

Hong Kong Confidential

Life as a Subversive

David T. K. Wong



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CHAPTER I

Interregnum

AFTER LOSING A SERIES of wars during the 19th century, China had to make reparations, confer privileges and cede territories to foreign countries under the terms of “unequal” treaties. In the case of Britain, one of the territories surrendered under a series of treaties comprised the 400 square miles of land making up the Crown Colony of Hong Kong. The bulk of that area, however, was only on a 99-year lease on land called the New Territories.

In January of 1943, while the Second World War was still raging, Britain and China signed a further treaty pledging friendship, which abrogated the provisions of previous treaties between them — except for the retention of the colony of Hong Kong. The future of that territory was to be further negotiated after the end of World War II.

By the time the war ended, however, the internationally recognised Chinese government under General Chiang Kai-Shek was already locked in a bitter struggle for power with Chinese Communist rebels under the leadership of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung. The negotiations projected to be held between Britain and China were therefore left in limbo.

It was during that politically unsettled interregnum that I returned to Hong Kong in the spring of 1947. I had been born there but I had been taken by my mother to live in Canton when I was about three. By the time of my return, I was already 18, short of money and with no visible means of

support. I was also weighed down by a variety of psychological baggage.

Before my return, I had gained a Cambridge School Leaving Certificate in Singapore. I had been living there since before I was six, having been consigned to live with my paternal grandparents after the collapse of my parents' marriage.

My grandfather was a doctor, trained at the then Hong Kong College of Medicine. Soon after his graduation in 1900, however, he secured an appointment as a medical officer in the British Colonial Service and was fortuitously assigned to Singapore, then a part of the Straits Settlements. That was why he happened to live there.

Though my grandfather was officially a British Crown servant, he had spent a significant part of his time supporting revolutionary activities against the corrupt and ineffective Ching Dynasty in China. He got involved because he was a good friend of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the revolutionary leader advocating change, unity and renewal for the country.

Because my grandfather had shared Dr. Sun's belief in the need for China to pull itself together and end its humiliations at the hands of foreign powers, he devoted his efforts to raising funds among overseas Chinese to support the revolution. After a number of failed attempts, the revolution finally succeeded in 1911. But the country, unfortunately, remained politically almost as fractured and divided as before.

When I was growing up, my grandfather had been pretty tight-lipped about his clandestine activities. He made little mention of Chinese history or politics. In any case, I had been too young to be interested in such topics. I had far more immediate and vexing existential puzzles of my own — why my parents had separated and why my mother had given me up while retaining my younger brother? I felt instinctively that brothers ought to grow up together and that children ought to be with their parents. I could not fathom why I had to be split away in such an incomprehensible fashion.

My brother, Tzi-Choy, admittedly had a more felicitous name than my own.

His name meant “talented son” or “gifted child” whereas mine only meant “strange son” or “unusual child”. Thus I grew up with a thirst to uncover the reasons for the unexplained goings-on within my own family. No adult had ever given me a satisfactory reason for my fate. Not my grandparents, my father nor my many aunts and elders. They all seemed deliberately evasive. I smelt a rat.

I soon suspected that my mother must have rejected me because I had some unspeakable defect and for which she felt ashamed. Perhaps I had an incurable disease, for I certainly could not put on weight however much I ate. Leaving me with my grandfather, a doctor, made sense in that case. But what was the disease afflicting me? I simply could not find out.

So, with those unresolved suspicions hanging around my neck after completing my secondary education, I made it known within the family I intended to head for Canton, where my mother was living with my younger brother. I had not seen either of them for almost 13 years. In the meantime, my mother had also acquired a new husband. They lived in a street called Six Two Three Road. That latter fact, coupled with my determination to go there, somehow caused my grandfather to start telling me about certain aspects of Chinese history.

He explained that the street where my mother lived had been named to commemorate the slaughter in 1925 by French and British machine-gunners of cadets from the Whampoa Military College and other demonstrators trying to cross the two bridges leading to the foreign concessions on the island of Shameen. The island was located at the western side of the city.

My grandfather then went on to describe the many other massacres of Chinese by the British — in Shanghai, in Hong Kong and in other parts of China — and to explain why our countrymen had to overthrow the Ching Dynasty and end such oppressions. Sadly, after the overthrow of the Manchus, China failed to produce the calibre of leaders the country needed.

After listening to my grandfather’s narratives, I began to understand

better his attachment to his country and why he had committed himself to revolution. He was then 73 and I got an impression that, in recounting the past, he was somehow trying to indicate he had done all he could and that the responsibility for rejuvenating China now rested with my generation.

I found that slightly unnerving. Was he expecting me to pick up where he had left off? I was not sure. I had only just got out of secondary school. What could I do? If I had any ambition at all, it was only to continue my education at a university somewhere.

* * *

The Kwangtung provincial capital of Canton had a reputation for being “the mother of revolutions” because it had hatched more insurrections and rebellions than any other city in China. When I set eyes on it after the war, that reputation seemed well-deserved. The place indeed reeked of corruption and political divisions.

Sing-song houses, gambling dens, black market dealerships in UNRRA supplies and shady restaurants with hidden agendas lined the front of its harbour. Spiralling inflation, grinding poverty, economic chaos and criminal enterprises affected virtually every walk of life. Everything and everyone appeared capable of being bought or sold — if the price was right. The need to restore the country’s dignity seemed almost palpable, just waiting for the right patriots to answer the call. Yet the inhabitants of the city appeared more concentrated on just surviving the economic chaos, staying ahead of the rampant inflation and avoiding being caught up in the raging civil war.

One look at Six Two Three Road was enough to tell me that the glory previously associated with heroic deaths was transient and overrated. How could a string of numbers, indicating a half-forgotten date, do sufficient honour to the dozens who had forfeited their lives there 22 years earlier?

Meeting my mother and brother again also proved something of an anti-

climax. Neither turned out to be as warm and welcoming as I had expected. The reunion seemed stiff and formalised, like a meeting between distant relatives. The only surprise was that my mother and her doctor husband had produced a jolly baby daughter as a half-sister for me.

I was soon to discover for the first time hitherto unknown traits in my mother's personality. I found her very practical and down-to-earth and not much interested in politics or national issues, notwithstanding that in the days before I was born she had worked in a secretarial capacity in the office of Borodin, that notorious Russian Comintern agent sent to China to foment revolution.

The circumstances at her home in Six Two Three Road indicated a diminishing economic status. Whatever resources she and her husband might have accumulated had fallen victim to spiralling inflation. If I had previously entertained hopes of my mother financing my further education, those hopes quickly evaporated.

Stuck for a direction for my future, I sounded my mother out on the prospect of enrolling in the Whampoa Military Academy. It would be my contribution towards national reconstruction and advancement, I claimed. She responded with ridicule. She suggested I should learn typing and shorthand instead. I saw some justice in her response. Although I was 18, I was physically little more than a bag of skin and bones, weighing in at a mere 102 pounds! Hardly the right material for a military career.

Her reaction naturally doused me like a bucket of ice water poured unceremoniously over my head. It hurt my pride that my own mother should see so little prospect for me. A depressing clerical life loomed before my mind's eye. Pushing pens and filling in ledgers was hardly the life I wanted. My heart sank. I realised that if I wanted a better fate, I would have to find it for myself. And certainly at a place less chaotic and more promising than Canton. On that basis I boarded a train for the short journey to Hong Kong.

* * *

The British Crown Colony represented a sea change. In 1947, the Hong Kong dollar was much more stable than Chinese currency. Neither did the city display Canton's filth and disorder and its air of impending doom. Yet the colony also had its own edginess, apprehensions, anomalies and antagonisms. More than 98% of its population were Chinese; but the real political power and commercial wealth rested in the hands of a small elite group of European rulers and Chinese merchants.

Since I was desperately short of money, I wasted no time seeking out relatives and family friends to help me find a job. It was not easy. I had no qualifications apart from a School Leaving Certificate. I managed in the end to land a probationary appointment as cub reporter with the *South China Morning Post*, the colony's leading English-language newspaper.

A probationer's pay, however, was pitched at starvation levels — a mere HK\$150 per month or roughly 80 American cents per day at the then prevailing rate of exchange! The amount was just about sufficient for two modest meals per day, in the form of either two bowls of *wonton* noodles or two plates of barbecued pork and rice.

But the low pay was not what upset me most. It was the sharp discrepancy in the terms of employment between local journalists and expatriate ones. The latter not only got higher salaries but also housing and holiday packages. I had spent more than four years as a refugee in Australia during the war, predominantly among Europeans, and I could not see that they, as a racial group, were inherently superior to any other race. So why should they be automatically paid more and treated better in Hong Kong? What was equally surprising was that the local employees within the newspaper seemed to accept such disparities without much ado.

As I set about my duties, covering everything from magistrate courts

to fires and accidents, from social galas and charity balls to the funerals of the great and the good, it came to me that racial discrimination was an all-pervading fact of life in the colony. As a Chinese, I resented deeply that I should be regarded as inferior simply because of my race. It riled me more effectively than my grandfather's accounts of historical massacres of Chinese by foreigners. It pricked more directly upon my skin.

It became progressively obvious that enormous gulfs of ignorance separated the bulk of the population from the tiny foreign ruling elites, not only where language, race, culture and habits were concerned but also in the nurturing of competing myths and concepts of *amour propre*.

Under such circumstances, different outlooks and approaches to everyday issues were bound to arise. How could a hawk gliding far up in the heavens have the same point of view as a worm burrowing through the mud flats below? Even a person living in an airless tenement bunk space, where the communal night-soil bucket would be replaced only once every two or three days, could not entertain the perspectives of someone subsisting in a squatter hovel, without electricity, running water or latrine facilities, and exposed to the quotidian whims of wind, rain and fire.

The growing squatter problem had been staring everyone in the face, yet no coherent policy had been put in place by the administration to tackle it. On Christmas night of 1953, a fire broke out at Shek Kip Mei squatter area and by morning it had left two dead, 53,000 homeless and many unemployed.

It took that misfortune to force the government to embark on an emergency housing programme. Remarkably, for a small place like Hong Kong, within a year and a bit all the victims had been re-housed in a resettlement estate. That demonstrated what a government could be capable of if the will and the determination existed. That project marked the beginning of the colony's public and subsidised housing programme now covering more than half the population. But the demand for affordable housing remains today as great as ever.



Homeless former residents of the Shek Kip Mei squatter area after the fire of December 1953.
Photo: *South China Morning Post*

Another illustration of the potential for mutual misunderstandings between rulers and the ruled could be found in the way hawkers were dealt with. According to one official estimate at the time, in excess of 75,000 people were earning their livings through hawking after World War II. That meant a quite significant part of the population was dependent upon that rudimentary form of economic activity.

Since time immemorial, the Chinese had been primarily an agrarian nation, living relatively plain and simple lives. Should the need for some extra money arise, it was customary for people to set up pitches on the roadsides of nearby towns and villages to sell produce, products or snacks. Or to trade their skills in juggling, fortune-telling, toy-making or whatever in return for a coin or two. It was not too dissimilar to market days in some of the smaller European towns.

After the British took over, however, they wanted to bring system and order and to prevent thoroughfares from becoming obstructed. They introduced licensing for hawking, separating that activity into different types — fixed

pitches of specified sizes at specified locations, for example, and another on an itinerant basis. Thus new offences such as obstruction and hawking without a licence — or with the wrong type of licence — came into being.

Sometimes the regulations contradicted one another. While itinerant hawking licences were provided, such hawkers were forbidden to call out to indicate their presence or to create noise to peddle their wares.

I recalled when I was a boy living in Blair Road in Singapore, I always kept an ear open for the arrival of various hawkers — the tock-tock signals struck on bamboo sticks by the noodle sellers, the ting-a-ling of the ice popsicle man, the high-pitched cries of the sharpener of knives and scissors, and the different call signs of the Indian seller of nuts, the fruiterer, the olive man and so forth. Without making a noise, how could any itinerant hawker make his presence known? So the courts ended up seeing daily parades of bewildered folks being fined or otherwise punished for unwittingly committing various breaches of the law.

So far as officialdom was concerned, it was just trying to produce a public good for a people predisposed to being disorderly, noisy and disorganised. But for the hawkers affected, it came across as foreigners trying to stop them from making an honest living.

When more strange and arcane offences were added to the statute books — like loitering with intent, larceny by finding and possession of an implement fit for an unlawful purpose — even the most competent court interpreters had difficulty explaining them to baffled defendants. That provided further sources for resentment and disaffection and the rise of irredentist sentiments.

It was therefore unsurprising that in October of 1946, the authorities appeared taken aback by an outbreak of anti-foreign rioting in Kowloon after a peanut seller had been killed during a hawker clearance operation in Yaumati. Disturbances flared spontaneously and spread rapidly to other parts of Kowloon. Foreigners and the police were stoned wherever they appeared. It was days before the authorities could re-establish control.

The authorities might have anticipated trouble if they had been more conscious of the anger building up for months over hawker clearances. Any cursory examination into Hong Kong's colonial history would reveal many more instances of absence of understanding between the ruling elites and the common people.

Towards the end of 1964, for another later example, the local demand for Chinese to be made a second official language — which had been brewing for some time — reached a critical mass. But such a demand, if met, would create a number of legal and technical problems which were outside the bureaucracy's comfort zone. So instead of offering a degree of accommodation, the government sought to stifle or downplay the demand, branding it as “an intellectual exercise” by “frustrated intellectuals”. It was left to civil society to take the lead for change. The Catholic Church, for instance, began using Chinese for Mass in 1965. It was not till 1972 that the government, with ill-grace, conceded to making Chinese a second official language.

Another example of the ham-fisted way the administration dealt with public opposition could be found in the way it handled a proposal for a five-cent increase in First Class Star Ferry fares in 1966. The arrest of a solitary peaceful protester for staging a fast at the Star Ferry concourse, and thus causing a minor obstruction, provided the spark igniting three days of rioting. One person was killed, 1,800 were arrested and 258 sent to gaol as a consequence. A subsequent Commission of Inquiry ascribed one of the causes of the riots to the distrust existing between the government and the population at large.

* * *

It might be appropriate at this point if I were to make a foolhardy attempt to encapsulate in a few short paragraphs some of the enduring traits of a people as old and complex as the Chinese. They have the distinction of being the only continuous civilisation from ancient times which has

survived more or less intact to the present day.

They are a people who are highly individualistic, eccentric, creative, hard-working and rambunctious. Yet they are bound by history, rituals, customs, family and clan ties which curbed their more individualistic inclinations. That rendered them difficult to stereotype. My justification for this attempt, however inadequate and skimpy it might be, is that the overwhelming number of Hong Kong people are an offshoot of that dominant racial stock. So to understand them requires some grasp of the origins of their behaviour, culture and values.

The Chinese had once been described as a people “poor in possessions but rich in sentiments and discriminating tastes”. To get a feel of their character, it is essential to explore how they had been shaped by circumstances and how their social and philosophical systems have evolved over the millennia.

Of foremost importance to the Chinese was the influence of Confucius, a teacher who lived between 551 and 479 B.C. His period was a chaotic time of feudal city states and patriarchal societies, arranged in hierarchies according to age, sex and class distinctions.

Confucius believed in the fundamental goodness and teachability of human beings, that they could cultivate virtue and ethics through personal and communal endeavours. Unlike Aristotle, he held that man was not just a reasoning being but was also a reasonable one.

Hence he worked out a system of propriety and restraint, of moderation and of knowing one's place. He assigned a moral duty on those in higher positions to look after those below them, as would be the case for a king over his subjects and for a head of household over his family. Those in lower positions should in turn repay those who looked after them with loyalty and obedience.

In respect of the virtues of the individual, Confucius emphasised certain inherent qualities which he called human-heartedness and righteousness. The latter revolved around what ideally *ought* to be done. In other words,

in every society there would be things which ought to be done because they were morally the right things to do. A person might do those things for non-moral reasons, but if so then he could only be acting for profit and not righteousness.

By 100 B.C. Confucius and his teachings had become so revered that his countrymen regarded him as The First Teacher and his ideas were accepted as national orthodoxy. Around that time, the famed Chinese imperial examination system also began, whereby entry into the ranks of government depended not upon noble birth or wealth but on passing periodic examinations based upon the Confucian classics.

During the Tang Dynasty, under the Emperor Tai Tsung, an official edition of the Confucian classics was prepared, together with the numerous commentaries which had been made upon them. Confucianism was thus reaffirmed as the official teaching of the state.

Legend has it that Confucius had a slightly older contemporary by the name of Li Erh, who ridiculed Confucius when they met, berating him for his arrogance, ingratiating manners and excessive ambition. Li Erh has come down to us as Lao Tzu or the Old One, the putative author of the *Tao Te Ching*, a slender two-part volume embodying the philosophy known as Taoism.

Taoism is not easy to explain. The very first sentence of the *Tao Te Ching* had tested the ingenuity of commentators and translators for centuries. It is now generally translated as: "The Tao which can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao." Lao Tzu then went on to obscure the concept further, by saying that the Tao concealed itself by being nameless, shadowy and indistinct. He believed the Tao to be a force behind everything existing in the world. It could not be categorised, sliced up or placed under a microscope. It could only be intuited. Man was an integral part of the Tao, so he was like an eye that could see but could never see itself.

At its heart, Taoism is concerned with the survival of the common man,

whom it believed to be innocent and ought to be living in harmony with Nature and leaving things alone. If people would only follow their own nature, then a social order would emerge by itself. In short, to act through non-action, because every tiniest thing was interconnected, each following its own nature. “The Tao does nothing, yet nothing is left undone.” To be proactive might inadvertently upset the harmony of the Tao. It would be better for people to curb ambition, avoid seeking fame and position, slow down the tempo of their lives and not despise working with their hands.

Confucianism and Taoism in due course produced a reaction in another group of thinkers known collectively as the Legalists. That short-lived school was embodied in Han Fei, who committed suicide in 236 B.C.

Whereas Confucius held that man was born good and Lao Tzu that he was born innocent, the Legalists held he was born evil. Hence man had to be forced to obey a fixed set of rules, regardless of his social or political status. The rule of law might sound beguiling but if man was a rascal, who could draw up laws which would not benefit rascals? And of course the more laws the more law-breakers.

After a brief attempt to bring an elaborate system of law into practice, social and economic affairs of the country ground to a halt. It would appear that modern advocates of the rule of law had not studied thoroughly enough what had happened in China a couple of thousand years ago. Law without the human touch would be both unworkable and unenforceable. In many countries today, legal processes have become so complicated, convoluted, time-consuming, expensive and open to abuse that it is arguable whether justice could really ever be served.

While both Taoism and Confucianism dealt with the problems of earthly existence and on finding human happiness and contentment in an inhospitable world, they left unfilled in the Chinese psyche a spiritual gap about eternity and the afterlife. Confucius, when asked about death, gave the terse and celebrated answer which, in pidgin English, went as follows:

“Don’t know life, how know death?”

When Buddhism first came to China is a matter of dispute but it was a few centuries after Confucius and Lao Tzu. One Taoist legend has it that Lao Tzu went to India and influenced Buddhism before it came to China. In any event, its offer of a Nirvana after the pain and vicissitudes of earthly life gradually rendered it a major factor in Chinese civilisation. Today, it is quite noticeable that for every Taoist temple still standing in China there are probably at least ten Buddhist ones.

Buddhism’s concept of karma, of a person’s deeds forming a chain of causes and effects stretching well into the future, found ready acceptance among the Chinese. It did them a power of good by making them conscious that death needed not to be the end of their being but only one aspect of an extended process. Whatever people did in their present existence would determine what they would become in the future. That belief made them kinder, more peace-loving and more inclined towards becoming vegetarians. It also drove them to engage in charitable acts in order to store up merit for their next reincarnation.

None of those strands of philosophy touched upon above would appear very suitable preparation for vaulting into the bare-knuckled struggle for profits and fame under the quasi-capitalistic arena currently prevailing in Hong Kong. Indeed, commerce had been frowned upon since ancient times and merchants had been relegated to the lowest level in society. That was because merchants and traders — unlike farmers and artisans — produced nothing while seeking to make gains from trading the products of others. They therefore came to be generally viewed as corrupt, treacherous and selfish.

Notwithstanding such seeming anomalies, most Chinese have woven some elements of those schools of thought into their personalities, emotional make-up and everyday conduct. They would seek whatever enjoyment or happiness there might be on hand, be it through sipping tea, playing chess or *mah-jong*, picking their teeth, keeping caged canaries, practising *tai chi*,

eating melon seeds or fiddling with their toes. Bits of each philosophy would also be reflected through family custom and common habit. For example, when I was a boy, I quickly got accustomed to the family cook serving up Buddhist vegetarian dishes on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month, although my family was supposed to be Christians.

Close behind philosophies, another important element in the make-up of the Chinese was their preoccupation with food. They have remained completely catholic in this regard, more so than most nations. They would eat everything that moved and a lot more that did not. In some parts of China, snakes were popular; and in other parts, dogs. Because famines used to be such a recurring feature of life, the Chinese had also tried assuaging their pangs of hunger with grass, tree bark and boiled mud.

Some believe that certain foods eaten determined virility. For instance, it is a historical fact that all Chinese dynasties had been founded by noodle-eaters from the north, with no dynasty ever being established by a rice-eater from south of the Yangtse River.

Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, a southerner, had inspired and led the Revolution of 1911, but soon discovered the unforgiving reality that a man with words could never prevail against one with guns. In the interests of national unity, he stepped aside as President of the fledging republic in favour of the northern warlord Yuan Shih-Kai. But Yuan — who incidentally had failed twice in Imperial Examinations — had other ideas. He had set his heart on establishing another dynasty with himself as its first emperor, until a timely death in 1916 put paid to his ambition.

In addition to that general picture, the Chinese have also developed a wry sense of humour, rather akin to the British one. They are known for their intelligence, their innovative cast of mind and their capacity for hard work when that proved necessary. Their social structure and upbringing have foisted upon them a family-oriented outlook in spite of any individualistic inclination they might have. That also created in them

an aversion to poking their noses into other people's business.

* * *

The Chinese in Hong Kong have inherited many of the basic characteristics of their compatriots from the mainland. But since they are largely immigrants, they also bring the complications of geographic and dialectic attachments with them. Most are Cantonese, with roots in Kwangtung Province, but sizeable segments had originated from Kwangsi, Fukien, Kiangsu, Chekiang, Shanghai and places farther afield.

The fact that they all looked pretty much alike and shared a common written language and an aloof and self-satisfied manner, have often led foreigners to take them to be the same. In truth, they are often divided into factions and cliques, and further separated by class, education, politics, religion, wealth, family background, clan attachments, sex and varying money-grubbing motives.

Outsiders might also consider the Chinese to be over-attached to the concept of face. It might be just a more openly ritualised form of politeness not uncommon among Eastern races. For instance, some cultures would say "yes" when they actually mean "no". It was the way in which the "yes" was expressed that told the true response. The Chinese possibly set a greater store in subtlety than others.

Yet, as an all-pervading social practice, face is not easy to explain, especially to foreigners. The best I can do is to quote from Dr. Lin Yu-Tang, an eminent Chinese scholar, who wrote a book entitled *My Country and My People* more than 80 years ago.

Dr. Lin said: "Face cannot be translated or defined. It is like honour and is not honour. It cannot be purchased by money, and gives a man or a woman a material pride. It is hollow and is what men fight for and what women die for. It is invisible and yet by definition exists by being shown to the public.

It exists in the ether and yet can be heard, and sounds eminently respectable and solid. It is amenable, not to reason but to social convention. It protracts lawsuits, breaks up family fortunes, causes murders and suicides, and yet it often makes a man out of a renegade who has been insulted by his fellow townsmen, and it is prized above all earthly possessions. It is more powerful than fate and favour, and more respected than the constitution. It often decides a military victory or defeat, and can demolish a whole government ministry. It is that hollow thing which men in China live by.”

A Chinese should be able to relate easily to what Dr. Lin had described. He would almost certainly have come across instances of a family going into debt to lay on a wedding feast or a stylish funeral in order to preserve face. I doubt, however, whether very many foreigners would plumb the true depths of silliness to which the Chinese could descend in their pursuit of face.

Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the Father of Republican China, had likened the Chinese nation to a tray of sand, lacking cohesion and unity. I would characterise those in Hong Kong as more like a heap of beans, thrown together haphazardly inside a shop-worn gunny sack of foreign colonialism.

Within that sack, each retained an individual existence, jostling for whatever opportunities there might be for survival or profit or advancement. Such competitive contacts often generated more friction than warmth; good fellowship was left to providence or chance. Should that colonial gunny sack ever split, they would probably spill all over the place, with each pursuing his individual self-interest, ranging from the noble to the profane.

I am unsure whether a reader is left much wiser about the Chinese race after these brief paragraphs. Perhaps Sir John Bowring, the Governor of Hong Kong from 1854 to 1859, had put his finger neatly on that issue when he declared: “We rule in ignorance, they obey in blindness.”

I sometimes wonder whether, for some perverse reason, those gulfs of ignorance had been kept deliberately unbridged by both the rulers and the ruled. Left apart, both might find it easier to nurse misconceptions and

illusions about each other. Closer contact might reveal the unsettling reality of a common humanity. In that case, how could relationships continue to be conducted on a basis of inequality and lack of mutual respect?

* * *

My joining the *South China Morning Post* in 1947 marked the beginning of more than 70 years — and still counting — of a working life carried out in a variety of callings. Out of that total, 35 years had been spent in Hong Kong, including nearly 21 years as an Administrative Officer in the colonial government.

When I was first admitted to that select cadre in 1961, it comprised only 84 officers, with 28 in what was described as superscale officers, that is, those running secretariat branches or departments, and the rest on time-scale. Naturally the overwhelming majority in that corps were expatriates, with local officers coming to only slightly more than half a dozen.

Given the antipathies I have expressed towards foreign occupation, and given my grandfather's influence during my upbringing, ending up as a colonial civil servant must appear to readers as grossly incongruous. Those considerations had, indeed, left me with a problem as uncomfortable as a dog bothered by fleas. I have tried to explain some of my reservations and feelings in the two earlier volumes of these family memoirs, in *Adrift* and in *Hong Kong Fiascos*.

The present volume will deal with some of the further dilemmas I faced as I continued to serve as an Administrative Officer for another 10 years, till 1981.

I should re-emphasise, however, that my integration into the colonial civil service at various levels had been rendered more rewarding than I had expected because of a succession of very kind, able, knowledgeable, dedicated and enlightened British superiors. Each of them, in his own way, had taught

me a great deal, not only about what bureaucratic ropes to manipulate and what pitfalls to avoid, but also about the sense of integrity and duty which should be at the heart of discharging public responsibilities. I should add that throughout my career in the Administrative Service, I had only ever worked once directly to a local superior. That was because there were very few Chinese officers senior to myself.

That single occasion proved a thorough pleasure though it lasted for just a few short months before I was reassigned. That superior was Eric Ho. We shared many common attitudes which had enabled us to remain firm friends long after both of us had retired.

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In the autumn of 1970, the administration decided — for some reason not altogether clear to me — to pack me off to Oxford on a Queen Elizabeth House Fellowship. I assumed someone must have decided that I was becoming, under the influence of Sir John Cowperthwaite, too agnostic over many of the more orthodox tenants of that pseudo-science known as economics and needed some re-indoctrination in free market dogma.

I have used the term “pseudo-science” deliberately because economics has struck me as a discipline too full of imprecisions, with far too many of its practitioners attempting to bamboozle the public over the reliability of their dodgy analyses and forecasts. I had arrived at that point of view due in no small measure to working for Sir John as his Assistant Economic Secretary. Sir John had been the Financial Secretary of Hong Kong since 1961 and had been the chief architect of the colony’s sturdy and workable financial and economic structure.

In my humble opinion, he was one of the greatest and most practical-minded economists of his day. Many have praised him as a dyed-in-the-wool free marketeer. But, in my opinion, that would be too simplistic a view. He

allowed a free market only in spheres where he thought it would be in the interest of Hong Kong to have one.

One could as easily make the case that he was a central planner by selecting a different set of facts. For example, all the public transport facilities were either state-owned or operated by private monopolies subject to profit-limitation clauses. The electricity companies, the gas company, the telephone service and the international cable operations were likewise regulated. Road-building, water supplies and postal services were carried out by government departments.

Rice imports worked under a quota system and virtually all the other foodstuff imported from China — fruits, vegetables, eggs, meat and fowl — were being brought in by a China-appointed cartel subjected to a profit limitation regime imposed by the Chinese authorities.

As for exports from the colony, textiles and garments were dominant. They made up some 40% of domestic exports by value and provided employment for 41% of the industrial workforce. Most of those exports were subjected to quota restrictions imposed by importing countries. Taken overall, Hong Kong could hardly be said to conform with the widely held myth of being a free-wheeling *laissez-faire* economy.

Under Sir John's tutelage, I had acquired a healthy scepticism over economic myths and over many of the over-dressed theoretical formulations favoured by politicians, academics and media gurus. Instead of using complicated mathematical formulae or econometric models to tackle economic problems, Sir John had merely used common sense, fair play and a constant reviewing of the facts on the ground.

When I was offered the Fellowship, however, the thought of digging into more of the lamer economic obscurities was far from my mind. Instead I saw Oxford as a temporary respite, not only from bureaucratic memos in the office but also an intractable tangle of sexless domesticity and responsibilities at home.

I had never previously been to Oxford, although I had read a fair amount about its dreamy spires, its bleached ancient stones, its grimacing gargoyles, secluded cloisters and its history of intellectual ferment. There was a flow in the language of the likes of Walter Pater and Edward Thomas that I found beguiling. One of them had spoken about the place being marked by “the unction of antiquity”.

Thus long before I even got there, I was already entertaining notions of loitering in the churchyard of Holy Cross, as Byron had done, or putting on a ridiculous straw hat for an afternoon in a punt. Or indulging in some amusement, like studying Etruscan tomb pottery or pronouncing on the virtues of cold soups, as the Shakespearean scholar William George Clark had ventured after a visit to Spain.

Oxford turned out to be much more than I had anticipated. I soon discovered that all that was required was a short stroll from Carfax to be delivered into some splendid idioms in green, usually enhanced by a gently flowing rivulet or stream. Before I knew it, I would find leaves expiring around me, dropping as softly as autumnal sighs. They would fall from trees whose names I had to recall from memories of other places and other times.

Tall poplars and priestly yews, pale birches and thoughtful elms. Here and there, grey beeches and venerable oaks would interlace branches like holding hands. Any stream nearby would be fringed by willows, leaning this way and that. And around their timbered feet, rank grasses would grow with impish delight, livened occasionally by splashes of yellow toadflax. Paths might weave unsteadily across verdant swathes, as if they had been trampled by people in happy inebriation.

Such encounters left a catch in my heart, as if I had stumbled upon a succession of hallowed places. Something soul-restoring would scent the air, like an elusive spirit teasing an idling painter or poet. My mind would drift to Blake’s line about seeing a world in a grain of sand.

The very next moment, lines by the Chinese poet Li Shang-Yin would also

re-surface in me. Li had written a thousand years before Blake, about seeing a world in a grain of millet. What common sentiments could be shared across both time and space!

Other thoughts would take me back to the Wordsworth of my boyhood.

“One impulse from a vernal wood
 May teach you more of man,
 Of moral evil and of good
 Than all the sages can.”

Those musings soon took me even farther back, to the more elevated beauty of China's five sacred mountains highlighted by a Chinese tutor I had when I was a boy in Singapore. He told me about those mountains when he was teaching me the *Three Character Classic*. He said there were vantage points on those mountains where one could experience the meeting of Chinese poetry and painting. At the time, I did not know sufficiently of either to grasp what he was driving at. By the time I had gained an appreciation, political obstacles and restrictions had intervened to deny me access to even a single one of those mountains.

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Those solitary walks around Oxford inevitably reignited my longing for communion with Nature, a longing that formed an inevitable part of every Chinese soul. The woods at Oxford had something mysterious and healing about them. They filled me with a sense of wonder and liberation. It was as if I had miraculously sloughed off all the trammels of official protocol, the restraints on social behaviour and the shackles of family responsibilities. Half a world away, the oppression of the tight concrete canyons of Hong Kong, made up more gracelessly and more sharp-edged than the geometrical

constructions in New York or Chicago, could no longer confine me. Even the air in the woods seemed perfumed by freedom.

It was, of course, only a trick of the mind, a momentary delusion. I was already 41 and was unambiguously unfree. Moreover, more than half of my biblical allotment of three score and ten — which my maternal grandfather used to tell me about — had been used up to no apparent purpose. That passage of time had brought me neither a realistic goal in life nor even a clear direction of travel.

In retrospect, the period after the end of World War II appeared almost idyllic by comparison. There had been a semblance of hope and potential, even if human courage was sometimes in dreadfully short supply. At the bungalow of my Eighth Grand aunt on Tsing Yee Island, I could hear birdsong at the break of dawn, see honey bees and butterflies during the day and be entertained by the chirping of cicadas and the glitter of fireflies at night. Even within the brashness of the city itself, banyan trees could still provide shade along parts of Pedder Street and Nathan Road.

Now, Tsing Yee Island had disappeared and the city had turned itself into little more than a jungle of structures made of concrete, glass and steel, tied together with dark strips of macadam. The notion of lining roads with trees was about as dead as the dodo. The noises of pile-drivers, jackhammers, car horns and angry engines polluted every livelong day; garish neon signs erupted like unsightly rashes with the advent of darkness. Now, contrary to the glossy advertisements paid for by both the government and the tourism trade, the place was just turning into a piece of counterfeit China, catering to the manufactured predilections of wide-eyed visitors, while recurring rumours of impending disasters lurked within the hearts of locals.

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It soon became abundantly clear that Oxford was quite the wrong place for

me to be at that time of life. It left me with too much leisure to reflect and worry about the future. Those hushed and tranquil Oxford nights, which should have brought refreshing rest, brought instead mainly fitful sleep. My mind was filled with too many memories of missed opportunities, dubious choices, delusions, defeats and loves won and lost. They rushed back like so many sub-atomic particles, colliding with one another, only abruptly to change substance and form before flying off in unpredictable directions. Could they in fact be alerting me to the incongruities and schizophrenia gumming up my own life?

What was I, after all, but a second-class flunkey serving both foreign masters and a life sentence for an ill-advised marriage? Everything was a muddle. I had accepted an appointment from the British Crown. But my salary was being paid by Hong Kong taxpayers and not Whitehall. Common sense and logic dictated that whoever paid the piper ought to be calling the tune. But the payers could not. Dr. Sun Yat-Sen had repeatedly warned against allowing foreigners to play off one section of our nation against another. Had I not now been reduced to just another pawn in that dismal game?

Trying to serve two masters was problematic enough without race and heritage being thrown into the mix. The Communist rulers of China might have their reasons for leaving a sliver of Chinese land under foreign sovereignty but their decision could not absolve me, a Chinese, from my duty to both my nation and my fellow countrymen. How could I stand with folded arms when white occupiers advanced policies I considered inimical to Chinese values? Someone had to object to cultural imperialism.

My father had to endure repeated humiliations during the Japanese occupation of Singapore. He had to demean himself every day before Japanese Army officers at the Blue Willow Restaurant, just so that he could lay his hands on enough leftover food to keep 10 members of our family alive.

Unlike my father, I did not *have* to work for occupiers. I had other options. I could quit and, indeed, I would be able to support my family in far better

style if only I were prepared to join that shifty, abacus-clicking commercial fraternity.

Had the great Six Dynasties poet, Tao Yuan-Ming, not already set an example for me to follow? Had he not resigned in disgust after serving for 10 years as an official because he was no longer willing to “bow like a servant in return for five bushels of grain”?

Whenever an Emperor was weak and his court corrupt, a righteous official had to humanise rash edicts and protect citizens from excessive taxes. Simply walking away had to be an abandonment of responsibility or an act of self-indulgence. I was, without equivocation, an official of some sort. But what sort?

Confucian ethics required an official to be a *fu mu guan*, in other words, to be someone who would look after the welfare of his charges like a father and mother. I was only one of a handful of Chinese Administrative Officers. If I were to quit, one more Chinese voice would be removed from the scene. The fate of ordinary citizens would then be more than ever in the hands of foreigners and their colonial stooges, of commercial profiteers and “running dogs”.

Apart from the example of Tao Yuan-Ming, I had another role model much closer to hand — Sir John Cowperthwaite. He had distinguished himself throughout his career by standing up for the interests of Hong Kong — in so far as the colonial system and international politics allowed — rather than to obey blindly whatever British politicians and the mandarins in Whitehall might want him to do.

Among his many successful tussles with London had been those concerning access rights to Britain for Hong Kong textiles, limiting local contributions to British defence costs, ending the requirement to hold reserves in sterling and gaining greater control over the colony’s civil aviation landing rights. Those successes had been achieved away from the limelight and the glare of publicity, for Sir John was a very shy man. He preferred to

work anonymously, as befitting every good civil servant.

If Sir John, an expatriate British civil servant without roots in the colony, could fight so hard on Hong Kong's behalf, could a native son like myself throw in the towel without a fight?

Sir John was due to retire in mid-1971. By the time I returned from Oxford, he would probably be gone. I became fearful over the forthcoming loss of his masterful economic touch and was doubtful if his successor would command either the stature or the inclination to fight for the people of Hong Kong as Sir John had done.

Moreover, the existing Governor, the genial and laid-back Sir David Trench, would also be retiring towards the end of 1971. The kind of satrap Whitehall might send to oversee the end-time of colonialism was fraught with uncertainties. It would be a period when the city would be especially in need of all the stability it could get.

Those considerations weighed upon me during my stay at Oxford as I tried to figure out how I ought to live out the rest of my life. No easy resolution came to mind. The future seemed more tangled than ever in contradictions and anomalies. Yet, somehow, through that mental fog, I dimly perceived that I was far too exposed and vulnerable on too many fronts. I decided I had to pull myself together before I got back.

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In the event, in spite of my misgivings and reservations, I was to remain in the Administrative Service after Oxford until 1981. That period coincided roughly with the governorship of Sir Murray MacLehose.

Now that some 35 years have passed since Sir Murray ended his governorship, perhaps historians ought to do a more forensic and dispassionate assessment of his achievements and failures. It should be remembered in this context that every colonial Governor was by definition

an autocrat. At the same time, it should also be remembered that following the formation of the United Nations, a consensus was arrived at whereby those who ruled over non-self-governing territories should do so as trustees, for the benefit of their wards. Britain had subscribed to that consensus.

With those considerations in mind, what did Sir Murray actually leave behind? Just the flamboyance of a seasoned diplomat and the warm words propagated through his public relations machine? Or improvements to the traditions and structures of a long-established administration? Did he pursue policies in the short-term political interests of Britain or in the long-term interests of the people he ruled over? He turned out to be, at the end, the longest-serving Governor in 150 years.

My direct contacts with Sir Murray had been fairly limited, though I could not avoid many of the indirect effects of his decisions. I have revealed in this volume my honest opinions concerning a number of his policies. Much of what I have recounted had never previously been recorded, let alone put into the public domain.

Obviously, others may not share my assessments on Sir Murray, for he had been well liked locally and highly thought of in Whitehall. He was elevated to the peerage after his retirement. But if historians were ever to do an objective analysis of his tenure, then I think what I have written in this volume ought to be taken into account. The people of Hong Kong deserve to make up their own minds on where the truth should actually lie.

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When I left the Administrative Service in 1981, it was on premature rather than normal retirement. I had applied for it, but with considerable ambivalence. My reasons for leaving had been several. Prominent among them was my need for more money to fulfil the wishes of my sons to be further educated in North America. I simply could not afford to do that on my civil service salary.

I had either to frustrate them or to find an enhanced income.

After retiring, I took up a position as managing director in an international trading company called Li & Fung (Trading), which had its headquarters in Hong Kong. The company had originally been founded in Canton in 1906. It moved to Hong Kong after World War II. My subsequent years in the private sector will form the subject for the next volume of these memoirs.

That next volume will also detail how I met one day, quite by chance, a teenage member of the Communist Youth League on the Great Wall of China. Within two hours of that meeting, I had proposed marriage.

But it took about 18 months of hard work to persuade her family and the Chinese Communist Party to allow us to tie the knot. And it took many more months to persuade the Chinese officialdom — right up to the Politburo level — to issue my wife with a one-way exit visa so that she would be granted permanent residential status in Hong Kong.

All this may amount to another case of the ordinary facts of life being much stranger than fiction!