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Like Tigers Around a Piece of Meat
The Baba Style of Dondang Sayang

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Cover Photo: The basic Donang Sayang instruments — violin,
gong, and rebanas.

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In memoriam

Baba Boon Kim Yew

Buah rambutan buah remunia,
Dikirim sahabat di Pantai Kundur;
Sudah menjadi resam dunia:
Tua gugur mombang gugur.

(Gwee Peng Kwee 1982, 1984)

Rambutan and remunia fruit,
Are sent by a friend in Pantai Kundur;
So has been the way of the world:
Ripe coconuts and green both fall.
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A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore) in 1982.

As this volume neared completion, my dear friend and teacher Baba Gwee Peng Kwee passed on (1900–86). We had seen this book as a memorial to our friend Baba Boon Kim Yew. May it likewise serve as a token of Baba Gwee’s long service to Dondang Sayang.

_Patah tiang rosak kemudi,_
_Nakhota China berlabuh di Jawa;_
_Patah tumbuh hilang berganti,_
_Mana sama guru yang lama._

Phillip L. Thomas
Gunong Sayang Association Management Committee, 1975/76.
Lee Yok Poh and Cik Puteh singing Dondang Sayang (1982).
Baba Gwee Peng Kwee (1982).
Dondang Sayang scene from the play, "Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih" (Let Bygones Be Bygones), February 1985. Singers: William Tan and Lee Yok Poh (right).
Malim Osman (on the violin) and the Orkes Asli Rama playing at a spirit shrine.
The late Mr Koh Hoon Teck, a founder member of the Gunong Sayang Association, and publisher of Dondang Sayang pantun books.
Baba Boon Kim Yew (1982).
Like Tigers Around a Piece of Meat

Burung cecawi di pohon sena,
Pohonnya besar dahannya jarang;
Biola, penyanyi, gong, rebana,
Barulah jadi si Dondang Sayang.

(William Tan 1982)¹

A drongo sits in the senna tree,
The tree is large, its branches scarce;
A violin, singer, gong, and tabor,
Now you have Dondang Sayang.

Shortly before he passed away in 1982, the master singer Boon Kim Yew recalled the Dondang Sayang of twenty years earlier. He said, “In those days we used to be like tigers around a piece of meat, but today I think of quitting. There are no young people coming to Gunong Sayang to learn how to sing. There is no longer any challenge. Always the same people come forward.” To what extent this pessimism is justified is difficult to say, but what is clear is that for many Malaysians, and increasingly more Singaporeans, the ability to understand Dondang Sayang has been lost. In this study, I outline the known history of the form and give an account of the Baba and, to a lesser extent, Malay aesthetic systems which generate and interpret this style of sung, poetic debate found in Malacca, Singapore, Penang, and Kuching.

Because my emphasis here is on the Baba style of Dondang Sayang, the account of Malay practice is necessarily limited. Malay aesthetics requires a separate study; yet an understanding of Baba work is impossible without at least an elementary appreciation of its
Malay roots. Babas view Malay Dondang Sayang as the model they aspire to, attributing to it a greater difficulty, a more refined use of language, different values of poetic creation, and above all, a more fluent poetic technique. In the following remarks, I have tried to suggest that Malay aesthetics has quite different values. These will be set out later in an appropriate work.\textsuperscript{2}