

## **We Move to Hong Kong, 1977**

By Camilla Lee

When we were in our thirties my husband and I moved to the Royal Crown Colony of Hong Kong with our two sons. The boys, who were six and eight, went to the Hong Kong International School. We had a live-in maid – an amah – named Ah Fung. Ah Fung’s ten-yearold son also lived with us. We went to Hong Kong because the investment firm of Paine, Webber (now the United Bank of Switzerland) wanted my husband to open a branch office. The year was 1977. While we were there, President Reagan was shot, Elvis died, and Beijing was still called Peking.

We lived in a new apartment building half-way up Victoria Peak, the dramatic mountain rising from the center of Hong Kong Island. The apartment was a duplex, with large windows overlooking the Governor’s Mansion, the Botanical Gardens, and farther out, toward Hong Kong Harbor. The view of cruise ships and freighters, junks and sampans, was spectacular, but to see it from our balcony made you dizzy. Standing on the tenth floor of a building that’s situated on a steep hill plays tricks with your balance. While our flat was modern and gracious, the kitchen and amah’s quarters were not. You could say Ah Fung’s room was the size of today’s “walk-in closet.” The idea was, in 1977, that a servant who cooked, cleaned, washed and ironed, should be grateful to have a roof over her head.

Arriving in August, we spent our first week at the Hong Kong Hilton, waiting for our furniture to come from Rhode Island and trying not to be homesick. There were other expatriate families staying at the hotel as well, also waiting for shipments, or looking for apartments to rent.

There we became friends with families representing Caterpillar Tractor, The National Bank of Dallas, Frito-Lay, General Foods. Our boys met other American children in the coffee shop and by the pool. These children would become close friends during their four years at school, and after. They still are, 30 years later. The grandfatherly Hilton doorman didn't mind when kids hung around the entrance of the hotel, telling him about their homes in the States. They would ask him strings of questions: How many taxi doors did he open in one day? Did he ever go fishing? Had he been to America? (No, but he had a son at UCLA.) When school opened in September, the school bus for the Hong Kong International School would drive under the portico and suck in a dozen or so children. The numbers decreased as the families settled into their apartments.

Our shipment of household goods arrived neatly and on schedule. The graceful Chinese movers padded around the apartment in their white socks, placing furniture and cartons in appropriate spaces. A few days after, while I was unpacking linens, the back doorbell rang. There stood an old man and a young woman. The man was Ah Ping, a houseboy, who was not a boy, but a wizened man who might have been in his seventies. I knew him because I had met his employers – a gracious British couple who lived high up on Victoria Peak – where the view was more spectacular, and the houses more impressive than ours. That's how the prestige ladder went – it worked its way up the mountain. (Except the top of the peak was often shrouded in clouds and mist.) My husband and I had been to this couple's house for a dinner party, where Ah Ping took our coats, our drink orders, and served dinner to eight guests. There was an understanding in the expatriate community that he was senior man in procuring employment for Chinese domestic servants, from whom he'd collect a fee. It was also said about Ah Ping that, when he was a young man living in Shanghai, he sold one of his daughters. Selling girls into slavery was not uncommon then, in order to survive the great famine, and to pay for a place to live. Now, here in my kitchen doorway, Ah Ping introduced me to the silent woman standing at his side. "Very good amah missee," he said, pointing to her, as though she was a new appliance. "Work very hard." That encounter was to be my only experience in hiring a domestic.

I liked Ah Fung's face immediately, as she stood quietly to the side. In fractured English and hand-gestures Ah Ping and I discussed salary and Chinese holidays (of which there are many). It was not until the end of the negotiations when it was revealed that Ah Fung had a son, named Ah-Ming, who was in the picture as well. (N.B: *Ah* is a word for endearment, much like Bobby for Robert. Hence, everyone's an *Ah*.) It was surprising news to me, that a young boy would be coming to live with us, but by that time it was too late for me to re-consider. You might say I was duped.

My husband's job in Hong Kong involved creating a partnership with a British brokerage firm; a company that had been a presence in the Orient since the early years of the Colonial settlement. Through his business relationship we were introduced to many British residents in our first few weeks. You might call them "Old China Hands." The wives were very kind; they had luncheons for me and took me shopping. We became genuine friends. I was grateful to have English friendships and American ones. There were British schools, while the International School was based on an American system. The division of nationalities was not attributed to anything other than falling into the comfort of one's culture.

The way I lived felt something like role-playing, I became suddenly the "mistress of the house." This is how the morning began: The dining room table would be laid out for breakfast, with boxes of cereal, a pitcher of milk, and a copy of the South China Morning Post at my husband's place. There'd be slices of papaya and mango arranged on a platter. Ah Fung, appearing from the kitchen, would pour us coffee. "Master/Missee wanchee loll/toastee?" she might ask. Translation: "Mr. and Mrs. Lee, would you like toast or a croissant?" The question would be said with the Cantonese inflection that is neither gentle nor quiet, but more like the sounds from a chicken coop. After breakfast came the morning rush: searching for homework and jackets; signing a permission slip for a class trip to the sewage treatment plant or the new aquarium. Ah Fung would have lunch bags ready, as the boys ran to catch the bus. Then Master, I mean my husband, would either take the Peak Tram – a funicular trolley built in the late 1800's

– down to his office in Central, the business district, or else I'd drive him. We had a white Honda Civic, with the steering wheel on the right, a standard shift at my left, and blue leather upholstery. The round trip might take twenty minutes. After dropping him off, I'd drive back up the steep hill to our apartment, and then sit in the living room while Ah Fung made the beds and cleaned the rooms. I'd sit there on that sofa, and wonder what to do next.

Those first months were difficult. I knew all about moving, as we'd done it a several times before, but never overseas. I had an established routine, which was to create a sense of nesting as quickly as possible. This meant getting the furniture, pictures, lamps, and rugs arranged in a familiar pattern right away. In time, I'd unpack the rest of the cartons. Our apartment had few electrical outlets so I needed to purchase extension cords. Because Hong Kong was a British Colony, the wall sockets were British, although some were Chinese. The sockets came two-pronged, three pronged, large and small. Our lamps were American. I made a detailed list of what I needed, which lamp went with which outlet. One day I took the Peak Tram downtown in ninety-degree heat and oppressive humidity, and walked through the hazy exhaust-filled streets, looking for a hardware store.

Central had narrow sidewalks, exhaust fumes, and such a volume of pedestrian traffic that it was hard to maintain any sort of clear space around your body. There were no recognizable hardware stores that I could see. I stopped to ask the doorman of the Mandarin Hotel (now the Mandarin Oriental), who directed me to a special alley of electrical supplies, about five blocks away. There I found a row of outdoor stalls dealing mainly with the assembly of custom-made extension cords. I chose the stall of a man with the widest and most toothless smile. Together we sketched a few diagrams: length of cord, prong size, etc. He made what I needed, but the effort of this one errand depleted me. On that steamy September day in 1977, I did not find the steep, cobble-stoned alley of electrical supply booths charming in its local color, as I would later in my stay. I only found it frustrating and infuriating. The other errand that day was to look for a shower

curtain, but instead I went to the Hilton coffee shop, had a grilled cheese sandwich, and took a taxi home.

Ah Fung and I shyly got to know each other as we made the apartment comfortable. We unpacked boxes, while filling up shelves and closets and bureau drawers. Although we spoke different languages, it seemed apparent that we were compatible. I asked about her childhood; she grew up in China where girls did not go to school – she did not know how to read or write. “Girl no go school China missee.” During the Cultural Revolution in the sixties, Ah Fung came across the border into Hong Kong with thousands of other refugees. Everyone wanted to escape the turmoil and Chairman Mao’s Great Leap Forward. Her brother drowned while swimming across a river in the midst of the exodus, as did many others. When she arrived, she found work with a British family that already had an older amah in its employ. This amah taught Ah Fung about Western things: beds and bed sheets, bathrooms, forks and knives. Ah Fung was a sort of intern, or a “lookie-learnie,” as such trainees were called. It was from that older amah that she learned her English.

I wanted to teach her a correct, dignified English. I tried to have her call us “Mr. and Mrs. Lee,” but she was not at all interested. The way she spoke was like a cliché from Charlie Chan movies – the ones now condemned for stereotyping. I did not like being called “Master and Missee.” On the other hand, in her mind, “Master and Missee” might have been a translation for “Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,” or some Chinese equivalent of goofy characters. The title of respect here was ambiguous. Slender and friendly, Ah Fung wore cotton pants and tops that never matched – busy prints with other busy prints; or sometimes plaids. She slapped around the apartment in plastic flip-flops with pandas on them, dusting and humming. The classic older amahs were known as “black and white,” referring to the black pants and white tops they always wore. I did not care about uniforms, and Ah Fung, it seemed, had no intention of wearing one. “You Americans are so lenient with your help,” a French woman once told me at a charity luncheon.

I was grateful to have a Chinese amah. It was especially useful to have her to communicate with the

service people – repairmen and such. She would loudly scold them for tracking in dirt or making a mess with their tools, (which they never did). But she did it for show on my behalf, just so I'd know she was in charge. Part of the Cantonese culture, I learned, involved yelling insults at each other, although it never amounted to anything. The reason I emphasize *Chinese* amah, is because more and more families were employing young women from the Philippines, whom they would sponsor for a legal visa, thus guaranteeing their room and board, and that they would not be a burden to the Hong Kong government. These women would leave a country where living conditions were deplorable and the income meager. By comparison, the money they could earn in Hong Kong working in a household was huge. The women were usually educated, some were trained as accountants or dental hygienists. They left behind husbands and small children living in dilapidated houses without plumbing and lots of family members. Once a month they'd send home most of their salary. They would return to the Philippines twice a year to visit their children and families.

The Chinese eyed the Philippines with distrust. Ah Fung told me one day with certainty: "Philippina amah in number 6-A no good. When missee go away, Philippina amah sleep with master." This was a fact she learned from the doorman.

But domestic service, for a vocation, was losing momentum with the Chinese as the next generation chose to work in factories, where they had some independence. The influx of Philippines continued to grow. On Sundays the maids would gather downtown in the square between the Catholic Church and Mandarin Hotel. They would fill the entire plaza – an area that had once been a cricket field – and socialize with each other on their one day off. By our fourth year in Hong Kong, the Sunday gathering was so dense that it flowed beyond the plaza into neighboring streets. Sometimes the unmarried women would respond to classified advertisements placed in questionable American periodicals – ads placed by men seeking Asian wives. Friends of ours pleaded with their sweet young maid not to leave for the States, where she intended to

marry a man who had put in such a classified. A resident of Kentucky, he stated that he owned a modern house with a swimming pool and earned a big salary. The prospect of a green card was, of course, the ultimate objective. This young woman followed through, and the result was disastrous. She became somewhat of an indentured servant to a three-hundred-pound man and his invalid mother. Our friends, the former employers, received desperate letters from her. They hired a lawyer to help her get a divorce.

Soon after the start of school in September the rhythm of our week, Monday to Friday, grew more comfortable, much like a school year back in the States. Halloween came, and the boys went trick-or-treating (Frankenstein and the Incredible Hulk) with friends from school. Ah Ming went along, dressed as Dracula. Although only vaguely familiar with the American custom of trick-or-treating, he seemed happily curious as they went in a clump from door to door in our building, and the ones nearby. In Central there was a shop in the basement of a small office building that carried Hallmark decorations – black and orange streamers, vampire teeth, plastic pumpkins, candles. When Thanksgiving came, we spent it with two other families. Butterball turkeys filled the freezers of the Western supermarkets and cans of Ocean Spray cranberry sauce went on display. One of our friends' parents came to visit from the States. The presence of grandparents was always a source of comfort and nostalgia, as there was a strange absence of anyone over fifty in the expatriate community. The days went as though we were living “at home” in America. There was school, work, Cub Scouts, soccer. Only the backdrop was different. Instead of a lawn, we had a rocky cliff with a thin cascading waterfall. Our building backed up to the steepest section of the Peak; a long vertical drop. Cut into the sides of the rocky cliff were narrow stepped terraces lined with profuse and colorful pots of flowers. As in a 19<sup>th</sup> century hand-tinted print, the nursery workers carried long bamboo poles stretched across their shoulders. Buckets hung from either end. The men, in wide-brimmed straw hats, climbed up and down from one level to the next, watering potted flowers. Alongside the waterfall was a square concrete cistern from which they filled their buckets.

Weekday evenings, on the other hand, were a part of the routine that was new to me. At least two or three nights a week we went to business dinner parties. Sometimes it was our turn to entertain. Visiting executives came from New York and London to review their company's offices in Asia. Their wives came too. As a hostess, I was not comfortable with entertaining visiting dignitaries. Ah Fung and I would make beef Stroganoff or chicken Kiev from the Joy of Cooking. She made bok choy sautéed in oil and garlic. I bought Haagen-Dazs ice cream at a special store in Central, and fudge sauce. To help serve and wash up, one of her amah-friends would come. There would be a large amount of clattering pots and pans, animated chatter and laughter coming from behind the kitchen door, drowning out the quiet and polite conversation at my formally set dinner table. I'd worry Ah Fung would put the cookies on a Star Wars plate, or serve the chocolate sauce in its plastic container. Which sometimes happened. For moral support, part of my guest list would always include some of my friends. They were good sports about the steady appearance of beef Stroganoff.

We would live in Hong Kong for three and a half years. Did I love it? It's hard to say. The exotic climate of the Crown Colony was intoxicating – the junks and sampans, the amahs, the British governor. But an underlying current of longing for home on the East Coast of America was always present. The longing to be with our extended families was there, no matter how much I tried to stifle it.