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The Visual Culture of Sinophone Modernism:

Aw Boon Haw's Cultural Entrepreneurialism and Early Twentieth-Century's Architectural Eclecticism

JIAT-HWEE CHANG

Abstract

Through the eclectic architecture of the three houses commissioned by the wealthy Singapore-based businessman Aw Boon Haw in Singapore and Hong Kong in the 1920s and 1930s, this article explores architecture as part of the multimedia visual culture that was deployed by Aw to promote himself, as well as advertise and sell products on a vast scale for his transnational pharmaceutical and media empires to multiethnic and multicultural audiences that spanned across Southeast and East Asia in the pre-World War II era. Using cultural entrepreneurship as a framework to analyse Aw's business empires and philanthropic work, this article shows how Aw strategically mobilised artists, designers and architects like Kwan Wai Nung, Tchang Ju Chi and Ho Kwong Yew to shape the emerging modern visual field and help him accumulate social, cultural and economic capital. The article also proposes that we go beyond our preoccupation with the Anglophone world to look at the cultural influences of the Sinophone world of East and Southeast Asia in the early 20th century in order to understand how modern art and design tendencies might have circulated and translated transnationally to Singapore.

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Current scholarship on Southeast Asia's architecture history tend to frame the early 20th century as a transitional period to modernism. It was a period when certain modernist tendencies emerged before flourishing in the postwar period of the mid-20th century. It was also a time when different types of eclecticism—from eclectic Classicism to Art Deco—dominated. There have been various interpretations of these different types of eclectic architecture. To some, eclectic architecture takes on pejorative connotations that imply an impure, inconsistent and even excessive aesthetic.¹ In another view, eclectic architecture is seen as an outcome of cross-cultural exchanges and its hybrid form is celebrated as a sign of multiculturalism.² In yet another view, the different variants of colonial state-supported eclectic architecture in Southeast Asia—such as Indo-Saracenic architecture in British Malaya, *le style indochinois* in French Indochina and *Indische architectuur* in Dutch East Indies—are understood in relation to the different cultural politics of imperialism in the early 20th century.³ On the whole, eclectic architecture defies easy generalization and requires careful situated reading.

This article offers such a reading of early 20th-century eclectic architecture through the built environment in Singapore, Hong Kong and China commissioned by the prominent Singapore-based Chinese overseas businessman Aw Boon Haw (胡文虎). The focus here is on the eclectic architecture linked to the transnational economic and cultural networks of Aw, and the artists and designers he strategically deployed for his art and architectural production.⁴ Aw owned two major transnational business networks that extended across Southeast and East Asia: the first a pharmaceutical empire under Eng Aun Tong (永安堂 or Hall of Everlasting Peace) which purveyed a number of popular medicinal products; and the second a media empire of Chinese-language and English-language newspapers. Not only was he one of the wealthiest businessmen in Southeast and East Asia, Aw was also one of the most high-profile philanthropists of his time, contributing generously to various causes in the region, from healthcare to education, disaster relief to sports and recreation, social services to infrastructure building.⁵ His philanthropic work was closely connected to the way Aw sought to promote his pharmaceutical and print media businesses, and at the same time elevate his social status in the communities he operated. The entanglement of business and philanthropy, the private and the public in Aw's life and his activities is a recurring theme in our discussion of the built environment with which he was associated.

Aw first made his fortune shortly after he and his brother Aw Boon Par (胡文豹) inherited Eng Aun Tong in 1908 from their father Aw Chi Kim. The brothers concocted four pharmaceutical products and marketed them very

successfully as elixirs (四种灵药).⁶ The most successful among them was a cure-all ointment known as the Tiger Balm (虎标万金油), which was a household name and continues to be sold today. After the Aw brothers became successful in Rangoon, where their father had migrated to from Yongding County in Fujian Province in the 1860s, they expanded their business to Southeast and East Asia, eventually transferring Eng Aun Tong headquarters to Singapore in 1926. Aw also established a newspaper empire, starting with *Sin Chew Jit Poh* in Singapore in 1929. By the 1930s, Aw owned 11 newspapers in 7 Southeast and East Asian cities.⁷ The Chinese pharmaceutical business was one closely connected to modern advertising in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the newspaper business was an industry instrumental to the rise of a new print culture and novel marketing strategies in the emerging consumer culture in the modern port cities then.⁸ Some scholars interpret Aw's enterprises as a form of cultural entrepreneurship, one that took a "pluralistic approach to the art and business of culture characterized by active participation in multiple modes of cultural production".⁹ Using Joseph Schumpeter's definition of an entrepreneur as someone who creatively combines different means of production, Christopher Rea argues that Aw exemplified what he calls the tycoon model of cultural entrepreneurship by mobilizing creative actors across different conventions of cultural production—writers, artists, photographers, designers and architects among others—to sell commercial products on a vast scale. By actively commissioning multimedia works that combined graphic design, cartoon, photography and architecture for his enterprises, Aw acted as a cultural agent that contributed to an expansion and transformation of the visual field in the region, especially within the major metropolises, in the early 20th century, which was central to the emergence of a modern visual culture. This article contextualizes the eclectic architecture commissioned by Aw in relation to this modern visual culture.

The notion of architecture and visual culture here draws on but modifies Sibel Bozdoğan's concept of architectural culture. The premise of Bozdoğan's architectural culture is that architecture should not be studied as "an autonomous, self-referential discipline". Instead, architecture should be understood as a cultural discourse situated within larger institutional practices of architectural production.¹⁰ My use of visual culture in this article continues this cultural approach of understanding architecture in context, except that I focus more specifically on visual culture, an interdisciplinary field that both describes the centrality of the visual world in modernity and puts forward particular theories of understanding visibility.¹¹ The visual has come to be the dominant cognitive and representational form of modernity globally.¹²

In Asia, revolutions in technologies of imaging and pictorial production and reproduction—through photography, lithography and different print media—since the second half of the 19th century radically transformed not only how different types of images were made but also the quantity of images produced, the distance these images circulated, and the number of people these images reached.¹³ Alongside new technologies in transportation and communication, these brought about a large quantitative increase in the amount of images being produced and made accessible to a great number of people over considerable distance. The creation of mass consumer markets and urbanization, accompanied by new strategies of advertising and marketing to multicultural and multiethnic audiences in Southeast Asian and Chinese port cities, further accentuated the proliferation of images and their importance in the urban life of these cities. The commercialism of these cities also affected the nature of patronage, the organization of image production, and the types of visual images produced.¹⁴

In this article, I explore different genres, media and scales of the visual field produced—from fine art to commercial art, from print advertisement to buildings as advertisement, and from graphic design to architecture—in relation to Aw's businesses and philanthropy. Aw was a prodigious commissioner of buildings for different purposes—for himself and his family to reside in, for his businesses to operate in, and for the philanthropic causes he contributed to. While the purposes of the buildings might differ, they often bore his name and helped to publicize his businesses. Among the buildings Aw commissioned were a number of high-profile built examples of architectural eclecticism. In this article, the emphasis is on three of the houses Aw commissioned in Singapore and Hong Kong in the 1920s and 1930s. I treat architecture not as a separate and autonomous medium but as a part of Aw's multimedia strategy of promoting his businesses and himself. The houses are analysed in conjunction with the other buildings commissioned by Aw and understood in relation to the larger visual field and the strategies of visual communication. Likewise, architects are seen among a group of image-makers from Singapore, Hong Kong and Shantou mobilized by Aw to help him produce the visual field for his pharmaceutical, media and philanthropic enterprises. Among these image-makers were the artists Kwan Wai Nung (关蕙农) and Tchang Ju Chi (张汝器), the architect-artist Ho Kwong Yew (何光耀) and the craftsman Kwek Hoon Sua (郭云山). Although my focus is on the visual field, I follow visual culture scholars who argue that all media are necessarily hybrid and synesthetic.¹⁵ Furthermore, I seek to understand what W.J.T. Mitchell calls the "visual construction of the social field", not just the

social construction of the visual field, through my analyses.¹⁶ Aw's contributions to the cultural productions in the visual field did not always lead directly to economic returns. They might have helped Aw to accumulate social and cultural capital, which might subsequently have been inter-converted to economic capital.¹⁷

Aw's cultural entrepreneurship and the visual culture he coproduced have to be situated within the East and Southeast Asian port cities of the early 20th century. These were polyglot, migrant worlds with multiple linguistic and cultural affiliations to not just distant homelands in Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, but also to the Euro-American worlds. These cosmopolitan connections were forged through various degrees of direct and indirect influence via the overlapping political, economic, social and commercial networks of trade and migration.¹⁸ Despite these multilingual networks with diverse cultures, architectural histories of British Malaya tend to be narrowly focused on the connections with the Anglophone world. They are likely to attribute any architectural ideas, including those pertaining to architectural eclecticism that this article discusses, in the colony to metropolitan sources in Britain.¹⁹ This limited and limiting Anglophone network is challenged by the geography of Aw's businesses that stretched beyond British colonial Malaya, Burma and Hong Kong to include Dutch colonial East Indies, semi-colonial Thailand, Japanese colonial Taiwan and various semi-colonial treaty ports and non-colonized territories in China.²⁰ This article attends to the geography of Aw's transnational business networks, from which he also found and commissioned the aforementioned image-makers and cultural producers. Although a few of them probably read and spoke English with some level of proficiency, they were—like Aw—more proficient in written Chinese and more conversant in Mandarin and a few Southern Chinese languages.²¹ Furthermore, this article shows that they were closely connected to and intimately knowledgeable of the Sinophone discourses and practices on art, design and culture in East and Southeast Asia, especially in the major port cities like Shanghai, Hong Kong and Guangzhou. As such, I argue that the visual culture produced by Aw with the assistance of these image-makers could be understood as a form of cosmopolitan Sinophone modernism. My use of Sinophone here is both denotative of the Sinitic language communities in multilingual and multicultural colonial and semi-colonial societies that Aw engaged with, and connotative of what Shu-Mei Shih describes as the "Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states [and their predecessors of colonies and empires] and their hegemonic production".²²

FIGURE 1: Exterior view of the Nassim Road house taken in 1983 (Source: Lee Kip Lin collection, National Library, Singapore).

The Private-Public Houses and Gardens

The best-known examples of built work commissioned by Aw are the houses and gardens he built for his family. In this section, we examine three of these: the Nassim Road house (completed in 1928), the Haw Par Mansion in Hong Kong (1935) and the Haw Par Villa (虎豹别墅) in Singapore (1937). Although they were first and foremost intended as private residences, these later also became public to various degrees and in different ways. These three houses were also built in different styles, each of which is a form of eclecticism. The Nassim Road house was the first to be completed in 1928 (it was demolished in 1990). Designed by the local architectural firm Chung and Wong in a Classicist eclectic style, the house had an asymmetrical façade with a corner tower or turret on one side, and a three-bay classical plan, all of which were features found in other grand houses erected in Singapore for Chinese *toukays* (Hokkien for 头家, or heads of large businesses) during the early 20th century (Figure 1).²³

The plan of the house showed spaces configured asymmetrically, another popular tendency in early 20th-century architecture (Figure 2).²⁴ From the entry loggia, two doors led to the interior. The one nearer to the side with the billiard room leads to a reception hall, which was in turn connected to both the billiard room and the dining room. The other one closer to the turret led to a room ambiguously labelled as the drawing room or bedroom in the

FIGURE 2: Ground floor plan of the main building of the Nassim Road house, September 1926 (Source: Building Control Division, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

building plan.²⁵ The reception hall and the drawing room served similar functions: they were semi-formal sitting rooms with the most impressive furnishing that guests first encountered. In many colonial houses, either one of those rooms would suffice. They seldom coexisted.²⁶ From the reception hall, guests would proceed to the dining room and from there, the male guest would carry on to the billiard room according to British colonial norms. This en suite arrangement of an entrance hall, a billiard room and a dining room was common to many large colonial houses. It followed a socio-spatial arrangement in the proper reception and entertainment of guests in both metropolitan and colonial societies of its time.²⁷

When compared to other houses of the wealthy *toukays*, which tended to be at least double-storeyed with many bedrooms, the Nassim Road house was relatively modest in size. Its modesty could be attributed to the fact that Aw had at least three houses in Singapore at that time, with the families of his four wives residing at these different houses.²⁸ The Nassim Road house was

Aw's most public residence in Singapore and its publicness might account for how a large proportion of the spaces in the main building was used to entertain guests.²⁹

According to a few architectural historians, the main qualities that distinguished the houses owned by wealthy Chinese capitalists in Southeast Asia could not be easily identified in the plan. Instead those qualities resided in the theatrical eclecticism of the furnishing, ornamental details and landscaping.³⁰ Contemporary reports of the Nassim Road house noted that the interior was covered with Italian marble and teak panelling, and "the ornamentation, in accordance with Chinese ideas, being throughout most profuse and elaborate...betray[ing] almost unlimited wealth and prodigality".³¹ The few photographs of the interior of the house during the prewar period showed that its interior combined colonial Western-style ceiling design, ventilation grilles, light fixtures and furniture with Chinese-style vases, Tietsin carpet, portraits and guardian lions.³² The East-West mix was also prominently displayed in the exterior. In the middle of the wall of the Classicist entry loggia was a painted relief panel depicting a tiger and a leopard in landscape, above which was another stone tablet on which the Chinese characters for tiger and leopard (虎豹) were inscribed.³³ The tiger here referred to both Aw's name, Boon Haw (文虎), which means gentle and cultured tiger, and the tiger trademark Aw used for his Eng Aun Tong's products. The leopard referred to Aw's brother Boon Par (文豹), which stands for gentle and cultured leopard. The tiger and leopard were often conjoined in their usage as Haw Par, as in the case of Haw Par Villa.

Besides the main building, the Nassim Road house also had a large compound (Figure 3). On one side of the main building was a garage building, on the other was a pavilion and tennis court, and directly behind it was a large outhouse with a kitchen and servant quarters.³⁴ In between these buildings were a series of landscaped spaces. In front of the main building was a large lawn with a European-style fountain in the middle, directly aligned with the centre of the entry loggia. To one side of the lawn was an open pavilion—also called a bandstand—capped with a bell-shaped roof similar to that of the turret of the main building.³⁵ The large garden, including the tennis court, was socially as important as the buildings at the Nassim Road house as it allowed Aw to host large parties and banquets central to enhancing his status as a successful capitalist and community leader. For instance, right after the completion of the Nassim Road house, Aw hosted house-warming parties over three evenings for different groups of guests with specially tailored entertainment.³⁶ Lavish house-warming parties attended by key political and social figures would also be a feature of the other two houses.

FIGURE 3: Site plan of the Nassim Road house (Source: Building Control Division, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

After Aw moved into the house, he began to add more artifacts to it. For example, he added rock formations, which were common in Chinese gardens, and statuary animals to the garden. These elements would later become the major features of the two Tiger Balm Gardens in Singapore and Hong Kong, as we shall see below.³⁷ In the late 1930s, Aw acquired a large jade collection in China that added another important dimension to the public perception of the house. The jade collection was displayed in specially built glass cabinets lining the walls of the reception hall, dining room and billiard room of the Nassim Road house.³⁸ The jade collection in the house was subsequently made available for public viewing during the Chinese New Year holidays from the 1930s.³⁹ Dignitaries such as Mrs Hiroko Sato, the wife of Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, and Governor-General of Trinidad and Tobago Sir Solomon Hochoy, would later be brought to the house during their official trips to Singapore to view the jade collection in the 1960s and 1970s (Figure 4). Interior photographs of the house show that the glass display

FIGURE 4: Mrs. Hiroko Sato (second from right), wife of Japanese Prime Minister Mr Eisaku Sato, visiting the Jade House in 1967. Aw Cheng Chye, Aw Boon Haw's son is standing next to her (Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

FIGURE 5: View showing the “Tiger Oil House of Jade” sign above the house in 1964, during the visit of a dignitary hosted by Yang Di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak (Source: Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

cabinets took up significant amount of space in the house, dominating the rooms they were placed in, which suggests that the public display function of the house was given as much, if not greater, priority than the private residential requirements.

The fame of Aw's jade collection in the house later led it to be popularly known among the public as the "Jade House". Photographs from the 1960s also showed a large sign "Tiger Oil House of Jade" erected above the entry loggia (Figure 5).⁴⁰ The popular name of the house and the sign clearly indicate that Aw's Nassim Road house was not just a private residential building but also a public building—not so much in the civic sense but certainly much more than most residential buildings. The house was clearly public in that it was opened to members of the public and became a place of interest among them, so much so that its subsequent demolition stirred widespread interest. The house was also public in another related sense of the word—it was much publicized and served as a publicity tool for both Aw and his businesses.

The Nassim Road house was built shortly after Aw relocated the headquarters of Eng Aun Tong from Rangoon to Singapore. Later, as Aw further expanded his business empire to Hong Kong and China, he would spend more time at his East Asian base in Hong Kong. That led him to build the Haw Par Mansion (completed in 1935) at Tai Hang Road, Hong Kong.⁴¹ The mansion was designed in a Chinese eclectic style that combined a three-bay plan common to colonial classical building with Chinese-style roofs and ornaments (Figure 6).⁴² As the only one of the three houses discussed in this article that is still standing today, the interior of the Hong Kong mansion gives a sense of Aw's taste and how the interiors of the other two demolished houses might have been.⁴³ The interior shows an assortment of elements drawn from different cultural influences, including timber-framed moon gates infilled with Florentine stained glass, inscribed stone tablets (牌匾), extensive decorative plasterwork inspired by Chinese geometric patterns or architectural motifs, stone reliefs illustrating Buddhist and Burmese tales, intricate carved wood panels illustrating Chinese historical events and landscapes, and glass windows, doors and partitions with stained glass inserts (Figure 7).⁴⁴ Among these diverse interior elements is the tiger motif closely associated with Aw, as we saw earlier. Many of the tigers featured in the house look similar to the springing tiger designed by Hong Kong-based artist Kwan Wai Nung for the famous trademark. The tiger motif appears in the Florentine stained glass panels, in the intricate carved wood panels, as emblems above door frames, as porcelain and wood sculptures, and on porcelain vases (Figure 8). As, if not more, important than the mansion was the Tiger Balm Garden—named after Eng Aun Tong's best-known product—that

FIGURE 6: Exterior view of the Haw Par Mansion, Hong Kong, June 2019 (Source: Author's photograph).

FIGURE 7: A composite image showing the various interior details of the Haw Par Mansion, Hong Kong, June 2019 (Source: Author's photographs).

FIGURE 8: A composite image showing the different manifestations of the tiger motif in the interior of the Haw Par Mansion, Hong Kong, June 2019 (Source: Author's Photographs).

FIGURE 9: An old drawing of the Tiger Balm Garden next to the Haw Par Mansion in Hong Kong (Source: Author's Photograph).

adjoined the house on a hilly site (Figure 9). Filled with pagodas, pavilions and brightly coloured cement statuaries depicting creatures and characters drawn from a melange of Chinese/Taoist folklores and Buddhist teachings, the garden was conceived by Aw and built under the charge of two craftsmen Aw specially engaged from Shantou—Kwek Hoon Sua and Kwek Choon Sua. The garden was later opened to the public and became such a popular site of leisure that it was subsequently etched into the collective memory of Hong Kong society.

A similar garden was completed two years later in Singapore at the Haw Par Villa (虎豹別墅) (Figure 10). The garden also had a mansion that was specially commissioned by Aw for his brother Boon Par. This mansion was, however, designed along the lines of the Streamline Moderne Art Deco style, which was then in vogue in Singapore and other cosmopolitan commercial cities around the world.⁴⁵ The single-storey mansion featured curved walls with horizontal strips of windows under thin curvilinear concrete fins. But in this case, it looks like the architect of the mansion Ho Kwong Yew (1903–42), who also designed a few other prominent Art Deco buildings in Singapore, took the curvilinear idea to an extreme, probably at the promptings of Aw.⁴⁶ All the seven rooms were in circular shape, and they were capped by a roof that consisted of seven domes, one for each room. The circular motif was further extended into the design of the stairs, pathways, balustrades and walls surrounding the house.⁴⁷

If the exterior of the mansion was unusual, the interior and the surrounding landscaping further accentuated its peculiarity. On the inside, the domes were “gold gilded in parts” and specially illuminated—the smaller domes were artificially lit by a combination of blue, green and red lights, and the central large dome was capped by a stained-glass oculus admitting coloured daylight (Figure 11).⁴⁸ These were complemented by walls of “highly colour[sic] marblings, studded with mother-of-pearl shells” creating a polychromatic interior. The tiger motif again appeared in the form of “bronze panels of tigers in different postures, specially ordered from Europe” that adorned the doorways and spaces.⁴⁹

The mansion sat on top of the highest of four terraces of a large hilly, sea-facing site in Pasir Panjang, a suburb in the western part of Singapore. The other terraces consisted of, among other things, large lawns, a grass tennis court, a swimming pool and a large fish pond. Linking the three terraces were pavilions and rockeries adorned by statuaries similar to those in Hong Kong and crafted by the same Kwek brothers. Like the Tiger Balm Garden in Hong Kong, this was also opened to the public and became one of the best-known legacies of Aw Boon Haw.⁵⁰

FIGURE 10: Exterior view of Haw Par Mansion, Singapore (Source: Gift of Mrs Betty Luders, courtesy of National Museum of Singapore).

FIGURE 11: Interior views of Haw Par Mansion, Singapore (Source: Courtesy of Ho Weng Hin, Studio Lapis).

A journalist described the 250,000 Straits dollar house and purportedly the most expensive one-storey structure in Singapore as “a millionaire’s whim”.⁵¹ Indeed it was a short-lived whim as Aw would decide to demolish the house in the late 1940s, after it was vandalized during and right after the Japanese Occupation.⁵² Not many records of the mansion have survived, in particular, photographs of the interior. However, when the house was first completed and a large house-warming party was hosted, it was, like the other two houses, widely reported in both the English-language and Chinese-language newspapers in Singapore. The mansion was given a full front-page coverage that was illustrated with many photographs in the *Sunday Times*. In *Xingguang* (星光), the Sunday pictorial supplement of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (星洲日报) owned by Aw and to which many important prewar Chinese artists including Tchang Ju-Chi contributed, it was featured in a two-page photographic spread.⁵³

Common to all the above three houses and gardens were their duality as both private and public entities. They were opened to the public and became so popular that they were part of the collective memory of the overseas Chinese societies in Singapore and Hong Kong. The duality of the houses was also echoed in how Aw’s name was both private and public. Aw’s name referred to not just himself but was used for his houses and gardens. Haw Par Villa, one of the common names for both the two aforementioned houses and gardens in Singapore and Hong Kong, which literally means tiger and leopard’s villa, is also an abbreviation of the names of Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par, as we noted earlier. As his houses and gardens become public entities in the public’s imagination, Aw’s name also became publicized. Furthermore, the tiger denoted in Aw’s name was also used as the trademark of Eng Aun Tong. Rendered as a springing tiger with the help of Kwan Wai Nung, it appeared not just in Eng Aun Tong’s product packaging but also in its buildings, as we shall see. The springing tiger was also a recurring decorative motif in the interior furnishing and the architecture of Aw’s houses, as we saw earlier. The duality between the private and public was further accentuated by how Aw’s name circulated broadly in the media—through his own newspaper empire, as a successful businessman and philanthropist, as a name for novel buildings and gardens that were accessible by the public, and as a trademark and brand. Much of its circulation depended on different visual means, in the form of photographs, graphic design and even interior, architectural and landscape design. The various visual forms constitute a visual culture that shaped the ways society perceived Aw, Eng Aun Tong and its products.

FIGURE 12: View of Eng Aun Tong at Neil Road, c. 1930s (Source: National University of Singapore Libraries' Digital Gems).

Architecture as Advertisement

Besides Aw's houses and gardens, the buildings of Eng Aun Tong were also a key part of the visual culture he coproduced. One of the earliest buildings commissioned by Aw to house Eng Aun Tong's production and sales facilities was at Neil Road, Singapore, not long after he relocated the headquarters of Eng Aun Tong to Singapore (Figure 12). Occupying a corner site with elevations facing Neil Road and Craig Road, the most prominent feature of the building completed in 1926 was a hexagonal pavilion perched at the top

corner of the building. Capped with a bell-shaped roof similar to the Nassim Road house, above which flew a flag with the tiger trademark, the pavilion was a response by the architects from Chung and Wong to Aw's instruction to have a structure shaped like a jar of Tiger Balm placed on top of the visually prominent corner of the building.⁵⁴ Positioned below the pavilion on the chamfered edge of the building were the tiger trademark, Chinese characters and English letters inscribing Eng Aun Tong. Lining the adjacent walls on the two longer sides were two rows of texts: large Chinese characters stating "Rangoon Eng Aun Tong, Tiger brand medical hall (仰光永安堂虎标大藥坊)" above smaller English lettering inscribing "The Tiger Medical Hall" and other texts I could not read from old photographs.⁵⁵ The use of Chinese characters here could trace its origins to the signboards of traditional shops in China. The bustling commercial culture and dense urban fabric of the Chinese treaty ports and colonial cities like Guangzhou, Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 19th century changed the way Chinese characters were used for advertisements. They became enlarged, set into the building itself and/or projected onto the street, saturating the streets in commercial districts of these cities with written characters announcing shop names, products and services.⁵⁶ As a city closely connected to these port cities, Singapore was also influenced by this visual and textual culture, as seen in the multilingual signs rendered in plaster relief on the facades and columns of vernacular shophouses.⁵⁷

The design strategies seen at Eng Aun Tong's headquarters—namely, the calculated placement of a building on a corner site so as to give it at least two frontages to maximize exposure, the vertical accentuation at the corner to create visual impact, and the combination of architectural elements with letterings and graphic arts to advertise the names of the company and its products—were later adopted and further elaborated in subsequent Eng Aun Tong's buildings. The same design strategies were evident in another Eng Aun Tong building at the Selegie Road-Short Street junction in Singapore. Two design schemes of the building could be found in the archives. The first was proposed in June 1929 by Keys and Dowdeswell, a well-known colonial architecture firm that was behind some of the best-known pre-war buildings in Singapore.⁵⁸ Keys and Dowdeswell's proposal consisted of a fairly conventional three-storey building for the corner site (Figure 13). The drawings show a building design that was devoid of the usual Classical embellishments that characterized the firm's other works. The only visually striking feature of the proposed building was a two-storey tall tower raised on top of the building. The tower consisted of a steel truss propping up a sphere criss-crossed by two ribbons with the words "Tiger Balm" inscribed on them.⁵⁹ A later drawing by Keys and Dowdeswell showed a modified design for the

FIGURE 13: Elevation drawing of Keys and Dowdeswell's proposal for Eng Aun Tong, Selegie Road-Short Street junction, April 1929 (Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

FIGURE 14: Keys and Dowdeswell's revised proposal for the tower at Eng Aun Tong, Selegie Road-Short Street junction, May 1930 (Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

tower: a tiger statue replaced the globe as the object at the pinnacle, and three rings with the words "The Tiger Balm" and "Eng Aun Tong" wrapped around the steel truss at intervals (Figure 14).⁶⁰

Both designs by Keys and Dowdeswell were, however, not built. Instead, a simpler scheme by Chung and Wong featuring a much shorter but better integrated Art Deco-styled clock tower was realized (Figure 15).⁶¹ Perched at the top of the tower was, as with the second scheme by Keys and Dowdeswell, a tiger statue. Photographs taken of the building in the 1930s show that its exterior surfaces were covered with Chinese characters and English letterings announcing the names of the medical hall and its various products. The narrower frontage facing the corner was again the most elaborate elevation. Besides the clock tower and tiger statue at the top, this frontage featured another relief of the tiger trademark at the second storey and at the junction between the clock tower and roofline, two large signs illuminated by electric lighting at night advertised Eng Aun Tong's best-known product Tiger Balm in both English and Chinese. The simple and unadorned surfaces in the architects' drawings proved deceptive as they were not intended to remain

FIGURE 15: Chung and Wong's proposal for Eng Aun Tong, Selegie Road-Short Street junction, October 1931 (Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

bare. Instead, they served as blank canvases for the subsequent addition of different types of signs and graphics that turned the building into a three-dimensional advertisement.

Similar design strategies and architectural rationale were also at work in Eng Aun Tong's buildings elsewhere, especially in southern Chinese coastal cities where they tended to be larger in scale. At Shantou, for example, the main Eng Aun Tong office and factory, completed in 1933, was a three-storey building with a six-storey round tower capped by a bell-shaped roof (Figure 16).⁶² Serving also as a factory in which around 500–600 employees worked to produce medical products for the mainland Chinese market, the building was larger than the two Eng Aun Tong buildings in Singapore.⁶³ It had a 60 m-long curved façade facing a road junction that was similarly adorned with both Chinese characters and English words publicizing Eng Aun Tong and its products.⁶⁴ Even grander than the Eng Aun Tong building at Shantou was its building in Guangzhou, which was a six-storey building topped with an almost equally tall clock tower, making it the second tallest building in Guangzhou at its time of completion in 1935 (Figure 17).⁶⁵ In a way, the Guangzhou building could be seen as a larger and better-proportioned version of the Eng Aun Tong building at Selegie Road.

FIGURE 16: Eng Aun Tong building, Shantou (Source: National University of Singapore Libraries' Digital Gems).

Aw's use of buildings to advertise his pharmaceutical products was similar to the strategies adopted by Shanghai-based entrepreneurs in medicinal products. Aw's strategies appear to combine that used by two major pharmaceutical companies in early 20th-century China: the Great Eastern Dispensary (中法大药房) and the Great Five Continents Drugstore (五洲大药房), both headquartered in Shanghai. The Great Eastern Dispensary was founded by Huang Chujiu (黄楚九), a pioneer in multimedia advertising in early 20th-century China. Besides mobilizing radio, short films, print advertisements and other media to promote his products, Huang also made use of architecture. He deliberately selected busy intersections in Shanghai as sites for the buildings housing his dispensaries to give them greater visibility, a strategy that Aw emulated. Huang even formulated a set of design guidelines for his architects and builders to follow. By engaging with various modes of cultural production, Huang was employing what is today called a cross-promotion strategy that Aw also deployed later with his newspaper empire and philanthropic

FIGURE 17: Eng Aun Tong building, Guangzhou (Source: National University of Singapore Libraries' Digital Gems).

work. Huang who owned the Great World (大世界), Shanghai's foremost popular entertainment centre that contained theatres, halls, bars, teahouses, shops and a whole array of leisure facilities, used it to promote his medicinal products by covering it with related advertisements and using it to launch advertising stunts.⁶⁶

Xiang Songmao (项松茂), who presided over the Great Five Continents Drugstore between 1911 and 1932, the years of its rapid expansion, also introduced innovative strategies of exploiting architecture as a form of advertisement. The buildings of the Great Five Continents Drugstore were covered

with large Chinese characters announcing the name of the drugstore and its products on their facades. A relief of the trademark—a globe—was also prominently and centrally displayed on the façade. These buildings also tended to be taller than the surrounding traditional Chinese shops, often using “a crowning element to give each building the sense of a soaring mass”.⁶⁷

Eng Aun Tong, the Great Eastern Dispensary and the Great Five Continents Drugstore were three of the leading Chinese producers of pharmaceutical products in the early 20th century. The sale of their products took place at a time when a new consumer culture that entailed new marketing strategies and advertising techniques was on the rise in Southeast and East Asia. Along with cosmetic and tobacco companies, pharmaceutical companies were the major drivers of advertisements in Chinese treaty ports and colonial cities.⁶⁸ These marketing and branding initiatives also led to the production of a new visual culture across different media and scales. While buildings existed at the larger end of the scale, they were part of a larger visual economy and a continuation of the visual communication strategies adopted on a smaller scale in both two- and three-dimensional forms. In fact, perspective drawings of these buildings were often incorporated as key graphical elements in the print advertisements of these pharmaceutical companies (Figures 18 and 19), just as Chinese characters, letterings and other graphic elements, particularly those of the tiger motif and trademark, were scaled up and incorporated into the buildings.⁶⁹ The marketing of these pharmaceutical companies happened in hybrid modes involving combinations of different media, such as print, signage, sculpture and architecture, to form a larger visual economy.

A New Visual Economy

The multimedia visual economy of Aw and Eng Aun Tong was an extension of the sophisticated and distinctive packaging of Eng Aun Tong’s products. Like many new Chinese pharmaceutical products from the early 20th century, each had a layered packaging to fulfil various utilitarian and symbolic functions in their production, circulation and consumption (Figure 20).⁷⁰ For instance, Eng Aun Tong’s best-known product Tiger Balm was in the past sold in a packaging with at least three distinctive layers. The balm itself was placed in a hexagonal glass jar, the bottom of which was cast with the tiger trademark. The jar was sealed with a gold-coloured lid to keep out air and moisture. The top of the lid was embossed with another tiger trademark. Glued around the glass jar was a colourful paper label with the name of the product spelled out in different languages alongside the third tiger trademark on the jar itself. The glass jar was then wrapped with a folded piece of

FIGURE 20: A label on Tiger Balm packaging.

paper with directions for using the balm. On the piece of paper, which also served to cushion the glass jar during transportation, was the fourth tiger trademark alongside the portraits of the Aw brothers. Finally, another external layer of colourful paper featuring two rows of springing tigers akin to the trademark wrapped around the jar with the top and bottom sealed using two circular stickers each featuring once again the tiger trademark.⁷¹ The graphic elements in the Tiger Balm packaging—the portraits, the trademark and the bright colours—were not untypical of Chinese medicinal products in the early 20th century. Some of these elements, particularly the use of a graphically distinctive trademark, might have been based on the marketing strategies of Japanese pharmaceutical companies, which many Chinese-owned pharmaceutical companies in South China and Southeast Asia later adopted in response to forgeries and imitations.⁷² In the case of popular products like those by Eng Aun Tong, a distinctive packaging featuring the registered trademark was especially important given that many competitors tried to confuse and deceive consumers by producing counterfeits.⁷³

The tiger trademark of Eng Aun Tong had a unique design that was created with the help of Hong Kong's king of calendar-poster advertising painting (月份牌王), Kwan Wai Nung. Kwan was a member of Lingnan School of Painting (岭南画派) who became a commercial artist. He adopted the techniques developed by the Lingnan School cofounder Gao Qifeng (高奇峰) in depicting the tiger (Figure 21). Gao, in turn, was influenced by the depiction of tigers in *Nihon-ga*, the modern iteration of traditional Japanese painting that introduced a new realism in its portrayal of animals through its adaptation of Western art influences. Gao took to *Nihon-ga*'s way of depicting the tiger as a bold, fierce and predatory animal, which departed from how the animal was conventionally depicted in traditional Chinese painting. Gao's representation of the tiger in a naturalistic and ferocious manner inspired

FIGURE 21: The cover of an illustrated magazine with a tiger drawn by Gao Qifeng (Source: *The Truth Record* 1:12 (1912)).

Kwan's design of the trademark for Aw.⁷⁴ While Gao's portrayal of the tiger was intended as an emblem of resurgent Chinese nationalism, the tiger trademark painted by Kwan became a memorable visual icon that transcended the linguistic and cultural barriers of the Southeast Asian and East Asian markets that Aw wanted to reach.

Featuring a vividly coloured springing tiger, the trademark was prominently displayed on the packaging of all Eng Aun Tong's products. The products' packaging tended to be multilingual, typically in English, Chinese and one of the local languages, be it Malay, Indonesian, Thai or Burmese. But words were kept to a minimum and considered as secondary to the visual communication. As the literacy rates in China and Southeast Asia were generally low in the early 20th century, visual communication was probably more effective than the use of words in creating what we call brand recognition today and pictorial representation was more likely to cut across the linguistic and cultural barriers in the multiethnic societies in the Southeast and East Asian cities where Eng Aun Tong sold their products. Furthermore,

FIGURE 22: Aw's tiger car during its tour of Jiangsu region in China (Source: *Xingguang* No. 216, 1933).

Aw's use of the tiger image had the additional advantages of being able to connect his products with a whole range of folk superstitions, particularly the almost mythical prowess and supposed healing virtues associated with the ferocious predator.⁷⁵

The origins of the tiger trademark, which became a motif applied to not just Eng Aun Tong's products but also to Aw's personal properties ranging from his clothing and car (Figure 22), to the interior furnishing of his houses

and the public parks he created, happened in conjunction with the emergence of a new visual culture in Asian port cities during the early 20th century. Furthermore, the involvement of Kwan foregrounds a few key aspects of this new visual culture. Born into a family of renowned painters, Kwan became an accomplished painter before he was employed as art director of the *South China Morning Post* between 1911 and 1915. He subsequently established the Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press (亚洲石印局) in 1915 and helped many companies, including Eng Aun Tong, design and print advertisements, packaging and other commercial products.⁷⁶ Kwan's case showed that the boundary between a commercial and fine artist in 20th-century Chinese treaty ports and colonial cities was a fine and porous one. These visual artists draw on a new aesthetic imagination that came from the confluence of European, Japanese and Chinese traditions of visualization and representation. They also seized the commercial opportunities that the marketplaces of these cities offered to cross genres and move between different types of painting, graphic design, cartoon and even interior decoration.⁷⁷ Besides Kwan, Aw also commissioned many other artists to help him and his companies visualize and publicize their products. Aw had the advantage of owning a transnational newspaper empire in Asia that had the means of printing, distributing and significantly influencing the production and reception of the visual field in Southeast and East Asia.

After apparently spending what Aw deemed as too much money on promoting Eng Aun Tong's products in an "advertising war" with a rival pharmaceutical company in Chinese cities during the 1920s (the bills for Shanghai alone for the year 1925 cost him more than one million yuan), Aw decided to cut his advertising costs by starting his own newspaper.⁷⁸ In 1929, Aw started his first newspaper *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (星洲日报) in Singapore. Through strong textual and visual content, the introduction of new formats—such as a free Sunday pictorial supplement—and low pricing, Aw was able to turn *Sin Chew Jit Poh* into the most popular and widely read Chinese-language newspaper in Southeast Asia by 1937. To create content that attracted readers, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* employed talented writers and gifted artists.

One of these artists was Tchang Ju-chi (张汝器), a Chaozhou-born painter, cartoonist and graphic designer who received his art education in Shanghai and Marseilles.⁷⁹ Tchang served as the founding editor of *Xingguang* (星光), a weekly supplement issued free of charge to subscribers of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* between 1929 and 1930. *Xingguang* was the first *huabao* (画报) or pictorial in Singapore. The early pictorial was seen as an important print format instrumental in introducing photolithographic printing and illustrated news in China that contributed to the emergence of a modern visual culture.⁸⁰

The same could be said of *Xingguang* in Singapore.⁸¹ As the editor, Tchang designed the layout, curated the contents—primarily photographs and cartoons—and contributed cartoons.⁸² Besides *Xingguang*, Tchang also produced the cover design of two commemorative books published by *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. The first was *Xingzhouribaodexiansheng* (星洲日报的先声), loosely translated as *Sin Chew Jit Poh's Herald*, which celebrated the launch of the newspaper.⁸³ The second was the first-anniversary yearbook of the newspaper, which was said to be the first Chinese-language yearbook ever published in Singapore.⁸⁴

Both books featured covers with bold modern graphics and typographic forms that were contemporaneous with—and probably informed by—similar experiments in book design being conducted by modern artists in Shanghai that Tchang would have been familiar with, given that he solicited contributions from some of the leading Shanghai-based cartoonists for *Xingguang*.⁸⁵ The cover of the first book (Figure 23) features a crowing rooster with sunrays and raging waves behind, implying that the new newspaper represented a new dawn and was making waves. Together with the stylized typography of the title across the top of the cover, the bold colours and geometrical forms of the rooster, sunrays and waves suggest that the design was influenced by then modish Art Deco aesthetics. In comparison, Tchang's second cover (Figure 24) presents a different aesthetic tendency. The main feature is a slim female nude resembling a femme fatale with a drapery coiled around her body. The Chinese characters of the book's title in stylized curved typography are arranged in a manner that followed the curves of the body. The flatness of the painting, the use of block colours and the curvilinear forms hint at the influence of Art Nouveau graphic design. In the yearbook, Tchang also designed an advertisement for Tiger Balm on the back cover in a style similar to the cover art (Figure 25). Tchang's graphic designs for *Sin Chew Jit Poh* publications set a trend that was followed up with equally striking covers and commercials for Eng Aun Tong's products, such as those in the second yearbook (Figures 26 and 27).

The different styles used by Tchang in the two books that were produced within the space of a year suggest that Tchang was experimenting with the various tendencies then in vogue.⁸⁶ After Tchang left his position at *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, he continued to experiment with other styles of design as the studios he established—Ju-Chi Studio (汝器画室) in 1930 and United Painters (朋特画室) in 1935 with his brother-in-law Chuang U-chow (庄有钊)—took on more commercial art commissions, which included interior decoration. Like Kwan and other artists based in commercially vibrant treaty ports and colonial cities, Tchang's works moved between different media and fields of specialization. Besides being an accomplished artist who blazed a trail of

FIGURE 23: Cover of *Xingzhouribaodexiansheng* designed by Tchang Ju-chi (Source: National University of Singapore Libraries' Digital Gems).

FIGURE 24: Cover of 1930 yearbook of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* designed by Tchang Ju-chi (Source: National University of Singapore Libraries' Digital Gems).

FIGURE 25: Tiger Balm advertisement on the back cover of the 1930 yearbook of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* designed by Tchang Ju-chi (Source: National University of Singapore Libraries' Digital Gems).

FIGURE 26: Cover of 1931 yearbook of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Source: National University of Singapore Libraries' Digital Gems).

FIGURE 27: Tiger Balm advertisement on the back cover of the 1931 yearbook of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Source: National University of Singapore Libraries' Digital Gems).

incorporating regional characteristics into his art, Tchang also taught art and actively promoted art in Singapore. Tchang's close connections with Chinese artists and the Chinese art scene could be seen in his work with the Society of Chinese Art (华人美术研究会) that he cofounded in 1936 with a group of Singapore-based Chinese artists, most of whom graduated from art schools in Shanghai. As a founding president of the society, Tchang was the prime mover in the society's activities. These revolved around the organization of exhibitions, the hosting of lectures and exhibitions by prominent visiting Chinese artists like Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿) and Liu Haisu (刘海粟), and fund-raising activities in support of China and Chinese war refugees in the Sino-Japanese war. It was the society's support of anti-Japanese activities that led to the purging of many of its members in Operation Sook Ching in the first few weeks of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Among the members purged were the president Tchang and the vice-president Ho Kwong Yew, also a prominent architect who worked closely with Aw, as we shall see below.⁸⁷

As a cultural entrepreneur, Aw strategically employed talented artists and designers in the cosmopolitan port cities in which his businesses operated. Besides Tchang and Ho, Aw also engaged major Chinese cultural producers like the writer Yu Dafu (郁达夫) and the cartoonist Zhang Guangyu (张光宇)

to help produce content for his pharmaceutical and print empires, and his philanthropy.⁸⁸ Many of these artists were pioneers in the emerging modern visual culture, working and experimenting at the forefront of innovation across different media and specializations. It was therefore neither uncommon nor unexpected for visual innovations in one field to permeate another. In the case of buildings commissioned by Aw, we have established earlier that the graphical and typographical were closely integrated with the architectural. Could we extrapolate from that and suggest that the bold geometrical forms and striking curvilinear lines of the graphic and typological designs that we saw earlier might have influenced the architectural designs of Aw's built environment?

Art Deco, Eclecticism and Sinophone Modernism

Of the three houses commissioned by Aw in Singapore and Hong Kong, the Nassim Road house and the Haw Par Mansion in Hong Kong are recognized in existing scholarship as eclectic architecture, whereas the Haw Par Mansion in Singapore tends to be labelled as Art Deco, especially under its Streamline Moderne variant. Some commentators have, however, doubted whether Art Deco was a style at all as it has been attached to "a large and heterogeneous body of artefacts whose sole common denominator seems to lie in their contradictory characteristics".⁸⁹ Those works labelled Art Deco could be inspired by high styles or vernacular traditions; they might be influenced by contemporary Western avant-garde art or "exotic" and "primitive" art from non-Western traditions; they could be cheaply mass produced using machines or expensively and exquisitely handcrafted; and their form might be abstract or decorative. In other words, Art Deco was characterized by an eclectic mixture of several styles and popular undercurrents. In general, Art Deco architecture has a strong decorative quality and Tim Benton even labels one of the categories of Art Deco architecture as "decorative modernism".⁹⁰ As the decoration of Euro-American Art Deco was inspired by a bewildering variety of sources from around the world, including from "oriental" sources in China and Japan, Art Deco architecture was itself very malleable and could be easily localized as it circulated globally. Patterns and motifs derived from local culture could be effortlessly incorporated into Deco-inspired imagery.⁹¹

Aw's Haw Par Mansion in Singapore was indeed an example of highly localized Art Deco architecture. The curvilinear geometry and thin concrete fins on the exterior of the mansion might suggest a Streamline Moderne aesthetic but the interior spaces were arranged based on a three-bay configuration common to earlier colonial residential architecture. The interior

incorporated many of the elements found in the two earlier houses of Aw: stained glasses, luxurious finishes of gold-gilded surfaces and marbling, and of course the springing tiger motif. The Art Deco style—in the sense of what Charlotte Benton and Tim Benton call a “family of resemblances”⁹²—seems well suited to Aw, given its close association with commerce and consumerist societies of the early 20th century and its recurring use of “luxury materials expressive of the surface glitter and hedonistic tastes of the age”.⁹³ Indeed, as we saw earlier, Art Deco architecture and graphic design was already used in Eng Aun Tong’s buildings and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*’s publications from 1930 onwards. It was an inextricable part of the visual culture Aw had coproduced with the help of designers even before the completion of the Haw Par Mansion at Pasir Panjang.

Aw was not the only constant in this visual culture; the designer behind the different houses and the Eng Aun Tong building at Selegie Road might have also been the same person. Although the Nassim Road house and the Selegie Road building were attributed to Chung and Wong, and the Haw Par Mansion in Pasir Panjang was attributed to Ho Kwong Yew, Ho might have worked on all three buildings. Chung and Wong was formed in 1920 by Chung Hong Woot and Wong Puck Sham, and Ho joined as the third partner in 1926. Ho was put on record as having worked on the design of the Nassim Road house during his time with the firm.⁹⁴ Ho only withdrew as a partner from Chung and Wong to set up his own firm in 1933 because the partnership was suffering from the economic slump at that time. It was under his own firm that Ho designed a number of buildings for Aw. Besides the Haw Par Mansion, Ho was also asked to design a number of buildings that were funded by Aw’s philanthropy: the Maternity Hospital in Seremban (1934), the Home for the Aged at Thomson Road (1937) and an Anti-Opium Clinic at Tiong Bahru (1936).⁹⁵

Ho was also fascinated by traditional Chinese architecture, which he studied carefully during a trip to Hong Kong and Guangzhou in 1930. One of his earliest published works was his 1928 competition-winning entry for the Cai Gongshi (蔡公时) Memorial in Nanjing, then capital of China (Figure 28).⁹⁶ Commemorating a Chinese national hero who had been brutally murdered by the Japanese, Ho’s entry drew on traditional Chinese architectural elements to create an archway (牌坊) and a memorial gateway (纪念门) to frame a bronze statue of Cai on a pedestal.⁹⁷ Besides this entry, Ho also designed the Holy Trinity Church (1940) at Horne Road in a Chinese eclectic style, capping the building for a Foochow- and Hokkien-speaking congregation with Chinese roof forms. In addition to these two buildings, Ho also participated in and won a number of architectural competitions in Canton.⁹⁸

FIGURE 28: A perspective drawing of Ho Kwong Yew's 1928 competition-winning entry for the Cai Gongshi Memorial in Nanjing, China (Source: "蔡公时烈士像坊评选第一名之图案", 新加坡画报 39 (1929)).

Ho was also an artist and vice-president of the Society of Chinese Art, with Tchang as the president, as we noted earlier. While Ho was well connected to the Singapore-based European architects since he was a council member of the Institute of Architects of Malaya from around 1935 to 1941, he was undoubtedly also deeply linked to the Sinophone art and cultural networks through his networks of artist friends and his association with Aw's cultural entrepreneurialism. Besides his well-known collaboration with Aw and the Kwek brothers at the gardens of Haw Par Villa, Ho was likely to have worked with the artists and designers that Aw mobilized for the other buildings to incorporate their graphic elements and sculptural features into architecture.

The influence of Sinophone art and cultural networks on the architectural production in Singapore is a dimension that is neglected in the current historiography of architecture in Singapore, which until very recently has been primarily the domain of a few Englishmen and Anglophone Asians.⁹⁹ By Sinophone, I am not just referring to the cultural discourses in Sinitic languages or the geographies of East and Southeast Asian coastal cities with significant ethnic Chinese populations. I am also drawing from Sinophone studies to refer to a set of geopolitically marginal productions.¹⁰⁰ The architectural production of Ho and the built environment of Aw were outside the

dominant colonial (read: Anglophone) architectural practices.¹⁰¹ While they are nominally included in post-independent art and architectural histories of Singapore by Anglophone scholars, their connections with the broader Sinophone cultural networks remain inadequately captured. What we see instead in Singapore's architectural histories is an assumed equivalence between Sinophone architectural production and "traditional" architectural forms and practices. Ignored in this assumption is the history of how Singapore-based Sinophone artists, designers and architects were not parochial traditional craftsmen stuck to practices of the past, but cosmopolitan modern practitioners at the vanguard of experiments in modern art and design. By casting light on the Sinophone networks, I am not claiming that the Sinophone discourse constituted a separate and unique cultural sphere. There is no doubt that the Sinophone discourse on modernity and modernism was influenced by the Euro-American discourse, except that the routes of circulation and the modes of translation might greatly differ from how they were transmitted and translated to colonial Singapore. Rather, my intention is to go beyond Anglophone parochialism and its overly narrow understanding of metropole-colony relations. I hope that this preliminary research on Sinophone modernism can contribute in a small way to a fuller understanding of the different cultural flows of influences in a multilingual and multiethnic colonial society like Singapore.

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- ²⁴ Norman Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life, 1819–1939* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 136.
- ²⁵ The plan of the house is from Chung and Wong, "Proposed Residence to Be Erected at Nassim Road for Aw Boon Haw Esq." (National Archives of Singapore BLD439/1926, Sept. 1926).
- ²⁶ For the complex history of the drawing room and the reception hall in the metropole and colonial Malaya, especially on how it has been adapted by the Chinese, see Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life, 1819–1939*, pp. 154–8.
- ²⁷ Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life*, p. 134.
- ²⁸ Besides the Nassim Road house, Aw also owned a house at the adjacent plot of land at No. 2 Tanglin Road and a shophouse at Cantonment Road. See "Interview with AW It Haw (Dato) 胡一虎 conducted by Ho So Miang, Reel 1 of 5".
- ²⁹ The other spaces of the main building were the two bedrooms, one of which was directly accessible from the reception hall and had no window. Its only connection to the exterior was through a door to a space labelled as a "drying verandah", which it shared with the other bedroom.
- ³⁰ The British also saw the architecture in China as frivolous. See Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life, 1819–1939*, p. 47 and Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*.
- ³¹ "House-Warming: Mr. Aw Boon Haw Opens New Residence", *Malaya Tribune*, 29 Sept. 1928.
- ³² Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: A History of the Chinese Diaspora* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), pp. 175–6; "New Residence of Messrs. Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par", *Malayan Saturday Post*, 27 Oct. 1928.
- ³³ 关楚璞, *星洲十年*, pp. 48–9; "New Residence of Messrs. Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par".
- ³⁴ The site plan is from Chung and Wong, "Proposed Residence to Be Erected at Nassim Road. Plan of Bandstand for Aw Boon Haw Esq". The outhouse was a typical feature of large colonial houses in Malaya (which included Singapore) and other parts of the British Empire. It was an indication of the dependence on cheap

colonial labour by wealthy colonial families in sustaining their lifestyles. See Anthony D. King, *The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Swati Chattopadhyay, "Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of 'White Town' in Colonial Calcutta", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, 2 (2000): 154–79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/991588>.

- ³⁵ "New Residence of Messrs. Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par".
- ³⁶ "House-Warming", 29 Sept. 1928; "House Warming Functions: Big Company at Nassim Road", *Malaya Tribune*, 10 January 1928.
- ³⁷ 关楚璞, *星洲十年*, p. 49; Judith Brandel and Tina Turbeville, *Tiger Balm Gardens: A Chinese Billionaire's Fantasy Environments* (Hong Kong: Aw Boon Haw Foundation, 1998), p. 42.
- ³⁸ "Interview with AW Kow (Datin) @ Tan Kah Joo Conducted by Tan Beng Luan, Reel 2 of 4" (National Archives of Singapore Oral History Centre Accession No. 000041, 6 June 1981).
- ³⁹ "Chinese Houses May Be Visited", *Straits Times*, 2 June 1940. The jade collection was donated to the National Museum of Singapore in 1979. Poh Wah Ling, "Saga of the Aw Jade Collection", *Straits Times*, 29 Nov. 1979.
- ⁴⁰ Tiger oil could refer to either Tiger Balm, Eng Aun Tong's best-known product, or Tiger Oil, a medicated oil Eng Aun Tong produced in the 1960s. Tiger Balm was also known in Chinese as Ten Thousand Golden Oil (虎标万金油) and could thus be abbreviated as Tiger oil.
- ⁴¹ For a detailed description of the Haw Par Mansion in Hong Kong just prior to its conservation and the history of its site, see Centre for Architectural Heritage Research, "Heritage Impact Assessment for Revitalization of Haw Par Mansion into Haw Par Music Farm" (Haw Par Music Foundation, 2014).
- ⁴² The architect, if there was one, behind the mansion is not listed in existing scholarship. The Chinese eclectic architecture of the mansion is often mislabelled as Chinese Renaissance architecture. For why the former is a more appropriate label than the latter, see 何培斌 and 蔣志丹, "何東花園是中國民藝復興建築?", *信報*, 20 Dec. 2011.
- ⁴³ The house was recently conserved and adapted as a music school. See Peta Tomlinson, "Haw Par Mansion: 1930's Splendour given New Lease of Life as Music Academy", *South China Morning Post*, 10 Dec. 2016.
- ⁴⁴ The author was given a tour of the mansion by Roger Wu Tsan-sum, the chief executive of the Foundation, in June 2019, thanks to Puay-Peng Ho's facilitation.
- ⁴⁵ Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton and Ghislaine Wood, eds, *Art Deco 1910–1939* (London: V&A Publishing, 2003).
- ⁴⁶ Among the Art Deco buildings Ho designed are the Chee Guan Chiang House (1938) at Grange Road and the corner shophouse (1938) at the junction of Circular Road and Lorong Terok.

- 47 Brandel and Turbeville, *Tiger Balm Gardens*, p. 47.
- 48 “City’s Entire Gold Stocks to Gild a Dome”, *Straits Times*, 31 Jan. 1937.
- 49 “House-Warming by Aw Brothers”, *Sunday Tribune (Singapore)*, 14 Mar. 1937.
- 50 Brandel and Turbeville, *Tiger Balm Gardens*, pp. 108–9.
- 51 “City’s Entire Gold Stocks to Gild a Dome”.
- 52 Aw unsuccessfully proposed to replace the house with a palatial building in the style of Chinese traditional revival architecture. See “1951年8月31日 受建筑物统治法令影响 虎豹别墅重修工程搁置”, *联合晚报*, 31 Aug. 1983.
- 53 “A \$250,000 ‘Bungalow’: Mr Aw Boon Haw’s Villa at Pasir Panjang”, *Sunday Times*, 31 Jan. 1937; “虎豹别墅”, *星光: 星洲日报图画副刊*, 14 Mar. 1937.
- 54 Brandel and Turbeville, *Tiger Balm Gardens*, p. 23.
- 55 关楚璞, *星洲十年*, pp. 154–5.
- 56 Jonathan Hay, “Notes on Chinese photography and advertising in late nineteenth-century Shanghai”, in *Visual Culture in Shanghai, 1850s–1930s*, pp. 107–13.
- 57 Vikas Kailankaje, “Sign Language: Singapore’s Graphic Vernacular in Jalan Besar”, <https://www.figment.live/journal/sign-language-singapores-graphic-vernacular-in-jalan-besar/>, last accessed 9 Oct. 2020.
- 58 See Jiat-Hwee Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture: Colonial Networks, Nature and Technoscience* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 117–8, endnotes no. 107, p. 127.
- 59 Keys and Dowdeswell, “Proposed New Building for Aw Boon Haw Esq” (National Archives of Singapore BLD339/29, 6 April 1929).
- 60 Keys and Dowdeswell, “Advertisement Tower for Aw Boon Haw Esq per Messrs Keys & Dowdeswell Architects Singapore” (National Archives of Singapore BLD339E/29, 23 May 1930).
- 61 Chung and Wong, “Amended Plan to Passed Plan No. 339/29 at Selegie Road and Short Street for Aw Boon Haw Esq” (National Archives of Singapore BLD339F/29, 7 Oct. 1931).
- 62 关楚璞, *星洲十年*, p. 158.
- 63 “永安堂良藥將減價, 汕頭製藥新廠落成”, *申報*, 25 Oct. 1933.
- 64 “这座汕头昔日的最高楼 沉淀了一段华侨爱国史”, https://www.sohu.com/a/325262382_481645 and “走访老汕头民国中医药旧址, 老建筑有老故事”, https://www.sohu.com/a/255870503_239208 [accessed 23 Dec. 2020].
- 65 关楚璞, *星洲十年*, p. 145.
- 66 Sherman Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men: Consumer Culture in China and Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 58–9; Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 97, 115.
- 67 Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men*, p. 79.
- 68 Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Chinese Graphic Design in Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 36.

- ⁶⁹ See, for example, 新加坡中华总商会, *新加坡中华总商会第二届国货展览推销大会特刊* (新加坡: 新加坡中华总商会, 1936), C4.
- ⁷⁰ Simon Go, *Hong Kong Apothecary: A Visual History of Chinese Medicine Packaging* (Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2008).
- ⁷¹ Brandel and Turbeville, *Tiger Balm Gardens*, p. 27.
- ⁷² Sherman Cochran recounts the marketing success of a pharmaceutical product known as Humane Elixir by a Japanese company in China during the 1910s through its graphically striking trademark of a man with an unusual hat and moustache. See Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men*, pp. 44–6.
- ⁷³ There were many reports of counterfeit Eng Aun Tong products. See, for example, “永安堂控究台南偽造萬金油案”, *申報*, 20 Feb. 1934; “獅牌萬金油商標撤銷”, *申報*, 25 May 1930; “虎標永安堂訴願結果: 仁安堂侯獅兩標撤銷”, *申報*, 8 June 1934.
- ⁷⁴ Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men*, pp. 121–3; Ralph Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906–1951* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 37–43.
- ⁷⁵ Brandel and Turbeville, p. 28.
- ⁷⁶ 顏淑芬, ed., *月份牌王 -- 關蕙農* (Hong Kong: 香港藝術中心, 1993). Go, *Hong Kong Apothecary*, p. 159.
- ⁷⁷ Yeh, “Afterword”.
- ⁷⁸ Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men*, pp. 127–8.
- ⁷⁹ 姚梦桐, *流动迁移, 在地经历: 新加坡视觉艺术现象* (新加坡: 南洋理工大学孔子学院, 2017), pp. 135–44; 潘醒农, *馬來亞潮侨通鑑* (新加坡: 南岛出版社, 1950), p. 159.
- ⁸⁰ The pioneering pictorial was *Dianshizhai huabao* (點石齋畫報, 1884–1889) of Shanghai. See Ellen Johnston Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), pp. 51–7; Julia Frances Andrews, “Commercial Art and China’s Modernization”, in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Julia Frances Andrews and Kuiyi Shen (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), pp. 181–212.
- ⁸¹ 沈仪婷, “谱写虎标传奇: 胡文虎与其创业文化史”, unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Singapore, 2013, pp. 110–7.
- ⁸² 章星虹, *星洲星光: 现代旅人手记* (新加坡: 八方文化创做室, 2016), pp. 33–6.
- ⁸³ 星洲日报的先声 (新加坡: 星洲日报, 1929).
- ⁸⁴ Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men*, p. 129.
- ⁸⁵ Lynn Pan, *Shanghai Style: Art and Design between the Wars* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2008), pp. 90–129.
- ⁸⁶ In fact, even Tchang’s signature changed in the designs, from an earlier more angular stylization of the two Chinese characters of his given name (汝器) to a rendering of the last character (器) to resemble a face.
- ⁸⁷ 姚梦桐, *流动迁移, 在地经历*; 陳宗瑞, “本會史略,” *南洋商报*, 23 Dec. 1946.

- ⁸⁸ Zhang was the co-founder of the Shanghai Cartoon Society who also worked as an advertising artist at a series of large corporations, including tobacco companies that pioneered in advertising. Rea, "The Business of Culture"; Sin and Volland, "The Business of Culture"; 张光宇, 张光宇插图集 (北京: 人民美术出版社, 1990).
- ⁸⁹ Charlotte Benton and Tim Benton, "The Style and the Age", in *Art Deco 1910–1939*, ed. Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton and Ghislaine Wood (London: V&A Publishing, 2003), p. 14.
- ⁹⁰ Tim Benton, "Art Deco Architecture", in *Art Deco 1910–1939*, ed. Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton and Ghislaine Wood (London: V&A Publishing, 2003), p. 245.
- ⁹¹ For East Asian examples, see Pan, *Shanghai Style*; Anna Jackson, "Art Deco in East Asia", in *Art Deco 1910–1939*, pp. 371–81.
- ⁹² Benton and Benton, "The Style and the Age", p. 16.
- ⁹³ Ibid., p. 24.
- ⁹⁴ "Malayan Architectural Personalities: Ho Kwong Yew", *The Malayan Architect* 7, 12 (1935): 276–7; "Notice", *Malaya Tribune*, 2 Feb. 1933.
- ⁹⁵ "Maternity Hospital", *Malaya Tribune*, 27 Feb. 1934; "Malaya Not Abolishing the Opium Scourge", *Sunday Tribune (Singapore)*, 22 Nov. 1936; "\$150,000 Building to House Aged Poor", *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 7 July 1937.
- ⁹⁶ "蔡公時建造像坊中兩事之解決", *南洋商報*, 13 April 1929.
- ⁹⁷ "蔡公時烈士像坊評選第一名之圖案", *新加坡畫報* 39 (1929): 25–7.
- ⁹⁸ "Ho Kwong Yew"; "Notice".
- ⁹⁹ See, for example, C. Northcote Parkinson, "The Homes of Malaya", *The Malayan Historical Journal* 2, 2 (1955): 123–30; T.H.H. Hancock, "George Doumgold Coleman, Architect & Planning Advisor to Sir Stamford Raffles, Designer of the Armenian Church, Singapore", *The Quarterly Journal of the Institute of Architects of Malaya* 1, 3 (1951): 57–70; T.H.H. Hancock and C.A. Gibson-Hill, *Architecture in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Art Institute & Institute of Architects of Malaya, 1954); Seow, "Architectural Development in Singapore"; Jon Sun Hock Lim, "Colonial Architecture and Architects of Georgetown (Penang) and Singapore, between 1786 and 1942", unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Singapore, 1990; Lee, *The Singapore House, 1819–1942*; Yunn Chii Wong, "Public Works Department Singapore in the Inter-War Years (1919–1941): From Monumental to Instrumental Modernism", unpublished research report, National University of Singapore, 2003.
- ¹⁰⁰ Shih, "The Concept of the Sinophone".
- ¹⁰¹ The main colonial architectural histories were totally silent on Ho and Aw. See Hancock and Gibson-Hill, *Architecture in Singapore*; T.H.H. Hancock, "'Singaporiana': An Historical Review", *The AA Journal* LXX, 789 (1955): 187–200.

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