King Hui

The Man Who Owned All the Opium in Hong Kong

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BLACKSMITH BOOKS

Above: Peter at the age of eighteen.

Introduction

THIS IS THE STORY of a man's life. He was not an important man, if importance is measured by social position, but he was a man who was at one time rich and socially well-connected, and he might have continued to be if only he had been just a little bit different – but then this book would not have been written. Instead, like Icarus, he revelled too much in the glorious sensation that all possibilities were open to him. Then, singed, he fell headlong, tumbling down through the layers of Hong Kong society – now and then his descent was interrupted, occasionally he wafted upwards briefly on a favourable thermal – but always, inevitably, the fall continued until he hit rock bottom.

He was a man of certain uncommon gifts whose destiny it was to be drawn irresistibly to folly. His story is the living story of Hong Kong. This book is, therefore, a subjective, intimate history of this curious territory: where Shanghainese money and industry, Cantonese grit and fiery doggedness, and British phlegmatism and sense of order created a place where East and West worked out a way of living together.

Histories of Hong Kong have unanimously ignored the man in the street, concerning themselves instead with the dry bureaucratic colonial facts and particularly with the prisoner-of-war experience. But what of the local experiences of World War II, and more importantly perhaps, of daily life during the peaceful years both before and after the war?

There is a smell that distils for me all the essential ingredients of Hong Kong. It is the smell of browned cubes of tofu being heated in a dry wok by a street hawker. Black heat waves vibrate upwards carrying the stench, worse than diesel fumes, of the marinade that this tofu has sat in, seemingly for days on end: vinegar, sesame oil, chilli and shrimp paste. Not for nothing is it called *chow tofu,* stinky beancurd. This is the authentic smell of Hong Kong. This book is a stinky beancurd history of this city.

The island of Cheung Chau lies about eight kilometres south south-west of Hong Kong's main harbour, less than an hour by ferry from the centre of the city. It is a small but densely populated island. In the spring of 1976 I came to live on Cheung Chau. I had come for the simple reason that it had everything an island should have. It was a fishing village with a waterfront and a pier where the ferry came, and when you got off the ferry, there you were, right in the middle of the village. There was no ugly hinterland of docks to walk past.

The island was still quiet then. It is amazing to remember a deserted waterfront on a midsummer Sunday. Now, of course, it has been discovered and the ferries are packed with day-trippers. But back then it was a place known only to those in need of cheap rents or a quiet, unruffled life.

Among the people I met very quickly was a slight, dapper Chinese gentleman who went by the name of Peter Hui. He had an easy, charming smile and a reputation for borrowing money and not repaying it. He would have been in his early sixties then. The flesh on his face was taut and he complained of ulcers or a mysterious heart complaint which seemed to prevent him from working full-time, as he insisted he had to in order to survive. Yet he did survive. No one was really sure how he managed it.

From time to time he would hint of a past that would be worth telling – but, naturally, he said, he couldn't tell the whole truth. In particular, he often talked about the years of the Japanese occupation. 'You wouldn't believe how rich I was in those days,' he would say to me over a bottle of Tsingtao beer. 'During those years I had the largest string of ponies at the Jockey Club. Believe me, Jonathan, I'm not lying to you. I gave them brandy while people were starving.' He shook his head at the perplexing iniquities of fate.

We would be sitting at a small round table under the open sky. Girls from the fishing boats would pass by, dressed in thin cotton pyjama suits and wearing conical rattan hats. The older women had deeply tanned and heavily creased faces and, as they laughed, flashed rows of gold teeth. Where have they all gone? It is an age that has slipped quietly away. Time slips past us so fleetingly. It is difficult to stop and capture the small human details.

There was a general consensus among the European community that Peter Hui was not to be entirely believed. He would say anything to get you to buy him a drink. But the stories he told over the years didn't change. If he was a liar he had an impossibly good memory. And the purple swollen knuckles on his hands were testimony enough to the *kung fu* prowess he claimed for himself.

The years passed. Cheung Chau ceased to be a haven from the city. Life became busier. The year 1997 loomed. It posed questions. One of the questions for me was what life in Hong Kong had been like for the local people in the years gone by. It seemed to me important to capture the past now that we were still there. For the present seemed already like part of the past – and no one knew what the future, after 1997, would bring. There wasn't a book that gave any real sense of the place in an informal way. I didn't know that this was exactly the kind of book that was to fall to me to write.

One day, Peter stopped me in the street.

'I need to talk to you, Jonathan. Are you in a hurry?'

I shook my head cautiously. We had known each other now for coming on thirteen years.

'I'm getting old. I should tell my story. If you have time, maybe you can write it.'

As we stood in the glare of the sun I looked at Peter and it seemed he had hardly aged at all. He was still the same: alert and impish. I nodded slowly. It was true I was busy but then again, Peter's life story might be worth listening to. I had always been curious to know more about the racehorses and the years of the Japanese occupation. It occurred to me that there would be no harm in spending a few evenings with Peter. I would get to hear a few stories. Maybe they would be interesting. Maybe not. It didn't matter. Or maybe they would be everything that Peter had always promised they would be. I had no idea what to expect. As it turned out, Peter's stories were everything he said they would be. Over the months and years that we talked there was never any sense of discrepancy or contradiction. As we talked I set him small subtle tests. He passed them all. I have no doubt at all this is a true story.

This then is the story of Hui Shen-kei, also known as Hui Tak-kwong, also known as Peter Hui, also known as Hui Lo-sze – Respected Teacher Hui. (Hui rhymes with 'boy'.) Known too, when still a schoolboy, as

'King' because of his *kung fu.* This is the story of a true son of Hong Kong, a hero in his own way, though most readers will probably see him as an anti-hero. This is the life story of a Hong Kong playboy, gambler, fighter, wartime collaborator with the Japanese, CIA agent, mastermind of armed robbers, associate of triads; a man who once, for a very short time, owned all the opium in Hong Kong.

I am in Peter's rooms overlooking the beachfront. Ostensibly it is the island's RSPCA clinic but Peter has taken it over – he is the RSPCA man on the island. Usually the room is bare and functional but today it is bright with flowers. It is Chinese New Year. His few photographs line the walls – 'I have lost so many things. I have been so careless!' This, as it turns out, is an understatement. Although Peter professes to be a Christian there is a porcelain Buddha and another set of figures showing the folk deities: Fu'k, Lu'k and Shao – the human embodiments of Happiness, High Rank and Long Life – the three great traditional desires of the Chinese.

Otherwise the room is spartan. There is an office desk with a telephone on it and a metal table for the veterinary inspections. Under it, in separate cages, are two mynah birds. Their sharp shrieks burst out from time to time: 'AAANGAANG! . . . Grrrek Grrrek! . . . Ngahwee . . . Ngahweeeee . . . Warrowarrowarrow . . . wooowwooo . . . ngeow . . . ngeow!' It is a wide repertoire of noises. Have they learnt them from the animals that file in every Wednesday when the RSPCA vet comes? Two dogs mill around. 'Shut up! Sit down!' Peter slaps them and they obey.

Occasionally there is a loud whirr as a helicopter approaches, red lights flashing. Behind Peter's house is the hospital – little more than an emergency out-patient clinic and a geriatric home. Two hundred yards along the beach is the helicopter landing pad. Someone has to be taken into town for serious medical treatment. There is no point talking now. The sound is deafening. Eventually the aircraft takes off and the sound drifts off into the distance and merges with the other sounds that come in from outside. There is a basketball court not far away and sounds of laughter and shouting interrupt the silence but we are at the back of the village and it is mainly quiet. Of course there are the yapping village

dogs. But we can also hear the hush of waves gently slapping against the sand.

I fix the microphone to Peter's shirt, press the record button, check the batteries, check the tape is moving, nod to Peter that we're ready to start and then I lean back in my chair to wait.

'What shall we talk about today?' he asks.

'Tell me about your first memory,' I say.

In the beginning

My first memory? I was four years old. It was the day of my eldest sister's wedding in our home village of Taam Shan in Punyu district of Guangdong Province. And do you know what I remember? I was really terrible. My very first memory is of biting my mother's arm very hard. I can remember every detail. I can even remember the taste of her skin. I was so furious. I was angry with her and I was angry with everyone else because they were allowing my sister to be carried away. My sister was crying and wailing and pleading to be rescued but the strange men were carrying her away and none of our relatives did anything to stop them. They just stood there and let my sister be kidnapped. I remember it was getting dark. Maybe it was already dark. Of course I must have been very excited. We had been entertaining people from the neighbourhood all day. I didn't understand what was going on. I knew my sister was being taken away from me and I didn't understand why. There would have been a lot of firecrackers. Strings of them suspended from the roof of the house exploding like a machine gun. Of course that's not the sort of thing I would remember. I am just imagining how it would have been. That's how I know it would have been dark, or nearly dark. It is our belief that the sun is the seat of male influence and the moon is the seat of female influence. So there is a superstition that if the bride leaves her home when the sun is still strong in the sky then she will be oppressed by her husband and perhaps badly treated. The easier a husband gets a wife the less respect he will have for her. So a wife should not be too cheap. And no one would think of giving a girl away. Our Chinese custom is that a girl must be taken away by force. She must be captured and kidnapped. She must be taken like a treasure from her home to her husband's home. But while the groom will want to take her away as soon as he can so that their marriage will be ruled by the sun, so the bride's relatives will seek to delay the 'kidnapping' for as long as possible. It is a natural compromise then that twilight is the time agreed upon by most couples for their departure

from the girl's home. My brother-in-law's village was a few miles from ours. He had a sedan chair with four bearers to carry her back to his house. It is normal for the bride to cry out and wail. But of course she was happy. It is rare for a girl not to welcome marriage. But she has to pretend. I didn't understand. I was only four years old.

It was late afternoon and preparations were being made to take my sister away from me. I cried to everyone to stop them but of course they just laughed at me. The more they laughed the more furious I got. All I could think of was to stop them somehow. The servants couldn't control me at all. I loved my mother. She was the only one who could control me. I think she was scared I would run down the road after the sedan chair to fight them all by myself. And I would have done. I am like that. So, my mother put me on her back but I continued to struggle and fight and when I found I couldn't get free, I bit her hard in the arm. I can still remember the warmth and taste of her skin as I bit hard and she yelled and slapped me and I screamed for someone to help my sister.

I think this was the first time I could feel in myself a terrible temper. On that day, I discovered something very important: I had a fighting heart.

Now, I can tell you that my sister was nineteen years old when she got married. I can calculate it like this. I was four. My second sister was thirteen years older than me and my first sister was two years older than her. At that time, this was considered to be quite old. Most girls got married at the age of sixteen. I think the reason my sister didn't marry until she was nineteen was because my parents were very serious about who they wished to have for a son-in-law.

When the match-maker came to us with details of Ho Tim, my father accepted. Although we were quite rich then and Ho Tim's family was poor, it was obvious that Ho Tim would make a good son-in-law. He had started work at the age of ten. He now had a good job at the Hongkong Hotel, which at that time, this must have been in 1918 because I was born in 1914, was the best hotel in all Hong Kong. The Peninsula Hotel wasn't built yet. But when it was, in 1928, Ho Tim was the man in charge of all the staffing arrangements.

I don't remember anything more of the wedding. But I can tell you that the day after the wedding Ho Tim would have sent back a whole roast pig and some fish. This gift is like a final seal on the wedding. It

means the husband has spent a night with the bride and found that she was indeed a virgin. Not to send this present would be a big insult. After three days they would have returned in person to pay their respects to my parents so that they could see that my sister was well.

So my sister was taken away from me. I missed her very much because she loved me with all her heart and took care of me. Now there was just my mother and my second sister to take care of me – and, of course, at home there was also an amah and a *mui-jai,* a slave girl.

Although the wedding took place in Punyu, we actually lived in Hong Kong. We were all born in Hong Kong, all three of us – but because both families came from the same area it was thought a good idea to have the wedding in our native district.

Let me tell you about this district. Hong Kong is on the south China coast on the eastern side of the mouth of the Pearl River. Actually there is no such thing as the Pearl River. 'Pearl River' is the name we give the joining of three rivers: the West River, the North River and the East River. Canton city is situated more or less at the junction of the West River and the North River on the northern bank. The estuary lands south of Canton are flat and rich in rice and river fish. We call this area Nam-Pun-Shun. This is really three districts joined together: Nam-hoi, Punyu and Shun-tak. Nam-hoi is the richest, Punyu is the second richest. But this didn't mean that the farmers were rich. It was the middlemen who grew rich: the rice merchants. The farmers, like farmers everywhere, worked hard and earned little money.

Perhaps the most important reason for having the wedding in Punyu was that my grandmother was still living there. She was old and paralysed. My grandfather had died. I never knew him but I remember my grandmother clearly. Not from this time but a few years later when I was sent to live with her during the great seamen's strike. She was in her nineties when she died. My grandmother was old and paralysed so she was always lying on a couch or bed. She could do nothing for herself. She always asked me to go to her and kiss her. I was the only son in our generation and so it was natural for her to love me. In fact, I can tell you, I was a little bit disgusted by her. She was old, ugly and wrinkled. I remember, she always drooled from the corner of her mouth. But I knew it was very important that I show her my respect so I always did go up to her and kiss her. I know many boys my age would have refused

to kiss her but I knew it would make her happy. I was very naughty in other things but not in this.

As for my grandfather, all I know is that he was a wood merchant. Now, there are many different kinds of wood. There is wood for furniture and wood for building. Obviously wood for furniture is the best quality and wood for building is of a lower quality. Our family business was to sell wood of the poorest quality – wood for fuel. It was a hard job. He had to collect the wood and put it into bundles and then he had to carry it to the houses of all his customers. I suppose it wasn't a bad business. He could afford a house. But he only had one wife and one son: my father. I have no records of any sort of our family before my grandfather. Who or what my earlier ancestors were I really cannot say. They were country people. Perhaps they were farmers or perhaps they had always sold firewood.

When my father grew up, perhaps he was like me, perhaps he was a gambler. He knew he could never have a good life if he stayed in Punyu district. For a few years he helped his father by carrying wood to people's houses. Then, for some reason, he decided to try his luck in Hong Kong. I don't know why he didn't prefer to go to Canton city which was closer. He never felt that Hong Kong could be a proper home for a Chinese. Not while it was ruled by foreigners. Although he lived there all his adult life and made a lot of money, he never bought any land or property in Hong Kong. Every piece of property he owned was in China. I really regret that. I can say that things would have been very different if he had invested in Hong Kong. I would still be very rich. Perhaps it was God's will. My father was a man of contradictions. He was not a man who wanted to be like the foreigners, and yet he arranged for me to have a Western education. He never dressed or appeared to be rich but when I got married I had the biggest wedding Hong Kong had seen for over ten years.

Now, let us go right back to the very beginning. I was born a few months before the start of the first European war. My father had come to Hong Kong in his early twenties and he hadn't married young. So by the time I was born he was nearly fifty and my mother was about three years younger than him, so she was forty-six or -seven when she bore me. Of course such a thing is certain to make people talk. A lot of people from our home district believed that I had been adopted. Actually, this

would have been a very common arrangement and would not have caused any surprise at all. Perhaps there was surprise that he hadn't already adopted a son. Only a son can carry on the family name. A man without a son has no respect.

Now, it seems that a man from the same village was heard to express his suspicions that I was really only an adopted son. My father was angry when he heard this. At last he had a real son of his own, after trying for many years and only having two daughters. A son of his own flesh and blood. And everyone was saying he had adopted a son into the family. The only way to settle a case of this sort was to take it to the council of Taam Shan village – what we call the council of the ancestral hall. So my father and the man who had expressed his reservations both went back to Punyu and put the case to the council. There was plenty of evidence that my mother had been pregnant and had been aided by midwives at the time I was born. Naturally, my father won his case. He wouldn't have won any money, just a few catties of roast pork. The purpose of the case was to ensure that people accepted that I was a real son of his flesh. In fact I have no doubt that I am his real son.

My father first came to Hong Kong when he was a young man in his twenties. Of course he didn't have any money but he was a clever and hard working man. I remember he used to tell us stories of his early life. At one time he operated a cinema. Not really a cinema. Everything was much simpler then. Maybe it was what they call a lantern show. It must have been something like that because he operated in the street. He charged just a few chien-jai to see a show. Nowadays ten cents is the smallest unit of currency but in those days ten cents was worth something. Even with one cent or less you could buy something. There were ten chien-jai to one cent. Then, after a while he gave that up and got into the clothes dyeing business and this is what he was doing when I was born.

In those days there was a lot of dyeing work. It was a good business to be in. People didn't buy new clothes like they do now. When their clothes started to look old they would get them dyed. They always dyed them a darker colour. If they were originally white they would be dyed light blue. If they were light blue they would be dyed dark blue. My father was already very well known by the time I was born. He would walk from Central to Causeway Bay. He carried everything he needed

with him. He had a big wooden box with his name on it: HUI KUM KEI – DYEING MERCHANT. His name was Hui Kum. Kei means 'company'. This box was about two-and-a-half feet high and about twenty inches square. In this he kept all the dye stuffs and utensils he needed, a stove for heating up the water and also there was space for all the clothes he collected that didn't need to be dyed urgently. These he could take home and dye there. However, some people insisted he did the dyeing on the spot, while they waited, so he also carried a large tin tank in which he had some water.

He carried everything on a hawker's pole. At the front he tied his box and at the back he tied the tank. But the tank was light compared to the box with everything in it, so he put water in the tank. He was a very strong man. I know he could carry up to a picul in weight: that's about 100 catties (130 pounds). He put his shoulder under the pole and lifted it up. Then he would walk with quick short steps that made everything sway and dance, like a spring. That makes it easier to carry a load like that. He would walk down the streets calling out: 'Hui Kum is here. Dye your clothes.' In those days it was easy to tell everyone you were coming. None of the buildings was more than four or five floors high. Everyone could hear what was going on in the street. If anyone wanted him they would just shout down from the windows. In those days there wasn't any mains water. All the water came from wells. He would go to the nearest well and draw up the water he needed. Then he would heat up the water, add the dye, stir it until it was just right and then he would dye the clothes. Later, when he had made a name for himself, he always refused to do the dyeing in the street. Instead he would collect the clothes and take them home. By the time I was born he was doing good business. He was quite well off. But he wasn't rich. Maybe I brought him luck. Within a year of my birth he was to be a very rich man. How? It was like this.

When war broke out in the summer of 1914, people became nervous and this had an impact on the economy. Obviously at a time like this no one buys new clothes and no one worries if their old clothes don't look very smart. No one spends money on looking good. So naturally the dyeing business was very bad. But later it turned out to be lucky because soon there was more dyeing business than ever before because people preferred to dye their old clothes rather than buy new clothes.

The very best clothes dye was made in Germany. Before the war broke out my father had bought twelve drums of this dye. Soon it became impossible to get this so there was a very big shortage and the price shot up. My father sold his stock of dye and for each tub he sold he was able to buy a large property in Canton. He bought warehouses and blocks of flats, three- or four-storey blocks. So we became very rich. But even though we were very rich we lived a very simple life. We had a two-storey building in Staunton Street, just above Hollywood Road – but we just rented it. We lived upstairs. Maybe it was about 700 square feet with a slanted, tiled roof which was very common then. My father did his dyeing in the kitchen. With the money he earned in rents from the properties in Canton he bought more property. We were rich but you could never tell that by looking at him. He dressed in very simple Chinese-style clothes.