

Holding Court Beyond the Kitchen

By Khong Swee Lin

The property of one particular Peranakan lady lies not in the iconic mortar and pestle, but in a remnant of 17th century England - horsehair curled and tailed; usually found bobbing around within the precincts of the Royal Courts of Justice, London.

Standing proudly atop its box on the third floor of the Peranakan Museum, the barrister's wig that belonged to the late Madam Kwa Geok Choo (21 December 1920 - 2 October 2010) is very much a tribute not only to its erstwhile owner, but also to the era's fledgling coterie of able Peranakan women. They dared to strike out beyond the Peranakan woman's traditional confines - the *dapor* (kitchen) and along with that, the expected mastery of Peranakan cuisine.

The third daughter of Mr and Mrs Kwa Siew Tee (he was one of the founders of the OCBC Bank which he served

as General Manager from 1935 to 1945, the Municipal Commissioner of the Colony of Singapore in 1947 and Public Service Commissioner in 1953), Kwa Geok Choo secured a place in Peranakan history by topping the Senior Cambridge Examination, class of 1936, and then attended Singapore's premier Raffles Institution Special Class.

After Singapore's establishment as a colony, English-medium schools such as St Margaret's Girls' School (1842), the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (1854), Raffles Girls' School (1879) and Methodist Girls' School (1887), were founded by various missionary groups. However, the colonial administration's attitude towards mission schools was to regard them as a means of providing minimal literacy and grants were kept small.

By the turn of the century, increasing prosperity provided the impetus for the development of education. Straits Chinese leaders established schools, for instance the English-medium Singapore Chinese Girls' School (1899) and the Chinese-medium Chung Hwa Girls' School (1911). The founding of the latter was tied up with the rising tide of Chinese nationalism and events such as the Boxer Rebellion.

As the English language became popular in Southeast Asia, the Peranakans embraced not only the language, but also the education system. The Queen's Scholarships founded by Sir Cecil Clementi Smith in 1885 and awarded by the Straits Settlements' government, provided opportunities for British subjects of the Settlements to continue their education in the United Kingdom. Maggie Tan, a Peranakan and descendant of Tan Tock Seng, was the first female recipient of the scholarship in 1930.

English and Baba Malay were the dominant languages of the Peranakans. A few Peranakan women began to practise medicine (Dr Lee Choo Neo) and law (Teo Soon Kim was admitted to the Bar of the Straits Settlements in 1929) and



Barrister's wig - Madam Kwa Geok Choo

Lim Beng Hong of Penang, (the first woman qualified to practise law in Malaya in 1927) and they began writing to newspapers, not only about their lot in life, but also to advocate the equality of the sexes and the adoption of modern practices.

Kwa Geok Choo further distinguished herself by winning the Queen's Scholarship whilst at Raffles College in 1947 (she had resumed her studies after the war) and headed off to Girton College, Cambridge, where she earned a First Class Honours degree in Law. After being called to the bar of the Middle Temple, she returned to Singapore to begin an illustrious career as a conveyancing lawyer and co-founded the firm of Lee & Lee. It is noteworthy that despite her career, she put her family first, eschewing duties such as entertaining clients.

Besides being an advocate of equality for women, her forte in drafting documents led her to draft clauses pertaining to mutual government guarantees of water agreements between Johor and Singapore upon the separation of Singapore from Malaysia.

Her stand on women's rights led to the introduction of the Women's Charter in 1961, which provided for monogamous marriages, a big step in those days. The late Madam Kwa, wife of Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, was undoubtedly an excellent Peranakan woman, steel clothed in velvet, as Peranakan women were known to be!

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Photo courtesy of the Peranakan Museum