

[The Star Online](#) > Lifefocus

Sunday March 21, 2010

Songs of love

By MARTIN VENGADESAN

Wit and repartee, music and poetry. The dondang sayang is a colourful display of fun, and a way with words.

THERE are those who attempt to define and divide Malaysians strictly on the basis of race, religion and language. But close inspection reveals that this diverse nation of ours has actually emerged as a result of a natural fusion of many different cultures, often over the course of centuries.

This can be seen from culinary dishes, such as curry mee, to the transplantation of Sanskrit words into modern Malay language and the evolution of art forms that are unique to the Peninsula.



Bibik Francis, 73 (second from right), is the very picture of a charming Nyonya, as she performs the dondang sayang

Unfortunately many cultures, such as that of the Peranakan community of Chinese immigrants who had settled down largely in Penang, Malacca and Singapore, and adopted local attire and language, are being eroded.

Also known as the Baba-Nyonya community, they are small in numbers and have gradually assimilated into and absorbed local cultures, but the special arts they have created are fading in prominence.

Dondang sayang (literally translated as "love song") is one such unique art form. It originated in Malacca, perhaps as far back as the 16th century, when the region was under Portugese influence. Essentially the dondang sayang is an impromptu exchange between two or more singers of Malay poems (*pantun*), although the Peranakan form of Malay (known as Baba Malay) incorporated both Hokkien and Portugese words.

These singers are usually accompanied by a violinist, a *rebana* (drum) and a *tetawak* (gong) player with flutes and accordions as optional extras.

Cedric Tan, 45, is a Baba businessman who indulges in dondang sayang whenever possible. "I sing for fun and also partly to promote my culture," he says. "My grandfather collected pantuns. In fact, in the past, every Peranakan family would do that. Whenever there were cultural gatherings such as weddings or big festivals, a dondang sayang performance would spice things up. It is really synonymous with our culture."

The performance of dondang sayang is more than just that; the purest form involves lyrics are made up on the spot!

"In the past, all the words were improvised. Performers would create their own pantuns impromptu. This required a knowledge of Malay literature and Chinese proverbs, quite often used in the last two lines known as the 'balas', which is where the *termasuk* (meaning) comes in."

In a recent performance, however, Tan used more conventional methods, even employing a minus-one (pre-recorded backing tape without vocals) in lieu of a full band.

"Nowadays, the performances are quite standard. Singers prepare in advance, just to make sure we complement each other. The topics are also pretty standard. They usually involve love and romance, but can also occasionally be critical, in a mild manner," he says. "There are normally two singers, but there is no hard and fast rule as long as the repartee element is maintained. It starts with the *pembayang* (initial rhyming couplet) and there is always a retort or response. Musicians play by ear because dondang sayang is always performed in the standard key of C major, whether you like it or not. This suits both male and female voices, but the



Dr Lee Su Kim ... intrigued by the improvisations and potpourri of words.

styles are flexible - the vocalists can be soft, jocular or even shriek."

Sadly, because it is an oral tradition there has not been much documentation of dondang sayang performances or performers.

Tan adds: "In the '60s and '70s, Baba Chia Kim Teck starred on RTM radio and TV with Che Aminah and he was very popular. Babas Yeo Kim Swee and Lee Yoke Poh were also very respected veteran performers. Sadly all of them have passed away. Right now Che Boon (Kim Yoke) is known as a master of dondang sayang.

"It is a pity that there is no large collection of recorded music. If you listen to the way the masters rebutt, and how sharp they are, you will be amazed. Nowadays, we are not so creative with our language and wit." Calls to preserve dondang sayang are still being heard. Last month veteran dondang sayang performer Abas Katan noted that if efforts are not made to revive the traditional music, it would soon be obsolete.

The good news is, a few dedicated people are doing their bit to keep the art alive. Dondang sayang violinist Rahim Jantan lectures in music at the National Arts Culture and Heritage Academy (Aswara) and Nyonya Tan Abdullah, the Malacca Dondang Sayang Association secretary, has performed dondang sayang in Europe to help promote the state's cultural heritage.

Abas, Rahim and Nyonya Tan are in their 60s. Goh Beng Soo, 66, who is in the printing line, performed with Tan recently. "My mother and the older generation were always singing and quoting pantuns. In my school in Muar, Johor, we learnt Malay pantuns, but these were different from the pantuns we use in dondang sayang, which were all in dialect. So there was no formal training for us when we were growing up," Goh says.

He recalls the work of Baba Chia Kim Teck. "To be a master like him, you have to be very witty, with a large vocabulary, and be quite knowledgeable too. The great performers can think fast. Even for someone like me, when you are in the mood, it can come naturally."



Dondang sayang violinist Rahim Jantan teaches music at Aswara.

Still, Goh worries that the centuries-old tradition of may be drawing to a quiet end. "It is dying out, in the sense that there is a lack of exposure. The love of dondang sayang is not instilled in most of the next generation. Unless we make a proper effort with camps and seminars, I fear it will not survive very long."

There are a few organisations committed to the preservation of Peranakan culture in general and, in some cases, dondang sayang in particular.

The Gunong Sayang Association based in Geylang, Singapore, was founded precisely 100 years ago, in 1910, while the Penang Dondang Sayang Club was created in 1954.

Dr Lee Su Kim is president of the Peranakan Baba

Nyonya Association Kuala Lumpur & Selangor, and a committed fan of dondang sayang.

"Our organisation is quite new, and is aimed at preserving our culture. We set it up because we realised that many Peranakans have migrated from Malacca and Penang to KL.

"Our identity is quite different from that of the more Chinese migrants who came in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But our culture is slowly dying out.

"My father was a Baba from Malacca and my mother, a Pe-nang Nyonya. I grew up with dondang sayang at weddings and other functions.

"I was intrigued by the improvisations and the almost-pantomime quality in this unique creole language that mixed in lots of Hokkien, Malay, Portugese words," Dr Lee says.

She co-founded the association to help preserve Peranakan culture. With minimal numbers and an identity that is linked to a specific historical migration, the community is unlikely to experience an upsurge in its population. Nonetheless, gatherings such as the association's recent anniversary celebration at Rumah Peranakan in Petaling Jaya help make the younger generation aware of this unique heritage.

Beyond Penang, Malacca and Singapore, there are a number of different Peranakan communities in Phuket, Medan and even Kelantan.



Cedric Tan (left) and Goh Beng Soo are out to preserve their culture, despite their lack of formal training

"They have their own musical traditions but without the Portugese folk influence that makes *dondang sayang* so special."

While there are a few people committed to keeping *dondang sayang* alive, it has become diluted, especially post-independence.

"With modern life being so fast-paced, these traditions get forgotten," Dr Lee adds.

Indeed, Tan recalls that the only exposure many people had to his culture was through the 90s TV programme, *Baba and Nyonya*.

"That was a light-hearted series that portrayed some aspects of our culture

wonderfully. But in others, it took dramatic licence and was a bit crude.

"I hope that *dondang sayang* will be preserved. In the past, people had a lot of time on their hands. Some even published their own *pantuns*, and these are now expensive collectors items!"

Tan concludes with a *pantun* handed down by his grand-uncle:

Akar menyular bergulung-gulung

Rumput turki di tengah hutan

Mintak umur setinggi gunung

Mintak jerki (rezeki) sekaya lautan

"This is a simple wish for prosperity and long life but the words are so poetic. They are about turkey grass in the middle of the forest, of life as long as a mountain is high, and good luck as vast as the oceans. To me these words are timeless," he says.