



**NANYANG  
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**SINGAPORE**

**THE PERANAKAN PHOENIX:**

ON HOW THE PHOENIX BECAME AN EMBLEM OF THE  
PERANAKAN CHINESE IN SINGAPORE FROM THE 1980s–2020s

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School of Art, Design and Media

2023

# THE PERANAKAN PHOENIX:

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Peranakan Chinese in Singapore from the 1980s–2020s

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SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN AND MEDIA

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts (Research)

2023

## Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research, is free of plagiarised materials, and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

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Toh Ying Li

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Toh Ying Li

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## **I. Abstract**

The phoenix is a popular motif found in Peranakan Chinese artefacts. While it has been used for centuries as an auspicious symbol in Chinese culture, its role as an emblem of the Peranakan Chinese is a relatively recent phenomenon. Particularly in Singapore, it has been extensively used by Peranakan Chinese associations, museums, historians and advertisers to construct an ethnic identity in a modernised Singapore. This study examines historical, cultural and social factors that led to the ascendancy of the phoenix as an emblem for the Peranakan Chinese.

There is a general consensus from prominent Peranakan Chinese scholars (such as Hwei-Fe'n Cheah in *Phoenix Rising*, 2010) that the phoenix has become an emblem of Peranakan Chinese identity, but scant research has been conducted on why this happened and how different players, cultural factors and historical events triggered this phenomenon. To respond to this research gap, my thesis focuses on exploring the process from the 1980s-2020s that led to the phoenix becoming an emblem of Singapore's Peranakan Chinese. My research will conduct a visual analysis of the different phoenix representations in branding materials and logo designs, and a textual analysis of related books, press releases and articles to examine the relationships and gender roles in Peranakan Chinese culture that led to the selection of the phoenix. Interviews with members of Peranakan associations, authors and organisations involved in the logo and branding decisions will also be conducted to supplement the investigation.

The importance of this research is threefold. First, it provides deeper understanding of a recent, emerging trend in Peranakan Chinese culture that has not yet been analysed in greater depth. Secondly, the research heightens the understanding of how emblems are chosen and the power held by museums, academics, associations and organisations in shaping narratives and perceptions of a certain culture. Finally, it promotes an appreciation of Peranakan Chinese culture which is still in need of preservation to ensure its continuation and survival in the modern world.

## II. Introduction

For centuries, the Chinese have used the phoenix as an auspicious motif. Its role as an emblem that represents the Peranakan Chinese is a relatively recent phenomenon. Particularly in Singapore, the phoenix has increasingly been used by Peranakan Chinese associations, museums, historians and organisations as a way to construct their ethnic identity. This study, which focuses on the events and groups that contributed to the rise of the phoenix emblem in Singapore from the 1980s to 2020 examines historical, cultural, symbolic and social factors that led to the ascendancy of the phoenix as an emblem for the Peranakan Chinese in the city state.

While there is a general consensus among prominent Peranakan Chinese scholars (such as Hwei-Fe'n Cheah in *Phoenix Rising*, 2010) that the phoenix has grown to be an emblem of Peranakan Chinese identity, scant research has been conducted on the different players and forces behind this phenomenon. My research will conduct a visual analysis of the different phoenix representations in branding materials, magazine articles, posters, logo designs and a textual analysis of related books and press releases to examine the factors that led to the emergence of the phoenix emblem. Interviews with members of Peranakan Chinese associations, authors and organisations involved in the logo and branding decisions will also be conducted to supplement the investigation.

The Peranakan Chinese are an ethnically mixed community descended from intermarriages between Chinese migrant traders and indigenous women from the Malay Archipelago since the early 15<sup>th</sup> century (Koh, 2013). The Peranakan Chinese resided in mainly Singapore, Penang, Malacca and Indonesia – although some of the community can also be found in Myanmar and Thailand (National Heritage Board, 2023) (Knapp, 2012, pp. 6-13). In Singapore, the Peranakan Chinese adopted local Malay culture in their clothing and cooking, whilst retaining their ethnic Chinese roots and decorating their households with traditional Chinese motifs and imagery. Like all cultures, the Peranakan Chinese are not a static community and have evolved to face different challenges and categorisations during the course of its history (more on this will be discussed in Chapter 1) (Poomduang, 2021, p. 239) (Naylor, 1996, pp. 1-13).

Traditionally, the Peranakan Chinese are known for their heavily ornamented “material culture” – a term that has now become synonymous with their elaborate wooden furniture, beadwork, ceramics, jewellery and textiles from late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century Peranakan Chinese homes. Produced and commissioned mostly in the 1870s-1920s during the

Peranakan Chinese's peak period of economic affluence, these were often decorated with intricate flora and fauna patterns from Chinese mythology, which were believed to bring auspicious blessings to a Peranakan Chinese household (Chee L. , 2007, p. 13). The phoenix in particular appears frequently in Peranakan Chinese ornamentation (Tan H. , 2003).

## **Definition of Terms**

Prior to delving into the rest of the introduction, it is essential to establish a comprehensive understanding of key terminologies that will be used consistently throughout this thesis when discussing the research. Within the realm of Peranakan discourse, certain key terms have been used interchangeably or with varying interpretations by different academic scholars. Therefore, this section aims to provide clarity and coherence for the reader regarding the specific meanings ascribed to these terms within the context of this thesis.

### **Peranakan Terminologies**

Previous writers have often used the terms 'Peranakan,' 'Peranakan Chinese,' 'Baba and Nyonya' and 'Straits Chinese' interchangeably to describe the Peranakan Chinese despite the slight differences in these terms. The following section provides clarification regarding their meanings as used in my thesis.

#### *Peranakan vs. Peranakan Chinese*

In Malay, *Peranakan* means 'locally born' and this term can be used to describe any descendants of mixed-heritage communities in the Malay Archipelago such as the Peranakan Indians, Peranakan Chinese, Peranakan Muslims and Peranakan Eurasians. Towards the late nineteenth century, 'Peranakan' was sometimes used as a shortened version of *peranakan cina* (Peranakan Chinese), referring to the Peranakan Chinese (Cheah H.-F. , 2010, pp. 19-21). In the context of my thesis on the Peranakan Chinese and for brevity purposes, 'Peranakan' will be used as a shortened version of 'Peranakan Chinese' unless otherwise specified.

### *Baba and Nonya*

The terms ‘Baba’ and ‘Nonya’ are used to refer to Peranakan men and women respectively. The term ‘Baba Nonya’ has usually been used to refer to the Peranakan Chinese but occasionally also includes the broader Peranakan community (including Peranakan Indians and Eurasians). In the context of my thesis on the Peranakan Chinese, ‘Baba and Nyonya’ will be used to refer to solely Peranakan Chinese men and women.

### *Straits Chinese*

Another phrase commonly used to describe the Peranakan Chinese is ‘Straits Chinese.’ However, there are some discrepancies between different writers on Peranakan culture regarding the exact definition of ‘Straits Chinese.’ Some writers use the term to refer solely to the Peranakan Chinese. Other writers define the Straits Chinese as a broader term that refers to any Chinese born in the Straits Settlements (the British-controlled parts of the Malay Archipelago), regardless of whether they possess the mixed bloodlines and culture of the Peranakans (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 29). In my thesis, ‘Straits Chinese’ will be used to refer to this broader Chinese community and will not be considered synonymous with ‘Peranakan Chinese’ unless otherwise specified.

## **Phoenix Terminologies**

Due to the complexities of mythologies and translations made between languages, there are several different terms that have been used interchangeably when describing the phoenix. The following section provides clarification regarding their meanings as used in my thesis.

### *Phoenix vs. Feng Huang* [凤凰]

The Peranakan phoenix originates from a mythical bird named *feng huang* [凤凰] in Chinese mythology. The Chinese term: ‘*feng huang*’ was translated as ‘phoenix’ by English-speaking scholars due to the visual similarities between the Chinese *feng huang* [凤凰] and the Western phoenix from Greek and Egyptian myths. Both mythical birds were visually similar, often depicted brightly coloured with long tail feathers (Priest, 1942, p. 99). Some Chinese scholars have argued that translating *feng huang* [凤凰] as ‘phoenix’ is a misnomer, since the Western phoenix has very different symbolic meanings and mythologies. Nevertheless, the term ‘phoenix’ still continues to be used by scholars as the accepted English translation of *feng huang* [凤凰] (Zhu, 2020, p. 122).

The Peranakan community likewise uses ‘phoenix’ as the English translation of *feng huang* [凤凰]. In various Peranakan events, posters, books and announcements made by the Peranakan Association and various Peranakan writers, the term ‘phoenix’ is consistently used when referring to the *feng huang* [凤凰] (Cheah H.-F. , 2010, p. 327).

In my thesis, the term ‘phoenix’ will be used when referring to the *feng huang* [凤凰] (Chinese phoenix). The term ‘phoenix’ will not be used to describe the Western phoenix, unless otherwise specified.

### *Phoenix vs. Vermilion Bird*

In Chinese mythology, the phoenix and the Vermilion Bird (the Red Bird) originated as two different mythical creatures during the pre-Qin and Han dynasties (before 221 BC). The phoenix [凤凰] was a mythical bird that appeared during times of peace, while the Vermilion Bird [朱雀] was a mythical constellation that protected the Southern compass direction (Chen, 2014, pp. 133-136).

When the two birds were brought into Taoist teachings, their meanings were combined into a single entity due to their similar appearance and status as divine birds. After the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), scholars began to use ‘phoenix’ and ‘Vermilion Bird’ interchangeably (Chen, 2014, pp. 133-136). The Chinese scholar, Wang De Wei, considers the Vermilion Bird to be an incarnation of the phoenix (Wang, 2009, pp. 49-52). The books, ‘Symbolism in Chinese Art’ and ‘Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives’ also use ‘Vermilion Bird’ and ‘phoenix’ as equivalent names for the same mythical bird (Yetts, 1912, p. 24) (Williams, 1976, p. 190).

The Peranakan community similarly uses the terms ‘phoenix’ and ‘Vermilion Bird’ interchangeably. Peranakan scholars Ho Wing Meng and Kee Ming-Yuet both used the term ‘phoenix’ when describing the Vermilion Bird (Ho, 2008, p. 43) (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141). The Peranakan Association also referred to the Vermilion Bird as a ‘phoenix’ during their official logo announcement (The Peranakan Association , 2000).

In my thesis, ‘Vermilion Bird’ will be considered equivalent to the phoenix as an alternate name of the same mythical creature.

There are two main traditional discourses surrounding the phoenix motif in Peranakan Chinese culture. First, the phoenix motif is seen as an auspicious creature from Chinese mythology that symbolises harmony and benevolence. Its feathers are often depicted using five main colours,<sup>1</sup> representing the “five cardinal values of righteousness, propriety, wisdom, humility and sincerity” (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141).

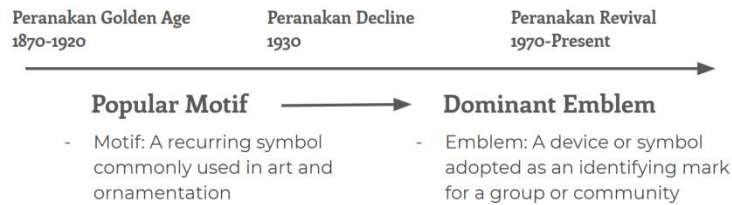


Figure 1: Changing discourses regarding the phoenix motif, Toh Ying Li, 2023.

Secondly, the phoenix is a symbol representing feminine *yin* [阴] energy (see footnotes for more information).<sup>2</sup> Since the Ming-Qing dynasty in China (1368-1912 AD), the phoenix has been popularized as a feminine symbol due to its usage in imperial settings as an emblem of the empress (Zhu, 2020). The Peranakan Chinese, who emerged as a culture during this period, used the phoenix as a feminine symbol to represent different roles of Peranakan women such as the bride (at weddings)<sup>3</sup> or the matriarch (in domestic situations). Typically, the phoenix is traditionally paired with the Chinese dragon which represents masculine *yang* [阳] energy (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141).

In recent decades, a new discourse has emerged – the notion that the phoenix is an emblem representative of the Peranakan Chinese. Increasingly, the phoenix has become the face of the culture: it is now used in the branding of various media relating to the Peranakans, regardless of whether the content directly relates to the phoenix. Edmond Chin’s 1991 book on Peranakan Chinese jewellery was named ‘Gilding the Phoenix,’ despite the book focusing on general Peranakan Chinese jewellery items. The 2002 documentary ‘On the Trail of the Phoenix’ and the 2005 Peranakan Annual Convention named ‘Raising the Phoenix’ used the phoenix motif in their titles and posters, despite their content focusing on

<sup>1</sup> The phoenix is sometimes alternatively depicted entirely in red to represent the summer and warmth from the sun.

<sup>2</sup> The phoenix has not always been a feminine symbol in Chinese mythology. In the Confucian period (551-479 BC), the phoenix was considered masculine as it was once described as ‘the king of all birds.’ However, the Peranakans emerged as a culture during the Ming-Qing dynasty (1368-1912 AD), and were more familiar with the feminine interpretation of the phoenix, as which was common during this time period.

<sup>3</sup> In Peranakan weddings, the bride’s attire and hair accessories are covered in phoenix motifs. She wears the “phoenix collar”: an embroidered ruffle designed to look like neck feathers from a phoenix. The bride sometimes carries a red phoenix ornament called the ‘kemunchak’ which is a symbol of virginity and fidelity.

general Peranakan culture (Cheah H.-F. , 2010, p. 327). Most notably, the phoenix was recently made the official logomark of three major Peranakan organisations in Singapore: the Peranakan Association of Singapore, the Baba House Museum<sup>4</sup> and the Gunong Sayang Association,<sup>5</sup> marking its ascent as an emblem of the Peranakan community. The focus of this research paper pertains to an investigation into the usage of the phoenix as an emblem by high profile Peranakan organisations, associations, museums, and academics. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that the Peranakan community in Singapore is diverse and far from being a homogenous entity. While the phoenix emblem has been repeatedly used as an emblem by prominent Peranakan associations and organisations, it is important to note this research does not intend to position the phoenix as the only emblem used by the entire Peranakan community, or suggest that the phoenix holds universal significance as an emblem to all everyday Peranakans in Singapore. The research instead is an investigation of a constructed phenomenon undertaken by specific high profile Peranakan groups and individuals in Singapore, and to understand the motivations and factors that led them to use these new representations of the phoenix.

There is demand for more academic research on Peranakan culture. Dr Lye Wai Choong, a collector of Peranakan artefacts and frequent collaborator of the Peranakan Museum stated in a 2016 article that there is a “dearth of scholarly material” on Peranakan material culture and that he hopes for more “masters or doctorates to thoroughly research” the subject. Such academic research, he stresses, can help with the culture’s continued survival and recognition (Chee, 2016, pp. 4-7).

Similarly, Lee Su Kim wrote in a 2008 journal article that despite a slight revival of interest in Peranakan culture in the 1970s onward, the heritage as a whole is still “gradually disappearing [as evidenced by] diminishing numbers of Peranakans today who actively observe or practice the culture” (Lee, 2008, pp. 161-170). Continued scholarship is thus important to document and preserve this fading culture and to continue to inspire an interest in the continuation of modern Peranakan Chinese identity in contemporary Singapore. More importantly, the bulk of academic writings on Peranakan culture have a tendency to focus on the Peranakan ‘Golden Age’ from the 1830s–1920s, when their economic wealth was at its peak. Not as much research has been conducted on more recent, evolving aspects of Peranakan culture. Instead of viewing the culture as a fossilized relic of

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<sup>4</sup> The National University of Singapore (NUS) Baba house is a museum, converted from the Peranakan ancestral home residence of the Wee family.

<sup>5</sup> Singapore’s Peranakan association for the performing arts.

the past, my research therefore plans to look at the more recent developments in modern Peranakan culture – moving away from the heavily studied Peranakan ‘Golden Age.’

For the purpose of the Master’s thesis, the social, political and cultural context of my research focuses on Singapore. Preliminary research showed that the use of the phoenix emblem is prevalent in this country – both of Singapore’s Peranakan associations feature the phoenix in their main logo. In addition, many Peranakan exhibitions, festivals, advertisements, books and essays that employ the phoenix emblem are Singapore-based.<sup>6</sup> This is also the case in Indonesia, where their two Peranakan associations also use the phoenix in their logos: the Association of Peranakan Tionghoa uses a *yin yang* [阴阳] phoenix emblem and the Persaudaraan Pertiwi uses an abstract *yin yang* [阴阳] phoenix and dragon emblem. This is unlike Malaysia where none of the five Malaysian Peranakan associations have incorporated it as their main logos.<sup>7</sup> There are some signs that the Malaysian Peranakan associations may eventually adopt phoenix emblems as well (e.g. the Straits Chinese Penang Association designed a phoenix logo for their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 2020, the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka used a phoenix and peony emblem when hosting the 2019’s Baba Nyonya Convention), Nevertheless, none of the Malaysian associations have adopted the phoenix as their main emblem thus far and for the purposes of this Master’s thesis, my research will focus on Singapore where there is a strong presence of phoenix emblems.

My research focuses on the 1980s–2020s as this period contains key events that shaped the formation and selection of the phoenix as a Peranakan Chinese emblem. The 1980s–1990s was a period where permanent museums exhibitions relating to Peranakan culture in Singapore first began to open. These were responsible for shaping initial narratives surrounding the Peranakan Chinese discourse (see: III. Chapter 1) (Yoong, 2013). Prior to the 2000s, the various Peranakan associations did not use phoenix logos but instead utilised logos with different motifs (see: IV. Chapter 2). In the 2000s–2020s, numerous Peranakan Chinese organisations then began rebranding and discarding earlier motifs for the phoenix: the 1980s–2020s thus contain the main crux of events that chronicles the selection of the phoenix emblem.

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<sup>6</sup> The majority of phoenix related Peranakan media are Singaporean in origin: See “Edmond Chin’s 1991 book, ‘Gilding the Phoenix’, the 2002 documentary ‘On the Trail of the Phoenix’, the 2005 Peranakan Annual Convention ‘Raising the Phoenix’, the Singapore Peranakan Association logo, the Gunong Sayang Association logo and the Baba House logo.

<sup>7</sup> The logos used by the five Malaysian Peranakan associations are as follows: 1. A traditional basket; 2. Ritual offerings; 3. A logotype forming geometric patterns; 4. Flag containing a castle; 5. Logotype with no symbol

It should also be noted that while the Peranakan Chinese are the focus of my research, there are also smaller communities of Peranakans known as the Peranakan Indians (the Chitty Melaka), Peranakan Muslims (the Jawi Peranakans) and Peranakan Eurasians (the Kristang) in Singapore. However, my research will not focus on these communities as they did not adopt the phoenix emblem for their cultures. The Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association in Singapore uses a yellow flower as its emblem. The logomark of the Kodrah Kristang (Singapore's Eurasian Peranakan initiative) uses a wheel containing a crescent moon and stars. Meanwhile, the Peranakan Muslim community in Singapore used a wreath enclosing Arabic script as their logo in the historic 'Jawi Peranakan' newspaper (Islamic Arts Magazine, 2016). An emblem comprising mainly Arabic script is favoured by the Jawi community: the Penang Jawi Peranakan Heritage Society uses Arabic script as its logo, and various other Jawi community groups in Singapore do so as well.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that the Peranakan Muslim community used textual Arabic scripts in their emblems due to Islamic teachings that forbid drawing the image of living things (Supana, 2018, p. 538).

Another possible reason why the Peranakan Indian, Muslim and Eurasian community did not favour the phoenix is that these communities descended from Indian, Arab and Portuguese immigrants (Hassan & Abdillah, 2021, p. 1). The phoenix's status as a symbol from Chinese mythology may not have resonated with them as much as it did for the Peranakan Chinese community, who descended from Chinese immigrants and had stronger Chinese roots.

Two main scholars have commented that the phoenix has become a representation of Peranakan Chinese identity: Ho Wing Meng and Hwei-Fe'n Cheah. Ho Wing Meng, a pioneering writer on Peranakan Chinese material culture, was among the first to argue that the phoenix should be seen as a defining Peranakan Chinese emblem. On page 43 in 'Straits Chinese Porcelain,' he asserts that "the phoenix [...] became, to all intents and purposes, the characteristic emblem of Straits Chinese culture – and rightly so." He cites the phoenix as a symbol of the southern cardinal direction in Chinese mythology<sup>9</sup> as a reason why it is representative of the Peranakan Chinese community. The Peranakan Chinese, he argues, had originally migrated southwards from China and the phoenix best encapsulates their ancestral roots and southern identity (Ho, 2008, p. 43). These remarks

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<sup>8</sup> In Singapore, the Jawi Literary Society (Pertubuhan Warisan Anak Jawi) and a Jawi performing arts group (Kompang Jawi Singapura) are represented by an emblem of a wreath enclosing Arabic script.

<sup>9</sup> According to Chinese mythology, the four different cardinal directions are protected by different mythical creatures. The north is protected by the tortoise, the south is protected by the phoenix, the east is guarded the dragon and the tiger protects the west.

were made by Ho in 1983, well before the proliferation of phoenix emblems in the media, museums and Peranakan Chinese associations.

Nearly three decades later, Hwei-Fe'n Cheah in her book 'Phoenix Rising' similarly notes the phoenix has become "a representation of Peranakan [Chinese] culture," citing its widespread use in logos, documentary titles and events by the Peranakan Chinese community (Cheah H.-F. , 2010, p. 327). Her book, however, was on the evolution of Peranakan Chinese needlework and observations on the phoenix were cursory and limited to only the general acknowledgement of the phoenix's elevated role in Peranakan Chinese society.

My research will draw on ideas of the 'invented tradition' in relation to how the phoenix became an emblem in Singapore's Peranakan Chinese culture. Particularly relevant is Eric John Hobsbawm and Terence Osborn Ranger's essay on 'The Invention of Tradition,' which highlights that certain aspects of culture and "traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented." Hobsbawm explains in his work that the usage of old symbols in ways that "extend the old symbolic vocabulary beyond its established limits" can be a form of an invented tradition. These new traditions are often rooted in a desire to "establish continuity with a suitable historic past", similar to the current practice amongst certain Peranakan groups where the traditional phoenix motif is now used as a Peranakan insignia: repeatedly printed and presented in materials and backdrops of Peranakan events, festivals and media.

These new cultural values and norms are often created by "a process of formalization and ritualization" and are enforced through repetition. Significantly, Hobsbawm points out that closer study of discourse allows one to better recognise the role historians play in shaping cultural narratives and biases they introduce from their different "class, social position and intellectual training" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, pp. 1-14). The two authors also observe that new traditions are often created during a period where society experiences a "rapid transformation" or "sudden change that weakened old patterns of behaviour" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, pp. 4-5). In Singapore, this period of rapid development happened from the 1980s-2000s where there was a slight revival of interest in Peranakan culture, leading to its rapid "museumization" and the opening of the first Peranakan exhibitions in many major museums in Singapore (Kwok, 2015).

My decision to do a visual analysis of phoenix motifs is informed by the academic discourse surrounding the study of symbols in culture. Symbolic anthropologist Clifford

Geertz argues that culture can be understood through the study of symbols, describing culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). Understanding these meanings can help shed greater light and understanding of the cultures they are present in. Fellow symbolic anthropologist Talal Asad, however, disagrees with Geertz’s assertion that research should be conducted by merely decoding a culture’s system of symbols. Instead, Asad is more interested in investigating “how symbols come to be constructed and accepted as natural and authoritative, while others are opposed.” He argues that inquiry should focus on understanding “the conditions (discursive and nondiscursive) that explain how symbols come to be constructed, and how some of them are established as natural or authoritative as opposed to others” (Asad, 1993, p. 31).

I support Asad’s view that the study of symbols should not only be linked to decoding their various meanings: the process that led to their creation should also be studied in greater depth. A more in-depth study of the process and relationships at play beneath the selection of the phoenix, may therefore shed new light.

Asad’s anthropological perspective aligns with constructionism – similar to Hobsbawm and Ranger’s view that cultural identities are constructed, often as a result of political and economic factors and are not innate or fixed. These perspectives challenge Geertz’s primordialist ideologies which instead consider ethnic identities to be deeply ingrained within “human evolutionary psychology” and therefore largely static and unchanging (Kaufmann, 2012, pp. 2-13). Geertz believes that cultures and ethnic groups are shaped by their “primordial loyalties” which are intrinsic attributes that perpetuate across generations and serve as binding forces for communities (Geertz, 1994). In contrast, Hobsbawm and Ranger assert that cultural groups are held together by “a constructed or invented component” often alongside a “tailored discourse” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 14). Asad similarly agrees, underscoring the importance of exploring the “historically distinctive disciplines and forces” that have led to the adoption of symbols as a crucial pursuit for students of anthropology (Asad T. , 1983, pp. 237-259).

In the context of my study on the selection of the phoenix emblem, my research supports Hobsbawm, Ranger and Asad’s views on constructionism – namely the notion that certain cultural practises are constructed, often by prominent groups or leaders within the culture, and often as a result of the pressures from political and economic change.

## **Research Aim and Objectives**

The aim of my research is to investigate how the phoenix became an emblem of the Peranakan Chinese in Singapore. It will focus on the processes that took place from the 1980s to the 2020s that resulted in the usage of the phoenix as an emblem and in branding items by Peranakan Chinese associations, authors, museums and other organisations. This research also raises secondary questions: Did the symbolic properties of the phoenix influence its selection as an emblem? Were there any relationships between the various Peranakan Chinese associations, museums, authors, organisations and did they influence each other?

In order to address these questions, my research will aim to meet the following objectives:

1. To examine how and why the phoenix became an emblem representative of Peranakan Chinese culture in Singapore
2. To understand the symbolic properties of the phoenix and identify if they influenced its selection as an emblem
3. To explore potential interrelationships between Peranakan Chinese associations, museums, authors, and organizations and examine their influence on the selection of the phoenix as an emblem

## **Research Approach and Methodology**

The research will be conducted via visual analysis, with historical contextualisation. I conducted a visual analysis to unpack the symbolic meanings of the phoenix and will also examine its historical context to uncover the different individuals and institutions involved in its adoption as an emblem. A historical approach is chosen as a considerable portion of my research will be conducted on prior events.

Visual analysis has been implemented to analyse the symbolic connotations in the various representations of the phoenix. The visual analysis was conducted as follows: firstly, an archive of sources is collated – consisting of photographs of branding materials, logomarks, posters and other archival images containing the phoenix. These visual sources have been gathered into the online database “Airtable.” Next, the various phoenix representations are sorted and categorised to identify patterns, evolutions and relationships between them. Analysis of the phoenix representations is then conducted with reference to other books, journals and press releases to examine their various symbolic meanings. The analysis takes

into consideration symbolic meanings from Chinese mythology as well as regional Malay and Indonesian influences that could have shaped these representations. Finally, the social, political, or cultural context during the production of these representations is examined to glean insights regarding the selection of the phoenix.

Conducting a visual analysis is of importance when examining representations of the phoenix, as while the phoenix may occasionally appear in textual form (e.g. in books, the naming of Peranakan Chinese documentaries, event titles, festival names), these emblems are primarily depicted in pictorial form. The analysis of such visual forms of the phoenix can reveal significant insights into the stylistic choices, influences, and symbolism embedded within these emblems. This presents a valuable and informative resource for understanding the design processes and influences behind the creation of phoenix logos, as well as providing insights into the desired image projected by Peranakan Chinese organizations through their use of such emblems. Secondly, numerous scholars have noted that visuals are often a crucial part of identity formation. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is “always constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall S. , 1990, p. 222). Stephen Spencer similarly agrees that visuals are a “powerful dimension for affirming personal as well as collective identity” (Spencer, 2011, p. 111). It is therefore essential to thoroughly analyse the phoenix’s visual manifestations, as these are likely to have played a key role in transforming the phoenix into an emblem capable of encapsulating Peranakan Chinese identity.

Gillian Rose notes visual analysis can be conducted through identifying formal elements of an image (colour, subject matter, composition, style, and expressive content), sorting the images into a series of categories and then examining the frequencies and patterns that can be observed within them (Rose, 2001, pp. 33-68).

Stephen Spencer similarly observes that visual analysis can be conducted by examining the formal properties of an image (subject matter, lighting, composition), the image’s style, genre and tone, and also when the image is presented together with text, the effects of this combination and the relationships between them (Spencer, 2011, pp. 132-166).

Umberto Eco emphasises the need for visual analysis to be done critically and supplemented with contextual references about the time period and viewpoints of the image’s creator – to avoid the pitfalls of “aberrant decoding.” Eco warns that “[if] we do not have access to the codes the artist or author had, we might be interpreting the message from entirely the wrong standpoint” (Eco, 1980, pp. 131-150). Whitely similarly writes that

visual analysis should be “conjoined to other types of analysis so that the visual scrutiny of what can literally be seen can be studied in relation to reception, meaning and content” (Whitely, 1999, pp. 99-122).

In accordance with Rose, Spencer, Eco and Whitely, I will conduct a visual analysis by first studying the formal properties in the image (subject matter, colours, line, style/genre, composition and any text used in the images). The results from these categories will then be analysed and their interpretations will be supplemented with social and historical information to ground the work with contextual evidence.

	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Concepts to Identify</b>
1	Subject Matter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phoenix motifs represented (e.g. phoenix in flight, twin phoenixes etc.)</li> <li>- Other motifs present in the image</li> </ul>
2	Colour & Saturation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Colour schemes, complementary, contrasting colours, warm/cool colours, saturations</li> </ul>
3	Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Layout of the image, focal points, symmetry, balance, harmony</li> </ul>
4	Line	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thick, thin, tapered, curved, straight, vertical, horizontal, diagonal</li> </ul>
5	Style & Genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Potential influences of certain art periods (if any)</li> </ul>
6	Text (if any)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relationships between text and image</li> <li>- Connotations of chosen typefaces (if present)</li> </ul>
7	Contextual Meanings / Background Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify potential meanings, in reference to traditional Peranakan Chinese symbolism</li> <li>- Examine archival sources directly released by the museums/associations and their reasons for using the phoenix</li> </ul>

Analysis of the various sources in these seven categories have been gathered, conducted and consolidated via the database, Airtable. The link to this database can be accessed through this link: <https://airtable.com/shrtOkgFwdDqUXQkQ>. The visual analysis of the phoenix conducted is summarised in subsequent chapters.

Research has also been conducted via textual content analysis by studying the portrayal of the phoenix in these following sources:

**Primary sources:**

- Logomark designs and branding materials from Peranakan Chinese organisations
  - Logomarks from the Peranakan Association, Gunong Sayang Association, Baba House Museum, Peranakan Sayang
- Quarterly publications from the Peranakan Association
  - Archival records of The Peranakan Magazine
- Museum exhibition catalogues/publications
  - Festive Expressions (National Museum, 1989)
  - Gilding the Phoenix (Asian Civilisation Museum, 1991)
  - Rumah Baba: Life in a Peranakan House (National Museum, 1998)
  - Peranakan Museum Guide (Peranakan Museum, 2008)
- Photographs and press releases from the National Archives of Singapore
  - Photographs from key museum exhibitions (e.g. the 1985 Straits Chinese Gallery; the 1996 Rumah Baba exhibition at the National Museum)
  - Press release from the opening of the 1985 Straits Chinese Gallery
- Posters where the phoenix is represented
  - Posters from Peranakan Chinese festivals and events (e.g. 2000 Baba Las Vegas gala dinner, 2005 Raising the Phoenix: Singapore's first Peranakan festival)
- Archival records on policies released by the Singapore government
  - Appointment of the Museum Development Committee (MDC) at the National Museum; 1989 report by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA); 2000-2008 Renaissance City Plan I, II, III; 2008 Heritage Development Plan
- Interviews with Peranakan Chinese organisations and groups
  - See the appendix for the full transcripts

**Secondary sources:**

- Books/journal articles

Interviews with Peranakan Chinese associations and organisations involved in the logo and branding decisions were undertaken to supplement the investigation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted via email and Zoom with recordings taken and transcribed (with the interviewee's permission). Transcripts of all interviews conducted are included in the appendixes of this report.

Qualitative analysis of data from interviews and textual sources have been conducted through three phases of “meaning coding,” “meaning condensation” and “meaning interpretation” as defined by Steinar Kvale (2007, pp. 104). During the first phase of analysis, transcribed interviews or textual sources will be analysed to identify different discourses, power relations and ideas present in the data. The second phase of data analysis would then sort and categorise all of these identified concepts, relationships and discourses. Finally, the third stage of the data analysis involved examining relationships between these various categories to arrive at conclusions. The structure of this analysis draws influences from grounded theory (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014), with a focus on identifying motivations that contributed to the changing discourse.

## Timeline of Events Derived from the Research

		Peranakan concerns in each time period:
Peranakan Golden Age 1830–1930	1900 – Straits Chinese British Association is established	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Establish useful political alliances</i></li> <li>- <i>Drive to modernise</i></li> </ul>
	1910 – Gunong Sayang Association is established	
Peranakan Decline 1930–1970	1959 – British Crown Colony Dissolved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Survival of the culture and the community</i></li> </ul>
	1964 – Straits Chinese British Association renamed itself as the Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association	
	1965 – Singapore becomes independent	
	1965 – The Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association renames itself as The Peranakan Association	
	1965 – The Peranakan Association launches its new linked arms logo	
Peranakan Revival 1970–Present	1976 – Ho Wing Meng releases first book in series on collecting Peranakan artefacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Survival of the culture and the community</i></li> <li>- <i>Presenting the culture in new ways that appears useful and non-threatening to the Singapore government</i></li> <li>- <i>Led to the ‘museumification’, commodification, feminisation and domestication of the culture.</i></li> </ul>
	1980 – The Singapore National Museum changes its collection policy on Peranakan artefacts	
	1985 – Opening of the Straits Chinese Gallery in the National Museum: the first permanent Peranakan exhibition in Singapore	
	1993 – Opening of the Peranakan exhibition at the National Museum. Named: <i>Gilding the Phoenix: The Straits Chinese and Their Jewellery</i> –	
	1994 – Christie’s holds an auction featuring Peranakan artefacts	
	2000 – The Peranakan Association launches new phoenix logo (replacing the old linked arms motif)	
	2005 – The Peranakan Association launches ‘Raising the Phoenix: The First Singapore Peranakan Festival’	

2005 – Article appears in The Peranakan Magazine titled ‘Through the Eyes of a New Phoenix’

2008 – Opening of the Baba House. The heritage house launches a new phoenix logo

2008 – Opening of the Peranakan Museum. Focuses on Peranakan material culture from the Golden Age

2009 – Article appears in The Peranakan Magazine titled ‘Recognising the Phoenix in our Hearts’

2010 –Hwei-Fe’n Cheah publishes Phoenix Rising, a book on Nyonya beadwork

2010–Article appears in The Peranakan Magazine titled ‘The Phoenix gets a new nest on the web’

2010–Opening of the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony, a research house on Peranakan material culture

2016–The Gunong Sayang Association makes minor updates to their phoenix logo

2018–The Peranakan Association makes minor updates to their phoenix logo

2020–The Peranakan Sayang launches new phoenix logos, branding and merchandise

### III. Chapter 1: The Revival of Peranakan Culture

#### A Brief History of Peranakans in Singapore

Prior to conducting the analysis of the impact of the various organisations on the emergence of the phoenix emblem, it is imperative to establish the historical backdrop to position the research. Although the usage of the phoenix as emblematic of the Peranakans largely occurred from the 1990s to 2000s onward, there is a rich array of preceding events in Peranakan Chinese culture that created conditions for the phoenix to be selected as an emblem in the first place.

When studying Peranakan culture in Singapore, there are three major periods. The first is the ‘Golden Age’ of the Peranakans. The Peranakan Golden Age lasted from the 1830s to the 1920s and it was during this period where the culture truly thrived, with the community experiencing great political and economic power (Teo, 2019, pp. 245-256). Peranakans were mainly businessmen and tradesmen and managed to acquire large amounts of wealth. This wealth was attained partially through the Peranakan’s savvy business abilities and also through their ability to speak multiple languages, including fluent English, Baba Malay and Hokkien (a Chinese dialect). These linguistic abilities allowed them to play a profitable role as intermediaries between the colonial British and the local population (Sim & Liu, 2015, pp. 33-57). Partially from a desire to showcase their wealth, and partially from an intrinsic love for beautiful things, it was during this period where Peranakans began filling their homes with decadent and highly ornamented furnishings. Peranakans during this



*Figure 2: Peranakan plate from the Golden Age with phoenix and peony motifs, 19th century, The Peranakan Museum, Photographed by Toh Ying Li.*

period were also mainly Taoist and believed in the importance of Chinese principles such as *feng shui* [风水] and using certain motifs and symbols to attract good fortune to the house. Household items that were heavily decorated with motifs were considered auspicious and ways to attract prosperity. It was during this period where the phoenix was popularised as one of the auspicious motifs for decorating a Peranakan household. Other motifs favoured by the Peranakans during this era included the peony, crane, deer, lotus, butterfly and the *qilin* [麒麟] (Teo, 2019, p. 253).

Peranakans during the Golden Age were also actively political, and often had ties to different governmental powers. These Peranakans were heavily in support of British colonial rule, even going as far as to call themselves the ‘King’s Chinese’ or the ‘Queen’s Chinese’ in support of Britain’s ruling monarch. They considered themselves as subjects of the British Empire and were fully in support of British rule in Singapore. In addition, some Peranakans such as Dr. Lim Boon Keng used their economic wealth to back political movements in China and as former Chinese immigrants, maintained ties and vested interest in Chinese politics. Dr. Lim Boon Keng supported Sun Yat-sen’s revolution in China, and others were involved in Chinese secret societies (Teo, 2019, pp. 245-256).

The second major period of Peranakan culture is the ‘Peranakan Decline’ which occurred from the 1930s to the 1960s. During this period, the world was experiencing the Great Depression from 1930 – 1934 and the Japanese occupation of Singapore in World War II in 1942 which greatly disrupted their trade and businesses (Ho, 1987, p. 14). Numerous Peranakan manor homes experienced looting and this period was marked by great hardships for the Peranakans. Struggling economically, many Peranakans had to resort to selling their heirlooms and jewellery to survive (Chin E. , 2022). In addition, the withdrawal of the British and collapse of the Crown colonies in the 1960s also led to complications and uncertainties for the Peranakans (National Museum of Singapore, 1989, pp. 5-8). After such a long period of openly supporting the British and various Chinese



Figure 3: Logo of The Peranakan Association during The Peranakan Decline, 1966.

political parties, Peranakans during this period were viewed with suspicion and their loyalties were considered questionable by the rest of the local Singaporean population. In addition, with the formation of an independent Singapore government, the government was pushing for racial harmony and the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model as a way to soothe inter-racial tensions during a turbulent period marked by incidents such as the 1964 Race Riots (between the Chinese and Malay communities) (Cheng, 2001, pp. 431-455.). In accordance with the CMIO model, the Singaporean government officially recognized four ethnic categories: namely Chinese, Malay, Indian, and “Others” for minority groups. However, the Peranakan Chinese community, characterised by a hybridisation of Chinese and Malay cultural heritage, found themselves frequently misclassified as “Chinese.” Despite their ethnic Chinese origins, the Peranakans' mother-tongue language was Baba Malay, and many of their cultural practices diverged from the rigid categorisations of the CMIO model. This misclassification caused significant unease within the Peranakan community, raising concerns about their survival and legitimacy of their cultural identity (Lee S. K., 2009, pp. 167-177).

The third and final period is the ‘Peranakan Revival’ which occurred from the 1970s onwards. It is the most significant period for the purposes of this thesis as it is in this period where we see the phoenix’s emergence as an emblem. This period will be discussed in depth in the next section of my thesis.



Figure 4: Phoenix logos from the Peranakan Revival, 2000-2012.

## **The Peranakan Revival**

The mid-1970s to 1980s marked the start of a turning point in Peranakan culture, commonly described as the Peranakan Revival. As its name suggests, it is characterised by resurgence in the interest and popularity of Peranakan culture (National Museum of Singapore, 1989, p. 7).

While it is categorised as the Peranakan Revival, this period differs from the Golden Age and it is unlikely that Peranakan culture will ever experience a resurgence that matches the Golden Ages' peak. Numerous cultural traditions that were commonly practised by the Peranakans during the Golden Age are largely discontinued by modern Peranakans today (such as the elaborate twelve day wedding and intricate rituals associated with ancestral worship) (Teo, 2019, p. 253). Furthermore, interest in Peranakan culture is now viewed through a markedly different lens. Peranakan culture has been commercialised, commodified and packaged as a heritage or tourism product to sustain Peranakan organisations and to help the Singapore government's branding purposes and image.

The Peranakan culture has also been fossilised and preserved in the form of collectable artefacts and museum exhibits. Notably, there has been an increased interest in the collection of Peranakan material culture which has experienced a "museumification" in the past decades – something which began with the changing goals of the Singapore government, and the newfound availability of artefacts (Kwok, 2015, pp. 115-125). More on these points will be discussed in the sections below.

### **Ho Wing Meng's Books on Peranakan Material Culture**

During the Peranakan decline, many younger generations of Peranakans chose to sell their ancestral homes, replacing traditional Peranakan furnishings with modern furniture. This mass selling of items from the 1970s-1980s meant that old Peranakan objects could easily be acquired very cheaply or even for free – leading to a surge in new collectors (Kwok, 2015, pp. 115-125).

One of these collectors was an academic named Dr Ho Wing Meng: a professor at the National University of Singapore. Ho developed an interest in old Peranakan Chinese items and began studying and collecting them (Lee L. H., 1986).

In 1976, Ho wrote his first book on Peranakan Chinese silver, which was initially published by the National University Press, and then later republished into a series named ‘A Collector’s Guide.’ The four-book series focused on Peranakan material culture, and comprised Straits Chinese Porcelain (1983), Straits Chinese Silver (1984), Straits Chinese Beadwork & Embroidery (1987), Straits Chinese Furniture (1994).

Ho Wing Meng’s books were among the earliest to suggest that the phoenix should be considered “the characteristic emblem of Peranakan culture.” In *Straits Chinese Porcelain*, Ho argues that the symbolic significance of the phoenix as a “symbol of the South,”<sup>10</sup> and status as a bird that appears in times of “peace and prosperity” are reasons why it is the perfect emblem for the culture.

Another significant impact of Ho’s works was their role in popularising Peranakan material culture. Ho’s books have been described by academics as the “impetus” and “culmination” for increasing public interest in the collection of Peranakan artefacts (Kwok, 2015, pp. 115-125). They were written in a way that was easily readable and accessible to anyone new to material culture. Eng-Lee Seok Chee’s describes Ho’s work as written with an “anecdotal and conversational manner,” and treats its readers as new “students” (Chee E.-L. S., 1985, pp. 154–157). Ho himself writes that his goals were to spark “interest and imagination” in Peranakan material culture to encourage the reader to make “further inquiry of his own” (Ho, 1987, p. ix).

The third effect of Ho Wing Meng’s series was his criticism regarding the underrepresentation of Peranakan artefacts by Singapore museums and academics. Ho writes in *Straits Chinese Silver* that the artefacts displayed in the National Museum of Singapore focused on Malay, Balinese, Sumatran, Brunei and Thai material culture, with no inclusion of Peranakan artefacts. He directly criticises the National Museum of Singapore, writing that the “deliberate omission and neglect” of Peranakan silver artefacts by museums and academics in Singapore is “remarkable” (Ho, 1984, p. 19). Ho dedicates at least eight pages in his book towards this, providing examples and speculative theories as to why such an omission was made (Ho, 1976, pp. 13-20).

These criticisms and the popularity of Ho’s books drew the attention of reviewers and the National Museum of Singapore, who attempted to debunk these statements. Eng-Lee Seok Chee points out that the National Museum of Singapore did in fact have a small collection

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<sup>10</sup> The Peranakans were descended from Chinese immigrants who migrated south, making the southern cardinal direction particularly significant to them.

of Nonya porcelain wares on display, amongst other traditional wares from the Straits Settlements (Chee E.-L. S., 1985, pp. 154–157).

The National Museum responded to these accusations when it opened the first Peranakan permanent exhibition by a major museum in Singapore (The Straits Chinese gallery in 1985), and it published its first book on Peranakan material culture named *Festive Expressions* in 1989 (Kwok, 2015, pp. 115-125). The first line of *Festive Expressions*'s preface begins with a statement that the National Museum of Singapore has begun collecting Peranakan artefacts since the 1960s – perhaps a statement made in response to Ho Wing Meng criticisms. The museum also cites Ho's works in the bibliography of *Festive Expressions* (National Museum of Singapore, 1989).

Despite the controversies in some of Ho's writings, his works remain well respected in the Peranakan discourse and are still cited today, for example in 'Gilding the Phoenix' by Edmond Chin (1991), 'Phoenix Rising' by Hwei F'en Cheah (2010), and 'The Peranakan Chinese Home' by RG Knapp (2013). The academic, John Teo describes Ho Wing Meng's books as "a canon of works" that were the "foundations" that began the study of Peranakan material culture (Teo, 2019, pp. 252-253). Kenson Kwok, the founding director of both the Asian Civilisations Museum and The Peranakan Museum describes them as "pioneering books on Peranakan art," and concedes that there was truth in Ho's critiques on Singaporean museums. Kwok explains that despite the first Peranakan artefacts making their way into the National Museum's collections in 1963, the museum as a whole did not consider the artefacts as "museum-worthy," and there was little "concerted effort" to collect these materials till after twenty years later (Kwok, 2015, pp. 115-125).

From my perspective of researching the phoenix and its emergence as an emblem, it is interesting that such an influential book series contains arguments that the phoenix should be treated as an "emblem of the Peranakan culture." Interestingly, both Edmond Chin (author of *Gilding the Phoenix*) and Hwei F'en Cheah (author of *Phoenix Rising*), were influenced by Ho's works which was cited and commented on when writing their own books. Both of these authors chose to name their books after the phoenix, despite their books focusing on Peranakan jewellery and Peranakan needlework respectively. In addition, Ho's works advocated for Peranakan artefacts to be recognised as a legitimate component of the culture – a focus that paved the way for increasing the visibility of the phoenix motif. Fundamentally, the phoenix is a design that traditionally appears in the medium of Peranakan material culture; constantly recurring in old porcelain, furniture, textiles and

ceramics. The visibility of the phoenix motif increases as artefacts of material culture gain focus and credibility in the Peranakan discourse.

### **Support from the Singapore Government**

Another major factor that led to the Peranakan revival was the changing attitudes of the government towards Peranakan culture. After the turbulent decades of Singapore's independence, the Singapore government began to recognise the importance of establishing a Singaporean cultural identity (Ting, 2015). Ironically, the multicultural nature of the Peranakans (which caused the Peranakans much anxiety regarding their identity in the past) is precisely what makes Peranakan culture so attractive to the Singapore government today. As an amalgamation of both Chinese and Malay heritages, Peranakan culture manages to represent both races. In addition, there are also subsets of Peranakan communities, such as the Peranakan Indians and Peranakan Eurasians, making Peranakan culture politically acceptable when defining a Singapore cultural heritage (Lee S. K., 2009, pp. 167-177).

In the mid-1980s, the Second Deputy Prime Minister Dr Ong Teng Cheong created the Museum Development Committee (MDC) and the Advisory Council for Culture and the Arts (ACCA) to challenge "popular notions that Singapore was a cultural desert" (Ting, 2015). The MDC submitted recommendations which were combined into the proposals submitted by the ACCA in 1989. In the 1989 report, the council writes that Singapore should now "devote great attention and resources to culture and the arts" and that culture is a "much needed social bond to hold its people together." The council also writes that it deems culture to be important for Singaporeans' quality of life, nation-building and a contributor to economic growth (The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989, pp. 3-34).

These changed mind-sets are similarly reflected in the 2000 Renaissance City Report released by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, where the ministry reaffirms its goals to increase "Singaporeans' sense of national identity" by strengthening its people's "appreciation of our heritage." The government is also interested in the link between culture and economic growth and is willing to improve funding and educational programs to achieve these goals. The report suggests that cultural sectors should work in tandem with the Singapore Tourism Board to promote "cultural tourism," noting that this is a profitable market that grew in Singapore from \$2.19 million in 1986 to \$38.4 million in 1999. The report also describes interest in using culture for "image-branding" to improve

Singapore’s reputation in the global hub (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2000, pp. 16-59).

In the following years, culture continues to be viewed as a useful means for economic growth through tourism, and for boosting Singapore’s brand image. In the 2005 Renaissance City Report the ministry continues to list “Cultural Tourism” as an area of focus. It also describes the importance of establishing a Singapore brand and using merchandise to capitalise on “Singapore’s wealth of heritage resources” to express “the Singapore identity” (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2005, pp. 9-20).

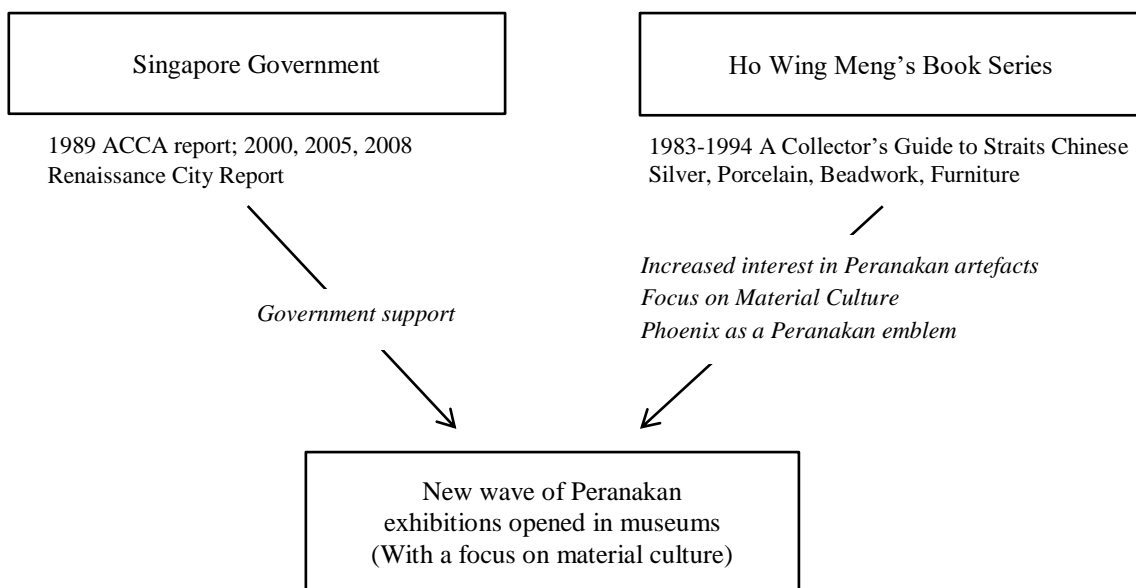


Figure 5: Factors and influences surrounding the opening of the first permanent Peranakan exhibitions and museums in Singapore, Toh Ying Li, 2023

Peranakan culture is directly mentioned by the Singapore government in the 2008 Renaissance City Report where the ministry lists it as a unique “made-in-Singapore” culture with indigenous traditions. The report also details how the National Heritage Board and national museums plan on exhibiting Peranakan artefacts in Europe as a showcase of Singapore’s cultural heritage (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2008, pp. 5-35). Singapore’s arts and information minister Lui Tuck Yew even described the Peranakans as Singapore’s “multiracial emblems of our social mix” during the opening of a new Peranakan exhibition.

The combined pressures of governmental interest in developing Singapore's cultural sector to suit the government's own agendas (i.e. to increase economic growth through cultural tourism and improve Singapore's status and reputation), as well some pressure from Ho Wing Meng's book series eventually resulted in the opening of new exhibitions and museums dedicated towards Peranakan culture – many of which were ground-breaking and unprecedented in Singapore. These exhibitions that followed had a particular emphasis on the investigation of Peranakan material culture. More on the effects of these new Peranakan museums and exhibitions will be examined in the following section.

## The Effects of Museums and their Exhibitions

Prior to the 1980s, Singapore's major museums largely considered Peranakan artefacts to be 'not museum-worthy,' and there was little vested interest in exhibiting or collecting large numbers of Peranakan artefacts. This changed after newfound governmental interest towards developing cultural tourism. A wave of new Peranakan exhibitions and museums opened from the mid-1980s to the present day, in a phenomenon that Kenson Kwok, director of the Asian Civilisations Museum and The Peranakan Museum describes as a "museumification" of the culture (Kwok, 2015, pp. 115-125).

This section will examine several case studies of exhibitions that led to a heightened visibility of Peranakan culture, specifically Peranakan "material culture" in Singaporean museums.

### The Straits Chinese Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore, 1985–1989

The Straits Chinese Gallery was ground-breaking as the first permanent Peranakan exhibition in a major museum in Singapore (Yoong, 2013, pp. 15-21). It was opened as one of several new galleries<sup>11</sup> initiated by the government's "museum modernisation plan" with the goal of showcasing aspects of Singapore's cultural heritage (Dhanabalan, 1985, pp. 1-3). This gallery was also opened eight years after the first publication of Ho Wing Meng's



*Figure 6: The Straits Chinese Gallery, Singapore Tourism Board Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore, 1985–1989.*

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<sup>11</sup> All of the galleries opened in the National Museum as part of the Museum's modernisation plan had a distinct focus towards establishing Singapore's history and culture. The four new galleries were: the History of Singapore Gallery, the Straits Chinese Gallery, the Trade Ceramics Gallery and the Southeast Asian Gallery.

book, *Straits Chinese Silver*, where Ho directly criticised the National Museum’s lack of Peranakan representation in their exhibits, and two years after its republication in 1983.

The opening of the Straits Chinese Gallery was celebrated by the Peranakan community as a legitimisation of their ethnic identity (Kwok, 2015, pp. 115-125). As the first permanent Peranakan exhibition in a major Singaporean museum, this exhibition helped to define perceptions in Singapore during a period where the culture had been rapidly fading into obsolescence. The curators chose to focus the entire exhibition on displaying “Peranakan material culture” – a term that would become rapidly used by scholars and museum curators to describe the highly ornamented traditional household artefacts from the Peranakan Golden Age. This material culture comprised of Peranakan late 19th to early 20th century wooden furniture, porcelain, embroidered textiles, beadwork, metalwork and musical instruments (as seen in the archival photographs below).



*Figure 7: The Straits Chinese Gallery, Singapore Tourism Board Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore, 1985–1989.*

The decision to focus exclusively on material culture for the exhibition was motivated by several factors – the first is the availability of these artefacts which could be acquired easily through purchase and donations during this time period. During this time period, the younger generation of Peranakans were modernising their homes and there was a mass selling of traditional ancestral homes and furnishings. As a result, artefacts from Peranakan material culture were easily available at affordable prices. Second, Peranakan material culture is a tangible artefact and a medium that lends itself well to the exhibition format. Highly ornamented with intricate carvings, paintings or detailed embroidered designs, these items are visually striking and the museum displayed them in layouts aimed to authentically reconstruct the rooms of a Peranakan house, creating an immersive experience for the viewer (Chee E.-L. S., 1989) (Yoong, 2013, pp. 15-21).

The motif of the phoenix was present in the ornamented designs of artefacts exhibited in the Straits Chinese Gallery – notably in the porcelain ware and textiles. The phoenix also appears in the clothing of a mannequin wearing a Peranakan bride’s full wedding regalia, with the bride wearing a phoenix collar (in Figure 7 above). Phoenix collars were tufted, layered collars that resembled the neck feathers of a phoenix. In the Golden Age, phoenixes were associated with the Peranakan bride and were extremely popular on Peranakan wedding clothing and items. This usage of the phoenix in bridal attire stems from the older Chinese usage of the phoenix as a symbol of the Chinese Empress. Peranakans during the Golden Age frequently blended different cultural traditions together and were influenced by the Malay tradition where the bride and groom are treated as royalty during their wedding (the queen of the day). By blending different traditions together, the Peranakan Chinese followed this Malay custom but instead dressed their brides to resemble a Chinese empress by sewing motifs of the phoenix on her bridal clothing. Through repeated use, the meaning of the phoenix to Peranakans during the Golden Age gradually shifted from being associated with the Chinese Empress to becoming associated as a symbol of the Peranakan bride (National Heritage Board, 2021).

Although the Straits Chinese Gallery’s main goal was to document the “material manifestations of a unique but rapidly changing Chinese sub-culture” for future generations (Kwa, 1989), the gallery also had a secondary narrative: a focus on the lives of traditional Peranakan women. The exhibition focused on recreating the domestic Peranakan household from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which were spaces and items predominantly used by women in this time period. The exhibition also included two life-sized mannequins of Peranakan women in their full traditional attire (as seen in Figure 7 above), while their male counterparts were conspicuously absent. This narrative is even more noticeable in the museum’s catalogue, which describes Peranakan women as the main custodians of the culture, whilst openly criticizing Peranakan men as “awkward” and lacking conviction in their cultural identity (Chee E.-L. S., 1989). The catalogue also contained an entire section dedicated towards detailing the lives of Peranakan women, while no such section was provided for Peranakan men (Chee E.-L. S., 1989). It is possible that the decision to focus the exhibition mostly on the women may have been due to the large gender divide within traditional Peranakan families. Peranakan women from the Golden Age were typically confined to the household and were more traditional in their manner of dress and conduct. They often wore traditional clothing like the *baju panjang* or the *sarong kebaya*, decorated with brooches and jewellery like the *kerosang* (Koh, 2013), and spent most of their time cooking, embroidering and managing the household. On the other hand, the men spent

most of their time outside working and trading with the British and as a result adopted a much more Western dressing style, typically in suits and bowties (as seen in Figure 8). This adoption of a less traditional lifestyle is perhaps what caused the museum to consider the women as more culturally representative of the Peranakans. In addition, Peranakan men were active politically and often had foreign ties to Britain and China – it is possible the museum did not want to focus on the more political aspects of the Peranakans, ultimately resulting in the exhibition’s narrative focusing on the cultural aspects of the Peranakan women instead.

This gender bias towards women by the museum curators is notable as traditionally, the Peranakan phoenix is a feminine symbol that symbolises the bride, the matriarch, and the empress. The opening of this new wave of Peranakan exhibitions in museums marked a shift in the Peranakan discourse to focus more on traditionally feminine aspects. As museum curators draw greater attention to women in Peranakan culture, it is unsurprising, then, that the phoenix – a traditional symbol that was often present on Nonya artefacts should also receive greater exposure through these exhibitions.



*Figure 8: Gender differences in traditional Peranakan culture, Toh Ying Li 2023.*

### **Gilding the Phoenix at the National Museum of Singapore, 1990–1991**

From 1990-1991, Edmond Chin curated an exhibition named “Gilding the Phoenix: The Straits Chinese and their Jewellery” at the National Museum. This exhibition also focused primarily on Peranakan material culture from the Golden Ages and showcased 300 pieces

of Peranakan jewellery and a selection of traditional clothing and accessories. The items were a combination of Chin's personal collection and other private collections (Chin E. , 1991) (Chin E. , 2022). The exhibition was considered "ground-breaking" and introduced new perspectives regarding Peranakan material culture (Backman, 2022). Chin demonstrated that there was a 'Peranakan aesthetic' that distinguished Peranakan artefacts from other Straits Settlements artefacts from the same time period. Peranakan artefacts were generally not produced by the Peranakans themselves, and instead commissioned and imported from craftsmen in China (for the porcelain), or commissioned from local craftsmen in Singapore (for the wooden furniture and jewellery). The only exception to this is Peranakan needlework, which was often handmade by the Nonyas themselves. However, Chin suggested the notion that the Peranakans "exerted artistic control over the production" of these commissioned items, even going as far as to provide "working drawings" to the craftsmen with specific requests. Chin's cites the brightly contrasting colour palettes, the rounded corners and designs that followed a "more is more" philosophy as evidence of a distinct and consistent Peranakan style in these artefacts (Chin E. , 1991, pp. 30-32).

The phoenix appears in a portion of items in the exhibition, such as in several phoenix brooches, wedding garments and wedding headdresses (Chin E. , 1991, pp. 110-154). Chin describes the phoenix as "a personal symbol of the Nonya matriarch," a symbol of the Empress and one of the most "ancient auspicious animals in Chinese mythology" (Chin E. , 1991, p. 64). Despite the presence of other motifs in the exhibited jewellery (such as the peacock, the butterfly and the dragon), Edmond Chin chose to name both the exhibition and the catalogue book after the phoenix. Interestingly enough, Chin references Ho Wing Meng's opinions in the catalogue and also lists "Professor Ho" as one of the people which he had "personal communications" with when curating his exhibition and writing his book. Professor Ho Wing Meng was one of the academics who suggested that the phoenix should be considered an emblem of the Peranakans. It is possible that Ho's opinions may have influenced Chin's decision to name the exhibition "Gilding the Phoenix."

Gilding the Phoenix is notable for the purposes of this research for several reasons – the first of which is this is an early high profile instance where a Peranakan related event and publication was named after the phoenix – a trend which would continue decades later. In addition, the exhibition helped to shift narratives in the Peranakan discourse towards material culture from the Golden Ages (when previously the Peranakans were more known for their political or economic activities). Thirdly, Gilding the Phoenix focuses on the domestic and feminine aspects of Peranakan culture. Although some artefacts exhibited

were used by men, such as the gold cuff-links and several male wedding garments, the vast majority of the jewellery in the exhibition was for women. Even the front cover of the book displays only a female Nonya decorated in gold jewellery with no male Baba in sight (as seen in Figure 9 below).



Figure 9: *Gilding the Phoenix*, Book by Edmond Chin, 1991.

Museums and exhibitions play a crucial role in shaping the academic discourse of cultures and what is included or excluded can change the way the culture is perceived. The choice to name the exhibition after the phoenix (instead of dragons, tigers or butterflies, which were all alternate motifs that were present within the displayed artefacts) is an example of a phenomenon that the academic Lavoie describes as ‘folklorisation.’ This process occurs when there is a selection of “particular popular forms of art” to be used “as emblems of an ethnic group” (Lavoie, 1986, p. 72). Folklorisation results in the formation of “identity exhibitions,” and “folklore museums” that continue to perpetuate a specific narrative and image of the culture (Thiesse, 1999, p. 189–210).

### **The Peranakan Museum, 2008**

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2008, The Peranakan Museum opened with the support of the National Heritage Board and Singapore Tourism Board. This was Singapore’s first museum dedicated entirely to Peranakan culture and the decision to do so was initially met with concern from board members who were worried that dedicating an entire museum to a minority group would be controversial to non-Peranakans (Yoong, 2009, pp. 59-66).

Ultimately, the museum was well received by the public and also endorsed by the Singapore government. At its opening, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was present and gave a speech stressing the importance of having a “rich cultural life” for nation building and to define the Singapore identity (Lee H. L., 2008). The Peranakan Association was also consulted during the opening of the museum as was listed as one of the “community partners” (National Heritage Board, 2008).

Similar to its predecessors, the museum had a strong focus towards exhibiting Peranakan material culture from the Golden Age, focusing on “beadwork, ceremonial necklaces, embroidery, furniture, porcelain” and other domestic items that shed light on their lifestyle, food, fashion and rituals of traditional Peranakans (Lee H. L., 2008). The phoenix can be found on numerous artefacts such as the porcelain and on textiles used in Peranakan weddings. Although the Peranakan Museum included two galleries on the Peranakan’s public life and politics, the other eight galleries all displayed material culture (Teoh, 2015, pp. 58-85) (Yoong, 2009, pp. 62-64).

## **Main Effects of new Peranakan Exhibitions and Museums**

### **Domestication and Feminisation**

The large majority of key Peranakan museums and exhibitions can be credited in the past few decades with shifting the focus of the Peranakan discourse towards more domestic and traditionally feminine aspects of the culture. This trend has not gone unnoticed by other academics with scholars such as Teoh remarking that museums in Singapore largely “emphasize portrayals and consumption of supposedly feminine aspects of Peranakan culture” while “downplaying purportedly masculine elements.” (Teoh, 2015, pp. 58-85)

This new focus on traditionally female aspects of Peranakan culture does not only exist in the exhibition sphere, but also in Peranakan pop-culture and media. The two most prominent Peranakan stories in recent decades are “Emily of Emerald Hill,” a 1982 stage play by Stella Kon and the 2008 hit television soap opera “The Little Nonya,” (Kripalani, 2013, pp. 1-5). Both stories are centred on the domestic life of a traditional Peranakan woman. She is the main character, and the story is told from her perspective and her experiences. Emily of Emerald Hill is “one of Singapore’s most enduring plays” and continues to be performed by Singaporean theatrical productions. The Little Nonya

obtained the highest television viewership numbers in fourteen years when it was released, and popularised Peranakan culture amongst a modern audience (Teoh, 2015, p. 66).

Peranakan academics have suggested that this interest is caused by a desire to focus on the “uncontroversial realm of the woman’s world” and to keep the focus away from the Peranakan men’s potentially controversial political history (Teoh, 2015, pp. 58-85). In the context of my research, it is noteworthy that the feminisation of Peranakan culture has coincided with the rise of the phoenix as a Peranakan emblem. These corresponding trends may not be entirely coincidental as the phoenix is itself considered a feminine symbol in Peranakan culture. The phoenix traditionally symbolises different manifestations of feminine energy such as the empress, the bride and the matriarch, and is also the symbolic embodiment of feminine *yin* [阴] energy to traditional Peranakans. As museums, exhibition and authors continue to increase the focus towards traditionally feminine aspects of the culture throughout the mid-1980s to 1900s, it lays the groundwork for the later selection of the phoenix as a Peranakan emblem that later takes place in the 2000s.

### **Increased Visibility of Peranakan Material Culture**

Another major impact of the new wave of Peranakan exhibitions and museums from the mid-1980s onwards is its role in elevating the significance and attention towards Peranakan material culture. Peranakan material culture can be defined as the physical artefacts and objects used, commissioned or created by the Peranakan community. These items are typically domestic household objects from the Golden Age (late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century) – such as wooden furniture, porcelain, traditional clothing, textiles, jewellery and metalwork. In the past, Peranakan material culture was largely overlooked by curators and received limited scholarly attention. Since the mid-1980s, there has been a notable shift with the emergence of a new wave of Peranakan exhibitions and museums that have placed a significant emphasis on showcasing Peranakan material culture. This renewed focus has garnered considerable attention and has elevated the prominence and recognition of Peranakan material culture within the academic and cultural spheres.

Peranakan material culture serves as the source of origin and reference for the depiction of the Peranakan phoenix, which is often intricately carved, embroidered, and painted on various domestic household items from the Golden Age. Within traditional Peranakan material culture, a diverse range of phoenix representations and motifs can be observed, frequently appearing alongside other popular Peranakan symbols. A comprehensive

compilation of the recurring phoenix representations and motifs in Peranakan material culture, along with their traditional symbolic meanings, has been provided in the appendix of this thesis.

The phoenix's popularity as a motif in material culture can be attributed to its various symbolic qualities that appealed to traditional Golden Age Peranakans. First, the phoenix represents the Peranakan's Chinese heritage. Peranakans have always retained a connection to their Chinese ancestors, with traditional Peranakans practising Chinese traditions such as Cheng Beng (also known as Qing Ming). Surrounding themselves with motifs of a symbol that originated from Chinese mythology is homage to their ancestral roots (National Heritage Board, 2023) (The Peranakan Association, 2019).

Second, the phoenix in Chinese mythology appears only in times of peace and harmony (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141). Using the phoenix symbol everywhere in household objects is thus seen as an auspicious act as the appearance of the phoenix in all parts of the house indicates that peace and prosperity will soon follow.

In addition, the phoenix is a guardian bird that protects the Southern cardinal direction. According to Chinese legend, there are four great mythical creatures – the tortoise, the phoenix, the dragon and the tiger which guard the north, south, east, and west respectively. As the Peranakans descended from Chinese traders who migrated to the South, and are currently residing in South of China, adorning their homes with the Southern guardian would have resonated with Peranakans from the Golden Age (Ho, 2008, pp. 43-44).

Another possible reason is that the phoenix is traditionally seen as an imperial symbol. The phoenix is known as the ruler of all birds and is also the symbol of the Empress. A popular classical depiction of the phoenix in Chinese paintings called *Bai Niao Chao Feng* [百鸟朝凤] or 'a hundred birds in homage to the phoenix' depicts the phoenix surrounded by numerous birds paying their respects. This motif can often be found in Peranakan Chinese porcelain as well, and is an imperial symbol representing the relationship between a ruler and the subjects (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141). Peranakans from the Golden Age were fond of having imperial connections. They named themselves 'the King's Chinese' in support of King Edward VII and King George V, Britain's ruling monarchs during this period (Tan K. Y., 2020, p. 54). Many Peranakans also believed in the legend of Hang Li Po. According to the legend, Peranakans are descendants from the royal retinue of the Ming dynasty princess Hang Li Po. The Chinese princess was married to a Sultan in Malacca, and she arrived with a royal entourage of hundreds, which were the supposed ancestors of the Peranakans. This

legend has since been disproven as there are no historical records of Princess Hang Li Po and her retinue (Teo, 2019, p. 247). Nevertheless, the story remains popular amongst Peranakans, who have historically appreciated having a connection to royalty. Using the phoenix, which itself had imperial connotations, would likely have appealed to their tastes and preferences.

Finally, the phoenix is an important symbol during weddings. In Chinese mythology, the phoenix is a symbol of feminine *yin* [阴] energy in contrast to the dragon which represents masculine *yang* [阳] energy (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141). The Peranakan bride is covered in bright phoenix motifs during her wedding day. Peranakan Chinese weddings were elaborate and ostentatious affairs that lasted for twelve days. All the cabinets, the beddings and the ceramics used in the bridal chamber were custom made or acquired specifically for the purpose of the wedding. These items would be decorated with motifs of the phoenix, as a representation of the bride. Twin phoenixes also symbolised love and harmony in a marriage, making the phoenix motif very popular. Peranakans from the Golden Age held extensive weddings that lasted for twelve days and intricate and exquisite Peranakan artefacts were commissioned with phoenix motifs (to represent the bride) specifically for these wedding occasions. These items were some of the most beautiful and well-made artefacts from the Golden Age – making items with phoenix motifs more likely to be collected, studied and exhibited by academics and museums in later years.

Overall, the mid-1980s onward saw a new wave of Peranakan exhibitions and museums being established, with a strong focus on the exploration of Peranakan material culture: domestic artefacts from the Golden Ages that featured motifs of the phoenix. Peranakan material culture has gained recognition and appreciation in recent years, both within the community and among broader audiences. Museums, exhibitions, and publications such as Ho Wing Meng's series have played a vital role in showcasing and documenting the richness and diversity of Peranakan material culture, contributing to its continued appreciation and study. All of which can be attributed to the newfound governmental support, who approved these new museums and exhibitions dedicated to the culture. These exhibitions also redirected the discourse surrounding Peranakan culture, placing less emphasis on potentially controversial aspects such as politics and economic activities and more on traditionally feminine aspects such as cooking, craftwork, and domestic life.

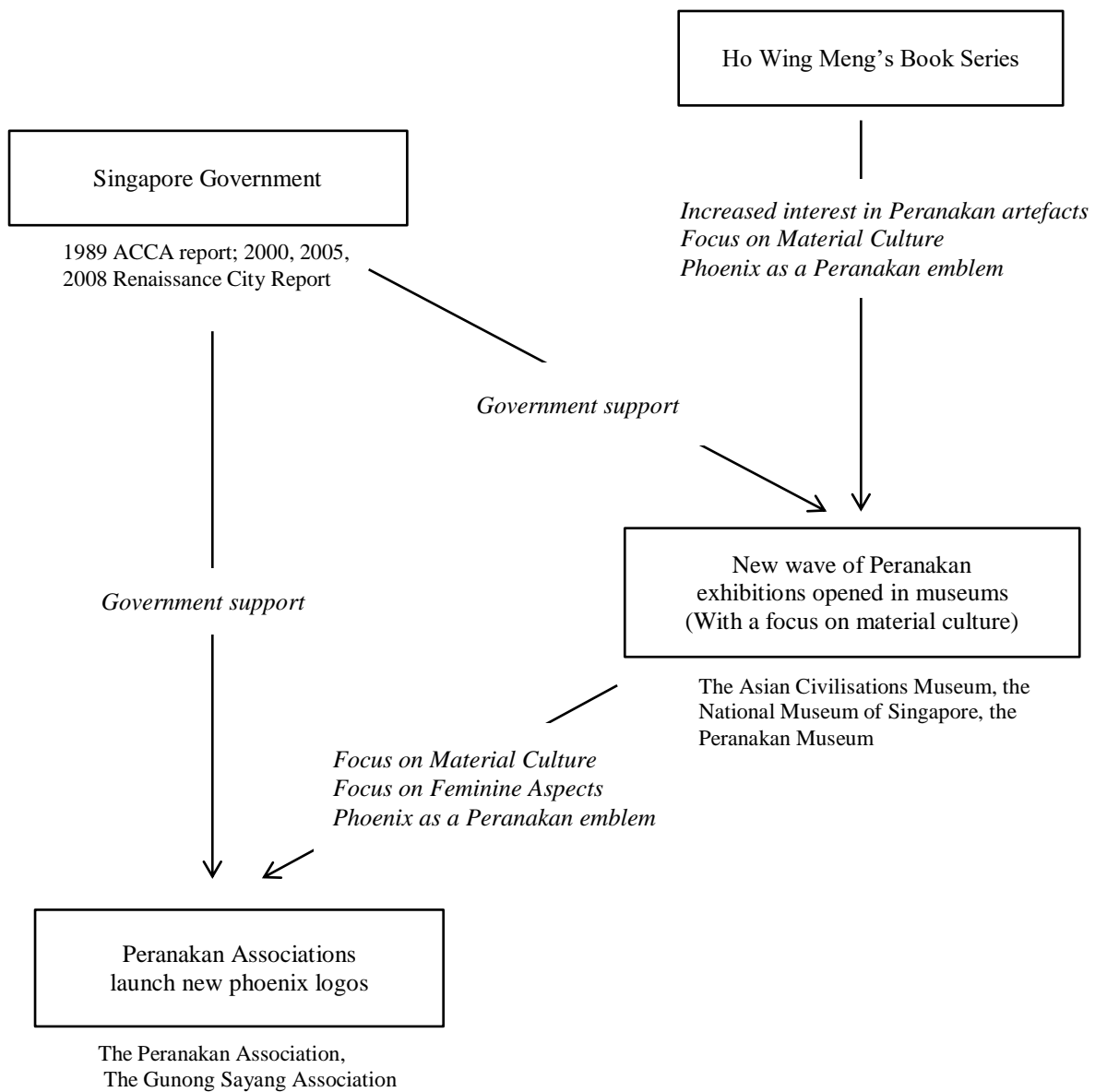


Figure 10: Relationships between the Singapore government, museums and the Peranakan Associations, Toh Ying Li, 2023

The renewed attention on the traditionally feminine and domestic aspects of Peranakan culture, alongside the prominence of the phoenix motif in material culture, contributed to the selection of the phoenix as the emblems of the two official Peranakan Chinese associations in Singapore: The Peranakan Association and The Gunong Sayang Association. More on the two official Peranakan associations in Singapore will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **IV. Chapter 2:**

### **The Phoenix Rebrand of Peranakan Associations**

In Singapore, the Peranakan Chinese community established two official associations - The Peranakan Association and the Gunong Sayang Association during the 1900s to serve as social organizations for supporting Peranakan interests. Both are founding members of The Federation of Peranakan Associations: a guild of fourteen Peranakan associations from Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Australia (The Peranakan Association, 2020, p. 63).

Both associations, particularly The Peranakan Association of Singapore, have been influenced by the Singapore government's shifting attitudes towards the Peranakan community and underwent several phases of rebranding in response to these changing stances. Following the effects of the new wave of Peranakan exhibitions in major Singaporean museums, the evolving discourse on Peranakan culture increasingly emphasises material culture and this trend continues with the selection of the phoenix (a symbol from material culture) as the new emblem for both associations.

In the 2000s, both Peranakan Associations began using the phoenix as their official emblem. The reasons behind the selection choices of the various emblems of the Peranakan associations (the phoenix emblems as well as emblems prior to the phoenix), will be analysed in the following section, as well as the contextual, governmental and historical reasons for their phases of rebranding.

#### **The Peranakan Association**

Throughout the course of their history, the Peranakans in Singapore have been impacted by the varying attitudes of the Singapore government and societal conditions, causing several different phases of strategic rebranding as a way of survival. This phenomenon is exemplified in the changing emblems and changing names used by The Peranakan Association during the three distinct phases of Peranakan culture in Singapore: the Golden Age, the Peranakan Decline, and the Peranakan Revival.

During the Golden Age, the Peranakan Association was first established on August 17th 1900 as the "Straits Chinese British Association." The association did not use an emblem during this period and expressed their support to the British by incorporating the term

“British” into their association’s name, an economically advantageous move given that the British were the Peranakan’s main business partners at that time. (Clammer, 1979, p. 5). (The Peranakan Association, 2022) (Tan K. Y., 2020, p. 54).

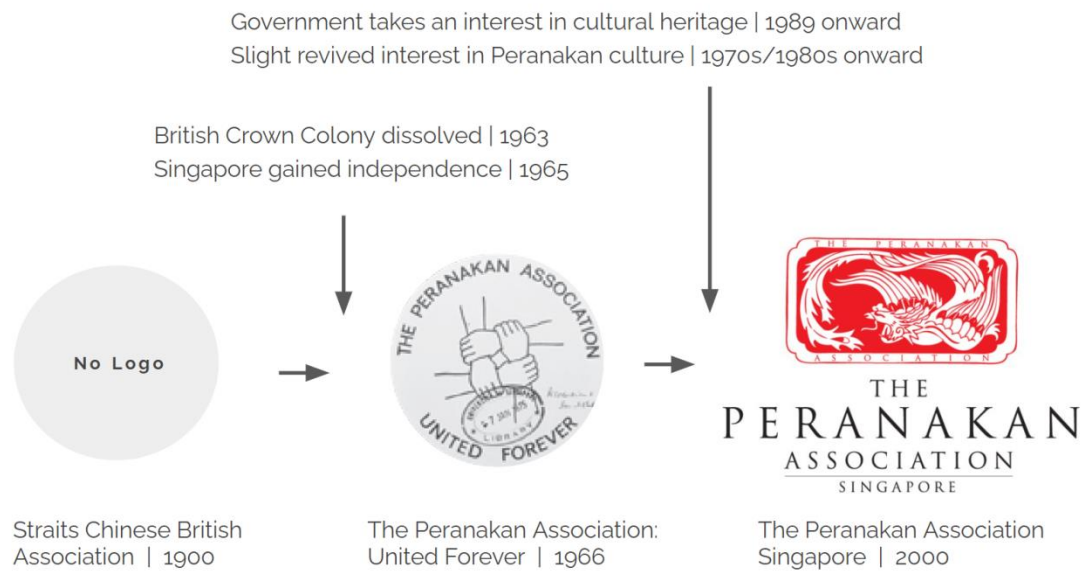


Figure 11: The changing logos of the Peranakan Association, Toh Ying Li, 2023.

### The Peranakan Association United Forever Logo, 1966

During the Peranakan Decline, The Peranakan Association made large scale changes to its branding and image. This turbulent period was marked by the collapse of the British Crown colony and Straits Settlements, as well as the economic hardships from the Great Depression. As Singapore gained independence, the country was also filled with nationalistic fervour and the Singapore government had little interest in cultural development during a time when economic growth was prioritised. In addition, the new government declared the four official racial categories in Singapore to be “Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others,” which raised uncertainties amongst the Peranakans about their legitimacy as a culture.

Facing pressure from the perceived lack of governmental support and the new wave of nationalistic zeal in Singapore, Peranakans made large scale changes to their branding and

image in order to project a more subdued and conformist image, deemed necessary for their survival as an ethnic group (Cheng, 2001, pp. 431-455.).

The association removed the potentially controversial “British” portion of its name in 1964 and changed it to “Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association.” “Straits Chinese” was also changed to “Singapore Chinese” after the collapse of the Straits Settlements. A new black and white emblem featuring the slogan ‘United Forever’ with four linked arms was also launched in an effort to appear committed towards racial harmony and unity with the rest of the population. In 1966, this name was further shortened as ‘The Peranakan Association’ (Lee S. K., 2009, pp. 167-177). Visual analysis of the logo has been conducted below, and will also be conducted for all subsequent emblems and visual branding materials used by the associations. A combined summary of the findings and observations from the visual analysis sections will be included at the end of the chapter:



Figure 12: The Peranakan Association emblem, 1966.

## Visual Analysis

### a) Subject Matter

The logo contains a motif with four linked arms, clasped together at their wrists. The arms are surrounded by text wrapped around the image, containing the name of the association and its new motto: United Forever. The stamp and writing in the bottom of the image (in Figure 12) were added by archivists to the image and are not part of the original logo.

### b) Composition

The design features a primarily circular composition, with the logo’s shape, text, and tips of the four linked arms all forming a circle. Linked circles are traditionally a symbol of continuity and unity, matching the message of the ‘United Forever’ slogan in the logo.

*c) Repetition*

Repetition can be observed in the central motif of the four linked arms, and the design also features rotational symmetry. Each arm in the motif symbolised one of the four races (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others, which in line with the CMIO system used by the Singapore government to designate racial identity). As all of the linked arms were depicted as visually identical, this symbolises the equality and unity of the races.

*d) Text*

The logo uses a sans-serif typeface which projects a modern, contemporary aesthetic. It is interesting that the oldest Peranakan association logo in 1966 uses a sans-serif typeface, whilst the newer Peranakan association phoenix logos in 2000 and 2018 use a more traditional serif typeface.

**Content Analysis**

Articles extracted from the Peranakan Magazine Archives reveals that the Peranakan Association has made several statements regarding its old 1966 United Forever logo (The Peranakan Association, 2000, p. 3). Textual analysis of extracts from this archival source has been conducted as follows:

<b>Condensation</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
The old logo, of four linked arms shared the sentiment and style of the early years of Singapore's independence	Logo reflected mood and style of time period	Influence of time period
Perhaps exuded the nationalistic concerns of the Association at that time	Nationalistic concerns Projecting the right image	Aims and challenges

Overall, the Peranakan Association's 1966 United Forever logo (as seen in Figure 12) is reflective of the time period and historical context which it was made. The logo is careful to not express any sense of a Peranakan identity – instead, the logo focuses on expressing compliance with the Singapore government's objectives of maintaining racial harmony between the four "official" races in Singapore. The logo is decidedly low profile, with the

emblem depicted in simple monochromatic line work. The logo is also the only emblem released by The Peranakan Association to use a purely sans-serif typeface – an interesting deviation as sans-serif typefaces typically evoke a modern aesthetic, whereas serif typefaces evoke tradition. The Peranakan Association was careful to present itself as modernising with the times, and not embracing its old traditions – something which the association was later able to do in subsequent years.

### **The Peranakan Association Phoenix Logo, 2000**

The first phoenix emblem from the Peranakan Association was launched in 2000 during the middle of the Peranakan Revival in 2000.



*Figure 13: The Peranakan Association emblem, 2000.*

Compared to the 1960s, the 2000s was a markedly different time period for the Peranakans in Singapore. Peranakan culture was now in the midst of its revival and was no longer viewed with suspicion, but rather acceptance and growing interest. Characterised by numerous Peranakan exhibitions by Singapore’s museums, and outward support from the Singapore government, it was during this time period when The Peranakan Association designed its new phoenix emblem as a vibrant celebration of its cultural identity.

The design and launch of the phoenix logo was also influenced by Peranakan exhibitions held by the National Museum of Singapore – notably the “Gilding the Phoenix” exhibition. The graphic design company that created the association’s new phoenix emblem, Equinox Art and Design, was the same company that worked with Edmond Chin for the “Gilding the Phoenix” exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore. Equinox Art and Design produced the catalogue (also named *Gilding the Phoenix*) and designed several images that were used in the museum’s jewellery exhibition (Chin E. , 1991, p. 194). This design

company was directly involved in both Peranakan projects that used the phoenix in its branding.

In addition, the president of The Peranakan Association in this period, Lee Kip Lee<sup>12</sup> was in correspondence with curator and author Edmond Chin during the opening of Chin's *Gilding the Phoenix* exhibition. Chin credits Lee Kip Lee as an expert he had "personal communications" with during the creation of his book and exhibition (Chin E. , 1991, p. 201). Lee Kip Lee would later become the president of The Peranakan Association in 1996, and launch the association's first phoenix emblem in 2000 (Chee C. , 2019).

## **Visual Analysis**

### *a) Subject Matter*

The logo features a phoenix in flight – which is a popular traditional Peranakan motif. The phoenix flies in a circular pattern and faces the left. It is enclosed within a lobed, cartouche frame and the name of the association surrounds the phoenix in small letters in its borders. The name of the association is also depicted in large text below the logo as well.

### *b) Composition*

The emblem features a circular composition with the phoenix flying in a circle and its curled tail feathers completing the loop. The name of the association surrounds the phoenix on the top and bottom. Although the enclosing frame appears rectangular, its rounded corners continue to suggest a curved shape. The circular shape of the phoenix is described by the association as a symbol of continuity (The Peranakan Association , 2000).

### *c) Repetition*

Slight repetition within the phoenix design can be observed in the five red feathers on each wing. Five is an auspicious number for Peranakans and the five feathers in phoenixes traditionally symbolise the five virtues of righteousness, propriety, wisdom, humility and sincerity (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141).

### *d) Style*

The phoenix is highly detailed with each of its feathers, wings and beak carefully drawn with a fine line. The style of the phoenix is reminiscent of carved phoenixes from

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<sup>12</sup> Lee Kip Lee was president of The Peranakan Association from 1996–2009.

traditional Peranakan brown and gold furniture. Traditional furniture from Peranakan houses often were decorated with motifs of the phoenix enclosed in lobed cartouche panels (as seen in Figure 14 below). The lobed frame that encloses the phoenix in the Peranakan Association’s emblem pays homage to this Peranakan design style – where subjects such as animals or flowers are often enclosed in a panel or a frame.



*Figure 14: Twin phoenix cartouche on door, gilt-lacquered carved wooden carriage, The Peranakan Musuem, Photographed by Toh Ying Li, 2023.*

The style of the Peranakan Association’s phoenix emblem is also depicted in a style that is somewhat reminiscent of a Chinese seal. The colour choice of red and the rectangular frame that encloses the phoenix is evocative of a seal (as seen in Figure 15 below). Chinese seals were insignia used as a mark of identity by individuals, government officials and manufacturers. These seals were unique to their owner and were stamped on documents, scrolls, paintings and the bottoms of ceramic wares as a means of authenticating items. The



*Figure 15: Comparing the Peranakan Association’s phoenix logo to a Chinese seal. (On Left) Manufacturer’s stamp on a Straits Chinese porcelain container, photographed by Toh Ying Li, 2022.*

Peranakan Association perhaps makes use of the phoenix emblem in a manner reminiscent of Chinese seals, whereby the emblem serves as an insignia prominently featured on the masthead of correspondence and at the bottom of official posters issued by the association.

*e) Colours*

A bright, highly saturated red is the main colour used in the emblem. The neutral colours of white and black are also present as well. The phoenix, depicted in red and white, is formed through the negative space created by the red background. The small letters forming 'The Peranakan Association' is written in red as well. The large letters at the very bottom of the logo are depicted in black – likely for readability purposes. Red is an auspicious colour to the Peranakans and is traditionally used for celebrations. When the colour red is used in a phoenix, it typically symbolises summer, warmth and the sun (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 153).

*f) Line*

The design of the emblem features thin, organic lines for illustrating the phoenix's body. These taper in width very slightly at the tips of each stroke, giving the illustration a more naturalistic feel. Thicker lines are used to illustrate the phoenix's eye and the curve of its shoulder blades.

*g) Text*

The logo uses purely a serif typeface. There are bracketed serifs and a slight diagonal stress in the uppercase O glyphs which suggests an old style typeface was used. Old style typefaces create a more handwritten and traditional aesthetic – which is in line with the association's aims in this period to focus on preserving traditions and culture.

### **The Peranakan Association Phoenix Logo, 2018**

In 2018, some minor tweaks were made to the 2000's phoenix logo for readability purposes and to make the logo clearer in small prints. No changes were made to the subject matter, composition, style and use of repetition in the phoenix, and the changes instead only focused on the colours, line work and the text. The section below examines the revisions that were made:



*Figure 16: Minor changes made to the Peranakan Association logo, 2018.*

## **Visual Analysis**

### *a) Colours*

The revised 2018 phoenix emblem made changes to saturation of the red used in the logo. A darker and less saturated shade of red is used – increasing the contrast between the red and white colours, and improving its clarity when viewed.

### *b) Line*

The lines within the phoenix were revised to be much thinner in width, which helps the phoenix’s silhouette appear clearer when the logo is printed small. The lines in the outer frame of the logo were made thicker, to ensure that they are more visible when printed (Chee C. , 2018).

### *c) Text*

The text in the borders of the lobed frame was removed after a review by the association’s general committee where the text was deemed “redundant” (as the exact words were written below the logomark as well) (Chee C. , 2018). The size of the bottom text was decreased, providing more balance between the sizes of the text and the phoenix.

## **Content Analysis**

Textual sources found in the Peranakan Magazine Archives reveal several articles and statements released by the association during the launch of their new phoenix emblems. The article explains in detail motivations that led to the phoenix rebrand of the association

(The Peranakan Association , 2000, p. 3). Textual analysis of these articles and statements has been conducted in the section below:

<b>Condensation</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
The Peranakan Association looks into the future with a brand new logo	Cultural revitalization	New aims
A new logo to express the exuberance, optimism and unique cultural heritage of our community	Cultural preservation Cultural expression Optimism	New aims Mood / Tone
The old logo no longer reflects the concerns of the Peranakan community today	Out-dated logo	Changing aims
The mission statement, “to preserve and revitalize the Peranakan culture and traditions”	Cultural preservation Cultural revitalization	New aims
The logo should be a contemporary, dynamic interpretation of a traditional symbol	Cultural preservation Cultural evolution	
To express the Association’s commitment to the past and to the future	Cultural preservation Cultural revitalization	
The phoenix is an imperial symbol favoured by the Peranakans	Phoenix as an imperial symbol Phoenix as a popular symbol	Reasons for using the phoenix

The phoenix together with the peony and <i>qilin</i> [麒麟], can be found in the decorative schemes on porcelain, furniture, jewellery, costume, among others	Phoenix part of material culture Motif pairing	Phoenix usage
In Chinese mythology the phoenix can symbolise the southern cardinal point; it is also the insignia of the empress.	Chinese mythology Phoenix as a symbol of the South Phoenix as an imperial symbol Phoenix as a feminine symbol	Reasons for using the phoenix
Together with the peony, the phoenix represents romantic love	Motif pairing Phoenix and peony as a romantic symbol	Phoenix usage
In the Western tradition, the phoenix symbolises rebirth and regeneration, being the mythical creature that is reborn from the ashes of a great conflagration	Western mythology Phoenix as a symbol of rebirth and regeneration	Reasons for using the phoenix
A dynamic logo in a vibrant red was selected, depicting a soaring phoenix within a lobed, rectangular panel derived from a motif typically found on carved “brown and gold” furniture	Dynamism Eye-catching Phoenix part of material culture	
Its swooping fluid tail forming an almost circular shape, symbolising continuity and dynamism	Dynamism Cultural preservation	
Contemporary and dynamic, yet traditional and complex	Dynamism Cultural preservation	New aims

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This symbol will hopefully express the multi-faceted challenges of being Peranakan and Singaporean in the new millennium	Optimism	
	Overcoming challenges	New aims
	Multi-culture	Mood / Tone
	Cultural evolution	

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## Findings

Ultimately, analysis of these statements reveals that the phoenix emblem was selected for a variety of reasons by the Peranakan Association. The first is the new and changed concerns of the Peranakans: with the Peranakan Revival underway and the Singapore government now supportive of the culture, it was no longer vital for the association to evoke a nationalistic and compliant image. The association was now instead focused on its new aims of cultural preservation and cultural revitalisation – using the phoenix, a popular traditional image straight from the Peranakan Golden Ages, perfectly fits the association’s new goals of preserving its heritage and traditions.

The second reason for the phoenix’s selection is its variety of symbolic meanings that appealed to the Peranakan Association, and which were considered in alignment to the association’s own aims. These symbolic meanings mentioned by the association included the phoenix as an imperial symbol, as a symbol of the south, and as a symbol that represents revival and rejuvenation (from Western mythology). In Western mythology, the phoenix is a mythical creature known for its ability to regenerate after its death through flame and ashes. The Western phoenix is usually depicted rising from flames, with red and gold feathers and an eagle-like appearance (Nigg, 2016). Despite sharing its name with the phoenix from Chinese mythology, their symbolic meanings and origins are different: the Western phoenix is a symbol of rebirth, while the Chinese phoenix is a symbol of prosperity and harmony (Zhu, 2020). The Peranakan Association writes in their logo announcement that they took into consideration how “in the Western tradition, the phoenix symbolises rebirth and regeneration, being the mythical creature that is reborn from the ashes” (The Peranakan Association, 2000). There are several possible reasons behind this choice: firstly, themes of “rebirth” resonate with the Association’s own goals of revitalising Peranakan culture. It is also possible that the presence of the Western phoenix in modern pop culture and its established mythology would be seen as something recognisable to modern Singaporeans (as compared to the *Qilin* [麒麟] or the Peony), and thus more impactful and powerful as an emblem.

The third reason is the phoenix's prominence in material culture. During the launch of the new phoenix emblem, the Peranakan Association cites the phoenix's origins from material culture, and states that the phoenix is commonly found as a motif "on porcelain, furniture, jewellery, costume, among others." The Peranakan Association also states that the visual design of their emblem was directly inspired by traditional carvings of the phoenix from brown and gold wooden furniture (The Peranakan Association, 2000). Reference and study of traditional Peranakan material culture has directly shaped the design and style of the association's new emblem.

### **The Peranakan Association's 100th Anniversary Logo, 2000**

Following the launch of its official phoenix emblem, The Peranakan Association began to consistently use the phoenix in the branding of its other important milestones and events. An example of this is the association's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary logo which was released in 2000 and features three phoenix designs.



*Figure 17: The Peranakan Association's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary logo, 2000.*

### **Visual Analysis**

#### *a) Subject Matter*

The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary logo features three phoenixes. The phoenix on the left is a perched phoenix which is a symbol of stability (National Heritage Board, 2021). This phoenix is coiled around a pillar in the shape of the number '1.' The other two phoenixes are in flight with their wings spread. Both phoenixes face each other and are rotationally symmetrical. Twin phoenixes are traditionally considered an auspicious symbol representing love and

fidelity (Ho, 2008, p. 43). Small wispy clouds are depicted amongst the flying phoenixes. The word ‘anniversary’ is placed at the bottom of the logo.

*b) Composition*

The three phoenixes are positioned and curved to form the shape of the numbers ‘100.’ Similar to the official 2000’s Peranakan Association logo, the phoenixes are flying in a circular shape with their long tail feathers completing the loop. Circles were seen by the association as a symbol of continuity (The Peranakan Association, 2000).

*c) Repetition*

The design of the emblem makes use of repetition in the duality of the twin phoenixes. Both of the flying phoenixes have identical designs, rotated 180 degrees. The three phoenixes depicted in the logo are all depicted with two tails. Traditionally, female phoenixes are depicted with two tails (the male phoenixes were depicted with five tails) (Knapp, 2012, p. 123).

*d) Style*

The entire logo is depicted as a line drawing of the three phoenixes. This highly detailed style of a line drawing of a phoenix is similar to traditional phoenix depictions in batik cloth, where outlines of all motifs are clearly delineated.

*e) Colours*

Only one colour is used throughout the entire logo: a bright shade of purple with a high saturation. Purple is a popular colour amongst the Peranakans and can often be found in batik cloth, Kebaya and other Peranakan clothing.

*f) Line*

Thin, delicate lines are used to illustrate all the intricate details of the phoenix. Organic lines are used to capture the naturalistic movement of the phoenix in flight.

*g) Text*

A serif typeface is used in the entire logo. Serif typefaces typically portray tradition, sophistication and elegance which suit the aims of the association in this time period.

Overall, the majority of phoenix logos released by the Peranakan Association has the phoenix flying in the shape of a circle (including their official emblems) – which the association describes as a symbol of continuity. ‘Continuity’ seems to be an important

symbolic connotation for the association's emblems, perhaps because it encapsulates its desire for continuing cultural practises through preservation and revitalisation.

### **Content Analysis**

An article was released by the Peranakan Association to celebrate the new phoenix logos and the association's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary (Oei, 2001, pp. 3-4). This article from the Peranakan Magazine Archives has been analysed via textual analysis below:

<b>Condensation</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Celebrated The Peranakan Association's glittering 100 <sup>th</sup> birthday bash	Grand celebration	Event's scale and tone
The largest gathering of the clan ever, and the cavernous Neptune Theatre was the appropriate venue for the momentous event	Huge event	
This was also the hour to unveil the new logo. Created with much thought and effort, the new corporate image expresses the exuberance, optimism and unique cultural heritage of our community	Deliberation in design Corporate branding Cultural expression Optimism	Logo aims Mood / Tone
A new spirit that will inspire us for the next 100 years	Cultural revitalization	Logo aims
We have also been collaborating with the National Heritage Board by participating in events organised by the Singapore History Museum and the Asian Civilisations Museums (ACM)	Collaboration with Singapore government Collaborations with major museums	Relationships with museums, government

The ACM has invited us to take part in a programme in connection with the opening of the Peranakan Legacy exhibition at its new Peranakan galleries	Collaborations with major museums	
The exhibition showcases under one roof at ACM the best collections in the region that include jewellery, textiles, rare batik, embroidery, beadwork, garments, silver and porcelain	Focus on material culture	Area of interest
Delighted to have worked with the museums of the National Heritage Board in the past, are doing so for the present exhibition and hope to continue to do so in the future	Collaborations with Singapore government Collaborations with major museums	Relationships with museums, government
The Association will also be working closely with the various organisations under the National Heritage Board – the National Archives, Asian Civilisations Museum and Singapore History Museum	Collaborations with major museums	

## Findings

In this article, the Peranakan Association describes its recently adopted phoenix emblem as a “new corporate image.” Such phrasing implies a utilisation of the phoenix symbol for the purpose of brand establishment and signifies a shift in the self-perception of The Peranakan Association, where it now also identifies as a corporate entity as opposed to purely a social club or clan association. (Lee S. K., 2009, pp. 167-177).

The article also reflects how the release of new phoenix emblems is very much an expression of the Peranakans feeling free and no longer restricted in the expression of their own identities. Articles released during the time period of the unveiling of the new phoenix

emblem are all written with a hopeful and cheerful tone, with the association describing the phoenix logo as capturing the “exuberance, optimism” of the Peranakan cultural heritage.

We can also observe the close relationships that the Peranakan Association now has with governmental bodies such as the National Heritage Board and Singapore museums. The article describes the collaborative efforts between the Peranakan Association, the National Heritage Board, and the Asian Civilisation Museum in curating an exhibition titled “Peranakan Legacy.” This collaboration serves as a testament to the evolving dynamics between the Peranakan Association, governmental bodies and museums, wherein the association has transitioned from perceiving the government as a source of apprehension to a valuable partner. This newfound cooperation also provides the Peranakan Association with a sense of security regarding its status and legitimacy as a culture, fostering an environment conducive to a more unreserved expression of its identity. The Peranakan Legacy exhibition, similar to its predecessors, followed the precedent set by prior Peranakan exhibitions by centring its attention predominantly on Peranakan material culture from the Golden Age. The exhibition featured a diverse array of traditional Peranakan artefacts encompassing “jewellery, textiles, rare batik, embroidery, beadwork, garments, silverware, and porcelain.” Once again, this selection underscores the continued emphasis on material culture within the discourse surrounding the Peranakan community.

### **Raising The Phoenix: The First Singapore Peranakan Festival held by The Peranakan Association**

The Peranakan Association continues to use the phoenix in the branding of important events held by association. In 2005, The Peranakan Association started its very first

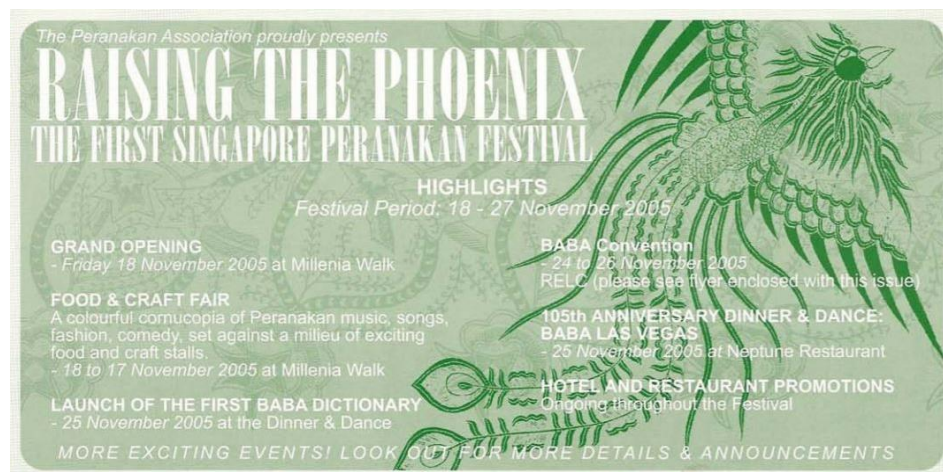


Figure 18: Poster from Raising The Phoenix: The First Singapore Peranakan Festival, 2005.

Singapore Peranakan festival. The festival was named “Raising the Phoenix” and an illustration of the phoenix was used throughout promotional materials for the festival (as seen in Figure 18 above). The festival consisted of a variety of different events: such as a food & craft fair, a dinner and dance, a Baba Convention for notable Peranakan speakers and the launch of a new Baba Malay dictionary (the traditional Peranakan mother-tongue).

## **Visual Analysis**

### *a) Subject Matter*

The poster depicts a phoenix in flight with its wings spread – a phoenix in flight has been a recurring phoenix motif for the Peranakan Association. In the background of the poster, there is a faint pattern reminiscent of designs found in batik cloth. The poster also contains text with the name and details of the festival.

### *b) Composition*

The phoenix is depicted on the right-side of the poster soaring diagonally upwards. Text containing details of the event are positioned on the left in two columns. There is a clear visual hierarchy in the poster: the phoenix is the largest element and draws the viewer’s eye first. The next most important elements are then the header with the festival’s name, the sub-headers and finally the body text.

### *c) Repetition*

There is slight repetition in the two tails of the phoenix. A phoenix with two tails is traditionally used by Peranakans to represent a female phoenix (male phoenixes were depicted with five tails) (Knapp, 2012, p. 123).

### *d) Style*

The style of the phoenix in the poster is reminiscent of traditional depictions of phoenixes in batik patterns. The phoenix is flattened and illustrated using single blocks of colour with no shading and detailed line-work. The phoenix is depicted entirely in green – which is more consistent with portrayals of the phoenix in batik than in Peranakan porcelain (in Straits Chinese porcelain, phoenixes are brightly coloured: typically predominantly red or a rosy pink with feathers of blue, yellow, green and black).

*e) Colours*

The entire poster is printed in monochromatic shades of green. The phoenix is depicted in a dark emerald green, while the background features a pale green with a low saturation. Green traditionally symbolises youth and spring in Peranakan culture – a fairly apt colour choice considering the poster is for the association’s first Peranakan festival (National Heritage Board, 2018). The neutral colour of white is also used for the text in the poster.

*f) Line*

Fine, organic lines with smooth curves are used to illustrate the phoenix. The feathers in the phoenix’s wings and tails are wavy, diagonal lines – giving the phoenix a sense of movement and dynamism.

*g) Text*

Both serif and sans-serif typefaces are paired together in the poster – creating a blend of the traditional with the contemporary. A modern serif typeface is used for the heading of the poster – featuring little to no bracketing in the serifs and very high contrast between thick and thin strokes. Subheadings and body text in the poster are all from the Arial font family and are a neo-grotesque typeface.

**Content Analysis**

The ‘phoenix in flight’ motif continues to be the most popular representation of the phoenix used by the Peranakan Association, perhaps because of its dynamic qualities, and the uplifting visual imagery of the phoenix soaring up into the sky. Two articles about the festival were published by the Peranakan Association (Lau, 2006, pp. 20-22) (The Peranakan Association, 2005, p. 29). Textual analysis of the articles from the archives has been conducted here:

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<b>Condensation</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
To mark the 105 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Peranakan Association	Celebratory event	Mood / Tone

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Aims to make this festival a regular event that can become a truly all-encompassing major festival with much cultural significance	Aspires towards cultural significance	Aims
Boost retail sales, attract tourism, engender artistic creativity and foster educational programmes	Increase tourism Educational Foster creativity Increase sales	
Peranakan music, fashion and comedy sketches all set against the background of our now well-established Craft and Food fair	Peranakan food Peranakan crafts Peranakan performances	Areas of interest
Consists of seminars on the preservation and revival of the culture	Cultural preservation Cultural revitalisation	Aims
A get-together for the Baba Nonya of Malacca, Penang, Phuket and Singapore	Social bonding	
Hotel Phoenix and Furama Hotel will feature a variety of activities showcasing Peranakan cuisine	Collaboration with hotels Peranakan food	Relationships with other organisations Areas of interest
Events at Asian Civilisations Museum: activities include a children's workshop on making selected Peranakan crafts, an interactive play, food and craft fair	Collaboration with major museum Peranakan crafts Peranakan food	
Enjoy choral performances by The Peranakan Association and Gunong Sayang	Collaboration with Gunong Sayang Association	

Peranakan Festival Supporters: Asian Civilisations Museum, Furama Hotel, Gunong Sayang Association, Hotel Phoenix, Millennia Walk, OG and the Singapore Tourism Board	Collaboration with major museum Collaboration with hotels Collaboration with companies Collaboration with Singapore government	Relationships with other organisations and government
Weddings are generally elaborate affairs, but the Peranakans outdo most other Asian cultures when it comes to a no-holds-barred traditional ceremony	Elaborate Peranakan weddings	Area of interest
Such a wedding was the highlight of the Peranakan Festival, a procession elaborately staged	Elaborate Peranakan weddings Recreating Peranakan traditions	
An insight into the intricacies of Peranakan culture and celebration	Recreating Peranakan traditions	Cultural education

## Findings

The article provides another example of the close relationships that The Peranakan Association now has with governmental bodies such as the Singapore Tourism Board, other Peranakan associations such as the Gunong Sayang Association and museums such as the Asian Civilisations Museum. The Peranakan Association credits these different parties for working with them to launch the Peranakan Festival. The Peranakan Association also publically states its main objectives for opening the festival were to “boost retail sales, attract tourism, engender artistic creativity and foster educational programmes” with a combination of goals linked to commercial growth and cultural preservation. Notably – the Peranakan Association’s goal to “attract tourism” is very much in line with governmental objectives to develop “cultural tourism” as presented in the 2000 Renaissance City Report, again showing the changed relationship the association now has with the Singapore

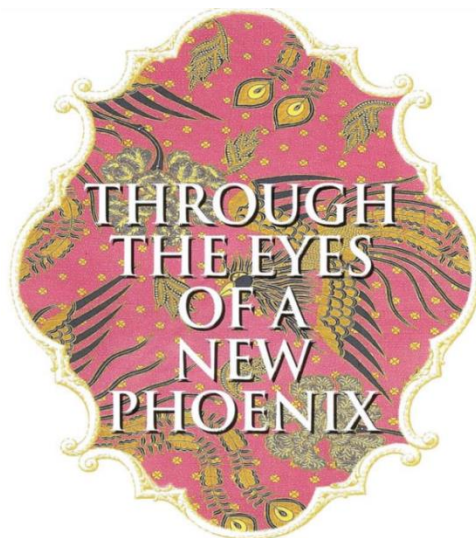
government, as well as how influential the government is in affecting the way in which the association brands and presents itself.

### **The Phoenix as a Byword for “Peranakan”**

The extent in which The Peranakan Association has woven the phoenix into its brand identity can be observed in the following examples where the “phoenix,” in the context of The Peranakan Association, grew to be synonymous with “Peranakan.” This is evidenced by multiple articles published in The Peranakan Magazine (a magazine written and published several times a year by the association). The following section will present a series of three case studies of articles written or published by the Peranakan Association in its magazine.

#### **“Through the Eyes of a New Phoenix”**

In 2005 Lovelynn Chong, a young Peranakan and a new member of The Peranakan Association, wrote an article titled “Through the eyes of a new phoenix” (Chong, 2005, pp. 21-23). The article does not mention or discuss phoenixes, and instead entirely describes her thoughts and experiences after attending a function held by The Peranakan Association for the first time. The “new phoenix” in the title refers to Chong, as a new recruit of The Peranakan Association. The word ‘phoenix’ is used by The Peranakan Association as an



*Figure 19: Article in The Peranakan Magazine, The Peranakan Association 2005.*

emblematic representation of Peranakan culture and The Peranakan Association. This usage is not explained in the article and the author assumes the reader will be able to understand that the phoenix is functioning as a representation of Peranakan culture, rather than to describe the mythical bird.

## **Visual Analysis**

### *a) Subject Matter*

The phoenix design in the magazine appears in the background of the article's title. A repeated pattern of a phoenix in flight is printed behind this text. The phoenix is the same motif that was previously used in the "Raising the Phoenix" poster for the 2005 Peranakan Festival. The entire design is enclosed in an ornate lobed frame.

### *b) Composition*

The phoenix design has a framed composition with a lobed frame that is vertically symmetrical. The main title is centre-aligned to maintain this symmetry.

### *c) Repetition*

The phoenix is repeated four times in the panel – with one main phoenix depicted mostly in frame. Yellow dots are also repeated throughout the background, forming a decorative pattern.

### *d) Style*

The design of the phoenixes is reminiscent of a traditional Peranakan batik print. The phoenixes are depicted in a flattened pattern, with the bright colours of pink and yellow predominantly used throughout. Pink and yellow are popular colours found in Peranakan clothing, particularly in sarong kebayas. The ornate frame is reminiscent in style to the lobed frames found in Peranakan porcelain. Traditional Kamchungs (ceramic jars) are often depicted with similar lobed frames enclosing a phoenix design.

### *e) Colours*

The main colours of pink, yellow, grey and white are used in the design. The entire background is depicted in pink, with the phoenix depicted in yellow and grey. Pink traditionally symbolises youth and innocence to Peranakans, and yellow represents an auspicious celebration (National Heritage Board, 2018) (National Heritage Board, 2018).

f) *Line*

The panel contains organic, flowing lines to capture the essence of the phoenix in flight. The lines are mostly thin to illustrate the detailed feathers in the phoenix.

g) *Text*

The design uses an old style serif typeface, with the glyphs containing diagonal stress and bracketed serifs. Old style typefaces typically convey tradition and history.

**“Recognising the Phoenix in Our Hearts”**

This second case study shows another example where The Peranakan Association uses the phoenix in its branding in an article by Emeric Lau, titled “Recognising the phoenix in our hearts” (Lau, 2009, pp. 24-25).



Figure 20: Article in *The Peranakan Magazine*, *The Peranakan Association* 2009.

Just like Chong’s article, the writings of Lau do not involve any discussion of mythological phoenixes or phoenix motifs. Rather, Lau’s focus is on the experiences of the younger members of The Peranakan Association, with the use of the term “phoenix” serving as a metaphor for Peranakan culture. The title’s true meaning should be interpreted as “Recognising the Peranakan Culture in Our Hearts” instead, with “phoenix” substituted for Peranakan culture. It is worth noting that the article was published in the association’s magazine, which has a readership consisting primarily of Peranakans, or individuals who are already familiar with The Peranakan Association. Readers of the article would possess

a greater level of contextual knowledge concerning the culture than the average Singaporean, and would recognize the phoenix in this article as referring to the culture (Chee L. , 2007, p. 2).

## **Visual Analysis**

### *a) Subject Matter*

The phoenix design in the magazine page is positioned beneath the title on the top and aligned to the left. The main body of text is depicted beneath in two columns. On the right side of the page is an illustration of a phoenix in flight with outstretched wings. The phoenix is surrounded by flowers, likely peonies. The phoenix and peony is a popular motif combination that traditionally symbolises love (The Peranakan Association , 2000).

### *b) Composition*

The main body of text is broken up into two equal columns. The phoenix's body and beak points diagonally upwards to the top left, creating leading lines that guide the eye to the article's title.

### *c) Style*

The style of the phoenix is reminiscent of a Potong Kertair Merah – a traditional paper cutting craft often done by Peranakan families. The entire phoenix is depicted in a flat block of a single colour, with no shading or tonal differences.

### *d) Colours*

Four main colours are used in the page: pink, white, black and green. Black and white is used for the text and the page's background respectively. Pink and white is used for the phoenix illustration, with the phoenix depicted in white against a pink background. Green is used in a small box on the top left, containing text in white labelling the category of the article as 'Youth.' The colour choices of green and pink both align with this theme – both pink and green traditionally symbolise youth and innocence to Peranakans (National Heritage Board, 2018) (National Heritage Board, 2018).

*e) Line*

A mixture of thick and thin lines is used to illustrate the details in the phoenix and peonies. Most of the lines in the phoenix are diagonal, pointing to the top left. Diagonal lines give an image a sense of dynamism.

*f) Text*

The main heading, subheading and label text all use a glyphic serif typeface. Glyphic typefaces were inspired by stone engravings and convey tradition and permanence. The body text is comprised of an old style serif typeface. Old style serifs were based on natural handwritten text, and are easier to read – making it a good choice for body text. Old style serifs also represent tradition and history.

**“The Phoenix Gets a New Nest on the Web”**

Once again, a similar phenomenon can be observed in the article published by The Peranakan Association’s vice president, Edmond Wong to announce the launch of its new website in 2010 (as seen in Figure 21 below). This article is titled “The phoenix gets a new nest on the web” (Wong E., 2010, p. 24). The article does not make reference to the mythical creature “the phoenix”; rather, the term “phoenix” is used to signify Peranakan culture and The Peranakan Association itself. Additionally, a small image of the association’s phoenix emblem is featured in the website’s new layout.



Figure 21: Article in *The Peranakan Magazine*, The Peranakan Association 2010.

Since the launch of the first phoenix emblem of The Peranakan Association in 2000, the phoenix has been heavily used in all aspects of its branding through magazine articles, posters, festivals, and anniversary logos. It is particularly remarkable how this phoenix branding has been perpetuated to such a degree that the association is able to use phoenix as a substitute word for “Peranakan culture” or “The Peranakan Association.”

## Gunong Sayang Association

The Gunong Sayang Association is the second official Peranakan association in Singapore. It was opened ten years after The Peranakan Association in 1910, and is dedicated towards facilitating social events and the appreciation of Peranakan performing arts. The Gunong Sayang Association maintains a close relationship with The Peranakan Association, and the two frequently collaborate on events such as the Peranakan Festival. The Peranakan Association has described The Gunong Sayang Association as its “sister association” and regularly extends support in promoting its events through the Peranakan Association’s magazine. Both associations are also founding members of the official Federation of Peranakan Associations.

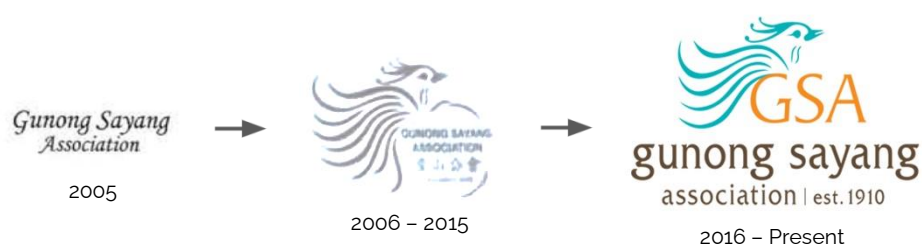


Figure 22: The changing logos of the Gunong Sayang Association, Toh Ying Li 2023.

Following the launch of The Peranakan Association’s phoenix logo, The Gunong Sayang Association launched its own phoenix emblem as well in the subsequent years. Their initial emblem was a wordmark (purely text with no image), and changed to a phoenix between 2006-2015. This phoenix was reworked slightly with minor changes in a 2016 to the emblem that is currently still in use today. This phoenix emblem will be examined in the section below.

## **Gunong Sayang Association Logo, 2016**

In 2016, the Gunong Sayang Association released a revised phoenix emblem with a variety of changes to suit its new goals and vision (Gunong Sayang Association, 2016).



*Figure 23: The Gunong Sayang Association's logo, 2016.*

These changes included a reduction in the number of wing feathers from nine to five, and the crest feathers on the phoenix's head from four to three. The implementation of various changes to the new phoenix logo demonstrates the importance the association places on symbolism in its emblem. In traditional Peranakan culture, the number of feathers on the phoenix is symbolically significant, and different feather numbers have distinct meanings. The number five is considered particularly auspicious and five phoenix feathers traditionally represent the "five cardinal virtues of righteousness, propriety, wisdom, humility and sincerity" (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141). The association followed this tradition but created their own five moral values of: "Passion, Adaptability, Giving, Integrity and Inclusiveness." A visual analysis of this phoenix emblem has been conducted in the subsequent section - a detailed explanation of the complete findings from all visual analysis segments within this chapter will be presented and collated at the end of the chapter.

## **Visual Analysis**

### *a) Subject Matter*

The logo features the head and wings of a perched phoenix. A perched phoenix is traditionally a symbol of stability. On the bottom right are the letters 'GSA,' acronyms of the association's name. The very bottom of the logo has the full name of the association and the date in which it was established.

#### *b) Composition*

The composition makes use of leading lines that draw the eye towards the centre of the logo. The wing feathers and the neck feathers of the phoenix both curve and guide the viewer's eye towards the letters 'GSA.'

#### *c) Repetition*

Repetition is used deliberately in the feathers of the phoenix: the five wing feathers are used by the association to symbolise its five values of "Passion, Adaptability, Giving, Integrity and Inclusiveness" (Gunong Sayang Association, 2021).

#### *d) Style*

The overall style of the logo is modern and contemporary. The phoenix is fairly minimalistic, depicting only the head and wing purely through simple line strokes with no shading. The phoenix is depicted using through very minimal use of lines and Gestalt's law of enclosure is applied in the gaps left between the phoenix's head and neck. This minimalistic approach is markedly different from traditional depictions of the phoenix. Typically the full body of the phoenix is always depicted, and its portrayal is normally intricate with shading, and detailed illustrations of each feather and wing.

#### *e) Colours*

The Gunong Sayang Association's phoenix logo uses blue, orange and brown as the three main colours. The phoenix is depicted in blue, the GSA letters in the complementary colour of orange and the full name of the association in a dark brown. This colour combination is often found in traditional Peranakan batik clothing – the attire typically worn by performers from the Gunong Sayang Association.

#### *f) Line*

The emblem largely utilises thick lines that taper at their tips for illustrating the phoenix. Some thin lines are also used for the finer details in the phoenix's neck feathers, beak and eye. Numerous diagonal lines are used in the phoenix's wing, giving the logo a sense of dynamism and movement.

#### *g) Text*

A glyphic serif typeface is used in the logo, featuring triangular serif shapes and minimal stroke weight contrast. Glyphic typefaces are inspired by stone engravings and feel

traditional, strong and lasting – in line with the association’s aims to create a sense of stability and permanence surrounding Peranakan culture.

### **Content Analysis**

During the launch of the Gunong Sayang’s 2016 phoenix emblem, the association released several statements explaining its choice and design. In addition, I managed to directly contact the association and obtained several new statements regarding their reasons for selecting the phoenix emblem as well. Textual content analysis of their various statements has been conducted in the section below:

<b>Condensation</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
In line with the birth of Gunong Sayang Association’s values and vision, we are pleased to launch our new logo	Logo reflects values New aims	New aims
The phoenix often burns brightly in a myriad of cultures, especially in the Peranakan Culture	Phoenix as reborn through flames Phoenix as a multicultural symbol	Reasons for using the phoenix
This mythical bird symbolising longevity, creativity and purity	Phoenix as a symbol of longevity, creativity, purity	
The three crests of the phoenix’s crown stands for Authenticity, Innovation and Relevance in our Peranakan culture	Phoenix reflecting association’s values Phoenix as an imperial symbol	
The Phoenix is widely used in Peranakan porcelains and designs	Phoenix as part of material culture	Material culture

It signifies the matriarchal infrastructure of a typical Peranakan household in the past	Phoenix as a female symbol (matriarch) Focus on the domestic sphere	Reasons for using the phoenix
It represents fire, fertility and stability	Phoenix as a symbol of fire, fertility, stability	
GSA logo shows the phoenix perching over the letter GSA, signifying the covering of stability of the association	Perched phoenix as a symbol of stability Phoenix reflecting association's aims	
The five tails signifies the 5 GSA values: Passion, Adaptability, Giving, Integrity and Inclusiveness	Phoenix reflecting association's values	

## Findings

Analysis of statements made by the Gunong Sayang Association reveals that the phoenix was chosen as the main emblem due to two main reasons. The first is the phoenix's symbolic properties being in line with the association's values. The association mentions the phoenix's wide array of auspicious symbolic traits (such as longevity, creativity, purity and stability) as reasons why it is the perfect emblem for the association.

And secondly, the increased focus of material culture and origins of the phoenix's design from Peranakan artefacts is highlighted as the second reason that led to the phoenix's selection as an emblem. The association cites the prevalence of the phoenix motif in "Peranakan porcelain and designs" as a contributing factor behind their selection of the phoenix emblem.

## Chapter Findings

### Visual Analysis Findings

Throughout *Chapter 2: The Phoenix Rebrand of Peranakan Associations*, visual analysis has been conducted consistently for each of the key phoenix emblems and branding materials (posters, magazine articles) created by The Peranakan Association and the Gunong Sayang Association. This section will collate and provide a summary of the extracted findings obtained from the analysis of these various phoenix representations. In addition, it will also do a cross comparison of the various phoenixes and discuss trends and findings that have been collated through the online database, *Airtable*.<sup>13</sup>

The findings from the visual analysis strongly corroborate the argument that the potential symbolic attributes associated with the phoenix played a significant role in influencing its selection as an emblem by the two official Peranakan Associations in Singapore. By examining the subject matter of the phoenix representations used by the associations (emblems, posters, magazines), we can observe that the “phoenix in flight” and “phoenix perched on a rockery” are the two most prevalent phoenix representations used. Over 80% of phoenixes used by The Peranakan Association and the Gunong Sayang Association in their branding materials were of a lone phoenix, either in flight or perched. In contrast, designs where the phoenix was paired with other motifs such as the “twin phoenix” and the “phoenix and peony” were used less than 20% of the time in their branding materials. This

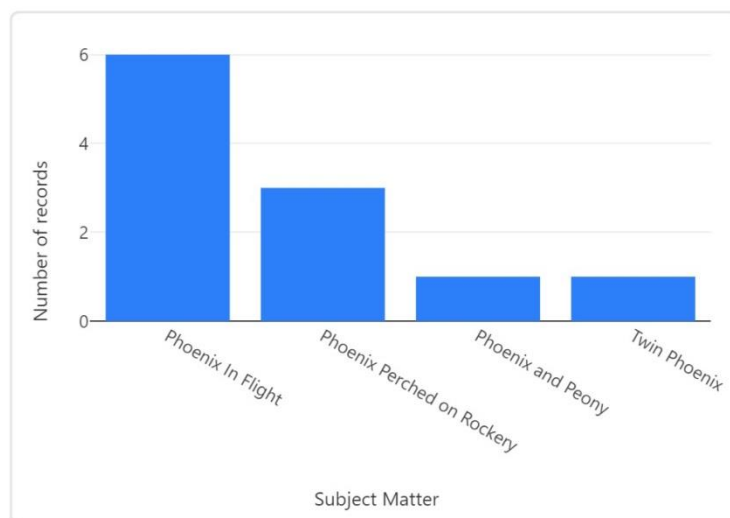


Figure 24: Various phoenix representations in the phoenix branding materials of the Peranakan associations, Toh Ying Li 2023.

<sup>13</sup> The *Airtable* database can be accessed via this link: <https://airtable.com/shrtOkqFwdDqUXOkQ>

disparity points towards an awareness and care taken by the associations towards ensuring that the symbolic meanings of the various phoenix manifestations matched their goals and values. In traditional Peranakan culture, it is established that the “twin phoenix” typically symbolises martial harmony, and the “phoenix and peony” symbolises romance – both of which are not symbolic meanings that are in line with the goals of either association. In contrast, when depicted in isolation the phoenix tends to possess broader symbolic attributes, such as peace, harmony, or stability (when it assumes a perched stance). The symbolic interpretations of the “phoenix in flight” and the “perched phoenix” aligns more closely with the objectives of the associations, where peace, harmony and stability matches their goals to preserve and promote Peranakan culture. This indicates that the symbolic properties of the phoenix were a significant factor in influencing the development and choice of the phoenix emblems.

Findings from the visual analysis, particularly when examining branding materials from The Peranakan Association, also provide support to the argument that the Western phoenix’s symbolic attributes of rebirth and rejuvenation played a significant role in the association’s decision to adopt the phoenix as its emblem. As seen in Figure 24 above, it is evident that the “phoenix in flight” representation was the most prevalent choice used by The Peranakan Association. Notably, this particular design closely resembles the Western phoenix motif and is often portrayed with similar outstretched wings, soaring through the air. In contrast, the other traditional Peranakan phoenix depictions such as the “perched phoenix,” “twin phoenixes,” and the “phoenix and peony” exhibit fewer visual similarities to the Western phoenix imagery. By portraying the phoenix in a dynamic flying position, The Peranakan Association’s emblem captures the Western symbolic associations of a phoenix reviving from flames and ashes. This sense of dynamism is of particular significance to the association and was explicitly mentioned as a design consideration during the unveiling of the new phoenix emblem in 2000. The quest for capturing dynamism in the visual representations of the phoenix is further evident in the use of line work in the phoenix branding materials. As seen in Figure 25 below, lines that were predominantly used to illustrate the phoenix were diagonal, curved and thin lines – all of which effectively capture the movement and flow of a soaring phoenix.

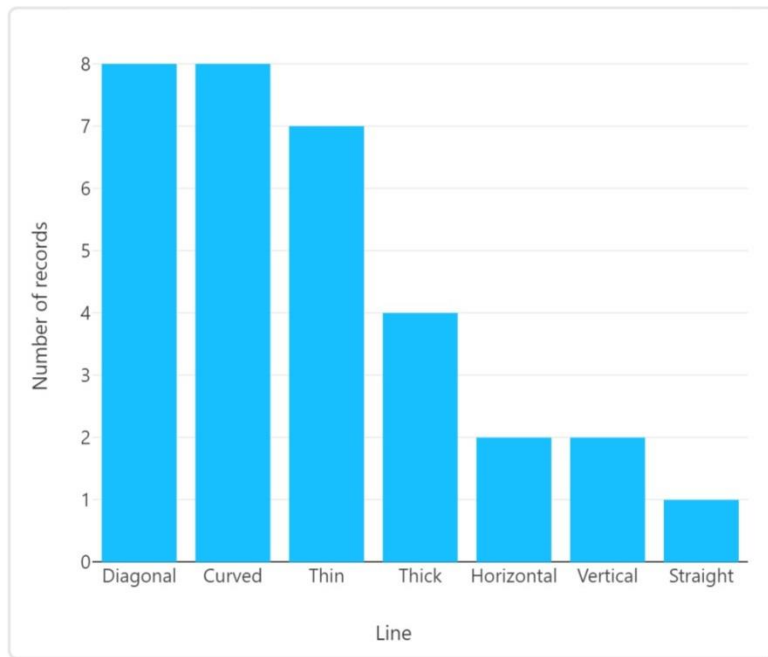


Figure 25: Line work in the phoenix branding materials of the Peranakan associations, Toh Ying Li 2023.

Findings from the visual analysis also further support the argument that the recent focus on the Golden Age era in the Peranakan discourse has influenced the emergence of the phoenix emblems. In the designs of the phoenix emblems featured in the associations' branding materials, there has been a consistent effort to evoke a sense of tradition and portray a traditional aesthetic through the branding materials. Notably, the selection of typefaces that were paired with the phoenix emblems provides valuable insights. As depicted in Figure 26, there is a predominant use of serif typefaces, while sans serif

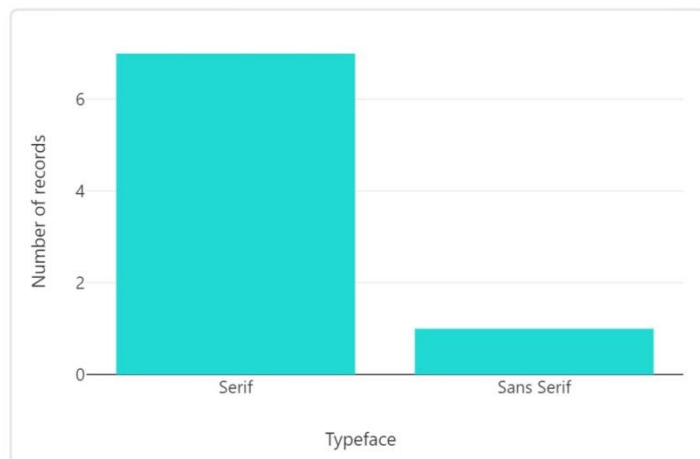


Figure 26: Accompanying typefaces in the phoenix branding materials of the Peranakan associations, Toh Ying Li 2023.

typefaces are comparatively less prevalent. Serif typefaces are commonly associated with notions of tradition, history, and permanence, in contrast to sans serif typefaces, which tend to display a more modern and contemporary aesthetic. This deliberate preference for serif typefaces aligns with the associations' objective of branding themselves as a traditional, historical organisation, which perhaps also explains why they selected a motif commonly used in the Golden Age era for their emblems.

### **Content Analysis Findings**

Through textual analysis of the statements and articles released by The Peranakan Association and the Gunong Sayang Association, we can observe that both associations ultimately selected their phoenix emblems in part due to the phoenix's favourable symbolic attributes, and in part due to changed governmental and societal interests. Newfound support from the Singapore government, who now saw the Peranakans in a favourable light and beneficial for cultural tourism and building Singapore's national image, allowed the associations greater room to express their true cultural identity (as seen in Figure 27 in the following page). Associations were now free to choose emblems that reflected traditional Peranakan culture, which was a marked change from the previous "United Forever" emblem of The Peranakan Association which existed only to appease nationalistic sentiment and project compliance towards unity and racial harmony.

In addition, the impact of prominent museum exhibitions and scholarly publications that from the 1980s onwards have heavily focused on Golden Age domestic artefacts can be felt in the decision by both associations to choose emblems based on symbols from material culture. During the unveiling of the Gunong Sayang's new phoenix emblem, the association reiterates and acknowledges the phoenix's origins as a symbol derived from material culture, writing that the phoenix was historically prevalent on Peranakan porcelain and various household artefacts found within the traditional Peranakan home. The Peranakan Association likewise designed its phoenix emblem based on phoenix carvings from traditional brown and gold furniture. The choice for both associations to design their emblems based on motifs from Peranakan Golden Age artefacts reflects the growing focus on material culture within the contemporary Peranakan discourse, initiated by museums and academics.

Another important aspect to consider is the new usage of phoenix emblems by both Peranakan associations in Singapore aligns with the broader trend of the feminisation of

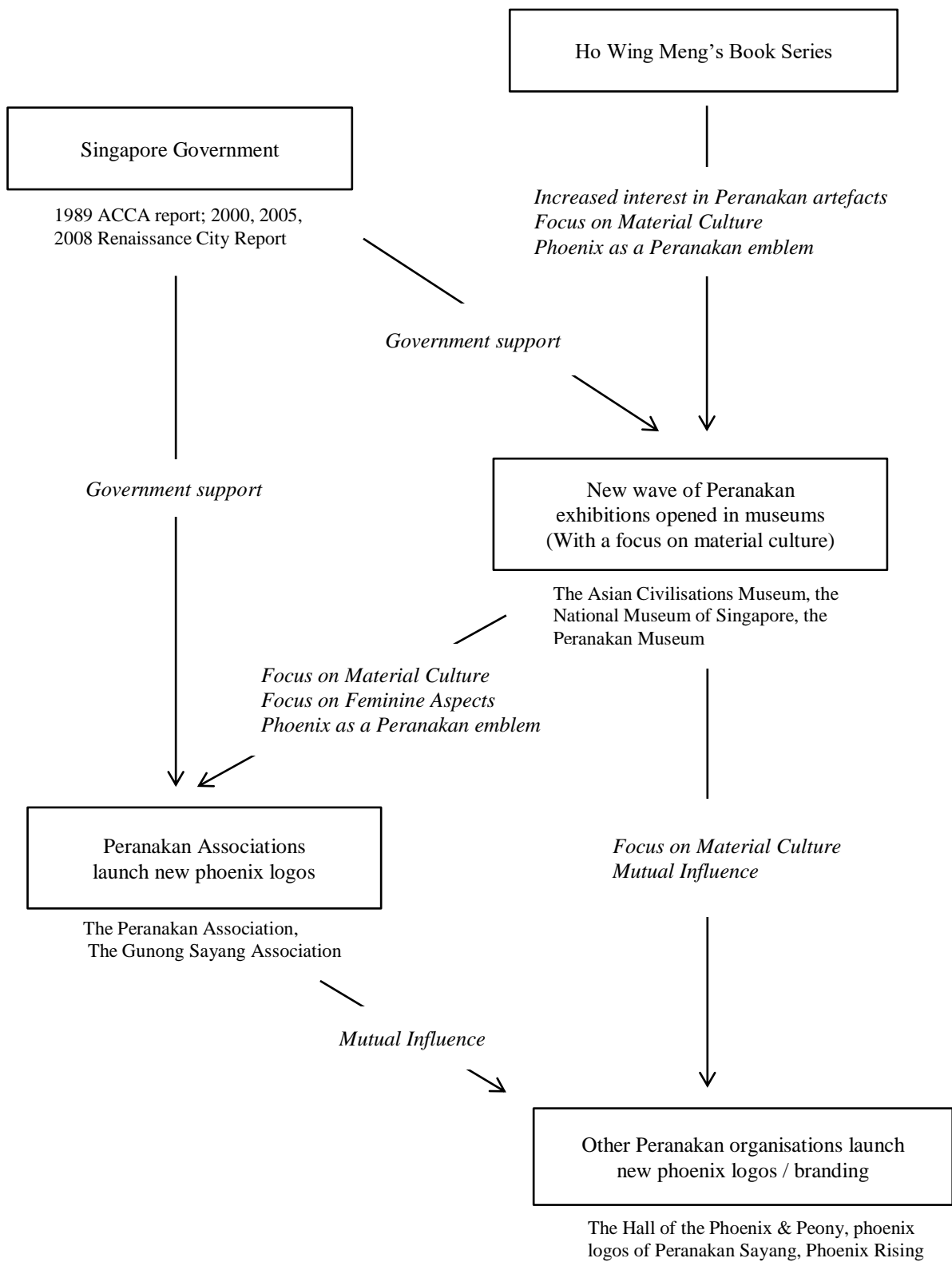


Figure 27: Relationships between the Singapore government, museums, Peranakan Associations and other Peranakan organisations, Toh Ying Li, 2023

Peranakan culture, a phenomenon that began since the start of the Peranakan Revival. The opening of the Straits Chinese Gallery at the National Museum was a prominent instance that actively positioned Peranakan women as authentic custodians of the culture in contrast to their male counterparts (who were instead framed as being disconnected from their cultural roots due to their more modern and Westernized lifestyle). Consequently, there has been an increased focus on exploring the supposedly “truer” and more genuine aspects of Peranakan culture, with subjects such as cooking, domesticity, embroidery and handicrafts garnering heightened attention. Amongst all the motifs prevalent in material culture, such as the dragon, *qilin* [麒麟], tiger, crane, butterfly, deer, tortoise, and peony, the phoenix holds the strongest feminine attributes – having historically been used to represent the empress, the Peranakan bride and the matriarch, as well as being an embodiment of feminine *yin* [阴] energy. The Gunong Sayang Association was aware of these connotations and during the release of its new phoenix emblem it described the phoenix as a reflection of the matriarchal infrastructure of traditional Golden Age households, where the women were traditionally in charge of running the house.

In addition, Edmond Chin’s *Gilding the Phoenix* jewellery exhibition, which was a prominent exhibition that used “phoenix” in its branding, also played a role in influencing the selection of the phoenix emblem for The Peranakan Association. Many people who worked on the *Gilding the Phoenix* exhibition were also later responsible for designing or launching the first phoenix emblem for the association. Equinox Art and Design was the graphic designer who created the first phoenix emblem, and they had also previously worked on graphics and the book for the *Gilding the Phoenix* exhibition. Similarly, Lee Kip Lee, the president of The Peranakan Association who spearheaded the change to the new phoenix logo was also in close communications with Edmond Chin and advised him when he was writing the book and curating his exhibition.

Furthermore, the influence of Edmond Chin’s *Gilding the Phoenix* jewellery exhibition, which prominently featured the phoenix in its branding, cannot be overlooked in relation to the selection of the phoenix emblem by The Peranakan Association. Several individuals involved in the *Gilding the Phoenix* exhibition also played significant roles in the design and launch of the association’s first phoenix emblem. Equinox Art and Design, the graphic design agency responsible for creating the emblem, had previously collaborated on the graphics and publication of the *Gilding the Phoenix* exhibition. Additionally, Lee Kip Lee, who was in close communication with Edmond Chin and provided guidance and insights

during the development of the exhibition, later became the president of The Peranakan Association who spearheaded the transition to the new phoenix logo.

The adoption of the phoenix as the emblem by both of Singapore's official Peranakan associations would have a degree of influence on the Peranakan organizations, groups, and creative endeavours that would emerge in subsequent years. Further exploration of these groups and works will be presented in the subsequent chapter.

## V. Chapter 3:

### Phoenix Branding by Other Peranakan Groups and Works

Following the adoption of the phoenix as the emblem for the two official Peranakan associations in Singapore, a subsequent period witnessed the emergence of various other Peranakan groups, organizations, and literary works that also began using the phoenix as an emblem for their respective organizations or as part of the titles or branding for Peranakan related books.

#### The NUS Baba House

The NUS Baba House was originally an ancestral home of a Peranakan Chinese family from the 1890s (the Wee family). In 2006, the National University of Singapore (NUS) purchased the house for restoration and conversion into a heritage house. This project was undertaken in collaboration with The Peranakan Association of Singapore, as well as the Singapore government's Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The heritage house is currently managed by the National University of Singapore and showcases a wide collection of domestic Peranakan antiques – mainly furniture, porcelain, clothing, photography, paintings and fixtures (National University of Singapore, 2008). This house focuses entirely on Peranakan material culture and is furnished to resemble a recreation of an authentic Peranakan house from the Golden Ages with artefacts arranged in naturalistic positions.



Figure 28: The Baba House's front entrance, Photographed by Toh Ying Li 2022.

Motifs of the phoenix can be found in all parts of the house: the ground floor displays a ceramic panel carved with twin phoenixes, and a display case of Peranakan porcelain covered in painted phoenixes. In addition, cabinets on the second floor contain phoenix carvings and motifs. Phoenixes are prominently displayed at the entrance of the Baba House – a pair of phoenixes in flight decorates the heritage house’s front entrance.



*Figure 29: Twin phoenixes in flight with peony, entrance roof of the Baba House, Photographed by Toh Ying Li, 2022.*



*Figure 30: Twin phoenixes in flight with peony and guardian lions, wooden carving on cabinet, courtesy of the Baba House 2023.*

Depictions of the phoenix in flight are prevalent throughout the Baba House. The phoenix is often paired as twin phoenixes which symbolises marital harmony. The phoenix items were often presented with other motifs as well such as the peony (when the phoenix is paired with the peony, it signifies romance) and protective guardian lions. There were also depictions of the phoenix perched on a rockery, as seen in the ceramic panel below. To the traditional Peranakans, perched phoenixes were symbolic of stability and strength.



*Figure 31: Twin phoenixes perched on a rockery, ceramic panel, courtesy of the Baba House 2023.*

### **The Baba House Logo**

The Baba House was officially opened in September 2008 and the launch unveiled its new phoenix logo.



*Figure 32: The Baba House's logo, 2008.*

### **Visual Analysis**

#### *a) Subject Matter*

The logo features a phoenix in flight, an auspicious symbol and a “mythical creature that appears during time of good fortune” (NUS Baba House, 2018). It also contains the name of the heritage house and a vertical divider separating it from the phoenix.

#### *b) Composition*

The phoenix is depicted swooping in from the left side of the logo, curved towards the words ‘Baba House.’ The composition uses leading lines from the phoenix’s wings and feathers to draw the viewer’s eye to the museum’s name.

*c) Style*

The silhouette of the phoenix is influenced by traditional Peranakan carvings of phoenixes in wooden furniture panels. Phoenix carvings on wooden cabinets and bed frames can be found in artefacts all around the Baba House.

*d) Colours*

In the phoenix emblem, two colours are used: a pale shade of turquoise blue for the phoenix, and a dark, saturated brown for the divider and the name of the heritage house. The phoenix is depicted in a flat block of colour with no shading or tonal differences. Blue and brown is a colour combination that can be found in traditional Peranakan porcelain, as well as textile items like Kebaya and batik.

*e) Line*

A variety of thick and thin lines are used to illustrate the phoenix. Thick, swooping lines are used to depict the main structures of the phoenix (such as the neck, wing and tail). Thinner, finer lines are used for the delicate details in the phoenix's curved feathers.

*f) Text*

A serif typeface is used for the text in the logo. The typeface has vertical stress and bracketed serifs. Serif typefaces typically are used to portray tradition and authority.

**Content Analysis**

During the release of the Baba House's phoenix logo, the heritage released several statements describing the significance of the phoenix and explaining its origins. Textual content analysis of these statements has been conducted below:

<b>Condensation</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
A favoured symbol in Peranakan art	Phoenix as a popular Peranakan symbol	Reasons for selecting the phoenix
It is a mythical creature appearing in times of good fortune	Phoenix as an auspicious symbol	

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As a western mythological bird, it is associated with rebirth and regeneration, therefore making it both dynamic and auspicious

Phoenix as a symbol of rebirth

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The image for the logo was developed from the phoenixes found on the furniture and architectural elements within the house

Phoenix as a symbol from material culture

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## **Findings**

Analysis of statements released by the Baba House reveals that it selected the phoenix as its emblem for a combination of reasons. The first is the symbolic meanings of the Peranakan phoenix as an auspicious symbol of “good fortune” and the western phoenix’s symbolic associations with “rebirth and regeneration” were considered favourable and aligned with the aims of the heritage house to help preserve and revive interest and study of Peranakan culture.

The second reason the phoenix was selected was because of its prominence in Peranakan material culture which was the main focus of the heritage house. The recurrence of the phoenix motif on artefacts and “architectural elements” exhibited in the house itself, such as the roof carvings, carvings on cabinets, painted porcelain motifs and carved ceramic panels made the phoenix a fitting and logical choice for the heritage house’s emblem.

In addition, the opening of the Baba House was initiated with help from The Peranakan Association, an official Peranakan entity which had been using the phoenix emblem for eight years at the time in which the Baba House was opened. It is possible that The Peranakan Association’s official phoenix emblem may have resulted in the Baba House also choosing to use a phoenix emblem. In the journal article by Pamela Henderson, Joseph Cote, Siew Meng Leong, and Bernd Schmitt, they explain that newer organisations often adopt logos which are similar in design to existing, established organisations. This is effective as “logos that are similar to other logos create a sense of knowing, which results in false recognition” which is advantageous for newer organisations. False recognition is a process that occurs when customers or visitors subconsciously associate a new organisation

with properties from the older, established organisation due to similarities in their brand image and emblem designs. By likewise using a phoenix emblem, a new organisation is able to quickly establish its affiliation with Peranakan culture to visitors who are already familiar with the Peranakan associations' official phoenix emblems.

## Hall of the Phoenix and Peony

The Hall of the Phoenix and Peony is another Peranakan research house that branded itself using the phoenix (paired with a peony). The research house is dedicated to the study of Peranakan material culture and it was opened and founded in 2010 by Dr Lye Wai Choong, a collector of Peranakan artefacts since 1993, and frequent collaborator with the Peranakan Museum. The hall was built to resemble a traditional Peranakan mansion house, with many of the artefacts displayed in positions natural to the layout of a household from the Golden Age. He and his team of interior designers and architects recreated the layout of traditional Peranakan rooms from the 1900s to 1930s by referencing “old photographs and postcards” (Chee L. , 2016).

The aim of the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony is to document, preserve and conserve Peranakan material culture, and to provide researchers and scholars with access to his collection of artefacts. Artefacts in the house are stored with careful temperature controls, and special lighting in order to protect the collection (Chee L. , 2016). These artefacts are mostly household items from a traditional Peranakan home. They include brown and gold furniture, porcelain, embroidery, beadwork and metalwork.



*Figure 33: Hall of the Phoenix and Peony wall carving (left), Phoenix and peony stained glass panel (right), Photographs courtesy of Dr Lai Wai Choog and Colin Chee, 2010.*

The hall was named after the phoenix and peony – and besides the name it does not have any official logo designs. However, a carving of the phoenix and peony is prominently displayed in a cartouche on the outer façade of the mansion, and a mural of the phoenix is

also prominently displayed in stained glass at the top of the stairway (as seen in Figure 33 above).

Dr Lye, the founder of the hall, comes from Peranakan descendant through his maternal grandmother. When he first started collecting in 1993, his focus was on Peranakan porcelain, which is intriguing as the phoenix and peony is particularly prevalent in Straits Chinese porcelain. In the early years, he was drawn only to the aesthetic beauty of the porcelain, but in the decades that followed began researching their stories, “historical significance and how these things were used” (Chee L. , 2016).

### **Content Analysis**

I conducted an interview with Dr Lye Wai Choong to investigate the phoenix and peony, and his reasons for using these motifs. The interview also seeks to uncover his thoughts regarding Peranakan culture and the phoenix. Extracts from the interview have been analysed below, following Christen Erlingsson and Petra Brysiewicz’s methods of conducting content analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The full transcript of this interview is also provided in the appendix.

<b>Condensation</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Documentation, conservation and preservation of Peranakan material culture	Cultural preservation Material culture	Aims / Goals
Built to hold Peranakan material culture	Material culture	Area of interest
I started collecting in 1993	Collector	Role
I decided to call it the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony because a lot of the Peranakan material cultures, the main motifs are phoenix and peonies	Phoenix as a symbol from material culture	Reasons for using the phoenix

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[The phoenix and peony] is just one of the most common popular motifs of the Peranakans of the Babas and Nonyas

Phoenix as a popular Peranakan symbol

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We don't know exactly why they chose phoenix and peonies, but they have a taste for the phoenix and peonies. So a lot of the material culture depicts phoenix and peonies

Phoenix as a popular Peranakan symbol  
Phoenix as a symbol from material culture

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I decided to name the hall the Hall of the Phoenix and Peonies because the hall is about Peranakan material culture.

Phoenix as a symbol from material culture

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The Peranakans I guess just like the phoenix rather than the dragon and adopted it into their material culture.

Phoenix as a symbol from material culture

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The phoenix is part of material culture for the Chinese. So it's not that the Peranakans created the phoenix, they just incorporated the phoenix into their material culture because they have a preference for the phoenix.

Phoenix as a symbol from Chinese mythology

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That is open to speculation. I wouldn't like to say that, —Oh, because the Peranakans are a matriarchal society, they place great emphasis on their mothers and their grandmothers; therefore they choose a feminine symbol.

Not a full matriarchy

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If they want to pick a logo, if they want to pick an emblem, if they would pick something to represent the Peranakan Association or society, they would pick the phoenix and peony. Because it's just all over, it's all over the Peranakan culture.

Phoenix as a popular Peranakan symbol

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Yeah, a partial matriarchy. The women play an important role, but I wouldn't – they are not a matriarchy. A matriarchal society, I don't think so. The women have a lot of say in their homes, but if you look at the history of the Baba, it's still the man that has the say.

Partial matriarchy

Traditional gender roles

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[Recent attention] mainly focuses on the material culture. There is not much that has been said about the politics and the other aspects of the Peranakan culture. The decorative arts, let's put it this way. The decorative arts.

Material culture

Area of interest

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Oh obviously [Peranakan culture] has been commodified. Definitely, definitely. In every sense of the word.

Commercialisation

Status of today's Peranakans

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Isn't that commodification of the Peranakan culture? So it's all over the place, it's all over the place.

Commercialisation

<p>I have no problems with anyone using the Peranakan culture to generate income, as long as it is presented correctly. I mean we don't expect people to do anything for free. But we do not want it to be sensationalised and create something, and tell a partial story.</p>	<p>Opinions on the commercialisation of Peranakan culture</p>	<p>Opinions</p>
<p>If you look at the so called Peranakan culture, what is there that is persistent? There is nothing.</p>	<p>Struggles to establish a Peranakan identity</p>	<p>Challenges</p>
<p>What is there in Peranakan culture that hasn't gone away? Basically there isn't! Peranakan culture is basically Chinese culture.</p>	<p>Struggles to establish a Peranakan identity</p>	
<p>Peter Lee and I, honestly we are very frightened of calling something Peranakan culture.</p>	<p>Struggles to establish a Peranakan identity</p>	
<p>We always joke what is Peranakan culture. And then from then you lead on, who is a Peranakan? How do you define someone as Peranakan? All of this is extremely complicated.</p>	<p>Struggles to establish a Peranakan identity</p>	
<p>These are representations of a group of people during a certain period of time that have incorporated local customs, local cuisines, some local costumes and developed features that you can identify that are different from other immigrant Chinese.</p>	<p>Hybrid culture</p>	<p>Peranakan characteristics</p>

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<p>The material culture is just a representation of the past! And most Peranakans don't own any significant material culture anymore. And a lot of them do not practise the old Chinese practises anymore.</p>	<p>Focus on the past Cultural loss</p>	<p>Challenges</p>
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<p>I see so many people, so many Peranakans especially, try to crystallise, try to create an entity and to create something and say that is Peranakan culture.</p>	<p>Struggles to establish a Peranakan identity</p>
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### **Findings**

The interview reveals several main points: the first is that Dr Lye named the hall after the phoenix and peony primarily because they are one of the most popular symbols in Peranakan material culture. As the hall was designed to focus on material culture, Dr Lye considered these symbols the most suitable name for his hall.

In my research, Dr Lye's Hall of the Phoenix and Peony is the only entity that did not choose the phoenix for its symbolic qualities. The Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang Association, the Baba House and other entities that will be analysed in subsequent sections all cited the symbolic properties of the phoenix as a motivational factor that led them to select the phoenix as their emblems. Dr Lye emphasises in the interview that his choice was not based on the various symbolic meanings of the phoenix and was instead made purely due to the sheer prominence of the phoenix and peony in Peranakan material culture. Interestingly, The Hall of the Phoenix and Peony is also one of the few entities that incorporated both the phoenix and peony motifs in its branding – The Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang Association, and the Baba House all opted for the solitary representation of the phoenix in their emblems (with no peony). In traditional Peranakan culture, the phoenix when paired with the peony typically signifies romance, which likely influenced the decision of other associations and groups to exclude the peony from their emblems. In contrast, The Hall of the Phoenix and Peony's choice to include the peony in their branding appears to be solely based on the sheer prevalence of the phoenix and peony motif within material culture, disregarding any symbolic implications.

This demonstrates that whilst symbolic meanings are a common reason for the selection of the phoenix, not every Peranakan entity will adhere to them. Ultimately, there are a variety of reasons that contribute to the usage of the phoenix emblem, and there will be deviations between every individual and group. Dr Lye's interview in particular underscores the influence of material culture as a determining factor in the selection of phoenix emblems. The Hall of the Phoenix and Peony's focus on Peranakan material culture resulted in the eventual selection of the phoenix as an emblem, due to the motif's pervasiveness in this cultural medium.

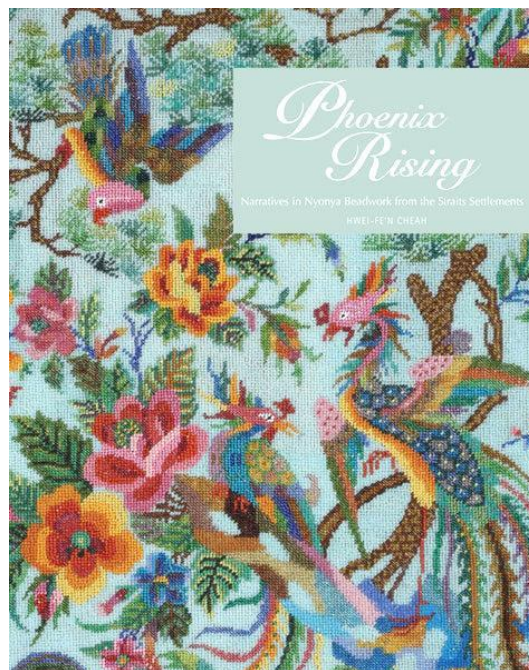
The interview offers insights into the factors contributing to the adoption of the phoenix emblem within the Peranakan community. Dr Lye's observations shed light on the commercialization and commodification of Peranakan culture in recent decades. After decades of the Peranakan Decline where the culture was fading into obsolence, efforts were made to preserve and revive it through commercial ventures, necessitating the creation of branding and emblems. This period, known as the Peranakan Revival, prompted the design and development of new emblems by Peranakans seeking to establish a visual identity for their projects and organizations. Furthermore, the Peranakans, being a fusion of Malay and Chinese cultures, encountered challenges in presenting a cohesive sense of identity and asserting themselves as a legitimate cultural group. This struggle and the underlying anxiety surrounding their cultural legitimacy likely motivated them to turn to logos, branding, and emblems as visual tools to solidify their established identity. By adopting specific symbols, such as the phoenix, the Peranakans aimed to visually represent their cultural heritage and affirm their place within the broader cultural landscape.

## Phoenix Rising by Hwei-Fe'n Cheah

In 2010, author and researcher Hwei-Fe'n Cheah published a book named “Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements,” which was named after the phoenix despite the book’s contents largely focusing on material culture – namely traditional Peranakan beadwork largely from the early 1900s, which were often handcrafted by women during this period. Cheah describes needlework as one of the “few means of expression for the Nonya,” who were often confined to the household and faced restrictive gendered attitudes in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Cheah H.-F. , 2010, pp. 291-295).

Although her book predominantly focuses on traditional Peranakan needlework, on page 327 Cheah very briefly mentions that the phoenix has become “a representation of the Peranakan culture.” She cites books, television programmes and the Peranakan Association as entities that have all used the phoenix as their emblem. Cheah herself also uses the phoenix in the name and cover page on her book on Nonya beadwork.

I conducted an interview with Hwei-Fe'n Cheah to collect more information on the phoenix and to examine her reasons for using it to represent her book. Visual analysis of the book’s cover and content analysis of the interview can be found in the section below. Findings from the visual analysis in this chapter will be collated and discussed in the “chapter findings” section at the end of the chapter. The full transcript of the interview is also provided in the appendix.



*Figure 34: Front cover of Phoenix Rising, book by Hwei-Fe'n Cheah, 2010.*

## **Visual Analysis**

### *a) Subject Matter*

The front cover of *Phoenix Rising* displays a large image of three phoenixes surrounded by lush flowers and branches. The two phoenixes on the left remain perched, a symbol of stability. The phoenix on the bottom right is a phoenix in flight, with its wings outstretched and claws just leaving the tree branch. The paired phoenixes at the bottom are traditionally a symbol of fidelity and love (Ho, 2008, p. 43). The top right contains a light turquoise box with text showing the title of the book and the author's name.

### *b) Composition*

The cover of the book contains a cropped photograph of a Peranakan table screen. The original table screen contained cockerels, deer, crane, and butterflies on the outer peripheries, but these were cropped away for the book cover. The composition roughly follows the rule of thirds, with the important element of the flying phoenix strategically placed on the right third of the cover.

### *c) Style*

The style of the cover follows traditional Peranakan embroidery from the 1910s. The designs are brightly coloured with flattened motifs. The composition has slight pictorial depth, but overall does not have true perspective.

### *e) Colours*

The background of the book cover is a light blue, with multi-coloured phoenixes, peonies, lilies, branches in shades of red, pink, yellow, orange, green, blue, brown, black and white. The text box containing the title of the book is a light turquoise with text in white.

### *f) Line*

The lines are natural and organic, capturing the flow of the birds and flowers. The curve of the branches and shape of the phoenixes form leading lines that guide the viewer's eye towards the other phoenixes and the title of the book.

### *g) Text*

A formal script typeface is used for the title of the book, with flowing loops and flourishes. Script typefaces convey elegance and tradition. A sans-serif typeface is used for the subtitle and the author's name. Sans serif typefaces are more readable than script typefaces, and also create a more modern and contemporary aesthetic.

## Content Analysis

Condensation	Codes	Categories
The phoenix isn't the only "traditional" motif they have picked up on - e.g. the peony recurs often too, <i>qilin</i> [麒麟], paired dragons	Multiple Peranakan motifs	Other motifs
But perhaps its visibility and prominence on items like the kamcheng and wedding garments which continued to be strongly associated with Peranakan culture have contributed to its popularity.	The phoenix as a popular symbol The phoenix as a symbol from material culture	Reasons for using the phoenix
I think the literature on Peranakan art and culture (see for example illustrations in Khoo Joo Ee's book; the batik book titled Butterflies and Phoenixes, and Edmond Chin's 1991 book <i>Gilding the Phoenix</i> ) also helped to cement its place in the collective Peranakan imagination	Phoenix is popular in Peranakan book titles	
At a time when Peranakan society was trying to articulate its identity and sense of culture.	Matching the objectives of its time period	
In that sense, maybe it has become a part of a discursive Peranakan identity.	Phoenix as a symbol of Peranakan culture	
It's also an easily recognisable image, (and maybe more easily identified with than a peony).	Phoenix as a well-known symbol	

<p>Partly as a sort of homage to Edmond Chin’s ‘Gilding the Phoenix’ this was, for me, a significant work in laying out the ideas and nuances of Peranakan art.</p>	<p>Phoenix is popular in Peranakan book titles</p>	
<p>The allusion to the (Arabian, not Chinese) phoenix rising from the ashes relates to the rejuvenation of beadwork in a contemporary context, i.e. the potential for craft to be revived.</p>	<p>Phoenix as a symbol of rebirth</p>	
<p>Definitely [there has been a greater interest in the domestic / feminine aspects of Peranakan culture in recent decades]</p>	<p>Interest in domestic / feminine aspects</p>	<p>Area of interest</p>
<p>Associations have been pivotal in creating conditions that energise the culture and for the coherence of a Peranakan community today</p>	<p>Influence of Peranakan associations</p>	<p>Institutions with influence</p>
<p>Institutions [...] have also played an important role in bringing public attention to Peranakan culture, and the feminine aspects are quite tangible and can be displayed or, better still, deliciously consumed.</p>	<p>Prominence of material culture Material culture is often domestic / feminine</p>	<p>Area of interest</p>
<p>Perhaps it has helped that such aspects of the “culture” are very photogenic and “instagrammable.” With (his/her) stories to go along.</p>	<p>Ease of sharing material culture</p>	
<p>Today, the traditionally feminine aspects of the culture have become less “gendered” as both men and women are involved. Especially with cooking. In terms of craft - men are practising experts.</p>	<p>Modern men doing traditional women roles</p>	<p>Changing gender roles</p>

## Findings

The interview reveals that Cheah's decision to use the phoenix to represent her book was caused by two factors. The first is influence from Edmond Chin's 1991 *Gilding the Phoenix* exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore. This influential exhibition played a pivotal role in starting the phoenix phenomenon among various Peranakan entities, leading them to adopt the phoenix as their emblem or integrate it into the branding of their works. The Peranakan Association itself was influenced by this exhibition when it selected the phoenix for its new emblem in 2000. In the interview, Cheah attests to being similarly inspired by Edmond Chin's *Gilding the Phoenix* book and exhibition on Peranakan jewellery during the process of writing her own book. Moreover, she was aware of the widespread adoption of the phoenix motif by other Peranakan works and entities for their titles and branding purposes. In accordance with this prevailing trend and also in homage to Chin's works, she decided to also name her book after the phoenix, thereby further contributing to the usage of the phoenix as a representation of Peranakan culture.

The second reason why Cheah selected the phoenix to name her book was due to the symbolic properties of the phoenix motif. Similar to The Peranakan Association and the Baba House, Cheah cites the Western symbolic interpretations of the phoenix as a symbol of rebirth and rejuvenation as reasons why she selected it for her book. These symbolic properties of revival and rebirth felt particularly meaningful to Cheah as they reflected her own aims to revive interest in Peranakan beadwork in a modern Singapore. This interpretation of the phoenix as a symbol of rebirth draws inspiration from Western mythology, which diverges from traditional Peranakan perspectives that perceive the phoenix solely as a mythical creature rooted in Chinese folklore. Cheah also cites the recognisability of the phoenix to a modern Singaporean audience as a reason why she used it to name her book, as opposed to lesser known Peranakan motifs like the peony.

The interview also provides more evidence that the increased attention of material culture in the Peranakan discourse is a key factor that led to the increased popularity of the phoenix as a Peranakan emblem. Cheah points out certain key items in Peranakan material culture such as the *kamcheng* (a traditional Peranakan porcelain jar), and wedding clothing have received closer scholarly attention and study in recent years. These two items frequently contain phoenix motifs and close scholarly and public attention from academics, museums and heritage houses have given these items and the phoenix greater visibility in the Peranakan discourse. Cheah likewise agrees with the argument that material culture has increasingly become a focal point of the contemporary Peranakan discourse due to its

photographic qualities which according to Cheah makes it more visible and “sharable” especially in the age of social media age we live in today. From my perspective, Peranakan material culture has become a popular focal point in recent discourse not only because of its sharable nature through social media, but also due to its tangible qualities as a physical artefact, making it the perfect subject for museums exhibitions. The visually captivating and aesthetically rich characteristics of material culture make it a more accessible medium for exhibition purposes in comparison to other components of Peranakan culture, such as *pantuns* (traditional Malay and Peranakan poetry), which predominantly exist in an oral form and pose greater challenges for presentation within a museum context.



Figure 35: Phoenix and peony kamcheng on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum (left), photographed by Toh Ying Li 2021; Peranakan wedding photograph of bride wearing the phoenix collar and a pleated bridal skirt with an embroidered phoenix (right), courtesy of the Peranakan Museum, 1978.

## The Peranakan Sayang cultural organisation

The Peranakan Sayang is a cultural organisation which began using the phoenix in its emblems and branding from 2020 onwards. Dedicated towards promoting Peranakan culture, Peranakan Sayang focuses on Peranakan songs and the performing arts. The name Peranakan Sayang is Baba Malay and translates to “Peranakan love.” The organisation regularly hosts performances that showcase its Peranakan singing group. In addition, it also organises Peranakan social dinners, gives educational talks in schools, hosts virtual programs and sells Peranakan merchandise and gifts.

The group first started performing together in 2004, but was only officially rebranded as ‘Peranakan Sayang’ in 2017. It is owned and founded by Alvin Oon, a Peranakan who has history in the Peranakan cultural scene. Alvin Oon was previously a director of a Peranakan cultural organisation known as The Main Wayang Company Pte Ltd. This group was the parent company of Peranakan Sayang and ceased operations in 2016 (Peranakan Sayang, 2022).

Performances conducted by the Peranakan Sayang are typically sung in Baba Malay – the traditional language of the Peranakans. Some of the performances focus on classic, nostalgic songs such as ‘Rasa Sayang.’ However, some of their other music is known for having a unique modern twist. The classic *dondang sayang* is a traditional Peranakan ballad where two or more singers exchange back and forth *pantun* (poetry) verses. The Peranakan Sayang sometimes reworks the *dondang sayang* into a contemporary rap performance, with singers performing Baba Malay verses in rap (Oon, 2022).



Figure 36: Logos used by Peranakan Sayang, courtesy of the Peranakan Sayang, 2020.

The first logo of the Peranakan Sayang was created in 2016. It was mostly text based (as seen in Figure 36 above) and featured the words, ‘Peranakan Sayang.’ The text was surrounded by an ornate frame with five stars on the top, and a heart shape symbol at the

bottom. This logo was then supported by a new phoenix logo, which was launched in 2020. Since its launch, the phoenix emblem has been repeatedly used in posters and merchandise released by the company, such as in their phoenix medallion magnet, phoenix *ang baos* (Chinese New Year red packets) and phoenix brooches. The phoenix logo is currently one of the official emblems of the Peranakan Sayang, alongside their original 2016 logo.

### **Peranakan Sayang Phoenix Logomark**

The 2020 phoenix logo was personally designed by Alvin Oon, the founder of the Peranakan Sayang (as seen in Figure 37 below). During the period surrounding the release of the phoenix logo and phoenix merchandise, the Peranakan Sayang repeatedly described the phoenix as “the grand symbol of the Peranakan culture” and as “the icon of Peranakan culture” (Oon, 2022) (Peranakan Sayang, 2022).



Figure 37: Peranakan Sayang phoenix branding, 2020.

### **Visual Analysis**

#### *a) Subject Matter*

The phoenix emblem features the phoenix in flight. The phoenix’s body is curved and flying in an arc with outstretched wings and long tail feathers. Beneath the phoenix is a heart shape, symbolising ‘love’ – a reference to the organisation’s name ‘Peranakan Sayang’ which translates as ‘Peranakan love.’

#### *b) Composition*

The phoenix is curved around the heart shape, protecting it with its body. The composition makes use of leading lines to guide the viewer’s eye through the design. The bottom wing, tail feather and feathers near its midsection all point down towards the text ‘Peranakan

Sayang,’ guiding the viewer’s eye to the organisation’s name. The phoenix’s head is also curved and pointed towards the heart shape – drawing the eye to all the important elements.

*c) Style*

The depiction of the phoenix is very detailed and intricate with individual feathers in its body and wings illustrated. The phoenix is depicted in a flattened form in a single block of colour, reminiscent of a Potong Kertair Merah – a traditional paper-cutting craft often done by Peranakan families (Chanelle, 2019).

*d) Colours*

The phoenix and text are illustrated in gold, with the important areas in the design depicted in a brighter shade (the main phoenix body, the heart shape and the organisation’s name), and the less important areas in a darker shade (the upper wings and tail feathers). Gold is an auspicious Peranakan colour and it is typically paired with red in Peranakan weddings.

*e) Line*

Organic, fine lines are used to capture the delicate details of the phoenix. The lines taper at the tips and are curved, capturing a naturalistic depiction of the phoenix in motion.

*f) Text*

Serif and sans-serif typefaces are combined in this design. A glyphic serif is used for the word ‘Peranakan.’ Glyphic serif typefaces have triangular serif shapes and were inspired by stone inscriptions. These typefaces portray tradition, stability and permanence. A sans-serif display typeface is used for the word ‘Sayang.’ The typeface is very angular and geometric, producing a modern, futuristic aesthetic.

### **Virtually Peranakan Fest Logomark**

The Peranakan Sayang consistently uses the phoenix in the branding for its various events, such as in the Virtually Peranakan Fest logo. The ‘Virtually Peranakan Fest’ was a virtual live stream, where speakers volunteered to discuss various aspects of Peranakan culture. The aim of the virtual fest was to connect Peranakans during the isolating lockdown period of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) where numerous live Peranakan events by The Peranakan Association had been postponed, such as the Peranakan Ball 2020.



Figure 38: Peranakan Sayang's Virtually Peranakan Fest logo, 2021.

## Visual Analysis

### *a) Subject Matter*

Both the official Peranakan Sayang phoenix logo and the Virtually Peranakan Fest logo use the same 'phoenix in flight' design. However, the heart symbol has been removed from the – likely because the word 'Sayang' (meaning love) is not part of the fest's name. The text beneath the logo contains the event's name and year.

### *b) Style*

The style of the phoenix is very intricate and detailed, with all the individual feathers of the phoenix clearly depicted. The phoenix is flattened and depicted entirely in a single block of red, greatly resembling a Potong Kertair Merah – a traditional Peranakan paper-cutting craft which was typically created using red paper.

### *c) Colours*

A single shade of red is used in the entire logo, with no shading or colour variations. Red is one of the most auspicious colours for the Peranakans.

### *d) Text*

Four different typefaces are used for the text in the logo. A glyphic serif typeface is used for the word 'Peranakan' – glyphic typefaces were inspired by chiselled stone engravings and portray permanence and tradition. A sans serif display typeface is used for the word 'Virtually.' This typeface is angular and geometric, providing a futuristic aesthetic. The combination of a futuristic typeface with a more traditional one perfectly captures the essence of having a virtual e-conference about traditional Peranakan culture over electronic

media. Meanwhile, the word ‘Fest’ is depicted using a formal script typeface with flowing loops and flourishes. Script typefaces produce an elegant aesthetic, reminiscent of handwriting. The year ‘2021’ is written using Calibri in italics, a simple sans-serif font for readability.

### Content Analysis

An interview with Alvin Oon, the founder of Peranakan Sayang was conducted to examine his thoughts on Peranakan culture, the phoenix and why Peranakan Sayang uses the phoenix as an emblem. Analysis of the interview is conducted below, and the full transcript of the interview is provided in the appendix.

Condensation	Codes	Categories
What is a Peranakan? I don’t know. Am I Malay? No, not really. Am I Eurasian? No, am I Chinese? Not really. So it’s quite lost. As with most Peranakan, I believe.	Struggles to establish a Peranakan identity	Challenges
Our objective was to keep the culture alive, promote the culture in ways that we can	Cultural preservation Cultural revitalisation	Aims / Goals
We had our agenda to push the Peranakan card in national view	Acceptance by the Singapore community	Aims / Goals
I have not watched a single episode of The Little Nonya because I refuse to. In the first place, we Peranakans don’t speak Mandarin.	The Little Nonya criticism	Opinions on a Peranakan TV soap opera
And some of the things were not very well portrayed, like how they made the matriarch so fierce.	The Little Nonya criticism	

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The show has also brought about a lot of attention to the culture

The Little Nonya praise

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A lot of people, you know, were very interested in all the places that the show was being filmed. So there's a lot of business there for my fellow friends, you know, because they visited, they went to the shops. So I mean, in a way, it was good, because it supported all the local Peranakan shops, Baba Nonya shops, which is good.

The Little Nonya praise  
Commercialisation

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So I'm basically self-employed. And I'm running this culture full time. So culture becomes my business.

Commercialisation

Status of  
today's  
Peranakans

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Going into multimedia, I think, in the whole Baba Nyonya community around the world, I'm the most prominent person doing media, especially virtual, you know, streaming, and it's all things and videos and animation. So and I mean, that's my strength.

Technological  
advancements

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I believe in what I do, and my idea is to keep the culture relevant to today's society, because we are not living in the times of our great grandfather or great grandmother you know, the world has changed.

Cultural evolution

Aims / Goals

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I think the power of the culture is our culture is one that has always been having an evolution, we're always evolving

Cultural evolution

Aims / Goals

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<p>We cannot live in the past, we have to live today, and for the future, but always remember and be guided by the past. I think that's important.</p>	<p>Cultural evolution</p>	<p>Aims / Goals</p>
<p>Actually Peranakans are a very creative people, you know, from our crafts, to our colours, to our music to our theatre. We are very, very, very creative people. And we're also leaders in our community.</p>	<p>Creativity Leadership</p>	<p>Peranakan characteristics</p>
<p>We still maintain the true values and what you call the character, the character of the culture. So yes, we are still alive and thriving, but in new ways, not in the old ways. And our new ways will be the old ways in the future.</p>	<p>Cultural preservation Cultural evolution</p>	<p>Aims / Goals</p>
<p>Last time, they were so isolated, in their own ways, community is a community and that's it. Now, you just pick up your phone, you can talk to anybody around the world. So it's different. Life is different, right? Our society is different. Technologies are different. So we evolve with the times and we move ahead.</p>	<p>Technological advancements Cultural evolution</p>	<p>Status of today's Peranakans</p>
<p>And I would say, in my opinion, the culture is much more alive today than we were; let's say 40, 50 years ago.</p>	<p>Peranakan revival</p>	
<p>And even for our Singapore government, I must say, they've also identified that the Peranakan culture is one that is very neutral and very acceptable for most Singaporeans.</p>	<p>Acceptance by the Singapore government and community</p>	

<p>I think from the time that we found our independence in Singapore, to today, the culture has grown substantially and for us to have even a museum right that is dedicated to our culture</p>	<p>‘Museumisation’ of Peranakan culture</p>	
<p>Women were not allowed to perform, because it was unbecoming for women to spread, you know, to perform on stage last time, because they were supposed to be very demure, kept at home, you know. The only things that they do are know how to cook, you know, to clean the house, you know, to be a good wife.</p>	<p>No female singers</p>	<p>Traditional gender divisions</p>
<p>Women were not allowed to perform or entertain anybody unless they were women of the night. So, because of this, men took on roles of the women. So you have a cross-dressing kind of thing.</p>	<p>No female singers</p>	
<p>After the war, women started, you know, getting more educated. They could stand on their own. And then they start to say, “No, I want to sing, you know, I want to perform, I want to.” So they came on stage.</p>	<p>Female singers</p>	<p>Changing gender roles</p>
<p>But today, of course the role, the standard and the status of women has changed drastically over the decades and centuries, that women are now you know, full time actresses or performers or singers or whatever. So that’s progression for you.</p>	<p>Female singers</p>	

<p>In fact, if you talk about it, there's no such thing as original Peranakan music because we don't have anything that is original. All that we have is all mashed up from different cultures or races, you know.</p>	<p>Hybrid culture</p>	<p>Peranakan characteristics</p>
<p>But I did it as a rap. So, yeah, so I rap the pantun, and then my friend will rap the pantun, and in the beat is, you know, it's really modern, it's not the old fashioned thing, it's a very modern beat. So it's about bringing the culture up to date.</p>	<p>Cultural evolution</p>	<p>Aims / Goals</p>
<p>It's about bringing it to be relevant to today's society, because we cannot be living in the past, we have to live for now. And for the future.</p>	<p>Cultural evolution</p>	
<p>The phoenix quite often represents the Peranakan culture. However, this is not a well-accepted fact.</p>	<p>Phoenix as a representation of Peranakan culture</p>	<p>Reasons for using the phoenix</p>
<p>Some people say that "Oh because the phoenix is auspicious you know so Peranakans like the auspicious, because being Chinese you know we adopt the phoenix as our emblem. But then you say you're Chinese then why are China's Chinese not using the phoenix as much? Because we still Chinese one right?"</p>	<p>Chinese mythology Phoenix as an auspicious symbol</p>	

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So then there's other arguments "Oh because the dragon, you know, because there's always the *yin* [阴] and *yang* [阳] there's a dragon and there's always a phoenix. The dragon is always used by the emperor of China. So we cannot use dragon. So we use the phoenix as an alternative because we have left the motherland and we're starting on our own."

Phoenix and Dragon as a *yin yang* [阴阳] symbol

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And then some will say "Oh, because the Phoenix is about rebirth. You know, because we have spread our wings and we have gone away far away from our motherland. So we are rebuilding our own Chinese community, you know, so rebirth."

Phoenix as a symbol of rebirth

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Then of course there are auspicious, good luck reasons. But there's no one reason why they're using the Phoenix.

Phoenix as an auspicious symbol

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But it is generally accepted that the phoenix symbolizes the Peranakan culture.

Phoenix as a symbol of Peranakan culture

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However, we cannot say that this is a 100% fact. It is just a matter of tastes and preferences. But I must say that if you look back, there are a lot of things that the Peranakans use with the phoenix.

Phoenix as a popular Peranakan symbol

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For example, the porcelain ware you know, when you see all the kamcheng [traditional ceramic jar] and the plates and all that you always see the phoenix being drawn, you know, it's always featured there. And then sometimes you see the, the wood carvings, you know, some of the cupboards and all that

Phoenix is common in material culture

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all the decorations, you always see a phoenix somewhere.

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It's a very symbolic icon of the Peranakans.

So for me, since it is a symbolic thing, and people identify the Phoenix with the culture, why not use it right?

Phoenix as a symbol of Peranakan culture

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And quite a few of the associations around the region have also used Phoenix as their logo. So it's just a matter of an identity.

Phoenix as a symbol of Peranakan culture

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Sayang is all about love, love for our culture, love for our people. So that's why we came up with this name of the company "Peranakan Sayang" because we love the culture and we love the Peranakan people

Cultural appreciation

Aims / Goals

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Help to keep the culture going. Keep the culture alive. To keep the culture to evolve to the new ways.

Cultural preservation  
Cultural evolution

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It seems I'm the only one who is doing all this multimedia stuff virtual, because I'm a host, I'm a professional host. And because of the pandemic, I became an online virtual host as well

Technological advancements

Status of today's Peranakans

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As long as you keep something positive going, it might help people, change people.

Serving the community

Aims / Goals

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<p>This is my effort, as I say I do this for as a business. But because I generate income from my work, I push it back to all this community work, by organizing this whole virtual festival, to make it accessible to Babas and Nonyas around the world.</p>	<p>Commercialisation Serving the community Technological advancements</p>	
<p>Usually for my Peranakan virtual shows there's a flying Phoenix that flies together with a dragon. So it makes its appearance every now and then because, you see, when you think about it the Phoenix is actually a mythical creature. It does not appear all the time. It only appears some times because if you use too much of it, you lose that magic you know.</p>	<p>Phoenix appearing in only special moments</p>	<p>Phoenix usage</p>
<p>For the Malay Kebaya, you will never ever see a creature being embroidered into the Kebaya. Most of the 100% of the time is always flowers or leaves. Right? But for Peranakan ones, you can see birds. You can see Phoenix.</p>	<p>Phoenix as a popular Peranakan symbol</p>	
<p>I have supported them in some of the events in efforts, and often they also support me when I do something. So you know, this event is supported by the Gunong Sayang Association or the Peranakan Association.</p>	<p>Mutual support with associations</p>	<p>Relationships with the associations</p>
<p>And there is a new breed of a new generation, a new generation of Babas and Nonyas. Oh, my close friends. We are all of the same mind: that the culture is not dead. The culture has evolved. And we are the generation to push the evolution ahead.</p>	<p>Cultural evolution</p>	<p>Aims / Goals</p>

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And we will continue and push it so that the next generation will see that route, how the culture has evolved. And because if you can accept evolution, you have a future, if you cannot accept evolution, then it's gone because of this.

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Cultural evolution

These young girls were educated in the late 1800s, the early 1900s. And that made a huge difference to the community because they are educated. Their children also get educated I'm assuming because their way of thinking is different. So how the children were brought up is different. And because the children were brought up in a different way by educated mothers, this makes them successful.

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Women becoming educated

Changing gender roles

It's actually both, although many of us see it as a matriarchal society, based on the home. But you know that the men actually contributed to the family, and the politics and stability and all that. So it's actually a mix of both.

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Matriarch in the home  
Partial matriarchy

Traditional gender roles

## Findings

This interview reveals that the phoenix's presence in material culture is yet again a key reason why Peranakan organisations such as the Peranakan Sayang selected it as its emblem. Oon cites the sheer prevalence of the phoenix in traditional items of material culture, such as in the *kamcheng* (traditional porcelain jar), plates and the wooden carvings in traditional cabinets as having contributed to the phoenix to becoming associated with the Peranakan identity.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the adoption of the phoenix emblem by both The Peranakan Association and the Gunong Sayang Association as discussed earlier, might

have unconsciously influenced subsequent Peranakan cultural entities to incorporate the phoenix as their emblem. In the interview, Oon highlights the prevalence of the phoenix as a logo among prominent Peranakan associations, contributing to its solidification of its status as a Peranakan emblem. Oon states that the main reason for Peranakan Sayang's phoenix emblems is his belief that the phoenix is now an "icon of the Peranakans" that encapsulates Peranakan identity. This phenomenon can be seen as an instance of reciprocal influence, where multiple entities utilise similar branding logos and designs to establish a stronger collective identity.

In addition, Oon agrees with the argument that the phoenix has been chosen as an emblem by other Peranakan entities due in part to the phoenix's symbolic properties. In the interview, he suggests that symbolic associations of the phoenix, such as the phoenix being a homage to the Peranakan's Chinese heritage, a symbol of rebirth (following Western mythology), and an auspicious symbol of harmony as possible reasons for others to select the phoenix to represent Peranakan culture. Oon believes there are multiple reasons why a person or organisation may choose to use the phoenix to represent Peranakan culture, and this could be different to each individual.

The interview provides valuable insights into the connection between the commercialisation of Peranakan culture and the adoption of phoenix emblems and branding. This process has been rapidly occurring during the Peranakan Revival – a period where Peranakan culture has somewhat revived in part due to the culture's transition into a marketable commodity. As the culture became increasingly commercialised, the necessity for branding and logos arose, ultimately contributing to the emergence of the phoenix as an emblem. In the interview, Oon discusses the operational aspects of Peranakan Sayang, acknowledging its function as a business that generates income. He describes the Peranakan-themed merchandise sold in the company's gift shop, including phoenix magnets, phoenix brooches, and phoenix red packets. However, commercialisation is a necessary compromise for modern Peranakans to sustainably promote and preserve the culture. Oon emphasises that profits derived from commercial sales in Peranakan Sayang are reinvested into community initiatives and cultural endeavours. In addition, Oon also conducts educational talks in schools and free educational Peranakan live streams: cultural preservation efforts which are only possible with the profits generated from the business.

An interesting point learned from this interview pertains to the cultural evolution of modern Peranakans. While much of the discourse surrounding Peranakan culture tends to centre on the traditions and practices of the Golden Age era, often regarded as the pinnacle

where Peranakan culture was its most “authentic,” it is important to acknowledge that modern-day Peranakans are actively engaged in reshaping and redefining the culture. Culture, as a societal construct, is inherently dynamic and subject to change over time. Oon highlights the adaptive nature of Peranakan Sayang, exemplified by their experimentation with blending traditional *dondang sayang* (Peranakan ballads) with contemporary rap, a conscious effort to evolve traditional practices and appeal to a modern audience. Additionally, Peranakan Sayang harnesses technology, particularly through live streams as a powerful tool to disseminate awareness and knowledge about the culture. It is plausible that in the future, the focus of Peranakan discourse will shift beyond the Golden Age – giving more recognition to the myriad of innovations and lifestyles embraced by contemporary Peranakans.

## Chapter Findings

### Visual Analysis Findings

Throughout *Chapter 3: Phoenix Branding by Other Peranakan Groups and Works*, visual analysis has been conducted consistently for each of the phoenix emblems and branding materials used by other key Peranakan groups and works. This section collates and provides a summary of extracted findings obtained from the analysis of these various phoenix representations. In addition, it will also do cross comparisons between the different phoenix designs and discuss findings and trends that have been collated through the online database, Airtable.<sup>14</sup>

The findings derived from the visual analysis of various phoenix branding materials provide support for the argument that Peranakan organisations and works that were branded with phoenix emblems after the 2000s were influenced the two official Peranakan associations. As depicted in Figure 39, the “phoenix in flight” motif was the most popular phoenix design used in branding materials produced by other Peranakan groups. Interestingly enough, the “phoenix in flight” is the same phoenix design that is also

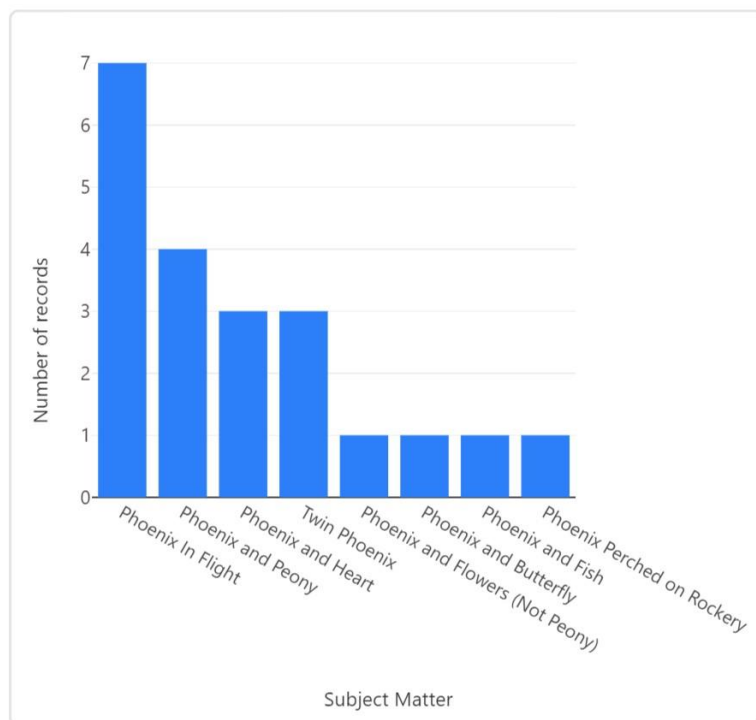


Figure 39: Various phoenix representations in emblems and branding materials used by other Peranakan groups and works, Toh Ying Li 2023.

<sup>14</sup> The Airtable database can be accessed via this link: <https://airtable.com/shrtOkqFwdDqUXOkQ>

prevalently used by The Peranakan Association’s phoenix emblems and branding materials. In addition, while the intended design of the Gunong Sayang Association’s phoenix emblem is a “perched phoenix” motif, it is worth noting that its emblem portrays only the head and outstretched wing of a phoenix, with the perched body and feet omitted. Consequently, the Gunong Sayang Association’s phoenix emblem bears a closer visual resemblance to a “phoenix in flight” design (rather than a “perched phoenix”), explaining why later logos and emblems inspired by the association’s emblems would likewise be inspired to use “phoenix in flight” designs instead.

Another significant finding that emerges from the visual analysis is that while unofficial Peranakan entities and groups had more leeway to use experimental designs for their phoenix emblems as compared to the official Peranakan associations, they remained driven by a similar strong inclination to evoke a sense of tradition and history in their adoption of these emblems. Figure 39 above demonstrates a wider variety in the phoenix designs used by other Peranakan entities in contrast to the more traditional representations used by the official Peranakan Associations. Furthermore, new, innovative phoenix pairings were created, such as the “phoenix and heart” motif, which deviates from traditional phoenix designs found in material culture. Similarly, Figure 40 below reveals a wider range of typefaces used by these other Peranakan entities, with sans serif typefaces appearing as frequently as serif typefaces in their phoenix branding materials. This variation can be attributed to the inclusion of both commercial and non-commercial entities in this section,

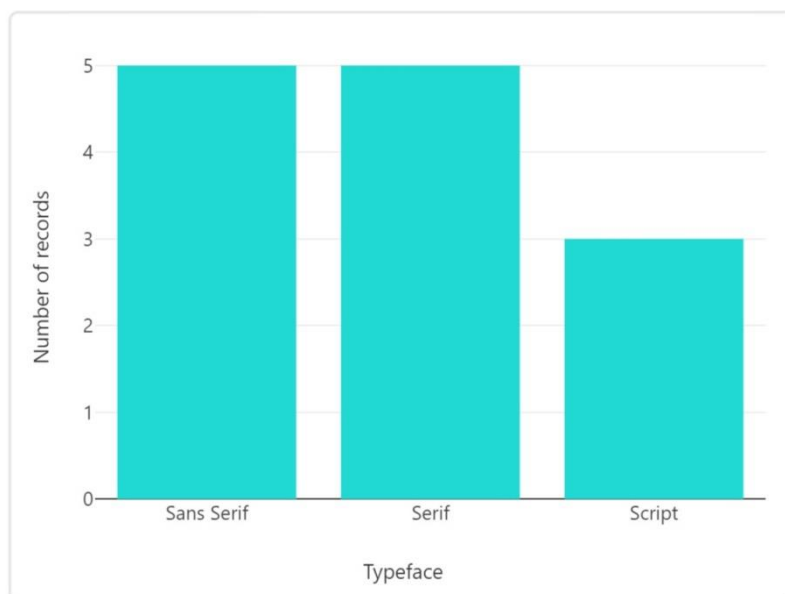


Figure 40: Typefaces used in Phoenix emblems and branding materials from other Peranakan groups and works, Toh Ying Li 2023.

leading to more entities adding a modern and contemporary aesthetic to the phoenix representations.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that despite the increased variety and experimentation observed in the phoenix branding materials of these entities, their underlying objective still possessed the desire to evoke a sense of tradition and history through their emblems and branding. The phoenix representations used consistently displayed intricate detailing, and was designed to bear resemblance to the ornamental phoenix depictions from the Golden Age. This provides further evidence that the phoenix's emergence as an emblem is intricately linked to the Peranakan groups' aspiration to evoke the historical significance of the Golden Age, which has garnered heightened attention in recent years.

### **Content Analysis Findings**

Throughout the course of *Chapter 3: Phoenix Branding by Other Peranakan Groups and Works*, content analysis has been conducted regularly and with in-depth observations presented in the “findings” portion at the end of each case study. As a result, this section will provide only a brief overview and summary of the textual content analysis findings that have been discussed in detail throughout the chapter.

Ultimately, analysis of the statements and interviews conducted with the various Peranakan entities has revealed that there are three main reasons why they selected the phoenix for their emblems and branding purposes. The first reason is the favourable symbolic properties of the phoenix, embodying qualities such as “good fortune,” “harmony,” and the Western interpretation of “rebirth.” The second reason is the newfound importance placed on Peranakan material culture from the Golden Age era by academics and museums in recent decades. Material culture has increasingly been painted as an authentic and defining part of Peranakan culture, resulting in Peranakan entities selecting a traditional symbol from material culture when they required a visual emblem to brand themselves. The third reason is influence from the official Peranakan associations, as well as Edmond Chin's “Gilding the Phoenix” exhibition. The use of phoenix branding by The Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang Association and through the museum exhibition solidified the phoenix's status as a cultural emblem, leading other entities to follow suit in selecting phoenix emblems for their own organisations or works.

## **VI. Chapter 4:**

### **Conclusion**

From the 2000s to the present day, the phoenix has become an iconic emblem of Peranakan Chinese culture in Singapore. Used in the logomarks of the official Peranakan associations, heritage houses, research hubs, and in book and magazine titles, the phoenix has become a representation of the Peranakan identity. Through undertaking a historical approach and a study of the various historical events and players (museums, authors, associations, and private organisations), the research shows that the process that led to the selection of the phoenix as an emblem is multifaceted and was caused by a variety of reasons such as the increased focus on material culture in the Peranakan discourse, symbolic connotations of ‘revival’ that matches the interests of Peranakans, mutual influence between Peranakan groups, commercialisation driving a need for branding, and a greater acceptance from the Singapore government which allowed the Peranakan groups to freely express themselves.

The increased focus on material culture as well as the Golden Age era is a significant reason that contributed to this phenomenon. With the opening of new museum exhibitions and books on Peranakan artefacts, material culture has increasingly become a focal point of Peranakan identity. Peranakans often look back on the Golden Age with nostalgia and reverence, and consider material culture to be one of the few tangible reminders of this period. The phoenix is a common recurring motif on artefacts from this time period, and the heightened focus on material culture has put the phoenix in the spotlight. In press releases, interviews and comments made during the release of their phoenix emblems, The Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang Association, Peranakan Sayang, Hall of the Phoenix and Peony and Baba House have all cited the phoenix’s prominence in traditional Peranakan material culture as a factor when explaining their decision to select the phoenix as an emblem for their organisation.

The selection of the phoenix as a prominent emblem in Peranakan culture can also be attributed to its favourable symbolic properties. Within traditional Peranakan beliefs, the phoenix holds auspicious connotations associated with peace and harmony. This symbolic significance influenced the Gunong Sayang Association’s decision to adopt the phoenix emblem, as the perched phoenix represents stability – a desirable quality to be associated with the organisation. Similarly, the Peranakan Association cited the phoenix’s role as a protector of the South as a reason for its choice as an emblem. Given the Peranakan’s origins as descendants from Chinese Southern migrants, the Southern cardinal direction

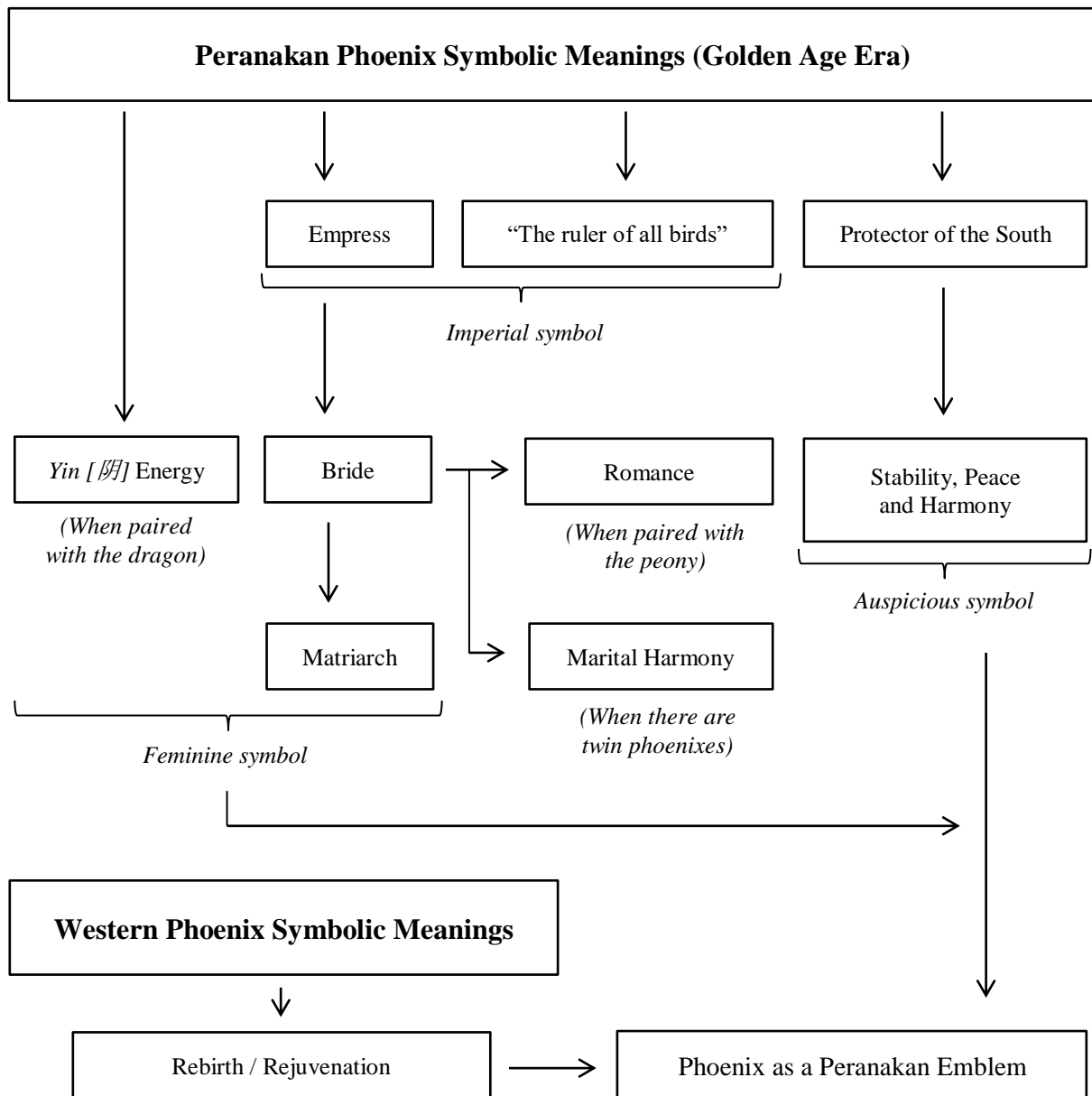


Figure 41: Symbolic meanings of the phoenix in Peranakan and western culture, Toh Ying Li, 2023

holds particular importance in Peranakan culture, making the phoenix an apt symbol to represent the community. Figure 41 above illustrates an overview of the various favourable symbolic attributes of the phoenix that contributed to it becoming an ideal choice to represent Peranakan culture.

In addition, new symbolic associations of the phoenix with ‘revival’ and ‘rebirth’ are an important factor that led to the emergence of phoenix emblems. Although the phoenix was adopted by the Peranakans from Chinese mythology, contemporary Peranakans have

interpreted the phoenix with new symbolic meanings based on their own contextual knowledge. In modern Singapore, the phoenix is a familiar mythical creature in pop-culture and is known as an immortal bird that can be reborn and revived from the ashes. These symbolic meanings of ‘revival’ and ‘rejuvenation’ are associated with the Western phoenix – and not the traditional Peranakan phoenix. Nevertheless, many prominent contemporary Peranakan organisations, such as The Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang Association, the Baba House and authors such as Hwei Fe’n Chaeh cited the symbolic associations of the phoenix with revival and rebirth as reasons why they ultimately selected the phoenix as their emblem or in the title of their book. The decision to associate the Peranakan phoenix with these new symbolic connotations could be because the notion of a phoenix in flight ‘reviving from ashes’ perfectly aligns with their desire to see the culture rejuvenate from the aftermath of the Peranakan Decline. The phoenix is essentially the perfect emblem to represent the current phase of the ‘Peranakan Revival’ and its period of cultural rebirth. In addition, the recognisability of the phoenix makes it more appealing than more obscure motifs like the peony or the *qilin* [麒麟].<sup>15</sup> Emblems by themselves do not contain innate meanings and rely on the viewer’s prior knowledge to form interpretations: it is beneficial for an organisation to select an emblem that already has a known and favourable meaning with the majority of the Singapore population.

Another factor that contributed to the phoenix phenomenon is mutual influence. Once Edmond Chin launched his landmark ‘Gilding the Phoenix’ exhibition and The Peranakan Association of Singapore made the phoenix its official emblem, many organisations and groups became similarly inspired to use the phoenix as an emblem for their Peranakan organisations. Hwei Fe’n Cheah reveals in the interview that she named her book ‘Phoenix Rising’ because she was inspired by Edmond Chin’s book and exhibition ‘Gilding the Phoenix.’ Similarly, the founder of Peranakan Sayang revealed in the interview that he began incorporating the phoenix in his branding materials due to the perception that the phoenix has become an “icon of the Peranakans.” He noticed that other prominent Peranakan associations have used the phoenix as their logo and the phoenix has become a symbol associated with the culture, and decided to include the phoenix in his branding materials and merchandise as well. An overview of the various relationships between the government, the Peranakan associations and other Peranakan organisations that led to the

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<sup>15</sup> The *qilin* [麒麟] is mythical creature that is typically depicted with horns and a scaled body. It is an auspicious creature and its arrival is typically associated with the birth of a new ruler. *Qilins* are also associated with bringing new babies into the family (similar to the stories of the stork from Western mythologies). The *qilin* is one of the many popular motifs that can be found in Peranakan material culture.

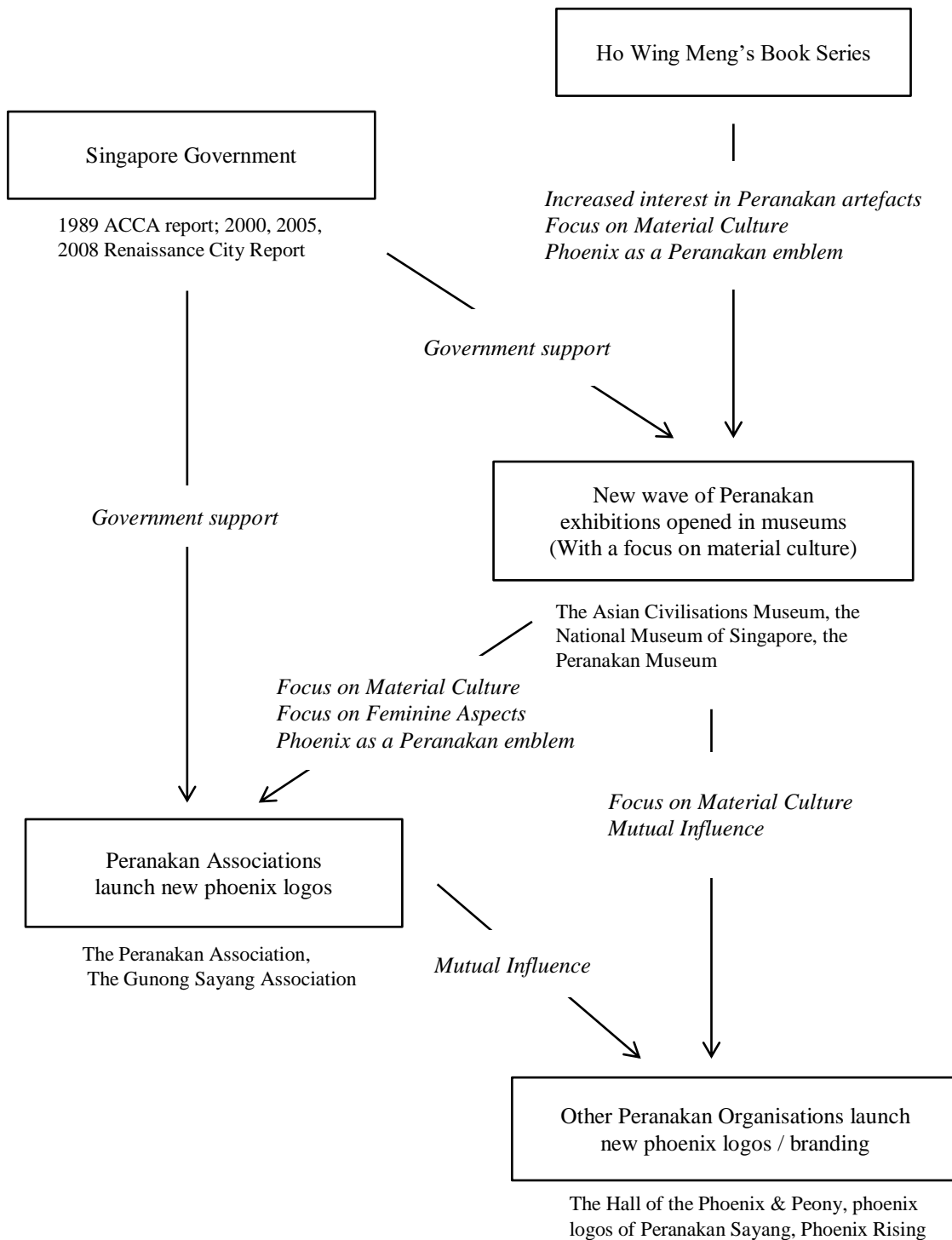


Figure 42: Relationships between the Singapore government, museums, Peranakan Associations and other Peranakan organisations, Toh Ying Li, 2023

emergence of the phoenix emblems can be observed in Figure 42 above. This mutual influence can be understood through Pamela Henderson, Joseph Cote, Siew Meng Leong and Bernd Schmitt's journal observations on the visual components required for building

brands. In it, they note that “logos that are similar to other logos create a sense of knowing, which results in false recognition,” a process that is beneficial to newer organisations. These newer organisations benefit as the usage of a known emblem creates a sense of familiarity to the viewer. In addition, the phoenix currently has connotations attached to the official Peranakan Association of Singapore. By similarly using a phoenix emblem, an organisation can tap into the existing codes of the phoenix being a representation of Peranakan culture, essentially creating a more effective logo. The phoenix trend is essentially a self-perpetuating phenomenon: the more Peranakan organisations (especially the established ones) begin using the phoenix, the more likely newer Peranakan organisations will also start using the phoenix to establish their own brands. In addition, the Peranakan community in Singapore is small and tight knit – Peranakan organisations are constantly collaborating with each other, making this mutual influence all the more prevalent.

The rise of the phoenix emblem can also be attributed to the Peranakan’s current need for branding and to develop a recognisable identity. The period of the Peranakan Revival marks a phase where Peranakans have embraced commercialisation as a necessary means for survival. With the older generation of Peranakans slowly disappearing and the younger generation reluctant to continue many of the old traditions, avenues such as ‘cultural tourism’ and reinvesting profits from selling Peranakan merchandise or services into education are increasingly becoming crucial to the survival of the culture. In addition, the Peranakans have historically always been anxious regarding their identity and legitimacy as a hybrid culture. Having a unified phoenix emblem for the two main Peranakan Chinese associations in Singapore (as well as a variety of other Peranakan organisations) strengthens their brand cohesion and identity. The Peranakans’ quest to brand themselves and find their identity parallels Singapore’s need for branding. After Singapore gained independence, the country similarly went through a period where it created new emblems and tapped into its heritage as ways to find its identity. Singapore’s arts and information minister Lui Tuck Yew declared Peranakan culture to be “the multiracial emblems of [Singapore’s] social mix” during the opening of a new Peranakan exhibition. Just like how the phoenix has become an emblem of the Peranakans, Peranakan culture is increasingly being adapted by the government to become an emblem of Singapore.

All of this branding activity by Peranakan organisations was made possible by the Singapore government’s changed stance regarding the Peranakans in the 1980s. When the Singapore government and the rest of the population were largely distrustful and wary of

the Peranakans during the 1960s, they kept a low profile and deliberately chose emblems that presented a conformist and neutral message. The old 1966 emblem of the Peranakan Association in particular is a motif of four linked arms – which has nothing to do with Peranakan culture and instead is a representation of Singapore’s four ‘official’ races. The linked arms logo has a muted black and white colour palette, in stark contrast with the exuberance of the colourful phoenix emblems today. The changed opinions of the Singapore government towards Peranakan culture as being valuable to Singapore’s growth is a crucial factor that allowed for the selection of the phoenix logos. If the Singapore government did not begin to look favourably on the Peranakan community, it is unlikely that the Peranakan Associations would change their logos to the phoenix – an emblem which is a vibrant, eye-catching expression of the Peranakan identity.

Another point to note is the heightened focus on the feminine aspects of Peranakan culture. Traditionally feminine aspects of the culture, such as food, crafts, the domestic Peranakan house, and the Nonya herself have been increasingly placed in the spotlight, mirroring the rising popularity of the phoenix: a traditionally feminine symbol. Based on statements made by The Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang Association, Peranakan Sayang, Hall of the Phoenix and Peony and the Baba House, these groups were aware of the usage of the phoenix as a feminine symbol, but did not choose the phoenix as their emblems directly due to this reason. Instead, the same thought processes that resulted in the recent ‘feminisation’ of Peranakan culture also resulted in a preference for the phoenix. Academics such as Karen Teoh have dissected the feminisation of Peranakan culture as being caused by a desire to focus on the “uncontroversial realm of the woman’s world” to keep the focus away from the Peranakan men’s controversial political history. By using the phoenix as an emblem, it continues to keep the focus of the Peranakan discourse on “safe” and “unproblematic” topics, steering the focus away from references to their controversial political past.

Yet at the same time, gender dynamics have changed in Peranakan society today, and the gender divide is no longer as pronounced as it was during the Golden Age. Both Peranakan men and women are now involved in traditionally feminine roles, such as cooking, embroidery and crafts, with Peranakan men such as Raymond Wong doing embroidery and making his own Kebayas (Peranakan clothing). Similarly, contemporary Peranakan women are now educated and working, with Genevieve Peggy Jeffs becoming the first female president of the Peranakan Association in 122 years. While cooking, fashion, crafts and the phoenix were considered feminine in the past, cultural meanings can shift and change over

time. The Peranakan phoenix is now used as an emblem that represents all Peranakans: men and women. With repeated usage in this context, the phoenix is likely to develop more gender-neutral meanings over time.

Ultimately Peranakan culture, like most cultures in the world, is ever-changing and constantly in flux. Continuous evolution is necessary for a culture's endurance and Peranakans must adapt in order to survive. Historically, the Peranakans have rebranded themselves with emblems to suit their new goals in every phase of their cultural growth or decline. The phoenix is currently the perfect emblem of the Peranakan Revival, but once this phase is over the phoenix emblem may yet again be set aside to make way for the Peranakan community's next phase of rebranding. Only time will tell what the Peranakan's next emblem will be, in their next era of change.

## VII. Appendix

### Meanings of Phoenix Motifs in Material Culture

#### *Phoenix and Peony*

The phoenix and peony motif typically symbolises prosperity and righteousness. The peony flower is associated with spring and the phoenix is associated with summer (Kee M.-Y. , 2009, pp. 53-54). The phoenix is typically paired with the peony as they are considered the most important bird and flower respectively (Sim & Liu, 2012, pp. 265–290). This motif draws influence from the classic Chinese “bird and flower paintings [花鸟画],” where birds are commonly depicted with flower motifs (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141). Birds and flowers were also motifs featured in Malay and Indonesian batik designs, which may have made this design more familiar and appealing to the Peranakans (Supana, 2018, pp. 537-541). The pairing of the phoenix and peony also symbolises romantic love (The Peranakan Association , 2000).

#### *Phoenix and Dragon*

When paired together, the phoenix and dragon is a symbol of the union between female (*yin*) and male (*yang*) energy, where the phoenix represents the feminine and the dragon represents the masculine. This motif is used to symbolise the emperor and empress (in imperial settings) or husband and wife (at weddings) (Kee M.-Y. , 2009, p. 141) (Knapp, 2012, p. 57).

#### *Twin Phoenixes*

When the phoenix is presented by itself, it is typically considered to be female. When two phoenixes are depicted in a pair, one of the phoenixes is considered to be male (named *feng* 凤) and the other phoenix considered female (named *huang* 凰). These twin phoenixes are a symbol of marriage, love and fidelity (Ho, 2008, p. 43).

#### *Phoenix in Flight*

The flying phoenix motif depicts the phoenix with its wings outstretched and in flight. The phoenix only appears during a period of peace and harmony (Kee M.-Y. D., 2004, p. 141). This motif draws influences from the Chinese proverb “as the phoenixes fly [凤凰于飞]” which came from the Book of Songs [诗经], a collection of Chinese poetry from the Zhou

Dynasty (1046 BC–256 BC). The proverb refers to a pair of twin phoenixes flying together, and it is a metaphor for a happy marriage (Chen S. Z., 1992, p. 9).

#### *Phoenix Resting on Rockery*

The phoenix is often depicted perched on a moss-covered rockery. When the phoenix stands on a rockery, it symbolises stability and permanence (Kee M.-Y. , 2009, pp. 53-54).

#### *Phoenix and Qilin [麒麟]*

The *qilin* [麒麟] is a benign chimera creature from Chinese mythology typically depicted with horns, hooves and a body covered in scales. The *qilin* [麒麟] is known for its ability to deliver a baby into a family (similar to the Western fable of the stork delivering a baby). When the phoenix and *qilin* [麒麟] are paired, it is a symbol of fertility and children. This motif is particularly common in Peranakan weddings (Pan & Tang, 2004, p. 39) (Lukman, Setyoningrum, & Rismantojo, 2018, pp. 89-90).

#### *A Hundred Birds in Homage to the Phoenix*

This is one of the more complex motifs surrounding the phoenix. It typically depicts the phoenix in the centre, perched beneath a parasol tree [梧桐] and surrounded by numerous pairs of different birds (e.g. cranes, magpies, swallows). This motif is an imperial symbol and it represents the phoenix's elevated status as the ruler of all birds – surrounded by other lesser birds coming to pay their respects. The parasol tree symbolises royalty and highlights the phoenix's regal status. This motif is sometimes used to highlight imperial power and the relationship between royalty and their subjects. It originates from classic Chinese paintings, where it is known as *Bai Niao Chao Feng* [百鸟朝凤] (Kee M.-Y. , 2009, pp. 53-54).

#### *The Sparring Phoenix*

This motif depicts a phoenix with raised wings, an open beak and outstretched claws – in a striking position. Normally, the sparring phoenix is never portrayed alone and is always depicted in a pair or in a series of phoenixes with similar fighting stances. It is most commonly found on batik prints and this motif is heavily influenced by the 'sabung ayam' cock-fighting motif that is popular in the Indonesian community (Damais & Knight-Achjadi, 2005, pp. 13-17). This aggressive motif deviates from the typically tranquil and serene depiction of the phoenix.

## The Emblem

Emblems are symbolic images or objects that represent a nation, individual or entity<sup>16</sup> (Oxford University Press, 2021). Such symbols were named ‘emblem’ from the Greek word ‘*embállein*’ which means ‘to insert’ (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Their earliest forms can be traced to 2600 B.C., where emblematic symbols for Egyptian deities were used in hieroglyphics (Allen, 2010) (Manning, 2002).

Emblems by themselves do not contain innate meanings: they rely on the viewer’s prior knowledge and cultural perceptions to form interpretations. The context and cultural norms surrounding an emblem is therefore crucial towards understanding its meaning and purpose (Bryan & Gillespie, 2005, pp. 8-16). These meanings can also change drastically with time, depending on its manner of use (Quinn, 2005).<sup>17</sup> Emblems are expressions of identity that have the power to evoke a sense of belonging or controversy, depending on the group or idea it is representing (Bryan & Gillespie, 2005, pp. 8-16).



Figure 43: Differences between emblems and symbols, Toh Ying Li, 2023.

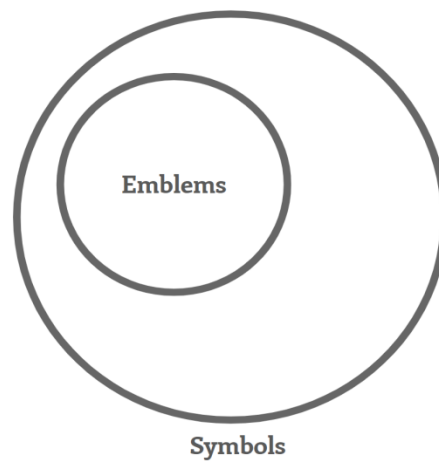
## Differences between Emblems and Symbols

Although emblems are symbols, not every symbol is an emblem (see Figure 43 and Figure 44). Symbols typically consist of an image and its derived meaning. However, emblems take this one step further: they consist of not only image and meaning, but also encompass the identity of an entity or community. An example of this can be observed in the difference between an image of a dove carrying an olive branch (a symbol), and the Olympics logomark (an emblem). The dove symbol conveys ‘peace,’ but on its own has no attributed identity. In contrast, the Olympics emblem represents not only ‘union’ but also the identity of a specific global sports competition. Emblems are hence symbols (as they consist of image and meaning), but a symbol only becomes an emblem when it is also able to represent the identity of a person, group or ideal (Hall, 1970, pp. 261-265).

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<sup>16</sup> An alternate usage of the word ‘emblem’ sometimes refers to an art tradition where images were accompanied by verses of mottos or moral lessons, and assembled in the form of emblem books. The thesis will not focus on this definition of the emblem, but rather the more common definition of an emblem being a symbolic mark of identity.

<sup>17</sup> An example is the Swastika: which evolved from a spiritual Buddhist emblem into an emblem of the Fascist Nazi party.



*Figure 44: Emblems are a subset of symbols, Toh Ying Li, 2023.*

### **Historical Overview of Emblems in Singapore**

The earliest presence of emblems in Singapore can be traced to the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century where they were used for religious purposes to represent gods and deities. Artefacts found on Fort Canning Hill include gold jewellery from the 14<sup>th</sup> century inscribed with emblems representing the Hindi god, Vishnu (a conch and discus) (National Museum of Singapore, 2017).

Emblems were also used as symbols of power by the series of sultanates that controlled Singapore during its early history. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Majapahit Empire controlled Singapore and used The Sun of Majapahit as its emblem (National Heritage Board, 2021). This emblem consisted of nine Hindu gods overlaid with a sun in an intricate design. From the 15<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century, the State Sword was an important part of the royal regalia and functioned as an emblem of the Sultan. This sword was passed from one generation of Sultans to the next: whoever wielded the sword also wielded power. (Lanang, 1615) (The Straits Times, 1939).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, emblems were used in Malay seals for treaty signing. The historic treaty signed on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1819 between Temenggung Abdul Rahman, Sultan Husain Syah and Stamford Raffles featured three different seals: all emblems of their respective signees. This treaty granted the British authorisation to set up their trading post in Singapore (National Library Singapore, 2020).

New emblems in Singapore were created each time the island acquired new governance. When the British controlled Singapore as part of the Straits Settlements, the emblem of the Straits Settlements was used throughout Singapore. This emblem was printed and circulated on paper money from 1898–1942 (National Heritage Board, 2021). The British also gave Singapore a variety of other emblems, including the emblem for the Singapore Municipal Commission and Singapore’s first coat of arms, in 9<sup>th</sup> April 1948 (Wong, 2018).

When Singapore moved towards gaining independence, a new series of emblems were commissioned to represent Singapore as a self-governing state. Among these include the National Flag and State Crest which were unveiled in 1959, as well as the Lion Head Symbol which was launched in 1986 (National Heritage Board, 2021).

During this period, emblems were also used in the form of logos by companies and communities in Singapore to establish their identities. Some major companies that commissioned logos from 1900–1938 include Eu Yan Sang, Leung Kai Fook Medical, Yeo’s and Haw Par Corporation Ltd (Chin Y. C., 2017). Some notable examples of ethnic communities that branded themselves with emblems from the 1900–1986 include the Singapore Indian Association, Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, The Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Peranakan Chinese Association.

## Interview Transcripts

Transcript – Interview with Dr Lye Wai Choong, 7<sup>th</sup> December 2022

Founder of the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony

W: Dr Lye Wai Choong

Y: Toh Ying Li

Y	Tell me a bit about yourself and the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony. When did you create it and what does it do?
W	Documentation, conservation and preservation of Peranakan material culture.
Y	When did you start doing this?
W	Started in 1993.
Y	1993? That is a really long time ago...
W	The building [for the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony] was completed in 2010 after four years. The building was adapted from 1927. In 1927 the building was there. The original building was owned by Lim Yan Peng, he is not exactly a Baba but his wife was a Nonya. The building is still in existence in Penang. The building is what John Lim would call a castle mansion. Because of the dome, so the description of that building was a castle mansion. The building was built to hold Peranakan material culture around the turn of the 1920s.
Y	I see – so right now where are you based? Are you based in Penang or Singapore?
W	I'm based in Singapore.
Y	When you founded the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony in 1993 as you said -

W	Well I started collecting in 1993. The Hall of the Phoenix, the name was created in the year 2010. The collection is referred to as 堂鳳丹 (Tang Feng Dan): The Hall of the Phoenix and Peony. You know a lot of Chinese collections have a name: the hall, collection. So I decided to call it the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony because a lot of the Peranakan material cultures, the main motifs are phoenix and peonies.
Y	Ah I see, so what does the motifs of the phoenix and peonies represent to you? To you what does it symbolise?
W	Well, it is just one of the most common popular motifs of the Peranakans of the Babas and Nonyas. We don't know exactly why they chose phoenix and peonies, but they have a taste for the phoenix and peonies. So a lot of the material culture depicts phoenix and peonies.
Y	So that is the main reason why you chose it?
W	Yes, so this is the main motif. So I decided to name the hall the Hall of the Phoenix and Peonies because the hall is about Peranakan material culture.
Y	Ah, I see that's very interesting. So do you feel the phoenix is a very important emblem to Peranakans?
W	Well the Peranakans I guess just like the phoenix rather than the dragon and adopted it into their material culture. You must remember that the Peranakans basically are very Chinese. Their rituals, their religious beliefs, their practises are all derived from Southern Chinese culture. The phoenix is part of material culture for the Chinese. So it's not that the Peranakans created the phoenix, they just incorporated the phoenix into their material culture because they have a preference for the phoenix. Whether that symbolises femininity, matriarchal culture, that's up to speculation.
Y	Very, very interesting! So does the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony have an official logo? I visited the website but I was not too sure if it had an official logo.
W	The Hall doesn't have a logo.
Y	So it just goes by the name, The Hall of the Phoenix and Peony?
W	Yeah, that's right.

Y	Ok, so another I noticed was the Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang Association, the NUS Baba House and many other Peranakan groups all used the phoenix as their main logo, their main emblem. And you also named your hall, the Hall of the Phoenix and Peony. So do you feel that there is this trend where lots of Peranakan groups are using the phoenix and how do you feel about this?
W	Well I think it's just that there is a preference and they see it in their material culture, therefore there are emblems and you don't see dragons. There are hardly any dragons.
Y	Yes, there are very few dragons.
W	So what we see is the phoenix. So I guess there are lots of Peranakan groups, whether there are dondang sayang or Gunong Sayang or the Baba House or the Peranakan Association, I would imagine they would pick the phoenix and the peony. Because that is what is most commonly seen.
Y	That is very true...
W	So I guess if they want to pick a logo, if they want to pick an emblem, if they would pick something to represent the Peranakan Association or society, they would pick the phoenix and peony. Because it's just all over, it's all over the Peranakan culture.
Y	Makes sense! So another thing you mentioned just now was about matriarchy. So I'm quite curious about matriarchy and patriarchy in Peranakan culture. The phoenix is often a feminine symbol that represents the bride and the matriarch, so do you feel that this could have influenced –
W	That is open to speculation. I wouldn't like to say that, "Oh, because the Peranakans are a matriarchal society, they place great emphasis on their mothers and their grandmothers; therefore they choose a feminine symbol."
Y	So you don't think that -
W	I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I'm not sure; I think that is sheer speculation.
Y	But you think that is possible, it's just not confirmed?
W	Oh it's possible, but it is hardly confirmed. And then if it is perpetuated, then of course it becomes a fact! And that is perpetuated all the time: "Oh it is a matriarchal

	<p>society, the daughters are very important to the Peranakans.” No, no, of course they care more for their daughters more than the Chinese would. But they are still not an open society where gender equality is the norm. It’s not! Peranakan daughters are not sent to schools. Peranakan daughters are still made to do domestic chores. They have to learn embroidery, cooking and all that. And this is all gender biased isn’t it? Even though they are not like the Chinese where daughters are taken with less regard, it’s not that the Peranakan think their daughters are equal status as that their sons. But of course, the Peranakans allowed their daughters to go to school and go for an education earlier than the Chinese. But I do not think – I would hesitate to say that the Peranakans think of their daughters equally in status as their sons.</p>
Y	<p>Ah, so you feel that Peranakan culture was never really a matriarchy. It was like a partial matriarchy, but not a full matriarchy.</p>
W	<p>Yeah, a partial matriarchy. The women play an important role, but I wouldn’t – they are not a matriarchy. A matriarchal society, I don’t think so. The women have a lot of say in their homes, but if you look at the history of the Baba, it’s still the man that has the say.</p>
Y	<p>It’s true - the men have a lot of power.</p>
W	<p>Yeah, the men have the power, it’s not the women. If it were a totally matriarchal society where the women have all the power, they would not be having multiple wives.</p>
Y	<p>Yeah! Ok, another question I have is do you feel that there has been greater focus on the domestic lives of Peranakans in recent years? I noticed that many museums and cultural groups focus on the Peranakan house. For instance the Intan and the NUS Baba House. And many museum exhibitions also display Peranakan material culture, which are often items from the household. So do you feel that in recent years that more attention has been placed on the Peranakan household, rather than the politics or things like that?</p>
W	<p>Well, it mainly focuses on the material culture. There is not much that has been said about the politics and the other aspects of the Peranakan culture. The decorative arts, let’s put it this way. The decorative arts. So if you had the money during those times and you want to have beautiful things to use and beautiful things for display in your home, what would you do? It’s the same today as in the past! I do not think there was any intention of creating a material culture. It was an “Oh well, we have the money</p>

	<p>and so we want things for the house. We want to use beautiful porcelain, expensive porcelain.” And where would the porcelain come from in the past? It would either come from China or it would come from Europe, from UK. Early years, in the end of the 19th century, then it would be bought from China. Later on, then it would come from the UK. So there was no real intention, to them it was not a material culture. It was using nice porcelain, like what you would do now. They would decorate their house with arts, that’s was how it was. So when we label it as Peranakans material culture, we are looking with today’s eyes, with hindsight. In the past, they would not look at it as material culture. Their porcelain would be looked at as nice, expensive porcelain from China that they use during weddings and ceremonies. Basically that was it.</p>
Y	<p>That makes sense. So another question I have is that some people are worried that Peranakan culture has become a commodity, or a commercial tourism gimmick. So do you think that this is true?</p>
W	<p>Oh obviously it has been commodified. Definitely, definitely. In every sense of the word. Food, food is one thing. Food, of course, food of course is fine when you go to restaurants, Peranakan restaurants. But commodifying Peranakan material culture is all over the place. When you see the new reproductions of the porcelain. When you see people using the material culture. I mean look, look at some of the small Peranakan, I don’t even dare to use the word “museum,” small Peranakan houses, Peranakan homes. Some small little houses, small little museums have been turned into “Peranakan museums” and they charge a fee to go in. They charge for tea and coffee and charge for tea and cake. And they give you a little blurb on Peranakan culture. Isn’t that commodification of the Peranakan culture? So it’s all over the place, it’s all over the place.</p>
Y	<p>So how do you feel about this? Do you think it is a good thing or a bad thing or do you think that it is fine?</p>
W	<p>Well if it is presented in the correct way, if the information is presented correctly, I have no problems with it. I have no problems with anyone using the Peranakan culture to generate income, as long as it is presented correctly. I mean we don’t expect people to do anything for free. But we do not want it to be sensationalised and create something, and tell a partial story.</p>

Y	<p>Very true. And how do you feel about the status of Peranakan culture in Singapore. Do you feel like it's getting more attention, is it staying the same or is it declining and slowly fading away? How do you feel about the survival of Peranakan culture?</p>
W	<p>I think that is a long answer. That would be a difficult and a long conversation. Because I'm very uncomfortable with the word "culture." When I have spoken to Peter Lee, Peter Lee and I are two people who are very uncomfortable with calling something "Peranakan culture." Because what is a culture? Chinese culture, alright for example. If you're Chinese, no matter where you are in the world, whether the north or the south, when the spring festival comes, basically Chinese New Year, it is celebrated in the spring, you celebrate Chinese New Year. So for centuries, even if you're in the south during the spring you celebrate Chinese New Year. Even if you become a Christian you still celebrate Chinese New Year. So that is cultural, and cultures don't change. But if you look at the so called Peranakan culture, what is there that is persistent? There is nothing. Can you identify something? Chinese New Year? Cheng Beng? Those are aspects of the Chinese culture, they don't go away. What is there in Peranakan culture that hasn't gone away? Basically there isn't!</p> <p>Peranakan culture is basically Chinese culture. People do not see that the main, the core of Peranakan culture is Taoism Chinese culture. When people talk about the 12 day Peranakan wedding, that is basically a 12 day Taoist Chinese wedding. What is there basically in Peranakan culture that is persistent, that we can identify as a culture? Food? Is food good enough to be labelled as a culture? I don't know, maybe. Is a costume a culture? That's the problem, a lot of Peranakans who commodify the culture use Sarong Kebaya as Peranakan, as tiffin carriers as Peranakan, have stolen a lot of things that were generic in the past as Peranakan. Peter Lee and I, honestly we are very frightened of calling something Peranakan culture. Sarong Kebaya was worn by all women folk at that period. It is a period women costume. The Malays wear it, the Indians wear it, everyone wears it! People try to make something out, that they are, that this is Peranakan culture. We always joke what is Peranakan culture. And then from then you lead on, who is a Peranakan? How do you define someone as Peranakan? All of this is extremely complicated.</p>
Y	<p>It sounds very interesting and also very complicated...</p>

W	<p>So it is an evolving lifestyle of that period. Evolving lifestyle of over a hundred years, a hundred and fifty years. The early 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, that is an evolving thing. From a lifestyle that was very Chinese, to a lifestyle that is very Anglicised. And which time point in that period, can you put a pin and say “Hah, this is Peranakan”? Very difficult, very difficult. So what do we have now that you can say that these are representations of a group of people during a certain period of time that have incorporated local customs, local cuisines, some local costumes and developed features that you can identify that are different from other immigrant Chinese. Because we are talking about Peranakan Chinese and we are not talking about Peranakan Indians. They have incorporated certain characteristics and certain features that we can identify them as separate from immigrant Chinese. And that’s about all I think that we can say about this group that are different from the Chinese, that this group have been labelled by the English too, by people who have observed them that they are different from the immigrant Chinese and they are called the Baba, the Nonya.</p>
Y	<p>Ah, but then how do you feel about the status of the Peranakan community? Do you feel that they are surviving, that they are thriving?</p>
W	<p>Well they are trying, they are trying of course. The Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang, they are trying. But if they do not, if they cannot keep the Peranakan patois alive, that would be a great lost to the Peranakan so called culture. These spoken languages, generally without a written version. If they do not have the patois still around, they would have lost a very important part of the Peranakan culture. And then you’re just left with food. And the material culture is just a representation of the past! And most Peranakans don’t own any significant material culture anymore. And a lot of them do not practise the old Chinese practises anymore.</p>
Y	<p>So that’s all the questions I wanted to ask you, but if you have anything else that you want to add, you can let me know.</p>
W	<p>I think you should not be dogmatic. Because I see so many people, so many Peranakans especially, try to crystallise, try to create an entity and to create something and say that is Peranakan culture. I think you have to look at it as a scientific point.</p>

Y	So you think it is important to not categorise Peranakan culture, to try and see it as it is and to try not to put it in a box?
W	Yeah, don't put it in a box. That's what Peter Lee and I strongly believe. If you read an article that he wrote some time ago, he thinks that Peranakans glorify themselves. That's another thing that the Peranakans do. Yes, they glorify themselves [laughs].

Founder of Peranakan Sayang

A: Alvin Oon

Y: Toh Ying Li

Y	Maybe you could tell me a bit about yourself. What does the Peranakan Sayang do? And also how did it start and evolve from the Main Wayang Company?
A	Okay, so I'm probably a fourth or fifth generation Peranakan. Well, Baba, actually, and I say fourth or fifth because my history is not very clear to me. It's not easy to trace. And I've never been involved in culture. I've always known that I was different, I also knew that I was called Peranakan. But what does it mean to be a Peranakan? I never knew, especially in the days when I was young, and we were talking about, you know, in the 70s and 80s, where culture was not really celebrated, especially minorities. You know, the standard one was always Chinese, Indian, Malays, you know, that kind of thing. So going to school, I never knew my identity. I knew I was a Peranakan. But what is a Peranakan? I don't know. Am I Malay? No, not really, am I Eurasian? No, am I Chinese? Not really. So it's quite lost. As with most Peranakan, I believe. But I only realized a little bit more, when I was going to get married and that was quite some time ago. And then I had to sit and think like, when I have children, what kind of values do I share with them? Right? What do I tell them? Who they are, where they come from? Then it only dawned on me that this is important to find out your own family tree and who you are. So I started, you know, doing research on my own. Finding out from family relatives, talking to people, working with other people who are like-minded and slowly finding myself in a community that is pretty similar with me, all the OCBC people, the Orang-Cina [Peranakan] people. And then I realized, oh, okay, this is something that I'm discovering of myself. And as I went along, I had a few other like-minded people so we started off the Main Wayang Company. And this was back in 2004. Were you born yet? Not yet? Small? Okay. So, so yeah, so we started then. And our objective was to keep the culture alive, promote the culture in ways that we can. And because we were all from events and entertainment backgrounds, we did a lot of shows and music, and I'm a musician. At least a self-taught one. So I write a lot of songs, you know, I do a lot of shows, I host shows and that kind of thing. So I've started going,

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doing all these things. So as the years went by, we found ourselves finding the momentum doing all these things. So even national events, we had our agenda to push the Peranakan card in national view, you know, like, for example, things like The Little Nonya [a Peranakan television soap opera], you know, they came they came to us for advice, “how to do this, what to do,” you know, so we were actually consultants behind that project. Although we were consultants we were very purely Peranakan culture, or Baba Nonya culture consultants, but as to how the movie, how the whole series turned out, it’s not our cup of tea, honestly speaking. Because it was basically a Chinese drama that was dressed up as a Peranakan show, which didn’t - well, I have not watched a single episode of The Little Nonya because I refuse to. In the first place we Peranakans don’t speak Mandarin. I know, I know, it’s for a wider audience of people to watch the show. But then it kind of like bastardizes the whole thing. It’s like watching a Japanese series, but dubbed in Chinese. Not quite right. You know, and I mean, you lose the authenticity of the whole thing. So as a Baba, I felt very uncomfortable with the whole thing. And some of the things were not very well portrayed, like how they they made the matriarch so fierce, you know, like, “Wow you know she will scold everybody.” Of course, there are elements of times when our real bibiks [older women] were actually like that. But not to that extent, of course, it’s dramatized I can understand that but it doesn’t reflect too well on our culture and our people. So I didn’t particularly enjoy that. But having said that, the show has also brought about a lot of attention to the culture. And there was one particular year where Chinese New Year was really a Peranakan New Year New Year because all the ladies were wearing Sarong Kebaya during Chinese New Year. Although they were not actually Nonyas they all - and you want to buy any kueh [traditional desserts], they are all sold out already. So there was one particular year when Little Nonya was on, that was a very hot thing. And there’s also a lot of spill over effects, especially for our neighbouring Malacca and Penang and a lot of people, you know, were very interested in all the places that the show was being filmed. So there’s a lot of business there for my fellow friends, you know, because they visited, they went to the shops. So I mean, in a way, it was good, because it supported all the local Peranakan shops, Baba Nonya shops, which is good. Yeah, so that’s, that’s the Main Wayang Company. However, as in all businesses, you may find out later on in your life, it’s not easy to maintain company with fellow partners for a long term, because you may all start off with the same ideas and values. But as long as there is a one degree of difference when you started, when you multiply that down the years,

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that one degree becomes very big, or very obvious. So that is normal. I mean, in most businesses, you will find that it's not easy to maintain a good business relationship. So in 2016, we decided to call it quits after wow, quite a long run, I would say from 2004, 2005 to 2016, was quite a few years, like 12 years or so. We called it a day. So Main Wayang officially wrapped up. But I felt that, you know, just because Main Wayang wrapped up doesn't mean that we should end our efforts, because we've been doing so much over the decade, right? So I started Peranakan Sayang, which effectively started from 2017. So Peranakan Sayang took off, continued, where Main Wayang ended. And this is my own thing. So I'm basically self-employed. And I'm running this culture full time. So culture becomes my business. Right? Of course, you know, as a business, you need to earn a profit, but the profit quite often is ploughed back into doing things for the community, doing things for the culture, creating new grounds and new ideas. You know, like going into multimedia, I think, in the whole Baba Nyonya community around the world, I'm the most prominent person doing media, especially virtual, you know, streaming, and it's all things and videos and animation. So and I mean, that's my strength. That's the things I can do. Right, I write songs, I put it out on YouTube. So it's very visible. I'm very easily reachable. When you send out the email I respond. I'm helpful. Because I feel that is my role. And you're not the first person to ask. There have been quite a few people, down the years undergraduates and older who have been doing the thesis about culture and stuff. And I'll spend the time and it's not just in Singapore, there are people from overseas, I just helped one guy who lives in one of the small islands in the Pacific. He's doing cultural research for his - but I mean that the island is part of the French government. And there was also another guy a few months back, he came from Paris itself, and he came here and said "Can I talk to you, I need to find out about the culture." So I'll spend time talking to them and explaining to them about the culture because it's important. If we don't do such things, or we just keep within our community, the culture will die, you know, because you're just, you're not, you're looking inwards, you're not looking outwards. So by doing what I do, of course, I believe in what I do, and my idea is to keep the culture relevant to today's society, because we are not living in the times of our great grandfather or great grandmother or you know, the world has changed. We cannot be you know, looking back Yeah, last time, you know, my grandmother, she only do this way you know, we cannot change you know, you can't our world is so different. When my grandmother got married, her wedding was 12 days long. I got married. I'm not

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	<p>going to get married for 12 days because the world is so different and their beliefs and you know, the things that they do the rituals that they do, like you know, finding a rooster and a chicken to put under the bed to find out whether it's a male or female child for the firstborn. I can't even find a live chicken now you know, so how can I? How can I even do that? Right? So we have to evolve. And I think the power of the culture is our culture is one that has always been having an evolution, we're always evolving. From day one we're the first Chinese men that came to this part of the world and started to settle down. And then when he got married, had children, their lives have always been evolving from their generation to the next generation to the next. And if you compare the pros and cons of this, let's say, the 15th century, right, and then you compare that the Peranakans of the 18th century, which to us is quite long ago. But there's a big difference between the 15th and the 18th. I wouldn't say that, you know, that they lived the culture exactly the same, no, they would have evolved over time, over 300 years, of course, they would evolve. And from the 18th century to the 21st century, another 300 years, of course, we have evolved. So we cannot live in the past, we have to live today, and for the future, but always remember and be guided by the past. I think that's important. We must never forget about our past, but we cannot be living in the past. Because if we do, the culture died a few generations ago, and that's very sad.</p>
Y	<p>This is very good answer! So do you feel that Peranakan culture right now is surviving? Is it declining? Is it going down or staying the same? How do you feel about the health of Peranakan culture now?</p>
A	<p>Your question is quite relevant to what I was just saying - if you are a person who is a purist and say that "Oh, the Golden Age of the Peranakans was in the 19th century," for example. Then, for this person, the person will say the culture is dead. Right for the purist. Yeah. Because he or she only believes that the culture only existed at that time. And now since we don't even talk the language, we don't even live the way they do, it is dead. Right? I mean to the purist. But for me, I'm more optimistic and more forward looking. I'm living for today. I say yes, the culture is not from the 19th century, the culture is now today, we're talking about the 21st century Babas and Nonyas and we are different, we can speak many languages. We can speak English now, some of us still can speak the language like I do, you may not. There are a few, but there are a few who still can. And on top of that, we can even speak Mandarin today. You know, we are diverse. But remember when the first Peranakans came, or the first generations of Peranakans they probably spoke</p>

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Hokkien and Malay. That's it. They don't even speak English. Until the British came along in the 1800s then they said "Oh, we must learn English. It is important now to find work." Yeah, so they started learning English. Because of survival, you know, and they've been here longer than the new Chinese who just came to this part of the world. And because there's opportunity, "Hey we must learn English" so they tried then they became good at English, right? And they spoke Malay, they spoke Baba Malay and they spoke Hokkien. So now our generation we are different, but that does not make us wrong. Right. So I think, what is most important about any culture is the values, do we still have the values of the culture? Do we still have that pioneering spirit? Do we still have that creativity that we are so well known for? Actually Peranakans are a very creative people, you know, from our crafts, to our colours, to our music to our theatre. We are very, very, very creative people. And we're also leaders in our community. Do we have leaders today who are Peranakan? Of course we do. Do we have people who are theatre people or musicians in our community? Who are Babas and Nonyas? Yes, yes, of course we do. We still maintain the true values and what you call the character, the character of the culture. So yes, we are still alive and thriving, but in new ways, not in the old ways. And our new ways will be the old ways in the future. Let's say 50 years down the road. 100 years down the road. Somebody, maybe a student like you would say "Hey, last time there was this guy who used to write songs. You know what? That was classic, man." Then I'm the old ways. The Golden Age. Right? So it's all relative, you want to see it as an old culture or a dying culture you can. Or you want to see it as a culture that has evolved. So it's all up to the individual, how do you see your culture? How do you take your culture? Of course, there's pride in it or there's certain things Peranakans don't do, you know, that we still try to maintain, but it's not easy. And you know; well, now we are so interconnected with everything. Last time, they were so isolated, in their own ways, community is a community and that's it. Now, you just pick up your phone, you can talk to anybody around the world. So it's different. Life is different, right? Our society is different. Technologies are different. So we evolve with the times and we move ahead. And I would say, in my opinion, the culture is much more alive today than we were, let's say 40, 50 years ago. That is correct. As there's a lot of people who are very aware of their culture now who are trying to find their heritage, you can see a lot of even architecture, you know, a lot of people trying to maintain the buildings, as they were before. Clothing, I mean, there's so many Kebaya shops that you can find today. And you're talking about other material

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culture, like all the jewellery, lots of it, a lot of people who are collecting jewellery, creating new jewellery. In the entertainment site, you know, there's a lot of performers, including what Peranakan Sayang is doing. And even for our Singapore government, I must say, they've also identified that the Peranakan culture is one that is very neutral and very acceptable for most Singaporeans. So sometimes when you see like a national event going on, and the guest of honour is one of the female ministers or MPs in order, more often than not, they will wear the Kebaya because that is very Singapore, right? It's very neutral. The Chinese are okay with that. The Malays, okay, the Indians, okay, everybody's okay with it. So when they wear it, it represents a Singaporean identity, for want of a better one, we don't have a typical Singaporean costume per se. But the one that comes to closest would be the Sarong Kebaya. Or even for our gentlemen. Ministers and all that, you have more often than not, you'll see them wearing a Batik shirt. Right? And that's how we are. Quite unlikely you see them that let's say wearing a Chinese jacket, for example, unless it's Chinese New Year, of course, Chinese New Year they wear that. But other than that, you will never see them in a Chinese jacket, no way. They will never, they will wear a Batik shirt. So that's a visual identity of who we are, the region that we represent. And of course, you know that the Peranakan culture is not just Singapore, it's the whole region, you know, from Singapore, to Malacca to Penang to Phuket, to places in Indonesia, like places in like Jakarta, for example. So there are many, many communities, many of these Chinese communities who settled down and made the local place their home, they may or may not have intermarried the locals so that the life changed, they change the ways of how they were before to fit the situation of where they live today. And that made them Peranakans. That made their life change, the diet change, or diet, you know, there's so much Peranakan food, still, food is everywhere, where you go, of course, in varying qualities and taste, there's no - there's no one taste to it. There's always varying styles on taste, or recipes, but it is abundant everywhere. So culture is doing very well, I would say. It's just that we need to somehow accept it. Not everybody has accepted it, because they're still living in the past perhaps. But I think from the time that we found our independence in Singapore, to today, the culture has grown substantially and for us to have even a museum right that is dedicated to our culture, which is not an official culture. By the way. There is no such thing as a Peranakan culture, you know, to our Singapore government. Yeah, we are not an official race or official culture. But we have a huge museum dedicated to the culture. You think about it? We have our Indian culture, we

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	<p>have a museum. We have our Malay culture, we have the heritage centre and we have the Chinese culture. Is there even a museum for the Chinese culture? No, I'm not sure. But for the Peranakan ones we have it. So I think it's doing well. And this spill over effect to our neighbouring countries is also happening. Because of our enthusiasm and all that. Our partners in Malacca and Penang they say, Wow, you guys are doing so much, we are also going to do more. So there's more activity, there's more excitement, you know, they create, not only from us, of course, they also are very enthusiastic people. But there's this synergy and all these things that we do when they do something it spreads to us when we do something spreads to them. And we're all interconnected. So I think it's doing good now. Of course, we can hope to do better.</p>
Y	<p>Another question I have is that I was quite interested in the history of performing arts and traditional singing in Peranakan culture. So I noticed that right now, both men and women are performing. So was this the case in the past? Was it always both men and women?</p>
A	<p>So we must bring ourselves back to the 18th, 19th century, where the world was very different. Similar to kabuki theatre, women were not allowed to perform, because it was unbecoming for women to spread, you know, to perform on stage last time, because they were supposed to be very demure, kept at home, you know. The only things that they do is know to cook, you know, to clean the house, you know, to be a good wife. They were not allowed to go on stage, I mean that was the world last time. So because of that, women were not allowed to perform or entertain anybody unless they were women of the night. So, because of this, men took on roles of the women. So you have a cross-dressing kind of thing. So way before all this gender bender things and all that the Peranakans used to do it. Yeah, so this is called Wayang Peranakan. So that's why when you see some of the shows, or Peranakan shows, Wayang and all that, the bibik [an older woman] that is performing, which is the older lady is usually men who are dressed up. Because they can be more campy, they can be louder, you know, they can be more naughty, but it's quite funny, you know, so that the effect is very funny. And people know, that guy "Kenneth" now he's bibik, you know, he changed his persona to be that. So it's quite entertaining. So because of that the men took on all the roles of the women, but not that they were effeminate in any way. I mean, some are, are but not necessarily so. Some were just actors, and they were just acting as women for the show, because there were no women taking on the roles. So that was what went on until perhaps after war, perhaps</p>

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yeah. After the war, women started, you know, getting more educated. They could stand on their own. And then they start to say, “No, I want to sing, you know, I want to perform, I want to.” So they came on stage. So eventually, you saw the women or the Nonyas coming on stage to sing. But because of the tradition of the men taking on these roles, it still exists today. So sometimes when you see current shows, you see, bibik is actually a man. But today, of course the role, the standard and the status of women has changed drastically over the decades and centuries, that women are now you know, full time actresses or performers or singers or whatever. So that’s progression for you. Yeah. So for current performances like for what Peranakan Sayang does. We, at least for me, because I’m a songwriter, I can create anything that I imagine. So it’s important for me to come up with the essence of the culture for everything that I do. So for example, when I first started writing songs for Peranakan culture, I wasn’t so fluent in my Baba Malay. It’s hard to write a whole song in Baba Malay, I can write part of the song in Baba Malay, no problem, certain words that you can use, but to write a song well in Baba Malay for a full song, it’s tough, especially in this day and age because we don’t use the language often enough. Right? For any language you learn, if you don’t use it often enough, you just lose it. So that’s normal. Yeah. So I used to write songs that had some touch or some tastes of the culture. So when somebody listens, they can say “Hey, this is a Peranakan song,” yeah, but the problem is also if I write the song that is too Peranakan or too Baba Malay, the listener might not understand because of the lack of listening to the language, right? So, so there’s a bit of a dilemma, you know, but whatever it is, it’s always a visual treat the person would be, you know, either a Nonya singing the song, a Baba singing the song, the instrument that is used are typical instruments that were used for the *dondang sayang*. Basically, the *dondang sayang* is a repartee a kind of music, where I will say a *pantun* [traditional Malay poem]. A *pantun* is like a poem, right? Four lines kind of thing. So I will say a *pantun*, and then I will talk about, you know, somebody or somewhere or whatever situation, and then there’ll be another singer who would respond. You know, as the music goes on, he will he or she will respond to the first singer’s *pantun*, and it goes on, sometimes for hours in a day. They will just continue sitting down enjoying their coffee. They were smokers, you know, what have you on a Sunday afternoon in somebody’s house. And there will be instruments like the *Rabana*, you know, the Malayan drum, and then there’ll be somebody playing the violin. And then another person playing the accordion. Things that was very accessible in those days. So but this *dondang sayang* actually,

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	<p>originated in Malacca, which is Malay style of singing or Malay form. But because the Peranakans were very good in their language, they respond to something that the first singer said immediately without even thinking and the fluency of the language was so good. Like you can slap me once and okay I'll slap you twice, it's like a response kind of thing you know.</p>
Y	<p>So it is like an improvisation?</p>
A	<p>Yes, improvisation. It's like today's rap. Rappers, you know, they have the rap and then they have this fight. You know, rappers' fight. And then you say something and I'll say something, you know, that is what <i>dondang sayang</i> was. And because the Peranakans were so good at responding and the use of the language, people say <i>dondang sayang</i> is a Peranakan form of music, which is not true. It is actually a Malay form of music, which we adapted. In fact, if you talk about it, there's no such thing as a original Peranakan music because we don't have anything that is original. All that we have is all mashed up from different cultures or races, you know, yeah, so when the Peranakan food came, Peranakan food is basically a mix of Chinese styles and Malay spices and whatever is available locally. Mix it together; you get Peranakan food, right? Our costumes that we wear the <i>sarong kebaya</i> that is basically from Indonesia, you know the style they do but because we like it we wear it. So there's nothing original in what we do. But having said that, I believe now, especially with a few of us maybe here in Singapore, maybe a couple in Malaysia, we are creating our own Peranakan music. Like for me I can now slowly try to be a resource of Peranakan music. Original Peranakan music because one, the music is the style of music that we all love but the language used is Peranakan, <i>Baba Malay</i> is not Malay. Its <i>Baba Malay</i> so that you can call it <i>Baba music</i> or <i>Peranakan music</i>. The instruments used in the music that I do has semblances of styles of the <i>dondang sayang</i>. So you have the violin, you have the accordion, you have the sound of the <i>rabana</i>, but mixed with the modern sound like strings, drums, bass guitar, you know. So because, as I say, it's about evolution. If you do everything the old way, the younger generation would not want to listen because it doesn't sound good to the ears. You know, it's not their taste. But if you mix something that is more modern, there is a wider possibility that the younger generation can appreciate it. So I've written things like doing the <i>pantun</i> that I mentioned about the Malay poetry, right? But I did one song called <i>Ho Mia Lah Lu</i>, which means "wow you're very fortunate," you know, "ho mia, very ho mia." But I did it as a rap. So, yeah, so I rap the <i>pantun</i>, and then my friend will rap the <i>pantun</i>, and in the beat is, you know, it's</p>

	<p>really modern, it's not the old fashioned thing, it's a very modern beat. So it's about bringing the culture up to date. It's about bringing it to be relevant to today's society, because we cannot be living in the past, we have to live for now. And for the future. So also, it's still consistent in what we do for the culture.</p>
Y	<p>That is a very good answer! So the next question I have is, I noticed that the Peranakan Sayang often uses the phoenix in their cover pictures. And even the heart icon has two phoenixes inside. So I was curious to know what the phoenix represents or symbolises to you? And what do you use the phoenix so much?</p>
A	<p>To put it in context, the phoenix quite often represents the Peranakan culture. However, this is not a well-accepted fact. Or it's not a general thing where you know, everybody says yes, it is true because the nature of our culture in the first place, there's nothing perfect or there's nothing concrete about our culture. For example, when you say about food let's say the Ayam Buah Keluak [traditional Peranakan dish with chicken and nuts], for example. The black nut, okay. Anyway, it's one of the dishes, one of the more so called popular dishes of the culture, there is no one family's Ayam Buah Keluak that is perfect. Or the correct one, because every family will have their own variation of the recipe. So when you have different families, even let's say a family had three daughters in the family and the mother taught them how to cook the Ayam Buah Keluak, the three daughters will have their own preferences and cook slightly different a slight variation of the dish, maybe one of them don't like this ingredient, so she takes it out, never puts it in, she adds in something else.</p> <p>Of course, the taste is going to be different. But then you see, there's no one fixed way how it is cooked. For example, for other culture for something simple like sushi. Everybody knows what is standard for sushi. Everybody says okay, this is standard, you know, but there's no such thing in our culture. Because our culture is one that is mixed. It is very open to different cultural experiences, you know, or influences that comes by the way, even the Peranakans of Malacca and the Peranakans of Singapore, we are similar but we are not the same. There are differences between us. So if you look at the whole landscape of the Peranakan culture you cannot put your finger down to it and say this is 100% Peranakan because we are all different in our way so coming to the Phoenix some people say that "Oh because the Phoenix is auspicious you know so Peranakans like the auspicious, because being Chinese you know we adopt the Phoenix as our emblem." But then you say you're Chinese then why are China's Chinese not using the Phoenix as much? Because we still Chinese one right? So so then there's other arguments "Oh because the dragon, you know, because</p>

	<p>there's always the <i>yin</i> [阴] and <i>yang</i> [阳] there's a Dragon and there's always a Phoenix. The dragon is always used by the emperor of China. So we cannot use Dragon. So we use the Phoenix as an alternative because we have left the motherland and we're starting on our own." And then some will say "Oh, because the Phoenix is about rebirth. You know, because we have spread our wings and we have gone away far away from our motherland. So we are rebuilding our own Chinese community, you know, so rebirth." Phoenix sounds like it. Then of course there are auspicious, good luck reasons. But there's no one reason why they're using the Phoenix. But it is generally accepted that the Phoenix symbolizes the Peranakan culture. However, we cannot say that this is a 100% fact. It is just a matter of tastes and preferences. But I must say that if you look back, there are a lot of things that the Peranakans use with the Phoenix. For example, the porcelain ware you know, when you see all the kamcheng [traditional ceramic jar] and the plates and all that you always see the Phoenix being drawn, you know, it's always featured there. And then sometimes you see the, the wood carvings, you know, some of the cupboards and all that all the decorations, you always see a Phoenix somewhere, you know, so it's a very symbolic icon of the Peranakans. So for me, since it is a symbolic thing, and people identify the Phoenix with the culture, why not use it right? And quite a few of the associations around the region have also used Phoenix as their logo. So it's just a matter of an identity. However, we cannot put our finger to it and say 100%.</p>
Y	<p>I noticed that in your website and in your Facebook, you often have the phoenix logo. So is the phoenix your logo or is it the other one with the flowers? You have many logos, so I'm not sure which one's the right one?</p>
A	<p>There's no, no particular icon that really represents the culture or the company, but we tend to use the one that has the flowers and the Phoenix. It's actually a combination of both</p>
Y	<p>The Phoenix and the flowers? Yeah, there's a combination.</p>
A	<p>Yeah, it's a combination of both. But then again, there's, there's no one official one, but I would say that quite often we use the heart because sayang is all about love, love for our culture, love for our people. So that's why we came up with this name of the company "Peranakan Sayang" because we love the culture and we love the Peranakan people and you know everything happy [laughs] and you know, so yeah, so that was the inspiration behind it. So there's no one particular logo, because it's more of an identity than anything else.</p>

Y	Also, did you hire a designer or do you do it yourself?
A	<p>I hire myself. So everything that you see here, it's all designed by me. Even this gallery behind is done by me. This is my personal life gallery. So this this, this couple here is my grandparents. And then this is my singing group. You know, some of the things that I have. Yeah, so things like visuals? All done by me. Things that are videos? 100% done by me. Music of course done by me. So yeah, so I'm basically a one stop production centre that's why I can do what I do, you see. So I can influence or provide a direction where people can appreciate and enjoy things like you know, I recently have done a lot of merchandising, doing the Ang Bao [Chinese New Year red packets] doing things like you know, key chains, things that people appreciate and say "Hey, I've never seen this before, the design is so nice." For example, when you buy Ang Baos right? It's always a Chinese Ang Bao, you know, for many, many years, but I created a whole line of Peranakan Ang Baos. So the symbols includes the Phoenix, right? And then there was another one or the current one, for this is coming new year is the pintu pagar, which is the door, the Peranakan house door. So it's very unique on its own. And then there's another one that is batik, you know, so where got Ang Bao with batik? You don't have batik, but you know, I create one with flowers and batik, which is very Peranakan and the very first one that I did was more fun, where the cover or the print of the Ang Bao is all greetings, you know, Gum Sia [translates as "thank you"], all the words that we use. So, as a person uses the Ang Bao, as he or she presents the Ang Bao, you can actually use the greetings that's found on the Ang Bao. So, in this way, it generates interest in the culture and the language. People start talking about it, like "Yeah, my grandmother used to say this and yeah we better learn." So when you give the Ang Bao then yeah we must say this word, though it helps them as they present the power to the let's say to the nephew or their children, whoever right. So, all these things are all calculated, how all these things produced can help. Help to keep the culture going. Keep the culture alive. To keep the culture to evolve to the new ways. So when I do music videos, you don't see many Peranakan music videos out there. Like I'm probably one of the few people who do this but because it is a music video is very accessible to anybody around the world. Anybody with the link or anybody who has a YouTube you just search you can find it. It is easily found, which also inspired me to do the Virtually Peranakan Fest. I don't know whether you know about that. This one basically started because every year since the 1980s, I believe there will always was a convention, a Baba Nonya convention that goes around the different states,</p>

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sometimes in Singapore, sometimes in Malacca, Penang, it just goes around and it rotates every year. You know, it's an annual thing. So it has grown to include places like Phuket, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, whenever there are communities around, they create this annual festival or annual convention. But because of the pandemic, it was all washed up, nothing happened. So the last one happened in 2019. Then the pandemic kicked in 2020, and there wasn't any. So I was thinking, "Oh, this is sad, right you know, all of the sudden, people don't have something to look forward to. Everybody's stuck at home. And it seems I'm the only one who is like, you know, doing all this multimedia stuff virtual, because I'm a host, I'm a professional host. And because of the pandemic, I became an online virtual host as well. So I do all these things professionally with proper lighting and whatever not and sound system. That's why I sound like how I sound now. So I say, why not do a virtual version of this, you know, convention. So I started in 2020. And then I did two days of non-stop programs. Every hour, from one o'clock to six o'clock, every hour, something's going on. And all these presenters are all from around the region around the world, you know, some will be in Malacca, Penang, Australia, wherever, you know, and then they will all contribute an item or whether it's a performance or talk about Kebaya, talk about food, whatever, you know, so it goes on. And so the beauty of this is anybody can watch it. It's for free. It is for community, there's no fee, there's no signups nothing, it's not news, you got YouTube, or you go on Facebook, okay, you can you can watch it already it's for free. And this is my effort, as I say I do this for as a business. But because I generate income from my work, I push it back to all this community work, by organizing this whole virtual festival, to make it accessible to Babas and Nonyas around the world. And this year, we had one as far as Alaska, watching the show. So you think about it, the implication is, it is far reaching, there are Peranakans all over the world, you know, they may have migrated and all that. But as long as you do not connect with them, the culture is lost on them. Because there's nothing for them to continue. But because we had this thing, it connected to that lady who's living in Alaska right now. And it touched her so much that she said to me, "Hey, I'm listening to the people who are talking like how I used to talk when I was back home in Malaysia, or Singapore or whatever, and I reconnect with the culture all over again." And I said "Oh, you know, they get excited, they get so happy that you know somebody is doing this." And it perpetuates the whole culture, you know, it keeps everybody afloat. And those who are not involved in the culture. But because if there's this link, you can just click in and hear somebody talking about

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the culture, all of a sudden, you're enlightened, and be like "Oh, that is why my grandmother did that, or you know, something like that," then then they understand more about the culture. And by doing so, it helps the whole community not just in Singapore, but all around the world, to keep their culture going. It's not the same as how I practice it is not perfectly the same, but it's similar. Right? So because of that, it helps everybody and it's not just national or just Singapore. No, no, no, because we also need the Malaysian Peranakans to survive. They need to thrive as well. Because they thrive we thrive, and when we thrive they thrive. You know, so we're all hand in hand in this together. That's why this year I'm very happy that quite a lot of Malaysian friends all came and saw it. No matter how we will come and support you. We will spend those two afternoons with you. We'll do it together. Virtually. So I mean, I'm very thankful to have friends but of course this has been built up over the years of friendships and understanding each other. Because you cannot do this alone. You need people to back you up, you know people to support you? And I tell you one of the most beautiful things because it's not just culture alone. It's about mental health. Because when we were all locked up, you know, the pandemic, everybody's in their home, we had no access to anything. You know, social life and all, the thing is the older folks are not IT savvy. They cannot talk to anybody. Right? Besides their own family or watching TV, that's about it. But when it comes to culture, nothing. Zero. Then here comes this fellow, come up with this virtual show. And then one of the daughters, a mum says, "There's this guy who's doing this - do you want to see?" And they click it and it comes out, wow all her language comes to life again. Imagine what it does to that person's mental health. It really perks the person up, you know, she looks forward to something, keeps the culture going. And I'll tell you another beautiful thing. There was this show that we did. One of the tea time funny Sunday shows we did is called Mari Hua Hee. Mari Hua Hee means "Come, let's have fun." So my friends came online all over the world. We sing songs, we joke, we talk nonsense. It's like how Chinese New Year is like in a Peranakan home. All the aunties and uncles come. Everybody talks nonsense, like, that kind of environment. And then it was a one hour show. When it was finished, one lady messaged and said, "Oh, thank you very much for the one hour show." I say "Oh, you're most welcome." "You don't, you don't understand how important that one hour show is to my family." I was thinking, "What are you talking about? I mean, we were just having fun singing and talking, right? Just having fun." "So you know, you don't understand. My father. He has dementia for many years. But that one hour, my father

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	<p>came back to life. He could sing the songs that you sang, he could reply to your questions in the language that we used to talk. He was laughing. He was so happy. And when we asked him questions, he responded. But when your show finished, he went back.” Can you imagine how amazing the power is to make somebody live? Come back again. Because we touched something about the past. And probably for this particular gentleman, his long term memory is still around. His short term memory perhaps is affected but his long term memory is still there, the days when he was a young boy. So when we sang all the songs, he could connect straight away and he just came to life. And the family was so happy for that one hour. I was, I was so touched by something that I did unwittingly. I wasn’t thinking. I’m just doing this for the sake of doing it right? But it happened and it made a difference to that family. So you never know. You know, as long as you keep something positive going, it might help people, change people.</p>
Y	This is an incredible story! So let's see -
A	What else do you have? Or your own personal questions?
Y	I was quite interested in the phoenix but I was also interested to know if the phoenix ever appears in performances? Do you have songs about the phoenix or does the phoenix appear in costumes?
A	<p>We don’t sing about the phoenix. I have not ever heard of any Phoenix songs. I’m even thinking - what do we call the phoenix in Baba Malay? I have to go and find out. Yeah, but the only things that it appears visually is in animation that I use, usually for my Peranakan virtual shows where there’s a flying Phoenix that flies together with a dragon. So it makes its appearance every now and then because, you see, when you think about it the Phoenix is actually a mythical creature. It does not appear all the time. It only appears some times because if you use too much of it, you lose that magic you know. You know so, so yeah sparingly. Even for Kebayas. You hardly see Kebayas that has Phoenix; very few people have a Phoenix Kebaya because you’ve got to specially make it. You order somebody to go and do the sulam embroidery to create that Phoenix, but most of the time when you see any Kebaya, it is all flowers, leaves and flowers and that is the standard one. But having said that, do you know that there is a difference between the Malay Kebaya and the Peranakan Nonya Kebaya? For the Malay Kebaya, you will never ever see a creature being embroidered into the Kebaya. Most of the 100% of the time is always flowers or leaves. Right? But for Peranakan ones, you can see birds. You can see Phoenix. There are dragons, pigs. There are rabbits, this Chinese New Year you’ll see rabbits.</p>

	<p>So, Peranakan ones will often include creatures, but not 100% of the time. Of course, we also love flowers. No, but you can see creatures. Once you see creatures it's 100% a Nonya Kebaya. So bats, you know, even bats are auspicious, you know, so we have bats. And yeah, so even people, dancers, you know, people carrying umbrellas, very creative. So when it comes to the embroidery, again, you know, Nonyas and Babas, even Babas are very good embroiders. It's a dying skill, but there are classes going on. And I know a few people who still do it today. Excellent work, you know, it's so, so intricate, you know strings if you do it wrongly you have to do it again.</p>
Y	<p>Another question I have is does the Peranakan Sayang often collaborate with like maybe the Gunong Sayang Association or the Peranakan Association. Is there any collaboration?</p>
A	<p>Okay, so there lies a little - I wouldn't say no, we are actually all friends, we all know each other. I mean, our community is so small. I wouldn't say collaborated, I have supported them in some of the events in efforts, and often they also support me when I do something. So you know, this event is supported by the Gunong Sayang Association or the Peranakan Association, because our roles are quite different, you see, for the longest time, talking about maybe decades or a century, when associations were created last time, you know, if you think about it, when foreigners or especially Chinese come to this part of the world, clans are very important, you know, all the Hokkien clans the Teo Chew clans, you know all those Hakka clans. So clans are basically associations, because you need to connect yourself, associate yourself with like-minded fellow people from wherever you are. So associations had a role, then to connect the community together as one. So similarly, when we started the Singapore Chinese Peranakan Association, which is the predecessor of the Peranakan Association, their main reason for starting off the association was business driven, or us Babas must come together to form associations so that we can continue driving our business in Singapore and Malaysia. So there was a reason but eventually, it became more cultural, you know, as we all assimilated, so it can be more cultural. And, and then TPAS came about, but you see, in any association, it's all about making your members happy, your association members happy so they're always focused on the members to do things like whether to organize a dinner or organize a talk. It's all for the members, which is good, I think, but you see the problem is, people then left culture to associations. You know, people tend to say, "Oh, you want to talk about culture, talk to the Peranakan association of Singapore,</p>

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because they are they are the ones.” But you see, they are not the only gatekeepers you see. Actually culture to me, belongs to everybody. It’s not the responsibility of the association to keep the culture alive; it’s everybody’s responsibility because this is who we are. We cannot lose our heritage and our colour because then we become nobody. We just become black and white. But with culture and heritage, we are very colourful, you know, look at our kueh kueh [traditional desserts], red, green orange or whatever kinds of colour you have. So we’re very colourful like all our buildings in all the Peranakan homes. You can find pink, blue, red, all kinds of colours you never seen. Even our Kebayas, the women will wear green tops, pink bottoms. I mean, the colours are clashing but beautiful, right? So so it’s the culture is all it’s us. So for me as Peranakan sayang, when I do this, I preach or I promote that culture belongs to everybody, I am making culture accessible to everyone. If you think you are Baba Nyonya, if you appreciate the culture, you want to learn more about culture, “Come, let us work together.” If your association one will come, I’m very happy. In fact, I’ve done quite a few projects with the Malaysian associations I’ve performed at the events and all that and also for the Australian associations, because the Australian associations are basically offshoots of Singaporeans and Malaysians who have left and migrated there. But they are Peranakans themselves. So they set up their own associations there. But you see, for me, it does not need to be an association, you can call it a club, it’s the same thing. Association is, you know, to me it’s a bit old, because of this clan-clan thing. So my effort is to make it available and accessible to any Peranakan whether it be in Singapore, Malaysia, or Alaska, you’re all part of the family, you’re all part of this diaspora of Chinese who have migrated long time ago and change their lives in a totally different way. That we are all in this together. We are all interconnected. It’s all our responsibility. So it is my effort to make it available. Whether it be in videos, or music, or creative stuff, or visuals, or people like you who want to ask questions. I’m here because I, I’ve met a lot of information and research, you know, through the decades that that I know more than I can share more. So I go to schools, for example. They say, “Oh, can you share about culture?” Yeah, so I’ll talk half an hour about this culture. Do you know this? Do you know that? Then suddenly, “Oh, I think I’m a Peranakan? Because my grandmother -,” I say yeah. But if I didn’t talk to them, he or she will not know, we won’t even realize. To them it’s nothing you know, it’s not there. But when you talk to them, and you give them the information, then it sparks that knowledge, you know, and that thirst to go and find out more. And if you do that, it can only help the culture, it will grow.

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	<p>Because culture is only alive, if we take it. If we just leave it on the table and walk away, it's dead. Any culture, right? But if we go to the table and take it that's when there is a future because I'm not looking at only today, I'm also looking at the future. 30 years' time, 20 years' time, where is the culture going to be at that point in time? And that's the beauty of running my own thing. I do what I want to do, I don't have members to appease, you know that, oh, you know, I must organize this or else my members not happy. They don't vote me in again next year. You know, again, no, I don't have that. I don't have the burden of all these things. Unfortunately, you know, my fellow friends have it because they have to appease. I mean, that's how associations are. You have to vote them in. So I have the freedom to move. So whether it be in Singapore or Malaysia, wherever I am, I just do what I think is right. And if I am in doubt, I always ask the elders or my friends who are also in this age, what do you think this is? And there is a new breed of a new generation, a new generation of Babas and Nonyas. Oh, my close friends. We are all of the same mind, that the culture is not dead. The culture has evolved. And we are the generation to push the evolution ahead. Yes, we respect our older Baba Nonyas who are maybe in the 80s or 90s, You know, they will say, "Oh, no, it's all dead." I mean, we respect them, but we feel that is still alive. It lives with us. And we will continue and push it so that the next generation will see that route, how the culture has evolved. And because if you can accept evolution, you have a future, if you cannot accept evolution, then it's gone because of this.</p>
Y	Very interesting and well said!
A	So what about your family?
Y	<p>I only found out recently that my grandma was a Peranakan. When I was growing up, she always wore batik clothing. Every single clothing item she has was handmade and she makes it herself. It's actually quite incredible, the sewing. She tried to teach me and my sister, but we were very bad at it. She taught us sewing lessons every week to try and teach us. She tried to teach us poetry as well. But she passed away when I was quite small. She didn't manage to tell us too much about the culture. Mostly, she tried to pass us little bits and pieces, like how to sew maybe and how to write poetry. But she didn't really - we didn't have her long enough to really understand much. And it's only recently that we found out she was Peranakan and suddenly lots of things started making sense. I didn't realise she was a Peranakan because as a kid she never said anything like that. So I've been discovering the main things right now and I'm really going down a rabbit hole.</p>

A	Do you have any relatives on your grandmother's side who are still around?
Y	I have a great-aunt but she lives in Malaysia. So we don't see her very often.
A	It's harder, right? So do you know whether she was educated?
Y	Yes, I think she was in a Catholic school. She was very good at English, English was her main language. She also speaks Malay.
A	<p>Most Malaysians do that's why the culture is easier to thrive in Malaysia than in Singapore because of the language used. We don't speak Baba Malay anymore. The Malays don't even speak Baba Malay anymore. So it's hard for the language to continue. But that doesn't mean we stop, we have to continue trying. So like I asked about whether she was educated because that is a key thing that the women Peranakans are actually educated earlier than the Chinese counterparts. So like my grandmother in this photo, in this particular photo, the original one, that's actually her handwriting and this was in the 1930s when she got married. This is pre-war. And she wrote, I was married on I think, ninth of September in 1935. I got married at this place. And in very classic handwriting style - last time, there's this classic handwriting style. And it was in good English. So the implication was that when she was a little girl, perhaps in the 20s 1920s or so she attended school. Now, this was 100 years ago, and she was educated in school. And that's a big deal. Because education, of course, it's so important. And for a woman of that time to be educated. Very important. So that reflects on how the Peranakan community knew that education was important. Yeah, you know, there's some people stuck in their old ways. Oh, no, no, no girls must stay at home, learn how to cook and go and pound the chilli, you know "stay at home you don't do." Of course, those was probably, let's say maybe the 17th - 18th century when women or girls were only there to take care of the family or find a good husband, that kind of thing. But if you read through the history, when Singapore Chinese Girls School was started, it was started by the Peranakan men. And the Peranakan men said "No, our girls must be educated." So they started SDGS. And that's why today SDGS still thrives and they have a Peranakan history. So all these young girls were educated in the late 1800s, the early 1900s. And that made a huge difference to the community because they are educated. Their children also get educated I'm assuming because their way of thinking is different. So how the children were brought up is different. And because the children were brought up in a different way by educated mothers, this makes them successful. They became doctors. They became Prime Ministers like Lee Kuan Yew, they became you know, prominent people who made a difference to the community. So</p>

	<p>you see, there's the whole butterfly effect, you know, the Butterfly Effect. Let's say it affected the whole community it brought about prosperity, you know, riches, good, successful businessmen, people who will make a difference to the community because they have the means to do so. They contributed money to the community and it all adds up to where we are today. So it makes a big difference. And for me as a parent, I'm very proud that my predecessor a century ago, they saw the vision. They contributed, they made the difference. They led, you know, it's from the Peranakan people. Because the Peranakan people were accepted by all the communities. If you were a Malay man for example, you try to be a leader then the Chinese of the past are not happy. It didn't mean all of the Indian men or the typical Chinese men, you tried to lead. I mean, as much as we talked about racial harmony and all that back then it wasn't so easy. But the Peranakans, they were like, not here, not there. I'm friends with everybody. It doesn't matter, you know, everybody can accept me. So in a way, it was easier and we could speak to the British in English. You know, we spoke English to the British and they respected us. You know they said "We need the Peranakans to be around, we cannot talk to the rest, you know." So all these things added up now, you know, to how we are today. So I'm proud of that fact that we contributed a lot to the community.</p>
Y	<p>So the final questions I have are: do you feel that Peranakan society now or in the past, is a matriarchy or patriarchy? Or both?</p>
A	<p>We had this talk on YouTube. Patriarchy and matriarchy is presented by Dr. David Neo. His eventual conclusion is it's actually both, although many of us see it as a matriarchal society, based on the home. But you know that the men actually contributed to the family, and the politics and stability and all that. So it's actually a mix of both, but I urge you to see that video. You just go to Peranakan Sayang's YouTube.</p>
Y	<p>I will watch that! Thank you so much for speaking to me today.</p>

Transcript – Interview with Josephine Chia, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2022

Established Peranakan author who writes about her culture and heritage

J: Josephine Chia

Y: Toh Ying Li

Y	What was it like growing up as a Peranakan in Singapore?
J	Special. My mum always stressed on us being Peranakan that I've never thought of myself as just Chinese.
Y	What are your thoughts on the phoenix in Peranakan culture? What does the phoenix mean to you personally?
J	The Phoenix is a symbol of regeneration for me.
Y	Have you noticed that many Peranakan organisations in Singapore started using the phoenix as their emblems / logos: such as the Peranakan Association, the Gunong Sayang Association, the NUS Baba House and many more? Do you feel the phoenix has become an emblem of the Peranakans and why do you think the phoenix is so prevalent / popular?
J	I guess this reflects part of our roots, i.e. the Chinese roots. Also I feel it might suggest that as a minority race and culture we have to regenerate ourselves to keep it alive.
Y	In your opinion, do you feel that the Peranakans are a matriarchy, a patriarchy or a mix of both? And has this changed in modern times?
J	It used to be a matriarchy but in modern days it's neither.
Y	Do you feel that in recent decades, there has been greater interest in the domestic / feminine aspects of Peranakan culture? For instance, there is a greater interest in Peranakan cooking and crafts (which were traditionally feminine spheres).
J	Absolutely. I think Singaporeans are also searching for their identity. So being Peranakan is a very clear identity.

Y	Do you feel that Peranakan culture has become more commercialised / become a tourist commodity in recent decades? And how do you feel about this?
J	Yes but I don't think it's a bad thing as it means more people know about us and our unquestionable culture.

Author of Phoenix Rising

H: Hwei Fen Cheah

Y: Toh Ying Li

Y	<p>In Phoenix Rising pg. 327, you mentioned that the phoenix has been used very often by the contemporary Peranakan community in logos, event names, film names and it the phoenix has evolved to become this symbolic representation of Peranakan culture.</p> <p>Why do you think the phoenix is popular / prevalent as an emblem in the modern Peranakan community? There are many other traditional motifs besides the phoenix - do you have any insights on why the phoenix is so popular?</p>
H	<p>The phoenix isn't the only "traditional" motif they have picked up on - e.g. the peony recurs often too, <i>qilin</i> [麒麟], paired dragons etc. But perhaps its visibility and prominence on items like the kamcheng and wedding garments which continued to be strongly associated with Peranakan culture have contributed to its popularity. I think the literature on Peranakan art and culture (see for example illustrations in Khoo Joo Ee's book; the batik book titled Butterflies and Phoenixes, and Edmond Chin's 1991 book <i>Gilding the Phoenix</i>) also helped to cement its place in the collective Peranakan imagination at a time when Peranakan society was trying to articulate its identity and sense of culture. In that sense, maybe it has become a part of a discursive Peranakan identity. It's also an easily recognisable image, (and maybe more easily identified with than a peony?).</p>
Y	<p>What does the phoenix represent and symbolise to you and why did you name your book Phoenix Rising?</p>
H	<p>Partly as a sort of homage to Edmond Chin's <i>Gilding the Phoenix</i> this was, for me, a significant work in laying out the ideas and nuances of Peranakan art. The allusion to the (Arabian, not Chinese) phoenix rising from the ashes relates to the rejuvenation of beadwork in a contemporary context, i.e. the potential for craft to be revived.</p>
Y	<p>Could you tell me more about the use of the phoenix in Peranakan needlework?</p>

H	<p>Hmm, this is difficult. Mostly they seem to have followed fairly stock standard representations similar to those from Chinese embroideries, but sometimes they are simplified or modified. If I can locate any “odd” ones, I’ll email you separately.</p>
Y	<p>In your opinion, would the Peranakans be considered a matriarchy, a patriarchy or both?</p>
H	<p>I’m not sure...depends on the family...</p>
Y	<p>Do you feel that in recent decades, there has been greater interest in the domestic / feminine aspects of Peranakan culture? For instance, there is a greater interest in Peranakan cooking and crafts (which were traditionally feminine spheres).</p>
H	<p>Definitely.</p> <p>I think the Associations have been pivotal in creating conditions that energise the culture and for the coherence of a Peranakan community today. And they are a good reference point for anyone interested.</p> <p>Institutions like TPM and businesses like those along East Coast Road like the late Peter Wee’s Katong Antiques House, have also played an important role in bringing public attention to Peranakan culture, and the feminine aspects are quite tangible and can be displayed or, better still, deliciously consumed.</p> <p>Perhaps it has helped that such aspects of the “culture” are very photogenic and “instagrammable.” With (his/her) stories to go along. Today, the traditionally feminine aspects of the culture have become less “gendered” as both men and women are involved. Especially with cooking. In terms of craft - men are practising experts eg Raymond Wong in Singapore and Michael Cheah in Penang.</p> <p>(A reminder - although we tend to frame needlework as domestic and feminine, historically it may not have been so rigidly defined. Male embroiderers may have been involved in the past, and a part of it was commercial i.e. made for sale although I don’t have firm evidence of the former so please don’t quote me).</p>

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