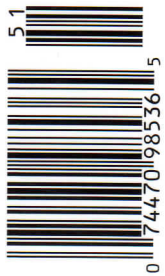


# Cabinet

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## EVEN THE TREES WOULD LEAVE

H. LAN THAO LAM & LANA LIN

**AUGUST 23, 2008**

She watches a special story, broadcast as part of the television coverage for the Olympics, detailing the history of golf. A Chinese professor asserts that golf can be traced back to as early as tenth-century China, though it is popularly thought to originate from Scotland. She examines a Ming dynasty treasure hanging in Beijing's Palace Museum. The painting's five elegantly dressed court women, playing what appears to be a game of golf, disproves the acronym Gentleman Only Ladies Forbidden. *Chui* (to hit, strike, or whack) *Wan* (ball) was apparently the Imperial Palace maids' favorite past time. The painting looks easily as if it could have been altered. This would not be too far-fetched for her to imagine, given China's ceaseless drive to claim the origins of practically every facet of civilization.

**JUNE 20, 2005**

Her family convenes for a reunion on a Malaysian island hosted by Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie. Any site can become a tourist site, she thinks, any day a commemoration.

**JANUARY 17, 2004**

Finals of the amateur Hole-in-One competition take place at Golf & Fun Driving Range, Whitehead, Hong Kong. A hole-in-one earns HK\$1 million.<sup>1</sup> She might also win a car. The publicity pamphlet asks: "Overwhelmed by routine? Longed for fresh air, sunshine, and getting some exercise? With magnificent ocean view, Golf & Fun is your place of desire." Golf is not just an elegant sport to her. She practices her swing because it oils business relations.

**DECEMBER 26, 2003**

She steps off the bus, and notices the sign: Pillar Point Refugee Camp. She is surprised that they have not changed the name of the bus stop, since the camp has been closed for several years. She ventures to the New Territories for "Sleepout Hong Kong" at River Trade Golf Driving Range and BBQ Centre, Tuen Mun. The Sleepout invites everyone to help needy children in China who have not had a chance to learn how to write their own names. "Build your own cardboard shelter. Enjoy the company of your friends and co-workers for one night. For HK\$290, you will be provided with bread and water, so that you can experience the hardships that children in our Motherland face."

**OCTOBER 8, 2003**

Entering the recreation site, she's greeted by a towering golf ball at least two feet taller than she is. Cars pull in for the preliminary rounds of the HK\$1 million Hole-in-One shootout at Golf & Fun Driving Range, Whitehead. Had the Hole-in-One sponsors noticed the footprint left from a structure that was once called the biggest prison in the world?

**65** An entrepreneur nabbed these vast unoccupied

stretches of land with a lucrative business plan. At last, Hong Kong reclaims its own land. Not long ago, no one could bring sports equipment into these areas for fear that it would be turned into weapons; now even without a club membership, for HK\$40 she can drive unlimited balls for half an hour. Nets as high as the former barbed wire fences now restrain high-flying golf balls. She stares at the row of golfers' silhouettes that adorn the bathroom, monotone and unresisting. This is how they wanted the refugees—as mute and abiding as these painted figures. This is not the bathroom that served thousands of Vietnamese. It is air-conditioned, clean, too small.

**JULY 28, 2001**

She flips through a special issue of *Refugees* magazine celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights. The black and white photo of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention is typical of such legal ceremonies: nineteen men and three women gather around a central figure putting weight into his official stamp. This is the document that protected her sister when Vietnamese were considered more desirable. Her brother was not as lucky.

**JUNE 20, 2001**

The UN General Assembly adopts a resolution to celebrate World Refugee Day on June 20.

**MAY 31, 2000**

Hong Kong's last Vietnamese refugee camp—Pillar Point Vietnamese Refugees Centre, Tuen Mun—closes at midnight. She hears that there are proposals to turn it into a crematorium, a theme park, or a botanical garden. The last of the 230,000 Vietnamese that have passed through Hong Kong are free to "stand on their own feet."

**MARCH 3, 2000**

She encounters the term "land reclamation" in the Hong Kong Museum of History in an exhibit called "Hong Kong Story." She reads about how Hong Kong re-claims land for commercial use, and asks aloud, "reclaims it from what?" In unison, an elderly, distinguished Asian couple responds from across the hall: "from the sea."

**FEBRUARY 22, 2000**

The Widened Local Resettlement Scheme is initiated, allowing 1400 VRs and VMs<sup>2</sup> who have no prospects for acceptance elsewhere to apply for resettlement in Hong Kong. Removal allowance ranges from HK\$3,950 to \$11,410.

**JANUARY 9, 1998**

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government abolishes the "Port of First Asylum" policy. Vietnamese illegal arrivals after this date are treated as illegal immigrants, as opposed to refugees.



**JULY 1, 1997**

The Government of the United Kingdom transfers sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. This is also the deadline China announces for the complete removal of VMs from Hong Kong.

**JANUARY 3, 1997**

In Calgary, Canada, she reads the headline: "Saga of Vietnamese Boat People Nears End." Whitehead Detention Centre, where she spent almost twelve years of her life, closes. At the height of the refugee influx, it contained 29,000 asylum-seekers.

**MAY 10, 1996**

Another massive riot breaks out at Whitehead in protest against forced repatriation. Over 500 tear gas canisters are emptied. Fortunately, some families had the idea of making gas masks out of knitted hoods with plastic drink bottles cut out as visors.

**FEBRUARY 3, 1994**

President Clinton lifts the nineteen-year US trade embargo on Vietnam.

**NOVEMBER 1, 1991**

As a result of the Orderly Repatriation Programme, her plastic shopping bag is packed with clothes collected from donations. Some people dress in their best clothes. Two days ago they wore the same outfits for group photos. This time they didn't smuggle the film out to be developed. It will be done more cheaply in Vietnam. She waits with fifty-nine others to be repatriated. At the airport, Hong Kong Correctional Services Officers form a barricade lest anyone try to escape. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will give her US\$50 when she registers in Vietnam.

**JUNE 16, 1988**

All VMs arriving in Hong Kong undergo mandatory screening to determine whether they are genuine refugees or economic migrants. "Non-refugees" are repatriated to Vietnam. She has managed to learn a little bit of English, but they keep introducing new words. She cannot hear their words. Encamped on an unused military airstrip, she hears only the roar of jets flying overhead. Will she ever board one of them? Heading west or east?

**APRIL 16, 1985**

A volunteer lectures her on the competition for land in Hong Kong. To these tiny 1100 square kilometers of land, crowded with 6.8 million people, piled in high-rises standing on an artificial shoreline fashioned out of rubbish and imported soil, thousands of Vietnamese have fled. Hong Kong receives them under the "Port of First Asylum" policy.

**JULY 2, 1982**

"Closed camps" are set up to deter more Vietnamese from flooding Hong Kong like a wave. She must give up her job at the hotel and clean the camp kitchen instead.

**SEPTEMBER 23, 1981**

Grim faces greet the news that Hong Kong will no longer grant automatic asylum. It is Wednesday and they dine on chicken wings as usual. This morning her uncle was given his "first chicken wing". In camp lingo this means he will not fly to the West on a real jet wing; with chicken wings one cannot fly. But he will appeal to the Refugee Status Review Board. He has two more tries before he is sent back.

**MAY 15, 1980**

She squats in line with the others, a first of many lines: waiting to identify herself, waiting for the bathroom, waiting for cans of beans, instant noodles, and Tang. A well-known Vietnamese song is amplified and distorted through loudspeakers: "Tomorrow you leave; the sea remembers your name; calls it to return..." The song was banned both in North and South Vietnam, but here it is played freely each time fellow campmates leave for their new countries. When she hears it after eighteen days at sea—her seventh attempt to flee—she could not hold back her tears. The sea may remember her name, but on this land, she is just one of thousands of boat people. In the sea, she had placed all her hopes for an unknown future. From inside the camp, the sea is what separates her from the free world.

**APRIL 30, 1976**

For the first anniversary of the fall of Saigon, her father gives the children a lesson on the Law of the Sea. Preparing to escape Vietnam, they should know their rights. She likes the sound of "Eleanor of Aquitaine"—the woman who brought admiralty law to England; its syllables come out of her mouth like a poem. She wonders whether Eleanor became interested in the law of the seas because her name refers to water. Her sisters copy maps and flags of different countries from the back of a Larousse French dictionary for their father to navigate their journey.

**MAY 4, 1975**

The Communist takeover of the South precipitates a massive exodus from Vietnam. Those departing tear away from their ancestral roots. People say even the trees would leave if they could. The Danish container ship *Clara Maersk* containing 3,743 Vietnamese refugees enters Hong Kong's waters.

**1** US \$1 = HK \$7.8

**2** According to the Hong Kong government's official acronym, VR is a Vietnamese refugee and VM is a Vietnamese migrant.



