

## A Reluctant Journalist

Within days of my show-down with my father, Bishop Halward sent for me. He told me he knew of an opening for a cub reporter at the *South China Morning Post*, the most influential of the three English language dailies then being published in Hong Kong. He had taken the liberty of arranging an interview for me with its editor-in-chief, tentatively scheduled for two afternoons hence at the paper's office at Wyndham Street, only a two-minute walk from Bishop's House. If I were interested, I should telephone to establish a time for the interview.

Even as I expressed gratitude, a few hesitations and doubts stirred in me. I had never contemplated journalism as a calling. My father's job at the *Malaya Tribune* had left me with an impression of poor wages and unsociable hours.

Moreover, the *Morning Post*, founded in 1903, was regarded generally in the Chinese community as a mouthpiece for the British and expatriate establishment, even if it offered an extensive coverage of international news drawn from a variety of news agencies. Though I needed work, I had reservations over being associated with such an outfit.

"The editor-in-chief is a Chinese gentleman called Mr. Henry Ching," Bishop Halward said. "He's an extraordinary character, but not exactly a case of a local boy making good. His father originated from these parts, somewhere around Shataukok, I think, but he himself was born and brought up in Queensland, where his father worked on a sugar cane farm.

"I gathered he came here with his father around 1915, when he was 24, after his mother died. He had been a reporter in Australia and he soon joined the *Morning Post*. By 1926, when he was only 35, he was appointed editor-in-chief. Quite an achievement, I'd say."

The bishop's narrative elicited my interest and shifted my train of thought. A Chinese running an English newspaper at the age of 35. Extraordinary indeed for a British colony, especially when racist sentiments still

flourished barely abated, with Chinese and others of the wrong skin colour being barred from membership in expatriate social and sporting clubs. How could Westerners have tolerated a Chinese as the editor of their main newspapers as far back as 1926?

As if he had read my thoughts, the bishop continued: “I believe his appointment initially met with some controversy, though I wasn’t here then. The board of the paper was apparently split and some expatriate companies showed their displeasure by pulling out their advertising. But Mr Ching met those challenges manfully and he has since turned the paper into a great success. Of course, he isn’t a typical Chinese. His English is flawless, but he doesn’t speak Chinese. Nonetheless, I’m sure there’ll be much you can learn from him.”

The bishop’s further revelations surprised me again. It was not unusual for a Chinese brought up in Australia not to know his native tongue. Mr. Wong Sue’s children were cases in point. I myself, after spending four years in Australia, had felt my Chinese heritage leaching away. And yet, how could someone who had been living in Hong Kong for more than 30 years not be sufficiently drawn to his cultural roots to learn the local language? Did he not mix with local people? Again Mr. Wong Sue’s poor command of English came to mind. Chinese abroad so often lived within their own ghettos. Could Mr. Ching have for some reason sought only the company of Europeans?

“Mr. Ching certainly sounds like an intriguing person,” I said. “I can certainly learn a lot from him.”

“Well, good luck with the interview,” the bishop said, as he brought our meeting to a close. “Let me know how things go.”

I promised to do so.

But as I marked time till the interview, I could not help speculating over the sort of man I was about to meet. Since Mr. Ching had attained such a high position, in spite of being Chinese, he must have demonstrated to the paper’s owners he was a safe pair of hands, someone who would confine any

campaigning instincts to issues not inimical to shareholder interests and the British or expatriate points of view. Could he still have, beneath whatever foreign graces he might have acquired, a healthy Chinese heart? Or had he gone overboard, like the bowler-hatted man I had spotted on Queen's Road Central? If so, he might have become what the Chinese disparagingly referred to as a banana -- a person yellow on the outside but white inside.

I began preparing myself for an unpredictable interview.

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Mr. Ching confounded all my expectations. He came across like an unflattering caricature by Hogarth. He was a man of medium stature, in his mid-fifties and dark-complexioned. His head was large, high-domed and quite asymmetrical, crowned by a mop of untidy hair over a fretful brow. His nose was prominent and more hooked than would be normal for a Chinese. In counterpoint, his chin projected a bulldog-like determination, signalling that he would not suffer fools gladly. The eyes, peering out from behind a set of dark-framed spectacles, appeared as wise as an owl's.

Coming face to face with such an unusual-looking Chinese disconcerted me. It was akin to encountering Boris Karloff suddenly on a fog-bound street, in the dead of night.



Henry Ching, in his office as the editor-in-chief  
of the *South China Morning Post*.

Photo courtesy of Henry Ching Junior.

“Bishop Halward speaks highly of you,” Mr. Ching began, as if he had noted my lack of ease. His voice sounded raspy but not unfriendly. “I’ve read your résumé. You appear to have acquired as sound a grounding for journalism as any young man your age. I see you’ve spent a period in Australia during the war.”

“Yes, Sir,” I replied. “I was evacuated from Singapore.”

“I see. And you returned there after the war. Is Singapore still your home?”

“Not exactly. My grandparents used to live there. I happened to be living with them when war came.”

“Did your entire family get evacuated?”

“Sadly, no; only the women and children. My father and my grandfather had to remain behind. They both managed to survive, however.”

Mr. Ching nodded. “That’s good. Not everyone is so lucky. How did you find Australia? You seemed to have acquitted yourself well at school.”

“I liked the place and the people well enough. They were friendly and generous. I was most thankful for simply getting away from the Japs, I guess.”

“Yes, a lot of people here tried to get away too. You’ve now got a First Grade School Leaving Certificate. Is typing among your accomplishments?”

“I did type my résumé, Sir.”

“Any shorthand?”

“I’ve just started learning, Sir,” I lied.

“A most essential skill for this line of work. Seeing you’re fresh out of school, why have you opted for journalism? Its apprenticeship is long and arduous. It’s not everybody’s cup of tea. A lad with your education and background should be able to carve out a more rewarding career in other callings.”

Mr. Ching’s question caught me off balance. The truth was that I had given no more thought to entering journalism than I had of joining a circus or becoming a hairdresser. Bishop Halward had found an opening for me and had arranged an interview. I needed a job, that was all.

Being stumped for a forthright answer, I flustered. “My father was a journalist,” I said.

“‘Was’? You mean your father has passed away?”

“No, sorry. I mean he used to be a journalist but he is now the headmaster of a Chinese secondary school.”

An exchange then ensued as to the name of the newspaper my father had worked for, the position he had held, why he had left his paper and whether he had told me much about life as a journalist.

At the end of the exchange, Mr. Ching probably figured I had not thought very seriously about journalism, for he said: “Well, it’s seldom easy for a young man starting out to decide what he wants to do for the rest of his life.

For our part, we want serious and dedicated people. We can't afford to train up someone who's going to disappear after a few months. If you're keen on a shot at journalism, how about this: We try you on probation for three months? We can then decide whether you like us well enough and whether we like you. What do you say to that?"

"Sounds very fair to me, Sir," I said, half-fearing he might just be humouring me as a favour to Bishop Halward. Mr. Ching's offer nonetheless tweaked my conscience. I wished I could have been more forthright, telling him how badly I needed to earn my keep. But such a confession would probably scupper all hope of landing the job.

"When can you start?"

"Any time. Right away, if necessary."

"Good. Come along with me."

Mr. Ching led me out of his office into the large but sparsely occupied editorial department. A tall and slightly stooped European with a thick moustache was sitting before a desk in orderly disarray. Among its clutter of paraphernalia were a number of "In" and "Out" trays and a lethal-looking steel spike. I was later to discover that the spike was meant for impaling unsuitable stories. Next to that desk stretched two rows of other desks of slightly different sizes, jammed together cheek by jowl, to form some cubist conception of a communal working area. Upon that uneven surface stood a haphazard collection of Underwood typewriters and black Bakelite telephones. Only two of those desks had people using them. Elsewhere in the large room I noticed small clusters of men settled in odd corners which I later learnt constituted the Foreign News Desk and the Sports Section.

The European with the moustache was called Mr. Luke. Mr. Ching introduced him as the city editor, the person responsible for daily assignments to reporters.

"This young man's joining us on probation," Mr. Ching said. "Get

him started as soon as convenient.” With that, he turned to head back to his office.

“Sir,” I called out, to stay his departure. “My pay, Sir. You haven’t mentioned my pay.”

He gave me a hard look. A roguish shadow of amusement played upon his crooked mouth. “A hundred and fifty a month, to be reviewed after probation,” he snapped. With that, he retreated to his office.

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I was taken aback by the meagreness of my wages. In previous centuries, those who tried to earn a living in what Samuel Johnson defined as “grub street” had to put up with starvation wages. I had not appreciated that similar conditions prevailed in the middle of the twentieth century. The sum of \$150 per month came to less than £10 Sterling at the then prevailing exchange rate or, in local terms, five dollars a day. Going by the Jimmy’s Kitchen vouchers priced at \$2.50 each, it would mean I could only afford two not very filling meals a day, with nothing left for anything else. The likelihood of the money from my father being exhausted long before my probation ended loomed like a doom.

I realised I had been too rash in accepting the job, before knowing what the wages were. But having accepted, I felt I had to go through with it because I was now 18 and I did not want either the bishop or Mr. Ching to consider me unreliable or frivolous.

When I reported for work the following morning, Mr. Luke passed me to a senior Indian reporter called Mr. Hoosen and told him to take me to the Central Magistracy to show me the ropes on court reporting.

My mentor duly equipped me with a couple of pencils and a notepad. The pad, apparently produced in-house, consisted of lengths of newsprint cut to

about 14 inches by five inches. Those strips were then stapled together across the middle and doubled over. The result was a very serviceable writing pad. (After 66 years and several changes of addresses, I still have a couple of those pads with notes taken at the time. What sentimental junk we all collect!)

Mr. Hoosen soon walked me up the incline of Wyndham Street, from the *Morning Post* to the very same place where Cheung, the would-be burglar, had earlier been sentenced.

The edifice housing the courts, located adjacent to the Central Police Station and the Victoria Remand Prison, was of an antiquated design. All three institutions lay within an area bordered by streets redolent with British associations -- Old Bailey Street, Chancery Lane and Arbuthnot Road. The magistracy itself consisted of three courtrooms, two presided over by Europeans and the third by a retired Chinese barrister.



The Central Magistracy building.  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Kitto.



All three courtrooms had lofty ceilings which conferred upon them an air of sombre elegance. Their layouts were virtually identical, including an imposing bench on a wooden dais, a high-backed chair positioned beneath a large canopy carved in the likeness of the St. Edward's Crown, and two pulpit-like structures on either side of the bench, one being the witness box and the other the perch of the court interpreter. A small table in front of the bench provided working space for a court clerk, while a much larger counsel's table stood at the floor level a short distance away from the clerk's.

Behind the counsel's table, an intimidating square enclosure erupted majestically out of the centre of the room. It was a dock, made of sturdy polished wooden panels enhanced by gleaming brass bars at the top. A close observer would notice an opening on the floor within the enclosure, with a flight of stairs leading into cells below. Those facilities enabled prisoners to appear theatrically, like apparitions, inside the dock whenever their names were called.

Beyond the dock lay a few rows of seats meant for the curious public and for relatives and associates of those facing charges. A press box with two pews stood on one side of the room, at right angles to the bench.

The three courts operated like highly efficient production lines, handing out fines and prison terms to an endless parade of petty offenders and miscreants. Their offences ranged from hawking violations to various types of larcenies, from dealing in opium to demanding money with menaces. Everything seemed to run as smooth as silk, with charges being read, defendants pleading guilty and punishments being adroitly dealt out. Out of those ceaseless streams of criminal dross, reporters were expected to salvage whatever pebbles of human oddities which might come to light. Different newspapers had different requirements. For the English ones, a handbag snatched from a European woman outside a department store was news, whereas a purse snatched

from a Chinese housewife at a Shaukiwan market was not.



Typical on-street wet market in Hong Kong.

Photo curtesy of Fred Laurenceau and Gwulo.com

The main interest of newspapers, however, centred upon the occasional committal proceedings involving sensational crimes like murders or armed robberies. Because magistrates had only limited sentencing power, committal hearings were held to determine whether a *prima facie* case existed for cases to be referred to a higher court for trial. Such hearings resembled trials in many respects, with charges being laid and evidence against the accused being presented. Defendants, however, did not have to respond with their side of the story, unless they wanted to. Those with the means to engage lawyers often elected to defer even the right to cross-examine prosecution witnesses till the trial itself, in order not to disclose too soon the nature of their defence.

Since courts did not begin sittings till 10, Mr. Hoosen took the opportunity to introduce me to some of the court clerks and to regular members of the press corps. Most of those representing the half dozen or so Chinese

dailies were seasoned Chinese news hounds in their late thirties or early forties. Those from the two English rivals to the *Morning Post* had Eurasian reporters of more tender years.

After a week of mentoring by Mr. Hoosen, Mr. Luke judged my output sufficiently workmanlike to award me the Central Magistracy as a regular beat. In the days and weeks which followed, I was introduced to additional duties, reporting on fires, accidents, funerals, luncheon speeches and -- on Saturdays -- certain sporting fixtures. Sunday was my day off.

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The novel judicial environment I had been introduced to could not deflect me from the untenable financial situation I was in. I could hardly continue to take advantage of Bishop Halward's hospitality now that I was in what passed as paid employment. Yet, even renting a YMCA hostel room would leave me with no money for food. The perception of semi-independence I had cultivated in Perth had been a snare and a delusion. I had been able to build up a nest egg then only because I had been subsidised by charity.

A prompt return to Singapore was not a real option either. The many contradictions and paradoxes in Hong Kong were revealing aspects of life at variance with a world I had constructed out of books. The city, being much more homogeneously Chinese than Singapore, was definitely exerting a hold on me. It was the kind of place I felt I might one day regard as home, if only I could work out what actually made it tick.

One of its many puzzles, for example, concerned the working arrangements of the press corps at the Central Magistracy. Its members should, in theory, be competing with one another to produce scoops or the best accounts

of daily proceedings. But in reality, they all acted like collaborators, regardless of the different political or economic orientations of their employers. A remarkable camaraderie existed among them, for they openly shared notes with one another. The *raison d'être* was that newspapers seldom assigned more than one reporter to cover the three courts. Since it was impossible for one person to be in three places at the same time, a co-operative and self-regulating routine had to evolve.

But for the system to be effective, an indulgence on the part of court clerks was also necessary, for they were the guardians of the daily dockets of the courts. Reporters turning up in the morning would need to know whether potentially newsworthy cases were coming up. If they should arise in more than one court simultaneously, they would share out coverage among themselves. If nothing of interest was pending, most would disappear, leaving only a volunteer or two behind to guard against the unexpected. Most would then meet up again for tea or coffee later in the afternoon at one of their regular haunts near the magistracy, where they would debrief one another before repairing to their respective offices to offer up the fruits of their supposedly conscientious toil.

The co-operation of the court clerks apparently came at a small price. It was soon revealed that they were often treated to the odd beverage or cigarette during breaks and recesses. Being the greenest of greenhorns, I was automatically inducted into that system, though I was initially only at the receiving end of the largesse dispensed by others. Those modest treats might amount to no more than a widely-practised element in civilised social intercourse. But the fact that they were being made regularly to poorly-paid public servants in exchange for information seemed to alter the nature of the transactions. Could such treats be regarded as petty bribery and corruption? Newspaper proprietors could not be blind to the circumstances under which their employees were required to carry out their duties. Why were they complicit in such practices? I felt I was being led towards slippery terrain.

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But I could not afford to spend much time weighing such moral conundrums. Before the end of my first week, I decided to seek my father's advice. Having accepted his money, I could no longer pretend at independence. I made my way to No. 33 Leighton Hill Road late one afternoon to find my father chatting in a leisurely manner with my Eighth Grandaunt. My Eighth Granduncle was out doing his hospital rounds.

“What wonderful timing,” my grandaunt said, in her welcoming and finely modulated voice. “*Ayah!* You're still so thin. Are you eating properly? You must stay for dinner. We shall be starting the moment your granduncle returns.”

Her consideration touched me. She was not a well person herself, for she suffered from chronic high blood pressure.

“I have never been able to put on weight since childhood, no matter how much I ate,” I replied.

“How very strange! We must see what can be done about it, now that you're in Hong Kong.”

Food had always been a weakness with me but I could anticipate my entire mission being jeopardised if I waited till a meal got underway. There would then be too many people around for open talk about my predicament. I had no wish to broadcast to all and sundry my inability to earn a living. So I rushed to get things off my chest.

“I've called to report I have started work at the *Morning Post*, as a cub reporter,” I began.

“Congratulations!” my grandaunt said, beaming. “To land a job with such a prestigious newspaper must be quite a feather in your cap.”

“How are you settling in?” my father asked. “Are you learning

anything? Are you still at Bishop's House?"

"Yes, I'm still there but I'm facing a number of problems.

Remaining at Bishop's House is one of them."

I hastily summarised my dilemmas. My pay packet of \$150 a month was insufficient to maintain myself, let alone rent a place to stay. Bishop Halward's hospitality could not be abused indefinitely. I could look for another job, but was unlikely to land one paying significantly more, since I had no working experience and only a School Leaving Certificate. At the same time, I was finding the job at the *Morning Post* fairly challenging and intriguing. It was exposing me to social realities I had not known about before. I was not angling for a subsidy; a working man ought to be able to support himself, I declared soberly. The only solution I could think of was a return to Blair Road where, regardless of the kind of employment I might find, I would be assured of food on the table and a roof over my head there. Could my father see any other path open to me?

Before my father could respond, my grandaunt addressed him.

"Yan-Chee," she said, "why not let Tzi-Ki live here with us? Making a living is not easy these days. It would be a pity for him to quit a job he likes simply because of poor pay. There's enough room here. My two eldest have left home and he can help the younger ones with their English."

"Eighth Grandaunt," I interjected quickly. "I would not dream of inconveniencing you and Eighth Granduncle."

"It's no inconvenience," my grandaunt replied. "Relatives are supposed to help out with problems. How would it look if you relied on help from outsiders instead of from within your own family, especially since your father is already staying here?"

My grandaunt's invitation was a possibility I had not considered. It presented me with a fresh dilemma. While it offered an immediate way out of my financial straitjacket, it would also cause me to be under the same roof as my

father again. I was not sure how long such an arrangement would last nor how I should react to the invitation, so I left the decision to my father. I looked in his direction and our eyes met. After a moment's reflection, he said: "You should thank your grandaunt for her offer of hospitality."

I did so, with genuine gratitude. It came to me right away that henceforth I could look forward to much more satisfying meals, both at No. 33 and outside. That was how the decision to move to Leighton Hill Road was made.

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I lost no time in informing Bishop Halward of my projected move to the home of my granduncle. I thanked him anew for his hospitality and for making possible my appointment at the *Morning Post*. In order not to place him in an invidious position, I refrained from mentioning the meagreness of my wages.

"I'm so glad you have settled on a means of livelihood," the bishop said. "I'm sure a bright future awaits you."

We chatted for a while and when I was about to take my leave, the bishop said: "By the way, have you heard of Pascal's wager?"

"Which one is he?" I asked, thinking he was referring to another of the residents at Bishop's House.

"Pascal was a Seventeenth Century French mathematician and physicist," the bishop said.

"Oh! What did he bet on?"

"The existence or otherwise of God. He advanced the proposition that in weighing the two possibilities, a man should always wager on God's existence, because by doing so he gains everything if he wins and he loses nothing if he loses."

I thought about the proposition for a moment and then asked: “Is it really as simple as that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if a person feels he is in the possession of a truth, should he not shape his life in accordance with his belief? If he does not, then is he not simply espousing an empty proposition?”

The bishop’s face brightened up with a smile. “The answers to those questions, my dear boy, have to be found by the person posing them.”

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The name of Leighton Hill Road was originally derived from a small hill located there. After the hill had been levelled for re-development, the road quietly dropped the word “hill” from its name. The unremarkable tenement houses built along it were generally of a split-level design, with a larger front portion brightened by sash windows overlooking the street connected to a smaller and lower rear section by a short flight of stairs.

My granduncle maintained a considerable establishment at No. 33. Apart from a nurse and a dispenser for his clinic, he also employed a number of servants which included a housekeeper, a chauffeur, a cook and a personal maid for himself and his wife.

At the time I went to live there, the eldest daughter, a graduate of Yen Ching University in Peking, was already married to a Swatow businessman and had gone to live in that South China town known for the delicacy of its embroideries. The second son had gone off to study medicine in the University of Wisconsin.

The sleeping quarters for the rest of the family were located in the front section of the top floor. The hall-like space was rendered cozy and lived-in through a sensible arrangement of unpretentious furniture and accessories. One



wall displayed a picture of a kneeling Christ bathed in a beam of celestial light, to remind the family of its Christian roots.

The whole layout was not too dissimilar to the one at Blair Road, except in two significant respects. First, the substantial space could be divided by a set of built-in wooden folding panels. By closing the panels, two compartments could be formed, with one taking up roughly two-thirds and the other one-third of the total space. This was done only at night, when the smaller compartment became the bedroom of my granduncle and my grandaunt. The larger compartment, though filled with beds hugging its walls on either side, was still large enough to fit in a full-sized ping-pong table at its centre. The beds were interspersed by small wardrobes and sets of drawers. The one I was assigned was among them, whereas my father was accommodated on a lower floor and he seldom ventured onto our floor.

The second notable difference was the presence of a small cubicle immediately outside the larger compartment. That facility was achieved by sealing off the frontmost part of a five-and-a-half-foot wide passageway outside the compartment with a partition of opaque glass and wood. The cubicle served as the bedroom for the third daughter, Mui-Kwan, a vivacious and cheerful girl half a year older than myself. At the time I moved in, she was still a couple of years shy of finishing secondary school because her education had been disrupted by the flight of her family to the scenic interior city of Kweilin during the Japanese occupation.

All the occupants of the floor shared a bathroom and toilet located at the lower part of the split floor. A sewing room and a servant's room were adjacent to the bathroom.

The building had a flat roof, just like the one at my mother's home in Canton. Sections of it were used by my grandaunt to grow roses and vegetables. But enough space remained for alfresco family dinners to be held on special occasions, like the Mid-Autumn Festival.

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Soon after my arrival at No. 33, my father took me on a courtesy visit to the home of my Ninth Granduncle and Grandaunt. They lived with their five children in an apartment at Morrison Hill Road, which was barely a hundred yards from No. 33. My Ninth Granduncle, a businessman, was by no means as well-to-do as his Eighth Brother. His wife, however, was also a younger sister of my Eighth Grandaunt. The two of them shared a remarkable similarity in appearance and graciousness. The children of the two families were particularly close due to that added kinship and they often gathered at the more roomy facilities at No. 33.

On the day of our visit, only my Ninth Grandaunt happened to be home. As she fussed to welcome us and to prepare tea, my father and I went out onto the balcony of the sitting room to watch the street scene below. After standing a while in silence, my father said: “Now that you have met your mother again, do you think she and I could have lived together harmoniously?”

His question took me aback. It was the first time -- and it turned out to be the only time -- he had ever broached with me a subject personal to himself or to my mother.

“No,” I replied promptly, fearful of straying into matters too inappropriate for any son to say about his parents.

My reply apparently satisfied my father. He nodded sadly a couple of times, as if in reflection, but said nothing further. It was difficult to judge whether he gained anything from the single word response I had given. My impression was that, in spite of the passage of years, the collapse of his marriage still left a trace of regret in him.

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As I continued with my probation, the novelty and the *modus operandi* of the judicial system absorbed me. I wanted to understand its ritualised dynamics. While the concept of “the rule of law” was theoretically beguiling, I wanted to discover how it panned out in practice. To this end, I invariably volunteered to sit through run-of-the-mill cases. For that apparent self-sacrifice, I gained a degree of popularity among the veterans of the press corps.

I noticed that the courts usually began each day with cases involving hawking offences. Hawkers were a ubiquitous feature of city life, enabling refugees and the poor to earn a relatively quick and simple living. Many housewives liked the relative cheapness and convenience of neighbourhood stalls. On the other hand, people with homes or shops at locations where hawkers congregated naturally regarded them as nuisances, for inflicting noise, obstruction and general untidiness upon their surrounds. This was understandable because hawkers traded with baskets filled with squawking fowl, fresh vegetables in untidy heaps, trays of tofu, tubs of congealed pig’s blood, squirming eels and paddy field worms. They could hardly avoid leaving debris behind. According to one official estimate, in excess of 75,000 people were engaged in hawking immediately after the war. It followed that a similar number of families must be dependent upon the trade.

Hawkers brought before the courts were usually those who were dealing without a licence or those who had a licence but were breaching one or more of the licensing conditions. Fines being handed out ranged between five and 10 dollars. A fact which struck me was the way most of them acknowledged the charges against them, paid their fines and left without much ado. Was that because they could not cope with the English language used in the proceedings, which had always to be filtered to them through a court interpreter?

Another issue which troubled me was the level of fines being paid by

hawkers day in and day out. It was akin to a recurring regressive tax upon the poorest section of the community. I was earning only five dollars a day and had found the sum impossible to live on. Hawkers with families to support must find the penalties extremely onerous. Why did they not make greater efforts to abide by licensing conditions? I looked into the licensing conditions and found they were available only in English and they ran about a mile long! They covered everything from the precise dimensions of hawker pitches to the use of correct weights and measures, from the proper display of valid licences to responsibilities for the cleanliness and hygiene around their stalls. They were so detailed I doubted if even the grocery department of the royalty-patronised Harrods could comply with all of them, let alone poorly-educated Chinese with no understanding of English. Furthermore, the requirement to display prices apparently took no cognisance of the Chinese fondness for a bit of bargaining, to add a dash of colour to workaday routines.

It seemed British governments often went off half cock, without making up their minds whether they sought to be naked imperialists or benefactors of “the lesser breeds without the law”. If Whitehall took the United Nations trusteeship mandate seriously, to govern in the interests of the local population, it ought to have required its magistrates to learn Chinese, rather than to foist a foreign language upon them.

Neither was it easy for me to grasp some of the criminal charges levelled against defendants. Offences like larceny by finding, loitering with intent, and possession of an instrument fit for an unlawful purpose sounded almost like hangovers from the times of the Tudors. Naturally everybody loitered with an intent of some sort, if only to take the breeze or to admire the moon. Anthony Trollope loitered around Salisbury Cathedral to get ideas for a novel. If a homeless and destitute person loitered around Hong Kong, chances were he might be simply looking for a spot to bed down for the night. In that case, of course, he could be prosecuted for vagrancy. The law seemed stacked

against the poor and the dispossessed.

A similar consideration should operate in respect of an instrument fit for an unlawful purpose. Almost anything could be used for an unlawful purpose. I used to carry a penknife for woodcraft activities when I was a Boy Scout in Perth. Would I be guilty of an offence if I were to carry a pocketknife in Hong Kong? It was telling that well over 90% of prosecutions ended up in convictions.

My bewilderment with the judicial system came to a head when a 35-year-old unemployed man living in an unnumbered hut in a squatter area was charged with possession of an instrument fit for an unlawful purpose. The instrument in question was a screwdriver. He was a thin man of medium height, with slightly shifty eyes and a hangdog look. The charge against him was read out in Chinese by the court interpreter, a wizened, bird-like creature who gave the impression he had been part of the court fixture since the year dot. The interpreter intoned the particulars listlessly. At a certain time on a certain date at a certain place the defendant was found to have been in possession of a screwdriver. "Do you admit it?" he asked, indifferently.

The defendant nodded.

"Your Worship, the defendant pleads guilty as charged," the interpreter related in English, in the same flat and tired voice.

I was surprised. The statement was not accurate. The defendant had not been asked if he accepted that the instrument was fit for an unlawful purpose or that he intended to use it for such a purpose. He merely admitted to possessing a screwdriver at the relevant time and place. For all anyone knew, he might have wanted to use it to repair an item of furniture in his hovel.

The prosecutor wasted no time to summarise the circumstances of the defendant's arrest. He said a constable had seen the defendant acting in a suspicious manner and decided to search him. A screwdriver was found on his person. He had a previous conviction for attempted burglary.

“Two months,” the European magistrate said and made a note in the court record. I was relieved that whipping was not also ordered, because I had learnt that thousands got whipped in addition to imprisonment each year for offences like burglaries and housebreaking.

“The court sentences you to two months in prison. You have anything to say?” the interpreter asked the defendant. The man, still appearing lost and subdued, shook his head. The next case was called. It was all over in less than five minutes.

I could not help feeling that the man, unprepossessing as he was, did not receive a fair shake. By the time I returned to the *Morning Post*, I thought I could make a point with the case. It was not exactly another Dreyfus affair but, if I played my cards right, I might stir a debate and secure my first by-line. So I wrote the case up in only a single paragraph, reporting on his guilty plea, the two months’ sentence and his previous conviction. When I handed the story to Mr. Luke, I said: “Something’s not right with this case.”

Mr. Luke read what I had written and said: “What’s wrong with it? It sounds straightforward enough.”

“That’s the officially recorded version, not the true version. The man never pleaded guilty. The court interpreter misinterpreted the charge and then misrepresented the man’s response. Neither the European magistrate nor the European prosecutor understood what was going on and took the interpreter’s account as read.”

Mr. Luke gave me a whimsical look. “After only two weeks covering courts, you’re ready to challenge the competence of an interpreter who has probably been doing the job for 20 years?”

“Oh, quite a lot longer than 20 years, I warrant. He looks more than ready to start drawing his pension. That doesn’t mean he and the court can’t make mistakes. He didn’t put the actual charge to the man. I’m certain of that. I can write up my version, if you like. I’m sure if the chap had a half-competent

lawyer he would probably get off completely.”

“Oh, I see! You’ve now got proposals for reforming the judicial system as well. The bugger has a previous conviction, you know.”

“Yes, and now he has two. Clearly a hardened criminal,” I said. “Maybe it’s all for the best. The chap looked as if he could do with free board and lodging from the Crown for a spell.”

When Mr. Luke gave me another of his whimsical looks, I knew he was not going to take the bait. I saw my attempt to get my name in print over exposing a case of imperfect justice going up in smoke. I gave a shrug of defeat and went back to my other work. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mr. Luke spiking my story.

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Among the regular bunch of reporters at the Central Magistracy, I had struck up a particular friendship with was a young man working for a Chinese newspaper. His name was Chan Hon-Kit. He reminded me a little of Jackie Sue, only he came over as more handsome and more cerebral. Although he was normally garbed in an ordinary white shirt with a pair of writing instruments clipped to his breast pocket, there was something compact, well-conditioned, energetic and vaguely heroic about him. He appeared like an idealised version of manhood, the kind sometimes captured in Roman statues. He had a finely structured brow, humorous dark brown eyes and an outreaching smile. He looked at least half a dozen years older than myself. I was to discover later he was a university graduate.

Our relationship began when Hon-Kit approached me one day when the courts recessed for lunch and he remarked: “You seem to be taking your work very seriously, my young friend, sitting through hearings all day long. Beware of forming a habit for unproductive work.”

“Yes, most of the cases are not worth writing up,” I replied. “I’m just trying to understand how this machinery of justice works. Besides, I’m on probation. I can’t afford to be caught playing hookey.”

Hon-Kit’s eyes narrowed interrogatively. “You think our missing colleagues are playing hookey, do you?”

“No, not for sure. I’m just assuming. A loose way of speech, I guess. As I’ve said, they’d be wasting their time here. None of the cases are worth hanging around for.”

Hon-Kit patted me on the shoulder. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to go hard on you. You’re new to this game and you may not know how it’s played. I don’t imagine the *Morning Post* is paying you a great fortune. All of us are in the same boat. Most of our colleagues have families to support. They have to find ways of supplementing their regular income. Some ways are not very commendable -- selling advertising or insurance or picking up a few bucks for getting certain pictures or names into the social pages. I write magazine articles and give private English tuition. We all have to get by somehow.”

“I’m the one who ought to apologise,” I said, hurriedly. “I sounded off without thinking. Yes, kind relatives have been helping me to get by, I’m ashamed to say. Why should things be this way? A man doing a decent day’s work ought to receive a living wage.”

“It’s the nature of the society we’re in, the outcome of the free enterprise system we’ve got. Supply and demand, the dominance of market forces. Sometimes I think the Brits fall back on laissez-faire because they don’t know what else to do. Plenty of people want jobs, so employers can afford to depress wages. An alternative would be to go back to the civil war and hyper-inflation in China. Would anyone want to do that? It’s dog eat dog either way. Besides, lots of qualified people from Shanghai and other northern towns are beginning to come here looking for jobs.

“Having said that, we should not ignore the reverse side of the coin.



Just consider: Is there another profession which welcomes into its ranks people with no training, no experience and no qualification, save for an ability to string together a few words?"

I nodded, only half following his economic points, for my knowledge in that sphere was rudimentary in the extreme. But his final question slotted me firmly into my own dismal reality.

"I feel for the poor hawkers and refugees though, being harried and fined every day," I said, defensively. "You've seen them. How can they keep paying such fines?"

"You don't know the half of it. They have to pay protection money regular as clockwork to the local triads as well."

"Can't the government stop that? There must be laws against blackmail or intimidation or demanding money with menaces."

Hon-Kit chuckled with irony. "A Frenchman once said laws are spider webs for the rich and powerful and steel chains for the weak and the poor. At least here, what passes for justice is dispensed relatively quickly, without too many beatings. The nature of all governments is counter-revolutionary."

"Which Frenchman are you referring to?"

"Pierre Joseph Proudhon. If you've got a yen for unsettling ideas, there was also a German who believed that man has to become aware of the non-human conditions of his existence and his alienation before he can be stirred to radical transformation."

"No, thanks. One unsettling idea a day is more than enough."

The conversation with Hon-Kit left me annoyed over my own ignorance. I had fancied myself well-read but, in quick succession, I had been shown to know nothing about Pascal or Proudhon. How could I achieve anything without knowledge? I had scant understanding of life in the city I was born in, let alone in the rest of China. Yet I was toying with grandiose notions of following in my grandfather's footsteps, to help bring unity and good

governance to my country. Idle teenage illusions. The urgency of finding a way into university churned within my entrails like some potent drug.

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A couple of weeks later, I was assigned to cover a Saturday match from one of the expatriate cricket clubs. For most Chinese, cricket had always been one of those incomprehensible British eccentricities like their approach to tea, a perfectly fine beverage they insisted upon ruining with additives before drinking. The practices and nomenclature of cricket seemed equally designed to confound the rest of mankind. Who but an Englishman could appreciate the confusion of wickets, stumps, finger-spins, fast yorkers, maiden overs and LBW's? And yet, though players and on-lookers might be lubricated by varying quantities of alcoholic potations, the game somehow was supposed to convey a gentlemanly sense of fair play. Did that mean taking every possible advantage of opponents without actually cheating? Over the years I found myself acquiring a sneaky fondness for the incongruities of that outlandish game.

It was the first time I had been to the cricket club in question, so I did not know my way around. I went into the clubhouse to seek directions. Before I got very far, I heard a shout.

“Hey, you!” the brusque voice said. “What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be in here.”

I turned to find myself confronted by a thick-set European with bushy eyebrows and a red, bulbous nose. His posture was far from friendly, apparently agitated by the full weight of his white man's burden. His tone of voice conveyed in capital letters his contempt for those who did not know their places.

“I'm from the *Morning Post*,” I said. “I'm here to cover the cricket.”

“Don't care where you're from. You don't belong in here. The

clubhouse's for members only. Outside for cricket, in the pavilion." The man pointed with an outstretched hand, as if he were a master ordering a slave out of his sight.

My blood boiled. All at once the man seemed to personify all the bullying foreigners who had inflicted humiliations upon my country for more than a hundred years. I wanted to say something crushing, to cut him down to size. "*You* don't belong here. This is *my* country," was on the tip of my tongue. In the split second before giving voice to my thoughts, however, I realised the nasty man had a point also. My weak and divided land had hocked a portion of it to others and they had built for themselves an exclusive clubhouse to which I was not entitled to enter.

We glared at each other for a moment with our respective obsessions, frozen in postures of antagonism. Then I headed outside. Neither of us said another word.

From that moment on, I realised that an unpleasant edge could reside in some devotees to the game. It was not always about a sporting spirit. I was sorely tempted to include in my account of the match a comment or two on the rude reception I had received at the cricket club. In the end I desisted, knowing full well such comments would have no more chance of getting past the editorial blue pencil than a pink elephant passing through the eye of the proverbial needle.

That whole galling episode kept playing itself over in my mind all weekend. I felt like a blind man demeaned and trapped in a maze, yet too frustrated even to grope for a way out. By Monday, I was still agitated. So when I saw Hon-Kit at the magistracy, I could not resist unburdening my resentments to him. He listened to my account with surprising equanimity.

"Why can't China simply take this place back? This is *our* territory, part of *our* Motherland. Why shouldn't we just kick out all such arrogant bastards?" I demanded.

"You're not calling for another Boxer Rebellion, are you?" Hon-Kit

asked, making light of my agitation. “Given current power equations and our continuing disunity, we would not come out very well in a fresh fight. Let me try to answer your question with another. Just imagine that you’re a man suffering from a number of life-threatening diseases. Would you give much thought to a pimple on your bum?”

A pimple on the bum! The starkness of the analogy hit me. The place where I had contemplated turning into my home was no more than a dermatological eruption on China’s backside! In that case, I would amount to no more than a microbe battering on a pinhead of pus. What could I strive for, what could I ever change? My destiny was being dictated by political considerations I could not even apprehend. If Hon-Kit, a university graduate and a man of experience, had to accept the situation as he found it, how could I ever alter anything? The utter bleakness of the future suddenly smothered me like some funereal shroud. Life appeared hardly worth living under such terms.

Seeing my surly silence, Hon-Kit gave a laugh and slapped me on the back. “Cheer up, my young friend,” he said. “If you can regain your cool by lunch time, I’ll treat you to a bowl of *wonton* noodles.”

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As the end of my probationary period approached, the imperfections in colonial society were manifesting themselves to me with increasing frequency. The more I was exposed to them, the less happy I became. It seemed the British elites were bent on restoring in the colony the status ante-bellum, as if nothing had changed, regardless of how World War II had altered the dynamics in China and elsewhere. Examples of this hidebound attitude were on display in the ill-mannered Blimp at the cricket club and the farcical proposals by the new governor, Sir Alexander Grantham, for a lopsided municipal council for Hong Kong. I therefore wavered between helplessness and despair over the

circumstances I had to live under. I ceased to care whether I got through probation or not. For the first time, I sensed that going to university might actually lead to even deeper unhappiness. Ignorance at least left scope for dreams and illusions. Knowledge without power must be a most excruciating torment.

It was in that mood that I returned to No. 33 late one afternoon, to find Tzi-Choy just leaving the building.

“What are you doing in Hong Kong?” I asked, surprised.

“Just paid Father a visit,” Tzi-Choy replied.

We engaged in a few conventional pleasantries. He did not seem keen to elaborate on the purpose of his visit and I was too preoccupied with my own concerns to enquire. Thus we parted.

When I saw my father and Eight Grandaunt inside, I mentioned having bumped into Tzi-Choy. Neither volunteered anything about his visit but my father did ask if I thought it might benefit Tzi-Choy to bring him to Hong Kong to continue his studies.

“Don’t ask me,” I replied. “I don’t know the first thing about him or his educational level. You’ve talked to him more than I have. If you want another opinion, you had better ask Mother.” That was, so far as I was concerned, the end of the matter. I forgot about it entirely.

In subsequent decades, Tzi-Choy and I had few dealings with each other, mainly because we had been living in different parts of the world and pursuing careers with little in common. We even maintained relationships with different sets of relatives. We occasionally visited each other’s homes and once in a while, during Lunar New Year, we spoke on the telephone to exchange good wishes. That was all.

During one of those telephone conversations about 60-odd years later, we somehow fell into a sentimental and confessional mood.

After chatting for a few minutes, Tzi-Choy said: “You know, Elder

Brother, I was quite angry with you for many years.”

“Angry with me?” I exclaimed, flummoxed and jolted out of my mood. “Why should you have been angry with me? What have I ever done to you? We’ve hardly seen each other for decades.”

“You ruined my chances in life.”

“You’re crazy! How could I have done that?”

“Do you remember meeting me outside No. 33 all those years ago, after I had visited Father?”

“Yes.”

“Well, before you showed up, I had a long conversation with Father and Eighth Grandaunt about my future. I was certain they were disposed to bringing me to Hong Kong to improve my English education. Then you turned up, and the next thing I knew they had decided *not* to bring me to Hong Kong. So you must have said something against me to make them change their minds.”

“You’re completely off the mark!” I cried. “How could I have said anything against you? I hardly know anything about you. This is totally balmy.”

“It’s ancient history now,” Tzi-Choy said.

After we had rung off, my brother’s unexpected accusation gave me no rest. Could there be the slightest substance to it? I dredged my memory to recall our chance meeting and the few words exchanged with our father. I could not recall anything else I could have said or done.

But did my failure to speak more positively about bringing him to Hong Kong amount to ruining his chances in life? Or had he been too naive and had misunderstood what had transpired? I could well visualise Eighth Grandaunt’s ever-ready helpfulness in family matters. But our father was not one to take important decisions off the cuff. He would realise that our mother had custody of Tzi-Choy. For the boy to come to Hong Kong would entail awkward negotiations. Neither of our parents had much inclination to talk to each other, so an intermediary would have to be used, possibly in the form of my

aunt in Canton. To be able to put forward my support for the proposal might possibly have tipped the balance but not expressing a view could hardly amount to ruining anybody's chance in life.

On the other hand, what about what had been left unsaid? Why had I deliberately remained on the fence? I had a pretty shrewd idea of our mother's notions of careers for her sons. She had also judged Tzi-Choy to be more interested in chasing girls than in studying. So why had I shirked from my brotherly duty of being more proactive in supporting him? Was it because he had never taken me into his confidence or because I dreaded assuming any additional responsibility when I could not see my own way ahead?

As Tzi-Choy has said, all that happened a long time ago. A few years after that meeting, he did manage to get to Hong Kong to enrol in an English school. He subsequently trained as an aeronautical mechanic at the Hong Kong Aircraft Engineering Company and spent the rest of his life servicing commercial aircraft in Hong Kong and Canada.

It is idle to speculate how a person's life might have been enhanced or diminished if he had different circumstances from those assigned to him by Fate. One might argue that keeping aircraft flying safely could be more rewarding than learning to distinguish between a noun and a gerund or acquiring miscellaneous facts and myths about happenings from long-ago. But such arguments would be fairly pointless.

What remains for me today is only a slight discomfiture over my brother's belated revelation of the grudge he had nursed against me. It keeps niggling away like a tiny grain of sand playing hide-and-seek inside the shoe of my conscience.

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When my probationary period came to an end, Mr. Ching informed

me I had acquitted myself satisfactorily and could, if I so wished, become a regular reporter on local month-to-month terms. My pay would be doubled to HK\$300 per month. The amount was still far from a living wage but since I was undergoing what was virtually an apprenticeship I accepted the deal. Besides, I had no better alternative and my previous need for food and lodging had been assuaged by the kindness of my granduncle and aunt. The increased income at least opened up the possibility of not skimping so much on my lunches outside and not relying too shamelessly on making up deficiencies at dinners at No. 33. It also permitted small luxuries, like taking in an occasional Hollywood film featuring the fantastic dancing of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire or the typecast heroics of John Wayne. I could also go to the barber with greater regularity instead of lengthening the intervals between needed haircuts to save some money.

It was Mr. Luke who surprised me with a thoroughly unexpected perk after my pay increase. It took the form of a free bus pass issued by the China Motor Bus Company.

There were two private bus companies operating in the colony at the time -- the China Motor Bus Company and the Kowloon Motor Bus Company. The first provided services on Hong Kong Island while the second covered Kowloon and the New Territories. It appeared that both companies customarily issued two free passes each year to many of the major newspapers. Presumably, the passes were intended as a public relations gimmick to keep relations with the media sweet. It was difficult to see, however, how newspapers could make use of them except to bestow them upon a few selected outdoor staff. I was awarded one of the China Motor Bus passes, probably because I was living on the island and normally had to take the bus to work and to cover assignments.

Although the free pass did save me a trifle on travel expenses, I was too naive at the time to reflect upon its implications and possible conflicts of interest. I simply enjoyed the perk because it did wonders for my ego. To be



able to travel on a bus by simply flashing a pass created the impression among fellow passengers that I was someone of standing and authority. It never occurred to me till later that the objectivity of both the *Morning Post* and myself might be compromised should complaints arise about the quality and adequacy of public bus services.

Some 30 years later, after I had become a government servant, I was appointed a director to the boards of both bus companies, to oversee their compliance with the terms of their franchises and to ensure that their applications for fare increases could be justified. Those responsibilities, unless one spent a great deal of time probing into the day-to-day operations of the companies, were by no means easy to discharge. That experience left me with a rather jaundiced view of the true efficacy of outside watchdogs for privately-operated public utilities.

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As my employment at the *Morning Post* lengthened, I became increasingly aware of a certain Alice-in-Wonderland atmosphere in the editorial department akin to that existing in the colonial establishment. The top echelon, except for Mr. Ching, was made up entirely of expatriate Europeans whereas the sub-editors and reporters consisted of Eurasians, Indians, Portuguese and a tiny sprinkling of Chinese, the most notable of whom was an elderly gentleman in charge of screening and selecting news items from China. The Europeans were all on expatriate terms, which meant they had entitlements to longer paid leave, passages to their home countries and housing whilst serving in Hong Kong. They also earned significantly more than the rest on local month-to-month terms.

The rationale for such a division was obscure to me, for it did not seem to be based on excellence or competence. It was in all probability based mainly on skin colour. My own immediate concern, however, was not so much

centred upon its unfairness but on how to acquire sufficient experience so that I would not be kept cooling my heels at the Central Magistracy every day. I yearned for fresh pastures, the chance to express my own views on a multiplicity of things, like the celebrated columnists known as Beachcomber and Cassandra in Fleet Street newspapers. Of course, the possibility of taking home more than HK\$300 per month was also never very far from my mind.

Work in the editorial office usually reached a fever pitch in the late afternoons, when reporters all rushed to submit their reports before deadlines. During that brief liberated interregnum between handing in their assignments and escaping from the trammels of duty, some older hands were apt to exchange rumours, jokes, tall tales, innuendoes, outright slanders, pseudo-secrets and private resentments. As a neophyte, I was fascinated by such accounts. I soon realised, however, that careful winnowing was needed to separate fact from mere rodomontade.

One startling tale which emerged from that gossip-mill was of Mr. Ching not being a genuine overseas Chinese, as Bishop Halward had led me to believe, but rather a Eurasian. It appeared his mother was an English woman from Devon who had gone to Australia at the age of 17 under what was then described as an “assisted passage scheme.” The aim of the scheme was to encourage white women to go from Britain to redress the imbalance between male and female settlers in Australia. But Mr. Ching’s mother married a Chinese instead.

The disclosure led my thoughts to race off in several directions at once. Back in those days, prejudice against Eurasians was rife among both Chinese and Europeans. Mr. Ching must have had a rough ride in reaching professional success in Hong Kong. But now that he had secured his own position, which side of his dual ancestry was he leaning towards? The fact that he had surrounded himself with expatriate staff at the top was disquieting. Had he merely chosen the side of his employers and readers as the safest bet? Yet,

from what little I had observed of him he appeared a quite thoughtful and fair-minded man. I simply could not work him out. I was not even sure whether he was on full expatriate terms himself, although the general supposition was that he was. I kept my ears opened for more recycled yarns which might bring greater illumination. But nothing came to notice.

When the Christmas holidays came around at the end of 1947, Mr. Ching invited me to a staff party at his home. He lived in a first floor apartment at Village Road in Happy Valley, which was not far from Leighton Hill Road. Apart from finding most of the editorial staff there, I met for the first time Mrs. Ching and their five children. Their oldest one was a schoolboy named Henry Ching Junior. He was to become 14 years later a colleague of mine in the Administrative Service of the Hong Kong government.

Seeing Mr. Ching with so many young children brought home the messiness people often had to face in their lives. One tended to judge others by what could be seen or heard, without regard to intimate or private circumstances hidden from the public eye. I was reminded of the way I had viewed my father when I first learnt he had set up the Blue Willow to cater for enemy officers during the Japanese occupation. He had immediately appeared as a cowardly collaborator, until I discovered how much the survival of so many members of our family had rested upon his shoulders.

I was falling into the same mistake in trying to judge Mr. Ching. He might have reached the top of his professional tree but where could he go at his age if he had a fundamental falling out with the *Morning Post* or its readers? How would he provide for his young family then?

Perhaps no man should ever pass judgement on another, I pondered momentarily. Although charades were being made every day in courtrooms around the world, perhaps the only one who could account properly for what any man has done or has not done was the man himself.