City of the Queen

A Novel of Colonial Hong Kong

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— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

1

Huang Deyun was thirteen that year.

Dressed in a faded short jacket with loose sleeves, she came out of Dr. Zhou's Herbal Pharmacy on West Corner, a bamboo basket hanging from her arm. Her prematurely born baby brother had spent a restless night. Saying the infant was frightened, Deyun's mother had told her to drop by the Temple of Mazu for an amulet to exorcise the evil spirits.

Passing a stand of sandalwoods by the river, Deyun headed toward the temple, the tips of her worn cloth shoes kicking the yellow dirt under her feet and sending tiny specks of dust dancing in the early morning September sun. For generations the villagers of Huang Deyun's hometown had lived on that yellow soil. Since the late Ming or early Qing dynasties, they had abandoned their fishnets and stayed ashore to grow sandalwood, which thrived in the hard soil, and produce Dongguan incense.

Fragrant incense destined for export was first transported in sampans to a port called Stone Raft Bay on a small island in the South Sea, where it was transferred to cargo junks and shipped back to Canton and the large cities of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. At some point, Stone Raft Bay was renamed Hong Kong, or Fragrant Port. Over time, the name was used to refer to the whole island.

Deyun was worried about her brother, and was thinking about things that concerned every thirteen-year-old girl, unaware that the moment she reached the last step on the flagstone stairs leading up to the temple courtyard, her life would be forever changed, that barely an hour later

she would be on her way southward, following the route of the fragrant wood on which generations of her kin and neighbors lived, all the way to Hong Kong. Stepping over the high threshold of the temple, she entered the courtyard, now quiet since Mazu's birthday had just passed. Still a child at heart, she played hopscotch on the flagstones and jumped onto the temple stairs, sending her red copper earrings jangling as a tall figure ducked behind a dragon column on the south side and a light perfume rose from the rustling cassia flowers beneath the stairs. Deyun thought it must be some of those roughnecks from a neighboring village who sneaked into the temple to prey on stray dogs that wet the temple walls with their urine. Every autumn, the season for restorative nutrition, none of the dogs around the village, fat or lean, was spared.

Before she had a chance to look up, Deyun felt darkness descend around her as a burlap sack, like a deep well, dropped over her head. She was about to shout when a large hand clamped over her mouth through the burlap sack. With a twist of her neck, she bit down on the invisible hand; her mouth filled with putrid, salty burlap soaked in seawater. As she was lifted up by the waist, something fell off and rolled across the ground. It was a copper earring, the only thing she would leave behind in her hometown.

Now wearing a single copper earring, Deyun was tossed into the dark hold of a ship, where a heavy sea sent her rolling around in her own vomit. She lay in a daze for a long time before she finally saw the sun again. Brought up onto the deck, she gazed around with eyes like those of a frightened animal, unaware that she had arrived in Hong Kong, Queen Victoria's city.

In 1839, half a century before Huang Deyun landed at Pedder Wharf, the Daoguang emperor in Peking sent an imperial commissioner southward to ban opium. At the time the opium-smoking population in China had reached two million. Armed with his imperial edict, Lin Zexu arrived in Canton, where he forced the foreign opium merchants to turn in twenty thousand cases of opium, to be destroyed at Tiger's Mouth Beach. This act by the imperial commissioner would decide both Hong Kong's fate and his own.

The Daoguang emperor subsequently signed the first unequal treaty in modern Chinese history, ceding Hong Kong to British opium merchants, who could see that the geographical location made it one of the finest ports in the world. But Queen Victoria believed that the British Empire had got the worst of the Treaty of Nanking: except for an indemnity and five ports opened for trade, the empire's new territory was a desolate island without a single brick building. Following Lin Zexu's exile to the hinterland by the Qing government, his British negotiating counterpart, Captain Charles Elliot, was banished to the new Republic of Texas in North America as punishment for his incompetence.

But this was ancient history by the time Huang Deyun, hands tied behind her back, was shipped to Hong Kong on September 25, 1892. The Union Jack, under whose protection the British opium smugglers flourished, fluttered in the wind. Long forgotten were the words of England's conservative MP, Sir James Graham, who passionately denounced the Opium War as "unjust."

Now, under the flag that had shamed Graham, heads bobbed amid the shouts of rickshaw coolies and street vendors. Queen Victoria's desolate island had transformed itself into "the pearl of the British Crown." The busy Victoria Port had fulfilled the British Empire's dream of controlling the seas, with opium merchants setting up a permanent transfer port there. Thatched huts and bamboo sheds had been replaced by opium warehouses and godowns for firms such as Yee Woo and Tai Koo. A port city at the foot of Mount Taiping rose up out of the water like a miracle. Queen's Road was lined with banks, family associations, churches, stores, and British firms, all in the neoclassical architectural style of the Victorian era. Perhaps because the colonial government wanted to flaunt the maritime hegemony of an empire where the sun never set, or because the conservative, ill-adjusted Britons were incapable of changing their lifestyle outside of England, scenic Hong Kong, surrounded by mountains and water, had become a city much like Bombay, Calcutta, and Singapore, except that the bricks, tiles, granite, and marble all came from China, along with the bricklayers, stonemasons, and carpenters.

As she stood on the deck, Huang Deyun had no idea where she was. Queues coiled atop the heads of coolies in short jackets and wearing cloth shoes were a familiar sight, but the red-bricked clock tower, a colonial symbol, on Pedder Street told her she was in an alien land.

Suddenly a commotion erupted on the wharf. Beneath the clock tower, a group of smartly dressed Chinese in black silk gowns and brocade satin jackets struck an interesting contrast with the European clock tower, a strange harmony, like the mingling of Chinese and westerners on the wharf, a sight one gradually got used to if one stared at it long enough. This group of prominent Chinese gentry was about to set off for the Taiping Theatre, where they would call for a ban on the evil custom of keeping and abusing slave girls in Chinese families.

As early as 1880 Governor Hennessy had raised the issue of slave girls with the colonial administration. Twelve years later, under the rubric of Western humanitarianism, these Western-educated Chinese bigwigs launched an unprecedented campaign. Waving the banner of the "Anti-Slave Girl Society," they distributed leaflets to fight for the rights of Chinese women who were being sold as maids and abused like animals.

If not for this impressive demonstration by the Chinese gentlemen as soon as the sampan docked, the frightened slave trader who had kidnapped Huang Deyun would have sold her like a beast of burden to a rich family, where she would have been worked to death. Had that happened, many years later, sociologists would have found the record of Huang Deyun's suffering as a slave girl among a vast collection of historical documents stored at the Rehabilitation Board.

As it turned out, Deyun would in fact be linked to the Rehabilitation Board, not because she had sought shelter at this humanitarian organization, but because a large sum of money would be donated to the board in her name. Even now, a large color portrait of her as an old woman hangs above the stairs of a local orphanage. Wearing a traditional Chinese dress with a long emerald necklace, she had been granted an honorific title as a result of her son's achievements.

But all that would happen much later.

2

On the deck of the sampan, the slave trader grabbed Deyun by the hair and examined her for the first time—thin eyebrows over brown eyes that, reflected in the afternoon sea, were much lighter than those of the average Chinese. Her single-fold eyelids, long and narrow, slanted upward, and her eyes reminded him of the prostitutes on Lyndhurst Terrace, most of them mixed bloods from Macao. So Huang Deyun did not become a slave girl, after all. Instead, she followed in the footsteps of a different group of girls kidnapped from inland China to an even worse fate—she was sold into prostitution.

Unloaded along with boxes of cargo, Deyun climbed the stone stairs toward Mid-Level in Central District. Only a few days earlier, her strong, still growing legs had been mounting the last stone step of the Mazu Temple when darkness fell before her eyes. Now, when she reopened them, she was facing a black-lacquered bed, as big as a house. Thick smoke floated in the air like dust with a pungent smell that scratched her throat. Someone lying on the bed facing the wall was smoking. By then, Hong Kong was suffocating in this white acrid smoke; the person in bed, like millions of Chinese, was curled up in the fetal position in a fog, as if dead. Even if the westerners' cannons were splintering their doors, they would satisfy their craving before getting up.

The feet resting on a footstool belonged to a woman. The soles of her black embroidered silk shoes looked brand new, as if they had never stepped on solid ground.

Yihong, the woman in bed, stirred and sat up lazily. Her hair was unkempt, her short, green-edged jacket open at the neck, exposing peach-pink underwear. Without raising her puffy eyes, she listened as Huang Deyun was dragged over by a maid, who rolled up the girl's sleeves.

"The skin is fair enough," Yihong said, as if buying livestock. "Let's see her teeth!"

The manly hands of the maid pried open Huang Deyun's mouth, exposing a mouthful of white, pearl-like teeth. The woman in bed snorted.

The maid went out to bargain with the slave trader.

Yihong, once the concubine of a Happy Valley tea merchant, had been lured into prostitution. Eventually, she opened her own brothel, Yihong Pavilion, on Hollywood Road, populated with girls bought from poor families or kidnapped from inland China; she took them all in as her own daughters. She also sent pimps out for abandoned baby girls in Hong Kong and Kowloon orphanages, and bought illegitimate girls born to cloistered women in Chinese nunneries. She trained them all herself, teaching them a variety of skills, musical and sexual, and calling them her little "lute girls," then sold them for good prices.

Upon Deyun's arrival, Yihong got up off her opium bed to attend to the new girl personally. To keep calluses from forming on her hands, Deyun was not allowed to do anything for herself, not even wring out a towel after washing her face. Relying upon a girl's natural love of beauty, Yihong taught her how to apply makeup, to match colors in clothing, and to conduct herself like a lady. She hired tutors to teach her how to play instruments and sing, even some English conversation, leaving nothing to chance. Within two years, the girl had learned how to play finger-guessing games, had become a capable drinker, and was a talented musician. But the moment Yihong turned her back, Deyun would sit by the window, lost in thought.

One day, a fellow they called Fatman, who had not been around for a while, called on Yihong with a shipment of Yunnan opium. Wu Fu, the right-hand man of Comprador Wang of the Yee Woo firm, had just re-

turned from inland provinces where he collected opium revenue for the firm. After welcoming him in a side room reserved for special guests, Yihong sent for a servant best known for her opium preparation skills to wait on them. With her head propped against a high porcelain pillow, Yihong finished a pipe of opium without coming up for air, then took a cup of hot tea in both hands and relaxed.

At that moment, Deyun's maid came in to report to Yihong that Deyun would miss today's English lesson, because her teacher, Miss Young, had not shown up. Wanting to ingratiate herself with Wu Fu, Yihong said to the servant, "Bring Deyun in. We've a teacher right here in our midst." Then she added, "Remember to deduct a day from Miss Young's pay."

A soft breeze transported a lovely figure up to the opium bed. She was dressed in everyday clothes; her hair, now much longer, was coiled into a bun. But the face below the bangs was exquisite under the flickering lamplight. Fatman sat up quickly.

"I've been to Yihong Pavilion so many times I've nearly flattened the threshold, but somehow you managed to hide this beauty from me."

"Fatman, don't pretend you don't know the rules here. I'm making an exception today because you know the barbarian tongue. I would like you to test her English, so I'll know if I've gotten my money's worth from Miss Young."

With her eyes cast down, Huang Deyun sat up straight, appearing distant and reserved. Sensing that the girl was far too good for the likes of him, Wu Fu did not bother arguing with the madam, proceeding instead to test Deyun's English with a string of simple questions. When she heard that Wu Fu was also from Dongguan, she quaked. Staring at the flickering lamp, she was silent for a moment before mustering the courage to ask him about her hometown. At that point, Wu Fu had used up nearly all the pidgin English he had learned from the taipan. Scratching his head, he scrambled a few phrases together. Meanwhile, Deyun bent forward, her fingers clenching the silk skirt draped over her knees, beseeching Wu Fu with her eyes to tell her more about her hometown. Wu Fu cocked his head, searching for tidbits to tell her, finally produc-

ing some fragments he'd heard a month earlier, when he was in Dongguan collecting opium money. Deyun smoothed her rumpled skirt as her face gradually lit up. Yihong, sitting off to the side, was secretly pleased that the tuition had not been wasted and that her foster daughter's fluent English would undoubtedly drive up her price.

But the madam was no fool, either. Knowing that anything could happen if the conversation went on too long, she waved Deyun away. For she had plans for the girl. Even if guests filled up Yihong Pavilion, only a handful of her clients could claim a status higher than Wu Fu's. High officials and rich tycoons spent their gold and silver elsewhere, in licensed brothels.

So she went to see the madam at Heavenly Fragrance Tower.

"My foster daughter is a rare beauty who can sing and can play a musical instrument," she boasted. "She also speaks fluent English, personally taught by the comprador of a foreign firm."

Following a round of negotiations, the two women agreed to split the fees paid for Deyun's first night, although the final sale price would have to wait until the madam at Heavenly Fragrance Tower saw Deyun in person.

After Yihong left, the madam at Heavenly Fragrance Tower was occupied by different thoughts. On the previous New Year's Eve, a group of foreign women had come to Lyndhurst Terrace as part of an Australian theatrical troupe. When the performances were over, the actresses stayed behind to take up residence on a street corner a block from Heavenly Fragrance Tower, where they opened a house of prostitution directly opposite the clock tower of the Roman Catholic church on Wellington Street. Clients who went there in search of foreign beauty reported that the brothel was decorated like an imperial palace, extravagant and luxurious. All the foreign beauties had skin like snow that would melt at the slightest touch. And they exposed half of their buttery breasts for anyone to ogle for free. The mattresses were so thick you sank in as soon as you lay down. Who would want to leave a place like that?

Not long after the Western owner, Madame Randall, placed a witty ad about sweethearts in an English newspaper, her place of business was

packed nightly. British soldiers thousands of miles from home were easy prey when they read about "women dressed like fresh flowers, lying in bed waiting to be picked by men."

As she thought of Deyun's fluent English, the owner of Heavenly Fragrance Tower rubbed her chin and had a brainstorm.

In the meantime, Deyun was dressed according to Chinese standards of beauty: a red brocade blouse, an emerald green crepe skirt sprinkled with tiny flowers, and a headful of ornaments. Walking out of her "home" for the first time in two years, she held the arm of the woman who served her. Several times, she opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Eventually she turned and climbed into the curtained sedan chair that would take her to Wellington Street. When she stepped down from the sedan chair, a drinking party had just begun in the east wing of Heavenly Fragrance Tower. A stream of prostitutes summoned from other brothels were standing behind clients, pouring wine and serving food.

The patron who bought Deyun's first night, a crossed-eyed, uncouth tax collector, treated money like dirt, for his income came mainly from loot his lackeys plundered on the ocean. The decorations he displayed for Deyun's first night provided an eye-opener for everyone in Heavenly Fragrance Tower. All sorts of foreign curios filled the room, where a foreign golden coin was tied to the tassel of each hand towel.

The colonial government's policy on prostitution had an interesting history. In the beginning, prostitutes were expelled from Hong Kong. But during Governor Davis's tenure, a "prostitution tax" was collected each month, since the prostitutes were the ones who infected lonely seamen and British soldiers. The prostitutes were also required to set up a hospital for patients with venereal diseases. Later, a "Venereal Testing Regulation" was implemented and licenses were granted to brothels, thus contributing tax revenue to the colonial government.

In 1903, when the first land reclamation project was completed, the area around Shek Tong Tsui was still barren and desolate, and prostitution appeared to be the best way of bringing prosperity to the place. So

the government, under the pretense that there were too many brothels in the crowded Possession Street district, relocated them and issued more licenses.

But this, too, would happen much later.

The owner of Heavenly Fragrance Tower had not given up on the idea of earning foreign currency through Deyun. Speculating that Madame Randall could not guess the age of a Chinese girl, and would probably treat Deyun as a novice, she looked forward to bringing in a tidy sum in a deal with the foreign brothel. But that was not to be, since she lacked the necessary connections, and had to settle for second best, selling Deyun to Southern Tang House next door, a haven for Western patrons, whom they called *guailow,* barbarian.

It was on the seventh day of the seventh month, the Chinese Valentine's Day, that Deyun moved to Southern Tang House. It was raining—the separated celestial lovers, the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid, who were cursed to meet but once a year, were shedding tears.

Deyun sat by the window, hands clasped around her knees. Her fingers were painted bright red with Western nail polish given to her by a patron but lacking the fragrance of touch-me-not, which Chinese girls used to color their nails. It was still drizzling; the celestial lovers seemed more sorrowful than usual this year. Deyun sighed softly. This house, her third in Hong Kong, had a more alien feeling than the previous two. The Western-style Southern Tang House, which had been built on the side of a hill, seemed to hang in midair, and each time the porters strained to climb the hill, her sedan chair would turn nearly vertical; Deyun, feet sticking up in the air, would be thrown into a terror.

Confined to an attic room, she was like an exile on a remote island. Surrounded by water so blue it seemed demonic, there was no way for her to escape. Yet even if she could, she had no place to go, for she had by then given up hope of ever returning to Dongguan and her parents. For a while she had asked heaven to take pity and send a benevolent patron to buy her out. She would willingly become a maidservant, a slave even. But now that she had been resold to Southern Tang House, hope

died. How could she entrust the remainder of her life to some barbarian, a *guailow* with crimson eyebrows and red hair?

The prostitutes at Southern Tang House, which catered to westerners, all wore Manchu dresses to show off their Chineseness. Holding embroidered handkerchiefs and swaying in high-heeled Manchu boots, they looked like royalty. With delicate fingers they would lift a Suzhou curtain embroidered with a hundred birds paying tribute to a phoenix, and there, behind a gilded screen, was hidden a China that indulged westerners' imagination: imitations of old paintings of mountains and rivers hung on the wall, vases in famille rose from the town of Jingde stood in the corners, drum-shaped stools with blue inlay and hardwood tables intermingled with sofas and silk chaise lounges; antique curios were piled everywhere, and of course, there were the ever present opium couches.

This concocted China had nothing to do with Deyun. When she stood up, walked in Manchu boots that seemed to lift her into the air, and gazed past the steeple of the Roman Catholic church outside the window to the north, above Victoria Harbor crammed with sails and masts, she saw a red brick wall encircling the western corner of Kowloon Peninsula. Shaped like the Great Wall, this barrier surrounded a six-acre land called Kowloon, an isolated territory with family shrines and local temples familiar to her. Farmers there lived in tile houses and worked the land following the changes of the four seasons. There was even a private school designed like an imperial college.

Why would a miniature of old China be hidden in an island port open to foreign trade? After the first Sino-Japanese War, when the British colonial government expanded its foreign concession into the New Territories, the Manchu Imperial court, in order to save the last vestige of face, retained the right to rule Kowloon. So banners embroidered with yellow dragons rippled on either side of the city gate, as sounds of students reciting the Chinese classics drifted out of the school, and the official appointed by the Manchu court sat in his little enclave daydreaming about how to subdue the barbarians, totally oblivious to the fact that the foreign powers were biding their time before the next assault.

3

This alien land was a bleak and barbaric hostile island, not just for Deyun but for the early colonizers as well; it was a frightening place with barren mountains and unruly waters. Britons considered it an insidious form of exile to be sent to the queen's most backward city in the Pacific. Even ambitious young civil servants did not accept their posts without qualms, let alone view them as stepping-stones for future promotion. British sailors who planned to make careers in the Royal Navy had a rude awakening when they were sent to the Western Garrison. The well water decimated their ranks, and taipans, who engaged in smuggling by sea, found the terrible weather on land unbearable. Every winter, snow covered Mount Taiping, which was not even two thousand feet high, and as soon as May arrived, the humid, stuffy summer took hold before anyone had a chance to change out of their woolen undergarments. They ate fly-specked meat, then spent half the summer seeking medical treatment for stomach ailments.

Then came an unknown fever, and members of the Western Garrison began dropping like flies. Malaria spread from the marshes eastward, and a quarter of the artillery troops quaked in their beds like leaves in the wind, hot one minute, cold the next. Those who died so far from their homeland were buried in a cemetery called Happy Valley, which years later would become a racecourse.

During the Dragon Boat Festival of 1894, hordes of rats appeared in Chinese residential districts, gnawing on rice stuck to bamboo leaves used to wrap holiday rice dumplings, their never-ending chittering send-

ing shivers down the spines of those who could hear them. When people went out at night, they felt gentle squirmings underfoot, like wading through water. When they shone their lanterns on the ground, they ran off in terror, dropping their lights, as high-pitched squeals rose around them, making their skin crawl. Rats swarmed out of ditches, caves, and basements. Packs of them materialized in hallways, on staircases, in kitchens, in corners, on roof beams, and in attics, twitching violently several times, balletlike, before rolling over and dying, blood spurting from their mouths, like red flowers.

Every morning, refuse carts from the Sanitary Board rolled from one end of the street to the other, their wooden wheels clattering on the flagstones. Uniformed workers walked in line, like a funeral procession, carting away the dead rats for cremation. So many rats dying in droves could not be cleared away immediately, so by the afternoon, the bloated rodents stank horribly in weather that abruptly turned hot around the time of the Dragon Boat Festival.

The bloating soon spread to human bodies, with hard lumps appearing on necks, under arms, and in groins. Afflicted men and women, their limbs splayed grotesquely, ran fevers of 102 degrees, with intermittent heavy breathing, amid the whimpering of the dying rats. The city of the queen had become a bubonic plague zone, and drugs to combat the disease had yet to be discovered.

A dozen years earlier, the colonial government, concerned about overcrowding in the Chinese districts, had limited the number of residents on each floor of all buildings. Officials checked the areas at night, giving illegal residents no chance to escape. But after the outbreak of the plague, the Chinese managed to hide these illegal residents, some infected, in the homes of relatives, and the plague spread unchecked. As the number of dead increased, fearful families dumped the corpses outside at night. Every morning, workers from the Sanitary Board carted the dead away to St. Mary's Hospital to await dissection by medical students.

One must admire the foresight of the tenth governor of Hong Kong, Sir William Des Voeux, who legislated against the intermingling of Chinese and Europeans in order to prevent the expansion of Chinese busi-

ness. The colonial government even implemented laws forbidding the Chinese from residing in Mid-Level and on the Peak of Mount Taiping, so as to "keep the Europeans out of harm's way." But even segregating the Chinese at the foothills did not ease the concerns of the governor, who then established a Sanitary Board, second in size only to the Police Bureau, which was charged with preventing violence against the colonial government. One of the duties of the Sanitary Board was to enforce hygienic standards in the anthill-like Chinese colonies, whose residents were ordered to disinfect their bedding and furniture and keep their streets, kitchens, and ditches clean.

Following the onset of the plague, the director of the Sanitary Board, Mr. Dickinson, authorized his Chinese interpreter, Qu Yabing, to lead a cleaning crew to saturate the plague-infested areas with disinfectant. Soon, white globules covered Hollywood Road, the smell of disinfectant lingering for days. By then Mr. Dickinson was so caught up in paperwork that he no longer had time to swagger into the Chinese districts, his white-gloved hands clasped behind his back, ready to order a rewash for areas that failed his inspection.

As the plague raged, afternoon tea was served as usual at Dickinson's home on the mountain peak. Standing on a porch lined with marble columns, he welcomed his guests as they walked up a garden path. If not for the sedan chair beside the gate and the gardeners' Hakka straw hats peeking out here and there amid the bushes, lending the place an oriental flavor, his guests would surely have thought they were back in London as they passed the Romanesque fountain and entered the crowded Victorian living room to sit on walnut chairs with green silk cushions.

More than any of the others, Adam Smith, a pale-faced young man with green eyes, freckles, and a pug nose, who worked for Mr. Dickinson, was deceived by the illusion, for he was a newcomer to the city of the queen.

Mr. Dickinson was a bearded man with a ruddy face and a booming voice, especially when he laughed. Born into the middle-class family of a general store owner in Edinburgh, he was not eligible for postings in

India, a magnet for British aristocrats, or Shanghai, a city of adventure, nor even Canton, the "London of the Orient." Because of his background, he had been sent to this barren backwater to sit in his office at the Sanitary Board, surrounded by green walls, swallowed up by paperwork in the dull, monotonous life in the colony.

Two weeks before the plague outbreak, Dickinson had received the latest yearbook of the East India Company. On the inside cover of the gilded volume was a portrait of a British aristocrat, a patrician in tails and a stiff white collar. Oh, how he wished for a similar portrait of himself, standing in front of his Romanesque columns.

Sometimes, when he could contain himself no longer, he would put aside the difference between himself and Adam Smith, his subordinate, and complain about how others who had begun their foreign service at the same time as he were being promoted regularly and enjoying themselves immensely in Calcutta and Shanghai.

"Think about it, Adam. This godforsaken place was opened for trade at the same time as Shanghai, and more than two hundred foreign firms are already operating on Shanghai's Bund. Here, it seems, our only industries are natural disasters and man-made calamities, rampaging pirates, gamblers, and opium smugglers. It's worse than Macao!"

At dusk that afternoon, Smith, the last to leave the tea party, walked down the flagstone steps and entered the garden, where a black furry thing stumbled through a gardenia grove and jumped into a sedan chair by the path. He later realized it had been a staggering, infected rat whose faint squeaks were swallowed up by the deepening evening air.

The next morning, a liveried servant, holding a silver teapot, stood in the dining room, with its spotless cabinets and dining table, waiting for Mr. Dickinson to come whistling down the stairs for breakfast. But when Mrs. Dickinson opened the velvet curtains in the bedroom, she found her bedraggled husband slumped by the window, his limbs splayed, his face crimson, breathing heavily.

"A wall . . . should've built a wall, damn it!" he mumbled before losing consciousness.

Dickinson had sent more than one request to the governor to build a wall to keep the Chinese out, so as to protect the tranquility of life of the British expatriates inside, advice considered extreme by the governor. For the British residents, this subtropical island was little more than a stopping-off point for ships. The treaty the British had drafted granted legal rights to opium-laden British ships from India to enter Victoria Harbor, one of the finest deepwater ports in the world, and they got exactly what they wanted. Yet, half a century after Hong Kong was opened for trade, the colonial government still had no intention of developing the island. That was not what they had in mind. They had set their sights on the population and resources of China's inland cities, a huge market for the British to dump their consumer goods. The most they would do in Hong Kong was to ensure that their transit port was clean by decreasing the number of people who had contracted fever, malaria, or cholera.

Except for the issue of sanitation, the governors of Hong Kong historically could not have cared less about the Chinese, who were left to fend for themselves. That included Governor Hennessy, who, on the premise of respecting the Chinese lifestyle, turned a blind eye to such problems in the Chinese residential areas as poor ventilation, a scarcity of drinking water, and no underground drainage system, all the prerequisites for a sanitary environment. The Chinese, who made up 90 percent of the population, were squeezed by the colonizers into the western corner of Queen Victoria's city, with a total space of half a square mile to serve as their business, entertainment, and residential district. It was overcrowded even before refugees fleeing the Taiping Rebellion arrived from the mainland. Added to that were farmers and fishermen from Southeast China who took up temporary residence before setting off for North America and the South Pacific. At the time, Hong Kong had the highest population density in the world.

Upon hearing the news of Mr. Dickinson's death, the colonial government, as a last resort, ordered that the infected areas be torched and the residents to be relocated within seven days. Responsibilities at the Sani-

tary Board fell to Adam Smith precisely when the terrified governor issued his order to quarantine all victims of the plague and seal up their houses.

Rest in peace, Mr. Dickinson! Adam Smith vowed to avenge his supervisor. He bowed deeply before Dickinson's casket. With a strange glint in his eyes beneath their silvery brows, he raised his face, which had been baked red by a blazing sun, balling his fists in hands empowered by the order to seal up plague-infested houses. As acting director of the Sanitary Board, he had now become a warrior, armed with orders issued by the governor himself to crush the ubiquitous plague demon. He would hold high his torch and fling it into polluted corners; the plague, hiding in the dark, would squeal and scurry amid the raging fire and turn to ashes.

Final victory would be his!

Wearing a helmet and an oilcloth protective suit, and accompanied by his Chinese interpreter, Qu Yabing, Adam Smith walked toward the plague area on Ice House Street, followed by a gang of sanitation workers carrying wooden planks and hammers. Climbing the hill, he stood facing Hollywood Road, the first street to be developed after the queen's city was opened for trade. The normally bustling, chaotic street was deadly quiet under the blazing noonday sun; abandoned rickshaws and sedan chairs were strewn everywhere.

As he stood on the deserted street corner, Smith felt forsaken by the world. Unlike the young people he had grown up with, he had chosen not to stay in his hometown to inherit the family mill by the little creek, where, on summer afternoons, he would have rowed and sung with the neighbor's daughter, Annie. One day he had discovered a diary among a pile of magazines in the attic, and it had changed his life. The yellowed pages of the diary recorded the travels of his uncle, and so, on an early November day, as snow fell on Britain, a ship crawled through the narrow waterway of Carp Gate, carrying Adam Smith and a letter of employment for foreign service from the British colonial government. In the eyes of the twenty-year-old, Victoria Harbor had looked like a lively seafaring port.

Mount Taiping Street was inhospitably steep. Early visitors had predicted that the stony island, with its rugged geography, could not possibly develop into a metropolis. But it had. The streets, narrow as shirtsleeves, were crammed with stores on both sides, their signs hung so closely together they were an unbroken tableau. A dazzling array of shops and services, from foreign goods to money exchange, to rice shops, grocery stores, soy sauce plants, and teahouses and, of course, authorized opium retailers. With the sun blocked by all the store signs, the street was forever dark, as if in the shadow of a solar eclipse.

It was afternoon nap time, and the doors were closed. Smith was uneasy, for the street seemed to have been seized by the plague demon, its terrifying ghosts snickering behind closed doors. Most of the residents had left. Shop owners infected with the plague had boarded ships on dark nights, returning to Canton in hopes of finding a cure. Their employees, fleeing the plague, had also returned to the countryside, in defiance of laws prohibiting anyone from leaving Hong Kong.

Mount Taiping Street had been cowed into silence by the plague demon, all but the shop at the end of the block with the sign proclaiming Top Quality Legal Opium. As advertised, the odor of burning opium hung in the air, deeply intoxicating. Adam Smith inhaled twice, despite himself. He felt like a man wandering in a wasteland, never expecting to see another living soul, and the unexpected smell of opium, a scent from the world of the living, sent a chill through his body.

As he left the business district, his nostrils were assailed by the smell of incense, so thick it overpowered the burned odor of opium. The few Chinese who remained had gathered outside the Temple of the Guanyin Bodhisattva to pray for protection from the plague. Ashes from paper spirit money and papier-mâché, in all sorts of colors, filled the sky above them; offerings to the deities—chickens, ducks, fish, eggs dyed in red, and a braised suckling pig—were piled high. Devout believers who could not find a place to kneel crowded against each other outside the temple, all holding joss sticks.

Back when the plague had first erupted, an herbal doctor practicing medicine on Hollywood Road had set up a stand next to the temple, dis-

playing a banner proclaiming him to be the "Reincarnation of Huatuo," the magical physician of Chinese legend. Even on hot days, he wore a felt top hat adorned with yin and yang hexagrams; a red mark between his brows looked like a third eye, and his spittle flew as he touted magic pellets and divine oil, which he claimed had been passed down in his family.

On this day, he was again out hawking his wares, drawing crowds of people to his stand, which prompted Adam Smith and Qu Yabing to do the same. Suddenly an old man in a white robe sprang out of the temple. With a sword in his left hand and a duster in his right, he darted around the courtyard. Acting as if the true god had arrived, the believers, men and women, knelt and kowtowed, a sight that drew away those buying divine oil.

The old man was the incarnation of the legendary Immortal Tan, who, he said, had given him a secret formula to cure the plague. Qu Yabing translated the legend for Adam Smith, adding, "The Immortal Tan, the patron saint of fishermen, was actually a little boy. His image in the temple shows that he was barely twelve years old. They say he controls the weather, which is why fishermen worship him."

"It seems that the young boy has yet another talent. Those who worship him can be free of plague!"

Qu silently considered the sarcasm in the Englishman's comment.

Qu Yabing had completed the fourth form at an English school, but the color of his skin dictated that he serve under the younger Adam Smith, who had arrived in Hong Kong barely four months earlier. Carefully and respectfully maintaining a distance between himself and his British superior, Qu walked one step behind and cast his eyes down, holding his arms tightly along the seams of his pants when he spoke. His mother had been a maidservant in the Qu household, a family of wealthy landowners. Sired out of wedlock by the licentious Master Qu, Yabing had been expelled from the Qu family, along with his mother, by the mistress. Raised in a church-run orphanage, Yabing had seen his fill of the hypocrisy of the church people. Commingling their respect for Queen Victoria and the will of God, the pastor and his flock systematically

oppressed the Chinese. Yabing hated yet feared them. But he could not stand the barbaric nature of his own people either.

Following Adam Smith, Qu passed the Guanyin Temple and arrived at the marketplace. His face, gloomy after the eruption of the plague, now turned red in shame. It was not what one might imagine a plague-infested area to be. Bare-bottomed children rolled in the mud with pigs; hens expelled green excrement alongside the mud holes. A shoe repairman looked on coolly, smoking his pipe. At one of the stalls, salted fish hung from bamboo poles, while squid and raw oysters lay drying on the ground. Flies swarmed up with a loud buzz as soon as someone came near. The thatched awning of a food stand, blown over by the last typhoon, was propped up with rocks and ropes; droves of customers kept the owner too busy to make repairs. Bamboo poles strewn with laundry poked out from Chinese-style houses. Water dripped through the holes in the awning, but the customers didn't notice. Mostly men with queues coiled atop their heads, they squatted barefoot on bamboo stools, stretching their necks to gobble down fried crabs, Chinese sausages, and cow innards. One cent per earthenware bowl. Soup mingled with their sweat and ran down their chests, but they were like starving animals, too busy slurping down their food to wipe it off.

Squatting on the dusty ground, this group of diners paid no heed to the strangely dressed Adam Smith. Except to make important proclamations, the fair-skinned Englishmen rarely showed up here. But a woman selling fruit, spotting his helmet and oilcloth protection suit and thinking he was a demon from hell, fainted dead away on a pile of sugar cane.

Smith's instincts told him he should not have set foot in a place like this unarmed. If attacked, he would not have been able to fight back. The colonial government had warned police and officials to be armed when entering Chinese districts. But these ordinary citizens, shoulders and backs laden with saleable items, were too intent on eking out a living to bother, while the beastly diners appeared incapable of sparing the energy to harm him. Smith was shocked by the voracious look on the Chinese as they wolfed down their food. In his homeland, religious beliefs and a system of education regarded gluttony as one of the deadly

sins. Even as a plague raged around them, and as their relatives dropped like flies, in the midst of this unimaginable horror, these people knew only how to satisfy their desire for food. They ate as if there were no tomorrow. What kind of race was this?

Sunlight that had originally given him a feeling of rebirth now bore straight down like needles, piercing his helmet. Sweat drenched his silvery eyebrows and blurred his vision. He felt that his life was threatened even before he had time to adjust to this desolate island, with its barren mountains and unruly rivers, and was distressed that he had not been assigned administrative duties. As he stood under the blistering sun, he thought of his superior, who had lain in the hospital, blood spurting from incisions on the buboes in his groin. Smith had been left to combat the omnipotent plague demon alone, and soon he would follow in the other man's footsteps. He had yet to encounter any of the mysteries recorded in his uncle's arcane oriental diary, and already he was on the brink of death. If he took another step forward, the demon would set him ablaze, weaken his pulse, and swell his chest with fever and black splotches. But could he just turn and walk away, leaving behind this group of ridiculous-looking Chinese workers with queues hanging limply down their backs?

The Chinese customarily rang bells to scare away demons when plagues erupted. Now Adam Smith longed to hear the sound of a bell, which he associated with the lepers of medieval Europe: a cluster of afflicted wretches swathed in cloth from head to toe, exposing eyes that were beginning to fester, and ringing bells to warn off others. The ringing of the bells, at least, was a sign of life, no matter how debased and putrid it might be.

Ahead of them, where Hollywood Road met Lyndhurst Terrace, finally emerged the sounds of humanity. Those who had stayed behind were awakened from their naps to protest the sealing up of their houses. A mere block away, Lyndhurst Terrace and Wellington Street were strangely full of life, in total disregard of the encroachment of the plague. People were lying low in opium dens, gambling houses, and brothels, waiting for the shroud of sunset to disappear before they swarmed out to

earn dangerous money, wagering their lives. More and more rigid corpses were being carted away, replaced by people creeping up onto the salty, smelly shore. Newly opened stores run by compradors on Lyndhurst Terrace displayed a neat array of goods to challenge the plague demon. Long rows of cask-aged brandy stood behind dozing shopkeepers who were struggling through the sweltering afternoon to welcome the arrival of extravagant evenings.

Soft music seemed to drift out from Madame Randall's beauty den. Two days earlier, in a public toilet, Adam Smith had overheard two policemen whispering salacious tales about their weekend. An unknown anxiety raged in his body; there was so much empty space to fill, especially at a time when there might not be a tomorrow. The suppressed passion accumulated over the past few days was in urgent need of an outlet.

The sun was still baking his back. To escape from the burning heat, Smith opened a door he mistakenly thought belonged to Madame Randall. By thus accidentally entering Southern Tang House, he would alter Huang Deyun's life completely. She, of course, had no premonition of what was about to happen. Sitting in the same chair she'd sat in the year before, when she'd first arrived, she had just awakened from a nap. Wearing a loose dress with wide sleeves, her bright red undergarment unbuttoned, she was lazily waving a cattail fan—the one that had hung from Yihong's opium couch. Her embroidered shoes were softly kicking the edge of the bed, either because she was bored or to pass the time before night arrived. Her shoes, dimpled by the kicks, showed signs of movement, unlike Yihong's, which had stuck out of the opium couch and rested on the footstool. Deyun had not yet given up on herself.

Just before her door was thrown open, Deyun noticed that the cross atop the clock tower of the Roman Catholic church was nearly melting under the blazing sun. Then a shadow crept into the corner of her eyes and hesitated before pitching forward into the room. Professional training prompted her to cast a sideways glance before turning to look, her lightly painted eyebrows showing no sign of surprise. All men were free to enter her room, anyway, particularly now, as the plague raged. Clients had lost all sense of propriety, coming to her without regard for day or

night. And the brothel servants failed to announce the clients' arrivals, since they themselves had already gone into hiding.

But the sight of the helmet and the oilcloth protection suit Adam Smith wore so shocked Deyun that she quickly stood up. The newcomer rushed toward the dark shadow—his eyes had yet to adjust to the darkness—before his legs buckled and he fell to his knees. Grabbing Deyun's waist, he buried his head between her legs, sending his helmet rolling to the floor and revealing a head of curly chestnut hair. He was exhausted, having just climbed out of the plague demon's pit. Never before had he been so close to death; he felt the demon howling around him, dragging him toward a bottomless abyss, deeper and deeper. . . .

Barely recovered from the fright, Smith tremblingly returned to the world of the living. His protection suit, treated with oil and dried by the sun, cracked and rustled as he trembled. Now that he had seized a body—the warm, soft body of a woman—he felt safe.

"Let me hold you. Let me hold you a while."

Caressing his protruding ears, which stuck up helplessly, like those of a deer, Deyun assumed that Adam Smith was another boy far from home who had come to seek a moment of comfort from her. The cold glint of a sneer flickered in her experienced eyes over his misfortune. And as her lips curled slightly, she held up the head in her arms, the loose sleeves of her purple satin dress dipping down to reveal a naked shoulder. Smith looked up and came face-to-face with the bright red undergarment of a prostitute. He froze at the redness, like a bloody flash. Flinging away the caressing hands in disgust, he stood up and ran out, not giving the woman a chance to see his face clearly.

Smith dragged his weary body back to his government flat, where he had been spending so many lonely dusks in the colony. Lighting a cigarette, he thought of his faraway hometown and of Annie, until the urge for whisky overpowered him.

But then the dying sunset in the ocean sky called out to him, and he found himself walking along the steep flagstone steps leading back to Southern Tang House. There he downed the glass of whisky handed to him by the bartender, but the alcohol failed to revive him; instead,

fatigue blurred his eyes and lent his face a shrouded expression. Holding onto the banister of the spiral staircase, he walked upstairs, nearly falling several times when his hand slipped. Alcohol surging in his empty stomach filled him with a hollow feeling. He kicked open Deyun's door and saw her playing solitaire under a lamp, his helmet resting beside her. The sound at the door had not startled her, for she was waiting for him, certain he would return. The cards in her hands opened and closed like a fan, but she paid no heed to the man standing there. The shadow on the wall grew and grew, until it enshrouded her. Like a thief, he snatched his helmet and held it to his chest.

"I came . . . came back for this," he said, backing away until his body was up against the door. "I need it for tomorrow morning. Mr. Dickinson fell ill, infected, ill . . . I must take his place."

His shoulders slumped. The woman put down the cards in her hands and stood to face him. Tonight would be her night; she had carefully made herself up, colorful and dazzling.

Outside the nearly dark window, the cross of the Roman Catholic church was obscured. The beautiful woman, as if inlaid on the screen like dark night, began to move, gracefully walking toward the man pressed to the door.

"My poor child!"