

馬國明：荃灣的童年

My Childhood in Tsuen Wan: excerpts

By MA Kwok Ming

Translated by TAM Pak Shan

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In summer a bottle of water was something you couldn't do without on your way to school. The water was of course from the mountain stream which our neighbouring incense powder factory tapped for its water supply. The spring water we got was far superior to the tap water which most families drank, or so my parents said. That was why I would never squander my money on soft drinks which cost more than two bread rolls did, not just to quench my thirst. The fact was I needed to buy the bread, and were I to save whatever money was left, it would have taken me a whole week's savings to buy a Coke. I seldom had a soft drink, and if I did, I wouldn't go for a Coke. But, deep down, I thought that to be able to have a soft drink to go with a meal was a sure indicator of the good life. I don't recall when and how I had my first soft drink. It seems that I bought all my soft drinks on my way home from school, at the kiosk where my family had taken a rest when we were moving into the neighbourhood. I would down the drink in one gulp and my belly would swell out like a balloon. Then I would go on my way, feeling a little 'high'. But I would walk a little more slowly than usual in full expectation of what was brewing in my belly. After a minute or two, the air built up inside would be released in a gust, giving me my money's worth.

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I can't really explain why I longed for that feeling of release. Maybe a soft drink is to children what alcohol is to grown-ups. Soft drinks are called 'soft' to distinguish them from strong ones. If the two had really been completely unrelated, it wouldn't have been necessary to distinguish them in the first place. A soft drink was the first consumer product I ever bought. I don't know how many other people in those days bought soft drinks to get the same kick as I did, but it was that special sensation that I was after. Kids these days may not feel it at all, but they will certainly get a kick from something else. After all, to be successful, a product has to arouse in the buyer a special feeling, no matter how short-lived, how trivial or irrelevant to real life it is.

To use a vogue-word of today, what I did was purely a matter of 'taste'. It wasn't because I was thirsty or I had pocket money to spare. Since a bottle of soft drink would cost me a whole week's savings, it was a deliberate decision. But, you may ask, what was behind this 'taste'? If the sensation I was after—provided I wasn't making it up—had little to do with real life, how come it has left such a lasting impression on me? To answer the first question, you can't just say it's because of consumerism in a capitalist society. In fact ever since my family moved to Tso Kung Tam village, I was very much a child of the wild. The place had no electricity (we had little need for it, anyway). The first radio in the village belonged to the family who built a brick house by the Tso Kung Tam pond when they moved in a few years after us. Despite the possibility of getting scolded by our father, my elder sisters and I sneaked out after dinner to this neighbour's doorway just to listen to our favourite radio series 'Moonlight Murders'. We probably did that for a week or two and, who knows, we might happen to have listened to a few soft drink commercials. But this was hardly the reason why I would spend my precious money on soft drinks. The only possible explanation is that, as human beings, we have more needs than just being fed and clothed. Apart from basic sustenance, we have numerous material and non-material needs—in fact, it's hard to distinguish between the two. If all you can manage is sustenance without the least sense of pleasure, it is likely that you will not have any self-respect either. 'High-principled even in poverty' is probably just an ego trip for the well-educated few. The occasional bottle of soft drink was the only luxury in my childhood.

This also explains why I still remember clearly that pleasurable sensation from all those years ago. But is there any need to explain? After all, if we really make an effort to recall the past, we will be surprised to find how good our memories are. The only problem is we have so little time for quiet recollection: we can't do it at work, and even less after work. On the other hand, in a society which has no time for recollection, nostalgia can become a trendy thing. Old things, once they have faded from people's minds, become fashionable again. So forgetfulness is not

only a question of personal lifestyle but also a sign of commercialization. In fact there is something highly political to people's memories: we tend to remember only the history of the victors. Those who hold on to the memory of the losers' history do so at the risk of their lives, because winning and losing are not the same as the outcome of a fair soccer match.

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Hong Kong is known as one of the 'little dragons'. Maybe that's why Hong Kong has always been a mystery, just like the dragon, which no one has ever seen. But you can paint a dragon which, as legend has it, will fly up to the sky once the pupils of its eyes are dotted in. As for the history of Hong Kong, if its eyes are left unpainted, it will be little more than batches of files passed on from one sovereign to another. But how can we paint the eyes of Hong Kong's history? Let's go back to Tak Sing Primary School, where I used to study.

Tak Sing Primary School was located somewhere on a hill slope over the present-day Sam Tung Uk Museum in Tsuen Wan. To make way for the MTR station, both the school premises and the hill have been razed. The school building wasn't particularly impressive and had little conservation value. It had two storeys with seven rooms altogether, one each for the six classes, and the remaining one for the teachers. But the Catholic church next to the school building was well worth conserving because, even though it pales beside the nearby Tung Po To and Yuen Yuen Institute,¹ it was located between the original villages of Sam Tung Uk and Sai Lau Kok. The church had a seating capacity of over a hundred. In the rows of pews separated by a central aisle would sit the churchgoers, with the men on one side and the women on the other: there was strict segregation. In the early morning, by the time we reached school, a dozen churchgoers would have just finished mass. On Sundays, the church was usually packed to capacity, mostly with working-class people like my parents. They might not be able to explain why they were willing to go to church on this precious day of rest but they always came in earnest. Its preservation would have saved not only a church but part of Hong Kong's history. And it wasn't merely a reflection of the inner world of the working class. When it was first built, the church was probably the only building sprouting out of those vegetable fields. When I entered primary school the fields were no longer there.

¹Tung Po To 東普陀 is a major Buddhist monastery in Tsuen Wan. Yuen Yuen Institute 玄園學院, a Taoist monastery, is the largest of the monasteries in the area.



Sam Tung Uk Museum, Tsuen Wan.
Collection of the Hong Kong Tourist Association.

Next to the church and my school was an enamel factory which spewed out black smoke all the time, its wall forming the edge of the school playground. Through a hole in the wall filled in with barbed wire we could see workers bare to the waist heating enamel ware in a furnace. Sometimes the workers would come over to watch us at play. The scorching heat might have been hard to stand, but who cared, if that was the only way to make a living? In pretty much the same way, at a time when many children of school age could not get an education, we didn't mind the coal ash from the enamel factory. So in the blazing fire the difference between the worlds of the factory workers and us school children melted away.

I still remember clearly Eldest Sister's graduation photo: all her schoolmates and the teachers were lined up in three rows. Obviously the photographer didn't use a wide-angle lens, for the corrugated iron roof of the enamel factory also appeared in the picture. But the chimney of the factory had been erased, leaving behind a white mark in the shape of a column against a background of blue sky with white clouds. I think either the school or the church authority must have complained to the government about the school's poor amenities because, around the time when I was in primary three, a new iron gate was built, which led into an open space behind

the church. This open space was bigger than the school playground but it had no facilities; it wasn't even paved. The only side fenced off was that adjoining the school premises. Obviously the ground was not property of the school, and was probably temporarily set aside for our use to compensate for the school playground being permanently polluted with coal ash. It probably didn't belong to the enamel factory either. But if it was really provided by the government, then the government's time-honoured policy of 'active non-intervention' is admirable indeed.

No anti-air-pollution legislation was introduced until the late 80s. Therefore throughout my school-days I had to play on a playground with coal ash flying around. But I always preferred the dust of the earth to the coal ash because of the happy memories I have of playing on the yellow sandy soil of the open ground behind the church, which later became our soccer field. On the day of the school anniversary we had a soccer match and I played for my class. The little football was like a huge magnet for a bunch of school kids. Four pieces of stone were placed on the field with two at each end for the goals—suddenly the magnet passed between the two stones and the match came to an end. But my enthusiasm for the sport had only just begun.

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Throughout my six years at primary school, I never felt the pressure of homework. It seems that I was never given a dictation in class. As for my parents, even if they had any expectations for my future, they never let me know; at least not that I can remember. The school fees of four dollars a month were affordable, but to spend a few hundred dollars on school books for all five of us sisters and brothers each year was quite beyond my family's limited means. One day following the HKSSEE,² Father came home saying he'd read in the newspaper my name on the list of students qualified for a secondary school place, and so I hurried off to register at my school. Otherwise I wouldn't have thought of the matter, and the subject of my further studies wouldn't have been brought up by my parents either. Tak Sing Primary School had two primary six classes, but only one class was allowed to take part in the HKSSEE. The other class didn't even have the chance to be also-rans, so as not to waste taxpayers' money, so it was said. In fact, of the forty-five pupils who took part, only seven were able to get a secondary school place through

²Hong Kong Secondary School Entrance Examination.

the exam. As for the rest, with the exception of three or four whose families could afford the fees for private secondary schools, all of them had provided Hong Kong industry with more cheap labour within a couple of years.

But times are better. Now our children are provided with nine years of free education. Now getting a place in a tertiary institute is even easier than passing the HKSSEE in the old days—at least statistically speaking that is the case. With the progress of our times, parents would not allow their children to play in the midst of coal ash. At the same time, factory owners are complaining that labour is no longer cheap and that they are losing their competitive edge as operational costs soar. But is all this really social progress? Maybe progress itself is a contradictory thing. The government's labour import scheme and the manufacturers' relocation of their factories to north of the border are all attempts to take us back to the age of cheap labour. On the surface, it seems Hong Kong has become a post-industrial society, with most of its work-force employed in the service industry. But so much of Hong Kong's service sector is based on manufacturing now carried out north of the border! When the mainland changed its political colour the first time round, it triggered off a flow of factories from Shanghai to Hong Kong, with their names changed to 'South' this, that and the other. Now that the political colour has changed again, it seems only natural that the flow be reversed. Is history just a meaningless cycle that keeps repeating itself? Does Hong Kong serve no other historical role than being some sort of palette for the mainland to mix its political colours on? In the time between the factories' shift south and then back north, a generation was born, raised and educated here (if only up to primary level). Now this generation is trying to figure out if all it wants is 'stability and prosperity'. "I think, therefore I am." But here in Hong Kong, the question is not so much "I am" as "where am I?", to which you can't simply answer, "In Hong Kong." If you find yourself in between the coal ash from the enamel factory and the dust on the open ground behind the church; or between the mountain stream at Tso Kung Tam and the pollution from the China Dyeing Works Ltd, you could be at a loss where you are, for it could be the promised land or, just as likely, an urban landfill.

Like China Dyeing Works Ltd and the mountain stream at Tso Kung Tam, Tak Sing Primary School and the enamel factory have disappeared from the map of Tsuen Wan. The open ground where kids kicked up dust chasing each other is long gone. Of course the plan for Hong Kong's future has been settled. But if you don't believe Hong Kong's history simply consists of its metamorphosis from small fishing port into major trading port, and from colonial rule to the embrace of the motherland, you can't help wondering: where am I? When all the familiar surroundings have changed, you just have to ask: where am I? *