

## Historic Building Appraisal

### Stone Steps of Shing Wong Street

#### Sheung Wan, H.K.

Shing Wong Street (城皇街) is one of the streets constructed in the hilly *Historical Interest* urban areas on Hong Kong Island. It extends from Gough Street (歌賦街), rising all the way to Caine Road (堅道) in the Mid-Levels. The steps start from Wa Hing Lane (華興里) near Hollywood Road (荷李活道) and ends at Caine Road. While the uppermost section of the street has been replaced with concrete, many of the old steps constructed of granite slabs still exist along the street between Wa Hing Lane and the portion near Wa In Fong East (華賢坊東) in spite of the passage of time.

Shing Wong Street is thought to have been given this name because a Shing Wong Temple (城隍廟) once stood here. The temple, likely the first temple erected after the British takeover of Hong Kong Island,<sup>1</sup> is believed to have been erected at No. 10 Shing Wong Street (the site of the present-day PMQ) around 1843,<sup>2</sup> and remained there until 1877, when the Government purchased the buildings on several plots of land, including the site of Shing Wong Temple, for the construction of a new campus of Central School (中央書院, which was renamed “Queen’s College” 皇仁書院 in 1894).<sup>3</sup> Although the temple is long gone, it left its mark on the street name. It is especially worth noting that while the surrounding streets were all named after British administrators in the past, this street is the only one which was derived from the Chinese deity. Hence, it is believed that, in its days, the Shing Wong Temple was an important landmark in the area.

The name Shing Wong Street can be observed on the map for the first time in 1863.<sup>4</sup> From Government records and Chinese newspapers of the 1880s, the

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<sup>1</sup> Carl T. Smith, “Notes on Chinese Temples in Hong Kong”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, Vol. 13 (1973), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> According to the account of E. J. Eitel, the construction of “Sheng-wong-miu” on the “site of the present Queen’s College” began in 1843. See Ernst J. Eitel, *Europe in China: The History of Hongkong from the Beginning to the Year 1882* (London: Luzac & Company, 1895), p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> Central School was opened on Gough Street (Inland Lot 78, the present site of SKH Kei Yan Primary School) in 1862. To accommodate the increasing number of students, the Government bought the properties on Inland Lots 55, 93, 91 (the site of Shing Wong Temple) and 91A at the junction of Hollywood Road and Aberdeen Street (the present site of PMQ) for the construction of a new campus of Central School (the second campus of the School) in 1877. See Government Notification No. 6, *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, 6 January 1877. The school was renamed “Victoria College” in 1889 when it moved in. In 1894, “Victoria College” was renamed “Queen’s College”.

<sup>4</sup> Plate 2-2 “(1863) The 8 inch map of Victoria and Kowloon (reduced)”, Hal Empson, *Mapping Hong Kong: A Historical Atlas* ([Hong Kong]: Govt. Printer, 1992), pp.132-133.

original Chinese name of the street was 城隍廟街,<sup>5</sup> which later evolved into 城隍街.<sup>6</sup> Still later, the word “隍” was replaced by a different character with the same pronunciation, “皇”. The reason for this change is, however, uncertain.<sup>7</sup> Currently, the Chinese name 城皇街 is still in use.

From the 1850 map, the alignment of Shing Wong Street was completed, and this has remained the same until today. However, it seems that the street was just a slope without steps when it was initially laid out. The steps appeared to have been built in sections. The first section evidently started construction by 1859, when the steps at both ends of the portion between Hollywood Road and Staunton Street/ Bridges Street started to appear,<sup>8</sup> while the steps in between were in place no later than 1889.<sup>9</sup> By 1897, the layout of all the steps as they appear today is shown on map.<sup>10</sup> Hence, it can be concluded that the steps of Shing Wong Street were constructed between 1859 and 1897.

Besides being a street with a long history, its location also made Shing Wong Street an administrative boundary between the Taipingshan and Choong Wan districts in the mid-19th century. From a map of Victoria City in 1889,<sup>11</sup> it can be seen that to the east of Shing Wong Street is District No. 5 Choong Wan, and to its west is District No. 3 Taipingshan.

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<sup>5</sup> Government Notification No. 21, *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, 20 January 1883; 《循環日報》, 1883年1月23日。

<sup>6</sup> The earliest record of “城隍街” is found in a Chinese Newspaper in 1929, namely 〈昨日城隍街幾遭回祿〉, 《香港工商日報》, 1929年6月25日。

<sup>7</sup> According to the available Chinese newspapers, “隍” was still in use at least in 1962. An example can be found in 〈急救風災災民善長心聲〉, 《華僑日報》, 1962年9月14日。A street sign with “城隍街” was also captured in a photo taken in 1961. See Hong Kong Museum of History, Photo captioned “Photo taken by Dutch photographer Michael Rogge, titled ‘Corner of Shing Wong Street’, 1961” (Photo Ref.: P2017.14). While no record about Shing Wong Street during the period of 1963-1966 is found, the change of “皇” is observed since 1967. For example: 〈中區城皇街火警焚燬舊樓一層〉, 《工商晚報》, 1967年1月15日。

<sup>8</sup> National Archives, “Plans of portion of the City – by the Surveyor-General, June 1859”, CO 700/HongKongandChina54, <https://www.hkmaps.hk/map.html?1859> (accessed on 18 July 2023).

<sup>9</sup> National Archives, “Plan of the City of Victoria, Hong Kong, 1889 160 feet to 1 inch”, CO 700/HongKongandChina7, <https://www.hkmaps.hk/map.html?1889> (accessed on 18 July 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department, “Hong Kong Map (1897)”, <https://data.gov.hk/en-data/dataset/hk-landsd-openmap-historical-maps> (accessed on 18 July 2023).

<sup>11</sup> National Archives, “Plan of the City of Victoria, Hong Kong, 1889 160 feet to 1 inch”, CO 700/HongKongandChina7.

The association of the street and steps with Dr Sun Yat Sen (孫中山) (1866-1925) further adds to the historical interest of Shing Wong Street. No. 2 Bridges Street (adjoining Shing Wong Street), where the Hong Kong News-Expo stands today, used to be the Preaching House of the American Congregational Church (美國公理會, now named as China Congregational Church 中華基督教會公理堂). After Sun arrived in Hong Kong in 1883, he lived on the third floor of the Preaching House. He was also baptised at the American Congregational Church, receiving the baptismal name “Yat Sun” (日新). It was from this name that his later name, “Yat Sen” (逸仙) derives. Between 1884 and 1886, Sun studied at the first-generation Central School, which was located at the junction of Gough Street and the lower section of Shing Wong Street (now the site of SKH Kei Yan Primary School 聖公會基恩小學). Undoubtedly, his daily journey to school and back to his place of residence would involve walking up and down the steps of Shing Wong Street.

Shing Wong Street is built on a slope consisting of a series of flat halts connected by flights of stone steps. It is a pedestrian street too steep for motor traffic in the early days. The flat halts at various points along the street are believed to be built to allow sedan chairs to proceed more easily on the journey up and down, and to enable the chair coolies to rest and realign their loads, a feature commonly seen in many other uphill streets such as Ladder Street (Grade 1) nearby.<sup>12</sup>

*Architectural  
Merit*

The stone steps of Shing Wong Street are constructed with long heavy granite slabs cut and dressed in similar tread width and thickness, except that the five uppermost piers of the steps near Caine Road have been rebuilt with cast-in-place concrete steps and paved with concrete landings. The section between Hollywood Road and Staunton Street / Bridges Street retains many of the original steps and landings paved with granite slabs. For the section which extends from Staunton Street / Bridges Street to the portion near Wa In Fong East, granite steps could still be observed but all landings are covered with concrete. In general, the stone steps bestow tangible evidence of the utilisation of local materials in constructing one of the remaining century-old step streets.

Unlike the steps at Duddell Street (Declared Monument) and Pottinger Street (Grade 1), which are embellished with decorative balustrades and

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<sup>12</sup> Jason Wordie, *Streets: Exploring Hong Kong Island* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2002), p. 289.

constructed with special laying methods such as breaking bonds respectively, the stone steps of Shing Wong Street are of a modest design, sharing similarities in terms of the setting, material used and construction methods, with other step streets in the neighbourhood, such as Ladder Street (Grade 1) and Pound Lane (Grade 2).

Shing Wong Street is one of the few exemplary step streets built with granite slabs that retain its authentic appearance, form and setting, in spite of the repair and replacement of some of the steps over the years. Substantial alteration in materials is observed at the top section where granite slabs have been replaced with concrete steps and concrete-paved landings. ***Authenticity & Rarity***

In 1987, a section of the steps beside the Former Bridges Street Market was demolished for the construction of a single-storey Refuse Collection Point (RCP). Following the revitalisation of the market into the Hong Kong News-Expo, which took place in mid-2010, the RCP was demolished and this section of the steps was reinstated with new granite slabs, re-laid to match the profile of the adjoining old stone steps.

Hong Kong's development as a city on the steep hilly environs of Hong Kong Island has left its traces in the form of step streets. Shing Wong Street is one of these examples. The steps of Shing Wong Street have served as a pedestrian link between Sheung Wan and Mid-Levels for over a century. In spite of many years of urban makeovers, most of the old stone steps still survive today, not only serving residents and visitors alike, but also contributing greatly as a key component of the urban setting in this hilly terrain. ***Social Value & Local Interest***

The original site of the American Congregational Church adjoining the steps at Bridges Street is one of the spots in the "Sun Yat Sen Historical Trail" (中山史蹟徑), which aims to enhance public understanding of Dr Sun's activities in Hong Kong.

The stone steps of Shing Wong Street have group value with other historic steps and step streets in the Central and Western District, including Duddell Street steps (Declared Monument), Pottinger Street (Grade 1), Ladder Street (Grade 1), steps of Pound Lane (Grade 2) and steps of Prince's Terrace (Grade 3). The street is also located in the area with a high density of historic buildings in the vicinity, such as Man Mo Temple, Kom Tong Hall and Old Pathological Institute (all Declared Monuments). ***Group Value***

Shing Wong Street runs past the Hollywood Road Former Married Police Quarters (Grade 3), No. 88 and 90 Staunton Street (Grade 2) and Bridges Street Market (Grade 3) which was built in 1953 on the original site of the Preaching House of the American Congregational Church. The adjoining Wing Lee Street has been made famous by the film “Echoes of the Rainbow” (歲月神偷) (2010).

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