

Singapore HeritageFest 2009
“Arte (factually) Speaking” Story-Writing Competition
Merit Award (Lower Secondary Category)



Contest ID: 178
Name: Venus Tan Sze Ning
Gender: Female
Age: 14-year-old
NRIC: SXXXX622G
Nationality: Singaporean
School: Dunman High School

Artefact: Kamcheng; Kerosang Serong
Museum: Asian Civilisations Museum

The Nyonya's choice
August, 1954

Court proceeding.

I fiddled my thumb in the glistening of the gold brook. I could not dispel the dizziness of confusion. Despite my clear direction, I was lost. The gavel banged to usher the silence away and the murmurs came to a gradual halt. They were waiting for my decision. "So, have you reached a decision for your new mother?" the judge questioned.

~1947~

"Ibu, is this how you stir the bird's nest?" My step-mother nodded and grasped my little hand, to motion my nimble fingers to stir the soup. Slowly, the fragrance unveiled and told me that I was finally a qualified *Nyonya*.

"I did it Ibu! Now, I can cook for you all the time!" I exclaimed.

She laughed and patted my nose to get rid of the flour. Then, she pulled out a beautiful ware from the cupboard. It was a *kamcheng*, my very own *kamcheng* to put my soup in. It was Ibu's family treasure and I was sure it was very old, probably from the Qing Dynasty. It looked varnished and beautiful. The delicate strokes of the intricate design, the slight undulation of the lines, the uncouth colour mix. So this was what Ibu had been working on for the past few nights. Under the candlelight, she had been touching up this *kamcheng* for me, her hands wavering like the candle flame.

Her silhouette like the candle flame of the night, lighting the way.

January 1954

Today, I am going to meet someone important and I am nervous although I do not know why. I was rushing Ibu to put on my beaded slippers and rushing her to usher me to the living room that I did not realize something. "Sayang, you forgot to put on your favourite brooch!" my Ibu exclaimed.

How could I forget that? My mother's *kerosang serong*. Ibu had been helping me search for my biological mother for years, questioning people in the alley where she found me as a baby. Despite only having the brooch that was found in my clasped hands when she found me, she still did not give up.

As I fastened the brooch and neared the end of the steps, I sensed a shadow. Her arms embraced me and her heavily jewelled fingers patted my head. The lady wailed and wiped her tears away.

"Sayang, I found her!" she smiled uncertainly.

Was this my mother, my biological mother?

"Sorry for being so secretive. I wanted to give you a surprise." Ibu shrugged.

My stomach lurched and I felt a rather uncertain joy. I unpinned the brooch and clasped it. My mother closed the *kerosang-serong* in my hand and placed it near my heart. It was my *bapa's* and she had given it to me. I embraced her. In the shadows, I could hear a whimper of quiet, silent sorrow.

~

Wait! How could I forget that? My beloved *kamcheng*! My mouth was still opened. Her silhouette like the candle flame of the night, lighting the way.

I chose *kamcheng*, the *kamcheng* who did not abandon me and fled when the Japanese invaded, unlike my biological mother. Ibu's love is and will forevermore remain vibrant like the uncouth mix of colour on my beloved *kamcheng*. In it holds the memories of my dream of becoming a real *nyonya*, when I learnt to cook my first dish, with my Ibu.

(564 words)