

Lilian Tong (Ed). *Once Upon a Kamcheng*. Penang: Phoenix Press, 2020. 183 pp. ISBN: 9789671771112.

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Once Upon a Kamcheng was published in conjunction with the centennial celebrations of the State Chinese (Penang) Association (formerly known as The British Straits Chinese Association) at the end of 2020. This collection was compiled by *Peranakan* (or Straits Chinese) culture advocate Lilian Tong, and consists of thirteen stories and memoirs of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* of Penang, whose lives have heretofore been insufficiently chronicled or documented.

The title recalls archetypal fairy tales and the book is ornately decorated, containing numerous sepia-toned photographs of *Peranakan* patriarchs and matriarchs, as well as the *Peranakan* material culture of lavish embroidery, *kamcheng*, and jewellery, reconstructing a bygone era. The book revels in a kind of “Once Upon a Time” nostalgia that celebrates the glorious past of the *Peranakan* Chinese community of Penang. Tong describes the *kamcheng* as “the charming lidded jar with exquisite paintings imported from China that the Baba Nyonya have claimed as their own” (5). Like its Hokkien homonym, which means “a sense of deep, intimate, emotive bond connecting two or more persons; love, loyalty, affection, friendship” (5), this much-needed book warmly invokes the culture and values of this unique and marginalised community in Malaysia. *Once Upon a Kamcheng* attempts to capture some of the complex realities of Penang as a colonial Straits Settlement and a postcolonial city.

The range of stories spans the privileged lifestyles of *Babas* indulging in cars, horses, and planes (among others), to growing up in rubber estates, to the disappearing matriarch of the past century. Many of the stories capture the special bonds with matriarchal *Nyonya* grandmothers, particularly seen in Pat Lim Chooi Ewe’s memories of her *Ah Mah*’s healing prowess and her knowledge of herbs, *jampi*, and local folk medicine in the collection’s opening story; whilst Jewel Tan Xin Yi shares how she came to inherit a peacock with a flower basket hairpin that had been in the family for five generations. But it is Doreen Lim Swee Lin’s poignant account of her father’s World War II experience that struck a personal chord with me; the story reminded me of my cousins asking my father how he and my *Pek Pek* (paternal uncle) had escaped persecution during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. My father’s nonchalant response at that time was, “We wore our singlets and just walked away.” It was only years later that it dawned on me that they had probably escaped the Sook

Ching Massacre of 1942. My cousin, also remembering that conversation, had related to me that a close friend of my father and my uncle was too fearful to join them. That friend was never seen again.

There are only three stories in this collection written by *Babas* rather than *Nyonyas*. Michael Cheah contributes two: *Polo, Planes, and Playboys* (86-91) and *A Nyonya Matriarch's Final Odyssey* (92-97); and Tan Kean Teong offers up *One Moment in Time* (132-149), sharing memories of his growing up years in the postcolonial Penang of the 1960s. But *Polo, Planes, and Playboys* gives fascinating glimpses into the colonial world of the Penang *Peranakans*, who sent many of their sons to England for a British education. They, therefore, became Anglophiles appreciating tennis, cricket, polo, afternoon teas, and soirees; yet Cheah highlighted that they were O.C.B.C—Orang China Bukan China (Chinese who are not quite Chinese), playing on the acronym for Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation (ironically also established by the *Peranakans*). Cheah's family archives of photographs included in the story are most intriguing. A photo of the Heah brothers (Cheah's maternal granduncles) with a biplane in the background introduces the memoir with the caption: "The two brothers are from different mothers." And Cheah's grandfather, Cheah Seng Yean, leading his winning horse (presumably at the Penang Turf Club), with a local syce in the photograph, evidently shows their comprador position. But the most fascinating photograph is of Rockhill Bungalow, presumably also belonging to Cheah Seng Yean (never explicitly mentioned but suggested), depicting him, his brother (Cheah Seng Khim), and Estate Manager Mr. Jones in a sarong, "enjoying tankards of beer" while "a slave boy in loincloth squats at his feet" (88)—so was Mr. Jones an employee of Cheah Seng Yean? This very short memoir of Cheah explains the significance of the *Peranakan* community to Penang at the turn of the 20th century with hardly any reference to the playboys in the title, but with subtle suggestions capturing the decadence of that bygone age. It is the lacuna between the laconic memoir and its photographs that raises many questions about life in British colonial Penang.

A Nyonya Matriarch's Final Odyssey tells the story of Cheah's maternal great grandmother, Kang Cheng Swee, who hailed from the family of the second wealthiest Teochew rice merchant in Rangoon, Burma. She became the second wife of Penang magnate Heah Swee Lee, and the mistress of their mansion on Northam Road; but we are not told any details about Heah's principal wife. In her 90s, Kang was diagnosed with cancer and journeyed with her son by ship to China to seek a cure, but died upon arriving in Shanghai. Her body was treated and sealed in a coffin and made its lengthy southern sojourn back to Penang with Cheah's grandfather, where she lay for another month to allow relatives from England and Burma to pay their last respects. And finally, with a grand procession, she was loaded onto a railway ferry to Butterworth, and then to the Heah family mansion at Bukit Tambun. Funerary extravagance and rites were of paramount importance to the elite

Peranakan Chinese (rarely seen now) to show their societal standing, and Kang's arduous and elaborate final "odyssey" to her resting abode is a testament to this.

While the book is presented beautifully in visual terms, it lacks literary merit. The writing is also uneven. Tong's *Father in a Christmas Turkey Pan* documents intricate *Peranakan* death rituals with stilted humour. The collection attempts to construct (and archive) a historical record of a once elite community under British colonial rule. In a sense, the title attests to the book's commodification of *Peranakan* culture. This can also be observed in the contrived, "studio-staged", and self-conscious construction of recent coloured photographs of Tong and her family in traditional *Peranakan* regalia mimicking vintage black and white ones, and in the stories of *The Peacock with a Flower Basket* (37-50), *Father in a Christmas Turkey Pan* (51-86), *Nasi Lemak and Sambal* (127-132), *Sintok and Kemenyen* (161-166), and *Mother and the Moon Goddess* (167-179). The latter four stories are particularly choreographed attempts to record forgotten traditional practices such as the ostentatious wedding, death, and *sintok* (cleansing) rituals by recalling and reinscribing their new-found meaning and understanding of them. The inaccuracy of Penang *Peranakan* Chinese exchanging *nasi lemak* at weddings is a case in point, which was only practised in the south.

Despite its shortcomings, the book is an earnest effort to document some of the (at least) 100 years of Penang *Peranakan* history and culture for posterity. This is indeed a salutary undertaking considering that the government of Malaysia, unlike Singapore, does not generously fund the archiving and preservation of the unique and marginal *Peranakan* cultures of Malaysia.