

accessible to a literate middle class through building manuals and pattern books that contained detailed measurements and materials' lists. Anyone wanting to build a classical style home or public building anywhere in the world now had access to comprehensive information about designs, dimensions and materials. The sameness of style found in buildings throughout the British Empire can be attributed to the wide availability of these resource books on classical architecture.

By the 18th century, rising fortunes also enabled many households to send their sons abroad. With its splendid collection of antiquities and classical Roman ruins, Italy became a popular 'Grand Tour' destination for young British gentlemen seeking to further their education in the art, culture and politics of Europe. Before long, classical design became a feature of British homes, which until then, had been primarily of timber-frame construction in the Elizabethan or Tudor styles from which Singapore's 'black and white' houses descend. Classical ornamentation such as pilasters or Palladian windows on a home's façade, whether in a colonial outpost or Britain itself, increased not only the building's appearance of grandeur but also the social standing of its owner.

Aware that visual proportions affect the mind much as music affects the ear, classical architects used both proportion and symmetry to create visual harmony. It was a tenet of classical architecture, for instance, that all buildings on a street be built in a single plane set at right angles to the street or that the windows of a classically designed townhouse be the same size regardless of which storey they illuminated. These rules applied whether the buildings graced the streets of London or the colonial enclaves of Singapore, Malacca or Penang.

In a shophouse, well-balanced, symmetrical windows occupy a large portion of the front façade so as to provide maximum light to the street-facing rooms – while also providing opportunities for passers-by to glance into hallowed ground-floor spaces, whether it be a shop or private home. Most shophouses have three windows or openings (including the door) on the front façade, an architectural tradition that makes reference to the Christian



*Transitional Style shophouse in Club Street with Georgian fanlights above the louvre windows*

trinity while also appealing to the Chinese, who believe that the number three is auspicious. (This also explains why *dim sum* is usually served in threes!)

Some theorists who see architecture in a purely social context, regard the rusticated (rough stone) base on which classical buildings rest as the least refined part of the building, a metaphor for the 'great unwashed' of society. The second storey, with its pediment windows framed by columns or pilasters, is seen as representing the middle classes. The third or upper storey and roof, supported by columns that run through the entire façade, are interpreted as conformity and loyalty to the monarch. Elaborate ornamentation, such as pediments and the capitals of columns and pilasters, is found towards the top of the building – a metaphor for the aristocrats and nobility who stand near the apex of the social hierarchy. This theoretical perspective suggests there's more to classical design than first meets the eye.

Although the Singapore shophouse borrows heavily from European models, early *towkays* cleverly incorporated their own heritage, resulting in a distinct architectural style best described as 'Chinese Baroque'. Late Period shophouses thus achieved a new level of extravagant ornamentation in which the elegant designs and exacting proportions of Georgian architecture met exquisite Chinese ornamentation executed by master craftsmen from Shanghai, who combined the skills and aesthetics of both western and Asian traditions. These shophouses, which truly reflected *la belle époque* of colonial Singapore, encapsulated the *zeitgeist* of Singapore's 19th century mercantile classes, who fully understood that the house was an extension of the owner's aspirations, expressing his taste and refinement while also reflecting his social standing. Today these elaborate and detailed classical buildings contribute to a historical and aesthetic harmony that remains visible despite the expansion of Singapore's modern cityscape.



*Art-deco shophouses in Bukit Pasoh Road with typical scallop shell motif on façade and flagpoles mounted on a stylized zigurat reminiscent of the Empire State Building*



*Restored China Square shophouse with a local interpretation of the Palladian window and columns, which run the full length of the façade*

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*Photos courtesy of the author*

# On Babies and B'ng kong

By Cynthia Wee-Hoefer



Ang-Pow

If only the little ones could have spoken, how they might have protested!

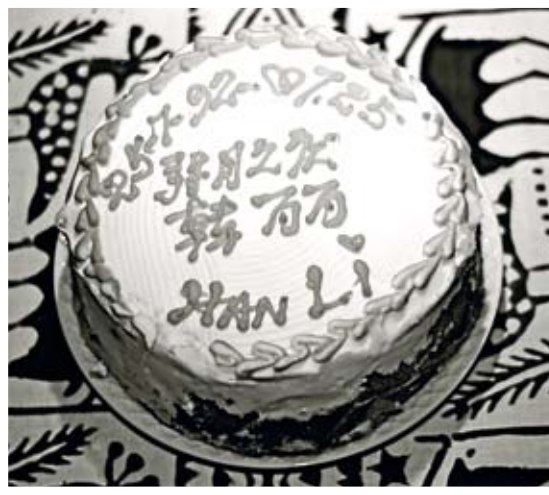
Shaving heads, piercing tender ears for earrings and giving boys girls' names to ward off evil spirits – these are but a few of the rituals and superstitions of Peranakan parents to ensure their child's safe and prosperous future.

I married an *orang lain* (foreigner), so when I became a mother some 17 years ago, perhaps I over-compensated; in any case, I took enormous pride in implementing Peranakan rites of passage from my own culture.

My husband and I adopted a beautiful baby boy, Hans-Sen, who arrived with a freshly-shaven head indicating that he was a month old. Months later he began to teethe, and as we fussed over the newest and noisiest member of the family, a relative asked if we wanted to stop his fountain of drool (*leler*). That set events in motion! We ordered a dozen *kueh pong pia*, Chinese puff pastry with sweet fillings, and strung the palm-sized cakes into a necklace. We sat our son before the family altar and invited the adults to break apart a cake and wipe the saliva from baby's mouth. Then they were to eat the *kueh*! Miraculously, our beautiful boy's excessive spittle dried up a week later.

When I checked with other households to see if this practice was commonplace, there was a lot of head scratching. It seems that only my circle of relatives practised this obscure *pong pia* ritual!

Five months after the adoption, I conceived. Old wags spouted the 'I told you so' line that if you adopt, you will conceive your own child. Blessed with a healthy baby girl, we named her Han Li and embarked on various practices to celebrate *mua h guek*, her first month of life.



Han Li's *mua h guek* (first month) cake, 1992

When a baby's umbilical cord drops off, this bit of flesh that resembles a dried *sng buay* (plum) is wrapped in a square of cotton. Some old folks throw it among trees or cast it into the sea. We kept it in a drawer and forgot all about it!

I learned from Peter Wee, First Vice-President of the Peranakan Association, that a century ago most women delivered at home attended by a midwife. The new father would place the birth placenta in an earthen pot, which was then buried in the family grounds or at a place where it would not be disturbed, a custom unheard of in these days of high-tech maternity wards. My own daughter was delivered in a hospital and, thank goodness, we did not go through the placenta-burying ritual.

Hans-Sen arrived with a shaved head, but when Han Li reached the one-month mark, we undertook the rather messy operation of shaving her moult of fine hair at home. Some parents head to the barber for a professional job while others make a symbolic gesture by trimming just the child's fringe and nape and scattering the hair to the wind. Seen as a cleansing ritual, head shaving is a purification that signifies the emergence of a full person no longer a part of the mother's womb.

In our great desire to give thanks for our newborn baby, we celebrated Han Li's *mua h guek* through two cultures, ordering dozens of Western-style cakes



Author feeding her son Hans-Sen in his *pokia ee* (bamboo chair), 1991