

## Gathering Storms

The first dismal augury of things to come happened on the night of December 5, 1986. The Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Edward Youde, died in his sleep at the British Embassy in Peking. He was 62.

The city he governed was deeply shocked by the news. His body was brought back for a state funeral by his wife, Lady Pamela, herself a Sinologist.

Sir Edward had been in China as part of a high-powered delegation, working out with Chinese officials the technical details of reverting Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. This had followed the formal signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration by Premier Zhao Zi-Yang, on behalf of China, and Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, on behalf of Britain in December of 1984. It had been a statement that Sir Edward must have had a hand in drafting.

One could not help speculating whether the possibility of his actually dying on the job had ever been considered by Sir Edward himself, before he accepted his appointment as the governor of Hong Kong in May of 1982. Problems with his heart had already been known then, as had the extremely delicate state of Anglo-Chinese relations under a strong-willed Margaret Thatcher. She had just won the Falklands war and was not without some illusions that Britannia could still rule the waves — at least after a fashion. Moreover, her legions of advisors were all badgering her with a chorus of discordant voices.

There were, for example, the legalistic beagles who were focused too much on the meaning of the word “perpetuity” contained in the treaties signed by China ceding Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula to Britain. And then there were the myth-makers who truly believed that it was in some way the brilliance of British colonial administrations which had rendered the colony enormously wealthy under a vague *laissez-faire* policy. Surely, to those so inclined, such factors must be worth at least another 50 years of continued British management of the city, albeit theoretically and legally already agreed to be returned to Chinese sovereignty?

There was also the combative instincts of Mrs. Thatcher herself to take into account. When the Chinese side told her in September of 1982 that China would brook no delay over the negotiations and that if it came to a choice between sovereignty and prosperity, China would always choose sovereignty, she had responded by asking her minions whether Hong Kong could be defended.

It was high time that Western leaders like Mrs. Thatcher accepted that the power equations had been shifting radically over the years and that the China of today was quite a different kettle of fish from the China during the Opium Wars. Moreover, the old model for development through colonisation and exploitation of human and natural resources was no longer one which the people of many nations would be willing to tolerate.

Of course, the Chinese side also had its own hang-ups. For several generations, the nation had felt aggrieved over “unequal treaties” with foreign powers and had suffered acute psychological humiliation as a result. The people had therefore preoccupied themselves with their national loss of “face”, so much so that no leader could have retained power without promising to rectify an awkward situation left over from history. Their attitude had steadily hardened to become the same as the one which gave rise to the Western knightly motto of “Death before dishonour”.

In any case, the opening gambit by the British regarding managing the city for another 50 years got short shrift from the Chinese. However, being a pragmatic people, the Chinese side recognised that the kind of economic and social experimenting that it would be disrupting might well not go down agreeably with many of the five million bourgeois-pampered citizens of Hong Kong.

The Chinese were also conscious that memories of the spill-over of the Cultural Revolution into Hong Kong in 1967 might have raised some local apprehensions. So they agreed to a transitional period of 50 years whereby the corruption-infused capitalist system hitherto practised in the city would remain largely unchanged. Ballroom dancing and horse-racing would continue under Chinese rule, they asserted lightheartedly.

Sir Edward, being a Sinologist and fluent in the languages of both sides and more than alert to their respective concerns, must have been aware of the tricky political and cultural cross-currents he would have to navigate to arrive at a fair and equitable settlement over some old and inglorious episodes in international history. But would either side permit him to steer towards accommodation or merely seek to scupper him? He was likely to have viewed his own inclusion in the British team as both a matter of duty and of conscience.

He had, since his student days at the School of Oriental and African Studies, steeped himself in the language and culture of the Chinese civilisation. He must have quickly become attuned to their many endearing charms, quirks, subtleties and eccentricities.

In fact, he had demonstrated his skills early in life. He had happened to have been on board the frigate HMS Amethyst on the Yangtze River when the ship was caught in the cross-fire of the Chinese civil war. His ship had been severely damaged by artillery but he managed to negotiate with a People's Liberation Army commander somehow and freed the vessel. The episode could have left him with an early impression that civilised people could achieve results as readily through talking rather than through violence. For that accomplishment, he was awarded an MBE.

For a foreigner to communicate successfully with the Chinese in their own language could not have been an easy matter, for Chinese was sometimes described as the language of the heart, whereby deep feelings and meanings could be conveyed with simple words or silences. It has remained today a language without grammar, tenses, regular and irregular verbs, masculine or feminine pronouns and so forth.

Sir Edward must have mastered many of its subtleties and nuances prior to joining the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He had also undertaken several diplomatic assignments in China, the last one being as the British ambassadorship between 1974 to 1978.

When Sir Edward took up office as Hong Kong's governor in 1982, I had already retired from the Hong Kong civil service the previous year. I therefore, much to my personal regret, never had the opportunity to work under him. However, every ex-colleague I could trust and who had worked for him had spoken of him in respectful and glowing terms. He had been variously described as sincere, hard-working, sober and thoughtful, cool and unflappable, well-liked and admired, and always honestly striving to gain practical benefits for the ordinary people of Hong Kong.

Sir Edward was, I think, the only Welshman to attain the governorship of Hong Kong and it was a great pity for its citizens that his term in office should be so abruptly cut short. The number of people who turned up to mourn his demise was ample testimony of the gratitude and affection he had garnered during his brief tenure.

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Earlier in 1986, my friend Wang Kuan-Cheng, erstwhile President of the Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, also passed away, at the age of 79.

He, together with a few of my other friends at the General Chamber, had been such indefatigable supporters of my pursuit of Kitty that they had pulled all kinds of political strings with powerful personages in China to ensure that I could overcome the various obstacles standing in the way of my marrying a Chinese citizen and a leading member of the Nantong Communist Youth League I had fallen in love with.

Wang joined another bosom friend, Ip Yeuk-Lam, to actually accompany me to Shenzhen to meet Gao Lin-Mao — who happened to have been there making a film— and to persuade him and his wife, Kitty's eldest sister, as members of the Chinese Communist Party, to withdraw their letters of objection against the marriage between myself and Kitty. I would always remember in particular Wang with great affection and gratitude because he had staked his own standing and reputation on my behalf.

It was a pity that circumstances were such that he never got to meet Kitty, the object of his efforts, after her arrival in Hong Kong towards the end of 1984.

In 1985, the year before he passed away, Wang had used his considerable fortune, amassed through the development of his quarry and properties in North Point, to establish an education trust to send Chinese students abroad to study the sciences and technology.

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At the start of 1987, I suffered from another of those severe pancreatic attacks which had been a regular feature of my life since the first attack took place during a *mah-jong* game with civil service colleagues in 1981. I nearly died on that occasion, because my ailment had been initially misdiagnosed as a simple case of food poisoning, before my condition worsened and I was transferred to intensive care.

Since that time, I had undergone a series of ultrasound examinations, endoscopies and other tests, both at government and private hospitals, but no cause had ever been discovered to explain my condition. Hence, periodically, roughly once or twice a year at least, and sometimes more often, I would be hospitalised for a few days after every attack.

The attack in 1987 came in the evening, after Kitty and I had just finished dinner. We were watching television in the sitting room when I suddenly felt the normal early symptom — a gathering of pressure and then

pain in the middle of my chest.

I jumped out of my seat to change into street clothes, calling simultaneously to Kitty: “Please pack a suit of pyjamas, a change of underwear and daily essentials like toothpaste and toothbrush. I have to go to hospital.”

Kitty was totally unmoved by the sense of urgency in my voice. Although she was aware that I suffered from pancreatic problems, she had never actually seen me suddenness of an attack. The last time I had one she was in Nantong overseeing renovations to the home for her parents.

Therefore she replied without haste: “We have just finished dinner. Why do you want to go to a hospital?”

“Stop asking questions and do what I asked!” I snapped. “In less than five minutes I will collapse with pain and you won’t have the strength to carry me downstairs and put me in a taxi.”

Events turned out more or less as I had predicted. Kitty just managed to help me into a taxi before I utterly collapsed with pain.

At the Yeung Wo Hospital in Happy Valley, I told the admissions nurse to telephone Dr Joseph Fung, the Li & Fung medical service provider and Fung family elder, who would inform her of the type of medication I ought to be given. It was an altogether steep learning experience for Kitty to realise how quickly I could be reduced to complete helplessness.

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A couple of months after my pancreatic attack, I went out after work with Kwok-Hong and Rosetta for a meal. It was an occasional habit we had fallen into after they realised I was not out to find fault with their work at Li & Fung (Trading), as an excuse for dismissing them. Indeed, they began to see me as a kind of protector, who would assess the performance of their division fairly and objectively rather than blindly following the instructions of H.C.. A feeling of mutual trust and understanding therefore grew steadily between us.

So far as I was concerned, they were a straightforward and reliable couple, not exceptionally brilliant or gifted, but without guile and trying to do their best at work. It would in any case be difficult for me to judge Kwok-Hong’s performance since he worked most of the time directly to his uncle regarding all aspects of the fireworks trade. If H.C. really wanted to shunt him out of the company, then he would have to make the case for a

dismissal himself and not count on me wielding the knife.

During the course of the meal, Kwok-Hong asked me what I thought of the idea of privatising Li & Fung. He had inherited a block of Li & Fung shares from his father and was under the impression I was privy to the privatising idea. But I was not. It was the first I had ever heard of such a move and I told him so.

Kwok-Hong then explained there had been a meeting of Fung family members and the idea had been discussed. Although the company was a publicly listed company, the overwhelming bulk of the shares were held by members of the family. The shares were therefore seldom traded on the exchange and their price had languished for a number of years, as had its annual dividends. It was suggested that by buying back at a premium those shares held outside the family, the company might be privatised, reorganised and re-launched as a newly listed company.

When I heard what Kwok-Hong had to say, I was not keen to learn any more, for it might make me vulnerable as a possessor of insider information. A slew of troubling thoughts jostled through my mind, almost simultaneously.

I was confident that the initiative for privatising the company had not come from H.C. or any of the Fung family elders. It had to come from someone who had been through the American business school mill. Whoever had talked the elders into the advantages of such a ploy might have other moves up his sleeve.

Shades of Michael Milken, Ivan Boesky and the other Wall Street Masters of the Universe loomed before my mind's eye. They were forever filled with clever ruses and slick tricks. Leveraged buyouts, asset stripping, greenmail, misuse of the company's assets and other forms of financial manipulations had to feature somewhere further down the line if anyone was to pocket anything substantial at the end of the enterprise.

Who knew what else might be in the wind? Some smart American executives were already issuing corporate bonds with a hundred-year maturity, in the certain knowledge that the executives authorising their issue would not be around when they matured. After all, corporations were supposed to have an infinite life! What a wonderful opportunity for financial experimentation and skulduggery! I wanted no association with whatever might be coming.

I was only the head of one of Li & Fung's many subsidiaries, albeit the largest and most profitable one. But I had no access to the accounts of

the parent company which were kept in a separate building on the other side of the harbour by the Group Financial Controller.

All I knew was that the trading arm of the company had been growing steadily and profitably since I took over. I had been too busily engaged in my own responsibilities to familiarise myself with activities not of my direct concern. For example, I was aware that the group was trying to establish a series of retail outlets which required considerable outlays but which had not yet become functional. Financing that venture and other projects was somebody else's responsibility, not mine.

In responding to Kwok-Hong's query, I had to admit I had no meaningful answer because I had no idea what might eventually be cooked up by the privatisation project. I suggested that he should really seek an independent legal or accounting consultant's advice, as to how selling his shares to a privatising venture might affect present share holders and who would ultimately benefit most from the change and who would end up owning or controlling the reconstituted company.

Naturally, after dinner, I began contemplating my own ambivalent position in the light of the snippets of information gained from Kwok-Hong. I had signed up to work in a publicly listed corporation under the leadership of a friend of many decades. If that public corporation were somehow to be transformed into a private company at a time when that old friendship was fraying at the edges, over philosophical business differences, then it might well be time for me to move on. The fact that I had not been brought into the privatisation scheme at all — just as I had not been consulted over speculating on the Hong Kong dollar foreign exchange rate — spoke for itself about the growing lack of trust and respect among top executives.

The original agreement had been for me to work for Li & Fung for ten years, with an option on both sides to disengage after five. Well, I had completed six years. So at least that part of the agreement had been met and was operational.

Another minor aspect in my relationship with Li & Fung also niggled me. Before joining the company, I had owned no stocks and shares. Most of the time, as a civil servant, I had been too poor to do so. Indeed, I had to rely on the generosity of the father of my first wife to subsidise me and my family through allowing us to live at his home at Wise Mansion. It was only many years later, after I had risen sufficiently within the ranks of the bureaucracy, that I could afford to make a few investments. But Li & Fung

shares had not been sufficiently attractive a choice for me to invest in.

After joining the company, however, I thought it would be a fitting symbolic gesture to my staff if I were to buy at least one small lot of Li & Fung shares to nail my commitment to the mast.

But based on what Kwok-Hong had told me, I was now in possession of a kind of insider information. Once the word got around in a rumour-mongering city, the only thing clever city-slickers would do would be to buy up available Li & Fung shares at their current depressed market prices and to wait for news of privatisation to collect an easy premium.

It was not a move I was remotely interested in, since I had already gained more wealth than I could possibly use through my venture into the foreign exchange market during the general panic over the Sino-British negotiations.

However, I still possessed my solitary lot of Li & Fung shares and, if I kept it till privatisation was announced, then who knew what fantasies might be circulated about my benefiting handsomely from insider information? To guard against lending the slightest substance to that possibility, I sold my single lot of shares the following day.

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There used to be a strand of economic argument linked to the so-called Chicago school of economics which postulated that — among other things — corporations were entities designed to maximise profits and hence could not be expected to let anything as nebulous as morality interfere with their objective. It had been a line of argument which did not appeal to me at all, regardless of how many Nobel Prizes its advocates might accumulate with their sophistries.

To my way of thinking, corporations were not automated pieces of machinery; they had to be operated by human beings with human strengths and weaknesses, including moral perspectives. They had to acquire different forms of morality from their elders at home or while attending schools, churches, religious ceremonies, youth gatherings, or participating in sports, joining clubs, professional bodies or other social groupings. Even if they had been suckled by a she-wolf, as described in legends about Romulus and Remus, they would have acquired some sense of right and wrong.



Part of the reason why fallacies and outlandish theories have gained currency, I surmised, was because few of the economists formulating them have ever actually dirtied their hands in the nastiness of free market operations. If they had done so, they would have experienced a few aspects of the interpersonal emotions and recurring uncertainties which often came into play.

For example, in former times in China, it used to be quite common for peasants to take their produce and/or some home-cooked food to a nearby village or township to sell, simply by setting up roadside stalls. To bargain with passers-by over the price of a *cattie* of cabbages or cucumbers or a home-cooked pork or red bean buns would be a quotidian activity, something which lent a little colour to their otherwise humdrum lives. If a prospective customer happened to be a flighty housewife or a hard-pressed widow, the price might well be adjusted to suit the interpersonal mood of the moment.

But such free and easy ways inevitably came under pressure with the wheels of progress. Local authorities in search of system and order, as well as fresh means of boosting income, soon issued licences for stalls, while local gangsters also got into the act by demanding “protection” money. Combines and companies were not slow to note the demands for certain commodities and brought to bear the economies of scale. Competition developed and with it mass production and the development of complicated supply and distribution chains, each with its many layers of intermediating players and profit-seeking entities.

Transactions gradually became more impersonal and abstract, with more and more of the human and moral elements in commerce being reduced. Intermediaries multiplied, each seeking his own advantage or slice of profits. To look upon one’s cup of morning coffee, one would hardly imagine the number of hands those humble coffee beans must have gone through to get into that cup — the growers, the harvesters, traders, processors, roasters, packers, exporters, manufacturers, retailers and others *ad nauseam*.

In the end, anyone who wanted to trade in bales of cotton or sacks of Robusta coffee or any other product could do so by pressing a few buttons or communicating with a stranger at one of the various commodity exchanges. No one needed to know how a product had been produced, or by whom, or exactly where in the world, and under what processes and circumstances. Indeed, the details in the “culture” part in the word

“agriculture” would remain known to only a small number of the actual participants in the process.

Everything would be handled behind corporate veils, at a distance, sanitised, impersonal, anything written down would be cloaked in ambiguous legal lingo and without any social, environmental or moral commitments. They would be done by anonymous characters assigned with only numbers and dressed in bespoke suits and displaying clean fingernails. The commodities they traded in would also be classified in numbered lots.

If logs have somehow been illegally cut down and gathered from virgin forests or if fishing quotas have been violated, criminal responsibilities would be defused among umpteen corporations registered in a dozen jurisdictions around the world. Proving any controlling intelligence over the whole shebang before a court of law, and beyond a reasonable degree of doubt, would be well-nigh impossible. Welcome to the globalised world!

Clever economists could make almost any theory— like many conspiracy theories — sound plausible by buttressing it with fancy but misconstrued statistics! They had probably never read Chuang Tzu’s warning made thousands of years ago against complicating and confusing our existence so as to render us forgetful of who we really were and become obsessed with what we were really not.

No doubt plenty of city slickers and commercial go-getters would welcome such a complicated arm’s length world. So would international bankers issuing sub-prime mortgages or fixing LIBOR rates, insurance companies writing dodgy policies, car manufacturers rigging pollution recorders, tobacco companies faking researches into the risks of smoking, drug makers obscuring side-effects in their medicines, accounting firms cooking their books and so on.

In such an environment each could give unhindered rein to his or her appetite for profits or bonuses. No justification needed to be formulated for whatever might be done in good faith or bad; and all awkward questions from whatever source could be deftly sidestepped.

Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* could be there to provide a hackneyed quote or two to justify most profit-seeking activities. However, Smith’s other words, uttered in his earlier and probably more important book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, could be conveniently ignored. Smith had advised on the need to restrain human selfishness and exercise

benevolent affection, because basic rules of prudence and justice were needed for any society to survive.

And what about the end-user, the ultimate consumer? What would, for example, a mother wishing to buy a bar of chocolate or an Easter egg for her child think if she were fully conscious that the modest prices for her purchases were rendered possible partly because a million other children in the Ivory Coast and Ghana were working as virtual slaves to harvest cocoa beans every day? Would she still have no qualm over her intended purchases for her child? And what about changing the system, by asking the purchasers of cocoa beans to negotiate a realistic price for each sack of beans with the children who had actually harvested them, instead of leaving them with only whatever remained after everybody else had taken their customary cuts?

It was inevitable in business, as in other spheres of human endeavour, that there should be grey areas and contradictions left without clear-cut answers. How to work them out would always have to depend on an individual's moral make-up and acquired values.

For example, take my own reactions to the marketing of "Black Cat" firecrackers which had been taking place decades before I ever appeared on the scene. Li & Fung had invested massively in touting the brand as the best that money could buy and that its products gave more bang for the buck.

Such brand identification, promoted over decades, was just a form of brain-washing to induce consumers to believe that the product was indeed something which it was not. Some quarters might even call it a form of cheating. The efforts had in any case been so successful that Black Cat products could command a premium of 10% over other brands.

But upon discovering that Black Cat products were being mass produced by a single huge factory in China which also supplied identical products to half a dozen other brands, what should I ethically do? The products were being produced there like cans of beans. The factory had no interest whether customers wished them to be labelled as "Nourishing Beans" or "Tasty Beans" or "White Cat Beans" — so long as they were bought and paid for. Nor would it care about how purchasers handled pricing, advertising the product for its intended market or anything else.

In the circumstances, should I be morally bound to inform customers that the Black Cat products were not superior to other brands, as had been consistently represented for decades, but were in reality no different from

other less promoted brands? Or should I reduce the premium charged, contrary to the interests of my own employer? Or should I merely resign from my position?

Such conundrums and moral decisions pervade every commercial relationship — whether openly recognised or not — because all parties had been locked into an exploitative capitalistic system. Each would be seeking an advantage or a greater share of profits from the other. Someone had to give up something and it would nearly always be the weakest party. This would apply equally to corporation as well as to individuals, whether operating as manufacturers or customers, importers or exporters, wholesalers, retailers, shippers, advertisers, sales staff or ultimately as end consumers.

Every now and then some terrible tragedy would occur in some far-off country. A large number of workers would perish in some avoidable fire or in the collapse of some unsafe factory building manufacturing goods with designer labels. There might be some temporary uproar, many crocodile tears and every Tom, Dick and Harry would lament the tragedy and vow it would never be allowed to happen again.

But the sad truth was that it would be bound to happen again and again till everyone involved in that supply chain recognised that, wittingly or unwittingly, he or she had been culpable or complicit to some degree in bringing about that tragedy through some collective whim or wish to have something or to act in a particular way. Only by wholesale change in behaviour or culture could systemic change occur.

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As an illustration of another aspect of the problem, let me recount my personal experience when I first went to America in 1949 to study at Stanford University. I had bought a single pair of Levi denim jeans, which was all I could then afford.

I wore that pair of denim jeans every day for the next four years, winter or summer, like a second skin. I washed it in the student hostel laundromat once in a long while, when it got too dirty from mowing lawns or undertaking other forms of manual labour to earn extra money. I had never been ashamed for wearing that same pair of jeans every day because I knew that in some parts of China people were so poor that all the adults in a family had to share a single pair of good trousers to wear on special

occasions.

Now, as the managing director of a multi-national trading corporation, I supervised staff who could source millions of pairs of jeans from half a dozen locations for export to America. Sales depended on what customers wanted regardless of their dubious tastes, the wastefulness of materials or the environmental friendliness or otherwise in the production process. The jeans could be coloured in denim blue or stone-washed, with tapered legs or flared bottoms, with hipster cuts or frayed edges, with simulated threadbareness or patches to suggest wear and tear. It all depended on the vagaries of fashion and styles which would sell better or faster from one season to the next.

Since I joined Li & Fung in 1981 to run the trading arm, the turn-over had multiplied manyfold, not only in garments but also in other mass consumption products — shoes, toys, handbags, wigs, fireworks, handicraft and Christmas decorations.

If I were to postulate those few selected facts alone, I could no doubt cultivate an impression of my leadership successes. But the truth was much more complicated. The rapid rise in trading volume was a company-wide effort, attributable to multiple individuals — to merchandisers in locating reliable suppliers for the desired goods, to quality control inspectors for detecting early production flaws, to department heads for negotiating mutually acceptable deals between suppliers and purchasers, to shipping clerks for ensuring that good would reach their destinations on time and, above all, to purchasers for knowing their domestic markets and for designing and ordering products which would sell like hotcakes to consumers. Indeed, they were really the ones shaping fashion tastes and manufacturing wants and desires among general consumers.

If all those poor souls within the trading arm, from Kwok-Hong and Rosetta downwards, had not been so desperate about making a steady living and so conscious of their tenuous month-to-month terms, they might have realised with a modicum of reflection that each had a vital role in the entire trading enterprise. Without every single one of them, acting according to some pre-arranged plan, the whole corporate edifice would come tumbling down. If they would act in concert, they could demand better terms or else bring the corporation to a standstill.

It was the job of people like myself, with a nagging weight of conscience, to keep them busy and industrious and leave them without too much time to reflect upon their fraught situations. They were paid at more

or less market rates, with scarcely enough fringe benefits. Sometimes when I walked around the offices after working hours, I could see many staff members still hanging around.

At first I was fearful they might be overworked or exchanging views on their existential conditions. Later I discovered that my fears were misplaced. They were hanging around merely because during the hot summer months their offices still provided air conditioning which they could not afford at home! A sorry commentary on their wages and their existential conditions indeed.

Yet there were millions like them in China, hard-working and uncomplaining souls, believing they were living, doing dull and monotonous work until death, to honour their ancestors and to survive and provide for their families. They had been the underdogs since time immemorial. Yet they have nonetheless built the Great Wall with their blood and sinews, the Burma Road with their bare hands against all engineering advice, matched the most advanced military machines in the world in Korea and fought them to a standstill.

I have seen them in their Hong Kong hovels, scraping livings out of rocky hillsides, without water, electricity or other amenities. What could they not have made of themselves and of their nation, if given decent equipment and inspiring leadership!

I had been much relieved to know that my staff members had not been engaging in mutual exchanges of views, for down that road would loom the prospects of unionisation, collective bargaining and the securing of a fairer share of what they had been truly contributing to the enterprise. In short, Marx and socialism and understanding about surplus value would all raise their ugly heads and I would be forced to choose a side.

People like myself existed not because we were inherently bad or mean or exploitative. We had our personal failings and circumstances to contend with. Mine had been a hasty and ill-judged marriage and the bringing of children into the world when I should have found the courage to simply walk away. But I failed to do so, largely because conscience could often make cowards of us all!

So I found myself slipping into an ever-tightening trap. Because I had to earn the means of providing for the physical needs of my family, I could not find sufficient time to provide for their emotional and intellectual needs. When my wife eventually walked out, I could not find a suitable woman to help me discharge my moral and ethical responsibilities towards

my children. And in the end, when my children demanded the fashionable thing of their generation, of being sent to North America for their university education, I sold myself into intellectual serfdom — much against my better judgement and instincts — in order to meet their demands. It turned out to be a monstrous price to pay, not only for myself but for my children too.

Mass markets and national culture also came into play in trading. I remembered Kitty telling me that when she was a child and when cloth rationing was enforced in China, she had always been taught at school to be frugal. A little ditty had been sung by children. It urged them that garments should be worn for three years as “new” and three years as “old” before wearing them for another three years as “sewed and repaired” items.

It would appear that in a non-capitalistic society account had to be taken of the national circumstances in addition to the likes or dislikes of individual consumers. It remained, however, a huge question mark to be clarified as to whether the opening of the country to outside influences would gradually alter or water down the emphasis to children about the need for frugality.

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While I was grappling with moral conundrums at the office. I was also encountering some similar problems at home. The main one was the excruciating slow progress being made by Kitty in coming to terms with the English language. Once she had been granted an exit visa by the Chinese authorities and given the right to take up residence in Hong Kong, I had arranged private lessons for her to learn English from scratch, for five mornings every week.

The tutor I had selected was a former English teacher and the wife of a senior Administrative Officer. I would pay the tutor several thousands of dollars per month to pick up Kitty from Seymour Road, give her lessons and a decent lunch before returning her home. The purpose of the whole exercise was quickly to get her English up to the level for admission to a local university.

Unhappily, that outcome proved rather more difficult than expected. The blame could not be pinned on any single person but on a host of different circumstances which interrupted her studies. For instance, once she had acquired travel documents in 1986, her studies were interrupted

because I had to take her to Singapore to meet my father and siblings there. Then I had to take her to Canada to meet my mother and more of my siblings there. On top of that, she had to spend a large part of that year scurrying between Hong Kong and Nantong in order to identify and upgrade a comfortable retirement home for her own parents.

Kitty, unlike myself, had never taken to foreign tongues with any enthusiasm. English was to her just another incomprehensible series of sounds, like the croaking of frogs in the garden or the meowing of cats in the back alley.

When I was a child and introduced to English by Miss Fox at St. Andrew's School, I had taken immediately to the cadences and rhythms of the language. After all, both my father and my grandfather knew the language and our home in Singapore was filled with English books. I accepted my initiation as not just learning another language but as a step towards becoming a grown-up within my family.

I was concerned about Kitty's slow progress with English on another score. Her reluctance to practise with the Linqophone set I had given her was troubling. It was not that I was expecting right away for the words of Shakespeare or John Donne to drip majestically from her lips. But she should, in the time she had spent, at least have acquired enough command of the language to write intelligibly about cats and dogs and other ordinary things. But she had no such capacity. Her standard was inadequate to get her into a local university, let alone into one overseas.

Moreover, her deficiencies in the linguistic department were not compensated by a sure command of a more traditional Chinese education. She was, after all, a child of the revolution. No *Three Characters Classic* was ever used to cut her teeth on. Nor much of Confucian or Taoist readings or indeed the entire classical range of Chinese literature.

Her Chinese and geography of China might be all right but otherwise her favourite quotations might well be those from Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*. I had noticed in addition that her choice of recreational reading in Hong Kong had veered towards the Cantonese versions of Mills & Boon romances. No doubt they would be more easily digestible and less taxing than anything by Chuang Tzu.

Or perhaps I had not really fathomed or understood her dreams, the dreams of the mass of the under-informed of her world. Could I have unwittingly and arrogantly just superimposed my own dreams upon her?



My worry following that reflection was that I was fast approaching the age of sixty and that any of those irregular and as yet unidentifiable type of pancreatitis attacks like the first occasion could prove fatal. I was, after all, only of mortal clay.

I had had several subsequent sudden attacks elsewhere, like my collapse at the Taipei airport. If an attack were to occur in a less developed country with primitive medical facilities and if I were unable to communicate adequately in a local language, then I did not fancy my chances.

In that eventuality, I would be failing once again to fulfil a promise I had made to Kitty, of getting her into a university and preparing her for the vicissitudes of life on her own two feet. That troubling prospect haunted me.

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So, one day, I alluded gently to the slow progress she seemed to be making with English and I urged her to apply greater efforts if she really wanted to get to university.

“What do you expect?” Kitty retorted. “All your friends and everyone else around talk to me in Cantonese and I have to concentrate to understand what they are saying. Even strangers only talk to me in Cantonese. Nobody wants to talk in English.”

“I’m really sorry,” I said, regretfully. “You’re absolutely right. An English environment would suit much better for you to master English.”

“Do you know how boring it can be for me to keep listening to a machine all the time? Even you don’t want to speak to me in English. Your first instinct when speaking to me is to find out how to put a common Cantonese phrase or idea into authentic Mandarin. It’s all very well for you to want to improve your Mandarin. But what about me?”

“I **am** really sorry. I thought Hong Kong would make your transition to life outside China easier. I overlooked there are disadvantages here as well.”

“I’m sorry too. This place makes me feel so useless. I couldn’t even explain to the nurse at the hospital what your problem was.”

“Never mind. Severe pancreatitis is not a Cantonese term that crops up very much in polite conversation. Let’s forget about that and go to London. We can find a place we both like and move there.”

“Is London as strange and as unnatural a place as Hong Kong?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when you have your regular twice-weekly *mah-jong* games with your friends, I usually meet up with my *kai-ma* or adoptive mother, so that she could show me how to shop for basic necessities at the most suitable places. She always told me not to reveal my liking for any particular item, like for a dress or a pair of shoes or an item of jewellery. She said I should always show coolness or indifference, not my real feelings no matter what, because as we pretend to leave the shop, the proprietor might well come up and offer a bigger discount in order to nail down a sale.”

I laughed. “Your *kai-ma*, Suze, might well be right for Hong Kong. Everyone is trying to make the best deal for himself or herself here. She’s an experienced and veteran shopper. But it won’t be like that in London. Prices are fixed there and on display, with no bargaining. It’s different from here, unless you go to a district like Notting Hill.”

“Notting Hill? You want us to live there?”

“Oh, no. I just intend to show you what different districts in London can be like.”

“So the British also bargain there?”

“Yes, sometimes.”

“Do you also bargain during work here, to get the best deal?”

“I’m different. I’m not out to maximise profits for myself. I’m a kind of middleman. I try to accentuate the positive for all sides, so that my company can earn a commission if a deal is made.”

“But you had told me previously you would be considered in China as ‘a skimmer in the middle’. Is that kind of non-productive activity not found objectionable here?”

“No, not in Hong Kong. We operate a capitalist system here and I’m not exactly non-productive. I offer a service, putting together buyers and sellers, to benefit everyone.”

Kitty looked puzzled for a moment. “You mean you’re like a marriage match-maker?” she said.

“More like a pimp,” I almost answered with tongue-in-cheek. But in the end I answered with a simple “Yes.”

“So when are we moving to London?”

“Well, we have to find a suitable home first. London’s a pretty big place, you know, and finding the right kind of home is bound to take a bit

of time, perhaps even several visits might be necessary to find the right one. Then I'll have to give my employers a reasonable period of notice before leaving. But leave all that planning and other arrangements to me."

\* \* \*

I saw no reason to lumber Kitty with a lot of unnecessary facts and opinions. London was largely unknown to her, whereas I was familiar with the city from many previous visits and prolonged stays. Indeed, I knew where the snooty residential districts were located and also where the relatively safe and agreeable neighbourhoods were, though those two conditions did not necessarily coincide. I was, of course, more concerned with comfort, safety and convenience than with the snob appeal of an appropriate address. I also knew roughly how well or poorly the public transport system served the various targeted locations.

Furthermore, two important conditions — which most migrants would normally have uppermost on their minds — did not enter into my calculations at all, to wit, the economic implications of migrating and the likelihood or otherwise of the recipient country accepting one's residency there. I had more than enough financial resources to purchase whatever property Kitty and I might decide upon and, given my resources and the number of foreigner spivs with money already granted residential status in London, I did not anticipate any difficulty.

There was a common Chinese saying to the effect that, given enough money, a man could even persuade the devil to do his bidding. Or as the 17th century English poet, Aphra Behn, had put it: "Money speaks sense in a language all nations understand." Given the new Babylonian age spawned by neoliberal economics, I had no reason to doubt the validity of such observations. In my experience, money remained the best passport anyone could possess.

Whatever home we might eventually decide upon, I had a number of *sine qua nons*. First of all, the location of the home had to provide quick and easy Underground access to Soho, the location of a wide collection of Chinese restaurants. Decent Chinese meals were a necessity I could not be deprived of for very long, especially since I found Kitty's cooking not entirely reliable.

Secondly, because of my random pancreatic attacks, there had to be a good teaching hospital within a reasonable walking distance from the

home. I could not rely on Kitty's English being sufficient to explain on the telephone why she would need an ambulance.

Thirdly, the proposed dwelling should also have easy access to the twin railway stations of Euston and St. Pancras for visits to the soon to be completed new British Library facilities there. I had been using the old library for years, when its famous round reading room was still part of the British Museum at Bloomsbury. I recalled the delightful hours I had spent there, acquainting myself with the finer points of Mongolian cuisine during the time of Kublai Khan and the history of Chinese erotic art during the Ming Dynasty.

No doubt I would have many occasions to make use of the library again because since the winning of the two short story prizes in Hong Kong and the publication of *Lost River and Other Stories*, I had felt a growing urge to write short stories again.

Maybe I was finally approaching an age when Anaïs Nin had spoken of people seeking to write because they wanted to live life twice — once in the moment and the other in retrospect.

As to the kind of home I wanted, I also had very definite ideas. I needed more space than the original bachelor's apartment I had bought at Seymour Road. The room there I had used as my study did not have enough room for my books, let alone provide suitable accommodation for visiting guests.

At the same time I had had enough of living in an anonymous multi-storeyed development with hardly any interaction among neighbours, even when sharing the same lift with them. I therefore preferred a more cosy converted town house with at least about 2,000 square feet of space, made up of three good-sized bedrooms and two bathrooms. Friendly but quiet neighbours would be a definite plus.

Realising that people tended to be less active and more sedentary with age, I took some precautions. I decided to aim for a second floor apartment in a building without a lift. That would force me to exercise by running up and down the stairs several times each day, to collect the morning newspaper, to pick up the morning and afternoon mail, to buy groceries at the neighbourhood supermarkets and stores, to put out the rubbish in the evening, and so on.

All those foregoing considerations, however, would be far too exhausting to explain to an unsophisticated girl from China. So I decided to keep them to myself.

After a couple of days of sifting and considering my prejudices and preferences, I narrowed a suitable home in London down to about ten locations. It was after I had made a list of my own requirements that I asked Kitty what her requirements might be.

She replied at once that we should have much more space than the 1,200 square feet we had at Seymour Road. Furthermore, she requested that her future English school and a good gymnasium be situated within walking distance from any new home.

After adding her requirements to the list, I began contacting estate agents in the specified areas to arrange for viewing potential properties. We managed to start our first home-hunting visit to London in September.

That first visit was not a success, however, for none of the properties on offer in the districts we visited had met our requirements. But the visit did highlight another issue — the remaining length of the lease on various properties.

So far as I was concerned, any suitable property with another 30 years to run on its lease was all right by me because, if I were still alive by then, I would not wish to renew the lease as I would probably need institutional care. But it was far from the case with Kitty. She wanted a lease which would not expire till the end of her natural lifespan.

That therefore became an additional requirement. But because of the approach of winter, our next trip to London did not take place till the spring of the following year.