

Canton Reunion

It seems that every significant change in my life always begins with a sea voyage. And so it was when I boarded a Messageries Maritimes ship in Singapore early in 1947 to head for a reunion with my mother and younger brother in China. We had had virtually no contact with one another for 12 years and I did not know what to expect. My mother had also acquired a new husband. Should anything go awry, all I had to see me through was a modest sum in Australian currency. My other possessions came to no more than a few paltry items of clothing inside a small rattan suitcase.

The Messageries Maritimes vessel I boarded had been used as a troop carrier during the war and had yet to be fully converted back to civilian use. The smell of fresh paint permeated the air like a potent disinfectant. My accommodation was only a lower bunk in a large cabin filled with many two-tiered bunks. That accounted for the low fare.

The ship's most extraordinary feature came in the form of its toilet facilities. They comprised only a single large compartment with a long metal urinal stretching along the entire breadth of the room, facing an equally long row of toilet bowls on the opposite side. All passengers used the same compartment, regardless of sex or nationality. Separating one toilet bowl from the next was a metal half-partition, rising from about a foot off the floor to a height of approximately four and a half feet. None of those partial cubicles had a door. That meant anyone sitting on a toilet bowl would be looking directly at users of the urinal. Likewise, any man turning away from the urinal could seldom avoid the sight of people perched upon one or more toilet bowls.

Far from deriving voyeuristic pleasure from those arrangements, most passengers found the circumstances disconcerting. Asian women, more conscious of their modesty than Europeans, selected unsociable hours for their calls of nature. To break wind in such an environment must sound like a burlesqued trumpet call!

The voyage was also memorable because it introduced me to

several parts of Vietnam, then still a country under French control. When the ship dropped anchor at its first port of call, Saigon, I had the opportunity to explore a city offering many insinuations of French heritage. Its Chinese quarter of Cholon, however, bore the more familiar features of Chinese settlement.

One of the first things I noticed was the odour of opium. I was not sure whether smoking it was still legal but no one appeared to pay much attention to its pungency. I sniffed one trail to an ill-maintained building and was sorely tempted to enter and try a pipe. But, being a stranger in a strange place, and with only limited resources, I thought better of it. I thereby lost my final chance to indulge in a drug I had long yearned to smoke like my grandfather.

My overall impression of the Vietnamese was extremely favourable. They looked almost identical to the Chinese, perhaps reflecting the fact that, some 3,000 years ago, many of their ancestors originated from China. The men appeared energetic and hardy while the women were svelte and graceful, many with quite refined features. The faces of the women were among the most exquisitely beautiful I had ever seen. They all seemed elegantly clothed in flowing dresses with slits up to the waist. Their beauty soon captivated me. I made a mental note to return to Vietnam at the first opportunity but, sadly, such an opportunity never arose.

For the rest of my voyage, my thoughts dwelt on how I might be received in Canton and how I should interact with my long-lost mother and brother.

If my mother had expected me to turn up at the age of 18 looking like a younger version of my father, she was going to be sorely disappointed. I had attained a height of only five-foot-six, a good three or four inches shorter than my father, and still weighed only 102 pounds. I lacked my father's charm and quiet confidence and, given the introspective nature inherited from my

forebears, I was far from being a good social animal. Most distressingly, I had started to sprout pimples and, like most teenagers, I could not resist picking upon them. That habit left a few acne scabs on my face.

I feared I would not be the elder brother Tzi-Choy might have expected. I could visualise him, reared in the bosom of motherly security, to be bracingly robust and oozing with confidence. He might even already be taller than myself. He would have had no truck with castaway clothes or hunger pangs. I was prepared to envy him.

I, naturally, could form no image of my mother's new husband. Was he tall or short, fat or thin? Nor could I gauge his reaction to my intrusion into his life. I was not even sure whether my mother had told him anything about me. Would he attempt to boss me around or would he engage me in a silent war of resentment? Anything was possible.

My own calculations were fairly straightforward. Any belated display of affection between mother and son I would take as it came. I was more interested in my mother's economic circumstances. Upon that hinged my chance for further studies. If indications were positive, I would soon be off to a university. Otherwise, I would have to leave and find a job, most probably in Hong Kong, for decent job opportunities were unlikely in the midst of a deteriorating economic and political situation in Canton. In either event, circumstances should limit the amount of close inter-personal contact.

From my grandfather's remarks and from news reports, I knew that civil strife and inflation were tearing the country apart. Civil war had erupted around the middle of 1946 between the Nationalists, led by General Chiang Kai-Shek, and the Communists, under Chairman Mao.

The Nationalists had achieved a symbolic victory by capturing the Communist capital of Yan'an in March of 1947, just before my examination results were released. But conditions in areas under their control, including Canton, were worsening very quickly. That was in spite of massive American

aid. Corruption at all levels was endemic.

One indicator of governmental failure was the crazy rate of inflation. When the war with Japan started in the middle of 1937, one American dollar was worth approximately 3.4 Chinese yuan. At the time of Pearl Harbour in 1941, an American dollar had appreciated to around 19 yuan. By the end of World War II, the yuan had fallen to more than 1,200 to one American dollar. Under those circumstances, whatever wealth accumulated by my mother would have been grievously eroded by 1947. It did not bode well. My becoming a charge upon her in the midst of such economic stress might be less than opportune.

By the time the ship arrived in Hong Kong, therefore, I was already considering the possibility of an early retreat, probably to the British colony where I had enough relatives from whom, *in extremis*, I could cadge some temporary shelter. Never in my wildest imaginings, however, could I have foreseen how quickly the economic collapse came. By the time I left for the United States in August of 1949, only a little more than two years later, a single American dollar had risen to an incredible 23,000,000 yuan!

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When I first wrote to my mother, I had been struck by the odd name of the street she lived in -- Six Two Three Road. I suspected that it must commemorate some event. When I asked *Ah Yeh* about it, he gave me my first lesson in modern Chinese history.

“Ah, Six Two Three Road,” he said, with one of his wry smiles. “That was to mark the Shakee Massacres, one of the tumultuous happenings in 1925, the year compatriots sacrificed themselves to bring China to its senses, to remind it of some of its past glories. You were not born then, so you were spared the heartaches of watching opportunities paid for in blood being

squandered away. But you must have heard the strains of *The March of the Volunteers* at some stage. That tune and its lyrics, penned some years later, captured some of the fervour of that period.”

Indeed, I knew that rousing song and had even sung it, especially after I had learnt that Paul Robeson had rendered it at a concert in New York in 1940. Its opening lines of “Arise! You who refuse to be slaves! With our flesh and blood, let us build a new Great Wall!” had stirred me.

I therefore settled myself next to his favourite rattan couch to hear what he had to say. His eyes glazed over behind his glasses as he recalled the past.

“When Dr. Sun died in March of 1925, it looked as if the last ray of hope had been extinguished from our nation,” he said.

All of a sudden, it appeared as if some hidden switch had been thrown, because my grandfather’s usual reticence fell away. His words began to gush forth with all the verve and dramatic skill of a street-side story-teller.

“We had got so used to being disunited, to being kicked and abused by foreign powers, that we simply submitted like some frequently whipped dog. We had been conditioned to expect more of the same.

“Then in May of that year, a commonplace thing happened in the International Settlement of Shanghai. A guard at a Japanese textile factory assaulted and killed a Chinese trade unionist.

“Now you have to remember that foreign powers had extracted extra-territorial rights from China, which meant any criminal act done by any of their citizens, or carried out at a place they considered under their jurisdiction, had to be their preserve.

“The killer in that instance fell beyond the reach of Chinese law. But instead of the usual collective shrug of the shoulder, a group of university students and trade unionists began a march to demand justice, right down the main thoroughfare of Nanking Road in Shanghai. As they marched, ordinary

citizens spontaneously joined them. The crowd quickly swelled into the thousands.

“They reached a police station under British command and surrounded it, chanting anti-foreign slogans and demanding justice. The officer in charge, fearful that the station was about to be attacked, panicked. He ordered his Sikh soldiers to open fire. About a dozen of the demonstrators were killed, many more were wounded.

“The killings somehow galvanised the nation. All at once, as if by chain reaction, protests and strikes against British interests erupted all over the country, from Peking to Wuchang, from Nanking to Hong Kong. Some protesters in Amoy initiated a boycott of British products and that too rapidly spread.

“It was exhilarating; it was as if our nation had suddenly come alive again, emerging from a long coma. Change and national unity seemed no longer a pipe dream. For a brief while, China became the cynosure of the revolutionary world. The Shakee Massacres, which subsequently occurred in Canton, formed part of that national awakening. Pity you were not taught any of this at St. Andrew’s.”

I was lapping up the story. Although his narrative underlined my own ignorance of Chinese history, it enthralled me more than many of the adventure books I had read.

My grandfather then began sketching the background to events in Canton and in some other treaty ports.

Canton had a well-deserved reputation of being a midwife to uprisings and revolutions, he said. Many revolutionaries have plotted there over the centuries. Dr. Sun had set up his headquarters there after warlords stole the Revolution of 1911, frustrating what he had hoped for. Borodin and his agents likewise based themselves there, organising trade unions, collecting intelligence and promoting Socialist or Marxist philosophy. There had been

ideological splits and schisms, assassinations and unexplained disappearances too.

It so happened that the Whampoa Military Academy had also been set up there. Dr. Sun's protégé, Chiang Kai-Shek, headed it, but it was financed by the Soviet Union. It was intended to produce officers for a modernised Chinese military establishment. The instructors were a mixture of Russians, Germans and Chinese, among whom numbered such Communist luminaries as Chou En-Lai and Yip Kim-Ying.

It was understandable for Whampoa cadets to be caught up in the anti-foreign fever rippling through the country. On June 23, a group of them, armed with a few rifles and pistols taken from the academy, decided to attack the British and French in their concessions on Shameen, an island located south of the city. They wanted to avenge the Shanghai killings and to rid the country of imperialists. They might have been green with youth but also with magnificent passion. They were joined by trade unionists, students and people from many other walks of life.

The French and British jointly occupying Shameen had anticipated trouble, given that Chinese anger was being openly expressed everywhere. They erected barricades and barbed wire defences on the two short bridges leading to the British and French Concessions on the island and mounted machine-guns behind those defences. Their naval vessels were also positioned nearby, with their big cannons trained upon the city, ready to shell civilians, as was their usual tactic whenever they were at odds with China. They meant to terrorise civilians, to break their collective will to resist.

When the attacks began on the two bridges, the defenders responded with their machine-guns. It was an unequal fight. Fifty Chinese were quickly slaughtered. Because Whampoa cadets had been at the vanguard, a disproportionately high number of them were killed. Some 120 other protesters were wounded.

That massacre triggered a much wider series of anti-British strikes and boycotts, aimed at destroying British economic interests in China and, in particular, their dominance in Hong Kong. Those activities led to further massacres of protestors in the colony as well. By the end of July, a quarter of a million Chinese had abandoned the British enclave to return to Kwangtung Province. Their departure paralysed the city, sending real estate prices tumbling and bringing its economy virtually to its knees.

“But that brief unity of purpose soon fizzled away,” my grandfather said, with his voice dropping into a tone saturated with dismay.

“Why?” I cried. “What happened?”

“It’s easy to call strikes and boycotts in the heat of the moment. But what happens when the strike money runs out? An inescapable fact of life is that people have to eat. What can any man do when his family is without food? He must get back to work.

“The warlords and moneybags also realised that strikes and boycotts hit their pocketbooks too. They might still mouth patriotic words but their immediate interests coincided with those of the imperialists. They sold out.

“Disagreements emerged among the revolutionaries as well. The foreign ones split from their Chinese comrades, the Nationalists broke with the Communists, the Anarchists took issue with the Nihilists. So everybody reverted to business as usual, playing their old factional and doctrinal games, resuming their wheeling and dealing ways.”

My grandfather heaved a sigh. “There was no one around, you see, to inspire the nation to higher ideals, to lead us out of our shameful decline,” he said. “Dr. Sun was dead. His Revolution of 1911 had fragmented. So a road in Canton named Six Two Three Road is all that remains to commemorate the deaths of the Shakee martyrs.”

I was seized by a sudden sadness. “But their spirit must remain,” I

cried.

“If you’re referring to their immortal souls, I’ll have to say that as a pathologist I’ve cut up a lot of corpses in my time. I’ve never been quick enough to spot any leaving the body.”

With that, my grandfather lit a pipe. His sparse, graying beard quivered as he puffed. He seemed disinclined to talk any more after that, leaving me unsure whether I should probe further into the events of 1925. He also left me with a vague suspicion he might have witnessed some of those events himself. His work as a ship’s surgeon must have taken him regularly to Chinese ports around that time.

He also left me with another even vaguer impression, that he was finished with his dreams and that -- since I was approaching manhood -- he was passing them on for what they were worth.

I began to wonder whether he was suggesting in a roundabout way I should get to know Chinese realities at first hand rather than be obsessed with books and university. After all, my father had spent a mysterious six years wandering around China before he went to university. But if he had encouraged my father towards *engagement*, he had failed. I could not imagine my father even distributing radical pamphlets at street corners, let alone making passionate and incendiary speeches.

My grandfather’s brief account of history reminded me of my many inadequacies. Something stirred in me. Such accounts should have been part of my normal upbringing. Because I had been educated in places belonging to others, they had all been missed.

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Due to my grandfather’s narrative, I knew about the origins of Six Two Three Road before I set foot in it. The road was situated adjacent to

Shameen and was largely made up of three-storeyed tenements, one very much the same as the next. Wartime neglect had turned their facades leprous with peeling paint and discoloured whitewash. For the most part, small family-run enterprises occupied the ground floors, leaving the upper floors for domestic accommodation.



The picture above, taken in 1939, shows the West Bridge leading to the British Concession on Shameen Island on the right. I lived for a short time with my mother in one of the tenement buildings a stone's throw from the West Bridge.

My mother's flat was on the third floor of one of those buildings. Its tenancy gave her exclusive access to a large flat roof with a small room on it. The room had probably been originally conceived as a store room, like the one on the roof at my maternal grandfather's home. But it had since been converted into an extra bedroom and it was assigned to me.

The flat did not measure up to No. 10 Blair Road, either in terms

of size or furnishing. It exuded an air of middle class determination to keep up appearances. No ebony furniture was around to confer gravitas and there was a notable absence of books.

My greatest surprise, however, was to discover a half-sister by the name of Mabel. No one had mentioned her existence before. She had been born in November of 1945, in the Portuguese territory of Macau, where my mother and her new husband had gone to seek refuge during the war. That accident of geography conferred Portuguese citizenship upon the child, although she was otherwise half Filipino and half Chinese.

Mabel was an attractive child. But since I had never managed to develop any affinity with children much younger than myself, I paid my half-sister scant attention. In later years, however, we became quite friendly and visited each other with some regularity.

I could not divine what had caused my mother to embark upon motherhood again at middle age. My perplexity was never satisfied. She remained absolutely mute about it, as least to me. There was some gossip among my aunts later that the child was an “accident”.

When I reconnected with my mother, she was aged 44. But she was little changed from how I had remembered her. She had put on weight and had become broader in the beam, but her face was still smooth and unlined, and she had the same dimpled smile. She remained an image of calm and unflappable restraint.

Her husband was Raymundo Riego, a doctor trained in America and about nine years her senior. He was still practising medicine. The front section of the flat was being used as his consulting room.

He was a tall, well-fleshed and easy-going man, who spoke so softly that I could not imagine his ever raising his voice either in anger or in panic. An indication of his laid-back approach was typified by his casualness over whether Mabel ought to be brought up as a Catholic or not. Given his

Roman Catholicism and my mother's Protestant faith, they simply compromised by attending churches of both denominations, depending on their convenience and mood.

I quickly concluded that so far as I was concerned no contretemps with the good doctor would ever arise. The more I got to know him, the more it became apparent my mother ought to have started by marrying someone as easy-going and accommodating as he.

Meeting up with my brother was a different kettle of fish. He surprised me by taking after our mother in build. He was therefore shorter than myself, though he had more meat on his bones. He came over as reserved, lackadaisical, a trifle insecure and reluctant to make eye contact.

He was thus far from the poised and confident teenager I had imagined. I became momentarily disconcerted. When he greeted me as "Elder Brother", I offered my hand out of habit, instead of embracing him. Our handclasp turned out rather limp and far from brotherly. It was entirely my mistake. Without doubt, Tzi-Choy must have thought me a cold fish, not the kind elder brother *he* had expected. No spontaneous warmth flowed between us; no fizz bubbled in my veins. It became a case of two teenagers eyeing each other as suspiciously as total strangers.

I was anxious to avoid another *faux pas* and felt I had to make conversation. So I resorted to one of those anodyne ritual questions frequently addressed to school children: "Your studies going well?"

Before my brother could reply, however, our mother hooted in derision. "Studies? He's more interested in chasing girls than studying."

An awkward silence descended. I was surprised by the revelation. My siblings in Singapore had all been keen students. The notion of a fourteen-and-a-half year-old boy preferring to chase girls rather than to study left me stunned. Chasing girls had been no more than a glint in my eye whenever I listened to the ballads crooned by Nat King Cole or Frank Sinatra. How could

Tzi-Choy be so precocious and how could he have pulled it off under our mother's watchfulness? Being conscious of my own backwardness in things romantic, I bit my tongue.

It was not an auspicious beginning. Tzi-Choy and I retreated into our respective bubbles of distrustful isolation. A quasi-estrangement developed which, unfortunately, deepened for other reasons as the decades rolled by.

During one of our rare moments of contact decades later, I asked Tzi-Choy casually if he could tell me something of his childhood. His reply took me aback.

"My childhood was the darkest period in my life," he declared solemnly. "I don't want to talk about it."

That revelation bowled me over. It was at odds with everything I had speculated about his childhood. It made me regret more deeply not having made greater effort to bond with him when I had the opportunity in Canton.

A great deal of time has passed since. Our parents have been long dead and we now live far apart, on different continents. Yet we have remained strangers to each other's childhood and private demons. Hence we have been unable to empathise. We have kept a distance ever since, even as we trundled into our eighties.

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Dr. Riego was very considerate during my stay. He left ample space for my mother and I to catch up after our long separation. But in reality neither of us had much to say. We were both too wary to exchange confidences.

My mother brought me up to date on the demises of my *Kung-kung* and *Por-por*. She also explained how she and my brother had to decamp

from one foreign concession after another to dodge the Japanese, before finally ending up in the neutral enclave of Macau. She did mention, however, that Tzi-Choy's education got rather disrupted during that process. Hence his standard of English left much to be desired.

I took her account of those frequent relocations as a partial explanation for her infrequent contacts with me.

She did not go into the whys and wherefores of her second marriage. She asked no question about my father or Anna, and I volunteered nothing. I breathed not a word about the outrages committed against my aunts at No. 10 nor the necessary deceptions by my father at the Blue Willow. As to my own life, I confined myself to a few inconsequential details about school in Australia and the way *Ah Mah's* health broke under the strain of living as a refugee.

In short, neither of us revealed much. The most telling parts of our lives dodged past us like shadows. I was quite pleased, however, we had managed to talk, mundane though the words might have been. At least we managed to exchange more of them within a few days than I had had been able to do with my father over a like number of years.

Yet, as I gingerly edged my way forward in our relationship, I was left in little doubt the umbilical cord which had once linked us had been well and truly severed. The hospitality she extended had a slightly formal flavour, like that being offered a visiting relative.

A few evenings later, a conversation took place which showed even more clearly the extent of her concern for my future.

It began with my mother asking a humdrum question: "What are your plans?"

"Not sure," I replied. "A bit in the air at the moment. I'd like to go to university. Don't know where though, given my Western educational background."

“Have you discussed it with your father?”

“No, not yet.”

The silence that quickly ensued assumed a significance of its own. I sensed my mother had no desire to get involved.

I did not hold such caution against her, however, for I could see the economic circumstances she faced. She was no longer working and she now had a baby daughter to look after. That left her dependent upon Dr. Riego’s modest medical practice. Moreover, she still had responsibilities for my brother. And all the while the wildfires of civil war and rampant inflation were singeing everybody within reach.

Yet, paradoxically, I was at the same time irked by the lack of a caring suggestion or a word of moral support. Somewhere buried in my psyche I might have still nurtured a resentment against her, for abandoning me at a young age. I must have subconsciously fixed upon a compensation of some kind -- either in a belated show of affection or in material support. Her hands-off approach came over almost like another abandonment.

Out of that disappointment, I remarked perversely: “I suppose an alternative to university might be to join the army. You did send me a toy rifle once upon a time, didn’t you, to steer me in that direction?”

My mother’s retort was swift and unambiguous. It took the form of a Chinese adage. No filial son would ever enlist in an army, just as no good metal would ever be used for making nails, she declared. A toy was just a toy, not a signpost for life.

I had stuck my neck out too far, however, to retreat with good grace. “Lots of sons from good families have joined the army these days,” I cried. “Just look at those who are enrolling in the Whampoa Military Academy, not to mention those who had been enrolled in the past.”

“Yes, to be turned into pawns and playthings for scheming politicians.”

“That’s not always true. Some just want to show their patriotism, like those who led the attack against foreign imperialists and got this road named Six Two Three Road in commemoration of their deed.”

“And what did their foolishness achieve, except to produce more grieving parents and kinfolk, and more dead Chinese?”

“That’s the trouble with us,” I retorted, aroused. “It’s always the family and the immediate present. What about the nation and its future? We need people willing to make sacrifices. Otherwise every foreign Tom, Dick or Harry will keep walking all over us. We need someone like a Napoleon, to lead us and to restore our dignity.”

My mother gave off a chuckle, the kind released out of mock politeness when someone has made a disastrously unfunny joke. “You speak Mandarin, I suppose?” she said.

“No, but what’s that got to do with it?”

“Not much. Just haven’t heard the Chinese army is now composed entirely of Cantonese, that’s all.”

I kicked myself for overlooking so obvious a point. I felt completely deflated and off-stride. After a pause, I said sheepishly: “Don’t know when I’m going to get to talk to Father. I suppose I should be doing something in the meantime.”

“Go learn some shorthand and typing,” my mother said. “There’s a reasonable outfit here. The course is short. With your good English you should get through it in no time. Too bad your Uncle Jim has retired. Otherwise he might get you a post with the Maritime Customs afterwards.”

My spirit plunged like a shot pheasant. In one shattering moment I realised how I must stand in my mother’s eyes: A thin, pimply youth, already dependent upon false teeth and horn-rimmed glasses at the age of 18. Eyes over-bright and suggestive of tuberculosis. Singled out more clearly than any mark on Cain as sheer office fodder. And an airy-fairy talker to boot, just like

the father. Napoleon indeed.

Imagining such a judgement, I again became resentful. How could she think so poorly of me? She hardly knew me! My punctured pride triggered a sharp and secret hurt. I was, of course, too callow at that stage to grasp the good intentions behind her suggestion. The hope for a steady and reliable livelihood for a son was what any mother would wish, particularly in unstable times. Furthermore, she had travelled down that path herself with considerable success, going to secretarial school instead of university.

An instinct, however, warned me against resisting my mother's ideas too openly, at least for the moment. I therefore played along.

"Maybe I ought to work a little on my French first," I temporised. "I only scraped through with an ordinary 'pass' in that at School Cert. Mastering another lingo never does any harm. Lots of French firms around. Is there a place nearby I can practise French?"

"There's a French priest on Shameen," she said. "You can go and ask him."

I secured the location of the Catholic mission and that brought an end to a hurtful exchange. My vision of myself had been rudely shaken. My confidence in myself, never very great at the best of times, started falling away more quickly than yellowing leaves in an autumnal gust.

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With the hope of gaining financial assistance dashed, depression set in. Though a slender chance of help from my father remained, the problem was he was in Singapore and I had insufficient funds for a ticket back. I quickly ruled out approaching him by letter, for fear I would be unable to convey the urgency and passion I felt. I wanted to make my pitch face to face, in hot blood. The presence of *Ah Yeh* could also make for a more favourable

response.

My mind, therefore, turned to a means of returning to Singapore. I could easily ask my mother for a loan to make up my shortfall and she would certainly grant it. But the low regard she held about my capabilities had wounded my pride. I did not want to be beholden to her. Pride also prevented me from asking my father for funds. I had never done so and I was not about to start with such a petty request.

Another way had to be found. The most feasible one appeared to be working in Hong Kong till I had saved enough. That meant delaying university for a year but no other alternative came to mind.

Apart from my School Leaving Certificate, the only skill I had was the ability to recite a few Tang poems and some passages from Shakespeare. What was the good of any of that? I could not even specify the kind of job I might be fitted for. Perhaps my mother was right. I have been marked out for office fodder.

Suddenly, it crossed my mind that my mother might have been painting that same prosaic future for Tzi-Choy. Her practical instincts might have killed off my brother's dreams at birth. That might account for his losing heart in his studies. I wished I could have encouraged him in some way, though I was trapped in a blind alley myself.

Meanwhile, the dictates of family courtesy demanded that I should make a call upon my Eldest Paternal Aunt and her dentist husband while I was in Canton. They had five children, none of whom I had met. But my mood was too sour to discharge such a duty with grace. So I kept procrastinating and in the end never made that call at all.

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On a hot and humid afternoon, unable to decide firmly on my next

step, I set out for the Catholic mission on Shameen. Although I had no real intention of studying French, it seemed as good a way to demonstrate to my mother I was not idling aimlessly. I accordingly crossed the East Bridge linking the former French Concession to the rest of the city.

Once across, I entered a different world, an enclave in arrested time, with leafy aspects and period architecture reminiscent of one of the snobbier neighbourhoods of Paris or London. As I proceeded along shaded walks uncluttered by crowds, I saw two perspiring Europeans playing tennis within a chain-linked enclosure. Their strenuous activity seemed incongruous in the comfortless afternoon.

What wealth, security and leisure they must possess, I thought, to be able to play games in the middle of a working day without a care. They might not be directly involved in the Chinese civil war but surely they must be affected by the galloping inflation devastating everyone else? Unless their wealth was held in foreign currencies, like the few Australian notes I still had in my pocket. Those notes had appreciated in value against the Chinese yuan almost by the day, without my even lifting a finger. What a crazy world we lived in.

The mysterious workings of the foreign exchange markets occupied my thoughts for a while, until I found the Catholic mission. The French priest in charge was a middle-aged man of medium height, dressed in a black cassock with an upright collar. He displayed a receding hairline of some distinction, below which were positioned a pair of hooded eyes and a long sharp nose. A thin moustache and a neatly trimmed goatee enhanced his authoritative air.

When I explained I was seeking to improve my conversational French prior to entering university, he reacted affably, quite overdoing the bonhomie. “*Alors, université! Merveilleux!*” he exclaimed. “Future belongs to za young, *n’est-ce pas?*”

He introduced himself but I have forgotten the name he gave. He probed into my background with a couple of quick questions in French. When I stumbled, because I did not wish to reveal too much in a going-through-the-motion exercise, he reverted to his accented English. “You speak English well. You intend to enter university here?”

“Not sure. Depends on my father.”

“Ah, *certainement, le père*. If you study here, we could -- how you say in English? -- kill two birds with one stone?”

He made a Gallic flurry with his hands before continuing. “I much interested in za youth of your country, what they feel, how they think in these troublesome times. I respect zhem, very much. They are in vanguard of change. Not easy for Westerners to get close, to win their confidence. Now, you are different. You are one of zhem. You are -- how you say? -- on za ground floor?”

“Practising French no problem. We talk, once a week or more. You can tell me za mood of fellow students, their motivations, their plans. Good subjects for conversation, *n'est-ce pas?* What you say?”

I said nothing. As I listened to his proposition, my suspicions gathered. Why should a man of the cloth, a Catholic missionary preaching the teachings of his God, be so interested in the thoughts and activities of Chinese students? Was he more than what he had made himself out to be? Was he someone fishing in troubled waters?

I feigned slowness in comprehension. “What fee for practising conversation?” I asked.

The priest laughed amicably. “No fee at all, my young friend. Investment in peace and friendship. Can have trial run next week, if convenient, pending decision on where you study.”

The priest suddenly brought to mind the devious Cardinal Richelieu portrayed in *The Three Musketeers*. Indeed, with his hooded eyes

and neat goatee, all he would have needed was the crimson robe of a cardinal to make the picture complete.

“Thank you,” I said. “You are most kind. My family will be delighted by your generosity. I will revert in due course.”

With that I took my leave.

On the way home, I began wondering if I might have been rather un-Christian to ascribe ulterior motives to a priest, simply because he fitted in with my image of Cardinal Richelieu. His words had been friendly and, indeed, generous, though he certainly got me wrong. He had assumed I was part of China’s youth and belonged “on za ground floor”. I certainly was not a part of anything. I was an outsider, still unclear as to what I was and where I belonged.

The world seemed a bewildering, multilayered place. My bafflement over currency fluctuations and foreign missionaries was only part of it. I was walking, for instance, on a Chinese island, recently returned by foreign powers. Yet treading on it felt no different from walking around in Singapore or Australia. It gave no boost to my sense of attachment or national pride.

The Chinese repossession of Shameen might be well and good, but what about the other annexed pieces of the country? Why had Britain and Portugal been allowed to retain Hong Kong and Macau respectively? Who had agreed to those continuing alienations and for what reasons?

Some remarks overheard during the distant yesterdays of my boyhood, between *Ah Yeh* and his friends, drifted back to me.

They had all agreed during one of their opium-smoking reveries that for the last hundred years the Chinese nation had only desired to be left alone, so that it might sort out its own mess in its own way. But foreign powers gave the country no peace.

Their judgement still remained accurate at present. The country

was still going through convulsions, foreigners were still interfering and its people were still fighting among themselves. The Americans had chosen a side in China's internal conflict and the Soviets another. Possibly the French, in spite of the shame of their Vichy collaboration with the Nazis, still itched for imperial glory. After all, France was the last foreign power to relinquish extraterritorial rights within China. It did so only in 1946.

A measure of China's vulnerability could be gleaned from its inability to form and finance a symbolic occupation force for Japan, in spite of having waged such a sustained and protracted struggle against its ancient enemy. That failure signalled both an enduring weakness and a continuing danger for the country.

A tingling sense of helplessness seeped into me as I made my way back to the East Bridge. Reality was much more incomprehensible than I had bargained for. I paused after setting foot on the bridge and allowed my thoughts to wander as I leaned myself against one of its stone balusters.

The afternoon had turned more sticky. The usual bustle drifted towards me from the Chinese part of the city -- chanting coolies hauling loads, cyclists jingling bells, hawkers touting wares, housewives haggling over prices, newspaper sellers yelling the latest headlines, crippled beggars seeking alms, rickety urchins squealing in play. I could see shoppers lugging purchases, mothers carrying babies, pedestrians waiting for traffic lights, rickshaws, lorries and cars dashing off in all directions. Each in a rush to get rid of cash before it devalued further.

The scene brought back faint echoes of what I had seen of the city ages ago, when I was going to kindergarten. Nothing much had changed. It was struggling with the same dreary routines for survival, except for new tensions replacing the old ones.

If my mother had her way, I would be joining that treadmill. If a man had only one life, why spend 40 years clocking in and clocking out? It

would amount to slow death in the swamps of boredom, ordinariness and disillusionment. Better to lay life on the line, in one grand and glorious gesture, like the Whampoa cadets back in 1925.

So thinking, I realised I was standing at the very spot where one of the machine-guns used in the Shakee Massacres had been mounted. Lying before me was the ground once hallowed by the blood of martyrs.

My heart skipped a beat and my imagination gradually took me back to a time before I was born. I conjured up that unequal contest -- the angry crowds charging towards the fortified bridges, the shouted slogans, the rattle of machine-gun fire, the tang of saltpetre, the cries of pain, the gushing of blood, the human bodies twitching in the throes of death.

Suddenly, I fancied the strains of *The March of the Volunteers* swelling around me like some magnificent and stirring symphony. Yes, with one heart people had braved enemy fire; it was possible to build a new Great Wall with flesh and blood. My imaginings set my heart beating like a war drum. I became so drunk with emotion that I had to grip the baluster to steady myself.

It must be utterly wrong and unpatriotic for my mother to put the deaths of Shakee martyrs down as sheer foolishness. They had been young men like me, on the threshold of life. The humiliations heaped upon their country must have wounded their self-esteem beyond endurance. They had no alternative to action, to restore both their own and their nation's dignity.

The nation was still in jeopardy today. The country was still divided; perils threatened from many directions. What could *I* contribute? I had no physical strength or courage to speak of, not even enough to stand up to a drunken Australian or to beat a one-armed boy in a boxing match. Simply depriving me of my spectacles would reduce my world to a hostile blur. As to knowledge, I was still essentially a schoolboy trained to act like a British subject rather than a patriotic Chinese. I would be largely useless in any

struggle for national renewal. A wave of bitter self-disgust washed over me. The need to gain access to further education, to make myself more useful, sharpened with a vengeance.

Then I suddenly recalled from one of the books I had read that only those favoured by the gods had the privilege of dying young. I had been ill-favoured in physique and appearance. Could the gods be intending to compensate me with an early death? To go like the Shakee martyrs would not be without grandeur.

I moved away from the bridge in a half-daze. Instead of heading home I allowed my feet to take me wherever they chose. After more than an hour of dispirited wandering, I found myself in Wanfu Road. Out of the paling light loomed the red-painted Church of Our Saviour, an institution my maternal grandfather had set up decades ago. A few elderly people had begun to gather there, possibly for evensong.



The Church of Our Saviour founded by my Maternal Grandfather, Bishop Mok Shao-Tsang at Wanfu Road in Canton.

My thoughts drifted back to my childhood and some of the questions I had posed to my mother and *Por-por* about the biblical stories they told. I never got answers which completely satisfied me. My maternal grandparents had frequently extolled meekness, subservience, endurance, turning the other cheek and reliance on some form of divine benevolence. Their views were subsequently reinforced by teachers at Sunday school and at St. Andrew's.

I was well aware that nationalists and revolutionaries had long condemned the apathy, resignation and acceptance of suffering inherent in the Chinese race. They had urged people to rise up against their semi-serfdom and their bottomless poverty. Yet many advocates of drastic changes, like Dr. Sun and *Ah Yeh*, were also Christians. How did they reconcile the contradictions in their ideas? No apparent end to conundrums.

As I stared at the Church of Our Saviour, it came to me that Christianity must be somehow incompatible with radical change. It was a religion of acceptance, of inaction, of weakness and postponement. After all, why should anyone act when an all-powerful God was overseeing everything? He would punish the wicked and reward the good on some far-off Judgement Day. It was all a matter of patience.

Once my thoughts went in that direction, it became obvious Christianity was a subversive ideology working in favour of foreign imperialists. Where had meekness and turning the other cheek ever got China in the last hundred years? At best Christianity might be just a gigantic confidence trick to keep people in their places. Why should my violated aunts have to wait till Judgement Day, for example, before receiving justice?

By the time I began making my way home, my faith in an all-powerful Christian God was beginning to wear very thin.

* * *

The night that followed remained muggy. The mental upheavals of the afternoon made me restless. I went out of my room to pace the roof, in search of fresh air. But there was not even the shadow of a breeze. Large banks of low-lying clouds had set in, not only blanketing in the sultry heat of the day but also obliterating the moon and the stars.

New quandaries assailed me over the capriciousness of the

heavens. Once I started to question the existence of a Christian God, it followed I had to question the biblical explanations for the origins of the universe as well. Science classes had already cast doubts on some of those accounts. The need for clarity suddenly seemed urgent and imperative.

The following morning, I told my mother I had decided to return to Singapore, to tackle my father about university. She signified her acceptance in a matter-of-fact way, without any attempt to urge me to stay longer. I mentioned I would like to spend a little time in Hong Kong before going back, to re-acquaint myself with the place of my birth. I did not tell her of my parlous financial situation, in case she took it for a plea for money.

“Who are you going to stay with?” my mother asked.

“Haven’t made any approach yet,” I replied. “Whom would you suggest?”

“You might try your Fifth Maternal Aunt and Uncle,” she said.

“You used to play with their children when you were little. You even once cut one of them with a piece of firewood. It’s about time you all got re-acquainted on a more gentlemanly basis.”

I had previously written to my Fifth Maternal Aunt for possible shelter en route to Canton in case I needed a stop-over in Hong Kong. She had been quick to offer hospitality. In the event, I did not have to stop-over. I now followed my mother’s advice and wrote to her again. On receipt of another welcoming response, I left for Hong Kong.

* * *

After I took my leave in that summer of 1947, I was not to see my mother again for another six years. I next saw her in Manila, in the summer of 1953, while I was on my way back to Hong Kong after finishing university at Stanford. My mother and Dr. Reigo had migrated to the Philippines in 1951,

settling in Davao City on the island of Mindanao.

They moved again in 1975, to Vancouver to be with Mabel and her husband. I made a point of dropping in on them whenever my duties or my travels took me to their vicinity.

During one of those visits, after the death of Dr. Riego in 1979, my mother reached back into her past in a dramatic fashion one evening. We had been sitting quietly by ourselves in her sitting room after dinner when she suddenly turned to me and demanded: “Why did your father do such a terrible thing to me? What have I ever done wrong?”

Her questions flabbergasted me. I had not expected the débâcle of her marriage and divorce to rankle so much after half a century. I thought momentarily of some of the women I had loved and the sorrows or afterglows left behind. A thousand reasons could be found to explain why anyone should lose his way but none of them was entirely satisfactory.

I had toyed during my youth and early adulthood with a theory as to why the marriage of my parents failed. It was based on the supposition that my mother had been wrong-headed to marry a man like my father and then compounding her mistake by misreading both his character and that of her best friend and bridesmaid. That theory suddenly appeared over-simplistic. I should have worked instead on discovering why, after societies had ended the practice of keeping concubines, failed marriages should become the order of the day for many in my family.

Faced with my mother’s troubled questions and watching the tears rolling down her cheeks, I could only manage a cowardly evasion.

“Mum,” I said, “all that happened a very long time ago. Just let it be. Life constantly throws up issues for which there are no real answers.”

So much for facing up to truths.

After leaving Canton, I did not visit the city again for another 35 years. When I did so, I stayed briefly at a new hotel which had opened on Shameen. The town appeared little changed at that time but the hotel must have been a harbinger of things to come.

Another 30 years have since passed and I have not had the chance to pay another visit. I am told, however, that the city is now greatly transformed. All the tenement buildings along Six Two Three Road have disappeared. In their place, gleaming edifices dedicated to the new gods and goddesses of conspicuous consumption have arisen. The emporiums lining the road are stuffed with branded designer products aimed at satisfying the fabricated wants and empty vanities of the consumer age, at those so wanting in self-esteem that they have to mimic others.

The world has, for reasons I cannot fully fathom, increasingly embraced an economic system which gives infinite choices in terms of shoes, face creams, spectacle frames, electronic gadgets and so forth but little choice in respect of education for the young or for the condition of our rivers or even for the quality of the air everyone has to breathe.

A moot and intriguing point arises. Is the present world the kind of future envisaged by the Shakee martyrs when they laid down their lives on that bleak June day back in 1925?

The fate of *The March of the Volunteers*, however, can be stated with greater certainty. After a few ups and downs, it has been adopted as the current National Anthem of China.