

Heritage Appraisal of Tin Hau Temple
Joss House Bay, Sai Kung

The Tin Hau¹ Temple in Joss House Bay is believed to be one of the oldest surviving temples dedicated to Tin Hau in Hong Kong and the coastal area of Guangdong province. The Temple is commonly known as *Tai Miu* (大廟), literally means “great temple”.² It has been one of the most popular Tin Hau temples in Hong Kong since the 1950s, the period when worshippers residing in Hong Kong waters changed their place of worship.³

***Historical
Interest***

A rock inscription situated behind the Temple gives a clue to the early history of the site. The inscription states that an officer in charge of salt production in Kowloon noticed that a man called Lam Tao-yi (林道義) had restored and expanded a *tong* (堂) (literally a “hall” or “shrine”) in the area when he and his friend visited Fat Tong Mun in 1274.⁴ In addition, an old Chinese voyage map produced in the 16th century records a temple dedicated to Tin Hau in northern Fat Tong Mun.⁵

The Tin Hau Temple in Joss House Bay is linked to the Lam family of Chuk Yuen and Po Kong, Kowloon. The *Lam Genealogy of Chuk Yuen, Kowloon* (《九龍竹園村林氏族譜》) records that, in the Song dynasty, two Lam brothers, Chung-kin (松堅) and Pak-

¹ Tin Hau, also known as the Empress of Heaven and the Goddess of the Sea, is a popular patron deity of seafaring folk, particularly in Guangdong and Fujian provinces. Tin Hau worship is originated in Fujian.

² The waters in front of the Tin Hau Temple are marked as “Tai Miu” in the 1895 map of Hong Kong, which is the revised version of the map prepared by Lieutenant Collinson in 1845.

³ Before the 1950s, the Tin Hau temple in Chiwan, Baoan (寶安赤灣) was more popular than the one in Joss House Bay.

⁴ It is stated in the 1819 edition of the *Gazetteer of Xin'an County* (《新安縣志》) that four Chinese characters “咸淳二年 (the second year of the Xianchun period of the Southern Song dynasty) (1266)” were just about legible in a rock inscription found inside a temple at the current site. However, the rock inscription described is no longer in existence. Whatever the relationship between the rock inscriptions, the shrine and the then Tin Hau temple are themselves subject to a number of interpretations.

⁵ The *Coastal Map of Guangdong* (廣東沿海圖) from *The Grand Record of Guangdong* (《粵大記》).

kin (柏堅) were rescued by Tin Hau during a storm at sea. Grateful to Tin Hau for saving them, they built a shack to pay tribute to her on the southern shore of Fat Tong Mun. Chung-kin's son Lam Tao-yi built a temple at the current location.⁶ In 1939, the Chinese Temples Committee took over the Temple from a Lam family which may have a remote connection with Lam Tao-yi.

The Temple has been popular among local fishermen and seafarers throughout the years. The relics preserved in the Temple demonstrate that it was well supported by the locals during the past two centuries. The oldest relic is an incense burner cast in 1803.⁷ Other relics include two bells cast in 1839 and 1840 respectively, an incense burner cast in 1893, a pair of wooden banners offered to the Temple in 1898, a timber plaque bearing the inscription, “神力扶持” (literally, “empowered by the Goddess”) dated 1908, a pair of historic wooden couplets dated 1909, an incense burner dated 1925, and a decorative wooden panel (彩門) dated 1926. These were all offered by the devotees in order to honour Tin Hau's divine prowess.

The Temple building follows the South China vernacular style that was popular during the Qing period. The granite lintel at the main entrance is evidence that the current layout of the building was formed during the restoration work done in 1877.⁸ The Temple is composed of a row of five buildings. The main building is flanked on each side by two subsidiary buildings. The front elevation of the main building is recessed. It shows an entrance porch formed by two granite tie-beams supported by granite bracket supports and inserted into granite columns. Granite *gejia* (隔架) and a wooden camel's hump (駝峰) decorated with shallow reliefs can also be found at the porch. The roof is covered with green glazed tiles. The gable wall is decorated with a plaster relief, showing a grass motif pattern and *bogu* (博古) ends.

***Architectural
Merit***

⁶ “The story of the North and South shrines” (南北二佛堂誌) in the *Lam Genealogy of Chuk Yuen, Kowloon*.

⁷ The two oldest relics preserved in the Temple are two incense burners cast in 1803 and 1804 respectively.

⁸ Reference is made to the inscription “光緒三年歲次丁丑重修” (literally, restored in the third year of the Guangxu reign) on the granite lintel which dates back to 1877.

The main building has a typical temple layout, being a two-hall-three-bay (兩進三開間) structure. Between the two halls (the entrance hall and the rear hall), there is a covered incense pavilion and two side chambers. The entrance hall served as a reception area with a pair of screen doors in the middle. Behind the screen doors is the incense pavilion supported by granite columns, decorated with two pairs of antique wooden couplets and tablets. Three statues of Tin Hau sit at the middle of the central altar in the rear hall. Another deity, Madam Golden Flower (金花娘娘), is housed to the right, and two smaller statues of Tin Hau are placed to the left. In front of the central altar, there are sculpted figures of maids and Tin Hau's guardian assistants, the Thousand League Eyes (千里眼) to the left and the Wind-Flavouring Ears (順風耳) to the right. The layout of the rear hall is similar to the setting of a law-court, as it occasionally functioned in the past as a place to resolve matters among the followers in front of the deities.

The two subsidiary buildings to the left of the main building are also two-hall structures. At the rear hall of that subsidiary building which is closer to the main building is the residential chamber of Tin Hau (天后寢宮); the Year Gods deities (*Tai Shui* 太歲) are enshrined in the entrance hall. The rear hall of the furthest subsidiary building is the Matreya Buddha (彌勒佛) hall. The subsidiary buildings to the right of the main building are the back office of the temple management.

The Temple is heavily decorated. One of the most outstanding decorations is a wooden panel painted gold in colour, placed above the screen doors in the entrance hall. Produced in 1926, it is a boat-shaped ornament with intricate carvings depicting a scene of an opera performance. As for the fascia boards, these are decorated with patterns of flowers and plants. Relief mouldings of animal and human figurines and murals are found on the left and right of the friezes. Unlike the murals of other historical Chinese buildings, which feature historical figures and stories, two murals at the incense pavilion depict a young woman rowing a boat, presumably a modern interpretation of the protection given by Tin Hau.

Restorations and repairs to the Temple were carried out in 1840, 1877, 1925, 1962, 1990, 2009 and 2022. In 1990, the glazed ceramic double dragons with a petal finial at the centre of the main ridge and the *bogu* decorations at the ends of the main ridge and the gable ridges replaced the previous decorative elements. However, the overall setting and the spatial layout of the main building and subsidiary buildings have remained unchanged for years. The building structure and most of the building fabrics, such as the granite columns, the granite *gejia*, the murals of the incense pavilion, the screen doors, timber cornice boards and floor tiles, are all preserved. Last but not least, the decorative ceramic main ridge of 1925 remains at the roof of the rear hall. ***Authenticity***

The setting is the most distinctive feature of the Temple. It is believed that the location of the Temple was carefully chosen with a view of helping Tin Hau to “keep on eye” on the waters, so that she could protect fishermen and seafarers passing through the Fat Tong Mun channel. This sea-facing setting is still the most direct manifestation of the core purpose and value of the Temple. The Temple is one of the most prominent examples in today’s Hong Kong where a Tin Hau temple is close to the sea shore, undisturbed by urban development. Some people believe, additionally, that the setting of the Temple is consistent with traditional *fengshui* principles.⁹ The *fengshui* setting and the scenic view endow the Temple with a leading position among other Tin Hau temples in Hong Kong. ***Rarity***

The Temple provides a centre-piece for those rituals of Tin Hau’s followers which take place in the waters of Hong Kong. The most important event of the Temple is the celebration of Tin Hau’s birthday (known as Tin Hau Festival in English). A considerable number of government documents, photographs and videos, dating from 1950s and 1990s, record the populous and bustling birthday celebrations during the period. On the 23rd day of the third lunar month - celebrated as the birthday of Tin Hau - thousands of people ***Social Value & Local Interest***

⁹ The hill Tin Ha Shan at the rear provides a backup support. To the two sides of the Temple are Tei Tong Tsui and Tei Tong Teng supporting the two wings, “green dragon” and “white tiger”. To the south, Joss House Bay provides a “bright hall” for the Temple.

from all over Hong Kong, including fishermen, seafarers, and other people engaged in sea-related business, as well as local villagers, pay homage to Tin Hau at the Temple. The ferry company arranges ferries to travel between Fat Tong Mun and North Point at the time of the Tin Hau Festival. Nowadays, celebration activities continue to be held annually and reinforce the status of the Temple as a prominent and popular Tin Hau Temple in Hong Kong.

The Temple has a close connection with the Po Toi O Chuen and other villages nearby. The villagers from Po Toi O and Clear Water Bay served as temple-keepers of the Tin Hau Temple in the past. Together, the villagers formed the Joss House Bay Jiao Committee of Sai Kung to hold the Jiao Festival at the Temple, beginning in 2003. In addition, the villagers at Hang Hau perform the Hakka Unicorn Dance at the Temple, as well as at the Tin Hau Temple in Hang Hau, to celebrate the Tin Hau Festival and strengthen the connection between the two places. Through organising the celebration activities, the bonding between the Temple and the local communities is further reinforced.

In addition, the Temple has been selected as the venue for the commissioning ceremony of new vessels in Hong Kong. A recent example is the commissioning ceremony of new vessels held in mid-2021 by the Marine Region of the Hong Kong Police.

The Temple serves as a significant landmark demonstrating and witnessing at the same time the social cohesion, cultural diversity and financial strength of the local society. It also plays a leading role to promote our cultural heritage. The celebrations held at the Temple form a crucial part of the Tin Hau Festival in Hong Kong and contributed to the inscription of the “Tin Hau Festival in Hong Kong” onto the Fifth National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2021.

The vast number of the Tin Hau temples reflects the popularity of Tin Hau belief in Hong Kong. Other than the leading one in Joss House Bay, the Tin Hau temples in Yau Ma Tei, Causeway Bay and Lung Yeuk Tau are declared monuments. The Tin Hau temple at Fung Chi Tsuen, Yuen Long has been accorded the status of

Group Value

a Grade 1 historic building. Eleven Tin Hau temples have been accorded the status of a Grade 2 historic building and twenty-two have been accorded the status of a Grade 3 historic building. These Tin Hau temples have established and reinforced the important folk culture and religion in Hong Kong. The site of the Chinese Customs Station at Junk Island, the Tung Lung Fort at Tung Lung Chau, the Rock Inscription situated behind the Temple at the Joss House Bay (all Declared Monument), the Hung Shing Temple at Po Toi O (Grade 3), and the Temple present the different stages of the development of the Fat Tong Mun area since the time of the Southern Song era in the 13th century. Amongst them, the Rock Inscription and the Hung Shing Temple are within walking distance of the Tin Hau Temple. Collectively, they reflect the historical and socio-cultural development of the area.

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