

## CHAPTER 2

# Fresh Beginnings

WHEN I RETURNED TO Hong Kong from Oxford at the end of spring in 1971, I found myself promoted to Staff Grade C in the Administrative Service. I was at the same time appointed to a post in the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs with the title of “City District Commissioner for Hong Kong.”

What was foremost in my mind, however, was not official advancement but the grasping of the long-avoided nettle of my failed marriage. It was necessary not only to end one of my vulnerabilities but also to arrange for some civilised break from Man-Ying and to secure the care and well-being of our children. Yet such moves were fraught with financial and custodial implications I could not completely get my head around.

On the financial side, I had already gained a tenuous independence back in 1968, after I had become eligible for subsidised government quarters. But, following the *Singapore Herald* débâcle, I had no savings to speak of. My only income was my civil service salary. The prospect of supporting two households after separation was daunting.

However, right after my return from Oxford, my mother-in-law forced my hand by deciding to leave for America to rejoin her husband. The loss of her calming presence around the home left me with no other choice.

But before I could act after my mother-in-law's departure, another unexpected development occurred. The “one-foot-kick” who had come over

with the family from Wise Mansion gave notice she was quitting. Her excuse was that the size of the Palm Court apartment was too large for her to manage on her own. There was a semblance of truth in the assertion because my mother-in-law used regularly to lend a hand with housework.

Man-Ying had no such inclinations. I was unwilling, however, to disclose that the size of the family was about to shrink in order to retain her services. So it came down to finding a suitable replacement.

A friend recommended a Cantonese peasant woman from Vietnam by the name of Ah Duen. She was around 50 and was short, sturdy and barely literate. She had come to the colony as a refugee because she had relatives in the New Territories. She had been helping them on their farm and had never worked as a domestic before. But she was willing to learn. I liked her honest looks and hired her on the spot.

She turned out to be a real brick, though her culinary skills were too far removed from *ordon bleu* standards to rate a mention. Nonetheless, she could concoct a kind of Vietnamese spring roll that the boys greatly favoured. She was also good at keeping an eye on them whenever I had to be away. She stayed with the family for 10 years, till I left government service.

Once Ah Duen had proved herself reliable and capable of helping to look after the children, I initiated a conversation with Man-Ying. I asked whether we could disengage with a minimum of fuss; I found her as every bit as keen as myself in bringing an end to our nominal marriage.

British laws on divorce were by no means as flexible as Ching dynastic laws. The grounds were limited to five. We eventually decided to live apart for a number of years, to demonstrate to a court that our marriage had irretrievably broken down.

Custody of the children was another issue. I thought my wife might want to have the eldest boy, for he had always been her favourite. Having been separated from my brother, Tzi-Choy, during my childhood, I had wanted to keep the children together. It turned out my wife did not want any of them;

so I got all three. It was better than splitting them up, though I was not sure how I could possibly bring them all up.

Since Man-Ying was aware of the loss of my savings because of the *Singapore Herald* misadventure, she generously offered to move out and forego maintenance. She suggested instead that I should rebuild the educational fund for the children. The divorce settlement provided her access to the children four times a week, if she so desired. I was so grateful for her generous approach that I reciprocated by giving her free visiting rights to the children at any time, so long as she left before I returned from work. She could also have them for at least one day each weekend, or even for the entire weekend.

In that way, 11 years of a hapless marriage came to an end. It was then that I discovered how difficult it was to explain to children in terms they could apprehend why their parents' marriage had failed and why their mother had to leave them. I could do no better than to leave most of the explaining to Man-Ying. My only hope was that she would do it in such a way as to minimise their trauma.

As for explaining to friends and colleagues, I resorted to a quite ungalant ploy. Around that time, I was about to go into partnership with Fung Hon-Chu to acquire a Jockey Club subscription horse. So I told everybody that as a civil servant I could not afford to support both a wife and a horse. Therefore, one or the other had to go!

\* \* \*

The Secretariat for Chinese Affairs had long been regarded in government circles as the main conduit for communication between the administration and the urban Chinese population. My arrival in that secretariat coincided with some major changes in its leadership, structure and responsibilities. Not all the changes, however, struck me as well conceived.

One of the more commendable changes was the introduction of a City

District Officer scheme to make the government more accessible to — and more in touch with — the urban citizenry. The scheme was based on an arrangement which had long been in existence in the more rural New Territories.

After the Peking Convention of 1898, when a lease of that territory was made to Britain for 99 years, a District Officer scheme based on what had been tried in other parts of the British Empire was introduced. District Officers were supposed to be a manifestation of government at the grassroots level, providing authoritative father figures for settling minor disputes, extending pastoral care and drawing the attention of the central authorities to local deficiencies. That concept meshed well with the traditional Chinese view that officials should act as “parents” to citizens.

As Hong Kong’s urbanisation increased, it became apparent that there was no effective means of tapping in a similar way into the aspirations and needs of urban and immigrant population. It had occurred to David Trench when he was Deputy Colonial Secretary in the mid-1950s that a means had to be found. Therefore, when he returned as Governor in 1964, it was no surprise that he would try to give reality to an urban scheme similar to the one in the New Territories.

But he came up against a long-serving Secretary for Chinese Affairs who staunchly believed that the best way to improve communications would be through expanding his existing channels. It was a more indirect approach, of gathering comments and feedback through contacts with the office bearers of the 400 or so traditional Chinese organisations like clansmen groups, kaifong associations, temple trustees and so forth. Needless to say, opinions from those sources had to be biased towards those with vested interests and not necessarily those reflecting the worries of the common man.

For more than a century, the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs had operated as a quasi-independent entity, physically removed from what some had regarded as “the ivory tower” of the Colonial Secretariat. Such an arrangement gave the

Secretary for Chinese Affairs a powerful voice within the bureaucracy, for he alone could claim to speak for all Chinese. It inevitably spawned jealousies, rivalries, back-biting and personality clashes between the staff of the two bureaucracies.

The concept of having a body of officials devoted to garnering urban Chinese opinion at the street level was not flawed in theory. It failed in practice, however, because there was a dearth of Chinese officers with the right talent and of the right seniority, coupled with a shortage of British officials with the linguistic, cultural and personality traits to engage with ordinary citizens. Racial and cultural differences also separated the rulers from the ruled, the occupiers from the occupied. Many political sensitivities were side-stepped or overlooked as a result.

Yet, given the irredentist sentiments bubbling across China following the end of World War II, it was unrealistic to expect that similar feelings stirring in Hong Kong could be smothered merely through economic progress alone, through its so-called “trickle-down” effects.

As I have already explained in Volume 2 of this family memoir, the contacts cultivated by the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs tended to be focused on English-speaking Chinese from traditional organisations and the more affluent classes, that is, mainly from the commercial and professional sectors. They generally stayed aloof from politics, for the status quo was quite congenial to them. They were the main beneficiaries of political stability and the prevailing free-wheeling commercial ethos.

The common man was largely left out of account. For him, the everyday image of a governmental presence took either the form of a predatory policeman or a bossy hawker control inspector. The need for change became increasingly urgent as corruption became more prevalent and as the gap between the rich and the poor widened. A better way of taking the public pulse was needed.

But the sitting Secretary for Chinese Affairs could not be persuaded. Sir

David Trench, in his characteristically laid-back and non-confrontational way, allowed his idea to be placed in cold storage, at least until after the Secretary in question had retired in 1966.

By then, however, the Star Ferry riots of 1966 came along and the Cultural Revolution erupted in China. Instead of the administration gaining credit for the City District Officer scheme as a forward-thinking move, many members of the public saw it as a belated and panicky reaction to those unfortunate events.

The scheme itself involved the creation of two City District Commissioners, one for Hong Kong Island and one for Kowloon, with each overseeing a number of City District Officers to be drawn mainly from the Administrative Officer corps. I was made the Commissioner for Hong Kong.

City District Offices were deliberately located in the midst of commercial and shopping areas, with frontages similar to adjacent commercial enterprises. Their decor was customer friendly. Each was equipped with a public enquiry counter at which anyone could ask for help, information or explanations of government policies. Complaints about failures in government responsibilities were also entertained. Each office was staffed with a complement of liaison personnel who went out to observe situations on the ground and to report back. Every approach by the public had to be logged and pursued to the best of each City District Officer's ability, before referring the more complicated problems to higher authority.

As Commissioner, I had responsibility for four City District Offices. My own office, however, was physically separated from theirs. I had my own small staff at Hysan Avenue, a three-minute walk from the former Leighton Road home of my Eighth Granduncle. By then, No. 33 and the other buildings along that road had all been demolished and rebuilt. My granduncle and his family had moved into new flats at Tai Hang.

While the City District Office scheme was being installed, other changes also took place. It was decided that the former Secretariat for Chinese Affairs

should be dismantled, with the Secretary being moved into the Central Secretariat, as just another policy Secretary. The word “Chinese” in the title would also be replaced by the word “Home”.

That change was presumably to remove from the title the condescending imputations of dealing with “natives” or “the indigenous” or “lesser breeds without the law”. The Secretary would also lose his former independence and be stripped of line functions. The liaison and other work, together with the new responsibilities under the City District Officer scheme, would instead be assumed by a new Director for Home Affairs.

\* \* \*

My new posting filled me with misgivings. I was conscious of a rising sentiment of rebellion, particularly among the young, as they groped for some national ballast or cultural identity. There was also a re-awakening of the spirit of the May 4th Movement among local intellectuals, coloured to some extent by an undertone of racial resentment. Everybody seemed to be reaching for some form of emotional or national attachment which the colonial administration had singularly failed to foster.

Any Chinese reading *China's Destiny*, written by the country's wartime President, Chiang Kai-Shek, and first published in 1943, could hardly fail to feel aggrieved by his summary of bullying and humiliations inflicted upon the nation by foreign powers for a hundred years. Britain had been one of the chief aggressors. Deep personal and national resentments had therefore accumulated in many sections of the local population. With the defeat of Japan after World War II, there had to be an almost palpable urge to restore some dignity to the nation. The colonial remnant that was Hong Kong therefore appeared to be a place ripe for confrontation, unless the situation could somehow be defused.

The big picture was clear. Right across the Chinese political spectrum

there was unease that Hong Kong was becoming only a side show in wider international politics. The Sino-British treaty signed in January of 1943 had provided for the relinquishing of extraterritorial and concession rights in China but a final settlement over Hong Kong was deferred till after the end of World War II. But that settlement did not take place due to post-war power politics and the start of China's own civil war.

It gradually came to be expected, however, that when the lease of the New Territories terminated in 1997, the place and its millions of inhabitants would be handed back to whoever might be in charge of China at that time. In the public psyche, the days of British rule appeared numbered. Those who thrived particularly on colonialism knew it too.

What policy ought Britain to pursue to prepare the more general population for that eventuality? Should it retain the tried and tested imperial policy of divide and rule or should it follow the spirit of the United Nations decision that all nations ruling over non-self-governing territories should rule as trustees for the benefit of the local inhabitants?

Both London and the local officialdom appeared keen to dodge such tricky and awkward questions. Indeed, an influential segment of the China-watchers in Whitehall smugly thought that Chinese leaders could be manipulated into extending British management over Hong Kong for another 50 years, in exchange for Britain's self-assessed excellence in public administration. Later, the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, upon their recommendation, actually put forward such a flawed proposition. It got unceremoniously shot down by the Chinese leadership.

That *faux pas* illustrated the lack of understanding by many Westerners of how the Chinese nation and its leadership had been evolving. They apparently saw Chinese leaders as just a later version of the semi-ignorant opium-smoking and muddle-headed warlords their ancestors had bested repeatedly in the past. They imagined them as essentially peasant types, with cow-dung between their toes. They overlooked the fact that the latter day

Chinese leaders had been steeled in the crucibles of protracted wars and revolutions. A tougher bunch could hardly be found, enormously committed to restoring national pride and cultural identity.

The appropriate lessons were not drawn from developments in Hong Kong. For example, when the Star Ferry riots broke out in April of 1966, the administration was at a loss to understand why a five-cent increase in First Class ferry fares should have provoked such a violent response. The Commission of Inquiry which followed ascribed one of the main reasons for the riots to the significant gap in communication and understanding between the government and the people. But those findings washed over the consciousness of officialdom like water off a duck's back.

The following year, when the Cultural Revolution spilled over into the colony and the left-wing Federation of Trade Unions called for a general strike, the government was again surprised to find that thousands of its junior staff had joined left-wing unions and had answered the strike call.

I doubted if the government had any reliable figure on the number of other staff who had joined unions under the right-wing and equally irredentist Trade Union Council. That Council, for political reasons, had not joined the Federation's call for strike action. If its paymasters in Taiwan had called for a strike, it must remain a matter of speculation how many other government servants would have acted against their British employer.

An observer might well wonder why there should be so much disaffection. The history of a succession of British acts would suggest the answer. First of all, a declaration had been made way back that any British-born subject of the Chinese race would not be entitled to British consular protection whenever he or she happened to be under Chinese legal jurisdiction. That meant that only a sub-standard British citizenship could be conferred upon someone of the Chinese race.

Secondly, it had also been made plain by the passage of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act that a British subject of the Chinese race

would not automatically enjoy the right of other classes of British subjects to take up residence in Britain. Implicit in that Act was also the message that should anything untoward befall Hong Kong, no Chinese should expect to find the doors of hospitality open to him or her in the metropolitan country.

Thirdly, regulations covering recruitment into the civil service made obvious that any local candidate fortunate enough to be offered a post should not expect the terms and treatment extended to expatriates. The reasons were not spelt out, perhaps because they were truths already considered self-evident.

Add to those realities the random and recurring everyday slights and insults and it should be easy to understand why locals should feel little attachment to a British administration.

The educational system was geared to a Eurocentric narrative rather than the promotion of native history or culture. When I was a school teacher in the mid-1950s, instructing classes in European history along the lines set by the school syllabus, I could see that whenever I detailed the battles of the Napoleonic era — Ulm, Austerlitz, Eylau, Borodino, Leipzig *et al* — the minds of my students would shut down like shops on the eve of foreclosure. What was the point? Had there not been Far Eastern squabbles enough to draw from? They would be more digestible and of greater relevance to the Hong Kong young.

Geography was probably no different. Why keep going on about the voyages of Magellan or Cook when similar voyages had already been carried out by the eunuch Cheng Ho and his admirals in the early part of the Ming Dynasty? Those had been completed a hundred years or more before any European appeared on the scene. Did they not count?

The Eurocentric bias was even more pronounced in the fields of science and technology. Never mind going back to Chinese sources. Any European with a passing acquaintance with the scholarship of Joseph Needham and

his monumental work, *Science and Civilisation in China*, must have got an inkling of the extent of China's contributions to the modern world. The First Law of Motion was discovered there some 2,000 years before Newton, for instance, and moveable type in printing had been in use 400 years before Gutenberg. Yet little attention was being paid to numerous such achievements and inventions in the classrooms of Hong Kong.

Another key point which was left unexamined and unappreciated was the firm linkage in Chinese culture between science and ethics. In the West there had been a steady separation of the two from the 17th century onwards. That separation opened a path for those without moral restraints to turn their hands at robber-baron capitalism and creating such horrors as nuclear bombs and weapons of mass destruction.

Today it remains highly doubtful whether political leaders would ever find the wisdom to re-evaluate a failing neoliberal economic order well on its way out. It was already devastating much of the world through exploitative economics, creating unacceptable inequalities in most societies, and blighting the lives of millions for the sake of profits for the few.

Conspiracy theorists could no doubt construct plausible explanations pointing to the well-established policy of divide and rule, of disdain for local cultures so often practised by the proponents of empire. The aim would be to produce rootless, pliant, partially de-culturised and semi-educated servitors for the needs of empire. The way to achieve this would be through an education system which would dampen nationalistic feelings and induce cultural amnesia.

I do not believe in such theories because I cannot conceive of any British administration in Hong Kong having the corporate intelligence and foresight to implement such a fanciful scheme. If such an outcome was achieved, it would more likely be due to the thoughtlessness, indolence, incompetence, ignorance and misplaced good intentions of those placed successively in charge of education since the colony was acquired.

It would not be difficult to parody a conversation, say, between a couple of Victorian dodderers in 19th century Hong Kong. Imagine them sitting in one of their exclusive clubs at sundown, sapped by tropical heat and rubicund with drink, sipping their second or third pink gin.

“We’ve got a thankless task here, old chap, trying to educate this lot,” the first, a man of squire-like proportions wearing mutton chop whiskers would muse out loud. “They simply can’t do what they’ve been told, you know. Been trying to teach them rugby all afternoon. No matter how many times you tell them to pass the ball backwards in heading for the opponents’ goal posts, they keep tossing it forward. No respect for rules.”

His drinking companion was a man more lean and less hirsute. He looked like one of those Pickwickian characters who kept turning up like a bad penny. He would mumble: “One-track minds, in all probability. Heathens are all alike.”

“They just don’t get the point of the game. They can’t see that the greatest battles in life had to be won on the playing fields.”

“Hmmm.” The lean man would puff out his cheeks for a moment, as if he were cogitating a deep philosophical matter. “Yes, that’s a tough one to get across,” he conceded after a pause. “How in heaven’s name did we ever learn, never to wonder why but just to do and die?”

“Why, at our splendid boarding schools, naturally,” the squire-like man said, gazing soberly down his aquiline nose. “It was beaten into us, wasn’t it? Toughening our moral fibre was what they called it.”

“By Jove, yes! All that fagging, cold showers, kneeling in a draughty chapel, endlessly reciting the Recessional and getting six of the best when our masters wanted some light entertainment.”

“Precisely,” the bewhiskered man of ample girth agreed. “Inflict the punishments first and then leave the blighters to figure out why afterwards. We all had to be guilty of *something*. That teaches us to think, you see, forces us to nut things out, though that might take some years or decades to achieve.

Education nowadays is quite different. It's all about indoctrinating the young on how to make a living.”

The lean man furrowed his brow for a moment. “Yes, I can see it all now,” he declared, with sudden enthusiasm. “The rest of the world do not quite understand our methods. That's why we've acquired an empire upon which the sun never sets.”

“Come to think of it, our rules can be a bit confusing. If you send a team out to get a ball from Point A to Point B, the ordinary yokel would try to do the job by passing the ball forward towards Point B, rather than backwards in the direction of Point A. It takes a lot of horse-sense to work that one out.”

“Is it wise to even attempt to explain the rules to the locals? Why not just leave them confused? Otherwise, they might start to get restive.”

“Well, perhaps you're right. Confusion does make our jobs easier. I'll drink to that.”

With that the two well-intentioned gentlemen emptied their glasses and ordered another round.

\* \* \*

That was probably how the educational approach was arrived at. Somewhere along the way, however, the notion of education being indoctrination got reversed into indoctrination being education, which was not at all true. But that muddle nonetheless became the ruling ethos. That would probably account for the long and inglorious record of education in Hong Kong.

For those interested in the details of the fiascos and cock-ups, such as the public burning of the Green Paper on Higher Education by excitable Baptist College students in 1977, the threatened march on Government House by girl students and teachers of the Precious Blood Golden Jubilee School in 1978 and other scandals, they could do no better than to read *Times of Change: A Memoir of Hong Kong's Governance*, written by my late friend and

Administrative Service colleague, Eric Peter Ho, published in 2005.

Ho's book is illuminating in another respect. It records instances where Sir Murray's preemptory style of governance often exacerbated problems. Though soft and deliberate in speech, the Governor was inclined to behave like a gunslinger in the Wild West when arriving at decisions — shoot first and ask questions afterwards.

\* \* \*

Given my own reading of the portents — particularly after a period of quiet reflection at Oxford, away from the wishful-thinking and rapaciousness of the ruling elites — I had serious reservations as to whether I was the right person for conveying to the upper government echelons the unpalatable truths about “the great unwashed”. It would be like trying to indicate to someone not very bright that he was suffering from halitosis or an unpleasant body odour. If the words were too subtle, the message would not be received. If they were too straightforward, the messenger might be regarded as disloyal, biased, mischievous, subversive or simply mad. It was an invidious task. I warned myself to tread cautiously.

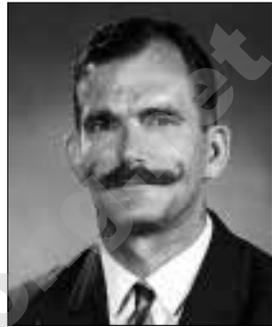
\* \* \*

When I arrived at the new Department in May of 1971, the re-allocation of responsibilities was still in a state of flux and a Director had yet to be appointed. The Secretary therefore remained in command. At the same time, a change in the Secretaryship took place. The new incumbent was an Administrative Officer by the name of Donald Luddington.

My first encounter with Luddington was a trifle unsettling. He was tall, hard-jawed and square-chinned, with the martial bearing of one totally committed to Queen and Country. That impression was heightened by an

intimidating moustache known to aficionados as a handlebar or an imperial. Such a growth was far from common in Hong Kong in the 1970s. It conjured up in my mind an image of a drill sergeant berating foot soldiers as the lowest of the low. In such a presence, one could hardly resist the impulse to snap to attention and salute.

Luddington's appearance belied his agreeable nature, however. He was then 51. He had military credentials all right. He had been an officer in the Royal Armoured Corps, in charge of a unit of three tanks in Burma during the war. He had been mentioned in dispatches. Yet his speech was soft, slow, considered and not the least bit hectoring.



Sir Donald Luddington

I was to find him a thoroughly decent, practical and principled superior, who was easy to like and a pleasure to work for. He had a sense of humour and a common touch to boot. He had a Deputy somewhere, but for reasons not altogether apparent to me, he chose to deal directly with me.

Our relationship was unusual in another respect. Whereas in the past I had always worked to superiors who were readily accessible and could be seen every day — for they would be just in the next room or in an office along the same corridor — I was located in a building far removed not only from Donald Luddington's but also from the headquarters of the Home Affairs Department. Even telephonic communications were trying because we had different schedules for meetings and inspections. Hence most important matters had to be dealt with through written memos.

\* \* \*

Before I could really find my feet in the new job, an illegal student-led demonstration involving about 6,000 people took place at Victoria Park on

the 7th July 1971. When the police tried to break it up, rioting occurred, and it spilled over into the shopping areas of Causeway Bay. Injuries were sustained and arrests were made at the park. Subsequently, prison sentences were handed down.

Tellingly, hardly a single Western media correspondent stationed in Hong Kong ever let out more than a peep about the democratic right of peaceful demonstration or of freedom of speech following the forceful dispersal of demonstrators at Victoria Park. According to President Franklin Roosevelt, the latter freedom was one of the Four Freedoms that the world had given up the lives of its citizens for during World War II.

As a consequence of the demonstration and the rioting that followed, both Donald Luddington and I were summoned to Government House by the Governor, Sir David Trench, on July 16th. I was quickly pitched into the deep end, with orders to initiate a dialogue with student organisations to calm things down.

The demonstration had arisen out of a dispute concerning five uninhabited islands and three rocky outcrops off Taiwan known collectively as the Diaoyu Tai islands. World attention had been drawn to the problem early in 1970, when America announced an intention to hand over control of those islands to Japan. Chinese students around the world mounted demonstrations opposing the move. In America alone, Chinese students groups formed in some 130 universities and colleges. Those in Hong Kong naturally followed suit.

I soon discovered that a number of the student organisations involved operated under the banner of the Hong Kong Federation of Students. Since the Federation, formed in 1968, was unregistered under the Societies Ordinance, it constituted an illegal outfit. I pointed out that there might be legal and public relations implications if a civil servant were to be seen holding discussions with its leaders. I was nonetheless authorised to do so at another meeting at Government House on August 13th.



The Diaoyu Tai demonstration at Victoria Park on 7 July 1971. Pictures on this and following pages courtesy of *South China Morning Post*







\* \* \*

I had been pretty sketchy on the background to the dispute when I was first given the assignment. I began to trace its origins. It went back to the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894. China had lost that war and had been forced to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki of 1895, ceding to Japan the island of Taiwan and its “subsidiary islands” as well as the Penghu group of islands.

From the Chinese perspective, historical records indicated that the Taiwan provincial authorities had for long exercised a theoretical oversight over the Diaoyu Tai islands. That had been recorded in Ming Dynasty guidebooks since 1403 and official documents of the Ching Dynasty had listed them as of strategic maritime importance since 1722. A record also existed of a Chinese landing on them in 1808, a full 76 years before the Japanese claimed to have discovered them. So in the Chinese mind, when they ceded Taiwan, they also ceded those “subsidiary islands”.

To the Japanese, those islets were known as Senkaku Islands and they claimed they formed part of Okinawa. Both the Chinese and Japanese names for them referred to fishing, which had been the main activity around their waters for centuries.

Japan had desired those islands at least as far back as 1885, long before it formally went to war with China. It had planned an invasion to grab them but did not carry out the plan. In the midst of the First Sino-Japanese War, however, it did land troops on one of the islands in January of 1895 and erected a sovereignty marker there, before the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed in April. After the treaty, it formally annexed those islands to Japan, which would appear unnecessary if the islands had been part of Okinawa all along.

After the annexation, a Japanese businessman bought four of the islands from the government and set up a tuna processing plant in 1900 because

of the islands' rich fishing harvests. At the height of the venture, about 200 people had been employed. But the project proved uneconomical and it was wound up in 1940. The islands, now once again uninhabited, were then sold to the Kurihara family.

After World War II, Japan surrendered unconditionally. One of the terms imposed by the Allies was that all territories seized by Japan through its many wars of aggression had to be returned to their original owners. It should be noted that no Chinese representatives took part in the drafting of the peace treaty with Japan because the civil war then raging in China claimed the attention of both the warring factions.

Chinese of all political persuasions had assumed that when the country took back Manchuria and Taiwan, the subsidiary islands of Diaoyu Tai would be included in the reversion. But exercising control over those tiny islets hardly featured in the long list of priorities for those engaged in the civil war. There were no people or facilities there. Both sides were too busy pursuing their own battles for turf and power on the mainland.

Another of the terms imposed on Japan was that the United States could administer Okinawa for so long as it deemed necessary. The Americans accordingly built a number of military bases there. As occupiers, they followed that old imperialist practice of expelling inhabitants from any land they wanted and demanding extraterritorial rights. The latter is still a hot prevailing policy in Okinawa as well as in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, America imported some 7,000 Filipinas as sex workers to provide "recreation" for its servicemen stationed there. Displaced Okinawa families were encouraged to migrate to Latin America.

As part of that occupation, the Americans took over control of the Diaoyu Islands and used one of them as a firing and bombing range. It was uncertain whether they sought anyone's permission. Neither China nor Taiwan made an issue of it at the time. That island is today probably very badly contaminated, because of depleted uranium contained in the ammunition

and bombs exploded there. But no one will know for sure until the site has been examined.

While the Chinese civil war settled into a messy stalemate, with the Communists in control of the mainland and the Nationalists holed up in Taiwan, under the protection of the United States Seventh Fleet, neither of the two Chinese regimes felt it opportune to pick an argument with America over the Diaoyu Islands.

Neither were either able to resolve militarily its own tussles over two sparsely populated archipelagoes called Matsu and Kinmen lying just a few miles off the Fukien coast. The uninhabited rocks of Diaoyu Tai, lying much farther away, were simply left as an issue for some other day.

In their contest over the Matsu and Kinmen islands, the opposing sides resorted to a fine and ancient Chinese military tradition. The two commands talked to each other through clandestine back channels. They both belonged to a sensible and practical race; no point shedding blood if some alternative *modus vivendi* could be arrived at, regardless of what their respective superiors might decide.

Thus a proposition along the lines of: "Why not shell me only on certain specified days of the week while I will shell you in return on other specified days? We could both preserve face, get on with our lives and not harm our people."

And so it was agreed. Today, there is no more shelling at either Matsu or Kinmen. Instead, tourist and trading boats ply happily between the two archipelagoes and to and from both the mainland of China and Taiwan.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, in Okinawa, the people grew restive under American occupation. They liked neither the nuclear weapons being stored on their island nor the heavy foreign military presence. The latter spawned bars, night clubs and

cultural corruption, giving rise to increasing numbers of women being molested by Americans whom — because of extraterritorial protection — they could not be brought to book before local courts. That provided the bedrock of the island's continuing opposition to having American bases on its territory till the present day.

The island's standard of living was also slipping progressively lower, compared with the rising prosperity in the rest of Japan. A demand for independence gathered momentum and it came as a surprise to the United States that the people should elect in 1968 a leftist named Chobyō Yara as their Chief Executive, notwithstanding that Okinawa was still under American tutelage.

In Japan, misgivings increased as well. Many felt that Okinawa had become like an abandoned or orphaned child. Though Japan provided subsidies for the island, there was a large body of sentiment that the Okinawa people were drifting away from them. They wanted reunification and an end to American occupation.

In America, the political mood was changing too. The strategic and military importance of Okinawa had declined over the years. President Nixon wanted to get out of Vietnam and repair relations with China. Talks got underway for the reversion of Okinawa to Japan, with the Japanese agreeing to pick up the cost of US\$320 million involved. It was eventually announced by America towards the end of 1970 that Okinawa would be returned to Japanese administration in May of 1972. The intention was that Diaoyu Tai would also be handed over as part of the package.

It was then that China came out to denounce the move as “illegal”. Taiwan also lodged its claims of ownership. Those moves provided the spark for Chinese students to mount protests in defence of their nation's territorial integrity.

The demonstrations began first in China and among Chinese students studying in Western universities. It was an issue around which ordinary Chinese in Hong Kong of all shades of political opinion could unite. The first local demonstration in 1970 was small, consisting of only about 40 participants. By April of 1971, however, the number had swelled to several hundred.

It was perhaps fortuitous that the Diaoyu Tai issue should have erupted at roughly the start of the last generation to be born under the Union Jack in Hong Kong. They were growing increasingly restive about their future and their anomalous identity. Thus, when a “Defend the Diaoyu Tai Action Committee” was formed, many participated.

The Committee called for a demonstration on May 4th — a significant date in modern Chinese history — and it took place outside the American Consulate General. Notwithstanding its generally peaceful nature, the police made 12 arrests.

Those arrests somehow touched a patriotic nerve among the usually apolitical Hong Kong populace. Sympathy for the demonstrators mounted steadily. A boycott of Japanese goods soon started. Student leaders decided to hold a larger but peaceful demonstration on July 7th — another politically significant date — in Victoria Park, a public park in Causeway Bay. They had been keen to do so legally. Therefore they took pains to apply to the Commissioner of Police for permission.

The police, however, disliked the idea of anyone holding any demonstration at all. Keeping order at such events was too much like hard work. But they could not think of a plausible reason for refusing, at least not one which could bear much public scrutiny. So they resorted to the usual bureaucratic game of passing the buck, hoping that somebody else would carry the can. They told the students their application could not be considered because Victoria Park was under the jurisdiction of the Urban Council. For the application to be considered, they said, there must first be approval from the Urban Council

for the use of the park. In short, they attempted a Pontius Pilate.

The bureaucrats at the Urban Services Department were flummoxed. They had never been called upon to decide a thing of this sort before. So when the students applied for permission as advised by the police, the Urban Services hierarchy did not fancy putting the matter before an unpredictable Urban Council. The redoubtable Mrs. Elise Elliott was there. They did realise, however, they were holding the short end of the stick. Being seasoned civil servants, they knew that some problems could resolve themselves if they could be held in abeyance for long enough. The students had asked for July 7th, why not first offer them alternatives to Victoria Park?

To that end, football stadia and other out-of-the-way sites were suggested to the students. They would be more comfortable at such sites, they suggested, some had seating capacity for many thousands. Shelter would also be available should the rains come. No need for disturbing other users of Victoria Park.

The student leaders rejected the alternatives. They wanted to be seen by the population at large. They wanted to arouse the public and to persuade them to join the protest.

What a pity, the Urban Services bureaucrats must have thought. The young had such inflexible ideas. But at least time had marched on and it was now July 6th. Surely, no reasonable person could expect the Urban Council to be convened for an emergency night session at the eleventh hour to consider such an issue?

The students were not amused. Their leaders felt they had been given the run-around, to frustrate their right to demonstrate peacefully. They decided to press ahead with the demonstration the following day, regardless of whether it was legal or not. In fact, the Urban Council had approved the use of Victoria Park that evening but the decision never got conveyed in time to the students. Notwithstanding that, over 6,000 participants turned up for what was still technically an illegal gathering.

The problem was now back on the lap of the Commissioner of Police.

The rule of law was at stake. The police had a clear duty to enforce the law. Agitators could not be allowed to hold illegal rallies whenever they chose. The crowds were ordered to disperse immediately.

When the orders were not obeyed, the riot squads moved in with batons swinging. The crowds scattered in confusion and terror. Those not fleet enough of foot were beaten, with six of them injured. Missiles were thrown at the police in return and rioting spilled out of the park into the shopping areas of Causeway Bay. Injuries to the person were sustained and cars and private properties were damaged. A total of 25 demonstrators were arrested.

It was following those unhappy circumstances that I was directed to open a dialogue with students and to try and defuse the situation. From the British point of view, it seemed pointless for students to be demonstrating on a political matter over which Britain had no control.

My brief was to find out what youth leaders were up to and to persuade them to desist from further unlawful activities. I had no authority to negotiate with them or to offer concessions. I was merely to calm their agitation, to report on their attitudes and to persuade them to remain good boys and girls.

\* \* \*

In spite of the passage of more than 40 years, I can recount to a fair extent my involvement from 1971 onwards with some degree of precision. The reason was because I had fortuitously found among my old papers a copy of a nine-page confidential report I had sent to the Secretary for Home Affairs dated 8th October 1971. The reference number on the report indicated that it was the 51st report I had made on the subject up till that point.

I cannot explain why I had kept a copy of this particular report, except that it represented an interim summary in which I had made certain proposals for future action. All the reports I had made should be available in the files of the

Secretary for Home Affairs, unless those files had been removed to London or destroyed prior to the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

\* \* \*

Getting a dialogue started with youth leaders proved quite difficult. Emotions were still raw after the injuries and arrests on July 7th. That created a certain *fin de siècle* air, as if the cusp of a tipping point had been reached. The resentments against the British were counterbalanced by the fears that the Cultural Revolution had unleashed. Complicating the political atmosphere were the anomalous emotional attachments of many members of Kuomintang affiliated organisations who had been chased out of China by the Communists. Nonetheless, though still smarting over their dispossession, they tended to be even more xenophobic than the Communists.

Previously, the end of the New Territories lease in 1997 had been taken as a likely curtain fall for British sovereignty. But more recent developments, like ping-pong diplomacy and a thaw in relationships between China and America, raised the possibility of that a finale might come much sooner. An unsettling ambivalence therefore rippled through the young. The British at least represented the devil they knew, whereas the Communists, consistently demonised in the Western mass media, stood as a more terrifying one that they did not know. Their colonial education had left them as unsatisfactory hybrids drifting between conflicting cultures and competing value systems.

Given such a mood, no youth leader wanted to be seen having a *tête-à-tête* with a government official *qua* government official. The various organisations they belonged to also had differences in agenda and political inclinations. It was only after much persuasion that I managed to convince a few of them to start talking to me on a strictly person-to-person basis. Once the ice had been broken, however, others were also prepared to come for tea.

The office bearers and leaders whom I met could be classified under three

broad categories — those in university or post secondary college unions or in umbrella organisations like the Hong Kong Federation of Students; a small collection of precocious and overly idealistic secondary students; and committed activists in fringe organisations like the 70's Bi-Weekly and the Chong Kin Experimental College.

I talked to at least 50 student leaders during the course of the exercise, meeting a number of the more influential ones several times. Once a degree of personal rapport had been established, they generally spoke frankly, thoughtfully and often passionately.

It became evident very quickly that vast gulfs of misunderstanding existed between them and the colonial government. They entertained woefully mistaken notions of how the bureaucracy functioned and ascribed to it a fanciful degree of cunning and deviousness which bureaucrats wished they actually had. The students failed to appreciate that some official actions might merely be the result of individual ineptitudes or ham-fistedness; or based on a reading of reality every bit as flawed as their own.

They sought reassuring political certainties where none could be delivered. They predicated their actions on views about the future no more valid than those advanced by Nostradamus or one of the local *fung shui* masters. I had to keep reminding them that for more than a century Hong Kong had thrived on adapting to changes as they came. Very many more of those same challenges lay ahead. It was up to each generation to shape its own future.

Understandably, the youngsters were in a hurry. Because they had drawn mistaken inferences from actual happenings, they believed they could somehow really change the nature of their society. For instance, they interpreted the government's establishment of a Chinese Language Committee to study the demand for Chinese to be made a second official language as a direct result of their confrontational approach on the issue. They saw the illegal demonstration at Victoria Park as a continuation of that successful strategy.

Their thinking was often coloured by a romantic delusion that any gaol

sentence served for their activism would automatically turn them into patriotic martyrs. It proved difficult to disabuse them. Their education had clearly failed to acquaint them to the real implications of the Stalinist show trials or, closer to home, the various rectification campaigns in China against erstwhile comrades who had not been nimble enough to shift with every change in political orthodoxy.

\* \* \*

Of the three groups I had identified, my judgement was that the students in university or college unions were the least dangerous. Many had middle-class backgrounds and had absorbed — to some extent at least — the bourgeois values of making good, getting rich, not rocking the boat and becoming reputable citizens. Their participation in demonstrations was probably little more than a gesture to the idealism of their youth, a rite of passage, before settling down to a more humdrum money-grubbing life in commerce or one of the professions. They were essentially sheep trying to dress up as wolves for the sake of their own self-esteem.

The secondary students, on the other hand, were more difficult to handle. They appeared to come from less affluent backgrounds and, because they had not yet been humbled by experience, they tended to see the world in the simplistic hues of black and white. That rendered them more dogmatic and vulnerable to manipulation by rabble-rousers.

I could see the flame of rebellion burning more brightly in them than in many of the older students. I tried to water down their perceptions into varying shades of grey, but to no great avail. In order to play down their importance in the demonstrations, I deliberately made a point of not seeing them individually but only in groups of threes or fours.

Their radical frames of mind boded ill for the future. Unless their perceptions could be altered through the educational system or through youth work

or sensible adult engagement, they could become a more confrontational generation of student leaders should they move into universities. It was a foregone conclusion that any advice I gave them to concentrate on their studies instead of joining demonstrations would go down no better than similar advice given by their parents or teachers.

The fringe groups presented the greatest challenges and concerns because they were sincere, active and rapidly gaining adherents. Members of the 70's Bi-Weekly, for instance, were by no means unintelligent people. The group had a hard core of a hundred-odd members, made up of university students, factory workers, clerks, musicians, shop assistants and citizens from other walks of life. But it was clearly an expanding organisation, along with others in the same mould.

Most members of such organisations regarded themselves as "revolutionaries" because they felt Hong Kong society to be so corrupt and unjust as to be beyond reform. They saw the widening wealth gap between the haves and the have-nots. They were prepared to lend comfort and support to anyone challenging the existing social order. They often intervened on the side of the underdogs in all manner of disputes, ranging from a strike by construction workers at the Cross Harbour Tunnel to the protests by squatters being cleared from their hovels at Tung Tau.

Members of such groups were often dedicated and committed. They would conduct discussion groups and long study sessions on specific topics in the evenings and on weekends. They also published magazines highlighting instances of corruption and injustice. They found ready favour among the underclasses because they raised bread-and-butter issues like the lack of affordable housing or the inadequacies in tackling the heroin trade and the increasing addiction it engendered. They believed in the rightness of their various causes and were not afraid to act. Therein lay their appeal to young people. They were prepared to act while the more traditional student union leaders often merely talked about social problems.

The fringe groups were not without their own mistaken notions and blind spots, however. For example, they took the lack of government response to the complaints published in their magazines as official admissions of their validity.

In reality, the top levels of officialdom were not even aware of the existence of most of their publications, for they were all written in Chinese. Until very late in the day, top officials paid little attention to what was written even in the main Chinese newspapers. They took scant notice of criticisms made in English also, such as a book by J. Walker called *Under the Whitewash* criticising various aspects of government policy. Trying to get that reality across to committed youngsters was like trying to chip away at a piece of granite with a toothpick.

One of the leaders of the 70's Bi-Weekly I had invited to tea went by the name of Mok Chiu-Yu. I remembered him particularly because a number of other student leaders kept pointing to his circumstances as a case of British unfairness and injustice.

Mok had studied to become a teacher. In 1969, he intervened in a dispute concerning some students at Chu Hai College who got expelled for criticising the administration of the college. Mok joined in a demonstration to demand an investigation into the grievances of the students. He was arrested and convicted for taking part in an illegal demonstration. Because of his conviction, the Education Department later refused to register him as a teacher.

Student leaders felt an injustice had been done because Mok had effectively been punished twice for the same offence. His hopes of becoming a teacher were dashed for standing by his principles. Recalling how I myself had been sacked from the *Hong Kong Standard* for no apparent reason, I had considerable sympathy for his plight. But there was nothing I could do except to refer his case to higher authorities.

While the government was in general turning a blind eye to the expansion

of fringe groups — because it also had no firm vision of the future — those groups were catching the attention of the left-wing politicians and others. Offers of financial support had reportedly been made. The 70's Bi-Weekly group had plans for the imminent opening of a book shop to sell its pamphlets and publications but there was no indication where its financing came from. None of the leaders of the fringe group admitted to having taken funds from Communist organisations.

\* \* \*

It would be tedious and repetitious if I were to attempt a summary of each of the dozens of conversations I had with different youth leaders, for many of them rehearsed the same topics with variations in tone, emphasis and arguments employed.

Many of the exchanges were conducted in Chinese though all reporting done by me had been in English. In order to give a tenor of those talks, I propose to create a fictional dialogue based on actual questions posed and answers given. The putative student leader would also be a composite of the various young men involved. I shall give him the fictional name of Kwan. It was significant that no female leader had emerged at that time among the youth.

\* \* \*

Kwan was a skinny fellow, much like what I had been before my fellow student at Stanford, Mike Zinck, started me pumping iron. And the lad was clearly excitable. He seemed over-eager to get a government official within the cross-hairs of his verbal weaponry. I could read in his quick brown eyes a certain lust for confrontation and martyrdom.

“It’s good that you’ve accepted my invitation to tea,” I began, trying to set

the tone. “Chinese tradition has it that it is always better to talk to opponents than to fight them. It seems students have some issues with the government; some young people have managed to get themselves hurt or sent to gaol. That is something I personally would not like to see. Government has asked me to initiate some conversations to get to the root of disaffection. So here I am. I don’t want to mislead anybody, however. I have no power to approve or change anything; I am here only to listen to your views and perspectives and to convey them upwards.”

Kwan wasted no time in venting his spleen over what had happened at Victoria Park. “I was beaten by batons; got bruises all over to prove it,” he declared. “My girlfriend didn’t quite get beaten but she got pushed around too. What need was there for the police to behave like fascists and to treat us like hooligans?”

His voice surprised me. It was strong and affecting, the kind which could sway impressionable crowds. I had not expected it to emanate from so unlikely a frame. If its potency were tempered by more knowledge and discipline, it would be capable of stirring trouble. I wondered if I could harness his anger and channel it in more constructive directions, as Hon-Kit had done with me when I was his age.

“Yes, it was a poor show by the police,” I essayed casually. “I fear they’re not very good at dishing out equal treatment for women.”

“You think that’s funny?”

“No, no, not at all. But wit is sometimes a useful diversion when one is on the defensive. As I understand the situation, the police gave the crowds several warnings to disperse. They did not. The assembly thus became an illegal one, which the authorities were obliged to break up.”

Kwan emitted a derisive grunt. “That’s very neat and tidy and legal, isn’t it? The government gives us a run-around, knowing full well we wanted to hold a legal and peaceful demonstration on July 7th. It deliberately delayed things and then claimed it was too late to grant permission in time.”

“Did you point out the significance of the date when you first applied for permission?”

“No, of course not. Everybody knows that date. The Brits make us learn their dates of significance. Why can't they respect *ours*?”

“The British are not required to study Chinese history. You can't blame them for not knowing the importance of July 7th. It's the fault of the applicants for not alerting them.”

My guest stared at me from across the table and made a wry face. “I suppose it was our fault too that we got beaten and manhandled?”

“I did not say that. I was not there to form any judgement. According to official reports, some demonstrators started throwing missiles at the police. Then rioting broke out, spreading to Causeway Bay. Both public and private properties got damaged or destroyed.”

“How are people supposed to react when they're being beaten, when they see their girlfriends being manhandled?”

“They could have obeyed police instructions and dispersed in an orderly manner. Or else, if they had a valid point to make, they could have made it non-violently, like Gandhi and his followers. That may not always work, of course, but at least they would have secured the moral high ground. Violence is never the answer.”

Kwan snorted. “That's easy to say. Why are the Brits so set against a peaceful demonstration? We were not even demonstrating against *them*, only against the Japs and the Yanks. Isn't it bad enough that after the war our leaders — for whatever political or economic reason — had allowed them to hang on to this place under the terms of unequal treaties? Why must these foreigners now throw their weight around, to prevent us from expressing opinions on matters of national concern to us?”

“I don't think the British are against legal and peaceful demonstrations. Perhaps what they do not understand is why you and your friends want to demonstrate over Diaoyu Tai, an issue in which they are not involved and

over which only international politics can resolve.”

“Why are you defending them? Because you are a Crown servant enjoying fat perks denied to ordinary people? When the time comes, they’ll dump you, you know, just like the rest of us.”

“I’m not defending the British. I’m defending the orderliness of this city because my salary is being paid by Hong Kong taxpayers.”

“But you’re a Chinese. Don’t you care if foreigners get back to their old stealing game with parts of our Motherland? Wouldn’t expressing our outrage be the right and patriotic thing to do?”

“A wise Frenchman once said that being a patriot or a traitor — or vice versa — was just a matter of dates. A person could turn from one into the other with a simple change in the ruling regime. Loving one’s country, like loving one’s god, is growing rather out of fashion these days. I suppose there’s no great harm in either, so long as one does not expect to be loved in return. I hope you and your friends are not allowing yourselves to be used by those with hidden agendas.”

“What do you mean?”

I put on a sympathetic but cautious air before replying, not daring to go too far down that slippery road. “It is just that international politics are not always what they seem,” I said. “Young people kick up a fuss about Diaoyu Tai and that might create a useful bargaining chip for those seeking to make deals behind the scenes.”

“Is that the line the Brits are asking you to spread, to discourage us and throw us off stride?”

“No, no, that’s not a government line. It’s just some talk I’d picked up from friends attuned to diplomatic hypocrisies. Rumours have it China might be willing to play down the Diaoyu Tai issue in exchange for Japan’s support for its bid to take over Taiwan’s seat at the United Nations.”

“Jesus! I don’t believe it. Can you prove it?”

“No, I don’t even know if it’s true. But governments and states don’t have

any moral sense of right and wrong. Their concerns are power and expediency, securing what they conceive as imperative ends by whatever means necessary. But you don't have to take my word for it. As the old saying goes, rocks will emerge once the tide recedes. You will be able to see for yourself whether the rumour has any validity when the General Assembly meets later in the year."

"So the government message is just to be good little colonials and stop trying to be patriotic Chinese?"

"I didn't say that."

"What are you saying then?"

"What I'm trying to say is: Be careful and think things through. Laws are seldom perfect; often they're asinine. But they're all we've got. Legal procedures can also be complex and cumbersome but I'm ready to help you negotiate your way, if you want me to. I'm a public servant; I have to be at your disposal. But things should be done within existing rules. To do so may not make as much of a splash in the media as acting outside the law but in the long run it may be more productive. Why risk ruining anyone's future for what might turn out to be only an illusion?"

My young interlocutor snorted again. "Everything's an illusion, isn't it? Truth, justice, fair play, the whole bloody lot. The law's just a trap, to make criminals out of people who want to stand for principles. Do you think any of us wants a criminal record? We want visas to study abroad, to get decent jobs. But we are being frustrated all the time. Just look at Mok Chiu-Yu. You've heard of him, haven't you? He got a very raw deal."

"Yes, I've heard of his case."

"Then why don't you do something about it?"

"Look, I may have a fancy title but I have no authority to speak of, and I certainly have no authority to intervene."

"No authority to intervene," Kwan echoed derisively. "What kind of public official is one who does not stand up against injustice? In ancient times, didn't

righteous officials send memorials to the emperor and resign in protest? Mok just asked for a fair investigation into why a college should expel students for criticising its administration. For that, he got sentenced for taking part in an illegal demonstration. Then, because of his conviction, the Education Department refused to register him as a teacher. Is that the kind of British justice you stand for?”

“Mok knowingly broke the law,” I said, through gritted teeth. “People who break laws ought to be prepared for the consequences. That’s why I am urging everybody to think before acting in hot blood. If Mok believes the Education Department has been wrong in denying him registration, he has a legal remedy. He can always apply to the High Court for a judicial review.”

A rising note of indignation reverberated in Kwan’s voice. “Who has time and money for that? Are there lawyers lining up to do *pro bono* work? They’re all too busy clocking up their bloody hourly rates from rich corporate clients.”

“Some of your colleagues said they intended studying law. Perhaps when they’re qualified, they would go out and make a difference.”

“You officials are all the same. You have nice excuses and evasions for everything, except for rectifying wrongs. Mok isn’t the only victim, you know. There are plenty of others. Chan Yee-Hon from the Chinese University is another example. He’s right now being prosecuted through the courts for what happened at Victoria Park. No wonder the Chinese character for ‘official’ includes twice the character for ‘mouth’. How convenient it must be for officials to speak with different voices whenever it suits them.”

I sighed, feeling a degree of disappointment as well as of culpability. “Officials are *not* all the same,” I asserted. “You should learn to tell the difference. But you are also right in one respect. It *is* convenient sometimes to speak through two mouths — one to speak the truth to you and the other to speak a different truth to my masters. You may not believe me, but my sympathies might be closer to you students than you think. I want to help

them — and you — so long as you all stay within the law. Try me. What have you got to lose? We are both intelligent people; we can betray each other only once. More than once and the game's up."

Kwan regarded me quizzically for a couple of seconds. "What *can* you actually do for us?" he asked.

"That depends on what you intend to do," I replied. "If you intend to stay peaceful and within the law, I will argue on your behalf within the government. I fear Fate has only given me the chance to deploy words, not to exercise power. I can't promise talking will bring you what you want; but I will at least try. If you don't follow the law, then I'll have to speak out against you. Are more demonstrations being planned?"

"They're being discussed."

"Well, you know where I stand. Please tell your colleagues and friends what my position is and my willingness to help. My door is always open, if they stay within the law. You can give them my number. Call me any time, if they want advice."

Kwan gave a nod and when I offered my hand at the end of the meeting, he seemed to have shaken it more firmly than when we first met.

\* \* \*

On October 6th, two days before I wrote my summary report, an astonishing and unprecedented event — unrelated to the Diaoyu Tai protests — occurred. Some 300 off-duty nurses marched up to Government House and handed in a petition signed by most of the 3,600 nurses in government service demanding equal pay between men and women. It represented the first time in Hong Kong's history that a group of civil servants was to demonstrate openly against their employer.

That episode marked another instance of simply how out of touch the ruling elite was with the people it ruled over. The demand for equal pay for

equal work had a long history, particularly in respect of discrimination on the basis of sex.

Some years back, under pressure, the government announced that it would seek to have equal pay between genders in place by 1975. But it singled out nurses for separate consideration. The nurses were unhappy. It went without saying that their overwhelming number were women.

The government then made it known, with the sort of crude cunning that would have made Machiavelli spin in his grave, that equal pay for nurses might be achieved by lowering the pay of the handful of male nurses to the level for women. The nurses, predictably, would have none of that. It was not lost on anyone that no whisper of eliminating the differential in pay between locals and expatriates might be similarly achieved.

In any event, the government unveiled on August 24th a unisex scale for nurses which had the effect of squeezing together the male and female scales. The nurses were furious. The general public and various social organisations came out on the side of the nurses. The result was the march on Government House on October 6th. On that same evening, the government announced it would think again.

Those who knew their Machiavelli must have reflected upon the Florentine's observation that the first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler was to look at the men he had around him. And that insight remains as valid for the political classes of today as it had been when first advanced in the 15th century. Very few rulers, however, had the good fortune to have a Mencius or an Aristotle as an advisor.

\* \* \*

Given that unexpected development, I thought it best to attend quickly to my own responsibilities. Hence my summary report of October 8th. I put in it a number of recommendations for future action. I pointed out that there

were grave misunderstandings and misconceptions between the government and the younger generation. Many of those misunderstandings could be rectified or dispelled through honest and sympathetic engagement. Without engagement, mistaken ideas would gain root and disaffection would spread. The educated young were destined to become future leaders of Hong Kong. If positive messages from the government were not forthcoming or were being lost through default, they could turn much more disruptive in the years ahead.

But to engage meaningfully with the young, a senior and matured official would have to be appointed to deal with the young full-time. A Polonius would not do. He would have to participate more actively in the out-of-office-hours discussion groups to promote official points of view and to keep track of and to rebut flawed opinions expressed in youth publications.

It was not possible for that job to be done effectively on an *ad hoc* basis, as I was attempting to do as City District Commissioner. Engaging with the young was a patient and time-consuming business. To try doing the job while carrying out the responsibilities of another office would cause both jobs to suffer.

There would also need to be much more co-ordination between government departments. I was working in complete isolation, with no access to reports and attitudes of other departments or to the intelligence gathered by the Special Branch.

In my own mind, I would visualise a clear pattern of disaffection and identity crisis emerging. Each appeared like a harbinger of a future doom. Yet the leaders of society did not seem to recognise them as such and hence did not take the remedial actions to forestall that fate.

For the sake of simplicity, allow me to construct a simple summary, beginning with the 1966 Star Ferry riots during which one person was killed, 1,800 arrested and 258 sent to gaol. A Commission of Inquiry convened afterwards to look into the causes of the rioting drew attention to the “gap between the

government and people in communication and understanding.”

The following year, 1967, the spill-over of the Cultural Revolution in China brought another bout of rioting. This time, 52 people lost their lives and about 5,000 were arrested, with some 2,000 convicted of some type of crime. To the surprise of many in the government elite, when the left-wing trade unions called for a general strike to oppose the government, a large number of junior civil servants responded. Over 1,650 of them were sacked as a result.

Having been active as a trade unionist myself in the Senior Non-Expatriate Officers Association, I could testify to unhappiness felt at the senior levels as well. Many resented the government's discriminatory treatment as between expatriate and local officers.

In 1968, student unions formed the Hong Kong Federation of Students to press for some unclearly defined reforms. It operated illegally without proper registration for years. Yet the guardians of the rule of law remained fast asleep.

Then came the more massive and clearly nationalistic Diaoyu Tai demonstrations of 1970. Nurses soon took the cue to voice their own dissatisfactions and marched on Government House in 1971.

On that sequence of events, could anyone still proclaim that God was in His heaven and all was well with the world? For reasons unexplained to the ordinary man, it seemed a great many among the elite decision-makers still clung to a complacent attitude!

While those open manifestations of alienation and dissatisfaction were taking place, more fundamental changes were also destabilising society at various levels.

For instance, the virtue of frugality which had for thousands of years marked the Chinese character soon came under attack. Likewise the people's native propensity to save what little they could against hard times and the education of their children. Once the industrial and financial corporations

noticed that Hong Kong was beginning to prosper against the odds, they quickly devoted huge efforts to fabricate artificial needs and stimulate consumption through advertising and marketing. Since the machines of the Industrial Revolution made mass production possible, it followed that their outputs had to be consumed to keep the cycle of profits rolling. Otherwise factories would go bankrupt.

Confucian philosophy used to hold teachers in high esteem. Children were taught that without a father there was no life and without a teacher there would be no wisdom. But the Eurocentric nature of colonial education, the decline in moral teaching through religious institutions and the advent of Western films like *Blackboard Jungle* and reality television shows created an environment for some very different and equivocal attitudes.

The growth of population within a limited geographical area naturally caused property prices to soar. That in turn impacted upon the ability of the general public to afford housing spacious enough to accommodate extended families. In ancient times, there used to be well over a hundred names to identify the precise kinships within the extended family. But with the pressure on space in Hong Kong — and not to mention the implementation of the “one-child” policy in China — hopes of returning to the traditional family structure were all but a memory.

Other measures also began crimping urban family life further. For instance, prior to World War II, building regulations provided for ceiling heights of 16 to 18 feet. But central air conditioning becoming available in new commercial buildings, an argument was advanced for ceiling height to be reduced to a minimum of ten feet. The rules were accordingly changed. But what about domestic buildings without central air-conditioning? Since the demand for affordable housing far outstripped supply, it would always remain a sellers’ market. And who would be controlling the rapacious instincts of developers to add an extra floor or two by reducing the height of each floor?

All the while, the British occupying power did its best to duck the

consideration of such complicated matters. It assumed that so long as economic progress kept making headway, a trickling down of wealth would theoretically occur. That would be sufficient to keep the population satisfied enough to remain politically divided and neutered.

Such developments and others left the young of the time with realities that were more and more adrift from the traditional aspirations and ideals. It was as if they were caught in a vortex of forces they could neither comprehend or influence, leaving them alienated, rootless, culturally eroded and without any meaningful collective purpose except the accumulation of wealth.

Wise leadership became sorely needed to prevent a disaffected generation from descending into rebellion or nihilism. But did the elites manage to rise to that challenge? That question has to be left to posterity to answer.

\* \* \*

Shortly after submitting my report, the rumours of political horse-trading at the United Nations proved to be substantially correct. By the end of September, the organisation decided collectively that the decades-old fiction of representatives from Taiwan speaking on behalf of the Chinese nation should end. All seats in key U.N. organs should be occupied by nominees of the Communist mainland government. Japan supported the move.

Before my recommendations for dealing with the restive youth of the colony could be considered by the government, however, a new Governor in the person of Sir Murray MacLehose was installed in November to replace Sir David Trench. He was to serve a record-breaking ten-and-a-half-years in that post.

My suggestion for the appointment of a dedicated and senior official to further the dialogue with student and youth leaders was therefore left in limbo.