

## Chapter 1

# TIGERS ALL AROUND

1900 – 1910

### **Hong Kong expands into tiger country**

The fateful ninety-nine-year lease that expanded Hong Kong into little-known, wild and mysterious hill country began on paper in 1898, three years before the close of Britain's grandly ambitious, empire-grabbing Victorian era. Until then the area north of Boundary Street in Kowloon, and hundreds of islands surrounding Hong Kong Island were all part of Guangdong province, tiger country. Not that it would have made any difference to tigers one way or the other. They don't stop at imperial frontiers, taking note of treaties made by humans. But knowledge of their presence could be spread or stifled depending on where a border is drawn, and which side of that frontier they are stalking in.

News travelled slowly around the newly acquired hinterland and the Brits were at first not in any rush to take possession. Like the tigers, the 80,000 inhabitants of 423 villages had not been consulted about the treaty Britain signed in Peking, and naturally the new landlords were cautious about not wading in too gung-ho. There were no telephone lines, and there were very few roads, mostly a network of tracks linking one clan-cluster to another over rocky hill-country deemed to be ninety percent scrub and stone. Pirate and bandit attacks were frequent in the area, where one walled village had been besieged for three months by robbers just before the new treaty came into force. The people of the New Territories were used to fending for themselves and defending their land.

There was a battle-hardened, trained and organised militia always ready to meet unwelcome interlopers, whether four-legged or two-legged.

The date was set to raise the flag at Tai Po on 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1899. A British reconnaissance trip was organised on the 14<sup>th</sup> when a number of policemen escorted by local Hong Kong volunteers travelled into clan territory and were greeted by unfriendly, uniformed men and a wall of pointing artillery. Taking no chances the British contingent made a calm retreat, only to return two days later with reinforcements armed with Maxim machine guns, and naval support out at sea from a gunboat called HMS *Fame*. It was after all the era of gunboat diplomacy, the great oxymoron, and the idea of avoiding a gung-ho takeover was instantly forgotten. Historian Frank Welsh informs us that “some Chinese” were killed and wounded, there were no British casualties and the flag was hoisted on 16<sup>th</sup> April.

Unfazed by local hostility, the British commander, Captain Berger, felt he was in a place that was good for the soul. He wrote “after the basely material life one continuously sees in Hong Kong, it was certainly a treat to find oneself among purely natural people where a man would not actually die if he had forgotten to put a flower in his coat, or to curl the ends of his moustache.”

The “purely natural” people came back at the Brits in a force of 3,000 on the 17<sup>th</sup>, a day after the flag-raising, but their locally forged crossbows, firearms, crackers and gongs were no match for recoil-operated guns capable of firing 600 rounds per minute. They were easily repulsed leaving “several hundred” casualties. A flippant colonialist noted that “the gravest injury to the British forces was caused by an enraged and patriotic buffalo.”

Taking no chances with his new charge, the boss of Britain’s latest expansion, James Stewart Lockhart, quickly took the opportunity to establish his authority when three inhabitants were murdered. He burned down the houses of the suspects.

Police posts were built, roads laid, and telephone lines erected. Some kind of peace-like equilibrium was somehow imposed. News from the

New Territories started to filter through, and with that came the first reports of tigers in the British crown colony of Hong Kong.

### **The bones of the beast**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century tigers were reported with fascination and enthusiasm from the beast's heartlands of Bengal, Burma, Indonesia and the Malay peninsula including Singapore. But when they surfaced in Hong Kong the stories were treated with scepticism. That was the pattern that started early in the century and would never be shaken off.

Yet as early as February 1901 a correspondent saw the remains of a tiger in the New Territories and confirmed what all the villagers already knew – that the tigers were there. Rumours reaching the city had enticed several hunting parties to go exploring the New Territories. Mr C.H. Gale was on one of these adventures when he came across the remains of a big cat.

“From what I saw of the bones, the animal must have been of fair size for this part of China,” wrote Gale in a disappointingly glib, and short, report in the *China Mail*.

That was it.

Our first tiger confirmation of the century was dropped into the conversation as a slightly gossipy titbit that presumably should not excite the grown-ups too much. It was the first of more than 100 reports from within the Hong Kong boundary that would drip-feed through the colony up into the 1960s.

On the one hand, tigers were taken for granted at that time. People did not know that the species would be down to its last few thousand within a few decades, and that trying to save it would become a multinational multi-million-dollar industry. On the other hand, the species was also inherently exotic when they appeared in India, Burma or Malaya. Yet for some reason, in Hong Kong their appearances seemed either humdrum or suspect. To be fair, perhaps seeing a few bones in the New Territories doesn't compare with the tales of ferocious attacks, daring hunts and

sheer spectacle that were regularly reported from neighbouring lands in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Gladiators vs potshots**

In Indonesia there were gladiator-like man versus tiger shows for entertainment. On one occasion huge crowds turned out to watch twelve tigers battle against hundreds of flimsily armed men. The tiger-fighters entered the arena and formed a square around cages, the *Hong Kong Telegraph* reported from Java on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1900. The beasts were let out two at a time and prodded and stoned until they made an enraged charge at the line of humans holding up a wall of spears.

Twice, plucky felines broke through the spearmen and caused panic, but they were chased down and demolished. The blood sport lasted three quarters of an hour. "All the tigers fell in the unequal contest," the paper concludes without commenting on whether there were any human casualties. Not surprisingly, the Javan tiger was one of the first tiger species to be declared extinct later in the century.

The South China tiger was not to last much longer either, but in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were still thousands of them in the southern provinces of China. Hongkongers regularly got news from around the trading posts in the region. It wasn't that tigers chose those spots, it was that foreign correspondents were there for other reasons, such as trade, economy and politics, and they just kept coming across good tiger yarns on their beat. The tales that emerged were numerous and consistent, including marauding livestock thieves and terror-inducing man-eaters. Every now and then 'Big White Hunters,' gun enthusiasts and have-a-go heroes from Hong Kong made the trip to Guangdong and Fujian to stalk the Lord of the Hundred Beasts. Had they been patient, they could have got one in Hong Kong.

In September 1902, a farmer from a village called Chin Wan found three of his cows dead. Determined to catch the culprit he sat up all night to keep watch. He got more than he bargained for on his lonely vigil when two tigers appeared, crawling around looking for their prey. He



*He got more than he bargained for on his  
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took a pot-shot or two, but he failed to down either of them. The farmer recovered some of his loss by selling off the flesh of his dead cows at the local market.

The newspaper made a call out to its readership, “here is a chance for our local sports to take a trip to the place indicated to get rid of the undesirable intruders.” But our first confirmed bag on Hong Kong territory was still 13 years away.

### **District of man-eaters**

The Hong Kong farmer should have considered himself lucky to have survived. Although it doesn't seem that many people in Hong Kong were killed by tigers, the man-eaters were out there in neighbouring provinces stalking people right into the middle of the century. Less than two months before the New Territories farmer's three-cow loss, there was a large beast over the border roaming around the village of Tak Hing on the West River, killing people and traumatising the living.

A missionary made a heartfelt appeal to Hong Kong readers, asking them to come up and shoot the animal. One plucky reader responded, perhaps seeking glory, perhaps hoping to help his fellow man. Either way he was drawn to the great task with the best of intentions, only to return empty handed.

It sounded like a chaotic hunt: “The tiger while waiting for this man to shoot him managed to eat a Chinaman within two hundred yards from where the hunter was keeping his vigil. The tiger is described as a very large one and has eaten over a dozen men this summer.”

There was a close call in Hong Kong a couple of years later when a badly wounded man was brought into Tai Po. He had been working in a field at Au Tau, in Yuen Long district, when a tiger suddenly appeared and sprang on him, “severely mauling him about the shoulders, back and arms.” His life was probably saved by his brave workmates who beat the beast back into a retreat. He was eventually taken to the Government Civil Hospital, while a party of “enthusiastic sportsmen” went on another failed campaign to “secure his skin.”

### **Winchester at full-cock**

Tiger hunting is not easy. The animal is extremely sly and until it decides to charge, practically invisible. In a place called Koon Wui, Guangdong province, another hunter set off on a trip in June 1904 that “though unsuccessful, afforded plenty of enjoyment and excitement.”

Having got to the tiger-infested district, the hopeful adventurer haggled with locals for a dog, and headed up the hills to the tiger lair. He didn't need a particularly fine dog – no pedigree hunting hound was necessary, just a dumb mutt would do – as its sole purpose was to be tiger bait.

He also needed personnel, trackers and beaters, but he complained it wasn't easy to get local people to join his hunt, noting that “the Chinese stand in the greatest terror of the tiger, and even apply the propitiatory adjective ‘venerable’ to it.” He did concede though that without effective weapons against the “formidable beast” the fear was justified. He managed to find one “sturdy yokel” and set off with him to spend the night in a deserted hut at the end of a narrow valley. The family that had previously occupied the isolated building had fled in fear of the Lord of the Hundred Beasts.

“I was not sorry then we reached the shelter of this hut,” he wrote, “for the Chinaman with me had a nasty trick of looking over his shoulder at every bush and hillock which we passed. He evidently feared that the hunter might become the hunted, and, as it was pitch dark, this prospect was decidedly unalluring.” They tied the dog up to its sacrificial post and installed themselves in their hideout. The hunter took watch from a loft window.

The marksman was extremely frustrated when the canny dog remained dead silent all night long, instead of howling in terror as it was supposed to. The canine obviously knew its life was in great danger, and only by keeping quiet would it have any chance of prolonging its life. It even held its mouth tightly shut when the would-be shooter could hear a tiger within 400 yards emitting a hunting whine, in search of prey.

“Thoroughly disgusted and feeling much inclined to slaughter the dog which has saved its skin by keeping silent,” the intrepid adventurer

and his sturdy yokel pushed on the next day, like the Don Quixote and Sancho Panza of southern China.

They met a party of woodcutters who pointed to a trail of spoor – tiger paw-prints. They followed the marks until they saw where the predator had laid down to rest, and put its claw marks in a pine tree. The hunting duo continued, following the fresh tracks, until they reached an area of dense jungle almost surrounded by hills to form a natural amphitheatre in a place traditionally known as an ancient abode of tigers.

Sancho climbed up onto a higher ridge and rolled stones down the walls of the dip in an effort to flush out a tiger as the Don waited “with a Winchester at full-cock.”

Nothing happened.

Undeterred, the hunter followed a narrow trail and entered the thick jungle. The wild foliage closed right in on him and he ended up on his hands and knees until he found a “black and awesome cave” in the hillside. He hesitated for a moment, then shot blindly into the abyss.

“After some time I emerged from the jungle in a very dishevelled condition, and with no ‘bag’ to console me, but nevertheless the excitement and enjoyment had been considerable.”

He was convinced that given enough time, it would be possible to get a tiger at that spot. Four had been killed the previous year and he urged like-minded adventurers to go there armed with a gun to “earn the gratitude of the neighbourhood by ridding it of some of these dangerous pests,” like he hadn’t.

Another hunt took place near Pakhoi a little while later. Two English men went looking for the King of the Forest with a pig and goat in tow. They returned humbled, minus pig and goat, admitting they took a shot at the King but missed. The villagers were said to be disappointed because they lived in terror of the beast.

### **Leave it to the yokels**

Three female peanut harvesters, without the benefit of a Winchester, or anything like it, had a different story in the same area in July 1905. The



women were up in the hills to gather a harvest and had set up a small hut to sleep overnight. They woke up to a sound they at first thought was a robber, only to find a tiger at the entrance. They flung themselves into a fierce and screaming attack with their defensive spears and brought down the 200-pound beast. Villagers heard the racket and ran up to the rescue with clubs and spears and finished the job off when they got there. They carted the corpse of the King of the Beasts off in a wheelbarrow and sold the meat at a market in Pakhoi.

And so the reports from the neighbourhood kept coming in.

In August 1905, Hong Kong sportsmen were encouraged to go after four tigers that lived in a cave near a place called Kai Kum Shan, north of Canton. Every afternoon the tigers descended from their lair and ate village dogs. The neighbourhood originally swarmed with dogs, but now there were only one or two left. The terrorised locals dared not leave their houses after 5pm. They had managed to persuade some soldiers to go and kill the big cats, but when the hapless troops actually saw the beasts, one of them was so terrified that he couldn't hold on to his gun. The others took that as an excuse to bring him back to the village and abandon the hunt. That is why besieged residents called for European braves to make the three-hour trip upriver from Canton.

A week later a party from Hong Kong, made up of Major Hatch, Lieutenant Maclean and Lieutenant Borton, along with Mr Sung Kok Pang and four Indians, took up the challenge. They camped overnight and at dawn stationed themselves at a narrow pass that they reckoned the tigers would have to come through. They waited there until they spotted three tigers.

But there was a problem.

The villagers had come out *en masse* to witness the sport. The tigers saw the crowd and sensed something was not right. Thus spooked they changed direction. After two more days of trying to sneak up on the stealthy felines, the hunting party decided to change tactics. They tied up a goat near the lair and waited. Once again the striped marauders

remained invisible. The party returned empty-handed and a few days later a child was killed by the beasts.

Meanwhile in the same month, another tiger was killed over at Pakhoi by “peasants.” The carcass was brought to town and “disposed of in the usual way,” which presumably means chopped up and sold off at market.

### **Here come the Nimrods**

It was a time of great change, and a time to stop taking old assumptions for granted. In 1905 Japan shocked the world by winning a war against Russia, a European imperial power. The two nations fought over tiger country: north-east China and the Korean peninsula. Manchuria was the territory of the formidable Siberian tiger, and tiger hunters were still active at that time in North Korea, tracking the big cat there.

At the other, warmer end of China, in Hong Kong, Sun Yat-sen, father of the nation, was plotting revolution against another old imperial power – the Qing dynasty. Taking shelter in the British colony, nationalists established bomb factories, collected arms, recruited troops and plotted coups in Canton and Kwangsi. Qing authorities were much perturbed by the *de facto* shelter that Hong Kong had become, and they attempted to extradite at least one of the leaders of the conspiracy to Canton on trumped-up charges of robbery.

Meanwhile, just across the Pearl River from Hong Kong, at a spot that perhaps is visible from Tiger Hill on Lantau on a clear day, ten people from one village, and twenty more in the surrounding area, were killed by tigers in early 1906. A district around a Hakka village about 40 miles from Macau, which was already suffering from a spate of robberies and a deadly outbreak of smallpox, became infested with a band of tigers. In another heartfelt appeal a writer urged Hongkongers to take up the gun and make the journey across the river to help these people. “Why cannot some of the Nimrods of Hong Kong inaugurate a great hunt and thus clear out these monsters?...it is a great shame that not more than 100

to 120 miles from Hong Kong within easy reach, these wild beasts are permitted to carry on their depredations.”

Perhaps Frederick Lugard, governor of Hong Kong, could have helped. Apparently he was a bit of a nimrod himself. He arrived in 1907 after tours of duty in Afghanistan, Sudan and Burma, with a reputation as a big-game hunter. His favourite rifle was said to have been bought from the reward he earned for killing a man-eating tiger. Unfortunately we don't get to hear if he put the shooter to good use in or around the territory. Instead he spent energy on tussling with ministers of the Liberal government in London, who were morally outraged that the opium trade was still going on in Hong Kong. Lugard knew only too well that the drug provided a handy revenue stream and neither he nor his local administrators were ready to let London's qualms get in the way of good profit.

The formal meaning of “nimrod” is a skilled hunter, but in American slang it is used to mean an inept person. That ambiguity seems to suit the stories of hunters well, where breathtaking daring and ingenuity often travel side-by-side with unfathomably bad decision-making. One nimrod expedition in China met with success under circumstances that are difficult to imagine planning and voluntarily undertaking. A tigress was shot in a cave near Amoy.

### **Cave hunting in China**

Edwin Pinches and his companion followed the instructions of local Chinese guides and spent a night at a mountain temple. At dawn they scoured the landscape and spotted a big cat making its way back from a night-hunt. They watched it enter a cave. Having checked the cave had no other exits, the braves tossed for the first shot, and sent their Chinese scouts in to locate the tiger. The fearless scouts returned unscathed to report that there was indeed a tigress and two cubs deep inside the cavern.

The nimrods silently entered in single file. At some points the passage became so narrow that they had to crawl through on hands and knees,

pushing their rifles ahead. Faces down to the ground, they could see the footprints of the mother and cubs.

They spotted the tigress in a chamber that was about 10 feet square, just enough standing room for two big white hunters and two Chinese guides.

The feline matriarch attacked immediately, jumping for one of the shooters, and snuffing out torches in the commotion. The man who won the first-shot toss became the target of the tiger leap. He slipped in the split-second attack and dropped his rifle. His quick-reacting companion shot at the flying beast and brought it down.

"The situation was exciting, to say the least," Pinches wrote. He wasn't certain the tiger was dead, but could feel part of its body across his feet. The guides managed to re-light the torches and it became clear that the man who fell was severely mauled and bleeding badly.

The tiger was dead.

Pinches lived to tell the tale to an eager Hong Kong audience. They couldn't get enough of tiger yarns from the district and another big cat leapt from the pages of the Hong Kong press soon afterwards.

A fisherman at Shun Tak, not far from Hong Kong, spotted what he thought was a bundle of paddy stalks floating harmlessly on a waterway. For some reason he took a pole and prodded the pile, perhaps thinking the straw could be useful. The over-curious fisherman got a face-full of terror when a huge tiger exploded out of the water from underneath the bundle, and sprang to the shore.

Within a few seconds the ferocious aquatic beast had mauled five people on land and went on the run. Villagers armed with guns chased after it, killed it and sold off its flesh. It is no exaggeration to say a wild tiger is a terrifying, dangerous animal. But the Lord of the Hundred Beasts ought to know, and I suspect, does know, that as far as possible it is better not to mess with the Naked Ape.

### **Lusty screams of fright**

People in Hong Kong got used to thinking that the district over the Shamchun River was “elsewhere”. There lay tiger country, not here. But that was not how the tigers saw it. The British Crown Colony was within reach. It was a peripheral blip on the end of a vast tiger kingdom, but it was still attached to that land.

The tiger reports that made the Hong Kong press tended to be clustered around the few trading posts where foreign correspondents were stationed. It wasn't that tigers concentrated around Amoy, Canton and Pakhoi. It was because the vastness in between was a dark unknown, where a nation of farmers tilled the soil, and wild beasts stalked undetected by the outside world.

Tigers roamed everywhere around Fujian, Hunan, Jiangxi and Guangdong provinces. They didn't care about administrative boundaries, and they didn't do it for the benefit of foreign correspondents. In terms of communication, Hong Kong's nerve centre, at Victoria, across the harbour from the Kowloon peninsula, was probably better connected to the commercial stations of Pakhoi, Canton and Amoy than it was to the outer reaches of the New Territories in its own backyard. Those dark mountain tracks connecting the fields and the tiny clan-based hamlets beyond the tip of Kowloon were far away to officials, and reporters, in their normal habitat. Those trails over hilly bushland, pockets of lush greenery and through stream-gouged gullies, newly acquired by British administrators, were very much part of the Guangdong hinterland. They were in tiger country.

Yet just as much as tiger reports were sensational just over the border, the press often preferred to play the sceptic's card when the stories came from within. So despite news arriving of tigers all around the region, a hunting account from the New Territories in 1907 was delivered with a heavy dose of sarcasm. It started off saying “whether this story is true or whether it is a figment of the imagination of those sportsmen on the peninsula who see a tiger or leopard in every emaciated village pariah dog, must be left to the credulity of our readers.” Journalists hate to be

thought gullible, so it is sometimes easier for a correspondent to treat a story with scepticism than to investigate the murky facts.

The story goes on to describe how a party from the railway works at Kowloon set out in search of two tigers that had been spotted. The party found tracks, followed them, and caught sight of the pair. Inexplicably at this point the tigers turn into leopards.

“Our informant avers that he certainly killed one if not both of the leopards with his single shot, but failed to get the skins in proof of his prowess because the carcasses fell down a mountain 2,000 feet,” our correspondent tells us. There are no 2,000-foot cliffs in Hong Kong that you can fall off. The story is amusing enough, but it is missing the wider context – that the tigers were there.

The Castle Peak tiger of 1907 to 1908 was dealt with more simply as a matter of fact. On 30<sup>th</sup> November 1907 the *China Mail* reported that a tiger had been seen roaming about Castle Peak Farm. The paper had a story that criticised a group of people who were planning to bring a leopard to a barren uninhabited island just so they could hunt it down and kill it. They were planning a pretend hunt.

“The man who wants to pit himself against the animal and slaughter it under the guise of sport should go into the wilds and tackle the beast in its own country,” the writer asserts, before saying that there was an opportunity to do exactly that near Castle Peak.

A tiger in the area was roaming about “picking up the occasional pig, and the other day it carried off a cow.” The gauntlet is laid for all: “the true sportsman who would have too much pride to corner a leopard on a small barren islet and pump lead into it from the shelter of a launch, is welcome to avail himself of a hunt in earnest.”

Just over two months later there was a follow-up. The tiger had shown up again. It had stolen several pigs and two cows. But none of the intrepid hunters had got to it. Instead it was spotted by a grass-cutter who “fled with lusty screams of fright.”

Educated Hongkongers knew that tigers were all around the region. But the grass-cutters, pig farmers and cow hands of the colony knew better

than that. They knew that Hong Kong was well within tiger country. The tigers weren't next door, they were in the bloody backyard, and in the coming decades the weight of evidence would become undeniable.