PATTERNS, PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PATTERNS AND MOTIFS ACROSS THE INDO-PACIFIC

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I, Linda Cheok, declare that this dissertation contains no material that has been accepted for any other qualification at any university and contains no material previously published and/or written by another person.

Signed:

Linda Cheok
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Patterns, Pride and Prejudice: A Comparative Study of Patterns and Motifs Across the Indo-Pacific (Abstract/Summary)

The quest to find a common visual language across the Indo-Pacific is the focus of this project, which combines a written dissertation with an exhibition of exploratory artworks. The scope of the written thesis covers the ornament of China, Japan and Singapore, with Peranakan artistic traditions of Singapore as the pivot of the comparative study. Peranakan artistic traditions have been chosen as the pivot because I am part Peranakan and would like to see a revival of the culture that is currently in decline, or at least, an active remembering of my heritage. As such, at the heart of this thesis is a detailed study of the motifs on some ceramic items of Peranakan origin held in private collections and how the symbolic interpretation of these motifs provides access to Peranakan traditions.

Other countries in the Indo-Pacific have been represented in the creative component through artworks that explore and intertwine the various artistic cultures of the region.

“Pride and Prejudice” the other half of the project title is a wry take on Jane Austen’s novel of the same moniker. It takes into account the influence British imperialism has wielded over the fortunes and culture of the Peranakan Chinese in Singapore during the Colonial era. In this dissertation, ‘pride’ also refers to artisanal pride in mastering the requisite skills of the various craft trades, and ‘prejudice’, to the perceived inferiority of crafts when compared against the fine arts. An argument is advanced throughout the dissertation that as the motifs and patterns that have been applied to Asian artefacts carry secret meanings that can be interpreted by people of the particular cultures in question, these craftsmen or their commissioning patrons are not being merely decorative, but have imbued their work with thought, creating art with content in the contemporary Western sense. These twin elements of ‘pride’ and ‘prejudice’ have thus been woven into the fabric of the dissertation.
This thesis moves through three chapters in a narrative style, starting with an auto-ethnographic approach in the first chapter dealing with issues of identity, heritage and hybridity that I have experienced as a member of the Peranakan Chinese diaspora from Singapore living in Perth and Japan. In writing about my Singaporean Peranakan Chinese heritage, I am giving a portrait of a particular kind of society: superstitious, commercial, and of mixed British and Chinese influence. Tracing my genealogical roots and recounting the lives of my forebears gives me a portal to the past and of a culture that has changed. All these factors have impacted my studio practice as my work often interrogates the idea of cultural and personal identity and incorporates the colour and symbols of traditional Asian art in order to discover a personal artistic style or oeuvre.

The second chapter deals with the sharing of common symbols by Peranakan, Chinese and Japanese cultures through a shared logographic written script and through horizontal and vertical transmission of cultural traits. It also touches on the importance of art symbolism and aesthetics of the three primary cultures in my dissertation.

Chapter Three is a detailed study of motifs on a quintessentially Peranakan collection of ceramic ware. Items from one collection belonging to a member of the Peranakan Chinese diaspora in Perth are featured in this chapter. The meanings of the various motifs found on these Peranakan wares have been explicated through folk beliefs and folklore, while nuances in meanings and the usage of similar motifs in Japanese and Chinese culture have also been discussed. The Afterword concludes the dissertation by weighing up how successful the initial quest to establish a common visual language has been; whether there is in fact an existing body of symbols with similar interpretive meanings that is already commonly shared between the three cultures and whether sharing such a common language would actually translate into better economic, social and political ties for the region.
The practical component of the degree closely aligns this theoretical enquiry with artworks that probe questions of cultural identity, hybridity, heritage and diaspora through the language of symbolic motifs in a variety of media ranging from the artisanal craft end of batiks and ceramics through to fine art paintings on Belgian linen mounted supports, electronic media, and installation art. But first it is necessary to situate myself in relation to the knowledge that is my subject.
Hybridity

A Syncretic Mix of Cultures – Chinese, Peranakan, Singaporean, Australian and Japanese.

I have often bemoaned the fact that my spoken Mandarin, Hokkien or Teochew is not as fluent as I would like it to be. English is my lingua franca though I am ethnically Chinese and this used to cause me some degree of embarrassment, especially whilst travelling through China, as five words out of ten would be as baffling to me as to a foreigner totally unschooled in the language. Despite twelve years of Mandarin language learning through the Singaporean school system, and achieving passing grades throughout, I still feel inadequate when confronted by the authentic Mandarin speaker from Beijing.

What constitutes one’s identity? Is it the desire to take on the cultural characteristics or markers of a certain race? Is it the sum total of one’s experiences in life? Is our identity what we make of it? Can identity be forged? And if so, are we thus forgeries and somewhat inauthentic? Is the forging of a new identity merely the result of adaptation to local conditions? These are some of the questions that have plagued me for a long time as I come from migrant stock, with the latest move to Australia being just fifteen years ago.

Furthermore, I discovered a great affinity to all things Japanese whilst reading Japanese studies at the National University of Singapore in the eighties, and have often thought that it actually would be amazing to be Japanese. Whilst wintering in my home in the Japanese Alps, I have heard myself being described as the “Singaporean Chinese Australian in Miharashiya (name of my house)”, a syncretic mix of different nationalities, a mongrel, but of a particular kind. Does it then necessarily follow that the art produced by a transnational would reflect these various foreign influences?
My antecedents

In writing about my Singaporean Peranakan Chinese heritage I am giving a portrait of a particular kind of society: superstitious, commercial, of mixed British and Chinese influence. Tracing my genealogical roots and recounting the lives of my forebears gives me a portal to the past and of a culture that has changed. Understanding the past has a direct bearing on how the present can be understood, whilst writing about my own history helps define who I am. This is in turn reflected in the themes, colours, and stylistic oeuvre. My first exposure to language would have to be the ones spoken by my Hokkien and Baba Malay-speaking grandmother, Pek Cheng Hiang as she brought me up. Grandfather Khoo Peck Oon spoke mostly English, Hokkien and Malay, our Chinese amah or servant spoke Hokkien. Both my parents, civil servants for the British colonial government also lived with my grandparents. However, as they were out for most of the day, grandmother’s influence was paramount. My parents speak English as their first language as they were English-educated, which meant that they attended schools that taught most subjects in English. My father, Cheok Jiak Kim is from the Teochew dialect group, which is similar to Hokkien, but just slightly higher pitched and musical sounding. The reason why my father ended up staying with his in-laws was that he was expelled from his parental home when he defended my mother against the charge of practicing black magic! I suspect there was infighting going on for the Cheok family fortune and despite being the eldest born son, he signed away all rights to property after his father died in 1969 out of filial piety for his mother who requested it of him. I was six at the time and it was the first time I had ever laid eyes on my father's father. Grandfather was lying in a huge coffin, dressed in a resplendent Chinese traditional scholar’s gown and headgear. I remember seeing a Daoist monk placing rice balls into his mouth with chopsticks which I thought was rather strange, but then, everything was strange, as I did not know the Teochew dialect, and never knew that all these Teochew speaking aunts, uncles and cousins even existed.

My grandfather, Cheok Peng Ngee had come from the Indonesian Riau islands to Singapore as a boy and was provided with an English education at Gan Eng
Seng School by his guardian Teo Chwee Chua. Grandfather became a civil
servant upon graduation from high school, and enjoyed a comfortable salary.
He was also perceived as scholarly, of good family and thus good husband
material for my paternal grandmother, Seah Siew Tian who hailed from a
wealthy merchant family. The Cheoks in Riau islands traded in sea turtles, sea
cucumbers and other exotic sea creatures.

**Peranakan or Baba Roots**
Of my four grandparents, Pek Cheng Hiang (my mother’s mother) could be
considered the most Peranakan as her mother, a Penang “Khoo”, was a “full
blood” with both parents being Peranakan. My mother’s father’s family, also
‘Khoos’, migrated to Singapore in 1852, and being involved in business, have
spoken Baba Malay, the lingua franca of the region in colonial times, since then.
On my father’s side, my grandmother, although fully Chinese with Teochew
dialect speaking parents, possessed and displayed the cultural markers of an
acculturated nonya. What then is a Baba, nonya or Peranakan? And what does
the term ‘acculturation’ mean?

Anthropologist Tan Chee Beng has defined the Baba as follows:

> Ethnically, the Babas are Chinese men who came from the Southern provinces of
> China (mainly Fujian). Having taken women from the Malay Archipelago as their wives
> and the region as their adopted homeland, they developed a hybridized culture that
> merges local rituals and colonial values whilst retaining fundamental elements of
> Chinese identity. They are thus seen as a localized community of acculturated
> Chinese.¹

Nonyas are the women folk of the Babas, and “Peranakan” is the non-gendered
version, referring to both men and women from this hybrid Chinese culture. The
word ‘Peranakan’ literally means “locally-born” in Malay and could refer to other
hybrid races resulting from the union between local indigenous women and
Indian, Arab, Jewish or men of other races. However, according to political
scientist, Leo Suryadinata, the term has been used primarily to refer to

¹ Bonny Tan, “Textualising the Baba Identity: Insights into the Making of a Bibliography,”
*Reframing Singapore : Memory, Identity, Trans-regionalism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University
acculturated Chinese since the mid-nineteenth century and does not necessarily involve the element of mixed blood ancestry.²

The term ‘acculturate’ is defined in the online Oxford Dictionary as “to assimilate to a different culture, typically the dominant one”. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines ‘acculturation’ as “the processes of change in artefacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of two or more cultures. The term is also used to refer to the results of such changes. Two major types of acculturation, incorporation and directed change, may be distinguished on the basis of the conditions under which cultural contact and change take place”. ‘Incorporation’ refers to changes made with one’s free will, whilst ‘directed change’ is enforced upon one.

In tracing my Peranakan or “local born” roots, I have taken a good look at my antecedents and sought information from relatives.³ With regards to my paternal forebears, the Cheoks and Seahs are of merchant stock. My paternal grandmother, Seah Siew Tian, as mentioned earlier, displayed the cultural markers of a Peranakan by wearing the Malay-style of dress, which is the sarong kebaya for outings and a sarong paired with a simple blouse whilst at home. She also cooked a lot of spicy Peranakan food and spoke a smattering of Baba Malay. Despite enculturation from birth in a fully Chinese Teochew milieu, grandmother chose acculturation to Peranakan mores and praxis. My father accounts for this penchant of his mother’s from the fact that her childhood girlfriends were mostly Peranakan, and their influence must have rubbed off on her.

On the maternal side of the family, my grandfather Khoo Peck Oon, sailed to Singapore at age three with his mother, Yeo Tung Oh, who was the third wife of his father, Khoo Gin Keat. Khoo Gin Keat’s father, my great-great grandfather was Khoo Tiong Poh who was “possessed of a very large estate, the value of

² Hwei-Fe'n Cheah, "Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements, 1870 to the Present" (The Australian National University, 2005), 12.
which is estimated at $2,000,000 (British Trade Dollars) in 1892. By today’s standard this translates to anything from a hundred times to 1,250 times of the 1892 value, so between $200,000,000 to 1.25 billion British Trade Dollars. His wealth was derived from “shipping, trading and business interests in tin mining, revenue farming, planting, rice milling, insurance and controlling the Singapore opium and spirit farms.”

My grandfather Khoo Peck Oon married Pek Cheng Hiang, who was technically his aunt, as he called his mother-in-law, Khoo Siew Kee (she married a “Pek”), his grand aunt. My great grandmother, Khoo Siew Kee was a Peranakan from Penang who spoke Hokkien and Baba Malay. Her daughter, Pek Cheng Hiang was thus brought up speaking Penang Hokkien and Baba Malay. She was also taught to cook, sew and embroider fine silk and linen in typical Peranakan style. All the Chinese folk traditions and religious rites were faithfully transmitted to grandmother, who, embraced ancestral worship and saw to the continuation of these religious observances in the family. A fragrant example of a superstitious rite, is the regular Thursday evening “smoking of the house” with kemenyan incense, which is a piece of benzoin resin that is lit and carried round the house on a clay holder dispensing smoke as a form of worship to the spirit-guardian of the house. In terms of religious practice, a syncretic mix of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism was the norm in our household.

Great grandmother Khoo Siew Kee’s skill in beaded slipper embroidery has fortunately been preserved as we have in our collection of family heirlooms, a pair of wedding slippers that she crafted jointly with my mother, Shirley Khoo. Several other samplers of joint work by Siew Kee and Shirley also form part of the collection. The collection also includes an intricately worked silver belt featuring the Qílí 麒麟 or Chinese unicorn, a diamond studded keronsang (brooches linked by fine chains which acts as buttons for the kebaya top) and other items of jewellery. Grandmother Pek Cheng Hiang’s cooking skills and

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6 Wong, "Uncovering the Myths of Two 19th-Century Hokkien Business Personalities in the Straits Settlements," 150.

7 Chee Beng Tan, "Baba and Nonya: A Study of the Ethnic Identity of the Chinese Peranakan in Malacca" (Cornell University, 1979), 153.
nonya recipes have been passed on to my parents and myself. I remember helping out grandmother with food preparation especially on festival days when our ancestors and various deities were offered worship with joss sticks and a table laden with food. Six main traditional Chinese folk festivals were observed, all of which are also celebrated by Peranakan people: Chinese New Year, Ching-Ming (All Souls’ Day), May Festival or the Dumpling Festival, Hungry Ghost Festival, Winter Solstice Festival where one eats pink and white glutinous rice dumplings and the Moon-cake Festival where colourful lanterns are carried by children around the neighbourhood.8

Chinese New Year celebrates the coming of spring and is a time of family reunion or annual homecoming, with the letting off of firecrackers and the wearing of red clothes to frighten off the folkloric “Nien” beast that devours humans unlucky enough to be caught in its wake. It is the most important of the six festivals and is celebrated over a period of two weeks, with many taboos and rituals to be observed during that span of time. One such taboo was a ban on sweeping the floor on the first day of the Chinese New Year, as this translates into sweeping away all of the family’s good luck in the new year. Ching-Ming or All Souls’ Day entailed a trek to the ancestral burial grounds to spruce up the tombs of our forebears and offer food, flowers, prayers, burning joss sticks and hell money to replenish their netherworld stock of such sustenance. It normally ends up with a lively picnic meal at the graveside, indicating a symbolic communion with the deceased.

The Dumpling Festival in May is a delicious one, as Peranakan glutinous rice dumplings are filled with pork seasoned in ground roasted coriander seeds and five spiced powder plus sweet melon strips and shiitake mushrooms. It celebrates the loyalty and integrity of the folk hero Qu Yuan from the State of Chu, who lived during the Warring States period (475-221B.C.). When Chu fell to the Qin Dynasty, Qu Yuan committed suicide by jumping into the river. The populace who venerated him greatly, threw dumplings into the river as a ploy to prevent the fish from feeding on their hero’s corpse.

8 Ibid., 142-52.
The Hungry Ghosts Festival is sufficiently frightening to exercise the imagination of most children and remain indefinitely lodged in their memories. Children are told that all the ghouls in hell have been let loose on earth for a full month and their needs have to be propitiated, and that these spirits are not to be offended by thoughtless words or deeds for it would be followed by some form of dire retribution. One has to be very careful indeed during this month, of hungry ghosts, who are hungry chiefly due to the neglect of their descendants who have not sent them “hell money” nor offered them sacrifices of food and drink on a regular basis. Also, hungry ghosts roam the earth because they have been reborn into this lowly position due to evil deeds accruing to an earlier life, and thus they are not very nice to begin with. Money is spent by the community in providing superior entertainment for these ghosts by way of outdoor Chinese operatic performances, or song and dance variety shows throughout the month. The row of seats right at the front, constituting the first row at these performances is always left empty for these special ethereal guests. Needless to say that sitting on these chairs is taboo. Many tales of the macabre are told during this month to add to the general atmosphere of spooky fun and feasts are held for their delectation.

The Winter Solstice Festival is celebrated in Singapore despite the tropical heat and humidity and everyday being more or less the same in terms of daylight hours. Traditionally, in China, the winter solstice or the day in the year when daytime is shortest is celebrated as it marks the beginning of longer daylight hours, warmth, growth and life. Little spherical glutinous rice dumplings in white and red colours are cooked in a sweet broth scented with screw pine leaves and eaten. The roundness of these dumplings signifies family reunion. This Festival is always celebrated on either the twenty second or twenty third of December each year. The Mooncake Festival or Mid-Autumn Festival was traditionally meant to celebrate the autumn harvest, but it has become more about thanksgiving in general and of celebrating family reunion with the eating of round shaped mooncakes and walking around at night admiring the full moon whilst carrying lanterns fashioned out of bamboo and coloured cellophane in unique plant and animal shapes, decorated with lively brush strokes in folk art fashion. As a child I would have at least two lanterns for the festival night, as they combusted easily when dropped or bumped.
At the start of each festival, family ancestors have to be honoured first before attending to the other communal sacrifices, and this is done by the usual offering of choice food and burning of hell money and joss sticks at the family altar. Having lived through and participated in many cycles of celebrating these festivals, I would say that it kept my grandmother busy throughout the year.

**Losing the Outward Markers of Being Peranakan**

When Grandmother Pek Cheng Hiang passed away, it was decided that keeping the ancestral tablets at home and offering daily worship was too onerous a task, as was observing all the religious festivals, so, a donation was made to a temple for them to take charge of all the ancestral tablets and offer the required prayers. After migrating to Perth, my parents now only observe Chinese New Year, the Dumpling Festival and the Moon-cake Festival, and only in terms of the food culture and not the ancestral and deity worshipping component of these festivals as they have become Christians. They converted to Christianity from their syncretic form of Chinese religion upon the cathartic death of my eldest brother whilst in military service three years before their arrival to Perth.

In terms of language, Baba Malay and Hokkien were spoken by my grandparents, and even though my parents are fairly conversant in both tongues, they much prefer speaking English at home. This is because they had both attended schools that operated chiefly in the English language medium and felt most comfortable and competent using the English language as opposed to the local patois. This has led to the total loss of this crucial linguistic marker of Baba identity in my generation of the family.\(^9\)

We have thus lost the outward markers of being Peranakan in terms of dress due to practicality and modernity, as well as the Baba language due to non-usage, and finally, folk religion due to a conversion to Christianity. The Hokkien and Baba Malay that I had spoken in childhood gradually lost out to the

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\(^9\) Ibid., 125. Baba Malay is a dialect of Malay spoken by the Peranakans which began as a form of bazaar Malay and later incorporated words from the Chinese dialect of Hokkien.
standard Mandarin that I had to learn whilst in school. The incentive for passing Mandarin in school was strong, for acceptance into the National University of Singapore was contingent upon a pass mark in standard Mandarin. Thus, although Mandarin was not my mother tongue, I had to adapt to the Singaporean education policy and learn a completely new tongue.

After migrating to Australia, we speak English most of the time, and hardly any Hokkien, Teochew, Baba Malay or even Mandarin. However, when a Singaporean or Perth Peranakan Association event is organized locally, all these languages and dialects come to the fore. Another way that my family has adapted to Australia, is that even Christianity, which replaced our Chinese syncretic religion, has been lost to the almost religious Australian love for sporting activities and the secular lifestyle. The term ‘outward’ seems like a truism in my case, as deep down inside, I have retained the ‘inward’ markers; primal beliefs and taboos learnt at my grandmother’s knee. For example, I was exhorted never to point at the moon as my earlobe would suffer an injurious cut, and to this day, I have never knowingly pointed at the moon. What remains of Baba culture in my family are therefore remnant fragments; a collection of material culture such as vintage sarong kebayas, beaded slippers, pieces of nonyaware, furniture pieces, jewellery, food culture and childhood memories of a bygone era.¹⁰

The general family traits that may be surmised from the above genealogical trace is that I come from a line of traders, that all members speak at least two languages and/or dialects, that both grandfathers were English educated civil servants, and that they would migrate or move to seek a better life or upward mobility. An English education in British colonial Singapore spelt better opportunities and the ability to make a comfortable living when compared to the Chinese educated populace. My mother was paid three times as much as my Chinese educated mother-in-law, though they were both the same age and in the civil service, with equivalent qualifications; the only difference being that of language medium. Historian and psychiatrist Howard M. Feinstein recommends that historians utilize family therapy theories for biographical research because

¹⁰ Nonyaware refers to porcelain ware that the Peranakan families used for meals, these included a distinctively patterned blue and white everyday ware and the colourful and highly ornate porcelain sets used for special occasions.
the historical reconstruction of multi-generational families guided by these concepts is apt to yield insights on the behavior of the present and subsequent generations.\textsuperscript{11} A particular concept, that of the multigenerational hypothesis,\textsuperscript{12} is one that I have utilized in seeking to relate my proclivities to the traits of my forebears. Although Feinstein’s example was of something negative that gets passed down from generation to generation like a curse, I have taken artistic license to convert this concept to one that applies to positive traits and qualities.

A frank and lucid self-examination – conducted by directed and spontaneous memory, reflection, corroboration by family members and selection – has extracted these truisms; that following familial precedents, I have learnt to speak several languages (English, Mandarin, Japanese, Chinese dialects of Hokkien and Teochew, a smattering of Malay and a year of Italian language), that I ran a successful business trading in hobby and art materials for a decade and still seek business opportunities, that a sense of adventure and chance to experience alternative lifestyles abroad prevails and that a strong belief in education is the key to change. My Australian experience has widened my scope and perspective of life considerably; from the crowded cityscape of Singapore to the relative peace and quiet of Perth and country style living in Margaret River. A year in horticultural TAFE has made me less of an ignoramus in terms of tending to the land. Six years in the Fine Arts faculty at the University of Western Australia has kept me mentally active through reading, writing, creating art and building a nascent career as an artist. Of course, I am a relatively unique example, but my own experience alerts me to the fact that the degradation or dilution of ethnic identity has advantages of self-consciousness and diversity of cultural skill amongst other Peranakan immigrants.

**Mindset and Motifs**

This mindset, or my heritage, has informed my art practice with its syncretic impulse to merge the various skill sets and aesthetic sensibilities that I possess or have adopted. It is a fine balance, with the production of artefacts: mute


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 99. The multigenerational hypothesis originally focused on schizophrenia as the result of progressive failed development over three generations. However, the hypothesis has now been widened to include other types of conflicts and tensions that are transmitted and amplified between generations.
matter that serves to articulate my intuitive thoughts and reflect my identity on the one hand, whilst being careful not to create overly studied and thus forced, kitschy and unlikely hybrid works on the other. In choosing to study traditional patterns, motifs and the craft aesthetic, I am in effect looking into my own cultural background by tracing the roots of Chinese, Peranakan and Japanese symbolism and art. Each motif tells a story and these stories vary from culture to culture, depending on context. For example, the mythical phoenix 鳳凰 (fènghuáng or Emperor of all birds) in China is the symbol of the South, of warmth, the sun and summer, and as descendants of Chinese who have travelled southwards to the tropics in junks to Malaya, the phoenix appears to be a fitting emblem for the Peranakans.13

In Chinese ornament, the phoenix often appears together with the dragon, symbolizing the empress and the emperor, whereas with the Peranakans, especially on their ceramics, the phoenix appears without the dragon.14 This is because Peranakan crockery is normally a wedding gift to the bride, and pretty feminine symbols on these wares are preferred over male ones. Thus the dragon as an emblem of the Chinese emperor and a distinctly male symbol was deemed unsuitable imagery.15

A better reason is because Peranakan tastes reflect the Islamic Malay cultural milieu which surrounded the Straits Chinese, where representations of animal and human form is forbidden in religious art16 giving rise to a preponderance of floral and vegetal motifs. Peranakan imagery is thus a subset of Chinese motifs,17 with the Peranakans choosing to include only auspicious and lucky decorative motifs that are inline with Confucian teachings, ancestral worship practices and local Malay customs. The human figures found in Chinese literati paintings featuring poets and other historical personages held little appeal for a non-scholarly mercantile diaspora of baba-nonyas, the majority of whom did not

17 Ming-Yuet Kee, Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2009), 52.
read or write Chinese characters. Therefore these figures from Chinese antiquity, literature and folklore are seldom depicted in their embroidery work or on their quotidian objects as they hold little meaning for, or relevance to their lives. The Peranakan phoenix has thus managed to un-twin itself from the Chinese dragon, in life as well as in porcelain.

Another plausible reason for the un-twinning of the phoenix from the dragon is because some Peranakans converted to Christianity during the Straits Settlement era and their new beliefs powered an aniconic reaction to dragons, as dragons are seen to represent Satan.19

The Japanese phoenix is virtually identical to the Chinese phoenix due to the great flood of cultural borrowing that occurred when Japan sought to emulate Tang China (618-906 A.D.) during the Asuka (552-710 A.D.) and Nara (710-794 A.D.) periods.20 Some of these commonly held beliefs about the phoenix in both Japan and China are as follows: the mythical phoenix is said to appear only when a virtuous ruler is about to be born and when times are peaceful. Conversely, the phoenix disappears when discord prevails within the country;21 phoenixes are benevolent as they do not feed on living creatures, with the seeds of the bamboo as its only form of sustenance; phoenixes only alight on the wú tong tree, or the parasol tree22 and spends most of its time in the Vermilion Hills located at the South Pole.23 Like the Peranakan phoenix, the Japanese phoenix is also depicted without the dragon, it normally appears with the wú tong tree and florals. However, the florals that accompany the Japanese Phoenix tend to be the stylized imaginary multi-layered hosoge24 or the

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18 Ho, Straits Chinese Porcelain: A Collector's Guide, 47.
19 Revelation 12:9 in the New International Version of the Bible states, "The great dragon was hurled down — that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray..." This aniconic reaction is still strong amongst my Christian friends, family and acquaintances and I will not be painting a dragon or featuring one in my art for fear of giving offence to both people and the Christian God. Instead, I often add Christian iconography to my art as a way of interrogating my thoughts on existential issues and for working out my doubts with regards to Christianity.
24 Haruo Shirane, Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature and the Arts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 136. The hosoge figure combines the "peony,
symmetrical karahana flower whereas the Peranakan phoenix is nestled amongst more realistically depicted double peonies. Japanese imagery, though by and large having the same symbolic meanings as Chinese motifs, has evolved its own visual style and recognizable characteristics; such as asymmetrical compositions, abstract motifs that are less realistic than their Chinese equivalent motifs and the all over usage of pattern to cover a surface which is different from the Chinese tendency to restrict pattern to border designs.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure1.png}
\caption{Hosoge flower close-up, Keman (pendant ornament), Kamakura Period, thirteenth century, gilt bronze. Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Image by Daderot, Creative Commons.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure2.png}
\caption{Linda Cheok, Peranakan vase in baluster form, phoenix and peony theme from Tan Swee Lin’s collection, indistinct reign mark, possibly late nineteenth century A.D. Guāngxù (1875-1908) period. Digital photo. 2013. All illustrations credited to Linda Cheok are her original artworks unless followed by ‘Digital Scan’ or ‘Digital Photo’ in which case the scan or photo is her work.}
\end{figure}

Studying singular motifs with their hidden nuanced meanings and the differing aesthetic styles of the three cultures and recombining this knowledge into hybrid artworks and artefacts is largely an experimental process. The goal being the discovery of a personal artistic style or oeuvre through an auto-ethnographic approach which incorporates my lived experience and points beyond it to the visual traditions it comes from.
Preservation of Peranakan Heritage through Art

In presenting Peranakan motifs afresh through contemporary artworks I hope to achieve a resurgent interest in a culture that is dying out. The “baroque” appeal of Peranakan colours, motifs and patterns will be explored in the re-interpretation of Peranakan beadwork and nonyaware through textile arts of batik, patchwork, beadwork and embroidery, ceramics, painting, collage, installation and weaving in the exhibition portion of my masters degree. The artworks will reflect hybridity of different cultural styles, symbols and art approaches, some more so than others as global integrating forces tend to level out cultural differences, and motifs and patterns seem internationally familiar. This is somewhat akin to a visual version of Homi Bhabha’s oxymoronic concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism where though rooted in the local or parochial, the vernacular cosmopolitan person is open to the world. In the sphere of art imagery, parochial or vernacular art motifs and patterns commingle with images from many cultures and countries on an equal footing to produce a democratic art. In other words, in creating vernacular cosmopolitan art, co-opted artistic elements from other cultures are treated with equal validity as the ones from the local culture. In this instance, vernacular Peranakan art aesthetic ranges alongside its Chinese and Japanese counterparts. However, a case could be argued for my work as falling within the ambit of multilingual cosmopolitanism as opposed to the vernacular because of the ways in which it reflects my facility for languages, a penchant for foreign sojourns and socializing with diverse peoples. Therefore although the ostensible aim is the preservation of cultural identity and difference, the reality is one of an admixture of familiar cultures and artistic styles. And since we cannot simultaneously have both without one eroding the other (since to add to an identity is implicitly to alter it in some respect), the preservation aspect of my work has taken the back

26 “Baroque” as in applying ornate detailing and using florid colours in Peranakan artefacts.
27 The terms nonyaware, Straits Chinese porcelain and Peranakan ware are used interchangeably and refer to the crockery used in Peranakan homes.
29 Democratic art here refers to the free and general accessibility of images and information enabling artists in the peripheral regions of the world to create works that resonate with a global audience.
seat to a hybrid style that is constantly evolving due to self-cultivation (that is, continuing self-education and acquisition of new skills) so as to bring about change. The various Peranakan Museums in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have managed to showcase the Peranakan past and have amassed collections of material culture artefacts that adequately covers both preservation and conservation. It is through art that the way forward for the culture can be imagined and forged and, further, it is through the concerted efforts of the various Peranakan Associations in social and cultural educational programmes that the culture can be kept alive and propagated. The inaugural Peranakan Arts Festival held in November 2015 was a step in the right direction in this respect. The five-day Peranakan Arts Festival held in Singapore included a Baba Nyonya convention, Peranakan plays, an exhibition of artworks by Peranakan artists, workshops teaching traditional Peranakan crafts and a Bazaar selling Peranakan food and merchandise. The convention was attended by delegates from eleven Peranakan associations from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Australia. The three seminars conducted in the convention portion of the festival dealt with the fate of Baba patois, the sale of authentic Peranakan products and identity issues with being Peranakan in contemporary society. Despite the presence of artworks by artists who are Peranakans at the Festival, there is still no significant category of art that is deemed Peranakan that compare with those available for Western style high art paintings or sculptures (for example: Mannerist, Baroque, Abstract Expressionism etc.). However, there have been some Peranakan works that reflect the influence of Western categories such as portraits of wealthy Peranakans painted during late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and still life paintings of Peranakan artefacts and contemporary artworks by such Singaporean artists as Tung Yue Nang, Martin Loh, Desmond Sim and Robert Teo.\textsuperscript{31} Malaysian artist Lee Sin Bee exhibited a painting of a nonya in front of a Straits Eclectic style home, entitled \textit{Peace and Happiness} in November 2014 at the British-run \textit{Affordable Art Fair} in Singapore. Peranakan Art characteristically expresses itself in other kinds of artifice than these. Meanwhile, two other international art fairs held at about the same time, \textit{The Bank Art Fair} and \textit{The Singapore Art Fair} had no art with Peranakan themes.

More art needs to be produced that can effectively and imaginatively carry the Peranakan Legacy forward into the future. What is needed is an art that takes account of the various Peranakan issues delineated by Peranakan Associations and presents attractive solutions to these perceived problems of Peranakan cultural transmission. The issues that concern the various Peranakan associations are reiterated each year at the Annual Baba Nonya Convention, and also in the various newsletters published by these associations. A central issue is ensuring the preservation and survival of Peranakan culture, closely followed by the identity issues of what constitutes ‘Peranakanness’ and future directions for the culture.\footnote{The Singapore Peranakan Association’s website has a Magazine Archive that contains back issues from 1994 through to 2015, with four issues published each year. From these issues, a good idea of what concerns Peranakans may be garnered. The Peranakan Association Singapore, "Magazine Archive," http://www.peranakan.org.sg/magazine-archive/.}

In the main, what we do have are artefacts that make up Peranakan material culture that includes beaded embroidery, ceramics, jewellery, furniture, traditional clothes, and cuisine. The iconography contained therein, particularly the motifs found in nonyaware will be studied in concert with similar motifs in the Japanese and Chinese cultural context. I will show how all three cultures have a similar interpretation of these motifs as this would indicate a common visual lexicon.

These Peranakan motifs will be combined with motifs derived from my life in Australia, Singapore and Japan in the exhibition component of the degree. These motifs or imprints from life reflect the “primordial ties that shape a person,
namely, ethnicity, gender, age, cohort, language, social structure, birthplace and religion” and unlock the meaning of self. Thus, as stated earlier in my initial research proposal, my quest is an understanding of self and others through studying the significant symbols and motifs that surround us in daily life. I shall argue that having many motifs in common across cultures constitutes a nonverbal language that creates better ties between disparate nations and peoples. If not in any precisely intelligible way, then through an aura of connectedness that has a powerful evocative meaning. In a perfect world the better ties created through sharing common nonverbal symbols would be apparent. However, territorial disputes and other issues of concern between countries have obscured or negated the good that commonality in cultural symbols can engender. I would like my approach to exert this good influence on others.

**Hybrid Artworks – Peranakan elements plus input from other cultures**

Two motifs, the kawung and the crane motifs are presented under this heading in discrete artworks that reflect the syncretic impulse in my art practice.

**Kawung Motif -**

**Peranakan colours on ceramic combined with an East Indian Design**

![Image of a ceramic plate with Peranakan and East Indian design](image)

*Figure 7. Linda Cheok, Ceramic plate hand-painted with Peranakan “baroque” coloured glazes, East Indian pattern. 2013. Terracotta clay 23.5 cm diameter.*

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33 Professor Tu Weiming (杜维明) defined primordial ties during his talk on Confucian humanism at the Harvard Humanities Center hosted by Homi Bhabha on 2010-04-07.
Choosing to paint a design motif common to several cultures but one that is interpreted differently by different cultures allows the artwork to be many things to many people. If an explanatory text to the artwork is included to highlight these different nuances, a greater understanding of other cultures may result. An example of this is the ceramic plate decorated with an East Indian design but painted in brightly hued glazes reminiscent of Peranakan clothing and ceramics. This design motif is a common one across several cultures; kawung or coffee bean in Indonesia, interlocking circles in Hindu and Buddhist temples, the star anise pattern in Malaysia, ‘shippo’ or jewel pattern in Japan and interlocking coins with square holes pattern in China.

The Balinese kawung or coffee bean pattern is a popular batik design in Indonesia and is also found in Hindu and Buddhist temples in Java where it indicates that the pattern is of cosmological significance representing a “sacred, regulated universe” due to its intersecting and interlocking circular designs and the cross in the centre which is thought to represent the universal source of energy. In Malaysia, however, this same design is taken to represent the spices star anise and clove. Reading the kawung pattern or symbol as a secular nature motif representing something as unexceptional as coffee and spice makes it acceptable across cultures and religions. In Japan, this overlapping circles pattern is called shippo as it often appears on cloisonné, or shippo. Shippo also means seven treasures, namely, gold, silver, lapis lazuli, agate, pearl coral and crystal. This plate may therefore be considered as being inspired by Peranakan, East Indian, Balinese, Hindu, Buddhist, Japanese or Malaysian spices, singly or in a combination of these elements depending on who views it. Other than its jewelled Peranakan colours, the decorated plate really does not look Peranakan, as all-over repeat patterning utilizing just one motif on ceramics, is non-existent on nonyaware. Straits Chinese porcelain is normally packed with a variety of motifs, and repeated patterns are confined to

26 Rafeah Legino, "Malaysian Batik Sarongs: A Study of Tradition and Change" (School of Art, RMIT University, 2012), 148.
borders, bases, rims and trims, examples are shown in figure 8. Although the kawung pattern is not featured in Peranakan porcelain, it makes an appearance on the sarongs that are worn by the Peranakans. Nonyas wore sarongs produced in Malaysia and Indonesia of various colours and designs to match their kebaya (tunic) tops. However, the sarongs most favoured by nonyas were produced in Pekalongan, Central Java, between the late-nineteenth century and the end of the Second World War in a style known as Chinese Batik or Batik Cina that combined Indo-European and Chinese motifs in bright colours. Florals, butterflies, birds and other nature motifs would be featured over or alongside geometric patterns, one such pattern being the kawung. Batik Hookokai produced in Pekalongan when Indonesia was occupied by Japan from 1942 to 1945, also exhibited the same qualities as Batik Cina but includes Japanese motifs and Hookokai was considered more exquisite, as with the wartime shortage of cotton, every bit of the fabric was filled with even more delicately intricate design. The Batik Hookokai in Figure 12 with a background kawung pattern in cream is “characterized by diagonal partitioning with two different designs, extreme detail, wide floral borders, semi-traditional Javanese background fill-ins and frequently, pairs of butterflies.”

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39 Elliot, Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java. loc 1741.

Figure 10. *Coffee Bean or Kawung design on hand drawn batik*. *Batik Kawung Batik Tulis* by hoho152, 2008. Digital Photograph. Flickr Creative Commons.

Figure 11. Linda Cheok. *Shippo pattern on traditional Echizen chiyogami paper*. Digital scan. 2014.
The batiks produced in Pekalongan, which includes the Japanese inspired Batik Hookokai are particularly suited to Peranakan tastes as the designs are colourful and packed, exhibiting the *horror vacui* that is a defining characteristic of Peranakan aesthetics (perhaps due to the pressures and anxieties, as well as the exhilaration, of incorporating and combining multiplied identities in new locales, thus enriching its significance). As batik producers in Pekalongan also catered to local Javanese, Chinese and European tastes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries besides Japanese tastes during the three years of Japanese occupation, it would be fair to say that Pekalongan batik is a true hybrid style of this skilled craft.  

As Pekalongan Chinese batiks were produced at about the same time as Peranakan porcelain were being mass produced in Jingdezhen for export to Malaysia and Indonesia in the late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it has been surmised that the patterns, colours and designs in the batik medium were influenced by the prevailing consumer tastes in nonya ceramics.

It can thus be said that the batik medium takes inspiration from Peranakan ceramics whilst the plate artwork with the East Indian design painted in Peranakan colours has done the reverse by using a pattern commonly found on

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42 Kee, *Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese*, 82.
batiks for ceramics. The syncretism here is one of using a different medium (ceramics) to feature a motif commonly found on fabrics, and using bright Peranakan colours instead of the more earthy or pastel palette of Indonesian batiks. As the meanings from the different sources have been explained, the viewer can choose to interpret the work any way they prefer, or agglutinate the various viewpoints for a richer, fuller picture.

The danger in this however is that the kawung is regarded as a sacred motif in Hinduism and Buddhism, and if it were accidentally placed on a ‘profane’ object, there is scope for causing offence. Likewise, the kawung pattern has also had a history of being a forbidden motif in Java, Indonesia, only to be used by royalty, and has thus acquired an aura of talismanic power and mystique. This suggests a strong link between motif and functional object, and divorcing the two, muddies the meaning for some interpretants.

The kawung design on a plate fits in better with the secular interpretation of the motif being from an edible food source, like the Malaysian star anise or Balinese coffee bean. Thus, it is more decorative rather than imbued with significant meaning or message. Whether the maker intends for the object to impart meaning or is using a motif unknowingly or decoratively is hard to decipher from a purely visual perusal, and the viewer will have his or her own interpretation based on prior knowledge or cultural background.

**Crane Motif – Combining disparate material to constitute the whole**

Another artwork, *Peace Crane* by Linda Cheok, exemplifies hybridity in a thousand-piece patchwork that features a white crane. The crane depicted on the work is a representation of a stylized Japanese origamic creation (folded paper) unlike most Chinese or Peranakan style naturalistic depictions, and it tells the tragic story of Sadako Sasaki, a 12-year old Hiroshima atomic bomb survivor folding one thousand paper cranes in a bid to beat leukaemia. The Japanese crane thus represents hope and a wish for world peace, in addition to

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being a sign of longevity, victory in battle and good tidings.\textsuperscript{44} The thousand pieces of fabric reflects perseverance, diligence and sincerity, and a wish for unity amongst disparate races, as the pieces of Chinese brocade, kimono fabric, Indian silk saree and Indonesian batik represent the different races. Some of these fabric squares also contain meta-meanings derivable from their printed, stitched or interwoven motifs. These scraps of fabric were acquired from eBay and Facebook from friends, acquaintances and strangers, demonstrating the transnational or global nature of today’s digitally connected world. This crane artwork is a metaphor for the interconnected world we currently live in.

![Image of Thousand Piece Patchwork Peace Crane](image)

Figure 13. Linda Cheok, Thousand Piece Patchwork Peace Crane, 2013. Silk, cotton and brocade fabrics, square card templates. 170cm X 125cm.

The Latin name for the red crowned crane is \textit{Grus japonensis}, though it also breeds in China, Mongolia and Russia.\textsuperscript{45} This fact makes it seem natural for Japan to claim the red crowned crane as one of its national symbols and it has been deployed on Japan’s national carrier, Japan Airlines (JAL) since 1959.\textsuperscript{46} In this instance, according to JAL President, Masaru Onishi, the “high-

\textsuperscript{44} Niwa, \textit{Snow, Wave, Pine: Traditional Patterns in Japanese Design}, 56.
flying crane represents JAL’s commitment to provide their valued customers with the highest level of service”, plus the red colour of the bird logo signifies happiness.47

Other auspicious connotations associated with the crane in Japan are derived from observing its behaviour in the wild, particularly its fidelity to its mate. Thus, crane imagery is suited to inclusion for wedding celebrations as it alludes to marital fidelity and happiness. The previously mentioned practise of senbazuru or folding a thousand cranes in order to make a special wish, elaborately embroidered cranes on wedding kimonos and crane mizuhiki (stiff paper cord art48 decorations), 49 are several ways the crane imagery has been included in weddings as a harbinger of hope for a successful union.

A different aspect of the symbol is the focus of Peranakan and Chinese crane imagery on longevity, immortality and the crane’s mythical ability to navigate between this world and the next as a heavenly courser.50 In Peranakan and Chinese funerals, a crane shaped finial is often placed on top of the hearse for

48 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Mizuhiki - the Art of Tying Paper Cords, (Japan Video Topics, 2009).
49 Baird, Symbols of Japan, 106.
this purpose. Cranes also carry the folkloric Daoist immortals on their backs as recorded in the book, *Lie xiān zhuàn* (Biographies of Transcendents) by Daoist Huan-ch'ū, during the fourteenth century A.D. The immortal Lán Cāihé, for example, was said to have been a wandering beggar for many years before he was swooped up into heaven by a crane and immortalized. As legend has it, the crane lives to a thousand years of age, and when cranes are featured on quotidian objects such as plates and bowls, it carries the wish that those partaking of the meal live to a healthy and prosperous old age. The bowl below is part of the heirloom collection of Christina Tan, Perth member of the Peranakan diaspora. The bowl has a reign mark on its underside that traces its provenance to that of the Qīng emperor Dàoguāng’s era (1821-50). As most Straits Chinese porcelain imported into the Straits Settlements were from the reign of emperor Tóngzhì (1862-74) and Guāngxù (1875-1908), this indicates that the bowl with the crane motif is a relatively rare item.

![Figure 15. Linda Cheok, Nonyaware bowl from Christina Tan’s Collection featuring a red crested crane, Dàoguāng 道光 period (1821-50), Diameter: 18cm, Height: 8cm. Digital Photograph. 2013.](image)

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51 Kee, *Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese*, 54.
53 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
This rarity factor is reified in the plight of the remaining red crown crane population of one thousand seven hundred worldwide. They are an endangered species and their numbers are in decline, as their wetland habitats have been either lost or degraded by industrialization or agriculture. This is probably not a good sign for Japan Airlines if the avian that represents them metaphorically is dying out. In the past, the Japanese hunted cranes for their stunning plumage to adorn hats and other fashion accessories, and a shogun in Edo period (1615-1868) used to deliver cranes that his hawks caught to the Emperor for his delectation. Today the poaching of cranes is still a problem in parts of Asia for subsistence hunting and the red crowned *Grus japonensis* might pass into legend if conservation efforts fail. Actually it already is a legendary fowl for those au fait with the potency of its symbolic meanings as a metaphor for peace, wisdom, fidelity and longevity. Though it might literally die out, the crane will live on in folklore and folk beliefs if the meanings of symbols continue to be transmitted to successive generations.

**Conclusion**

I have utilized motifs with symbolic meanings to enrich my essentially decorative art style that requires skilled and patient craftsmanship in both the Peranakan-coloured East Indian designed ceramic *Kawung Plate* and the *Peace Crane* thousand-piece patchwork quilt. All the artworks in the exhibition component will similarly interrogate the meaning of individual motifs while

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57 Ibid.
exploring the materiality of the mediums employed. For example, in terms of materiality, as ceramics has been closely linked to China and the Chinese, I have deliberately set out to research this medium through both a haptic making process as well as through studying, handling and photographing collections both private and public. It is an exploration of ancient roots via the clay medium to better understand the various terms used in describing porcelain ware.

The second chapter deals with the sharing of common symbols by Peranakan, Chinese and Japanese cultures through a shared logographic written script and through horizontal and vertical transmission of cultural traits. It also touches on the importance of art symbolism and aesthetics of the three primary cultures in my dissertation. Chapter three is a detailed study of motifs on quintessentially Peranakan collections of ceramic ware. Items from one collection belonging to a member of the Peranakan Chinese diaspora in Perth are featured in this chapter. The meanings of the various motifs found on these Peranakan wares have been explicated through folk beliefs and folklore, and nuances in meanings and the usage of similar motifs in Japanese and Chinese culture discussed. In a sense, unless there is a key or a legend to explain the symbols on these objects, the viewer will only experience the surface aesthetic appeal of the work whilst its deeper or hidden cultural meaning remains shrouded. Take for example, the iconographical aspect of Aboriginal paintings; certain patterns denote waterholes, snake tracks, nature elements like the rain, fire, clouds and so on. Without a key or prior knowledge it would be difficult to identify the symbols and interpret the meaning contained in the work. The artwork is therefore enjoyed aesthetically as abstract art sans its ‘hidden’ meaning.
Peranakan, Chinese and Japanese Art Symbolism and Aesthetics

Connecting Peoples Through Symbols

Chinese Written Character Symbols
A symbol is one of three types of signs, the other two being the index and the icon. An iconic sign looks like the object it represents; the trash can symbol on the MacBook is easily understood to mean trash or to discard. Indexical signs point to something that is related to it; art historian David Summers has given the example of a footprint to be an indication of “former presence” of a foot, and that an expert tracker would be able to infer a lot of information from such a sign. In the terminology of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, the sign would be the footprint; the person that made the impression the object and the tracker would be the interpretant. Symbols however, do not look like nor indicate the object or idea it stands for, in other words the meanings ascribed to symbols are arbitrarily assigned.

The English language is a symbolic language, as we assign spoken and written words with particular meanings when in actuality, nothing in nature associates the word to its meaning. The Chinese written language on the other hand has evolved from iconic pictograms to its present day abstracted symbolic logographic form, thus about four percent of Chinese words or characters look like drawings and drawings tend to look like calligraphy. This indicates that some Chinese characters are both iconic and symbolic signs and that it is

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sometimes possible to guess at the meaning of a word from its form. Furthermore as the Chinese language is not phonetically derived, a written character carries the same meaning despite being pronounced in myriad ways by different Chinese dialect groups. Thus the written word presents one possible way of keeping channels of communication open between diverse peoples within China and is “the very emblem of an essential unity”.  

Similarly, the Chinese script also serves to foster communication within the East Asian region as historically, both the Japanese and Korean writing systems borrowed heavily from the Chinese script, having started off only as spoken languages with no scripts of their own. Today, the Japanese Kanji (Chinese) script can be pronounced in two ways, either in Chinese fashion or Japanese style. The word ‘mountain’ for example, is pronounced as ‘shān’ by Mandarin speakers, and pronounced as either ‘san’ or ‘yama’ by Japanese speakers, so Mount Fuji is either Fujisan or Fujiyama, with the former being the Chinese sounding version. In both China and Japan the written character is the same, 山. Mountain is also pronounced as ‘san’ in Korea, but it is written 산 in Hangul, the Korean phonetic script, which replaced Hanja, or Chinese style writing in the 1940s. As North Korea has dropped the Chinese script and now uses a phonetic script they no longer share this common communication bond with Japan and China. South Korean schools however, still teach about 1,800 Chinese words, thus, Chinese, South Korean and Japanese tourists visiting each other’s countries can communicate to some degree in writing; comprehending signboards and the written script. Knowing one thousand nine hundred and forty five Jōyō kanji or Chinese characters for use in daily life is the literacy baseline in Japan. And in China, that figure is roughly doubled.

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67 Ibid., 5.
Commonality of Symbols
In addition to the Chinese script being a unitary factor, visual or art symbolism represented by nature (plants, animals and natural phenomena) and visual symbols associated with ancient Chinese myths, the Chinese cosmic order and good fortune also serve to provide common ground between Chinese, Japanese and Peranakan cultures. Art symbolism in Japan and China share many similarities as historically the Japanese had by the early seventh century endeavored to import Chinese civilization wholesale. This was because China was vastly superior to Japan in both material and technological terms during the Tang dynasty (618-906 A.D.), and adopting and adapting Chinese civilization to the Japanese context would aid progress and improve living standards. Furthermore, luxury goods imported by the Japanese court from China helped augment centralized political power as these scarce goods indicated ability, resourcefulness and conferred prestige on their owners. Overall, Japan has borrowed heavily from Chinese culture in terms of the written word, system of government, religious learning such as Buddhism and Daoism, visual art, folk beliefs, folktales, court rituals and Confucian ethics. This borrowing commenced from about 300 B.C. during the Yayoi period (300B.C – 300 A.D.) in Japan when she exited the Stone Age Jomon period (10,000 B.C.- 300 B.C.), starting with the transmission of wet rice farming from China. Thus, this wholesale borrowing effectively established a great commonality of cultural practices and attendant symbolism.

Many of the motifs found on Peranakan artefacts are also extensively featured in Chinese art and artefacts because Peranakans spring from a hybrid Chinese culture that combines Malay and Indonesian influences with Chinese mores. Thus, as a subset of the wider Chinese culture, many motifs are shared between the Chinese and Peranakans in their quotidian objects with one main exception. This is the absence of human figuration in their ceramic ware or nonyaware, the reason as mentioned in the previous chapter, being that of respecting the local, ostensibly Islamic Malay cultural milieu, which frowns upon

72 Baird, Symbols of Japan, 15.
73 Varley, Japanese Culture, 4.
74 Lee, Golden Dragon Purple Phoenix. loc 6603.
the use of animal and human figuration in religious and sometimes even secular art and design.\(^75\) A second reason is because the Straits Chinese\(^76\) were largely ignorant of Chinese literature and history, and their attendant figural motifs, and found the traditional portraits of arhats\(^77\), lohans\(^78\) and other immortals “ugly and repulsive”.\(^79\) This impulse of finding Buddhist figures and Daoist immortals repellent is due to the Peranakans being predominantly ancestral worshippers and not Buddhists or Daoists and thus not cognizant of the qualities that these figures represent. A third reason, also mentioned previously, is that nonyaware is normally presented as wedding gifts to Peranakan brides and the favoured auspicious wedding imagery bespeaking marital bliss is the phoenix and peony theme. However, Chinese animal and human figuration though absent in their ceramics, is found in Peranakan silverware, furniture, architectural ornament, embroideries and beadwork probably because they have been subtly incorporated making their presence as “background” lucky designs acceptable. Thus generally, ‘luck’ as a theme has made it through, but not Chinese literature and history. The overall look is one of intricate and ornate design throughout the entire artefact.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 17.** Linda Cheok, Straits Chinese Silver Belt and Buckle featuring a qilín (unicorn). The belt is fabricated out of a network of interlocking rings superimposed on the flip side with little floret panels in appliqué work. Digital photo. 2013. Mrs. Shirley Cheok’s Collection, Perth.

An engraving of a qilín (Chinese unicorn) in Figure 17 on a silver belt buckle is only apparent when perused up close. The mythical qilín is believed to protect

\(^75\) Kee, *Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese*, 52.

\(^76\) Straits Chinese is used as an alternative term for Peranakan. The Straits of Malacca is the body of water that connects Penang, Malacca and Singapore, the three cities that make up the Straits Settlement.

\(^77\) A Buddhist term for a perfected person who has gained nirvana.

\(^78\) A Lohan is a Chinese saint.

against evil influences.\textsuperscript{80} Similarly, in Figure 18, small dragons are unobtrusively featured on only the topmost carved wooden panel of a Victorian style cupboard encircling a Dutch tulip. The dragons juxtaposed with the Dutch tulip on this cupboard reflect the hybrid nature of Peranakan teakwood furniture crafted between 1880 and 1930 by Shanghainese craftsmen living in the Straits Settlements. This cupboard typically follows English furniture design style and form, but is richly ornamented and gilded with Chinese motifs.\textsuperscript{81} The tulip may be a reference to the Dutch who ruled Malacca before the British in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries or it could have been featured because it was a popular flower in Victorian period gardens.

Figure 18. Linda Cheok, Peranakan Cupboard with top panel decorated with a pair of carved gold leafed dragons, 2013. Digital photo. Mrs. Christina Tan’s Collection, Singapore.

Another reason proposed for the presence of human and animal figuration is that furniture and silverwork was often crafted by non Peranakan Chinese who did not have the same reservations as the Peranakans with regards to Malay religious sensibilities.\textsuperscript{82} It can also be argued that as Peranakan men normally chose and bought all household furniture, they would choose male power symbols such as the dragon and characters from Chinese street operas that

they had watched. Thus Baba furniture would include intricately carved or painted scenes from popular operas, or folklore in addition to the bird and floral theme.

Figure 19 Linda Cheok. Chanab or altar furniture or offering set which comprises a carved and gilt stand with an offering tray and a box cover, 2013. Mrs. Tan Swee-Lin’s Collection, Malacca.

Origins of the Japanese people in prehistory

Another plausible reason for the sharing of symbols by the three cultures may be traced to the origins of the Japanese people in prehistory. A hundred thousand years ago, Japan was part of the main Asian land mass and the Japanese race could have sprung from the mingling and interbreeding of peoples from China, Mongolia and Korea with people from Indonesia, Philippines and Okinawa. Thus vertical transmission of genetic and cultural traits could have occurred, furnishing one explanation for why certain traditional patterns and motifs are the same in East Asia and South East Asia. Horizontal transmission of culture occurs when one culture influences another and vertical transmission occurs when parents, teachers and elders from the same culture transmit cultural traits down generations. Another plausible reason for the many similarities between Chinese and Japanese culture is derived from the writings of Sīma Qiān 司馬遷, first historian of China (145-86 B.C.), where he writes of a Qin dynasty occultist Xú Fú 徐福 who was commanded by the First Emperor, Qín Shīhuáng 秦始皇 (reigned 221-210 B.C.) to travel east in search

84 The Dawns of Tradition, (Nissan Motor Co., Ltd., 1983).
86 Ibid.
of an immortality elixir, but ended up setting down roots in his new country of abode together with three thousand men and women of his delegation. This new homeland was subsequently identified as Japan, and Lee Khoon Choy, former Singaporean Ambassador to Japan in his book *Japan: Between Myth and Reality*, writes about the various Xú Fú studies that point to Xú Fú and his delegation as being perhaps the first Chinese to arrive in stone age Japan, and Xú Fú as possibly even being the first Japanese emperor, Emperor Jimmu. If this account is true, then both vertical and horizontal transmission of culture occurred with this influx from China, as Xú Fú apparently taught a variety of skills and imparted knowledge to the indigenous Japanese population such as rice growing, Daoism and whale catching. Further evidence to support the claim that ancient Japanese society might have originated from China may be gleaned from the Yayoi period (250B.C. to 300A.D.) findings unearthed at the Yoshinogari ruins in Kanzaki, Saga Prefecture in Japan in 1989. Tadaaki Shichida, chief researcher of the ruins has admitted, “many of the Yoshinogari findings have their origins in China”. On the other hand, historian George Bailey Sansom writes that archaeologically, although much of the material culture in Japan can be traced to China, there is a strong Ural-Altaic element (Finns, Samoyedes, Huns, Tungusic tribes and Mongols) in the racial characters of the Japanese evident from their thought, behavior and folkloric legends that makes them distinct from the Chinese.

Thus, on the whole, the commonality of Chinese and Japanese symbols may be explained by cultural borrowing or by the alternative theory of having common forebears or progenitors. However, with its different geographical features, Japan has its own native as well as evolved motifs and symbols that are considered endemic to Japan. Likewise, Peranakan motifs reflect the prevalent culture of the babas and nonyas during the modern period in tropical Malaysia and Singapore. Marked differences between the ceramic ware

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89 Ibid., 12.
commonly used by the Chinese in China and Peranakan Chinese are also apparent. The difference is that ceramic ware produced for home consumption by Chinese potters in China tended to be staid and conservative, reflecting traditional court wares noted for “their classic austerity of form and sparseness of decorative design painted in muted colours”.\(^{92}\) Whereas, Peranakan ceramic ware, whilst simple in form, are vibrantly glazed and packed full of decorative design and could perhaps be echoing the local tropical penchant for bright colour and the packed design aesthetic of Malaysian and Indonesian batik. As the ornately decorated over glazed ceramic ware was costly to produce and purchase, this could be a reflection of class factor and indicative of the Peranakans being an “urban community of relatively high socio-economic standing who enjoyed considerable affluence”.\(^{93}\)

**Purely Japanese Symbols**

Most symbols found in books on Japanese traditional motifs are also found in books on Chinese symbolism. A close reading of Merrily Baird’s *Symbols of Japan: Thematic Motifs in Art and Design* yields many symbols identical to the ones found in books on Chinese symbolism, such as that by C.A.S. Williams, Wolfram Eberhard, Patricia Bjaaland Welch and Terese Tse Bartholomew. Baird states that besides religious symbols from Taoism and Buddhism, Japanese symbolism has also been influenced by Chinese diaper patterns, Persian and West-Asian motifs (such as floral arabesques) originating with China’s Silk Road, as well as Chinese symbols of good fortune and symbols used during the five seasonal festivals.\(^{94}\)

It is, however, possible to pin point entirely native Japanese symbols by the simple process of eliminating the Chinese influenced symbols from the various Japanese handbooks. For example, a mischievous aquatic creature, the *kappa*, which features in Baird’s book is not mentioned in any of the Chinese books on symbolism because the *kappa* is a Shinto deity rooted in Japanese animism.\(^{95}\) Other examples of Japanese motifs not featured in Chinese symbolism are Mount Fuji, *chidori* (plovers), seashells, racoons, mugwort, *fugu* (blowfish),

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\(^{94}\) Baird, *Symbols of Japan*, 17.

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 186.
hydrangea, heron, pampas grass, *shojo* (an orang-utan-like mythical creature) and the *tengu* (mythical birdman). Although the cherry blossom does appear in Chinese art, the plum blossom takes precedence in Chinese culture and it is the cherry blossom that assumes pride of place in Japan.96 This could be because the Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware* or the evanescence of life is exemplified by the short-lived cherry blossom that blooms for about a week or two. Another plausible reason is the emergence of a distinct Japanese Heian court aesthetic that sought to distinguish itself from Chinese culture, hence the switch over of allegiance from the plum to cherry blossom in Japan from the late eighth century onwards. The Japanese court of the late ninth century had in fact, put an end to over two centuries of cultural borrowing when they severed official relations with China due to the decline of the Chinese Tang Dynasty and the feeling that “guidance and inspiration” was no longer needed from the continent.97

**Derivation of Symbols**

Symbols are derived in several ways: metaphorically, metonymically or through the process of tagging.98 A metaphorical symbol is one that represents a completely unrelated object that has certain similarities with the subject, for example, “She is a tiger mum” means that she is fierce and forceful like the tiger, in the upbringing of her children. Asian migrant mums apparently make their children excel academically, and musically on both piano and violin by ensuring that they never give up no matter how difficult the task.99 This entails a fair amount of coercion or 勉強 miǎn qiāng in Chinese. Coincidentally, the kanji characters for “study” in Japanese are these two Chinese characters for coercion 勉強, but pronounced as benkyō.

Metonymic symbols are a substitute for the subject; however, it does not need to be like the subject, unlike metaphorical symbols, which reflect the nature of their subjects. Examples are the kangaroo and emu, native fauna that are synecdoches for Australia,100 but it does not follow that Australia or Australians exhibit the behavior or characteristic qualities of these emblems. The third way

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96 Ibid., 48.
97 Varley, Japanese Culture, 57.
98 Baird, Symbols of Japan, 9.
symbols are derived is through tagging. Tagging is when a label is attached to someone for the purpose of identification or to give other information. For example, the folkloric Daoist Eight Immortals 八仙 Bāxiān, each carries an object as a tag to help us identify them. Lán Cāihé 藍采和, or the Immortal representing Poverty whose emblematic tag is a basket of fruit or flowers. Other clues or tags to confirm his identity are; his tattered blue clothes and his having only one shoe on. Symbols that are tags can also be metonyms, as the immortal does not look like nor exhibit qualities of a fruit or floral basket. In Peirce’s scheme of signs, symbols are one of three types of signs, however, there are overlaps between the three categories of iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. For example, a diamond-shaped road sign featuring a black border and black kangaroo on yellow background is iconic, indexical and symbolic simultaneously. According to Main Roads Western Australia, diamond-shaped signs with black borders and subject on yellow background are warning signs; this is a symbolic sign as the choice of black and yellow, as well as the diamond shape have been arbitrarily assigned. The placement of the kangaroo sign by the road is indexical as it points to the fact that kangaroos are likely to appear on these country roads and caution is necessary whilst driving. The sign is also iconic as the kangaroo on the road sign looks like a kangaroo, at least in a simplified, profile view of one.

Symbols Created Based On Puns, Rebuses and Homonyms
Most Chinese motifs and symbols are based on Mandarin puns, rebuses and homonyms and are easily understood by the Mandarin speaker, but both Peranakans and the Japanese have to remember the associated meanings as explicated and commit their hidden meanings to memory. This is because Peranakans mostly communicate in the Hokkien dialect if they hail from Penang or they would speak Baba Malay if they were from Malacca or Singapore and standard Beijing Mandarin is lost on them. Likewise, though Chinese pictographic characters were adopted and adapted by the Japanese into their

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language, the Japanese pronunciation of the words normally differs widely from the Mandarin enunciation, making Mandarin puns and homonyms unintelligible. For example, the Mandarin saying 年年有余 nián nián yǒu yú which means “May you have a surplus each year”, is often represented by images of fish because the last word of the above idiom 余“yú” or “leftover/surplus” is the homonym of the word 鱼“yú” or “fish”. However, in the Hokkien dialect, “fish” is pronounced as “hú” and “surplus” is pronounced “chūn”, these words are not homonyms. Similarly, “fish” in Japanese is pronounced as “sakana” and “left over” is “nokoru”, therefore the punning device of the mandarin rebus is literally lost in translation. Thus, for the non-Mandarin speaker, Chinese metonymic symbolism that utilizes homophonic equivalencies is a learned language that needs decoding.

Once decoded, it is seen that Chinese art symbolism is about conveying auspicious good wishes or warding off evil due to a superstitious belief that pictures could function like apotropaic charms.104 Pictures of Chinese stone guardian lions, or a sheet of paper with the empowered writing of a Daoist monk are examples of such talismanic charms. Most images are thus imbued with positive meanings, and there are few negative symbols. Even creatures deemed ominous or evil in Western eyes are endearing. For example, images such as dragons, crows, bats and spiders are viewed negatively following Western cultural norms, but positively through the Chinese lens. Dragons are seen as powerful and benevolent mythical creatures as they are believed to bring rain to keep the earth fertile.105 Crows represent filial piety as these birds care for their aged parents, the bat蝠 is a symbol for happiness as it is pronounced as “fú” and is the homonym for the word happiness 福, and the spider虫喜 chóng xǐ is also a homonym for xǐ 喜 or happiness.

Japanese symbolism also employs the same punning device of using homonyms, for example the chestnut, pronounced as kachiguri sounds like the word ‘victory’ which is pronounced kachi, thus ‘chestnut’ stands for victory.

Another example, black soya bean or *kuromame*, stands for diligence as *mame* means ‘hardworking’. Thus eating black soybeans during the Japanese New Year is a wish for a hardworking life in the year ahead. A third example is the Japanese Puffer Fish *fugu* 河豚, which sounds like *fuku* meaning happiness. It is believed that eating *fugu* fish will bring happiness and luck even though it contains poison 1,200 times more lethal than cyanide in its liver, bowels, stomach and ovaries;\(^\text{106}\) and only highly trained and licensed chefs should prepare and cook *fugu* to prevent poisoning. Likewise, owls are considered lucky as they are called *fukurou* 福 or happiness. Furthermore, *fukurou* has another homonym, 不 - *fu* meaning "no" and *kuro* meaning hardship or suffering, imbuing the owl symbol with the ability to offer protection against a hard life.

**Art Symbolism and Why It Matters**

Symbols of all varieties appear on traditional quotidian objects and they convey a wide range of messages, depending on the motifs employed. Besides this function of delivering coded messages, art symbols and their associated aesthetics are also important for several reasons; they have the power to move us emotionally, they tell us about the story of mankind and his way of life, they fulfill a need for man to express himself symbolically, and assists in perpetuating, conserving or documenting cultural mores.

**Japanese View on Art**

**Tea Aesthetics and Sen no Rikyu**

In Japan, art appears to be more in touch with the realities of life as daily activities are imbued with a unique aesthetic sensibility and it is possible for nearly anything to be an art form; for example, meals, floral arrangements, tea drinking, and gardening. During the *chanoyu* or the tea ceremony, one is served a bowl of green powdered tea or *maccha*. Everything to do with the process, from choosing the bowl, whisk, and scoop spoon, to the actual whisking and serving of the tea is executed with utmost care and spare stylized movement. Tea drinking is transformed into an almost spiritual experience where man

contemplating the bowl of tea in the humble tea hut is in tune with nature and one’s innermost being and where sublime beauty is found in rustic simplicity of the wabi sabi aesthetic. Wabi refers to a ‘deliberate simplicity in daily living’ and sabi to an ‘appreciation of the old and faded’. In the movie still from the arthouse film, Ask this of Rikyu, released in 2013, Rikyu is serving a bowl of tea to the shogun Hideyoshi Toyotomi, the two men were depicted as diametrically opposed in terms of taste as Hideyoshi preferred a more gilded, resplendent gorgeousness, whilst Rikyu believed in utter simplicity and rusticity.

![Ask This of Rikyu, movie still, 2013.](image1.png)

The bowl Rikyu is holding is almost identical to the bowl in figure 22, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection, which is attributed to the potter Chojiro who made hand-moulded tea bowls to Rikyu’s specifications in the sixteenth century. Today, these two different aesthetic strands are evident in Japan; jimi

![Figure 23. Chojiro Tanaka, Tea Bowl, 1575, Metropolitan Museum of Art.](image2.png)

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107 Mitsutoshi Tanaka, “Ask This of Rikyu,” (Toei Company, 2013). A recently released movie entitled Sen no Rikyu on the life of the consummate tea master of the same moniker captures the wabi sabi essence of the Japanese tea ceremony.
or good taste that includes wabi sabi and shibui (astringent refined taste) and the opposing loud aesthetic of hade or the gaudy.108

Hanami or cherry blossom viewing in early spring is yet another aspect of life closely entwined with aesthetics. During Hanami the cherry blossoms bloom for a few short days, and people picnic under the trees to celebrate the beauty of the spectacle and transience of life, and the term for this particular aesthetic is mono no aware or the pathos of things.109 Although people are happy that spring has arrived and glad that they have survived another cold winter, it is tinged with sadness at the thought of how ephemeral life is.

Art matters in Japan as art is an aesthetic attitude that pervades society in myriad ways and adds pleasure to life. For example, meals are a feast for both the body and the eye, flowers are arranged with ikebana ideals in mind and home gardens are laid out like miniature landscapes. Nature is enjoyed both indoors and outdoors, akebi vines from the forests are woven into baskets, and the stylized symbols of plants and animals appear on utensils, kimonos, furniture, fabric noren or room dividers and sliding door panels. During the Heian period (794-1185), the ladies of the court nobility were not allowed outside the palace grounds and had to content themselves with images of

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outdoor scenery as depicted in their fans, crockery, garments and other paraphernalia. Art mattered for them because it brought life from the outside into their confined lives.

**Peranakan View on Art and Peranakan Aesthetics**

Similarly, during modernity from about the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, Peranakan girls who had attained puberty were also confined indoors in their homes. They too surrounded themselves with colourful motifs of plants and images from the world outside; art was a conduit to the outside world. Their confinement was to prevent men from glimpsing or liaising with them, whilst suitable marriage partners were found for them. Their time was spent sewing, embroidering and beading nature elements onto items for their trousseau. The designs were often lifted from Victorian pattern books as these books were seen as sophisticated, chic and imbued with the progressive Western aesthetic. Their view of life was glimpsed through peepholes, one in the floorboard of the room over the front porch (in two-storey houses), to see who was visiting downstairs, and another peephole in a room screen that separated the main guest parlour from the private portion of the house on the ground floor. As their period of confinement lasted several years, there was plenty of time to work on intricate craftwork and to finesse their cooking skills.

Peranakan or nonya cuisine is a spicy blend of Malay and Chinese cooking styles and involves much preparation, it is the embodiment of slow food. Figure 25 features a close-up from a pair of beaded slippers with Victorian roses made by my mother, Shirley Khoo, an example of the Peranakan aesthetic of packed colour and refinement.

![Figure 25. Shirley Khoo, Beaded embroidery wedding slippers with Victorian roses, 1958.](image)
She took approximately 80 hours to complete beading a pair of these slippers for her wedding in 1958. The colours of the beads are typically Peranakan, with turquoise, purple, peach, white, pink, green, yellow, white, red and even dark blue all in one piece of work. This penchant for bright jewelled colours is followed through in their traditional clothing style of the sarong kebaya and their ceramic ware.

![Figure 26. Kebaya by Jamieson Teo licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license](http://rumahbebe.com/wedding/)

**Peranakan Art Symbolism**

Understanding the symbols depicted on Peranakan objects is like cracking a secret code, which allows us to decipher hidden meanings intended by the maker, person commissioning the work or person gifting the piece. There are two leitmotifs in Peranakan iconography, and these are the phoenix and the peony. These motifs are strongly represented on nonyaware or Peranakan ceramics. The phoenix represents the bird of the south, and is thus a fitting symbol for the Chinese who have migrated to South East Asia. The phoenix is also a symbol of the empress as the motif was used to decorate ceremonial costumes and headdresses of empresses.110 Peranakan brides are referred to as an “empress for a day” as wedding celebrations are ornate, lavish and regal.111 The peony is considered the grandest of all flowers, as its blooms are large and showy. It is called fuguihua 富貴花 in mandarin, and the homonym for fu 富 is 福, meaning good fortune or happiness. It is an emblem of love,

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111 Rumah Bebe’s website has photographs depicting traditional Peranakan weddings. [http://rumahbebe.com/wedding/](http://rumahbebe.com/wedding/) and watch Singapore Press Holding’s short video clip of a re-enactment of a traditional wedding at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuKBkr4-7vo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuKBkr4-7vo)
affection and feminine beauty and represents springtime. Thus, nonyaware which is usually given to brides as presents are regarded as a wish for good fortune and happiness as peonies are ubiquitous on these ceramics. The wealthier Peranakan families would commission dinner sets from ceramic factories in Jingdezhen in Southern China stipulating desired colours, motifs and designs.

![Figure 27](image)

**Figure 27.** Linda Cheok, Phoenix and Peony offering plate with scalloped edges, stamped with the four-character red kǎishū script of Emperor Guǎnxù reign (1875-1908), collection of Mrs. Tan Swee Lin. Digital photo 2013.

The offering plate in Figure 27 is part of Mrs. Tan Swee Lin’s collection inherited from her grandmother, a Peranakan from Malacca. Besides the phoenix and the peony, the border design features the eight Buddhist emblems; eight-spoke wheel, conch shell, umbrella, banner, lotus, vase, paired fish, and the endless knot. The wheel represents the eight fold path that leads to enlightenment; the conch shell speaks of Buddha’s call to his disciples to follow his precepts; the umbrella represents protection from evil and disease; the banner stands for victory over evil; the lotus is about purity triumphing over the dross and murkiness of life, just as a lotus flower pushes its way up through the mud; the vase is a repository for treasures; paired fishes refer to freedom from fear and the endless knot is a symbol for eternity. As these emblems have good connotations, they have been appropriated into nonyaware despite Peranakans being mainly ancestor worshippers and not Buddhists.

Art symbols are therefore not merely decorative in function but serve to convey coded messages and these messages are always happy or positively instructive ones. Tightly packed floral, leaf, bird and insect forms in bright vibrant colours with some geometric pattern work border is the norm in nonyaware. This packing in of motifs or horror vacui is also seen in Malaysian and Indonesian batik work and is an example of how the hybrid Peranakan culture has adapted itself to local mores and tastes. One such adaptation may be seen in the clothes worn by their women folk, the sarong kebaya, a Malaysian-Indonesian style of dress. However, Peranakan kebaya tops have been specially embroidered not only with Chinese florals but also designs from Europe, such as pansies, daffodils and bluebells due to the influence of colonialism. The packed motifs of the sarongs made in Malaysian and Indonesian workshops and factories, could have arisen not so much from horror vacui, but rather from the Malay-Indonesian positive sense of halus or exquisite refinement. Therefore space in a composition is filled up not because of a dislike for void space, but rather emanates from a love of complex and intricate design.

Art matters in the context of Peranakan quotidian objects as it indicates the willingness of the Chinese Peranakans to assimilate both local and foreign elements into their culture. Likewise, in their speech, the Peranakans speak an admixture of the Chinese Hokkien dialect and a form of Malay known as Baba Malay plus English. Their hybrid art therefore reflects their role in the 1800s and early 1900s as tri-lingual go-betweens for new Chinese migrants to the region in their dealings with both the Malays and colonial authorities. Art matters as a historical record of a period in time when the Peranakans were “jealous of their position as British Subjects and loyal to the British Government.”

Peranakan Culture in Decline

Today, the Peranakan lifestyle and language is fast becoming a phenomenon of the past as Peranakans marry non-Peranakan Chinese and acculturation

moves towards being more Chinese than Peranakan. This was also spurred on by the Singapore Government’s policy of recognizing only three major ethnic groups and forging a common Singaporean identity rather than encouraging ethnic and cultural diversity.\textsuperscript{117} As such, English was made the first language in schools for unity’s sake, even though English is not the mother tongue of the citizenry. As second language proficiency was also stressed by the government, Malays had to study Malay, Chinese had to learn Mandarin, and Indians had the choice of Tamil or an Indian language of their choice. Sub-ethnic groups such as the Peranakan Chinese had to adapt to the prevailing educational policies, which meant accelerating their acculturation towards being more Chinese in terms of relinquishing their mother tongue that is a mix of the Hokkien dialect and Baba Malay, for standard Beijing Mandarin. In the past (pre-1979), Peranakan children could and would normally choose to study standard Malay in school as a second language as they already spoke a creolized form of Malay at home, however, after 1979, this was disallowed, and Mandarin became a compulsory second language for all Chinese children. Thus, from being the lingua franca of the Malay Archipelago in the nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century, Baba Malay has now been consigned to the back burner in Singapore.\textsuperscript{118}

In terms of cuisine, Peranakan food qualifies as slow food as it requires a lot of preparation, thus it is now cooked during Chinese New Year or for special occasions rather than on a daily basis. Fortunately, there are a few restaurants that specialize in Peranakan cuisine and it is possible to try it anytime during the year. Clothing-wise, the nonya sarong kebaya is elegant, but restricts movement, as it is skin tight, a symbol of gentle femininity (despite its occasional political significance in the Indonesian context). Due to its impracticability, sarong kebayas are worn mostly on special occasions, with one

\textsuperscript{117} The three groups were Chinese, Malay and Indians. And to forge intra-group unity and identity, Chinese Singaporeans were taught Mandarin as a second language in school and the speaking of Chinese dialects, including Baba Malay (which incorporated Hokkien Chinese in its lexicon) was discouraged. Similarly, although many Indian languages are spoken by the Indian population, Tamil language is taught as a second language to all ethnic Indians in school. However, unlike the Chinese or Malays, Indian children are allowed their choice of second language; they can choose between Tamil or Hindi if they would like to learn another Indian language or even Mandarin or Malay. English is the main medium of academic instruction and constitutes the first language of Singaporeans, a significant unifying factor in a multicultural polity.

prominent exception; the stewardesses on Singapore’s national carrier, Singapore Airlines, who are clothed in a Pierre Balmain designed, figure hugging sarong kebaya.

In terms of religion, the ancestral worship practices that kept Peranakans occupied throughout the year has been slowly whittled down due to busy-ness or replaced entirely by other religions, agnosticism or atheism. As such, what we are left with are artefacts or things that are now finally filling our museums to help us remember the Peranakans.119 We also have Peranakan Associations trying to impart craft and culinary skills to younger Peranakans and teach them about traditional rites and rituals through re-enactments of weddings and festive celebrations. These associations also organize balls and conferences for remnant Peranakans to meet and dress up in traditional garb and reminisce, dance to old Peranakan tunes, speak Baba Malay and ponder Peranakan issues, such as those of the continued viability or re-invention of Peranakan culture. Historical tours to Malacca and other Peranakan enclaves are also run from time to time for members of the association. The final role of art is that of a requiem with regards to the Peranakan culture. For the culture is now showcased as an exhibit, as re-enactments and not a lived experience, perhaps the Peranakans are an accident of history,120 for as quickly as they have sprung up with the trade winds, opportunity and the special historical conditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the culture is now in its death throes due to political factors charting its course since the time of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942-1945).121

The Peranakan Museum, Asian Civilisations Museum and the Singapore Museum all exhibit aspects of Peranakan material culture and social practices as a permanent record of a bygone but charming way of life. Peranakan culture is now a selling point for cultural tourism travel with restaurants dishing up nonya food and enterprising businesses producing replicas of nonyaware and furniture, or selling vintage sarong kebayas, beaded shoes and jewellery. In

119 Patricia Ann Hardwick, "Neither Fish nor Fowl," Folklore Forum 38.1(2008): 47. According to Ho Wing Meng, Peranakan Chinese porcelain was not represented in the National Museum of Singapore’s exhibitions in the early 1980s.
Malacca and Penang, tourists can stay in hotels that used to be old Peranakan style homes, these hotels are of the Straits Eclectic style of architecture that feature ornate and colourful plasterwork of flowers and birds on walls and decorative friezes under the eaves, decorative tiling and louvred shutters. There is an awareness of a passing of an era by the locals and by Peranakans themselves, acknowledging the fact that the anachronistic, transnational, peace-loving lifestyle of the pre-World War two Peranakans cannot be reclaimed and now needs to be conserved for posterity. This is more keenly felt by Peranakans in Singapore than the Peranakans in Malaysia and Indonesia, due to the loss of a crucial language marker, Baba Malay. This is because Malay is still widely spoken in Malaysia and Indonesia by the Chinese population in these countries, and this aspect of speaking the local endemic patois has survived and will contribute to continued cross-cultural understanding, interaction and exchange between the various races, which unfortunately is not the case in Singapore. Tan Chee Beng states that the Chinese in Malaysia have adopted the language of the dominant environment and that “most children of Chinese Malaysians now study in Malay and many of them read better in that language than in Chinese or English.”

**Conclusion**

Art symbolism matters in the Peranakan context as it serves as a record of hybridity with quotidian objects exhibiting a fusion of Chinese, Malay and European elements. Art symbolism matters as learning what each symbol or motif stands for helps us understand a culture better as we view and study their artefacts. When many art symbols are shared across cultures, this constitutes a kind of common language, an ability to utilize the same visual system of representation in large part, as in East Asia and South East Asia. Peranakan quotidian arts matter as artefacts to be conserved for posterity, as Peranakan culture continually evolves and adapts itself to present day Singapore. According to psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, relating internal to external reality requires a suspension of sanity or rational behavior, acceptable only in the intermediate area of experience encompassing “the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts, religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific

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122 Tan, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage in Malaysia and Singapore*, 72.
work.” This would definitely be the case for a Peranakan ancestral worshipper who has to burn incense and hell money, attend daily to the ancestral altars believing that his ancestors are going to somehow bestow health and wealth upon him. Is this stretching one’s credulity too far or, not very different from what other major religions demand of one? And if it is not so very different, perhaps, there might come a day when this neo-Confucianist practice of ancestor worship becomes popular again, thereby restoring one aspect of Peranakan identity. The corner-stone of Peranakan identity is the ability to speak Baba Malay, and the will of present day young Peranakans to re-learn their old mother tongue will determine the viability of the Peranakans as a sub-ethnic Chinese group. This task, though daunting, is quite possible, as evinced by migrants or workers to other countries who through applying themselves to language study manage to communicate in a new lingua franca. Today, Peranakan material culture is seen as chic and cool by both locals and tourists to the island, thus it is an opportune time to launch a Peranakan Renaissance and reverse the acculturation process towards being more Singaporean Peranakan Chinese, than just plain Singaporean Chinese. It boils down to a matter of learning four distinct tongues for the Peranakan person; mother tongue of Hokkien, English as first language, Mandarin as second language and Malay or Baba Malay as the fourth and historical vernacular. This thesis and art praxis is an attempt to weave the four cultural strands, plus Japanese culture, behind these languages into visual language, either in hybrid form or juxtaposed one against the other, either resonating with or resisting the other visually speaking, through the aesthetic use of signs and symbols. It charts my journey as a Peranakan person through time and geographical space as I question the intertwining concepts of heritage, identity, memory and diaspora. The next chapter will take an in-depth look at the symbols on Peranakan ceramics of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century and their meanings explicated and compared against their Chinese and Japanese counterparts. These meanings are normally derived from folklore and some people believe that these symbols imbue the artefacts they grace with latent power as good luck charms and apotropaic magic, whilst others see these symbols as mere ornament on objects and miss their raison d’être.

A Malaccan Nonyaware Collection & its hidden meanings

Introduction
Peranakan art symbolism utilizes all the various types of symbols discussed in Chapter 2; Mandarin homonyms (bats for happiness), metaphors (cranes for longevity), metonyms (phoenixes for brides that are ‘empresses’ on their wedding day) and tags (Daoist God of Longevity, Shōulǎo 寿老, holds a peach and has a very large forehead). This chapter is concerned with the art symbolism found on Peranakan ceramics or nonya ware and how the symbols that occur in nonyaware differ in terms of nuances of meaning or style when compared to symbols found on Chinese and Japanese artifacts. Towards this end, nonyaware belonging to two members of the Peranakan diaspora in Perth have been photographed and studied for their motifs and cross-referenced against previous studies mounted by specialists on nonyaware such as museum curator William Willets, academics Lim Suan Poh and Ho Wing Meng and educator Kee Ming Yuet. These source books confirm that the two

Figure 28. Linda Cheok, God of Longevity with Peach from Mrs. Tan Swee Lin’s Collection. Digital photo. 2013.

125 A nonya is a youthful Peranakan female, with more mature ladies being addressed as bibik, whilst males are referred to as babas.
collections I have chosen are atypical of the nonyaware genre. However as many motifs from the two collections are common to both, only one collection is featured in detail. The Peranakan motifs on nonyaware will be compared against similar motifs found on Japanese and Chinese quotidian objects and their differences or similarities noted. Some of these quotidian objects include chiyogami or traditional hand-printed Japanese patterned papers, kimonos, ukiyo-e or woodblock prints and Chinese roof ornaments. Folkloric tales associated with these motifs have also been included, as these stories are often the very ones that have generated the symbolic meanings behind the motifs in the first place. The subsections in this chapter also provide the key to the symbols in my artworks for the practical component of my research. A tabulated list of these symbols and their meanings has been appended.

**Nonyaware Heirloom Collections**

Collection A, belonging to Mrs. Tan Swee Lin from Malacca and Collection B, belonging to Mrs. Christina Tan from Singapore are the two main collections I have focused on for my study of Peranakan motifs. Assorted nonyaware that I bought from a collector in the 1990s and several pieces from museums in Singapore have also been photographed for this study. As the focus of this thesis is on motifs found on nonya ceramic ware, only items with differing motifs will be dealt with. Only nine ceramic items from Collection A are featured in this chapter, as all the other ceramic pieces in the collection carry similar motifs. As most of the motifs in Collection B are also found in Collection A, only three pieces have been featured; the Dàoguāng period crane bowl in chapter one, and two others. The motifs I have been able to extract from the various collections are not exhaustive, as there are many other collections in existence with specially commissioned patterns and motifs. However, I am satisfied that the main motifs have been dealt with, as several museums in both Singapore and Malacca have been visited, and careful perusal of their nonyaware for their motifs undertaken. To adhere to the word limit, only Collection A is located in the main body of this thesis whilst motifs from the other collections are in the appendix.

**Collection A**

Mrs. Tan Swee Lin inherited a small fraction of her maternal grandmother’s
polychrome enamelled nonyaware when she migrated to Perth from Malacca, the rest have been distributed to her other siblings. Swee-Lin has also inherited her mother-in-law’s collection of underglaze blue and white nonya ceramics commonly called Kitchen Qing. Thus, Swee-Lin has two types of nonyaware; polychrome enamelled ware and blue and white underglaze Kitchen Qing. The former was used for special occasions whilst the blue and white Kitchen Qing was for daily use as it was relatively inexpensive and robust. Furthermore, the Peranakans had to observe the death anniversaries of their ancestors by making offerings of food on these appropriately sombre wares. This dissertation will confine itself to the motifs found on polychrome enamelled ware as this genre of ceramics is peculiar to the Peranakans, unlike Kitchen Qing, which was also used by Chinese diaspora in South East Asia and other diverse places such as America, Europe and Australia.

The reign marks and factory marks stamped on the bases of the polychrome enamelled pieces, trace the oldest item (dessert bowl) in this collection back to 1862-70, made during the reign of Qing Emperor Tóngzhì. The other reign mark found on some of the items is that of Qing Emperor Guāngxù, 1875-1908 (光緒年制 Guāngxù niánzhì). Stamped marks of four factories from the pottery-producing town of Jīngdězhèn; Cáoshùntài zào, Zhānfúxìng zào, Wángshēngsù zào and Chéngyìtài zào were also on some of the pieces. These factory-made wares were mostly produced from 1908 till about 1920, as they had to cease operations due to civil unrest.

Figure 29. Linda Cheok. Reign mark of Emperor Tóngzhì (Dàqíng Tóngzhì Niánzhì). 2014.

126 Kee, Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese, 236. Kitchen Qing was produced during the Qing dynasty for export to the Malay Archipelago and Europe.
127 Blue is taken as a substitute for black, which is a colour associated with mourning together with white.
128 Kee, Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese, 236.
129 Ibid., 47.
Ten types of Polychrome Enamels in Collection A – twenty-six items in total

1. Motifs on Tóngzhì 同治 era (1862-70) dessert bowl with high curved fluted cavetti, gilt-edged rim. Diameter 15.5cm; Height: 7cm. (Two pieces in the collection)

The following motifs were found on the bowl; crickets, peaches, lychees, cicada and flowers of the four seasons – peonies for spring, lotuses for summer, chrysanthemums for autumn and plum blossoms for winter. These motifs carry a wealth of meaning, for example, the flowers of the four seasons depicted as a group symbolizes "peace and fortune throughout the year." 130 Insects as a group represents fertility and abundance. However, individually, they carry deeper, particular meanings. The cricket, for example, is an emblem of courage and a symbol of power 131 as it displays valour during cricket fights arranged by humans both in bygone days 132 and today in China. 133 The cricket xīshuài蟋蟀 is also a homonym for happiness xǐ喜 and auspiciousness xǐ禧。The cicada is the emblem of immortality and resurrection as it issues forth from the earth after 17 years underground, climbs up a tree, moults and flies off to find its mate. 134 The two fruits on the bowl, peaches and lychees stand for longevity, and heirs and intelligence respectively. Where the peach is concerned, it functions as a tag identifying immortals such as the stellar god of Longevity, or the chief of the eight immortals, Zhōnglí Quán钟离权 as these gods are depicted holding peaches. 135 Another tag to help identify Zhōnglí Quán is his bare-bellied rotund figure and a feathered fan that he wields to revive the dead. 136 The peach’s link

130 Amrine, Peranakan Museum Guide, 263.
to longevity has been derived from folklore such as that of Sūn Wù Kōng, 孙悟空 or Monkey God who ate up all the peaches in the garden of the Mother Goddess of the West and became immortal.\textsuperscript{137} The other fruit, the lychee or Lizhī荔枝 is a summer fruit and is often depicted together with cicadas, making identification of the fruit easy. Otherwise, sans cicada, the depicted lychee could be interpreted as Chinese mulberries or even the Chinese strawberry or arbutus. The lychee has several homonyms lì zǐ 利子 meaning having an heir, or monetary interest, or lì 利 meaning intelligence.\textsuperscript{138}

2. Motifs on Guǎngxù 光緒 era (1875-1908) offering plate with wavy rim and a foot-rim (see fig. 25). Diameter: 18cm. Height: 3cm (Two pieces in the collection)

These offering plates were used for religious offerings on All Souls’ Day, and for serving food in the usual fashion. A phoenix in flight circling peonies and
a mossy rock (its perch) forms the main design of the plate. The plate rim is decorated with the eight Buddhist symbols connected by undulating ribbons, this Buddhist border design is typically found on many nonyaware plates, bowls, covers, teapots, jars, vases, spittoons and trays. The foot rim features sea waves. The underside of the plate is decorated with sprigs of peonies and plum blossoms.

![Image of a plate with sea wave patterns on foot rim]

Figure 37. Linda Cheok, Guangxu 光緒 offering plate with sea wave patterns on foot rim. Digital photo. 2014.

The Phoenix and the Peony

The phoenix and peony theme is ubiquitous on polychrome enameled pieces. The mythical phoenix is chief among feathered creatures in Chinese symbolism, though only second in importance after the dragon in the hierarchy of the “four miraculous creatures”, the other two being the tortoise and the qílín麒麟 or unicorn. These four intelligent creatures are featured in the Pángǔ 盘古 Chinese creation myth in the ancient text, the Lǐjì 禮記, believed to have been authored by Confucius.139 In the tale, these four creatures assisted Pángǔ, the Chinese Adam, to “set the economy of the universe in order.”140 Thus the phoenix occurs as progenitor in mythology, besides being a symbol for the south, a metonymic symbol for the empress, and when sighted singing on a paulownia tree, a portentous symbol of the birth of a great sage and a sign of good government and rule. Of the four creatures, only the phoenix is given

prominence in Peranakan ceramics. The tortoise is featured in some nonyaware as a stylized border design. Fig 38 is a close-up of one such stylized border on a display plate at the Singapore Peranakan Museum. In Japan, the phoenix is also considered an auspicious imperial symbol, and thus used on clothing, personal effects and buildings of the Japanese emperors.\textsuperscript{141}

The peony, although impossible to cultivate in tropical South East Asia, still remains the “Queen of Flowers” with regards to Peranakan imagery. This temperate climate flower requires frosty winters to bloom, and is therefore only available at upmarket florists in warmer climes. Having never seen the actual bloom, is however no bar to the peony being revered for its symbolic significance as the emblem of wealth and distinction. Or perhaps its rarity prompted an increased desirability.

The Eight Buddhist Symbols

The eight Buddhist symbols bā jíxiáng 八吉祥, featured round the plate rim were originally derived from “the very oldest stratum of Indian royal ceremony.” These Indian royalty symbols were presented during the coronation of a king, and included the wheel of the law, the conch shell, a parasol, a banner of victory, a lotus, a vase filled with the nectar of immortality, a pair of golden fishes and an endless knot. However, in Buddhism, these eight symbols represent good fortune and it is believed that Buddha received these eight offerings from the Indian Gods when he achieved enlightenment.

Wheel of the Law

For example, Brahma, the Hindu God of creation is said to have given Buddha the wheel of the law that is essentially a moral code of conduct, to turn or rotate and expound on Buddha’s teachings. Just like a wheel that rotates swiftly, so too does the transforming power of Buddha’s teaching effect positive spiritual change in a follower’s life. These wheels originate from the wheels of Indian war chariots that often have blades attached to them in order to viciously decimate the enemy whilst in their midst. The eight spokes of the wheel refer to the eight-fold path to enlightenment and the circular form of the wheel symbolizes the complete and perfect nature of Buddha’s teaching. Buddhists believe

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144 Ibid., 185.
that there will be a stop to suffering when the truth of the eight-fold path is revealed by Buddha, and that this path encompasses right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. The wheel is a popular traditional motif in Japan and is depicted either on its own or as a flower cart. It sprang from the use of ox carts during the Heian period (AD 794 - 1185) for transporting people and goods, however, after the late fifteenth century the ox cart was only used during imperial ceremonies. In the Edo period (AD 1615 – 1868), the cart filled with flowers of the four seasons sans ox became popular. As such the wheel in Japan is a secular motif, associated with nobility and prestige rather than a Buddhist symbol. The wheel is also sometimes depicted half submerged in water on lacquer ware and textiles of the feudal period. This semi submersion evokes a mood of sadness or mono no aware or pathos of things.


Figure 43. Linda Cheok, Flower Cart on Chiyogami Paper. Digital Scan. 2014.

Conch Shell

In the ancient Indian epic, Mahabharata, warriors blew the conch shell to announce the beginning and end to battle. In Tibetan Buddhism, blowing on the conch shell is a physical calling to worship of devotees to gather together. In a metaphorical sense, the conch shell horn trumpet makes a resounding drone and this is akin to Buddha’s sermons as contained within the wheel of the law being heard loud and clear by devotees. In Japan, the conch shell is a metonymic symbol for the life of a reclusive monk.

Umbrella

Traditionally, umbrellas were used to shelter Indian royalty from inclement weather, initially these umbrellas were silk parasols but later on from about the fourth century AD, water proof umbrellas made from oiled paper stretched over bamboo spokes were also used. Furthermore, as umbrellas are held over the head it symbolizes honour and respect. As a Buddhist religious symbol, the umbrella metaphorically protects one from the heat of defilement stemming from desire, sickness, suffering, obstacles and other harmful human or natural forces. In Peranakan and traditional Chinese weddings, the groomsman carries a ceremonial umbrella and holds it over the bride’s head to symbolically ward off harm.

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150 Baird, Symbols of Japan, 13.
to her body.\(^{153}\) In the East Asian context, umbrellas have been a symbol of power associated with imperial institutions and in Japanese artistic design, the umbrella is a popular motif in wood block printing, family crests or *mon*, and umbrellas are also used as stage decoration.\(^{154}\) In both Chinese and Japanese folklore, umbrellas have the ability to harbour ghosts. In Chinese superstition, opening an umbrella indoors might release a spirit or ghost into one’s home, especially during the Hungry Ghost month that falls on the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar as ghouls are believed to be on a month long hiatus from hell. A superstition regarding umbrellas in Malaysia common to both Malays and Peranakans is that a snake would appear if umbrellas are opened indoors. Whilst in Japan, there is a religious *Shingon* Buddhist belief that objects that have existed and served mankind for a hundred years could receive souls.\(^{155}\) These objects are called *tsukumogami* or artefact spirits, one example of which is an umbrella spirit, *kasa-obake* that has been featured in Japanese woodblock prints, in stage plays and movies. The Chinese and Malay reasons for not opening up umbrellas indoors probably has the commonsensical motivation of not wanting to knock things over, poke someone in the eye or create puddles of water on the floor. If a powerful taboo were created with frightful results for the recalcitrant person, the undesirable action would not be perpetrated. However, the Japanese umbrella demon is friendlier, with overtones of an eco-friendly message of non-wastage by encouraging people to continue using functional old things instead of discarding them and suffering the wrath of vengeful tsukumogami.

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Figure 46. Linda Cheok, *Showcase display of a Peranakan Wedding at the Peranakan Museum*. Digital Photo. 2014.


Figure 48. Linda Cheok, *Chiyogami Umbrellas*. Digital Scan. 2014.

Canopy or Banner

The canopy or victory banner had its origins in ancient Indian warfare, as it was the military standard carried on the back of a general’s chariot. When this imagery was transferred to Buddhist iconography, it came to symbolize Buddha’s victorious enlightenment and triumph over demonic defilements.\(^\text{156}\) In East Asia, both the canopy and umbrella are symbols of power and still widely used in religious and imperial contexts.\(^\text{157}\)

Lotus

The lotus functions as a metaphorical symbol for purity, as the lotus is able to rise above the murky waters unstained and fragrant. Besides denoting purity, it is a sacred symbol that stands for perfection, compassion and renunciation\(^\text{158}\) that furnishes an explanation for Buddhist deities seated on lotus mounts.\(^\text{159}\) The lotus is also a metaphor for fertility as there are numerous lotus seeds in each lotus pod.

\(^{156}\) Beer, "The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs," 180.
\(^{157}\) Baird, Symbols of Japan, 276.
\(^{158}\) Beer, "The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs," 37.
\(^{159}\) Baird, Symbols of Japan, 88.
In Japanese and Chinese cuisine and medicine, every part of the lotus plant is utilized.\textsuperscript{160} The root, thinly sliced and deep-fried, adorn plates as delicate crisps, the root may also be double boiled in herbal soups or pickled. Lotus leaves are used to wrap up parcels of rice and meat and steamed. The flowers and leaves are brewed as tea and the nodes of the leaves are juiced and drunk as a cure for nosebleeds. The lotus flowers are said to heal skin disorders\textsuperscript{161} Lotus seeds feature in most Chinese desserts, for example, the Chinese mooncake is essentially a ball of sweetened lotus seed paste covered with pastry, pushed into a moon-shaped mould and baked. Mooncakes were originally conceived as a means of revering the moon fairy Cháng Ê 嫦娥, who is the wife of the mythical hero Hōu Yī 后羿 who shot down nine suns from the sky to prevent the earth from burning up. Cháng É was virtuous, and in order to prevent the elixir of life from being consumed by an evil man, she swallowed the potion and was immediately transported to the moon, with only an elixir producing rabbit for company. The lotus seed paste filling is ostensibly a metaphor for the purity of Cháng É’s nature as evinced by her sacrificial act of swallowing the potion and forfeiting a happy life with her husband on earth.\textsuperscript{162}

Figure 52. Linda Cheok, Chinese Mooncake filled with lotus seed paste. Digital Photo. 2014.

Vase

Figure 53. Linda Cheok, Vase. Digital photo. 2014.

\textsuperscript{161} Symbols of Japan, 88.
The vase is a repository for inexhaustible treasure in Buddhist lore. This treasure is however, a symbol for spiritual abundance and the fulfillment of spiritual wishes, and not material wealth.\textsuperscript{163} Nonetheless, the general symbolic meaning attached to vases is one of storage and satisfaction of material wants and wishes.\textsuperscript{164} The commonly accepted meaning of the vase where the Peranakans are concerned is that it acts as a symbol that attracts material treasure and that it contains the elixir of life.\textsuperscript{165} The homonym for vase 瓶 píng is peace 平 also pronounced píng, thus the vase is also a symbol for peace.

**Fishes**

![image]

Figure 54. Linda Cheok, *Fishes*. Digital photo. 2014.

Two fishes are normally depicted head to head and represent fertility, freedom and salvation from suffering.\textsuperscript{166} Some fish are able to spawn thousands of offspring and are thus, an apt metaphoric symbol for fertility. Likewise, fishes in the ocean are free to roam far and wide, hence the idea of fish as a stand-in for freedom and happiness. As an early Indian symbol the pair of fishes referred to the two sacred rivers in India, the Ganges and the Yamuna.\textsuperscript{167}

In secular Chinese culture, fish 魚 is the rebus for “having more than enough” or 魚 余, as the two words are homonyms. Japanese and Chinese cultures view the carp or koi as a symbol for strength, perseverance and endurance. This is due largely to an old legend,\textsuperscript{163, 164, 165, 166, 167}

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[164] Rinpoche, *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture*, 22.
\item[165] Kee, *Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese*, 69.
\item[167] Beer, "The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs," 176.
\end{footnotesize}
common to both countries of carps swimming upstream and leaping over the dragon gate (rapids in the Yellow River) and being transformed into powerful dragons. This legend is in itself an allegorical tale of studious young men achieving success against all odds in the Imperial civil service exams and as a result, achieving status, high position and eventual wealth.\textsuperscript{168}

**The Eternity Knot**

![Eternity Knot](image)

The eternity knot is also known as the endless knot as it loops back into itself. It has its genesis in the Hindu shrivatsa or nandyavarta symbols which look like the Greek swastika or hooked cross.\textsuperscript{169} Shri refers to the Goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, and the shrivastsa is an auspicious hooked curl of hair that adorns her husband Vishnu’s chest and presents as a looped knot. As the lines of the endless knot intersect at many points, going over and under each other, it is a metaphorical symbol for how all things are somehow connected to each other.\textsuperscript{170} If an endless knot is placed on a gift, it symbolizes a wish for good and lucky relations between the giver and recipient of the present. Visually-speaking, the middle portion of the knot could be interpreted as a cross or a swastika. In Buddhism, the eternity knot is a symbol for Buddha’s wisdom and compassion that knows no end. Thus the swastika, “wàn” or 卍 as derived from the eternity knot was originally an auspicious symbol of good fortune, and in Daoism, the swastika symbol is taken to represent the word “wàn” 万 or ten thousand as it is its homonym.

\textsuperscript{168} Benjamin A. Elman, “Civil Service Examinations,” in Berkshire Encyclopaedia of China (Berkshire Publishing Group LLC, 2009), 405. These Biennial exams (instituted in 650, ended 1905) attracted about two to three million candidates, with the success rate pegged at one to a thousand in 1850 A.D.). Variations of this merit-based exam system exist to this day in countries influenced by Confucianism, especially Singapore, Japan and Korea. In essence, students who do well in the National exams will gain entry into the top universities, which makes securing a good career easier upon graduation.

\textsuperscript{169} Beer, "The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs," 176.

\textsuperscript{170} McArthur, Reading Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols, 119.
In the Chinese language, “ten thousand” has the connotation of infinity, thus when the Chinese officials prostrate themselves before the emperor and declare, “wànsuì！wànsuì！wànwànsuì！” “万岁！万岁！万万岁”， it is a wish for the emperor’s reign to last forever. The same Chinese characters or ideograms are pronounced “banzai”万岁 in Japanese, and also mean venerating the ruling emperor. However, as these were the rallying words uttered by Japanese soldiers during World War Two whilst in suicide attack mode, it is now tinged with a slightly negative connotation.171

Sea Wave Pattern

As the plate is an offering plate, the sea waves which denote the element of water probably have Buddhist or Daoist religious overtones. Water is the yin or female principle in Chinese cosmology and is soft, yielding and pliant. However, a passage from chapter seventy eight of the Dàodé jīng 道德经 written by the philosopher and founder of Daoism Lǎozi 老子 states, “Weak overcomes strong, soft overcomes hard.”172 Seemingly paradoxical, this is seen to be true in several instances; flowing water for example can wear down a hard rock over time. The pattern of quarter circle curved lines above represent the sea. The green undulating border with vertical lines above the wave pattern could be mountains, stylized halves of the banana leaf or the upturned rim of a lily pad.

3. Motifs on Finger Bowl with Zhānfǔxìng zào 詹福興造 factory mark (made at the very end of the Qing Dynasty era, around 1911). Wavy

mouth rim with Eight Buddhist emblems linked together with trailing ribbons and exterior with a pair of pink ogival medallions enclosing flying phoenixes encircling a peony. The white glazed interior features a sprig of peony whilst the foot rim or base is decorated with stylized lime green and pink lotus petals. Height: 8cm, Diameter: 6cm

Ribbon and Sash Motif

Figure 57. Linda Cheok, Finger Bowl with wavy mouth rim in polychrome enameled colours featuring the Phoenix and Peony theme and eight Buddhist emblem border. Digital photo. 2014.

Figure 58. Linda Cheok, Base of finger bowl with Zhānfúxing zào 詹福興造 shop mark and stylized lotus petal border. Digital photo. 2014.

Figure 59. Linda Cheok, Peony sprig inside finger bowl. Each Buddhist emblem is embellished with a wavy ribbon or sash. Digital photo. 2014.

Figure 60. Linda Check, Detail of Zhanfuxing shopmark on base of Late Qing bowl. Digital photo. 2014.

Figure 61. Supersentai. Traditional Chinese Wedding Attire. 2009. Wikimedia Commons.
In Mandarin, the ribbon or sash 带 dai motif is a rebus for the word “generations”, as the image is read for its sound value of “generation” which is also pronounced dài 代. 带, dài besides meaning sash, also has the additional meaning of bringing something along, or parenting children. In Buddhist and Daoist art imagery, ribbons often entwine treasured objects indicating the function of the beribboned objects as powerful charms. Ribbons emphasize the auspicious and miraculous properties of the objects they embellish and in the late Qing Peranakan finger bowl (figure 49), the Buddhist emblems are wrapped around with alternating ultramarine and turquoise trailing ribbons to augment ornamentation as well as to help lead the eye around the rim of the bowl to all eight different emblems. The red wedding sash that connects a couple, besides being an auspicious symbol for their future conjugal felicity, is also a wish for them to bear children and ensure generational succession.

4. Late Qing (1644- 1911) Spoons with Phoenix and Peony theme.
   Length: 12.5cm, Height : 5 cm. (Six pieces in the collection)
   The body and tail feather of the phoenix fills up the slim handle of the spoon in another instance of horror vacui or good form fitting design.

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173 Baird, Symbols of Japan, 270.
5. Late Qing (1644-1911) Lime green and Mauve Teapot with Phoenix and Peony theme and Eight Buddhist Symbols. Length : 13cm, Height : 8cm.

This teapot was used for pouring water for datuk or Buddha and Buddhist deities in Mrs. Tan Swee-Lin’s family as part of Buddhist worship rites. The water is poured into eight tea bowls, and the water that fills each bowl
represents eight items offered as sacrifice; water for drinking, water with which to wash one’s feet, flower infused fragrant water, incense and rice, candles, perfume, food and music. The logic behind using water as a substitute for incense, rice, candles, perfume, food and music, is the high cost of proffering these items on a daily basis.

6. Ogee-shaped, everted gilt-edged wavy rimmed medium-sized dessert bowls (10.9 cm diameter and 5.5 cm height) with pink foot rim and Cáoshùntai Zao 曹順泰造 shop mark (1900). (Six pieces in the collection)

These medium-sized dessert bowls feature the eight Buddhist emblems, the peony and a phoenix. Four of the Buddhist emblems are featured on the outer bowl rim with the remaining four on the inner rim, the symbols are on pink ground with alternating lotus blooms and trailing ribbons.

7. Ogee-shaped, everted gilt-edged wavy rimmed small dessert bowls (7.5 cm diameter and 4.3 cm height) with pink foot rim and Wángshēng sùzào 王生肅造 shop mark (1900). (Three pieces in the collection)

These small bowls feature a butterfly on one side and a peony on the opposite side on white ground. The inner bowl rim has four Buddhist emblems (wheel, shell, banner and umbrella) and the outer rim the remaining four emblems (lotus, eternity knot, vase and fish). These emblems are decorated on pink ground with trailing ribbons. The inside well features a pink and white five-petal peony bloom.
Butterfly Motif

In Chinese culture, the butterfly or Húdié 蝴蝶 is an emblem of joy, a symbol of summer, conjugal felicity and longevity. ¹⁷⁴ Though naturally short-lived with an average life span of a month, the butterfly is a metaphor for longevity as dié 蝶 is a homonym for seventy 廿, also pronounced dié. ¹⁷⁵ When depicted with a flower it forms the “butterfly admiring flower” motif with man as the butterfly and woman as the flower. ¹⁷⁶ This “butterfly admiring flower” motif is a recurring one in Chinese style batiks that were produced in the north coast of central Java, Indonesia, for both local and export markets from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. ¹⁷⁷ Although the depiction of fauna is normally frowned upon by the Muslim faith, the butterfly seems to have escaped censure and is a popular batik motif in both Malaysia and Indonesia. ¹⁷⁸

In feudal Japan, the butterfly, besides being a symbol for immortality and magic was also a popular family crest for the samurai class, as the butterfly being an allegory of rebirth after death into the Buddhist cosmos provided hope and comfort to these warriors who faced imminent death during battles. The butterfly motif is also featured in the twelfth century Tale of the Heike, firstly as the

medieval crest of the vanquished Taira clan\textsuperscript{179}, and secondly when the Taira warriors and nobility were transformed into butterflies at their deaths during the final battle of Dannoura.\textsuperscript{180} Short-lived warriors and butterflies are examples of the \textit{mono no aware} aesthetic discussed earlier in chapter two about the pathos of things and the ephemeral.

The classic Tang Dynasty (618-906) romantic tale, \textit{Butterfly Lovers}, is about true love defying the grave when a pair of butterflies is seen emerging from their joint graves.\textsuperscript{181}

8. Green enamelled flower vase in baluster form with a flared gilt-edged mouth rim. Underside of mouth rim decorated with a \textit{rúyì} 如意 (lucky fungus) border pattern in pink yellow and blue. Vase neck decorated with two peonies, two green and gold fo-dog (lion dogs) handles and two mauve lizard-like hornless chi dragons. The body of the vase decorated with two pink ogival medallions with standing phoenix on peony plant with pink blooms and partially opened flower buds. The remaining spaces surrounding the medallions filled with peony leaves and blooms and around the base of the vase a stylized border of lotus petals in blue, green, pink and yellow. Interior and base of the vase white-glazed. Height: 25cm, diameter of mouth rim: 8cm, diameter of base: 7.5cm and the widest part of the vase body: approximately 32cm. Indistinct reign mark, possibly Guāngxù 光绪 period (1875-1908).

\textsuperscript{181} Cultural China, "Classic Love Stories from China," Shanghai News and Press Bureau http://traditions.cultural-china.com/en/211Traditions7917.html. Butterfly Lovers tells the story of an erudite beauty, Zhu Yingtai, disguising herself as a man in order to pursue her studies in the city of Hangzhou. Whilst in Hangzhou, she meets and lodges with a fellow scholar Liang Shanbo for three years. Shanbo is oblivious to her real sex and treats her with brotherly affection. They part ways after graduation, but several months later, Shanbo visits Yingtai in her hometown to look “him” up. He was pleasantly surprised to discover that his friend was in fact a female and lost no time in falling violently in love. However, although Yingtai loved Shanbo in equal measure, it was impossible for her to break off her betrothal to another, which caused Shanbo to fall into a swift decline and die shortly of a broken heart. On the day of Yingtai’s wedding to her betrothed, just as her wedding procession came upon the site of Shanbo’s grave, a freak storm sprang up and split the grave open. Yingtai being thus supernaturally beckoned, immediately leapt into the fissure and was swallowed up by the earth, preferring death and eternity with Shanbo to mortal life with another man. When the storm ceased, the wedding entourage witnessed a pair of butterflies, believed to be the couples’ spirits, emerging from the spot, fluttering about joyfully.
Figure 70 Linda Cheok. *Baluster vase with phoenix and peonies on green ground. Indistinct reign mark.* Height: 25 cm. Digital Photo. 2014.

Figure 71. Linda Cheok, *Detail: ruyi (lucky fungus) “As You Wish” border and Fo Dog handle.* Digital Photo. 2014.

Figure 72. Linda Cheok, *Indistinct reign mark.* Digital Photo. 2014.
Fó 佛 dog or lion dog Motif

The lion dog or Fó dog is also known as the Lion of Buddha or more simply, stone lion shíshī 石狮. The punning tendency in Chinese culture has also resulted in the word fó 佛 (Buddha) approximating fú 福 which means wealth or luck. In general, from its appearance and characteristics, the lion has traditionally been a metaphorical symbol for the majestic and royal and were introduced into China from Persia in A.D. 67\textsuperscript{182}, around the same time as the introduction of Buddhism and its iconography into China.\textsuperscript{183} The Buddhist symbolic meaning for lions is that they are guardians of Buddha, Buddhist temples and buildings. The lion also acts as a tag for the youthful Boddhisattva Manjusri, the Boddhisattva of Wisdom often depicted mounted on a white lion.\textsuperscript{184}

These guardian lions are paired, with the female on the left and the male on the right (looking out from the building). The female has a cub under her left paw whilst the male lion has an “embroidered” ball under its right paw.\textsuperscript{185} As these lions are normally portrayed as playful and kitten-like, prancing around and sporting with the embroidered ball, they are unintimidating and have sometimes been mistaken as dogs, and referred to as fó-dogs.\textsuperscript{186} Regarding real dogs, there is a Chinese myth or belief that stray or strange dogs wandering into

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{182} Eberhard, A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought, 164.
\textsuperscript{183} McArthur, Reading Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols, 53.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{185} Eberhard, A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought, 164.
\textsuperscript{186} Welch, Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery, 244.
\end{flushleft}
one’s home are harbingers of good luck. All these layers of meanings for both the lion and dog are incorporated into the Peranakan fó lion dog in figure 74, which looks friendly and very much like the Pekinese breed. An explanation for this peculiarity could be that the vase was made during the Qing Dynasty when these dogs were popular due to the Empress Dowager CiXi’s fondness for the breed. This fondness was however politically expedient as the Pekinese dog is literally called shīzīgǒu or lion-dog and as Manchus are named after the lion-riding Boddhisattva Manjusri, the more lion imagery saturates their rule, the better. Thus by associating their rule with lion and lion dog imagery, the attendant symbolic meanings of wisdom, wealth and good guardianship are conflated and simultaneously invoked.

Japanese lion-dog sculptures that accompanied Buddha statues first appeared in Japan during the sixth century A.D. with the spread of Buddhism into Japan from China via Korea. They were a little different from Chinese lion-dogs as these paired lion-dogs would have the male with an open mouth and the female with its mouth shut. Additionally, the female would have a horn on its head to signify that it is actually a lion-dog, whilst the male sans horn is a true lion. They are called komainu, meaning Korean dogs as their appearance was thought to have approximated dogs in Korea.

Figure 74. Linda Cheok, Pair of fó-dogs in the Singapore Peranakan Museum. Digital Photo. 2014.

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187 Eberhard, A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought, 164. A Boddhisattva is a perfected being who elects to stay on earth instead of going on to paradise in order to help humans break out of samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.
189 Ibid.
190 Baird, Symbols of Japan, 146.
Chi Dragons

According to Chinese mythology, chi dragons are actually young dragons that have yet to grow out their horns. They are lizard-like in shape and will become full-fledged horned dragons after about two millennia and in three millennia they sprout wings.\(^{191}\) Chi dragons are also called 螭吻 chīwěn and are said to like to swallow things and have a fondness for water. In terms of etymology, chī 螭 means “hornless dragon” and wěn 吻 is “to swallow”. Chīwěn are thus found on the ends of roof ridges for two reasons. Firstly, their fondness for water guards the buildings from fire hazards\(^{192}\) as they are bearers of water to put out any fires. Secondly, their penchant for swallowing things enables them to swallow up evil and miscreants. Folk mythology tells of a wicked Prince Min of the state of Qi 齊 during the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 B.C.), placed up on the roof to die a miserable death from exposure as punishment for his deeds.\(^{193}\) If he were to try getting off his designated perch by backing up the roof ridge, the guardian beasts would devour him; and if he were to try sliding down the ridge, a chīwěn would swallow him up. Qi and chī are homonyms and perhaps chīwěn literally means “swallowing up the Qi Prince”.

9. Butterfly-shaped Cricket Box with breathing holes on lid decorated with peonies on lime green ground and four-petalled blooms with scrolled stems and foliage on pink ground rim. The breathing holes are gathered into two circular groups of five, with a square hole in the middle approximating the look of Chinese coins. Height of box: 4.4 cm, Length: 12.6 cm. No reign or shop marks stamped on base, possibly Guāngxù 光緒 era (1875-1908 A.D.)

Coin Motif

Figure 77. Linda Cheok, Cricket Box with peonies and coin-shaped breathing holes. Digital Photo. 2014.

Figure 78. Qing Dynasty coin (1644-1911 A.D.) from the Teaching and Research Collection of Laval University Library. Digital photo by Cephas, Wikimedia Commons. 2013.
Cosmologically, the round shape of the coin alludes to the all encompassing universe or heavens whilst the square hole represents the earth. The coin motif is also a symbol of prosperity, protection when worn as an amulet and a good luck charm when carried as a talisman.

10. Serving plate with gilt-edged rim, pink and purple peonies and phoenix perched on a mossy rock on white ground. The inner rim of the plate has four Buddhist emblems; wheel, conch, umbrella and canopy. White glazed outer walls of this sloped plate painted with two pink and blue floral sprays. Diameter: 10cm, Height: 1.8cm. Chén yìtài Zào 程義泰造 shop mark (1900). Chipped.

Mossy Rocks

Moss 茅 tái is a homonym for seniority, great age or longevity, also pronounced 太 tái. Rocks are also symbols for longevity, thus when combined with mosses the overall feeling is that of a great patina of age and seniority.

Mosses are present only when the air and water quality of an area is good, thus the mossy rocks hint at a superior paradisiacal locale inhabited by the phoenix with peonies growing in profusion.

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196 Ibid., 64.
Peranakan Material Culture and Thing Theory

From the preceding account of the motifs found on nonyaware pieces, one can either view these crockery dispassionately, as mere material objects, or see them as things with particular subject-object relations. For the Christian or non-religious Peranakan, it would be the former, but, for a Peranakan practicing ancestral worship, the tea pots, tea cups, plates and bowls that have come into contact with the spiritual realm are probably viewed as quasi-objects that function as a bridge or conduit to the metaphysical and are objects that are infused with or transformed by a kind of aura. Bill Brown, professor of English at the University of Chicago has, amongst several definitions, described a thing as “what is excessive in objects”, and this description seems like a good fit for nonyaware and kitchen Qing.198 This is because these wares, or ‘objects’, sport a profusion of symbols, and when these symbols are properly interpreted by its owner or ‘subject’, the object acquires the ability to function as a charm, a thing with powers. ‘What is excessive in objects’ is thus the feeling of ‘sacredness’ and talismanic effect derivable from the depicted motifs. In addition, dining off these same plates that unseen ancestor spirits had metaphorically used, and consuming the food that was offered up for worship would evoke the feeling of being connected to one’s ancestral spirits in a tangible way. The very nature of the ceramic medium, constituted from clay connects one to the earth and to mankind as death and putrefaction returns us all into the world as dirt, grit and clay. Therefore a feeling of universality and antiquity is embedded in the clay medium itself for it is composed of a multitude of past lives. The line between people and objects is thus blurred, for in death the animate becomes inanimate. And coming full circle, inert earth is transformed into a ceramic thing in the hands of the potter and imbued with life and functionality from without. Using and viewing ceramics in this fashion as vessels of worship thus highlights another aspect of the social life of these things.

“What is excessive in objects” also encompasses the idea that when an object ceases to fulfill the function it was originally created for, it becomes a thing. In the case of Peranakan ceramics, they have stopped being plates, bowls, soup tureens and objects of utility for the dining table, and are now thus things,
though as such they become useful as objects of aesthetic contemplation. When Peranakan ceramics were being used as tableware in the past in Peranakan homes, they were paid scant attention, almost as if the human subject were seeing through them. But when taken out of this circuit, as for example when collectors came to purchase these items from Peranakan homes, Peranakan ware became noticed for itself, its genealogy, its economic value and its unique aesthetic aura. Its thingness is noticed for it being more than a plate or bowl. It gains a quality of excess by virtue of these other values.

The values that constitute its thingness also serve to illustrate the broad purpose of thing theory that examines how the inanimate object world helps to form and transform human beings. A Peranakan person is formed by the transmission of cultural values that includes constant exposure to distinctively Peranakan objects and their accompanying diasporic tale of hybridity. Perusing these objects, and understanding their historical significance as symbols of transnational hybridity has the potential of transforming one’s world view for in looking back at a complex culture we can move forward and celebrate the “right to difference in equality”.199

Having crossed the continents and settled into Australia, these Peranakan artefacts in the various collections, along with their owners, have begun a new transnational chapter in their lives; with these things currently cherished for both their commercial and sentimental value. This has not always been the case, as can be seen from the changing status of Peranakan ware through diachronic time; these bespoke ware began life derided by the very artisans that created them for being ‘barbaric’ due to their florid hues, they have also been slighted by the ceramic collecting art world as inferior ware till about the late 1970s. Furthermore, sometime in the mid-twentieth century it was the vogue for Perankan families to discard their old nonyaware for European dinner sets, and nonyaware languished in obscurity in second hand shops and flea markets. The tide however turned and nonyaware has become highly sought after since the eighties.

199 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012), xvii.
The function of these things has changed, and collectors now keep them in glass cupboards, admired but scarcely used, for fear of breaking a plate or bowl that is now worth hundreds or perhaps, thousands of dollars. They have become heirlooms, prized commodities for investments and wanted by Christie’s for auction. Echoing Arjun Appadurai’s words, yesterday’s trash has morphed into today’s treasure and tomorrow’s heirloom. There is a human parallel in this discourse, as initially, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Peranakan person was considered as part of the elite in society and his language, the lingua franca of the region. However Peranakan culture went into a decline after the Second World War and was largely ignored till its inherent qualities of openness and acceptance of other cultures was remarked upon in the globalizing world context from about three decades ago. Today, various museums in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia showcase Peranakan culture and the Peranakan person of old as a model for the future in terms of outlook towards life and other races.

Afterword
The meaning one can derive from symbolic motifs on objects is dependent on the subjective interpretation of the viewer. This interpretation is culture-bound: the more alike the cultures are, or the more common cultural ground they share, the greater the overlap of visual symbols will be for people from different races or ethnicities. For example, the bat, a symbol that stands for happiness in the Far East is viewed negatively as portentous of evil in the occident because the stories behind the genesis of the symbols differ widely. In the Far East, the bat’s happy meaning is derived from its Mandarin homonym and disseminated regionally through horizontal transmission of culture. In the occident, the nocturnal habits of the bat and people’s general unfamiliarity with the animal, coupled with the bat’s unsavoury reputation in Bram Stoker’s Dracula has branded it as evil. However, some symbols are universal, common across almost all cultures because they are nature-based, and inspired by animistic nature worship, such as water waves, spirals, clouds and mountains.

As Peranakan, Chinese and Japanese cultures spring from the same roots, their symbols mostly bear identical meanings, differing only in stylistic application on objects. With Peranakan objects, it is an aesthetic of profusion with objects entirely covered with packed ornamentation. With traditional Chinese quotidian objects, symmetry, balance and order are important. Japanese ornament is unique in that it is usually asymmetrical and exhibits either one or the other of two antithetical aesthetic styles, either of gaudy hade or astringently restrained shibui. In other words, visual symbolism in the Far East can generally be said to be the same in essentials, differing only in style. Furthermore, in terms of the symbolic Chinese script, nearly two thousand characters are shared in common between literate Chinese and Japanese persons, making it easier for each party to learn the language of the other. This relative ease in communication is probably a key reason why Chinese residents in Japan form the largest grouping of Japan’s foreign population, and why the second most popular city in the world for Japanese living abroad is Shanghai.201

As the meaning of visual symbols has to be learnt, only those au fait with Far Eastern symbology will be able to interpret the phoenix and peony motif as both metonym and metaphor for the Peranakans in South East Asia and beyond – a dispersal of resilient Chinese southwards from China, seeking wealth, and honour in a sunny clime. Cherished symbols on their crockery is an exposé of their sanguine mindset, hopeful and optimistic with regards to living a life of plenty, not just wealth, but a holistic happiness; five bats on a bowl thus denotes five happinesses – health, wealth, longevity, love of virtue or doing the right thing and a peaceful death. New replica Peranakan ware, not fakes posing as antiques, but reasonably priced ceramics, can now be bought at retail shops and are appreciated not as precious heirloom collections, but rather, enjoyed in themselves, as things of beauty bearing meaning. The nonya of today is now able to purchase and use crockery that look like old ones that went out of production in the 1930s. Perhaps the Peranakan community of today, like these new wares, can start anew, and find a way of staying relevant, portraying a semblance of the old, but yet, clearly marked out as new, functional and dynamic.
Appendix 1

Motifs on Polychrome Enamelled Nonyaware from Collection B and other collections, not encountered in Mrs. Tan Swee-Lin’s Collection

Collection B – Mrs. Christina Tan’s Collection
Christina’s collection consists of polychrome enamelled nonyaware on white ground and blue and white kitchen Qing. From the reign marks on the pieces, one set of plates bear the reign mark of Qing Emperor Qiánlóng 乾隆 (1735-1796 A.D.), but might be apocryphal. The other bowls and plates are from the Dàoguāng (1821-1850 A.D.) and Tóngzhì periods (1862-1875 A.D.). Only the pieces featuring motifs not already encountered in Collection A will be covered.

1. Serving Bowl with the Double Happiness symbol, lotus and peach motifs with eternity knot mark on base (14cm diameter and 7.5cm height).

![Figure 80. Linda Cheok, Serving bowl with double happiness symbol and peonies on white ground. Eternity knot mark (Dàoguāng period 1821-1850 A.D.). Diameter: 14cm and Height: 7.5cm. Digital photo. 2014.](image)

This symbol is literally a doubling up of the Chinese word character 喜 xǐ or happiness or joy. It signifies marriage, for two people become one and joy is multiplied. The eternity symbol mark on the base of the bowl in iron red enamel often appears on Dàoguāng period porcelain pieces. 203

202 Ho, Straits Chinese Porcelain: A Collector’s Guide.
203 Ibid., 127.
2. **Dessert Bowl with Peonies and Leiwen border on inner rim.**
   Dàoguāng (1821-1850 A.D.) reign mark on base of the bowl.
   Diameter: 10.5cm and Height: 6.5cm.

![Image of Dessert Bowl with Peonies and Leiwen border](image)

**Figure 81.** Linda Cheok, *Dessert bowl with peonies and Leiwen border on inner bowl rim. Dàoguāng (1821-1850 A.D.) period mark on base. Diameter: 10.5cm, Height: 6.5cm. Digital photo. 2014.*

The leiwen or fretwork border is also known as the thunder and lightning border. It is a wish for rain to ensure good growth of crops.

**National University of Singapore Museum**

3. **Wisteria and Laughing thrush**

![Image of Plate with Wisteria and Laughing Thrush with Peonies](image)

**Figure 82.** Linda Cheok, *Plate with Wisteria and Laughing Thrush with Peonies in the NUS (National University of Singapore Museum). Digital Photo. 2014.*

No special symbolic meaning is attached to the wisteria other than it being the favourite flower of the last Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 and its purple colouration indicating nobility. Likewise, the laughing thrush also has no
particular symbolic meaning and is known primarily for its melodious singing and could be a metaphor for joy. This combination of motifs became popular after the Empress Dowager ordered a set for her sixtieth birthday.

4. One Hundred Antiques

Any large number of lucky symbols is referred to as the hundred antiques motif. It alludes to the recipient of the ceramic object as someone who possesses or will possess all the good things in life.

Singapore Peranakan Museum

5. Buddha’s Hand limes, pomegranate, scholar scrolls and Leiwén (thunder and lightning border).

Buddha hand limes and other citrus are symbols for wealth and prosperity whilst pomegranates symbolize happiness, passion,
abundance and fertility. Scholar scrolls represent education and wisdom.

Asian Civilisations Museum
6. Bat, Phoenix, Mandarin Ducks, golden orioles, wagtails, cranes, swallows, butterflies, peonies, lotus and leiwen border

![Figure 86. Linda Cheok, Water pot with birds signifying the five principal relations. Digital photo. 2014.](image)

This waterpot is crammed full of symbolism, the principal message being that of happiness. The phoenix, mandarin ducks, orioles, wagtails and cranes represent the Confucian ideal of five relationship types, and when these relations are smooth, national stability ensues.

Linda’s Collection
7. Goldfish in Kamcheng bowl with Tóngzhì níanzhi 同治年制(1862-1875) reign mark. Diameter: 22cm, Height: 22cm

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206 Kee, *Peranakan Chinese Porcelain: Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese*, 57. The five cardinal relationships are that between; ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and between friends.
Figure 87. Linda Cheok, Goldfish in Kamcheng bowl with Tóngzhì níanzi 同治年制(1862-1875) reign mark. Diameter: 22cm, Height: 22cm. Digital Photo. 2014.

*Kamcheng* bowls normally hold water for drinking. *Jīn yú* 金 魚 The Goldfish is a symbol for abundant wealth as the first character *jīn* 金 means gold and the second word *yú 魚* or fish is a rebus for “surplus”.


**Appendix 2**

**Key for symbols used in Artworks/Dissertation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrows and Archer</td>
<td>Mythical hero Hou Yi who saved the earth by shooting down excessive suns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bat</td>
<td>Happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddha’s hand lime &amp; other citruses</td>
<td>Prosperity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butterfly</td>
<td>Seventy years of age, longevity and conjugal felicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canopy</td>
<td>Political power and victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi dragon</td>
<td>Protection against fire and evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chidori (Japanese)</td>
<td>Perseverance and to seize and capture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cicada</td>
<td>Immortality and resurrection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clouds</td>
<td>Good fortune and happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coin</td>
<td>Heaven and earth, prosperity and talismanic qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conch shell</td>
<td>Life of a reclusive monk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crane</td>
<td>Longevity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cricket</td>
<td>Courage and power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamonds</td>
<td>Hardness, ying and yang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon</td>
<td>The Emperor and the male principle of yang, fertility and rain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echidna (Aboriginal)</td>
<td>Give and take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternity knot</td>
<td>The relatedness of all things, endless compassion and wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishes</td>
<td>Fertility, freedom and having more than is needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo-dogs</td>
<td>Guardians against evil, brings wealth and good luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fretwork or Leiwen borders</td>
<td>Thunder and lightning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldfish</td>
<td>Abundant Wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass tree (my own interpretation / Linda)</td>
<td>Aboriginal Australia, resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibis (Egyptian)</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ikura or fish roe (Japanese)</td>
<td>Fertility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa (Japanese)</td>
<td>Malevolent water spirit that has a humanoid shape and a plate-like depression on its head. When the plate contains water, it is empowered, when the water is spilled it is enervated. Causes drowning and has a lascivious appetite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kawung or interlocking circles (Buddhism and Hinduism)</td>
<td>Sacred regulated cosmos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotus</td>
<td>Purity, perfection, renunciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lychee</td>
<td>Heirs and intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin Ducks</td>
<td>Marital happiness and fidelity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marina Bay Sands building (my own interpretation/Linda)</td>
<td>Mammon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mossy Rocks</td>
<td>Seniority and longevity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountains</td>
<td>Constancy and firmness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Hundred Antiques</td>
<td>Prestige and wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaches</td>
<td>Longevity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peony</td>
<td>Riches, honour and romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phalaenopsis Linda Cheok</td>
<td>Orchid that is a metonymic substitute for myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>Metonym for the Chinese Empress, a bird representing the South, gentleness, benevolence and goodness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plum blossom</td>
<td>Delight, Happiness, Longevity, Smoothness and Peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomegranate</td>
<td>Happiness, passion, abundance and fertility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qilin or unicorn</td>
<td>Benevolence and greatness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ribbon and sash</td>
<td>Generational succession and denotes beribboned object as a powerful charm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruyi or Cloud Fungus</td>
<td>Longevity, immortality, goodness and brightness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakura or cherry blossoms (Japanese)</td>
<td>The ephemeral, mortality and beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar scrolls</td>
<td>Education and wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning tops (Japanese)</td>
<td>Good harvest and well-being of family and business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>Yang principle and the Japanese Emperor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torii or red Shinto gates</td>
<td>Entry into a sacred space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tree of life (Christianity)</td>
<td>Resurrection, immortality, wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turtle</td>
<td>Longevity, stability and lasciviousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umbrella</td>
<td>Honour, respect and protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vase</td>
<td>Peace and inexhaustible treasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waves</td>
<td>Strength and life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheel of the Law (Buddhist)</td>
<td>Code of moral conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheel (half submerged)(Japanese)</td>
<td>Pathos of things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian roses (Colonial Singapore)</td>
<td>Love, joy and beauty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3

Linda Cheok’s Family Tree

Figure 88. Linda Cheok. Family Tree created with template from website Family Echo.
http://www.familyecho.com
Appendix 4

Khoo clan’s migratory route from Sin Kang Village in Fujian Province

Figure 89. Map showing the migratory routes of the Khoo clan from Sin Kang Village in Fujian Province from Khoo Kongsi web page. http://www.khookongsi.com.my/history/emigration/
Works Cited


