

## A jewel in Phuket's Sino-Portuguese crown

When Chinese immigrants made their mark in Phuket, luckily some made sure they left something special for future generations to admire. Chinpracha House on Phuket town's Krabi Road fits this category nicely.

Panta W.

Tin mining became a major source of income on the island of Phuket in the 16th century. Chinese businessmen and workers, who were mainly from the Hakka sub group of Han Chinese, were employed by the mines and their influence on the island's culture and cuisine can still be felt today.

While tin mining is no longer of importance to the local economy, it is still possible to get a idea of the impact it had upon the island. Chinpracha House, located just a short stroll away from the center of Phuket Town, is an excellent place to start.

### Boom time

Tan Oui Ghee, a native of China's Fujian province, headed for Southeast Asia in 1854 during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Accompanied by numerous workers seeking employment in the booming tin sector, Tan soon became active in trading the metal, which usually took place in Penang, Malaysia.

Tan's son - Tan Ma Siang – began to build a home for his bride along what is now known as Krabi Road in 1904. During this period of time it was fashionable among the wealthy to build Sino-Portuguese-style homes. Tan, who became better known as Phra Phitak Chinpracha, decorated the impressive property with imported floor tiles from Italy and ornate fencing from the Netherlands, which can still be seen today.

The area around the site of the house was largely undeveloped during that time and didn't have any major roads or public utilities. In the end, Phra Phitak's wife didn't move into the house so he used the property instead as a place to accommodate and entertain his guests.

The late Pracha Tantavanich, whose wife Charoonrat Tantavanich still resides at Chinpracha House, inherited the house from his father. Charoonrat told us that Chinpracha House was once quite a bit bigger. Unfortunately, the front section of the two-storey building had to be pulled down due to the high cost of maintaining the building, she said. The upper floor is still used as the family's residence, while the ground floor is open to the public.

### Halcyon days

As I strolled through the historic building, I somehow felt transported back in time. The imported tiles from Italy remain in place, while there are some beautiful examples of pearl-inlaid tables and chairs for visitors to appreciate. The walls are adorned with portraits of the pioneers responsible for creating such wealth.

As I wandered through the house, I overheard a guide explaining that, "this is the Baba style of dress". 'Baba' refers to the children of mixed race born when the Chinese and Indian migrant population married local women. This community developed its own unique style of dress, food, and culture in general. For example, the ladies would wear a Batik sarong together with a brocade-decorated blouse. Baba food is a mixture of local, spicy Thai food and Fujian (Hokkien) cuisine.

An airy courtyard in the middle of the building features a pool of fish, while the kitchen is packed with original utensils and crockery.

People in Phuket relied on wells for their water supplies during the early part of the 20th century, and most homes had a well at the rear to make it easier to carry out washing activities. It's been said by some people that having a well at the back of a house brings bad luck, but personally I would think it was quite simply the most practical option.

One of the smaller bedrooms features a small bed adorned with tiny drawers on three sides, while in another room, a glass cabinet contains numerous household items, including Phra Phitak's topknots stored in a glass container.

#### From past to present

Another room at the front of the house displays family portraits, including one picture of Tan Oui Ghee as a young man, and another towards the end of his life. These are flanked by portraits of younger generations of the family. Pracha Tantavanich passed away in 2006, but he is survived by Charoonrat, their two sons, as well as three granddaughters.

From the outside of the house, you'll see that the building has many windows. This was an important design feature to ensure good ventilation.

While there are no guided tours available if just showing up at Chinpracha House, it is possible to arrange them through any one of the following tour companies: Phuket Sea Land (+66 [0]76 222 900); Phuket Jet Tours (+66 [0]76 222 221); or Phuket Franchise Tours (+66 [0]76 212 889).

Otherwise, admission to the museum (open daily, 8 am-4 pm) is just 100 baht (US\$3). You can contact Chinpracha House directly on Tel: +66 (0)76 211 167 (Thai language only).

#### Transport connections:

Chinpracha House is located on Krabi Road, just a short walk from the central market area in Phuket town. From beach resorts, you'll need to take a local bus, songthaew, or other vehicle into town.

Air: Domestic carriers Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways, Nok Air, Thai AirAsia and One-Two-Go currently operate several daily flights from Bangkok's Don Muang Airport to Phuket International Airport. The flight time is about one hour and 15

minutes.

**Car:** From Bangkok, take Highway 4 (also known as Phetchakasem Road) and drive through the provinces of Phetchaburi, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumpon, Surat Thani and Phang-Nga. Either cross Thep Krasattri Bridge or Sararin Bridge to get on to the island. The journey takes about 12 hours, but it can be longer when national public holidays create a "long weekend". The total distance is 862 km.

**Bus:** Air-conditioned buses depart Bangkok 's Southern Bus Terminal (Sai Tai Mai) several times daily. Most depart from in the evening. The journey takes about 12 to 13 hours.

Phuket's major bus terminal is located east of the downtown area and is within walking distance of many hotels. For further enquiries, contact Transport Co Ltd in Bangkok on Tel: +66 (0)2 434 7192 or +66 (0)2 435 5605. You can also contact the Southern Bus Terminal directly on +66 (0)2 435 1199 or +66 (0)2 435 1200.

**Train:** There are no direct train services to Phuket, however, you could take a train from Bangkok 's main Hualamphong station to Phun Phin station in Surat Thani province and then continue your journey by bus. For enquiries regarding train services, call the State Railway of Thailand in Bangkok on Tel: +66 (0)2 220 4444.