

FOREWORD

Lam Woo died more than eighty years ago, but his memory lives on in his family, in his contributions to Hong Kong church and society, and through the foundation that bears his name. His memory is very much a part of the history of our church.

As a young boy of fourteen, Lam went to Australia, joining the Chinese diaspora at that time. Endowed with an enterprising spirit, he benefitted greatly by his sojourn in Australia which opened his eyes to a much wider world. In Melbourne and Sydney, he worked hard as a shopkeeper's assistant, studied English in the evenings at the YMCA and was baptised in the Anglican Chinese mission. He then returned to his native village in Guangdong where he was married.

He subsequently moved to Hong Kong where he set up a construction company. This occurred at a time when Hong Kong was rapidly evolving into a center for international trade, as well as a cradle for new ideas for a modern China. Lam Woo & Company, which Lam started with his brother and which employed many family members, was creative in its approach to construction. It soon developed a reputation for careful planning, with fine and reliable workmanship in the building industry. It

worked on many important government and private projects in Hong Kong, and helped lay the foundation for Hong Kong's infrastructure. The eleven-story Bank of East Asia building, which was often regarded Hong Kong's first skyscraper, was one of the projects. His company was also involved in major building projects in Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Lam Woo was a public spirited man, and a committed Chinese patriot. His support for Sun Yat-sen and the Republican revolution was unwavering. Like Sun, he was committed to the principles of nationalism, democracy and people's livelihood, all of which were reflected in his interest in modernisation of China and in Christianity.

Lam Woo was a very active Christian. In Hong Kong, he became a founding member of the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and of Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui (HKSKH) St. Paul's Church. He had a broad and encompassing faith, which enabled him to be a natural networker with Christians and non-Christians alike. He became well-known and respected in all sectors of the society. Lam personally supervised the building of St. Paul's Church that was erected by his company. He was also involved in the planning of the building of St. Mary's Church, although his untimely death in 1933 deprived him of seeing it to completion. Through his company, Lam contributed to the construction of many of our HKSKH schools and YMCA buildings. His company also worked on the building of the Church of Our Saviour, the first Anglican Church in Guangzhou, which, like St. Paul's and St. Mary's, is still in use today. Lam Woo made very generous financial contributions to the church, and he gave his time and expertise working unsparingly for the Christian community and broader society.

I like to see Lam Woo as one of the "founding fathers" of Chinese Anglicanism in Hong Kong, alongside many of his contemporaries. He was highly regarded by Bishops Lander, Duppuay and Hall, as well as our Chinese clergy. The HKSKH has relied on lay leaders like Lam Woo since the time of our founding. An active laity is essential for a healthy and growing church, and I am personally encouraged by Lam Woo's example. I am happy to say that many of his family members are loyal members of

St. Paul's Church to this day, and that they continue to be involved in the life of the broader community.

This biography of Lam Woo should be read by all who are interested in the development of Hong Kong and HKSXH from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. We have much to learn from Lam Woo, a soft spoken man, with an inner sense of authority, a commitment to his family, and an abiding faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul Kwong
Archbishop of Hong Kong
June 2016

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FOREWORD

I have never met my grandfather as he died before I was born. However, I have heard so much about him that I greatly admire him. It seems inconceivable for a young boy of fourteen with very little education to leave his impoverished village and venture to Australia as a labourer. He not only worked hard but also improved his education by going to the local YMCA to learn English, attended the Anglican church, and was baptised. All that helped towards the great success that my grandfather would achieve in the later years in Hong Kong.

After 1949 many members of the Lam extended family immigrated to North America and other parts of the world. During my travels I met many relatives who thirsted for knowledge of their roots. Upon my return to Hong Kong after fifty plus years abroad I found that many of the younger generation living in Hong Kong had no idea of their ancestry as well. That gave me the idea to ask someone to write a book about grandfather Lam Woo.

I have known Professor Moira Chan-Yeung for a long time. In fact I first met her in London over fifty years ago when we were sitting for the same professional post-graduate medical examination. She is related to me by marriage. Her husband, Dr. David Yeung is my cousin (maternal side). After

London, I went to Toronto and Moira went to Vancouver. We seldom met. She became a world-renowned chest specialist. I never thought that she would also become such a prolific writer after retirement.

A number of years ago, my cousin, Mrs. Gennie Lee asked me, “Have you read the history of Diocesan Boys’ School?” I replied that I had not. Gennie then told me to read it as the book included a few pages about my grandfather. I finally got hold of a copy only to find that the book was written by Professor Fung Yee Wang and Moira. On one occasion I met her again and I said to her, “Moira you wrote about my grandfather (Lam Woo) and you did not let me know!” Her answer was, “I did not know that he was your grandfather.”

We moved back to Hong Kong eight years ago. In early 2010, I found out that Moira was preparing a book about Bishop R. O. Hall who was a great friend of my late father, Mr. Lam Chik Ho. We have had numerous discussions on that book. It suddenly dawned on me that Moira would be the ideal person to write about grandfather. So I invited David and Moira out one evening and asked her. To my great delight she accepted the offer after a few days. My idea was a simple story book to let the relatives know about their ancestry. I never thought that Moira would work so hard to do all the research and discover so much about the family that I had no knowledge of.

This book describes my grandfather as a man of courage, an extremely successful builder, and a wonderful Christian philanthropist. His selfless devotion to the revolution in 1911 and to the new Chinese Republic had earned him the title of a “perfect revolutionary” from Dr. Sun Yat-sen. It is a wonderful history book for everyone to read. I am deeply indebted to Professor Chan-Yeung for this literary gem. I am also deeply grateful to Professor Fung Yee Wang for providing the most pleasing Chinese translation of this book.

Lam Pak Nin, Samuel

April 2016

PREFACE

This book focuses on Lam Woo, a well-known, highly successful Chinese building contractor whose company was based in Hong Kong at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it is also about the marginal group of people he exemplifies—those who joined the Chinese diaspora because of poverty and political turmoil and were later driven back home because of racial discrimination and other difficulties. Many ended up settling in Hong Kong, a relatively stable place congenial to business. They were deeply attached to their mother country, but knew that they could not raise their families in the tumultuous, dangerous early decades of the new republic and chose, instead, to live under the efficient rule and protection of colonial Hong Kong.

Lam Woo embodies many of the proficiencies that emigrants, whether from China or elsewhere, are required in order to thrive in their adopted countries. He needed to observe keenly, work diligently, learn new customs and a new language, cultivate social networks and nurture loyalties, apply his observations and knowledge—and take prudent, strategically timed risks. Like other Chinese emigrants, Lam Woo needed discernment to blend what was most valuable in the family and village traditions he had learned with the new western values he encountered as

a young man in Australia. He had to sense when it was time to initiate a new project and when it was time to consolidate; when to hold on, and when to let go.

This book provides a window onto the socio-political conditions in Hong Kong leading up to and following the 1911 revolution that established the Republic of China and the following two decades. By reading about Lam Woo's life and family, we can glimpse the lives of a unique segment of the Hong Kong Chinese community—namely, the educated, westernised Chinese, mainly Christians, who supported the revolution to overthrow the Qing dynasty and some helped found Hong Kong's influential YMCA. As more and more countries today struggle with issues such as land and resource scarcity due to pressures from overpopulation, we may be able to glean much of relevance by reading about the development of infrastructure that enabled Hong Kong to become an international port, and reclamation to create more land while also helping it to adapt to ever-swelling populations from the Chinese mainland. As we learn about the development of Hong Kong's construction industry, we will also learn about the birth of the Building Authority and enactment of ordinances to ensure building standards and safety.

And how did I get interested in Lam Woo?

I first encountered the name Lam Woo when I was researching the history of the Diocesan Boys' School, as Lam Woo was the contractor who had won the contract in 1924 to build a new campus for the school in Mongkok, and in 1925 found himself in the midst of the labour strike-boycott. Because of the economic downturn resulting from the strike-boycott, the prospective buyer of the old campus went bankrupt and the school was unable to pay Lam Woo. Nevertheless, under very trying conditions he managed the feat of finishing the building on time and did not press for any payment. I remember being struck by this sign of generosity, most unusual among contractors who required considerable liquidity to carry on their business.

My second encounter with the name occurred while researching into the life of Bishop R. O. Hall of Diocese of Victoria and South China (Bishop 1932–66). Bishop Hall officiated at the burial of Lam Woo and wrote in the first issue of 1934 of *St. John's Review*: “His going is like the passing of an era in the growth of the Chinese Christian Church. He was one of the ‘Grand Old Men’ who in the more plastic days of forty or fifty years ago made money by his sheer trustworthiness.... On his return (from Australia) he gave a third of his small capital for the building of a Christian church. He and one or two of his contemporaries spent all their spare time in evangelistic work, preaching and teaching with a fearless will... In later years Mr. Lam Woo served on the highest council of the Chinese Anglican Church (Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui), and was Treasurer of the Diocesan Synod and took part in much charitable work....” My interest had been piqued by the idea of a highly practical Chinese entrepreneur who embodied the Christian virtue of charity.

It was some time later that I discovered that I am related to this extraordinary man by marriage—he was the grandfather of my husband's cousin, Dr. Samuel Lam (林柏年). When Dr. Lam asked me to write a biography of his grandfather, I felt honoured to be entrusted with such a project. As a native of Hong Kong I have seen some of the majestic buildings that Lam Woo built in his time. While many of these prominent buildings in the Central District had given way to high-rise office buildings because of the ever escalating cost of land, some heritage buildings such as St. Paul's Church, St. Paul's Coeducational College, the Diocesan Boys' School, St. Stephen's College and the Fung Ping Shan Library remain in use today.

Lam Woo's legacy also includes his participation in the building of many infrastructure projects in Hong Kong—rebuilding of port facilities such as Hong Kong & Whampoa Dock that helped the colony's transformation into a glamorous, international port. The building of the roads encircling the New Territories and the bridges, which Lam Woo contributed, eased government management of the region, and linked different parts of the territory with mainland China, where water and food

supplies would later come from. By participating actively in the East Praya Reclamation Project, Lam Woo also contributed greatly to the development of the Wan Chai district.

A devout Anglican, Lam Woo constantly involved himself with the church and the Chinese Anglican Church community, contributing much to its expansion. He was one of the founders of St. Paul's Church and promoted the establishment of Hong Kong YMCA, with its emphasis on character training in "the development of body, mind, and spirit" for young people. Lam Woo's progressive views on social justice and gender equality led him to champion the anti-*mui tsai* movement that fought an age-old practice of poor families selling their girls to wealthy families as servants. He supported education for girls and founded St. Paul's Girls' School, the forerunner of the notable St. Paul's Co-educational College. He also founded a primary and a secondary school in his native village and donated extensively to Lingnan University. His legacy for philanthropist activities in education is perhaps his most lasting and memorable of all.

Much less known is his participation in revolutionary activities in his younger days. A devotee of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Lam joined the Xingzhonghui (興中會 Revive China Society) in 1903 and the Tongmenghui (同盟會 Revolutionary Alliance Society) in 1905. He donated and raised large sums to support the revolution. Knowing full well the danger to himself, he selflessly helped bury the 72 "martyrs" in the Yellow Flower Mound after the failed uprising in April 1911. He supported the bankrupt military government of Guangdong when the revolution succeeded. He continued to support Sun's aim to "protect the constitution" of the newly formed republic, and to unify the country which had been broken up by warlords. He declined any offering of official position in the new government, preferring to base his work in Hong Kong. From there he was well situated to help with the modernisation of cities in China, which benefited enormously from his professional work as a building contractor. For his selfless support of the revolution, Dr. Sun labelled him as a "Perfect Revolutionary".

His story seems even more remarkable when one considers his humble origins. As a peasant boy of 14, Lam left his village in Xinhui, Guangdong, for Australia, having had only a few years of village education. In Melbourne, he worked in a general store where his diligence and honesty gained the trust of his employer. He worked hard by day and learnt English by night at the YMCA, gaining knowledge that would be vital to his future career. He was baptised as an Anglican in Melbourne. After five years in Melbourne and two years in Sydney, he returned to his native village with one thousand dollars in his pocket, fluency in English and a network of Christian Chinese friends, important contacts he made in Sydney. These social networks proved to be vital for the establishment of his career in Hong Kong.

The primary source of information concerning the family came from two family albums, published in 1998 and 2008 respectively, a few remaining official documents of the company in Guangzhou, Wing Yik, interviews with Dr. Samuel Lam Pak Nin, grandson of Lam Woo, and Mrs. Gennie Lee, grandniece of Lam Woo, as well as numerous e-mail exchanges between myself and Dr. Lam Pak Nin, Mrs. Gennie Lee, Mr. Gordon Lin Kin Kwok, grandnephew of Lam Woo, and Dr. Tenny Lam, grandson of Lam Kau Yui (cousin of Lam Woo). Other primary sources of information on Lam Woo came from several old Hong Kong newspapers, such as the *China Mail*, *Friends of China*, *South China Morning Post*, *Hong Kong Telegraph*, *Huazi Ribao* from 1890 to 1940 depending on the publication of the newspaper. Most of the information about Hong Kong during this period came from Hong Kong Government Reports Online including *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, *Hong Kong Administrative Reports*, *Hong Kong Sessional Papers* and *Hong Kong Blue Book*. Land Registry materials came from Hong Kong Public Records Office. To fill in the background information of the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the Xinhai Revolution (1911 revolution), and the history of the early Republic of China and of Hong Kong, I have consulted a number of books in the Special Collections of the Library of the University of Hong Kong and the Library of School of Oriental and

African Studies in London, which are listed in the appendix of this book.

The book has 10 chapters. The first and second tell the stories of the origins of the Lam clan, Lam's journey to Australia, and the impact of his sojourn in Australia on his future career. The third and fourth chapters are stories of his return to his native village, his marriage, his decision to stay in Hong Kong to learn a new trade, the establishment of his own construction company and the development of his varied social networks. The fifth and sixth chapters recount his revolutionary activities and his efforts to help modernise China through construction of roads, wharves and houses. The seventh and eighth chapters describe his construction work in Hong Kong, where he helped build roads, develop its port facilities, reclaim land, and construct prominent buildings, some of which remained in use today. The ninth and tenth chapters analyse the elements of success of his company and his legacies in Hong Kong and China.

In order to understand Lam Woo's many facets, I have researched the complicated political and social situations in China and Hong Kong where Lam spent most of his life. In writing this book, I have tried hard to be as accurate as possible on the basic facts about Lam Woo. To catch a glimpse of what we can of Lam Woo's life from the necessary distance of time, I have had to use the tools of imagination, as well as historical research, to fill in certain gaps in the records. Since Lam Woo left no personal letters, journals or other writings that recorded his inner feelings, I have done my best to set his story in the context of his dynamic times, and to sketch pictures of the landscapes, inner and outer, where he fathered not only his own children, but a company and a family that would carry on his legacies.

Because Lam Woo was much more than a building contractor, his story will resonate in the hearts of many Chinese emigrants, whether they live in Hong Kong or outside the country. Lam Woo was a revolutionary, a social activist and a philanthropist, but above all a patriot who loved his countrymen. He was a devoted Christian who served his church and society, but at the same time also followed the Confucian values of family loyalty. He cared deeply for his immediate and extended family,

even the descendants he did not know. By establishing the Lam Woo Foundation from his estate, his descendants perpetuate his good works even today.

Moira Chan-Yeung
June 2016

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