

**Historic Building Appraisal**  
**Epiphany of Our Lord Chapel,**  
**Sham Chung, Tai Po, N.T.**

Epiphany of Our Lord Chapel (三王來朝小堂) is situated at Kau Tong Wai (教堂圍), one of the five Hakka clusters (圍) in Sham Chung,<sup>1</sup> which is on the west coast of Sai Kung. The chapel was originally built in 1879, one of the earliest Catholic churches in Sai Kung. The present chapel is a 1956 rebuilding at the same site.

*Historical  
Interest*

The missionary activities of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong began in 1841 when the Roman Catholic Church established an Apostolic Prefecture (宗座監牧區) in Hong Kong.<sup>2</sup> As early as 1860, evangelisation work in the San On County which included the New Territories, was entrusted to the Apostolic Prefecture of Hong Kong. Rev. Simeone VOLONTERI (和神父, 1831–1904) and Rev. Gaetano ORIGO (柯神父, 1835–1868) began their mission journeys to Tai Po and Sai Kung in the 1860s. In 1866, Rev. VOLONTERI completed the Map of the County of San On (新安縣全圖), which records the name and location of the villages he visited, including Sham Chung.

Rev. Luigi PIAZZOLI (和神父, 1845–1904) was the first to preach in Sham Chung. In the early 1870s, he travelled from the mission station in Ting Kok, Tai Po to other Hakka villages in Sai Kung and started his missionary work at Sham Chung. In 1879, the first purpose-built Epiphany of Our Lord Chapel was constructed on the site where the current chapel now stands. As a result of continuing missionary work, the number of Catholics in Sham Chung increased.

The priests not only administered to the spiritual needs of the villagers but also ran a school to provide education to village students. The chapel housed a school set up by the missionaries called Kung Man School (公民學校) which can be dated back to the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

The present chapel-cum-school building was built in 1956 to replace the deteriorating old one. The opening ceremony for the new chapel and Kung Man School took place later in the same year and was officiated by Bishop Lorenzo

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<sup>1</sup> The other four Hakka clusters in Sham Chung are Pao Lei Tsai (包籬仔), Shek Tau Yin (石頭峴), Wan Tsai (灣仔) and Wan To (灣肚).

<sup>2</sup> An Apostolic Prefecture is generally the first step toward organization of a church hierarchy in a determined territory. It is ordinarily headed by a priest, the Prefect Apostolic. The Apostolic Prefecture of Hong Kong was raised in status to an Apostolic Vicariate in 1874, and was made a Diocese in 1946. (See the Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives website, “The Succession Line”, <<https://archives.catholic.org.hk/Succession%20Line/SL-Index.htm>>, accessed on 26 April 2022.)

<sup>3</sup> A government document dated 1957 says that the Kung Man School was established inside the chapel, and provided primary education to the children in Sham Chung for 25 years, thus implying the school was built in 1932. (HKRS1690-1-178, “Proposed Sham Chung Public School” – *Application Form – Building for New Schools, Extensions, School Sites etc.*, 19 October 1957.)

BIANCHI (白英奇主教, 1899–1983). The Chinese name of the school, “公民學校” (Kung Man School) inscribed on the school’s façade was written by Chan Pun Chiu (陳本照) who was the principal of Tai Po Vernacular Normal School (大埔官立漢文師範學校), an institute to train primary school teachers for the New Territories.

But within a few years of the rebuilding of the chapel, the increasing population of the villages made it impossible for Kung Man School to take in all school-age children. In 1959, the Government constructed a new school, named Sham Chung School (深涌學校) in Shek Tau Yin (石頭峴). So, by the early 1960s, Kung Man School ceased operation. Despite its closure, Catholic services continued at the chapel throughout the 1960s and 1970s, wherein villagers went for Mass, prayers and other gatherings.

By the 1970s, many of the villagers of Sham Chung had either emigrated abroad or moved to the urban areas. By the early 1980s, the use of rural chapels continued to decline. Bishop John Cheng Chung WU (胡振中主教, 1925–2002), then Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, suggested to Rev. Paul Yee Tseng WAN (溫以政神父) that a Camp Site Committee be established, and that the chapels in remote areas, including the Epiphany of Our Lord Chapel, should be repurposed as camp sites for Catholic church members and scouts and retreats for clergy. In the late 1990s, the camp site in Sham Chung was closed and the chapel has been left vacant and in disuse ever since.

Epiphany of Our Lord Chapel is a single-storey building. It was built as a school as well as a chapel, and consists of two large compartments. Immediately upon entry to the building is the part which was used as the Kung Man School classroom, with a teachers’ room also at ground level. The high ceiling allowed for a cockloft above the classroom, which was used as the priests’ quarters in the past. Further inside is the compartment for the chapel, oriented along an east-west direction. Located on a raised platform is the sanctuary, where the altar is placed at the centre of the west end. At the rear of the building is a small outhouse which served as an ancillary kitchen. As the building faces a large open yard at the front, it is believed that the classroom was deliberately accommodated in the front compartment to receive a better intake of daylight from the row of south-facing windows. The chapel is closer to the slope at the rear, and thus could enjoy a relatively private and tranquil environment.

### *Architectural Merit*

Epiphany of Our Lord Chapel adopted a simple, humble and functional approach with little decoration. It has a gable wall as the front façade, quite typical for a Western church building. At the tip of the gable wall is a Latin cross. There are two small windows at the cockloft level, and a small opening above them, which formerly housed the chapel bell. The Chinese name of the former school, “Kung Man School” (公民學校) and the Chinese characters meaning “Catholic Church” (天主堂) are found on the front façade, indicating the functions of the building. The fenestrations are regular on the four elevations, all are below projecting overhangs running around the building envelope. The rhythmic fenestration, the deep overhangs and a rather functional design approach reflect some influences from the Modernist architectural style.

The chapel adopted a Catholic church setting, which was typical before the liturgical reforms laid out by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962–1965).<sup>4</sup> The altar (祭台) was built against the end wall, and the priests celebrated Mass facing the altar with the congregation. The altar rails (聖體欄), for use by the congregation during Holy Eucharist (聖餐禮), were placed on either side facing the altar, an arrangement reflecting early traditional ritual practices. The altar adopted a stepped design, and a cross (a golden Budded Cross overlaid by a red Latin Cross) is inscribed within a circle on the front. The altar is designed with an ambry on one side and a sacarium on the other side.

The Chinese roof, laid with traditional Hakka and Canton roof tiles on timber battens and purlins, on the other hand, shows local influences on the construction materials and method used.

The existing chapel and school building is divided into two compartments with the classroom at the front and the chapel at the back. This is a unique layout amongst the Catholic chapel-cum-school buildings in Sai Kung, where the schools are usually built adjacent to the chapels.

A considerable number of architectural features have been maintained, namely the general external appearance with the original metal windows, projecting overhangs, the names “天主堂” and “公民學校” on the front façade, the opening for the bell, the original interior layout, the walls and partitions, the chapel setting common before Vatican II, including the altar built against the wall and the presence of the altar rails, though old photos reveal that the original altar rails have been shortened in length. Despite the building is in a poor condition, it has not experienced large-scale intervention apart from a few door replacements. The chapel still maintains its authenticity.

The chapel not only demonstrates its religious role in preaching Catholicism to a Hakka community, but also retains traces of the social interaction between early missionaries and the local villagers. In addition to sharing their religion, the Catholic missionaries also assisted in improving the livelihood of the villagers. For instance, soon after the coming of Catholicism to Sham Chung in the 1870s, Rev Luigi PIAZZOLI mobilized the villagers to build a long embankment, so as to prevent seawater from flooding the farmland. This in turn yielded more land for cultivation and what was harvested was able to feed half the population of the village. In addition to improve the local economy, the missionaries also responded to the villagers’ specific needs, often by offering bread, flour and even pocket money to those in need, and by assisting in the search for jobs.

*Rarity,  
Built*

*Heritage  
Value &  
Authenticity*

*Social Value  
& Local  
Interest*

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<sup>4</sup> Pope John XXIII announced the creation of the Second Vatican Council (also known as Vatican II) in January 1959. The council met in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican for four sessions of meetings between 1962 and 1965. It brought together thousands of bishops from around the world to address the relationship between the church and the modern world, and to forge a new set of operating principles for the church. After the meetings, the council decided on many dramatic changes in the church's traditions so as to bring Catholicism closer to the modern world. Among these were the use of languages other than Latin for the celebration of Mass as well as making the celebration of Mass into a more interactive ceremony.

The chapel also testifies to the villagers' enthusiasm for religious events. It served as a central gathering place for both Catholics and non-Catholics in the village, and fostered unity among Hakka communities. For instance, every year, the villagers would observe the annual Epiphany with great pomp and zeal. According to a 1932 story published in *Kung Kao Po*, on the eve of the annual Epiphany, the Catholic villagers would raise money to buy paper flowers and banners, and post couplets so as to decorate the chapel lavishly. When the ritual was over, they would set off firecrackers and slaughter pigs for a banquet that was open to all villagers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. It was an important event, to which all were invited. From the oral history of villagers who lived in Shek Tau Yin and Kau Tong Wai between the 1950s and the 1970s, we know that this festive event lasted well into the 1960s. The village children even dressed up as the Magi, complete with paper crowns, to perform a play in the open space in front of the chapel. This was followed by the enactment of Chinese traditions such as setting off firecrackers and holding basin feasts. These activities showcase how Catholic activities intertwined with traditional rural customs and how Catholic and Hakka traditions blended seamlessly in the village life of Sham Chung.

According to a villager who lived in Kau Tong Wai from the 1950s to the 1960s, although the priests were not stationed at the chapel and only went to Sham Chung once or twice a month to hold Mass, the Catholic villagers would gather at the chapel without the priests every night and weekend for prayers. In addition to regular Catholic Sunday services, the priests also held weddings and funerals at the chapel. The devout Catholics among the villagers would insist on conducting the ceremonies of their life events – weddings and funerals – according to the rites of the Catholic church. Another villager recalled how, when Catholics villagers passed away, their family members insisted on waiting for the priest to come to the village from outside to conduct the funeral service and say prayers for their souls before a proper burial. All these examples show how Catholicism was firmly embedded in the Hakka communities.

A former resident of Kau Tong Wai also remembers, back in the 1950s and 1960s, when the priests arrived at the village to hold Mass, they would stay at the chapel the night before. Villagers would take turns inviting them for dinner at their homes. The hospitality showed the special bonding between the missionaries and the indigenous villagers, arising from established friendships, which lasted through the generations.

Epiphany of Our Lord Chapel together with the other surviving Catholic chapels in Sai Kung, including St. Joseph's Chapel (聖若瑟堂) at Yim Tin Tsai (鹽田仔) (Grade 2), Rosary Mission Centre (玫瑰小堂) at Wong Mo Ying (黃毛應) (Grade 2), Holy Family Chapel (聖家小堂) at Chek Keng (赤徑) (Grade 2), Immaculate Conception Chapel (聖母無原罪小堂) at Tai Long (大浪) (Grade 3), Immaculate Heart of Mary Chapel (聖母無玷之心小堂) at Pak Sha O (白沙澳) (Grade 3), Nativity of Our Lady Chapel (聖母聖誕小堂) at Long Ke (浪茄) (Grade 3) and Chapel of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows (聖母七苦小堂) at Pak Tam Chung (北潭涌) (Grade 3) are of group value, as they link up to serve as tangible testimonies to trace back the development of Catholicism among

**Group Value**

the Hakka villages in Sai Kung.

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