
NUS
National University
of Singapore
BABA
HOUSE
Refrain
Reframe
Baba House Displaced

Refrain, Reframe

Baba House Displaced

Introduction

The exhibition begins with a pause. The temporary closure of the NUS Baba House interrupts a familiar way of encountering the house. Access is suspended. What was once understood through a choreographed journey through rooms, thresholds, and domestic routine is set aside.

In the absence of the house as a spatial experience, attention shifts. Objects, fragments, and material traces come into view differently. The exhibition *Refrain, Reframe – Baba House Displaced* arises from this moment of interruption, inviting reflection on how the house, and the histories held within its architecture and objects, have been encountered, interpreted, and cared for over time.

Yet this moment of pause is also part of a longer institutional history.

The House as Institution

When the Baba House opened to the public in 2008 following its restoration by the National University of Singapore, it was proposed as both a restored interior setting and a curatorial experiment. The property at 157 Neil Road, once the residence of the Wee family from 1910 to 2006, became part of NUS through the donation of Ms Agnes Tan Kim Lwi, repositioning a private residence within institutional care.

From the outset, the curatorial approach to the house museum was shaped by a careful balance between reconstruction and interpretation. As Peter Lee, Founding Curator of the Baba House, noted in his reflections on the project, the presentation of the house drew upon surviving architecture, archival photographs, family histories, and artefacts associated with the household to evoke the domestic environment of a Peranakan residence in the early twentieth century. At the same time, the house was conceived and described by Peter Lee, as "theatres of memory" [1] that produce an environment for experiential learning within its conserved interiors. It was intended to function as a platform for exploring the layered histories associated with the building, including its social, architectural, cultural, and geographical dimensions.

In this conception, the Baba House was never intended to exist solely as a static heritage reconstruction. Rather, it was envisioned as a site where domestic history, material culture, and contemporary inquiry could intersect over time.

The act of gifting did not simply preserve a house. It repositioned a private residence within institutional care, where domestic space became a site of public stewardship and curatorial interpretation. Held in common, open to interpretive inquiry. A private inheritance became public. The intimate became institutional. What was lived is now interpreted.

[1] Peter Lee, "Confining and Connecting: Curating Strategies for Presenting Singapore's Baba House," in *Peranakan Chinese in a Globalizing Southeast Asia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre and Baba House, 2010), 145–169.

From House to Discourse

Within this institutional setting, the Baba House developed as both a house museum and a site of experimentation within the broader curatorial work of the NUS Museum. Exhibitions, conferences, and artistic projects associated with the house began to examine not only the history of the Wee family residence but also the interpretive frameworks through which Peranakan culture has been understood.

One of the exhibitions that marked this shift was *Glossaries of the Straits Chinese Homemaking*, presented prior to the current conservation works. Rather than reconstructing domestic life, *Glossaries* assembled primary texts drawn from historical and contemporary sources, archival materials, artistic interventions, and references to earlier projects developed at the Baba House.

Through these materials, the exhibition proposed that heritage is not simply inherited but continually negotiated. Terms accumulate. Meanings overlay. A vocabulary forms not through agreement but through use, contestation, and evolution.

In this way, the *Glossaries* exhibition transformed the third-floor gallery of the Baba House into an interpretive space, where historical narratives are shaped by institutional contexts, scholarly inquiry, and contemporary cultural imagination.

The present exhibition extends this trajectory further.

If the 2008 establishment of the Baba House focused on reconstructing a domestic environment, and subsequent exhibitions examined the interpretive frameworks surrounding it, *Refrain, Reframe – Baba House Displaced* encounters the house at the moment its spatial continuity is suspended.

Structure as Story

With the house temporarily closed for conservation works, attention returns to the material building components. The building fabric is examined not as an artefact frozen in time, but as material under care, shaped by intervention and judgment. Its surfaces bear traces of aging, repair, and decision, accumulated over different periods. Plaster cross sections reveal time as sediment. Deterioration mappings chart the building's relationship to climate, function, and touch. Material investigations grounded in heritage science raise questions about the fragment and the whole.

Time settles into matter. It is neither erased nor idealised. Permanence and change coexist within the fabric of the house, stratified into multiple truths. Within the exhibition, these investigations become a method of working with accumulated layers of time. Conservation is understood not as a return to an earlier state, but as a series of choices shaped by responsibility and care. At what point does repair become replacement, and what then constitutes authenticity? Material traces remain legible as archival records of time. A building continues to weather. How might buildings be allowed to age gracefully, without denying either decay or endurance, and without foreclosing the futures they must still hold?

Yet the house is not only a material structure under care. It also sits within wider cultural histories that extend beyond its walls.

Peranakan Culture Beyond the House

The Baba House also exists within a wider field of scholarship and cultural discourse surrounding Peranakan history and identity. Over the past several decades, the study of the Peranakan or Baba community has expanded across disciplines including history, anthropology, architecture, language studies, and material culture.

Defining the Baba community is inherently complex. Cultural markers commonly associated with Peranakan identity such as language, dress, ritual practices, cuisine, and domestic interiors reflect the active relationship between social consensus and scholarship. Baba identity emerged historically through processes of migration, intermarriage, and cultural adaptation among Chinese settlers and local communities in the Straits Settlements. Identity formation is continuously in flux. It formed in transit and it continues to form.

These encounters shaped the domestic practices and material culture associated with Peranakan communities. Many of these cultural forms have since moved beyond the domesticity in which they were once embedded. Since the late twentieth century, exhibitions, publications, and popular media have brought elements of Peranakan culture into wider public circulation, from Nyonya cuisine and dress to the decorative arts.

Within this evolving cultural landscape, the Baba House occupies a distinctive position. As both a historic residence and a university museum, it provides a setting where these wider debates about identity, heritage, and cultural memory can be encountered through the material traces of a particular household.

The Baba House therefore functions not only as a preserved domestic environment, but as a site through which Peranakan identity has been shaped, negotiated, and reinterpreted within these broader historical processes. Through the material traces of a single household, including its architecture, objects, and memories, the house opens onto larger histories of migration, cultural exchange, and social transformation. In this moment of pause, when the house is temporarily displaced from its familiar setting, these connections become newly visible. *Refrain, Reframe – Baba House Displaced* invites reflection on heritage not as a fixed inheritance but as an evolving practice of care, interpretation, and attention, one that will continue to unfold when the house and the stories it holds return to view.

Object Lessons

Removed from its domesticity, the Baba House as a curatorial project is reframed. Objects are recategorised not by room or hierarchy, but by material, function, and relation. What had been absorbed by the sequence of rooms now registers through proximity, repetition, and variation. What becomes visible when the familiar domestic context recedes?

The objects gathered here are read through this condition. They do not illustrate a settled culture but register the ongoing negotiations through which a domestic world was assembled and continually remade.

A bentwood *kopitiam* chair, manufactured in Eastern Europe, no longer limits its place within a household setting. An English white ironstone wash basin from Staffordshire rests on a Chinese stand, once part of a routine of daily care, now estranged from the rhythms it once served.

Embedded within the aesthetics of Peranakan domestic life, western marble busts and figurative sculptures produced by French and Italian makers appear alongside polychromatic wares long associated with Peranakan culture. The juxtapositions of these objects make visible a domestic visual language assembled across geographies and cosmopolitan exchanges.

Within this field of relations, ornamentation comes to the foreground. A cabinet panel reveals unexpected alignments where a *yin-yang* symbol rendered in inlay meets the geometry of an art deco cabinet panel, depicting the cosmological and the decorative occupying the same surface without contradiction. Elsewhere, carved timber surfaces incorporate motifs, such as a horse-shoe crab, drawn from the surroundings of Southeast Asia, where traditional symbolism meets the visual language of place.

The decorative arts carry what daily routines obscure. Pattern, material, and craft transmit belief systems and communicate social values across generations. Ornamentation records labour and aspiration. Ornamentation remembers.

Among these objects sits a *tenong*, a ceremonial basket associated with wedding exchanges. Donated by the Wee family, it traces connections beyond the house to regional traditions, with roots in Palembang. Once richly gilded in gold and topped with a lotus shaped lid, the basket would have carried wedding gifts during ritual exchange. Its presence raises a simple question. Does an object become Peranakan through origin, through use within the household, or through the meanings that gather around it over time?

Elsewhere in the exhibition display, objects tied to systems of use and modern life point to the incorporation of technologies from overseas. A ceramic water filter from England reflects early water filtration practices within the household. Stoneware bottles used for carbonated drinks speak to imported modes of consumption. These register another layer of material circulation, one grounded in the habits and routines of domestic life.

Taken together, these objects reflect a confluence of sensibilities shaped through mobility, circumstance, choice, and exchange. Once commodities circulating through trade networks and later entrenched within domestic life, these objects now circulate again as museum artefacts and as symbols of contemporary cultural capital.

Their meanings evolve through time, popular culture, and institutional narratives. Peranakan cultural sensibilities hold hybridity not as resolution but as a condition shaped by colonial trade routes, changing social aspirations, and the domestic interior as a site where identity is performed, contested, and revised. What stories will it reveal about the *Peranakan-ness* of an object?

The House Unhoused

The house is absent. Its objects remain. Displacement makes visible what continuity concealed. Reframed within the white walls of the museum, its objects are encountered differently. Objects are positioned with intent, released from domestic hierarchy and recategorised for the exhibition. Their critical proximities invite new readings. Juxtapositions invite inquiry. Repetition reveals variation. Seen together, they form constellations that complicate familiar ideas of *Peranakan-ness* and draw attention to how cultural meaning is shaped, transmitted, and negotiated.

Material culture, memory, and heritage develop not as outcomes but as processes shaped by time, care, and interpretation. The house, temporarily unhoused, is perceived in ways its domestic continuity had withheld. Interpretation unfolds through refrain and reframe. The exhibition does not seek to reconcile absence. What remains is not an answer, but a condition of inquiry with an invitation to consider how heritage might also be approached through restraint, attentiveness, and the quiet persistence of what lingers in the liminal.

Yvonne S.Z. Tan
Curator

About NUS Baba House

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 Kim Lwi 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.

About NUS Museum

NUS Museum is a university museum that advances critical inquiry, interdisciplinary learning, and experimental curatorial practices. Positioned within the National University of Singapore and focused on Southeast Asian and Asian visual cultures, the Museum serves as a platform for teaching, research, and dialogue across disciplines. Through collections-based inquiry, collaborative partnerships, and reflective exhibition-making, it fosters new ways of engaging histories, shaping knowledge, and contributing to regional museological discourse.

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OPENING HOURS:
Monday: By appointment (for schools/faculties)
Tuesday to Saturday: 10:00 am – 6:00 pm
Sunday and Public Holidays: Closed

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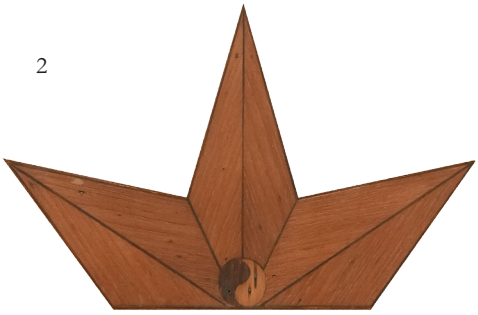
OPENING HOURS:
Temporarily closed for conservation works

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[1] *J. T. Close & Co Ironstone Wash Basin*, B2014-0004-017-0; Gift of Ms Agnes Tan Kim Lwi, [2] Detail from *Brown Teakwood Mirrored Wardrobe*, B2008-0046-001-0; Gift of Mr Wee Lin, [3] Crown from *Brown & Gold Cupboard*, B2012-0006-067-0; Gift of Ms Agnes Tan Kim Lwi, [4] Detail from *Red and Green Lacquer Chest*, B2014-0002-002-1; Gift of Ms Agnes Tan Kim Lwi, [5] Giuseppe Bessi (1857-1922), undated, *Primo Amore,* B2012-0018-002-0; Gift of Ms Agnes Tan Kim Lwi, [6] *Blue & White Bowls,* B2008-0117-016-0 to B2008-0117-019-0; Gift of Ms Agnes Tan Kim Lwi, [7,8] Details from *Red & Gold Bridal Cupboard*, B2008-0045-001-0; Gift of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lin, [9] Table Leg from *Console Table with Marble Top*, B2008-0029-001-0; Gift of Ms Agnes Tan Kim Lwi