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Saving Hong Kong Disappearing Village Heritage

Man Kwan Julia LAU & Kwai Shun Mirage CHOW

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ABSTRACT

Fu Tei Au Village (FTAV) is located in the northern part of New Territories, a suburban region of Hong Kong (HK). This area is incorporated into the "Northern Metropolis" (NM) initiative, a comprehensive development plan announced by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 2020. FTAV possesses historical significance, particularly due to its red bricks inscribed with the KCR (Kowloon Canton Railway) lettering, indicative of its past ownership by the Kowloon Canton Railway Brick Company. Additionally, FTAV holds considerable ecological importance, showcasing a rich biodiversity. Notably, it is home to a remarkable habitat of fireflies, exhibiting a striking fluorescent green bioluminescence. However, due to the unfortunate inability to secure further funding from the relevant governmental authorities for ongoing research, there are concerns regarding the potential loss of this unique ecological site amid conservation efforts. Therefore, it is imperative to document and raise awareness about FTAV at this juncture.

1. Introduction

HK was ceded to Britain in 1842 through the Treaty of Nanking, which ended the First Opium War. Initially it encompassed the area of the island itself. Then in 1860, Kowloon, was ceded to Britain after the Second Opium War through the Convention of Peking.

North of Kowloon is the New Territories (NT), which was leased to Britain for 99 years in 1898 under the Second Convention of Peking. The lease for the New Territories expired at the end of June 1997, and the sovereignty was returned to China on 1 July 1997 together with HK Island and Kowloon. (Fig. 1 Fig. 2 & Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 Map of Hong Kong



Fig. 2 Conceptual Boundary of the Northern Metropolis (NM) Plan

FTAV was initially part of the "Fanling North New Development Area" (FLN NDA) "Preliminary Outline Development Plan" (PODP) around 2009; it was then zoned for "Government" use, "Other Specified Uses - Port Back Up" use, and "Open Space". (Fig. 3)

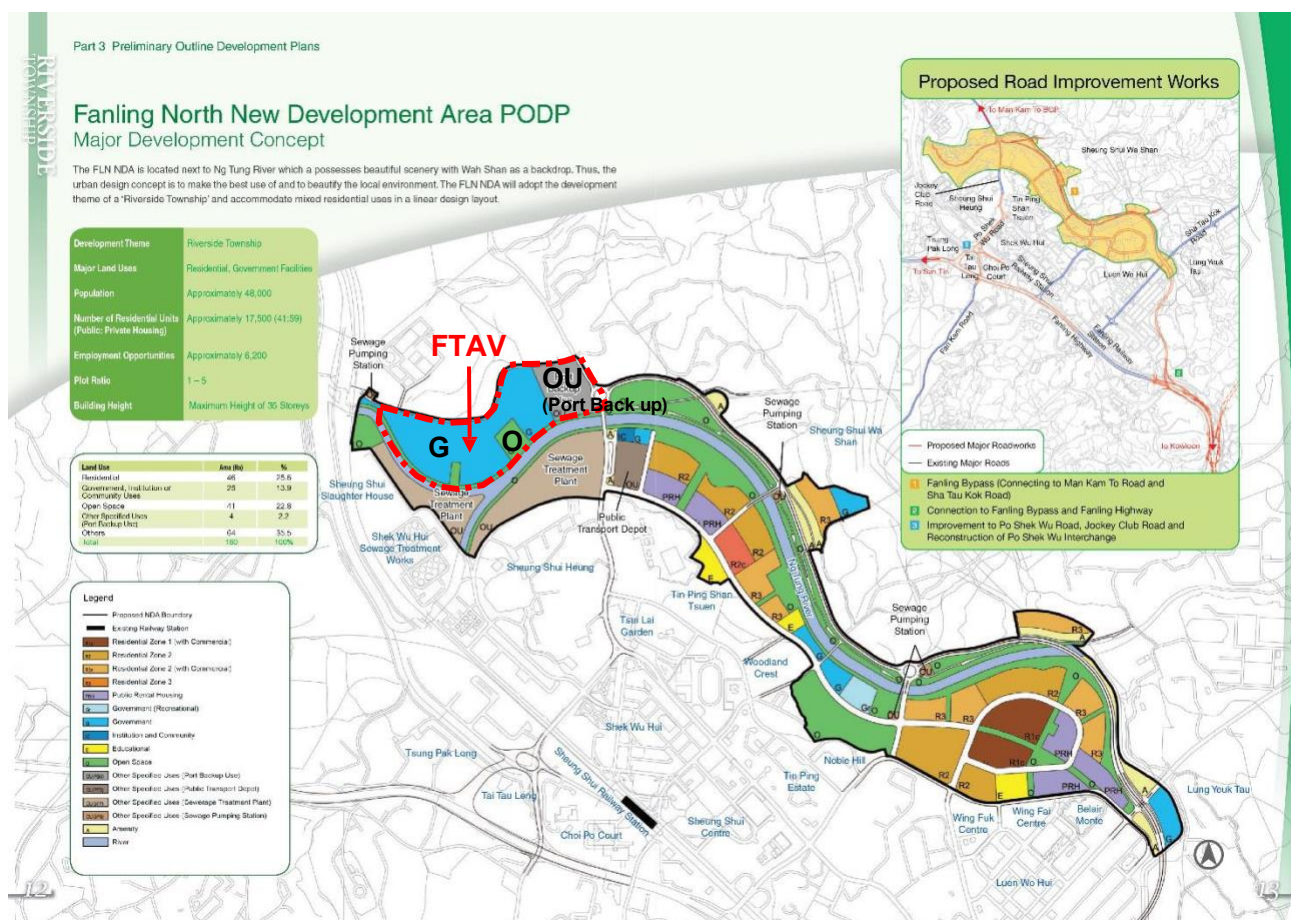


Fig. 3 Fanling North New Development Area PODP

In 2012, it was gradually changed to more "agricultural use"(AGR), retaining a small area of "conservation area"(CA), and reducing the "Government use (G) for Police Driving and Traffic Training Couple & Weapons Training Division". (Fig. 5)

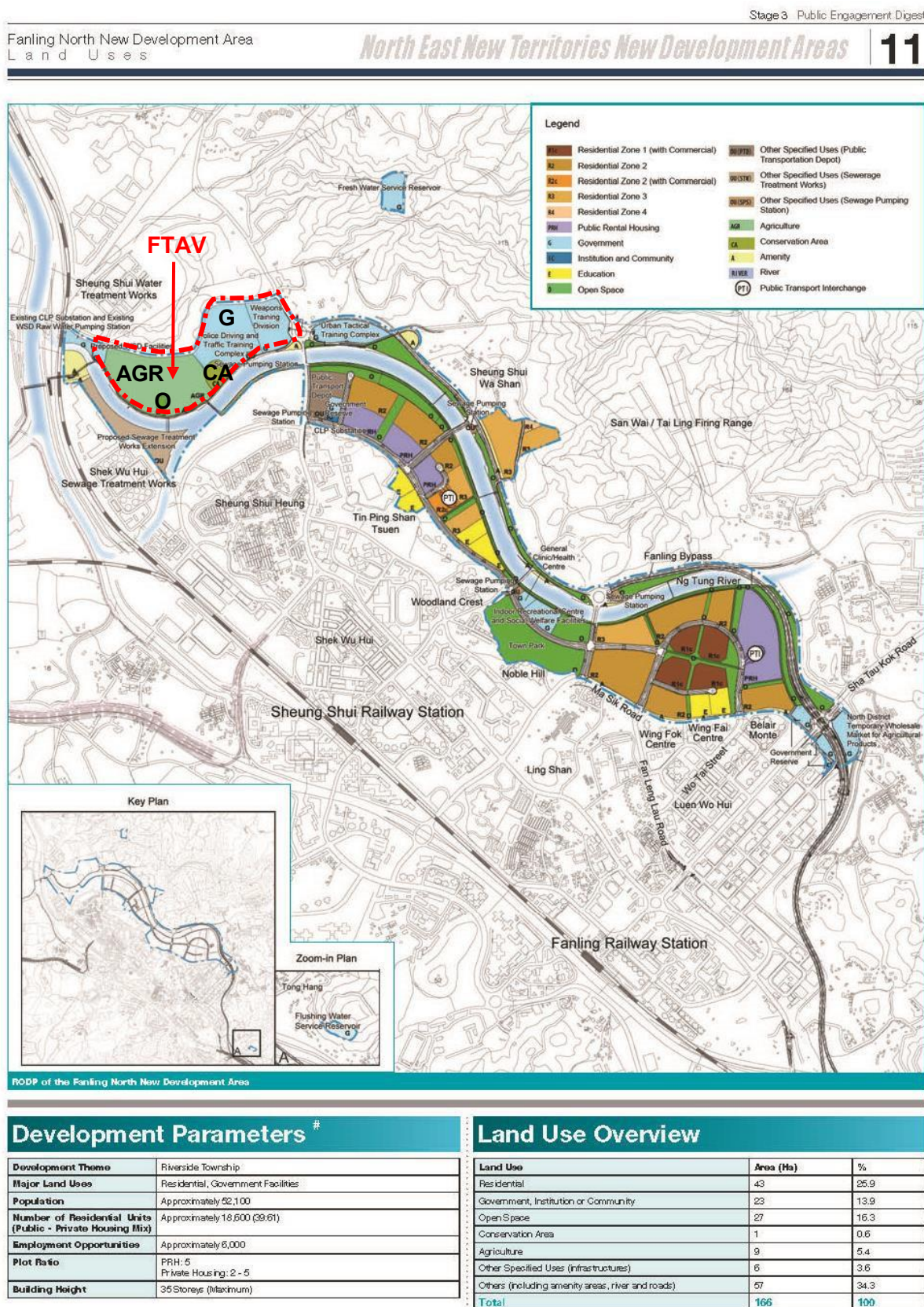


Fig. 4 Fanling North New Development Area Land Uses

In 2013, it was gradually changed to more "agricultural use"(AGR), retaining a small area of "conservation area"(CA), and further reducing the "Government use (G) for Police Driving and Traffic Training Complex". (Fig. 5)

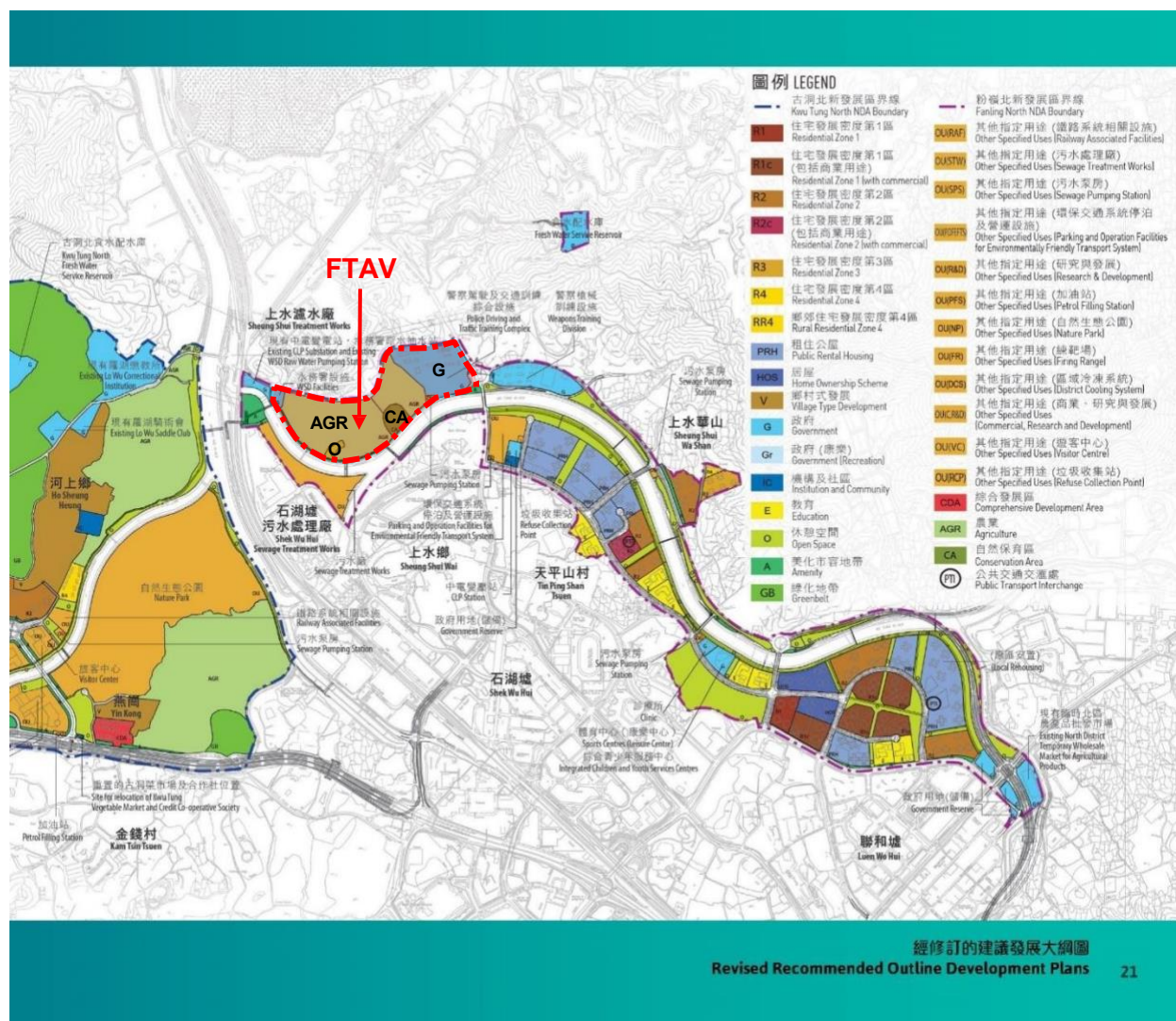


Fig. 5 Revised Recommended Outline Development Plans (2013)

The latest uses as at September 2023 under the gazetted Fanling North OZP proposed for FTAV are - agriculture, conservation area, other specified uses (Logistics Facility) and some utilities facilities such as sewage pumping station. (Fig. 6)

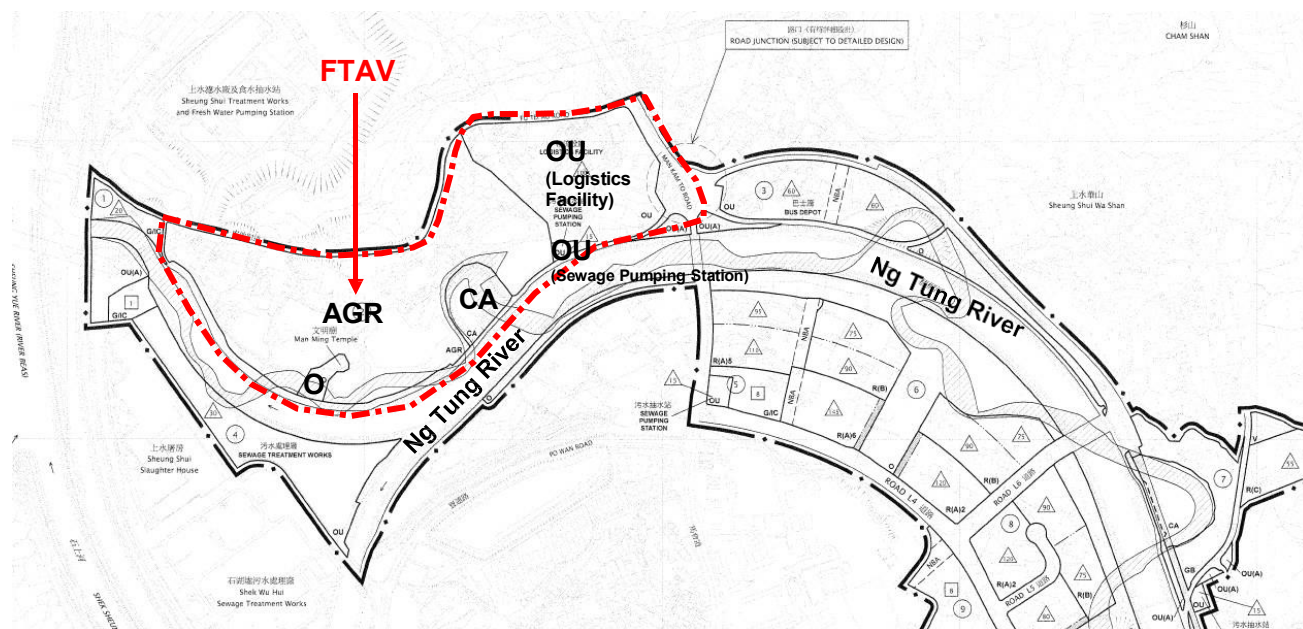


Fig. 6 Extract of Fanling North Outline Zoning Plan (S/FLN/4 gazetted on 29/09/2023)

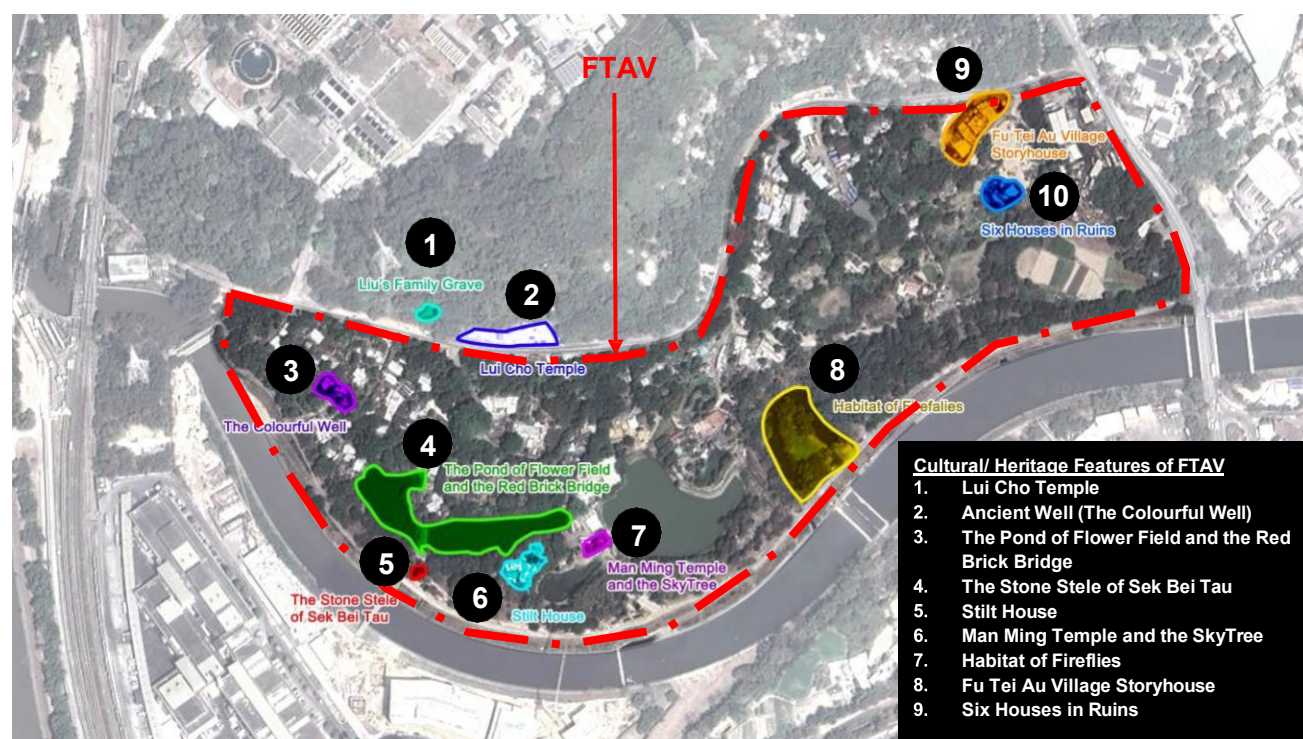


Fig. 7 Location of Cultural/ Heritage Features of Fu Tei Au Village

We would like to record the heritage of this village in case some of these might disappear soon, likely the "Six Houses in Ruins" which shows traces of traditional domestic Hakka house typology, and some made of red bricks bearing the "KCR" logo fired on the brick. The location of these ruins was zoned for "G" (Government) use for development.

2. Methodology

This is conducted through site visits & interview with villages representatives.

2.1 *Fu Tei Au Village*

Fu Tei Au Village (FTAV) is located in the lowland area at the foot of the Fu Tei Mountain. The village's name derives from its geographic location, as "Fu" means "Tiger" in Cantonese, "Tei" means "land", and "Au" refers to the lowland area between two high mountain ranges. Tigers presence were documented in Qing Dynasty records noting wild tigers in the region. (Fig.) The "Jiaqing Edition of the Xin'an County Gazetteer" describes tigers as formidable creatures and recounts incidents of tiger attacks. In 1915, near "Lung Yeuk Tau", a real tiger was hunted down, possibly leading to the village's name of "tiger land" or "Fu Tei". At the foot of the Fu Tei Mountain is Ng Tung River (NTR). The village's name, "Fu Tei Au," reflects both its geographical features and linguistic influences from the Hakka community.



Fig. 8 Tiger was found in Fu Tei Area

The earliest known inhabitants of FTAV were members of the Liu clan, with the oldest recorded family grave dating back to 1868, over 156 years ago. The Liu clan's ancestors can be traced back to the tenth year of the Yuan Dynasty (1350), indicating a long history in the region. However, under the then prevailing government administration, the village is considered a squatter settlement, as the residents are not recognized as indigenous villagers.

The fertile land and abundant water resources of the NTR, previously known as the "River of the Phoenix" and later the "River Indus" (named by an Indian surveyor during the British colonial era), have attracted settlement and agricultural activities in FTAV. Rice cultivation was the primary agricultural pursuit in the past. The availability of water resources also enabled fish farming, with villagers breeding ornamental fish for sale to Southeast Asia and local markets.

Unfortunately, the village's proximity to the NTR has also exposed it to environmental challenges. The river attracted polluting industries, such as tanneries, which, coupled with a severe drought in 1963, led to significant pollution and degradation of the water resources. This, in turn, prompted many young villagers to seek opportunities elsewhere, while their parents remained in the village, engaging in alternative livelihoods like poultry farming and fruit tree cultivation.

Over time, the village's population composition changed, with immigrants from mainland China, particularly those of Chaozhou descent, joining the original Liu clan, who associated themselves with

the Hakka community. Despite the challenges, the village has maintained a tight-knit community, with residents committed to maintaining a safe and supportive neighborhood.

The NTR is prone to flooding, and the village has a long history of improvement projects dating back to the Qing Dynasty, as evidenced by a stone stele – "Sek Bei Tau" – which records several dam reconstruction efforts in 1954, 1956, and 1957. (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 A stone stele - "Sek Bei Tau"

The area of study has undergone significant environmental modifications over the past several decades. In 1967, a pumping station was constructed, followed by a "river regulation project" in 2002 that involved the channeling and diversion of water to the Tai Lam Chung Reservoir and Plover Cove Reservoir for storage purposes. Additionally, a stone stele was relocated to the "Pond of Flower Field and the Red Brick Bridge" in 2000.

The "Red Brick Bridge" is an arched structure made using materials from the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR), designed to maintain a balanced water level on both sides of the adjacent pond. This pond has existed since the early 20th century and is believed to have originated as a result of the extraction of high-quality mud and clay by a local brick company, whose laborers established an excavation and manufacturing site in the area to produce bricks for the KCR.

After the closure of the brick factory, the man-made depressions left behind eventually evolved into a natural rainwater reserve and a buffer zone adjacent to the flood-prone Ng Tung River. During the 1970s and 1980s, some villagers utilized the pond area for fish farming, but this activity was later abandoned due to excessive pollution, which has since been addressed.

Despite these anthropogenic changes, the area has maintained a rich ecological diversity. The low-lying valley conditions and the presence of the Ng Tung River have provided a favorable habitat for a variety of flora and fauna, including fireflies, migratory birds, butterflies, and dragonflies. The pond itself has presented opportunities for increased biodiversity, attracting migratory birds to roost during the winter months. The villagers have also cultivated different types of plants, which have benefited the survival of various insects and provided natural food sources for the migratory birds. (Fig.).

Over time, the pond has become overgrown with water hyacinths, which have attracted visitors to observe the seasonal floral displays from approximately May to October.



Fig. 10 Fish Pond, Flowers & fireflies

In addition to the historical agricultural and poultry farming practices in the pre-war era (prior to 1945), the study area also exhibits traces of the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) brick manufacturing industry. Specifically, the Luo Wu Brick Factory established a facility in Fu Tei Au Village in 1923. According to the recollections of local villagers, the remaining ruins are believed to have been part of the manufacturing site operated by the Luo Wu Brick Company.

It is postulated that the factory workers would have excavated rocks and minerals from the surrounding area and transported them to the rock-breaking machines, the foundations of which can still be observed today (Fig. 11) After the kiln operations ceased in 1939, the machines and equipment were dismantled and sold, leaving only the structural ruins as a remnant of the historical industrial activities in the region.



Fig. 11 Traces of “KCR” bricks

Beyond the agricultural and industrial heritage, the study area also exhibits remnants of British corporate influence. Specifically, several concrete light poles bearing the logos of the General Electric Company (GEC), a prominent British multinational conglomerate that once dominated the electronics, communications, and engineering sectors, can still be observed throughout the FTAV area.

According to the oral history accounts provided by Mr. Wu Ren-bo, the son of a local immigrant, his father had purchased a row of eight "green brick" houses, indicating that the area had been populated and developed several centuries ago. During the Japanese invasion in 1941, three of these eight green brick houses were demolished by the invading forces.

The remaining six houses in a state of ruin are believed to be tangible evidence of the aftermath of the Japanese occupation and the destruction wrought during World War II. It is reported that when the British army attempted to impede the Japanese advance by blowing up the "Red Bridge" connecting Fu Tei Au and the Sheung Shui town center, the Japanese troops subsequently dismantled the surrounding houses, utilizing the building materials to construct makeshift crossings over the destroyed bridge.

Due to the lack of original building materials, the local residents have resorted to employing various ad-hoc methods to repair the damaged houses, including the use of cheap metal sheets and the repurposing of the distinctive red Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) bricks, resulting in a patchwork aesthetic.

The vulnerability of FTA and NTR being prone to flooding has also influenced the architectural adaptations of the local dwellings. Residents have constructed elevated thresholds and even built stilt houses, reminiscent of the flood-mitigation strategies employed in the Tai O community, to protect their homes from the rising waters.

Beyond the domestic structures, the study area also features the remnants of the Man Ming Temple, a religious complex constructed by the Liu clan in 1924. This temple, which housed deities associated with the Imperial Civil Service Examination, was complemented by a now-demolished hexagonal pagoda. Despite its historical and cultural significance, the temple has fallen into disrepair, with the 2018 typhoon and the encroachment of a Banyan tree contributing to its deterioration, leading to its downgrading on the Antiquities Advisory Board's heritage list in 2010. (Fig. 12)

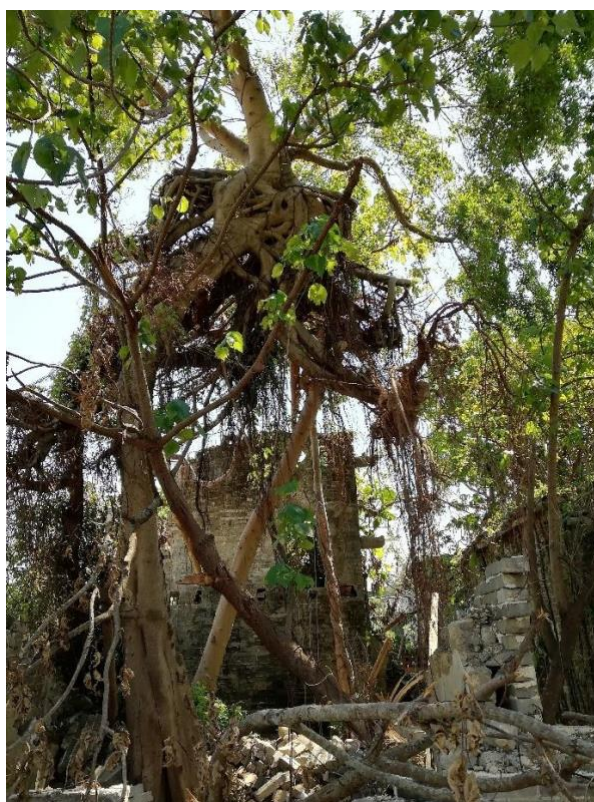


Fig. 7 Photo of Banyan tree

The Man Ming Temple is a rare three-bay structured temple located in Hong Kong. It is believed that only more affluent families could afford to construct this type of temple in the past. The structure consists of three main components: an entrance hall leading to an open courtyard, which then connects to the main hall where the altars of the deities are enshrined, and a rear chamber that was likely used for storage purposes. The corridors on both sides of the temple are roofless, allowing natural light and ventilation to permeate the building and providing direct access to the rear chamber.

The temple is constructed with green bricks, and its pitched roof is supported by timber rafters and covered in clay tiles. Two Chinese characters spelling "Man Ming" are carved onto a granite plaque displayed above the entrance, while intricate moldings of flowers and dragons adorn the walls as ornamental elements.

In 1967, a group of 11 members from the Chaozhou/Chiu Chow clan gathered to plan the hosting of the Yulan Festival, also known as the Hungry Ghost Festival. They raised funds to establish the Lui Cho Temple, identifying the deity Lui Cho as the one to bestow blessings upon the FTA (Fu Tei Au)

Village. The primary objective of the Yulan Festival is to pay respect to the souls of the deceased, particularly those who did not make it across the Shenzhen border. The festival includes traditional opera performances for both the dead and the living, as well as a communal dinner in the evening, which is an intangible cultural heritage. A distinctive feature of the Yu Lan Festival in Fu Tei Au is its innovative representation of the King of Ghosts, believed to maintain order among the spirits during Ghost Month. To honor the demographic diversity of the residents, villagers have agreed to alternate the representation of the Ghost King's effigy each year. Each effigy was characterized by a distinct facial color, representing different cultural origins: red for Hakka, blue for Chaozhou, white for Dongguan, and green for Fujian. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8 Effigies of Yu Lan Festival in Fu Tei Au

The old well, allegedly constructed around 1923 by workers from the Lo Wu Brick Company temporarily resided in Fu Tei Au during the early 20th century. In 2016, the residents were able to obtain funding to repair the "colored ancient well" (Fig.) and establish a story hall. However, it is unfortunate that no such funding has been available this year, as Fu Tei Au Village has fallen off the conservation priority list. It is hoped that this 5-meter-deep well will not be demolished as part of the development plans for the Northern Metropolis.



Fig. 14 Coloured ancient well

In the 2010s, the government began planning new development areas (NDAs) in the Northeast New Territories, which includes Fu Tei Au and other nearby villages. In response, the residents of Fu Tei Au Village, Ma Shi Po Village, Shek Wu Sun Village, Tin Ping Shan Village, and others formed the "Fanling North NDA Squatters Concern Group" in 2012 to raise awareness of the cultural heritage and ecological diversity of the region. The residents of Fu Tei Au, in collaboration with the abovesaid concern group have made concerted efforts to preserve the village and compile information on its cultural heritage, inviting various school groups to participate in tours and learn about the local history and environment.

While it is necessary to move forward with development initiatives to provide the necessary infrastructure, facilities, and amenities for a growing city, it is also crucial to respect our history in a broader sense. This includes not only the preservation of the physical structures and architectural features but also the built environment and the cultural elements that comprise the cultural landscape of a place.

It is hoped that individuals like Mr. Liu will be able to find like-minded people to continue the valuable work of preserving the cultural heritage of these communities. This would involve undertaking necessary conservation efforts to document and convey the stories behind the establishment and evolution of the community to future generations. Just as individuals need to preserve their personal histories for the betterment of their living environments, communities must also strive to safeguard their collective histories and cultural identities.

The Fu Tei Au Village (FTAV), despite its relatively small size, holds significant historical significance. However, it is likely that the village will not escape the pressures of urban development and city-building. In such circumstances, it is crucial that the relevant authorities recognize the value of FTAV's cultural heritage and make concerted efforts to treasure, salvage, and conserve as much of it as possible for the benefit of future generations and humanity as a whole.

The delicate balance between progress and preservation is a complex challenge, but it is one that must be addressed with a nuanced and holistic approach. By recognizing the intrinsic worth of cultural heritage sites, like FTAV, and incorporating their preservation into the overall development planning, a more sustainable and inclusive vision for the city's growth can be achieved.

3. Results/Conclusions

3.1 Fu Tei Au Village

The preservation of Fu Tei Au Village's cultural heritage is crucial in maintaining a balanced and holistic approach to urban development in Hong Kong. While progress and modernization are necessary to accommodate the city's growth, it is imperative that the historical significance and unique character of this small, traditional settlement are not overlooked or sacrificed.

The preservation of not just the architectural structures, but the overall built environment and intangible cultural elements, such as local traditions, social dynamics, and community narratives, is essential. This comprehensive approach to heritage conservation can help ensure that the essence and identity of Fu Tei Au Village are not lost amidst the rapid changes occurring in the surrounding areas.

The work of individuals like Mr. Liu, who have dedicated themselves to documenting and advocating for the preservation of the village's stories and heritage, is commendable. However, the long-term

sustainability of these efforts will require the involvement and support of a wider network of like-minded collaborators, including heritage experts, local authorities, and community members. By working together to safeguard the cultural assets of Fu Tei Au Village, they can pave the way for a more inclusive and respectful approach to urban development that benefits both present and future generations.

Limitations of the current research on Fu Tei Au Village include the reliance on limited secondary sources and the potential for gaps in the available historical documentation. Additionally, the lack of direct engagement with the current residents and their perspectives could limit the understanding of the village's contemporary sociocultural dynamics and the specific challenges they face in preserving their heritage.

The implications of this research extend beyond the specific case of Fu Tei Au Village, serving as a broader call for the recognition and preservation of Hong Kong's diverse cultural landscapes. As the city continues to evolve, it is crucial that the authorities and urban planners adopt a more nuanced and inclusive approach to development, one that acknowledges and respects the historical significance and unique identities of local communities.

Future research should aim to expand the knowledge base by incorporating primary sources, such as oral histories, archival materials, and in-depth interviews with residents and community leaders. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the village's past, present, and the aspirations of its people. Additionally, collaborative efforts between researchers, heritage professionals, and the local community could help develop innovative and sustainable strategies for the long-term preservation of Fu Tei Au Village's cultural assets.

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