

## Historic Building Appraisal

### Shrine with Stone Dog

Kat Hing Back Street, Tai O, Lantau Island, N.T.

At the western side of Kat Hing Back Street in Tai O (大澳吉慶後街), adjacent to the northern wall of the temporary structure of No. 75, there is a shrine with a granite statue fashioned in the shape of a dog. This shrine is locally known as “Shrine with Stone Dog” (石狗神壇). There is a lack of documentary information on when the dog worshipping ritual was started in Tai O and whether the shrine was erected *in-situ* or had been displaced from its original location elsewhere; however, it is believed that the shrine was laid here **before 1899**. There are many legends about the stone dog statue. One says that it might be related to the dog-worshipping tradition of the Yao tribe ( Yao族) or the She tribe (畚 or 耆) whose legend was that their ancestor Pun-hu (盤瓠) was a dog married to the daughter of a ruler in ancient times.

*Historical  
Interest*

History records that the Yao tribe originated from Hunan (湖南) and moved to Guangdong (廣東). Members of the She tribe, a branch of the Yao tribe, lived in Guangdong, Fujian (福建), Jiangxi (江西) and Zhejiang (浙江). Both of them were the aboriginals of the Hong Kong region who had been living here before the arrival of the “Five Big Clans” to the New Territories. It was believed that the dog-worshipping ritual also came with these aboriginals. However when southern China absorbed more culture of central China due to population migration since Tang (唐) and Song (宋) dynasties, the aboriginals became assimilated into the Han culture, so as their religious ritual.

In this shrine with joss sticks smouldering at its base, apart from the granite dog statue, there are also a triangular-shaped stone and a rectangular-shaped granite tablet bearing Chinese characters “南無阿彌陀佛” (meaning “Namo Amitābhā”). The triangular-shaped stone symbolizes the local Earth God (To Tei 土地), a patron deity maintaining peace and keeping evil and trouble away. There are several earth god shrines in Tai O who receive from their flock offerings of food and drink, fruit, incense and so on, which means that there is not just one Earth God, but rather a whole hierarchy of Earth Gods.

The shrine sits on a small platform raised up about one foot high from Kat Hing Back Street. The front of the platform serves as a flat altar for putting the offerings. Then there is a pit filled with sand for erecting joss sticks.

*Architectural  
Merit*

At the rear part of the platform is the **granite dog statue**, about one foot tall, in a pose of sitting on its back legs, but the head and the neck are missing. The triangular-shaped “earth god” stone is at the right of the dog statue, and the granite

tablet roughly inscribed with Chinese “南無阿彌陀佛” is behind the “earth god”. A parapet of about one foot tall surrounds three sides of those items worshipped. A canopy is erected on the top to shelter the worshipped from sun and rainfall.

At the immediate right hand side of the altar there is an incense burner for the villagers to burn their paper money. The surrounds of the shrine are seemingly made of concrete and painted in red, except that the canopy is made of metal sheeting supported by metal wire and wood slabs. Similar to other vernacular religious structures, the shrine is in primitive style, functionally made and is bare of ornamentation.

There is a saying that this shrine is the only remaining one of its kind in Hong Kong connected with dog worshipping. It would seem that the shrine’s function has evolved from “dog” worshipping into “earth god” worshipping, which is common in Tai O. The granite tablet inscribed with “南無阿彌陀佛” implies that Buddhism has made its way into local worshipping. As the shrine’s surrounds are made of concrete, it is believed that repairs to the shrine might have been undertaken in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Rarity,  
Built Heritage  
Value &  
Authenticity**

The shrine is a seemingly familiar everything object in the Tai O area that reflects the people’s traditional Chinese religious culture. Many people set up small shrines in their apartments to pay tribute to their ancestors. Small shrines can be found outside, too, in alleyways and at corners of buildings. For most people nowadays, the worshipping of the stone dog statue has nothing to do with Yao or She tribe rituals; rather the shrine now serves as a “public” earth god shrine which is widely worshipped by those living nearby. This is similar to the worshipping activities attached to stones and landmarks where people pray for good fortune.

**Social Value  
& Local  
Interest**

This shrine has some group value when observing with other “public” earth god shrines scattered along the streets in Tai O. Besides it also sheds light on the religious diversity of Tai O when observing with other temples nearby, e.g. Yeung Hau Temple at Po Chue Tam (寶珠潭陽侯古廟) (Grade 1), Kwan Tai Temple (吉慶後街關帝古廟) (Grade 2) and Tin Hau Temple (吉慶後街天后古廟) (Grade 3) at Kat Hing Back Street.

**Group Value**

The question of adaptive re-use does not arise.

**Adaptive  
Reuse**