

# MASTER OF NONE

HOW A HONG KONG HIGH-FLYER  
OVERCAME THE DEVASTATING  
EXPERIENCE OF IMPRISONMENT

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**BLACKSMITH BOOKS**

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## FOREWORD

When I helped mother to pack for her trip to England in 1969, she handed me a few sheets of sepia paper. That was the beginning of a manuscript of a book, handwritten in superb English. It was a pity that my father Walter did not live to complete this work.

I pledged then that I would continue his effort by authoring a book of my own. This attempt had started a few times, but the call of corporate demands always got in the way.

It has taken all this while for me to focus on this book. Although this may not measure up to the quality hinted at by dad's short script, at least I have fulfilled the promise and hope this book has to some extent closed the chapter of what dad had started some 75 years ago.

This book is a reflection of the many events that have affected my life, the success accomplished in a wide array of activities and the accolades bestowed on me. Ironically however, I never managed to reach the pinnacle of any of these pursuits with my true potential fully exploited.

I am thus in essence a jack of all trades, and a...

Master of None

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*“I tend to forget the things I wish to remember, and remember those that I wish to forget”*

## I

### STANLEY

I glanced absent-mindedly at my cell in Stanley Prison late on 26th June 2009. My mind was still in shock and I could not accept that I had just been convicted. Harsh reality hit me then. Very quickly I had to resign myself to having to spend the next 16 months in confinement... in that small hole.

The cell was about six feet by nine feet. It had a bolted-down fibreglass bed not quite long enough for me, a tiny corner table, a plastic stool, a polished metal wall-mounted mirror, and a toilet with an attached wash basin both made of stainless steel. This was to be my home for what seemed a long sentence – a grim prospect indeed.

How on earth did I end up here?

The lead article on the front page of the *South China Morning Post* the next morning made a song and dance on how I had fallen from grace – from the highest rung in society to the lowest. My photograph was boldly displayed. The Chinese-language media covered the case in similar vein.

Frustratingly, media observations all seemed reasonable commentaries superficially. The knee-jerk led me to think that I must conduct a conscious reflection of my life to discover where I did things right and where I might have gone wrong.

I was 70 years old and widely regarded in society as a high achiever. There had been a long and sustained successful career in a leading public-listed corporation. I was appointed to various statutory civic bodies; was the chairman of two charities; an accomplished international sportsman; a Fellow of the Hong Kong Management Association; awarded the Silver Bauhinia Star (an award given by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region after the handover of sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997) and appointed a Justice of the Peace. I was without question at the top tier.

I had now been incarcerated to be away from my wife Gail and from my children for what seemed an eternity. In my mind, I was certain that my family would have to face the social stigma I had brought on them in an unforgiving society. I could already see the sniggering bigotry. I was extremely concerned about the effect this would have on my family. How would they face their relatives, friends and associates? Would this make them uncomfortable with people in general? Would some actually make unkind remarks to them? I was also embarrassed by the stigma this would throw on my close friends, my close associates and even my in-laws. I was consumed by these apprehensions.

The conviction was not anticipated as we all felt that the case went well. I had not prepared for the worst. After the conviction, I was summarily led away without even a few minutes with my family. This left my wife Gail in the terrible position of having to take care of the affairs of the family. She would not have too much knowledge of my banking arrangements nor my detailed financial position. There was no doubt that this was my principal worry and concern, to such an extent that I often broke out in a cold sweat in the middle of the night during the first few weeks.

This meant that I had to contact my bankers urgently. This was exceptionally awkward as we had no access to regular use of the telephone or email. I had no alternative but to resort to old-fashioned letter writing. This process took an inordinate amount of time. As all outgoing and

incoming letters were checked by the prison security, it often took two weeks before I would receive a reply, even for local mail, if I was lucky.

Advice to Gail depended on her visits but these were restricted to two 30-minute slots per month. On special application, I could normally secure a further two visits. The visiting rooms were cubicles and we had to talk via telephone across a glass partition. We could not touch each other. I distinctly felt distant from my visitors, especially when I saw Gail or the children. Emotions were unbearable initially. It often brought us to tears.

Anger then came upon me. I simply had to fight on to clear my reputation. I had to appeal.

There had been a period of almost three years when I was “under investigation” before I was charged. To be under surveillance was uncomfortable to say the least because there was always the thought that I was being watched. I had to answer bail every six weeks or thereabouts and this continued on and on. It seemed there would be no end to the tunnel. I could hardly focus on my work. It was torture!

When they eventually decided to charge me, it almost felt like a relief. At least there was a definition of sorts. This emotive reaction was however rapidly dimmed by what ensued thereafter. My name was splashed across the media. Banks called and I had to resign from my directorships on listed boards and the more high-profile private companies. I was no longer permitted to be an accredited Type 4 Asset Manager by the Securities and Futures Commission. My world was shattered. Legal fees continued to mount. Even before the trial, the case had already ruined the lives of my family and I. How did I plunge this far down?

I could not help but feel that government bodies like the Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC) had been accorded powers that were far too wide. They hardly had any regard for the “subjects” under investigation. We were, just as I said, “subjects”. Their only concern was to nail these subjects, oblivious to the hardships caused and at a time

when they had not even made up their minds to prosecute or otherwise. So what if they made us wait? That was no skin off their noses!

I slowly got accustomed to prison life. I was bundled together with foreign prisoners, better known as “Other Nationals” or “ONs”. This group had their own dining hall as they were on either Western or Indian diet. I found a few friends in that group. We were posted to different workshops and I was allocated to Printing & Finishing, principally involved in book-binding and sundry work. Work was simple and it kept us active for only about four hours per day. People were friendly and the days passed painlessly but with little purpose.

Breakfast, lunch and early dinner before 5pm were all served in the ON dining hall. There was always a break of some 90 minutes for daily exercise, football, volleyball or basketball. We could walk, jog, do Tai Chi or aerobics. This choice was ours. We were trooped back to our cells by 6.30pm daily which meant we were effectively locked in the cell for 12 hours every day.

We had no access to Internet or email, and no effective use of telephones. There were only a couple of hours of television (mainly coinciding with children’s programmes) and the *South China Morning Post* was normally available by late afternoon. I relied largely on the radio for news, mainly through the ever-reliable BBC World Service or RTHK Radio 3.

Communication with the outside world was only by means of letters, other than the limited visits by family and friends a few times each month.

I gradually conditioned myself to block out negative thoughts, put bitterness aside and consciously directed my mind to prepare for the days ahead. There was no future in history. Looking forward was my only option. The launch of an appeal against conviction became my top priority.

It seemed logical for me to look back on how things really started. I had a niggling suspicion that it might have been the events after my



retirement from corporate life that indirectly gave rise to the troubles leading to my ordeal. It seemed important to understand how my life had been charted. Through the writing of this book, I hoped that I might succeed in throwing some light on this enigma.

Not an easy task, I thought. At my age of 70, I tended to forget the things I wished to remember and remember those that I wished to forget.