

KITCHEN TILES

A COLLECTION OF SALTY, WET
STORIES FROM THE BAR-ROOMS OF
HONG KONG

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BLACKSMITH BOOKS

Kitchen Tiles

ISBN 978-988-13764-9-7

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Edited by Grahame Collins

Published by Blacksmith Books

Unit 26, 19/F, Block B, Wah Lok Industrial Centre,

37-41 Shan Mei Street, Fo Tan, Hong Kong

Tel: (+852) 2877 7899 • www.blacksmithbooks.com

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FOREWORD

The Cantonese call anyone lecherous, and anything salacious, *harm sup* – literally, salty (and) wet. And the Cantonese code name for *harm sup* is “kitchen tiles”. Anyone who’s ever been inside a Chinese kitchen knows it is like a war zone, with water and condiments spilt all over the place; hence the tiles are deemed salty and wet.

Kitchen Tiles is the title of this book because the content focuses on the lascivious aspects of Hong Kong society, and if the articles are not sex-related, they are often off-beat and captious.

Some of the articles were published in the *South China Morning Post* in the late 1990s when I was one of their columnists. Later on, I self-published them with the help of the late Diane Stormont – under the title *Idle Musings*.

Kitchen Tiles is the new and improved edition, with several new stories.

I used the word “bimbo” many times, but all within the same article. I used it not to denigrate women but to show the shallowness of some Hong Kong men. I hope no one gets too

upset over its use. I have to forewarn the readers, because when the article appeared in the *Post*, I received some hate mail.

All the stories are based on my life experiences. Names and circumstances might have been fictionalized, but the sentiment and spirit are authentic. There is plenty of irreverence, and maybe some humor. My publisher thinks it's worth republishing my work properly this time. It's up to you readers to prove him right or wrong.

Feng Chi-shun
Hong Kong

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I

TEA DANCE

Why settle for just afternoon tea if you can have both tea and dance?

Hong Kong in the '60s and '70s had numerous venues where young people could go in the afternoon for a snack and a drink, and most of all, live music they could dance to. Groups of girls made themselves available as dance partners for young men on the prowl. But they were nice girls, and dancing was all they would agree to. Romance blossomed on a regular basis, I'm sure, but the original motive was solely the love of dancing.

Live bands played Western music, because the popular dances were all Western, including Cha Cha, Rock & Roll, Twist, A-go-go, Two-Step, and Jitterbug. A Waltz sometimes, but rarely Tango.

Then there was another type of tea-dance outlet, which provided in-house dance girls for male customers to choose from, and pay to become their dance partners. Charges were based on the number of units of time spent with the customer, and the duration of each unit varied as widely as the price for the catch

of the day. An hour could be divided into twelve, twenty-four, or thirty-six portions, depending on how good the business was at that time. When the service of a lady was hired, she would insert a chit into a container on the customer's table for billing purposes.

In these types of tea-dance places, customers usually went for the slow dance so that they could be physically intimate with the ladies. Groping was not routinely permitted, but because the place was pitch dark, it was frequently attempted. As is usually the case with the flesh trade, the more popular the woman, the less she gave away.

These dance partners were theoretically available for sexual services as well, though many claimed they were doing the dancing part to raise their families, and were not ready to sell their bodies. Many men spent huge sums of money trying to win the hearts of their favorite women so that they could have their bodies as well; but failed, only to find out their friends were able to buy the same women – at a fraction of what they had spent – in a nearby hourly motel where the supposedly chaste women actually worked as freelance hookers.

Interestingly, the steamy environment of such type of tea-dance parlors was the hotbed for the origin of slang commonly used in Hong Kong today. According to legend, in a popular tea-dance outlet in Sheung Wan, a short and ugly patron made up for his deficiencies in the looks department by wearing very expensive suits, made by an up-market tailor on Shanghai Street called Tsuen Tso (“Made by Tsuen”). He was quick to show

people the label of his suits when comments were made about his exquisite wardrobe. Soon, he was called *Ah Tsuen*, meaning “an inch” in Chinese, indicating his love of fancy suits made by the famous Tsuen Tso, and also insinuating his small stature and shortness of a specific part of his anatomy as well. *Tsuen* is nowadays synonymous with being cheeky.

Another slang word owing its origin to the tea-dance era is *lo sai*, which is nowadays synonymous with *the boss*. But it was originally used sarcastically to describe another tea-dance patron, who was the boss of a trading company and had a bit of money. He was infamous for being mean, cheap and *harm sup*. He was given to sample every dancing girl available in the dance hall, but was willing to pay as little money for sex as he could get away with. They called him *lo sai* (literally, old and small), because he was ridiculed behind his back as being old in age and small in manhood.

LOCKHART ROAD

Lockhart Road in Wanchai never changes. What remain constant are the sleaze and the sex – a sin city within our metropolis. The atmosphere there somehow attracts many expat male denizens of Hong Kong, and certain tourists.

In the late '60s and early '70s, when I was in my late teens and early twenties, Lockhart Road was a narrow street, made narrower still by the roadside girlie bars pushing their jukeboxes halfway out the door. Over a stretch of many months, they played two songs loudly over and over again – *House of the Rising Sun* by The Animals, and *Black is Black* by The Los Bravos.

Working girls spilled out into the street hustling for business. Typically, the girls wore stilettos, long false eyelashes, dark eyeliners, and lots of make-up – nothing like the girl-next-door image of Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong*. Their business hopped when US soldiers took leave from battleships docked in the Hong Kong harbor, in transit to and from Vietnam.

Some of the girls were careless enough to become pregnant, and in Tsan Yuk Maternity Hospital where I was trained as a medical student, the staff at the delivery room often made crude bets on whether the baby coming up would be a black or a white one.

Fast forward to the 21st century.

Lockhart Road is still a narrow street. Old buildings have been replaced by glittering high rises. Neon lights and street lamps are brighter now. The demographics of the women working there have changed radically. It used to be mainly local Chinese; many from the fishing village of Tai O. Now, Filipinas and Thai women are the staple sex workers, with a United Nations of transitory hookers who ply their trade on a short-term basis.

The girlie bars are still there, with young women in hot pants sitting outside the entrance, ogling potential customers and literally pulling them inside the bar if they show the slightest interest. The entrance is usually blocked by a velvety screen, and there is always a metal container nearby, used to hold burning joss sticks and hell money – the traditional practice with any Chinese-owned vice establishment.

These girlie bars are notorious for ripping off the inebriated tourist by adding extra zeros to his credit card bill after he has signed. A tab of \$2,500 becomes \$250,000 when he receives the monthly invoice back in his home country; too far away to complain effectively to the Hong Kong Police, and maybe too difficult to explain to the wife.

There are also numerous bars meant to be watering holes only. Some ban women who appear to be working girls, while others welcome them by erecting a pole in the middle of the sitting area and providing deejay music to encourage pole dancing – especially on Sunday, the day of rest for many domestic helpers, who want to supplement their income by making trips to an hourly motel close by with any of the drinking customers who are aroused beyond control viewing their pole-dancing moves.

In the wee hours of the morning – notably around daybreak – Lockhart Road could be quite a sight. Among many interesting things, it is not unusual to find an expat man lying next to a pile of garbage by the roadside, in a drunken stupor, vomit all over his expensive tailored suit, wallet empty.

Once in a while, there are police reports of a male customer on Lockhart Road being led to an ATM by a woman, and the man carelessly divulging his PIN to her – apparently after consuming drinks laced with something equivalent to a date-rape drug.

On Lockhart Road, men willingly subscribe to degeneracy, and women excel at hustling money from such men. Just like the good old days.

A friend of mine grew up in the area. He knows a mama-san on Lockhart Road, who started out as a teenage prostitute there. When I was writing another book, he took me to her bar to interview her, for her take on her industry. We spent thousands of dollars that evening buying her and her girls watered-down sugar water. She said she would meet me for lunch the next day to tell me her life story. We even agreed on a rendezvous.

She never showed up.

Lockhart Road never changes.