

Runes of History

The Treaty of Nanking of 1842 ended the first of the so-called Opium Wars between China and Britain. It saw China ceding Hong Kong Island to the British in perpetuity. But Lord Palmerston, the then British Foreign Secretary, cavilled at the measly prize, declaring it “a barren island with hardly a house upon it.”

Lord Palmerston’s usage of the word “barren” was not entirely in keeping with more discerning use of the language because the island — at least according to contemporary Chinese records — was inhabited by 7,450 fisherfolk in a small number of villages. His reference to “hardly a house upon it” was somewhat more accurate, because most of the fisherfolk lived on their vessels rather than on shore. Such people became, in the fullness of time, to be referred to jocularly as part of the “floating” population.

They were, of course, not the only people who “floated” into the territory. That foreign-induced contusion on the underbelly of China soon became a magnet for Western drug traffickers, adventurers, missionaries, chancers, smugglers, ex-foreign servicemen, as well as Chinese seeking to escape from the long reach of their domestic bureaucracy and from the pestilences and other recurring calamities in their own localities. Those who just wanted better job opportunities for themselves or for their families also formed part of those new arrivals.

The colony thus quickly and mistakenly earned a bad reputation in Britain for itself. The *Times* of London in 1859 described it as a “noisy, bustling, quarrelsome, discontented, and insalubrious little island.” Perhaps the *Times* was referring only to the expatriate community because it was doubtful if all those adjectives could aptly be applied to the majority Chinese population.

Sir John Bowring was sent there as one of the early governors, serving between 1854 and 1859. It might be difficult now to visualise what it might have been then as an essentially mixed-raced trading outpost.

The administration numbered no more than about 50 Europeans during the first ten years of its occupation. They were generally people of rather poor educational and social quality, for appointments were then often secured through patronage. Living within the bubble of a growing European commercial community offered ample scope for generating scandals, quarrels, jealousies, spites and corruption.

Sir John was an intelligent and perceptive governor, as well as a hard-working reformer. He felt alarmed that the colony’s budget for the police was more than 70 times bigger than that for education. Realising the

Chinese attachment to educating their young, he quickly adjusted the allocations and began expanding schools and training more teachers. Student numbers increased almost tenfold as a consequence, although part of that increase had to be attributed to the efforts of missionary organisations.

However, the question remained as to whether the Eurocentric education generally dished out — ranging from Queen Boudicca and the Romans to King John and the barons at Runnymede — was quite suitable for essentially Chinese children on the other side of the world. The Mother of Parliaments came up often enough but, of course, without mentioning the monies changing hands for buying honours or for raising suitable parliamentary questions.

Sir John did not change his reforming tack even after an anti-foreign Chinese baker had put arsenic in bread baked in 1857 to poison European settlers, including Lady Bowring.

During his administration, he quipped: “We rule in ignorance, they obey in blindness.” And the “ruling in ignorance” portion of his statement became a suitable summary of the pattern of governance for his successors over the next hundred years or more. I am less certain about the “obeying in blindness” part, however.

Meanwhile, both the territory and the number of inhabitants of the Crown Colony expanded through more conflicts with China, which China lost consistently and comprehensively.

The Treaty of Tientsin of 1860 ended the Second Opium War, gaining for Britain in perpetuity the Kowloon Peninsula and Stonecutters Island and the legalisation of the opium trade, while the subsequent Boxer Rebellion of 1900 led to the Convention of Peking, conferring on Britain the lease of the New Territories for 99 years. The lease covered an area north of Kowloon Peninsula up to the Shum Chun River, though excluding the walled city of Kowloon but including some 235 islands.

In addition, the Convention specified for punishment a number of Chinese officials deemed to have sympathised with the creeds of the Boxers. So far as I could determine, not a single Chinese official thus specified attempted to make a run for it. All either committed suicide or submitted themselves for execution.

It would be salutary if at a more recent stage of world history those regarded as war criminals could be similarly dealt with under international justice, instead of further belabouring civil society with more platitudes and

lies and, particularly, the obscenity of some of their book deals.

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Lest anyone should accuse me of exaggeration in pointing out missed opportunities and lack of vision and wisdom in Hong Kong governance, let me admit that most people tend to become a little uncomfortable outside their own turf, due to isolation from their own language and culture. Moreover, the feeling could be compounded by the responsibility for ruling over alien peoples with different values.

For many Westerners going East, their initial contacts were likely to be domestic servants, *punkah wallahs* and toilers conveying their private rickshaws or sedan chairs between their homes and offices. Hardly the best sources for acquiring experience and local knowledge. Thus myths circulated about the all-wise white sahibs in dark or yellow-skinned communities and tall tales of the Old China or Japan hands having sussed out the thought processes of inscrutable orientals. It was an area rife with half-truths and myths.

But allow me to cite a few more facts from the runes of history to support my thesis on colonial blindness in Hong Kong.

For example, Sir Reginald Stubbs was Governor from 1919 to 1925. There had been a general strike in 1925 among workers in Canton and Hong Kong. Sir Reginald failed to control those in the colony, even though he had had a meeting with Dr. Sun Yat-Sen. He eventually used local triad members to intimidate strikers but also failed. He was removed by his superiors for being out of touch with the people and ignorant of China and its peoples. Later he got into further trouble in Ceylon but that is another story. His legacy for Hong Kong has been a road in Mid-Levels named after him.

Sir David Trench was made Governor from 1964 to 1971. He was an affable man and easy to approach but not particularly gifted intellectually. Under his watch, however, corruption flourished in several parts of the civil service.

Which middle-class family of the 1960s had not used an illegal “white-plater” taxi to convey children to school or refrained from an illegal extension or two in their homes? The current estimate is that a quarter of the buildings in Hong Kong still have illegal extensions. So much is an example of the workings of the Buildings Ordinance Office.

Sir David's administration got into trouble by mishandling a modest fare rise for the cross-harbour Star Ferry services in 1966. It resulted in a 27-year-old man by the name of So Sau-Chung staging a peaceful hunger strike in protest, by sitting outside the Star Ferry concourse on Hong Kong Island.

The protester was soon arrested and sent to gaol for two months for "obstructing a passageway". Rioting broke out in several parts of the city as a consequence and lasted for four days. Troops had to be deployed to quell them. Eventually, 258 people were each imprisoned for two years for rioting. A Commission of Inquiry naturally followed, because feelings were running high on all sides. It was held under a High Court judge who concluded, foreseeably, that the government had been out of touch with the public.

The following year, when Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution spilled over from China in a more threatening manner, Sir David was quite out of his depth for dealing with that more serious situation.

I myself had not been directly involved in such political issues until 1971, and then over a matter of lesser importance. The police had forcefully and bloodily broken up a peaceful demonstration of about 6,000 people. The demonstration had been organised by patriotic students against the handing over of the five uninhabited Diaoyu Islands by the Americans to Japan. The islands, around which nevertheless existed rich fishing grounds, were situated between Taiwan and Okinawa.

The Hong Kong demonstrations took place on July 7th, a particularly sensitive date for Chinese people, as part of a world-wide student movement to assert Chinese national unity. Following rough police action, demonstrators got agitated and flowed over into the shopping areas of Causeway Bay. Rioting then erupted.

Sir David, fearful of things taking a turn for the worse, summonsed me to Government House and directed me to initiate a dialogue with local youth and student leaders to soothe their grievances and to dampen down their potential for making trouble. I was given authority to deal with people who might be members of illegal organisations but no authority to make any concessions.

At that time I was in the civil service and was occupying the post of City District Commissioner for Hong Kong Island. Thus I embarked upon roughly a year of interchanges with youthful activists.

In the background, among the shadows, conspiracy theorists were holding that the chessboard of *realpolitik* was being laid. The great powers had inclined towards replacing the representatives of a weakening Taiwan in the United Nations with representatives nominated by the rising economic might and money-making opportunities emerging in China. I doubted if very many of the demonstrators actually believed they might be being played as pawns in a grubby and complicated multi-national game.

When Sir David retired in 1971, he was succeeded by Sir Murray MacLehose, who automatically extended my mission for holding talks. I imagined that the conversations I had been conducting were also something of a smokescreen to obscure some larger purpose. But who was I to question the best laid plans of bigger and more important players?

Sir Murray was an entirely different kettle of fish. He had not risen through the administrative ranks of the Colonial Service but rather parachuted into the autocratic position of Hong Kong governor after serving as their British ambassador in two relatively minor territories. Perhaps he had also been picked as part of some masterplan.

He was tall, impressive, patrician and well-meaning. But he had, understandably, rather too much hubris and was over-quick and over-confident over the rightness of his own judgements.

Though Sir Murray wanted me to continue to engage with the protest leaders, he did not seem to be particularly keen on listening to what I had to report back.

After almost a year of dialogue with youth leaders and making many reports to government, I had gained a degree of rapport with the different protest leaders. They told me they intended ending the demonstrations by marching in a body from Victoria Park to the consulates-general of the United States and Japan in Central to deliver letters of protest. Thereafter they would disperse peacefully and end further protests in Hong Kong.

They wanted, however, official approval for the march, for which they had already applied to the police as the licensing authority. In order to ensure that there would be no disorder or disturbances along the route, they would appoint sufficient student marshals and would also welcome a strong escort by the police. I had, of course, only my lowly worm's eye view of events and was anxious to do what appeared right by my own bailiwick.

When the issue came up at Government House, I reported what I had heard and recommended that permission be granted for that final march. I was convinced not only by the sincerity of the youth leaders about a

peaceful expression of their patriotic sentiments but also by their ability, with appropriate co-operation from the police, to maintain discipline and control during the march.

The police representatives at the meeting, on the other hand, were adamant against creating a precedent for allowing a march to go through a crowded and busy city. They would, however, arrange for a heavy police presence throughout, plus ample filming and recording of every stage of the march for future prosecution for illegal activities.

I argued that the approach suggested by the police made little practical sense. The marchers represented the best of the city's future; it would be unfortunate if so many had to begin life with a criminal record. If so much police manpower was to be devoted to escorting and recording the march, would it not be better to give official permission for the march with the same precautions?

But the decision went against me. I told the youth leaders that permission would be denied for a march and I recommended that they should call it off. Otherwise, each individual would be held responsible for taking part in an illegal activity. The police would be there to record every breach of the law and there could be consequences.

In the event, though permission was not granted, the march went ahead as planned, peacefully and without any incident along the way. The marchers dispersed quietly after handing in their letters of protest, as they said they would.

A de-briefing session was called at Government House a few days later. Every official who had been there when the decision to refuse permission was made seemed as pleased as Punch that it had gone off without any incident. Everyone was ready to write the whole thing off, except me.

When the de-briefing session was about to break up, I piped up: "Since the police have firm evidence of a mass breach of the law, isn't it the duty of the Public Prosecutor to lay charges before the courts? The rule of law should not be deterred by sheer numbers alone; otherwise the law falls into disrepute."

Everybody looked at me in silence, as if I had gone mad. Sir Murray was the first one to stand up and leave the conference table. The rest followed.

To me, the issue was a simple one of principle and logic. Those who took the original decision not to grant permission for the march must

explain openly why they took that decision, in court if necessary. They had to be accountable for their decisions. Otherwise, in the longer run, governance would become unaccountable and proper governance in any crowded city in the world would become virtually impossible.

Firstly, the notion that a civilised society need not openly account for decisions taken in private on behalf of the common weal had to be anti-democratic; and secondly, the notion that the rule of law could be disobeyed with impunity by mobs claiming noble motives, however misguided or wrongly arrived at, would be a dangerous one to set.

It could well be the case that a law could become outdated or no longer in harmony with the temper of the times. But there must be constitutionally approved ways of changing the law and, until it had been changed, every person must obey it.

I surmised that my arguments did not prevail at Government House on both occasions simply because I had been the only Chinese at the meetings and I was also the most junior officer in attendance.

It would be interesting to see how future historians might speculate on whether the seeds of those two rather ugly ideas had been sown or encouraged in the city during the record-breaking tenure of Sir Murray as governor.

Recent events in Hong Kong as well as in cities elsewhere suggest that some of those baleful seeds might have unfortunately sprouted.

In the subsequent years, I have had occasion to be critical of some of Sir Murray's other decisions, or at least with their clumsy and imperfect implementation by his subordinates. Nevertheless, he had ended his tenure with high approval ratings and general popularity.

A partial explanation for this might be due to his having a very sly and efficient publicity machine. It conferred upon him fulsome credit even for things initiated by others. At the same time, it spared him blame for some of the cock-ups he had been ultimately responsible.

I have already challenged some of those attributions in 2018, in the third volume of these memoirs, published under the title *Hong Kong Confidential: Life as a Subversive*. I will therefore refrain from repeating my comments here. However, it is dismaying to note that lax or lazy journalists, commentators and obituary writers have kept repeating some of those erroneous attributions. I suppose in the post-truth era we are living through now, misrepresentations broadcast or repeated often enough would in the end be taken as factual and authoritatively correct. Nazi propaganda

had foreseen this possibility during World War II.

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When the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, and the Chinese Premier, Mr. Zhao Zi-Yang, sat down to begin talks on the future of Hong Kong in Peking in September of 1982, both had different aims and were subjected to different types of historical pressures.

It was significant that neither side deemed it necessary to consult the 5.2 million people in the colony on what **they** really wanted, rather than just simply using them like poker chips at a high-stakes game of chance.

Premier Zhao was apparently there to bring a fitting end to what had been commonly referred to by the Chinese as “the century of humiliation” inflicted by foreign powers. He knew, however, that there were pressures pulling in different directions within his own side.

For a start, the Chinese Communist Party was a broad church, with tens of millions applying to become members, making it possibly the largest political party anywhere in the world. It would be a far cry from the numbers wanting to join a Western political party. Yet it had to accommodate a wide range of opinions, with Leninist democratic centralism at its heart.

Premier Zhao himself had liberal inclinations but there were many conservatives favouring different approaches. There were also those tricky economic modernising and opening-up policies advocated by the Paramount Ruler, Mr. Deng Xiao-Ping, to be taken into account.

Historically and officially, the Chinese position seemed to have been made abundantly clear. As long ago as the Ching Dynasty, it had been asserted that Hong Kong was an inalienable part of China, surrendered only because of a series of unequal treaties. In time, that lost territory had to be restored. National honour demanded no less.

That position had been adhered to by successive Chinese governments. For example, General Chiang Kai-Shek, the former Kuomintang President of the Republic of China, had expressed that same sentiment in 1943, in his book *China's Destiny*.

The return to Chinese sovereignty was hence due to be negotiated after World War II. But civil war, unfortunately, erupted in the country and the issue had to be left in limbo.

The Communist government which replaced the Kuomintang in 1949 had followed the same line. The unsettled situation it inherited also prevented actual negotiations. Its premier of the time, Mr. Chou En-Lai, indicated that the future of the territory would be dealt with “when the time was ripe”. Indeed, he took the further step in 1958 of informing Britain that China would regard as an unfriendly act any attempt by Britain to move the territory towards any sort of dominion status.

In 1972, right after China had replaced Taiwan in the United Nations, China went out of its way to notify the world that it did not recognise any of the three treaties pertaining to Hong Kong.

Given that background, the Chinese position at the 1982 negotiations appeared to have been fairly consistent and logical. The Chinese team held that they spoke for all Chinese in the world, knowing that at least a billion of their countrymen at home and abroad were committed to the cause for national unity. Compatriots caught in the tiny foreign-usurped enclave in China should be no different from the vast majority within China and elsewhere. To give them more say would call into question the legitimacy of the Chinese team and ferment dangerous old tendencies towards divisions and partitioning.

In any case, the cadres already stationed in Hong Kong were well-acquainted with the shifting kaleidoscope of overlapping and multiple opinions there — Kuomintang remnants, Taiwan separatists, triad societies members, faint-hearted capitalists, money-grubbing traitors, foreign spies, drug-addicts, frivolous youths, followers of bourgeois life-styles and families of those who might have suffered during the protracted civil war, as well as the irredentist forces which had surfaced in 1967 and 1971.

It was inconceivable to the Chinese leadership that the bulk of the population in the colony would prefer the humiliation of living as second or third class alien subjects than being ruled by their own kind.

After all, 92% of the inhabitants within China were of the Han stock, though recognised minorities were also living in peace there. It was also important to remember that, in the Chinese psyche and mind, the definition of being a Chinese was not just a matter of race, skin-colour, language or even the accidental location of one’s birth.

From time immemorial, Chinese-ness had been considered as essentially a civilisational thing, that is, whether a person behaved in an appropriate Chinese manner, observed Chinese habits, customs, traditions and so forth. The naturalisation of foreigners in China, like in Japan, had

been extremely rare in contemporary times, recording only about 1,500 cases.

For that reason, Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci and some other early Jesuits were accepted as Chinese. On the other hand, it was also true that given enough time, the Chinese had a habit of absorbing minorities within their midst. Take for example the Jews who had chosen to settle in Kaifeng, and later, the Manchu conquerors themselves. It was not for nothing that the Chinese civilisation had endured for over five thousand years, largely intact.

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It was worth noting that during the negotiations for the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, the Taiwan government, whose Kuomintang leaders had boasted repeatedly of recovering mainland China from their isolated island, had remained conspicuously silent. No talk of recapturing the mainland or any such, but rather some fake form of independence under the wings of the United States.

Apparently Taiwan politicians had no interest in gathering around themselves the Kuomintang remnants who had been so unprofessionally abandoned decades ago in Hong Kong by their officers, contrary to the ancient rules of chivalry among the warrior class of society.

Instead, the Taiwan regime had now apparently only set its sights on embracing the corrupt Hong Kong police station sergeants who had fled there with their ill-gotten loot. The fact that the two territories had no extradition arrangements was — and remained — a great legal convenience for all parties concerned.

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The British position in the Sino-British negotiations, on the other hand, appeared all over the place, riddled with internal divisions. It was like a man desperately trying to cross a troublesome river by straddling two different boats, neither of which was amply under control.

Prominently, there was the team leader, Mrs. Thatcher, flushed after victory in her war with Argentina. Then there were her various advisors — legal, political, economics and financial, national security, *et cetera* in the form of faceless apparatchiks from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

And finally, there was an assortment of so-called China-watchers.

Many of the advisors had been so handicapped by doctrinal, philosophical and political contradictions that they all sang slightly off-key within the ensemble, tripping over themselves concerning myths and beliefs their ancestors had sprinkled everywhere.

Mrs. Thatcher herself was a prolific myth-generator. She became a champion of that neoliberal economic and political order firmly established after World War II, together with deregulation, flexible labour markets, reducing the power of trade unions and the privatising of state enterprises. What she did not realise was that her society — and particularly its ruling elites — was actually on a downward slide and that she was taking over a sticky wicket.

Some of her advisors pandered to her proclivities while others advised forthrightly but at cross purposes. For example, some would say that the *laissez-faire* free market system Britain had put in place in Hong Kong had brought the colony bulging coffers and low inflation without recurring strikes, high unemployment, currency devaluations and balance of payments crises back in their homeland. Sound British management had been consistently demonstrated in the colony and that ought to count for something in negotiations with the Chinese.

The legal advisors, obsessed with legal minutia and the sanctity of international agreements, were quick to point out that Hong Kong island and the Kowloon peninsula had been ceded by China in perpetuity under treaty provisions, notwithstanding the firm rejection of “unequal” treaties by the Chinese. They would emphasise the rule of law and if those territories were to be given back, then they too should be worth something in return.

A few conscientious advisors, on the other hand, pointed out that provision should be made to allow the settlement of at least a number of Hong Kong residents in the United Kingdom, particularly those who had been doing the questionable work assigned to them by foreign superiors in the Special Branch, in the listening posts of the CGHQ and in other similar organisations. Without such a provision in the light of several changes in the Nationality Act, loud cries of betrayal and accusations of perfidious Albion might well arise from several quarters.

But political advisors warned at once, however, that — regardless of reasons, compelling or otherwise — the British voting public would never countenance another influx of foreigners into their already over-crowded

island. It was not a matter of breed, colour or racism, just practical politics.

Then there were the China-watchers, holding forth on Chinese pragmatism, ingenuity and willingness to seek the middle ground. None of them seemed to have realised that China-watching was akin to birdwatching. It could not be meaningfully done without first ridding one's own head of accumulated prejudices and extraneous noises.

Furthermore, if done for laziness or convenience, say, within the confines of the back garden, the watcher was likely to miss a number of important indicators, like the creatures' habitat usage, their aural expressions, their migration patterns, and whether they were moulting or not. More importantly, one was likely to miss the murmuration of starlings or group flights reminiscent of the dynamics of physics rather than of the well-worn tram tracks of conventional ideas and politics.

My humble impression was that most China-watchers who had wormed their way into the establishment were still a fair distance away from the accomplishments of a Needham or a Giles.

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Given the avalanche of conflicting advice received, Mrs. Thatcher decided to assume her Iron Lady persona and floated, as an opening gambit, a proposal to return both the ceded territories of Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon peninsula to Chinese sovereignty provided the British could administer the entire territory for a further period of years after the end of the New Territories lease in 1997. She felt the tested British managerial know-how could strengthen confidence in the future of the city, increase its stability as a financial centre and prevent any damaging flight of capital.

She was genuinely taken aback when Premier Zhao gave a dusty response. He said only two principles were at stake in the negotiations — Chinese sovereignty over the whole of Hong Kong and the prosperity and stability of the city. In any crunch, China would always choose sovereignty.

The following day, Mrs. Thatcher had an audience with the Paramount Ruler of China, Mr. Deng Xiao-Ping. The chain-smoking and diminutive Mr. Deng made plain the issue of Hong Kong. It had to be settled quickly, within no more than a year or two. Otherwise, China might unilaterally decide to recover the territory.

In fact, Mr. Deng had earlier passed that message informally to Mr. Edward Heath, the retired prime minister before Mrs. Thatcher, that the Chinese deadline for settling everything was before September of 1984. He might have expected that that clear message would be percolated back to the Whitehall mandarins. But Mrs. Thatcher's opening gambit might have struck him as a deliberate British tactic to drag things out. He reacted accordingly.

The *démarche* from Mr. Deng also produced a reaction from Mrs. Thatcher. She bridled. It was not the kind of message the lady had been accustomed to receiving. She therefore ordered with hauteur that her team produce a cabinet paper on how Hong Kong might be defended militarily.

She probably would not have issued her order if she had been properly briefed by her advisors in the first place. She might then have known how many days it had taken a relatively small contingent of Japanese troops to secure the surrender of British forces in December of 1941. She might have known too how the metal border fences crumbled like match sticks in 1962 under the onslaught of Kwangtung refugees, once the People's Liberation Army had withdrawn guarding their side of the border. She might have heard also that infamous boast by Chairman Mao that Hong Kong was for the taking, with just one telephone call from him.

It did not require a military genius to tell a political leader that a territory could be defended only if the hearts of the bulk of the people of that territory were behind its leader. To have that kind of support behind a foreign leader was an unwise assumption given the history of Hong Kong.

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The city has long had a reputation for being flooded with rumours and gossip, but it had an amazing ability for embellishing and exaggerating those stories as they passed from mouth to ear. So it was not in the least surprising that when leaks suggested that the talks in Peking were hitting snags, roadblocks and disagreements. Different people therefore started projecting their own fears, hopes and prejudices into widely circulated tales.

Very few individuals knew what were the actual sticking points but, in a situation of considerable secrecy, even the wildest stories were being picked up and given credence. Some things were quite understandable. For example, if a person happened to be one of the 50,000 or so members

of Hong Kong triad societies at that time, he would naturally be only too conscious of the fate of such membership after Communist authorities had taken over in Shanghai, Canton and other major cities.

Again, if a person already had not got a bolthole established in Canada, Taiwan or elsewhere, he might well join one of the queues seeking visas outside the offices of consulates-general and high commissions.

Without candid statements coming from either side, some people started converting Hong Kong dollars into American dollars and liquidating fixed assets. Property prices fell. Speculators, fraudsters, demagogues and profit-seekers also jumped on the bandwagon for quick kills.

It was in that fevered and uncertain atmosphere that I too easily made many millions — but I did that out of a sense of pique and out of sheer frustration over how supposedly clever people could remain so blind to the realities under which they lived and got carried away by loose talk simply because of their own fears or greed. I shall recount how I came by my enormous windfall in a subsequent chapter.

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Mrs. Thatcher might have had an easier time at the Sino-British negotiations if more of her underlings had done their jobs properly. But too many of them had fixed their sights on technicalities and legalities rather than the burgeoning of pride and nationhood among the Chinese after World War II. If they had not been smugly oblivious of the latter, they would have advised Mrs. Thatcher against the futility of her opening gambit.

No Chinese leader could have survived in the 20th century if he had made any further territorial concession in China to a foreign power. It would have violated such sense of history that most Chinese leaders of note through the ages would have been impregnated with.

As one raked through the ashes of history, it would appear that the British focus on treaties and leases caused them to overlook wider changing realities on the ground.

Since the New Territories lease did not expire till June of 1997, the assumption was that nothing much required attention till much closer to that time. But this was not the case. Some more perceptive administrators had seen that the duration of the lease of the New Territories was storing up a number of practical problems.

For example, Sir Cecil Clementi, who was the governor from 1925 to 1930, drew attention to some of the problems in 1928. He thought that the relatively short lease duration on the New Territories would be an impediment to longer-term investments in the colony. He therefore suggested to Whitehall that the territory should be made permanent like the rest of the colony. But he did not meet with success. Whitehall feared that such a move would lead to another conflict with China which the international community of the time would not support.

Another problem was that thousands of short-term renewable or non-renewable leases of various durations were being handed out for a multiplicity of purposes, like for squatter settlements, burial grounds, schools, petrol stations and so forth. Such leases had different durations. For example, leases for petrol stations were normally granted for 21 years while those for recreational purposes were for 15 years. In total there were over 30,000 leases in the New Territories.

If a lease came up for renewal with a renewal period going beyond 1997, what would happen? Both a renewal or a refusal to renew would send wild and confidence-shaking rumours flying around like bluebottles around a rotting carcass in the rumour-prone society that was Hong Kong.

A local Administrative Officer by the name of Eric Ho foresaw such a possibility in 1972 when he was serving as Director of Home Affairs. He wrote a memo classified as “Secret” to his immediate superior in the Central Secretariat, suggesting that thought should be given to a coherent policy on the issue of short-term leases in the New Territories before they became a hot issue. In due time, a “Secret” memo came back without a substantive reply but ordering him never to raise the subject of New Territories leases again.

It was not recorded who had been consulted on Eric Ho’s memo or who had authorised the stern order in reply. The exchange was revealed in Eric’s memoirs *Times of Change — A Memoir of Hong Kong’s Governance* published in 2005.

Apparently there were some at the top of the colonial bureaucracy who preferred the good old stand-by of keeping their “heads-in-the-sand” approach when presented with difficult government problems.

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In 1979, something unprecedented happened. For the first time since

the Communist government came to power in China in 1949, the governor of Hong Kong, in the person of Sir Murray MacLehose, was invited to visit Peking.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office duly instructed the governor not to raise the problems surrounding New Territories leases with Chinese officials — presumably because a British strategy had not been fully worked out.

But Sir Murray, being Sir Murray, chose to ignore the order. He must have thought that, given his cocksureness about his own diplomatic experiences and skills, he could somehow pull a difficult political rabbit out of the hat. So when he had a meeting with the Paramount Ruler, Mr. Deng Xiao-Ping, he floated the idea of the colonial government issuing short-term leases in the New Territories without a termination date, should they extend beyond June of 1997.

Mr. Deng naturally turned down that unorthodox suggestion, thinking it only a British ploy to extend the New Territories lease by stealth. But the incident alerted the Chinese to a possible British line of thinking and thereby compromised beforehand one of Mrs. Thatcher's negotiating positions.

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Another handicap that Mrs. Thatcher had to face concerned some of the myths her officials had generated over the years and in which they themselves actually and honestly believed. Such myths stretched all the way back from Lord Palmerston's "barren island" remark to the latter-day narratives about British managerial genius turning that barren island and its Chinese low-life immigrants into a glitteringly prosperous and efficient modern society.

It was true, of course, that during the early days of the colony, many of the Chinese immigrants were criminals and pirates fleeing from the uncompromising reach of native laws and regulations. One of the most notorious was named Wong Ma-Chow. He somehow gained the patronage of the then British Registrar-General, a man named Daniel Caldwell, and thus was able to amass a vast fortune and considerable local power. There had been, of course, numerous lesser rascals than Wong Ma-Chow among immigrants.

But many of the early arrivals were also ordinary labourers,

job-seekers, peasants, students, small time traders and plain refugees, escaping from famines and uncongenial environments. Among them were also educated people and intellectuals, particularly teachers.

However, because the British elites wanted to take full credit for the transformation of Hong Kong from its humble beginnings as fishing villages to what it has become today, they have propagated a certain narrative for a century and a half through its skewed and muddled education system. They have done it so well that many Hong Kong youngsters who had gone through that educational mill still accepted uncritically what they had been fed.

Take, for example, Mr. Steve Tsang, a person brought up in Hong Kong. He had graduated from the University of Hong Kong and later became an Oxford academic. He was commissioned to write a book about the Administrative Service which was published in 2007 under the title *Governing Hong Kong*.

In that book, he asserted that the early Kwangtung immigrants were “generally deemed to have come not from an honourable background.” He added that, on the whole, respected and wealthy Chinese did not have any desire to migrate to live under alien rule.

He did not, however, provide any case histories to back up his thesis. Neither did he define what he meant by “an honourable background” or a yardstick for determining what was a “respected and wealthy Chinese”.

I would, within the confines of my own kinship connections, question the validity of some of his sweeping statements. I have in Chapter One of this memoir set out in some detail the pedigree of the Chau family from which my paternal grandmother originated.

Let me now set out the background of my paternal grandfather. His name was Wong Wan-On and he was born in Hong Kong in 1876. He was the youngest of six children, consisting of three sons and three daughters, all born in Hong Kong. His father had been a teacher in the Hsin Hui District of Kwangtung before moving to the colony, but no oral history has been passed down on his precise motives for moving, except that he continued in the teaching profession after his arrival.

My grandfather studied at the Diocesan Boys’ School till 1893 and then entered the then Hong Kong College of Medicine, graduating in 1900. He then became a “Registering Medical Officer” in the British Colonial Service in Singapore

While being a British Crown servant, he was also a

crypto-revolutionary, raising funds among overseas Chinese to finance the revolutionary activities of his friend Dr. Sun Yat-Sen.

When I was a boy, I had seen a number of photographs of Dr. Sun taken with various elders in my family. Unfortunately, most of those photographs had been lost or destroyed during the Japanese occupation of Singapore. The only photograph surviving within the family is a copy of the one taken in Singapore in 1907 and which now is hanging in the Sun Yat-Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall at Tai Gin Road in Singapore.

As to the two older brothers of my grandfather, the eldest became a doctor and migrated to San Francisco. The second brother became a dentist and migrated to the tin mining town of Ipoh in Malaya.



A group picture taken in Singapore in 1907 of supporters of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen. The author's grandfather is seated second from the left in the centre now.

* * *

As for the antecedents on my mother's side of the family, she was the fourth daughter in a family of nine. Her father was Mok Sau-Tseng, born in 1866 in the agricultural town of Tseng Sing, not far from Canton. His

family traded in household provisions. He received a traditional education till the age of 15, when a relative suggested he should go to Hong Kong to broaden his vision and to learn some English.

He did so in 1881 and enrolled in St. Paul's Secondary School. Before he finished, however, he converted to Christianity and decided to follow a priestly calling. He therefore started to study theology.

Meanwhile, he met a Chung Shan woman named Wong Chung-Shun who had come to Hong Kong to take up a teaching post at a girls' school. She shared his religious enthusiasms and the two soon married.

Mok Sau-Tseng was ordained as a priest in 1902 and the Church Missionary Society sent him to Canton the following year to start a new ministry. He duly founded the Church of Our Saviour at Wanfu Road in Canton and the Holy Trinity Middle School a short distance away.

In 1934, when a new South China diocese was created, he was unanimously elected as the first Anglican Bishop of Canton. In that position he oversaw the work of seven churches and a number of schools and medical clinics throughout Kwangtung Province. He and his wife devoted the rest of their lives to church and charitable works.

A number of biographies, both in Chinese and English, have been published about my maternal grandfather. Today there is still a secondary school at the Tai Po area of Hong Kong, founded in 1975, named after him.

It is for others to decide whether my ancestors had come from "honourable" or "respectable" backgrounds. I think there are many in Hong Kong today who, like myself, had ancestors with similar backgrounds. For instance, I have played *mah jong* in Hong Kong with a friend surnamed Kung who traced his ancestry back to Confucius. I also know a businessman whose family originated from the great Warring State poet, Wat Yuen. If anything, some of my ancestors and those of some of my friends probably typified the complex reasons why people move from one place to another.

I cannot imagine my native city for five generations developing the way that it has without heavy doses of investment, both financial and intellectual, from China. Furthermore, the infusion of Chinese values, cultivated over many centuries, in terms of work ethics, frugality, high propensity to save, concern for future generations and respect for the aged certainly informed many sections of the city today.

After all, until the British switched to a more merit-based system of selecting civil servants in the 1930s, many of the British officials appointed

to Hong Kong during the early days had been fairly mediocre. They merely continued the tradition of what Sir John Bowring had once described as “ruling in ignorance.”

* * *

If Mrs. Thatcher had not been taken in to some extent by the myths that generations of her own people have created over time, she would have hardly begun her pitch at the Sino-British negotiations in the way that she had. No doubt she would have been impressed by what she could see in the thriving city. But if she thought it was entirely or even to a substantial extent due to British management, then she was greatly mistaken.

I do not know why the Chinese side had rejected out of hand her proposal for continued British management after 1997. Perhaps they could not get their heads around the contradiction between claiming credit for the success of *laissez-faire* policies and at the same time credit for displaying extraordinary management skills. Or perhaps, they judged — as I have done — that the British contribution to the overall development of Hong Kong had been not as crucial as British propaganda had made out, even without taking into account all the shambles that have occurred over one and a half centuries of British rule.

But of course it would have been contrary to the Chinese sense of decorum and politeness to spell out the unvarnished truth in so many words before a visiting lady British Prime Minister.

The curtain finally came down on the negotiations on December 19, 1984, when China and the United Kingdom signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration in Peking. The document consisted of eight paragraphs and three Annexes. Signing on behalf of China was the Chinese Premier, Mr. Zhao Zi-Yang, and on behalf of Britain, the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher.

The document provided for the return of the entire colony to Chinese sovereignty and had no provision for any British management role after 1997.

However, some Britishers with colonist mindsets still seemed fond of playing the role of back-seat drivers; in particular I refer to the Conservative politician rejected by the voters in Bath who nevertheless gained an appointment as the final British governor of the colony. It was a pity that the people of Hong Kong were never given any say over the

matter.

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