

Appraisal of the heritage value of Ho Tung Gardens

Ho Tung Gardens, also known in Chinese as 曉覺園, is a ***Historical Interest*** 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) (1862-1956) 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 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.

Before the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, the military authorities had used the premises at “The Falls” to house one of their units. During the Japanese invasion in December 1941, the site received several direct hits. One of the bombs landed right on the family shrine at the top of the house, another on Lady Clara Ho Tung’s bedroom and several elsewhere in the house and on the grounds. After the war, the house underwent several renovations. However, the setting of the Gardens is well-preserved.

Ho Tung Gardens was closely associated with Sir Robert Ho Tung (何東). 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 was 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.

Many members of his family 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;
- (b) Mr. Ho Fook (何福) - brother of Sir Robert Ho Tung and grandfather of Dr. Stanley Ho (何鴻燊); an unofficial Member of the Legislative Council;
- (c) General Robert Ho Shai-lai (何世禮) - son of Sir Robert Ho Tung; an important historic figure not only in the history of Hong Kong but also in the history of modern China. He passed away in Ho Tung Gardens in 1998;
- (d) Sir Lo Man-kam (羅文錦) - son-in-law of Sir Robert Ho Tung; an 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.

Ho Tung Gardens was a residence of Lady Clara Ho Tung and most of her children from the 1920s to 1938, and his son General Ho

Shai-lai from the 1960s to the 1990s. The land on which Ho Tung Gardens stands was bought by Sir Robert Ho Tung for Lady Clara Ho Tung to set up a new residence on Lady Clara's request. Lady Clara masterminded the building plan, arranged the renovation and lived there until she passed away.

Lady Clara Ho Tung organised important family events in Ho Tung Gardens, such as Christmas and New Year parties, to host her children, grandchildren, relatives and friends. Her 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, 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 kept her and their children company. When Lady Clara Ho Tung passed away on 5 January 1938, Sir Robert Ho Tung was there along with the rest of the family. The funeral of Lady Clara Ho Tung which was held at Ho Tung Gardens was an important family event.

While Ho Tung Gardens was not Sir Robert's main residence, it was Sir Robert's delightful residence and was closely associated with him. For instance, a garden party given by Sir Robert was held in "The Falls" on Wednesday, 6 November 1935, attended as it was by the Vice-President of the United States, Mr. John Nace Garner, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Mr. Joseph W. Byrns, 18 Senators and 24 members of the House of Representatives. In addition to these were a number of Philippine and Hawaiian delegates, and local guests including the American, German, French, Italian and Portuguese Consuls as well as Chinese community leaders such as Mr. T. N. Chau (周埈年) and Hon. Dr. S. W. Tso (曹善允) who swelled the assemblage that crowded the rooms and terraces of "The Falls".

Ho Tung Gardens also played host to many different important guests after it was taken up by Sir Robert's son Ho Shai-lai (何世禮) (1906-1998) who lived there from 1960s to 1990s during the latter part of his life. These guests included, for example, General L. L. Doan (advisor of the China Aid Council) in 1959, Chang Kia-ngau (張嘉璈) (former head of the Bank of China) in 1962, General Albert Wedemeyer

(former Chief of Staff to Chiang Kai-shek) in 1965, Koo Chen-fu (辜振甫) (Chairman of Taiwan Cement Corporation) in 1969, Hau Pei-tsun (郝柏村) (former “President” of the Executive Yuan of Taiwan) in 1993 and George H. W. Bush (former President of the United States; he was the Chief of the United States Liaison Office in the People’s Republic of China at the time of visiting Ho Tung Gardens).

Ho Tung Gardens also symbolizes the rising status of the Chinese community. When the British took over Hong Kong, Chinese subjects were confined to live around Tai Ping Shan area while the ruling Europeans were given the liberty to choose their place for living. In 1888, The European District Reservation Ordinance was enacted to stipulate that no Chinese tenement was allowed to be built in the “European District” which, by law, covered many areas in and around the Mid-Levels and above. Later, as more affluent Chinese built Western-style houses in the Mid-Levels (e.g. Seymour Road and Robinson Road), the British passed a more stringent law, The Peak District Reservation Ordinance (山頂區保留條例) 1904, to keep the Chinese away from The Peak district. Sir Robert Ho Tung was the first non-European to receive permission from the Hong Kong Government to reside in the Peak area. Ho Tung Gardens was also the only building with Chinese architectural elements built in the Peak area at that time.

Ho Tung Gardens is situated in a large garden with three buildings (including the main residence, a servants’ quarter and a garage). The garden has pavilions, a pagoda, a tennis court and a swimming pool. The main residence is basically two-storeyed building, 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 tower, the roof of the other parts 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. Ho Tung Gardens has functioned well for its intended purpose as a private residence since it was built.

Architectural Merit

Ho Tung Gardens exemplifies a mixture of Chinese and Western cultural elements, and thus it gives expression to a unique culture in

Hong Kong, where the East meets and integrates with the West. This type of buildings, named as “Chinese Renaissance architecture” by some architects, was popular in Hong Kong and China during the early 20th century. It represents not only an important page in the history of architecture in China and Hong Kong, but also the vision of China’s first-generation Western-trained modern architects to create an architectural identity for China. These architects developed an architectural language that merged Chinese aesthetics with Western construction techniques. It is an early example, and may be the earliest surviving example, of Chinese Renaissance architecture in Hong Kong. It is also dated to an earlier time than many of the examples found in Mainland China.

Ho Tung Gardens is one of the few remaining examples of a grand house setting within an expansive garden and with dramatic views in the period preceding World War II. Architecturally, the exterior of the main building largely remains intact. The overall layout and setting (整體佈局) comprising the main building and the surrounding garden ground with Chinese pagoda and the ancillary structures is also well preserved. The main building and the garden are inseparable and, indeed, create a memorable designed cultural landscape that has changed and continues to change over time. The garden is more than a character-defining element or feature; it is a major component of the place and inseparable from the main building and its carefully “staged” scenic viewpoints which offer some of the best framed views of the southern part of Hong Kong Island. The containment of the views by nearby and mid-distance hills intensifies the sublimity of the experience, creating a distinctive spirit of place that is quite unique in Hong Kong.

Ho Tung Gardens is the only remaining residence directly related to Sir Robert Ho Tung in Hong Kong and is much valued for its high heritage value. Sir Robert Ho Tung had several residences: “Idlewild” at 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.

***Rarity &
Authenticity***

While Chinese Renaissance architecture became a popular trend in Hong Kong prevalent before World War II, postwar development has reduced such buildings to a small number, and the number of private houses bearing the character is even smaller, thus making every extant house a rare specimen worthy of preservation, regardless of its relative aesthetic quality. Ho Tung Gardens was also the only building with Chinese architectural elements built in the Peak area at that time. Ho Tung Gardens is an example of the buildings with skilful blending of local traditional and western architectural features. It is also a piece of architecture designed by Palmer & Turner, one of the oldest architectural firms which still survives.

Ho Tung Gardens was heavily damaged during World War II and has undergone major alterations. However, changes that do not adversely affect the important character-defining elements are acceptable. Conservation is not about freezing the place at a given point in time. Changes may reflect the accumulated layers of history of the place (for example, the damages made to Ho Tung Gardens during World War II reflect its history of being a base of military operation against the Japanese attack in 1941) and reinforced its designation as a continuing cultural landscape.

As far as the external appearance of the building is concerned, the architecture has maintained its authenticity in terms of the Chinese Renaissance aesthetic character despite alterations and modifications. This is evident in the rebuilt portion of the building that was damaged during World War II, and in the addition of the lift core, in which the same aesthetic character was applied to the exposed lift machine room on the roof.

While the interior has undergone extensive alterations and modifications, the structure of the building, which is essential in maintaining the external form of the architecture, remains unaltered.

Ho Tung Gardens, blending the Chinese and Western architectural elements, not only reflects the cultural characteristics of the Eurasian family, but also gives expression to a unique history, culture and value in Hong Kong, where the East meets and integrates with the West.

***Social Value
& Local
Interest***

Apart from its association with Sir Robert Ho Tung, Ho Tung Gardens is also valued for its associations with Lady Clara Ho Tung, and their son Robert Ho Shai-lai. General Ho Shai-lai is an important historic figure not only in the history of Hong Kong but also in the history of modern China.

The community leadership of the Ho Tung family and their close involvement in the development of social services are still evident in many places in Hong Kong, for example –

- (a) Ho Tung Road in Kowloon Tong;
- (b) 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) 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 in Sheung Shui.

Lady Clara Ho Tung represented one side of the story of the distinguished Sir Robert Ho Tung family and Hong Kong which may have been overlooked but is equally important historically, in at least three aspects. The first is that she set a new role for women who

embraced both traditional Chinese virtues and modern ideas. Apart from championing girls' education, she also promoted the dissemination of Buddhism. Secondly, she championed women's exercise of their free will. By arranging for herself to be married to Sir Robert as an "equal wife" but not a concubine, she pioneered a kind of marriage arrangement that was unheard of in the past. Thirdly, she took her roles not only as wife and mother, but also a great contributor to society. In additions to her pioneering efforts said above, she donated her personal savings to set up an endowment fund for Tung Lin Kok Yuen.

In short, Ho Tung Gardens has strong associations with Sir Robert Ho Tung and his family. Not only was Ho Tung Gardens the site of a number of significant events related to the family took place in Ho Tung Gardens, Ho Tung Gardens was also used as a base of military operation against Japanese attack in 1941. Moreover, an important element of the social value of Ho Tung Gardens lies in the role it played as a Peak residence of Sir Robert Ho Tung who distinguished himself as the only non-European to live on the Peak before World War II. Ho Tung Gardens is regarded as a significant symbol or visual landmark in Hong Kong which is cherished by the Hong Kong people community as social memory and cultural landscape.

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. Ho Tung Gardens together with King Yin Lei (declared monument), Haw Par Mansion (Grade 1 building), S.K.H. St. Mary's Church (Grade 1 building), the Old Block of Holy Spirit Seminary (Grade 1 building), etc, form a diminishing record of the evolutionary development of Chinese Renaissance architecture in Hong Kong. Ho Tung Gardens is also among the cluster of historic sites on the Peak including Gate Lodge of the Governors' Mountain Lodge (declared monument), Peak Café (Grade 2 building) and Peak Tramways Office (Grade 2 building).

Group value

References

Barman, Charles. *Resist to the End: Hong Kong, 1941-1945*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009.

Cheng, Irene. *Clara Ho Tung: A Hong Kong Lady, Her Family and Her Times*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1976.

Cheng, Irene. *Intercultural Reminiscences*. Hong Kong: David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, 1997.

Cody, Jeffrey. *Building in China: Henry K. Murphy's "Adaptive Architecture", 1914-1935*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001. Gittens, Jean. *Behind Barbed Wire*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1982.

DiStefano, Lynne, Lee, Hoyin and Tse, Curry. *An Architectural Appraisal of Ho Tung Gardens*, 2011.

Tse Liu, Frances. *Ho Kom-Tong: A Man for All Seasons*, with contributions by Terese Tse Bartholomew, et al. Hong Kong: Compradore House Ltd., 2003.

Yeo, Florence. *My Memories*. Pennsylvania: Dorrance, 1994.

何文翔：《香港家族史》，香港：明報出版社，1989年。

林零：《專訪何鴻毅》，《明報週刊》，第1782期，香港，2003年1月4日。

鄭宏泰、黃紹倫：《香港大老—何東》，香港：三聯書店(香港)有限公司，2007年。

鄭宏泰、黃紹倫：《香港將軍—何世禮》，香港：三聯書店(香港)有限公司，2008年。

鄭宏泰、黃紹倫：《何家女子：三代婦女傳奇》，香港：三聯書店(香港)有限公司，2010年。

鄭宏泰、黃紹倫：《何東花園文物價值評估報告》，2011年。