

CHINESE HOUSES

of Southeast Asia

The Eclectic Architecture of
Sojourners and Settlers

Ronald G. Knapp

Photographs by A. Chester Ong

Foreword by Wang Gungwu







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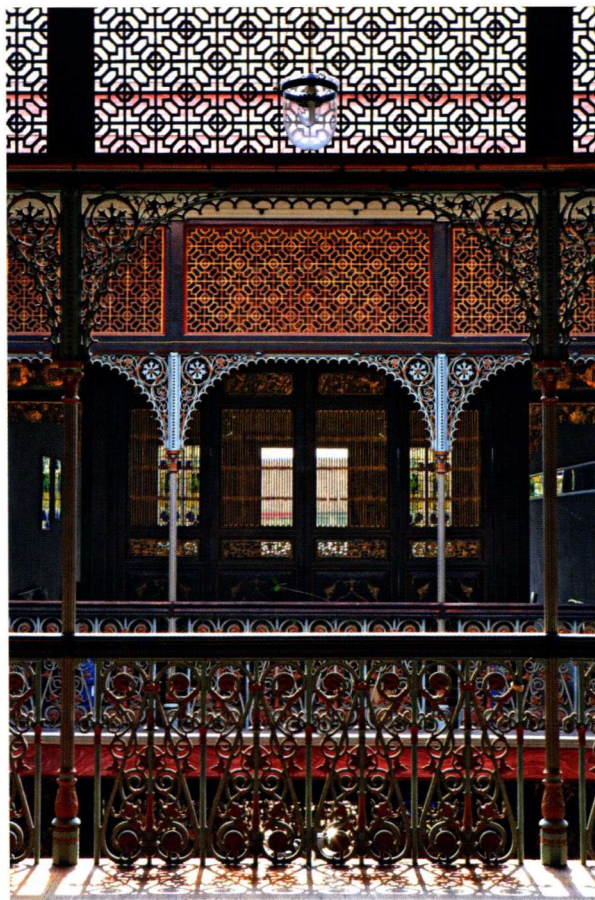
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A FEAST OF COLORS AND DESIGNS

I do not know when professional architects of Chinese descent first began to design residences in Southeast Asia, or when their work began to change the built environment away from what was indigenous or traditionally Chinese. The buildings described in this book predate the rise of their profession and reflect the times when sojourners were beginning to transform themselves into settlers and could still exercise their personal choices.

The illuminating text and beautiful photographs also bring back memories of the numerous homes in the region that I have lived in. The first home I remember was a standard public works residence built for junior civil servants in the Malay state of Perak, a state that the British claimed to “protect” on the Malay Peninsula. This was in Ipoh, the capital of Kinta, one of the richest tin mining valleys in the world and where many wealthy Chinese built their mansions. Unlike their fine homes, our small house was inspired mainly by Malay designs and was built on short stilts not more than four feet above the ground. The most striking feature was the covered corridor that connected it to the kitchen and servants’ quarters at the back of the house, some 20 yards away.

My family went on to live in houses built by the Chinese themselves. In Ipoh, the Chinese who moved up the social scale from unskilled mining and plantation laborers preferred to live in rows of shophouses beside the main streets. We had our share of living in several of these. Away from towns, there were those who followed Malay practice and built their houses on stilts. But, when they were ready to build their family homes, mostly on the edge of town, they turned to models of the traditional homes they admired in China. They also noted the work of European architects and adapted their newer homes to the need to appear fashionable.

We had the chance to live with one such upwardly mobile family and saw them transform a large Malay-type house into a new mansion. What struck me most was, the richer our host became, the more the Malay features about his house were replaced by things and shapes that were markedly Chinese or European. The overlap of Chinese ethnicity and Western modernity quickly edged out much of what was indigenous to the tropical environment.

Later, when I began to meet Southeast Asian Chinese trained in Britain and elsewhere in the West to be professional architects, I became conscious of how instinctively eclectic my host in Ipoh had been in the choices he made for his extended home. Whether in its external structure, the use of interior space, the adornments on the roof, the plan of the garden, or the selection of furniture for the public and private rooms, there was dissonance in the midst of elegance accompanied by several corners of splendid harmony. By that time, I realized that many other newly rich Chinese also displayed varying degrees of eccentric individuality that made their residences unforgettable.

Today, cautious public planners and venturesome private architects vie for the attention of new rich Chinese in every urban center. There is better appreciation of indigenous artistry, and the mixtures they offer are less whimsical and contrived. There is also brilliance surrounded by mediocrity. But overall the effect is one of confusion that the competing styles do little to minimize. It would appear that we need time to weed out the unmemorable so that, decades from now, the best of them that survive will be lovingly studied by someone like Ronald Knapp.

The houses described in this book represent some of the finest and best preserved or restored in Southeast Asia. I have visited most of those in Malaysia and Singapore and a few others in Jakarta, Semarang, Bangkok, and Manila. But Ronald Knapp has examined all of them closely. His sensitive and meticulous descriptions have opened my eyes to points of transmission and adaptation that I had missed. Altogether, the book provides a feast of colors and designs that appeals both to my interest in their histories and to my suppressed desire to have a family home of my own.

In particular, how he has described the mix of convention, sacral loyalty, and keeping up with the times captures the many layers of emotions that most sojourning Chinese experienced when they decided to settle down. By doing that, the author has opened new doors to all of us who are fascinated with the plurality of Southeast Asia. He has also enabled new generations of Chinese overseas to savor some of the delights in the lives of their transplanted ancestors.

Wang Gungwu

National University of Singapore

PART ONE

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SOJOURNERS AND SETTLERS





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贈朝議大夫
誥太恭人
贈奉直大夫
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THE ARCHITECTURE OF SOJOURNERS AND SETTLERS

Migration has been a recurring theme throughout Chinese history, continuing to the present at significant levels. The dynamic relationship among push and pull factors has long motivated both the destitute as well as the adventurous in China's villages and towns to uproot themselves in order to move to locations within China and throughout the world in search of opportunities. Settling on a new place to live by building a home, which Chinese called *dingju*, has always resulted from a complex combination of individual resolve, cultural awareness, and financial resources. *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia* examines the products of these decisions and actions, the surviving eclectic residences of Chinese immigrant pioneers and many of their descendants who, for the most part, flourished in their new homelands while living in dwellings reminiscent of those in China. This book presents the eclectic nature of their residences in terms of style, space, and materials. A companion volume will focus on the full range of objects enjoyed by Peranakan families within their architectural spaces or settings—the rooms—of their terrace houses, bungalows, and mansions as well as the layers of ornamentation around and about these residences. It is clear that these families were proud of their Chinese heritage.

The maintenance of that which is familiar while adapting to new circumstances is a recurring theme in Chinese history. The pushing out from core areas into frontier zones, indeed the sinicization of both landscapes and indigenous peoples, is a dominant part of China's historical narrative. While complete families and whole villages in China sometimes migrated without ever going back to their home villages, there also was a tradition of sojourning in which fathers and/or sons left with the expectation of only a temporary stay away before returning home. In Chinese history, merchants and financiers from the Huizhou and Shanxi areas, especially, epitomize the concept of sojourning. The resigned sentiments of this concept for a sojourning merchant and dutiful household head from Huizhou can be sensed in the note: "Those like us leave our villages and towns, leave our wives and blood relations, to travel thousands of miles. And for what? For no other purpose but to support our families" (Berliner, 2003: 5). Like those from Huizhou and Shanxi, traders, peasants, and coolies from



the southeast coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong sojourning and settled in far-flung places, including Southeast Asia.

Reified by scholars as "mobility strategies," sojourning, whether in metropolitan regions of China itself or to a distant outpost in Southeast Asia, was for most traditional families a well thought out and logical traditional practice that heightened aspirations, providing enterprising families with opportunities for diversifying sources of income and acquiring wealth. Sojourning took many forms. In the fifty years from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, for example, some 25 million peasants from the densely populated North China plain provinces of Hebei and Shandong traveled seasonally to the relatively sparsely populated areas of Manchuria in order to open up for cultivation what were essentially virgin lands. They were called "swallows" or *yan* by their kinfolk because of the seasonal rhythm of their sojourn (Gottschang and Lary, 2000: 1). G. William Skinner, in his presentation of mobility strategies in late imperial China, provides a contemporaneous description of the Hu family's approach to sojourning that involved not only trade in salt and porcelain but also finance and foreign trade (1976: 345):

Previous pages The streetside entry to the Kee Ancestral manor, Sungai Bakap, Malaysia, in the early twentieth century.

Opposite This engraving shows the various types of boats plying the waters along the north coast of Java. Clockwise: Javanese *prahu*; Chinese junk; coastal fishing boat; and Javanese junk.

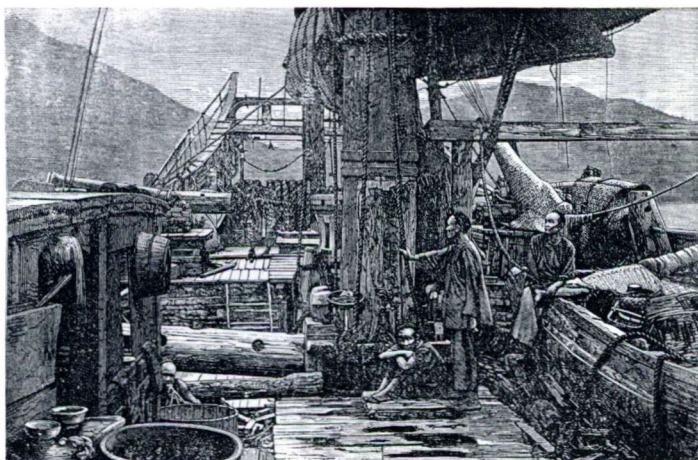
Below Topside activity on a Chinese junk as depicted in a circa 1880 engraving.

Right Although this colorful view of a Fujianese junk is off the coast of Nagasaki, Japan, similar vessels plied the routes throughout the Nanyang.

When a family in our region has two or more sons, only one stays home to till the fields. The others are sent out to some relative or friend doing business in some distant city. Equipped with straw sandals, an umbrella and a bag with some food, the boy sets out on the journey to a place in Chekiang [Zhejiang] or Kiangsi [Jiangxi], where a kind relative or friend of the family will take him into his shop as an apprentice. He is about 14 years old at this time. He has to serve an apprenticeship of three years without pay, but with free board and lodging. Then he is given a vacation of three months to visit his family, who in the meantime have arranged his marriage for him. When he returns to his master he leaves his wife in his old home. Every three years he is allowed a three months' vacation with pay which he spends at home.

This strategy to acquire wealth, which was pursued by territorially based lineage systems in inland China, operated as well in the coastal villages and towns of southern Fujian, and later in Guangdong. In this coastal region, embayed river ports and their hinterlands were the principal homelands for peasants, laborers, and traders who set sail in junks along the coasts and across the seas into what was for some *terra incognita*, but for many others parts of well-known trading networks.

Beyond the borders of imperial China, no area of the world experienced more sustained contact with Chinese or in-migration of Chinese over a longer period of time than the region referred to today as Southeast Asia, and which the Chinese have historically called the Nanyang or Southern Seas. Characterized by landmasses, peninsulas, and islands of many sizes, this is a region of great complexity and vast expanses, yet significant interdependence. Most of the maps of Southeast Asia show the region as a pendulous outlier of mainland Asia at a substantial distance from both China and India. Yet, from a Chinese



perspective, the Nanyang was a sea-based region where even the most distant islands could be reached by sailing along well-known and charted routes. The maritime system within which Chinese coastal traders operated actually spanned an area greater than that of the Mediterranean Sea. Including both the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the immense maritime region stretched 5000 kilometers from Korea and Japan in the north to the Malay Archipelago in the south, and 1800 kilometers from coastal China eastward, beyond Taiwan, to the Philippines. Perhaps as many as 80 percent of the 35 million who trace Chinese ancestry and live beyond the political boundaries of China reside today in the crossroads of Southeast Asia.

Arab, Indian, Japanese, and Chinese merchants arrived in the regional trading ports of Southeast Asia more than a thousand years before the appearance of the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and English. Raw and processed silk was carried from China along the Maritime Silk Road westward through the Indian Ocean where it was exchanged for exotic items from Europe. Among the earliest concrete evidence of the direct trade between China and the western Indian Ocean was a ninth-century Arab or Indian shipwreck filled with Chinese ceramics that was excavated in 1998–9 off Beitung Island between Sumatra and Borneo (Flecker, 2001: 335ff). Moreover, beginning in the eighth century, residential quarters called *fanfang* for foreign traders from Western Asia were located in Chinese port cities, including Guangzhou (Canton) in Guangdong and Quanzhou (Zaytun) in Fujian as well as farther north in Ningbo (Mingzhou) and Hangzhou in Zhejiang. Exotic commodities such as ivory tusks, gold, silver, pearls, sandalwood, kingfishers' feathers, pepper, cinnabar, amber, and ambergris, among many other precious goods, found their way to China from the distant lands via the southern sea trade.

In time, the politics within the Southeast Asia region increasingly were brought within the Chinese tribute system that peaked during the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century. Zheng He, the Muslim



Left The South China Sea as well as the East China Sea to its north had well-charted and well-traveled routes—a veritable maritime system of trade routes—that linked small and large ports across a vast region.

commodities known to peripatetic Chinese during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was in this way that Chinese sojourners and settlers populated distant lands in increasing numbers as both sojourners and settlers. Their tales of prospects and opportunities no doubt infiltrated the outlooks and hopes of others in their home village.

The greatest flow of Chinese migrants by sea occurred from the mid-eighteenth century through the early twentieth century. While Wang Gungwu describes four overlapping out-migration patterns from southern China to Southeast Asia, only two will be discussed (1991: 4–12). *Huashang*, Chinese traders/merchants/artisans, comprised the dominant and longest lasting pattern. *Huashang* during the early periods generally settled down and married local women even when they had a wife in China. As their businesses became more profitable, other family members might leave China and join them. Some *Huashang* returned to China, according to the rhythm of trade, chose a spouse, and then maintained separate households for their different families. The *Huashang* type of migration pattern was employed especially by Hokkien migrants from southern Fujian to the Philippines, Java, and Japan; the Hakka on the island of Borneo; and those originating in the Chaozhou region of northeastern Guangdong province. It is both a fact and a curiosity that the *Huashang* pattern of migration had been practiced for many centuries *within* China.

Huagong were Chinese contract workers who arrived between the 1850s and the 1920s, usually as sojourners who intended to earn money and then return to their home villages to live out their remaining days. Unskilled contract workers were usually referred to as coolies, an English loanword whose roots reside in many Asian languages, including the Hindi word for laborer, *qūlī*, and the Chinese term *kuli*, meaning “bitter work.” *Huagong* especially played important roles in the opening up of rubber and palm plantations in Sumatra as well as tin mines and plantations along the Malay Peninsula. Substantial numbers of Chinese contract workers/coolies or *Huagong* also migrated to North America and Australia where they worked as laborers in mining enterprises and in railway construction. As opportunities arose, some of those who arrived as coolies or traders eventually became storekeepers or artisans, while others became farmers or fishermen. Patterns of settlement and return, living and working, varied from period to period. Indeed, as described by Anthony Reid, “It is the curious reversals of the flow southward, periodically running evenly, occasionally gushing, sometimes tightly shut, more often dripping like a leaking tap, that provide the rhythm behind the historical interaction of China and Southeast Asia” (2001: 15). While many other broad and complex topics—the history of migration, reputed business acumen and entrepreneurship, acculturation and assimilation, as well as tortuous issues relating to loyalty and nationality—are important and worthy of study, they will not be explored in this book.

Chinese mariner who carried out seven fabled expeditions between 1405 and 1433, traversed the region, reaching some forty destinations that stretched from the Horn of Africa eastward along the southern, southeastern, and eastern shores of Asia. Over the following centuries, many of the ports visited by Zheng He became hubs for Chinese trading networks as well as sites for Chinese settlement and development. Even today, many of these places recall in their historical narratives the visits by Zheng He six centuries earlier.

Sometimes sojourning resulted simply because Chinese traders were forced to stay for many months at a time at distant emporia waiting for the seasonal shifting of the monsoon winds. Indeed, over the centuries, the seasonal reversal of monsoonal winds was critical in establishing the trade patterns of Chinese traders. From September to April, the winds blew from the northeast to southwest carrying sailing ships from China southward. From May to September, the flow was reversed with the arrival of the southwest monsoon. Following these same routes, Arab traders took as long as two years for a round trip to China. From the fifth to the twelfth century, “the skippers trusted—when venturing out of the sight of land, to the regularity of the monsoons and steered solely by the sun, moon and stars, taking presumably soundings as frequently as possible. From other sources we learn that it was customary on ships which sailed out of sight of land to keep pigeons on board, by which they used to send messages to land” (Hirth and Rockhill, 1911: 28). By the twelfth century, maritime navigation improved with the introduction of a “wet compass” or *yeti luojing*, a magnetic piece of metal floating in a shallow bowl of water. Zhao Rukua, also known as Chau Ju-kua, a customs inspector in Quanzhou during the Song dynasty, chronicled in his book *Zhufan Zhi* (Records of the Various Barbarous Peoples) the places and

Below Old gravestones, such as these found along the sprawling slopes of Bukit Cina (Chinese Hill) in Malacca, Malaysia, which is the largest Chinese cemetery outside China, indicate the name of the ancestral village of the deceased.

Descendants of both *Huashang* and *Huagong* are found today throughout the countries of Southeast Asia where popular lore as well as the memories of descendant families trumpet tales of once penniless males who came to “settle down and bring up local families” (Wang Gungwu, 1991: 5). Through what is called chain or serial migration, pioneers arrived first, then sent information about new opportunities to those back home, which then spurred additional migration from their home villages. The ongoing arrival of related individuals helped maintain connections between the original homeland and new locations. Indeed, for many, their hearts remained back in China, and they saw themselves as Chinese in a foreign land. Yet, circumstances often meant that dreams of returning home were thwarted, and sojourners became settlers, forced to “bear hardship and endure hard work,” *chiku nailao*, as the common phrase ruefully states it, dashing their prospects of “a glorious homecoming in splendid robes,” *yijin huanxiang*, also *yijin ronggui*, as someone who had made off well and could have a proud homecoming. To do otherwise, according to Ta Chen, “his unrecognized distinctions might be compared with a gorgeous costume worn by its proud owner through the streets on a dark night” (1940: 109).

While this book highlights the homes of Chinese who had done reasonably well in the places they ventured to, it is important to keep in mind that most Chinese and their descendants lived and continue to live in much more modest homes in these places. Significant numbers of arrivals and their descendants, of course, never broke the debilitating chains of poverty, living on as an underprivileged underclass, the hard-working but powerless who dreamed of a better future that was never realized. Coolies, peasant laborers, rickshaw pullers, trishaw pedalers, pirates, fisherfolk, even prostitutes and slaves, lived in the back alleys, on the upper floors of commercial establishments, and on sampans along the banks of streams without ever “settling down” or *dingju* (cf Warren, 1981, 1986, 1993, 2008). Voiceless in life, they left illegible traces of their subsistence lives.



Homelands in China

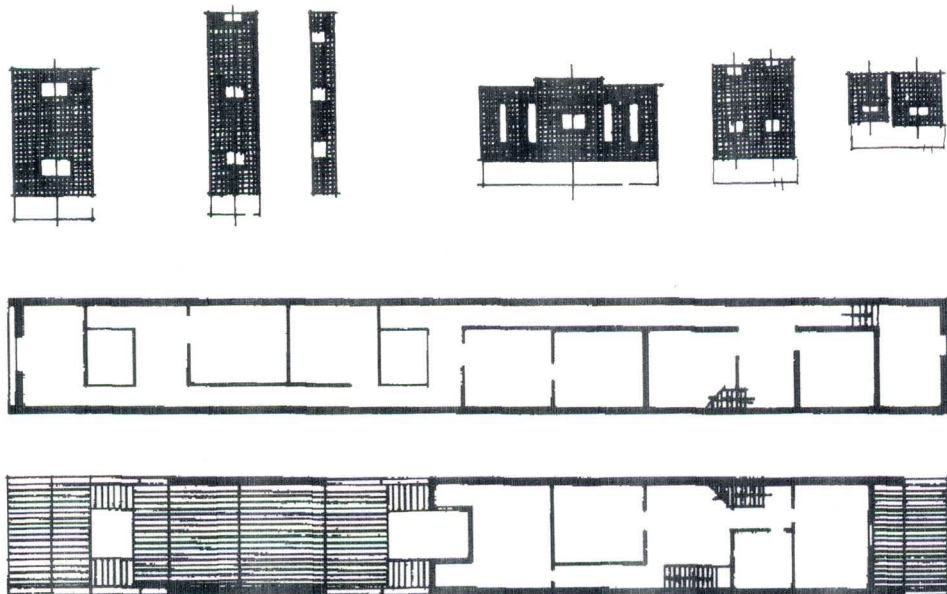
While it is common for outsiders to describe migrants from China in terms of the province of their origin, most migrants, in fact, traditionally identified home as a smaller subdivision, as a county or village. In southeastern China, river basins and coastal lowlands, circumscribed by surrounding hills, mountains, and the ocean, formed well-understood units of local culture and identity, shared cultural traits that were affirmed with the population speaking a common dialect. For Chinese, the awareness of origins in terms of a native place has traditionally been as significant as consciousness of the connections to forebears via their surname and lineage. Indeed, old gravestones and ancestral tablets memorialize place-based identity even when the deceased was many generations removed from the family's homeland. Children and grandchildren born in an adopted homeland, moreover, inherit the native place of their immigrant parents and grandparents. Native-place associations, called *tongxiang hui*, and lineage or clan associations, *tongxing hui*, traditionally served as ready reminders of the two most meaningful relationships Chinese individuals had with their broader world. The place-name origins of migrants thus signify more than a link to an administrative division, more than a reference to a mere location. Rather, native places connote a shared cultural context that clearly separates one migrant group from another.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, a majority of the emigrants from China originated from Fujian, a province with a rugged coastline and a tradition of building boats for fishing and seafaring. The encyclopedic *Shan Hai jing* (Classic of Mountains and Seas), an eclectic two-millennia-old compendium of the known world, states: “Fujian exists in the sea with mountains to the north and west,” *Min zai haizhong, qi xibei you shan*. With limited arable land to support a growing population, the Fujianese turned to the neighboring sea, using small boats for fishing and seagoing junks for distant trade to the Nanyang where they exchanged manufactured wares for food staples. “The fields are few but the sea is vast; so men have made fields from the sea” is how an 1839 gazetteer from Fujian's port city of Xiamen viewed the maritime opportunities afforded its struggling population during the last century of the Qing dynasty (Cushman, 1993: iii).

Referred to collectively as Hokkien, the local pronunciation of the place-name Fujian, the homelands of migrants can be readily subdivided in terms of at least three main dialects found in areas to the south of the Min River in this complex and fragmented province. Called Minnan or “south of the Min River” dialects, each is a variant of the others and is centered on one of the area's three major ports: Quanzhou, Xiamen, and Zhangzhou. Although the three dialects are mutually intelligible to some degree, and are spoken in geographic locations that are relatively near to one another, the speakers of these dialects traditionally have

Above right These simple plans reveal the characteristic forms of residences found throughout Fujian. The white areas indicate the variety of *tianjing*, skywells that open up the buildings to air, light, and water.

Center and bottom right Elongated two-storey urban residences in Guangdong include multiple skywells, narrow corridors, steep stairs, and stacked rooms.



seen themselves as belonging to distinct local cultures with dissimilar mores. In neighboring Guangdong province, another source region for significant numbers of migrants to the Nanyang, are other dialect-based communities: Chaozhou (Teochew, also Teochiu) and Hainan hua (Hainanese), which are also in the family of Minnan dialects, as well as Kejia (Hakka) and, farther west, those who speak Guangdong hua (Cantonese). One characteristic shared by all of these groups is that they occupy areas either adjacent to or connected by short rivers reaching the Taiwan Strait that connects the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

Along the Fujian–Guangdong coast, there are countless areas that are known in the vernacular as *qiaoxiang*, literally “home township of persons living abroad.” The term *qiaoxiang* was used in the nineteenth century to apply not only to sojourners, temporary residents who were abroad, but also to those who had been away for generations. Those Chinese who left China were referred to as *Huaqiao*, a capacious term often translated as “overseas Chinese,” but essentially meaning “Chinese living abroad.” “Overseas Chinese” itself historically has been a descriptor of considerable elasticity, applying not only to those temporarily abroad but also to those who are Chinese by ethnicity but have no actual connection with China. *Guiqiao*, indicating those Chinese who returned from abroad, and *qiaojuan*, indicating the dependants of Chinese who are abroad, are expressions still heard today. *Qiaoxiang*, as “emigrant communities,” traditionally were bound by social, economic, and psychological bonds in which emigration became a fundamental and ongoing aspect of country life. While poverty and strife may have induced earlier out-migration, over time migration chains create a tradition of going abroad that propels outward movement. In some ways, overseas sites arose as outposts of the *qiaoxiang* itself, linked to it by back and forth movements of people and remittances of funds to sustain those left behind. Indeed, as Lynn Pan reminds us, “emigrant communities are not moribund. The men might be gone but, collectively and cumulatively, they send plenty of money back. Many home societies have a look of prosperity about them, with opulent modern houses paid for with remittances by emigrants who have made good abroad” (2006: 30).

As later chapters will reveal, individual *qiaoxiang* are linked with specific locations in Southeast Asia, indeed throughout the world. Emigrants from the Siyi or Four Districts of Guangdong province on the west side of the Pearl River, for example, favored migrating to the goldfields and railroad construction opportunities in California. Farther

east and clustered around the port of Shantou, once known in English as Swatow, those who spoke the Chaozhou dialect sailed to Siam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Kejia or Hakka from the uplands beyond Shantou, and accessible to it via the Han River, spread themselves widely. The area between Xiamen and Quanzhou, more than other areas in Fujian, fed the migrant streams throughout Southeast Asia. Jinjiang, once a county-level administrative area just to the south of the port of Quanzhou, not only looms large as the homeland of countless migrants throughout Asia, it is the ancestral home of over 90 percent of those of Chinese descent in the Philippines. Each of these distinct *qiaoxiang* areas is noted for its own variant forms of vernacular architecture, which explains in at least a limited sense many of the differences in the residences built by migrants in their adopted places of residence. The section below highlights some of the common features among these vernacular traditions, while later chapters will reveal some of the differences.

Old Homes Along China's Coast

Chinese dwellings throughout the country share a range of common elements even as it is clear that there are striking regional, even sub-regional, architectural styles. Given China's vast extent, approximately the size of the United States and twice that of Europe, it should not be surprising that there are variations to basic patterns that have arisen as practical responses to climatic, cultural, and other factors. While there is no single building form that can be called “a Chinese house,” there are shared elements in both the spatial composition and building structure of both small and grand homes throughout the country. In addition, Chinese builders have a long history of environmental awareness in selecting sites to maximize or evade sunlight, capture prevailing winds, avoid cold winds, facilitate drainage, and collect rainwater. Details of these similarities and differences are considered at length in some of my other books (Knapp, 2000; 2005).

Adjacent open and enclosed spaces are axiomatic features in Chinese architecture, whether the structure is a palace, temple, or residence. Usually referred to in English as “courtyards” and in Chinese as *yuanzi*, open spaces vary in form and dimension throughout China and have a history that goes back at least 3,000 years. Courtyards emerged first in northern China and then diffused in variant forms as Chinese migrants moved from region to region over the centuries. The complementarity