

Historic Building Appraisal
Ho Tung Gardens
No. 75 Peak Road, The Peak, Hong Kong

Ho Tung Gardens, also known in Chinese as 曉覺園, is a residential *Historical Interest* 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;
- (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 the main 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. Lady Clara Ho Tung's 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.

When the British took over Hong Kong, residence at The Peak was limited to Europeans while Chinese were not permitted to live there according to the Hill District Reservation Ordinance (山頂區保留條例). 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 symbolizes the rising status of the Chinese community.

Ho Tung Gardens is situated in a large garden with three buildings *Architectural Merit* (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-storied in Chinese Renaissance style, 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.

Architecturally, the exterior of Ho Tung Gardens largely remains intact. The overall layout and setting (整體佈局) comprising the main residence, the surrounding garden ground, the Chinese pagoda and the ancillary structures is also well preserved. Ho Tung Gardens deserves an in-depth study on the significance of its layout and setting.

There are only a few buildings in Hong Kong in Chinese Renaissance style, of which Ho Tung Gardens and King Yin Lei at Stubbs Road are masterpieces. 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.

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***

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 (何世禮) (1906-1998) who lived there from 1960s to 1990s during the latter part of his life. 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.

***Social Value &
Local Interest***

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.

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. *Immediate Environs*