

## A Bureaucrat in the Making

My first posting in the Administrative Service was to the then recently created Social Welfare Department, which had its head office in the Causeway Bay Magistracy Building. A China Motor Bus service ran conveniently between Robinson Road and Causeway Bay, taking me almost from door to door.

The Department had a potpourri of responsibilities hived off mainly from the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs. It consisted of a number of self-contained divisions or sections, including a probation service for young offenders, the provision of food and shelter for victims of natural disasters, rehabilitation services for the handicapped, the distribution of dry rations to the destitute, the development of youth recreational facilities and the oversight of orphanages and homes for girls in moral danger.

The Director was an Administrative Officer by the name of David Baron. He had previously served as an aide to the Governor of Ceylon before transferring to the Hong Kong Colonial Secretariat and occupied a number of posts before becoming the Deputy Colonial Secretary. When he was appointed Director of Social Welfare, he was in fact the second officer to be so appointed. His predecessor, however, hardly stayed long enough to warm his seat before proceeding on retirement. So for all practical purposes David Baron was the one who actually shaped the organisation and laid the foundations for its development.

His plans, however, were often hampered by a severe shortage of qualified social workers. He therefore had to spend a great deal of time consulting with various institutes of higher learning to devise ways and means of upgrading and expanding the output of qualified staff.

David Baron was well over six feet and moved with a slightly loping gait. He was in his mid-40s and was an epitome of an urbane English gentleman, courteous, considerate, reserved and soft-spoken. He had an elevated forehead, a pair of kindly and deep-set eyes, a sharp pointed nose and a small

mouth. His head, however, gave the impression it was disproportionately small in relation to the size of his body. It also rested on top of a fairly long neck. Somehow those physical attributes, combined with the steady and methodical way of tackling his responsibilities, evoked an image of that wise and mythological tortoise which won a fabled race with a hare.

He turned out to be an exceptionally caring superior. He took a great personal interest in the welfare of his staff. Soon after my arrival in the Department as Administrative Assistant, he formed the habit of sticking his head around my door after the mid-day hour to enquire: “Doing anything for lunch?”

My answer was invariably in the negative, for I usually ate by myself at some nearby noodle shop or at some down market eatery where plates of rice with barbecued pork, soy sauce chicken or the like could be had. Thus I regularly ended up lunching with him at one of his clubs.

There was never want of conversation during those meals. He had a wide curiosity, not only about my education and what I had done before joining government service but also about various aspects of Chinese customs and practices.

One day, I happened to mention that I had to take a pay cut in order to join the civil service.

David Baron expressed surprise. “What? You’ve worked for 10 years before joining?” he declared. “You mean they didn’t give you increments for experience? They ought to have.”

I was foxed by what he said, since I was only aware of increments being given to expatriates.

David Baron then explained that Establishment Regulations provided for increments to be awarded to officers with relevant experience. For instance, British National Service was considered relevant. An officer who had served in British National Service for, say, two years, would be entitled to two increments. He said he would take the matter up on my behalf.

His remarks stirred my own interest in the unfamiliar Establishment Regulations. I soon discovered all sorts of arcane gems were buried there. One such gem was the existence of something known as “acting pay”. Apparently, each officer had a rank and a pay point. But each post also had a rank with a corresponding pay point. If an officer served in a post appropriate to his personal rank, then no issue arose. But if he served in a post with a higher pay point than his own, then he would earn an extra income, calculated at 90% of the difference between his own pay and the pay for the post. On the other hand, if an officer served in a post below his personal rank, then he would still retain the full pay of his rank. It was a win-win situation. I was to benefit unexpectedly from that acting pay provision within a year.

Another surprising discovery I made was that notwithstanding all the glib public talk about localisation, only eight local Administrative Officers had been inducted throughout the decade of the 1950s, including my competitor F. K. Li in 1953. Two of the eight left after about three years and one was reclassified as an expatriate officer.

The official excuse for the poor showing was that locals preferred the greater financial rewards of the private sector and hence lacked interest in government service. The local universities were also blamed for not producing enough suitable candidates.

That alibi patently did not bear scrutiny. For a start, evidence suggested that the so-called lack of local interest in public service was a complete myth. In 1953, for instance, there were at least three people anxious to serve but someone within government had decided to restrict admission to only one. Secondly, for some unexplained reason, the government had failed to retain the services of some who had joined. It would appear some official introspection and analysis was called for, rather than lame excuses.

In addition, regardless of the output of local universities, there was a plentiful pool of Chinese foreign graduates to choose from. F. K. Li was an

American graduate and so was I. Another Administrative Officer, appointed at the same time as myself, was Lai Ka-Wah. He was a graduate of a Japanese university and had married a dainty and eminently presentable Japanese wife called Margaret. Later that year, Mr. Henry Ching's elder son, Henry Ching Junior, a graduate of Oxford, also joined to augment the growth of locals in the service.

Those who had been responsible for recruitment to what might be called "the higher civil service" could also be faulted on another count. They were thoroughly unmindful of Chairman Mao's observation that women held up half of heaven. They seemed either lost for initiative or else keen to keep the service as a purely male and largely expatriate preserve.

It was not till 1959 that a female expatriate joined the Administrative Service. But she left in less than two years. The first Chinese female officer was not recruited till the end of 1961 -- 16 years after the end of World War II.

Therefore, local candidates had been available all along. And no doubt more would be forthcoming if the bureaucracy had taken greater pains to encourage both male and female graduates to join. For instance, I have alluded to the existence of the award of two increments for expatriate officers, simply for being expatriate. Why not two increments for anyone with a good working knowledge of Chinese?

Before the war, Administrative Officers -- then known as Cadets -- were routinely sent to Canton for two years to study Chinese before taking up their appointments. Even after the war, some officers had been put on Chinese studies locally. It would thus appear entirely logical for those who already knew Chinese to be awarded increments. Moreover, why not increments for other types of experience apart from those who had served in the British National Service?

The available evidence suggested that no shortage of local talent for the Administrative Officer grade existed. Only the bureaucratic will for

localisation was missing.

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Since Lai Ka-Wah and I were recruited at the same time, it was not unnatural for a friendship to develop between us. There was something else we had in common. We had both been rejected on our first attempt to join the Administrative Service.

Ka-Wah was about five years younger than I. He was energetic, personable, ambitious and much more of a social animal than I. He quickly established many social and working relationships with expatriate colleagues.

He told me privately his aim was to become the first Chinese to occupy the post of Colonial Secretary. I queried him on such an ambition, for it presupposed that all the Chinese officers senior to him would not make the grade.

“I’m not passing judgement on the competence of our Chinese colleagues,” he replied. “I’m only surmising on the time it would take for the Brits to get around to accepting the need for a Chinese as Colonial Secretary. At least 20 to 25 years, I reckon. By then, all our present senior Chinese colleagues would have retired or be about to. But I would be in just the right age bracket.”

I wished him well. I confessed to being unsure whether I had made the right choice in working for foreign occupiers. In any case, I could not image what I might be doing 20 years hence.

Our friendship developed swiftly, to such an extent that we often exchanged personal confidences, opinions on colleagues and favours we would never dream of sharing with our wives. When my second son, Tien-Kay, arrived in 1962, Ka-Wah and Margaret agreed to become his godparents.

Tragically, Ka-Wah was never given the time to live out his dream. He kept over-taxing himself with work and social obligations to the detriment of

his health. He died in the spring of 1974, from cirrhosis of the liver. I was asked to serve as one of his pall bearers.

It had also been through Ka-Wah that I became acquainted with his former Japanese university classmate, Ted Fujii. Both of us always drank fondly to his memory whenever we met.

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My duties at the Social Welfare Department were basically to carry out whatever tasks David Baron and his Assistant Director might assign -- doing research, drafting reports, taking notes at meetings or responding to public queries.

The Assistant Director was also an expatriate Administrative Officer. He complained constantly of back pains, however, and was invalided out of the service within a year of my arrival. His replacement was a genial and very likable Scot by the name of David Alexander, a former Lt. Colonel in the British Army who had been awarded a military M.B.E. for “gallant and distinguished services”. He had been dropped behind enemy lines in Malaya to join Chin Peng and his Communist guerrillas fighting against the Japanese. (I shall have more to say about him in a later chapter.) Thus for a while all three Administrative Officers in the Department shared the same given name.

One of the first tasks that David Baron assigned me was to serve as secretary to the committee administering the statutory Hong Kong War Memorial Fund. The Fund was set up in 1947 for the purpose of providing maintenance, education and other forms of benefit to the widows and children of auxiliary service members killed in action by the Japanese. The Fund also covered the families of those who had died under torture or because of hardships suffered during Japanese imprisonment.

My job was to study reports and assessments made by case workers

to determine whether applications conformed with the rules of the Fund and whether there were any obvious gaps or inadequacies to be rectified before seeking decisions from the Fund committee.

The Chairman of the Committee was Sir Sik-Nin Chau, a gentleman of enormous reputation as an eye doctor, a lecturer at the University of Hong Kong, a banker who had founded the Hong Kong Chinese Bank, a bold community leader and a dogged politician. He was at the time the Senior Unofficial Member of the colony's Executive Council, having served on that Council since 1959.

At the same time, he was or had been the chairman or director of a host of governmental boards, publicly listed companies, social welfare organisations and other community bodies. Among the more important quasi-governmental posts he had held were the chairmanship of the Federation of Hong Kong Industries and of the Hong Kong Management Association.

Working for a man with such credentials covered me with awe. I quickly noted that he was a comfortably corpulent gentleman of around 60, with the bearing of one accustomed to giving orders. I was determined to observe him closely, to learn how he went about achieving his successes.

As the Chairman of the War Memorial Fund committee, he was crisp and workmanlike. His questions were always to the point. It became evident, however, that he was highly ambitious and was far from satisfied with the social and political heights he had already attained. I gradually surmised he was being driven by a belief that Chinese values and sensitivities had not been given due weight in public affairs.

As one of the acknowledged leaders of a population living under foreign rule, his concerns were understandable. I had sympathy for that view myself. The long exclusion of Chinese from many of the private clubs in Hong Kong, for example, was irksome and unjustifiable.

Cynics might have ascribed Sir Sik-Nin's drive for a greater Chinese

voice to his desire to further his own ambitions or to benefit his own commercial interests. Some quarters described him as “pushy” and “arrogant”. My own assessment was that many emotional elements and points of principle were involved. Most human actions were driven by mixed motives. It was pointless to try to separate out the precise quantum of each.

While I had been studying Sir Sik-Nin and his *modus operandi*, he must have been sizing me up as well. Soon after I had assumed the duties of secretary of the War Memorial Fund, he began casting a favourable eye upon me and my work. I was not sure exactly why. It could have been because he liked the way I was handling the cases, or because he had discovered I had once taught at St. Stephen’s College, his old school, or because he recognised in me a potential ally in promoting local Chinese interests. In any case, he surprised me one day around the latter part of 1962 by asking if I would care to become a member of the Jockey Club.

At that point, I knew next to nothing about horse racing. Nor did I appreciate the great favour he was offering. I knew only that he was one of the stewards of the club and had been the first Chinese to ever occupy such a position. My own thoughts circulated around the possibility that, if I were a member, I could secure a guest badge for my father-in-law to enter the less crowded members’ enclosure rather than to have him suffer the discomforts of the public stands. I therefore answered in the affirmative and he said he would arrange for my nomination.

To be put up for membership required one of the 200 mainly European Voting Members to nominate the candidate for membership and another to second the proposal. Any nomination would still had to be approved by the panel of stewards. Since each Voting Member was restricted to making only one nomination per year, the difficulties facing the man in the street wishing to join can be easily imagined, especially if he was without upper class or expatriate connections.

By February of 1963, thanks to Sir Sik-Nin, I became a bona fide member of that exclusive and elitist club. I should add here that the entry fee back then was minuscule compared with the astronomical figure of around \$400,000 now reportedly demanded. I cannot remember what the exact entry sum was then but it was one easily affordable even by a poorly paid civil servant.

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I should like to digress here for a moment, to explain some of the more opaque workings of the Jockey Club. An understanding of its then prevailing culture is essential for appreciating how unique and valuable a gift Sir Sik-Nin was offering in putting me up for membership.

The club had been for long one of those anachronistic outfits reserved for the moneyed expatriate on the upper crust. It was founded in 1884 as a private club for the purposes of riding horses and conducting amateur horse races. Few would object to people forming private clubs to pursue a common interest. But for decades not a single Chinese interested in horses or in racing was ever admitted, presumably because he did not have the right skin tone. Nor had a single woman of any race been admitted as a member either. Although nowadays there are far fewer expatriates and many more women members, it remains largely a male-dominated organisation, meant for the well-to-do. The level of the entry fee said it all.

In bygone days, it used to be said that the greatest power in the colony rested not with the British Governor but with the Chairman of the Jockey Club. The reason was that its Chairman was generally perceived as commanding more raw wealth and being more capable of delivering quick social cachet than the Governor.

The wealth which the Chairman was perceived to control was derived from the club's legal monopoly in running the enormously popular *pari-*

*mutuel* betting on horse races. The betting turnover grew at such a pace that it soon rendered the club the largest single revenue raiser and the leading donor to charitable causes within the colony. Its charitable donations are currently running at well over a billion dollars a year.

The rules for admission to membership at that time were somewhat Byzantine. There were two classes of members -- ordinary members and Voting Members. One had to be an ordinary member of good standing for some years before being elected by the stewards to become a Voting Member. Being in the good books of one or more of the stewards was an advantage, because a Voting Membership was for life and was restricted in number to only 200. Since no women members were allowed, it went without saying there was not a single female Voting Member.

The current ordinary membership is said to be around 20,000 but the number of Voting Members has remained unchanged.

A quaint historical privilege was conferred upon Voting Members. Whereas an ordinary member would be issued a single non-transferrable metal badge for his use in gaining admission to club premises on race days and a single transferrable badge for the use of his wife or girl friend, each Voting Member was issued with a distinctive metal badge marked with a "V" for admission to the Voting Members' box and other facilities and *two* distinctive transferrable ladies' badges. The origins for such an arrangement were unclear. Presumably it must have been thought at one time that any gentleman reaching that status of a Voting Member must have more than one wife or at least a couple of mistresses. A number of Administrative Officers, both expatriate and local, were Voting Members.

Dark rumours had always circulated of certain Voting Members being willing to nominate total strangers for membership in return for a consideration. It was not until quite recently, however, that a few were convicted and sent to gaol for such offences.

There was something remarkably cosy and incestuous about the relationship between stewards and Voting Members. Stewards selected the members to be elevated to Voting Membership but the Voting Members were also responsible for electing the stewards from among their own ranks! The current number on the panel of stewards is 12.

Normally, the election of stewards was a rather tame and insipid affair. Stewards served a term of three years. Unless somebody wanted to retire, the serving stewards would usually offer themselves for re-election. Since no Voting Member would be so gauche or ill-mannered as to put himself forward without first getting the appropriate nods from on high, the number offering themselves would often neatly coincide with the required number of stewards. Someone would then say a few pious words about the happy coincidence, obviating the need to put anything to the vote. The candidates would then be elected *en bloc*. It was all in the best traditions of Tammany Hall.

It would then be up to the newly elected stewards to determine among themselves who would be the chairman and vice-chairman for the duration. No transparency or accountability to the general membership was required. There was also an unwritten understanding that the vice-chairman would, as an heir apparent, succeed to any vacant chairmanship.

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Perhaps, since I have already digressed, I might as well zoom forward in time to round off my subsequent relationships with Sir Sik-Nin and to recount how such a doughty campaigner for a greater Chinese voice in public affairs came to meet a sad, terrible and humiliating end.

After I had been re-assigned from the Social Welfare Department in the latter part of 1963, I remained on fairly warm and cordial terms with Sir Sik-Nin. He often invited Man-Ying and I to lunch at his box on race days, thereby

allowing us to become acquainted with captains of commerce and industry, knights of the realm and other notables. I had in fact already met some of his guests in my previous incarnation as a journalist.

But neither Man-Ying nor myself ever met Lady Chau. The reason was because by the time I began working with Sir Sik-Nin, his wife was already too ill to attend public gatherings. We did, however, get to meet the elder of Sir Sik-Nin's two sons, Kai-Yin, and his gentle and charming wife, Martha.

As I began my long slog through the trenches and barbed wire entrapments in the civil service, I gradually got to know some of the other stewards of the club. They also invited me for lunch at their boxes. Mixing with them and their guests, I gradually developed an interest in horse racing and the intricacies and challenges of equine ownership.

After nine years as an ordinary member, I found myself -- without seeking it -- elevated to fill a vacancy in the ranks of the 200 Voting Members. At that time, there were only around 65 Chinese Voting Members; the rest were all expatriates. In getting thus selected, I became drawn into the unedifying parish pump politics at the top of the club.

Sir Sik-Nin had, in the meantime, risen to be Vice-Chairman on the panel of stewards and Lady Chau had passed away.

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Any city that was packed and over-crowded, economically and politically on edge, geographically hemmed in and visibly stratified in terms of wealth, was bound to provide fertile breeding ground for rumours. And so it was in the case of Hong Kong. Rumours flew around more thickly than flies around a rotting carcass. For back-stabbers, insider traders, confidence tricksters and practitioners of other types of skulduggery, it was a field day every day.

It was under such circumstances that a rumour came to my ears in

1972, suggesting that the sitting Chairman of the Jockey Club would likely step down when he finished his three-year stint. I received that news with mixed feelings. I could sense that Sir Sik-Nin was still keen on going down in history as the first Chinese to become the Chairman of the Jockey Club. By convention, his position as Vice-Chairman gave him an edge. But I could also sense that a significant section of the European Voting Membership was not yet ready to accept a Chinese at the helm.

Sir Sik-Nin himself was aging and his political power had slipped from its peak. He was no longer an Unofficial Member of the Executive Council. As fate would have it, he had also suffered a minor stroke which slightly impaired the movements of one of his arms. The sensible thing for him would be to retire gracefully, leaving it to someone else to take over the struggle for a Chinese chairman.

But such a suggestion would be too presumptuous for a person like myself to make. It should come from someone older and with a standing comparable to his own. The prospect of being caught in the midst of a looming cultural and racial crisis filled me with foreboding.

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Time marched relentlessly on, and in due course the original rumour was confirmed. But another arose. It suggested that there would be more candidates for election as stewards than there would be to fill the vacancy created by the chairman's retirement. A genuine election would have to take place and I immediately smelt another of those back-room plots.

The arguments against Sir Sik-Nin would naturally not be couched in such bald or undiplomatic terms. They would be framed around his advancing age, his visible infirmity, his long tenure as a steward, the need for new blood and so forth.

When it became clear there would indeed have to be an election, I made a deliberate call as a freshly elected Voting Member on Sir Sik-Nin at the Hong Kong Chinese Bank. I wanted to get a feel of the land. I pretended, of course, I had just happened to be coming by to withdraw some money.

Sir Sik-Nin received me cordially. He seemed in good spirits and after a few inconsequential pleasantries he reminded me to vote for him in the forthcoming elections. I assured him he had my vote.

After leaving him, I dropped into the office of his son, Kai-Yin, who also worked at the bank. Kai-Yin was around my age and was by then also a Voting Member. I felt I could speak more openly to him. I asked him whether his father was really keen about another term as steward.

“Yes, he seems to be,” Kai-Yin said. “He figures it’s about time there was a Chinese chairman at the top. He has asked me to lobby everybody I know for their votes.”

“Your father has distinguished himself enough already,” I ventured. “There’s nothing else he needs to prove. A man his age certainly doesn’t need another three years as a steward. Why don’t you urge him to take it easy, slow down, enjoy life?”

“Easier said than done. A lot of Voting Members have promised to support him.”

“Look, Kai-Yin, politics is a very dirty business. You know as well as I do how the voting system works. When there are more candidates than places, there has to be a loser. I think certain people -- for whatever reason -- want to make your father that loser.

“If he really wants to win this election, then the tactics will have to change. It’s not the votes he gets that matter, but the votes he does not get. Even if Jesus Christ stood as a candidate, he will never get all 200 Voting Members rooting for him. Each Voting Member has to choose all names on the slate minus one. Left purely to chance, the law of averages would probably

result in all candidates getting around a similar number of votes. It would be a touch-and-go race to determine who would end up at the bottom.

“But if a small group of Voting Members were to target your father for elimination, and to persuade their friends to do the same, then the equation will be entirely different. Your father could easily end up a clear bottom. To retain a fighting chance, your father must identify the weakest candidate in the field and get his supporters NOT to vote for that person. He may make a few new enemies by doing that but there’s no other choice. Please discuss this with your father; make him see the danger. Then come back and tell me what he wants me to do.”

But Kai-Yin never reverted to me. I assumed that either he did not discuss the matter with his father or else Sir Sik-Nin had ruled out such an ungentlemanly approach as beneath him.

On the afternoon set aside for the voting, Sir Sik-Nin appeared relaxed and confident as he sat with the other out-going stewards at a long table facing an all-male assembly of Voting Members. A chartered accounting firm had been engaged to tabulate the votes.

When the results were announced, they were as I had feared. Sir Sik-Nin had been cruelly voted out. There was an ominous hush in the room as the gathering watched his face being drained of colour. Suddenly, he could hardly rise from his chair. Kai-Yin, equally pale, rushed forward to help him and together they stumbled clumsily from the room.

My heart was filled with anguish at the sight. As I surveyed the room filled with my fellow Voting Members, I noted some downcast eyes, some complicit fidgeting, some body language suggestive of betrayal. In others there were traces of genuine surprise. I wondered how many of that crowd had over the years partaken of Sir Sik-Nin’s food and quaffed his wines before dealing him such a dastardly blow. That devastating image of an old man’s public humiliation has haunted my memory ever since.

The last major public appearance of Sir Sik-Nin was in May of 1975, during the royal visit of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh to Hong Kong. He led the procession of local knights of the realm at a reception at the City Hall.

He suffered a massive stroke some time after that event and eventually declined into a deep coma. He lived on in a vegetative state for many years before finally dying in 1985 at the age of 83.

Kai-Yin, unfortunately, died from a sudden heart attack in 1979, well before his father. I have found it puzzling that, in biographical accounts of Sir Sik-Nin, Kai-Yin's name rarely gets a mention.

Sometimes, when I hear contemporary news about the thirst for democracy being all the rage in Hong Kong, I have wondered about the democratic credentials of the tens of thousands of members of the Jockey Club, plus the tens of thousands who wanted to become members of that exclusive club. So far as I am aware, none of them had taken to the streets or to the club premises demanding "one man one vote" in the running of the club. They seemed contented to leave 200 Voting Members they did not know or select to choose 12 stewards they equally did not know to anoint one of that magical 12 as their leader. I supposed that so long as the horses kept racing and the public could keep gambling to their heart's content, democratic accountability could go out of the window.

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My work as secretary to the War Memorial Fund formed only a very minor part of my duties in the Social Welfare Department. A much tougher assignment was to work with the head of the Relief Section to review the operational systems within that unit.

The Section had two main responsibilities. The first was to provide hot meals for victims of natural disasters, like landslides or typhoons. Its

organisation would be tested to the limit by events like Typhoon Wanda, which devastated the colony in 1962, leaving 130 dead and 72,000 homeless. The second responsibility was to provide dry rations on an on-going basis for unfortunate people rendered temporarily or permanently destitute.

Ever since I joined the Department, there had been a vague air of unease about the Section, although no one could quite explain why. Its head was close to retirement. But he was not a qualified social worker nor was he very articulate in English. Those same conditions applied to many of his staff, because most of them had been former liaison officers transferred over from the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs when the Social Welfare Department was established.

Their previous work had involved liaising with leaders of community organisations like clansmen associations, residential building management groups, temple trustees, benevolent bodies running orphanages, old folks homes, shelters for girls in moral danger and the like, to explain government policies and secure feedback. They were not really equipped, other than with common sense, to assess the welfare needs of individuals. They provided relief from hunger or distress only when called upon to do so.

Together with the Section head, I examined how the kitchens and their distribution system for hot meals worked during emergencies. Both seemed satisfactory. But the retirement of the Section head became due before we could start analysing the individual cases receiving relief or probing into how best to distribute dry rations to them.

In the circumstances, David Baron appointed me as an acting Principal Social Welfare Officer to run the Section and to continue the study. By so doing, he took a chance on my man-management skills, for many of the staff were older than I. He also virtually doubled my salary in one fell swoop through “acting pay”, because the starting salary for the post was -- if I remember correctly -- a shade over \$3,000. Hence for the first time in my life, my income

did not have to be completely devoted to sheer essentials.

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Dry rations, as I was to discover, consisted of a measure of rice, a certain number of tins of sardines and a bundle of firewood. Sometimes cucumbers or some type of melon might be included. Dieticians had no doubt been consulted so that the appropriate calorific and nutritional value was a given. The rations would be handed out approximately once a month at designated distribution centres. They had to be collected by each recipient personally.

In order to familiarise myself with the system, I asked to see -- in appropriate batches -- every case file of those in receipt of rations. In fact, they totalled only around a thousand in all. The files immediately brought a number of problems to light.

First of all, all case reports had to be made in English, as that was the official language, whereas case officers had only limited facility with it. Hence stock phrases like “no relative to depend” or “too old and jobless” or “sick and infirm” kept reappearing in the reports.

When I questioned the officers concerned, the unfolding stories were often much more complicated. The roots frequently lay in some family tragedy or ailment. A dead husband or son, family members in China, separated by war or natural disaster, abandonment by husband or unfilial children. Disabilities were often involved -- Parkinson's, partial blindness, chronic pain, muscular atrophies.

Even when a recipient was recorded as not having a single relative in Hong Kong, that was not necessarily true. It could be a case of the relative being too poor to help, especially when ties were remote and springing from the female side of the family. Not everyone could be as fortunate as I with helpful relatives on my grandmother's side of the family. In addition, there were no equivalent

terms in English to describe some of those relationships. The shorthanded way case workers used for getting around explaining such complex sociological and human issues in a language they had little command over was to simply say that a recipient had no relatives. I did not find a single case, however, of a recipient being not genuinely in need among the thousand-odd cases I reviewed.

My journalistic instincts and my common sense caused me to go to the distribution centres to study operations. Many recipients were indeed old and infirm. Some could hardly manage to carry away what had been given. Some of the younger women were widows, encumbered with children.

But I noticed something else. Many recipients had been brought to the distribution centres by younger people, mostly women, but sometimes by men also. Those escorts tended to hang around outside the precincts of the centres, trying not to be conspicuous. I tried to mix with them and to engage them in conversation.

I would approach one of the women and remark casually with a smile: “It is very kind of you to bring an elder to collect her rations. Do you happen to be related?”

“Oh, no! Oh, no!” the woman would reply. “I’m just a neighbour trying to help. She’s not very strong, as you can see.”

“Then you’re doubly kind and I thank you also on her behalf.”

Further observations and overhead remarks convinced me that some of the men accompanying the recipients were being paid to do so with a share of the rations, for I overheard one of the old ladies leaving a centre saying to a man as she handed over a couple of tins of her allocation of sardines: “This is for you.” The man then helped her to carry the rest of her rations away.

After studying all the files and making observations at every distribution centre, I came to the conclusion that whoever originally designed the system must have been a great cynic and a pragmatist, but one completely out of touch with the Chinese character.

It seemed that person had decided that since there were few qualified staff to make investigations, the best safeguard would be to make dry rations both unappealing and onerous to receive. Hence the monthly dole had to be collected in person. He must have also reasoned that by so doing only the truly hard-up and desperate would come forward. Otherwise, why go through so many hoops to get so little?

He apparently took no account of the Chinese character, with its sense of reliance on the self or, at worst, on the extended family. Its deep streak of pride and its concern for face were also ignored. Only the really desperate would descend to seeking help from an impersonal government, laying bare before strangers family relationships they would prefer not to divulge. The fact that only about a thousand were claiming dry rations in a society filled with refugees testified to such basic truths. It was not that the Chinese were incapable of producing freeloaders and rascals. But good case work and unscheduled home visits could weed such cases out.

It might be possible I was unduly sympathetic towards the needy because I had been a virtual destitute more than once myself. Rice might be measured out in cattles and taels, but how would one dish out a measure of human dignity? And could anyone, let alone the poorest of the poor, really tolerate eating sardines every day, month in and month out? Such vexing questions haunted me as I struggled to come up with a better means of helping the poor.

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Meanwhile, by the middle of 1962, David Baron's intervention with the Secretariat on my behalf regarding increments for past experience finally bore fruit. It was agreed that I should be granted four increments for 10 years of working experience. The basis on which that computation was made was not

revealed but I think that was the first instance of such recognition of outside experience in the Administrative Service. Subsequent entrants benefited from it. For me, it was a fairly moot point, because my acting pay as a Principal Social Welfare Officer already far exceeded the four increments awarded.

Nonetheless, I celebrated the award by indulging myself in purchasing a watercolour painting for \$200. I think Man-Ying splurged her share on a fashionable handbag.

The painting I bought was by a Kwangtung scholar who had fled to Hong Kong as a refugee. Since Chinese classical education was no longer in vogue, he tried to survive by employing his skill at painting and calligraphy. A friend of mine had told me about the scholar some time ago but since I previously had no spare cash, I had refrained from visiting him.

When I at last went to his modest home, I immediately fell enchanted by one of his paintings. It was of a Taoist mystic sitting in meditation on a prayer mat. His eyes were closed and there was a quite serene and otherworldly expression on his face. He was depicted with a thick and untidy growth of black hair on his upper lip and on his chin. The hair behind his high, receding forehead was more sparse by comparison. The most curious feature was a little green bird perching quietly and apparently unnoticed upon the mystic's forehead.

On the left hand side of the painting was a two-line Chinese poem with the standard seven syllables in each line. I cannot quite capture the spirit in those lines in translation but they said roughly the following:

“Together with green bird, there's neither it nor I.

The bodhi tree is non-existent in the original Nothingness.”

I did not hesitate in acquiring that painting. I quickly had it mounted and framed and it has been hanging in my home ever since. The money I had paid for it was the most rewarding sum I have ever spent in my life. For more than half a century, that painting has given me -- and still does -- both pleasure

and pause each time I gazed upon it.



The painting of the meditating mystic

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No sooner had David Baron resolved the issue of my increments, another issue arose.

There was a young university graduate by the name of Anson Fang. She had gone to university on a social welfare bursary, which meant she was

obliged to undertake social welfare work for a period after graduation. The young lady had applied to join the Administrative Service after graduation, however, and the recruitment board had selected her for appointment.

But David Baron queried such a course. He felt that, given the great shortage of qualified social workers, the young graduate ought first to honour her obligations to undertake social work. Besides, no one in the Social Welfare Department had even interviewed her yet. The Establishment Branch, on the other hand, asserted that there was a similar shortage of Administrative Officers and Miss Fang could be a greater asset to Hong Kong as an Administrative Officer rather than as a social worker.

In the end, both parties agreed that perhaps two middle-aged Europeans might not be the best judges of the potential of a young Chinese girl. They agreed she ought to be interviewed by a Chinese officer to assess her potential. I was chosen to be that officer and both parties agreed to abide by my recommendation.

Thus it came about that Anson Fang came to my office for an interview and I concluded she was better suited as an Administrative Officer. It was probably not the outcome David Baron had expected but he accepted it with good grace, as befitting the fair-minded person that he was.

At the time of the interview, I had no idea Anson Fang was the daughter of the lady artist Fang Zhao-Ling whom I had written about in London some years earlier.

Nor had either David Baron or I ever anticipated that the woman thus chosen would finally become the first Chinese to fill the position of Chief Secretary under British rule. That happened in 1993, after the title of Colonial Secretary had been changed to that of Chief Secretary some years earlier.

In that respect, Ka-Wah's estimate of 20 to 25 years was way off the mark. It actually took 32 years from the time of his assessment for the colonial bureaucracy to wake up to that need.

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By the beginning of 1963, I had arrived at a proposal for reforming the entire system of distributing dry rations. I had done a rough calculation of the total cost of acquiring dry rations through the governmental purchasing system, the labour involved in storing, handling and keeping inventory on stock, and the staff costs incurred in distributing the rice, sardines and so forth. I took the total and divided it by the number of recipients and soon arrived at a per-case cost.

It became apparent at once that if each recipient got an appropriate share of that cost in cash, he or she would be far better off than what each got in dry rations. Each would be able to purchase more and better food with the money on the open market. Even if each got a smaller amount than the true per capita cost, no one would need to worry about physically lugging supplies home. Each would also have the choice of eating other kinds of food besides endless sardines.

From the point of view of the government, the workload of other departments involved in the process would also be reduced. In respect of the Social Welfare Department, slightly more work would accrue to the accountants but that would be more than counter-balanced by a reduction in the number of labourers in the Relief Section. Moreover, adjustments to cash payments would be simpler should inflation mount.

I managed to convince both David Baron and David Alexander of the workability and superiority of my plan. A submission for a policy change was duly made to the Colonial Secretariat.

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At around the same time, a request came from the Secretariat asking for me to be released for two weeks to serve -- more or less but not in those exact words -- as window dressing or a fig leaf for Hong Kong on the international stage.

Britain had some time back apparently signed the colony up as a member of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. Each year the Commission organised a ministerial conference to discuss economic and social issues pertaining to the region. As more and more former Western colonies gained independence, however, the representation of Hong Kong by a team of what someone had once described dismissively as “white ghosts” stuck out like a sore thumb. The problem was that not a single Chinese officer had reached anywhere near what might be regarded as “ministerial” status.

The bureaucratic solution was to ask one of the Chinese Unofficial Members of the Executive Council or Legislative Council to lead the delegation and to read out a carefully prepared “country statement”. But he would still be leading too many white ghosts.

The government could not simply pack the delegation with Chinese faces, for there was serious work to be done and political sensitivities to be observed. For instance, although Britain had been one of the earliest countries to recognise Communist China, the Chinese seat in various United Nations organs was still occupied by people representing the Kuomintang in Taiwan. Thus at the meetings and social functions of the Commission, Hong Kong delegates had been briefed never to fraternise or exchange invitations with Taiwanese delegates. Otherwise there might be awkward diplomatic fallouts.

Another unintended side effect of mutual non-recognition was that Taiwan became a most favoured destination for Hong Kong fugitives. Since the two territories did not recognise each other, it stood to reason that no extradition treaty could exist. Thus corrupt Hong Kong police sergeants and other assorted

crooks could thumb their noses at various colonial authorities once they had escaped there.

My appointment as Secretary to the delegation was due largely to my Chinese face. The title was a euphemism for being a general dogsbody, to receive and distribute documents, to book a venue for receptions, to answer invitations, to hold an impress of cash and so forth.

It was a good learning experience. However, if diplomacy had been given due consideration, then the composition of the Hong Kong delegation must have been put together in much the same way as Spike Milligan had done for the Goon Show.

The leader of the delegation was a newly appointed Unofficial Legislative Councillor, Fung Hon-Chu, who was the head of an old Chinese trading firm called Li & Fung, founded in Canton in 1906 to deal in porcelain. He was a square-faced and sturdy man, who reminded me of the lumbering Japanese character, Odd-job, in one of the James Bond films. Fung walked with a slight limp because one of his legs had been shrivelled by a childhood bout of polio. He had patently strong Kuomintang sympathies and connections, because his firm maintained a large branch office in Taipei. I had no idea who had selected him to head the delegation but whoever it was apparently had not taken his political orientations into account. I certainly could not vouch to anyone that Fung Hon-Chu had been punctilious in not fraternising with Taiwanese delegates.

What I could vouch for, however, was that notwithstanding his unimpressive appearance, Mr. Fung was a very shrewd businessman. If there was a means of making a profit or getting the right person to work for him, he would find it.

After observing me at the conference for a few days, he approached me and asked: "Have you ever thought of going into the private sector? There are lots of money to be made for a smart guy like you."

“I’m not the adventurous type,” I replied. “People say being in government service is like having an iron rice bowl. So long as a person does nothing seriously wrong, he’s fixed for life. And he gets a pension as well at the end of the day.”

“It would be a missed opportunity, squatting in government,” he said, and we left it at that.

The next member of the delegation was Professor Stuart Kirby, then a professor of economics at the University of Hong Kong. As he drifted in and out of academia, he carried with him a known and colourful Trotskyist past. His reputation was that he had at various times been a spook for a variety of masters. A character not easy at all to read. Why he had been selected has remained a mystery.

Another member was Hal Miller, an Administrative Officer in the Economics Branch of the Colonial Secretariat, who had intended to resign from the civil service to run for election to the British Parliament. He subsequently won a seat as a Tory Member and was eventually knighted for his services.

I brought up the delegation’s rear, as the biblical hewer of wood and drawer of water.



Hong Kong Delegation to the meeting of the United Nations Commission for Asia and the Far East. From left to right, Fung Hon-Chu, myself and Hal Miller.

The annual conferences usually rotated around the countries within the region. That year it was scheduled for Manila from March 5 to 18. The Philippines was then under the presidency of Diosdado Macapagal. Attending the two-week conference was my first involvement with international affairs but I was to attend several more such conferences in the years that followed.

Originally the Secretariat for the Commission was to have been located in Shanghai. But due to the Chinese civil war it was finally set up in Bangkok.

The various working and social occasions enabled me to become acquainted with a number of the Commission's permanent staff. It also brought me into contact with the then young Senator Ferdinand Marcos and his mercurial wife Imelda, a glittering pair destined soon to rule the Philippines as a fiefdom for 21 years.

I came away from my first sortie into the international political

circuit with three abiding impressions. First, the Filipinos were great hosts for parties. Second, the wealth gaps in Manila, as between the barrios and the gated communities at Forbes Park, were far wider and more obvious than the ones existing in Hong Kong. And third, the most pressing economic affairs in the world, like the reduction in poverty and inequality, seemed to be conducted in a very detached and haphazard way.

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During my posting at the Social Welfare Department, I found David Baron not only a most delightful superior to work for in the office but also an excellent mentor in every other way. During the one-on-one lunches he invited me to, he often alerted me to the pitfalls and proper procedures in getting things done within the bureaucracy. Out of office hours, he also schooled me in the social responsibilities of a public servant. In doing so, he became a firm friend.

He and his wife, Julia, a charming and most elegant lady widely known within government circles for her artistic skills, laid on a superb dinner table. Julia came from an artistic family and had developed an early interest in Renaissance and Byzantine art. After her arrival in Hong Kong, however, her paintings took on a more subtle oriental flavour. She held many exhibitions and received a number of local commissions.

It was a delight for Man-Ying and I to join their table on a fairly regular basis. The Barons soon took a liking to Man-Ying for she was a graceful and decorative presence. Their other guests would normally be members of the diplomatic corps, other top public servants and society notables, especially those heading organisations actively involved in voluntary social work.

There was a particularly memorable evening when the General Commanding British forces in Hong Kong and his wife were present. After dinner, the guests got into a lively and light-headed discussion on whether --

assuming the People's Liberation Army stayed clear of all involvement -- it was possible to mount a successful military coup in the colony. Speculations and fanciful arguments flew heartily around the room as to which branch of the armed forces had to be won over first and which installations, either military or civil, ought to be secured as a priority. And what would the Chinese population make of such an event? An all-British farce played out on a grand scale? And what would British forces have to be offered to go along?

I thoroughly enjoyed those convivial dinners put on by the Barons. So did Man-Ying at first. Later, however, she felt somewhat left out of the ribaldry. Some of the more bohemian references went over her head. She seldom kept up with current affairs or with the latest political and economic twists and turns in the news and that omission presented another handicap. Unfortunately, the arrival of our second son did not provide the marital glue that had been hoped for and our relationship continued its slide.

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Around the middle of 1963, a response to the proposal to convert dry rations to cash payments came back from the Secretariat. It asked for an assessment on whether the convenience of cash payments would encourage more people to seek public assistance.

I thought the question unfair, misdirected and beside the point. It seemed an attempt to evade responsibility for making a decision, shifting the onus to the Social Welfare Department to second guess the future. A whole range of developments over which the Department had not the slightest control could affect the level of need. For instance, if a serious local economic downturn occurred or if the famine in China became more widespread and brought more refugees or if the secret agreement with China governing the number of people allowed to leave with one-way visas were to change, they

would all alter dramatically the need for relief.

The last possibility referred to the agreement by Hong Kong to accept 50 people from China migrating on one-way visas every day. It implied they could legitimately settle in the colony for good. That number was doubled to 100 per day in a later agreement.

At the beginning, that one-way visa scheme was operated largely by the Kwangtung authorities. Priority for such visas was given to cadres and other officials needed by the New China News Agency, the unofficial representational office for the Chinese government, and certain Kwangtung organisations trading with the colony. Before the advent of the “Four Modernisations” in the early 1980s, few other provinces in China bothered about establishing representational offices in Hong Kong.

The Kwangtung authorities were no slouches during the early years. They used the surplus over official needs to grant visas to aging and ailing citizens who had family connections in the colony. It was an effective way of ridding the province of sick or unproductive people they had no facilities to look after properly. If their relatives in Hong Kong happened to be hard pressed as well, then seeking foreign welfare relief was a fallback. Should the Kwangtung authorities increase the number of aged and disabled permitted to leave on one-way visas, that would impact not only the Relief Section but also other parts of the Social Welfare Department and government generally.

But for me, a more cogent argument for change was the existing inadequacies of the dry rations system rather than the fear of distant possibilities. Governments were supposed to exist to improve the lives of their citizens. If life could be made better for a small number without extra cost, then that should be sufficient justification for change. Future problems would have to be dealt with by future officials. It was as simple as that.

In adopting that position, I had very much in mind a story told to me by Tutor Tam when I was his student. It concerned Su Tung-Po, the celebrated

Sung Dynasty poet, painter, calligrapher, statesman, engineer and *bon vivant*.

When Su was a magistrate in Hangchow, a maker of paper fans was brought before him for failing to pay his debts. Su asked the man why he had fallen into such a predicament. The man replied that his father had died and he had inherited the business. He had incurred some debts in burying his father but in the period that followed the funeral there was a prolonged cold spell, followed by a period of drizzly rain. Nobody had a need for fans and as a result he had no business and no income to meet his debts. Su asked the man to go home and bring him the fans.

At the time, Su was already famous as a poet and a calligrapher. He could versify at the drop of a hat and was already recognised as one of the greatest calligraphers in Chinese history. Plenty of admirers were collecting his verses and calligraphy.

When the man brought his fans, Su picked up his brush and wrote a few words or a couplet on each fan. When word got around that fans with Su's writing on them were available, there was a great rush for them. They were soon sold out. The man cleared his debts and the need for litigation disappeared. It was because of such acts of understanding and kindness that Su is still much loved by the people of Hangchow today.

In later years, after I had learnt a bit more about Su's life and the positions he had adopted in respect of taxation, conscription and famine relief, I had always fantasised a little that I might one day help the poor and the common man in the same way that Su had done. As acting head of the Relief Section, an opportunity had arisen. That was why I had made the proposal to give relief in cash instead.

I explained my way of thinking to David Baron and David Alexander. But before we could reach a consensus on how to respond to the Secretariat, I received a notification that I was to be transferred promptly from the Social Welfare Department to the General Branch of the Colonial Secretariat.