

Thugs and gangsters

THERE WERE THREE MAJOR “TRIBES” in Diamond Hill. The biggest was the Cantonese, mainly indigenous Hong Kong people or refugees from Guangdong province. The Chiu Chow refugees were a force to be reckoned with. And the rest were all called Shanghainese. The Cantonese had this habit of calling anyone who spoke any non-Cantonese dialect a Shanghainese.

My father’s ancestors originated from Zhejiang, and he was born and raised in Xian and Wuhan. He spoke Cantonese with a heavy accent, and he was immediately labeled a Shanghainese.

There is safety in numbers. The Cantonese produced the largest number of thugs and triad members. They also looked down on anyone who spoke with an accent.

The Chiu Chow people could hold their own because they had a reputation for being fierce fighters

and being loyal to their own people. One of their favorite sayings was: *Gaa gie noun*, which means *paisan* in mafia-speak. When a fight broke out between a Chiu Chow group and another group, you could count on other Chiu Chow people in the area to join in. Chiu Chow people fought among themselves, too; but all would be forgotten when outside people were involved.

The “Shanghainese” were generally meek people. Most of them were not literally Shanghainese anyway, and could have been from any province other than Guangdong. There was no bond among them. Genuine Shanghainese, rightly or wrongly, had a reputation for being wily and having a penchant for pretending to be richer than they really were. They were also formidable businessmen.

My mother was from Chiu Chow, my father was Shanghainese, and I spoke perfect Cantonese. So I’d be whatever worked to my advantage. Among Chiu Chow people, I’d be *gaa gie noun*, I spoke Mandarin with the Shanghainese, and among Cantonese, no one had to know I wasn’t one of them.

In spite of my father’s worries, I could never become a thug or a triad member, because I was a coward and I was not cruel enough. I did not grow up in a family full of thugs. Also, even at a young age,

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I believed I would have a future. There was nothing in my formative years that was conducive to a life of crime.

Ah Noun, on the other hand, was spoiled rotten by his mother. The “uncles” who visited him once in a while were macho guys who promised him protection and taught him life lessons not in what not to do, but how not to get caught doing what should not be done. He was hopeless in school, and was a natural-born fighter. When he was seventeen, he fought with another thug in a nearby village over a girl, and got stabbed in the abdomen. After leaving hospital, he had to marry the girl because she was pregnant. He took up a job as a marine policeman later, and told us not to call him Ah Noun but call him Double Eight, his badge number. His mother made his wife wash his feet every day when he came home from work or else she would be beaten. I witnessed the beatings with my own eyes, and they were brutal. What was memorable to me was not only the face of a young woman smeared with blood and tears but also the expression of nonchalance on the face of Ah Noun, as if it was none of his business.

Ah Noun got into trouble when he abandoned mother, wife, and son and everyone else and started going to “dance halls,” where men paid to dance and

chat with young women. He borrowed heavily and ran afoul of the law to earn desperate cash. All this happened before he turned twenty. He spent the rest of his life in jail or running.

Ah Noun's cousin was a thug of a different kind. His nickname was "Bull." He looked like one and behaved even worse. He was an epileptic, and did not receive the best of medical care. His fits must have deprived him of oxygen to his brain, because he was borderline retarded. His father, who was a well-respected member of the Chiu Chow fraternity, always insisted it was karma and not illness that had caused his son's problems. You should have seen the father's face whenever Bull was lying on the ground convulsing. It seemed the father was suffering more pain and despair than the son.

It didn't help to have a cousin like Ah Noun, who frequently led him astray by getting him in all sorts of trouble. Ah Noun would taunt him into getting into fights with people just for kicks. To get his own kicks, Bull went around sexually assaulting young girls. He approached the victim from the opposite direction and swung his hand towards her crotch and squeezed it so hard the girl screamed and sometimes passed out in pain.

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One of the victims was my friend's sister. The family was so traumatized they didn't talk to anyone in the neighborhood for years.

Another thug I knew had a worse childhood. Ah Noun and Bull were violent and dumb. This one was violent and psychotic. His nickname was Kwai Tsai (ghost boy) because he had light blond hair, blue eyes, and freckles on his face. He had always been an angry young man, for good reasons. His Chinese mother worked in a Wan Chai bar, and it was common knowledge what she did for a living, and the other kids wouldn't let him forget it. He was much feared because he used weapons when he fought. He would produce a knife or an axe at the slightest provocation. Policemen were usually called. One time I saw a tall plain-clothed policeman take his axe from him by a *kung fu* move that would do Bruce Lee proud. I was so impressed that I tried to talk my father into giving me money for *kung fu* lessons. I did not get it. Whenever I asked for anything, my father would lecture me on the power of the pen. That's why I am torturing people now not with my *kung fu* but my pen.

When I was a teenager, many young men knew some *kung fu*, or claimed to know it. The most popular style was Wing Chun, which was easy to get

into but hard to excel at. Young men learned *kung fu* for self-defense and to show off, and also as a result of the domino effect. When Umbrella got beaten up by a bigger kid for being cheeky, he immediately enrolled in a Wing Chun class. Within weeks, he wanted us to accompany him to attend an arranged fight between him and some kid he had a grudge with, so that he could show off his *kung fu* moves. His opponent was a smaller kid, and Umbrella might have won that one marginally. Very soon, we heard that small kid was taking up *kung fu* as well. His *kung fu* master was the same one who taught Umbrella, so during the initiation ceremony in which that kid was to kowtow to the master and vow subservience for life, the master told Umbrella and that small kid to make up. They had their arms around each other's shoulders and swore brotherhood and allegiance to each other's life and the betterment of the art of *kung fu*. It was so disgusting to watch I almost threw up.

A younger brother of my sister's friend, also a La Salle boy, got bullied by some boys from St. George's College, which was a school for the British Army brats. He picked up Wing Chun, and apparently got to be quite good at it after a couple of years. His mission in life became going over to Kowloon Tong and picking fights with St. George's boys.

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My favorite thug was a guy named Chee Kit who lived not too far from the wet market down Diamond Hill Road. He was a couple of years older than I was, but we were in the same class in school. He was also a Wing Chun wizard. After my dramatic improvement in academic standing in school, I let him copy my homework in exchange for protecting me from other bullies. He was everyone's friend when some extra muscles were needed. But you had to be very clear about who the target was because he had been known to mess up and beat up the wrong guy. He wasn't very bright.

Young thugs usually formed a gang and then they became formidable. There were many such loosely formed gangs. Most didn't do any harm except to protect their turf and honor, or to teach a cheeky outsider a lesson. Unlike young triad gangs nowadays, they were not into any money-making ruses, because there just wasn't any money around. They were, however, very much about girls. All the loose girls (called teddy girls) in the village were seen hanging out with them. Boys like me could only gawk and salivate.

There were basically two categories of teddy girls. One category was regular girlfriend of a thug, the other was communal property. We had a friend who was too young and too short to be a regular thug but

hung around to be their errand boy. He told us he was once rewarded with one of the communal girls, but he refused in a hurry because she happened to be his older sister.

This girl had quite a past. She got knocked up at a very young age. The mother, a hawker in the wet market, when told of the pregnancy, was in for a shock because no one, not even her own daughter, could pinpoint who the father was. The young girl would offer herself for rewards as little as a ticket to a movie or a meal in a tea-house, according to Ah Ho, our maid, who knew the mother well.

The lack of privacy at home was a big problem for dating. If a boy wanted to get to know his girlfriend better, but had no car or money for a love motel, he could only use a dark corner or a deserted spot in public areas.

When I got my driver's license, the first thing my friends and I did was to borrow a car and drive it after dark to all the popular make-out spots in town, for instance, Kadoorie Avenue or dead-end streets in Ho Man Tin. We drove in without headlights and suddenly turned them on to put the spotlight on men and women in compromising positions. That was good for a cheap thrill.

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The Diamond Hill thugs dealt with the privacy problem in their own way. When we were twelve or thirteen, we went gallivanting in a nearby hill and in a clearing among the bushes, the three of us stumbled upon a man and a young lady in a state of undress. Then all of a sudden, three big guys showed up and threatened to do us some harm if we didn't scam, saying we were disrupting important business their brother was conducting. We scooted away with our tails between our legs. We talked excitedly about the incident for weeks afterwards, and each time the girl was more naked than the last.

When we were a bit older, maybe fourteen or fifteen, we stumbled upon another sex scene, this time in a vacant lot where we played soccer during the day but which became deserted at night because there were no street lights. We were curious to see numerous flashlights flickering on the ground. When we went closer, we found twenty or so "couples," lying down on newspaper or towels, several feet apart, and engaging in necking and heavy petting. We didn't have a chance to have a better look, because a sentry was there pronto, and threatened to punch our eyeballs out if we looked that way again.

There were two types of thugs: the teenage bullies who ganged up to terrorize other teenagers, and the

grown-up ones who were most likely triad members with prison records. I had only seen teenage thugs fighting in the streets. Adults were seen late at night in the back of a coffee shop whispering to one another. Fights usually involved several young gangsters attacking one victim. Battles between two gangs were rare, indicating that if you belonged to a gang, you didn't get bullied. The street gangs were very organized when it came to ambushing someone. A few fighters would be dispatched to guard possible escape routes. One would try to immobilize the target by bear-hugging him from behind, followed by the victim being assaulted by a barrage of fists from others. I still remember a thug by the name of Willy, who liked to strike with two fists clenched together. It must have been a pretty clumsy way to fight, but it worked well when your opponent was held down by your collaborators. The thump of fists landing on someone's body could make your heart race and give you a cold sweat.

A beating was meant to teach a lesson and not to maim. It was meant to send the victim to a bone-setter and not to a surgeon. The Chinese medicine man down the street did a swift business taking care of victims of gang attacks by applying a herbal lotion called "wine for beatings by iron" to the bruises of the battered body.

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When young thugs graduated to become full-fledged adult ones, you didn't see them in the streets in broad daylight anymore. I asked one of my old acquaintances what happened to them. He said: "There is no money in Diamond Hill." They often migrated to Mong Kok, Yau Ma Tei, and Tsim Sha Tsui where all the money-making actions were.

Umbrella's neighbor was a Chiu Chow triad member of good standing. He was typical in that he married a plain-looking school teacher, a homebody who bore him children and looked after him without questioning him about his whereabouts or his businesses. He ran an illegal gambling den, and sometimes took Umbrella and me on a tour of all the joints where he had "influence," including a dance hall in Yau Ma Tei where he talked to the manager in a dialect I couldn't understand even though it was Cantonese. He collected \$10 each from us, and he only used half of the money when it was time to pay and pocketed the rest. Umbrella told me the big man was accustomed to getting discounts wherever he went.

The relationship between policemen and thugs was complicated, especially with Chiu Chow men. It was said the career path of a Chiu Chow boy would be either a gangster or a cop—the former a regular thug, the latter a thug with a gun and a warrant card. A Chiu

Chow boy of age could apply to the police academy if he hadn't had a criminal record and was semi-literate. Failing that, he would join some relatives or childhood friends in what would be called *lo pin moon*, which could be loosely translated into "working in a semi-legal business."

I had seen gangsters arrested by policemen and the verbal exchange would be in the Chiu Chow dialect, with the gangsters declaring their affiliations, looking for some kind of connection. Violence broke out often, usually with the gangster punching the cop. I seldom witnessed police brutality in the streets, but I was told if you were in the much feared *tsap tsai fong*—the room of the plain-clothed Criminal Investigation Division officers, you would be in for an experience you wouldn't forget.

The beat policemen in our eyes were pretty low human beings. They were, as I alluded to before, thugs with a license. I had seen them walk into Tai Lin's place, an open house, pick up an apple off the dinner table and walk away. They did their route, stopped by a few illegal spots to collect their daily bribes and did nothing except bully female hawkers. Umbrella's father knew a few cops, and that was how we learnt of the illegal gambling and opium dens in the neighborhood.

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The plain-clothed CID were even worse; their demeanor was indistinguishable from that of triad thugs, with their true identity apparent only when they showed off the gun they carried at the waist.

Many thugs wore hats, the kind you see in Humphrey Bogart movies. We watched a policeman trying to chase down a thug, and dramatically the hat fell off his head, and that stopped the policeman in his tracks, because he had to pick up the hat and look for clues inside. Some older guy told us, in a conspiratorial tone, that there would be a hundred-dollar bill tucked inside.

Not all young thugs grew up to be professional gangsters. A guy by the name of Johnson used to go out with my sister. (As was usually the case, a La Salle boy and a Maryknoll girl). He lived in Kowloon City but came to Diamond Hill often because of my sister. He was a muscular guy and was much feared among the young thugs in Diamond Hill, because he teamed up with another La Salle boy by the name of Michael who lived in Tai Hom Village, and together they had broken a few bones and taught a few lessons to the local teddy boys. Johnson later in life migrated to Canada and became an accountant. And Michael became Mr. Michael Hui Koon Man, the showbiz tycoon, and one of the most successful comic actors

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and movie producers Hong Kong has seen. Michael has three younger brothers. The oldest one was Hui Koon Mo, nicknamed “Hero,” who in those days formed his own youth gang terrorizing the neighborhood. He grew up more law-abiding but did no better than being the owner of unsuccessful bars and restaurants. The other two younger brothers were not like Hero; they were more like Michael and went into show biz. Hui Koon Ying became a comic actor, and the youngest brother is Samuel Hui Koon Kit, the most famous of the brothers, who had an illustrious music career, and is still lauded by Hong Kong people as the god of Canto pop.