

王韜：香海羈踪

My Sojourn in Hong Kong: excerpts

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Wang Tao

THE AFTERNOON of the next day I arrived in Hong Kong. The hills all around are rather bare of trees, and nothing but water meets the eyes. The people appear rather stupid and speak a dialect that is quite unintelligible. The experience was so exasperating when I first arrived that I felt that I could hardly stand it.

My residence was halfway up the mountain, surrounded by banyans. Several large plantain trees could be seen outside the window, greeting the eyes with their luscious green. In the evening I was just dashing off a letter to my family by lamp-light when the sound of a Chinese fiddle arose in the neighbourhood. Someone was

Wang Tao (1828-1897) was one of the earliest Chinese scholars to promote Western studies. For thirteen years he worked in Mohai shuguan 墨海書館, a Shanghai publishing house run by British missionaries, where he helped W.H. Medhurst to translate the Bible into Chinese. Later, wanted by the Qing government for his early connections with the Taiping rebellion, he fled to Hong Kong. There he started his long-term cooperation with James Legge in translating Chinese classics into English.

singing sonorously to the accompaniment of the instrument. The sound of music in a foreign place only makes one sad.

Hong Kong was originally a barren isle. There is very little flat land between the mountains and the sea, perhaps a few yards altogether. Here the Europeans have made painstaking efforts in planning and building. Their persistence reminds one of the mythical *jingwei* bird that endeavoured to fill up the sea with pebbles, and the "foolish old man" who tried to move mountains. Land in this area is now so costly that even a few square feet can command a fantastic price.

The district near the shore is the commercial district. It is divided into three so-called "rings", the "Upper", "Central" and "Lower" Rings, named in accordance with the topographical features of the hillside. Later, another Ring was added, so there are now four of them. The local people often refer to this last Ring as the "Apron-string Road", an appellation which evidently derived from the way it circuits the hillside.

The people of Guangdong province have always had something of a monopoly on commerce, and thus Hong Kong has proved to be attractive to craftsmen from far and wide. Business flourishes here, and trade relations have been established with many places.

The people of Hong Kong depend mainly on mountain springs for their drinking water, which is pure and refreshing. Chickens and pigs are inexpensive, but are not as delicious as those from Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. The ocean fish have a pronounced fishy flavour. Most fresh-water fish come from Guangzhou, but cannot be kept for very long.

The streets in the Upper and Central Rings are closely lined with imposing shops. Passers-by are so numerous that they are constantly jostling against each other, and it is both noisy and dusty. The Lower Ring, by contrast, is more tranquil and shady, with plenty of trees. It is less densely populated and retains a rural atmosphere. Many Europeans have built their summer houses in the district known as Pokfulam. This picturesque neighbourhood is a fit place for those who seek solitude and relaxation. The district beyond the Lower Ring is mostly inhabited by the fishermen, many of whom spend their entire lives on boats.

Central Ring has St. Paul's College, and Ying Wah College stands at the junction of Upper and Lower Rings. Great College is located in Upper Ring. In all these institutions students are taught Western languages so that they can render useful service to the government upon graduation. Ying Wah College has an automated typesetting machine and printing facilities.

The highest point of Upper Ring is Tai Ping Shan. Here the streets are neatly lined on both sides with gaudy houses sporting brightly painted doors and windows hung with fancy curtains. These are the brothels, which are literally packed with singsong girls. It is a pity that most of them have large natural feet, and that those with tiny bowed feet account for a very small percentage, perhaps only one or two out of a hundred. About half of the girls can be considered attractive. There is a class of girls called "salt-water maids", most of whom live in Central Ring. As many of them are kept by Europeans, they have become quite wealthy, and own houses of their own. The finest among them are attractive in their own way, with roundish

faces and seductive eyes. At a friend's request, I have improvised the following verse about Hong Kong:

*A lone isle displays its splendour on the sea
Magnificent buildings everywhere to be seen.
Yet outlandish are the singsong girls
Who put new lyrics to old tunes.*

Drastic changes are now taking place in the way of life in Hong Kong. People are beginning to pursue luxury. When I first arrived there, merchants generally wore short jackets and put on a cotton overcoat when the weather got cold. The women paid little attention to their dress. Even the singsong girls wore plain cottons when entertaining their visitors, and rarely wore jewellery of any sort. But then the people became more wasteful and corrupt. Since the founding of the Tung Wah Hospital, the members of its board of directors have begun to hold an annual gathering to celebrate the lunar new year. For the occasion they don all sorts of fine headgear and gowns, as if they were illustrious officials having an audience with the emperor! Sartorial splendour has supplanted the plainer styles of the past. At fashionable social gatherings, some spend tens of dollars on a single dinner. Bright lamps burn through the night, and loud music is heard until the small hours. Hong Kong's prosperity now exceeds that of Guangzhou, and it is all the result of fate and chance.

Roaming Around the Island

During my sojourn in Hong Kong, I have stayed indoors most of the time, and seldom mingled with people of note. The one acquaintance whom I sought out during moments of leisure is Mr Bao Rongfang, who accompanied me on many excursions in the hills and along the shore.

One place of abiding interest near my home is the museum, which houses a large collection of books in European languages. Everyone is free to go in and read them. The books cover numerous subjects, including geography, anatomy and mechanics, and all contain detailed illustrations. In the courtyard there is a display of specimens of various kinds of birds, fish, animals, plants, and trees. They are so finely preserved that they appear to be alive.

Next to the museum stands the opera house, where the Europeans go for plays and concerts. Among the performances, magicians occupy a prominent place. Their skills are very great indeed, often achieving feats which seem incredible.

The British have set up three colleges. They are the St. Paul's College headed by Mr Sung Mei, the Ying Wah College headed by Mr James Legge and the "Great Britain College" headed by Mr Shi An. These institutions only admit youths of exceptional talent. Upon graduation, most of them will go to work in government departments, while the rest will be recommended to other establishments.

Near St. Paul's College and the City Hall, there is a tract of wooded land with clumps of bamboo and carpet-like lawns under lofty trees. I have taken many a

pleasant stroll there at sunset. When the refreshing breeze blows through my sleeves, I often feel a strong reluctance to turn back.

The buildings in the Central Ring are particularly magnificent, and many are veritable mansions. This is the principal commercial district. The streets are broader, too. Therefore, it is not as noisy and chaotic as Upper Ring.

There is a huge striking clock near the water's edge. When it strikes the hours, it can be heard at a distance of several miles.

Pokfulam, where the Europeans have their summer houses, is rather distant from where I live. Handsome villas equipped with all sorts of conveniences have been built there in great numbers. They are set in picturesque surroundings, with lofty trees and flowering plants all around. The courtyards of many houses boast gurgling fountains. Sitting in the cool comfort of the airy rooms of such residences, one can almost forget the sultry summer weather. In such places, the cold drinks or iced fruit and melons so popular in summer seem quite unnecessary.

When Mr Legge is not busy teaching, he sometimes invites me to spend a day in his Pokfulam home, where we while away the hours together reading or composing poems in the wafting breezes. Even immortals could hardly aspire to such pleasure. I owe it to Mr Legge's unstinting friendship that I am allowed to share his comfort in the hot season.

A short walk away from where Mr Legge resides, there is a reservoir—a broad expanse of calm water, so lucid that one can see right to the bottom. There is a

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guards' lodge nearby, for the reservoir is watched by sentries to prevent the water from being poisoned. The people of Hong Kong depend primarily on that reservoir for drinking water. The supply never stops even in the dry season. This is indeed a great boon.

The villas owned by European merchants at Pokfulam have been built in a variety of styles and are reached by flights of stairs. Many are surrounded by high walls topped by battlements; it is as if their proprietors were prepared to defend themselves against attack from hostile countries. Europeans are always on the alert, and arm themselves even at home. Their houses are built on hillsides or mountain tops, and command magnificent views. The sea stretches out before you all the way to the endless horizon; vast networks of mountains appear like little mounds. Ships and boats of every description lie at anchor in neat rows in the harbour, which appears no larger than a spittoon. Such sights are a delight to the eye as well as the mind.

Some of the houses are built in Japanese style, complete with bamboo screens and paper windows. They are remarkable for their cleanliness and refinement.

In the past the island of Hong Kong was free of mosquitoes. However, the planting of many trees and plants has led to a serious infestation of these insects. The way they frequently disturb one's sleep is one of the major drawbacks of the place.

By following a tortuous path, one will eventually reach the Peak. There is a tiny hut perched there which serves as a lodge for the guards, with a tall flagpole standing beside it. When a ship arrives from a foreign port, a flag will be hoisted to inform the people who live further down the hill of its arrival. I have climbed up there, and standing in the wind, dropped my handkerchief, only to have it fly back to me. The guard told me, "The wind always blows towards the summit." This phenomenon is hard to explain.

Visitors from distant places generally lodge in the guest houses. These consist of a number of buildings large and small that are spread out over an area of several acres planted with lovely flowers and shrubs. However, there are no pavilions and pagodas here. In this respect, they are inferior to the mansions of China. At sunset when the moon comes out, many distinguished Europeans gather here to enjoy the cool breezes. Dressed in their finest, they stand together chatting in small groups, or stroll leisurely through the grounds in pairs. The scene gives one the impression that these people are thoroughly enjoying themselves on their sojourn in a foreign place.

During my stay in Hong Kong, I worked together with Dr Legge on the translation of *The Thirteen Classics*. Before he was called back to Britain, he discussed the possibility of my going to Europe to assist him with further translations. In the winter of 1867, I received a letter from him inviting me there, and made up my mind to take the trip. My friends in Hong Kong arranged a farewell dinner in my honour at the Apricot Blossom Restaurant. We all enjoyed ourselves immensely chatting over our cups. Then on 20 October I boarded a foreign ship which departed promptly at ten o'clock in the morning. ☐