



# DRESSING THE BABA

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Recent Donations of Portraits

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Exhibition supported by Ms Agnes Tan in memory of her father the late Tun Tan Cheng Lock

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Recent Donations of Portraits

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## Acknowledgements

Mr Peter Lee for the loan of artefacts

Ms Sharron Chee Guek Kee for the loan of portraits from the collection of her late father Chee Teng Kwee

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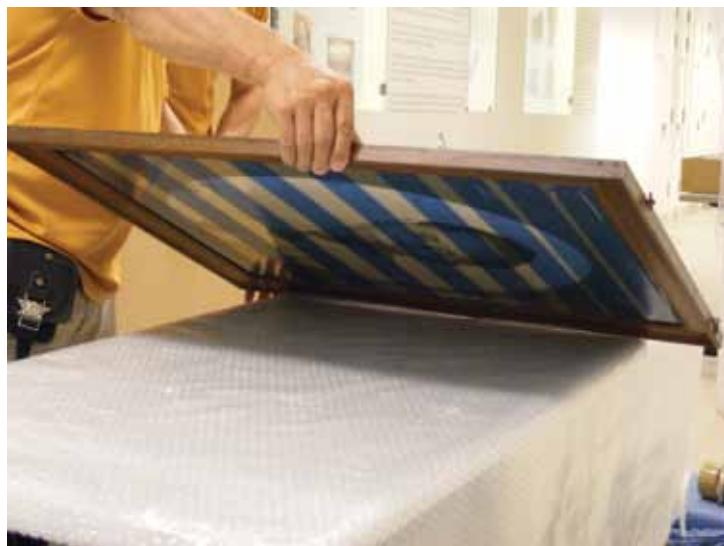
# Foreword

Ahmad Mashadi  
Head, NUS Museum

NUS Museum and Baba House are honoured to have received donations of portraits from Ms Agnes Tan, Mr Wee Lin, Mr Winson Tan, Mr Melvin Tan, and Mr Peter Lee. Also included in the exhibition are five portraits on loan from the collection the late Mr Chee Teng Kwee. We thank his daughter Ms Sharron Chee Guek Kee for this generous gesture. The donations received from Ms Agnes Tan are especially meaningful as they mark an ongoing encouragement and support to the Baba House in developing its collection of Straits Chinese materials, including emerging areas of collection and study such as Peranakan portraits.

Gathered from sources in Singapore, Malacca, Penang and Java, the portraits range from coloured photographs, ink on paper, to oils. As recent additions to the Museum's permanent collection, these portraits are significant examples of practices that were informed by patronage, taste and pictorial conventions in periods of social and economic transformations in Southeast Asia. The diversity of their subjects, origins, medium, and technical qualities indicate the complexities of change and continuity as societies across the region at the turn of the 20th century accommodated newer expressions while sustaining aspects of older practices.

Ancestral ink and oil portraits and modern studio photographs were displayed in homes according to their varied functions; to facilitate family rituals, to map ties, and to define social settings. As images that defined social and economic status, the subjects were characterized by their fineries and gestures. Beyond structured devices and formalities, these images may be studied as part of our attempts to understand the modern as a condition that requires newer forms of social, economic and cultural negotiations and expressions. This exhibition at the Baba House is conceived to celebrate the donations. However, while doing so, we also hope to prospect fresh grounds of investigations, not only germane in organizing an upcoming exhibition at the NUS Museum, but also significant in framing potentials of collections development and curatorial research.



# Preliminary Frames

Fashion, Gender, Class and Modernity in  
NUS Museum's Straits Chinese Portraits Collection

Foo Su Ling

This exhibition of portraits at Baba House presents a selection from NUS Museum's Straits Chinese collection and foregrounds an exhibition to be held at the Museum in the latter half of 2013. The portraits are gifts from several donors; some pieces coming from the donors' respective family collections while others were acquired and collected over a period of time. The works range in stylistic approaches and formal qualities. They are collected as examples of early practices in art making, in particular when photographic and artist studios were emerging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The collection also forms part of the growing category of Straits Chinese material culture and is indicative of the economies of art patronage and cultural projections.

There are no known specialized portrait collections of the domiciled Chinese community in Southeast Asia. NUS Museum's collection of such materials is modest at this point, with research and analysis in its preliminary stages. Nonetheless, the assortment of works offers grounds for embarking on the study of portrait making in the region and its differentiate formal and thematic interests.



Lim Kim Swee  
*Ancestral Portrait of Tan Keow*  
1898, Singapore  
Ink on Paper, 129 x 101 cm

## The Portraits

The collection currently holds 50 portraits produced from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the works that were acquired from dealers and third parties are undated, and information on each piece remains relatively scarce and fragmented with much to be discovered. In this respect, opportunities abound for those pursuing studies on portraiture with an interest in undertaking research on the cataloguing elements of pictorial materials.

The portraits may be subdivided along the following media – 13 oils on canvas or board, 8 watercolours and 29 photographs. Of the photographed works, a number are painted over with gouache, a technique used to add colour and artistic touches to enhance black and white images prior to the invention of colour photography. A handful of portraits are attributable to specific artists namely, Lim Kim Swee; Low Kway Song; Luo Yihu; Ong Swee Hong; and the photographic studios of G.R. Lambert, Gustave Mogliei and T. Williamson. Three of the watercolour portraits (*Ancestral Portrait of Tan Keow*, *Ancestral Portrait of Wee Boon Teck* and *Portrait of Tan Beng Wan*) representing members from two different families were painted by Lim Kim Swee. *Portrait of Tan Kim Seng* by Luo Yihu has a composition comparable to two other paintings, one belonging to the National Heritage Board and the other located at the Tan Kim Seng ancestral home in Malacca. This assembly of signed works is significant as primary sources for further survey on artistic practices and studio processes.

The portraits originate from British Malaya as well as the Dutch East Indies and it has been possible to establish the provenance of each work back to the point of the item coming into the possession of the respective donor. More groundwork would be necessary to locate the earlier histories of each piece; such knowledge would form the basis for constructing a fascinating account of how this category of collectibles travels through family homes across generations, or circulate in the collecting market.



Luo Yihu  
*Portrait of Tan Kim Seng*  
c. 1860, Singapore  
Oil on Canvas, 97 x 76 cm

The majority of the subjects represented in the collection are of ethnic Chinese descent and the identities of about half are known. Among the unidentified sitters, it is possible to recognize those from Peranakan Chinese<sup>1</sup> families through the costume of the ladies, namely the *baju panjang* (*Portrait of a Man in Blue Mandarin Robe and Lady in Black Baju Panjang and Yellow-Orange Sarong with Brown Designs* is an example). In circumstances where the female half of the couple is attired in Chinese-style garment (as in the pair made up of *Portrait of a Lady in Green Chinese-Style Blouse and Skirt*, and *Portrait of a Gentleman in Black Mandarin-Collared Jacket and White Trousers*) or when portraits do not come in a set and only a man is featured, it is less certain if the subjects were from families with a

<sup>1</sup>Peranakan Chinese refers to the domiciled ethnic Chinese community in Southeast Asia. The term ‘Straits Chinese’ is also used in this essay when referring to Peranakan Chinese residing in Malaya, particularly in the Straits Settlements (the ‘Straits’).



Unsigned  
*Portrait of a Man in Blue Mandarin Robe and Lady in Black Baju Panjang and Yellow-Orange Sarong with Brown Designs*  
c. 1890, Indonesia  
Oil on Canvas, 54 x 39 cm



Unsigned  
*Portrait of a Lady in Green Chinese-Style Blouse and Skirt*  
c. 1900, Indonesia  
Oil on Canvas, 92.3 x 58.7 cm



Unsigned  
*Portrait of a Gentleman in Black Mandarin-Collared Jacket and White Trousers*  
c. 1900, Indonesia  
Oil on Canvas, 92.3 x 58.7 cm



history of residency Southeast Asia or new immigrants to the region. Accompanying the selection depicting individuals and couples are a few group portraits where the sitters are affiliated through their participation in various organizations or attendance at momentous occasions (*Group Photo at 13 Amber Road* and *Group Photo at 17 Paya Lane*). The subjects' outfits and adornments, their expressions, postures, and the objects surrounding them, work collectively towards projecting particular identities which offer numerous standpoints from which to explore concepts, ideas and functions in portrait making.

Unsigned  
*Group Photo at 13 Amber Road*  
c. 1920, Singapore, Photograph, 24 x 29 cm

## Dress and Distinction

Referencing the collection, it is noticeable that at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a change occurred in the costume choices of male subjects; from the traditional Chinese long gown, the Western suit or a hybrid of Chinese and Western fashion became the norm. The vestimentary code for ladies, however, appears to have remained consistent with sitters continuing the tradition of presenting themselves in the *baju panjang*. Portraits furnish a wealth of details for the scrutiny of dress and dressing, a trajectory which is explored in the rest of this essay. Dress is studied in relation to the wider political climate and social conventions surrounding gender, status and outlook, and attempts are made to apprehend the connections between the (un)changing direction of fashion and the transformations society was undergoing during the era.

In the portraits that are chronologically earlier, the long gown appears to have been the preferred apparel for male subjects. Tan Beng Swee's attire (*Portrait of Tan Beng Swee*) is a one-piece body-length gown. Both Tan Jiak Kim (*Photo of Tan Jiak Kim*) and the subject in *Portrait of a Man in Black Chinese Jacket and Blue Gown* combine the Manchu-style jacket with a waist to ankle length gown. The jacket, which may be waist length or could extend to cover the abdomen, sports a rounded tip mandarin collar and is fastened down the front with Chinese knot and loop buttons. All three subjects use white socks and footwear of dark coloured fabric with white soles.

Over various historical periods, elite classes from different cultures have shown a predisposition towards fashion encompassing flowing drapery not only for females but also among males. Up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sarong – a single length of cloth wrapped around the lower half of the body – was a familiar male apparel in Southeast Asia across social strata, with class distinction evident mainly in the type of fabric used and motifs imprinted on the material. In present times, this continues to be a mode of dressing for men at rituals, ceremonies and celebrations held in observance of traditions.



Unsigned

*Portrait of Tan Beng Swee*

c. 1880, Singapore

Watercolour on Paper, 59 x 42.5 cm

Traditional Chinese society deemed the long gown worn over trousers to be attire befitting men of stature – the gentry, literati, public officials and wealthy merchants. As recent as the 1930s, Chinese writer Lin Yutang opined that the human body, being essentially similar to that of a monkey, was best served by clothes which concealed rather than accentuate bodily forms (Harrist 2005: 175, citing Lin Yutang). This sartorial principle is reflected in the loose-fitting apparel on Tan Beng Swee and Tan Jiak Kim, but is most evident in the official robes of the Qing court exemplified in the ancestral portraits of Wee Boon Teck and Tan Beng Wan (*Ancestral Portrait of Wee*



G R Lambert  
*Photo Portrait of Tan Jiak Kim*  
c. 1900, Singapore  
Photograph, 71.8 x 46.6 cm



Unsigned  
*Portrait of a Man in Black Chinese Jacket and Blue Gown*  
c. 1890, Indonesia  
Oil on Canvas, 58 x 42.5 cm



Lim Kim Swee  
*Ancestral Portrait of Wee Boon Teck*  
c. 1888, Singapore  
Ink on Paper, 114.5 x 83.5 cm



Lim Kim Swee  
*Portrait of Tan Beng Wan*  
1896, Singapore  
Watercolor, Gouache and  
Gilding on Paper, 98.5 x 72 cm

*Boon Teck* and *Portrait of Tan Beng Wan*). The massive gowns of these gentlemen, replete with elaborate and colourful insignia and motifs, draw attention away from all bodily articulations except the head, hands and shod feet. Not unlike the Romans who saw trousers as articles of clothing for nomadic barbarians and peasants (Steele 1989: 14), the Chinese regarded this bifurcated design as an undergarment and its exposure in public suggested a wearer of proletarian origins (Harrist 2005: 176).

The port cities of Southeast Asia witnessed vast immigration of Chinese from the 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. By this time, the Straits Chinese were already a distinct community with a relatively long history of residence in the region. Men from these families actively establish themselves in the frameworks of formal and informal authority governing the community of local-born Chinese and the growing immigrant population from China. In their official capacities as *Kapitans*, municipal commissioners and Justice of Peace, the Babas assisted the colonial office in mediating disputes and maintaining order. As owners of successful commercial enterprises, they were employers and also

patrons of schools, hospitals and welfare groups.

Temples were prominent social and cultural spaces for the Chinese community. Setting foot on the shores of Nanyang for the first time, the preliminary encounters of new Chinese arrivals with local society took place at these sites of worship where they offered thanks to the deities for safe passage and relied on the temple infrastructure for advice, job references and welfare. With the immigrant population comprising mainly single males, these spaces also served as focal points for socializing, entertainment and the practice of cultural traditions and celebrations. The Babas participated actively in the ‘public displays and structures of informal government centred within and around [the temples]’ (Frost 2005: 9). While leadership and acts of patronage consolidated their relationship with and influence over the newcomers, the long gowns in which the Babas were sported, both in person and on images, offered a form of everyday visual messaging, continuously reinforcing the status and position of these gentlemen to an audience familiar with the Chinese sartorial language of the time.

## The Politics of Dress

Among the male subjects sitting for portraits at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a shift in choice of outfit is observed with the Chinese gown and jacket giving way to sharply cut Western suits. A variety of styles were adopted – Wee Eng Cheng (*Photo Portrait of Wee Eng Cheng*) uses a two-piece suit with a waistcoat in contrasting fabric; the subject in *Portrait of a Man in Greenish-Grey Three Piece Suit with Orchid on Lapel* favours the more formal three piece variation; and the winged collar and bow tie suggest that Chee Tye Cheng (*Photo Portrait of Chee Tye Cheng*) is in a formal dinner apparel. What can be inferred from this change in fashion?

Inroads made by European trading companies introduced Western fashion to East and Southeast Asia. In colonized Southeast Asia, the ubiquitous outfit of European administrators – the men’s suit – became a common sight and by association with its wearers, evolved into a marker of status and rule. Electing to present oneself in a suit signified participation, or legitimacy to participate, in the new colonial order.

Taylor and Van Djik situate the adoption of the Western suit by Javanese males in relation to presence in the Dutch political sphere. Widespread use of the suit occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Javanese middle-classes were co-opted to run the colonial state. When first used by the administrative officers, teachers, soldiers and policemen, the costume represented delegated authority held by Javanese men working in the service of the Dutch. Over time, it became the uniform of the nationalists, ‘men who wanted to push both the Dutch rulers and Java’s aristocracy aside’ (Taylor 1997: 100-101) and proclaim their own legitimacy to lead the nation.

Scientific discoveries and technological innovations in 19th century Europe propelled the emergence of nations seen to be progressive in ideology and practices covering every aspect of public and private life – public administration, commercial cultivation, education, medicine, hygiene and decorum. European expansion introduced Western



Unsigned  
*Photo Portrait of Wee Eng Cheng*  
c. 1920, Singapore  
Photograph, 20 x 15 cm

notions of modernity to urban centres across the globe and developing ‘progressive’, ‘enlightened’ and ‘civilized’ states was soon viewed not only as a productive but also an inevitable endeavour.

The full force of such ‘civilizing mission’ was felt in colonized centres, but nations which managed to avoid direct colonial rule – Thailand and the treaty ports of East Asia – felt equally compelled to undertake self-reforms, including transformations in outward appearances. In Thailand, Western-style uniform became a forceful symbol of modernization with the aristocracy leading the way in restyling the royal dress along Western lines. King Mongkut (Rama IV) and his successors adopted the Western military uniform and harnessed the power of photographed and painted images to fashion Thai royalty as an institution



Low Kway Song  
*Portrait of a Man in Greenish-Grey*  
Three Piece Suit with Orchid on Lapel  
1917, Malaysia (Penang)  
Oil on Board, 49 x 33 cm



T Williamson  
*Photo Portrait of Chee Tye Cheng*  
c. 1910, Malaysia (Malacca)  
Gouache on Photograph, 49 x 34 cm

fostering progressive ideas (Peleggi 2007: 68-69). Here, Western-style dress emerges as an embodiment of modernity, embracing this fashion suggests competency in the values and concepts associated with it, and the inferred right to political freedom and self-rule.

Politics of dress aside, an additional perspective may be applied in understanding the Straits Chinese community's transition to Western fashion – the pride in being British subjects. English education and commitment to British rule are among the factors Chua (2010: 136-138) highlights as common characteristics defining the identity of the multi-ethnic domiciled communities in Malaya. Preferred use of the English language in the home, the honour felt in being 'King's (Queen's) Chinese' and enthusiastic support of the crown are evidences of the Baba's amicability towards the

British; embracing British culture including forms of dress was consistent with this affinity.

The language of fashion is fluid and while it adjusts in response to the political landscape, it is equally pliable in accommodating personal tastes and inclinations. Attempts by local communities to negotiate their ethnic identities in a climate of foreign sovereignty saw the combining of elements from different modes of dress, giving rise to fascinating hybrid styles. In his ancestral portrait, Wee Boon Teck is seen in the voluminous Qing official robe, but his daily wear appears to have been the Chinese top with baggy trousers (*Photo Portrait of Wee Boon Teck*). Wee's headgear is a western Homburg typified by a rift down the centre of the hat and he uses a pair of pumps, a low-heel leather shoe which was not an uncommon facet of formal



Unsigned  
*Photo Portrait of Wee Boon Teck*  
c. 1880, Singapore  
Graphite on Paper, 66.5 x 44 cm



Unsigned  
*Portrait of a Man in Black Jacket with Red Buttons*  
c. 1890, Indonesia  
Oil on Canvas, 51 x 38.5 cm

European male attire. The subject in *Portrait of a Man in Black Jacket with Red Button* dons a contemporary jacket over a collarless shirt with Chinese knot and loop buttons.

Two Malay gentlemen in *Group Photo at 17 Paya Lane* combine the sarong with a western jacket. One uses the *songkok*, a traditional Malay headdress, while the other projects his religious affiliation with the skullcap. Haji Manjoor Sahib Maricar, the person for whom the gathering was held, is in a full Western suit but uses the *songkok* as a marker of his ethnic identity. Taylor (1997: 97-98) noted similar adaptations among Javanese officials in the Dutch colonial service. The men assigned clothing styles from distinct fashion regimes to different parts of the body – stiff-necked shirt, bow-tie, and jacket which declared their official place in the Dutch administration, and the batik *kain* on the lower half of their body proclaiming privileged descent.



Unsigned  
*Group Photo at 17 Paya Lane*  
c. 1920, Singapore  
Photograph, 24 x 29 cm

## Traditional Female Dress and its Representations

Imageries of ladies in traditional costume alongside their menfolk in Western suit have been read in relation to the subordinate position of the former and their limited access to modernity. Commenting on images of Indonesian men and women on public stages, Taylor (1997: 113) observes that ‘the camera creates associations of male gender with public power by showing men in suits. The camera associates female gender with distance from modernity by showing women in forms of ‘native’ wear. Natives and women become equated as subordinates.’

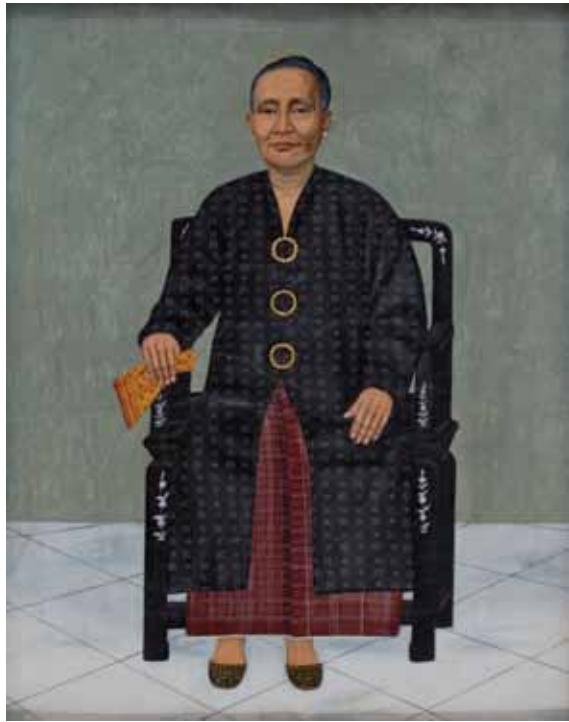
Alwis’ (1999) research on colonial Ceylon reveals active criticisms in the Singhala press about women’s adoption of Western outfits. Their ‘respectability’ was deemed to have been destroyed by ‘short, sleeveless jackets which laid bare the arms and midriff, low cut jackets which exposed bosoms and shoulders, and jackets made out of transparent cloth that ‘exposed the entire upper half of the body’ (Alwis 1999: 183). Sinhalese reformer Anagarika Dharmapala prescribed the saree – a six-yard long cloth draped around the body – as a proper garment for women and advocated a similar form for men. Women across the low country, including Dharmapala’s mother, heeded his call for dress reform but the response was much less enthusiastic among Sinhalese men. Alwis proposed that ‘[t]his gendered response... speaks to the differential positioning of women within colonial modernity and patriarchy; there was more at stake in women signifying the purity of their ‘culture’ than for men’ (Alwis 1999: 181).

Our present portrait collection offers little occasion for rebutting the arguments presented by Taylor and Alwis – alongside smartly suited Babas, the nyonyas in their traditional *baju panjang* (*Portrait of a Lady in Black Baju Panjang with Small Printed Patterns and Checked Reddish-Brown Sarong and Photo Portrait of Mrs Chee Tye Cheng*) appear to be the bastion of conservative values. Scholarships further underline the patriarchal Confucian nature of Peranakan Chinese families where pressure to maintain traditions and observe customary practices were tasks women had to undertake on behalf of their husbands’

families (Seah 2005: 31-36). While this may be a deeply unfavourable prospect in today’s context, the possibility that a notable proportion of Peranakan Chinese ladies at that time found a sense of purpose in these responsibilities cannot be overlooked.

A hierarchical structure defines the relationship among women in traditional domestic settings starting with the matriarch and branching downwards to the servants (Chua 2004: 7). The matriarch led in matters pertaining to the household and the extended family; it was not uncommon for her to be visually ‘positioned at the apex of clan genealogies’ with her portrait hanging above the ancestral altar, a remarkable situation in the patriarchal Peranakan community (Lee 2011: 3). The day-to-day wear of the matriarch was the *baju panjang*, and while the Western suit associated the male gender with public power, the *baju panjang* connected the female gender with control in the private domain of home.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the Straits Chinese Reform Movement proposing formal schooling for girls. Education, in particular English education, was a key contributing factor to the emergence of the ‘Modern Girl’ in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and by the 1920s, she was a visible phenomenon in urban centres around the world (Lewis 2009: 1385-1388). Recognizable by her appearance (cropped hair, miniskirts, heels, sunglasses) and lifestyle (dance parties, sports, shopping, dating), education afforded her a presence in the public sphere by way of professional employment and expression in the press. The proposed education reforms for girls, however, enjoyed neither widespread support nor swift implementation. If at all, conservative Straits Chinese parents provided daughters with the most rudimentary formal learning opportunities for fear that too much education would reduce the chances of marriage for the girls (Seah 2005: 35, 50). Other parents were of the view that skills learnt at school would be of little consequence as the girls would eventually operate only in the domestic realm.



Unsigned  
*Portrait of a Lady in Black Baju Panjang with Small Printed Patterns and Checked Reddish-Brown Sarong,*  
c. 1890, Malaysia (Penang), Oil on Canvas, 63.5 x 50.5 cm



T Williamson  
*Photo Portrait of Mrs Chee Tye Cheng*  
c. 1910, Malaysia (Malacca),  
Gouache on Photograph, 49 x 34 cm

Confined to an environment where traditional views towards women continued to be fostered, the role of wife and mother, and the hierarchy within the household, remained the only reality for a majority of nyonyas. The Modern Girl destabilized this established pattern. Professional employment freed her from the confines of the home while financial independence offered a degree of flexibility in lifestyle choices. Her active presence in the public sphere and her outward appearance challenged traditionally sanctioned norms of decorum. In essence, the Modern Girl heralded an era of change, injecting uncertainty into the framework of authority which privileged the matriarch and senior female members of the household. Emphasis on the observance of tradition, and reinforcing this through its manifestations – the traditional dress being an example

– afforded the ladies a sense of stability in a climate of change, and a means of articulating seniority within the household.

This essay provides a preliminary reading of the portraits in the Museum's collection by reflecting on how these visual materials advance the projection of self through the adoption and appropriation of fashion. This process, whether deliberate or unconscious may be further understood in relation to the historiography of colonialism and discourse on modernity.

Foo Su Ling is a curator at NUS Museum.

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## NUS Baba House

A gift from Ms Agnes Tan to the National University of Singapore, the NUS Baba House was officially opened in September 2008. Once the ancestral home of a Straits Chinese family, it is now conceived as a heritage house which facilitates appreciation, reflection and research into the Straits Chinese history and culture. This is articulated primarily through the reconstruction of a domestic space characterised by the architectural conservation of the shophouse, and restoration of interiors including furnishing, household materials and decorative features. Research, conservation and restoration were undertaken in partnership with NUS Department of Architecture and Urban Redevelopment Authority.

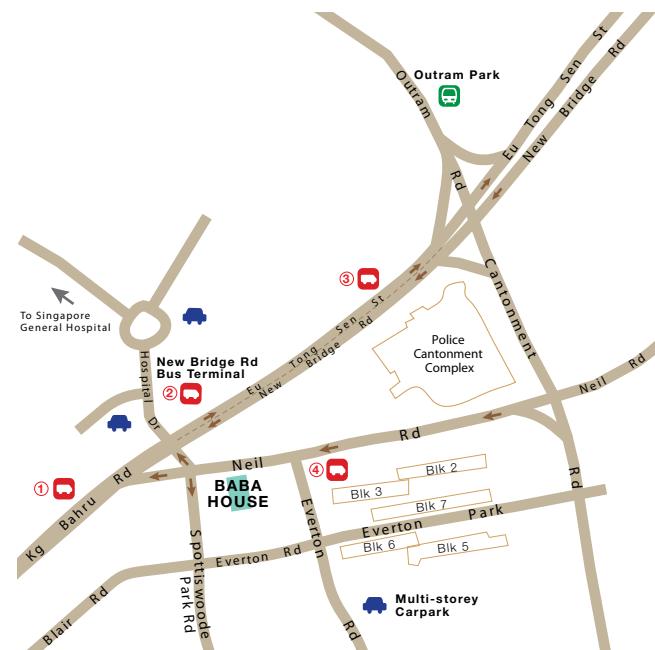
The first and second floors of the Baba House reference the community's material culture during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The third floor hosts temporary exhibitions, encouraging academic researchers and art practitioners to explore fresh perspectives into an evolving discourse on the Straits Chinese, and to develop insights into cultural encounters, hybridity and their contemporary implications. Baba House is also a unique resource for the study of architectural traditions, conservation efforts and urban developments in Singapore.



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Visits to the exhibition only (3rd floor) are free and By Appointment.

Visits to the 1st and 2nd floors are By Appointment Only. Visitors are required to sign up in advance for a heritage tour.



NUS Baba House is managed by NUS Museum, an institution of NUS Centre For the Arts

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  - ② 2, 12, 54, 174, 174e, 190, CT8, CT18, CT28
  - ③ 61, 124, 143, 147, 166, 197, 961
  - ④ 61, 166, 167, 196, 197