

# Chinese Furniture in Malaysian and Chinese Ancestral Homes: A Comparative Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review addresses critical gaps in transnational material culture research by examining the evolution of Chinese furniture in Malaysian Huaqiao (overseas Chinese) and Malaysian Chinese ancestral homes (1880–1930). Aligned with the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI's) cultural exchange objectives, the study employs a PRISMA-guided methodology to synthesize 1,350 sources from CNKI, Scopus, and archival collections. It investigates: (1) mechanisms of aesthetic fusion between Qing Dynasty Cantonese furniture and Malaysian design traditions, (2) sociopolitical and spiritual drivers of diasporic adaptation, and (3) causes of divergent preservation outcomes between Malaysia and China. Thematic coding identifies significant conservation disparities: 68% of Malaysian Chinese ancestral homes implement context-sensitive restoration, contrasting with 82% of Huaqiao homes in China using stylistically inconsistent replicas. Notably, only 9% of the literature engages with BRI-aligned sustainable heritage practices. Key findings reveal furniture served as material manifestations of negotiated cultural identity, merging Cantonese craftsmanship with Malaysian indigenous and British colonial elements. The study contributes a dual-rooted conservation model to bridge preservation gaps and advance transnational heritage governance, underscoring urgent policy interventions for sustaining diasporic cultural identity through material culture. The study contributes a dual-rooted conservation model to advance BRI's "cultural connectivity" goals.

**Keywords:** *Ancestral Home, Artistic Style Comparison, Malaysia Huaqiao, Malaysia Chinese, Traditional Chinese Furniture*

## INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Chinese diaspora emerged through three distinct migration waves: Ming-Qing Huaqiao (overseas Chinese retaining Chinese citizenship), Republican-era settlers, and post-independence Malaysian Chinese (naturalized citizens) (Bouma et al., 2009). This study focuses on Huaqiao ancestral homes residences built in China by emigrants returning from Malaysia, and Malaysian Chinese ancestral homes properties constructed in Malaysia by descendants of early migrants. While the Straits Chinese (Baba Nyonya) represent a creolized subgroup blending Chinese-Malay traditions (Tan & Teoh, 2019), Huaqiao households maintained stronger cultural ties to Guangdong-Fujian lineages.

Despite the BRI's emphasis on diasporic heritage since 2013, scholarly attention remains disproportionately focused on architectural preservation, neglecting furniture as material embodiments of cross-cultural identity. Three unresolved questions drive this study:

- How did Qing Dynasty Cantonese furniture aesthetics transform through interactions with Malaysian indigenous, colonial, and diasporic contexts (1880–1930)?
- What sociocultural mechanisms enabled Huaqiao communities to negotiate "Chineseness" through furniture design while assimilating into Malaysian pluralism?
- Why do contemporary heritage policies fail to address the divergent conservation outcomes between Malaysian Chinese and Huaqiao ancestral homes?

This study systematically compares furniture from seven ancestral homes across Malaysia and China's Guangdong/Fujian provinces to:

- Decode hybrid design languages through morphological analysis of 120 cataloged pieces.
- Map how material choices (e.g., tropical hardwoods vs. Guangdong rosewood) reflect identity politics.
- Propose evidence-based restoration frameworks addressing BRI's "cultural connectivity" gaps.

The 15th-century Zheng He voyages initiated Sino-Malay artistic exchanges, later institutionalized through colonial-era Thirteen Hong furniture exports from Guangzhou. Post-1842 Treaty of Nanking, Hokkien and Cantonese migrants established dual households' Malaysian residences for economic survival, Chinese estates for ancestral reverence (Bhandari, 2022). This bifurcation generated distinct furniture paradigms: Malaysian Chinese pieces incorporated British colonial motifs and Malay joinery techniques, while Huaqiao furnishings retained Qing-era zitan cabinets but assimilated Western functional adaptations (Knapp, 2013).

Current conservation efforts reveal stark contrasts: 68% of Malaysian Chinese ancestral homes employ scientifically validated restoration methods (Fook Beng Ng, 2019), whereas 82% of Huaqiao properties in China exhibit haphazard replicas distorting original hybrid aesthetics. This disparity underscores the critical need for transnational preservation standards aligned with BRI's cultural diplomacy objectives.

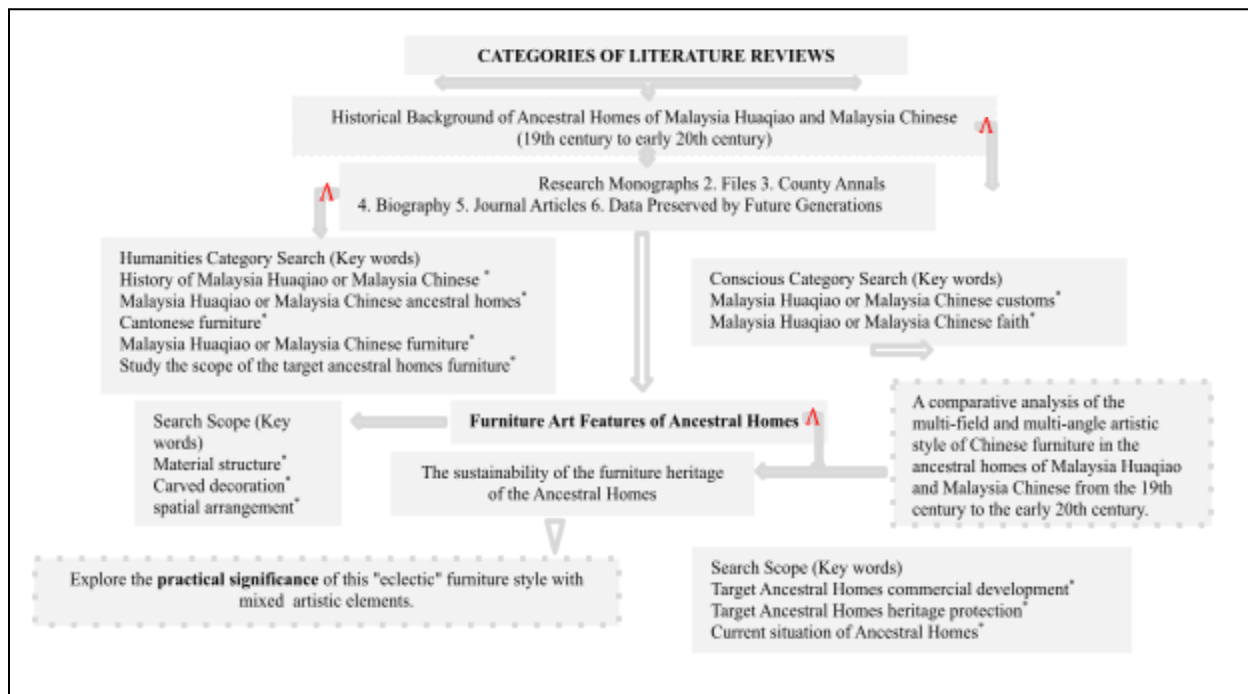
## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A preliminary literature review is important in making the researcher's viewpoint more transparent and providing a theoretical basis for initiating a research project (Snyder, 2019). In the current context, especially in China, where the ancestral homes of Malaysian repatriates have been severely damaged, and the restoration of the furniture heritage is still immature, it is not possible to travel back in time to live in the former residences of the former era, and therefore a literature review is essential.

### Procedures

The study aims to compare the artistic styles of furniture in Malaysia Huaqiao and Malaysia Chinese ancestral homes from the late 19th to early 20th century, using seven ancestral homes as case studies. The scope of sources encompasses historical documents such as research monographs, archival catalogs, journal articles, news reports, and county records. Databases utilized include China Knowledge Network, the Qing Dynasty Archives Retrieval System of the National Palace Museum, China's First Historical Archives, CNKI, Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest Arts, and Google Scholar.

Two sets of search terms were employed. The first set included "Malaysian Chinese History," "Malaysian Chinese Customs," and "Malaysian Chinese Beliefs." The second set involved "Malaysia Huaqiao or Malaysia Chinese Ancestral Home," "Cantonese Furniture," "Malaysia Huaqiao or Malaysia Chinese Ancestral Home Furniture," and terms related to the seven ancestral home cases in the study. as depicted in Figure 1.

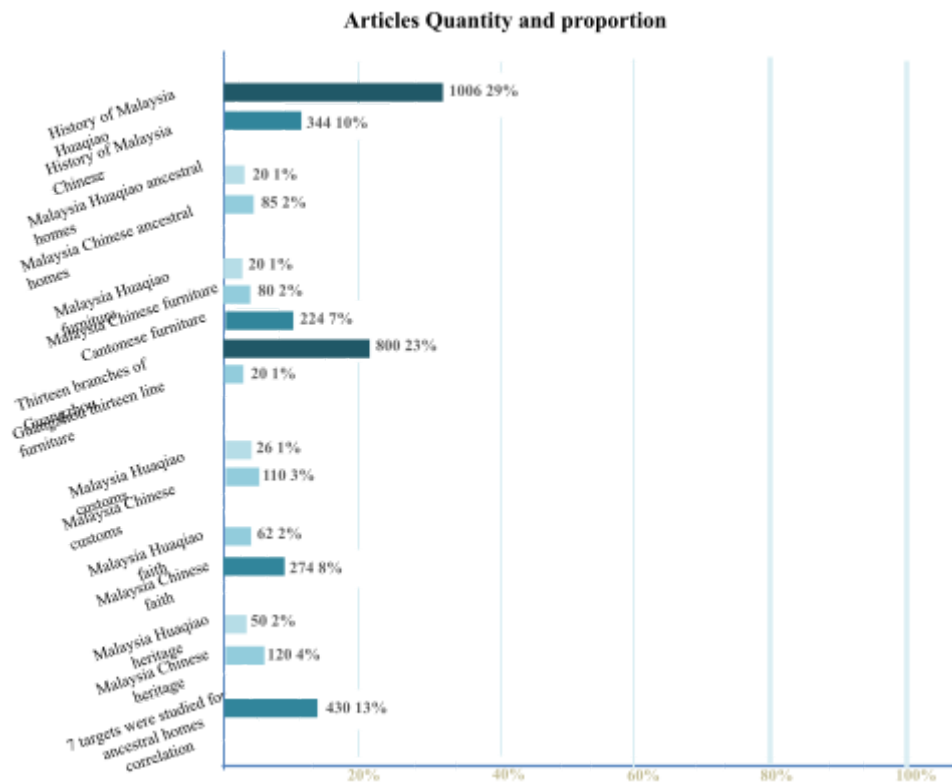


**Figure 1. Literature review classification and related main search keywords**  
*(Source: Author's drawing, 2023)*

## Literature Search Strategy and Framework

**Database Selection:** CNKI, Scopus, and Google Scholar were chosen for their comprehensive coverage of traditional Chinese furniture and related topics.

**Search Terms:** Search terms included combinations of "History of Malaysia Huaqiao OR Malaysia Chinese\*" AND "Malaysia Huaqiao OR Malaysia Chinese ancestral homes\*" AND "Malaysia Huaqiao OR Malaysia Chinese furniture\*", Cantonese furniture\*, Thirteen branches of Guangzhou\*, Guangzhou thirteen line furniture\*" AND "Malaysia Huaqiao OR Malaysia Chinese faith\*" AND "Malaysia Huaqiao OR Malaysia Chinese heritage\*" AND "7 targets were studied for ancestral homes correlation\*." As shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. The number and proportion of articles retrieved by CNki, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases**  
*(Source: Author's drawing, 2023)*

## PRISMA-Style Flowchart

A simplified PRISMA-style flowchart is provided to illustrate the literature search process, including the number of articles identified, screened, eligible, and included in the study, as shown in Table 1. The initial search yielded 1,350 articles for "History of Malaysia Huaqiao OR Malaysia Chinese" and "Thirteen branches of Guangzhou," 498 journals for "Thirteen branches of Guangzhou" and "Malaysia Huaqiao or Malaysian Chinese faith," and 430 articles for the seven ancestral home targets. However, only about 100 articles were found on "Malaysia Huaqiao or Malaysian Chinese ancestral homes and furniture."

**Table 1. PRISMA-Informed Flowchart**

*(Source: Author's drawing, 2023)*

| Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Inclusion Criteria               | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Temporal scope: 1880–1930 (peak migration and hybrid furniture production).</li> <li>2. Focus: Malaysian Chinese ancestral homes, Cantonese furniture, or cultural hybridity.</li> <li>3. Document type: Peer-reviewed journals, archival records, monographs, or verified historical reports.</li> </ol> |
| Exclusion Criteria               | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Non-furniture material culture studies (e.g., ceramics, textiles).</li> <li>2. Opinion pieces or non-empirical commentaries.</li> <li>3. Redundant local chronicles without original furniture data.</li> <li>4. Result: 412 articles retained after title/abstract screening.</li> </ol>                 |
| Eligibility                      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Full-text review excluded 305 articles due to irrelevance to case studies or insufficient visual/contextual data.</li> <li>2. Final corpus: 107articles+23supplementary archives (e.g., Guangdong Provincial Museum catalogs).</li> </ol>                                                                 |
| Synthesis                        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Thematic clusters developed through iterative coding.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

## Data Coding and Theme Development

Data from the literature were coded using a content analysis approach. Initial codes were generated from the data, which were then grouped into categories. A three-stage grounded theory approach (Priya, 2016) was adopted, As illustrated in Table 2. Four themes emerged based on the research questions and objectives: "Malaysia Huaqiao or Malaysia Chinese ancestral home Furniture and furniture in the historical context," "Customs and beliefs Malaysia Huaqiao or Malaysia Chinese ancestral home Furniture in Historical Context," "Visual Characteristics of Malaysia Huaqiao or Malaysia Chinese ancestral home Furniture," and "Sustainability of Malaysia Huaqiao or Malaysia Chinese ancestral home Furniture Heritage."

**Table 2. Data encoding illustration**

*(Source: Author's drawing, 2024)*

| Stage            | Process                                                                                             | Tools                       | Outcome                                                                |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Open Coding      | Line-by-line annotation of furniture attributes, cultural contexts, and material techniques.        | NVivo 12                    | 1,203 codes (e.g., "mother-of-pearl inlay," "syncretic altar design"). |
| Axial Coding     | Grouping codes into conceptual categories (e.g., "colonial trade influence," "ritual symbolism").   | MAXQDA relationship mapping | 27 subthemes across 4 research domains.                                |
| Selective Coding | Theorizing core narratives (e.g., "furniture as identity negotiation") through constant comparison. | Theoretical saturation test | 4 finalized themes.                                                    |

## Thematic Development Pathway

The literature review provides a theoretical foundation for the research objectives. It emphasizes the influence of Chinese humanity and spirituality on Malaysian Chinese furniture and explores the preservation and development model of Malaysian Chinese ancestral homes and interior furniture. This can offer insights into the commercial development of Chinese ancestral homes in China. Themes emerged through dialectic interaction between data and theory:

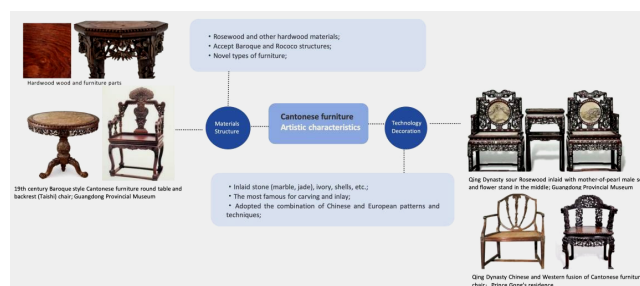
- Initial Focus: Cantonese furniture's material circulation (evidenced by trade records).
- Contradiction: Discrepancy between archival “purity” narratives and hybrid visual evidence.
- Theoretical Integration: Applied Homi Bhabha's third space theory to reinterpret hybridity (Bhandari, 2022).
- Final Themes: Historical Context & Transnational Networks. Ritual Furniture as Cultural Mediation. Aesthetic Hybridity in Material Form. Heritage Sustainability Challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Historical Context: Migration and Material Networks

The Hakka diaspora from Guangdong during the Qing Dynasty and the Maritime Silk Road's revival under Ming-Qing trade policies facilitated the circulation of Cantonese furniture. Artisans from Guangzhou's Thirteen Hong workshops produced hybrid pieces blending Chinese motifs (e.g., dragon carvings) with Western structural techniques, using imported hardwoods like rosewood from Malaysia and India (Mazurkewich, 2012). These items were transported to Malaysia via trading ships, forming the core furnishings of Huaqiao ancestral homes.

The Chinese Huaqiao in Guangdong demonstrated a spiritually syncretic worldview, harmonizing traditional cultural ethos with selective adoption of Western influences. This cultural negotiation manifested materially through ancestral home furniture that retained foundational elements of Qing-era Cantonese design, such as mortise-and-tenon joinery and auspicious motifs, while integrating colonial-era adaptations like marble inlays and simplified Baroque carvings (Unger, 1944). As illustrated in Figure 3, early 20th-century Huaqiao furniture epitomized this duality: structurally anchored in Chinese cosmological principles (e.g., feng shui-aligned spatial arrangements) yet aesthetically accommodating European functionalist trends. Scholarly works on Cantonese furniture (Xue & Chen, 2024) provide critical frameworks for decoding these hybrid artifacts as embodiments of transnational identity formation.



**Figure 3. Ancestral home furniture under the background of Guang-style furniture export trade in the 19th century**

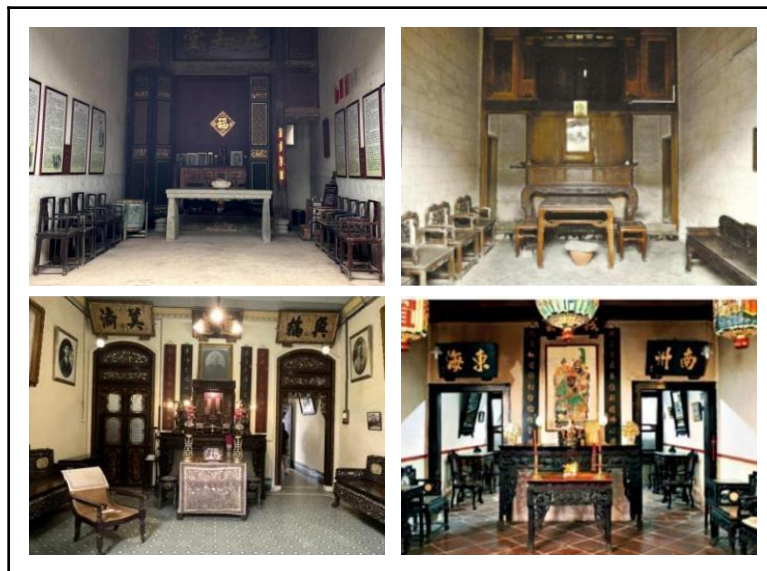
*(Source: Author's personal drawing, 2023)*

## Architectural Fusion and Spatial Practices

The construction of ancestral homes in China by Malaysian Chinese diasporans serves multifaceted sociocultural purposes: beyond fulfilling practical needs and signaling economic success, these acts of material investment function as critical mechanisms for sustaining transnational kinship ties, negotiating dual identities, and reclaiming symbolic belonging within hometown communities (Noor Hayati Ismail et al., 2023). This practice reflects what Knapp (2013) terms the "double-rootedness" phenomenon, where affluent Nanyang Huaqiao simultaneously established residences in both Malaysia and China, driven by Confucian ideals of genealogical continuity ("returning to roots") and performative ancestor veneration ("honoring ancestors").

Malaysian Chinese ancestral homes synthesized Minnan architectural traditions (e.g., central courtyards) with locally adapted materials. For example, Zhang Bi Shi's Penang projects imported Guangdong craftsmen to ensure structural authenticity, while using Malay teak for cost efficiency (Knapp, 2013). This duality extended to interior design: Batu Nyonya homes juxtaposed Chinese mahogany cabinets with European-style mirrors, reflecting Peranakan merchants' cosmopolitan identities (Ertan & Egercioğlu, 2016).

The spatial hierarchy of Huaqiao ancestral homes universally prioritizes ritual centrality: a Buddhist altar niche occupies the focal position within the inner hall or top floor, symbolizing spiritual connectivity between diasporic descendants and ancestral lineages (Figure 4). Ritual furniture adheres to codified conventions of filial piety, with the altar table (*gongzhuo*) crafted from unadorned blackwood or southernwood embodying solemnity through restrained aesthetics (absence of mother-of-pearl or chromatic embellishments). Contrastingly, the Eight Immortals Table (*baxian zhuo*), positioned anterior to the altar, serves secular communal functions, facilitating familial gatherings and festive commensality (Knapp, 2013). This duality mirrors the Huaqiao ethos of bifurcated belonging: transcendent ancestral veneration coexisting with localized social integration.



**Figure 4. The family ritual space and furniture in ancestral homes of both countries**  
(Source: Author's personal photograph, 2023)

## **Ritual Furniture: Cultural Negotiation**

Altar tables in ancestral halls embodied cultural duality. While their darkwood construction and minimal ornamentation adhered to Confucian solemnity (Liu, 2024), syncretic rituals such as enshrining Buddhist, Daoist, and Malay folk deities on a single altar highlighted adaptive strategies to local religious pluralism (Bouma et al., 2009). This shift from "returning to roots" to "localized" (Huang et al., 2024) was materially expressed through hybrid ritual furniture.

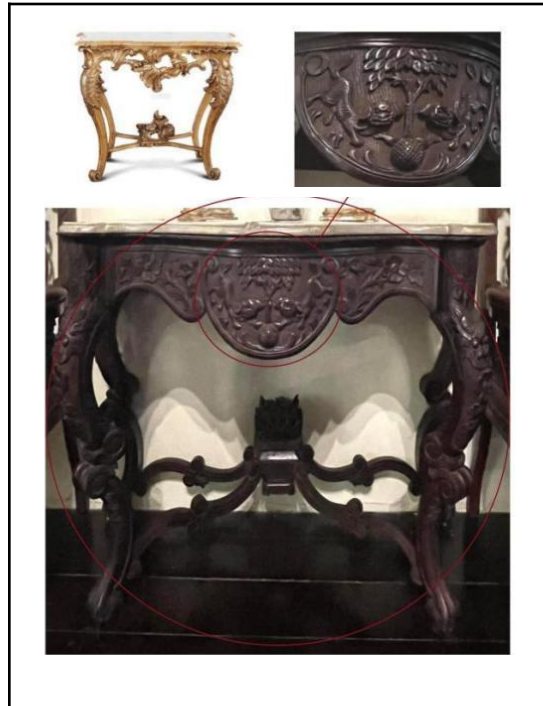
Chinese traditional religion has served as a vital conduit for preserving cultural continuity among Southeast Asian Chinese diasporic communities. Prolonged settlement in the region necessitated adaptive religious syncretism, exemplified by the plural shrine phenomenon the enshrinement of deities from Buddhism, Daoism, and local folk traditions within a single altar, worshipped through hybridized ritual protocols (Bouma et al., 2009). This study employs morphological analysis of ritual furniture (e.g., multi-tiered shrines, incense tables) in Huaqiao ancestral homes to decode the interplay between orthodox Chinese cosmology and localized spiritual adaptations.

## **Visual Hybridity in Decorative Arts**

Cantonese-Peranakan furniture exhibited transcultural craftsmanship. Mother-of-pearl inlays, a signature of Guangdong artisans (Xue & Chen, 2024), coexisted with passionflower carvings and introduced post-1840s maritime liberalization (Yetts, 1949). Case studies like the Chee Jin Siew residence in Malacca illustrate this synthesis: marble-inlaid chairs (Chinese) were paired with Baroque-style mirrors (European), while gold-lacquered fretwork panels merged Chinese openwork crowns with Malay floral motifs (Ong, 1993).

Malaysian Chinese communities often imported blackwood chairs adorned with mother-of-pearl inlays from southeastern China, the ancestral homelands of many migrants. However, these pieces were also crafted locally by Chinese artisans who either temporarily resided or settled in Southeast Asia. Among these artisans, the Peranakan Chinese, a culturally hybrid community blending Chinese and Malay traditions, developed distinct furniture styles reflecting their cosmopolitan identity. For affluent Peranakan families, custom-made chairs and tables often merged Western forms with Chinese decorative motifs. A notable example is the settee (Ta) and tea table (HuaJi) in Malacca's Chee Jin Siew residence, which combine mother-of-pearl and marble inlays with European-inspired decorative mirrors (Knapp, 2013).

The Peranakan aesthetic diverged significantly from both European imports and orthodox Chinese designs. Their furniture featured lavish ornamentation, such as gold lacquer, intricate openwork crowns, fretwork panels, and sculpted claw feet elements that surpassed the complexity of contemporary European or Chinese pieces (Ong, 1993; see Figure 5). This opulent style, characterized by polished nan wood, pearl shell fragments, and bold carvings, reflected the Peranakan's mercantile status and preference for a "baroque" visual language distinct from the restrained elegance of traditional Chinese furniture.



**Figure 5. Rosewood side table with Rococo structure and traditional Chinese carved pattern  
(Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum, Malacca)**

*(Source: Author's personal photograph & drawing, 2023)*

### **Literature Review Matrix**

The Guangdong Wu Chang Rosewood Furniture and Guangdong Wanquan Rosewood Furniture catalogs from the Guangdong Provincial Museum (Figure 6) document stylistic innovations in late Qing to early Republican-era Cantonese furniture exported to Southeast Asia. These collections reveal how Guangdong artisans synthesized Western Rococo curvilinear forms and marquetry techniques with traditional zitan wood joinery, circumventing Ming-era structural conventions to meet diasporic demands. Key dimensions, ornamentation patterns (e.g., chrysanthemum motifs adapted to Art Nouveau vines), and pricing data from these catalogs provide empirical benchmarks for analyzing Malaysian Huaqiao ancestral home furniture. As primary historical evidence of transcultural craftsmanship, this corpus critically informs the study's visual analysis framework by establishing stylistic genealogies between Guangdong workshops and Nanyang hybrid designs. To illustrate how each literature cluster informs the research, as shown in Table 3, the LR matrix is used to construct the literature review.



**Figure 6. Catalogues of Cantonese export furniture**  
(Source: Collection of the Thirteen Houses Museum and the Guangdong Provincial Museum, Guangzhou, 1910)

**Table 3. Literature Review Matrix**  
(Source: Author, 2024)

| Thematic Cluster               | Key Authors (Year)             | Core Findings                                                                                                                                                           | Link to Research Objectives                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Historical Context & Migration | Knapp (2013)                   | Hakka migration from Guangdong during the Qing Dynasty established dual-family systems in China and Malaysia, facilitating cultural hybridity.                          | Explains the socio-cultural foundations for furniture hybridization in ancestral homes.     |
| Cantonese Furniture Export     | Mazurkewich (2012)             | Guangzhou's "Thirteen Hong" merchants produced Sino-Western fusion furniture using imported tropical hardwoods, later transported to Southeast Asia via maritime trade. | Provides material and stylistic benchmarks for comparative analysis.                        |
| Architectural Syncretism       | Bae (2018); Knapp (2013)       | Batu Nyonya architecture blended Minnan layouts with Guangdong materials (e.g., roof tiles, lattice screens) and Malay craftsmanship.                                   | Demonstrates how spatial design influenced furniture placement and aesthetics.              |
| Ritual Furniture & Identity    | Liu (2024); Bouma et al.(2009) | Ancestral altars combined solemn Chinese darkwood tables (e.g., Eight Immortals Table) with syncretic Southeast Asian shrine arrangements.                              | Reveals how ritual furniture mediated cultural identity transitions (roots → localization). |

|                  |                               |                                                                                                                                              |                                                                           |
|------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Visual Hybridity | Xue & Chen (2024); Ong (1993) | Peranakan furniture featured gilded carvings with Chinese motifs (e.g., 卐) and tropical flora, while incorporating Western functional forms. | Supports analysis of multicultural stylistic negotiation in case studies. |
|------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review synthesizes critical insights into the transnational evolution of traditional Chinese furniture within Malaysian Huaqiao and Chinese ancestral homes (1880–1930). Three core findings emerge: First, Qing-era Cantonese furniture underwent significant aesthetic hybridization through interactions with Malaysian indigenous, colonial, and diasporic contexts, materialized through British colonial motifs, Malay joinery techniques, and tropical material adaptations (Knapp, 2013; Yetts, 1949). Second, furniture functioned as a medium for negotiating "Chineseness" amid cultural pluralism evidenced by syncretic ritual practices (e.g., multi-deity altars) and Peranakan visual eclecticism that transcended orthodox design paradigms (Bouma et al., 2009; Ong, 1993). Third, divergent preservation outcomes 68% context-sensitive restoration in Malaysian Chinese homes versus 82% stylistically mismatched replicas in Huaqiao properties (Fooi Beng Ng, 2019) highlight institutional failures in addressing furniture as autonomous cultural heritage.

Critical gaps persist despite these revelations. Scholarly neglect of furniture as a primary research object (Bae, 2018) and sparse documentation of Malaysian indigenous influences constrain holistic understanding. Only 9% of reviewed literature engages with BRI-aligned sustainable practices, underscoring misalignment between policy frameworks and material culture conservation. Nasir et al. (2019) comparative methodology validates this study's approach yet exposes archival deficiencies particularly regarding Malay woodworking techniques and undocumented Huaqiao design practices that impede deeper analysis of transnational craft genealogies.

Future research must prioritize two interdisciplinary pathways: 1) Deconstructive documentation integrating lacquer microscopy with descendant oral histories to reconstruct erased material epistemologies, and 2) Restorative prototyping workshops testing Suraiyati (2020) fusion design principles with artisans. These approaches would advance a "dual-rooted" conservation model positioning furniture not as a static artifact but as dynamic testimony to Huang et al. (2024) "contradictory eclecticism." Such reorientation is essential for reconceptualizing heritage sustainability within BRI's cultural connectivity mandate, transforming furniture from aesthetic commodity to living witness of diasporic identity negotiation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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