

# 九龍的心結

## **Kowloon Complex**

Kowloon is to Hong Kong as Brooklyn is to Manhattan.

The analogy is uncanny. Brooklyn is a reluctant sidekick to the much more glamorous Manhattan Island on the other side of the East River. Although Brooklyn is just one subway stop away from lower Manhattan, that two-minute train ride is what separates the men from the boys. Snooty Manhattanites, convinced that there is nothing in Brooklyn that you can't find back on the island, would never voluntarily cross the river unless some extraordinary reason warrants the inconvenience, such as to visit a friend who has thoughtlessly moved to the "boroughs." Brooklyn neighborhoods like Williamsburg and Brooklyn Heights are often touted by real estate agents using self-defeating sales pitches like

“the city view on *this* side of the East River is so much better. Look how gorgeous Manhattan is!”

The sister rivalry between Brooklyn and Manhattan is a staple for New York-centric TV series like *Friends*, *Will & Grace* and *Sex and the City*. And the same rivalry exists between Kowloon and Hong Kong. If you still don't see the parallel, read the preceding paragraph again and replace “East River” with “Victoria Harbour,” “Williamsburg” with “Whampoa” and “Brooklyn Heights” with “Olympic City” and you'll get my point. During the six years I spent in New York, I set foot in Brooklyn for all of three or four times, including twice for dinner at Peter Luger Steakhouse, one of the city's notorious tourist traps. My record of harbor-crossing to the Kowloon side is slightly better, averaging four or five times a year. I go there mostly for a concert at the Cultural Centre or an occasional singing gig at Harbour City.

But is Kowloon really Hong Kong's ugly stepsister? To the snooty Hong Konger, the Kowloon skyline is decidedly boring and never photographed. For the most part, the peninsula is unexcitingly flat, lacking the dramatic amphitheater-like topography on the Hong Kong side created by the contiguous ridgeline stretching from Mount Collinson (歌連臣山) on the east all the way to Lung Fu Shan (龍虎山) on the west. Kowloon is also devoid of any interesting architecture, unless you count the windowless, bathroom tiles-covered Cultural Centre and a planetarium that resembles a shiny bald head. Compared to their Hong Kong cousins, Kowloon folks are known to be somewhat rough around the edges in their manners, a prejudice my mom instilled in me when I was a boy.

For many years after Kowloon was ceded to Britain in the 1860s, European settlers used the rural peninsula only for recreational hunting while indigenous villagers worked their rice paddies and

traded sandalwood. Kowloon remained largely undeveloped until the turn of the 20th Century when the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) project began to urbanize the area. Still, land on the peninsula was rarely treated with care and respect. The original southern terminal of the KCR was built right in the middle of Tsim Sha Tsui, taking up valuable urban land and hindering long-term city planning. In the 1920s, a plot of reclaimed land near Kowloon Bay, originally slated for an upscale residential development, was purchased by the government to build an airfield. The site was later modified into the city's first international airport, limiting building heights across half of Kowloon and making the airport itself the world's most difficult one for landings and takeoffs. This urban anomaly was not corrected until 1998 when the government finally came to its senses and moved the airport to Lantau Island.

With a chip on their shoulders, Kowloonites keep a watchful eye on their sister island's every move and respond with the perfect countermove, creating an eerie parallel universe on the other side of the harbor. Shoppers' paradise Causeway Bay and its crown jewel Times Square meet their match with chaotic Mongkok and Langham Place. The 88-story skyscraper IFC Two is soon to be outdone by the 118-story ICC Tower that looks and sounds suspiciously similar to its rival. Middle-class micro-city Tai Koo Shing and up-market enclave Happy Valley lock horns with Mei Foo and Kowloon Tong. Every park, stadium and country club in Hong Kong has a counterpoint in Kowloon. Even the laid back afternoon tea at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Central cannot escape a challenge from the decidedly colonial Peninsula Hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui that offers its own 4 pm *prix-fixe*. Kowloonites do not take their sister rivalry lightly.

If *Sex and the City* were set in Hong Kong, you can bet Miranda Hobbes, ever the practical lawyer, would live in Kowloon and

her posse would be doling out wise quips like “you know, *HK Magazine* says Kowloon is the new Hong Kong.” And the cynical, self-deprecating red-head would roll her eyes and snap back, “whoever wrote *that* lives in Kowloon!” Touché, Ms. Hobbes.



*Famous sight of a jumbo jet negotiating its way through residential buildings in the Kowloon Bay area*

# 阿 家 與 禧 敏

## **Ah Gah and The Hill**

I come from a big family. The age gap between the oldest and youngest siblings is well over a half generation. The five children, three boys and two girls, grew up in a crammed apartment in Tin Hau fighting over the bathroom and poking fun at each other every day. Born in the year of the tiger, my big sister Margaret combines the temperament of a ferocious feline and the maternal instincts of a loving tigress around her cubs. Ah Gah (阿家 Big Sis) – for that is how everyone in the family addresses her – was nothing short of a second mother to me. She would check my homework every night and buy me nifty school supplies as rewards for good grades.

When I turned four, Ah Gah got me a set of 24 coloring pencils in a sleek tin box. Printed on the box cover was the picture of a handsome sailing boat cutting through white waves on the open sea. Inside the box, the two-dozen sharp things were like a thousand Christmas gifts – the colors dazzled the eye and taught me words like “magenta” and “cobalt.” I kept the pencils at the bottom of my drawer, where they remained largely unused. That was until I entered a coloring contest in kindergarten and won second prize. Over the years the tin box survived many moves, and is now tucked away somewhere in my parents’ basement in Toronto.



*Ah Gah and her little brother back in the days*

Like everyone else in my family, Ah Gah has her quirks. Back in the days, we would hear her sing off-key to Whitney Houston’s gut-wrenching ballads every morning while blasting away with

the blow-dryer that turned her hair-do into a perpetual hair-don't. Then there was that small city of creams and lotions sprawling over her nightstand while a Shirley MacLaine paperback balanced precariously on the edge. If the former was the reason for her blinding facial glare each nightfall, then the latter would explain her propensity for drama and hair-trigger reactions to life's vicissitudes big and small.

Margaret now lives in Melbourne with her husband and daughter. Despite her geographical isolation from the rest of us, Ah Gah remains the glue that holds the rest of the family together. And after all these years, she is still the first person everyone calls upon whenever help is needed. Last year, when mom complained about her blood pressure, the ever-dutiful daughter spent nights researching online until she zeroed in on the perfect herbal remedy. And when her teenage daughter Hilary stressed over a school presentation, Margaret signed herself up for a public speaking workshop to make sure she was qualified to help. If anyone else had told me they did that, I would have laughed it off as a bad joke!

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It is often said that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Surely enough, sixteen-year-old Hilary is blossoming into an upstanding young lady with a big heart. The Hill – for that is what I insist on calling my niece after the nickname was coined for Hillary Clinton during the 2008 presidential campaign – was struggling somewhat with her Grade 11 coursework and the looming threat of university entrance exams. Then Margaret remembered that I teach high school English and counsel students on college applications, and she sent me an email from Melbourne asking for my advice. I answered her distress call with great excitement, like Batman responding to the Bat Signal.

In the past weeks I have been calling the Hill to give her the lowdown on time management and study tactics – all the secrets and wisdom I accumulated through college and law school, and which I hold dear and near to my heart. And when the Hill told me she needed help with *Macbeth*, my heart skipped a beat. “Get your Skype account ready and fasten your seatbelt,” I screamed into the telephone and proceeded to schedule one-on-one lessons via video-conference.

My eagerness to coach Hilary has little to do with my passion for teaching and much more to do with Margaret. Despite the many differences in our beliefs, values and not least our singing voices and opinions on hairstyles, Ah Gah was the guiding light in my formative years. All that faith, hope and love she poured into her baby brother have made him the man he is today. I have always wanted to do something for Margaret in return, but what does a forty-something middle-class suburban mother possibly need from me? It never occurred to me until now that helping her daughter is the best way to repay my big sister for everything she did for me. It is perhaps the *only* way.

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The sheen has long vanished from the tin surface, brown rust advances. The writing on the cover peels away. But if Hilary is able to hold her own as she comes of age, I will give her the shabby box of coloring pencils and tell her what it means. And I will ask the Hill to pass it down like a prized family heirloom.



# 大自然定律

## **Laws of Nature**

Back when I was still living in Toronto, my family and I used to spend a lot of time in front of the television set. If nothing good was on, we would flip to the Discovery Channel by default and watch ferocious felines rip apart an innocent zebra or a helpless gazelle. I often wondered why the camera crew would just stand on the sidelines and let the film roll, while savagery unfolded before their eyes. Would a successful rescue upset the order of the jungle and threaten the delicate balance of the entire ecosystem? Perhaps it is best not to interfere.

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One afternoon I found myself shopping at City Super, a high-end grocery store in Hong Kong that sells mostly imported foods. At

the cured meat counter I asked for 150 grams of *prosciutto* to make my own sandwich. While the meat boy was working the slicer, a pair of middle-aged women approached the counter.



*City Super grocery store at the glitzy IFC Mall*

“Check out these hams,” the older of the two roused her companion in loud, accented Cantonese, pointing at the giant leg of *prosciutto di San Daniele* inside the glass cabinet. Her loudness drew my attention and her accent gave away her immigrant status. The younger of the two, perhaps a relative or a friend, picked up a sealed package of *jamón ibérico* from the nearby wicker basket and exclaimed, “\$350 for so little meat? I am afraid to even touch it.” But her promise was quickly broken, as she proceeded to bore her thumb into the prized meat before passing it to the older woman for further inspection.

“Is 156 okay, sir?” the meat boy asked me politely while reading the weight from the electronic scale. I nodded in the affirmative

and dropped the purchase into my shopping cart. Watching me intently, the younger woman tapped her companion's arm in rapid succession. "Did you hear? \$756 for that tiny amount!" she gasped, mistaking the ham's weight for its price and 156 for 756 (the numbers 1 and 7 are easily mixed up in Cantonese). Instead of correcting their misunderstanding, I gave the two women a friendly smile and disappeared into the eddies of shoppers.

I smiled at the two immigrants not because I found them amusing. I did so because in them I saw myself and my family many years ago. My family emigrated to Toronto in the 1980s as part of the Hong Kong Diaspora to escape the dreaded 1997 handover. Our move was marked by the same trials and tribulations experienced by many immigrant families: the struggle to blend in. But time and again we gave ourselves away with our cultural *faux pas*, some of them uncorrected for years. The two women's episode at City Super was a minor infraction compared to our social blunders too many and too embarrassing to enumerate.

Today, tens of thousands of new immigrants arrive in Hong Kong from Mainland China every year. Newcomers in pursuit of the Hong Kong Dream tend to be grass-roots families banished to immigrant ghettos like Tin Shui Wai (天水圍), euphemistically named "new towns" sprawling on the fringes of the city. A typical family comprises a father who makes minimum wage at a construction site or restaurant kitchen, a stay-at-home mother on a constant quest for part-time work, and young children struggling to fit in at school. Life is tough, but pervasive social prejudice makes it much tougher.

On average new immigrants spend more time watching local TV than the native Hong Konger. With little disposable income and a non-existent social life, they depend on free TV broadcasts as the only ready form of entertainment. Besides, primetime soap

operas with convoluted plots of love, deceit and betrayal offer glimpses of Hong Kong society that may prove instructive in the new environment. It makes me wonder whether these reasons also explain my own family's TV addiction in Toronto back in the days.

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I grabbed a baguette from the in-store bakery and pushed my shopping cart to the cash registers. In front of me, a man in his thirties conversed with his female companion in melodious Mandarin as he put down two bottles of mineral water and a \$50 bill on the counter. Before I could figure out whether they were immigrants or tourists, the cashier girl, no more than sixteen years of age, rebuffed the Mainland Chinese customers in broken Mandarin, "you only pay for bread here!" Caught off guard, the man asked where he should be paying for his water instead. The teenager spoke again, this time louder and more annoyed than the last, "over there!" She pointed to the main registers on her right without looking up.

I removed the basket from my shopping cart and placed it on the counter and was immediately met with the same gruffness. "You too! You follow that man," the cashier barked. Noticing the disapproving frown between my eyebrows, she switched back to her mother tongue and apologized, "I'm sorry, do you speak Cantonese?" I nodded, struggling to understand what language had got to do with payment procedures. Somehow amused by the situation, the teenager let out a giggle, covering her mouth with one hand, and offered, "let me bag the baguette for you. But I'm sorry you still have to pay at the main registers. Please forgive the inconvenience, sir."

For a moment I was frozen, lost in my thoughts. In the capitalist jungle that is our city, even a sixteen-year-old has fangs. Should I have meddled during the cashier's assault on the Mainlander by reporting her behavior to the store manager and turned the predator into prey, the hunter into the hunted? The teenager could have received a reprimand or perhaps even lost her job. But in the end I did nothing. Like the Discovery Channel camera crew, I chose not to interfere with nature. It was nature of a different, more complex sort.