

The Battle of the Loudspeakers

Hong Kong, July 1967:

Cymbals clashed, drums rumbled and the falsetto laments of a Cantonese aria reverberated outside the office of Derek Soames at Beaconsfield House. Ordinarily, such an irritating invasion of his peace and quiet would cause the Senior Press Officer of the Hong Kong Government Information Service to decamp immediately for a drink at one of the shrinking number of places where his credit remained unquestioned. Contrary to expectation, however, he seemed uncharacteristically unbothered. Indeed, he appeared to be positively revelling in those ear-splitting sounds.

They were, after all, his idea. He had masterminded the current battle of the loudspeakers. The deafening decibels underscored a deadly contest with the Chinese Communists, holed up across the road in the Bank of China Building. The expressions registered on the faces of passers-by suggested they were enjoying the silliness and, in the sober Communist view of things, to be regarded as silly was tantamount to having lost.

Derek Soames allowed his florid features to break into a self-satisfied smile. Opera was an acquired taste, particularly Cantonese opera, he reflected, as he rose from his desk. He waddled across the room to a steel filing cabinet, waving his arms as he went, in parody of those performers with grotesquely painted faces. From the bowels of a filing cabinet he extracted a clear plastic bottle printed with the popular Gold Star brand of mineral water. He took a hefty swig and smiled again as he closed his sly, intelligent eyes. He would have preferred gin but its aroma was too revealing in the office. Vodka had to do.

Soames, at forty-one, was already rapidly going to seed. His bulbous nose, his flabby, insolent mouth and his retracted chin inspired little confidence in superiors or associates. That accounted for the briefness of his previous careers in advertising and with a British tabloid. But he had luck, and through some kindly twist of fate he had been offered a job in Hong Kong as Senior Press Officer. It came just in the nick of time, for creditors and landlords in the slums of Liverpool, where he had digs, were already closing in like quicksand. The pay was nothing to shout about but the hours were mercifully short and the standard of work undemanding even for someone of his slackness.

His relocation suited his two main indulgences. Alcohol was his lifeblood and its cheapness in Hong Kong a godsend. Added to that was the plentiful supply of clean-smelling Oriental women. There was something about them which excited both his libido and his imagination. Their smooth magnolia skins and their sweet Eastern scents stirred him. Their voices tinkled soft and musical, whether in excitement or rebuke. It seemed he had escaped not only from his unsympathetic creditors but also from the shaved legs and sweaty pungencies of Merseyside women. Yes, gin and womanly tonics were all he desired.

His notion of heaven was a place filled with petite Oriental maidens, plying both. He could almost hear, in those recurring moments of reverie, their delightful, child-like propositions.

“Dellick, dalling, you gimme sixty dollahs faw all night, okay?” they would wheedle at the bars he frequented. He never managed to find strength to say anything other than “okay”, even though each affirmation increased the precariousness of his finances.

He could have winged things on the never-never, got by somehow cadging from colleagues. But those damned Communists had upset everything with their Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. What had hitherto been an amusing game of wit and luck and soft living had turned into something resembling hard work. He loathed hard work, almost as much as the deprivation of his nocturnal routine of drink and women.

It had all started unremarkably enough. A tedious labour dispute in a major shipping company in March had culminated in a victory of sorts for a Communist union. Then, a couple of months later, a rash of co-ordinated disputes erupted, involving a textile factory, a cement factory, four taxi companies and a manufacturer of artificial flowers.

When pickets illegally prevented the management of the artificial flower company from removing goods from the premises, police intervened and twenty-one of the pickets, including its leader, were arrested.

A collection of Communist unions demanded the immediate release of the pickets and government compensation. When the demands were rejected, rioting broke out in Kowloon. It lasted three days. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs entered the fray, protesting against British brutality and alleging that two hundred compatriots had been killed during the disturbances.

At that point only one person had been killed -- and probably by rioters rather than the police. But chanting students soon marched into the centre of town waving little red books containing the thoughts of Chairman Mao. Demonstrations also flared up in front of Government House. Powerful loudspeakers were installed at the Bank of China and at other Communist-controlled buildings. They began broadcasting seditious propaganda and incitements to violence. Intermittent riots erupted, forcing the authorities to impose curfews.

On June 3 the People's Daily in Peking called on Hong Kong people “to organize a courageous struggle against the British and to be ready to respond to the call of the Motherland for smashing the reactionary rule of the British”. The call was reproduced in local left-wing newspapers. That led to mob assaults on the police. On June 24 a general strike was declared and on the same day a mob of two hundred attacked a police post in the border village of Sha Tau Kok. The post was attacked again on July 8, this time with machine guns, and five policemen were killed. Eleven more were wounded.

The local moneybags had long sent their families to boltholes in North America and Australia and their liquid assets to numbered accounts in Switzerland. Now, even ordinary citizens formed lengthening queues for visas at foreign consulates. British officials began thinking the last jewel in the crown of empire was about to be snatched away. Discreet telephone calls to airline offices were made. Plans to bring children out for summer holidays were cancelled. Family heirlooms were quickly packed and shipped away.

But Derek Soames remained unfazed. It was not that he was made of sterner stuff. It was just that the unintelligible racket emanating from the Bank of China Building opposite had

rendered him incapable of thought. It also drove him with increasing frequency to the mineral water bottles in his filing cabinet. To add to his confusion, journalistic idiots in London, Washington and other capitols, utterly ignorant of time zones, kept ringing up at all hours to demand backgrounders and sitreps.

An excess of alcohol and a deficiency of sleep soon combined to shroud everything in a not unpleasant haze. It was in that merry condition that Soames attended an emergency staff meeting called by the Director of Information Services. Neither the Director's nervousness nor his desperate tones registered with Soames.

With a comforting sense of detachment he heard the Director articulate, seemingly from a vast distance, the sombre assessments of the great and the mighty. The Director revealed that umpteen meetings had taken place at the highest levels and everyone had had his say. The Attorney General held that broadcasts from the Bank of China Building constituted a criminal offence, a public nuisance at best and sedition at worst. They had to be stopped if the law was not to be brought into disrepute. The Director of the Special Branch warned, however, that arms had been stockpiled in the vaults of the Bank of China. Any attempt to interfere with the broadcasts or to confiscate the loudspeakers was likely to be resisted and might lead to a bloodbath.

The Commissioner of Police opined that his men, while remaining ready to serve the Crown, would probably balk at storming a fortified building owned by the Chinese state. A number of them had already been killed and attacks by mobs were becoming more frequent. The Political Adviser pointed out that forceable entry into a Chinese state institution would bring diplomatic repercussions. The Defence Secretary said shooting could bring the intervention of the People's Liberation Army. The limited British forces would be quite incapable of offering meaningful resistance. The Economic Secretary said stock and property prices were plummeting and the exchange rate for the Hong Kong dollar was coming under intense pressure. The Commissioner for Banking reported massive outflows of hot money. The Director of Commerce and Industry said business confidence would crumble completely unless law and order were quickly restored.

It seemed, according to the Director of Information Services, the only action so far agreed was the issuing of a summons for causing a public nuisance. Everybody thought moderation a virtue. But beyond that there were divisions. How was the summons to be served, on whom and by whom? London was no help. It raised questions on the effect on British exports to China, the security of British investments there and the safety of British nationals. While London was being consulted, the Director said, it would be as well to marshal ideas on how best to serve a summons should one be ultimately issued.

"Forget the summons. Just give them a bit of their own medicine," Derek Soames said, languidly and unsteadily.

"What do you mean, Soames?" the Director asked, frowning.

"That racket across the road is driving me round the bend. Why not pay them back in their own coin? Rig up a few loudspeakers and blast them with 'Rule Britannia'. It probably won't be legal, but what the hell! See how they like that!"

“Wait a minute! That’s not a bad idea,” an Assistant Director interjected. “Fighting fire with subterfuge! ‘Rule Britannia’ might be too provocative but what about Cantonese opera? That’s noisy enough to drown anything. Most locals know and like the stuff. Just think, operatic arias against the mouthings of Mao! Should be no contest!”

“Brilliant!” the Director said. “I’ll float that at the Chief Secretary’s Committee.”

Thus it came about that the battle of the loudspeakers was launched.

Soames took another swig from his mineral water bottle and a germ of resentment grew in him. No one had given him so much as a verbal pat on the back for his brainwave. Probably his name never even rated a mention in the Chief Secretary’s Committee. That was about par for the course with those old farts. Stealing the ideas of others without so much as a by your leave.

His resentment grew by quantum leaps as he visualized them with their la-di-da Oxbridge accents, their old boy networks and their secret masonic understandings. He hated the way they dropped crumbs of information to demonstrate their access to top secret papers. They turned their noses up at him at the Victoria Cricket Club as if he suffered from some unsociable disease. There was no need for that. He was only trying to make a living, just like them. He might have faults but at least he never tried to pretend he was something he was not. Well, he’d got their measure, seeing them flustered and indecisive over a small local difficulty. They were nothing more than fifth-rate brains masquerading as third-rate mandarins!

He had helped in their scams for years, putting out all that guff about how well they were running the world’s most successful economy, bringing stability and the rule of law. Well, where were their stability and rule of law now? They couldn’t run a Wimpy stand, let alone an economy like Hong Kong’s. It was the hard work and enterprise of the locals that had brought the place its success. Those old frauds merely stole the credit.

Soames pulled generously on the mineral water container and as he did so his resentments, real and imaginary, sharpened and multiplied. They had always done him down, never appreciated his talents. They had given him the most obnoxious assignments and passed him over for promotion. They blamed him whenever their pathetic speeches failed to make the newspapers. And all the while they pretended they were little tin gods bestowing good governance upon a heathen population.

Until the recent troubles, where in the world had there been a place requiring less governing than Hong Kong? Virtually all the essentials of modern living were in private hands. That was the real secret of Hong Kong’s success. Electricity, gas, telephone, telegraph and television were all run by private companies. So were buses, trams, ferries, cable cars, dockyards, wharfs and civil aviation. Three commercial banks issued local bank notes. Defence was provided by Britain, for an annual fee, though the efficacy of that defence was highly questionable. There were no elections to speak of, no labour exchanges, no unemployment benefits, no old age pensions, no social security. Even in a vital area of economic and political development like education, the government operated little more than five per cent of the schools.

Basically, government was in the hands of amateurs with little clue about how things ought to be run. They had a streak of shrewdness, to be sure. They realized that by sloughing off responsibilities to others, to business enterprises, voluntary organizations or private individuals, they could not be blamed for things going wrong. Malfeasance might be a crime but non-feasance was difficult to call to account. They hit upon fancy terms to justify avoidance of responsibility. Laissez-faire or free enterprise or positive non-intervention. What a laugh! They effected surprise and buried their envy when private individuals got on with supplying services and made fortunes at it.

They contented themselves with cutting ribbons, officiating at charity balls and mouthing platitudes. In time, as they watched boom after boom envelop the colony, they actually began thinking it was their genius, their masterly inaction, that had brought prosperity to millions. They rewarded themselves with perks and lived on the Peak, attended by official servants and uniformed chauffeurs. They waited with bated breath for the gongs and knighthoods they regarded as their due.

In reality, they had only the vaguest notion of how things worked. They remained blissfully ignorant of the rampant insider trading at the stock exchanges, the knavery among land developers and contractors, the gold smuggled from Macau inside the disembowelled bodies of babies, the bribes paid to the “no money, no water” fire service, the protection fees extracted from streetside hawkers and prostitutes, the syndicated corruption within the Police, the “snake heads” who brought in illegal immigrants by the boatload.

How complacent they were! How out of touch! Derek Soames felt a perverse desire to see the boot up their backsides, even if it had to be a Communist boot.

He took another drink and cursed himself for playing their game, doing their dirty work. How often had he refrained from exposing their frauds! How often had he trotted out dreary statistics about GDP growth, full employment, increases in exports, budget surpluses, hefty reserves and foreign investments to save their bacon! How off-handedly had he covered up the current parlous situation by posing a rhetorical question: “Would anyone be so stupid as to kill a goose that lays golden eggs?”

Even in his state of semi-inebriation he realized the question assumed that rational human beings rather than demented ideologues were calling the tune over Hong Kong. A risky assumption at the best of times and the present was decidedly not the best of times. And then there was a quirkiness in Orientals that had to be taken into account. In spite of an increasingly materialistic world, there were still many who placed face, pride, honour and other intangibles above money.

Well, the game had a long way to play yet. Pity he couldn't count on too many of his own countrymen to play it with him. The allies he needed were some of the brighter local civil servants, like T. P. Choy, who had been done down like himself by the eunuchs at the top. People like Choy would understand the real situation and would appreciate that so long as ordinary citizens did not lose their nerve, Communist bullyings and Whitehall ineptitudes could be surmounted. Hong Kong was supposed to be an anachronism, a colony without a magna carta or a bill of rights.

It had been deprived of elected representation. Yet the commonsense and pragmatism of its people managed to turn it into one of the truly free and thriving places in the world.

They deserved better than to be left to the tender mercies of bullies and incompetents. The eyes of the world were on Hong Kong and he wondered if he might, for once, spill the beans and expose the bureaucratic fault lines to the journalists now flooding in like competing undertakers.

He had been assigned to pick up yet another journalist that evening. This one he had heard of before, by the name of Sebastian Baxingdale, as the Far Eastern correspondent of the Daily Globe. He was coming direct from Saigon, where for the last three years he had been getting up the noses of Pentagon types with his weekly "Letter From Vietnam". He had also won Press awards for his coverage of the conflict. Well, it was about time somebody got up the noses of those in the ivory towers of Hong Kong and London. Baxingdale might be just the man. He had previously served with the garrison in Hong Kong. They couldn't pull the wool over his eyes so easily!

Soames emptied the contents of the mineral water bottle and discovered to his dismay that all the bottles were empty. He gathered them into a carrier bag and headed out of his office, leaving Beaconsfield House by the back exit. That lead into Battery Path, whereas the front entrance was directly opposite the Bank of China.

It was best for a gweilo carrying a load of empty bottles to avoid chanting Communist sympathisers, he thought. Otherwise the encounter might turn out a shade too Noel Cowardish.