's her Penang laksa and Nyonya laksa. If only photos can be eaten!

But back again at Page One — which is one of my three favourite book stores, the other two being Kinokuniya and Select Book Store in Tanglin Shopping Centre — my eyes just had to light on to yet another cookbook called *Nonya Flavours - A complete guide to Penang Straits Chinese Cuisine*.

It is a compilation of almost 150 recipes from the female members of the State Chinese (Penang) Association, to preserve Penang's very own Nonya recipes. The book carries some of those long, long ago culinary remembrances that bring back the faint whiff of kitchen

aromas and smells.

Recipes for dishes like *sambal chinchalok*, *achar hu*, *roti babi*, *kerabu hai tay*, *masak titik*, *inche kabin*, and *gulai pak lai* romp the pages. It is another must read and must have.

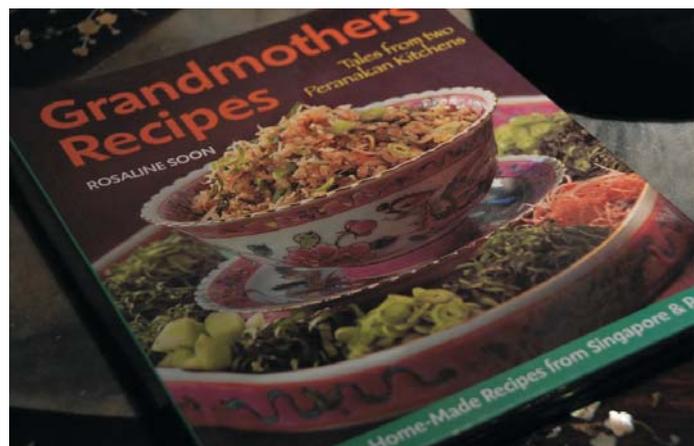
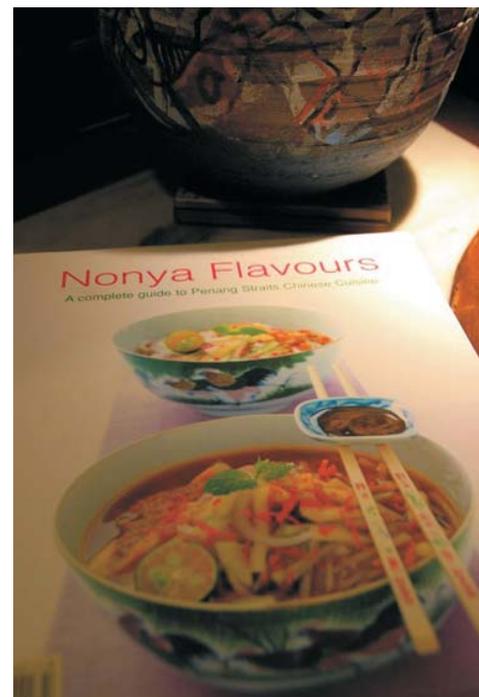
Irene's Peranakan Recipes  
by Elaine Yeo  
Epigram Books, Singapore, 2007

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Grandmothers' Recipes - Tales from two Peranakan Kitchens  
by Rosaline Soon  
Privately published, Singapore, 2007

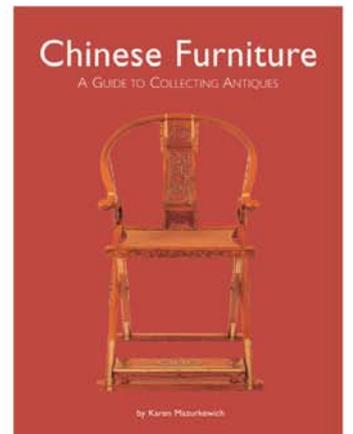
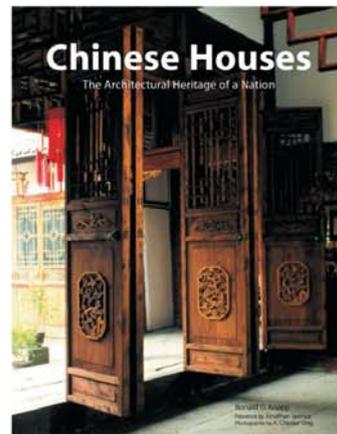
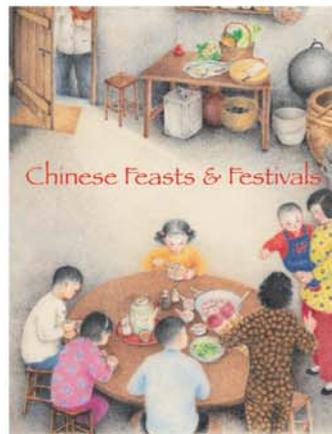
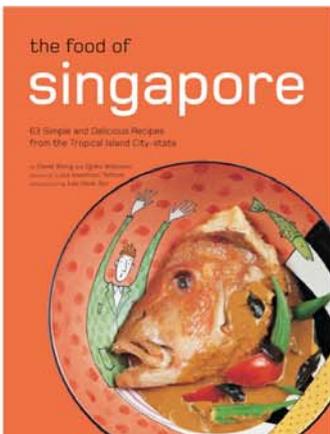
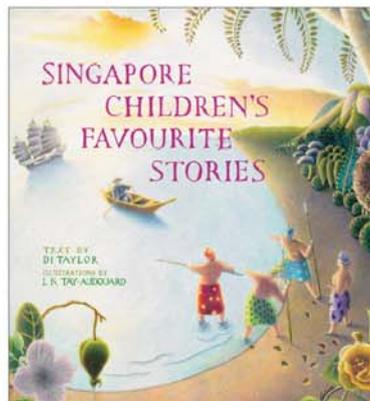
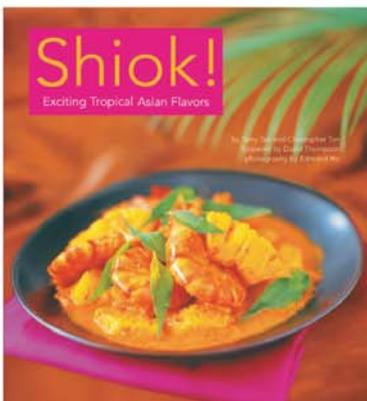
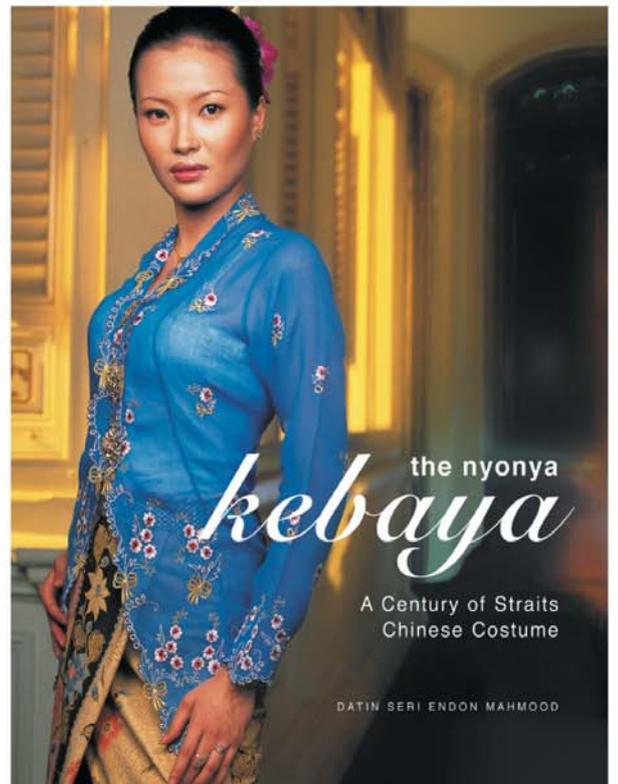
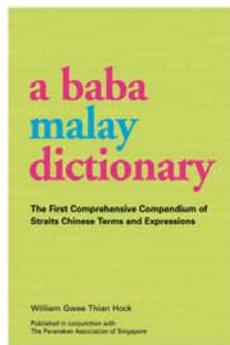
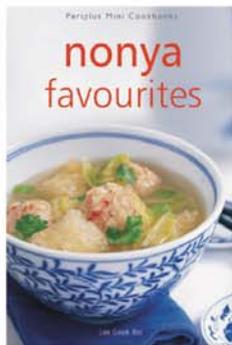
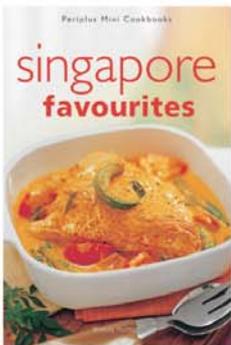
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Nonya Flavours - A complete guide to Penang Straits Chinese Cuisine  
by The State Chinese (Penang) Association, 2007





# Celebrate our Heritage



periplus publishing group





# PERANAKAN FIESTA

*By Khoo Poh Neo*

If audience response is anything to go by, Peranakan Fiesta proved an immensely satisfying cultural afternoon for Association members and their guests. Lamenting that there was a dearth of events and happenings, members had clamoured for more after last year's spectacularly successful buffet luncheon 2006.

15 July 2007 Sunday opened with a bang. The Peranakan Voices, besides being performers, were also servers, ushers, helpers, ticket sellers and donors, rendering every conceivable aid required with smiles and good cheer. Food was deemed good and hotel service satisfactory.

Organising committee members, Francis Chia, Irene Ooi, Irene Poh, Stephanie Tan, Patrick and Ruby Ng, Angeline Kong, James Chong and Patrick Tan, and emcee Chan Eng Thai, clearly made great efforts to create such a successful afternoon. Young and shapely Reggie Ismail, and veteran Francis Hogan brought out the best in each other in their raucous skit, with the sporting participation of three members of the audience. Loh Tuck Heng, a retired vice-principal, emerged after a close fight as the winner of the Peranakan Bagus title 2007. Not surprisingly, the event closed with a bang to cries and echoes of "More! More!" +





## THE GOOD LIFE

Leisure, at rest, at play, the good times. The love of the good life appears as recurrent themes captured by Peranakan artists Martin Loh and Desmond Sim.

By Linda Chee

**B**aba Martin Loh started it all. His style of naive art caused quite a splash in the local art world when he first exhibited his works in 1992. Such colour, such vigour! No one had seen the likes of it before. Happily, Baba Desmond Sim, who had already made a name for himself as a playwright, extended his talent into the art world not long after with his own style as we see now.

niche, Peranakan art has caught the fancy of collectors with its broad themes of family, beauty and especially nostalgia for the idyllic life of the Babas and Nyonyas. The works of Martin and Desmond are collected by locals and



foreigners alike, and most recently by the new Peranakan Museum at Armenian Street, which will show their works when it reopens in 2008. Both enjoyed strong support at their latest solo exhibitions at one of

Singapore's leading galleries, Utterly Art. Loh's *Return to Good Times* was a return to painting Peranakan women and children after a four-year hiatus (left). Sim's latest works, themed *Senang Peranakan* (The Easy Life), present a visual celebration of Peranakans in a holiday mood (above).



Pwee Keng Hock, managing partner of Utterly Art: "Martin's paintings have evolved into free-spirited, unrestrained works; for

example, objects appear out of nowhere, showing high distortion, exuberant colours and crowded detailing; so different from his earlier, warmer and more focused paintings. Desmond's are more stylised and careful, well-planned, exquisitely crafted and easier to understand. Both, to me, are just as charming." +

**"We Peranakans are amongst the most playful of cultures.**

**We love our leisure, and we enjoy it to the maximum!**

**...60 and 70 year-old Peranakans still joget and cha-cha up a storm whenever a band strikes up and there is a dancefloor available. The younger generation of Babas and Nyonyas, are just beginning to rediscover how much we need the happy, jolly, carefree laughter of our earlier Peranakans at play – especially in the competitive, serious world of today!"**

*Peranakan playwright-cum-artist Desmond Sim*

## REGARD AND RESPECT

Launch of Goh Keng Swee Book

By Peter Lee

**O**n 16 July 2007, Editions Didier Millet launched Tan Siok Sun's tribute to her father-in-law, Goh Keng Swee — *A Portrait*, at a very fitting place: the Blue Room of the Arts House, which was of course the old Parliament Building. The book had received a lot of publicity in the papers, which was helped somewhat by the controversial press statement of Phua Swee Liang, the second Mrs Goh Keng Swee, who said that the book was "contrary to his (Dr Goh's) wishes and is a show of disregard and utmost disrespect to him." It puzzles me how a tribute can be such a source of displeasure. The author wisely declined to make any

comment about this.



Tan Siok Sun, a lawyer, banker, diplomat and now a director of a HR firm, gave a lovely speech at the opening, paying tribute to one of the most well respected politicians in Singapore, and dedicating the book to her stepchildren, Goh Ken-yi and Shaoyi. Ms Tan is the second wife of Goh Kian Chee, the only son of Dr Goh and his first wife, Alice Woon. Dr Goh, now in

poor health, is of course a Malacca native of Peranakan descent, whose mother, Tan Swee Eng, was a first cousin of Tun Tan Cheng Lock. These details appear in the elaborate family tree in the front pages of the book. Guests of honour were Lt Gen (Ret) Winston Choo and Prof. Kishore Mahbubani. The turnout was huge and many books were sold. Several wives of the members of the old guard were present, including Mrs Gloria Barker and Mrs Jek Yuen Thong, as well as former colleagues such as JY Pillay. Also out in full force were relatives from the Goh and Tan clans, including poet Robert Yeo and Agnes Tan, daughter of Tun Tan Cheng Lock. +

*On 4 August, Ms Tan will present a talk on 'Goh Keng Swee — The Complete Man' at the Possibility Room, Level 5, National Library. For more details, please visit: [http://dl.nlb.gov.sg/victoria/2007/08/goh\\_keng\\_swee\\_the\\_complete\\_man.html](http://dl.nlb.gov.sg/victoria/2007/08/goh_keng_swee_the_complete_man.html).*



## BEAUTY IN ASIA: 200 BCE TO TODAY

ACM's new exhibition with sprinklings of Peranakan treasures

3 May – 23 September 2007

*Peter Lee*



This ambitious, breathtaking Pan-Asian exhibition with over 300 artefacts presents the many facets of beauty in Asia. The sacred and the profane, the precious and the mundane, ornament and utensil, modern and antique, all come together in this visually captivating show at the Asian Civilisations Museum at Empress Place. There are statues and paintings representing ideals of physical beauty, as well as precious adornments for the body, and a fascinating range of cosmetic containers and utensils.

The exhibition has great breadth, yet with several inspiring highlights and masterpieces there are many opportunities to provoke deeper thought. Look out for some exceptional treasures, including a newly acquired Chola period bronze statue of Uma Parameshvari. For those interested in Peranakan material culture, there are some exceptional examples of jewellery (*right*), and a stunning group of carved and gilt calligraphic plaques from Magenta Cottage, the demolished Killiney Road mansion of Baba tycoon Lee Cheng Yan, donated to the museum by a descendant (*above*). The plaques are perhaps the most ornate and refined I have seen, and although their link to the show is tenuous, I am thrilled that they are on display. No one should miss this show!+



*Photographs courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.*

## MAIN WAYANG COMPANY TURNS 3!

After staging performances at the Peranakan Makan Extravaganza @ The Raffles Plaza Market Café and the Golden Girlz of Katong at the Esplanade, during the Singapore Arts Festival, Main Wayang went into full gear to celebrate their 3rd Anniversary on 1 July with a Hi-Tea & Joget Party at their new home in Gillman Village.

The highlight was the performance by their newly formed Anak Baba Band (all teenagers from 16 to 19 years of age). They played a wide repertoire of popular Baba tunes composed by Baba William Gwee and some newly composed songs by Baba Alvin Oon, which were warmly received by the guests. The Main Wayang Rhapsody Choir also sang a few songs, while eight bibiks demonstrated playing cherki cards and on the dance floor, young and old took part in an afternoon of joget. There was also a mini fashion show featuring the latest kebayas from Toko Aljunied.

Baba Philip Chan was on hand to sign his new book, *Speak Baba Malay The Easy Way*. (More information to come on this exciting first practical 'text book' on how to speak Baba Malay!)

Looking ahead, Main Wayang Company will be preparing for Racial Harmony Day Celebrations with a Peranakan Heritage Roadshow to schools (Catholic Junior College, East View Primary and Geylang Methodist Primary Schools), and performances at the Singapore Festival

in Tokyo on 22 July. Visit their website for information on their upcoming events and especially their next play or musical.+





## MUSICAL TRIBUTE TO TAN CHENG LOCK

Istana Budaya, Kuala Lumpur,  
25 May - 3 June 2007  
By Cedric Tan

The illustrious Son of Malacca was the focal point of Muzikal Cheng Lock jointly produced by the Malaysian Chinese Culture Association and the National Theatre of Malaysia (Panggung Sari Istana Budaya) to celebrate the golden anniversary of Malaysian independence this year. Tun Tan Cheng Lock was the English-educated scion of an old Baba family, who in his later years struggled to obtain citizenship for Chinese residents in the face of the communist insurgency in Malaya. He became one of the founding fathers of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and ultimately one of the chief proponents of an independent Malaya.

The opening sequences chronicled his birth, childhood and youthful romance, how the young Cheng Lock met and fell in love with Yeo Yeok Neo, culminating in a colourful Peranakan wedding pageant. Besides being a successful businessman, he was also an upcoming political star in the colonial period, which forced him to evacuate to India to escape persecution and possible death during the Japanese occupation. The second half of the musical showcased his return after the Japanese surrender and his huge effort to deal with the threat by the British government to repatriate 500,000 Chinese villagers living in the interiors and fringes of the jungle back to mainland China, who were believed to be supporting the communist insurgency.

By preventing this catastrophe from taking place, he gained the support of the local Chinese and was later appointed the first President of MCA. With the United Malay National



Organisation (UMNO) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), the MCA formed a coalition that won the first general election. The musical closed with the image of a frail Tun Tan, confined to a wheelchair, shouting 'Merdeka', powerfully conveying how he had fought a good fight; not for himself but for the love of family, fellow Chinese and countrymen.

This musical is perhaps one of the better local productions to date in Malaysia, where historical themes are not so well received. It had all the ingredients of a good musical - romance, pageantry, suspense, nostalgia, poignancy, jubilant celebration. It also had a great musical score, superb choreography, eye-catching sets and a multiracial cast of more than 60 dancers and actors. Helmed by leading musical director Lokman Ghani and assisted by top choreographer Anthony Meh and renowned musical director Suhaimi Mohamad Zain, this musical received good reviews from the local press. Amongst the outstanding actors in this musical was Lim Boon Wah who gave a sterling performance as Tun Tan. Of note were the supporting actors from a local Chinese theatre group who formed the core of the Chinese new villagers. Their stellar acting, and the outstanding dancers from the group called Dua Space, during a scene where the British army raided a Chinese village, was perhaps one of the most poignant moments in the musical. The life-sized props coupled with period costumes certainly added great visual dimension to the musical. However I felt that the finishing of these props and costumes lacked the spirit of the real Malacca as well as of the Peranakan culture. For example a full-length Penang-style door and not the shorter pintu pagair was utilised for the doors of Malaccan prewar houses. There was also a poor understanding of period fashion. The kepala or 'head' of the sarongs worn by the Nyonyas were all worn at the back rather than in the front as they should be. The actress portraying Cheng Lock's mother wore an incorrectly figure-hugging kebaya labuh instead of a baju panjang and her hairstyle and accessories were similarly not of the period.

On the whole, this musical was indeed successful in providing 'infotainment' to the public. It is also a timely tribute during celebrations of Malaysia's 50th year of Independence, and a fitting reminder of the Chinese contributions to the making of Malaysia. Plans are on the board to bring this musical to various towns in the country and possibly abroad. Do go to this musical when it comes to your town. †

## SHOWCASE OR SHOWROOM?

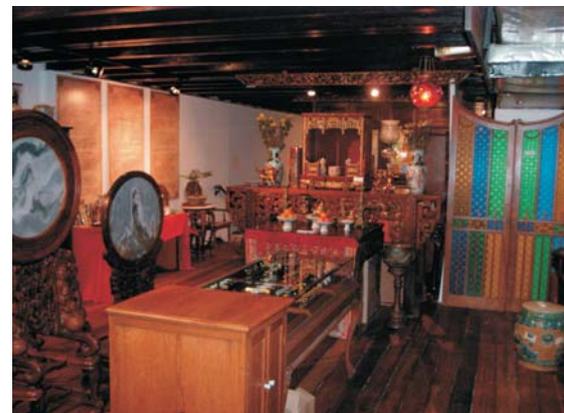
The Cultural Heritage of the Babas and Nyonyas of Malaysia,  
Central Market, Kuala Lumpur  
By Cedric Tan

The Central Market management showcased The Cultural Heritage of the Babas and Nyonyas of Malaysia in the Central Market Annex building from 17 April to 13 June 2007. This exhibition provided the public a glimpse of the Peranakan home as part of the current Visit Malaysia Year 2007.

The show comprised a recreation of a verandah, main hall, second hall, kitchen and a bedroom. A quick walk through however revealed that many items of furniture were not placed correctly. There was also the mixture of materials from Penang and Malacca. For example, Malacca-style lanterns adorned the verandah of a Penang-style house (the full-length pintu pagair is found only in Penang). The main hall was filled with mostly reproduction cupboards. Some were clearly out of place, especially the replica bridal cabinet, which should have been in the bedroom. The kitchen was at least more authentic.

The artifacts all had tags and a quick check with the staff on duty confirmed that many of the exhibits were actually for sale, and that I was in a furniture saleroom in the guise of a cultural exhibition.

In comparison, the Museum Negara has better exhibits on display in a more culturally correct arrangement. The Museum Negara ethnology gallery is probably the best place to get the Peranakan feel in Kuala Lumpur. However do visit the Museum's gallery before the end of this year as the current permanent exhibits will be dismantled for good as the authorities have other plans for the site. †





# BABA BUDDHISM

Vesak Day in Seck Kia Eenh Temple, Malacca – the Peranakan experience

By Cedric Tan

Seck Kia Eenh (Garden of Shakyans) is a Buddhist Temple in Malacca with strong Peranakan ties. The founding fathers were leading Peranakan personalities in Malacca and up to today, the majority of the management board members are Peranakan. It is not surprising that it is also a centre of Peranakan culture as evident in the many Peranakan plays and concerts that were staged in the past to raise funds to built the main shrine hall and quarters. It is also the focal point of the annual Vesak celebrations in Malacca. This temple was also the religious centre that became my second home during my growing up years, where I studied Buddhism and was exposed to many facets of Peranakan culture.

Vesak Day was celebrated on Monday, 1 May this year in line with the World Buddhist Fellowship's resolution to hold it on the first full moon of May. The first major event was observed on Vesak Eve with the offering of vegetarian food made to the dead enshrined in the columbarium behind the shrine hall. In the past, sets of eight saucers, teacups, chopsticks and spoons were neatly arranged before each ancestral altar the evening before, just like what is done in Peranakan homes on the eve of *semayang abu* day. However over the past few years, this arrangement has been transferred onto a common table in front of the main ancestral altar on prayer day resembling that of a *semayang rebot*-style offering. Since then, the four types of vegetarian dishes, fruits and cakes have been offered on large trays or containers instead of individualised bowls or plates.

Seck Kia Eenh also prides itself with probably the most well attended and eagerly-awaited public procession in town. The first Vesak public procession in Malaysia and Singapore was held here in the 1960s before this idea spread to other towns in Malaysia. To announce the impending procession to the general public, the traditional practice of displaying processional lanterns in front of the main pillars of the temple's verandah was carried out with diligence on the eve of the procession.

In the week preceding Vesak Day the main image of the temple was cleaned and the red bunting or *chaiki* on the main door of the temple was changed. These processes recall the activities in the final

week approaching Chinese New Year.

Some authentic practices were adhered to during the public procession. Firstly, ladies with new brooms led the procession, symbolically sweeping the street clean. Behind these ladies was the lantern bearer followed by devotees holding six red *chaikis*; each stretched taut by a pair of poles made of fresh, tall bamboo. Following behind were bearers of a horizontal scroll inscribed with the name of the temple, followed by the temple elders and VIPs draped with five-coloured sashes. It is becoming rare to find all these objects being hand carried today and in many instances, these objects have been actually mounted onto trucks owing to the shortage of manpower. Another unique feature was the wearing of white clothes by participants and devotees, signifying purity, instead of brightly-coloured traditional costumes.

Towards the rear of the procession just before the main float, young girls sprinkled perfumed *bunga rampay* on the street while young boys held long poles from which censers, billowing with incense smoke, were suspended. Other girls carried baskets of flowers or balanced lighted candles on trays as they walk along the route of the procession. Another fast disappearing practice was the setting up of temporary altars, laden with fruit, lighted candles, incense and flowers, outside the houses along the route of the procession, to welcome the passage of the main image. This year, only two homes along the route continued this practice.

After the procession, a group of Peranakan youths arranged the offerings of fruit and vegetarian dishes on the main altar. The fruits were decorated with serrated bands of red paper trimmed with gold and finials made of glittering 'Wheel of Law' *kemunchaks*. The dried vegetarian products were spiked onto wooden lacquered bowls to form the 12 *keng tok* offerings and crowned with a representation of the magical gourd. This practice has been revived lately but many traditional practices were dispensed with in line with the application of the true teachings of Buddhism. Thus offerings of fresh sugarcane with yellow paper decorations, the burning of joss paper, lighting of profusely-decorated giant candles and giant joss sticks have become a thing of the past.

Late Vesak Day morning, the mainly Hindu Chetty community living near this



temple in Gajah Berang brought in a procession from their neighbourhood, offerings of oil, saffron cloth, flowers, incense, fruits and sweets. The procession was headed by their temple musicians and on some occasions the infamous Hantu Tetek effigy would circle the main shrine hall once clockwise before placing the offerings on the platform in front of the main altar. The leading priest led the Chetty congregation in an offering-of-light ceremony, after which the holy fire was passed around as a blessing. When the main Buddha carriage had passed the Chetty neighbourhood the evening before, the community leader broke a coconut in front of the float as a symbol of purity. That was truly inter-religious respect at its best, and was a reciprocation of the visit by the Seck Kia Eenh temple elders to the Chetty's Sri Muthu Mariamman temple during the Hindu celebration known as *Semayang Datok Chachar*.

Other typical activities retained include the announcement of the donors names during the offering-of-oil ceremony or *tiam-yu*. The master of ceremony declared the donor's name out aloud as well as these words of blessing in Hokkien "*tiam yu peng ann, huat chye bo su*". Similarly, the practice of publicising donors names on strips of yellow paper strung from horizontal strings along the walls of the shrine hall was maintained. Devotees may buy uncooked rice and water that have been blessed and take them home where the rice would be mixed into the rice stored in the rice bin and water into the drinking water receptacle. The unique five-coloured thread to be worn on the right wrist of the devotee, and which had been blessed by the monks, was also distributed.

The continuation of these traditions in Seck Kia Eenh Temple will depend on how the next generation can relate to them and remember their processes. Some practices were lost owing to the passing of elders; some were eradicated as they were not considered Buddhist; while others were simplified for convenience. This article is an attempt to archive some of these unique practices, which in time may evolve further or even disappear. †

## KEBAYA TOPS GO DOWN UNDER

By Maurice Wee

Sixty pieces of Nonya *kebaya* belonging to Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, the late wife of the Malaysian premier, Dato Seri Abdullah Badawi, were exhibited on 3 May at Melbourne's Immigration Museum, together with batik sarongs from our Association Vice-President, Peter Wee.

Among those present at the official opening were guest of honour Mrs Janette Howard, wife of the Australian Prime Minister, and Puan Nori Abdullah, Chairman of Yayasan Budi Penyayang Malaysia. Datuk Seri Rais Yatim, Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, and Datin Seri Maznah Rais.

At the official opening, the Melbourne Peranakan community, headed by Alfred Chi and Margaret Lau entertained the VIPs and guests with a rendition of popular Malaysian songs such as *Rasa Sayang*, *Nona Zaman Sekarang*, *Chek chek semot* and *Geylang Si Paku Geylang*.

The exhibition itself is divided into various sections. The

'Peranakan Domain' provides glimpses of the development from *baju panjang* to *kebaya*. The 'Nonya's Private Chamber' introduces various versions of daily wear such as — *kebaya biku*, *kebaya renda*, *kebaya bandung*, and *baju rumah*, etc. A small but rare collection of mourning wear (*baju tuaha*) is also featured. Accessories like silver belts and jewellery are also showcased. Yayasan Budi Penyayang, Malaysia, hosted the evening supper at the Crown Plaza which was attended by Dato' Seri Abdullah Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia. The surprise of the evening was the spectacular appearance of Malaysian chanteuse Siti Nurhaliza, who happened to be in Melbourne. She was invited by the High Commissioner to entertain the guests with a medley of three songs.

The exhibition will be on until 9 September. †

Immigration Museum, 400 Flinders Street, Melbourne, Australia. Exhibition opens daily from 10am to 5pm. Adults AUD\$6.00. Phone 03 9927 2700



## PERANAKAN LEGACY OPENING IN MANILA

The Peranakan Legacy exhibition at the Ayala Museum in Manila was officially opened by President S R Nathan and Mrs Nathan on 14 February, during their state visit to the Philippines. The artefacts on display were all loaned by the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, and included important treasures such as the famous gold and diamond peacock belt. †



Photograph courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum



# TREASURES OF THE PORTUGUESE EMPIRE

An important exhibition of Portuguese colonial art in Washington, DC

By Peter Lee

As Peranakans, we often hear and read about how Peranakan culture retains elements of Portuguese influence, but seldom do we know exactly what these elements are. Language is the most apparent in the Baba Malay spoken, and basic words such as *lampu*, *sekolah*, *bendera*, *bomba*, *gereja*, are of course Portuguese. Then there is the influence in our cooking, whose full extent has yet to be documented. I suspect many recipes of old may actually have Portuguese colonial origins. From Goa to Macau, we share in enjoying *belachan* (*balchão*, *har cheong* in Cantonese), *bolu* (*bolo*), *onde onde* (although it is a totally different dessert in the different cities) and *bingka* or *bibingka*, which is a word known even in the Philippines (although it's a rice cake there). Little work has been done on the connections with Peranakan material culture.

Well, there is an opportunity to think about these connections in Washington, DC, where *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries* is on show from 24 June to 16 September at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

In the golden age of the Portuguese Empire, commissioned works of art, war booty, even pirated treasures made their way back from the furthest corners of the world where Portuguese sailors traversed, to the palaces, churches and monasteries of Lisbon and the rest of Europe. Many were kept in the *kunstkammern* or cabinets of curiosities, belonging to the great Renaissance princes, and amazingly their entry into these collections were well documented, helping scholars to date these objects more precisely.

On show are about 250 objects from China, Japan, Indonesia, India, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Brazil, among others, belonging to some of the most important museums and institutions in the world. All are made from the rarest and most exotic materials of the time — ivory, silver, gold, tortoise-shell, lacquer, porcelain. From Peranakan and southeast Asian perspective some objects are especially



Two silver filigree vases with covers.  
Goa, India, 2nd half  
of the 17th century. Height 21cm

interesting, such as a 16th century *kris* with a lacquered sheath from an Austrian museum, 16th century *wayang* puppets from Austrian and Danish museums, as well as fine silver filigree objects from Goa belonging to several European collections.

There are wonderful images and plenty of information online (details below) and an excellent catalogue edited by the show's guest curator, Jay Levenson. +

For more information please visit <http://www.asia.si.edu/EncompassingtheGlobe/>

Photograph of filigree vases courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia

Photograph of the kris courtesy of Schatzkammer und Museum des Deutschen Ordens, Vienna



Kris and lacquered scabbard  
Java, Indonesia, 16th century  
Length 49.5cm

## 107th ANNIVERSARY DINNER & DANCE

7pm – 1am  
Friday,  
16 November 2007  
Dunearn Ballroom  
Raffles Town Club  
MINI BAZAAR & WINE STALLS  
AT FOYER  
FROM 6.30PM

\$88 per person  
Donation tables  
\$1,500 and above  
BOOK EARLY! LIMITED  
TO 450 SEATS ONLY!

FOR BOOKINGS  
PLEASE CONTACT:  
MRS LIM GEOK HUAY,  
TEL: 6255 0704

### THE BUSINESS OF BATIK

Kuala Lumpur International Batik Convention  
KLCC, 30 November – 2 December 2007

'The Business of Batik' is the theme of the second KL International Batik Convention at the KLCC with a host of activities, including talks by speakers from several countries, fashion shows including the Piala Seri Endon Designers' International Showcase, business matching sessions, batik making demonstrations and a batik fair. +

The exhibition hall will be open from 10.30am to 6.00pm, but will close at 5.00pm on the last day. For more details please visit: [www.expomal.com/klib](http://www.expomal.com/klib).

### PENANG PERANAKAN CHINESE AND KWANGTUNG MUSLIMS CONFERENCE

Equatorial Hotel, Penang, 28 October 2007

Focusing on the contributions and cultures of the Penang Peranakans and the Chinese Muslims of Malaysia, this conference is jointly organised by the Persatuan Karyawan Pulau Pinang and the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang with the support of the Malaysian Ministry of Arts, Culture and Heritage. Among the 11 speakers are Prof. Emeritus Dato' Khoo Kay Kim (presenting the keynote speech) Dato Seri Khoo Keat Siew (President of the Penang Peranakan Chinese Association), Assoc. Prof. Sohaimi Abdul Aziz, Assoc. Prof. Tan Sooi Beng, Assoc. Prof. Lee Su Kim, Neil Khor, Johny Chee, Michael Cheah, Cedric Tan and Khoo Salma Nasution. +

The registration fee is RM170, for the conference from 8am to 6pm followed by dinner and cultural performances including a wedding pageant and dondang sayang. Accommodation not included. For enquiries, please contact Dr Jelani Harun at +604 653 3888 extension 2703 or [jelani@usm.my](mailto:jelani@usm.my).

### 20TH BABA CONVENTION IN PENANG

"Promoting the Peranakan Alliance  
Across Borders"  
30 November to 2 December 2007

The 20th Baba Convention 2007 will be held at the Cititel Hotel at Upper Penang Road, in the heart of George Town, Penang, within walking distance of all the many shopping centres and food outlets. The convention package will be tailored to everyone's requirements — especially value for money and affordability!

Please contact the Hon. Secretary Mrs Lim Geok Huay at 6255 0704, or visit our website [www.peranakan.sg](http://www.peranakan.sg) for more information.

Presented by The Peranakan Association and Millenia Walk

## Ba Bazaar

### A PERANAKAN FOOD AND CRAFT FAIR

10 days...16-25 November 2007  
Over 50 stalls...  
Under one roof!

Ba Bazaar, will be a Peranakan-themed marketplace featuring all the things we treasure:

*Nyonya cuisine*  
*Sarongs, Kebayas*  
*Handicrafts*  
*Jewellery*

In short, a one-stop heritage paradise for anyone itching for an injection of culture and nostalgia.

Organised with the aim of making Peranakan culture truly accessible to the public, the Ba Bazaar will be held in the airy atrium of Millenia Walk. In being able to interact directly with stallholders, many of whom are regarded as pillars of the Peranakan community, visitors come away with an enhanced knowledge of the Peranakan lifestyle, full stomachs, as well as new and antique treasures!

Parties interested in being a part of the Ba Bazaar, can contact:

Peter Wee, 63458544 or Irene Ooi, 96184038

For more details, log onto  
<http://babazaar.peranakan.org.sg>



#### NEW MEMBERS

Mr Lee Ching Seng  
Mr Loh Tuck Heng  
Mr Ng Kwang Yeow James  
Mr Ong Lin Heng Clifton Dodatsu  
Mr Sherwin Parulian Tien Siregar  
Ms Olive Tan  
Ms Juliana Yip

#### OBITUARY

Our deepest sympathies to the families of the following members:  
Mrs Ida Marjorie Bennett  
Mr Lee Boon Ann Lawrence  
Mr Lim Hap Hin  
Ms Ong Siew Wah Lily

# THE PERANAKAN GUIDE SINGAPORE

## MUSEUMS

**Asian Civilisations Museum.** Visit the Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery at the ACM Empress Place to view some outstanding pieces of Peranakan gold jewellery. Look out for some exquisite Peranakan treasures in *Beauty in Asia* (3 May – 23 September). The ACM at Armenian Street, which housed most of the Museum's Peranakan artefacts, is closed for renovations. It will soon be transformed into a dedicated Peranakan museum. *Asian Civilisations Museum, 1 Empress Place, Tel: 63327798, Opening Hours: 1pm to 7pm (Mondays), 9am to 7pm (Tuesdays to Sundays), 9am to 9pm (Fridays), Admission \$8 (adults) \$4 (students and senior citizens), \$4 (adults on Fridays 7pm-9pm), \$2 (students and senior citizens on Fridays 7pm to 9pm)*  
<http://www.nhb.gov.sg/ACM>.

**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 sireh 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>

**NUS Museum, NUS Centre For the Arts, National University of Singapore.** Objects & Desire is a project challenging eight invited talents to present works inspired by the Baba House, expressing their personal contemporary interpretation of the Straits Chinese lifestyle (Until 30 April). *NUS Museum, NUS Centre for the Arts, 50 Kent Ridge Crescent, Tel: 65162492, Opening Hours: 10am to 5pm (Mondays to Saturdays), Closed on Sundays and Public Holidays, Admission is FREE*  
[http://www.nus.edu.sg/museums/exhibitions\\_sseac.htm](http://www.nus.edu.sg/museums/exhibitions_sseac.htm)  
For programmes related to the exhibition, see <http://www.nus.edu.sg/museums/cattoni.html>

**The Baba House** — COMING SOON! This new heritage house museum at 157 Neil Road will open in late 2007. Meanwhile you can 'visit' the house on-line.  
<http://www.nus.edu.sg/museums/baba/index.html>.

## LANDMARKS

**Blair Plain.** A typical Peranakan residential area around Blair Road, Spottiswoode Park, Neil Road and New Bridge Road that is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms.  
[http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/soa/design\\_studio/ds2b/blair/study/Blair.html](http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/soa/design_studio/ds2b/blair/study/Blair.html)

**Emerald Hill Road.** Another interesting residential district showcasing the best of eclectic Peranakan 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 grand seaside villas and elaborate Peranakan terraced houses. The latter can still be seen in a walk around 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 along the same street.  
[http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stportal/en/home/what\\_to\\_see/suburban\\_living/katong.html](http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stportal/en/home/what_to_see/suburban_living/katong.html)  
<http://www.myjoochiat.com>

**Amoy Street and Telok Ayer Street.** Perhaps one of the first Peranakan enclaves. 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: 64234616*

**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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