

# Ku Lang Hsu: A Colonial Heritage

By Dr Howard M. Scott

Ku Lang Hsu is now known as Gulangyu. The Island lies a few minutes by boat off the island city of Xiamen on the Fujian coast of central China. Taiwan, known earlier as Formosa, lies 160 kilometres due east. Xiamen was previously called Amoy. Both Ku Lang Hsu and Amoy have a long association with European traders. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to enter Amoy. They arrived in the early 1500s but it took them until the mid 1500s to establish regular trade. A small number of Spanish traders from the Philippines followed the Portuguese to the Guangdong and Fujian coast in the late 1500s but it was the Dutch who really strove to extend trade to the hinterland beyond Amoy. The Dutch had begun regular trading with China from the early 1600s but they found it difficult to settle on the China coast, due to Chinese hesitancy. Consequently they occupied Formosa in 1624 and turned it into a trade station to service their commercial interests in both Japan and China. They also used Formosa to provision ships sailing on the southern trade route to the Dutch East Indies. During the 1700s and 1800s British and French rivalry dominated the China scene along with a growing American presence in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Although Dutch interests diminished in China after 1700 they continued to rule The Dutch East Indies until the Japanese occupation of World War Two. Soon after the end of The Pacific War the Dutch East Indies gained independence and became the Republic of Indonesia. Meanwhile, 'extra-territoriality' in China came to an end with Mao Tse-tung's (Mao Zedong) founding of The People's Republic of China in 1949 and European influence in China was severely curtailed. Since WWII, the strongest European presence in Asia has been American; although in China this American influence was severely restrained by the policies of Mao tse-tung. It wasn't until the opening of China in the 1980s under Deng Xiao Ping that an American presence was made welcome in China again. And the rapid economic expansion in China since the 1980s has been largely due to America opening its market to Chinese products.

The Dutch occupation of Formosa in 1624 infuriated the Chinese and it was from Ku Lang Hsu that the pirate warrior Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong), already in rebellion against the Ch'ing (Qing), marshalled his troops to recapture Formosa from the Dutch. Leaving Ku Lang Hsu in April 1661 with 25,000 troops, Koxinga defeated the Dutch in January 1662, liberated Formosa, and ended the 38-year occupation. But foreign trade continued and in 1684 the Ch'ing established a Customs House in Amoy that welcomed first the Portuguese and then the British and by the early 1700s even the Dutch had returned on favourable terms. As trade flourished, foreigners established themselves in Amoy and the Fujianese migrated in ever increasing numbers. The exodus of Chinese became so great that by 1750 the Ch'ing prohibited Chinese migration and banished the foreign traders from Amoy. The banishment of foreign traders and the prohibition on Chinese migration temporarily reduced the economy of Amoy closer to its former status of a scattered community of rural fishermen and farmers.

But these decrees did not end foreign settlement on the islands off Fujian. Historically Ku Lang Hsu may have been a natural reserve of egrets and wild Bougainvilleas with just a few scattered communities of pirate fishermen but Japanese and Chinese pirates had raided the Fujian coast for centuries and European traders were now equally keen to share in the profits of smuggling. Piracy and smuggling were endemic with salt and later opium the most lucrative contraband. The Ch'ing persistently struggled to eradicate piracy, contain smuggling, forbid foreign settlement and restrict foreign trade; but with little success. Following the first Opium War of 1839-1841 and the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, the Ch'ing were obliged to open Amoy, as one of five Treaty Ports, to foreign trade, as well as ceding Hong Kong to Britain. The other Treaty Ports were Canton (Guangzhou), Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo), and Shanghai and opium became the principal Chinese import. (1) Following the signing of the Treaty of Nanking, European traders established rights of residence along the China coast.

Great Britain established a concession on Ku Lang Hsu in 1851 and by 1902 an International Settlement had been formalized with well established Consulates from Britain, Portugal, Holland, Spain, the USA, France, Germany, Japan, Denmark, Austria, Norway, Sweden, Belgium and the Philippines. Foreign Consulates, Trading Houses and wealthy merchants built colonial style residences on Ku Lang Hsu and the International Settlement became the official centre of foreign trade and diplomacy throughout the hinterland of Fujian and beyond. Ku Lang Hsu also became notorious for heavy drinking, excessive gambling, wild nightlife and exotic bordellos. Between the late 1840s and the late 1930s many European colonial-style buildings were constructed on Ku Lang Hsu and the island became renowned amongst Europeans for its trading opportunities, benign climate, architectural splendour and convivial lifestyle. Most of the wealth on display on Ku Lang Hsu was accentuated by the imposing colonial architecture and came primarily from the profits of the opium trade. This trade continued for European firms until the Japanese occupation of coastal China during the 1930s and the Pacific War of 1941-45. (2) But opium use in China continued even after European firms left the trade. The illicit trade was largely controlled by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) in collaboration with the invading Imperial Japanese Army and was not finally eradicated until Mao Tse-tung established The People's Republic of China in October 1949. (3)

The Chinese Civil War, which began in the 1920s, remains unresolved with both Beijing and Taipei claiming One China that includes Taiwan. Although armed hostilities across the Taiwan Straits have ceased an unremitting international diplomatic battle rages with cat and mouse maneuverings from both sides continuing over the most trivial of things. One consequence of this impasse was that the Fujian coast was closed to foreigners after October 1949 for about 30 years and it was not until 1980 when Xiamen was made one of four Special Economic Zones, that foreigners returned once again to Amoy and Ku Lang Hsu. The modern era of 'Opening to the Outside World' had begun.

Ku Lang Hsu's rich history has left the island with a wide variety of architectural styles and many of the fine old buildings constructed since the Treaty of Nanking and during the days of the International Settlement are still standing. (4) Many are dilapidated and badly in need of repair. Some of the colonial style buildings were demolished in the late 20th century and replaced by modern replicas. (5) And other cleared sites had new buildings of modern design constructed on them. But today, many of the historically important colonial style structures are undergoing major restoration, maintenance and renovation. These classic buildings are no longer seen as a humiliating reminder of 'extra-territoriality' under the 'unequal treaties' but rather are valued as an important feature of Amoy's varied history. They are being restored by the city authorities for re-sale to wealthy residents and as an attraction for the growing tourist industry.

The Art Centre of Xiamen University invited me to Amoy as an Artist in Residence in late 2005. This gave me the opportunity to repeatedly visit Ku Lang Hsu and photograph the colonial style architecture. (6) I found, as Lily Wang in the book, 'Discover Gulangyu' stated, an appealing mixture of classical European and Chinese architecture. There are Doric, Romanesque, Corinthian, Tuscan and Ionic columns. There are Corinthian, Ionic Romanesque, Byzantine and Egyptian capitals. There are ornamented Roman astragals and Ionic entablatures and Renaissance and Gothic style windows. And many of these styles have been varied and mixed with Chinese design. There are classic Greek columns adorned with Chinese unicorns, phoenixes, and Taoist diagrams. And a single column may incorporate Doric, Ionic and Corinthian style with a Chinese ceramic trim. The windows can be European, American, Colonial, Chinese, Gothic, Art Deco or Art Nouveau. And some buildings have more than one of these styles on the same wall. The windows can be made from wood, stone, concrete or brick and are single, double, narrow, wide, shuttered, un-shuttered, arched and semi-circular. They may be ornamented with eastern or western design and some have small balconies. The roofs are varied too. The Chinese orange Jiageng roof tiles are very common but there are also mosque domes and designs, Northern European sloping roofs, and roofs with carved phoenixes or other mythical Chinese creatures. The verandas are single,

two, three and four sided and allow for weather protected outdoor living. And finally there are the gates. There are gates with Greek columns ornamented with 18th and 19th century European artwork and Chinese dragons and phoenixes. And the eaves and lintels may be Art Deco. And there are traditional Chinese gates too. Most of these gates follow the Chinese design of a double central door with smaller doors to the right and left. (7)

The photographs that I have included in this reportage are of buildings that I like. I haven't necessarily selected the best known or the most famous buildings of Ku Lang Hsu but rather the buildings that caught my attention. (8) My photos only cover a partial selection of the varied architectural styles to be found on the island as well as some of the more humble homes. The images show these buildings as they were in the final months of 2005 and will enable photographic comparisons to be made in the future, by others with an interest in the island. My hope is that more of these wonderful buildings, both grand and humble, will be restored and regularly maintained so that visitors from China and abroad can visit Ku Lang Hsu to admire them.

## References

- ^ 1: A wide selection of original documents about the opium trade are archived in the DVD by Howard M. Scott, 'A Photographic Essay on Water in Hong Kong', in Appendix 5, 'The Opium Ordinance 1891' The DVD, 'A Photographic Essay on Water in Hong Kong' is lodged in the University library of The University of Auckland in New Zealand, The University of Hong Kong in Hong Kong and Xiamen University in Xiamen, China.
- ^ 2: William N. Brown, 'Amoy Magic', Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2003, pp397-411.
- ^ 3: Zhang Chengjun and Liu Jianye, (Translated by He Jun, Gu Wentong, Chung Yu, and Xu Rong) 'An Illustrated History of China's War of Resistance against Japan', Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1995.
- ^ 4: For a general overview of Ku Lang Hsu I recommend the publication by Jie Gong. Jie Gong, (Translated by Zhang Baijia and Chen Junming) 'Gulangyu: Garden on the Sea', Xiamen: China International Press, 2003.
- ^ 5: An interesting selection of 318 old photographs of Amoy and Ku Lang Hsu have been collected and published under the direction of the Xiamen historian, Hong Bu Ren. Hong Bu Ren (Editor) 'Old Photos of Xiamen', Xiamen: People's Art Publishing Company, 2000.
- ^ 6: The recently published book by Bill Brown on Gulangyu has recorded many of the historic buildings and their history. I found this publication very useful to help me locate and identify specific buildings on Ku Lang Hsu and I would like to thank the author Bill Brown, the historical researcher Hong Bu Ren and the photographer Lily Wang for their thorough work. William N. Brown, 'Discover Gulangyu', Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2005.
- ^ 7: William N. Brown, 'Discover Gulangyu', Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2005, pp182-197.
- ^ 8: Jie Gong, 'Go to Gulangyu: Sightseeing the Old Villas' Wuhan: Hubei Drawing and Publishing Co., 2002.