

P is for heritage

More precisely, P is for Peranakan and Puteh, the character in a new series of children's books (right) written by a mother of three

Alphabet Soup

Benita Aw Yeong

It was the threat of forgetting that inspired author Adeline Foo to begin remembering. The 37-year-old civil servant by day and author on weekends began writing her new children's series, *The Story Of Puteh*, when her father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease late last year.

The series is about the adventures of a girl named Puteh (which means white in Malay). Puteh was the nickname of Foo's grandmother, who loved to put rice powder on her face which gave her a creamy white complexion.

Two books in the four-part series, *The Beaded Slippers* and *The Kitchen God*, are already in the bookshops.

The series began when Foo, the daughter of a Peranakan father and a Chinese mother, browsed through back copies of the Peranakan Association's newsletters at the library.

Childhood memories came flooding back, inspiring her to discuss familiar Peranakan traditions with her father, a ritual she felt helped to stimulate his mind.

Watching her father teach her three children, aged three to eight years old, how to count in Baba Malay also reminded her of what little they had to remember their heritage by.

"My father's illness and my children were the 'catapult' for me to write the series of early history books. I also feel that many children's books are highly Western-oriented, while few help the next generation to remember local culture and heritage," says the head of corporate affairs at the National Community Leadership Institute.

So Puteh was born. In *The Kitchen God*, the feisty girl dabbles in making belachan, cooking rice and later manages to set her grandmother's kitchen on fire.

Afraid that Datok Dapor, the Kitchen God, would report her naughty antics to grandmother, Puteh smears kueh bakol, a sweet brown glutinous rice cake, on the god's mouth to bribe him into silence.

Peranakan traditions are documented not just in the prose. Much attention is also paid to the detailed illustrations that grace each page of the books.



Painted by Lee Kowling, who has more than 20 years of design and illustrating experience under her belt, the images are the product of hours spent poring over books on Peranakan heritage and culture.

This ensures that the beaded slippers Puteh puts on, the stove she cooks on and even the staircase of her home, resembles real Peranakan objects.

The entire process has been so enriching that Lee decided take a holiday in Malacca, a well-known Peranakan enclave, last month. The trip was a rich source of inspiration for the next two books in the series.

The co-authors have tried to make the stories come alive in other ways by organising a postcard-making activity and a treasure hunt at the Singapore Philatelic Museum and the Peranakan Museum recently to promote the books.

They are planning other activities such as a class teaching students to make kueh ee, glutinous rice balls with sweet filling, or what the Chinese call tang yuan at the Peranakan Museum in November. Kids will also hear the story behind Dong Zhi (winter solstice).

Other plans include lessons on how to wear the kebaya and the sarong – both traditional Peranakan attire.

The third book, *Chilli Padi*, will hit bookstores next month.

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The Beaded Slippers and *The Kitchen God* are available at major bookstores, each priced at \$9.90 with GST.

A book-signing session will take place at Times Newslink, Changi Terminal 3, on July 25 at 4.30pm and July 26 at 1pm.