

Fertility for sale

The view in south China is that northern girls are looked down upon and northern wives are trodden on. Here is the story of Limfa, a peasant girl who would normally have few survival options. Without a pleasing appearance, she chose not to be a hooker, but followed a survival strategy more helpless than prostitution.

It was a typical morning at 6:30am on Mongkok Road. Construction workers were gathering to wait for the site supervisor, who would pick the labour he needed for the day. Uncle Gin could not sleep and had arrived at 5:00am. He needed money badly and wanted to be at the front of the queue. He squatted on the pavement and prayed for the supervisor to come early; no matter what, he had to work today.

Carrying a document folder and wearing a grey suit and a big smile, Kwai approached the hopeful men waiting for work. As Uncle Gin saw the smiling insurance salesman, he immediately turned away. Old Keung was standing next to him, and before he could do anything to save himself, Kwai had locked onto him, saying: “Hi there, Old Keung, you should buy insurance as early as you can. You are only in your fifties, with no injuries and no illness. The monthly payments would be very low.”

Old Keung was tired of the repeated sales pitch and said to Kwai, “I have told you many times, wait till I find a wife.”

The regular casual labourers nicknamed Kwai ‘the insurance Kwai’ – in Cantonese the word ‘Kwai’ sounds like ‘loss’ and insurance sounds like ‘sure’, indicating that buying insurance from Kwai did not sound like a good deal.

Insurance Kwai instantly responded to Old Keung: “You’ve been talking about getting married for years and years.” But Old Keung was running out of patience: “You think I enjoy being single! I just can’t raise enough for the marriage. What can I do?”

Seeing Uncle Gin trying to slip away, Kwai called out: “Hey Uncle Gin! Why are you so hard to find? The only place I can find you is here, early in the morning!”

“Don’t push me so hard!” replied Uncle Gin. “I haven’t cleared my prostitution debts yet, and my wife is having a new baby.” Kwai was shocked. “Haven’t you had enough babies, Uncle Gin?”

Old Keung was amazed as well. “Your first wife gave you four children, your new wife already had one, and you want more? That must cost you a few dollars!”

“She’s a tigress, she won’t have an abortion no matter what I say, so what can I do?” Uncle Gin sighed with resignation. Kwai showed no interest in Uncle Gin’s family troubles; he just wanted him to pay the money he owed. “Uncle Gin, I paid your last month’s life insurance premium, plus this month’s. That’s HK\$1,120 you owe me.”

“I don’t want the insurance any more, I’m giving it up,” said Uncle Gin.

“Giving it up? How about your little boys, your little girls, and your young wife, what will they do? Besides, you’ve already paid the insurance

policy for a whole year; if you give up now, you won't get anything back."

This made Uncle Gin uneasy. "If I can get some work today, then I'll pay you back by instalments," he conceded.

The construction supervisor drove his lorry along Mongkok Road and pulled over in front of the hopeful crowd. He picked out a few strongly built men, leaving Uncle Gin to plead: "I've waited here every day and worked for you for years. For old times' sake, please take me, I'm desperate!" The captain nodded and Uncle Gin climbed into the back of the lorry.

The job that day was to move bricks to the higher floors of a partially finished building. Uncle Gin loaded bricks into the makeshift lift at ground level and passed them up to the waiting bricklayers, who were listening to a radio announcer repeating an irritating news item:

"The Court of Final Appeal has reached its verdict on the residency of Hong Kong citizens' children born outside Hong Kong. Yesterday, those violating their temporary visas stormed government offices and attacked the police in a show of anger. Both those who have stayed longer than permitted, and illegal immigrants, are praying for an amnesty from the SAR Government. Most of the overstayers say they are not willing to leave Hong Kong."

The constant repetition of the news item annoyed Uncle Gin, who yelled out: "Hey, switch the channel, will you? I'm sick of hearing this news over and over again!"

While looking upwards and shouting, he lost his footing. The weight of the bricks he was carrying made it impossible for him to keep his balance. He toppled over and fell silent. An ambulance rushed to the

scene, only to find Uncle Gin already dead amid a scattered load of bricks.

Limfa arrived in Hong Kong by ferry, holding her son in her arms and carrying an unborn baby in her belly. The crowded customs hall smelled of peasantry. She noticed a well-dressed, apparently educated lady and coyly followed her into one of the long queues. When Limfa was standing in front of the immigration officer at the head of the queue, she was suddenly inspired to tell him: “I came for my husband’s funeral. My cousin saw me suffering so much, and she took great care of me.” She looked past the officer towards the well-dressed lady. The officer turned and glanced at the supposed cousin and let Limfa enter.

Burdened with packages, suitcases and her son, Limfa came out of the customs building to look for her husband’s family, who were nowhere to be seen. Then it began to rain heavily, which started the little boy crying. Limfa watched the well-dressed lady get into a taxi while she cursed her in-laws: “The whole family are bastards! They don’t care, they just want to abandon us, a poor widow and her child!”

It was now dark and Limfa stumbled towards her in-laws’ house, struggling with the infant and her luggage. She could tolerate having no one meet her at the ferry terminal, she could even tolerate the rain; but nagging at her most was wondering how much funeral gift money the in-laws had received. She had calculated the number of his friends and relatives who might have attended her husband’s funeral, and was expecting to receive a minimum of HK\$9,000.

When she finally arrived, her first words to the several generations of female relatives seated at the dinner table did nothing to endear her.

“Is the mourning ended now? Couldn’t you wait a few more days to hold the funeral? What are you doing now, finishing off all the food gifts? How much money did you collect? It’s my husband that died; all that money belongs to his widow and son!”

Without looking up, her sister-in-law spat out a fish bone and sneered to another family member: “Last time Limfa came to Hong Kong, she walked in and asked why there was only 10,000 dollars for the bride price. We told her, her husband’s first wife didn’t get a single cent from her wedding, so why should she be any different? Now she’s after money again, this time from the funeral.”

The little boy began to cry again, and the hard looks from the in-laws added to the palpable tension. Limfa began to weep: “You are all so mean. You just couldn’t wait for a few more days.”

The eldest daughter of Uncle Gin’s first wife took a sip from her drink and said: “The funeral parlour charged daily and we had to pay all the funeral expenses. It was up to us to decide when to bury him.”

“What about the cash gifts? How much is there?” asked Limfa.

Her husband’s third sister was sick of arguing over money. She tossed a handful of notes at Limfa’s face. “Friends and relatives donated this money for the children of your husband’s first wife. You take this money and you never, never come here again!”

Limfa counted the money in tears, paused, and then screamed in anger: “Only 5,000 dollars! You can’t bully me and my children like that!”

Her husband’s sister was outraged. “You deserve what you get! Is one child not enough for you? You’re having more? You’re shameless!”

Limfa's mother-in-law was in her eighties and looked frail, but her quiet demeanour suddenly changed and she screeched: "You want more babies! You fucking whore! Even if you bear more of my grandsons, I won't take you into our household!"

Limfa retorted: "Your son was old, ugly, and had stinking breath. I served him obediently for his last two years. Now you treat me like shit!"

The first wife's daughter was infuriated, shouting: "If you despised our dad so much, why did you pressure him into marriage?"

This enraged Limfa. "I forced your dad into marriage? Ha! It was your dad that tricked me into this marriage! He promised to give me this, give me that; in the end, he gave nothing but his shit, and you lot!"

Inside a tumbledown building in Sham Shui Po, Insurance Kwai was breathless from climbing seven floors. He had run into an old hooker at a one-woman brothel on the third floor; she fondled his crotch, trying for a deal. Kwai said he wasn't interested, and that he was an insurance agent there on business. The hooker's expression went cold. "If you were in the heroin business, maybe I'd be interested," she said and let him pass.

Kwai finally made it to the landing on the eighth floor, where he found a peasant woman washing nappies in an illegally pitched lean-to. He gathered his breath. "Excuse me. Are you Wong Limfa, Mr Ho Gin's widow?"

"You know my husband?" Limfa replied, excited. Kwai nodded.