

Awkward Passages

Once news came towards the end of 1984 that Kit had been approved for a one-way exit visa, steps were immediately taken to bring her to Hong Kong. It was eventually decided that I would meet her in Canton to escort her over.

We booked into the White Swan Hotel on Shameen for a few nights, to familiarise Kit with the sights and sentimental locations of the city where I and many of my ancestors had once lived, before crossing the border into what must be — for Kit — a totally strange and different type of society.

But before our rendezvous in Canton, there was a host of chores and arrangements I had to attend to. Foremost among them was the clearance of an appropriate number of closets and drawers in the Seymore Road apartment for the use of the new permanent sharer of the flat. This included bidding a fond farewell to my extended bachelorhood and disposing of all compromising photographs and other items left-behind suitable for feminine use. Otherwise various kinds of explanations or white lies might have to be employed.

A more difficult task was to give up smoking altogether. Although I had experimented with smoking when I had been a teenager, mainly to make myself appear older and more sophisticated, I did not pick up the habit till I was studying at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague in 1965. From then onwards, I became a regular cigar smoker.

However, after meeting Kit at the Great Wall, I noticed she always averted her face whenever I blew a cloud of smoke into the air. Since we were going to live together as man and wife, it seemed wise to eliminate a possible point of conflict right from the start.

Next, I had to negotiate an expanded deal with Ah Seam, the chubby and cheerful part-time maid who came three mornings a week to clean my apartment and to do the laundry. The arrival of another occupant was bound to entail more washing and ironing. Perhaps Kit would sometimes even prefer dinner at home, whether by candle light or not, but that would surely involve certain errands to and from the local wet market.

Since I would be at work every day, I had to arrange beforehand for daily tutorial English lessons for Kit, with a former English teacher who had now become the wife of an Administrative Officer. She had agreed, for a fee of several thousands of dollars per month, to pick Kit up at Seymore Road every week day at 9.30 a.m., to take her to her home for lessons appropriate for an adult beginner for two and a half hours, to provide lunch for her, and then to drop her back at Seymore Road.

Of course, there would be other tedious details like getting Kit a set of the front door keys, informing the security office of the building that my wife would henceforth be going into and coming out of the apartment and alerting the Jockey Club — on its very centenary year, by the way — that my wife would henceforth be signing chits for food and drinks and other expenditures on my account.

After Kit's arrival in the city, a whole range of other arrangements and briefings would have to take place. For instance, I would have to show her the locations of the nearest supermarket and wet market, as well as where both a suitable hairdresser and an expert dressmaker could be found. Likewise the most convenient route for walking down to the centre of town from the apartment and the number of the bus to be taken to get to the gymnasium facilities of the Jockey Club at Happy Valley.

Then there would be the more complicated business of introducing Kit to Mr. Yeung at the bank, to start a banking account in her own name, into which I would transfer a specified sum each month for personal and out-of-pocket expenses.

Finally, there would be a series of meals and other functions to introduce my wife to friends and associates. The most important of whom would naturally be Ip Yeuk-Lam and his wife, Suze, since they had long before assumed the role of adoptive parents. Suze, in particular, would become instrumental in showing her where to shop and, in particular, the level of prices pertaining to products generally used by women and within a home.

During that process, a reality brought immediately to attention was that most of my dearest friends were a few years older than myself. Since I was myself 34 years older than Kit, the generational gap yawned mightily between my wife and my closest friends. In addition, most of my friends did not know enough Mandarin to communicate effectively with Kit.

Nonetheless, this was not to say that all parties did not take readily to one another. My friends enjoyed the cheerful company of Kit — to whom they quickly affixed the more phonetically pleasing sobriquet of Kitty — but they all indulged her excessively, as if she were a recently discovered granddaughter they had never met before! Kitty, for her part, lavished upon them the respect and consideration appropriate to family elders. All parties got along quite swimmingly in their respective ways.

My close friends, being very clued-up people, soon began insinuating their children and their respective spouses into our company, because their

offspring were obviously much closer in age to Kitty than themselves. It then became my turn to feel slightly out of place.

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Among my closest friends was the widower, Leslie Sung, the erstwhile editor-in-chief of the *Hong Kong Standard* and now a senior partner in the long-standing law firm of Lo & Lo. He had a daughter called Elaine, a graduate — like her father — of the University of Hong Kong.

The four of us soon arrived at an arrangement whereby we would on certain specified Sundays gather for a day's recreational swimming and substantial meals at the Jockey Club country club in the New Territories.

After a while, Elaine would seek out a private corner with me and say: "Uncle David, you and Kitty seem to make such a happy combination. Do you think you could help find someone like Kitty for my father? He's getting a bit lonely in his old age."

"I'm not a matchmaker, Elaine," I fended her off immediately.

It was not because I disagreed with her assessment that her father was in need of some caring feminine company; it was just that I knew Leslie's personality too well. I had been familiar with it for many years, at both work and play. He was a man of high principles, but he was also one who was far too intellectual to suffer fools gladly. I could recall vividly how he had reacted against his poor deceased wife, Lorraine, whenever she had made one of those silly mistakes he had taught her to avoid at the bridge table.

But in the face of the entreaties from Elaine, I said to her finally: "I do think it would indeed be good for your father to find an appropriate mate. But because of your father's temperament, he will have to hunt for one himself. Neither you nor I can pick one for him. If we tried, we could both end up in tears."

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Our pleasant and regular Sunday adventures came to an abrupt end, however, not because anyone did or failed to do something, but because of an unforeseen development in the tragic life of Leslie's younger sister, Greta Sung.

I may, in some future volume of these family memoirs, deal more fully with Greta's life. But for now, in the context of the present narrative, I would offer only a summary of the more salient and relevant points, as follows:

When Chairman Mao and his comrades took power in Peking in October of 1949, Leslie and his wife left Shanghai for Hong Kong, where he subsequently took over the editorship of the *Hong Kong Standard*.

Greta, however, elected to remain in Shanghai, where she had an agreeable job as secretary to the head of a British company doing imports and exports with China. Since Britain had been among the first countries to recognise the new regime, she figured she would be safe working for a British firm. Moreover, her mother had been Swedish.

Upheavals usually occur after revolutions and civil wars. Unexceptionally, one of many subsequently broke out in China. Greta had developed a friendship with a British girl who had been the secretary of the British consul in Shanghai. Greta often had to contact that British girl to put through an enquiry from her employer as to whether a particular product was sanctioned in trade with China or not, particularly after the United Nations embargoed trade with China for its involvement in the Korean War.

In any case, the two girls quickly found common interests in jazz, ballroom dancing and tennis. They took to meeting often out of their offices to pursue their mutual interests. Greta confessed to a weakness for Cadbury's chocolates which the British girl promptly procured for her from the consulate canteen. So the relationship blossomed into a friendship between two like-minded young women.

Then, after the British girl had already finished her tour and had returned to Britain, Greta was accused by the Chinese authorities of being a British spy. She denied the accusation, of course, but the prosecution produced photographs of Greta receiving regular packages from the British girl. Greta's nationality was somewhat uncertain. Although her mother had once claimed Swedish nationality for her, she had also at one stage claimed Chinese nationality. She certainly was not British.

In any case, she had already eaten all the chocolate bars passed to her and could not produce anything to prove she had received only bars of chocolate. Neither the British consulate nor a representative of her company came forward to support her version.

The upshot was that Greta was found guilty of being a spy and was sentenced to a lengthy period of imprisonment and corrective detention. Thereafter she was reduced to just a number within a complicated internal security system and no family member could find out where she was being detained at any given time. All contact was hence eventually lost.

Then, suddenly, several decades later, news came to Leslie that Greta had finished her sentence and was being expelled from China by way of Hong Kong. But where was the poor woman to go? With the passage of time she had become virtually stateless. Lengthy imprisonment had also turned her into a complete physical wreck, in need of all kinds of medical and dental attention.

Time had also shrunk the size of the Sung family to just three siblings — an elder brother, a petroleum engineer, working in the oil fields of Brunei and incapable of overseeing care for Greta. His wife was living in Sweden but she spoke neither Chinese nor English and was of an age where she could largely only look after herself. Then there was Leslie and his daughter, Elaine. There was no other family member anywhere.

Leslie was quite willing and financially able to attend to Greta. The only problem was that Hong Kong had a policy of not taking in refugees because of limited space. Leslie went to see the then Chief Secretary and, because of his long record of public service, Leslie had asked for a visa for temporary stay for Greta, so that she could at least receive much needed medical and dental attention.

But the Chief Secretary had replied that if an exception were to be made, then the whole government policy would fall to the ground. Greta had to leave Hong Kong within the number of days specified for refugees on transit.

Somehow, through some legal loophole, Leslie managed to get Greta into Macau as a tourist. There she managed to stay at a hotel for an unimaginable number of years for medical and other attention, with Leslie footing all bills.

She stayed for so long that she eventually qualified to become a Macau resident! That was when she could obtain proper legal documentation as a Macau resident and visited Hong Kong. That was when I met Greta for the first time and heard her side of the story.

During those long years, Leslie had gone to Macau religiously every weekend, as a devoted and loving brother would, and that was why our original Sunday swimming trips came to an abrupt end.

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In the meantime, other less tangible and yet more personal considerations in the relationship between myself and Kitty came into play. For example, how could I explain to someone like Kitty why the tempo of life in Hong Kong had to be lived at such a frantic noon-day pace? I have found that insane pace in no other city I had ever visited; certainly not in New York, which seemed almost sedate by comparison.

It was as if everyone in the colony was in a rush for some inexplicable reason. I could not put a finger on it myself. So I tried to evade the issue by ordering two middle-of-the-road daily Chinese newspapers to be delivered to the apartment, in the hope that Kitty would gradually, with their help and her own experiences, form her own impressions of her new home.

But there were plenty of other issues. What about the various subtle snobberies virulent in Hong Kong? How should one explain to a girl brought up in a classless society why residents on Hong Kong island commonly looked down upon the residents of Kowloon, or why they, in turn, tended to look down upon those living in the New Territories?

It had, so far as I could see, nothing to do with wealth or education or genealogy, for that same kind of one-upmanship existed between those who were wealthy, depending on whether their riches came from new or old wealth. Likewise regardless of whether one got one's education at a local or an overseas university.

I found myself floundering repeatedly for the right words to explain the complexities. It dawned on me that playing Pygmalion was not at all easy, neither in the original form nor in the later Shavian version through Professor Higgins. My attempts at any explanation could be so easily misunderstood and lead to inappropriate responses.

To take one concrete example: I told Kitty after her arrival that should she ever take a taxi or have a meal in a restaurant alone, she should always pay at least 10% in excess of any bill presented. It was known as a tip. Otherwise the person receiving the money might take umbrage if a tip was not given.

“Why?” Kit asked. “Do people here not find dignity in performing labour?”

“They probably do,” I fudged. “But that practice of a tip happens to be a well-established local custom.”

Little did I foresee the hilarious chaos that would ensue when Kitty tried to give a tip to a vegetable seller at the wet market, with whom she should customarily bargain for a deal. And then later, with a cashier at the supermarket! The fact that Kitty did not speak or understand Cantonese and the other parties not speaking Mandarin compounded the problem.

Likewise, I woke up later than usual one morning and found Kitty and Ah Seam trying to conduct a conversation in their respective versions of Chinese.

Ah Seam was asking where Kitty had gone to university and Kitty was explaining that she had not secured a high enough grade in the entrance examinations for university. Therefore she had to be assigned a job in a textile factory by the authorities.

Whilst interrupting the conversation, I did not say anything at the time. But after returning from work that evening, I suggested to Kitty that protecting her own privacy was quite important. She should therefore not tell other people too many details about herself or her family, especially to a part-time maid.

“Why not?” she said. “My adoptive mother, Suze, asked me a similar question along time ago and I gave her the same answer. Is it wrong to tell others the truth?”

“No, of course not,” I said. “But one has to be careful. Suze is a respected elder who you could trust with private information.”

“You mean Ah Seam is not to be trusted?”

“No, no! Ah Seam is a very decent and trustworthy person. Don’t get me wrong.”

Kitty’s questions had me momentarily stumped. How could a person explain class distinctions to someone brought up in a classless society? How could one point out that some were more equal than others and that it would not do to share too many confidences with just anyone.

What was I trying to do to the innocence and outgoing personality that I had originally found so endearing? Was I in fact trying to destroy those very qualities to adapt her to life in a bourgeois capitalist city? It became apparent that it was not only her transition from a mainland society that was awkward but my adjusting to her socialist values as well.

In the end, I said that Hong Kong was a very tittle-tattle sort of town and filled with gossip. It was collectively like a bunch of nosy parkers

around a parish pump.

“You’ll have no conception of what I’m trying to convey because you don’t know what a nosy parker or a parish pump is,” I said. “But a person in Hong Kong cannot be too open and above board like back in Nantong. Every little nugget of information here can be twisted out of all proportion. It would be best if you make a habit of keeping as much as possible of your personal information to yourself and not put everything out in the public domain.”

“You mean I shouldn’t tell other people about myself?” she said. “Even when they ask?”

“No, I mean you should only give such information to those worthy of your trust,” I replied, which was a rather sneaky way of giving non-answers to truly difficult questions. Under certain circumstances, it might even be considered a form of intellectual bullying.

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There had been a long-standing arrangement between the British and the Chinese authorities that a certain number of Chinese people should be allowed to cross the border every day to settle permanently in the colony. At the time that Kitty crossed the border, the agreed figure was 150 per day.

I assumed that each side must have made its own calculations as to the perceived advantages and pitfalls in such an arrangement. From the British perspective, I imagined Chinese cooperation in guarding the other side of the border was immensely helpful, to prevent any sudden mass exodus to escape from a natural or politically-made disaster in the mainland. After all, it had long been a standard Chinese requirement for anyone leaving the country legally to first apply for an exit visa.



Picture of Kitty in 1985 shortly after her arrival in Hong Kong

Therefore to have someone enforcing Chinese law on the other side would quell British humanitarian voices protesting against the colony turning away refugees. But most important of all, the British side must have figured that some trafficking and illegal immigrants would continue to get through to provide a pool of cheap and able-bodied labour for the city's mercantile activities and burgeoning industrialisation.

But the Chinese, initially at least, must have had a different set of calculations. Since most of Hong Kong's population had originated from Kwangtung Province, there was bound to be a persisting demand for family reunifications. Those left behind were apt to be from the older generations, all becoming less productive as they aged and more prone to illnesses and disabilities. Facilities for the infirm and the medically

challenged had been quite rudimentary in Kwangtung. Why not meet that popular demand by granting exit visas so that they could be reunited with their more prosperous families in Hong Kong?

So, during the early years of the scheme, a whole procession of aged, blind and otherwise handicapped exited the mainland to take up permanent residences in the colony. But, as both sides probably expected, illegal immigration and trafficking kept up a steady supply of cheap labour.

It was only after China had decided to modernise and to open up the country to new ideas that a scramble began for other provinces, metropolitan cities and autonomous regions to be allocated a share of the daily quota of visas, in order to set up representational and promotional offices in Hong Kong, to be staffed by their own provincial personnel.

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A peculiar aspect of that daily quota system was that, though a person might be given the right of permanent residence in Hong Kong, that person had to complete a full year of residence before he or she could apply for a colonial travel document to venture outside the colony.

That stipulation prevented me from taking Kitty to visit Singapore to pay her respects to my father and to meet some of my siblings. Neither could I take her to Canada to meet my mother and my remaining siblings, let alone my two children who happened to be still studying there.

It was only the sudden arrival of one of Kitty's relatives in town and my need to offer hospitality that my mind was sent scrambling in several different and unfamiliar directions with fresh perceptions.

The visitor concerned was named He Wei. She was the wife of Gao Shu-Mao, the younger brother of Gao Lin-Mao, who had married Kitty's eldest sister.

First of all, He Wei was a seasoned member of the Chinese diplomatic service and was, naturally, a member of the Chinese Communist Party. She had been assigned for years to diplomatic posts in the Indian sub-continent. Her husband was likewise in the Chinese diplomatic service but they had never been allowed to serve abroad at the same time. Her husband had once been an aide to Zhao Ziyang before the latter became the Chinese premier, which implied that he might have been a cadre with a fairly liberal cast of mind. I was to confirm that speculative image when I met him some years later, during a visit to Ottawa, and found that he was in

post at the Chinese mission there.

He Wei and her husband had a young daughter, currently being looked after by grandparents. The reason He Wei was in Hong Kong was because she was a member of a study group sent to the city to learn how the city and its government functioned.

That piece of information gave me pause. This was during 1985, a full 12 years before the city was due to return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997! Could the Chinese authorities be so far-sighted as to plan and prepare so far ahead?

And what of the British authorities within the city? Were they also sending groups of local civil servants to the mainland to study how the Chinese bureaucracy functioned, so that a smoother integration could be achieved after 1997?

If no step was contemplated, did that mean an absence of long-term planning or did it imply a continuation of the old failed and divisive policy of keeping the younger generation only educated and money-hungry enough for a hard-scrabbled and materialist existence? If youngsters could really think for themselves, would they not start questioning their rootlessness, their moral confusion and their lack of attachments, on top of their uncertainties about identity? After 20 years in the local bureaucracy, I feared that would be the case, just more political and psychological *ad hocery*.

I was very pleasantly surprised, however, when Kitty introduced me to He Wei. She appeared a mature, sophisticated and very self-possessed woman in her early forties. Out-going and with a well-modulated voice too. Since she offered me my first opportunity to interact socially with a *bona fide* member of the Chinese Communist Party, I was determined to be friendly and courteous for Kitty's sake. But I also wanted to gain whatever knowledge I could out of the unexpected visit.

After we had shaken hands and welcomed her, I said: "I have booked dinner at a restaurant serving European meals; I hope that suits your taste. We can always go somewhere else if you prefer a Chinese meal."

"No, a Western meal would be excellent," He Wei replied.

"I've also booked for four, in case you've a companion."

"That's very thoughtful of you. But I've got no companion; my husband's home in China."

"Oh, I was given to understand that Chinese officials on missions abroad are seldom allowed around unaccompanied by some other official or

minder. I must have been misinformed.”

“Hong Kong’s hardly ‘abroad’,” He Wei reminded me pointedly. “But, in spite of regulations, I’ve found a loophole. That particular regulation does not apply where family reunions are concerned. Since Kit’s eldest sister is married to my husband’s elder brother, that places us within the same family. Now you too. This evening can therefore be considered a family affair. The state has to recognise that long-standing basic social unit, a concept in place since before Confucius.”

She and Kitty gave out a joint conspiratorial laugh as they linked arms to negotiate the narrow pavement up Wyndham Street to the restaurant of long vintage known as Jimmy’s Kitchen.

Not wishing to be outdone so easily, I observed: “A splendid Chinese attitude regarding families and regulations. But some people seemed to have forgotten to think that way during the Cultural Revolution.”

“That had been an aberration, now well gotten over,” He Wei said, rather light-heartedly, as we arrived at Jimmy’s Kitchen.

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I have now forgotten what the womenfolk had for dinner. As for myself, I always followed the same menu whenever I dined at Jimmy’s Kitchen — half a dozen escargots smothered in garlic to start, to be followed by a medium-cooked black pepper Australian steak. We all accompanied our meals with suitable amounts of house wine.

Under the influence of the wine, we mellowed and chatted freely, though the conversations were in the main between He Wei and myself, especially when the inadequacy of my command of Mandarin forced me to elaborate on some of my points in English.

“Our team’s here for ten days,” He Wei said. “Can anyone get to understand such a bewildering place like Hong Kong in ten days? I understand you’ve been here most of your life. What do you make of it? How would you sum it all up for me?”

I shook my head. “An outsider like you might get a better sense of this town in ten days than I possibly can,” I said. “You may have a much better perspective to begin with. When I look at this place, I keep seeing too many details and too many problems. Also too many unknowns and missing pieces to the puzzle. I keep thinking of conspiracies and guilty flesh athwart the dark purple of the night. It’s like looking into one of those

distorting mirrors at fairgrounds. Everything becomes fluid, blurred, protean and multi-layered, full of paradoxes, contradictions and conundrums.”

“You sound almost poetical. Are you a poet as well? Most educated people in ancient times used to be.”

“Definitely not in my case! We’ve all become less educated since. With me, I’m just lost for finding the right words to express myself. For example, there’s great wealth here. But, as Balzac has quite rightly observed about his native post-Napoleonic Paris, behind every great fortune lies a great crime. But one and a half centuries of British colonialism has failed to produce anyone as penetrating or as perceptive about Hong Kong, in either Chinese or English, as Balzac had been about Paris.”

“Why do you think that has been so?”

“I don’t know. Many possible reasons. Perhaps nobody could love this mongrel town enough, because its imperfections and anomalies had been so rudely displayed. Or because nobody wanted to study and understand the fundamental circumstances giving rise to those defects. Some respectable writers have passed through — Maugham and his *Painted Veil* and Edmund Blunden’s collection of poems in *A Hong Kong House*, after spending a spell as English professor at the University of Hong Kong. But such writers have not really been rooted here, they remained mainly birds of passage, using the place as backdrops to their own stories or perhaps to illustrate something they had been more specifically interested in, like triad society rituals.

“Or perhaps because some of the great crimes here have never been fully uncovered, because balanced investigative journalism has largely died or has been taken over by corporations focused on politics, trivia, readership, hidden agendas and profit. The yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst, for example, has just about conquered the world. And the libel laws here, like those in Britain, are pretty strict, while the economics for independent journalism simply do not add up at all. I could go on for hours on such subjects, without giving you any clearer picture of what this society is really about.”

“Why don’t you try your hand at portraying a panoramic picture of the ambiguities of life here, like Balzac did for Paris?” He Wei asked.

“I’m not a writer, I don’t have anywhere near that type of talent. I’m at most only a clumsy chaser after dreams.”

“Aren’t we all, in some sense or other? But you’re now also supposed to be a big capitalist. Why not begin by telling me about the business ethos and practices in this town? Our leaders in China want our nation to learn from the outside world.”

“I’m not a true capitalist either, in that I am not instinctively conditioned to maximising profits at all cost. I just happen to be a fellow who had signed up to work for a capitalist corporation.

“I could well go on for hours on the neoliberal flaws in the Reagan-Thatcher ideology, on unregulated free markets, privatisations, dog-eat-dog competition, rampant individualism, exploitative inequality, trickery and knavery, the absence of social responsibilities and cohesion, and so on. People, out of isolation, loneliness and empty lives, could easily fall prey to the attraction of religious cults and dead-end ideas. That type of capitalism is being practised at full throttle here. It does indeed contain the seeds of its own destruction, as pointed out by Marx. I might add that total freedom, practised without moral constraints, can be equally self-destructive.

“Our country ought to be very wary of what and of how much of a quasi-capitalist system ought to be allowed into our own country. Our people might still be wedded to a straightforward and old-fashioned way of recording cash in and cash out. When clever outside accountants start introducing a time element to the booking of profits and deciding when an overdue debt should be declared a bad debt, then confusion can reign. Add in off-balance sheet accounting and intra-subsidiary loans and most of the toxic ingredients for fraud would be present.

“Such a free enterprise system may well produce some material benefits for a few. But in the longer term, it is bound to unleash human greed, selfishness, inhumanity and corruption. How can any obviously profit-obsessed system be allowed to run amok in China? The country is still too vulnerable. Can socialism with Chinese characteristics ever produce, for example, those vital components of a civilised society like sages, philosophers and public intellectuals?”

I paused and sighed. I then added: “Since we are, at this very moment, supposed to be in a ‘private family gathering’ I would rather switch to subjects I seldom get to discuss with a person of authority from the other side. For example, how did you become both a diplomat serving our nation and a member of the Chinese Communist Party?”

He Wei gave another of her light-hearted laughs. “What you’ve asked me is far too easy,” she said. “I’ve nothing to hide. We’re all Chinese, more or less members of one family. If we started drawing lines between this and that, between Communists and non-Communists, where would we end up? Where would you expect Kit to stand?”

“You’re right,” I said. “We’re all Chinese and want what’s best for our nation. But tell me a little more about yourself; you have me at a slight disadvantage at the moment.”

“Well, I went to school like countless millions of others,” He Wei said. “Like Kit, I joined the Communist Youth League at a young age, at 14, I think. I guess I must have somehow distinguished myself in the League. I was also fortunate enough to get good enough grades in the national university entrance examination.

“At university, most of the kids went in for the sciences or some form of engineering. I took a different path and studied anthropology. I developed an interest in ancient civilisations along river banks, like the Yellow River, the Nile, the Euphrates and the Indus. I got particularly taken by the urban development of the Harappa civilisation. Their urban centres were well laid out and had very impressive plumbing and drainage systems. But I don’t think you want me to go on and on about their steatite seals, their terracotta figurines, and so on.

“When I graduated, I applied for a job and also to join the Communist Party. The latter was more difficult than I had imagined. It appeared that millions might apply but few were chosen. Kit’s father applied more than once but was repeatedly rejected. To think that when the Party started in 1921, there was only about 50 members; now it has well over 80 million. How many political parties around the world can claim that kind of membership? In the Western world, any political party would jump for joy if membership even reached six figures.

“Being a woman counted against me in becoming a Party member because only about a quarter of the Party were women, although we are supposed to hold up half of heaven, according to Chairman Mao. I had to serve a year’s probation before I could be admitted. On the other hand, being a university graduate helped, because more and more graduates are being admitted, compared with the early days when farmers, fishermen and workers predominated.”

“How did you feel about having to serve an authoritarian state and being an obedient cog in a vast machine?” I interrupted deliberately.

“Do you believe that over 80 million people could suddenly turn themselves into automatons, without the ability to think for themselves?” He Wei countered. “We must serve the masses, to make their lives better. That has been drilled into us. ‘Serving the people’ has been written in Chairman Mao’s own hand and displayed at the main entrance of Zhongnanhai, the former imperial gardens and now the residential compound for our top leaders.

“When the Party came to power in 1949, the average life span in our country was only 40 years. By the 1970s, the average life span had gone up to over 60 years. I could cite other statistics to show we’re making progress.”

“I could cite statistics too,” I teased. “But that only means that all governments have mastered how to lie with statistics or at least confuse their citizens with the selective kind.”

“All right. I accept that some Party members have been greedy, self-serving, corrupt and careless over statistics. Yes, they’ve made big mistakes too. Some of our leaders have also misread the patriotism and good sense of our people. They’ve made too many complex regulations on that basis. For example, to maintain control and fearing too much choice, they’ve figured that most would head straight for bright lights and easy money.

“Well, I and my husband have been sent outside of China for several years, and there’s really no place either of us would rather be than amongst the sights, sounds, smells of China and sharing the warmth of our families and the fellowship of our compatriots. We would never contemplate living in exile no matter how luxurious life might be in another country.

“You must also remember that our Party is a broad church; it has to accommodate a wide range of opinions. Meanwhile, there also has to be discipline. After individual opinions have been expressed, we must be humble enough to defer to the collective wisdom of the Party. We have to adhere to policies once agreed. That is what democratic centralism is all about.”

“What if an individual member still disagrees, if he still visualises a future for our nation that is different from that envisioned by the Party — economically, environmentally or in some other way?”

“Then he has to submit and live to fight another day.”

“That all sounds very well and perhaps even romantic. But how does that reconcile with a person who has heard about the Stalinist show trials in

Russia?”

“We all have to retain hope.”

“Well, my hope is that we can have another family gathering before the end of your mission.”

“I’d like that too. You’ve given me a lot of food for thought. Kit is in good hands. I’ll see whether I can persuade my team leader and my comrades.”

Thus the wine-fuelled hours of loosened tongues at Jimmy’s Kitchen passed all too quickly. During the process, my respect for the integrity of He Wei grew. She was from a generation of cadres, unlike many of those who had joined the Party immediately about the Liberation, simply because they fitted the right social backgrounds or because they were crypto-bourgeois turncoats out to preserve their old elitist positions. There would be better hope for the country if enough members of He Wei’s calibre could reach the higher levels of the Party.

But at the same time, I was assailed by doubts about whether Kitty, at the still untested age of only 21, would develop sufficiently and intellectually to see behind the bright lights and the glitter of her new home town, to detect the plethora of fakery abounding in the background. I was certain that Kitty would be quite lost for a considerable time following the kind of conversation I had been having with He Wei.

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One of the first things I noticed after He Wei’s visit was that Kitty had been much more relaxed in the company of people she had known — in spite of the conversation being beyond her depth — rather than in the new Hong Kong company I had been introducing her to. It therefore came to me that since she would not be able to travel for lack of travel documents, it might assist in her adjustment process if members of her family could be with her for a time to soften the cultural shock.

Since I possessed more money than I really needed, I could easily invite her various family members to the colony and present each, through Kitty, with a reasonable gift of money to acquire many of the electrical appliances I had around the apartment should they ever take a fancy to the electric kettle, rice cooker, vacuum cleaner, coffee percolator, fruit blender, dehumidifier, microwave oven or whatever for use in their own homes.

Our apartment was, of course, not big enough to accommodate them

en masse, but they could take turns coming throughout the year, beginning with her parents. After Kitty had given an enthusiastic nod to the idea, the year-long project was set in train.

* * *

Kitty's parents were on the top of the list of invitees and they stayed for nearly a month. They were an absolute delight to be with, for it enabled me to deepen my links with Chiu Bun, who was only two years older than myself.

He and his wife were a simple and undemanding couple. Kitty acted as a tourist or shopping guide for part of the day until I returned from work. Then we would either venture out for a meal or else Kitty together with her parents would prepare something simple at home. Afterwards, there would be ample opportunity for me and my father-in-law to explore the contents of my liquor cabinet.

Otherwise, recurring diversions were provided in explaining the novelties of Cantonese television or in illustrating the types of clothes and music which some officials in China might regard as "yellow culture" or cultural pollution.

Conversation with my mother-in-law was much more difficult because she spoke only the Nantong dialect; thus requiring either Kitty or her father to act as an interpreter. Although our exchanges had been mostly confined to pleasantries, it was obvious from the smiles wreathing her face that she was enjoying her visit. Since she came from farming roots, she became something of a celebrity within her family upon returning home, because she became the only family member who had ventured so far outside her own district.

* * *

Shortly after the old folks had returned to Nantong, to spread the word about their sojourn, it became time to bring the next couple of the Chiu family to the colony — Siu Wah and her husband, Yam Kwan-Lam. They had appeared even more country bumpkin-like than they had been when they had visited Shanghai a couple of years earlier. The variety and cornucopia of goods available in Hong Kong simply bowled them over with amazement. If they had the means, they would have happily taken a couple

of container-loads of goods back home with them.

After a day of wandering around the centre of town, Yam Kwan-Lam returned home and declared one evening: “Your town must be very rich. All anyone has to do is to go to some hole in the wall to be supplied with money!”

“They’re money-vending machines,” I explained. “A person must first deposit money with a bank before he can take money out.”

“But there’s nobody there to tell whether you’re the one who originally put money in.”

“When you open an account, the bank will issue you with a debit card and a password. Everything is getting computerised.”

“Amazing!” Yam exclaimed.

I felt certain that if I could look into the young man’s mind I would see it furiously calculating how he could take a money-dispensing machine home with him!

* * *

During the visits of Chiu Bun and Siu Wah, I picked up some random mentions in casual conversations which intrigued me. Chiu Bun, for instance, let it drop that he and his wife had seen little of their eldest daughter, Shu-Ching, once representatives from the Cultural Services Department selected her at a young age for training as a dancer in an academy in Peking.

Siu-Wah, on the other hand, mentioned that her elder sister had resided for a time at Zhongnanhai and had taken her there twice to meet Chairman Mao.

It did not seem appropriate to quiz guests too closely about family events which they had not voluntarily disclosed. So I had to wait, hoping for supplementary details from Kitty. But my wife proved unhelpful about her elder sister, for she had disappeared from their home long before she had been even born in 1964. However, she did hear proud talk by elders during her infancy of her sister having been selected by Chairman Mao to dance for him.

As for Siu-Wah’s encounters with Chairman Mao, she was not at all sure. She herself had gone to Peking as a child with her mother in 1971. Her elder sister was no longer living at Zhongnanhai then. She had become a member of the People’s Liberation Army and had married Gao in 1970.

She was expecting her first child in 1971 and that was why her mother had gone to help.

The bits of information I had received left me on tenterhooks. They had been like tiny unconnected pieces of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle which told me less than nothing about the big picture, like how the two Chiu girls had interacted with Chairman Mao. That might well constitute part of the hidden history of one of the leading figures of the 20th century I had an interest in. I became increasingly anxious to get Shu-Ching to the colony to learn more.

But the original programme called for a visit by her brother, Chiu Bing-Hsin, first. That proved harder to arrange than I had imagined, because of a number of inter-personal reasons.

In the first place, it appeared that Bing-Hsin harboured a deep-seated inferiority complex. He somehow was on bad terms with his sisters, probably because, being the only son in the family, he expected being deferred to within the family. And yet, while he was stuck in a dead-end job as a low grade civil servant, his sisters seemed to be distinguishing themselves in their chosen endeavours.

Moreover, he had married a woman from a Nanking family, who regarded marrying a Nantong man as sliding down in social status. Therefore she had been agitating for her husband to be transferred to another civil service job in Nanking and not be beholden to his Nantong family. Hence when Kitty invited her brother and his wife to visit Hong Kong, his wife had adamantly refused the invitation.

Thus it was left to Bing-Hsin to decide what to do. But further complications came into play. A date initially suggested by Bing-Hsin conflicted with the timing of a business trip I had to make; so a postponement was necessary.

Then a secondary matter occurred to me. Kitty's brother was a heavy smoker. Since Kitty did not take kindly to smoking and I had recently to give up smoking cigars to accommodate her, I specified to Bing-Hsin — through Kitty — that any smoking during his visit would have to be conducted from the outside balcony of the sitting room or else in Seymore Road or in the adjoining Robinson Road.

The restriction was considered by Kitty's brother to be an unwarranted infringement upon his personal freedom and in the end led to his staying in the city for only a week. It was by no means a successful visit.