

## Wong Tai Sin Temple

I could smell the waves of burning incense for blocks. Joss sticks. In the Far East their primary purpose has nothing to do with adding a pleasant fragrance to one's home. Joss sticks are used to awaken the gods.

I thought about Bruce Lee for the better part of the fourteen-hour flight from Los Angeles. Halfway across the Pacific I found myself fixating on how Lee's \$HK40,000 bronze coffin had mysteriously opened during transit to Seattle twenty years earlier, and how moisture had entered and caused the dye from his dark blue suit to bleed onto the casket's white silk interior. The ancient Chinese saw it as a bad omen. "The buried man will not live in peace," they proclaimed. "There are unsettled matters."

Hours earlier, I awoke in Hong Kong in the predawn hours and jogged through the streets and back-alleys, and eventually made my way down to the polluted harbor. I had to get a feel for Hong Kong. If there was any chance of unraveling the mystery of the elusive Bruce Lee, then I had to get into his head. I had come to the place where he had grown up as a child and died as a young man. I had to see his family home, stroll through Nathan Road Park, visit all his old haunts, sit in the hospital emergency rooms and talk to the physicians who had treated Bruce, and the doctor who had finally pronounced him dead. There were business partners and old girlfriends and fellow martial artists also on my list. There were court records and stacks of twenty-year-old newspapers at City Hall I needed to read. Most of all I wanted to talk to the people of Hong Kong. I had a lot of questions to ask, and I didn't expect many of the answers would be easily and readily forthcoming. I could predict the individuals who would avoid me, and I also thought I knew which doors would be slammed in my face. I expected to be followed at some point, and after the second day of phone calls and storming one hot spot after another, I never left my hotel room without taking my notes and camera with me. Prior to leaving California, I had left with one of my black belts a complete working copy of the skeletal manuscript, along with all relevant

documents, photographs, and taped interviews. If for whatever reason I did not return, he was to continue in my absence.

By nine o'clock that morning the thermometer was already approaching ninety degrees. This was typhoon season in this part of the world, and the humidity was suffocating. I was not alone as I approached the steps leading up to the massive Wong Tai Sin Temple. I had a Chinese girl with me named Ming Hing-wai. The way I saw it she was a gift from the gods. Not only did she speak both Cantonese and Mandarin, but she knew her way around the back-alleys of Hong Kong, and she wasn't afraid to get her feet wet. Street and book smart, she could talk her way out of most touchy situations.

Coming to the temple was Hing-wai's idea. Actually in a nice way she insisted. According to her, before embarking on any serious endeavor one must come to the temple and talk to the gods and the fortune tellers. It is the Chinese way, and they take it very seriously.

Wong Tai Sin Temple is an enormous Taoist temple set in the midst of a high-density government housing project. It was built in 1921 in honor of Wong Tai Sin, a mythical shepherd boy with the powers of healing and bringing good luck to gamblers. As Hing-wai and I approached the main entrance, I was immediately besieged by old women selling lucky cards, paper money, and joss sticks. It was the joss sticks I was after, as they would be necessary for me to awaken the gods. As I handed an old toothless woman \$HK20, I couldn't help but notice the several Chinese men standing near the entrance to the temple. At their feet were roasted pigs the size of small dogs, gift wrapped in shiny red Saran. Hing-wai explained that this meant that these men had gotten what they wanted. As custom dictates it is then necessary to return to the temple with a roasted pig for all to see. The pig is not given to the temple, but is instead later returned to the home of the "lucky one" where the family partakes in a feast. These pigs are not cheap. They cost around \$HK800 (\$US100), which is a lot of money to a working-class Chinese.

As I arrived at the top of the stairs leading to the temple, I was in awe of what stood

before me. Hundreds of worshipers, fanatical in their sincerity, stood in the vast square facing the massive temple. Huge urns were squatted on either side and in the center of the square, and billowing clouds emanating from thousands of burning joss sticks made it seem like I was standing in the middle of a forest fire. All around there was chanting and wailing. The shaking of scores of hand-held containers of slivered bamboo sticks cast an eerie effect on whatever it was that was going on in this revered place.

There was a specific procedure one had to follow. To begin, I walked to one of the many large golden urns filled with sand. Adjacent to these urns were small pagoda-like glass structures which housed metal bowls of burning oil. It was here that the one-hundred-plus joss sticks were lit. Next was to walk to the urns and stick the burning incense sticks in the sand. Now that I had awakened the particular gods I had come to talk, I proceeded to the next step. Holding the container of thin bamboo sticks, I faced the temple directly. No one, at least no Westerner anyway, was allowed inside the temple building, although I could clearly see the altar and the portrait of Wong Tai Sin inside through the open doors.

Hing-wai spoke softly from slightly behind me, "Tell your name and your date of birth and why you are here."

The incense was beginning to stifle my breathing.

"My name is Tom Bleecker and I was born on April the thirteenth, nineteen hundred and forty-six. I have come 7,000 miles to ask about a book I am writing on the life and death of my friend Bruce Lee who died here in Hong Kong."

After a meditative pause, I began to gently shake the container of bamboo sticks. The idea was to continue this process until one particular stick worked its way out of the container and fell to the ground. It was akin to shaking a single cigarette from its pack. The process seemed to go on for an eternity, and I began to envision the entire 100 sticks falling out at the same time, or none at all. Ever.

Suddenly Hing-wai raced in front of me. "Stop, Tom! Stop!" She bent to the ground and retrieved a single stick which, unbeknown to me, had fallen from the container. It was

Number 71.

I walked with Hing-wai to another area of the temple grounds where the fortune tellers were located. Several rows. All older Chinese men dressed in assorted clothing. Some appeared to be right off the street, while others looked like they had just come from a monastery. Many had props, like colorful birds that would jump from their bamboo cages and retrieve various items from the table and hand them to their masters. It was all part of the fortune. I stood there for the longest time, not knowing what to do next.

"Pick one, Tom. Do not rush," said Hing-wai, who had early on gotten into the habit of guiding me along my Far Eastern path.

I studied the row of fortune tellers. "Do any of them speak English?" I asked. It didn't matter. Hing-wai would interpret for me. Finally, I selected a Chinese man I felt connected to.

I sat down before the fortune teller and handed him the bamboo stick that fallen to the ground minutes earlier. He studied the wooden sliver for a long while and intermittently glanced up at me. Finally he told the ancient parable of Wong Tai Sin Temple stick #71. He spoke in a self-learned broken English, whose meaning was occasionally translated by Hing-wai.

"In the beginning you are the fish," the old man began. "And the fish is in trouble, caught in the water. It is like being trapped in a whirlpool. This is a story of patience."

The fortune teller asked my age. I told him I was forty-six. He said that the resolution of this matter would not occur until I was forty-seven, and then he quickly changed that to forty-eight. "The fish must find a way to make the whirlpool stop. To solve the mystery. There is great trouble here," the man continued.

I was beginning to grow uncomfortable.

"It is conditioned on the waters from the west," the man continued. "On getting support from the west. The waters from the west. Then you will solve the mystery and break through the whirlpool." He studied the last column of Chinese characters, and then looked

up at me and seemed to study the very depth of my soul. Finally a smile turned the corners of his mouth. "You are doing the right thing and it will be most successful. But you must have patience. It is a good fortune."