

Odds and Half-Ends

The further trip that Kitty and I made to London proved unproductive. Although we had visited many properties in various districts north of the Thames, we were unable to find any which came close to our multifarious needs.

“What about Paris?” Kitty suddenly asked one day. “I’ve heard so much about that romantic city and you’ve also at times spoken fondly of it yourself.”

“Yes, spring time in Paris, chestnuts in blossom, cafe tables along the streets, strolls along the banks of the Seine, the smell of freshly-baked bread and all those images. But if you want to live there, you’d need to learn the language. Do you want to learn French as well?” I replied.

“Well, maybe later. For now, one language at a time. But I’d love to wrap myself in those dreams at some stage.”

“And you will.”

Kitty’s reference to the choice of Paris alerted me to the need to secure residential status somewhere for Kitty and myself. I had been in and out of Britain so frequently in the past, for work, for studies and a variety of missions, that subconsciously I might have taken Britain as almost a natural second home. But to live there permanently for both of us necessitated meeting a set of bureaucratic requirements.

One of the oddities I had noticed previously was that London was such a cosmopolitan playground, with almost every nationality and culture in the world represented. Probably also every kind of law-breaker and misfit as well. It must be either a manifestation of a remarkable tolerant and welcoming streak in the British character or else of a certain universally attractive nature in those green and pleasant isles for so many different types of people to be drawn there.

Yet there was a flip side to things. The British government never seemed too willing to allow many of its former colonial subjects to sink their roots there — unless they came loaded with cash or some rare and unusual talent. So many of the vital staff in its celebrated National Health Service, for example, seemed to have been recruited from abroad.

Well, at least I could satisfy the cash side of things under British immigration rules. So I duly applied for Kitty and myself to be granted permanent British residential status as a couple with independent means.

I was eventually asked to produce not only my bank and brokerage house statements testifying to the sufficiency of my funds and where they were being kept. I was in addition asked to provide a legally certified

document indicating that Kitty and I were in fact married, presumably to guard against the human trafficking of young women. It seemed almost as if the Whitehall machinery paid more attention to an immigrant's moral lapses than to his morality.

Having in due course submitted the documents requested, I sat back and waited patiently for the bureaucratic mill to slowly turn. Not having found a home there yet and not having been properly disengaged from my employment, I was in no terrible hurry to move.

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Meanwhile, Leslie Sung's letter and cheque elicited no response from anyone at the appropriate level within Li & Fung. Part of the reason might be that neither H.C. nor Victor knew exactly how to respond.

On the other hand, it might also be due to other developments within the corporation. One of those developments was that the office space occupied by Li & Fung (Trading) at Cameron Road had proved inadequate for some time to meet its expanding activities. The property arm of the corporation, under the leadership of William Fung, had been charged with finding alternative accommodation. Could a suite for a Managing Director and his immediate supporting staff be soon surplus to need? That could have been one of the vexing questions the company faced.

Nobody sought my views about where or how the expansion might best be effected. Since I was, in my own mind at least, on the way out, I did not volunteer an opinion. I had been given to understand that alternative accommodation in a new building at the China Hong Kong City on Canton Road was under consideration.

Likewise, no one saw fit to bring me into the company's privation plans which were first mentioned by Kwok-Hong and Rosetta. I had thought it unwise to stick my nose into those hush-hush family or corporate manoeuvres being made by others with their banks and financial backers. In such matters, an ability to deny inside knowledge was truly important. It was a case of ignorance being bliss.

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While I was pondering what additional move I ought to make to further my disengagement from the company, I was suddenly struck down

by another attack of severe pancreatitis.

It so happened that Dr. Joseph Fung, who traditionally provided company medical services for staff of the entire Li & Fung group, was away in America on a prolonged holiday.

I therefore got myself admitted to the Yeung Wo Hospital at once and asked Kitty to urgently contact Ip Yeuk-Lam's youngest son, Shing-Kwan, to get him to use his *guanxi* for a top internal medicine specialist to attend to me there.

Shing-Kwan was a gynaecologist but he had been part of the medical establishment for some years and so knew who were the best specialists in each field. He arranged for me to be seen by a Dr. Lam who had specialised in internal medicine.

Dr. Lam initially gave me the same type of medication as Dr. Joseph Fung had and that quickly eased my pain. But he expressed surprise that I should be suffering from severe pancreatitis for so many years without anyone being able to find a cause or cure for the ailment. He suggested that I should be given another set of ultrasound and endoscopy tests.

I replied that I had already undertaken a large number of those, both under Dr. Fung and under a number of government consultants at Queen Mary Hospital. But none of them seemed able to pinpoint the cause for my attacks.

Dr. Lam said although he had practised internal medicine for a number of years, he could not say he was well up on the latest techniques and developments in the field. However, there was a Professor Leung who had just joined the Chinese University Medical Faculty. He had come with a big reputation from America and Europe. If Professor Leung could be persuaded to accept me as a patient, would I be prepared to place myself in his care, Dr. Lam asked.

I said I would gladly place myself under the care of the Devil himself if he could deliver me from my sudden and recurring attacks.

And so it was arranged that I would be transferred by ambulance from the Yeung Wo Hospital to the Prince of Wales Hospital in the New Territories, where Professor Leung taught and practised.

Professor Leung turned out to be a stern and straight-talking individual. He appeared fairly young in my eyes, being only in his forties, but he seemed very self-assured. He ordered me to take a further set of ultrasound and endoscopy tests.

When the results became available, he shared them with me and pointed out what they showed. But he began by asking if I had been prone to developing stones in my internal organs.

“Yes,” I replied. “About 20 years ago I had some gall stones and they had to be removed.”

“Well, I don’t want to know who gave you your previous tests concerning your pancreas and I don’t want to know why they could not see what I am seeing now,” the professor said. “You have developed another stone in your pancreas and it is floating around inside. Sometimes it gets itself stuck in your pancreatic duct and when that happens, you get an attack. If you agree, I can operate and get rid of the stone for you. But before I do so, I want to know whether you’re a heavy drinker.”

“I used to drink a fair bit,” I admitted. “But in recent years, I’ve gone off drink and now limit myself to just a glass of wine or two at dinner, on special occasions.”

“If you want me to operate on you, you’ll have to give up even that occasional glass or two of wine.”

“That’s all right with me,” I said.

“No, I’m serious,” Professor Leung said. “If you touch a drop of alcohol after the operation, so much as a beer or a glass of wine, don’t come back to me if you get into further trouble with your pancreas. I won’t treat you any more. Is that clear?”

I nodded in acceptance of his condition.

So I had my operation, following which I gave up alcohol altogether. I did not have any further problem with my pancreas thereafter, until about 20 years later, when I developed pancreatic cancer and was treated at the Royal Free Hospital in London.

By then, I had naturally migrated and had to undergo a risky and major operation known as a whipple to cope with that dangerous new ailment.

An interesting aside to the Hong Kong episode was that, since I had been a former civil servant and was then a pensioner, which entitled me to free Hong Kong medical care at government hospitals, I was not charged anything for my stay at the Prince of Wales Hospital nor for the services of Professor Leung.

After my discharge from the Prince of Wales Hospital, which was considered as sick leave, I was given another week's sick leave to recuperate at home.

When I returned to the office, the atmosphere seemed to be crackling with static electricity. Everybody knew that I had been hospitalised and rumours had circulated that I had refused to take further responsibilities for policies in the bags division. So most of the more senior staff sensed that some major change was in the air. They were filled with curiosity and expectation. A few dropped by my office to ask after my health but there was not a peep out of either H.C. or Victor Fung.

A check with Leslie revealed there had been no response to his letter with the cheque for the Panamanian company loan. I was anxious to bring matters to some quick and civilised resolution but I had to take into account the interests of innocent third parties apart from my own immediate interests. For example, I had to consider the future of my secretary, Mrs. Gina Cheung.

I had engaged Gina as my secretary at the beginning of June of 1982. I could not have selected a more efficient and loyal one. She was a petite and cheerful woman married to an inspector of police who rose later to become a superintendent. She also willingly handled some of my personal correspondence with friends, relatives and ex-lovers and was quick-witted enough to keep her own dossier of important dates on them, like their birthdays and anniversaries, so that she could remind me of their approach if I were absentminded.

Gina was pregnant with her second child at the time and was due for paid maternity leave in the early part of 1989. If I were to leave Li & Fung too early, I would not put it past the company to discharge her as someone no longer needed and hence deprive her of paid maternity leave. So I had to calibrate my actual departure to protect her entitlement.

Although it has now been more than 30 years since we both left Li & Fung, I still receive a greeting card from Gina on festive occasions, although she is by now a grandmother, with her hands full of grandchildren.

For the foregoing reason, Leslie advised me to sit tight till a response came from Li & Fung.

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So I decided to take another two weeks of the 48 days of annual leave I was due and headed for London again with Kitty to continue our search for a suitable home but it again proved a complete damp squib. Upon my return to Hong Kong, there still remained no response from Li & Fung.

But my mind was soon driven towards a much wider and more troubling focus. A flurry of stories had been appearing in both Western and local media about social and economic problems in dozens of cities in China. There had apparently been protests and demonstrations by students and strikes by workers over price inflation, shortages of essential goods, corrupt practices and so on. Amidst those manifestations of discontent, there had also been shouted slogans and demands for “democracy” and “freedom” without anyone spelling out what those words actually meant.

A few of the stories were objective and constructive but most carried an anti-Communist or anti-China undertone. Some of the narratives even reported contradictory demands by demonstrators.

But with the British due to return the colony to Chinese sovereignty looming ever closer, more residents became receptive to those tales of woe and grew alarmed over their own wellbeing after 1997. Those stories encouraged some to contemplate emigrating, while a fair number actually did move later to Canada, Australia and elsewhere.

I had anticipated a number of transitional problems when such a large and impoverished country like China decided to allow market forces to play a bigger role to aid the country’s progress. To move from a system where the prices of essentials had been kept stable by the state since the early 1950s into a partially market-influenced pricing system would be challenging enough in itself. But with so many stuck at the margins, filled with unarticulated hopes and unrealised dreams, a transition could be very disruptive and a painful adjustment.

While the transition was proceeding, someone would still have to work in the fields to produce the food and others would have to mine for coal to fight against the cold. Under a dual pricing system, people with the right connections could purchase goods at state specified prices and later resell them at market prices to gain quick profits, leading to corruption and growing inequality in wealth.

It was all very well for the Paramount Ruler to say that getting rich was no crime, without spelling out that some means of enrichment had to constitute real crimes.

It was obvious that the transition would encounter many hiccups. To

attempt to do it on the fly, with cadres inexperienced with capitalism's twists and turns, would be challenging enough. Although higher education had been increased, the emphasis had been placed on turning out scientists, engineers and technologists rather than able administrators. Furthermore, out of sheer ignorance or a mistaken understanding of a free market, cadres might well begin to introduce some of the more objectionable features and practices of capitalism into the new system.

There was in addition no shortage of spivs, crooks and profiteers within the country itself to exploit whatever could be exploited for gain. Inefficiencies in distribution must initially create shortages which would in turn spark inflation. In Peking, for example, the consumer price index soared by 30%, making ordinary wage earners no longer able to afford staples. Simple survival stared many unfortunates in the face.

As I took in those media reports, I became worried that fresh turbulence might overtake China once again, especially if stirred by malicious rumours, profiteers and outside forces with evil geopolitical intentions.

Hong Kong under British rule had been a notorious gathering place for provocateurs, local turncoats, rabid anti-Communists and Western spies and counter-revolutionaries. The colony's lack of foreign exchange control made it easy for dubious money to be sent into and out of the city for a range of ideological, criminal and other purposes. Banks were already up to their necks in money-laundering, tax avoidance and other dicey activities.

To add to that toxic mix, a small collection of Chinese pseudo-intellectuals who had "soaked themselves in salt water" but had returned to the country with qualifications in some specialised field, had utilised their status in those fields to offer nostrums for curing the ails of the country in completely unrelated fields.

Some of the more swell-headed gave speeches blaming the country's poverty on its political system and circulated their ideas about freedom and democracy among naive students still wet behind the ears.

History had in fact produced very few public intellectuals or sages whose musings and insights were worth reflecting upon or memorising. The reason was that very few had real competence over multiple spheres of human knowledge. A man might be an astrophysicist or a pioneering neurosurgeon, but why should anyone listen to him when he was sounding off on *mah-jong* techniques or on how to manage a nation's budget?

But it seemed that the entire world had somehow been so dumbed-down as to expect simplified solutions to very complicated problems. No doubt, blindly following the snappy opinions of movie stars, sporting icons and popular personalities was far easier than thinking for oneself. The gullible would have to swallow such proffered pearls of wisdom at their own peril.

To top everything off, the leadership of the country was not in the least united in providing solutions. Some modernisers, like the Premier Zhao Zi-Yang and Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yao-Bang, wanted to speed up changes while many conservatives wanted to slow down the role of market forces. That split in the leadership naturally percolated down to those implementing changes on the ground.

In the face of spreading student and worker demonstrations and repeated breakdowns in law and order, Hu had to resign in January of 1987. He had been accused of being too soft on students and agitators by some hardliners.

Deng Xiao-Ping, the Paramount Ruler and initiator of change himself, began warning against the worship of Western lifestyles and multiparty systems, as such notions undermined not only traditional values but also the leadership of the Communist Party. That showed that Deng himself had reservations about the degree or speed of change. Yet he had allowed Zhao Zi-Yang to assume the position of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party during the 13th National Congress in 1987.

In those confusing and unsettling circumstances, I could not help soliciting the views of my friends in the Chinese General Chamber. Unfortunately, they either blamed the Western media for exaggerating problems in China or else they supported the prevailing official line of the government, which was that it was doing its best to adjust to the transition.

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It was inevitable that the situation in the mainland should become central to conversations between myself and Chan Hon-Kit when we met regularly for tea.

“What do you make of those media reports of protests and strikes in different parts of China?” I asked. “Are they being exaggerated? What have your children been telling you? What have the mainland media been saying?”

Hon-Kit shook his head and sighed. “Where can anyone go for reliable news nowadays? China is a vast country with many towns. What might be happening in one place might not get much coverage elsewhere. Besides, the media are now either controlled by government or by media moguls with their own axes to grind.

“When we started out in journalism 40 years ago, our editors used to tell us to go after facts and still more facts, allowing readers to make up their own minds about whatever might be going on. We were told to leave expressions of opinions to the editorial pages. Now we are fed false news and manufactured opinions. Independent news outlets have been steadily dying or are being taken over. I don’t know what universities teach in mass communication courses these days. They are probably just churning out an endless stream of new and unprincipled paid hacks.”

Now it was my turn to sigh. “Yes, my friend,” I said, “it seems that both technology and a changing world are leaving both of us behind. Uncovering the truth and revealing it to the world are now no longer core to our former profession. Anyone with such notions can now be left to weep in his beer — if he is still allowed to have beers! But I am still curious to know what’s actually happening in China.”

“That’s hard to say. It’s a very big country. Both the Chinese government and vested foreign governments publicise only what they want to put out with their own spin. Both may use some of the same words to describe events but those words mean different things. So far as can be determined from the bits and pieces culled from the grapevine, things are not going so well with the transition to a more market-led economy. People are encountering many unforeseen problems impacting their lives.”

“Perhaps it’s time we found a modern Kung-Sun Lung to start another rectification of names, so that everybody has a common understanding of the meaning of the words they use.” I said.

Hon-Kit chuckled. “Not a bad idea at all. People may then realise that ‘Freedom of the Press’ does not include the freedom to spread falsehoods and lies in China.

“When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, you will recall, most of the people were illiterate farmers with no disposable incomes. We had nothing to sell them except faith in our leadership and a hope that the hardships and sacrifices being called for would one day lead to better lives for their children and for the nation.

“Our people are still too inadequately educated today. They are riddled with many superstitions. They still put faith in physiognomy, palm-reading and *fung shui*, for instance. Government has a duty to protect them from crooks, fraudsters and fermenters of political dissent.

“However, exercising control entails problems over messaging and how to address and influence those on the receiving end. Government cannot sell a narrative or a promise without delivering at some stage, just as it cannot condemn capitalist excesses in one breath and try to promote free market reforms in the next.

“We are facing that same old dilemma anew today, in the teeth of many wild and competing narratives and greater ease in communications. In such circumstances, we cannot be completely open with the truth, can we? Can we truthfully admit, for example, differences of opinion within our own leadership? That would undermine both the faith in our leadership and the unity of our country. Then everything gained by the revolution might start unravelling.

“Answer me this, my friend: If you were charged with caring for a child incapable of chewing enough intellectual food for his own needs and growth, would you consider it wrongful for some pre-chewing to be done for him before feeding him?”

That question completely turned the tables on me. I was caught off-guard for a solution. “I can understand the differences of opinion within the party,” I mumbled. “I imagine memories of the Cultural Revolution must keep appearing before all their minds’ eyes like Banquo’s ghost. But in the end we have to trust the good sense of our people somehow. Do you know what the trouble really is with people like us, Hon-Kit? We think too much and we have too many qualms and scruples. We always try too hard to consider things from different points of view. We would never make good leaders. We’re not decisive enough.”

“You’re right! That’s why I’ve never aspired to lead anyone or anything. I know my limitations. But we have both been brought up that way, trying to figure out, for instance, why we had to learn a foreign language just to submit to being ruled by rather mediocre foreigners.

“Was it because our British rulers wanted to produce subjects like us, subordinates of a different race but with English tastes, attitudes and morals? Psychologists say that childhood experiences would affect many of us. Maybe that was what the British were after with their educational system. Have we both been moulded, each in a slightly different way, since

our boyhoods and school days? Are we only now at this late stage trying to come to terms with our own country, now that we have been left outside in a ceded place and without a jot of influence there?”

“Let’s not start down that road, Hon-Kit. At our age, we probably still have too much fire in our bellies to accept that Lord Macaulay took both of us for a ride. Let’s stick with the present subject and try to visualise how things might span out in our country.”

Hon-Kit smiled and nodded. “All right, if you feel that time is not yet opportune for serious introspection or self-examination. We can afford to allow my questions to marinate for a while longer.

“In that case, do you remember that ancient story from the time of the School of Names? One of its leading lights was a lawyer by the name of Teng Hsi, as history goes. When the Wei River flooded, a rich man got drowned. His body was picked up by a boatman. When the family of the rich man sought his body for a proper burial, the boatman demanded a huge reward. The family went to Teng Hsi for advice and he told the family to merely wait, because nobody else would want the body except themselves. Later, when the boatman became anxious about disposing of the body, he also went to Teng Hsi for advice. He was also told to merely wait because he was the only one from whom the family could get the body.

“There has been no historical record or legend handed down about the eventual outcome of that interesting case. That is our present predicament. We too can only wait and watch.”

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After my inconclusive discussion with Hon-Kit, I got a message from Leslie that a solicitor’s letter had come back from Li & Fung, returning the cheque for clearing the debt of the Panamanian company.

I huddled with Leslie immediately to work out what this might mean. Obviously, the cheque had not led to any approach for ironing out the situation. The letter returning the cheque was terse and gave nothing away.

We appeared stuck in limbo. I could not imagine that the company would want me to continue when my decisions were being overturned without explanation. I felt that some explanation was at least due to me, though I did not want to approach H.C. or Victor lest either would construe me as a supplicant.

In the meantime, something else happened. When H.C. was urging me to leave the civil service to join his company, he said that his company adjusted staff salaries every year in line with movements in the Consumer Price Index and that, as a top executive, I would, in addition, be entitled to an annual bonus based on the profitability of the company.

I had responded to H.C. by saying that an annual adjustment in line with the Consumer Price Index would be good enough for me, although movements in the Consumer Price Index were a very crude and inaccurate indication of inflationary pressures. As to bonuses, I would gladly forego them, so long as my salary and perks did not fall below that of a head of a government department. Moreover, as my work would be largely administrative in nature, it would make for difficulties in aligning bonuses with profitability.

And so it came about that my salary was adjusted every year along with the salaries of other staff. But following the contretemps with the British bag customer, mine had remained unadjusted. That had to be deliberate. What lay behind that omission? Was it a nudge for me to go? But if Li & Fung wanted me to leave, it could openly serve me a year's notice. Why had it not done so?

I asked Leslie what he thought and what Li & Fung might be up to.

"It is hard to say," Leslie replied. "From the return of the cheque and the failure to adjust your salary, the company might be minded to contest some of the terms of your employment."

"After seven years on the job?" I exclaimed.

"The great difficulty is that your agreement was largely an oral one between friends. H.C. could argue, for example, that he was unaware after the conversion to annual leave of 48 days, a head of department could still accumulate leave for up to six months. No one in Li & Fung had such an arrangement. Leave not taken within a particular year would normally be forfeited."

"He wouldn't stoop so low, I think. I had been given permission to accumulate leave for up to six months because I had been roped into the Bermuda II and other civil aviation negotiations. I had specifically mentioned that benefit as part of my package to H.C."

Leslie nodded. "I see," he said. "If you were to give notice, you might have an argument over your accumulated leave and the housing benefit that would go with it."

“How else could I get Li & Fung to begin a dialogue and resolve the matter in a civilised manner?”

“If the company wanted a dialogue it would have started one when we sent in the cheque. Instead it sent the cheque back with a curt solicitor’s letter. So the company has obviously taken some legal advice.”

“Okay, so why shouldn’t we go down the legal route as well? Should I sue H.C. and Li & Fung(Trading) for breach of contract? I am owed a number of other perks, you know, like annual holiday passages for my wife, now that I actually have one. I haven’t claimed for any of her trips overseas to visit my mother in Canada or to London to search for a suitable home.”

“Litigation is a mug’s game, David. The main winners would be the lawyers involved. I would urge you to think it over very carefully. But if you’re minded to move that way, I’ll have to ask one of my partners to take over your case, to give you the most objective legal advice available. I fear my judgements might be clouded by our friendship.”

“Thanks, Les. I think I’ll think things over while taking the rest of this year’s leave in London. I’ll let you know on my return.”

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Kitty and I were in luck on the latest of our London visits. We found what we wanted in Belsize Park, within walking distance to the Royal Free Teaching Hospital and conveniently linked to underground transport. In addition, there was a smart private gym located right across the street to cater to Kitty’s needs.

The flat was on the second floor of a converted Victorian town house on a 999-year lease. The apartment was slightly over 2,000 square feet and had three large bedrooms and two bathrooms. The asking price was fairly reasonable and the seller and I shook hands on a deal, barring the settlement of a few outstanding legal technicalities.

The place needed refurbishing, however. But I could visualise clearly what I could do with it, where I could install a new electrical fireplace in the sitting room, hang my chandeliers here and there, modernise the kitchen to my satisfaction, re-tile the two bathrooms and so on.

I returned to Hong Kong in such high spirits that I wanted to end all the sophistries and uncertainties concerning my employment as a trader and get stuck into re-designing my new home, so that I could settle in and revive my old passion for writing, while Kitty concentrated on mastering

the English language.

Coincidentally, I received word at around the same time from the British immigration authorities that Kitty and I would be granted residential status in Britain as people of independent means, provided that I remitted a sum of not less than half a million pounds into the country. Considering that I intended to purchase the property at Belsize Park and to initiate some other pet projects, I duly remitted much more than the sum specified.

Those two developments increased my desire to pull up roots in Hong Kong and start a new life in London as soon as possible.

In order to bring my relationship with Li & Fung to some kind of conclusion, I asked Leslie to pass my case to one of his partners so that a suit could be initiated against H.C. Fung and Li & Fung(Trading) for the breaches of my oral contract with them.

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Once the lawsuit had been formally lodged and picked up and embroidered upon by a couple of local scandal sheets, the city lived up to its reputation for being one of the most gossip-mongering place in the Far East. Speculations abounded as to what could be behind the break-up of an old and successful horse-owning partnership and a subsequent working friendship.

The first person to contact me on learning of such a conflict between old friends was a businessman and fellow horse-racing fancier by the name of Peter Leung. He had known both H.C. and I for many years and he was aged somewhere between H.C. and myself.

“David, I’ve known you and H.C. for many years,” Peter declared. “You two have long been known as close friends; you’ve even owned race horses together for decades. If some disagreement has risen between you two, surely you don’t need to take H.C. to court, do you? That might be a foreigner’s way of doing things but it certainly is not a Chinese way.”

“You’re right, Peter,” I replied. “My suit is not a Chinese way of doing things at all. Perhaps we made a mistake from the very start, by assuming that words uttered between friends were as good as a bond. As a result, there’s hardly anything in writing regarding the terms of our engagement. So when problems arose, how can we continue in a Chinese fashion when one party refuses to talk?”

“Is that so? Perhaps what you both need is only a good mediator. Tell me what is at issue between you and I’ll talk to H.C.”

“There is no need to trouble you with specific issues. They are all relatively minor. Once we can start talking, they can all be fairly easily resolved.”

“All right. Leave it with me. I’ll talk to H.C.”

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A week later, Peter Leung came back to see me, looking crestfallen.

“I’ve spoken to H.C.,” Peter reported. “He says he has handed over the day-to-day running of all company affairs to his two sons and he does not wish to interfere with their decisions in your case. I’m sorry I’ve not been more successful as a middleman.”

“I’m sorry too. But thanks for your efforts,” I said. “Did you really believe H.C.? He is still very much the head of the family, you know.”

“He seemed to be rather upset with you.”

“Yes, I can imagine he well might be. I had refused to stand by him concerning some Fung family dispute which had absolutely nothing to do with my work. You might remember that H.C. never saw eye to eye with his elder brother, Mo-Ying, when he headed the company. Now that Mo-Ying had passed away, H.C. is still trying to take his former dissatisfactions out on his nephew, Mo-Ying’s son. It’s a shame really.

“The nephew is not exactly a live wire but he spends most of his time working directly under H.C. on selling fireworks. H.C. sets all the policies and pricing. But somehow H.C. has got into his head that his nephew is planning to start trading on his own and possibly take some of the existing customers with him. That is why H.C. wants to get rid of him and he wants me to wield the knife.

“I don’t think the nephew is planning anything untoward. He’s by no means the adventurous type. Apart from fireworks, he does a reasonable job as the head of his division. I cannot find anything seriously wrong with his or his division’s performance to warrant dismissal. If H.C. wants to turf him out, he would have to make the case himself, on the basis of the nephew’s work on fireworks. I just cannot manufacture a case against a person I consider to be innocent.”

“A sad business altogether,” Peter observed. “Family feuds are so troublesome. I guess a man must follow his conscience and do what he

thinks is right.”

“I agree. But if H.C. finds it difficult to engage with me directly, because of our past associations, the proper conduct would be to send his son to approach me as a senior to iron things out. That would have been in line with proprieties, not the other way around.”

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Another friend who contacted me over my law suit with Li & Fung was Eric Ho, a former Eurasian colleague in the civil service. Eric had retired in 1987 as the Secretary for Trade and Industry to take on the challenging job of Chairman of the Hong Kong Public Services Commission during the difficult transition period.

“How can Li & Fung breach the terms of a contract with you?” Eric asked. “I know you. You’re not a person to go for legal redress unless it were a last resort.”

“It more or less is,” I replied. “Our contract was largely an oral one, made between old friends, with hardly anything written down.”

“Still, that’s scandalous, considering what you’ve done for the two Fung boys. It was on your say-so that I arranged to introduce them into public life, getting one appointed to a social welfare committee and the other to the Cotton Advisory Board. How can the company turn around and be so mean to you in return?”

“Well, I’ve got a lot to thank the company for as well, Eric. It enabled me to leave the civil service and make a lot of money on the foreign exchange market during the turbulence of the Sino-British negotiations. It would have been quite improper for me to do that sort of thing if I had remained a member of the public service. I now already have more money than I can possibly ever use. So it is a question of fighting for a principle, rather than money.”

“It’s sad when the ways of our forebears are not followed nowadays. Perhaps the younger generation has been too much influenced by foreign education. If you ever want me to talk to the Fung boys, you know where to find me. I’ve had interfaces with both of them in the past,”

“Thanks awfully, Eric. No need to trouble you. Unfortunate for all concerned. If the Fungs don’t want an amicable settlement, then we’ll just have to see how this plays out in court.”

* * *

It was possible that the intervention by Peter Leung had triggered a response from Li & Fung (Trading), for I received a formal letter giving me a year's notice for terminating my employment.

So some movement at last! It was also a tacit acknowledgement that a year's notice on either side had constituted a part of our original agreement. However, the letter did not attempt to tidy up any of the details. It did not indicate, for example, whether I was expected to continue working for that year or whether I could take my accumulated leave of six months within that period.

Still, no one at the right level in the company seemed interested in initiating a face-to-face conversation, to indicate what was expected of me during the period of notice, or how the breaches I had claimed in my law suit could be fairly and sensibly resolved.

In the absence of conversation, my turning up each day in the office soon descended into a farce. I would sign contracts for established customers on established terms, except for those concerning the bags division. I made the kinds of authorisations I normally made; but I held no meetings with new customers or pursued discussions with old ones who wanted fresh arrangements. I diverted all matters requiring changes to Victor.

Needless to say, with my equivocal and unsettled standing within the company, I made no more overseas trips to visit possible foreign clients or to drop into branch offices. A sense of unease manifested itself among staff who still had to interface with me. I felt quite sorry for their discomfiture.

* * *

I was soon diverted again from my own situation by further events in China. On April 15 in 1989, Hu Yao-Bang, the disgraced former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, suddenly died. He had been one of the leading reformers after the country decided to introduce market-led pricing into the economy at the beginning of the 1980s.

In an outpouring of emotion, students and others began attributing his death to the way hardliners within the party had forced him to resign. They therefore gathered at the Monument of People's Heroes and sang patriotic songs to mourn his death. Most of the assembled crowds dispersed quietly

but a small group had to be forcefully removed by the police.

A state funeral had been set for Hu on April 22 at the Great Hall of the People. Tiananmen Square was accordingly closed for that purpose. But about 100,000 students nevertheless ignored the closure and marched there, demanding to see the Premier Li Peng. The demand was naturally not met.

The passing of Hu seemed to have turned into a national focal point for all sorts of grievances, dislocations, complaints and suffering endured by ordinary people since the introduction of market forces into the economy. Price inflation had been a universal phenomenon. But there were a thousand other ways in which ordinary citizens could have been adversely affected.

Take, for illustration, what Kitty had experienced when she went back for a short visit to her parents in Nantong. Her mother suddenly became unwell one evening. Kitty took her to a hospital. But the staff there asked for a deposit of 30,000 RMB before they would attend to her mother. This was a marked departure from the health care system Kitty had known as a girl when medical services, although more rudimentary, were free.

“It’s the middle of the night,” Kitty protested. “All the banks are now closed. How can I get my hands on 30,000 RMB? And why so expensive? Why can’t my mother be attended to first? She’s in pain. I will pay the deposit tomorrow, as soon as I can get the money.”

But the medical staff would not relent. Those were the new rules, they explained. The sum asked was only a deposit. If the cost came to less, a refund would be made. Kitty therefore had to ask her father to scurry among their relatives and friends in order to raise the deposit.

It was obvious that any major policy shift decided upon in Peking still depended on sensible implementation at the local level, with regulations that suited local circumstances. To simply ask for an unspecified amount as deposit without thinking through the implications could merely shift the burden towards the more vulnerable in society.

For example, how could a reasonable deposit be decided upon without first examining the seriousness of the malady in the patient? Those deciding on the level of deposits would naturally want to play safe by asking for a higher amount to reduce their own liability.

On the other hand, any examination of a prospective patient might discover a life-threatening situation. Could any medical professional seriously turn away such a patient with a clear conscience, if that patient

could not come up with an appropriate deposit?

In the case of Kitty's mother, it might appear at first sight that the medical staff had been heartless and bureaucratic and had acted against medical ethics. But on further examination, it became apparent that some other patients had been disappearing after treatment without settling their bills. The new rules had been fashioned by local authorities to ensure that costs could be recovered from the salaries of the staff who had treated defaulting patients without first collecting deposits from them!

Hence the transition to a market-focused pricing system led to enough unintended dissatisfactions and unhappiness to go around. Perhaps a better explanation to the population at large of what was really expected for "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" should have been done before any implementation was attempted. And such minor flaws in carrying out policies all came to a head across many towns and cities upon the unexpected death of Hu, crystallising all the passions, mistaken perceptions and the unwarranted hopes of students and the general public.

* * *

Meanwhile, various student groups in different parts of the country were echoing calls for an end to corruption, greater government accountability, the introduction of democracy and a multi-party system, freedom of the press and other Western practices and slogans. They seemed to have swallowed naively and unthinkingly the standard narratives of foreign propaganda, that such changes could somehow cure all their country's woes. They therefore boycotted classes and held marches and demonstrations to further their vague but so-called "patriotic" demands. They nonetheless gained considerable support from disgruntled factory workers and from the inflation-ravaged general public.

On April 22, the day scheduled for the state funeral of Hu, rioting broke out in the cities of Changsha and Xian. Many cars and shops were burnt and looting occurred. Law and order were breaking down in several locations in the face of sustained agitation. It was unfortunate that most of the young, idealistic or trouble-makers, had not been old enough to remember the madness and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution.

The following day student groups in the capital formed a union and elected leaders to lead them to press for reforms and to protest against the failure of the government to respond to their demands. Thousands of

students marched through the capital to head for Tiananmen Square and were joined en route by many more thousands of workers and ordinary citizens.

On April 25, the Paramount Ruler, Deng Xiao-Ping, endorsed the need for martial law. But the Premier Li Peng also warned the students through an editorial in the *People's Daily* the following day, that the demonstrations were considered as an anti-Party and an anti-government revolt.

The students reacted angrily to the accusation and on April 27 began marching in their tens of thousands through the streets again. Joined by non-students along the way, they broke through police lines to reach Tiananmen Square. Protests and strikes also began occurring in other cities and some students from elsewhere began converging upon the capital.

Nonetheless, by April 30, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Zhao Zi-Yang, still argued for making concessions and talking to the students to end the protests and the classroom boycotts.

Subsequently, leaks of the discussions in the Standing Committee of the Politburo revealed sharp differences of opinion among its members. Hardliners wanted a condemnation of student violence and a decisive end to demonstrations. But Zhao thought that, while taking all necessary measures to combat rioting and violence, students could still be persuaded to return to their classrooms out of a sense of patriotism.

By then, I was developing an uncomfortable foreboding that things might slip out of control. In addition, rumours began swirling around Hong Kong that anti-Communist Chinese and Taiwanese elements and Western intelligence agencies were getting ready to intervene and stir up further unrest in China. Both local as well as foreign money was being couriered to dissident groups within China. Furthermore, American troops were touted as being ready to intervene if the unrest exceeded a certain critical pitch.

Meanwhile, the names of some leaders of the protesters began appearing in media stories, together with their statements and demands. Some of their demands were half-baked and it was by no means clear how representative those leaders were or how far their writ extended among the tens of thousands camped at Tiananmen Square.

I therefore asked Hon-Kit to meet me as soon as possible, to get a better handle on what might be brewing.

* * *

By the time Hon-Kit and I met the following week, the situation had deteriorated further. Some 300,000 protesters had already occupied parts of Tiananmen for a week. Emotions were running high and the encampments on the square were turning into a chaotic and unhygienic collection of humanity. There had been squabbles and fights among some demonstrators too, for control of the public address system used to broadcast to the crowds. It seemed that whoever had control of the system at a particular moment in fact became a sort of *de facto* leader.

“Had you previously heard of any of the so-called protest leaders?” I asked Hon-Kit.

My friend shook his head. “There appears to be a vast mixture of groups out there, some patriotic, some opportunistic, some just curiosity seekers gawking like spectators at a gruesome accident. I suppose those speaking out now must be the ones with the loudest voices or the thickest skins or the keenest to enjoy his or her time in the limelight. Some might have received foreign money or been promised an imagined cushy exile in the West for acting out a specified role. I doubt if any has really thought through the real problems in their own country or the consequences that they or their families might face as a result of their actions and statements. Numskulls the lot of them! Shouting empty slogans out of emotion or momentary pride.”

“A lot of bravado and highfaluting declarations have indeed been tossed around,” I said, “and they are being gleefully reported on by many Western media. Those kids are going to find themselves hard put to live up to their words, uttered either before some adolescent damsel or during a moment of mob madness. When the chips are down, they’ll find that forfeiting one’s life for an abstraction will not come as lightly as a feather, but fall more crushingly than Mount Tai.”

“What can anyone expect when you have immature youngsters stewing for days and weeks together, feeding on each other’s self-delusions, passions and mob psychology?”

“But I’m puzzled why Zhao cannot foresee what such toxic closeness might produce. Why is he continuing to press for dialogue in opposition to his colleagues on the Politburo Standing Committee? Has he plans for using the students, just as Chairman Mao had done in launching the Cultural Revolution?”

“Not that I know of,” Hon-Kit replied. “I’ve only been a very small potato at the local level all these years. Never got anywhere close to Zhao or anyone near the top. But his offering dialogue has been a big mistake. It has given those kids encouragement and a false sense of their own importance. Can anyone now really speak for that rabble in Tiananmen?”

I sighed. “I suppose the destinies of men, as well as of nations, all depend on making a right decision at some critical point, don’t they?”

“Yes, indeed. I seem to recall that ages ago, an outnumbered young Napoleon defending another revolution, resorted to ‘a whiff of grapeshot.’ to gain the day.”

“That phrase was actually coined by Thomas Carlyle, some time after the event. Please forgive and ignore my pedantry. But with so many at Tiananmen, ‘a whiff of grapeshot’ would mean significant spilling of blood!”

“I’m no hardliner, my friend. But I’m both a realist and a Chinese. The moment for nipping trouble in the bud has unfortunately passed long ago. Acting now might still mean less bloodshed than later. No responsible government can ever allow unruly mobs to take over a nation.”

“Mob-rule certainly provides no answer. But how to avoid a tragedy?”

“A good question. I don’t have an answer either. We in Hong Kong can only be bystanders. The game is being played by others and we do not know when and what silly move is going to be made by someone. The future rests in the laps of the gods; we are helpless.”

Hon-Kit paused for a moment and then added: “Odd, isn’t it? No matter how much the world changes, human nature remains the same. Aristotle had it spot on thousands of years ago. Did he not say that the young would always overdo things? They love too much and hate too much and the same with everything, because they have not yet been sufficiently humbled by experience to know the limitations in life.”

“Ah, yes!” I replied. “How long ago has it been when you and I were acting just like those kids in Tiananmen today? We also kicked against the pricks. We felt then that something was not right about our lives but we could not work out the wider contradictions within our society. We were miserably paid and we supported the idea of forming a union for journalists but our employers soon put a stop to that. So we just lashed out, without being able to articulate what was actually wrong and what we really wanted!”

Hon-Kit laughed. “Yes, those were the days! But have we grown any wiser from our missteps and mistakes? How much have we really learnt? There are still so many problems to which we have no answers, though we still give way to moments of sentimentality and hope.”

“You pose too many unanswerable questions, my friend,” I said. “We must meet again fairly quickly to catch up on developments in the mainland. How about a week from now?”

* * *

After that meeting with Hon-Kit, I was informed by Lo & Lo that it had received a letter from Li & Fung, offering a lump sum to settle my claim for breaches of my contract. The sum was not broken down but it added up to roughly 85 or 86% of the amount claimed. The difference by itself was not really of much moment.

Leslie’s partner advised me to accept the offer. He explained that rejection might be costly, because legal convention provided that if I failed subsequently to convince a court that I could better the sum being offered, then I might be denied costs and be made liable for the costs of the other side. Those sums could be considerable because barristers would be involved.

I was in two minds as to how to respond. On the one hand, if Li & Fung had made the offer right at the beginning, I would undoubtedly have accepted it to avoid a row and for old times’ sake. But on the other, I still felt irritated by the company’s refusal to engage in meaningful talks for so long.

There was also another important point of principle to consider. Corporations had always enjoyed a distinct advantage over their employees whenever a dispute arose. A corporation could always use shareholder resources to scare an employee into accepting a less than favourable settlement for fear of incurring unaffordable legal fees.

Since I possessed a surfeit of wealth, why shouldn’t I take on one of those bullying corporations to demonstrate that justice did not automatically go to those with the biggest purses? Also, what was the use of money if a person did not use it to fight for principles?

There were two other related factors to be worked into the equation. First, I had been very astringent in calculating my claims. I was therefore quite confident of being able to prove that the sum outstanding was more

than the amount being offered in settlement.

Secondly, I could surmise from the sum offered that Li & Fung had made provision for paying my salary during the entire period of notice. It was not clear, however, whether the company expected me to take my accumulated leave during the notice period, rather than making me work until the end before paying me a lump sum in lieu of leave.

Therefore I asked Leslie's partner to seek clarification on this point before considering the offer. When Li & Fung eventually replied that it had no objection to my taking accumulated leave during the notice period, I realised that, given the lapse of time since the letter of notice, I could end my presence at the company in a matter of weeks if I took the last six months of the notice as leave.

Liberation was apparently much closer than I had previously imagined. I therefore wasted no time in instructing Lo & Lo to reject Li & Fung's offer of settlement, to indicate that I would take my accumulated leave during the last six months of the notice period, and to brief a Queen's Counsel and a junior for the ensuing proceedings.

I felt as light as a bird as I turned my concentration to finalising the purchase of the property at Belsize Park and planning the various renovations I intended to make there prior to moving in.

* * *

"I'm afraid the die has been cast," Hon-Kit exclaimed dejectedly, the moment he saw me on May 14th. "A bunch of knuckleheads on Tiananmen decided yesterday to start a hunger strike to pressure the government into making concessions. Do those clowns even know who our leaders are? They are men who have been forged in the crucibles of death, against the Kuomintang during the arduous Long March and against the mechanised might of the United Nations in the bleak hills of Korea. They've seen thousands of their comrades give their lives for a cause. Do those silly kids really think our leaders will bat an eyelid if some of them decide to skip a few meals? It's a recipe for total disaster."

"I hear Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, is scheduled to begin a state visit to China tomorrow too," I said. "It's supposed to be the first state visit between our two countries in 30 years."

Hon-Kit gritted his teeth in exasperation. "Yes, there was supposed to be a grand welcoming ceremony for him at Tiananmen, but the venue

had to be changed. It will be a great loss of face. No consideration of national dignity or honour, or any inkling of political protocol among those kids.”

I nodded apprehensively. “Their demands also seem to be becoming more absurd and incoherent. It all looks like an unhappily ending on the horizon.”

We then chatted in a desultory fashion for a while, exchanging news of students in other cities copying the hunger strikers in Peking and rumours of anti-Communist groups and foreign agents making their way into China to fund protesters. We both grew more despondent as we talked.

“Chaos is apparently gaining momentum and spinning out of control,” I said. “National television is apparently planning to broadcast a possible meeting between the Premier Li Peng and student representatives on or about May 18.”

“Yes, part of Zhao’s softer approach, no doubt,” Hon-Kit said. “Could make things worse.”

“I’m still curious about Zhao’s motives. He was picked by the Paramount Ruler, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, he had a pretty good record for dealing with economic problems. He had also been a part of a five-member committee set up in 1986 to look into political reforms. He was elected as General Secretary during the 13th National Congress the following year.”

“Was there any gossip about him or his inclinations among cadres?”

“There was some talk of him finding too much corruption within the system but not knowing how to deal with it. Too many powerful cadres involved. It was said that he then started to talk about Western parliamentary democracy being less prone to corruption. Perhaps that was what led him astray.”

I chuckled with irony. “If Zhao really believed that self-serving Western theory, then it proves that a little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing. He would not have thought that way about parliamentary systems if he had known about the little brown envelopes being passed around Westminster to secure peerages and honours and to have a loophole or two incorporated into pending legislation; or about the myriad ways British banks launder money, work tax avoidance schemes, collude over LIBOR rates, foreign exchange, mortgage rates and heaven knows what else; or how J.P. Morgan could stifle competition in America and acquire more wealth in that country than the total value of property in some 22 of the

constituent states west of the Mississippi.”

I then rattled off a whole string of known abuses and corrupt practices in various Western countries with elected legislatures — price gorging and wrongful marketing of drugs by pharmaceutical companies, misinformation on health hazards from smoking by cigarette makers, manipulation of pollution gauges on vehicles by major motor manufacturers, using tainted meat to produce food, insider and naked short trading options in stocks and shares, fixing sporting events with desired outcomes beforehand, using advertising on a massive scale by public relations and lobbying firms to turn casual wants into compelling needs for paying clients, and so on and so forth.

“It seems that whatever the political system, human greed will always be there,” I concluded. “Corruption will just take on new and different and less obvious forms under a different political system.”

“You seem to have acquainted yourself with a multiplicity of shady ways of enrichment in the outside world,” Hon-Kit observed. “I’m not sure it’ll be a good thing for Chinese cadres to learn so many such tricks.”

“They’ll learn them soon enough, I’m sure, once they’re fully exposed to free market practices and their lax regulations,” I said. “In actual fact, right now in Hong Kong, I think we have the scariest political and economical arrangement in the world — a snooty, white-dominated colonial autocracy out of touch with its citizens and of dubious competence sitting on top of a neoliberal free-market laissez-faire economic system that is rotting away from its own excesses and contradictions. Yet Western politicians of limited intelligence keep singing the praises of such an arrangement. I just hope Chinese leaders will have enough sense not to use us as a model.”

“We must analyse this situation more when we next have tea,” Hon-Kit said.

* * *

During our meeting, I also took the opportunity to update Hon-Kit on the state of my dispute with Li & Fung and to inform him of the intention of Kitty and myself to move and settle soon in London.

Kitty had found the Cantonese environment in Hong Kong too overwhelming, I explained, and it had been a real interference to her getting to grips with the English language. A British setting should suit her better.

“As for myself, I’m keen on another shot at writing fiction,” I said. “But what can I really write about except Hong Kong and its inhabitants? I’ve worked here for most of my life and my family’s been here for five generations. Yet this place remains so unique, puzzling and poorly understood by me and by outsiders.

“You have contact with a part of it and you think it represents the whole. But it doesn’t. This is in fact a mongrel city, superficially Chinese, but lacquered by foreign influences in terms of food, clothing, social habits and class culture. But it is also protean and dynamic, riddled with paradoxes and cross-currents. It is raucous, greedy and divided, given to swashbuckling lifestyles and testing the limits of the law. And yet, somewhere beneath the money-madness, the brassy deceits and outward cynicisms, there exists in many of its inhabitants a streak of compassion and goodness. I just need to distance myself from the place and gain some perspective in order to disentangle the various strands and to make more sense of them. I’m hoping London will be far away enough for me to do that.”

“You’ve given yourself a whale of a task, my friend. Good luck!” Hon-Kit said. “I was born and brought up here too. But after having been away for four decades, I almost find myself a stranger visiting another town.”

* * *

Li Peng’s televised meeting with students turned out to be a complete disaster for the government. The Premier appeared stiff and ill at ease, without even a trace of charisma. He was, to any practised public relations eye, quite the wrong type of person to stick before a camera for such an exercise.

He had been an engineer by training and was not the least adroit at winning over hearts and minds. Instead of projecting an image of a caring official, sympathetic to the trials and tribulations necessitated in adjusting to a more open economy, he came over to many as doctrinaire, aloof and hidebound.

A measure of his failure to convince was that about a million of the residents took to the streets of the capital to demonstrate their solidarity with those on hunger strike.

On the other hand, the body language of most of the student

representatives was distinctly cock-a-hoop, if not wantonly confrontational. They seemed pleased at last to have secured a national platform for their voices. But apart from repeating their mangled litany of slogans, they offered no constructive remedy to the transitional problems faced by the common people. They had, at the very least, failed to display the good manners expected to be taught to the young.

Moreover, it was doubtful whether the students really represented anybody except themselves and their small circles of classmates. Though they and their statements had been promoted and lionised by some foreign media, their writ hardly extended very far among the hordes in Tiananmen Square.

Two or three of those leaders merely sat quietly during the televised show, possibly stuck dumb by the sudden glare of national limelight in which they found themselves.

Zhao, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, must have deduced from the televised fiasco that his conciliatory approach had been a total flop. The moods of both the protesters and of his own colleagues in the Politburo Standing Committee appeared to be slipping beyond his control.

It was subsequently leaked that Zhao and other members of the Standing Committee had met following the broadcast at the home of the Paramount Ruler, Deng Xiao-Ping. Deng had felt that the demonstrators were being used by elements advocating bourgeois liberalism. He therefore concurred with declaring martial law and using the People's Liberation Army to restore order.

Zhao had responded by saying that he did not want to be the General Secretary who mobilised troops to implement martial law. In making that statement, he surrendered his own power and political career.

In a desperate attempt to reduce the risks and bloodshed that were bound to ensue, he went among the demonstrators in Tiananmen at 4.50 a.m. on the following morning, to plead with hunger strikers to end their strike and for the demonstrators to disperse. He was accompanied by a few aides.

"Students," Zhao announced, tearfully, "we have come too late. We are sorry. You talk about us, criticise us, it is still necessary. The reason I have come is not to ask you to forgive us. All I want to say is that students are getting very weak. It is the seventh day since you went on hunger strike. You cannot continue like this.

“You are still young, there are still many days yet to come, you must live healthily, and see the day China accomplishes the Four Modernisations. You are not like us, we are already old. It does not matter to us any more.”

Soon afterwards, Zhao was stripped of his official positions and placed under house arrest. His supporters within the Communist Party were progressively purged. Zhao himself remained under house arrest in Peking until his death some 16 years later, in January of 2005. During his confinement, however, he managed to record a secret journal, which was smuggled out bit by bit by his friends and published after his death as *Prisoner of the State*.

* * *

When Hon-Kit and I spoke on the telephone on May 19th, our hearts were heavy with dread and apprehension. We had both watched Li Peng’s meeting on television and had heard of Zhao’s visit to Tiananmen and his short speech.

“Can a tragedy still be averted?” I asked. “It will take a while to assemble enough troops in the capital to deal with those massive crowds at Tiananmen. So there’s still time for emotions to subside and for people with common sense to disperse.”

“Unfortunately, I fear that will not happen,” Hon-Kit replied. “People have been hyped up for too long and the psychological and group bonding that has taken place will be difficult to change. Besides, the youngsters have now got the bit between their teeth and think they have the popular will on their side. They’re too naive to realise that anti-Communist and foreign forces are merely using them as foolish tools against their own country.”

“It’s crazy for so many people to remain crowded together at Tiananmen. They’ve already made their views known. A few calls have been voiced by *agent provocateurs* to overthrow the government. By remaining there, do the crowds really expect to bring the government down? With such numbers, any panic could start a stampede and cost lives. That has happened before at football games and religious festivals. So why can’t the more sensible leaders begin urging the crowds to disperse?”

“Those who consider themselves leaders are bickering among themselves. Some hotheads even yearn for bloodshed to legitimise themselves and force the government into a climb-down. I imagine there

might be a few unhinged kids among them who think the only way out of their humdrum lives might be to seek glory in martyrdom. Complete idiots the lot of them!

“But the lives of troops might be at risk as well. Troops have long been taught their duty was to serve and assist the people. Hence their frequent use during natural disasters. But now they are being used to disperse and chase them away. That might place them under considerable emotional and psychological stress. They might hesitate when given orders, thus endangering themselves in front of angry protesters.”

“What an unholy mess! Are the student leaders so trapped in their own self-delusions and inflammatory utterances to use their brains? Have they thought about the consequences for themselves and for others?”

“If rumours are true, some might be thinking of running for it. If they had been one of the instigators of unrest or had colluded with outside elements, they could well have no other choice. British and American spies, I hear, have been working on an operation codenamed ‘Yellowbird’ to get people to America. Taiwan-sponsored elements would no doubt be aiming to reach that island.”

“Does not say very much for those who claim to be leaders when they think only of saving their own skins. No doubt some could even dine out indefinitely on the mere fact of having been present at Tiananmen. But so have countless thousands of others. They would, however, have to stay behind to face the music. Or readjust themselves to the less heady business of just leading ordinary productive lives at home.”

* * *

The portents had been plentiful in the prelude to disaster in and around Peking during the first few days of June in 1989 but few paid much attention to them. It was as if everybody was mesmerised by some great street theatre being enacted in which they all expected, at some stage, to have a role as bit players or as part of some gigantic chorus. No doubt some had been so conditioned to playing an assigned role that they could only follow developments through a sort of collective haze or through the prisms of their individual fantasies, prejudices and false hopes.

When troops from some 30 Chinese military divisions, totalling more than 300,000 soldiers, began arriving and camping around the suburbs of the capital, had the citizens been too absorbed by their own predilections

and concerns to notice? When newspapers emphasised the imposition of martial law and called upon everyone at Tiananmen to leave, did those messages fail to reach their targets? Had the repeated broadcasts warning citizens to stay off the streets and remain at home also produced no effect?

For whatever reason, tens of thousands remained lolling about the streets or at Tiananmen, as if they could not bear missing any twist or turn in the unfolding drama around them. Perhaps they had been too consumed by curiosity or by their own everyday grievances. Perhaps they simply could not help themselves, like people drawn to gruesome accidents. It all seemed quite amazing in retrospect!

It has now been over 30 years since those few bloody days in June of 1989 in Peking, collectively known as the Tiananmen Incident. Yet the world is left with no balanced and coherent overall account, with appropriate time lines, of why so many hundreds of thousands of people got caught up in the sporadic events which took place over many neighbourhoods within the capital city. A significant number of people, both soldiers and civilians, got killed or injured. The precise number remains uncertain because different sets of figures have been tossed around.

Among the first people to be injured were troops in a convoy of vehicles entering the city along Changan Avenue from the suburbs. The convoy was ambushed long before it reached Tiananmen, by angry residents who attacked and set fire to the vehicles. According to a Chinese government statement, a total of 65 trucks and 47 armoured personnel carriers were destroyed. It is difficult to imagine how many people must have been seriously hurt in the fracas that followed.

Reports currently available about the Tiananmen Incident are numerous, but most are fragmented accounts by individuals and visiting journalists. They are too often shrouded in propaganda, half-truths and outright fabrications with political bias to be taken at face value. Perhaps another generation or two will have to pass before all governments and their agencies which had any role in that shattering affair would declassify their secret files and diplomatic cables to allow historians and scholars to piece together into an understandable mosaic all the evidence and timelines of the Tiananmen Incident.

* * *

Kitty and I left Hong Kong to begin our new life in London at the

start of 1991. As to my law suit against H.C. Fung and Li & Fung (Trading), it was left in limbo because the High Court still had to assign hearing dates.

The timing of our departure, on the heels of the Tiananmen Incident, gave rise to unfounded rumours that I, like many others seeking to emigrate, had no confidence in the future of the colony once it had been returned to Chinese sovereignty. My decision to do so had long been made for other reasons. Indeed, for more than ten years thereafter, I looked forward to visiting Hong Kong regularly at least twice each year, usually during April and November, to reunite with my old *mah jong* friends and my relatives. I only ended those visits after most of those dearest to me had gone the way of all flesh.

* * *

Although this volume concludes my memoirs for the period up till 1990, I remain keen to continue writing about the next stage of my life. However, whether a further volume will ever be written depends on my health, my memory and whatever Fate might choose to decide.