

Identification of Chinese Architecture in Malang City's Chinatown District

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ABSTRACT: *Malang Chinatown is a historic district that represents the richness of Chinese architecture, culture, and social life. Although the area is currently better known as a commercial center, its cultural and historical values have not yet been fully understood by the wider community, particularly the younger generation. One of the distinctive architectural elements of the Chinatown district is the shophouse, a building typology that integrates residential and commercial functions within a single spatial unit. This study aims to identify the architectural characteristics and spatial patterns of shophouses in Malang Chinatown. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed through field observations and a literature review. Field observations were conducted to identify the physical characteristics of the buildings, architectural elements, spatial functions, and spatial organization patterns, while the literature review was used to strengthen the theoretical framework and support the interpretation of the observational findings. The findings reveal that the architectural character of Malang Chinatown has been influenced by various cultural traditions, particularly Chinese, Dutch, and Javanese cultures, as reflected in the forms, functions, and ornamental elements of its buildings. The architectural characteristics of the district have also undergone transformations over time, including changes in building functions, the addition or removal of architectural elements, and modifications to spatial layouts. These findings demonstrate the dynamic process of cultural adaptation and architectural transformation that has shaped the identity of Malang Chinatown.*

KEYWORDS: *Chinese Architecture, Chinatown, commercial center, shophouse, spasiat pattern.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Chinatown districts have played an important role in shaping the spatial structure and urban development of Indonesian cities, particularly those located on the island of Java. Historically, these districts emerged as residential environments for Chinese communities while simultaneously functioning as centres of trade, social interaction, and religious activity. The presence of temples, residential buildings, shophouses, street networks, and commercial activities has created a distinctive urban atmosphere that differs from that of other urban areas. Therefore, Chinatown should not merely be understood as an area inhabited by a particular ethnic group, but also as a cultural space that represents the historical trajectory, social life, and economic development of Chinese communities within the context of Indonesian urbanism. [1]

According to Pratiwo, Chinese architecture in Indonesia has evolved through a prolonged process of adaptation to geographical conditions, climate, material availability, local cultures, and government policies prevailing during different historical periods. This process has produced architectural forms that do not entirely replicate the traditional architecture of mainland China, but instead demonstrate a synthesis of Chinese spatial principles, symbolism, and cultural traditions with local and colonial architectural elements. These characteristics can be identified through building orientation and spatial configuration, roof forms, internal courtyards, structural systems, the use of colours and ornaments, and the relationship between buildings and the activities of their occupants. Chinese architecture in Chinatown districts can therefore be understood as a dynamic product of cultural acculturation that continues to adapt in response to urban development and the changing needs of society. [2]

The Chinatown district of Malang is a historic urban area closely associated with the development of commercial activities in the city centre, particularly around Pasar Besar and the surrounding commercial corridors.

The area is characterised by the predominance of commercial functions, the presence of shophouses, a dense building pattern, and a direct relationship between buildings and the street. Although only a limited number of buildings continue to display explicitly Chinese architectural features, the district's identity remains recognisable through its trading culture, spatial-use patterns, and the continuity of the shophouse function. Several buildings also exhibit a combination of Chinese and Dutch colonial architectural elements, reflecting the adaptation of the Chinese community to the evolving urban environment of Malang.

Sudarwani et al., argue that the rapid expansion of commercial activities, changing spatial requirements, and building renovations undertaken without adequate consideration of historical values may further obscure the Chinese architectural character of Malang's Chinatown district. Alterations to façades, materials, spatial functions, opening configurations, ornamentation, and internal spatial organisation may reduce the legibility of the district's identity and eliminate physical evidence of the cultural development of the Chinese community. The continuity of a Chinatown district, however, is determined not only by the survival of historic buildings but also by the community's capacity to maintain its historical values, activities, functions, traditions, and sense of attachment to place. Given these conditions, this study seeks to identify the architectural characteristics of Malang's Chinatown district by examining building forms, façades, spatial patterns, functions, materials, ornaments, and district-forming elements. The findings are expected to provide a foundation for efforts to conserve the district's architectural identity and urban cultural heritage. [3]

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of Chinatown

Chinatown is an urban settlement area formed through a historical process and inhabited or developed by a Chinese community. Its formation is driven not only by residential and economic needs but also by the spiritual and cultural values and historical experiences of the Chinese community within a city. The interaction between cultural values, social activities, and historical development has created a complex and multilayered socio-spatial structure. [4]

Furthermore, Kautsary explains that, in the course of urban development, Chinatown often occupies a strategic position as a centre of commerce and economic growth. The historical involvement of Chinese communities in the commercial sector has encouraged the formation of mixed-use districts, particularly areas that simultaneously accommodate residential and business activities. Therefore, Chinatown should be understood not merely as an ethnically based enclave but also as an integral component of a city's economic structure and development. [4]

Meanwhile, Adishakti states that, from a functional perspective, Chinatown plays an important role in urban economic activities because it generally serves as a centre for commerce, services, and residential functions. The integration of residential and commercial uses produces a distinctive spatial character, reflected in the presence of shophouses, street patterns oriented towards commercial activities, and the intensive use of space throughout the district. [5]

According to Handinoto, in addition to functioning as an ethnic residential environment, Chinatown can be understood as a form of urban space with readily identifiable physical, social, and cultural characteristics. These characteristics are generally marked by the presence of Chinese temples as centres of religious activities; residential buildings and shophouses with distinctive architectural features; street networks that support commercial activities; and a social environment shaped by kinship relations and community-based activities. Thus, the definition of Chinatown refers not only to the concentration of Chinese residents but also to the entire system of spaces, buildings, activities, and cultural symbols that distinguishes it from other urban areas. [1]

Widodo argues that, within the context of the development of coastal cities in Southeast Asia, Chinatown is also the product of interactions among Chinese migration, maritime trading activities, and the establishment of new settlement centres. Chinese communities generally developed around ports, markets, transportation routes, and administrative centres because these locations facilitated commercial activities and the establishment of social and economic networks. This process produced districts that did not develop in isolation but instead became integral to the overall growth and spatial formation of cities. Chinatown may therefore be viewed as a spatial representation of the historical trajectory of the Chinese diaspora and its integration into the local urban environment. [6]

Chinatown may also be understood as a cultural heritage district formed through interactions between Chinese traditions and the sociocultural conditions of local communities. These interactions have generated processes of adaptation and acculturation reflected in architectural forms, spatial arrangements, belief systems, ornamental elements, economic activities, and various practices of everyday life. The identity of Chinatown is therefore dynamic, as it continues to evolve in response to demographic changes, economic activities, urban policies, and modernisation, while retaining historical elements that serve as markers of local identity and the district's collective memory. [7]



Figure 1. Gateway to Surabaya's Chinatown District

2.2. Characteristic of Chinese Architecture

Chinese architecture is primarily characterised by geometric order, balance, and spatial hierarchy, which are manifested through the symmetrical arrangement of buildings along a principal axis. Its spatial organisation commonly incorporates an internal courtyard as the main focal point, surrounded by several building masses. This arrangement not only provides natural lighting and ventilation but also reflects family structure, social status, and the allocation of spaces according to the occupants' age, gender, and level of importance. In addition, traditional Chinese construction extensively employs timber-frame systems consisting of columns, beams, and interlocking joints, allowing walls to function as non-load-bearing enclosure elements rather than as the principal structural components of the building. These characteristics demonstrate that Chinese architectural forms result from the integration of functional requirements, construction systems, social organisation, and the cultural values of their communities. [8]

Visually and symbolically, Chinese architecture can be identified through its dominant roof forms, curved ridge lines, wide overhanging eaves, decorative ornaments, and the use of colours with specific meanings. Red generally symbolises good fortune and happiness, whereas yellow or gold is associated with nobility and elevated status. Motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, lotus flowers, clouds, and geometric patterns are used not only as decorative elements but also as symbols of protection, harmony, prosperity, and longevity. Building arrangements are also influenced by the principles of *feng shui*, particularly in determining orientation, entrance placement, the relationship between buildings and their surroundings, and the balance of natural elements. In the context of Chinatowns in Indonesia, these characteristics have been adapted to the tropical climate, locally available building materials, commercial activities, colonial architectural influences, and local cultural traditions, thereby producing distinctive and acculturated forms of Chinese architecture. [1,9]



Figure 2. Eng An Kiong Temple on Laksamana Martadinata Street, Malang City [10]



Figure 3. Interior atmosphere of Eng An Kiong Temple [10]

2.3. Typology of Chinese Building

Chinese building typology refers to the classification of buildings based on shared fundamental characteristics, including architectural form, spatial organization, function, structural systems, and symbolic elements rooted in Chinese culture. Typological classification is not determined solely by visual similarities, such as roof forms, façades, gateways, doors, windows, and ornamental details, but also considers spatial arrangements that reflect family structure, social hierarchy, belief systems, and the relationship between humans and the natural environment. In traditional Chinese houses, spaces are generally organized hierarchically along a principal axis and arranged using repetitive building modules. Building masses are typically positioned around an internal courtyard, which functions as the centre of family activities and social interaction while providing natural lighting and ventilation to the surrounding spaces. [11]

Within an urban context, Chinese buildings can be classified according to their functions, forms, and spatial configurations, including residential houses, courtyard houses, shophouses, temples, and commercial buildings. The shophouse is one of the most prevalent building typologies found in Chinatowns throughout Indonesia. This typology generally features a relatively narrow frontage, an elongated building mass extending towards the rear of the plot, adjoining party walls, and an integration of commercial and residential functions within a single building. The front section is commonly used for commercial activities, while the middle and rear sections accommodate family and residential spaces. Similarities in façade treatment, opening composition, party walls, identifying architectural elements, spatial arrangement, and roof form may be used as the basis for classifying buildings into particular typological categories. [2,12]

The typology of Chinese buildings in Indonesia is fundamentally dynamic and adaptive, as it has developed through a process of adjustment to the tropical climate, the availability of local materials, colonial government policies, changing economic activities, and interactions with local cultures and European architecture. Consequently, Chinese buildings in various Indonesian cities do not always display forms identical to those of traditional buildings in their regions of origin. Instead, they tend to exhibit hybrid characteristics, reflected in the use of verandas, large openings, high ceilings, courtyards or air wells, and combinations of Chinese, local, and colonial decorative elements. Therefore, the study of Chinese building typology is intended not only to classify buildings according to formal similarities but also to identify architectural elements that remain consistent, recur, adapt, or undergo transformation. Such an analysis is essential for explaining the relationships among architectural form, building function, the historical development of an area, environmental conditions, and the sociocultural identity of Chinese communities. [13,2]

III. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using an area-based case study method. This approach was adopted to identify, describe, and interpret the physical and visual characteristics that shape the identity of Chinese architecture in Malang's Chinatown district.

3.2. Research Object and Unit of Analysis

The object of this study is the architectural identity of Chinese buildings in Malang's Chinatown district. The unit of analysis is the individual building, encompassing residential houses, shophouses, and multi-unit dwellings. The aspects examined include geometry, symmetry, rhythm, and building scale and proportion.

3.3. Research Variables and Indicators

Chinese architectural identity was analyzed using typological variables and the following indicators:

Table 1. Interior atmosphere of Eng An Kiong Temple

Variable	Indicators
Building typology	Residential houses, shophouses, and commercial buildings
Façade characteristics	Composition, openings, proportions, rhythm, color, and ornamentation
Roof characteristics	Roof form, roof pitch, eaves, and decorative elements

3.4. Data Sources

a. Primary data

Primary data were collected directly from the study area through:

- Field observations
- Photographic documentation
- Architectural sketches
- Interviews

b. Secondary data

Secondary data were obtained from:

- Historical archives
- Journal articles and previous research findings

3.5. Sampling Technique

The selection of building objects and informants employed a purposive sampling technique. The buildings were selected based on the following criteria:

- Exhibiting distinctive characteristics of Chinese architecture.
- Possessing historical significance.
- Being located along the main corridors of the study area.
- Retaining part of their original architectural form.
- Representing a particular building typology.

3.6. Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed through a building typology analysis. The selected buildings were grouped according to similarities in geometry, symmetry, rhythm, scale, and proportion. The classification included:

- Shophouses
- Residential buildings
- Commercial buildings
- Chinese-style buildings

Following the classification process, a comparative analysis was conducted to examine the buildings' basic forms, spatial configurations, façades, roof forms, materials, ornamentation, and relationships with the street.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Results and Discussion section presents the typology of Chinese architectural buildings in Malang's Chinatown district, as described below:

4.1. Building Forms of Chinese Architecture in Malang's Chinatown District

Malang's Chinatown district is one of the city's major commercial areas and has played an important role in its growth and development. The high intensity of commercial activities has established the district as a significant economic center that contributes to the formation of the urban spatial structure. The principal characteristic of buildings in Malang's Chinatown is the integration of residential and commercial functions within a single building type commonly referred to as the shophouse.

Chinese shophouses are generally characterized by relatively narrow frontages and elongated building forms extending toward the rear of the plot. This configuration represents an adaptation to limited land availability while optimizing spatial use in a densely developed commercial district. During the initial stage of their development, shophouses maintained a relatively balanced relationship between commercial and residential functions. The front section of the building was used for commercial activities, whereas the middle and rear sections accommodated living spaces and family activities.

As the district developed and the intensity of economic activities increased, commercial functions gradually became more dominant than residential uses. This shift resulted in transformations in the internal spatial organization of the buildings, including the expansion of commercial areas, the conversion of residential spaces,

the addition of storage areas, and the reduction of spaces used for domestic activities. Accordingly, changes in the spatial configuration of shophouses in Malang's Chinatown district may be understood as an architectural response to evolving economic and social needs, as well as changing patterns of urban space utilization.



Figure 4. Malang Chinatown District along Pasar Besar Street

4.2. Typology of Chinese Architecture in Malang's Chinatown District

The typologies of Chinese architecture identified in Malang's Chinatown district include shophouse architecture, residential architecture, and multi-unit residential architecture. Each typology is described in the following subsections.

4.2.1. Shophouse Typology

Most buildings in Malang's Chinatown district take the form of shophouses, reflecting the predominantly commercial activities of the Chinese community. These buildings are generally arranged as two- to three-story row houses, with the ground floor used for commercial purposes and the upper floors serving as residential spaces. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a shophouse is defined as "a shop opening on the pavement and also used as the owner's residence." Thus, a shophouse may be understood as a building that combines commercial and residential functions within a single architectural unit.

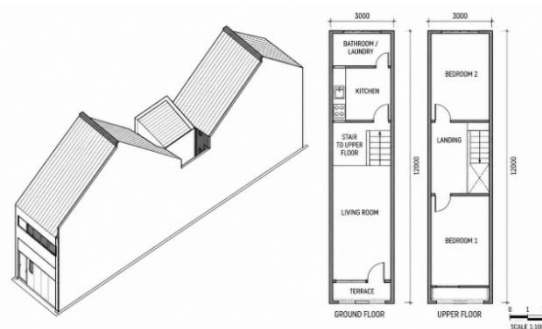


Figure 5. Shophouse typology [3]

4.2.2. Residential Building Typology

The residential building typology generally consists of two- to three-story row houses characterized by relatively narrow and elongated building forms. This type can be observed in several alleys within the Chinatown district, particularly Gang Tengah and Gang Besen. The residential typology can be classified into two categories. First, it includes two- to three-story row houses with narrow and elongated configurations. Second, it comprises buildings that were originally constructed as large residential blocks but were subsequently subdivided into smaller units, either to accommodate descendants through inheritance or as a result of changes in property ownership.

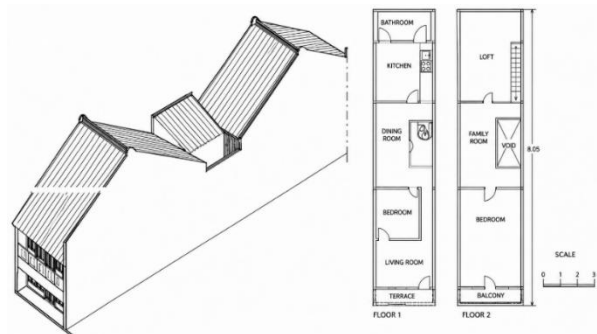


Figure 6. Residential building typology [3]

4.2.3. Multi-Unit Residential Typology

The multi-unit residential typology originally consisted of relatively large residential blocks. Over time, these buildings were subdivided into smaller units based on the number of descendants within the family or as a result of changes in property ownership.

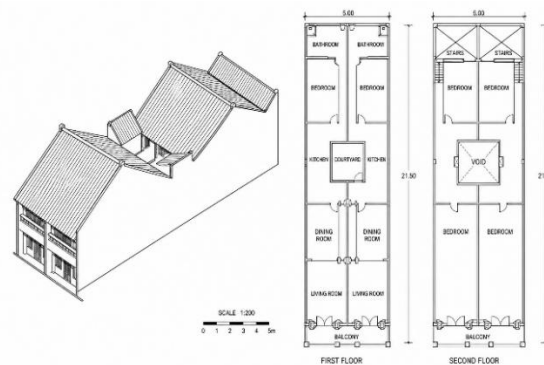


Figure 7. Multi-unit residential typology [3]

4.3. Building Façades along the Pasar Besar Corridor in Malang's Chinatown

Pasar Besar Malang has existed since the colonial period. At that time, Jalan Pasar Besar was known as *Chineeschestraat*, meaning a street inhabited by the Chinese community. The implementation of the *Wijkenstelsel*, a colonial regulation that required ethnic Chinese residents to live within designated areas, resulted in the concentration of the Chinese population around Pasar Besar. As many residents were engaged in commercial activities, the area subsequently developed into an important trading centre. Consequently, Pasar Besar became widely known as the "Chinatown Market," an identity further reinforced by the presence of Eng An Kiong Temple, a Chinese place of worship located near Pasar Besar Malang.

Malang's Chinatown occupies a strategically important location, where economic and commercial interests have gradually become more dominant than other values. As a result, the area no longer displays a strong Oriental character, while its traditional Chinese architectural features have increasingly disappeared and been replaced by commercially oriented buildings, particularly shophouses. The architectural character of buildings along the Pasar Besar corridor also reflects an assimilation of European and Chinese architectural traditions. This influence can be observed in the shophouses, many of which incorporate colonial architectural elements associated with the *Nieuwe Bouwen* style. This phenomenon warrants further examination because the façades of buildings along the Pasar Besar corridor have gradually lost the distinctive character of the area's historical image, which could otherwise serve as an important urban icon of Malang.

The analysis identified several architectural styles within Malang's Chinatown area: (1) the modern architectural style, represented by 225 buildings; (2) the nineteenth-century colonial architectural style dating from 1850 to 1900, represented by three buildings; (3) the colonial architectural style dating from 1900 to 1915, represented by 35 buildings; (4) the colonial architectural style dating from 1916 to 1940, represented by 91 buildings; and (5) the shophouse architectural style, represented by eight buildings. Although the study area was widely recognised as a Chinatown district during the colonial period, buildings with distinctly Chinese architectural characteristics are now difficult to find. Only a small number of buildings retain elements of traditional Chinese architecture. The following section presents the percentage distribution of architectural styles among buildings in Malang's Chinatown area.

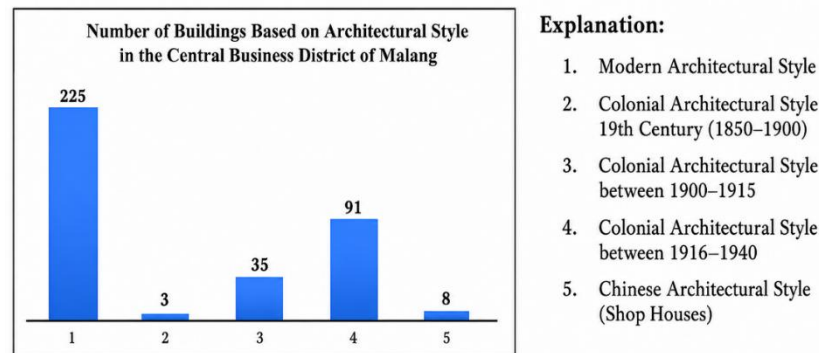
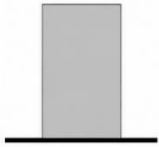
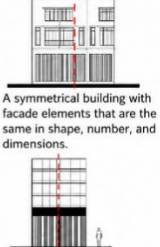
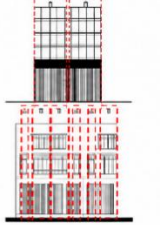
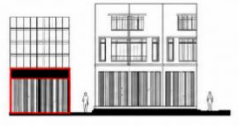


Figure 8. Percentage distribution of architectural styles in Malang's Chinatown Area [14]

Modern Architecture			
Geometry	Symmetry	Rhythm	Scale and proportion
The building's geometric form is rectangular.	There are buildings that are not symmetrical because the number of facade elements differs.	Rhythm is determined by the dimensions of the openings (windows), the spacing between openings, and the repetition of the opening shapes. For example,	The scale is adjusted to human dimensions, with floor-to-floor heights of approximately 3.5 to 4 meters. This building is proportioned in relation to its facade elements. These elements include doors, windows, and a horizontal gable.
			

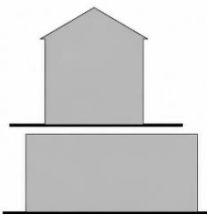
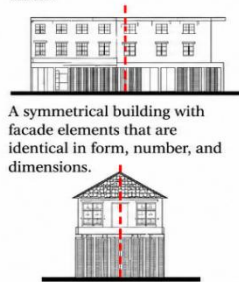
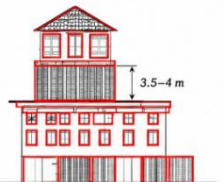
Chinatown Architecture (Shophouses)			
Geometry	Symmetry	Rhythm	Scale and Proportion
The building's geometric forms are rectangles and triangles.	There are buildings that are not symmetrical because the number of facade elements differs.	Rhythm is determined by the dimensions of the openings (windows), the spacing between openings, and the repetition of the opening shapes. Some buildings have an irregular rhythm caused by differing numbers of facade elements. For example,	The scale is adjusted to human dimensions, with floor heights of approximately 3.5 to 4 meters. Having too few windows makes the facade elements disproportionate to the overall surface.
			

Figure 9. Façade composition of buildings in Malang's Chinatown Area

Based on Figure 9, the building façades are generally composed of basic geometric forms, including squares, rectangles, and triangles. Although several buildings exhibit asymmetrical configurations, their overall formal compositions remain visually balanced. The architectural rhythm also varies among the buildings, while the proportions and dimensions are generally consistent with the human scale. In terms of building profiles, several distinct profile types were identified, each representing the characteristics of buildings within the study area.

The following table presents the various building profile types distributed throughout the study area:

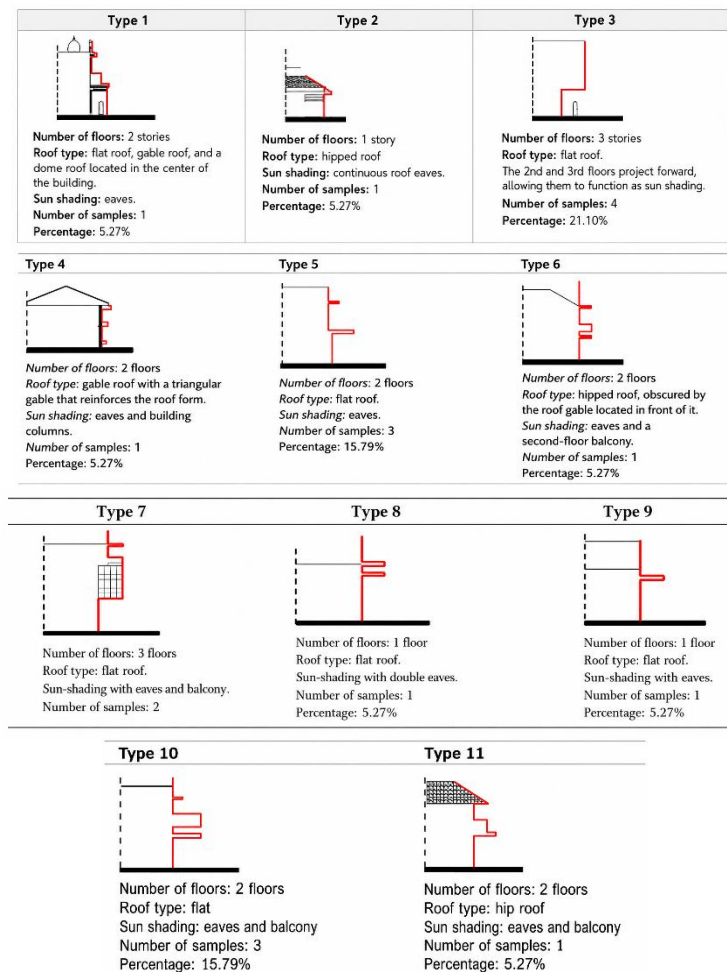


Figure 10. Façade profiles of buildings in Malang's Chinatown Area

Based on Figure 10, the façade profiles are influenced by variations in building setbacks and projections, as well as by the presence or absence of shading elements, such as roof overhangs, columns, and balconies. In buildings without roof overhangs, the upper floors—particularly the second and third storeys—typically project farther outward. These projections function as passive shading devices that reduce direct solar exposure on the lower parts of the building.

V. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the characteristics of Chinese architecture in Malang's Chinatown area. The findings indicate that: (1) the categorisation of architectural styles within the study area identified 225 buildings in the modern architectural style, three buildings in the colonial architectural style dating from 1850 to 1900, 35 buildings in the colonial architectural style dating from 1900 to 1915, 91 buildings in the colonial architectural style dating from 1916 to 1940, and eight buildings displaying Chinese architectural characteristics, resulting in a total of 362 buildings. Based on this distribution, modern architecture is the predominant style within the study area. Consequently, the historical image of the area as a Chinatown district is no longer clearly visible. This condition has occurred because many property owners have altered or renovated their buildings in response to changing needs and contemporary architectural trends; (2) the architectural character of Malang's Chinatown has been influenced by various cultural traditions, including Chinese, Dutch, and Javanese cultures, as reflected in the forms, functions, and ornamental elements of its buildings; (3) the area has undergone various transformations over time, including changes in building functions, the addition or removal of architectural elements, and modifications to spatial configurations; and (4) this study recommends that conservation efforts in Malang's Chinatown should take into account the area's historical, cultural, and social values while actively involving both local communities and government authorities.

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