



Executive Summary
Appraisal of the Significance of the Mansion and Gardens

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1 Appraisal of the Significance of the Mansion

The appraisal is based on the criteria for the grading of Historic Buildings carried out by the Antiquities and Monuments Office and Antiquities Advisory Board.

(a) Historical Interest of the Architecture

The mansion of Ho Tung Gardens is historically significant on two counts. First, it is the first piece of property developed, owned and lived in by a Chinese, who was hitherto forbidden to build on the European-exclusive Peak District under the *Peak District Reservation Ordinance, 1904* and the *Peak District (Residence) Ordinance 1918*. Second, it is the first building in the Peak District whose architecture does not conform to the "European house" tradition established in the Peak District via the *European District Reservation Ordinance, 1888*. Most significantly, the mansion was the first building in the Peak District that was designed with a conspicuous Chinese aesthetic character consistent with Chinese Renaissance architecture as developed in China at this time.

(b) Rarity of the Architecture

While Chinese Renaissance architecture became a popular trend in Hong Kong before World War II, residential buildings in the manner were uncommon. There are probably two reasons for this. First, the aesthetics seems to have been used mainly for institutional buildings, and, second, local upper-class

Chinese seemed to prefer Western-style houses. Post-war development has reduced the already small number of such residential buildings to an even smaller number, thus making every extant example a rare specimen worthy of conservation.

(c) Significant Architectural Merit

The significant architectural merit of the mansion of Ho Tung Garden is as an early example of Chinese Renaissance architecture in Hong Kong. In fact, it appears to be the earliest surviving example – of any building type – of Chinese Renaissance architecture in Hong Kong. It is also dated to an earlier time than many of the examples found in Mainland China.

(d) Group Value of Comparable Extant Examples

Known extant examples of the residential type of Chinese Renaissance architecture in Hong Kong are:

- Ho Tung Gardens (何東花園), completed in 1927, a Proposed Monument) (**Fig. 1**)
- Haw Par Mansion (虎豹別墅, completed in 1935, a Grade I Historic Building) (**Fig. 2**)
- King Yin Lei (景賢里, completed in 1937, a Declared Monument) (**Fig. 3**)
- buildings in Dragon Garden (龍圃, completed from the 1950s to the 1960s, the buildings and garden are collectively Grade II Historic Buildings) (**Fig. 4**)

These residential buildings, built from the 1920s to the 1960s, are a diminishing record of the evolutionary development of Chinese Renaissance architecture in Hong Kong. Clustering these places may present an opportunity for a group heritage designation under the theme of Chinese Renaissance architecture, which will certainly be the first designation of its kind and a breakthrough in the field of heritage conservation in Hong Kong.

When considered as a group, the mansion of Ho Tung Gardens reveals another important value – it is the only mansion among the four that is built within the pre-war European-exclusive Peak District.



Figs. 1 and 2 (from left to right) Ho Tung Gardens (source: Development Bureau); Tiger Balm Garden (source: from a vintage postcard).



Figs. 3 and 4 (from left to right) King Yin Lei (source: Development Bureau); Dragon Garden (Apple Daily).

(e) Authenticity of the Architecture

As this study shows, the greatest value of the mansion lies in the socio-political meaning behind its aesthetic character. As such, the authenticity of the building is not measured in terms of how much it has been altered and modified, but in terms of whether the alterations and modifications have maintained the overall aesthetic character of Chinese Renaissance architecture.

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, these have been applied only in terms of finishes and partitioning, and the structure of the building, which is essential in maintaining the external form of the architecture, remains unaltered.

(f) Social Value and Local Interest of the Architecture

Robert Ho Tung's choice of a conspicuous Chinese aesthetic character for the mansion was deliberate – it was a decision to challenge and subvert the statutory discrimination against Hong Kong's Chinese community by the Colonial authorities and the socially advantaged European community. This means that the mansion is a tangible expression of Robert Ho Tung's identification with his Chinese heritage and his affiliation with the Chinese community. As such, the mansion is a significant and unique monument to the struggle of the disadvantaged early Hong Kong Chinese community for cultural dignity, legal rights and social equity, all of which are universal values to which today's Hongkongers of all ethnic backgrounds can collectively relate.

In Singapore, one of the criteria for designating a National Monument is by its social value, which is defined as "the qualities for which a building has become a focus for spiritual, political or national cultural sentiment for the nation as whole or for a social group."¹ This definition fits well with the social value of the mansion, which possesses the qualities to become a focus for the cultural sentiment for Hong Kong as a whole, particularly for the Hong Kong Chinese social group. As such, it can be argued that the mansion qualifies as *an architectural heritage significant to the historical development and cultural identity of Hong Kong*, and it should be considered for appropriate protection.

¹ See: Hong Kong Legislative Council Secretariat 2008: 8.

2 Appraisal of the Significance of the Gardens

The appraisal builds on the criteria for the grading of Historic Buildings carried out by the Antiquities and Monuments Office and Antiquities Advisory Board, with focus on the significance associated with Clara Cheung (Lady Ho Tung).

(a) Relationship between the Gardens and the Mansion

The gardens are more than a series of Character-defining Elements (CDEs). As mentioned previously, they are a major component of the place and inseparable from the mansion and its carefully “staged” scenic viewpoints. And, clearly, as the mansion reflects both Chinese and Western elements (typical of the Chinese Renaissance movement), the gardens combine individual Chinese elements within a Western setting.

The mansion is set within distinctive gardens, and the gardens themselves are an integral part of the place. They are more than an element; they are a major component of the place and inseparable from the mansion and its carefully “staged” scenic viewpoints. Focusing on the mansion alone, rather than the mansion within its garden setting, negates the original design intent: the creation of a mansion within a garden setting, a mansion that is carefully positioned to exploit dramatic views to the south.

(b) Relationship between the Gardens and Clara Cheung

Perhaps even more important than the overall character of the gardens is to the thinking behind the gardens - what informed their planning. Clara Cheung was responsible for the gardens, including their planning, and her influence was fourfold. As a devout Buddhist, she created a meditation garden –a Mixed Buddhist Garden (including a "Pure Land Garden"), which she shared with the public. As a caring matriarch, she provided spaces for outdoors recreation for her extended family and presumably their friends. As an avid and accomplished gardener, she created standard-setting ornamental and vegetable gardens.

And, finally, from what can be gleaned from written accounts, Clara Cheung, as a connoisseur of fine things, sought beauty and serenity in her surroundings. Ho Tung Gardens, as a whole, expresses this search. Sadly, the interior of the mansion, as Clara Cheung lived in it, no longer exists. But, the mansion (its exterior), the gardens and the views remain – *a testament to one of Hong Kong's most important women.*

3 Appraisal of the Significance of Ho Tung Gardens as a Whole: Educational Value

This last appraisal takes us to a fundamental question raised by Article 67 of *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (English Heritage 2008: 36): "whether a place might be so valued in the future that it should be protected now." In direct layman's terms, "Why should we care about conserving Ho Tung Gardens?" The reason is that the place provides a tangible educational platform for future generations to learn about such social aspirations as national identity and cultural identity, as well as such universal social values as cultural dignity, legal rights and social equity, all of which are crucial ingredients for the harmonious society that China is striving to become.