The Last Tigers of Hong Kong

True stories of big cats that stalked Britain's Chinese colony

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INTRODUCTION

THE TIGERS OF HONG KONG

Tigers came to Hong Kong.

They appeared frequently and scared people, though their sightings were always fleeting. They would flash through the undergrowth, stride across hillsides and trample over farmland.

They left signs – huge paw prints and mighty roars in the night. They preyed on pigs, chickens, cattle and deer. They left calling-cards of torn flesh.

They also killed people.

When they visited, they were at the top of the food chain, except for one species, a species that appears to have been spectacularly successful, a species that won the war against tigers, yet always seems on the brink of self-destruction.

That species is us of course, humans. We invented God and said that he made us in his own image, though we cowered in fear of the stalking tiger for centuries. Eventually we made weapons that let us get the better of the big cat. Then we set out with a vengeance, and finished the tiger off in much of its territory.

To be fair, the war against tigers wasn't played out in Hong Kong. That's because Hong Kong lies on the extremity of a vast landscape. It is on the periphery of China. For a long time the area had been mostly uninteresting either to large groups of humans or to the South China tiger whose heartland lay hundreds of miles to the north in the mountainous wilderness of inland Fujian. But they both came, human migrants and vagrant tigers. Human politics put the region in the spotlight for power

players, and tigers just kind of wandered in every now and then looking for free food.

Not everyone took the tiger reports seriously. The English-language press loved a tiger story, but just to ensure no one would take them to be fools, they also loved to scorn a tiger claim. There was a racist tendency to treat a local Chinese claim with more scepticism than a claim made by an Englishman. And a sexist tendency to take a man's word to be of more value than a woman's. If a Westerner of good standing couldn't corroborate a claim there was a chance that the witness was too excitable, or had mistaken a civet cat, monkey, pig or dog for the Lord of the Hundred Beasts. On the other hand, if a European, or better still a British person, a man especially, with a good job, like a clerk, a civil servant or, best of all, a policeman or high-ranking army officer, reported one – well then, it goes down as fact.

The intriguing thing is that despite the existence of testimony from people who qualified according to the above criteria, Hong Kong tigers still didn't make it into the history books, other than the two most famous tigers killed here. Of course history is about what people do to each other and there is so much to say about that, so perhaps it is understandable that natural history is usually edited out. But history is also about how we live and the conditions we live in. If a tiger is in your neighbourhood, that has an impact on your life. It affects your behaviour. You keep your kids and your old parents indoors, and your door locked. You might not be able to tend to your crops. You keep weapons at hand, you learn to be vigilant, you learn to read the signs. You don't wander about alone at night. A tiger has an impact on society, so it has an impact on history.

So why didn't tigers really make it into the mainstream narrative about Hong Kong? And by the way, if the tiger history of Hong Kong has not yet been told, what other histories are we missing?

I have a couple of ideas about the missing tiger stories.

First of all, tigers are almost invisible. Even if tiger visits were frequent in the first part of the 20th century, they tended to be fleeting. The Lord of the Hundred Beasts, to use a title American researcher Chris Coggins

translated from Chinese, melts into the landscape just as quickly as it appears. There could be five sightings in a district one month, then none for a year. Tigers crouch, they almost slither on the ground. One hunter described a tiger to be like a snake. They hide and watch, they can be still for hours, though they can fly through the air. They are silent, except when they explode in a roar. They can appear from nowhere, and they can just as quickly disappear.

Another reason is prejudice. The British overlords of the colony did not expect to find magnificent big cats in the territory. They did not think they belonged here, and most of them never saw one. The British in the early part of the century didn't go out and about at night, when tigers are most active. They went to bed early and stayed behind closed doors. Only the wild and the untamed were active and restless at night, and who's going to believe their words? There was a sense that the grandeur of the tiger didn't belong to this scratty place that was not much more than a trading post and garrison town in many people's minds – hardly the jewel in the crown that was India.

Tigers are magnificent animals that belonged to the mysterious wonderland of the Indian rainforest. There, brave, mostly aristocratic hunters of renown would shoot the beasts from the backs of elephants after they were flushed out of the forest by an army of Indian jungle beaters. Tigers come at that level of power and drama, not skulking around the deforested wastelands of Hong Kong's back country, tearing off the odd limb from a buffalo or a pig.

The habits and habitat of the South China tiger were little understood especially by the outsiders from Britain and the other countries of the western world. The majority of western travellers came to China seeking profit through trade; they stuck mostly to the coast and spent little time thinking about the wildlife inland. The South China tiger was unnoticed by the average visitor to Hong Kong, Canton or Amoy. High-ranking officers and consuls, even in the trading posts of the heartlands, were just as ignorant. But the locals had a completely different story.

District offices of southern China kept detailed records of tiger encounters going back two thousand years. Coggins looked through records in the natural range of the South China tiger and realised that the beast had been everywhere inland throughout four provinces, including Guangdong, which is where Hong Kong was situated until the British prised it off.

He also counted the dead, those killed by tigers, and found documentary evidence of an estimated minimum of 10,000 people killed in 1,900 years of record keeping. His analysis shows a clear spike in casualties from the 1500s to the 1600s when human encroachment into tiger territory intensified. But this is research done in recent decades and Hong Kong's colonial political leaders and administrators of the early 20th century were oblivious to such trends.

Villagers throughout the region knew all about the Lord of the Hundred Beasts. They guarded their livestock with gongs, poles and firecrackers. They told their children to behave, and doused them in rags soaked in the blood of the beast to ward off evil and disease. They passed on wisdom such as always to run downhill when a tiger comes stalking. They locked their doors at night, and didn't write down too much history, though sometimes they ate tiger flesh.

There were some officials in Hong Kong who understood the situation better than others. Not surprisingly they were the specialists in zoology, agriculture and hunting. They knew the tigers were here, or at least that they came here on their travels. Hong Kong University biologist Geoffrey Herklots told an audience in the mid-1930s that tigers on average visited the colony once a year. He wrote much about the territory's wildlife from the late 1920s to the Japanese occupation, and the renowned biologist had no problem accepting the fact that tigers visited. As with pangolins, a favourite tiger food, it is much easier for the expert to detect the presence of the tiger than it is to actually catch a glimpse of the elusive animal. Spoors or pugs, their footprints, and the occasional roar were the main giveaways. That and the carnage they left behind when they ripped apart their prey.

The police too were familiar with the tiger's calling card, the mutilated livestock that they would occasionally be called to examine. They saw the footprints, the claw marks and some of them even caught sight of stripes and took a shot. The journalists got wind several times a year. There was no doubt an appetite for a good tiger yarn, but so often the hacks reported the details they had been told with a nod and a wink, details that were consistent throughout the decades, year after year. But of course they would only know that if they checked the archives.

The westerner who got to know the South China tiger better than any other outsider was an American missionary. Harry Caldwell arrived in the region a seasoned hunter, but he had never seen a tiger until he set foot in China. When the villagers he came to serve in the Fujianese hinterland saw how Caldwell worked his gun on the local fauna, they told him about the man-eating tigers and begged him to set his sights on them. Caldwell soon discovered that killing a tiger was more effective at converting people to Jesus than any sermon on the mount. By the time he left China in the chaos of Japanese invasion he had killed 48 of the beasts. His exploits in what seemed like far-off exotic lands were occasionally mentioned in Hong Kong press reports, though perhaps the readers were blissfully unaware of the fact that members of the same species as those man-eaters Caldwell dispatched were frequent visitors in their neighbourhoods.

In Hong Kong, history buffs agree on at least two undisputed tiger apparitions that happened in 1915 and 1942. We know about the first tiger because the beast killed two policemen, one an Englishman called Ernest Goucher from Nottinghamshire, and the other Rutton Singh from India. The tiger was also killed and its body was displayed at City Hall for all to see. Its head now survives in the police museum at Wanchai Gap, if the records are correct. Just weeks before the 1915 tragedy, reports of a tiger in the vicinity were treated with the usual mix of sensation and scepticism. Once there were bodies, the doubters shut up, for a short time, until scepticism crept back in again.

The other tiger killed in the territory met its fate nearly 30 years later. You can see its skin for yourself, hanging over an altar in the Tin Hau temple at Stanley, ragged and tattered, mostly a dirty dark brown, like a bearskin, but you can make out the stripes if you look closely. Its story is shrouded in the fog of war as it was shot in 1942 when Hong Kong was under Japanese occupation, and record-keeping was in tatters. But there are accounts of it from former prisoners at Stanley who recalled the shooting party that went after the beast.

This tiger remains controversial as several accounts suggest that the big cat killed wasn't wild, but was a circus escapee. Judging by the frequent reports up to the wartime period, and in the decade following the Japanese surrender, there is no reason to think that the escapee theory is any more convincing than that of a wild tiger. Herklots, who was at the Stanley camp at the time, certainly had no difficulty in accepting the fact that it was a genuine wild tiger.

To many with a passing interest in the subject, those two incidents are the extent of tiger lore in Hong Kong. Yet not only have I seen scores of accounts in the period between those two incidents, the reports continued to appear in the press until well into the 1950s. In fact the latest credible account comes from 1965. Considering that tiger experts estimate there were still around 1,000 South China tigers in the wild in the 1960s, I find the 1965 report plausible, even if it isn't proven. So did the police and Gurkha units at the time that spent several nights up in trees around Shing Mun Reservoir and beyond, trying, unsuccessfully, to catch the elusive beast.

After that time, if any tiger reached Hong Kong, they would have been escapees from Mao's war against the species, which the Communist Party declared a pest and a hindrance to the country's development goals. Party loyalists formed themselves into tiger brigades and went out slaughtering as many of the creatures as they could, using machine guns and grenades as well as traditional hunting rifles and crossbows. They were encouraged by government buyout schemes for skins, which guaranteed prices and supplied an export trade that delivered hundreds of pelts abroad. At

the same time a domestic trade that fed on the traditional interest in body parts for medicine further encouraged the hunters. There was a perfect storm of reasons to kill tigers, and the pest was rid from the land, probably by the mid-1990s in all four of the South China tiger base provinces, according to conservationists who went out searching for the last of them.

The tiger won't be coming back to Hong Kong. Not the true wild animal that used to visit. There are schemes to bring the subspecies back from the small gene-pool of remaining captives, but they'll never be the same thing. At best they will be happy captives living in luxury in a large and closely guarded theme park. They will never be the free and hungry beast of the forest and mountain that once wandered wherever its instincts drove, and regularly strayed into Hong Kong.

You can visit the grave of Ernest Goucher at Happy Valley Cemetery and read the final words on the tombstone: 'Gone but not forgotten.' That is how I wanted to title this book – *The Last Tiger of Hong Kong: Gone but not forgotten*. But I can't do that, because the tigers of Hong Kong have been largely forgotten. And we can't actually say which one was the last.

So I hope you enjoy this book, *The Last Tigers of Hong Kong,* and together we can perhaps at least resurrect the memories of the Lord of the Hundred Beasts within the boundaries of this extraordinary territory.

A note on place names

The romanisation of Hong Kong village names wasn't always consistent in news reports of the years gone by, especially for smaller, lesser-known hamlets. It is not always clear what today's name is for a village that was written about in the earlier parts of the 20th century. I found that there were even different spellings of the same place in different reports. Some of the locations would have changed names afterwards, or have been absorbed into better-known districts. Added to that, newsprint more than 100 years old is not always clear, even when digitised for library records. Where a modern equivalent is absolutely certain, I have adopted

the names we know today unless the previous name is also well-known; otherwise the place names remain as they appeared in the original source.

Here are some old place names that are sometimes still seen, and their modern equivalents:

Old form	*Modern form*
Amoy	Xiamen
Canton	Guangzhou
Fukien	Fujian
Kwangsi	Guangxi
Kwangtung	Guangdong
Lantao	Lantau
Lyemoon	Lei Yue Mun
Pakhoi	Beihai
Peking	Beijing
Sham Chun	Shenzhen
Shaukiwan	Shau Kei Wan
Shun Tak	Shunde
Taipo	Tai Po
Tsun Wan	Tsuen Wan
Un Long	Yuen Long
Victoria	Central District
Yaumati	Yau Ma Tei

A note on units

Throughout the text I have standardised on imperial units for distance and weight since that is what the vast majority of reports at the time used. Here are their equivalents in metric units:

1 inch = 25.4 millimetres
1 foot = 30.48 centimetres
1 yard = 0.91 metres

1 mile = 1.61 kilometres
1 acre = 0.4 hectares
1 ounce = 28.35 grams
1 pound = 0.45 kilograms
1 stone = 6.35 kilograms
1 catty = 0.5 kilograms

Wherever the monetary unit $ is used it refers to the Hong Kong dollar unless otherwise stated.

What do you call a tiger?

We refer to the tiger many times over in this book. My favourite name is "Lord of the Hundred Beasts", as translated by China tiger researcher Chris Coggins. This title is also often reproduced as "King of the Hundred Beasts" in journals and articles. In addition "King of Cats", "King of the Jungle", and "King of the Forest" are well worn titles for the regal feline. Hong Kong newspapers sometimes had the habit of referring to the magnificent animal as simply "Stripes" so we've borrowed that on occasion too.