The 'lost' *Peranakan* Reimagined:

Creating new interpretation of lost *Peranakan* objects through contemporary artistic imagination

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VOLUME A

Table of Contents

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the lost Peranakans of today, and to my mother, Betty Low whose unwavering love and support have carried me through all my doubts and uncertainties.

Kamsiah mak, I will never forget the sweet taste of your *apom bokwah.*

Abstract

This research project aims to explore new interpretations from 'lost' objects of the *Peranakan*-Chinese, through contemporary artistic interpretation and reimagination. The *Peranakan*-Chinese community can be traced back to the early 17th century, when Chinese traders travelled to Southeast Asia, formed unions with the native women, and settled in the regions. The offspring of such intermarriages were referred to as the "*Baba* Chinese" or the "Straits-born Chinese", and later, the "*Peranakan*-Chinese". The changing reference to this community is synonymous not only to their shifting identity, but it also signifies the decline of the community over time. With the decline, the objects used and treasured by this community have been 'lost'. The notion of 'lost', explored in this research, is layered and complex. 'Lost' refers not only to physical loss of objects, but also loss in a cultural sense, particularly, in their diminishing relevance and significance among the *Peranakan*s today. The term 'lost', may be applied to objects that have been misplaced or forgotten over time, or objects that have vanished, and are now absent. It may also suggest objects that lack strong physical presence in that they have not disappeared completely. Instead, they are being considered 'invisible', meaning that the objects are physically present, but for some reasons they are not noticeable, seen, or even considered present. Objects are 'lost' through different causes, for example, through extensive and repetitive representations, that desensitises our reaction towards them, through the lack of critical attention on them, contributing to their waning significance and value, which further compounds their lacking symbolic presence, resulting in their presumed archaic status. In this research, I explore from the position of a *Peranakan*-Chinese today, who experiences material dispossession and cultural estrangement. With reference to Merleau Ponty's

discussion of ‘embodiment’, Jacques Derrida’s notion of the ‘spectre’ and Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space’, I explore the implications and paradoxes of absent cultural inheritance. Using contemporary art practice, phenomenological and cultural theoretical lenses, I seek to offer an alternative approach to examine, reinvigorate, and expand the understanding of *Peranakan* cultural objects.

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Preface

I began this research from a very specific condition, the condition of having 'no-thing', as a *Peranakan*-Chinese living in the contemporary world. As the term implies, 'no-thing' refers to being materially dispossessed. My interest in the cultural objects of the *Peranakan*s began quite ironically, from the realisation that my family was dispossessed of any *Peranakan* paraphernalia, typically valuable antiques, heirlooms, and household objects that were used by the *Peranakan*s in the past. To be in possession of something (material/object), suggests having control over something by making it belong to us. It is an act of control. Having possession over 'things' also means having possession over their affiliations, such as their relationships with people, with other objects, and with spaces - spaces within cultures or societies, or spaces within prescribed systems or organisations. Thus, simply not having any 'thing', suggests the opposite. There was no material/object significant enough in my family to justify my interest in the *Peranakan* culture. There was no object, except one, that probably came close to that. It was my grandmother's embroidery work, which was done on an unassumingly common fabric. It was a brief discovery which did not last very long before the embroidered fabric was lost and was never found again. I was about fifteen years old when I first saw the object. Interestingly, it was like a portal that brought me into the past and revealed to me an incredibly vivid memory of my grandmother. Unfortunately, the embroidery work was forgotten for many years, and when I eventually remembered it and had wanted to show it to my children, it was gone. The embroidery work soon became not only a lost object, but its loss became a mystery. It was something I had for a long while but was unaware of and later forgotten, until it was gone forever. The feeling of losing something so significant I knew I had once owned, was

different from chancing upon something you never thought you had and being able to add it to your growing collection of old junk in the loft. It was the difference between a pleasant surprise and a grave disappointment. Reflecting on this loss, I began my research from the basis of three positions: firstly, lacking connection with my cultural materials/objects, secondly, lacking knowledge of their cultural significance, and lastly, lacking possession of these materials/objects that were often meant to be passed down within the family for generations. This lack of concrete, physical cultural objects, is inextricably tied to a lack of cultural self, thus, the title of this research, 'The 'lost' *Peranakan*'. The lost object that had once been made by my late grandmother can be said to have initiated my research journey. The term 'lost', is used in this research in a few ways. 'Lost' refers not only to physical loss of physical objects, but it also refers to 'lost' in a cultural sense, and essentially, in their diminishing relevance and significance in the consciousness of *Peranakan*s today. The term may be applied to objects that have been misplaced and forgotten over time, or objects that have vanished and are now absent. It may also refer to objects that lack strong physical presence in that they have not disappeared completely; they may be objects that still have some degree of physical presence, yet their presence may not be fully validated. In other words, they are there, but cannot be 'seen'. Objects are 'lost' through different causes. For instance, through extensive and repetitive representations that desensitises our reaction towards them, through the lack of critical attention on them that contributes to their waning significance and value, which further compounds their lacking symbolic presence, resulting to their presumed archaic status.

Glossary

A

alus - fine; delicate (of a person or product)
ari – day
ari besair - special big day [e.g., a festival, holiday]
antair sireh - to personally deliver a wedding invitation in the form of a tiny, folded bundle of sireh leaf.
anak - child; the young of any creature
apom bokwah – pancake with banana gravy

B

Baba – a descriptive name applied specifically to male local-born Chinese of mixed Chinese-Malay-Indian descent belonging to the Baba *Peranakan* community.
badan- body
Bapa / bapak - father
barang – thing; item
baju – garment
baju kurong - Malay lady's long loose blouse worn with sarong.
baju panjang – a three quarter length Nyonya dress worn with sarong.
batik – also, batek. Wax-resist dyed cloth from Java, Bali, and Sumatra
batu - stone; rock; boulder; pebble; gem
batu giling – a set of grinding tools comprising of a roller and a flat stone.
batu lesong – mortar and pestle made of granite.
bawang merah – shallot
bawang puteh – garlic
bayang- shadow
betol - true; correct.
bunga siantan – Ixora flower
bukan- no; not
bibik - form of address for Nyonya ladies
bintang - star
bomoh - spiritualist; witch doctor
bunga teratay - lotus flower

C

Cha bo kan (Hokkien) - female slave.
chai ki- red bunting hung above the doorway on social or festive occasions.
Cheena - Chinese
cheo(n) thau – the avowal and initiation ceremonial rites in the traditional Baba wedding
cherki - Nyonya card game
chermin – mirror
Chitty Melaka/Chetty Malacca- Indian Babas
chukop - complete; sufficient; adequate

D

daon – leaf
datok dapor – kitchen god
datok naik - household deities' annual ascent to heaven (on the 24th day of the 12th lunar month)
dondang saying - quatrain (verse of four lines) in Baba or Malay sung to a tune.

H

hong sui - Chinese geomancy. The term in Chinese is known as ‘feng shui’.
hu – Chinese talisman (of paper or cloth)

I

Ibu- mother

J

jawi – the Malay-Arabic script

K

kachep - areca nut slicer
kain lepas - Also, kain lepair. Sarong worn as a tube without the cloth's ends sewn together.
kaki pindanan - beading stand
kamcheng- jar with cover
kamsiah – thank you.
kapor- lime
kasair - coarse; rough in texture
kasot - shoe
kasot manek- beaded slippers of the Baba community
kebaya - a Nyonya long sleeve blouse worn with a sarong.
kebaya sulam - kebaya with embroidery
kechik - small
kepala – Head
kerosang- brooch in sets of three used to fasten the front of Nyonya garments viz. the baju panjang and kebaya.
ketok lobang - stitched seam with regular open intervals that look like perforations, used to join the panels of a kebaya.
kotor – dirty
kueh ee(n) - glutinous rice-flour balls
kueh chang (glutinous-rice dumpling)

kuku- human nail; claw
kunyet - turmeric; saffron

L

lah – a suffix to emphasise the word.
lemo – lime
lemo purot – non-edible lime used by mediums during a trance.
lengang lengok – meandering, to walk with swaying arms and body; to walk with a slow swaying gait

M

mas sepuloh - 24-carat gold; the best in quality
mati- to perish.
mak- mother
makan – to eat.
manek potong- beads with cut surfaces
mata kuching - cat's eye fruit
manis – sweet paste
manis-manis pait – bitter sweet /bitter sweet memories

N

nasi kunyet - tumeric glutinous rice
Nenek – form of address for an elderly lady
Nona – young unmarried ladies; young maidens
Nyonya- Baba *Peranakan* lady

O

orang – human being

P

pak kua - eight-sided amulet
pantang – taboo
pantun- poetry; verse; four-line verse (quatrain)

Peranakan – popular reference to members of the Baba community; local born.
pidangan - embroidery frame (definition taken from: https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1110537)
pintu – door

R

rempah – ingredients

S

sambair - condiments with chilli as the main ingredient in Nyonya cooking or eaten with Nyonya dishes.
sambair belachan - chili with shrimp paste eaten with Nyonya dishes.
sang Ih – 'sang' means 'to present'. 'Ih' was the symbol and harbinger of the good things of matrimony (definition taken from: A Baba Wedding by Cheo, K. B, 1983).
sangkek um – mistress of ceremony in the traditional Baba wedding
sarong - a long skirt or wrap worn by Nyonyas and Malay ladies; sheath.
sarong kebaya - the full kebaya outfit of jacket and sarong
semayang abu- anniversary prayer to the souls of ancestors
sinkek – new immigrant from China; newcomer
sireh - betel-vine, betel-vine leaf, betel-vine leaf wrapped with areca nut, gambier, and lime for chewing.
sulam – embroidery

T

tak – not; a negative prefix
tak seronok - unbecoming behaviour
tangkal - protective talisman or charm
Tang Chek -winter solstice festival which normally falls on 22nd December.
Taon Baru- New Year
tumbok - to punch; pound
tempat – place (where anything is kept, is found or is happening).
tempat sireh - betel-nut box
teng ji seh(n) - surname lantern
teng kaki - a teng ji seh(n) specifically for Baba wedding. It is fixed on a pole and mounted on a stand and placed outside the home to signify a wedding in progress.
Teochew [潮州] Chinese person originating from the Teochew (Chaozhou) district of Guangdong province, China.
teng ji seh(n) at the main door of Baba homes
thian teng - a lantern dedicated to the King of Heaven. It is centrally hung between a pair of teng ji seh(n) at the main door of Baba homes
Ting Kong – Heavenly King

W

wayang- theatrical; a show

Introduction

In the preface, I have explained my motivation of this research through positioning myself as a 'Lost Peranakan'. In this introduction, I shall explain my research project with clarity and purpose by first presenting my research question: In what ways can I create new interpretations for the 'lost objects' of the *Peranakan*- Chinese through contemporary artistic interpretation and reimagination?

The question is two-pronged. Firstly, it aims to generate new understandings through the study of 'lost' objects by examining their relevance, significance, and value with specific relation to the Peranakans today. What was valuable in the past has almost certainly changed, but what kind of legacy did they leave behind? Peranakans who once owned and used them before may still value them today but for different reasons, and what are those reasons? Would holding onto memories of 'lost' objects contribute in any way to how new narratives can be shaped for future understandings? Secondly, the question also involves the use of practice methodology to gain new knowledge. What can the generative acts of art practice really offer? How is practice instrumental and indispensable in this research? In other words, how can practice illuminate and transform understanding? How do we find new knowledge through practice? How does practice make any difference to the way we think about things and understand things? What happens during practice, when the materials come into play, when processes take place, and when something emerges out of the interactions?

I shall briefly describe the flow of this introduction. First and foremost, I explain how this thesis is designed to be read. I also present the organisational structure of this thesis, such as the chapters, categorical sections within the structure, and the guiding theoretical

frameworks for this research. Next, I discuss my complex relationship with my cultural identity, as it forms a huge part of the reason why I embarked on this research. I then introduce the various terms used in the past and present when referring to the Peranakans, with reference to the socio-political contexts through which these terms evolved. I also provide a brief history of the beginnings and the alleged decline of the Peranakan communities. With reference to scholarly research on the evolving cultural identity of the Peranakans, I call for a critical examination of the Peranakan identity, in terms of how the Peranakan identity is performed through its cultural objects. With reference to Bill Brown's concept of 'thingness', and Barbara Bolt's access of tacit knowledge through artistic material handling, I explain my proposal to navigate 'lost' using art practice. Last, but not least, I explain the use of multiple voices to rearticulate this 'lost', which include my personal, artistic and researcher's voices, as well as the voices provided by my research participants [Annex 1].

Structure

This thesis is designed to be read in a particular way. The outcomes of this research are presented in three volumes, making up the tripartite structure (two sets of images and one set of text), which emphasises simultaneously the links and gaps between i) visual sources /cultural objects, ii) my art practice and iii) the reflection/theorisation. All three volumes are interlinked and can be encountered at once, but at the same time they remain separated and distanced. This dual image-text format differs from the more conventional textual presentation where images serve as supplements to the main text. The intention is not to separate the two sets of images, on the contrary, it aims to establish a tight

connection between them, forming two parts of a whole. Volume A (text) is a creative exegesis. This volume is a multifaceted document that explains and contextualises the practice, serving as an interactive, dialogical component for reflexive engagements (Barrett and Bolt, 2010; Dally, Graham, Holbrook, and Lawry, 2004). The creative exegesis records preliminary purposes, in-process activities, and presents outcomes that facilitate criticality (Sullivan, G., 2005). It is an "active documentation" (De Freitas, 2002: 2), where "practice becomes theory generating" as "the obsession to create the new has found a particular discursive form" (Barrett and Bolt, 2010: 31). It offers a double articulative process where theory emerges from reflective practice, while it also informs practice (Barrett and Bolt, 2010). Barrett and Bolt (2010: 31) has aptly highlighted the critical role of the exegesis in "revealing the work of art". Without an effective link between the two, the knowledge I gathered through artistic explorations cannot be demonstrated fully with the texts alone. Volume B (contextual images and illustrations) includes images of cultural objects used, owned, or discussed by the participants, and relevant images of artistic works that have informed my practice. Volume C (art practice documentation) consists of process-oriented creative works generated through interactions with a range of stimuli (materials from diverse sources such as journal articles, books, websites, videos, online platforms, interviews, and feedback, physical events and activities, as well as physical objects). The creative works form the backbone of this research project, holding together information gathered from the research journey. The creative outcomes chart the development of ideas, of how one thing leads to another through in-depth examination. They are also to be considered as a whole, with tightly knitted components that will be put together at the end of this project in the form of an exhibition, which I shall further elaborate in the last part of the introduction.

I shall now proceed to explain the structure of the textual component, Volume A (text). Thematically organised, Volume A consists of three chapters - Chapter 1 'Identity', Chapter 2 'Protection', and Chapter 3 'Continuity'. Each chapter is articulated through three distinct but connected categorical sections of the 'Body', 'Space', and 'Motion'. 'Body' discusses objects that are connected to the human body either through physical, symbolic, or metaphorical relationships. As suggested by Merleau-Ponty (1962), while the body as a subject sees and feels from within, it is also an object that is being seen and felt in this world. The body and anything involving physiognomy, has been regarded with great emphasis by the Peranakans. Cheo and Speeden (1988: 99) has put it, that "anything that comes from the body must be regarded with respect." Some beliefs and superstitions subscribed by the Peranakans have been associated with the body. For instance, the head is considered the abode of the spirit/soul *[semangat]*, which should not be touched unnecessarily or handled roughly, or even pointed to with the feet or with unsanitary objects (Cheo and Speeden, 1988). The body is not only a vessel where emotions and thoughts are generated and processed, but also an entity that connects with other co-existing entities, which include other bodies, animate and inanimate objects. It allows things to be handled and manipulated, made, and unmade. It is a medium through which things are transformed with ideas and actions, as well as a material that is imbued with qualities that facilitates the said transformation. The body is a "tool of tools", as suggested by Shusterman (2012: 1). 'Space' looks at objects associated with specific physical space, as well as the notion of space. Space here refers to areas where physical activities take place and develop, such as the kitchen, the studio, living rooms. The notion of space on the other hand, may refer to something less tangible, like mental, spiritual, liminal, or imagined spaces, such as openings, or voids where nothing has yet to happen, or empty spaces that

await stirrings. 'Motion' connotes movement, the transference of bodies and things in space, from one point to another. Objects in motion are objects in operation, such as when they are used in everyday activities or in ceremonies and rituals. Objects in motion are also operative, meaning they have the ability to produce effects. Motion is a process of shifting position(s), a process set to elicit, affect, and articulate intentions, a process that make changes. Through the lens of the 'Body', 'Space', and 'Motion', I discuss the 'lost' objects I have specifically chosen, with a focus on identity, absent material, and cultural inheritance. I draw on various strands of arguments derived from the phenomenological, hauntological and cultural dimensions, to examine and discuss the ideas of 'Identity', 'Protection', and 'Continuity' as presented in chapters one, two and three respectively. With reference to Homi Bhabha's (1994) 'Third Space', I consider the enunciative potential of this liminal space, and explore its viability and expandability to articulate the *Peranakan* cultural identity. I examine the complex identity of the *Peranakan*, and by extension, the complex relationship between cultural identity and cultural objects. Jacques Derrida's (1993) concept of the 'spectre' has illuminated the functioning role of the spectre in the revelation of a possible future for the *Peranakan* objects. I examine the immaterial existence of the spectre as it travels into the past, as it resides in the present, and as it slips into the future. Through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concepts of 'embodiment', and 'visibility and invisibility', I examine the internal and external spaces of the physical body, and its implications as a site of knowing. I also discuss the body's sense experience through Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's interpretations of touch, where touching is not only complex, but sometimes unachievable. In the last chapter, I consolidate the insights gained through this research as I respond to the research question: In what ways can I create new

interpretations for the 'lost objects' of the Peranakan-Chinese through contemporary artistic interpretation and reimagination?

Identity and Things

My *Peranakan* heritage intrigues and confuses me at the same time. Growing up, I often heard the phrase 'Chinese but not Chinese' *[orang Cheena bukan Cheena]*, when people were referring to the *Peranakan*-Chinese. This expression has origins in 20th century Malaysia, a phrase that suggests the forgetting of one's Chinese ancestral roots (Ng, 2021). It sets me pondering about my ethnocultural identity - what does it mean when one is Chinese, but not really? The earliest realisation of my *Peranakan* roots came only upon the observation, or confusion, that my maternal side of the family spoke Malay while my paternal side of the family spoke Mandarin and Chinese dialects, although English remained the common language on both sides. Despite the apparent differences, many materials/objects that were used and valued by both sides of family were similar, such as some daily or ceremonial rituals. They felt primarily Chinese, but sometimes with a twist. Some examples include prayers to the kitchen god and ancestors, celebrations such as the mooncake festival, the dumpling festivals, and the Chinese Lunar New Year. The mooncake festival is commonly known as the mid-autumn festival because it falls 15th day of the eighth lunar month in autumn. It is also a day of family reunion, a reference drawn from the full moon as a symbolism of fullness. The Dragon Boat festival, or the glutinous-rice dumpling *[kueh chang]* Festival is observed on the fifth day of the fifth month on the lunar calendar and celebrated by Chinese communities the world over. This event is commemorated with dumplings made with glutinous rice filled with meat wrapped in

pandanus leaves (Wee, 2009). Many of these events would also involve the displaying of celebratory ornaments for good fortune and blessings, as well as the preparation of festive food. This also stands to reason that cultural identity is not only tied to the languages we speak, but also related to the physical activities and objects that give meanings to these events. It is impossible to talk about the *Peranakan* objects before introducing the very people whom the objects are associated with, the *Peranakan*s. Who are the *Peranakan*s, and specifically for the purpose of this research, who are the *Peranakan*-Chinese?

Many terms have been used interchangeably to describe the *Peranakan*s, such as 'Straits Chinese', 'Straits-born Chinese', 'baba Chinese', 'baba-nonyas', or simply 'baba' (Ho, 1983; Khoo, 1996). *'Peranakan'* is a comparatively new term which did not exist until the 1960s, which was later popularised in the 1980s (Wee, 2017). The term '*Peranakan*' is derived from the Malay word '*anak'*, meaning 'child' or 'children', referring to the Indians, Eurasians, and Chinese born within, and outside the former Straits settlements (Khoo, 1996). It is important to note that not all *Peranakan*s are of Chinese origin. The *Jawi Peranakan*s were created between the unions of Straits -born Muslim immigrants and indigenous females in early Southeast Asia (Kershaw, 1980). Other non-Chinese *Peranakan*s in the early 20th century also include the Bugis *Peranakan*s, the Arab *Peranakan*s, the Java *Peranakan*s, and the *Peranakan* Indians, known as *the Chitty Melaka* (Koh, 2022). *Baba Nyonya* is another common name to describe the *Peranakan* community, *Baba* refers to the male, and *Nyonya* the female (Lee, 2019). *Baba* as a name only came to be used in the 19th century (Rudoph, 1998). It may have been derived from the Malay word *bapa*, which means 'father' (Lee, 2009). Other versions include the Persian-influenced version of *Baba, used as an* honorific term to show respect (Khoo, 1996). It is also a Malay term of endearment for

one's grandfather (Ooi, 2017). *Nyonya* on the other hand, could have come from the Portuguese word '*dona'* (Lee, 2019), or from Dalgado's (1900) recorded term *nona,* meaning mistress, respectable lady, or grandmother (Silvio, Moreira de Sousa and others / et al., 2019). For this research, I will only be focusing on the *Peranakan*-Chinese, and I will be using the term *'Peranakan'* as a collective way of referring to the *Peranakan*-Chinese community. By doing so, I am aware of the tendency to overgeneralise the *Peranakan* identity (Rudolph, 1998). As a counter, I will carefully consider identity markers (language, descent, lifestyle, work, customs and beliefs, material culture, and food) when discussing the *Peranakan*-Chinese, and likewise, the non-Chinese *Peranakan*s. The intention here is not to oversimplify the term *Peranakan* by removing it from specific historical, social, and political frames. Instead, the aim here is to establish a better focus on the *Peranakan* as an entity, and fundamentally, from a contemporary perspective with a progressive attitude in mind. This deliberate approach proposes not to shoehorn the *Peranakan* identity into specifics, but to present it as multifarious and changing (Rudolph, 1998). I will, however, use specific terms (such as '*baba', 'baba-nonyas'*, 'Straits Chinese', 'Straits-born Chinese') employed by the authors from various texts I have consulted, with respect to their intended contexts of reference. Definitions for *Baba* Malay terms are provided in the glossary. The terms are extracted mainly from the *Baba* Malay Dictionary website which provides two-way translations, from *Baba* Malay to English, and vice versa. This online dictionary is based on the spelling conventions and standardisations in *'Mas Sepuloh'*, meaning '24-carat gold', or 'the best in quality', and from 'A *Baba* Dictionary'. Both books were authored by William Gwee Thian Hock who is an authority on *Peranakan* culture and history. Although the *Baba* Malay Dictionary.com website has ceased its operation at the end of December 2022, the terms and definitions can still be found in the two books by William Gwee. Throughout the

text, I introduce the Malay terms, italicised, in square brackets right after the English terms. For example, the traditional wrapped skirt and blouse *[Nyonya sarong kebaya]*, and the Malay art of reciting quatrains in *Baba* or Malay sung to a tune *[dondang sayang].* There are, however, exceptions, such as when the Malay terms are emphasised in open and close inverted commas, followed by the English translation in square brackets, for example*, 'kain lepas'* [sarong or wrapped skirt worn as a tube without the cloth's ends sewn together]. The same applies to non-English terms, such as Tamil words like 'tatta' and 'patti' *[Tamil for grandfather and grandmother].* However, the terms in brackets are usually the simplified definition, which may or may not be directly referenced in the glossary, for example, hair-combing *[cheo(n)-thau]* instead of the avowal and initiation ceremonial rites in the traditional Baba wedding *[cheo(n)-thau].* Chinese texts are also used, italicised, followed by their pronunciation in square brackets, such as the kitchen god *[灶神, pronounced as 'zao shen'],* and the 'Eight immortals crossing the ocean' *[八仙过海, pronounced 'ba xian guo hai'].* The sub-headers are also in two languages, English and *Baba* Malay. The translations are my own, with the assistance of my mother who speaks both languages.

The beginnings of the *Baba* communities can be traced back to the early 17th century, when Chinese traders who travelled to the Southeast Asia formed unions and settled with native women in the region, notably, at a time when such travels were not granted to their female counterparts from mainland China (Rudoph, 1998) [Fig 1 in Volume B (contextual images and illustrations)]. These traders were mainly seafarers who began trading between the ports in southern China and Southeast Asia and were later involved in the dealing of the region's most lucrative goods by the 18th and 19th century, such as opium, nutmeg, liquor cargos, pepper, gambier, and tin-mining (Low, 2014). The offspring of such

intermarriages were referred to as the '*Baba* Chinese' or the 'Straits-born Chinese', and later, the '*Peranakan*-Chinese'. Recent evidence has shown a significant level of Malay admixture in the *Peranakan* Chinese, contributed by Malay females two centuries ago (Wu et al., 2021). This genetic admixture occurs through the interbreeding of two or more previously isolated populations (Shriner, 2013), and in the case of the Peranakan Chinese, the genetic interaction between the two populations can still be traced today. The *Baba* communities are also commonly known as the 'Straits Chinese', a term coined by the Colonial British in the mid-19th century (Lee, 2016) referring to Chinese who were born in the former Straits Settlements of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore in the Malaya. Although interchangeably used, the 'Straits Chinese' coined by the British, is different from the Straits-born Chinese, who are the new guest/ newcomers *[sinkeks]* or other migrant Chinese who arrived later from China (Khoo, 1996). The Straits Chinese were different in the sense that they became increasingly westernised, and many of them held the position of middlemen in the colonial administration (Hardwick, 2008). The children of this privileged group of Chinese, many of which belong to the wealthy trading families sent their sons to England for studies, received western education and spoke the English language (Hardwick, 2008). Over time, the *Babas* dominated key spheres of influence in business, politics, and the media in the 19th century, they became a distinct class which sets them apart from the other migrant Chinese or the new guests *[sinkeh]*, the later arrivals from China (Rudolph, 1998). Many *Peranakan*s became wealthy and powerful merchants, and were appointed leaders by the British government, making them British subjects when the Straits settlements became a Crown colony in 1867 (Khoo, 1986). Compared to the newly arrived Chinese immigrants who still had strong loyalties to China (Hardwick, 2008), it stands to reason that the Straits-Chinese continued to receive preferential treatment by the British.

Rudoph (1998: 203) commented that they are often described as "more Chinese than Chinese ", "more English than English," and “more Malays than Malays” (Rudoph, 1998: 203). He explained that these references were a result of the early *Babas* following many traditional Chinese customs way more than the other Chinese and dressed like Englishmen as well as engaged in their activities; the *Babas* also published the first newspaper in romanised Malay and gained mastery in the Malay arts of reciting quatrains in *Baba* or Malay sung to a tune *[dondang sayang]* and in impromptu exchanges *[pantun]*. This intercultural syncretism can be seen in their architecture, dressing, food, recreation, customs, and practice. Take for instance the eclectic characteristics of the Peranakan architecture that have blended Chinese, European, and Indian, and Malay features. They were given names like ‘Straits Eclectic’, ‘Chinese Palladian’ and ‘Chinese Baroque’, or ‘Sino-Malay-Palladian’ (Khoo, 1996). Palladian columns, Chinese tiled roofs, Indian-inspired bungalows, Malay-style stilts, and Art Nouveau-stained glass windows are some examples of this type of hybrid architecture [Figs 2 to 7 in Volume B]. One such architecture with Malay -inspired elements is a Peranakan style bungalow at 25 Chapel Road in Singapore, an award-winning restoration by the URA, Singapore [Fig 7 in Volume B]. According to Knapp (2017), the raised building is reminiscent of the Malay houses at the seaside designed to protect the residence from rising tides. The traditional crafts of the Peranakans are also well-known examples of interesting amalgamation of various cultures. An example would be the Peranakan beadwork, which was derived from the embroidery traditions of the Malay, Chinese and European needlework (Seet, 2009) [Fig 8 in Volume B], and similarly, the jewellery craft [Fig 9 in Volume B], and other household objects in the Peranakan home [Fig 10 in Volume B]. One prominent aspect of this eclectic culture is the language used by the

*Peranakan*s, known as the *Baba* Malay, a variant of Malay language formed within a generation or two by the locally born descendants of the *baba* community (Rudoph, 1998).

Despite forging myriads of cultural, social, and political connections, the Straits-Chinese/Baba/*Peranakan* identity has been constantly challenged since its emergence and throughout its development in history. From the late 19th to mid-20th century, the Straits Chinese had to negotiate among themselves and with the British authorities, as well as with the indigenous Malays, the new immigrant Chinese, and other migrants, the Chinese state, and later, the postcolonial governments (Teoh, 2015). Many of these later immigrants from China started off as tin-miners and labourers in plantations, who gradually increased their wealth and attained a different position amongst the rich Chinese in the Straits. By 1930s, they became wealthy Chinese-speaking businessmen, and by the 1940s, they had dominated two-thirds of the Malayan Chinese population (Khoo, 1996). This situation was certainly not ideal for the *Peranakan*s, whose status and privileged position was now being threatened by the newcomers. In fact, the *Peranakan*s have been regarded to have lost touch with China and have instead regarded themselves to be natives of the British Straits settlements (Png, 1969). With the Great Depression and the second World war, and eventually the repatriation of the British, the political and social status and wealth of the *Babas* suffered (Tan, 2009, Rudolph, 1998). Many *Peranakan*s were forced to sell off their material possessions for survival during the Japanese occupation, while rampant looting left them further dispossessed (Rudolph, 1998). Time-consuming and extravagant ceremonies were also abandoned (Rudolph, 1998). Following the war and the establishment of independent nation states in the late 1950s, the *Peranakan*s underwent a series of identity adjustments to ensure their best interests. These adjustments also hastened the decline of

the *Baba* Malay, the home language of the *Peranakan*s. The *Baba* Malay is now considered a critically endangered language (Lee ,2019). The endangerment was believed to have been the result of long-term acculturation and new policies, such as the dominance of British culture, the use of English language among the *Peranakan*s, as well as the introduction of Mandarin as the official 'mother tongue' as part of a bilingual language policy in 1966 (Lee, 2019).

Today, the evolving *Peranakan* identity continues to call for critical examination. This criticality towards self-identification, as highlighted by Rudolph (1998), only occurred at the time when aspects of the *Baba* culture were disappearing. While some old customs and traditions are still practised within the *Peranakan* community, despite their obsolescence in China, the place of their origin (Wee, 2009), others have proposed the need to promote relevance and embrace modernity to revive and strengthen the *Peranakan* culture (Lee, 2009). The anxiety towards the loss of *Peranakan* identity was also encapsulated in Lam's (2017) article titled '*Has the soul gone out of modern Peranakans?*' In a similar vein, the Malaysian National News Agency also expressed concern about younger *Peranakan*s' lack of interest about their ancestry, and their parents' nonchalant attitude (Bernama, 2017). The News agency also highlighted a critical concern that the traditional and cultural practices has become less relevant to the Peranakans in the contemporary world today. While the *Peranakan* identity is not always regarded as exclusive by some, considering that it has been subsumed into the main culture, there are those who call for a delicate balance between preserving the past and welcoming its evolution. Although these perspectives revolve around the construction and reconstruction of the *Peranakan* identity, the evolving Baba identity in the literature were mostly based on Baba's socio-identity dating back to the early 20th century (Tan, 2009). It is within the interstitial spaces between the past and present,

social, and individual, that this research finds its place. From the late 1960s, cultural revival took the forms of *Peranakan*-related televised programmes, contests, parades, and festivals (Rudoph, 1998). This was followed by an increased interest in the *Baba* material culture in the 1970s (Tan, 2009). In the 1980s, there were also exhibitions and antique fairs featuring Straits Chinese paraphernalia and architecture preservation work (Rudolph, 1998).

The material culture of the *Peranakan*s can be considered one of its most prominent cultural markers. In the past, many functional objects were used in *Peranakan* ancestral worship and festivals. Beadwork and embroidery work were made by young Peranakan females in preparation for their marriage (Tan, 2009). *Peranakan* objects range from the Nyonya wares, *Peranakan* Chinese or Straits-Chinese enamelled porcelain made in Jingdezhen *[景德镇, pronounced as Ji de zhen),* Kiangxi *[江西, pronounced as jiang xi]* province of China, to exquisite silverware, jewellery, and other household paraphernalia with diverse cultural influences. Indisputably, the *Peranakan* artefacts carry the connotations of opulence, luxury, and grandeur. The *Peranakan* aesthetics is often thought of as overtly ornate, complicated, with extreme integration of seemingly unrelated symbols. Ho (1984) once commented that the significance of these symbols may be lost on those not able to recognise them. Many of these symbols are representations that suggests prosperity, longevity, and continuity. The thought that these motifs suggest or encapsulates the desire of a thriving and vibrant future, inevitably adds poignancy to the now waning culture. The irony does not end here. It is interesting that despite its presumed decline in active use within the community, the *Peranakan* objects are well-regarded as precious objects in auction houses, cultural museums, and galleries. The ubiquitous presence of these objects seems to have resisted the presumably dying culture. There seems to be something about these objects that intrigue and has given them such longevity. Is it the

monetary value that these objects carry, or the fact that they have become 'more important' with the label of precious objects attached to them in auction houses and museums, that has somehow kept them going? Now no longer in their natural habitat (the *Peranakan* home), how much longer would these objects be of value, and what kind of value?

There have been on-going concerns regarding the ways these cultural materials are presented and disseminated to the public. Teoh (2015) raised the issue that state-sponsored museums and heritage projects have effectively compromised the dynamic nature of the *Peranakan* identity. She highlighted that instead of addressing its 'non-easily defined' identity and embracing its evolution and dynamics, many of these conservation projects had presented the *Peranakan* identity as unchanging remnant of a pre-existing world. On top of that, many initiatives are commercially driven, with paid tours and monetised events (Teoh, 2015), resulting in limited representation of the *Peranakan*'s real-life experiences. All these initiatives may have led to what we see today – the regurgitations of purposefully curated conservation, but at the expense of genuine interest and meaningful articulation of the *Peranakan* identity. Peranakan cultural expert *Baba* Peter Wee once commented that the new generation of *Peranakan*s is experiencing only "a ghost of its culture" (Nur Azlin Abdul Karim, 2017). In this respect, 'ghost' essentially implies a fading, non-objective existence, a ghostly presence, incomplete, unreal, and out of this world. This 'ghost' reveals a hauntological dimension, which recalls Derrida's (1993) 'spectre' in his 'Spectres de Marx', a political idea that the metaphorical spectre of Marxism continues to haunt the present and future of western society. Extrapolated by Fisher (2014: 34-35), this ghost signifies "lost futures" dominated by "persistencies, repetitions, prefigurations", which can lead to the "cancellation of the future" (Fisher, 2014: 13). I will further discuss these theoretical

connections with the 'ghost' in Chapter One: Identity. What is worth noting about this ghost, is that these definitions and interpretations of the 'ghost' fit rather aptly with the 'ghost' of the *Peranakan* culture as aforementioned. In one of my discussions with Heath Yeo, a Singaporean 'kebaya' *[traditional Peranakan blouse]* designer and maker, he commented that common designs used in *Peranakan* blouse embroidery have become rather limited, such as the dragon, phoenix, peony and rose. He was intrigued by some rare designs he saw on some older *Peranakan* blouses, like Spanish dancers, geishas, and monkey on a coconut tree, and wondered why such creative ideas have not been continually developed on more recent blouses. I interpret that it was not the specific designs that he hopes to continue producing, but the creativity that have led to them that should have been the focus. His concern about the rarity of more varied motifs on the blouses, should be something that warrants serious attention. The implication is that of a 'lost future', where nothing new would be generated over time, that is if there is no demand or production for designs beyond what we already have.

The significance of the ghost lies in its ability to impact and effect the present as well as the future, like a shadow that persists and repeats itself in many permutations, from objects that were used and owned by *Peranakan* families in the past, to *Peranakan*- inspired objects created today, as well as in various display platforms that operate as reminders of their past. When an object is removed from its original location of the home, relocated, and displayed as an exhibit in a museum or gallery, the object is inactivated and no longer performs its intended role in real life. Invariably, this effectively removes the phenomenological historicity of the object. Rudoph (1998) had long highlighted, that the essence of the *Baba* culture is found in the traditional rituals "which are still meaningful" to

the *Babas*, rather than in the material culture itself. In other words, it is the lived experience, actions, or rituals involving objects that define the essence of a culture. Today, rituals may have a totally different meaning, thus a different kind of cultural essence that have gone through significant evolution. Yet, it is the 'evolving into' that holds much anticipation. The link between the *Peranakan*s and their cultural objects has been tenuous and ambiguous. While many studies have investigated the purposes and the symbolisms behind the *Peranakan* objects, few have focused their attention specifically on the user's relationship with the objects. And if cultural essence has anything to do with cultural identity, it makes sense to examine how identity is performed in the contemporary life of the *Peranakans* today, not only using objects, but also how it is performed through objects.

Navigating 'Lost'

First of all, this study involves an interest in the things that were lost, how much was lost, and what can be done to process the loss. The mention of 'things' here is intentional and with particular reference to the condition of lost. My grandmother's embroidery can be said to be more of a 'thing' than an 'object'. The distinction between the two is clearly explained by Brown (2001), that a thing emerges from an object that ceases to function as one, as the thingness of an object becomes prominent. I recalled a project I once did, titled 'Thing-ing', where I explored the dis-connections between things and objects in their various stages as object-yet-to-become [Fig 1 to 4 in Volume C (art practice documentation)]. They appear as disparate fragments, as if they are waiting to be assembled. In their state of rawness and diverse materiality, there is no guarantee what they might become. Brown (2001) mentioned that an 'object' is transparent, while a 'thing' is opaque. He proposed

that an object has a see-through quality, where its functions are more readily revealed, compared to a thing that is not. In other words, while transparency gives access only to the things we already know, as functional objects, opacity brings possibilities and outcomes we may never have known. According to Brown (2001), 'things' exceed their material and utilitarian states as objects and instead asserts a sensuous or metaphysical presence that made them items of value, fetish, idol, and totem. In this respect, my grandmother's embroidery in its incomplete state had remained an unfinished 'thing' of value. 'Thingness' involves a latency, of something yet formable, that what cannot be reducible to objects (Brown, 2001). In an ironic twist of fate, my grandmother's embroidery was indeed a non-object, not only because there is no trace of its physical form, but because it was also something I would not have known what to do with. All I knew of it was that it looked different from the other examples I had seen, and it was clearly an attempt of someone (my grandmother) trying to make something out of basic materials. I also knew that it was kept by someone (my mother) who certainly valued it enough to have hidden it from public eye for so long. The only value it has to me is its ability to evoke memories of my grandmother [Annex 2]. I have derived from this lost object something intangibly valuable. As I set out to explore other 'lost' objects, I explored the unknown, or yet-to-be known information I may not have otherwise found. This process involves charting paths, not answers, revealing possibilities, and not formulas. This is where the art practice forms the core of this research, to expand on existing knowledge through provocations, challenges, and illumination (Sullivan, 2005). According to (Sullivan, 2014), the complexities in our world today has made creative alternatives an urgency to develop. This view proposes that diverse artistic articulations could offer ways to deal with contemporary human tendencies and unprecedented scenarios, such as personal and emotional connections with things, and the

shifting perspectives and attitude towards them, all of which could potentially change the ways we look at ourselves - our identity and our place in this world. Fundamentally, the complexities in this research are manifold, and in particular, the challenges of exploring the relevance, significance, and value of materials from a culture that has long been considered declining. Through engaging the processes of observing and making objects, I explore these complexities.

The "handling" of materials, according to Bolt (2006: 5), creates an opening that allows the relationality between the artist, materials, processes, and the creative object to be reconsidered. Reconsideration suggests a shift from previous conceptions towards the anticipation that something else might emerge. The agent of this shift is essentially the artist who handles the materials, thus the activator of this transformation. This happens when the artist becomes a medium, a mediator and activator of the medium all at once. It is a specific sort of stirring. Bolt (2010: 27) describes this kind of interaction as the "magic" of handling. This magical process takes place where the materials and processes are active and effecting, they "have their own intelligence" that comes into play with the artist's creative intelligence to effect knowing (Bolt, 2010: 30). Using the example of David Hockney's inquiry on the techniques used by Ingres to produce small and accurate portraits, Bolt (2010: 31) explains that the new knowledge as experienced by Hockney, "arrived" through drawing experiments. It is this specific kind of knowing grounded in practice that the reconfiguration of things occurs, that the portal into the yet-to-be known opens. In other words, the new cannot be induced upon desire or made to happen until it actually happens. This arrival is what I hope to achieve in my research, knowledge led by an openness to what finds its way through the substance of things. When considering the use of practice methodology for the

Peranakan objects, it is not a case of simply creating new stories out of old things. Instead, it is more about exploring new ways to find meanings and interpretations that we may not have been able to imagine or may not have known otherwise. “Meanings” are made, and not found (Sullivan, 2005: 18). This concept challenges the conventional idea that meaning is inherent to an artifact and can be discovered through one’s prerequisites and perceptive skills (Sullivan, 2005). This perspective removes the maker/designer of an artifact from the equation of interpretation and places the responsibility of meaning-making on something external – the observer. In practice, observation is carried out in a very different way, through the direct handling of things. Here, the artist is an observer and a maker. The immediacy of direct material handling allows the observer to enter, and literally get into the fibre of things. The getting into things is not only important in this research, but also necessary, considering that this very condition of being inside things is not always possible with *Peranakan* objects. Lacking experience of seeing them used and not having the opportunity to actually use them in real life, thus not being able to fully appreciate how they would operate in a real-life context, has no small part to play in my rationale and motivation for this research. As old or pre-existing meanings of some of these Peranakan objects are now lost, due to lost connections and knowledge, it is a crucial time to be looking for more alternate means to create new meanings and new knowledge for these ‘lost’ objects.

Several artists have worked with *Peranakan* themes and have contributed significantly to the visual research in *Peranakan* studies. The works of Australian-based artist Jennifer Lim is a good example. Many of her prints are made using Japanese woodblock printing techniques and materials, which feature motifs inspired by *Peranakan* stories, objects, and architecture [Fig 11 in Volume B]. Lim’s research on the heritage tiles,

also known as the 'Peranakan tiles', and her artistic practice in printmaking are intertwined (Pierson, 2020). Notably, she initiated the 'The Singapore Heritage Tile Project in 2019, which involved 100 volunteers to uncover, clean and document vintage tiled tombs at Bukit Brown Cemetery, what she considers "Singapore's best outdoor museum" (Jennifer Lim Art, 2021) [Figs 12 and 13 in Volume B]. Through the project, she discovered historical lineages between a myriad of cultures around the world and collective cultural memories. With the help of some history enthusiasts and caretakers of the cemetery, Lim identified about 200 types of rare vintage tiles that were imported from Belgium, England, Germany and Japan, influenced by the Art Deco, Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts decorative movements that were popular in the 20th century (Pillars of History, 2020).

Likewise, there are also designers who have created or recreated *Peranakan* attires, accessories, and furniture using new methods and technologies. Onlewo *[安乐窝, pronounced as 'an le wo']*, meaning cozy nest, is a recent example of a design studio specializing in contemporary fabric designs that carry iconic motifs of Singaporean culture and heritage, including a range of products inspired by the *Peranakan* culture, such as the covered jar *[kam cheng]*, the beaded shoes *[kasot manek],* phoenixes, and floral *Peranakan* tiles [Fig 14 in Volume B]. Designer Audrey Chua harnessed the 3D printing technology and algorithmic software in the making of the *Peranakan* beaded shoes*,* jewellery, and traditional vases [Figs 15 and 16 in Volume B]. Using new technology, she was able to create perforated, prefabricated canvas bases for beads to be sewn onto (Lee, 2018). These efforts are testaments of current initiatives to invigorate the *Peranakan* material culture, by instilling creativity and innovations into old crafts. One could only imagine what it must have felt like to drive these bold experimentations, like taking a leap of faith from the familiar

expectations and cultural correctness, into unknown territories where the jolting newness of these objects may have risked being deemed as 'incorrect' and contrived. Far from surrendering to long-existing expectations, these initiatives make us look back into the past with renewed admiration, and into the future with the hope that with new configurations, *the Peranakan* objects may continue to exist, to serve different needs and purposes.

Some artists have also been presenting works with a nod to the *Peranakan* tradition, with an attitude of openness to contemporary perspectives. Take for example Malaysian painter, Sylvia Lee Goh's and Carolyn Law's portrayal of the *Peranakan* women, each of their works speaks of a certain individualism that are informed by their own experiences and perspectives. Set against the domestic scenes, Goh's works are autobiographical representations of her social and cultural life events as a *Peranakan* woman, such as the *'Woman Oh! Woman' series'*, painted by Goh as a tribute to a close friend and neighbour, Maimun Din (Eddy Izuwan Musa and Sarena Abdullah, 2017). In *'Camaraderie', and 'My Friend, My Sister!'* [Figs 17 and 18 in Volume B], two women are portrayed engaged in intimate conversations, as one could observe from their close proximity and the level of attentiveness shown through their bodily gestures and facial expressions. Both paintings are also saturated by assortments of food, ceremonial objects, and ornate spatial decorations. Carolyn Law's portrayals are comparatively more radical. In *'The Figurative Brides'* series, the *Peranakan* brides are meticulously painted in vibrant colours and intricately embellished with traditional bridal attire and accessories, yet they are not quite how the *Peranakan* bride are expected to be. For instance, in her *'Smoking Bride' and 'Mustardfields',* [Figs 19 and 20 in Volume B], the brides appear to be smoking, striking a nonchalant stance and holding their cigarettes or cigars close to their faces as smoke escapes their open mouths.

Against non-descript dark backgrounds, the brides stare right back at the viewers in distinct confrontational stance. These brides obviously challenge the stereotypical perception of properly behaved and demure *Peranakan* brides. Other dramatic portrayals such as *'She says …', 'She',* [Figs 21 and 22 in Volume B], the mouths of the brides are wide open as if screaming, while their faces contort responsively to either the objects they were holding in their hands or towards something that lies beyond the painting.

In the visual research undertaken by Lee (2016), she reconstructed the visual identity of the *Nyonya* (baba *Peranakan* lady) based on portrait photographs, paintings, and surviving dress materials from the 1860s to 1930s [Figs 23 and 24 in Volume B]. Lee was able to locate and analyse the time in history when these women first took on the distinctive identity of modern *Peranakan* female, specifically the identity of the 'Straits Chinese' woman. In her words, she had given a voice to the 'mute' visual images of the nineteenth century *Nyonya* (baba *Peranakan* lady). Through analysing the change in the dressing system of the *Peranakan* lady, Lee was able to examine how they have gradually shaped their identity over time through their inclusion and omitting of certain dress elements to illustrate prestige and status, or to align themselves to the European and Chinese aesthetics and influences. She also observed the expanding dress styles adopted by the *Peranakan* lady as an indication of modernity in the early twentieth century and revealed that the *Nyonya's* hybrid visual identity are not only ethnically, but socially and politically shaped (Lee, 2016). Lee's attempt at reconstruction presents an effective way to create new meanings out of narrative-imbued fragments, which would perhaps remain fragmented if not for the agency of the researcher. These works offer us a world where visual expressions and meaning making are intertwined and interdependent of each other.

More recently, individuals and organisational groups are actively developing ways to promote the *Peranakan* heritage through various means of engagement. One good example is the digitally recreated National University of Singapore (NUS) *Baba* House [Fig 25 in Volume B]. The project is a collaboration between the NUS *Baba* House, the Urban Redevelopment Agency (URA) and Building Information Modelling (BIM). Using 3D rendering technology, information about the *Baba* House is documented and mapped digitally, with interactive features such as information points that are expandable upon clicking (NUS, n.d). The initiative not only provides an opportunity to engage with the artefacts and the spaces visually and virtually, but it also shows that the reinvigoration of the *Peranakan* heritage is a task that involves diverse resources and expertise from different organisations and communities.

Although these are good practices of visuals in the *Peranakan* research, there remains the question: what kinds of narratives, messages, meanings, perspectives, and interpretations can we still harvest out of objects that have long been decontextualised and rehoused in new environments, where their functions and purposes have presumably changed with modern living? These objects would have been periodically shaped by changing values, needs, and wants of their users and admirers. There may be one thing, however, that the creators of these objects may not have thoroughly considered, that is, the relevance of the objects beyond the time they were made, a time beyond their immediate relevance. To be fair, it is a strange and anachronistic expectation. Ironically, we are constantly looking into the past for inspiration. Would representing the images of these old and obsolete things necessarily inform us about their place in the future? I have mentioned here two conditions that have piqued my interest into this study – first and foremost, that

these objects belonged to and lived in the past, secondly, these objects are essentially static, not in the literal sense of the word, but suggestively, 'trapped in time'. This is not to say that the past should be discarded to create new things. What I am trying to get at is precisely the opposite. It is essentially through looking at specifics of the past, such as why and how certain objects were made, and for what purposes and events they were made for, that we might have a chance at understanding the rationales behind their existence, and consequently, the possible continuation of these objects. In this research, I propose the 'breaking apart' of these objects, as a way of moving beyond the material to get to the core of why some of these objects had existed and are still existing, albeit in different ways. This 'breaking apart' of objects aims to study objects as they are made, rather than objects that are already made. Ingold (2013) highlighted the over-reliance on finished objects found in more conventional material and visual studies. According to him, the creative processes that have brought into being the objects or artefacts, and the sensory awareness of practitioners who have made them, appear to have been overshadowed by objects that were already made (Ingold, 2013). This research, therefore, seeks to shift the focus from 'made' to 'making', and to place emphasis on intentional observation and active knowing.

Rearticulating 'Lost'

While trying to piece together a cacophony of images, texts, and multiple, I found myself engaged with fragments – developing ideas, fleeting voices, fruitful and failed art explorations, snippets of memories sealed within hidden photographs, as well as memorable and newly forged relationships. Fragments come in different sizes, shapes, and with all kinds of edges and textures. They may have been broken off from a larger body, or

as independent pieces that do not belong anywhere. Essentially, they do not fit with each other, and hence the challenges of grappling, reshaping, or re-enforcing them such that they can somehow be held together as a whole.

I have chosen to use include multiple voices to articulate my research. This way of presenting my research reflects how I have been experiencing my cultural identity and materials - in fragments. These fragments came from snippets of Peranakan-ness I have gathered over time, from my family, relatives and friends, cultural experts and enthusiasts, museums and galleries, exhibitions and workshops, books, and journals. The multiple voices represent my way of experiencing, comprehending, and knowing. These voices include my researcher's voice, artist's voice, and personal/cultural voice, as well as the voices of my research participants. I am aware that the voices overlap and as a result, the distinctions between them are sometimes indiscernible. It is precisely this intertwining of voices and their transcendency that I seek to explore. The voices are presented through different text styles. My personal/cultural voice is italicised and represented by comparatively lighter font, in indented paragraphs and centralised format). This voice weaves throughout the text and is also interwoven with the other voices. This voice recalls memories, and reflects my lived/living experience, which may be physical, or non-physical, real, or imaginary. Likewise, my researcher's and practitioner's/artist's voices are guided and channeled from the many artistic approaches I have undertaken, and they are meant to be read as extensions from my personal/cultural voices, sometimes in response to it. My identity can be said to be multifaceted, both as the researched and the researcher, and at the same time, an insider, and an outsider. I am, however, aware that my multiple voices may pose a challenge where the appropriate level of self-reflexivity is concerned, as over self-reflexivity may lead to the

shadowing of the other voices in the research. Bearing in mind these concerns, I took care in ensuring that responsible reflexivity is established and maintained throughout my interactions with the participants, which I will elaborate later. The voices of the research participants are also interwoven into the main text. They include opinions, ideas and suggestions that are representative of their experience with the *Peranakan* material culture. The purposive sampling approach is used to collect responses by the participants. The researched adhered to Birmingham City University's Research Ethical Framework, to respect all ethical obligations and responsibilities in all aspects of the research. I have obtained the ethical approval before carrying out this research. I have demonstrated the awareness of relevant ethical concerns such as obtaining informed consent from the participants, acknowledging their contributions, providing them the options of anonymity and the right to withdraw from the research at any time, as well as ensuring their confidentiality and not causing harm [Annexes 3 to 5]. I also showed awareness of potential bias and influence when engaging my own family members as participants, and the awareness of my own potential biases when including my personal, subjective responses and interpretations. Purposive sampling is also known as judgmental, deliberate, selective or subjective sampling. This approach is by no way randomised, instead, this method focuses on participants who are able to offer meaningful insights into the topic of my study. The participants chosen for this research are those who identified themselves as *Peranakan*s and whom have stories to share about *Peranakan* objects belonging to their families or *Peranakan* objects they have used or interacted with. They come from various age groups, ranging from people in their 20s to 70s, who are interested or are involved in *Peranakan* cultural activities. Apart from some of them being my own *Peranakan* family members and relatives, several participants were invited to take part in this research due to their interest

in the Peranakan culture. A few of them are associated with the *Baba* Malay course group created and organised by Kenneth Chan, who is also a writer of *Baba* Malay books, whose effort to keep the culture alive cannot be understated. However, there are also participants in this category that may not be directly affiliated to the course group but have showed strong interest to share with me their personal experience with the *Peranakan* cultural objects. Other participants selected for this research are people who have contributed or are still making contributions to the *Peranakan* culture. They are people who currently work in the field of *Peranakan* cultural preservation and conservation. One of them is a *Baba* cultural adviser, and the other a designer and maker of *Peranakan* embroidered blouses. The inclusion of multiple participants aims to look at common experiences, with the advantage of offering multiple viewpoints on a shared experience (Flowers, Larkin, and Shaw, 2019). This study recognises the importance of multiple realities where knowledge and meanings are socially rather than individually constructed. With these understandings, I conducted face-to-face and online open-ended, semi-structured one-to-one interviews, and focus group discussions. Rapley (2001) explains that open-ended dialogues are inherently social encounters which could effectively open new and alternative trajectories of thinking through and the analysing of data. I also prepared a list of loosely organised questions with the aim of preventing excessive control over the conversations. [Annex 3]. This method allowed the participants to express their thoughts and emotions naturally, bringing greater flexibility of coverage, leading the interviews into new areas, and producing richer data (Smith and Osborn, 2015). I also conducted a second interview in some cases to obtain more developed and comprehensive responses. Although conducting more interviews could mean generating deeper and interesting insights, I took caution to avoid overcommitment in this area (Rowley, 2012). The interview responses were captured with

audio recordings and transcribed to gain insights into the interpretations provided. Data collection and analysis is different in arts-based research compared to general social research, in that stronger emphasis is based on artistic interpretation than direct inputs from transcriptions. Selected quotes and responses are treated as part of the practice-based investigation to generate artistic responses and support artistic outcomes. As the transcription and data analysis involve subjective description, personal interpretation, and judgement, I have engaged multiple supplementary sources to triangulate the data collected, such as related images and documents to support existing data with clarity and integrity. I have also collected images and borrowed objects from some participants, which I used for a few different purposes. Firstly, the images and loaned objects were used as stimulus for my practice, and secondly, as references to provide better understanding on the physical, emotional, and contextual dimensions of the objects examined. Thirdly, they were included as an indispensable part of the viva exhibition, which I shall elaborate in the conclusion chapter.

Chapter 1 Identity

In this Chapter on 'Identity', I will discuss the three sections 'Body', 'Space' and 'Motions' with reference to objects owned, used, or remembered by the *Peranakans* today. The 'Body' discusses the traditional blouse and wrap skirt *[Nyonya sarong kebaya]* and the brooch *[kerosang]* worn and owned by the *Peranakans* as a way of portraying what would be considered an authentic *Peranakan* identity. 'Space' examines the mortar and pestle *[batu lesong]* as a common object in the *Peranakan* household and its significance today. 'Motion' discusses the glutinous rice balls *[kueh ee]* making activity as an important event in the *Peranakan* household. Many insights contributed by *Peranakan*s such as Betty, Cedric Tan, Josephine, Kaleb, and Mary, are essential in providing me a holistic view on the implications surrounding the *Peranakan* identity as we discussed the physical objects selected for this research. The objects were frequently mentioned by participants in the interviews; thus, I have chosen to discuss them in this chapter. The traditional *Peranakan* blouse and wrap skirt, with a set of three brooches, form a major part of the full ensemble of the traditional *Peranakan* attire, which would normally include a pair of beaded shoes. The mortar and pestle have been something deemed indispensable by several *Peranakans* I have met over the years. Likewise, the glutinous rice balls cooked in sweet syrup has been an important dish present at events celebrated by the Peranakans.

The task of defining the Peranakan identity is a complex one. Apart from the general fundamentals such as ethnicity, geography, language, social and cultural affiliations, part of the complexity has to do with change, the continuous change by history, culture, and power and through different points of reference (Hall,1990). Hall explains that identity is a 'production' that is never complete but always in the process of making and constituted

within representation. Similarly, Bhabha (2004) discusses that cultural identity is fluid and malleable rather than fixed. Using African artist Renee Green's site-specific work 'Sites of Genealogy' as a reference, he discussed Green's use of the architecture space as a metaphor, and in particular, her conceptualisation of the stairwell to illustrate the liminal space that connects the upper and lower areas. Instead of maintaining the divide between the two opposing spaces, the stairwell becomes a conduit between them. It becomes an interstitial passage that opens the interaction of ideas with no imposed hierarchy, a space where cultural hybridity is possible (Bhabha, 2004). This in-between space, epitomised as the 'Third Space', posits that cultural negotiation goes through constant formation in a fluid manner, opposed to fixed identifications (Bhabha, 2004). Specific to the topic of this research, 'the lost peranakan', I considered my lost cultural identity through the lens of the 'Third Space', as the threshold where new ways of identification can emerge.

I engaged with three interconnected works in my practice, an embroidery series *'Ghost Collar'*, and two performances '*Chukop' [Enough]*, and *'Peranakan Whispers'*. The *'Ghost Collar'* series consists of embroidery work on cheesecloth I had made over four weeks. Most of it was done using black thread on white cheesecloth, apart from two pieces where I had used white thread on black cheesecloth instead. The sewing process involved simultaneously adding and removing yarns from the cloth. Two performance-based collaborations with a Singaporean artist *'Chukop'* and '*Peranakan* Whispers' were produced solely through online interactions between UK and Singapore. Coincidentally, the Covid crisis of 2020 occurred a month after 'Chukop', which further compounded the separation. Apart from the literal geographical separation, the fact the I could not visit Singapore due to covid travel restrictions, made me more aware of my status of being an 'outsider' from my

legitimate 'place' (birthright citizenship). It was also an event that 'placed' me in a new location, detached from both worlds. I was effectively made 'homeless'. It was an interesting position that resonates with my research, particularly the estrangement aspect of it. In *'Chukop'*, my collaborator and I were engaged in actions and reactions that took place concurrently, which included the use of pre-made embroidered cloud collar motifs on cheesecloth, and the removing and chewing of loose yarns. '*Peranakan* Whispers' was a consequential performance video after *'Chukop'*. The video consists of tightly framed overlapping and merging footages of both performers engaged in the actions of wrapping and unwrapping. Further exploring the topic of identity, I examine the physical characteristics of the Chinese ink, which led to a further examination of my ritualistic engagement with Chinese ink painting in a series of videos, which I later compiled and named 'Chinese But Not Chinese'.

The link between human beings and objects could not be more aptly explained than by Cslkszentmihalyl (1993), he stated three ways which they are connected. He highlighted that objects demonstrate one's power and place in the social hierarchy. He also suggested that objects reveal the continuity of the self by being the centre of involvement in past, present activities, and as signposts to future goals, and that objects provide concrete evidence symbolic of one's place in a social network. To consolidate his points, objects validate our individual and social identities. The body is the central locus around which activities occur. The physical object on the other hand, grounds the body in time and space, placing the body in relation to other bodies and other objects. In doing so, the object connects the body to not only its functional value and purpose, but also to their symbolic connections, such as responsibilities, expectations, duties, and obligations which the objects

have come to represent or signify. Fundamentally, it can be said that objects validate our individual and social roles and identities as they concretise and consolidate our place in the world. While the body is an activator of objects, objects facilitate and determine the way the body lives.

Body

Traditional wrapped skirt and blouse *[Nyonya Sarong Kebaya]*

The traditional *Peranakan* blouse *[Nyonya kebaya]* is a two-piece attire worn by *Peranakan* ladies, which gained popularity after 1920s; the attire consists of the *batik sarong [wax-resist wrap skirt]* and the fully embroidered kebaya (Ong, 2011). The traditional *Peranakan* blouse is a hip-length blouse that fits closely to the contours of the body, and typically with elaborated embroidery, such as on the front lapels [Figs 26 and 27 in Volume B], along both sides of the blouse's opening, at the ends of the sleeves, and most heavily at the base of the blouse, and sometimes on the back. Fabrics such as rubia and voile are commonly used for the blouse due to their sheer and light-weight qualities [Fig 28 in Volume B]. When combined with meticulously embroidery work, they often produce intricate and elaborate lacework and patterns. One of the earliest historical mentions of the traditional *Peranakan* blouse *[Nyonya kebaya]* was a reference to the "*Noonga Cabaia", which means 'Nyonya Kebaya'* (Parkinson, 1773: 179). The term initially referred to a long robe, was speculated to be introduced into the Straits by the Portuguese or the Portuguese Eurasians from India from as early as late 1700s (Parkinson, 1773; Lee, 2016). The wrap skirt *[sarong]* makes the lower part of the attire. It is a common garment worn by both men and women in several parts of Southeast Asia, such as in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In Southeast Asia, wax-resist wrap skirt *[batik sarongs]* produced by traditional resist-dyeing

method are commonly worn. The term *'sarong'* literally means 'cloth covering' in the Malay language, and a typical wrap skirt would consist of two sections, known as the body *[badan]* and the head *[kepala]*, and it is important to position the head at the front to indicate the header of the wrap [Fig 29 in Volume B]. The head and the body usually have similar motifs, but they differ in colour and patterns. *Peranakan* women wear their *sarongs* either sewn together into a tubular-shaped skirt or wear it left open in a '*kain lepas'* [sarong or wrapped skirt worn as a tube without the cloth's ends sewn together] (Lee, 2013). Some would argue that the proper way of wearing the *sarong* would be to secure it with a silver belt [Figs 30 and 31 in Volume B].

The wearing of garments on our body, apart from ensuring warmth and protecting our modesty, is also a means of self-identification. The traditional attire of the *Peranakan* wrap skirt and blouse is like a map where cultural and geographical threads can be traced. As these threads continue to develop and evolve as they pass through generations, it is also interesting to see how this 'map' is now regarded in our contemporary life today.

***Brooch** [Kerosang]*

Another significant object that makes up *the Peranakan* traditional attire, is the brooch *[kerosang].* It is used by many communities in Southeast Asia and worn by both the men and the women. Its exact origin is difficult to trace due to its various mixed cultural influences (Ee, Henkel, Joseph, Lee, Tan, and Yoong, 2013). Some sources have traced the use of brooches to the Malay tradition (Ee et al., 2013), while others have highlighted their long existence in Europe (Lee, 2014). Brooches used by early communities were known to be simpler in their styles, and were made of simple circlets, and in some instances, decorated with faceted granulation, wire filigree and (Ee et al., 2013). Typically, these

brooches come in sets of three, either in three identical pieces or in a set consisting of one large heart-shaped brooch accompanied by two smaller circular ones. Sets of five have been known to exist as well (Ee et al., 2013). The elaborate heart -shaped design appears to symbolise a peach, known as the mother brooch *[kerosang ibu]* while the two smaller brooches are known as baby brooches *[kerosang anak]* (Khoo, 1996). *Peranakan* ladies use these brooches to secure and adorn the frontal hems of their traditional blouse and wrap skirt, and their long tunic *[baju Panjang]* [Figs 32 to 34 in Volume B]. As the traditional long tunic was tailored without buttons, brooches such as these are necessary for fastening the garment (Lee, 2016). The identical version consists of three brooches connected by short chains [Fig 35 in Volume B]. They appear to be smaller and lighter in weight compared to the more elaborated version. It is not unusual to find them in a variety of decorative designs such as intricate floral sprays mounted with pearls, or those made of precious and semi-precious stones. Pearls, diamonds and precious stones are common features on these brooches. Box-setting and a jour setting are two methods known for setting the gemstones onto the brooch. Using box-setting, the stones are set on tiny circular mountings fashioned out of short, thin gold or silver metal strips soldered onto the base plate of the *kerosang* [brooch] to firmly secure the gems in place (Ho, 1984) [Fig 36 in Volume B]. The à jour on the other hand, omits the base plate; this method of mounting gems was used for jewels of great purity and brilliance and takes advantage of the light-reflecting quality of gemstones to create a rich, glittery appearance (Ho, 1984) [Fig 37 in Volume B]. The star *[bintang]* brooch [Fig 38 in Volume B] is another example of an extraordinary accessory. It is set with ninety-three round brilliant cut diamonds, with a removable centre made up of nine diamonds (Citigold Select, n.d). Such a design gives it versality to be used as a button, cuff links, an earring or a brooch (Citigold Select, n.d). During an interview with *Baba* Cultural

Consultant from Malaysia Cedric Tan, he commented that some brooches even have fastenings that would allow it to be worn as a hair decoration for the Peranakan bride on pre-wedding events and on wedding day.

Much care has been placed on how the brooch is designed and used, in terms of the right number of brooches to be used each time and on which occasions they should be used. To say that the brooch is merely an accessory, or an ornament on the body, is an understatement. Materials remind us of who we are and where we come from, Cho (2007) once commented, stating that a pair of beaded shoes brings to mind the Peranakan cultural identity, and an impressive diamond brooch (worn or used by the Peranakan) may remind us of the material success of the *Peranakan* forefathers. In a similar vein, Cedric Tan also highlighted the importance of observing boundaries in dressing, adding that decorum is a very important virtue of the *Peranakan*. For instance, while he acknowledged that accessorising the *Peranakan* man's shirt with a brooch is a relatively recent fashion trend, he emphasised the importance on its appropriate placement on the shirt. He proposed having one brooch rather than more brooches on the man's attire, and of the appropriate size, to avoid overdressing and to maintain finesse. He reasoned that when donning cultural wear, the emphasis should be on the culture than on the individual wearing it.

My culture Is the outermost layer that will never touch my skin
[Gua mia adat sama luair lapis, dia tak kena gua mia kulit]

Where do I begin? I have nothing. That's it, that is exactly where I
shall begin, the position of lack - lacking connection with my cultural

materials/objects, the lacking the knowledge of their cultural significance, and the lacking possession of these materials/objects that were often meant to be passed down within the family and sometimes for generations. Having possession of such materials/objects are often thought of as an indication of belonging to the culture/organisation/system/place/society where these things belong. Thus, simply not having any of them in the family suggests the opposite. Yet a faint recollection of seeing such an item intrigued me. It was a piece of my grandmother's embroidery that featured a few small clusters of flowers sewn using embroidery threads. Unlike those elaborated intricate embroidery works commonly shown on expensive kebayas [traditional Peranakan blouse], my grandmother's work paled in comparison. Sewn on a coarse and thick dull blue fabric using moderately colourful embroidery threads, there was a sense of honesty to it. It reminded me of her invariably gentle persona, although admittedly I did not know her well enough to say otherwise. My grandmother was always dressed in her sarong [wrapped skirt] and always spoke only Baba Malay, with occasional smatterings of English during our brief interactions. The embroidery work was my only material reminder of her. Many years passed and for some reason, it was never to be found again, lost, or at least I was told that its disappearance probably had something to do with us moving house, clearing space, and getting rid of old things. The item had long gone, leaving only remnants of threads and yarns etched in my

memory. Performance artist Janine Antoni said something interesting, about how her grandmother had left behind a half-finished doily with a crochet needle stuck to it, carefully folded and still fixed to a spool, as her grandmother had died before completing it; she calls the doily an "open object" (Janine Antoni's interview with Heathfield, 2012: 519). Unlike her, I no longer have an open object like hers that would remind me of its incompleteness, or the nagging need to get it finished. In my case, my grandmother's lost embroidery work was to me an 'open object' in a different way. It was an object that was left open to interpretation, open to the imagination, a condition made possible by its very absence.

'Absence' opens up the possibility of a hauntological engagement. Through this lens, the non-existent embroidery is replaced by the "figure of the ghost" (Davis, 2005: 375). The *'Ghost Collar' became the ghost. In this series of work, I had chosen to use the cloud collar motif as it appears* on many *Peranakan* Chinese objects. Cammann (1951) stated that the pattern was adapted to form an actual collar to decorate the upper part of Chinese robes and was later painted around the necks of vases and jars on Chinese ceramics [Figs 39 to 42 in Volume B]. In '*Ghost Collar'*, the individual cloud motifs are featured in disjointed segments, not as a whole collar. Much like Janine Antoni's approach, triggered by the feeling of discomfort towards an object she did not understand and thus following the object back to its birth, the *'Ghost Collar'* series seeks to return to its pre-made state. Using embroidery threads, I created a motif of the cloud collars on cheesecloth. While the contours of the embroidery thread left fading impressions of the cheesecloth, pockets of

void/empty spaces formed between them became catchment areas that highlighted 'absence'. It is not unlike the punctum, an incidental detail in a photograph that 'pierces' or 'pricks' the viewer (Barthes, 1981; Busch, 2012), the ghost collar creates a distinct situation of remembrance. The removal of the cloth's yarns mimics the object's gradual dematerialising state [Figs 5 to 7 in Volume C], like the fading story of my grandmother's embroidery. The actions effectively strengthened the cheese cloth yet weakened it at the same time. The cloth soon became thinner as more yarns were removed. As it happened, the diaphanous quality of the cloth against and the stark black thread, appeared like a tattoo over my skin [Figs 8 and 9 in Volume C]. A tattoo is an intentional mark engraved on the body, which then becomes part of the body. Like tribes that use tattoo as an identity marker, a tattoo may connote the idea of belonging and commitment to a place/culture/organisation, although not always the case, as there are other reasons why people have tattoos. Like message boards, a tattooed body sends a message/ statement to the world. The thread of the cloud motif appears ingrained, woven through and into the porous material [Figs 10 and 11 in Volume C]. The cloud appears to hover above my skin, much like how they often appear to be floating on *Peranakan* Chinese porcelain rather than being interwoven into the spatial context. Like a ghostly immaterial replica of the original body that edges on disintegration, the hovering cloud looks like a piece of floating skin that is not part of the body. It was to me, a metaphor that my culture is like the outermost layer that will never touch my skin. Given time, would the layer eventually adhere to my skin? Is there anything I could use to make it happen, and do I really want that? The 'ghost' has caused a disturbance; it made me pause to notice its non-adhering quality. An apt description of the ghost's ability at disruption is given by Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska (2017). They said that the ghost haunts by dislocating the past, bringing the past into the

present, and thus disrupting it. Despite its non-adherence, the 'ghost' lingered around stubbornly for a long while. It made me think about possibilities. Through the ghost, my cultural past was brought into attention. It reappeared and became less of a past; it became a present contemplation.

On several occasions during my conversations with some *Peranakan*s on the topics of clothing and ornamentation, we talked about not steering away from tradition, such as wearing the *Peranakan* traditional blouse and the brooch correctly, and not wearing those of poorer quality, or those that were modified and thus less refined**.** A participant of this project Josephine suggests that well-made traditional blouses are often those with punched holes *[ketok lobang],* an effect with regular open intervals that look like perforations [Fig 43 in Volume B]. The process uses a machine to punch holes into the material to neaten the seams at the princess-cut line around the armholes and the collar to create intricate web-like effect (Ong, 2011). To Josephine, good workmanship comes from labour-intensive process and highly skilled craftsmen. She also expressed that some people avoid wearing the non-authentic versions of the traditional blouse and wrap skirt for fear of being criticised. As mentioned earlier in this chapter by CedricTan, the observance of decorum in dressing is noted as one of the most important qualities for the *Peranakan*s. He added that the brooch should ideally be worn exclusively by women but noted that some men wear them too. However, he stressed that men should only be wearing one brooch each time, and not three like how women wear them. Similarly, another participant, Mary would rather acquire authentic and high-quality *Peranakan* wear, like those she inherited from her grandmother. When discussing modernising the traditional beaded shoes worn by *Peranakans*, she commented that "something is just totally lost" if the shoes are produced by modern technology instead of being handmade in the traditional way. She expressed her

appreciation for the labour-intensive process that have gone into making these shoes, despite also confessing that she may not be able to tell if the shoes are indeed the authentic version. She also said that the final appearance of the shoes is important regardless of whether they are machine or handmade. To her, practicality, cost, and comfort are significant factors that would influence her decision to purchase them. Despite all, she highlighted that for certain items, such as the traditional Peranakan blouse, brooches and beaded shoes, it is still important to wear them properly. She commented that "there is something not right about it if you don't wear *kerosang [brooch]* on the *kebaya* [traditional *Peranakan* blouse]", and also "*kebaya* with buttons are just wrong!".

There seems to be a particular concern regarding who knows how to wear them and who does not, which shows an attitude of particularity towards authenticity and legitimacy. In some cases, the proper usage of the objects and the fact that they were family heirlooms, seems inseparable. It also appears to me that the traditional *Peranakan* blouse, wrap skirt and the brooches, despite being less commonly owned or worn today, are still highly regarded for their fine workmanship and qualities. The ability to discern authentic items from the non-originals and those of lesser quality appear to be a significant aspect of cultural identification. Words and phrases like "True blue *Peranakan*s", *"alus*" [fine and delicate] versus *"kasair" [coarse and rough],* "authentic" or "cheat versions", "the way they should be done" were mentioned by some participants. These terms suggest binary opposites between what is accepted and encouraged, and what stands outside these expectations. These realisations, when analysed in tandem with *'Ghost Embroidery'*, presents to me further insights about the notion of identity. Many 'dispossessed' *Peranakan*s like me would never be able to reconcile with our cultural identity if it were to be inexplicably linked to authentic materials and material inheritance. Like the traditional

blouse, wrap skirt, and the brooches that I had never inherited, these 'authentic materials' and 'heirlooms' are like the ghosts that hovers over my skin/ body. The notion of identity seems to be attributed by the 'right' kind of clothing or accessories that one puts on, like a 'message board' that proclaims 'authenticity', 'inheritance' and 'lineage'. These attributes appear vague to me, like the ghostly presence of the cloud collar motif that one drapes over the body, more ornamental than functional, more intangible than concrete, with its materiality at the verge of collapsing.

Am I Peranakan Enough?
[Gua chukop anak Peranakan tak?]

"Don't say I didn't try." I found myself saying that often enough to irritate my mother whom on several occasions had insisted that I dressed appropriately for Peranakan events such as the Peranakan shows [wayang], or the Peranakan dinner and dance. I remember the first event I was being invited to a few years ago, was a Peranakan high tea function. Without much fuss, I was able to acquire a new set of the Peranakan traditional blouse and wrap skirt from Malacca. I was however not too bothered by the fact that I did not own any brooch [kerosang] then and had proceeded to turn up at the event wearing none. It did not take me long to realise that it was a huge mistake, as I was getting quite a bit of attention. I did not know that the brooches were supposed to function as pins that would hold both sides of the traditional blouse's front together, like a well-buttoned up

shirt. My blouse came with hidden pressed buttons instead [Fig 44 in Volume B]. It was no wonder that some older Peranakans were staring at my front, perhaps they were wondering about how I was able to 'button up' my blouse without the brooches! "Tak Seronok lah" [not proper], one of the organisers commented jokingly to my mother about how she should be encouraging me to be better dressed for the next event. On another occasion, a well-meaning Peranakan had offered to adjust my wrap skirt before a Peranakan event. What she didn't know was the fact that I was wearing a modernised wrap skirt with an attached zip, and not a traditional version like what most would wear [Fig 45 in Volume B]. I was so embarrassed that I made some excuses to get out of the situation, with full awareness that a wrap skirt with a zip would be considered almost blasphemous to an old Peranakan lady who had probably worn the traditional attire her entire life. These embarrassing episodes had left an indelible mark on me, and each time I dress up for a Peranakan event, I would always ask my mother "Is this enough? ["Chukop tak?"]. It was my way of telling her that I was trying, but I can never be confident about how I present myself to the other Peranakans, and that I may never be good enough.

Looking back, the *'Ghost Embroidery'* hovers like a piece of clothing and does not affix itself to the body, it is inherently outside the body and not grown from within or skin

deep. Similarly, dressing up in traditional clothing may give the impression that one is affiliated or belong to the culture, or to some, a façade that aims to parade a sense of belonging. The very act of putting on, the performance of identity through mimicry, suggests an inherent distance from what it actually is. The act of dressing is a social act (Entwistle, 2000), and a validation of normality (Goffman, 1973). It can be said that the irony here lies in view that an immediate sense of alienation is effectively created by the very notion of assimilation. Although the traditional blouse and the brooches may have huge resonance with personal memories for some *Peranakan*s, they may in themselves be the very objects that alienate and demarcate those who know/used/owned/ lived with/ familiar with them, and those who are less associated with them.

This scenario presents an acute sense of displacement, in terms of displacement from the expectations of propriety, decorum, and consequentially, the displacement from an authentic cultural identity. In response to this notion of displacement, I created *'Chukop?' [Enough?]'*, a collaborative online performance with a Singaporean artist Wilson Goh. *'Chukop?'* was a 30-minute collaboration on the zoom platform involving actions and reactions that happened concurrently in different time zones, between Singapore and the UK. The performance took place as part of the annual Inside//Out PhD Festival 2020 organised by the Birmingham City University, in a tutorial classroom within the premise, in front of an audience of about 20 people consisting of students and lecturers in higher education. The materials used in the performance include two pieces of cheese cloth with embroidered cloud motifs which I made earlier for *'Ghost Embroidery'*, with one piece longer than the other. Other materials include the traditional *Peranakan* blouse with press buttons, a traditional wrap skirt with zip, a pair of beaded shoes *[kasot manek]*, a laptop for

zoom interface communication, and a projecting screen. The performance centred around the displaced meanings caused by distance -geographically, culturally, and ideologically. In the performance, the interaction between us focused on our actions and reactions. I began the performance dressed in a western style long black shirt and a pair of black leggings. I proceeded to put on the traditional *Peranakan* attire, a set of brooches and a pair of beaded shoes, while the Singaporean artist was dressed in a traditional wax-resist dyed shirt *[baju batik]* and a pair of casual Bermuda shorts which was only visible at the beginning of the performance before he sat down. I then engaged in the action of taking apart loose strands from the fabric and proceeded to chew the strands [Figs 12 and 13 in Volume C]. The attempt indicated the ingestion of the loose strands so that it can be consumed or absorbed back into my body. I then placed the embroidered fabric over my traditional blouse in an attempt to attach it onto me. Much like Janine Antoni's *'Coddle'* where she portrayed herself embracing her leg [Fig 46 in Volume B] to connect with what she deemed as the farthest part of her body (Antoni, 2012), *'Chukop?'* seeks to reconcile with the sentiment of loss by ingesting the strands removed from the collar. Janine lamented on how she felt a sense of distance from it, and fundamentally how her skin had created the distance between herself and the world (Antoni and Heathfield, 2012). Similarly, I saw that the 'lack' of cultural materials in the family and my understandings towards them, has created a distance between myself and my cultural world. This distance was amplified by my collaborator's reinterpretation of my actions, as a mundane act of consumption (eating a bowl of noodles, where he stretched, stirred, slurped, and chewed noodle strands).

Following '*Chukop?',* working on the same concern about displacement, I created a performance video work *'Peranakan Whispers*' with the same collaborator [Figs 14 to 18 in

Volume C]. Overlapping and merging imageries of two bodies can be seen, tightly cropped in a way that our faces and the rest of our bodies were omitted to give focus to our hand gestures. The objects used in this performance included a bamboo leaf, a common food wrapper/container used in Southeast Asia to wrap glutinous-rice dumpling *[kueh chang]*, and a piece of white drawing paper. Despite tight cropping, our traditional *Peranakan* attires were visible within the frames. While my collaborator was wrapping and unwrapping the leaf, I was mimicking his action, sometimes with empty hand gestures, and other times with the white paper. The video was layered with the sound of crumpling paper over the merging and coinciding movements of both bodies. '*Peranakan* Whispers' seeks to address the issues of displaced identity, displaced meanings, and displaced expectations. Two sets of actions merged and faded in and out as though one assimilates another, with the substituting materials of paper and string. There were significant difficulties involved in the process, primarily due to the structural and tactile differences of the materials, as one was soft and pliable, and the other rigid and uncompromising. While the empty hand gestures move with much more fluidity and ease, suggesting an independence from the physical limitations set by the object, the difficulties of assimilation through challenging simulating gestures, hints at irreconcilability. One way to interpret this situation, is that mimicry has its limitations, but it also has possibilities. With more handlings of the 'difficult' materials, there might be a chance of being more familiar with them, either superficially or genuinely. With nothing to handle (empty gestures), there is freedom for creating something that has not yet taken its form, a new object, perhaps even a new kind of identity.

Space

Mortar and pestle *[Batu Lesong]*

The *Peranakan* or *Nyonya* cuisine is undeniably one of the most reliable *Peranakan* cultural markers. The kitchen being the immediate space where *Peranakan* delicacies emerge, holds great significance in the *Peranakan* household. Cooking was an important part of the *Peranakan* life, it is "an accomplishment" and "an art to be proud of" (Khoo, 1996: 127-128). The kitchen can be considered to be one of the most important parts of the Peranakan home. One of the most important objects in this space is the mortar and pestle [*batu lesong]*, generally believed to be of Malay influence (Mohd Nazri Abdul Raji, Shahrim Ab Karim, Farah Adibah Che Ishak, and Mohd Mursyid Arshad, 2017). As the word *'batu' [stone]* suggests, it is made of granite [Figs 47 and 48 in Volume B]. The sound produced using the mortar and pestle, was often a good indication of an experienced cook, a criterion often used by prospective mothers -in-law when visiting the homes of potential brides in the past (Wee, 2009). The object consists of two parts, a deep bowl-shaped container, and a blunt, club-shaped, hand-held pounder [Figs 46 and 47 in Volume B]. It is used for the preparation of the ingredients *[rempah],* which involves crushing, breaking up, mincing, grinding, pulverizing, and mixing of seeds, nuts and sometimes large pieces of leaves and edible roots to release the flavours of the ingredients [Figs 49 to 52 in Volume B]. It was believed that this preparatory method would give the cooked food a unique taste. Made from granite, the mortar and pestle could withstand the aggressive process of pounding and grinding. The deep bowl allows for effective grinding of ingredients without spillage. The surrounding wall of the bowl not only contains and holds the ingredients within, having the same rough surface as the bottom of the bowl, the sides also facilitate optimum

rubbing and bruising. Although the surface of the mortar and pestle is sufficiently rough, it is not porous, thus the ingredients do not get stuck on its surface. Porosity may cause the odours, oils, and small particles of the food to be absorbed into the granite, which may affect the hygiene, smell, and taste of the paste produced. Turmeric *[kunyet]*, shallot *[bawang merah]*, garlic *[bawang puteh]*, kaffir lime leaves *[daon lemo purot]* and meat-based ingredients such as shrimps for cooking chili shrimp paste *[sambair belachan]*, are some of the more common ingredients used for this process. My mother, Betty Low once told me about her experience of using the mortar and pestle in her Malacca house. She said that the dry spices for pounding were often kept in baskets and in well-organised drawers in the *Peranakan* kitchen, to facilitate efficient workflow. A regular practice is to dry the ingredients under the sun to keep the moisture and mold out. According to her, the best way to preserve the ingredients, is to fry and store it in glass bottles.

Your spice paste is my Chinese ink
[Lu mia rempah sama gua mia bak]

"Tumbok lah!" ["Pound!"] my mother exclaimed as she watched me struggling with the mortar and pestle. I was twelve years old. I remembered that each piece of ginger was the size equivalent to a third of my palm, and one of those ginger pieces was more orangey in colour and much tougher than the regular ones. There were onions, a few cloves of garlic, some seeds which curiously came with thick shells. I could not recognise half of what my mother put into the mortar and pestle *before she commanded me*

to start pounding them. My first hit was weak, nothing happened. I tried repeatedly to bruise the ingredients but with little success. I got the hang of it after a while as I saw the ginger splitting slightly and the onions denting and oozing. All I could smell was the pungency of the onions and needlessly to say, tears began streaming down my cheeks and all movements came to a halt. My mother could not help it but laugh at the situation, which made me more persistent and so I carried on. It was difficult getting the ingredients to stay within the container, and I had to pound slowly and from an oblique angle, which obviously defeated the purpose. The ingredients started sliding and shooting out from the mortar.

I was glad I was not using the grinding stone slab [batu giling] which would obviously create more mess [Fig 53 in Volume B]. "What happened? Keep the ingredients in the bowl!" my mother exclaimed. "I cannot. The batu is not big enough", I protested. At this stage, while I was preoccupied with all that wincing, tearing and sniffing, I felt a hand over mine, and me losing grip of my pounder to the hand. Still struggling to open my eyes and keep them open, I saw my mother taking over the task. With firm, repetitive and well-paced pounding, she seemed to have flattened the ingredients and managed to toss them around in the stone bowl. She then proceeded to push them against the wall of the bowl with rotating motions, which effectively shredded the fibrous

roots and even the membranes of the onions. The shells of the seeds had not only cracked opened, but their skins became wet with the juice of the onions, which made it easy to remove them from the bowl. Then with skilfully swift motions of rubbing, grinding forward and backward as though stirring soup in the pot, a dark orange paste is formed in the bowl [Fig 54 in Volume B].

In view of the many complaints from her neighbour living in the flat below hers, I often wondered why my mother was still using the mortar and pestle so regularly. It was not really an issue when we lived in our old flats at Bedok (a town in Singapore), where my mother was more familiar with the habits of her old neighbours, and many of them would chat with her about cooking and recipes. Since the complaints however, she had been placing layers of cloth or newspaper between the mortar and the floor, using them as muffler. To this day, I must say that the long process of preparing the ingredients sometimes put me off cooking Peranakan dishes. Ironically though, it was the batu mortar and pestle which made me feel a little more Peranakan. There was an incident a few years back at a Peranakan club event. The mortar and pestle were mentioned, and one of my Peranakan friends brought up a superstition connected to the object. She shared about a family belief that the mortar and pestle should never be separated as they might cry for each other at night as the two parts of the

object represents a mother and her child. In defiance, she did the opposite of what she was told not to do by her mother, that was to separate the mortar and pestle. She proudly proclaimed that nothing bad came out of it. I was surprised to hear this from someone outside my family. I recalled that after being told the story by my mother at a very young age, I would regularly check on the mortar and pestle at the corner of the kitchen just to make sure that the two parts were kept together.

Like the kitchen, the studio is the space where my art emerges. In the same way, the preparation of the spice paste is akin to the preparation of black ink for painting. The long process of making spice paste is comparable to the time, effort, craft and skills of the ink preparation. To prepare the ink for painting, the artist would require an inkstone, an inkstick, and water [Fig 55 in Volume B]. The ink stone and the Chinese ink are two of the four essential equipment used for Chinese painting and calligraphy, also known as the Four Treasures: paper, brush, ink and inkstone. The inkstick is solidified Chinese ink, made of soot produced by burning pinewood or burning oil at the wick and combined with animal glue yielded from the hides of mammals (Hackley, Swider, and Winter, 2003). The earliest sample of the Chinese ink were excavated from the third century and one of its first forms was the ink cakes produced in the Han dynasty 206 B.C. – A.D. 220 (Hackley, Swider, and Winter, 2003). According to historical sources, the ink stick was produced through the long-drawn process of adding carbon to a solution of glue to form a mass, which was repeatedly pounded about thirty thousand times, rolled, steamed, and treated with water, before

carefully mixed and pressed into wooden stick moulds that had to be dried at a suitably slow pace (Winter, 1989). The glue from the product is an essential substance that facilitates the dispersion of ink when the stick is rubbed or grinded against the slightly abrasive surface of the inkstone (Winter, 1989). To make ink, a small quality of water is poured into the inkstone, bearing in mind that the amount of water used would indicate the amount of ink desired to be produced. The end of the inkstick would first be submerged in the water and ideally held upright as if holding a Chinese paint brush [Fig 19 in Volume C]. With circular motions and a slight downward pressure, the inkstick is moved slowly around the inner rim of the inkstone in a clockwise direction. The slow movement would avoid the ink from splashing outwards while allowing the inkstone ample time to dissolve into the mixture. To quicken the process and make larger quantities, bottled ink is sometimes used to replace water, but never skipping the grinding process. Here, the ink grinding process is an indispensable step that allows the artist to create a whole spectrum of grey from the lightest to the darkest tone. Fine tonality of the ink is vital in creating a sense of spiritual resonance or liveliness within a painting. The darkest black creates a strong presence that advances towards the viewer while the faintest grey recedes into the background [Figs 20 to 21 in Volume C]. Multiple shades of grey function in a way that stretch not only the visual distance perceived by the viewer, but also, the imagination through subtle ink variations and layered effects. Optimal tonality in a work of art could effectively create atmospheric effects, spatial perspectives, visual weight and focus within the composition.

Both the grinding of ingredients in the mortar and pestle, and the grinding of the ink stick in the ink stone, both processes involve the breaking up of substances into smaller particles or parts that would bind or blend into each other in a transformed form – from

inkstick to black liquid with a dense consistency, from separate ingredients into an aromatic paste. According to Betty, the pounding process affords greater flexibility than using the food processor or the electric blender. With the mortar and pestle, she could customise and manually gauge the change of the paste's consistency, texture, colour, fragrance, and even predict the taste of the condiment. She felt that every dish requires different types of spices and different levels of spiciness, which can be tuned accordingly based on the duration of the pounding. To her, the longer the ingredients are pounded, the more intense the taste, but not all dishes need the same amount of ingredients or the same level of intensity. The long and slow processing time is crucial to achieve suitable variations to suit the diverse requirements for a good range of *Peranakan* cuisines. It is a process that cannot be replaced using modern food processors that can be too effective in chopping things up and thus risking the subtleties required in *Peranakan* cooking. Smooth texture produced by these modern devices do not release the oils and flavour in the same way, given that mortar and pestle pounds the ingredients more uniformly in comparison (Mohd Nazri Abdul Raji, Shahrim Ab Karim, Farah Adibah Che Ishak, and Mohd Mursyid Arshad, 2017). With that, she also emphasised the importance of knowing what ingredients and how much of it to use when making condiments with chilli *[sambair].* The same applies to the grinding of the ink with its provision of control, which allows the artist to create a suitably dense black liquid that can be diluted with water to achieve desired shades of grey. Despite the availability of bottled Chinese ink, further treatment with the ink stick is still needed to achieve a desired consistency. Both the preparation of the pounded ingredients and the black ink could easily be conceived as extremely laborious, time-consuming, and seeming unnecessary processes. It is however important to see beyond the physical drudgery to consider the rewarding outcomes, such as the individual skills of the maker (artist or cook), and the tacit knowledge

involved in the doing. The amount of attention placed on achieving optimum results recalls a character trait of *Peranakans* that was mentioned by Cedric Tan. He elaborated on the importance of achieving finesse in food preparation and not compromising the culinary quality of *Peranakan* food. In other words, the menial efforts of repetition and constant monitoring are necessary in ensuring the best results. In the grand scheme of things, the skilful and committed use of the mortar and pestle in her kitchen signifies Betty's sense of cultural identity, and likewise, my commitment to my ink preparation in my studio consolidates my artistic identity as a Chinese ink painter. The physical spaces of Betty's kitchen and my art studio became places where our cultural and artistic identities are activated and developed. The relationship between place and identity can be said to be mutual. While place gives purpose to identity, identity creates purpose for place.

Motion

Glutinous Rice Balls *[Kueh Ee]*

As mentioned, food has a special place in the cultural narrative of the *Peranakan*s, and one such example is the glutinous rice balls *[kueh ee(n)]*, which holds much significance in the *Peranakan* household. They are brightly coloured flour dough balls poached in a sweet ginger flavoured syrup [Figs 56 and 57 in Volume B]. The glutinous rice balls are prepared only for special occasions such as the winter solstice festival *[Tang Chek]*, weddings, and the household deities' annual ascension to heaven *[ari datok naik]*, the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth lunar month preceding the New Year *[Taon Baru]* celebrations. Traditionally, the glutinous rice balls were also presented at the *Peranakan* wedding, where the bride's father would receive the dish from the groom's family and return with sweet foods such as the cat's eye fruit *[mata kuching]* and rock sugar as a

gesture of acceptance (Cheo, 1983). In addition, the rice balls would usually be the first dish shared by the wedded couple. Served in sugared syrup, the sticky rice balls symbolise sweetness and togetherness as well as purity and unreserved joy (Cheo, 1983). There is also a tradition observed by the *Peranakan*s whereby the remaining rice balls will be kept under the bridal bed for 12 days that followed (Ng and Karim, 2016).

In a conversation with another participant, Kaleb, he lamented that many ritual practices and cultural habits are gradually fading, and so are the knowledge and purpose connected to them. He was however, intrigued by the many interpretations behind these practices, such as the sticking of the glutinous rice balls to the back of the main door of the *Peranakan* household, a practice known as '*pintu makan kueh ee(n)' [literal translation: the door eats the glutinous rice balls].* This practice was often considered as an offering to the ancestral spirits or to the door deities, in gratitude for their spiritual protection throughout the year (Chan, 2020). Some others had regarded the gesture as a way of warding off evil spirits. The rice balls would usually be stuck on the door frame with its non- sugared surface, as the sugared surface often would not hold the rice balls long enough before they slide downwards and leaving an unsightly trail of syrup. Two glutinous rice balls would normally be left unremoved from the door as a blessing to the family in the following year (Chan, 2020) [Figs 58 and 59 in Volume B]. Kaleb commented that this ancient practice was like a display, or a notice to neighbours that the household has survived another year, another winter, with no deaths in the family. He also mentioned that many *Peranakan*s today still worship the door deities in this manner. It is the day where an annual report detailing the good and bad deeds of the family would be submitted to the Heavenly King' *[Ting Kong] or the* Jade Emperor of Heaven by the kitchen god *[datok dapor]*. The Heavenly King, upon

receiving the report would then determine the occurrences of successes and failures in the family, and fundamentally, the health and life span of those he reviewed. This makes the kitchen god one of the most revered deities in the *Peranakan* homes, and the annual ascension of the deities to the heaven one of the most important events where the rice balls play a culturally significant role. According to Gwee (2013), the kitchen was regarded as one of the most important rooms in the *Peranakan* home where the womenfolk spent most of their time. It is therefore not surprising that the kitchen deity has such a powerful influence on the household for some *Peranakans* even today. In China, the kitchen god *[灶神, pronounced as 'zao shen']* is represented by a woodblock printed image on red or grey paper (Knapp, 2017). However, in the *Peranakan* home, his altar would be a red shelf affixed to the wall in the kitchen and a vertical board with his name written on it (Knapp, 2017) [Fig 60 in Volume B]. A common practice on the day the deities' ascend to heaven, is to offer sweet treats to the kitchen god to seal his lips and sweeten his words, figuratively, so that he would make only a favourable report to the Jade Emperor (Knapp, 2017). A pair of cooked red and white glutinous rice balls would also be stuck onto an auspicious red paper on the rice urn filled to the brim with raw rice grains to show fullness and abundance (Gwee, 2022).

Your glutinous rice ball is so different from great- grandma's
[Lu mia kueh ee(n) tak sama cho-cho mia kueh ee(n)]

I've never really understood the significance of the winter solstice festival. As somebody who was born and raised on an equatorial land in Singapore, the winter solstice meant nothing more

than spending a day with family and doing things families do. It was like any other day except that my parents would come home earlier than usual. However, on this day, we would spend many hours making glutinous rice balls together at the dining table. The rice balls will be made in two distinct colours of red and white, and of two sizes, the larger ones with diameter of about half an inch [Fig 61 in Volume B]. The process of making the rice balls was the highlight of the day for us children. We would wait for my mother to place the red and white doughs on separate bowls, and we were then told not to mix them together. After my mother had divided the large chunk of dough into smaller pieces, she would further reduce the sizes by halving each lump of the dough, which she would then roll each piece between her palms. We would often start with the white dough before rolling the red ones to avoid the red staining the purity of the white dough [Fig 62 in Volume B]. More white than red rice balls were made, and the white ones can be as big as three times the size of the red ones.

After that, they would then be placed on woven bamboo trays separated by a wet cloth to avoid them sticking onto the tray. In fact, my great grandmother was the one who led us through the process by giving us instructions on how to make them, and we would follow her instructions to the tee. My great-grandmother came from the paternal side; she was going blind and very old at that time, about eighty to ninety years of age, but fit as a fiddle. I was often told that

after coming from China in her twenties, she had led a hard life since, which toughened her a great deal. Despite her strict step-by-step instructions, my mother would sometimes make the rice balls differently, which confused me no end. It was interesting to watch how my mother had made her rice balls so tiny, and how my great-grandmother had made hers so big. I sometimes wonder if there is a corelation between my mother's increasing number of small rice balls and my great-grandmother's blindness as years progressed.

The golden rule of making the rice balls is to make them as round and smooth as we can. It was believed that round glutinous rice balls would bring about fullness or completeness in our lives. I assume that smooth texture of the rice balls may symbolise the absence of obstacles in our lives.

I enjoyed the rolling process very much and would sometimes challenge my brother to see who can roll them faster. Our giggles never failed to agitate my great-grandmother, who would discipline us verbally. No matter how mischievous we were, there was one thing we were told never to do, that is to drop the rice balls either onto the table or the floor. Regardless of whether it was an accident, the outcomes would be symbolically tragic. To avoid bad luck, my brother and I would effectively close the gap between ourselves and the table when we perform the sacred task.

Further exploring the notion of identity, I created 'The Case of An Unusual Presence', a series of works based on the dandelion plant. The plant was used as a metaphor to articulate the ideas of migration and movement that resonate with my cultural identity. Inspired by the seed dispersal mechanism of the dandelion plant, I drew connections to my multiple cultural lineages and my current experience of living in the UK, as I imagined myself as a pappus being carried by winds that blow in all directions and across vast seas and continents. As a *Peranakan*, in particular a *Peranakan* Chinese who picked up the art of Chinese painting out of the fascination of its exotic attributes rather than an innate connection to the arts from a familiar culture, the metaphor of dandelion represents an indeterminate identity, one that is always in flux. In some of my paintings, I depicted the dandelion plant in tightly cropped formats of single and double-framed panels [Figs 22 and 23 in Volume C]. In black and white, the dandelions look like shadows on white curtains, or a dandelion field seen through the window of a cottage house. Black ink contours delineate the floral forms from its environment, they also clash and blend to form new boundaries. Notably, apart from the assumingly uncomplicated black and white, ranging greys appear to bridge, shade, tint, blend, pull and push the distance between the two opposing shades. Puddles of ink accumulate on the surface of petals, like small pools formed by runoffs and floating streams [Fig 24 and 25 in Volume C]. The flowers appear light, ungrounded, and floating in the non-descript white space. A lot of details can be seen, from clear delineating linework to accidental, indexical marks. The open compositional format, however, does not show what lies beyond the window. Like a viewfinder, the windows capture the scene at a field filled with dandelions. No matter the composition, there is no indication of roots. Even when the flower stalks touch the very base of the frame, the window never seems to lower itself sufficiently to reveal the roots. This is not to say there is nothing beyond the windows;

they are just not emphasised. There is a tendency to disregard what lies outside the frame, to render the parts that are cropped out as non-existent. Can the dandelions survive without its roots? Can a dandelion grow out of a pappus that landed onto a surface that failed to take root? The answers are obvious. Parallel to the window over the field of dandelions where the roots are not shown, the window that frames the preparation of glutinous rice balls have selectively emphasised a segment that is deemed important and meaningful - the making of it.

Like the missing roots of the dandelion plant which are responsible for its survival, histories and stories that lie beyond the motions may be the missing roots that could nourish and preserve the practice. Uprootedness, the tenuous link with past knowledge and intentions may not survive scrutiny unless more work is done to connect the roots. The danger is that over time, all we could see is that window with a limited view of the glutinous rice balls, but with no one at the table. Interestingly, limits of the window prompted me to think about the limits of my 'Chinese-ness'. My Chinese-ness is framed within the calligraphic brushstrokes and within the black ink puddles that have effectively flooded the paper. My Chinese-ness was also framed within the traditional convention of the white space that was left untouched. Like the missing roots of the dandelion plant, the runoffs and floating streams of ink and water, my Chinese-ness was something elusive to me, its concept slippery and contrived.

Chinese But Not Chinese

[Orang Cheena Bukan Cheena]

Someone asked me recently why I use Chinese ink to paint. Simply put, Chinese ink painting has been a way for me to claim my Chinese identity, the only identity I knew I could claim for sure. Chinese ink painting has always been a crucial part of my studio ritual, and ironically something exotic and intriguing. Growing up, I often hear the phrase "Orang Cheena bukan Cheena" [Chinese, but not Chinese]. In fact, I have always felt "Bukan Cheena Bukan Peranakan" [Not Chinese, not Peranakan]. My fascination with Chinese painting began as a desire and a need to belong. There is a subconscious fear of losing this long-cultivated Chinese-ness.

To me, there is another identity I do not know enough to claim, my Peranakan identity, which further compounds the urgency to hold on to my Chinese roots.

With this, I started recording my daily painting routine with the intention of regarding it as a ritualistic practice [Fig 26 in Volume C]. The ritualistic aspect of it would be its regularity and the manner which I carry out my art practice, accompanied by a comprehensive set of art materials and a routine that I follow every day without fail. I treated the medium of recording like a mirror that not only reflects, but also articulates my desire to retain, collect and validate my Chinese heritage. In some ways, Chinese painting as a medium

of expression seems like a replacement for my *Peranakan* heritage. I recorded my videos daily at noon each day, setting up my workstation with essentials such as the Chinese ink, inkstick and inkstone, brushes, washing pails and colour pigments. Here, the videos are like my journals that document my painting routine and preparation habits that have become part of my daily ritual [Fig 27 in Volume C]. The repetitive ritualistic preparation and employment of ink, and the action of painting, all counts as daily reminders of something I do not wish fade away.

In a nutshell, the making of the glutinous rice balls, and preparatory processes involved in the grounding of the spice paste and the Chinese ink, all of which are ways of affirming my complex yet interconnected identities (*Peranakan*-Chinese, Chinese ink artist, artist of Chinese descent). In the same way, it can be said that through doing - the actions of making, handling and making changes through the materials I used, I have effectively performed my cultural identity through my physical engagement with objects.

Rent The Ghost A Room

The traditional wrapped skirt and blouse, brooch, mortar and pestle, and the glutinous rice ball; these objects signify the *Peranakan* identity. Apart from their visual appearance, they are testaments of multicultural influences, 'ghosts' that live between these cultures.

Identity has always been an abstract concept for me. The abstraction probably emerged from the failure to place myself culturally in the identification process. It is a case where the idea of being a *Peranakan* does not correspond with the concrete experience of

being one. Ironically, the *Peranakan's* legacy of hybrid identity has never quite allowed the identification process to be a straightforward one. That is a far more precarious situation to contend with, which I have no means nor the necessity to decipher. The crux of the issue here is incomplete identification, like how I see my *Peranakan*-ness as a gap. A gap typically means a fault, an incomplete journey, a place to fall into, a point of no return. This gap is a space that may not seem attractive, or even safe to be in, and the idea of walking through in may intimidate rather than encourage. The problem with identification was discussed by Bhabha (1994) as he commented that the representation of identity negates the original presence, and through displacement and differentiation, renders it a liminal reality. When considered in this way, the 'gap' between identity and identification, present and represented can be reconsidered. Bhabha (1994) posits that the 'Third Space of Enunciation' creates the condition for the emergence of cultural meaning, symbol, and identity that are non-fixed and fluid. The 'Third Space' where hybridity resides, is the "in-between" space where "meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew" (Bhabha, 1994: 55). This presents a different way of viewing the 'gap' which I have experienced thus far as a Peranakan, feeling like a pseudo-*Peranakan*. Through my practice, I became more aware of this complex culture that pre-existed me. I grappled with the ideas of how it has been / is represented and presented. It is like seeing the gap from a different angle and walking through it like how you would walk through a valley. You could walk into it, through it, maybe even out of it. This way of looking at the gap is probably just one of many interpretations, or it could well be a gap with many more interpretations. The voidness and incompleteness, presented or revealed by the objects I chose to study, had prompted me to consult the theoretical lens of Jacques Derrida's 'Spectre' (1993). Derrida's 'Specters of

Marx' (2006) luminates the possibility of extracting knowledge from the unlikely source, a spectre, referring to paying attention to voices of the past, their faint voices, and our relationship with them. This 'Spectral Turn' (Luckhurst, 2002) occurs when the ghost is no longer deemed as the remnant of a dead being but one with the potential to transform and redefine the nature of knowledge through non- traditional critical procedures. The spectre haunts, like a ghost that lurks at the back of our everyday existence, it is not visible but makes its occasional appearances through glimpses, sightings, poking through gaps and crevices in unsuspecting settings. I took on the task of looking for ghosts that demanded to be looked at, dwelled into, and examined through. I reflected and searched for past occurrences and engaged practices, closing in on the ghost's veil with the aim of removing it.

Through practice, I problematised the issues of absent inheritance, conditioned rootlessness, as well as identity displacement and affirmation. Having something that should have been there but is now absent, is like a gaping wound. It reveals a state of immateriality, which has replaced its material condition, like a hole left open to be inspected, contemplated, like the demand of the spectre that insists that "their singular tale be retold, and their wrongs be acknowledged" (Luckhirst, 2002: 542). '*Ghost Collar', 'Chukop?*' and '*Peranakan Whispers'* raised questions of how one's perception of the object(s) can affect the way one perceives cultural identity. The works closed in on the interwoven relationship between authenticity and inheritance. They revealed the irreconcilable distance between 'those whose skins are part of their culture' (who had inherited intangible aspects of the culture such as taste, habits, knowledge, and practices), and 'those whose skin never seems to touch their culture' (people like me, lacking the

tangible aspects of the culture). One way to shine a brighter light onto this seemingly unbridgeable distance / gap, is to examine the notion of 'inheritance'. Inheritance is associated with something derivable from the past, something that comes into our possession from someone else. It is an object that was already there before us.

An object refers to an already formed entity with given attributes, rather than what it is yet-to-be and can be (Ingold, 2013). Objects hold indexical imprints of its formation; the formed object is thus a retrospective documentation (Ingold, 2013). In this scenario, the formed object effectively limits its generative and interpretative potentialities. Similarly, if we were to equate cultural identity solely to material possession and inheritance, we are effectively bounded by the values prescribed by those who made and used the materials in the past. This scenario would probably alienate those who do not fit the criteria. An alternative would be to reconsider our relationship with these materials in a generative sense, that would enable us to engage with the object from within, as suggested by Ingold (2013), through 'making'. With that being said, I suggest that the meaning of 'making' to be expanded. To make something need not necessarily mean to create something from scratch, as literal as to sew a traditional wrap skirt, to make a brooch out of gold, or to fashion the mortar and pestle out of granite. 'Making' can refer to 'making a story', 'making a conversation', 'making change'. Apart from the meanings 'to construct', 'to put together', 'to produce', to make something can mean 'to perform', 'to alter', 'to work out'. The idea here is building on the formed object and allowing our interventions to grow from there. This would mean performing on, pondering on, and making alterations on the existing objects and stories.

This notion of 'making' recalls the first lesson my mother had given me on using the mortar and pestle. Through the experience, she created a 'ghost' that haunted me for years. The 'ghost' was also on that flower embroidery my grandmother made, on my modern wrap skirt with a zip, on my brooch-less traditional blouse, and in those carefully rolled glutinous rice balls. I have been living with ghosts all my life. As the ghost loses itself in the entangling yarns of the ghost collar, in the ritualistic motion of Chinese painting, in the mesmerising sound of grinding ink, its senses are heightened, and it speaks. The 'ghost' asked if the dandelions outside the window have roots, and where their pappi are flying to. It questioned if grinding ink in the studio has got anything to do with grinding the spice paste in the kitchen and wondered if the wrap skirt with a zip and the traditional brooch-less blouse can ever be acceptable. It is evident that the ghosts forced me to confront and deal with the past and with the unacknowledged spectres (Lorek-Jezinska and Wieckiwske, 2017). Derrida (1994) proposes to learn how to talk to the ever-present ghost, to listen and let it speak back to us. These hauntings are moments where I "bump into rememo[ries]" that are not solely my own (Gordon, 2005: 165). They were memories that are "out there, in the world, right in the place where [they] happened" (Gordon, 2005: 166). They are social memories, or "social relations" that linger beyond our time (Gordon, 2005: 166). I have crossed paths with these ghosts whose time does not sync with my chronological time. They seem to be able to weave through time in a non-linear manner. They brought me back into the past and brought back emotions that I forgot I once felt, some pleasant, some shocking, with a fair share of tears and anxieties. They also made known to me their lingering presence in the now and their impending presence in the future. These ghosts may not all be traces of my memories. In fact, sometimes they seem too new to be considered memories. They may be formless, shapeless, or vague, and they may be quiet, soft, or loud.

They can be anything, and they can be anywhere, for they have been there before me, and probably will still there after me. Instead of lamenting about lost objects, lost practices, and lost instructions of how to use them, it is perhaps more constructive for us to give the ghost a space to live in and encourage new ways for it to tell its stories. This means accepting the ghost and allowing it to live with us and absorbing them into our modern lives. In other words, if you rent the ghost a room, you may find things you never would have imagined.

Our identity may be partially biological, but there is obviously more to the story. Our life experiences shaped us into who we are. Sometimes these experiences may be instant, and others may take years to affect us. These 'ghosts' are part of our identity. They 'live' through the lives of the objects and through the stories of those who used or owned them. In this instance, our cultural experiences have been formed by the experiences of others, and our cultural identity intertwine with other cultural bodies. These 'ghosts' do not just disappear even if we are not aware of them, even if we do not need them anymore. This haunting by the 'ghosts' of the past may sound intrusive, maybe even invasive, but their presence may also be comforting to those who need them around, or to those who realise that the 'ghosts' affirm who they are, their identity, and their place in the cultural world.

Chapter 2 Protection

In this chapter, I will discuss the three sections 'Body', 'Space' and 'Motions', with reference to three significant groups of objects used by the *Peranakan* community for protection. They are namely, the talisman, the eight-trigram fixture, and the small ceremonial mirror. These objects are selected based on my personal experience with the *Peranakan* side of my family. Talismans were often mentioned in conversations among my older relatives who would go to the temple to acquire them for the safety and well-being of the young ones in the family, like me. The small ceremonial mirror was also a common conversational topic, which had something to do with tradition and superstition, especially those related to the *Peranakan* weddings. Despite these mentions, these small mirrors are not readily visible. 'Body' discusses talismans that *Peranakan*s wear or carry on them which they believed would keep them safe from harm, or simply for general blessings. 'Space' looks at the eight-trigram fixtures that are used for similar purposes, except that they are installed in the living spaces of the *Peranakan*s. 'Motion' discusses the small ceremonial mirrors that are used in rituals and ceremonies during important events in the *Peranakan* household. Many perspectives have been contributed by *Peranakan*s such as Betty, Cara, Cedric Tan, Mr. Goh, and Uncle Baba on the many aspects of the objects discussed, particularly, their lived experience with these objects.

The pursuit for protection has long been an ongoing and essential affair among the *Peranakan*s. For a culture that has been facing the difficulties of keeping its significance and relevance, the idea of protection could not have been a more appropriate theme to consider. Through generations, the *Peranakan*s have been known to be believers of superstitions and folk beliefs (Cheo and Speeden, 1988). Rituals, in particular, religious rituals, play an important part in the daily life of the traditional Peranakan family. The

Peranakan Chinese family have known to follow the principles of balance and harmony in their behaviour and expression (Cheo and Speeden, 1988). Traces of these rituals can still be seen today in more simplified versions, such as in modern hair-combing ceremonies and wedding-related activities, and in celebrations like the winter solstice festival where the glutinous rice balls are prepared as offerings for deities. Today, remnants of such spiritual devotion are still evident on *Peranakan* houses and objects and typically in the form of symbolic protective features designed to ward off evil spirits and bestow good fortune. The presence of these practices today may have to do with how they were gradually developed and concretised over the years. Cheo and Speeden (1988: 7) highlighted in their book '*Baba* folk belief and superstitions' that "the religious rituals have, through generations of use, acquired a patina of unself-conscious dignity".

The task to conserve and protect old traditions and practices has been a constant struggle. Over the years, there have been many initiatives designed to educate the public about these traditions and cultural materials. Some examples are heritage projects, recontextualised artefacts in museum settings, and related public events that sought to reinvigorate the *Peranakan* culture. Despite the extensive resources and considerations, they fall short in some ways. An area of concern, as highlighted by some experts, is the misrepresentation of these cultural artefacts. It is not surprising that one of the reasons for this situation, is the fact that these objects were taken out of their original contexts to be re-presented in a different setting. According to Teoh (2016), the static presentation of these objects in the *Peranakan* Museum places more emphasis on an already- fixed ethnocultural identity, and that it was presented as a thing of the past rather than a process that is still evolving. She also stated that "disproportion representation" in museums and historic homes often focuses on wealth and privilege which effectively downplays the less well-to-

do sector of the society (p.78). In some cases, artefacts could also be misrepresented by an institution. During one of my discussions with Cedric Tan, he commented that the misrepresentation of cultural materials in the museum setting can occur when information is taken at face value. His comment suggests that cultural museums can sometimes compromise the actual meanings behind the artefacts by over emphasising the visual displays. He recounted two separate incidences. He was once invited to give a talk on Peranakan ancestral worship in a cultural institution, where he tried to set up a table of paraphernalia to illustrate the event. He was, however, not allowed to use the existing artifacts on the premise and had to borrow an array of tableware to make up the collection. To him, the contrived mixture of styles shows an incomplete representation of the setup. Tan described such an approach as "a nail in the coffin" to the already waning understanding of these cultural objects. He also recounted another incident where a Peranakan wedding bed was incompletely assembled as a conservation effort in a cultural institution. As the bed was assembled, based on images of the fully dressed bed, the back part of the double-sided embroidery hanging was missing from the actual display. He lamented on the common lack of consideration for the cultural materials of the Peranakans, in terms of how they were meant to be used, made, and displayed. In one particular incident, he talked about the commercialisation of cultural products, such as the traditional surname lantern. He commented that some tradesmen would disregard the natural browning process of the lantern cover that are usually caused by prolonged usage, and instead, they would choose to pre-stain the cover artificially to give an impression of an aged lantern, to increase their commercial value.

What cannot be understated in these instances, is the lived experience of using these objects, stories that are worthy of protection, before they are lost forever.

Body

Talisman *[Tangkal]*

The wearing of the talisman for protection may not be a universal concept, but it is something that can be found in many cultures around the world, manifesting in different forms. Sometimes, they are visible, worn as pendants on necklaces, as bracelets, or simply fastened onto shirts and jackets using pins. Other times, they are not visible, kept under layers of clothing, in small pouches, or in bags or pockets. One of my earliest recollections of a talisman, was the talismanic wordings on the yoke of my primary school shirts. My mother had brought them to the temple to have them stamped with red enigmatic words.

Talismans were designed to make daily life easier with invisible forces for benefit (Legeza, 1975). This would generally be done through the employment of an object believed to empower the user, with enhanced energies and influences. According to Gaster (1987), the use of talismans (and amulets) is determined by different criteria and are categorised as rare objects with unusual forms, medicinal herbs or flowers, animal parts that exemplify certain desired qualities, holy relics, figurines of gods and goddesses, models of common objects with symbolic significance, and exotic objects of foreign provenance.

In the past, the talismans were also worn by *Peranakan* babies and toddlers to ward off ill fortune, within which small and sacred talismans would be kept (Wee, 2009). Although the two terms ‘talisman’ and ‘amulet’ are often interchangeably used (Jonathan, 1995), and often thought to be the same thing, they are radically different, depending on their different intentions and energetic purposes. While amulets are designed to repel what is baneful, the talismans are used to impel and enhance beneficial energies and influences (Gaster, 2005). I will use the term ‘talisman’ when referring all the above-mentioned properties. In this chapter, the term ‘talisman’ would carry the meaning of ‘an enhancer of

desired energies' and 'a repellent of undesirable elements.' This is to ensure clarity in my discussion, and on the consideration that both terms do not appear to carry characteristically distinctive meanings in the *Peranakan* cultural context.

Magic from a dead tiger
[Mati yang Arimo]

I had a love-hate relationship with the talismans I used to own. I remember having two of them, I must be about six to ten years old. One of my talismans was a tiger's tooth which I did not care much about, except when it often made a slight impression on my chest in the morning. At times, this accidental mark lingered for a while, not exactly painless, and rather unsightly. It took me some time to realise that what I was wearing daily as a pendant around my neck, came from a ferocious animal. Before that, I remembered sometimes holding it between my lips as it was something cool to the touch. I stopped doing that after knowing what it was. I often wondered about its use and purpose. It was to me a disembodied item, a part of an animal carcass, and its extraction from the animal did not convince me much of its prowess. It was strange to think that the remnant of a fallen tiger would do any good to bestow protection upon its wearer. The talisman was primarily cream colour with some beige stains near its tapered, pointy end, assumingly a mark formed over time due to its reaction to food and saliva. It was about three or

four centimetres in length, with a width of less than a centimetre, and with a surprisingly silky appearance. Its top was covered with a gold cap where a small ring hoop was made available for a necklace or string to go through. As I recalled this strange experience of having to carry a tiger's tooth around, I also found out through talking to people that some Peranakans today still believe in the use of the Tiger's Claw talisman [Figs 63 and 64 in Volume B].

The tiger's claw talisman *[kuku arimo tangkal]* is a natural talisman sourced from tigers. Often, they are made into pendants to protect the wearer from harm, especially against malevolent spirits, and to instil courage in the wearer. It was common belief that once leaving the house, one would no longer be protected by the house guardians or the deities (Ee, Henkel, Joseph, Lee, Tan, and Yoong, 2013). Portable talismans such as tiger's claw talisman would then serve as an extended protection of one's well-being beyond the household. Imbued with the predatory qualities of the animal whose part was taken from, the tiger claw was known to ward off black magic and unclean spirits *[barang kotor]* associated with disease (Roots, 2022). One of the participants, a Malaysian Medium Uncle Baba, however, expressed his concerns over the use of the tiger's claw as a protective ornament, stating that if not cautiously used, the talisman can do more harm than good. He was reluctant to elaborate any further. Ornately decorated and partially encased in gold, especially at the curved sharp ends of the claws, which forms a protective feature that minimises accidental piercing into the wearer's body, the close contact between the object and the wearer appears at once reasonable and ironic. It seems counterproductive that an object meant for protection can at the same time cause physical damage. It seems that the

desire to repel what we cannot see with the naked eye, has overshadowed the ominous structure of the object. Other talismanic pendants used by the *Peranakan*s comes with religious symbols of the Goddess of Mercy or the Buddhas [Fig 65 in Volume B], or sometimes in cylindrical locket form [Figs 66 to 68 in Volume B]. They are usually mounted in gold, and functions secondarily as a pendant, although Cedric Tan commented that the practice is less popular today.

The misplaced talisman
[Terletak salah tempat mia hu]

My other talisman, a Chinese talisman [Hu] was something that resembled a small thick pillow [Figs 69 and 70 in Volume B]. It was slightly bulky and looked as though it was about to burst at the seams. It was deep yellow in colour, rectangular in shape, a rather uninteresting looking object. I remember the slightly uncomfortable sensation of having the object hung around my neck. It was not heavy nor was it huge, but I recall it being damp and resting on my wet chest after my bath. I would often hang it on a wall hook of some sort in the bathroom. It was not an ideal place to hang it even for a brief duration, as its base was just next to the dripping tap. It certainly did not smell too appealing. It smelt like wet socks left in the wash for too long, those that we often miss until it is too late. Soon, smudging coloured marks started to show on the wrapping, forming small patches that made it look dirty. The edges, especially the four corners

of the talisman soon became darker and sheened. These experiences were not exactly joyful, mostly caused by the naivety of not knowing how to handle or live with an external item that was constantly stuck on me. In fact, the only time I've ever looked at it, would be the time I was taking a shower. The saving grace was, however, the fact that I felt important to the people who had given it to me. I felt that I deserved to be protected from harm. So, despite the discomfort, I learned to live with it. Strangely, I did not remember the last time I wore it or took it off without putting them back again. What I could remember, was that I was no longer wearing it when I was in my teens. In hindsight, I didn't think it would go well with my clothes then. I may have taken it off for that reason, as the string necklace was made of multi-coloured threads woven together, which would certainly jar with my teenage fashion sense then. But, then again, it really wasn't so bad compared to the times I had to consume what I would call, the 'talismanic drink', a mixture made with burned talismans half submerged in water. The only explanation I was given by adults at that time, was that it would allow the body to extract the power or magic more efficiently from within. I am glad that this practice eased off as I grew older.

Wrapped within the slightly bulky talismans, are small yellow cloths or paper with sacred talismanic symbols or written scripts. Traditionally, talismans were used as a direct communication tool between the human and spirit world, as spirits were believed to play a

commanding role throughout the whole universe (Legeza, 1975). Sometimes, inscriptions were written using the blood extracted from a small cut made on the tongue of the priest who performed the ritual. Uncle Baba also shared that the talisman would first be prepared by the priest or medium drawing or writing on the talismans while incantating healing words, after which it would be burned and mixed with water before offering to the affected person needing healing. More commonly, talismans of this kind would be made into a pendant for the wearer. One of the participants Mr. Goh shared that the talisman would sometimes be kept in a silver container for long lasting protection. Tan commented that although some people still carry these talismans around, talismanic pendants have lost their appeal and are no longer considered fashionable to wear the talisman around one's neck. Instead, according to Tan, the direct attachment of the talisman to the body has given way to a more common practice, of placing them in a red packet, that goes into the wallet or handbag. He commented that it is "more personal" for these objects to be carried around in these ways. He also mentioned that more so in the past than now, the *talisman* can be found pasted on the entrance of the house, at the top end of the bridal bed, or at the entrance of the bridal chamber.

Used by the *Peranakan* Chinese in the past, the talisman may be considered less popular now. They may have lost their appeal among the younger generation of *Peranakan,* but their purpose and function to protect are not entirely lost. The idea of owning and using a talisman may still hold its appeal among some *Peranakans* today, providing that it does not interfere with their personal image and lifestyle. The tensions between hiding and exposing, visible and invisible, not only reveal the uneasy relationship one may have with these talismans, but also the implications that the talisman may not really be considered a

lost object after all. It may be more apt to consider it a hidden object, perhaps one that is uncomfortably hidden.

Space

Eight trigrams fixture *[Pak Kua]*

The Chinese geomancy or '*feng shui*' [Chinese Geomancy, literal translation: wind and water] plays a huge part in the lives of early *Peranakans*. *Baba* businessmen were known to pay attention to the rules of *fengshui* when looking for a house (Cheo and Speeden (1988), or when arranging furniture at home (Khoo, 1996). '*Feng Shui*' is the art of divining an auspicious and suitable site for a building, including its interior (Khoo, 1996). It is an ancient Chinese wisdom that focuses on the connection between architecture and the built environment (Mak and Ng, 2005). More specifically, it is a Chinese philosophical system of interpreting space and developing equilibrium amongst nature, building and people (Mak, and Ng, 2005). *Peranakan's* inclination towards '*feng shui*' may have been a desire to ensure optimum protection. *The Peranakan*s believe that ignoring critical *'feng shui'* prescriptions would have negative outcomes, considering that these preventive measures are necessary to avoid misfortunes, and consequently to ensure their happiness and well-being (Knapp, 2017).

The almost forgotten eight-trigram fixture outside the window
[Gua sikit lagi lupa pak kua di lua jenela]

My family only ever owned one eight-trigrams fixture [pak kua]. It was octagonal, with a concave, round mirror at the centre. I still have

the fixture with me, but it now looks old and battered. Even the reflective surface of the mirror is gone [Fig 71a -c in Volume B]. However, I have seen many eight-trigram mirrors in Chinese vampire movies and dramas, those with really powerful beams shooting out of them that never fail to destroy vampires and ghosts that happened to be their targets. In these movies and dramas, the fixture appears to be an indispensable item that the Taoist priest would carry on them to repel vampires or evil spirits. The visual impacts created in these collisions are always dramatic and violent, sometimes even comical due to the over dramatisation. In real life, our eight trigrams fixture sits quietly outside the window, facing the vast space in front of my parents' flat. It was far less exciting than what we used to watch on television and in cinemas. It was my father's idea not to put the fixture at the main door; he explained that it would be unkind to others to do so, as it would mean that the bad energies coming into contact with the mirror on the eight trigrams will be deflected onto people around it. It was a sacred item that only adults could handle, for example, my brother and I were never allowed to clean its mirror, and we never did. It stayed outside the window for more than thirty years and was only taken down after my father passed away a few years back. When I finally discovered it, it was wrapped in a folded red bunting cloth, placed under a pile of my father's old hobby collection of gemstone rings, trinkets, and old maps.

In the world of talismanic devices, the eight trigrams motif is regarded as one of the more commonly known talismanic feature of '*feng shui*'. In Southeast Asia, the eight-trigram symbol can be found at the base of the heavenly lantern *[thian teng]* that hangs above door plaques at the main entrance of a *Peranakan* Chinese house (Roots, 2021) [Figs 72 and 73 in Volume B]. The eight-trigram fixture is considered one of the most potent deflectors of malevolent forces (Knapp, 2017), which would be placed in areas where its influence is desired (Jonathan, 1995) [Figs 74 and 75 in Volume B]. It is believed that the device has the ability to draw evil spirits to their own reflections and repel them as they encounter their own image (Stellhorn, 2012). It is divided by a spiral line in the centre forming two equal sections, which represents the creative principle of the masculine and feminine manifestations, and everything that is in contrast such as heaven and earth, sun and moon, light and darkness (Thomas and Pavitt, 1922). Surrounding the opposing-complementary sections of the eight trigrams, are symbolic lines of different configurations.

The eight-trigrams can sometimes be seen embedded into the windows of the *Peranakan* house [Figs 76 and 77 in Volume B]. These glass windows have panels that are shaped in the likeness of the eight trigrams motif. They have wooden lattice on the side that is facing outwards and a separate pair of screen shutters in front of it. When closed, the lattice would reveal the design of the eight trigrams motif. In other words, the motif can only be formed when the window is shut, for either side hold only one part of the entire design. In the interior of the house, the design would only be visible with backlight, or rather, light coming through from the outside. Commenting on these windows, Tan said that although many houses in Singapore and Malaysia still have windows with inbuilt design of the eight trigrams, they may be gradually losing their appeal due to increasing modern housing designs. Windows are vulnerable openings, holes in the wall fitted with panes of

glass, and usually set in a wooden or metal frame. The windows allow light and air to be admitted into the interior space and people to see out. An apt description 'window to the world' suggests a broader perspective beyond one's immediate surrounding or situation. The ability to expand one's horizon also works in reverse. The penetrable gaze and elements could potentially enter through the opening from the outside. Like the wall, windows demarcate a separation of the 'inside' (personal, intimate, protected), and 'outside' (shared, public, open, or exposed). The use of the eight trigrams as a repellent of unseen elements, seems to suggest the notion of an ever-present danger. One could assume the eight trigrams window asserts some psychological effects, for it allows a heightened sense of control beyond what normal windows could offer.

In no small ways, the eight trigrams fixture has been used for safety and self-preservation, essentially to protect one from invisible dangers. Like the talisman, they are still around, still being used, and not entirely lost. Found on doors, windows, lanterns, sometimes in old drawers, the eight trigrams fixture is not always visibly displayed. This begs the question, has the eight trigrams fixture now acquired a different purpose other than providing protection?

Motion

Small Mirror *[Chermin kechik]*

Like the previous objects mentioned in this chapter, one of the things that also play a significant role in the *Peranakan* household, is the small mirror. Unlike big mirrors that are usually hung on the walls of the main hall or embedded into furniture to enhance the interior, small mirrors used by the *Peranakan*s serve different purposes. One such mirror can be found above the main entrance of the *Peranakan* homes. They measure about four

to five inches in diameter, and usually set within a metal frame and attached to a foldable metal stand. On a common day-to-day basis, such mirrors can be seen folded and placed on tables or countertops and used as a stand-alone vanity mirror or shaving mirror. But in a *Peranakan* household, they may have meant something more. In an interesting conversation with Tan, he recalled that such mirrors would usually be placed at main entrances of the *Peranakan* home, next to an eight trigrams fixture, with a ruler, a pair of scissors and a pomegranate, that formed an assemblage of vaguely associated objects. It used to be a common feature in the *Peranakan* homes of the past.

Like the eight trigrams fixture, the small mirror also possesses the ability to repel negative energies. The power of mirrors can be seen from accounts of early civilisations, such as in ancient China, the brass mirrors possessed the power to reveal hidden spirits (Stellhorn, 2012), and in India, water was used as a 'mirror' to capture the healing energy of the moon to be offered as remedy for sickness (Stellhorn, 2012).

A Troubling Reflection
[Bayang tak betol]

Sometimes when I see Peranakan objects, I feel as though I am looking at reflections of the objects rather than the real thing. Like reflections, these objects do not appear real to me even though a reflection is only possible when the object is present. The object would be on the same side as me, as I look into the mirror to see our reflections. Despite sharing the same physical space, I never knew what to do with the reflected image of this object. Perhaps I should

let the reflection be just an image on its own, so that I can continue to be a passive viewer, observing from afar without the stress of ever having to touch or handle it.

In the context of the *Peranakan* household, small mirrors can be seen regularly in ritualistic events, one of which is the hair-combing *[cheo(n) thau]* ceremony [Fig 78 in Volume B], an occasion that symbolises the transition of wedding couples from childhood into adulthood, also known as the Purification Rite and Initiation into Adulthood (Cheo, 1983). In this ceremony, the mirror is placed together with a basin of water with sprigs of Ixora tied to long spring onions, while other accompanying items such as scissors, comb, ruler, razor, scale and red thread will be placed between a Chinese Almanac (Cheo, 1983). The spring onion, complete with roots, represents long life and industriousness and the Ixora represents good luck. The Ixora, *when used together with the* long spring onions in the hair-combing ceremony, symbolises cleansing (Tan, 2007, cited in Chee, 2007). Interestingly, the red thread was a relic of the past when mothers would braid the thread into their son's queue (hair) during the hair-combing ceremony as a way of symbolising her last time doing so before passing on the duty to his wife (Cheo, 1983). Together, the objects symbolise the management of an ideal marriage life. The comb and a red silk thread represent longevity, a small pair of scales symbolises the careful weighing of all matters in the marriage, a Chinese ruler to represent judgement and sincerity, a pair of scissors to make all things equal, and an old-fashioned razor to remind one to be cautious in actions. The mirror used in this context symbolises the importance of telling good deeds from bad. The mirror validates one's physical existence and consequently, one's actions. Such validation of self recalls Jacques Lacan's 'Mirror Stage' theory. Lacan (2005) posits that through the Mirror Stage, the human

being learns to see himself /herself as an entity, separated from the image in the mirror. This identification of the 'self', is however, not straightforward, as it takes place between the formative ages of 6 to 18 months (Lacan, 2005). This transformation, as suggested by Lacan, occurs through the child's encounter with the image in the mirror, which he/she first assumes to be another human being. This is subsequently followed by later development when the child recognises himself/herself to be separated from the image and knowing that the image is not his/her actual body, but a projection of his/her body. In essence, this continual imaging validates the continuing presence of himself/herself. Through this self-recognition, he/she is able to reassemble the previously fragmented body into a unified identity (Dor, 1997: 96). Extrapolating this notion of the established 'self', the small mirror that was used in the hair-combing ceremony can be regarded in the same way. As the small mirror symbolises the discernment of good and bad deeds, it centralises the user as the one who is responsible for it. In the context of the traditional hair-combing ritual, the symbolic weight of responsibility falls on the shoulder of the newly wedded couple, whose transformation to adulthood comes with the expectation of caring for their new family.

Another kind of small mirror can also be found on the traditional wedding regalia worn by the *Peranakan* brides. Unless one pays special attention, this small mirror could easily be missed. This mirror ornament can be seen hanging on the back of the *Peranakan* bride to ward off approaching evil spirits (Chin, 1991). In a recent conversation with one of the participants, Cara shared with me her recent experience of seeing this mirror ornament. She described that the ornament was hung on the back of her cousin's traditional wedding dress and explained that the object symbolises the parents' love, care, and concern for the bride. The purpose of the ornament was to protect the bride from the unknowns and ill

intentions directed to her on her wedding day. One interesting feature of this ornament, is the way it is worn, positioned, and carried by the bride as she went through the wedding ceremony. The ornament is attached to a long braid with an embroidered tasselled emblem and hung between two embroidered strips that are pinned to the bride's multiple-flapped collar (Cheo, 2009) [Figs 79 to 81 in Volume B]. The strips would be attached to the flaps, equidistant from the mirror ornament. The multiple-flapped collar, also known as the 'Phoenix Cape', or the 'Phoenix's feathers' is then fastened on the front, where the bride's jewellery would be worn over, covering the resultant gap [Figs 82 and 83 in Volume B]. Tan referred it to a cape as the opening of the collar is on the front. Two more embroidery strips would also be used for the front, flanking both sides of the jewellery. When attired in full regalia, the bride is required to walk with a special gait, called 'the willow swaying in the wind' *[lengang lengok]*, where her arms and body would sway as she walks slowly. Her body would turn to her sides and back to the centre with every step she takes. When doing so, the tassels which the ornament was attached to, would sway along, which symbolises the sweeping away of bad energies from the bride. As Cara discussed the way the bride must have struggled to walk, we could only imagine the immense weight on her as she moved. The bride would have to carry with her the intricately embroidered wedding garment made of gold and silver threads, her family jewelleries on her chest, her headgear constructed of one hundred diamond embellished gold and silver pins supported by a gold circlet, and an ornate headband bearing motifs of the eight immortals, a motif that symbolises virginity (Cheo, 1983) [Fig 83 in Volume B]. With all these auspicious ornaments, she moved with carefully orchestrated steps, her folded arms hidden underneath her long broad sleeves, one over the another such that the coloured bands at the end of both sleeves are brought together, forming an image of propitiousness [Fig 84 in Volume B]. The mystical powers of

the evil-repellent mirror ornament may have been released because of the solemnity and momentum imbued in her walk.

Reflecting on the small mirror, I realised a compelling sense of weightiness in the contexts where they were used - the uncomfortable physical weight of my talismans on my neck, the responsibility of taking care of them, similarly, the weight that hangs over the *Peranakan* bride in the form of overtly encrusted jewelleries, her carefully orchestrated walk, the new responsibilities that newly wedded couples must bear as they go through the hair-combing ceremony. With these thoughts, I went on to develop '*Weight of a Moving Thread*', a three-part video designed to be played concurrently and side by side in three separate panels [Fig 28 in Volume C]. The first panel on the left, shows footage of an embroidery project where I embroidered a series of eight blessing motifs using white thread on red fabric. The middle panel shows footage of a burial ritual where I buried the embroidered motifs in the back garden of a house in Worcestershire England where I currently reside. The right panel shows a ritualistic ceremony of packing and sealing of the eight motifs in two pouches, one within another. The embroidery project was made in eight separate parts, representing qualities desired by the Chinese. I have chosen these eight motifs due to their common presence on the objects of the *Peranakan* Chinese, such as wedding paraphernalia, *Peranakan* ceramics and decorative features in the *Peranakan* homes. The motifs were sewn on a thick red cloth using a white embroidery thread.
The motif of the carp battling river currents to swim upstream to jump over the dragon gate 龙门 *[pronounced as 'long men']* [Fig 29 in Volume C] symbolises scholarly achievement (Welch, 2008). The bat suggests happiness and good fortune [Fig 30 in Volume C], the peony represents royalty, rank, wealth, and honour [Fig 31 in Volume C], a pair of mandarin ducks

signifies marital constancy and fidelity [Fig 32 in Volume C], and the pomegranate with many seeds symbolises fertility [Fig 33 in Volume C] (Welch, 2008). According to Welch (2008), the pomegranate motif can often be found on embroidered pillowcases for the newly wedded, and the eight trigrams [Fig 34 in Volume C] are still used in the modern day to ward off evil. The endless knot symbolises the cyclical nature of all existence, and the futility of endless life (Welch, 2008). Likewise, the cicada has long been associated with the cycle of life and death. Both the endless knot and cicada symbolise continuity, immortality, and regeneration [Figs 35 and 36 in Volume C]. Welch (2008) mentioned an ancient Chinese practice of placing jade carvings of cicadas in the mouth of the dead before the burial. The purpose of doing that was speculated by scholars as either a preventive measure against the degeneration of the body or to speed up its rebirth in the afterlife (Welch,2008).

Each motif was carefully and purposefully planned onto the fabric using pencil lines, which I then sewed onto. The act of sewing involves making marks on the surface of a material. By getting another material (thread) into and through it, this process often leaves permanent marks on the surface. The marks left woven into the material becomes indexical imprints of decisions, decisions such as where to mark, when to mark, how to mark, and to mark with what? The marks become registers of specific questions asked by the one who sews; “Where should I start? Where shall my needle emerge from the surface next, and where would the next jab be? How close should the stitches be? Is it necessary to overlap them to create a more solid line? Should I leave gaps between them to allow space for further improvisations?” Stitching is an affective expression and communication of reparation, aggression, and destruction (Betterton, 2009; Parker, 2012). Stitching can be said to be an embodied act of working through thoughts and emotions, and in my motif embroidery project, stitching becomes the registration of desires and hopes. The late

French-American artist, Louise Bourgeois's textile works are good examples of expressions that convey the personal realm of the embroiderer. In 2002, Bourgeois created a cloth book, *'Ode à l'oubli' [Ode to Forgetting]* [Figs 85 and 86 in Volume B], where she used 'found' fabrics with personal associations, for instance napkins embroidered with her initials from her wedding trousseau, her nightgowns and scarves (Sotheby's,2022). According to Harper (2007), Bourgeois was enacting erasure and reconfiguration to reduce the pain of childhood trauma and self-scrutiny. Further than this, I would argue that the act of embroidering is an act of penetration, in this case, penetration into memories. Interestingly, on one of the pages, her texts read "I had a flashback of something that never existed" (Sotheby's, 2022). From this, it is as though the work has given Bourgeois access into a different reality apart from her real-life experience. Going back to my embroidery project, the stitching of the eight blessing motifs can be considered a deliberate access into an alternate reality in a very specific way, by literally penetrating the fabric, and leaving behind carefully marked out traces of 'future blessing' that are interwoven into the very fibres of the material. Moving from one stitch to another with a thread is like creating sentences out of words, and the repetition is nothing short of a chant, words spoken repeatedly, like a silent mantra. Upon reflection, I realised that each stitch is like the carefully deliberated walk of the *Peranakan* bride, her strong resolute may well had activated the mystical powers of the talismans hung on her back. Likewise, each stitch I have used on the motif was motivated by the intent of imbuing it with heartfelt blessings, and the weaving of goodness into the lives of those blessed enough to receive it. Sometimes, this process may lack constancy, especially when threads are caught in chaotic entanglement, or in a dead end, or when the needle gets into places it did not intend to go [Figs 37 and 38 in Volume C]. The amount of force, the length of thread, the kind of needle used, even how

the fabric is held, how the hands are positioned in relation to the affected surface, all of which can be reasons why this silent chant is often interrupted. Yet, these disruptions heighten the awareness of the physical needle in hand, the fraying thread that did not make it to the end, the broken surface that could have been prevented. It is the materiality of the fabric, the needle and thread that make us aware of our physical involvement with the materials.

As the sewing stops, the motif becomes a separate entity from the process; it becomes visible to the world. This was followed by the ceremonial packing and concealing of the motifs [Figs 39 and 40 in Volume C]. The completed motifs were first placed in two separate pouches, one within another. The outer pouch is predominantly light mustard yellow in colour with a floral decorative band in rusty red. The inner pouch is smaller in size, evidently shorter, and made of the same floral material as the bigger pouch. Both pouches are opaque and laced with inner linings, which added volume to their otherwise flimsiness. Each has a drawstring that enables the opening and closing of the bag, which determines whether something is private (concealed, sacred), or public (shared, exposed). The main principal here is to keep the contents out of casual sight. Next, I dug a hole, about 3 foot deep into the ground, and buried the pouch [Fig 41 in Volume C]. While doing this, I recalled a well-known story of Nyonya Mabel Tan (Lim, 2003), an old *Peranakan* lady who sewed a cloth belt with pouches to hide her jewelleries during the Japanese Occupation in Singapore (1942 to 1945). She had secured them safely around her waist, where it remained undetected throughout her ordeal. This must be a terrifying experience for her, considering that extreme social control measures were implemented by the Japanese to force civilians into submissions (Huff and Huff, 2020). Terror tactics such as tortures, rapes and killings were the standard practices of the Japanese military army (Huff and Huff, 2020). Continuing

Mabel's story, she survived, and the jewelleries were eventually used to purchase a home for herself and her family after the war (Lim, 2003). Interestingly, Mr. Goh also shared with me that the Gunong Sayang Association, a *Peranakan* cultural organisation in Singapore, had once staged a play called *Manis-Manis Pait* (Sweet Sweet Bitter) to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of the Japanese Occupation, where they featured stories based on accounts of women who hid their jewelleries under their pouch belt. A replica of the pouch belt was made for the play. These jewelleries moved from place to place and survived one ordeal after another. I recalled a comment made by Cara about the jewellery that was passed down to her by her grandmother. To Cara, the jewellery is a form of protection and care, her grandmother's way of ensuring her financial security. It was as though they sat in quiet resilience, sealed within the materiality of gold and diamonds, invisible to the outside world. Like treasures buried in the ground, they lay dormant, until they were revealed, valued and used once again. With this, I planted a seedling on the spot where I buried the pouch. I imagined that one day its root would wrap around the pouches and protect the contents within, until they are revealed again in the future. What resonates with me the most in this private performance, is the idea of placing something important at a somewhat open, but hidden spot. I thought about how this scenario reflects the way *Peranakan* motifs often appear on objects, somewhat openly, yet 'hidden' as well. While the blessing motifs, painted/engraved/sewn onto *Peranakan* objects may seem ostentatious and open, the symbolic significance of these motifs may be inconspicuous and hidden, especially to the younger generations of *Peranakan*s. Further exploring the tension between the dichotomy of hidden and revelation of this private performance, I *created "Weight of the Moving Thread"* - a three-part performance video consisting of concurrently occurring actions involved in the sewing, wrapping and burial of the embroidered motifs. Complied as a

whole, the previously private performances will be displayed publicly as a part of the viva exhibition. The intention here is to situate the notion of blessing in a non-determinate continuous loop of actions that portray the doing and undoing, hiding and revealing of the blessing motifs. From small mirrors and blessing motifs to huge responsibilities, in the form of obvious weight and indiscrete presences, the idea of protection manifests in many forms. The need or desire to protect something, in reverse, also create tensions – between expressing blessing and hiding it, between creating and losing it.

Paradoxes of Blessings

The objects used in this chapter are the talisman, eight trigrams fixture and the small mirror; they have been used as protective devices by many *Peranakan* Chinese in the past and now. Although their original purpose and symbolic function as protection objects remain largely the same, the physical contexts in which they now operate have changed. On the auspicious red cloth, I generated, imbued, and bestowed upon the embroidered motifs aspects of eternal blessings. In the ceremonial ritual of concealing the motifs, I kept them safely in pouches and out of sight. In the burial ceremony, I created a situation where they can one day be revealed again. Two things stood out from the chapter as I gradually realised through my practice – 'Weight' and 'Concealment'. What I also realised, is that they are not merely phenomena that are clearly observable, but paradoxes that require a considerable amount of unpacking.

'Weight' can be seen on the immensely decorated jewelleries worn by the *Peranakan* bride, her deliberated walk as she journeyed into her new family, the heavy responsibilities that newly wedded couples begin to bear as they went through the *hair-*

combing ceremony, the wet talisman that hung unyieldingly on a child's neck, and the embroidery needle that trotted with great care and intentionality with its every stitch. With these weights, we see moral obligations, social and cultural expectations, as well as efforts towards self-preservation. While these concerns may be universal and relevant, it is likely that many *Peranakan*s today may not be as knowledgeable as their predecessors regarding the contexts where these objects and events had played out in the past. The many good intentions behind traditional rituals and ceremonies may have now been concretised into burdensome 'weights'. The objectives and purposes behind them may have been side-tracked by modern beliefs and values today. Paradoxically speaking, these 'weights' may have over time, been perpetuated by the weight bearers themselves. It may be the time to think about the kinds of 'weight' the future generations of *Peranakan*s would likely to be carrying, in other words, a different set of concerns derivable from modern living. It is fair to say that some cultural objects or events may have already past their relevancy, but it is also reasonable to consider those that may hold future potentials.

The second paradox can be found in the act of 'concealment'- the talismans that were kept from public scrutiny, the discrete eight trigrams window that reveals its full form only when it is closed, the ostentatious bridal ornament that secretly protects the bride from the back, the embroidery motifs that were buried underground. Found in various degrees of concealment, the contexts and reasons behind the concealment of these objects are no less intriguing. While they are kept hidden or partially hidden in these settings, these objects themselves may in essence, conceal something more. Cultural and social conditions have affected the way we regard these objects today. The treatment of these objects may have concealed feelings of displacement, ambivalence, uncertainty, even embarrassment. The outward display of these traditional protective objects may have given the impression

of an archaic mindset. It may have created a condition of differentiation or separation. It may have interfered with the modern aesthetics today. Whatever the reason may be, the intrinsic way of embodying protection (wearing protective objects out of necessity or beliefs) has been replaced by a more extrinsic agenda (to only reveal what is necessary for others to see). Also, when something is kept on the 'inside', it needs no public validation. In some ways, protection has become personal, it has become a private affair. Some *Peranakan*s are still finding these protective objects relevant, even necessary. The personal desire to triumph over adversities had kept the talismans and small mirrors close to their bodies, and the eight trigrams fixture firmly embedded within the structures of their living spaces.

Fundamentally, the objects presented to others are at the same time also embodied (worn, carried, displayed on the users). Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1968) in his discussion about this gap between the perceivable (visible world, how things appear), and the perceiver (the embodied mind), proposed a specific way of looking at this gap, by relating the two. According to him, the visible world and the embodied mind are not dichotomous. Instead, they are connected by what he calls 'flesh', a precondition that enables things/phenomena to penetrate and permeate our consciousness. It is a faculty that adheres us with the world, and the world with us. He proposed that while the users see the visible object, they also observe their own visibility in relation to the object. Putting this in the context of *Peranakan* objects and their users, while the talismans, *the eight-trigrams* window, and the small mirror ornaments appear to be objects in use, the users are also seeing /thinking /feeling from within their bodies (wearing the talismans, living in a house with the windows, and walking in heavily ornamented bridal gown and accessories). Technically, they are aware of their bodily relationship with these objects. In their family heirloom jewelleries, they appear

glamourous, dignified, and proper. They appear to be responsible adult/spouse/son or daughter, and they appear to be modern *Peranakan*s with modern outlook/fashion sense/ home décor. They also 'feel' their appearance from within an inherently subjective position, from their bodies inside-out. An apt analogy to explain this scenario would be the mirror and its reflection, as we see ourselves in the mirror, and knowing that we share the same space with the things around us, through the mirror. Previously, I mentioned about not knowing what to do with the reflection of *Peranakan* objects when I see them in the mirror. I was perhaps acutely aware of the clear divide between the illusional and the physical worlds. Similarly, the users of the objects discussed may have experienced a similar disconnect with their cultural materials they had used, carried, or worn on them, and increasingly so with evolving modern values. But there may be another way to consider the mirror- as a tool that provides an overview of our relationship with the objects, as we examine them from within our physical faculty. In this light, we might be better poised to establish a more tangible relationship with these objects. Through this mirror, future *Peranakan*s may be encouraged to consider more critically their involvement with these cultural objects, not merely as visible objects in the world they live in, but also to re-imagine a place in the future where they can co-exist more meaningfully and purposefully with them.

There is a limit to this suggestion, as it proposes an imagined connection with objects that are not tangible to the touch. We generally derive sensation, understanding, thoughts and emotions from the act of touching. So, is it possible to touch something that is not possible to touch, in the case of my proposal above involving the *Peranakan* objects that are not exactly present, except perhaps in the mirror? In 'On Touching-- Jean-Luc Nancy', Derrida (2005) engages in the rethinking of Jean-Luc Nancy's writings and discusses the

touching of the untouchable – in that touch can never be fully realised. He attributed this condition of untouchability to what he calls the "figure of touch" (Derrida, 2005: 266), meaning that what is touchable is only limited by the 'figure' set by physical limits. He proposed that touch is therefore tangential, as a tangent touches without true intersection. What lies beyond this premise is therefore what cannot be figured. Putting this in the context of my query, it suggests the unknown possibilities – the unexplored interaction between the *Peranakans* and their objects and the unexplored ways of thinking and rethinking the relationship between future *Peranakans* and their cultural identity/objects/legacy. One way to access the untouchable is to engage the imagination, as discussed by Derrida (2005), based on his reading of Jean Luc-Nancy's 'Sublime offering'. According to Jean Luc-Nancy (1993), the imagination occurs when the sublime touches the limit and takes place there, "sublime as being the pure production of an excess of all form" (Jean-Luc Nancy, 2005: 81).

As I extrapolate, form could mean matter, structure, methods, or generally, something definite, something shaped and concretised. So, if the interest here is what lies beyond the form, beyond the limit, I propose that limit can be conceived in these ways – limited experience with the *Peranakan* objects, limitations in the representation of the *Peranakan* experience, and limited future opportunities to engage with the slippery concept of *Peranakan-ness*. I am aware that both Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida had both articulated on the concept of touch, but in different ways. Merleau-Ponty (1962) posits that touch is an overlapping sensation and that touching is immediately returned by the feeling of being touched. Derrida, however, talked about the impossibility of touching. Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests that 'flesh', the precondition that enables things or phenomena to

penetrate and permeate our consciousness, is what makes this touching possible. So, the question remains: Could Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh' touch the 'untouchable' as proposed by Derrida? I would argue that it is precisely the intangibility of the 'untouchable'- the ghostly presence, the "rememo[ries]" (Gordon, 2008) that activates and challenges the living body in the least expected ways. The 'untouchable' (ghosts) cannot be felt, perhaps not directly. At the beginning of my research, I said "my culture is like the outermost layer that will never touch my skin". This 'untouchable' ghost is like my culture, it is always there, hovering over my skin, and has a presence way before me, like Gordon (2008: 166) suggested, it will "linger well beyond our individual time". Through this research, the knowledge, experiences, and memories that live within the social lives of other Peranakans, which were once 'untouchable', have crossed paths with me. Somewhere between the interstices of my living body and the 'untouchable', between my skin and my culture, there is a now a new sensation. As I conclude this chapter on 'Protection', I propose that the shared memories of the Peranakan cultural objects, is the crux point that validates the need for protection.

Chapter 3 Continuity

In this Chapter, I explore three objects, beaded shoes, surname lantern and the betel-nut set, in one way or another, they can be found wedged between two contradictory situations, that of impending demise and hopeful continuation. Today, the surname lantern and the betel-nut set have become rare items, where the beaded shoes are more readily available due to increasing interest in them. All three objects relate in some way to the idea of continuity in that they are either a symbol of continuation (surname lantern and beaded shoes) or discontinuity (use for betel nut by the *Peranakans today*).

I will discuss the objects in three sections, 'Body', 'Space' and 'Motions', and with reference to the theme of 'Continuity'. 'Body' examines the beaded shoes *[kasot manek]* as an important part of the *Peranakan* lady's *[Nyonya]* attire ensemble. 'Space' looks at the surname lantern *[teng ji seh(n)]* that was used during important events in the *Peranakan* families. 'Motion' recalls the betel-nut box *[tempat sireh]* as an indispensable ceremonial object in the *Peranakan* families of the past. Many conversations with *Peranakan*s such as Betty, Cedric Tan, Fong, Heath Yeo, Kaleb, and Mr. Goh have also significantly enriched my perspectives, comprehension and understanding of these cultural objects, making this chapter a truly meaningful endeavour.

The issue of continuity has been, and still is, a real concern for the *Peranakan* community today. Many objects that were once common fixtures in the *Peranakan* home, are slowly disappearing, and some old habits have discontinued due to modern perspectives and lifestyles. Objects that played significant roles in traditional rituals and ceremonies are gradually being forgotten or written off as old-fashioned or obsolete. Craftsmen of some of these traditional trades have expressed the difficulty of passing down their skills to the

younger generations. Heath Yeo, a Singaporean kebaya designer and maker shares a similar sentiment about the lack of interest among the younger generations. He suggests the need to change this mindset by way of innovation, by reinventing the *kebaya* [traditional *Peranakan* blouse] and the *sulam* [embroidery] to accommodate modern aesthetics. His belief in incorporating new perspectives into design is evident in his works [Figs 87 – 90 in Volume B], where he creates small flowers with compositions that deviates from the tradition, and layered applique floral pieces to produce a semi three-dimensional effect on the blouse. His staunch belief in the use of free-motion embroidery using the vintage sewing machine, what he calls "the good old way", not only does not hinder, but has allowed him to experiment freely and creatively. Yeo also highlights the need to branch out into creative alternatives, such as to apply the art of *sulam* [embroidery] onto other objects besides the *kebaya* [traditional Peranakan blouse*]*. The re-imagination of the traditional embroidery, as he proposes, may be the way to make this art form accessible to more people.

Other inventive craftsmen and designers have also been critically exploring and creating new trends and narratives through reinventing *Peranakan* craft objects [Fig 91 to 93 in Volume B]. It can be said that on one hand, *Peranakan* objects may be gradually fading into history, but on the other, they are in the midst of transformation.

Body

Beaded shoes *[Kasot Manek]*

At the centre of the *Peranakan* aesthetics lies the *Nyonya* [Peranakan lady] crafts, and notably their beaded creations. The ability to bead the beaded shoes *[kasot manek]* was believed to be a determining factor for the *Peranakan*s to choose their daughter-in-laws

(Wee, 2017). The traditional *Peranakan* blouse, wrap skirt and the beaded shoes were, and still are, considered a significant part of the *Peranakan* lady's full ensemble. The idea of wearing a complete outfit, was often considered as a sign of being 'proper' *[seronoh].* It was also customary for the bride to fashion and handcraft her own beaded shoes *[kasot manek]* as a part of her dowry (Khoo, 1996; Seet,1997). This claim has in recent years been challenged by evidence showing that some *Peranakan*s had acquired their beaded shoes *[kasot manek]* as readymades (Gwee, 1985), as imports from China (Hector, 1995; Cheah, 2007), or commissioned works by non-*Peranakan* embroiderers (Ee et al, 2008). In other words, the shifting narratives show not only the complex realities of cultural history, but they also highlight the increasing openness in incorporating multiple, irreducible realities that may continue to unfold or develop over time.

In recent years, the increased availability of places where the skills and techniques of making the *beaded shoes* has made it possible for hobbyists to pick up the craft. More contemporised approaches have given this craft a chance to revive and regenerate. The idea of consumers becoming active participants and creators of the objects, may have presented itself as a viable answer to the dying trade. The beaded shoes have been the quintessence of the *Peranakan* fashion since its debut in the 1920s. Despite being worn by both the *Peranakan* men *[Babas]* and the *Peranakan* ladies *[Nyonyas]* in the past, they are now more commonly considered as women's footwear (Roots, 2021), and they would typically be worn with the traditional blouse and wrap skirt *[sarong kebaya]*. The beaded shoes are usually adorned with intricate hand-embroidered beadwork [Fig 94 in Volume B]. Traditionally low-heeled, they now come in a variety of heel types, from low to high, chunky and wedges. The buying and selling of glass beads were considered one of the most

lucrative businesses and convenient trades during the early days, as beads were highly portable. Often associated with social privileges, high quality beaded shoes are characterised by neat and tight alignment of beads on the shoe face. Often, faceted glass beads or cut beads *[manek potong]* imported from Europe were used. The items needed for beadwork include beads in various colours, cross-stitched cloth, needles, threads, and graph paper (Tan, 2011). The front or face of the footwear is done using the embroidery frame *[pidangan]* [Figs 95 and 96 in Volume B] to provide suitable tension for beading. The beads are typically sewn onto a stiff fabric such as velvet or gauze, which would be reinforced by a layer of handmade, unmarked paper over more fabric, and finally over a thick layer of leather (Michael Backman Ltd, 2021). A skilled and experienced maker would turn the glass beads in specific ways to allow the faceted surfaces to catch the light, creating a glittering effect (Wee, 2017). Common motifs on the beaded shoes would include flowers, birds, butterflies, bats, and fruits, as they are often derived from various cultural influences, with symbolic or auspicious meanings. For instance, the Chinese drew from these motifs homophonous relationship, such as the word 'bat' 蝠 (pronounced as 'fu') shares the same sound as happiness and good fortune 福(pronounced as 'fu'), or the word 'cricket' 蟋蟀 ((pronounced as xi shuai) shares the same pronounciation as 'happiness' 喜 (pronounced as xi) and 'auspiciousness' 禧(pronounced as xi) (Welch, 2008).

You must walk in a slow swaying gait
[Mesti jalan lenggang-lenggok]

"Mo pakay kasot manek, mesti jalan lenggang-lenggok!" (If you want to wear the kasot manek, you must walk in a slow swaying

gait), said my mum jokingly. Unfortunately, as somebody who would rather dash around to get things done, I'd rather not wear them, ever. All thanks to my mother and her superstitious belief that gifting shoes symbolises farewell, as it literally encourages one to walk away in them, I was never given shoes, and neither have I ever inherited them from my Peranakan ancestors. Quite literally, I have never walked in their shoes. If a pair of shoes metaphorises walking, then I would say that the walking stopped even before I was born. For a long time, I never understood why people would wear kasot manek [beaded shoes]. It certainly does not appear in any way practical, considering its delicate appearance. I have never seen my mother wearing them either, at least not until she was much advanced in her age, or any of my female relatives donning them for that matter. Ironically, the first pair of what looks like beaded shoes I encountered, belonged to my uncle who lived in Malacca, except that the shoe front was bigger, broader than those worn by females, and covered with sulam [embroidery] rather than beads [Fig 97 in Volume B]. *In recent years, my mother and I started collecting these shoes. We bought most of them from shops in Malacca. This has been our way or reconnecting with our culture. We do not always know what to look out for when buying these shoes, but it was something we both enjoy doing very much. These beaded shoes are beautiful, so beautiful that I keep them in boxes and hid them with layers of bags.*

Whenever I needed them for special events, I find them clean and shiny (thanks to my mum for keeping them in pristine condition). I am so careful with them that I sometimes find myself constantly checking to make sure that they are clean, and that I will not get myself in trouble when I finally surrender them back to their custodian (my mother). I cannot afford to lose these precious shoes or damage them, as they were the few pieces of cultural symbols I have ever 'owned'. To be honest, acquiring these shoes through purchasing them seems more necessary to us than actually wearing them. It was more like a desire to be a part of the whole process, of engaging with these shoes, from custom ordering them, to buying them and finally keeping and caring for them.

My lamentation of not having the experience of walking in the shoes of my ancestors, and that the walking stopped even before I was born, led to me to a performative exploration. Both in literal and metaphorical sense, the expression speaks of not being able to understand the feeling of wearing the beaded shoes properly, and the discontinuation of the practice in my family. The performance centres around the idea of tracing the footsteps left behind by the shoes; the action of walking suggests moving and taking the heritage forward. The paper I used for capturing the shoe prints was similar to the protective paper my mother has been using to wrap the shoes. It is highly absorbent and well suited for the humid weather in Singapore. It is not dissimilar to the kind of paper found with new shoes wrapped in shoe boxes. I bought the paper from a craft shop in Singapore, and I was told that they are not very sellable due to the brown aging spots on them after being tucked

away for many years. It was precisely this reason that I decided to buy them, as the idea of simultaneous deterioration and protection had always been in the background of my research. After placing the paper on the ground, I then stepped on each of the laid-out paper. I proceeded to tear away the excess paper, and each time, I retained only the area covered by the base of my shoe [Fig 42 and 43 in Volume C]. It was mostly successful except for a few occasions where my rough handling resulted in smaller surface than what they should have been - badly shaped shoe prints [Fig 44 in Volume C]. At one point, I tried to create the shoe prints with much force, tweaking and pressing the edges, and ended up breaking the paper. I was probably too preoccupied with the prints than the actual walking itself. The entire experience was a strange combination of class/sophistication and awkward/mundane walking.

A further development of leaving foot/shoe prints led to a later exploration. I created a series of images that show the shoes displaced in environments that were clearly not suitable for its use. They were precariously placed on cliff faces and street bollards, hung on trees and hooked on doorknobs [Figs 45 to 51 in Volume C]. The hard sole of the shoes and the stiff shoe face meant that they were clearly not designed for rough usage (stretching, bending, wear and tear), and obviously more suited for domestic use on flat carpeted floors, or on tiled, shiny teak wooden floorings. By taking the beaded shoes to a contrasting environment of uneven terrains and juxtaposing them against the outdoor ruggedness, I aimed to highlight the foreignness of these traditional shoes against my current physical reality in the UK, to amplify the notion of distance and cultural dislocation through doing this study in a foreign land. The absence of the human body wearing the shoes hints at a

few ideas: shoes in use, shoes going places, abandoned shoes, missing bodies, shoes awaiting retrieval.

Seeing shoes in public recalls a common habit of picking up objects that clearly look like they have been accidentally dropped or left behind by their owners. These 'lost' objects are usually placed at visible spots for the owners to retrieve them. The act of keeping the lost object safe and free from dirt and damage is an act of care, especially when the object is deemed worth preserving, such as a child's toy, a shoe, a glove, or hat. In a similar way, the beaded shoes may have looked like they were lost, or left in public space by accident, or they could also be objects that have been carefully set up, awaiting their owners' retrieval. There is a visible tension between motion and stasis, as well as latency, as if echoing the times when these beaded shoes were popular and common, and when they were gradually abandoned, to later being remembered, reinvigorated for its cultural significance. The shoes placed in the woods is at the same time, disconcerting, amusing, and pointless. However, while this is so, the shoes featured in stride appear purposeful, like they are ready to go somewhere or do something. The absence of the human body keeps one from knowing too much but it does not stop one from imagining what the human body is trying to do. Shoes hung on the tree branches may indicate someone taking a rest, drying their shoes, where those found on treacherous spots could indicate adventurous undertakings. Especially those in precarious situations, they have an ominous vibe to them – what happened to the body who left the shoes abandoned in the woods? What happened to the person before that happened? We are perhaps interested in the shoes because of the living or lived entity, the mind/soul/consciousness that had brought the shoes there. Shoes, they may be sacred, personal, culturally, or socially specific, but they seem to hold some universal truths: they facilitate transportation (going somewhere, to do something), they are containers of bodies,

an existential trace of where the body had been to, like the names carved on cliff faces to show “I have been here”, “I was with someone here” [Fig 50 in Volume C].

With these thoughts, I developed a series of video footages to amplify this embodiment of foreignness and displacement. These footages show the shoes being placed in several sites in Worcestershire where I currently reside, juxtaposed with British street scenes of houses, people, rivers, cars and roads, mailboxes, and canal barge etc [Figs 52 to 55 in Volume C]. I tried bringing the shoes and specific landmarks in and out of focus intermittently, to connect and highlight the fact that they share the same space and time. Each time the focus shifted away from the shoes, the viewer’s vision is thrown away into the distance, like an instant reaction towards something interesting somewhere else. When the vision is brought back onto the shoes, it felt as though the gaze is brought back once again to a near focus [Figs 54 and 55 in Volume C]. The ‘absent’ body consciously ‘sees’ from its own vantage point. The invisible body creates a presence and gives hint to a consciousness. It is a case where one sees from within the body, yet not literally seeing their body in this world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). In the videos, the disembodied beaded shoes evoke the presence of a body that was wearing/ in possession of them even when the body was absent. The shoes appear to be tied to its primary function as wearable items that are inseparable from a human body. This paradoxical state suggests that the invisibility of the physical body expands the thinking about the body, from within the invisible yet present body. An extrapolation from this would be to create opportunities for others to engage from within, in a similar way, assuming the experience of seeing from within the body is a universal phenomenon. This potentially puts the viewer in the position to imagine why the shoes were there, how did they get the shoes there, where are they going next with the shoes, what do they know or not know about these shoes, etc. As the self is situated among

things that have “a front and back, a past and a future” (Merleau- Ponty, 1964, 163), this potentially implies that this ‘front and back, past and present’, would be perceived or known to each person differently. Such an expansion of experience may be how stories about these shoes could continue to exist and propagate, within and outside the self, privately and publicly, as a representation of a past-present-future continuum.

The empty shoes became the locus where the reimagination of the ‘lost’ object took place. The ‘disembodied’ beaded shoes were substituted with the idea of the ‘present’ body. Like the objects that are lost in public spaces, where deliberate efforts are made for the benefit of their owners who come back for them, shoes found in public may be regarded as personal objects that await retrieval. Like the care that is often extended to lost objects in public, it is perhaps the connection to the personal, that these lost objects are given continual and sufficient care and attention before they are found again.

Space

Surname lantern *[Teng Ji Seh(n)]*

The surname lantern *[teng ji seh(n)]* bears the family surname written in Chinese character. The lantern has long been used for important events in the *Peranakan* household, more so in the past than now [Figs 98(a) and (b) in Volume B]. The surname lanterns come in a pair and are hung at the main door of the *Peranakan* homes. They are made with bamboo strips that are vertically arranged to form the cylindrical shape of the lantern and covered with paper. Today, the cotton fabric is preferred for better durability, and light bulbs have also replaced candles in these lanterns (Tan, 2008). The surname lantern would typically bear auspicious images and motifs on one side - illustrations of

Chinese fables and legends, such as the scenes of the 'Eight immortals crossing the *ocean' [八仙过海, pronounced 'ba xian guo hai']*, and 'Fairy princess touring the earth' *[仙女下凡, pronounced as 'xian nu xia fan']*. On the other side, the family's surname and hallmark are written in Chinese characters to indicate the place from where the family originates. They were hung in honour of the ancestors, to remind the family of their roots (Wee, 2009). These lanterns would have to be displayed in a very specific manner. When one stands facing the house, the side displaying the family surname would be shown on the right lantern, and the one on the left would show the painted scenes (Cheo, 1983) [Fig 99 in Volume B]. To ensure that the lanterns do not twist around when they catch the wind, they were hung from long iron hooks that would keep them in place (Cheo, 1983). In a recent interview with *Baba* Cultural Consultant Cedric Tan, he mentioned that there is a metal contraption that connects the top and base of the lantern on the inside, which compresses and holds the lantern in the desired shape.

While these lanterns were more commonly seen in the past, today they are kept indoors and hung only on special occasions (Wee, 2009). Traditionally they were meant to be hung outside above the entrance of the *Peranakan* homes, flanking both sides of the heavenly lantern *[thian teng]*, which would be positioned in the middle [Figs 99 and 100 in Volume B]. Unlike surname lanterns that comes in a pair, the heavenly lantern is singular. However, on the eve of the ancestral worship day *[semayang abu]*, the surname lanterns would be hung without the heavenly lantern *[thian teng]* (Tan, 2008). The lanterns are also used during the preparation and the commencement of the traditional *Peranakan* wedding ceremonies. One of these days is the personal invitations *[sang Ih]*, *'sang'* means 'to present', *'Ih'* was the symbol and harbinger of the good things of matrimony (Cheo, 1983).

This is an important day that marks the start of the official wedding preparations, and the red bunting *[cha ki]* [Fig 101 in Volume B] will be hung over the main entrance, with both draping sides tied in the fashion of the lotus flower *[bunga teratay]* [Fig 102 in Volume B], formed out of free hanging drapes gathered, tied, and fluffed out to create the shape of a lotus (Wee, 2009; Cheo, 1983). This would be followed by the hanging of the surname lantern at the door. The presence of the hung surname lanterns would be taken as a sign for guests to send their wedding gifts (Wee, 2009). During the hair-combing ceremony [*cheo(n) thau]*, if two pairs of surname lanterns are seen at the main entrance of the house, it indicates that both the bride and her groom are holding their hair-combing ceremonies in the same house, and the lanterns would carry their respective surnames (Tan, 2008). Another kind of *teng ji seh(n)* (surname lantern) used during the wedding was the *teng kaki* (processional lanterns), also in pair, they bear the name of the bridegroom and serve the purpose of leading the wedding procession from his house to the bride's house. According to Cedric Tan, the procession lantern is structurally different to the previous version. Instead of the vertical bamboo frame, these lanterns are made using a woven method derived from *Teochew* (a district of Guangdong province, China). Unlike the hung surname lanterns, procession lanterns are not meant to be hung, instead they are designed to be fixed on a pole which are mounted on heavy wooden stands and placed outside the house [Fig 100 in Volume B]. The extra pair of lanterns before the threshold would signify to others that a traditional wedding procession was to take place (Cheo, 1983). In addition, there is another version of the surname lantern that is used solely for funerals, they have an off-white colour base with yellow and black Chinese characters written on them (Tan, 2008). Therefore, the different versions of surname lanterns serve different functions, and one version does not replace another. Despite their differences, some people had assumed that the procession

lantern was in fact the same lantern hung outside the main door; they had mistakenly thought that the procession lanterns are made by inserting a metal pole into the hanging surname lantern. Cedric Tan commented that the mistake is probably made from the lack of observation and research.

Hidden Lantern

[Terpendam mia teng]

When I recall an event, it may have been an accumulation of many events that happened over a long period of time. They may have been emotions which have simmered over time, or feelings in short bursts, eventful and uneventful. Nonetheless, they are imprints of experience that are important enough to still be retrievable from my memory. One of these events was the time when my grandmother passed away. I remembered having a lucid dream about seeing her fall and feeling helpless about the whole situation. I was only six when my grandmother died, and that nightmare still traumatises me even now. I also recall that I was not at her funeral; it was held in Malacca. I do not remember why I wasn't there; it could have been one of those pantang(s)[taboos] that convinced people it would be best for young children to stay away from such events. When my mother came back home to Singapore after my grandmother's funeral, she was absolutely shattered and devastated. From the corner of my eye, I saw her taking out a bundle of what looked like a bulky envelope and

shoving it into her wardrobe. I asked her what it was, she kept quiet, and immediately began tearing. She then told me not to touch it. For a six-year-old, being told not to touch something basically means 'go on, find out what it is!'. One day, I did it. I waited patiently for my mother to leave for work before getting into the wardrobe to find it. I regretted ever doing it, for what I saw could never be erased from my memory. The bundle contains photographs of my grandmother's funeral which I had missed. From the photographs, I could tell that it was a grand event, with attendees from the neighbourhood and performances by several uniform groups led by my uncles. I then saw a picture showing people carrying two huge cylindrically shaped objects on red poles. They were huge mobile lanterns. The poles went through them, and they do not appear heavy, almost like they were made of paper. It has some words written on them, which I was unable to read, as I was too young to know many Chinese characters. All I can remember seeing, was that there was yellow or orange words, also some black words on them [Figs 103 and 104 in Volume B]. The words looked like those printed words on the Chinese newspaper. They looked important, probably because they were written in bold characters. I remember being shaken by it and being very emotional at that time. I was probably too young to comprehend what death really meant, but I recalled thinking about the last time I bid her farewell at the carpark below my old flat. It was goodbye

forever. Whenever I see paper lanterns of that shape and size, even

those hung outside some shophouses, I will think of her.

The primary function of a lantern is to provide light. Most people may find it unimaginable moving around in spaces without it. We rely on light to see the things in our environment, to keep us safe and away from potential dangers, for example, a lighthouse. A brightened place usually indicates inhabitants, like how illuminating candle signifies hope by eliminating darkness around it. Not only does light activate our senses and demarcate spaces, but light also communicates intentions. For instance, fast blinking lights conveys urgency, red light suggests danger, soft glowing light creates an atmosphere of ease, and bright neon light is often linked to excitement and modernity etc. In short, light is hardwired to the human psyche.

Through my practice, I responded to the surname lantern using two different sculptural forms - a handmade lantern and a stone-carved Chinese seal. I was enthralled by the sacredness and mystery that the surname lantern exudes. I was especially intrigued by the fine brushwork that was shown against the backlit lantern [Fig 105 in Volume B]. The handmade quality of the lantern [Fig 106 in Volume B] echoes the hand of the artisan who made it and spurred me to try my hand at making my own lantern. I used bamboo strips, steel boning, copper wires and fabrics for my lantern [Figs 56 and 57 in Volume C], which I then painted over with segments of the infinity loop and phoenix motifs using Chinese ink and gouache [Fig 58 Volume C]. To give it a modern twist, I created my lantern with two removable covers, which worked like changeable jackets [Fig 59 Volume C]. My lantern was nothing like the traditional ones. The brushworks I had used was more spontaneous,

whereas the traditional surname lantern has clean line illustrations and detailed rendering done with a steady hand which produces highly controlled outlines and meticulous layering of colours. I may have prioritised expression over form and likeness. In hindsight, such detailed depiction of allegories, myths, and legends may have been done to obtain a sense of completeness. It could have been a way to keep the entire image intact and wholesome. Looking at the disjointed image on the top and bottom of my lantern cover [Fig 60 and 61 Volume C]. I realised that completeness was something I had not been able to achieve and had not even thought about. Unlike the traditional lanterns where the image on the lantern is painted after the lantern cover is glued to the frame, I had done the opposite. I had painted my lantern cover flat on the wooden plank [Fig 62 Volume C]. When I completed and hung up my lantern, only one part of the lantern is visible at any given time, unlike the traditional ones which were hung as a pair where each side would display the front or the back of the lantern [Fig 63 Volume C]. I realised that my estrangement from the traditional *surname lantern* had played no small part in the way I had interpreted the lantern, an item that was much revered by my ancestors. The space that these lanterns used to illuminate was a different space from mine. The lighting of the main entrance is a practical way of finding my house in the dark, a light that keeps me safe from dangers that could be lurking nearby. It was a different kind of light for the *Peranakan*s who lived in the past. It was to them, a light that proclaimed or declared to others that something of great significance was about to happen, was happening or had happened in the family. It was a light that connected them to the outside world, a space beyond their abode. The pictorial space they dedicated to pay tribute to moral teachings and ancient symbolisms, was again to me, a different space. It was to them, a space that needed to be kept whole and complete, a sacred space that was never secondary to its form, a space that was never flattened, unlike

mine. Another crucial difference between the traditional version and mine, was that I had omitted the surname entirely, thus effectively omitting the very essence of what made the surname lantern what it is. These realisations led me to further my explorations.

I looked back at my first experience of seeing surnames on lantern, and I recalled their bold and officious-looking Chinese characters on the lanterns, they appeared like boldly printed headline on the Chinese newspaper. Using my surname '黄' [pronounced as huang], I carved my surname on a seal stone. With each completed carving, I made a seal print using the cinnabar red paste *[朱砂, pronounced as 'zhusha']*, and sanded it down each time after the print was made. Each print was then made over the previous, repetitively. This eventually created an unreadable print [Figs 64 and 65 Volume C]. The repetition brings to mind Qiu Zhi Jie's 'Writing the Orchid Pavilion Preface One Thousand Times' [书写兰亭序一千遍], 1990–95 [Figs 107 to 109 in Volume B], inspired by a text written by ancient calligrapher, Wang Xizhi. The text was claimed to have been buried with the emperor Tang Taizong who loved Wang's works, leaving only two existing copies, which became known examples used by learners for centuries. In his work, Qiu copied the texts a thousand times on the same sheet of paper, saturating it with black ink. His performative work echoes the artistic tradition of copying the model to acquire exemplary brush skills and techniques. His gestures effectively defaced the much-revered texts, rendering it meaningless. The incrementally layered texts were literally flattened within the same space on the paper. The photographs of the written texts highlighted a different reality. They show gradually accumulated gestural marks and subjective agency. Qiu's 'Memorial for Revolutionary Speech' expresses a similar deliberation [Figs 110 and 111 in Volume B], where he wrote

historic and revolutionary thoughts on molten cement, which upon curing, were used to produce ink rubbings. Each time a print was taken off the cement surface, he would pour molten cement over it, which effectively eradicated the original writing. These actions culminated into an installation consisting of a cement cube block placed on the ground afront a wall of sixteen ink rubbings. Within the cube lies sixteen layers of hidden text that are no longer retrievable, making the ink rubbings the closest one can get to the originals.

Like graves that conceal bodies of those who passed, and gravestones with inscribed words of remembrance, and the images of the once living, Qiu's presentation of the written texts in both works had transcended the present reality of lost pasts. By rendering the texts at once visible, and invisible, we are immediately drawn to the poignancy of the irretrievable text. Yet, we are also granted access to it by ways of their remnant ink marks. We are made aware that the thoughts, actions, and significance behind the genesis of the texts, concealed within the cement block, will not be revealed again. Invisibility has made the loss more visible. My unreadable seal print, like Qiu's cement, kept layers of no longer retrievable prints. The poignancy of the lost surname was not only made more visible by the oversaturated cinnabar-caked print, the lost was further compounded by the fleeting processes I had captured on videos. I began to focus more intently on the material lost during my work process. Using the same stone, I carved, stamped each seal separately, and with each sanding down, I collected the powder that had worn away [Figs 66 to 69 Volume C]. With each sanding, the stone became shorter, and over time, the entire stone was exhausted. With a similar attempt to keep track of materials as they wear down, I began an experiment. I made another lantern, but this time, I wrote my surname on it and in Chinese calligraphic style [Fig 70 and 71 Volume C]. I traced each written layer by outlining the paint

that had bled over the previous. As I had managed to capture the workings behind each layer of surname, it felt as if I was trying to pry through the layers of surname that were made over time and through generations. I began to realise that there must be more to this 'skin' (lantern surface/cover) than I can see. I started examining the inner space of the lantern and having a view of what it must be like to see from within the lantern, perhaps like the indispensable light within it [Fig 72 Volume C]. The functionality of the lantern relies entirely on this light; be it a candle or a light bulb, it is meant to be there, it was designed as such, unless it ceases to be called a lantern.

As I reflected upon the painted layers on the lantern skin and the light within, I thought about Merleau- Ponty's (1964: 164) idea that "things and body are made of the same stuff" and how things are manifested through us and us through them. I wondered about our experience with things, how we made them to serve us and how we are in turn affected by it and vice-versa. I thought about the possibility of a relationship with things that have been 'lost' (or no longer in use), like the surname lantern. Could this lantern still be of use to us now, and how does it affect us and vice-versa? If they are no longer common or popular today, have the reciprocal relationship as mentioned, ended with the loss as well, or have this relationship taken a different path, influencing us in a different way? With that, I started 'Light Conversation' with my mother and son. For my mother, the surname lantern was something she knew about and was familiar with. To me, it is an object I feel missing from my cultural life as a *Peranakan*. To my son, it is something that was never a part of his life. In fact, the only common knowledge about the lantern, is the universal experience of light, hence the unostentatious title.

I then began to work on 'Light Conversation'. 'Light Conversation' began as a recorded conversation with my mother and son, three generations of *Peranakan*s. The topic of the conversation was the surname lantern *[teng ji seh(n)].* Due to the geographical distance and the difference in time, the conversation took place on zoom at 4 pm in the afternoon in UK and near midnight in Singapore. The difference in time zone was evident through the way we lighted our respective spaces [Fig 73 Volume C]. I illuminated my surrounding artificially by having a lamp close to my face that was placed in a very dark room, while my mother and son had to depend solely on the ceiling lights for illumination. This resulted in them having a more diffused and comparatively less yellow and harsh lighting than mine. It was a lively intergenerational conversation where each of us would turn on the light only when we speak and turned it off when we stopped talking. The conversation flowed continuously without many gaps. Occasionally, all three lights would come on at the same time, but only for a moment, to let the others continue. The conversation revealed how differently each generation perceived the lantern and its significance and future value. My mother shared with us how the lanterns were lit during important events in the family as she was growing up. It was a way of declaring to others the happenings in the family. My son, however, took a more modern stance. He commented that displaying messages using physical, tangible objects such as the surname lantern may have been in the past a natural way of communication, but this has now changed due to modern technologies. To him, the social media platform has largely replaced physical platforms as 'natural' modes of publicity and communication. Although he appreciates how some *Peranakan*s find value in the traditional practices and passed down tales, he felt that traditional practices and old beliefs carry a different meaning for the current and future

generations. It was interesting to see how our conversation had brought to the fore the changing expectations of objects like the surname lantern.

For the post-production of the video, I used a video editing software to explore two aspects that stood out from the video - the sound of the conversation, and the light from our respective zoom screens. Playing on the interactive quality of the light, I sped up the video incrementally, until it reached a point when the lights from the separate screens became flashes that flicker continuously like a candle flame. I then enhanced the video with saturated orange yellows to mimic the burning flame [Fig 74 Volume C]. The candle was generally what the *Peranakan*s had used in their lanterns before they were replaced by the lightbulb. Building on this nostalgia, I removed the sound of the actual recording and replaced it with the audio of my mother reading the *Baba* poems *[pantuns].* These poems were taken from a book she compiled about 60 years ago [Figs 112 and 113 Volume B]. According to her, the poetry book consists of 303 poems she had recorded from her impromptu recitation exchanges with friends and neighbours living in the same village in Malaysia. She recalled that she was only 14 years old then, and that the poetry sessions typically took place on the porch of Malay houses that were built on stilts. She described it as an empty and flat space with a veranda, where people spent their leisure time having conversations and playing games. The entire book was intact, and all the pages were well-kept, apart from the aged appearance of its browning pages, and a few pages defaced with random scribbles (done by me when I was about 2 years old). I extracted some parts of her audio recordings and played it in sync with the flickering flames. It appeared as if the reading voice came from the burning flames itself. With the personified flames and the nostalgic voice, I brought the lantern back as an overlay on the video [Fig 75 Volume C]. The three faces on the screens were immediately pushed behind the screen of red with the

surname at the foreground. As the light within the lantern is rekindled, the space within the lantern seemed more purposefully filled. The 'lost' lantern is now experienced differently, and the reciprocal relationship as discussed earlier, may not have ended. It may be simply charting a different journey. The reading voice may have rendered the actual conversation inaudible, eliminating the actual content totally, instead, it became a different kind of conversation. Unlike the past, when the surname lantern was designed with certain priorities in mind, serving both practical and symbolic needs, it may now need a different kind of light, and a different kind of purpose.

Motion

Betel-nut box *[**Tempat Sireh]***

For millennia, the betel nut box *[tempat sireh]* was an indispensable item in the *Peranakan* communities across Southeast Asia (Lim and Pakiam, 2020). The betel nut box or the betel nut set can be found in almost every special day *[ari besair]* and carries symbolic weight in the *Peranakan* household, a practice that probably harks back to the era when official events were facilitated and validated by the very presence of this object. It was used in ancient Malay official ceremonies to welcome delegates to the palaces, before commencing important discussions in the royal court, as a token of royal favour, and before warriors were sent to war (The Straits Times, 1987).

The betel nut box usually consists of a few things required for betel chewing, which would include several receptacles that hold the necessary ingredients [Figs 114 and 115 in Volume B]. It was also typical to find a little drawer at the base of the box that stores the betel leaves. Usually, two lidded containers would be used to hold the gambier and tobacco,

and the open ones would be used for the slaked lime [*kapor]*, a substance made from the powdered shells of molluscs or coral to apply over the betel nut leaf *[daon sireh]* (Lim and Pakiam, 2020). The betel box would also include a container for storing the 'pinang' [sliced areca nut] [Fig 116 in Volume B], and a nut slicer *[kachep]* for slicing the dried nut [Fig 117 in Volume B] (Lim and Pakiam, 2020). The ensemble would almost always be accompanied by a table spittoon made of either porcelain or silver, as well as a small mortar and pestle for breaking the betel nut [Fig 118 in Volume B]. Betel nut boxes were commonly made from solid wood that are glided or inlaid with mother-of-pearl or exotic materials such as turtle-shell, while some were fashioned in silver or gold and enhanced using metalwork techniques of enamelling, repousse, chasing, applique, and filigree (Cho, 2008). The betel nut box thus represents status and prestige of its owner. There are also several other reasons why people chew the betel nut. Some people do it to experience psycho stimulating effects and for other purported benefits, such as for relaxation, enhanced alertness, better concentration, improved digestion, and euphoria (cited in Tobacco Control Legal Consortium, 2017).

During my conversation with Mr Goh, he noted that the chewing of the betel quid was a more common habit among the *Peranakan* ladies *[Nyonyas]*, and not the *Peranakan* men. He commented that the ability to own a betel nut box was in the olden days a mark of elitism, and that it was especially so when some *Peranakan* ladies would carry their personal ones to their *Nyonya* card game *[cherki]* sessions [Fig 119 in Volume B]. He recalled that it was not uncommon to find everyone at the event having their personalised betel nut boxes. He noted that many of these ladies have female slaves *[cha bo kan(s)]* who would tag along to prepare the betel quid for the ladies' enjoyment. He added that these female slaves were often very adapt to the task. To prepare the betel quid, the betel leaves would first be washed and cleaned before use. The betel nut would then be cut open either by the areca

nut slicer or cracked open with the mortar and pestle [Fig 118 in Volume B]. Once opened, the kernel of the betel nut will be extracted and sliced up into small pieces for use, and the husk of the betel nut will be discarded. When the ingredients are ready, the betel leaf is held open on the palm with its right side facing up. A small amount of slaked lime is then smeared over the leaf, a few slices of betel nut shreds along with some gambier and tobacco are placed at the centre of the leaf before folding it into a small parcel. This parcel would then be placed into the mouth for chewing. Mr. Goh remembered fondly that many *old* Peranakan ladies used to drape a red handkerchief over one of their shoulders of their long tunic *[baju panjang]* to wipe of the red saliva left on their lips after spitting the masticated betel quid.

Betel *[sireh]* chewing was one of the habits that set the *Peranakan*s apart from the migrant Chinese in the early days of the Straits Settlement (Cho, 2008). The habit was said to have originated from India and became a part of the ancient Malay custom, which was later adopted by the *Peranakan* in the Straits settlement. More recent research has revealed that the betel palm may have been introduced into India from Southeast Asia during the second milliennium B.C.E (Zumbroich, 2007-2008).The betel leaf was highly regarded for its medicinal properties. The leaves were used as a stimulant, an antiseptic, while the nut was regarded an aphrodisiac (Toprani, R and Patel, D. 2013). They were also customarily used in the olden *Peranakan* households. Some *Peranakan* grandmothers used betel leaves as a remedy to treat fever by creating a paste made with pounded cloves, rue leaves, shallots, and a splash of Cologne (Cho, 2008). The betel leaves were also often employed by the witch doctor *[bomohs]* as an offering or ingredient in spiritual treatments, which many *Peranakan*s trusted and subscribed to. If a witch doctor suspects that a child's fever is caused by an offended sacred white tiger spirit, he would murmur apologetic

incantation before chewing some *sireh* [betel] *leaves* and spewing it out onto the child's head by way of treating his illness (Cheo and Speeden, 1988). It was believed that the betel leaf possesses healing powers and were therefore frequently used as amulets (The Straits Times, 1987). The witch doctor would recite healing words on the leaves before placing them under the pillow of an infant or an expectant mother or applying the masticated leaves onto affected areas (The Straits Times, 1987). It was believed that the betel nut set can purify the house by its very presence, and families were known to place them on the highest shelves of their cupboards as deterrent against evil (Ee et al., 2013).

The offer and acceptance of the betel quid indicates a few things, such as friendliness, invitation, willingness to engage in conversations, a favour asked or granted, an agreement in betrothal for a marriage (Khoo, 1996). The marriage proposals made by *Peranakan*s were similar to that of the Malay's, but with some differences (Lim and Pakiam, 2020). In a traditional Malay marriage proposal, the elders would represent the girl and partake the betel *[sireh]* leaves upon agreement to the union, but they would leave the leaves untouched if they are not in favour of the marriage (Mardiana Abu Bakar, 1987). Mr Goh shared a similar procedure about wedding invitation house visits. Wedding invitations carried out in this manner was known as 'to send the betel leaf' *[antair sireh]* (Gwee, 2006). This means to personally deliver a wedding invitation in the form of a tiny, folded bundle of betel leaf. Wedding invitations without including the *betel [sireh]* would be considered a lack of sincerity (Cho, 2008). Mr Goh said that the acceptance of a prepared betel leaf from the invited family would indicate a positive response, and the rejection of the offer would mean the opposite. He added that rejection may have repercussions, as those rejected may respond in the same way when the rejecter invites them in the future. The use of representatives in place of direct invitations from the parents of the bride or groom had

probably saved some parents from the embarrassment of rejection. The betel nut box was also used as a part of the bridal trousseau that would accompany the bride during traditional wedding procession. It represents the bride's virtue as a maiden, and it would play a part in formalising her acceptance into the husband's family (Ee et al., 2013). According to Ho (1976), the betel nut box has a serious and ominous function of indicating the virginity of the bride. From the first night of the marriage the box would be placed on the wedding bed for twelve days, and if the bridegroom or the mother-in-law has any reason to suspect the bride's chastity, they could overturn it to signal their anger and the desire to annul the marriage (Khoo, 1996; Ho, 1984). The importance of this item is evident from the extent that some *Peranakan*s would go to great lengths to acquire good quality betel nut sets. Wealthier *Peranakan*s in the past were known to commission highly skilled craftsmen to have them made to their tastes for use in wedding ceremonies, these *sireh* [betel] sets eventually became treasured family heirlooms (Ho, 1984).

Old Lady with Red teeth
[Nenek ada gigi yang orna merah]

The door was already opened when we got there, and I was surprised that we needn't knock at all. My mother and I went right into the house, past the living room and into the kitchen. An elderly lady in her 70s or 80s stood at the doorway, clad in a traditional Malay long loose blouse [baju kurong]. I noticed that she looked tall as she moved closer, towering over my small frame. I was only eight, and I was about to witness an activity I would remember for a long

time. This old lady was my mother's friend, and I was asked to call her 'nenek' [elderly lady]. As I looked up from an ant's eye view, I could see that she was chewing on something as she spoke. At that time, I couldn't tell what it was, but it was weird. After a while, she proceeded to sit down on a chair next to a small table, and atop the table was a metallic bowl or some sort with a few small containers and some leaves in it. She took one leaf and placed it on her palm of one hand and used her index finger of the other hand to smear a white substance from one of the containers onto the leaf. Then she added some bite-sized pieces of what looked like dried fruit onto the centre of the leaf. I watched with much anticipation as she folded the leaf into a little parcel and pushed it right into her mouth. That was a mouthful if you'd asked me. She seemed to have pushed the parcel right against her cheeks from the inside of her mouth, and then she chewed it, while talking to my mother at the same time! While she was clearly enjoying the conversation with my mother, I could only hear her laughs and occasional muffled speech. What I saw next was quite shocking, her teeth had turned red! [Fig 120 in Volume B]. Assumingly that was the red juice from the leaf parcel she ate, but wait a minute, isn't leaf juice green? I was utterly confused and feeling quite disgusted by the copious amount of red stuff oozing from the corners of her mouth. She looked like a blood sucking monster, and for an eight-year-old it was more than enough to bear. This 'monster' appeared again when I was much older. It was a usual

day at my old neighbours' flat. They were an old couple whom I had affectionately called 'uncle' and 'auntie'. I often visited them with my daughter, who was then a toddler. She would call them 'tatta' and 'patti' [Tamil for grandfather and grandmother]. That day, I was in the kitchen learning to cook Indian curry from auntie. It wasn't until I looked down that I panicked. I noticed that my daughter was not in the kitchen with me. So, I went into the living room to find her. There she was, with 'tatta', who was trying to stabilise her wobbly stand. Her right hand was reaching out for something that looked like a small container off a round metal tray. She probably thought that they were little toys used for pretend cooking. As 'tatta' started to chuckle upon her discovery, I saw that same familiar bright red stain on his teeth. That same feeling of discomfort came over me as I was reminded of old nenek's blood-stained teeth!

The culprit of the red stained teeth effect is a chemical reaction caused by mixing the betel nut and slaked lime (IARC Working Group, 2004), a mixture that essentially produces sensations of euphoria, relaxation and enhance alertness. Prolonged consumption of the betel quid usually causes permanent staining of the teeth, gingival and oral mucosa (Anand R, Dhingra C, Prasad S, Menon I., 2014. Although betel chewing is still popular in some parts of Asia and the Pacific (Tobacco Control Legal Consortium, 2017), the practice was gradually phasing out in Singapore from the 1950s and became unpopular by the 1980s (Lim and Pakiam, 2020). A whole range of negative effects are often cited as reasons why the habit has been largely discontinued, such as cancer of oral cavity, lung, breast, prostate and

colorectum cancers (IARC Working Group, 2004). Ironically, one of the earliest records of 'betel chewer's cancer' was referenced more than 160 years ago by Tennent (1860). Negative perceptions and unflattering appearance of the red-stained teeth also made the habit unfashionable and unhygienic, especially when red spittle left by betel chewers often left public spaces defaced (Lim and Pakiam, 2020). Consequentially, the betel nut set became less common, and today they are more likely to be owned by collectors as antiques. Although some *Peranakan*s still use them in rituals, Mr Goh said that for many *Peranakan*s today, a more convenient way to still acquire the prepared betel leaves is to get them from small Indian corner shops.

The stain from the betel quid juice is a stain long gone. The stain, however, was a not-too-distant memory for me. As I thought about how the red stains of the betel fade into history and the betel nut box may one day be forgotten, I reflected on a private experimental performance I had done in my back garden, relating to stains. In my work, I often try to create a space where visuality and materiality are interwoven, where the markings and imprints left on surfaces function as visceral points of entry into the work. I encounter stains a lot, especially in my paintings, whether it is staining the surface of the paper lightly, or letting pigments sit on the surface for an extended period to create staining effects. I wanted to explore the 'inside of things' using these methods. Through flooding water, inks, and pigments onto the painting surface, and I manipulated the materials as I worked through the layers [Figs 76 to 80 Volume C]. Upon realising how this way of working has enabled me to explore the randomness of the markings , I started to treat this randomness as a metaphor of changing boundaries. I observed how pools of pigmented water would sit on the surface and eventually forming clearly demarcated areas. I also saw that sometimes layers would intermingle to create gradations and tonalities. Further

exploring randomness, I began studying the dandelion plant. I used the plant as a metaphor for migration, due to its highly transportable pappi and its adaptability to changing environment. As I continued to explore these ideas, I became aware that my intervention with the Chinese brush was instrumental in pushing the materials and water around; there is a definite control aspect in this process. I later developed this process into a private performance where I painted on the patio slabs in my back garden that was overrun by relentlessly growing dandelions. It was a challenge to reclaim the space, and at the same time, an attempt to co-exist with the chaotic randomness of the widely dispersed plants.

Using black ink, gouache and acrylic paints, mediums of varying viscosity and consistency, I began with first wetting the patio slabs with water before painting directly over with bold sweeps of black ink. As the brush swept over the slab, the scratching sound can be heard, making me aware its solidity and graininess. I was reminded of the extremely thick and coarse watercolour paper. The slabs were surprisingly highly absorbent. As the ink was spreading slightly around the edges of the black lines, creating feathery outlines, I dipped, poured, and drew over with a mixture of yellow gouache and acrylic paints, followed by a more diluted mixture, and then with just plain water. The overlaying of yellow pigment over the black ink first created a strikingly contrasting image of an abstract flower [Fig 81 Volume C]. With water dropped from different heights and angles, breaking, and pushing the pigment around and into the gaps between the slabs, the image dissolved into muddy puddles on the uneven patio floor [Fig 82 Volume C]. As time went by, shadows could be seen casting intermittently over the drying slabs and gradually creeping over it [Figs 83 to 85 Volume C]. An interesting thing about the meeting of these phenomena was that it created a moment of suspension, where the black drying ink was partially obscured by the overcast, and the small pools on the ground slowly formed different configurations. It

was as though the shadows momentarily became a part of the drying pools, and as the slabs eventually dried out, fading streaks of black and yellow stains began to show, like shadows that did not go away. What I thought were stains, could potentially had been shadows and vice versa. Staining is a natural phenomenon, but when stains linger in unexpected ways, we detest them, feel embarrassed about them and we find ways to get rid of them. They can be very stubborn and can destroy pristine surfaces or things. We expect and allow for stains by using designated fabrics to manage or clean them up (Sorkin, 2012). However, there is often no guarantee that a surface once stained can ever go back to its pre-stained condition; cleaning with strong chemicals could potentially leave an area distinct enough to show where a stain used to be, a mark that says, “here it is”. In other words, staining can be seen as disruptive and destructive. Is there a way to consider stains differently? What if we could allow ourselves that suspension of judgement, like the time when the black ink pools, shadows and stains coincided and became indiscernible? What if we allow ourselves to perceive stains like how we would perceive shadows?

Shadows behave differently from stains; they are temporal, intangible and they leave no trace. Shadows vary according to the intensity of the light source - natural or artificial lighting, the distance of the light from the object, the angle where the light comes from, the number of light sources available and how they integrate. For a shadow to appear, an object must stand in a path of light. Light illuminates and makes things visible while shadow being the consequence of the illumination. In this instance, the betel nut box can be seen as the object in the path of light. However, today, light illuminates the stain instead, as the object gradually disappears into history. For a long time, the betel nut box had facilitated the forming and breaking of relationships and witnessed important social and cultural events in many *Peranakan* households. It had shaped the living habits and beliefs of many whose daily

functioning and ceremonial rituals depended on it. Today, it might be said that the red-stained teeth of the habitual betel chewers had left an indelible stain on the betel nut box. To bring focus back onto the object itself would involve allowing light to shine on it. This is not the same as bringing back the habit of betel chewing or to encourage the use of the substance that was scientifically proven to be harmful. To shine a light on the object in this instance, suggests focusing on a different phenomenon, to look at shadows instead of stains. It proposes looking at generative potential than a static remnant, active participation than passive reminder. Stains connote definitive markings, and they invariably lack dimension. Shadows on the other hand, suggests dynamism, versatility, and possibilities. In other words, shadows may be analogous to stories told from different times and of diverse life experiences. Stories change over generations, depending on how each interprets to make them relevant to their lives.

Change is inevitable and natural, conversely the lack of change may bring more harm than good. The same story told repeatedly is like an object exposed to the same light source, assuming that only the area in shadow gets protection from the exposure, whereas the area surrounding it does not. Over time this would create a distinct divide between areas in shadow and areas that are not. It would probably leave quite a spot, or a stain. Multiple lights may yield more holistic outcomes. Stories may merge to create new stories that would continue to intrigue and grow. With multiple light sources, the peripheral shadows are not exactly black and white, as they contain shades of grey and mid tones, literally a grey area. This recalls the 'third space', that according to Bhabha (1994: 41) emerges as "something else besides" that contests two existing elements/positions/spaces. The grey areas, considered in the context of lost (identity, cultural stories), may be the place for rearticulation, where 'something else or new' can be found.

Secret Visibility

This chapter seems to have hinged adamantly on the notion of invisibility, on things that are missing, hidden, or lost - the missing body who left the beaded shoes at different sites, the hidden photographs of the funeral lanterns, the unreadable seal print, the defaced stone, and the silent presences within the surname lantern, and the quasi-visible stains on the patio floor. It was as though the continued presence of the objects were disrupted, as they were made not to exist any longer, like the owner of the beaded shoes, the photographs of the funeral lanterns that I did not know existed after my grandmother's discontinued existence, the seal print that lost its function and usefulness, the fading presence of the surname name lantern and the betel nut box in modern Peranakan households. On one hand, all the above point to various degrees of invisibility, on the other, they are certainly not without a general sense of visible concreteness. The relationship between the visible and the invisible is highlighted by Merleau- Ponty (1964: 167), he commented that the visible "rests upon a total invisibility." In short, what we are able to see depends on the workings of the invisible. This invisibility, as he proposes, is a kind of 'secret visibility', that manifest through quality, light, colour, depth, elements that are capable of stirring us internally and sensorially. As artists employ and manipulate these qualities, they work behind the scenes of this 'secret visibility', blending imageries, private visions, and external manifestation of things, to present the "inside of the outside and the outside of the inside" of things (Merleau- Ponty, 1964: 164).

In my various explorations, this 'secret visibility' lies in the perspective and focus of my beaded shoes video footages, on the amplified scale of the Chinese calligraphic surname lantern, at the bleeding outlines on my surname, on the obliterated stone seal and the unreadable print, in the digitally flickering candle of the 'Light Conversation', and on the

residual marks on the patio slabs. What we can see through this secret visibility, is only half the story. The other half may not be immediately obvious, like the ongoing adventures of the dis/embodied shoes after its long walk from the past, the truncated story of the repetitively carved and sanded down seal, the renewed connection with the distant light emanating from the surname lantern, and the red stains from the betel quid that had turned into expandable shadows. Applying these understandings, we may be able to consider the continuity of the *Peranakan* cultural objects in new ways. I see a rather optimistic picture – of the possibility of harnessing from remnants and missing entities new narratives for years to come.

Conclusion

It seems surreal that I am now at the concluding part of this research when the overwhelming task of juggling with fragments has yet to settle. A conclusion connotes the idea of summing up the findings, a restatement of what has been said, a result, a termination, or an end. It is strange to consider the end when everything seems to be still in the making, starting again, with yet another sense of 'lost'. This new sense of loss is not easy to explain, but I shall try. This is not the same as saying that nothing has been found or resolved thus far. In fact, many things I sought out to investigate has yielded some interesting outcomes, just that more questions have emerged since, leaving me with a contradicting feeling of unease-satisfaction about 'lost'. I have come to realise that this is exactly where things need to be, to be lost again. This new sense of loss feels like a necessity, rather than something we rather not have, like where I first began. At the beginning of this research, I have operationally defined 'lost' as having no-thing - lacking material, cultural dispossession, as something forgotten, stashed away, a precondition or by product of an identity crisis. Through practice, I dissected and examined this notion of 'lost', which I shall now consolidate, as I bring back the research question: In what ways can I create new interpretations out of 'lost objects' of the *Peranakan*-Chinese through contemporary artistic interpretation and reimagination? 'New interpretations' suggest opinions that are current, or contemporary, and a good way to get to these interpretations is to trace them in chapters, before finally putting them together to obtain a holistic view of this study.

In chapter 1, I examined the notion of cultural estrangement through my personal recollections of wearing the *Peranakan* traditional blouse and wrap skirt [*Nyonya sarong kebaya]* and the brooch *[kerosang].* I have also considered the performative attributes of

the mortar and pestle *[batu lesong]* and the Chinese grinding ink stone and stick used in Chinese painting, in terms of how they each function in the spaces of the *Peranakan* kitchen and in the artist studio respectively. I suggested that both sets of equipment shape, develop, and form the identities of their users. These identities were encapsulated within the materials and the processes they employed. When my mother insisted on specific ways to use the mortar and pestle to make spice paste, she was in fact showing me how to be a *Peranakan*. I discussed the notion of 'windows without roots' in the section on the glutinous rice balls *[kueh ee]*. I highlighted that the generational stories that have been affixed within selected frames, were like dandelions seen through the window, where their roots were out of sight. I argued that stories presented within the limitation of these windows may not stand up to scrutiny if rituals are preserved solely for ritual sake. I proposed the importance of teasing the 'ghosts' within the objects by recognising their potentials and allowing them to respond back with embedded, forgotten, and untold stories. The stories held within the objects in this chapter revealed much about expectations - such as maintaining and achieving propriety and finesse to preserve the *Peranakan* identity. What can be interpreted through this chapter is the attitude of particularity. Particularity can be read in more than one way, for it can suggest the inclination towards exactitude, fastidious attention on things, or it could suggest the over-fixation on something that one finds hard to move on from.

In chapter 2, I looked at the current psyche towards the symbolic objects designed or used by the *Peranakan*s for protection. I reflected on my personal childhood experience of wearing talismans and discussed its potency and relationship with my body and the spaces in which they operated. I also examined the small mirrors used by the *Peranakan*s in traditional rituals, and the traditional *Peranakan* wedding gears, in terms of the significance

they carry. Focusing on the idea of 'protection', I traced the objects back to their origins, to the time they were intended and made. My investigation culminated into the *"Weight of the Moving Thread"* - a three-part performance presented in the video format and designed to be played concurrently. The process eventually led to the surfacing of two paradoxes - 'Weightiness' and 'Concealment'. These paradoxes appeared to be tightly bounded to past cultural responsibilities and expectations that once came with the objects, which may have contributed to their enigmatic presence today. The attitude towards these protective objects appears to have been affected by the extent which they fit into modern living. The notions of 'Weightiness', and 'Concealment', apart from their physical manifestation, are also embedded within the narratives of those who shared about them. I highlighted how the past benefits of having these protective objects, have somehow turned into obligations and burdens today. I regarded the paradoxes as prompts for future reconsiderations and suggested that the relationship of the user/owner/appreciator, and the objects be readjusted. The paradoxes – 'weightiness' and 'concealment', can be interpreted with reference to the physicality of mass (weightiness) and volume (concealment). Mass and volume are inherently present in all objects, and in no way can they be ignored or considered void or non-existing. These objects can be deemed necessary and functional, or they could just be in the way, based on how they are being considered. The objects discussed in chapter 2 – talismanic symbols, ornaments, architectural fixtures, protection mirrors, and rituals, may have been regarded in both ways, depending on the contexts in which they have been used. This recalls a conversation I had with a participant of this project, Kaleb, about material inheritance. He lamented that many things were cleared out by his mother when they moved house. No one else in his family except him was interested enough to hold on to their family heirlooms, as they have very little practical value today. As

time passes, these objects would gradually become lost to families and individuals. Over time, the ownership of these objects has been gradually transferred to history and culture and to collecting institutions. In other words, many *Peranakan*s today no longer own these objects 'fully' or have meaningful possession of them. Parts that they do not own probably appear less charming now, while the few parts they do own are now perhaps superficial. With these thoughts, I discussed about 'standing in front of a mirror', to imagine being on the same side of the cultural objects, to imagine a future with them. Considering the long existing disconnection between the *Peranakan*s today and their cultural-material legacy, I proposed that the mirror could be used as a tool to alter and improve the equivocal relationship between the *Peranakan*s and their cultural objects.

In Chapter 3, I considered the continuing presence of the beaded shoes *[kasot manek], the surname lantern [teng ji seh]* and the betel nut box *[tempat sireh]*. I examined their silent presence as objects that are kept away safely in boxes, as decorations that sit discreetly on the display shelf. I discussed their quasi-visible presence, as I imagined the roles they might have played in the *Peranakan* household of the past, operating within a predetermined cultural frame harking back to their privileged and political affiliations. Using 'visibility' and 'invisibility' as anchors, I imagined the embodied experience of the absent body who wears the beaded shoes. Through *'Light conversation'*, I re-possessed the void within the surname lantern with a personified flame, a new kind of presence. I scrutinized the fading red stains produced by the chewing of the betel and contemplated on the different ways that the betel nut box can be re-evaluated beyond their red-stained history. I then proposed to shine multiple lights on the objects that we may have been black marked, to consider the generative prospect of merging multiple shadows as a way of introducing

new dimensions. These objects may have a future if we take notice and put effort into developing their 'secret visibility' through imaginative means. The void in the objects, although not always literal, speaks of a sort of invisible presence. By 'filling up' these voids, I realised an acute sense of agency, when the void becomes a space for openness that can be meaningfully harnessed.

I have focused on 'lost' as an experience hinging at the threshold between the past and the future. The past is like a beacon that proclaims what we had, in the case of the *Peranakan* objects, the beacon holds the cultural materials that were once outward expressions of prestige and uniqueness. The future of these objects, is however, shrouded by a veil of uncertainty and vagueness. These sentiments may have been the inherent characteristic of most futures, but the poignancy of this 'lost' may only be truly felt upon the realisation of an impossible future. The impossible future, I posit, emerges from the vantage point of the present, where the transition and connection between the past and future occurs, a conduit in the past-present-future continuum. The present becomes a place of action, imbued with immediacy and an expectation for change. Yet, it is also from this point, that the disconnection from the past becomes a missing lead that hinders future progression. The loss of a possible future was the impetus of this study, which I initially defined as a 'lack', of not having, or missing, of deprivation and invisibility. Hence, 'Lost' can be read as the lack of control. However, 'lost' is also situational, as it is dependent on comparative circumstances. 'Lost' is entirely conceivable by comparison to 'gain', or with the expectation of gaining. It is when a 'gain' is not in sight, that the sense of lost is validated. Through this research, I realised that 'lost is gain'. It can be said that the 'lost *Peranakan*' has gained new ways of navigating 'lost'. 'Lost' has been reframed, into a viable

condition for the preservation and conservation of the Peranakan identity to take new forms.

Navigating Unknowns

Practice has yielded new interpretations of the 'lost' *Peranakan* objects. 'Lost' has taken on new meanings as a result, essentially by navigating through three conditions that are inherent in the practice methodology – the unknown, disruptions, and complexities. 'Lost' is made operative and effectual through material manipulations and theorisation. Artistic reinterpretation and reimagination of the 'lost' objects have revealed insights relating to identity, protection, and continuity. In 'Identity', I examined the *Peranakan* identity in terms of how it plays out through the cultural body, space, and motion. I discussed the body's relationships with the *Peranakan* traditional blouse and wrap skirt *[Nyonya sarong kebaya]* and the brooch *[kerosang].* I examined the interactive spaces of the mortar and pestle *[batu lesong]* and the rituals and practices surrounding it. The various instances of close-looking have highlighted a few things about identity- that identity is performative and attitudinal, and they are held together by activities, things, and spaces. It can be said that our identity is performed through repetitions and influenced by the expectations of us to perform in certain ways. These expectations, in turn, shape the reality that our identity purportedly drives. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1974 :44) commented that social activities involve repetitive acts that are characterised as "slow process", and likewise, the "slow flux" that takes place over time. This view is echoed in Butler's (1988) discussion of gender identity, that an identity is instituted through stylised, repetitive acts of the body through time, as enactments that constitutes the illusion of self (gendered self as she proposes). In the case of the *Peranakan* identity, repetitive acts are not always

continuous over time. Some rituals may have stopped at some point, but continued at a later time, or in a different generation, while others may have stopped indefinitely. In 'Protection', I explored the 'lost' symbolisms of protective objects, and studied the rationales behind their conception, making, and presentation. The process has revealed current sentiments of equivocality and ambivalence towards these symbolisms. In 'Continuity', I looked at lost experiences that were long forgotten, and constructed objects that could be a part of a future journey. Ultimately, 'lost' has become a facilitator of an imaginative leap, a medium through which creative visions can be projected.

Fundamentally, practice has facilitated the shift from material absence to immaterial richness. It has enabled me to take possession of what was absent, what is left, and ultimately, what can still be created. The making of art objects epitomises the very notion of 'creation'. The art object is something that does not yet exist until it is brought into being by the artist. In contrast with traditional methods of examining objects, where knowledge is derived from interaction with what was already there (things that were already made or formed), the artistic method is different, it examines objects in the making, where knowledge emerges through its coming into form. With this, I propose to draw a parallel between the prior non-existence of the art object, and the missing or absent objects of the *Peranakan*s. There is, materially speaking, very little one can hold on to, considering that both the art object and the 'lost' object are on one hand yet-to-be-formed, and on the other, 'lacking form'. I posit that it is within this formlessness that the art object and the lost objects collide in liminality, where the characteristics of both interpermeate and regenerate. It is a process of charting a route where there is none, a journey from the 'unknown' to the 'known' where imaginative leaps are made into the unknown, leading critical insights to

change what we know (Sullivan, 2009). This plunging into the unknown was exactly where I was at in the beginning, where I began to trace the journey of 'lost'. The imaginative leap into the unknown became the primary mode of my inquiry. The 'unknown' is a place with no expectations, for there is freedom, where there is no right or wrong, for there are no paths. It is a space to test, develop and grow ideas, but also a space where pre-established concepts are re-examined and changed.

Navigating Disruptions

Practice operates as a form of intervention in this study. Artistic inventions occur when art interacts with existing structures or situations (Tate, n.d). In other words, practice can be said to be characteristically disruptive, cutting through pre-conceived knowledge and accepted norms, manifesting between bodies, events, places, and time. In this research, practice cuts through the personal, historical, and geographical, as well as the physical, and the intangible. Practice has put the many objects selected for this study through different forms of internal examination, by 'getting into' the core of physical objects. The double irony of trying to 'get into things' is often followed by losing sight of the very things one tries to get into, and as more things start to reveal themselves in the process, not everything gets to be seen. It has been a critical interruption that is necessary for the re-examination and revaluation of existing relationships surrounding the objects. These disruptions arose from responsivity and reflections, they were emergent rather than planned, like the unlikely use of corset boning and cable wires in my version of the sacred name lantern, or me chewing off the fraying threads from the embroidered cheese cloth. Using various materials that do not sit comfortably with the existing materials or employing methods that appear to jar

against more predictable approaches, disruptions occur primarily in the bid to find things out. There was no intention to diminish the sanctity of these objects, or to distort them deliberately simply for the sake of creating something different. These disruptions emerged as spaces where questionings take place through materials and materiality, and with the agency of the artist's handling. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's notion of 'handlability', Bolt (2010) reiterates his argument that the handling of materials and processes is the basis of knowledge that occurs before any contemplative theorisation. In other words, questioning occurs after the 'handling', and through disruptions.

Significantly, these disruptions illuminated new ways to reconsider the *Peranakan* objects that are so often regarded as emblematic representation of the *Peranakan* identity, or as outward markers of *Peranakan*-ness. What eventually emerged from the disruptions created by practice, are silent markers that are discrete, and ironically, hidden within the outward markers themselves. I posit that silent markers are existing perspectives and attitudes held by the *Peranakan*s today. They are not the physical objects that have long been part of the identification narrative - the traditional attires and accessories, emblematic decorations, ceremonial, and ritualistic objects used or found in the *Peranakan* households. These silent markers have brought with them the uncertainties and anxieties that many *Peranakan*s, including myself may have, the difficulty of visualising *Peranakan*-ness in the future.

Navigating Complexities

I began this research with only fragments, fragments of family narratives, fragments of objects I had lost, fragments of memories shared by close friends and relatives. The

possession of these fragments soon became the reason that ushered me into this study. I wanted to make sense of them. This research grew from a complicated place, due to the many uncertainties and uneasy relationships involving objects, cultural identity, and cultural legacy. Complexity is, however, an essential characteristic of practice-led research, and its impact in unsettling and shaping research has been considered one of the factors that delineate practice-led from other research approaches (Haseman and Mafe, 2009). Complexity occurs at the critical juncture where material and materiality, creative genres and disciplines meet (Haseman and Mafe, 2009). These perspectives echo the view of Sullivan (2014), as he expressed the urgency to develop and adopt creative methodologies in our complex study of contemporary human tendencies and unprecedented scenarios. Interpretations generated through practice have the ability to transcend the limits of long dominant research practices struggling to cope with the complex realities caused by human actions today (Sullivan, 2005). Underlining the idea of complexity, is the messiness of real-world phenomena, where experiences are not formulaic but constantly in flux, where interactions are not pre-determined but fluid. In the same way how real-world scenarios and variables react to each other, the complexities imbued within each material, each handling, and each observation, gives rise to meaningful interactions between them.

In this research, practice has created opportunities for the emergence of visual vocabularies to articulate ideas relating to embodiment, connectedness, disassociations, and displacement. Through practice, the bodily, spatial, and ritualistic relationships with cultural objects are brought into dynamic negotiations. These changing relationships echo Butler's (1988) view on challenging the reified status of rituals, as she suggests breaking or subverting the repeated acts of rituals through a different sort of repetition. Changing

repetitions may be more complex than we think, as it involves moving away from what is familiar, socially agreeable, or legitimate. The idea of going through the same repetition may seem mundane or uneventful, but it may still be a route that offers fewer risks. Change can be a very a complex issue. Myriad of ideas and relationships form entangled webs of interconnected variables that generated more questions than answers. The explorations reveal attitudes of particularity and ambivalence, as well as paradoxical sentiments towards the cultural materials of the *Peranakan*s. Complexities have yielded further complications. These insights are no less complicated than the ones I started off with. There are certainly no straightforward answers, but there are possibilities. I began this study with fragments, and I now feel that I am ending this study with more fragments than I had ever imagined. I would suggest, boldly, that I perceive this state of fragmentation to be necessary. Each fragment would possess its own unique set of variables that would further disrupt and complicate, and that the spaces between each fragment would be expandable and fluid.

But what do I hope to achieve with these fragments? What are the foreseeable outcomes I hope to achieve after obtaining these insights? As I have mentioned, I believe that there are many possibilities. However, I will endeavour towards a more immediate outcome for now. I hope to present these fragments as visual analogies and metaphors in the viva exhibition, to provide a holistic view of this research. I shall embark on this plan with the believe that fragments can give structure to meaning (Sullivan, 2009). I anticipate that this exhibition will not be just a display of disparate objects created through my study. Contrary to that, I envision the objects to be relational and communicative about the various paths I took as I charted my journey, and as I carried with me the various implications of 'lost'. Some examples include - images of artworks, performances, audio,

and video documentations, artefacts, and texts from conversations, comments, and feedback about the exhibition. Conceptualised as a whole, the objects and the creative outcomes aim to bring across the notion of past-present-future continuum. It is equally significant that the exhibition site, United Kingdom, is a land 11 000 kilometres from Southeast Asia from where these objects were obtained or loaned. The distance makes a poignant statement of identity displacement and cultural diaspora, the very conditions that set this research in motion from its beginning. Using visual analogies and metaphors, I aim to connect the viewers with something recognisable and relatable (Sullivan, 2009). Visual analogies and metaphors generated through the various artistic experimentations are encapsulated in many ways through the objects I created in this study. For instance, the ghostly translucent cloud collar embroidery work, video documentation of disembodied beaded shoes, rituals, performances, and object making. Other items may include intergeneration narratives, drawings and paintings, photographs, handwritten notes, and books. As part of the exhibition, I would include a live performance as a way of unpacking the idea of 'motion'. This was inspired by my fieldwork in Singapore at the end of last year. During my meetings with several *Peranakans,* I was shown many things, and most importantly, I was shown how certain things are made or done. For instance, Mr. Goh has showed me the appropriate way to tie a wrap skirt *[sarong]*. My mother had showed me the traditional method of making the spice paste *[rempah].* She even showed me how to make *Peranakan* puddings from scratch. I wish to reiterate the idea of 'making' as I have discussed earlier, the notion of making need not just mean 'constructing', 'putting together, or 'producing'. Instead, making can also mean 'performing', 'altering', 'working out'. Like the motions of tying the wrap skirt and the pounding of spices, these motions capture the subtle knowledge that needs to be unfolded through sequences of actions. They are visual

and layered, direct and immediate as their 'workings' unfold. I feel that this approach may have been overlooked in our contemporary world today, where information acquisition may have become too convenient, at the expense of compromising authentic and meaningful learning experiences. The idea of embodying knowledge through 'motion' would therefore be something worth exploring in the proposed performance, and hopefully something I could further develop for future exhibitions after my PhD study. The curatorial considerations which I shall undertake in the planning of this exhibition, and the various outcomes of this exhibition, will be placed in [Appendix C] of this thesis.

Contributions

This research project aims to make both cultural and methodological contributions. This project aims to find new interpretations for 'lost' objects of the Peranakan-Chinese, where the ability to do so is made possible using the practice-based approach. This research provides a contemporary perspective of a dispossessed *Peranakan* who actively seeks new ways to understand and interpret her cultural materials. It also presents the phenomenological implications of this perspective through art practice. I propose to consider the practice methodology as an effective addition to more traditional methods used in dominant cultural studies on the *Peranakan* identity. Here, the practice approach offers an alternative way of bridging and valuing indigenous knowledge systems, where the knowledge encoded in objects and visuals and oral narratives are considered differently. A similar concern of valuing indigenous knowledge was highlighted by Cai Yunci in her 'Review of Museum of Our Own…'. Cai (2014) reiterated the view of Christina F. Kreps, Associate Professor from Denver University, regarding the importance of acknowledging different

forms and versions of museology created by communities in Southeast Asia. Cai (2014: 3) also highlighted that Krep suggested using multiple interpretations and intangible properties of objects as part of exercising "appropriate museology". Interpreting her proposal through the lens of practice-led research, I propose that art practice has the capacity to carry out these commitments.

It is, however, important to note that my practice reveals my own thoughts and emotions in a very personal way, and they may not represent the experience of all *Peranakan* Chinese. Nonetheless, my personal experience as a *Peranakan* Chinese might still resonate with others in different and equally important ways. In other words, my art practice prompts me to think about my relationship with my cultural identity rather than providing formulaic answers that can be applied to others. This research looks at using art practice as a way of knowing, and fundamentally to demonstrate what artistic approaches can look like, the processes it entails and the possible outcomes it can offer. Practice has facilitated my attentive looking, getting into things, and illuminating the unseen. Intense concentration in practice opens new associations (Sullivan, 2009), it allows me to scrutinise things through material handling and theorising. It connects and disconnects me to things. It disrupts and complicates things. It also leaves portals and pathways, hanging threads and loose ends. It leaves possibilities. An overarching aim is that this research would present itself as a useful source for individuals, groups or cultures facing similar situations of 'lost'. It is for those whose collective or cultural histories have been forgotten, written out, or simply lost. Living in a cultural mosaic of our globalised world today, the respect and appreciation that we accord to diverse cultural entities are crucial to the development of an encompassing and open society. Given that the exposure to the arts and cultures is

instrumental in engendering us to think about who we are, where we are and how we choose to live our lives, this research hopes to open more dialogues on new routes to knowledge at the crossroads of artistic, cultural and research practices. *Peranakan* culture has always been one of the communities that epitomises what it means to be accepting and respectful to other cultures. For centuries, the *Peranakan*s embraced diversity in their everyday living and in many aspects of their lives. It has long been said that the *Peranakan* community is far from being ethnically- constructed. Instead, it is a cultural phenomenon that exists in many permutations. It may also be this inherent slipperiness, that the *Peranakan* culture, in my opinion, continues to be 'lost'. Perhaps also, for the very same reason, new ways of articulating this loss may be what we need to progress beyond this loss. The *Peranakan* heritage is imbued with much potential for future development, hence the importance of not letting it fade into the background, but to make conscious efforts to reinvigorate and regenerate it for the generations to come. Ultimately, it is my hope that this research would encourage and inspire future practice-led practitioners and *Peranakan* researchers to consider less conventional, but comparatively rigorous means of knowing, articulating, and navigating their research in the ever-changing world today.

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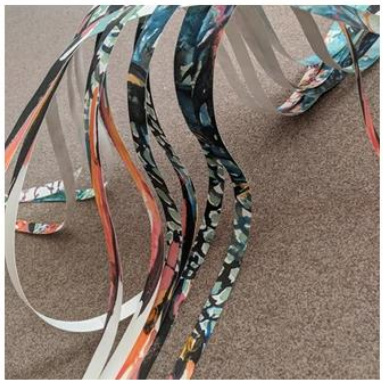
Annex 1: Participants' information

Name	Age group	Residence	Occupation	Cultural affiliation
Betty Low	70s	Singapore	Housewife	Peranakan
Cara Ow	20s	Singapore	Student of Baba Malay Course 2020-2021	Peranakan
Cedric Tan	50s	Malaysia	Baba Cultural Consultant	Peranakan
Fong	20s	Singapore	Individual	Peranakan
Heath Yeo	50s	Singapore	Kebaya Designer and Maker	Peranakan
Josephine	40s	Singapore	Student of Baba Malay Course 2020- 2021	Peranakan
Kaleb (pseudonym)	40s	Singapore	-	Peranakan
Mary (pseudonym)	50s	Singapore	-	Peranakan
Mr. Goh	70s	Singapore	Individual	Peranakan
Uncle Baba	70s	Malaysia	Religious medium	Peranakan

Annex 2: The Illogical Journey of the Mythological Bird

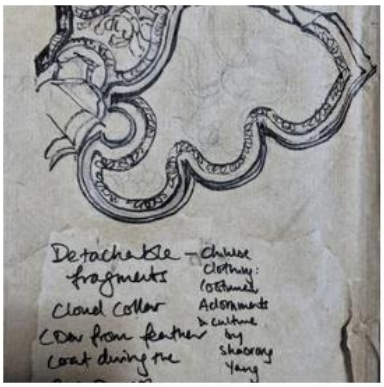
This is the story about the illogical progression of the mythological bird, Phoe.[1] The problem has always been there, that chronological time no longer makes sense to the Phoe, a supposedly magical bird. This time, it started to notice its tattered and fraying feathers. It was horribly uncomfortable; she did not feel like herself anymore. She used to look gorgeous, colourful and regal, but she felt the need to carry on despite her less-than-optimal condition, she had to. Now, the thing about this bird is her inability to recognise its relevance and in particular, her inability to see where her future lies. Having lived for 600 years, Phoe knew that there has to be a catch somehow. Not many birds can live this long, something has to go, obviously. With unyielding determination, she would tend to her wings every night by licking her feathers, straightening and patching together bits that were precariously hanging on its ends. She would often combine herbs and species to concoct her own special medication to treat her wounds.

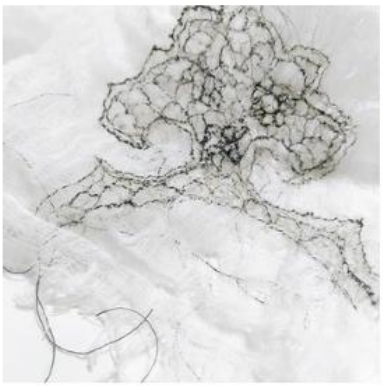


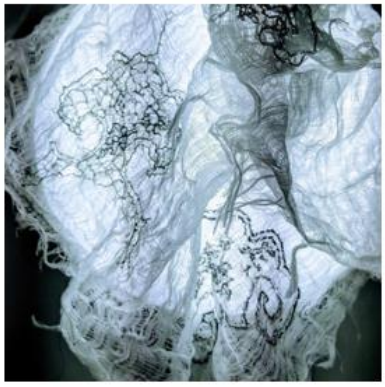



[1] Phoe- short form for Phoenix. The Phoenix has always been considered a symbol of the Peranakan culture.

What agonised her the most was to sew up her gaping wounds with plant fibres she found along the way. As the only bird of her kind to survive each time she comes back to life, she had to know how to take care of herself. Phoe soon noticed that some parts of her wings were missing, "strands that were left behind are nowhere to be found' she thought to herself. Much like history long gone and forgotten, perhaps no one would care about those lost feathers or even care enough to figure out what kind of bird these feathers came from. She found ways to weave her feathers carefully and delicately while trying hard to maintain the structural integrity of her form. She continued patching through the damage and as a means to stop herself from further disintegration. Her persistent efforts soon paid off and she was able to hold her frail frame together in one piece.







I wrote in my art journal "my cultural identity is like the outermost layer of me that will never touch my skin." My next connection to this culture would be my maternal grandmother.

My relationship with her was a rather interesting one. My maternal grandmother was someone I hardly had enough contact with. She resided in Malaysia and would visit us in Singapore about twice a year and my parents would also make an attempt each Chinese New Year to visit my grandparents. However, my grandparents were always busy during our visits, my grandfather will always be at the garden and my grandmother almost always in the kitchen. In the Peranankan household, the mother takes pride in her cooking, and she would take control of every aspect of her food preparation. This means that children like us had no place in the kitchen. As a result of her commitment, my grandmother was almost non-existent in the living room so to speak. One day as I was rummaging through the textiles my mother kept in her cabinet, I came across one of my grandmother's embroideries. It brought back some hazy memories of her. I remember looking at the threads used on the piece, they were rather thick, and the colours were far from flattering. I must say that I was not too enthusiastic about the workmanship more so than I was about the person who made it. It has been many years since my grandmother had passed on. The embroidery work was nowhere to be found. It was nevertheless an intriguing experience to remember her through something she made. Its raw appearance never left my mind, and I could vaguely remember the unevenness of those stitches, a far cry from the usually more refined works I had seen. Despite its imperfection, it was perhaps the only object belonging to her that I can remember, something that she owned and worked on for a period of time. It was rather special to me, it was like a portal that allowed me to relive the moments I spent with her, again and again. My grandmother had the gentlest voice I had ever heard, and she would often pat me on my back affectionately whenever she spoke. To be honest, I cannot recall the exact words she said, all I could remember was the feather-like sensation of her touch, her beautiful smile as her words washed over me like the gentle waves of the sea. I remember being very quiet whenever she was with me. It was never my intention to not speak to her; it was hard to imagine why anyone would not respond to such a warm character. It was simply because I could not converse in her language. She would often include smatters of English words in her attempt to communicate with me. As a Nyonya, she could not speak Mandarin, unlike me, a Singaporean Chinese whose ascribed mother-tongue was Mandarin. We are very different. "She doesn't even look like me", these words still ring in my head every now and then. She was dark and rather tall for an Asian woman, big-boned and had broad shoulders. She dressed humbly, often in western blouse matched with a sarong wrapped around her waist. She looked like someone of Malay ethnicity to me. In fact, both my maternal grandparents looked Malay in every way possible, from the way they dress to the language they spoke. My grandfather was not a Baba, but he spoke in native Bahasa Melayu (Malay language). He left his native home in China at a tender age and had settled in Malaysia since then.This identity-related tension never ceases to exist in my consciousness, and in some ways it fascinates me. I became curious about these conflicting yet intertwining emotions of sentimentality and foreignness.

Phoe glided for days through this unfamiliar land. She was alone. In fact, Phoe was always alone. She was very different from the other birds, which never bothered her the slightest. One could say that Phoe was comfortable under her own feathers. She was aware that she stood out amongst other birds. Not all of them have crazily majestic colourful plumes like hers. That was all she knew about herself, 'a composite of a thousand colours' as she was once told. Phoe flew from one place to another, crossing one ocean to the next. One day, she found herself seeking shelter in a cave. She was totally drenched and was shivering uncontrollably upon entering the cave. All she could hear was the deafening gushing sound of the torrential downpour, which effectively

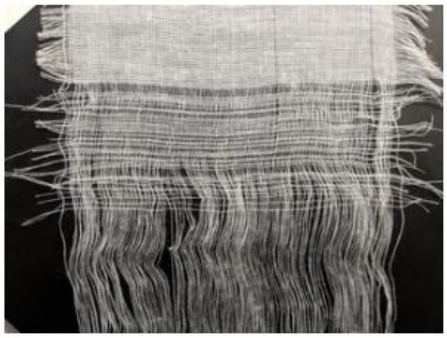
consumed all of her senses. Soon, Phoe began to walk deeper, and deeper into the cave. She needed to find somewhere comfortable and safe to rest for the night, but all she saw was darkness. She finally did get some sleep in the end; she was tired beyond comprehension.

The next morning, Phoe was woken up by a shaft of light from above. As she gradually opened her eyes, she began taking in everything around her. Sinewy rock formations towering above her and surrounding the entire place, Phoe knew this was no ordinary sight. Her curiosity brought her further into the cave and before she knew it, she could see a tiny opening where she thought the exit of the cave would be. She could feel fresh air coming through the gap and so she began to dig, hoping to get a glimpse of the world outside. After hours of digging through the surprising soft wall, she managed to make a hole big enough for herself to get through. Soon, Phoe was outside the cave. One thing that instantly stuck her was the immense scale of the things she saw around her. The trees were incredibly tall and their trunks broad, their chunky appearance made them look like giants stood in their padded armour, ready to take on anything who wishes to challenge them. The plants! They can hardly be considered plants for their luxuriant foliage covered the entire forest floor; their shimmery appearance made them look almost artificial. "The rocks were fascinating as well, just look at how they slide!" Phoe thought to herself. Then upon realising what she just said, she jumped, and repeated "

They slide! They slide!". Something was not right. In fact, everything was wrong. Everything started moving. The trees glided across the forest floor with their roots held together as they 'flew', the rocks spun around in a spiralling mess. The flowers went tunnelling through the ground like some strange alien worms, and not to mention the forest bugs, they seem to disappear and appear in different places. It was so confusing for Phoe. It was a very different world from what she used to experience, very, very different. What a strange land! Nothing appeared constant, perhaps the only constant was change. Phoe was lost, she could not even see the cave where she had spent the whole of last night. A nearby rustle caught her attention, it was caused by one of the strangest creatures she had ever seen. It has antlers resembling that of a deer, scales like a fish and long thin legs like those of an elegant horse and with a long tail with a bushy tassel at its end.

Phoe was shocked for she had no idea what was going to happen. Out of fear, she threw her head back, puffed up her chest and let out a chilling shrill cry. She stretched her gigantic wings, which seemed to go on forever, her body glistened brightly under the moonlight. Her silhouette was that of eerie majesty. An aura of fading glamour encompassed her as she looked to the illuminating moon, before facing the strange creature again. The creature appeared to be bending over to pick something off the ground. Rummaging through the thick build-up of organic matter, the creature found some twigs, branches and dry leaves.





Wasting no time, it proceeded to attach the found materials clumsily onto its body. It wasn't skillful at all, it's all very confusing what it was trying to do. It went on for a bit. Its unusually dense feathers held the appendages in place, it was a surprising success!

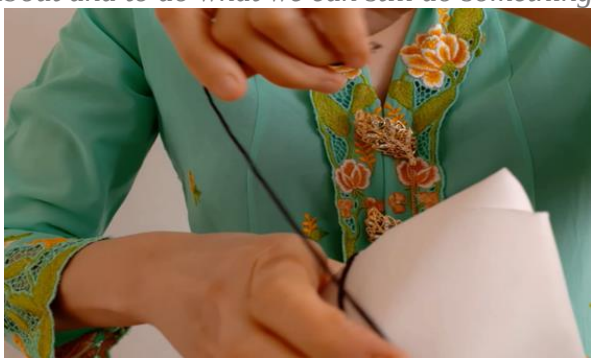
Encouraged by it, it carried on, and each time with more materials. It was a hilarious sight to behold. Phoe was appalled by the sheer bizarreness of such ridiculous display, she was lost for words. What in fact caught her interest as she watched with amazement, was the spectral shadow of the creature, cast on the forest floor. Like a transmogrifying phantom, the shadow began to morph and gradually taking on the form of a bird-like creature. Gradually, a beautifully curved beak started appearing on the shadow, followed by an elegant slender neck, an arched back and a body fluffed up by its contour feathers. Phoe realised that the shadow made her feel that she was looking at her own silhouette, it felt like her. For the first time in her life, Phoe began examining herself, looking at every inch of her feathery coat and thinking to herself how strange it felt. It was a strange sensation, but a familiar one.

In my art journal, I wrote " It's been a week since the performance, and people are still giving me comments on Chukop, very thankful for that, so I've decided to list them down. One viewer made connections between the unthreading of the distressed cheese cloth, its diaphanous quality and the idea of fragility. They felt a sense of discomfort, especially when my collaborator's face got cropped and that only a part of his body was visible on screen (thinking that things were not working out). The viewer felt the tension building from the very moment we set up the Skype connection. He was anticipating possible technical glitches as he had little faith in technology and was worried that the performance may not run smoothly. Others felt that the arrangements were clearly artistic decisions made to create the desired effects. The viewers were touched by the intimacy and simultaneous distance created using the Skype technology. They commented on the well synchronized and well-thought-out actions in the way that no words were needed yet there was a clear sequence of actions. They liked the use of thread as a metaphor for 'connection' and thought that the idea of using noodles was brilliant. They could see the juxtaposition between staged, purposeful presentation of tradition and the banality of a domestic, everyday scene. They were also fascinated by the traditional garb worn by us although nothing much was mentioned about it apart from the intricate designs and vibrant colours on the attire. One viewer commented that she was inspired by the performance, which made her think about the kind of actions she could create for her research on 'drawing'. I need to think about what all of these could mean, what's next?

It has been two weeks since I left Birmingham. The Coronavirus crisis is worrying.
The problem now is not knowing if anything I am doing now will be of any use considering that none of the things I do now seem urgent. Needless to say, they distract me from the grim crisis and the dreadful global statistics I had to endure seeing every morning, there is however a clear sense of false security that all will be well and that we will soon be meeting, discussing and presenting our research to our friends at the University. But the truth is that we now live in a world where toilet paper could possibly be the most important paper to have, perhaps more so than churning out paper loaded with texts and images that probably don't matter to anyone, anymore, well unless it is printed on toilet paper.

Who cares if I do not address the waning cultural spirit of the Peranakans? Who cares if some Peranakan old grannies have their stories to share? Who cares how amazing artistic research methodologies are and how it can potentially contribute to the betterment of humankind? I guess at this point I can only be grateful that I can still process these emotions. This state of emotional deprivation has definitely made me more aware of how fragile human relationships can be and how importantly it is for me to see other beings on my little monitor

screen. To me at least, I just have to keep going, even if it means being deemed irritatingly pretentious or overly optimistic. Move regardless, work regardless, write and draw regardless, for we need to give ourselves a chance to worry about what we can still worry about and to do what we can still do something about.




In my art journal, I wrote "I looked at objects that were forgotten, remembered, used, discarded, absent. I looked at the incoherent and missing narrative from my Peranakan family, and the mystery that surrounded the lost object. It was like a convenient container where I kept my memories of her. It was like a foreign object that I will never see again, a dislocation from home, which triggered feelings of connection and disconnection."

I am trying to refocus as I have paused a little too long. I am now looking at my immediate environment for inspiration, looking at some of the photographs I took during my walks at the nature reserves. I thought of transposing some of them onto old Peranakan tile designs. I began visualising flower motifs on Peranakan objects just like how flowers were commonly used as the main motifs on Peranakan tiles in the earlier days. Using Google Lens app, I was able to identify the types of plants I found along the way.




Gradually I began exploring Dandelion, a common weed here in the UK, and there is a system kept in place to get rid of them. To me at least, this was a plant forgotten by most, but

one of the most resilient I've ever came across. The Dandelion soon became a metaphor to represent my much forgotten but still very beautiful Peranakan culture.

The Case of an Unusual Presence is an incident of re-storying a ubiquitous weed. The irony of this story lies in the fact that one often lose sight of the protagonist. Where did it go? It was here a minute ago? What have I seen, and would I remember it again? Would it still be as fun as it was before or have I lost it all over again? Wait for it, wait for it...and poof! Now what did I say?

Next morning, Phoe continued her adventure on the strange magical land. She found a really amazing plant, it has a round fluffy head, standing on a tall and thin stem. Phoe bent down and moved closer to the plant, something happened. The tiny hairs attached to the head of the plant suddenly began to detach themselves. The poofy little things soon got carried away in the wind, Phoe thought they looked like *pom-poms*, whatever that meant. Phoe took off and glided alongside the *pom-poms*, where they sometimes travel long distances. Some pom-poms ended up in cracks on the ground, some got stuck in sticky muddy piles of soil, some on meadows and hills, some floated-on water. She watched as it happened, she was curious where these *pom-poms* would end up. She was now so far away from the magical land, but she didn't mind. She soon witnessed how the little poofy things got rooted, grew and flowered, they were beautiful. Phoe thought to herself "Trust the wind for it can bring you to places you never thought you could go." Some *pom-poms* floated a while before they settle, some stayed up high in the air, some landed quick, even for those carried away by the currents. Phoe realised that was difficult to decide which to follow and which to ignore.

Phoe made a discovery. The plants ... they look discoloured, cold, strange. They hardly looked alive. Then again, you could not say that they were dead. They were in a state limbo, of neither dead nor alive, neither growing nor disintegrating. Phoe can obviously relate to that; her fraying wings and weary body... yet she was still very much alive.

'Marcescence, a boundless moment' describes the state of endless existence in nature. Inspired by Robert Frost's 'A Boundless Moment', this series explores the inevitable cyclical nature of life and its continual flow and transition between life and death. The seamless connections between growth and decay sets in motion meditation of our own existence.

The shadow of language by Olivier Richon discusses the creation of shadows as a phantasmagoric act, a language that defies definitions and specifics, but instead creates and alters like a stain that did not initially exist but eventually claiming existence beyond its physical limits. Shadows illuminate, elucidate and proclaim while simultaneously obscure, complicate and mystify.

In my work, the stain or residue became more comprehensible when presented with the time lapse footage showing the drying process of the paint marks. The process indicates a story one of what happened before the stain marks appear. However, the stain also became a point of departure for those who had not seen what happened prior. On close inspection, one observes the added textures of the patio slabs appearing almost shadow-like, an added visual interest to the residual marks. In many ways, the faint mark can potentially spin off in many directions, producing diverse readings other than the intended.

Annex 3: Ethical Review document

Jennifer Ng's Practice-led research explores how the artistic approaches can be used as a methodology to re-story the objects belonging to a hybridised community known as the Peranakan in the Southeast Asia. The Peranakan culture today is one that reflects a waning spirit and to many, a displaced sense of cultural identity. However, central to the evolving cultural identity is the ubiquitous presence of the Peranakan objects. Jennifer's research attempts to explore the ways which contemporary artistic interpretation and reimagination can embody stories about objects from the Peranakan Chinese families in Singapore and Malaysia. She intends to collect stories relating to Peranakan objects used today, objects that were used or existed in the past, objects that most people have forgotten or have become unknown in today's context, objects that were considered still valuable today but are losing their significance as time passes, objects that are of interest until today but have little or no stories attached to them. Using the Practice-based methodology, this research aims to explore alternative means to more conventional research formats used in Peranakan researches and demonstrate the ways in which artistic practices can be used as research strategies to understand cultural phenomena within the regions of Singapore and Malaysia and in the wider global context.

In this practice-based research, two sets of primary data will be collected through a dual-interpretation process. One set of data will include chosen participants' interpretation of their experiences. This set of data will be collected through individual and focus group open-ended interviews which may include images as well as video, audio and textual information. The data will include the participants' perspectives towards the cultural objects belonging to the Peranakan Chinese community in Singapore and Malacca. Participants in this research reflect a range, of people below 21 years old, 21 to 40 years old and 50 years old and above. As this research was motivated by the waning interest and cultural narratives of the Peranakans, choosing participants below 21 years old would provide a demographic that could possibly experience the impact with greater intensity than the older generations. The lowest aged participant is targeted at 16. Amongst many who are interested in the culture and are making efforts to be more involved in it, most of them fall within the category of 21 to 40 years of age. The individuals belonging to the category of 50 years old and above are those most connected to the Peranakan culture in terms of their understanding of the cultural practices and the language used within the Peranakan community. The participants from this research will be people affiliated to the Peranakan culture in the following ways: people who identify themselves as Peranakans through ancestral connection, people who have Peranakan relatives, people who are interested in the Peranakan cultural beliefs and practices, as well as people who are not Peranakans by heritage but are interested in Peranakan cultural beliefs and practices. The participants would be members from Peranakan-related organisations such as e.g The Peranakan Association Singapore, The Peranakan Museum Singapore, Gunong Sayang Association and social network platforms such as the Peranakan online discussion platforms. They are people interested in promoting the Peranakan culture through their involvement in events such as the Peranakan theatre and performances, workshops and tours. They are also connected to their families and friends whom may also have close relationship with the Peranakan culture and are willing to

share about their experiences. Participants could also be members from the researcher's own Peranakan family residing in both Singapore and Malaysia. She is aware of the potential bias of interviewing my own family members. In view of this situation, she will keep a reflexive stance throughout her research by keeping track on the accounts of her activities. This study may also be subjected to interpretive bias due to the heavily reflective approaches employed. It is therefore vital that the transitions and interactions between the two roles - the practitioner and researcher, are clear. All processes will be dutifully journaled in the style of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) in an attempt to capture the thoughts and ideas of both roles and specifically with close reference to relevant contexts. As the transcription and data analysis will necessarily involve subjective description, personal interpretation and judgement, Jennifer will engage supplementary information such as related images and documents to support existing data with clarity and integrity. Multiple sources will be employed for the purpose of triangulating data. The researcher will use multiple frameworks to discuss her findings and cross-reference the ideas to develop her inquiry.

This set of data will be collected and analysed and use as stimuli to create a body of artworks, which the researcher will then use as a means to re-interpret the data. The researcher will respond to the data by generating artistic outputs for further analysis and discussion. The outcomes generated by the researcher would be considered as the second set of data in this research, which will be further analysed and discussed at a later stage.

Ethical considerations

The research will adhere to Birmingham City University's Research Ethical Framework.

Participants

The participants include people below 21 years old, 20 to 40 years old and 50 years old and above. The researcher is aware that some participants fall within the category of vulnerable individuals who may not understand what it means to participate in research and what constitutes informed consent (Allen, 2017). The researcher will therefore provide explanation pitched at a suitable language and content level to the participants under the age of 18 and 21 accordingly to the informed age of consent for research in the countries where the participants reside. The explanation will include the purpose and process involved in the interview and how the information collected will be used in the research. The researcher will only identify herself as a researcher and clearly explain her role in the research and in the interview(s) she is conducting with utmost integrity.

Informed consent

Before their involvement, informed consent will be obtained from all participants in this research to ensure that they are fully aware of the outcomes of their involvement. An agreement would be drawn up in the form of a consent letter to detail their rights to the information shared and to its dissemination. The written consent will include detailed information about how the data will be collected, stored and disseminated. They would be informed of the dissemination formats produced by the research such as exhibitions, presentations, talks and publications.The consent form will also give the participants options on whether they would prefer themselves and their contributions to be acknowledged or anonymised (Refer to Appendix B). All participants will also be provided with the information sheet (Refer to Appendix A) with details on the nature of the research and the participants' involvement which will be thoroughly explained to all participants before their involvement.

All interviews will be recorded, and a transcript may also be produced for each interview. The interviewees will be sent the transcripts and given the opportunity to rectify factual errors and remove any portion of the transcript they wish not to be included in the final text. They will be given the opportunity to include their afterthought and indicate edits before the final dissemination of the contents.

All participants will be given the right to withdraw from the research at any time. In the case of withdrawal, all possible measures will be taken to ensure that the participants' contributions from existing publications will cease to be further disseminated or produced. The participants will also be informed that it may not be possible to make any more changes to the texts already in publication at the time of their withdrawal.

For participants under the age of 21, a written consent will be obtained from the parents or guardians of the participants prior to the commencement of the research. According to the Institutional Review Board in Singapore, a Minor is considered to be a person who is under 21 years of age and who has never been married and that appropriate consent must be obtained from both the Minor and at least one adult parent or guardian of the Minor. In Malaysia Minor Participant in research are people under the age of 18. The parental/guardian consent will be taken in the same copy Informed Consent Form together with the participant's consent.

Data gathering and storage

Interview recordings from participants and images obtained in the course of this research will be captured using secure devices. When voice recording is used during the interviews, the Verbatim transcription method will be employed to transcribe the data with the

intention to preserve the integrity of the utterances during the interviews. Participants will be assured that the recordings will not be used for commercial purposes.

The researcher will take all measures to ensure that sensitive data provided by the participants of this research will be carefully kept and that in no circumstances should they be disclosed without their consent. All digitalised transcripts and field notes generated will be stored using BCU secured 'One Drive' with restricted access to the research investigator Su Yin Jennifer Ng. Physical documents will be secured and locked for as long as required before they are scanned and destroyed. The scanned files will then be stored in BCU's 'One Drive' with its access limited to the research investigator and her research supervisors Dr. Joshua Jiang and Dr. Sian Vaughan from the Birmingham City University. All data will be held for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project as indicated in the BCU Guidelines and Procedures for Good Research Practice.

Acknowledging Contributions, Anonymisation and Confidentiality

To ensure that all participants' identities are protected in terms of their contributions in academic publications or other forms of dissemination, there will be an option for them to be anonymised in this research. They will also be able to indicate their permission for the full acknowledgement of their contribution. This also includes any creative outcomes produced by the participants in the research, which will be given all due acknowledgement to ensure and maintain full integrity of the authorship and copyright of their works. Likewise, all other information with the possibility of revealing the identities of the participants will be withheld for the same purpose.

Su Yin Jennifer Ng, 11 September 2020

Annex 4: Participant Information Sheet

Research title:

The Role of Contemporary Artistic Interpretation and Reimagination in the Re-Storying of the Peranakan-Chinese Objects

Brief summary

You are being invited to participate in this research project due to your affiliation to the Peranakan culture. Your involvement will be a great contribution to my research if you decide to participate in this interview.

It is therefore important for you to understand why this research is being carried out and what being a participant in this research would entail. Please take your time to read the information below, and you are welcome to ask for clarification if in doubt. You may also request for more information to be provided if necessary.

This research attempts to explore the ways which contemporary artistic interpretation and reimagination can embody stories about objects from the Peranakan Chinese families in Singapore and Malaysia. The Peranakan culture today is one that reflects an evolving cultural identity. Central to the evolving cultural identity is the ubiquitous presence of the Peranakan objects. Using the Practice-based methodology, this research aims to explore alternative means to more conventional research formats used in Peranakan research. This methodology can be useful to explore the cultural phenomena locally and in the wider global context.

As the researcher, I will be collecting data for this research through individual and focus group open-ended questionnaires and interviews. I will be using the online platform as well as face-to-face interaction for this purpose. The interviews can include both video and audio recordings. The data will reflect your views towards the Peranakan cultural objects. Responses provided by you will be used by me to generate artistic outputs for analysis and discussion.

Firstly, a questionnaire will be sent to you to gather preliminary information. This will be followed by one or more interviews. The interviews and focus group discussions will be recorded, and transcripts may be produced from these sessions. I will also be asking you for images as part of the process if required. I may use the images and extracts from the interview/focus group discussions for my dissertation, in exhibitions, conference presentations, talks and published papers, in both physical print and online publication. Prior to use, you will be sent the transcripts, which you will then have an opportunity to rectify any factual errors and remove any portion of the transcript you wish not to be included in the final text. You will also have the liberty to include your afterthoughts and indicate what needs to be edited before I use the contents.

You will have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. In the case of withdrawal, all possible measures will be taken to ensure that your contributions for the publications will be omitted. It may not be possible to make any more changes to the texts already in publication at the time of their withdrawal.

If you are considered Minors, a written consent will be obtained from your parents before the start of this research. According to the Institutional Review Board in Singapore, a Minor is considered to be a person who is under 21 years of age and who has never been married and that appropriate consent must be obtained from both the Minor and at least one adult parent or guardian of the Minor. In Malaysia, Minor Participants in research are people under the age of 18. The parental/guardian consent will be taken in the same Informed Consent Form as the participant's consent.

I will be collecting the interview recordings and images you provide using secure devices. To transcribe the data, I will be using the verbatim transcription method. This method aims to capture not only what you say, but also the filler words you use and other sounds you make such as laughter, coughs and even silences. I consider the verbatim transcription method an effective way to preserve the integrity of your response. Please be assured that the data collected from you will not be used for commercial purpose.

I will take all measures to ensure that all data provided by you for this research be carefully kept and that in no circumstance should they be disclosed without your consent. All digitalised transcripts, field notes and images will be stored using the Birmingham City University secured 'One Drive' with restricted access only to the me and my research supervisors Dr. Joshua Jiang and Dr. Sian Vaughan from BCU. All data will be held for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project as indicated in the Birmingham City University Guidelines and Procedures for Good Research Practice.

To ensure that your identity is protected, you will be given an option to indicate if you would want your contributions in academic publications or other forms of dissemination to be acknowledged or anonymised. This also includes any creative outcomes produced by you in the process of this research. You will be given all due acknowledgement for these creative outcomes to protect the full integrity of your authorship and the copyright of your works.

Thank you for your participation.

Annex 5: Participant Consent Form

Study Title: Re-storying the Peranakan Objects using artistic methodology

Name of Researcher: Su Yin Jennifer Ng

Please complete all relevant sections of this form.

I _____ (name of participant) voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Please tick one of the following:
☐I would prefer my contributions to be acknowledged.
☐I would prefer my contributions to be anonymised.

I give my consent to the use of data for this research on the understanding that:

- I am required to read the information sheet provided for this study.
- I have had the opportunity to consider the information, raise questions and have had them answered satisfactorily.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study thoroughly explained to me in the information sheet before my involvement in this research.
- I have been informed on how the data will be collected, stored and disseminated.
- My interview(s)/focus group discussion(s) conducted by the researcher will be recorded in the form of recorded interviews and/or completed questionnaires.
- I will also be providing relevant images to the researcher as part of my contribution.
- I understand that my contributions in the form of images and interview/focus group discussion in this study will not be used for commercial purposes.
- I have the option of having my contributions acknowledged or anonymised.
- I have the option of rectifying factual errors and remove any portion of the transcript I do not wish included for use.
- I am free to withdraw at any time without providing any reason or refuse to answer any question without consequences of any kind.

- Images and extracts from my interview(s)/focus group discussion(s) may be used by the researcher in dissertation, exhibitions, conference presentations, talks and published papers in both print and online platforms.
- My contributions in the form of images and transcripts will be made available for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project.
- All digitalised images, transcripts and field notes generated will be stored using BCU secured 'One Drive' with restricted access to the research investigator Su Yin Jennifer Ng and relevant individuals from the Birmingham City University. I give permission for these individuals to have access to these data.

For participants above the age of 21

I acknowledge that I am giving informed consent to participate in this study.

Name of participant:

_____

_____

Signature of participant: Date

For participants under the age of 21

I acknowledge that I am giving informed consent to participate in this study.

Name of participant:

_____

Name of parent/guardian:

_____

Parent/guardian's relationship to participant:

_____

Email address of parent/guardian:

_____

Telephone/ Mobile number of parent/guardian:

_____

_____
Signature of participant: Date

For the parent/guardian of participants under the age of 21

I acknowledge that I am giving informed consent for my child/ward to participate in this study.

I acknowledge that my contact details had been obtained from their child/ward for the purpose of this research.

Name of parent/guardian: _____

_____

Signature of parent/guardian: Date

For the researcher

I acknowledge that the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

Name of researcher:

_____

_____

Signature of researcher: Date

Appendix A: A list of pre-prepared questions for open-ended interviews

- Is there a Peranakan object in your family you remember and would like to share with me about?

- If you can remember this object? Can you tell me more about it?

- Please describe the object in detail. You may describe the colour, shape, form, dimensions, size, weight, where it was kept, used, made, or found.

- Was this object found with other objects or was it on its own?

- Was this object in good, somewhat good, somewhat bad, or bad condition?

- In your opinion, how do you think the object was in such condition?

- Does the object still exist? If yes, who owns it now?

- Did this object belong to another person in the past and who?

- What was the object used for? Or what do you think the object was used for?

- From your knowledge, what would be the most common use for this object now?

- What kind of relationship do you have or have had with this object?
  You may elaborate on how significant this object is to you. Please provide as many details as possible

- Are there ways you would like this object to be regarded, used, presented, displayed, preserved or kept or taken care of by your family? Please explain and elaborate on your response.

- Are there any object(s) in the Peranakan household/family you can associate with, that has to do with the idea of

- Were /Are there specific events where these objects would be used?

- Are these objects still commonly used amongst Peranakans today? If so, why? If not, why?
- Are there such objects in your family that were/are important or significant to you?
- Were there practices in the past that were not as successfully passed down, and are now forgotten?
- How are these practices symbolic or important?
- Has these practices anything to do with protection?
- What are some of the most important motifs or symbols that suggest the idea of protection valued by the Peranakans?
- If you must name a particular symbol or motif that is most important to the Peranakan culture, what would it be?

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Research title: **The Role of Contemporary Artistic Interpretation and Reimagination in the Re-Storying of the Peranakan-Chinese Objects**

Questionnaire

Please tick all that apply:

☐I consider myself to be Peranakan
☐Both my parents are Peranakan
☐One of my parents is Peranakan
☐I have Peranakan relatives
☐I do not have any Peranakan heritage

Please tick all that apply:

☐I am confident that I understand Peranakan cultural beliefs and practices
☐I follow Peranakan cultural beliefs and practices in my everyday life
☐I sometimes follow Peranakan cultural beliefs and practices
☐I do not adopt Peranakan cultural beliefs and practices, but I am interested in them
☐I do not adopt Peranakan cultural beliefs and I am not interested in them

1. Do you associate any particular objects with Peranakan culture?

_____

2. Are there particular Peranakan objects in your family that are important to you? If so, can you tell me a little about them.

_____

3. Are there any Peranakan objects that you remember, but that are no longer in your family?
If so, can you tell me a little about them?

_____

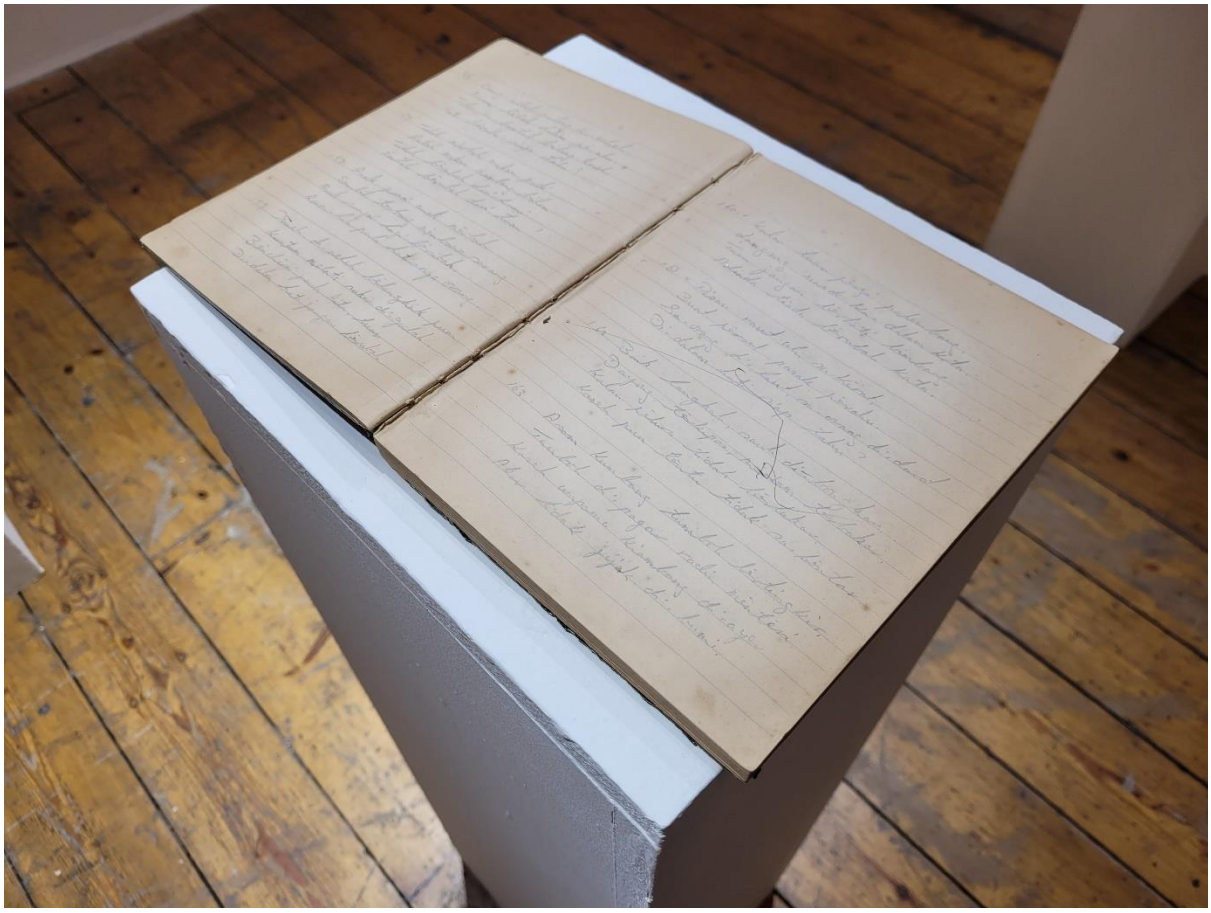
4. Would you be willing to be interviewed about your Peranakan objects? This could be in an online interview, or an interview done via email correspondence.

_____

Please tick your preferred mode of communication.
☐Online interview
☐Email Correspondence

Appendix C: Viva Exposition

The setting up for my viva exposition took place over five days at the Birmingham School of Art, G20, 17th -21st April 2023. The task of putting together fragments that came from different segments of my practice was not an easy one. The gallery space was divided into three main sections based on the themes of Identity, Protection and Continuity, at the same time, all sections were connected and interdependent on each other to provide a holistic picture of what my research was about. Many hours were spent on painting the plinths, sorting out the technical equipment with the help of the technical support staff, curating the space and working out what goes where and why. Throughout the setting up, I had several visitors, which included the staff and students in the school, and some artists friends who were interested in what I was doing or had been doing. I had a few good conversations with them. It was useful for me to talk about my work in that space where the objects we discussed were also present. The setting up was completed on the eve of my viva. I stepped back to admire my work, still very critical of my choices, and I reflected on a few things: the aesthetics of the exposition is not usual for me, it all seems too clean. Despite having found a place on the plinths for all the objects I wanted to showcase, they look overtly exclusive, almost sacred, as they sat atop the white rectangular blocks. I realised that it could very well be the sacredness attached to them that I still deeply revered, that was neither monetary nor glamour. Rather, these objects reveal years of usage, all of which were personal and intimate. Also, looking at how each plinth stood independently in the space, not against the walls and not tucked into corners, I realised that the decisions behind this was the desire to encourage engagement from all sides of the exhibits. It was to me a way of amplifying the three-dimensional quality and vividness of the objects, a way of directing my viewers to experience the 'realness' of them.

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