

Historic Building Appraisal

Village House, No. 19 Muk Wu, Ta Kwu Ling, New Territories

Built in the 1920s, the village house at no. 19 Muk Wu in Ta Kwu Ling is **Historical Interest** one of the few surviving traditional vernacular houses in the village. The house reflects the traditional self-sufficient lifestyle of villagers in the past.

Muk Wu is a walled village in Ta Kwu Ling in the northern part of the New Territories. It was first recorded in the 1819 edition of the *Xin'an Gazetteer* as Muk Wu Wai (木湖圍), but its history dates back further to the Zhengde period (1506-1521) of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) when the To (杜) clan, originally from Jiangxi province, moved south and settled in the area. After establishing the village of Muk Wu, the clan was forced to move inland by the "Evacuation Edict" in the early years of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and did not return until the edict was rescinded. In addition to the To clan, Muk Wu is also home to members of the Wong (黃) and Yam (任) clans, which later settled in the village.

Similar to other villages located in the northern area of Hong Kong, Muk Wu was often threatened by settlers from the north and it therefore joined with other villages in nearby districts to establish a mutual defence alliance called the Ta Kwu Ling Luk Yeuk¹ (打鼓嶺六約) during the Qing dynasty.² The need for security is also reflected in the layout of Muk Wu, the shape of which resembles a square: four parallel rows of south-west facing houses are separated by lanes and surrounded by houses serving as enclosing walls to protect the interior of the village.

Many of the villagers in Muk Wu made their living from farming, and the family who used to live in this house at no. 19 was no exception. According to the available land records, the lot was passed down from generation to generation of a family surnamed To. The house was built by the current owner's father, who passed it on to his son when he died.

¹ It also comprised the villages of Ping Yeung (坪洋), Wo Keng Shan (禾徑山), Nga Yiu Ha (瓦窰下), Sheung Shan Kai Wat (上山雞乙), Ha Shan Kai Wat (下山雞乙), Kan Tau Wai (簡頭圍), Lei Uk (李屋), Tai Po Tin (大埔田), Fung Wong Wu (鳳凰湖), Lo Shue Ling (老鼠嶺) (now known as Chow Tin 週田), Tak Yuet Lau (得月樓), Tsung Yuen Ha (松園下), Chuk Yuen (竹園), Ping Che (坪峯), Tong Fong (塘坊), Nga Yiu (瓦窰), San Uk Ling (新屋嶺), Lo Wu (羅湖) and Heung Yuen Wai (香園圍).

² A self-defence force was also set up in Muk Wu to provide security and conduct regular patrols. In the past, the guards were allowed by the Hong Kong police to carry guns when performing their duties. The patrol service was continued in the area until the 1970s.

Built in a one-hall-one-courtyard design, the courtyard is first seen when entering this village house, with two stoves each on either sides; the living room is at the centre of the house, with the bedroom and the cockloft at the back. Living in the house since the late 1940s, the owner spent most of his time with his mother on the farm cultivating produce that was sold to the market to earn an income or kept to provide food for the family. The crops included radishes, corn, sugar cane, cabbages and fuzzy melons.

To help his mother prepare meals, the owner went up to the nearby mountain to collect firewood and fetch water. Chickens were raised near the stove. On festive occasions, his mother pounded rice at home to make Chinese fever vine sticky rice dumplings and glutinous rice dumplings, among other treats. The tool used to pound the rice can still be found in the living room today.

When the government established the Frontier Closed Area along the China-Hong Kong border in 1951 for security reasons and to tackle illegal immigration and smuggling problems, Muk Wu was included in the restricted zone³ and residents then had to obtain a Closed Area Permit to show when entering or leaving the restricted zone. The inconvenience this caused gradually prompted many residents to migrate to England or the Netherlands or to move to the city in the 1960s, which is also what the owners eventually did.

No. 19 Muk Wu is a Qing vernacular residence designed with a single hall and one courtyard. Constructed with fair-faced grey bricks, the residence is topped with a traditional pitched roof that is laid with Chinese pan and roll tiles, supported by a timber roof system and flanked with gable walls at both ends. *Architectural Merit*

The internal layout of the village house remains generally intact. In the courtyard in front of the hall is the kitchen with two brick stoves and chimneys on both sides and a bathing area in the southeast corner. The living room in the main hall is separated from the rear bedroom and its cockloft by a timber partition. An altar with an L-shaped shelf is constructed as an extension of the cockloft, which is used for worshipping the family's ancestors and for storage purposes.

The front façade (south-west elevation) and the north-west elevation are exquisitely decorated with plastered mouldings and murals. In particular, the

³ This arrangement ended in January 2016 when the third stage of the reduction of the Frontier Closed Area was implemented. Muk Wu has been outside of the area since then.

area above the stone lintel of the main entrance is embellished with a projected eave decorated with calligraphy and plastered mouldings featuring auspicious motifs, including flowers, fruits and crops (such as pomegranates, arrowhead root and corn symbolising fecundity and a long line of descendants and peach symbolising longevity).

Other plastered mouldings and murals on the wall frieze of the south-west elevation and the gable wall frieze of the north-west elevation are decorated mostly with floral patterns and plants, including lotus and lotus pods, which are also symbols of an abundance of offspring.

The village house has retained much of its authenticity in terms of its building fabric and intricate decorations. Other than the addition of a new kitchen stove and chimney in the kitchen in the 1950s, no other major alterations have been identified. However, condition of some wooden structural elements in the house, purlin and cockloft floor for instance, are dilapidating. ***Authenticity & Rarity***

As a surviving traditional building in Muk Wu village based on the Qing vernacular one-hall-one-courtyard design, no. 19 is a typical example of village houses in the New Territories.

As the village house has been used only as a residence and the village was part of the Frontier Closed Area on the China-Hong Kong border from 1951 until 2016, the house is of relatively low social value for the local community. ***Social Value & Local Interest***

The building has a group value with the other old buildings in its vicinity, namely the Tin Hau Temple, Muk Wu Tsuen (木湖村天后廟) (Grade 3) and the Entrance Gate, Muk Wu Wai (木湖圍圍門) (Grade 3). This value is based on their unity that reveals aspects of the traditional daily lives and folk beliefs of the villagers and also the layout of the village, which highlights the need for defence and security in the settlement's early history. ***Group Value***

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