

Heritage Appraisal of Race Course Fire Memorial
So Kon Po, Hong Kong

The Race Course Fire Memorial (the Memorial) (馬場先難友紀念碑) was erected in 1922 to pay respect to those who died in the tragic Race Course Fire which broke out on 26 February 1918 (the second day of the annual “Derby Day” races) at the Racecourse (跑馬地馬場). The Memorial, which is situated on the hillside above the present Hong Kong Stadium at So Kon Po (掃桿埔), is the only memorial in Hong Kong dedicated to the victims who died in the disastrous fire at Happy Valley Racecourse.

Historical Interest

The Race Course Fire on 26 February 1918 was one of the worst catastrophes in Hong Kong history, claiming more than 600 lives of various nationalities. After the calamity, the Tung Wah Hospital was prompt to offer assistance and arranged for labourers to collect the dead bodies. Meanwhile, the then Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Francis Henry May, requested that all the bodies should be buried in the same resting place and a suitable large unoccupied site on the other side of Wong Nai Chung (黃泥涌) was chosen, in an area known as Coffee Garden (咖啡園)¹. In March 1918, the then Secretary for Chinese Affairs requested the Tung Wah Hospital to arrange a traditional *jiao* (醮) ceremony to appease the spirits of the victims and this ceremony was held in Happy Valley. The Tung Wah Hospital, under its Chairman, Tong Yat-chuen (唐溢川), then organized an architectural competition for a permanent and suitable monument to be erected close to the burial site and they eventually selected the design from Ho Sheung (何想)². Also, a *fung shui* master, Lee Yiu-chuen (李耀村), provided advice on the orientation of the proposed site. With the benefit of public donations, construction of the Memorial started in 1922. Several memorial plaques were also installed in the Memorial, including an inscription recording the site selection and construction processes of the Memorial. Other memorial plaques

¹ The place is named as Coffee Garden as it was used for planting coffee in 1916.

Source: 夏歷：《香港東區街道故事》，香港：三聯書店（香港）有限公司，1995年，頁145。

² Ho Sheung worked for the Public Works Department.

commemorate those who perished in the calamity.

The Memorial is sited on a steeply sloping area of wooded hillside planted with bamboo groves, which faces northwest in the general direction of Happy Valley Racecourse and is constructed on a series of terraces climbing up the hill.

*Architectural
Merit*

The Memorial comprise two Pavilions on the topmost terrace, then the central Memorial Arch on the next lower terrace and finally a pair of Pagodas built on the lowest terrace. Each terrace is paved with granite slabs and includes balustraded parapets, which is connected by flights of granite steps. The front retaining granite wall which supports the lowest terrace is curved in the traditional shape of a Chinese grave.

Two octagonal Pavilions on the top terrace of the site, are of two-storey construction and supported by eight slender columns of reinforced concrete. The roofs are covered by Chinese green glazed tiles; fixed tables and stools constructed of granite and concrete are placed inside for the benefit of visitors.

The Memorial Arch is constructed of granite columns and beams which form three archways, each with its traditional hipped roof of Chinese green glazed tiles; the ridges are attractively decorated with glazed ceramic ornaments with dragon-fish and celestial pearls. The main central archway is inscribed with the characters “福” (fortune), “祿” (riches) and “壽” (long life). Each bay consists of a Classical Italianate granite niche, containing marble memorial plaques. Below the right-hand side plaque is an Earth God shrine (后土).

A pair of traditional Pagodas is constructed on the next lower terrace; the Pagodas are octagonal with three storeys. The characters, “寶塔” (precious pagoda) are inscribed on their front elevations. The Pagodas have also been constructed for use as furnaces for visitors to burn paper offerings.

The whole composition shows great architectural talent in

cleverly combining both Western Classical as well as traditional Chinese architectural elements.

The Memorial site and structures have received regular repair and maintenance in 1974, 1983 and 1993 respectively, but no major alterations have taken place and it can, therefore, be considered as virtually being in its original condition. Likewise, the immediate wooded surroundings appear not to have changed much since the construction of the Memorial. ***Authenticity***

The Memorial is the only one in Hong Kong commemorating this major Hong Kong disaster. It is also a rare example of a monument site designed in such a skilled manner combining both Chinese and Western elements by a local architect. In addition, its original tranquil and wooded hillside location is retained intact. ***Rarity***

The Memorial is an impressive reminder of a major tragedy in Hong Kong that directly resulted in the improvement of fire safety standards throughout the territory. It also demonstrated the generous and immediate response to such a major disaster relief project from both the public, Tung Wah Hospital and the Government in contributing their resources to taking care of the dead, injured and the affected families. Even at the present day, the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals still pays homage visit to the Memorial during the Ching Ming Festival. ***Social Value & Local Interest***

The Race Course Fire Memorial naturally has a strong historical and social connection with the Happy Valley Racecourse and the nearby Tung Wah Eastern Hospital (東華東院) (Grade 2). The Memorial is also situated close to some graded historic buildings in Wanchai District namely St. Paul's Convent Church (聖保祿修院) (Grade 1), St. Mary's Church (聖馬利亞堂) (Grade 1), St. Margaret's Church (聖瑪加利大堂) (Grade 1), Haw Par Mansion (虎豹別墅) (Grade 1), Po Leung Kuk Main Building (保良局主樓) (Grade 2), Shing Kwong Church (聖光堂) (Grade 2), etc. ***Group Value***