

ORIGIN & EVOLUTION OF THE
MALAYAN
SHOPHOUSE



ROBERT POWELL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIN HO



keystones and an entablature with pronounced triglyphs and metopes. The whole mélange is topped by a highly decorative 'broken' pediment with a vase at the apex. At the extremities of the facade are acroteria. The features were seen frequently in Baroque architecture and were introduced to bring dynamism to the roof top silhouette. The façade dates the building as probably 1920.

SOON TUCK WOUI KWON

49 Love Lane

In the 19th century, arising out of the needs of migrants coming from mainland China, clan associations were established, dating from the early 1800s. Today, there are 170 clan associations in Penang.

The Soon Tuck Wooi Kwon was one such Clan House. Established in 1838, it was for people from Soon Tuck, Guangdong. The facade of the building proclaims that it was constructed in 1928. The language is eclectic, with classical features alongside Chinese calligraphy surrounding the entrance. There are three windows, surmounted by half round fanlights and separated by short pilasters, each crowned with a Composite Classical capital. Above the windows keystones underpin a heavy frieze with dentils supporting a projecting cornice and, to top it all – a triangular pediment. The corners are accentuated with acroteria.

The gable of the clan house depicts a particularly fine example of the feng shui element of 'fire'.

TONARI

89 Lebuh Aceh, George Town

The Japanese restaurant Tonari, is housed in an elegant 1940s Art Deco shophouse. It is a short shophouse without a lightwell. But the façade is an excellent example of Art Deco architecture with clean lines, geometric decorative elements (circles, squares) and rich colour, habitually topped by a flagpole. The restrained composition of the facade matches the precision found in Japanese food presentation.

CHRIS ONG HOUSE

Lebu Muntri, George Town

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Lebu Muntri was named after the 19th century Menteri of Larut, Ngah Ibrahim. Before WWII most of the terrace houses in the street were residential. After



CHRIS ONG HOUSE

← The beautifully proportioned Art Deco façade of Tonari, a Japanese restaurant at 89, Lebu Asheh

the war wealthy Chinese families moved west, to the beach front and the suburbs, away from the congested town, Cars made commuting easier and many of the town houses became commercial properties.

Chris Ong was born in Penang and attended St. Xavier Institution in the city. His Straits Chinese family's association with George Town stretches back six generations. At 18 he entered University of Melbourne and upon graduation went into the investment banking business in Australia. It was a profession he pursued successfully for 20 years and in that time he bought and restored houses in Fitzroy and Carlton, filling them with Peranakan furniture and artifacts bought at auction in Richmond salerooms.

Chris was in his early 40s and in a senior position in a major investment bank when it was acquired by Westpac which provided the incentive to change tracks and he moved to Sri Lanka. He and an Australian business partner acquired the historic Galle Fort Hotel, a 13-suite boutique hotel within the fort, which they revamped and managed profitably.

In 2006 he returned to Penang and bought a (circa-1890s) property in Lebu Muntri. It had been in use as a grocery store, and he set out to restore it to a condition approximating to his great-grandfather's house.

In the spirit of restoration, the layout of the house has been returned to an earlier state, prior to its use as a grocery store, with new additions where necessary. The lightwell has been reopened to the sky. A garden court has been created at the rear of the house, an area that was destroyed by a Japanese bomb during WWII.

The plans for the house restoration were prepared by Ar. Au Tai Yeow who graduated with an M.Arch from Washington University, St. Louis in 1991. Timber floors have been retained at first floor level. The original back staircase has been restored. The kitchen is quiet but in an earlier era it would have been buzzing with cooks and amahs. Now it is the place to sit, looking out to the pond and garden. There is much to be learned from the late 19th/early 20th century terrace house in terms of its response to climate.

Yet beyond the physical building work the most



→ The elegant façade of hotelier Chris Ong's Peranakan House





spectacular transformation is the integration of Peranakan carved and gilded timber screens, lacquered wooden doors and the exposure of original floor tiles, together with the authentic period furniture, porcelain, and other memorabilia. In the old days when the houses were residential, a pintu pagar prevented passers-by from looking in while allowing ventilation when the main door was open. Today the entrance door is securely padlocked.

The house is a mesmerizing reincarnation of a former era – of an imagined past. Chris Ong is hugely knowledgeable about porcelain and Straits Chinese architecture and interiors. He is steeped in Peranakan culture and has a palpable passion for its preservation and continuity.



SUN YAT-SEN MUSEUM

120 Armenian Street, George Town

In 1910, Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) moved the Southeast Asian Headquarters of the Tongmenghui party to Penang as he had found strong support among the Overseas Chinese in the city, for the overthrow of China's Qing Dynasty. The Penang Philomathic Union was a 'reading club' set up in May 1909 – a cover for Sun's political activities. 120 Armenian Street was in many ways the perfect location for a revolutionary group. It isn't ostentatious. It doesn't shout out for attention. It is a 'safe house' one that merges into the background, but its details are unequivocally Chinese. It is said there was an exit route to the rear in case political enemies raided the house.

Sun Yat-sen was born in 1866 in Chuiheng Village, Guangdong province in China. He studied medicine in Hong Kong and began his revolutionary activities in 1894. In 1895 he founded Xingzhonghui in Honolulu. He visited Penang no less than five times from 1906 to 1912.

Sun convened the celebrated Penang Conference in 404 Jalan Dato Keramat on 13th November 1910, and on the 14th November delivered a famous speech at 120 Armenian Street, that preceded the Huanghuagang Uprising and Wuchang Uprising, important precursors of the 1911 Chinese revolution.

In 2012, Sun Yat-sen became the first Provisional President of the Republic of China. He passed away in 1925. The Tongmenghui moved out of 120 Armenian Street in January 1912 and the Kwong Wah Yit Press exited in 1913.

← (previous) Behind a restrained exterior there is a spectacular transformation of a former grocery shop with the integration of carved and gilded timber screens, together with authentic period furniture, porcelain, and other memorabilia

✕ In 1910, the Southeast Asia Headquarters of the Tongmenghui was located at 120 Armenian Street, George Town, prior to the overthrow of China's Qing Dynasty in 1911. Today it is the Sun Yat-sen Museum

SUN YAT-SEN MUSEUM

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