

CHAPTER 4

Friendships Through Mah-Jong

EVER SINCE COMING ACROSS the Chinese gambling game of *mah-jong* as a child of six or seven in Singapore, I have been fascinated by it. My paternal grandmother used to play it off and on at Blair Road, dextrously shuffling and stacking the hand-made bamboo-backed tiles fixed to carved ivory faces. I found that bewildering adult activity more absorbing than any game played by children. I was given few opportunities to watch proceedings, however, because my elders did not start playing until well after my siblings and I had been sent to bed.

The basic game involved four participants playing against one another, with a set of 136 tiles divided into three suits of nine, in multiples of four, plus four “winds” and three “honours”, also in multiples of four. The three suits were commonly referred to as “circles”, “bamboos” and “characters” respectively. Should there be general agreement, additional tiles known as “flowers” could be added to spice up the game. They made for bonus winnings if they happened to be drawn by a player. Such additions were much sought after by women players who considered the game to be one essentially governed by luck. Serious players eschewed playing with flowers.

Several myths attended the game’s origins. One common account has it that Confucius had been its inventor. The basis for that theory was that its name, *mah-jong*, meant “sparrows”. The ancient sage had been known to have had a

great interest in birds. The red, green and white “honour” tiles were supposed to represent, respectively, the middle way, family prosperity, and benevolence and filial piety — all ideals which permeated the sage’s teachings.

The truth, however, was probably more mundane. The game was more likely to have been invented much later, possibly around the early Ming Dynasty. It must have already taken on considerable popularity by the beginning of the seventeenth century, because the Portuguese Jesuits made references to it in their accounts of China.

The game suffered its only major setback when the Communists took over the country in 1949. It was then banned as part of an anti-gambling drive. The ban was not formally lifted till 1985. Today, the game has once again reclaimed its position as a much favoured Chinese pastime. It goes without saying that in countries with a large concentration of Chinese — as in Singapore and Malaysia — the game, with slight local variations, remains hugely popular. It has likewise established itself in countries neighbouring China, like Japan and Korea, again with local variations.

For some unclear reason, the game did not transfer well to the West. It had enjoyed a brief vogue in the United States in the 1920s but its appeal did not last.

In Hong Kong, it has become so popular that games would be laid on almost as a matter of course before banquets celebrating weddings, anniversaries or the birthdays of elders. Likewise, they would also be on offer at staff dinners held by Chinese enterprises to mark the commencement of a new Lunar New Year. Hence the ubiquitous clatter of tiles being shuffled and stacked was a sound seldom out of earshot in the territory. Indeed, hardly a local film or television drama about life in the city could be made without one or more scenes involving *mah-jong*.

Because the Chinese are inveterate gamblers and are firmly rooted to notions of karma and other cosmic unknowns, it is inevitable that an extraordinary number of superstitions should attend devotees to the game. Should a player

draw a succession of bad hands, he is apt to take a toilet break to wash the ill luck from his palms. Or else he might light a match and wave it around like a joss stick to ward off anything jinxing his tiles. We are supposed to live in an age of science but there is no stopping those who believe that some things are beyond science.

When I first immersed myself in the game, I was a cub reporter in the *Morning Post*, at the tail end of the 1940s. I found its combination of skill, strategy, calculation, deception and yes, luck, thoroughly challenging. By then, the former hand-crafted tiles of my grandmother's era had been replaced by cheap mass-produced plastic ones.

I had begun by learning its simplest and most common form, known as "old style", a form stripped of flowers and extraneous bonuses. Its approach was essentially conservative and defensive, placing a premium on tactical skills. A winning hand had to be made up of four sets of either three-of-a-kind or consecutively running numbers in the same suit, such as two, three and four; or four, five and six; and so on, in a pattern similar to gin rummy. In addition, a pair known as "eyes" was needed to make game.

Each player would begin the game with 13 tiles. A winning hand consisted of 14 tiles and a player depended upon drawing that crucial 14th tile to complete his hand when his turn came to draw a tile or else when that tile was discarded by one of the other players.

A marker, rotating in an anti-clockwise direction among the players, denoted the banker for each hand. The marker would move only if the banker lost the hand. Sometime if the banker was on a winning streak, the marker would not move for several hands. The banker had the right to initiate a hand after stacking by throwing a set of dice. The number produced by the dice determined the starting point among the four stacks of tiles for drawing the initial hands.

The supreme winning hand yearned for under all styles of play would be a maximum hand known as "13 wonders". It was an occurrence infinitely rarer

than a hole-in-one in golf. In over 50 years of playing *mah-jong*, I have seen it successfully completed only once. Under the “old style”, the maximum winning hand would be limited to four or five *fans* or “doubles”. Therefore there was no practical need for trying for anything so difficult and exotic as “13 wonders”. A hand reaching the payout limit could be achieved through a number of other much easier combinations.

When I was still a neophyte, I asked my father if I could join him and my Eighth Granduncle in an occasional game, so as to gain some practical experience.

My father’s answer was direct and unambiguous. “Do you have enough money to pay for your losses?” he enquired. “Once a person sits down at a *mah-jong* table, he should forget all about family relationships and ties of blood. No quarter or credit can be expected, even between father and son.” I got that message loud and clear.

After I had started to earn a government salary sufficient to withstand minor losses, I became immediately hooked. I wasted no time to organise a weekly session with colleagues similarly keen on the game.

But all of us had modest means. So we held those games at the unpretentious premises of the Hong Kong University Alumni Club because that was the most economical and respectable venue we could find. We also agreed to tax each winning hand on a graduated scale to defray the cost of refreshments, snacks, meals and Club fees. The minimum winning hand was known as a “chicken”. Since it came below a single *fan* or double, we decided that all winnings from such hands should go straight into the taxation kitty. As a result, winners seldom ended the night with anything very substantial. On rare occasions, all four players could end up losing!

Among friends, the enjoyment came as much from the good-natured bantering known as “the war of jaws” as from winning money. Putting down others for misfired techniques or crowing over a clever coup lent additional spice to the game.

Although all forms of *mah-jong* had fairly well-established rules, the game is also attended by an unspoken ethos about fair play. It has something akin to the spirit of bridge or of cricket when played at the village green level. Professional cricket matches, now attended by widespread bookie betting, ball tampering and match-fixing, were a different matter.

In *mah-jong*, the character and temperament of an individual could become readily apparent. Just as in poker, a great deal could be discerned from body language. It is permissible to make a pretence of wanting a tile thrown by the left-hand opponent — in the boxing ring it would be called a feint — but once the face of any tile is exposed, then the player exposing it must play it.

I have stuck exclusively with old style for many years before I got interested in the “new style” played by Ip Yeuk-Lam and his friends at the Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. Their system was decidedly more exciting, for it stretched potential winning hands to a maximum of 22 *fans*! And that was entirely without the addition of flowers, jokers or other easy multipliers.

The new style required a strategic approach entirely different from the one I had been accustomed to. The reason was that hands were much more fluid and mutable, enabling them to be easily transformed from a run-of-the-mill hand to one of multiple *fans*. Stakes could also mount rapidly and dramatically because of that. I hesitated for a good long while before trying my hand because I realised that a weak or inattentive player could easily be taken to the financial cleaners.

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My 39 years of friendship with Ip Yeuk-Lam, the long-serving Vice-President of the Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, began in the latter part of 1968, when I accepted one of his invitations to a Sunday lunch with his family at the Chamber’s club. The purpose was ostensibly to explain

to me some of the intricacies of the new style he played, in order to persuade me to try my hand. But deeper and unavowed purposes were present at the back of both our minds.

Both of us knew times were unsettled following the deaths and upheavals caused the previous year by the spill-over of the Cultural Revolution from China. An undercurrent of suspicion and uncertainty swirled like undercurrents through various sectors of society. It appeared that both Peking and London had fumbled the strings to their respective marionettes, allowing them to behave in some demented and unpredictable ways. Yet neither side was prepared or able to reassert control for a time. Both resorted to trying to pin the blame on the other side.



An anti-colonialism demonstration in Hong Kong in 1967 during the spill-over of the Cultural Revolution. Photo: *South China Morning Post*

In that fraught atmosphere, any initiative by a Chinese civil servant to consort with a known left-wing stalwart was bound to come under scrutiny. For a colonial officer to enter a Chinese leftist bastion, even on a Sunday, would probably excite imputations of disloyalty, subversion or worse.

I was acutely aware that only a few years earlier, in 1961 to be exact, the most senior Chinese police officer in Hong Kong, an Assistant Superintendent by the name of Tsang Chao-Ko, was suddenly and summarily expelled at Lowu, for allegedly spying for the Communists. He was never charged or brought before a court. His British citizenship and his employment rights within the civil service counted for nothing. The Chinese response was to embrace the expellee and elevate him to membership in the National People's Congress.

When the Cultural Revolution spilled over, the Hong Kong authorities again attempted to expel people for alleged incitement. Quite apart from the real or fake blood being spilt on the streets, this brought personal hardships to two left-leaning motion picture personalities. One was the popular actress Shek Wai and the other her husband and film director Fu Chi.

The Chinese authorities, however, having learnt from the experience of Tsang, refused to accept their expulsions, insisting upon their right to remain in the colony. The unfortunate couple therefore became stuck for days in the no man's land of Lowu bridge, exposed to all the elements. Whether back-room deals had to be done to resolve the impasse were unknown to me. What eventually transpired was that China accepted their expulsions and, after some time, Shek Wai was also made a member of the National People's Congress.

Today, both Shek Wai and Fu Chi are honoured in Hong Kong, along with other local motion picture personalities, in the Avenue of Stars on the waterfront at Tsim Sha Tsui.

It was not difficult to see, therefore, that associating with the Chinese Left was attended by risks. I could be expelled too, notwithstanding that I was part of the civil service and a British subject by birth. Those qualifications did

not do Tsang much good. Besides, my British citizenship had been turned progressively into a third grade one compared with the citizenship of those born into a white race.

Moreover, 15 years earlier, I had been summarily fired from the *Hong Kong Standard* because someone in the administration apparently did not like some of the articles I had written. My brother Francis had fared worse in a similar situation in Singapore. All kinds of pressure could be exerted behind the scenes. The Leviathan of the modern state knew no bounds. Those who objected to dastardly or underhanded deeds had little option except to resign, as some did during the Suez crisis and the Iraq invasion. Others took to blowing the whistle, as Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden did more recently.

Against such realities, the prudent man had to hesitate. I doubted if I would be expelled; I was simply too insignificant. In addition, I had done nothing that the government could show to be disloyal. I might be asked to resign on the grounds I had turned into a security risk. That would mean losing my iron rice bowl and starting all over again, with three young children in tow. Not a pleasant prospect but one I could live with.

Yet, I could not in good conscience fold my arms and watch from the sidelines when I believed I could make a contribution towards a more harmonious Hong Kong. The British were certainly not about to help bring Chinese citizens of different political persuasions together. Rather the reverse. Since my wages were being paid by local taxpayers of all political persuasions, I felt it my duty to do what I could to foster reconciliation and social harmony.

At the same time, I could not be oblivious to the other side of the coin. Should I venture into the Chinese General Chamber, how would the other stalwarts react — apart from Yeuk-Lam? Would I be accepted or would I be shunned as an interloper, a colonial running-dog?

After all, one of their more distinguished members, Tong Ping-Tat, was

servicing a sentence in Stanley Prison because the British had considered him guilty of participating in an illegal assembly. Why should they want to have anything to do with me? What had I to offer? They had time on their side, safe in the knowledge that when the chips were down they had the kind of political and economic clout that counted. They could afford to wait and be indifferent to what the British might think.

Yeuk-Lam's companies, for instance, held the monopolies for the wholesale importation of both vegetables and eggs from China. Others had different monopolies and not a few occupied significant official positions in the mainland. Their connections would be invaluable for the well-being of the city. But they could hardly be reached by expatriate officials. Yet if I were to initiate contact under my own steam, there was no telling how my superiors would react.

After that muddled imitation of Hamlet, I decided to chance entering the left-wing bastion. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I made for the sixth floor, which consisted of two small fixed private dining-rooms and a large hall. The latter could be segmented into smaller units through the use of moveable panels. A name plate on the door of one of the two fixed rooms indicated it had been reserved under the name of Ip Yeuk-Lam.

Upon entering, I was greeted heartily by a smiling host. His jet black hair, immaculately combed, gave him the appearance of a man far younger than his fifty-odd years. I was swiftly introduced to his wife, Suze, a matronly figure confident of the social position she had attained through long years of voluntary work in various women's organisations. One lazy eye required her to use a pair of glasses.

The youngest of their three sons, Ip Shing-Kwan, was also there with his charming and delightful wife, Maureen. Shing-Kwan was a gynaecologist, recently qualified, and his wife was a nurse. Maureen was to prove in later years to be one of the most consistently filial Chinese daughters-in-law I have ever met. Another two Chinese guests from overseas were present. I have

forgotten their names, however, because our paths never crossed again.

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“I hope you wouldn’t mind an ordinary family lunch,” Yeuk-Lam said as we took our seats around the table.

“Suits me down to the ground,” I replied. “Have missed decent home cooking for a very long time. My servant is hopeless and my wife doesn’t cook.”

“Why haven’t you brought your missus and your children?”

“They’ve committed themselves to another outing. Next time.”

When the food came, I found it consisted of a congee accompanied by dishes of fried noodles, a seasoned chicken, a large helping of stir-fried seasonal vegetables and some Chinese doughnuts. Because of the great number of Sunday lunches I subsequently had with the Ip family, I cannot now remember the kind of congee served up on that particular day. It would have been one of the standard ones, made with salted pork and preserved eggs or with legs of frogs or perhaps with slices of fish or chicken or other ingredients.

The food tasted so delicious and well-prepared that I was reminded of the meals I had ages ago, served up by the amazing hunchbacked servant, Ah Sei. I could not help remarking that their quality reminded me of meals I had when I was a small boy in Singapore.

Yeuk-Lam chuckled. “Can you figure out why the dishes here taste so much like home-cooking?”

I shook my head. “All I can say is that they’re superb. I love them.”

“The kitchen here is forbidden to use monosodium glutamate. The natural flavours of food therefore come through better. There’s too much eating in restaurants in this town. Taste buds get ruined as a result.”

“How true!” I exclaimed.

At the same moment it occurred to me that the kitchen staff of the Chinese General Chamber Club must be security vetted too. After all, a great many mainland dignitaries and delegations ate there. I was reminded of the remark dropped by the Soviet Assistant Cultural Attache in London, about how much safer it was to eat among friends!

Over subsequent decades, I was to marvel over the consistently high standard of dishes the kitchen produced for our *mah-jong* dinners. The seasonal soups — be they sea turtle or snake, or herbal ones to cool the blood in summer or fortify the body in winter — would always be prepared to perfection. And the steamed whole fish, which was a standard dish, would always be done to a turn.

As I write today and think of the leftovers I now have to make do for dinner — with the aid of a microwave oven — I cannot help my mouth watering over the delightful repasts of yesteryears.

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After lunch, and after the other partakers in the meal had dispersed, Yeuk-Lam handed me a sheet setting out all the possible permutations for gaining doubles in new style *mah-jong*. At first sight they appeared frightening, until I discovered it was not a case of progressive doubling for 22 times. Contrary to the old style, where a player could make game with a “chicken” hand, the way that Yeuk-Lam and his companions played with required a minimum of three *fans* to make a winning hand. The doubling started only after that point. Furthermore, there was a cut-off point after 10 *fans*. A hand worth 11 or 12 *fans* would still be paid out at the same level as for 10. Doubling the pay-out again would only occur when a hand reached 14 *fans*. There were similar cut off points at 18 *fans* and 22 *fans*.

Yeuk-Lam told me he had a game starting at 3.00 p.m. and I was welcome to stay and watch. I did so. It appeared the players also practised taxing

each winning hand to pay for the food and the use of the premises, just as my Thursday group had done at the Hong Kong University Alumni Club. Although the stakes being played were reasonable, they still came to more than I could afford to lose, even with my acting pay as Assistant Economic Secretary. On the other occasions Yeuk-Lam had invited me to dine with the players, I merely confined myself to the meal and watching the game.

By being around, I got to meet a number of left-wing personalities and to develop some important friendships. Apart from Yeuk-Lam, I got along well with Wang Kuan-Cheng, who had been elected President of the Chinese General Chamber in 1968. He was not a *mah-jong* player, however. I also made friends with H.T. Liu, a shipping magnate who had learnt from the British the advantages of flying flags of convenience on his vessels.

Both men were from Shanghai, although Wang was a native of Jiangsu. He had arrived in the colony in the late 1940s and had bought a large granite quarry at what was then a quite underdeveloped North Point. When the granite was exhausted by the successive building booms, he was left with an invaluable stretch of prime real estate the size of a city block right smack along King's Road. He subsequently became an influential member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Liu was thick with an intimate circle around a then rising political star in the mainland called Jiang Zemin. Jiang subsequently rose to the Politburo in 1983, the Mayorship of Shanghai in 1985 and then, following the Tienanmen upheavals in 1989, the General Secretaryship of the Chinese Communist Party. He was President of the country from 1993 to 2003.

Liu was a short, impish and jolly fellow, standing a shade under five-foot-three. He knew no English and, apart from his native tongue and Mandarin, he could only manage a rather fractured kind of Cantonese. At the Chinese General Chamber Club he was generally referred to by the Cantonese version of his name. It was Lau Hao-Ching. Among the *mah-jong* fraternity, however, he was addressed simply as Uncle Lau.

He was a fiend when it came to *mah-jong*. He would happily play every night if given half a chance. After China had opened up in the 1980s, he renovated a mansion in the former French Concession in Shanghai and fitted it out with a *mah-jong* room. He kept inviting Yeuk-Lam and myself and another regular player to go as his guests to Shanghai, so that we could spend an entire week playing every day. None of us could take him up on it, however, because none could spare the time.



From left: Ip Yeuk-Lam, H.T. Liu and myself

Wang, Lau and Yeuk-Lam all turned out to be stout and steadfast friends. Fifteen years later, when I was forced to pick a fight with the Provincial Government of Jiangsu, and in particular with the apparatchiks in the city of Nantong, they all rallied to my support and carried the fight to Politburo members in Peking.

Surprisingly, I prevailed in the end, in a manner of speaking. It had been mainly due to their support and the support of their connections. But the latent humanity in the hearts of many of my countrymen — even when they describe themselves as members of the Communist Party — was also an important factor.

In achieving my objective in that row, I gained myself not only a beautiful

woman as a wife but also an extremely likeable failed Communist as a father-in-law. He was an Assistant Manager in a local government organisation responsible for determining and allocating quotas for fuel oil to factories and industrial organisations. He had twice applied to join the Communist Party but he was rejected on both occasions because he was deemed not to be “red” enough.

Furthermore, in marrying his daughter in China, I acquired a slew of interesting, intelligent and genial card-carrying Communist relatives. But those would be stories to be recounted in the next volume of these memoirs.

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Yeuk-Lam had been very frank and open in his dealings with me. He made no secret of the fact he found it difficult — quite apart from the impediments of language — to engage openly with responsible British colonial officials. There were simply too many suspicions and blind spots on both sides. I echoed his sentiments.

Because of our mutual openness, it did not take me long to gain an understanding of his character. He was basically an astute, dedicated and modest man who wanted to do his best for both his country and for the Hong Kong community. The city was his home, although he had been prudent enough to keep a bolt-hole in Vancouver, where his eldest son also had a home.

He was an able administrator and immensely popular with both the membership of the Chinese General Chamber and with mainland officialdom. Both had urged him repeatedly to run for the presidency of the Chamber but he had always declined. He did not relish the limelight, preferring to bear the political and administrative burdens of that organisation behind the scenes. Thus he remained its longest serving Vice-President. In that capacity, I found him a very reliable sounding-board on left-wing developments both locally

and across the border.

He had an office at the Chamber which he attended religiously every day. The entire staff of the organisation looked to him for day-to-day directions. The New China News Agency, which served as the *de facto* Chinese government representative in Hong Kong, trusted him enough to brief him regularly on the evolving political lines. He supervised most of the arrangements for visiting mainland bigwigs to the Chamber. But he always left photo opportunities to others.

Early on in our relationship, he asked me for a minor favour. Apparently the then Director of Urban Services, an expatriate Administrative Officer, was due for retirement and Chinese etiquette required the monopoly importers of Chinese foodstuff using Urban Services facilities to host a farewell dinner for him.

“You know how it is,” Yeuk-Lam said. “Most of us don’t speak English and the few who do are very *luk-luk kuk-kuk*. I need someone to keep the chit-chat going. Otherwise there will be dreadful silences and the dinner will drag.”

“I’ve not had much dealings with the Urban Services,” I said. “I hardly know the departing Director. But if you think my presence will help, I’d gladly come.”

The dinner was duly held at the Chinese General Chamber Club with a table for 12 people. The conversation was banal in the extreme. It consisted essentially of exchanges of courtesies, good wishes for a happy retirement and thanks for the courtesy of the farewell gesture.

The location of the Director’s retirement home was touched upon but he said his wife had not yet decided whether it ought to be in Surrey or Devon. That led to some generalised talk about weather conditions in various parts of Britain, such as Cornwall and East Anglia, where other expatriates had retired. I acted as no more than an interpreter throughout.

When that meal was over, I thought that was the end of the matter. But

about 10 days later, I received a telephone call from the Defence Secretary.

“Why haven’t you filed your report on your meeting with a left-wing organisation?” the Defence Secretary demanded.

He was referring to some rules in Security Regulations which required any officer meeting with officials from a left-wing organisation to report on the names of all those attending and to detail who said what to whom.

I was baffled. “I can’t recall any substantive meeting with a single left-wing organisation recently,” I replied.

The Defence Secretary then cited the date of the dinner and the names of some of those present. He then cited the chapter and verse of Security Regulations. Apparently the departing Director of Urban Services, being an exemplary bureaucrat, had filed a report fingering me among the attendees.

“That wasn’t a meeting,” I protested. “It was just a social occasion, a farewell dinner. The people were essentially importers of Chinese foodstuff, a collection of ordinary businessmen and not officials or politicians. Most of the conversation was about the suitability of the weather in various parts of Britain for retirement. No information was ever passed which could not be readily found in any tourist brochure.

“If you’re worried about Chinese Communists planting sleeper cells in Britain or myself becoming an oriental version of Burgess and Maclean, I can assure you that nothing was raised about the weather at GCHQ in Cheltenham or about the possible locations of MI-5 or 6 sub-stations. If you want me to confirm all this in writing, I’ll do so.”

“Oh, never mind,” the Defence Secretary said, wanly. “Just remember for the future that regulations *are* regulations.”

I supposed that must have been just another of the many black marks in my dossier. I could hardly imagine why such a senior and highly paid official should busy himself with such trivia.

I was promoted to Staff Grade C in the Administrative Service in March of 1971, although an announcement was not made till July, after I had assumed the post of City District Commissioner for Hong Kong Island. It implied that my cheeky exchange with the Defence Secretary had not done as much damage as I had feared. That eased my mind.

My promotion — which commanded the magnificent salary of \$6,800 per month — left me with sufficient financial leeway to try my hand at new style *mah-jong*. This was especially so since I had separated from my wife and no longer had to provide her with pocket money. I kept up, nonetheless, the weekly old style game with my civil service colleagues.

Having observed the games at the Chinese General Chamber crowd since 1968, I had picked up some pretty shrewd ideas about how the game should be played. More importantly, I had sized up the strengths and weaknesses of most of the regulars. Some were long-time China traders, committed to the mainland because of business considerations rather than political ones. But there was also a number of young turks who smelt opportunities long before the country was ready to open up. They were seeking connections and intelligence on out-of-the-way localities where suitable factories could be built or joint ventures launched.

An occasional carpetbagger, after a quick kill, would also sometimes try to ingratiate himself into the *mah-jong* circle. The rascal's intention to exploit the lack of capitalist savvy among Communist cadres would soon be exposed and he would be given short shrift.

Among the regulars, Yeuk-Lam was, without doubt, the oldest and most expert player. He commanded an excellent defensive game, of the kind my cousin, Chau Yiu-Hung, had taught me when I first started.

Uncle Lau was a persistent risk-taker. He always fell for the excitement of building the biggest hand possible, regardless of the tempo of the play among other players. The game would often be over before he could get anywhere near success. But he had a happy-go-lucky way of treating success or failure

with indifference. He was about three years younger than Yeuk-Lam.

Another regular player I developed a strong liking and affection for was a retired banker named Lo Yuk-Chuen. He was in fact an old friend of Yeuk-Lam's. They both lived in the same apartment block in Bowen Road and would take a taxi home together after a game, that being the simplest way since the nearest car park to the Chamber was a fair walk away.

Lo's family had owned one of the 101 licensed banks which existed in Hong Kong at the end of World War II. Lo Yuk-Chuen had worked for most of his life at the bank. He was the sixth child in his family. Although he was a year younger than Yeuk-Lam, all his friends followed his younger siblings by addressing him as "Sixth Eldest Brother".

He was a jolly and loquacious fellow, who dressed immaculately like an English country squire, in chequered fawn shirts with a jacket and tie. His shoes were custom made.

He had a weakness for branded antique timepieces, like those made by Patek Philippe, Constantine, Audemars Piguet, TAG Heuer and others. He apparently had an enormous collection, for he confessed to having to spend an hour each day winding them up and selecting one to wear for that day.

He would lose me, however, once he started explaining what a *Contrôle Officiel Suisse des Chronomètres* certification meant or how sapphire-on-steel had a lower coefficient of friction compared with steel-on-steel. I was glad I did not have to concern myself with such refinements; my inexpensive Japanese quartz told the time quite adequately.

Lo, like myself at that time, was a cigar smoker. At our *mah-jong* games, we would each normally light up a cigar after dinner. Yeuk-Lam used to smoke but had given it up years earlier. Uncle Lau did not smoke but he had an extraordinary fondness for the aroma of burning cigars. He would from time to time present both Sixth Eldest Brother and myself with fine Cuban cigars so that he could enjoy the smell while we smoked. The three of them became my favourite *mah-jong* partners.

Sixth Eldest Brother had another eccentricity. I discovered that every time he went out and about, his pockets would be stuffed with bank notes in 500 and 1,000 dollar denominations, amounting to as much as \$200,000.

Some of us were naturally concerned over his being mugged. But he explained it was precisely for that reason that he carried so much cash. He did not care about money. He had a defective hip which impeded his movements and his main concern was that he should not be physically harmed. Should a mugger tackle him, he intended to toss those banknotes into the air as quickly as possible. The prospective robber would be so busy gathering them that he would have time to make his less than swift get-away, before any mugger could begin to think of harming him.

It followed that Sixth Eldest Brother was generous to a fault. The attendants at our meals and the night watchmen of the Chinese General Chamber building all loved it whenever he played *mah-jong*. They could always count on generous tips.

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One night, when I went home after a game, I was surprised to find Ah Duen waiting up for me. Normally, she would have retired to her own quarters once the boys had gone to bed at 9.00 p.m. and after the dinner things had been tidied up.

She told me she had waited up to tell me that she had found my youngest son, Tien-Kit, crying by himself in a corner of the dining room that afternoon. She asked him why he was crying and he said because nobody loved him. He said that his mother loved his eldest brother and his father loved his second brother but no one loved him. She thought I should know that. She had waited up for me on that account.

I thanked her and sent her off to bed.

That night, as I lay wide-eyed in bed, I tried to figure out how to deal with

the situation. What Tien-Kit believed was certainly not entirely true. But I did not know how to get that message across effectively. I had never been very good with children and my own upbringing had given me few examples to follow.

Both my father and my grandfather had never been very demonstrative with children. They had tended to regard rearing them as a province best left to womenfolk. I might have fallen a bit into that attitude myself. The trouble was that I had been separated from my mother at the age of five, so I did not have enough exposure to her. Such memory as I could retain of her till I was 18 centred upon her look of suppressed irritation because I was always asking too many foolish questions.

My father had been like a remote god, a deliverer of scoldings and punishments, but never of an encouraging word. Throughout my life, he had never so much as put an arm across my shoulders. I had noted that his charm and his witty remarks had all seemed reserved for other adults and not for children. Perhaps he had intended me to learn the harder lessons in life through such observations. I was never sure. In any case, it had been I, late in my teens, who had taken the initiative to put my arm around his shoulders. He had appeared pleased when I made that gesture.

It was against such an inadequate background that I tried the following day to reassure Tien-Kit. I took him aside after dinner and told him what Ah Duen had recounted to me.

I then said he had been completely mistaken in his perceptions. I could not speak for his mother, but so far as I was concerned, he was the son I loved most, although I readily admitted I had found it difficult to give voice to that fact or to demonstrate it. One should avoid taking overt acts or spoken words as expressions of genuine love.

It was true that his mother devoted a lot of attention to his eldest brother. But that was because his brother had suffered seriously from asthma since birth. He also had a recurring series of other health and dental problems. I had

given more attention to his second brother because he was quick-tempered and bull-headed, frequently at loggerheads with his elder brother and getting into trouble in one way or another at school.

Tien-Kit himself, on the other hand, had always been sweet-natured and accommodating, giving me no cause for worry. He always fell in easily with whatever his brothers wanted to do. His school work had also been fairly passable. My lack of attention to him did not mean I did not care for him. Quite the contrary. Because he was turning out just the way I would like him to, I saw no need to be unduly concerned over him.

There were many things vital to an individual to which that individual paid scant attention, until something went wrong. For example, the heart, the lungs, the kidneys and the other internal organs were all vital. But, unless they acted up, everybody took their smooth functioning for granted. No one would tell his heart and his other organs every day how much he appreciated them. Their importance was a given.

Some of the deepest truths could often only be intuited and felt, without the use of words or gestures. The accumulated experiences of life would lead a person to discover eventually what was actually true or false.

I was uncertain how much of what I had been trying to convey had been taken in by my eight-year-old son and, if taken in, whether he believed any of it at all. He hardly said a word after I had finished. So I just patted him on the shoulder and gave his upper arm a squeeze. That was the best I could manage. And what I had said about my feelings towards him was the truth.

* * *

In October of 1973, the world was astounded by an oil embargo imposed by the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries on the United States, Britain, Canada, Japan and the Netherlands for their support of Israel in the six-day Yom Kippur War. The price of a barrel of crude oil jumped

fourfold and the fallout reverberated around the world. In America petrol stations were told to stop selling petrol on weekends while in Britain the then Prime Minister, Ted Heath, urged families to heat only one room in their homes that winter.

Hong Kong was not spared. Being a relatively small consumer, it had no leverage with the oil companies, known collectively as the Seven Sisters, when they imposed quotas on all their customers.

Cutting usage was the only way to reduce consumption. But such a move was not easy to achieve and quite harmful for the colony's economy. The local power stations depended on oil and many factories needed electricity to operate around the clock. Neon signs were ordered to be switched off to save fuel and that in turn adversely affected bars, night clubs and other places for evening entertainment. Long-haul airlines started cutting back on services to the territory because there was no assurance their planes would be able to secure enough aviation fuel for their return journeys. That impacted upon trade and tourism.

Mike Clinton was swiftly appointed as Deputy Colonial Secretary (Special Duties) to tackle the crisis.

The city darkened noticeably by night. The unaccustomed gloom in which my *mah-jong* partners and I found ourselves when we made our way home depressed us. It had never occurred to us before that we would miss the garish neon lights touting the excesses of our consumerist society. Yet we did. The risk of being mugged loomed larger upon our collective consciousness, especially for the last one left waiting for a taxi in the ill-lit and near-deserted streets. Being the youngest, that last one was usually myself.

As City District Commissioner for Hong Kong, I had no direct responsibility for dealing with the crisis, apart from urging citizens to economise on lighting and electricity.

It occurred to me, however, that one of the people I had become acquainted with at the Chinese General Chamber had good connections with cadres in

the Chinese oil and gas sector. It might be possible for me, as an individual, to probe for possible help from China in a way that the Hong Kong government could not — because of the considerations of political rectitude and face.

I reasoned that China was a country with enormous energy requirements. For that reason, it had to have considerable strategic fuel reserves. If a tiny fraction of that reserve could be diverted to Hong Kong, then the local shortage could be virtually solved.

In line with that thinking, I bounced the idea off the person I knew. If China could come to Hong Kong's assistance when the free market mechanism of neoliberal capitalism was failing, it would be a timely demonstration of the Motherland's concern for the well-being of its compatriots, I stressed. It could win hearts and minds.

My contact — who shall remain nameless — thought it a good idea and agreed to sound out his connections. The answer that came back two or three days later, however, was not what I had expected.

Mainland officials apparently took a dim view of the people of Hong Kong, regarding them as an ungrateful and unpatriotic lot. They accused locals of forever criticising Chinese policies, without ever expressing gratitude to the People's Liberation Army for preventing the territory from being swamped by illegal immigrants or to the Kwangtung provincial authorities for providing them with subsidised foodstuff and drinking water. If Hong Kong now wanted fuel supplies, then it would have to pay an appropriate price.

"Hong Kong would of course pay at the full prevailing market rates," I said. "No one is looking for a subsidy or handout."

"The mainlanders want something more than that," my contact said. "They have learnt some of the hard lessons of capitalism."

"What have they learnt? What do they want?"

My contact then explained that Chinese authorities had for some time been keen to gain a foothold in the local petroleum retail market. But each time a site for a petrol station came up for public tender, Western oil companies

would out-bid Chinese corporations with grossly inflated bids. The Chinese kept doing the arithmetic but could not see how the Western companies could offer the prices they did and still turn in a profit. Then it gradually came to them that the oil giants, with an already established network of petrol stations, merely wanted to keep out competition. They did not seem to mind losing money on any one site so long as they achieved their wider goal to preserve a cosy cartel.

China could not afford to waste its resources in that way. Therefore, if China were to help with fuel during the present crisis, it would expect some petrol station sites to be granted at fair and equitable prices, not through any perverted public tendering system.

My immediate reaction was that I could not possibly get involved in that sort of negotiations. I had already overstepped my authority in floating the proposal. If it were a simple matter of a sale and purchase of petroleum products, I could possibly steer it through Mike Clinton. He would understand my motives. But if grants of land were to be involved, then that was an entirely different matter.

In the gossip-saturated environment of the colony, there was no telling what kind of allegations about my involvement might be bounced around. Some would suspect the worst of me, implying I might be getting some secret financial advantage under the counter.

“To get what the Chinese want, I’m afraid you’ll have to deal directly with the official handling the oil crisis,” I said. “It’s too awkward for me to be involved.”

“Why? You’re a senior Chinese official.”

“Not senior enough and not in the right sphere. An expatriate official has already been given the responsibility to tackle the crisis.”

“Can he speak Chinese?” my contact asked.

“No, he’s an Englishman.”

“How can I deal with him? I don’t speak English.”

I thought for a moment. "Look," I said. "I'm not at all sure the British will go for the kind of arrangement being suggested. Let me sound things out first. If the government is interested in talking, I'll let you know. Then it will be up to you or the Chinese to appoint an English-speaker to deal with the government direct. I don't want to be further involved."

"Pity, but fair enough," my contact said.

On that basis, I telephoned Mike Clinton. I told him what I had done and apologised for sticking my nose where it did not belong. I then outlined the kind of proposal the Chinese were prepared to offer. It was one fraught with policy difficulties. If the government did not wish to consider it, I would send that message back and the matter would be closed.

Mike said the situation was so dire he had to explore all options.

I then said I had no wish to get involved in any shape or form. Some segments of the establishment already regarded me as a man who did not know his proper place. I did not want to make a worse reputation for myself. Should the government wish to take the matter further, I would like no mention at all to anyone about my involvement. I would arrange for an English speaker to give him a ring. They can then both make an appointment direct. I would appreciate it if Mike would just pass off the Chinese contact as one which he had made himself.

Mike agreed and I withdrew completely from the scene. I purposely kept myself in the dark on subsequent negotiations, on who would get what from whom and on what terms. I later learnt that Hong Kong got extra fuel supplies from China in return for three sites in the New Territories designated for petrol stations, all granted under private treaties made by the Governor in Council.

Presumably neither side wanted to publicise the arrangements, for fear of handing the other side some propaganda advantage. The local media, just as in the case of the illegal Diaoyu Tai procession through the city, failed to pick up the story. If anyone wanted confirmation of the grants, all he had to do

would be do a search of Land Registry records.

* * *

The OPEC embargo of 1973 should have been a wake-up call to the world. It had created since the mid 19th century economic systems and lifestyles utterly dependent upon the use of fossil fuel and natural gas. Those bounties of Nature had to be created over eons of time though their temporary abundance and cheapness after uses had been found for them obscured that fact. That led mankind to assume they would be inexhaustible. But they were in fact quite finite and not at all renewable within any human timescale. When they were used up, that would be that. The whole human pattern of existence would have to change radically.

The economic and human chaos caused by that first OPEC disruption should have warned both governments and the consuming public that a crisis was coming. But the message did not sink in. It elicited no serious review of the world's dependency on those limited resources. Neither was any meaningful consideration given to finding alternatives.

When the disruption occurred, evidence had already been piling up that the use of fossil fuel and natural gas on such a vast scale was immensely damaging for the earth's environment and the living creatures inhabiting it. The progressive extinction of bird, animal and plant life, the pollution of air, river and sea, the acid rain, the changing weather patterns, the greenhouse gases damaging the ozone layer and global warming all signalled worrying developments.

But instead of facing up to the challenges, governments collectively buried their heads in the sand. They attributed the temporary disruption to obstreperous Arabs; they assured citizens that oil was in plentiful supply, that new sources were bound to be discovered and that science and technology would, in any eventuality, find suitable replacement fuels in the nick of time.

The big oil cartels, too, took to ramping up their estimates of oil reserves they had buried beneath the ground and seas, to reassure both their shareholders and their customers.

Other vested interests went on gaily making profits from the reckless consumption of oil and gas. Automobile manufacturers kept producing ever more powerful gas-guzzling machines and promoting them as essential status symbols. At the same time, the tourism industry and their handmaidens inundated the world with promotional material about visiting romantic and exotic places faraway.

The governments of developing countries added fuel to that travelling jamboree by establishing their own airlines, as if having a loss-making flag carrier was a hallmark of modernity.

Countless millions of ordinary Jills and Joes, lulled by those comforting narratives, responded by booking journeys to every conceivable corner of the globe, either singly or in motley groups. They descended upon historical towns and location of surpassing natural beauty like locusts and left them the worse for wear.

They journeyed not to engage with other cultures but too often merely for self-titillation and to globalise their superficial lifestyles, leaving trails of noise, litter, congestion and money-arrogance wherever they went. They might frivolously demand to be served hamburgers done just the way as back at Houston, Texas, or Yang Chow fried rice as dished up in Shanghai. Small wonder that many towns like Venice now want to limit the influx of tourists

The only major world leader who tried to warn of approaching dangers was President Jimmy Carter and he got promptly voted out of office. Thus the world rushed headlong towards an uncertain doom.

Now, four and a half decades after that first oil shock, the world is only beginning to glimpse the enormous problems left by the long and wasteful use of fossil fuel. A number of wars have been fought and millions have been killed in the struggle to secure fuel supplies. Many more wars are on the

horizon as the hour of fuel depletion looms nearer.

Since the start of the Industrial Revolution the world's population had grown sevenfold from about one billion. This is one of the by-products of rampant oil usage. Fossil fuel provided the feedstock for fertilisers, which in turn permitted agriculture to be practised on a massive scale and food to be cheaply sent all over the world. The abundance of food up-ended some of the old constraints formulated by Malthus. One could only shudder to imagine what would happen to those poor hapless billions when the present form of agriculture and the ease of shipping produce half way round the world would no longer be economically practical. There would be a scramble for food as well as for oil.

It is now clear that all the known alternatives to conventional oil, such as, coal, tar sands, shale oil, solar, wind, tidal, water and nuclear power, all depend to some degree on an underlying fossil fuel supply and that all of them taken together would still not make up for the amount of oil currently being consumed. Some have other drawbacks. Something has to give.

While it is true that electric cars are making an appearance, no one has yet come up with an electric airplane. Commercial aircraft use prodigious amount of jet fuel and at current prices fuel comes to roughly a quarter of operating costs. When fuel prices go up, how many could keep jet-setting all over the place?

Meanwhile, cities around the world are busily adding to the sterile and ugly forests of skyscrapers with windowless curtain walls. One can only wonder who would be using them when there would be no longer enough power to operate their lifts and run their air-conditioning.

Roughly two-thirds of the known oil reserves are located in the Middle East, a notoriously unstable and restive area. Should some hardline fundamentalist cliques seize power, they might well decide spontaneously to cut off supplies to punish infidels. Nothing can be ruled out in our present cockeyed world. An oil crisis of that sort would be more extreme than any previously experienced.

Even without such provocations, the depletion of natural gas and fossil fuel is likely to occur some time during this century, sooner rather than later. The world had better start preparing for that event.

Yet, all the while, governments around the world seemed incapable of making common cause to tackle one of the most severe existential crisis facing mankind.

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