

BOOK TOUR  
Baba &  
Nyonya  
House Museum

We hope you enjoy this self-guided journey!  
Please return this book to us after your tour.



## INTRODUCTION TO THE PERANAKANS



Welcome to the Baba & Nyonya House Museum! The three terrace houses that make-up this museum were acquired by the Chan family in 1861.

From as early as the 16th Century, merchants from China, India & Arabia came to the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Malacca, Penang) in search of trade. Some intermarried with local women and their children were known as "Peranakan" or "Straits-Born." There are the Peranakan India and Peranakan Jawi.

Ours is the story of a Peranakan Chinese family.

## FAMILY PORTRAITS

Since 1861, four generations of the Chan family have lived in this home. It was opened by the family to the public in 1985. The portraits on the wall are of the residents who once lived here. Peranakan men are called **baba**, an honorific title meaning gentleman and the women **nyonya** meaning lady.



Chan Cheng Siew  
(1865–1919)

Baba Chan Cheng Siew was a planter. In his early years, he planted gambier, a crop used for medicinal purposes. He later switched his plantation to rubber, and this brought him a lot of wealth. Around the estates, he was fondly called Big Boss with Glasses, **Towkay Cermin Mata**. Most of the furniture in the house today belongs to when Cheng Siew lived here until he passed away at the age of 54, in 1919.



Chee Gee Geok Neo  
(1865–1933)

Chee Gee Geok Neo, was Cheng Siew's wife. She was fondly known in the family as Fat Mother, **Mak Gemuk**.

Cheng Siew also had three concubines. The eldest concubine Choo Way Neo, or **Nenek Cho**, lived in the house until her death in 1970. The two younger concubines Maggie Tan Ah Moy and Tan San Yeok, lived nearby on Jalan Kuli Street.



Chan Seng Kee  
(1895–1983)

Cheng Siew only had one legitimate son — Chan Seng Kee. He was match-married to Ho Joo Suan in 1917, and when Cheng Siew passed on, he became the trustee to his father's estate. Seng Kee and Joo Suan had eight children.



Ho Joo Suan  
(1901–1987)

Ho Joo Suan grew up on Tengker Street and came from a Peranakan family. Her father was Mr Ho Seng Giap, better known as Big Brother, **Twa Ko**. The family was also known for its curry powder recipe which they sold under the brand Ho Siang Gap. She was the youngest daughter of five children.

## THE GRAND RECEPTION HALL (THIA BESAR)



The Peranakan-Chinese community spoke a language known as Baba-Malay which is a mix of Hokkein dialect and the local Malay language.

Even though Malay customs (**adat**) were adopted, keeping an identity as Chinese was still important. This grand reception hall was where honoured guests would be entertained, and business negotiations conducted by the men of the household.

The setting of this room is a typical Straits-Chinese reception hall. Its symmetrical layout mirrors a mandarin official's home in China of the Qing dynasty.

Here, everything in the room must be balanced, organized, and the furniture comes in multiples of two.



## THE GRAND RECEPTION HALL *(continued...)*



a. Silk Embroidery *(wall facing North)*

The centerpiece showcases the Three Abundances of blessings, good fortune and longevity – **Fu Lu Shou**. The three abundances are symbolized in this artwork by images of bats (blessings), deer (prosperity) and cranes (longevity).

## THE GRAND RECEPTION HALL *(continued...)*



b. Silk Embroidery *(wall facing South)*

This centerpiece depicts the Phoenix or **Feng Huang**. The phoenix is second among the four supernatural creatures in Chinese symbolism. It is a motif that was adopted by the Empresses of China. It is believed that this embroidery symbolizes the citizens of China paying respect to the Empress during a time of peace and prosperity.



c. Wooden Sign on Top of Door

The placard on top of this door was given to Chan Cheng Siew when he moved into the house, in 1896. It reads “**Congratulations to Mister Cheng Siew, on the new home. A glorious and magnificent house!**” It was made in a shop called Quan Shun.



## DARK HALL (THIA GELAP)



This hall was the furthest a young lady (**nyonya**) could go out of the household unaccompanied. The screen door protected precious daughters from being seen from the street. If the ladies wanted to look out, they would need to peek through the slits in the screen to catch a glimpse of what was happening!

## DARK HALL (THIA GELAP) *(continued...)*



a. Lantern *(on the left)*



b. Lantern *(on the right)*

Hand painted lanterns were placed outside each of the houses. They were a way for families to advertise who the house belonged to, and the names of their business.

The left lantern reads the family business name Swee Hin. The right is the Chan family surname. Before electricity came to the street in the 1920s, lanterns would have been lit by candle.



## AIRWELL (CHIM CHE)



The houses on this street are 160 ft in depth and 55 ft in width. The land was demarcated when the Dutch occupied Malacca. There are no windows on the left or right walls. Ventilation and light comes into the house through 3 main courtyard airwells. Rain would fall through the airwell, to cool the house, and also bringing good luck and prosperity (**ong**) into the house as it is believed that water signifies wealth.

### a. Staircase

One of the unique features of this house is its gold-gilded staircase. No nails were used in creating the staircase, lending to the superstition that the only time a nail is used for the family is 'the final nail in the coffin'.

The symbols on the staircase represent 8 immortals. There are legendary taoist beings representing different life conditions: poverty, wealth, aristocracy, the working class, age, youth, masculinity and femininity.

One of the eight immortals Lu Don Bin carries a Taoist Fly-Brush and Sword. According to the legend, he attained immortality at the age of 50 and is worshipped by the sick. He is said to travel the earth slaying dragons and ridding the world of various forms of evil!



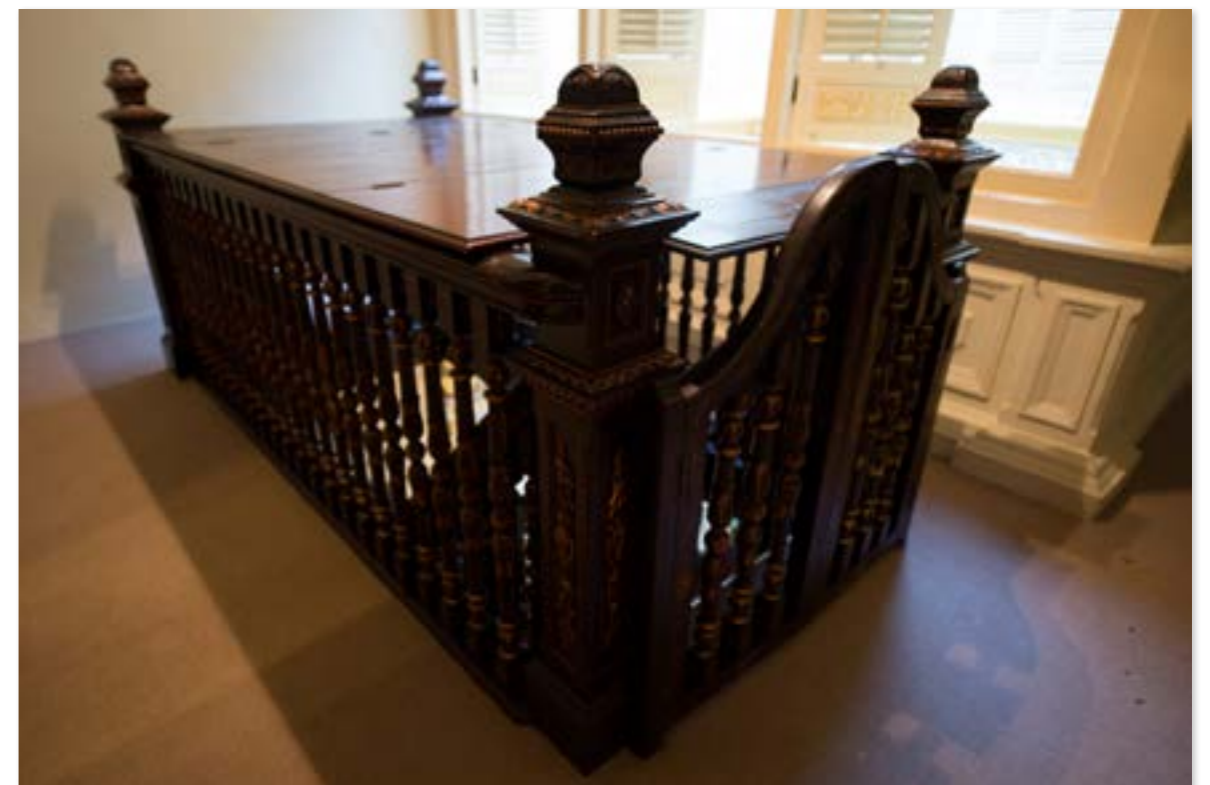
## STAIRCASE WITH FOLDABLE PANELS



Welcome to the living quarters. This staircase features an 19th century security feature. It has a foldable cover that is able to be locked. This could have prevented thieves from coming in, children from venturing downstairs at night and the late husband from coming back in late.



a. Staircase opened



b. Staircase folded & locked



## WEDDING CHAMBER

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This was once the master bedroom of Cheng Siew and Jee Geok Neo, and later Seng Kee and Joo Suan.

Today it is used to showcase what a bridal chamber bed might have looked like.

Peranakan-Chinese weddings were known to be a 12-day feast of festivities, rituals and merriment. The beautifying of the bridal chamber was a ceremony that would have been conducted by the older ladies of the family before the wedding festivities began.

### a. Blessing of the Bed Ritual

Once the bed was prepared with decorations and cleansed with local Indian incense known as **stangee**, it would then be ready for a blessing. On the right day and appointed time, a young boy within the family, would be chosen to roll on the bed back and forth three times. It was important that his chinese zodiac sign complemented the couples. This ritual was done to bless the couple with many children, with the hopes of the first being a male.

## WEDDING CHAMBER (continued...)

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### b. Bride & Groom Costumes

These are the wedding costumes of Chan Seng Kee and Ho Joo Suan when they were married in December 1917. During the 1900s, wedding attire in Malacca were commissioned from Shanghai or from a Shanghainese tailor that lived in Singapore. These costumes are fashioned from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912).

### c. Chun Tok Ceremony (Fun & Games)

The **Chun Tok** ceremony would be the first time the bride and groom would eat as a couple. During this ceremony, a game would be played. Underneath the table, if the groom manages to put his foot over the brides, then he would be the master of the house. However if she manages to put her foot over his, then she would rule the roost.

As the couple eats, the candles would also be observed by on-lookers. The candle on the brides side represented her lifespan, and the candle on the groom's side his lifespan. The flame to last the longest shows who would live the longest! However just to be fair and politically correct, most family members would snuff out both candles at the same time.





a. Birthday

A birthday was always an occasion to be celebrated as a mile-stone! This cloth was given to Gee Geok Neo (**Mak Gemuk's**) when she turned 71. She would have donned an imperial-like gown, and shared her joy by giving out red paper packets (**ang pow**) to all her grandchildren (**cucu**) and relatives who visited.

Many dishes would have been cooked for the occasion. Some of the dishes that were a must were noodles (**mee suah**) to signify longevity, glutinous rice balls in syrup (**kuih ih**) to celebrate the sweetness of life, and eggs to celebrate fertility for many generations. It would have been a time of much merriment and festivities for the family.



b. Funeral

Blue was a colour that became synonymous with Peranakan funerals. Even the cakes (**kuih**) eaten during the funeral would be blue and white in colour.

When Cheng Siew passed away in 1919, all the deities and mirrors of the house would have been covered with white paper. The funeral lanterns would be placed outside the house to let the town know that the master of the house had passed on.

A Peranakan funeral must also be odd-numbered. It may have lasted from 7-31 days!



## NYONYA ENTERTAINMENT



a. Mahjong Table



b. Cherki

**Mahjong** and **Cherki** were two games that were well loved by the Nyonyas.

**Mahjong** is a game that can be played four players. The objective is to build sets with the tiles.

Nyonya Joo Suan loved to play **Mahjong**. It was a past time and a way for her to socialize with her sister-in-law and other relatives. She would take a trishaw down the road to Tengkerah and play several rounds of **Mahjong** with the ladies in the household she grew up in.

Cherki is similar to Mahjong but is a simpler and shorter version.

## CLOTHING OF NYONYAS & BIBIKS

Young Nyonyas were styled in a dress known as **Baju Kebaya**, which comprises of a lace top usually with motifs that the nyonya would have liked, and a skirt known as a **sarong**. She would have fastened her top with a brooch known as **kerosang** (the first piece is called the **ibu**, and the two other pieces are referred to as the **anak**). Her hair would be in a bun known as a **sanggul** with three pins to fasten it.

*Please proceed downstairs for 'Part 3: Ground Floor' of the tour.*

## ANCESTRAL HALL (THIA ABU)



The Peranakan-Chinese still kept their religious beliefs: a mix of Daoism, Buddhism and ancestral worship. Ancestral worship was a way of respecting one's elders through filial piety.

This hall is dedicated to the ancestors of the Chan family, and prayers (**semahyang**) are still conducted 7 times a year: during ancestor's birthdays, death anniversaries, all Soul's Day, Chinese New Year and the Hungry Ghost festival. Even though some family members now follow Christ, the act of honouring one's heritage and ancestry and getting family members together becomes a treasured time for all.

### a. Ancestral Portrait of Chew Poye Yan

As the eldest son, Cheng Siew was expected to keep the tablets of his mother and father in this altar.

A picture of Cheng Siew's mother Chew Poye Yan (1845-1903) takes center-stage on top of the altar. This is telling of the Peranakan culture at home. In society, the **babas** played active roles, where young **nyonyas** were not allowed ruled the roost. Many tales are told of the fierce Peranakan mother-in-law as a force to be reckoned with!





## ANCESTRAL HALL (THIA ABU) *(continued...)*



### b. Cheng Siew's Funeral

Cheng Siew had a grand funeral. The Straits Times November 26th, 1919 reports:

*The funeral of the late Mr Chan Cheng Siew, J.P took place yesterday. The cortege left his residence at Heeren Street, at 11:45am and preceded to the family burial ground at Peringgit where the mortal remains of the millionaire were laid to rest. The canopy used was one of the best and costliest seen in Malacca during the last ten years.*



### c. Seng Kee & Ho Joo Suan's Family



Seng Kee and Ho Joo Suan's first child was born in 1923, a few years after Cheng Siew passed away. They had eight children altogether: four boys, four girls. Those eight children went on to have families of their own and the clan has now been in Malaysia for 7 generations.

This photograph was taken circa 1940.

*Family portrait next to Chiu Thau display*

## CHIU THAU WEDDING DISPLAY



This display showcases one of the many rituals in a Peranakan wedding. The hair-combing **Chiu Thau** ceremony is a coming-of-age ritual which both bride and groom perform in their respective homes before the actual wedding begins.

This three-tier (**sam kai**) altar is used to honour the highest god Ti Kong. It would have been placed in the outer reception hall, facing the street. The bamboo tray (**niru**) symbolizes the world. The bride or groom would step onto the tray, and sit on a measuring scoop for rice known as the **gantang**.

A female master of ceremony, **Sang Kheh Umm** would assist the bride, and an older man, **Pak Chindek** would assist the groom through this ritual.

The bride or groom would sit on the **gantang**, hold the prayer book in their lap, with the items to remind them of their new roles they would be stepping into. The scales to act justly, a pair of scissors to make all things equal as husband and wife, a razor as a warning to be cautious, and mirror to tell good deeds from bad, a comb and a 3½ meter thread to represent long life of 3½ generations.



## DINING ROOM



### a. Tok Panjang

**Tok Panjang** literally means long table — **Tok** is a Hokkein Word for table, **Panjang** a Malay word for long. With eight children in the Chan family, it was indeed necessary to have such a long table! Older family members would have eaten with their hands like the Malays, while some would have adopted the more English style of eating with utensils. The Peranakans did not use chopsticks as this was seen a “chinaman” way of eating. Dinner in this household was held promptly at 7pm sharp, everyone was expected to be at the table. The main dishes were a spread of the typical Peranakan fare such as duck soup (**itik tim**), nut of pangium edule (**buah keluak**), pork soybean-paste stew (**babi pong teh**), accompanied with a chilli paste (**sambal belacan**), and shrimp paste (**cincalok**) was a must.

### b. Nyonya Porcelain

The Peranakans are well-known for their porcelain ware. Different sets were used for different occasions.



Red porcelain was used for brought out during special occasions such as birthdays and weddings.



Daily porcelain would have been a mix of English patterned plates bought from Robinsons Singapore. Johnson's Brothers porcelain was the popular brand of the day.



Blue and white porcelain were used for funerals.

## KITCHEN (DAPUH)



The heart of a Peranakan home is the kitchen. This household had two cooks. The main cook (**chong poh**) would buy the food from the market, and a second assistant would pound the ingredients and clean the fish.

The lady of the household would oversee the cooking.



## KITCHEN (DAPUH) *(continued...)*



### a. Pounds

A good Nyonya must know how to pound a shrimp-paste known as **belacan** in the right way. A potential mother-in-law would be able to see if the **nyonya** of the household is a suitable bride for her son, by listening to the rhythm in which she pounds the **belacan**! Pounds were used to get rid of husks from rice, for pounding condiments and **belacan**. These are staple utensils found in Indian, Malay and Chinese households.

### b. Ice-cream Maker

The family remembers going out to the shop (**keday**) to buy ice-blocks, vanilla or strawberry flavouring and condensed milk. The boys would then take turns to turn the ice-cream wheel for at least half an hour before they could enjoy the spoils of their hard work!



### c. Putu Mayam Maker

Joo Suan enjoyed baking more than she did cooking. One of her favourite delicacies to make was an Indian delicacy known as **putu mayam**. Seng Kee loved his wife's **putu mayam**, it was back-breaking to make because one needed to squat in order to press the ingredients! Seng Kee modified this **putu mayam** maker into a bench so that it would be easier for Joo Suan to make the **putu mayam** at arm level. Seng Kee enjoyed watching his wife make all sorts of cakes (**kuih muih**) for tea-time.



## KITCHEN (DAPUH) *(continued...)*



### d. Stove

The household has two wood fire-stoves. One here, and another in the back which would have been used during festive occasions. This stove showcases items which cook (**chong poh**) would have used everyday: pots for steaming rice, boiling soups, fans to stoke the fire.

## BATHROOM (CHIWAN)



There are only two bathrooms in this household, one downstairs and one upstairs.

The toilet facilities were a lot less glamorous and adopted an eastern squatting style.

Known as the **jamban**, it was a simple raised concrete platform with a hole. Lime (**kapir**) would be poured into the hole, and cut strips of paper known as **chor chua** were used to clean oneself. One had to balance themselves, and aim well!

There was no sewerage system until the 1960s. Before that, a bucket system was adopted. A man would walk through the front of the house to collect the day's waste. He would bring a clean bucket, clear the contents of the **jamban** and take the old bucket away to be cleaned.