

Breathing new life into an old culture



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WHEN Mr Wee Lin was a tyke celebrating Chinese New Year in 1953, he once heard a neighbour singing a Cantonese ditty which went: "Who thinks I'm a fool?"

Now 60 and an electrical engineer, he recalled with a chuckle: "I sang back: 'I do.'"

The neighbour, a big boy with a temper to match, was so furious, he began hurling firecrackers at the Wee family home at 157 Neil Road.

A barrage of big bangs later, its entire compound was strewn with red firecracker paper.

"I thought my grandmother would be mad at me for causing such a mess, but she was overjoyed because the lucky colour red was everywhere," said Mr Wee.

In September this year, there will be another red letter day for his family home when it opens as the Tan Cheng Lock Baba House Museum, becoming one of two main paeans to Peranakan heritage here.

The other is the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in Armenian Street. It closed in 2005 for a \$12 million makeover to turn it into a Peranakan museum, and will re-open next year.

Is there enough interest to warrant two Peranakan heritage centres here?

ACM director Kenson Kwok, 57, said: "Local interest in Peranakan culture has been growing exponentially for the past 10 to 15 years.

"The Peranakan culture is unique to South-east Asia, so tourists love it as it is something they cannot see anywhere else."

Ms Christine Khor, 56, director of the National University of Singapore's Centre For The Arts, which is overseeing the Baba House restoration, said: "The house is far too fragile for mass traffic, so we will open it only at select times. We will

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