

## Taking Up the Pen

After the departures of my parents-in-law and Shu-Ching for their respective homes, I received a whopping surprise. The organisers of the short story competition informed me, privately and confidentially, that “The Card Index” had won the first prize in their competition. I was invited, like all other participants in the competition, to turn up at an appointed hour on an appointed day at the University of Hong Kong for a formal announcement of the results. I was completely flabbergasted. I had expected perhaps a honourable mention at most.

How could a story written 30 years ago and rejected by a succession of august British literary magazines be considered a winning entry in a contemporary Hong Kong short story competition, I asked myself. A number of possibilities drifted through my mind.

The first was that the inhabitants of the city had lived up to their reputation of being in a cultural desert, with hardly anyone else entering the competition. Furthermore, news had leaked out that the folding stuff, which would normally constitute the prize, was not the kind meant for a wallet but a collection of books published by the Hong Kong University Press. Small wonder I ended up winning by default.

But, on the appointed day, a fair number of people — supposedly participants — turned up with an air of expectation to hear the results. If memory serves, I think the winner of the second prize was an Indian lady. She received a smaller pile of books published by the Hong Kong University Press than I did.

So both the outcome and the number of people who turned up would appear to contradict my initial suppositions. It also proved a salve for my ego, suggesting that the judges might have discovered an element of appeal in my half-forgotten story. A further consolation came after the piece had been published in the local newspapers. A number of friends took the trouble of telling me they had read and enjoyed my story.

Unless the comments received amounted to no more than the conventional courtesies in social interchanges, then there would still remain a mystery of why so many British magazines had found my story lacking in appeal. Perhaps the standard of English they had expected had been set at a higher level than I had been able to attain. Possibly, over the years, the progressive corruption of the language by the more frequent usage of slang and Americanisms had altered the equation.

However, there was likewise a more alarming possibility. Could the various sub-editors responsible for culling uninvited submissions at the

magazines have noticed my Chinese name and promptly returned my submission in my pre-stamped envelope without even reading it? It would not have been an unheard of practice, especially during a time of fading empire and unbridled British upper class snobbery.

It would have been intellectually routine to regard an unknown colonial upstart as being incapable of putting together a couple of sentences of the Queen's English without fracturing an idiom or splitting an infinitive or two!

It occurred to me on a sudden that if such an approach by readers had been taken, then it might explain my dismal acceptance record in Britain during 1957-58. I had written more than ten stories but only managed to sell a solitary one.

On further reflection, I realised I had restricted my efforts to subjects I knew something about — like rickshaw pullers, scaffolding workers, *fokis* in Chinese provision shops and some rather institutionalised racism in British society. Those might well have been topics with little appeal to the gentlefolks in the shires who might be subscribing to the magazine.

Such attitudes might well have been encountered by many writers from the Third World at that time. I imagined that the Nigerian writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa, might have experienced something similar to have inspired him to pen *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*.

Ken had been a firm believer in non-violent protests, a man after my own heart in that respect. He campaigned assiduously against the severe environmental damage done to the Orgoni people by the indiscriminate dumping of petroleum waste in the Niger Delta by Royal Dutch Shell and other oil companies. But nonviolence did not protect him from the Nigerian authorities, however. He was soon arrested.

When Ken was arrested, I had demonstrated with others outside the Nigerian High Commission in London for his release. But our efforts were to no avail. The Nigerian government put him on trial on trumped up charges, found him guilty and executed him by hanging in 1995.

It appears that human civilisation has now reverted to a more atavistic age when a price has to be paid by anyone daring to stand by a principle.

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Winning the short story competition gave my dormant creative instincts a decided nudge. But having failed to make a mark some 30 years

ago, I deemed it best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Besides, there had been a lot of other things going on which I was endeavouring to handle better. For example, I had signed up for a ten-year stint with Li & Fung and that period had only reached the half-way mark. I had hoped at least to promote a less exploitative atmosphere in commercial dealings, among both staff and customers alike, but that aim had been rather difficult to bring about within the money-mad *à gogo* environment of Hong Kong.

Since my intervention into the foreign currency market a few years earlier, I had been saddled with wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. How to do some small amount of good with that money was still a matter lodged in the back of my mind.

On top of that, the weakening links with my father, my mother, my siblings and cousins, due to physical separations in different parts of the world, also troubled me. Visiting them took up so much more time than I could really afford.

The physical separation from my sons presented an even more acute problem. I could sense we were becoming estranged. They had been in a hurry to rush off to the West, in search of what they had regarded as “freedom”, while still unanchored to their own culture and unaware they would turn themselves into free-flowing and autonomous atoms in the outside world, without roots and connections.

Most important of all, I had acquired an innocent and grievously under-educated young wife from a newly-established socialist country. How to mould her into a rational, thinking and sophisticated woman, capable of coping independently with a turbulent and erratic neo-liberal capitalist world, where individual desires often trumped the general public good? It was a heavy responsibility I still had to fully articulate and discharge.

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The extended visit by my in-laws had confirmed my earlier impression that they were a very simple, likeable and undemanding couple. During eras when China still had emperors, a palace maiden catching the fancy of an emperor could usually count on some material benefits for her parents. Shu-Ching might have found favour with Chairman Mao but the only benefits that accrued had been to her dancing career rather than to her

parents' wellbeing.

When I had been offered hospitality in the Chiu family home in Nantong on my wedding night, I had discovered to my dismay that their modest house had been bereft of even in-door toilet. I therefore decided that, with my excessive wealth, I should at least ensure that they could spend the autumn of their years in reasonable comfort.

My decision to provide for them was somewhat triggered by a Hong Kong visit by my own mother from Vancouver in March of 1987. She stayed with me for about ten days before moving to Kowloon, where she had promised one of the sons of my Fifth Maternal Aunt she would stay for a few days.

The presence of my mother alerted me to the fact that the wings of time waited for no one. Before any of us knew it, some expression of love or regret we had meant to utter just somehow never found the right moment to escape our lips. Thus the sentiment we had meant to express just remained too late to be expressed at all.

Therefore, shortly after the departure of my mother, I broached with Kitty my intention to provide a new home for her parents. She was absolutely delighted. "Excellent!" she cried. "Give me the money and I'll remit it to them."

"Money is the easiest part in this whole exercise," I said. "To properly realise the project, it should be handled in a way which avoids problems arising in the future."

"What do you mean? What kind of problems?"

"I can easily visualise quite a number. Napoleon had once observed that to foresee was to rule. For a start, it would be far easier to explain to outsiders or anyone with suspicions why you should be buying an apartment in Nantong for your parents, as an act of filial piety, rather than explain why you or I was remitting money to them to buy a property.

"Secondly, given the *hukou* system in effect in China, insinuations are bound to circulate as to how a lowly paid civil servant, responsible for assigning petroleum and other fuel oil quotas in a small city, could afford to purchase a large and new apartment in a well-appointed part of town for his retirement. However, if that apartment were to be purchased by a daughter, newly-married to a Hong Kong businessman, would that not simplify matters to a great extent? Moreover, you would then retain a *bona fide* residential address and a connection with your native town."

"You are implying that I should go back to Nantong to ensure that my

parents selected an appropriate home?”

“Yes, and it would not be too early either for you to start making a list of all the features to be included. You have seen more of what is available in the outside world than they, so be sure that their new abode provides them with all the modern conveniences. Don’t wait for them to ask for things. They are not demanding folks. They would be accepting of whatever might be made available to them. You will have to anticipate their needs and their wishes.”

“How can I know what they might want without asking them?”

I laughed. “My dear wife! You are, like most young people, not paying enough attention to your parents. The young often expect the spotlight to be on themselves all the time. When I visited your home after our marriage, I noticed a few potted plants outside your house. That suggested to me that your father had an interest in flowers and plants. Is that not so?”

“Yes. That has been one of his main hobbies.”

“Well, there you are. Make sure that any place purchased has a big enough front or rear garden, so that your father can potter around to his heart’s content. He will most likely swoon with delight when that possibility is presented to him.

“During your mother’s stay here, she had much interest in the hot and cold running water in our bathrooms and kitchen. So, too, the pull-out larder in our kitchen with its shelves filled with preserved eggs, wind-dried drumsticks of duck, canned goods and Chinese sausages. Be sure that those features, plus other modern conveniences, are incorporated into their new home. If any component is not available in Nantong, you’ll have to arrange for it to be imported.

“Also be sure that the place is spacious enough to install an adjoining bathroom for yourself and an extra room for a live-in maid. Your parents will require one sooner or later.”

“Looks like I’m going to be loaded with a lot of work.”

“That’s the least we can do for your parents. Please assure your parents also that you will meet all utility charges indefinitely. Otherwise they might worry over running costs. They could then relax and spend most of your father’s pension on food for themselves. My approach should also absolve your siblings from possible quarrels in the future.”

“What quarrels? We have no quarrels.”

“Your parents are bound to die one day,” I said. “If the house were

left in your father's name instead of your own, and if he left no will, there may well be a quarrel over how the estate should be disposed of. For example, your brother, being the only son in the family, might claim he ought to get the house outright. How would you and your sisters react to that?"

"I wouldn't care how the house might be disposed of because I would be here with you."

"What if I were to die too? Would you still want to stay in Hong Kong by yourself, without friends and relatives? More so, should we decide to move elsewhere, to be closer to my family and kinfolk?"

Kitty threw up her hands in agitation. "Why are you bringing in the subject of death, so soon after our marriage? It is morbid and unsettling!"

"Thinking ahead sometimes requires taking into account the darker prospects as well as the sunny days. Don't forget you have to shoulder your share of responsibility, for agreeing to marry a man only two years younger than your father."

And so it came about that for the next six months and more Kitty had to make repeated shuttle trips between Hong Kong and Nantong in order to identify, purchase, renovate and up-grade a home for her parents. I retained in the background, only exercising an oversight as a consultant and reminding Kitty now and then of some detail she might have overlooked, such as the provision of enough electric sockets in each room.

I was happy to learn that Kitty's parents were fully satisfied with their new home after they had moved in. However, I never saw the final product for myself, because I had no time or opportunity to visit Nantong again throughout my subsequent years

The total outlay for the entire project amounted to only a small fraction of the cost of setting up a similar establishment in Hong Kong.

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During one of Kitty's absences in Nantong, I came across another announcement of an English short story competition being held in Hong Kong, now under the sponsorship of the *South China Morning Post* and *Radio and Television Hong Kong*. Like the competition held a year earlier, publication of the winning entry was also promised. The prize was to be a brace of plane tickets on one of Cathay Pacific's regional routes.

I was in two minds as to whether I should participate again. Since I

had won the last competition, I was — in the parlance of boxing — still the reigning champion. It would be cowardly and unsportsmanlike for a champion to hide from a challenge out of sheer cold funk.

On the other hand, I had not written a short story for 30 years. I must be rusty, even if I had not completely lost the knack. For 20 of those years, I had been a bureaucrat, churning out an endless stream of verbose minutes or turgid policy proposals. The trick in both processes was to be noncommittal and to protect one's own backside. The use of lukewarm prose and easily alterable recommendations was the order of the day. Occasionally, one might have to conjure up an apt but obscure Latin phrase to decorate one's outpourings. It would be like laying a wreath upon a grand funeral *cortège* for a dead language.

The possibility of disinterring another unpublished story from long ago did cross my mind. But that struck me as a poorly defensible deception, if not actually cheating. If an entry had to be made, I told myself, then I would have to try my hand at a fresh story.

I thought over the matter with trepidation for a day or two. In writing a new story, I might have to go down in ignominious defeat. But it would be worth a try. So I began work using as background setting one of those perennial daily occurrences in Hong Kong — a cocktail party. It would involve a bitter-sweet ending of a love affair between an ambitious young girl and a married wealthy business tycoon. "The Cocktail Party" was chosen as the title. Amazingly, I managed to finish it in a single day and I duly submitted it with crossed fingers.

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To my surprise "The Cocktail Party" came first in that competition as well. After the story had been published in local newspapers and broadcast on Radio Hong Kong, congratulations from my friends came in and some suggested that I should be writing more stories instead of selling garments, shoes and other mass consumer products. Although I was elated with my showing, I was far from convinced that concentrating on writing again would be a sound idea.

Kitty and I made use of the plane tickets to make another trip to Singapore to visit my father and my siblings.

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Fate, however, appeared to move in mysterious ways. The cocktail party I had written about was such a unique Hong Kong institution that I made every effort to attend as few of them as possible. They could be held for a variety of different purposes, from celebrating a lucrative commercial merger to announcing an unexpected engagement by a son or daughter.

There would appear, on the face of it, a melding of different cultural streams. But whether that would operate in the longer term to the benefit or detriment of anyone remained to be seen.

The attendees would, of course, vary accordingly. Parvenues of various types. But overall, they constituted a happy hunting group for seeking some kind of social, commercial or sexual connection.

There would be, consistently, a few well-dressed professional scroungers who habitually wormed their way into such functions. They would go from one cocktail party to another, day after day, in order to load up on free food and drinks. They could get away with their illegal but fairly innocuous activities because security, back in the days before suicide bombers, was by no means tight.

Apart from them, there was a regular stable of local notables who would figure on most invitation lists — comprising captains of commerce and industry, diplomatic representatives, High Court judges, bankers and so forth. But those personages could not always be counted on to turn up. It all depended upon the amount of *face* expected to be given or exchanged between the parties concerned.

There were, however, a number of more steady presences at cocktail parties. The first group would be the social columnists and their associated photographers. Then there would also be a regular contingent of eager social climbers, always hopeful of having their pictures taken and published hobnobbing with some celebrity or other.

Of such diverse elements was the cult of the cocktail party composed.

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In the weeks following the publication of “The Cocktail Party” I happened to be attending one such party. I cannot remember exactly the purpose or the circumstances, but I imagined it must have been the National Day of one of the countries from which my customers sourced a lot of products.



I had made my number with the host, as required by etiquette, and was searching for a convenient backdoor to make an early escape when I bumped into a lean and hungry-looking European nursing a drink in a corner. He had appeared so forlorn that I felt I had at least to put up a pretence of being sociable.

I helped myself to a drink from a passing waiter and introduced myself.

The man replied that he was from the Netherlands and that his name was Jan Krikke. The mention of Holland gave me an opening and I waxed lyrical on how much I had enjoyed studying in his country, delving into the intricacies in public administration at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague.

We engaged in various reminiscences and the usual exchange of pleasantries for a while.

Then Mr Krikke asked: “You don’t happen to be related to that David Wong who has been winning short story competitions, are you?”

“I’m worse than that, I’m afraid. I am actually that very scribbler,” I confessed.

“Congratulations!” he said. “The last story I read was very good and very amusing. Have you written other stories?”

“Yes, a few.”

“May I see them?”

“What for?”

“Well, I am actually working for a publisher. Asia 2000. Have you heard of the company? It is being run by an American named Mike Morrow.”

“Yes, I’ve heard a little about Asia 2000 and about Mike Morrow.”

“Only the good things, I hope. I was thinking that if your other stories are of the same standard as the one I’ve read, then Asia 2000 might be keen on putting out a collection of your stories.”

We eventually exchanged business cards and I agreed to send along a number of stories for his perusal.”

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Hong Kong was a rumour mill and a natural resting place for those who wished to spy on China. The British colonial regime had made no bones about the city being a nest for the dirty business of that cabal of

Anglo-Saxon secret service agencies known as the “Five Eyes”. The five participating countries, then as now, were the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Their aim was to maintain some sort of political and intelligence advantage over the rest of the world, particularly in respect of those they regarded as enemies.

The colonial administration had openly colluded with its partners in crime. It had allowed American agents leeway in interrogating refugees from China within the Immigration Department itself and had set up listening devices at strategic locations to intercept Chinese radio and telegraphic messages.

Of course, I was not without sin myself. When I was appointed by the colonial government to the Post Office in 1980, I did not realise, until too late, that I would be overseeing a system which allowed the surreptitious photographing by Special Branch operatives of private correspondence of citizens whose names appeared on a notorious Q List.

It appeared that the vague excuse of “National Security” covered a multiplicity of sins. And all the while loyal civil servants were expected to repeat the sanctimonious mantra about the “integrity of the Royal Mail.” Thus I could not completely display a clean pair of hands.

I had heard loose talk about Asia 2000 being only a publishing front and about Mike Morrow being in fact a CIA agent. Having known a number of Anglo-Saxon spies in Hong Kong over the years, masquerading as academics, journalists, missionaries, bar tenders or whatever, I was not overly concerned about their spying activities against China.

Just like the much-touted China-watchers in Whitehall, they were mostly an incompetent lot and much over-rated. Unless they managed to turn some better educated Chinese into traitors — as the Soviet KGB had tried to recruit me in London during 1957 — they were unlikely to have the cultural accretions to read the more subtle Chinese nuances. It would be idle to think that good spies could be spawned from acquiring a mere university degree. Such people would probably gather only misinformation.

There was probably some justification to the rumours about Mike Morrow being a CIA operative, however, because he was subsequently arrested in Vietnam and accused of being a spy. After some diplomatic kerfuffle over his arrest, he was eventually released and allowed to return to Hong Kong.

When I met him he appeared a pleasant enough type and he was quite knowledgeable about the publishing business. He told me he was thinking of starting a business in China, selling textbooks for those desiring to learn the English language. Whether that would constitute just another cover for other activities or whether he wanted to get me involved, I could not say.

My immediate interest in him and in Asia 2000 was focused only on whether they could usefully provide me with a platform for launching my short stories.

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In due course, I rummaged through the bottom drawer of my desk and put together a *pot-pourri* of stories to send to Mr. Krikke. There was no unifying theme running through them, nor had they been set in the same place. Their backgrounds roamed from Hong Kong to China, from Europe to Southeast Asia.

Mr. Krikke came back with a positive response and asked me to write a couple more to bulk the volume up to sixteen stories.

When I had done that, I took Kitty on a trip to America, together with copies of all the stories. I wanted to show her Stanford and to meet an old friend, Dr. Wilfred Stone. Will was a Professor of English and a prize-winning biographer of E.M. Forster. I wanted to show him my stories and ask him to write an introduction to the book which would be the first one bearing my name.

When I first met Will, he was a teaching assistant at Stanford while I was aiming at my first degree there. In his youth, Will had been a fighter pilot and later on he had been quite active in mobilising opposition to the Vietnam War. We had been in contact ever since. It so happened that when I spent 1957-58 in London, trying to write, Will was also in the United Kingdom, undertaking a teaching assignment for a year.

Will readily agreed to my request and wrote the following excessively flattering introduction:

He wrote: "A craving for something better, sometimes intellectual, sometimes aesthetic, inhabits most of these stories and become virtually their moral imperative. . . . Always there is a crisis of sensibility that heads to what Sean O'Faolain called a point of illumination or to the verge of one.

“We may claim a sentence from *The Legacy of Liu Pui* as a key. ‘He did not want his children to grow up like so many modern Chinese, with the ways of the West half-learned and those of China half-remembered. He wanted them to have the best of both worlds.’ David Wong also wants the best of both worlds, but is too honest a writer to fake the evidence and make this ideal come true in ‘happily ever after’ closures. That ideal is fraught with difficulty and irony, and these stories end — even those with O.-Henry-type endings — heavy with a sense of unfinished business.”

Unfortunately, Will passed away at Stanford in 2014, at the ripe old age of 97. He had been such an active person that many friends thought he would easily make it to 100!

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The book came out in a hard cover edition in early 1990 under the title *Lost River and Other Stories*. My friends had been immensely supportive, buying many more copies of the book than each needed, in order to pass on to friends and relatives. Even my regular *mah-jong* partner, Uncle Lau, who could not read a word of English, bought half a dozen copies to give to his children and friends.

The net result of such generosity was that the book became a best seller and the hard cover edition was quickly sold out. A paperback edition was soon issued by Asia 2000 in response.

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I did not allow the initial robust sales figures to go to my head. I knew they had been manufactured to a large extent by the kindness of friends. But nonetheless it was a nice feeling, especially when local magazines started approaching me to enquire whether I would like to write a story for them.

However, I was quite hesitant over making another stab at a literary career so late in life. But events quite outside my own control were brewing in both my personal and my professional life. Willy-nilly, they forced me onto a path I was disinclined to follow of my own accord.

I will detail those events in a subsequent chapter of these memoirs.