

The Chief Secretary's Dilemma

Hong Kong, September 1984:

The office of Sir Reginald Beaufont Quinn on the fifth floor of the Government Secretariat was spacious and anonymous. Virtually every item of furniture in the room, from the portrait of the Queen hanging behind the desk to the ungainly armchairs, was standard government issue. The exceptions were two panels of temple carvings, gilded and mounted, decorating the wall opposite his desk. Quinn had acquired them for a song in Cat Street when he first came to Hong Kong thirty years before, at a time when such objects excited colonizers with their novelty and workmanship.

The Chief Secretary studied the carvings wistfully. They would have to be taken down soon, to be shipped to his retirement cottage in darkest Surrey, together with his collection of bronze Buddha heads and Buddha hands picked up during official trips to Bangkok much earlier in his career. Those items, exquisitely crafted, would provide a point of reference for inquisitive neighbours, nailing his long association with a mystical East. They would also provide launching pads for entertaining tales to deflect curiosity about his early life in Britain. Even in front of his wife and children he disliked references back to his parents' haberdashery shop in Basildon. It was simply not a suitable ancestry for a knight of the realm.

Of course, such souvenirs also harboured risks. The more discerning might see them as desecrations, the destruction of foreign heritage and alien gods for the sake of money rather than culture. His own role in fostering tourism might be called into question, although he was proud of having a hand in making tourism the second most important industry in Hong Kong.

One of the telephones on the desk rang and the Chief Secretary picked it up. It was Miss Pringle, his Personal Assistant, reporting that Mr. Xavier Chu had arrived.

Sir Reginald looked at his watch. It was five minutes before the appointed hour. He crinkled the corners of his hazel eyes and said: "In five minutes." He needed a moment to arrange a more sombre and sympathetic countenance. His visitor's mother had recently passed away.

Altering his appearance was not altogether an easy matter for Sir Reginald. He had no overtly attractive attributes and making himself likeable took a lot of practice in front of the mirror. His facial muscles were now so well conditioned that putting on a warm gaze and an attentive half-smile presented no problem. But putting on a mournful look was a different matter. In any event, his ruddy complexion, acquired through exhausting weekend walks with his wife along the Sai Kung Peninsula and in the Plover Cove Country Park, did not marry well with a doleful appearance.

Whilst preparing himself, Sir Reginald selected from an in-tray a "Top Secret" file and placed it in front of him. He was not sure what it contained because its crimson jacket was marked only with a Safe Care Registry number and the words "Top Secret" in black. But its contents did not matter. Its presence was enough to underline his involvement in great affairs of state.

A tap on the door heralded the entrance of a blonde woman, middle-aged and generous around the hips. "Mr. Chu is here, Sir," Miss Pringle announced.

Sir Reginald came round his desk to shake the visitor by the hand. "Can Miss Pringle get you tea or coffee?" he asked

"No, thanks. I shan't be long," Xavier replied.

Sir Reginald nodded and Miss Pringle retreated. He waved his guest into one of the armchairs and said in suitably lugubrious tones: "I'm very sorry about your mother, Xavier. Those long final months must have been very trying. Our deepest condolences."

"Thank you, Reggie. It was good of you and Brenda to come to the funeral. Thanks also for the floral tribute."

"If there's anything Brenda or I can do, please don't hesitate."

Sir Reginald restored his warm gaze and his half-smile. He liked Xavier Chu. The fellow was good-natured and respectful, in spite of being such a power in the commercial world. Sensitive to the proclivities of government too. His wife, Lucille, was intriguing and they hosted the most delicious Chinese dinners imaginable. But more than anything else, he liked Xavier because he made him feel superior. One needed the company of a diminutive man to feel like a giant at five-seven.

"There is something actually," Xavier said. "I'd like leave of absence from ExCo."

"But ExCo's still in recess. You don't need leave."

"Yes, I know, but it'll resume in days and I need to get away. My mother's left me with some unfinished business."

"Of course, of course. I'm sure the Governor'll understand. How long do you want?"

"Not sure. Make it open-ended?"

"That's rather awkward. It has to be gazetted and so forth. The Governor won't like your being absent at a critical time like the present. Peking's being particularly intransigent. The Old Man relies a great deal on your advice, you know."

"Come on, Reggie. You don't have to flannel me. What's my advice worth? Nothing! Consulting ExCo's just window dressing to calm the locals. You know it and I know it. If it hadn't been for the insistence of the Governor, Whitehall would have kept us in the dark till everything's been stitched up. Our not knowing anything makes for a less complicated life in Whitehall."

Sir Reginald was taken aback by his visitor's uncharacteristic candour. During all the years he had known Xavier, the man had always spoken in smooth, accommodating tones, like someone chasing a sale. The unexpected change threw him but he maintained his half-smile.

"That's unfair, Xavier" he said, in a parody of light-heartedness. "You shouldn't be taken in by Peking-inspired leaks and mischievous articles. Journalists are always after sensational headlines. The Governor has always felt a strong sense of moral responsibility for the people of Hong Kong. You've got to remember this is a colony, however, and we're just civil servants. We try our utmost to put the local case but in the final analysis we have to take orders from London."

“The Governor is a fine man. But you’ve put your finger on it. Good intentions and moral responsibility don’t count for much without power. Whitehall’s calling the tune and it is concentrating on the British national interest. A few million lesser breeds half-way round the world, well, they’re are just an inconvenience aren’t they? Better to be swept them under the carpet.

“You remember the Foreign Secretary coming in April and telling ExCo Britain couldn’t achieve continuing British administration under Chinese sovereignty? Some of those silly ExCo appointees actually wept! They believed Britain had genuinely fought the good fight and lost. I never did. I knew all along it was a confidence trick, stitched up beforehand, possibly in a corner over canapes at one of the innumerable gatherings of international diplomats. I’m not without connections across the border, Reggie. Or elsewhere, for that matter. The Chinese told Mrs. Thatcher in no uncertain terms long ago that sovereignty was not negotiable and continuing British administration after 1997 out of the question. I don’t know why your Ministers fooled people into believing otherwise.”

The Chief Secretary swallowed hard. In his heart he knew Whitehall had been economical with the truth and the local administration had been forced to play the accomplice. But 1997 was still thirteen years away. Anything could happen before then. One certainty was that he would be retired a year hence and guiding the colony through the transition would be somebody else’s responsibility. He wetted his lips before attempting to salvage some self-esteem.

“Xavier, we’ve known each other a good long while. Surely you’re not suggesting we’ve been deliberately selling the colony down the river? You must accept that we’ve tried our best. Just think of the number of trips Ministers have made to Peking and the diplomatic notes flying all over the place. The files on this are about a mile high. I’ve just been looking at another set of Priority telegrams between our Ambassador and the FCO.”

The Chief Secretary gestured vaguely towards the Top Secret file on his desk.

“We can both see the shifting power equations, Reggie,” Xavier replied, matter-of-factly and with an innocent smile. “We both realize China’s going to be the big bonanza in the decades ahead. Britain wants to trade us for that. Can’t blame Britain, but can’t fault us for making our own arrangements either.

“Quite frankly, you guys bungled it from the start, sending MacLehose to talk about land leases in the New Territories. There’s a Chinese way for dealing with such matters. You’ve got to know when heated words and sabre-rattling are for real and when they’re just play-acting. The long-running row between the mainland and Taiwan is a case in point. In due time it’ll be settled in a Chinese way. What if it takes a hundred years to arrive at? What is a hundred years, so long as there’s money to be made in the interim? Your experts don’t seem to know our mentality. That’s why their initiatives blew up in their faces. And we’re being made to pay the price.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Xavier. Negotiations are still going on. There’re still important things to play for. That’s why we need your advice.”

“Nobody needs my advice. It’s all a done deal, so far as I’m concerned. I’ve got to attend to things left by my mother.”

“All right. I’ll clear things with the Governor. Where are you off to?”

“Taiwan.”

“Xavier! You’re joking! You can’t go to Taiwan! We had an explicit understanding before you joined ExCo that there would be no going to Taiwan. That’s politically unacceptable. Good God, man, you’re an important person in this part of the world. The local media are like bloodhounds. The moment they sniff where you’ve gone there’ll be enormous headlines. Peking’ll accuse us of playing the ‘Two China’ game. Local confidence will be dealt a blow more serious than when Jardines moved domicile to Bermuda. You must consider the bigger picture, the welfare of the community at large.

“Strictly between you and me, we’re having enough problems as it is. We’ve just found out that Kwangtung Public Security have nabbed a Hong Kong social worker for smuggling dissidents out of China. Those bleeding hearts do get us into awful jams, you know. The Chinese have kept mum about the arrest so far, so we’re not sure what they’re up to.”

“Social worker? What’s the fellow’s name?”

Sir Reginald rose and went to his desk. He extracted from his in-tray an orange-coloured file marked “Secret” and flipped through a few pages. Then he read out the transliteration of a Chinese name. He heard a sharp intake of breath from his guest and a muttering under the breath which sounded like “Little Ho”.

“I beg your pardon? You know the man?” the Chief Secretary asked, as he resumed his seat.

“Yes, we used to go to the same school. Belonged to the same Boy Scout troop.”

“Well, he seems to have gone to the bad.”

“Impossible! The man hasn’t a devious bone in his body. He’s a British subject. You’ll make formal representations, of course. Get him consular access. Otherwise they might shoot him.”

“Can’t do that, I’m afraid. The intelligence is secret. Can’t be compromised. In any event, Peking’s position is clear. Every Chinese in China comes under its jurisdiction. We can’t argue that issue at a critical time like this.”

“As a British subject he’s entitled to British protection.”

“Not when he’s in China, I’m afraid.”

“Not even if he were Anglo-Saxon?”

“It is pointless speculating about theoretical situations. We must deal with actual circumstances. There’s too much at stake at the moment. We can’t risk upsetting Peking over the fate of one man who has apparently broken Chinese law.”

Sir Reginald’s voice was thick with hurt. The implication of racism got under his skin. His complexion had lost some of its ruddiness. His smile had vanished.

Xavier’s face, too, seemed drained of expression. “Well, perhaps I can do things governments cannot,” he said, evenly. “In any case, I have business in Taiwan.”

The Chief Secretary saw eyes as hard as pebbles behind the spectacles of his visitor. He knew whatever influence he might have had over that baby-faced man was gone. He was now

the supplicant. “Can’t that be done elsewhere?” he half-pleaded. “Bring the people here or to Japan. Do what you have to, but not in Taiwan.”

“Sorry. It’s got to be Taiwan. If being on ExCo makes things difficult, I can resign. Then I’ll be a completely private person.”

“That’s worse! How can you possibly be a completely private person, for heaven’s sake?” the Chief Secretary cried, shaking his head distractedly. “You’re the Chairman of Gold Star. You control a big chunk of the economy here, not to mention interests in other parts of the world. Resignation from ExCo would suggest major policy differences between you and the government. Going to Taiwan might be taken to imply a pull-out of Gold Star from Hong Kong. Rumours would buzz like hornets. Please, Xavier, think it over. Find another way. Or at the very least postpone your trip till the deal with Peking has been done. We’ve been friends a long time and I’ve never asked for a favour. I’m asking now. Please don’t do this on my watch.”

“Well, there may be a way around the problem,” Xavier said, pausing as if pondering a solution.

The silence lengthened and the Chief Secretary waited with bated breath.

“My mother used to give money to a number of Buddhist organizations,” Xavier finally resumed. “One of them has a monastery in Japan, in Hokkaido. I can contact the abbot and see if I can go into retreat there, to mourn the passing of my mother, as it were. We could let it be known that I’m so grief-stricken that the length of my retreat is indefinite. I would also formally hand over the running of Gold Star to my deputy to make the story credible.

“I’ll have to stay in the monastery for at least a few days, until the media pack gets tired of waiting around outside. So far as the world is concerned, I’m in retreat. Full stop. Neither you nor the Hong Kong government need be concerned with anything else I do. Would you be satisfied with that?”

“How can you pull that off without anyone finding out? You have to pass through immigration and customs to get out of Japan and same again on entering Taiwan.”

Xavier smiled. “Leave that to me.”

The Chief Secretary rubbed his temples with both hands. “I don’t know, Xavier. Sounds awfully risky. If anything goes wrong, London’ll have my head, perhaps even my pension.”

“It’s important for me, Reggie. London doesn’t have to know anything. So far as you’re concerned, I’m just on leave to mourn my mother in a monastery in Hokkaido. No one can be responsible for anything else I might do. If I’m caught, you don’t know a thing. Just blame me, for deviousness, treachery or whatever you like.”

The Chief Secretary sucked in air through his clenched teeth. “It might just work. We’ll have to co-ordinate press releases. Once the Gazette Notification is out, the media will demand details. We must stick to the same story. Do you mind if I sent somebody around from Government Information Services to tie things up with you?”

“By all means. Whom do you have in mind?”

“Do you know Derek Soames?”

“Certainly. Reputation for being an alcoholic.”

“Exactly! Perfect camouflage. The media know Soames is seldom trusted with anything very sensitive. Got a loose tongue. If he handles Press queries about your leave, everybody will be off guard, figuring it to be something routine and innocuous. Of course, you must under no circumstances tell Soames anything about Taiwan or this social worker on the other side. Or your own people, for that matter. Not even Lucille. Everything must remain strictly between you, me and the walls in this room.”

“Naturally.”

The Chief Secretary heaved a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Xavier,” he said. “You’re a real friend.”

“An official friend or a personal friend?”

“Both, of course,” Sir Reginald replied, with a chuckle. He felt he had pulled a tricky chestnut out of the fire.

“Of course,” Xavier said, smiling as he rose to leave.

The two men shook hands and Sir Reginald accompanied his guest towards the door. As they reached it, Xavier asked: “Reggie, since we’re such good friends, official and otherwise, how come you never hinted to me your Special Branch has been tapping my phones and opening my mail?”

“What! Tapping your phones, opening your mail? Really? How outrageous! I had no idea. Those intelligence types sometimes get out of control.”

“That’s strange. I have it on good authority my name’s on the Special Branch’s Q List. I understand also that every name going onto that list has to be specifically approved by the Chief Secretary.”

Sir Reginald’s jaw dropped and his face went dead.

Xavier smiled again but his eyes remained stony. As he reached for the doorknob, he said: “Thanks for being such a pal.”