

BOOK REVIEW:

HONG KONG MURDERS

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Crime is a revealing lens through which to see any society. There are few better ways to understand the pressures a society puts on its members, the standards it sets for success and the price it exacts for failure than to comb through its crime annals. That is what Kate Whitehead has done in *Hong Kong Murders*. Her collection of 14 of Hong Kong's most flamboyant true-crime stories highlights the pressures of living in one of the most densely populated cities on earth, where those caught up in an endless grind of low-paid work are daily thrown into proximity with gaudy displays of new wealth. It is a world in which neighbors, schooled to respect each other's privacy, hesitate to call the police even when the smell of death pervades their apartment building, and in which young boys find companionship and upward mobility by joining criminal gangs called triads.

Whitehead, a reporter for Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* newspaper, portrays loners and losers as well as self-made crime bosses and opportunistic strivers in a colorful, if ultimately depressing, roster of locally famous criminals and their victims. Lam Kwok-wai, an unemployed school dropout, terrorized the women of Tuen Mun, one of Hong Kong's soulless high-rise "new towns," for months in 1992 when he began raping and killing women in the stairwells and elevators of their apartment buildings.

A world apart, Chan Yiu-hing, the handsome, charismatic leader of the Sun Yee On triad, socialized with movie stars and raced his own car in the Macau Grand Prix. His lavish lifestyle was funded by extorting protection money from businesses in Hong Kong's busiest shopping and entertainment district. Gunned down in a parking garage by a rival gang at age 32, he was promptly memorialized in the movie "Tragic Fantasy: The Tiger of Wan Chai."

As a key Asian financial center, Hong Kong's most spectacular crimes tend to be of the investment-scam and money-laundering variety. But Whitehead's theme is murder, so she touches only tangentially on the tangled web of malfeasance that produced the 1983 collapse of the Carrian Group, Hong Kong's most far-reaching financial scandal of recent decades. Malaysia's Bank Bumiputra had been a major source of funding for the

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Hong Kong real estate conglomerate, many said in return for kickbacks to Malaysian politicians. When prices on the Hong Kong property market plunged, putting Carrian on the ropes, Bank Bumiputra tried to engineer a rescue—until the body of one of its senior managers turned up in a Hong Kong banana grove. As Whitehead recounts, the banker, Jalil Bin Hj Ibrahim, had apparently been trying to cut off the flow of new funds to Carrian, and paid for it. A petty criminal was convicted of Jalil's murder, but the full story was never uncovered, due in part to energetic stonewalling on the Malaysian end.

Whitehead devotes four of her 14 crime vignettes to triads or mainland-based gangsters, many of whom have taken on a bizarre folk-hero status in Hong Kong, like the gun slingers of the early American West. None looms larger than the mainland-born Cheung Tze-keung or "Big Spender." Cheung engineered the 1991 robbery of HK \$167 million (\$21 million) in cash from an armored security van, was arrested but managed to escape conviction, thus launching his tabloid reputation as a crime genius. He cemented it in 1996 by kidnapping the eldest son of Hong Kong's wealthiest man, property tycoon Li Ka-shing, for a record-breaking ransom of Hong Kong \$1 billion (\$128.2 million). Months later, he kidnapped a second tycoon's heir and released him for HK \$600 million (\$77 million). Cheung had spent his way through much of the money by the time he was arrested in mainland China in 1998. Rumor has it that Chinese President Jiang Zemin ordered police to track him down at the personal request of Li Ka-shing, who never reported his son's kidnapping to Hong Kong police. Cheung was tried and executed in China for his Hong Kong crimes, provoking controversy over whether mainland authorities overstepped their jurisdiction.

The most chilling tales in this book, however, are not the rise and fall of gangland bosses but the furtive crimes of under-educated, under-employed young men like Lam Kwok-wai, the Tuen Mun rapist, and Lam Kor-wan, dubbed the "jars killer" because he preserved parts of his female victims in jars of formaldehyde. These are stories straight from the heart of working-class Hong Kong, where an under-funded school system spews out children after as little as eight years of education, prepared only for blue-collar jobs that increasingly have fled across the border to southern China. Community services are thin on the ground and petty crime proliferates in the unadorned concrete canyons of Hong Kong's minimalist public housing. In such a building, an estimated 40 neighbors stepped over the body of one of Lam's victims in a stairwell before one finally called the police—a display of indifference almost on a par with the 1964 Kitty Genovese murder in New York, where a similar number of neighbors heard and ignored her

cries for help.¹

Lam Kor-wan's tale pierces the myth that although Hong Kong may sometimes seem a cold and money-grubbing place, family values have survived the transition to a modern, post-industrial society. Lam, a taxi driver who lived with his parents and brother, strangled four women and brought their bodies back home for dismemberment without any of his relatives noticing anything was wrong. He even stashed containers with body parts under the bunk bed he shared with his brother in an apartment little bigger than the standard American two-car garage. Only when a film-shop employee told police about Lam's disturbing photos of body parts did the dysfunctionally uncommunicative family learn of his obsession with pornography and his career as a voyeur, which led up to the murders.

Whitehead's book will hold little that's new for any reader of Hong Kong's tabloid media, which in fact appears to be the main source for her tales. Readers outside Hong Kong may have trouble understanding the mythology that has sprung up locally around some of the killings that are recounted, such as the 1985 Braemar Hill murders. A gang of youths came upon two British teenagers, a boy and a girl, in a remote spot and brutally beat and killed them; they also raped the girl. From a distance, nothing distinguishes this crime from the many rapes and murders that occur daily all over the world, but Hong Kong's expatriates were deeply shaken by the randomness and violence of the attack, in which race seemed to be a motive. Was this how local Chinese would show their contempt for the British as the clock wound down on their long rule over Hong Kong? In the event, the Braemar Hill murders proved an anomaly and expatriates were not singled out for attacks in the lead-up to Hong Kong's 1997 return to Chinese rule—or since.

Indeed, Hong Kong remains remarkably safe for a city of seven million people, even before considering the ease with which weapons can be obtained across the border in mainland China. This is where Whitehead lets her readers down. Although she notes in her introduction that Hong Kong averages fewer than 100 murders each year, she offers no explanation either for the low crime rate or for these brutal departures from the norm. Some

¹ Genovese's attacker actually fled twice when some neighbors flung open their windows at the sound of her cries. If any of these neighbors had followed up by telephoning the police, Genovese's life might have been saved. Instead, the neighbors took no action and Genovese's attacker returned after each interruption, finally stabbing her to death. Incidents such as this at a minimum show that Hong Kong residents are less unusual than Whitehead seems to believe in their reluctance to "get involved." But whereas Genovese's death touched off a storm of soul-searching in the United States, reflected both in the popular media and in scholarly studies of alienation in modern urban society, Hong Kong has shown little inclination to meditate on the meaning of Lam's crimes or the neighbors' indifference.

readers may come away without understanding that these murders are renowned in Hong Kong precisely because the city has so few murders and in particular so few serial or random murders. On the other hand, triads have not only survived recent decades of police monitoring and crackdowns but thrive and even dominate some sectors of the economy, such as filmmaking. Whitehead makes no attempt to explain these apparent contradictions.

To be fair, Whitehead makes no pretence at writing an academic work. This is no more and no less than a collection of true-crime stories: colorfully told, but without serious analysis of the pathologies of Hong Kong society and its raw brand of capitalism at a time of wrenching economic and political change. For that, readers will have to look elsewhere.

A good start would be another Oxford University Press product, *Perspectives on Hong Kong Society*, by University of Hong Kong sociologist Benjamin K.P. Leung. In this rich, thoughtful survey of sociological studies on crime, the family, social mobility and culture, Leung notes that violent crime began rising in Hong Kong in the 1970s around the same time that the government began diverting the population into high-rise public housing in “new towns” in the formerly rural mainland portion of the colony.² Old neighborhood networks were shattered; parents spent more time commuting to work, leaving their teen-age children unsupervised for long periods after school. New laws banning child employment meant that school dropouts were often on the streets. Government-built communal spaces in the new towns, such as recreation centers, became recruitment grounds for the triads.

The triads, in turn, had become deeply entrenched in Hong Kong over decades during which police sometimes connived at their activities in exchange for graft and cooperation in controlling petty crime. The Hong Kong government began a determined assault on corruption and severed police links to triads in the 1970s, but the gangs were already deeply entrenched and remain so to this day.

One factor in their strength may be that the triads don't excite a great deal of moral outrage among members of the public. Triad members are simply trying to get ahead in a tough world, like everyone else. To that extent, they share in what Leung calls the “Hong Kong Dream”—the notion that “society offers abundant opportunities for social and economic advancement.”³ People “are willing to bear with the trials and tribulations of life in anticipation of a better tomorrow.”⁴ The flip side of that is a utilitarian view of social order as simply a means of “facilitating the individual pursuit of wealth,” says Leung, adding: “In the final analysis, if the Hong Kong

². Benjamin K.P. Leung, PERSPECTIVES ON HONG KONG SOCIETY 100-101 (1996).

³. *Id.* at 72.

⁴. *Id.* at 72.

brand of utilitarian individualism is devoid of moral commitment, we have to conclude, so is the Hong Kong people's support for social order."⁵

It is small wonder, then, that losers like the Tuen Mun serial rapist-murderer and Lam, the so-called "jars killer," arouse neither public sympathy nor breast-beating in Hong Kong over society's responsibility to help its least-motivated, most-alienated youths before they commit horrible crimes. From a popular point of view, they are mere aberrations, unreflective of any deeper failings in the Hong Kong way of life.

But gangsters like Chan Yiu-hing, the "Tiger of Wan Chai," and Cheung Tze-keung, the "Big Spender," were brilliant if failed contenders in the pursuit of the Hong Kong Dream. Their names will long survive on the silver screen and in popular legend.

⁵. *Id.* at 54-55.

