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Outside Jakarta's Tugu
Kemerdekaan, a 210-ft landmark
tower housing an art gallery,
restaurant, and lounge.
See page 82

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BIG FISH, SMALL POND The lotus pavilion at Hollywood Road Park.

A PARK AT THE HEART OF HISTORY

A leafy enclave of carp ponds and pavilions, Hollywood Road Park occupies a storied patch of Hong Kong Island—the very spot, in fact, where the British first raised their flag
BY OLIVIA ROSENMAN

On Hollywood Road, 20 strides up from Queens Road West in Sheung Wan, a Chinese garden is enclosed behind a white wall topped with glazed greentiles. Drab, gray apartment buildings surround the garden on all sides. Tall and thin, they protrude like dominos in the typical Hong Kong style. Faded T-shirts and underpants dangle or coat hangers hooked to improvised washing lines—lengths of bamboo balanced between dripping air conditioners.

Four thick, red columns are the legs of the garden's entrance gate. Just below the roof HELIHUO DAO GONGYUAN is inscribed in stylized characters. To the left, a plaque on the wall translates the name in English: HOLLYWOOD ROAD PARK. Inside the walls, curved paths wind around pavilions and a lotus pond where fat carp loiter near the surface, waiting for a feed. They never wait long. Overhead crested mynas, great tits, and tiny sparrow join forces to compete with the din of traffic. Mostly, they hold their own. Then an ambulance screams past, heading west to Queen Mary Hospital.

In a small pavilion by the pond, at four in the afternoon, a caucus of silver-haired gentlemen with corn-yellow teeth holds session. This is the *hehua ting*—the lotus pavilion, traditionally designed for people to sit and enjoy the flowers' aroma. On its bench the oldsters have placed neat squares of newspaper, each folded carefully to bottom-size. One man gazes off to the north, unperturbed by buildings blocking what would once have been harbor view; now and again, he drops handfuls of stale bread to the ravenous fish. Another paces from one side of the pavilion to the other and back again, gesticulating as he goes. At five o'clock, a helper shuffles up in plastic slippers to collect a man parked in his wheelchair. She executes a tight three-point turn and rolls him down the pavilion's zigzag path, past the playground and toward the exit. Dinnertime.

My daily routine takes me down Hollywood Road, past this park. Rarely do I stop. A regular cast of locals visit daily too. But do any of us pause to consider that today's Hong Kong started here? From the fallout of the Opium War, through a plague and as a civic center, the



THAT WAS THEN Left: Tai Tat Tei, the future site of Hollywood Road Park, as it looked circa 1930.

IN 1897, A 40-YEAR CURFEW ON TAI PING SHAN WAS LIFTED. SITTING AT THE NAVEL OF HONG KONG'S UNDERBELLY, TAI TAT TEI FLOURISHED AS A NIGHT MARKET. CALLED THE "POOR MAN'S NIGHTCLUB" BY THE BRITISH, IT WAS THE PLACE TO GO FOR HOT FOOD, HOT FUN, AND HOT SEX

piece of land—just half the size of an athletics track—has seen events that helped shape both Hong Kong's British and Chinese communities.

JANUARY 26, 1841: British ships blazed down the Pearl River, brandishing a freshly inked agreement negotiated after China's defeat in the battle of Chuanbi. It was the beginning of Britain's victory in the First Opium War, and the blueprint for the Hong Kong we now know. The victors strode ashore right where Hollywood Road Park now sits.

Britain and China had been fighting for almost two years. A lot was riding on this war, for both sides. The British were determined to end the Canton System, a restrictive set of rules that forced all foreign trade through the port of Guangzhou. The Qing emperor's tight control on trade infuriated the British, and limited their profits. The Chinese, for their part, were desperate put a stop to British opium imports—and the ruinous addictions that attended them—once and for all.

In June 1839, the imperial commissioner Lin Zexu seized and destroyed thousands of kilos of the drug. In the most scathing letter ever addressed to a British monarch, he told Queen Victoria that her merchant subjects were callous, profit-seeking barbarians: "Let us ask, where is your conscience? I have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly for-

bidden by your country; that is because the harm caused by opium is clearly understood. Since it is not permitted to do harm to your own country, then even less should you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries—how much less to China!" The letter was ignored and in November 1839 the First Opium War began.

In the first week of January 1841, Commodore James Bremer led British forces to victory in a battle around the islands of Chuanbi, in the Pearl River Delta, south of Guangzhou. The ceasefire agreement provided for the cession of Hong Kong Island to the British government, as well as a hefty 1.4-million-pound payment for the opium Lin Zexu had destroyed. Bremer and his squadron then sailed into Hong Kong's harbor and pitched the Union Jack in what is now Hollywood Road Park. "Under a *feu de joie* from the marines, and a royal salute from the ships of war," Hong Kong was formally in Britain's possession.

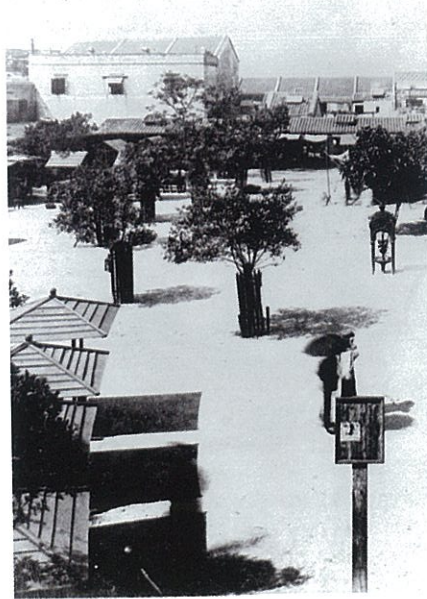
Today, the only remaining evidence of this fanfare is Possession Street. Short and steep, it runs along the east side of the park from Queens Road, which skirted the waterfront before a 1859 land reclamation project pushed the shore back by half a kilometer. At dusk, tired office workers trudge up it, heading toward trendy apartments on Hollywood Road. Some escape the havoc of the streets by

detouring through a tiny alley that leads to the park's back entrance. Inside, it is cooler, calmer. There is space. But, like me, they do not slow down. This is their daily routine and they've got somewhere to be.

HOLLYWOOD ROAD WAS ONE of the first streets built in Hong Kong; construction started in 1844. Its path—from the former waterfront at Queens Road, continuing as Wyndham and Lower Albert Road to the Victoria Barracks—was chosen to facilitate the movement of troops. Along it were built three- to four-story buildings, many of which are still standing, albeit in revamped form; in photographs from the time, bedraggled sheets and shirts hang on European-style balconies adorned with ornate Chinese balustrades. At street level, open-fronted barbershops, fortune-tellers, pawn dealers, and coffin shops spilled out onto the pavement.

When the British administration got organized, they flattened the barren hill where Bremer and his crew drank a toast under the flag, and set aside the land as an open space. Tai Tat Tei (literally "big piece of land") was decorated with manicured trees and small gazebos. Sir Henry Pottinger, Hong Kong's first governor, designated the surrounding area as a Chinese-only residential zone. He laid out a grid of 12 narrow streets and divided them into minuscule lots to accommodate the many and unexpected numbers of Chinese arriving from the mainland. With great optimism, he named the precinct Tai Ping Shan—"hill of peace and safety." It was anything but. The area gained a reputation for seediness, debauchery, and squalor. The British avoided it, but the plague did not. In 1894, an outbreak festered in the city, thriving in Tai Ping Shan, which was as packed and funky as a can of sardines. More than 200,000 people were stuffed into an area the size of seven football fields with no drainage. Tai Ping Shan suffered the most plague casualties in all of Hong Kong; a plaque in nearby Blake Garden now commemorates the dead. The following year, the British government razed and rebuilt the entire district in an attempt to improve sanitation.

In 1897, a 40-year curfew on Tai Ping Shan was lifted. Sitting at the navel of Hong Kong's underbelly, Tai Tat Tei flourished as a night market. It was the place to go for hot food, hot fun, and hot sex. The British would come to



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referred to it as the "poor man's nightclub," and most of them were too scared to set foot near it. But they were missing out. Hong Kong's working class feasted on cheap food in the warm light of dangling globes rigged up to hawker stalls and food carts. A packet of preserved olives cost just a few cents. Steaming bowls of *chap sui*—"mixed bits"—was an inexpensive favorite among locals, who came for dinner and stayed for the entertainment. Soothsayers read the future to young singles hoping for love. Storytellers, magicians, and acrobats competed for the attention of audiences. Cantonese chanteuse Lee Yin-Ping sung "*Pretty boy, pretty boy, you make my thoughts wander in joy*" to giggling girls.

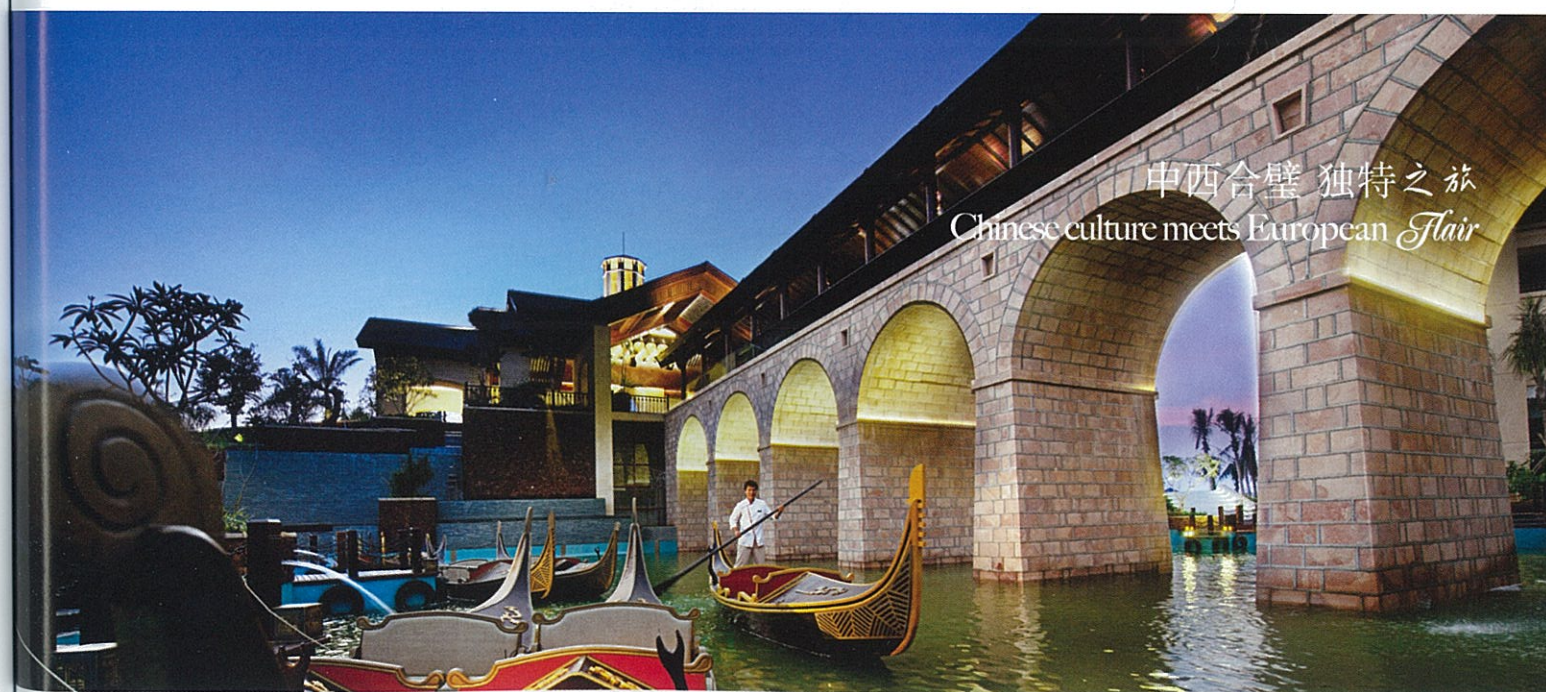
Crazed fans watched kung fu masters' kicks and contortions. A department store-range of wares was offered on peddlers' makeshift tables. Mah-jongg tiles clinked long into the night. The later the hour, the more fun there was to be had. Around the corner on Queens Road, the Ko Shing Theatre showed Cantonese opera and Chinese films to packed

audiences crammed into stiff seats. In later years, American troops on break from Vietnam became regulars at the Tai Tat Tei, but not for long. The government repossessed the land in 1972, clearing it out by 1978. In 1992, the site was converted into a Chinese garden and named Hollywood Road Park. The Tai Tat Tei's regulars keep coming, though—the majority of visitors are people of that generation. But the place has changed. Today, when dark falls, the park empties out.

IT'S LATE AT NIGHT NOW; quieter, calmer. The park feels still, as if at rest. The roar of traffic is reduced to a gentle background hum and the small fountain's flow is clearly audible. In the water, the carp swim slower, deeper, weighed down by the day's fill. The playground is bathed in light, but all the children are in bed. And the old men, too: their pavilion is brightly lit, but empty.

Now and then, a runner pants in through the front entrance and out the back. A middle-aged man is deep in discussion on his mobile

phone. As he talks, he circumambulates the park, carrying his conversation to its farthest corners on a well-worn circuit that takes him five minutes flat. In one corner, five young men dressed in black and white have taken over an open space near the lotus pavilion. They are under the spotlight of blazing lamps, break-dancing in front of an audience of backpacks on a long bench. A small boom box is their soundtrack, volume down low. Ten hulking biceps push at ten T-shirt sleeves. Headstands and handstands pull their T-shirts down, revealing the toned trunk holding them upside-down for three, four, five seconds. Each tumble, twist, and contortion is powered by stored energy pushed from the ground. But this is not the performance, just a rehearsal. Each man inhabits his own world of movement. From time to time one stops to watch another; from time to time they rest. When they leave the park they will pass a signpost that encapsulates the area's rich history. South to Tai Ping Shan, east to Possession Street, and west to Queens Road. ©



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