



Yuen Tun Chung Old Houses Museum

Introduction

Established in 1952, the Civil Aid Service (CAS) is a volunteer emergency organisation which has served Hong Kong for more than seventy years. It offers assistance in natural disasters, emergency incidents, and provides non-emergency community services during peacetimes to the Government and citizens of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Its vision is to be an outstanding auxiliary force in Hong Kong, providing civil support services on the occasion of any emergency, while at the same time helping nurture and develop future leaders and responsible citizens in both Adult Service and Cadet Corps.

Since 1973, the historic site of Yuen Tun Tsuen in Tsing Lung Tau, Tsuen Wan, was allocated to the CAS for use as a training campsite named Yuen Tun Camp. Built in about the 1780s, the Former Chung Ancestral Hall and the adjoining Chung Old Houses on two sides have been adaptively reused as a folk museum since 1981, they were confirmed Grade 3 by the Antiquities Advisory Board in 2010.



Aerial photo of Yuen Tun Tsuen and farmlands in 1963
Source: Hong Kong Survey and Mapping Office



Aerial photo of CAS Yuen Tun Camp in 1977
Source: Hong Kong Public Libraries



Villagers planting rice seedlings in a paddy field



Farming was the main source of income for Yuen Tun Tsuen villagers

History of Yuen Tun Tsuen

Yuen Tun, which literally means “round mound”, was one of the upland villages in the New Territories located at an altitude of over 200 metres. It was one of the oldest villages in Tsuen Wan where 9 generations of the Chungs had settled. It was said that its population reached around 300. Yuen Tun Village was established by the Hakka Chungs in the 1780s who originated from Tieluba of Changle City, Wuhua District, Guangdong province. Chung Chun-lam is the founding ancestor. He was the second of a family of five brothers and the only one who came to Hong Kong. One of his sons, Ting-choi, later branched out to set up a village called Tsing Lung Tau Village further south of Yuen Tun Village, close to the seashore. The exact reason for the split is no longer remembered, but it was probably because the villagers of Yuen Tun were fishermen as well as farmers and it was more convenient to earn a living to live beside the sea instead of in the hills.

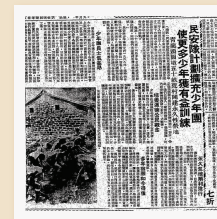
The livelihood of the villagers was based on padi farming in front of and around Yuen Tun village where most families had scattered land holdings, as is usual all over the New Territories. They practised semi-subsistence farming aided by cash crops and miscellaneous employment. They were heavily dependent for their livelihood upon two rice crops harvested in July and October. They also fished, using small boats to catch fish and shrimps, and manned stake nets along the nearby coastline. In addition, the village women collected firewood and grass which was sold to boat people and others at Tsing Lung Tau.

Tai Lam Chung Reservoir was constructed from 1951-59 to the northwest of Yuen Tun. Two of its tunnels associated with the reservoir scheme ran below the village fields of Yuen Tun and one way or another the large amount of water needed to irrigate the fields was no longer available. Many of the fields became drylands and farming was impossible. It led to the decline in the yield of the fields of the village. Complaints were made to the Tsuen Wan District Office by the villagers of Yuen Tun. Over several years assistance was given with rice distribution to the villagers to offset the shortfall in crop yield attributed to the tunnels. For example, in the second half of 1956 farmers could not even plant rice seedlings and no harvest would be anticipated in October, District Office thus provided 11,186 kg rice as drought alleviation to 19 households, rationed according to the size of the paddy fields.

In 1964, only one-thirds of the fields could be farmed. As the situation of drylands persisted and the problem could not be reconciled, villagers of Yuen Tun expressed the wish to relocate the village to Tsing Lung Tau in the midst of the development of a new town in Tsuen Wan. The government eventually resettled the Chungs to a piece of land north of Tsing Lung Tau to establish their new village in 1972. Since then, the number of villagers cultivating land gradually decreased as most of them opted to work in the urban areas such as Tsuen Wan and Kowloon.

The old village with an area of 50 acres was then allocated to CAS for the development of the Yuen Tun Camp which officially opened in 1973. The targeted users were college teenagers that would become the back-up volunteering power to CAS. It was hoped that the Camp could provide more disciplinary service training and outdoor activities such as leadership, countryside protection, rescue, first-aid, orienteering etc. Besides, the rural setting could allow teenagers living in dense community settings to have proper channels to vent their surplus energy.

After the CAS's adoption, some of the old buildings in Yuen Tun were demolished. Four detached groups of village houses have been preserved and restored for reuse. The row of retained village houses forming the biggest mass was rehabilitated for use as a folk museum which has operated till now.



Wah Kiu Yat Po (1974-08-05)



Wah Kiu Yat Po (1971-06-08)

From Yuen Tun Tsuen to Yuen Tun Camp

In the 1970s, the Yuen Tun Camp development project was coordinated by the New Territories Training Section of CAS and Tsuen Wan District Office, and was contracted to different units within CAS in the form of “working camps”. The team members work like engineering soldiers. They not only trained cooperation, physical fitness and discipline, but also developed the camp.

A team member recalled that when the Kowloon Rescue Team went to Yuen Tun Camp for training in those years, they had to clean up the collapsed village houses. The team members had to use their dilapidated house search and rescue skills to remove every element of the dilapidated houses, as well as the pigsties and sheep sheds next to the houses. The ruins and tiles were then transported away and used to fill in the low-lying areas within the camp. With collaborative effort of CAS teams and subsequent repairs by skilled craftsmen, the environment of the historic village was beautified, and some abandoned houses were restored to their original appearance. The row of village houses in front of the village has been converted into offices, while the houses in the back row have been converted into a folk museum, allowing the moments of history to be displayed. The farm tools and furniture, cooking utensils and tableware displayed in the house were carefully procured from other villages in the New Territories.

Under the coordination of the CAS headquarters, and with the assistance of other Government departments and the Jockey Club Charity Fund, Yuen Tun Camp has been carefully managed by generations of team members, rendering it the best choice for young members to experience outdoor training.



Wah Kiu Yat Po (1980-04-08)



Demolition and restoration of village houses by CAS members in the 1970s



Former Chung Ancestral Hall and Two Chung Old Houses

Now a folk museum housing the old village furniture, cooking and daily use utensils and farming implements to demonstrate the agricultural life of the Chungs, the restored houses is a Qing vernacular building compound of particular interest exhibiting the features of Hakka houses. They include one row of village houses constructed to a distinct architectural morphology which is rectangular in plan. Composed of three interconnected houses, the Former Chung Ancestral Hall called Lai Leung Tong with a hall bay sandwiched between one bay of side room on its left and right (a total of three bays) forms the central part. The ancestral hall was however moved to a separate village house at the back. From the ancestral hall there is a corridor connecting two Chung Old Houses each on its sides. Each of the old houses has a hall bay flanked by one bay of side chambers either on its left or right (two bays each). As a result, a total of seven bays collectively forming a symmetrical plan are found.

As a two-hall architecture, the main hall of the hall bay is normally used as the living room of the family. A cockloft is above the living room for use as a bedroom. A cockloft is provided above the side room also used as a bedroom. The front chamber on the left of the middle hall bay was used as a kitchen of the old house with a cooking stove and a chimney. A bathroom is provided on the left of the entrance hall and the front chamber of the side room bay. Each of the three hall bays has an open courtyard between the entrance and main halls which introduces natural lighting to the interior. As it also receives rainwater, the courtyard is slightly sunken and equipped with an outlet so rainwater can be drained away.

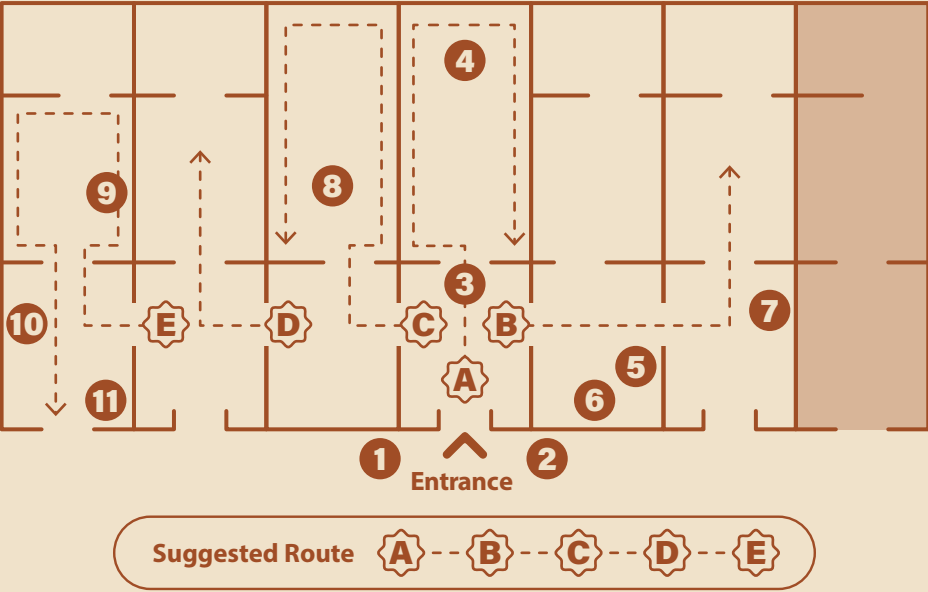
The design and workmanship of the row houses are good and the block has a very pleasing appearance. Their walls were constructed of grey bricks with a bond of seven courses of stretchers to one course of headers. The walls are also responsible for supporting its pitched roofs of timber rafters, purlins and clay tiles. The entire house has a common roof at the back for the four side rooms and three main halls. Most of the walls are fair-faced and only parts of them are plastered and painted white.

The three entrance halls have recessed entrances. Such design rhythm does not only indicate the locations of the entrance halls, but also advises the concerns on the defence quality of the entrances. Wall murals with plants and birds, for example, orchids, bamboo, peony, chrysanthemum, pomegranate, mandarin ducks and magpie, etc. are found under the front eaves. The main ridge of the entrance hall at the middle bay is a bogu ridge composed of the geometric expression of curling dragons in red at the two ends, juxtaposed with auspicious animals and bergamots, etc., plus a peach at middle. They do not only provide decorations and colours to the monotonous facades, their implied meanings also represent the villagers' blessings on their future and generations to come, for example, good fortune, longevity, many offsprings, etc. It is interesting to note that no window openings can be found on the front and side facades suggesting the internal-looking and defensive design of the compound. Besides, all the bays have their own entrances except the two side room bays of the former ancestral hall, facilitating the daily living and farming operations and providing efficient access to the flat area at the front (usually used for drying of crops).

The historical buildings were confirmed Grade 3 by the Antiquities Advisory Board in 2010.



Floor Plan



1 Bogu ridge

Roof ridge decorated with geometrically patterned Kui dragons at both ends of the ridge. Kui, a strange animal in ancient legends, looks like a dragon and has one leg.



2 Auspicious motifs

Some plants and animals symbolize special meanings due to their qualities, pronunciation, etc. For examples: Bergamot = Lots of blessings, Magpie = Double happiness, Mandarin ducks = Love, devotion and fidelity. Therefore, they are painted on the murals or made into decorative plaster reliefs and fixed on the ridge.



3 Courtyard

The Former Chung Ancestral Hall was established at the middle bay of the row house. It is a two-hall architecture with a courtyard for natural lighting in the middle.



4 Altar

It is the only bay where the original altar can be found and does not have a cockloft.



5 Big stove

The kitchen area is characterized by the big stove with a chimney stack channelling smoke to the roof.



6 Hakka wedding cage

Besides the rice bowls, past wedding items such as gift boxes and Hakka wedding cage can also be found. The cage was used to hold a cock and a hen as betrothal gifts.



7 Ant-proof Jar

One of the examples which can demonstrate the traditional wisdom of Hakka people is ant-proof jar. It was used to store food. Villagers placed the food inside the jar, had it covered, and poured water into the trough at the fringe of the cover. As such, insects like ants could not enter the jar and damage the food.



8 Grass Hook

The tiny timber gadgets that were used to tie collected fallen branches for sale.



9 Foot operated masher

Mounted on the ground is a foot operated masher employing the lever principle. Villagers only need to step on one end of the mechanical device and can easily mash and mix some hard ingredients and crops without spending much effort.



10 Winnowing machine

Using wind, the winnowing machine near the entrance separates the heavier grain from the lighter husks and can also remove weevils or other pests from the stored grain, replacing hands. It is another example which proves the use of machines in farming.



11 Bathroom

On the left of the entrance hall and the front chamber of the side room bay is a bathroom which is separated from the remaining area by a grey brick wall not reaching the roof.

Exhibit Highlights



Hakka wedding cage

The kitchen area is characterised by the big stove with a chimney stack channelling smoke to the roof. Besides the rice bowls, past wedding items such as gift boxes and Hakka wedding cage can also be found. The cage was used to hold a cock and a hen as betrothal gifts.



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