# All the King's Women

## The Story of a Hong Kong Family

Mimi Chan

香港大學出版社
Hong Kong University Press

**Hong Kong University Press**
14/F Hing Wai Centre
7 Tin Wan Praya Road
Aberdeen
Hong Kong

© Hong Kong University Press 2000

ISBN 962 209 515 1

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Secure On-line Ordering
http://www.hkupress.org

Cover illustration: Painting by Liu Xiaoxi, from the author's collection.
Printing in Hong Kong by Condor Production Ltd.

# CONTENTS


Preface ix

Acknowledgements xii

Note on the Romanization of Chinese Words xiii

Genealogical Table xiv

**1** Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies:
The King (1885–1944) 1

**2** The Gods Are Just:
Fourth Concubine Surnamed Kam (1900–1981) 13

**3** All the World Is a Stage:
Seventh Concubine Surnamed Kwok (1906–1990) 37

**4** An Honest Mind and Plain:
Ah Hing (1900– ) 63

**5** Like Niobe, All Tears:
Fifth Concubine Surnamed Poon (1900–1992) 85

**6** Sweet Are the Uses of Adversity:
Fourth Sister Violet (1906–1998) 101

**7** Some Have Greatness Thrust upon Them:
Third Mother Ming Chu (1907–1927) 123

**8** Some Are Born Great:
Second Daughter Portia (1910–1991) 137

**9** Lowliness Is Young Ambition's Ladder:
Eighth Concubine Surnamed Ho (1910– ) 155

# FULL FATHOM FIVE THY FATHER LIES: The King (1885–1944)

My father-in-law was called 'King' by his wives. They used the English word without the article, but with the Cantonese premodifier — hence 'Ah King'. The wives didn't know any English, so he must have taught them the English word. Most of the denizens of his smaller domestic world were not at all sure of how he made his money, although the one who claimed to be his 'most intimate' concubine could rattle off the names of his various enterprises. Suffice it to say, his wife, concubines, younger offspring and legions of servants were in great awe of his money and particularly of his power in the world they hardly knew. I never met him. I married his son some twenty years after the boat he was travelling on to Macau was bombed towards the end of the Second World War. I think that perhaps the King did much to foster the mystique surrounding his person at home among his multitudinous subjects, most of whom were semi-literate. It is difficult to disentangle fact from fiction.

'Ah King not only spoke English like a *fan-gui-lo*. He spoke French and many other languages. He used to talk to the French Consul all the time — chatting away.'

'He also spoke *lau sung wah* ("the language of the older brothers", slang for Mandarin) like a *lausung*.'

'He was on many diplomatic missions because he was a great negotiator.'

These — and similar bits of information — were delivered by the still adoring surviving concubines. There was no doubt the King did speak English, but to what level of proficiency I shall never know. He was probably fluent because he started off as the *compradore* or Chinese agent of a great British corporation with offices all over the Chinese Mainland and in Hong Kong. I shall never find out if he was a prattling polyglot.

Not only are paeans sung to his ability, but also to his good looks: 'He was so handsome that in town they called him "Hong Kong *lang* (Hong Kong good-looking)".' I have only seen his photographs. The photo which shows him at his youngest is one of him giving away his second daughter when he must have been in his forties: a small natty man, with long angular face and well-defined features, he had fairly deep-set eyes and a straight nose, and a generous mouth which in the photograph was set in a rather stern line. Was he indeed known as 'Hong Kong good-looking'? That is something else I shall never know. In a later photograph, the dark hair had turned grey and sparse; the narrow face had grown narrower still. He wore spectacles like the Last Emperor, Puyi's or Georgio Armani's. Puyi wore them and Georgio Armani designs them. I was told that these spectacles were more often twirled around with his hand than resting on his nose.

A photograph of Lee Pak Hung a.k.a. 'the King' hangs in our pantry, beside one of his first wife, his 'original match'. The pictures are black and white — or were. They are now a yellowish grey. He looks quite distinguished, sharp eyes peering out from behind the Puyi-Armani spectacles. He is wearing a pale-coloured linen suit with narrow shoulders. His photo hangs beside that of his 'big' wife because my 'real' mother-in-law, the fourth concubine of the King, had given me instructions to always allow the lawful-wedded couple to hang side by side. 'Big' Mother-in-law looks younger than her husband in the photograph, but not particularly attractive, with an angular face and severe centrally-parted hairstyle. So the pictures hang there, over thermos bottles and jars of Metamusil, boxes of Panadol, half-full containers of vitamin pills and tonics and elixirs, Chinese as well as Western. Certainly a comedown for the King and his consort.

Lee Pak Hung was born in 1885, during the last decades of the Qing dynasty to a wealthy family in Nanhai. By the time of his birth,

his family had already been wealthy for two generations. The founder of the family fortune was Lee Kai Ming, born in 1823. Lee Kai Ming came from a farming family and made his fortune in Siam, as Thailand was then called. Lee Kai Ming, grandfather of the King, was known by his contemporaries and descendants by the sobriquet, 'Strange-eyed Three' , and I have seen a photograph of him, given to me by one of my sisters-in-law. He was called 'Strange-eyed Three' because he was the third child in the family and — more significantly — he had the strange power of being able to see the smallest objects. His eyes were like a pair of microscopes. Allegedly he could see objects which were a great distance away, too. Thus, his eyes were a combination of microscopes and telescopes. This would be hard to believe except that he had left behind proof of his unusual abilities. He copied the whole of Confucius's *Analects* on to a small round fan and the Tang poem, 'The Song of the Pipa Girl' on to a grain of rice. I have seen these family treasures. An attempt to sell the fan recently through Christie's came to an ignominious conclusion when it was declared 'a mere curiosity' by the resident expert.

Fortunately, the King's 'strange-eyed' grandfather had other talents. In a year of famine in his native Nanhai, Lee Kai Ming made his way to Annam, the Chinese name for present-day central Vietnam, by boat *en route* to Bangkok. A storm in the South China Sea caused the boat to sink. Fortunately, Strange-eyed and a handful of others managed to clamber into a lifeboat. They were floating in what seemed to the others like an unending stretch of turbulent water when Strange-eyed exclaimed, 'Land ahoy!' Because of his gift, he was able to see the land mass of Annam which was miles away. Guided by Strange-eyed they finally reached land. The other survivors, some of whom were Annamese, were so grateful that they gave Strange-eyed enough money and provisions for him to make his way to Bangkok overland.

In those days, there was already a big Chinese population in Bangkok — nearly half a million — and they were engaged in feverish commercial activity. Once in Bangkok, he set about looking for suitable work. He apprenticed himself to a clock and watch repairman, and — again thanks to his extraordinary eyesight — he mastered the delicate skills required by the profession very quickly. In those days such talent was rare, and word of his dexterity spread quickly. He was soon able to open his own repair shop and to make a very comfortable living. Once he had saved enough money, he began to ponder how to

go into business in a big way. Like Jim Thompson over a century later, he saw great potential in the Thai silk industry. His native Nanhai was a centre for silk production. He set up a silk factory in Bangkok, then another and another. He was not only entrepreneurial but also artistic, using his considerable artistic talent to create new patterns and designs for the silk produced in his factories. Legend has it that when he was just nineteen, Strange-eyed made his way to France to study the use of machines in the production of silk. His eyes served him well in his role as industrial spy. He saw the blueprints for a new machine on the desk of one of the managers some forty or so feet away. Because he was familiar with the process of production and because he had a photographic memory he was able to reproduce the plans when he returned home. He had machines, powered by steam, made by an engineering shop in Guangzhou in his native China, where he also set up factories. With the new machines he was able to improve the quality and quantity of the silk his factories produced. He was soon employing nearly one thousand workers. I have heard that later on he outbid rival Chinese in an auction for a royal monopoly of gambling in Bangkok. This set him firmly on the road to fabulous wealth.

By the age of thirty, Strange-eyed had brought his growing family to live in Nanhai, but he retained his business interests in Siam, and these continued to enrich his sons and grandsons. I have been told he had three sons. The second, Chun Nam, was the King's father, and was born in 1856. To the concubines of the King, he was known as 'Old Master'. They gave little thought to what he was called in the macrocosm outside. One concubine claimed with pride, 'Ours is a scholar's family.' Her grounds for this allegation? In his youth Old Master, Lee Chun Nam, had gone to the capital to take the imperial examinations. These *jinshi* examinations had for thousands of years been used by the Chinese government to select people for high official positions. He had studied hard and did 'very well' in the examinations. He was told that he had succeeded in securing a third-tier award, something which was highly regarded. But, according to the story, a corrupt Qing official refused to confer the honour until he had been given $200 as a bribe. His father, Strange-eyed, was furious and refused to pay. He said to his son, 'If we have to pay for it the honour is worthless. You will take the examinations again next year.'

Lee Chun Nam was so disappointed he became sick. When he

recovered, he decided scholarship and officialdom were not for him. He decided to use his considerable intellectual powers in the service of Mammon instead. He was extremely successful in helping his father build up his already flourishing business. Strange-eyed Three died when he was in his sixties and the villagers of his native Xiqiao in Nanhai, many of whom had prospered because of his investments, mourned his passing. His youngest son had predeceased him and his oldest son was allegedly an undeserving opium addict. Thus Lee Chun Nam inherited the bulk of his wealth.

I was told that Lee Chun Nam had urged his sons to practise monogamy and marital fidelity. If he did, he did not practise what he preached himself. True, he was relatively abstemious as polygamists go. He had a paltry number of wives — only three. The first marriage had been arranged since he was a child by his family. This 'original match' was the mother of the King and two other sons and four daughters, one of whom died in infancy. His first concubine was a Vietnamese woman he met in his business travels. She had a number of sons, much younger than the children of the first wife. His third concubine was an exquisitely beautiful young woman, over forty years his junior, from a wealthy Foshan family fallen on hard times. She gave birth to two daughters.

Lee Chun Nam's younger brother, Chun Kwong, had no sons, although he married a total of seven women. This was considered a great disaster because it meant he would have no one to carry on the family line and to perform the necessary rites to honour their ancestors. It was agreed that the King would be 'adopted' by his uncle and made his legal heir, unworthy though his uncle was. For this reason, he was technically the son of his own uncle and his children's great-uncle. This was why he was called *pak fu* or 'Uncle' by his own children. The mystery of this mode of address was not unravelled until I had been married to 'Uncle's' son for many years.

Once the King had grown to manhood and had children, his mother became known as *Nai-nai* or 'Old Lady', and also as *Seung Mah* or 'Superior Paternal Grandmother'. In our study now is a huge portrait of Superior Paternal Grandmother. In the portrait Old Lady is wearing a benign smile. I have heard that in her later years she could be grumpy and difficult. Her husband, on the other hand, had a flair for good living. I have studied his photograph. Even in late middle age Lee Chun Nam, tall and slender, with aquiline nose and deep-set

eyes, had movie-star good looks. He retired at the early age of thirty-nine because at the turn of the century China was beset by a great many problems — warlordism, civil unrest, an inefficient central government, and foreign aggression. He felt it would be safer to opt out of the business world.

The story goes that he moved from the paternal village in Nanhai and took his family to Guangzhou. There he built a magnificent house. It was immense. At the back of the house was the bay known as Lychee Bay because of all the lychee trees growing in profusion along the rim of the bay. The house, one of two magnificent edifices owned by the family in Guangzhou, had more traditional architecture than the one the King and his court lived in later in Hong Kong; it had a landscaped Chinese garden, a fish-pond, and a curved tiled roof. Lee Chun Nam threw a house-warming party that lasted the whole day and was attended by many important people. Once settled in Guangzhou, Lee Chun Nam began to plan the future of his sons.

Hong Kong had been ceded to Britain in 1842, and enjoyed a considerable degree of insulation from the upheavals that racked the Mainland. Neither the Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s which devastated much of southern China, nor the Boxer disturbances at the turn of the century which brought the massacre of Europeans in the north and resulted in the occupation of Beijing by foreign troops, caused much upheaval in Hong Kong. Lee Chun Nam decided that — to safeguard their future — he would do well to send his sons to be educated in Hong Kong.

The King attended King's College, a bilingual government school. He was presumably exposed to a European style of education. At the turn of the century, knowledge of English, though a valuable asset, was not common among the Chinese. I read in the papers about a recently retired banker, who had come into prominence a good half century after the King. His meteoric rise through the ranks was attributed to his English language skills. For years, many ordinary uneducated people held in awe their colonial masters, and by association, their language.

Armed with his knowledge of English or, as his concubines called it, 'chicken intestines' because of the curly nature of the script, the King became *compradore* of the Guangzhou office of a major British *hong* (company) when he was twenty-four. I later discovered that it was because his father had paid a surety of $10,000 in order to get

him the job. At the beginning of the century that was a tremendous amount of money. A *compradore* was a Chinese agent who acted as an intermediary between the foreign merchants and their own compatriots. Some modern historians and Marxist scholars have condemned *compradores* for being unpatriotic and traitorous because they put the interests of their foreign masters above those of their own country and people. The Chinese merchants might have been envious of the close working relations between the foreigners and their agents. The aping of the lifestyles of the foreigners was also considered suspect although in fact many sons of the Chinese merchants also adopted Westernized ways. The King, like many other *compradores* of the time, gained technical knowledge and managerial skills through working for his foreign firm. These were to prove invaluable in his subsequent enterprises.

Money rolled in and the King was able to indulge his love of luxury. His wealth became legendary. Stories true or untrue circulated of his extravagance. 'He threw away his silk monogrammed handkerchief after he had used it once. He couldn't stand using a handkerchief that had been laundered.' 'He imported a special brand of perfumed soap from France and would use no other.' 'He had twenty sets of silver from Asprey.' 'He gave the most lavish dinner parties in Guangzhou.' He did a great deal to 'improve' the Lychee Bay estate, adding a swimming pool and other Western trappings like a tennis court and marble statues in the garden. He was very drawn to marble statues of naked ladies after a visit to Italy. He built another house in Guangzhou, much more centrally located, also very large. Big houses confer prestige and his was a growing family.

He had married early, at the age of seventeen. The marriage, as was the custom, had been arranged by the two families. The daughter of a wealthy Nanhai merchant surnamed Shek, Yuet Fa or 'Moon Flower', was considered a perfect match for the King. We Chinese have an expression, 'wooden door to wooden door' when speaking of the marriage of a couple from equally well-to-do backgrounds. A wooden door stands for wealth, good family. A 'bamboo door', on the other hand, stands for poverty and a humble background. The concubines came from behind bamboo doors. Moon Flower was a year younger than the groom. In those days, it would have been unthinkable for a man to marry an older woman. My eighth mother-in-law tittered indulgently when she told me, 'Poor Big Master. He told me he was so

young when he married that he was literally trembling on his first night.' I imagine he got over his nuptial tremors fairly quickly considering his later reputation as a womanizer.

From all reports he was a loving husband — for a time. He was reputed to have accorded her all the respect due to an 'original match'. But there was an unwritten law that if a wife failed to produce a son by her thirtieth birthday then the husband had the right — indeed the duty — to acquire a concubine. Moon Flower produced three daughters, the youngest of whom died very young.

The concubine who was ever afterwards designated Number Two was 'a Suzhou beauty'. She was the *first* concubine but the second wife — hence, I presume, 'Number Two'. The King had met her while on a trip to Shanghai where it is alleged he had many business ventures and rather mysterious links with 'the Shanghai gang'. Suzhou women are supposed to be the most beautiful in China because of their superbly smooth and white complexions. An old Chinese saying goes: 'Get yourself born in Suzhou; eat in Guangzhou; die in Liuzhou.' Guangzhou is supposed to have the best food and Liuzhou the best wood for coffins. Number Two was a *pipa* girl, an entertainer in a restaurant, given to the King by some of his business associates. She bore one child, a girl who died in infancy. The King was approaching his mid-thirties without a male heir. He acquired a second 'small wife'.

Number Three was a singsong girl. A great disgrace because she was caught in the act with one of the gardeners and driven away. My own mother-in-law was Number Four. Unlike her concubine-predecessors, she was a country girl. In her later life, she always prided herself on being fair, kind and generous. And she *was* fair, kind and generous. She was also in favour of maintaining the *status quo*. At least this was true of her title in the household. After Number Three's disgrace, the King offered her promotion to the vacant third slot but she declined. In the end, the vacant slot remained vacant. Number Four became the mother of two daughters, one of whom died young and a son, born when she was at the age of thirty-seven, considered an incredibly advanced age for childbearing at that time.

Number Five was given to the King as a present. She was a squat little figure, with bright eyes and a broad nose — certainly no beauty, but a fun person, later becoming a general favourite with the grandchildren, her own and those of other wives. In 1918, the King's

wish for an heir was finally fulfilled at the age of thirty-three when his fifth wife bore his first son, Tak Yan. The King no longer had an excuse for acquiring more concubines but by then it had apparently become a habit. I have heard he had a reputation for being 'addicted to actresses'. Number Six was a minor actress — I mean really minor, working in the troupes that travelled 'down', as the expression goes, to play to the yokels. She was tall and willowy, a languid beauty with classical features, including the moth eyebrows, the almond eyes, melon seed face shape and little cherry mouth of the traditional Chinese beauty. She was barren because she was sickly or sickly because she was barren. When she joined the household she was joined by her plump little sister, who became a sort of *muitsai*-companion-hanger-on, in 1922. It is alleged that this little sister tried really hard to insinuate her way into the private chambers of the King. But it was some years later before she gained the status of concubine. She tells me that she was his great confidant and kneaded his bones and in general 'ministered to his needs'.

The King needed all the ministering he could get because those were difficult times. He felt that the government of Sun Yat Sen was causing obstacles to business. He threw his influence and financial support behind the Merchant Corps organized by a fellow *compradore*, Chan Lim Pak, agent for the Guangzhou branch of the Hong Kong & Shanghai Banking Corporation. When the Merchant Corps were decisively defeated, Lee Pak Hung thought it safest for him to flee to Hong Kong with his family, whither Chan had also gone. He resigned his position as *compradore* of his British firm with some reluctance because it was a lucrative position. He left behind for the time being his mother and father, his father's concubines and his own first wife because by that time Moon Flower was no longer altogether right in the head.

Lee was not in great financial shape in 1924, after the Merchant Corps debacle. He was, moreover, worried for his safety. He had made many enemies because of his loyalty to the cause of the merchants. His three sisters had come with the rest of the family to Hong Kong. The two older ones patrolled the grounds and roof of their big house on the Peak with flashlights to see if would-be assassins had managed to slip past the guards stationed at the gates. I was told by a sister-in-law, 'The aunts actually learned to shoot and carried rifles as they patrolled.' But she was not always noted for her accuracy.

The King had no dearth of business contacts in Hong Kong and on the Mainland. He had many offers and was tempted to make Shanghai his base because of his connections there. But he finally decided he would stay in Hong Kong because he believed Hong Kong had 'a great future'. 'One day,' he said, 'Old Peak Road will be crowded with houses.' It was fortunate that the King had built and maintained the Peak house even when he was based in Guangzhou. One of the most obviously objectionable aspects of British administrative policy then was 'zoning' which was in effect segregation. The Chinese were forbidden to live in certain areas 'for health reasons'. The Peak area, where the King had built his home, was certainly out of bounds to ordinary Chinese residents. It was a measure of his stature and influence that he was allowed to live amongst the *fanqui*.

The year after he moved to Hong Kong, he took as his seventh wife an actress of the second rank. He never quite lost the habit of being a stage door Johnny: he used to buy the first four rows of the seats of the Ko Shing Theatre (now demolished) if a favourite was playing there. The seventh concubine bore him a son, his third. The little sister of Number Six, after some years of bone kneading and confidanting 'entered the door' — to use the Chinese phrase for marrying — as Concubine Number Eight. The year after her installation she gave birth to her only child — a son, the King's fourth. She was followed into the household by *her* little sister, a great beauty some thirty-five years younger than the King, who took her place as the Ninth Concubine, the last formally acquired by the King. At first I found it remarkable that the King had married three blood sisters. I later learned that the practice of taking siblings as concubines or 'equal wives', meaning wives with equal status, was quite common. Convenient all around. The practice reduces the number of in-laws. It is alleged he had in addition a number of mistresses and what we call 'outside encounters'. Only one of these, a former household *muitsai* who had borne him a son, was acknowledged as the tenth concubine after his death.

As his ménage grew, so did his wealth and prestige. Already wielding considerable clout in the colony before settling there, the King quickly buttressed his reputation by becoming a well-known social figure. He threw many dancing parties and the vast living-room of his vast Peak house resonated with the sound of Western music. Strauss waltzes were his own favourites. At these parties, to which

were invited local *fanqui* VIP's as well as local ones, the King's sisters played hostesses. I heard that the King received many invitations in turn — even to Government House.

He was a charitable man, I was told, very active in philanthropic activities. He was involved with the work of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals and was also a leading figure in the Jockey Club. One of his small wives told me that he was so free with his money in charitable matters that he once bought four books of sweepstake tickets, each with twelve tickets. He was rewarded for his generosity — he won the first, second and third prizes — thousands of dollars. She said rapturously, 'Those were glorious years.'

One cloud hung over the King's sunshine; all through the 1930s the threat of a Japanese invasion grew. Stories of Japanese atrocities filled the Chinese in Hong Kong and on the Mainland with dread. When the Japanese started to occupy Hong Kong in 1942, the Lee household suffered great privation. When the war was in its last stages, in 1944, the bombing got worse and worse. The King called together his court and announced that he was tired of the pressure of living in Hong Kong with the constant bombing. He would take some of the family and his valuables, including many antiques he had been collecting, to Macau to make a new life there. He would send for the rest of the family when he had settled down. He was going to create a brave new world for all of them; he brought along Number Two who was the senior concubine, Number Nine, the youngest and most beloved, her sister Number Eight and her son, and the fifth son, child of Number Five, together with a large number of servants.

The ship on which the King and his entourage were travelling was hit by an American bomber. The story goes that the King drowned in a vain attempt to save his fifth son. Number Eight was rescued, as was her son, but not before he had received a severe blow on the head. Number Nine, the beloved concubine, drowned, weighted down and dragged to a watery grave by the burden of gold and diamonds sewn into a piece of cloth wrapped around her waist. Number Eight — one of the few survivors of the wreck — is inevitably moved to passionate distress when she recounts the terrifying events of the King's last moments. 'I shall never, never forget the face of Big Master when the entire boat was burning and splitting. He was pale, oh so pale, drawn like a man deflated, without hope. He kept saying, "There's nothing left, nothing left." Tak Lai, then only twelve, kept clutching at

him. I was bruised and bleeding. I discovered I was leaning against corpses in the debris. They never found Big Master's remains, although they tried really hard. I had a dream in which he asked, "Why can't they find me?" I have a recurrent dream in which he appears, looking as he did just before he died — pale, oh so pale, like a man deflated and without hope, murmuring, "There's nothing left, nothing left."'

'There's nothing left, nothing left.' But in fact there were many, many troubles, many, many problems left for the house of Lee. In keeping with his belief in his own immortality, the King had died intestate and this fact alone was to have a profound influence on the surviving members of his household.