

My Great-Grandfather's Clan House

By Jennifer Lim

When I arrived in Singapore seven years ago to learn more about my father's past, I never imagined I would uncover a personal connection to a Chinese clan house. I was surprised to discover that my great-grandfather helped fund the establishment of the Lim See Tai Chong Soo Ancestral Temple in 1928. I've been deeply moved by this distinctive building, which has inspired a research project about antique tiles.

A short time after relocating, I was unexpectedly asked to witness the exhumation of my great-grandfather's grave in Bukit Brown Cemetery. When I later shared my experience with a local Facebook group, history enthusiast Ang Yik Han uncovered a link between my family and the hall.

Upon visiting the hall, I was immediately attracted to the decorative tiles, cupolas and neoclassical columns. Designed by Westerhout & Oman, the free-standing building appears to have been purpose-built to serve three functions: a clan house, an ancestral hall and a temple dedicated to the Chinese sea goddess Mazu.

The extensive use of Majolica tiles, mosaics and mouldings is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the hall, and I've counted around forty different kinds so far. The striking patterned floor tiles, Chinese gold-lacquer timber plaques and ornate Venetian mirrors create a unique mix of elements, locally known as *rojak*.



Recording details about decorative tiles at hall entrance. Photo by Finbarr Fallon

At the staircase entrance, a checkerboard of light coloured and dark coloured tiles creates a protective dado wall capped with a sea-green ceramic moulding. This opulent wall treatment can be seen on the ground and first floors and reaches an impressive visual pinnacle around the altar of the Jade Emperor.

The loveliest tiles in the hall, however, are to be found underneath the central display of ancestral tablets facing the entrance. A close inspection of the wall under the joss table revealed three unusual tiles, and although tarnished by almost a century of incense smoke, they still exude great beauty. These textured tiles feature designs unlike any I've seen so far in Singapore.



Lim Nee Yam, the author's great-grandfather, to the far left, in front of the entrance to the hall. Photo courtesy of the author

A delightful tiled mosaic of cute deer, a Shinto shrine and a lakeside cottage is located at the back of the hall. I suspect this mosaic was installed later on in the 1960s, and sourced from Hiromasa Emporium, a Japanese tile company famous for bathhouse scenery mosaics. Imaginary animals such as the phoenix and *qilin*, as well as traditional Chinese floral arrangements, can also be seen on tiles nearby.

It's been a life-changing experience getting to know the hall and its active members. I now feel more connected to my Chinese ancestors and the long history of antique tiles in Singapore.



Tiled mosaic with deer and lakeside scenery. Photo by Finbarr Fallon

Look out for my future article on decorative tiles in Bukit Brown Cemetery. If you'd like to know more about the Lim See Tai Chong Soo Ancestral Hall, join the upcoming tours with FOM's Explore Singapore! or the FOM/URA Chinatown Heritage Trails.

Jennifer Lim is an Australian-Singaporean artist, Japanese speaker and former docent at the Peranakan Museum. Discover a beautiful legacy of design and heritage through the Singapore Heritage Tile Project: www.jenniferlimart.com