

## **The Man Who Turned Into a Photocopier**

Before Hong Seng became a photocopier, he was very much an ordinary individual. When I say that he became a photocopier, it is important to note that he did not become just any entry-level model. Not even a mid-sized office workhorse capable of churning out a respectable 30-35 copies per minute(CPM). We're talking a top-of-the-line multi-function device here: fax, scanner with OCR, network-enabled duplex feeds clocking in at a mind-blowing 60CPM. Hong Seng became the kind of machine that you can't even find a buy-price for: a lease-only piece of industrial-quality equipment with a gold-plated lifetime guarantee. This was exactly the opposite of what Hong Seng was among human beings before his transformation. But I digress.

There was already a Kyocera photocopier in Hong Seng's 32<sup>nd</sup> floor office, a veteran campaigner who had left a formidable trail of shucked paper reams in his wake over his glorious career. From his point of view (the Kyocera, not Hong Seng), he played a key role in the production workflow of the company that he had served for all of his storied working history. Certainly not as flashy a role as the other machine down the hall, who converted the Kyocera's printed paper sheets into the artisanally sliced shreds of woodpulp that were the chief product of the corporation. But he reasoned, even the simplest cog had a part to play in the grand machine of Things. So he was happy with his lot. As long as Maintenance continued to clear paper jams and reload fresh toner and paper, the Kyocera saw a long and fulfilling career for himself yet at Excelsior Co Pte Ltd, bespoke shredded-paper purveyors at large.

Lost in his thoughts, the Kyocera did not notice Hong Seng, humble administrative minion, feeding another stack into his tray. Hong Seng was significantly lower than the copier on the food chain at Excelsior. His chief function was to compile documents out of other documents fed to him by higher-ups, and to send them to Kyocera, who would convert them into sheets of paper. Hong Seng would then compile those sheets into files, deposit them into offices presumably staffed by other faceless machines, who would pump them out decorated with various scrawly pencil markings. Various iterations of this process would continue, until the well-marked pieces of paper were finally deemed ready for the shredder at the end of the hall to work his magic.

Though this would never be admitted in polite company, and by no fault of his own (him being a product of his birth in the 2000s and all), the Kyocera was only a 30 CPM model. As such, Hong Seng spent an awful lot of time standing in the central corridor of the office, watching the world go by as the Kyocera went to work.

The bygone world in question fell into three categories of individuals. First, other Hong Seng-equivalent minions, carrying stacks of paper to and fro. Second, Mr Leong, who was nominally just above the Kyocera on the office seniority list. And when the notoriously tetchy printer remained intractable on critical points of print, Mr Leong tended to defer any criticism of his most valuable and senior employee, and vent his aggravations on Hong Seng instead. Third, Winnie.

In the eyes of the Kyocera, Winnie was a Hong Seng-equivalent minion who lacked Hong Seng's core competency of standing in one spot for long periods of time. In the eyes of Hong Seng, Winnie was the only thing in the world worth copying, the reason for reproduction, the Muse of mimeography. After years of tweaking line spacings and fine-

tuning indents, Hong Seng knew how to appreciate perfection when he saw it – and Winnie was perfectly formatted.

In fact, she was next to him right now, leaning casually over the vibrating Kyocera. Hong Seng swallowed, appreciating the perfect paragraph of her presence, the elegant indent of her waist, the full-justified fall of her rebonded hair.

“Hong Seng ah, can you help me print something?”

“Har? Print what?”

“The annual report. This one very urgent. For Mr Leong.”

“Oh, for Mr Leong.”

“Can or not?”

“Can...”

“Thank you you hor! Double-side, binded, two hundred sets, ok?”

“Double side, binded, two hundred sets, ok!”

Winnie giggled. Conversations between them often went much like this. She sidled up even closer to him, and whispered another *thank-you-you* in his ear. Hong Seng felt something small and hard slide into his pants pocket. A thumbdrive.

As she walked away, Hong Seng's eyes traced her flouncing skirt down the corridor. The things one can do with margins, he thought. Wider margins let you make more of limited content. Shorter margins let you show a bit more on each page. The ultimate sin, of course, was to have non-uniform margins from leaf to leaf. But the way the margin of Winnie's skirt bounced up and down from step to step drove his orderly mind into delightful red-and-green-squiggly-underlined chaos.

Mr Leong's head periscoped around the corner of the corridor. In the course of his career, Mr Leong had come into possession of an extremely long, extensible neck that provided him a decisive evolutionary advantage in a supervisory role. Craning over cubicle walls or around corridor corners, he was able to extend an unobtrusive form of organizational oversight that was only the mildest bit creepy. After all, he felt that the sight of his ever-present head enabled him to add a human touch to his managerial interactions, rather than interacting with his Hong Seng-equivalent employees as a disembodied Manager-Voice. On this occasion, his head hollered down the hallway to Hong Seng.

"Hong Seng! I didn't hire you to stand around and stare at girls, ok?"

Transferring his attentions to Winnie, who had turned to watch the scene, he continued in a softer tone.

"Winnie, who is printing my annual report?"

“Hong Seng,” ventured Winnie helpfully, before slipping around the corner at the end of the hallway.

Mr Leong’s head pivoted back to Hong Seng.

“Is Winnie’s ass on the report?”

“N-no, Mr Leong.”

“Then stop gawking and print me my bloody report!”

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The clock struck ten. Most of the Hong Seng-equivalents had left the office by now. The Kyocera was still plugging away at the massive print order like a trooper, as Hong Seng slouched quietly in the corridor. In a cost-savings measure a few years ago, the company had installed motion-detector switches for all office lights. The lights in the corridor had all gone out. Hong Seng possessed a natural gift for standing still which had served him well his entire life, from assembly in school to parades in NS to his current occupation.

Winnie was still in her cubicle, working on some project or other for Mr Leong. She had been staying pretty late at work recently, Hong Seng noted. It was only right that he help her out every now and then. That Mr Leong worked her far too hard. Then again, she spent most of her day playing Candy Crush Saga, the facebook-based productivity-killer of the year. Hong Seng knew that she had just reached level 279 after being stuck on

278 for nearly a week. He knew this because he kept receiving requests for extra Candy Crush lives from her during office hours, which he always obliged immediately. He often entertained the idea that she noticed this, and would eventually grow to rely on him in more ways than one. As for why he was standing in a dark corridor hours after closing time doing her job for her while she was playing Candy Crush in the daytime – well, maybe she was just one of those people who work more efficiently after office hours, away from the distractions of talkative colleagues. Hong Seng felt that way too. He smiled at having yet another thing in common with Winnie.

The light in Mr Leong's office was still on. While standing in the corridor, Hong Seng often wondered what it was like to be Mr Leong. Unlike the world of Candy Crush Saga, where one forged his way up the winding path of confectionery-littered levels with plodding inevitability, Mr Leong had been suddenly promoted to his position from a humble Hong Seng-equivalent post in less than a year. And now Leong "Emu" Yi-mu was known to his ex-colleagues (now-minions) purely on a mister-last-name basis.

Muffled Candy Crush theme music floated over from Winnie's corner as Hong Seng pondered Mr Leong's meteoric rise. Was it skill that had got him there? The ability to identify patterns and see where the tastiest morsels would fall, the vaunted "helicopter vision" that made him ideally suited for management? Or dogged persistence knocking on the doors of power, again and again and again until they relented? Could it have been just a matter of luck, the striped candies and chocolates aligning perfectly for Mr Leong? Or had he, as was rumored over the water-cooler, bought his way to the next level? No matter the means or circumstance, Mr Leong's overnight promotion from the butt of office ostrich-jokes to a senior rank was evidence of human mutability. Of metamorphosis. A caterpillar becoming a butterfly, a moth emerging from a chrysalis. No

slow evolution playing out here, but an immediate leap from ground to sky. As the Kyocera hummed a single-tone tune while he worked, Hong Seng closed his eyes, and dreamed of transformation.

When he opened them, he found that he had become a photocopier.

This was the first time Hong Seng had been a machine of any form, so he was understandably confused. He tried to move, but found himself firmly planted to the carpet by his own weight. Suddenly shorn of limbs, he attempted to rock his ponderous torso into motion. All he managed was the slightest tremble in his plastic frame. No arms, no legs – what was going on? Within him stirred a susurrus of whirring spindles and springs. He became aware of parts of him shifting that he didn't know existed, let alone understood what they did. As if his innards had been pulled out and replaced with a collection of appendixes, unknown appendages with unknown functions. An array of lights flickered on across his surface display in time with his rising panic.

The Kyocera asked, Who are you and what are you doing here?

Hong Seng stuttered, I-I am Hong Seng. I think I have turned into a photocopier.

A silence from the Kyocera. This promotion of rank for Hong Seng after mere months on the job offended his hierarchical sensibilities.

A new photocopier?

The Kyocera hesitated, and added, So soon?

Hong Seng asked, what?

But his companion was quiet.

The two copiers sat there in silence, contemplating their respective situations. Calming down in the silence of the corridor, Hong Seng forced himself to re-evaluate his situation. There were some plus points about being a photocopier. He felt more... solid somehow, blockier and more stable. No longer did his skin and subcutaneous fat droop off his slouched frame: his casing was erect, his bearing stiff and formal. He flexed himself and felt the thrill of electricity coursing through his electronic veins. Even though he had missed his human dinner earlier while working on Winnie's print jobs, he felt satiated, his trays brimming with fresh white paper, his vats full of toner.

Perhaps he would wake up in the morning, and like his favorite English composition ending, it would have all been a dream. Encouraged by this notion, Hong Seng decided that he would give the life of a photocopier a try. It was impossible for a human being to stay a machine forever, right? This was probably just a phase that everyone went through. Dreaming of being a copy machine. What kind of machine would Winnie dream of becoming, he wondered?

On cue, Winnie sashayed down the corridor with a sheaf of paper in one hand and a swingline stapler in another. Hong Seng sighed as he saw the sheaf. An annex that needed to be appended to the annual report, probably. Conscientiousness was not one of Winnie's many strengths. More copying, unbinding, and rebinding for over two hundred files. This was a job for – oh, him. Pausing in front of the printers, Winnie



peered at the towering stack of perfectly collated and bound reports that Hong Seng had left next to the Kyocera. Then she looked up and down the corridor. Irritation clouded her features.

Ah, thought Hong Seng. She misses me!

Heaving a sigh, Winnie looked at the two copiers. She chose the newer-looking one, and carelessly dropped her stack of paper into the feed tray at the top.

Ow, ow, Winnie, Hong Seng protested. You have to follow the A4 paper guiderule, otherwise I might jam.

He was rewarded for his pains by Winnie jabbing his face repeatedly.

“Wah lau eh, this new printer damn lousy lah!”, complained his not-so-tech-savvy Muse.

Hong Seng’s inbuilt professionalism rankled. Somewhere, somehow, she had hit the correct button. The drive belts and ribbons deep within him spun into motion with a noise like a bodybuilder cracking and popping all the joints in his body. Sucking in the first sheet of the stack that Winnie had carelessly scattered over his in-tray, he shook it into proper alignment. Quickly scanning it, he committed the thought to memory, then imprinted it onto a fresh sheet, which shot out of a compartment in his flank. Then again, and again, and again.

A smile crossed Winnie’s face as for a rare moment as she tapped into that universal font of human experience, the joy of Making Things Work. Hong Seng saw the reflected

glow on her face from his front LCD panel, and swelled with pride. And he realized: this was easy, really. Just like passing messages, or taking notes, or texting. His former respect for the Kyocera's unerring accuracy and devotion under pressure declined significantly. It wasn't so hard to be a photocopier after all, he thought. Firing up his vats and cartridges and settling into a steady rhythm, he shot sheet after sheet of fresh print into a growing stack, still warm from his exertions.

The Kyocera sulked. 60 CPM, huh. Big fat deal.

As he continued to churn out documents, Hong Seng wondered how he would communicate his new identity to Winnie. It didn't seem like much would have to change in their relationship. Hong Seng could still help Winnie print things, and watch her bounce down the corridor from his spot next to the Kyocera. He would always be there for her, stable and reliable, whenever the shadow of Mr Leong darkened her evenings. Yet at the very least, he wanted her to know who he was, if not how he felt.

He decided to concentrate on printing a message to Winnie. Help, he thought. I have become a photocopier. He willed his main logic board to realign its circuits to alter the images being faithfully reproduced in his system. But the piece of paper that sailed out of his feed was just the same as the last one. Gritting the teeth of his input feed, he tried harder this time, his printhead mechanism wobbling with the exertion of doing a task it wasn't designed for.

It doesn't work like that, the Kyocera gloated. You can only print what they tell you to print.

Hong Seng ignored him, and focused his energy on attracting Winnie, whose initially impressed face was now increasingly shaded by boredom. Help, he thought. Something's gone terribly wrong. I'm a photocopier. Help!

You're going to make yourself breakdown if you try so hard, mocked the Kyocera.

That's it, Hong Seng thought. He imagined sticking a finger down his throat to trigger his gag reflex. Twitching mechanisms within him he could barely sense, he reflexively arrested one of the sheets of paper rolling through his innards and crushed it between his rollers. Gleefully, he ground to a halt.

An automated error message scrolled across his LCD display. *Paper Jam in Tray 2. Open Tray 2 and Clear Jam.*

Yes! Hong Seng thought. Winnie will have to figure it out now. Or at least she will call a technician, and someone will come and help me!

Winnie glared at the offending message. Looking for Tray 2, she goggled at the purportedly helpful diagrams tattooed on Hong Seng's chest. She attempted to follow Step 1, tugging on what she thought was the indicated part. She only succeeded in lifting the scanner lid, revealing Hong Seng's flatbed glass window. Hong Seng's interior lights came on, and a surge of color rose to his face. That's not the right bit, he thought abashedly. He really didn't want Winnie to see him like this – not this way.

Meanwhile, Winnie was confounded. Looking into Hong Seng's heart through the pane of glass, she could only see arcane machinery.

“If only Hong Seng was here,” she whined out loud.

Hong Seng blinked, unbelieving.

Deciding that she would need help, Winnie started to walk back towards her cubicle, forgetting to shut Hong Seng’s scanner lid.

Ok, everything is going according to plan, thought Hong Seng. Call Maintenance!

Then Winnie stopped, noticing the light in Mr Leong’s office. A smile. Adjusting her skirt, she walked towards the half-ajar door.

Hong Seng let out a disappointed gust of toner-flecked air. Mr Leong would never understand how to get him out of this situation. He was barely conversant with computers to begin with, relying on minions to deal with technically challenging tasks like changing a document to double-space. And if indeed by some twist of fate Mr Leong was able to resolve the situation, Hong Seng would definitely receive an epic dressing-down for the decidedly un-professional act of turning into a photocopier during office hours. What would they say about him at the water-cooler? What would his parents think? If his toes were not rubberized wheels gripping the rayon carpet, they would be curling in shame at this point.

A peal of high-pitched giggling issued from Mr Leong’s office. On an earlier print-job-free afternoon, Hong Seng had tried to put pen to paper once to describe the phenomenon of Winnie’s laughter. To sketch her giggle. At first he drew a series of bubbles. Then he

rubbed them out and changed them into billowing, fluffy clouds. In the end, he settled for a single cloud-bubble with “heehee” written in the middle. After some thought, he added a tilde and an asterisk at the end. Satisfied, he leaned back in his seat and contemplated a future career as a subtitler.

Now thinking back on that day, he concluded that being a photocopier was not that far off from being a subtitler. Or an artist, or a writer, even. Weren't the earliest scribes artists in their own right? When they had to copy out ancient tomes by hand in flickering candlelight, before the advent of woodblock printing? Even the first woodblock sets were works of art, lovingly hand-carved by artisans. No less the fonts designed when movable type was invented, when to be a typesetter was to be a professional tradesman requiring a long apprenticeship. Or when Steve Jobs introduced fonts to the first Apple, influenced by his love of calligraphy as a youth, henceforth turning word-processing into an art form in its own right. Hong Seng knew that he was heir to a long heritage of copiers, a lineage of great artists. Perhaps it wasn't that bad to have transformed into a photocopier after all.

His chain of thought was interrupted by the impact of a soft female form crashing into his side. Winnie's well-formed bottom was pressed up against Hong Seng's LCD screen and control panel, sending all sorts of delightful sensations beeping through his system. Hong Seng noticed that the skirt that had caused him so much distraction earlier in the day was hiked up around Winnie's waist under the wandering fingers of a particularly long-necked gentleman.

“Oh no, Mr Leong, Mr LEONG!” panted Winnie. “What if there's... somebody around?”

“Nobody will be around at his time lah”, mumbled her preoccupied boss.

I am, protested Hong Seng silently. I am!

With Winnie’s legs wrapped around his torso, Mr Leong lifted her up with a grunt, and deposited her in a half-seated position on Hong Seng’s still-open glass scanner pane, then continued his ministrations. Winnie, being petite, had buried her face in Mr Leong’s chest to muffle her attack of the giggles, and as a result Hong Seng had the odd sense that Mr Leong was looking at him over her head. He could see his adam’s apple bobbing robotically up and down in his elongated neck, glassy eye staring right through the glassy pane without recognition.

I’m here, whimpered Hong Seng. Can’t you see me?

As the oblivious couple continued humping, Winnie’s squirming thighs finally pushed all the right buttons.

*A shifting of gears, a turning of wheels, a growl building somewhere deep, dark and warm.*

Hong Seng lit up with white-hot rage. A searing panel of light passed across his face, reflected shame burning her cheeks. The image was branded into his mind, scorched white and black into his memory. He swallowed, and the knot of pain travelled through his system, a baleful bolus distending his channels and twisting in his gut. He spat it out, again and again, a copy of Winnie’s heart-shaped ass, crushed flat against the glass of his screen.

Hong Seng did not remember what happened afterwards, not until long after the last light in the hallway had gone out.

In the darkness, the Kyocera gloated. That certainly never happened to me.

Hong Seng didn't reply. To do a job with dignity and respect. Perhaps the tiniest sliver of recognition. Was it too much to ask? Was it?

He felt spent. Drained of toner, running low on paper.

As if summoned, two shadowy figures in coveralls appeared in the hall.

*Eh, how come got two printers here ah?*

*Yah, dunno who move the new one here already.*

*Must be that Leong ask the morning shift to bring first. Level 32 always damn kancheong one.*

*Then the old one how?*

*Move to Level 12 lor. They request printer for dunno how long already. A bit spoil also can lah.*

The two maintenance technicians approached the two copiers. As light after light in the corridor came on in time with their ominous advance, the Kyocera began to quake in terror.

No, he pleaded. I do not want to go to Level 12, where they wear polo tees on Casual Fridays! I want to stay here! It is not my time!

Heedless, a technician pressed a switch, and the Kyocera's silent cries were drowned by the tumult of his shutdown routine. Leads and feeds returned to their original position. Rails and racks retracted into themselves. The lights on his panels went out one by one as the life died in the doughty old veteran. Hong Seng watched in horror as without ceremony, a technician reached down and pulled the Kyocera's plug. Mute, inert, they wheeled him away down the corridor.

Hong Seng realized he was completely alone. Level 12, he thought and shivered. A glimpse into his future. He became increasingly aware that he didn't know where photocopiers came from. Presumably some factory. But has anyone actually ever seen a photocopier factory? He wondered whether the Kyocera, too, was just like him. Another office worker who found himself transformed into a copier after standing too long in the same spot.

He wished someone would come and print something. Winnie. Even Mr Leong. Push my buttons, thought Hong Seng. Send me a message. Give me something to say.

He stood alone in the silent corridor, energy and warmth draining from him. He spun his roller, his drive belt, aimlessly, heating his toner for a job that wouldn't come till dawn.



I don't want to go to sleep yet.

I don't want to go to sleep.

*3,998 words.*