



AUTHOR WENDA LI (2ND FROM RIGHT) IN HONG KONG. ALL ARTICLE PHOTOS PROVIDED BY WENDA.

# ARBORICULTURE IN HONG KONG

## *Wenda Li Experiences Tree Culture in an Entirely Different Light*

If someone were to ask me prior to my trip what comes to mind when I think of Hong Kong, I would have said: immense crowds, concrete jungle and a shopping mecca. The last thing that would have crossed my mind would have been trees, let alone arboriculture. Last winter, on January 21, 2011, I departed for Hong Kong for three weeks to take part in an opportunity of a lifetime. I had been invited to train and work as an arborist in one of the most densely populated cities in the world. I had no idea what to expect – especially since I didn't even realize that there were actually arborists in HK.

**T**o put things in perspective, Hong Kong (HK) has a landmass of 426 sq. miles, which consist of a mainland and an island, and has a population of over 7 million; the City of Toronto covers 641 sq. miles and has about 2.5 million people. Hong Kong was a British colony for 156 years up until

1997 when it was handed back to China and as such has been declared a Special Administrative Region (SAR). Hong Kong has its own self-government with an entirely different political system and currency than China. Cantonese is spoken predominantly in HK, while Mandarin is spoken in China. HK is situated just south

of the Tropic of Cancer and thus shares a similar latitude with Cuba and is considered subtropical.

### **ArborCamp**

Don Picker, owner and operator of Asian Tree Preservation Ltd. ([www.asiatreepreservation.com](http://www.asiatreepreservation.com)), had invited myself and Ascending

the Giants co-founders Brian French and Will Koomjian ([www.ascendingthegiants.com](http://www.ascendingthegiants.com)) to develop and facilitate a program called ArborCamp. Our target audience were government workers within the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (similar to a Parks and Recreation Department). We knew nothing of the skill level of these workers and Don had given us complete carte blanche to design a program.

Our primary objective was for participants to have fun in a learning environment with a strong emphasis on team building. We ran two consecutive 2-day courses with 16 participants in each. Small groups were rotated through various teaching stations, including footlocking, belayed speed climb, throwline and limb walking (both in the tree and on a rather unique and challenging ground obstacle course with

a tie-in-point in the tree). An elevator system was set up to get people into the work climb tree. We also demonstrated several aerial rescue scenarios and there were lots of opportunities to share in new techniques, gear and knots. In the evening, videos were shown courtesy of Ascending the Giants, while I spoke about my participation with the ITCC (International Tree Climbing Championships) and showed past competition highlights. The finale of the course was the team relay whereby each team member had to complete one of four event stations and pass the baton to the next member. A point system was devised which included bonus time points for the entire relay. If you want to see how much fun we had, you can view the relay on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yg6gzRJoNw&list=FL1czPXXUMxnLGVnMWrrccsg&index=16&feature=plpp\\_video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yg6gzRJoNw&list=FL1czPXXUMxnLGVnMWrrccsg&index=16&feature=plpp_video).



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In the first course, we found out rather quickly during the introductions that no one understood English. Fortunately, we had two Asian Tree Preservation (ATP) employees who acted as interpreters and I could moderately understand Cantonese – I just couldn't speak it. We learned that the frontline workers originally came from the horticulture and landscaping department because the government had to form a new arboriculture department. Most had some previous in-house training and elementary exposure to climbing trees. In the second course, the participants were supervisors and managers and surprisingly, much younger. Several of these workers had advanced training by attending climbing courses in the UK.

Tree climbers are a universal breed. Regardless of language barriers and



ASIAN TREE PRESERVATION. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:  
HINDLEY, JON, BRIAN, DON, AWAH AND WILL.

cultural differences, we are still inherently passionate about trees: we get excited when we see new climbing techniques or a new piece of gear and we enjoy sharing knowledge – and the HK climbers were certainly no different. In fact, I enjoyed listening to the participants carrying on in Cantonese with conversations about something they just learned simply because the content was exactly the same whether it had been with students at Humber College or on an Arboriculture Canada course. Overall, I was both impressed and inspired by all the climbers through their tenacity to learn and fierce determination. There were a total of six women between the two courses. It was a profound experience for me not only to meet them, but also to climb with them. I am so removed from my Asian culture that sometimes I forget I am Chinese, especially when working in the arboriculture industry – the thought of Chinese women climbing trees was completely foreign to me.

The course was held at Suen Doh Yuen Camp in the Northern Territories of Hong Kong. Every morning I would enjoy a pleasant 20-minute walk along a treed

bicycle path from the apartment where I stayed to the camp. The focal trees that we used for the course were two large camphor trees (*Cinnamomum camphora*). With their wide spreading form, these trees provided excellent opportunities for challenging limb walks. The camphor tree is a large native evergreen, which can grow up to 36 m (120 feet). The large leaves are glossy and waxy and when crushed release a pungent smell of camphor. This species is the commercial source of camphor and its wood is used to make storage chests.

### Tree Work in Hong Kong

After the success of ArborCamp, Don gave me the opportunity to experience some production pruning and to do an arborist report. Things that I take for granted as an arborist in Toronto are all but a dream in HK. Take for instance a truck and chipper. It would be inconceivable for us to run a tree care company without them. In HK it is illegal for a truck to tow a separate trailer on public roads, thus a truck and chipper would not be permissible. In fact, most people in HK do not own a vehicle as they

are considered a luxury and not a necessity. Also the taxes on vehicles are apparently astronomical. Don, owner of ATP, does not own any vehicles other than a fold-up bicycle. It is actually more economical to hire a van driver to pick up and drop off the crew and their gear. Sometimes, crew will travel by taxi and or by train to job sites. Brush and wood disposal is coordinated by hiring a disposal truck that has a knuckle boom attached to a scoop bucket. The logistics in coordinating transportation and disposal can be daunting as timing is everything.

Much of the trees in HK are within the state right-of-way and are the government's responsibility. No less than five years ago, a very large tree failed over a busy street. This became headline news and created a lot of backlash. As a result, the government has been systematically doing hazard risk assessment on all of its trees. The need for arborist reports for both public and private trees is great and has kept Asia Tree Preservation Ltd. very busy. Don had me go out to a private property to do such a report. Luckily, I was first given a crash course on HK's most common trees.



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Interestingly, what I had previously thought were dying trees, were in fact the flamboyant or flame tree (*Delonix regia*). This tree comes from the same family as the black locust and is a popular ornamental tree known for its striking red and orange flowers. Because the flame tree is a semi-evergreen (a term which I did not know), it partially loses its leaves in the winter giving the appearance of a scraggly dying tree.

### The Greening of HK

Following my trip, I now ask myself: where did I get the perception that HK did not have any trees? Did I automatically assume that there is a correlation between high population density and the lack of green space? Even my father said to me, "What are you going to do in HK? You are an arborist, there are no trees." Luckily for me, both my father and I were very wrong!

Over the last 20 years, the HK government, in collaboration with the private sector and the public, have taken proactive efforts to promote urban greening. Despite HK's dense urbanization, I was absolutely astounded by the amount of green space which was so harmoniously blended into the urban centres. This synergy relates to *feng shui* or the art of placement to create harmonious flow. The Chinese embrace this concept whole heartedly as it not only brings prosperity, but creates a sense of wellbeing.



HONG KONG PARK AGAINST A BACKDROP OF CORPORATE GLASS TOWERS.



Kowloon Park and Hong Kong Park are the two largest parks (13 ha and 8 ha, respectively) located in the heart of the city. Although each park has its own distinctive features, both have a lake and an aviary enclosed with mature trees and beautiful landscaping. I experienced Hong Kong Park, which is virtually surrounded by corporate bank glass towers, during hurried lunchtime traffic and it was nice to see so many people dressed in office attire relaxing in the green space (pictured on adjacent page). Kowloon Park is famous for a row of 13 of HK's largest camphor trees that overhang onto Hai Phong Road. It is interesting to note that each of the parks were original sites of British barracks. The government could have easily used the land for development, as real estate in HK is a commodity, but instead designated it as parkland.



Nan Lian Garden recently opened in 2006 and is located at Diamond Hill. This garden was re-created to resemble a famous Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) garden. The entrance of the garden is inconspicuously located beneath two raised highway overpasses. (That is like designing a zen garden built under Toronto's Gardiner Expressway!). As I walked into the garden, my senses were shocked into utter silence by the intense distraction of the

aesthetic beauty and its serenity. The surrounding highway traffic ceased to exist. This was feng shui at its finest. All of the trees in the garden have been meticulously manicured and shaped. I am usually not fond of this practice but if well done, it is attractive. There was also a large collection of bonsai that mirrored the way the trees were pruned. I could tell that some of the

forts to transplant so many trees, some of which were quite large. There were also private niches that encouraged people to meditate and to sit in silent contemplation. The classical Chinese garden design principles are to create a seamless flow between land, water, rock, vegetation and building structures and Nan Lian Garden clearly achieved this.

**The entrance of Nan Lian Garden (pictured above, far right) is inconspicuously located beneath two raised highway overpasses. That is like designing a zen garden built under Toronto's Gardiner Expressway!**



large trees were intentionally wounded to re-create a natural effect. I actually liked it and could appreciate the artistic beauty in it. I know this is commonly done on bonsai trees, but I have never seen it with large trees. I could also appreciate the ef-

**Photos. Top of Page:** All three photos are of Nan Lian Garden. **Above Left:** Large camphor trees from Kowloon Park that extend over a busy road. **Above Right:** Lovely parkette nestled between a ball court and playing field.



Whenever I took the train to central HK, I would always pass by a local community park. It had a basketball court and a large playing field. No big deal – this could be seen anywhere in North America. However, strategically placed between the court and field was a lovely garden/parkette that had a fountain, plenty of

seating, and beautifully landscaped trees. For me, this park embodies a perfect balance of a place to play, sit and rest and presents yet another example of feng shui.

I could go on about the many tree-lined bicycle paths, roof top gardens and the new airport trail, but there are simply too many excellent examples of how HK was able to improve on the quality of its green space in a relatively short amount of time. No doubt, the government had to undertake

a campaign to change people's attitudes towards the environment, which reflects well with the Chinese proverb, "Trees take 10 years to mature and people take 100 years to educate."

HK's urban planning not only combines green space into its infrastructure and development, but also incorporates an aesthetic quality that connects with one's inner calmness. Toronto and other urban centres have much to learn from the success of HK's green initiatives and urban planning.

### Famous Wall Trees

Much of HK's development is on steep hills and slopes. Retaining walls, or what is more commonly referred to as "stonewalls," are everywhere (pictured left). What is impressive about the stone walls are the trees that grow from them. The "wall trees" are in fact the Chinese banyan (*Ficus microcarpa*) which have seeded themselves between tiny crevices

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in the wall. Eventually these established trees form a lattice of exposed roots that cling to the wall. The roots growing behind the wall are in contact with soil and nutrients. The extensive matrix of roots on both sides of the wall in fact reinforces wall stability. Wall trees, some of them over 100 years old, offer a unique view of the urban landscape and have become an important part of HK's cultural heritage. With new development, the stonewalls are being replaced or re-surfaced with concrete surfaces which are smooth and impermeable. Thus, the future of the wall trees is now threatened.

### Tree Climbing Hong Kong

On the day before my departure, Brian French and I were invited guests to Tree Climbing Hong Kong ([www.treeclimbinghk.com](http://www.treeclimbinghk.com)). This is a recreational tree climbing group whose membership is in excess of 100 climbers. In 2010, TCHK had the honour of hosting HK's first Tree Climbing Championship.



So there we were on a Sunday morning greeted by about 40 loyal and dedicated climbers in a torrential down pour. Despite the heavy rains, this did not deter people from climbing. Brian demonstrated some unique techniques of traversing between trees while I climbed with a group of women. It was a pleasure to meet such a diverse group of climbers and arborists. Soman Choi is an ISA certified arborist who runs her own tree service company and has competed in regional tree climbing competitions both in HK and Singapore. She will be going to her first ITCC in Portland this summer. I also met Jack Chan,

manager of the landscaping department at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Jack has a degree in forestry from the University of Toronto and is also an ISA certified arborist. He manages a staff of 50 responsible for university landscaping and tree maintenance. Last summer when Jack visited Toronto, he spent a half-day shadowing me at work.

### The New Frontier in Arboriculture

I am indebted to Don at ATP for giving me the opportunity to experience arboriculture in HK. He has also been instrumental in bringing arboriculture into HK. Don is an arborist and native of Minnesota who has lived in China and Hong Kong for almost 20 years and is impressively fluent in both Cantonese and Mandarin. Don and his son Jon, run a successful full service tree care company that services HK, China, Taiwan, Malaysia and Japan. Besides providing pruning and removal services, ATP also conducts training and education courses, specializes in hazard risk assessments and offers resistograph and tomograph services. Since 2008, Don has hosted the International Arboricultural Summit in HK, inviting renown guest speakers who have included Dr. Ed Gilman, Dr. Gary Watson, Nelda Matheny and James Clark, and Sharon Lily to name a few. Don also played a key role in having the *Tree Climbers' Guide* translated into Chinese.

Arboriculture in HK is still relatively young, but very much alive and thriving. The enthusiasm and excitement for promoting the industry is refreshing and vibrant. All of the climbers and arborists that I met are thirsty for knowledge and are connecting actively with the international network of arborists. The Asia Pacific Tree Climbing Championship (APTCC), which was originally between Australia and New Zealand, is now sanctioned into the ITCC. This has spurred increase participation with climbers, both men and women, from Japan, Singapore and HK. ISA HK/China is now an associated organization of the ISA and becoming an ISA Certified Tree Worker and a Tree Risk Assessor through PNW ISA are both highly regarded and strongly encouraged. As you can see, HK has become the new frontier for arboriculture and I look forward to returning.

### A Return to my Roots

On a personal note, my trip to HK has been about the return to my roots. As a first generation Chinese Canadian, I grew up stigmatized as a "banana" – white on the inside and yellow on the outside. I experienced a lot of shame by the time I was in my early teens having lost my ability to speak Chinese.



**Photo:** Author Wenda Li is standing on the far right of the mural.

When I was initially asked to work in HK, I felt twinges of apprehension as repressed issues of childhood humiliation started to arise. It had been more than 35 years since I last visited HK, and it had not been a positive experience. On the contrary, my entire HK trip this time has been profoundly positive. Not only have I re-connected with my culture and healed old wounds, but I have also gained much respect for arboriculture in HK and for their arborists, and most importantly, I have made invaluable friendships. There is a famous Chinese proverb which sums up my entire HK experience: *Fallen leaves always return to their roots.* ☺

### Gotta Great Story?

Or simply want to comment on this or any other content featured in the *Ontario Arborist*? This is your publication and we'd like to start a "Letters to the Editor" section in which we have a constant dialogue among members. Please email your thoughts to editor Joy Black at [joy@npc-solutions.com](mailto:joy@npc-solutions.com). Deadline for the next issue is April 16. Drop us a line!