

A Peranakan Man's Journey

Alvin Yapp – Collector, Caregiver and Heritage Preserver

By Adrienne Urbanec

Although dishes at home were spicier than those at a friend's house and his family spoke Malay, young Alvin Yapp did not spend much time wondering about how he differed from his Chinese schoolmates. The son of humble working class parents, he studied, learned a musical instrument and grew into an adventurous lad. It was not until he accompanied his relatives to a Peranakan play that it dawned on him that his heritage was unique. As grandma howled at the players and his mother sobbed along with the protagonist, Alvin was both amazed and befuddled because he could not understand what was occurring on stage. It was then he realised what a rich heritage he had and threw himself into exploring what it meant to be 'Peranakan'.

Combing local markets during the 1990s, he and his father procured several traditional items, but Alvin admits that those early buying junkets were fraught with mistakes. What characterises a true Peranakan item, especially an antique, is often difficult to discern, so Alvin reached out to the community for guidance. This newcomer on the scene was surprised at the number of influential community leaders who stepped up to help. He soon discovered just what constitutes Peranakan culture – inclusiveness and a willingness to be supportive.

Heavyweights like Peter Wee and Peter Lee helped Alvin navigate some of the pitfalls around acquiring important pieces and encouraged him to follow his dreams. As Alvin began the painstaking process of converting his home into a showcase for furnishings, artworks, serving wares and accessories, a mentor asked him a question that remains a guiding axiom, "Where is your collection headed?" The fine line between collector and hoarder is easily blurred and Alvin kept this in mind as he expanded his enterprise. Never quite sure if he had succeeded, but enjoying the ride, Alvin



Inside Alvin Yapp's house 'The Intan'

still remembers the day when an important figure visited his home, 'The Intan', and relayed his belief that the vision had blossomed into success!

As a student, Alvin volunteered at the Assisi Hospice and fondly recalls spending time with dying patients. Although often queried about the sadness of his weekly visits to the facility, Alvin viewed them as uplifting experiences. Helping someone prepare for the final 'journey' with a person is spiritual, humbling and profound.

This exposure to the brave people at Assisi bonded Alvin to the hospice and when he was financially able to assist, he did just that. Combining his love for his heritage, music and community service, Alvin asked the Assisi administrators to compile a list of needed equipment. With that in hand, he encouraged, cajoled and otherwise convinced friends, neighbours and relatives to select an item and figure out a way to fund it. Additionally, Alvin opened his home to local children, no matter what their musical talent or ability level, to learn Peranakan songs for a fundraiser. Today this endeavour is in its third year, but Alvin still recalls the tears in neighbours' eyes as they sang along to tunes they had not enjoyed since childhood.

Recognising how the stage can open hearts and mind, Alvin reported that The Intan will be hosting its first play later this summer, with a charity violin recital in autumn. At the heart of this dynamic Peranakan man's journey is a passion to ignite those around him with the enthusiasm to keep the Peranakan heritage vibrant and also to make the world just a bit better.

Adrienne Urbanec has lived in Asia for most of the past decade. Residing in Hong Kong, China, Japan and now Singapore, she devotes her time to animal welfare work, writes for a number of non-profit organisations and chairs the AWA Arts and Culture Committee.



Local children playing various musical instruments and singing Peranakan songs

Photos courtesy of Shireen Lim