The Happy Valley Race Course Fire of 1918

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Prelude

The late winter of February 1918 in Hong Kong was unusually dry and heavy with anticipation. The war in Europe was in its final months, and the effect on trade in Asia, the control of which was now shifting to the Americans and Japanese, was a cause for concern. ¹

Among superstitious Chinese and Europeans, two small earthquakes on the 13th and 14th of February, and an outbreak of spinal meningitis leading to 968 deaths, were ominous signs for the future. Just a few weeks earlier a storm had damaged the dock and beach area around North Point. Since then no rain was recorded on the island, and as a result, the weather remained dry and unseasonably warm.²

The dry weather, however, suggested to other residents the coming of spring, and with it the opening of the horse racing season at Happy Valley, a traditional event in Hong Kong since 1864.

Racing at Happy Valley in the 1860’s

The “season” had different meanings to many people. To the government, horse racing meant the appearance of “matsheds”, the temporary bamboo and palm leaf structures licensed and built at the race course by enterprising groups of Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, Indian, and Swedish families.³

This required police and fire personnel to perform perfunctory inspections of each structure in anticipation of the 6000 spectators who attended each year, most of whom would inhabit the sheds during the races. The process usually involved informal tours of the stands by young
cadets or Chinese “watchmen” a few days before the races began, and approval was almost never denied. The scant oversight was also reflected in the usual police presence. Records indicate that 50 regular officers were assigned to the races that year, but none were assigned to duty in the matshegs, and 8 reserve officers were positioned outside the race course, presumably for crowd control.

Those who were fortunate enough to obtain the permits were considered “men of substance” in their respective communities. Some were landowners or chief clerks. Others ran taverns and boarding houses. A few were stock brokers, or owned printing presses with government contracts.

Each paid the government HK$706 for a single license and HK$180 to build each structure. The total outlay for each matsheg was more than one year’s annual wages in the colony, and multiple dwellings were often purchased by large families and licensing groups. Government records indicate that 19 matshegs were built during the 1918 racing season, so the licensing revenue to the government was substantial.

The construction of each structure was common for the time. Most matshegs were two or three stories high, measuring about fifty feet tall, and could hold 300 people. Many were erected by Chinese contractors in less than three weeks. The design was based on single story theatrical structures used in religious ceremonies. Depending on the builder, each had a specific blueprint that usually did not vary from year to year.

Derby Day at Happy Valley in 1918 with matshegs in the back

On the “first” or main level were a large counter and a viewing area, with the only door at the back leading to the street and the tram. Below was a basement level, where a food counter was setup for refreshments, such as tea cakes, pastries, alcoholic drinks and hot tea. The food was kept warm on several charcoal “chatties” kept by the vendor.
The third floor of the structure was also a viewing area and a popular location for most bettors, providing an expansive view of the races. The entire edifice was supported by bamboo or wooden planks, sometimes driven into the ground underneath the shed, but usually simply lashed to a tree, to another structure nearby if available, or to other matsheds that were build beside it.\(^9\)

The building of the stands, the licenses, and the wagering, like the races themselves, were part of a long held tradition. The rich purses at Happy Valley had drawn wealthy horse owners from all over Asia since the 1860’s. Each purse was paid for by the high volume of “pari-mutuel” and “cash sweeps” gambling that was permitted by the government in betting booths located on the main floor of each matshed.

Middle class men who could afford the initial investment made substantial profits each year by charging a commission on each wager. Many also rented out the bottom floor of each stand to food and drink vendors. This practice continued over a few decades, contributing to the entertainment of the public and the wealth of the families involved in the annual festivities at Happy Valley.\(^{10}\)

**Derby Day 1918**

On Tuesday February 26\(^{th}\), Carlos d’Assumpção took the Star Ferry from Kowloon to meet his good friend Aureliano Jorge for lunch at Wiseman’s restaurant in downtown Hong Kong. Aureliano was a well-to-do member of a prominent merchant family and the father of thirteen children, with another due in April. Carlos was a distinguished Macanese diplomat and the father of eleven children.\(^{11}\)

Carlos and Aureliano shared a love of horse racing and gambling with many in the Portuguese community. It was not unusual for entire families to attend the races together and place bets on their favorite thoroughbreds. The children, at least those too young to gamble, often mimicked their elders.

Carlos’ youngest son, Bernardino, who was twelve at the time and attended the races that day, described how boys would write down the names of horses on small pieces of paper, then scribbled their own names, as would-be “bookies”, on the back.

_We would run round selling these “tickets” to whoever wanted to place a small bet of ten or twenty cents each, depending on the importance of the races. Naturally, we always retained for ourselves “a ten percent commission”, earning one or two dollars in this way: which to us was a fortune then!_\(^{12}\)

On this particular day, Carlos was struck by Aureliano’s persistence about joining him for the “Derby”, but declined because of a previous engagement at the Club de Recreio later that afternoon. So Carlos accompanied his friend to the tram stop, bidding Aureliano good luck on his way to Happy Valley, then took the ferry back to Kowloon.\(^{13}\)
On that same morning, John Olson II, the son of a Swedish landowner and tavern manager, was at the race course to inspect “stands” No. 4, 5, and 6, the matsheds he owned with his business partners, J.J. Blake and Charles Warren, who was also Olson’s brother-in-law. Olson had hired the Chinese firm, Taz Hop, to construct the three structures in early February, but the crew of seventy workmen had only completed the work on the 24th. Four years earlier, Olson had complained in vain to the Clerk of the Course that adjoining matsheds, which stood three stories high, were too weak and had given way, compromising his own structures. In 1918 Olson instructed his workers to build only two story matsheds, but neglected to specify that supporting struts be driven into the ground. Instead the Taz Hop crew, as was tradition, lashed Olson’s stand to the adjoining structures that were being built at the same time.

Olson did, however, order his contractors to put “double uprights” to reinforce the betting and refreshments counter on the bottom floor, expecting, as he stated later, “more of a crush at the counter” that year. In No. 6, Olson also allowed the use of charcoal “chatties” for cooking by a Chinese vendor, M.Y. San, but instructed San to have three large barrels of water on the bottom floor, and eight full fire buckets on the upper floor.

After the morning races ended, Francisco de Paula Xavier, one of the owners of his family’s stand at No. 7, joined several relatives and friends for lunch. They included his stepbrothers Jose Maria Xavier and Ludovino “Bino” Xavier, and nephews Paulo and Vasco Xavier, who were eighteen and twenty years old, and niece Daria Xavier, who was sixteen. The younger relatives were the siblings of Pedro Xavier, the owner of the Hong Kong Printing Press. They were probably joined by at least seven other members of the Portuguese community from Hong Kong and Kowloon.

Francisco had instructed his contractor to build a three story matshed for the 1918 season. The ground floor was used for refreshments, which were sold by Chinese employees. The main floor was for pari-mutuel and cash sweeps betting. The top floor, built to only half the size of the lower floor, was reserved for ladies in attendance. Cooking was not allowed that day, but a charcoal chatty was used on the bottom floor to boil water for tea. Francisco also stated there was one entrance on the first floor, but none on the top or bottom floors, adding that the doorway was about six feet wide.
The Collapse and the Fire

As the betting period ended and the horses approached the line, the last thing anyone expected was the chaos and terror that was about to unfold. A reporter for the Hong Kong Daily Press gave this eyewitness account:

*At a few minutes to three o’clock, just after the third bell had rung for the first race ..., the whole row of Chinese booth and matsheds ...collapsed, and awful confusion ensued.... The stands fell gradually ... falling ... outwards ... and made the sound like a rasping of a saw. It looked as if the tops of all the stands had been connected by a wire ... and that ... had been pulled over gradually. The stands and booths took about 10 seconds to collapse.*

Aureliano Jorge arrived just as the afternoon race was about to begin. Bernardino estimated that he probably disembarked at the Happy Valley tram stop with the rest of the crowd and rushed to make his only bets that day. Aureliano then would have been among those who rushed to the front of a matshed when the race began, and was probably among the first to fall in the crush of humanity.

As a witness to the disaster, Bernardino described the stands collapsing one by one in a row toward the race track, like “long grass being blown down by a strong gust of wind.” In that moment, he and other boys realized the danger, and quickly climbed down one of the stands and raced across the track to safety.

At approximately the same moment, John Olson and J.J. Blake were standing near the refreshment counter in matshed No. 6 about to ring a bell signaling the end to betting. Olson and Blake later stated they heard a cracking sound in the direction of No. 7 and saw a portion of the wall fall into their stand as women and children burst through it. Olson was momentarily stunned by the collapsing wall and the crush of people. But he was able to free himself by pushing through the debris, as he directed others to safety.

Blake ducked under his own reinforced counter just as the walls of the matshed fell around him, saving himself from being crushed. As he was exiting the front of the stand, he heard the cry of a small Portuguese boy and pulled him out from under the matting. But was injured by a bamboo piling and had to be rescued by a passersby.

Constable J. Deskin, who was in Olson’s stand “assisting in the pari-mutuel”, later testified that the partition between Olson’s No. 6 and Xavier’s No. 7 stands swayed back and forth just as the panic started. Then Deskin witnessed a stampede of people going for the exit as the collapse was occurring. The constable was thrown forward in the crush, but escaped to the race course before the fire began.
The delay between the collapse and the fire was noted by the Daily Press reporter. He wrote that it looked as if those who had fallen from the stands would be safe, since some were breaking holes in the mat roofs to escape. But suddenly white smoke and flames appeared on the side of the stands, and began to spread.

*The flames were seen to rise from one of the sheds, and they quickly spread to the whole... While the flames were raging, the wind refreshed and the heat became terrific. ... There was a terrible crush, everyone struggled to save himself. ... The outbreak caused a terrible panic ... and hundreds were thrown to the ground who would have otherwise have had no difficulty ... escaping.... Once down it was a case... finished. The clouds of smoke ... must have suffocated many. ... Children were swept hither ..., and I fear that several of them must have been trampled to death....*

Eyewitnesses reported that Ludovino Xavier and his niece Daria were sitting with other family members in stand No. 7. When the matshed tumbled, Daria was pinned under some heavy bamboo poles. Then the chatties on the lower floor ignited and quickly engulfed the structure.

Daria’s brother Paulo and others tried to free her, but Paulo was badly burned on his arms in the attempt. Years later, Paulo tearfully related how Daria told him it was no use and to flee for his life. Paulo stayed until the last possible moment, and was almost caught by the flames until a police sergeant pulled him to safety. A young police cadet, identified only as “L.L. Lopes”, is credited with the rescue of several members of the Xavier family and others from the stand.
Once Bernardino and his friends were on the race course, he noticed smoke rising from the collapsed stands, followed immediately by fires from every side. In less than a minute he wrote that “thousands” who had been trapped under fallen bamboo and palm leaves had no time to escape.

He stated that those in the infield were …

“… stunned by the awesome sight …: a very, very huge fire and smoke rising up to more than two hundred … feet, accompanied by … loud screams from everywhere. Young as we were then it was most certainly a sight and experience … none of us could ever forget!”

The race course stands fully engulfed in flames

The screams were accompanied by muffled “popping”, like the dull explosion of fire crackers under sand. One of the older men explained to the boys that it was the sound of skulls bursting under the intense heat.

Ludovino Xavier and Aureliano Jorge suffered similar fates. “Bino” was rumored to have escaped the collapse and the fire by fleeing to the safety of the race course. But he suddenly realized that he left behind the cash box in the family’s betting booth. Rushing back into the flames, he too was trapped in the debris and joined the other victims. Aureliano’s body was identified by Carlos after a long search. Although burnt beyond recognition, Carlos was convinced it was his friend when Aureliano’s gold watch was found under him.

The Aftermath
An inquiry by the Hong Kong government officially listed the dead at 670, mostly Chinese women and children, with several hundred injured and a number of bodies that were unidentified. The exact number of fatalities and their ethnicity has never been fully tallied. Based on records provided by the Macanese Families web site and other sources, there were least nine Macanese killed in the fire and several more were probably injured.

A few weeks later the Portuguese community met at the Club Lusitano in Hong Kong to express sympathy for the families and relatives of the victims. Many conveyed their thanks for tokens of sympathy from military, government, and religious leaders, which included an offer of free board and tuition to the sons of Ludovino Xavier at the Seminary of Macao.

The memorial service on Mount Caroline in 1922

Requiem masses were conducted for Macanese victims in Hong Kong, Macau, and other Chinese cities. A correspondent at the ceremony in Canton wrote that almost every member of the Portuguese community attended, adding:

... the service was more than a conventional expression of sympathy. It was indeed an outward manifestation of genuine sorrow, not only for the relatives and friends ... but also for the hundreds of human beings who have been victims of an appalling catastrophe.

Recriminations within the Hong Kong government soon followed. Hong Kong’s Coroner noted that:

“... this calamity ... could most probably have been prevented by the exercise of foresight ... expected before the event...”

A member of the Legislative Council further pointed to the:
“… neglects and omissions of duty on the part of the Public Works Department (the licensing agency for the stands) and the Police Department (which supervised Hong Kong’s Fire Brigade).”

This led the Governor, Sir Francis Henry May, a horse racing enthusiast, to take official responsibility for the fire, voicing sentiments that many probably shared:

_I blame myself as regards the non-provision of fire precautions, because I was head of the Police here for nine years and I never anticipated a fire in these matsheds._

Then, to his credit, the Governor permanently banned the use of temporary stands from the race course. The construction of new grandstands was begun soon after.

The ruling and the renovations came too late for the victims of the Happy Valley fire. The memories of that day have faded along with a lonely memorial erected in 1922 behind the old course.

Today horse racing continues at Happy Valley, where the excitement of the racing season attracts thousands each year. But with the passage of time, perhaps the ghosts of the race course tragedy, representing the many ethnic groups that were present in the stands that day, may now rest a little easier knowing that their story has finally been told.

_To read other stories about the Macanese community, please go to FarEastCurrents.com for the most recent posts, or to the “Articles” section of the web site. You can also contact us directly at: rdinvest@yahoo.com._

1 _HK Legislative Council Report for the Year 1918, IX General Observations, pgs. 30-31_
2 _HK Report of the Director of Public Works for the Year 1918, Q19, #34._ The dry weather in Hong Kong during January and February were also mentioned in reference to the epidemic that year. _Report on the Investigations of the Outbreak of Epidemic Meningitis in Hong Kong_, Peter K. Olitsky, Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, New York, October 17, 1918, pg.68
3 _The China Mail, March 16, 1918, “Fifth Day of the Inquiry: Views as the Cause of the Collapse”,_ includes testimony from Swedish and Portuguese licensees. The existence of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian licensees is also mentioned in unpublished accounts (see note 10 below) and in the account written in the Hong Kong Daily Press (see note 21 below).
4 ibid
5 ibid
6 ibid
7 _HK Public Works Report-1918, Q14, #20, reported under “Sites for Booths at Race Course” that the revenue from the licensing of matsheds that year was HK$ 13,420.50, about GBP 1,087.21 (or about $3.3 million in 2012 USD). The cost of each license was extrapolated from the revenue reported. Construction costs were stated in the previously cited article in The China Mail, note 3. The HK Police and Fire Report – 1918, K22, Table 1, reported 20 structures, including the Hong Kong Golf Club House, were destroyed at the Race Course, valued at HK$30,000. See report of the public works director, op. cit. note #2: Q21, #42_
8 The China Mail, op. cit.
9 ibid
Ibid. John Olson testified that he and his partners had owned their matsheeds for 13 years. Francisco P. Xavier testified that his family had owned its matshehed for 9 years.

The following information is from an unpublished account written by Bernadino de Senna Fernandes d’Assumpcao (hereafter referenced as BSFA), graciously shared by his son, Henry d’Assumpcao, with the author. Biographical information on Aureliano Jorge and Carlos d’Assumpcao was obtained from Henry’s web site: Macanese Families.com (hereafter referenced as MacFam)

BSFA, pg. 1
BSFA, pg. 1
The China Mail, op. cit.
ibid
ibid
ibid
ibid, and MacFam citations for Lisbello J. Xavier, who was Pedro, Vasco, Paulo, and Daria’s father.
The China Mail. op. cit
ibid
The Hong Kong Daily Press, Wednesday, February 27, 1918
BSFA, pg. 2
ibid, pg. 2
The China Mail, op. cit.
ibid
ibid
The Hong Kong Daily Press, op. cit.
BSFA, pg. 4
ibid
BSFA, pg. 4. Paulo’s daughter, Jeannette Smith, also confirms her father’s anguished attempts to save his sister.
The Hong Kong Daily Press, op. cit. P.C. (R) Lopes was also injured during the rescue.
BSFA, pgs. 2-3
BSFA, pg. 4
BSFA, pg. 3
HK Report of the Secretary of Chinese Affairs-1918, Appendix C, C13, #81, noted the number of dead at 670. In 1922 the Legislative Council set aside a plot measuring 7,319 sq. ft. on the slopes of Mount Caroline as a burial ground for the unidentified victims. Hong Kong Government Gazette, June 23, 1922.

The dead included: Maria Ernestina Vieira Ribeiro, José Libânio Manuel Spencer do Rosário, Gustavo Maria do Rosário, Carlota Isabel Vieira Ribeiro, Maria Amélia Vieira Ribeiro, Ludovino Leopoldo Xavier, Daria Maria Xavier, Aureliano Guterres Jorge, and Luís Gonzaga Baptista. The injured included: Mr and Mrs J. Remedios. There also are unconfirmed reports that members of the d’Aquino family were among the dead. (Correspondence to the author from Frederic J. Silva, April 8, 2012.)
The China Mail, March 6, 1918, “The Portuguese Community and the Catastrophe”
The China Mail, March 12, 1918, “Pontifical Requiem Mass at Shameen”
HKLCM- Legislative Council minutes, May 23, 1918, The Race Course Disaster, pgs. 16-17
The Hong Kong Business Symposium, South China Morning Post, 1957, page 48
Ibid, op. cit. HKLCM, May 23, 1918
Ibid. In the same HHLCM session, Governor May later stated: “There will never be any more matsheeds there (at Happy Valley.) I think I may state that.”

One of the earliest descriptions of the Happy Valley race course appears in the following: (see text below)

Recollections of Baron Gros’s embassy to China and Japan in 1857-58

Author: Moges, Alfred, Marquis de.
Imprint: London: Richard Griffin, 1860
Language: English
we came down the hill, making a circuit to see the Happy Valley, where the English have staked off a drive and race-course through a superb meadow. The turf is rolled down regularly, as in the English parks. The name of Happy Valley, given to this place, comes from the cemeteries which surround it. There are three of them. One belongs to the Church of England; another is Roman Catholic; and a third Parsee, or Zoroastrian. In the latter the bodies are burned. On the opposite side, scattered over the slope of the hill, in the midst of fir-trees and rocks, there are a number of Chinese tombs, marked by an upright block of granite, mentioning the name of the deceased, and the year and day of his death. All round is a circular bench, put up by the relations of the departed, on which the spirit may rest when so disposed. All along the road we found strewed bits of silvered paper. These are intended to keep the