

## An Accidental Journalist

It was late October in 1946 that Suen and his grandmother returned to Hong Kong. Nearly eight years earlier, it had taken them two weeks to travel to Kunming. The return journey took two and a half months.

If Suen had begun the return journey thinking that peace had been restored to the world, that illusion was quickly shattered. Years of war and privations had led to a burgeoning of banditry and warlordism. He found en route towns and villages filled with uncertainties, forebodings, fears and jangled nerves. Strangers were viewed with suspicion.

Inclement weather added to their woes. The inns in which they sought shelter were seldom comfortable or free from bedbugs. The food was chancy. Suen picked up dysentery and a little later his grandmother went down with hepatitis. Since modern medical attention was difficult to come by, both fell back on slower-working herbal remedies. Such misfortunes made for delays.

Worse was to greet the pair on arrival in Hong Kong. Parts of the city were under curfew, following riots with racial undertones.

Apparently the police had been trying for some months to clear Portland Street in Yaumati of illegal vendors, many of whom were refugees or army deserters from China. Tensions built steadily. When a peanut seller was killed during one of the operations, violence erupted and quickly spread from Yaumati to the more commercially active area of Mongkok.

The disturbances took on a spontaneously anti-European tone. The police and the British military were stoned wherever they appeared and parts of Kowloon became virtually no-go zones. Order could not be restored for several days. Although Bowen Road was a long way from the rioting, it was not at all the kind of welcome the returnees had expected.

The saving grace was that Ah Loy had single-handedly put the house in excellent order. The air of normality was so uncanny that both

Suen and his grandmother felt they had been away for only a brief interlude. Suen had no difficulty repossessing his old room and falling back into the established routines of the house.

In spite of her exhaustion, the grandmother's first priority was to see her daughter, her son-in-law and their family. Aunt Soo-Leung had given birth to a daughter shortly after the matriarch left for Kunming. It was natural for her to want to see her grandchild for the first time.

Suen had remembered his aunt as a kind and gentle woman. He, too, was anxious to see her and her entire family, particularly Hing, his cousin, with whom he used to play often at family gatherings.

But when Aunt Soo-Leung called, she brought only Hing and Peony, her six-year-old daughter. Her husband, Uncle Pak, a building contractor, did not come.

Aunt Soo-Leung quickly explained that her husband had been unwell, with high blood pressure, and had asked to be excused. But his grandmother was dubious. She soon got the full story out of his aunt.

It appeared that Uncle Pak had carried out some building work during the Japanese occupation, notably at Government House. In return, the Japanese had supplied him with bags of rice at a time when food was very scarce and when most had to survive on starvation rations. Upon the return of the British, business enemies had accused Uncle Pak of being a collaborator. He was arrested and locked up, which of course did his health no good. He was eventually released without charge.

That outcome had apparently less to do with his claims of innocence than with practical politics. The rioting had revealed severe social instabilities. The British did not want to exacerbate the situation when trying to re-establish their administration. They needed the active co-operation of the locals. A number of community leaders had also bowed to the wishes of the Japanese during the occupation. They naturally viewed

Uncle Pak's case with some unease. In the end, pragmatism freed him.

Aunt Soo-Leung was much exercised by the whole affair.

"It's so unfair to single him out. He did no more than many others did to survive," she complained to her mother. "How can anyone refuse the Japs anything? They beat and kill at the slightest provocation. So we got some food. Is that a crime? Imprisoning him made him lose face and damaged his health. He's now too embarrassed to be seen in public. How can he manage a business that way?"

"Be patient. It'll blow over," his grandmother said.

Suen could see that Hing had also been affected by his father's humiliation. His eyes had lost their innocence and had taken on a sly and wary look. He smiled more ingratiatingly and without real warmth. The occupation had interrupted his education, leaving him straggling several years behind Suen, both intellectually and academically. Those factors made it difficult for them to resume their former relationship.

Suen knew that the Japanese had committed many atrocities after capturing Chinese cities. In Nanking alone they had slaughtered more than a quarter of a million civilians, including women and children. Although the Japanese had not been as harsh in Hong Kong, for anyone to co-operate with them still seemed utterly reprehensible. Thanks to his grandmother's foresight, he had escaped such testing times. If he had had to endure them, would he have collaborated in order to survive? That question nagged him.

His grandmother did not appear judgemental when she comforted Aunt Soo-Leung. He couldn't help asking for elucidation.

"Don't be taken in by name-calling," his grandmother said. "People have to survive and look after their families. What is a collaborator? If Uncle Pak is one, then we are all the same. The British have occupied Hong Kong for a hundred years and we have submitted to

their ways. Very few of us fought them or tried to overthrow them. Indeed, most leading families have waxed rich currying favour with them. Why fuss over people acting in a similar manner under the Japanese?”

His grandmother shook her head slowly and sighed. “Ah Suen, people have to be practical. When a typhoon comes, what is the point of resisting? Heroics are useless. If you cannot get out of its way, you would do well to bend before its fury, like grass, and bide your time.”

His grandmother’s eyes glazed over as she paused. Then she added: “Our nation has seen more than its fair share of upheavals and suffering. Invaders and occupiers have come and gone many times. We saw off the Mongols. The Manchus did not have the wit to leave and got turned into Chinese. The Japanese and most of the Europeans have now gone. Only toeholds in Hong Kong and Macau remain. So long as we hold firm to our beliefs, what should be ours will one day come back to us. In conflicts, victory often does not go to the strongest or the best armed. Patience has its own rewards.”

Listening to his grandmother, Suen got even more confused. What were Chinese beliefs? His grandmother had spoken of bending like grass before the wind. But Tutor Tseng had praised Wat Yuen for killing himself in protest against corruption. Scholars had also abandoned high posts to become hermits rather than to serve bad rulers. Which was the authentic way? An awareness of his own inadequacies made him impatient for more knowledge.

But delays on the homeward journey had frustrated his university plans. Before leaving Kunming, he had applied for a place at a number of British and American universities. He had omitted Leiden because -- following the death of his father -- the compradoreship of the great Dutch firm had passed into other hands. Upon his return to Bowen Road, he found many letters of acceptance waiting for him. But he had got

back too late to meet their deadlines. That meant the whole exercise had to be repeated the following year.

As a consequence, he was left twiddling his thumbs. The gap that had opened up between him and Hing also emerged between him and his former schoolmates. They were in most cases too concerned with catching up on their missed education to spend much time with him.

He thought about a temporary job. But what kind of job could he do? He was just seventeen and fresh out of high school.

The delay over university also affected his grandmother. She too was stumped over how he might occupy himself till the next academic year. She was keen for him to complete his education, so that he might find employment and marry.

One day, early in the new year, he happened upon an advertisement in the Hong Kong Herald, one of the three English daily newspapers in the colony, inviting secondary school graduates to apply for training as cub reporters. A good command of English and typing skills were essential. Knowledge of shorthand an advantage. The position would be on local employment terms, after a probationary period.

He had never thought of journalism. He knew that all the English newspapers were controlled by expatriate interests and generally echoed the views of the colonial elites. Nonetheless, he thought becoming a reporter might teach him something new.

His grandmother had reservations. She feared that such a temporary job would cause him to keep unorthodox hours and put him in contact with undesirables. But in the end she agreed. She bought him a portable typewriter and a “Teach Yourself” book on typing.

He discovered that keyboard skills came quite readily. After a few failed attempts he managed to type a neat and respectable letter of application. A reply duly came back specifying a time and date for an

interview with the City Editor.

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Suen agonized a great deal over how he should dress for the occasion. He wanted to appear older but not too smartly dressed. He also wanted to display his seriousness of purpose and his pride in being Chinese. In the end he selected a suit cut in the Sun Yat-Sen style which he had worn in Kunming. It was a mode of dress rare in Hong Kong, except for recent arrivals from China. He thought that would strike the right note.

The appointment was for 3.15 p.m. At that precise moment he presented himself to the receptionist at the Editorial Department of the Herald and asked to see the City Editor, Major Richard Monroe.

The young lady eyed Suen's suit with surprise and said: "Major Monroe isn't back from lunch yet. He should be back any moment, if you don't mind waiting."

He agreed to wait and took the opportunity to study the layout of the Editorial Department which took up the entire floor. It was untidy, open-planned and under-occupied. Afternoon sunlight flooded in through large windows along one side, below which a row of wooden cabinets with glass doors displayed bound copies of the Herald dating back fifty years. On top of the cabinets lay stacks of the current week's issues of both the Herald and its English competitors.

The opposite side of the room was lined with steel filing cabinets. On top of them were dictionaries, reference books and a sizeable globe.

Working space lay between the two sets of cabinets. At one end a large horseshoe table, with an European sitting inside its curve. Gathered on the other side were an Indian, an Eurasian and two other

Europeans.

More than a dozen wooden desks of different sizes and colours occupied the central part of the floor. They were jammed together, face to face, in two contiguous rows. Some stood an inch or so taller than others. Some had a glass cover, others were without. Vintage Underwood typewriters and black bakelite telephones stood on a number of them. Only three Chinese were at the desks. Yet, somehow, the men and desks presented a form of unity. A much larger desk stood at right angles to the cluster, accompanied by a swivel chair.

At 3.25 p.m. a rotund and partially bald man of medium height brushed past Suen. He had a beer belly of gargantuan size and was dressed in a blue double-breasted blazer incapable of being buttoned over his midriff. A regimental tie and a pair of grey slacks completed his outfit.

As the man headed for the large desk, he was intercepted by the receptionist. She whispered something. The man glanced in Suen's direction and then at his watch. He then removed his blazer, hung it on a clothes stand and took his seat at the City Editor's desk, before signalling to the receptionist to show his caller in.

"How good of you to come, Mr. Lam," Major Monroe said, standing up to offer a hand and gesturing with his other hand for Suen to take a seat next to the desk. "I'm sorry I'm late. Unavoidably detained. It's always encouraging to find young men interested in entering our ancient profession. Have you just come from China?"

"No, I've been back for three months. I used to live here, before the war."

"I see. May I have a look at your qualifications please?"

Suen handed over his Matriculation and Cambridge School Leaving Certificates and a letter of reference from Reverend Adams testifying to his mastery of the English language.

“Excellent, excellent,” Major Monroe intoned, as he studied the documents. “You can type?”

“Yes, Sir. I typed my letter of application.”

“Of course. What about shorthand?”

“I’m learning, Sir.”

“Very good. That would be a distinct advantage. Let me be frank. A lad with your grades would normally be looking at university or some commercial calling. Why do you want to be a reporter?”

Before Suen could answer, the major continued: “We run a very tight organization, with cub reporters the lowest of the low. They have to be prepared for long hours and dangerous assignments. Lost weekends too, attending social functions, sporting events, fires, funerals, the sites of natural disasters. Pay isn’t much. What we need is dedication. We can’t afford to train people who disappear after a few months. We only want those truly committed to journalism.”

Suen was reluctant to admit that he had purely stop-gap intentions. His mind raced for a response which would sound reasonably honest yet not damaging to his chances. He couldn’t hit upon a satisfactory form of words, however. Instead, he blurted out: “I’m an orphan, Sir.”

“Sorry to hear that,” the City Editor mumbled, embarrassed, evidently taking the answer to imply that the young man had little to fall back on. The fourth glass of wine at lunch had befuddled him into not noticing the Bowen Road address given in the application.

“Let’s try you on probation, Mr. Lam. Three months. When can you start?”

“Any time that suits you, Sir.”

“Good. Let’s say next Monday.” The major then yelled across the room to one of three Chinese sitting at the bank of desks.

A man in his mid-thirties with sad eyes and a serious,

contemplative face rose and approached the City Editor. He was stocky, with powerful shoulders, but his movements were smooth and agile, like those of a featherweight boxer tuned up for a match.

“You want me?” the man asked, in a slow, throaty voice.

“Yes, this young man is Mr. Lam. I’d like you to take him in hand, show him the ropes. He’s coming on board on probation, as a cub. You’re at the Central Magistracy at the moment, aren’t you? Start him there on Monday.”

Then, turning to Suen, the major added: “This is Mr. Yuen, our Chief Reporter. You wouldn’t find a better or more experienced teacher in this line of business.”

“Just call me Kim,” the Chief Reporter said, as he shook hands with Suen. “Come along. I’ll introduce you to the others and show you how things operate around here.”

The major gave every appearance of having no further interest in either of them, for he picked up a packet of cigarettes from his desk, extracted one and lit it. He then loosened his tie.

“Excuse me a moment,” Suen said to Kim. Turning back to the major, he asked: “May I have my certificates back?”

“Oh, yes,” the major said, picking them up from his desk and returning them.

“Thank you, Sir. And my salary?”

“What? Salary?” The major’s voice boomed, sounding aggrieved. He stared at Suen absent-mindedly. “Oh, salary. Slipped my mind. Let’s say a hundred and fifty a month.”

“Sir, that’s hardly enough for two square meals a day.”

“Mr. Lam, by rights you should be paying us!” The major countered. “We’re going to equip you with skills which will stand you in good stead for the rest of your days. We’re taking a chance, investing our

time and effort. We're paying you without knowing whether you're any good. Seeing you're an orphan, I've tried to be generous, to help with travelling expenses and the like. We live in a tough world. The only thing further I can offer is a review of salary after probation."

Suen was about to protest further when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a dissuading look from the Chief Reporter. "All right, Sir," he said. "I shall wait for a review in three months."

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Kim first introduced Suen to the other two men working at the bank of desks and then said: "This working area's for reporters. The typewriters and telephones are communal. No desk is assigned. Use whichever is vacant. First come, first served. Each has one or two top drawers with locks. Lockable drawers are claimed like uninhabited land and are duly acknowledged by your peers, a sort of privilege for long-service. None is available at the moment. If you wish to leave some personal item, say, a book, a sweater or bottle of aspirin, use any of the empty lower drawers. Don't leave anything valuable."

Kim then pointed out the office of Mr. Meadows, Editor-in-Chief, at the other end of the room and explained that the group of sub-editors at the horseshoe table constituted the Foreign New desk. Other Europeans scattered around outside were editorial, feature and sports writers.

"Key thing each day is to check regularly the logbook on the City Editor's desk," Kim continued. "Major Monroe gives assignments for the following day in the afternoon. Make sure you know what you've been assigned. Before you start, dig up the background from the morgue, which in our parlance is that collection of filing cabinets over there. They are

filled with files on all kinds of subjects, complete with photographs and clippings. For example, if you are down to interview a visiting politician, you'll need to know enough about him to ask intelligent questions. But the major can slip in last minute assignments. A Rotary lunch, a funeral or the like. Keep checking the log. Now, I'll show you the rest of the building."

The tour began from the basement, where the printing presses and the gigantic rolls of newsprint were located. The air there was thick with the smell of ink.

"The presses don't really start rolling till the Night Editor has put the paper to bed, that is, the completion of Editorial Department input," Kim explained.

The ground floor was occupied by the business, advertising and circulation departments. It was packed with people. Behind the counters bright, diligent girls were attending to customers wishing to place classifieds or to order subscriptions.

The first floor was filled with rows of clattering linotype machines. The whole place was noisy, grimy and poorly ventilated, leaving the air thick with the pungencies of printing ink, molten lead and human toil. The soiled workers going to and fro could have equally been chimney sweeps or coal miners. Oblong steel frames, the size of broadsheet pages, rested on stone tables, filled with the output from the linotype machines. Next to each frame was a paper mock-up of the page, indicating spaces already taken up by ads. Once a composition was completed, it was inked and imprinted for proof-readers to check for errors.

"They're doing the early pages," Kim explained. "Features, reviews, editorial page articles, letters to the Editor, stuff like that. Be careful not to brush against anything or you'll get ink all over."

Suen nodded and pulled a face. "Not a place to enter in white ducks," he observed, wryly.

The floor above held the editorial offices and the floor above that a photographic dark room, a staff canteen and a room for teleprinters which spewed endless reams of text on overseas happenings. An office attendant delivered the material regularly to the Foreign News Desk.

During the course of the tour Suen warmed to Kim. The older man had explained the various stages of newspaper production without condescension.

When they arrived at the canteen, they found it practically empty. They decided to have some tea.

“Did you learn your English here?” Kim asked after they had seated “It’s first class. I detect an occasional American inflection though.”

“Thank you. I did start English here. But I learnt most of it in Kunming, at an American Baptist missionary school.”

“Ah, that accounts for the American inflections.”

“I’m conscious of it and do try to catch myself. What about you? Where did you study English?”

“Like you, I started here. At St. Paul’s Co-Ed, but ended up at a Church Missionary Society school in Canton. Later it was Lingnan University. Wanted to teach literature but other things got in the way.”

The two men sipped tea in silence for a while.

“Forgive me for being nosey, but are you really an orphan?” Kim asked.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Please tell me to mind my own business if I’m out of line, but are you sure you want to be a reporter? Not much future here for a bright lad like you. If you can’t get into a university, I’d try another line of work. Just look around our office. The top jobs are all held by expatriates. You’ll never get their salaries. Nor their perks -- housing, long holidays, passages, club memberships and so on. You could slog away for years and perhaps

end up as a sub-editor, still on local terms. It would be a terrible waste.”

“Thanks for your concern. Strictly between you and me, I don’t expect to be around long. I’m just killing time, until I start university in the autumn.”

“Oh, that’s a different kettle of fish!” The Chief Reporter sounded elated. “Have you landed a scholarship or a bursary?”

“No, nothing like that. Actually I’m trying to make up my mind on whether I ought to go to England or America.”

Kim arched an eyebrow. “Both very expensive. Thought you were an orphan?”

“I am, but I’m also a beneficiary of a generous trust. And I have a very rich grandmother as well.”

“How fortunate! Now I needn’t worry over arranging some extra income for you. You can learn a thing or two here. Lessons from street life can come in handy.”

The two men walked down the stairs back to the Editorial Department. On arrival, Kim said: “Let’s meet here at 9.15 on Monday and I’ll take you to the courts. It’s an easy walk. Incidentally, wear something less eye-catching than a Sun Yat-Sen suit. This is still a British colony. Don’t frighten off people at first sight, particularly those you might need assistance from to discharge your duties. Try to blend in. People are likely to be more forthcoming towards those who dress like themselves.”

“Point taken,” Suen said. Then he headed for home.