



# Heritage interpretation assessment framework for historic house museums in Singapore: A case study of the NUS Baba House

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Singapore is increasingly preserving historically significant structures through adaptive reuse, notably using historic house museums to connect with local history. NUS Baba House, a well-preserved Peranakan townhouse, is a prime example of this. Evaluating heritage interpretation at NUS Baba House can clarify relevant criteria, but existing principles lack specificity for the heritage interpretation of Singaporean historic house museums. This paper systematically assesses NUS Baba House's heritage interpretation using a literature-based framework, providing tailored recommendations across five dimensions: authenticity, sustainability, professionalism, guided tour interactivity, inclusiveness, and community engagement. While further validation through case studies is needed, this study offers a practical framework to enhance heritage interpretation at Singaporean historic house museums, filling a gap in current guidelines.

**KEYWORDS:** heritage interpretation; historic house museum; Singapore; NUS Baba House

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Singapore has increasingly recognized the importance of architectural conservation. As a result, numerous historically significant buildings have been preserved through adaptive reuse strategies. One prominent approach to preserving these structures is through Historic House Museums, which are historical buildings previously inhabited and now open to the public as museums. These museums typically showcase the building's original furniture and artifacts, preserving the owner's spirit and connecting strongly with local historical memory (Museums Association et al., 1987). Historic house museums differ from many historic buildings that are converted into new functional spaces, as they view the building and its associated history and culture as an integral whole. Their core concept revolves around transforming the building into a museum through heritage interpretation, a broad range of strategies aimed at increasing public awareness and enhancing understanding of cultural heritage sites, as defined by ICOMOS (2008).

NUS Baba House, a well-preserved traditional Peranakan Chinese townhouse, exemplifies the concept of a historic house museum in Singapore. Evaluating and analyzing the effectiveness of its heritage interpretation not only assists in optimizing its interpretation approach but also provides valuable insights into what constitutes effective heritage interpretation for historic house museums in the Singaporean context. However,

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existing heritage interpretation principles, such as Freeman Tilden's classic six principles and the ICOMOS Ename Charter's seven principles, are more general and do not account for the specific context of Singapore and the typology of historic house museums. Therefore, a more comprehensive and context-specific perspective is needed to assess the effectiveness of heritage interpretation at NUS Baba House.

This paper aims to advance the research by conducting a comprehensive review of academic literature, international, and local documents pertaining to heritage interpretation. The primary objective is to synthesize an assessment framework for heritage interpretation and subsequently employ it to evaluate the interpretation initiatives at NUS Baba House. The implications of this study are significant, as it provides a practical evaluation of NUS Baba House's heritage interpretation system, filling the existing gap in the absence of an assessment framework tailored to heritage interpretation in historic house museums in Singapore. Furthermore, this research serves as a valuable resource for similar museums in Singapore, offering insights into effective heritage interpretation practices. However, it is essential to acknowledge the need for further exploration of the framework's applicability through additional case studies, owing to practical limitations.

## 2. Methods

The research methodology employed in this study aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of heritage interpretation at NUS Baba House within the context of historic house museums in Singapore. The methodology involves a multi-stage approach to achieve the research objectives outlined in the introduction.

- **Literature Review:** The initial phase of the research involves an extensive literature review. Academic literature, as well as international and local documents related to heritage interpretation, will be thoroughly reviewed. This literature review serves as the foundation for understanding the existing principles and frameworks of heritage interpretation. It will also help identify gaps in the current knowledge base, especially in relation to the Singaporean context and the specific typology of historic house museums.
- **Framework Development:** Building upon the insights gained from the literature review, the research will focus on the development of a heritage interpretation assessment framework. This framework will be designed to address the unique characteristics of historic house museums in Singapore and their interpretation needs. It aims to provide a structured and context-specific approach to assess the effectiveness of heritage interpretation.
- **Application to NUS Baba House:** The developed heritage interpretation assessment framework will then be applied to NUS Baba House. The goal is to evaluate and analyze the heritage interpretation efforts at this well-preserved traditional Peranakan Chinese townhouse. By doing so, the research will contribute to optimizing the interpretation approach at NUS Baba House while serving as a practical case study to illustrate the framework's applicability.
- **Research Implications:** The study's implications are significant. Firstly, it will offer practical insights into the assessment of heritage interpretation systems, particularly within historic house museums like NUS Baba House. Secondly, it fills a notable gap in the field by providing an assessment framework tailored to the Singaporean context. This framework can also serve as a valuable reference for similar museums in Singapore, offering guidance for effective heritage interpretation practices.

**Research Limitations:** It is important to acknowledge the research limitations. Practical constraints may affect the comprehensive applicability of the framework summarized in this study. Therefore, further exploration of its effectiveness through additional case studies is essential to refine and validate its practicality.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Stage 1: review of existing heritage interpretation guidelines

In the first stage, we conducted a literature review focused on three aspects of heritage interpretation. Firstly, we examined Tilden's six heritage interpretive principles, Sam H. Ham's TORE model, and the seven principles of heritage interpretation from the ICOMOS Charter. This review led to the identification of nine general heritage interpretation guidelines (details in Appendix 1).

Secondly, we delved into Sherry Butcher-Young's work from 1993, summarizing guidelines found in Chapter 10, supplemented by insights from Jessica Foy Donnelly's book and other relevant literature. These efforts resulted in nine guidelines tailored for interpreting historic house museums (details in Appendix 2).

Lastly, we analyzed 16 case reports from the URA handbook "Heritage Interpretation: Do It Right," assessed criteria and objectives from URA's Architectural Heritage Award, and examined missions, objectives, and strategies from NHB's "Our Heritage Plan 2.0." This analysis yielded six preliminary guidelines specific to heritage interpretation in Singapore (details in Appendix 3).

#### 3.2 Stage 2: development of heritage interpretation assessment framework

To enhance the practical application of these 24 guidelines in assessment, we compared and summarized them. We also referred to the categorization of cultural heritage interpretation systems by Zhou and Yan (2016) and Liu and Hui (2021). Consequently, we formulated a comprehensive assessment framework comprising 13 guidelines, categorizing them into interpretive resources, contents, media, and recipients (Table 1).

Table 1. Heritage interpretation assessment framework for the historic house museum in Singapore. Source: Author.

| <b>Resources of Interpretation</b>  |
|---|
| <p><b>1. Authenticity</b><br/>Interpretation needs to respect the authenticity of the heritage, minimize damage to the value of the heritage when renovating it and ensure that it is always irreversible, as well as providing appropriate descriptions and indications of non-authentic objects.</p> <p><b>2. Sustainability</b><br/>The interpretation of the historic house museums needs to consider the long-term sustainability of its interpretation, including but not limited to the sustainability of its cultural value, the sustainability of its daily maintenance, and the sustainability of its social empowerment.</p> <p><b>3. Diversity of Information Acquisition</b><br/>The acquisition of primary sources for interpretation is a comprehensive process of acquiring information that can be studied from the past and the present, as well as archaeological excavations on the ground.</p> |
| <b>Contents of Interpretation</b>   |
| <p><b>4. Thematic Interpretation</b><br/>It is not just a collection and listing of information, but a thematic explanation and disclosure of its important value.</p> <p><b>5. Diversity of Perspectives</b><br/>Historic house museums need to take care of at least six perspectives of interpretation, including the background of the era, the contextual environment, architecture, artefacts, people, conservation. At the same time need to clarify the theme, to avoid information redundancy.</p>   |

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### **6. Relativity and Accessibility**

The content of the interpretation needs to be relevant to the audience and easily understood, e.g. the logic of the interpretation is logical and organized.

### **7. Interpretation of Space Scene with Historical Atmosphere**

The characteristic of the historical house museum is that it has a space with historical authenticity, so the interpretation needs to focus on creating a scene with a sense of historical atmosphere through the space.

## **Media of Interpretation**

### **8. Enrichment and Innovation**

In addition to the traditional art exhibitions, talks, architecture tours, and other means of interpretation that meet the needs of contemporary audiences can also be actively introduced after evaluation.

### **9. Aesthetic and Enjoyment**

Interpretation is an art that needs to have a certain aesthetic value and at the same time be able to immerse people in it.

### **10. Professionalism and Interactivity of Guided Tours**

As one of the most common ways of interpretation in historic house museums, guided tours need to be based on professionalism and have a certain degree of interactivity in order to better enhance the effect of interpretation.

## **Recipients of Interpretation**

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### **11. Inclusiveness**

Interpretation needs to consider the needs of different stakeholders, such as age, race, gender, nationality, physical condition, etc., and provide targeted means of interpretation on a daily or temporary basis.

### **12. Relate to the Community**

Interpretation needs to consider the values necessary for the daily life of the community. Interpretation should not only focus on the historic building itself, but also clarify and show its relationship with the area in which it is located.

### **13. Evaluative**

Interpretation methods and techniques are constantly changing due to people's understanding of the past, and therefore need to be kept up to date through continuous interpretation evaluation.

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### *3.3. Stage 3: review of nus baba house heritage interpretation*

This section systematically evaluates NUS Baba House's heritage interpretation from four angles: objective and theme, architecture and collection, presentation and guided tours, and outreach and education.

The objective and theme of interpretation at NUS Baba House is driven by stakeholders' demands, resulting in a clear focus on interdisciplinary education and cultural dissemination, architectural heritage, and community engagement.

Regarding architecture and collection, NUS Baba House adopts a "live-in house" concept, preserving authenticity by creating a genuine historical atmosphere. They meticulously restore and present the building and artifacts, emphasizing a sense of authenticity. Conservation is not a one-time effort, as ongoing restoration is showcased to visitors, illustrating the heritage conservation process (details in Appendix 4).

In terms of presentation and guided tours, NUS Baba House primarily employs guided tours via a reservation system to manage visitor numbers and protect the house. The guided

tours are informative and immersive, with trained docents providing varying interpretations based on their unique styles (details in Appendix 5). Additional interpretation methods include non-fixed and fixed display boards, e-websites, 3D model guided maps, videos, and music. These methods enhance the visitor experience and understanding of the heritage (details in Appendix 6).

The outreach and education initiatives at NUS Baba House encompass a wide range of programs, including tours, workshops, online live-casts, talks, panel discussions, and short film screenings. The target audience includes NUS students, staff, alumni, school students, parents, and the wider community. These programs cover diverse themes related to heritage, culture, history, and art, effectively aligning with interpretive objectives. The collaborative approach with various organizations and events extends the impact of NUS Baba House's initiatives (details in Appendix 7).

### 3.4 Stage 4: Assessment of NUS Baba House heritage interpretation

This section assesses NUS Baba House's interpretation against the 13-guideline framework, as detailed in Table 2 below, to evaluate the effectiveness of its interpretation efforts.

NUS Baba House demonstrates a strong commitment to preserving heritage authenticity, engaging visitors through immersive experiences, and offering a variety of interpretation methods. However, for sustainable impact, clearer introduction to authenticity, more sustainable event organization, more professional and interactive presentations, more inclusive of multilingualism and persons with disabilities, and greater community involvement should be considered.

Table 2. Assessment for the heritage interpretation of NUS Baba House. Source: Author.

| <b>Resources of Interpretation</b>      |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Authenticity                         | <p>To be improved</p> <p>The building and its decorations are restored in original styles and materials, and the layout of the interior of the first and second floors basically follows the layout of the original owner, which fulfils the original authenticity.</p> <p>However, some of the furniture and artefacts do not originate from the Wee family, were donated by others, thus constituting a complete scenographic interpretation, which is more inclined to a kind of staged authenticity, and to a certain extent, will be confused with its original authentic heritage, affecting the tourists' perception of authenticity</p> |
| 2. Sustainability                       | <p>To be improved</p> <p>The guided tours by appointment control the flow of visitors, thus contributing to the sustainable conservation of the house and its artefacts. Although several outreach educational events have been organized, the timing, audience and themes of the events have been fragmented and inconsistent, to the detriment of sustainability interpretation.</p>  |
| 3. Diversity of Information Acquisition | <p>Satisfactory</p> <p>The interpretive material for the NUS Baba House, derived from public records and relevant information provided by the Wee family, as well as what was obtained in the archaeology of the house, basically covers the sources of access to information from the historic house museum as mentioned by Sherry Butcher-Youngmans in her handbook.</p>  |

### **Contents of Interpretation**

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| 4. Thematic Interpretation                                  | <p><b>Satisfactory</b><br/>From the beginning of the project research in 2007, Baba House has clearly defined the goal of thematic interpretation, and in the account of curator Peter Lee, several themes of curation were explicitly put forward, and the subsequent contents of interpretation basically centered on the interpretation of several core themes.</p>   |
| 5. Diversity of Perspectives                                | <p><b>Satisfactory</b><br/>The interpretation of Baba House is based on the story of the Wee family and its architectural features, and describes various aspects of the period, peranakan culture and customs, heritage features, and the process of conservation and restoration, thus fulfilling the criterion of the diversity of interpretative perspectives.</p>   |
| 6. Relativity and Accessibility                             | <p><b>Satisfactory</b><br/>Using "family" as the main entry point for interpretation and creating a live-in house atmosphere is an entry point for interpretation that makes visitors of all genders, ages, and nationalities feel familiar, and combined with interactive tours, it lowers the barrier to understanding for visitors.</p>   |
| 7. Interpretation of Space Scene with Historical Atmosphere | <p><b>Satisfactory</b><br/>The first and second floors of NUS Baba house are basically presented according to the original layout, creating a space with a historical atmosphere, such as some stacked books and daily used objects are presented in detail. In addition, although the third floor has been used as a new exhibition space, the curators have cleverly used music to create a historical imagination, so that visitors can imagine the Wee Family dancing on this floor while viewing the exhibition.</p>  |
| 8. Enrichment and Innovation                                | <p><b>Satisfactory</b><br/>At present, Baba House's means of interpretation are mainly based on daily guided tours supplemented by display boards and occasional outreach programmes. This basically covers the types of interpretation methods mentioned by Sherry Butcher-Youngans in her manual, with some innovative interpretation methods such as 3D model maps.</p>   |
| 9. Aesthetic and Enjoyment                                  | <p><b>Satisfactory</b><br/>Because the live-in house interpretation strategy helps Baba House to be able to preserve and display its historical buildings, decorations, artefacts, etc. in an intact way, compared to the traditional display boards, the Historical House Museum itself is the best place for aesthetic and immersive enjoyment.</p>  |
| 10. Professionalism and Interactivity of Guided Tours       | <p><b>To be improved</b><br/>On weekdays, the docents of the heritage tour need to go through special training and assessment before they can be formally on duty to give explanations, so professionalism is guaranteed, but as the tour is mainly led by the docents, who follow the prescribed routes and explanatory texts, the interactivity and flexibility are relatively weak.<br/>The Saturday exploratory event complements this by allowing visitors to explore freely after receiving an introduction from the hosts, and volunteers are available at each key space to provide advice and simple explanations. However, the volunteers are not professionally trained, so their professionalism may be lacking.</p> |

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| <b>11. Inclusiveness</b>            | <p><b>To be improved</b></p> <p>The inclusiveness explained by NUS Baba House is mainly embodied in multi-language, multi-age groups, accessibility, gender equality, and so on.</p> <p>In terms of multilingualism, the heritage tour on weekdays provides guided tours in Japanese on a regular basis, in addition to English; the self-guided tours on weekends also provide services in both English and Chinese. However, the exhibition boards in the museum are still predominantly in English, and the multilingual guided tour service is not stable, for example, the Chinese guided tour service was previously provided, but was discontinued due to the lack of docent.</p> <p>In terms of accessibility, although the space of Baba House is limited, there is still a passageway for wheelchair users in the newly constructed part of the backyard, and a lift has been added, which can be considered as an ingenious move without destroying the original structure of the building. However, the fact that few people with disabilities visit the building, apart from the need to continue to improve the infrastructure to meet the needs of different groups of people, such as the hearing impaired, visually impaired, physically disabled and so on, there is also a need to enhance the degree of accessibility at the level of booking and publicity.</p> <p>In terms of gender equality and multi-age groups, Baba House has demonstrated its care for different groups by organising talks and workshops from time to time.</p> |
| <b>12. Relates to the Community</b> | <p><b>To be improved</b></p> <p>Baba House currently invites the neighbouring community to participate in occasional programmes and leads visits and learning sessions for people who are not part of the community. It also disseminates information about its own community through social media.</p> <p>However, in the daily guided tours, the content of the neighbouring community is rarely mentioned, and the focus is more on the building itself.</p>  |
| <b>13. Evaluative</b>               | <p><b>Satisfactory</b></p> <p>Baba house is now inviting participants to fill in feedback questionnaires after daily tours and activities, which has become a regular feature.</p>   |

#### 4. Conclusions

This research is structured into four stages to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of heritage interpretation at NUS Baba House. Firstly, it conducts a systematic literature review and policy analysis, distilling 24 guidelines from various sources, including Freeman Tilden (1957), Sam H. Ham (1992), ICOMOS Ename Charter (2008), and Singaporean documents. These guidelines are then synthesized into a 13-item framework specific to historic house museums in Singapore, covering resource, content, media, and recipient dimensions. Subsequently, the current heritage interpretation at NUS Baba House is analyzed, revealing areas for improvement in authenticity, sustainability, professionalism, guided tour interactivity, inclusiveness, and community relevance. This study establishes an heritage interpretation assessment framework for historic house museums in Singapore, addresses the absence of specific heritage interpretation guidelines, aids in evaluating NUS Baba House's interpretation, and serves as a reference for similar assessments in Singapore. Despite its contributions, limitations exist due to time

constraints, suggesting future research directions involving visitor evaluations and expert-based assessments to enhance the framework's applicability.

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