

ROUND TABLE

Historicizing the *Ee-Tok* as a Transcultural Object

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Theoretical Statement TPOD EPFL 2023–2024

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Introduction	7
Chapter One: Locating the <i>Ee-Tok</i>	11
Chapter Two: Before the Table	21
Chapter Three: Parallels	31
Chapter Four: Persons and Things	45
Conclusion: A Surface across Time	53
Bibliography	57
Appendix	61

ROUND TABLE

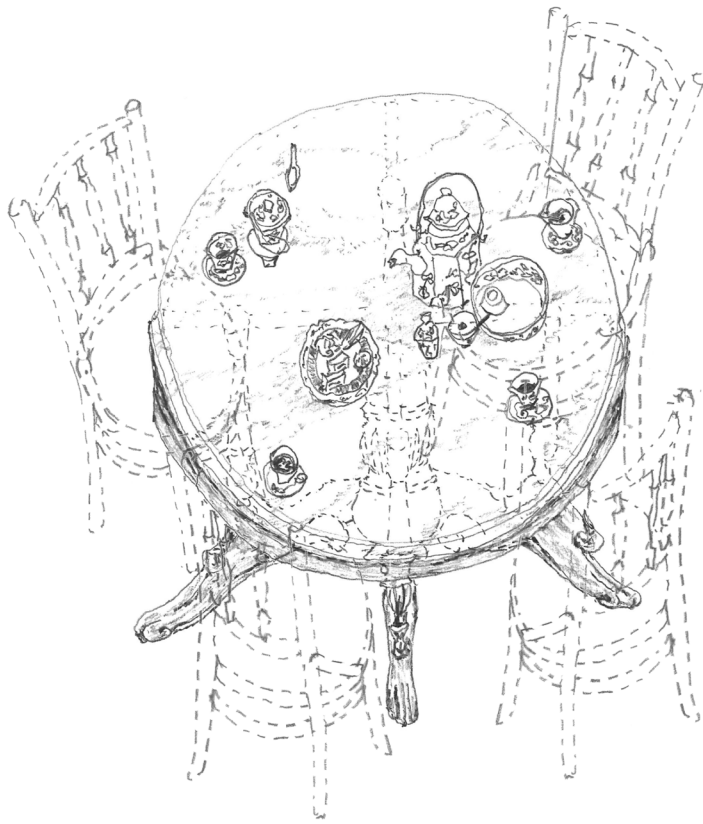


Figure 1
A typical early twentieth century *ee-tok*. Drawing by author.

1 This essay reads the table primarily through the works of Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*; with references to Martin Heidegger's *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, and Edmund Husserl's *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*.

2 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 164.

3 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5, DOI:10.1017/CBO9780511819582.

4 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. William Gibson (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), 46.

5 Here, the term "diaspora" has been used to conceptualise an imagined community where non-territorial connections are maintained through a sense of a joined past, or otherwise through a rupture from a sense of bounded connection. This definition of "diaspora" is largely based on the one provided by Divya Tolia-Kelly, "Locating Processes of Identification: Studying the Precipitates of Re-Memory through Artefacts in the British Asian Home," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29, no. 3 (2004): 327, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3804494>.

6 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>.

7 Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," 5.

The table has appeared repeatedly in phenomenological theory as a point of departure from which to orient our perception of the world.¹ Apprehending the table anew, and inhabiting multiple positions around it, might form the beginnings of an interrogation towards the overlooked. By disorienting our understandings of familiar objects, we might see them "as if for the first time," so as not to lose sight of their history.² In this way, *Round Table* uses the table as a tool to unravel the multigenerational, and geographically dispersed, narratives which have come into contact with it. Looking closely at the table might form the beginnings of an understanding of the object not only as a repository of human histories, but as an enabler of them – one which provides a point of connection, or separation, between the significations, actions, and rituals of individuals within and across communities. As Arjun Appadurai remarks, "even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context [author's emphasis]."³ *Round Table* shares in this approach by using the "equipmentality" of the table to interrogate the relationships between people and things,⁴ and the modes in which material objects provide meaning to their wider social and spatial contexts.

The *ee-tok* (Hokkien for "round table"), a marble-topped circular table commonly found today in the homes, coffee shops, and hawker centres of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, is used as a starting point to explore the wider narratives of cross-cultural exchange behind Malaysia's material and domestic practices.⁵ Chapter One, "Locating the *Ee-Tok*," introduces the *ee-tok* by exploring its appearance in Malaysia – namely, as a nineteenth century Regency centre table which came to play a central role within the front halls of traditional Malaysian Chinese households. The *ee-tok* is read as a diasporic, and as such transcultural, object: one which was dislocated from its geographically distant English origins, to be incorporated into and redefined by the migrant community of its Chinese owners. In this way, the *ee-tok* is read as a locus within the "contact zone" of Malaysian Chinese domestic space,⁶ where objects and practices – both from afar and acquired in the place of residence – interact to produce new material and spatial hybridities.

In *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai urges us to look behind the certainties of familiar objects, and "follow the things themselves," in order to uncover the underlying histories which led to their arrival.⁷ In this vein, *Round Table* borrows from the works of phenomenological theorists by employing the table as a point of orientation, yet addresses phenomenology's tendency to overlook the historicity of objects. It attempts to form an understanding of the *ee-tok* through a methodology which pays attention to both the object's perception, as well as its background, where "background" might be taken to mean that which took

place in order for the object to appear, or arrive, and refers to both the spatial and the temporal. The spatial nature of a background allows it to mediate or sculpt the object to take on the shape it acquires, and Sara Ahmed illustrates its role by using the example of the image or painting, where what is represented at a distance allows the “foreground” to take the shape that it does.⁸ Equally, a background might be thought of as the temporal events of “what is behind,” in which we might read the background as a result of the historical developments which constitute “what has happened before.”⁹

As a diasporic object, the *ee-tok* might be thought of as arriving through two major genealogies: that of the table in Europe, from which the *ee-tok* largely derives its form, and China, the domestic setting into which it is incorporated. These two genealogies shape the lines of enquiry of the essay’s following chapters, beginning with Chapter Two, “Before the Table,” which traces the European lineage of the *ee-tok* through two developments which led up to the centre table’s conception as a significant, intimate site within the household. The first half of the chapter “unseats” us from the table by showing that the modern prominence of the table emerged as a result of a shift from reclining to upright dining practices in the Byzantine period. In locating the table’s development from its subaltern peripherality within the Greek *andron* to its central role within the medieval hall, the first half of the chapter tracks the increasing significance of the table in the European imagination and interior. The second explores the development of its capacity to act as an enabler for intimacy and leisure through the arrival of the circular Georgian tea table. By exploring the tea table through its design and location within the Georgian house, the chapter identifies the table’s singular, and circular, form not only as a product of its evolving architectural context of increasingly specialised spaces, but as an enabler of practices associated with the casual, and often intimate, sociability of the parlour.

Despite gaining an understanding of the major developments behind the arrival of the centre table, the question remains as to how a European object came to locate itself within the Malaysian Chinese home. Chapter Three, “Parallels,” traces similitudes in Chinese seating and social practices to explain the relative ease of the centre table’s adoption, in the form of the *ee-tok*, within the homes of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora. Two comparable developments are identified: the early practice of sitting *at* tables, unique to the region, caused by the adoption of a “chair-level mode of living” in the Song period (960-1126 CE);¹⁰ as well as the existence of a consciousness, and desire for, certain forms of table more given to casual intimacy. The first part of the chapter will explore the processes behind the advent of chair-level modes of seating in China, while the second half discusses three forms of table (the square Eight Immortals table, the low *kang* table, and the Qing-period imported European round table) to demonstrate how a Chinese understanding of the table encompassed notions of intimacy and formality depending on type and form.

Having traced the *ee-tok*’s backgrounds through several major moments in the cultural development of the table within the European and Chinese context, Chapter Four, “Persons and Things,” returns the *ee-tok*

8 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 38.

9 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 38.

10 Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 9.

11 Husserl, *Ideas*, 130.

12 The Lims' descriptions of their *ee-tok*'s uses, and placement within the wider setting of their traditional Chinese terrace house on twenty-four Cinema Street, formed crucial starting points to much of this essay's research. For instance, hearing about how the *ee-tok* was never used for dining, and of its position in the house's main hall, instead of close to service areas further back, challenged my initial understanding of its function as a dining surface, and prompted a wider interrogation of the table as a site for sociability. Condensed versions of five of these interviews have been included in the appendix.

to the scale of individual perception. How we perceive the table, and what we do around the table, might be understood as essential to what it is. Yet, what the table "is" might take a multiplicity of forms. Edmund Husserl suggests this when he writes: "We start by taking an example. Keeping this table steadily in view as I go around it, changing my position in space all the time, I have continually the consciousness of the bodily presence out there of this one and the self-same table, which in itself remains unchanged throughout."¹¹ If we re-train our eyes upon the familiar, but attempt to occupy multiple positions around it, what can we learn from the "self-same" table? By analysing eight interviews undertaken with a family of siblings who grew up around an *ee-tok* in the middle of the twentieth century,¹² the chapter attempts to capture the overlaps and divergences in the family members' associations towards the *ee-tok*, and explore the modes in which individual practices correlate and vary within wider historical narratives. In looking more closely at the relationships between people and things, the chapter attempts to disrupt a fixed understanding of the *ee-tok* by exploring the evolving nature of how the *ee-tok* was perceived, and understood, by users of its time.

As a whole, *Round Table* draws on the works of phenomenological theorists to use the table as a means to apprehend anew. By looking into the deeper histories which form the background of the *ee-tok*, the paper's primary case study, we are led to trace the development of the table within the cultural imagination and spatial realities not only of Malaysia, but of Europe and China. Re-encountering the table forms a means to examine its trajectories of arrival more closely, and unpick the varying, yet sometimes similar, ways in which it has been culturally re-defined and put to use. In this way, the table is treated as a space around which multiple positions are occupied – as a recurring object found across geographically distant lands, it marks a material node in which cultural differences and continuities might be read across time and territories. Equally, by attending to the vagaries of its perception, we might better understand how individual encounters with a thing lead to its personal redefinitions, which, when agglomerated, might sometimes result in wider societal shifts. The table acts as a window through which to re-look, and encounter again, the accumulation of worlds, histories, and human relationships which exist behind the familiar.

ROUND TABLE

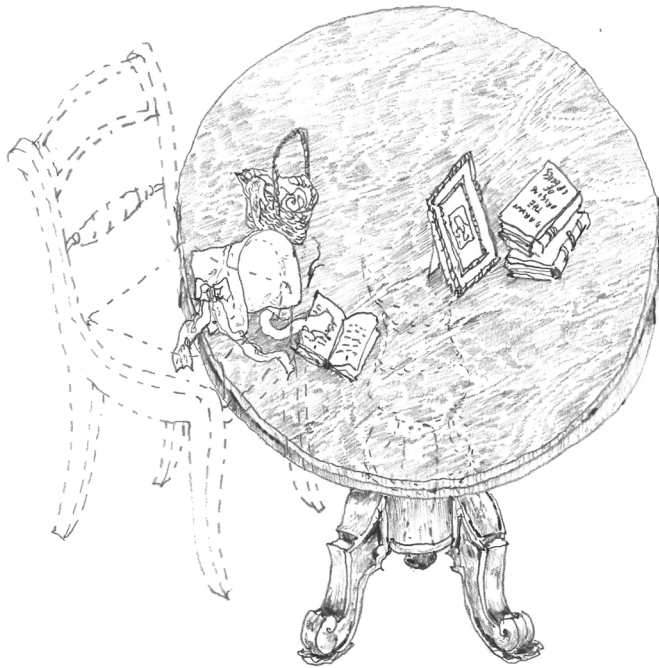


Figure 2
A Regency centre table, following a design by Holland and Sons, c. 1840. Drawing by author.

Chapter One

LOCATING THE *EE-TOK*

Traditionally found in the homes of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, the *ee-tok* most commonly appears as a circular table, typically 75 centimetres tall and 120 centimetres wide, with a white or grey marble tabletop. This is supported by a teakwood base composed of a large central pedestal, often with four ancillary pillars, which rest on the central support's termination as four claw, or claw-and-ball, feet. As a transcultural object borne through the flows of objects and knowledges along colonial pathways yet adopted into the Malaysian Chinese domestic interior, the *ee-tok* might be thought of as a “material node”: a product both of local specificities, and wider patterns of cross-cultural exchange.¹³ This essay follows the specific material object of the *ee-tok* to uncover its accumulation of histories across time and place. In the process, it attempts to explore the wider history of the table, and the cultural, and spatial, contexts it has come into contact with.

In this way, the *ee-tok* acts as a point of entry to explore the cultural forces at play within Malaysia, particularly between its Chinese and European communities. The nation sits within contemporary Southeast Asia, a region historically marked by an openness to the outside world, allowing for the constant integration of new ideas into local cultural frameworks.¹⁴ As part of the South China Sea, the region acted as a space of cultural and ethnic intermingling – with fluid movement of peoples, goods, and ideas along ocean pathways.¹⁵ Its location as a trade hub between the South Asian subcontinent and China aided the development of cosmopolitan cities where Arabs, Tamils, Gujaratis, Chinese, and Southeast Asians, intermingled and interacted.¹⁶ This, alongside its colonial history of Portuguese arrival in 1511, Dutch control from 1641, and British administration from 1795 until the middle of the twentieth century, marks the region – and its material culture – as a product of a *histoire croisée*, a term coined by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann to describe “multilateral entanglements that occur in a temporal and spatial framework where many actors interact together on different levels, in different directions.”¹⁷ Within this Southeast Asian context, the origins of the *ee-tok* might be understood to arise from a series of developments more akin to a tangle of networks, than to a single, directional, thread.

In *Straits Chinese Furniture*, Ho Wing Meng identifies the *ee-tok* as belonging to a family of “English-style Teakwood Furniture” largely based after models from seventeenth to nineteenth-century England.¹⁸ Its derivation from English precedents becomes apparent when compared to the English Regency centre table (Fig. 2), whose circular top and central pedestal were recognisable features of the nineteenth-century *table de famille* typically used within the social and familial areas of the English household. As sites for social activities such as conversation, reading, or games, rather than dining, these tables would often be found in rooms such as the main sitting room or salon, as well as library-

13 Tolia-Kelly, “Locating Processes of Identification,” 317.

14 Alexandra Green, *Southeast Asia: A History in Objects* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2023), 9.

15 Barbara W. Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 34.

16 Green, *Southeast Asia*, 9.

17 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond comparison: Histoire croisée and the challenge of Reflexivity,” in *Religion and History* 45 (2006): 30-50. Interpretation of the term provided by Thomas DaCosta Kauffmann and Michael North, “Introduction – Artistic and Cultural Exchanges between Europe and Asia, 1400-1900: Rethinking Markets, Workshops, and Collections,” in *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges Between Europe and Asia, 1400-1900*, ed. Michael North (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 2.

18 Wing Meng Ho, *Straits Chinese Furniture* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1994), 113.



Figure 3

The Drawing Room at 49 Seymour Street. Mathilda Sharpe, c. 1850.

From The Geffrye Museum of the Home / Mary Evans Picture Library, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.prints-online.com/geffrye-museum/drawing-room-59-seymour-street-15482941.html>

19 Camille Mestdagh, "Types and Uses," in *A Cultural History of Furniture in the Age of Empire and Industry*, eds. Catherine L. Fütter and Christina M. Anderson, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 88.

20 Ibid., 89.

21 Ho, *Straits Chinese Furniture*, 115.

22 David G. Kohl, *Chinese Architecture in the Straits Settlements and Western Malaya: Temples, Kongsis and Houses* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1984), 76.

23 Mark Hinchman, *History of Furniture: A Global View* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2009), 306.

24 Ibid.

25 Green, *Southeast Asia*, 128.

26 Ibid., 129.

27 Ibid.

28 Ho, *Straits Chinese Furniture*, 132.

29 Ibid.

ies, which came to be the favoured gathering room for English families after dinner in the 1830s.¹⁹ The English *Encyclopaedia* of 1833's description of the library in a country residence is useful in suggesting the nature of the centre table in the early-nineteenth century English home: "...The [library] would be used as the family sitting room on common occasions... the seat furniture would be of great variety... A large round table is usually placed in the middle of the room, in which are generally books, prints and other things to amuse the company."²⁰ Similarly, its presence as a symbol of family togetherness is suggested in *The Drawing at 59 Seymour Street* (Fig. 3), where the centre table appears as the centre of a familiar domesticity within the typical sitting-room arrangement of a mid-nineteenth century middle-class home.

The centre table's arrival in Malaysia, before its subsequent transformation into the *ee-tok*, probably began with local commissions from British officers following Britain's administrative take-over in 1795. British officers originally shipped furniture pieces from home, but eventually found it more convenient and inexpensive to commission local craftsmen, typically Chinese carpenters trained in China, to reproduce such pieces using regional varieties of timber.²¹ Despite these carpenters' ability to closely imitate pieces of furniture provided as examples by European clients,²² these commissions nevertheless produced new amalgamations which were often "new" to both parties.²³ To clients, they were made of "foreign" materials and sometimes sported "exotic" decorations; while to local makers, these commissioned pieces were often composed of new forms of furniture unseen in the traditional repertoires of their native countries.²⁴ In this way, new furniture types such as the centre table, and its related social practices, made their way into the Malaysian domestic realm.

As a whole, the nineteenth century marked a period of accelerated cultural exchange in Southeast Asia through large volumes of migration and intensified contact with European traders and officials.²⁵ The movement of peoples through colonialist expansion and burgeoning local industries generated the creation of large mixed communities, which effected profound changes to the material cultures of the region by the early twentieth century.²⁶ These included the rapid emergence of new materials and fabrication techniques, as well as hybridised practices, beliefs, and ritual customs.²⁷ Within this period of cultural exchange, we might locate two additional clues which locate the *ee-tok* as an object borne through colonial pathways. The first of these lies in the *ee-tok*'s use of teak, a hardwood historically popular in India due to its high durability.²⁸ Teak is endemic neither to Malaysia nor to China, and its utilisation in Malaysia hints instead at a transfer of knowledges spread through European officials who originally learned of its properties in India, then of its availability in nearby Burma and Thailand, and proceeded to commission reproductions in it from Malaysian Chinese carpenters.²⁹ Additionally, it is worth highlighting the improbability that the *ee-tok* resulted from furniture traditions developed by Malaysia's other Indigenous, Malay, Indian, and Arab communities. Up until the first half of the twentieth century, these communities rarely used types

of “furniture” we might commonly identify today (such as the table, chair, or cupboard), due to a practice of sitting close to the ground on mats or carpets.³⁰

So far, in tracing the *ee-tok*’s history, we have located its earliest Malaysian origins through the local reproduction of centre tables in fulfilment of foreign commissions. Nevertheless, questions remain as to how the centre table found its way into the Malaysian Chinese home, and the nature of its incorporation within its new domestic setting. In order to expand on the second face of the identification of the *ee-tok* as a diasporic object – that is, as an object incorporated into the material repertoire of a diasporic community – the rest of this chapter investigates the backgrounds and arrivals of its Chinese owners; as well as the characteristics of the Chinese terrace house, the domestic housing typology in which the *ee-tok* was traditionally found. Interest is placed on the latter particularly as, within the diasporic context, the domestic sphere might form an “active site” for cultural identification, perhaps through a shared memory of past practices, including those shaped by religious philosophy.³¹ The Malaysian Chinese terrace house is read as a connecting landscape which negotiates between the realities of the Chinese community’s new host country, and the domestic, and spatial, traditions of their native lands.

Many of Malaysia’s Chinese settlers came from China’s southern regions, with the majority tracing their origins to the maritime provinces of Guangdong and Fujian.³² These settlers were hardly a monolithic entity: there was a great variance in languages across Chinese migrant groups, who were often organised through common dialects.³³ Most migrants tended to identify themselves with smaller geographical areas such as the county or village, and saw themselves as belonging to distinct local cultures with dissimilar mores.³⁴ While the greatest flow of Chinese settlers to Southeast Asia occurred between the mid-eighteenth and early twentieth century,³⁵ the region’s sustained history of contact with China also resulted in a community of earlier settlers often referred to as Peranakan Chinese.³⁶ This diasporic group, whose members mostly originated from Fujian and spoke a patois of Hokkien and Malay,³⁷ largely maintained traditional Chinese domestic and religious customs, yet displayed a higher level of assimilation to local practices compared to later Chinese arrivals, which included the adoption of certain local Malay traditions in dress (particularly amongst females), cuisine, and material culture.

As the setting in which the *ee-tok* has been most widely documented, this chapter pays particular attention to the homes of the Peranakan Chinese. While the *ee-tok* has since made appearances in the domestic and commercial settings (such as the *kopitiams*, or coffee shops, largely run by Hainanese communities) of later Chinese migrants, several reasons make it likely that the *ee-tok*’s entryway into the spaces of Malaysia’s Chinese communities began in the Peranakan terrace house. Firstly, the Peranakans were a social group composed largely of traders and merchants, who as such had the financial means to live in more established homes. The *ee-tok*’s traditional terrace house context was not typical to newly arrived contract workers, and instead formed part of a domestic situation affordable only to the middle-to-upper classes.³⁸ Equally, the

30 Ibid., 27.

31 Tolia-Kelly, “Locating Processes of Identification,” 327.

32 Kohl, *Chinese Architecture in the Straits Settlements*, 1.

33 Ronald G. Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia: The Eclectic Architecture of Sojourners and Settlers* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2010), 15.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 14.

36 “Peranakan” is thought to derive from the Malay word for “child,” *anak*. Other terms for the community include Straits Chinese, and Baba Nyonya (male members were called Babas, and female members Nyonyas.)

37 Ibid., 15.

38 Late nineteenth century Kuala Lumpur (which was effectively a Chinese tin miners’ camp) was described as consisting almost wholly of wooden, attap, or mud houses. See James C. Jackson, “Kuala Lumpur in the 1880’s: The Contribution of Bloomfield Douglass,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 4, no.2 (1963): 117-27.

39 Chee-Beng Tan, *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and Identity of a Chinese Peranakan Community in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Gerakbudaya, 2020), 48.

40 Ibid., 49.

41 Ho, *Straits Chinese Furniture*, 119.

42 Kohl, *Chinese Architecture in the Straits Settlements*, 145.

43 For a personal account of the terrace house in the mid-twentieth century, see Teng Peng Lim's interview in the appendix. Lim walks us through a memory of his house on Twenty-Four Cinema Street, from the front main hall to the "female domain" of the back quarters (Teng Peng Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, December 5, 2023).

44 An interview and walk-through of Five Jonker Street with Eng Leong Lim of Malacca Heritage Centre was extremely useful in gaining an understanding of the sequences of spaces and their uses in the Peranakan terrace house (Eng Leong Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 22, 2023).

45 *Bilik gelap*: "dark room" in the Malay language.

46 Beyond its utilitarian use as a service-oriented stairway, Eng Leong Lim explains the second back stair of Five Jonker Street as a means for female members of the household to move discreetly between storeys if more formal forms of hosting were occurring in the dining area.

47 Ronald G. Knapp, *China's Old Dwellings* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 28.

48 Ibid., 55.

Peranakan Chinese had more direct contact with Europeans than other Chinese communities as their command of Malay, and a growing ability to speak English beginning in the nineteenth century, positioned them as useful compradors for European merchants.³⁹ Cultural contact was further increased by the introduction of English schooling in the port cities in which Peranakan families had largely settled (such as the towns of Malacca, Penang, and Singapore) which "exposed [them] to the influences of the West, so that [their] outlook was a combination of Chinese, local, and Western cultures."⁴⁰ Needless to say, Europe's cultural hegemony in colonial Malaysia also had its influence upon the Peranakan Chinese, who purportedly had a particularly "strong desire to emulate the customs and manners of the *orang putih* [white man]."⁴¹

While adapting to both Malay and European influence, the Peranakan Chinese continued to construct houses with clear spatial ties to traditional houses from China's southern regions. This is apparent in the Peranakan terrace house, a housing type which became the most common dwelling form across the broader Malaysian Chinese community until the early twentieth century.⁴² These two to three-storey houses had an elongated form adapted to the constraints of narrow urban plots delineated under English and Dutch administration, resulting in sequences of rooms which gave directly from one to the other.⁴³ In walking through the ground floor plan of Five Jonker Street (Fig. 5), a typical early-twentieth century Peranakan terrace house, we enter through a pair of timber double-doors into a main hall, in which ceremonial pieces of furniture such as the altar table dedicated to the family's household gods, might be found.⁴⁴ Two symmetrically placed doorways on the far end of the room lead to a second hall, or *bilik gelap*,⁴⁵ which acts as a resting space or area for more informal sociability. A skywell and dining area lie beyond a timber screen which forms the far end of the *bilik gelap*. The deepest areas house, accessed through a doorway along the back wall of the dining area, comprises of service spaces such as the kitchen and water closet. The main staircase to the sleeping quarters above begins just before the opening of the skywell, while a second stair leads upstairs from the kitchen.⁴⁶

Like others of its kind, the house on Jonker Street speaks of its Chinese antecedents through three spatial characteristics: the skywell, the *lang*, and a gradation of increasingly intimate spaces. The skywell, a small courtyard-like void used to evacuate interior heat in hot and humid southern China (as opposed to the larger courtyards of the nation's colder northern regions), was useful in the environmental similarities of Malaysia's tropical climate.⁴⁷ The punctuation of the Peranakan terrace house with one, or sometimes multiple, voids also created sizeably proportioned *lang*; wide passageways and transitional spaces next to skywells. Particularly in Fujian and Guangdong, *lang* were typically larger than those found in the north, which transformed them from mere passages into spaces with room-like utility.⁴⁸ This utilisation of the *lang* is seen in the Peranakan terrace house, where generous adjacent covered areas next to skywells are often used for purposes such as dining.

During her visit to the Malay Peninsula in the late nineteenth century, Isabella Bird commented that the Chinese in Malaysia "have fashioned their dwellings upon the model of those in Canton...The wives of



Figure 4

Reception Room in a Noble House. From "Essai sur l'architecture chinoise," fol. 34. Qing dynasty, 18th century. From Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 168.

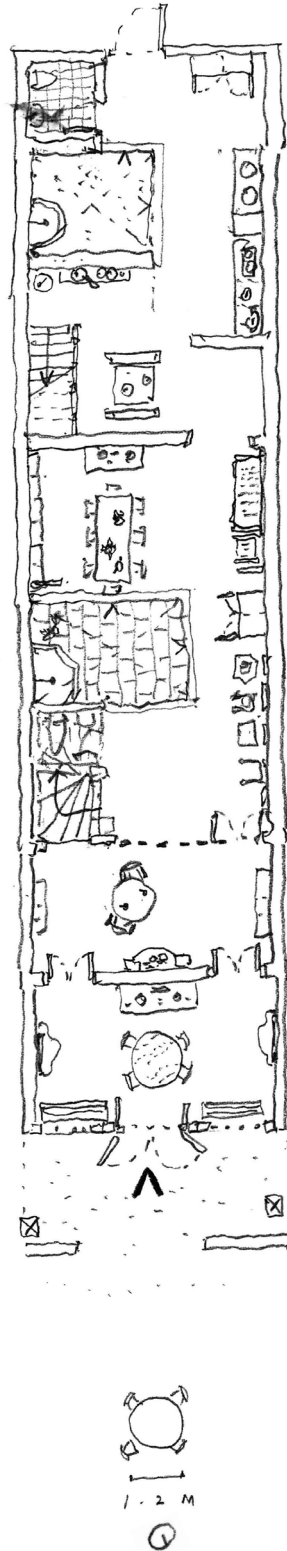


Figure 5
Plan of a typical traditional Peranakan Chinese house on 5 Jonker Street, Malacca.
Drawing by author.

all are secluded, and inhabit the back regions and have no share in the remarkably ‘good time’ which men seem to have.”⁴⁹ By referring to the ways in which women were typically ascribed to the “back regions” of the house, Bird’s remark touches upon the Peranakan terrace house’s re-enactment of the spatial gradations of intimacy and gender found in the traditional courtyard houses of China. Particularly in wealthier households composed of multiple hall-courtyard complexes, deeper regions of the house were associated with the realm of women and increasing levels of intimacy.⁵⁰ The Peranakan terrace house was structured according to similar spatial delineations of intimacy: casual visitors and new acquaintances might have been invited to the formal reception area of the front hall, while friends and relatives were welcomed into the deeper interior of ensuing halls and dining spaces.⁵¹

Within this sequence of spaces, the *ee-tok* traditionally occupied a central position in the front hall of the Peranakan terrace house.⁵² Its siting within the hall is significant, as it places it within a space which, particularly for southern Chinese homes, held significance as the principal ceremonial, formal, and reception space within the household.⁵³ As the primary space for hosting, social gatherings, and ceremonial purposes such as the display of offerings during religious festivities, the *ee-tok* formed an integral part of a traditional Chinese furniture set-up composed of an altar table along the far wall facing the front entrance, a surface often set with ancestral tablets, images of gods and goddesses, family mementos, and ceremonial paraphernalia;⁵⁴ as well as a symmetrical arrangement of armchairs, console tables, and mirrors along the hall’s two side walls. Akin to the spatial structure of the terrace house, these items of furniture were placed in configurations which date back to traditional arrangements of furnishings in houses in China, and were established along the ancient Chinese cosmological concept of balance and bipolarity akin to the idea of “yin and yang”.⁵⁵

The centre table’s assimilation into the spatial and domestic context of the Peranakan household did not occur without a change in its own ornamentation, materiality, and form. As Laura Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra note, migration tends to go hand in hand with the export of the diasporic community’s craft and artistry; which, when applied to new types found in the host country, often leads to creations encompassing a spectrum of forms, styles, materials, and visual references of both the migrants’ native country and their new home.⁵⁶ Similarly, under the hands of Chinese carpenters, the Regency centre table underwent a transformation which marked the *ee-tok* as a hybrid departure from both its English precedents and its Chinese equivalents. The *ee-tok* grew to sport decorative auspicious and religious symbols from Chinese religious art. While retaining traces of European ornamentation in some instances, local carpenters tended to Sinicise the *ee-tok*’s ornamentation through the introduction of decorative dragons’ heads, *qilins*, gargoyle-like masks, and other religious motifs, especially when fulfilling commissions from Peranakan clients.⁵⁷ Decorations were usually chosen for their auspicious and religious significance, and bore meanings such as longevity, health, and abundance.

The *ee-tok*’s use of marble also marked a material change reflective of a wider Peranakan practice of using stone as a means to distinguish

49 Isabella Bird, *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1883), 133.

50 Knapp, *China’s Old Dwellings*, 33.

51 Tan, *The Baba of Melaka*.

52 For a sense of the central nature of the *ee-tok* within the main hall and wider household, refer to the Lims’ interviews, which note the object as a “focal point” in the “centre of the whole household.” (Swee Liew Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 27, 2023; Teng Chwan Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 23, 2023).

53 Kai-Yin Lo, “Traditional Chinese Architecture and Furniture,” in *House, Home, Family: Living and Being Chinese*, eds. Ronald G. Knapp and Kai-Yin Lo (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 182.

54 Knapp, *China’s Old Dwellings*, 24.

55 Lo, “Traditional Chinese Architecture and Furniture,” 187.

56 Laura E. Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, “Migration and material culture: legacy, ethnicity, hybridity,” *Diasporas* 32, (2018): 127.

57 Ho, *Straits Chinese Furniture*, 21.

58 Ibid., 145.

59 Ibid., 122.

60 Ibid., 26.

61 Ibid.

a piece of furniture for more formal or ceremonial purposes.⁵⁸ Marble tabletops were uncommon in England, whose centre tables, while sometimes ornamented with timber marquetry, were typically constructed with tabletops of the same timber as their bases. The *ee-tok*'s adoption of marble tabletops might have been the result of several reasons, including the long-standing Chinese tradition of having figured marble slabs to adorn furniture such as chairs, tables, and settees; marble's utilitarian advantage of being hard-wearing and easy to care for, especially in relation to Malaysia's tropical climate; as well as its availability in the nearby Langkawi Islands, which supplied much of the grey or black-streaked white marble seen upon *ee-toks* made in the earlier part of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ The *ee-tok*'s change in materiality also produced an transformation of its form: structural difficulties in its construction, caused by the weight placed by the marble slab upon the table's central leg, were a likely cause behind the *ee-tok*'s standard form with four ancillary pillars, rather than the single tripod stand of English examples.

Equally, the *ee-tok*'s hybridised expression differentiated it from other more traditionally Chinese types of furniture found in the Peranakan home. Its use of teak associated it with a new type of furniture regarded as more fluidly programmed, or casual,⁶⁰ and stood it apart from blackwood and carved namwood pieces, two types of furniture typically reserved for more ceremonial purposes. Blackwood furniture tended to be supplied by Chinese carpenters from the provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang, and were recognisable by their ornamental patterns made with mother-of-pearl inlays. These pieces adhered much more closely to their Chinese precedents and were usually laid out in symmetrically in the front reception room to receive guests on formal occasions such as weddings, birthdays, and the Lunar New Year. On the other hand, carved namwood furniture stemmed from a tradition originating in Fujian and Zhejiang, and used a species of cedarwood found in China's southeastern parts. They were usually patterned with a bright red or reddish-brown lacquer, sporting elaborate carvings of figures, horsemen, court scenes, landscapes, and floral patterns in gilt work.⁶¹

Despite its origins as a foreign object, the *ee-tok* found its way into the centre of one of the most significant spaces of the Malaysian Chinese home. As a point of convergence, the *ee-tok* not only marked a space central to the social and ritual life of the Malaysian Chinese household, but also formed an object whose materiality tied the nation's Chinese diaspora to commodity flows from Burma and Thailand, and acquired knowledges from India. Within this tangle of networks, "Locating the *Ee-Tok*" has outlined two major backgrounds behind the *ee-tok*'s materialisation in Malaysia – its appearance through British channels, as well as the nature of its adoption within the Malaysian Chinese terrace house. In doing so, the chapter has attempted to frame the *ee-tok* as a diasporic object, so that it might act as a point of orientation from which two major genealogies might be further explored: the European history of the table, first as an object then as a concept, from its earliest extant examples to its culmination in the round, as well as the simultaneous development of China's own unfolding relationship to the table.

ROUND TABLE

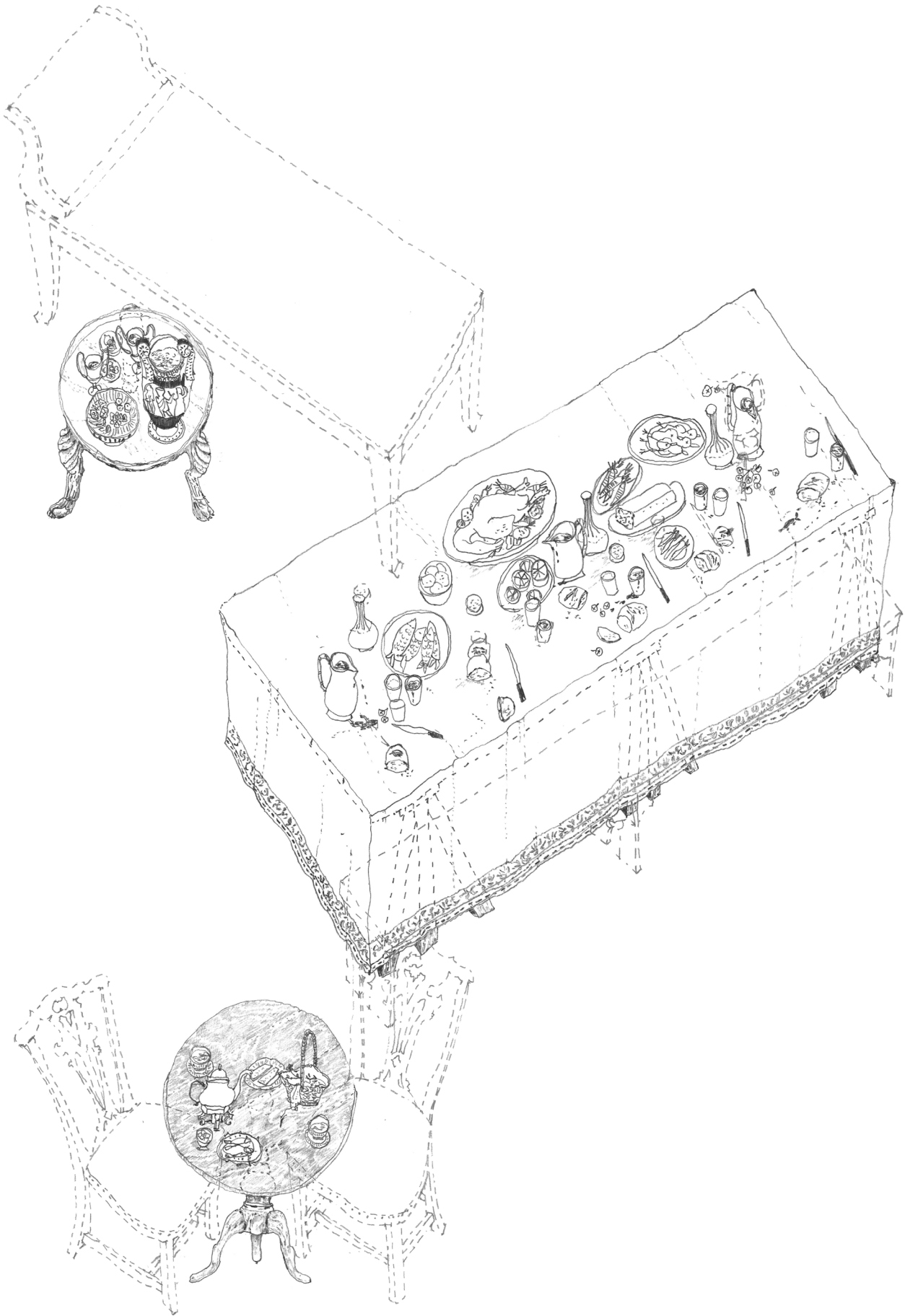


Figure 6
From top to bottom: a Greek three-legged table, medieval banquet table, and
Georgian tea table. Drawing by author.

Chapter Two

BEFORE THE TABLE

In order to understand the *ee-tok* in relation to its antecedents, we might begin with an exploration of the background and cultural intimations of the English centre table, within the wider European imaginary of the table. While describing the human world of shared things, Arendt writes that “to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”⁶² Two inferences about the table might be made: firstly, the assumption that it forms a site one gathers around, seated; and secondly, that the space of the table is likened to a world, which acts as both the product, and the mediator, of the social relations surrounding it. While Arendt’s statement falls in line with contemporary approaches to the table not only as an object, but as an event and concept, such an understanding of the table only appeared since its cultural redefinition in the Middle Ages.

We might understand the early table’s relatively peripheral role through a wall painting found in the Greek Tomb of Agios Athanasios from the last quarter of the fourth century BCE (Fig. 7). In the painting, we see five figures, four reclining and one seated, upon a series of dining couches. They are most likely in the *andron*, the main reception area of the house reserved for formal drinking parties such as the symposium. Two three-legged tables are shown in front of them: one’s top is rectangular, while the other is circular.⁶³ Both are low, coming up to the bottom edge of the couches’ mattresses, and are just tall enough to facilitate a reclining body’s ability to reach the food and drink placed upon them. The unobtrusive presence of the two tables in the wall painting are representative of other depictions of feasting in antiquity, in which tables typically have a lower visibility compared to other types of furniture such as stools or chairs, which were often used to denote a position of rank or honour.⁶⁴ While visual evidence such might have tendencies to reproduce codified iconographies, rather than realistically reflect ancient realities, they continue to provide useful statements about the relative significance of objects depicted.

In this way, the understated presence of tables in visual representations from antiquity suggests the table’s relatively ancillary role within the social realm.⁶⁵ As supportive, rather than central, items of furniture, we might understand the early table as an effect, rather than a cause of, developments towards a raised mode of living. (In antiquity, practising a chair-level mode of living was still relatively uncommon compared to the practice of sitting on the floor on mats or carpets, which continued to be a widespread way of life for the majority of the population outside elite households.) The early table’s morphology also suggests an understanding of its role as a peripheral object more akin to the tray, than to the site-like centrality often ascribed to tables today. Tables used to be small and extremely portable, often sporting tabletops with raised edges to catch items at risk from slipping off while carried. In some instances, tabletops were also detachable from their podium-like bases.⁶⁶ In this

62 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52.

63 Hinchman, *History of Furniture*, 58-9.

64 Vassilis Petrakis and Platon Petridis, “The Public Setting,” in *A Cultural History of Furniture in Antiquity*, ed. Dimitra Andrianou (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 127.

65 Vassilis Petrakis, Athina Chatzidimitriou, and Stefan Feuser, “Visual Representations,” in *A Cultural History of Furniture in Antiquity*, ed. Dimitra Andrianou (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 177.

66 Dimitra Andrianou, “Introduction,” in *A Cultural History of Furniture in Antiquity*, ed. Dimitra Andrianou (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 104-6.



Figure 7

Symposium scene from the wall painting of the Tomb of Agios Athanasios, Thessaloniki. Last quarter of the fourth century BCE. From Dimitra Andrianou, ed., *A Cultural History of Furniture in Antiquity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), Plate 10.



Figure 8
How the Noble King Alexander was Poisoned. Manuscript illumination by Jean Vauquelin in *Histoire du Grand Alexandre*, c.1460. From Erin J. Campbell and Stephanie Miller, eds., *A Cultural History of Furniture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), Plate 14.

way, we might understand the early table's inception as a response to the simple need to raise items to height comfortable for the raised, seated body.

However, from the Middle Ages, the table appears once again in depictions of the medieval banquet, but in a much more prominent form. In Jean Vaquelin's *How the Noble King Alexander was Poisoned* (Fig. 8) tables are shown as large rectangular surfaces which shape the spatial structure of the room by dividing it into three defined spaces: the high table on the right, recognisable by its elevated position upon a dais; perpendicular to two long tables on either side of it. Guests sit on one side of each table, connected by a surface laden with drinking vessels and dishes of game and poultry. Between Vaquelin's painting and the Agios Athanasios scene, we might immediately notice the increasing size, and presence, of the table within the interior. During the Middle Ages, tables had grown to be much larger, losing their form as small, tray-like stands to consist of large, if crudely constructed, boards placed upon trestles.⁶⁷ These could reach significant lengths – a 1377 inventory of a hall in Argilly Castle, France, belonging to the Duke of Burgundy, cites a pair of trestle tables up to forty feet long requiring fifty-one trestles.⁶⁸

The table's expanding role within the interior of the medieval hall can be traced to a change from reclining to seated dining practices.⁶⁹ From the tenth century, reclining while banqueting became an outdated practice apart from rare, official occasions. This development most likely occurred during the Byzantine period of Christianisation, a transitional era in which social customs evolved with regards to catering, entertainment, and relaxation.⁷⁰ As official and domestic customs grew closer to those of Christian religious communities, sitting while dining became a widespread practice which emulated monastic communities who ate "always seated and not lying down."⁷¹ Monastic dining practices also had an effect on domestic table etiquette, from appropriately passing food to companions, to eating in moderation, apart from the silence which often accompanied monastic meals. In secular homes, this was abandoned in favour of lively conversation, emulating the Feast of the Gods.⁷²

The medieval table's new expression as a singular, large expanse (rather than as a series of small, discrete tables) allowed it to form a connecting surface which people sat *at*, rather than alongside, and aided its development as an increasingly codified site of social relations. As an integral part of the socially charged event of the banquet, which marked a host's display of wealth through "expansive generosity,"⁷³ tables were used to define social hierarchies. The host and most honoured guests sat at the centre of the high table, while other household members and guests of lower rank were placed at the lower tables. Seating continued to imply a distinction of rank, with armchairs and folding stools demarcating positions of honour, and benches forming the most undistinguished type of seating.⁷⁴ Yet, unlike its central role in conveying rank within the Greek *andron* by structuring the positions in which guests were seated (with the most honoured positions on the couch aligned to the far wall from the *andron's* entrance), the seat grew to be a secondary means of distinguishing importance in relation to the position one occupied at the table.

67 Erin J. Campbell and Stephanie R. Miller, "Introduction: Furniture and Culture," in *A Cultural History of Furniture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Erin J. Campbell and Stephanie R. Miller (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 8-9.

68 Stephanie R. Miller, "The Domestic Setting," in *A Cultural History of Furniture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Erin J. Campbell and Stephanie R. Miller (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 113.

69 Vassilis Petrakis et. al., "The Domestic Setting," in *A Cultural History of Furniture in Antiquity*, ed. Dimitra Andrianou (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 112.

70 Vassilis Petrakis, Dimitra Andrianou, and Ilias Anagnostakis. "Verbal Representations," in *A Cultural History of Furniture in Antiquity*, ed. Dimitra Andrianou (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 224.

71 Petrakis, Andrianou, and Anagnostakis, "Verbal Representations," 224.

72 Miller, "The Domestic Setting," 112.

73 Ibid., 98.

74 Ibid., 108.

75 Ibid., 115.

76 Mimi Hellman, "Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century France," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 4 (1999): 416. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053926>.

77 Miller, "The Domestic Setting," 113.

78 Hollie L. S. Morgan, "Verbal Representations: Making 'an Honest Bede' – Encountering God in Bed in Late Medieval England," in *A Cultural History of Furniture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Erin J. Campbell and Stephanie R. Miller (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 221.

79 Morgan, "Verbal Representations," 221.

80 Markman Ellis, "The Tea-table, Women and Gossip in Early Eighteenth-century Britain," in *British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century: Challenging the Anglo-French Connection*, edited by Valérie Capdeville and Alain Kerhervé (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2019), 69.

81 Ibid., 71.

82 Hannah Greig and Giorgio Riello, "Eighteenth-Century Interiors – Redesigning the Georgian: Introduction," *Journal of Design History* 20, no. 4 (2007): 278, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25228549>.

If the table was integral in defining social relationships based on where one was placed at it, it did so too through how one behaved around it. Across the fifteenth century, a formalisation of table manners meant that the table grew to be theatre of display, setting the stage for an event where "all movements, seating, and object placements [were] orchestrated for an audience," and "participant-diners were on display to each other."⁷⁵ In being part of a "joint performance" between person and the thing,⁷⁶ the table came to form the major mediating element of the medieval banquet, thus forming a site of intricate social negotiations. This was augmented by its role as one of the major pieces of furniture associated with the medieval hall, a space which held the cultural status as the centre of hospitality and governance within the medieval household.⁷⁷ Its capturing of the public imagination as a space, or symbol, is evidenced in its recurring appearance in Medieval written documents.⁷⁸ For instance, in eleventh century Salisbury marriage vows, the woman promises to be "bonour and buxom, in bed and at board," while judicial separation was referred to as divorce "*a mensa et thoro*" (at bed and board).⁷⁹ Far from its origins as a peripheral object in the ancient Greek household, the medieval table had come to be understood as the centre of the hall, family, and household.

Thus far, we have seen the table emerge as an increasingly significant site within the medieval household. This development begins to explain the centre table's role as a gathering space within the domestic interior, and its ability to act as a symbol of family togetherness. Yet, it leaves unanswered the means through which the centre table developed its specialised function as a space for intimate, and often familial, sociability, in contrast to the medieval table's role as an enabler for the formal, hierarchical, and often elaborate, performance of dining. The rest of this chapter locates the arrival of the Georgian tea table, the smaller ancestor of the Regency centre table, as a second constitutive development in the English imaginary of the table – one which layers the conception of the table as a ceremonial and formalised space, with the alternative potential to act as a site for intimate sociability and leisure.

The appearance of the Georgian tea table traces back to the seventeenth century beginnings of the English practice of consuming tea.⁸⁰ The table, often found in the social spaces of the parlour or sitting room, set the stage for the tightly scripted ritual of tea-drinking, and provided a surface for tea equipage which included a teapot, kettle, sugar bowl, slops bowl, sugar tongs, porcelain cups and saucers, and teaspoons.⁸¹ As a "register of ideals" on contemporary frameworks of politeness and gentility,⁸² eighteenth-century conversation pieces help to illuminate the specific qualities of the social occasions in which the Georgian tea table was found. The tea table acts as a recurring central figure in these paintings, around which a small family group or couple are typically captured in an atmosphere of affectionate and casual domesticity. In Johann Zoffany's *Willoughby de Broke Family* (Fig. 9), we are provided a momentary insight into the family's private life. Father, mother, and children are loosely gathered the tea table: John Verney raises a finger in admonishment at his son, who reaches for a slice of toast. Meanwhile, his wife is unable to notice this theft, as she is preoccupied with keeping their daughter's skirts away from the table, and observing their other



Figures 9 & 10

Above: *Lord Willoughby de Broke and his Family*. Johann Zoffany, c. 1766. From Kate Retford, "From the Interior to Interiority: The Conversation Piece in Georgian England," *Journal of Design History* 20, no. 4 (2007): 300, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25228550>.

Below: *Jonathan Tyers and his family*. Francis Hayman, 1740. From Matthew Craske, "Conversations and Chimneypieces: the imagery of the hearth in eighteenth-century English family portraiture," *British Art Studies* 2 (April 2016), <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-02/mcraske>.

son as he draws in a wooden horse. A similar liveliness is seen in Francis Hayman's *Tyers Family* portrait (Fig. 10) as we catch the family just as tea is being poured; the informality of the scene reinforced by a son's artless, downward glance at his father.

The Georgian tea table provided a form particularly suited to the intimate and familial sociability of tea-drinking. Like those seen in Zoffany and Hayman's paintings, the timber tea table was typically small, round, and set upon a central pedestal which branched into a tripod base. In contrast to the generously proportioned medieval table, or even contemporary rectangular or oval Georgian dining tables, the tea table was unique in its compact, circular shape. The table's circular form provided a lack of directionality which more easily dispensed of clear social hierarchies. Equally, the pedestal leg of the tripod tea table was not only an aesthetic convention, but an enabler of more intimate relationships between bodies. The central column replaced the need for multiple supports, allowing for a number of people to pull up their chairs snugly, thereby creating a sense of closeness which provided the opportunity for intimate language and relations.⁸³

Yet, the tea table's association with intimacy and conversation was reinforced not only by the form of the table, but where it was found. Beginning from the fourteenth century, increasing wealth and political stability aided the house's move away from compact, defensive structures to larger homes sporting a variety of more specialised rooms. Compared to the medieval household, which was largely composed of the hall and chamber, the eighteenth-century home provided more opportunity to give rooms defined uses such as that of the parlour, dining room, and study. When read alongside the period's increasing notion of privacy, rooms came not only to be attributed with more discrete programmatic functions, but equally with more calibrated degrees of intimacy.⁸⁴ For example, in an eighteenth-century house with multiple parlours, a visitor with particularly close ties might expect to be taken past the front, and most formal, reception room, to the more intimate and strictly controlled areas deeper within the interior.

In returning to the conversation piece, we find that the tea table tends to appear in the more modest "family rooms" of the Georgian house, in which familiar and intimate sociability was expected, rather than the "state" or "parade" chambers typically associated with more ceremonious and formal kinds of hospitality.⁸⁵ This might be read in the relative simplicity of the interiors found in Zoffany and Hayman's paintings, as opposed to the impressive reception room seen in William Hogarth's *Assembly at Wanstead House* (Fig. 11). Hogarth's painting provides a rare example of a conversation piece staged in the elaborate setting of the formal reception room, and the stateliness of its furnishings, which include an impressive marble hearth, as well as a lavishly gilded orthogonal occasion table, in place of the more unassuming circular timber tea table, are unusual for contemporary pieces of the genre. In this respect, it might be deduced that the tea table was seen as befitting the casual, familial spaces of the home in which closely bonded friends and family members socialised, rather than the magnificent "state" chambers used

83 Anna Smart Martin, "Tea Tables Overturned: Rituals of Power and Place in Colonial America," in *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 177.

84 Benjamin Heller, "Leisure and the Use of Domestic Space in Georgian London," *The Historical Journal* 53, no. 3 (2010): 640, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40865672>.

85 Matthew Craske, "Conversations and Chimneypieces: the imagery of the hearth in eighteenth-century English family portraiture," *British Art Studies* 2 (April 2016): 1. <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-02/mcraske>. In his article, Craske makes an analysis of the types of rooms in which conversation pieces take place based on the types of chimneypieces featured in the paintings – typically not the most lavishly carved marble chimneypieces of "state" rooms, but the simpler pieces of inner family rooms deeper within the interior of the Georgian house. By observing the furnishings of the rooms in which the timber tea table appears, we might arrive at a similar conclusion.



Figure 11
Assembly at Wanstead House, the family and friends of Sir Richard Child, Viscount Castlemaine. William Hogarth, c. 1729–31. From Matthew Craske, “Conversations and Chimneypieces: the imagery of the hearth in eighteenth-century English family portraiture,” *British Art Studies* 2 (April 2016), <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-02/mcraske>.

for more ceremonial and official forms of hosting.

As a familial and intimate space for sociability and leisure, the Georgian tea table might be read as a major event within a chain of cultural developments which lead to the appearance of the Regency centre table. This chapter has investigated the European history of the table by reading it as a series of cultural redefinitions beginning with its early, subaltern appearance as a raised tray; before its emergence as the spatially and socially prominent centre of the medieval hall and household, and its eighteenth century culmination as the circular, compact tea table. By looking into changes encompassing the table's form, locations, and surrounding practices, this chapter has attempted to trace the means through which the centre table arrived as a culturally charged site within the European imagination and interior.

ROUND TABLE

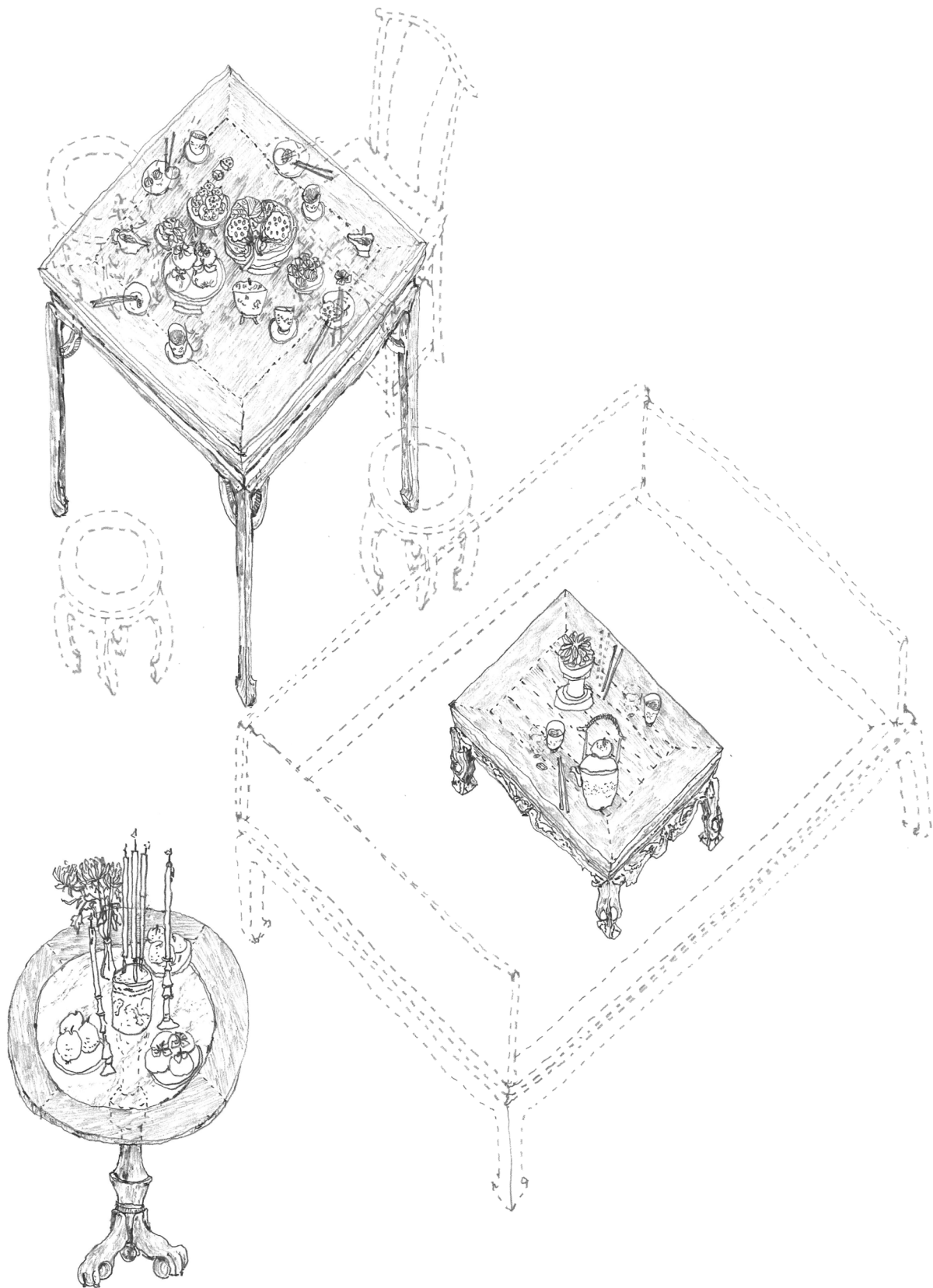


Figure 12
From top to bottom: a square Eight Immortals table, *kang* table, and Qing round table. Drawing by author.

Chapter Three

PARALLELS

Despite gaining an understanding of the developments behind the centre table's appearance as a site for gathering and intimate conviviality, the question remains as to how a European object came to locate itself within the Malaysian Chinese home. This chapter traces parallels in seating and social practices between China and the West to explain the relative ease of the centre table's adoption within the reception halls of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, and begins by identifying China's widespread and early adoption of a chair-level mode of living. While the earliest Chinese instances of the chair were reserved for persons of honoured positions, Zhang Zhechuan's *Qingming Festival on the River* shows that commonfolk had also adopted the practice of sitting at tall tables by the twelfth century.⁸⁶ Parts of Zhang's painting depict humble eateries, shown as open thatched structures and furnished with crudely made square or rectangular tables and benches, where a traveller might stop by for a quick meal of noodles or soup (Fig. 15).⁸⁷ China's adoption of raised seating was exceptional within Asia. As Sarah Handler notes, China was the only region outside the West to adopt a chair-level mode of living before the modern period,⁸⁸ whereas other cultures in Asia continued to sit close to ground.⁸⁹

China's adoption of a chair-level mode of living might be located sometime between 500 to 1000, before which its people, like their neighbours, commonly sat on mats or low platforms.⁹⁰ Reasons behind the region's movement towards a chair-level mode of living encompass both the social and the practical. While it remains unclear how exactly the form of the chair developed within China, it seems that its earliest examples were used to convey stature and importance to a person. Before the tenth century, isolated examples exist of elevated chairs used for honorific purposes.⁹¹ The elevation of the body, and the adjustment of its posture through chairs and stools, aided its hierarchical distinction from those seated closer to the ground. Equally, raised seating helped to distance the body from the cold and damp of the floor, and facilitated labour by freeing the feet to operate tools and machinery such as the loom. There is inconclusive evidence to suggest that the early chair was based on foreign prototypes, yet two points suggest its arrival through exchange with foreign cultures: firstly, that China had contact with chair-using peoples such as the nomadic community of the Altai Mountains in Southwest Siberia, and that the region's first known depictions of chairs are all connected to Buddhism, which originated in modern-day India.⁹²

Here, it is interesting to note how China's adoption of new seating practices affected its table forms as well as its dining practices. Before the advent of chairs, Chinese tables shared characteristics with those of Western antiquity by resembling small, and portable, tray-like surfaces. During the Han period (206 BCE – 220 CE), tables were small and portable enough to be carried from the kitchen readily set with dishes, and

86 Here, "tall" is used to refer to heights of around 75 centimetres, typical to contemporary dining tables.

87 Handler, *Austere Luminosity*, 187.

88 Ibid., 9.

89 Hinchman, *History of Furniture: A Global View*, 174.

90 Handler, *Austere Luminosity*, 9.

91 Ibid., 14.

92 Ibid., 44.

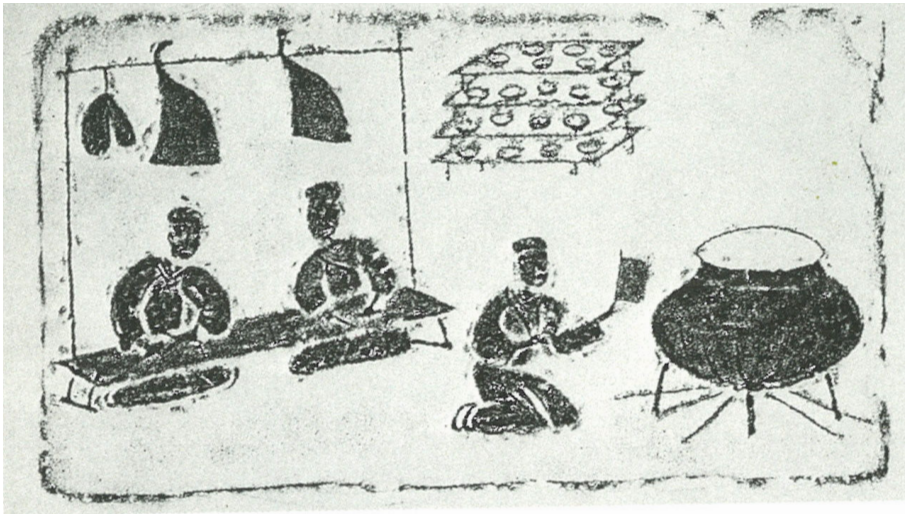


Figure 13

Kitchen preparations. Rubbing from pottery relief from a tomb in Xindu county, Sichuan, Eastern Han dynasty. From Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 12.



Figure 14

Banquet. Detail from a tomb wall painting in Nanliwang, Chang'an county Shaanxi, middle of the Tang dynasty (781-848). From Kai-Yin Lo, "Traditional Chinese Architecture and Furniture," in *House, Home, Family: Living and Being Chinese*, eds. Ronald G. Knapp and Kai-Yin Lo (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 195.



Figure 15

Qingming Festival on the River. Zhang Zechuan, early twelfth century. From Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 186.

93 Ibid., 180.

94 Ibid., 12.

as such were typically individual – each person would sit on a mat with their own dishes in front of them.⁹³ In observing an early representation of a kitchen scene (Fig. 13), we find that tables sit along the room's back wall, stacked atop each other with dishes already placed upon them. To aid their portability, such tables also often sported rims to facilitate the carrying of dishes.⁹⁴ Yet, by the Tang period (618 – 907 CE), sitting on stools had grown to become more common. Perhaps as a result of the comparative ease of raising food up on a single table surface, the use of elevated seats shaped mealtime conventions so that people began to gather around large, orthogonal tables on which common dishes and delicacies were placed.

China's rise from mat to chair was not a wholly straightforward process. Depictions of gatherings in the period leading up to the Song dynasty show a transitional moment where tables were large enough to be spaces around which people sat, but too low to assume contemporary relationships between chair, table, and body (i.e., such that one's legs are bent under the table). An example of such an in-between moment might be found in a tomb wall painting of a banquet completed in the Tang period (Fig. 14). A detail from the painting depicts a gathering of figures around a single, large rectangular table placed with communal dishes. They are seated on benches, yet bench and table share the same height, meaning that the figure's legs were unable to be bent under the table. Table heights were slightly awkward, as bodies continued to retain a significant amount of distance from the table, with the table acting as a support for items, rather than the body itself. Nevertheless, visual evidence shows that, by the Song period, the table had consolidated its form as a space one sat *at*, with chair and table heights relating to each other in much the same way as they do today.

If Zhang's *Qingming Festival on the River* depicts the table's appearance in the common world, visual references from *The Plum in the Golden Vase* provide information on its use in more ceremonial and elite settings. A woodblock illustration from the latter shows the table incorporated into the formal set-up of a banquet (Fig. 16), in a spatial arrangement not completely unlike the one found within the medieval hall, where guests sit along a single side of tables, facing others across a room. The formality of the occasion is underlined by the frontals hanging along the sides of tables; and the presence of yoke-back chairs and footstools, an addition which marked their users as more distinguished guests. Women do not have a place within this arena of orchestrated sociability, but watch proceedings from behind a screen while sitting on stools, a form of seating allotted for those of lower rank. The underlying hierarchies at play within the scene, expressed materially and spatially, are reflective of the structured social frameworks formed under Confucianism. The belief system, whose teachings on conduct and ritual came to form the primary means of organising state and society since the first century BCE, included guidelines on the use, and ownership, of different classes of furniture.⁹⁵

Confucianism's social conventions also allowed for more informal occasions, to which several types of tables were often ascribed. These

95 François Louis and Chongyi Nie, *Design by the Book: Chinese Ritual Objects and the Sanli Tu* (New York City: Bard Graduate Centre, 2017), 3.

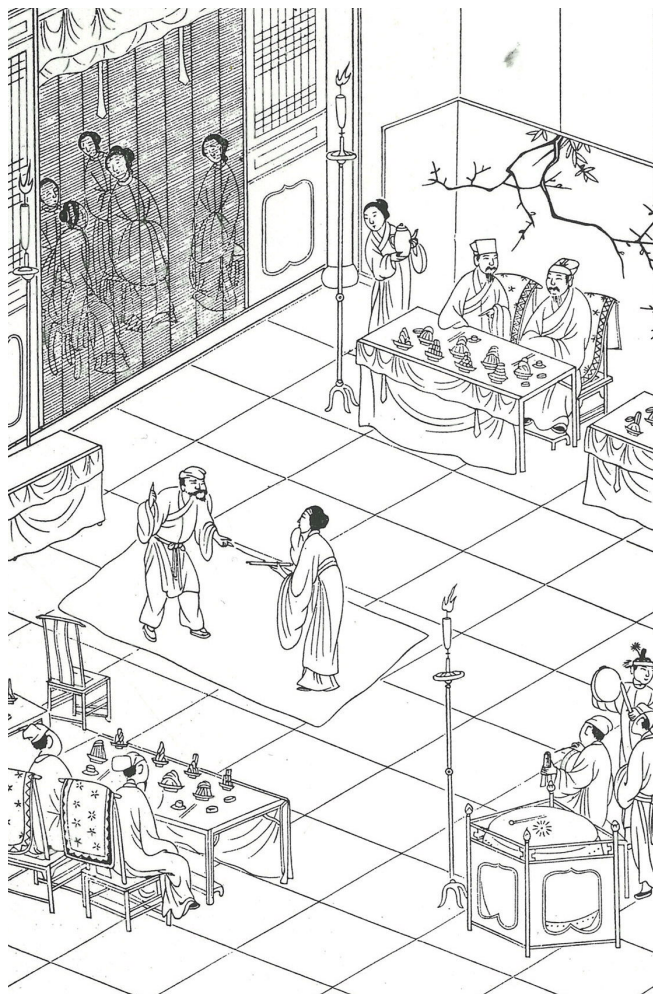


Figure 16

Banquet scene. Woodblock illustration to *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Ming dynasty, Chongzhen reign period (1628-44). From Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 51.

96 Handler, *Austere Luminosity*, 173.

97 Ibid., 202.

98 Ibid., 188.

99 Xueqin Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 3, *The Warning Voice*, trans. David Hawkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 221.

100 Handler, *Austere Luminosity*, 95-6.

include the square Eight Immortals table, which until today remains a common central piece of furniture in the reception halls of Chinese homes.⁹⁶ The square table typically appears in social gatherings between friends and family: in *Ximen Decides to Deflower Li Guijie* (Fig. 18), we see the table in the centre of Ximen Qing and his five followers during night of drunken revelry, while in *Meng Yulou's Birthday* we see Qing at the table again, this time in celebration of his first wife's birthday (Fig. 17). The Eight Immortals table varied in size, but typically accommodated around four to eight persons, and was used for communal functions such as eating or games. Its equidistant edges facilitated activities which occurred at the centre of the table and benefited from easy communication between those around it.⁹⁷ Its conception might be traced back to new customs of communal eating, as the square table provided a particularly appropriate form in making meals "intimate, shared occasions in which everyone sat close together and helped themselves with their chopsticks from common dishes placed in the centre of the table."⁹⁸

The *kang* table provided another type of table with associated with intimacy. Small and low in form, and either round or orthogonal in shape, this type of table was used upon the *kang*, or couch bed. In an excerpt from *The Song of the Stone*, written in 804 CE, a friendly gathering settle themselves around a round pear-wood *kang* table, which forms an intimate and comfortable setting, as opposed to the "big table":

"Let's not sit up at the big table [,] said Aroma.] We can put the round pear-wood table on the kang. It will be much more relaxed and comfortable on the kang.' ... 'It's so hot,' [Baoyu] said to the maids. 'Let's take our outer clothes off.' ... And so, before taking their places on the kang, they went off to remove their hair-ornaments and make themselves more comfortable. They returned wearing only tunics and trousers, with their unadorned hair loosely knotted or coiled...The girls found [Baoyu] already ensconced on the kang. He was leaning back, one elbow resting on a newly made turquoise-coloured pouffe stuffed with rose and peony petals, playing guess-fingers with Parfumée."⁹⁹

Yet, while square and *kang* tables were typically ascribed to social, convivial, and intimate settings, their forms – and who was allowed to use them – continued to be imbued with undertones of social hierarchy. In the instance of the *kang* table, delineations were set in place by who was given a place upon the couchbed itself. The *kang* was a reserved space for privileged friends and the household's highest ranking members, with younger family members sat on low stools beyond its edge.¹⁰⁰ Thus, while signifying an intimate space, the *kang* also marked a privileged realm for the honoured individual. Equally, the square Eight Immortals table's angularity continued to sustain a directionality and hierarchy supplemented by the types of furniture used around it. Hierarchy was highlighted by the orientation of seats, with the most honoured assuming the seat facing south, towards the main entrance of



Figure 17
Meng Yulou's Birthday. Woodblock illustration to *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Ming dynasty, Chongzhen reign period (1628-44). From Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 96.



Figure 18
Ximen Decides to Deflower Li Guijie. Attributed to Gu Jianlong, Qing dynasty, c. 1662 to late 1670s. From Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 191.

hall.¹⁰¹ In the painting of Ximen and Guijie, the former, as the leader of the group, is shown seated in this venerated position (deductible by the altar table behind him), with a red footstool to further distinguish his status. A similar spatial delineation of hierarchies is also seen in the woodblock illustration of Meng Yulou's birthday celebration, where Ximen and Yulou, as master of the house and first wife, are shown seated in a position of honour facing south towards the exterior and in front of a painted screen, while other wives sit on stools on either side as befits their lesser rank.¹⁰²

Through the Eight Immortals and *kang* tables, we might understand that, in Confucian China, intimacy and conviviality did not necessarily denote a dispensation of stratifications between those involved. Yet, beyond these two ancient forms of table, a third – the Qing-period round table – presented itself as one allowing a more informal egalitarianism. The round table might be attributed to the arrival of the European tea table and its larger cousin, the gate-leg table, in the eighteenth century, at a time when a desire for social dining practices emphasising informality, in addition to intimacy, was taking shape.¹⁰³ While angular tables date back to ancient times, Chinese round tables were “virtually non-existent” until they began to pervade the China's material culture in the Qing dynasty.¹⁰⁴ The round table's spread into Chinese society first began with its appearance in Canton, through European traders who brought furniture aboard ships to furnish their own homes in Chinese trading ports.¹⁰⁵ These communities tended to bring along tilt-top and gate leg tables due to their lightness, portability, and space-saving tendencies, which rendered them useful in the cramped quarters of the ship cabin. Following their appearance in China, local furniture workshops began to reproduce these designs for export back to Europe, and their continuous presence and reproduction facilitated their adoption into local Cantonese, and later wider Chinese, culture.

While largely retaining its European form, the round table was incorporated into Chinese practices in a slightly different way. Small round tables continued to sport tripod bases, but were no longer specifically associated to tea-drinking as a specific form of ritual and sociability.¹⁰⁶ Instead, they were a preferred form of table for casual situations, often outside – set up as provisional surfaces, used whenever necessary to refreshments in the garden or at a picnic, then dismantled, carried back, and stored away after the excursion. They were also considered particularly appropriate for outdoor religious activities which took place during the Lantern Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival. In such scenarios, round tables were rarely ornate or luxuriously made, and were typically made of secondary woods and constructed so that they were easily put together and taken apart. Gao Yinzhang's *Offerings to the Full Moon* shows a moment of the moon offering during Mid-Autumn night, where two boys are learning about offering rituals from an adult woman in a private courtyard (Fig. 19). A tripod table inlaid with white stone stands in front of them, set with mooncakes, dumplings, and fruit, candles, and an incense burner.

Beyond the reinterpretation of the round table's functions, what is

101 Xiaoming Zhang, *Chinese Furniture: Exploring China's Furniture Culture*, (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2009), 132.

102 Handler, *Austere Luminosity*, 95-6.

103 Kyoungjin Bae, “Around the Globe: The Material Culture of Cantonese Round Tables in High-Qing China,” in *EurAsian Matters*, edited by Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja (Cham: Springer, 2018), 37.

104 Ibid., 38. Bae notes that earlier forms of round table did exist, but these were typically half-moon side tables used as display surfaces of objects, rather than as social spaces to be sat around.

105 Ibid., 40.

106 This is perhaps due to the fact that tea, which had been something of a luxury at the beginning of the Song dynasty, had become a common everyday drink for both rich and poor by the end of the dynasty. It was termed one of the “seven necessities”: firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea.

striking is how its circular form captured China's imagination for its sense of egalitarianism. In contrast to the directional hierarchies of angular tables, the circular table allowed for ambiguity and casualness in seating positions, dispensing of clear formalities on who sat where. This sense of easy, unhierarchical sociability might be inferred from a passage in Jia Baoyu's mid-eighteenth century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*:

"When [Xiangyun and Baochai] were back again, they ordered servants to clear the seats and arrange a new table. Baoyu, however, said, 'No, don't set a new table. We are about to get on with poems. Set out the large round-reunion table in the centre [of the pavilion] and place all the food and wine on it. We don't have to assign seats; instead, we can help ourselves while sitting wherever we like. Would it be much more suitable?' 'That is right,' Baochai replied. [...] After a while, they called for another lot of hot crab-meats and ate them around the large round-reunion table."¹⁰⁷

107 Xueqin Cao, *Hong lou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber), vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), 520-1, Bae's translation.

A desire for, and intrigue by, the "ambiguity" of the round and its implications on social relationships might also be found in poetry of the period, such as by Qian Daxin's (1728-1804) poem "Round Table":

I still remember the Eight Immortals gathered at the Jade Terrace.
Yet, who transmitted the ambiguous new shape [of this object]?
Trimming the lantern with sincere joy, we reunite and chat.
Offering seats, either left or right is fine – in rotation.
Moving [the table] to the courtyard, heaven is like a bamboo hat.
When halved, the table resembles the crescent moon.
The gourd-like cottage rather suits your humbleness.¹⁰⁸

108 Daxin Qian, *Qianyan tang* (Collected Writings at the Hall of Secret Studies) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 592, Bae's translation.

The poem depicts a scene in which people are gathered around a round table, perhaps to prepare lanterns for the Lantern Festival. The round table is seen as a place for reunion, emblematic of its strong association to *tuanyuan*, a concept which might be translated to a range of words including replete, round, completion, and reunion.¹⁰⁹

Those around it are not positioned according to social rank, but simply choose to sit "wherever [they] like" while engaging in an activity shared through reciprocal, non-hierarchical relationships.

With its eighteenth-century arrival, the round table formed a relatively recent development within China's long and sustained relationship to the table. This chapter has attempted to trace this relationship, particularly with an intention to uncover moments which shed light on the *ee-tok*'s inclusion into the households and practices of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora. Three key developments have been identified: namely, the early Chinese adoption of chair-level modes of living, which made common the table-to-body relationships also found in Europe from the Middle Ages; a consciousness that certain forms of table were more suitable to social settings of conviviality and intimacy, even within the highly ordered and stratified social frameworks of Confucianism; and, lastly, an eighteenth-century awakening of a desire for an even more

109 Bae, "Around the Globe," 50. Note that Baoyu uses *tuanyuan* to refer to the round table in the original version of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This has been translated to "round-reunion" in the excerpt above.



Figure 19

Offerings to the Full Moon. Gao Yin Zhang (1835-1907), Yangliu New Year's Print. From Kyoungjin Bae, "Around the Globe: The Material Culture of Cantonese Round Tables in High-Qing China," in *EurAsian Matters*, eds. Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja (Cham: Springer, 2018), 51.

and casual and egalitarian table form, which found its answer in the European round table. While “Parallels” places China’s attitudes towards the table alongside the West’s, it refrains from suggesting that its relationship to the table closely follows the lineage of its Western counterpart’s. Instead, it aims to identify instances of cultural overlaps which helped to facilitate the centre table’s migration into the Chinese home, while raising questions about the means through which similar spatial practices appear in different contexts through alternative pathways, and comparable “types” might be culturally approached, described, and redefined.

ROUND TABLE

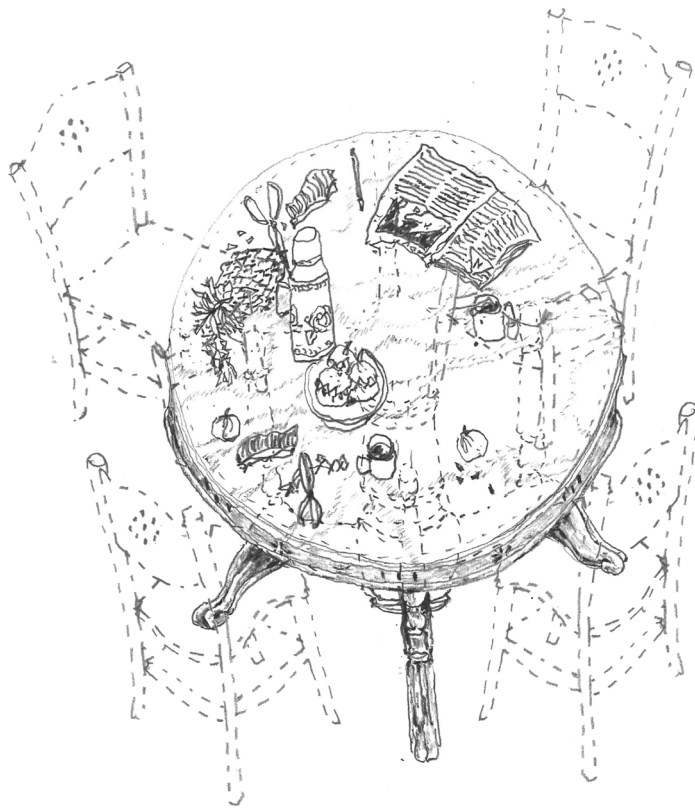


Figure 20
The Lim family's *ee-tok*. Drawing by author.

Chapter Four

PERSONS AND THINGS

Having traced its historical background through two major genealogies, “Persons and Things” returns to the recent history of the *ee-tok* by attending to its perception. The chapter provides an analysis of eight conversations with the Lim siblings, who grew up around an *ee-tok* between the 1950s and 1970s in a traditional Chinese terrace house in the mining town of Taiping, Malaysia. The family household had been run by a Peranakan Chinese grandmother married to a trader from Fujian, the latter of whom arrived in Malaysia in the early twentieth century. Their house on twenty-four Cinema Street was a largely traditional Chinese terrace house composed of a front hall, whose main items of furniture constituted the customary arrangement of an altar table against the far wall, two console tables with mirrors on either side, and an *ee-tok* in the centre of the room (see Fig. 21). Apart from the Lims, the house was shared with two other families (who were a part of the extended Lim family), and two make-shift bedrooms were built with access from a doorway to the left of the altar. The doorway on the right led to the back areas of the house, and a timber double-door separated the passageway from an area which included a skywell and a *lang*, which acted as a shared kitchen and dining area for the various families. Most of the bedrooms were located on the second storey, which was accessed through a stairway leading up from the passageway behind the front hall.

Despite belonging to a shared domestic situation, each family member was interviewed in order to explore how different perceptions might arise even between close proximities. As Ahmed observes, our interactions at the table correlate with being given a place within a familiar order.¹¹⁰ In *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Martin Heidegger delineates these differences in his description of the actions which take place between members of his family and the table: he *writes*, his wife *sews*, and his children *play*.¹¹¹ Equally, the essay was interested in using the format of the interview as a source of information to understand how the meaning of objects might be passed on, or lost. Its interest in the modes in which knowledges are transferred through contact with persons and material objects ties closely to Divya Tolia-Kelly’s concept of “re-memory,” a term Tolia-Kelly uses in reference to memory which is encountered in the everyday, but is not necessarily a recollection of actual experience.¹¹² In this way, it is separate to memories which recall experienced events, and instead might involve the memories of others recounted by family, friends, and parents, and which are absorbed through day-to-day living, and point beyond a linear narrative of events directly linked to the self.¹¹³

In the recollections of Lim Teng Chwan, the family’s eldest brother, we see the *ee-tok* forming a point of re-memory tied closely to his grandmother. Despite her passing while he was still of a young age, stories about her – relayed by his parents, or older relatives – widely inform his understanding of the *ee-tok* as a traditionally reserved, and almost “sacred,” space:¹¹⁴

110 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 59.

111 Martin Heidegger, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 67-8. In addition to the Lims’ experiences, other accounts of the *ee-tok* were provided by Lim Eng Leong, curator of the Malacca Heritage Centre, himself of Peranakan Chinese descent, as well as well as through brief visits to the homes of friends and acquaintances.

112 Tolia-Kelly, “Locating Processes of Identification,” 316.

113 Ibid., 316.

114 Teng Chwan Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 23, 2023.



Figure 21
Plan of twenty-four Cinema Street, based on a sketch by Lim Teng Peng. Drawing
by author.

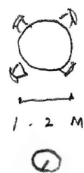
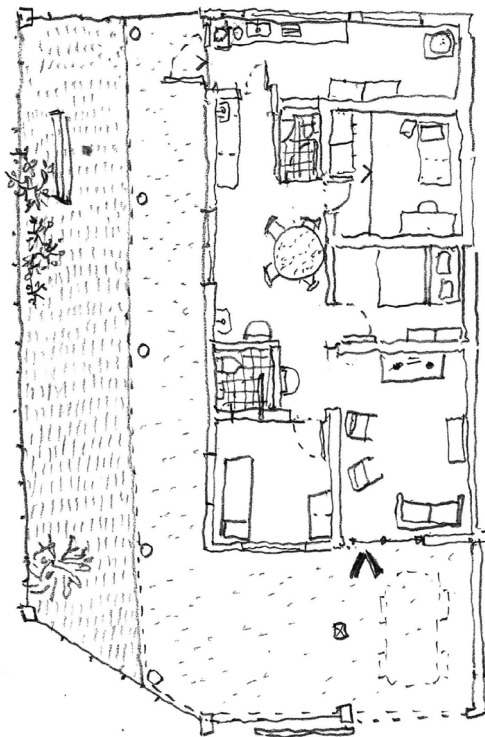


Figure 22
Plan of the Lim's current home on fifty-three Limau Nipis Street. Drawing by author.



Figure 23

The *ee-tok* in the reception hall at twenty-four Cinema Street, c. 1980s. An image of the Lims' grandmother hangs above the doorway. Image provided by Lim Swee Siang.

“By my time, how the table was used was very different to [my mother’s] time, when that table was like a reserved area. They used it when guests came. Then they would use it, as I’d said earlier, for ceremonial purposes. When the [grandmother] was no longer around, then the role of the table also evolved. We started to do our homework there, read our newspaper there; sometimes we’d also take our meals out to eat there. Then we’d play our games there – we played a lot of monopoly, scrabble. You know, the next generation used it a little bit different already. So, it evolved like that. From a more, I would say, ‘sacred’ kind of place, it then opened up to more general use. Before that, as far as I know, it was never allowed – as the grandmother would say – to be ‘abused.’ The function of the table would not have been allowed to have been “abused” like that. I mean *I* would use those words, not *her*. Because if she saw somebody doing something which she thought should not be done there, of course then she’d tell you off – ‘You shouldn’t be doing it, go eat at the back.’”¹¹⁵

115 Ibid.

Later on, he recounts how he “was around two or three when grandmother passed away”:

“...I hardly have any recollections of her at all, as I was around two or three when grandmother passed away. I only know her from the photograph hanging in the house. I don’t have any recollections of any interactions with grandmother, so I guess I must have been very small. I only remember her rules around the table through word of mouth, or what Ah Ma would tell us..”

Through familial anecdotes of his grandmother, Teng Chwan was able to arrive at an understanding of the *ee-tok* which largely fell in line with academic accounts of the table and the socio-spatial demarcations of the traditional Chinese home (for example, of the front hall of the house as a more formal, and ceremonial, area traditionally kept for the hosting of guests.) This is in contrast to the understanding of the *ee-tok* among the younger Lim siblings, of whom their grandmother, if mentioned at all, was a much weaker memory. While the *ee-tok* continued to hold a range of personal associations, it was widely considered as a much more everyday object which had always been used for activities such as food preparation, light industry such as sewing, and schoolwork.

If the home is a site where “memories traverse, are stored, exchanged, encountered, and materialised,”¹¹⁶ the *ee-tok*’s central position within it helped it to acquire the characteristics of a node within which existed multiple layers of significations. While all members of the family agreed that it was more of a “living table,” rather than a space for eating, amongst the Lim family alone, we see the *ee-tok* operating as a sign of overlapping, as well as diverging, significations.¹¹⁷ It might be understood to represent the family and household, and act a sign of their Chinese heritage; while it might also otherwise form a personalised symbol of a character strongly associated with it (for instance, between Teng Chwan and his grandmother), as well as a particular bodily relation to it. Lim Swee Chin, one of the younger sisters, recounts it as a place she

116 Tolia-Kelly, “Locating Processes of Identification,” 316.

117 Teng Chwan Lim, interview.

sat under while watching television.¹¹⁸ This is a bodily memory shared by the siblings' youngest brother, Lim Teng Peng, who remembers the *ee-tok* as a place not only to sit around, but under; and to lean against its central pedestal "like a tree trunk."¹¹⁹

Sometimes, these significations took us to spaces beyond the domestic realm. Yet, at least within the period of the Lims' childhood, this was often tied to the roles they were given within a familial, and gendered, order. For the Lim sisters, the *ee-tok* was an object almost exclusively tied to the home. When asked about its appearance in the *kopitiam*, or coffee shop, a space in which the *ee-tok* is frequently encountered today, recollections about these spaces were typically poor, generating remarks such as "I don't think *kopitiams* were really a thing back then," or "we never really went."¹²⁰ Nevertheless, responses from their brothers were markedly different: Lim Teng Joo, their second brother, recalls sharing *koleh*s (large metal mugs) of coffee between his friends, at *ee-toks* which were significantly smaller, typically by a foot (thirty centimetres) in diameter,¹²¹ while Teng Chwan remembers it as a space in which men would discuss "world affairs."¹²² At least for certain members of the family, the *ee-tok* was a material object which held additional ties to the outside realm, in a *kopitiam* setting which seems to have played a similar function to the coffee shops of Jürgen Habermas' public sphere – predominantly male spaces which acted as platforms for gossip, debate, and the catching up on news and political affairs.¹²³

Ruberto and Sciorra call attention to how diasporic material culture – the objects which immigrants bring with them, leave behind, or create in place – reveal their own personal experiences as well as those of the wider communities they are a part of.¹²⁴ As such, they might act as a mode to tell untold stories, especially of everyday experiences, as well as the emergence of hybrid practices and identities. Here, paying attention to individual histories might reveal the often diverging narratives which lie within the broader arcs of historical accounts. An example of these divergences might be found in the varying attitudes individuals and households had towards the formality, or ceremonial function, of the *ee-tok*. Among the Lim siblings, the *ee-tok* was a central fixture for offerings during Lunar New Year activities; a space for laying out meat dishes in a symbolic representation of a meal for ancestors, distinct from the decorated fruit on the altar table dedicated to the household gods. However, Lim Eng Leong, another interviewee, remarked that the *ee-tok* was a space exclusively for hosting and conversation, rather than offerings, which would have been placed upon a square table in front of the altar following more traditional Chinese arrangements.¹²⁵

As for the formality of table, the Lims' placement of the *ee-tok* in the front room marked it as a space for receiving both formal and intimate guests, and allowed it to be an integral part of religious ceremonies and rituals such as weddings and New Year celebrations. On the other hand, Tan Chee-Beng's ethnographic study of the home of one of his Peranakan Chinese participants noted the *ee-tok* as situated within a second, deeper, hall, to which only more well-acquainted guests were invited.¹²⁶ In this household, then, the *ee-tok* lost its ceremonial functions and re-assumed its role as a site for intimate conversation more akin to its morphological and cultural ancestor, the Georgian tea table.

118 Swee Chin Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 20, 2023.

119 Teng Peng Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, December 5, 2023.

120 Swee Bin Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 22, 2023; Swee Liew Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 27, 2023.

121 Teng Joo Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 27, 2023.

122 Teng Chwan Lim, interview.

123 Khairudin Aljunied, "Coffee-Shops in Colonial Singapore: Domains of Contentious Publics," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 77 (2014): 65–85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43299548>. Also see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press 1989).

124 Ruberto and Sciorra, "Migration and material culture," 127.

125 Eng Leong Lim, interview by Jian Lin Wong, November 22, 2023.

126 Tan, *The Baba of Melaka*, 80.

Undoubtedly, the means of these households' domestic situations – from the number of rooms available for greater distinctions in specific uses and levels of intimacy, to the amount of furniture owned – would have contributed to the decisions made on the role of the *ee-tok* within the home. Nevertheless, we are reminded of the heterogeneous and fragmentary nature of the *ee-tok*'s history – one accumulated through a series of personal re-inscriptions encompassing its placement and use, as well as its relationship to other objects within the home. As a site of negotiation between the existing domestic traditions of Chinese diasporic households and the implied practices of a newly arrived form, the *ee-tok* accrued its transcultural nature not only across the scale of the territory, but between the household and individual.

ROUND TABLE

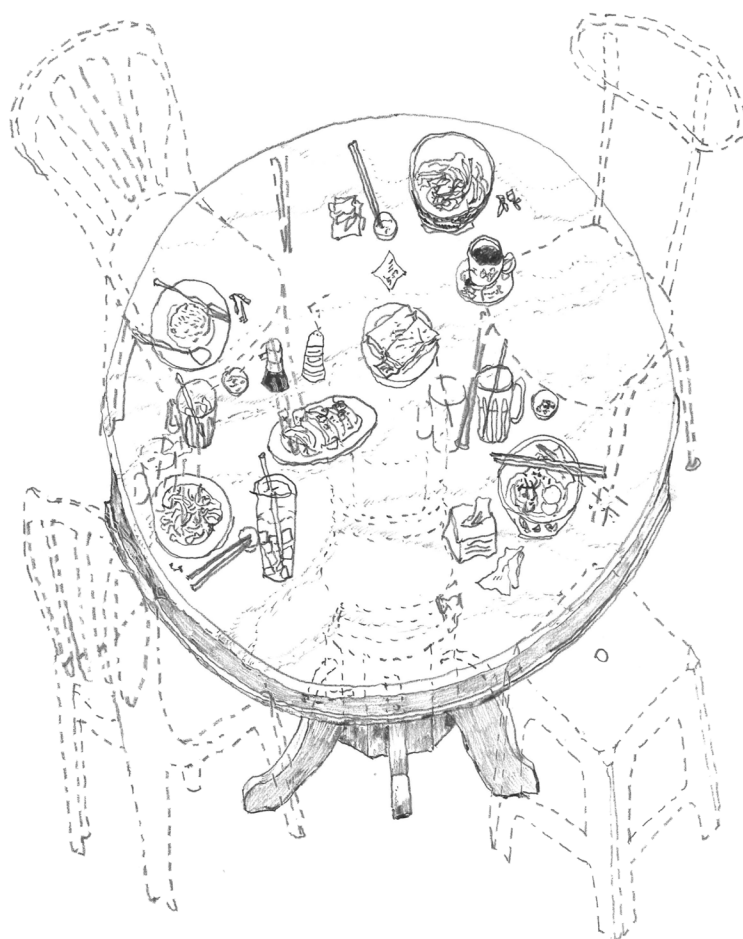


Figure 24
A modern-day marble-topped table, typically referred to as a *kopitiam* dining table. Drawing by author.

Conclusion

A SURFACE ACROSS TIME

Today, the Lims' *ee-tok* sits in what might be considered the dining room of their new house on Limau Nipis Street, Taiping (Fig. 22). With its current location within a wide passageway between the front living room and back kitchen, the *ee-tok* has lost a sense of its ceremonial and social significance and plays a role similar to that of a contemporary circular dining table. The Lims' current use of their *ee-tok* falls in line with an increasing tendency to associate *ee-toks* with dining, a perception bolstered by their appearance in the kitchens and dining rooms of contemporary homes, and by their use in early twentieth century *kopitiams*, which eventually developed into casual eateries following the incorporation of hawkers in the latter half of the century. Yet, at least in the Lims' situation, the decision to place the *ee-tok* in the dining area was not conscious choice to change its social or programmatic functions, but a practical response to the constraints of a living room which was no longer wide enough to accommodate it comfortably.

The trajectory of the Lims' *ee-tok*, from its beginnings as a more formal and ceremonial space, to one which acted as a surface for everyday activities, and finally to its culmination as a dining table, might be read as one within a wider collection of the *ee-tok*'s histories. *Round Table* has attempted to collect these narratives, as it is interested in how familiar objects arrive through a series of often tangled redefinitions. As we have seen in Chapters Two and Three, the *ee-tok* forms just one point in a wider genealogy of the table which, if we were to extend it further afield, takes us back to the table's beginnings in antiquity. Equally, the objects we have around us are typically not the product of one but multiple lineages, which span across territorially distant cultures. From the *ee-tok* alone we might trace a network of histories originating in Medieval Europe, then Georgian England; translated through knowledge transfers and material flows from India, Burma, and Thailand, and finally intersecting with parallel developments of chair and table practices in China.

Yet, how are such histories revealed; and how do they take shape? Arendt writes on the "backward glance" of the historian:

"What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself... because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable result of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story."¹²⁷

127 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192.

By working between the wider arcs of the *ee-tok*'s historicity and its immediate perception at the scale of the individual, *Round Table* has attempted to call attention to how these broader narratives and understandings are formed through the accumulation of, and transmission through, individual actions and associations. As Chapter Four suggests,

ROUND TABLE

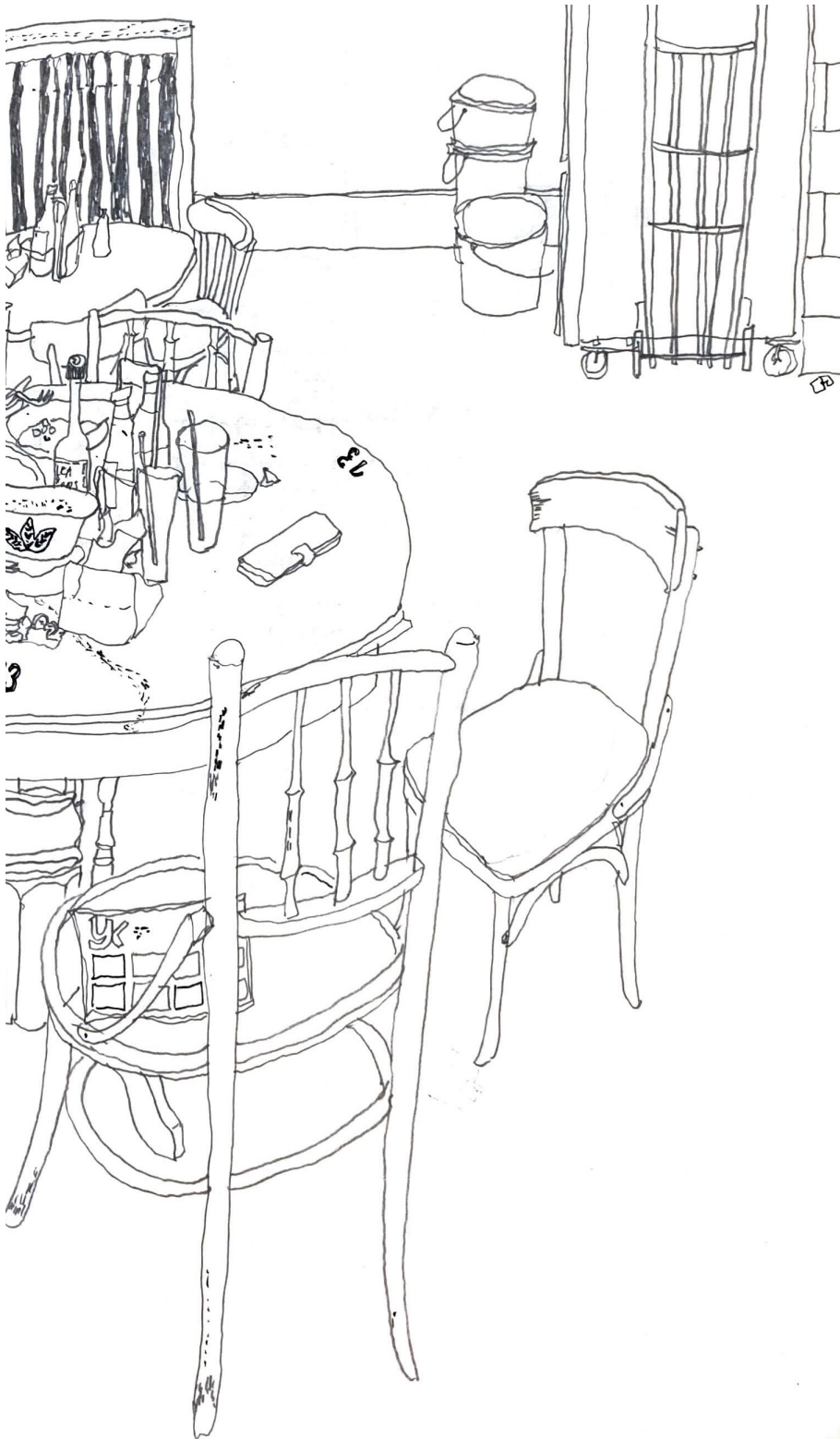


Figure 25

The *ee-tok* at a *kopitiam*, November 21, 2023. Drawing by author.

the *ee-tok* formed a site of negotiation around which individuals and families developed their own relationships by navigating decisions on how to use it, and where to place it. In this way, the essay takes the *ee-tok* as the beginnings of a methodology which understands an object's wider narratives, as well as its personal histories, as essential to what it is. In doing so, it hopes to look past the certainty of familiar objects, and encounter the untold stories which lie behind them.

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ANNEXE

November 20, 2023

LIM SWEE CHIN, THIRD SISTER

1 *Kaya roti*; typical *kopitiam* fare of bread with *kaya*, a coconut spread.

2 Ah Ma; a Hokkien term used interchangeably for “mother” or “grandmother.”

3 Ah Kong; a Hokkien term used interchangeably for “father” or “grandfather.”

The kopitiam table would be the white marble table with the round, carved legs – what do you mean what comes to mind? Kopi and toast, or rather, kaya roti and toast. And eggs. But I also think of Ah Ma’s old table when you mention it. I remember the carvings on it – normally they’d use rosewood and carvings are like lion heads, but mostly they are round blobs, with a round thing in the centre at the bottom. All the ornamentation are symbols from China, because Chinese tend to use phoenix, goldfish, koi fish, dragons – all these are auspicious symbols. As for their significance I can only guess that they would mean prosperity, harmony, and things like that.

The table was Ah Kong’s father’s, my grandfather’s.³ The old house was also his parents’. That was where all of us were born, in those pre-war houses which were about 20 ft wide by 80 ft long, with three shutter windows on the first floor. Downstairs you’d have two shutter windows and a double wooden door that was never locked, a halfway door like those cowboy salon doors. It was always open. Every week, a few times, you’d have different relatives visit. They’d come and sit down for a while and chitchat. The eldest uncle and the fourth uncle were there the most. Then, on Ah Ma’s side, her own brother’s wife and her sister would also come. Everybody liked to come to this house, also because we didn’t have a car and they did, so they knew that Ah Ma couldn’t go out. So they’d come and visit, and sit only ever at the round table, and Ah Ma would make her light coffee for them. Normally when they came, they’d come to chat, and nothing else.

For our family the round table was used in the living area, and it was a table for everything – you’d write on it, sit at it, have tea on it, you know. But for us it was never used as a dining table. All the eating happened towards the back part of the house, never the front. In the mornings nobody would be sat at there, all would be moving around. It was only after school. What happened was, Ah Ma had a sewing machine next to the window on the left, and next to that there was a long lanai chair. Ah Ma would be sitting there, doing her sewing or whatever. And then the round table is normally clear, until the children come back and want to do homework. Nobody sits there for long, actually, because the chairs were upright and uncomfortable. So you’d only sit there to do things. Most of us would sit on the floor, and then we’d lean against the table leg – it’s very thick. We’d sit under there to watch TV – the chairs weren’t comfortable to sit on, you see; they were so upright.

We’d sit around, but the floors were dirty so when we sat on the floor, we’d take off our slippers and sit on them. For homework we’d sit at the table or the eating table. But it was scattered, nobody did their homework together. Oh yes, we also used to hang around outside. They had put a makeshift bench at the longkang where we’d sit and talk with neighbours.⁴ There were pigeons which liked to make nests up on the underside of the overhanging floor above. So we’d be sitting there most

4 *Longkang*; used locally to refer to a ditch, or drain.

of the time, and neighbour's kid would come over and we'd talk, talk, talk.

It was a main feature of our living room because we didn't have much other furniture. There wasn't much - you saw the half-moon table, in the picture? It was with the mirror my sister now has; there was that. And then the bench I told you about, by the window. So two half-moon tables, one bench, the marble table and the four chairs with the holes, and the altar. That's all. When they moved out of the house, the table was considered heritage – or an heirloom – so they said that it was sayang, as an antique.⁵ So they brought it with them, and the best use at that point was as a dining table. Nobody ever really maintained the table; we just used it. But they didn't want the chairs as it used to be infested with bedbugs, so there was no point in bringing that along. They were already wobbly, anyway.

5 Sayang; Malay for “dear,” or “precious.”

November 23, 2023

LIM TENG CHWAN, FIRST BROTHER

That table has always been the centre of the whole household since my grandmother's time. So, I think, being a traditional Chinese family, of course there was the altar; and after that, it was that round table. It was in the centre of the living room, and always was, as long as my grandmother was around. Nobody could move that table. It had a very permanent and prominent position in the centre of the living room. If you entered through the main door, you'd see the marble table right there, in front of the altar. People would gravitate there because it was positioned in such a way to welcome. When guests came, they'd all be seated there, and hosted there. So that table of course has seen many events in the family. From New Year to weddings; ceremonial offerings and all that were placed there too. It was only when Ah Ma moved to the new house on Jalan Limau Nipis that they put it at the back as a dinner, or dining, table. But in the old house, it had always been in the centre of the living room, and we had our own eating places at the back. Its use was very, very specific.

By my time, how the table was used was very different to Ah Ma's time, when that table was like a reserved area. They used it when guests came. Then they would use it, as I'd said earlier, for ceremonial purposes. When the [grandmother] was no longer around, then the role of the table also evolved. We started to do our homework there, read our newspaper there; sometimes we'd also take our meals out to eat there. Then we'd play our games there – we played a lot of monopoly, scrabble. You know, the next generation used it a little bit different already. So, it evolved like that. From a more, I would say, 'sacred' kind of place, it then opened up to more general use. Before that, as far as I know, it was never allowed – as the grandmother would say – to be 'abused.' The function of the table would not have been allowed to have been "abused" like that. I mean I would use those words, not her. Because if she saw somebody doing something which she thought should not be done there, of course then she'd tell you off – 'You shouldn't be doing it, go eat at the back.'"

We would never bring food from the back to the front during grandmother's time. But during our time, slowly all these things were more relaxed, because the matriarch was no longer around. People started to flout the rules because they weren't enforced so strictly. My grandmother I understand was of Nyonya descent, so she was very strict, and she ran the family. And it seems that all the sons and daughters-in-law feared her. All the names of the children were given by her too – she already had a list for boys, and for girls. So when one grandchild was born, she would say this is the name. The parents had no say in their names, until the later ones once she had passed away. Up until my name, or maybe Liew Ko's name – all were decided by her. But personally I hardly have any recollections of her at all, as I was around two or three when grandmother passed away. I only know her from the

photograph hanging in the house. I don't have any recollections of any interactions with grandmother, so I guess I must have been very small. I only remember her rules around the table through word of mouth, or what Ah Ma would tell us. We found out through that way, not through our own experience.

During our time I think it was common for Chinese houses to have tables in their living rooms. It's just what sort of table, and what kind of prominence they gave to the table. So even if I went to my friend's house, there'd be a table, but it might be placed in the middle of the living room, or at the side. I think it was like a Chinese custom; you'd have a place for guests to sit when they came visiting. In those days the better-to-do families would have a table in the living room, and the more well-to-do ones like our grandmother would have the marble one with the antique legs. Otherwise, it would probably have been just a wooden table, because the marble table wasn't a very common item in households. Though it's funny how it somehow went from the household to the kopitiam. I don't know the exact reason for the transition, but my guess is that the kopitiam started using it because people felt comfortable sitting around it. It reminded them of home, so when they sat there it felt as if it was their home, you know?

We didn't have much chance to go to them though, because Ah Kong would only take us out once in a while. He'd order a cup of kopi-o and pour it into the saucer, and the saucer would be for me – because it would cool down faster – and he would drink the remainder from the cup. So we'd share that kind of thing, but it was mainly the more elderly working people who would go to kopitiams, not families. You really didn't see families gathering in the kopitiam as if it were a restaurant. So I guess back in the day the kopitiam served as a meeting point for all these friends – where they'd gather around to talk about the affairs of the world. Because for a lot of them, maybe they couldn't have these conversations at home, so when they got a few friends to gather at the kopitiam, they'd get a cup of coffee, then start talking about world affairs – politics, whatever. So that's how they'd pass their time.

1 *Kopi-o*; a local term for black coffee.

November 27, 2023

LIM SWEE LIEW, FIRST SISTER

1 A Hokkien celebration in worship of *Ti Kong*, the Jade Emperor, on the ninth day of the Lunar New Year.

It was actually just a table in the centre of the living room of the old house, but it was the main focus. Guests would sit around the table every time they came. A lot of activities would be done there – Ah Ma would lay out offerings there during New Years, and when it was time for Pai Ti Kong we'd do paper cuttings there. But we'd never eat there; we'd eat at the back of the house. When we were young, we'd also sit there to do our homework. All of us: Ean Ee, Heoh Ee, Ah Fatt, Ji Koo, Kheng Ee – a group of more than four of us would squeeze sit around it to do our schoolwork. For Ah Ma and my aunts, most of the work they'd do would be at the back in the kitchen, but when they were free, they'd sit around there and chit-chat and gossip.

The table was handed down from our grandparents from the Lim family – we were actually Nyonya and Baba, you know. So they were more like Peranakan. They'd cook certain dishes, and follow a lot of the customs and traditions of the Nyonya and Baba. But the house itself was rented from the Chang family. I used to be in charge of sending the rent, and would have to send it to Ipoh as the eldest son was based there. I don't remember how we ended up being in that house, but we were there since I was born. There were so many people living there: Goh Chim Po's family (as her husband had passed away, she was a widow, so it was her and her and two daughters), then my cousins, whose mother had passed away and father had remarried and moved off. But they were very much older than us, and some of them got married in the house too.

Those weddings were mostly old ceremonies like the tea ceremony. As for the wedding itself, you'd have a long table where guests would come, and you'd cook to serve them. Usually you'd cook curry, meat rolls, and achar. Then you'd have stir-fried turnip. We didn't normally have enough space indoors, so they'd place a long table outside, on the five-foot way. They'd place one or two tables there, and one or two inside the living room of house. The round table would be used for placing gifts when guests came. It mostly stayed in the centre of the room, as we tried not to move it so much as it was antique. You'd notice that the stand is quite wobbly, and the marble top is quite heavy. It wasn't easy to move. Even now, I don't think Kheng Ee and all would move it.

Usually once a year, when we cleaned the house for New Years, we'd dust it. But otherwise, it was just there. Though of course when we used it, we'd wipe the surface after. We were allowed to do anything there; the only thing was that you'd have to respect the table. Because in Chinese beliefs, you shouldn't put unclean things on there; things like worn trousers. Chinese families were like that. During the New Year we'd also prepare a lot of the food there – kueh bangkit, jam tarts, cookies like these.² Then my father would buy crabs, roast pork, chicken, and things like that. Ah Ma was very generous. When we prayed to Ti Kong, she'd prepare a lot of fruits: apples, oranges, sugar cane, pears, ba-

2 *Kueh bangkit*; a Lunar New Year biscuit made of tapioca starch and coconut milk.

nanas. We'd help with them by putting the red paper on them for Pai Ti Kong. We learned to cut the papers for them, it was easy to learn. Not Kheng Ee or Min Ee though, they weren't interested. That's how I know how to do paper cutting. But they weren't very elaborate.

When Ah Ma was around and still in the old house, she'd use the ee-tok for offerings and prayers in front of the altar. Ah Ma had a specific way for laying out the table. She had a higher altar table, where she'd put the fruits and vegetable dishes. Then the round table would be the lower table used for the chicken, roast pork, crabs. But not so much in the new house – it was put there as a dining table. After prayers, all of us young ones would go to sleep in preparation for school the next morning, but the older cousins would carry all of these dishes to the back to enjoy them and habis everything. We didn't get to taste them; they'd finish everything, have a party. We were all like kua gien. We'd stay up for the sake of prayers, but after that we'd go to sleep. We weren't allowed to stay around after, due to school.

In the old house, the table used to be a focal point. When we were very young, during our school days, Ah Kong would buy smarties, or gummies, back home. He couldn't always afford to buy one for each of us, so we'd have to share. In a way, the marble table was the pride of the house. Even when we were young, we could sense that the ee-tok was a place of importance, probably because all of us would gather there for New Years Day, or Pai Ti Kong. It was a space where we would share our homework, our discussions, and things like that. Now, not any longer, but I don't think it's strange it's mostly a dining table today. When Ah Ma moved into the new house, that's how she chose to put it. People nowadays don't have these kinds of living room tables; the younger generation don't use these sorts of round tables, though I do feel it was a custom, or culture, just like how ancestor worship was part of our culture. But the house changes in time, doesn't it?

3 *Habis*; Malay for “to finish.”

4 *Kua gien*; a Hokkien phrase implying “to look on longingly.”

November 27, 2023

LIM TENG JOO, SECOND BROTHER

There was no specific name for it, just sia-chok tok – marble table. It used to be in the living room of the old house, since my grandfather's time. Siew Yean would do all her sewing things there, for clothes – taking measurements – she'd use this table, and had a sewing machine beside it. The table was big enough, and resting your feet on its legs made it very comfortable to sit at. For us, it was mostly our homework table, although nobody ever controlled us about what we could do at it. These days, I seldom use it – mostly it's just for putting things on. Usually only Kheng Ee will eat at it, or when the family comes back for New Year's, when all of them will sit around this table to talk and eat. It's the main table, mostly for guests to use. This would also be the reunion table, for yee sang and things like that. But these days we don't use it so much. Kheng Ee would sometimes eat in her room, or here. I don't use it because I eat out. But when I do, I'd eat here.

1 *Yee sang*; a raw fish salad usually had during reunion dinner of the eve of the Lunar New Year.

I guess in the past, in the old house, I used to entertain my friends at this table. We'd gamble there, do everything there, sit around the table and talk. When we gambled it'd be around eight of us – when dealing cards you don't actually need that much space, so it was possible to fit around it by adding those round stools. We'd play Russian poker, poker, and three cards. But most of the time I'd use it for homework, and our aunty would use it for sewing. There weren't really any other tables in the house apart from this one, and a square one opposite the bathroom and next to the kitchen. That one was mainly for eating; food. We'd never use this one for eating, but ate at the back instead when we were still in the old house, at the square table which was placed against the wall. We didn't eat at this one because it was in the living room, and the living room was where you'd do other activities.

There are quite a few other places with these tables – if you went to Kwong Wai Sang, they have four or five, though they aren't as nice as this one, or other coffee shops, such as at Peace Hotel. You could find one or two there. Taiping still has a few marble tables, and I think most of them came from many years ago. They were around the size of Ah Ma's table, but a bit smaller. If you look at their legs, they look like ours. New ones are slightly different. They must have used those marble tables because it was cooler, and easier to wipe. It was cheaper to get marble back then too. My gang would go to the kopitiam which was most convenient, often the one close to the old house. You just walked down, and their coffee was the best one. Even the cups they used were different – I can't describe them, but they were special, not those typical ones with the green flowers. When you drank the coffee there was a special taste!

We were twenty-something when we started going to kopitiams. Mostly single people would go there to hang out, talking about football. That's what men talk about. It was usually men, not so many women. They'd sell cake, biscuits, Nyonya kueh.² Nowadays it's different, they

2 *Kueh*; a local term for cakes, sweetmeats, and biscuits.

have all these food stalls, I guess because more people eat out. Oh, but people used to stay for a long time when they went. We usually ordered what we'd call a koleh – an iron mug – it was cheaper. Then we'd ask for separate cups and pour out the coffee and share it. Once the first was finished another person would order the second, and the second fellow would pay – one fellow one round; so you'd get to drink for many hours there. It'd be around ten of us, we'd go after playing football. If we were a big group we'd join the tables together – they were quite heavy to move, but you don't really have to lift them, just pull. But actually, usually no, we didn't need to join them, since we weren't actually eating there, just drinking, so it was okay sitting quite close.

December 5, 2023

LIM TENG PENG, THIRD BROTHER

It used to be that we'd leave the doors open. In the beginning, privacy was never really controlled by doors. People knew that you weren't supposed to go in unless you were invited; it was kind of a social norm. But I think for our house it was a little distorted after a while because Kilroy, our family dog, would always run out to fight, but couldn't fight and would get into trouble, so we ended up having to close the doors all the time. Either way, visitors would always stay at the front of the house, unless they had to go to the toilet; then they'd have to go to the back. But they would just quickly go in and come out, and wouldn't proceed any further. The further you go in, the more familiar a friend or relative you are. Somebody you didn't know well wouldn't really be invited to go back, whereas somebody who is very familiar would just walk all the way through. Back then, say it was someone you'd just met, you wouldn't really invite them to the back part or the kitchen – you might not even invite them into the house. They'd just hang around the porch. Though our house wasn't really a very formal house, because we are quite informal people, there was still a sense of implied privacy. Even though it wasn't a very strict kind of formality, people still knew that you weren't supposed to go there.

But okay, let's say you're going in. In our old house there was this little ramp up, before the porch. This was normally where we'd put our bicycles in the day, and in the evening people would hang out and chat, squatting here, squatting there. In the past the main activity was chit-chatting, actually. When the sun went down, they'd come and visit, then they'd talk, talk, talk, talk through the night and go back. Similarly, when relatives came to visit, it would also be to do that: to sit down, to catch up, to chat. People would come, and mainly stay in the main hall where the altar is. This Angkong tok would be there, facing the main door. And in the middle of the hall was the round table. We would have referred to it either as ee-tok, or marble table. It's Hokkien for round table, if I'm not mistaken. Yes, ee is round, and tok means table. So this this ee-tok was there, with a set of four chairs that were always arranged around it. We also had this kind of thing which looks like a sofa but made of timber; a bench thing. That was in one corner with Ah Ma's sewing machine by the window, where she used to work. So the hall was the living space, and a sitting room. It was basically a formal room where people could come and visit.

Past this main hall, the house was kind of symmetrical, but not really. On the left side, there were actually some rooms. On the right side, there was a corridor, which was also the underside of the staircase, which went upstairs. But if you followed the corridor in, you'd reach the inner courtyard. Beside the inner courtyard, there was a wide corridor, which was just next to the inner courtyard. And then to the back of it was the kitchen area. Most of us had our meals at the space next to the courtyard because that's where you'd cook. So it was very

1 *Angkong tok*; Hokkien for “grandfather’s table.” The altar was used for worship both to the household gods and to the Lim’s ancestors.

easy, and it was airy. Because there was an airwell, there was nice light, ventilation; it was a nice space. I suppose you could call it the “female domain,” because most of the time the women in the family would hang around there. Beyond the kitchen was the backyard, and the toilet and whatnot were in the back area. Upstairs were where the bedrooms were. Our bedroom was directly over the main hall actually, overlooking the street. In the evening, when the lights in the rest of the house were switched off, people would start to congregate at the front, the living room, and that became a kind of family room. We’d watch TV, do homework, study; everything would be there, basically, or you’d find your space elsewhere, in some corner. It was a big house, actually, so although there were a lot of people, you could always find some corner to have some privacy.

When I was a kid – because these kinds of table were constructed with a central post, like a tree trunk, with spreading legs – it was quite nice to sit below the table. Sit, leaning against the post, like you’d sit against a tree. And there was a canopy over, so it was very comfortable, especially when you watched TV. But only kids would do it, of course adults didn’t do it, though dogs liked to sleep sit below too, our family dog. I know that I played a lot around the table. Because it was in the middle, it was like a circuit. I ran around it, cycled around it; things like that. You’d chase your friend around it. I knew that when I drew things at the table, I would stuff the pieces of paper below, between the marble and the timber support. I needed somewhere to put them, so I’d fold them and stuff them there. Eventually, they’d get thrown away. So that table had a lot of uses, but not really for dining. For example, when Ah Ma or Siew Yean tailored clothes, they’d use that table. We’d study there and read the newspaper there too; it was always spread over that table. There was interaction with table, but it wasn’t formal. It was a very informal kind of interaction and was basically part of your everyday life.

Then, there were also the more ceremonial things that happened on occasion, like when people came in to visit for Lunar New Year, they’d sit there. It was basically a living area. For prayers as well – Ah Ma used to pray for the ancestors and would use that table as a setting. But I think it had significance because of its location, actually. In the main hall, you’d come in, see the table, and walk past it every day. Things sort of revolved around it; a lot of life went on around the table. Because right now, if you compare it with where it is right now in our current home, tucked against the wall, it’s less significant because it’s just a table there. It had a particular location before in what was basically the main room. Yet I don’t think at that point in time, anybody looked at it like it was something special. We weren’t aware at all when growing up that it had some kind of ritual significance, that’s why we ran around it, stuffed paper into, sat under it. Though there was some sense of care,

and that we couldn't anyhow do anything with it. But that was mostly because our mother would say something if we were too rough, or tell us not to put dirty things on the table, those kinds of things. At the same time, it wasn't off limits. You could use it as needed; you just needed to be respectful. In that sense, I suppose it was more like a ceremonial table, but a lot of living went around it, because you'd pass by it every day, and interact with it a lot in a lot of ways.

To

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