

### **Author's Note**

In order to lend flavour and authenticity to the novel, I have blended fact with fiction. In doing so I have tried to reflect the day-to-day hardships, aspirations, resentments, intrigues and cross-purposes colouring the tumultuous decades following the end of the Pacific War.

A novel, naturally, has to have characters. I have created a range of fictional ones. Some I have placed in public offices which actually existed at the relevant times. An example would be the inept and chain-smoking Director of the New China News Agency in Chapters 30, 31 and 33. He naturally bears no resemblance to the actual Director who served as the de facto voice of the Chinese Government in Hong Kong. The same is true of the devious Sir Reginald Beaufont Quinn, appearing as the Chief Secretary of Hong Kong in Chapters 37 and 39. His physical features, mannerisms and intellectual outlook are totally at odds with those of the actual Chief Secretary of the time.

To avoid enriching lawyers, I wish to state categorically and unambiguously that all characters, except for historical personages such as Chairman Mao or Sir Murray MacLehose, are entirely figments of my imagination. None of them is based on any individual, living or dead.

I have also on occasion found it convenient to place events outside the actual time of their occurrence. I hope those with an intimate knowledge of Hong Kong would not quarrel with such liberties.

For example, I suggest in Chapters 29 and 37 that as late as 1984 the British Special Branch was targeting certain people and organizations whose names appeared on a list known as "the Q List". People or organizations listed were to be suspected of dangerous political or criminal activities. Their mail would be opened and photocopied during the night at the General Post Office, prior to delivery the next day. In fact, that practice ended at the General Post Office in 1982.

Again, in Chapters 30 and 33, I give accounts of meetings of the then underground Communist Hong Kong and Macau Work Committee. Though the Work Committee actually existed, those particular meetings and their participants are entirely fictional. The meeting described in Chapter 33 was purportedly held to discuss a proposal by the colonial administration to construct a plant to produce potable water from sewage through a process known as reverse osmosis. Such a proposal was actually mooted but it was in 1979 rather than 1980.

At the time such plants were coming on stream in the Arabian Peninsula and a similar plant for Hong Kong was considered by a high-powered government committee. So far as I am aware, no detail of that project has ever reached the public domain. Since I played a minor role in that curious affair, it might be in the public interest for me to add a small historical footnote.

My involvement was as follows: in 1979, by virtue of holding the office of Secretary for Economic Services in the Hong Kong Government, I was a member of an internal Secretariat group known as the Land Development Policy Committee. The Committee was chaired by the Secretary for the Environment and at that time I happened to be the only Chinese on it.

At one of the Committee's meetings, a proposal was tabled for constructing a plant at Shatin. It was argued that the consumption of water in Hong Kong was increasing at such a rate

that additional supplies had to be assured for the future. The operating cost of an earlier plant to convert sea water into potable water had proved too expensive. The reverse osmosis proposal represented a fresh attempt to increase supplies.

I had reservations from the start. I pointed out that regardless of the scientific merits of the process, the people of Hong Kong would balk at drinking reconstituted sewage unless all other alternatives had been exhausted. I asked about the possibility of simply buying more water from the Chinese under an existing agreement. A pipeline was already in operation and it was only a matter of getting the Chinese to sell more water. I was told that the Chinese had been approached but had refused to increase supplies. The answer puzzled me. But since responsibility for dealing with the Chinese rested elsewhere, I had to accept what I had been told.

It so happened that a few days after the LDPC meeting I was invited by one of my left-wing friends to a dinner party at the Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. It was a small private party, with no more than about half a dozen guests. I found myself seated next to Mr. Ki Fung, the then Deputy Director of the New China News Agency in Hong Kong. After a few drinks I could not resist asking Mr. Ki why China was being so unhelpful over supplying more water to Hong Kong.

Mr. Ki reacted with bewilderment and asked what I was talking about. I then told him about the proposal winding its way through the Hong Kong bureaucracy to construct a reverse osmosis plant at Shatin. The project was being justified on the grounds that China had refused to make more water available.

Mr. Ki expressed amazement. He said the British knew full well the normal channels of communications and assured me that no request for additional water had been received. He added that if such a request were to be made, it would be dealt with very sympathetically.

When I returned to my office the next morning, I wrote a confidential minute to the Governor, Sir Murray MacLehose, later Lord MacLehose, recording my conversation with Mr. Ki. The minute was routed via the then Political Advisor, Dr. David Wilson, later Governor and now Lord Wilson. I received no reply or acknowledgement from either. What did happen, however, was that the reverse osmosis project was dropped and a fresh agreement was reached with the Chinese over increasing water supplies.

Politics is a funny old game. I fear I have never fully understood how it ought to be played. Over the years I have occasionally wondered what might have happened if chance had not led me to a dinner party and convivial company had not spurred me into an unauthorized initiative in international diplomacy. Would Hong Kong be saddled today with an expensive plant that it has happily done without ever since?

As a former Hong Kong civil servant, I should like to add one final observation. It has become fashionable in certain quarters nowadays to denigrate Chinese officers who had served the British Crown and to dismiss them as “puppets” or “running dogs”. It should be remembered that during colonial rule the official British position was that, pending a political settlement, the territory would be run in trust for the benefit of the local inhabitants. Reality might at times have fallen short

of that commitment but many Chinese served the British Crown on that basis and had discharged their duties in that light, so far as circumstances permitted.

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