



ON LEONG MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION BUILDING

2216 SOUTH WENTWORTH AVENUE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS

SEPTEMBER, 1988

COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS
320 North Clark Street, Room 516, Chicago, Illinois 60610
(312) 744-3200

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STAFF ANALYSIS OF LANDMARK CRITERIA APPLICABLE TO THE
ON LEONG MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION BUILDING

Based on its analysis of the information compiled, the staff of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks believes that the On Leong Merchants Association Building merits designation as a Chicago Landmark and recommends that the Commission initiate the process leading to such designation. In the opinion of the staff, the structure fulfills three of the seven criteria set forth in Chapter 21.66 of the Municipal Code of Chicago.

CRITERION 1: Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The On Leong Merchants Association Building is the most significant visual symbol of the cultural heritage of the Chinese of Chicago. After periods of racial tension, official discrimination, and difficulties in adapting to Western culture, the construction of this structure represented the economic growth and cultural pride of its community. Used to house recent immigrants, as a school to teach the Chinese language to their children, as a shrine, and as the ethnic equivalent of a chamber of commerce, it was the center of activity for a community that made its heritage an asset. An aggressive statement of tradition, it also symbolized faith in the continuing growth of a united community.

CRITERION 4: Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

The On Leong Merchants Association Building is an innovative integration of a building type common to Chicago, the union hall, with the stylistic traditions of China. Its terra cotta details were unique to the City, and they demonstrated the skill of the architects and craftsmen in interpreting and articulating an uncommon architectural vocabulary. Although the building has a plan that is similar to a number of others in Chicago, the massing of the elevation and the style of the details give it a singular profile and identity. The attention paid to the style of the exterior was extended to the interior, where fine materials were used in the traditional style for

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the design of screens, fixtures, and furnishings. The quality of the craftsmanship and materials throughout the building was exceptional.

CRITERION 7: Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.

As the first and most prominent permanent structure built after Chinese designs in Chicago, the On Leong Merchants Association Building established a new physical presence for Chinatown. Its distinctive towers, curving roofline, size, and colorful detail make it a structure of singular prominence in the neighborhood, identifying the heritage of the community and its most important cultural institution.

The On Leong building retains an exceptionally high degree of integrity. Minimal alterations were overseen by the original designers and their successor firm for more than forty years after the building was completed, which assured consistency with the original design. The staff recommends that the structure be designated and that all aspects of the interior and exterior be considered critical features.

ON LEONG MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION BUILDING
2216 South Wentworth Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Date of Construction: 1926-28

Architects: Christian S. Michaelsen and Sigurd A. Rognstad

The On Leong Chinese Merchants Association Building was commissioned by the organization that has provided an institutional framework for the activities of its community since the turn of the century. Like other ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago, Chinatown is an informally understood geographic area in which public gathering places, distinguished by their size, materials, and design, were created to perpetuate cultural values and make manifest the traditions of the community. For many ethnic immigrants the buildings that housed cultural activities were the homes of religious institutions, as exemplified by the churches of Irish Catholics and German Lutherans and by the synagogues of Russian Jews. In the Chinese community, however, it was the businessmen's association that furnished an institutional focus and an architectural symbol of ethnic culture. The On Leong Merchant Association Building, designed in 1926 and built to accommodate multiple uses, is the oldest and most prominent physical symbol of Chicago's Chinese heritage.

Chinese immigration to the United States started in the early 1850s in response to the California Gold Rush of 1849. The majority of Chinese who came to California were young working-class men, farmers and dock workers from the Sai-ya and Sam-ya regions near Canton and Hong Kong in Kuangtung province. The natives of Kuangtung share a distinct dialect that has become the predominant form of Chinese spoken in the United States. Roughly half of these immigrants were literate in their native tongue, and very few arrived with a working knowledge of English. Due to the costs and difficulties of trans-Pacific travel, the type of physical labor demanded by the jobs awaiting them, and a tradition that demanded a wife remain in the household of her husband's parents rather than travel with him, the profile of mid-nineteenth century Chinese immigrants was almost exclusively young and male. In going to the land they called "Golden Mountain," most intended to make their fortune and return to China with the means to buy land.

The majority of Chinese immigrants were geographically limited to the West Coast until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1870. Among the first Chinese to settle in Chicago were Harp Lee, who opened a laundry on Madison Street in 1873, and T. C. Moy, a grocer who established his business on Clark Street in 1874. Moy became instrumental in the development of a Chinese enclave in the Loop. Having found Chicago particularly to his liking, he encouraged relatives and friends in San Francisco and Kuangtung to join him. By 1885, forty members of the extended Moy family from his native village were living in Chicago, and by the census of 1890, 567 Chinese were recorded as residents of the city. The largest settlement was concentrated on Clark Street in the Loop, between Adams and Van Buren streets, where they lived above the small shops they worked in or operated.

Increasing tension caused by cultural conflict and competition for jobs and housing between Chinese and white immigrants in California eventually elicited a series of racially motivated responses from the federal government. Beginning with restrictions on the number of immigrants in acts of the late 1880s and culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1902, these measures were designed to discourage further immigration, to bar those who had gone back to China from returning, and to deny Chinese women the right to join their resident husbands. These policies achieved their intended results, as the total Chinese population of the United States decreased, particularly in California, between 1892 and 1902. As a result of the exodus from California, the number in Chicago's Chinese community doubled in the same period.

When the Chinese government responded to the Exclusion Act by boycotting all American-made products in 1905, the Chinese of Chicago felt the force of recrimination in the form of political harassment and dramatically increased costs, particularly for rent. The Clark Street Chinatown lost most of its residential base at this time, its tenants forced to find less expensive housing in the largely poor districts immediately outside of the Loop, including the area of Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Road, then considered a slum and a vice district. In response to the poor treatment they were suddenly receiving and due to their expulsion to poor, high crime neighborhoods, the Chinese established organizations variously known as societies, clans, or tongs. In his dissertation of 1926, Dr. Tin-Chu Fan described the foundation of these organizations in Chicago and their intention to "protect members . . . and help them in sickness and poverty, to assist them to become familiar with the laws and customs of their adopted country, and yet not to forget their fatherland, language, and family codes." One of the most prominent of these new organizations was the On Leong ("Prosperity peaceful conduct") Merchants Association. The On Leong Association operated under the leadership of a branch of the Moy family and was made up initially of the extended Moy, Lee, and Chin families.

By 1911, the Chinese population of Chicago was over 1,800. In that year the federal government announced the construction of a new federal building on Clark Street between Adams and Jackson streets, in the heart of the Chinese district. Concurrent with the news that many of the buildings housing their businesses were scheduled for demolition, a political split developed within the community between pro-monarchy and pro-republican fac-

tions in reaction to the Chinese Revolution of 1911, led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Energized by the pending loss of Old Chinatown and an ideological conflict that was fed by daily reports from the homeland, the On Leong Merchants Association identified itself with the republican cause. Its members took an active role in organizing the community, and they obtained a lease through the H. O. Stone real estate management company for approximately fifty commercial spaces near the intersection of Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Road. The businesses that participated in the association moved from Clark Street to Cermak and Wentworth *en masse* in February, 1912, and the area was immediately proclaimed as the "New Chinatown." In spite of its previous reputation as an area of poverty and crime, the new location had a number of advantages over its Loop predecessor: a relatively large number of available residential and commercial buildings, one public and one private school, and the potential for growth without the encroachment of downtown businesses or the focused attention of city officials.

The On Leong Merchants Association made itself the center of cultural activity in the wake of the foundation of New Chinatown. It was responsible for a Chinese language after-hours school for children, provided assistance for new immigrants, organized community activities and celebrations, and established an informal judicial system that settled disputes between its members. In order to expand its services, the association decided in 1926 to build a new headquarters building that would consolidate its operations under one roof and provide a symbol of Chinese heritage to those outside the community.

The only previous large scale building built after traditional Chinese designs in Chicago had been the Chinese Theater located on the Midway during the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 (Figure 1). In addition to its theater, this structure housed restaurants, a market, a shrine, and a tea garden. The building was 2½ stories with an open loggia on its second floor and a symmetrical elevation that was framed by two towers. The diminishing scale of the successive levels of each tower was an element inspired by the traditional form of the pagoda in the southern provinces of China. Funded privately by the Wah Mee Exposition Company, a group of merchants, the architect of this theater building is not known. Like all of the large structures at the fair, the Chinese Theater was demolished after the fair closed in the fall of 1893.

A number of problems confronted the On Leong Merchants Association in its attempt to realize the new building. At the time, there were no architects of Chinese origin or descent licensed to practice in Illinois, nor were there any standing examples of traditional Chinese architecture in the state. Since there had been no previous demand for their skills, there were also no craftsmen in the local community familiar with traditional construction techniques. The directors of the On Leong were forced to find an Occidental designer who had an understanding of and an appreciation for traditional Chinese vernacular architecture.

At least one established Chicago architectural firm had a recent connection with Chinese design. In the annual Chicago Architectural Exhibition of 1919, Purcell and Elmslie exhibited a drawing of a design that had been accepted for the Institutional Church at

Sieng Tan, Hunan, China. Although it incorporated elements derived from traditional Chinese structures, these were applied to a building whose mass, fenestration, and use of a monumental arch entrance were exemplary of the work of the Chicago School and of Louis H. Sullivan, with whom Elmslie had worked for many years. The impact of this design on the Chinese community of Chicago was negligible; neither the design nor the firm had an influence on the work that was about to begin in Chinatown.

In 1920, Jim Moy hired the newly founded architectural firm of Michaelsen and Rognstad to design a new storefront and interior for his Peacock Inn restaurant in the then-fashionable Uptown nightlife district on the North Side of Chicago. By 1926, Moy was one of the directors of the On Leong Merchants Association and his cousin, Frank Moy, held the position of American (English language) Secretary, a title popularly referred to in the community as the "Mayor of Chinatown." Jim Moy's satisfaction with the Peacock Inn design led to Michaelsen and Rognstad receiving the commission for the new headquarters building for the association.

Christian S. Michaelsen was born in Chicago on January 28, 1888, the son of Christian Michaelsen, a building contractor of Norwegian descent. He attended the public schools and received his first training in the building trades working with his father. In 1905, he began training as a draftsman in the office of Arthur Heun (1866-1946), a prominent society architect. Among Heun's most notable designs were the William McCormick Blair and William Henry McDoel residences on Astor Street and the Melody Farm for J. Ogden Armour, now the home of Lake Forest Academy.

From 1910 to 1913, Michaelsen worked for Chicago's most prolific society architect, Howard Van Doren Shaw. A graduate of Yale and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Shaw was a master of historic styles in the Beaux-Arts tradition, and his office became a training center for a number of future architects of prominence. Others in Shaw's employ during Michaelsen's tenure included George B. Eich, David Adler, Henry C. Dangler, and Robert G. Work. The social backgrounds and educational attainments of this group were exemplary of the patrician class: most had studied in the East, and Adler and Dangler attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Most had also had personal contact with historic European architecture, and they were all avid collectors of books on historic buildings and styles. With so many design specialists in the firm, Shaw's need and Michaelsen's previous experience in construction led the latter to work in the area of structural engineering for the office. While Michaelsen was in his office, Shaw completed designs for the Henry Hoyt Hilton House at 5640 South Woodlawn Avenue, the Clayton Mark House and a second house by the firm for Edward L. Ryerson, both in Lake Forest, and the Gustavus Swift, Jr. Residence at 1551 North Astor Street.

Sigurd Anton Rognstad was born to Marcus and Emilia Rognstad in Chicago on July 28, 1892. His parents were recent immigrants from Norway; his father was employed as a machinist and his mother taught music out of the family home. From the age of 18, Rognstad worked as a free-lance draftsman, and in 1915 he joined the office of the architect Frederick W. Perkins (1866-1928) as a designer and draftsman. Perkins had been edu-

cated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and he too was a specialist in society residential design. Among the projects executed by Perkins' office while Rognstad was in his employ was the Charles H. Schweppe Residence in Lake Forest.

The partnership that Michaelsen and Rognstad formed in 1920 established a firm that remained in business through a number of transformations. Michaelsen provided expertise in structural engineering and oversaw the business operations of the office; Rognstad was responsible for the interior and exterior stylistic designs in their work. Their association was to last 17 years, ending with the death of Rognstad at the age of 46 in 1937. With the addition of Charles Rabig and Albert Ramp as partners in 1940, the firm continued under Michaelsen's direction until his death on June 27, 1960.

Although Michaelsen and Rognstad had come from immigrant working-class backgrounds, both had served apprenticeships with prominent architects who specialized in residential design for an upper-class clientele. Trained in the tradition of the Beaux-Arts, they had neither the educational credentials nor the social connections necessary to compete with their teachers in pursuit of similar commissions from the elite. In order to follow their mutual inclination toward monumental designs in historic styles, they concentrated their efforts on large scale projects intended for public use.

Traditional Chinese architecture is characterized by its rectangular floor plans, the horizontality of its proportions, and the curving lines and overhanging eaves of its tile-covered roofs. The structure is based on the column or pier, which supports a system of cantilevered brackets, rafters, purlins, and eaves, known collectively as *tou kung*, that produces the characteristic profile of the roofline. Most Chinese buildings are one or one and a half stories tall, with the notable exception of pagodas, and were constructed of wood. The walls were treated as screens between structural members and had no load-bearing function. The use of brick, terra cotta, and stone was limited to structures that carried the symbolism of permanence, such as temples, pagodas, tombs, and palaces, and to those that demanded strength, including bridges and fortifications. Although construction methods and the proportions of certain elements, in particular the height and pitch of the roof, varied over time and by region, the style has been consistent and uniform over many centuries.

Michaelsen and Rognstad received the commission for the On Leong Merchants Association Building in the Spring of 1926. Possibly in anticipation of this commission, or in response to it, the firm had in its possession a number of books on historic Chinese architecture, notably including the two volume photographic survey *Chinesische Architektur* by Ernst Boerschmann, published in Berlin in 1925. Following the Beaux-Arts approach, they studied the literary and graphic materials available on the classical masterpieces of Chinese architecture to gain an understanding of the style and its underlying system of thought. Although these materials were of primary importance as sources of inspiration for the design of the On Leong building and its ornament, the association's formal needs and the position of the community within the larger social fabric demanded a novel

architectural solution. The challenge was to produce a building whose functions had no precedent in the Chinese tradition while retaining the essential elements of the style.

When plans for the On Leong Merchants Association Building were announced in the *Chicago Tribune* of July 4, 1926, it was called "One of the most expensive and elaborate buildings ever erected in America by the Chinese." The building was constructed on a steel and concrete frame and clad entirely in brick and terra cotta (Figure 2). Its elevation is reminiscent of the Chinese Theater at the Columbian Exposition in its symmetry and in the arrangement of its elements, particularly in having a facade that is framed by towers whose design was inspired by the profile of the pagoda (Figure 3). Similarly, the centrally placed main entrance was given emphasis by a canopy over the first floor, the rhythm of the piers on the upper floors, and the shape of the roofline above. The open loggia on an upper floor is an element common to multi-story commercial buildings in Hong Kong and Canton, and the choice of the pier over the column to support the loggia is a regional variation favored in Kuangtung province.

The first floor of the On Leong building is clad entirely in terra cotta and capped with a frieze of decorative panels. Terra cotta was also used for the brackets and railings of the loggia, to frame the windows and form the tops of the towers, and for the cresting of the rear stair tower (Figure 4). The terra cotta was custom made from Rognstad's designs by the American Terra Cotta Company of Crystal Lake, Illinois. The designs were based on Chinese prototypes, and the material is similar to the traditional form of glazed terra cotta known in China as *liu li* (Figure 5). Animals, figures, foliage, and geometric patterns represent good fortune, long life, and the six Confucian Virtues: Li, propriety; Yee, moral courage; Yun, physical courage; Jen, charity; Chu, the pursuit of knowledge; and Len, temperance. The animal figures have their faces turned toward either the viewer or each other; in order to avoid a symbol of bad luck, they were never allowed to have their backs turned on one another (Figure 6). The details were given polychrome glazes with red, the traditional color of joy, and jade green, symbolizing affluence, as the predominant colors; white, the color of death and mourning, was avoided.

Stores flank the elaborate terra-cotta main portal at the center of the first floor (Figure 7). The portal opens on a large foyer with a vaulted ceiling and a staircase that leads to a lobby and the upper floors. The second floor was originally designed to accommodate a residential hotel, a lounge, offices, and facilities for the Chinese language after-hours school. A kitchen, dining room, and three large meeting halls were built on the third floor. One of the third floor halls was equipped as a shrine, trimmed in marble and precious woods inlaid with gold and mother-of-pearl. According to an article that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* three years after the completion of the building, the shrine room was decorated with tapestries, gilded screens, figurative reliefs in bronze, an porcelain vases that dated to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The altar held a painted image of Gwon Gun, an ancient hero venerated as a soldier and philosopher; the altar was flanked by oil portraits of two later military and political "liberators," George Washington and Dr. Sun Yat-sen.

The interior plan is similar to that of a building type common in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Chicago, that is, the guild or union hall. Usually a three- or four-story brick building, its exterior would be decorated with symbols of the trade that its organization represented. The typical union hall housed a number of street level retail shops, with facilities for the training of apprentices, dining rooms, meeting halls, and offices on its upper floors. Although the organizational principle of the Association was based on advancing the commercial activity of an ethnic community, rather than on a single trade, the uses for which its building was created were nearly identical to those of a union hall.

With the completion of the On Leong Merchants Association Building, Michaelsen and Rognstad and their successor firm became the architects of choice in Chinatown for the next two decades. In addition to new storefronts and interiors for existing buildings, the firm went on to design a number of new structures in the traditional style for neighborhood businesses. They were also responsible for subsequent renovations to the On Leong building, making interior alterations and executing a partial reconstruction of the piers supporting the second- and third-floor loggia. The building retains a high degree of integrity, with its original storefronts, windows, doors, and trim almost wholly intact.

The success of the On Leong Merchants Association Building, the largest public building designed by them up to that time, helped establish the firm's reputation for the design of large public buildings. Within the next four years, Michaelsen and Rognstad received commissions for numerous buildings for public use, including the Midwest Hotel and Athletic Club at Madison Street and Hamlin Avenue, the La Follette, Holden, and Douglas Park fieldhouses and the Garfield Park administration building for Chicago's West Park District, and the renovation of the dome of the State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois.

The efforts of the On Leong Merchants Association produced a building that has a commanding presence in its neighborhood and created a distinctive element within the streetscapes of the city. Its size, materials, colors, and design established a new sense of identity for Chinatown among the many ethnic communities of Chicago. Although forced to rely on designers from an alien culture, the association selected an architectural firm whose members were trained and equipped to interpret diverse stylistic traditions. The result was the integration of traditional Chinese details with an American interior plan, to produce an architectural statement of ethnic community and institutional importance that has retained these connotations for more than sixty years.

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Chicago Department of Planning and Development
320 N. Clark St., Room 516, Chicago, IL 60610
312-744-3200; 744-2958 (TDD)