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Like Tigers Around a Piece of Meat

The Baba Style of Dondang Sayang

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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 Dondang 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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In Singapore, my special thanks are due to the family of the late Boon Kim Yew, Boon Kuan Fah and family, the members of the Gunong Sayang Association, the family of Gwee Peng Kwee, Lee Yok Poh, Mockram Kassim, the singers and dancers of Kelab Dondang Sayang, Mohammad Yusuf, Cik Puteh Sidik, Saleha Yakob, and Tan Geok Koon.

In Malacca, advisers were Aionon Idrus, Chik Mohammad Amin, Rahim Jantan, and Yeo Kuan Jin. Information about Penang comes from Khoo Phee Tuan, Ramlah Jusoh, Tan Eng Cheng, Tan Koon Hoy, Yeoh Seng Hoe, and documents held by the Penang Dondang

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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.*

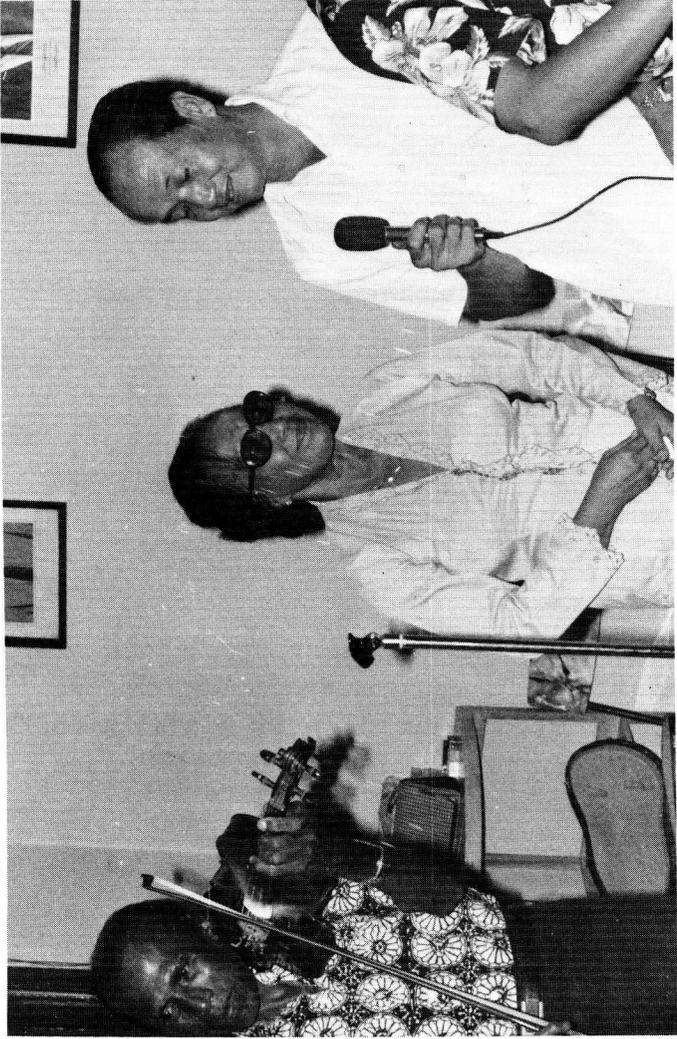
Phillip L. Thomas



Gunong Sayang Association Management Committee, 1975/76.



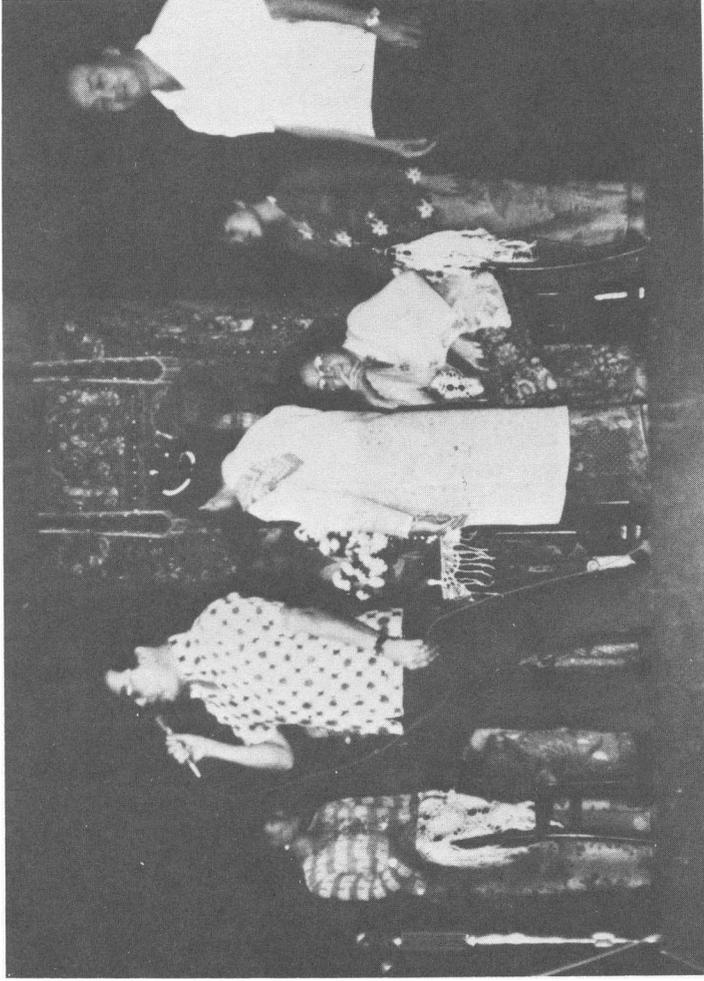
Gunong Sayang Association Executive Committee, 1982. Back row: Boon Kim Yew, Roystan Tan, Seow Kway Chin, Peter Scen Fook Loy. Front row: Chia Swee Lee, Chong Swee Hock, Lee Yong Teck, Wee Thian Bock, Chia Kim Hean, Ang Lian Teng, Charlie Koh Kim Cheong.



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.²