

Heart of the Beast

Being transferred to the Colonial Secretariat rendered going to work much less of a journey. It was but an easy 10-minute walk downhill, through ancient streets redolent with local smells and colours. There would be those bustling wet markets, roadside stalls, elderly men reminiscent of my grandfather, puffing on long pipes or attending to caged canaries, grannies overseeing small grandchildren even as they assembled plastic flowers or other piece goods for a pittance. My normal route would take me past Bishop's House. It represented a world of earthiness and familial connections, as different as could be imagined from the Secretariat complex I was heading towards at Lower Albert Road.

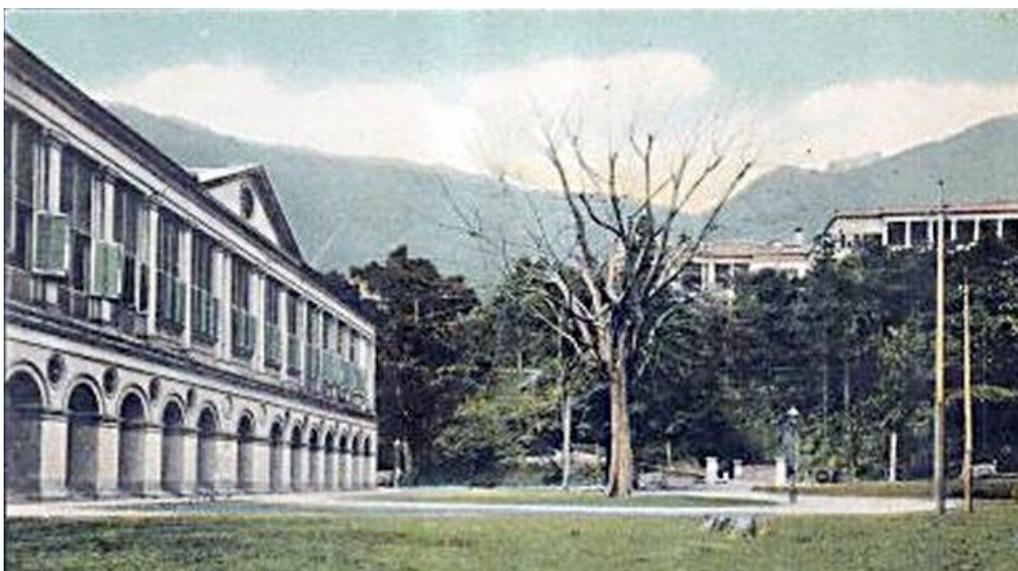
Of course, walking home uphill took greater exertion, especially in the summer heat or during rain. But a crowded bus service, following a rather circuitous route, was always available as an alternative, at the cost of just a few coppers.

My new posting took me into what some perceived as "the heart of the beast", the ultimate centre of colonial power. Being moved entailed a significant reduction in salary because I would no longer be entitled to draw the acting pay I had been receiving as a Principal Social Welfare Officer. Nonetheless, I was already several hundred dollars better off than when I first joined, due to both the four increments I had received for past experience and a further two I had earned during my service at the Social Welfare Department.

The Centre block and the East Wing of the Secretariat held the greatest concentration of expatriate Administrative Officers in the entire government, together with their individual complements of supporting staff. The top dogs would roll up in chauffeur-driven official cars. They would be met by uniformed attendants who opened their car doors more smartly than any footman of old and who would at the same time utter bright and snappy morning greetings.

The West Wing was in a separate building and it housed a number of government departments like the Civil Aviation Department and the Registrar

General rather than policy officials.



The pre-war Centre Block of the government Secretariat.

Photo courtesy of gwulo.com



The replacement block completed in 1959 on the same site.

The Centre Block would always be thick with human traffic at the start of each working day. Its atmosphere vibrated with status-consciousness,

mixed up with pomp, ambition, envy, calculation, deference and hierarchical superiority. Minions who knew their places would step aside automatically to allow the more senior officials to enter the lifts first.

At one time, lift operators had been under instructions that, upon the arrival of the Colonial Secretary, they would have to speed him non-stop to his office on the fifth floor first, regardless of who else might already be in the conveyance. Those lesser personalities would have to wait, to decant when the machine was on its way down again. Those instructions had probably been issued out of consideration for others as much as for the dignity of the office, because the elevated personage in question had a mighty reputation for certain types of liquid breakfasts. It was not known whether he partook of kippers, bangers, bacon, fried eggs and baked beans as well.

The General Branch was also located on the fifth floor, but along a much dingier corridor devoid of carpeted waiting rooms and other appurtenances of power and circumstance. It was just one of several branches located on different floors of the building. The actual number of branches fluctuated over time, depending on reorganisation, expansion, amalgamation, name changes or specialised needs.

At the head of the General Branch was a Principal Assistant Colonial Secretary. Its subordinate staff consisted of two Administrative Officers, occupying posts known as Assistant Secretaries, and a number of Executive Officers, stenographers, clerks and clerical assistants and messengers. It ran its own registry, filing systems and other support services. Files belonging to the Branch were kept within jackets of a distinctively sandy brown colour. Any document which could not be readily identified as belonging to any obvious subject file would float around in a white jacket known as a "Loose Minute" -- until someone with sufficient authority or common sense decided where its contents ought to be archived.

Files belonging to other branches had jackets of different colours.

For example, the files of the Establishment Branch had jackets of pale blue. All security graded files, however, were in a uniform pink and stamped “Confidential”. An unsightly orange was the colour for “Secret” files while crimson was reserved for “Top Secret” ones. Some Top Secret files were also crossed with bars, which meant they were reserved for British eyes only, which was an unsubtle way of describing European eyes. There was some uncertainty whether the eyes of a Eurasian officer were sufficiently European. The course usually chosen was one that would be safe rather than sorry.

The “Confidential” files were all kept in a common Confidential Registry while those of a higher security grading would be kept in a Safe Care Registry inside the Defence Branch. That high security branch had always been led by expatriate Administrative Officers.

Unlike Singapore decades earlier, when both Anna and my sister Helen were employed in the Special Branch, in Hong Kong even minor staff like filing clerks and clerical assistants still had to be expatriates. All security graded files had to be signed for and returned promptly after use. An Assistant Secretary rarely had access to any file graded above “Confidential”.

The head of the General Branch was a bluff, energetic and stocky Administrative Officer of medium height by the name of Alistair Todd. He gave every impression of being decisive, with quite limited patience for suffering fools gladly. He answered directly to the Deputy Colonial Secretary or those still higher up in the chain of command.

The first file Alistair Todd handed me upon my reporting for duty was a Branch file containing instructions on how Assistant Secretaries ought to draft and present a proper minute. The instruction had been drawn up by no less a personage than the Deputy Colonial Secretary of the time, Geoffrey Hamilton.

Hamilton, an agreeable enough fellow when one got to know him, set out the instruction uncompromisingly, almost as if it had come straight down from Mount Sinai. It was accompanied by a detailed sample minute, written by

himself, on how such a submission ought to be done. According to him, when a proposal has to be submitted for higher consideration, the submitting officer should first summarise the proposal and determine whether there had been any relevant precedents. If so, the minute should identify all such precedents with marginal references on the minute itself, flagging all relevant minutes and memos within the file. If the precedents were located in separate files, those files had to be bundled with the submission, with documents similarly flagged.

If a proposal was not on all fours with a precedent, then the pros and cons of the proposal ought to be analysed, together with possible alternatives. All foreseeable consequences in accepting, denying or postponing the proposal ought to be explored, assessed and listed.

The submitting officer should then make his own recommendation on the proposal, stating succinctly his reasons for doing so. If a minute were well argued, all that should be required was for an approving officer to place a tick against the recommendation and initial his name. The proposal could then proceed as recommended. If an approving officer had to raise questions, that would imply an inadequately studied or analysed submission.

I was required to sign in the file to acknowledge I had read and understood the instruction. I actually saw no insuperable difficulty following either the spirit or the letter of what had been set down. Indeed, I regarded the whole thing as fairly sophomoric. Precedents previously made must have been based largely upon European or imperialist assumptions. I was keen to muddy the waters and did so by subtly tossing in an occasional Chinese perspective. I could see, however, why some colleagues, especially those just out of university and without working experience in the field, might dread Secretariat assignments. Yet, for some reason, the Establishment Branch seemed to relish inflicting such postings on fresh recruits.

The responsibility of the General Branch centred around policies on providing social services. In other words, it dealt with the social services and

infrastructures which every civilised and modern society ought to provide for its citizens, like medical facilities, education, public hygiene, a safety net for the poor and disadvantaged, public transport, marine and port matters and so forth. Its tasks were to work with the front line departments to formulate appropriate policies, to examine their cost and other implications and, if approved, to help bring such projects to fruition, together with realistic assessments of staffing needs.

Since I had worked for more than two and a half years with the Social Welfare Department and had played a part in drafting submissions to the Secretariat from that Department, I thought it might create a conflict of interest if I were to deal with proposals from there. I therefore asked the head of Branch if I might be spared that involvement, so that proposals could be judged on their merits by others more dispassionately. He readily agreed.

It soon became apparent that any large scale government project was enormously complicated. There were a thousand and one things to attend to. There had to be a crucial anticipatory element, a judgement years ahead of a need actually arising. In the case of a hospital, for example, it was no use deciding on building it when patients were already lying all over the corridors for want of hospital beds. Moreover, sufficient doctors or nurses had to be trained long before any hospital materialised. The process therefore had to be started years earlier.

If the hospital were to be a teaching one, it needed to be located adjacent to a medical college or university. The educational system had to be geared up to producing the surgeons, nurses, anaesthetists, radiographers, pharmacists, laboratory assistants and others needed for the hospital. The town planners had to make sure that ambulances could reach its Accidents and Emergency Department without being stuck in traffic; the architects and engineers had to come up with an effective design; and so on and so forth. Getting a piece of Crown land assigned and securing the capital and recurrent

expenditures voted upon by the legislature were the relatively easy bits.

As a lowly Assistant Secretary, I found getting involved at the start of such projects thoroughly exhilarating. Imaging the future was a challenging exercise. And yet, though one might review and re-calculate that perceived future a thousand times, there would always be some obvious contingent need overlooked.

But there were other disappointments too. In scanning textbooks for secondary education, for example, I noticed that as in the case in Singapore and Perth, the glories of British achievements were emphasised while the more shameful British episodes such as the Opium Wars were largely skipped over. Nor was due examination given to the impacts of those and later conflicts upon China and its people.

I myself had been largely a product of British colonial education. I did not fully realise the many gaps in my early education till I went to Stanford and began studying Chinese philosophy and history. It was only then that some elements in my past began to fall into place. I could then relate more fully to some of the things Tutor Tam had tried to impart and to understand what lay behind my Eighth Granduncle's decision to acquire a Chinese school and to ask my father to run it.

Some random readings of anthropology about Western colonialism in Polynesia also alerted me to the devastating effects such intrusion had on indigenous cultures. Many of the native tribes there had their original beliefs and cultures progressively expunged and haphazardly replaced by ill explained alien ones. Once proud tribesmen in settled ways of life were soon reduced to lost and empty servitors dependent upon an all-devouring pseudo-culture of trashy mass tourism.

Such a threat was less real in Hong Kong because Chinese traditions ran deeper and there was a resurgent national pride in the mainland. Nonetheless, there was no telling where decades of brainwashing about the

superiority of neoliberal market values might lead. Upon the inevitable reversion of the territory to China, there might well be a considerable number of maladjusted and alienated people unable to fit into a radically different social and political environment. The alternative outcome might be that they would spread the money-grubbing contagion to a mainland struggling to establish a socialist society.

It was a surprise that no Chinese educator had apparently foreseen the looming problem to come forward with remedial proposals. I had neither the knowledge or the clout to raise such a fundamental issue. I could only confine myself to minor technical matters such as class sizes, turning schools bi-sessional to increase the number of school places and updating some textbooks.

In respect of the last mentioned, I was surprised to discover that among the authors of textbooks were two very senior officers in the Education Department. Surely that had to constitute a conflict of interest, because every change in a textbook brought profit to printers, publishers and authors. But I immediately saw the risk of being badly bitten if I were to poke into a snake pit like that. So I desisted.

More than half a century had passed since I first identified that problem of too frequent and unnecessary changes to some textbooks. But I understand that the issue still remains unresolved in Hong Kong today.

After I had been in the General Branch for about a year, Alistair Todd was reassigned to take up the post of Defence Secretary. His replacement, regrettably, was not half as effective as he.

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At around that same time, a Senior Education Officer was seconded to the Establishment Branch to look into the training needs of those in “the higher civil service”. That term was about as difficult to define as the

dimensions of an amoeba, though it seemed that all Administrative Officers fell into that category.

The secondee found that some courses in Public Administration had recently been started by the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague. They included a six-month post-graduate diploma course and a one-year course leading to a master's degree. They were specifically designed for mid-ranking government officials from developing countries. I was asked if I would be interested in being a guinea pig to try out the diploma course.

I naturally jumped at the chance of a break, not because I was exhausted in any way with work but because things were not going well at home. The arrival of our second son did not improve relations between Man-Ying and myself. If anything, it exacerbated our estrangement. It became increasingly obvious that my wife was still unreconciled to the loss of her adolescence and was still trying to recapture it. Having to share accommodation with her parents might also have been a factor for her.

I made an effort to attend some of the parties thrown by her friends, most of whom were still unmarried. Their conversations revolved around people completely unknown to me and whether wedding bells would ring for one or another among them. Otherwise the chatter would be about the latest colours for eye shadows or the current must-have fashion accessories. All that made me realise how little we shared in common. I felt as out of place with Man-Ying's crowd as she did at the dinners with the Barons or at the race day lunches. I would much rather stay home to baby-sit or to curl up with a copy of Poe or Baudelaire instead of going to one of those parties.

Although I always made a point of asking Man-Ying if she was willing to attend a function before accepting, she would sometimes turn moody and change her mind at the last minute. I was therefore often left at the eleventh hour thinking up a plausible excuse to explain her absence.

She thought, in her turn, that the painting I had bought of the Taoist

mystic was too ridiculous for words. Fancy anyone taking a liking to a silly old man with a bird sitting on his head!

It would be fair to mention at this point that family relations were not helped by a developing relationship between myself and Fung Hon-Chu, following the crossing of our paths at the ministerial conference of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. Mr. Fung had made no secret of his belief that I would be an asset in his business, since his own children were still in school. He lost no opportunity to paint the bright and lucrative future awaiting me in the private sector.

He set about cultivating me openly, with the aid of his dumpy and jolly wife Charity. The pair would invite my family for weekend buffets at private clubs or *dim-sum* lunches at restaurants. I felt obliged to accept some invitations because Mr. Fung was a Legislative Councillor. He also couched his invitations as requests for help in explaining government policies or in selling Hong Kong to prospective American or European customers. Charity would bring along for my boys a few outdated sample toys from Li & Fung showrooms. The boys relished those outings so much that I could not deny them.

The sum of all those activities was to underline the poor rewards in government service compared with the private sector. Since civil service scales were publicly known, he had no difficulty pinpointing what I was being paid. He went so far as to promise to double my income right away if I were to join Li & Fung. The prospect of hefty bonuses was also there if business was good. It was something of a human oddity, for the more I spurned his blandishments the more keen he became to secure my services.

To Man-Ying's credit, she kept a discreet silence during those interchanges, though once back at home she made clear I was a fool not to accept such those offers. To her, one job was the same as another. It was the pay cheque that mattered.

The inability for us to see things in the same way came to such a pass that even the carnal part of marriage lost all appeal. We coupled less and less. When we did, it was almost like a war of attrition, waged with dry loins. Worse than that, during one of those rash and loveless couplings, Man-Ying managed to get herself pregnant again.

With the arrival of our third son, Tien-Kit, soon after my transfer to the Secretariat, my heart sank. We were both in different ways going out of our minds. If it had not been for the steadying presence of my in-laws and the buffer zone they created, I could not imagine what might have happened to us. I was convinced that our marriage was beyond help, though we attempted to maintain a reasonable and superficial calm for the sake of our children.

But children could not be fooled. They had a way of knowing when things were not right. At their tender ages, neither of us was in a position to look after them unaided and neither could come up with a viable solution.

My in-laws had been pulling out all stops to salvage our marriage. But after five long years of sustained effort on their part, it must have looked increasingly futile even to them. Yet there was no way out which any of us could accept with an easy conscience.

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It was against such a background that I was told I had been selected for the six-month diploma course at the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague, beginning in January of 1965. The Institute was located in a former royal palace in the heart of the city. Although the neighbourhood turned out to be very pleasant, before going there I did not fancy living among students. I wanted to get to know some ordinary Dutch people and get a taste of their everyday lives.

To that end, I had approached the Netherlands Consul-General in Hong Kong, whom I had met at one of the dinners hosted by the Barons, to find

me a suitable family. He put me in touch with Colonel Pieter Jansen Schoonhoven, whose family lived near the seaside at Scheveningen, a mere 15-minute tram ride to the centre of The Hague.

The colonel, attached to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation at that time, had a considerable interest in Chinese culture and in Far Eastern affairs. He had a wife and four teenaged children living at No. 78 Gentsestraat and he offered me a room with breakfast for what appeared a very modest sum. I accepted with alacrity.

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Shortly before I was to leave for Holland, I bumped into Alistair Todd in the corridors of the Secretariat. I greeted him heartily and asked how he was taking to the Defence Branch.

“It’s all right,” he replied, without much enthusiasm.

I had by then had my security clearance after three years of probation and had been confirmed to the permanent and pensionable establishment.

In order to poke a bit of fun at him I said: “Alistair, your security boys aren’t much good, if you don’t mind my saying so. They were supposed to check my security background thoroughly. But not a single question was asked about my grandfather’s revolutionary past or my mother’s work with a notorious Comintern agent in Canton. For all anybody knows, I might be a subversive being planted into your system.”

“I wouldn’t go around talking like that, if I were you,” Alistair Todd said, unusually tartly.

I was slightly taken aback by his sour response but thought no more about it.

Shortly thereafter, I was amazed to learn that Alistair Todd had resigned from the Administrative Service and was heading back to England to

enter the church as a pastor. I could not figure out why he should have made such a decision, because during the time I had worked for him I had regarded him as a man destined for higher office.

Nine years later, with the benefit of hindsight and after institutionalised corruption scandals erupted inside the police force, I could not help wondering whether Todd had already discovered during his tenure as Defence Secretary what a can of worms he was trying to keep a lid on.

The scandals shocked the public in 1973 with the flight of Chief Superintendent Peter Godber to Britain on the eve of his retirement with a cash fortune of \$4.3 million which he could not explain. The attempts to put him on trial for corruption soon led to the swift decamping of a number of Chinese desk sergeants from a number of local police stations with similar fortunes. Most sought refuge in Taiwan, since it had neither diplomatic relations nor extradition arrangements with Britain. It became startling clear to one and all that a massive system of collecting bribes and protecting racketeers had long existed within the police force.

Among the ordinary men and women in the streets, rampant corruption in certain section of the government was common knowledge. Street hawkers, pimps, opium den operators and illegal gambling bosses all paid hush money with regularity. Moreover, anti-corruption activists like Mrs. Elsie Elliot had been writing numerous letters and petitions to the Governor and to British Ministers in Whitehall about that actual state of affairs. Many of the letters written by her are now in the archives of the Baptist College. The so-called free press in the colony failed miserably to investigate any of her allegations or to hold the authorities to account.

The failure of the administration to tackle the problem before the eruption of the Peter Godber scandal was inexplicable. The Defence Secretary had always been an expatriate Administrative Officer, one of the top administrators. His all-expatriate staff had responsibility for overseeing the

police and other uniformed services. Furthermore, for many years a senior expatriate Administrative Officer had been posted as Civil Secretary within the top echelons in the Police Department, to keep an eye on things. How Godber and others could have got away for so long with a massive syndicated form of corruption beggared belief -- unless people at the top had accepted such a development as a logical apotheosis of combining a free market with imperial exploitation.

In the case of Alistair Todd, a most decent and straightforward man, perhaps the recognition of the extent of the problem might have come too late. He might have found himself trapped between his own Christian values and the impossible task he would have to tackle without any appreciable outcome as a loyal civil servant. Resignation might have been the only honourable way out. All this can be nothing more than personal supposition, for Todd did not tell me why he changed vocation mid-stream.

What was an undeniable fact, however, was that the Godber and other scandals forced the government's hand. It had to take some action. But it was done in such a ham-fisted manner, by the creation of an Independent Commission Against Corruption before the proper groundwork had been laid.

The governor of the time, Sir Murray MacLehose, initiated the action. Before he did so, he did ask me whether I thought corruption was widespread in the police force. I told him it was common knowledge that there was widespread corruption at the ground level. But I did not know to what higher levels the disease had reached. The best people to advise him would be Administrative Officers who had served in the Defence Branch or in the police itself.

I do not know whether Sir Murray had followed my advice and if so, what advice he got. Sir Murray was, based on my limited experience with him, a man with an impetuous streak, a penchant for acting first and asking the wrong questions afterwards.

In any case, if he had sought advice, he might have got a rather dubious kind. He launched the Independent Commission Against Corruption without being assured that the rank and file of the police would go along with the house-cleaning. Stopping corruption in fact meant a sudden reduction of the regular income policemen on the beat had been accustomed to. Many had come to depend upon that illicit income to subsidise their low salaries and to provide for their families.

When the Independent Commission started acting against them, they rebelled. A group of police officers went to the headquarters of the Independent Commission and beat up its staff.

Since police officers were armed, the Governor had to grant a humiliating amnesty for all past police misdeeds to salvage the situation. It was not an edifying precedent for wise and considered leadership.