YET MORE THOUGHTS ON HAN SUYIN’S A MANY SPLENDOURED THING: CONDUIT ROAD AND ITS ENVIRONS

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In Volume 40, (2000), of the HKBRAS Journal, there were two fine articles. One was entitled *Tea, Ivory and Ebony: Tracing Colonial Threads in the Inseparable Life and Literature of Han Suyin*, and the second was *Some Thoughts on Han Suyin’s A Many Splendoured Thing*. These were contributed by Teresa Kowalska and Peter Halliday respectively. I will continue from there and include also a little more history about the interesting district around Conduit Road.

As we read in the above articles, *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, starring Jennifer Jones and William Holden, was partly shot at 41 Conduit Road in the 1950s. This film was based on Han Suyin’s autobiography, *A Many Splendoured Thing*, where Han’s lover, a British correspondent, was killed in the Korean War. In the film, in addition to the slight change of title, the hero miraculously became an American. The Chinese-style pavilion out at the back, over towards Po Shan Road, which was used in the film, still stands today. A bit further away is a watercourse, which seldom dries up even during a drought. Water was piped from there for flushing toilets, at the old mansion at No. 41, right up until it was demolished in the 1960s. There was water rationing in those days.

Conduit Road itself really came into being as a result of Hong Kong’s first water supply scheme, which resulted from the construction of Pok Fu Lam Reservoir. Water began to flow in 1864. Before then, the entire Island depended on wells and streams. Later, a water main was laid around the southwest slopes of Mid-Levels and a road was constructed at the turn of the century, which became known as Conduit Road. The well-to-do in the Colony liked the location and some built their dwellings there.

A Chinese gentleman, Mr. Mok Kon Sang, in 1911 built a palatial residence at 41 Conduit Road where Realty Gardens stands today. Mr. Mok was a comprador for Butterfield and Swire (in 1974 the name was changed to plain Swire). In keeping with rich Chinese of his times he
had eight (some say nine) concubines. In 1928, the house was passed on to his son, Mr. Mok Hing Shung.

Up until the 1950s and 1960s, there were several palatial mansions standing in their own grounds in the Mid-Levels. Some had tennis courts. One splendid example was Marble Hall, at 1 Conduit Road where Chater Hall now stands. Marble Hall was built by Sir Paul Catchick Chater a wealthy Armenian merchant and philanthropist. It was said in his days: 'What Chater does today Jardine does tomorrow.' The general design of Marble Hall was similar in many respects to the old mansion at 41 Conduit Road. In addition to the photographs hanging in the entrance lobbies of the five blocks at Realty Gardens today, there is an artist’s embellished impression of No. 41 in the Hong Kong Museum of Art at Tsim Sha Tsui.¹

From 1951 to 1961 the Foreign Correspondents’ Club (FCC), a period some members describe as its heyday, was ensconced in the splendid building at No. 41. One could drive to the Club then and either drive up the slope or, alternatively, there was space for about three cars to park at the Conduit Road level. One could then take the lift (the first installed in a private dwelling in Hong Kong) up to the main entrance. There were nine bedrooms on the upper floor and the fireplaces were of Italian marble. The whole house had a wonderful ambience. With a little stretch of the imagination one can almost picture Han Suyin sitting under a cupola on the roof partaking of afternoon tea. The FCC was offered the lovely old building for a mere HK$250,000 in the 1950s, but the political situation was considered too precarious at the time to contemplate purchase.

I first came to live in Conduit Road in March 1955, at the previous (then newly completed) block at No. 56. I frequently walked past the old Foreign Correspondents’ Club, sometimes when boisterous parties were in full swing. On Saturday nights it was considered the place to be. The FCC had its own band but it also hired bands from the armed forces. Private parties were common there as well as diplomatic corps and airline lunches.

But, in spite of the noise emanating at times from No. 41, Conduit Road was generally quiet and peaceful. At the western end especially it was almost like a country road, with trees and undergrowth, and one
could sometimes hear barking deer calling from Victoria Peak. At the
time one could still hire a sedan chair and four coolies to carry one up
to Conduit Road. There were half a dozen or so parked regularly in
Wyndham Street, in Central, up until the late 1950s. The fare was 30
cents for each 15 minutes with a 30 cents surcharge. The working life
of a chair coolie was said to be eight years.

As with many houses in Conduit Road at the time, 41 Conduit
Road had a superb view and, long before the days of cross-harbour
tunnels, one of the pastimes of children was counting the number of
ferries they could spot. Between the two World Wars an eccentric
Englishman who lived in Robinson Road, not far away, did not own a
clock. He used a telescope to tell the time from the clock tower then
standing in Pedder Street. In the “good old days,” more than one British
Governor used the activities in the harbour as a barometer of the strength
of the economy. We are talking of times, up until the mid 1930s, when
a cannon was fired from Blackhead Point, in Tsim Sha Tsui, to let
residents know when a typhoon was approaching or, alternatively, the
mail ship had arrived. Occasionally, inhabitants were not sure to which
of the two events the firing referred!

When the FCC vacated the premises the final days had come for
the old mansion at 41 Conduit Road. In 1960, it was bought by Cheng
Hing Realty and, in 1966, rebought by Court Properties. As with so
much of Hong Kong it was a case of ‘Hungry for the new forget the
old.’ The old building was demolished and the site remained empty for
some time. The sale price was reputed to have been $13 million. The
site was then redeveloped. In the summer of 1970, there were 1,200
applications to purchase the 400 flats at Realty Gardens. My wife and
I were successful in the ballot and we took possession of our newly
completed flat in Venice Court, for which we paid, in mid 1972, the
 princely sum of $114,000. Prices were still low after the property slump
brought on largely by the drawn-out 1967 riots. My flat has been a
splendid investment. We let it for the first four years, unfurnished, at
$2,000 a month. We moved in ourselves on 1 March 1976.

Although I can see a narrow strip of the harbour and Stonecutters
Island (an island no longer) from my bedroom window, my flat at Realty
Gardens in fact faces south. It is thus shielded from the cold north­
easterly monsoon in the winter and receives the benefits of the cool
south-westerly monsoon in the summer. As the Cantonese saying has it, ‘Even with a 1,000 taels of gold it is not easy to buy a flat facing south.’

On the steep hillside with its lush vegetation, opposite and well above Realty Gardens, exists even now what is sometimes still called Cheung Po-Tsai’s Path. Shown on maps, starting more or less opposite and a little higher up than May Road, although heavily overgrown and not negotiable in parts because of landslips and other obstructions, the footpath goes around and finishes up on the southern slopes of the Peak. Cheung was Hong Kong’s most notorious and fearsome pirate who was at the zenith of his powers during the first decade of the 19th century. He was reputed to command as many as 600 junks, 40,000 fighting men — including a few British ex-Royal Navy gunners — and “own” the prettiest girls. No firm evidence, however, appears to exist that he himself ever walked along that path.

From the \textit{fung shui} aspect Victoria Peak with its spurs, and Seymour Cliffs to our southeast, symbolise strong backing. The “cosmic breath” of \textit{fung shui} rides on the wind and is dispersed and checked by watercourses. Realty Gardens’ location brings blessings, which are just, and inevitable rewards deserved by the skilful and the diligent. Watercourses stream down the mountain keeping fortunes flowing into our flat and protecting our well-being. Some \textit{fung shui} specialists maintain that the spiritual energy on the Peak is the best in the whole of Hong Kong.

At the far western end of Conduit Road, close to the junction with Kotewall and Po Shan Roads, a steep, narrow road branches off. This is Hatton Road. It leads to the Peak. About half way up it passes the remains of Pinewood Battery, which has been turned, into a picnic spot. This artillery emplacement was constructed by the British, starting in 1903. The whole area around Hatton Road is relatively unspoiled and provides a wonderful recreational area for Conduit Road residents to stretch their legs and to appreciate nature. Many of the elderly Chinese who walk up there daily for exercise call it “Long Life Road.”

Sadly however, while talking of heritage, with the villa at No. 55 (completed in 1919) having been demolished in the summer of 2000, there is only one pre-World War Two building still standing in Conduit
Road. That is the supermarket and estate agency at No. 44. Now, many of the buildings flanking Conduit Road top 30 or 40 storeys blocking their neighbour’s view. Certainly today barking deer can no longer be heard calling from Victoria Peak. But, proving the location is still peaceful, Realty Gardens does have its own flock of pigeons and it is not infrequently visited by a destructive, gregarious group of sulphur-crested cockatoos.

Nevertheless the pattern of nature does change. In the 1970s crested-mynah birds were common in the grounds at Realty Gardens. Nowadays, you seldom see them. Snakes are not uncommon. But much of the wild life on the slopes of the Peak itself is nocturnal and limited. However I did see dead ferret badgers and masked-palm civets, in the 1990s, which had been run over by vehicles. Although rare on the Peak, one can occasionally even see fresh-water crabs and blue-tailed skinks. The latter is Hong Kong’s most attractive lizard.

Although customs have changed one can still sometimes see and hear street criers in Conduit Road. They vary from the itinerant, tiny, wizened old sharpener of knives and scissors to the trader who buys odds and ends of scrap metal. There is also the old man who sells lengths of bamboo. These are used for hanging out the washing to dry when it is euphemistically called “flags of all nations.” In the mid-1950s, I remember there was a peddler with a pet monkey.

Certainly if the present old, worn, steps, which are original, which Han Suyin and her boy friend once trod in the film shot at Realty Gardens, together with the original balustrades and the heavy, battered, gravity retaining walls which still exist today, could talk, they would have wonderful tales to tell.

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1 The picture in the Hong Kong Museum of Art, of 41 Conduit Road, is a watercolour on paper titled, ‘Fairview, Conduit Road 1926’, by Alfred Lane, reference AH72.1. It was donated to the Museum of Art by Mr. Kwok On.
Secretary for, and resident of, the old Foreign Correspondents’ Club at 41 Conduit Road in the 1950s. Thanks are also due to Mr Geoffrey Roper HKBRAS member and long-time Hong Kong resident.