

## CHAPTER 14

# The Cabotage Route

IN CIVIL AVIATION PARLANCE, a cabotage route is one providing regular air services linking two points within a single country. In the case of the United Kingdom, for instance, it might be a route running between, say, London and Glasgow. Such a route would normally be within the gift of the nation's Civil Aviation Authority to a domestic airline, with foreign carriers being barred.

The vagaries of ancient imperial misadventures, however, had left the route between London and Hong Kong as a cabotage route as well, at the dispensation of the British authorities. The reason was because a colony was considered in civil aviation terms as a part of the ruling state, hence just another “domestic” point. The route was thus awarded to the British state-owned carrier BOAC on a monopoly basis.

After World War II, when civil aviation was in its infancy, the regulatory regime was fairly ad hoc. It was not till 1972 that a Civil Aviation Authority was set up in Britain to formalise the right to register and license operators on the cabotage route.

As Britain gradually recovered from the ravages of war and as Hong Kong prospered and opened up more trading opportunities for Britain, traffic between the two cabotage points rapidly grew. Air travel ceased to be the preserve of the wealthy and the elite. An expanding middle class in both

territories sought to enjoy the perks of the good life. Rampant advertising by the cult of conspicuous consumption soon gave rise to burgeoning hordes of the cola-guzzling and souvenir-hunting package tourists as well.

The state-owned BOAC, operating within a cosily captive market, was less than responsive to the changes taking place. The shortage of state capital as well as balance of payments constraints compounded the problem. In any case, the fact that the airline was still using flying boats in 1950 when other major airlines had already switched to more modern aircraft was a reflection of the laid-back outlook of its management. It was not surprising therefore that the company did not achieve profitability till late in the 1960s.

Faced with that situation, the airline tried to squeeze additional income out of existing customers. In the circumstance of the time — if my memory for details has not faded as badly as some old sepia photographs — the rough rule of thumb for measuring a passenger flight's break-even point was held to be just under half of its fare-paying seating capacity. Or, to put it another way, a passenger plane could theoretically fly off half-empty and still turn in a slender profit. Every extra fare-paying seat occupied above that point would be added jam. A service regularly flying with a near-full load of paying customers would be sending its managers singing all the way to the bank.

In order to secure that desirable outcome, BOAC resorted to keeping the number of flights on the route static in order to boost load factors. To do so in the face of growing demand meant a better chance for getting bigger loads. Some flights might be fully booked and customers needing to fly might be forced to travelling on flights not entirely convenient for them. But in a monopoly situation, customers had little alternative.

BOAC was stingy in other ways as well. When other airlines flying in and out of Hong Kong on more competitive routes began providing free alcoholic refreshments, BOAC stuck to serving only free soft drinks on the cabotage route. Passengers who desired alcoholic refreshments had to pay extra. A charge was also levied for the use of headphones to listen to in-flight

music or to watch other forms of entertainment.

It stoutly resisted the emerging long-haul practice of other airlines in handing out complimentary gift sets made up of a toothbrush, a tiny tube of toothpaste, a cake of soap, a plastic comb, a face towel and an eye shade. Its pre-packed airplane meals came close to being uninviting for many Asian travellers. For example, the wedges of English Cheddar meant to round off each meal were often left untouched on trays.

But its dismal record for punctuality was its greatest defect. If one of its flights arrived or departed strictly on schedule, it became almost a cause for celebration. Public complaints sprouted as abundantly as crocuses in spring. They were given voice even in the colony's Legislative Council. Virtually everyone who had ever travelled regularly on BOAC ended up with some horror story to tell. A joke of long standing currency was that the initials BOAC stood for "better on a camel".

In 1971, BOAC began a rebranding exercise. It merged with British European Airways to form British Airways. By 1974 BOAC was dissolved. But the change in name hardly brought better service on the increasingly heavily used cabotage route.

I myself have had several trying experiences while flying on government business. One flight I took had to make an emergency landing in Madras because of engine failure. It took four days for a replacement engine to be flown out from London and to be fitted. My enforced stay in a middling Indian hotel left me with only one pleasant memory: I had somehow developed an enduring fondness for spicy Madras curries.

In 1978, I was on another flight to London when another engine failure occurred, necessitating yet another emergency landing. This time the landing was in Teheran, right when the city was in the midst of strikes and violent demonstrations aimed at overthrowing the Shah.

Because of the chaos, the airport authorities in Teheran did not quite know how to handle the emergency landing of a British aircraft. Perhaps they feared

it might be a ruse, by either the Shah or the rebels, to fly in covert support. To play safe, the airport authorities refused to allow anyone to disembark pending instructions. All passengers had to remain on the aircraft parked on the airport tarmac, under the blistering Middle Eastern sun. Since the aircraft engines were malfunctioning, the air conditioning could not be turned on. The air in the cabin quickly became more fetid than the air inside an overcrowded Third World sweatshop. The only semblance of ventilation came from the opened exits for normal and emergency use.

As the temperature rose to oven pitch, children began to act up and cry. Many male passengers were not slow in discarding their jackets and shirts. Women passengers also began loosening their blouses and pulling up their skirts in a manner that was not quite ladylike and decidedly contrary to Islamic traditions. They would have gone further if the dictates of modesty had allowed. Only soft drinks were available to quench thirsts. No alcohol drinks could be provided. Bedlam soon reigned.

I had been scheduled to attend a meeting on civil aviation matters at the Ministry of Trade and Industry at 9.00 am on the following morning. I demanded of the purser that I be immediately transferred to the first available flight of any other airline leaving Teheran for London. The purser at first demurred, saying that many other passengers had made similar demands and it was not possible to meet them all.

I warned the purser, however, that if I missed the scheduled meeting with the Department of Trade and Industry the following morning, the repercussions would definitely be inimical to the interests of his airline. He consulted the captain and I was duly transferred to a Japan Airlines flight out.

But I had to leave without my luggage. I was told it would be delivered to my hotel after the plane itself got to London. Fortunately, I had my working papers in the briefcase I had as hand luggage. I gave the purser the address of my usual cheap but friendly bed-and-breakfast hotel in Sussex Gardens.

I managed to turn up at the Ministry of Trade and Industry in the nick of

time but smelling as if I had spent the previous night on the tiles. My suitcase was not delivered till more than three days later. In the meantime I had to buy myself new shirts, underwear and toiletries. I could hardly imagine what my fellow passengers might have had to go through during that period.

My misadventures were by no means unique. Many other Hong Kong officials had been hampered by BOAC or British Airways delays in the execution of their duties.

My colleague Eric Ho, for instance, recorded in his memoirs, *Times of Change: A Memoir of Hong Kong's Governance*, that in 1950, when he was sent to London to be trained as an Inspector of Taxes, BOAC delayed his journey for two days in Cairo because of engine trouble. Later, in 1989, he got stuck for a whole day in Rangoon on an emergency landing due to another British Airways engine breakdown. On the second occasion, he had been on his way from Hong Kong to London, to transit to Oslo for textile negotiations with the Norwegian authorities.

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Meanwhile, the economic advancements in Asian countries on the Pacific Rim caused their governments to establish state airlines as a symbol of national pride. A flag carrier, however, was too often an unsound investment. Governments could have often done better investing their limited resources in other nation-building endeavours like education and health services. If a country was developing satisfactorily, there would be no shortage of airlines from rich countries willing to fly passengers and freight into and out of such a destination.

Hong Kong was proof of that happy approach. There was no shortage of foreign airlines wishing to mount services to Hong Kong, except that Britain was reluctant to grant rights without getting something in return. The Hong Kong administration was content to leave a private company like

Cathay Pacific Airways to make the running on regional services in exchange for similar services by regional flag carriers. It noted with satisfaction that Cathay Pacific was thriving under competition, providing local employment opportunities and making a significant contribution to the wider domestic economy.

Over time, to control and regulate operators of air services based in Hong Kong, the government set up an independent statutory body known as the Air Transport Licensing Authority. It was given powers to “grant, revoke and suspend licences to carry passengers, cargo or mail by air for hire or reward on scheduled journeys.” The Authority would also consider local needs such as capacity on particular routes, frequency of flights, the pricing of seats and other related matters. It was given the responsibility to look after the interests of the travelling public as well.

The Air Transport Licensing Authority, however, could not require a licence from aircraft registered elsewhere by some other competent authority and whose service had been subjected to air services agreements between governments. For such aircraft to operate in and out of Hong Kong, only an operating permit from the Hong Kong Director of Civil Aviation was required.

Before long, the state-owned airlines in regional countries started developing larger ambitions. They wanted — or at least their political masters wanted — the prestige of running long-haul services to the main European capitals. Being state-funded, they did not suffer from the same financial and other constraints as private airlines. London was high on their lists of favourite destinations. Former colonial links had something to do with it. In any case, a variety of long-haul routes were soon agreed between Britain and those countries.

As the number of long-haul routes grew between London and Asian capitals, Asian airlines naturally synchronised the schedules of their long-haul routes with those of their regional services, for ease of connecting flights to

tap into potential long-haul customers from neighbouring countries.

By the same token, European countries also sought long-haul routes to a dynamic economic and financial powerhouse like Hong Kong. This sometimes necessitated an awkward three-cornered type of negotiations between London, the foreign country and Hong Kong.

Hong Kong had always been keen to have as many international services as possible for wider developmental purposes. But Britain tended to be more narrowly focused, on the balancing traffic rights alone. It would only grant rights if there were either compensating rights for British airlines or else payments in hard cash in lieu. Once rights had been obtained, European airlines would also co-ordinate their long-haul schedules with their short-haul European networks.

Those developments gradually ate into the traffic on the monopoly route for British Airways. Because a growing number of Hong Kong's travelling public found British Airways services unsatisfactory, they often flew on a Thai or Singapore plane to Bangkok or Singapore to take their direct connecting flights to London. Or else they would take a direct flight on Air France or Lufthansa to Paris or Frankfurt, before connecting with one of their short-haul regional flights to London. Though such truncated journeys might take slightly longer, at least they could travel in greater comfort, without jam-packed cabins, and with a better assurance of reaching their destinations on schedule.

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With the arrival of Mrs. Margaret Thatcher at No. 10 Downing Street in 1979, her fascination with privatisation, market forces and other neo-liberal fixations led to the decision to open up the cabotage route between London and Hong Kong to competition between British airlines. Thus the monopoly granted to British Airways was lifted and other British airlines were invited

to apply to conduct scheduled flights on the route. By then, other British airlines had arrived on the scene in the form of British Caledonian Airways and Laker Airways, the brainchild of Sir Freddie Laker who developed the Skytrain concept for budget travel.

British Caledonian was founded at the end of 1970, growing out of an earlier idea to expand Britain's aviation capacity with a "second force" independent of the state-controlled operators. It initially concentrated on developing passenger services across the lucrative trans-Atlantic routes. Little was known about the nature of British Caledonian services in Hong Kong. Laker Airways had its eye on bearded backpackers and the young and adventurous. They both wanted to fly to Hong Kong. But most in Hong Kong would prefer seeing a local company like Cathay Pacific given a chance on the route as well.

In addition, certain sections of the Hong Kong community had reservations over the type of people Laker Airways might bring. They held there were insufficient facilities to cater to budget tourists. The possibility of a growth in the number of seedy and illegally subdivided cubicles in buildings to accommodate their needs — like those being provided in Chungking Mansions on Nathan Road — worried them in the event of a fire. A fire did indeed occur at Chungking Mansions in 1970. The local attitude was predictably money-conscious and pragmatic. If outsiders had to flock in, why not go after the big spenders instead of tight-fisted backpackers?

Under the then existing rules, Cathay Pacific was considered a British airline. That qualified it to bid for a share on the cabotage route. Although the company had secured a trans-Pacific route to San Francisco, via Vancouver, during the Bermuda II negotiations, it saw at once that a route to London would be a far easier one to establish and make profitable. So Cathay Pacific put in a bid and I was sent to London to express the support of the Hong Kong administration.

Hearings were duly held by the Civil Aviation Authority in London. No

one in Hong Kong was exactly sure how that authority normally arrived at decisions. But rumours soon flowed back through the bureaucratic grapevine that the CAA intended to award the route to only two airlines — British Airways, with its hub at Heathrow, and to British Caledonian, operating out of Gatwick.

Those indications — once confirmed but remaining still unannounced — came as a great disappointment for me. Implicit in that decision had to be my failure to persuade the powers-that-be in London of the economic and political importance into giving Cathay Pacific a fair crack at mounting a service. It went without saying that the news constituted an even greater disappointment for Cathay Pacific and its chairman, John Bemridge.

Bremridge soon found himself caught in an ethical bind. He had, since 1977, been made an Unofficial member of the Executive Council. Being an honourable man, he saw immediately a conflict of interests if he were to press the Hong Kong administration to do battle on his airline's behalf, even if that request came under the cloak of defending a wider Hong Kong interest. But he needed not to have worried because I had already decided to pick up the cudgel on the colony's behalf and — indirectly — on Cathay Pacific's.

It was clear to me that a public row would do nobody any good. With the inexorable approach of 1997, the political and emotional undercurrents in society were stirring. And yet, my reading of the available omens suggested that a mutually satisfactory resolution could not be reached without a degree of pressure from the public. The well-mannered exchanges of opinions through the sluggish bureaucratic machineries at both ends would not secure the desired result.

For me, Sir Murray was the fly in the ointment. I could seldom predict his reactions to any given situation. Of course, his responsibilities were infinitely broader than my own and he would have to juggle them according to his own judgement and priorities.

But if it came to some serious arm-wrestling with London, would he exert

himself in the civil aviation sphere as determinately as Sir John Cowperthwaite had done? I seriously doubted it. He was too much of a protocol-observing diplomat. He would make the required gesture to London for local consumption, a weak and lukewarm one just enough to pass muster. But his heart would not be in it. If things turned out that way, then the prize would have slipped away even before the game had begun.

Sir Murray's relative lack of interest in this particular issue was understandable. It was not a thing of great moment for him. He had a far bigger hornet's nest to worry about. He had poked his finger precipitously into the feverish hives of corruption buzzing within the uniformed services of government, without first working through the possible permutations in a dynamic middle or end-game. He had chosen the police for his initial foray.

Shortly after Sir Murray's arrival in the colony, he had sought my opinion about corruption within the police. I had been circumspect in my reply, as any Chinese who knew his place ought to be. The police, just like other government departments, had been led by expatriates while the bulk of the rank and file was filled by Chinese. The usual impediments in language and culture patently existed, if not quite in spades then at least in clubs.

I did not know enough about the police, I said, and it would be far better if the Governor were to consult Administrative Officers who had served in that department. I had no idea whom the Governor consulted afterwards, nor the nature of the advice he had received. Hitherto, police corruption had been handled by an in-house unit within the police force. The results had been predictably unspectacular.

It had been well-recognised by society that the salaries of policemen on the beat, along with those of other civil servants, had been depressingly modest. Policemen had therefore over the years augmented their incomes by extracting bribes from those engaged in the so-called "victimless crimes" like illegal gambling and prostitution. Accordingly, the policemen and their families had long been able to enjoy a standard of living out of line with their official pay.

The syndicated nature of the corruption was so well organised that virtually every policeman up to at least the Godber level got regular envelopes stuffed with money.

In any case, the Governor decided in 1974 to appoint an Administrative Officer by the name of Jack Cater to head a brand new Independent Commission Against Corruption to tackle that long-standing scourge. Cater, later made a Chief Secretary, would be answerable only to the Governor.

It was unclear whether the Governor, before launching the Independent Commission, had ordered the Secretary for the Civil Service and the Commissioner for Police to review the police pay structure to reduce the temptation of bribes. Nor was it clear whether the police high command had issued warnings to staff unions that the old lackadaisical ways of dealing with corruption within the force was about to change. At least nothing had been openly revealed to the public.

I supposed it was only human nature for any new organisation to want to deliver quick and visible results. But it faced that old and recurring enforcement dilemma currently confronting the Chinese government — to tackle initially the tigers or the flies? Because flies were easier targets and could be found everywhere, the Commission's investigators went for the flies.

Suddenly, ordinary constables found their pasts catching up with them, while those higher up in the chain of command were left relatively untouched. The foot soldiers on the beat had to face not only imprisonment but also an immediate drastic cut in family income to cover the likes of mortgages, instalment payments for cars and the fees necessary to provide their children with the best education available. As the Independent Commission's investigators dug deeper and wider, morale plummeted.

By 1977, the writing was clearly on the wall. To avoid being sent to prison and placed among some of the very people they had helped put behind bars, half the force put their names to a petition to the government asking for an amnesty for past misdeeds. But Sir Murray turned the petition down. It

was not revealed whether he had taken the decision off his own bat, because he was working according to his own game-plan, or whether he had been advised to do so by senior officials.

In either event, tensions within the force mounted rapidly. Six thousand policemen soon made a protest march on police headquarters. The then expatriate Commissioner of Police sneaked off through a back door to avoid confronting his own angry staff. The penny finally dropped within the administration. Someone had seriously misjudged the stakes in the game.

The next episode involved an armed group of policemen storming the offices of the Independent Commission Against Corruption and roughing up several of its investigative officers. The possibility of mutiny now filled the air.

Before turning down the petition for an amnesty, had the Governor and his advisors factored in such a possibility? Had consideration been given to using the British garrison to deal with a possible mutiny?

Those questions still remain not fully answered today. In 2005, Lord Owen, who was British Foreign Secretary at the time, revealed in an address at a meeting of the Overseas Service Pensioners' Association that Sir Murray had asked to see him in private in 1977 and explained that he had ordered the arrest of about 600 civil servants for corruption offences of various types. He now wished for an amnesty to be granted to at least 400 of them.

Sir Murray explained that unless that was done, he would no longer have the authority to govern and would have to resign within days. It was on that basis that Lord Owen agreed to an amnesty.

So it came about that Sir Murray announced a general amnesty in November, except for policemen who had committed the most serious offences. Sir Murray's decision was subsequently debated and, naturally, fulsomely supported in the House of Lords.

After the dust had settled, a mass purge of other corrupt civil servants outside the police force was carried out under Colonial Regulation 55.

For those unfamiliar with the arcane architecture of Colonial Regulations, I should explain that Regulation 55 specified that all officers held office only at the pleasure of the Crown. Should the Crown ever become displeased, then an officer can be got rid of without any further explanation or recourse. There used to exist other Regulations for dealing with an officer who might be accused of criminal or corrupt acts, such as bringing him to trial before a court of law. But Regulation 55 was often the Regulation of choice, for it obviated any washing of dirty linen in public and the judicial requirement to prove accusations beyond a reasonable doubt. No doubt Regulation 55 was a marvel of Anglo-Saxon law undimmed by the provisions of the Magna Carta.

Interesting questions have been left tantalisingly hanging in the air ever since. How did matters come to such a dangerous pass? Who had been calling the shots along the way? Had each move been a deliberate and calculated one? Or had the whole saga been played out by gut-feel and the seat of the pants?

To deny a petition for amnesty and then to be forced into an about-turn left a bad taste in the mouth. Would a government not lose its legitimacy to govern if it ever surrendered to violence? To give way before a violent mob would be an awful precedent to set. Any government allowing itself to be thus intimidated had to lose its right to govern. Sometimes, therefore, it had to be necessary to defend the security of a nation and its way of life by allowing blood to flow.

And after the tumult and shouting had died, why resort to Colonial Regulation 55 instead of bringing culprits in corruption cases before an open court? Had there been too many dirty deeds that could not bear the light of judicial enquiry?

The answers, I fear, would have to be extracted assiduously from whatever secret documents which might eventually emerge from the archives or from the accounts of those at the heart of such affairs. Those with a genuine interest

in Hong Kong history would simply have to wait or else to start digging themselves.

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Against such a background, I surmised that Sir Murray would not be enthusiastic over taking on Whitehall on a relatively unimportant civil aviation matter. Therefore, to ensure that a Hong Kong position be framed in terms I considered fitting, I decided to commit a little political arson, hoping that the flames ignited would be containable.

Without seeking the by-your-leave from anyone, I contacted some of my old journalistic friends and gave them off-the-record briefings on what was lying just below the public horizon. I told them London had intentions of freezing out Cathay Pacific of the cabotage route.

Hong Kong would make a formal protest as a matter of course. But it would strengthen the administration's hand if a few critical stories or editorials were to appear about rumours of the nature of the impending changes to the cabotage regime. Not to give Cathay Pacific a chance to compete would be regarded by local people as an unfair decision, given that airline's superb record in providing regional services. Cathay Pacific would naturally do its own lobbying.

None of my contacts needed any convincing over the unfairness of such an outcome. They all had experienced their own horror episodes while flying between Hong Kong and London on BOAC or British Airways.

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After a media buzz had been developed, I drafted a confidential telegram for the Governor's consideration. In essence, the message welcomed the ending of the cabotage monopoly but drew attention to public disquiet over rumours of Cathay Pacific being denied an opportunity to compete on the route.

Cathay Pacific had earned its spurs through developing an efficient network of regional air services, the draft continued. It was therefore right and proper that it should be allowed to expand to the trunk-route stage of development, to provide more local job opportunities and to contribute towards the colony's growing economic sophistication.

Cathay Pacific was a well-respected and well-supported Hong Kong company, whereas British Airways had chalked up a rather unflattering record of delays and poor service. There was a real risk that the CAA's decision to restrict the route to only two United Kingdom-based airlines might be construed as some form of discrimination.

Public sentiments had been in flux in recent years. The former local political apathy over government decisions could no longer be relied upon. The amnesty granted to policemen in 1977 and the subsequent mass purges of other corrupt civil servants under Colonial Regulation 55 had divided public opinion. A significant section of the public was beginning to feel that the rule of law ought to be adhered to, regardless of consequences.

Now that a decision had been made to open the cabotage route to competition, it was important that the selection of airlines to serve the route should appear to be fair and even-handed. To deny Cathay Pacific a share might cause some to speculate whether the time has come for our own Air Transport Licensing Authority to have a say in deciding who should or should not be serving the cabotage route. Other awkward and constitutional issues might arise therefrom.

In the circumstances, it might be wise to ask the CAA to reconsider the matter before any public announcement, the draft telegram concluded.

The Governor, naturally, was not prepared to send off my draft as it stood. But he at least did cover the points I considered essential.

Whitehall's response to the Governor's telegram was to despatch the Assistant Under-Secretary of State from the Department of Trade and Industry to the colony for further discussions and to get an independent feel of public sentiments in Hong Kong.

The Assistant Under-Secretary was a middle-aged civil servant dressed in an off-the-peg suit. He had none of the sartorial elegance usual among Westminster politicians or mandarins. He was a lean man with sharp features, dominated by a pair of hard, humourless eyes. Those eyes were shadowed by the confidence of experience and cunning. He spoke with a high-pitched voice, which was quite unmarked by the plummy intonations handed down by elite public schools. The indubitable stamp of a red brick education was all over him. He had an air both intimidating and vaguely sinister, similar to a Fagin's. His Christian name was George.

But George was in fact rather quick-witted and quite a dedicated civil servant. He and I had crossed swords previously during negotiations over regional routes. He was wont to be not entirely scrupulous when it came to pressing the interests of those who paid his salary, just as I was not entirely straightforward when advancing the cause of those who paid mine. We both had a reasonable measure of each other. I supposed we were each in our own way a hired mercenary, trying to earn his keep.

George had been scheduled for separate sessions with Sir Murray, the Cathay Pacific management, the Director of Civil Aviation, the British Civil Aviation Representative in the Far East and a host of others. But, since I was looking after the wider civil aviation policies for Hong Kong, I became his first port of call.

George started off without preliminary frills and went straight on the offensive.

"One of your people has been leaking confidential information," he said. "There's no way the local media could have got hold of some of the material they've published. Someone has been trying to manipulate the news. It simply

won't do. I shall be forced to complain to the Governor."

"By all means, George," I replied. "We have a free and rather unruly press here, not so much under the thumbs of media moguls as in some other places. No doubt His Excellency will direct me to investigate your complaint. I can assure you I will do my level best to bring any culprit to book. But it won't be easy. We live cheek by jowl here, on top of one another. One can hardly go to the toilet without somebody making a note of it. It's an ideal environment for gossip and insider trading. Every person who thinks he has locked away a dark secret or two eventually discovers that what he had taken for a Chubb safe was in fact a sieve, leaving endless vulnerabilities for others to exploit.

"Our Chinese extended family system compounds the problem, I fear. Did you know that in ancient times we used to have more than a hundred names to specify exactly the degree of kinship a person has in relation to all the other members within an extended family? Thank goodness we are becoming more Westernised these days, going in for nuclear families. Can you imagine what a bore it must have been to have to remember all those old family titles? China has now gone one better. Only one child per family. That should simplify things no end in future; farewell to brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins first, second or third removed, everyone gloriously autonomous and unlinked."

"Stop fencing, David. What is it that you really want?"

"Only a place in the sun, my dear fellow, nothing more than a legitimate ability for a Hong Kong company to grow and prosper. That had been my position when I called upon you in the DTI and later at the CAA; that remains my position today. I had assumed then we were all going to indulge in a fair and gentlemanly game of cricket, of the kind traditionally played on village greens, that is. Now it appears to have been a game of a different kind, with ball-tampering and other tricks."

"Everything has been above board, I can assure you," came George's stern and immediate response. "You know as well as anybody there cannot be a

free-for-all. Capacity dumping will be bad for everybody. There's only so much traffic to go around. We have to see that a private airline like British Caledonian gets a fair go."

"We also want a fair go for everybody, including Cathay Pacific, which is after all also a British airline," I replied. "Nobody's asking for capacity dumping or a return to predatory pricing. There are ways to harvest traffic. British Airways has been losing passengers on the cabotage route to foreign carriers simply because of its unsatisfactory performance. I don't know whether British Caledonian will turn the tide.

"But your new boss lady believes in competition, market forces, survival of the fittest and so forth. Why not give Cathay Pacific a piece of the action, to see how that plays out? Or are you afraid that the United Kingdom-based airlines won't hack it in open competition?"

"Lots of things sound perfectly feasible in theory but don't work out in practice. Governments can't afford expensive mistakes. We have strong trade unions to contend with. A lot of jobs are on the line."

"There are all kinds of pressures at both ends. I understand all that. I know it's traditional for the UK to look at traffic rights as a self-contained issue. But once in a while, we *have* to look at the bigger picture.

"At this end, it is not just job opportunities at Cathay Pacific at stake but also those in the Hong Kong Aircraft Engineering Company. It provides jobs for our young people coming out of technical schools. I've had relatives working at HAECO since the mid-1950s, for heaven's sake. British pension funds have bought shares in both Cathay Pacific and HAECO. Their dividends go back to Britain each year to pay British pensioners and to ease the country's balance of payments problems. Wouldn't Britain like to see those dividends grow?"

"Let's get back to specifics. Cathay Pacific has operated very effectively on its regional routes. It hasn't been blighted by the kind of engine trouble and emergency landings plaguing BA. Once a monopoly has been removed, there

ought to be a system of rewards and punishments beyond the vagaries of an unreliable market, don't you think?"

"Cathay Pacific has never flown long-haul before," George said. "It'll find that presents a different set of problems."

"Precisely," I said. "Isn't it time to give the company a shot to see whether it can deliver? Besides, there are political dimensions here too, you know. We've had the Air Transport Licensing Authority for some years now. It's beginning to feel its oats. Since the cabotage route is now open for competition, some of its members might feel aggrieved if Cathay Pacific were not to get a look-in. They read the newspapers; most have travelled on British Airways. They're an independently-minded bunch, not a rubber stamp. All it would take to land us with a very hot political potato would be for one or two of them to pose the question on why they should not have a say on who should operate on the cabotage route."

"Has anyone raised such a question?"

"No, no! Nothing of the kind. It's just one of the possibilities that has flitted across my mind. Call it thinking out loud, if you like."

"Why do I get the feeling that someone here might be trying to plant that notion in their heads?"

"George! How can you ever think that? I have sworn allegiance to the British Crown. How could I undermine the interests of Her Majesty's Government?"

George made a sarcastic sound. "You were far too friendly with the Americans throughout Bermuda II."

"They were a friendly bunch. A few of them and I just happened to share a few idiosyncrasies. Besides, being friendly got us Vancouver, didn't it?"

"Yes, but in a very unorthodox way, coming out of the blue at the end."

"Well, you've been in this game long enough to know that if something works, don't knock it. If you're afraid of someone planting subversive ideas into the heads of members of the Air Transport Licensing Authority, why not

have an informal chat with some of them yourself, while you're here? You can then get a first-hand reading of their inclinations. I would be happy to arrange for you to have a cup of tea with some of them, if you so wish."

"How *very* kind of you, David. But it does rather have the flavour of something a spider might say to a fly."

"Relax, George. You're in my home town. I'm just offering normal Eastern courtesy."

"Well, let me think about it. Don't want to put you to any trouble. I should really talk to the Governor first."

"Of course, George. Whatever you wish is never any trouble for me. I'm always at your service."

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Following the visit by the Assistant Under-Secretary of State, a further appeal was made in the name of the Governor to Whitehall, for the CAA to reconsider its decision to exclude Cathay Pacific from the cabotage route. For me, then, it was just a case of waiting with bated breath, to see if my risky indulgence in political poker could salvage anything from my failure to convince the CAA to give Cathay Pacific a slice of the cabotage cake.

Eventually, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Mr. John Nott, did overrule the CAA and asked for the bids to be reconsidered. Then it became a matter of fresh CAA hearings in London, scheduled for November and December, and possibly into January if matters dragged on.

By then, rumours had begun to circulate that I might soon be transferred from the Economic Services Branch. That caused John Bremridge, the Chairman of Cathay Pacific, to ask the government to defer any transfer for me so that I could continue to represent the views of the administration on traffic sharing on the cabotage route at the CAA hearings. The Chief Secretary agreed.

John Bremridge must have had greater confidence in my persuasive powers than I had myself, for my words had apparently left no impression the first time around. Thus, at considerable inconvenience to my own maturing plans for early retirement from the civil service, I had to pack my bags for more journeys to the other side of the world.

The eventual outcome of those new hearings was that Cathay Pacific was granted permission to mount a thrice-weekly service between Hong Kong and London.

Meanwhile, British Caledonian also began services on the route in August of 1980. But it soon met with a series of financial setbacks, due to geopolitical and other factors. By 1988, the company had ceased to exist, swallowed up by British Airways. Cathay Pacific picked up some of the slack.

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Gaining a slice of the action on the cabotage route for Cathay Pacific was but small beer compared with another set of looming negotiations. No one in the community took the cabotage route outcome as more than a vagrant breeze upon its fevered brow. The city had by then been sweating metaphorically for quite a while, over a mixture of anxieties, uncertainties and happenings beyond its control — the nerve-wracking prospect of China resuming control over Hong Kong.

Pressures had been building up steadily since January of 1976. The first inauspicious portent came in the form of the death of the Chinese Premier, Chou En-Lai, that tried and tested moderating rock upon which the diplomatic policies of the Chinese Communist government had been founded. By September of that same year, Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, the absolute ruler of the Chinese nation since 1949, had also hurried off to join Marx. A month later, his widow and other members of the so-called Gang of Four found themselves rounded up and stripped of power. Within the short

space of a year, the political future of China had been turned upside down and inside out. The accompanying uncertainty that jangled throughout the nation also rippled around the chancelleries of the world. Hong Kong could hardly remain unaffected.

A short while afterwards, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher stormed into the British Prime Ministership in 1979, throwing yet another unknown into the political equation. She had struck many like some modernised and rejuvenated Britannia, out to tell China what was what when it came to the expiration of the New Territories lease set for the stroke of midnight on the 30th of June in 1997. The China-watchers and the Foreign Office apparatchiks had not been slow in warning the new Prime Minister that the colony could not be viable without the New Territories. But no one was really sure how the Iron Lady's thinking went.

In spite of the repeated pieties about human rights and the need to welcome refugees and migrants, Britain had been habitually slow and hesitant in accepting displaced persons of non-European stock. Its approach had often been viewed by its colonial subjects as oblique and crab-like.

Its intentions, however, had long been made plain to those residing in Hong Kong. While it valued the economic and strategic advantages of ruling the place, it did not want British subjects of the Chinese race to seek the right of abode in Britain. To guard against that possibility, parliamentary obstacles had been erected well ahead of time. Some outspoken Hong Kong residents had — with justice — characterised those precautions as acts of betrayal.

In returning the colony to China, Britain intended to include as bargaining chips the fate of the millions of "British subjects" living there. Conveniently for the British, the Chinese government claimed to speak for all who were racially of Chinese stock, wherever they might happen to be. The British, with a bit of moral fidgeting, was only too glad to fall in with that notion. Thus Chinese inhabitants of Hong Kong — unless they had a guilty conscience and could do a timely bunk — would be handed over like roads, canals,

bridges and drainage systems upon the transfer of sovereignty.

The final vestiges of public delusion and wishful thinking had been stripped away by *realpolitik*. Those who had previously braved abnormal dangers to reach the mythical Pearl of the Orient finally had to stare their dark destinies in the face. They saw a return of their old desperations, poverty, alienation, guilts, griefs and failed ambitions. The city they had dreamt of as an answer to their hopes and prayers had turned out to be largely a collection of blind alleys. The place had been a mirage, appearing in disguise. It was in fact like one of those carnivorous flowers in the wild, out to devour both their dreams and themselves once they had been lured into its embrace.

For ex-Kuomintang soldiers who had fought and lost to the Communists, for the survivors of the Great Famine of the 1950s, and for the displaced from the Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the game was definitely up. Some had fought the Communists in Hong Kong too, in 1956, at the cost of many lives. Their refuge in an anachronistic British colony was coming to an end. They had to devise an exit plan.

For Kuomintang followers, boltholes in Taiwan were the easiest to come by. But it was a shaming choice. Not only had the island already turned into the hideout of choice for crooked Hong Kong coppers but its survival depended on the protection of the American Seventh Fleet. And how much reliance could be placed on the honeyed words of any foreigner?

So for the hundreds of thousands who wanted to play it safer, there was little alternative to queueing up at foreign consulates for visas and the prospect of a second passport. Those with no means of escape could only bewail their karma.

But the numbers seeking to leave, though impressive on the face of things, formed only a small minority of the population. A large core of the people, like colonial subjects everywhere, welcomed the impending reunification with their Motherland. Most considered the dignity of being ruled by their own kind preferable to living under foreign yoke, whatever the social and economic consequences.

Of the rest, there was at least the customary Chinese resignation or indifference. What did any change in rulers matter to them? Emperors had come and gone since time immemorial. The lives of the common people usually remained as hard and unforgiving as ever.

Indeed, such attitudes dovetailed with the views held by the Chinese government. When Mrs. Thatcher met the Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang in 1982, before sovereignty negotiations were actually joined, she had entertained the hope of retaining significant British control over Hong Kong's commercial affairs after conceding sovereignty. But Premier Zhao soon set her straight. He told her two principles were at stake — sovereignty versus the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong — and China's position was that sovereignty had to be placed above everything else.

Of course, not only patriots and chauvinists favoured Chinese sovereignty. Fraudsters, mountebanks, international businessmen and other speculative types were also licking their chops. They saw re-unification as an entrée for garnering easy wealth. After all, what would those dull and unsuspecting mainlanders know about the wonders of conspicuous consumption, of corporate takeovers, leveraged buyouts, pyramid selling and ponzi schemes? Even if their machinations got exposed as frauds, victims would hardly complain. To do so would cause them to suffer further for losing "face" over being duped!

Such differences in perception and in expectations ran right through every sector of the community. Society was certainly divided, between the rulers and the ruled, the expatriates and the locals, the rich and the underfed, the go-getters and the resigned, male and female, young and old, masters and servants, creditors and debtors, radicals and conservatives, patriots and collaborators, those with their fingers on their abacuses and those with their heads in the clouds.

Cross-currents of culture, habit, identity and myths skewed things further, accentuating every contradiction and fallacy. The quietism of Eastern

religions jostled with the proselytising enthusiasms of various Christian sects for adherents, for instance. But no matter the actual number clasping joss-sticks in their hands or wearing crosses around their necks, the prevailing god at the end was usually Mammon.

Racism was also a given between Europeans and Chinese, each considering himself racially and culturally superior to the other. A Chinese would regard a European as a “barbarian” or a “foreign devil”. How could any sane Chinese not regard Europeans otherwise when he could see them ruining a delectable beverage like tea by adding milk and sugar? A European would return the compliment by regarding the Chinese as “heathens” or “expectoraters” or belonging to a “lesser breed without the law”.

A further mixture of diehard snobberies and class distinctions remained alive and well within each race. Woe betide a member of one race marrying into the other. Before mixed marriages became fashionable, a European taking a Chinese bride would be branded as having “gone native” and was likely to lose his job or his career or both. Any Chinese woman marrying a European would be regarded within her own community as little better than a whore. Children from such unions would face discrimination from all quarters and would often have to exist in a twilight zone with fellow Eurasians.

A small Portuguese community also formed a little sub-group of their own. Many of them found a welcoming niche for themselves in the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. The bank was at that time the *de facto* central bank of the colony and its bosses sought after the Portuguese as tellers because they wanted to create the illusion the bank was solidly staffed by Europeans.

Beneath the bustle, the bright lights and the edgy energy of the city, there exists a thousand other subterranean zones with inhabitants nursing antagonisms and alienation not apparent to the eye of a visitor. If one were to be a fly on the wall at regular meetings of some clans, for instance, one would soon discover that quite ancient enmities and feuds with other clans still had not been entirely forgotten or forgiven.

But the city was, paradoxically, also a place with a high degree of civility, inter-dependence, generosity and absence of envy. The all-pervasive need to maintain face and not to lose it had something to do with that. A dogged “can-do” and get-up-and-go attitude pervaded and found ready expression. If a rickshaw puller could end up running a bus company, a bank clerk could rise to become the Executive Chairman of one of the biggest banks in Hong Kong, a plastic worker could transform himself into the richest property developer in the colony and a *kung fu* practitioner like Bruce Lee could turn himself into an international film star, why not the next man?

Until fairly recently, therefore, Hong Kong was not a place for moaners. It might sink itself into an occasional bout of mass hysteria or collective schizophrenia but such outbreaks usually corrected themselves within reasonable time.

For legitimate businesses or for crime, the city had an allure and a pull that went far beyond the mere smell on money. A goodly proportion of prosperous citizens — and even crooks — who had decamped for a second passport eventually found their way back. It went beyond commonplace nostalgia. Perhaps the place had a way of infecting the blood.

Even for those who had lived among the shadows, the place had a fascinating appeal. In 1961, it was estimated that there were 80,000 triad society members in the colony. The present number is unknown. What was clear was that the character of triad organisations had been changing in line with the times.

Triad life is now not so much about tough guys with tattoos shaking down the weak and the vulnerable. Like the Yakuza gangsters in Japan, the Hong Kong triads had gone up-market. A free-wheeling financial centre, reputedly the third biggest in the world, offered plenty of scope for money-laundering and other types of white collar capers. Triad leaders are now more likely to be found sitting in the boardrooms of banks and multi-national corporations, selling sub-prime mortgages, participating in the fixing of LIBOR and foreign

exchange rates and, like Wells Fargo, opening fake accounts in the millions in the names of their unsuspecting customers.

One persistent rumour over the years had been that some of the top triad leaders were now in fact partners in law firms. The rumour had never been confirmed, although a number of lawyers had been sent to prison over the years for other criminal offences, like embezzlement. But a significant triad presence in law firms would make sense, since triad members were likely to have more conflicts with the law so long as Anglo-Saxon corporate law provided an abundance of loopholes for them to wriggle through.

Such white collar misdeeds had at least one positive result. Since little violence was involved in picking the pockets of wealthy victims, the average Hong Kong policeman, though steeped in the syndicated corruption of that era, was unused to combating violence when tackling crimes, regardless of how things might be portrayed in local gun-blazing motion pictures.

The average copper thus remains today a non-intimidating and unmilitarised figure, though not quite the idealised avuncular bobby on the beat of a bygone era. But things might be about to change, given that a new generation of badly educated and attention-seeking adolescents have been testing his forbearance, egged on by failed politicians and *agents provocateurs*.

Another aspect of shadowy life in the city concerned the refuge given to revolutionaries, dissidents and whistle-blowers from elsewhere. They often had to play ducks and drakes with a not very bright local Special Branch. Notable among them had been such national heroes like Sun Yat-Sen, Ho Chi-Minh and Jose Rizal. A more recent example was Edward Snowden.

In addition, at the fringes between politics and espionage, there lurked always a motley collection of spies and secret agents of all persuasions. They might masquerade as journalists, educators, publishers, diplomats or simply tourists. Among them might be found the odd Kuomintang spymaster with his network now decimated and running for their lives, or a Comintern leftover with switched allegiances now willing to offer his outdated spy-craft

to any bidder, or a clean-cut Langley operative so out of place outside his Virginia suburbs that he could be spotted a mile off. There would be no shortage of self-acclaimed China-watchers too, ready to parley every snippet of rumour or information into cool hard cash.

But apart from spies and spooks, the colony was also attractive to a variety of outsiders seeking jobs, ranging from dubious ones in the financial sector to the hard slogs in domestic servitude. This development is reflected in the demographics. For an extended period after the war, the population had been stable at being 98% Chinese. In recent years, however, the number of non-Chinese has increased by several percentage points. No doubt a continuing sign of a healthy openness in the society.

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I am constantly amazed by some of the accounts I read about Hong Kong written by people I call five-day wonders. By that I mean some of the commentators or journalists who fly in, meet up with cronies for a few drinks and then pronounce definitively about almost every aspect of the city's immensely convoluted and tangled life. Their ability to discover within five days the essences of the city can only be regarded as magical and supernatural! Everything from its ever-changing moods, the nature of its governance, its neuroses, dynamics, delusions, aspirations, griefs and incongruities to predictions about its social, economic and political future.

A few of those five-day wonders might speak some Chinese or hold a degree or two in Far Eastern studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies. But it would be rare indeed for them to stray far from the usual stereotypical thinking about Eastern peoples and cultures. Add to that farrago the usual quantum of disinformation, propaganda, gutter and chequebook journalism and the justification of a free press holding truth to power begin to sound pretty hollow.

Even long standing residents of Hong Kong often stumbled in trying to describe or explain the protean nature of their absurd and infuriating home town. Part of the reason is that most tended to move mainly within their own narrow professional or social group and their own comfort zones. The layered, segmented and contradictory nature of the city made for isolation rather than reaching out. The fear of losing face is also a strong inhibitor. Thus the city often gets explained in terms of tourist-speak, hackneyed myths and quotations from that almost mind-numbing official annual reports.

That last named publication would contain plenty of pretty pictures but over the years it has taken on more and more the character of a corporate annual report — strong on public relations appeal but factually obscured. It is usually smothered with an overkill in equivocal statistics and overworked platitudes. But, surprisingly, the government has managed to get away with telling the public very little about what had actually been going on.

To chronicle the splendours and sorrows of so muddled a place and with so extraordinarily resilient a people would be no easy matter. But officialdom should have tied harder. How would one describe a city with the potential of becoming as open and creative as Changan at the height of the Tang Dynasty and yet, if the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel were still around, would invite their condemnation as a harlot city, for its many strutting vulgarities and its godlessness?

To undertake such a task would require someone with at least the touch of a Tolstoy or a Balzac. Once upon a time, during my swell-headed youth, I had fancied myself up to such a challenge. But a year in London in 1957, trying to earn my living as a scribe, brought me crashing back down to earth. Hardly any editor or publisher would touch my stuff. Stories about Hong Kong and the Far East simply had no audience.

Later, during an unforgettable spring in Holland with Sharlee in 1965, I still had a remnant of that delusion bubbling inside me. But now, after years of insufferable bureaucratic prose, I am truly done for. Not even K'uei Hsing,

the Chinese God of Literature, could ever rescue me.

My hope is that one day some native son or daughter more blessed with talent than myself will emerge, to do justice in chronicling the spirit of this anomalous and endearing place of my birth.

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Yet, back towards the end of the 1970s, the prospect of a messy negotiation between Britain and China over a piece of historical real estate was unsettling in the extreme for many people. They saw the dismal prospect of inhabitants being used as bargaining chips. Yet they remained impotent to affect so ignominious an outcome. The problem was that very few had the ear and the trust of both of the main protagonists, let alone the various sub-groups. Each sector tended to listen only to those it could trust and it was axiomatic that those it trusted were people who shared its predispositions.

As a Chinese civil servant, I found my position even more frustrating and invidious. I was being paid by Hong Kong taxpayers and the only side I could choose had to be theirs. But in order to serve them, I had to be in touch with all shades of opinion, as well as what I might glean from the main protagonists.

Yet, to sound out opinion among those most affected, I was hog-tied by security regulations. If I were to speak to someone who happened to be an office bearer in a left-wing organisation, for example, I would be required to make a long and tedious report to the government as to who said what to whom. Most of the conversations I had with others, like those with people in the Chinese General Chamber, would be confidences exchanged between individuals and friends and not between a government official and an office bearer of a left-wing organisation. Because I could often gain insights into Chinese mainland thinking from friends in the Chinese General Chamber, I usually ignored compliance with security regulations. Nor could I betray the

confidences of friends by sharing them with foreign occupiers.

More absurdly still, the administration seemed to have written off Kuomintang organisations in the colony. It must have regarded them as a spent force. Or perhaps it did not want to appear to be pursuing any semblance of a two-China policy. In any event, the Kuomintang remained strong in certain quarters, especially in a number of key trade unions. Oddly, talking to their officials required no reporting under security regulations. I could never quite work out the rationale to justify such a head-in-the-sand approach.

Such was the predicament I found myself in. Yet what could I do to influence anything? I had little power and virtually no influence within the colonial bureaucracy. I had no illusion of how I was regarded by the hierarchy. I was a loner, a maverick, someone who could not be relied upon to act as a team player. Hence someone with too many question marks hanging over him.

Time and again, even when my judgement was accepted by my immediate superior — as in the case of the Diaoyu Tai student demonstrations — the Governor ruled against me. More recently, I had to resort to subterfuge to frustrate the false narrative to justify that very questionable reverse osmosis project.

Naturally, I had no standing with Chinese officialdom either. Thus I felt often like a mere feather, waiting to be swept along by an approaching storm.

As I thought about the situation, I was reminded of something my paternal grandfather had said. I remembered him saying more than once during my boyhood, when he was enjoying pipes of opium with his associates, that so long as the Chinese remained disunited foreigners would always try to make trouble for the country.

The more I thought about the matter, the more I got the impression that my grandfather had vague expectations of me. But what were they? He never spelt anything out fully. I had strongly identified with being a Chinese but

I had never entertained anything so grand as playing a part in my country's destiny. As a local civil servant, I could do nothing about the sovereignty issue, for that had to be handled between countries and governments.

I knew the British had an immaculate record in practising the old Roman maxim of *divide et impera* or divide and rule. They had a penchant for drawing lines all over other people's territory — the Curzon Line, the Durand Line, the McMahon Line, the Sykes-Picot demarcations in the Middle East, concessions and settlements all over China, the partition of India *et al.*

So far as Hong Kong was concerned, disunity suited British purposes. People could be manipulated easier. But in truth, the British could not bring the segmented population together even if they had wanted to. Their devious politics had long ago eaten away the trust of many and few of them could overcome the barriers of language and culture.

The only slight advantage I had over them was that I had been more catholic in my friendships, developing connections across the entire social, political, intellectual and economic divides. Perhaps I could add a stitch or two to knit the community closer together to face a common destiny. It seemed worth trying. Perhaps that had been all my grandfather had expected of me. So thinking, I decided on an experiment.

I chose the sumptuously bourgeois setting of a race day buffet lunch in the Owners' Box at the Jockey Club for my experiment. My ploy would be to say that my racing partner and I had a horse running and, if it lived up to expectations, we would need help with the bubbly afterwards. I would make it a family occasion, because H.C. Fung and his wife, Charity, would be there.

For my first experiment, I chose an occasion when our horse, Free Lad, had a winning chance. I accordingly invited Ip Yeuk-Lam, his wife Suze, and his youngest son, Shing-Kwan, and his wife Maureen. My hope was that in sharing a meal together they might also discover some opportunity for doing business together, in spite of their different political allegiances.

Happily, on that occasion Free Lad did not disappoint. So I invited all the ladies to help me lead the horse into the Winner's Enclosure.



Leading in another winner at Happy Valley with the help of friends, from left, Mrs. Charity Fung, Mrs. Suze Ip and Mrs. Maureen Ip.

Unfortunately, that initial experiment did not quite work out as I had hoped. Although the ladies got along well enough—for they shared certain charitable interests—nothing happened between the men. The political divide between them proved too great to bridge. My grandfather had been right. We Chinese were a nation cursed by too many divisions. We were still as lacking in cohesiveness as Dr. Sun's tray of sand. So long as the nation remained in that state, it would indeed be exploited by others.

I had greater success later, however, when I put my former journalistic colleague, Leslie Sung, and Yeuk-Lam together. Leslie had once been quite anti-Communist because he felt his younger sister, Greta, had been wrongfully imprisoned by the Chinese for being an alleged British spy. Leslie

and Yeuk-Lam happily got to deal with each other as rational and decent human beings. They got along well enough for all of us to take an Easter holiday together in Thailand some time later. A small step towards fostering a much needed unity.

As to Greta Sung's story, that would be left to the next volume of these memoirs.

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