

# Historical pursuits

By Melanie Chaili @melanie@mmail.com.my

**HENRY** Bong Lian Hin, 63, has always been surrounded by history. Though he spent 20 years as a banker, the siren call of family heritage and a burning passion for Malaysian and Nusantara cultures proved too hard to ignore.

He opened Pucuk Rebung with the aim of celebrating Malaysia's past and present, at home and abroad by preserving and promoting its unique civilisation.

Tucked away in Bangsar's cosy

Lucky Garden, the gallery-shop is warmly lit and packed to the rafters with heritage pieces, fine antiques and contemporary art that will delight collectors or anyone on a gift hunt.

The youngest of six siblings, Bong was born into a true blue Peranakan household — his father, Henry Sr was the last regional postmaster under Charles Vyner Brooke, the last White Rajah of Sarawak while his mother, Nellie Lim, was the family matriarch who excelled in managing the home's expenses as well as cross stitching and crocheting, as Nyonya ladies were expected to back in the day.

His mother's family left Shanghai during the Boxer Rebellion when foreigners and Christians were driven out the country.

Growing up in colonial Sarawak, the Bong residence on Rubber Road in Kuching was two doors down from the head of information, Tun Morshidi Osman whom Bong described as one who "literally walked

through history", having been part of significant events such as the Duke of Edinburgh's visit and the Japanese Occupation.

Today, Bong's beloved childhood home has been demolished and the land left undeveloped, after it was bought by Sarawakian property tycoon Ting Pek Khiing.

The cherished house was of Sarawakian-Malay architecture that boasted a waterproof belian wood structure and is also a nod to family history — his paternal grandfather was a belian wood merchant.

As a child, Bong recalled his paternal grandmother fondly, someone he credits for his entrepreneurial gene.

"We called her the thin granny and she would ride in a rickshaw everyday selling Nyonya jewellery with rose cut diamonds and Indonesian batik that Peranakans wore.

"On big occasions, she would invite us to have tea and feed us with Jacob's biscuits, fruitcakes, jams and Mackintosh's chocolates that we get from the only imported goods store in town."

The first item Bong collected belonged to his grandmother's best friend, Janet Cox. At the tender age of nine, he was entrusted with her husband's inheritance, an Italian majolica inkwell.

But the genesis of Bong's love of antiques well and truly began with his mother's *tepak sireh*.

"My first encounter with antiques was my mum's *tepak*

*sireh* that had Brooke coins as wheels," he said.

He has the brass family heirloom at his gallery, which is filled with betel leaves and lime paste.

Not too long after, he inherited from his father another *tepak sireh* that belonged to the 28th Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III.

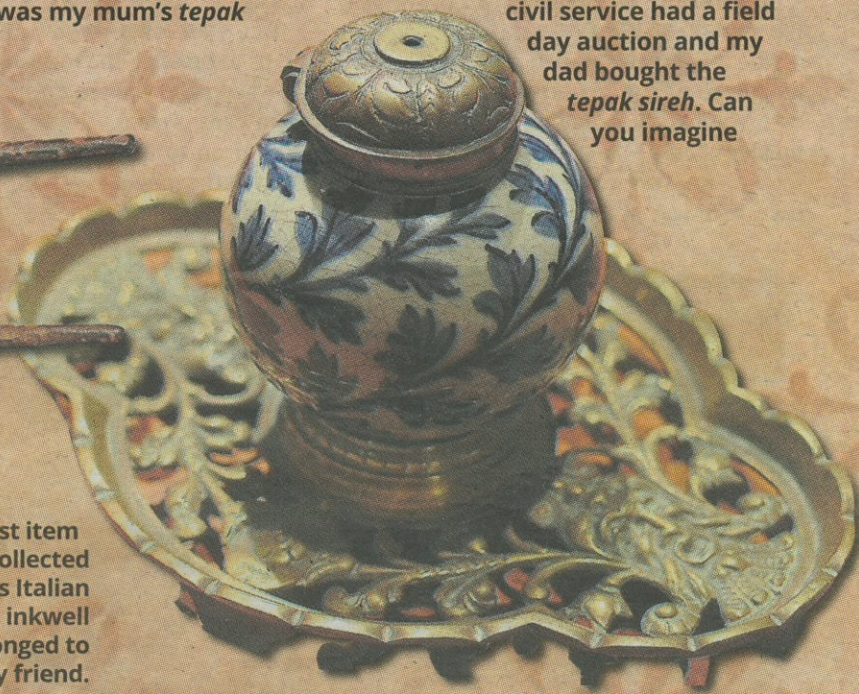
"When the Rumah Brunei in Kuching closed down, the civil service had a field day auction and my dad bought the *tepak sireh*. Can you imagine



A Chinese cloisonné bowl featuring a dragon motif.



A 'tepak sireh' that belonged to Bong's mother is the reason he fell in love with antiques.



The first item Bong collected is this Italian majolica inkwell that belonged to a family friend.



Bong with a letter from Brooke and family heirlooms that belonged to his mother. — Pictures by Mukhriz Zabidi



a 14-year-old having this?" said Bong, who also inherited letters written by Brooke.

Some 30 years later, it all came full circle for the avid collector when he curated an exhibition for the royal families of Brunei and Kelantan called "A Glimpse of the Glory of the Brunei and Kelantan Sultanates".

It was in this exhibition that the current Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah was introduced to an artefact his late father owned.

"The Sultan was very impressed, he asked me how I got it," said Bong.

Working closely with royal families has become somewhat of a routine for Bong and his Singaporean business partner and cousin, Terence Tay, an architect by training.

Bong has earned the reputation of the go-to person when it comes to Malay and Nusantara antiques, art and interior design.

On top of numerous exhibitions and talks on heritage textiles, Baba Nyonya antiques and Borneo culture, Bong has served as royal interior decorator for the Kelantanese royal family.

The royal ballroom and royal banquet hall at Istana Negeri, Istana Telipot and the Sultan of Brunei's palace in Kuala Lumpur are just some

of the regal residences Bong has given a makeover.

Pucuk Rebung, whose royal patron is the Raja Perempuan of Kelantan Tengku Anis Tengku Abdul Hamid, is also responsible for crafting gifts for foreign delegates such as the Mayor of London and Thailand's Queen Sirikit.

"Our artworks reflect Malaysia's cultural identity," said the designer of the country's gift to the United Nations in 2003 that was received by Kofi Annan.

Though it may be hard for Bong to pick out the most precious item in his possession, the national museum's original blueprint and architectural drawings is arguably the most significant.

"These Muzium Negara files belonged to the architect Ho Kok Hoe and they must have been touched by Tunku Abdul Rahman and Mobin Shephard when it was built," said Bong, who bought the collection with post-dated cheques.



At an exhibition celebrating Bruneian and Kelantanese sultanates, Bong told the Sultan of Brunei (right) about a tepak sireh in his collection that once belonged to the sultan's father.