

Heritage Appraisal of Lo Pan Temple, 15 Ching Lin Terrace, Kennedy Town, Hong Kong

Lo Pan Temple is located on Ching Lin Terrace, one of the seven terraces built on the slopes between Pok Fu Lam Road and Belcher's Street in Kennedy Town. Dedicated to Lo Pan,¹ who is revered as the god of Chinese builders and building contractors,² the temple was completed in 1928 and bears witness to the development of the construction industry in Hong Kong.

*Historical
Interest*

A group of local builders and building contractors initiated the construction of the temple in the 10th year of the Guangxu (光緒) reign in the Qing Dynasty (1884).³ Sympathetic to their cause and impressed by their enthusiasm, the businessman Li Lai Hing (李禮興) donated the land for the temple in the name of his company, Lai Hing Ho (禮興號). Commenced in 1884 and completed in 1888,⁴ the construction of the first temple building was made possible by donations from over a thousand companies and individuals involved in the construction industry. The temple underwent several renovations between 1894 and 1910, which were financed with the help of local builders and contractors.⁵ The establishment and later renovations of the temple reflect the booming construction business in Hong Kong in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

As the condition of the first temple was deteriorating, it was rebuilt at the same site in 1928. A total of 210 construction

¹ Born in 507 B.C. in the State of Lu (魯) (now Shandong province) during the Spring and Autumn period (春秋) (770-476 B.C.), Lo Pan, also known as Kungshu Pan (公輸班), was described as the most talented and skilful builder, carpenter and inventor in ancient China. In honour of his achievements, he was made the patron god of the people working in the construction industry after his death. Legend has it that he came to the assistance of craftsmen and builders in despair, and as a result praying for his protection and guardianship became a custom of many Chinese builders and contractors.

² A more generalised term for builders and building contractors in Hong Kong is *sam hong* (三行), which literally means "three trades" and traditionally refers to carpentry, masonry and bricklaying. Today, the term *sam hong* is generally associated with the trades involved in the construction and renovation of buildings.

³ Reference is made to the stone tablet "倡建魯班先師廟簽題工金芳名碑誌" erected in the temple in the 10th year of the Guangxu reign, which dates back to 1884. The intention behind the building of the temple was to commemorate the virtues and contributions of the great master Lo Pan. The inscriptions on the stone tablet read "茲我行香海經營，躬建北城侯魯班先師廟宇，以盡崇德報功、飲水思源之義。".

⁴ The inscription "風調雨順，沐恩弟子曾瓊記敬送，北城侯先師案前。光緒十四年季秋吉旦，國泰民安，信昌爐造" can be seen on the bell in the temple.

⁵ Stone tablets commemorating renovations in 1897, 1902, 1904, 1907, 1908 and 1910 can still be seen in the temple.

companies and individuals sponsored the works.⁶ In 1949, a pavilion between the two halls of the temple and an annex as quarters for the temple keeper were built.⁷ The construction works demonstrate the vigorous development of the construction industry in the 20th century and the trade's commitment to the upkeep of the temple.

The construction of the Lo Pan Temple also testifies to the rise of associations established by Chinese people in Hong Kong. Many immigrants from the Mainland and other places were attracted to Hong Kong to make a living in the middle of the 19th century. They noted the need to unite in order to offer each other help and support, and to safeguard their mutual interests. The early Chinese associations in Hong Kong can be roughly divided into associations based on the same family name, on a common homeland, on a local religious belief or on a trade. As the construction industry in Hong Kong grew increasingly prosperous in the 1870s, builders gradually formed sufficient group cohesion to build the temple.

Moreover, the temple is a reminder of the close links that Hong Kong had with other regions in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. According to information on the stone tablets commemorating the construction and later renovations of the temple, donations to the building works included several from individuals originating from different parts of Guangdong province, such as Xinhui, Shunde, Kaiping and Dongguan.

Facing northwest, the temple features a two-hall, one-courtyard layout of a single bay with a recessed façade. It is built of grey bricks. Both the entrance hall and the main hall are topped with a traditional Chinese pitched roof laid with green-glazed roll tiles and red pan tiles, which is supported by a timber roof system and flanked with gable walls on both ends. The height between the floor and ceiling is almost two storeys. The temple follows the topography of the site and thus has a few steps leading up to the main hall housing

*Architectural
Merit*

⁶ Reference is made to the inscriptions on the granite lintel and the stone tablet erected in 1951 in the temple. Reference is also made to a news report in *The Kung Sheung Daily News* of 23 November 1928 and an article in *Hong Kong and Far East Builder*, vol. 19 no. 3 (October 1964).

⁷ Reference is made to the stone tablet “本堂奉祀” erected in 1949 in the temple and the approved drawing from the Buildings Department.

the altar of Lo Pan as well as other deities, such as the god of wealth.

The temple was built and embellished in a highly imaginative and decorative style. Delicate works of art in the form of mural, plaster mouldings, wood carvings and Shiwan (石灣) ceramic figurines adorn all the interior and exterior walls of the temple in abundance and highlight its exceptional architectural and aesthetic values. The exquisite craftsmanship displayed in the wide variety of decorative elements testifies to the superior status of Lo Pan Temple and its significance to the worshippers there.

One of the temple's most distinctive architectural features is its stepped gable walls on both sides of the two halls. These gables, which point upwards like daggers, are built in the "Five Peaks Paying Tribute to Heaven" style (五岳朝天式), a very rare design that is seldom found in Hong Kong.⁸

Another highly significant feature of the temple is the wealth of delicate decorations throughout the entire building. To begin with, both sides of each ridge of the rooftop of the entrance hall and the main hall are elaborately embellished with numerous exquisite Shiwan ceramic figurines. The upper part of the ridge of the entrance hall features precious pearl and a pair of dragon fish and phoenixes used as ridge-end ornaments. The decorations on the main ridges of the two halls and the *chitou* (gable wall heads 墀頭) on the front façade depict figures from the 16th-century Chinese novel *Investiture of the Gods* (《封神榜》), a popular theme adopted in ceramic ridges in Hong Kong.

Chinese inscriptions engraved on the main ridge, including "省城聚興選辦", "均玉窑造"⁹, and "香港鍾照記建" on the roof of the entrance hall, record the names of manufacturers in Guangdong province, the year of manufacture and the local building contractor that was in charge of the construction of the ceramic ridges and decorations. The Shiwan ceramic figurines are not only exquisitely crafted, but also very skilfully positioned. It is noteworthy that a few figurines have

⁸ According to the Antiquities and Monuments Office's records, there are three historic buildings with this kind of stepped gables: Lo Pan Temple in Kennedy Town, Hau Wong Temple in Kowloon City and Tin Hau Temple in Peng Chau.

⁹ Junyu kiln was the renowned Shiwan ceramic manufacturer from Foshan, Guangdong province.

been placed leaning forward in order to facilitate a clear and undistorted view from ground level.

The large quantity of superb mural paintings depicting a wide variety of subjects in the temple, numbering as many as 26 pieces, is also exceptional. Right above the door lintel on the front façade is a remarkable mural containing nine paintings and two calligraphy murals on a single tableau featuring various themes such as *Evening Trip to Red Cliff* (夜遊赤壁)¹⁰, and *Bodhidharma Crossing Waves on a Reed* (達摩一葦渡江), together with subjects from traditional landscapes and plants.¹¹ These highly decorative murals convey the inspiration of the thirst for knowledge and the virtue of diligence. Other fine murals can be found decorating the front and rear elevations as well as internal walls and wall friezes.

In addition, a total of seven sets of finely crafted plaster mouldings can be found across the temple depicting auspicious motifs and historic folktales. Two of these mention a prominent local building contractor, Chung Cheu Kee Building Contractor (鍾照記建造), and the names of the notable craftsmen Deng Zizhou (鄧子舟) and his son Deng Juqian (鄧居謙) at the border frame.¹² The intricate wood carvings in the temple are also remarkable. Looking up at the covered pavilion reveals an exquisitely decorated *caimen* (彩門), a wooden panel. Depicting historic folktales including *Xue Gang Rebelling against Tang* (薛剛反唐) and other auspicious motifs, the *caimen* was manufactured by Leung So Kee (梁蘇記) and presented by Lam Yam Chuen (林蔭泉), the founding chairman of the Hongkong Building Contractors' Association (香港建造商會), and his son to commemorate the temple's reconstruction in 1928.¹³

The temple retains its authentic layout and main elements. ***Authenticity***

¹⁰ This is the largest painting and is placed in the middle of the tableau. It depicts famous scholar Su Shi (蘇軾) in a boat, Fou Yin the monk (佛印和尚) on the bank and the calligrapher Huang Tingjian (黃庭堅).

¹¹ The painting above the word “魯” is different from the rest of the paintings. Depicting several books and papers, it is an example of a genre of Chinese art that developed during the middle of the 19th century in China known as the “eight broken”.

¹² Four plaster mouldings crafted by the Dengs are preserved in the temple.

¹³ Inscriptions “魯班先師廟廣悅寶堂重建崇陸誌慶” are engraved on the *caimen*. Reference is also made to 馬素梅：《迎祥接福：香港中式古建築的木雕彩門》，香港：作者自印，2021年，頁158-159。

The building structure and the decorative features remain in good condition. The major later additions to the temple include the pavilion that was erected in 1949 over the original courtyard and the temple keeper's quarters in the southwestern corner.

The temple is the well-recognised historic temple dedicated to Lo Pan in Hong Kong. Its stepped gable walls in the style of the “Five Peaks Paying Tribute to Heaven” are a rare sight in Hong Kong. The temple is also one of the most gorgeously decorated temples in Hong Kong. It retains and expresses advanced techniques and superb craftsmanship in the execution of its wood carvings, ceramic figurines, plaster mouldings, mural paintings and stone inscriptions. Both the front and rear sides of the ridges of the entrance and main halls are vividly decorated with Shiwan ceramic figurines, which are found only in isolated cases in Hong Kong. **Rarity**

The temple is of significant social value and local interest. In the time when it was built, new entrants to the trade learned the knowledge and techniques of construction and building by undertaking an apprenticeship rather than through vocational training in a school setting. Lo Pan can be regarded as the great teacher of all the trades associated with building. Paying homage to Lo Pan at the temple is thus an important part of the heritage of the building trades that reflects the continuity and significance of apprenticeship. Since the temple was built, local owners and workers of construction businesses have followed the traditional practice of celebrating the birthday of Lo Pan, widely known as the “Master Festival” (師傅誕), on the 13th day of the sixth lunar month every year, when they usually stop work and gather in front of the temple to pay homage to Lo Pan, thanking the master for his protection and asking for his blessing for smooth and safe works. They later hold a banquet in a restaurant in the evening. **Social Value & Local Interest**

Traditional celebrations have been held at the temple that last one and a half days over the evening before and the day of the “Master Festival”. The festivities include a consecration ceremony conducted by Taoist priests to enshrine the souls of workers who have died in industrial accidents and the performance of lion and dragon dances. Another memorable activity is the distribution of “master rice” to

children in the neighbourhood. Tradition has it that children who eat “master rice” will grow up to be as smart, versatile and hard-working as Lo Pan. “Master rice” was thus very popular in the old days. But as the older generations of craftsmen passed away, the “master rice” tradition has gradually disappeared since the 1960s.

In 2020, the Construction Industry Council in association with the Hong Kong Construction Association launched the “Construction Industry Lo Pan Rice Campaign” during the “Master Festival”, distributing hot lunch boxes to underprivileged groups in the community. The campaign has now become an iconic territory-wide charity event of the construction industry, reflecting the fact that the influence of Lo Pan is not only confined to the tangible historic temple building, but has also extended out in intangible form to a wider community from a socioeconomic perspective.

To promote the spirit of Lo Pan, which values innovation, and to recognize outstanding young practitioners in the industry, the Young Lo Pan Award Ceremony was inaugurated in 2010 by the management of the temple in collaboration with other stakeholders in the industry and is now held at the temple every year. It reflects the strong bonds that the temple fostered within the industry, and continues to foster even today, and testifies to the historical development of one of the major industries in Hong Kong.

Built in 1949, Kwong Yuet Tong Public Office (Grade 3) is *Group Value* located next to the temple. The existence of the office and the temple in close proximity form a significant group value.

Another renowned temple in Central and Western District is the Man Mo Temple compound in Sheung Wan, which was declared as monument in 2010. Other historic buildings in the vicinity of the temple include No. 9 Ching Lin Terrace (Grade 3), the Ex-Western Fire Station (Grade 2) and the Senior Staff Quarters and Workmen’s Quarters of Elliot Pumping Station and Filters (Grade 2 and 3 respectively).