

## Land of the Free

Before landing in San Francisco, my notions of America were only a blurred montage of bits and pieces, without coherence or interconnections, picked up here and there and stored away. The terrible initial impression was of the killing of King Kong by men in flying machines, to be followed by the brutal images of tough guys and importuning women from Raymond Chandler's stories of Los Angeles. The happier and slicker notions had been gathered later, mainly from movies and books -- the mesmerising dancing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, fast shooting gunslingers, images of mountains and wide open spaces, the ballads of Nat King Cole and Ella Fitzgerald, the cool jazz which shivered the soul, the bobby soxers screaming their hearts out for Frank Sinatra, the rich and the beautiful peopling the books by Scott Fitzgerald. Everything seemed fantastic and larger than life. Chinese old timers who had returned from there had marvellous tales to tell of what they called the Golden Mountain across the seas. And superimposed over everything was the towering symbol of the Statute of Liberty, a gift from the people of France fashioned to represent the Roman goddess of freedom. Engraved on its base were the welcoming words of the poet Emma Lazarus:

“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free;  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shores,  
Send them, the homeless,  
Tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

Stanford outdid my imagination on arrival. A campus covering over 8,000 acres, with an elegant cloistered quadrangle of sandstone buildings at its centre, was far more than I had expected. One could easily get lost among its covered walkways and ancillary buildings. Just finding where to get registered was in itself an adventure. After the cramped circumstances of Hong Kong, it took me a while to get used to the glorious luxury of space.

I kept my eyes out for Chinese students, so that I might get pointers on how to go about things. But they were few and far between. I learnt later there had been no more than about a dozen from China, overwhelmingly male and post-graduate. There were, however, two or three undergraduate boys from Hong Kong. One other feature became quickly obvious. There was not a single black student among the thousands studying there. I concluded that the university must be meant for better-off students, especially since I noticed that about a third of them owned motor cars.

As a freshman, I was assigned to an old multi-storeyed dormitory called Encina, to share a room with two other first-year students. The communal bathroom and toilet facilities were located at the end of each corridor of rooms.

One of my roommates was a courteous and out-going person. His name was Gerald Gould and he aimed to become an engineer. We hit it off quickly and have maintained a friendship ever since. The other boy said he wanted to study medicine. But I found him somewhat arrogant and inconsiderate. Our personalities did not mesh, so I avoided him as much as I could. Among the three of us, I was the only one who had not settled on a specific subject to study. I simply wanted to accumulate as much knowledge of everything I could before my money ran out. The rumour that at least a quarter of the freshmen usually failed to make the grade beyond the first year added to my sense of urgency.

Initially, I was like a fish out of water. I had imagined that those who had gained admission would, like myself, be bursting to find answers to all the imponderables in life. But most of my classmates were not like that. They were for the most part easy-going teenagers fresh out of high school, filled with the boisterousness, exuberance and playfulness of pampered children from well-to-do families. The boys were still at the age of wanting to distinguish themselves at sports or snaring a raving beauty. But the odds at

Stanford for the latter were not favourable. There was only one girl for every three boys and girls who got into Stanford were apt to be the bookish type. On the other hand, I suppose their scarcity value enhanced their attractiveness.

The poor odds did not dampen the chase, however. Boys did whatever was necessary to attract attention, by organising outrageous parties, guzzling prodigious amounts of beer or raiding female dormitories en masse to hunt for panties as trophies. One group of freshmen even dismantled a Model T, carried the parts up to an upper floor of Encina, re-assembled the car and ran it along the corridors to gain notoriety, much to the consternation of the lady supervisor of the dorm who went by the unlikely name of Mrs. Coffin.

Since I was older than most of them, I stayed well clear of their antics. I gravitated towards older students, those who were already in graduate studies or those who had been veterans during the Second World War and had returned for studies under the provisions of the 1944 G. I. Bill.

Where American college girls were concerned, they represented a cultural shock. They displayed more curves than Chinese girls since they were better physically endowed. Whereas Chinese girls were inclined to de-emphasise their bodily attributes in baggy clothes, American co-eds had no hesitation in flaunting their curves, either in tight fitting sweaters or in revealing off-the-shoulder peasant blouses. The bebies of cheerleaders at sporting events went even further. They shook their under-clad bodies with gusto and kicked their naked limbs with wild abandonment. Their antics played havoc with both my imagination and my libido.

Unlike my forebears, who had been married by the time they entered university, I was completely retarded in matters sexual. Although I was already 20, I had not so much as kissed a girl on the mouth, let alone known one in the biblical sense. Yet any temptation to approach a co-ed was killed at birth by the sheer ridiculousness of my situation. How could a 103-pound Oriental skeleton with untidy hair sweet talk a white Western lass

significantly heavier than himself? She could probably break him in two without effort.

Moreover, it was quite the wrong time and place to go prospecting for affection and romance. I did not have the wherewithal to even offer a girl a beer or to take her to a movie or to invite her to a half-decent meal. I could only visualise myself stumbling for words and making an utter laughing-stock of myself.

Although co-eds intimidated me, most of my male classmates were open and friendly. They showed no overt racial prejudice. Perhaps they saw me as such a weakling that I was more a joke than any threat. Indeed, they were often more friendly than I -- a Chinese brought up to value a certain formality in inter-personal relationships -- was used to. My exposure to British reserve did not help either. Their ready slaps on the back surprised me. Being called "Dave" upon a first meeting also struck me as too much of a liberty.

My American classmates puzzled me too in another respect. They showed little inhibition over talking about their personal affairs, like whether their parents were separated or divorced or whether some girl they were making a play for was "easy" and how far they had gone with her. I was shocked by the casualness with which they could damage a girl's reputation, even if their claims were true. It seemed thoroughly ungentlemanly and in bad taste.

On the other hand, a number of them were generous and hospitable to a fault. Many invited me during term breaks to their homes and to meet their parents, although we had not known one another for very long. Sometimes I wondered whether I might be regarded as a kind of curiosity, an unprepossessing Chinese who spoke with peculiar English upper class intonations. I gradually gained the impression that Americans generally made friends easily and sought to be popular. It was surprising, however, that given

their wealth, their range of choices and their talk of rugged individualism, so many of them should choose merely the freedom to conform.

\* \* \*

It did not take me long to realise I had seriously underestimated the cost of a year's study at Stanford when seeking a loan from my Eighth Granduncle. Though I had factored in the cost of books and the sundry costs of fellowship with classmates, I had not foreseen the need for a bicycle to get around the large campus. My mind thus turned desperately to part-time work to eke out the year.

I quickly secured a job serving breakfast at one of the dormitories for a couple of hours a day, in return for free meals. That took a big weight off my mind. The only snag was that I had to turn up at six in the morning to get things ready. Given my unruly hair, it meant I had to get up particularly early to spend about 20 minutes to get my hair to behave. After struggling for a while, I took the decision to adopt a crew cut in order to gain an extra 20 minutes of sleep each morning. I have never regretted that decision and have worn a crew cut ever since.

Not long afterwards, I found an extra job working for two hours each afternoon as a library assistant in a post-graduate political science library. The job was a breeze because the library had few users. I could utilise my time there to doing my own reading. But the pay was only 75 cents per hour.

At that time, the academic system at Stanford for a bachelor's degree lasted four years, with each year broken into three quarters of an average of 15 units of work. Certain courses, like English, Western Civilisation and American history, were required of all students. Apart from those, one had to fulfil a specified number of units of work in one's chosen field. The total number of units required for graduation was 180.

It occurred to me that if I took more than 15 units of work a quarter, I could reach the total of 180 units much quicker. Furthermore, if I signed up for summer school as well, the requirement could be completed quicker still. So I signed up for at least 20 units of work per quarter. In spite of the hours spent every day on part-time work, I did not find the workload in the least taxing.

Apart from the required subjects, my first selections were courses on modern Asian history, so that I could learn about the Opium Wars and other aggressions upon China which my colonial schooling had denied me. It was rather ironical that I had to travel so far from my own country to learn its history and its problems. One of the first books I came across was *My Country and My People* written by the Chinese scholar Lin Yutang which came out in 1935. I found that it reflected some of my own feelings about China which I had hitherto been unable to put into words. It also gave a wide and comprehensive sweep of Chinese ideals, philosophy, arts and literature, besides providing excellent pointers for further reading to break me out of the constricting carapace of colonialist education. In particular, I began for the first time to read about Taoism, the essence of which -- quite frankly -- I did not grasp till much later.

Conscious of my mother's mockery over my ignorance of Mandarin, I also signed up for some Mandarin classes.

\* \* \*

Just after my financial circumstances had taken a turn for the better, a political storm broke. On October 1st, Chairman Mao announced at Tienanmen the establishment of the People's Republic of China. I was excited by the news because it meant the long civil war in my country was reaching some kind of conclusion. The remnants of the Kuomintang forces had

retreated to Taiwan, where they were protected by the American Seventh Fleet.

I could see that my grandfather's dream of a united China was taking shape. I did not care much which side won, so long as the country could be unified and freed from foreign interventions. I regretted only that the revolution my grandfather had shared with Dr. Sun, to bring about a government of the people, by the people and for the people, had ended up in so much corruption and misery. I did not know much about Communism, except for the Proudhon Hon-Kit had asked me to read. I was prepared to give any decent and patriotic Chinese regime a chance to pull the country together and improve the lot of its long-suffering people.

Chairman Mao's proclamation was hardly noticed by the kids on campus but a heated ruckus soon broke out among American politicians as to who was responsible for "losing China". Those arguments confounded me. Although America had poured treasure and arms to help the Kuomintang, its chosen party, stay in power, Kuomintang leaders still managed to lose the war through corruption and ineptitude. So how could Americans claim to have lost a country they had never possessed in the first place? I did not care much which side won so long as the country could move towards unity and freed from foreign interventions. Since I did not understand America's strange passion about China, I just kept my head down, busied myself with my studies and part-time jobs, and avoided expressing political opinions.

But worse was to come. In February, Senator Joseph McCarthy launched a vitriolic witch-hunt against alleged Communists within the American government and in various other sectors of the country's institutions. Many of the accusations were made without real evidence but nonetheless quite a lot of people got blacklisted and lost their jobs. An air of nervousness pervaded the campus, especially among some of the teaching staff.

Since I did not know much about Communism, I began reading the Communist Manifesto and some of the writings of Marx and Engels at the Political Science Library. I also started reading some of the novels by John Steinbeck which gave me some fresh insights into America.

Meanwhile, my classes in American history were also revealing streaks of racial bigotry I had not previously been aware of -- the Jim Crow legislation in the deep south, the existence of the Ku Klux Klan, the eugenics programmes in North Carolina and Virginia aimed at coloured women, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the anti-Chinese violence on the West Coast, and the internment of American citizens of Japanese descent during the Second World War. It was another irony. It was like being taken in by the image of a beautiful woman only to find on closer relationship that she had quite intolerable traits. Those were aspects of America most Chinese back home seldom hear about.

Although the American mass media ran stories of the influx of Chinese refugees into Hong Kong -- a development which they colourfully described as people voting against Communism with their feet -- there was little sign of those refugees being welcomed into the Land of the Free, in keeping with the sentiments expressed at the base of the Statute of Liberty.

News from home added to the gloom. Letters spoke of the booming export trade to China coming to a shuddering stop, poverty on the rise and diseases like tuberculosis, diphtheria and malaria taking hold of the population again.

Two thoughts clashed frighteningly inside my head. Was the American ideal of freedom and liberty meant only for the white races and not for others? The second thought was even more frightening. If Senator McCarthy's anti-Communist ranting gained more popular traction, would it be turned more specifically against China and myself?

\* \* \*

In the meantime, I became increasingly conscious of my skinny physique as I moved around the campus. Trying to hoist a large trayful of empty dishes and eating utensils about my shoulders during my breakfast duties and to take them to the washing machines, proved a trial. I came close to doing a clanger more than once. After work at the library I headed for the gym to get myself into a less disgraceful shape. I tried to enrol for both boxing and wrestling and was told there was no one remotely small enough to work with me.

While there, I came across a student by the name of Mike Zinck. He was around my age but a couple of years ahead of me academically. Mike used to be a body builder and had boxed in the Golden Gloves. One day, when I saw him flexing his rippling muscles in one of those body-building poses, I cried out involuntarily: “Gosh, I wish I could be a monster like you!”



Mike Zinck at Stanford in 1951.

Mike took my remark in good heart. “I can make a monster out of you too,” he answered. “Before you know it, you could be the next Mr. Hong Kong.” After that exchange, we became friends and Mike taught me a regime for pumping iron. We also fell into the habit of addressing each other simply as “Monster” after that. Surely enough, Mike’s regime worked and within months I put on in excess of 25 pounds. My arms no longer looked like matchsticks and I could actually feel my pectoral muscles rippling beneath my shirts. For the first time in my life I felt like a normal human being and no longer cringed at my own appearance.



The picture below, taken in Hong Kong in the summer of 1949, will illustrate how skinny I was before Mike took me in hand.

Mike and I kept up our friendship for many years, although I was more than satisfied with what I had achieved without ever getting close to becoming a candidate for Mr. Hong Kong.

After Mike graduated, he entered law school and then joined the FBI. He visited me when I was in London in 1958 and years later, after he had left the FBI to take up a post as head of security at one of the major credit card companies in Paris, I went over there to visit him and his French wife. I was to become further indebted to him because during that visit he introduced me to the Père Lachaise Cemetery, named after Père de la Chaise, the confessor to Louis XIV. A million people have been buried there since it opened in 1804, on plots held in perpetuity or on leases ranging from 10 years to 50 years. And the waiting list for a lease is enormous.

We spent a long half-day ambling in quiet reflection among the endless rows of tombs. The great marshalls of the Napoleonic era, like Davout, now largely forgotten; the leading writers of their day, like Balzac, Molière and Oscar Wilde, now no longer in fashion; the great lovers, Abélard and Héloïse, buried side by side, still a shrine for the lovesick.

Ever since that introduction by Mike, I have always made it a point to spend an hour or so at Père Lachaise whenever I went to Paris, if only to remind myself of the emptiness of fame and of what brief candles human lives are.

\* \* \*

As my self-confidence increased at Stanford, I became more active socially. I joined the *Stanford Daily*, the student-run campus newspaper, and began writing feature articles under my own by-line. The latter gave me a big thrill and made me known around the campus. My articles usually involved interviews with professors on timely subjects in their respective fields of

competence. I also participated in the contract bridge tournaments run by the Bridge Club



Working with fellow students at the *Stanford Daily* in 1951.

\* \* \*

Increasingly I found myself being asked by fellow students to take them to San Francisco's Chinatown so that I could order for them some "authentic" Chinese meals, instead of the usual fried noodles or chop suey. The meals would usually be followed by dancing at a night club. Seeing how enthusiastic they were for such ventures I was loath to confess what a dent they would represent for my finances. I did extra odd jobs like mowing lawns or ditch-digging to gain the necessary funds.

Getting dates with American girls did not prove a problem. I got on friendly terms with a number of them, though I never fully understood why they took a liking to me. Perhaps they thought me a bit unusual. Because I was perpetually short of money, necessity had to be the mother of invention. When a girl invited me to a party, I could ill-afford to buy a present, like a box of chocolates or a bunch of flowers. Instead I resorted to writing her a poem. This seemed to tickle recipients more than the common run of presents. Word went around about a queer poetry-writing Chinese boy with the reserved manners and speech of an English gentleman. Some must have thought me sufficiently off-beat to invite me home to meet their families during term-breaks. For some inexplicable reason, the mothers usually took a liking to me also.

But I took great care not to stray beyond friendship into anything romantic. I liked one or two of the co-eds enormously. But as fate would have it, the one I fancied most already had a boyfriend in tow, although I did not think the boy at all worthy of her. I could not see myself competing for her, however, since I was incapable of offering her any satisfactory future. There were simply too many cultural, family, emotional, linguistic and financial barriers standing in the way, not to mention those of our respective personal ambitions. I could not imagine an American wife taking easily to having a lot of Chinese relatives descending without notice upon the home and expecting to stay indefinitely, if need warranted.

Besides, as soon as I had sufficient education, I desired nothing more than to go home and try to do something for my country. Perhaps even to dash off somewhere where I was needed, like Hon-Kit and Frances. Where would that leave a wife? Even if I got as rich as my Eighth Granduncle, I could never provide materially for what an American girl would expect. What scope was there in Hong Kong for a nice garden with a lawn in front and a big swimming pool at the back? So I alternatively played the life-of-the-party or

the over-serious student wedded to studies. I simply closed my heart to feminine attractions. That was not always easy. How could a man keep a cool head when dancing to some romantic melody with a delectable young woman held tightly in his arms?

\* \* \*

Just as I was about to approach the Dean of Students with my grades for the first year and to confess that I was running out of money to continue, war broke out in Korea. At first it was described as a border crossing problem. Then President Truman told the media it was only a United Nations policing action.

With such a complication in the air, I was not hopeful of securing a scholarship even though I had scored practically straight A's. But the Dean of Students made an offer which went beyond my wildest dreams. He said that because the Communists had taken over China, many Chinese students studying in America had been stranded and without funds. The American government had therefore made funds available to assist all Chinese students to complete their studies.

It was a typical act of generosity and kindness I had learned to associate with Americans, though I suspected the machinations of the powerful China Lobby must have had something to do with it. The naive assumption behind the scheme was that any Chinese who had studied in America had to be a "good" Chinese standing for freedom and wanting to rid Communism from their country.

I tried to point out to the Dean of Students that I was from Hong Kong, and not China, but he brushed off the difference. He was convinced I was covered by the scheme and told me I would be getting a document setting out the details soon. I left his office reassured about my immediate future but

also uneasy I might be benefitting from an arrangement not really meant for me. Although I had started at Stanford as part of the Class of 53, I resolved that I would speed up my studies with extra units so I could graduate sooner.

The other significant development during my second year was that the first black student was at last admitted to Stanford. His name was Edward Tucker.

\* \* \*

I would like to interrupt the narrative briefly to insert a few observations on the tremendous relevance of the Korean War on the thinking of the Chinese people in China, Hong Kong and elsewhere.

The end of World War II left Korea divided at the 38th parallel because of geopolitical considerations. Both parts came to be ruled over by neurotic and obsessive men who saw their destinies as one of reunifying their country -- but on their individual terms. After their country had suffered as a Japanese colony, their sentiments were understandable.

In the north, the diehard Communist Kim Il-Sung was installed. He, like many other leaders before and after him, laboured under the delusion the people in the south would rise up to welcome him once he had crossed the border. Stalin, his mentor and protector, was apparently the only one who could curb his passion for ill-considered ventures.

Syngman Rhee was America's man in the south. Though he had spent decades in exile in America, he was equally delusional about his appeal as a Korean patriot both in the north and south. He was both a Christian and a virulent anti-Communist but that did not prevent him from being unstable, brutal and corrupt. He was not popular but he thought his mission was being hampered by insufficient America vision and support.

On June 25, Kim, somewhat jealous of the Chinese Communist

success in China, deliberately misinterpreted a vague remark by Stalin and sent his tanks south in a lightning strike. He caught the American advisors and the South Koreans by surprise and pushed them into just a small defensive perimeter at Pusan. The southern population did not welcome the liberator from the north by strewing rose petals, however.

Fortunately for President Truman, the Soviet member of the Security Council had decided to boycott the Council in protest against a Kuomintang official still occupying the Council seat meant for Communist China. The Soviet absence enabled America to get a Security Council resolution passed to aid South Korea in what President Truman had described as “a United Nations policing operation.” There had, of course, been a number of border skirmishes between the two Koreas before.

But President Truman had to face a trying problem of another kind. The United States commander in the Far East was General Douglas MacArthur, then overseeing the occupation in Japan. The General, at the age of 70, was a man the President neither liked nor trusted. The General did not relish following orders. He was still a towering heroic figure in the American public mind and he knew it. Someone had once observed that the General had been so decorated and praised that he considered only God to be senior to him. Yet he was the man the President had to rely upon to deal with the Korean imbroglio.

The General was full of confidence. He declared he could deal with the North Koreans with one hand tied behind his back. He duly sent reinforcements to stabilise Pusan and, against significant military advice, launched a highly risky but brilliant amphibious landing at Inchon behind enemy lines. It had the effect of cutting the North Korean supply lines, leaving them with no alternative except retreat. Once the North Koreans were back across the 38th parallel, that meant the aims of the United Nations police action had been achieved. As previously, a cease-fire could have been

negotiated with a bit of face-saving all around.

But the brilliance of the Inchon ploy had whetted the domestic American appetite for a grander victory. The mauling taken for two months at the hands of the North Koreans had to be avenged. MacArthur saw himself as just the man for the job. To be the one to reunify Korea would be his crowning glory. If that led to a greater war which would clear Communism out of Asia, so much the better. By October 20 his troops had taken over the North Korean capital of Pyongyang and the way farther north seemed clear and irresistible.

The cooler heads in Washington knew MacArthur's temperament and were fearful that inching any closer to the Yalu River might provoke intervention by the Soviet Union or China. But after Inchon, they were on the defensive. MacArthur himself was dismissive of their fears. He claimed to be an expert on the Oriental mind and was certain the Chinese would not intervene. If they did, he would deal them one of the greatest military slaughters in human history.

Meanwhile, China had no illusions on what MacArthur was about. Indeed, Chinese intelligence had suspected a possible landing at Inchon, though the North Koreans dismissed that possibility. China, in the person of Chairman Mao, foresaw that a conflict with America had to happen sooner or later. China therefore sent clear messages, both through diplomatic and back channels, that the presence of American troops on the Yalu River would be considered a threat to Chinese security and there would be a response.

But the Washington establishment was too awed by MacArthur and his popularity in the Republican Party to deal firmly with him. Even President Truman had twice failed to get the man to come to Washington for a meeting. In the end, the President had to suffer the humiliation of flying to Wake Island to meet him.

The outcome was a wishy-washy instruction to the General. He

was to avoid any act that would engage the United States or the United Nations in a larger war with the Soviet Union or China. His troops were not to go anywhere near the Korean provinces abutting the Chinese or Russian borders. Those issuing the instruction had not the slightest doubt in their minds that MacArthur would interpret those terms in any way he chose. But they lacked the guts to tie things down in clear and unmistakable terms, to dot every i and cross every t.

Thus it inevitably came about that the vainglory and ego of one aging warrior and the want of courage among his political masters brought about a wider war involving both China and the Soviet Union. It led to the needless deaths of millions. President Truman was forced to dismiss MacArthur as the supreme commander in April of 1951. It transpired at the inquiry which followed that MacArthur never spent a single night in Korea during the entire conflict but had merely directed activities from the safety of his office in Tokyo.

The toll of the “policing action” depends on whichever figures one chooses to believe. According to the South Koreans, they lost 227,800 killed, 717,100 wounded and 43,000 missing in action. The North Koreans were reticent about their own losses but they claimed to have eliminated 390,000 American soldiers. The Chinese admitted to 114,000 battle deaths and 34,000 non-battle deaths. The official American figures were 33,686 battle deaths, 2,830 non-battle deaths and 8,176 missing in action. Little attention was given to the 3,212 killed and 11,280 wounded among the 15 other nations which joined the venture. Chances are that every party suffered losses significantly higher than the figures announced. Some sources placed the number of North Koreans and Chinese killed at no less than 1.5 million.

The fighting ended three years later and today Korea remains divided along the 38th parallel as it had been back in 1950. The bitterness of that conflict still looms like a spectre over the world today and no doubt had

contributed to the development of nuclear weapons in that country.

For the Chinese Communists, the conflict had one great beneficial result. It legitimised their right to rule the country even among those who had not liked them to begin with. They had at least pulled together a nation which could stand up to the combined might of the most powerful nations in the world and fought them to a stalemate. They had stood for no more of the kind of humiliations after the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion and all the other past conflicts. There was no more ceding of territory, no more sackings of the Chinese capital, no more demands for reparations, no more extraterritorial rights and no more unequal treaties. China had once again stood up in the world.

Even among people in the politically apathetic enclave of Hong Kong, where the money-making instinct ran a close second to the built-in one of breathing in and breathing out, there was a notable shift. All of a sudden, in certain circles, there was a realisation that they were simply no longer a bunch of helpless subjects lost in an alienated plot of land. They were only a temporarily alienated part of a nation which counted for something, a nation which had faced down a fresh attempt at foreign bullying.

A courageous few had quickly organised a smuggling operation by junks and assorted boats in defiance of British law, to beat the United Nations embargoes on strategic materials imposed on China. There were naturally rich pickings to be had from embargo-busting but it also satisfied a genuine patriotic urge and pride.

As in most societies, a few rotten apples always existed. The most notorious case was a small pharmaceutical company which produced fake antibiotics and other medicines to sell through the smuggling syndicates. It was a wicked and evil thing to do because the medication was intended for wounded men who had fought for their country. Perhaps the pharmaceutical company simply wanted to make some quick bucks regardless of any harm

that might be done. The fraud was quickly exposed, and once the word got around, the nature of the deed revolted even people with right-wing inclinations. They shunned further dealings with the owner of the firm.

Although producing fake medicines was a criminal offence under colonial legislation and although such activity by that particular company had been widely bruited about, there was no evidence of the police ever mounting an investigation or prosecution. Suspicions arose that Westerner intelligence operatives might have connived in producing fakes to harm the Chinese war effort. The truth would probably never be known because the firm soon closed and its owner disappeared quietly into the grey anonymity of some foreign abode.

\* \* \*

As I continued with my education, I studiously steered away from any discussion with fellow students on the Korean conflict. Indeed few seemed to be following its developments with any great interest, in spite of the fact that their countrymen were being sent to fight and die there. Some had only the vaguest notion of even where Korea was, let alone the locations of the most bitterly fought engagements or the most startling defeats.

Once the conflict began, my concern grew over my own ignorance of how the real world operated. The ignorance of Hong Kong I had earlier discovered was a mere prelude.

As I worked towards a political science degree, it struck me as ludicrous that the great issues of war and peace at the heart of politics were being decided by unstable people with delusions of grandeur. How could some dim-witted Korean Communist dictator think that people he had never ruled over would love and welcome him if he sent his tanks to liberate them? Incidentally, the political advisor who had given the dictator those misleading

assurances was promptly taken out and executed.

On the American side, how could a megalomaniac general think he had grown too important to pay any attention to the wishes of a mere president of his country? The American founding fathers of the republic had never envisioned such a situation. The American system of government became even more of a mystery. Its electoral system appeared ready-made for wheels and deals and representatives with odd ideas being elected to power. How could I possibly learn everything I should in the short time remaining?

The impossibility of the situation seized me as I entered the final term before graduation. To get a fancy piece of paper conferring a degree seemed an utter farce. It amounted to not a testimony of knowledge acquired but merely a certification of a not total ignorance. The time between my entering Stanford in 1949 and my impending graduation in 1952 had taught me not only how pathetically little I knew but also how much remained to be learned.

Fortuitously, the head of the Journalism Department, a gentleman I had known only in passing because of my involvement in the *Stanford Daily*, asked me to see him. He told me there was available a post-graduate fellowship in journalism called the Melville Jacoby Fellowship. It was a year-long fellowship to do an M.A. in journalism. He thought my academic record and my experience in journalism, both at the *Stanford Daily* and previously in Hong Kong, should make me a strong candidate. He asked if I had any inclination to apply.

My initial reaction was lukewarm. I had no intention of going back into journalism, especially after I had seen examples of the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst. And I already experienced the starvation wages in that profession in Hong Kong. I had up to that point taken no course in journalism and the thought of having to go through things like identifying typefaces, learning printing processes and the skills for make-up of

pages appeared too much of a bore. On the other hand, the tedium of a few journalism courses would be a small price to pay for the chance to study more history, philosophy, psychology and anything else I fancied. Thus I applied for and gained the fellowship, possibly against a weak field.

But to complete the degree I needed to write a thesis. The head of the Journalism Department was keen that I should apply a theory known as “value-analysis” to some Asian newspapers. The theory was developed by a Professor of Psychology and government official named Ralph K. White, who had studied the psychological implications of Voice of America broadcast overseas. Professor White claimed it to be a quantitative method of measuring any form of verbal data and bringing out the value system of a culture. Basically, it was the counting of the number of times that certain key words like freedom, peace, independence, democracy, etc. were used in the editorials of particular newspapers to determine the values they were espousing.

I thought the whole idea fanciful and a waste of time. People might use the same words but attach different meanings to them. It would be like trying to determine how good a Christian a man was by counting the number of times he went to church.

Words have become so abused and degraded from misuse that one hardly knows what they mean any more. Take the word “democracy” for instance. There is no generally accepted definition. Even the most thuggish governments claim themselves to be democracies. How the democratic will of the Greek people is currently being crushed by other so-called “democracies” in the European Union is a case in point. The loose pinning of labels by third rate journalists in mass media did not help at all.

Given all that, I figured that nearly all M.A. theses were destined in any case to merely collect dust. So I went along with the idea of counting words to secure a degree. I imagine the governmental surveillance on electronic communications currently practised by many regimes must be based

on a similarly dubious idea.

\* \* \*

Before the fighting in Korea ended on July 27, 1953, I was already on my way home by boat with an M.A. The boat was scheduled to stop for a day in Manila before reaching Hong Kong. In order to meet me, my mother made the journey up from Davao City, where she had migrated after the start of the Korean war.

She appeared very pleased I had done so well at university. I did not tell her about the loan from my Eighth Granduncle and the generous help I had received from the American government. So I allowed her to assume that it was my father who had put me through my studies.

She told me that my eldest aunt, Cheuk-Yim, was still practising medicine in Canton and that her family was well the last time she saw them before she left. They had not been in touch since.

\* \* \*

During my stay at Stanford, I made many lifelong friends, far too many to describe in detail. Many of them led notable and interesting lives. Some became politicians and diplomats. There was also a Cornishman I met briefly there and we became friends. He went by the name of David Watmough. He was three years older than myself but he had already decided upon pursuing a writing career by then. He thought I had some writing potential too, judging from the articles I had written in the *Stanford Daily*, and he tried to encourage me in that direction.

But I was too busy harvesting the missing knowledge of my own culture and too scatterbrained to know what I wanted to do with my life. We

kept in occasional touch after we had gone our separate ways, however. Some 40 years later, after I had become seriously infected by the fiction-writing bug, David gave me every encouragement and tried, without success, to get my stories into prestigious magazines like *The Malahat Review*.

In that lapse of several decades, David seemed to have hardly stopped long enough from his writing to draw breath, for he produced in rapid succession some 20 volumes of short stories, novels and plays. He took out Canadian citizenship in 1967 and stationed himself in British Columbia with a life-long partner who was a university professor. Today, at the age of 89, he is writing sonnets and is considered one of the most venerable playwrights and novelists in Canada.

Naturally, most of the friends I made at Stanford were Americans. In general, I found them kind, generous, open and easy to get along with. The accidents of history had bestowed upon them a land of great abundance and its founding fathers had steered them towards the constitutional rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That had to some extent turned them inward-looking, with scant interest in what was happening outside their own bountiful land. That might have all been very well if the quarrelling Europeans, exhausted by their endless wars, had not seduced them at the turn of the Twentieth Century with the colourful cloaks of their crumbling and no longer manageable empires. Today the contradictory instincts between freedom and democracy on the one hand and naked domination and imperial wealth on the other still divide the nation and remain unresolved.

There are two American friendships made during Stanford I ought to mention in this point in my narrative. The first concerns Dr. Wilfred Stone. He joined Stanford in 1950 as the Director of Freshman Composition and that was how we met. He was made a full Professor of English in 1963 and became noted as a biographer of E. M. Forster and William Hale White. He was born in 1917 so he was some 12 years older than I. But we discovered we

had several interests in common so we have maintained regular contact till the present day.

In the early 1980's, after I had been lucky enough to make a serious sum of money through one of those bouts of irrationalities seizing free markets, I asked Wilfred to help me establish a writing fellowship for fiction at Stanford. I wanted to endow a one-year fellowship for people to write a serious novel or collection of short stories set in the Far East.

The reason for my proposal was that during the course of my life I had come across many people like General MacArthur, who claimed to be an expert on the Oriental mind, and many Asians who likewise thought they knew completely the Occidental mindset. More often than not, however, I found such people's knowledge about their own cultures extremely superficial, let alone the cultures of others. I thought that if some Asians with more knowledge about their own heritages were to write in English about their values and backgrounds, Westerners might gain a better understanding of Asian peoples.

Wilfred liked my idea and took it to the professor in charge of creative writing. But the response of the said professor came in such a politically correct manner that it shocked both of us. The professor said he would be happy to accept the funds for a creative writing fellowship but only without the restriction on writing about Asia. To require a work to have an Asian setting and to deal with Asian issues would be discriminatory and hence unacceptable.

After I had got over my shock, I asked whether if I wanted to leave money for medical research, I would also be prevented from specifying whether the research should be for cancer or heart disease. The head of creative writing replied that would indeed be the case. On that note we disengaged.

I therefore turned my attention to the British university most noted

for its creative writing programmes -- the University of East Anglia. The Dean of its English Department at the time was a wonderful lady and a brilliant writer by the name of Lorna Sage. She grasped immediately what I was after and we got along like a house on fire. A Trust Deed was drawn up between the lawyers of the university and my own in reasonable time. Funds were paid over and an annual fellowship paying £25,000 to each successful candidate has been up and running since 1998. The sum was later increased to £26,000 and the fellowship has been working smoothly ever since. Many have published quite readable works of fiction and have won prizes, though there have been a few inevitable duds as well.

Professor Sage unfortunately suffered from poor health and she heartbreakingly passed away shortly after the fellowship had been initiated. Funds have now been paid into the Trust to ensure a sufficient income flowing to keep the fellowship running forever -- or at least barring any total collapse of the world's existing financial system.

Sometime after I had completed arrangements with the University of East Anglia, people from the Stanford administration visited me and apologised for the failure to get my initial proposal off the ground. They wondered if there might still be a chance to have another shot at it. I expressed regret there could be no going back because the original money earmarked had already been given elsewhere.

I must also record my gratitude to my old friend on another score. When my first collection of short stories appeared in 1990, Will penned a highly flattering though probably quite undeserved review, stating that my stories always presented a crisis of sensibility that led to "a point of illumination or to the verge of one."

\* \* \*

The second Stanford friend I wish to record is Dr. Robert C. North, the then Managing Editor of a quarterly magazine called *The Pacific Spectator*, published by The Pacific Coast Committee for the Humanities of the American Council of Learned Societies. Some 20 colleges and universities on the Pacific Coast supported the work of the Committee. Since Robert was interested in the Pacific area we sometimes have conversations about developments there.

*The Pacific Spectator* published in each issue a small section called “Literature from Asia” consisting of two short stories by writers from that part of the world. During my post-graduate year, I developed a slight itch for writing fiction. I played around with a couple of stories and when I had finished them I showed both to Robert.

To my delight, he accepted both for his magazine. Due to the volume of submissions, however, neither appeared in print till after I had left Stanford. I do not know to what extent friendship might have influenced Robert’s judgement but his acceptance left me with the delusion I might have some of the fictionalising talent originally identified by David Watmough.

That delusion was to set me off on a disastrous venture to London in 1957 to try and make a living writing fiction. I managed to sell only one story in more than a year of effort and found myself slowly starving to death. No blame whatsoever, of course, should be attached to Robert for my own recklessness.

But there were one or two interesting spin-offs from that débâcle which I shall relate later.