

HONG KONG NOIR

“Ng and Blumberg-Kason defy the fates by presenting a collection of 14 stories—by Chinese tradition, an ominous number—illustrating their city’s dark side. [Their] Hong Kong is a city on the brink, haunted by its past but facing an uncertain future. Readers can feel lucky to have such a collection.” — *Kirkus Reviews*

“Hong Kong is a city of breathtaking highs and earth-shattering lows, luxury and poverty, excess and want, and this new collection of 14 tales from Hong Kong’s best crime writers showcases the extremes of one of the world’s capitals. From ghost stories, to historical thrills, to underworld brutality, *Hong Kong Noir*, like the city it captures, is as endlessly fascinating as it is impossible to define.” — *CrimeReads*

HONG KONG NOIR

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Hong Kong Noir

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For my fellow Hong Kongers, alive and dead.

—JYN

For Tom, for bringing me back.

—SBK

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INTRODUCTION

BEHIND THE NEON LIGHTS

Fourteen. That number is about as bad as it gets in Hong Kong. Pronounced “sup say” in Cantonese, the city’s lingua franca, the ominous word sounds like “sut say”—which means certain death. It is so universally avoided that buildings have no fourteenth floor and people stay clear of cell phone numbers, license plates, and hotel rooms with that inauspicious combination of digits. Think about the myth surrounding unlucky thirteen in the West, amplify that a thousand times, and you’ll start to get the idea.

So when Akashic Books suggested that we put together fourteen stories for a Hong Kong noir volume, we cringed. *Choy!* as older folks in Hong Kong like to say when they hear something sacrilegious, before they spit on the floor and shoot the offender a dirty look.

Then it clicked. Of course. It has to be. What would the city’s first noir volume be without the most forbidding of all numbers? A collection of dark tales set in Hong Kong must have fourteen stories—no fewer and no more. Call it foresight or blind luck, the publisher had gotten it dead right.

But unlucky numbers are hardly the only ominous thing that Hong Kong has to offer. Going back two centuries when it was a sleepy fishing village on the underbelly of imperial China, Hong Kong was rife with pirates roaming the South China Sea. Once the British snatched Hong Kong—after not one but two wars with the Middle Kingdom—they built it up with opium money.

Conglomerates in modern-day Hong Kong like Jardines started out as drug pushers to a country that never wanted opium in the first place. With checkered beginnings like this, it is little wonder that Hong Kong has always had a dark side that persists to this day.

Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China, spoke Cantonese as his mother tongue and spent his formative years in Hong Kong in the late nineteenth century. It was there he and likeminded rebels plotted an empire-ending revolution against the Qing Court. Soon, with its *laissez-faire* environment, Hong Kong became home to Jews, Russians, Parsees, Gurkhas, Hindus, and other foreigners seeking new starts and business opportunities. When the Second World War reached East Asia, Hong Kong became a refuge for mainland Chinese fleeing Japanese invaders. And on Christmas Day in 1941, the city fell and so began one of the darkest chapters in its colonial history. During the occupation, Japanese collaborators and the Allied resistance played dangerous games of espionage in Hong Kong, risking it all to outlast and outmaneuver each other. It is against those tumultuous times that Brittani Sonnenberg set her haunting story included here, “The Kamikaze Caves.”

Hong Kong began to recover and thrive after the war ended, as mainland migrants from wealthy businessmen to skilled artisans and poor peasants continued to pour into the British-governed city, while the Communists fought the nationalist government in a bloody civil war. It was then that monikers like the Fragrant Harbor, the Pearl of the Orient, Shoppers’ Paradise, and Asia’s Little Dragon were coined. Feng Chi-shun describes the 1950s in his story, “Expensive Tissue Paper,” which is set in a neighborhood of mostly Shanghai immigrants aptly called Diamond Hill.

Hong Kong continued to benefit from the southern migration,

as refugees swam across the Shenzhen River in search of safety and opportunities. Mainlanders overran the border during Mao Zedong's epic land reform and the Great Leap Forward, a man-made famine that reportedly took forty-five million lives between 1958 and 1962. Enter Hong Kong's "Belle Epoque." The West learned about this exotic southern belle through Hollywood romances like *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* and noir films such as *Hong Kong Confidential* and *The Scavengers*.

Hong Kong's "Golden Age" was a period of rapid urbanization. Infrastructure projects began with the construction of public estates, subsidized apartment blocks in which hundreds of thousands of hillside squatters—as seen in Hollywood's *The World of Suzie Wong*—were resettled. It was one of the colonial government's most ambitious and proudest campaigns. Carmen Suen's story, "Fourteen," takes place in the first public housing estate to have its own bathroom and kitchen in every unit.

The fifties and sixties were also an era of R&R mayhem during the Vietnam War, which comes alive in Xu Xi's "TST," about a young girl in the world's oldest profession. James Tam writes a dark yet comical account of another lady of the evening in the gritty and populous Mong Kok district. Sexual exoticism came to a halt in 1967, when leftist riots broke out in Hong Kong shortly after the Cultural Revolution began to ravage China. Shen Jian writes about those eight months of bomb scares and street violence in his story, "Kam Tin Red," and how one local family was torn apart.

The early 1970s saw the peak of police corruption, which resulted in the Independent Commission Against Corruption, an agency created to investigate dirty cops and bring order to law enforcement. At the same time, the Royal Hong Kong Police Force began to hire more local Chinese and fewer British cops to address widespread discrimination and improve public relations

with the *hoi polloi*. Charles Philipp Martin's story, "Ticket Home," brings the reader into the last few years of the Royal Hong Kong Police Force, before the word *Royal* was eventually dropped in 1997, when the city was handed back to the Communist regime under the promise of "one country, two systems."

We relive the handover in Rhiannon Jenkins Tsang's story, "One Country, Two People," which takes place in Ma On Shan in the New Territories, while Tiffany Hawk flashes back between the handover and the present day in "You Deserve More," set in the rowdy expat enclave of Lan Kwai Fong. And on the subject of expats, Christina Liang writes about domestic drama in Hong Kong Island's luxurious Repulse Bay in "A View to Die For."

Hong Kong's sordid history notwithstanding, the city remains one of the safest in the world. In a place that never sleeps and barely even blinks, violent crimes are a relative rarity and people feel safe hanging out on the street at all hours of the day. When Hong Kongers do commit murder, however, they do so with plenty of dramatic flourish. Dismemberment, cannibalism, a laced milkshake, and a severed head tucked inside a giant Hello Kitty doll—Hong Kongers have seen it all. The media always has a field day with homicides, splashing gory photos and fifty-point-font headlines on the front page. Shannon Young sensationalizes a grisly murder in "Blood on the Steps," set on Hong Kong Island's fabled Pottinger Street. Marshall Moore memorializes gruesome suicides on the outlying island of Cheung Chau in his story, "This Quintessence of Dust," and Ysabelle Cheung's story, "Big Hotel," takes place at an eerie funeral florist shop in North Point.

As coeditors, we come from two very different backgrounds. Jason was born in Hong Kong and spent his formative years in Europe and North America before moving back to his birthplace to rediscover his roots. Susan was born and raised in the United

States and lives there now, but spent her formative years in Hong Kong and mainland China. What brought the two of us together was our love of Hong Kong and its history, culture, and freedom. The city may be far from perfect, but there is a bounty of quirks to make writers like us constantly feel like kids in a candy shop.

All across the city, for instance, you can find little shrines dedicated to To Tei Kung—the God of the Ground—placed in front of retail shops and outside residential homes, complete with burning incense and a pyramid of Sunkist oranges. Religious holidays such as Buddha’s birthday, Christmas, and Yulan—the Taoist Festival of the Hungry Ghosts—are observed in secular Hong Kong with equal zeal. Jason brings alive To Tei Kung, Yulan, and other elements of the local folk belief system in his story, “Ghost of Yulan Past.”

Jason’s story also takes us to the present day, Hong Kong’s darkest era yet. His tale alludes to the Umbrella Movement in 2014, during which student activists occupied large swaths of the city for months on end to demand universal suffrage and oppose the Chinese government’s increasing interference in local politics. Since then, many young activists have been jailed for their involvement in the movement, and publishers of books critical of the Communist leadership have been kidnapped, only to reappear on the mainland in staged confessional videos. The city’s future is murky and the rights enshrined in the Basic Law—the constitution governing Hong Kong for the first fifty years after the handover—are being chipped away by the day. Twenty years into the handover, the Sword of Damocles that hangs over the city’s heads is inching ever closer.

So what will Hong Kong look like in five years, ten years, or thirty years—when the “one country, two systems” promise expires? It’s impossible to foresee. Hong Kong’s future may not be within our control, but some things are. We can continue to

write about our beloved city and work our hardest to preserve it in words. When we asked our contributors to write their noir stories, we didn't give them specific content guidelines other than to make sure their stories end on a dark note. What we received was a brilliant collection of ghost stories, murder mysteries, domestic dramas, cops-and-robbers tales, and historical thrillers that capture Hong Kong in all its dark glory. The result is every bit as eclectic, quirky, and delightful as the city they write about.

So bring on the fourteen.

Jason Y. Ng & Susan Blumberg-Kason
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