

Keeper of a precious legacy

Pucuk Rebung founder and CEO Henry Bong's fascination with heritage art stems from his belief in a shared cultural history

IN 2003, then-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad met United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan and unveiled Malaysia's gift to the UN, on the sidelines of the 58th UN General Assembly. Henry Bong, the maker of the gift, was half a world away, returning from a visit to Bangkok.

Bong's creation, called *Tepak Sirih*, remains in a display case at the UN in New York, giving visitors on a guided tour a look at a brilliant display of Malaysian icons and regalia.

The sculpture is an elaborate arrangement of precious metals and stones. It stands on four traditional native weapons: The *Keris Semenanjung*, *keris tanjung*, *tumbuk lada* and *parang ilang*. Fourteen miniature boxes represent the Malaysian states and federal territory and, for centrepiece, a *tepak sirih* in gold. A *pending* rests above the box, encrusted with sapphires, rubies and rose-cut diamonds. A large emerald sits at the centre of this item, symbolic of the power of the Malay Rulers.

To the trained eye, the expensive piece contains influences from the various ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese, Indian and East Malaysian – closely intertwined.

The gift stands for "communication and harmony among people" according to the UN transcript. But it is also an important symbol of nationhood, which reflects our heritage in ways more complex than most would be at liberty to admit. At UN headquarters which one million people visit annually, it is hard to imagine a guide equipped with the vernacular of Malaysian history to explain the work of art.

Bong was commissioned to create the piece due to his preservation

► Continues on page 32



benchmark
A measure of achievement

The people person

Event photographer extraordinaire Paulius Staniunas talks about becoming one of the most sought-after talents in Kuala Lumpur

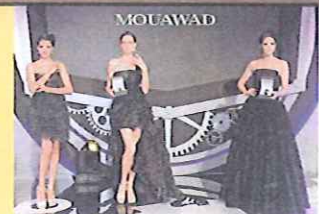
— pages 36&37



The Bakhache experience

Antoine Bakhache on carving out his brand of luxury in Southeast Asia

— pages 38&39



Preserving a shared heritage

> From page 29

and creation of Malaysian heritage art and artefacts. He had previously designed the interior art of the Chancery at the Malaysian Embassy in Washington, DC, assembling a narrative in decor and displays.

Under the banner of his company, Pucuk Rebung MHS, Bong operates the Pucuk Rebung art and heritage gallery, as well as an interior design, landscaping and art installation service. Over 20 years since he left a successful career as a senior banker, he has turned his knowledge of heritage art into a far-reaching business of passion.

His talent in incorporating architectural design with heritage is evident in several prominent projects. Pucuk Rebung was behind the design of Galeri Diraja, the Royal Palace Museum in Kota Bharu, for the Sultan and Raja Perempuan of Kelantan, and has been appointed art and culture consultant of the Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur. Bong, himself an accomplished artist, created the Peranakan paintings hanging in the Mosaic and Lounge in the Park restaurants of the hotel.

In Malaysia, Bong is known as a curator of culture, highly regarded for his collection. His personal repository is at his home, named Sayang Pusaka, and covers the 6,000 sq ft of space designed by famed architect Ken Yeang. It is probably the largest non-institutional collection in the country, and has been documented in publications for its size and diversity. For a sense of scale, Bong reveals he has over 5,000 lengths of textile alone.

That Bong's work to preserve history is at a private location in Kuala Lumpur is far from ideal. He is no self-serving purveyor of rarities. Instead, he ardently wishes for funding, perhaps the convenience of a proper building in which to house his collection.

Bong needs the infrastructure to properly curate his collection and make it available for public viewing. "I have a huge collection of artefacts, worth a lot of money, which clearly shows the cross-cultural exchange in Malaysia. But I don't have somebody to spend money on a building and to assure me that while it is there, it will be safe and curated under a foundation," he laments.

Bong's interest in the arts and artefacts stems from an earnest fascination with the story of our origins. He believes history is tactile and his collection serves as empirical evidence of events. "This can speak," he says. "Anything else I wouldn't be able to keep in a museum."

Through his Peranakan legacy, Bong has an inherited affinity for the culture of the land. He can lay claim to a centuries-old play between native and relative newcomer. And as with any dutiful son, he has an avid passion for the culture of his forebears. "Jangan bagai kacang lupakan kulit," he says.



by Bong Min Yuan



photos by Shari Amin Abdul Rahim

Items on display at Pucuk Rebung form a fraction of the collection Bong has amassed over the years



Anti-clockwise: Bong stands against a wall of local contemporary paintings, the Tepak Sirih on display at UN Headquarters, keris from past Malay sultans and a traditional woodcarving with antique Chinese ceramics in the background

In Kuching, Bong grew up surrounded by belian wood, the ironwood of Borneo, which his ancestors traded in. It was used for construction, roofing, furniture and even for coffins.

"We lived on Rubber Road, in a nice little place near the British Council and near mostly civil servants. It was a 100% belian house, from floors to roof. Everything inside was made of local hardwoods and my mother would get beeswax polish from Robinson's in Singapore, and the wood would give off a wonderful smell of pine and hardwood being

polished with a coconut buffer," he says of his since-demolished childhood home.

Bong learned how to tell precious hardwood from cheaper, softer variants, and what was durable in the heat and humidity of the tropics. From there, he developed an eye for value that no layers of lacquer or paint could conceal. Small wonder then that today, he can easily look beyond the glossy make of cheap, synthetic cloths.

Bong's value system is built on heritage and history. "Look at the branded products – the Gucis and Chanel – that people wear to look like a Christmas tree. What's missing? Yourself. Your identity," he says.

He points to an intricate, palm-leaf weave by the Kayan people, a subset of the Dayak of Borneo. The ornamental headgear, painstakingly handmade over hours and days by a master-weaver, was the fashion of the Kayan upper class, worn by ladies of privilege. It is a complex record of communal history told in colour-coded patterns and materials.

Modern luxury goods, on the other hand, promote a culture of brand before identity, as is evident in the many shoppers who carry Pradas from China. "Today I buy the completed product from overseas, which is a statement of wealth. And if I can't afford it, I buy the imitation from Kwangtung. You may look and smell like an 'orang kaya' but there is no base, no authenticity. There's nothing wrong with carrying a Chanel but it's sad that no one incorporates a local design [in luxury culture]," says Bong.

Sometimes, prosperity brings a disdain of your roots, he adds.

Bong takes pains to explain that by virtue of a "commonality" between the peoples of Malaysia, culture should be made accessible. "I can see how Malaysia has evolved and it is important to tell people about the commonality we inherit. *Nasi lemak* is not Malay, it is of Malay origin. Why are we internalising this commonality we have?"

His words resonate with a family history, which begins with a cultural mingling between Chinese settlers and the Malay Archipelago in a period of mass migration.

But this history of cultural assimilation is threatened. Even as Malaysia embarks on a concerted effort to promote a national identity to foreign investors, there are casualties at the margins of nationhood. The Peranakan culture, an identity that rests





ancient intercivilisational and interfaith bridges, is dwindling due to ethnic typecasting and reductive social policies. Forced into a mould, the Peranakan are increasingly

reverting to the mainstream Chinese identity.

All this makes Bong's preservation work more important. Collectively, he refers to historical artefacts as "civilizational art" – that made by long-dead craftsmen and which played a role in the formation of our modern identities.

In fact, Bong's definition of art encompasses a complete timeline. He alludes to the pre-historic carvings you would find at Gua Tambun in Perak or in the Great Cave of Niah in Sarawak. In their ancient abodes, Stone Age peoples depicted the divinity of the hunt and existential dilemmas such as life after death.

In light of such resonance, "how can you not be moved?" Bong asks.

Among Bong's artefacts for sale at his Pucuk Rebung gallery is a cabinet of Sung Dynasty ceramics from nearly a thousand years ago. It sits beside a display of Ming Dynasty ceramics and, beside that, Ching Dynasty. The set-up allows the onlooker to make a visual connection between the craft of the periods.

Neighbouring shelves are dedicated to Malay artefacts, with *keris* from the Sultanate as well as Brunei bronzes of copper and zinc from melted-down Chinese coins. And then shelves that display native sculpture and weaves – from the Kayan in the Bario Highlands to the Melanau and Kelabit. The value and

corresponding prices lie in the ages and rarity of the artefacts.

But the Pucuk Rebung gallery is not a dour warehouse of antiquities – it is lush with the colours of various artistic genres up to the present period. The canvases that feature more abstract forms – defined as "contemporary" art – capture a more current aesthetic for art collectors.

Even so, the winding form of a red Chinese dragon or traditional Malay symbolism is inescapable in the pieces Bong has displayed. "I like to have a bit of substance in my wares. So even if I sell contemporary art in Pucuk Rebung, there is some heritage in it," he says.

Canvas paintings and woodcarvings – traditional and modern – by local artists narrate Malaysian themes to new generations. Any Malaysian who walks into the store will find several items about which he could wax lyrical.

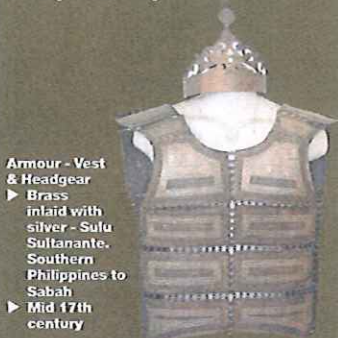
"Let's not be so serious," Bong says as he points to paintings of rambutan and flowers, and to a decorative bowl of mangosteen in the foreground. "You can relate to all of this, can't you?"

Having understood Bong's belief in our common inheritance, the large "Malaysian Heritage Art & Style" fonts at the entrance of Pucuk Rebung should serve as a bold statement of welcome for all Malaysians.

From his personal collection



Royal Regalia condiment set and arecanut cutter (cembul-cembul and kacip) from a betel-leaf quid set (tepak sirih)
 ▶ Gold and Silver - Royal Malay Court Art, Malay Peninsula
 ▶ Early 19th century



Armour - Vest & Headgear
 ▶ Brass inlaid with silver - Sulu Sultanate, Southern Philippines to Sabah
 ▶ Mid 17th century



View of Malacca Town and its surroundings from the sea
 ▶ Copper engraving, European
 ▶ 18th century



Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj at the Merdeka Parade in Melaka
 ▶ Original photograph
 ▶ August, 1957



Kelantan Lady in Kebaya Baju Melayu and Sarong Batik Jawa
 ▶ Oil on Canvas, Yusoff Abdullah
 ▶ 1963

Pucuk Rebung: On common ground

BONG halts our interview at intervals to welcome passers-by to his store. They are curious but hesitant to take that first step. "Please come in and have a look," he insists. One week into its opening in Bangsar, art curator and trader extraordinaire Bong is enthusiastic about greeting customers at his Pucuk Rebung premises. He is an able conversationalist and can readily engage any newcomer. Unassuming as he seems, Bong takes his place among the most learned of his peers.

The new Pucuk Rebung store in Lucky Garden, Bangsar, is where Bong feels a return to a more simple and authentic environment. The pragmatic neighbourhood is adjacent to glitzy Bangsar Baru. Unlike the neighbouring Telawi streets famed for imported consumerism and excess, here in Lucky Garden is where economy meets necessity.

Bong's store is exactly where a Secret Recipe restaurant had attempted to succeed. But it closed, having failed to lure patrons away from the staple fare of noodles and *roti canai* offered by neighbouring coffeeshops. At lunch hour, the eateries in Lucky Garden are the reason for the innumerable cars parked with an obscene lack of consideration along both sides of the roads.

Lucky Garden reminds Bong of the wetmarkets behind Singapore's Holland Village. An avid traveller, he sees the cities he has visited as living, breathing organisms, reflected in the people and their activities.

"Bangsar Baru is where all the rich, glamorous people go. But



The storefront of the Pucuk Rebung shop in Lucky Garden, Kuala Lumpur

Lucky Garden is where you eat," he points out, referring to the trio of busy coffeeshops on the same road as his store. "You don't dress up to come here."

In a sense, moving out of Suria KLCC where Pucuk Rebung was previously located is like moving mid-way back to the atmosphere of Bong's original place of business, Jalan Tun HS Lee, 17 years ago. This was where Bong and his partner, Terence Tay, briefly set up shop and were joined by Tengku Anisah Hamid, a Kelantan princess, who became a third partner in the venture. As those familiar with Kuala Lumpur will know, Jalan Tun HS Lee is known more for its naked authenticity than for attracting deep-pocketed customers.

Renting the intermediate shopplot in the mom-and-pop neighbourhood of Lucky Garden makes fiscal sense. The rent is a fraction of the lease cost at Suria KLCC. After 15 years and

millions of ringgit in rent, Bong yearned for more reasonable rates despite the steady stream of affluent traffic. He compares his move to coming out of an ivory tower.

It thus seems a little paradoxical, what with all these allusions to simplicity, that Bong's Pucuk Rebung is an outlet chock full of artefacts that would be the envy of a lesser museum. This coincides with Bong's belief in fostering public accessibility to a shared culture.

As these artefacts are passed from generation to generation, they bring with them currency and culture. Bong calls the transfer "recycling in its noblest form".

PUCUK REBUNG
 Address: 18 Lorong Ara Kiri 2, Lucky Garden, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur
 Email: prebung@gmail.com