

# THE BORROWED

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*THE BORROWED* is the story of Kwan Chun-Dok, a Hong Kong police officer who rises from constable to senior superintendent over the span of forty-six years (1967-2013), becoming a legend in the force as he does so. The book is divided into six chapters, each a stand-alone novella dealing with an important case in Kwan's career and taking place at a pivotal time in Hong Kong history: the riots of 1967, the conflict between the HK Police and the ICAC (Independent Commission Against Corruption) in 1977, the Handover in 1997, the SARS epidemic in 2003 and lastly 2013, when Hong Kong is turning into a police state, a chillingly accurate portrait seemingly foreshadowing the Occupy Central movement.

What makes *THE BORROWED* unique is not just the structure, but the way the story is told in reverse-chronological order. The novel begins in 2013, with Kwan solving his final case on his deathbed, and goes back in time, finally reaching 1967, when he defused a bomb plot and saved the life of a British inspector. The six chapters are linked in ways big and small. The novel's real twist, however, comes at the end of the novel, in the very last line. Only then do the connections reveal themselves, that history is destined to repeat itself and how we have come full circle.

*THE BORROWED* is the portrait of a brilliant, Holmes-esque detective, as well as a chronicle of Hong Kong over the past fifty years. Although each chapter is a self-sustained, carefully constructed mystery, the book is greater than the sum of its parts and it is on this level that it truly shines; a sweeping, ambitious crime drama that offers a startling insight into one of Asia's greatest cities.

### Chan Ho-Kei 陳浩基

Chan Ho-Kei was born and raised in Hong Kong. He has worked as software engineer, scriptwriter, game designer and editor of comic magazines. His writing career started in 2008 at the age of thirty-three, with the short story 'The Case of Jack and the Beanstalk,' which was



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- First epic crime novel by a Hong

shortlisted for the Mystery Writers of Taiwan Award. He went on to win the award again the following year with ‘The Locked Room of Bluebeard.’

In 2011, Chan’s first novel, *THE MAN WHO SOLD THE WORLD*, won the biggest mystery prize in the Chinese-speaking world, the Soji Shimada Mystery Award, and has subsequently been published in Taiwan (Crown), China (New Star), Japan (Bungeishunsha), Thailand (Nanmee) and Italy (Metropoli d’Asia).

Kong writer

•Film rights sold to Wong Kar-wai  
(*The Grandmaster*)

# THE BORROWED

By Chan Ho-Kei. Translated by Gigi Chang.

## Extract from CHAPTER FOUR: THE SCALES OF THEMIS

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Kwan Chun-Dok steps out of the lift, into a dark corridor. A light bulb dyed grey by dust hangs from the ceiling. It flickers over a patchy stone tile floor and once-white walls marked by stains and graffiti. There is no window on this side of the corridor. Footsteps and radio conversations reverberate between the walls like tinnitus. Standing in the twists and turns of this corridor are successions of lifeless doorways, shut behind chilling metal gates. These gates seem to be commenting on how unsafe the building is: whoever chooses not to install anti-theft measures would be inviting thieves and robbers to try their luck. And this is the truth.

The residents of this floor were evacuated in an orderly fashion a few minutes ago, following police instructions to leave by the stairs. Kwan knows that the most dangerous moment has already passed. The evacuation was an empty gesture, the operation commander simply following protocol. Of course, if some yet-to-be-detected items were to explode now and cause casualties, the police would face a further backlash.

If I was him, I'd probably have given the same order, Kwan thinks.

Though Kwan is the most senior officer on site, he is not in charge of the operation. He is a passerby who just happened to be close.

He could have stayed in the operation centre or gone back to Headquarters with Tso. But he decided to walk around the site, following his colleagues into the building. This, he thinks, is probably the instinctual reaction of someone who has been on the frontline for more than 20 years.

Kwan knows his role full well. Because he is more senior than the operation commander, if he suggests anything, it will have to be followed. But that would be interfering with district operations and investigation, meddling with their independence. He is not going to do anything. He will just be a bystander.

The only thing he wants to do is to go inside, into that suffocating space, to feel what his former subordinate had to face.

He saw him in the ground floor lobby minutes ago. It has been a long time since their last encounter—he was a detective sent by another department to support an arrest Kwan had planned. His daring and judgement in those operations left a deep impression on Kwan.

This brave man was lying dazed on a stretcher right at that moment, being treated by a paramedic.

When Kwan walked past and caught his eye, he looked surprised. He could never have imagined that

his one-time superior—the crime-solving legend Kwan Chun-Dok—would appear at this moment. Kwan wanted to tell him he had done well, but looking at what actually happened, any praise might sound like a dig. Kwan left his thoughts unspoken. Instead, he reached out to pat his uninjured arm, gave a slight nod and headed to the lift without a word.

Standing in the corridor, Kwan can almost feel that oppressive sensation at the edge of life and death. He turns a corner and walks past a wooden door by a stairwell. The wall is riddled with bullet holes. Two officers are collecting evidence, carefully examining and recording each bullet's path, unaware that Superintendent Kwan Chun-Dok has just walked past them.

Kwan keeps walking on to the brightly lit crime scene.

There is no flickering light to cause disorientation here, but the atmosphere is more unsettling. The smell of blood mixed with gunpowder fills the air. Blood splatters and bullet marks cover the floor, the wall, the furniture.

The most disturbing sight is on the floor. A skull penetrated by bullets, a head blasted apart. The floor is covered with a dirty pink mixture of grey-white brain matter and blood. Blood is still flowing, forming bright red pools.

But there is more than one dead body. Investigators crowd around the victims in the cramped unit, resignedly recording and checking every detail.

No one is bold enough to look straight at their faces. They look horrifying, yes, but the detectives do not avert their eyes out of fear.

But guilt.

These faces that have been blasted beyond recognition, these bodies that have been pierced by bullets, they are accusing the Royal Hong Kong Police of incompetence.

The detectives know, among the deceased, only one deserved to die.

## 1

‘Ko, this is Kwan Chun-Dok, the new head of CIB B Division.’

Chief Inspector Ko Long-Shan didn't expect Superintendent Tso Kwan to visit unannounced, least of all with the renowned Kwan Chun-Dok. A commander never wants officers more senior than himself at the operation centre, just as a general doesn't want the king or courtiers at the frontline. Superiors are synonymous with trouble. When Ko shakes hands with Kwan, he tries hard to hide his feelings, but he thinks this legendary detective has already seen through him and is only smiling out of politeness.

‘Superintendent Kwan,’ greets Ko. Over the last few years, Kwan Chun-Dok has run the Hong Kong Island Regional Crime Unit, solving several major cases in succession. Officers from other regions are jealous of his track record. When Ko was promoted to head the same department in Kowloon West, many made the comparison. Though Ko is doing a reasonable job, uncovering quite a few drug dens and cracking some major fraud cases, when compared to a ‘freak’ like Kwan Chun-Dok, he can only ever come second. Ko is only three years younger, yet Kwan's career seems a faraway goal that can never be

reached.

He's lost even before he's begun—this is the thought running through Ko's mind. Kwan Chun-Dok is not just 'capable', he is also one of the first few Chinese elites from the early days. He joined the force in the 1960s. At the time, senior officers were exclusively British. Local Chinese were only there to do support work, but Kwan was one of a select few, handpicked and sent to the UK for two years to train. He returned to Hong Kong in 1972, just as the force was restructuring. He was promoted to Inspector and due to his outstanding performance he kept on moving up. Back then, 'training in the UK' was equivalent to a 'promotion notice'—much like being given a yellow imperial robe by the Emperor—with a special place waiting for you upon your return. Ko was given no such opportunity. He heard that Kwan resolved an incident during the 1967 riots and caught the eye of a British inspector. After that, it had all been plain sailing. Ko kicked himself for joining the force a few years too late, missing the chance to make an impression in that tumultuous period.

'Superintendent Kwan heard about your operation and wanted to come over to say hello. I'm sure you'll work well together,' Tso says to Ko. Senior Superintendent Tso Kwan is the deputy commander of the Criminal Intelligence Bureau. He is stern, serious and efficient; everyone expects him to run CIB next.

'I understand the Shek brothers hold a great deal of intelligence on criminal syndicates. For the CIB, they must be goldmines, eh?' Ko pretends to be jovial.

Kwan nods, 'Yes. If we get a confession, we can put a stop to at least four flows of illegal firearms into the city.'

Shek Boon-Tim and Shek Boon-Sing are the top two on the most wanted list. They have committed a series of serious crimes in the past four years since the police first became aware of them in 1985: the serial robbery of four jewellery shops on Nathan Road in 1985, the cash-in-transit heist in 1986 and the kidnap of tycoon Li Yu-Long in 1988 included. To this day, the brothers are still on the run. The police believe they have connections with several criminal syndicates in Hong Kong and mainland China, from which they acquire heavy-duty firearms, hire their crew of cut-throat thugs, fence their loot and arrange passage abroad to hide out. There have been a number of manhunts, but each failed at the last hurdle and the police were only able to catch their accomplices. The two masterminds have always managed to escape.

But, a few days ago, the police caught their first trace of the fugitives in some time.

Crime rates had been rising in the Mong Kok area and the Mong Kok Police District Crime Unit had mounted a number of operations in recent months to flush out the criminals.

When an officer receives intelligence on where suspicious persons are hiding out, the police set up surveillance to ascertain the location and number of suspects. Only after assessing the risk, do they take action and make arrests. The criminals might be drug dealers, robbers, murder suspects or triad ringleaders. District officers not only have to investigate, they also have to confront the criminals on the firing line. District police stations often have limited resources, meaning that they can't mobilise backup, so officers just have to tough it out, playing it by ear as they risk their lives.

It was during one of these routine operations last Saturday, 29 April 1989, that the Mong Kok District Crime Unit Team Three encountered something unusual. Team Three was about to arrest a suspect from a unit in Ka Fai Mansions on Reclamation Street. They had received intelligence that a suspected car thief was hiding out in Unit 1507. An officer was sent to verify the information and saw the suspect with an unidentified man. They planned to arrest the car thief the following night. In the early evening of the 30th, just as Team Three was about to launch their raid, they received an order to halt. The District Commander announced that the case had been taken over by the Kowloon West Regional Crime Unit and Team Three was designated as backup.

All because of an unidentified man.

‘Mong Kok Crime Unit was going to arrest the car thief known as ‘Jaguar’,’ Ko points at a photo on the pin board. ‘But instead they came across this man and sent his photo to CIB to see if he’s involved in any other cases...’

‘Mad Dog Biu – Sum Biu – Shek Boon-sing’s right hand man,’ Kwan finishes the sentence. ‘I’ve read the report.’

Ko nods with slight embarrassment, ‘The bank heist at the end of last year, other than the Shek brothers, we’re pretty certain that this Mad Dog Biu was one of the perpetrators. He disappeared with the Shek brothers. Now that he has reappeared, it’s very likely that they’re planning another ‘major deal.’ 1507 Ka Fai Mansions was only rented out last month, we think this is the hideout. If we keep watch, it’s likely that we’ll catch our two most wanted.’

‘Did you get anything from the past five days?’

‘Yes,’ Ko smiles triumphantly. ‘The younger brother Shek Boon-Sing has been sighted.’

Kwan Chun-Dok lifts one eyebrow.

Ko chose not to report the appearance of Shek Boon-Sing to Headquarters, partly to prevent the intelligence from being leaked and partly to protect his professional interests. If he announced the sighting of a most wanted man, the Organised Crime and Triad Bureau would certainly take over. If OCTB arrested Shek, not only would he lose the credit, it’d also be a blow to his frontline staff. In the hierarchy of headquarters–region–district, local police don’t want ‘outsiders’ to interfere. And since this is an ongoing operation, Ko has enough reasons to withhold information about Shek Boon-Sing’s appearance to prevent mishap. By telling two senior CIB officers from Headquarters now, it is clear that Ko is confident.

‘Two days ago, Jaguar picked up a bald man in a car and brought him here,’ Ko points at an underexposed photograph: two men walking towards one of the entrances of Ka Fai Mansions. ‘We’ve verified that, though he looks rather different now. Meet Shek Boon-Sing.’

‘The scar on the back of his left hand. From the shootout four years ago.’

Ko’s heart sinks. It took him and his team hours to discover that and Kwan spotted it right away.

‘From experience, Shek Boon-Tim would not desert his brother and leave him to act on his own. And there are only three in the hideout, not enough for a major deal.’ Ko focuses back on the case, ‘We have intercepted messages and believe that Shek Boon-Tim will appear tomorrow. He has probably hired two

or three others to help. When Shek Boon-Tim arrives, we will take action.’

‘This information comes from...?’

Ko smiles to himself. He has scored this time. ‘We know the numbers to some of Jaguar’s pagers.’

‘Oh?’

‘We arrested a junkie the other day. He said he had registered several pagers for Jaguar. Since Jaguar is with the Shek brothers, we believe these pagers are for their use.’ Ko grins.

In Hong Kong, identification documents are required to sign up for a pager. Smart criminals wouldn’t let themselves be traceable, so they often get delinquents and drug addicts to get pagers on their behalf as a way to communicate with their accomplices.

‘And yesterday, we got this message.’ Ko goes over to a screen and signals to his staff stationed at the computer to pull up the message.

‘042 – 624 – 7 – 0505.’

Green numbers glow on black screen.

‘Telecom was unwilling to cooperate, but they couldn’t stop us because we have a court order. The numbers mean...’

‘Shek Boon-Tim will be here on 5 May.’ Kwan Chun-dok finishes the sentence.

‘Um, yeah... CIB deciphered the code, of course you’d know what they mean.’ Ko tries to smooth over his faux pas.

Pagers first appeared in Hong Kong in the 1970s, but only started to gain popularity in the 1980s. The earliest models could only beep and flash, so the user had to ring a call centre to receive his message. Today, pagers have evolved to include an LCD display. Though pagers cannot yet display text—this technology will only be available in the next few years—the numeric display already greatly reduces the need to speak to a call centre operator. It is a great leap forward in terms of improving efficiency and lowering operational costs. The telecom company provides subscribers with a booklet of pager codes that transcribe commonly used words and simple messages into numbers. For example, the code for last name ‘Chan’ is 004. ‘On my way’ is 610. ‘Traffic jam’ is 611. ‘Time’ is 8. So the message ‘004 – 610 – 611 – 8 – 1715’ is someone named Chan telling the pager user that he or she will arrive at 5.15 pm because of traffic problems. In the codes, there are also place names and landmarks, such as ‘Central’, ‘Jordan’, ‘Prince Edward’, ‘China Hong Kong City’, ‘Ocean Centre’, ‘New Town Plaza’ and others. There are also words like ‘restaurant’, ‘bar’, ‘hotel’ and ‘park’, which help to codify most messages.

Usually, callers leave their last name and number, so when a message like ‘004 – 3256188’ appears, the user knows that they should call a friend named Chan on 3256188. With the numeric display, there is no need to ring the call centre. The code booklet also saves users from contacting callers in most circumstances. Of course, with a complicated message, the call centre will send out the code of ‘ring call centre’ and the user will have to call back the old-school way.

In previous manhunts for the Shek brothers, the police had found pagers left behind by accomplices. But the nonsensical messages baffled investigators. CIB later managed to deduce a set of codes based on the limited records the police held, believing that the Shek brothers assigned new meanings to existing

pager codes to communicate. For example, the code for ‘play mahjong’—623—now means ‘rendezvous.’ 625—meaning ‘dinner,’ now stands for ‘operation start.’ 616—‘meeting cancelled’—is now ‘run.’ By comparing found messages with known facts from cases related to the Shek brothers, CIB is certain that the last name ‘Lam’—042—is used exclusively as a code name for the ringleader and elder brother Shek Boon-Tim.

In other words, Shek Boon-Tim only has to tell the call center operator, ‘My name is Lam, please tell the user that we’re playing mahjong on 5 May.’ The pager will display ‘042 – 624 – 7 – 0505’, which means ‘Dai lo says rendezvous on 5 May.’

The police have the upper hand here. To prevent Shek Boon-Tim from altering the codes, only those at Inspector level or above and CIB members have access to the cipher. But Ko Long-Shan also knows full well that Shek Boon-Tim is not to be trifled with: he would have other means to safeguard his communications. In the last few days, Ko intercepted only a few messages. Those he missed include the one about Jaguar bringing Shek Boon-Sing back to the hideout. He believes each of them have several pagers which they use randomly, so even if some of the pagers are compromised, the police cannot get the full picture.

Kwan Chun-Dok and Tso Kwan fully understand the significance of ‘042 – 624 – 7 – 0505’. The police have previously only found this kind of message as they cleaned up a crime scene. Intercepting such a message before anything has happened is unprecedented. They can be fully prepared and wait for the Shek brothers to walk into the trap.

‘Got enough manpower?’ Tso asks. The Shek brothers are brutal. They always use heavy-duty firearms and have no qualms about bloodshed.

‘A bit tight right now, but we’ve notified the Special Duties Unit. Even if Shek Boon-Tim makes an early appearance, they can be on site within half an hour.’

‘Shek Boon-Sing won’t be sitting around. If anything happens, you’ve only got yourselves,’ says Kwan as he surveys the operation centre.

The so-called ‘operation centre’ is a unit on the first floor of a tong lau tenement block. In this room no bigger than four hundred square feet, there are only three others alongside the operation commander Chief Inspector Ko Long-Shan: one monitoring pager messages, one communicating with the teams on site, one acting as support and runner. The window looks out to the south entrance of Ka Fai Mansions and the structure of this building makes deployment difficult.

Ka Fai Mansions was built in the 1950s. Eighteen storeys tall with thirty units on each floor, it was once a famous residential block in the Mong Kok and Yau Ma Tei area occupied by middle class families. From the late 1970s, as urban development shifted focus and the building fell into disrepair, Ka Fai Mansions lost its sheen and gradually became a tenement block frequented by dubious characters, where families live alongside shops and offices. Right now, a third of the units are non-residential: tailors, traditional Chinese medical clinics, hair salons, import-export companies, old people’s homes, even Buddhist altars. Some of the residents are even more shady; massage parlours, social clubs, private hotels and self-employed prostitutes.

A nightmare for the police.

Ka Fai Mansions is a sizeable compound. On the ground floor alone, there are already three entryways connected to the main road, in the north and south wings and in the centre. It also has six lifts and three stairways. A maze of corridors crisscross each floor with few windows, a perfect place to lie low and out of sight. Having a fair share of commercial tenants means that the building's security is very lax; the caretakers have little interest in visitors due to the sheer volume of strangers that come in and out. Those hiding from the law can easily shake off pursuers in this environment. Even if they can't escape from one of the three exits, they can jump from windows on the first floor. The southernmost part of Ka Fai Mansions is about 100 metres from its northern end; the police would struggle to lead a search and arrest operation without mobilising a large taskforce.

'We've got twelve colleagues out there. As long as it's not a full frontal assault, we should be able to cover it.' Ko Long-Shan points out of the window with his thumb. 'If it was any other building, we'd have enough manpower to flatten our target. But it happens to be Ka Fai Mansions.'

'Are they in three teams guarding the three entrances?' Tso asks.

'Yeah, there is also a team at the top of Ursa Centre across the road. They can see into the corridor outside the target unit to monitor movement.' Ko points at a map on the pin board. He thinks Shek Boon-Tim chose this unit as their hideout exactly for this reason: the buildings nearby are not tall, so no one can see inside. The police can only maintain surveillance from across the road at Ursa Centre from where only part of the corridor is visible. Ko has thought of sending officers to keep watch close to the target unit, but he is facing the Shek brothers, it would be too risky a move. It might give away the game too soon, or worse still, lead his team into mortal danger.

'Did the Regional Crime Unit send two teams?' asks Kwan Chun-Dok. Twelve officers out there, four in the operation centre. Even without requesting snoops from CIB or support from Regional Operations Wing, there are already two teams' worth of officers here.

'No, only West Kowloon Team One. Other teams have their own cases. Oh, and Mong Kok Team Three.'

'The one that was going to arrest Jaguar?'

'Yes.'

'There are no co-operation issues, right?' Kwan asks.

'Of course not.' Kwan's directness has caught Ko off guard.

'Mong Kok Team Three is led by TT, isn't it?' Kwan smiles.

Ko realises that he isn't being picked on and relaxes a little, 'Superintendent Kwan knows Tang Ting?'

'He was in Wan Chai Crime Unit five years ago. I've seen him in quite a few operations,' Kwan laughs. 'Quick-thinking, agile, but too strong-headed. He has rubbed too many colleagues up the wrong way.'

Inspector Tang Ting is thirty-three years old. He is the Team Leader of Mong Kok District Crime Unit Team Three and goes by the nickname TT. The moniker is more than his initials. It came from a

quip when he was a detective constable in Wan Chai. His team leader, who was familiar with firearms, joked, 'Ah Ting, you're just like your name—the TT pistol.' The Tokarev TT-33 Pistol is a Soviet-made semi-automatic gun. Powerful, but it misfires easily. Its single action trigger lacks the usual manual safety. Just like Tang Ting. He bears no dislike for the name, in fact, it makes him feel big. He has won the force's annual shooting competition for the last few years. He is happy to be named after a gun. Both superiors and colleagues call him by this nickname. Some have even forgotten his real name.

'You said your other team is West Kowloon Team One. I think the team leader is Inspector Fung Yuen-Yan. It is well known in Wan Chai that TT and Fung don't get along, that's why I asked.'

It's not easy to hide anything from Kwan Chun-Dok. 'Yes, Fung and TT finished training at the same time. I don't know the details, but it's true that they don't get along. However, they're both professional, they don't bring personal feelings into work. Their reports, resource assignments and actions have shown that they're doing their job. I trust them fully.'

Kwan gives a faint smile. It is a diplomatic response. Senior Inspector Fung, as team leader of a regional crime unit, is half a rank more senior than TT. If there is any bad blood, the ranking difference is likely to fan the fire. It worries Ko too, so he has posted TT at the north entrance and Fung in the south.

'TT is about to get married. A married man thinks about his family, surely he won't be so rash anymore,' Tso says. TT's superiors often chide him for being too much of a 'gambler': physically fit and a good marksman, he has no qualms facing criminals alone with no support.

'TT is getting married?' This is news to Kwan Chun-Dok.

'Yes, his fiancée is the Deputy Commissioner's daughter, Ellen in Public Relations,' Tso snorts, as if this would change TT's fortune and his superior would look on the wild horse differently.

Kwan glances at Ko. He looks reluctant to continue this line of conversation, so he changes the subject.

'We'll rely on you to catch Shek Boon-Tim and Shek Boon-Sing, Inspector Ko. If we can catch them alive, I am confident that I can dig out the intelligence they hold.'

'We're very confident. The Shek brothers have nowhere to run.' Ko shakes Kwan's hand again.

'If you need CIB's support, just let us know,' Tso adds.

'For sure, for sure.'

Just as Tso and Kwan are about to leave, messages start coming through the radio on the desk.

'Water Tower to Granary. Water Tower to Granary. Sparrow and Crow have just left the nest. Repeat, Sparrow and Crow have just left the nest. Over.'