

Hoping Nyonya kebaya makes the cut

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By Imran Hilmy



Showcase of culture: Association members taking part in the shooting of a Baba Nyonya Chinese New Year and Chap Goh Meh programme at Pinang Peranakan Mansion in Church Street, Penang. — CHAN BOON KAI/The Star

GEORGE TOWN: A long time ago, when global trade depended on the monsoons, Chinese sea merchants stayed in Melaka or Penang awaiting for the arrivals of traders from Arab and Europe.

Some of them married the locals, which eventually led to a unique sub-culture called the Peranakan (Straits Chinese) today.

If everything goes as planned, Unesco may soon include a part of the community's intangible heritage – the Nyonya kebaya traditional outfit – in its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Penang Peranakan Baba Nyonya Association president Lillian Tong said they are working with their counterparts in Singapore, Thailand and Brunei to submit an application to Unesco.

For this, she added, the association has been making videos, collecting information, interviews and publications.

“We are in the midst of preparing the paper and document submission.

“Hopefully, the Nyonya kebaya will be included in the Unesco list,” she told reporters after taking part in the shooting of a Baba Nyonya Chinese New Year and Chap Goh Meh programme at Pinang Peranakan Mansion here on Monday.

She was joined by 20 association members in the television production held in conjunction with the festive celebrations.

Tong said the highlight of the filming was eating a Chap Goh Meh delicacy – “pengat” – a sweet dessert which sets the tone for a night of courtship and romance.

“After days of celebrating Chinese New Year, the Chinese will end the final night of the festival with a grand celebration.

“In the morning of Chap Goh Meh, the last and 15th day of the celebration, we will start our day eating the traditional pengat with prayers offered to the ancestors and gods at home.

“After seeking blessings and praying for good fortune, the family would gather for a meal before ending it with a bowl of sweet Nyonya pengat,” she added.

Pengat is a popular Nyonya dessert cooked with coconut milk, which is often mistaken for bubur cha-cha.

It is also a Malay traditional dessert with a similar name “pengat pisang”.

Meanwhile, Penang Tourist Guide Association chairman Clement Liang said chances were high that the Nyonya kebaya would be listed in Unesco’s World Intangible Cultural Heritage.

“It is part of our tradition and getting recognised for it will be good for our heritage city status.

“It will help to promote tourism not only in Penang and Malaysia but the whole of the South-East Asia region,” he added.

So far, Malaysia’s Mak Yong theatre, Dondang Sayang (song and music performance), songket (handwoven fabric) and silat (martial arts) have made it to the intangible cultural heritage list.

“The application will be sent to Unesco in March and the result will be known in October.