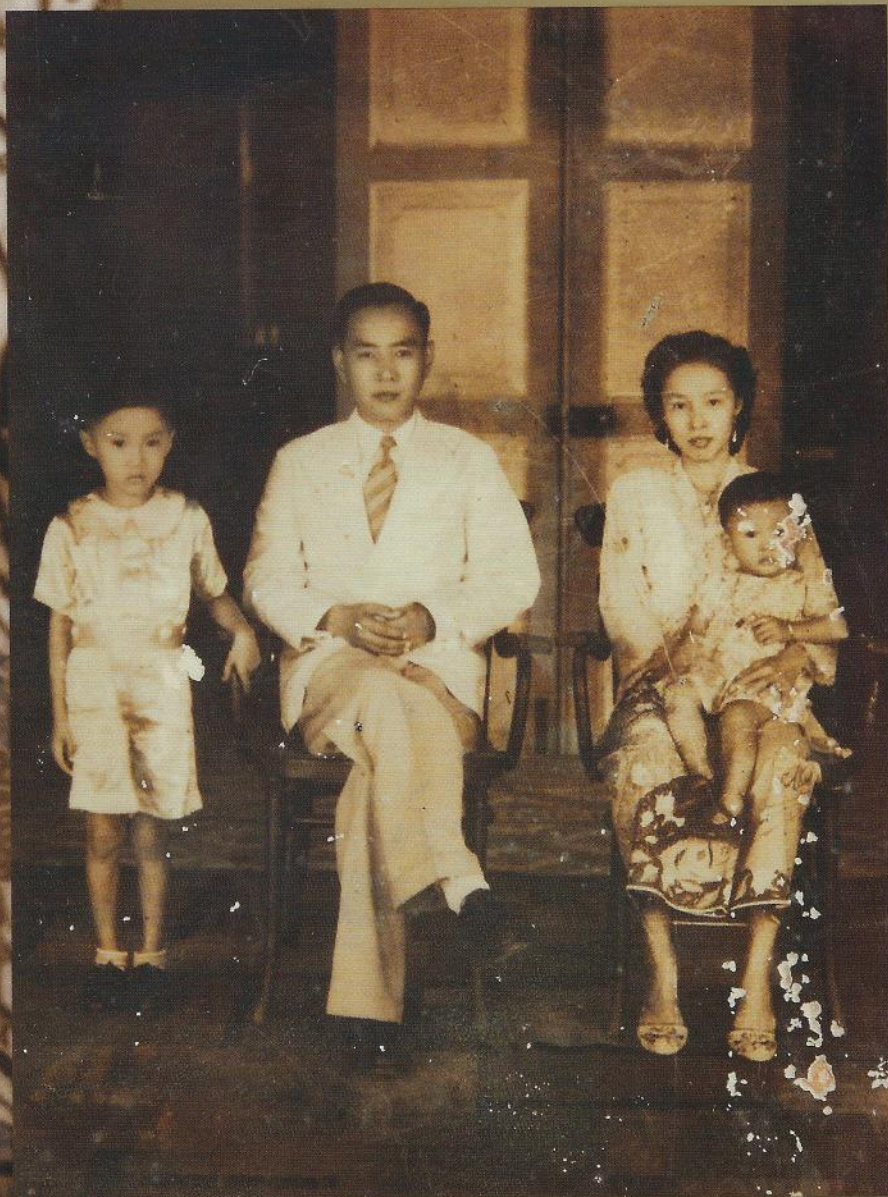


LIFE & TIMES
OF A REAWAKENED
PERANAKAN

A
BABA
ALBUM



PETER WEE

Author:
Peter Wee Ban Kheng

Editor:
Eddy Koh

Photographers:
**Peter Chua/Caesar Production
Eddy Koh**

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Family portrait (1947) of
Joseph & Josephine Wee,
& sons Joseph & Peter

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For
Alvin Ong -
from
Baba Peter Wee
17/June/2017

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Author of four books in the Straits Chinese Heritage collection		Duty called when I was invited to assist in the setting up of its Straits Chinese Gallery	
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Straits Chinese antiques collector extraordinaire		I was overjoyed when Christie's invited me to join their project team for its Southeast Asian auctions from 1994 to 1997	
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“In the early 1930s, Tan Cheng Kee subscribed to the Daily Mirror from London, which took more than three weeks by sea for the monthly publication to reach Singapore. He would read them voraciously before passing them over to his sister Hong Neo, my grandmother, who was also an avid reader interested in world affairs.” – Mark Wee, April 2015



Born in 1927, Mark Wee is the grandson of Tan Hong Neo, the sister of grandfather Tan Cheng Kee. In 2015, he was a spritely 89 despite walking with the assistance of crutches due to osteoporosis. He even managed to continue driving around everywhere in his car, swam twice a week at Serangoon Country Club, cycled regularly, and kayaked occasionally. He remembered mother most fondly as she babysat him when he was a toddler. Mark’s father Wee Huck Su helped to manage grandfather’s properties and estate. He recalled enjoying free movies at Alhambra, but he explained that the complimentary pass issued by grandfather was valid only on the third day after the shows were opened to the public.

WOMEN PUZZLE

Grandfather never spoke to mother about his wife Ong Whye Gan (spelled ‘Gunn’ instead of Gan in his last will and testament). So mother never met nor knew anything about her, and she said none of her relatives could tell her anything either. It was a strange mystery. Some said that grandfather loved his life as a swinging bachelor, enjoying the company of a bevy of women. He had clashed with his father on his remaining single well into his 30s. Compared to his Baba contemporaries, he married late, and became a father only when he was 40. It was said he didn’t appreciate his arranged marriage even though he left specific instructions in his will to be buried next to grandmother in Bukit Brown. Grandfather also revealed in his will that the house at 64 Carpmael Road was purchased by Ong Whye Gan so she likely lived there during her lifetime.

Considered charming with the ladies, there were several close female companions in grandfather’s life. His favourite mistress was a woman nicknamed Bibik Burok whom he visited regularly at her house in Geylang. But she was said to be the opposite of Burok (ugly in Baba-Malay). Those who had seen her described her as beautiful, and commented how grandfather and she made a perfect pair.

Many even addressed and referred to her as Burok Cheng Kee as confirmation of her place in grandfather’s heart.

Well cared for and tended to by his closest female cousin and confidante Tan Chow Neo till his last days, grandfather passed away at the age of 65 in his East Coast Road house but his funeral was held at the family mansion in Waterloo Street. He was baptised a Catholic and given the Christian name John one month before his death. Grandfather must have given serious thought to his religious conversion as he devoted many pages in his notebooks to Christian spirituality, and the Catholic faith.

Echoing the same meticulous attention he bestowed on every aspect of his business, acquisition of properties, and distribution of his estate to ensure his family was financially secure and comfortable, grandfather applied the same to ensuring his own place and eternal life in heaven.

Grandfather’s cousin Tan Chow Neo (seated right) was his lady-in-waiting. A caring man in life and death, he bequeathed her and his sister Tin Neo (seated centre) each a share of his estate



“From photos to private letters and diaries, I combed through Tan Cheng Kee’s personal effects to bring him to life. His private diaries were a window to a thoroughly modern man who read extensively from George Orwell to Sir Walter Scott. He had little sentimentality for traditions of the past. Many of his writings transcended the great distances of his time, speaking to me as an artist from the future attempting to paint his portrait in oil.” – Alvin Ong, April 2015



Alvin Ong

Youthful artist with an old soul

After commissioning Alvin Ong to paint my portrait, I discovered that the winner of the 24th UOB Painting of the Year Award in 2005 at the age of 16 is an old soul in a young vessel. Intrigued by my faded family albums, and a bygone Baba era, he made me his mentor-cum-muse of sorts. While pursuing a Master of Art at London's Royal College of Art, he penned his thoughts on our friendship



ALVIN'S OWN TAKE

“My conversations and fascination with Peter began in 2012 as an artist commissioned to paint his portrait. The sitting took place one morning at his Dunbar Walk house. Antique sideboards, mother-of-pearl furniture and old photographs lining the walls are complemented by an assortment of tropical plants outside. He would tell me their names as we passed them - belimbing-belimbing, buah nonah, pisang rajah, and pandan serani. Even now the memory of their names and their sounds seem to belong to an older, richer and more soulful world in the home-country where I grew up.

Beneath the batik shirt and his regal, casual demeanor, I saw a man and his house shaped by time and memory. His old photos, many of which have been included in this book, are a glimpse into a Singapore that has almost completely disappeared. I felt I was like a silent observer, privy to a very personal and intimate cache of culture and identity. These thoughts eventually gave rise to a work titled *The Memory Palace*, painted in 2014 whilst I was pursuing my BFA in Oxford, and thinking about what constituted 'home'.

Over the years, Peter has become like a grandfather figure to me. Through our

weekly breakfasts, trips to the morning markets, (Peranakan) association events, seminars, music and even the (Baba-Malay) theatre, he has showed me how culture isn't a museum, but something like a living and breathing organism.

Each time I was back from the UK for my term breaks, I'd assist him alongside Eddy (Koh), sifting through his personal archives, dust, photos, documents, receipts, postcards, diaries, and notes to self. This was a very visceral, powerful and complicated experience for me. Through the photos, I was taken out of the present and into the past. I witnessed how the photograph responded from film to the digital, from black and white to colour. I also started to compare how physical landscapes in these memories have changed in the present. It is an incredible testament to the power of time over us all.

At the same time, his archival collections remain very diverse and eclectic. His personal photos and effects mingle seamlessly alongside those of other individuals in the community. A family vacation snapshot is found randomly alongside an old Lee Brothers studio photograph inherited from an acquaintance. Others suggest a more

Facing Page
Alvin and I at Dunbar Walk after he completed my portrait in 2012

01
Peter Wee (2012) Acrylic on wood, 30 x 50cm. Collection of Katong Antique House

02
The four family portraits I commissioned Alvin to paint



Facing Page
The Memory Palace (2014)
 Artist: Alvin Ong.
 Oil on linen, 50 x 90cm.
 Collection of the artist
 01
The Holy Family (2015)
 Artist: Alvin Ong.
 Oil on linen, 150 x 200cm.
 Private collection
 02
The Last Supper (2015)
 Artist: Alvin Ong.
 Oil on linen, 142 x 200cm.
 Private collection



01



02

coherent grouping as a series about a family wedding, and so on. It often feels like piecing together a gigantic jigsaw puzzle, but perhaps therein lies what makes Peter so interesting as a subject.

No longer one man's view of the world, but rather a summation of how Peter and many individuals see themselves from time to time, and at the same time. It is about plurality and diversity in the Peranakan community. It is also about how memory and community are intimately intertwined, and how they shape our identities. To quote Peter, 'To know the present is to know the past' "