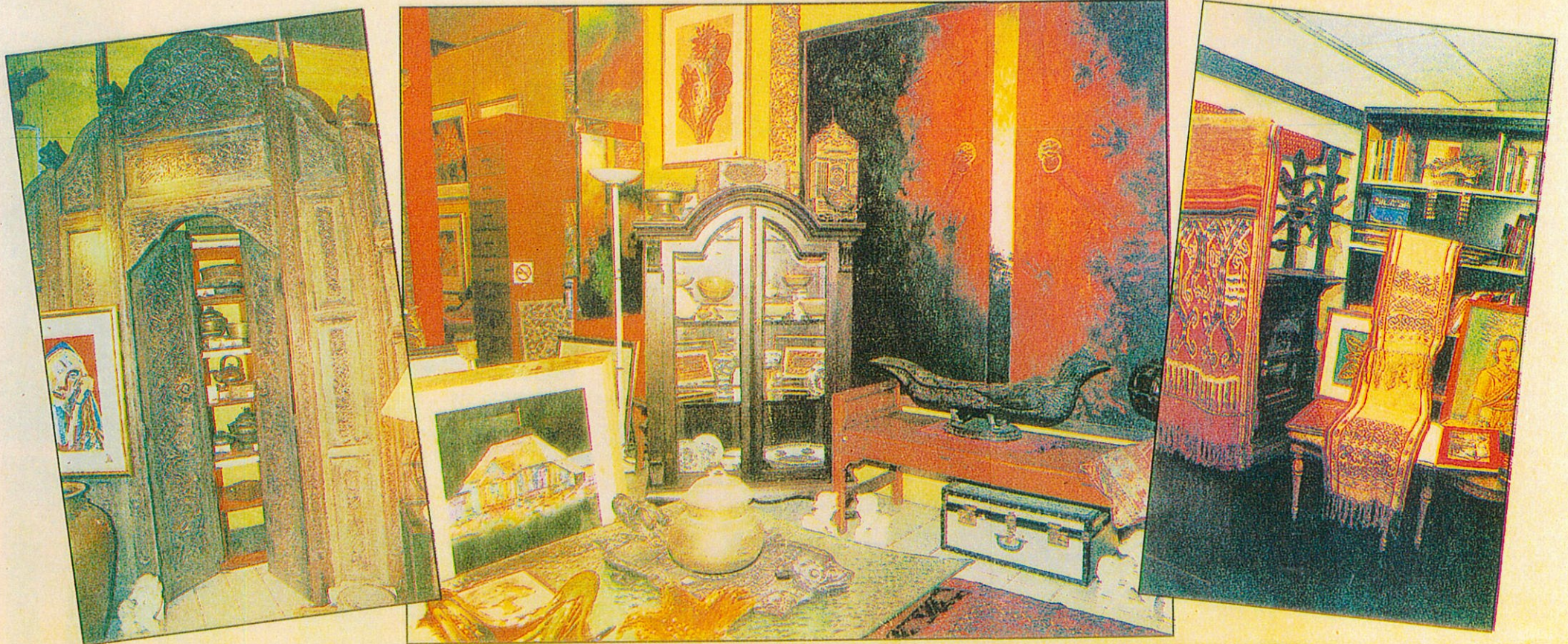


# A step into a cultural haven



By Ooi Kok Chuen

IT'S so bizarre. Along Kuala Lumpur's bustling Jalan Tun H.S. Lee where tidal waves of vehicles pour in during peak hours from the Jalan Tun Perak bend, an unobtrusive pre-war three-storey shophouse offers an "open sesame" step-back into time.

Sandwiched between a bank and a provision shop, Henry L.H. Bong's Pucuk Rebung Enterprise Sdn Bhd is a godsend oasis, a potpourri of antiquities celebrating the syncretic beauty of the Malaysian cultural melting pot, with the Malay art forms at the epicentre.

Stirring strains of piped *keroncong* lull the visitor into a somnambulistic trance as he or she traipses down history in this old curiosity shop.

This, as Bong, the banker-turned-culturion, equivocally puts it, is the marketplace, the bazaar.

One could almost hear the cacophony of seafaring Indian, Chinese and Arab traders intermingling in the halcyon days of barter commerce.

This was the historical crossroads of cultural transformations - a time when the Malay archipelago was one huge trading place, the "waterworld" of the Silk Route, truly the Golden Chersonese, until the European colonial masters came and dismembered the land and people.

It is as if some immortal elves or *bumian* have emptied choice art and craft mementoes of the glorious past into this modern-day Aladdin Cave called Pucuk Rebung, manifestations of wealth and power and creativity dating back more than 200 years.

"This is the marketplace. These (works) represent the eclecticism that exists in harmonious Malaysia. We don't have to read about it in *National Geographic* or



HISTORY COMES ALIVE ... Cultural treasures bring back the glory days of the Malay archipelago. All in a downtown shophouse. Pictures by YIP HEE KHEONG

*Time*," says the 44-year-old Bong, who occasionally lapses into the patois of his Sarawak Peranakan origins.

"These are all part of the international trade valued by the locals, part of the *pusaka*, heirlooms which were well-documented and collected and amassed and passed down the generations.

Part of Pucuk Rebung's aims is to assemble a collection of museum-quality artefacts and cultural treasures, not along mono-ethnic, even monotheistic lines but with all the inherent enriching osmosis and cross-fertilisations of ideas and forms.

It has also devoted one-and-a-quarter floors as a permanent museum. Some of the works come with impeccable pedigree and provenance. The ornamentative *batil bertutup* (water holder), dated around the mid-19th century, is from the collection of Frank Swettenham, the first Resident-General of the Federated Malay

States. In the old days, it was used to serve water to guests.

A brass *tepak sireh* can be traced to the royal house of the grandfather of the Sultan of Brunei.

A letter written by the last White Rajah of Sarawak to the Resident, MacKenzie, in 1933, detailed the way to handle dissent in an Iban hotbed - "one of the first examples of 'money politics'" as Bong puts it in jest.

What distinguishes Pucuk Rebung from the run-of-the-mill antique shops is not only the rare items of redoubtable quality but also the cross-cultural chemistry and flavours that dovetail into the Malaysian experience.

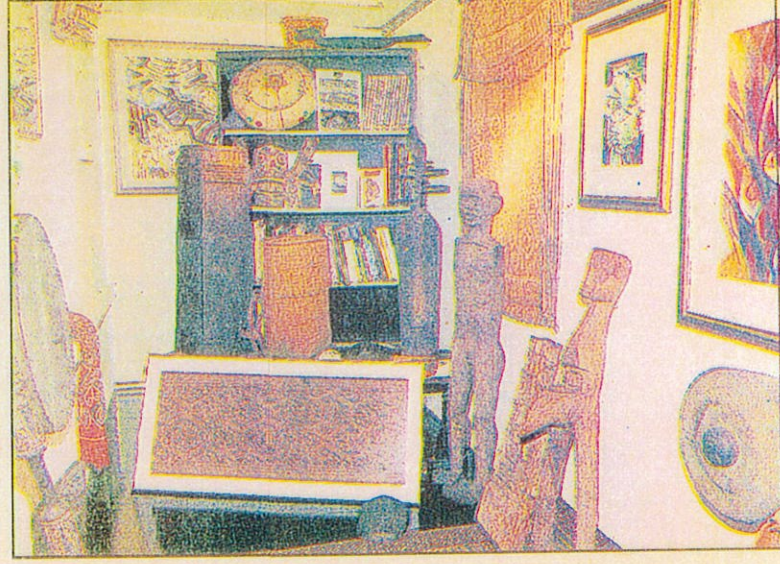
From the ingenuity and exquisite craftsmanship of the works, one can trace the thoughts and patterns of ancestral life. The advent of the Chinese, Indians and Arabs for trade, marriage and work; the influences in the periphery of the Siamese, Javanese, Acheneese,

Minangkabaus; and the dissemination of things Dutch, Portuguese and British during the colonial clinch.

Most imposing as one enters the air-conditioned "cavernous" interiors of Pucuk Rebung is the ornately carved *pintu gerbang depan* of hard *cengal* which had once barricaded the family of an *orang besar* in Kelantan.

Here on the ground floor littered with lotus flowers, thus *lantai teratai*, are a mishmash of Peranakan ware and wear, Chinese porcelains (Ming, no less, with some etched in Mohammedan blue) and Japanese arita ware of the Japanese Occupation (1942-45), Sarawak tribal artefacts and ceremonial costumes, and a large Martaban heritage jar with dragon motif dating from the 17th century.

A Peranakan gilded sweetmeat rack known as the *beet-chien* in Penang and the *chien-arp* in Malacca and Singapore sits on top of a lacquered



wooden box along with other Nyonya stuff such as the crockery and manik (beaded shoes).

There is also a Peranakan brass tray with the crest of the federation.

The more delicate, delectable jewellery - earrings, belts and buckles and necklaces all with the ostentatious Baroque styles of the Peranakans - are kept safely locked in a showcase.

"Even among the Peranakans, there are subtle differences in the objects made among those from Malacca, Penang and Singapore," says Bong, as he amplified the rationale of his collection.

"As the wealth went on, they accumulated more and more lavish things. They were influenced, in the main part, by what they inherited but more so by the Malay culture. They were even influenced to create buckles modelled after the Malays, and also dressed like the Malays."

A short flight of stairs takes one to the Dunia

Melayu/Warisan Islam section which houses, among other things, a stupendous collection of *kain tenunan Melayu* such as *kain songket* and *kain limar* embellished with the *pucuk rebung* and *awan larat* motifs and most of them in good condition.

A weaving loom stands like a martyr amidst this impressive clutter of pendings (belt buckles), keris, silver and gold jewellery, carvings and old manuscripts.

"The fact that I can buy the loom shows that the skills are not passed down, and that the children of the master-weaver were not interested in carrying on the tradition," laments Bong, who feels the decline should be arrested, and new use be found, whether in whole or in parts, for these dying crafts.

Bong does not see his collection as mere historical stuff to be gawked at and studied as something from a bygone era.

He sees "new meanings, new interpretations" to the old art forms in contemporary pieces such as the old pillow ends, the Malay *songket*.

He sees a viable prospect in harnessing the ideas, patterns and motifs behind the artworks for practical use in decorative and ordinary or even designer wear.

"We must re-create crafts, make things that are useful. By revitalising some of our extinct crafts, we can help cut imports," he says.

A section is also devoted to Sabah and Sarawak tribal culture - colourful textiles and beadwork, and artefacts such as a Bidayuh *tipado* or fertility statue.

Given the diverse influences of our rich cultural history, Bong is wary of a myopic Malaysian-only focus in the heritage collection.

As he reasons: "It is difficult to say, 'Let's draw a political boundary: on this side of Sungai Golok, this

is Thailand, and this is Kelantan. We forget the fact that before the signing of the 1909 Pangkor Treaty, they were the same people."

Bong continues his inimitable account of history: "Brunei once owned the entire Sarawak pre-Brooke, but the British acquired division by division (all seven of them) until they went on land-locked Brunei."

That in 30 years Bong has singlehandedly amassed such a remarkable collection of Malaysian-tinged memorabilia and antiques speaks volumes of his resourcefulness, grit and vision.

"There must be something more than Selangor Pewter that represents us. Our aim is to promote Malaysia and Malaysian-oriented art and produced art as world-class material," says Bong, whose interest was kindled when he was just 10 years old by his civil-servant father in Kuching, whose centre-piece of collection then was the Bruneian *tepak sireh*.

It takes a very unique person to quit a high-ranking banking job after 19 years - he was head of retail banking at Pacific Bank when he retired - to follow his childhood dream, his heart.

For a Malaysian, a visit to the museum cum gallery is a re-affirmation of sort, a journey of rediscovery, again and again, of the myriad and elusive multi-hued threads that make up the Malaysian tapestry.

Pucuk Rebung is, without doubt, the newest must-see destination on the Kuala Lumpur tourist map. Don't just take my word for it.

□ Pucuk Rebung is at 69 Jalan Tun H.S. Lee, Kuala Lumpur. For more information, call Bong or his partner Terence Tay Suwei at Tel: 03-2061769.