

REMARKS BY

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at the Launch of

***Clay & Colour: Ceramics from the Alice & Peter Tan Collection* ***

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Clay & Colour: Ceramics from the Alice & Peter Tan Collection is a catalogue of the more significant pieces of Straits Chinese ceramics collected by Mrs Alice Tan, which she donated to the NUS Museum in 2023. The catalogue illustrates fifty of the 435 ceramic objects donated to the NUS Museum with 139 pieces of silverwork and 3 wooden figurines. The catalogue includes three essays by Christopher Ng, Chen Yuh-Shiow, and Rie Ong. A foreword by University Curator Ahmad Mashadi provides the details of the donation and its relevance to the NUS Museum.

DEFINING PERANAKAN CERAMICS

Within our long social memories, these ceramics Mrs Alice Tan collected were not known as Peranakan ceramics. These plates, bowls, and pots were, for some of us, a special class of ceramics acquired or purchased by the group of local-born Chinese from the late nineteenth century who, in the twentieth century, became formally known as Straits Chinese. My father, in his nineties with his mind mired deep in senile dementia, when asked who he is, clearly answered, “I am a Straits Chinese,” and not a Singaporean. For my grandmother, these overglaze polychrome plates, pots, and bowls she inherited or acquired were *pinggang mangkok Shanghai* because these ceramics came out of Shanghai. As a young boy, I looked at these plates and bowls in my grandmother’s cabinet of curiosities and wondered what was their significance, which led my grandmother to so highly prize them. I eventually inherited some of her bowls and spoons. Others in my family got her prized kamchongs, which cannot compare to what Mrs Alice Tan has donated. It was only in the sixties I learned that these plates and pots were also called nonya wares and, since the 1970s, termed Peranakan porcelains.

So, for a century, from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, these plates and bowls were known as Shanghai crockery or nonya ware, but not Straits Chinese porcelain or Peranakan porcelain. These plates and bowls were bought as things to be used on special occasions like birthdays or anniversaries. They were not collected like paintings to be hung on walls and admired. As Christopher Ng, who was a specialist of Straits Chinese ceramics and works of art at Christie’s Singapore

from 1995 to 1997, points out in his essay in this catalogue, it was only in the early 1970s that these overglaze polychrome ceramics became collectables. And it was in 1980 that Mrs Alice Tan, who had married into a venerable Straits Chinese family whose lineage stretched back to Tan Kim Seng and included Tan Jiak Kim, started collecting these porcelains, adding to her family's patrimony of nonya ware.

Ho Wing Meng, Lecturer at the Philosophy Department at the old University of Singapore from 1965 to 1993, and under whose tutelage I struggled to understand Karl Popper's philosophy of science, published one of the earliest *Collector's Guides to Straits Chinese Porcelain* in 1983. Ho struggled with whether these overglaze polychrome wares were degraded late Qing "export wares" produced at Jingdezhen or prized heirlooms and patrimony of our grandparents. He settled for "Straits Chinese Porcelain." Ho went on to produce *Collector's Guides* to Straits Chinese silver, furniture, beadwork, and embroidery.

STUDYING STRAITS CHINESE PORCELAIN

The systematic collection of these plates and bowls from Shanghai, or nonya ware, is then a recent development. We are therefore especially appreciative that Mrs Alice Tan developed an interest in these plates and bowls from Shanghai and started systematically collecting them in the 1980s. But this collecting of nonya ware raises a basic question: what is the significance of this crockery originally ordered or purchased by our great-grandfathers for use on special ceremonial or social occasions, which defined their status among the Straits-born Chinese community and was passed on to their descendants as family heirlooms, but is now systematically collected as objects of art to be displayed as such and never used to serve dinner on? This issue of why and how objects—from matchboxes or postage stamps to porcelains and paintings—are collected is a perennial issue for museums, who eventually become the depository for some of these collections. How do museums make sense of collections of things donated to them?

This generous donation of Shanghai crockery by Mrs Alice Tan allows a younger generation of Singaporeans to re-examine and rethink the significance of these old plates and bowls from Shanghai which our grandparents prized and handed down to us as heirlooms. What is the relevance of these old pieces of Shanghai crockery for our identity of who we are as "peranakans" and Singaporeans? The essays in this catalogue offer different starting points for a wider appreciation of nonya ware that go beyond the conventional art history of treating nonya ware as art objects and classifying them into categories according to the style of their shapes, sizes, and colours, as in this catalogue.

Christopher Ng in his essay reminds us that these ceramics are not static remnants of the past, but active participants in cultural translation. He observes that

"kamchongs and lidded bowls acquired meaning through repeated acts of use" within Peranakan households, as objects brought out for special meals, festivals, or ritual offerings. Ng's research into inscriptions and iconography on these nonya wares reveals a dynamic relationship between object and user, and their meaning is constantly negotiated across generations.

The extensive use of phoenix and peony motifs in these vivid overglaze polychrome enamels invites us to trace how Chinese iconography was localised, domesticated, and reimagined in the Straits Chinese context. Here, ceramics become more than exports; they become vessels of adaptation, desire, and identity. As Rie Ong, a former Assistant Curator at the NUS Museum and now a Ph.D. student in art history and archaeology, reminds us in her catalogue essay, these wares are not just material objects but "sensory and symbolic forms" that invite us to explore how Peranakan taste-making expresses identity, memory, and diasporic imagination.

This donation of Shanghai crockery made between the mid-19th to early 20th century is, Rie Ong points out, a significant complement to the NUS Museum's current collection of Chinese ceramics from the Han to the Qing, and also aligns with ongoing efforts by the NUS Baba House to document and preserve the domestic heritage of Peranakan families. She also positions this donation in relation to William Willetts's practice of art history. Willetts, the second curator at the University Museum from 1963 to 1973, collected and studied not only ceramics from China, but also the region. He was the first to recognize the historical and artistic significance of ceramics produced in Southeast Asia and started the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society to further the study of these regional ceramics. The 1971 exhibition he curated for the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society and exhibited at the University Art Museum clearly established the historical and artistic significance of Southeast Asian ceramics and their links to that of China.

Willetts moved to the University of Malaya Art Museum in 1973 where he inspired a group of ceramic collectors to establish a West Malaysian Chapter of the Southeast Asian Ceramics Society and helped curate its first exhibition in 1981 on nonya ware and *Kitchen Ch'ing: Ceremonial and Domestic Pottery of the 19th–20th Century* commonly found in Malaysia. Here again, Willetts broke new ground in proposing that the low-grade mass-produced ceramics in the Southern Chinese kilns for daily use in kitchens and exported to the diasporic Chinese communities in the South China Sea are a significant category of Chinese ceramics worthy of further study. Willetts included as "Kitchen Ch'ing" a number of kamcheng jars and other utensils which would also qualify as nonya ware.

Mrs Alice Tan's donation will enable researchers to look at nonya ware as more than a specific category of Chinese ceramics, to its connections to Kitchen Ch'ing, as Willetts was moving towards in 1981, but also to other categories of Chinese

porcelains. National Palace Museum Assistant Curator Chen Yuh-Shiow's essay in the catalogue is about the similarity of patterns, motifs, and colours on late Qing *fencai* or painted enamel flower pots made in Jingdezhen and now in the National Palace Museum, to what was being exported from Shanghai to the Straits Chinese communities. This raises intriguing questions about how the motifs and symbols on our Peranakan porcelains were circulated between Jingdezhen craftsmen and their Singapore clients.

What we are looking at is not only the beauty of the shape, size, and colour of the kamcheng pot, but also the production and marketing of a regional product—from a decision to purchase by one or more wealthy Straits Chinese families, which was conveyed to the potters at Jingdezhen, who would have then designed and produced it, and then shipped it out of Shanghai to Singapore. There is much we do not know about how a purchase order from a Straits Chinese family in Singapore was made and conveyed to a Jingdezhen pottery workshop, and the shipping of that completed order to Singapore. These pieces present a connected history of the beginnings of our Peranakan porcelains in the late Qing kilns of Jingdezhen and their links to the broader history of Chinese export ware. Their motifs, enamels, and forms tell a story of adaptation, reception, and lived experiences across Southeast Asia. In Peranakan homes, they functioned as wedding gifts, altar vessels, and everyday wares, objects of ritual and routine. We have here a connected art history.

CONCLUSION

We are today doing more than launching an exhibition catalogue or unveiling a new display of Chinese ceramics. We are marking the convergence of philanthropy, scholarship, and curatorship. We are commemorating a patrimony that stretches from the nineteenth-century Qing kilns of Jingdezhen to the kitchens and altars of Southeast Asia, and now to the galleries of a university museum. We are invited to keep looking at these pots, vases, and plates, and to keep asking questions about them. What we are seeing are not just beautiful objects. These objects are about the stories we tell about ourselves, and the communities we build in the process of storytelling.

* Expanded text of Remarks delivered at the launch of *Clay & Colour: Ceramics from the Alice & Peter Tan Collection* (NUS Museum, 2025)