

Bill of Sale

Peking, December 1984:

There he was, larger than life, Sebastian Baxingdale thought, as he spotted Xavier Chu among the thousand or so dignitaries crowding the reception room in the Great Hall of the People. Xavier had not met some uncertain fate, as both Lucille and Hong Kong officialdom had feared. He had turned up after all, like the proverbial bad penny, for the diplomatic highlight of the year.

Baxingdale studied the tycoon's switched-on smile and his eager pumping of hands and felt annoyed by his re-appearance. If the man had vanished without trace, a future of some sort might yet have been possible for Lucille and himself. Lucille's beautiful face floated momentarily before his mind's eye and caused his heart to ache. What now? It seemed their relationship had to remain in cruel limbo.

The music from a military band flooding across the room sounding anything but uplifting to Baxingdale. He eyed again the assembled guests and media representatives waiting for the much touted signing of the Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong by the Prime Ministers of Britain and China. But the appointed hour had long passed and there remained no sign of either. Many guests were fidgeting, the more geriatric wilting. Most belonged to the Chinese Communist establishment and were dressed in Mao jackets or ill-fitting Western suits. The British contingent consisted mainly of Westminster has-beens and left-leaning types categorized by their hosts as "old British friends". Attendees from Hong Kong, numbering about a hundred, stood out anomalously, in their immaculately tailored suits and designer accoutrements.

Baxingdale recognized among the Hong Kong guests several leaders of the colony's commercial, industrial and financial sectors. Some had started from humble beginnings to reach the heights of wealth and influence. They had all accumulated enough of both to call it a day, to slip into pampered retirement in some safe and salubrious retreat. Yet here they were, in spite of the ideological gulf separating them from the mainland leadership. Were they present to pay homage to their future masters, lured by the opportunities held out by "Socialism with market characteristics"? Or were they simply anxious to play their part in the modernization of their country?

The motives of his own countrymen were clearer. He recalled the non-attributable briefing for British journalists at the Embassy the previous day. The briefing officer was of a type he knew well, sporting sandy hair, pale watery eyes and a short, supercilious nose. The stamp of cleverness, honed at some ancient university and seasoned with dry sherry and vintage port, adorned him like a badge.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the spokesman had said in a well oiled voice. "You've all studied the Joint Declaration. It's a unique document, a triumph of pragmatism. It will have the force of a treaty once registered with the United Nations. The agreement is imperfect. Let's make no bones about that. But don't forget that the Chinese hold most of the cards. It does represent the best that's achievable. The stark alternative, as the Foreign Secretary has taken pains to point out, is

no agreement at all. That would leave the people of Hong Kong without protection, completely at the mercy of the Communists.

“Some of you have been critical. But we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. The primary job of our government is to look after the British national interest. We must keep in mind the big picture and not pile on gloom and doom. This is not Armageddon. Thirteen years still remain before the transfer of sovereignty and, as someone has once observed, a week is a long time in politics.

“Drawing a line under Hong Kong will open up a whole new relationship with China, translatable into jobs, trade and prosperity for our nation. China has a population of over a billion -- and rising. We in the West have recognized it as the great market of the coming century. It'll need telecommunications, railways, mass transit, dams, bridges, power stations, sewage disposal systems, oil drilling equipment, machine tools, everything you can think of. At the consumer level, just imagine what it would mean if only half the Chinese smoked a packet of cigarettes a day, drank a pint of lager, sipped a dram of whisky, ate a patty of beef or consumed a bottle of bitter lemon.”

“Sounds like ministerial wet dreams,” an irreverent spark had interjected, provoking raucous laughter.

The briefing officer smiled indulgently and moved on to the need to stem the brains drain of professionals from Hong Kong and to preserve British investments in China and the colony.

“What about our responsibility for British subjects of Chinese race?” Baxingdale asked, when the meeting was opened for questions. “The Liberal Democrats have suggested that all British subjects from Hong Kong should be given right of abode in Britain if they wanted it. What is the government's position?”

“The government's responsibility is to look after the British national interest,” the spokesman replied. “It is no use speculating on proposals from people with no responsibility for government. Hong Kong is part of China and after 1997 Hong Kong citizens will be reuniting with their own kith and kin.”

Other questions in a similar vein received equally evasive answers.

Madness was a minority of one, Baxingdale reflected, remembering the briefing. To him the whole saga of dealing with the Chinese had been littered with miscalculations, bungles and ineptitudes. The MacLehose initiative, the Craddock memorandum, the ill-fated Thatcher visit of 1982, the drawn-out negotiations to settle a mere agenda and the inevitable surrenders in 1984. Whitehall and Westminster were simply too obsessed with rigid legalisms to accommodate the Chinese fluidities of face, fudge and deliberate absent-mindedness.

Baxingdale's thoughts were interrupted by a gathering murmur followed by an outburst of clapping. He saw the two Prime Ministers leading in their delegations. Shutters clicked and cameras whirred. He noted a shiny spot on the tip of Margaret Thatcher's nose and detected a slight variation in her gait. Designer shoes squeezing toes, he supposed. Serves her right.

The Chinese Premier, Zhao Ziyang, on the other hand, was bespectacled, urbane and garbed in a suit of the best British worsted. He gave an impression of being less self-satisfied than he might have a right to be.

The two delegations trailed their leaders like camp followers, in strict order of protocol. The leaders stood at pre-arranged places behind a long table, offering smiles and their best sides to the exploding flash bulbs. A few scratches on heavy bond paper and the deal was done. Bill of sale duly signed. The signatories displayed their teeth and applause followed.

Champagne corks popped and libations flowed. Media representatives quickly homed in on selected dignitaries. Greetings were shouted, handshakes exchanged, toasts drunk and awkward smiles erupted on Eastern faces. Two septuagenarian comrades, mistaking Baxingdale for an “old British friend”, shook his hand with vigour and toasted him with mao tai. Conversation bubbled around the chamber.

The obligatory group photographs followed. As the delegations lined up, Baxingdale sighed. Why should his country suffer to have its humiliation recorded for posterity? Britain had just agreed to delivering several million freedom-loving human beings, together with children yet unborn, to Communist sovereignty on the stroke of midnight on the 30th of June 1997. What could be more dishonourable than that? The shedding of the imperial past was to the good, but the manner of his country’s disengagement left a nasty taste in his mouth.

Baxingdale watched Mrs. Thatcher conversing with a short, rotund, chain-smoking old man who looked like an Oriental version of James Cagney. He was dressed in a Mao jacket buttoned up to the neck and seemed to be responding with no emotion to whatever the British Prime Minister might be saying.

Baxingdale regarded the old man with admiration. That man had been the real architect of the Joint Declaration and personified a reawakened China. He had put the Iron Lady of Europe in her place two years ago and he dominated her still. How could any Western politician deal with an old fox like that? In the West, to be on the losing side of a political argument meant only a few years in petulant opposition. In China it meant the forfeiture of freedom and, possibly, of life itself. That bred a different kind of politician. The only official position held by the old man was that of Chairman of the Central Advisory Commission of the Chinese Communist Party. Yet he was the Paramount Ruler of almost a quarter of the world’s population. He had arranged the nebulous catchphrases thrown as lifelines to the detested British.

“One country two systems.”

“Fifty years without change.”

“Hong Kong people running Hong Kong.”

“Socialism with market characteristics.”

Masterly! The man had coined those phrases to suit his own agenda. Yet, without them, Britain could never have bamboozled a sceptical Hong Kong public into believing that, behind closed doors, its emissaries were extracting significant concessions from Peking on the territory’s behalf.

An attendant passed with a tray. Baxingdale took a beer. He felt conspicuous and out of place. He gravitated towards some of the Hong Kong representatives he knew and was soon greeted a shipping magnate named Yue. He was on friendly terms with the magnate, whom he had once interviewed about the development of Chinese merchant fleets. Mr. Yue was a heavy, thick-set man in his seventies. He was reputed to be one of the Evergreens associated with the father of Xavier Chu.

Mr. Yue greeted Baxingdale warmly, offering his right hand and raising a glass with his left. They drank a toast.

“Dis is histollic occasion,” Mr. Yue said, heartily. “Abbyone can now move fawwad.”

“I take it you endorse the contents of the Joint Declaration?” Baxingdale responded.

“You asking me as Chinese, as Blittish subject, as shipping man, as Hong Kong lessident or as glandfada?”

Baxingdale, reminded of the older man’s limited English, at once switched to Chinese. “Is your opinion necessarily different in each case?”

“Of course.” Mr. Yue readily responded in Chinese as well. “Man lives at many levels, each with own dimensions.”

“Well, let’s hear all of them!”

“Ah, Mr. Baxingdale, this is hardly the time and place. But, to show I’m not jesting, let me say this: As a Chinese I’m proud of this agreement. It settles the return of a lost piece of the Motherland. No Chinese can quarrel with that.

“As a British subject, I feel rather let down. If someone pays protection money and finds in time of need that he has no protection at all, how do you think he will feel?”

“As a shipping man, I’m optimistic. More business, more cargo. More cheap cement, steel and building materials coming from China, more Hong Kong products going out. I profit both ways.

“Peking now talks of adapting Socialism to the Chinese situation.” Mr. Yue lowered his voice and added: “Who knows, a dose of Hong Kong capitalism may produce better results than a generation of Socialism. In time to come, Hong Kong moneymen may take over China instead of the other way around! That’s a thought, isn’t it?”

Baxingdale laughed and Mr. Yue joined him.

Mr. Yue was about to continue when a Chinese functionary came up to him. The newcomer was from the Hong Kong and Macau Office of the State Council, bearing information about seating arrangements for the banquet to follow. Mr. Yue effected introductions and pleasantries were exchanged.

Baxingdale, seeing little prospect of returning to the subject of the earlier conversation, bowed and excused himself. “I’ve got to earn my keep, rustle up a few useable quotes before everybody scatters for the banquet. We must continue our topic when we’re back in Hong Kong.”

“Please feel free to call me. Please give me the honour of inviting you to lunch,” Mr. Yue said, reciprocating the bow.

“That would be delightful. Thank you.”

“I shall take you to a traditional Chinese tea house not frequented by Westerners. It serves excellent meals. I’ll telephone you when I get back next week.”

Baxingdale wove his way to the margins of the hall. He could not help marvelling at a man like Mr. Yue. He possessed that certain Eastern mellowness and charm often found in Chinese of the older generation. By every account the man had started as a struggling fisherman, with little more than a seaworthy boat and an abundance of courage. He had prospered enormously under British rule. Yet he was now warming to a regime dedicated to the destruction of capitalism. What did that suggest about the Chinese character? That it placed nation and race before financial gain? Or that ideology was but a means to an end? Or sheer optimism that pragmatism would win through in the end? An answer remained elusive.

A waiter came by and offered Baxingdale another drink. He declined. Instead he lit a cigarette and took out a notebook to jot down some of his thoughts.

The diplomatic charade was winding down. His Chinese liaison officer had previously told him that journalists would be dining with their minds in a special section of the banqueting hall. The thought of sitting through another two hours of anodyne chit-chat was more than he could bear. The vast chamber, abuzz of small talk, suddenly seemed claustrophobic. And there was always the possible embarrassment of coming face to face with Xavier Chu. When attendants began ushering guests towards the banqueting area, he manoeuvred towards an exit.

Outside, snow was falling from a sombre evening sky. The heavy snowfall served to cover some of the ugliness of the squat, rhetorical monuments in the enormous Tienanmen Square. Cutting winds from the Gobi threw up flurries.

Baxingdale turned up the collar of his overcoat and went down the very steps upon which Margaret Thatcher had stumbled two years earlier. In retrospect, that stumble had been a dismal augury of things to come. At least many Hong Kong inhabitants took it as such and planned their futures accordingly.

Baxingdale strode across Tienanmen Square in the direction of the Gate of Heavenly Peace. In the distance, the giant portrait of Chairman Mao beamed down. As he approached it, he saw what appeared a familiar figure standing before the portrait in the swirling snow. Something about the silhouette suggested it might be Cheng Ching. He had not seen the man for more than a year, ever since Cheng got transferred back to Peking, and he was keen to find out what he was up to.

Cheng had been one of the truly powerful men during his time in Hong Kong. He was also one of the most uninhibited and likeable Communists Baxingdale had ever met. His influence upon the negotiations with the British must have been crucial. He not only knew Hong Kong inside out but had got the measure of every British weakness. Yet it was odd that he did not surfaced during the negotiations. Nor was he present at the signing ceremony. Surely such an important and talented man could not have fallen from grace?

Baxingdale's heart skipped a beat at the thought. It intensified his desire to renew his acquaintance. He yelled out Cheng's name as he quickened his step. The wind, however, snatched his voice away. He put his head down against the snow flurries and trotted towards the silhouette.

By the time he got within recognisable distance, however, the man had disappeared among the heavy human traffic along the Avenue of Eternal Peace.