



STUDENT-LED TOURS

RECONCILING HYBRIDITIES

Negotiating Identity through
Domestic Objects

by CHEN WYMAN and GWEN LIM

RECONCILING HYBRIDITIES

Negotiating Identity through Domestic Objects

What does it mean to become a 'hybrid'? The Peranakan Chinese community has a long history of being associated with multiculturalism and hybridity. Originating from the intermarriages between local, indigenous women and Southern Chinese traders since the 15th century, the community is often referred to as a mix between 'Malay and Chinese' in popular culture.

However, the reality of hybridisation was not a simple matter of amalgamating just two cultures together. A constant process of reconciliation and negotiation underlies the community, including their material culture. From Western sculpture to Chinese decorations, this tour seeks to embrace the complexity of hybridisation and the realities of identity-making for the Peranakan Chinese community in the 20th century, faced with adapting between the local and colonial, ancestral and contemporary, public and private.

On Cover:

English Novels, c. 20th C;
Paper, various dimensions.
Gift of Ms. Agnes Tan Lim Kwi.

NUS Baba House Floor Map

① *Hanging Calligraphy Scrolls*, 20th C; (Reproduction).

② *Majolica Tiles*, c. Late 19th C.

③ *Wee Family Photographs*, c. 20th C.
Gift of Wee Lin.

④ *Metal Safe with Red and Brown Paint*, c.1920-40.
Gift of Francis Chan Wui Siene.

English Novels, c. 20th C.
Gift of Agnes Tan Lim Kwi.

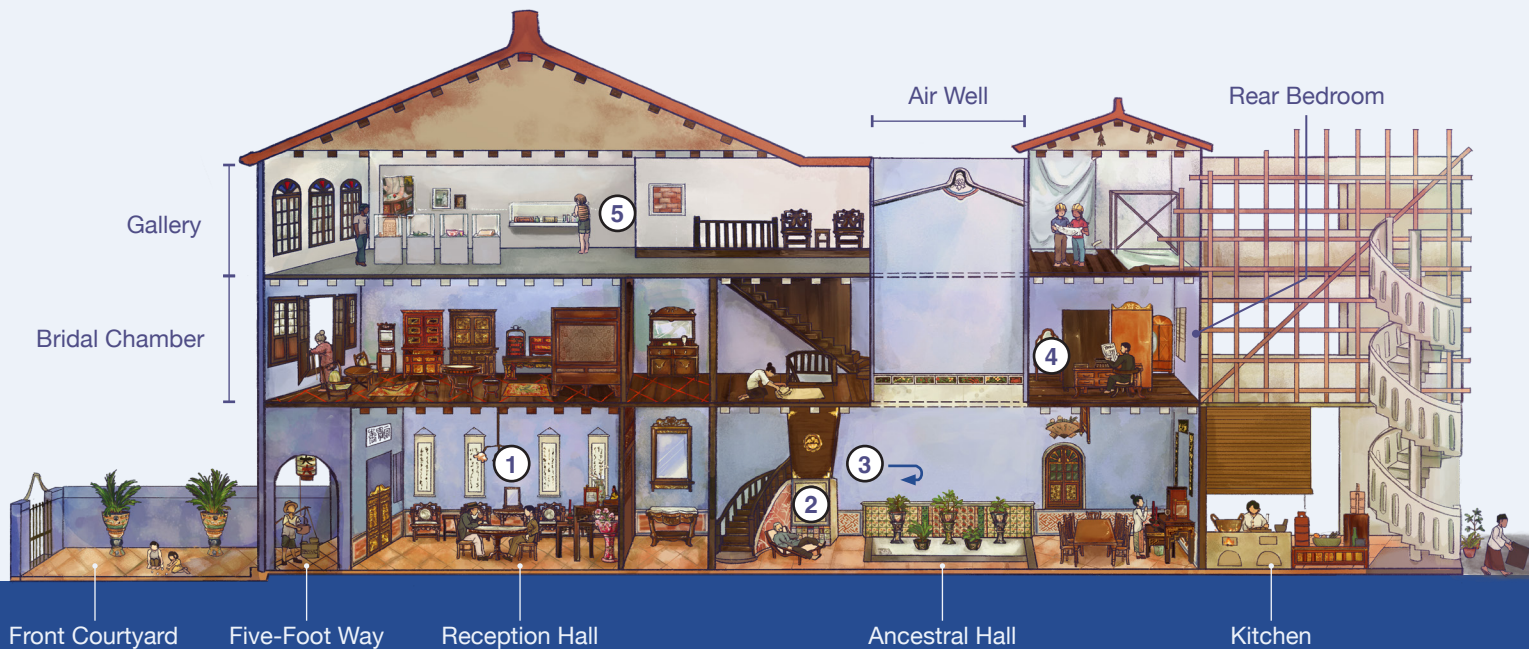
A Complete Chinese - English Dictionary, c.1920.
Gift of Agnes Tan Lim Kwi.

⑤ *Antiques from Antique Shop*, 2019.
On Loan from Guan Antiques.

1st Floor

2nd Floor

3rd Floor



HANGING CALLIGRAPHY SCROLLS

1

These reproduced hanging calligraphy scrolls decorate the Reception Hall, containing traditional Chinese poems. Inside a space designed to host guests, the scrolls signalled the homeowner's education and status. Poetry was associated with scholars in China, who were traditionally held in high regard in traditional Confucian beliefs which many Peranakan Chinese observed.

However, by the late 19th century, most community members in Singapore lost their Chinese literacy, adapting to local languages and developing Baba Malay instead. Yet, their inclusion here suggests a continued awareness of their ancestral cultural roots. This implies a deeper negotiation between the community's ancestral roots and their locality within Southeast Asia, complicating the process of hybridisation.

In Reception Hall.

Hanging Calligraphy Scrolls, c. 20th C;
Ink on paper (Reproduction), 133 x 32.2 cm each.





MAJOLICA TILES

2

These Majolica tiles adorn the bottom of the staircase in the Ancestral Hall, decorated with various floral designs, animals and colours. Majolica tiles are a common feature found around Peranakan Chinese homes in Singapore, earning them the popular namesake 'Peranakan Tiles'. However, most of these tiles were made overseas in Europe and later Japan, the latter catering directly to the Peranakan Chinese market by including auspicious symbols into the designs like loquats, which symbolises wealth. In the Ancestral Hall, the tiles lie opposite a collection of

In Ancestral Hall.

Majolica Tiles, c. Late 19th C; Ceramic, 15.3 x 15.3 cm.

European-style sculptures. Despite both being objects of Western origin, the latter has not been branded as 'Peranakan' in popular media.

What differentiates these objects from being 'Peranakan' versus 'Western'? And for these tiles to be transformed into symbols of Peranakan culture, we question how cultural identity is defined by originality or adaptation of the foreign.

WEE FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

3

This collection of early 20th century photographs features the Wee family members in various social and private settings. Of note is the attire of the individuals. They appear in Western suits and hats in some pictures, Chinese clothing in others, and sometimes combining various forms of dress at once. One can glean from these images a cultural fluidity embraced by the community: an ability to traverse between two spheres at once, from the Western to

the Eastern. Conversely, this may signal another underlying tension: the necessity to balance between the public and private, to succeed (or survive) in colonial society whilst respecting their ancestral roots. The hybridity displayed in these photographs - objects intended to convey character - displays both the flexibility and tensions experienced by the community at the turn of the century.

In Ancestral Hall.

Wee Family Photographs, c. 20th C; Various mediums, various dimensions. Gift of Wee Lin.





In Rear Bedroom.

Metal Safe with Red and Brown Paint, c. 1920-40;
Metal, 72.8 x 47.3 x 48.5 cm.
Gift of Francis Chan Wui Siene.

English Novels, c. 20th C; Paper, various dimensions.
Gift of Agnes Tan Lim Kwi.

A Complete Chinese-English Dictionary, c.1920; Paper,
27 x 20 cm. Gift of Agnes Tan Lim Kwi.

METAL SAFE AND ENGLISH BOOKS

4

On top of this metal safe lies a set of books including Victorian-era English novels and an English-to-Chinese dictionary. Wealthy Peranakan Chinese individuals often received English education in mission schools, allowing them to work closely with the British. Despite their affinity for Western culture, the dictionary's presence implies an attempt to reconcile with the loss of Chinese as a language. In the rapidly changing landscape of the 20th century,

the new wave of Chinese immigrants forming significant parts of Singapore's workforce may have prompted the move to increase Chinese literacy – a necessary move for many who were business owners. These books suggest a wider process of linguistic reconciliation and constant redefinitions of hybridity within the Peranakan Chinese community, necessitated by the changing social landscape of colonial Singapore.

ANTIQUES FROM ANTIQUE SHOP

5

The last stop focuses on a section of *Glossaries of the Straits Chinese Homemaking* and objects sourced from Guan Antiques. These everyday objects like dominoes, fragrance bottles and medicine boxes could be found outside of Peranakan Chinese homes. Yet, in an interview with the owner of the store, these items are labelled as 'Nyonya' when sold – even if their provenance and ownership may not be Peranakan. What then, does it

mean for an object to become 'Peranakan', to become assimilated into the culture? With the popularisation of Peranakan products as cultural commodities like souvenirs and gifts, it is crucial to note the risks of ascribing essentialising cultural labels at the risk of obscuring the other histories and communities who shared these objects and landscapes the Peranakan Chinese inhabited.

In Gallery, *Glossaries of the Straits Chinese Homemaking*.

Antiques from Antique Shop, 2019; Various mediums, various dimensions. On loan from Guan Antiques.



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Built around 1895, 157 Neil Road is a three-storey townhouse located in Singapore's historic district of Blair Plain. Once the ancestral home of a Peranakan Chinese family, namely the Wee family, the property was acquired by the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2006 with funds donated by the late Ms Agnes Tan in memory of her late father Tun Tan Cheng Lock, a Malaysian businessman and community leader.

In 2007, a project was undertaken to restore 157 Neil Road for presentation as a heritage house which contextualises Peranakan Chinese material culture and aesthetics within a domestic setting. The interior setting takes visitors on an experiential trip into a Peranakan Chinese family home of the early 20th century. NUS Museum, NUS Department of Architecture, the Urban Redevelopment Authority and The Peranakan Association of Singapore were the main partners in the conservation project. The house opened in September 2008, and was named NUS Baba House.

NUS Baba House is presently managed by NUS Museum.



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OPENING HOURS:
All visits are by appointment only.

Heritage Tours (English)
Tuesday – Friday: 10am
Saturday: 10am and 2pm