

Historic Building Appraisal

Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building

No. 25 Dragon Road, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong

Built in 1940, the Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building (香港紅卍字會大樓) is the headquarters of the society, from which it takes its name and serves as an important symbol embodying the society's dedication to and continuous efforts in supporting the local community for over 80 years.

*Historical
Interest*

The Hong Kong Red Swastika Society (“HKRSS”) is a branch of the World Red Swastika Society (世界紅卍字會) (“WRSS”), an international charitable organisation. The word “red” (紅) in the society's name stands for a compassionate heart (赤子之心), while the swastika (卍) signifies “compassion encompassing all directions, reaching all beings”.¹ The mission of the WRSS is to “alleviate human suffering and promote world peace”.² The WRSS was founded in 1923 by a religious group called Daoyuan (道院, literally meaning “School of the Way”),³ a salvationist religion that advocates religious concord and harmony in order to “expound and propagate the truth of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism”⁴ and lead humanity out of suffering.

Taking advantage of the strategic position of Hong Kong as an important entrepôt in South China and Southeast Asia since the middle of the 19th century, Daoyuan and the WRSS set up a branch in the city in 1931 with a

¹ 《世界紅卍字會史料彙編》(香港：世界紅卍字會中華總會，2000年)，頁2。

² Ibid, p. 1. In its early years, the WRSS not only conducted long-term aid work in China by establishing hospitals, academies and factories for the impoverished, they also set up relief teams to offer help during disasters both at home and abroad, including the civil war in China and the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 in Japan.

³ The origins of Daoyuan can be traced back to the belief in *fujū* (扶乩) (“spirit writing”) that emerged in Bin County (濱縣), Shandong (山東), in 1916. In 1920, a group of practitioners reported establishing a spiritual connection with the Zhisheng Xiantian Laozu (至聖先天老祖) (“Holiest Venerable Patriarch of the Primordial Heaven”) and receiving his teachings through *fujū*. They were instructed to practise meditation and were given *An Exposition of The Holy Arctic Canon Regarding Eternal Truth and Ultimate Reality* 《太乙北極真經》, which led to the development of the religious sect.

As many practitioners were influential figures in politics and commerce, including the former Qing official and businessman Du Bing-yin (杜秉寅) and Hsu Shih-guang (徐世光), the younger brother of the former president of the Beiyang Government (北洋政府) Hsu Shih-chang (徐世昌), the sect rapidly expanded. It received official approval from the government in 1922. Adopting the name Daoyuan, it set up its headquarters in Jinan (濟南), Shandong.

⁴ “NOTICE”, South China Morning Post, 14 July 1962.

view to expanding their religious and philanthropic work overseas.⁵ With the support of local businessmen, some of whom were originally from Shangdong (山東), the Hong Kong branch of the WRSS rented the third floor of No. 9 Arbuthnot Road in Central as its meeting place in the same year. When it was initially established, however, the Hong Kong branch failed to formally register with the Secretary for Chinese Affairs.

It was only in 1938, when representatives from the WRSS came to Hong Kong and proposed to the Government the idea of establishing a South China Refugees Relief Association (華南救濟隊監理部) to provide help to people fleeing the Japanese invasion of mainland China, that the Government recognised the charity services of the WRSS and its efforts to alleviate the pressure caused by the increasing numbers of Chinese refugees. Consequently, the application of the “Hong Kong Red Swastika Society” as a registered organisation was approved later that same year.

Upon its formal registration, the HKRSS launched a campaign to raise funds for the construction of its permanent headquarters. Tsoi Po-tin (蔡寶田),⁶ a prominent figure in the construction industry, volunteered to undertake the building project. The HKRSS purchased a land of Inland Lot No. 2411 S.A (i.e. No. 25 Dragon Road, Causeway Bay) on 15 August 1939 and commenced construction of the Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building. The building was completed and inaugurated on 23 April 1940. Lady Northcote, wife of Sir Geoffrey Northcote, the then Governor of Hong Kong, presided over the opening ceremony, which was attended by many distinguished individuals of the local community, including Lee Kau Yan (李求恩), Ip Lan Chuen (葉蘭泉), Ngan Shing-kwan (顏成坤) and Hsu Ti-shan (許地山), etc., reflecting the widespread recognition of the HKRSS’s mission and charitable work.

During the Japanese invasion of South China, the HKRSS and the South China Refugees Relief Association under its supervision carried out a

⁵ Daoyuan and the WRSS have always pursued the goal of promoting their beliefs overseas, and the idea of establishing a branch in Hong Kong originated in 1928 when they were invited to Hong Kong to collect donations raised by Chinese merchants for the victims of the Jinan Incident (濟南慘案). In addition to Hong Kong, branches have been opened in Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Japan, Thailand and the United States.

⁶ Tsoi Po-tin was a prominent figure and leader in Yuen Long and the founder of Wing Yick & Co. (榮益公司). He served as the chairman of Pok Oi Hospital (博愛醫院) in 1931-32 and as the director of the Po Leung Kuk (保良局) in 1934-35. Tsoi joined the HKRSS in 1938 and served as its vice president. In addition to assisting in the construction of the building, he also provided room for the HKRSS to establish an orphanage at the Tat Tak Communal Hall from 1940 to 1941.

wide range of relief activities in Hong Kong and in many places in the mainland, including Guangdong (廣東), Guangxi (廣西), Hunan (湖南) and Jiangxi (江西). The HKRSS also set up refugee camps in Yuen Long and Ping Shan in November 1938, which provided displaced people with food, education and medical services. Besides, the HKRSS opened an orphanage (屏山慈幼院) at Tat Tak Communal Hall (達德公所) in Yuen Long in 1940, where homeless children were provided with education and vocational training until the Battle for Hong Kong. In 1941, in response to a request from the Government, the HKRSS assisted in managing a low-cost rice distribution centre in Wan Chai, and oversaw a communal kitchen at Wan Chai Market.

In addition, the HKRSS set up a free clinic in 1941 on the ground floor of the Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building and another free clinic at No. 12 Tak Hing Street in Kowloon with the help of renowned local doctor and philanthropist Dr. Tseung Fat-im (蔣法賢)⁷. The two clinics provided free Western medical services to the public and saw up to 600 patients every day.⁸ Although the Kowloon clinic was closed soon after Japan invaded the city, the clinic located in the Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building continued to operate throughout the Japanese occupation. From the post-war period until the 1960s, before a comprehensive healthcare system was established in Hong Kong, the clinic in the Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building provided medical consultations to up to 18 000 individuals annually.⁹ To offer a more diverse range of medical services, the HKRSS set up free ophthalmology and dental clinics at the building in 1962 and 1985 respectively.

In 1949, the then president of the HKRSS Wang Cheng-ting (王正廷)¹⁰ organised a charity bazaar to raise funds to support the society's charity

⁷ Dr Tseung Fat-im was a renowned figure in the medical field in Hong Kong who played an active role in philanthropic endeavours. He held various public positions, serving as the director of the Po Leung Kuk in 1938-1939, the founding principal of United College from 1957 to 1959 and the commissioner of the St. John Ambulance Brigade from 1958 to 1963. He helped the HKRSS establish a free clinic in 1941 and became a member in 1942. He later served as the society's president from 1961 to 1974, during which time he spearheaded the opening of HKRSS schools and the transformation of the society into a limited company in 1962.

⁸ 「紅萬字會工作概況」，《華僑日報》，1951年2月20日。

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wang Cheng-ting was a politician and diplomat during the early years of the Republic of China. He played a key role in promoting the development of sports in China, helping to establish the China National Amateur Athletic Federation (中華全國體育協進會). In 1932, he facilitated China's first participation in the Olympic Games and subsequently led the Chinese delegation to the 11th and 14th Olympic Games. Wang joined the WRSS in 1938 and served as the president of the HKRSS from 1948 to 1961.

services. The bazaar has developed since 1952 into a signature annual event held at the Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building that attracts people from all walks of life and that has helped to promote the culture of charity in Hong Kong.

In addition to providing medical services, the HKRSS is also dedicated to education and has run a number of schools. The HKRSS opened a primary school on Hong Kong Island in 1961 and one in Kowloon in 1963.¹¹ Later, it founded a secondary school in Chai Wan in 1977. The Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Tuen Mun Primary School was opened in Tuen Mun in 1988, and the following year the HKRSS relocated the secondary school in Chai Wan to Tai Po, renaming it Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Tai Po Secondary School. Both the primary school in Tuen Mun and the secondary school in Tai Po continue to operate to this day, nurturing talents within the local community.

The Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building is a three-storey building with a symmetrical plan. The façades of the building are generally rendered in a stucco finish. The front elevation features three arched windows, accompanied by a cantilevered balcony on the first floor. It is also embellished with a variety of decorative elements that remain clearly visible, including rectangular mouldings with three stripes at the centre between the other windows on the first and second floors and medallions and beads ornamenting the top edge of the roof parapets. A richly decorated Chinese-style pavilion known as the Nam Kwong Pavilion (南光亭, literally meaning “bright light in the south pavilion”) stands on the rooftop of the building. Supported by concrete brackets, the ceiling of the pavilion features a mural of a blue sky and auspicious clouds, and the pavilion as a whole adds a special elegance to the building. *Architectural Merit*

The Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building was built on a raised platform and the main entrance of the building is reached by a pair of dog-legged staircases. A pagoda-shaped lamp post rendered in red Shanghai plaster stands on each side of an incense burner in front of the main entrance. The timber door features a lattice design comprising triple-crossed hexagons (三交六椀菱花)¹² coupled with patterned glazing.

Upon entering the building, a juxtaposition of traditional Chinese decorations in geometrical patterns and motifs with western components

¹¹ These primary schools were closed in the 1980s–1990s.

¹² The sophisticated lattice design is composed of triangles arranged in vertical and diagonal lattices to form a flower pattern of six petals as an expression of status and aspiration.

immediately comes into play. The lobby on the ground floor is lavishly decorated with Chinese polychrome paintings on beams and finely crafted timber carvings in the shapes of flower and auspicious clouds. The lobby features terrazzo flooring in red and green with meandering decorative borders coupled with floral patterns with *ruyi* (如意), *taiji* (太極) (yin-yang) and *bagua* (八卦) symbols. Other ornamentation can also be found throughout the building, including decorative mouldings of floral patterns on the ceiling, decorative bands of repetitive motifs along the walls and beads at the top edge of the columns.

The first and second floors accommodate a number of rooms of various sizes that are used for religious rituals and ceremonies. The two largest of these are the main halls, which feature coffered ceilings surrounded by beams decorated with Chinese polychrome paintings with a decorative motif made up of swastikas. The utility rooms, such as washrooms, kitchens, and storerooms, are located at the end of the corridors, which connect to the rear staircase of the building. Most of the areas on the upper floors have timber parquet flooring designed in a variety of patterns, while the smooth, curved detailing between the timber skirting and the floor edge further expresses the intricacy of the skilled workmanship that characterises the building.

The building has two internal staircases. Each floor is connected by the main staircase, which has a terrazzo finish and is embellished by a gracefully crafted timber railing with curved, smoothed detailing complemented by auspicious clouds as a decorative feature. The rear concrete staircase connecting the ground floor to the second floor has a simplified metal balustrade and railing system. The treads of the rear staircase have a granolithic finish, which adds a subtle aesthetic to the conventional design.

Minimal alterations appear to have been made, with the building therefore retaining its authentic appearance. Most of the original building fabric and architectural features are well preserved and largely intact. The fine detailing and workmanship of the building is still authentically presented to reflect its original design. However, some modifications and additions have been made in the past years, such as, the windows and doors of the Nam Kwong Pavilion have been replaced and railings have been added to the main staircase inside and the dog-legged staircases outside for safety reasons.

***Authenticity &
Rarity***

In conclusion, the building is a perfect example of a modern construction style featuring Chinese and Western architectural influences that incorporates symmetry and function while being steeped in rich historical significance as a

witness to the HKRSS's philanthropic endeavours and advocacy of religious concord and harmony. The extensive use of Chinese and Western decorative features, such as the Chinese polychrome paintings on beams and the *ruyi* patterns as well as the coffered ceilings and decorative bands of repetitive motifs, not only adds a visual emphasis, but also highlights the building's distinctive appeal.

Ever since it was first established, the HKRSS has been dedicated to its mission of providing relief during times of war and disaster, offering shelter to the displaced and providing health care and education opportunities. Even after the Second World War, the HKRSS has maintained its compassionate spirit and continued to promote medical and educational services to the benefit of multiple generations of people from all social backgrounds. The building consequently stands as an important symbol embodying the collective memory of the charitable sector in Hong Kong.

***Social Value
& Local
Interest***

Furthermore, the generous support that renowned members of the community provided for the construction of the building and continue to provide for the philanthropic work is home to demonstrate the wide recognition that the HKRSS enjoys across all sectors of Hong Kong society.

The building combines with the Tin Hau Temple in Causeway Bay (銅鑼灣天后廟) situated in front of the building and Lin Fa Kung (蓮花宮) in the vicinity to provide significant group value, as they all bear witness to the development of Tin Hau, Tai Hang and Causeway Bay.

Group Value

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