

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

Lee Su Kim

Kebaya Tales

Marshall Cavendish Editions



# Kebaya Tales

*Of matriarchs,  
maidens, mistresses  
and matchmakers*



Lee Su Kim

10th  
anniversary  
edition, with  
two new stories  
included

The bestselling collection  
of Peranakan tales,  
now with two  
brand new stories

Teeming with fascinating characters  
and unexpected plot twists, **Kebaya Tales**  
celebrates the colourful, flamboyant world  
of the babas and nyonys – a unique  
community of Peranakans for whom  
rituals, beliefs and superstitions are still  
very much part of everyday life.

Laced with humour, poignancy and  
gentle satire, these stories are based on  
or inspired by real-life events passed  
down from generations of mothers,  
grandmothers, bibiks and nyonys.



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## For Review only

Like the generations of babas and nyonyas who traverse these stories, this book is a succulent mixture of colours, kebayas, *kerosang* and conversations, of scents, spicy food and feisty families. Lee Su Kim brings her sharp eye, her love of stories, and her keen sense of the verbal and visual to this delightful book which gives us a chance to savour the richness and diversity of Peranakan lives.

PROFESSOR ALASTAIR PENNYCOOK  
University Technology Sydney, Australia

Mothers tell stories. Daughters often forget them but not Lee Su Kim. She shows that Malaysian Peranakan mothers transmit stories with a distinct flavour. Through these bright and trenchant vignettes, Su Kim has heightened the uniqueness of her community. One might add that these enjoyable tales also add a more nuanced dimension to the art of being both Malaysian and Chinese.

PROFESSOR WANG GUNGWU  
National University of Singapore, Singapore

A fascinating collection of tales bringing together the uniqueness of traditional Peranakan culture with universal human themes. By turns deeply moving and deliciously funny, these stories and the lives they portray go on reverberating in the mind long after reading them.

PROFESSOR ALAN MALEY, O.B.E.  
Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

*Kebaya Tales* – each of its stories is evocative of different aspects of Peranakan heritage – is a sharing of cultural experience that will undoubtedly be an important part of Straits Chinese literature.

DR NEIL KHOR  
*The Star*, January 2011

For Review only

If there were such a word as 'nyonyaness', this feminine book would epitomise that quality. These bitter-sweet stories have the diaphanous delicacy of an embroidered, lace-trimmed Swiss voile kebaya blouse, the dark riches of the *buah keluak* – that Peranakan rival to the French truffle – combined with the piquant zest of a freshly pounded *sambal belacan*.

ILSA SHARP  
*Off The Edge*, July 2011

Laced with gentle humour and candour, the stories cannot fail to draw the reader in ... Crafted around events and memories scandalous, momentous, heart-rending and even supernatural, the stories sparkle delightfully ... Su Kim also deftly captures moments that reflect our changing cultural mores, even down to delicate matters of the bedroom ... Pure reading pleasure from start to finish.

BABA EMERIC LAU  
*The Peranakan*, 2011

Full-colour photographs [and] sepia prints from her family albums are creatively interspersed amongst the stories, with captions to explain the intricacies of the handiwork or the relationship to the author of the various family members. Coupled with *pantun* and popular ditties, the atmosphere of a bygone era comes alive in her book, the reverberations lingering till well after one puts the book down ... At times funny, whimsical and touching in parts, Su Kim writes fluidly, with an ear to the argot of her Nyonya heritage that manages to inform and hold the reader's attention.

SEE FOON CHAN-KOPPEN  
*Ipoh Echo*, Dec 2011

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Concept and layout of colour plates by Lee Su Kim. All kebayas and accessories featured are from the personal collection of the author. Photography by Lee Yu Kit and Lee Jan Ming. Photographs cannot be reproduced without the author's permission.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.



*Dedicated to*  
**STEPHEN J HALL**  
*with love*

*And to the memory*  
*of my parents,*  
**LEE KOON LIANG &**  
**FOO KWEE HOON**

# For Review only

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## *Preface to this Edition*

When I first started writing *Kebaya Tales: Of Matriarchs, Maidens, Mistresses and Matchmakers*, I wondered how this book would be received. Who would be interested in reading stories about minority communities in a small country in South-east Asia? It is my pleasure to share that it has been an amazing and most satisfying 10-year writing journey. Six months after *Kebaya Tales* was published, the first print run was sold out. It has gone into several reprints since and is an award-winning bestseller today. It has been most warmly received and is sold not just regionally but in the UK, Europe, the US and Australia, and on many online portals. It is also used as a resource in language and literature courses in teacher's colleges and universities.

After *Kebaya Tales* was published in 2011, there was a clamour for more stories. With more stories in my head, and the fact that you can't have a kebaya without the accompanying sarong, I wrote my second collection, *Sarong Secrets: Of Love, Loss and Longing*, published three years later. In 2017, the trilogy was complete with a third collection, *Manek Mischiefs: Of Patriarchs, Playboys and Paramours*, named after the *kasut manek* (beaded slippers) and with the focus on the babas for a change. All three books were nominated for the national Popular-The Star Readers' Choice Awards (Fiction) with *Kebaya Tales* winning the first prize in 2011.

# For Review only

Where does your inspiration come from? I've often been asked this question. I am a sixth generation nyonya with links to both Malaccan and Penang Peranakan communities, as my father was a baba from Malacca and my mother a Penang nyonya. Coming from a unique and flamboyant culture with its share of eccentric personalities, complex cultural rituals, rich array of traditions and beliefs, a wonderful confluence of influences from Chinese, Malay, Indian, Javanese, Thai, Sumatran, Balinese, Portuguese, Dutch and English cultures, it's impossible not to be inspired. The sheer cultural hybridity of it all is absolutely fascinating. It struck me as strange there wasn't much fiction about the babas and nyonias although there were many coffee table books and nonfiction.

I grew up in an extended family setting in a pre-war house in Jalan Sin Chew Kee, off Galloway Road, Kuala Lumpur. Relatives, friends and neighbours dropped by often, and I loved to listen to the chatter and stories. My mother, a superb storyteller, with her dramatic flourishes and onomatopoeia, was also a fantastic cook, attracting even more visitors because they loved her food. My family observed the traditional rituals, celebrated the festivals, honoured our ancestors, cooked fabulous feasts. Thus I grew up with an insider knowledge of the smells, sounds, flavours, noises, cadences and the belief systems of a traditional baba nyonya household. I was exposed from young to a multitude of languages: English, Baba Malay, Penang Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Malay as well as idioms,

earthy expressions, swear words and the fascinating *berlatah* (ranting) of the *bibiks* (older nyonias). Attending auspicious occasions such as weddings and birthday celebrations and funerals and visiting relatives in Malacca, Penang and Singapore also gave me exposure to more cultural content, though I'd no clue then I would write about the babas and nyonias one day.

My purpose in writing is to try and capture the spirit of this culture, its very essence – its cultural hybridity, colour and opulence, its eccentricities and idiosyncrasies, its openness to myriad cultures, its array of intriguing personalities – as well as its less attractive features – its patriarchal structures, rigid social mores, the lack of opportunity for women in the 19th to early 20th centuries.

Altogether, *Kebaya Tales*, *Sarong Secrets* and *Manek Mischiefs* contain a total of 35 short stories, spanning the 19th century to the present. One can discern from the stories how the community has evolved, the issues it faces, its challenges and silent identity struggles, its resilience, its beauty and imperfections. Stories are living expressions of our diverse cultures and shared memories. With increasing homogeneity through globalisation, it has become all the more important to keep our individual cultures alive as expressions of our rich cultural diversity. They capture the zeitgeist of the day. While the perspective of my stories is through the lens of the baba-nyonya, the themes are, really, at the end of the day, human universal themes.

# For Review only

Over the ten years since I wrote *Kebaya Tales*, I have observed a yearning amongst my readers to know more about our localised identities, a deep pride in and appreciation of our history and heritage. The stories also evoked memories amongst readers who had lost touch with their past. A number of young readers informed me that my stories reminded them of their grandmothers and their childhood, leading to a rekindling of ties and seeking of knowledge. One young girl thanked me at a talk I gave and said she didn't know she was a nyonya till she read *Kebaya Tales* and found that the cultural practices, food, language, idiomatic expressions and lifestyles in the stories were all prevalent in her growing-up years and that her grandmother wore the same clothes described in the book. Several readers living in the UK, Europe and US felt nostalgic and sought to touch base again with their 'lost' culture or with members of the larger international community. This sparking of journeys of identity and self-discovery was an unexpected and most rewarding outcome.

As for my own personal journey, it is heartening to see a continuing resurgence of interest in the Peranakan baba nyonya culture. When once it was predicted to go the way of the dodo bird, today it is still alive and evolving in various ways. The Internet has played a large part in connecting Peranakan communities all over the world, sharing and disseminating information. Of course there will always be reinterpretations and concerns about commodification and Disneyfication but that, I guess, is the price of a broadening appeal and interest in the culture.

Cultural activism in my roles as a founding member and the Founding President of the Peranakan Baba Nyonya Association of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (PPBNKLS) from 2005 till 2014 and as a member of several Peranakan associations, heritage advocacy organisations and multiple Facebook groups, giving talks and readings at heritage and literary events, all helped me to connect with a vast network of Peranakans and heritage enthusiasts all over the world and stay tuned to the goings-on of the community. A TEDx talk I gave on my journey titled "A Nyonya Journey" in October 2017 for TEDx Petaling Street attracted 25,000 views on YouTube to date, reflecting keen and continuing interest.

It wasn't easy when I started writing *Kebaya Tales* ten years ago. It is hard enough trying to capture the nuances of a specific ethnic group while writing in English, what more when describing a complex hybrid community and a fusion culture. There was also a lack of precedents. How does one capture the sheer flamboyance and exuberance of this unique culture? Would I ever do justice to it? I hope I have, in a small way. In the process, I've enjoyed this journey very much – it has enriched me personally and I am grateful to all of you who have given me your encouragement, support and appreciation.

*Kebaya Tales: Of Matriarchs, Maidens, Mistresses and Matchmakers* now returns as a 10th anniversary edition with new stories. I thank my publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) and Leslie Lim from Pansing Distribution for their enthusiastic support in pushing for a new edition.

# For Review only

*Kebaya Tales* returns with two brand new short stories, both based on real events. *The Peephole* is not fictitious, but based on my own experience. Till today I am puzzled by the strange sighting. The other story, *Hitam Manis and the Majestic Mayfair Hair Salon*, will resonate with many readers who are familiar with identity politics and skin colour.

To my son, Jan Ming, who has been most helpful reading my new stories and giving enthusiastic feedback – I thank you for your interest and joyful support. To She-reen Wong, my editor, you are a pleasure to work with – I am ever grateful to you for your feedback, interest and efficiency. As always, thank you, Stephen Hall, for your abiding patience, encouragement and support. When I sometimes falter or procrastinate, it is your love and belief in me that keep me going. The journey has been all the richer and easier with you by my side.

*Lee Su Kim*  
*November 2019*

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I am truly indebted to my cousin, Lee Yu Kit, for his photographs – his creative expertise is much appreciated – and Siew Chi for her interest and encouragement.

I’d like to thank my son, Jan Ming, whose keen interest in these stories helped to spur me on. Thank you for all the lovely photos you took for me. Finally, to my husband Stephen Hall – it wouldn’t have been possible without your love, friendship, advice and unfailing support. Thank you for your insightful comments and feedback, and for giving me the space and peace to write. Your deep interest in my Peranakan heritage continues to inspire me to carry on writing and exploring more facets of this unique culture.

## *About the Babas and Nyonyas*

### **Origins**

The babas and nyonyas of Malaysia and Singapore are a unique ethnic group which originated 700 years ago when Chinese traders arrived in Malacca, the centre of the Malacca Sultanate. The traders sojourned in Malacca for around six months, waiting for the monsoons to change direction and bring them home to Fujian, on China’s southeastern coast. They did not bring their women folk along and many intermarried with the local women. It was from these crosscultural unions that the babas and nyonyas evolved. Inter-marriage between the babas and the local women eventually ceased, and for hundreds of years past, the babas married exclusively amongst their own people, becoming an endogamous and elite group.

Another interesting theory as to the origins of the babas and nyonyas is the legend of the Chinese princess, Hang Li Po, sent to marry the Sultan of Malacca to boost diplomatic ties between Malacca and China. The *Malay Annals* describes vividly the arrival of the Chinese princess Hang Liu in Malacca with an entourage of five hundred ladies and courtiers. The princess and her retinue settled down at a

place called Bukit China. The Sultan of Malacca, Sultan Mansur Shah, ordered a well dug at the foot of Bukit China for his Chinese bride. Both the well, Perigi Hang Li Po, and Bukit China are still in existence in Malacca today.

The babas and nyonyas are also known as the Peranakan, the Straits Chinese and Straits-born Chinese. The word 'Peranakan' is derived from the Malay word '*anak*' which means 'child'. The term refers to local-born as well as the offspring of foreigner-native union. Baba is an honorific from northern India for 'man', nyonya is an honorific for 'woman' in Malay adopted from the Portuguese word for grandmother.

## Culture

The Baba nyonya culture is a rare and beautiful blend of many cultures – Chinese and Malay, mixed with elements from Javanese, Sumatran, Thai, Burmese, Balinese, Indian, Portuguese, Dutch and English cultures. The influence of European elements was because Malacca was conquered by three colonial powers successively: the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1824.

The culture is very much localised in essence, and proudly Chinese in form. The babas kept to their patriarchal culture, with male offsprings bearing the family name, while the mother culture was maintained by the womenfolk. In Malacca and Singapore, the Peranakan spoke Baba Malay,

a patois of the Malay language with many loan words from Hokkien and English. In Penang, Hokkien was spoken instead of Baba Malay. The customs were heavily Chinese in form, as the babas and nyonyas clung loyally to their Chinese identity. Filial piety was very important and ancestral worship was core to the culture.

The lifestyle of the nyonyas was a unique balance between Chinese and Malay world traditions. The traditional nyonya costume was the *baju panjang* which can be traced to Javanese origins. It consisted of a long, loose calf-length top with long sleeves worn over a batik sarong. The collar is Chinese and the dress is fastened by a set of *kerosang* (three brooches linked by a gold chain).

By the end of the 1920s, young nyonyas abandoned the austere *baju panjang* for the more attractive nyonya kebaya. The short kebaya was more flattering and shapely, with intricate embroidery at the neckline, sleeves and hem. Nyonyas preferred the Pekalongan batik sarongs from Java because of their vibrant colours and motifs of birds, flowers and animals.

Nyonya food is a wonderful combination of Malay and Chinese cuisine with Southeast Asian and European influences. Using a variety of ingredients and cooking methods, herbs and spices and occasionally, western influences such as Worcester sauce, the nyonyas concocted a unique cuisine – the original fusion food with predominantly hot, spicy and piquant flavours. Peranakan cuisine is labour intensive and considered an art. Condiments are important

on the nyonya's dining table especially the ubiquitous *sambal belachan*. A nyonya's cooking ability could be assessed, in the olden days, from the rhythms of the way she pounded the *sambal belachan*.

### The babas and nyonys today

Today, the baba and nyonya community still survives with its strongholds in Malacca, Penang and Singapore. Many younger generations of Peranakan have moved to live and work in Kuala Lumpur. (There are also Peranakan communities in Kelantan and Terengganu on the east coast of Peninsular Malaya; Phuket, Thailand; Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam.) With globalisation and further migration, the Peranakans have settled all over the world with large communities in Melbourne, Sydney and London.

Both the old historic Quarters of Georgetown and Malacca, where Peranakan enclaves are located with its unique architecture and lifestyles, were declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 2009.



*Kebayas are the beautifully embroidered blouses worn by the nyonys and matched with sarongs. Its origin is obscure but is believed to have come from Java. The word 'kebaya' comes from the Portuguese word 'kobaya'. Wearing a kebaya is like reconnecting with another world – the world of the nyonys which moves at a gentler, more languid pace.*





### **PANTUN NYONYA JATI**

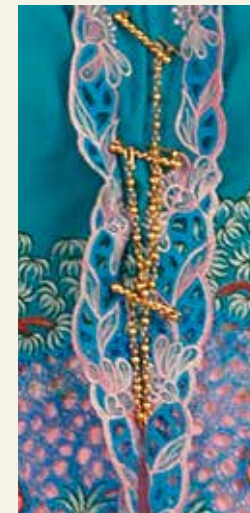
*Bungah telang warna biru  
Tanda kueh apom bokkuah  
Nyonya jati rajin poonsoo  
Rumah tangga perintah semua.*

*Kain robia jait kebaya  
Sarong batik pakaian Nyonya  
Budaya Baba adat kaya  
Ikut turut dewasa belia.*

*The butterfly pea flower is blue  
Infuses the pancake through  
The Nyonya diligent and skilful  
Matriarch of the home she rules.*

*Robia voile sewn into kebaya  
Batik sarong dons the Nyonya  
The Baba culture rich & alive  
Young and Old must let it thrive.*

*A pantun for Kebaya Tales  
in honour of the nyonys by  
Baba Chan Eng Thai,  
Peranakan Association, Singapore,  
27 August 2010*



*Kebayas are fastened together in place with the kerosang rantai, three brooches connected to one another with a delicate decorative chain.*



*The kerosang was painstakingly handcrafted by Chinese craftsmen in the past. They were made of 22K gold and lavishly decorated with intan (diamond chips). Sometimes, diamonds or precious stones such as rubies, jade or pearls were used.*

## *Boxed-In Bibik*

The Matriarch passed away at the age of eighty-nine. She was given a grand send-off in a lavish funeral, replete with banners, gongs, Buddhist monks reciting prayers for the safe passage of her soul, a five-night wake and a marching band.

“When they put me into the coffin, I want the band to play ‘Taps’. My favourite tune. Don’t you all dare forget,” she had reminded her daughter-in-law, Janet.

“Such a sad sad tune...guaranteed to make everyone cry,” she fixed a toothless grin at Janet and chuckled, looking quite pleased with herself.

“Remember, you lot. I want a nine-piece band, not a miserly three gig like what Si-Guat Neo had. I want a grand funeral. Don’t sting. There’ll be plenty of money left from what your Pa left me,” she nagged her children in her more lucid moments.

So the family had to look for a marching brass band. It was hard to find a nine-piece band – the local funeral parlour in Malacca had a four-man band comprising rickety, creaky octogenarians who looked as if one more puff on the trombone or trumpet would send them to meet their Maker. Finally, the manager of Kiew Kiew Blossom Nite Club & Cabaret at Jalan Bendera was persuaded to allow five members of his resident band to moonlight as funeral musicians.

# For Review only

The old lady had lived such a frugal lifestyle, it became extremely harrowing to certain family members that she got more and more extravagant the more ill and dying she became.

“I have already given instructions to Janet,” she croaked to her family summoned to her bedside on yet another false alarm. “After I am dead, I want to be dressed in my most expensive kebaya – Janet knows which one – my best *kerosang*, and my diamond earrings. And my favourite slippers – the red beaded *kasut manik*. Don’t anyone dare go against my wishes.”

What?! Rosie, Daughter-in-law Number One, who had been doing a poor job of massaging the matriarch’s bony shoulders, jerked upright, forgetting to maintain her staccato-like clumsy kneading for a full two minutes. She had hoped that Bibik’s gorgeous *kerosang* – three delicate brooches of filigree gold metalwork studded with *intan* diamond flakes, linked by a dainty gold chain – would fall into her hands when the bossy old cow died. But now, the wrinkled vainpot wants to wear her three-carat diamond earrings as well! What next? Who the hell is going to look at her wherever the hell she’s going? If the old loony went on like this, the entire family would go bankrupt. I didn’t marry the eldest son of the family for nothing, fumed Rosie.

“And don’t forget my gold anklets. I want to go out in style as they say...*heh heh*. And my silver belt – the one with the biggest buckle...make sure my sarong is fastened properly..., *nanti sarong jatuh*,” croaked the old Bibik,

enjoying her own bawdy humour, as she winked at Janet and glared at Rosie.

“If she lives another week, your crazy mother may decide to give everything to charity next. What are we to do, Boon Eng? You are the eldest son – do something!” Rosie complained bitterly to her husband that evening over dinner.

“What do you expect me to do? Can’t you be patient for once? She won’t be around much longer,” he snapped back.



One Sunday morning, the family was summoned to Bibik’s home again – the doctors warned that her time was nearly up. This time they were assured it wasn’t a false alarm. They gathered around her bedside in the large dark room upstairs. It was gloomy and musty, smelling of clammy illness, alcohol swabs, antiseptic and Chinese medicated oil. But the beautiful stained glass windows, expensive art deco furniture and the many framed photos of the matriarch in happier times with her late husband dressed to the nines, including an autographed picture taken with a young Tunku in London, and another with a coterie of Sultans and British colonial big shots, whispered of happier and grander times in the distant past.

The old Bibik lay half-submerged in her king-sized bed, surrounded by pillows, blankets and hot water bottles.

# For Review only

She had tubes sticking in and coming out of her. Her colonoscopy bag – what she jokingly called her *jamban* bag – contained a few ugly streaks of greenish-yellow bile. She was still alert, her eyes darting about the room, her breath coming in loud noisy rasps. She kept pointing to something at the foot of her bed.

“I see two persons...there...in front of me. They are waiting. It is time to go,” she mumbled, her hands trembling, her bony fingers jabbing in the air. Her large family of two daughters, two sons, in-laws, grandchildren and great-grandchild gathered around her, the womenfolk weeping and sobbing, the little ones puzzled, unsure, inexperienced with death’s throes.

“My mother...she is waiting. Waiting for me, I can see her. Ma...”

Her relatives could see no-one but were edgy, frightened at the thought of an unseen presence.

Boon Eng, kneeling beside her bed, suddenly howled like a coyote in a cheap Western spaghetti movie. He grabbed her hand and plastered it against his cheek. The tragic expression on his face was limited to his twitching facial muscles, his eyes remained cold and unfeeling.

“Ma, Ma...don’t go...*sob*...don’t leave us. You are my...*sob*...everything,” he sobbed.

His mother’s piercing gaze would have frightened even Boon Eng himself had he looked up at her but he was bent over, shoulders heaving, trying to get his tear ducts to function.

“Ah my dear Boon Eng, always all talk but no action. *Tosa cakap lagi*. How much more do you want?”

She called for Janet, her favourite daughter-in-law.

“Janet! Janet, where are you? Bibik wants to say something to you,” Rosie screeched jealously, flapping gratuitously around her mother-in-law. “Where’s that sister-in-law of mine? You can never find her when you want her.”

“I’m here,” said Janet, standing quietly in the doorway. She squeezed her way through to the front.

“Ahh, Janet. Come here,” the old Bibik smiled fondly at her daughter-in-law, and reached out weakly for her hand.

“Take good care of the house...” she instructed Janet. Then, her voice took on a strong urgent timbre. “You will clear up my room when I am gone, Janet? *Kam sia lu, Janet*.”

“Yes, Bibik. Please don’t worry about such things now,” comforted Janet.

Rosie, leaning over to eavesdrop, smirked when she heard what Bibik was asking Janet to do. Ahh, poor Janet, ever the doormat.

Janet was married to Bibik’s second son, Boon Guan. They both lived in the family home with Bibik. When Bibik became very ill, it was Janet who gave up her teaching job to take care of the old lady. Although Bibik had two daughters, they were not too keen to become caregivers, preferring to leave it all to Janet, their devoted sister-in-law. They made a big show of fussing over their mother when they dropped

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by to visit, but never went beyond shouting commands at the servants and giving instructions to Janet. Rosie would visit briefly, dropping in erratically to check if anyone was plotting to influence the old woman to change her will. The old cow had millions stashed away so you could never tell, just in case.

But Janet was safe, Rosie was sure of it. The guileless insipid thing. Not a scheming nerve in her brain or body. The unpaid Florence Nightingale. It was Janet who emptied the contents of the night chamber pot, fed and massaged the old woman, emptied her colonoscopy bag, administered the painkillers, tended to the bedsores. Yes, you can always depend on Janet, the woman with the eternal scent of Dettol.

Janet's cheeks were wet with tears as she reached out to hug the old lady and whispered, "Goodbye, Bibik. Thank you for all your kindness to me."

How strange, Janet thought, did the old lady just wink at her or was she grimacing from the pain afflicting her?

The matriarch looked at everyone in the room, her gaze resting a little while longer on her only great-grandchild. Her breathing became more intense and laboured. She sighed and closed her eyes. The matriarch went to sleep and never woke up again.



Hardly a fortnight had passed when Boon Eng's car came squealing up the driveway of the family home, and Boon Eng and Rosie emerged, slamming the car doors.

"Open up, open up, Janet," screeched Rosie as her husband banged on the wooden slats of the huge door with his car keys impatiently.

Janet dashed hurriedly out of the kitchen to open the door. Boon Eng and Rosie stormed into the hall.

"I want to know where my mother's nyonyaware collection is! I'm the eldest son. It belongs to me and Rosie now," Boon Eng demanded.

"Yah, where's all the crockery gone? Wah, don't simply quietly *sapu* everything hah! And where is the blue and white English tea set? The one with the Queen Elizabeth's head?" demanded Rosie. "Bibik said it's mine."

"Where's Boon Guan? Call your husband here, Janet, and let's get this settled. How dare you take my mother's things without asking me?" Boon Eng commanded Janet.

Janet was sickened by the wild accusations.

"What are you talking about? I have lived here ever since I got married. I have been using the same plates and cups and spoons for the past fifteen years. I haven't taken anything. You can take whatever you want. Just stop this nonsense," she protested.

Just then, Boon Guan stepped into the hall on hearing the commotion. "Big Brother, everything has been divided fairly and equally. What are you squabbling about? Mother is turning in her grave at your behaviour," said Boon Guan.



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## About the Author

Lee Su Kim is a Malaysian writer whose creative, literary and cultural activist endeavours and scholarly works have received considerable attention in Southeast Asia and internationally. Her light touches of humour, dry wit, sharp observations and fluid prose can be enjoyed in her three bestsellers – *Malaysian Flavours: Insights into Things Malaysian*, *Manglish: Malaysian English at its Wackiest* and *A Nyonya In Texas: Insights of a Straits Chinese Woman in the Lone Star State*.

Her first collection of short stories, *Kebaya Tales: Of Matriarchs, Maidens, Mistresses and Matchmakers*, is a bestseller and was awarded the national Popular-Star Readers' Choice Awards (Fiction) in 2011. This was followed by *Sarong Secrets: Of Love, Loss and Longing*. *Manek Mischiefs: Of Patriarchs, Playboys and Paramours* completes her much loved trilogy of short stories on the Peranakan Babas and Nyonyas.

In 2019, she co-authored a new and latest edition of *Manglish: Malaysian English at its Wackiest* with Stephen Hall. She also wrote more new stories for the 10th anniversary edition of *Kebaya Tales*.

She was born in Kuala Lumpur to a baba from Malacca and a nyonya from Penang. Educated at the Bukit Bintang Girls' School, Kuala Lumpur, Su Kim holds a Bachelor of

Arts in English, a Diploma and Masters in Education from the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

She lived in the US for four years and earned a Doctorate in Education from the University of Houston in 2001. Formerly Associate Professor at the School of Language Studies & Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, where she lectured and researched on language, culture and identity, she is now a writer, educator and cultural activist.

Active in heritage advocacy, Su Kim is the Founding President of the Peranakan Baba Nyonya Association of Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (PPBNKLS). As the President of the Protem committee (2005-2008) and then as the first President of PPBNKLS (2008-2014), she was involved in promoting the baba nyonya culture and heritage and in forging links with the various Peranakan associations in the region.

She is also a public speaker and has given many talks, readings and presentations all over the world. An invited speaker at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival and the Singapore Writer's Festival, she has a Youtube video sharing her love for writing and her unique heritage – “A Nyonya Journey” at TEDx Petaling Street 2017.

