

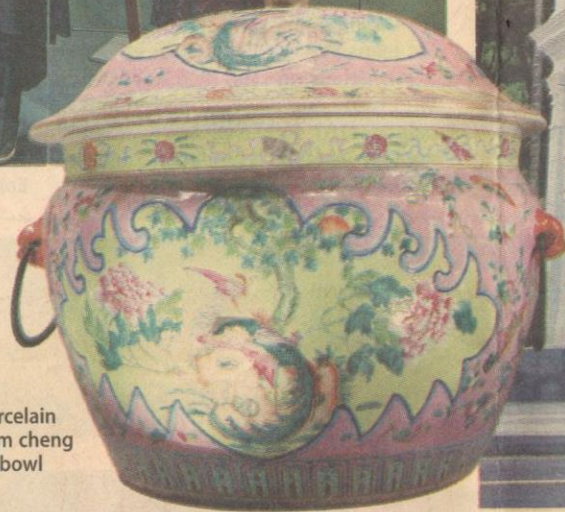
Straits-born splendour

Step into the enchanting world of the peranakan, with all its intricate rituals of daily life. **TAN BEE HONG** is fascinated

Peranakan
wedding
procession



Porcelain
kam cheng
or bowl



STANDING imperiously in Armenian Street, Singapore, like a regal matriarch, is the Peranakan Museum, housed in a stately whitewashed building.

Stucco trim cornices with details painted a pleasant cream shade as well as blinds with blue and white stripes give it a great presence.

Built in 1910, the three-storey building originally served as the Tao Nan Chinese School until it was decided to move the school to the suburbs in 1976 to cater to the growing student population.

Inside the colonial building are Neo-Classical and French-Renaissance architectural features with wooden flooring and 10 galleries that feature mainly the Chinese-Peranakan community which contributed largely to the culture and history of Singapore.

Visitors will be introduced to the heritage of the nyonya and baba through music, stories and exhibits.

Young visitors are encouraged too. There are 20 interactive stations for children to help inculcate an interest in the peranakan heritage. These include embossing stations.

Children under 12 will be given a Family Treasures card which they can use to emboss eight peranakan motifs stationed throughout the galleries.

Peranakan origins

Ground Floor: The exhibitions don't start only after you cross the threshold. Step back and cross over to the opposite side of the road so you can admire a tableaux of family characters set in bronze.

On the five-foot way, an "old man" stands, holding tightly the hand of a "young boy" of four or five years old who is pulling away as he waves at someone in the house. Follow the direction of his eyes and you'll see a "young woman" peeping out from the second floor window. And on the short flight of steps leading to the entrance, a "cat" yawns and stretches.

Cross the threshold at the front doors and you immediately feel how cool the place is. OK, it's probably the air-conditioning but it does give a feel of how it must have felt in the early 1900 when world temperatures were many degrees lower.

There is a museum shop and reception area as well as a gallery themed Origins. This explains the term peranakan and that though the museum focuses on the Peranakan Chinese (who form the biggest number of Peranakan in Southeast Asia), there are other communities of Peranakan such as the Jawi Peranakan (Indian Muslim) and the Chitty (Indian).

There are portraits of present-day Peranakan, from ordinary men in the street to celebrities including actors and politicians.

Wedding rituals

Second Floor: It gets more interesting upstairs. Galleries 2-5 are dedicated to the complicated traditional 12-day peranakan wedding ceremony and rituals from chiu tau (coming of age) to lap chai (exchange of gifts) and the wedding procession.

I love the talking portraits of the patriarch and matriarch of the family in the thia besar (literally big hall or living room). Really cool! Reminds me of the pictures described in Harry Potter books and newspapers where pictures move and talk.

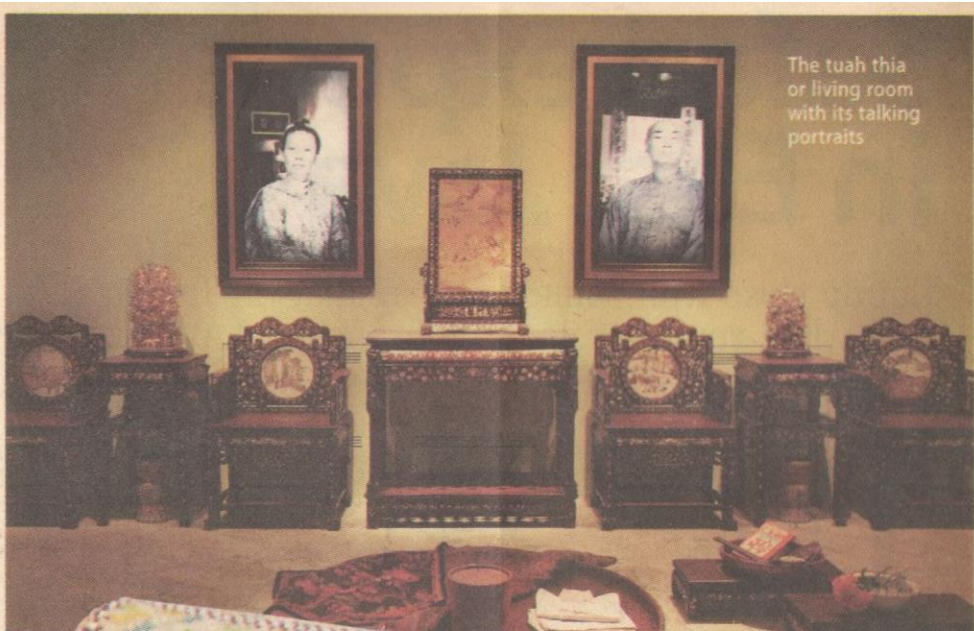
Here, the two old folks are discussing on-going preparations for their son's wedding. You can walk around and see the elaborate wedding gear, the wedding chamber and jewellery as well as the gifts exchanged between the two families, including jewellery, dowry, candles, oranges, garments, brandy and a leg of pork and its significance.

Admire the wedding bed that once belonged to Mrs Quah Hong Chiam of Penang who gave birth to seven of her 12 children on this bed. The bed was specially commissioned by her father as part of her wedding trousseau. It has incredibly elaborate carvings of flowers, birds and other animals.

You can also see fine samples of nyonya ware, especially the beautifully painted kam



The facade of the Peranakan Museum in Armenian Street, Singapore



The tuah thia or living room with its talking portraits



Nyonya beaded purse with flower motif



cheng (porcelain pots with covers), delicate beadwork for slippers, purses and spectacle cases.

Nyonya at home

On the top floor, food and feasting take centre stage, with a complete set of crockery and paraphernalia used in the kitchen. There is also a tok panjang, a long banquet table set up like how the peranakan used to entertain at dinner parties.

Religious beliefs (the Peranakan were Buddhists and Christians and some prayed to a whole pantheon of Chinese deities) are also showcased in one of the galleries.

Then there is a section devoted to entertainment brochures and books on Chinese opera as well as clothing. Those made for newborn children are particularly interesting. One gallery also shows ancestral worship and a funeral procession.

Special exhibits

It's a story that has been told and retold countless times.

Ramayana Revisited: A Tale of Love & Adventure will be on at the Peranakan

FAST FACTS

The museum is open from 9am to 7pm from Tuesday to Sunday and up to 9pm on Friday. On Monday, it is open from 1pm to 7pm. Adults pay S\$6 (RM13.5) while a family ticket for five is \$20. It's free for children under 6.

Guided tours in English, Japanese and Mandarin are available. For more information, call 65-6332 7591.

Museum till Feb 27.

Yes, apart from the permanent exhibits, the museum also showcases exhibitions with specific themes. For Ramayana, shadow puppets, paintings on paper and cloth, and photographs of ancient monuments representing the epic from South and Southeast Asia are used to tell the timeless tale based on the theme of Ramcharitmanas, a 17th Century text from India.

There are seven sections: Bala Kanda (Childhood

Chapter), Ayodhya Kanda (Ayodhya Chapter), Aranya Kanda (Forest Chapter), Kishkindha Kanda (Meeting the Monkey Army Chapter), Sundara Kanda (Hanuman's search for Sita Chapter), Lanka Kanda (Battle of Lanka Chapter) and Uttara Kanda (Epilogue).

In each section, two or three events are further identified for storytelling and a special focus on important characters will be introduced in the relevant chapter.

Special guided tours in English for the exhibition are available every Tuesday to Friday at 12.30pm.

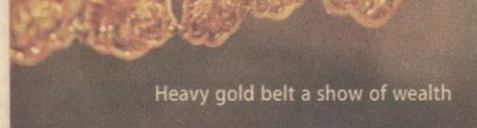
phoenixbee@nst.com.my



Wedding bed custom-made for Mrs Quah Hong Chiam



What a stove in a nyonya kitchen looked like



Heavy gold belt a show of wealth



Altar set with all the paraphernalia for praying