KUCHING OLD BAZAAR
ITS HISTORY AND CHANGES
古晋老巴刹
历史掌故与生活变迁
www.kchooldazaar.com
KUCHING OLD BAzaR TIMELINE

1820's
BRUNEI SULTANATE
Discovery of gold and amnonyx mines in upper reaches of Sarawak River.
Chinese were already in Kuching, Taik Pek tong set up already existed.

1830's

1841
THE ERA OF FIRST WHITE RAJA
James Brooke
James Brooke was given the authority by the King of China to found Kuching.

1848
1857
1860
THE ERA OF SECOND WHITE RAJA
Charles Brooke

1868

1870

1886
1884
1880's
The Chinese Court House was built at Main Bazaar and Duan Teng Shwee was appointed as the Chief Magistrate, in charge of the hearing of civil cases of Chinese community.

1912
Shop houses at five Main Street were constructed.

1920
1930

1941
1946

1963

1970's

POST-INDEPENDENCE

BRITISH CROWN COLONY PERIOD

The first Kuching Deli-Cultural Monument Festival was organized and held annually until.

2003
1995
Kuching Old Market Community Association established.

Construction of shops houses at Green Hill was completed.

2012
Launching of Kuching Old Bazaar Cultural Mapping & Tourism Promotion Programmes.

1993
1995

2020

Launching of Kuching Old Bazaar Cultural Mapping & Tourism Promotion Programmes.

The stretch of shops houses at Deli Rock Road diminished to pave way for Plaza Mentari.

1970's

Construction of shops houses at Green Hill was completed.

2020

MAP OF KUCHING OLD BAZAAR
古晋老巴刹
地图
THE GOLDEN ERA OF KUCHING OLD BAZAAR

The golden era of Kuching Old Bazaar was a time when the bazaar was at its peak, with a bustling atmosphere and a variety of goods available. It was a hub of trade and commerce, and a place where local people could gather and exchange news and information.

According to Elizabeth Pollard in her book Kuching Past and Present (1972), some ancient Selian wood tombstones found in 1830 in the area behind the Astana provided evidence of the presence of Buddhist temples around the 1820s.

The Kuching Kwong Wai Siew Association's record mentions a Cantonese pioneer Lau Chek and his compatriots arriving in Kuching around the 1820s and engaging in farming and small businesses for quite some time. Lau Chek was also officially recognised by the colonial government as the first Chinese to have arrived in Sarawak. He used to trade at the Old Bazaar and was one of the founders of Kwong Wai Siew Association.

When the British explorer James Brooke and his crew arrived in 1839, they noted that in addition to the Malay villages, there were also some 20 Chinese residing in Kuching. They also noted the existence of an old temple on the riverbank, although there was no explicit evidence regarding which temple this was. Historians generally believe this may have been a reference to the Tua Peik Kong temple and if so, this may be the earliest written record for the Tua Peik Kong temple. However, the actual year the temple was constructed remains an unsolved mystery.

When the Anglican bishop, Reverend F. McDougall arrived in Kuching in 1848, his wife Harriette McDougall described the situation of Kuching in detail. Her impression of Kuching at that time gives an indication of its size. She reported, "The town of Kuching consisted in those days of a Chinese bazaar and a King bazaar, both very small..."

Records about Old Bazaar

有关老巴刹的记录

根据1972年出版，Elizabeth Pollard撰写的《Kuching Past and Present》一书指出，1830年代末亚洲首任总督詹姆斯·布鲁克抵达古晋时，他注意到除了马来人村落外，还有大约20名华人居住在库钦。他们还注意到河边存在一座古老的寺庙，尽管没有明确证据指出这座寺庙的名称。历史学家通常认为这可能是对大坡公庙的参考，并且如果这是真实的，那么这可能是大坡公庙最早的书面记录。然而，大坡公庙的具体建造年份至今仍是一个谜。

1839年，英国探险家詹姆斯·布鲁克及其队伍第一次抵达古晋时，他们观察到古晋除了有马来人村落，也有20多个华人。与此同时，河边有一座寺庙，更可以确定有华人在这里活动。虽然布鲁克并未描述“古晋”，英国作家一殷信德描述的“大坡公庙”，或许这也是有关大坡公庙最早的一篇文字记录，至于其真实的建造年份至今还是一个谜。

到了1848年，总督的麦当劳爵士等人首次抵达古晋，其夫人麦当劳女士记录着那次见闻，她指出当时的古晋“与华人和印度人的市集各一，规模都很小”。

THE GOLDEN ERA OF KUCHING OLD BAZAAR

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By the time Madam Harriette arrived in Kuching, Sarawak was already under the rule of James Brooke and this also coincided with increased emigration of Chinese to Nanyang (or the South Sea). The Chinese migrants sailed from China to Singapore and upon learning about the newly established White Rajah kingdom, they crossed the South China Sea seeking new opportunities in Sarawak.

The Chinese bazaar mentioned by Mdm Harriette was undoubtedly the Old Bazaar, while the Klang bazaar was a combination of Sambere Street and India Street, which later became known as the New Bazaar.

During that time, two major Chinese settlements had formed in Sarawak. The downstream was the Kuching Chinese bazaar while the upstream was the Bau bazaar controlled by Hakka miners. In the beginning, there was peace and harmony between the Brooke government and the upstream Chinese, but the situation deteriorated in the 1850s. The culmination of the dissent ended with the eruption of the famous Bau Chinese Revolt, which ended with thousands losing their lives.

At the time, Sarawak was already under the rule of James Brooke, and the Chinese migrants sailed from China to Singapore upon learning about the newly established White Rajah kingdom. They crossed the South China Sea seeking new opportunities in Sarawak.

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A good question is whether the two groups of Chinese in Kuching and Bau had any historical contacts. With the limited historical records available, the relationship between upstream and downstream Chinese cannot be ascertained in much detail. However, since the Rajah maintained good relationships with Chinese traders in Kuching, it is believed the Rajah also initially forged similar relationships with Bau Chinese and this kept the relationship of the two groups of Chinese in good stead.

In relation to this there are two relatively important records unrelated to trading which are worth mentioning. These records are important as they indicate that there was some sort of relation and communication between the two groups.

In 1855, when the Kuching Tua Pek Kong temple was renovated, a contingent of Bau miners came by boat to Kuching and prayed at the temple to express their wishes for good fortune. Another record tells of a woman by the name of Ah Soo Ai who suffered beatings from her husband and who subsequently fell in love with a young miner. The woman and her new lover left Bau and eloped to Kuching where they apparently settled.

Whatever the prior communications were, after the Bau Uprising, it appears there was a clear distinction made between the Kuching Chinese and the Bau Chinese. When the Rajah’s forces massacred the Bau miners, the Kuching Chinese were not affected. Following this incident, the Rajah’s government became more cautious when dealing with the Chinese, but still relied on them for their trading skills and diligent work attitude. Indeed, the reliance on Chinese traders and labour led to a mass migration of Chinese to Sarawak especially during the second Rajah’s reign. This trade and labour was a driving force for the economic development of Sarawak.

Recognising the contributions of the Chinese on more than one occasion, the second Rajah, Charles Brooke in 1883 publicly pointed out that “Without the Chinese we can do nothing.”

Photo: Tua Pek Kong Temple in Kuching, Sarawak.

Photo: Kuching Chinese on official records.

Photo: Tua Pek Kong Temple in Kuching, Sarawak.

Source: Sarawak Museum.
OLD BAZAAR VS NEW BAZAAR

老巴刹vs新巴刹

The name of the Bazaar comes from the Malay term Pasar for market or bazaar. Ever-adaptable, the Chinese migrants adopted the usage of Bazaar (巴刹/bo shah) into daily language. The century old Kuching Old Street area was divided into the Old Bazaar and the New Bazaar with the two divided by the Old Court House.

The original bazaar started with the Main Bazaar located along the river and then spread with the formation of other streets and alleys in the 1860s. In the 1880s, under the second Rajah, development began on the other side of the Old Court House where Indian Muslims and Javanese settlements were originally located. This is when the names of Gambar Street, India Street started to appear. The wet market was also moved to the riverbank of Gambar Street.

People started to call the area around India and Gambar Streets the New Bazaar with the area along Main Bazaar remaining as the Old Bazaar.

Pasar是马来人对市集的叫法，华人南来后入乡随俗，因此有了“巴刹”一词，古晋的百年老街区，有“老巴刹”和“新巴刹”之分，两个巴刹刚好以旧法院建筑群作为分界。

最初的巴刹以沿河的海街码头，带动街巷小巷的形成，估计在1860年代以前出现，直到1880年代，随着查尔斯布洛克开发旧法事另一边，原是印度穆斯林与爪哇人的聚落，甘蜜街、印度街等随即出现，菜市场也搬迁到甘蜜街的河边。

为便于区分，当时人们将这个新区称为“新巴刹”，而海街街这一带自然就是“老巴刹”。“
STREETS AND PLACES WITH ITS INTERESTING OLD STORIES

One has only to look at the names of the streets to get a hint about the history and industry of the old part of town. Naturally, the longer the street has been in existence, the richer the stories associated with that street. The century-old streets and alleys in the Old Bazaar developed in an ad hoc manner before the existence of proper town planning. Likewise, in the earlier years, the streets did not have uniform names. The street names often reflected a point of reference among the local folks and the official names that appeared later are all important records worthy of note.

This section attempts to combine information gathered from the collective memory and oral history of early Kuching Old Bazaar dwellers and also from official records. Deciphering these stories and records was not an easy task given that there are more than 20 names for the 10 streets in Kuching Old Bazaar.
Kuching Old Bazaar was a very typical business district where the Chinese traders, Malay, Dayak and European customers frequented. In the early years, before the development of other outlying areas, the Old Bazaar was the main trading center. This was also how the name Main Bazaar was derived. People came to this street to trade and sell all the local barter trades as well as the import and export activities with Singapore and beyond and were dependent on its wharf.

Since the earlier years Main Bazaar was equivalent to the Old Bazaar, shop owners often used Old Bazaar as their corresponding address. However, following the various Chinese dialects, the streets also had a few other names depending on the dialect group. The earlier Hokkien settlers called the area Gang Chui (棚基) meaning “by the river”. The Teochew used the term Soon Hong Street (顺丰街) because there used to be a Soon Hong Kong (顺丰公司) belonging to the Teochew. In the first half of 20th century, some people even used the term Hai Chuan Street (海槎街) thought to be an influence from Singapore or Malaya. Around the 1960s, the name Hai Chuan Street (海槎街) became a rather fixed name for Main Bazaar. The word Hai Chuan is believed to have originated from the Hakka meaning “by the river”.

The early name of this street was Atap Street (亚答街), generally believed to have been derived from the common use of Atap roofing (palm thatch) by most of the shops there. However, among the locals other names also existed such as Bak Kow Street (拔瓜街) or Bak Kow Street (拔瓜街). These names were related to the Teochew Bak Kow Kongsi (拔瓜公司). Bak Kow or Bak are pronunciations in the Teochew dialect for wood. Thus, Bak Kow Street echoes the English translation of Carpenter Street when this back lane alley was the domain of carpentry.

The shophouses along this street were built by Ong Ewe Hai (王友海) in 1886. He was one of Sarawak’s Hokkien pioneers and also the first president of the Hokkien Kongsi (福建公司). He was also appointed the first Chinese Kapitan (community leader) of Sarawak. Ong Ewe Hai came to Sarawak from Singapore in 1864 and in the beginning, he was just a boat trader (水客) of goods. As time progressed he ventured into local products trade and also import and export trade. In 1864, he managed to obtain the licence for the government’s Farm Tax System and from there acquired a lot of wealth. The descendants of Ong family include Ong Tiang Siew (王長水) and Ong Kawan Hin (王觀興). Ong Kew Hui (王其輝) and Ong Tiang Swye’s son-in-law, Wee Kheng Chiang (黃慶昌) were all influential leaders in politics and trade.

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CHINA STREET 中国街

Among the streets of Kuching Old Bazaar, China Street is also referred to as Central Street (中街). The reason for this is not truly known and “Central Street” most likely referred to the center position it occupies at the Old Bazaar. As for the name China Street (中国街), this is often linked to the Cantonese pioneer, Lau Chok (刘泰). Lau Chok is officially recognised by the government as the first Chinese settler to have arrived in Sarawak. He and his compatriots were already actively conducting trading and farming activities in the Satok area in the 1820s. According to a photocopy of the land lease issued by the Brooke government to Lau Chok in 1866, Lau Chok operated the Ju Long Shi Ji shop at present China Street. Given that the whole Old Bazaar area was predominantly Chinese, the appearance of the name “China Street” and how the name was derived, requires further study.

BISHOPSGATE STREET 下横街

This small cross street forming the junction of Carpenter Street and Ewe Hai Street is also known as Little Side Street (横街华) or Side Street (横街). The street goes from the Main Bazaar to a small gate that once led to the garden of the St. Thomas’s Diocese of Kuching. The Bishop and church mission used this gate and street to come to town for meetings and to do their shopping at the bazaar. The gate was naturally called Bishop’s Gate and the street took its name from this. In 1993, the government built a road behind the Bishop’s gate severing the connection. The gate now serves as an alternative access to Carpenter Street and the Main Bazaar and the once prominent gate is now reduced to its Belian door frame.

WAYANG STREET 花香街

Wayang Street, also known as Huai Xiang Street (花香街), used to be an area dominated by the Hokkiens. The Hokkiens’ famous Hsing San Si Temple (興善寺) is located on the street and every year during the temple deity’s birthday celebration, a stage was set up opposite the temple. Crowds, including nearby Malay villagers, flocked enthusiastically to watch the vibrant Hokkien opera. The name wayang could have been acquired from the Malay audience as it is a Malay word. As for the use of Huai Xiang, there are two interpretations. The first interpretation is that was a flower tree that exudes a fragrance on the street. Another interpretation alluded to the presence of heavily perfumed and make-up women who frequented the area.

According to the inscription on one of the plaques in the Hsing San Si Temple, the street was also called Hock Soon Street (福順街). A name believed to be from among the Hokkiens. There was also a rather unfortunate unoffical name given to the street. In the early days due to the abundance of cow dung on the street, it was also called Cow Dung Street (牛屎街).

TEMPLE STREET 神庙街

The original Kuching river (Sungai Kuching) used to flow from what is now the Reservoir Park, through the Tua Pek Kong Temple and the old Chinese Chamber of Commerce and into Sarawak River. The creation of the reservoir had subsequently reduced the flow of the river and in 1928 the river was backfilled to allow development with the former river becoming a new street. The street was named Temple Street because the start of the street is where the iconic Tua Pek Kong Temple is located. The temple is one of Sarawak’s oldest temples and is believed to have existed since the early 1800s. Written evidence can be found on the temple’s pillars dating back to 1856.

神庙街的“前身”，是古晋河——发源自水沟公园的水口，注入砂拉越河。古晋市名称的由来便是这条河有关。1929年，古晋河被填平，成为街，名称未来源自河口的大庙街，这庙就是福进同兴大庙街，是供祀福圣之庙的，相传在1800年前已经存在，庙内供奉的神像可以追溯到1800年。
JALAN TUN ABDUL HAJI OPENG
致阿邦哈芝黎本路

This section of road used to be called Rock Road (大石路) as it led past a large rock named Batu Kliang (香都吉朗) located one and half miles away. The rock, which juts out from the ground, was believed to be sacred. This stretch of the road was the main route used towards the outskirts of Kuching and was also the longest road at that time. When Sarawak joined the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the first half of Rock Road was renamed after Sarawak’s first Governor, Tun Atang Haji Openg.

This road was once called Rock Road, with the road being on the side of the hill. It was believed to be sacred, and the rock was considered a holy site. The road was the main route to the outskirts of Kuching and was the longest road at that time. When Sarawak joined Malaysia in 1963, the first half of Rock Road was renamed after the first Governor of Sarawak, Tun Atang Haji Openg.

OTHER WELL KNOWN LOCAL PLACES
其他民间地名

SA KAK BO
三角坡

Four streets namely Wayang Street, Temple street, Tabuan Road and McRaeou Road meet at a traffic intersection in the shape of a triangle. Thus rendering the location to name the place as Sa Kaki Bo (Triangle Ground). It was a place for the local to spend leisure time and a playground for children. For a while, a roundabout was designed at the ground and inside the roundabout there was a playground.

在花香街、佛堂街、达美路和光复路的交汇处，四条街道形成了一个三角形。因此，这个地方被称为Sa Kaki Bo (三角地)。它是一个当地人休闲的地方，也是孩子们的游乐场。在一段时间里，三角地被设计成一个环岛，环岛内部还有一个游乐场。

QI ZHENG SENG
七丛松

From the 1990 geographical perspective, Padang Merdeka was then the backwater area where not many would frequent. It was not too far away from the Chinese cemetery. Around 1870s, the second Rajah developed the area for the purpose of building Kuching Recreational Ground. This place became Kuching’s first public garden. There were seven old ficus trees in the ground where the local Chinese called the place Qirang Seng. Hokkien and Teochew dialects pronounce the ‘Q’ (fou) and ‘R’ (pir) as Seng which gave the place a transliterated name, Qi Zheng Seng or Seven Pines. Some shops located opposite the Post Office on Old Rock Road used to write their address as shop number xx Qirang Seng and the postal office recognised the rightful address. Padang Merdeka were also called as Gunung Square and Central Padang (Central Square) is the past.

From a geographical perspective, Padang Merdeka was once considered a backwater area. It was not too far away from the Chinese cemetery. Around the 1870s, the second Rajah developed the area for the purpose of building Kuching Recreational Ground. This place became Kuching’s first public garden. There were seven old ficus trees in the ground where the local Chinese called it Qirang Seng. Hokkien and Teochew dialects pronounce the ‘Q’ (fou) and ‘R’ (pir) as Seng which gave the place a transliterated name, Qi Zheng Seng or Seven Pines. Some shops located opposite the Post Office on Old Rock Road used to write their address as shop number xx Qirang Seng and the postal office recognised the rightful address. Padang Merdeka were also called as Gunung Square and Central Padang (Central Square) is the past.

AD BOI GANG
后尾港

The street refers to an unnamed small tributary of Kuching River located behind the shophouses of Main Bazaar. In the early years there were small cargo boats plying along this tributary to allow shop owners to load and unload goods through the back doors. The meaning of Ad Boi Gang means River Behind. The river and Kuching River were backfitted to give way to development. Now it is just an unnamed lane between two main streets.

这是一条位于后尾港的小溪，位于水街的后尾港方向。早年有载货小船来回于后尾港，这家后门下船。在尾港大路沿着后尾港河一段消失，如今已经是一条通路的名称，依然没有路名。

PEK KONG NIA
伯公岭

The Tua Pek Kong temple is located on the slope of Bukit Mata Kuching, overlooking the Sarawak River and facing Gunung Serapi in the west. In the earlier years, there was a small trail by the side of the temple slope known as Pek Kong Nia (Pek Kong Hill). Under the second Rajah, the hill was opened up for development to connect to Padungan Road. When the development of the hill was announced, a commotion erupted among the local Chinese because they fear the Rajah had intentionally aim to destroy the Feng shui of the temple, which could ruin the luck and prosperity of the Kuching Chinese community.

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UPPER CHINA STREET
大井街

Upper China Street is a continuation of China Street. Until 1993, this was a dead-end street with a hill slope at the end. Before the 1930s, there used to be a well on the street and for this reason, the street is also called La Jiang, meaning Big Well Street.

大井街是沿街往下的巷道，过去是一条死巷，尾端是一个山坡，这条巷子是在1930年代前，曾经有一口水井，中文街名由此而来。

GREEN HILL
青山道

This street is considered as the greenest or youngest among all streets in Old Bazaar. It is relatively recent development, the shophouses were built in the 1970s.

青山道是旧巴刹中，最绿或最年轻的地方，这条街道是于1970年代才兴建的。
The publishing of Kuching Old Bazaar: Its History and Changes is the most important tasks in Kuching Old Bazaar Cultural Mapping & Tourism Promotion Programme.

As one of the earliest settlements in Sarawak, Kuching Old Bazaar has witnessed many important historical moments over the course of 200 years. The Old Bazaar community also kept with them many precious collective memories. From the collection of these memories, we can trace the footprints of the development of Kuching from the past and its transformation until present day.

This book, presented in both Chinese and English, focuses on the historical anecdotes of the Old Bazaar and the memories of the community. References were made using existing documents including the Sarawak Gazetteer, English and Chinese academic papers, monographs, and publications of the Chinese associations etc. Supporting these documents, interviews were conducted with more than 10 Old Bazaar residents between the ages of 45 to 95 years. At the same time, the assistance from Dr Elena Chui and her students from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak were solicited to conduct interview surveys of 75 shops in Old Bazaar.

This book contains eight chapters of historical anecdotes, 11 chapters related to changing lifestyles and a concluding chapter. The timeline of Old Bazaar is presented to facilitate the understanding of the history and significant events. The old photos of the Bazaar were reproduced from published works and from those shared by bazaar residents which the sources is indicated.

The publication of this book brings about three important connotations. ① It is the first monograph focusing both on the social history and oral history of Old Bazaar. ② This book combines information obtained from both Chinese and English literature, and importantly, materials from the Chinese associations which are largely missing in official records and publications. The complementary data from the Chinese community and Chinese associations enabled a more comprehensive perspective on the Old Bazaar. ③ Although this book is written based on academic work, it is presented in an easy-to-understand and enjoyable manner for the reading pleasure of the local resident and tourist alike.

Under the creative trend of coronavirus pandemic and other related factors, the process of writing and interviewing were met with many unprecedented challenges. Time was also a major concern as there were a series of lockdowns. As such there may be content that is missing and corrections that still need to be made. The publication of this book is just a beginning, and at an end and masters are welcome to transcribe their opinions. The interviewers and work on the Bazaar will continue and progressively be made available through the official website of Kuching Old Bazaar (oldbazaar.com).

Last but not least, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the Kuching Old Market Community Association for their support and the opportunity to publish this book. I would like also to thank Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture Sarawak for their support; Dr Elena Chui and her team for their help. The Chairmen of Sarawak Heritage Society; James Teng for his help, all the respondents who shared their exciting life stories, important information, and precious old photos. I am especially grateful to my team members who have contributed hard to this project in writing, translating, illustrating, photographing, design and layout of the book. Especially the two authors Helen and Fong Ying. Through the collective effort and dedication, we have completed the publication work within a short timeframe.

I believe our effort and dedication come from our shared passion: WE LOVE KUCHING.

The Chinese version of this book was published in 2020. The English version is the first monograph focusing on the history and transformation of the Old Bazaar in Kuching. The book captures the rich history and culture of the Old Bazaar, providing valuable insights into the local community and its development over time.

The book also highlights the importance of preserving cultural heritage and understanding the historical context of the Old Bazaar. It serves as a valuable resource for researchers, historians, and anyone interested in the history of Kuching and Sarawak.

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1. Dr. Elena Chui and her students from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak were solicited to conduct interviews of 75 shops in Old Bazaar.
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