

Historic Building Appraisal

No. 112 Jervois Street, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong

No. 112 Jervois Street (蘇杭街) is situated in one of the earliest Chinese settlements established after the British takeover of Hong Kong Island in the early 1840s. The Chinese community at that time, which mainly comprised newcomers from mainland China, was first established along the northern coast of Hong Kong Island, with settlements concentrated in the Upper (上市場), Middle (中市場) and Lower Bazaars (下市場). The main business centre near the coast was called the Lower Bazaar, within which the main thoroughfare was today's Jervois Street in Sheung Wan.¹ It was only renamed Jervois Street (乍畏街) after a great fire in 1851. Before that, it was known as "Lower Bazaar Road", which was first identified on a map of 1843 as part of the Lower Bazaar, and had a row of houses on either side of the street. *Historical Interest*

A great fire broke out at the Lower Bazaar near today's Western Market and Jervois Street on 28 December 1851. It spread eastwards to the present-day intersection of Queen's Road Central (皇后大道中), Jervois Street and Wellington Street (威靈頓街), southwards to Queen's Road Central, westwards to the junction of Jervois Street and Morrison Street (摩利臣街), and northwards to the Bonham Strand (文咸東街) Praya north of Jervois Street. To prevent the flames from spreading to Central, the British Army and Royal Navy blew up the buildings with explosives to create a firebreak, which resulted in the destruction of around 450 houses. This devastating fire led to the reconstruction of the Lower Bazaar, including Lower Bazaar Road, which was renamed Jervois Street after Major General William Jervois, who had directed the firefighting operation. The name can be identified on a plan of the City of Victoria dating from 1856. Jervois Street was known as "乍畏街" in Chinese, as "乍畏" is similar to "Jervois" in pronunciation. Interestingly, it was informally known by local Chinese residents as "So Hong Street" (蘇杭街), literally a street of Suzhou (蘇州) and Hangzhou (杭州) in mainland China, since it was well known for shops selling silk products from those cities. For instance, between the 1870s and 1880s, it was said that

¹ The Lower Bazaar was close to today's Western Market. The Upper Bazaar (上市場) was located on the hillside at the back of the Lower Bazaar, and was generally referred to as Taipingshan (太平山). The main streets of the Upper Bazaar were approximately where the present-day Lower and Upper Lascar Rows (上摩囉街) (下摩囉街) are situated. The Middle Bazaar (中市場) was an area including today's Peel (卑利街), Graham (嘉咸街), Gutzlaff (吉士笠街), Cochrane (閣麟街), Gage (結志街) and Gough Streets (歌賦街) in Central. At the foot of this area were some marine lots. The Middle Bazaar was located very close to the areas inhabited by Europeans. In view of the cultural differences between the Chinese and European communities and the undesirable hygienic condition of the Chinese tenements, the government carried out a segregation policy and relocated the Chinese residents of the Middle Bazaar to the Taipingshan area crossed by Lower Lascar Row (下摩囉街), Hollywood Road (荷里活道) and Taipingshan Street (now known as Tai Ping Shan Street) (太平山街). By September 1844, all the old structures in the Middle Bazaar had been removed. Subsequently, all the areas to the east of Aberdeen Street (鴨巴甸街) in Central were inhabited by Europeans. This situation continued until the rise of wealthy Chinese merchants in the 1860s.

some 20 to 30 shops of that kind were opened there. In the 1930s, Jervois Street was still well known for silk products, but the number of these shops declined gradually after the Second World War. Despite that, in 1978, the street was renamed “蘇杭街” in Chinese, although Jervois Street was retained as the English name.

Among the many shops selling silk products at Jervois Street was a herbal tea shop named Yuen Kut Lam (源吉林, the current trademark is Yuen Kut Lam’s) and a pigment shop named Yuen Kwong Wo (源廣和) run by the Yuen (源) family. The Yuens’ motherland was in Heshan (鶴山), where they first operated a pigment shop named “San Chang” (三昌顏料店) in Foshan (佛山) during the Daoguang (道光) reign (1821 - 1850) of the Qing (清) dynasty.² In 1892 during the Guangxu reign (光緒壬辰年), they also established a factory there to produce herbal tea with the brand name Yuen Kut Lam, which it was hoped could heal the poor. The brand name bears the founders’ wish for the fortune and prosperity of the Yuens and for the family business to flourish like a forest. The tea itself, which contained tea leaves impregnated with herbs, was known as “Kam Wo Tea” (甘和茶). Therefore, the tea was generally referred to as “Yuen Kut Lam Kam Wo Tea” (源吉林甘和茶). The tea was sold in the pigment shop. It became widely known in 1898 during the Guangxu reign (光緒戊戌年), when it healed many victims of the plague in places such as Nanhai (南海) and Foshan in Guangdong Province. From then on, the Yuens shifted their business focus to the herbal tea, while the pigment business was wound down.

In 1906, two branch shops were opened in Hong Kong and Guangzhou (廣州). The one in Hong Kong was first opened at No. 118A Jervois Street,³ and moved to the present building at No. 112 in 1923. At present, No. 112 is still situated on a plot of land registered as “The Remaining Portion of Inland Lot No. 195C” (or I.L. 195C RP). According to land records, this plot of land was first leased to a Chinese trader named Chun Tai (陳泰) from the government in 1883. It changed hands in 1888, 1894, 1911, 1919 and 1923 when it was acquired by Yuen Shut-ling (源述靈). It was possessed by the Yuen family from then on.⁴

² It was referred to as “Sam Cheong Firm of Fatshan” in English in an application for registration of trade marks by the Yuens in Hong Kong in the 1910s.

³ “Application for Registration of Trade Marks”, dated 14 August 1919, *Hongkong Government Gazette*, 15 August 1919 (Supplement) from Hong Kong Government Reports Online, and Publicity Bureau for South China, *Anglo-Chinese Directory*, Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Publicity Bureau for China, 1922).

⁴ The ownership of the plot of land “I.L. 195C RP” before 1923 is set out below:

1883 – 1888: Chun Tai (陳泰), trader;
1888 – 1894: Cheung Ting-tsim (張廷俊);
1894 – 1911: Helena Adelaide Margesson and Emily Charlotte Margesson;
1911 – 1919: Cheong Pat (張弼), merchant;
1919: Cheung Yeung Shi (張楊氏), wife of the late Cheong Pat; and

Following the tradition in Foshan, the Yuens sold both pigments and herbal tea in the shop, with an emphasis on the latter. The brand name Yuen Kut Lam was retained for the tea, while the pigment shop was named Yuen Kwong Wo (源廣和). Packed in small cardboard boxes, the herbal tea was also commonly known as small box tea (盒仔茶).

It is believed that No. 112 Jervois Street was a back-to-back Chinese shophouse built around the 1900s.⁵ A new Public Health and Buildings Ordinance, which required the provision of a scavenging lane at the rear of a domestic house, was enacted in 1903. According to a “Deed of Covenant with reference to a Scavenging Lane in rear of No. 112 Jervois Street” dated 29 August 1912, a portion of the building’s rear would become a scavenging lane when the party walls and other structures adjoining it had been removed. Moreover, according to the “Report of the Director of Public Works for the Year 1912” compiled on 30 July 1913, No. 112 was on the list of “scavenging lanes to be provided by owners when an opportunity occurs of gaining access to them from the adjoining streets”.⁶ No scavenging lane was shown in the Japanese Title Deed (家屋所有權登錄申請書) of 1942 (昭和十七年), or the maps of 1955, 1977 and 2020. Up until now No. 112 is still without any scavenging lane at the rear.⁷

The building survived the Japanese Occupation (1941 – 1945). According to the Japanese Title Deed of 1942, it was a three-storey (三階) shop (商店) built of brickwork and timber (磚瓦木石造) in Chinese style (中國式), with some damage (小破) at that time. While most of the walls have been plastered and painted, grey brickwork can be identified at locations where the finish has come off.

1919 – 1923: Lo On (羅安), trader.

Helena Adelaide Margesson and Emily Charlotte Margesson were British from a distinguished family. Their father William Margesson was the rector of Whetlington and high sheriff of Sussex in 1805, while their mother Mary Frances Margesson was from the Cooke Baronets of Wheatley Hall. One of their brothers, Henry Davis Margesson, was a merchant at Macau who founded Margesson & Co, and set up the Hong Kong branch in 1865.

⁵ Chinese shophouses were often referred to as “tenement houses” or “tenements” in colonial records. The older shophouses were built in a variety of styles including back-to-back, back-to-side, back-to-lane, back-to-street/ road.

⁶ *Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports*, 1912.

⁷ Then it appears that the building was constructed before 1903. Nonetheless, the deed of covenant of 29 August 1912 also shows that the owner, Cheong Pat (張弼), who purchased No. 112 in 1911, had “recently constructed on Crown Land adjoining the said Remaining Portion of Inland Lot No. 195C, a verandah or balcony projecting from the said 112 Jervois Street.” The technical feasibility of adding a verandah or balcony to an existing building at that time is in doubt. However, the rate records for the years 1910, 1911 and the first half year of 1912 are missing, which makes it difficult to prove with archival records if No. 112 was rebuilt around 1912.

The Land Registry Office, “Deed of Covenant with reference to a Scavenging Lane in rear of No. 112 Jervois Street” dated 29 August 1912. *Property Particulars of the Remaining Portion of Inland Lot No. 195C* (Memorial No. 50537).

No. 112 Jervois Street is a three-storey building with a long and narrow footprint. The ground floor houses a shop, while the upper floors are for residential and storage purposes. The front facade is designed with a cantilevered balcony on each upper floor, each on a concrete slab supported on concrete brackets and metal posts on both sides. The soffits of the balconies are decorated with moulded details. The decorative balustrades with geometric patterns are concealed by two large stainless-steel name plaques of “源吉林” and “源廣和”. Timber plaques were formerly used.

*Architectural
Merit*

The building has an eye-catching shopfront consisting of a timber doorframe painted red with classical details and a metal grille gate. Above the main entrance is a timber panel engraved with the name of the shop “源吉林” with a trademark under it. The metal gate surround was removed in the renovation work carried out around November 2019, but the trademark and symmetrical band of curling ironwork remain intact. Before the renovation, the vertical panel to the left of the doorway gave the name of the tea and its brand name (源吉林甘和茶), while that to the right stated that Yuen Kwong Wo (源廣和硯硃店) sells red pigment. The old vertical panels in poor condition have become museum collection items. The plinths below the timber frame are finished with red mosaic tiles.

Internally, the layout remains intact. The ground floor is mainly a retail area fitted with a timber cabinet and cashier’s counter. Upon entry through the main entrance, one encounters a wide threshold of granite floor slabs. A large pedestal finished with terrazzo near the shopfront is retained. The timber strips on the wall prevent moisture entering the brickwork, while a raised platform to prevent flooding also helps protect the goods. There is an opening in the timber boarding above the cashier, which is a smart design aimed to allow staff to hang up goods or money for convenience and security reasons. Mouldings supporting the timber joists and boarding for the first floor can also be identified. A timber staircase leading to the upper floors is still in use. The timber balustrade is of an elegant design with turned newel posts and balusters. The yard at the rear was originally open-air but is now covered. The space behind the yard (or the rear end of the building), which was used for storage purposes, has been recently converted for use as an office.

Proceeding from the ground to the first floor via the timber staircase, one would firstly see a cockloft situated between the floors. The Chinese characters “賬房” (account’s office), which were inscribed on the timber door lintel, have left a clear indication of the cockloft’s former use. The floor is laid with floral-

patterned cement floor tiles. The cockloft frontage facing the shop entrance is the most decorative part of the ground floor. It is designed with a timber decorative framework with a meander pattern, below which is a timber checker screen resting on a timber balustrade with a swastika motif. Hanging side by side in the centre are a pair of gilded timber plaques inscribed with the names “源吉林” and “源廣和” .

On the first floor, the living area is divided into two with a timber grille partition. The floor slabs are timber planks resting on timber joists and mouldings. The floor is laid with cement tiles patterned with pearl chips. It is worth noting that there are also some floor tiles showing the Chinese characters “祿” (wealth) and “壽” (longevity). Timber strips have been fixed to the walls for the protection of the goods stored on the first floor. There are three double-panel French doors with pivot windows above, which open onto the balcony. The whole set of doors and windows is of exquisite design with lozenge patterns, fitted with pressed glass of different colours, which is reminiscent of the Chinese Manchurian window design. At the rear is a bridge over the ground floor yard, which gives access to the kitchen. The yard enhances ventilation as well as the levels of natural light inside the building. The kitchen, which has been disused since around 2007, has brickwork stoves and was designed to be semi-open in order to benefit from the better ventilation and illumination.⁸ The second-floor interior was inaccessible at the time of the survey. From the exterior, it can be seen that the second-floor balcony is enclosed. The tiled roof has been replaced with a concrete one, while the pitched form is retained.

No. 112 Jervois Street is of considerable social value and local interest. For ***Social Value & Local Interest*** over a century, Yuen Kut Lam’s Kam Wo Tea has been a popular brand of herbal tea in Hong Kong, mainland China, Southeast Asia, and even as far away as Canada, and is especially famous for its ability to heal colds. It holds a special place in the collective memory of Hong Kong people, at least for older generations, and is still made in Hong Kong. Up until now, the firm has been located at No. 112 for over a century. Following the takeover of the Foshan-based firm by the Chinese government in 1956, the Hong Kong branch has operated since then as the head office (總行) of Yuen Kut Lam’s. The century-old shophouse is an iconic landmark, and has attracted wide coverage in publications, the press, social media and local films. For the Yuens, it is where their family business has its

⁸ A chef was employed to prepare lunch and supper for about 20 employees. Almost all the employees were indeed members of the Yuen family. Great meals would also be prepared on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month and festive days, mainly the spring meal (春茗) on either day between the eighth and twelfth days of the Chinese New Year, and the meal on Winter Solstice (冬至). This practice ceased around 2007 when the chef retired.

deepest roots. The building would also provide temporary accommodation for family members and relatives coming from places outside Hong Kong.

No. 112 Jervois Street has group value with other historic buildings, including Western Market (舊上環街市), the Man Mo Temple Compound (文武廟) (both Declared Monuments) and Ladder Street (樓梯街, Grade 1). ***Group Value***

No. 112 Jervois Street is a rare surviving example of back-to-back shophouses in Hong Kong. No major alterations that would have diminished its authenticity can be identified. It has been standing in Sheung Wan, a commercial and residential area with deep historical roots for the Chinese community, for over a century and has become a famous landmark. It holds considerable value in both built heritage and intangible cultural heritage. ***Rarity, Built Heritage Value & Authenticity***

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