Ancestral Images

A Hong Kong Collection

Hugh Baker

Foreword by Lady Youde

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
www.hkupress.org

ISBN 978-988-8083-09-1

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by Paramount Printing Co., Ltd. in Hong Kong, China

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Preface

In 1975 I was asked to record a short programme on Chinese culture for Radio Television Hong Kong. While I was in the studio it was decided that I might as well make it three programmes. A week later I was asked to do another ten to turn it into a *Baker's Dozen*, the title under which the broadcasts went out. Once riding the tiger I found I could not get off, and I ended up doing four series, 52 programmes in all. No sooner had I managed to dismount in 1977 than Mr Robin Hutcheon, Editor of the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), rang to suggest doing a few articles for his paper along the same lines. These too ran away with me, expanding into a weekly column, and for 121 weeks appeared "From My Album", a thousand words around one of my photographs. I actually wrote only 120 articles — by mistake one of them was published twice on consecutive weeks. Rather depressingly, nobody seems to have noticed, and I assumed that there was no readership other than myself, but when the SCMP published all of them in three volumes as *Ancestral Images* in 1979, 1980 and 1981, sales were very encouraging until a policy decision took the *Post* out of book publishing. In 1990, 39 of the articles, plus two additional ones, were brought out by Hong Kong University Press under the title *Hong Kong Images*.

Now the Press have given me the chance to bring the original 120 articles together in one volume. I have changed one or two of the photographs and have revised the texts so that they are written from a present-day perspective: but the subject matter remains as before, Hong Kong's New Territories in the 1960s and 1970s for the most part, with the odd excursion into more general areas of Chinese history and culture.

The reader will not take long to discover that I have borrowed snippets from many earlier scholars and authors. I have given the exact references at the end of the text, and there is also a short annotated list of further reading, so that those who want to find out more can do so. Beware, though! It's a trap — once dipped into, many of these books will stick to your fingers and refuse to be put down. The hours I have spent lost inside De Groot's anecdote-packed *Religious System of China* … the love-hate feelings I developed for Arthur Smith as I alternately nodded at the highly perceptive comments and seethed at the insufferable cultural arrogance of his *Chinese Characteristics* … the fascination

of reading in *Lion and Dragon in Northern China* the first-hand experiences of Sir Reginald Johnston administering far-off Weihaiwei in the company of Sir James Haldane Stewart Lockhart … the more recent purple-prose exploits in Hong Kong of Austin Coates in *Myself a Mandarin* …. Into traps like these it is a pleasure to fall.

As for the photographs, I make no claim to artistry and little to technical skill. I took most of them with quite primitive cameras, often without preparation or the chance to do more than fire off quickly in the hope of capturing something which had interested me. Some of them could not be taken again, because times have changed and because few people have the privilege of long-term access to a community such as I had while conducting anthropological fieldwork in a New Territories village. Some could still be taken by anyone, and doubtless most would make a better job of them, but with all these photographs it has been the personal attachment which has triggered my thoughts and stirred me to write and I do not apologize for the indifferent quality. I can even make a virtue of my incompetence — the poor focus of the wall in the article on "Mud" reflects the fading from sight of the institution with which it deals, and the fuzziness of the "Village" photograph underlines the significance of its being taken from a moving railway train. Just one of the photographs may not have been taken by me — over the years it has lost its reference sticker, and it is not impossible that it was given to me by someone else. If so that would certainly be reason for me to apologize to person unknown.

I have written Cantonese words according to the Sidney Lau romanization system, and place names in Hong Kong are spelled according to the standard Hong Kong SAR Government practice, the principal "bible" for which is the Government Printer's 1961 *Gazetteer of Place Names in Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories*. For dynastic titles and place names in China, I have used the official *Hanyu Pinyin* spellings. Some words (Kowloon, Hakka, Hong Kong, for instance) are so familiar in spellings that do not belong to any of these systems that it would be silly to try to change them. Chinese characters have been used wherever it has seemed useful.

Indirectly many people helped with this book, but I should acknowledge my gratitude in particular to Mr Robin Hutcheon and Mr Keith Jackson of the *SCMP*; to Dr Colin Day, Mr Michael Duckworth and Dr Chris Munn of

Hong Kong University Press; to President Robert Nield of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society; to Dr Elizabeth Sinn, Ms Yip Tin Pui and the staff of the Hong Kong Memory Project; and to the people of Sheung Shui who made this ignorant outsider welcome in their village and gave him a chance to be educated for life.

I have had a love affair with Hong Kong for more than half a century. I've lived in a village in the New Territories, in plush hotels, in a windowless, toiletless tiny flat, on the Peak, in Kowloon, in Mid-levels …. I return again and again, and I've enjoyed it all hugely. I've enjoyed the eating, and the walking, and the smells, and the buzz of human energy, and the sense of achievement, and above all the friendship and tolerant good humour of its people. I've enjoyed writing these pages, and I hope it shows.

H.D.R.B.
Somerset, March 2011

3 Kowtow

Three elders dressed in their long silk ceremonial gowns perform the kowtow before the altar in their clan ancestral hall. In the course of a ritual of ancestor worship lasting over an hour, they will be up and down on their knees many times: no joke for men who are getting on in years. But being the oldest men of the senior surviving generation of the clan, it is their duty and privilege to go through the arduous ceremony as the representatives of the whole group. The worship is thought to benefit both the ancestors and the living.

The Chinese have many ways of salutation and showing respect. At the most casual, a perfunctory nod of the head and a stereotyped greeting will do, but this would suit only very good friends or unimportant acquaintances. More respectful is the bowing of the head, hands together and held in front of the chest. Men do this with hands clasped, women with the hands laid flat against each other and preferably hidden in their sleeves.

The *guk-gung* (鞠躬) is yet more respectful and consists of bowing from the waist with the hands held down at the sides. This form of greeting is solemn enough that it can be used in worship, and I have noticed that younger people often perform it rather than the kowtow.

But it is the kowtow which is the most respectful of all. *Kau-tau* (叩頭) literally means "to knock the head" and, properly perfomed, the forehead should strike the ground fairly hard. As a sign of submission and obedience it could hardly be outdone.

A rather strange derivative of the kowtow can be seen any day anywhere in Hong Kong. When someone pours out tea for you in a restaurant or tea-house, the polite response is to tap the table with your middle finger. The tapping represents the knocking of the head, and means "Thank you", although when you first meet with it a more obvious explanation would seem to be "Whoa, that's enough!"

This trivial present-day custom gives no clue to the erstwhile importance of the kowtow — yet in some measure the fate of nations has hung upon it in the past. The kowtow was the required form of salute to the Chinese Emperor, and the Chinese reasonably enough considered that it should be performed by foreigners just as much as by natives.

When Lord Macartney arrived from Britain on an embassy to China in 1793, he was told that he could only have audience with the Emperor if he were willing to kowtow. This he refused to do on the grounds that he would not do it even to his own sovereign. He is said to have agreed to kowtow to the Emperor only if a Chinese official, his equal in rank, would do the same to a portrait of George III — a deal which the Chinese would not strike.

Despite his refusal, Macartney was eventually granted audience. But his embassy was a failure in all other respects, and the trade rights which he was principally interested in gaining for Britain were denied him in no uncertain terms. The Emperor began a message to George III as follows:

> You, O King, from afar have yearned after the blessings of our civilization, and in your eagerness to come into touch with our converting influence have sent an Embassy across the sea bearing a memorial. I have already taken note of your respectful spirit of submission, have treated your mission with extreme favour and loaded it with gifts, besides issuing a mandate to you, O King, and honouring you with the bestowal of valuable presents. Thus has my indulgence been manifested.[4]

He went on to point out that since "our celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders" therefore the Chinese were not looking for trade.

In 1816 Britain tried again with an embassy headed by Lord Amherst, but on refusing to perform the kowtow he was sent packing without even an audience to his credit. It is just possible that if these embassies had been successful, Anglo-Chinese relations and the history of the 19th century might have been less bloody.

Yet, other nations' ambassadors had achieved no better results even with the kowtow. A Dutch embassy of 1655 is described by Wells Williams in *The Middle Kingdom*:

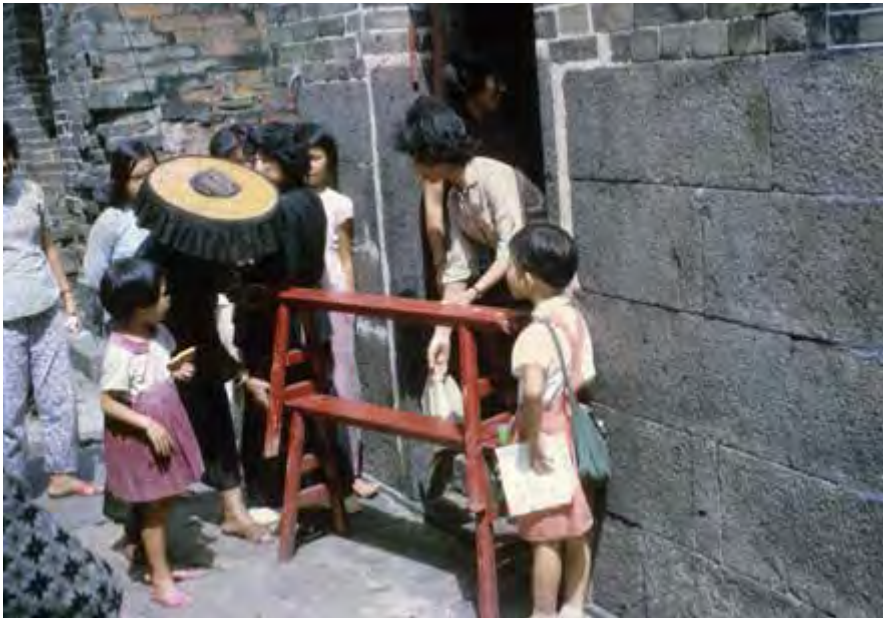
> Their presents were received and others given in return; they prostrated themselves not only before the Emperor in person, but made the kotow to his name, his letters, and his throne, doing everything in the way of humiliation and homage likely to please the new rulers. The only privilege their subserviency obtained was permission to send an embassy once in eight years, at which time they might come in four ships to trade.[5]

The kowtow issue was blown up by the foreigners probably because it symbolized their irritation at Chinese disdain rather than because it was in itself so important.

The result is that what to the Chinese was a serious and laudable kind of behaviour, for the British has come to be associated with unpleasantness. One of the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions of "kowtow" is "to act obsequiously".

The people in the photograph would not, I am sure, accept that they are acting obsequiously or in anything other than a respectful and dignified manner.

12 Barrier



Long ago, we are told, Chinese men used to go raiding to find brides, capturing what women they could; but for many centuries until recently marriages in China were arranged by negotiation between families, and in this way it often happened that bride and groom had not even met before they were united in wedlock.

Defenders of the system point to the almost non-existent divorce rate in traditional China as evidence of the success of arranged marriages. Their argument is nonsensical, if only because the implications of divorce were so unpleasant as to make it an unrealistic alternative to marriage.

Critics of the practice, on the other hand, throw up their hands and bewail the cruelty of throwing together for life two people who may well turn out not even to like each other. Their attitude too needs careful examination. Martin C. Yang appraises things coolly:

> The young couple's lack of knowledge of one another may make an early adjustment difficult, but it does not prevent successful marriage. When a husband and wife have worked together, raised children together, tried to build

> up the prosperity of the family, shared happiness and sorrow, they feel that they have had a successful marriage, be it romantic or not. In a rural community such as Taitou, although a young couple may not know each other personally, their backgrounds, their attitudes toward life are so similar that there is no danger of conflicting ideologies or patterns of living. A marriage based on mutual attraction between young people of different standards and ways of thought often calls for greater mutual adaptation than in the case of the traditional Chinese marriage, which is arranged by the parents but in which the parties concerned know exactly what is expected of them, and have similar traditions and ambitions.[21]

Nowadays in Hong Kong arranged marriage is uncommon. Young people instead indulge in the practice of *paak-toh* (拍拖 "courting"). The term has acquired respectability, but on the tongue of an old-fashioned person it still seems to carry its slightly derisive basic meaning "dragging each other about by the hand".

But even mates who select each other still get married, and the wedding ceremony as likely as not will be organized along traditional lines. A matchmaker is often called in to negotiate between the two parties, and the two sets of parents enter the lists as champions of their offspring. The major item to be discussed is the cost of the ceremonies.

Customarily the groom's family pays "bride-price" in order to acquire the marital services of the bride. Not that this necessarily gives the girl's parents a profit: they have to provide her with a dowry, as well as paying for a feast for their relations and friends. In many cases more will be spent than is received in bride-price. It has become more popular for some or all of the bride-price to take the form of the groom's family paying for an agreed number of tables for the bride's wedding feast.

The wedding at which I took this photograph was a "hand-dragged" one, but all kinds of traditional features were in evidence. At this point in the ceremony the groom was just arriving with three friends and the matchmaker to collect his bride. What did he find but a barrier of red-painted benches erected outside the door, and a gaggle of her girl-friends standing guard behind it.

I found myself pondering the words of Robert Louis Stevenson:

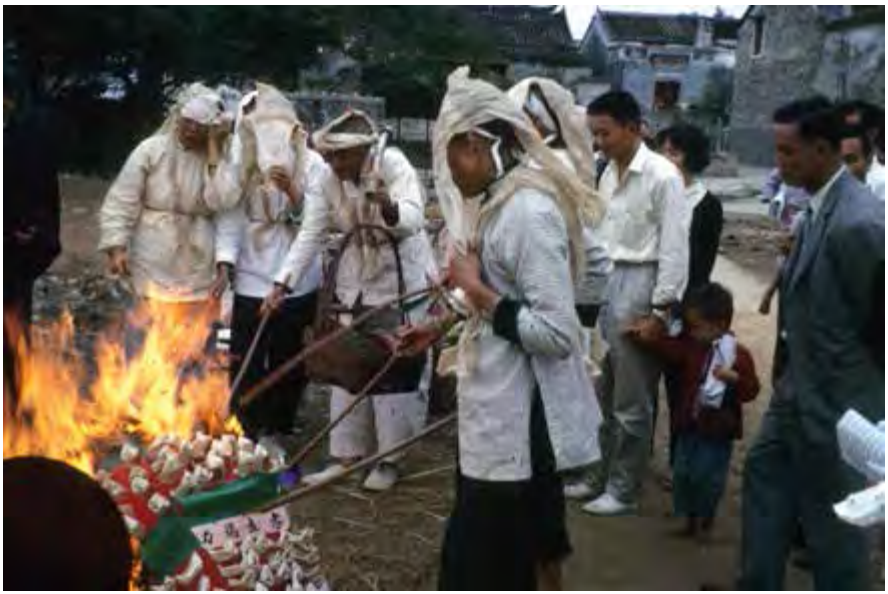
> Marriage is a step so grave and decisive that it attracts light-headed, variable men by its very awfulness.[22]

It was as if the girls were convinced that he must be "variable" and were insisting on his storming the barricades to prove his sincerity of purpose. He did not launch a physical assault, but stopped outside and politely asked to be let in. "We wouldn't let the likes of you in," said the impudent hussies with good-humoured rudeness. But the groom was a man of the world, and he offered them a few dollars to let him in. "A few dollars!" screamed the girls, "It'd have to be $100,000." Slowly in the hot sun the bargaining went on, the groom's party getting sweatier and more uncomfortable in their best suits. By the end of an hour the girls were asking $99.99, and a few minutes afterwards capitulated at around $70. The besiegers gained admittance and were given food and drink to refresh themselves. From then on all was plain sailing. In another hour the party left with the bride on the groom's arm. She was dressed in red, and was shielded from the sky by a red umbrella held by the matchmaker, who also carried a pair of red shoes for luck.

To the accompaniment of flute music she was helped into a car (the modern equivalent of the traditional sedan-chair), all decorated with coloured pompoms, red ribbons, and a doll on the bonnet. Well-wishers threw rice (for fertility), firecrackers added to the happy din of the occasion, and the last I saw of the bride as she was driven off she was crying into a red handkerchief, just as any self-respecting Chinese bride should be. A van containing the dowry goods followed.

Not perhaps as exciting as the practice of marriage-by-capture of which it is a degenerate form, but much less bloody and, yes, I think I can say it, rather more civilized.

60 Mourning



The minutiae of ritual concerned with death, burial and mourning in traditional China would fill volumes — indeed they have done so. De Groot describes the apparently simple process of washing the corpse, for example. It was actually set about with complicated procedures:

> All the sons and grandsons, even those who are scarcely able to walk, silently repair to some well in the vicinity, the eldest carrying a bucket in his hand. On their way they mournfully droop their heads, so that their eyes behold nothing but the pavement of the street. Arrived at the well, the eldest son throws a few coppers as an offering to the water-ghost, who does not like to be deprived of a part of his property without being paid for it; then the son draws some water and takes the bucket home, all his brothers in the rear keeping up the same kind of lamentations and death dirges which the family chant and wail at the moment of the decease. As soon as the females, who have staid at home, become aware of their approach, they join in the melancholy concert.[86]

Not all members of the deceased's family would necessarily be allowed to take part in the "water-buying" (*maai-sui* 買水), because complex rules of number-affinities meant that people of certain ages were thought to be harmed

by or harmful to the ritual. Participation in the process was not always at the same level either, as De Groot goes on to make clear:

> The ceremony described, which has for its object the procuring of water for washing the dead, is at Amoy called 乞水, "to beg for water." If the family is of some standing, the "water-beggars" are accompanied by a servant who carries the bucket and draws the water, it being incompatible with high-life to perform any coarse labour whatever. But, while the dipping of the bucket is done by the servant, the sons loosely grasp the end of the rope, to take at least the appearance of doing the work themselves.

Mourning is the process by which the living adjust to the new circumstances now that someone who was important to them has gone. It allows grief to be expressed and gives a breathing space before everyday life is taken up again. Until the 20th century the Chinese law stipulated how that mourning should be carried out, by whom, and for how long; and punishments were prescribed for failure to mourn accordingly.

The laws are known as the Five Mourning Grades (*ng-fuk* 五服), though a more literal translation would be "the five kinds of mourning dress". The five in order of severity were (1) a dress of undyed, unhemmed, coarse hemp, with head-dress of hemp, grass sandals and mourning staff; (2) a dress of undyed, hemmed, coarse hemp, hemp head-dress and shoes, and mourning staff; (3) a dress of coarse cloth; (4) a dress of medium-coarse cloth; (5) a dress of plain silky hemp. The periods of mourning associated with each grade were (1) 27 months, (2) one year, (3) nine months, (4) five months, (5) three months.

But the mourning grades did not only deal with behaviour at *death*: they carefully laid down which relationships should be more and which less important in *life*. The people for whom you were required to observe Grade 1 mourning (your parents and your husband) were therefore the most important to you. Next were those with whom you were in Grade 2 relationship — your wife, paternal grandparents, brothers and sisters, paternal uncles and aunts, sons and daughters — and so on down to the remote relationships such as those with your great-grandfather's brother's son's son's son, which were Grade 5.

The combined list of people who fell into these five grades made up for you an important circle of kin. It was incest to marry or have sexual relationships within this circle. To reinforce family solidarity and authority the law carefully

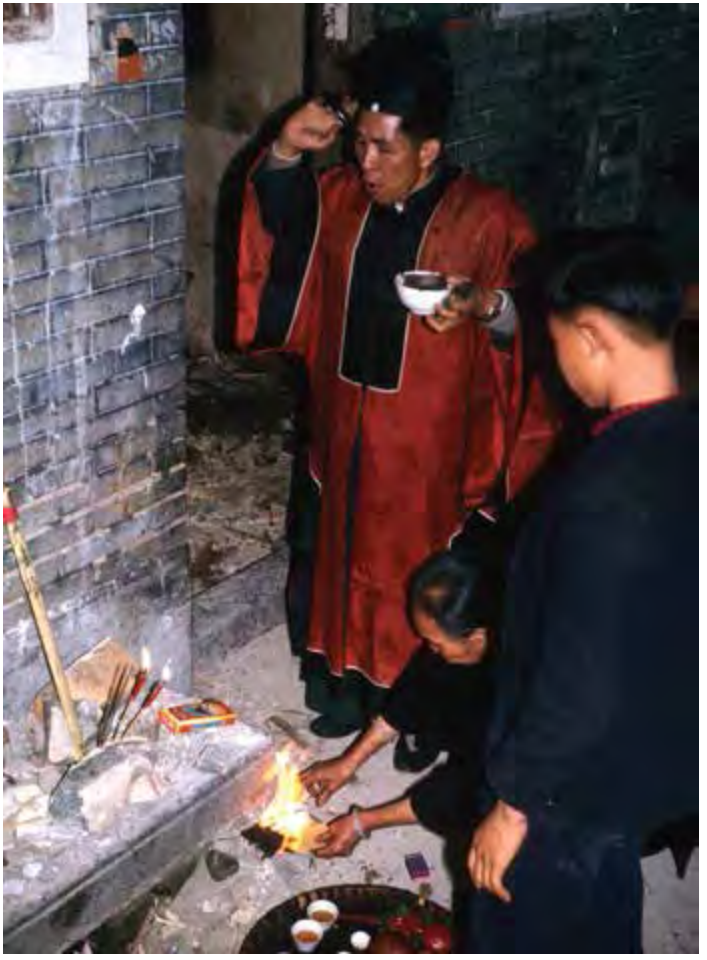
graded offences committed against other members of the circle according to whether they were carried out by an inferior to a superior or vice versa. A father could beat his son unmercifully without risk of punishment, but a son who so much as laid a finger on his father was liable to be executed.

Since the people inside the mourning circle were more important to you than those outside, it stood to reason that it was a greater offence to do harm to insiders than to outsiders. Murder was in all cases a crime punishable by death, but the murder of someone within your mourning circle was more severely punished than murder of an outsider. Happily (if that's the word) there were graded forms of capital punishment which allowed for subtle distinctions in your demise, ranging from strangulation at the lenient end to death by slicing for the most serious crime (patricide).

Theft worked the other way round. As the family was considered to be a mutual responsibility group and all its property to be held in common, it was difficult to conceive of theft from another member of your family. So theft from an outsider was *more* serious than theft within the circle, and was punished more severely.

The mourners in the photograph are mainly dressed in undyed cloth, though the niceties of grade cannot be picked out because they were not observed. The shot was taken at a New Territories ceremony to mark the end of mourning, despite the fact that it was only a few days after the funeral. The law no longer maintains the authority of the mourning grade hierarchy. All in all the resemblance to a pre-20th-century scene is superficial: the grief remains, however, and with it the need to mourn.

91 House Re-warming



Place:	Sheung Shui Village, New Territories, Hong Kong.
Date:	27th March 1964: *gap san* 甲辰 year, 2nd month, 14th day.
Time:	1.15 a.m.
Almanac entry:	11 p.m. to 3 a.m. auspicious.
	Bad day for: planting, marrying, burning ancestor tablets, burying.

Good day for: worshipping; starting school; setting out on journeys; meeting friends; moving house; bathing; curing sickness; tailoring; building dikes; digging; beam-raising; weaving nets; brewing; hanging doors; pasturing; buying in domestic animals.

Two days before, on 25th March, the Almanac had promised thunder, so I was not particularly surprised when at half past midnight I was awoken by a tremendous din. However, it was immediately obvious that it was not thunder. I got dressed, grabbed camera and flash, and went to investigate.

Just a few doors along the row of houses there was great activity, with firecrackers and two large gongs setting standards of noise which everyone else was trying hard to live up to. The house which was the centre of attention had been under repair for several weeks, and a new roof was now nearly complete. As with a new house, a new roof requires a topping-out ceremony, and the builders had reached the stage where they were ready for the ridge-pole to be put in place with due ceremony. It was unfortunate for the weary that on this day when "beam-raising" was approved by the Almanac the most suitable auspicious period should fall in the middle of the night.

Inside the house had been set up a long red-painted table. On this were trays and bowls of offering foods. There was a pig's head, a whole cooked chicken, nuts, a large bunch of bananas, bowls of soup with hard-boiled duck eggs in, cut meats, rice, tea, wine, and a dish of lurid red ceremonial buns. A red wooden tub at one end contained five paper swords, paper charms, ritual candles, and incense.

On the beams of the cockloft was pasted a strip of red paper with the words "May both sons and wealth enter here" (*ding-choi leung-jun* 丁財兩進) and other red paper lucky charms were stuck on the inside walls.

The ceremony was conducted by the Taoist priest in his scarlet robes and black hat. In the photograph he can be seen chanting spells outside the door of the house, while an old woman assists him. The boy in the foreground shadowed the priest throughout the ceremony: he was the oldest male member available of the family who were to live in the house.

The purposes of the ceremony were to dispel evil from the house and to appease any gods or spirits which might have been disturbed or upset by the building work. In addition, the ritual aimed to attract positive benefits to the house, as the wish for sons and wealth showed.

The five swords were smeared with blood which the Taoist took from a small nick in the comb of a live cockerel. They were taken to each of the five directions (North, East, South, West and Centre) and offerings made. I believe that this was to frighten off the evil from all directions, and to appeal to the god-rulers of the five parts of the Universe for their protection.

More chicken blood was dropped in a bowl of purified water. Then a long yellow paper charm was read out by the priest, burned, and the ashes added to the mixture in the bowl. At various stages he would sip up a mouthful of this holy water and spray it out. The climax came when the boy was made to stand under the top beam of the roof as it rested on trestles ready to be hoisted into position. The Taoist showered both him and the beam with rice and fruits — a fertility magic. Then the chicken and a pair of trousers (the latter being a symbol for wealth) were passed round the beam, and to a frantic gonging the beam was lifted into place. Hanging from it were various objects symbolizing good luck, fertility, wealth, and so on.

A long string of firecrackers burst into life, and echoed through the normally quiet night-time lanes. A feast of sharks fin soup and other delicacies was served, along with wine. It was nearly 3 a.m. before I got back to bed.

But what about all that noise late at night — did no-one complain? The answer is that no-one took any notice. Tolerance of neighbours' activities is high in close-packed villages and, after all, the need to hold a ceremony of some kind at inconvenient hours could strike anyone at any time.

As I have so often done, I turned to De Groot's *Religious System of China* for enlightenment. Sure enough, he confirms my view:

> The chief instrument for the production of exorcising noise is the gong … resounding throughout the empire every day, especially in summer, when a rise in the death rate induces an increase in devil-expelling activity …. Very often small groups of men and even women are beating on gongs, cymbals and drums for a succession of hours. No protest is heard from their neighbours, no complaint that they disturb their night's rest; such savage music then must either sound agreeable to Chinese ears, or be heard with gratitude as

a meritorious work, gratuitously performed by benevolent folks who have at heart the private and public weal and health.[138]

100 Hundred Surnames

This photograph makes no claim to originality. It is an everyday Hong Kong picture of what Hong Kong has in abundance — people. Here is "the man in the street", "the people", in Cantonese "the old hundred surnames" (*lo-baak-sing* 老百姓).

Surname has been terribly important to the Chinese, so important that unlike Westerners they put it before their personal names. The Westernized

Chinese who reverses his names for the convenience of non-Chinese friends is felt somehow to be disowning his birth-right, not to mention causing confusion to those who do not know whether he has done it or not.

A man may have many names in his life, casting off old ones and adopting new like a snake shedding its skin. Often he will change his name to mark some new stage in his life. When he first goes to school he will take a "book name"; when he marries he will take a "style"; if he writes he will use a "pen name", and so on. But his surname will not be changed.

Surname is passed down the male line, as it is in the West, but it carries with it far more significance for the Chinese. In the past, when people wanted to adopt a son, they looked for one of the same surname as themselves, so keeping adoption "within the family" as it were. Traditionally two people with the same surname were by law not allowed to marry. The idea that all with the most common surname Lei (李) were related and that intermarriage would be incestuous seems strange to foreigners, but it gelled perfectly with the emphasis on the male line. By contrast it was quite respectable, even laudable, for a man to marry a first cousin on his mother's side, because she would have a different surname.

There is said to be an area of Fujian province where virtually everyone for kilometres around was surnamed Lim (Lam 林), and since it was impracticable to go too far away to find a spouse, Imperial dispensation to marry within the surname was given provided the couple had no common ancestor for five generations back.

Nowadays there are fewer people who would worry about this problem, and I have known marriages in Hong Kong between couples with the same name; but at the other extreme there are still those who consider marriage between the surnames 王 and 黃 to be improper because both are pronounced *wong* in Cantonese and so *sound* as though they are the same surname. Mandarin speakers have no such problem, as they pronounce the two characters *wang* and *huang* respectively.

The old hundred surnames represented the common people, but why?

> Its ordinary signification is considered as equivalent to the term 民, or "the people" in a general sense; and some commentators have been led to assert that on the first invention of family names the number of these was restricted to one hundred. This is fantastically explained by a supposed arithmetical

> process, the 5 constant virtues being multiplied by the 5 notes of harmony and the product again by the 4 seasons, giving the total sum required. The only foundation for this theory appears to exist in the fact that the Chinese family names have been grouped according to their tone of pronunciation under the notes. The number of characters actually in use as surnames is between four and five hundred.[154]

Even four to five hundred is less than the full total, but there are certainly many fewer than the range of surnames to be found in a British telephone directory. The fact is that a hundred (*baak* 百), a thousand (*chin* 千) and ten thousand (*maan* 萬) are nice round numbers, and Chinese delights in them. The "old hundred surnames" merely means "all the many surnames". In the same way "a hundred birds" (*baak-niu* 百鳥) means "all the many kinds of bird", and "a hundred goods company" (*baak-foh-gung-si* 百貨公司) means a "department store". It is a courtesy to wish someone "a hundred sons and a thousand grandsons" (*baak-ji-chin-suen* 百子千孫) so as to ensure the continuation of his male line — note that you do not wish someone even a few daughters or granddaughters!

From the 5th to the 3rd century B.C. in China there were so many rival schools of philosophy (of which Confucianism and Taoism were but two) that they have become known to posterity as the "hundred schools" (*baak-ga* 百家). And in 1957 Chairman Mao Zedong made one of his most famous speeches on the theme "Let a hundred flowers bloom" (*baak-fa-chai-fong* 百花齊放). This was taken to mean "Let all the many opinions be expressed" and this was the signal for a (very short-lived) free-speech movement.

"A thousand antiquities" (*chin-gwoo* 千古) means "a long long time ago", "thousand mile eyes" (*chin-lei-ngaan* 千里眼) means "far sightedness".

The Great Wall of China is called the "10,000 mile long wall" (*maan-lei-cheung-sing* 萬里長城), but that is not supposed to be an accurate measurement of its length. When a Chinese shouted loyally "Long live the Emperor!" or more recently "Long live Chairman Mao!" it came out as "May X live 10,000 years!" (*X maan-sui* 萬歲). It would be absurd to think that anyone took the 10,000 years literally: it was neither more nor less meaningful than the English "Long live X!"

Talking of round numbers — this is the one hundredth article I have written in this series. I should like to dedicate it to the "old hundred surnames"

of Hong Kong, without whose colourful inspiration I wouldn't even have started to write.

120 Wires

In the 1960s I visited Tokyo. Its temples and formal gardens had a beauty of quietness and simplicity which appealed to me where the clash and clutter of the Hong Kong equivalents had always vaguely disappointed. Yet the greater part of Tokyo I thought excessively ugly, and when I tried to work out why, I decided there were three reasons: the drab colours, the dust, and the wires which criss-crossed everywhere.

Never had I seen such a mess of wires and lines — until I took a trip to the little island of Peng Chau (坪洲) to the east of Lantau. This photograph hardly does justice to the cat's cradle which sat over the shacks and small factories in the northern part of the island. Couldn't help feeling that there had to be awful problems with crossed wires — pick up the phone and next-door's television was switched on, that kind of thing.

Cantonese people are always talking about crossed wires (*chi-sin* 黐綫), not because of this scene, but because it is a slang term for "crazy" or "silly", rather like "having a screw loose" in English.

The Cantonese language of Hong Kong is as rich as a language could be, compounded of classical Chinese, modern standard Chinese, rapidly changing

slang, and English words all mixed in with the ancient forms of basic Cantonese. Colourful expressions spill from Hong Kong mouths in torrents, dazzling the ear — and muddling the senses, if that last phrase is any evidence!

The man who walks too slowly is accused of "trampling ants to death" (*yaai-sei-ngai* 踹死蟻); a jealous person is said to have "sipped vinegar" (*haap-cho* 呷醋); a naughty child is in danger of being smacked on his "moon festival" (*baat-yuet sap-ng* 八月十五), that is, on the full round part of his anatomy. "Chicken stealing" (tau-gai 偷鷄) is "playing truant"; if you've "dropped anchor" (*paau-naau* 拋錨) your car has broken down at the roadside; "kicking legs everywhere" (*tek-saai-geuk* 踢哂腳) means "crowded to bursting", and comes apparently from restaurant waiters' slang.

Then there is a kind of speech which is very reminiscent of cockney rhyming slang, where "I'm going up the apples" can only be understood by someone who knows that the words "and pears" which give the rhyme-clue to the intended word "stairs" have been dropped. Similarly, when a Cantonese says he has been eating "three and six" (*saam-luk* 三六) it doesn't make sense unless you know that three and six make "nine" (*gau* 九), and that gau sounds like the word for "dog" (*gau* 狗). It is only when it is eaten that dog is called saam-luk, presumably because the term evolved as a secret code designed to prevent outsiders knowing about an illegal activity. Nowadays, as with "apples", the expression has passed into everyday speech.

Another of these "double puns" is "Japanese ship" (*yat-boon-suen* 日本船). It turns on the fact that all Japanese ship names, however long, end with the word *maru* (丸 read *yuen* in Cantonese). So "Japanese ship" stands for "sooner or later comes *maru*" (*chi-jo-yuen* 遲早丸), and *yuen* sounds like the word "finished" (*yuen* 完) the intended meaning being "sooner or later he'll come to a sticky end". "Japanese ship" is the kind of thing you call a maniac motor-cyclist or anyone else embarked on a foolhardy course.

Not content with this already complex punning system, Hong Kong's linguistic innovators have turned to English to make it more complicated still. "What was the movie like?" you ask someone. "Foreign devil's moon-cake" he replies, and you know he didn't like it. "Foreign devil's moon-cake" (*faan-gwai-lo-yuet-beng* 番鬼佬月餅) is to be understood as "*yuet-beng* in a foreign language", that is, the English word "moon-cake". Now "moon-cake" sounds rather like the Cantonese *moon-gik* (悶極) which means "extremely boring",

and that is what you are intended to understand. From Cantonese into English and back again, all in one unspoken leap.

With such deliberate ingenuity it is hardly surprising that in moments of stress Cantonese speakers can produce startling originality of English expression, and nowhere does that show more clearly than in examination scripts.

Here are some of the things I have learned from candidates about family life. For instance, "I was a child when I was young"; "The members of the family were related to each other"; "My grandmother gave birth to thirteen children all together"; "Today she still a young girl, but after a night she was become a well-used housewife"; and the subtle variant phrase "next-of-skins".

On the subject of warfare I have found out that another name for a battle-field is a "bottle-flied", and that a chariot can be known as a "flighting carrot". "Rapering of women should be excuated," said one candidate sternly. "One way of fighting a batter is to surround it and fight with it," said another. The Qing dynasty depended for its defence on "the green ballet troops" I was assured, but maybe that wasn't so odd, because "Communication in the military department was mainly by horses and lettered pigeon."

Descriptive prose brings out great originality. Who would not be moved by: "The sky was as white as the dosal side of the fish's thrunk"? or "The cock is cocking happily at the back of the house, the hans hooting with happlies"? or "They were suffered from femine, and the cold weather was like a piece of wipe which was wipping on their back"? How much more colourful than "They left home sadly" is "They bring their eye-water leaving out their own village"! And one of them, indeed, was "sprinking his eyelash", poor chap! Another was "frightened and begin to shinking his body and creaming".

I could go on, but this article is becoming more and more chi-sin, so I now declare it and this book "copse and spinney — *fini*" (as a French cockney would say) or, as a Cantonese born within the sound of Bow Bells might insist, "stewed prune" *yuen*.

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