

Wellington Chinese Masonic Society Building

23 Frederick Street



Chinese Masonic Society Building.

Image: Charles Collins, 2015

Summary of heritage significance

- Built in 1925, the building has architectural value due to its Inter-War Free-Classical style and incorporation of traditional Hung League designs.
- The building has historical value due to its association with the Chee Kung Tong, a secret society that was originally dedicated to overthrowing the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) in China.
- The building has social value to members of New Zealand's Chinese community.
- The building has architectural authenticity due to its exterior façade having retained a significant amount of its original fabric.

District Plan:	Map 16, reference 123
Legal Description:	Section 231 DP 7326
Heritage Area:	No
HPT Listed:	Not registered
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	Chinese Masonic Building
Key physical dates:	1925
Architect / Builder:	Unknown
Former uses:	Meeting hall
Current uses:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offices • Residential
Earthquake Prone Status:	SR 172777 (124 Served) - expires 29/3/2025

Extent: Cityview 2012.



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The Chinese Masonic Society or Chee Kung Tong was established in 1907. It was the New Zealand branch of the Hung League, an international movement of Chinese patriots, founded in the late 17th century. The movement was devoted to the overthrow of the foreign, Manchurian Qing dynasty, and the restoration of the earlier Ming dynasty. Despite its English title, the Chinese Masonic Society had almost nothing to do with traditional freemasonry. It took on some of the costume and regalia, and it was a benevolent society, but the comparisons ended there. It was a secret society and even today little has been revealed about its day to day activities.

In the late 19th century, when persecution of the society was at its peak in China, many members of the Hung League emigrated to new countries such as America, Australia and New Zealand. They set up branches of the league where they went, with the expectation among members that they would one day return to China. In New Zealand the movement of Chinese to cities led to the formation of political organisations such as the Hung League. It began in Wellington in 1907 and in 1925 it opened its first purpose-built headquarters, in Frederick St, the heart of the city's Chinatown. The official opening, on 10 October, was attended by important Chinese and European guests. The building cost £3000.¹

The decline in the Chee Kung Tong started soon after this, although it was a slow process. Firstly the Kuomintang, a political force not supported by the league, took control of China in 1928. The opposition Nationalist New Zealand Chinese Association gradually became the Chinese community's official representative. When the Communist Government won the civil war in 1949 most Chinese gave up hope of returning to China and came to regard New Zealand as home. This led to a waning of interest in Chinese political affairs and finally, in 1975, the Chee Jung Tong was disbanded. The building was sold in 1982 and the proceeds divided amongst various Chinese community groups.² Since then the building has passed through the hands of several commercial organisations.³ It is now a ground floor office with residential apartments on the first floor.

Currently the ground floor is occupied by Film New Zealand, an agency which supplies information on using New Zealand as a setting to prospective international film makers.⁴

¹ Permit record not located at WCC Archives. Figure taken from the following source.

² Unless otherwise stated this history is taken from Murphy N. and Wong K. 1991, *Kung Tong: The Hung League in New Zealand*. National Library Gallery Catalogue. 1991 Alexander Turnbull Library.

³ Land Title Service, CT 31/209.

⁴ History taken from: Wellington City Council, "Wellington Chinese Masonic Society Building," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*, (Wellington City Council, 2001), FRED 1.



Frederick Street, Te Aro, Wellington. Pascoe, John Dobree, 1908-1972: Photographic albums, prints and negatives. Ref: 1/4-001970-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.



Wellington representatives of Chee Kung Tong. Chung, Doris: Photographs of Chinese groups in Wellington. Ref: 1/2-168568-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

1.2 Timeline of modifications

- 1925 Lodge construction (00055:48:A4515)
- 1947 Earthquake repairs (00056:337:B26110)
- Additions and alterations (00056:341:B26332)
- 1954 Boiler house (00056:487:B36608)
- 1995 Warehouse alterations (00061:166:15309)

1.3 Occupation history

- 1925 Kee Chung Tong society
- 1982 Sold to Gavin Munro Wilson, occupants unknown
- 2012 Film New Zealand

1.4 Architect

The architect for this building remains unknown. Further research is required.

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

Designed in an Inter-War Free-Classical approach the building demonstrates a style which was ebullient and self-confident and expressed society's growing prosperity. The building is extremely similar in style to a Masonic Lodge designed by C. Askew in Victoria, Australia (1929).⁵ The building was constructed along traditional Hung League designs (gates at each elevation) and has similarities with Cantonese architecture.⁶

The building is two storeys high, the main elements on the front facade being a central pair of doors on the ground floor and, above this, a framed panel with the building name in Chinese characters.

The planning of the building is simple, and has been simplified further with recent renovations. The plan of the building is rectangular, with a central entrance way. To either side of the entrance are two small rooms facing the street front, further back from the entrance is a large room that steps up further into another large room, and beyond this a lean-to kitchen bathroom area.⁷

Doors on either side give access to a shallow first floor balcony, while above there is a bracketed cornice and a roof parapet with a central arched motif. The present-day use of the building is offices on the ground floor with an apartment above. The side (west) elevation attests to these new uses with large openings on the ground floor providing access and natural light to the interior.

⁵ Wellington City Council, "30 Arthur Street," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 1995: Non-Residential Buildings*, (Wellington City Council, 1995), F.

⁶ Bret Thurston, 'Conservation plan: the former Wellington Chinese Masonic Society Incorporated Building,' Paper prepared for ARCH 273, Building Heritage Conservation (Victoria University of Wellington, 1999), 1041-06-FRE, Wellington City Council Records.

⁷ Sandra Smillie 'Wellington Chinese Masonic Society Inc,' Heritage Building Interiors Project Interiors Survey.

Little fabric of heritage value remains inside, although two small rooms on either side of the main entrance are intact, as are their steel-framed windows facing Frederick Street.⁸

2.2 Materials

- Unreinforced masonry brick.

2.3 Setting

Frederick Street is lined on both sides with a varied collection of light industrial, commercial and residential buildings of no particular distinction. Along with the former Chinese Mission Hall (40-46 Frederick Street), the former Chinese Masonic Society building, however, stands out in the street as a modest but graceful neo-Classical structure that still reflects the long association of Frederick Street and the surrounding area with Wellington's Chinese community. It has townscape value for its architecture, scale and the interest of the carefully considered Classical decoration.

⁸ Architecture taken from: Wellington City Council, "Wellington Chinese Masonic Society Building," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), FRED 1.

3.0 Criteria for assessing cultural heritage significance

Cultural heritage values

Aesthetic Value:

Architectural: Does the item have architectural or artistic value for characteristics that may include its design, style, era, form, scale, materials, colour, texture, patina of age, quality of space, craftsmanship, smells, and sounds?

This is a building which has been designed in both the Inter-War Free Classical style and along traditional Hung League plans, featuring similarities with traditional Cantonese architecture. The exterior façade features a cement rendered niche with Chinese characters and a pediment which had originally displayed a Masonic symbol (the latter has been removed but the outline is still visible).

Townscape: Does the item have townscape value for the part it plays in defining a space or street; providing visual interest; its role as a landmark; or the contribution it makes to the character and sense of place of Wellington?

This building has townscape value as its Inter-War architectural style stands apart from the surrounding modern structures.

Group: Is the item part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use?

Along with 40-46 Frederick Street (Chinese Mission Hall), the Chinese Masonic Society Building is one of the few buildings that still remain from the former Chinese settlement in Frederick Street.

Historic Value:

Association: Is the item associated with an important person, group, or organisation?

The building is historically associated with the Chee Kung Tong society, a branch of the international Hung League.

Association: Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme, pattern, phase, or activity?

The building is historically associated with the establishment and development of Wellington's Chinese community. It is also associated with international Chinese secret societies which were dedicated to overthrowing the rule of the Qing Dynasty in China.

Scientific Value:

Archaeological: Does the item have archaeological value for its ability to provide scientific information about past human activity?

The building is located in the Central City archaeological site reference NZAA R27/270.

Educational: Does the item have educational value for what it can demonstrate about aspects of the past?

Technological: *Does the item have technological value for its innovative or important construction methods or use of materials?*

Social Value:

Public esteem: *Is the item held in high public esteem?*

Symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual: *Does the item have symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual or other cultural value for the community who has used and continues to use it?*

Since the Chee Kung Tong was a secret society, the building's architecture possibly still contains esoteric symbolism. The building will also have cultural value to Wellington's Chinese community since it is one of only two remaining buildings that are connected with the Chinese settlement in the area of Frederick and Haining Streets.

Identity/Sense of place/Continuity:

*Is the item a focus of community, regional, or national identity?
Does the item contribute to sense of place or continuity?*

The building was once a focus of identity for Wellington's Chinese community.

Sentiment/Connection: *Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?*

Since the Masonic building is one of only two remaining buildings that are connected with the Chinese settlement in the area of Frederick and Haining Streets it will retain sentimental value to the descendents of Wellington's early Chinese settlers.

Level of cultural heritage significance

Rare: *Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?*

The building, along with 40-46 Frederick Street, is a rare surviving example of the buildings which were formerly found on Frederick Street when it was an area of Chinese settlement.

Representative: *Is the item a good example of the class it represents?*

Authentic: *Does the item have authenticity or integrity because it retains significant fabric from the time of its construction or from later periods when important additions or modifications were carried out?*

The north facing façade of the building has retained a significant amount of its original fabric.

Local/Regional/National/International

Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?

The building has local value in its historic role as a focus for Wellington's Chinese community.

4.0 Sources

Gak. Flickr. Accessed 7 August 2012.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/gak/160918621/>.

Murphy N. and Wong K. *Chee Kung Tong: The Hung League in New Zealand*. National Library Gallery Catalogue. 1991 Alexander Turnbull Library.

Smillie, Sandra. 'Wellington Chinese Masonic Society Inc.' Heritage Building Interiors Project Interiors Survey.

Wellington City Council. "Wellington Chinese Masonic Society Building." *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001. FRED 1.

Wellington City Council. "30 Arthur Street." *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 1995: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 1995. F.

Wellington City Council Records

Thurston, Bret. 'Conservation plan: the former Wellington Chinese Masonic Society Incorporated Building.' Paper prepared for ARCH 273, Building Heritage Conservation. Victoria University of Wellington, 1999. 1041-06-FRE. Wellington City Council Records.

"Heritage building - 175-179 Cuba Street". 1997. 1041-06-CUB175. Wellington City Council Records.

CT 31/209. Land Information New Zealand.

5.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory	Y	
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	Y	
WCC Records – building file	Y	
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)		
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
Plan change?		
Heritage Area Report		
Heritage Area Spreadsheet		
Heritage items folder (electronic)		
HPT website	Y	
HPT files		
Conservation Plan	Y	
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

Background research



Maker unknown:[Chinese textile relating to Chee Kung Tong (Chinese Masonic Society)]. Chinese Masonic. [Back. Late 19th or early 20th century].. Chung, Doris 1918- :[Eight silk triangular Hung League - Chinese Masonic Society regimental / ritual flags with Chinese characters painted on the front. 1925-1946]. Ref: F-077-2. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.