

Pre-war *Tong Lau*: A Hong Kong Shophouse Typology



(Source: Lee Ho Yin)

by

Lee Ho Yin

Architectural Conservation Programme (ACP)
Faculty of Architecture, The University of Hong Kong

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1.0 Definition of *Tong Lau* and Tenement House

Tong Lau (functioning as singular and plural; 唐樓, literally, “Chinese building”) belongs to the generic urban shophouse typology found in predominantly Chinese cities in Southern China and Southeast Asia, such as Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Macau, Singapore and Penang. It is a typology that has infused with material, construction and living traditions of Southern Chinese in 19th-century urban centres, particularly towns and cities in Guangdong and Fujian provinces. The prototype of this typology is the 19th century urban shophouse of Southern China (**Fig. 1**). This paper focuses on *Tong Lau* of Hong Kong built before the Pacific War (1941-45).



Fig. 1 A drawing by the 19th-century Shanghai-based illustrator Wu Youru (吳友如), depicting a Southern Chinese urban street scene lined with shophouses. (Source: 十九世紀中國風情畫二百圖)

Tong Lau has become a term that applies to the urban shophouse typology that has acquired special characteristics peculiar to Hong Kong as a result of such local factors as land policy, town planning and building regulations, all of which combined to transform the design from the prototypical architecture in order to adapt it to local conditions and circumstances.

Tong Lau in Hong Kong has been referred to as “tenement house.” Strictly speaking, this term does not describe the architecture, but the function of such buildings for tenement housing in response to the critical shortage of living quarters to accommodate the rising population. Such a situation became more severe from the 1930s to the 1960s, when mass influx of refugees escaping from war and political turmoil in Mainland China. The introduction of a public housing policy and the construction of large-scale public housing estates that began in the 1950s eventually alleviated the tenement housing problem in *Tong Lau* to a large degree.

According to Hong Kong’s Building Regulations, a building that is used for tenement housing is a “Tenement House,” which is defined in Clause 6, sub-clause 56 of the *Public Health and Buildings Ordinance, 1903* as “any domestic building constructed, used, or adopted to be used

for human habitation by more than one tenant.”

In summary, the type of Chinese shophouse found in Hong Kong should properly be called **Hong Kong Tong Lau** (香港唐樓 or 港式唐樓) or simply *Tong Lau*, as this provides cultural and geographical distinction from its counterparts in other places, such as, Guangzhou *Qilou* (廣州騎樓), Penang Shophouse (檳城店屋) and Singapore Shophouse (星州店屋).

2.0 Historical Context of Chinese Settlements in Hong Kong

In the 19th century, as foreign powers aggressively pried open China for trade and other economic gains, they provided an unexpected escape route to thousands of Chinese who were desperately seeking a way out of their socio-economic predicament in China. The people in the coastal areas of eastern southern Fujian and eastern Guangdong were exposed to opportunities for business and employment overseas through local trading ports that had been opened to foreign trade. For example, in the province of Fujian, the coastal city of Amoy (now Xiamen) established maritime trading with British Singapore in 1821, while its provincial capital Fuzhou (formerly called Foochow) opened to foreign trade in 1842. The capital of Guangdong province, Canton (now Guangzhou), became China's first official foreign trading port in 1759, while Hong Kong became a British possession and entrepôt in 1842 at the end of the First Opium War.

Consequently, large numbers of coastal Chinese from Guangdong and Fujian began a mass exodus to foreign lands in search of a better livelihood with considerable numbers being drawn particularly to the politically stable and economically vibrant British colonies of Hong Kong and Singapore in the Far East. The British colonial administrations of Hong Kong and Singapore welcomed the Chinese immigrants because the newly established colonial territories needed the cheap labour and services, cottage industries, and the trade and investment that the Chinese brought with them.

After Hong Kong Island was ceded to the British in 1841, the focus was on developing Hong Kong as a trading port and a foothold to the lucrative China trade. The first city plan for the city of Hong Kong, known as City of Victoria, was *Gordon's Map of 1843* (**Figs. 2 and 3**), is basically a survey map of the locations of the early batch of land lots sold for residential and commercial uses.

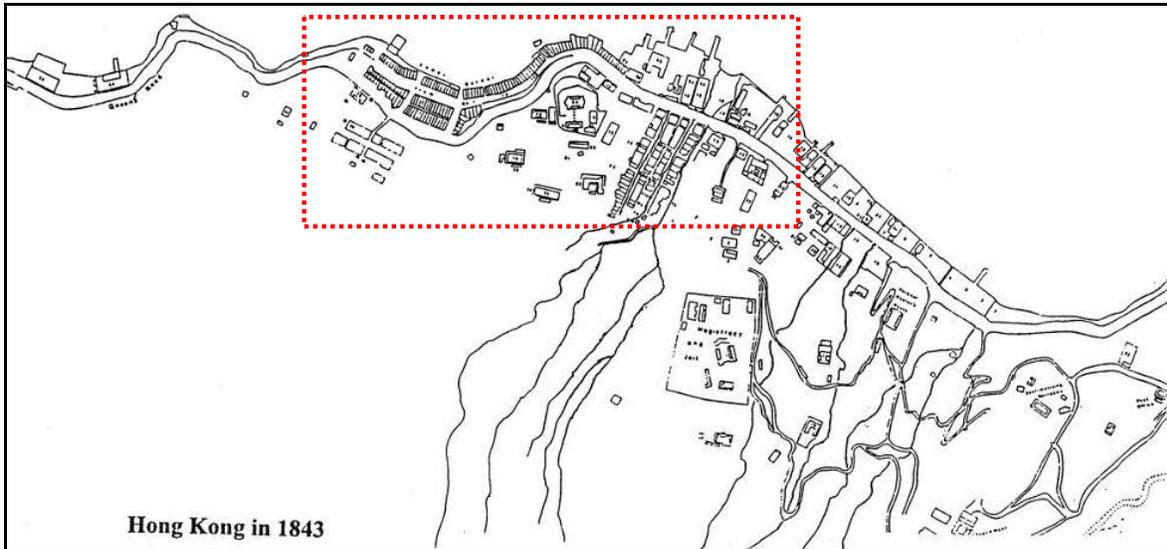


Fig. 2 *Gordon's Map of 1943*, showing the early ad-hoc layout of the City of Victoria. The large rectangular compound marked "Magistracy and Jail," is the site of today's Central Police Station Compound. The area outlined in red dotted lines is shown in Fig. 3 below. (Source: Public Records Office, Hong Kong)

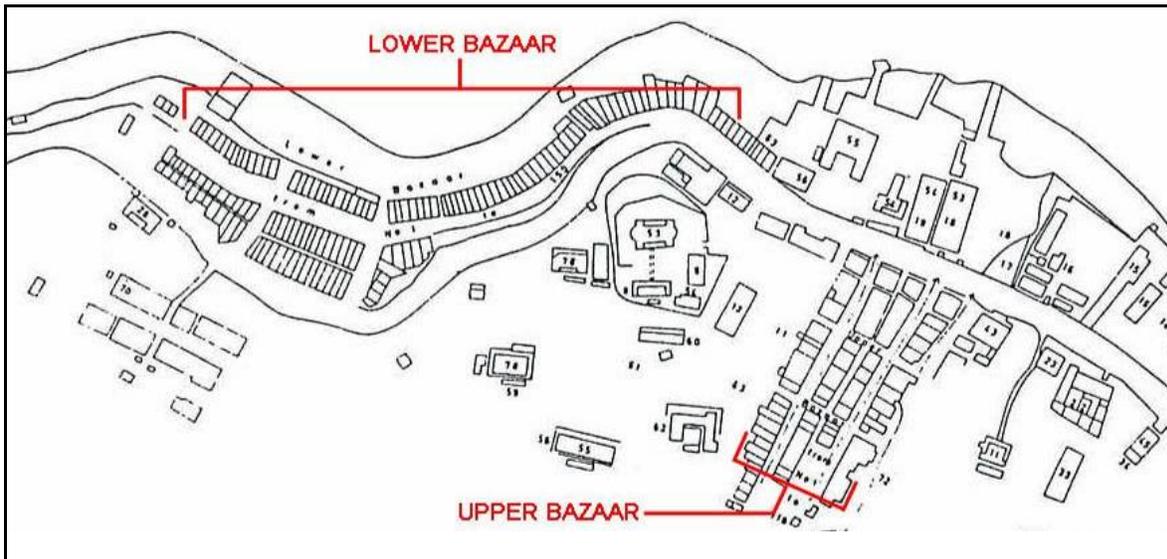


Fig. 3 Details of *Gordon's Map of 1943*, showing the three Chinese quarters, Lower Bazaar (today's Bonham Strand area), Upper Bazaar (today's Gage Street area) and Tai Ping Shan, which appears in its initial developing form (indicated by the two short parallel blocks in dotted lines on the lower left of Lower Bazaar). (Source: Public Records Office, Hong Kong)

In June 1853, two years and five months after the British hoisted the Union Jack on Possession Street to proclaim the takeover of Hong Kong Island, there were three areas in the newly fledged City of Victoria where emigrant Chinese settled (Evans 1970: 69-71) (**Fig. 3**). They were:

1. the downstream banks that correspond to the area across the road from today's Central Market, along today's Cochrane Street, Gutzlaff Street, Graham Street and Peel Street;
2. the coastal land that corresponds to the area along today's Jervois Street, Bonham Strand and Bonham Strand West;
3. the area that would become the Crown Colony of Hong Kong's first "Chinese Town": Tai Ping Shan.

The early forms of these three Chinese quarters are shown on *Gordon's Map of 1843* (above), the earliest map depicting the City of Victoria in the new Crown Colony. During this time, Tai Ping Shan was at the beginning of its development, as evident in the two short rows of yet-to-be-built development, marked in dotted lines. By 1856, Tai Ping Shan had fully grown to its territorial extent, as shown on an 1856 Map of City of Victoria (**Fig. 4**).

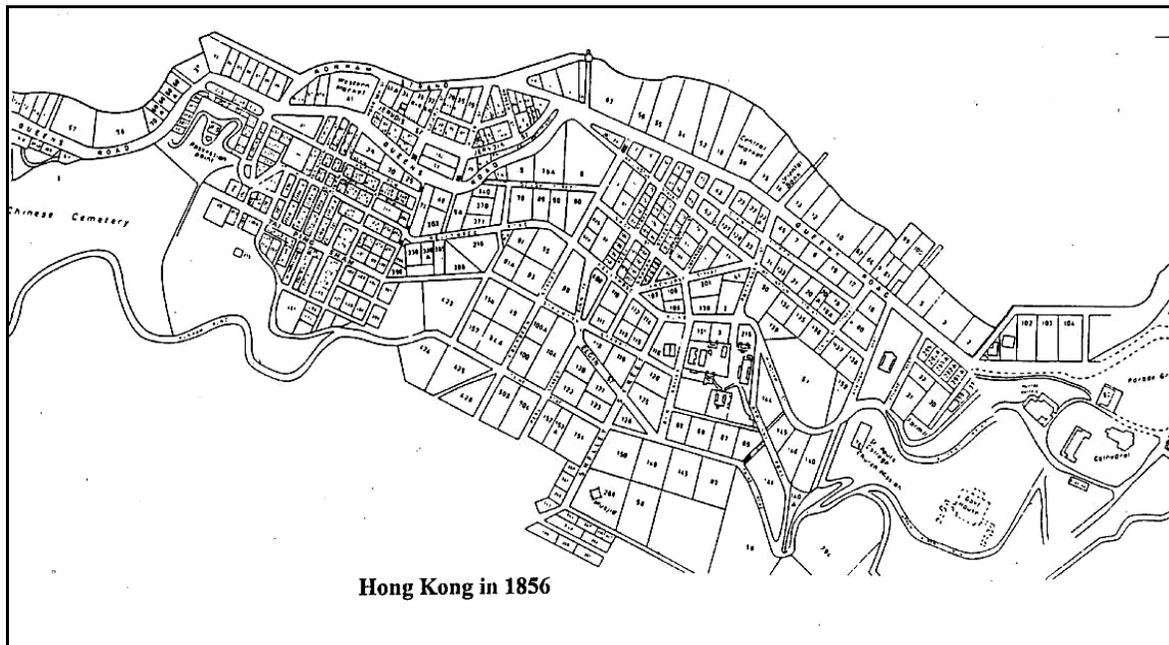


Fig. 4 Part of the 1856 Map of City of Victoria. Compared with the *Gordon's Map of 1843* (Fig. 2), the three areas resided predominantly by Chinese were now fully developed and distinguished by a denser urban pattern than its more spacious surrounding lots that were designated for European houses and public buildings. (Source: Public Records Office, Hong Kong)

As shown in the map *Scheme for the Improvement of Tai Ping Shan* (**Fig. 5**), dated 15 September 1866 (below), the fully developed Tai Ping Shan was an area roughly 300 m by 250 m and bounded by Caine Road in the south, Queen's Road (today's Queen's Road Central) in the north, Sing Wong Lane (today's Shing Wong Street) in the east and St. Stephen Street (today's Po Yan Street) in the west. By the eve of the bubonic plague outbreak in 1894, Tai Ping Shan was the main urban Chinese settlement in the City of Victoria, supporting a sizable percentage of the estimated 210,000 Chinese in Hong Kong (Pryor 1975: 65).

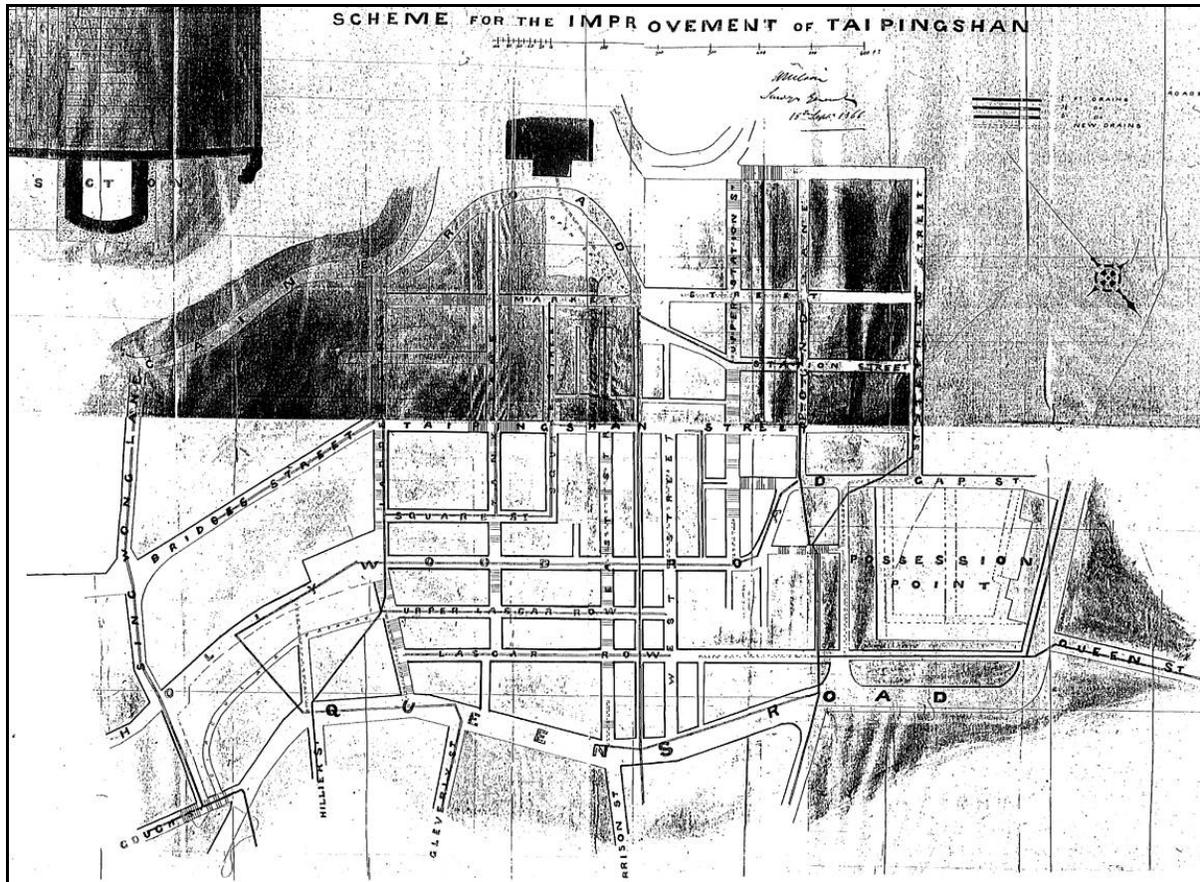


Fig. 5 The 1866 map (the date is shown under the signature of the Surveyor General) entitled “Scheme for the Improvement of Tai Ping Shan, showing the extent of district, as indicated by the smaller lots typically developed for Chinese shophouses. (Source: Public Records Office, Hong Kong.)

3.0 Early *Tong Lau* in Hong Kong (Pre-statutory Control)

The earliest form of Hong Kong *Tong Lau* was found on the island’s major Chinese settlements, one of which was Tai Ping Shan. Prior to the bubonic outbreak in 1894, the design of these buildings was broadly similar in appearance and construction with those found in towns and cities of Southern China during this period. In *Mr. Chadwick’s Report on the Sanitation Condition of Hong Kong* (in Faure 1997: 33-46),¹ there is a section on “Chinese Houses,” which describes in detail with illustrations the *Tong Lau* in Tai Ping Shan in the 1880s (the report is dated to 1882). A summary of the section is as follows:

¹ Osbert Chadwick (1844-1913) was a former Royal Engineer commissioned by the Colonial Office in 1881 to investigate the sanitary condition of Hong Kong. This investigation was in response to complaints from the commander of the local military garrisons that poor public sanitation was the main cause of illness and death among his soldiers. The result of the investigation was published in 1882 as *Mr. Chadwick’s Report on the Sanitation Condition of Hong Kong* (more commonly known as *Chadwick’s Report*), and the section “Chinese Houses” became the basis for Hong Kong’s first comprehensive set of building regulations, *Public Health and Buildings Ordinance 1903*.

3.1 Differences between Early *Tong Lau* in Hong Kong and their Counterparts in Southern China

Although the architecture of early *Tong Lau* in Hong Kong was broadly similar to those in Southern China, Chadwick observed that there were noticeable differences due to “European influence and example, but principally to the necessity for economy of space on account of the high price of land and the great cost of preparing level sites for building” (*Chadwick’s Report*, in Faure 1997: 34). This means that the local conditions did have an effect in transforming even the early *Tong Lau*, which featured decorative elements inspired by Western Classical architecture and, more significantly, were more compact than their Mainland counterparts (**Fig. 6**).



Fig. 6 Tai Ping Shan in the 1870s, showing the earliest form of Hong Kong *Tong Lau*, which were broadly similar in appearance and construction with those found in towns and cities of Southern China during this period, but were different in decorative details and size. (Source: Hong Kong Museum of History)

3.2 Materials and Construction of Early Hong Kong *Tong Lau*²

Foundation

Because of the sloping terrain of Tai Ping Shan (and most areas in the City of Victoria), the *Tong Lau* stood on “artificially prepared sites, part in bank, part in cutting.” Chadwick observed that “basements or cellars under houses are unknown.”

Floor

On the ground floor, unglazed red tiles (Canton tiles) were used, but the floor was frequently left un-tiled, with exposed rammed earth.

² All citations in this section are from *Chadwick’s Report* (1882), in Faure 1997.

Cookhouses and alleys were paved with granite blocks. Upper floors consisted of floor planks of Chinese fir supported on round rafters that were flattened above to receive the planks (and below to receive the ceiling, if there was one).

Walls Walls were constructed of blue Canton brick (traditional Chinese grey brick) usually of inferior quality (“soft and very porous”). Red bricks were more expensive and therefore rarely used. Granite from local quarries was largely used for door jambs and lintels over shop fronts. The walls were usually plastered but sometimes left fair-faced, with the brick surface rubbed smooth and neatly pointed in the traditional Chinese manner.

Roof The roof was tiled with unglazed semicircular clay tiles laid with overlapping ends; the eaves tiles were ornamental and glazed.

3.3 Architectural Characters of Early Hong Kong *Tong Lau* (Figs. 7 and 8)

Building Frontage Each unit, of two to three storey high and between 13 to 16 feet wide (about 4 to 5 m), was separated from adjacent units by brick party walls. A large unit for the wealthy was formed by uniting several narrow units by doors or archways in the party walls.

Building Depth The building measured about 30 to 60 feet from front to back (about 9 to 18 m), and two rows of buildings were built back to back with a common back wall and no space between them (this would change with the post-plague *Public Health and Buildings Ordinance 1903*, which reduced the building depth and introduced a scavenging lane, or service back lane, for waste disposal).

Service Areas A space of about 7 feet deep (about 2 m) at the back of the building was separated by a wall from the rest of the building. This is the “cookhouse,” which also served as the kitchen, toilet and the backyard. Venting of cooking fire was by means of a 4 to 5 feet square (1.2 to 1.5 m square) “smoke hole” through the upper floor(s) and the roof, or simply through windows. Chimneys were the exception. Compliance to the Ordinance 8 of 1856 that required every house to be “provided with a latrine or privy and ashpit” was rarely observed. The construction of waste water drainage was unregulated and often inadequate, if available.

Served Areas The ground floor of a *Tong Lau* was used as shop space, but a cockloft was often built on the upper space in front of the partition wall of the cookhouse, and used as working or sleeping quarters. The upper floor was partitioned into cabins of about 10 by 10 feet wide (about 3 m²) above which was a cockloft level that was similarly divided. Each cabin housed an individual or a family, and Chadwick inspected one tenement unit and found five families of 16 people living on one floor. Chadwick reported the case of a row of eight small houses that provided tenement lodging for 428 inhabitants, who were common labourers, each of whom had 230 cubic feet of space (about 20 m³) (Faure 1997: 46). It was reported in 1874 edition of the *Hong Kong Annual Report* that pigs and poultry were

kept inside buildings.

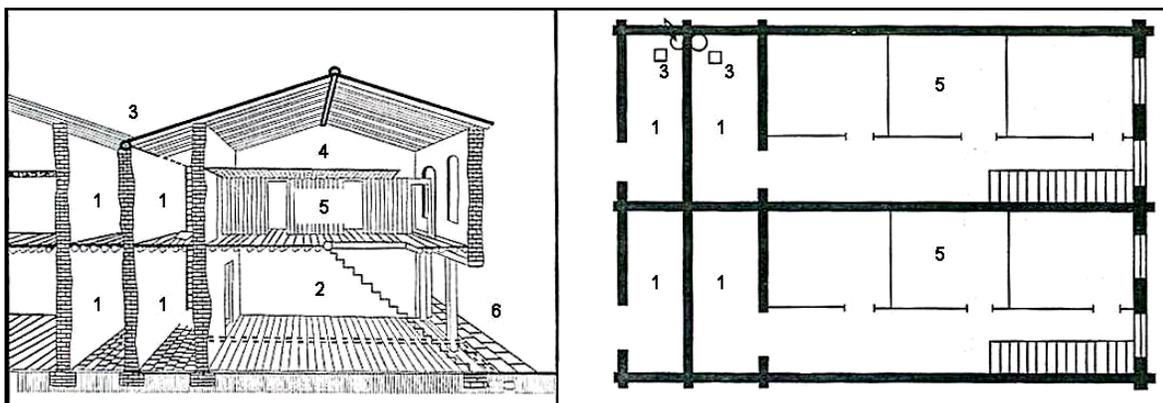


Fig. 7 Drawings depicting the section and plan of an early *Tong Lau* found at Tai Ping Shan in the early 1880s. In the drawings, 1 = cookhouses; 2 = shop; 3 = smoke hole through the roof and floor; 4 = cockloft or platform above tenement cabins; 5 = tenement cabins; 6 = street in front of building. (Source: *Chadwick's Report* (1882) in Faure 1997: 34 and 35)



Fig. 8 Block plan of several rows of early *Tong Lau* at Tai Ping Shan, early 1880s. (Source: *Chadwick's Report* (1882) in Faure 1997: 44)

4.0 Statutory Control of *Tong Lau* in Post-plague Hong Kong

4.1 The First Statutory Control of *Tong Lau*: *Public Health and Buildings Ordinance 1903*

In conjunction with the first town plan for Singapore, the *Jackson Plan*, or *Plan of the Town of Singapore* of 1922, the authorities in Singapore issued a set of building regulations that control the design and construction of Chinese shophouses in Singapore in terms of appearance, public space provision, and construction and materials standards. In contrast, the authorities of early Hong Kong imposed little statutory control on the architecture of Chinese shophouses other than that under *Buildings and Nuisance Ordinance* of 1856, which regulated the use of the building by prohibiting trades that would cause nuisance because of smell or noise. Such trades were cited as “brasier, slaughterman, soap maker, sugar baker, fellmonger, melter of tallow, oilman, butcher, distiller, victualler or tavern-keeper, blacksmith, nightman, scavenger, or any other noisy or offensive trade.”

It was not until the beginning of the 20th century when Hong Kong had its first comprehensive set of enforceable building regulations under the *Public Health and Buildings Ordinance 1903*, which regulated living space standards and construction quality of Chinese shophouses. These regulations were remedial measures after the outbreak of bubonic plague in the over-crowded Chinese quarters of Tai Ping Shan in 1894.

The recommendations made in *Mr. Chadwick's Report on the Sanitation Condition of Hong Kong* (1882) were resisted by both the European and the Chinese communities. In essence, the argument against it was out of financial considerations, as it was felt that the higher standards for living spaces and better provision of latrine would cost more and thereby reduce available accommodation. However, mindset changed with the epidemic outbreak of bubonic plague at Tai Ping Shan in 1894, which took a heavy toll in fatalities. As Chadwick summarized the situation in his *Preliminary Report on the Sanitary Condition of Hong Kong* (dated 10 April 1902) presented to the Legislative Council (second paragraph of section 98, page 34):

. . . Now land is costly in Hongkong, either it has to be excavated in the hill-side, or reclaimed from the sea. Naturally, the land-owner desires to get the best rental during the past twenty years, numerous Building Ordinances, drawn up by the Professional Advisors of the Government, have been brought before the Legislative Council, but in each case, many salutary provisions have been withdrawn or emasculated at the request of the Unofficial Members of Council, representing the landed interest. The Government has hesitated to use its official majority. Since the outbreak of the plague, the mercantile section of the community have [*sic*] realized that their interests are not quite independent of the health of the Chinese population. . . .

To urgently remedy the situation in the aftermath of the plague outbreak, public Ordinance was proposed in 1887 which stated that open space had to be provided at the rear of building, latrines must be included and there had to be a minimum of 8.5 m² internal living space. In 1888, a legal notice was drawn up and more notices were drawn up from 1887 to 1903.

An important recommendation that contributed to the *Public Health and Buildings Ordinance of 1903* was made by Dr. W. J. Simpson, professor of hygiene at King's College, London, and lecturer in tropical hygiene at the London School of Tropical Medicine, for general improvement of sanitary conditions and stricter control over the design of Chinese tenement blocks which he described as follows:

The rooms, as a rule, are far too deep, the object of this depth being to subdivide each room into a number of cubicles for the accommodation of families or lodgers. Though there may be windows at each end of the room, the great depth materially obstructs the light to take an example from the better class of buildings, many of the houses that are being erected are eighty feet deep without lateral windows and contain long, narrow rooms of fifty-five feet in depth, by twelve or thirteen feet in width, lighted in front by a window and also in the rear by another window which looks into a backyard of twelve feet.³

From the recommendations made by Chadwick and Simpson arose the *Public Health and Buildings Ordinance of 1903* which set new standards for the design and occupancy of *Tong Lau* and remained in force until 1935. Some of the regulations derived from the ordinance that emphasized on maintaining natural lighting and ventilation for the building and the surrounding environment were:

1. Provision of open space and a scavenging lane of at least 6 feet wide (about 1.8 m) behind buildings (Clause 179). This means that rows of *Tong Lau* facing parallel streets could no longer be built back to back, and the back lane helped improve sanitary conditions by having the space to allow in lighting and ventilation, as well as for waste disposal.
2. Building height limited to the width of the fronting street, and not more than four storeys, or higher than 76 ft (about 23 m) (Clause 188 (4) and (5)). This controlled the building volume to ensure that public areas, in particular the surrounding streets, would receive adequate natural lighting and ventilation.
3. Building depth limited to 40ft (about 12 m) (Clause 151 (1)). This was an attempt to curb the number of under lit and badly ventilated tenement cabins (or cubicles, in the words of Dr. W. J. Simpson in his quote above) in a long narrow building.

4.2 Statutory Control of *Tong Lau* prior to World War II: *Buildings Ordinance 1935*

The *Buildings Ordinance 1935* and its accompanying regulations represent the final set of statutory control imposed upon the architecture of *Tong Lau* prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War (1941-45). The next update of the building regulations would be in 1955, and this is outside the scope of this study, which focuses on the development of *Tong Lau* up to World War II.

The building regulations under *Building Ordinance 1935* are essentially a continuation of those introduced in 1903, but with more stringent control:

1. Building height limited to 3 storeys, unless constructed of fire-resistant materials, and limited to 5 storeys for domestic (Clause 87 (7)).
2. Building depth limited to 35ft (about 11 m) (Clause 74 (1)). The shorter building depth than that allowed in the 1903 regulations would further limit the partitioning of dark and badly ventilated tenement cabins or cubicles.

³ Second Memorandum from W. J. Simpson to James Stewart Lockhart, Sanitary Board Office, 20 Mar. 1902, p. 15, in *Blue Book Reports on Bubonic Plague 1894-1907* (also quoted in Pryor 1975: 68).

3. Adequate light and ventilation to be provided at every storey on every staircase (Clause 43 (3)). This regulation would give the late pre-war Tong Lau its character-defining feature—a naturally lit and ventilated common staircase.

5.0 Types of *Tong Lau*

5.1 General Features of *Tong Lau*

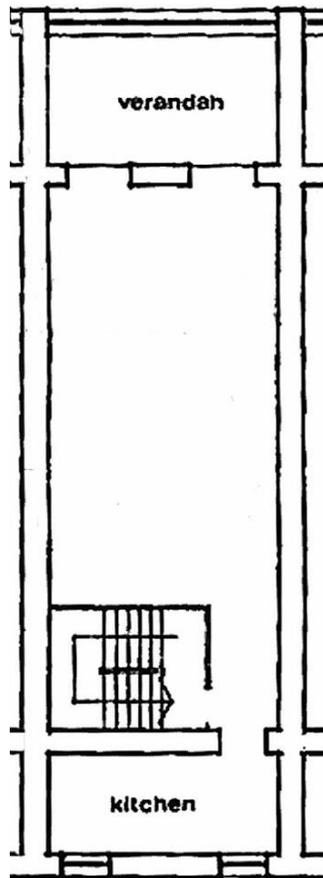
1. *Tong Lau* were usually built in continuous blocks with long narrow units.
2. They are usually 3 to 5 storeys high, with verandahs or balconies facing the street.
3. The arcade on the ground floor formed by projected verandahs or balconies on the upper floors was used as a social space in the past.
4. Entrances for regular units are from the front, while corner units are entered from the side.
5. Pre-1935 *Tong Lau* have enclosed straight-flight staircases with no window opening to the outside. Post-1935 *Tong Lau* have dog-leg staircases on the facade to allow for openings for natural lighting and ventilation.
6. Pre-1935 *Tong Lau* usually have brick or stone load-bearing partition walls with fir floor and roof beams. Post-1935 *Tong Lau* are built of reinforced concrete.

Many pre-war *Tong Lau* have their upper floors projected over the public pavement that these buildings front (public pavement are Crown Lands) in the form of verandahs and balconies. This is allowed with the proviso that the verandahs and balconies are used as such, and not be enclosed or used for any other purposes.

According to Clause 58 of *Building Ordinance 1935*, a verandah is defined as “any stage, platform, or portico projecting from the main wall of any building and supported by piers or columns.” And according to Clause 5, a balcony refers to “any stage, platform, oriel or other similar structure projecting from the main wall of any building and supported by brackets or cantilevers.”

In the following section, five representative types of *Tong Lau* (based on Cheung 2000) are illustrated for comparison. However, **in reality, some *Tong Lau* may carry a mixture of features from the illustrated types.**

5.2 Verandah Type



(Source: Lee Ho Yin)

Date: After 1903 and before 1935, but mostly the 1920s and the early 1930s.

Structure: 1½ ft (about 0.5 m) load bearing brick party wall with round fir floor beam; verandah of masonry or reinforced concrete, or timber for earlier buildings.

Frontage: 15 ft (about 4.5 m)

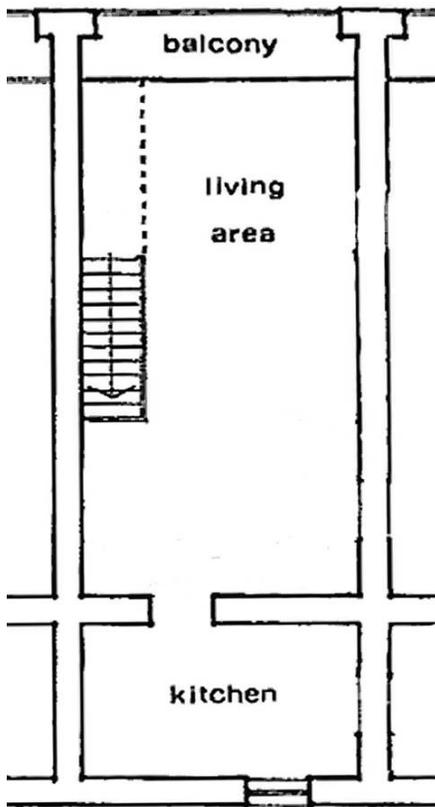
Height: 2 to 4 storeys; ground floor about 16 ft (5 m) high and each of the upper floors about 13 ft (4 m) high.

Floor area: 550 to 700 sq ft (about 50 to 65 m²) per floor.

- Features:
1. The 4th storey usually set back from the street.
 2. Verandah supported by brick piers projects over the whole width of the pavement to form a covered arcade at street level.
 3. A stairwell separates the living area from the cookhouse.
 4. Balustrade consists of Classical-style posts supporting a granite rail.
 5. The kitchen (cookhouse) of earlier designs (1920s and earlier) may take up the entire width of the back of the building, with openings to the back lane, whereas the kitchen of later designs (early 1930s) may take up half the width of the back of the building, and opens into the back lane and the open space at the back of the building.
 6. Not equipped with toilet.

Example: 290 Queen's Road Central.

5.3 Recessed Balcony Type



(Source: Lee Ho Yin)

Date: After 1903 and before 1935, but mostly the 1920s.

Structure: $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft (about 0.5 m) load bearing brick party wall with round fir floor beam.

Frontage: 15 ft (4.6 m).

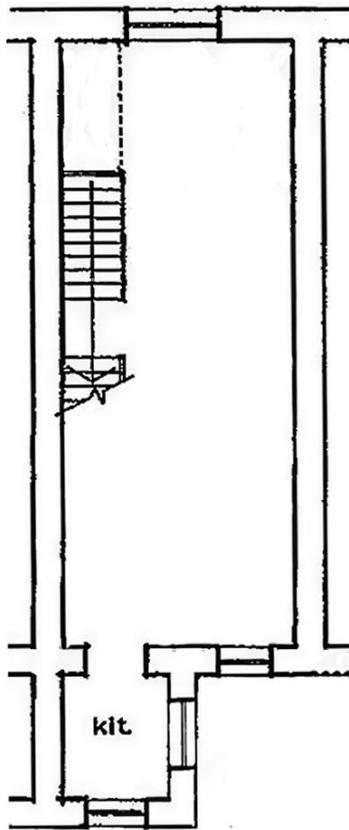
Height: Usually 3 storeys.

Floor area: Average 650 sq ft (about 60 m²) per floor.

- Features:
1. Facade of each floor recessed to form a balcony of about two feet deep.
 2. No light well, pitched roof over the living area and flat roof over the kitchen area.
 3. The kitchen takes up the entire rear portion of the building, with openings to the back lane.
 4. Not equipped with toilet.

Example: 35 Bonham Road.

5.4 Flat Facade Type



(Source: Lee Ho Yin)

Date: After 1903 and before 1935, but mostly the 1920s.

Structure: $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft (about 0.5 m) load bearing brick party wall with round fir floor beam.

Frontage: 15 ft (4.6 m).

Height: Usually 3 storeys.

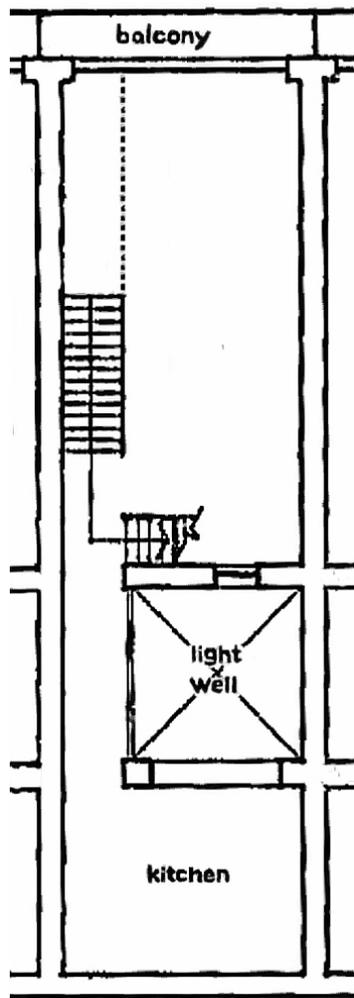
Floor area: Average 450 sq ft (about 40 m²) per floor.

Features:

1. A smaller building built on a site fronting a narrow side street (which precluded the construction of verandahs or balconies).
2. A flat facade with no verandah or balcony.
3. The kitchen takes up half the width of the back of the building, and opens into the back lane and the open space at the back of the building.
4. Not equipped with toilet.

Example: 6-8 Hing Wan Street (Yellow House).

5.5 Cantilevered Balcony Type with Suspended Wrought Iron Posts



(Source: Lee Ho Yin)

Date: After 1903 and before 1935, but mostly the 1920s.

Structure: $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft (about 0.5 m) load bearing brick party wall with round fir floor beam; balcony of reinforced concrete reinforced by suspended wrought iron posts.

Frontage: 15 ft (4.6 m).

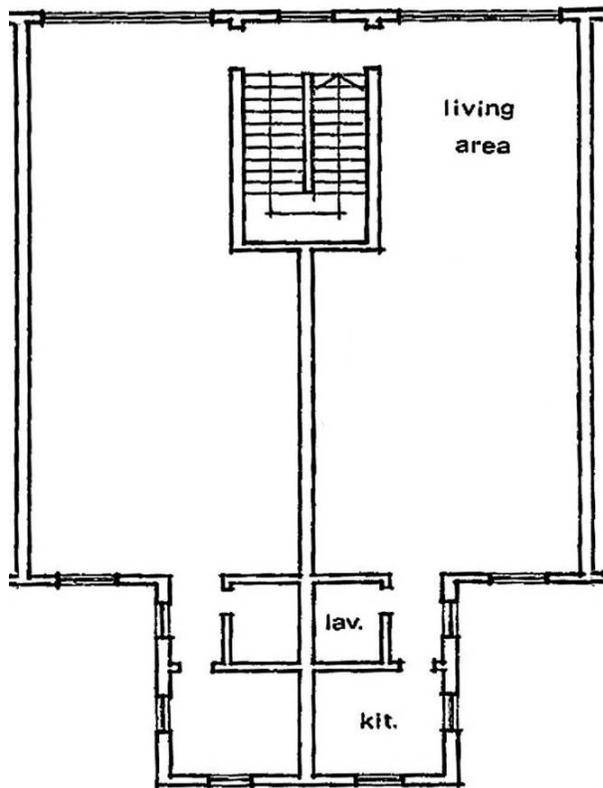
Height: Usually 3 storeys.

Floor area: 450 to 650 sq ft (about 40 to 60 m²) per floor.

- Features:
1. Built along narrow side streets which allow the construction of balconies but not verandahs.
 2. Narrow cantilevered balcony of about 2 ft deep.
 3. For buildings on a deep site, a light well separates the living area from the kitchen, so that living area and the kitchen are treated as separate blocks and thereby enables the building to comply with the building depth restriction.
 4. The kitchen may be the same as that in 5.4, or, in the case of a deep site, may be a separate block that takes up the entire width of the back of the building, and opens into a light well.
 5. Not equipped with toilet.

Example: 1-11 Mallory Street (Green House); 72-74A Stone Nullah Lane (Blue House).

5.6 Reinforced Concrete Type with Stairwell on the Facade



(Source: Lee Ho Yin)

Date: 1935-1955.

Structure: Reinforced concrete.

Frontage: 16 ft (4.9 m)

Height: 3-4 storeys.

Floor area: 550 to 700 sq ft (about 50 to 65 m²) per floor.

- Features:
1. Frontage width increased due to reduced width of living area to accommodate a naturally lit and ventilated stairwell on the facade.
 2. A dog-leg staircase shared by two blocks and opens into the fronting street; this design is a result of the requirement under *Building Ordinance 1935* for staircases on every floor to have adequate natural lighting and ventilation.
 3. The kitchen takes up half the width of the back of the building, and opens into the back lane and the open space at the back of the building.
 4. A toilet, equipped with toilet and sanitary fittings, separates the living area from the kitchen.

Example: 29-31 Bridges Street; 3-12 Wing Lee Street.

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