

HONOURABLE

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In the heart of Singapore, just off Orchard Road and opposite the Istana gates, stands the House of Tan Yeok Nee—the city-state's last surviving traditional Teochew courtyard mansion. Built in the late nineteenth century by a wealthy Chinese merchant, this rare architectural gem has served as a family home, a girls' home, Christian institutions, and now a restored heritage landmark.

Amid the city's rapid redevelopment, the house endures as a powerful link to the values and craftsmanship of early Chinese communities. It invites us to read the building as an architectural palimpsest, offering an alternative lens on Singapore's past—one grounded in built space.

This book is more than a study of a single house. It reveals how architecture preserves memory, expresses identity, and illuminates the broader historical landscape in Singapore.

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THE
INVISIBLE
HANDS
BEHIND
SINGAPORE'S
LAST
TRADITIONAL
TEOCHEW
HOUSE

楊荳善
YEO KANG SHUA

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THE INVISIBLE HANDS
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LAST TRADITIONAL
TEOCHEW HOUSE

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In the heart of Singapore, just off Orchard Road, the House of Tan Yeok Nee stands as the last surviving traditional Teochew courtyard mansion in the city-state. In a landscape transformed by rapid redevelopment, this rare architectural relic offers a tangible link to the values, aspirations, and craftsmanship of Singapore's early Chinese communities.

Built in the late nineteenth century by Tan Yeok Nee, a wealthy Teochew merchant with close ties to the Johor royal court, the house has served many roles: private residence, girls' home, religious institution, and restored heritage landmark. Despite these transitions, its physical fabric has retained a remarkable degree of authenticity. This book traces the house's evolution through detailed analysis of its architectural form, restoration history, and social context, arguing for the importance of material culture and architectural history as rich sources of historical insight.

By closely reading the building's structure, ornamentation, and adaptations over time, the book shows how it serves not only as heritage but as an architectural palimpsest. In doing so, it offers an alternative lens on Singapore's past, rooted not just in archives, but in the meanings embedded in built space.

Blending narrative clarity with academic rigour, this book will appeal to lay readers and heritage professionals, as well as scholars interested in architecture, conservation, and Southeast Asian history. The House of Tan Yeok Nee is more than a national monument, it is a vessel of memory, a witness to change, and a vital part of Singapore's cultural legacy.

THE INVISIBLE HANDS BEHIND SINGAPORE'S LAST
TRADITIONAL TEOCHEW HOUSE

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AUTHORED BY
YEO KANG SHUA

PUBLISHED BY
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This book is dedicated to my wife, Sheau Theng —my constant strength, my invisible hands. And for the other unseen hands of designers, photographers, videographers, illustrators and printers who gave form to this book.

AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Yeo Kang Shua is Associate Professor and Hokkien Foundation Professor in Architectural Conservation at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. He specialises in Singapore and Southeast Asia’s architectural history and conservation, with special interest in the built heritage of Chinese diaspora. His previous books,《粵海清廟：建築與歷史的對話》(ASD Press, 2020) and *Divine Custody: A History of Singapore’s Oldest Teochew Temple* (NUS Press, 2021), explore Teochew religious architecture in Singapore.

This book on the House of Tan Yeok Nee focuses on the residential tradition, offering a complementary perspective on Teochew architectural expression in the city-state.

楊沅善 [Yeo, Kang Shua]. 《粵海清廟：建築與歷史的對話》 [Wak Hai Cheng Bio: A Dialogue between Architecture and History], Singapore: Architecture and Sustainable Design, Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2020. ISBN: 978-981-143-218-7.

Yeo, Kang Shua. *Divine Custody: A History of Singapore’s Oldest Teochew Temple*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-981-325-144-1.

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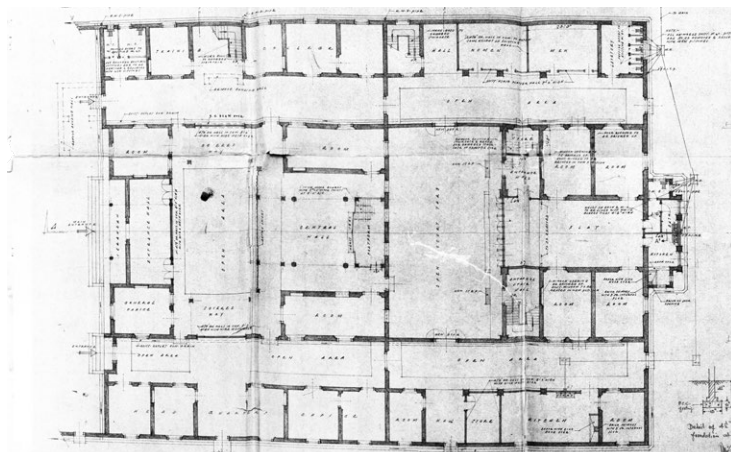
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ARCHITECTURE AS TEXT; TEXT AS ARCHITECTURE

"The house follows a spatial configuration known as 三落二從厝 (sānlùò èrcóngcuò / san¹ loh⁸ ri⁶ cong⁵ cu³), which centres around a principal courtyard framed by surrounding halls, while a second, more private courtyard lies beyond, set between the principal hall and the rear structure. A narrow fire alley 火巷 (huǒxiàng / huè² hang⁷) runs along either side, each flanked by a side wing 從厝 (cóngcuò / cong⁵ cu³). From the entrance, the eye is guided along a central axis, where the three main buildings: the entrance gateway, main hall and rear building, line up in succession, each separated by a courtyard that opens to the heavens. ...

The rear wall of the main hall runs along a north-south axis, dividing the house into two distinct sections. Four doors regulate access between these areas: two open from the main hall, while the other two sit within the fire alleys. This wall forms a clear boundary between the public-facing front of the house and the private domestic quarters at the rear."

Chapter 2, page 40 & 51



→ A House in the Form of a Book

The structure and design of *Honourable Mansion: The Invisible Hands Behind Singapore's Last Traditional Teochew House* follow the spatial logic of a traditional Teochew mansion. Just as the house is arranged along a central axis and composed of courtyards, halls, and side wings, so too is the book, organised in a sequence that mirrors these spaces.

→ Part I – The Public Front

Part I corresponds to the public front of the house. It contains the principal chapters, the "built fabric" of the publication. Blocks of text resembling architectural massing frame a central void, which provides a breather for photographs and illustrations. Such spaces of respite are reminiscent of the open courtyards within the house, regulating the rhythm of reading and setting the pace for one's experience of both the book and the architecture.

→ Part II – The Pause Within, a Companion

Part II takes the form of a detachable pull-out volume. Distinct yet harmonised with the main book, it serves as a self-contained companion and offers a moment of pause. On its own, it reads as a compact volume of interpretive box stories on traditional techniques, spatial typologies, sustainable practices, and profiles of craftsmen, whose contributions are often overlooked. In light of this, the book title is a play on the term *honourable mention*, underscoring the volume's role in giving credit to the invisible hands behind the restoration.

Alongside the main book, the volume functions as a parallel reference, allowing readers to consult stories, details, and crafts in tandem with the larger narrative. This dual nature evokes the role of a courtyard within the house once again, as a place that stands apart, yet remains integrated within the larger sequence.

→ Part III – The Private Rear

Part III corresponds to the domestic quarters of the house. It gathers the photo-essay, glossary, list of figures, endnotes, bibliography, index, and this design concept, elements which provide support and substance to the book. In much the same manner as how the private back of house bolsters the public front, these supplementary materials frame the whole without seeking prominence.

→ Architectural Devices in Print

Divider pages act as thresholds, guiding readers through shifts in tone and subject. Much like the many doors that mediate movement between different parts of the house.

Endnote numbers appear in square brackets, a typographic gesture that recalls the framing of a courtyard. An accent of ultramarine blue, drawn from the mansion's decorative scheme, highlights annotations and lends the book its distinctive visual identity.

→ Covers and Materials

The book as a metaphor of the house extends to its cover. A continuous wrap joins front, spine, and back, evoking the enclosure of a courtyard dwelling. Subtle imagery provides a glimpse of the mansion's front facade, while a warm grey palette and textured paper hark back to the colour scheme of the house and the tactile crafts that abound within.

To evoke the many architectural and cultural elements that often go unnoticed, certain details on the main cover appear only when light catches the surface. This quiet play of concealment and revelation reflects the work of invisible hands, often hidden yet essential in sustaining the architecture.

The pull-out volume continues this language in off-white. Across its surface, the rear elevation of the entrance hall rendered in light pigment is almost hidden — a restrained expression of the invisible made visible.

→ An Architectural Journey

This design concept is more than an analogy. It turns reading into a spatial experience. Readers are invited to move through the book as one would through a house, entering, pausing, crossing thresholds, dwelling, and finally arriving in quieter, more private spaces.

In this way, the book is not merely an account of a house, but an architectural journey in its own right.

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Efforts have been made to correct factual and grammatical errors, to British spellings, and to standardise typographical elements. Eccentricities of language and phrasing have been retained.



WILLIAM CHAPMAN

Heritage conservation academic; Director of the Historic Preservation Programme, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Yeo delivers an exceptional history of the House of Tan Yeok Nee with exemplary rigour and clarity. He traces the mansion from private residence to public use, and to its recent restoration. Along the way he illuminates the intricacies of traditional Chinese construction, and explains how evidence, craft, and judgement inform conservation best practices. The result is more than a case study: it sets a benchmark for architectural conservation in Singapore and the region, and offers readers, from students to specialists, a rare blend of scholarly insight and engaging narrative.

KWA CHONG GUAN

Historian; co-author of *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*, and co-editor of *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*

The House of Tan Yeok Nee is fortunate to have been documented with such detail and care. Yeo presents an impressive documentation of its architectural and social history, tracing the residence from its late-nineteenth-century origins to the most recent restoration. As the sole survivor of the 'Four Great Mansions' built by leading Teochew merchants, it is a significant monument in Singapore's history. Yeo carefully reconstructs the successive renovations since the early twentieth century, clarifying what changed and why, in preparation for the latest restoration of the mansion which he has been involved in.

LAURENCE LOH

Conservation architect; owner of the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (The Blue Mansion), George Town, Malaysia

As Yeo reflects on the granite inscription 資政第 (*Zìzhèngdì*), he offers a nuanced interpretation that the House of Tan Yeok Nee is 'a declaration of identity, ambition, and belonging'. His deep knowledge of Chinese architectural heritage, coupled with years of restoration practice, allows him to craft with quiet authority a masterful work of authorship and scholarship, informed by conservation praxis. Page by page, discoveries unfold—architectural and human alike. Few works match its blend of technical depth, literary clarity, and visual storytelling. A landmark contribution that sets a new benchmark for architectural historiography in Singapore and the wider Asia-Pacific region.