

Old Friends Re-united

It had been in the middle of a rather quiet and boring morning in the autumn of 1987, shortly after I had finished checking the over-night exchange of telexes between my staff and overseas customers, that my secretary entered my room to inform me that an elderly Chinese gentleman was in the reception area, asking to see me.

“Who is he?” I asked. “What’s his name and what does he want?”

“According to the receptionist, he has been rather evasive and wouldn’t say,” my secretary replied.

“Very odd! Hope he’s not an insurance salesman chancing a cold call. I’m not in the mood for that sort of thing today. Please see if you or the receptionist can get something more sensible out of him.”

“Very well.”

On her return, my secretary said: “He seems to be responding in riddles. He claims he simply wants to find out how his best man has been doing. Can’t make out what he’s getting at.”

Upon hearing that, I jumped out of my chair and rushed out to the reception area. I had served as a “best man” only once in my life and that experience had been deeply etched in my memory. That had been back in 1948, when I was 19 years old. The occasion had been the wedding between Chan Hon-Kit, a journalistic friend and mentor, and his then fiancée, Frances, a school teacher.

Shortly afterwards, they had left for China seeking — in their own words — “to do some good”. That had been a lifetime ago and all attempts subsequently to re-establish contact had drawn blanks. There had been rumours for a time that Hon-Kit had continued his journalistic career with the *Southern Daily* in Canton, but I myself soon went to California after that, to study at Stanford. By the time I returned years later, he had moved on and his tracks had been lost.

It would have been entirely in keeping with Hon-Kit’s character, if he were to re-surface, to do so in such a dramatic and unorthodox way.

And surely enough, Hon-Kit was standing with a mischievous smile on his lips in the reception area. He looked little different from how he had appeared decades earlier. The same grave, elevated brow and a head of hair that had remained surprisingly black for a man in his sixties, without the slightest hint of grey. There was also something vaguely familiar about the navy blue worsted suit he had on, before I noticed the creases which had to come from it having been folded up and left languishing for a prolonged period at the bottom of a camphor wood or other chest.

We fell into each other's arms and hugged tightly. A whiff of camphor tickled my nostrils.

"Where have you been hiding all these years, for heaven's sake?" I cried. "None of your friends had a clue. Heard you were with the *Southern Daily* for a while. Then I heard you had moved on, with no forwarding address."

"China's a big country, you know, and I had to go where my work took me," Hon-Kit replied, smiling broadly again.

"Where's Frances? Is she back too?"

"Yes, though obviously not here with me today."

"You've hardly changed, you elusive rascal. More tanned perhaps, but that's all."

"But you clearly have! You're no longer that teenage scarecrow that Frances and I said goodbye to at the border train station decades ago. You've prospered and lost that hungry look. Lavished with all kinds of laurels too, I read, at least according to the rags that pass for newspapers nowadays. You've been described as a business tycoon, a racehorse owner and a winner in short story competitions. You even appear younger than you ought to be. Is that what riches and success do to a man?"

I chuckled. "Appearances are deceptive, just a simple trick learnt from *Dorian Gray*. I've learned a great deal from you, too, like the need to be an honest journalist, even if you have to do three jobs on the sly in order to make ends meet."

"There's still an enormous need for honest journalists today. Access to reliable information is more vital than ever."

"I couldn't agree more. By the way, do you and Frances have children?"

"Yes, they're all in China, making their own headway in a brave new world. How about you? Presumably you're married and have children too?"

"Three sons in North America, shaping their money-focused careers in a somewhat less brave old world. But we don't keep in touch much. Pity.

"The family used to be the basic unit in Chinese society, not the individual. But modern pressures of life and ease of travel are undermining that. My boys have succumbed to an alien and almost anti-Confucian school of thought in respect of father and son relationships. They feel that since they never had a say in being brought into the world, it is the duty of

fathers to give them whatever education and trinkets they want.”

“How un-Chinese!”

“Not completely their fault, I guess. Their mother and I broke up a long time ago and the Hong Kong government kept sending me abroad on duty. So they didn’t get enough of the family-type of upbringing they should have had. But I’ve drawn the line after university, however. After that, they’re on their own.”

“Sad on all scores.”

“My marriage had been a mistake from the very start. But wait, I think I’ve salvaged something at long last. Let me get you into my office first, for a cup of tea; then I’ll spill the beans.”

Reuniting with Hon-Kit so suddenly seemed to have knocked me off-balance, emotionally and psychologically. An irresistible urge welled up in me, to quickly fill in all the missing years between us.

It dawned on me that I had imagined Hon-Kit burning through all his ups and downs like some “hard and jewel-like flame” whereas my own life had been dogged by missteps and missed opportunities. Perhaps, subconsciously, I was really seeking some form of absolution from my former mentor.

In that state of fuzzy awareness, I ushered Hon-Kit into my office and settled him into the most comfortable of my sofas. In passing through the reception area, I also asked my secretary to arrange for tea.

“Very satisfactory,” Hon-Kit said, as he surveyed his surroundings. “You appear very comfortably placed.”

“You should know everything here represents just froth and bubbles,” I said. “Just the appurtenances of being a capitalist; all quite meaningless. You should know, better than most. After all, you introduced me to Proudhon. ‘Property is theft.’ Remember? Capitalism is based on the profit motive. And to maximise profits, you have to exploit people at their weakest, people one should not exploit at all. Yet there it is, in the real world. We go to places where labour is cheapest and where the benefits are greatest for our customers, even though I personally dislike making a living that way.”

“And how **do** you want to make a living?”

“I’m not sure. That’s my problem. Perhaps I’d rather have done some good, like you and Frances.”

“I’m not sure we’ve actually done any.”

“Don’t say that! I’ve been envying you all these years, wishing I had

gone to China with you, living through all those tumultuous changes in our country. I've a million questions to ask.”

Hon-Kit sighed. “I'm not sure I've found very much in the way of answers.”

“But you must have! You've lived through everything — the campaigns against the three and five antis, the establishment of the communes, the Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and right now the opening up of the country under socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

My mind was now racing far ahead of my speech. No doubt my old friend must have joined the Communist Party for the sake of his ideals. But how had he coped with all the intellectual twists and turns necessitated by the Chinese linkage with their Soviet comrades? He was from an older school than the official who performed the marriage ceremony for Kitty and myself, and older than He Wei, the budding diplomat. How had he adjusted and compromised?

Meanwhile, Hon-Kit was shaking his head and sighing again. “You must know by now what can sometimes happen when a person is young. You think you've uncovered some shining truth and you believe with all your heart in every fibre of it. You couldn't sign up quickly enough to the whole shebang, like a priest committing himself to the vows of some holy order. Then you wake up one morning and start to wonder if God actually existed. That doubt comes as a complete shock and what you had been committed to for years suddenly begins to fall to pieces.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you now regret having gone to China when you and Frances did?”

“No, not in the least. Both Frances and I discovered ourselves a little.”

“Then why did you deter me from going with you when you did? Otherwise I might also have discovered something about myself.”

“You were too young and not yet ready.”

“Countless millions of our countrymen were also not yet ready for the changes they had to face. They coped somehow and made their contributions.”

“They had no choice. They had to accept their destinies with their families. You had a choice.”

“But I kept choosing the wrong path, can't you see? After I had finished university, I met quite a few Chinese graduates heading back to

China on the American President Lines ship coming back to Hong Kong. But again I held back, fearful of whether I would be up to the challenges. That had left me feeling I had missed out on something important, something that I still owed to my nation and to myself, solidarity with my fellow countrymen also.”

“I’m sure there must have been many opportunities since then for you to contribute to your country, through expanding its export trade or making investments there.”

“That’s not quite the same. It’s like missing that critical moment when a thing had to be done. Missing it taints a person forever and it can’t be undone. It’s like being born out of original sin or dodging the draft at the outbreak of war. You might try to convince yourself with a thousand excuses, that you’ve always been a pacifist or a conscientious objector or whatever. But deep inside your heart you know you had been in a blue funk of actual combat, of getting killed or maimed. Time might pass but you can never get to alter that fateful moment.”

“That’s all in your head, my dear friend. Hasn’t it been said that there’s nothing really good or bad but thinking makes it so?”

“That is easy for you to say because you and Frances made the right decision. I failed to make the right one.”

“Frances and I might have made **one** right decision. That does not mean we made all the subsequent decisions correctly also. By not making a decision when you did, you had been spared the dilemmas of facing all the ones that subsequently followed.”

“You’re always such a philosopher, employing sophistries to make me feel better. I’m immensely glad, nonetheless, that we’ve finally linked up again after so many years.”

“I’m mighty glad too.”

A tea lady brought in cups of tea to interrupt the conversation.

I invited Hon-Kit to partake and we lingered over a few leisurely sips.

Then he continued: “You know, when I employ sophistries it might be just to make myself feel better rather than for your sake. As I’ve said, so much is inside our heads. Time passes and perspectives change. As our Paramount Ruler has said: ‘What does it matter if a cat is black or white so long as it can catch mice?’ Changes come and a lot of things get overturned or re-evaluated.”

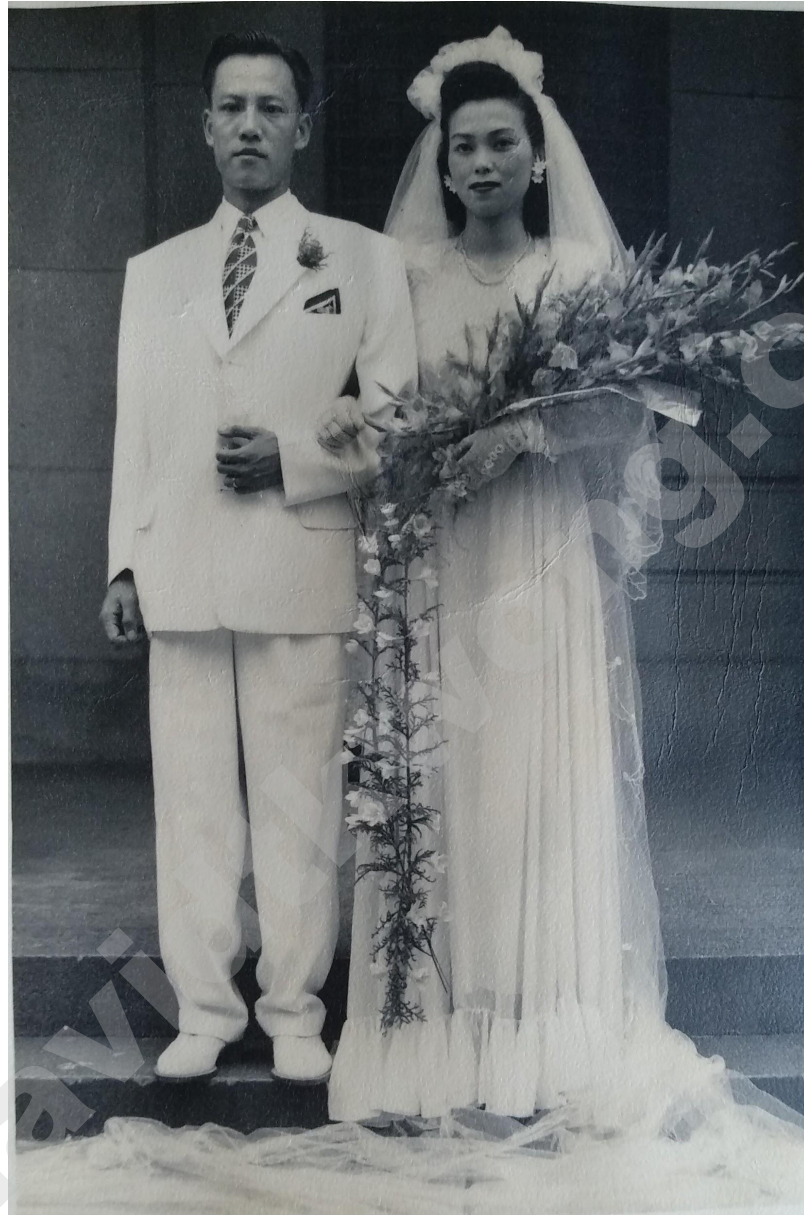
I detected for the first time an undertone of sorrow creeping into his voice and I did not know how to respond. A thought struck me that my old friend might have had to endure spells of the kind of “thought reform through labour” common for Party members straying from the prevailing Party line. Because of the suddenness of that thought, I said the first banal thing that came to mind. “Yes, things here have changed a hell of a lot here, too, since 1949.”

“Yes, I know,” Hon-Kit said. “We’ve seen some of them. A cross-harbour tunnel and a very efficient mass transit system. Is your Eighth Granduncle’s bungalow on Tsing Yee Island — The Abode of Butterflies — still standing?”

“Sadly, no. Those were simple and happy days back then, were they not? You used to bring your nieces, Irene and Florence, along sometimes. Are they still living in this town or have they migrated?”

“No, they’re still here. But you’re unlikely to recognise them if you came across them in the street. They were only schoolgirls when they visited The Abode of Butterflies.”

“I was only a wide-eyed teenager myself then. I probably wouldn’t have recognised my former self if I came across him today. How time has flown!”



The marriage in 1949 of Hon-Kit and Frances

“What’s standing at the site of the old bungalow now?”

“A couple of blocks of factory buildings, I think. The government has linked up the island with the mainland through reclamations.”

Hon-Kit nodded and said nothing further. I was also left with nothing else to say. A silence fell abruptly over the memories of our youth, like the sudden clanging shut of prison gates. Those golden and carefree weekends from long ago could never be revisited by any of us any more.

“Are you and Frances back here for good?”

“So long as we can survive on our modest Chinese state pensions, I

guess.”

“Have you never considered staying in China, to be close to your children or grandchildren?”

“Yes, but Hong Kong has always been home for us. When we Chinese reach a certain age, we always long to return to our roots.”

“Oh, don’t sound so morbid! You’re in absolutely fine fettle,” I said. “I assume Frances is too. I’m dying to see her again. How about lunching together this weekend? I’ve got a surprise for both of you. I got married again a short while back, to a Nantong girl who’s way too young for me, younger than my two eldest children, in fact!”

“Good heavens! Don’t tell me you’ve turned into a cradle-snatcher!”

“Not exactly. It’s a long and complicated story. She’s delightfully cheerful and out-going. My friends call her Kitty. I think you’ll both take to her. She used to be a leading light in her local Communist Youth League.”

“Oh! So it has been one of those unions of both heart and intellect, has it?” That earlier undertone of sorrow lifted from his voice.

“Not quite sure yet. Too soon to say,” I said. “Kitty only got her one-way visa at the end of 1984. She’s been trying to adjust to the wicked ways of Hong Kong ever since. And not always successfully. It has been an enormous cultural shock for her. Let’s have lunch this weekend, so you can meet her. Where are you guys staying? On the island or in Kowloon?”

“Kowloon.”

“All right. Do you prefer Saturday or Sunday?”

“Both are suitable for us. But don’t you often go horse-racing on Saturdays?”

“You’re right. Let’s make it Sunday.” I named a popular restaurant in Tsim Sha Tsui and said I would book a table for noon on Sunday. “See you both then,” I said.

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Seeing Frances again after almost four decades came as a complete shock. Time had been much more cruel to her than it had been to Hon-Kit. She had grown wizened and shrunken. The freshness and beauty that had attended her had vanished; even her voice sounded aged and cracked. I could not help speculating over what physical and psychological trials she must have had to endure since we last said goodbye. Women did not

appear to take to aging as well as men. It seemed so unfair.



Frances in 1948 at the Abode of Butterflies.

Introducing Kitty to her merely heightened the devastating passage of time. Although all the generational courtesies between Kitty and my old friends had been observed, the differences in their ages were difficult to ignore. So that initial get-together was by no means an unqualified success.

Nonetheless, a further meal was arranged for three weeks later, whereby other friends who had participated in those outings at the Abode of Butterflies also attended to celebrate the return of Hon-Kit and Frances.

Unfortunately, the number was small, because several of the

old crowd had migrated and the rest had gone to their final resting places.

Among the attendees at the subsequent meal was Auyang Ming, that long-confirmed bachelor who had been my roommate for a spell during our youth. He had long ago taken me to a Kowloon whorehouse to lose my virginity.

Auyang Ming also sprang a surprise on most of us. He brought along a newly-acquired wife, who turned out to be a middle-aged lady of a pleasant disposition. I had previously met her briefly at a *mah-jong* party. At that time she had been someone else's wife. Apparently her former husband passed away prematurely and Auyang Ming was conveniently available to fill the breach.

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After that second meal, Kitty and I continued to meet with Hon-Kit and Frances irregularly, on odd weekends. But it soon became painfully clear that not every one had the same motive for attending those get-togethers.

My motives had been more obvious. I had wanted to gain first-hand accounts of the revolutionary convulsions which had taken place in China from friends like Hon-Kit and Frances. I had always been far away from the field of action and I did not trust either the narratives given by the Chinese state media or the Western press. Hence my desire to get more rounded pictures from more reliable sources.

For example, I had read a piece by a Western correspondent about the Great Famine. The man claimed he had witnessed corpses lying by a roadside being chewed by a pack of stray dogs. I had no doubt that the reporter might have seen corpses by a roadside but the description of their being eaten by stray dogs had to be faked, manufactured or sensationalised to dress up the story. During famines, the natural instinct of any Chinese community would be to hunt down every stray dog in the neighbourhood for food, long before any would be left to feed on themselves. I wanted more details of the impact of that disastrous famine in the provinces or localities where Hon-Kit had been.

The long separation between myself and Hon-Kit and Frances certainly made all of us fonder of each other's company. For myself, their presence brought back the frank and uninhibited cut and thrust of ideas and youthful fancies. That spark had already been ignited by the unexpected

visit by Hon-Kit to my office.

But the subsequent meetings suggested that both Hon-Kit and Frances harboured a certain reluctance in talking about personal experiences, for they tended to respond to specific questions with only generalities. When I asked them how they thought Deng's policy of opening up the country to the outside world would affect ordinary Chinese life, for instance, they said it was too early to tell.

It occurred to me suddenly that in asking for their personal experiences I was effectively pushing them to justify their lives. How could anyone do that, especially in open company? If I had been asked to do likewise, I would also be stuck.

Kitty, for all intents and purposes, would be "open company" to them. She was from a different generation. Furthermore, she had no interest in either ancient or contemporary Chinese history. Like most young people her age, she regarded occurrences before her birth as matters of little interest or moment. She attended our meetings only because she was my wife and I was keen on them.

With those considerations in mind, I suggested to Hon-Kit that we should perhaps end our weekend family meetings and instead meet bilaterally on an *ad hoc* basis for a cup of tea, whenever convenient. Hon-Kit heartily agreed.

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It soon came out in private conversation that Hon-Kit had taken on a ghost-writing job to augment his pension, penning anodyne or uplifting speeches for a local business tycoon to deliver at his Rotary Club or other similar meetings. Frances, meanwhile, was busy peddling life insurance policies for AIA, on a strictly commission basis.

My heart wrung with sadness on learning of their financial circumstances. What a way to end up in old age and retirement! It was like starting off all over again as had happened in our youth, doing several jobs so that we could make ends meet for that one job that appealed to us.

I felt desperate to do something for them. But how and in what way? To offer them money would seem cruel and heartless, almost cold-bloodedly insulting. It would take no cognisance of the long decades they had both struggled and sacrificed for their ideals; it would be like delivering a cruel rebuke. I simply could not do it. The knowledge of their

financial situation, something which I could easily resolve, would have to remain on my conscience as my own form of punishment.

Kitty, of course, could not work out why I should sometimes slip into a melancholy mood after tea with Hon-Kit. She was, unhappily, still too tender in years to read my inner sentiments and my deeper sorrows. She would first have to make mistakes of her own before she could glimpse and be touched by the fountainhead of life's enduring misfortunes.

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Once the one-on-one sessions began between myself and Hon-Kit, the old former warmth of frankness and comradeship returned between us. At an early opportunity, I reverted to the subject of the Great Famine. I asked my old mentor how many people actually perished during those years.

"I don't really know. I wasn't responsible for counting the bodies, you know," Hon-Kit replied. "It all depended on how the statistics had been gathered and disseminated."

"You mean the mainland also know how to lie convincingly with statistics, like the best of economic gurus and confidence tricksters?"

"I'm afraid so. For example, some quarters just took the normal number of births in the period before the famine and subtracted the number of births during the period of the famine to arrive at a number of babies lost through not being born because mothers had been too weakened by lack of food to give birth or to carry their babies for the full pregnancy term. That number would then be added to the reported deaths to make another number. So numbers bandied around are all quite unreliable.

"But another consideration is also important. China's population was about 540 million in 1949, when the Communists took over, and it grew to around 969 million in 1969, well after the Great Famine had ended. Can you imagine what that number would have been and the implications for the country if there had not been those usual Malthusian interventions?"

"It was not till 1979, I think, that the one-child policy was implemented?"

"Precisely," Hon-Kit replied. "So the debate goes on, as to whether a growing population is a good or a bad thing. I don't really know. Is it a good thing to have a shrinking population, like Japan's?"

“I’m glad I’m not responsible for making that kind of decision,” I said.

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On the next occasion that Hon-Kit and I met for tea, our conversation settled around the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, launched by Chairman Mao in May of 1966. The revolution lasted for approximately ten years, until Mao died in September of 1976. Afterwards, in the common parlance used inside China, that period was often referred to as “the lost decade”.

How could Mao have launched such a destructive movement? I supposed since the Communist came to power in 1949 there had been a steady cult of the personality built around Mao. In the eyes of the Chinese nation and many members of the ruling elite, he had been elevated to the status of a demi-god whose commands had to be obeyed.

But why did Mao initiate such a movement? So far as I could make out, he had written a poem in 1963 which gave an indication of his thinking. He wrote:

*“So many deeds cry out to be done
And always urgently;
The world rolls on,
Time passes.
Ten thousand years are too long.
Seize the day, seize the hour!
The Four Seas are rising, clouds and waters raging.
The Five Continents are rocking, wind and thunder roaring.
Our force is irresistible!
Away with all pests!”*

According to my limited knowledge, Mao left no other comprehensive statement of his private thoughts. But further inferences could be drawn from the self-criticism statement that Party elders had forced him to write in 1962, after the failure of his Great Leap Forward policy and from the various public justifications and purposes subsequently given for the mass campaign.

My guess was that Mao thought he had lost power and prestige or — if you prefer — *face*, because of the criticisms voiced by old comrades over the Great Leap Forward. Mao had revealed some of his difficulties with them in conversations with Jiang Ching, his wife. Being a proud man, he had wanted to recover both. He therefore calculated that by rooting out what he conceived to be the remaining capitalist, traditionalists and bourgeois elements in society, he might retrieve his influence. He also might have genuinely felt that the revolutionary spirit was flagging within the Communist Party itself and that those reactionary elements were making a comeback. So he resurrected a slogan he had coined in his youth that “To rebel is justified.”

Chinese officialdom since ancient times had always been afraid of what they had termed “*luan*” or chaos and social disorder. But now it seemed that the chaos and social disorder were being initiated by Chairman Mao himself.

During the early stages, “big character” posters appeared everywhere and revolutionary committees and Red Guard units were formed. Violent clashes duly erupted in virtually every city across the country. Local and provincial government offices and factories were taken over by various revolutionary mobs. Rival groupings all sought opportunities to further their own ambitions and to establish their own power bases. They often fought and killed over who should be in control of each captured entity.

There were some half-baked calls to re-establish a Paris Commune-type of government, like that of 1792 after the storming of the Bastille. Tanks and machine guns stolen from military bases were used by proliferating factions, sometimes numbering thousands, as they fought pitched battles in the streets for control of newspapers, radio stations and other organs of power

Anarchists and Red Guards captured the Foreign Office, published China’s secret diplomatic reports and sacked the British Embassy. Foreigners were attacked in the streets. Xenophobia spread like a pox. Poorly educated youngsters often took on the fanaticism and passion of members of religious cults.

Schools and universities were closed, enabling those still wet behind the ears to run amok. They began putting dunce’s caps on former teachers and professors and lectured them on revolutionary commitments. Previous leaders of government offices and other organs of authority were openly criticised, humiliated and assaulted. Some were killed and many others

were driven to suicide. Numerous cultural and religious relics were severely damaged or destroyed, as were also some military defensive installations.

By October of 1966, Mao himself had to admit in a Central Committee meeting that he had been surprised by the vehemence shown. But he claimed that others were exploiting the disorder to feather their own nests, even waving the red flag only to pursue a reactionary path.

Among the high-level victims of the chaos were Liu Shao-Chi, the President of the People's Republic, Marshal Peng De-Huai, the second-ranking marshal and hero of the revolutionary wars, and Deng Xiao-Ping, the future Paramount Ruler of China. Towards the end, even the much loved and highly-respected Premier, Chou En-Lai, came under attack, possibly because he had always been a moderating voice urging Mao to rein in the more radical activities.

By 1969, even Mao hinted that the Cultural Revolution might have gone too far. A major city and port like Shanghai had already ceased to function by 1967 and factionalism was rife in a number of other cities. Mao increasingly had to rely upon Marshal Lin Biao and the People's Liberation Army to maintain a semblance of control. But he had opened a Pandora's box and there was no shutting the lid again. Developments had acquired a crazy momentum of their own.

One notable side event which happened during that dark period in Chinese history — when the officer corps of the People's Liberation Army was itself also divided in loyalties — was the picking by Mao of Marshal Lin Biao as his successor. Lin had been responsible for putting together that “Little Red Book” of Mao's quotations which soon became so ubiquitously waved and quoted throughout the land. Lin was also responsible for subsequently purging 80,000 rightist-inclined officers from the People's Liberation Army.

But Lin had not been a particularly ambitious or astute politician. He admitted that he had no talent and whatever he knew he had learnt from Mao. He therefore tried not to be designated as Mao's successor but Mao scolded him and told him not to behave like one of the Ming emperors, who had spent more time seeking medicines for longevity than attending to matters of state.

So Lin did the next best thing, by adhering as closely as possible to whatever Mao wished, though he was himself not too supportive of the Cultural Revolution itself. Nonetheless he went along with Mao's ideas

and became notorious within the Party for his own “three nos” policy — no responsibility, no suggestions and no crime.

Lin soon sensed, however, that he might be quite vulnerable within the Party after Mao’s death, given the devious nature of Party politics. So he began building his own base within the 21-member Politburo. His own wife, Ye Qun, had been a member. As his efforts mustered support, it caused Mao to suspect him of plotting a coup.

Learning of Mao’s suspicions and fearing for the consequences, Lin turned even more reclusive than he normally was. In 1972, he and his entire family finally attempted to flee by plane. His son, Lin Li-Guo, was a high ranking officer in the Air Force.

Where Lin had intended to head for was by no means clear. Some said he was seeking asylum in the Soviet Union while others said he was attempting to team up with General Chiang Kai-Shek in Taiwan.

In any case, the plane came down over Mongolia, due either to an accident or to an inadequate supply of fuel. Of course, it was inevitable that a number of conspiracy theories would circulate about the crash. But whatever the theory, the entire Lin family perished with Lin. He was aged 63 and was subsequently condemned by the Communist Party as a traitor.

Mao died in September of 1976 at the age of 82 and the Cultural Revolution petered towards an end. In its aftermath, it proved convenient to blame Lin and Mao’s wife, Jiang Ching, for the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution. The number of people who have been killed or harmed during that decade would always be the subject of partisan debate. But it was significant that the Communist Party itself had to admit rehabilitating three million people who had been “unjustly, falsely or erroneously” dealt with during the Cultural Revolution.

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When Hon-Kit and I discussed the Cultural Revolution over cups of tea, I observed: “Looking from the outside, I’m amazed that such a collective madness can overtake a country like ours. We are supposed to be ruled by a carefully selected Communist Party, a club harder to get into than any of those snooty ones located along Pall Mall. My own father-in-law applied to join twice and was rejected twice.”

“The Communist Party is a broad church,” Hon-Kit replied. “It contains a great many factions. Although it practises democratic

centralism, it is not always easy to predict who would control the majority.”

“But can such madness erupt again?”

“Certainly! Why not? Collective madnnesses can overtake any party or country. Ours has been particularly vulnerable, because many of its people have been poorly educated. When the country was liberated in 1949, most people were illiterate. Moreover, they had always since ancient times been a naive and superstitious lot. Credulous too. Otherwise they would not have believed that the younger brother of Jesus had led them in the Taiping Rebellion or that performing a few martial arts rituals could make them invulnerable to bullets during the Boxer Rebellion.”

I shook my head in despair. “We learn far too slowly,” I said.

“Let me tell you a story of the Cultural Revolution which did not gain much traction in the press outside of China,” Hon-Kit continued. “Foreign commentators had been too gleefully writing about the perceived disintegration of a Communist country to remember that such troubles could just as easily erupt in their own countries, if given the right circumstances.

“My story concerns a man in his mid-30s by the name of Chen Li-Ming. He had been something of a revolutionary hero in the town of Hsiang-Tan at one time. But he subsequently lost his mind, and for the last 16 years or so he had been confined within a lunatic asylum in Peking.

“During the Cultural Revolution, a revolutionary group formed by students at Tsinghua University broke into the asylum, in the mistaken belief that one of its members had been detained there. Instead of finding their fellow student, the group found Chen, who excitedly told them he was actually a Red Guard who had been locked up for criticising Liu Shao-Chi. A sort of mob mentality took over and the students began hailing Chen as a revolutionary hero, ignoring all protestations by the asylum staff that Chen had been in fact a long-term inmate.

“Led by Chen, the students went on a rampage throughout Peking and even followed him to other parts of the country to listen to him making speeches. They took Chen’s ravings against Liu Shao-Chi as comparable to Lu Hsun’s revolutionary work, *The Diary of a Madman*. They even tried to stage shows based on Chen’s writing,” Hon-Kit lamented.

“What happened to Chen eventually?” I interjected, in disbelief over how far such absurdities could go.

“In 1968, the Central Committee decided that enough was enough. It ordered Chen arrested and put back inside the asylum. For all I know, he

might still be there now.

“So you see how credulous even university students could be and why our young must be earnestly educated to think for themselves, to really learn the appropriate lessons from history. Proper education provides a kind of skein which could gather together and constrain all the selfishness, paranoia, greed, ambition, lechery, frustrations, propensity for violence and all those other undesirable emotional or intellectual habits we tend to hide and nurture inside ourselves. The better the education, the more sturdy the integument. Should such demons ever break out from confinement, then farsighted leaders must slay them swiftly and without mercy, lest they spread and infect others.”

“I’m beginning to see now what you are driving at,” I said. “The Germans were at one time better educated, on average, than the average Chinese. Yet they were still captivated by the ravings of a man with an unbecoming toothbrush moustache and, subsequently — as a nation — did a great deal of damage to the rest of the world. The Italians followed a man, who promised them he could make the trains run on time, with a similar result. History seems to be repeating its lessons with greater and greater frequency.

“Chairman Mao once declared that the mind of a child was like a piece of blank paper. People could write anything they wished on it. I suppose he has proved his point through the Cultural Revolution. Unfortunately, once upon a time, we have all had our own credulous moments. When I was a child, for example, my maternal grandfather told me about a certain Jewish man who was able to walk on water. I believed him and quickly tried to follow suit, at the deep end of a swimming pool. I almost drowned.”

Hon-Kit laughed. “You at least latched on to the scientific approach quite early in life. Not everybody did. If this is an occasion for confessions, then I guess I have to make one also.

“When I was young, I read a lot of Tao Yuan-Ming. He was a marvellous poet. When he declared, one and a half thousand years ago, that life was too short to compromise with principles, I believed him and thereby resolved that I, too, would not compromise with my principles. But I soon found I could not adhere to my own resolution.”

“That was because you have always been too much of a human being,” I replied, with an honest degree of consolation. “The trouble I find with most philosophers and thinkers is that they all seem to visualise

human beings as idealised abstractions. It might be fine for Marx to declare: ‘From each according to his ability; to each according to his need.’

“But it does not work out that way in practice because those with ability also have their own different needs. Again, we cannot all live like noble savages because man is at bottom a social animal. He needs to live not in isolation but among his own kind and to do that a willingness to compromise is necessary.”

“It’s always so reassuring for my ego and my self-esteem when I have a chat with you,” Hon-Kit said. “You always provide me with such plausible alibis for every failing.”

* * *

On the next occasion I had tea with Hon-Kit, he turned the tables on me.

“You once asked me how Deng Xiao-Ping’s policy of ‘opening up’ the country would affect China. You’ve been familiar with Western ways and have been largely outside of our country all these decades. What do you think? Would it turn our country into as rich and glitzy a place as Hong Kong?”

“Heaven forbid!” I cried. “The wealth and the glitz here, as you must surmise — even from the brief period you and Frances have been back — are only a facade, to disguise the real poverty of the soul and the dire rootlessness among ordinary people. If you remember your Balzac, you will recall him describing post-Napoleonic Paris as a city deprived of love, except for the love of money. That is what Hong Kong is dangerously becoming too.

“But it would be foolish to even pretend to answer your question without first establishing how ‘opening up’ is defined and the extent to which the government intends to lift the lid. Does it want, for example, a full-throttled Thatcher-Reagan type of free market, with public services privatised, banking deregulated, trade union power cut back and inequality made rampant through a regime where the devil takes the hindmost? Does it want hot money sloshing through our country, like in Hong Kong, looking for predatory pickings and then disappearing with the spoils, or alternatively, legal and accounting firms popping up all over the place selling shell companies in Liechtenstein or the Dutch Antilles for dropping corporate veils over dubious activities?”

“Certainly not!” Hon-Kit replied. “I doubt if the average cadre knows a fraction of what is really happening in Hong Kong or in the wider world. He is likely to be just thinking of incentives to spur productivity and speedy domestic capital formation to invest in national development.”

“That is why leaders must tread warily. It is no good announcing grand policies and saying that it was not a crime to get rich, if there are not enough competent cadres on the ground to sensibly and efficiently implement those policies. This is where most countries fall down. It might sound pretty nifty to have modern stock, commodity or foreign exchange markets but unless they are properly regulated they will become just handy tools for insider trading and a range of other malpractices. Even the richest man in Hong Kong has had his wrist slapped for insider trading.”

“I see the obstacles and what you mean. But our people have to start learning and making mistakes at some point. Might as well be as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the educational system in China has given too much priority to producing scientists and engineers, to students thinking within certain prescribed parameters, rather than to poets, administrators and generalists, those capable of truly exploring fresh horizons.”

“You mean poets like Chairman Mao?”

“No, not exactly like Chairman Mao. But now that you’ve mentioned the subject, why don’t you write an essay setting out the deficiencies and pitfalls likely to arise in opening up our country to the outside world?”

“I’m not an expert in the subject; I don’t know the ins and outs of all the complicated tricks. I can barely list the numerous corporations in Japan, Britain and America in oil, banking, tobacco, pharmaceutical, car-making and other major industries which have been lying, cheating and stealing from consumers for years.”

“All the more reason for exposing them. It would be a real contribution towards educating our people.”

“I’m through with tilting at windmills. Let the youngsters do it.”

“That doesn’t sound like the young journalist I used to know, the one who said he wanted to be like Zola and take up a pen to defend innocent victims like Alfred Dreyfus.”

“I haven’t got the talents of Zola.”

“You can never know until you have tried, can you?”

“Oh, stop flattering me. I have a much more pressing and personal duty to perform — to prepare my young and innocent wife for life in an increasing cockeyed world.”

And so it came to pass that I ended up once again in poor humour after having tea with Hon-Kit. How was I to anticipate that a silly and boastful remark I had made during my teens would come back to test the validity of my assertion 40 years later!

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