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

sti cks 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 dow n to the polluted harbor. I had to

get a feel for Hong Kong. If the re was any chance of unraveling the mystery of the elusive

Bruce Lee, then I had to get into his head. I had co me to the place where he had grown up as

a child and died as a young man. I had to se e his family home, stroll through Nathan Road

Park, vis it 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 de ad. There were

business partners and old girlfriends and fellow mar tial art ists also on my list. There were

court records and stacks of twenty-year-old newspapers at City Hall I needed to read. Most

of al l I want ed 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 individua ls who would avoid me, and I also thought I knew which doors would be

slammed in my face. I exp ected to be followed at some point, and after the second day of

phone calls and storming one hot spot after another, I never l eft 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

1

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 t he world, and the humidity was suffocating. I was

not alone as I approached the steps leading up to the mass ive Wong Tai Sin Temple. I had a

Chinese girl w ith me named Ming Hing-wai. The way I saw it she was a gi ft from the gods.

Not only did she speak both Cantonese and Mandarin, bu t she knew her way around the

back-al leys 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 embark ing on any serious ende avor one mus t come t o t he temple

and talk to the gods and the fortune tellers. It is the Chinese way, and they take it very

seriously.

Wong Tai Sin T emple is an enormous Taoist temple set in the midst of a high-density

government housing p roject. It was built in 1 921 in ho nor of Wong Tai Sin, a mythical

shepherd boy with the powers of healing an d 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 me n standing near the ent rance to t he temple. At their

feet were roasted pigs the size o f small dogs, gift wrapped in shiny r ed 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 ro asted 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

2

before me. Hundreds of worshipers, fanatical in their sincerity, stood in the vast square

facing the massive temple. H uge 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 wa s standing in the mid dle of a forest fire. All around there was chanting and wailing.

The shaking of scores of hand-held containers of slivered bamboo sticks c ast an eerie effect

on whatever it was that was going on in this revered place.

There was a sp ecific 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 a nd stick the burning incense sticks in the

sand. No w that I had awakened the parti cular gods I h ad come to talk, I pr oceeded to the

next step. Hol ding the container of thin bamboo stic ks, 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 insi de 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 Ble ecker and I was born on April the thirteenth, n inete en 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 beg an 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

3

Number 71.

I walked with Hing-wai to another area of the temple grounds where the fortune te llers

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 co lorful birds that would jump fro m 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 t here for the longest time, not knowi ng 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 fo rtune 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 tol d 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 n ot 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 conti nued.

I was beginning to grow uncomfortable.

"It is conditione d on the waters from the west,” the man continued. “On getting support

from the west . The waters fr om the west. Then you will solve the mystery and break

through the whirlpool." He studied the last column of Chinese characters, and then looked

4