

Unforeseen Consequences

When the Chinese Communists came to power in 1949, after Chairman Mao had earlier declared with his usual hyperbole that women held up half of heaven, I had assumed that the subordinate position placed upon women in China since the time of Confucius would at last be brought to an end. Women of marriageable age would henceforth be expected to be completely free to indulge in the folly of matrimony on an equal basis as sillier men had been doing for ages — without the interferences of parents, relatives, religious authorities or anybody else with a sounder grasp of human frailties and life experiences.

So far as my own family had been concerned, that freedom of matrimonial choice and that readiness to indulge in the chimera of romantic love had been practised since my grandfather's generation. He had, as family legends and some of my own boyhood observations had confirmed, ended up with a *ménage* of **nine** wives — a number I could barely imagine during my adult years, let alone get to grips with during my innocent boyhood.

What became progressively clearer, however, to those of us who had subsequently made a hash of our marriages — an increasing host including my parents, myself and some of my siblings — was that we had no one but ourselves to blame for the recriminations, divorces, custody arguments over children and all the other tedious legalities and acrimonies that inevitably followed.

I was to ponder in subsequent years whether all human beings harboured a contrarian streak where love was concerned. No matter how many times we might come a cropper, hope always seemed to spring eternal. After my disastrous marriage with Man-Ying and the fruitless pursuit of other affairs, experience should have taught me to be wary of further romantic entanglements.

And yet, when I found myself increasingly drawn to Chiu Kit, I managed to persuade myself that I was falling in love again. I even convinced myself that marriage simply had to work better the second time around.

So in proposing to Chiu Kit during our meeting at Wushi, I had laid most of my cards on the table. I had led a life that had been far from exemplary, with far too many liaisons along the way with far too many women, especially when I was trying to find a suitable substitute mother for my three children from a previous marriage. But that was now all over and done with, for my children had all gone off to North America for studying

subjects of their own choosing. They would be independent and on their own thereafter; and I would be free of further responsibilities.

I was comfortably off and gainfully employed. In addition, I enjoyed a civil service pension for life. I made no mention of my stash of World Bank bonds, for that money seldom came to mind. I could nonetheless afford all reasonable material, educational and travelling needs a wife might aspire to. I had already sown my wild oats, so it would all boil down to working out how best to make a companionable life together.

In order to reassure her that I was legally divorced and eligible for marriage, I sent her copies of the decrees pertaining to my divorce.

Although Chiu Kit had seemed prepared to accept my proposal unconditionally and without ado, I did not want to take advantage of her youth and inexperience. I therefore made a trip to Nantong just to meet her parents and to secure their blessing.

That meeting with her parents turned out well. They were simple and straightforward people, completely without guile. A rapport soon developed between us, especially between the father, Chiu Bun, and myself. They appeared genuinely pleased that their daughter, who had failed to secure a good enough grade in the *gaokao* or university entrance examination to qualify for higher education in China, would now have other opportunities in life besides the job on the midnight-till-morning shift in a local textile factory that had been assigned to her.

Chiu Bun and myself got onto the same wavelength very quickly, sensing that we could both be completely open with each other. He pointed out that having the right kind of social background could sometimes be just as important in socialist China as in bourgeois countries in former times.

He himself had emerged from a family of small shopkeepers and had been started with a traditional Chinese education. When he was a boy he had loved books and had dreamt of becoming a librarian so that he could always get his fill of books. But he soon realised that times were changing. Becoming a librarian might easily get him classified as an intellectual or someone with opinions to defend.

An intellectual with a shopkeeping family background might be a dangerous combination. Hence he set aside his ambition and settled for becoming just a lowly tallying clerk instead.

More than that, he foresaw that the coming age after World War II would be one where peasants and workers would be in the ascendant and more secure. He therefore sought out a healthy and agreeable peasant

woman for a wife so that the family they would raise could be firmly rooted in the soil. Having taken so many precautions to shield family members from the spotlight of political controversy, it was natural that the marriage of his youngest daughter to a Hong Kong capitalist so much older than herself would not have an impact on other members of the family.

Chiu Bun therefore suggested that one means of protecting them might be for each of them to distance themselves from our marriage, by writing letters to their respective residential and work units, stating that each had tried his or her best to dissuade Chiu Kit from marrying me but she had stubbornly ignored their pleas.

The suggestion sounded more than reasonable to me. For years, Hong Kong had been represented in China as an alienated piece of the motherland, sometimes even as a foreign induced carbuncle and a den of iniquity, rife with racism, inequality and exploitation. I was part and parcel of that bourgeois set-up, now engaging in “skimming from the middle” such productive labour others might produce.

I had no desire to get anybody else into trouble because of my marriage. So I ran the suggestion past Kit for her opinion. She seemed comfortable with it. She said she had anticipated some resistance over our marriage, especially from the more puritanical apparatchiks in her town. But she believed she could hold her own against them.

She also thought we should have no difficulty securing a slot from the local equivalent of the Registrar of Marriages for a civil ceremony, once I had secured a medical certificate confirming that I was in reasonably good health and free from contagious diseases.

On that optimistic note, we set in motion the various plans for our nuptials.

* * *

One of the first things I did upon returning to the colony was to seek appointments at Queen Mary Hospital for a comprehensive medical check-up. But before I could even complete all the procedures, I received a letter from Chiu Kit informing me she had been invited for “chats” with office bearers at both her neighbourhood’s residential unit and at her workplace’s unit. This was a tried and tested tactic in united front work, she explained, a method for persuading someone who had strayed to return to socialist orthodoxy. However, she assured me she could adequately

handle the matter.

Nantong was a relatively modest little town, though the section in which she resided had more the atmosphere and characteristics of a typical Chinese village. Everybody in it felt they had the right to poke their noses into everybody else's affairs and add their own two cents' worth. So once her father and her siblings had lodged their letters opposing her marriage, rumours and speculations circulated furiously, alleging that one of the neighbourhood's young women was intending to marry a rich but dubious Hong Kong capitalist in spite of the objections of her parents and of her entire family.

Reading between the lines, I gathered that the "chats" might range between good natured cajolery to outright threats and bribery. She was young and inexperienced in the ways of the outside world, her interlocutors would begin. Would it not be better to listen to her parents and her older siblings? They were, of course, talking to her only for her own good.

People from Hong Kong were notorious for being unscrupulous and silver-tongued; their word could hardly be trusted, no matter what they might promise. To them, money and profits were all that mattered. How could she risk marrying someone so much older than herself and whom she hardly knew? Had she not met him only two or three times? She should not be taken in by promises of wealth and luxury but seriously think again.

Information made available from Chinese official quarters suggested that the man in question already had several wives and a number of grown-up children. She would encounter all manner of complications and trouble fitting into such a family, perhaps even get rejected. What would she then do in a strange town, without kinfolk or family, should that man decide to abandon her?

The managers at her factory laid it on even thicker. They rehearsed similar arguments and expressed surprise that a young woman brought up on firm socialist principles could be so easily swayed by material blandishments from a virtual stranger. The world was filled with accounts of gullible women trafficked as prostitutes and sex slaves. They reminded her she was currently on the night shift, beginning at midnight till early the next morning. If she behaved more like a model socialist worker, it should be possible to consider changing her shift to one with more sociable hours.

Chiu Kit ended her letter by urging me to send her the results of my medical examination as soon as possible so that she could proceed with the requirements for our marriage at her end.

* * *

Kit and I had fallen into a natural pattern of writing to each other at least once a week, to update each other on what was happening in our lives. Therefore, when no letter from her had arrived for two weeks after the letter reporting on her being invited for “chats”, I sensed that something was amiss.

I had thought of telephoning Chiu Bun for the latest information. But back in those days only very senior officials in Nantong had the luxury of having a private telephone in their homes. There was only a communal telephone in his neighbourhood for emergency contacts with residents but anyone relying on that instrument could be certain that the operator and everyone else in the office would be listening in avidly on all conversations and broadcasting information thus gleaned as current gossip.

By the end of the third week without a letter from Kit, I was on tenterhooks. I was almost ready to hop on a plane for Nantong, regardless of consequences.

Just then, a letter with a Shanghai postmark fortuitously arrived. It was from Kit. It appeared that the leaders of the Nantong branch of the Communist Youth League had inserted themselves into our marriage controversy, the very same leaders who had a couple of years earlier awarded her a prize of a trip to Peking for her enthusiasm and command of socialist revolutionary principles!

They now felt not only outraged but betrayed that she should have so readily abandoned her principles to seek a bourgeois life of plenty with a middle-aged Hong Kong businessman. The fact that they had so mistakenly judged her degree of reliability and “redness” previously was there on the record for the entire Nantong community to see. Those cadres risked suffering serious damage to their reputations and possibly even being called to account by their superiors.

They therefore had to use whatever influence they had with Nantong municipal officials to frustrate her marriage, while pretending to be supporting the objections of her parents and her siblings. Thus all her letters to Hong Kong and all incoming letters to her from that city had been interdicted, contrary to Article 40 of the Chinese Constitution. They had calculated that by cutting off communications between Kit and myself our relationship would soon wither and die.

But Kit had found a way to overcome their machinations. She had a good friend who had found a job in Shanghai but who returned to see her parents in Nantong every weekend. That friend had agreed to take Kit's letters to me and mailed them from Shanghai. Likewise, if I would send my letters to her friend in Shanghai she would deliver them to her personally each weekend. It would inevitably take longer for our letters to reach each other but it would overcome the blockade imposed.

The Communist Youth League leaders were also applying pressure on her father through his work and residential units to press her further into changing her mind about the marriage. This was making life awkward for her father.

A few of her former comrades in the Youth League had also been calling on her at her home for "chats". She could not foresee what other tricks the Youth League leaders might get up to. She was confident, however, that they could not legally or constitutionally stop her marriage because the freedom of marriage was protected under Article 49 of the Chinese Constitution and she was clearly of marriageable age. Therefore the sooner their marriage could be finalised the better, she said.

* * *

As I read Kit's letter from Shanghai, I felt the chill of fear entering my heart. But I simultaneously also marvelled at her initiative in setting up an alternative means of communications. The Chinese have had a long history of coping with authoritarian rulers and they had always found ways of skirting their rules and regulations.

The latter was a clear indication she was determined about our marriage and that was heartening. Having been a member of the Communist Youth League, she seemed at least to have acquired a clear understanding of her rights under the Chinese Constitution.

But how could a young woman like her, standing alone, resist indefinitely the concerted and unlawful pressures from an authoritarian bureaucracy? That somehow had to end. I wrote her immediately, via her friend, urging her to stand firm while I figured out a way of dealing with our common predicament.

The only recourse which came to mind was to seek the help of some of my many friends at the Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, especially those with established connections to some of the

powerful political figures within China.

In approaching my friends, I was bringing my connections and *guanxi* into play, just as I would expect them to bring their *guanxi* into play on my behalf. That was a very Chinese way of solving problems and getting things done, doing it indirectly through intermediaries and behind the scenes.

I thus approached immediately Ip Yeuk-Lam and H. T. Lui, both *mah-jong* partners of long standing, and Wang Kuan-Cheng, the then serving President of the Chinese General Chamber.

Yeuk-Lam was the senior Vice-President at the General Chamber as well as a member of the Kwangtung Provincial People's Congress, while Lui was as thick as thieves with many of the political personalities surrounding Ziang Zemin, the then Mayor of Shanghai.

Ziang, a native of Yangchow and an electrical engineer by training, had by virtue of his position as Mayor of Shanghai, a seat in the Politburo of the Communist Party. He was later to rise to become the General Secretary of the Party and then President of the Chinese Republic.

Wang was, like Chiu Kit, a native of Jiangsu. Apart from his presidency of the General Chamber he was also a veteran member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a sort of *de facto* upper advisory body made up of various political, religious, racial, economic and educational representatives from throughout the nation. The body was supposed to work in collaboration with the Chinese People's Congress in approving laws. Therefore the three I approached all carried considerable heft with parts of the political leadership in China.

The concept of *guanxi* is generally taken by outsiders as a form of corruption but that is often not at all the case. The most basic and fundamental connections are those within one's own family. The family had been firmly established as the basic unit in society since the time of Confucius. As a consequence, nepotism and a subordination of an individual's wishes to the collective interests of the family had been among its more unfortunate offshoots.

Let me illustrate what I am driving at: suppose a person has a brother who happens to be a dentist or a doctor. If he has a toothache or a stomach ache he would first seek out his brother. The brother would then naturally give him some priority in attention because of that blood connection. Other Chinese patients who might be waiting to be attended to would automatically understand and accept why that priority due to blood ties

should be given.

The situation can become more clouded and less distinct if the brother happened to be a public servant, with the right to grant or withhold some scarce commodity, like a licence. Even though he might be judging all claims entirely on their merits, the perception of favouritism could unfortunately arise.

For the average Chinese, however, *guanxi* is seldom traded for cold hard cash, because it is firmly embedded in a system of family or personal relationships built up over considerable periods of time. It is also normally based on trust, reciprocity, friendship and other ties. For example, if one happened to be a member of a triad society and had sworn a blood oath with fellow members, that would represent a legitimate claim of *guanxi*.

The use of *guanxi* could lead to a never-ending series of favours being granted and received. A favour granted becomes a debt to be returned at some future time, if called upon. It would be considered in very bad taste not to treat it as an obligation which had to be honoured and repaid.

The intangible concept of face always form some element in the equation. It amounts to something more than what Westerners might merely refer to as contact, social capital or networking. In Western societies, sharing membership in the masons or a fraternity or a club might impose a similar but less compelling kind of obligation.

* * *

After I had outlined Kit's situation to my three friends, I told them I did not want to lodge a formal complaint against the unlawful deeds by those over-zealous cadres in Nantong. After all, my future in-laws would have to continue living in that town and it would be far better if things could be resolved quietly behind the scenes and out of public sight. Kit and I just wanted to be left alone so that we could get married as soon as possible.

All three friends agreed with my approach and pledged to do whatever they could to untangle the mess. However, they warned that people with influence in Peking would be unlikely to act until they had been made aware of the credentials of the person seeking their intervention. They would not be prepared to put themselves on the line just for some

Hong Kong Joe smitten by some Nantong factory girl.

“I would, for example,” Ip said, “have to tell my contacts what a patriotic compatriot David had been when he was working for the British colonial authorities. They would also have to know he was the one who had cut through years of delay to get a new and enlarged wholesale market built to facilitate the more efficient export of Kwangtung produce to the local market. He had also been the one who had countered the British attempt to spend money on an expensive foreign reverse osmosis sea water conversion project instead of simply buying more East River water from Kwangtung. So the authorities in Kwangtung definitely owe him some help in return now.”

“I can remind my friends in Shanghai how David had initiated the dialogue during the 1973 OPEC oil crisis which led to China supplying extra fuel oil to Hong Kong in return for grants of land here for Chinese corporations to start retail petrol stations to break Western monopolies,” Liu said.

“Look,” Wang interjected, “we should also stress David’s present position as managing director of an old established trading firm, engaged in promoting the export of a wide range of Chinese products to America and Europe. Why not get someone to put all that together in a resumé and I’ll take it up with the top brass in the New China News Agency. The people there ought to be able to advise on which department or organisation in Peking we could best direct our lobbying efforts at.”

“I can get one of the secretaries to attend to the resumé,” Yeuk-Lam said. “But judging from what David has told us, it appears that the Nantong officials are using the letters of opposition to the marriage from Kit’s parents and siblings to justify their meddling. Wouldn’t things be simpler if the letters of opposition were withdrawn?”

“Those letters were intended as simply a ritual of form, to protect family members,” I explained. “They were never meant to be taken literally.”

“Well, the Nantong cadres seem to be taking them literally now. Can they be withdrawn? That would cut some of the ground from right under their feet.”

“That should not be a problem for the parents,” I replied. “They are all for our marriage. Issues might arise, however, with Kit’s eldest sister, Chiu Shu-Ching, and her husband, Gao Lin-Mao. I’ve never met either of them. But they’re both in the Cultural Division of the People’s Liberation

Army and are members of good standing in the Communist Party. If they were to withdraw their letters, they would need some pretty cogent reason for changing their minds.”

“Can’t we send someone to talk to them?” Wang asked.

“I don’t have their address. But I can get it from Kit. They’re living somewhere in Peking.”

* * *

When I got Kit’s letter giving her sister’s address in Peking, it contained a pleasant surprise. She told me that Gao, her brother-in-law, was in fact at that moment in Shenzhen, just across the border from Hong Kong. He was expected to be there for several weeks, shooting a film. She also gave the name of the hotel he was staying in.

When I passed the information to Wang, he immediately sent off a message to Gao through official channels. He stated that he was the President of the Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. He and the General Chamber’s Vice-President, Mr. Ip Yeuk-Lam, were due to visit Shenzhen presently on business and would feel obliged if they could call on Mr. Gao at his hotel for a cup of tea or a meal so as to seek Mr. Gao’s assistance on a personal matter of great importance to both of them.

A reply duly came back, suggesting a time and date. So on the appointed date, I boarded a train to Shenzhen together with Wang and Ip.

* * *

Gao turned out to be a tall, handsome man of sturdy build. He displayed a distinctive military bearing, although I could not tell for sure whether it came naturally or whether he had adopted it as part of his screen persona. In any case, he met us with elaborate courtesy and politeness. He struck me as a friendly and very likeable type.

I quickly introduced myself and confessed that it was I who really needed his help because I very much wanted to marry his wife’s youngest sister.

We shook hands warmly and he said he had suspected as much when his father-in-law asked his wife and himself to protect themselves by writing letters opposing our marriage.

“In uncertain times, people learn to take precautions,” Gao added.

I was curious as to the precise role he might be playing in the film being made, so I asked him. But he said he was the director rather than an actor in the film being shot.

“How thrilling!” I exclaimed. “It must be very challenging to switch from acting to directing. What’s the story line of the film? Is it about the People’s Liberation Army or something else?”

“It’s a period drama,” Gao replied. He was about to elaborate on his project when Wang politely intervened and suggested that we should first offer Mr. Gao the hospitality of a cup of tea.

We therefore ordered tea in the hotel lobby and upon its arrival settled down pleasantly to discuss the matter in hand.

“You can assure your wife, Mr. Gao, that should her youngest sister decide to marry Mr. Wong she needn’t have any qualms over her sister’s future in Hong Kong. Both Mr. Ip and I can vouch for that. We have been friends with Mr. Wong for many years and I can stake everything I have on his good character, integrity, kindness and Chinese patriotism.”

Gao let out a chuckle. “I have not the slightest doubt over the qualities described by so distinguished a gentleman as your good self. But please tell me something, Mr. Wang. A couple of years back, my sister-in-law told me that Mr Wong had proposed marriage to her on the very first day they had met at the Ming Tombs. Are all Hong Kong men as romantic and daring as that? As an actor I have been filled with admiration ever since.”

“I’m not so sure that can be applied generally to Hong Kong men but that trait would be consistent with my friend’s character,” Wang said.

“I can also vouch wholeheartedly for my friend,” Ip swiftly echoed. “It appears that some cadres in Nantong are using the letters of opposition to the marriage by family members to frustrate the marriage. If such letters were to be withdrawn, the the ground would be cut from under their feet. If it would make it simpler to withdraw the letters of opposition, by all means state that assurances about Mr. Wong’s bona fides had been received from both Mr. Wang Kuan-Cheng, a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and Mr. Ip Yeuk-Lam, a member of the Kwangtung Provincial People’s Congress.

“Yes, that can be done,” Gao said, with a nod. “I’ll put that in hand once I’ve consulted my wife.”

That was the first and last time I met Gao. Although I invited him

and his wife to visit Kit and myself in Hong Kong in the late 1980s, he was unable to make it because he had been otherwise engaged. Only his wife came. After that Kit and I migrated to Britain. Gao passed away in 2016 at the age of 73.

* * *

Having secured Gao's agreement on withdrawing his and his wife's letters of opposition, the contacts of my friends began making representations about the unnecessary obstructions to my marriage to Kit to the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party's Central Committee.

When those representations reached a certain volume, the department decided to send an emissary to Nantong to investigate the situation and to make known the opposition to some of the extralegal initiatives resorted to by some Nantong cadres.

After the visit by the United Front Work Department emissary, the pressures on Kit and her family gradually dissipated. But some of the Nantong cadres remained resentful over being called to heel by the central authorities. They still had one or two cards to play and played them they did with great relish.

When I eventually sent Kit the report on my medical examinations at the Queen Mary Hospital to pass on to the Marriage Registry, Kit was told in no uncertain terms that a report from a colonial institution could not be relied upon as being comprehensive and unfalsified. For marriages to be performed in China, the medical examinations of the parties involved had to be carried out by an authorised Chinese medical institution. It was to be either that or no marriage at all.