



INSIDE DRAGON GARDEN, THE HIDDEN PARADISE THAT CAPTURES HONG KONG'S SPIRIT

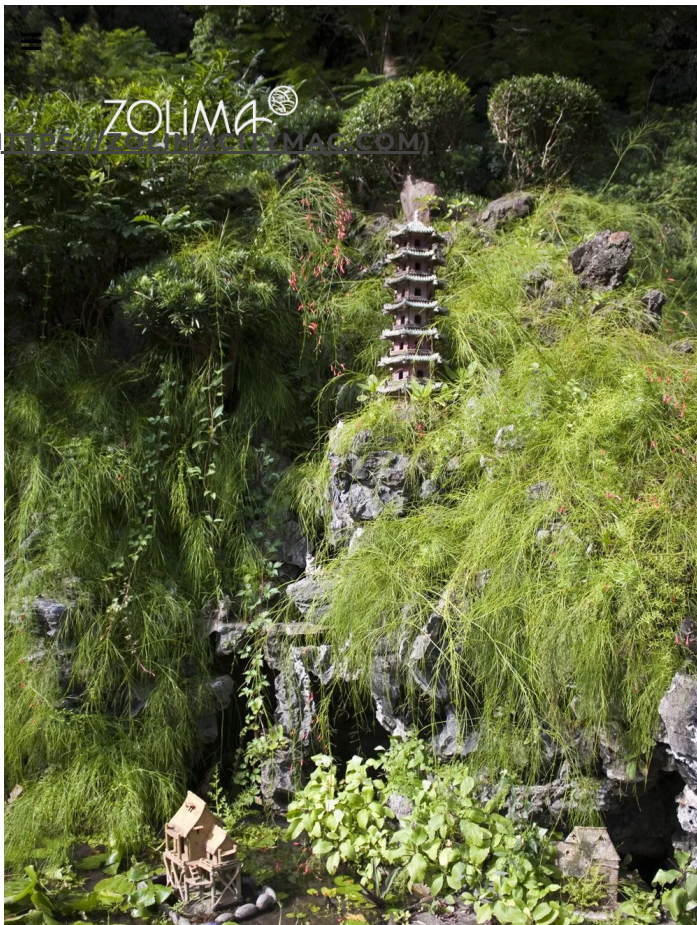
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One of Hong Kong's most beautiful places is hidden behind a wall on Castle Peak Road. Cascading over eight hilly hectares, with a view over azure seas and hazy mountains, Dragon Garden is filled with an eclectic mix of Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist and Christian iconography, plus a swimming pool that once hosted James Bond. It's a mid-century paradise of birdsong and butterflies. And it was very nearly demolished.

"The garden has an amazing story – and the people of Hong Kong have to know about it," says Leung Wing-tai, a filmmaker who now runs Lumina College, a private Christian academy that now takes care of the garden.





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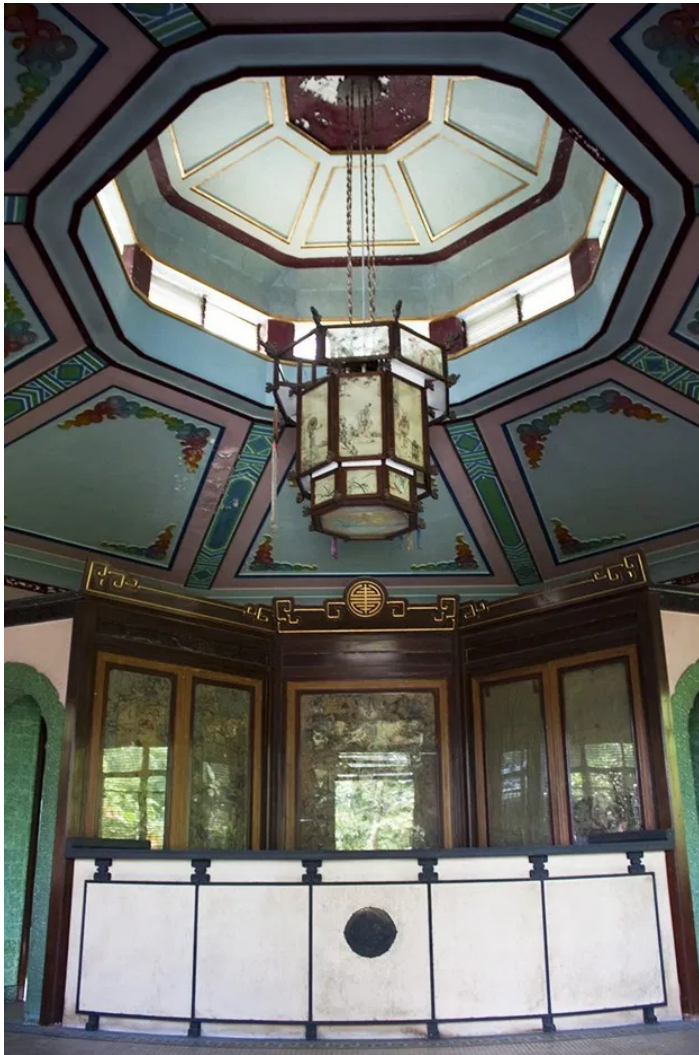
It starts with Lee Iu-cheng. His family was originally from Zhongshan, Guangdong, where they had earned a fortune in the scaffolding business, but after becoming involved in an ill-fated uprising against the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), they fled to Hong Kong, where Lee was born in 1896. The family continued their construction enterprise, helping to develop **Yau Ma Tei** (<https://zolimacitymag.com/tag/yau-ma-tei/>) into a thriving commercial district.

Lee was fortunate enough to attend some of Hong Kong's best schools. But he also witnessed how many of his Chinese compatriots lived in wretched conditions, which his friend, journalist Shum Wai-yau, later recalled giving Lee "lasting compassion for the poverty-stricken, a compassion which deeply influenced his life and his character." When he was 14 years old, Lee left school and travelled to Zhaoqing, where he joined a successful rebellion against local Qing rulers, two years before the dynasty fell in 1912.

He was eager to march north with his comrades, but his father convinced him he could do more for Chinese society by returning to Hong Kong to finish his studies. He obliged and eventually graduated from the University of Hong Kong with a degree in engineering. He soon married Chan Yuet-king, the daughter of a prominent family with



ties to the **Tung Wah Hospital** (<https://zolimacitymag.com/neighbourhood-guide-tai-o-ping-shan-an-old-soul-with-a-trendy-heart/>), and travelled to the United States to continue his engineering studies at Cornell University.



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Lee's time overseas was cut short when his father fell ill, forcing him to return to Hong Kong. But he channelled his civic-mindedness into philanthropy, serving on the board of the Tung Wah Hospital as well as 50 other charities. He also taught at the University of Hong Kong, training future generations of engineers. Between his family's good fortunes, a series of successful business ventures and his charity work, Lee had one foot in the upper echelons of colonial society and another in Hong Kong's grassroots communities. He came to embody an emerging Hong Kong identity, one that blended Chinese and European influences into an optimistic, forward-looking package.

Dragon Garden was built to reflect that identity. Lee bought the land from the government in 1949 and slowly developed it over the years – a quintessential passion project. One of its earliest features was a large swimming pool. Hong Kong had no

public pools at the time—the first wouldn't open in Victoria Park until 1957—so Lee occasionally opened up his to anyone who paid a HK\$1 admission fee, which was donated to charity. Roger Moore later swam in the pool as James Bond; several scenes in *The Man With the Golden Gun* were filmed at Dragon Garden in 1973.

In 1958, Lee hired architect Chu Pin to design an ancestral hall for his family. Its foundations were built with granite from historic buildings in Central that had been demolished. That was followed by a house where Lee spent the weekends with his wife and seven children – five sons and two daughters.



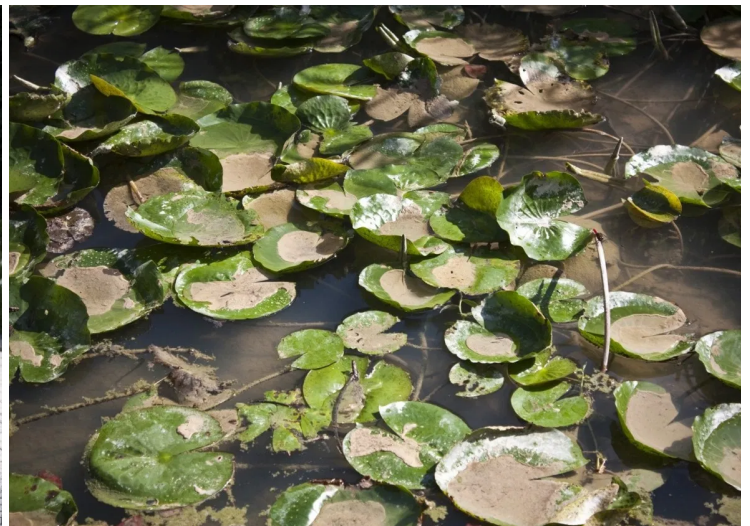
Lee shaped the garden according to his own syncretic tastes, fusing art, culture and religion from around the world. Above the pool, an English-style rose garden was built with pathways whose curbs were made with old ginger beer bottles. Glass tiles were used to create a huge dragon fountain. There are ponds, waterfalls, caverns and a mix of religious elements like Buddhist figurines and a mosaic portrait of the Virgin Mary, products of Lee's wide-ranging curiosity about religion. In the ancestral hall, a red-crowned crane—a traditional Chinese symbol of longevity—is enshrined in Italian-style stained glass.

"My father worked almost every weekend for 20 years to design this garden," said Lee's son, Lee Shiu, during an interview in 2010. "He would come in Friday night and Saturday and Sunday mornings to direct workers on what to do. He completed it in 1968 but he would still come every weekend like he did before."

When Lee died in 1976, he was buried inside a domed tomb next to the ancestral hall overlooking the garden. For a time, his family continued to use the garden, and Lee's granddaughter, Cynthia Lee, remembers being inspired by the "concept of mixing East and West, like making stained glass and using traditional Chinese techniques to paint it."

But without the family patriarch to oversee it, the garden eventually fell into disuse. In the late 1990s, the government expropriated a portion of it in order to expand Castle Peak Road, and they built an incongruous castle-like wall to shield it from the sound of traffic.

Not long after, Lee's family received a HK\$130 million offer to sell the property to developer Sun Hung Kai, which wanted to replace it with apartment towers. Two of Lee's grandsons were eager for the windfall, but when Cynthia Lee made a public appeal to save the garden, she was supported by a number of other family members who wanted to conserve it.



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"You really don't see something like this garden every day you step out of your apartment," Lee's great-granddaughter, Audrey Shui, told the *South China Morning Post* in 2006, when she was 13 years old. "I would feel terrible if the garden is torn down for more high-rise buildings."

Lee's youngest daughter, Wong Lee Kit-kwan, told the newspaper how much she had enjoyed the garden in her youth. "I sat with my parents watching the sunset," she said. "My parents would write poetry together. My hope is that the Dragon Garden can be preserved for the people of Hong Kong, so that they can experience the peaceful enjoyment of their land's natural beauty."

She got her wish. The garden was saved from redevelopment when Lee Shui bought out the rest of his family for HK\$100 million. But that raised the tricky question of what to do with the property. Cynthia Lee spearheaded a plan to fix up the garden and donate it to the government for public use, and for several years around 2010, she hosted public visits and cultural events.

In 2012, **Marisa Yiu and Eric Schuldrenfrei** (<https://zolimacitymag.com/architecture-beyond-architecture-marisa-yiu-and-eric-schuldenfrei/>) curated an exhibition that saw young architects transform the garden with site-specific installations; one group installed LED lights that blinked in accordance with the sound of road traffic and airplanes making the approach to the Hong Kong International Airport, underlining just how much the city had encroached on the once-remote garden.

Those efforts came to naught. Although Dragon Garden was given a Grade II heritage listing in 2011, the government wasn't interested in taking over the property. And so in 2016, Lee Shui invited Lumina College to take over the garden as a rural campus. Three years earlier, Lee had commissioned Leung Wing-tai to make a short documentary about his father, and he was impressed by the result. "That's why they think we understand the value of this garden," he says "Others see it as real estate, but we see its cultural value as a place of East-West convergence, and its social value because Lee lu-cheng did so much for people in Hong Kong."





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Leung founded Lumina College in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis to address what he saw as a lack of moral guidance in global business and policy-making. The world's top universities were producing graduates that pillaged the world's poor and destroyed the environment, he says. "I remember thinking, 'We've got to do something to put the soul back in university.'" He launched the college in 2015, offering diplomas and master's programmes in partnership with a variety of Christian universities in the United States.

Leung clearly feels a kinship with Lee's worldview and the garden that embodies it. Walking through the rose garden on a sunny afternoon, he points to the ginger beer bottles and notes that much of the garden was made with reused materials – an environmentally friendly gesture that was well ahead of its time.

He is smitten with many of the garden's other details, too. He points out a statue based on a Chinese legend called Eight Immortals Who Crossed the Sea. "Every thing, every stone, [Lee] put some thought into it," he says. Arriving in front of the mosaic of the Virgin Mary that rises next to a grove of Buddhist Pines, Leung notes that Lee wasn't



Christian, but was guided by a sense of mural duty. “He founded the garden for the common good – his heart was not just in Hong Kong or China, it was in building a common good for the world,” he says.

In addition to its own academic activities, Lumina College hosts group tours of the garden, mostly from local schools, but also from groups like the Royal Asiatic Society. The main house has been renovated, along with other structures. Leung hopes to one day reopen the swimming pool, which has been empty for years, but he says it has been “a very tedious process” of getting government approval to restore it to use. But he is happy that the rest of the garden is flourishing once again – just as Lee lu-cheng would have wanted.

Lumina College organises occasional tours of Dragon Garden. Visit [lumina.edu.hk](http://www.lumina.edu.hk) (<http://www.lumina.edu.hk/>) for more details.

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Inside Dragon Garden, the Hidden Paradise That Captures Hong Kong's Spirit

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PREFACE

How one man built up a unique cultural landscape that was narrowly saved from destruction.

