

## CHAPTER 6

# The Lottery of Recruitment

THE ROOTS OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE in Hong Kong can be traced back to September of 1862, when three Cambridge graduates arrived as “cadets” during the governorship of Sir Hercules Robinson. Their arrival signalled a departure from the previous practice of making official appointments as “offices of profit under the Crown.” That practice had led to a number of very troubling scandals in the early days of the colony.

The three new cadets had secured their posts through passing competitive examinations. That innovation began in the early part of the 19th century, after inadequacies in governance throughout the British Empire had become more apparent. British public opinion thus gradually turned in favour of a civil service based on merit rather than patronage.

It was doubtful whether in bringing that change to Hong Kong the British authorities had been mindful at all of the examination system already in place in China for over 2,000 years. The Chinese system, instituted by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty in 141 BC, came about after he had elevated Confucian teachings into a form of state education, forcing those seeking official positions to first master the Confucian classics. Examinations were held periodically, at different levels, for selecting district, provincial and national officials. By allowing anyone with the appropriate knowledge to sit for them, the system brought a democratising effect, since noble births, family connections or the

sheer power of wealth could no longer be the determining factors in securing preferment.

Unfortunately, while the more merit-based system was being introduced into Hong Kong, a more retrogressive development was also taking place in China. The Ching Dynasty, under Western attack and desperate for additional sources of finances, began openly selling public offices. That merely hastened the collapse of the nation by encouraging more corruption.

The new Hong Kong system differed in several respects from the ancient Chinese system. First of all, it was not based upon mastery of any Confucian or Western classics. Rather a First Class Honours degree in any subject — or at least a Second Class Upper — from a recognised university would be enough. Whether a degree from a university outside the British Commonwealth would be recognised or not remained a matter of some uncertainty.

Because World War II had interrupted the university education of some British students, the British government decided after the war to admit into the colonial service those who had distinguished themselves in the armed forces or emergency services, notwithstanding that they were without a university degree. Among those who found their way to Hong Kong that way were Mike Clinton and Jack Cater. Both of them subsequently reached the top of the hierarchy.

The second difference between the Chinese examinations and the Hong Kong system was that the Chinese system was open to all, whereas the examinations for Hong Kong posts were restricted to only graduates of European stock. Both the examinations and the interviews were conducted by the Colonial Office in Britain. Such an arrangement entailed an inevitable European bias. It was possible that a belief in the superiority of Europeans was too ingrained in the white psyche to shift. Or it might have been that Whitehall had real or perceived reservations over the loyalty of all non-white subjects.

That racial restriction was not lifted until after World War II, after

Japan had demonstrated amply that an Asian country could give Western nations a run for their money. But even then, despite pious Colonial Office declarations to the effect that Hong Kong candidates would henceforth be given preference in appointments, a quota system heavily coloured by race was still surreptitiously employed. The number of Chinese officers to be admitted was limited to only one each year, regardless of the number of vacancies and regardless of the number of suitable Chinese candidates coming forward.

Local candidates also had to surmount a few other impediments. They had to be British subjects to begin with. Then, even with a recognised university degree, they still had to pass both a written English test and an aptitude test before qualifying for an interview by the selection board. Many local candidates fell well before that point. The selection boards throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s was made up largely of expatriates. All proceedings naturally had been conducted in English.

After being selected, a successful candidate still had to serve on probation for three years and to pass a further examination in English criminal law before being confirmed to the pensionable establishment.

That unpublicised quota system enabled many vacancies to be filled by expatriates from Britain and other white commonwealth countries, often through transfers of serving officers from those places. For that reason, many exceptional Chinese candidates — like Eric Peter Ho and Lai Ka-Wah — failed to gain admission on their first attempt. Lai Ka-Wah was eventually admitted in early 1961, at the same time as myself, after the restriction on a single Chinese admission per annum was lifted.

Others who had been rejected became generally lost to the public service because they would then naturally go off to seek careers in other callings.

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Before I returned to Hong Kong in 1953 with two Stanford degrees, I — like

many young Chinese who had grown up in British colonies and subjected to a largely colonial education — had gone through an identity crisis and a great deal of soul-searching. I had gone to study in America just prior to Chairman Mao proclaiming at Tiananmen on October 1, 1949, the establishment of a Chinese Communist government. That event took me and many Americans by surprise. Fellow students asked me whether America ought to recognise the new regime or stick with the old one, with its remnants holed up in Taiwan under the protection of the American Seventh Fleet.

I could only hum and haw in response. I had no political affiliations to speak of. Nor had I any in-depth understanding of the complicated situation in China. My natural instincts, after witnessing hyper-inflation and rampant corruption in 1947, while staying with my mother in Canton, were to follow those of my revolutionary grandfather. He had throughout his life wanted his country to be at peace, prosperous and united.

There had to be a losing side in any civil war, I reasoned. And the losing side should accept defeat with grace. Otherwise fighting would never cease. Outside powers had been interfering in Chinese affairs long enough and they ought to stop too. Yet I realised most Americans tended to be instinctively against anything associated with Communism. So I merely waffled, to get out of providing an opinion which I could not fully explain. But the pressure kept mounting, particularly after the outbreak of the Korean War.

On the other side of the Pacific, Chinese and Americans began killing each other, along with their Korean allies. A wider conflict might well be ignited, given the loose talk about American armies marching all the way up to the Yalu and beyond. If a wider conflict erupted, how would that affect people inside China? Those in Hong Kong and Macau were bound to become involved too. In a time of national peril, the Chinese people would surely defy the United Nations embargo on China and smuggle needed vital supplies to help their homeland.

How could I remain a bystander with folded arms, enjoying the comfort

and security of California, while my country was once again forced to defend its national integrity? I felt compelled to explain to my American friends and classmates the Chinese perspectives. Yet I found I did not know enough about China's history and politics to give convincing explanations.

It came upon me forcefully then that all I knew about my own nation and its culture were the tiny bits of unconnected flotsam and jetsam I had picked up during my childhood, from Miss Nice and Tutor Tam and from eavesdropping upon conversations between my elders and their friends. I was in fact a cultural freak. Thanks to my early education in Singapore and Australia, I knew more about Western history, literature and values than I did those of China and the East!

I resolved immediately to rectify that situation. I signed up for courses in Chinese history and philosophy and devoted every spare moment I had outside my degree requirements to reading up on different aspects of Chinese culture. The more I read, however, the more I realised how inadequate my knowledge was. It was in fact a curse to be a Chinese. It was infinitely better to belong to a newly developed nation; there would then be no need to get acquainted with such a lengthy history and so many philosophies and traditions. I could see that no matter how much I read, I would never catch up with Western Sinologues like Thomas Wade, Robert Hart or Joseph Needham.

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My promiscuous reading nonetheless gave me a heightened consciousness of my own Chinese-ness. That fed a sharper resentment over having to return to a corner of China under foreign rule. But I had little choice. I did not want to remain in America, for I did not feel I belonged there.

My great-grandfather had chosen Hong Kong as the family home shortly after the start of the British occupation and my father was still living there, as a guest in the home of my Eighth Granduncle. My mother had gone off

to the Philippines, with her new family. I could have chanced heading for the mainland to assist in its national reconstruction, like many other Chinese did during that time. The new Chinese government in fact had a special programme to lure overseas Chinese to return, with promises of good jobs and special treatment, because it need professional people in all spheres were needed to support the country's development. But I hesitated again, for fear I would not be accepted because of both my questioning attitude and my lack of specialised skills.

So it had to be Hong Kong, till the place was reclaimed by the motherland. But that eventuality had been pushed back into an indefinite future after the Chinese Premier, Chou En-Lai, declared that the status of the colony was a problem left over by history and that the two countries involved would deal with it "when the time was ripe".

That statement sent a message not only to the British but also to the Chinese living in the territory. It implied there should be no premature effort to stir up a patriotic opposition to foreign occupation. The motherland would deal with matters at its own pace. Hence the ordinary citizen could only wait in limbo — either in hope or in trepidation, depending to his own political inclinations.

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Meanwhile, there was the mundane business of finding gainful employment to attend to. I was averse to entering the money-grubbing world of commerce, with its pervasive slipperiness and its dog-eat-dog ethos. My choice was either to try teaching or to return to journalism.

I began by seeking registration as a teacher but struck a snag immediately. The expatriate official in charge of teacher registration refused to register me. He said he had never heard of Stanford. There were a lot of "funny little colleges in America with dodgy degrees," he added. My registration would

have to wait till he had established the bona fides of Stanford degrees.

Stymied, I turned to sounding out possibilities in journalism. At the same time, I chanced upon an advertisement inviting applications for posts in the Administrative Service. The starting pay was in line with what I could expect in journalism. But the administrative posts came with a salary scale providing for annual increments. In my experience, pay rises in journalism often depended on the health of the publication's bottom line and on the whim of the editor-in-chief. Security in pay progression within the civil service seemed an attractive proposition. So I applied.

Working for the British, of course, risked being branded as a collaborator by the more nationalistic Chinese. But, historically, accommodating conquerors had been quite common. When China was a collection of warring kingdoms, people whose king had been defeated had to submit to a new ruler. After the unification of the country under the First Emperor of Ch'in, there had been long periods when foreigners like the Mongols and the Manchus ruled. Any Chinese wanting to throw off a foreign yoke would still have to eat while formulating plans for rebellion.

Collaboration was nothing new for members of my own family either. My grandfather had done so in the Straits Settlements for 20 years, when he put his medical skills at the disposal of the British Crown in order to facilitate raising funds among overseas Chinese to finance uprisings against the Manchus. Those uprisings had been led by his friend, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen.

Anna, the mother of my siblings, and Wong Hok-Keung, her cousin, had both collaborated more directly, working for the British Special Branch in Singapore before World War II. My father, too, could not help accommodating the Japanese during their occupation of Singapore. He had to ensure that 10 members of our family would not starve to death.

There had also been a more subtle kind of collaboration on the part of my maternal grandfather, Mok Shao-Tsang, when he spent much of his life promoting a foreign religion. He was a true believer in Christianity. During

the two years I had spent with him as a small boy in Canton, he had filled my head with the alarming notion that I had been born bad, loaded with original sin. I could only escape damnation, he said, by gaining the grace of his alien God.

He himself had been utterly convinced that he carried his own original sin, though he was a very sincere and kind-hearted man. He spent most of his life caring for the poor, the sick, the hungry and the dispossessed. Whether his deeds gained him salvation in heaven could not be discovered. But at least on earth, when the ecclesiastic office of Anglican Bishop of Canton was created, he became the first person to fill it.

My maternal grandfather's teachings had left me with a nagging residue of guilt. I began to rationalise that by doing some public service I might make up for whatever sins I might have committed too. That was part of the reason I applied to become an Administrative Officer. But I got nowhere; I failed the selection.

I did not discover till long afterwards about the unannounced quota of only one Chinese Administrative Officer to be admitted each year. Moreover, if several candidates were considered to be of equal ability, then preference would be given to one already in the civil service.

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Following my failure, I got a job as a sub-editor and feature writer with the *Hong Kong Standard*, then under the editorship of Leslie Sung, a Eurasian graduate of Hong Kong University. Leslie and I got along extremely well and we became fast friends until well after we had both retired and had migrated to different parts of the world.

I had been working happily at the *Standard* for less than a year before I was summarily sacked. Leslie told me that some people in the government had taken a dislike to the tone of some of my articles and had applied pressure

on the management to get rid of me. Leslie told me he had objected to my dismissal on grounds of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. But to no avail. He wanted to resign in protest, as a matter of principle, but I deterred him.

“Be pragmatic,” I said. “It’s better for men with principles to be working inside a newspaper than left on the outside. Besides, you’re married and have a family to support.”

On that basis, Leslie stayed. But he began studying law in his spare time to prepare for a career outside of journalism and later became a senior partner in a leading law firm.

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By then I had acquired registration as a teacher, so I set about teaching secondary school for a couple of years. It proved a dispiriting experience, teaching European history to young people who really had little interest in a foreign civilisation. In despair, I decided to end the farce and to leave for Europe, to resume work as a journalist or to engage in some other form of writing.

During the next few years of an itinerant life, I found I had enough leisure to delve deeper into the Chinese philosophies I had begun studying at Stanford, particularly the ideas of Mencius. Confucianism had attracted me enormously once I got a taste of it. The emphasis of its sages upon the importance of basic human relationships, as between king and citizen, father and son, husband and wife, got me thinking about the progressive disintegration of the old extended family. And of the different degrees and gradings of each relationship also.

It had been Mencius who had first tried more than 2,000 years ago to offer the theoretical justifications for many Confucian beliefs. He held that human nature was fundamentally good. If it were allowed to develop unimpeded,

then “human-heartedness” and a sense of righteousness would take hold. But man’s nature also contained other elements which had to be controlled. Otherwise they could lead to evil.

In the Confucian scheme of things, man was also a political animal, which meant that human relationships had to develop within a state or a society. The state therefore had to be a moral institution and the head of it a moral leader. In short, a real king was also required to be a real sage, someone who could place the welfare of the “old hundred surnames” before other considerations. I suppose that over the centuries the concept developed of selecting public officials from those who were steeped in the classics. Such officials could then serve as both the father and the mother of the people.

The government of a sage king would in practice be carried out through moral instructions and education. When a ruler lacked the ethical qualities to be a good leader, then the people had a right to rebel and kill him as a “mere fellow”. Such ideas exerted tremendous influence throughout Chinese history. They struck me as much more realistic and attractive than my maternal grandfather’s theory of original sin and the need for a god to intervene to attain salvation.

As a counterpoint to Confucianism, I also delved into Taoism and found in it much food for introspection and speculation.

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When I got back in Hong Kong in 1959, I was no longer alone. I had recklessly acquired a wife. I got a job as a night sub-editor with the *South China Morning Post*. But it soon became apparent that nocturnal work was not very conducive to family life, especially after a son in poor health came quickly upon the scene in 1960.

When I saw another advertisement about openings for Administrative Officers, I reflected upon it. The notion of working for a colonial government

overseen by a distantly appointed foreign autocrat was still not an agreeable one. My experiences with governments had been largely unsatisfactory.

But, now that I was saddled with a family, a civil service job did offer a measure of security. A regime with fixed yearly salary increments was also not available in the media or in the private sector. Moreover, the government would provide free medical attention for dependants of civil servants. That was an enormous plus, given the sickliness of my son. On that basis, I decided to give it another try, at least as a stepping stone. I had no great expectation of being successful.

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Going through the recruitment process for a second time, I was surprised to find that candidates still only had to be tested on English and not on their ability to communicate in Chinese. Before the war, expatriate officers had to spend two years learning Chinese before taking up their posts. Could the waiving of the need for fluency in Chinese be an attempt to send candidates a subliminal message that so long as they knew how to take orders in English, there was no need to pay heed to views expressed in other languages?

The obsession with facility in English was sometimes carried to absurd levels. Labour Inspectors, for instance, whose jobs required them to deal almost exclusively with factory workers, and Housing Officers, who dealt mainly with working class tenants in government housing estates, had often been selected or rejected on the basis of their command of English. It must have been due to some grace from heaven that no such requirement had been imposed upon rubbish collectors and manual labourers as well!

That bizarre and unenlightened state of affairs must have been due to the Establishment Branch having been as fast asleep as Rip Van Winkle for most of the last century and a half. It later morphed into a bloated Civil Service Branch under the McKinsey reorganisation.

The civil service, then as now, was the largest single employer in the colony. Whatever it did, for good or ill, inevitably set the tone for the rest of the community. And yet, for much of the colonial period that tone had been set mainly by expatriates whose contacts with the masses were minimal. Their forebears in the former foreign concessions in China had set the pattern, restricting communications with Chinese to the staff in their offices, their sedan chair carriers and their domestic servants at home. It was only after World War II that that situation slowly began to change.

That cocooned mode of existence was by no means unique to British colonial masters. It was quite common among well-meaning people committed to bringing civilisation to those described as “lesser breeds without the law.” Comintern agents sent to China, for instance, also appeared to be locked into a similar mindset.

Otto Braun was a prime example. He was known as Li De or Li the German after he had been sent by the Soviet Union in 1932 as military advisor to the so-called “Red bandits” in their struggle against the Kuomintang. Braun had studied at the Frunze Military Academy where German strategic thinking prevailed. He could quote from Caesar or Napoleon, or from Tacitus or von Moltke at the drop of a hat. But China and its people had remained blank pages for him. He knew no Chinese, made no attempt to learn it, and after two years in the country still preferred eating bread to rice, even if he had to bake the bread himself.

Of course, Braun also treated with disdain the guerrilla tactics advocated by Mao, labelling them as *passé*. How wrong he had been did not become clear until much later, until after Mao had secured control of the Red Army by out-manoeuvring Chang Kuo-Tao and proceeded to beat the armies of the Kuomintang hands down.

In fairness, I should perhaps not criticise the likes of Braun when I myself, in spite of having spent more than 30 years in the West, still preferred eating rice to bread — even if I had to cook the rice myself!

If the British elite in Hong Kong shared the mindset of a Braun, that should be quite understandable. After all, the *raison d'être* for the colony was initially to facilitate that morally equivocal business of peddling opium. Ingenious and amoral ways of making money were thus at the forefront of thinking among the top wheelers and dealers. I doubted if any colonial administration would wish to disturb such a cosy status quo.

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Unbeknownst to me, the previous annual quota on admitting only one Chinese into the Administrative Service per annum had been lifted around the same time as my application. To my surprise, therefore, I found I was offered an appointment at the start of 1961.

That offer forced me to re-evaluate the hitherto rudderless mode of my life. It appeared a very important decision, with many ramifications. The financial impact was not the least among them. It would mean an immediate cut in income, for the starting point of the Administrative Service scale was below what I was earning. It would require a couple of annual increments to get back to my existing level.

But even a return to that level still meant not earning enough to support my family. I had been relying on a substantial subsidy from my in-laws ever since my marriage to make ends meet. Living at the economic margins was one of the causes for my shaky marriage. How could that inadequate level be further lowered for an indefinite period of years? How furious would my wife get?

The counter argument was that there was no future in journalism in Hong Kong. I was stuck on an income plateau, if not actually slipping into a rut. Pay increases were at the discretion of the employer and subject to the profitability of his publishing enterprise. At least government service had an established system for salary increases and also more sociable working hours. To cap that

off, there would be considerable savings on my son's medical bills.

But it was other imponderables that worried me most. Although the Administrative Service had been touted as an elite service, made up of the best brains in the administration, how would that brainpower be deployed — for the benefit of the local population or to maintain an imperial agenda at all cost? The British record was not reassuring. Messes had been left behind at almost every place where the Union Jack had once fluttered. Would I be called upon to be complicit in sustaining a similar mess in Hong Kong?

Confucian sages had envisaged the art of governance — at its highest — to be a noble and ethical enterprise. Should I not try my hand at it, even under a foreign ruler? It had to be a challenging quest to identify that shifting centre ground upon which individual citizens could maximise their freedoms consistent with a state's overriding requirements for order and security. There would also be the task of mediating between local attitudes and foreign impositions.

I was not without certain notions about the rightness of things. There were principles from which I was not prepared to depart. If called upon to do the unacceptable, I could follow the example of Tao Yuan-Ming, that Six Dynasties poet and official, by refusing “to bow like a servant in return for five bushels of grain.” If pressed, I might even be able to throw a spanner or two into an infernal foreign machine.

After a couple of weeks of debating with myself and consulting with my in-laws, I decided to take the plunge to work for the government.

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After joining, I had the extreme good fortune of being assigned to work for David Baron, the then Director of Social Welfare. He turned out to be one of the most kind, fair, principled and compassionate colleagues I have ever worked for. We became life-long friends and we kept in touch for decades

after our respective retirements.

My next expatriate boss was Alistair Todd in the Government Secretariat. He was equally principled and intelligent and was straight as a die. I thus had two wonderful introductions to civil service life.

In later years, my good fortune continued, for I was assigned to superiors like David Alexander, John Cowperthwaite and Donald Luddington.

Those I have named were all in their different ways exceptional colleagues. They went out of their way to mentor juniors and to inspire them to adhere to integrity, dedication and openness. They contributed mightily to the excellence and *esprit de corps* associated with the Administrative Service and offered friendships which transcended racial divides to become enduring and treasured.

But like most professional organisations, the service also had its fair share of duds, gasbags, time-servers, chancers and unreconstructed racists. In my own view, the service was probably at its best during the early 1970s, before the steadying influence of many old-timers was lost through retirements. The top levels then became more flamboyant and more given to public relations gimmicks.

At the same time, cliques started to develop around personalities or mutual interests. For example, it was an open secret that a handful of local Administrative Officers had been meeting regularly since the early 1960s for the purpose of pushing the government to grant them equal treatment as expatriates. Expatriate officers too had their own lobbying groups. Some of the idealism, sense of service and unity of purpose began to fade as a result.

I have not been in the picture on how the service had evolved after the sovereignty over Hong Kong had been returned to China. Someone else would have to take up that story.

Three Administrative Officers, all Chinese, had to the best of my knowledge been sent to prison over the last 30 years for corruption of one kind or another. Two of them had been sentenced after the sovereignty of Hong Kong had

been returned to China. Perhaps more, both Chinese and expatriates, should have been imprisoned. There certainly had been cases of blatant intellectual dishonesty which went unpublicised and unpunished though they bordered on criminality.

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Soon after I had been confirmed into the permanent and pensionable establishment in 1964, I was asked to serve on a recruitment board for Administrative Officers. I reacted with some ambivalence, for I was not sure whether the invitation was on the up and up. Had I really gained sufficient experience in three short years to pass judgement on the suitability of others? Or was it a baited trap, to serve as a figleaf to obscure racial discrimination and to test my reliability in serving the British Crown? How far should I allow myself to be compromised or bent? After all, it was not for nothing that the Marquis de Ximénez had described the British as “*la perfide Albion.*”

But the invitation to participate appeared pretty much like the ones issued by the Mafia — impossible to refuse. So I duly turned up at the board to do my duty. The board consisted of four other serving officers, all expatriates, with a Staff Grade B officer as chairman. I was the only Chinese and also the most junior member. The chairman of the Public Services Commission, another expatriate, sometimes sat in as an observer.

I had expected to be given instructions on the kind of candidates the board should be looking for before proceedings commenced. But no instruction was forthcoming. Since I was unsure whether only pliable types or those unlikely to rock the boat were being sought, I asked the chairman what qualities we wanted in candidates.

“The same as our own, of course,” the chairman replied chirpily.

I was not prepared to rest on his evasion. I persisted. “Would that not be rather difficult, seeing that almost half the candidates to be interviewed are women?”

I doubt if we would find very many with masculine characteristics.”

“You know what I mean,” the chairman snapped testily.

Since the chairman appeared disinclined to explain, I did not attempt to tell him what was on my mind. I was keen to recruit candidates with qualities of heart and mind capable of developing human-heartedness and a sense of righteousness. I did not want to be responsible for selecting some flunkey who could turn readily into a Quisling or a Wang Ching-Wai. But I kept that thought to myself.

On that slightly ruffled note, I began my duties.

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The recruitment interviews turned out to be fairly unstructured, with no agreement beforehand as to who would ask what type of questions. It was pretty much catch-as-catch-can, according to the personal inclinations of individual board members. Each candidate was scheduled for at least half an hour's grilling. More, if thought necessary.

The use of English favoured female candidates, for they had studied the humanities or English literature for the most part. Thus they had greater facility with the language. The men tended towards more scientific degrees.

To put candidates at their ease, someone might begin by asking questions falling well within a candidate's field of study or interest. For a woman, she might be asked her views on equal pay for women or abortion laws or the adequacy or otherwise of statutory provisions for maternity leave. For a male physics graduate, he might be asked to explain the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory or Planck's Constant.

I myself preferred questions entailing moral dilemmas. For instance, I might say: “In ancient times, there used to be a Chinese saying that if the emperor asked a minister to die and the minister failed to die, he would be considered disloyal; and if a father asked a son to perish and the son did not

perish, the son would be considered unfilial. Do you think such dicta still relevant in our modern age?”

There would, of course, be no correct or incorrect answer. The candidate had to stake his or her ground and defend it. After an answer I would pass the candidate to another board member. But I would have laid the groundwork for later questions. For instance, I might return later as follows:

“As you may know, the government has enforced, following a big influx of illegal immigrants from Kwangtung Province in 1962, a policy known as the ‘touch base’ policy. It is predicated upon illegals being able to outwit both the Chinese and our own border controls.

“An additional security cordon has therefore been set up in the New Territories, to prevent any illegal from reaching any urban centre. The teams manning that inner cordon are required to arrest all illegals they can find, for quick repatriation to China. If an illegal manages to reach an urban area, however, he is considered to have ‘touched base’ and allowed to remain. The assumption behind the policy is purely pragmatic. First, it would require too much manpower to track down anyone who has reached a built-up area. Secondly, a person’s ability to do so would suggest some sort of local assistance, which might also be deployed to help him hide.

“Now imagine that you have been successful in this interview and, as a fresh Administrative Officer, you have been assigned to lead one of the teams manning the inner cordon.

“One night, you receive a telephone call from a stranger, a trafficker, if you like. He tells you your father — or maybe your brother — has got himself out of China to Hong Kong. Assume for the time being that you do have a father or brother who might want to come here. The trafficker continues by telling you that your kinsman is hiding in a chicken coop at a certain location in the New Territories. He requires you to help your kinsman to ‘touch base’ before he is picked up and sent back. What would you do under such circumstances?”



Some of the human faces in the 1962 influx. Photo: *South China Morning Post*

The earlier questions about loyalty and filial piety had already nailed the candidate down to certain doctrinal positions. He would now have to defend those positions. In practice, the answers offered ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Half an hour of interviewing was of course far from foolproof in determining whether a young person could fulfil the requirements of becoming a good public official. But it was often sufficient time to reveal whether he lacked the makings of a good public official.

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Subsequent to that initial recruitment board, I was asked to serve on two more boards during the next few years. The subsequent boards had been constituted in much the same way as the first. I had remained the sole Chinese member and I had chosen to continue the line of questioning I had adopted for the first board.

The greatest difficulty I encountered during the subsequent exercises concerned two exceptionally gifted candidates who appeared in the same year. Their names were Wong Sing-Wah and Chan Cho-Chak. Both had gone through the process with flying colours, fending off successfully some of the toughest questions thrown at them. Both displayed fine potential for the service.

However, after their interviews, I argued strongly against giving either of them an immediate appointment. I felt unable to explain some of my reasons before an expatriate-dominated board.

First of all, both candidates were short, standing at only about five-foot-three. Both of them had fresh, boyish faces which belied their status as university graduates. Their eyes shone with eagerness and intelligence. But I noticed that one of them — after more than 50 years, I cannot now be sure which one — betrayed evidence of biting his finger nails. Still high-strung, I thought, feeling the need to shield him from more insensitive colleagues to give him time to mature.

Secondly, I felt the potential of the two was too precious to be exposed to the vagaries of an unimaginative Establishment Branch. One or the other of them might be thoughtlessly sent to a frontline department responsible for, say, squatter clearances from Crown land. Such duties might demoralise a raw and untried officer before he could find his feet.

Squatter clearances were sometimes met by fierce resistance from those about to be displaced. Should that happen, would a fresh recruit know how to handle the situation? Would the tough and seasoned clearance teams under him obey his orders? He might in their eyes appear younger than their own sons or grandsons. Would either of them panic in the face of bloodshed? I wanted to protect both of them from such an early ordeal.

I had gone through a similar conflict during my first assignment at the Social Welfare Department. I fortunately had the advantage of being much older and more experienced. Nonetheless, it had rattled me and caused me to

wonder if I was really suited to be in foreign administration.

My test had occurred soon after I had been made head of the Relief Section. It came in the form of an agitated telephone call from a redoubtable lady named Mrs. Elsie Elliott. I had never met the lady but she had already made a fearsome name for herself as the bane of the colonial bureaucracy. She had a penchant for involving herself as a champion of underdogs in all sorts of social disputes.

She had asserted over the telephone that some unfortunates were being tossed off Crown land in Kowloon and that their huts were being demolished by squatter control teams. Why was I, as the head of the Relief Section, not out there to stop the demolition, she asked.

I explained that land clearances were not my responsibility. If people were illegally occupying Crown land and that land was required for some public purpose, then the illegal occupants had to be cleared.

“You’re the head of the Relief Section, aren’t you?” Mrs. Elliott retorted. “Innocent people, women and children, are having their homes destroyed. Shouldn’t you be out there offering them relief? Otherwise what kind of relief are you supposed to offer?”

“If they should be in need of food, they can register at a Social Welfare Department centre and I will see to their being processed for dry rations,” I replied. “I am sure the people undertaking the clearance have made provision for temporary shelter. I have no control over clearances. They are not my responsibility.”

“Not your responsibility!” Mrs. Elliott echoed. “What kind of man are you, to have no responsibility for the suffering of your fellow human beings? How would you like it if someone tore down your home and tossed your family and their belongings out on the street?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Elliott, but I cannot help you in this matter.”

“You just have no heart,” she said. “You should be ashamed of yourself.” She then rang off.

A surge of hopeless impotence had gripped me as I replaced the telephone in its cradle. What *was* I in the public service for, I asked myself, if I could not help the needy navigate through the thickets of public regulations and private needs? It was as if I were back at the Central Magistracy ages ago, watching bewildered defendants being sent to gaol for offences they could not apprehend. I could hardly fall back on the bland excuse I was not my brother's keeper.

And yet, I suppose I was trying to act as my brother's keeper in respect of Wong and Chan. The salary they would earn upon acceptance would be meagre enough but I wanted to give them the chance of finding their feet first, by inducting them into the civil service but at a lower level. I feared they might become disheartened by facing insoluble dilemmas too early. I was convinced they had potential; I did not want to risk losing either of them because of unsound initial postings.

It was because of such a tangle of considerations that I argued they both looked far too school-boyish to be Administrative Officers tasked with decisions beyond their experience. It would be safer to appoint them initially as Executive or Trade Officers. In order to encourage them to try again for the Administrative Service, they could be invited to apply next year. That would also test their determination to serve.

I must have cast sufficient doubt among other members of the board for it to decide as I had recommended. Both joined at a lower grade but were admitted into the Administrative Service the following year.

After their admission, I told them both I had been responsible for delaying their admission as Administrative Officers. I got the impression that neither held anything against me.

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Some years later, Wong Sing-Wah was posted to the Economic Services

Branch to work under me. I found him to be a meticulous and dedicated officer. His recommendations were always sober and thorough. After I had left the civil service and migrated to Britain, we maintained contact for many years. I had, unfortunately, no opportunity to work directly with Chan Cho-Chak. But such comments as I had received from his superiors suggested that he too had been doing splendidly.

Both of them in due course reached the highest grade of Policy Secretary and retired with distinction.

In 1993, when the British authorities could no longer resist the pressure to have a Chinese in the post of Chief Secretary before the return of sovereignty to China, I heard gossip in London that Chan Cho-Chak had been offered the post but he had declined it. No specific reason came to my ears. The appointment subsequently went to Mrs. Anson Chan, née Fang, another officer with whose appointment as an Administrative Officer I had been marginally involved in.

After Chan Cho-Chak retired from the civil service, he took on a number of important positions in community organisations, including the much prized chairmanship of the Hong Kong Jockey Club.

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Some time in 1973, I received a telephone call from the Deputy Secretary for the Civil Service. He said he would like to sound me out on a couple of ideas. Although he was a Chinese colleague, I was immediately put on guard. I had long ago arrived at the conclusion that senior Secretariat officers usually found my opinions inimical to the enjoyment of their quiet cups of morning or afternoon tea. For one to seek my views suggested there had to be a catch.

The Deputy Secretary indicated in a leisurely way that orders had come down from Government House for a rapid increase in the intake of

Administrative Officers. The Governor wanted to expand public services, which meant finding more bodies to man new posts. One way of achieving that result would be to reduce the rigour of recruitment interviews.

That would not necessarily mean any lowering of standards, the Deputy Secretary was quick to add. It merely meant that the weeding out process would be deferred to the time of confirmation, after three years of probation. The advantages to such a proposal would be a more thorough assessment of the abilities of the officers concerned, apart from the immediate availability of more hands.

I saw through the stratagem right away and replied that I disagreed with that approach and wanted no part of it. I had no access to recruitment statistics but, impressionistically, I think the recruitment boards I had served on had, on the whole, produced far lower intakes than the ones I had been absent from. I suspected the Establishment Branch of thinking of putting me on yet another board but wanted to be sure beforehand that I would not queer the Governor's pitch.

I told the Deputy Secretary frankly that I did not think the Government House proposal would work at all. Over the years, I said, I have had a fair number of probationary Administrative Officers placed under my charge. In four cases — involving both locals and expatriates, male and female — I had recommended after several months of supervision that their probations be terminated. It would have been a kindness to the probationers as well as to the bureaucracy because, whatever talents they might have, were clearly not the ones suitable for public service. They ought to seek careers elsewhere.

But in each and every instance my recommendation had been ignored. All those probationers went on to be confirmed. Fortunately for the public, three of them soon reached their own conclusions they could not cope as Administrative Officers and resigned. The fourth soldiered on till retirement but ended up in a very middling position. Those developments indicated to me that the people responsible for managing the civil service had fallen into

the bad habit of evading hard decisions.

“Those cases happened before my time,” the Deputy Secretary injected.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to imply you were personally responsible. I was criticising the system which allowed such nonsensical things to happen.”

I then went on to recall for the Deputy Secretary a specific event which happened some years back when both he and I had been present. The event had been a dinner held by local Administrative Officers to which the Governor of the time, Sir David Trench, and his wife had been invited. The number of local Administrative Officers was then quite small and the most senior one had reached no higher than the dizzying height of Staff Grade C. But we all had gripes.

The dinner was held at the Hong Kong University Alumni Association and consisted of two tables. As was normal for such occasions, the two most junior officers were selected to escort the Governor and his lady respectively, at the two different tables. I had been at the table with the Governor. The officer assigned to Lady Trench at the next table was a relatively fresh recruit. I could see him engaging in animated conversation with the Governor’s wife.

At the end of the meal, when the party was about to break up, one of the more senior officers said to Lady Trench — by way of small talk — that he hoped young So-and-So had been taking good care of her during the meal.

To the amazement of everyone present, Lady Trench declared in a loud voice: “That lad’s still wet behind the ears.”

I had no idea what the young man had been holding forth on. Perhaps he just wanted to impress the Governor’s wife with his cleverness. Whatever that was, it misfired badly. It must have taken some time for that young man to live down that public rebuke.

Some years later, he committed suicide in his bathroom, though it was doubtful whether the two events had been in any way connected.

I also drew the Deputy Secretary’s attention to another recent incident at

Government House. As had been customary for a long time, every Governor would invite one or two new Administrative Service recruits to dinner at Government House, both to give them a taste of life in high society and to bolster the illusion they had become part of an enviable elite. It had been a black tie affair.

Everybody was taken aback when a fresh recruit from the Chinese University of Hong Kong turned up in an ordinary suit wearing the kind of black tie meant for funerals. Of course, being well-bred, none of the guests betrayed anything more than they would if someone had broken wind loudly at a vicar's tea party.

The poor man should never have been admitted to the Administrative Service. Even if he had got in by fluke, his inadequacies should have been apparent to his supervisors during his probation. But somehow he got confirmed into the pensionable establishment.

That man's lack of common sense and the administration's bungling over his career were almost beyond belief. He could easily have consulted his seniors if he did not know what "black tie" on an invitation card meant. His lack of initiative reflected poorly on both his selection process and on his fellow Administrative Officers.

It was only after more than 20 years that the Civil Service Branch finally woke up to the fact he was incapable of discharging any of the normal duties of an Administrative Officer. It then resorted to a bureaucratic device known in the jargon as MIR or "management initiated retirement" to remove him.

After citing those two instances, I argued that recruitment procedures should be toughened rather than relaxed. Mentoring a fresh recruit demanded a great deal of time from seasoned officers. If they did not display the right potential to begin with, time spent in mentoring would be a waste.

Furthermore, I added, a measure of good governance depended upon the quality of officials undertaking the tasks required to be done and not merely on the number of people assigned to them. More fundamental matters ought

to be tackled first, before searching for extra bodies.

If the problem to be tackled concerned education, for instance, the entire system should first be systematically re-examined. If we were producing poorly educated citizens, the first investigations should be into what was being taught to them, how and by whom. Bad curricula and bad teachers could not produce good citizens. Associated issues like affordability, school meals, colleges for training teachers, recreational facilities and so on also had to be looked at. None of those related problems would disappear simply by building more schools and offering more school places.

The Deputy Secretary listened to my lengthy exposition in relative silence. I could sense his discomfiture; but I was enjoying myself too much delivering an earful to the Civil Service Branch. In his heart, I imagined the Deputy Secretary probably agreed with at least some of my points but he could not find it in himself to speak against the instructions from Government House. In the end, he just thanked me for my views and rang off.

In the normal course of events, the Deputy Secretary would probably note in a Secretariat file somewhere my utter unsuitability for service on future Administrative Officer recruitment boards. Whether he did or not I could not say. But after that exchange I was never again asked to serve on another recruitment board for the rest of my career.

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Of course, I only had the Deputy Secretary's account of the Governor's demand for a speedy increase in the number of Administrative Officers. If Sir Murray MacLehose had indeed sanctioned a watering down of standards to achieve that end, then he has done both Hong Kong and the Administrative Service a great disservice.

Administrative Officers, for good or ill, formed — and continue to form — the backbone of the Hong Kong civil service. The aim, therefore, should

be to inspire and attract the ablest and the most idealistic of each generation. The civil service could not — and should not — stoop to competing with the private sector in seeking talent on the basis of material rewards alone. It should instead project public service as a vocation calling for plain living, integrity, dedication, vision and anonymity, rather than as just another cushy job.

If enough serious effort were made, such people could be found in every age. Chinese history has been filled with examples. Take at random Chancellor Fan Chung-Yen of the Sung Dynasty. He worked himself to the bone for the public good and enjoined other public officials to be “the first to bear the world’s hardships and the last to enjoy its comforts.”

Another worthy coming readily to mind was Chang Chu-Tseng, a statesman of the Ming Dynasty. When he was in power he placed himself completely above personal success or failure and the praise of men. He instilled discipline into officialdom and insisted that officials fulfilled their duties with faith, determination and courage.

Unfortunately, colonial education largely avoided teaching students about such ancient personalities from Chinese culture. The newer generations of local Administrative Officers had probably never even heard of them. Besides, how many bright youngsters would rush to become an underpaid civil servant when business corporations were offering big bucks for the ability to draw up flattering corporate accounts or for stripping assets after a leveraged buy-out?

And even with 1997 fast approaching, the MacLehose governorship made little effort to prepare the young for significant change. Local community leaders had to bear some of the blame too, for they failed to put sufficient pressure on the administration to prepare for the future.

I lost touch with the pattern for recruiting Administrative Officers after my conversation with the Deputy Secretary. What I can confirm, however, was that a couple of positive changes occurred in 1974.

By that year, Eric Ho had become senior enough to be asked to chair a recruitment board for Administrative Officers. He immediately allowed, for the first time, candidates to answer all questions in the language of their choice.

His approach was entirely logical because in 1972 Chinese had been made — with much public fanfare and after a wait of some 130 years — into a second official language. Eric's move no doubt put the noses of some non-Chinese-speaking expatriate board members out of joint.

Eric also made another startling innovation — he demanded to see all the written English examination papers of candidates who had failed to qualify for an interview. When he found that some with good scores on the intelligence test had failed over English, he invited them for interviews nonetheless.

His argument was that if candidates had good brains, then language could be improved through usage. Because of his approach, a small number of extra Chinese officers with potential got appointed. If not for him, those officers would have fallen by the wayside.

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To run a little ahead of myself in chronology, it might be worth recording as a footnote that Sir Murray MacLehose began to recognise in 1981, towards the end of his stint as Governor, the dearth of top flight talent within his administration. He could not find among his coterie of blue-eyed boys anyone to fill the important post of Financial Secretary.

My own belief was that suitable Chinese talent existed both within the civil service and outside to fill that and a number of other posts. Many personages in the private sector had served with distinction and without remuneration

as members of the Legislative and Executive Councils, for instance. Their expertise and local experiences would have been invaluable in formulating policies in fields like education, medical and health, and engineering and public works.

But it was possible that neither the Governor nor Whitehall felt trustful enough of the loyalty of any Chinese at that stage to risk appointing them to high office.

In any event, the person ultimately chosen to fill the post of Financial Secretary was a very able British businessman named John Bremridge. He was a former Chairman of the Swire Group who had also served on the Legislative and Executive Councils. He was eminently suited both by experience and by temperament. He took a very significant cut in income to assume public office and his appointment turned out to be one of the most astute decisions taken by Sir Murray during his entire tenure.