

## Terms of Engagement

While I was serving out my year of notice before early retirement from the Hong Kong civil service, I was also holding discussions with Li & Fung Limited on the detailed terms under which I would work for that publicly listed company.

The broad parameters had already been agreed between the then Chairman of Li & Fung, Fung Hon-Chu, and myself, well before I submitted my application for early retirement. There was something endearingly Chinese and traditional about the way we had reached our agreement. We relied essentially on each other's word, with virtually nothing written down. In any case, how would one reduce some of our understandings into enforceable legalese? For example, how would one acknowledge that I was not a respecter of persons and that I intended to give no special consideration to anyone under my command simply by virtue of his or her surname being Fung?

That meeting of minds had been a landmark for both of us. It had flowed from a friendship which had been developing since 1962. On H.C.'s part, filling a key post in a tightly held family concern with an outsider, was a big departure from normal practice. On my part, I required an arrangement stable enough for me to count on seeing my children through university. For these reasons, our commitment to each other had to be for an extended period, possibly for as long as ten years.

It was also agreed that my initial salary and perks would not be less than those I was enjoying as the head of a major government department. Such a package would in fact mean a modest boost in my income because Li & Fung, in common with other private sector enterprises, paid an extra month's salary at the Lunar New Year, a practice not followed by the government.

In addition, salaries at Li & Fung would be adjusted annually, whereas salaries for Staff Grade civil servants would only be revised once every few years. On top of that, there was also the prospect of an annual bonus which, if the business prospered, would more than make up for any loss in the size of my government pension.

That package took into calculation the fact that I would be able to draw a monthly pension of a few thousand dollars immediately upon retirement. That sum would comfortably cover the North American educational costs of my children without impacting upon my existing standard of living.

Other less important details, however, still had to be ironed out between myself and Dr. Victor Fung Kwok-King, the elder of H.C. Fung's two sons.

Victor, when I got to meet him, turned out to be short and dumpy, taking after his mother, the ever-hospitable Charity Fung. He had recently returned to Hong Kong to join the family business, after securing a doctorate at Harvard and teaching there for a spell. He had assumed the post of Managing Director of the parent company.

But before proceeding further, a little background on Li & Fung might be helpful. The firm was originally formed in Canton in 1906, as a partnership between Li To-Ming, a merchant in the porcelain trade, and Fung Pak-Liu, an English teacher and father of Fung Hon-Chu. The partnership exported mainly porcelain, fireworks and Chinese handicraft to America. In 1937, it opened a branch in Hong Kong, after acquiring a property on Connaught Road Central. In 1946, Li sold his share of the enterprise to the Fung family.

With the outbreak of civil war in China, however, the Fungs decided to relocate the firm's headquarters to Hong Kong. Following that move, the company was headed by Fung Mo-Ying, another son of Fung Pak-Liu and the elder brother of H.C. Fung.

Over the years, in reading between H.C.'s words, I had gained the impression that he and his elder brother had not always seen eye to eye on business or family matters. H.C. had remarked wistfully to me once that while his elder brother was alive he always deferred to his brother's wishes.

The company remained true to its trading roots after its relocation. But as the colony industrialised, it soon branched out into additional product ranges, like textiles, toys and footwear. It continued to trade as a principal in some of the traditional lines but for most of the new lines it operated as an agent. In other words, in acting as an agent it earned a commission on each transaction, just like the compradores in the large Western trading *hongs*, that is, by identifying suitable suppliers, providing a linguistic bridge between buyers and sellers, and overseeing the quality and timely delivery of goods ordered.

As the company expanded, it took advantage of Western corporate laws to spawn a number of subsidiaries to ring-fence the risks inherent in the different types of trading activities. By 1973 it had grown sufficiently to become listed on one of the colony's four stock exchanges.

But its culture remained largely that of a paternalistic Chinese

enterprise, with Fung family members holding most of the equity and making all the major decisions. Employees were generally considered more or less to be just *fokis*, there to carry out the instructions of the proprietors.

A *foki* was an early Chinese version of the 20th century wage-slave. His pay would be meagre in the extreme but his employer would provide him with his meals and he could bed down in some nook at the place of business. Such arrangements probably evidenced a degree of low cunning on the part of the employer, for it ensured during all exigencies at every unholy hour a ready supply of elbow grease. But that sort of indentured servitude became less fashionable over time, due to the availability in Hong Kong of more job opportunities, the incipient growth of trade union activism and the passage of some poorly thought-out labour legislation.

In 1989, after I had left the trading arm of Li & Fung, its Board of Directors once again utilised the provisions of Western corporate law to privatise the concern. That had been during the *à gogo* era in America, when the “junk bond king” Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky, the author of *Merger Mania*, epitomised Wall Street greed and “greenmailers” engaged in ruthless leveraged buyouts, asset-stripping and insider trading to enrich themselves.

Li & Fung went in for a public listing again some time later and, in 1991, changed its official domicile from Hong Kong to Bermuda, presumably as a hedge against the perceived risks associated with the projected return of the colony to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

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The detailed discussions with Victor Fung went without too much difficulty, although his approach to tidying up the details of the deal seemed too extravagantly clean-cut and Americanised. He displayed his understanding of what his father had already agreed but he did not leave sufficient scope for the interplay of Eastern subtleties. Nonetheless, we managed to conclude most of the subsidiary agreements on an oral basis.

Victor informed me the intention was to appoint me as the Managing Director of its main subsidiary, Li & Fung (Trading) Limited, of which he was the Chairman. Trading activities represented at that time the overwhelming bulk of the company’s business and accounted for most of its headcount of around 200. I would not be required to sit on the main

board, he added, or to become involved with other activities of the group, such as, investments or property development. That limited remit suited me just fine. I figured I would have my hands full just getting to grips with the trading business and adjusting to its family-oriented organisational structure and ethos.

Apart from Fung Hon-Chu as the Chairman of the group, one of his sisters sat on the board of the parent company, as did Victor as Group Managing Director. H.C.'s had a younger brother, Dr. Joseph Fung, a well-known surgeon, and he operated the staff medical scheme for the company's employees. H.C.'s other son, William, was in charge of the textile divisions as well as heading the properties subsidiary. His nephew, Fung Kwok-Hong, was in charge of the handicraft and fireworks division, assisted by Kwok-Hong's wife, Rosetta. H.C.'s eldest daughter, Angela, oversaw for a time a branch office in San Francisco while the husband of his second daughter, Belinda, worked for a spell in the finance section of the parent company. His third daughter, Clara, a very sweet and pleasant girl, worked in one of the textile divisions.

The gossip doing the rounds within the organisation was that any person whose surname was not Fung could not be expected to carry much weight. I did not know whether that gossip was an oblique hint for me to watch my step. That kind of situation was not uncommon in Chinese family businesses; I was waiting to discover the reality.

One of the first items to be settled with Victor was housing. I told him that the government was providing me with a fully furnished luxury apartment of 3,500 square feet at Palm Court. To provide me something similar over ten years would cost Li & Fung a bomb and there would be nothing for either of us to show at the end of the day. I did not need so much space once my sons had gone off to university. Both parties would therefore benefit if I were to be paid a sum sufficient to purchase a much more modest apartment and to furnish it, so long as I would end up owning it at the end of my employment.

To include in that lump sum deal, I would be willing to forego another government perk — the use of a chauffeur-driven car. That was a perk I did not relish, for I much preferred walking or taking public transport, since some 90% of motorised journeys within the colony were being done on public transport. I felt I would be in closer touch with the rest of the population that way.

Victor thought my propositions workable and we decided that each would go away to do the sums so that a suitable amount could be agreed upon at our next meeting.

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A payment of X millions was eventually settled upon, in return for ten years of service. Then it was a matter of sorting out the detailed conditions and contingencies. I suggested that ten years might be too long a time and perhaps there ought to be some provision for an earlier break. After all, I might turn out to be inept at making money for the company. If so, Li & Fung would probably not wish to be lumbered with me for so long.

I, of course, had my own calculations. I thought six years should be long enough to see my sons through university. I never could work up much enthusiasm for the soulless activity of making money as an end in itself. There was a wide range of other activities I would much rather devote my time to. So I suggested that there should be a break clause after five years, with each party giving a year's notice to the other. An appropriate portion of the lump sum would then be returned for any unserved period below ten years. That arrangement was readily agreed but with one proviso — that in the event of my sudden death or incapacity for whatever reason, no repayment for the unserved time would be required.

We then went on to discuss other perks. My leave entitlement in government service was 48 days per annum, with a maximum accumulation limit of six months. I asked for the same terms and Victor agreed. I realised it must have been a big departure for the firm because most Chinese companies granted only 14 days leave per annum to employees. Neither did private sector firms allow for any accumulation for leave not taken within a specified year or for any payment in lieu. Leave not taken by the end of the year was usually forfeited.

Workers generally accepted such mean-spirited terms because of the hardworking culture of the Chinese and their realisation that life was tough. The harshness of the Japanese occupation was still fresh in many minds and the continuing influx of poor mainlanders into the colony reminded them that plenty of other people were anxious to replace them in their jobs. Trade unionism and collective bargaining had also been slow to develop in the white-collar sectors of the private sector. Where labour was concerned,

it remained persistently a buyers' market, though unemployment remained low.

Annual holiday passages were another perk senior expatriate officers and their dependents enjoyed in government service. This came about as a hangover from the pre-war days, when expatriate officers went on what was known as "home leave" after every three-year tour. Back then, there were no air services and the journeys had to be made by sea, which could take as much as a month's travelling each way. Coupled with several months of leave an officer could be away from his desk for a protracted period.

With the expansion of air travel, the government switched to providing holiday air passages on an annual basis instead, except for those who wished to retain their grandfather rights. With localisation, that benefit was anomalously conferred upon senior local officers who usually took their "home leave" far away from their real homes.

I pointed out to Victor that I was now unmarried and that once my sons had gone off to North America I would have no immediate family members to take on holiday. Assuming that I would be required to do a fair amount of travelling to Europe and North America for business purposes, I said I would be willing to forego holiday passages as such, so long as I remained single. I would simply tag my holidays onto the beginning or the end of business trips. In any case, I had had more than my fair share of travelling in government service and I was beginning to suffer from jet-lag. So I no longer relished travelling more than necessary. Thus the provisions for leave entitlements were agreed.

There were one or two minor government perks I did not pursue. For example, since I was an official Justice of the Peace and a senior official, it was sometimes necessary to contact me on official business out of office hours. For that reason, the administration paid for the installation and usage of a telephone at my home. Although it had been agreed that my package would include all civil service perks, I did not feel I should demand every last ounce of flesh from my new employer.

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A snag soon emerged, however, over the agreed lump sum payment. It occurred to me that the money paid might be construed by the tax authorities as part of my salary and hence liable for tax. If so construed, then a hefty chunk would be eaten up. Moreover, that tax would be payable

for the year in which I received the payment, although the benefits would only accrue over a ten-year period. If either party disengaged in less than ten years, it was unlikely I could secure a refund of tax from government.

I thought that in fairness Li & Fung ought to compensate me somehow. On that line of reasoning, I sought another meeting with Victor.

We mulled the matter over for a bit and then Victor said there might be a more effective way of solving the problem. He said he would get Coopers & Lybrand, the auditors of Li & Fung, to look at the issue and come to me with a solution.

Two accountants from Coopers & Lybrand duly called. They explained that the best solution would be for Li & Fung not to give me the lump sum but to set up a Panamanian company and make an interest-free loan to that company. The Panamanian company could then utilise the money to buy whatever apartment I wanted and rent it to me at a nominal rent, just like I was paying for my government quarters. My rent would pay for the running costs of the company.

The company would issue bearer bonds and whoever held those bonds would be the legal owner of the entity and of all its assets and liabilities. Li & Fung would write off 10% of its loan every year, while the shelf company would similarly write off 10% of its assets. Theoretically, at the end of ten years, both assets and liabilities would be completely written off. The company would technically and legally have no debt and no assets. The bearer bonds could then be passed to me or sold to me for a token sum and nobody would have to pay taxes or conveyancing fees.

What the Coopers accountants described reminded me of the way an old business friend and his family had arranged for their personal affairs. The rich were truly different from those of common clay; they had means of protecting their wealth not available to ordinary sods.

My bureaucratic training left me uneasy, however. I asked whether the proposal was really kosher and legally above board. They assured me the arrangement was absolutely legit, openly used by many Hong Kong corporations.

I was mindful that should an accounting firm for a client work for both accounting and auditing purposes, then there had to be a “Chinese wall” separating the two functions, so that there would be no conflict of interest. I supposed that professional arrangement would be on a par with barristers belonging to the same chambers taking briefs for opposing sides in a legal dispute.

Besides, the Chairman of Coopers & Lybrand in Hong Kong at the time was Sanford Yung, with whom I was fairly well acquainted. We were fellow horse-racing enthusiasts and racehorse owners. Besides, Sanford was the brother of the late Lorraine Sung and brother-in-law to Leslie Sung, with both of whom I had been playing bridge with since 1953.



Sanford Yung, Chairman of Coopers & Lybrand, and the author Sanford did not appear to me as a person likely to allow his firm to stray beyond professional standards and the purlieus of the law. On that basis, I accepted the proposal.

I did require, however, that the Panamanian company be structured with three equal bearer bonds, so that each of my three sons could be handed one bond should anything untoward happened to me.



Following the establishment of the Panamanian company, I set about hunting for a suitable apartment. I eventually found one agreeably laid out with two fair-sized bedrooms. It was in a 20-year-old building at the junction of Seymour Road and Robinson Road, almost directly opposite Palm Court. The apartment covered a total floor area of a little over 1,200 square feet, which was more than sufficient for a single person.

Both bedrooms had windows on two sides. There were also two balconies, one outside the sitting room overlooking Seymour Road, and the other, accessed through the kitchen, facing the harbour. The latter offered a quite respectable view of the city and harbour. A cubby room of about four feet square sat at one end of that balcony. It was presumably intended as a laundry room, for it had a large metal wash basin inside.

However, some previous owner had glassed in that balcony to turn it into a servant's room. It had obviously been one of those illegal conversions so common in a city with an insatiable lust for additional living space. In theory, any prospective purchaser should verify with the building authorities whether permission had been granted for that conversion. If not, then regulations required that the balcony be restored to its original state.

But then, who was the prospective purchaser? Surely not I. I would be merely a tenant renting the premises from a Panama company. That company had purchased the apartment and its accounts were being handled by an internationally renowned firm of chartered accountants. As a tenant, I could not possibly be responsible for any structural changes. It was all an arm's length deal, legally and meticulously arranged. On that dicey rationalisation, I neatly sidestepped the sleeping dogs lying across the path to my future home.

The unvarnished truth, however, still niggled me. Too much knowledge was sometimes an unsettling thing. Small wonder why some wise ancients had declared ignorance to be bliss. I could not help being aware that a hundred years of British Companies Law, a prolonged insouciance by colonial authorities over infractions of building codes and the all too widespread proclivity by locals to cut corners had all combined to create an insidious grey area of public irresponsibility. An unfathomable number of citizens had been gleefully playing ducks and drakes with their colonial masters and the law! A time of reckoning had to come, sooner or later. But like St. Augustine facing the need for continence, I prayed that any reckoning would not come until after my time.

After the apartment had been purchased, I set about arranging for its renovation, upgrading and furnishing, before “renting” it from a Panamanian company. The electrical wiring and water piping systems were relaid; built-in wardrobes and bookcases were installed; the two bathrooms and the kitchen were re-tiled and fitted with the latest accessories. Furniture to my liking was also ordered to be custom made. This included a sturdy teakwood bed of my own special design.

I was then still living at Palm Court because I was technically on my six months of pre-retirement leave. It was therefore quite convenient for me to nip across the road to oversee the work being done.

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Meanwhile, Li & Fung issued a press release announcing that I had assumed the post of Managing Director of Li & Fung (Trading) Limited with effect from 1 March 1981. That led to a flurry of newspaper items. The *Hong Kong Standard* asked in addition for an interview; and that came out under the questionable headline of “Wong’s new gamble”.

The press accounts caused a number of friends and acquaintances to offer me non-executive directorships in their companies. They said I could

earn my director's fees by simply agreeing to have my name appear on their letterheads and in their companies' publicity.

Those offers sounded far too much like those legendary free lunches for me to accept. I fended them off as best I could, saying I was new to the commercial world and until I had found my feet I did not wish to stumble into conflicts of interest. I also reminded them that my being a director on their boards was a two-edged sword. My directorship on both the local bus companies had not been universally welcomed. I was prone to asking too many inconvenient questions.

The newspaper headlines and the accompanying offers set me wondering if I had indeed embarked upon a monumental gamble. I had needed the extra money before I could meet the wishes of my sons to be educated in North America.

I could be gambling with the future and wellbeing of my sons as well. Their adolescent wishes had struck me as another of those potent but questionable middle-class fads. Their roots in their own culture had not yet been firmly planted. They had little idea of what being transplanted into an alien culture would involve. Without proper parental or educational guidance, they might well turn into half-baked philistines. They would only discover long after the event the loneliness, the racial prejudices, the cultural disorientations and the ready temptations of foreign habits and choices.

It was natural for most fathers to want to protect those under their care from harm. My own childhood and youth had left me with clear impressions of what lay in store. I too had been deprived of the attentions of a mother from a tender age and so had to find my own way through the snares of life in foreign climes.

But I had never been much good at explaining such things to the young. What could I do in the face of their misplaced teenage preferences? Perhaps I ought simply to allow them to learn their truths from the university of hard knocks. They should be carrying some of my genes. With luck, they might — like myself — re-discover their true identities in some far-off place.

On the other hand, the means for meeting their wishes required submitting myself to activities patently repugnant to me, to the unsavoury dog-eat-dog ethos of the private sector. Such work would be far from my first, second or even third choice. Chinese culture for thousands of years had relegated traders to the lowest level of society, for they were engaged in

mere exchanges for profit rather than producing anything useful or beneficial to society. Even the Communists lambasted them as “skimmers in the middle”.

I could visualise with dread the necessity of getting on and off planes to chase after deals, sweet-talking to pliable customers and over-selling my services at trade fairs. Nothing less than a modern-day purgatory arrived at through a Faustian pact between my intellect and my self-deceptions for the sake of quick money.

Could I fake sufficient enthusiasm to discharge such a pact? I was within a whisker of turning 52, though most people — probably because of my crew-cut — took me for being a decade younger. But there was no denying I was middle-aged. Could an old dog still learn new tricks? Or even to pretend to learn them?

H.C. had, out of friendship, taken a risk in bringing me into his company. The least I could do to repay him would be to gain him a respectable return on his investment.

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Li & Fung had prepared an impressive suite of offices for me at Lifung House on Cameron Road in Tsim Sha Tsui. The building was not owned by the company. It had merely exercised the naming rights extended by some Hong Kong developers when a tenant leased a significant number of floors in a new building. This Li & Fung did. The head office of the parent company, however, remained at Fung House in Connaught Road Central, where both H.C. and Victor had their offices.

The location of the office was quite conveniently situated for me. I could continue to walk or take a bus to the centre of town before catching the underground for two stops to cross the harbour to the Tsim Sha Tsui Station. One of the exits of the station was directly in front of Lifung House.

My office consisted of a spacious room, complete with a comfortable long sofa on which I could sometimes catch a short nap after lunch. There was an open-planned ante-room to my office, with enough space to accommodate an administrative assistant and two personal secretaries. One of the secretaries was for William Fung, who had a much more modest office next to mine.

I did not recruit my administrative assistant and personal secretary till much later, until after I had got acquainted with the existing senior staff and their current product ranges. The administrative assistant I eventually recruited was a smart female graduate from the University of Hong Kong by the name of Gloria. If she had chosen to apply, she would have made a fine candidate for appointment as an Administrative Officer in government.

The personal secretary I engaged was a petite and energetic young wife of a police superintendent. Her name was Mrs. Gina Cheung and she worked faithfully for me for most of the period I was at Li & Fung.

Attached to my office was a fair-sized conference room which I could access from either a private door in my office or through its main entrance farther along a corridor.

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After the Seymour Road property had been purchased and as the renovations were progressing, I did a rough calculation and discovered that a sizeable amount would still be left from the lump sum payment after all the bills had been settled. What should happen to that surplus money? Should it be left with the Panamanian company or passed over to me? If the latter, would I still not be liable for taxes?

Being uncertain, I contacted the two accountants from Coopers & Lybrand.

“That issue can be easily solved,” they said. “Do you have any artefacts, antiques or the like?”

“Yes, I have some paintings and calligraphies,” I said. “Also a collection of antique Chinese stone seals, some given me by my father and others collected by myself. In addition, a couple of old Ching Dynasty porcelain vases and some hand-knotted Tientsin carpets.”

“Splendid! They’ll do,” one of them replied. “The Panamanian company’ll buy them from you and pay you whatever sum that’s left over from the lump sum. All the items will be left in your possession, of course, for your continued enjoyment, though they would be technically owned by the Panama corporation. Since the payment would be for the purchase of personal possessions, it would not be considered as part of your salary. So no tax of any kind will be involved. The company will in due course write off those purchases like its other assets.”

“But antiques can only increase in value over time. How can they be

written off as valueless?”

“That’s the way the system works,” they reassured me.

Thus I dipped my toes deeper into the murky waters of the Hong Kong commercial world, an opaque and ill-defined way of getting business done that Western neoliberal politicians and economic gurus extravagantly and mistakenly touted by as the freest of free markets under the sun.

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I had hardly settled into the job at Li & Fung when I fell seriously ill. My ailment came all of a sudden, on a Thursday evening, while I was having one of my regular weekly *mah-jong* game with friends.

There was a group of seven or eight of us. The two more or less permanent fixtures were myself and a senior liaison officer in the Home Affairs Department by the name of Chia Chi-Pui. The rest were almost entirely civil servants who had become friends after working together at either Home Affairs or in the Secretariat. They participated as and when their family, social and official duties permitted and when everybody was free, we would have two tables.

Included among the regulars was my relative Chau Yiu-Hung who had spent most of his life in the clerical service, though he had never worked for me. He was an exceptionally gifted *mah-jong* player and I had learnt a great deal from him when I first took up the game in 1948.

Once in a while, when there was a desperate need for a leg to make up a table of four, the services of my ex-South China Morning Post colleague from the late 1940s, Auyeung Ming, would also be roped in.

No civil servant senior to myself had ever participated in the group. The simple reason was because those senior to me would virtually all be expatriates and none of them was a serious *mah-jong* player who had skills worth a brass farthing.

On the evening I fell ill, we had met as usual after work at the Hong Kong University Alumni Association club at D’Aguilar Street. We customarily started as soon as we were gathered, only to be interrupted for dinner at around 7.30 pm, before resuming play till about midnight.

About an hour after dinner that evening, however, I began experiencing a growing discomfort in the middle of my chest. The discomfort intensified quickly into pain. By 9.30 the pain had become so severe that I could no longer play. I was also beginning to feel nauseous.

The symptoms reminded me of what I had experienced some ten years earlier when I was suffering from gallstones. But those gallstones had been removed. Could new ones have developed in their place?

Before my friends could even get out of the building, I was in such excruciating pain that I could no longer stand up. They had to carry me out to find a taxi. They decided that the quickest way to get help would be to send me to the private Yeung Wo Hospital at Happy Valley rather than to the government Queen Mary Hospital at Pokfulam.

It happened to be a quiet night at the Yeung Wo. There was no queue at the emergency reception. The law in Hong Kong required that everyone had to carry an Identity Card, to be produced on demand by any authorised officer or for identification purposes. So I produced my I.D. from my wallet and my friends helped me to register.

The doctor manning the emergency service saw me quickly and asked what my problem was. I said I did not know. I had been suddenly seized by a great pain in the middle of my chest after dinner, similar to what I had previously experienced when I had gallstones, only more sharp and intense. It might be a case of food poisoning. My friends and I had all eaten the same meal but none of them seemed to have had any ill-effects.

The doctor did a check of my pulse, temperature and blood pressure. He then applied his stethoscope to my chest and back. When he was satisfied I was not suffering from a heart attack, he gave me an injection while I was still on his medical examination bed. He said that if it was a case of food poisoning I should be feeling better in about 30 or 40 minutes. I could then go home.

My friends had waited during my examination. They now continued to wait for me to recover. Sure enough, the pain went completely after about 30 minutes. But I had a sneaky premonition that whatever was ailing me might return. If it did after I had gone home, the two teenage boys and an old servant there would not know what to do. So I asked the doctor if I could stay at the hospital for the night.

“It’s all right by me if you want to spend a thousand dollars just to sleep here,” the doctor said.

My three friends then started to tease me. They had all previously worked for me at either the Home Affairs Department or at the Secretariat. Though we had long since become friends, few of them ever addressed me by my name. They usually expressed their respect by addressing me only as “Ah Sir.”

So one of them said teasingly: “We can all figure out why Ah Sir would want to spend a thousand bucks to sleep here, can’t we? Some pretty nurse must have caught his eye.”

With that they laughed and ribbed me furiously before leaving. Notwithstanding that most of my entanglements with the opposite sex had been part of a legitimate search for a replacement wife, facile society gossip had ended up painting me as a Don Juan. If even close friends who should know better gave credence to such gossip, what could any man do?

I asked Chia Chi-Pui to call my sons to say I would not be returning for the night. He belonged to a very selected group of friends and relatives who occasionally came up to Palm Court on weekends for *mah-jong*, notwithstanding Ah Duen’s unexciting food. They would usually bring along a roasted duck or a soy sauce chicken to supplement the bland meals on offer. For them and for me, the challenge of a well-contested game was the thing.

Chia had also taught my sons *tai chi* exercises on and off, so he was well known to them.

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I fell asleep shortly after my friends had left. But at around three in the morning, I felt the sharp pain in my chest coming back. I pressed the emergency bell for the doctor.

“You shouldn’t be getting any pain again,” the doctor said, sounding puzzled. “I’d better test your blood.” He extracted a blood sample and then gave me another shot of pain-killer.

The doctor returned about 40 minutes later and said: “Mr. Wong, there is something seriously wrong with you. I’ll have to transfer you right away into intensive care. Your amylase is going through the roof.”

I was not sure what amylase was and what a high level of it meant. But intensive care sounded alarming, from both the medical and financial points of view. If I had to pay a thousand bucks for an overnight bed, heaven only knew what a period in intensive care would cost. Though Li & Fung had a medical insurance scheme, I had not been with the company long enough to discover what its terms were. But I was fully aware I was still technically a senior civil servant on leave and hence entitled to free first class medical attention at any government hospital.



Through the skein of my apprehensions, I asked tentatively: “If I’m seriously ill, doctor, could you wait till morning to transfer me by ambulance to Queen Mary Hospital? I’m a civil servant, entitled to free treatment there.”

“Unless you go into intensive care right away, Mr. Wong, you’re unlikely to be around by morning,” the doctor said gravely. “Your pancreas seems very busy devouring itself. A very dangerous case of acute pancreatitis, I reckon.”

I was completely thrown by the dire situation conveyed by the doctor. His words sounded surreal and ominous. How could my life suddenly be dangling by so slender a thread? Could life and death be decided in a matter of a few short hours?

“All right,” I said, stunned and bathed with uncomprehending alarm. I gave him Chia Chi-Pui’s phone number and beseeched him to get someone to ring Chia and tell him what had happened to me. Chia would know what needed to be done.

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What happened exactly after I had been pushed into intensive care had been largely lost to me. My mind was too clouded by the real and present possibility of death. How could one die before even beginning to untangle the baffling puzzle of life, with all its random joys and its abiding regrets? And how to leave with so many loose ends?

But reflection had itself suddenly become a luxury I could neither enjoy nor afford. I was completely in the hands of others; things were happening to me over which I had no say at all. A tube was being pushed through my mouth into my stomach, another into my nostrils to help me breathe. An intravenous drip found its way into my arm and some kind of ventilation equipment was installed next to me. I had no idea of what kind of substances were being pumped into me.

Through a haze I recalled dimly overhearing talk about the risks of hypovolemic shock, without the faintest notion of what that meant or its lethal possibilities. I simply drifted from semi-consciousness into hallucinations and then periods of erratic sleep.

\* \* \*

The next morning, H.C. Fung appeared at my bedside. I felt weak and half-drugged but I tried to apologise for landing myself into such an awful mess.

H.C. told me to take things easy and to just concentrate on getting well again. He said he had already asked his brother, Dr. Joseph Fung, to take over my care. Costs would all be covered by the company's medical insurance scheme, so there was no cause for worry, he added.

Dr. Joseph Fung turned up shortly afterwards. He looked at my charts and asked the nurses a few questions. He then told me it appeared I might have some problem with my pancreas but that could be gone into more thoroughly after I had recovered from my present condition. For the moment I would only be fed intravenously. He would call again to check on me in the evening.

In the afternoon Chia Chi-Pui brought my two sons to the hospital. By then I was feeling weak, exhausted and dull-witted. The pharmaceutical cocktails I had been subjected to might have produced that effect.

"I've brought your sons to see you," Chia Chi-Pui began brightly, after he had led them into the intensive care ward.

"Thank you," I mumbled, over the stomach tube sticking out of my mouth and the oxygen feed in my nostrils.

As I peered at Tien-Kay and Tien-Kit, their faces appeared uncomprehending and expressionless. I must have been a grotesque sight, lying there limp and vulnerable, drained of vitality and at the mercy of strangers, with unfamiliar tubes and accessories protruding from different parts of my body. My attempts at speech must have sounded wan and bronchial too.

Then, through the fog of my stupor, a flash of intuition came. It occurred to me that the possibility of my demise was confounding them, not so much in itself but in its implications for their pending travels abroad! That impression was strengthened when they spoke. Their voices sounded flat and devoid of compassion and warmth.

My heart felt a pang of disappointment. It was almost like a fresh wound I had to endure. How badly I must have distanced myself from them! Their teenage needs had been lost by default; their aspirations and dreams left unmet. All those exhausting years I had restrained myself, so that no cutting words between myself and my wife would ever be uttered within the hearing of our children had earned no credit with them.

Even if I pulled through my current crisis, it would be too late to explain or to make amends. We would be on the cusp of separation. And when they leave, they would carry with them an image of myself as a Great Negator who had diminished their lives in a thousand ways, by always holding them in check.

I consoled myself with the thought that — regardless of what might happen to me — I had at least ensured their education. I had not had the opportunity to tell them of the arrangements I had made for the Panamanian corporation to pass them each a bearer bond for the Seymour Road property in the event of my demise. That should at least see them through university.

But it was now too complicated and difficult to explain any of that from a hospital bed. So I left them their unspoken anxieties undisturbed and unassuaged.

\* \* \*

Dr. Joseph Fung discharged me from the Yeung Wo Hospital after about a week. He said my attack of acute pancreatitis had taken a lot out of me; I should stay home and rest for the next two or three weeks. He had as yet not identified the cause of my malady. Once I had fully recovered, however, he would arrange for an endoscopy and some ultrasound tests to be conducted.

I rested at home for a week before I started getting bored and restless. I felt well enough to get back to work but Fung Hon-Chu deterred me. He was a great believer in *fung shui*. He wanted my office to be first surveyed by Mr. Choy Park-Lai, the foremost Hong Kong geomancer of that time, to ensure there was nothing in it that could conflict with my horoscope and the Eight Trigrams.

I was touched by his concern, although I was myself fairly agnostic about *fung shui* and those types of beliefs. I had already gone through that rigmarole once before, in respect of the spooky office I had to occupy at the Central Secretariat. I had not been of much help to Mr. Choy that first time around because I had no idea what my precise hour of birth had been. My mother never told me and I had never been interested enough to ask. But somehow I managed to survive for five years in that office after various interventions by friends and most particularly by wearing around my neck the miniature jade sword given by Mrs. Q.W. Lee, who was later elevated to

Lady Lee after her husband's knighthood.

H.C.'s faith in *fung shui* originated many years ago, after he had moved into a luxury apartment in a Magazine Gap Road building owned by Li & Fung. He soon began having recurring nightmares of being attacked by hordes of demons. In order to fight them off, he began repeatedly raining blows all over the place during his troubled sleep. Unfortunately, a goodly number landed on his poor wife, Charity, instead.

Eventually he consulted a master in geomancy. He was told he was having nightmares because the doorway to his bedroom was in the wrong place. A new doorway at a different location was suggested. When a new doorway was opened and the old one blocked off, his nightmares miraculously vanished.

When H.C. told that story to his friends in support of his trust in geomancy, they all ribbed him wickedly, accusing him of being a natural-born wife-beater. His alleged nightmares, they said, were nothing more than fabrications to cover up his habitual assaults upon poor Charity.

In any case, H.C. insisted that my office be inspected by Mr. Choy before I returned to work. The geomancer duly surveyed the premises to establish its polarities with the universe. He did so with all the solemnity of a high priest of an occult order. In the end, he pronounced that the physical layout of my office was not inconsistent with the requirements of my horoscope, though he suggested moving my desk about three inches to the right of its existing position to improve natural flow of the mystic *chi* or energy.

Since I saw no harm in following his advice, I acted accordingly. Then I tried to settle back into my new job, leaving behind the initial inauspicious hiccup.

The following month, Dr. Joseph Fung arranged for me to undergo an endoscopy and an ultrasound test. Neither uncovered anything amiss with my pancreas. The only conclusion that both Dr. Fung and I drew was that my ailment must have been just one of those inexplicable one-off events.

\* \* \*

Towards the end of June, the refurbishing of the Seymour Road apartment had been completed and the new furniture delivered. The wife of a friend helped me to select and order curtains for the various rooms while I engaged an electrician to take down a couple of chandeliers from Palm

Court to reinstall them across the road.

My two sons then assisted me in a leisurely process of transferring various possessions not in immediate use over to the new apartment. No heavy lifting was initially involved because all the furniture at Palm Court belonged to the government and could be left in situ.

The first items of importance to be carried over in manageable lots were naturally my books. I gathered them together into handy lots, according to subjects or authors. They more than filled the built-in bookshelves covering one entire wall I had made in the room intended as a study cum guest room. So additional shelf space had to be found in the sitting room.

The next consignment to be moved across the road consisted largely of glassware — sherry and port glasses, brandy snifters, beer tankards, water tumblers and the like. Accompanying them was a medley of partially-consumed bottles of alcohol — more than a dozen bottles made up of sweet and dry sherry, gin, brandy, armagnac, vodka, whiskey, bourbon, rum, *crème de menthe*, Drambuie and a half decanter of port. An altogether respectable reserve for extending and promoting good cheer among friends and for lubricating those solitary nocturnal conversations I occasionally had with myself.

The third lot of items under consideration for evacuation, however, brought forth an entirely different mood in me, one reflective of human thoughtlessness and absurdities. The items involved were things left inside various cupboards for more than two decades and which no one had ever used. They were for the most part wedding presents bestowed upon my ex-wife, Man-Ying, and myself, including such gems as pairs of crystal candle-holders, two Royal Doulton English tea sets and boxes of polished Sheffield steel cutlery.

One's mind could only boggle over how people obliged to give wedding presents had arrived at their choices. Did they really expect a newly wedded couple, forced by stricken financial circumstances to live with in-laws, would sit down each evening to dine by candlelight on, say, Chateaubriand steaks or a Beef Wellington? And all somehow magically produced by a "one-foot-kick" servant who had never in her entire life set foot inside a European kitchen?

But the *pièce de résistance* among the hoarded presents was a hand-painted Chinese dining set for 16 people presented by one of Man-Ying's richer relatives. It was complete with oval-shaped plates for

serving up whole steamed fishes, deep round dishes for other foods, soup and rice bowls, spoons, small condiment dishes, chopstick rests and traditional Chinese teacups. Each item had an attractive turquoise and gold design, painted against a white background. No part of that elaborate set had even been put to service.



Two traditional Chinese teacups forming part of the dinner set

Given the cramped state of most domestic accommodations in Hong Kong, was that dinner set meant as an expensive joke? Who — except for multi-millionaires — would have a dining room spacious enough to fit in a round banquet table for 16? Certainly I could not have found room for more than a table for eight in my luxury 3,500 square feet quarters at Palm Court. Or had Man-Ying's relatives expected me to rise to some dizzying height of wealth in a glorious future?

When I moved in with my in-laws in 1959, they already had the use of a much more modest and traditional set of Chinese eating utensils. So there was no call for trying out any part of that elaborate wedding gift. It so happened that when my in-laws migrated to America in 1971, I inherited their old eating utensils. I was entirely content to continue using them till I myself migrated to Britain in 1991.

Throughout those decades, no one in my family entertained any fear of being poisoned by lead or cadmium in using the old utensils. Those

materials had been used for thousands of years for improving colour fastness before porcelain was fired. There was certainly no significant evidence of Chinese dying off *en masse* because of leaching from their traditional eating utensils.

Given that background, my initial reaction was to donate all those unused wedding presents to charity raffles. There seemed not the slightest point in my hanging onto them for another 20 years.

But as I set about making arrangements for their disposal, a perverse and irrational feeling slowly came over me about the dining set with the turquoise and gold design. The people who had made the gift must have entertained great expectations for our marriage. What a damp squib we must have been! And I had been more responsible than anybody else for that mess!

It seemed only fitting that I should live with that failure, caring for that dining set for the rest of my life as a penance but also as a reminder that I should not behave so rashly again. Besides, I found the set quite impressive to look at even though I could not possibly put it to proper use.

Under the influence of those thoughts, I packed the plates, bowls and various accessories carefully and got my sons to help me carry the lot across to Seymour Road.

\* \* \*

By the end of July, most of the items which required moving over to the new apartment had been transferred. The only three items needing assistance from professional removers were the large hand-knotted Tientsin carpets. Once the carpets and the paintings and calligraphies had been transferred, the faint or dusty markings left by them at Palm Court gave the place a very abandoned and desolate air.

By then, it was also time for Tien-Kay and Tien-Kit to leave for North America, where they could enjoy reunions with both their mother and their maternal grandparents before they began their studies.

It transpired that the boarding school that Tien-Kit wanted to attend in Canada was located on Victoria Island in British Columbia, quite close to Vancouver where my mother and my sister, Mabel, were living. Mabel was then working for the Canadian Imperial Bank of Canada. So I asked her to help him get settled and to assume the fiduciary duty of doling out to him at the appropriate times his school fees, living expenses and pocket

money.

Mabel duly picked Tien-Kit up at the airport when he arrived and offered him hospitality at her home for a couple of weeks. When he was ready to start school, my mother told him he was welcome to visit at any time he wished, but particularly during his holidays. But for reasons I have never been able to get to the bottom of, the lad seemed to have deliberately tried to minimise contact with his grandmother and aunt throughout his years in Canada.

In the meantime, I had assumed that Tien-Kay was still trying to pursue his stated desire of studying chemical engineering at an appropriate institution when he left for North America. It turned out that he eventually enrolled at Gonzaga University, a private Jesuit university located at Spokane in Washington State, where he chose to study psychology. He did not seek my advice on either his choice of subject or university. If he had done so I would have suggested that his temperament was not quite suited to psychology. But since I had always held the view that a first degree was not a matter of moment, I kept silent on his choices.

Gonzaga was also quite close to Vancouver, just across the border in fact. So I asked Tien-Kay to find opportunities to pay his respects to his grandmother and aunt. Though his contacts with them had been very limited over the years because of geography, they were nonetheless important family elders. Appropriate Chinese proprieties ought to be observed. But it transpired that he did not follow my advice, unless I asked for his presence because I happened to be visiting my mother.

The failure of my sons to show due and proper respect towards those elders in spite of living so close to them was a great disappointment to me. My guess was that they both preferred spending time with each other than with elders because the two brothers had always been quite close. Nonetheless, it did make me regret that I had allowed them to venture abroad before I had instilled in them the essential Chinese etiquette for dealing with family members and with society at large.

\* \* \*

Notwithstanding the departure of my sons, I did not move over to Seymour Road right away. Since I held the tenancy at Palm Court till the end of my pre-retirement leave till August, I wanted to take over the remnants of whatever remained at my own pace.



The most important of the remaining tasks was the culling of a vast accumulation of old magazines, press clippings, personal papers, miscellaneous working notes and the tomes of civil service regulations with convoluted and sometimes absurd provisions I was no longer bound to observe. It was amazing how much excess baggage a person could squirrel away over time.

There was also a number of mundane practical items like pots and *woks*, the porcelain holder for chopsticks, my shirts and underwear and other oddments which had to be moved.

In addition, I wanted to explore quietly with Ah Duen her inclinations for the future. Although I would no longer need a full-time live-in maid after my sons had gone, I was quite prepared to retain her for a while longer if she so wished. After all, she had served me faithfully for ten years. But Ah Duen told me she preferred returning to help her relatives with farming in the New Territories. I therefore gave her a reasonable severance package.

So it was towards the end of August before I returned the keys to the Palm Court apartment to the people in charge of government quarters.