THE OLD HOKKIEN SCHOOL BUILDING, KUCHING, SARAWAK (1911)[1]

History

> *"As early as 1912, the Hokkien community in Kuching had established a school to nurture its children. This school, originally known as Sarawak Free School and later on as Hokkien Free School, is the present Chung Hua Primary School No.1."*
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> Lam Chee Kheung, 'Wee Kheng Chiang of Sarawak:Entrepreneur Extraordinaire', Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies, 2012, 1: 18-39, p.34

The history of the building is embedded in the history of Sarawak's community of Chinese descent and Sarawak's education system.

[1] This working paper is based on presentations made at the site visit that took place on 22 August 2015 and on some additional research. The visit was organized by PAMSC (*Malaysian Institute of Architects Sarawak Chapter*) and the *Sarawak Heritage Society*, in conjunction with the *Kuching Hokkien Association.* Mr. Wong Kok Nyen (ex-history teacher and treasurer of the *Kuching Hokkien Association*), Mike Boon (conservation architect, PAMSC President and past SHS President) and Karen Shepherd (SHS President) provided rich information on the history of the building as well as its architecture and state of conservation, highlighting its heritage value.

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Early settlers from China struggled for survival and were initially unable to prioritise education for their children. In the early Brooke times, the Christian missions expanded and engaged in education, including for the communities of Chinese descent. The Brooke administration had subsidised Chinese schools through the religious missions – the first in Serembu in 1870 and also Catholic Chinese schools in Bau (1892) and in Lundu (1904).

In Kuching, Chinese language schooling was made of a number of clan-based tuition centres teaching in dialects (Hokkien, Hakka, ….). The new, larger school project can be seen as a move to maintain cultural links through a more formalized educational system complementary to, but different from that offered by the Brookes government.

The Hokkien school was opened on 9 May 1911. It was an initiative of Ong Tiang Swee, -who had by that time reached the status of 'kapitan China' (leader of the community of Chinese descent) of Kuching, Chan Kee Hock -a son of Chan Kho, and a third Hokkien leader. It is said that they created a company for that purpose and obtained from the Brooke administration 5 acres on the present site, to replace a nearby plot previously allocated to them in the area of the current Meda Pelita building (site of the former Rex theatre) on Wayang Street.

1912: a historical turning point for the Chinese communities

It was the year in which the last Chinese dynasty, the Qing dynasty, fell. China became a republic led by Sun Yat Sen. The progressive ideas of the revolutionaries behind the Xinhai revolution very likely inspired the initiative to launch the school: for the Chinese community, including the overseas Chinese (Sun Yat Sen was himself a Chinese expatriate), it was a time of tumultuous change. The old dynasty had ended and a new page of modernisation was in the writing.

Sarawak's overseas Chinese communities were at that time still looking back to their ancestral home country[2] and for the young generation, China was the elected place for higher education. The perspective changed at the advent of the People's Republic of China in 1949. For those who had remained politically bent towards China rather than Taiwan, accessing it was not the same anymore. Several went back to study in the homeland but, deprived of the possibility to return to Sarawak, stayed and pursued careers in the PRC and families were split. Opportunities for higher education in Chinese language offered by Taiwan were taken up by some and these widened later with the set-up of the Nanyang University in Singapore 1956 which, interestingly, was also a Hokkien initiative.

Teachers from China were used and the curricula carried strong references to those in use in China. The teaching language switched to Mandarin later. There was also an English section taught by foreigners hired by the school. The school was originally free.

[2] A SHS member recalled during our visit, that up to 1917 only some 30 members of Sarawak's Chinese communities had applied for citizenship offered by the Brooke's Government to immigrants having resided more than 5 years in the country. Indeed, at that time, the status and long term future of Sarawak must not have appeared well secured to the communities of Chinese descent.

The *Sarawak Gazette* of 16 August 1912 reported on the school at the occasion of a visit by the Rajah Charles Brooke, related in a biography of Ong Tiang Swee:

> "As Chairman of the Hokkien Association, Ong Tiang Swee rallied support from the Chinese community, particularly the Hokkiens for the establishment of a school known as the Hokkien Free School, which emphasized the teaching of Chinese, rather than English, although the latter was also taught. The school […] was not restricted to Hokkiens, as there was also a section for "a mixture of races". The first headmaster was W.H. Jacques and the second was Philip Cox. […].
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> The Rajah, Charles Brooke, was also interested in the school, as the following account of his visit showed.
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> *The Chinese Free School*
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> *His Highness the Rajah paid an informal visit by invitation and his own desire to the new Hokkien Chinese Free School on the 8th instant. The edifice has been erected during the last two years; it is solidly built of brick and 'bilian'. Costing some $15,000 and is capable of taking in, as day scholars, about 200 boys on the upper and lower floors … the English Master, Mr Jacques, who received his highness and showed him round the building giving all information he could about the future intentions of the Chinese (Hokkien) Association who has established this exceedingly important undertaking which was required for the better education of the Chinese community in this country.*
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> *Looking at the matter in an impartial light it is only natural that the Government would wish to promote as far as possible the welfare of this school, the backbone of which will be Chinese, but in which English, taught by an Englishman, will be a branch of learning. […]*
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> *The 'Sarawak Gazette' on more than one occasion has had remarks in its pages on the need of Chinese education for the Chinese and this the Mission schools in Kuching have neglected, preferring English as the standard to be followed … This want has no doubt greatly influenced the leading Chinese to start an education establishment of their own under their own management. It must be allowed that they deserve the credit of having made the first move and laid out a lot of capital towards a meritorious object, viz, educational development of this country". (Sarawak Gazette, 16 August 1912)".*
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> […]"This school became the largest Chinese community school and continued to serve the community for a long time. […] It was (later) expanded to include a special section for girls."
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> From: "Ong Tian See of Sarawak" by Ong Boon Lim, published by Malaysian Historical Society, Sarawak branch, 1990, pp. 28-30.

In February 1928 the 'Hokkien Free School', as it was known, started a girls section, "the first real Chinese school solely for girls". It was first hosted in an old wooden building. A new, more spacious

building was built shortly after and inaugurated in October 1929, accommodating that year 69 girl students[3].

In 1937, the Hokkien school is remembered to have housed some 400 students in a Kindergarten, Primary 1 to 6 and Forms 1 to 3 of Junior Secondary classes. The school's budget was Straits Dollars $800 per month of which $300 were collected from school fees, the balance being provided by a Government subsidy ($180), by the Hokkien association's funds ($140), and by donations ($180).

> Up to the end of WW2, the Sarawak Government education facilities were very limited:
> *"A Department of Education was first created in 1924 […]. During the Great Depression of the early thirties, however, the Education vote had to be reduced and the post of Director was abolished. It was not until 1939 that the post […] was revived and even then the responsibility for the Chinese Schools was the concern of the Chinese affairs Department. In April 1946, on the resumption of Civil Government after the Japanese occupation, the Education Department was reconstituted by appointing the only available Education Officer to act as Director in charge of all educational services including the Chinese School system."* [Handbook of Sarawak, Government of Sarawak, 1949, p.64]

From 1941 the building was occupied by the Japanese and under the post-war British colonial administration, the 14 Chinese clan-based associations joined hands to restructure Chinese medium schools, by forming a *Chung Hua School Board*[4]. The school became Kuching's Chinese Primary School No. 1.

Around 1963, after the formation of Malaysia, another restructuration took place under which Primary and Secondary schools were segregated. The school became Chung Hua Primary School No.1, and an "äided" school, -i.e. Government subsidised- as opposed to the private schools which opted to remain independent. More adjacent modern school blocks were built.

The building remained in continuous use up to the 1970s. In the early 1970's, it was used as the school's staff room. It then became the Hokkien Free School Memorial Hall and was used by the Hokkien Association Youth Section for recreational purposes. It is now no longer in use.

[3]see: "Ong Tiang Swee of Sarawak" by Ong Boon Lim, published by Malaysian Historical Society, Sarawak branch, 1990, pp. 58-61.

[4] which still exists today, under the name of *Sarawak United Association of Private Chinese Secondary School Management Board.(not to be confused with the national level United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia, "Dong Zong")*

Architecture: not sophisticated, but deeply elegant and majestic.

The architecture of the building is that of a Sarawak mansion: a hybrid of styles incorporating Indian, European and Malay elements with local materials and workmanship.

Who designed it and who built it is unknown, but it looks like it was modelled on other colonial style mansions built at that period in Kuching. The "cut and paste" pattern, with seemingly little regard to the needs of a school building, may be explained by Kuching's limited pool of architectural and construction skills.

The high ceilings and large windows to facilitate air flow and the large verandas relate to the common English colonial architectural patterns of the time.[5]

By opting for such a construction, in brick, the Hokkien community was certainly aiming at showcasing its rising socio-economic status.

A limited range of traditional materials, all traditional, was used for the construction: bricks (wood fired, i.e. less compact than modern bricks), terracotta, timber (belian for the structure and for exposed joinery and usually other cheaper hardwoods for the non-exposed timberworks), lime-based mortar (mix of lime, sand and a binding agent such as clay), white lime wash and some black bitumen coating (the latter being used for waterproofing at the base of the building. It is known that cement only reached Sarawak in the 1880's and that it was initially used very parsimoniously due to its cost[6]. The woodwork bears the imprint of Chinese carpentry skills. The observable steel beams were probably added at a later stage, as were the window panels enclosing part of the large north veranda and likely the present concrete floor. The asbestos roofing is also probably a replacement of an original belian shingles roof.

Upon the initial diagnostic made by PAM's architects during the site visit, the structure of the building appears still to be sound in spite of the lack of maintenance and of some inappropriate renovations over the years such as patching cement over the lime mortar and use of modern paints. Use of these materials seem to have affected the breathing properties of the original materials and to have created signs of degradation caused by moisture retention. Pending a more in-depth technical assessment, the building could seemingly be restored without incurring high costs.

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[5] Available historical evidence seems to suggest that Malay wooden houses (built on stilts) did not originally have verandas and that the latter was introduced by colonial architecture.
[6] Kuching's first construction with concrete columns was the 1891 Pavilion building, which now houses the Textile Museum. Only little concrete seems to have been used in the construction of extension of the Museum building in 1911.