ABSTRACT

Over the period October 2006-July 2008, the author conducted a detailed survey of five historic buildings in Malaya constructed by 19th-century Chinese immigrants. These buildings feature roof decorations made in and imported from Shiwan 石灣, China, during that period. The decorations include scenes and figurines representing events and characters taken from Cantonese operas, Chinese legends and classical novels. In studying these decorations the author has come across several recurring themes illustrating concepts such as justice, sworn brotherhood, loyalty and courage in the face of adversity, which shed light on the cultural identities and thinking of the Cantonese migrants. In this paper these themes are interpreted against the background of the social and political circumstances in China and Southeast Asia during the period under discussion, showing how an understanding of the concerns of these Chinese migrants of the past can help one to understand contemporary migrant communities worldwide.