

Renaissance in Yim Tin Tsai

Catholic traditions and salt-making history define Hakka village

by Esther Chan, Total Lam, Donna Shiu and Mavis Wong



The moment visitors step off the boat at Yim Tin Tsai, they are immediately greeted by the sight of a giant sea-facing camphor tree. The majestic tree is luxuriant with green leaves, yet surprisingly, it is hollow. "This represents our village: full of vitality but with no people living here," says Nicholas Chan Tze-leung, chairman of Salt and Light Preservation Centre Limited, who launched the plan to restore and revive the village.

Chan was born in Yim Tin Tsai in the 1940s and moved out in the 1970s. It used to be an energetic Hakka village whose inhabitants were mostly Catholic. At its peak, there were around 1,200 inhabitants who led a self-sufficient life through salt-making, farming and fishing.

Yim Tin Tsai is only a 15-minute ferry ride away from the Sai Kung Public Pier. But despite its high accessibility for an outlying island, the

villagers had all moved out by the mid-1990s due to a lack of job opportunities and resources.

All that could soon change. A few years ago a number of the villagers decided to revitalise this 300 year-old village and restoring the salt pans is an indispensable aspect of the project.

"Yim Tin" means "salt pan" in Cantonese, while "Tsai" means neighbourhood. As its name suggests, Yim Tin Tsai was a village known for salt

production but the practice has been forgotten for generations. The plan to re-start production was given a boost when Salt and Light Preservation Centre Limited, a registered charitable organisation set up by a committee of villagers, raised HK\$60 million for a restoration project last year.

As the salt production business started to diminish in Hong Kong around 100 years ago, village representatives had to travel to places like

Singapore and Taiwan to acquire new knowledge about salt production. Armed with the knowledge, villagers hope they can get production going again. However, there is still a question mark over whether the salt produced will be safe for consumption. "The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department [will have to] test its quality. We have to go through a lot of procedures in order to meet the standards. For now, even if we could produce salt, we





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wouldn't encourage eating it," Chan says.

"Salt of the earth" is a saying derived from the Bible to describe good, worthy people. It carries great resonance in a Catholic village that used to make its living from salt pans. Apart from the salt pans, one of the treasures of Yim Tin Tsai is St Joseph's Chapel. This small late 19th-century chapel was able to hold all the villagers for services and ceremonies. Even today, many return to

the chapel for feast days in January and May, a requiem mass in November and for Christmas mass.

In Yim Tin Tsai, it seems Hakka culture and Catholicism blended to form a village culture based on the values of hard work and simple, frugal living.

Since the restoration project started, the vicar-general of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, the Reverend Dominic Chan Chi-ming, has been intimately

involved in helping with the revival. Chan's father was a local villager in Yim Tin Tsai and his mother was from another Hakka village. Chan's parents lived in the village for many years before they moved to the city and although Chan has never actually lived there, he cares about its development.

Chan's family house in Yim Tin Tsai has collapsed. All that can be seen at the site now are bricks, rocks and a large cross, a poignant reminder that

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over a century ago before the chapel was built, the parish priest would stay at the house and celebrate mass there. But the building and the significant part it played in village life will not be entirely forgotten because the site is to be turned into an open-air museum with exhibits that recall the island's Catholic past and photos showing its unique history. There are also plans to build a prayer room for visitors on the site. Other former villagers are also devoted to revitalising Yim Tin Tsai, including Colin Chan Chung-yin, the village representative of Yim Tin Tsai.

"Revitalising the whole village, that is my dream. And hoping the old villagers can return and bring the village back to life, that is my motivation," says Chan.

Fifty-year-old Chan spent his childhood in Yim Tin Tsai and studied in the village school, Ching Po School, for a year. The school is a single-storey building with only one classroom.

"This is where I studied. There was one teacher teaching only. The principal was also the janitor," Colin Chan recalls while standing in front

of the blackboard in the classroom. Ching Po School has now been turned into an exhibition centre for displaying everyday objects of Hakka village life. There you will find an antique dressing table, traditional kitchen utensils and old farming tools.

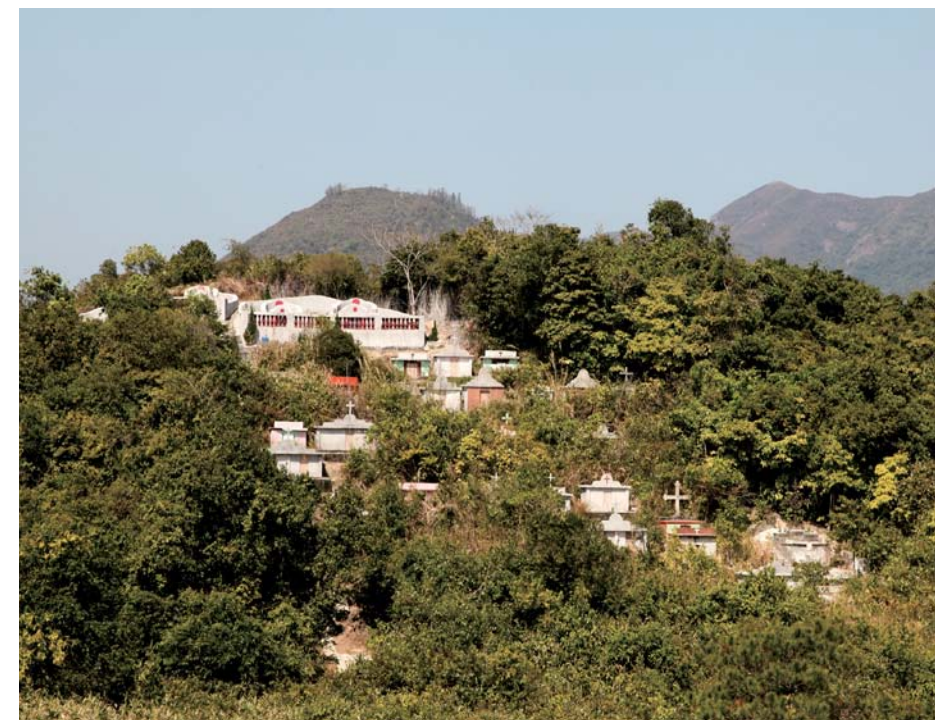
In the hope of attracting more old villagers to return to Yim Tin Tsai, Colin Chan is leading by example. He is preparing to move back to the village.

Throughout the years, Chan has worked hard on the restoration plan. However, his efforts are not appreciated by all. Villagers hold different

views about the plan, some are concerned about the financial returns of the restoration plan. Others question whether it is worthwhile to invest in the project. "Some villagers just want to make money. But we are different, we just want to conserve," Chan sighs.

On the wall behind him, there is a poster with the words: "Sacrifice enjoyment. Enjoy sacrifice." They seem to sum up Chan's predicament and also describe the traditional values of old Yim Tin Tsai. **V**

Edited by Natalie Tsoi





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