

**Historic Building Appraisal  
Ho Tung Gardens  
75 Peak Road, the Peak, Hong Kong**

Ho Tung Gardens was closely associated with Sir Robert Ho Tung (何東) (1862-1956). Affectionately referred to in his old age by the local community as “The Grand Old Man of Hong Kong” (香港大老), Sir Robert Ho Tung is almost the most prominent and distinguished business and community leader in early 20th-century Hong Kong. As one of the first very successful Eurasian businessmen in colonial Hong Kong, he made distinguished successes in his global businesses, as a testimony to the unique role of Hong Kong as a bridge between the East and the West. Well-networked in both the local and overseas communities, he participated actively in local affairs. He served on the boards of influential charitable organisations, including Tung Wah Hospital. He also contributed to the establishment of The Chinese Club, a counterpart to The Hong Kong Club for Chinese community leaders at the time, and was its first Chairman. He was knighted twice by the British monarchy, first in 1915 and then in 1955. He also received honours and decorations from the Governments of China, Portugal, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Annam, from His Holiness Pope Pius XII and from the Order of St. John of Jerusalem.

Sir Robert Ho Tung’s family is one of the most prominent families in Hong Kong and was the first non-Europeans to receive permission from the Hong Kong Government to reside in the Peak area. Many family members have participated actively in the local affairs and charitable work in Hong Kong. They include:

- (a) Lady Clara Ho Tung (何張蓮覺) - wife of Sir Robert Ho Tung; the founder of the first Buddhist school for girls in Hong Kong, 寶覺第一義學; and the founder of the Buddhist temple Tung Lin Kok Yuen 東蓮覺苑<sup>1</sup>;
- (b) Mr. Ho Fook (何福) - brother of Sir Robert Ho Tung, an Unofficial Member of the Legislative Council;
- (c) General Robert Ho Shai-lai (何世禮) - son of Sir Robert Ho Tung;
- (d) Sir Lo Man-kam (羅文錦) - son-in-law of Sir Robert Ho Tung, an

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<sup>1</sup> Tung Lin Kok Yuen is a Grade 1 historic building.

<sup>2</sup> Lady Ho Tung Welfare Centre is a Grade 2 historic building.

Unofficial Member of both the Executive Council and the Legislative Council;

- (e) Mr. Lo Tak-shing (羅德丞) - grandson of Sir Robert Ho Tung, an Unofficial Member of both the Executive Council and the Legislative Council;
- (f) Mr. Robert H.N. Ho (何鴻毅) - grandson of Sir Robert Ho Tung, founder of Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation; and
- (g) Sir Eric Edward Hotung (何鴻章) - grandson of Sir Robert Ho Tung, Ambassador at Large of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

Their community leadership and close involvement in the development of social services in Hong Kong are still evident in many places in Hong Kong, for example –

- (a) Ho Tung Road in Kowloon Tong;
- (b) the Ho Tung Technical School for Girls (now Ho Tung Secondary School) which is one of the first government technical schools for girls in Hong Kong under the initiative of Sir Robert Ho Tung and Lady Clara Ho Tung;
- (c) the Lady Ho Tung Hall of the University of Hong Kong established with the donation of Sir Robert Ho Tung;
- (d) the Buddhist temple Tung Lin Kok Yuen in Happy Valley;
- (e) Po Kok School (寶覺女子中學暨附屬小學, formerly known in Chinese as 寶覺第一義學), the first Buddhist school for girls in Hong Kong;
- (f) Kam Tsin Village Ho Tung School (金錢村何東學校) in Sheung Shui;
- (g) Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Ho Tung Home for the Elderly in Tsz Wan Shan; and
- (h) Lady Ho Tung Welfare Centre<sup>2</sup> in Sheung Shui.

Ho Tung Gardens, also known in Chinese as 曉覺園, is a residential

house with an extensive garden. The name 曉覺 is derived from the names of the couple 何曉生 (alias Sir Robert Ho Tung) and 何張蓮覺 (Lady Clara Ho Tung) (née Cheung) (1875-1938). The site was also known in English as ‘The Falls’ because of the presence of a mountain stream nearby. Palmer & Turner, a well-known local architecture firm, drew up the plans for the main house. The main house was built around 1927 while the ornamental gateway (*pai lou*, 牌樓) at the entrance was completed in 1938. Lady Clara Ho Tung passed away in January 1938, so the gateway might have been built to commemorate her.

Calligraphies of high-ranking Chinese officials of the Qing government such as Zeng Guofan (曾國藩) and Zuo Zongtang (左宗棠) could be found in the garden. As Sir Robert’s family was the first non-Europeans to receive permission from the Hong Kong Government to reside in the Peak area, Ho Tung Gardens (Sir Robert’s house on the Peak) has obvious historical value.

Lady Clara’s daughter Dr Irene Cheng (née Ho) (鄭何艾齡) (1904-2007), recalled that dozens of relatives and friends including those from Tung Lin Kok Yuen at 15 Shan Kwong Road came up to ‘The Falls’ to see her mother or to pray at her bedside during her last days. The house at ‘The Falls’ had a room earmarked for Sir Robert Ho Tung, who spent a few nights there during the period between Lady Clara’s last illness and her funeral when he wanted to be near her and their children. When Lady Clara passed away on 5 January 1938, Sir Robert Ho Tung was there along with the rest of the family.

Before the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong government had used the premises at ‘The Falls’ to house one of its military units. During the Japanese invasion in December 1941, the site received several direct hits. One of the bombs landed right on Lady Clara’s family shrine at the top of the house, another on her bedroom and several elsewhere in the house and on the grounds. After the war, the house underwent several renovations.

The main residence, in Chinese Renaissance style is situated in a large garden, which has pavilions, a pagoda, a tennis court, a swimming pool and a garage. The residence is basically two-storied with painted walls and rectangular windows of various sizes. A square tower with a Chinese tiled roof but resembling an Italianate *campanile* with arched windows and doorway is a striking feature of the main house. Except for the Chinese tiled roofs to the towers, the roof of the main house is flat. The pavilions and the pagoda in the site are reinforced concrete structures with Chinese tiled roofs. The granite gateway was built in 1938, the year in which Lady Clara Ho Tung passed away.

**Architectural Merit**

Ho Tung Gardens is the only remaining residence directly related to Sir Robert Ho Tung in Hong Kong. Sir Robert had several residences: ‘Idlewild’ at No. 8 Seymour Road in Mid-Levels, which he bought in 1899; ‘The Chalêt’ and ‘Dunford’, which were situated below Mount Kellet Road and ‘The Neuk’, which was close by on Aberdeen Road, purchased in 1906. Later on, ‘The Chalêt’ and ‘Dunford’ were sold and replaced with ‘The Falls’, and ‘The Neuk’ was retained as Sir Robert’s residence on the Peak until World War II.

There are only a few buildings in Hong Kong in the Chinese Renaissance style, of which Ho Tung Gardens and King Yin Lei at Stubbs Road are masterpieces.

The social value of Ho Tung Gardens lies in the role it played as a family house of the rich Eurasian businessman and philanthropist Sir Robert Ho Tung. It has strong associations with historic events, phases and activities in Hong Kong as well as connections with famous and historic figures including but not limited to Sir Robert Ho Tung, Lady Clara, and their son Robert Ho Shai-lai (何世禮, 1906-1998) who lived there from 1960s to 1990s.

Ho Tung Gardens is situated in a quiet surrounding on the Peak with residential buildings of a similarly low height and low density. Furthermore, the hill setting, lush greenery and broad views complement this heritage site.

## References

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