

# A woman's quest for Peranakan heritage

## The Baba House Donor: Agnes Tan

**T**EN years ago, philanthropist Agnes Tan (*below*) donated S\$5.5 million to the National University of Singapore (NUS). But she had an unusual request – that the money be used to buy and restore old Peranakan homes. NUS took her request seriously.

Subsequently, S\$1.5 million was used to purchase two attractive Peranakan properties in Malacca, while the remaining S\$4 million was used to buy a Peranakan home on Neil Road in Singapore.

The latter is estimated to have been built in 1860 and is the former ancestral home of late Chinese shipping tycoon Wee Bin. After it was restored, it was opened in 2008 as the Baba House, a heritage house-cum-museum with a mission to encourage greater appreciation of the Straits Chinese culture. So successful was its restoration that *Lonely Planet* travel guidebooks today ranks it as one of the top places to visit in Singapore.

Ms Tan, who is 95, was unable to grant an interview, but appointed the Baba House honorary curator Peter Lee to speak on her behalf. Mr Lee recalls: "Back in the mid-2000s, there were no dedicated spaces showcasing Peranakan culture, despite earlier calls for them. So Agnes, being the daughter of Peranakan community leader Tan Cheng Lock, wanted to

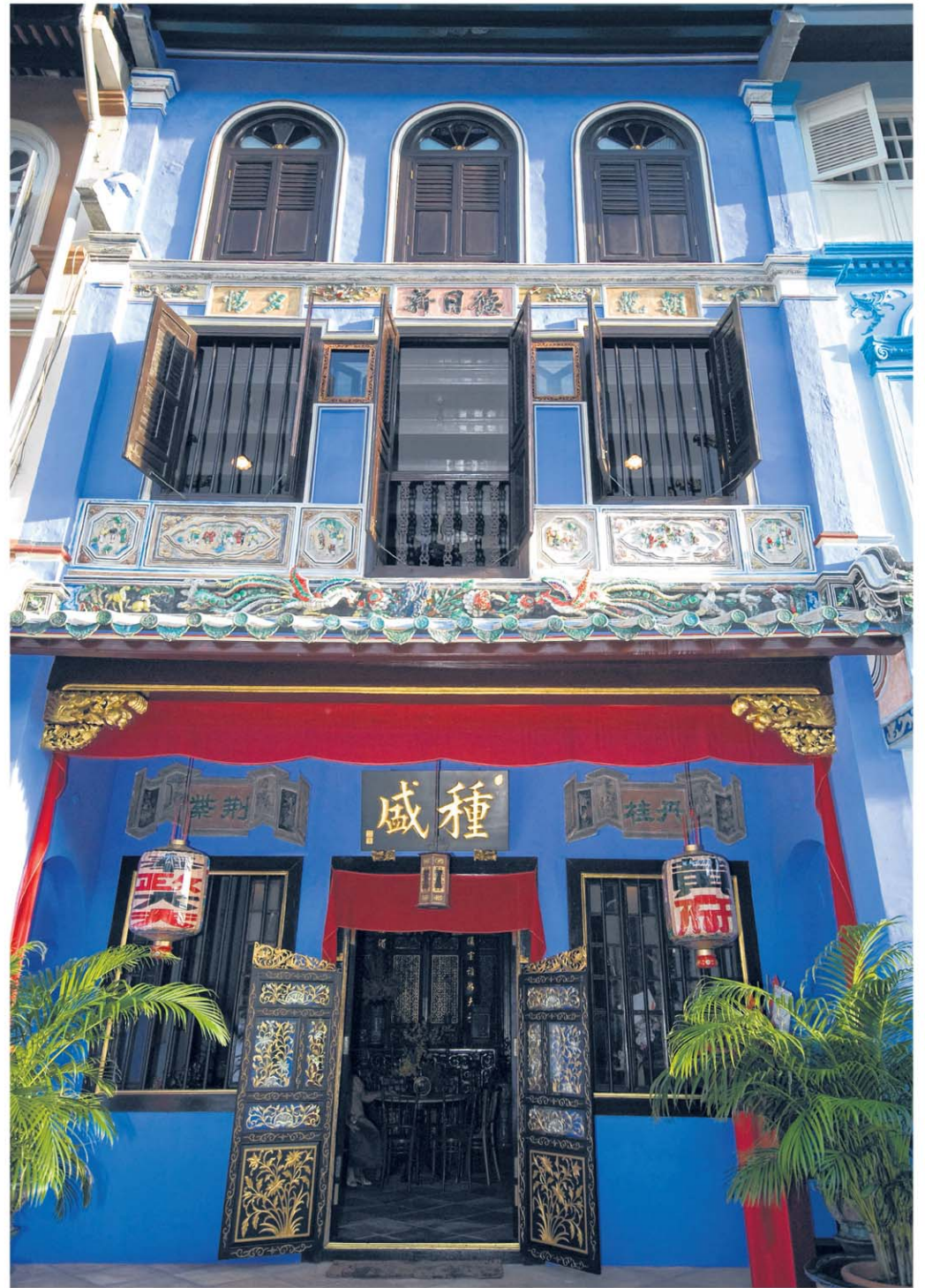
make a donation in memory of her father. She recalled her father advising them to remember one's heritage and be aware of the past."

Mr Lee, who is also Peranakan, recommended the Neil Road house to Ms Tan. Unlike many heritage houses whose exteriors may be preserved but its interiors redone for a more contemporary feel, the Neil Road building retained much of its original fixtures. "We saw an opportunity to restore it to its former glory to give visitors a feel of a typical Straits Chinese home circa 1928 ... Wee Lin (the former owner of the house and the sixth-generation descendant of the Wee family) worked with us to source a lot of things that used to be part of the house: its furniture, decorations and even kitchen appliances. To date, we have about 2,000 authentic artefacts in the house."

Meanwhile, the initial S\$4 million donation used to purchase the Baba house was eligible for a dollar-for-dollar (1:1) matching grant from the Ministry of Education. That additional S\$4 million has been used to maintain the Baba House and provide regular guided tours for visitors "for perpetuity", adds Mr Lee.

Judging by the rave reviews by tourists and Singaporeans alike on sites such as *Trip Advisor* and *Lonely Planet*, their efforts are not in vain.

For enquiries on visiting the Baba House, please e-mail [babahouse@nus.edu.sg](mailto:babahouse@nus.edu.sg)



The Baba House is a heritage house-cum-museum with a mission to encourage greater appreciation of the Straits Chinese culture. So successful is its restoration that *Lonely Planet* travel guidebooks today ranks it as one of the top places to visit in Singapore. FILE PHOTO