

CINEMA

Disaster flick that's not all it's cracked up to be / 32

CITY LIFE

BT writers' picks of what to see, do or talk about / 35

The Business Times | Friday, May 29, 2015

BT Lifestyle

31

In their bid to stay relevant in today's society, clan associations are trying to attract new members or teaming up with those in the arts and heritage circles to present tradition in a new light. **BY CHEAH UI-HOON**

OLD TIES, NEW ROLES

IF the Ching Yoon Woon Kwoon's proposal to the authorities is approved, then Singaporeans can look forward to regular outdoor screenings of old Cantonese movies at Ann Siang Hill. "It's the quieter part of Ann Siang Hill and we think this screening will help revive the area a bit and add more life to it," says David Lee, who heads the Chinese clan association's youth wing, and who is also the vice-chairman of the Singapore Film Society.

The association – set up for members of the surname Lee from a particular village (now municipal) in Guangdong province in China – is one of many such clans in Singapore which have had to find ways to add new members and survive financially in today's Singapore. One way of doing so isn't through business but the promotion of culture and heritage, as well as the arts.

In this case, it's fortunate to have people from the younger generation such as Mr Lee, in his 30s, following his father's lead as an active member of the society. "I guess I'm more old-fashioned, as I see the value of heritage and culture and still want to see the continuation of the clan institution. So with this proposal which I've formally put forward to the authorities, it marries both of what I like to do and the clan's needs."

A few doors down from Ching Yoon is the Kwong Wai Siew Li Si She Shui, founded in 1874, which is a collective of three clans for those with the Lee surname. Over there too, money issues have been temporarily solved by the renting out of its premises. At least once a week, its president James Lee conducts calligraphy classes at nominal fees. "The main idea is to continue to give some public service," he says of the clan which established itself as a "literary studio" for the promotion of education and culture.

Clan associations – which number about 200 in Singapore – have been made more acutely aware of the challenges of surviving in Singapore in the last five to 10 years, points out Gan See Khem, chairman of the Gan Clan Singapore and who's also one of



We want to attract wider segments of society than just business people, says Dr Gan.

two women in the council of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce. "We realise that if we don't bring in younger members, the associations won't survive, so many have been trying to become more relevant," she says. Dr Gan is, in fact, one of the rare woman leaders in the clan system that is traditionally patriarchal rather than gender inclusive.

Among the challenges faced by the clan is the fact that its members are fast ageing – usually making up more than half of the membership in an association, and the traditional roles of helping clan members find work or shelter, or looking after their welfare when they first came from China, are no longer relevant in today's Singapore. "So we've had to change to make ourselves more relevant and to be able to contribute more to the community," says Dr Gan.

Clans have done that by focusing on their strengths, and they would do well by emulating the Gan Clan Singapore, for example. The clan set itself on a "transformative" path about three years ago, says Dr Gan. It refocused on its educational heritage and set up a heritage centre, besides actively looking for people surnamed Gan and inviting them to the clan's activities and asking them to join as members. "By being in the Museum Roundtable or Heritage activities organised by the National Heritage Board or Urban Redevelopment Authority for instance, we've been learning newer ways to improve and man-



Now, the direction is to connect the Gans through family stories and heritage rather than business ties, says Ms Gan (above, in cheongsam). Members of the Ching Yoon Woon Kwoon clan (below), which has proposed to the authorities outdoor screenings of old Cantonese movies at Ann Siang Hill.

age our gallery," says Gan Ee Bee, the curator of Gan Clan's Heritage Centre.

More importantly though, the clan has made an effort to be bilingual instead of Mandarin-based, changed its structure and constitution and engaged a public trust company to manage its properties. "So we've migrated to a proper financial management system and we run the clan more like a company, with proper governance, instead of a society," explains Dr Gan.

Strategic planning sessions started as early as 2010, for example, where the clan's members mapped out their new mission and values.

Now, the direction is to connect the Gans through family stories and



heritage rather than business ties, for example, adds Ms Gan. As Dr Gan points out, there are many other organisations out there today to help businesses. "And we want to attract wider segments of society than just business people."

As for young folk such as Mr David Lee, there are opportunities for clans like his to partner businesses as well for innovative programmes. "We are open to working with businesses on our street, for example, and in doing so, to help revitalise the neighbourhood we're in," he adds. Traditional associations after all have come a long way, and it's all about finding new roles to play in modern society. uihoon@sph.com.sg

Musical box museum opens in Singapore

AMERICAN inventor Thomas Edison might be best known for inventing the light bulb but one of his favourite inventions was the phonograph, the forerunner to the gramophone. There are perhaps some 20 Edison phonographs left in the world, mostly in museums.

Now, one of them, the Edison Opera – which includes a wooden horn handmade by Edison himself – has made its way here, thanks to Japanese collector Naoto Orui, who has set up the Singapore Musical Box Museum which opens next month.

Mr Orui, 53, explains that the first time Singapore made an impression on him was some 30 years ago in London, when he came across an old musical box made in Singapore in the late 1800s.

He found out that the British had taught Singapore craftsmen to repair watches and clocks. Later, the British also brought in musical boxes, which the same craftsmen would repair and maintain, eventually going on to make the musical boxes themselves, he says.

"In fact, if one finds a 'Chinese music box' in antique fairs in Europe, it could well be a music box made in Singapore. At that time, any place in the East was considered Chinese or Indian," says Mr Orui.

The music box industry stems from the watchmaking industry be-



Mr Orui moved his collection from his Minamichita Music Box Museum in Mihama, Japan, to Singapore this year. The Singapore Musical Box Museum in Telok Ayer Street opens next month. PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

cause of the similar mechanisms used for making them.

One of Mr Orui's mentors, Graham Webb from Brighton, passed him the music box from Singapore, tasking him with the responsibility to "bring it back to Singapore" some day. This, along with other events, spurred Mr Orui to move his collection from his Minamichita Music Box Museum in Mihama, Japan, to Singapore this year.

"The more I investigated Singapore history, I realised that Singapore was technologically very advanced in the late 19th century and from the 20th century onwards," he says, adding that he believes this spurred development in other Asian countries like Japan.

Mr Orui also found interesting links between Singapore and Japan, such as the fact that the first Bible translated into Japanese was printed in Singapore. The translator, Otokichi, was born in Mihama, the town Mr Orui himself is from.

So now he wants the Singapore Musical Box Museum to showcase the seemingly "forgotten" golden age of Singapore before Independence. The museum has some 40 music boxes – ranging from table-top boxes to jukebox-sized ones, most of which are in working condition.

It wasn't easy finding a suitable location for the museum, but Mr Orui is very pleased that he finally was able to rent the Chong Wen Ge building,

next to the Thian Hock Keng Temple in Telok Ayer Street, both owned by the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan (Hokkien Association).

"From what I understand, we were suitable tenants for this building because what we are doing is related to education," says Mr Orui.

Chong Wen Ge was the first education institution set up by the Chinese community in Singapore. Thian Hock Keng Temple is Singapore's oldest Chinese temple and was gazetted as a national monument in 1973.

"It's very inspiring," Mr Orui concludes, referring to the mixed elements of colonial and Chinese architecture and the environment of learning in which his music box museum is located.

Using drama to showcase 136-year-old institution

WHEN Low Kok Wai, a theatre studies lecturer, needed to stage a play in Cantonese as part of his PhD thesis, he found a willing partner in Poon Yue Association. "They were very keen to work with me, as the association had been looking for ways to put on new programmes to attract younger people. So it was a perfect partnership as they were very supportive," he says.

Mr Low teaches drama and theatre studies at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, and for the play he wrote, he interviewed members of Poon Yue, and the members became the actors in the play itself. "What was interesting is that they were using a form of Cantonese that was more formal than the casual Cantonese spoken, and had preserved the dialect quite well."

Mr Low's interest in the topic stems from the fact that so little Cantonese is spoken publicly in Singapore today, and the fact that his research focused on "sound" cast a wider net than if he focused on a particular aspect of the Cantonese culture.

Based on his interviews with Poon Yue members, he wrote a history-based drama titled *Cantonese Diaspora Culture: A Legacy Sustained*.

The play has different narratives to express the various aspects of the Cantonese culture. There's a middle-

aged man who laments the generation gap, with his son showing no interest in the Cantonese culture; a former songstress; and a Taoist priest who explains religious rites within the culture. More than 100 people attended the staging in Poon Yue Association's century-old Bukit Pasoh building last September, making it a first time a contemporary drama was held there. The clan association was established in 1879.

"The thing is, if it had been a Cantonese opera, the audience would have been the same as it had always been – of opera aficionados who would be in their 60s and above. But this new drama was a way to attract the younger generation," says Mr Low, who is now wrapping up his thesis titled *Reviving Cantonese diaspora sound culture through a site-specific performance at the Singapore Poon Yue Association*.

Although he was born in Singapore, Mr Low's father came from Malaysia, and interestingly, had availed himself to Poon Yue's network and kinship when he first came over. "So I grew up in a Cantonese-speaking family," says Mr Low, 50, adding it wasn't until his project came along that he re-connected with Poon Yue. Perhaps more like him will soon follow.



Cantonese Diaspora Culture: A Legacy Sustained has different narratives to express the various aspects of the Cantonese culture