

## CHAPTER 15

# Crossing the Rubicon

DURING THE LATTER PART of 1979, shortly after my eldest son, Tien-Kuen, had left for Dallas, Texas, to join his maternal grandparents, my second son, Tien-Kay, approached me about his future university education. He expressed a desire to study chemical engineering after secondary school.

His choice surprised me. Up till that point, I had not noticed him displaying particular familiarity with the periodic table, let alone with Dmitri Mendeleev's role in its origins. His stated interest struck me as contrived, to justify being sent abroad since no local university offered a course in that field. He must have seen the position I had adopted with his elder brother and was trying to sound out his own prospects.

By the late 1970s, sending children abroad to study had become something of a fad among the *nouveau riche*, just as 40 years earlier colonial schoolboys who had devoured British boys' magazines like *Triumph*, *Wizard*, *Rover*, *Hotspur* and *Champion* used to dream of entering an English boarding school and emerging with all the panache of a toff.

Both fads smacked of that commonplace syndrome of regarding local ginger as lacking tang or of the grass being always greener on the other side of the fence. The laughable academic standings of some of the institutions children were being despatched to did not seem to matter a fig for some parents. Having offspring studying overseas was apparently deemed worthwhile

enough in conferring bragging rights for themselves and some form of cachet on their children. The whole mindset was as misguided as the belief of some women that wearing six-inch stiletto heels would somehow bring greater grace and elegance to their movements.

Changing times and changing ambitions were probably also a factor. At the turn of the 20th century, most Chinese heading for studies in Europe, Russia, Japan or the United States had aimed at learning foreign ideas and new ways of doing things as not only a good in itself but also a means of helping to rejuvenate their country. Many had a solid grounding in their own culture.

By the second half of the century, however, the motive had become less lofty; it became more about personal ambitions, professional advancement or family enrichment. No doubt the more extreme forms of Western individualism and the instant gratifications associated with consumer capitalism offered had also infected their psyches.

I myself was very conscious that my early education in Singapore had infused me with too many alien values and colonial biases. That trend intensified after I had fled to Australia at the age of 12 to escape the Japanese invasion of Singapore. The net result was that I went through my entire adolescence knowing more about the deeds of Nelson and Wellington, Drake and Captain Cook, Hastings and Clive of India than I ever did about those of the Sung Dynasty General Ngok Fei or the Ming Dynasty Admiral Cheng Ho or even that premier Chinese sage, Confucius.

It was not till after I had entered the more intellectually stimulating academia of Stanford that I began pulling myself back to my roots, to delve more deeply and systematically into the half-forgotten teachings of Miss Nice in Canton and of Tutor Tam in Singapore. I gradually returned to the subtler Eastern habits and the more face-conscious requirements demanded by Chinese conduct.

I did not want my sons to go through that same unsettling cultural journey.

Education in Hong Kong at that time had remained far too Eurocentric, with the teaching of contemporary Chinese history and culture still being disallowed.

My boys were suffering the further disadvantage of not enjoying the usual benefits of the extended family. Their closest kin were far away. My father and most of my siblings were in Singapore; my mother in Vancouver. I was divorced from their mother and their maternal grandparents and relatives were in America and Europe. Their mother had also left years earlier for America. So they also had no close interaction there.

It was therefore difficult for them to acquire a sense of connectedness with their family and elders. I did send them one summer to Kuala Lumpur, to get to know my brother Francis and his family and to learn something of the Malaysian way of life from my friend Sonni Pillai and his wife. But such one-off trips did not go very far.

My hope was that if they could remain in Hong Kong till after their university education, they would at least be exposed to Chinese newspapers, magazines, films and television and hence absorb more of their own culture and feel less alienated and rootless.

Contrary to the prevailing fad of overseas education, I considered much could be gained from a local university. The best of them could hold their own against the best in the world. After all, both my grandfather and my father had been local graduates, and so had many of my relatives and some of my dearest friends. If I could persuade my sons to do likewise, it would also suit my pocketbook.

However, I realised that both the pressures of the milieu and the preferences of my children were against me. But I had a trump card: I had insufficient funds to grant their wishes — even if I had wanted to! And it would be unconscionable for either of them to approach their maternal grandfather for financial help. He was still assisting their eldest brother and he himself was approaching retirement.

But it did not seem appropriate just then to take Tien-Kay through my rather abstract philosophical considerations. He was only 16, temperamentally impulsive, emotionally insecure and still quite narrowly focused. He might well interpret any wider discussion as an indirect attempt to reject his request. He was bound to brood over that outcome, straining our all too tenuous relationship.

On that judgement, I told him he still had almost two years to go before university. It was far too early to consider the matter. I assured him, however, I would bear his choice of studies in mind. I was hoping he might change his mind about chemical engineering. If so, the chances of persuading him to pursue a degree locally might be improved.

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Two or three weeks later, my third son, Tien-Kit, also approached me about his education. He and Tien-Kay were quite close, having shared a bedroom for many years. They must have gone over each other's hopes and aspirations before the younger one approached me.

I knew that he was having some trouble with the pressure-cooker nature of his schooling at the elite St. Paul's Co-educational School. It was a missionary school that both his elder brothers had attended. Unlike his brothers, however, he had year after year ended near the bottom of his class. It was not due to his being a loafer or a lad without ambition. He had suffered from encephalitis when he was young and that ailment had made him a slower learner than usual. Nonetheless, he had managed to do well enough each year to scrape through with a promotion.

Tien-Kit told me he was feeling disheartened at St. Paul's. His classmates looked down on him, he said, and whenever an examination or a test was due, they would lay wagers on who would come out at the bottom of the class. He was always one of the hot favourites. Some friends of his had left Hong Kong

to attend a boarding school in Canada. They had told him studying there had been more agreeable and less demanding. Would it be possible for him to go to a boarding school there as well?

I empathised with him and tried my best to console him. I suspected that the presence of pubescent girls in his class might have added to his discomfiture. I told him the majority of Hong Kong schools and most local parents placed too much emphasis on examination results. That created a vicious circle. But I was not one of those parents. Tests and examinations were just snapshots, capturing a student's ability at particular moments in time. They did not necessarily reveal what a person might or might not really be capable of. A self-aware student should regard them much as twinkling amber traffic lights, cautioning him on changing circumstances ahead.

History was filled with people who had achieved great things after doing poorly in examinations, I continued. I cited as an example the Tang poet Tu Fu, who had failed not once — but twice — at Imperial Examinations. Notwithstanding those failures, he still managed to become both an exemplary public official and one of the greatest poets China had ever produced.

“You have not yet failed in any of your examinations,” I asserted. “You may not have done as brilliantly as you would wish but your school is a highly competitive one. Wouldn't trying a little harder be the answer? If you need help on some subjects, both your Second Elder Brother and I are around to help.”

“It's not as simple as that, Dad,” Tien-Kit said. “I need a new environment, a place where I can make a fresh start, with the slate wiped clean. My classmates here have already nailed me as a loser, as someone who's never going to shine. That's depressing and hard to take.”

“Well, why not try proving them wrong, particularly if there's a girl in the class who has caught your eye? Is there one?”

“No, there's no girl.”

“Problems are never solved by running away from them, you know. They

have to be surmounted. You're only 14, far too young to be going off by yourself into a totally alien environment. It'll be very confusing; I can testify to that from my own experience when I was your age. I'm therefore not yet prepared to expose you to that kind of learning curve. By going away you may be able to duck being teased here but you may well find more unpleasant forms of taunting elsewhere."

Tien-Kit looked sad-eyed and slightly embarrassed at my mentioning the possibility of a girl.

"You're a Chinese," I continued, not quite knowing how to get my concerns across. "We have our own ways of dealing with the problems in life. In foreign societies, you'll stand out because of your physical attributes, like the colour of your skin. Some foreigners may accept you for what you are but others will view you as a legitimate target for their own resentments and frustrations. When I was your age, I was spat on for no apparent reason by a total stranger in Australia and called 'a dirty Chink'. You may get that same reception. Can you take that in your stride?"

"Before you head abroad, it would be as well for you to be more comfortable with your own culture and your own identity. Chinese spiritual and philosophical values have a lot to offer. Hong Kong may not be the best place to pick them up. It's not a typical Chinese city; it's adulterated, alienated, corrupted and wrong-headed in many ways. But it's the only native place you have."

"Don't imagine a Green Card or a foreign passport will give you an alternative. That'll only be an illusion, probably just a ticket to a place you do not really belong and can never feel entirely comfortable in. At best you might just get an equivocal kind of hyphenated citizenship."

As I spoke, I watched Tien-Kit's uncomplicated face crumbling further with disappointment. Words! How inadequate they were to get the deepest feelings across! Without words, birds could fly instinctively in flocks, animals travel in herds and fishes swim in shoals, without smashing into one another.

But human beings, blessed with the gift of language, so often made a hash of things. They could seldom call into service the *mots justes* that Flaubert pointed to. How wonderful it must be to command a talent for painting or dancing or making music. One's feelings could then be expressed without resorting to words.

Tien-Kit was such a pliable lad. The image of him, standing silent and crestfallen, triggered a sudden helplessness in me. How could I tell him about my fears for his vulnerabilities without hurting him? His personality was still unformed. Facing peer pressure in a foreign boarding school, he was apt to experiment too early with alcohol, drugs or sex. In Hong Kong, I could at least keep an eye on him. Left to himself, anything could happen.

It came to me all at once that my outpouring of words might have struck him as a completely irrelevant spiel, just filled with embellishments and evasions sprouted by grown-ups and parents. All he would take away with him might be my unambiguous denial of his wish to study in a boarding school abroad, to possibly spare his blushes before the girls in his class.

My heart contracted with helplessness at that thought. I recalled my own boyhood, when I had nursed resentments of one kind or another against both my parents, simply because I could not understand what was happening to myself. It took years before I could grasp what had stood behind their then incomprehensible decisions.

If by some whim of Fate my life should be forfeited on the morrow, Tien-Kit would forever remember me as only the Great Negator, a father who had denied him everything, ranging from a simple pair of trainers to studying in a foreign boarding school. I dreaded leaving him with such a memory for the rest of his life.

Ultimately, he might also blame me for messing up my marriage; thus depriving him of motherly love he deserved. And to cap it all, I had failed to extend him the kind of fatherly love he wanted either. How impossible it was to communicate with another person, even if he happened to be one's

own flesh and blood!

Not knowing what else to do, I placed a hand on Tien-Kit's shoulder and said: "Just give your school another try, my boy. I'm sure you can do better. I'll talk to your class teacher. Perhaps you need a part-time tutor."

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Although I had told Tien-Kay it was too early to decide on his university education, I knew that was not really the case. Timing was of the essence. If the boy were to stand a chance of studying abroad at a time of his choosing, then I would have to initiate a process of disengagement from the civil service almost immediately. The reason was because I was bound by bureaucratic rules to give a year's notice.

At that time, the normal retirement age was 55, though the rules specified that an officer could apply for early retirement at 50. In any case, a year's notice had to be given. Otherwise complications in pension entitlements might come into play. Another rule specified that an officer could not, after retirement, take up any employment in the private sector relevant to his previous duties without first going through a cooling-off period of one year. Sir John Cowperthwaite, the former Financial Secretary, for example, had to wait for a full year after he had stepped down from office before he could take up an appointment as a consultant for Jardine Fleming, a Hong Kong investment bank.

The big financial picture was clear. My income came almost entirely from my civil service salary. I might gain an occasional windfall in the form of prize money from the racehorses I owned in partnership with H. C. Fung. That would come only if both the nags and the jockeys riding them lived up to expectations! But that was all.

Over the years, those two income sources had left me unable to finance my children's studies overseas. Nor had I been able to save a *sou* to put a roof over

my own head after retirement, when I would no longer have any entitlement to heavily subsidised government quarters.

By failing to act promptly, therefore, I would in effect be allowing the regulations to move automatically towards the outcome I preferred, for I would definitely not have the funds to finance Tien-Kay for overseas studies when he finished secondary school.

If I had honestly believed that an initial overseas degree was essential to the future of my children, I might have gone into money-grubbing work sooner. But I had no such belief. Rather I believed the contrary; that their longer term interests would be best served by their growing up in Hong Kong and soaking up as much as possible of their Chinese cultural identity.

But self-interest also came into the equation. I was 50 years old. It was no time to cross the Rubicon, to trade in a challenging and meaningful career in the public service for a life requiring shady compromises and ethical ambiguities. The legal skulduggeries of Western corporate culture infiltrating local commercial life was quite repulsive. Was that too high a price to pay for accommodating the adolescent wishes of my sons?

Yet, I could not help experiencing some twinges of guilt. I had made too many mistakes in the past. I had brought them into the world knowing full well that my marriage to their mother was heading over the cliff. After siring them, I had also surrendered their upbringing to the mercurial moods of their mother, just to avoid conflicts in the home and to gain a semblance of peace. And I had lost what little I had put aside for their education by investing in the ill-fated *Singapore Herald* venture.

After their mother and I had separated, I had perhaps tried to impose upon them too quickly a remedial and more stable domestic regime. It had been a fairly liberal one by the standards that I and my siblings had grown up with at our grandparents' home in Singapore. But my boys were not prepared for that rapid change. The main difference, I supposed, was that I and my siblings had no shortage of elders around to enforce the rules and to sweeten them with an

occasional and unexpected act of affection or kindness whereas my boys had to be left largely on their own to follow the new rules. It was understandable, therefore, that I should have encountered resistance, especially from my eldest son. It took a while for my new regime to prevail.

But establishing reasonable order within the home did not equate with good parenting. I had inherited from my forebears a taciturn nature and I always found it awkward to communicate with my children on the abstract and philosophical plane. How could I explain to them all the complicated political, psychological and pragmatic factors which had caused me — a Chinese — to work willingly for a bunch of foreigners occupying a slice of my native land? The fact that my job came with a 3,300 square feet furnished apartment at Palm Court, a luxury far beyond the reach of the average salaried man, might lead them to surmise I had done so as a kind of dark and unspeakable *quid pro quo*.

My frequent absences on official assignments also rendered it difficult for me to bond with them. I must have come over as aloof and remote, just as my own father had appeared to me when I was their age. It was obvious that, lacking everyday contact with adults, their emotional development would have benefitted from a softer and more constant presence of a woman. To rely only on the faithful but illiterate Ah Duen was hardly adequate. Yet all my earnest attempts to get a suitable wife had met with total failure.

The fact I had not allowed them to enjoy another government perk must have compounded their misgivings. It concerned the use of an official chauffeur-driven car, a facility granted to every Policy Secretary or head of department. It was ostensibly for the purpose of taking him to and from office and for official engagements. General practice, however, sanctified its use by family members as well, like taking spouses on errands and sending children to school.

When I went into acting jobs as Director of Home Affairs and as Secretary for Economic Services, I also had the use of such a car. But I seldom took

advantage of the facility. Naturally, I did not allow my children to enjoy that facility either. Their school was only a shade over a mile from our home. They could easily walk it or take a bus. I did not want them to get into a habit that was above their station in life. Yet trying to explain everything that lay behind my thinking would have taken more time and effort than I could spare.

For instance, Hong Kong had a reasonably good public transport system, operated partly by government and partly by private companies on franchises with profit-limitation clauses. Some 90% of intra-territory journeys requiring power-driven transportation were made on public transport. This compared with the alarming 85% of car-obsessed Americans driving to work each day. That meant that within the colony only plutocrats and those wishing to flaunt their wealth would go around in expensive road-hogging cars.

Since global warming, environmental pollution and hazards to public health were becoming big issues, I thought the government was setting a bad example by providing official cars for top civil servants. First of all, it seemed morally wrong that any civil servant should live in a style above that of their paymasters. Secondly, the most senior expatriate officers were already cut off from the ordinary folks by language and culture. There was no case for them being further insulated from the *hoi polloi* by moving around in metal contraptions set on wheels.

If I had my way, I would eliminate all official chauffeur-driven cars, with perhaps the exception of those assigned to the Chief Secretary and to the Financial Secretary. When Sir John Cowperthwaite was Financial Secretary, he used to drive himself around in a vintage MG sports car rather than use his official car. If other top officials wanted to drive to work, they should jolly well use their own cars also.

Since I had refrained from explaining my various considerations to my sons, I could hardly blame them if they read my prohibition as just another instance of meanness on my part. Thus misunderstandings accumulated between us.

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The two conversations with my sons led me into a fair bit of introspection, particularly after I had slipped into bed but unable to find sleep. While delving into what someone had once called the dark night of the soul, I began to wonder if the course I was charting for my sons had been entirely honest and above board. Had I, in the fashion of so many other fathers, been subconsciously trying to shape them in my own image, as surrogates for my own aborted dreams? Acquaintances I had known as doctors or lawyers had often expressed the hope that their sons would enter the same profession as themselves and to do better in it. But what was meant by “better”?

That could hardly relate to my own ambitions. I had attempted journalism, teaching and fiction-writing and had failed to make a mark in any of them. Now I was a civil servant living at the economic margins and without any hope of meeting their wishes. I had never been even a good prototype as an obedient civil servant.

I had often failed to obey orders and had also failed, on occasion, to uphold the law of the land as I had been charged to do. My alibi for those failures was partly moral and philosophical and partly legalistic sophistry.

Chinese culture had taught me that human-heartedness ought to be at the centre of an individual's private life as well as his official one. In the case of an official, he had to behave as if he were the father and mother of the people he served. Merely following orders was not good enough. The Nuremberg war crimes trials had blown a gaping hole in that lame defence. A person could not do dastardly deeds simply because someone had ordered him to do so. He had to be personally accountable for his actions. That could create invidious choices.

In a previous volume of these memoirs, I had given examples of the choices confronting me when I was the head of the Labour Inspectorate, charged

under local labour laws to protect women and children from exploitation. I provide herewith one further example from that period.

One day, I was cutting through a street side market to walk to work when I saw a stout and energetic woman selling fresh vegetables from a hawker pitch. She had with her two young girls, one around three and the other around ten. Girls of those ages had no business being at a roadside vegetable pitch, I thought. They ought to be in a kindergarten or a school. So I stopped a little distance away and watched the proceedings for a while.

The pitch was busy with shopping housewives and servants. The woman hawker was very efficient. She would weigh out a customer's purchase and agree on a price before passing the vegetables to the older of the two girls to tie them with a string and to collect payment. The girl was also an efficient helper. She appeared to be co-operating without coercion. It was a *prima facie* case of using child labour.

The orthodox thing for me to do would be to send one of my Labour Inspectors around to observe the activity and then to collect evidence and bring the case before a court. I of course knew nothing about the woman. She could be a widow or a woman abandoned by her husband. But in either case she was obviously trying to make a living and support her family. What good would it do to disrupt her life, to have a fine imposed on her and possibly to fracture her family by having her children taken into care?

My thoughts jumped back to the time I had to wash dishes at the age of 13 at Mr. Wong Sue's restaurant, in exchange for daily meals. What would have happened to me if Mr. Wong Sue had been a stickler for labour laws? How would I have ended up if he had chased me off for being underaged and unemployable?

It so happened that at that same time I had also become qualified as an Air Raid Warden under the rules of the Civil Defence Council in Western Australia. I had volunteered to patrol the streets of Perth at night in order to aid the war effort and I had been assigned to see that all the blackout regulations

were being complied with. But I was paid nothing for that work.

Life seemed to be filled with moral hazards. Even when one followed some sort of vague moral compass, one was often left unable to read the direction it was pointing.

Western Australia      No 10407

Civil Defence (Emergency Powers) Act, 1940  
CIVIL DEFENCE COUNCIL

**AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS**

**Certificate of Examination**  
*Regulation 30 (j)*

This is to Certify that DAVID WONG  
of 97 ABERDEEN STREET, PERTH  
whose signature appears in the margin hereof, has qualified in a course of study in  
**AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS** in accordance with the scheme approved by the  
Civil Defence Council of Western Australia.

Dated this 8th day of October 1942.

*Signature David T. K. Wong*

*[Signature]*  
Instructor

*[Signature]*  
Chief Warden

*[Signature]*  
Under Secretary Civil Defence

Certificate for Air Raid Precautions Examination

In both instances, I had undertaken the duties of my own free will. But I could not figure out at that time — and after a lapse of 75 years I still cannot figure out — why it could be acceptable for a government to utilise child labour without payment but illegal for a child to offer his labour in return for food.

Sadly, up to the present day, far too many children all over the world still had to do the hard slog of harvesting cocoa or coffee beans or digging under appalling conditions for coal or gold just to earn enough to eat. In a perfect world no child should go hungry and no war would be fought. But how could such a perfect world be reached? So despairing over the state of the world as I saw it, I continued on my way to work and took no further action over the vegetable seller and her child helper.

After my two conversations with my sons, such recollections from my past kept riffling through my mind during my sleepless nights. A life like mine was certainly not what I would wish for my sons. I wanted to spare them my missteps and vicissitudes. But what was I actually trying to prepare them for? I was no longer sure.

They would certainly be growing up in a harsh and unstable world, full of the same problems and contradictions I had not managed to unravel or resolve. Was I being too unrealistic and over-protective in trying to shield them from reality? Would it not be better to cut them loose in the university of hard knocks? They might be better able to find accommodation with life than myself. Would it not be sufficient if they turned out to be reasonably hard-headed human beings instead of being hard-hearted ones?

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But obligations towards my sons were not the only obligations I had to bear in mind. I also had responsibilities towards the wider Hong Kong community. Its taxpayers had paid my salary for the last 18 years and they had twice financed my overseas studies at The Hague and at Oxford respectively. I also had moral obligations towards several very fine expatriate mentors who had lavished their time on me and had passed on to me their collective wisdom in the art of governance. Their commitment to community service had also guided my path. It behoved me to repay their kindness by at least serving

out my term. I could not, without due justification, shed such obligations as casually as a snake shedding its skin.

On the other hand, had I not reached the limits of what I could usefully do? I was one of the three or four most senior Chinese Administrative Officers in government; yet I had little in the way of actual power or influence. I had often wanted, in the spheres where I had been given responsibilities, to jolt the bureaucratic machine out of its established rut, to move it in fresh directions. But my views and suggestions had gone largely ignored or rejected. Hence I could count myself as no more than an inconvenient pebble lodged somewhere in the rut of the colonial machine.

Among current expatriate superiors, I had probably a reputation for being a loner, a maverick, and a poser of awkward questions. The few minor changes I had been able to bring about had been largely achieved through subterfuge, subversion and guile.

Perhaps it would be better if I were to leave after all. If I did, it might allow some of the camouflage covering colonial policies to fall aside, to reveal that Chinese officers had little say over most of the more crucial decisions. The public might then know who should be blamed for obvious flaws and for dodging all the big questions. The various strands in both my private and official lives seemed to have got as tangled as a Gordian knot and I was nowhere near being enough of an Alexander to cut through it.

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Such nocturnal ruminations edged me a little closer to the banks of the Rubicon. But I still had too many doubts to cross it. I suppose I was still searching for some elusive personal justification, like that Taoist point of spiritual and intellectual equilibrium between the fluctuating forces of the *yin* and the *yang*. My psyche was still wrapped too much within a mixture of emotions, values, commitments, historical guilt, individual aspirations

and quirks of temperament.

Over the years, a number of friends and acquaintances, being aware of my financial limitations in educating my children, had urged me to go after the material rewards of the private sector. But I doubted my suitability temperamentally. Indeed, I might not be the least bit marketable. I had seen many quite mediocre intellects striking it rich in business. But had I the stomach to sail dangerously close to the wind just to close a deal? Would any profit-minded employer allow me to dictate my own means of dealing when it came to making money for him?

Another worrying matter was the working culture inside many Chinese companies. Most had relatives lodged in positions with titles or in cosy sinecures. Blood was usually thicker than water and such relatives were likely to look to their family for instructions rather than any hired executive from outside the family. That could make for a lot of headaches. On occasion, money could also turn out to be thicker than blood and an outsider might quickly find himself in the middle of a family feud.

The only way to determine the lie of the land in any company would be to make soundings. Naturally, the starting point had to be H. C. Fung, the chairman of Li & Fung.

When we first met in 1963, he had tried to recruit me for the company. The firm was headed by his elder brother Fung Mo-Ying at the time. It was only after his brother had passed away that H. C. took over.

Li & Fung was founded in Canton in 1906 by his father and a Chinese merchant surnamed Li. The company operated as commission agents for trade between China and America, offering sourcing services and a linguistic bridge between buyers and sellers, in pretty much the same way as compradors in big British trading houses.

H. C.'s father sent him to establish a Hong Kong branch office before World War II. He bought a property in Connaught Road Central for that purpose. After the war, partner Li was bought out by the Fung family. The company

later became publicly listed and also did some business as a principal, notably in the areas of firecrackers and Chinese handicraft. Following a public listing in 1973, it created a slew of subsidiaries to handle different aspects of its work, in line with the legal protection afforded by corporate law. The bulk of its activities, however, remained centred on agency work for mass consumer products on behalf of American and European corporations.

I took the tentative step of arranging a meeting with H. C. and quickly laid all my cards on the table. I reminded him he had been urging me to join his company for 16 years. Now at last I was prepared to give it a try, if mutually satisfactory terms could be arrived at. I had been forced to risk a change, I told him, because I needed extra money to send my sons to study abroad. I would certainly not be able to do that on my civil service salary. If he was still interested in my services, we could talk terms.

“You’d always be welcomed in Li & Fung,” H. C. replied with alacrity. “You’ll be making an excellent decision. The one thing I can promise you is that you’ll be making much more than in government. We pay bonuses every year, for a start.”

“Thank you, but I don’t want to trade on our friendship,” I said. “We both have to get something worthwhile out of any deal. I’m not looking for a golden transfer fee or a quick fortune, just a package that will not leave me any worse off than what I’m currently enjoying in government.

“You may be wondering why I should be willing to switch jobs without a significant improvement in my package. I’ll level with you. I’ve never worked in business before, so I don’t really know whether I can make any real profit on your behalf. I don’t want to be greedy either. I’ve my own calculations.

“Right now, I only need enough to tide me over the expenses for my sons’ education. If I retired prematurely, I can immediately draw my pension and convert a part of it into a lump sum. That should take care of the extra expenses for the next few years. I’m now acting as Secretary for Economic Services. Soon I’d be given a department to run and the salary and other perks

that go with it. A package which gives me my present benefits and at the same time allows me to draw my pension is all I want.”

“Put your mind at ease, David,” H. C. said. “Doing business is easy. You’ll pick it up in no time. What you’re seeking is more than reasonable. If you join Li & Fung, I certainly will not treat you meanly.”

“I don’t want any misunderstanding between friends, H.C. Before you say ‘yes’ I have certain conditions you have to accept. First, I will not be a party to any transaction which I consider to be possibly illegal, not that I believe any of that sort of thing goes on inside Li & Fung. But there are just too many dodgy derring-dos happening in the private sector.

“Secondly, I know that you have kinfolk in various positions in the company. I’m not a very great respecter of bloodlines, you know. Anyone placed under my command has to work to my satisfaction or else he or she has to go. If you’ve got any relative you have a soft spot for, please don’t place that person under me.

“Finally, if we agree to a deal today, it’ll be at least a year before I can be available for work, because I have to serve out a year’s notice for premature retirement. If you can’t accept those conditions, I’ll try somewhere else and we can still remain friends.”

H. C. chuckled. “Don’t worry, David; trust me. The conditions you seek should be no problem. I know your character well enough. You should have no problem with my kinfolk. Go and put in your notice. My eldest son, Victor, has recently returned from Harvard to join the family business. I’ll get him to contact you so that the two of you can work out the terms in detail.”

We shook hands and the deal was done, orally and without lawyers, in the old-fashioned Chinese way.

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Once I had secured an agreement with H.C. I had to move smartly to

disengage from the Economic Services Branch of the Secretariat, lest I got stuck with a cooling-off period of another year before I could start work at Li & Fung.

I could not risk leaving my next posting to the vagaries of the Civil Service Branch. It might well send me to another negotiating job in the Commerce and Industry Department for instance, and that would scupper any opportunity for me to work without a cooling-off period. I soon found a perfect excuse for moving into a posting without any possibility of a conflict of interest — a post in the General Post Office.

The Post Office was a microcosm of colonial society. The department was topped by four expatriate officers with British postal backgrounds — a Postmaster General, a Deputy Postmaster General and two Assistant Postmaster Generals. The rest of the 5,000 or so staff members, however, were virtually entirely Chinese. So much for the lip service paid to “localisation”. The local staff had formed themselves into a number of active trade unions and staff associations. Recently, there had been one postal strike after another, ostensibly over working conditions and career prospects. Clear evidence of a breakdown of some kind in relations between management and labour.

It so happened that the Economic Services Branch had policy oversight in respect of the Post Office. I was aware of certain staffing problems in respect of the department’s hierarchy. The Postmaster General had recently been promoted from his previous job as the Deputy. But neither of the two Assistant Postmaster Generals was considered sufficiently seasoned to be promoted to the post of Deputy.

Furthermore, the newly promoted Postmaster General was himself due to retire in January of 1982, which meant that whoever his Deputy might be would need to be ready to take the helm in two years’ time. An outside recruitment for a Deputy was therefore necessary, with all the attending problems of morale within the leadership of the department while staff and management conflicts brewed lower down.

In the circumstances, I suggested to the Civil Service Branch that I take up the vacant Deputy's post at the Post Office *pro temp* and try to sort out its labour and management problems. That would take away the urgency of an immediate recruitment.

The Civil Service Branch jumped at my suggestion. It had its own reasons to be pleased. I would be the first Chinese to be among the top management of the department. Secondly, the Civil Service Branch calculated that once I had been installed at the Post Office, I might be persuaded to stay on and become the next Postmaster General.

The Secretary for the Civil Service sent me a letter in October of 1979 setting out those possibilities and offering me the choice of remaining in the Administrative Service or transferring permanently to the Post Office establishment. Since I had other plans, I replied saying I would consider his offer after I had started work at the Post Office.

Of course, the London hearings on the cabotage route intervened, to upset the best laid plans of mice and men. I was not appointed Deputy Postmaster General until the beginning of 1980.

As soon as it could decently be done after taking up my post, I sent in my application for early retirement, giving the required year's notice. The Civil Service Branch must have felt considerably narked by my move. Who could blame it? In the cat and mouse game with the branch, I had probably resorted to a ploy not sanctioned under Marquis of Queensbury rules. But the bureaucratic game was often a cut-throat business. From the MacLehose years onwards, if a person wanted a satisfactory career outcome, he could no longer rely on comradely feelings or any *esprit de corps* to secure him what he desired. He had to play his own hand the way he saw fit.

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Meanwhile, once I had been installed in the Post Office, H. C.'s eldest son,

Victor Fung Kwok-King made contact and I met him for the first time. He was short and dumpy, taking after Charity, his mother, and he had an outgoing and glad-hand American approach.

He had acquired a doctorate from Harvard. His speech was peppered with modish business school jargon like “synergy”, “mission statement”, “paradigm shifts” and “economies of scale”. He gave every impression of having already mastered all there was to know about the intricacies of leveraged buyouts, off-balance-sheet accounting and enhancement of shareholder values.

My guess was that his father must have instructed him that a deal had already been done and that what was needed was to tie up the small print prettily into a nice package. But somehow — perhaps because his speech was too earnest and his smiles too ready — he evoked for me an image of a hustling car salesman from Arkansas, trying to convince a customer a certain second-hand car sitting in the forecourt was truly the best bargain that could be had.

Over several meetings, we knocked into acceptable shape the detailed terms of my employment in Li & Fung. What we had ultimately agreed upon, I shall save for the next volume of these memoirs.