



A Visual Analysis of the Eclectic Shophouse Façades of Malaysia and Its Syncretism of Cultures

Fiona E. Chiong Wong

Department of Arts, Design and Media, School of Arts, Sunway University
Selangor, Malaysia

E-mail: fionaw@sunway.edu.my

Abstract

This study presents a visual analysis of the eclectic façades of Malaysia, that were built between the late 19th- and early 20th centuries. Highlighting on particularly the ‘Chinese Baroque’ or ‘Nyonya Baroque’ style eclectic shophouse façades, this study establishes the notion of eclecticism and hybridity, through its syncretism of cultures in its decoration and ornamentation, on the eclectic Malaysian shophouse façade. This study draws examples of the eclectic shophouse façades, which were built during the 19th- and 20th-century British Malaya, and which still remain intact today, in major towns and cities of present-day Malaysia, particularly the Peninsular Malaysia for this paper. This study addresses the present critical scenario of many old shophouses, that have been refurbished, revamped, torn down and rebuilt, or left abandoned and run down, thus losing their original façade, beauty and past glory. This study recommends that due attention and conservation measures, ought to be taken to preserve and conserve the eclectic façade of these Malaysian shophouses, as they are an integral part of the country’s built heritage, as well as cultural heritage and legacy.

Keywords: *Eclectic, Shophouse Façade, Preservation, Conservation, Ornamentation, Syncretism*

1. Introduction

The shophouse, a ubiquitous built form in the towns and cities of Malaysia, is often approached as an architectural study, but rarely from a visual arts or cultural perspective. This is due to the normal assumption that the shophouse building is related to architecture and the built environment than it is related to other fields of study. However, the Malaysian shophouse façades comprise various stylistic designs (such as a Greek column) and a myriad of symbolic visuals (such as bamboo and vase with Chinese letterings). Hence the Malaysian shophouse façades could be approached from a visual arts and cultural perspective. With the various stylistic and symbolic designs appearing on a single Malaysian shophouse façade, therefore the result of cultural syncretism, is an eclectic façade, compared to a plain or unadorned façade (which appeared later under the influence of Modernism).

The double-storey and triple-storey shophouses are commonly found in major towns and cities, while single-storey shophouses are mostly found in rural towns nowadays. Identifiable by rows of closely-knit structural blocks in uniformity, and with the distinct ‘five-foot way’ corridor feature at the ground floor of the shop front, a verandah or walkway concept imposed by the British colonial administration, to keep the pedestrians off the roadway and provide shield to the shopkeepers and pedestrians from the sun and rain (Chen, 1998). The shophouses were mainly built by the Chinese immigrants, not only for shelter and living purposes, but also for the operation of various types of businesses and trades, such as coffee shops, grocery shops, retail shops, saloons or barber shops, hotels, association halls, pawnshops, restaurants, clinics, gambling houses, even opium dens and death houses.

The shophouse is an built importation by the diasporic Nanyang Chinese immigrants, who flocked to the Malay Peninsula (present-day West Malaysia), Sarawak and Sabah (East Malaysia) from Southern China during the late 19th- and early 20th-century British colonial era for better work opportunities (Pan, 1998), the shophouses began to mushroom in the Straits Settlements (which comprised Malacca, Penang and Singapore towns, during the British Malaya administration), and later in other major towns such as Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur. In Sarawak and Sabah, the history and development of their towns are quite different from how the towns in the Malay Peninsula developed, hence it will not be discussed in this paper. European architectural styles and trends were brought into British Malaya, hence the shophouses began to display



Western influences, in their façades, especially in the early 20th century. The local Malays who were more centered on agricultural farming, and lived in the outskirts of the towns, were initially not concerned with the shophouses in the towns, but eventually the shophouses, in particular, those located in the towns of the northern Malay states, such as Terengganu, Kelantan and Kedah, began to display certain Malay elements in their architecture and façades.

As the Chinese community grew more resourceful with time, the wealthier rising middle-class merchants or towkays no longer built single-storey wooden and *atap* shophouses anymore, but erected two-storey and three-storey brick-and-tile shophouses (Kohl, 1984). The shophouse and its façade undergo a typological transformation. The façade of these shophouses also experienced changes – from a plain and unadorned façade into a decorative façade, with eclectic ornamentation filled with rich cultural symbolisms, termed as ‘Chinese Baroque’ or ‘Nyonya Baroque,’ that reflects the stylistic approach of combination. Chinese decorative design elements based on the cultural beliefs of the diasporic Chinese and the Peranakan or Baba and Nyonya communities, while echoing the Western Baroque design styles.

2. Objectives

There are three objectives of this study:

- 1) To examine the shophouse façade in Malaysia from a visual arts and cultural perspective rather than an architectural study.
- 2) To identify the shophouses façades with eclectic ornamentations, that show the syncretism of cultures reflective of a multicultural society.
- 3) To analyze the signification and meanings of the cultural symbols, on the shophouse façade ornamentation.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which consists of on-site observational study of the shophouse façade, at several selected major towns, and cities around the country. However, due to the scope of the study and limitation of this paper, only a few towns or cities from different states are being mentioned and discussed in here. The observations made in this study include photographs, sketches, video recordings, notes-taking from interviews conducted with the locals. The collected data is then analyzed and the findings presented in the next section of this paper.




4. Discussion and Results

4.1 Evolution of the Shophouse Architectural Styles and Façade Design

The shophouses in Malaysia went through four main evolutionary phases of architectural styles from the 1800s to the 1930s: (a) the single- or double-storey wood and *atap* prototypes; (b) the early permanent shophouse; (c) the transitional shophouse and eclectic façades; and (d) the fully Europeanized shophouse façades influenced, by the arrival of the modern International Style, prior to World War II. The evolution of the shophouse built styles and façade designs, from the 19th- to 20th-century Malaya (before the country's independence) is shown in Table 1.



Table 1 Evolution of the Malaysian Shophouse Façades showing four phases of shophouse architectural and façade transformation

Shophouse	Picture	Details
(a) Single- or double-storey wood and <i>atap</i> prototype shophouse		<p>Situated on the highway towards the town of Bentong, Pahang, this row of single-storey wooden terrace Chinese shophouse, likely to be built during the 20th century, is similar to the early wood and <i>atap</i> prototype shophouse, except the roof is made of zinc material instead. (Photograph by author)</p>
(b) Early permanent shophouses (with wooden shutters)		<p>An example of the early permanent shophouse form in Kuching, Sarawak, before its façade is ornamented and transforming into the transitional façade type. Note this shophouse is built in brick and tiled roofing and six panel wooden windows. (Photograph by author)</p>
(c) Transitional shophouse with eclectic façades ('Chinese Baroque' or 'Nyonya Baroque' being the peak of the eclectic façades)		<p>A 'Chinese Baroque' or 'Nyonya Baroque' shophouse in Malacca with an eclectic façade that portrays a mixture of Chinese elements and Western architectural features, and painted in contrasting burgundy red French windows and vents, Greek pediment and pilasters, Classical cornices, but adorned with Chinese floral decorations and symbolic vase plaster relief against the turquoise green colored walls. (Photograph by author)</p>



Shophouse	Picture	Details
(d) Fully Europeanized shophouse (with modern International Style influence)		A cut-corner shophouse in Kuantan with fully Europeanized (Greek and Palladian) stylistic designs displayed on the façade: the arches, verandah, balustrades, pilasters, and columns. There is no sign of Chinese or Malay elements on this shophouse façade. (Photograph by the author)

The earliest single-storey wooden and *atap* shophouses in Table 1 (a) were replaced by the early permanent double-storey brick-and-tile shophouses, with plain and unadorned façade, shown in Table 1 (b). The wealthier Chinese merchants and the Straits Chinese or Peranakan population eventually added more decorations to the façade design. Inspired by their Southern Chinese influence, coupled with influences from the European trends popular at that time, the double-storey shophouses, eventually, transformed into a transitional façade and ‘Chinese Baroque’ or ‘Nyonya Baroque’ style, with more emphasis on surface decoration and ornamentation, as seen Table 1 (c) (Kohl, 1984). After this eclectic phase, the shophouses that emerged, later adopted the modernized stylistic influence of International Style and, eventually, dropped the eclectic designs and reverted to plain and unadorned facades, but with streamlined shapes, evident in Table 1 (d). There are also shophouses with façades, that syncretized with the local Malay culture and its building practices, that are evident in the eaves fascia board that resembles *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoot) and half-doors or *pintu pagar* (American Express, 1989) (Figure 1).



Figure 1 A wooden Chinese shophouse still existing in Kota Bahru, Kelantan. The ground floor entrance is affixed with a plain half-door or *pintu pagar* before another full door, which is opened from the inside, the *pintu pagar* being a typical Malay architectural feature. On top of the door is an intricate wood carved rectangular-shaped vent of Malay influence (Photograph by the author).

The decorative styles that saw hybrid forms emerge on facades of the shophouses (as well as terrace houses and villa forms) in major towns and cities, revealed the European revivalist influence by the 1920s. Similar features, already initiated in the previous ‘transitional’ façade shophouse phase, were now brought to a higher level of sophistication (Piyadasa, 1993). These stylistic European features were the arched fanlights,



carved pilasters, triangular-shaped pediments, gabled frieze of plaster carvings or tiles decorations, stucco and plastered cornices or architrave (Kohl, 1984). Additional features like the rusticated doorways, or window patterns, were utilized for a fully European version. These features revealed European influence of the various styles and periods, such as the Neo-gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Palladian, Neo-classical, Dutch Patrician, Art Deco, and Modern (Chen, 1998; Lee, 1988). Chinese artisans and builders were employed by the shophouse owners, or towkays to apply plaster and stucco relief carvings onto the façade surface; however, sometimes they tend to ‘over-decorate’ resulting in a far more complex design, portraying Chinese cultural motifs, mixed with European stylistic treatments on a single façade surface, and certain shophouses are even included the local Malay cultural elements or architectural features. The eclectic ornamentation resulted in a kind of peculiar but eye-catching ‘masterpiece’ of mixed cultural motifs and symbols.

But of all the various evolved shophouse façade styles, the most interesting was the ‘Nyonya Baroque’ style for which the Straits Chinese or Peranakans are highly acclaimed. Although having absorbed more European influences, the double-storey shophouses, nonetheless, still persisted in an overall ‘Chineseness’ appearance. Popularized first in the Straits Settlements, this style soon spread to other major Malayan towns between 1914 and 1930. This particular period was to witness a final outburst of the Straits Chinese energy and flamboyance, in the architectural style of their built structures and decorations of their façades (Piyadasa, 1993).

The Straits Chinese decorative attempts on the façades of their built structures resulted in the free use of decorative wall, and floor tiles imported from Europe on the first and second floors (Figure 2). This form of ornate decorativeness could have been triggered by the Chinese preference for auspicious decorations of symbolic motifs and colors. This eventually signaled a comeback for some original Chinese art forms in the process. Pediments featuring shapes and forms, derived from Chinese mythology or folk arts, or plastered Chinese scrolls, replacing the earlier European-type balustrade at the top of the shophouse façade were few attempts, by the Chinese to assert back some ‘Chineseness’ into their edifices. The unique features of the Nyonya Baroque-styled façade ornamentations include decorative motifs on stucco-finished walls, decorative tiles (polychromatic ceramic tile panels), glazed roof filings, plastered moldings, and chipped glazed ceramic decoration (*jian nian*, means cut and glue, attaching broken shards and pieces of glazed pottery into a matrix of cement) (Kohl, 1984) (Figure 3).



Figure 2 European patterned ceramic tile found on the walls at the ground floor of a double-storey Chinese shophouse in Malacca (Photograph by the author)



Figure 3 Various shades of colours are depicted on the plastered floral relief which used the ‘*jian nian*’ technique, found on the transom of a double-storey Chinese shophouse in Malacca (Photograph by the author)

4.2 Symbolism of Cultural Motifs in the Decoration and Ornamentation

The early 20th century witnessed a significant transformation that culminated in a highly complex form of intricacy and syncretism, portrayed on the late shophouse façade, in particular the ‘Chinese Baroque’ or ‘Nyonya Baroque’ style shophouses. The Peranakan’s vivid personality had indeed shone through many aspects of their culture: textiles (*sarong*), ceremonial clothes and accessories, carved woodworks, jewelry, beaded slippers and even food delicacies. The shophouse façade normally displayed symbols of entwined dragons, phoenixes, birds and flowers, which are few of many symbols believed by the Chinese to bring good luck, fortune and fame to himself, his family and other people. The rich eclectic mix of cultural and symbolic ornamentations reflected not only the Chinese elements, but the local and foreign influences as well. Under these eclectic ornamentations lie rich cultural significations and symbolisms, a few of these cultural symbols are selected from the study and displayed in Table 2, followed by a detailed description for each cultural symbol.

Table 2 shows the 4 sketches of Chinese cultural symbols as follows;

(a) Bat (*Fu* 蝠)

A symbolic mammal creature that plays an important part in Chinese legendary lore, the bat is an emblem that symbolises happiness and longevity. In the visual arts, “the conventional bat is often employed for decorative purposes, and is often so ornate that it bears a strong resemblance to the butterfly. Its wings are sometimes curved in the shape of the head of the *Joo-I* or *Ju-I* (如意), and it is generally painted red—the colour of joy” (Williams, 1976). The bat motif is often “modified to a point where it no longer possesses more than a distant resemblance to reality” (Chavannes, 1973). The design of the Five Bats (*wu fu* 五蝠), owing to the similar pronunciation of the word, symbolises the Five Happiness or Five Blessings (五福): old age; wealth; health; love of virtue; and natural death (Williams, 1976; Chavannes, 1973). Commonly found on a thousand objects of domestic use wishing for happiness, for example on the clasps or corners of boxes, on the hooks of belts, and on teapots (Chavannes, 1973).



Table 2 Sketches of Chinese cultural symbols that appear on the Malaysian shophouse façades (Sketches by the author)

Chinese cultural symbols	Sketches
(a) Bat (<i>Fu</i> 蝠) – Variations of a bat symbol	
(b) Dragon (<i>Lung</i> 龍)	
(c) Phoenix (<i>Feng</i> 鳳)	
(d) Unicorn (<i>Chi Lin</i> 麒麟)	

(a) Bat (*Fu* 蝠)

A symbolic mammal creature that plays an important part in Chinese legendary lore, the bat is an emblem that symbolises happiness and longevity. In the visual arts, “the conventional bat is often employed for decorative purposes, and is often so ornate that it bears a strong resemblance to the butterfly. Its wings are sometimes curved in the shape of the head of the *Joo-I* or *Ju-I* (如意), and it is generally painted red—the colour of joy” (Williams, 1976). The bat motif is often “modified to a point where it no longer possesses more than a distant resemblance to reality” (Chavannes, 1973). The design of the Five Bats (*wu fu* 五蝠), owing to the similar pronunciation of the word, symbolises the Five Happiness or Five Blessings (五福): old age; wealth; health; love of virtue; and natural death (Williams, 1976; Chavannes, 1973). Commonly found on a thousand objects of domestic use wishing for happiness, for example on the clasps or corners of boxes, on the hooks of belts, and on teapots (Chavannes, 1973).

(b) Dragon (*Lung* 龍)

The Chinese dragon (*lung* 龍) is regarded as a beneficent being that became an imperial emblem of the emperor. It has been theorized that the number five, which is most common numerical categories used by the Chinese, may symbolise “the five happiness, the five constant virtues, or the five great leaders of antiquity” (Chavannes, 1973). The dragon is a mythical hybrid creature that appears in many religions. Unlike Western mythical beliefs, legends and fairy tales that associate the dragon creature symbolically to the devil and darkness, the Eastern dragon is regarded otherwise. It is a common Chinese belief that clouds spring from dragons, and dragons are supposed to travel about, upon the clouds, which were believed to produce moisture in the form of water, surrounding the dragon’s body in order for it, to retain its marvelous powers; otherwise, the creature would become powerless and die (Chavannes, 1973).

[599]

(c) Phoenix (*Feng* 凤)

The phoenix (*feng* 凤 or *feng huang* 凤凰), is a magnificent bird which is frequently paired up with the dragon to “announce and foretell happiness and good luck” (Chavannes, 1973). The phoenix is believed to supposedly appear in times of peace and prosperity. It is second among the four supernatural creatures (or *shi ling* 四灵兽) in the Chinese belief – the first being the dragon, and the third and fourth respectively being the unicorn and tortoise. It is believed to “preside over the southern quadrant of the heavens, and therefore symbolises sun and warmth for summer and harvest.” Its appearance has become a commonplace in Chinese history, and is believed to glorify a peaceful reign, or flatter a successful ruler (Williams, 1976).

(d) Unicorn (*Chi Lin* 麒麟)

The *chi lin* (麒麟) or unicorn, one of the four mythical animals of China, is fabled as a “fabulous creature of good omen, and the symbol of longevity, grandeur, felicity, illustrious offspring, and wise administration” (Williams, 1976). This mythical creature is believed to possess “perfect goodwill, gentleness, and benevolence to all living creatures... The male is called *ch’i*, (麒) and the female *lin* (麟); it resembles a large stag in its general form; but combines the body of the musk deer, with the tail of an ox, the forehead of a wolf, and the hoofs of a horse. Its skin is of five colours, red, yellow, blue, white, and black; and it is yellow under the belly... It is sometimes drawn surrounded with fire, and other times with clouds.” The unicorn is also written by other writers, as having “the body of a horse, is covered with scales like a fish, and has two horns bent backwards” (Williams, 1976).

The four mythical animals in Chinese cultural belief are seen on sculptural plaster reliefs on some of the Malaysian shophouse façades, for example on the pilasters or on top of columns. Figure 4 shows a bat plaster or stucco relief on top of a *chi lin* relief; whereas Figure 5 shows a phoenix flying towards a plant in sculptural relief; and lastly, Figure 6 shows a three-dimensional sculptural relief of a dragon resting on top of a pilaster or column of an eclectic shophouse façade.



Figure 4 A sculptural plaster or stucco relief of a bat is found on top of another *chi lin* plaster, or stucco relief on a Chinese shophouse in Taiping, Perak (Photograph by the author)



Figure 5 A sculptural plaster or stucco relief of a phoenix landing on a plant is shown on the pilaster of a Chinese shophouse in Malacca (Photograph by the author)



Figure 6 A three-dimensional sculptural relief of a dragon (in simplified shape) is found resting on the pilaster or column of an eclectic Chinese shophouse façade in Malacca (Photograph by the author)

Apart from these four Chinese mythical animal symbols, there are also other symbols that represent the Chinese cultural beliefs. These, however, can only be covered in another paper on the Malaysian shophouse façade designs, as the discussion will be too extensive. For this paper, the findings of the study, clearly, indicate the eclectic façade of the Malaysian shophouse, displaying a syncretism of cultures (Figure 7): the shophouse being a Chinese built importation, using brick and tile structure; the architectural and certain decorative features, displaying European or Western influences of Greek, Palladian or French styles, evident in the arches, columns, cornices, pilasters, and pediments; ‘five-foot way’ concept that was imposed as a British colonial administrative regulation; plastered reliefs or stuccos are of both Western and Chinese influences; *jian nian* stuccos are of Chinese influence and symbolic in representation and meaning; decorative tiles were imported from Europe; shophouses in certain towns in the northern Malay states, such as Terengganu, Kelantan and Kedah, that tend to incorporate Malay woodcarving elements into their architectural feature and façade design, such as vents and *pintu pagar*.



Figure 7 Syncretism of European, Chinese and Malay cultures, as portrayed in the architectural features and decorative ornamentations, on an eclectic Malaysian shophouse façade in Malacca (Photograph by the author)

5. Conclusion

In retrospect, the eclectic shophouse façades in Malaysia, have made a stamp of their artistic achievement through the assimilation of cultural symbols, evident in the ‘Chinese Baroque’ or ‘Nyonya Baroque’ style shophouses. This fervor approach of ornamentation and decoration of the eclectic shophouses particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, is witnessed, as the last of the glorious attempts by the Chinese artisans in the country’s architectural history, as the economic depression of the 1930s and the World War II that ensued halted any such creative endeavors, resulting in the evolution of the architectural styles of the shophouses in the country came to a standstill. Even though the construction of shophouses was revived during the post-war period commencing in the 1960s, the shophouses came under the influence of the Modernist Movement, that not only introduced high-rise buildings and steel and concrete materials, but also pointed to the ‘International Style,’ which reduced and excluded any decorative treatment on building façades, but retained the ‘classical character’ with simplified details, marking the end of the traditional shophouse architectural style and façade in the country.

The eclectic shophouse façade and its beauty, indirectly, reflects the rich cultures of the Malaysian fabric and represents a cultural identity of its multi-ethnic people. However, these eclectic shophouses of the past are now facing the threat of abandonment and destruction. Many of such shophouses are now left in bad shape or in ruins, hence refurbishment or renovation that take place would wipe out any trace of ornamentation on the façade. At present, the Malaysian consciousness of a localized and vernacular architecture has witnessed a decline, with our continuing preference, to build private edifices high-rise and multi-storey buildings, echoing the Modernist or International style and lacking vernacular sensibilities in our local tropical climate and environment. We need to be reinforced with a better understanding and appreciation of the earlier shophouse styles, built by the early Chinese, which had inevitably played a very significant role and contributed immensely in the urbanization and economic growth of the country. Yet their contribution to the construction of an architectural legacy, has been long forgotten. Awareness has to be created, and measurements taken by the local people and government, to preserve and conserve these disappearing shophouses, as they have contributed immensely to the urbanization and economic growth of the country, and therefore are part of the country’s built heritage and legacy.



The eclectic shophouse façades in Malaysia display a syncretism of cultures through the Chinese, Western and Malay architectural features and cultural ornamentations. This study shows that the eclectic shophouse façades can be analyzed from a visual arts perspective, by conducting a formalistic approach on the visual schemas, and composition of the elements on the surface design, as well as an analysis on the signification of the façade decorations, that reflect the various cultural beliefs and symbolisms of a multicultural society like Malaysia.

6. Acknowledgements

Appreciation is extended to Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, scholar and expert in Southeast Asian, and particularly, the Malaysian traditional performing arts and the visual arts, for his valuable opinions in this study. The author is indebted to the late scholar Redza Piyadasa, whose teachings and critical analyses in his articles of the Malayan shophouses, inspired the author to embark on this study. Acknowledgement is due to Sunway University, for her support and endorsement of my research on arts and crafts heritage of Malaysia.

7. References

- American Express. (1989). *Heritage of Malaysian Architecture*. Kuala Lumpur: American Express.
- Chavannes, E. (1973). *The Five Happiness: Symbolism in Chinese Popular Art*. Trans. Spaulding, E. A. New York: Weatherhill.
- Chen, V. F. (1998). *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Architecture*. Vol. 5. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet.
- Kohl, D. G. (1984). *Chinese Architecture in the Straits Settlements and Western Malaya: Temples, Kongsis and Houses*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd.
- Lee, K. L. (1988). *The Singapore House, 1819-1942*. Singapore: Times Edition.
- Pan, L. (ed.) (1998). *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*. Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre, Archipelago Press.
- Piyadasa, R. (1993). Impact of Nyonya Baroque on Shophouse Form. *New Straits Times*. 6 Mar. 1993, Business Times, p. 20.
- Williams, C. A. S. (1976). *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism & Art Motives*. 3rd Revised Ed. 1931. New York: Dover Pub.