

## Heritage Appraisal of Kwong Fook Tsz

### 40 Tai Ping Shan Street, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong

Originally called Kwong Fook I Tsz (廣福義祠) in the early decades and commonly known today as Pak Shing Temple (百姓廟), **Historical Interest** Kwong Fook Tsz (廣福祠), which literally means temple of common benevolence, was built in Sheung Wan in 1895. It is historically significant as it demonstrates the inseparable ties and cohesion among the Chinese community during the early period of Hong Kong and also stands as an embodiment of traditional Chinese beliefs about death.

The first Kwong Fook Tsz was proposed in 1851 at the instigation of the prominent businessman Tam Choy (譚才) and 13 other members of the emerging Chinese elite.<sup>1</sup> During the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many immigrants from Mainland China were attracted to Hong Kong to make a living in the city. However, many of them died in Hong Kong before they were able to return to their hometown. It was a Chinese tradition to put up soul tablets (神主牌) for the deceased. To honour the Chinese tradition and deceased's wish to be back to their ancestral roots, there was a need for a venue to house the soul tablets of the Chinese labourers from the Mainland who died in Hong Kong, in the hope that "their fellow-villagers or connections visiting Hong Kong could carry them home".<sup>2</sup> Tam Choy and his fellow donors raised funds and asked the Government to grant them a piece of land to construct a "common ancestral Chinese temple" intended "for the reception of soul tablets to the memory of their deceased countrymen".<sup>3</sup> The Government agreed to allot a piece of land in "Taipingshan"<sup>4</sup> (太平山) (designated as Inland Lot no. 361)

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<sup>1</sup> Enclosure 5, Appendix III, "Report on the Tung Wa[h] Hospital by the Honourable T. H. Whitehead", *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1896, p. XVII.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Enclosure 5, Appendix III, "Report on the Tung Wa[h] Hospital by the Honourable T. H. Whitehead", *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1896, pp. XVII-XVIII.

<sup>4</sup> "Taipingshan" refers to one of the districts in the City of Victoria in the early days. It was referred to as District No. 3 in the *Plan of the City of Victoria 1889*, among the others as District No. 2 Sai Ying Pun, District No. 4 Sheung Wan and District No. 5 Choong Wan (Central 中環) to its west, north and east sides respectively. See Enclosure 5, Appendix III, "Report on the Tung Wa[h] Hospital by the Honourable T. H. Whitehead", *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1896, p. XVIII. The plan attached to the Government lease of Inland Lot No. 361 (1895) shows that the area of the lot is 14,738 square feet. See Land Registry, Government lease of Inland Lot No. 361,

for free as long as the site was used exclusively as a temple.<sup>5</sup> The first Kwong Fook Tsz was then built on the present-day Tai Ping Shan Street in 1856. It provided the final home of the souls of Chinese labourers who died in Hong Kong and a place for keeping the soul tablets of the deceased.

In addition to housing the soul tablets of deceased Chinese labourers, Kwong Fook Tsz later began providing refuge and medical services for the sick, homeless and elderly. As a result, it gradually became a dark and filthy place that was regarded as a “Chinese hospital”<sup>6</sup> where the dead and dying, as well as sealed coffins were accommodated. The situation revealed the inhumane living conditions of poor and sick Chinese and the lack of affordable medical services for local residents in the early decades. It later caught the attention of the Government in 1866 when 21 coffins containing bodies were discovered inside the temple, many of which had been stored there for as long as five years, making it a source of hygiene problems in the area.<sup>7</sup> The Government finally recognised the need to build a Chinese hospital to help improve these conditions when the problem came to attention again in the so-called “I Tsz Scandal” that happened in 1869<sup>8</sup>, which led to the establishment of the Tung Wah Hospital in 1870. Kwong Fook Tsz was then placed under the management of the Tung Wah Hospital after the latter’s opening in 1872 and continues to be administered by the Hospital today.<sup>9</sup>

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11 July 1895.

<sup>5</sup> Enclosure 5, Appendix III, “Report on the Tung Wa[h] Hospital by the Honourable T. H. Whitehead”, *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1896, p. XVIII.

<sup>6</sup> Appendix III, “Report on the Tung Wa[h] Hospital by the Honourable T. H. Whitehead”, *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1896, p.V.

<sup>7</sup> Enclosure 6, Appendix III, “Report on the Tung Wa[h] Hospital by the Honourable T. H. Whitehead”, *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1896, pp. XVIII-XX.

<sup>8</sup> The “I Tsz Scandal” was sparked on 22 April 1869, when Alfred Lister, the acting Registrar General, visited I Tsz to investigate the death of a man from an emigration depot and discovered “the gross abuses and disgusting scenes” in the temple. These appalling unhygienic conditions were subsequently resurfaced and wildly reported in society. See Enclosure 2-3, Appendix III, “Report on the Tung Wa[h] Hospital by the Honourable T. H. Whitehead”, *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1896, pp. VI-XIV.

<sup>9</sup> A stone plaque entitled the renovation of Kwong Fook Tsz in 1869 recorded in its content the funds raised for the establishment of Tung Wah Hospital as well as the breakdown of the expenses in detail. It serves to testify the association between Kwong Fook Tsz and the

When the bubonic plague broke out in 1894, the Taipingshan area was the most seriously infected neighbourhood, and the land there was consequently resumed (acquired by compulsory purchase) by the Government. After clearing the site, the Government allotted part of Inland Lot no. 361, where the first Kwong Fook Tsz was located, to the Po Leung Kuk charitable organisation for the construction of their premises in 1895. At the same time, the current Kwong Fook Tsz was erected next to the Po Leung Kuk's building. A foundation stone with Chinese inscriptions recording the lending of land to Po Leung Kuk was laid next to the main entrance of Kwong Fook Tsz.

Kwong Fook Tsz has not only served as a temple for accommodating soul tablets; it has always been a venue for worshipping a number of different deities. The main deity at the temple is Ksitigarbha (地藏王), a Buddhist bodhisattva who protects and releases the souls of the deceased from purgatory. When the well-known Shui Ching Pak Temple (綏靖伯廟) in Tik Lung Lane (迪龍里) in Wan Chai was demolished during the redevelopment of the district, the statue of Chai Kung (濟公) and other relics, including the historic plaque inscribed with the Chinese characters “威伏炎瘟”, literally meaning “to eliminate epidemics”, and the “tiger head gate” (虎頭門) that were temporarily moved to the “Ma Miu” (孖廟) (“double temple”, also called Shui Ching Pak Tin Hau Ma Miu (綏靖伯天后孖廟), Sam Yuen Kung (三元宮) or Shui Yuet Kung (水月宮)) at 38 Tai Ping Shan Street from 1984 until they were relocated to Kwong Fook Tsz in 1991. At the request of the Ma Miu temple keepers, Kwong Fook Tsz additionally houses statues of other deities from the Ma Miu, including Shui Ching Pak and Tai Sui (太歲). The inclusiveness of Kwong Fook Tsz allows believers in different deities to continue to worship their gods.

Kwong Fook Tsz is a one-storey building situated on an *Architectural Merit* elevated platform, which is divided into two levels; the lower level accommodates the shrine of the Earth God; and the upper level is where the Kwong Fook Tsz building is located. The shrine of the Earth God is housed in an alcove under a tiled roof with pan, roll and

drip tiles decorated in auspicious patterns that also has a chimney for burning paper offerings. The shrine was designed to echo the typical Earth God shrine of a local village, with a raised rectangular platform serving as the foundation, and a gable-shaped decorative screen at the back. This background is also topped with a ball-shaped finial, a feature more commonly adopted for decorating Chinese graves than Earth God shrines. A granite block inscribed with the Chinese characters “社稷之神” (“the God of Earth and Grain”) is placed along the central axis of the shrine alongside a stone dog.

The Kwong Fook Tsz building itself has three halls and two courtyards, each one bay in width, with a forecourt at the front. The roof structure consists of timber purlins and load-bearing walls, while the corridors along the sides of the two courtyards comprise “humpbacked” rafters and a purlin system. The timber structure is topped with pantiles with green end tiles and drip tiles. The most prominent architectural feature on the exterior is the Shiwan (石灣) ceramics on the ridge of the entrance hall. These were manufactured in 1895 when the temple was built and feature the repertoire of characters from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Chinese novel *The Investiture of the Gods* (《封神演義》). In addition, there are a pair of dragon fish and a pair of lions adjacent to this novel scenery.

The building is mainly constructed in grey brick and granite. Granite was predominantly used for wall bases and door frames. The granite lintel above the doorway of the main entrance in the recessed façade is engraved with the Chinese characters “廣福慈航”, literally means “blessings and benevolence”. A set of couplets flanks the doorway. Another notable decorative feature is the timber fascia board decorated with fine relief and fretwork presenting auspicious motifs.

The internal layout is basically symmetrical, with each courtyard including a pair of covered passages that connect the individual halls. A pair of ceremonial screen doors is located along the central axis of the entrance hall in conformity with the typical setting in traditional Chinese architecture, while a latticed horizontal screen decorated with a floral motif is placed between the door lintel

and the ceiling.

Around the well-paved granite courtyard behind the entrance hall are two pairs of brick pillars erected to support the roofs of the side passages, where timber tie beams in the shape of “prawn beams” (蝦弓樑) sit between the pillars. With the aim of creating a symmetrical perception for people walking down the passages, decorative humpbacked roofs fixed on purlins and cylindrical posts are installed underneath the actual roofs. Exquisitely detailed timber fascia boards are fixed beneath the eaves facing the courtyard.

The sacrificial hall for worshipping the deities is located in the middle of the temple. “Dragon boat ridges” (龍船脊) decorate the gable ridges. A fine wooden board (彩門 *caimen*) with fretwork featuring dragons, phoenixes, oriental magpies, and grapevines is placed at the entrance to the hall. The colourful ornamental altar table, where the main incense burner is placed, also bears the Chinese characters for the year that the temple was built. Near the right end of the rear wall is an arched doorway leading to the next courtyard, which contains similar designs to the courtyard of the front hall.

The end hall houses the soul tablets and is functional in nature. The main ridge and gable ridges here are decorated with a *kuilong* (夔龍) motif.

Kwong Fook Tsz has undergone some renovations since it was erected on its current site. The site was originally enclosed by a brick parapet set on a retaining wall built using random undressed stones, which was later reinforced and rendered in red in the 1990s with a plaque with Chinese characters “勝地” affixed to it. The plaque was later removed before being replicated on a granite tablet placed in the forecourt in 2017.

Although some decorative elements, such as a pair of wall-edge brick sculptures on the edge of the gable walls (*chitou* 埤頭) and patterned plastered strips on these walls, have been removed, many of the original features of Kwong Fook Tsz remain intact. For example, the most prominent decoration on the exterior is the Shiwan ceramics

on the main ridge of the entrance hall. They were manufactured in 1895 when the building was erected at its current site, is still preserved. Moreover, the grey bricks and granite door frame of the front elevation, including the granite lintel and couplets flanking the doorway, are all well preserved. The shelters added in the forecourt were removed after the renovation in 2017, restoring the forecourt to its original appearance.

Kwong Fook Tsz is a rare example of a temple with a three-hall-one-bay layout and two courtyards in Hong Kong. In its early years, it was used to provide physical and spiritual refuge and medical services for the sick, homeless, and elderly as well as to appease the souls of the dead. There is no other surviving temple that performed these functions in the history of Hong Kong. It is of exceptional historic significance, as it not only bears witness to both the rise of local Chinese leaders and the development of Sheung Wan but was also the direct catalyst for the establishment of the Tung Wah Hospital. The stone plaque entitled the renovation of Kwong Fook Tsz in 1869, which recorded in detail the donations received for the establishment of Tung Wah Hospital, is one of the few artefacts of the first-generation Kwong Fook Tsz that still preserved up to present day after its relocation to the current building in 1895.

Kwong Fook Tsz played a significant role in providing communal services when it was first built. Located in the historic Chinese neighbourhood of Sheung Wan, it embodies exceptionally high local interest. In addition to its role as a temple housing soul tablets, its outstanding social value derives from accommodating the statues of deities and relics from other temples that were forced to close due to urban development or dangerous building conditions. The relocation of Chai Kung and its relics to Kwong Fook Tsz has allowed rituals related to Chai Kung to be continued, such as “passing the gate” (過關). It also houses the statues of other deities from the Ma Miu, including Shui Ching Pak and Tai Sui. Worshippers seeking the blessing of Ksitigarbha and Chai Kung still devotedly pay tribute to these deities at Kwong Fook Tsz.

In addition, Kwong Fook Tsz features several plaques

**Rarity**

**Social Value & Local Interest**

presented by believers living in the district and its environs that confirm its strong social value and local interest for the local community. A plaque, “顯鎮威靈”, which literally means “prominent and powerful deity”, was presented by worshippers from D’Aguilar Street (德己立街), Wing Wah Lane (榮華里), Lan Kwai Fong (蘭桂坊) and Wo On Lane (和安里) in the 34<sup>th</sup> year of the Emperor Guangxu (光緒) reign in the Qing Dynasty (1908).

Kwong Fook Tsz shares a group value with the Man Mo **Group Value** Temple Compound (declared monument) and Main Block of Tung Wah Hospital (Grade 1), as they all started performing charitable work for underprivileged Chinese in the middle and late 19<sup>th</sup> century, testifying the development of the Chinese community in Sheung Wan. It also forms a group value with Tung Wah Coffin Home (declared monument) at Sandy Bay, which played an identical role serving deceased Chinese. It has significant group value with the Old Pathological Institute (currently the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences, declared monument), Main Block of Tung Wah Hospital (Grade 1), the Main Building and Annex Block of Old Tsan Yuk Maternity Hospital (Grade 1 and Grade 2 respectively), the façade of the Old Mental Hospital (declared monument), Main Block and Staff Quarters of the old Lunatic Asylum Chinese Block (both Grade 2) as they form a heritage cluster reflecting the development of medical history of Hong Kong. The Chinese Y.M.C.A. of Hong Kong (declared monument), Steps of Pound Lane (Grade 2), and Bridges Street Market (Grade 3) are also historic buildings and structure in the vicinity of Kwong Fook Tsz.