

For Review

*Being Baba* presents selected articles on Peranakan culture seen through the eyes of contributors to *The Peranakan* magazine over its 20-year history. Specially selected articles capture the essence of Peranakan culture — from its history, traditions, material culture and lifestyle to its rich cuisine, language and even theatre.



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

- Explains the origins of customs and traditions
- Provides insights into their beautiful artefacts and delicious cuisine
- Collates articles from a rich archive that spans over 20 years
- Features writers who are experts in their own specialised areas
- Highlights the significant contributions of Peranakans

*The Peranakan* is the official publication of The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) which represents Peranakans or local-born Chinese also known as the Babas. They settled down in Southeast Asia many generations ago and assimilated the local customs and practices to create a unique culture of their own.



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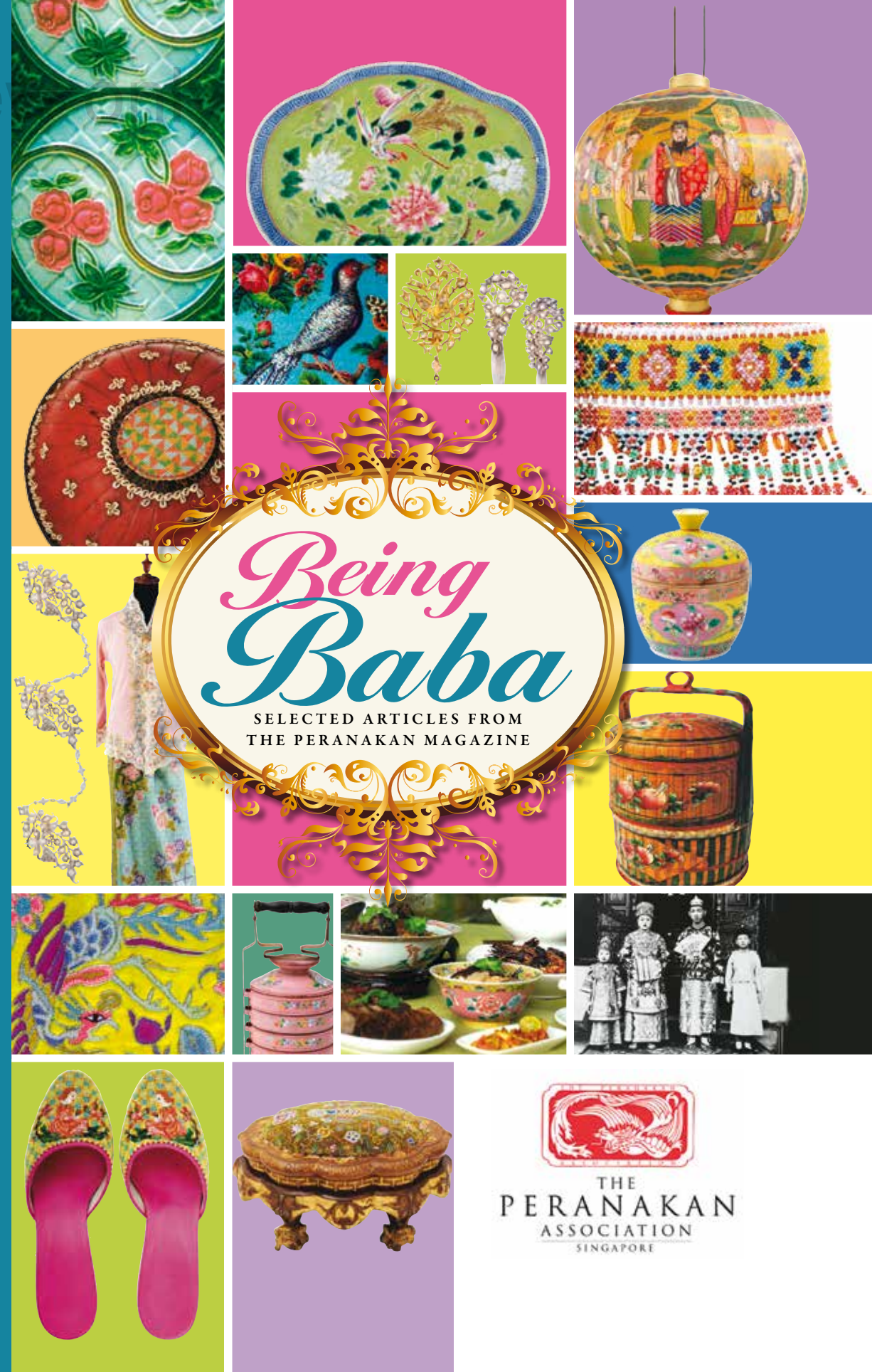
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SINGAPORE

*Being Baba*

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## MESSAGE

By Baba Peter Wee

President, The Peranakan Association Singapore.

Greetings from all of us at The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS).

Singapore celebrates its 50th year of independence in 2015. This year, Singapore also plays host to the country's first Peranakan Arts Festival and the 28th Baba Nyonya Convention, both of which will be held in November. We have published this beautiful book, *Being Baba*, to commemorate these events as well as to serve as our Peranakan legacy of culture for future generations.



For many years now, many TPAS members and also the public have asked for a publication that would capture the essence of our Peranakan culture and heritage as documented in TPAS's magazine, *The Peranakan*. Unfortunately, the cost of publishing such a book would require finances, logistics and manpower that TPAS can ill afford. By serendipity, leading publisher Marshall Cavendish approached the Association earlier this year to do just such a book.

Since then, our magazine Editor, Nyonya Linda Chee, has worked closely with Baba Melvin Neo of Marshall Cavendish to produce this extravagant, full-colour compendium. TPAS thanks Marshall Cavendish for the opportunity to collaborate on this initiative.

*Being Baba* is a compilation of selected articles from our magazine. There were so many good articles; hard choices had to be made. Over its 20 years of history, volunteers have put in much time to develop *The Peranakan* into a treasure trove of information on all things Peranakan — from our history, traditions, material culture and lifestyle to our rich cuisine, language and even theatre.

I would like to thank all members of *The Peranakan* editorial team and our passionate contributors past and present for your hard work and commitment to our shared vision. You have created a wonderful record of Peranakan culture and entrenched the role of TPAS as the go-to authority in promoting and preserving our culture in the region and beyond.

Our special thanks must go to our Life President Baba Lee Kip Lee and his son Baba Peter Lee for giving 'birth' to this publication in 1994 and for their dedication to ensuring its sustenance. We must also thank the late Baba Wee Kim Wee, past President of Singapore, for mooted the idea of a cultural magazine for our community.

To know the past is to understand the present, and may the future be blessed.



## PREFACE

By Nyonya Linda Chee  
Editor, *The Peranakan*



THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE

In the early 1990s Dr Wee Kim Wee, Singapore's first Peranakan President and once a journalist, mooted the idea of a periodical for all Peranakans. His daughter, Wee Eng Hwa, remembers vividly: "I remember he was very much in support of the idea that the Association should have a quality magazine to project a solid public image of the Association and its objectives — to inform about Peranakan culture, to keep the Peranakan cultural heritage alive and relevant, and to encourage Peranakans to stay connected."



Early issues of *The Peranakan Association Newsletter* which was a black-and-white affair. It was later renamed *The Peranakan*.

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Dr Wee, formerly Deputy Editor of *The Straits Times*, knew from first-hand experience the effect of a good quality periodical, having also published magazines for SATA (Singapore Anti-Tuberculosis Association), where he was the Chairman, and “the Useful Badminton Party, the only pre-war badminton party which I believe is still in existence today”. As was his nature, he had a heart for people, even in the magazine — he squeezed in half a page of humorous badminton-related jokes, perhaps to lighten the reader’s life during the Great Depression. Eng Hwa says, “It was no surprise to me that my father threw his weight behind Lee Kip Lee to pursue this magazine project. I understand that he gave the association some good ideas and guidance on the ‘how to.’”

Taking up the challenge, in June 1994, The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) gave life to a humble two-page Xeroxed publication called *The Peranakan Association Newsletter*. Two years later, it was renamed *The Peranakan* to give the newsletter a more distinct identity. It also became a regular quarterly with a wide range of reports covering recipes, cultural documentation, news and viewpoints to theatre reviews. In the Association’s centennial year 2000, the newsletter graduated to a full-fledged black-and-white illustrated magazine with the front and back covers in full-colour.

Backed by a very active team of volunteers running the publication, the magazine became an important communication platform for the Peranakan

community. By year-end 2005, *The Peranakan* was on a roll. It went full-colour in all pages and assumed a fresh new look. Doubling to 32 pages, it featured more articles, photographs, illustrations and advertisements. At the end of 2006, the magazine hit a bumper 44 pages for the first time. Its print run hit a record 4,000 copies.

The magazine continues to be produced by volunteers. It is distributed to the Association’s 2,000 members and a variety of locations including museums and Singapore Tourism Board locations where they are eagerly picked up by culture buffs.

Adds Eng Hwa: “If he were alive today, I have no doubt my father would be the first to congratulate the association and its editorial teams through the two decades for a job well done. *The Peranakan* has contributed much to our Peranakan heritage. It is something we can be proud of.”

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This article was first published in *The Peranakan*, issue 1, 2014.



In 2000, *The Peranakan* transforms from a newsletter to become an illustrated black-and-white magazine. By end 2005, it had become a full colour publication. Over the years, changes were also made to the masthead design.

To mark the 20th anniversary of *The Peranakan* in 2014, the magazine was given a design makeover.



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## 50 THINGS QUINTESENTIALLY PERANAKAN

To mark Singapore's jubilee, *The Peranakan* magazine identified 50 things that embody our multi-hued culture.

We came up with a veritable feast for the five senses.

Nyonya Linda Chee mulls over our choice picks.



Left to right: *Ayam buah keluak*, photo by Colin Chee. *Babi pongteh*, photo and dish by Keith and Melinda Chee.

### THE TASTE OF AMBROSIA

*With so many naysayers out there, choosing just ten of the most iconic Peranakan foods is like opting to walk on a bed of nails! We closed our eyes and vouched for our favourite dishes here.*

#### 1 *Ayam buah keluak*

This is a classic Peranakan dish that is so *sedap*! (delicious!). The first spoonful hits your palate all at once — spicy, salty, tart, slightly sweet and umami. Every family claims to have the best recipe. Some say the original dish had pork ribs and not chicken, as Peranakans ate mostly pork. Perhaps it first appeared in Indonesia, where we get most of our nuts from, and later became popular in Malacca when Javanese Peranakans married into Malacca families. An anthropological study would be most valuable.

#### 2 *Babi pongteh* (stewed pork with gravy)

Belly pork, potatoes, bamboo shoots and black mushrooms are cooked with a sauté of fermented *tau cheo* (soya bean) and garlic to create a full-bodied stew. Some families add chicken. The gravy can be soupy or thick and dark, almost like a sauce. The best way to eat *pongteh* is to tear a green chilli into it and stir a touch of *sambal belachan* into the gravy. *Celop* (dip) a slice of crusty French loaf and pop into your mouth. Heavenly!

#### 3 *Popiah* (spring rolls)

No other dish compares with *popiah* for community bonding. The whole of Malacca and Singapore comes together to help out with the peeling, slicing, chopping, frying... preparing from morning till evening for days, before we come together for just as many days to break the eating record — *lu makan berapa biji?* (how many did you eat?) The Peranakans are unique in using crepe-like *kulit telur* (egg skin wraps). Except for my family and our close relatives, I have not seen anyone else serving *popiah* with home-made *buay cheo*, a sweet sauce made from flour, *gula Melaka* and dark soya sauce.



The various ingredients and garnishes that go into a *popiah*. Photo by Raymond Wong.

# GLOSSARY OF PERANAKAN JEWELLERY TERMS

By Baba Peter Lee

**ANTING-ANTING** pendant earrings

**anting-anting kemanteng**  
SEE **anting-anting olek**  
**anting-anting olek** pendant  
earrings with diamonds specially  
for weddings  
**anting-anting panjang** drop  
earrings (1)

**BUTANG** button (2)

**butang baju pendek/dalam** collar  
stud (for the *baju dalam*)

**BATU** gem stone

**batu ceylon** paste  
**batu delima** ruby  
**batu yakob/yakut** paste used as a  
substitute for *intan*

**BELIAN** brilliant-cut diamond

**belian pontianak** old mine cut  
diamond from the Pontianak mines  
in Kalimantan

**CHIAM MAH** (Penang) hairpin

**CHINCHIN** ring

**chinchin belah rotan** 10-carat  
gold ring bond  
**chinchin buah kana** marquise  
shaped ring (3)  
**chinchin kahwen** wedding ring  
**chinchin lapchai** rings exchanged  
during the wedding *lapchai*  
ceremony  
**chinchin leret** ring band  
**chinchin mala satu** solitaire ring  
**chinchin tunang** engagement ring  
**chinchin wajek** diamond-shaped ring

**CHOCHOK SANGGOL** hairpin

**chochok sanggol ibu** the biggest of  
the set of three hairpins  
**chochok sanggol kemanteng** a set  
of 155 hairpins worn by the bride  
**chochok sanggol nombor dua/tiga**  
the second and third hairpin  
**chochok sanggol tiga batang** set of  
three hairpins (4)

**DOKOH** full bridal necklace

**GELANG** bangle (5,6)

**gelang jingle** SEE **gelang tengkat**  
**gelang kaki** anklet  
**gelang rantay** chain bracelet  
**gelang tangan** bracelet, bangle  
**gelang tengkat** bangle worn in  
numbers

**HONGLOK/TONGTOK** phoenix  
hairpin worn by the bride, symbolising  
the Emperor's consent for her to be  
dressed as a queen for the day

**INTAN** diamond chiffres (chips);  
rose-cut diamonds

**KERABU** earstuds (7)

**KEROSANG** brooch used to fasten  
the *baju panjang* or *kebaya* (worn as a  
set of three brooches)

**kerosang ati-ati** (Malacca) same as  
**kerosang serong** (8)  
**kerosang bintang** star-shaped  
*kerosang* (9)





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## CAKE FOR THE GODS

Baba Tan Kuning explains the importance of the *kueh bakol* in ushering in the Lunar New Year.



A five-tiered *kueh bakol* forms the centrepiece of this elaborate spread of offerings.  
Photo by John Lee.

*Kueh bakol*, literally translated as basket cake, is the most important item in Lunar New Year rituals as it is the main offering to the kitchen god (*datok dapor*) and ancestors. The name of this steamed rice flour cake is derived from its rounded shape. *Kueh bakol* is called *ti kueh*, or sweet cake, in the Hokkien dialect. In Mandarin it is called *nien gao* which means New Year cake, a most appropriate name for the cake of the season.

*Kueh bakol* is offered for prayers (*semayang*) one week before the New Year, ie the 24th day of the 12th month, when the kitchen god is believed to ascend to heaven to report on the affairs of the world to Ti Kong, the Jade Emperor. On the 9th day of the New Year, another round is offered, this time to Ti Kong.



Another table fully laden for *semayang* (prayers).  
Photo by Lee Yuen Thien.

While the various savoury dishes, fruits and cakes are placed on the altar table for about two hours or so during the prayers, the *kueh bakol* stays on the altar for 10 days. It is removed only on the 4th day of the New Year when the kitchen god returns to earth. This is why *kueh bakol* is never served together with cookies to friends and relatives visiting during the initial days of the New Year.

A family in mourning for the matriarch or patriarch who has passed away earlier in the year can neither make the offering of *kueh bakol* nor celebrate the New Year. No visiting or visits by relatives and friends either. The parents (*ching keh and chek em*) of the sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, and close neighbours are then obliged to make a token gift of one *kueh bakol* each to the family in mourning.

### Making the *kueh bakol*

Few families make their own *kueh bakol* today because lots of prohibitions (*pantang*) have to be observed. The toughest *pantang* perhaps is for the extended family not to quarrel or argue when the *kueh* is being prepared. It is said that negative words will cause the *kueh* to spoil — the surface will turn out rough or uneven instead of smooth and glistening.

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Steaming *kueh bakol* also requires much skill. As the *Bibiks* used to say: “*Moh chuey kueh bakol mesti pande jaga ayer, jaga api.*” (“If you want to steam *kueh bakol*, the skill is in controlling the water and fire.”)

Making *kueh bakol* is a labour-intensive process. It takes days of preparation before the steaming commences. In the old days, people made their own glutinous rice flour. I heard that the rice was pounded in a wooden mortar with a pair of pestles each about five feet long. Two women would stand facing each other to rhythmically pound the rice. The rice was then sieved in batches to gather the fine powder. The remaining coarse grains were pounded again and again and sieved until all the rice became fine flour. Nothing was wasted. The flour was then kept in an airtight tin.

The *kueh* usually came in two sizes. The half-kati *kueh* was steamed in a tin with a 12cm diameter and 8cm depth. The one-kati *kueh* was made in a 15cm-diameter tin with a depth of 10cm. On the day of steaming the *kueh*, fresh banana leaves were cut into 6cm or 7cm squares and wiped clean before being placed on a piece of zinc over a slow fire to soften and dry them. The tins were lined with the leaves to form a ‘basket’ for the filling.

Unlike the western method of precise quantities for ingredients, those who made *kueh bakol* at home usually *agak agak* or estimated the quantities of ingredients based on experience and instinct. It has been a fruitless search to find a recipe with specific quantities. One friend heard that equal parts of one kati glutinous rice flour and one kati white sugar were used.

## Preparing *kueh bakol* in the *chye tng*

The method of making *kueh bakol* here was described to me by a lady of about 60 years old who lives in a *chye tng*, that is, a Taoist temple, devoted to Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy.

From the early 20th century, the *chye tng* had been selling high quality *kueh bakol* during the Chinese New Year season to its devotees. Ten years

ago it stopped production due to a shortage of manpower. From about 15 female residents, comprising widows and single women, the *chye tng* now has only five women staying there. Today, the temple sources commercially produced *kueh bakol* from a factory.

At the *chye tng* previously, the white sugar was melted with water into syrup. The syrup was poured into a bowl of glutinous rice flour a bit at a time and mixed well into a batter (*gaol tepong*) using the fingers. The batter would be sufficiently fluid when it flowed through the fingers. The mixture was poured into tins lined with banana leaves.

About 10 tins were placed into one circular bamboo steaming tray. The trays, stacked up to 10 tiers high, were put on a very large *kuali* (wok) for steaming. Firewood was used to boil the water in the *kuali*, which needed to be replenished regularly to ensure consistency in the steaming.

After about six hours of steaming over a big fire, the *kueh* was removed from the trays. The surface of the *kueh* was smoothened by pressing down with oil-covered banana leaf to prevent sticking. The *kueh* was then steamed for another six hours over a lower fire to caramelize to a fudge brown colour with a smooth, shiny surface. It would be left to cool completely after cooking, and stored for later use.



A six-month old steamed *kueh bakol* encased in banana leaves. *Kueh* courtesy of Peter Wee. Photo by Colin Chee.



## HERITAGE ON YOUR WALLS

Baba Victor Lim shows his collection of decorative Peranakan tiles to Baba Colin Chee.



You can usually tell the provenance of these tiles. There are factory and country markings at the back of the tiles. You can also differentiate design and glaze styles. British tiles tend to have translucent glazes with *art nouveau* designs.

In Southeast Asia, colourful ceramic tiles were popular in the British Straits Settlements of Malacca, Penang and Singapore during the colonial era. Singapore Peranakan tile catalogues of the late 19th century testify to the wealth of decorative and figurative designs produced during Great Britain's glorious Victorian era.

Many of these tiles are of *art nouveau* style characterised by delicate, graceful and sinuous lines with richly-coloured glazes. They were produced as stand-alone tiles or as vertical panels for use in entrance porches, hallways, washstands and courtyards. These tiles can still be admired in old houses in Emerald Hill, Ann Siang Hill, Joo Chiat Road, Blair Road,



Belgian tiles with vibrant colors are like their famous and exquisite tapestries, and are used to decorate walls.

Neil Road and a few of the lorongs in Geylang today. These tiles were also used to decorate wooden teak furniture found in Peranakan homes.

Victor Lim, 52, who owns a tile company called Aster by Kyra, says: "During the early 1900s, large quantities of Majolica tiles from Britain, Belgium and Germany were imported by Tan Soo Hock & Co, A. Clouet & Co and Malcolm, Lyon & Co. These imports were halted at the outbreak of World War One in 1914. Fewer tiles were imported from Europe after the end of World War One, whereas more tiles bearing patent numbers issued by the Japanese patent office were shipped to Singapore, owing to the shorter distance between Japan and Singapore."

Many of the Japanese tiles produced in the 1910s and 1920s featured geometric patterns or auspicious Chinese designs depicting figurines, script, fruits, flowers, fish and birds of auspicious meaning. In the late 1970s and 1980s, pre-war shophouses, terrace houses and bungalows were

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demolished to make way for new buildings and infrastructural developments. Many such tiles found in these old buildings ended up in dump heaps.

Passionate about Singapore history since young, Victor, when in his late 20s, painstakingly searched for such tiles in places where old buildings were being demolished — Jalan Besar, Geylang, Katong, Tanglin, River Valley, Killiney Road, Bishopsgate, Emerald Hill, among others. He then researched and preserved them for his own collection.



Victor's first tile acquisition: one of a pair manufactured in Britain. He salvaged them from a house in Bishopsgate, Singapore.

Twenty plus years on, heritage tiles are still Victor's passion. A favourite pastime is to roam around Singapore looking for these tiles. He also has contractor friends who alert him to heritage shophouses and bungalows



Japanese tiles often come in a beautiful and balanced mix of pastel colours and would feature Japanese as well as Chinese motifs. The pattern on the tiles illustrated here is an exquisite geometry of flower motifs.

about to be torn down or renovated so that he can save the tiles. Showing us a set of six tiles depicting flying birds that he salvaged from a house in Geylang, Victor says: "The owner removed these decorative tiles from the external wall of his shophouse when he was renovating it and he threw them away. When the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) found out, it insisted the owner restore the tiles. He could not find them, so he employed a few Chinese craftsmen to paint and recreate the "tiles" on his external walls where the ceramic tiles used to be."

The fun of collecting lies not only in the visual aesthetics of the beautifully glazed tiles, but also in hunting down 'lost' pieces that make up a tableau.

Victor proudly showed us a recently completed five-piece set of a peacock (right). "This five-piece tableau took me just over 20 years to complete. I bought the first tiles 20 years ago from a junk shop in Singapore. Ten years later I found another one in an antique shop in Malacca. Then five years ago I acquired the fourth tile at a Joo Chiat junk shop. And just two weeks ago I saw and got the final piece in a Serangoon Road junk store. Some tiles form a picture and you may have to wait and hunt a long time to complete the tableau," Victor says.

Part of the fun of collecting is also painstakingly restoring badly stained, uncared-for tiles to their original state. Victor puts dirty and chipped tiles through a tedious and strenuous eight-step cleaning process stretching over 12 weeks. But what emerge from tubs of dirty water and other liquids are gems that look almost as good as when they were new almost a hundred years ago.

There are many tile collectors in Singapore. Most who are interested, however, buy them to decorate the walls of their homes, or offices and shops. To them, it is the same as preserving a part of Singapore's culture.

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This article was first published in *The Peranakan*, issue 3, 2013.

This five-piece tableau of a peacock took Baba Victor 20 years to piece together.

