

Slice of life by Hamish McKenzie

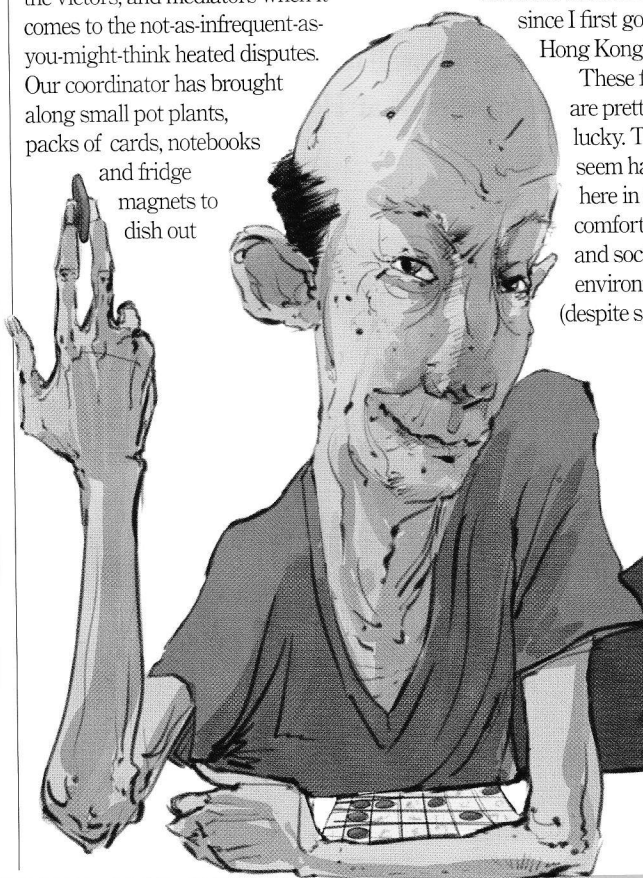
In with the old

Bingo brings high drama to a retirement home

The tension is high in the dining room of the China Coast Community retirement home. A cloth bag full of small plastic tiles rattles as a man shakes it up and down. The grey-haired woman sitting opposite me taps a pink button steadily on the Formica tabletop, eyes staring intently down at two laminated cards. A number gets called. "Seven two, 72!". Around the room there's a silent symphony of curses and exultation. Caught up in the drama, I allow myself a meek but triumphant "yes!" as my partner marks off her number.

It's the weekly bingo game, and I'm here with a group of five other volunteers from the group Hands On Hong Kong to act as ears for the hearing-impaired, eyes for the folks whose vision isn't as sharp as it was 20 years ago, prize-givers for the victors, and mediators when it comes to the not-as-infrequent-as-you-might-think heated disputes. Our coordinator has brought along small pot plants, packs of cards, notebooks and fridge magnets to dish out

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to the lucky winners (rule number one: every player wins a prize).

Hands On Hong Kong sends a small group here every second Sunday, ostensibly to run the bingo activities, but also to socialise with the residents, who are more than willing to talk your ear off about their pasts, the other residents, and what Hong Kong used to be like. It's a beautiful thing.

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Later, as I'm comfortably ensconced on a couch in the TV room and engaged in an amiable chat with a dignified woman 50 years my senior who tells me about the historical basis for James Clavell's *Noble House*, I think, "Why

haven't I been doing this since I first got to Hong Kong?"

These folks are pretty lucky. They seem happy here in this comfortable and social environment (despite some

fairly stringent rules, such as a limit on the number of pot plants allowed in their rooms), and playing weekly bingo games with handsome visitors such as me certainly isn't a bad way to get by.

The sad truth, however, is that Hong Kong's elderly don't always get the best deal. Every night on my walk home from the MTR station, for instance, I pass a man in his seventies settling down to sleep on a stoop outside a Towngas store. If I'm up early enough in the mornings, I often pass one or two hunched-over old folks sifting through rubbish bins on the footpaths of Nathan Road. A few weeks ago, a 100-year-old man was found dead in a Yau Ma Tei alley, where he slept every night despite renting a room nearby.

Hong Kong supposedly has a basic social security net to stop things like that happening. But plenty of people seem to slip through the holes in the net. That's why it's so encouraging to visit the China Coast Community. Here's a place where our senior citizens are looked after, and where volunteers can offer their time to help make the world a slightly better place.

Back in the dining room, another number is called. There's some disappointment for the people whose numbers aren't lucky today, but for the others the quiet celebrations continue. Every number on the card that gets covered with a pink button represents another little piece of happiness.

Hands on Hong Kong is an NGO that encourages community involvement and coordinates volunteering activities. See www.handsonhongkong.org for more details.

TIMOTHY MCEVENEUE

is the beer whisperer' 'My ears are buckling under the weight of my hair'