

Lessons Learnt

The Star Ferry riots in April of 1966 did not ruffle the insouciance of most of Hong Kong's ruling elites. They generally brushed them off as an aberration from the society's normal preoccupation with money-grubbing. As a consequence, they were ill prepared for the far more serious trouble which broke out the following year, after the Cultural Revolution had erupted in China. Even as chaos spread like a rash to Macau in December, Hong Kong retained a quaint complacency, smug that the British were made of sterner stuff than the Portuguese.

If the local elites had been more perceptive about the ails besetting colonial society, they might have picked up a number of straws in the wind. For example, the staff of the Star Ferry had gone on strike in July of 1946, to be followed in October by three days of anti-foreign riots over the death of a peanut hawker.

Another indicator of public mood was a newspaper controversy over the playing of the British national anthem after each show at movie theatres. An expatriate had complained about the boorishness of Chinese audiences in dispersing while the anthem was being played. Many Chinese, on the other hand, could not see why they should be respectful of an anthem which merely reminded them of their subjugated status. In the end, the matter was resolved by theatres abandoning the playing of the anthem altogether.

If the elites had read their tea leaves better years later, they might have got an inkling of why ordinary people should have been rioted over a five-cent increase in first class Star Ferry fare. The Commission of Inquiry into that rioting held afterwards drew pointed attention to the "gap between the government and people in communication and understanding". But still the thick hide of complacency was not pierced.

If it had been, the government might have given greater attention also to the fact that the population was growing younger -- with about half under the age of 29 -- and was being infected to varying degrees by the irredentist virus

spread by both the Kuomintang and the Communists.

Sadly, the elites failed to reach out to form fresh alliances, to win hearts and minds or to smooth over some of the harsher edges of old-fashioned colonialism. Instead they preferred retreating into their bunker mentality, nursing Madame de Pompadour's approach of *après nous le déluge*. Hence they were unprepared for the trials to come.

In addition, guidance from Whitehall was ambiguous, although the Foreign Office had a Political Advisor installed in Hong Kong allegedly to provide such guidance. The British establishment, however, was itself at sixes and sevens, keen to shed non-rewarding domains like the Solomons but to retain a decidedly revenue-generating colony like Hong Kong. That last jewel of empire was contributing handily to the British economy through the standard range of invisibles -- banking, insurance, shipping, dividends from investments, civil aviation landing rights and so forth.

The extent to which Whitehall took seriously its international obligations to govern in the interest of non-self-governing peoples was a matter of some scepticism. Arguable inferences could be drawn from some of the laws and social regulations foisted upon the colony.

If it had indeed been Churchill who had first coined the phrase about the British Empire being acquired "in a fit of absence of mind", it would perhaps not be too far-fetched to surmise that the latter day proconsuls in Hong Kong were perversely inclined to losing what was left in a similar mental state.

When Sir David Trench assumed the office of Governor in 1964, some had seen a glimmer of hope. He had been credited with a better understanding of the local situation since he had previously served in the colony as Deputy Defence Secretary from 1950 and later as Deputy Colonial Secretary till 1960. He had therefore been in the thick of things when bitter Chinese factional fighting erupted in Tsuen Wan in 1956, leading to the loss of 30 lives. The British Army had to be called out to restore order. Sir David thus could

hardly have been blind to some of the political fractures affecting the community.

During his earlier service, he had quickly joined the Cosmo Club, a social club which drew a mixed membership from both locals and expatriates. Its facilities had been located in the now long demolished Gloucester Building in Peddar Street. Clearly he was not a standoffish sort of chap. He was generally regarded as approachable, emollient and well-meaning. My own limited dealings with him confirmed those attributes. In addition, he was a war hero, having earned a Military Cross and an American Legion of Merit during the war while serving in the Pacific.

And yet, soon after taking office as Governor, he embarked upon courses of action which must have seemed to the proverbial man-in-the-street as incomprehensible as those mind-bending *koans* Zen Buddhist patriarchs had inflicted upon the faithful.

For instance, there had for some years been a simmering dissatisfaction among the bulk of the 98% Chinese population regarding the requirement for all official dealings to be conducted in English, a language unfamiliar to most. A demand for Chinese to be made a second official language therefore readily gained support.

In October of 1964, soon after Sir David had assumed office, that demand found expression in a motion in the Urban Council. Ironically, it was a European member, Brook Bernacchi, who had moved it. Bernacchi thought it a fundamental issue of fairness that the population should not be forced to use a language unknown to most of them. Other important social organisations, including the normally well-tamed Legislative Council, quickly joined that call.

The use of English in official dealings had appeared unjust to me way back in the late 1940s, when I was a reporter covering magistracies and courts for the *South China Morning Post*. Poor interpretations and translations had often compounded cases of miscarriages of justice. A Chinese sitting on the

bench was a rarity in those days. One such magistrate was a gentleman by the name of Lo Hin-Shing. I noticed he often had to intervene to rectify some mistranslation in his court. But I had never been allowed to give expression to such misgivings in print.

To make Chinese an official language would, of course, create an enormous cultural shock for the judiciary should litigants elect to use Chinese in proceedings. All the Puisne Judges and the overwhelming number of magistrates were Europeans. Without an adequate knowledge of either the Chinese language or of Chinese cultural traditions, they would be left struggling. The first ethnic Chinese to reach the level of a High Court judge did not occur till 1976.

Instead of recognising the demand and offering some accommodation with it, however, Sir David chose to resist it. The administration got its most loyal and most senior Chinese Administrative Officer to put his name to an article, branding the demand as “an intellectual exercise” for “frustrated intellectuals”.

Having known this particular brother officer for a number of years, I was certain that pattern of words could not have come naturally to him. But I did not try to discomfit him by asking why he had put his name to such a retrograde article. My guess was that he had done it out of loyalty and obedience rather than good sense. In any case, his article was roundly condemned by virtually all sections of the Chinese public.

But Sir David still chose to ignore the message. In February of 1966, a year and a half after the Bernacchi motion and barely two months before the Star Ferry riots, he declared in a speech before the Legislative Council he wanted more local participation in public affairs.

However, he went on to say: “We will be trying to get views . . . in the months to come, and we shall in particular take special steps to seek the views of that large section of the community which is not normally given to

public expressions of opinions. I make no apology for suggesting we hasten reasonably slowly in this matter. What we do we must do right; good judgement is much more important than haste here.”

He did not seem to appreciate that time was not on his side. The sun was rapidly setting on the British Empire, just as it indubitably had to set over all empires. He was not a reactionary or an unreconstructed colonial. In fact, he was probably one of the most liberal post-war Governors. Yet he appeared to be missing all the vital signals.

To be fair to him, however, he was losing the sober advice and support of officers like David Baron and Alastair Todd through early retirements. Their replacements were, unfortunately, not of the same calibre. They did not have their sensitivities or their dedication to the wider public good.

In any event, the administration eventually resorted to the standard tactics employed by governments all around the world for delaying an inconvenient but justifiable demand. It agreed to set up a Chinese Language Committee to study the issue. The hope was to knock the ball into the long grass where it could be quietly forgotten. But it was not forgotten. After all plausible excuses had been exhausted, the government finally made Chinese a second official language in 1972, soon after the arrival of Sir Murray MacLehose as the next Governor.

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Being relatively new to the bureaucratic system, I tried to figure out the reasons for such an odd state of affairs, more for my own edification than anything else. I found that a theoretically acceptable structure had been in place since the early days of the colony for taking the pulse of the Chinese population. It took the form of a Secretariat for Chinese Affairs. The Secretary was supposed to bring the concerns of ordinary people before the high councils of

government.

But, up to that point, all the Secretaries and most of their deputies had been Europeans. None of them had the linguistic skills to discharge their task at first hand. They had to rely on feedback from Chinese subordinates. The language used by lower ranking officers in interfacing with contacts was often not the same as the one employed in reporting back up the chain of command. Nuances would frequently be missed in translation or mis-conveyed; Eastern subtleties disappeared into thin air. The opinions received at the top could at best be only at second or third hand. There was also little assurance respondents would genuinely open their hearts to officialdom. They might merely say what they imagined the British wanted to hear. It had been a standard survival tactic among the Chinese.

The random straw polls gathered in that haphazard fashion suffered from another serious defect. They originated from an unrepresentative pool of the more affluent upper middle class, people engaged in some form of charitable or voluntary work, like in the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, the Po Leung Kuk for wayward girls and those trafficked into prostitution, clansmen's associations, leaders of Buddhist, Taoist, Christian and other religious orders, women's welfare clubs, governing bodies of various professions, alumni associations, *kaifong* or neighbourhood societies and mutual aid committees. In short, they were opinions from worthies nicely positioned within the expatriate comfort zones.

The opinions of the poorer segments of the popular were left unpolled or simply guessed at -- the industrial labourers, the small shopkeepers, the salarymen and office wage earners, the street hawkers, the artisans and fisherfolk, the growing numbers of educated young searching for roots and identity, not to mention those living beyond the pale in shanty towns. The youths were of particular importance, for they were already forming themselves into small activist groups homing in on various specific areas of social

disaffection. They all figured only vaguely -- if at all -- on the government's radar. Their existence had not been missed by either the Communists or the Nationalists, however, for they offered financial support to some of them.

The government, nonetheless, remained largely complacent, leaving the running to other political forces. It failed also to identify correctly the fragility of the kind of relationships being developed by the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs. They were necessarily symbiotic in nature, and could not be relied upon in a tight corner.

The Chinese had for thousands of years got used to the habit of bowing low and toadying up to officialdom. They merely continued that well-tried method with the British. They were aware that in the West, preferment could come through donations to political parties -- peerages in Britain and ambassadorships in a less class-conscious America. But politics alone could not get very far in a colonial situation. So wealthy Chinese fell back on the traditional way for gaining social and spiritual merit -- by giving to charities.

The problem was that such giving was not always noticed by those with the power to recommend or dish out rewards. In Hong Kong, the channels were restricted to the Secretary for Chinese Affairs and the District Commissioner, New Territories.

But the *nouveau riche* sometimes found British officials incredibly obtuse. With Chinese officials, there were well-travelled routes, both subtle and indirect, for establishing the going price for any favour. They were designed to avoid any risk of losing face for either party. With the British, however, that civilised tradition sometimes completely passed them by. It was as if they were too insensitive "to feel anything beneath the wine cups." If a person wanted to find out the cost of getting one of those coloured ribbons handed out annually in the Queen's Birthday Honours list or the New Year Honours list, he practically had to draw a picture. To resort to plain speaking would draw a pseudo-horrified British response that Her Majesty's Government would never stoop so low as to

consider a free market for honours.

It did not take the Chinese long to discover other ways of buttering up to Anglo-Saxon proclivities. The British apparently enjoyed the limelight of ceremonial functions like speech days, ribbon-cutting, laying of foundation stones and giving anodyne speeches at charity balls. So they invited them to such functions to get into their good books.

The pragmatic Chinese valuation of a ribbon with a piece of metal dangling at the end of it was reflected in colloquial usage. It was referred to as “receiving a bottle cap of an aerated drink” or as “growing a tail”. The latter term was derived from the ability to add initials after one’s name on office stationery and business cards. It was supposed to signify some sort of social arrival, like flashing a Rolex watch or driving around in a Rolls Royce.

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During Sir David’s tenure, he also made much of the introduction of improved labour legislation in Hong Kong, though that had been done largely at the behest of a Labour Party government freshly installed in London in 1964. So far as I have been able to make out, he did not object when some of the proposals were patently unsuitable in local circumstances. Nor did he point out, even where suitable, the need for massive inputs of scarce human resources to make them work.

Following the passing of legislation, the Labour Department charged ahead with encouraging the formation of trade unions as a good in itself. A Registrar for Trade Unions was in place to record their formation. But little attention was given to what might happen after the formalities, after the standard requirements for holding regular general meetings and the proper election of office bearers had been met.

Even senior Chinese civil servants, including doctors, lawyers,

engineers and Administrative Officers, formed themselves into a union called the Senior Non-Expatriate Officers Association (SNEOA) in 1959, to fight for equality of treatment within the civil service. I duly became not only a member but also an office holder. Nurses also formed a union to demand equal pay as between sexes. Female nurses were then being paid only 75% of the salary of their male counterparts. They did not reach parity till the early 1980s.

Given the rise of Chinese irredentist sentiments and the history of the trade union movement in China, it was remiss to expect any union to restrict itself to just seeking benefits for its members. Unions were bound to be sucked into the struggle for political ascendancy between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang. Both had gained considerable experience in that game following training given by Borodin and his Comintern associates back in the 1920s. Such unions were destined, sooner or later, to become rods for British backs.

The Communists in the colony proved more effective. They quickly sank roots into both individual unions and into one of the umbrella organisations known as the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions. That Federation remains to this day the most powerful of the four confederations of labour unions in Hong Kong.

The Kuomintang had its own umbrella group known as the Trade Union Council. The rest of the unions, numbering around a third of the total, were considered unaffiliated but gave their backing to one side or the other as circumstances dictated.

As thousands of junior civil servants began joining trade unions, the heads of their respective departments remained seemingly indifferent as to how many of their staff had joined or what the orientation of particular unions might be. This must have been one of the contradictions that David Alexander was trying to work around.

The administration compounded its complacency and ignorance by a staggering ineptitude in another psychologically important area. At that time,

the local Communist Party line on “united front” work was: “Patriots are not divided between Left and Right”. It was followed in trade unions and other social organisations.

Any forward-looking administration would have attempted to counter that in some way, by promoting, for example, the concept of a harmonious society in accordance with traditional Confucian teachings. Or by removing with greater vigour the rougher edges of the discriminatory and racist practices within the government system. Or, indeed, to revamp the entire education system to tone down or eliminate some of the obvious colonialist biases.

But it did nothing of the sort. Following on the Star Ferry riots of April of 1966 and the eruption of the Cultural Revolution the following month, the administration carried on blithely with its same old colonial mindset. Thus the Communists were left to make most of the running.

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By the time I reported for duty at the Economics Branch of the Secretariat, the over-spill of the Cultural Revolution was already being felt in Macau. I watched with dismay the outbreak of rioting there in December, followed by a call for a general strike in January. The Portuguese authorities could do nothing in the end except to surrender to left-wing demands and to accept *de facto* Chinese control.

Even in the light of those developments, the atmosphere within the Secretariat remained starkly surreal. It was as if those happenings were occurring on another galaxy.

While it was stimulating and rewarding to work for Sir John Cowperthwaite and Mike Clinton, I could not say the same for some of the other Administrative Officers in the Secretariat. Some very senior ones still had their

attitudes frozen in the old colonial mould. One of them boasted he had gone through a career in Hong Kong without having to learn more than six words of Cantonese. Another was so gauche as to openly declare his abiding dislike for Chinese food and detail how he always insisted upon those hosting Chinese banquets to serve him with a steak instead. To me, such people deserved to be pitied, for they suffered from the same kind of ingrained delusion of white superiority as Inspector Englestone, only without the overt violence.

Individual prejudices were less important to me than the institutionalised aspects of racism, as typified by the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962. In that case, the skulduggery of legislative fiat was used in Westminster to unjustly turn natural-born British citizens like myself into third class citizens.

Within the Secretariat, a potent symbol of that racism was evident in the Defence Branch. Unlike other branches, the Defence Branch was ensconced behind steel bars resembling those of a prison cell. The only difference was that the bars were there not to keep inmates in but to keep outsiders out. Anyone wishing to enter the branch had to first press a buzzer for someone to come along to ask his business. Within the branch, even lowly clerical assistants had to be European, sometimes recruited directly from Britain, whereas in the rest of the Secretariat the supporting staff were overwhelming Chinese, save for a sprinkling of Indians.

I did not know the thinking at the top. But to me, a Chinese, the bars were a clear signal that the Chinese were not trusted at the security level. I supposed Cold War paranoia and the rise of Communism in China might have something to do with such a self-defeating and retrograde approach. I was mindful of Anna and her cousin Hok-Keung having been fully accepted within the British Special Branch in Singapore in the 1930s whereas, 30 years later, Chinese were still not accepted as trustworthy within the Hong Kong government. Hardly a recipe for fostering loyalty.

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Contrary to the relaxed attitude within the administration, a ripple of unease stirred in my parents-in law. People like them, who had previously fled from the Chinese civil war, were becoming less sanguine about the future. Queues began forming outside consulates and Commonwealth high commissions for visas -- to find a bolt-hole somewhere, just in case.

At the office, I concentrated on preparations for attendance at the April meeting of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East to be held in Japan.

At the end of the two-week conference, I took the opportunity for some leave to meet up with Ted Fujii and other Japanese friends, one of whom was a very sweet-natured girl called Miki who had done a stint as interpreter at the United Nations in New York. She took me to Kyoto and spent three days showing me the sights. The most memorable event for both of us was getting deliciously wet in a gentle drizzle while strolling down a walkway lined with cherry blossoms. The path was appropriately named the Path of Philosophy.

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By the time I got back to Hong Kong, things had taken a turn for the worse. A series of strikes had begun in March demanding better working conditions in the shipping, taxi, cement and textile industries, all of which had unions affiliated with the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions. The pent-up fury unleashed by the Cultural Revolution on the mainland no doubt sharpened local disaffections. What I had feared was coming to pass.

By May, another labour dispute had broken out in a factory making artificial flowers at San Po Kong. It was centred around a management proposal

to re-adjust wages and to sack a number of workers who were union members. In the politically-saturated atmosphere of the time, I doubted if either side had made much effort at conciliation or arbitration. Tempers soon ran high and the management sent for the police on May 6. When the police arrived, clashes broke out between them and picketing workers. Many of the workers were injured during the scuffles and 21 of them were arrested. When representatives of their union called at the police station to secure their release, they were arrested as well.

The next day, large-scale demonstrations erupted in several parts of the colony, with many of the participants shouting slogans and waving the Little Red Book containing quotations from Chairman Mao. Clashes with the police inevitably occurred and 127 demonstrators were arrested. Many more were injured.

The government, noting the widespread nature of the disturbances, declared a curfew. The Emergency Control Centre at the basement of the Secretariat was activated. One of the drawbacks of working in the Secretariat was being roped in to perform duties at the Centre. It was designed as a round-the-clock operation in times of civil unrest. As luck would have it, I had been assigned the shift running from midnight to eight in the morning.

The main duty of the rotating teams would be to collate information coming in from police and other armed units in different localities and to report any significant incidents to Government House. Instructions from the top would also be relayed back to the relevant units on the ground. Thus that evening, an official car armed with the appropriate curfew passes, called at Wise Mansion before midnight to whizz me off for duty.

From that moment on, events took on a momentum of their own. Every action taken by any hot head or by a government organ produced a reaction by the opposite party. It was a great pity that neither side had leaders with the necessary clout, broadness of vision and linguistic dexterity to take the

initiative and say: “Let’s stop this nonsense. Let’s sit down and discuss our grievances.” Because of the lack of that kind of leadership, things went from bad to worse.

There is no need in these recollections to give a blow-by-blow account of what transpired over the next seven months. The helicopter raids for arms held at union premises, the protest marches to Government House to plaster it with slogans, the rioting in front of the Hilton Hotel and the farce of the war of loudspeakers, with one set broadcasting exhortations to struggle against colonialism from the Bank of China Building at the centre of town while another set located at Beaconsfield House opposite blaring out Cantonese operatic arias in response have all been amply recorded elsewhere. I intend to touch here on only a few less publicised incidents.

The Emergency Control Centre was closed within days, with the responsibility for responding to fresh opposition initiatives given to a more senior group of officials headed by Jack Cater, an Administrative Officer who was later to become the Chief Secretary in 1978.

On May 16, the left-wingers formed a group called the Anti-Hong Kong British Persecution Struggle Committee. On June 24 it called for a general strike. To the surprise of some, a fair number of junior civil servants in a number of government Departments, including Marine, Public Works, the Post Office, Resettlement and Urban Services responded to the call. It seemed, in retrospect, a tad careless of heads of those departments not to have kept track of their staff joining left-wing unions.

Subsequently, over 1,650 of those who had participated in the strike lost their “iron rice bowl”. That number would have been higher if pleas of “peer pressure” and “intimidation” had not been entertained by the government in its post-mortems.

One of the most ghastly episodes involved the murders on July 8 of five Hong Kong policemen by gunfire discharged from the Chinese side of the

village of Sha Tau Kok. What had often been left out of the accounts circulated in overseas media was that the Sino-Hong Kong border ran right down the middle of the main street of that village. It was called Chung Ying Street and all along it were stone markers setting out the boundary. In normal times the Hong Kong police patrolled one side of the street while the Chinese security forces patrolled the other. Village residents roamed and traded readily across that boundary line.



In happier times Hong Kong policemen and Chinese Security personnel patrol different sides of Chung Ying Street At Sha Tau Kok. The block between them is one of several boundary markers down the middle of the street.

Given the volatile situation which had developed both locally and within China by July, with juvenile Red Guards rampaging everywhere, killing, torturing and destroying in a directionless and often purposeless frenzy, why had

the five policemen not been withdrawn from their exposed and dangerous outpost? Why had they been left like tethered bait in a tiger trap?

If it had been considered that withdrawing them might send a wrong signal about British resolve in defending Hong Kong, why not post a senior European inspector there to gauge the changing situation? Or else send the British garrison in a show of strength? After all, what had all the contributions made by local taxpayers over the years towards British defence costs been for, if not for such a contingency?

Perhaps one day, when the secret documents of that era are declassified at The National Archives at Kew, some industrious academic might pore through them and reveal to the world -- and to the descendants of the five poor souls -- who had actually made the decision to leave them where they were and why. It might then be possible to determine whether anyone on the British side ought to be held complicit, at least in part, for their deaths. It might be as well for those who wield power to know that no one ever escapes from the judgement of history.

Towards the end of the year, when common sense began to regain the upper hand in China, Premier Chou En-Lai ordered a cessation of confrontational activities in Hong Kong, including the planting of bombs, commonly referred to as “pineapples”. Most of those bombs were fake. Only about one in eight was real. Even so, one could read a streak of anti-foreign sentiment animating the bombers, for they had written warnings of danger in Chinese on their devices.

At the end of that unduly long and sorry chapter in the city’s history, 52 people had lost their lives, including the five policemen at Sha Tau Kok, and some 5,000 people had been arrested, with about 2,000 of them being convicted for various types of crimes.

Among the dead were a number of demonstrators who had perished while in police custody. The Communists alleged that they had been beaten to

death by the police. I am not aware whether independent inquests had been conducted into those deaths. If they had been, then their findings do not appear to have been made public. Perhaps light can be thrown on them too one day, by going through the archives.

As for those sent to prison, I happened to know one or two of them. One was named Tong Ping-Tat, a more gentle, soft-spoken and inoffensive man would hardly be found. I could not imagine him resorting to violence of any sort. He must have felt it incumbent upon him to stand, at some stage, at least in solidarity with those opposing British colonialism, just as my grandfather had done in 1907, when he was still a serving British Crown servant. My grandfather had then appeared in public to be photographed with Dr. Sun Yat-Sen and other revolutionaries, to express his support for the overthrowing of the Ching Dynasty.

In respect of the 1967 demonstrators in Hong Kong, most were convicted of taking part in illegal assemblies and were usually given two years in prison. Tong Ping-Tat was charged and convicted for the same offence but I cannot remember exactly the length of his sentence.

After his release, the left-inclined Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce elected him as its president for three consecutive two-year terms, from 1974 to 1980.

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The only role I played throughout the events of 1967 was minuscule. It extended to no more than manning a few sessions of the Emergency Control Centre. Yet every report of a death of a countrymen on either side wounded me. It made me recall the pipe dreams of my grandfather and his contemporaries for a united China, at peace with itself and with the world.

That ideal had been part of Chinese thinking for at least 3,500 years

and it still had not been realised. For short periods in its history, it had seemed tantalisingly possible. But after each fleeting period of peace and prosperity, factional interests and corruption always resurfaced. Even after the Revolution of 1911, Yuan Shih-Kai, the elected President, lost little time in dissolving parliament so that he might declare himself an emperor. Then came all the machinations of the Anhui clique, the Chihli clique, the Fengtien clique and the rest of them. How dishearteningly sad.

And where did I figure in the midst of all that history? Nowhere! Even by the Christian standard set by my maternal grandparents of simply succouring the poor and the downtrodden, I had failed to measure up. The only small gesture I made, which baffled many of my colleagues, was the purchase of a copy of the Little Red Book of Chairman Mao's quotations which I left on my desk after reading.

Sir John and Mike Clinton had taken its presence in their stride, for they knew I had an iconoclastic streak. They had seen not only books like Bin Cheng's on my desk but also publications by contrarian economists questioning the efficacy of the mixed and modified laissez-faire system the pair had been overseeing.

My display of the Little Red Book caused some consternation among colleagues less familiar with my proclivities. I could sense their agitation over not knowing quite what to make of it. They could not decide whether I was trying to be cheeky, subversive, provocative or merely demonstrating my sympathies for junior colleagues sacked for responding to the calls of their trade unions. I thoroughly enjoyed their discomfiture.

At last, a junior Chinese officer could not contain his curiosity. "Sir," he ventured, "did you confiscate that Little Red Book from one of the demonstrators?"

"No, I bought it from a bookshop," I replied.

"What for?"

“To read, of course. Have you read it?”

The young man shook his head.

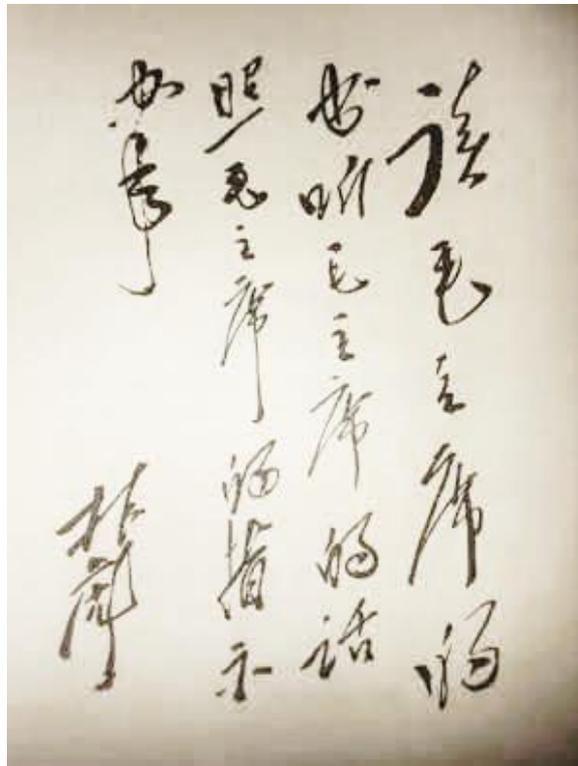
“Well, when you’re up against a bunch of people who are prepared to risk life and limb to wave it in your face, don’t you think it might be a good idea to find out what it contains?”

“Must be just Communist propaganda,” the man replied.

“You may well be right. But until you’ve read it, you can’t be sure, can you? Even if it’s just propaganda, it seems capable of moving people to action. That makes it a potent weapon. You can borrow my copy if you like.”

“Thanks, I’ll get my own,” he said sheepishly, before taking his leave.

The copy I bought contained an exhortation by Marshal Lin Piao, written in his own hand, urging readers to study Chairman Mao’s writings, to follow his teachings and to act according to his instructions.



Marshal Lin Piao’s inscription in the Little Red Book

Lin Piao, of course, was the principal instigator for cultivating a cult of personality around Chairman Mao. For that effort, and for enthusiastically supporting the Chairman's desire to launch a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, he got designated as Mao's "closest comrade-in-arms" and his heir presumptive.

However, his talents lay in fighting military battles rather than in tacking to shifting political winds. He failed to build the right kind of alliances. He could not see beyond the patronage of the Great Helmsman. Whenever Chairman Mao was scheduled to appear in public, he made a point of being there in advance, to greet the leader and to be photographed next to him. By so doing, he thought he was secure and within touching distance of the prize he desired. But Mao was not blind to his limitations and to his naked ambition. Mao gradually moved against him.

Lin Piao and his family perished in a plane crash in Mongolia in 1971, reportedly while trying to escape to the Soviet Union after being denounced as a traitor and the plotter of a coup. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

The book of quotations was a turgid document with its fair share of doctrinal nonsense. But it was not without commendable points. For example, it contained the following statement made by Chairman Mao in 1955: "Enable every woman who can work to take her place on the labour front, under the principle of equal pay for equal work. This should be done as soon as possible."

How many women activists in countries struggling for equal treatment -- including the Hong Kong nurses who had marched on Government House in 1970 -- would not endorse that sentiment?

Or take the following quotation from 1957: "Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting the progress of the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land. Different forms and styles in art should develop freely and different schools in science should contend freely. . . . Questions of right and

wrong in the arts and sciences should be settled in free discussion in artistic and scientific circles and through practical work in those fields. They should not be settled in summary fashion.”

The passage sounded to me almost like a crib from Milton. The pity was that his stated intentions were not always carried out by his disciples.

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I was to discover in the later years of my life, when I got embroiled in arguments with run-of-the-mill Communist officials in China, how useful it was to be able to quote Chairman Mao. An apt quotation would puncture them completely, rendering all their dogma futile and even dangerous. For them, I mean.

On the other hand, in those later years, I was to end up with not only a lot of Communist friends but also a lot of card-carrying relatives. I found that in virtually every case, they were Chinese first and Communists second. It came as a revelation how few -- in spite of all the talk about people being massively indoctrinated -- had actually read much of Chairman Mao or even of Marx and Engels. Most could only mouth a few slogans. I still have that Little Red Book in my study today.

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During that tumultuous period, I was uncertain as to what Sir John's overall assessment of the situation might have been. I was only aware that he had been struggling with his own particular set of problems for much of 1967. The Harold Wilson government had inherited a £800 million deficit when it came to power three years earlier, leaving it with a recurring balance of payments problem. That weakness invited predatory attacks on Sterling by

speculators. That worried Sir John, for Whitehall insisted upon Hong Kong's reserves being maintained in Sterling.

The only other acceptable form of reserves was gold bullion, some of which had been confiscated from gold smugglers operating between Macau and Hong Kong. I had on occasion been sent down to the vaults of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank to do an audit of the government bullion held there.

The colony itself was not allowed to import gold because that would result in an outflow of funds affecting the Sterling area balance of payments. On the other hand, Macau, being considered as part of metropolitan Portugal, could import gold freely. Chinese ingenuity soon saw considerable amounts of gold being flown legally through Hong Kong for Macau entities, only to be smuggled back to the colony in a hundred and one rather clever ways.

I did not know whether Sir John had hedged against the danger posed by Sterling reserves as speculators intensified attacks against Sterling. All I recall was that by November the speculation had become so intense that even the spending of £200 million by the British government in a single day proved to no avail in its defence. On the evening of November 19, Prime Minister Wilson was forced to announce a devaluation of 14.3%.

Hong Kong had been given no warning whatsoever that such a move was imminent. The news reached Sir John only after the London announcement had been made, which was in the middle of the night in Hong Kong. Sir John had to spend the rest of that night single-handedly making calculations so that he could announce the first thing in the morning the consequential adjustment in exchange rates for the Hong Kong dollar against Sterling and third currencies. In respect of Sterling the new peg was \$14.55 to a pound.

Because of Sterling devaluation, the colony's reserves suffered a loss variously calculated at between £30 and £60 million pounds. It was left to Sir John to negotiate some sort of redress and a fresh set of rules with Whitehall.

Meanwhile, the Sterling devaluation did not provide any lasting

relief for Britain's balance of payment problem. A host of structural and other issues plagued the country -- recurring labour strikes, low productivity of its workforce, complacency among executives in its exporting sectors, to name but a few.

The collapse of the London Gold Pool quickly followed in March of 1968, to provoke another crisis. The pool had been set up to maintain the price of gold at US\$35 per troy ounce under the financial system known as the Bretton Woods Agreement following the end of World War II. That agreement conferred upon America an exorbitant privilege. The American economist Berry Eichengreen summarised it as follows: "It costs only a few cent for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to produce a \$100 bill, but other countries had to pony up \$100 of actual goods in order to obtain one." American prosperity and standard of living were financed on that basis.

When other nations woke up to the fact, they began to demand physical gold for their American dollars. The United States was losing physical gold so fast that President Nixon unilaterally terminated the Bretton Woods arrangements and ended the gold standard. It led other countries to follow suit. That set the stage for financial crises and the deleterious effects that politicians and central bankers around the world have been arguing over and bumbling to get on top of ever since.

* * *

Towards the end of 1967, one of the three Assistant Secretary posts in the Economics Branch was upgraded to Staff Grade C, with the title of Assistant Economic Secretary. I was fortunate enough to be selected to fill that post, which meant once again earning some acting pay. Soon afterwards, in January of 1968, after seven years in government, I was promoted to Senior Administrative Officer at a monthly salary of \$4,580. My pay was by then a

moot point because I was receiving more than that already in acting pay at the Staff Grade C level.

The promotion nonetheless led to some very fundamental changes in my life. First of all, it made me eligible for government quarters on the same basis as expatriate officers, paying only 12.5% of my salary, instead of the thousands on rental per month paid to the private landlord at Wise Mansion.

A search for available quarters was quickly initiated. It so happened that the government had leased a number of luxury flats as quarters in a building known as Palm Court at No. 55 Robinson Road. The building had been constructed on an elevated terrace of buildings almost directly opposite Wise Mansion.

When I went with Man-Ying and my in-laws to view the quarters, it was like being presented with a dream. The quarters measured over 3,300 square feet or three times the size of the Wise Mansion flat we were in. It was the kind of accommodation which only the super-rich could afford without subsidy. From the balcony of the sitting room and from the windows of two of the four bedrooms, we were treated to an even better view of the entire harbour and Kowloon than from the roof garden at Wise Mansion. There was in addition a segregated servant's quarters with full facilities at the rear of the flat, located behind a spacious kitchen.

To top everything off, all the appliances and furniture could be supplied by government on request. The furniture might not be at the height of high society elegance but they were sturdy, serviceable and comfortable, virtually all made with prison labour. All that was needed were some personally purchased covers for sofas and beds to turn such standard issues into quite homely and attractive furniture.

It took no time at all for us to give notice to the landlord at Wise Mansion and for the entire family to be moved across the road. The only item of furniture we brought with us -- apart from books, paintings and family

accessories -- was the desk with built-in bookshelves in my study. The rest of the furniture was just sold or given away. Since the government did not supply double beds, it provided two single beds to be put together for me and my wife, with a bedside table on either side.

The savings on rent enabled me to begin repaying my long-outstanding debt to my Eighth Granduncle for financing of my Stanford education.



Myself sitting in one corner of the spacious Palm Court sitting room, complete with bookcases, sofa and tables supplied by the government

By the time we got used to the luxury of space at Palm Court, with my in-laws as *my* house guests for a change, another development occurred. It was one I had long anticipated and dreaded.

My father-in-law announced one day he would be leaving within a matter of months for America, where he had been offered a job more in keeping with his experience and ability.

I had always known deep down, without his ever mentioning it, that he had worked in Hong Kong merely to help me and his daughter get on our feet and build a viable marriage. After more than nine years of effort, he had finally seen me attaining financial stability. But our marriage was clearly heading for the rocks. He must have figured that it was time both of us sorted out our own problems. He indicated that my mother-in-law would follow, once he had settled on a home somewhere in America. It thankfully took him a good while longer to settle upon Dallas, Texas, as his home.

When the time came for him to leave, I could not find the words to tell him how grateful I was for everything he had done for me and how sorry I was that the temperaments and aspirations of his only daughter had not coincided with my own. I think he well understood, even without words, that a fortuitous series of events had pushed us into marriage and that its failure was not really anybody's fault. Thus we parted with respect and affection for each other.

* * *

The subsequent departure of my mother-in-law did not occur till 1971, after my return from Oxford. With her departure, the buffer zone that had made for restraint and a relatively peaceful co-existence was gone. I was fearful of the children being affected by the verbal jousting and disagreements between Man-Ying and myself. So both of us attempted a workable compromise. We agreed our marriage was to all intents and purposes a dead letter. Neither wanted

to split up the boys, though neither was in a position to look after three young children independently either.

I suggested that both of us should give the boys a sense of family and to wait until they were a little older before we separated. In the interim, we should lead separate lives but at least take them out jointly on weekends and have at least one of us present at evening meals each day.

Household rules and the moral upbringing of the children would be left in her hands, I reluctantly ventured. Legend had it that the mother of Mencius had been responsible for teaching that ancient philosopher the difference between right and wrong. But Man-Ying was not that kind of mother and our children hardly married up to the calibre of the young Mencius. But there was no alternative. To argue openly over how children ought to be brought up could only be detrimental to the children's wellbeing. We agreed to discuss differences in private.

We also agreed we would no longer go out to social functions together, except for certain special occasions, like dining at Government House or attending the Governor's garden parties.

One evening a week, I would go out on my own in addition to any official function I might have to attend. My choice would be Thursday. She could go out whenever she wished, except on that day, so as to keep an eye on the children. If she provided me sufficient notice on the nights she wanted to go out, I would make sure to be home for dinner.

My own demand for a free night was to enable me to resume playing *mah-jong* with Auyang Ming, Chau Yiu-Hung and the old crowd. Those Thursday evening sessions, usually held at the Hong Kong University Alumni Club, became quite a notorious institution within the civil service over time because I steadily roped an increasing circle of colleagues into the game.

It is difficult to explain to a non-playing foreigner how cathartic a game of *mah-jong* can be. Once a person has the 13 allotted tiles in front of him,

all his other woes seemed somehow to melt away. I suppose that is why the game has remained so immensely popular among the Chinese for so many centuries.

* * *

By the time some semblance of normality had been restored in the colony in 1968, my own duties had become concentrated on preparing for some air services negotiations with Singapore on regional routes and for the next United Nations Economic Commission session to be held in Canberra in April. By then, I had moved sufficiently up the ladder for the Economic Commission to have a more junior officer in the delegation to do the donkey work.

Outside of official duties, there was a number of other significant developments.

The first was an encounter with a gentleman named Ip Yeuk-Lam, which soon burgeoned into a very close and lasting friendship. Ip was a long-standing and very popular Vice-President of the left-leaning Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. I cannot now recall whether he was then already a member of the Kwangtung Provincial People's Congress or whether that came later. In any event, he had strong political connections in Kwangtung, Peking and elsewhere in China. His firms also held the monopoly for the wholesale importation of Chinese vegetables and eggs into the colony.

My initial meeting with him was by pure chance, though I had previously heard of his name and had known of his wife, Suze, née Yuen Shui-Chun, being active in local women's welfare groups. We met at one of those innumerable receptions and cocktail parties taking place almost daily in business circles and in high society.

Back then, such receptions were mainly expatriate dominated, because the local upper crust was fairly skimpy. The consular corps held them to

mark national days; taipans of international banks and the great hongts hosted them for purposes of image; and, in due course, the more successful English-speaking Chinese in business or in the professions also followed suit.

The attendees consisted largely of the senior colonial officials, high commissioners from Commonwealth countries, consul-generals from other nations, the chief executives of public utilities, stewards of the Jockey Club, High Court judges, heads of professional and charitable bodies, American stockbrokers, shipping magnates, Swiss reinsurance operatives, chairmen of Rotary Clubs and the like.

It was not unusual for the odd well-dressed con artist or gatecrasher to be present as well, for nobody bothered much about security in those days. Both hosts and attendees were far too engrossed in striking the right poses and uttering the right soundbites for the hordes of reporters and photographers circling around. The identical people tended to turn up for such functions day in and day out, uttering the same hackneyed pleasantries. They might be talking heads but their eyes would more often be on the lookout for more socially elevated personages to be seen with. The rationale for being at such gatherings, it appeared, was that non-attendance would provoke rumours of a social or business decline.

Conspicuously absent from many such bunfights were the representatives of some of the most vital sectors of Hong Kong life -- those who traded with China or who attended to that country's vast economic and political interests in the colony.

There were many reasons for that state of affairs. First of all, the havoc of the local manifestations of the Cultural Revolution had left an anti-Communist sentiment lingering within the broader community. Secondly, there was the general distrust between the two main sides of the political divide, each with its own concept of *amour propre*. Many left-wing leaders also did not speak English, or at least not well. Those elements made for awkwardness for

hosts and guests alike.

People on the left preferred socialising more austerely and selectively, for the country was poor. Moreover, they did not take to the uncomfortable foreign penchant of standing around for hours on end, holding a drink in one hand, eating canapés with the other and trying to manipulate a handshake upon being introduced to a stranger. When the left entertained, it would usually be a sit-down Chinese meal, justified by some visiting foreign or mainland delegation on an official mission.

Representatives of left-wing organisations did, however, show up at national day receptions for countries friendly with both Britain and China. It was at one such function that the paths of Ip Yeuk-Lam and myself crossed.

* * *

Ip Yeuk-Lam was an alert and friendly man of average build and height for a Cantonese. His squarish and agreeable face was enhanced by a pair of fashionably-framed glasses. He must have been at least 12 or 13 years my senior. The most striking feature about him, however, was his head of very black and well-combed hair. Later, I was to hear him asserting to his hair's blackness coming from eating plenty of vegetables and not from the use of any dye.

For some inexplicable reason, we hit it off almost immediately. After some pleasantries, he said in Cantonese: "What a fortuitous meeting. You might be just the right official to help with a very ancient problem."

I replied in Chinese I was merely "a sesame seed and green pea official" but would be more than willing to help if I could.

Ip Yeuk-Lam then told me a story about the wholesale market in the Western District. According to him, a very high British official, probably a Colonial Secretary or a military administrator, visited the wholesale market in

1946. A group of wholesalers involved in the China trade had then told the official that, with hordes of former Hong Kong residents returning after the war and with fresh influxes of other Chinese trying to escape the civil war in China, the existing market would soon be too small to handle the growing volume of produce necessary to feed an expanding population. The official, after inspecting the operations of the market, agreed that much larger facilities were needed. He undertook to initiate action for a more substantial market.

But 23 years had passed, Ip continued, and no better facilities had materialised. The increasing number of vessels and barges arriving at dawn each day with produce from China now had to unload along an ever-expanding stretch of the Western waterfront, to the annoyance and consternation of residents living along that part of road. The problem was becoming more critical and unmanageable. But wholesalers had no idea which part of government was responsible for delivering the promised market. One department always pointed the finger to another.

“This is the first I’ve heard about it,” I ventured nervously, without revealing that food supplies was part of the responsibilities of the Economics Branch. “I’ll look into this and get back to you,” I said.

* * *

The next day, I asked one of the Assistant Secretaries to research into the background to the issue. In due course, after ploughing through 23 years of old files, he reported back to say there had indeed been some minutes about building a bigger wholesale market. Several departments and Secretariat branches had been consulted.

At that time, the population had been estimated at less than two million. Now the population was about four million. So the plan to build a bigger market was a sound one even back then. Before conclusions could be

reached on details, however, the Chinese Communists declared victory in the civil war in China. Hot on its heels the Korean War followed and international embargoes were imposed on trade with China. The project then had simply died a natural death.

I asked the Assistant Secretary to send a memo around to revive the issue, pointing out that fresh and urgent problems were arising because of the long neglect over the matter.

As promised, I got in touch with Ip Yeuk-Lam and told him that sorry history and assured him I had started the ball rolling again.

He said he appreciated my forthrightness and added he had never before come across a colonial officer so candid towards an office holder from the Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce.

I said we were both Hong Kong belongers and it was only right that we did whatever we could in the interest of the community.

From that moment on, a chord of trust developed between us, akin to the spontaneous relationship that had blossomed between Hon-Kit and myself years ago. In fact, the characters of the two appeared to be very much alike.

(It is worth recording as a footnote that the project got bogged down again for years after my intervention due to inter-departmental squabbles. Some eight years later, when I was again back in the Secretariat as Deputy Secretary for Economic Services, I had to chair a meeting to try and untangle the still unresolved mess. It was not till October of 1991 that Phase I of the wholesale market went into operation and March of 1994 when Phase II became operational. Almost half a century to deliver on a simple promise!)

A short while later, I went early to another reception because it was held on a Thursday. I wanted to get away quickly for my regular *mah-jong* game. I presented myself to the host and uttered the appropriate platitudes before working my way to a side door to escape. Once I was outside the reception hall, however, I bumped into Yeuk-Lam arriving.

“You leaving already?” he asked, surprised.

“Late for *mah-jong*,” I replied, in a hushed voice.

“You a *mah-jong* player? Good, we have a nice crowd at the General Chamber Club. You should join us.”

“Your stakes must be too rich for my blood.”

“No, no! Not at all. Won’t detain you now, but come to my family lunch on Sunday. I’ll explain everything. Bring your family too.”

I did take up his invitation to a Sunday lunch some time afterwards and met members of his family. That was how my relationship with Yeuk-Lam began. Over the years he was to introduce me to many left-wing personalities both at the Chinese General Chamber and during *mah-jong* games. I formed firm and reliable friendships with a number of them. Some of those friendships would be instrumental in bringing significant benefits to Hong Kong in later years, though not very many people, even among those within government, knew much about them.

After our friendship had matured, I was often tempted to ask Yeuk-Lam to use his connections to find out the fate of Hon-Kit and Frances. But I managed to resist that temptation. Things were forever changing in China and I did not want to create problems for anyone unwittingly.

* * *

While cultivating friends on the left of the political spectrum, I did not neglect those on the right, particularly with Fung Hon-Chu. Fung was generally referred to by his Chinese associates and by the staff in his company as “Elder Brother Chu”. His foreign customers called him “H.C.”. I used both forms interchangeably.

Following my appointment to the Economics Branch, H.C. made renewed efforts to persuade me to enter the private sector. But since I was

comfortably installed at Palm Court, receiving acting pay, steadily liquidating my debt to my Eighth Granduncle and enjoying my work, I experienced not the slightest inclination to change. So I fended off his proposals, though often in a polite “well, let me think about it” manner.

Nonetheless, our relationship continued to develop, largely at the initiative of H.C. He regularly invited me to dinner, on the basis that he needed help in selling Hong Kong to one big potential American customer or another. I gently suggested that the Trade Development Council was the right organisation to help him. But he kept insisting that I could speak with greater authority on a broader range of subjects, that I knew better how to impress Americans and that, in any case, I had a duty to help foster the colony’s economic growth. So I felt obliged to accommodate him.

Paradoxically, my reluctance to go after the big money in commerce only heightened H.C.’s keenness for me to join his firm. During the course of my dealings with him, I got to meet some of his right-wing friends. One that was frequently in his company was a man named Chan Kuen, who claimed to be a former Kuomintang general. Chan, a short, swarthy man with a raspy voice ripe with halitosis, was forever offering H.C. profitable business contacts in Taiwan. He looked to me more like some small time ex-local warlord than a former general. Nonetheless he also urged me to join H.C. but I likewise fended him off.

The colonial government’s relationship with people like H.C. was a puzzling contradiction. On the one hand, Whitehall had been quick to cut political links with the Kuomintang once the Communists had emerged on top in the Chinese civil war. On the other hand, it was quite prepared to appoint Kuomintang-inclined people like H.C. to the Legislative Council while freezing out prominent left-wingers. I could only surmise that it was because the first lot spoke English and wore the acceptable mask of capitalism while the second lot did neither.

* * *

Another small incident also occurred, the significance of which I did not fully grasp at the time. When I returned from work one day, I found that the two single beds placed together in the master bedroom had been moved apart. The bedside table on Man-Ying's side had been placed between the two single beds, leaving a space of about 18 inches between them.

The new arrangement seemed a welcomed improvement to me. Man-Ying and I had long ceased to have conjugal relations and sometimes accidentally touching each other during sleep was uncomfortable for both of us. We seldom even talked. But so far as I was concerned, we had no real animosity towards each other. We had engaged in the charade of sharing a bedroom for the sake of creating a not entirely convincing illusion for the children we were still a family.

We seldom appeared as a couple if we could possibly avoid it, and certainly we never entertained as one. The white lies we had to resort to in declining invitations, especially from my expatriate colleagues, must have relayed the message that all was not well with us. So gradually, our names got dropped from invitation lists. That came as a great relief to me.

But it took me a while to become conscious of something else -- the way both of us slept either flat on our backs or with our backs turned away from each other, never facing the other. Had we sunk subconsciously below the level of marital indifference, to where we could not even bear to face one another in sleep? What would Freud or Jung deduce from subconscious reflexes like that?

* * *

During one of those regular small dinner gatherings organised by

Chinese Administrative Officers, a more junior officer pulled me into a corner and whispered: “David, it’s none of my business but I ought to tell you I’ve been running into your wife at nightclubs, twice, and the person she was dancing with each time wasn’t you.”

I placed a friendly arm around his shoulder and offered him a warm smile. “How observant you are, old chap,” I whispered back. “But you’re absolutely right. It *is* none of your business. Shall we join the others?”

I supposed such situations would forever be the fate in disintegrating marriages. Slowly or quickly, gently or violently, the bonds binding two ill-suited people had somehow to be severed.

* * *

One evening, when Man-Ying was out and the boys had turned in, I sat alone in a corner of the spacious Palm Court sitting room to enjoy a cigar and a snifter of brandy. A ruminative mood crept over me.

At last, it seemed, I had arrived at the economic goal of being able to provide a reasonable life for my family, without having to rely on the recurring generosity of relatives. At the age of 40, that achievement might have come a bit late but it was still better late than never. I was also paying off my debts and a *modus vivendi* had been arrived at for my failed marriage. Pretty soon, I should be in a position to put a little aside for the future education of my children. I should be feeling satisfied. And yet, at the back of my mind, there remained a vague nagging of things being somehow out of kilter. Why should that be?

The more I thought about it, the more I realised I was looking at life too narrowly, too self-centredly, confining myself to being just part of a small nuclear family. I was not giving due weight to being part of an extended family in spite of having enjoyed decades of the benefits flowing therefrom. My divorced parents -- one in Singapore and the other in Vancouver -- and my

siblings and their families were scattered around the world. Had I enquired about them often enough, visited them often enough, expressed my affection for them often enough? And what about all my aunts, uncles, cousins and their families?

Once I started down that path, it became evident I was not a self-sustaining unit existing in isolation. I was tied to a much bigger whole, to a society trying to find identity and purpose, while at the same time living under foreign occupation. Beyond that, I belonged to a massive country and its culture and, eventually, to all humanity. What were my commitments at each level to all of that?

The Hong Kong occupation might not be as harsh as those experienced by the Poles or the Greeks during World War II or the Koreans under Japanese imperialism. But it was an occupation just the same, an affront to the Chinese national dignity. What was I going to do about it, not only as a Chinese but as a descendant of a one-time revolutionary? Could I shut my eyes and become a handmaiden for occupiers simply because I have been rewarded with the luxury of an enormous flat at Palm Court?

I saw at once how I had slipped into a flawed frame of mind. I was a member of the Senior Non-Expatriate Officers Association and, indeed, had served as its Honorary Secretary for a period. During the course of that tenure, I had blindly supported the association's fight for equality of treatment as between locals and expatriates.

But as a group of Chinese, why should we be seeking to be treated like foreign occupiers? We could easily see how the squatters made do in flimsy huts on hillsides and the poor were crammed into airless bunks in rundown tenements. Having lived for 40 years at the margins of economic inadequacy might have coloured my views, but if junior civil servants could not bring up their families properly on their salaries, the temptation for corruption must be there. The fact that thousands of such junior staff had also joined left-wing trade

unions must have reflected a significant level of discontent. And yet, a solution could not be found in simply raising wages. In a harsh and competitive world, people had to pay their way and live on what they could earn.

As a group of the most senior Chinese in the administration, members of the SNEOA should have focused on decent housing for those lower down the economic scale before seeking to live like expatriates themselves. If we did not challenge the system, who would? We had all been taught that whenever we sent a missive to a member of the public -- or even a warning letter threatening action against him -- we should sign ourselves with the prefix "your obedient servant". Where in the world could servants live better than those who paid their wages? The sheer hypocrisy and cant of it all was staggering. Yet we had allowed our thinking to be corrupted by the dubious slogan of "equality" -- just so as to worm our way into becoming part of a ruling elite.

The irony was that few of our foreign masters would live in their native lands the way they did in Hong Kong. Instead of luxury apartments, they would more probably live in a terrace house or a semi-detached. Except for those from aristocratic or independently wealthy families, they would certainly be without houseboys, cooks, gardeners, chauffeurs, amahs and other types of household help.

That in turn opened larger questions. Could we not develop our own leaders and run our own affairs? We were a talented community, part of a race which had survived the perils of existence for thousands of years. Could we not do without expatriate officials or only accept those willing to work alongside us on equal and common terms?

All those grand notions of liberty, equality, fraternity, democracy, honesty, truth, justice, pride, friendship, duty, fairness, moderation, national destiny and the rest suddenly began tumbling chaotically inside my head, like so many random coloured elements revolving within a kaleidoscope. Each notion collided and smashed against another, like sub-atomic particles, endlessly

changing shape, nature, function and meaning. Those rapidly changing patterns appeared neither controllable nor sensible.

Perhaps the Buddhist had been right all along. We might indeed be living through a prolonged and degrading dhamma-ending age. The question was what could anyone do? We all seemed locked into a system so vast and pervasive that it was beyond the comprehension of any single human intelligence.

All of a sudden, I felt more defeated than I have ever previously been in my life. What was the point of so much striving to achieve, to get ahead? What *was* ahead? Sheer nihilism and more defeats?

My cigar and my brandy all at once lost their usual tastes.