

Heritage Appraisal of Yuk Hui Temple, Wan Chai

Yuk Hui Temple (the “Temple”) (玉虛宮)¹, also known as Pak Tai Temple (北帝廟), at the corner of Lung On Street and Stone Nullah Lane, Wan Chai was dedicated to the Taoist deity Pak Tai (北帝)². The Temple was built by local residents of Wan Chai and initially administered by a Kaifong Worship Committee (神功值理會), which appointed a keeper to look after it. The management of the Temple was taken over by the Chinese Temples Committee (華人廟宇委員會) in 1928³.

Historical Interest

The Temple consists of the main building and two annexes. Construction of the main building began in the first year of the Tongzhi (同治) reign (1862) of the Qing dynasty⁴ and was completed in 1863, which is suggested by inscriptions on a ridge purlin of the entrance hall⁵, as well as those on other objects given as offerings by worshippers. The latter include two historic timber plaques inscribed with “德煥辰居” and “總握天樞” to honour the divine prowess of Pak Tai, and a cast iron bell inscribed with “風調雨順” and “國泰民安” to pray for good weather and peace⁶. The characters “玉虛宮” inscribed on the granite lintel of the main entrance were written by Zhang Yutang (張玉堂), the then Commodore of the Dapeng Brigade (大鵬協副將) stationed at Kowloon Walled City (九龍寨城). The Temple was built in 1862⁷ at a time when pieces of land along Stone Nullah Lane were the subject of land sales, which was a move by the then colonial

¹ “玉虛宮” is the mythical palace of Pak Tai named after his title in heaven.

² Pak Tai (北帝), literally the Emperor of the North, is the Taoist deity who represents the stars of the north. As north is associated with water in Chinese folk culture, Pak Tai has been worshipped as a deity of the sea, mainly by boat people.

³ Home Affairs Department Trust Funds Section Temples Unit. “Pak Tai Temple, Wanchai” in *Temples Directory*, 1980. pp. 10-12, 14-15.

⁴ Reference is made to the inscription “同治元年歲次壬戌鼎建” on the granite surround and the inscription “同治元年歲次壬戌仲冬吉旦” on the granite lintel of the main entrance, both of which date back to the first year of the Tongzhi reign, i.e. 1862.

⁵ Reference is made to the inscription “同治二年歲次癸亥孟春吉旦下環同仁店彭國端陳棋光敬送” on a ridge purlin of the entrance hall, which dates back to the 2nd year of the Tongzhi reign, i.e. 1863. The donors’ surnames Pang (彭) and Chan (陳) correspond with the two families of the same surnames that were the chief landowners who acquired the lots in the neighbourhood after the 1862 land sale.

⁶ Reference is made to the inscription “同治二年歲次癸亥孟夏吉旦” on the plaque “德煥辰居” in the incense pavilion, the inscription “同治二年夏月吉日立” on the plaque “總握天樞” in the rear hall, and the characters “同治二年歲次癸亥季春吉旦立” on the cast iron bell, all of which date back to the second year of the Tongzhi reign, i.e. 1863.

⁷ Smith, Carl T. *A Sense of History – Studies in the Social and Urban History of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., 1995, p. 132.

government to develop the area as a means of accommodating an influx of immigrants due to the civil unrest in South China in the 1850s and 1860s. The neighbourhood eventually became a Chinese residential area⁸.

The main building is dedicated to the worship of Pak Tai, whose altars are located in the incense pavilion and the central bay of the rear hall. The deities Kwan Yum (觀音), Shing Wong (城隍), Sam Sin Kwu (三仙姑) and Choi Sun (財神) are enshrined in the left side bay, while Pau Kung (包公), Lui Cho (呂祖), Kwan Tai (關帝) and Tai Sui (太歲) are in the right side bay. The shrines for the Earth God (土地) and Jai Kung (濟公) are located respectively to the left and right side of the entrance hall.

The Hall of Lung Mo (龍母殿), which is attached to the main building on its left now houses the deities Lung Mo (龍母), Fat Mo (佛母) and Tin Hau (天后). Its lintel inscription recorded that it was rebuilt as a communal hall (公所) in the Dingwei (丁未) year of the Guangxu (光緒) reign (1907) during the Qing dynasty⁹. In the 1950s, it housed the St. James' Settlement Boys' and Girls' Club.¹⁰ The Hall of Three Pristine Ones (三寶殿), which is attached to the main building on its right, is now used for the worship of deities including Sam Ching (三清) and for the worship of ancestors. Its lintel inscription recorded its original use as a school (書院). No inscription recording the construction year can be found, but part of this building is visible on a postcard with an image of the Temple that dates back to the 1910s¹¹.

The main building and annexes, all with pitched and flush gable roofs (硬山頂), were constructed of grey bricks, granite and timber on a raised foundation with granite steps leading to the ground level. Most of the fair-faced brick facade has a smooth surface and fine joints.

***Architectural
Merit***

⁸ Ting, S.P. and Wong, N.K. *City of Victoria*. Hong Kong: Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1994, pp. 9, 75.

⁹ Reference is made to the inscription “光緒歲次丁未陽月穀旦重建” on the granite lintel of the left annex's main entrance, which recorded that the hall was rebuilt in the 10th lunar month of the Dingwei year of the Guangxu reign, i.e. 1907.

¹⁰ Wickeri P.L. & Chen R. *Thy Kingdom Come – A Photographic History of Anglicanism in Hong Kong, Macau and Mainland China*. Hong Kong: Hong University Press, 2019, p. 99.

¹¹ Reference is made to the image of Yuk Hui Temple on a postcard that dates back to the 1910s. (Hong Kong Museum of History Collection. Postcard PC1989.0008.)

Outstanding architectural features are concentrated in the main building, which is a Qing vernacular two-hall-three-bay structure with a courtyard covered by an incense pavilion between the two halls. The entrance porch is supported by granite and timber structures with superb carvings of figurines, flowers, auspicious animals and Chinese folk stories. Underneath the eaves is a finely carved timber fascia board with auspicious motifs in relief and pierced carving.

Exquisite historic Shiwan (石灣) ceramic figurines can be found on the main ridge and gable corner walls (墀頭) of the main building's entrance hall. On the upper tier of the main ridge are a set of double dragons with a pearl finial (二龍戲珠) in between, flanked by a pair of dragon fish. The lower tier mainly consists of figurines portraying Chinese folk stories. The ridge's outer ends are both decorated with a phoenix. The ridge was made by Junyudian in Shiwan (石灣均玉店) in the thirty-third year of the Guangxu reign (1907) during the Qing dynasty. The ceramic figurines on the gable corner walls were made by the same workshop¹². The front gable ridge ends are decorated with a pair of ceramic figurines of the God of the Sun (日神) and the Goddess of the Moon (月神).

Behind the pair of screen doors (屏門) facing the entrance, the courtyard is flanked by two side corridors with humpbacked roofs (捲棚頂). The parapet walls of the side corridors are decorated with polychrome painted plaster mouldings. The courtyard is covered by an incense pavilion with a hip-and-gable roof (歇山頂). A large bronze statue of Pak Tai, which bears an inscription on its robe hem marking the thirty-first year of the Wanli (萬曆) reign (1603) during the Ming dynasty, is enshrined in the pavilion¹³. Hanging above the statue is a timber plaque inscribed with “德煥辰居”. The altar to Pak Tai in the central

¹² Reference is made to the inscriptions “石灣均玉店造” (made by Junyudian in Shiwan) and “光緒三十三年” (the thirty-third year of the Guangxu reign) on the ridge, and “均玉造” (made by Junyu) on the gable corner walls.

¹³ The statue was bought in Guangdong by the wealthy Hong Kong businessman Tsang Siu-wing (曾兆榮), alias Tsang Fu (曾富) in the early twentieth century and was enshrined in his villa Nam Fung Terrace (南豐臺) near Kowloon City until it was demolished in the mid-twentieth century. See 蕭國健：《寨城印痕—九龍城歷史與古蹟》，香港：中華書局(香港)有限公司，2015年，頁132-138。

bay of the rear hall is flanked by four free-standing clay statues of his marshals. Hanging above the altar is a timber plaque bearing the inscription “總握天樞” which was given as an offering by fabric dealers (綢緞行).

The Hall of Lung Mo is a two-hall-one-bay building, with a courtyard between the two halls. Its facade is adorned with plaster mouldings on the gable corner walls and a finely carved timber fascia board. The pair of timber couplet plaques, which now flank the entrance, date back to the ninth year of the Guangxu reign (1883) during the Qing dynasty¹⁴ and were dedicated to Pak Tai but not Lung Mo.

The Hall of Three Pristine Ones is a single hall structure. The brick wall of the recessed entrance has a smoother surface and finer joints than those in the rest of the facade, which suggests that this annex was perhaps extended by craftsmen other than those that built the original entrance portion. The corner of this extension was recessed to accommodate a granite earth god shrine.

According to the two stone plaques embedded in the left-hand side wall of the main building's entrance hall, a large-scale extension was probably carried out in 1869¹⁵ and a major renovation in 1928¹⁶. After numerous repairs throughout the years, the Temple in general still retains much of its authentic layout and main elements. Most of the decorative features, including the historic Shiwan ceramic figurines, plaster mouldings, as well as stone and timber carvings, are still visible.

Authenticity

The Temple is the largest historic temple in Hong Kong at which Pak Tai is the main deity worshipped. The carved inscription of the completion year on the ridge purlin and an internal layout with statues dedicated to Pak Tai in both the incense pavilion and rear hall are rarely seen in traditional Chinese temples

Rarity

¹⁴ Reference is made to the inscription “光緒九年歲次癸未仲冬吉旦” on one of the plaques, which dates back to the ninth year of the Guangxu reign, i.e. 1883.

¹⁵ Reference is made to the recognisable inscription “同□八年歲次己□”, which most probably refers to the eighth year of the Tongzhi reign, i.e. 1869.

¹⁶ Reference is made to the inscription “中華民國十七年歲次戊辰十二月”, which dates back to the seventeenth year of the Republic of China, i.e. 1928.

in Hong Kong.

The existence of a communal hall and a school demonstrates that the Temple established by the local residents and merchants was also intended to be a venue for settling public affairs and providing education for the neighbourhood. The Yuk Hui Temple was of comparative scale to the Man Mo Temple on Hollywood Road, and was also a temple that served as a community hub for Chinese residents in the territory¹⁷. On the religious side of things, the worshippers and local residents strongly believed that the Temple's good fung shui (風水) orientation would bring prosperity to the people of the district¹⁸.

***Social Value &
Local Interest***

The Pak Tai Festival (北帝誕), which is on the third day of the third lunar month, is still enthusiastically celebrated at the Temple by worshippers. The Lung Mo Festival (龍母誕) is also celebrated on the eighth day of the fifth lunar month. At the Awakening from Hibernation Festival (驚蟄) and on days at the Chinese year end and beginning of the new year, the Temple is crowded with worshippers seeking blessings from the deities. In general, the Temple serves as an important historic landmark of the early development of Wan Chai and as an icon of the identity of the local community.

The Old Wan Chai Post Office (Declared Monument), Nos. 72, 72A, 74 and 74A Stone Nullah Lane (all Grade 1), Hung Shing Temple on Queen's Road East (Grade 1), Nam Koo Terrace (Grade 1), Nos. 60A, 62, 64 and 66 Johnston Road (all Grade 2), No. 18 Ship Street (Grade 2), Wan Chai Market (Grade 3), Nos. 2, 4, 6 and 8 Hing Wan Street (all Grade 3) and Nos. 186, 188, 190 Queen's Road East (all Grade 3), etc., are all located within walking distance of the Temple. These historic buildings collectively reflect the historical and socio-cultural development of the local community in Wan Chai.

Group Value

¹⁷ 冼玉儀：〈社會組織與社會轉變〉，載於王賡武主編《香港史新編(上冊)》，香港：三聯書店(香港)有限公司，1997年，頁165。

¹⁸ Home Affairs Department Trust Funds Section Temples Unit. 1980. "Pak Tai Temple, Wanchai" in *Temples Directory*, pp. 10-12, 14-15.