

Shifts in the Wind

Hong Kong, October 1978:

The enormous mirrored chamber in the World Trade Centre Building was filling up rapidly. The great and the mighty of the patriotic left came in dark well-tailored suits indistinguishable from those of corporate fellow travellers and diplomats seeking friendship with China. They made their entrances and shook hands with the Director of the New China News Agency and his deputies, before blending smoothly into one of the existing clusters of guests. Good manners and personal insecurities dictated that arriving guests attached themselves to groups whose status more or less approximated their own. Women guests were conspicuous by their rarity.

One wall of the room was dominated by a large replica of the national emblem of the People's Republic of China -- a garland encircling five stars shining above Peking's Gate of Heavenly Peace. The occasion for the party -- the celebration of the twenty-ninth anniversary of the founding of the Communist republic -- was made manifest by a red banner with gold characters hanging above the national emblem.

A workman was kneeling on a festooned dais beneath the decorations, engaged in last-minute checks on the unsightly bundle of cables connecting microphones and television lights. Press photographers and television cameramen hovered everywhere.

At each end of the room buffet tables, garnished with Chinese and Western hors-d'oeuvres, stood ready for consumption. Chinese dim sum and skewers of chicken and barbecued pork kept company with Parma ham, smoked salmon, miniature sausages, curry puffs and dainty vol-au-vents. White-gloved waiters in smart maroon jackets circulated with trays of drinks.

Sebastian Baxingdale stood with Derek Soames, the newly promoted Assistant Director of Information Services, to one side, against the wall opposite the dais. They made an unlikely couple, one tall, clean-cut and alert and the other resembling a bored and bulging burgher, with his nose tucked into a glass rapidly vanishing beer. They appeared like pale foreign ghosts at a predominantly Chinese gathering.

Baxingdale listened to the chaos of dialects resounding around him. To his ear some greetings seemed pitched half an octave too high and the occasional outbursts of laughter seemed artificial in their mirth. He divined a strange mixture of exaltation, uncertainty and scepticism in the mood, perhaps even a touch of apprehension. The political and economic equations had shifted dramatically over the last couple of years. For many the fall of the Gang of Four had fractured established allegiances and relationships. In the continuing power struggles, forging fresh links was both risky and difficult. A power-wielder one day might turn out to be a counter-revolutionary the next. Guilt by association was a contagious disease. But not to have contacts at all was to be left at the starting gates in the race for opportunity and wealth.

Only the previous month Baxingdale had noted the Ministry of Petroleum trumpeting about China's "magic weapon" of oil. Apparently the Victory Oilfield in Shantung had proved a great success, with revenues sufficient to finance 120 large-scale projects to be completed

by 1985. The target list included iron and steel complexes, railways, power stations, harbours and coal mines. Sulphur-free oil had been discovered in Hepei Province and in the South China Sea as well. With such juicy possibilities, hesitation was fatal. He had little doubt the stampede by international oil and money men towards the Ministry of Petroleum had already started.

At the same time, the political landscape in Hong Kong was shifting. British dominion suddenly appeared vulnerable and not to be taken for granted. The fact that for the first time in twenty-nine years a British Governor had deigned to attend a Chinese national day celebration was a straw in the wind. What did it augur? A belated recognition of a reality that had always been there or a preparation for some pragmatic deal, in exchange for retaining a degree of British influence in the uncertain years ahead?

Baxingdale knew that an overt division of spoils would be unseemly. Powerful local and overseas Chinese interests were in the scrum. Among the contenders were members of the Chinese National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Consultative Council and leading lights in the Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. But, not being a professional China watcher, he knew few of them by name or sight, only by reputation.

"Who do you know here?" he asked Soames, suddenly.

"Well, let's see," Soames said, emptying his glass of Tsingtao beer in one gulp. "A few of the drinking crowd at the Victoria Cricket Club, representatives of Jardine, Swire, the Hong Kong Bank, Standard Charter, Coopers and Lybrand. Then there's the Indian High Commissioner and the other consular types . . ."

"No, I mean Chinese."

"Ah! That's a different matter. Fraternizing with the enemy's new to me, you know. Previously we couldn't get within spitting distance of these fellows without having to report to the Defence Secretary and the Special Branch. Now it's our duty to accept invitations. What a bore! Most of these chaps are unknown because they never troop up to Government House to sign the book and hence are never invited to our functions. Political winds are definitely shifting."

"What an Alice-in-Wonderland world we're in!" Baxingdale said, shaking his head. "We're supposed to rule this place. There are people here who run banks, department stores, trading companies and shipping lines, who control schools, trade unions and newspapers, who bring in meat, poultry, rice and vegetables, delicacies like sharks' fins and swallows' nests, herbal medicines from Hupei and coffins from Liuchow. They supply oil, steel rods, cement and heaven knows what else. They trade in our property, stock and bullion markets, and yet, after 136 years, they remain largely faceless and anonymous to us. Amazing!"

"You don't know the half of it. You ought to see how some of the idiots really behave inside the establishment! Enough to drive a man to drink." With that Soames exchanged his empty glass for a full one from a passing waiter.

"What about you personally, Derek? You've never told me who your sources are among these people, apart from the female ones who swear by the properties of Connoisseur cognac!"

“Hey, I’ve already told you most of the people here don’t belong to the usual cocktail circuit. They don’t even speak our lingo. It’s not as if they’re into bridge or bowls or cricket. They haven’t even got around to serving civilized drinks like G & T. For hard information I rely on the likes of T. P. Chaps like him’ll do a lot better now that relations are less frosty. Can’t hold them back any more. If you go into it, you’ll probably find half of them connected in some way, gone to school or done things together during their youth. Might even be related, for heaven’s sake! We’ve had to second T. P. to escort the Guv around today, to interpret and make introductions.”

“Where’s T. P. now?”

“Downstairs I suppose, waiting for the Guv and the Political Advisor to turn up in the Crown car.”

Soames had hardly finished speaking when the Governor appeared at the reception line. He was tall, dour and patrician and was followed by the Political Advisor from the Foreign Office, the City District Commissioner T. P. Choy and a bodyguard who peeled off at the door.

Baxingdale watched the exchange of handshakes and diplomatic courtesies. He had witnessed such performances ad nauseam. The Director accompanied the Governor into the room. Television cameras rolled and flash bulbs exploded. Microphones were shoved towards their faces to catch any stray comment. Without hearing them Baxingdale knew their remarks could only be in banal diplomatic-speak.

A waiter appeared out of nowhere with drinks. Small talk was conducted with practised cordiality. The media lapped up the photo opportunities. Then, suitably equipped with libations, the Director and the Governor mounted the dais, like a pair of diplomatic marionettes, and toasted each other’s countries to the accompaniment of more media attention.

The atmosphere gradually became more relaxed. The ice accumulated over twenty-nine years slowly melted. The principals wove their way through the assembled guests, stopping at intervals to chat. Waiters circulated with trays of hors-d’oeuvres.

“Go easy on what you write today, won’t you?” Soames said, out of the blue. “The word from Whitehall is that your pieces are bordering on the subversive.”

“How jolly! The feeling’s mutual!” Baxingdale replied. “I think those weasels have been subverting the good name of our country for centuries.”

“Okay, I agree, but we’re just tiny screws in some vast contraption. We’re expected to keep our places. Otherwise the whole damned edifice comes crashing down. I’d better follow the Guv and keep an eye on him. Reggie Boy has given strict orders. If anything goes amiss he promised he’ll have my balls for breakfast.”

“You mean the Chief Secretary?”

“None other. Sir Reginald Beaufont Quinn, Knight Bachelor, Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George and all the rest of that bullshit. Don’t forget what I’ve said. See you at Szeto’s afterwards?”

“All right. I had better snag a few contacts too,” Baxingdale said, as Soames took his leave. He spotted two men talking a short distance away. One was sharp-featured and the other had an impressive scar on his right cheek. He remembered the sharp-faced man as Fu, the riot

leader who had made quite a splash during the 1967 disturbances and their aftermath. It would be interesting to discover whether his stint in a British gaol had affected his views on current political developments. He made his way towards the men.

“Nei ho! How are you?” Baxingdale offered, employing the honorific mode of Chinese taught by Madam Shek. “My humble surname is Baxingdale and I work for the Daily Globe in London. May I offer my good wishes on this auspicious day.”

“My insignificant surname is Fu, a teacher. This is Mr. Cheng, recently arrived from China to take up an appointment at one of China’s state banks. It is gratifying to meet a Westerner who has taken the trouble to learn our language.”

They shook hands and exchanged toasts.

Baxingdale studied Cheng as he might an opponent in the boxing ring before a bout. From the other’s firm handshake and erect carriage he surmised well-defined muscles beneath the inexpensive suit. If the man was a banking executive, he thought, then Sebastian Baxingdale was Mother Goose.

“I trust Mr. Cheng does not find the pace of life in Hong Kong uncongenial,” Baxingdale said.

“To speak the truth, this person hasn’t quite found his feet,” Cheng Ching replied. “Many things remain bewildering. Mr. Fu has been kind enough to show me the ropes.”

“That is not unusual for newcomers. I went through that phase myself. May I enquire which department Mr. Cheng supervises in his illustrious bank?”

Cheng Ching made a deprecating gesture. “Mr. Baxingdale flatters my lowly position. I do not have the privilege of supervising any department. My duties merely involve dealings in foreign currencies.”

“Ah, those can be onerous should turbulence hit the foreign exchange markets.”

“One lives in hope of being spared such travails. In any case, major decisions rest with my superiors.”

“I wonder if I might seek a favour from Mr. Cheng. I have long wanted to write an article on the foreign exchange earned by China from Hong Kong and its changing importance as China modernizes. As has been recently announced, China’s oil production is coming on stream to finance the Four Modernizations. The dependence on hard currency from Hong Kong must therefore be reduced. Might Mr. Cheng be in a position to assist with some facts and figures?”

“Mr. Baxingdale flatters this humble person again. Customers come to me to negotiate letters of credit and other petty commercial instruments. I have no knowledge of the foreign exchange requirements of my country. Even if I had, I would be without authority to release that information. You know how bureaucracies work. Everything is a state secret. In feudal times even the condition of the stools of an emperor was regarded as a state secret!”

“I’m all for leaving the condition of stools with bureaucrats!” Baxingdale said, laughing. “Let’s drink to that.”

The other two joined the laughter and all three toasted one another once more.

From the confident way Cheng ridiculed bureaucrats, Baxingdale surmised he had to be a senior cadre and one unafraid of speaking his mind. Cheng would be a contact worth cultivating. The man might even make a stimulating companion for an evening at Szeto's Bar.

"If I may make Mr. Baxingdale a suggestion," Cheng Ching said, cutting into Baxingdale's thoughts. "It may be more fruitful to approach the Bank of China. It has far greater authority than my modest institution. If I might have your card, I can pass on your request."

"Of course! How remiss of me!" Baxingdale passed copies of his visiting card to Cheng and Fu. He took theirs in return. "It would be a great convenience to be put in contact with the right section," he added.

"Mr. Baxingdale," Fu said. "Though we have only just met, our encounter is auspicious. Your illustrious name has been known to me for a decade. I have been much impressed by the even-handed way you have written about Hong Kong issues."

"Mr. Fu is too generous."

"You once wrote an article on the economic benefits derived by Britain from its possession of Hong Kong. Do you remember?"

"That was a long time ago."

"Yes, but I haven't forgotten it," Fu continued. "Some years later, following local suppression of the Diu Yu Toi demonstrations, you wrote again about the right of citizens to demonstrate peacefully. As a teacher, I am prevented by the provisions of the local Education Ordinance from teaching civic consciousness in the classroom. There is no regulation, however, against students reading articles in British newspapers. So for a number of years I've made your articles available to my students. I think your words have stimulated them and this humble person thanks Mr. Baxingdale for that."

"Good heavens! I had no idea of my own notoriety!" Baxingdale said. "I'm glad my scribblings have been of service. My countrymen have a saying -- there are many ways of skinning a cat."

Cheng Ching laughed. "Mr. Baxingdale jests excessively, to suggest that the British lion has turned into a cat!"

Baxingdale reciprocated with laughter.

"May I suggest, Mr. Baxingdale, out of respect for your professional eminence, another topic for inquiry," Fu said. "Chinese leaders have spoken of the imperative of seeking truth from facts. That is a good approach. The conventional wisdom advanced by many Western writers is that the prosperity, full employment and minimal inflation in Hong Kong have been a function of wise British administration, of adhering to free market policies, low taxation and the rule of law. But is that really so?"

Cheng Ching intervened. "I'm sure our honourable guest would not wish to delve into political matters on such an auspicious occasion."

Baxingdale sensed that Fu had been nursing a feeling of wounded chauvinism which Cheng was trying to deflect. "Oh, no," he interjected. "I'm all for seeking truth from facts. Since

Mr. Fu has given this unworthy person great face by offering his valuable insights, the least I can do is to benefit from them.”

“I mean no offence, Sir,” Fu said. “Nor am I aiming at a quarrel. I merely wish to express a Chinese point of view. This humble person’s feeling is that the main reasons for local prosperity have been China’s forbearance and the natural diligence of Hong Kong people. The British are here under the terms of treaties not recognized by China. But, rather than quarrel over that, China has decided to leave that matter to one side. It has instead taken pains to supply Hong Kong with inexpensive food, water and a wide range of daily necessities. It could have supplied more commodities of benefit to the local people, but the British have imposed quotas on essentials, such as rice.”

“Ah, yes, that has been a contention among rice merchants for some time,” Baxingdale said. “I do agree that rice quotas are rather silly in a supposedly free market.”

“China also stationed security forces along the border to deter Chinese citizens from exercising their natural desire to visit parents, relatives and friends in territory temporarily occupied by others. Those are the factors which have made for stability, low inflation and prosperity in Hong Kong, do you not agree?”

By now Fu was in full flow and Baxingdale nodded his agreement.

“Westerners wave the so-called rule of law around like a flag to justify colonialism at the end of the Twentieth Century. It is in fact a fraud. Local authorities have consistently perverted the law for their own purposes, to enforce or ignore as they wish. There are examples all around. The function of law is to deliver justice. King Solomon of the Jews knew this well. So did our own legendary Judge Pao. Where is the justice in preventing schools from teaching students about their own culture and their own historical traditions? Where is the justice in beating and imprisoning young men and women for demonstrating peacefully against plots to violate the territorial integrity of their country?”

Fu’s voice rose with indignation as he fired his rhetorical questions. “In spite of provocations, China has stayed its hand,” he continued. “It has not called upon citizens to rise and strike down unjust laws. It has suffered its compatriots to endure injustices for the sake of maintaining social order. If China had acted otherwise, how long would prosperity and stability in Hong Kong have lasted?”

“Mr. Fu, your thesis raises interesting issues. I sincerely hope we can debate them at length one day, over a pot of tea.”

“I should look forward to that, Mr. Baxingdale,” Fu replied with a smile, apparently soothed by the genial response. “We have each other’s number. I’m sure something can be arranged.”

They shook hands and Baxingdale took his leave with a half-bow. As he moved away, he suddenly caught sight of Xavier Chu, the husband of Lucille, the purveyor of Connoisseur cognac and much else besides. The young tycoon was deep in conversation with a Mr. Yue, a shipping magnate Baxingdale knew well. Both were slowly edging in his direction. His heart skipped a beat. He was fearful of Mr. Yue hailing him and entangling him in conversation with

Xavier Chu. He turned around abruptly and headed for the buffet table at the far end of the room, away from the approaching pair.

It was not guilt that was spurring his retreat. He felt no guilt because of the way Xavier Chu had treated Lucille. It was just that his sense of honour rendered it abhorrent to shake the hand which Chu, out of habit, would thrust at him. He could not believe that someone as intelligent as Xavier did not suspect his wife of having an affair. If he suspected, he certainly had the power and means to exact revenge. Yet, over the years, nothing untoward had happened either to himself or to Lucille. Even if Xavier did not love his wife, such behaviour was puzzling. What game was he up to?

Baxingdale had wanted more than once to confront Xavier, to tell him face to face he was in love with his wife and to seek resolution to their mutual predicament. But Lucille had forbidden that. She had her principles and her reasons, though she would not explain them fully. He could not understand how she could endure all the uncertainties and anomalies in their lives, the furtiveness and the last-minute readjustments to fit in an assignation. In a tight little place like Hong Kong, how long could a scandal be avoided?

But they loved each other too much to remain apart. He wanted them to live together openly, to end the torment once and for all. But that hope still seemed light years away. He wished he were living in a different age, when challenging a rival to pistols at dawn was the normal code of conduct for a gentleman. That would settle matters. If he should forfeit his life in the process he would have no regret.

There was also the issue of Lucille's son, Ah Yuen. The boy was interested in writing and literature and on that pretext Lucille had brought them together a couple of times at the Foreign Correspondents Club. A nice thoughtful boy. But how could he ever become a father to him?

As Baxingdale pondered the complications, he kept one eye on the exit and the other on the possible approach of Mr. Yue and Xavier Chu. He felt no desire to eat or drink. He simply wanted to talk, about anything. Soames's gonads being served up for breakfast would do. Or even diplomatic tangoes, political deceits, the hopelessness of the human condition. Any topic would do so long as it took his mind off Lucille and the cul-de-sac they found themselves in.

He had an article to write on the shifting political landscape, but that was not required till much later that night. In the meantime, he just wanted his time occupied. Otherwise, he would go out of his mind thinking about Lucille.

As soon as he saw the Governor taking his leave, he too slipped out to head for Szeto's Bar. Until Soames or T. P. turned up he could at least bend Szeto's ear at the long bar.