

# GOLD

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## **MIGRANCY AND ARCHITECTURE: THE NUM PON SOON SOCIETY BUILDING IN MELBOURNE CHINATOWN, THE SEE YUP TEMPLE IN SOUTH MELBOURNE AND THE KAIPING DIAOLOU IN CHINA AS CASE STUDIES**

*After the discovery of gold in 1851, the Chinese started to arrive in Victoria in large numbers. Most of them came from southern provinces in China. Due to language barriers and cultural differences, it was difficult for them to integrate into mainstream society, resulting in an ethnic enclave along Melbourne's Little Bourke Street, which served as a temporary staging spot on the journey to the goldfields. In order to foster mutual assistance among the Chinese, district associations were formed, including the Sam Yup Society (also known as the Num Pon Soon Society) in the 1850s and the See Yup Society in 1854. They played an important role among early Chinese migrants and provided places for worship and social interaction, such as the Num Pon Soon Society Building in Melbourne's Chinatown and the See Yup Temple in South Melbourne. Both were designed by Western architects with the incorporation of Chinese ornamentation.*

*With the decline of gold mining in Victoria and the implementation of discriminative regulations under the White Australia Policy, the majority of Chinese migrants returned to their homeland and built their houses there. Among them, the Kaiping Diaolou have distinctive appearances with exotic architectural forms and styles. This paper explores the relationship between migrancy and architecture through selected case studies.*

## Background

The Gold Discovery Committee officially announced the discovery of gold in Victoria on 16 July 1851.<sup>1</sup> This attracted Chinese gold seekers to arrive in Melbourne in considerable numbers. The Chinese population was 10,000 in early 1855 and reached a peak of over 40,000 in 1859.<sup>2</sup> Most of the Chinese gold seekers came from the southern province of Guangdong in China.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese diaspora was mainly due to social unrest and upheaval in China. The first Anglo-Chinese War or the so-called the First Opium War broke out in 1839-42, resulting in the Treaty of Nanking, signed in 1842 (the first unequal treaty between China and foreign powers) and the weakening of the ability of the Qing Dynasty to maintain the social order in Guangdong area against local uprisings.<sup>4</sup> The triple increase in the Chinese population within a hundred years from 1741 to 1841 and severe famines accelerated the poverty of farmers and miseries for the Chinese people.<sup>5</sup> The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and its failure caused a further wave of migration from China.<sup>6</sup>

Once Chinese gold seekers arrived, it was common for them to live in close proximity to one another due to language barriers and cultural differences. They gathered along Melbourne's Little Bourke Street, which was a lower rental area and it served as a temporary staging post for their subsequent journey to goldfields. The majority were Cantonese, coming from the southern province of Guangdong in China; so "one-half of Little Bourke Street" was regarded as "not Melbourne but China".<sup>7</sup>

The continual existence of the Melbourne's Chinatown along Little Bourke Street from the early Gold Rush period to nowadays shows its resilience. One of the reasons is due to the strong social bonding and mutual assistance among Chinese migrants through district associations and societies, including the Sam Yup Society (later renamed as the Num Pon Soon Society) in the 1850s and the See Yup Society established in 1854.<sup>8</sup> Both Sam Yup (or Num Pon Soon) and See Yup are places in Guangdong, in which Sam Yup are the former counties of Nanhai, Panyu, and Shunde; whereas See Yup (sometimes spelled Sze Yap and variants) refers to the four former counties: Kaiping, Enping, Taishan, and Xinhui. District associations played an important role among early Chinese migrants and organized regular events in their clubhouses on Little Bourke Street, such as the Num Pon Soon Society Building.

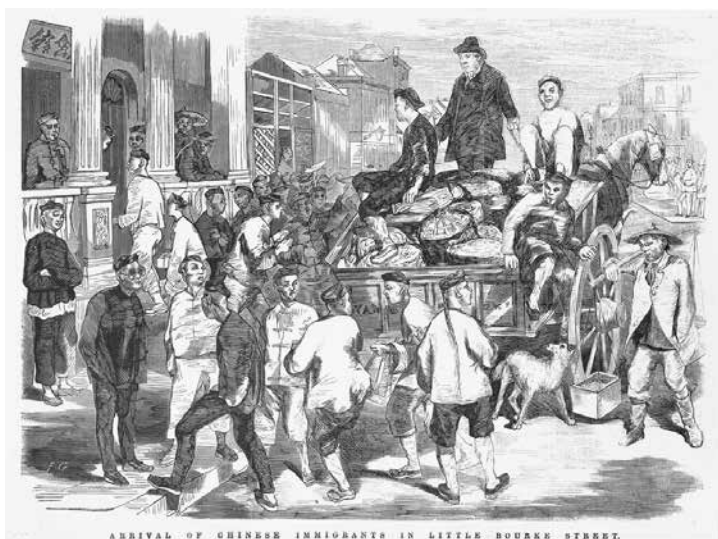


FIGURE 1

### The Num Pon Soon Society Building in Melbourne Chinatown

The Num Pon Soon Society Building built in 1860-1 is the earliest surviving Chinese community building in Victoria.<sup>9</sup> The original name of this building was “Chinese Exchange” and it served as a lodging house for providing accommodation for Chinese people coming from the Sam Yup area in Guangdong.<sup>10</sup> The arrival of Chinese migrants in front of the Num Pon Soon Society Building was vividly illustrated by a wood engraving published in 1866.<sup>11</sup> (Figure 1) The building was apparently an iconic landmark in this ethnic enclave at that time.

The Num Pon Soon Society Building also houses the earliest surviving Chinese ancestors’ shrine in Australia.<sup>12</sup> From religious, social and cultural perspectives, this building has played important roles in the Chinese community as a meeting place and a place of worship, fostering the sense of attachment to the place among Chinese sojourners.<sup>13</sup>

The erection of the Num Pon Soon Society Building was supported by donations and a substantial portion was contributed by the Malaysian Chinese, Low Kong Meng (1831-1888). Kong Meng arrived in Melbourne in 1853 and rapidly became a pre-eminent merchant with a successful trade business.<sup>14</sup> Being one of the wealthiest persons in Victoria, Kong Meng was a community leader helping other Chinese people, and at the same time, was one of the most Westernized Chinese, living as an affluent upper bourgeoisie and speaking fluent English and French apart from Cantonese and Malay.<sup>15</sup> Since Kong Meng was the president of the Sam Yup Society and a major advocator for erecting the Num Pon Soon Society Building, his influence on the building design was inevitable.

The Num Pon Soon Society Building was designed by the architectural firm, Knight and Kerr. John George Knight (1824-1892) and Peter Kerr (1820-1912) were appointed to design Parliament House, Melbourne (1856-1892), while Knight was the first president of the Victorian Institute of Architects (VIA) from 1856 to 1861.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, the most reputable architects at that time were appointed to design the Num Pon Soon Society Building, reflecting the aspirational impetus in the society and the importance of this building.

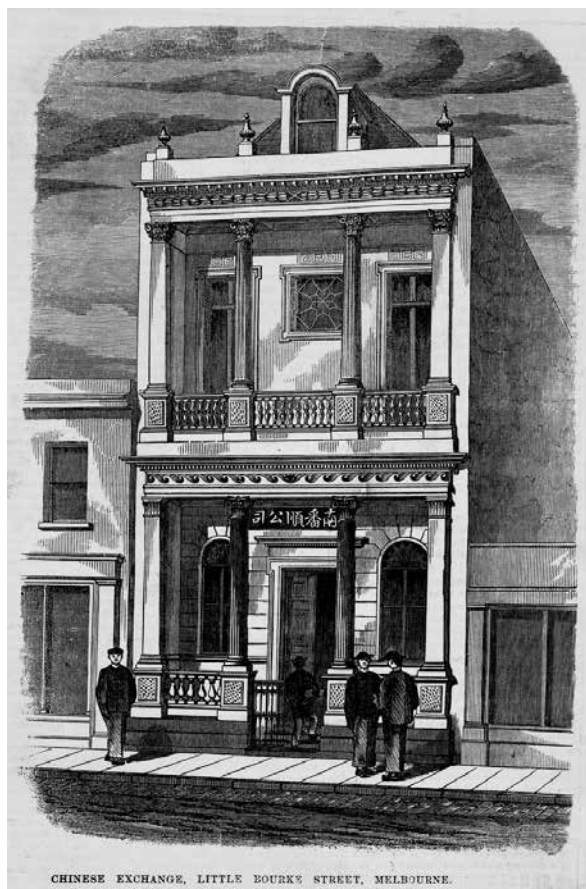


FIGURE 2 Num Pon Soon Society Building (1863)



FIGURES. 3-5 Composite order & pedestals

Since Knight and Kerr were famous for designing Parliament House in the Roman Revival Style, the Num Pon Soon Society Building, similarly, embodies various classical details. The facade facing Little Bourke Street was symmetrically arranged with a central main entrance and a small porch in front. (Figure 2) Columns had the same pedestals as Parliament House. (Figure 5) The two outer columns were square and the two middle columns were round, tapered, and fluted. (Figures 3 and 4) Apart from the two outer columns on the ground floor, other columns used the Composite order, combining the volutes of the Ionic order capital with the acanthus leaves of the Corinthian order.

Although the two-storey Num Pon Soon Society Building was designed by a Western architectural firm, it is “a fascinating blend of formal classicism with Chinese detail and function”.<sup>17</sup> A significant feature was a timber and gilt panel inscribed with Chinese characters originally placed above the main entrance facing the porch. Despite the subsequent major alteration of enclosing the porch and converting the ground floor function to a gift shop (Figure 6), two timber and gilt panels with Chinese characters are still hanging on the facade, one on the upper floor above



FIGURE 6 Num Pon Soon Society Building (2016)



FIGURES 7 & 8 Panels with Chinese characters

(reading from right to left) Above: Num Pon Soon Society Below: Num Pon Soon



FIGURE 9 “Num Pon Soon” on the pediment



FIGURE 10 Suspended timber-framed etched glass lanterns



FIGURE 11 Flower-pattern central glass window

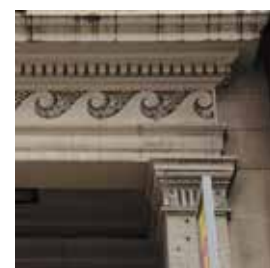


FIGURE 12 Wave pattern on the frieze of the entablature

the central window and one on the lower floor above the redirected entrance. (Figures 7 and 8) The name of 'Num Pon Soon' is also inscribed on the pediment above the cornice. (Figure 9) Chinese ornamentation has also been incorporated; including suspended timber-framed etched glass lanterns at the loggia (Figure 10), flower-pattern central glass window on the upper floor (Figure 11), and the wave pattern on the frieze of the entablature between the two floors. (Figure 12)

The Num Pon Soon Society Building is a salient example of architectural fusion in relation to migrancy. After substantial modification of the major facade compared with the original design, the building still exemplifies a creative combination of Western Classical details and oriental design treatment. Since the most reputable local architectural firm, Knight and Kerr was employed by the Num Pon Soon Society, this building served as an early experiment in cross-cultural interchange.

### The See Yup Temple in South Melbourne

Compared with the Num Pon Soon Society Building completed in 1861, the existing See Yup Temple in South Melbourne (or Emerald Hill) was built in 1866. However, there was an earlier Chinese timber temple or joss house on the same site in 1856:

The building, which may be called the only pagan place of worship in Victoria, is situated some distance beyond the Orphan Asylum at Emerald Hill, and is a wooden edifice some 60 or 70 feet long by about 85 in width. It has two stories, the lower one being apparently the one devoted to religious ceremonies. The upper story is surrounded by a gallery and lighted from the roof. This is evidently a sort of joss house or assembly hall. The whole interior is painted and ornamented in the Chinese style and hung round with banners.<sup>18</sup>

After demolishing the former timber temple, the current See Yup Temple was opened on 27 August 1866 as recorded by *The Age*:

Near the southern extremity of Clarendon Street, on turning down a narrow lane, at the left-hand side, may be seen a building of unusual appearance, being partly European and partly Chinese in its style of architecture. It is the new joss house, or temple, devoted to the worship of the deity patronised by a large proportion of the Chinese race. The erection consists of a centre hall and two wings, the central hall being the main place of worship, the door of which opens directly into the sanctum of their peculiar rites.<sup>19</sup>



FIGURE13 See Yup Temple (1869-1873)

The See Yup Temple was funded by donations from the members of the See Yup Society and was the work of the architect, George Wharton.<sup>20</sup> The building was symmetrical with Classical details, having a central main entrance and a small porch in front. Based on the current site observation, the design of the column capitals is a variant of the Corinthian order. (Figure 14) The three arches on the ground floor are supported by two circular columns in the middle and two outer square columns, the same arrangement as the Num Pon Soon Building. On the upper floor, the three



FIGURE 14 Column capital



FIGURE 15 Pilaster on the upper level



FIGURE 16 Keystone of the arch



FIGURE 17 Fleur-de-lis on the spandrel



FIGURE 18



FIGURE 19 Decorative motif at the eave corner

arches are completed by two engaged columns in the middle instead. (Figure 15) Differing from the Num Pon Soon Society Building, the circular columns here are neither tapered nor fluted. Keystones are selectively positioned for the three arches below and the central arch above. (Figure 16) Decorative fleur-de-lis are shown on the spandrels between the arches on the ground floor and above the roof balustrade in the middle. (Figures 17 and 18)



Fig. 20: Panel with Chinese characters



Fig. 21: Panels with Chinese characters

(reading from right to left) See Yup Society



Fig. 22: Lion statue at the entrance



Fig. 23: Lion and fish statues on the roof balustrade

(right) The spirit of righteousness pervades the universe

(left) Honour and charity transcend past and present

Like the Num Pon Soon Society Building, the See Yup Temple has a distinctive combination of Western architectural style with Chinese ornamentation. Timber panels with inscribed Chinese characters are hanging on the main façade.<sup>21</sup> (Figures 20 and 21) Besides, granite guardian lion statues seated on pedestals are located at the entrance (Fig. 22), while smaller lion and fish statues are placed on the roof balustrade. (Figure 23)

Despite the overall Western building envelope, the internal arrangement of the See Yup Temple is very similar to other traditional Chinese temples with statues and altars for worship. (Figure 24) It also houses tablets in commemoration of members who died from the early Gold Rush era to nowadays. (Figure 25) Besides religious and commemorative functions, the See Yup Temple is also a place for community activities and social events organized by the See Yup Society. Since its opening in 1866, the temple has never been closed and it still plays an important role with social, cultural, and historical significance.<sup>22</sup>



FIGURE 24 Statues and altars for worship



FIGURE 25 Commemoration of ancestors



Both the Num Pon Soon Society Building and the See Yup Temple were designed by Western architects integrating Chinese ornamentation and traditional functions. As important venues for the Chinese community with both Western classical details and oriental religious activities, these buildings might help cultivate in Chinese sojourners an open-minded attitude to embrace foreign culture.

***Kaiping Diaolou in China***

With the decline of gold mining in Victoria and the implementation of discriminative regulations under the White Australia Policy, it was difficult for Chinese to continue to stay in Australia. Under the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901, applicants were required to pass an English language test and were not allowed to bring their wives and children to Australia for family union.<sup>23</sup> Under such hostile conditions, the majority of Chinese sojourners preferred to return to China after making their fortune. Once they returned to their homeland in China, they often got married, set up their families, and built their houses there, enjoying a higher social status in their villages.

Among the houses built by returned Chinese sojourners, the *Kaiping Diaolou* (also known as Kaiping watchtowers) in Kaiping, one of the See Yup areas, are distinctive in appearance. *Diaolou* has the literal meaning of a stone house and is commonly referred to as a watchtower or a fort.<sup>24</sup> Due to the poor social order and rampant bandits at that time, it was necessary for village houses to be designed with defensive ability, akin to medieval castles and fortresses in



FIGURES 26 & 27  
Mingshi Tower, Kaiping



FIGURES 28 & 29 Ruishi Tower, Kaiping

Europe, but on a much smaller scale. Instead of using bricks and timber, some *Kaiping Diaolou* were constructed with reinforced concrete. Besides the use of modern construction technology, some *diaolou* display a flamboyant fusion of both Chinese and Western structural and decorative forms.<sup>25</sup> Having the experience of living overseas, *diaolou* owners not only brought wealth, but also Western culture and architectural styles back to their villages.



FIGURE 30 The name of the Ruishi Tower in Chinese on the main facade



FIGURE 31 Altar with tablets in commemoration of ancestors, Mingshi Tower



FIGURE 32 Corner for religious practice, Ruishi Tower

As multi-storeyed defensive towers, *Kaiping Diaolou* generally have corner protruding turrets and small window openings for the lower portion with more elaborate roof treatment above. For example, the Mingshi Tower has a delicate pavilion at the top supported by columns of Ionic order and arch structure, but at the same time covered by traditional Chinese roof tiles. (Figures 26 and 27) Comparatively, the corner projecting turrets of the Ruishi Tower are more articulated with small domed roofs coherent with the continuous colonnade underneath wrapping around the top of the tower. (Figures 28 and 29)

Against the overall Western architectural elements of the *Kaiping Diaolou*, it is common for the Chinese name of the tower to be shown on the main façade. For the Ruishi Tower, the Chinese characters at the top were even written by the famous calligrapher, Master Tiechan, of the Liurong Temple in Guangzhou.<sup>26</sup> (Figure 30) This reflects the aspiration of owners to declare one's prestige by employing the best, which is analogous to the Num Pon Soon Building designed by the famous architectural firm, Knight and Kerr.

Besides external treatment, the interior of the *Kaiping Diaolou* can also reflect the cultural roots of the owner, especially the religious practice within the tower. In the Ruishi Tower, a corner is dedicated for offering joss sticks to the deity of the land (Figure 32); whereas in the Mingshi Tower, there is an altar on the top floor for housing tablets in commemoration of ancestors. (Figure 31) Having the altar on the highest level indicates the primordial importance of cultural traditions and the due respect for the ancestral origin of the whole family.

*Kaiping Diaolou* in general show an interesting combination of both Chinese and Western cultures. Such assimilation may sometimes be superficial on the level of imitation, but can express the creativity of returned Chinese sojourners, who tried to incorporate what they had seen abroad to their own houses and at the same time retain their own heritage and identity.

## Conclusion

Through discussion of the above four cases, there is a close relationship between migrancy and architecture. Due to the Gold Rush, Chinese gold seekers came to Australia. They drifted and de-territorialized, but subsequently re-territorialized the place by erecting buildings to serve the Chinese community.<sup>27</sup> Although the Num Pon Soon Society Building and the See Yup Temple were designed by Western architects with predominately Classical appearances, they intentionally incorporated Chinese ornamentation for performing as social, cultural and religious venues for the Chinese community. Likewise, after the return of Chinese sojourners to their homeland, the *Kaiping Diaolou* that

they owned exhibited imported architectural forms and styles, but the cultural core of their religious practice is still maintained. Under this two-way dialogue in Australia and China, Chinese sojourners seemed to act as cultural carriers fostering cross-cultural interchange. On the one hand, they were open-minded to embrace foreign culture and adopt Western architectural languages and forms; on the other hand, they were conscious of their own religious beliefs and family traditions.

### Glossary

Enping	恩平
Kaiping Diaolou (Kaiping Watchtowers)	開平碉樓
Low Kong Meng	劉光明/ 刘光明
Nanhai	南海
Num Pon Soon	南番順
Panyu	番禺
Sam Yup	三邑
See Yup	四邑
Shunde	順德
Taishan	台山
Xinhui	新會/ 新会

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