

## **Executive Summary**

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Ho Tung Gardens, one of rare buildings in the Peak that mixed Chinese Renaissance style with Italianate campanile element, not only record the typical locally-bred “rags to riches” Hong Kong story, but also the colonial legacy and the East meets West architectural, cultural and historical context. The Gardens, originally named “The Falls” and situated at No. 75 Peak Road, is residential house with extensive gardens. The site was purchased by Sir Robert Ho Tung (1862-1956) for his equal-wife, Lady Clara Ho Tung (nee Cheung, 1875-1938), in the 1920s. Since both Sir Robert and Lady Clara were local-born Eurasians who asserted Chinese identities, the erection of the mix-styled Gardens in the Peak and the moving in of the family set an unprecedented record in the Hong Kong history and society which is still being told today.

### **A brief history of the Ho Tung Gardens**

According to the *European District Reservation Ordinance* (1888), Chinese tenements were not allowed to be built in the hill district, while according to the *Peak District Reservation Ordinance* (1904), non-Europeans were not permitted to live in the Peak. However, Sir Robert and his family made break-through on both, while Ho Tung Gardens was seen as iconic building in Hong Kong which attracted historical recollection because of the great social value and cultural significance. Looking back, the developmental history of the Gardens can be traced to as early as the 1880s. The site, carved as Rural Building Lot No. 28, was purchased by J.Y. Vernon, partner of Chater & Vernon Share and General Broker Company, in 1883. Four years later, the site was extended to include the southern portion which was

turned to an extensive garden. Bungalows were also built there. As there was mountain stream flow nearby, the property was named “The Falls”.

In 1923, Sir Robert bought “The Falls” and the adjacent lands, Rural Building Lot No. 124 and Garden Lot No. 26, to turn the site even larger. Then, Palmer & Turner, a locally well-known architecture firm, was assigned to draw up the plan for re-development. Since the property was purchased for Lady Clara, who was a devout Buddhist, Chinese style structures such as moon gate, pavilion and pagoda were asked to be included. When the mix-styled building plan was submitted to the Colonial Government for seeking permission in 1925, it was considered as “an Asiatic stronghold at the Peak” which might create more trouble in the European community and was suggested to turn down the application.

However, the unprecedented Canton-Hong Kong general strike and Po Hing Fong landslide happened simultaneously which nearly toppled the Hong Kong economy, especially the property market. Although there were no records showing how Sir Robert dealt with the Government officials to get the application passed, the fact was that Palmer & Turner finally got the permission for construction in 1926. Around two years later, the first mix-styled gardens, still called “The Falls”, were erected in the Peak. Lady Clara moved in when most of the renovation work finished in 1927.

As Lady Clara had free will in designing the Gardens and full right in using it, not only Asiatic pagoda and Buddhist statues were built for preaching Buddhism, monks and nuns from various places were invited to deliver seminars or gatherings there. The Falls really became “an Asiatic stronghold at the Peak” for religious and

cultural exchanges as some Colonial official predicted in the 1920s. In addition, Lady Clara also organized a number of family events, such as birthday, Christmas and New Year parties, to host her children, grandchildren, relatives and friends.

In fact, Lady Clara not only masterminded the acquiring and building of “The Falls”, but also found the first Buddhist school for girl, Po Kok Seminary School, and a Buddhist temple, Tung Lin Kok Yuen, in Hong Kong during her residency in “The Falls”. When the Anti-Japanese war broke out, she even joined the Chinese Women’s Relief Association in raising fund for supporting the national defence. Because of heavy work, Lady Clara fell in serious illness in late 1937 and passed away peacefully in “The Falls” in January 1938. An impressive funeral of Lady Clara was held in “The Falls” then, and thousands of mourners went there to pay their last respect.

In order to show the family deep affection and also to memorize Lady Clara’s unparalleled philanthropic work, Sir Robert changed the property name from “The Falls” to Ho Tung Gardens or “Hiu Kok Yuen”, an acronym of the Chinese formal names of Sir Robert (Hiu Sang) and Lady Clara (Lin Kok). An ornamental Chinese gateway (pai lou) was also built at the entrance of the Gardens to signify that memorial initiative.

Unlike the Idlewild, the town house of the Ho Tung family, which had once hosted internationally famous guests like Kang You-wei, Bernard Shaw and Robert Dollar, “The Falls” also welcomed other key figures and recorded some other important events. The most unforgettable/miserable one was the invasion of Japanese troops in 1941. In December 1941, shortly after the big celebration of Sir Robert and Lady

Margaret's diamond wedding, the Japanese troops invaded Hong Kong. Because of its well-built and well-provided of basic facilities, the Gardens were taken by the British troops as the "West Administrative Pool" for exercising the defence. As a result, the Gardens became one of the military targets of Japanese bombardment which not only led to disastrous damages but big casualties.

During the Japanese occupation period, because of serious shortage of food, fire wood and resources, not only furniture and house-ware were robbed, wooden doors/windows and fixtures were also stolen. War and social instability not only left extensive damages to the Gardens but also permanent scars (Sir Robert's principle wife, Lady Margaret died in 1944; his son, Ho Shai-kim lost both legs in an air raid; his sons-in-law, Cheng Hseng-hsin and Billy Gittins died in 1942 and 1945 respectively) in the Ho Tung family and Hong Kong history.

The end of the Japanese occupation not only marked the restoration of social order but also rebuilding of economy in Hong Kong. Ho Tung Gardens also underwent large scale renovation and repairing work. After the war, since many of the survived family members of the Ho Tung family chose different lives and careers, some of them even migrated to Australia, England or the US, Sir Robert decided to rent out the Gardens. In other words, from the late 1940s till the 1950s, the Gardens were no longer regarded as the prestigious "Peak houses of the richest man in the Colony", but ordinary apartments that could be rented by the common Hong Kong people.

Four years before his death, Sir Robert bargained with the Government to unify the Gardens' three separate land lots (Rural Building Lot No. 28, Garden Lot No. 28 and Rural Building Lot No. 124) in different terms and rents into a single deed but

higher premium for better development. Then, in the 1960s, General Ho Shai-lai retired to Hong Kong and took back the Gardens. After renovation again, he moved in with his family. During his residency, General Ho also invited important people to be his guests. Some of them were:

- Chang Kia-ngau (former head of the Bank of China) on December 1962;
- General Albert Wedemeyer (former Chief of Staff to Chiang Kai-shek) on October 1965;
- Koo Chen-fu (Chairman of Taiwan Cement Corporation) on June 1969;
- Hau Pei-tsun (former Premier of the Republic of China) on August 1993.

According to interview information, George H.W. Bush (later became the President of the US) also visited Ho Tung Gardens when he was the Chief of the United States Liaison Office in the People's Republic of China in the 1970s. During his visit, he even played tennis with General Ho in the tennis court in the Gardens. Moreover, former Chief Justice, Sir T.L. Yang recollected that he and his wife frequently visited General Ho in the Gardens. General Ho regularly sent vegetables/fruits that were grown on the Peak to Sir T.L.

On 26 July 1998, General Ho passed away peacefully in the Gardens. Unlike his mother, whose funeral was held in the Gardens, General Ho's funeral was held in the Hong Kong Funeral Parlour. Notwithstanding this, a number of close relatives and friends went to the Gardens to pay their last tribute to General Ho. After General Ho, his son, Ho Hung-ngai, and daughter, Ho Ming-kwan, lived there but became low key. Nevertheless, Ho Tung Gardens still attracted historical recollection and reminiscences.

## **Historic and social values of the Ho Tung Gardens**

From the above-mentioned brief developmental history of the Gardens, we can clearly see that the Gardens directly or less directly associates to a number of historical events and possesses a number of historical significance:

*A marker of racial policy in early Colonial rule.* As early as the beginning of the colonization of Hong Kong, the racial policy was adopted. The Chinese subjects were confined to live around Tai Ping Shan district while the ruling Europeans were given the liberty to choose their place for living. In 1888, *The European District Reservation Ordinance* was enacted which stipulated that no Chinese tenements were allowed to be built from the mid-level and above. Later, as more affluent Chinese built Western-style houses in mid-level (Seymour Road, Robinson Road), the Colonial ruler further passed stringent law, *The Peak District Reservation Ordinance 1904*, to keep the Chinese away from the Peak district. Sir Robert bought a house in No. 1 Seymour Road shortly after *The European District Reservation Ordinance*, and became one of the leading Chinese who could penetrate into the mid-level. Later, he even built the No. 8 Seymour Road town house, the Idlewild, in 1897-8. Also shortly after *The Peak District Reservation Ordinance*, Sir Robert bought three houses in the Peak, and became the first Chinese family that was allowed to reside in the Peak. In 1924, he bought a larger house, “The Falls” (the Gardens) for his “equal wife”, Lady Clara. When Lady Clara moved into the Gardens in 1928, the Ho Tung family still remained as the only Chinese family that was allowed to live in the Peak. Viewed from this perspective, the Ho Tung Gardens was a marker for racial policy under Colonial rule while the Ho Tung family was the icon of breaching the racial barrier.

*A note of bubonic plague.* As the Hong Kong economy prospered after the establishing of the international trading port status, large number of Chinese emigrants moved in which caused the Tai Ping Shan district extremely crowded. Together with the far from satisfactory public health and hygiene condition, a long drawn out bubonic plague broken out since 1894 which not only caused countless casualties but also deep social panic. Although the “epic-centre” of the plague was in Tai Ping Shan, the affluent Chinese class and the European class, who lived less far away, considered it as serious threat. Lady Clara’s first son, Henry Ho, died mysteriously in 1900 when he was only 20-months old. After the enactment of *The Peak District Reservation Ordinance*, Lady Clara learned that the air and environment in the Peak was extremely healthy for growing children, while around that time, her other children such as Eva, Irene and Edward, were not in good health. She convinced her husband to buy a house for their children. Shortly after the birth of Robbie, Sir Robert successful bought the Chalet, the Dunford and the Neuk, and the Ho Tungs became the first Chinese family that was allowed to move to the Peak. In short, one of the key factors that drove the Colonial ruler to pass *The Peak District Reservation Ordinance* and the Ho Tung family to move to the Peak was the serious threat of bubonic plague.

*A signage of taking-root in Hong Kong.* As “an emigrant society”, Hong Kong was regarded as the haven for sojourners. The mainstream of “refugee mentality” was making money and sending most of the savings back to the hometown to support family, buy land, and build houses. It was rare before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the refugees to build big family houses (ancestral houses) here. As a local born Eurasian, Sir Robert saw Hong Kong as his “hometown”. He could not “return home” like other emigrants when social and political turmoil (bubonic plague or

large scale socio-political disturbance like strike) happened here. Because of this fundamental difference in identity (sense of belonging), when Sir Robert became rich, he not only built big family houses for his offsprings, but also invested tremendously in property, an asset which was considered immovable in time of crisis. In other words, not only the Idlewild in Seymour Road was regarded as the signage of the Ho Tung family taking root in Hong Kong, the grandeur Ho Tung Gardens in the Peak was also seen as an icon of commitment of the family to the territory.

*A trajectory of social mobility.* Sir Robert was an illegitimate Eurasian son of a Chinese mother and a Dutch father, who was regarded as a “half-caste bastard” and was looked down upon by both the Chinese and Western societies. Notwithstanding this handicap, Sir Robert built his dynastic family business gradually with his bare hands and became “the idol of the poor in his own country”. His “rags to riches” story not only demonstrated his business acumen, but also Hong Kong’s economic vibrancy and openness. His change of residence from “a cottage in D’Aguilar Street”, to a house in Hollywood Road, to No. 1 Seymour Road, and later No. 8 Seymour Road, and finally Peak houses clearly indicated the path of upward social mobility. Although Sir Robert had become the wealthiest person in Hong Kong at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the Colonial Government undertaken racial policy, he was excluded to live in the peak when relevant law was passed. Sir Robert challenged the legislation and took necessary measure to break the “glass ceiling”. His unfailing effort on the one hand showed to us his wealth and social status finally reached the Peak, while on the other hand told us that with persistent attempt and effort, “nothing is impossible”. Because of this “can-do” attitude, Sir Robert forged an undefeatable image and his rags to riches story is still



being told today.

***A blend of cultures and values.*** Although *The European District Reservation Ordinance* in 1888 made clear that no Chinese tenements (structures) were allowed to be built in mid-level or above, Sir Robert could make a break-through to include Chinese structures such Asiatic pagoda, Chinese gate and pavilion into the renaissance-style building. Such kind of blending the Chinese-style with the Western-elements building not only reflects the nature or characteristics of the Eurasian, but also signifies Hong Kong's unique history, culture and value.

Although Sir Robert only occasionally resided in the Gardens while important family or social events were less frequently held in the Gardens than the Idlewild, its significance should not be neglected. If Sir Robert and various eye-catching family/social events were associated with the Idlewild, while Lady Clara and a number of less glamorous family/social gatherings were associated with the Gardens, the latter should not be seen as insignificant and valueless. As one of the prominent Chinese ladies in Hong Kong, Lady Clara masterminded the building plan and arranged the renovation, which was exceptional in traditional patriarchal society. To a certain extent, the Gardens represented the other story of the family and Hong Kong which we frequently over-looked but which was equally priceless. In other words, if we look from an alternative angle, the Gardens contain the following values and meanings:

***Set a new role for woman.*** If Sir Robert was regarded as “the idol of the poor in his own country”, Lady Clara might be seen as a role model of the Hong Kong women. As a Eurasian, although Lady Clara was socialized with traditional Chinese values

on woman such as obedience, submissiveness and femininity, she insisted about education and travel around the globe. Unlike her female counterpart, she learned Chinese classic when she was young. She also insisted that not only her daughters should have good education, ordinary girls should also have the right to education so that the society could make good progress. In addition, she traveled a lot and encouraged her daughters and ordinary girls to travel to broaden their horizons. She was also seen as a pioneer in promoting Buddhism in Hong Kong to bring peace to her followers.

***Mark a woman's free will.*** When Sir Robert proposed to take Clara as a concubine because his principal wife, Margaret (nee Mak), could not bear him children, Clara rejected the proposal. She knew clearly that being married as a concubine implied loss of identity, independence and social status. Since Clara stood firm on this issue, Margaret agreed to offer “equal wife” status (an innovative marriage arrangement which was unheard of in the past) to her which finally won her heart to marry Sir Robert. As Clara was the “equal wife” of Sir Robert, she was entitled to share her husband's wealth, and more importantly, could have the right to demand her husband to buy and build a big house in the Peak for her.

***Signify a woman's contribution to Hong Kong society.*** Traditionally, woman was confined to the family. Lady Clara not only took the roles as wife and mother in taking care of her husband and children, but also made great contribution to the local society through promoting education and Buddhism. She set up Po Kok Free School for educating poor girls and the Tung Lin Kok Yuen for preaching the gospel of the Buddha. She even donated all her personal savings as the endowment fund of Tung Lin Kok Yuen before she died. To be sure, before the 1930s, no other women could

make similar contribution to the society like Lady Clara.

In sum, although Sir Robert only occasionally resided in the Gardens, its huge socio-cultural value and historical significant are beyond doubt. To recap, the Gardens mark racial policy in the early Colonial rule, the spread of pandemic plague and poor public health, the taking-root of the local born generation, a trajectory of social mobility, and a blend of cultures/values. In addition, the Gardens also tell women's story, their contribution to Hong Kong, and the Japanese occupation. After WWII, when not only the socio-political landscape in the Chinese Mainland and Taiwan changed tremendously, and the Hong Kong's economy and society also transformed drastically, the Gardens directly or less directly witnessed some of these changes when General Ho resided there. A number of local and international celebrities once visited the Gardens and had exchanges with the owners. In short, the Gardens does arouse historical recollection and is regarded as a significant symbolic or visual landmark in Hong Kong which is cherished by the common Hong Kong people as cultural landscape and social memory.