

Exits A Bureaucrat

Any person who has spent 20 years in that dull, plodding, paper-pushing world of the civil service ought to find it easier than falling off a log to find his feet in Hong Kong's hustling mercantilistic snake-pit. After all, the poor man has now been abruptly liberated from all the legal, social, political and other institutionalised restraints that had hitherto inhibited his freedom of action, not to mention those bewildering provisions detailed in paragraph after turgid paragraph of the Establishment and Security Regulations.

In theory, he has been rendered at one stroke entirely free to indulge all his baser and possibly hitherto suppressed instincts, to plumb the depths of his own meanness, guile and greed for profit, like every other person in the cut-throat and self-seeking arena of commerce. But in reality life seldom pans out in such a neat and simplistic way.

After all, 20 years have to be a very long time. Over such a period, a civil servant has to become conditioned, whether he has been fully conscious of it or not, in much the same way as Pavlov's dogs or Skinner's rats or Kohler's chimpanzees.

If he has had the good fortune of working for fair-minded and enlightened mentors, he would in all probability have acquired certain habits of mind when approaching any given problem. He would view propositions from a broader and more objective perspective, as if by second nature, weighing whether each was in the public interest, good value for money, in keeping with existing legal, social, political, environmental and requirements, being largely neutral in its effects upon different segments of the population, and so on and so forth.

A public servant's career in essence offers only two broad paths to follow. If he were ambitious, he would usually seek a staff position in the air-conditioned ivory tower of the Central Secretariat. That was where one could more easily catch the eye of the great and the powerful and, with either luck or guile, be rewarded with accelerated advancement. The Secretariat also happens to be a place where the competition for promotion would be at its keenest and the tradition of backstabbing almost *de rigueur*.

Secretariat life would in itself be a kind of unreal and desiccated existence. Yet it would suit individuals of a certain bent and disposition. It was a life wedded to clever abstractions, playing with numbers, extrapolating from dubious statistics to formulate suggested courses of action. Without doubt policies always seemed to sound more convincing and digestible once the unpredictability of human nature had been factored

out of equations.

The second great sphere in civil service endeavour lay in the more messy work of frontline departments, that is, in departments dealing with problems generated by those living closer to the sharper edges of human existence. Examples of such work would be in squatter clearances, hawkers control, enforcing the rules and regulations governing “industrial undertakings” or under the Buildings Ordinance.

Anyone who has ever stepped inside a squatter encampment or through the former legally disputed Kowloon Walled City could not help being struck by the festoons of electric wires tapping electricity illegally from the overhead mains cables. Such activities, apart from being crimes, also represented serious public hazards.

A public servant stumbling upon such a situation would have a clear duty to act. He could, to some extent, sidestep the issue by reporting the problem to one of the two franchised power generation companies. After all it was their electricity that was being stolen and it had to be in their own self-interest to put a stop to it.

On the other hand, if he were a factory inspector coming across half a dozen housewives in a flat making garments as piecework to supplement their family incomes, his duty would be more immediate. He would have the sticky business of deciding whether the place constituted an industrial undertaking within the terms of the relevant rules and regulations. If so, the problem would hoist him into an uncomfortable position because it would be an issue he could hardly meaningfully resolve.

He could warn the housewives they might be breaking the law and that if they did not desist he would have to issue a summons against whoever might be in charge of the place. Thereupon the housewives would probably meekly move their sewing machines elsewhere to continue earning their pittance. If he were to decide that the enterprise was not strictly speaking an industrial undertaking within the terms of the law, he immediately exposes himself to the risk of being accused later of not doing his duty. Worse still, he might even be accused of having taken a bribe to turn a blind eye to a clear infraction of the law.

The lot of officials on the frontline was seldom a happy one. They faced invidious decisions almost on a daily basis. Sometimes they would be blamed even without doing nothing wrong.

Imagine for a moment the following scenario: The government, after due study and public consultation, decides to build a new highway linking

two townships through the suburban areas in between. The only snag in the project was a small cluster of illegal squatters camped somewhere along the route of the proposed highway. Someone would have to remove them and some official in squatter clearance would have to do that thankless job.

Such a clearance official would be depressingly aware that he would always be a convenient Aunt Sally for disgruntled citizens of all shapes and sizes. The countless thousands of motorists, commuters, goods hauliers and others who would benefit from improved traffic flows and the enhanced connectivity between the various parts of a city could not be counted on to openly support his clearance work. He and his demolition team would have to face alone the placard-carrying squatters, loud in their complaints about relocation packages being inadequate, temporary accommodation being sub-standard and alternative resettlement sites too remotely located.

And the mass media, always striving for a “human interest” angle to stories to boost readership, would avidly photograph some withered widow scheduled for removal, with her miserable possessions piled next to her, or some tearful single mother with a brood of children complaining about the disruption to their schooling. Such photographs would imply an obvious cold-bloodedness in officials handling their evictions. In that fug of emotion the fact that the squatters had been illegally occupying Crown land for umpteen years would be entirely lost.

Frontline officials are also human. They are not deprived of natural empathy. But their hands are tied. They are utterly incapable of offering succour. They are not allowed to deal with unfortunates as individuals, each with his or her own different set of personal circumstances. They are bound by precedence, by rules and regulations, by well established compensation packages, as if every victim of misfortune had been produced by an identical mould in some infernal machine. and had to be processed in the same way.

The more reflective of those in the frontline must ponder their predicament in having disagreeable duties over which they had little flexibility to alter or amend. They might vent their frustrations with colleagues, commiserate with one another over their common fate. The more conscientious might trawl through old files to see if there had been flaws in the original decisions or whether changed circumstances would merit a review.

If the frontline officers happened to be Chinese, their discomfiture might be even greater. First, they would feel the prick of racial discrimination against them *vis-à-vis* their European colleagues being paid better for carrying out the same kind of tasks. Then, in spite of the consistent attempt to de-emphasise the teaching of Chinese history and culture in the colonial educational system, they would recall the millennia-honoured Chinese ideal of officials treating common people under their care as if they were children and they their very own fathers and mothers.

But no amount of anguish and no number of initiatives at reform would be of much avail. Every bureaucracy has its own steadfastness. The high-fliers in the Secretariat would be quick to label all colleagues challenging the status quo disparagingly as “bleeding hearts” or, collectively, as “the wets”.

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Strange as it may sound, there had been a period in the colony’s history when “the wets” had appeared to be in the ascendent.

The origins of that ascendancy could reasonably be traced to the start of the governorship of Sir Geoffrey Northcote in September of 1937. His appointment happened to follow hot on the heels of the Marco Polo Bridge incident in China which ignited the long-running Second Sino-Japanese War.

As fighting erupted all over China, refugees began streaming towards the colony. The situation turned particularly dire after the fall of Canton and Northcote quickly declared Hong Kong a neutral zone. But with the arrival of refugees, he saw that additional housing and social services had to be provided for the growing numbers of poor. He appointed an Administrative Officer as the first “Labour Officer” to oversee the working and living conditions of workers as the colony willy-nilly started to industrialise.

Matters like an income tax to pay for increased social services and the possibility of encouraging the development of trade unions began to be mooted. By the time his term of office ended in 1941, he had been overtaken by poor health. So he retired.

He was succeeded by Sir Mark Young in September of 1941. Sir Mark, like Northcote, had a progressive cast of mind. But early in

December Japan suddenly attacked Hong Kong and Pearl Harbour simultaneously to create their great co-prosperity sphere. Since the Japanese had long had seasoned troops well positioned in Kwangtung, they made short work of British defences. By December 25, Hong Kong had no alternative but to surrender.

Sir Mark was thus taken as a prisoner of war and held till August of 1945. In spite of his high rank, he was not spared many of the normal brutalities of the Japanese. After a period of recuperation in England, he resumed his duties as governor in May of 1946.

He saw at once that the Japanese had punctured the comforting myth of white superiority which had hitherto cocooned much of the expatriate community. He pressed ahead with a programme for reform which echoed some of the ideas of Northcote. Within three months of his return he removed the bar against Chinese taking up residence on Victoria Peak and on the hills of the island of Cheung Chau. He also appointed the first Chinese to the elite Administrative Service.

In the political sphere, he proposed a 30-member Legislative Council to be chosen by Hong Kong residents with its decisions immune to the Governor's veto. He felt that if Chinese residents were given a greater say over their affairs they might develop a sense of belonging to Hong Kong and thus become more inclined to be loyal British subjects, as a sort of local antidote to the irredentist sentiments growing in other parts of China.

Sir Mark was fortunate in having a similarly progressive-minded Administrative Officer by the name of David MacDougall to support his programme. Indeed, MacDougall had anticipated some of the possible reforms even before Sir Mark had resumed duty as governor in May of 1946.

MacDougall had been working in Hong Kong since 1928 and he had harboured a dim view of some of his expatriate colleagues. He thought many of them pompous and too inward-looking and provincial in their attitudes. It would not be surprising if he had thought of them in terms of Kipling's lines about "the flannelled fools at the wicket and the muddied oafs at the goal".

After the Japanese had captured the colony, MacDougall managed to escape and find his way back to Britain. There he rose to become the head of the Hong Kong planning unit in the Colonial Office.

Because of that experience, he was appointed the chief civil affairs officer when Rear Admiral Ceil Harcourt and his flotilla came to Hong

Kong to set up a military administration after World War II. During that eight-month period before civil government could be restored, MacDougall and his small team did whatever was necessary to get the city back on its feet, without too much regard for pre-war bureaucratic protocols.

After Sir Mark had resumed the governorship, MacDougall was appointed Colonial Secretary. The reforming zeal of the duo, however, produced an unexpected response from the bulk of the Chinese population. Most were not much interested in abstractions like being represented in the councils of government; they desired more to be left alone to make a living as best they could. Nonetheless, many took their initiatives as manifestations that they were trying to live up to the Chinese ideal of being “*fu-mo-guans*” who had their best interests, as would their own fathers and mothers. From such a mistaken perspective, the Chinese inhabitants were content to leave political and social affairs largely in the hands of such enlightened British rulers.

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The impetus for reforms came to a shuddering halt when Sir Mark retired and an arch-conservative colonial bureaucrat, Sir Alexander Grantham, took over as governor in July of 1947.

Grantham had spent a period of service in Hong Kong in the 1920s. But much of it had been in the Secretariat where he had little contact with the people he ruled over.

The 1920s had been a fractured and turbulent period in China. The country had entered into the Allied Triple Entente in 1917 to participate in the First World War, on the understanding that the spheres of influence the Germans had in Shantung Province, which Germany had already surrendered after the Siege of Tsingtao, would be returned to China. As part of that agreement, China sent 140,000 labourers to France to assist in the common cause.

But during the negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Britain and France went back on their word and allowed Japan to take over the former German possessions.

The entire Chinese nation was outraged by that betrayal and demanded that its weak government should refuse to sign the treaty. Intellectuals, students, the media, magazines, chambers of commerce, workers and other sectors of society then joined forces to launch an

anti-imperialist cultural and political movement which came to be known as the May Fourth Movement.

The movement represented a very significant turning point in Chinese history. The Russian Revolution had taken place in 1917 which suggested new possibilities for organising society. However, much of the country remained parcelled out among warlords and their militias, each seeking only power for themselves.

The Revolution of 1911 might have overthrown the Manchu Dynasty but it still failed to deliver the national unity and pride people had longed for. The masses were almost past the point of endurance after so many decades of humiliations at the hands of foreign powers and so much corruption practised by their own rulers. Many came to regard the movement as a carrying forward of the yet uncompleted Revolution of 1911.

Yet among the leaders of the movement, the old Chinese disease of disunity was still virulent. Some blamed the old Confucian culture for the weakness of the country and suggested that the Western emphasis on science and liberal democracy was the right road to follow. Others advocated Marxism.

Still others charged that the Western notions of individualism, materialism and utilitarianism were corrupting the young and advocated Confucian teachings of traditional virtues be brought up to date so that those virtues might remain the foundation of the nation. Among those advocates were General Chiang Kai-Shek and Dr. Sun Yat-Sen of the Kuomintang.

In the near term, the more conservative voices prevailed and the government began purging foreign ideas and books from the educational system.

But however political leaders and intellectuals might bicker among themselves over political theories, the genie of Chinese nationalism had been released from the bottle and there was no putting it back. The masses expressed their anti-foreign sentiments spontaneously through boycotts, strikes and demonstrations. They were aimed primarily at British, French and Japanese interests.

For reasons which were not readily explicable, the British officers who commanded armed policemen or soldiers seemed unduly trigger-happy whenever confronted by Chinese demonstrators. What had happened to the legendary British phlegm and stiff upper lips? They opened fire prematurely on demonstrators in the Shanghai International Settlement on May 20th in 1925 and killed nine of them while injuring many others. Again at Shameen on June 23rd they killed 50 more while the number injured ran into triple figures. Those shootings added fuel to an already raging fire.

The Chinese authorities in Canton, responding to popular outrage and being advised by a number of Comintern agents from Russia, decided to call a boycott of British goods and a general strike in Hong Kong. British interests there presented obvious targets for retaliation. Pamphlets were distributed all over the colony to incite anti-British sentiments and to call upon Chinese to abandon the colony and to return to the mainland. Free rail and steamer passages were offered as a further inducement.

By the end of the first week of that retaliation strategy, 50,000 Chinese had left the colony; by the end of July that number had increased to a quarter of a million. That sudden loss of essential workers paralysed the city. Trade declined by half. Rumours circulated that the water supplies might be poisoned. The city quickly turned itself into almost a ghost town

Since the colony was hugely dependent upon China for food supplies, prices sky-rocketed, Those in need had to draw upon their savings to make purchases and that in turn triggered a bank run. To prevent a total collapse of the economy, London had to make an emergency loan of three million pounds to stave off that eventuality.

The Governor of the time was Sir Reginald Stubbs. He initiated forceful emergency measures, which included the deployment of triad thugs to intimidate those who supported or encouraged either the strike or the boycott. But he was criticised for being out of touch with Chinese sentiments and was shunted out of office. Stubbs Road stands today as a monument to his very mediocre governorship.

Stubbs was to land himself in another maladministration scandal in Ceylon some years later, after he had been appointed Governor of that island.

The strike in Hong Kong eventually fizzled out, after strike funds became exhausted and when those who had not returned to China found it

necessary to accept whatever work they could get. But the strike revealed the potency of what united Chinese action could achieve. It also sounded a warning to the British that the mood of their colonial subjects had to be taken seriously.

The French writer André Malraux used those events of 1925-6 as the backdrop to his novel *The Conquerors*.

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Alexander Grantham had been a young administrator in Hong Kong when those events unfolded. But he drew quite a different conclusion from them and he subsequently wrote about them in his memoirs. They also affected his approach to running the colony after he had been made Governor of Hong Kong in 1947.

Grantham had noted the havoc which could be inflicted on British interests once the Chinese decided to act in concert. The British had shot them in Shanghai and again in greater numbers at Shameen. But such measures brought no change in their behaviour. He might therefore have concluded that they were an irascible and irredeemable race. He began regarding the notion advanced by Sir Mark Young and the Colonial Secretary David MacDougall that such people could somehow be turned into loyal British subjects through constitutional and other reforms as totally misguided. And he told Whitehall and the Colonial Office so.

Grantham had not actually been a die-hard imperialist. He was not out to plunder the place as the leading lights in the East India Company had done in India. But he certainly governed with more of an eye on the broader United Kingdom interest than the more focused interests of the people of Hong Kong.

No doubt he was fully aware of the chronic balance of payments of Britain and the recurring pressures on sterling. He was aware also of the dark arts practised in the Colonial Office and the City of London. He therefore thought that by maintaining the city as a secure and stable hub for profitable trade the home country would benefit from the invisible contributions from banking, insurance and corporate dividends.

He set out to realise that vision, keeping a wary eye out for whoever might turn out to be victorious in the civil war then raging in China. He felt he had to keep the city on an even keel for there were many supporters of both factions in the colony. And a lot of fickle fence-sitters too.

He did not encourage the social intermingling between rulers and the ruled and he kept some of the racist and discriminatory colonial policies in place. But his ability to maintain reasonable stability during unsettled times made him popular with the local elites, for stability offered enhanced opportunities for wheeling and dealing and making money.

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With the retirement of Sir Mark Young and his replacement by Sir Alexander Grantham, the Colonial Secretary David MacDougall found his ability to initiate reforms on the wane. Moreover, apart from philosophical differences with Grantham, there had also been personality differences.

MacDougall's family was in Britain and he fell in love with a woman in Hong Kong. He engaged in an extramarital affair which Grantham did not approve of. Grantham thought it an unbecoming lapse for someone in such a senior position, as if those high up in the social order should all have atrophied hearts and be incapable of romantic impulses and sins of the flesh. Other more reprehensible types of human sins, however, appeared less objectionable.

In the end, MacDougall sought early retirement in 1949 at the age of 45, making use of a civil service provision which he, ironically, had himself introduced to get rid of deadwood infesting the bureaucracy. With his departure, the Administrative Service lost one of its most talented and farsighted members.

But MacDougall was not to be the last Colonial Secretary hounded out of the service for an extramarital indiscretion. That testified to the narrow-minded social attitude still infecting the colonial hierarchy.

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The first Chinese to be appointed into the elite Administrative Service had been brought about by Sir Mark Young in 1947. But it would be the 1950s before another Chinese was admitted into that magic circle.

The official explanation for that hiatus was that most of the graduates from the University of Hong Kong had studied medicine and the sciences and only very few graduated with Arts degrees. And among those few, most went after the better paying jobs in the private sector than enter government service. Hence the government had a very limited pool of

suitable candidates to choose from.

That official narrative was disingenuous in at least three respects.

First, it ignored the fact that in the early 1950s a growing number of Hong Kong students were returning to the colony with degrees in the Humanities from foreign universities. Therefore there had been a much larger pool of suitable candidates than had been made out.

Secondly, the aspersion cast upon the civic mindedness of the young was quite uncalled for. The real reason why some locals did not put themselves forward was because they could not abide the more generous pay scale offered to Europeans than the one offered to locals.

Thirdly, a secret protocol was in place which rendered it more difficult for a Chinese candidate to be admitted to the service because no matter how many vacancies there might be and how many suitable Chinese candidates might be available, the admission of a Chinese was restricted to no more than one a year.

All those discriminatory and atavistic policies had been in place and in practice during the Grantham governorship.

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When I returned from Stanford in 1953, a friend suggested I should apply to become an Administrative Officer. I had been very much in two minds. I was not a fan of the recurring hypocrisies of British colonialism. But since I was in urgent need of employment, I decided to give it a try.

I turned up for the preliminary interviews and took all the written tests. The final hurdle was to appear before the Public Services Commission. On the appointed day, two other Chinese candidates and myself turned up. I thought all of us did fairly well and I had expected all three to be offered appointments.

In retrospect, I might have blotted my copybook somewhat by answering a question too truthfully from a rather supercilious looking British Chairman of the Public Services Commission who went by the rather commonplace surname of Jones.

He had asked me to name the last book I had read. I replied unhesitating and truthfully that it had been Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Maybe I should have lied a little to ingratiate myself to a haughtily inclined Britisher. I could have said it had been a volume of

Churchill's wartime speeches, which incidentally had just been handsomely published around that time by Cassell. But I was not quick-witted enough.

I had no idea whether Mr. Jones had an aversion to German writers. I would now never know because he merely raised an eyebrow, looked down his nondescript nose and did not pursue the subject further. Neither did any other member of the Commission.

It transpired eventually that only one of us was given an appointment and that person was not I. It was then that I become aware of the secret protocol limiting the appointment of Chinese candidates to no more than one a year.

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Having failed to secure a post in the civil service, I reverted to my previous profession of journalism. I landed a job as night sub-editor with the *Hong Kong Standard*, which formed part of the strongly pro-Kuomintang Sing Tao Newspaper Group. I was not particularly concerned by the political orientation of the newspaper; I was just there to edit other people's reports.

The Editor-in-Chief of the paper at the time was a Eurasian by the name of Leslie Sung. He was a graduate of the University of Hong Kong and was several years older than myself. His father was Chinese and his mother a Swede. He had worked as a journalist in Shanghai before coming to Hong Kong after the Communists came to power in 1949. He was a six-footer, though he carried himself with a slight stoop, probably because his wife, Lorraine, a jolly and dainty lady, was barely five feet tall.

Leslie and Lorraine were avid bridge players and the three of us soon fell into the habit of meeting up at the Craigengower Cricket Club for a few rubbers before Leslie and I turned up for work early in the evening. Lorraine would continue her game at the club till we picked her up after work at around 2.30 in the morning. We would then repair for a snack at an eatery in North Point which served up a very succulent duck congee before making our separate ways home.

After I had been with the *Standard* for a few months, I offered to write an occasional editorial page article for free, just to keep my hand in. Leslie accepted my offer and a few of my pieces began to appear. They were for the most part anodyne stuff for I was not out to bruise colonial sensitivities or to ruffle the political feathers of the owners of the

newspaper. However I did take an occasional swipe at what I regarded as misguided American foreign policies.

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One day, a few months later, when Leslie and I turned up for our evening stint of work, Leslie was asked to go and see Miss Aw Sian, the Chief Executive of the Sing Tao Group.

When Leslie returned to his office, his mouth was set in a grim line and his face was black as doom.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I’ve been told to pay you a month’s salary in lieu of notice and to ask you to leave.”

“Why?” I cried, staggered by his answer. “What have I done?”

“Those were the very questions I had asked. It appears that the government Press Relations Officer, a chap by the name of Jock Murray, had called on Miss Aw Sian and indicated that the government did not like the tone of some of your articles. He suggested it would be better if you were no longer on the *Standard’s* payroll.”

“But Jock Murray is just a low-level functionary,” I said. “He would have neither the authority nor the guts to advance such a proposition unless he has already got a nod from someone much farther up the Grantham administration.”

“My reading of the situation precisely. I argued against your dismissal, stating it was clearly an underhanded attack on freedom of speech and the independence of the press. But Miss Aw Sian was adamant you should go. I’m very sorry.”

“Don’t worry, Les. I’ll survive. I’m employed here on a strictly month-to-month basis in any case, like the overwhelming majority of salary-earners in Hong Kong. I’m being paid off. I can’t quarrel with the right of bosses to hire and fire as they like. That *is* the prevailing custom here. It’s too bad that there’s not even a union of journalists for anyone to go to. Some of us did try to form what we called ‘an association of journalists’ back in 1948. The elites did not like the idea and it came to nothing.”

Leslie sighed. “I can’t just let you go like that. It impacts on my own position. If the government does not like the tone of your articles, then I

am also implicated because I approved all of your articles before publication. The least I should do is to resign in protest.”

“Don’t do anything quite so silly, Les! Why allow them to silence two voices instead of one? I’m a bachelor but you’ve a family to support. Impartial journalism is a fight worth sticking around for. Just continue doing whatever you think is right.”

That unexpected episode must have made Leslie realise that he could never count on job security in journalism. So he began studying law. After he had qualified, he left newspaper work and became a partner in the venerable legal firm of Lo & Lo. But long before that, Lorraine had passed away, leaving behind a daughter named Elaine to be raised by Leslie.

As for myself, I did a number of odd jobs to keep change in my pocket. It was fortunate that during that financially unstable period, I had an amazing run of good luck at the bridge table. Eventually I had to settle into two years of teaching English and European history at secondary schools.

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It came as no surprise to me that after the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the Sing Tao Group of newspapers quickly abandoned its longstanding pro-Kuomintang stance and switched support to Peking. It was about par for the course for those fond of extolling the virtues of Hong Kong “pragmatism”.

What I derived a certain degree of malicious satisfaction from, however, was an event which occurred the following year. In 1998, members of the management of the Sing Tao Group were found guilty of falsifying the circulation figures of the *Standard* in order to charge higher advertising rates. The government of the day, however, decided not to prosecute the spineless Miss Aw Sian for reasons of “public benefit”. No doubt this had been a decision made in keeping with the slipperiness and selectiveness of the great British tradition of allegedly following the rule of law.

Miss Aw Sian, however, was required to give up her substantial holdings in the Sing Tao Group.

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To be fair to Sir Alexander Grantham, the city had always been a place wide open to the influences of events occurring elsewhere in its neighbourhood, to the petty squabbles and misguided conflicts waged between others. His tenure overlapped a tumultuous period not only in Asian history but also in world history and in social and economic developments within his own country. For him to have maintained peace and stability in a tiny slice of alienated soil on the underbelly of China — and to do so with fairness and justice — would have tested the wisdom of Solomon.

A number of altered realities ought to be kept in mind in assessing the Grantham administration. Or perhaps they should be more appropriately described as “shattered illusions”.

I remember clearly some of the propaganda during World War II. The Japanese had been routinely depicted in cartoons as having buckteeth and wearing thick glasses. I imagined that had been partly the reason why Churchill had failed to consider the Japanese air force a serious threat when Japan entered World War II. Well, Japanese pilots made very short work of the British warships *The Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* once hostilities began.

But the Japanese also did something far more important to the psychology of Asians living as colonial subjects. They shattered once and for all the long-cultivated myth of white superiority. People under British colonial rule woke up to the fact that their white masters had feet of clay. Grantham could no longer expect the deference previously granted to some of his predecessors.

Furthermore, he was ruling from a position of metropolitan weakness rather than of strength. World War II had virtually bankrupt Britain. Strict rationing of food and other essential goods was being enforced. Recurring balance of payments problems were destabilising the pound, leading it to be devalued in 1949. Since the Hong Kong dollar was linked to sterling that provided another headache. Grantham knew that if Hong Kong ever got into serious economic trouble, he could not count on the kind of financial help granted during 1925-6.

The first of the many great tests of his mettle came when Chairman Mao's forces drove the remnants of the Kuomintang armies to their island redoubt of Taiwan, where they could be protected from further defeat by the naval might of the United States Seventh Fleet.

Meanwhile, Chairman Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1st of 1949. It was fairly touch and go for a while whether the People's Liberation Army, filled with irredentist fervour, would respect the borders of the colony. In the event the borders were respected. But within those borders lived large numbers of supporters of both factions in the civil war. How to deter them from extending their fights to the streets of Hong Kong called for considerable finesse.

But another international development farer afield also posed an unexpected challenge to Grantham's instincts.

The end of World War II had left the Korean peninsular divided into two regimes, both of which claimed to be the legitimate government of the whole country which had previously been under Japanese colonial rule. In June of 1950, the regime in the north invaded the south to assert its claim. Being better prepared, the northern troops soon had the southern forces on the run.

America and its allies then intervened militarily to help the south. That aroused the concern of China for its own national security. It conveyed a warning to the Americans that their forces should not move north of the 38th parallel dividing the two regimes nor move towards the Yalu River bordering China.

But General Douglas MacArthur, directing the allied armies from the comfort of his office in Tokyo, paid little attention. He dismissed the possibility of a Chinese intervention and even contemplated the use of nuclear weapons against them and the North Koreans.

When American forces went above the 38th parallel, China made good its promise by entering the conflict in October of 1950.

America responded by placing, via the United Nations, an embargo on all trade with China. But how could such an embargo be enforced in Hong Kong, whose very *raison d'être* had been and remained to facilitate *entrepôt* trade with China?

At the beginning of the 1950s, virtually every Chinese family in the colony had close relatives on the mainland. On average, about 5,000 Hong Kong residents travel to China every day for family or business purposes. How would junior civil servants on the frontline determine whether a traveller carrying, say, a quantity of insulin for his diabetic wife or several tins of milk powder for his newborn grandchild, was engaging in embargoed "trade"?

Or should the extreme option of closing the entire land border with China be considered? But the city was highly dependent upon China for its food. Could it endure another 1925-6 type of food scarcity? Any notion of replicating the 1948 Berlin airlift was totally impractical. Quite apart from the enormous financial costs, planes taking off or landing at the Kai Tak International Airport would have to overfly Chinese airspace.

And what about the sea boundaries? For centuries, the myth of Britannia ruling the waves had been assiduously cultivated and uncritically accepted. But during the 19th century, when British naval power was at its height, the British never managed to impose their will on the smugglers and pirates operating around Hong Kong. Indeed, at times they had to cooperate with those lawless elements to get the better of the Chinese authorities in the opium trade. And of course, during World War II, British naval might counted for little against the modernised Japanese.

The Grantham administration also had to contend with the emotional, psychological and commercial resistance of a significant section of the domestic population towards the UN embargo. Many Chinese saw the embargo as a fresh attempt by foreign powers to bully and humiliate their country again. Determined bands of patriots were soon formed to supply China with a whole range of strategic supplies essential for prosecuting the war in Korea. High on the lists of required items were sulphur drugs, antibiotics and other medicines needed to treat those wounded or maimed in Korea.

A more disreputable element in the colony's money-grubbing society soon entered the picture. Taking advantage of the Chinese lack of sophistication over pharmaceuticals, they began manufacturing fake drugs to sell to them. Both stages in that enterprise constituted criminal offences under colonial law but that did not deter the rascals who regarded money as thicker than blood or human life.

The kind of policies pursued by the Grantham administration in the light of such political cross-currents and countervailing circumstances was by no means clear. I was not in Hong Kong during the Korean War. So I cannot speak with any first hand knowledge. What I had subsequently heard from others who had been there at the time indicated that there had been neither consistent interdictions of junks breaking the embargo by smuggling strategic supplies to China nor any serious clampdown on the manufacture of fake drugs.

It would appear that Grantham and his administration had resorted to the old dodge adopted by Lord Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801 — holding his telescope to his blind eye to avoid seeing what he had no wish to see.

To an extent this represented another grand example of the triumph of British colonial non-management. Under it a number of Chinese patriots grew exceedingly rich and won great kudos and rewards from Peking. The producers of fake drugs which harmed those who had fought to defend the nation's security were left to be eventually dealt with by patriots in their own way.

If similar acts of wickedness were to take place today and the local authorities failed to prosecute the perpetrators to the full extent of the local law, then I see no objection to their being extradited to face justice in the jurisdictions where their products had caused harm.

Not all the crises befalling Hong Kong could be solved through benign neglect. For example, the 1953 Christmas fire at the Shek Kip Mei squatter area left two dead and 53,000 homeless overnight and immediately tested the capabilities of the bureaucracy to respond to emergencies. It resulted in the start of a massive public housing programme.

Regrettably, six and a half decades after Shek Kip Mei and after the touting of several Ten-Year Housing Plans by successive administrations, affordable housing in Hong Kong remains a lively and critical public issue.