

Garden Speaker Series

CHINESE HOUSES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE ECLECTIC ARCHITECTURE OF SOJOURNERS AND SETTLERS

Speaker: Ronald G. Knapp | Date: Thursday, August 17, 2017

The migration of Chinese from southeastern China to the Nanyang—the peninsular and insular region known today as Southeast Asia—is a significant component of the world’s major cultural diasporas.

After many of these migrants and their descendants became successful, they built architecturally eclectic homes—shophouses, bungalows, villas, and mansions—that combined Chinese, European, and local influences.

It is the story of these notable hybrid architectural forms—built under different social and geographical environments than had been known at home in China and thus the products of cultural fusion—that is the focus of this talk.

While most of these old buildings have disappeared, here and there in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, there still remain fine examples worth studying, documenting, and explaining. Many of these remaining residences are stunningly beautiful, as some are admittedly merely eclectic confections, creations of the nouveaux riches.

Ronald G. Knapp and photographer A. Chester Ong, with the assistance of many who are interested in the architectural patrimony of the Southeast Asia region, visited not only well-known residences but tracked down many others that had remained hidden from view. Over a two-year period in 2007 and 2008, they made four lengthy field excursions to Asia in search of nearly a hundred old homes of Chinese sojourners and settlers in six countries.

This talk is a fascinating account of architectural multiculturalism in the pre-modern world and is drawn from their 2010 book *Chinese Houses in Southeast Asia: The Eclectic Architecture of Sojourners and Settlers*.

Among some of the themes Knapp will briefly comment on in the talk are the following—more details may be explored by reading the book:

- » Many have speculated that the Chinese house forms echo the domestic residential patterns found in the home regions of the migrants, principally in Fujian and Guangdong provinces, while integrating features from European and local traditions. While teasing out the essential elements to explain this hybridity is fraught with difficulty, Knapp will offer evidence about the origins of variant forms
- » The role that climatic adaptation played in guiding building form. Comparisons between dwellings in the humid-subtropical areas of China with those found in the humid-tropic areas of Southeast Asia. Among the building elements discussed in both areas will be the following: internal courtyards, fenestration, overhangs, verandah, front porch, ventilation ports and grills, ceiling height, etc.
- » The continuance of traditional Chinese elements in house layout, including those related to ancestor worship and Confucian scholarship. Some claim that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that descendants of Chinese immigrants actually become “more Chinese” culturally than their parents and grandparents had been in the earlier periods. A question that will be explored is how this might be reflected in the layout of dwellings and in overall building styles. To what degree were such houses “Chinese” or simply perceived to be “Chinese”?
- » Identification of ‘non-Chinese’ elements in diasporic homes in Southeast Asia.
- » To what degree did craftsmen and building materials brought from China determine the building forms in Southeast Asia while furnishings came not only from China but also from as far away as India, Italy, Holland, Portugal, France, and Japan.
- » The impact of colonial building styles, identifying some of the components adopted from patterns characteristic of British, Dutch, and Portuguese styles, including pilasters, front, gables, full-length windows, plaster moldings, etc.
- » Interior decorative elements and furniture. Comparisons will be made with those decorative elements and furniture popular elsewhere in the world.
- » Using written and visual materials, an effort will be made to comprehend the “taste” and “styles” of various contemporaneous social classes as well as how the residential spaces were used and perceived by the occupants.