

Historic Building Appraisal

Tin Hau Temple

San Tsuen, Tai O, Lantau Island

The Tin Hau Temple (天后古廟) in San Tsuen (新村), Tai O (大澳), is dedicated to the Goddess of the Sea (Tin Hau) and was built in the early Qing (清) dynasty (1644 – 1911).¹ Tai O encompasses a coastal plain and a small island, which are separated by a watercourse known as Tai O Tai Chung (大澳大涌). Wing On Street (永安街) and Tai Ping Street (太平街) on the plain and Shek Tsai Po Street (石仔埗街), Market Street (街市街), Kat Hing Street (吉慶街) and Kat Hing Back Street (吉慶後街) on the island are the oldest main streets of Tai O. San Tsuen is situated to the south of Wing On Street and Tai Ping Street. In-between those streets and San Tsuen are the old salt pans and former paddy fields, which in the latter case are now home to mangroves. Fishing, salt-making and rice-growing formed the backbone of the local economy until their decline from the 1970s onwards.

**Historical
Interest**

While both the boat and land populations (水陸居民) of Tai O worshipped at the Tin Hau Temple in San Tsuen, over the years the land population (mainly the residents of Wing On Street and Tai Ping Street) were primarily responsible for the operation and management of the temple. Indeed, Wing On Street and Tai Ping Street were established on a section of the embankment purposely built for developing salt production and rice cultivation during the Qianlong (乾隆) reign of the Qing dynasty (1736-1795).² The streets also formed the oldest commercial centre of Tai O. Aerial photos dating back to the 1950s show that salt pans and agricultural land were situated in the coastal areas near Wing On Street, Tai Ping Street, San Tsuen, Leung Uk Tsuen (梁屋村) and Nam Chung Tsuen (南涌村). According to villagers, rice was grown there in the old days. The Tin Hau Temple was sited to have an unobstructed view of the salt pans and paddy fields protected by the goddess.³ Two round granite pillars, now placed near the temple's main

¹ According to a stone inscription on the renovation of the temple in the 18th year of the Daoguang reign (道光十八年) of the Qing dynasty (1838), the temple was built around 1644, i.e. the first year of the Shunzhi reign (順治元年). However, according to another stone inscription on the renovation of the temple in 1972, the temple was built in 1713 during the Kangxi reign (康熙之癸巳).

² Stone inscription on the renovation of the temple carried out in the 18th year of the Daoguang reign (道光十八年) of the Qing dynasty (1838).

³ Legend has it that Tai O is protected by four mythical animals (大澳四靈獸), namely a tiger in the north (near Po Chue Tam), an elephant and a lion in the east and a phoenix in the south. The mountains symbolising them were locally known as Fu Shan (mountain of the tiger) (虎山), Cheung Shan (mountain of the elephant) (象山), Sze Shan (mountain of the lion) (獅山) and Fung Shan (mountain of the phoenix) (鳳山), and collectively referred to as the four sacred mountains of Tai O (大澳四靈山). The inscriptions of “地接鳳山” identified from the two stone inscriptions on the renovations of this Tin Hau Temple in 1838 and 1895 narrate that the temple was situated on the land connected with Fung Shan. The maps of the present day show the names of Fu Shan, Cheung Shan and Sze Shan. It is said that today's Tsim Fung Shan (尖峰山) is the then Fung Shan.

entrance, were used to crush the larger salt crystals produced by the salt pans. Worshippers are mainly the residents of Wing On Street, Tai Ping Street, San Tsuen, Leung Uk Tsuen and Nam Chung Tsuen, which are all near the temple.

There are a number of historic artefacts in the temple. They include the stone inscriptions recording the renovations carried out in 1838 and 1892. It is worth mentioning that salt makers (鹽廠) were among the donors for the 1838 renovation. Besides, other examples of historic artefacts surviving in the temple include a bronze bell dating from 1713, a bronze tripod vessel dated 1725, as well as timber plaques presented by shops and individuals as gifts for Tin Hau in 1838, 1892 and 1946.⁴

The temple was built with a two-hall-one-courtyard plan, with side chambers to the left and right of the halls. An annex is attached to the right chamber.⁵ The halls are covered by traditional pitched roofs with pan and roll tiles as well as gable walls. The roof ridge of the entrance hall is decorated with exquisite ceramic figurines depicting Chinese folk tales, with a pearl in the middle, and a pair of dragon-fish (鰲魚) and a pair of phoenix at either end of the ridge. The Chinese characters “石灣均玉造” and “光緒十八年” reveal that the ceramic ridge was produced by Junyu (均玉), a famous brand name of the contemporary Shiwan (石灣) ceramics industry dating from the eighteenth year of the Guangxu reign (1892) of the Qing dynasty. It is noteworthy that the ceramic ridge is the oldest example of work by Junyu identified in Hong Kong.⁶ A pair of ceramic lions stand on the tips of the entrance hall’s gable ridges. The roof ridge of the end hall has a pair of simple geometric dragons, with a pearl in the middle and a ceramic dragon-fish at either end. On the gable walls to either side of the entrance hall are plaster mouldings of flowers, a vase and a bat, which have been painted white.⁷ The painted murals featuring peonies and images from traditional folklores, together with the exquisitely carved fascia board and plaster mouldings of auspicious motifs on the facade, are all typical of traditional temple decorations.

*Architectural
Merit*

The main entrance comprises a doorway with steps, a door cill and a threshold, all in granite, and a timber door with Door God painted on it. Above the main

⁴ 1713 was the 52nd year of the Kangxi reign (康熙五十二年), 1725 the 3rd year of the Yongzheng reign (雍正三年), 1838 the 18th year of the Daoguang reign (道光十八年), 1892 (the 18th year of the Guangxu reign (光緒十八年) and 1946 the 35th Republican year (民國三十五年).

A pair of metal joss stick holders, in the form of a carved figurine in traditional costumes, can also be identified from the door frame of the main entrance.

⁵ The quarters and kitchen (disused) of the ex-temple-keeper are housed in the annex. While the exact construction year of the annex is not known, aerial photos show that this annex has been in existence before 1956.

⁶ 馬素梅，〈屋脊上的戲台：香港的石灣瓦脊〉，頁 92 -93。

⁷ The decorative features at the top end of a gable wall are collectively known as “懸魚” in Chinese.

entrance are the engraved characters of the temple's name “天后古廟” in Chinese. The timber couplet on either side of the main entrance (島國渡慈航幸有神靈扶水陸；新村存聖蹟故留廟貌壯山河), which date back to 1921 (according to the characters of “民國辛酉年”), expresses the deep gratitude of the boat and land populations to Tin Hau for her blessings and protection, and their deep affection for the temple and its preservation, as well as their wish for prosperity. The engraved characters of the temple's name and the couplet as well as the wood carvings of the fascia board are all gilded.

Internally, a timber screen door, which is locally known as *dong chung* (檔中), was erected behind the main entrance doorway.⁸ To the left of the screen door is Tin Hau's “bedroom”. The courtyard in-between the front and end halls is covered by a pavilion comprising a timber-built roof structure with pan and roll tiles. However, the concrete parapet walls supporting to the pavilion suggest that it is a later addition. The roof of the end hall is supported by a pair of timber columns with granite bases. Altars are placed in the front and end halls, with the main central altar in the end hall for Tin Hau, one for the God of Fortune (財帛星君) and Hau Wong (侯王) to the left and another for Lady Golden Flower (金花娘娘)⁹ in the right-hand bay. Che Kung (車公) and the Earth God (土地), also known as Fuk Tak (福德), are worshipped in the front hall.

The temple, with its two halls and one courtyard with three bays is the largest Tin Hau Temple in Tai O.¹⁰ It underwent renovations from time to time, including those carried out in 1838, 1895 and 1972, as indicated by the stone inscriptions inside the temple.¹¹ According to villagers, the walls built of grey brickwork with lower sections made of granite blocks were plastered in 1972. White lines imitating brick joints were painted on the front elevation. The granite paving slabs in the covered courtyard and the granite steps leading from the courtyard to the end hall were also covered by modern cement and mosaic tiles during the 1972 renovation. Fortunately, elements reflecting traditional craftsmanship, such as ceramic figurines on the roofs, the wood carvings of the fascia board and other decorative features such as plaster mouldings and murals, remain intact. The historic ceramic main roof ridge, as well as the historic sea-oriented setting, make the temple a rather rare piece of built heritage.

**Rarity,
Built Heritage
Value &
Authenticity**

The Tin Hau Temple in San Tsuen has borne witness to the development of

Social Value

⁸ It is believed that *dong chung* can ward off evil spirits. Therefore, it is kept closed all year round, except on the auspicious day of the Birthday of Tin Hau on the 23rd day of the third lunar month.

⁹ Worshippers believe that Lady Golden Flower can grant descendants.

¹⁰ Another Tin Hau Temple is situated at Kat Hing Back Street (Grade 3). It is a one-bay and two-hall-one-courtyard temple.

¹¹ 1838 was the 18th year of the Daoguang reign (道光十八年) and 1895 the 21st year of the Guangxu reign (光緒廿一年).

Tai O and remains as one of the major temples in Tai O. It was surrounded by paddy fields and salt pans which were important to the local economy before the 1970s. Both the boat and land populations worshipped the Goddess of the Sea in San Tsuen. The performance of Cantonese opera (神功戲) was organized to celebrate the Birthday of Tin Hau (天后誕) on the 23rd day of the third lunar month.¹² However, many villagers began moving to the urban areas from the 1970s onwards, and thus it became difficult to secure sufficient resources to organize the Cantonese opera performances, which eventually ceased around 2000.¹³ Despite that, the Birthday of Tin Hau is still celebrated by the presentation of offerings, and the celebration is organized by a local association named Hop Chung Fa Pau Hui (合眾花炮會), whose members are Tin Hau's disciples.¹⁴

Besides, the social significance of the Tin Hau Temple is also demonstrated in local festive events, such as the annual Tai O Dragon Boat Water Parade (大澳遊涌) during the Dragon Boat Festival (端午節) on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.¹⁵ The parade was inscribed onto the third national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011 and the Tin Hau Temple is one of the significant ritual venues visited during the parade. According to villagers, the statue of Tin Hau in San Tsuen will also be carried to the bamboo mat-shed theatre for the performance of Cantonese opera during the celebration of the Birthday of Hau Wong (侯王誕) in the sixth lunar month. The same arrangement is also applicable to other festivals in Tai O, such as the Birthdays of the Earth God, Kwan Tai and Hung Shing.

The Tin Hau Temple in San Tsuen has group value with other historic temples and buildings in Tai O, such as the Yeung Hau Temple at Po Chue Tam (寶珠潭楊侯古廟) (Declared Monument), Kwan Tai Temple (關帝古廟) (Grade 2) and Tin Hau Temple (天后古廟) (Grade 3) at Kat Hing Back Street (吉慶後街), as well as the Old Tai O Police Station (舊大澳警署) (Grade 2) and Fong Bin Yuen (方便院) (Grade 3).

¹² The two concrete blocks in a pot-like shape, now placed near the main entrance of the temple, were used as the bases for setting up a temporary entrance gateway to the bamboo shelter for the performance of Cantonese opera.

¹³ In 2018, villagers recalled that the performance of Cantonese opera had not organized for around 20 years.

¹⁴ Tung Hing Tong (同慶堂) is another local association whose members are the Tin Hau's disciples. Its members are mainly the residents of Wing On Street and Tai Ping Street. Every year it obtains a licence from police for organizing lion dance for the second and third days of the Lunar New Year. The "lion" parades the streets of the market town of Tai O to bring fortune to the shops there. The lion and lion-dancers will worship at the Tin Hau Temple at San Tsuen before the parade starts.

¹⁵ On the morning before the festival, the three responsible fishermen's associations will firstly receive the statues of Yeung Hau at Yeung Hau Temple (楊侯古廟) (Declared Monument), then the statue of Tin Hau at San Tsuen and later on Kwai Tei and Hung Shing at other temples. They will carry the statues back to their associations' hall for worship. On the day of the festival, the deity statues will be put on sacred sampans towed by the associations' dragon boats to parade through Tai O's waters. After the ritual, the statues will be returned to the respective temples in the afternoon. This unique religious activity has been inherited for more than a century.

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