

## Debits and Credits

### **Hong Kong, April 1968:**

Baxingdale leaned back against the chair and stretched himself. He had been practising Chinese characters with a brush for an hour. The orthodox way of holding the instrument, not yet entirely familiar to him, had tired his wrist and cramped his hand. He set down the brush and wriggled his fingers. The bold, black pictographs on the rice paper gave him a sense of accomplishment. Each character, though less than perfectly formed, still appeared respectable and pleasing to the eye. They struck him as more attractive than the emaciated script of the Latin alphabet!

When he first expressed an interest in learning Chinese and mastering the brush, his tutor, Madam Shek, had reacted with surprise. “A traditionalist, are you?” she had cried with delight. “An unusual aspiration for a Westerner, especially when our own schools are abandoning the brush for the ballpoint. Acquiring even a passable competence requires hard work and much practice. You sure you’re prepared for that?”

“Yes,” he had replied, unhesitatingly.

“Good. You have a choice of approaches. You can either begin as Chinese children have done for centuries with the Three Character Classic, or follow a system popular among foreigners, based on learning a thousand basic characters.”

“The former, please.”

Madam Shek then explained briefly the practical philosophy embodied in the Three Character Classic, governing learning, filial piety and human relationships. At the first lesson she taught the basic strokes in forming characters, the appropriate way of holding the brush, how to tease on the right amount of ink and how to steady the wrist while writing.

Baxingdale discovered that the classic, written in the Thirteenth Century, had been in universal use until modern schooling edged it out of dominance. Its name was derived from the way its text was presented, in phrases of three characters making up 356 alternately rhyming lines. It began with a brave and optimistic assertion. “The nature of Man at birth is good.” It then went on to stress the importance of education in developing that innate nature in children.

The ideas expounded were not dissimilar to those held by his parents, Baxingdale reflected. Studying hard, bringing honour to ancestors, behaving decently towards neighbours, acting with fairness towards all. His parents had taught by example, supporting pacifism, opposing imperialism and pursuing ideals which often ran counter to the temper of the times. “A man must not just mouth his beliefs but live them,” his father had emphasized.

The recollection brought a smile to his face. Bless his parents. The trouble was that each time he tried to follow their teachings he had ended in a mess. He had joined the army at the start of the Korean War to defend freedom against tyranny. Instead he found himself at the borders of Hong Kong driving back refugees. His teaching efforts at Hackney also went disastrously wrong, probably doing more harm than good.

Writing fiction ended no differently. His scribblings found no acceptance among publishers. It took him a while to realize he had not lived enough. The characters he created had been too deficient in human failings. They hardly ever got skewered by mismatched or unrequited love! His portrayals of love had come across as dreamy abstractions, half created and half plagiarized. His brief and unsatisfactory affair with Phoebe Sweetman was all the experience he had to go by. No one had previously excited him like Lucille Chu. It was only after meeting her that he understood how love could turn the world upside down, that man without woman was incomplete. The Taoist imperative of keeping the Yin and the Yang in balance then began to seep into his consciousness.

Thoughts of Lucille stirred the sediments of loneliness and despair within him and gave him a thirst. He stood up, rotated his head to loosen the neck muscles and strolled over to the refrigerator for a bottle of the local San Miguel beer. He uncapped it and took a swallow. The coldness rushing down his gullet struck him like an internal douche.

Lucille continued to invade his thoughts as he drank. In spite of the advance billing by Derek Soames, he had not been prepared for her devastating beauty. He now relived the moment of their meeting. Dark, phoenix eyes, smooth magnolia skin, succulent lips. The lips, in particular, seemed designed for whispered endearments and immaculate kisses. He had betrayed himself hopelessly upon being introduced, by retaining her hand longer than was appropriate. Her unabashed voluptuousness and her open American manners, so different from the usual shyness and hesitancy in Chinese women, left him unhinged.

No woman had a right to look so damnably desirable, he reflected. A line from Marlowe struggled for recollection. What was it? Something about whoever loved who did not at first sight?

When he discovered she was also taking Chinese lessons from Madam Shek, he wondered whether their meeting had been fated. She had to be in search of something. What? Knowledge, roots, identity, purpose? What better relationship than one between two misfits, unsure of what they wanted out of life?

His instinct had been to give chase, to surrender to that wondrous tingling in his soul. The fact she was married to a powerful man merely added the spice of risk.

But at the same moment he also saw himself as he was, a foreigner, a gweilo, a common object of disdain among the Chinese. Even allowing for Lucille Chu's American egalitarianism, he had no money or illustrious connections to fall back on. He was just a paid voyeur of human tragedies, a hired chronicler of the poverty and enslavements blighting the world. What kind of a future was that to offer any woman?

Yet another line from Marlowe occurred to him and he wanted to cry: "Sweet Lucille, make me immortal with a kiss!" But how absurd to fantasize about a woman in his situation. He ought to stop behaving like an infatuated schoolboy! It was an impossible love. She had come too late into his life and he was too old for self-delusions.

Baxingdale returned to his desk with the beer, sat down and heaved a sigh. He gazed down upon his exercise sheets. He had been fiddling with Chinese calligraphy because he couldn't

concentrate on his work. The deadline for his next “Letter From Hong Kong” was only a day away. The prospect of getting down to it depressed him further. He reluctantly stacked away the exercise papers and brought out his Remington portable. What should he write? Another account of the mayhem and bloodletting in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution?

He was thoroughly sick of the subject. In a way he was glad diplomatic wranglings over a visa had kept him out of China. The British Embassy building had been sacked and the Reuters correspondent was still under house arrest. If he were there he would no doubt suffer an equally unpleasant fate.

Yet he could not escape knowledge of what was going on. Soames had put him in contact with an operative in the secret Anglo-American intelligence unit in the Immigration Department. He had seen some of the debriefing transcripts of refugees and illegal immigrants. They recorded in soul-blanching detail the disasters occurring in towns and villages across the southern provinces.

He had had his bellyful of death and suffering in Vietnam. The rattle of gunfire, the cries of the injured, the smell of burning flesh, death agonies in their various shapes and forms. They were all too familiar. So was his nausea of helplessness and disgust. No doubt the gathering protests in Britain and elsewhere against the war in Vietnam must reflect a more universal disgust. Yet the carnage went on. Now China had opened up its entire country to killings and excesses. It was the middle of the Twentieth Century yet barbarities remained medieval. Was the world going mad? Or was the real nature of Man basically far from good?

Suddenly, the cry of an itinerant hawker penetrated the room, interrupting his introspections. He had heard such cries before, each one touting a distinctive trade. He could normally identify them but the cry sounded novel this evening. It had the quality of a lament. The sound drew him out onto the narrow wrought iron balcony of his second floor flat and all at once the hubbub of his neighbourhood swelled around him, like part carnival and part hymn.

His flat was located along one of the meaner approaches to Victoria Peak. It was wedged in a steep, cobbled street linking Caine Road and Hollywood Road, a stone’s throw from the heart of the business and financial district. The Globe’s housing allowance was sufficient for accommodation in a more fashionable area. But he wanted to be connected to ordinary people, to the un-Westernized and less well-off, to those whose Chineseness had not yet been eclipsed by the ravages of colonialism.

The bubbling vitality of the neighbourhood washed over him. He closed his eyes and allowed the familiar medley of sounds to overwhelm him. The clip-clop of wooden clogs, the whirr of a sewing machine next door, the garrulous voice of Mrs. Ngan gossiping on the telephone, the shuffling of mah jong tiles, snatches of music, laughter and high-pitched altercations, water gargling down drainpipes, the rumble of vehicles along the intersecting roads. On some evenings the notes of a flute would float at the far edge of hearing. But not tonight.

Smells, too, wafted around him. Hints of camphor from across the street, where wooden chests with stone inlays were being fashioned. The sour odours of hemmed-in humanity; whiffs of sandalwood incense from ancestral altars or from the Man Mo Temple a short distance

away; the fragrances of stir-fried cooking from adjacent kitchens; and the more powerful pungencies of fermented tofu and salted fish from food stalls farther along the street.

He opened his eyes and was greeted by the familiar sight of housewives hanging out washing between garish shop signs. On the pavements were scatterings of old women and children assembling plastic flowers. Labourers chatted under street lamps or idled outside shop fronts. A few were munching snacks. Stalls, consisting of little more than shallow shelves nailed to a wall, were still trading in cigarettes and magazines, toilet paper and stationery. The area was too far down the economic scale to sprout the kind of neon signs disfiguring the centre of the city or to invite an invasion by international franchisers of junk food.

There was something enduringly Chinese all around him, in spite of more than a century of colonial rule and the pressures of the gathering Cultural Revolution. He knew that many were making sacrifices to send aid to relatives caught up in the homeland chaos. Their bland faces and their practised civilities hid so much, both of their strengths and their weaknesses. He had been living among them for nine months, yet he was far from understanding them. A curious chiaroscuro seemed to obscure them. He had no real idea what they thought of him, a gweilo, camped in their midst. Did they regard him as part of the imperialist order or had they tolerated him as an eccentric touched by too much sun? It was hard to say.

But one thing was certain. Behind their inscrutability, they were a remarkable race. Perhaps that came from what the German philosopher, Johann Herder, had called Volkgeist, the ability of a race to follow its own historical rhythm and maintain its own psychological characteristics. The writer of the Three Character Classic had observed that some men left their sons chests filled with gold but he wanted to leave children only one book. It was possible that the contents of that one book had been part of that nation's strengths.

The Chinese capacity for patience and endurance was amazing. Had that quality enabled their civilization to survive for thousands of years while others crumbled into dust? Upheavals associated with dynastic cycles had been regular features in their history. Yet they seemed to take them in their stride, surviving rectification campaigns, communes and official attacks on Confucian ideas. Seen in that light the Cultural Revolution might just be one more misfortune to overcome.

But what of the humiliations inflicted by foreigners? Would the Chinese, as a nation, ever forget? The grievances were many. Gunboat diplomacy, annexations of land, extraterritorial rights, the torching of the Summer Palace, the looting of national treasures and the massacres of students and demonstrators in their concessions and colonies. If there was no forgiveness, were they patiently waiting for an opportune moment to settle scores? The riots of the previous year might indicate the shape of things to come.

He could sense resentments at many levels, particularly against Britain among the local intellectuals Derek Soames had introduced him to at Szeto's Bar. References to British rule were seldom unlaced by contempt.

He recalled a beer-drinking session the previous week. As the only Englishman present, he bore the brunt of many awkward questions. Why should Britain strip Hong Kong

British subjects of the right of abode in Britain under the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act? Was that not an act of blatant racism aimed at non-white races? Why should Britain preach free trade in one breath and impose import restrictions on Hong Kong textiles the next? Why should the Hong Kong public be denied the air services of foreign airlines simply to protect the profitability of the state-owned BOAC? And how did legislation requiring local public transport companies to buy British Leyland buses square with free market principles?

The subject which generated most resentment was the huge losses suffered by the colony due to the recent devaluation of sterling. Hong Kong had built up substantial reserves over the years but London required them to be held in sterling. As a consequence the colony became the second largest holder of sterling in the world.

It had been apparent for some time, however, that economic bunglings and social disharmonies in Britain would sooner or later force a devaluation. Hong Kong naturally wanted to protect itself by diversifying its holdings. But Whitehall denied permission. When the inevitable came Hong Kong lost a quarter of its reserves or approximately £79,000,000. That sum could have been better used building schools, hospitals, public housing and other amenities. London took no responsibility and refused to consider compensation.

Such behaviour had been less than defensible, the crowd at Szeto's Bar declared. The duty of care owed by a metropolitan power towards a dependent territory had been breached. He could offer no excuse. He could only respond by saying: "Why haven't you chaps done something about that, instead of crying in your beer?"

The answer came from a senior civil servant by the name of T. P. Choy. "The concensus is that it's best not to rock the boat. Venting our spleen at gatherings like this is one thing but, ultimately, it's better the devil you know than the one you don't."

"Don't quite follow. Your complaints seem legitimate enough. Why not demand redress? Some of you are working for the government, for heaven's sake! Can't you push through change?"

"Some of us do work for the administration, my dear fellow, but we don't make the decisions. The important ones are taken in London. Political poker involves high stakes. Likely gains are not proportionate to possible losses. At the moment all geopolitical factors favour London. The community here has nothing to gain through protesting but a great deal to lose."

"Chinese pragmatism," an assistant professor of history named Mun commented.

"You mean cynicism, don't you?"

"We all know Peking wants Hong Kong to remain more or less as it is," Mun responded. "So does Britain and the majority of the local population. Peking needs Hong Kong to gain access to hard currencies and technologies, to gather intelligence and to keep a window on the world. We need Britain for a quiet life. Agitations against the British are likely to lead to instability. No one wants that."

"Everybody knows Britain is milking us," Choy added. "The Chinese are accustomed to paying protection money to triads and gangsters. But they had expected better from the Brits. If Britain wants to squeeze the colony, that's all right. Just don't be so damn hypocritical

about it. Our sharper operators would then feel less qualm about making it back speculating against sterling, circumventing British trade rules or simply by being fiercer barracudas when they come up against Brits in the free enterprise sea they all feed in.”

“If what you say is true, then it’s going to be quite a job drawing up the credits and debits on over a hundred years of British rule.”

Mun gave a merry laugh and intervened again. “Why such unseemly haste in that respect, my dear chap? History isn’t journalism. It need not be written fresh upon events. Indeed, it’s better without the immediacy of passion and personal involvement. Objectivity tends to increase over time. Political accountings are therefore best left to future generations.”

Baxingdale recalled those discussions as he gazed upon the lively street scene below. Successive British governments had refused to countenance giving Hong Kong people a voice. Even Socialist ones had retained atavistic attitudes towards democratic accountability and racial distinctions. Centuries earlier taxation without representation had sparked revolution in the American colonies. The trouble was that London was currently too preoccupied with strikes, demonstrations and the unravelling of the social order at home to consider its trusteeship responsibilities over a distant colony.

Such failure seemed shortsighted. His parents had believed that honesty and fair dealing were absolutes. Even if local people did not kick up a fuss for their own reasons, someone should raise the matter before the British electorate. His country’s record of empire had not been one deserving of much glory. But some reputation could be salvaged by relinquishing its last significant colony with a semblance of dignity and honour. The people of Hong Kong deserved it and his instincts as a patriot demanded it. It seemed a modest enough ambition to remind Westminster and Whitehall of their obligations.

With that thought Baxingdale left the balcony and returned to his desk. He inserted a sheet of paper into his typewriter and began drafting his next “Letter From Hong Kong”.