

**Heritage Appraisal of Tung Wah Coffin Home,
Sandy Bay Road, Pok Fu Lam, Hong Kong**

Tung Wah Coffin Home (東華義莊) was established in 1899 and the first group of buildings were completed in 1900. It is believed that the predecessor of Tung Wah Coffin Home was a coffin home near the slaughter house in Kennedy Town, which was established in 1875 with funds from the Man Mo Temple in Sheung Wan. The management of the coffin home was later handed over to Tung Wah Hospital. As the scale and facilities of the earlier coffin home were insufficient to accommodate the growing number of coffins, the Board of Directors of Tung Wah Hospital appealed to the Government for more land to increase capacity. A plot of land in Sandy Bay was granted by the Government for the rebuilding of the coffin home in 1899. The coffin home has been officially named the Tung Wah Coffin Home since then.

***Historical
Interest***

Taking advantage of Hong Kong's unique entrepot status, its geographic location at the doorway to mainland China, and the close connections of Tung Wah Hospital's board members with overseas organisations and global business networks, the coffin home was able to provide a repatriation service for those deceased abroad. This was achieved by providing a temporary depository at the coffin home, from where the deceased could then be returned to their place of birth. This service eventually became the centre of a global charity hub during the last century. The coffin home was also well known for placing coffins on vessels sailing to the United States, which would then be used to hold the remains of any Chinese who passed away on board and facilitate the proper burial of unclaimed remains. The strong demand for this service also reflected the history of Chinese migration over the centuries, from both local and global perspectives.

Since its establishment, the coffin home has experienced numerous episodes of renovation, expansion, and demolition in order to cope with the ever-growing demands for its services and changes in society, as well as damage brought by typhoons and general wear and tear. In 1912, the Board of Directors of Tung Wah Hospital

initiated an extension of the coffin home in response to an increasing demand for coffins and remains depository and repatriation services. The Government offered a piece of land adjacent to the coffin home's original site for its expansion. The construction of the new coffin home, which had 24 rooms and was later named the East Hall (東莊)¹, started in 1918 and was coupled with the building of a pier to facilitate the delivery of coffins.

In 1924, Tung Wah Hospital further expanded the coffin home by constructing another extension with 46 rooms named the South Hall (南莊)². In parallel, I-beam steel reinforcement was also added to the Old Hall and the New Hall in the same year. In 1925, the outbreak of Canton-Hong Kong Strike (省港大罷工) disrupted transportation both locally and to mainland China, causing the accumulation of coffins and human remains in the coffin home. In 1926, another site covering an area of 56,390 square feet in Telegraph Bay at I.L. 1572 was granted to the coffin home by the Government. A three-storey concrete building was built and completed in 1927, and later, in 1928, was named Bing Yan Hall (丙寅莊)³. In the same year, the Reception Hall ("Hak Teng" (客廳)) and its kitchen were severely damaged by fire. Sir Tang Shiu Kin (鄧肇堅), the director of Tung Wah Hospital at that time, initiated a series of improvement measures in order to prevent further fire in the future⁴. In the 1930s, the coffin home suffered from termite attack, and the *pai lau* (ceremonial gateway) facing Victoria Road, the pier and roofs of some coffin rooms were damaged by a typhoon. Some of the

¹ The drawings of the East Hall were done by the architect named Arthur George Hewlitt (曉列). The source only mentioned the Chinese name 曉列. The English name is made reference to Tony Lam Chung Wai, "From British Colonization to Japanese Invasion: The 100 Years Architects in Hong Kong 1841-1941" in *HKIA Journal Issue 46: 50 Years Hong Kong Urban Renewal/ Heritage Development* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Architects), 44-55.

² The drawings were done by Palmer and Turner (巴馬丹拿).

³ The drawings were again done by Palmer and Turner.

⁴ The measures included replacing the tiled roofs of the kitchen and Reception Hall with concrete ones; installing a gate at the entrance facing the sea; increasing the frequency of patrols to avoid fire caused by the burning of joss sticks and paper offerings; installing nylon water hoses; enhancing the security of the new coffin home with a fenced wall and gate; demolishing the timber screens in the "Luk" rooms and using brick partitions in rooms with opening windows used for air ventilation.

repair works were not initiated until the beginning of the 1940s⁵.

The coffin home's repatriation service was suspended shortly before and during the Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong (1941-1945). After the war, the coffin home's dilapidated condition triggered another round of repair works, which included the painting of the name "Tung Wah Coffin Home" in Chinese characters on the flat roof of Bing Yan Hall.

In the 1950s, during the Korean War, the United States and the United Nations imposed an embargo on mainland China. As Hong Kong was a colony of Britain, all transportation from Hong Kong to mainland China was halted. Large scale repatriation of human remains to mainland China finally came to an end. More metal racks were installed in order to cope with the accumulation of coffins and remains stored in the coffin home. By 1960, there were around 670 coffins and over 8,000 sets of bones stored in the coffin home⁶. In order to resolve the storage problem of the coffin home, the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals posted advertisements in local newspapers appealing to people to reclaim the coffins and remains of their deceased relatives. Any unclaimed remains were then permanently buried in the Sandy Ridge Cemetery at Sha Tau Kok near the border with mainland China.

In the early 1960s, improvement works were conducted at the coffin home due to the transformation of services it provided. In order to make way for a new sanatorium, Bing Yan Hall was demolished in 1961 and the remains previously stored there were moved to Yat Yuet Hall (日月莊), which was built in the same year (demolished in 2004) at the north-western corner of the site. Since the 1970s, cremation has been actively promoted by the Government and has gradually been accepted by the public. To accommodate the changing burial customs and practices, the garden area of the coffin

⁵ The repairs included improvements to the entrance ramp, the walls, windows and doors of the coffin home.

⁶ 〈東華義莊義山及辭靈亭與紀念亭〉，頁4，載東華三院：《香港東華三院發展史》，香港：東華三院，1960年。

home was converted between 1974 and 1982 to provide over 6,000 niches for cremated remains. Some of the coffin rooms named “Hong” (Good Health 康) and “Ning” (Peaceful 寧) were partially converted to serve as depositories for urns.

The latest large-scale renovation works, completed in 2004, were undertaken to restore the coffin home to its traditional architectural appearance and to bring the building cluster in line with modern safety standards.

Standing on Sandy Bay Road for over a century, the coffin home now consists of two halls, 72 rooms, gateways, pavilion and gardens built in different periods. Although the coffin home was built for charitable purposes and largely adopted the principles of economical and functional design, some decorative elements can still be found in some buildings. Moreover, as the buildings were constructed and renovated in different periods, the coffin home reflects a variety of architectural styles, ranging from traditional Chinese vernacular architecture, to modern Western-style elements, and others that are a hybrid of both.

***Architectural
Merit***

There are now two access points to the site. When entering from Victoria Road, there stands a ceremonial *pai lau* (牌樓)⁷ that guides the way down through Tai Hau Wan Village (大口環村) to the eastern main entrance of the coffin home. This Chinese-style ceremonial archway is believed to have been first constructed in 1925 and was rebuilt in 1938 after being damaged by a typhoon in 1937⁸. The rectangular columns were built of granite while the circular ones have a granolithic finish. The green-glazed tiled roofs are decorated with ridge-end ornaments with curled-up ends and have moulded cornices underneath. There are brackets in the form of Chinese geometric decorative features. Chinese couplets dated 1925 and name plaque inscriptions in both Chinese and English dated 1940 can be found on the front elevation.

⁷ The term *pai lau* generally refers to a gateway with a tiled roof on top; while *pai fong* refers to a gateway without a roof.

⁸ Reference was made to the inscription on the *pai lau*.

The eastern main entrance also takes the form of a Chinese ceremonial *pai lau* decorated with plaques and couplets on both elevations and having roofs laid with clay pan tiles and green-glazed roll tiles. After passing through the main entrance, there is another *pai fong* (牌坊) between the pavilion area and the rest of the coffin home. It is a Western-style segmental *pai fong* with a keystone and a pair of rectangular columns. The structure is topped by a cornice with a slightly curved pediment above. The structure is flanked by a pair of Chinese couplets. The name “Tung Wah Coffin Home” is moulded in relief in Chinese characters to either side of the keystone.

The entrance near the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Jockey Club Care and Attention Home for the Elderly is Western in design. It takes the form of a *pai fong* with three bays, but only the central bay is open. The central bay is decorated with moulded voussoirs, a keystone, and a pair of ornamental pilasters. The top of the structure has a stepped profile. The name “Tung Wah Hospital New Coffin Home” and the date 癸丑年, i.e. 1913, are inscribed on the entablature in Chinese, which confirms that the *pai fong* is one of the earliest structures within the coffin home.

Situated on a hillside, the coffin home’s buildings and structures were constructed at three different levels and are linked by flights of stairs. The pavilion, the Old Hall (舊大堂), the coffin rooms “Leung Long” (Two Corridors, 兩廊), the Reception Hall, and a courtyard at the centre of the site were all built at a highest level. The Reception Hall, which is the entrance hall and serves as a reception area, possesses rather more decorative elements than the other parts of the complex. On the flat concrete roof above the central bay of the main facade is a parapet with vase-shaped balusters. The entrance canopy and some window hoods are decorated with Chinese pan and roll tiles, which are later additions. The windows are surrounded by plaster-moulded architraves with decorative aprons. The metal window grilles and door fanlights have decorative geometric designs. The rear entrance has a portico supported by a pair of Tuscan columns and decorated with a pair of pilasters.

The entrance of the Old Hall is decorated with a granite door frame inscribed with the name “Tung Wah Coffin Home” in Chinese and a pair of couplets dated to 1924. The windows are decorated with plaster-moulded flat arches with keystones, aprons and timber shutters. It is a double-volume hall that originally had a mid-height interior gallery, which was used for the storage of boxes of skeletal remains, but this has now been removed. The coffin rooms, which are known as “Leung Long”, are located on each side of the open courtyard. Each comprises three rows of coffin rooms with a concrete low-pitched roof.

The coffin rooms named “Tin”, “Dei” (Heaven and Earth 天地), “Ping”, “On”, “Dai”, and “Gut” (Peace and Luck 平安大吉) were all built at the middle level. The New Hall (新大堂) and the coffin rooms named “Sau” (Longevity 壽), “Hong”, “Ning”, and “Yat” (Sun 日), together with the open courtyard at the south-eastern corner of that area, are all located at the lowest level.

The “Tin”, “Dei”, “Ping”, “On”, “Dai”, “Gut”, and “Yat” coffin rooms have flat concrete roofs while the “Sau”, “Hong”, and “Ning” coffin rooms have pitched roofs laid with double pan and roll tiles. The New Hall is a flat concrete-roofed building supported internally by rectangular columns and with I-beams used for storing coffins and human remains.

The “Sau”, “Hong”, and “Ning” coffin rooms are considered to be an earlier group of buildings, having been built around a century ago. The verandah along the front of the “Sau” coffin room has a corrugated metal roof supported by iron columns and brackets. The verandah along the front of the “Hong” coffin room has a corrugated metal roof supported by brackets, while the “Ning” coffin room’s verandah has a tiled canopy supported by square columns and wooden brackets. The “Ning” and “Hong” coffin rooms have been partially converted into columbaria.

The coffin home is the only example of its type in Hong Kong that is still serving its original purpose as a place for the *Authenticity*

deposition of coffins and human remains. Nowadays, coffins are still deposited at the coffin home temporarily while awaiting burial in the ground. Although it has undergone numerous episodes of restoration, expansion, and demolition in the past, the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals initiated a large-scale renovation project between 2003 and 2004, with a view to restoring the coffin home's elements to their original architectural styles. The restoration project won the Award of Merit in the 2005 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards and the Award of Honour in the Heritage Preservation and Conservation Awards offered by the Antiquities and Monuments Office⁹ in the same year. These awards recognised the outstanding conservation practice applied to the restoration of the historic buildings, which involved a combination of traditional architectural techniques and practical technical solutions.

Tung Wah Coffin Home is the only example of its type still in operation in Hong Kong today. It is the only place in Hong Kong associated with the provision of repatriation services for coffins and human remains, which strongly reflects the Chinese tradition of burying the deceased in their hometown. A wide variety of architectural styles are still visible on site. The continued existence of the coffin home also testifies to the evolving burial customs and practices of the Chinese community over the centuries.

Rarity

For more than a century, the Tung Wah Coffin Home has played an indispensable role in providing repatriation services, allowing the remains of deceased individuals to be sent back to their hometowns in mainland China from all over the world, while also managing the deposition of coffins and human remains. It has thus fulfilled the needs of a significant Chinese mortuary tradition involving the repatriation of human remains for hometown burial, whatever the temporal and spatial boundaries involved. The coffin home is not only a testimony to the contribution of the largest

***Social Value
& Local Interest***

⁹ The award was first launched in 2001 to recognise the achievements of individuals, schools or organisations in the conservation, education and promotion of cultural heritage of Hong Kong.

charitable organisation in Hong Kong – the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals – to the global network of Chinese charities during the 19th and 20th centuries, but is also illustrative of the history of Chinese migration during a unique era closely tied to the development of Hong Kong and mainland China. During the Ching Ming Festival, the Board of Directors of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals still preserves the tradition of paying tribute to the deceased at the coffin home. The social value of the coffin home has been enhanced through its renovation in 2004. Since then it has become a popular heritage site included in guided tours and talks showcasing heritage conservation practice, traditional Chinese burial customs and their association with the historical and socio-cultural development of Hong Kong.

Several declared monuments and graded historic buildings are *Group Value* located in the vicinity of the Tung Wah Coffin Home, including the Bethanie (伯大尼修院) (Declared Monument), the University Hall (香港大學大學堂) (the exterior of which is a declared monument), Main Block (Wing A to E) (Grade 3) and Nurses Quarters (Grade 2) of Queen Mary Hospital (瑪麗醫院主樓及護士宿舍), historic structures of Pok Fu Lam Reservoir (薄扶林水塘) (Declared Monument; Grades 1 to 3). All these historic buildings and structures collectively demonstrate the historical and social development of the Pok Fu Lam area.

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