

# *Nine Chairs*



*John Clang*

*Dreaming Islands; A Geomancy of Time*



This chair bears witness to both personal and cultural stories. Accompanying a family who carries a long tradition of Teochew puppet and opera, it has seen innumerable rehearsals and performances across five-generations-worth of performances, and has been passed over the hands of the many members in the troupe. While it has been phased out of regular use for more convenient and durable plastic stools, it still carries much sentimental value for its owner, who considers it the springboard for her decades-long practice. As a child, she would have sat on this very seat, operating and animating iron-rod puppets. While it carries fond personal memories for her, it also records and chronicles the endurance of a fading practice, and stands as a testament to the persistence of culture.



This chair actually belonged to the donor's father. For four years, it was his undisputed favourite, though he would never say such sentimental words out loud. At 88, he had faced many health issues, and one day, he was admitted into critical care at the hospital. The chair was thus left vacated, with the possibility that its owner would never again sit in it. Rather than keep the chair in hopes that the father would return, however, the donor decided to contribute the chair to this project. After all, the true value lies not in its material form, but in the memories that it evokes.



The owner of this chair is certainly no stranger to the notion of inheritance. His family has owned and operated a Michelin-ranked kway teow stall for over sixty years. Living with a big family with three brothers, items in his household are passed down all the time; nothing is left to waste. Likewise, this humble stool belonged to the earliest set of furniture in his house. When newer things were brought in – a nice marble top dining table set – the stool wasn't thrown away, but rather repainted and repurposed, placed in a convenient corner for anyone to use. Who knows if, years later, the next generation in the owner's family might find some new purpose for this handy object?



Like many Penangites, the owner of this chair takes an interest in the collection and restoration of old things. After all, history abounds in Penang, and many objects that have outlived their usefulness in one setting reenter circulation and find a new afterlife in a different context. One day, the chair mysteriously turned up at his doorstep – left by a well-meaning friend, perhaps? Intrigued, the owner took it into his house, though it didn't really fit with any of his existing furniture. The chair travelled from house to house, until it finally ended up at the front of his house, welcoming guests in with its unique design and striking colour.



Every week for many years, the owner of this chair would return to his elderly parents' house to spend time with his family. The family would gather around a dining table with a somewhat unique shape – a long rectangle, as opposed to the typical circle found in most Chinese families. Every time, the owner would choose this exact chair at the far side of the table. Facing the house's courtyard, he would always be able to see the children playing together outdoors. At the same time, choosing the far side allows his parents, seated at the center, to reach the food with greater ease. For him, the simple chair thus embodies two philosophies: that of respecting and caring for those who came before, as well as bearing witness to those who come next.



This upholstered powder-blue chair stands out at first glance in the assembly of all nine chairs. Taken from a well-known language school in Penang, this chair first served its purpose as a communal student's chair located in the centre's biggest classroom. Sometime in the past couple of years, the chair was moved to a room where language teachers sit, chitchat, and prepare materials to teach their students. The chair stayed true to its original intended purpose after all these years, albeit in a different fashion later. First, the chair supported the students' learning directly by offering rest and support as they attend classes, and thereafter, by awarding the same comforts to the teachers now who then in turn support the students' learning of the new languages and cultures.



Originally used as a support to pray to the Heavenly Grandfather Tiangong, this bench later found itself in much more homely contexts. Constructed before its owner was born, it was used for guests over dinner, at weddings, and finally, spent twenty years at its owner's teahouse. There were multiples of the bench, but their numbers have slowly dwindled over the years due to wear and tear. The bench has been continuously repaired and refitted with scavenged parts in Theseusian fashion, and it's uncertain which legs and top they used to belong to. However, for its owner, it lives as a record of family history and for posterity, as well as a reminder of a funny story: as a child, the films he'd watched would picture characters throwing these benches around, which he would emulate but to no avail, as they were far too heavy!



Despite its modern exterior, this chair has had multiple lifetimes across a century. Originally a hardwood beam from the roof of the owner's family house, it has been repurposed after their relocation and built into a stool. Despite the years, it still retains its sturdiness, and is now used for its owner's family to have meals outdoors — a practice resonating with his livelihood as the owner of a decades-old homestyle Cantonese *zichar* restaurant. The communal nature of food, after all, always requires a chair to sit on.



This industrial blue chair has lived many lives — though many of its stories will remain unknown. What we do know is that this chair is a rescue, highly likely retrieved from a school in Penang by an upcycling warehouse, before being remodelled and reinforced with what is believed to be Chengal wood. The chair owes its vibrant colour to its owner, who went through a ‘blue’ phase and painted many things in the same industrial blue shade. Much like the chair’s resilience and ability to stand the test of time, the Chengal wood — a native of Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore — is extremely durable and adept at weathering all the elements thrown at it. Now, the chair sits at a table in the owner’s home, providing old-school comfort to the owner’s guests as he holds his frequent gatherings — continuing its role in forging and sustaining varied communities in Penang.

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