

Fireworks

One of the first conversations I had with H.C. after joining the trading arm of Li & Fung was about the performance of the Handicraft Division. The division was headed by Fung Kwok-Hong, the nephew of H.C. and the eldest son of H.C.'s long deceased elder brother Fung Mo-Ying.

Fung Kwok-Hong was a sober, middle-aged man who was rather hesitant and halting of speech. He did not strike me immediately as an impressive mind in the same category as Albert Einstein might have been but rather as a hard-working plodder.

His wife, Rosetta, served as his deputy. Her own speciality was the sale and handling of Christmas decorations, wigs, earthenware, plastic flowers and handicraft. She was a woman who was much smarter and more talkative than her husband. The two of them nonetheless formed a good team and between them they shared a teenaged daughter.

The main income of the division derived largely from the sale of fireworks throughout the southern American states and in particular from the sale of a proprietary brand known as the Black Cat.

Whoever began the fireworks business in the early part of the 20th century operated very smartly. He recognised America as a promising market because its people celebrated the Fourth of July and Halloween by discharging vast quantities of fireworks. He not only registered the brand in the United States in 1952 but promoted it assiduously among young customers by slogans such as "The Best You Can Get". T-shirts with a Black Cat logo and other small gifts were handed out from time to time and myths about Black Cat products giving more "bang for the buck" soon took root.

Today Black Cat fireworks are not only favoured by the younger users but they also command a premium of about 10% in the market over all other brands of fireworks in the southern states of America.

Li & Fung joined the American Pyrotechnics Association at around the same time as the registration of the trademark. The Association was the main lobbying organisation for manufacturers, importers, retailers, distributors and others involved in the fireworks trade in America.

For reasons which were not very clear to me, H.C. had always retained a close oversight over the fireworks business and had ever since been working directly with Fung Kwok-Hong. Part of the reason could have been because H.C. had been involved in that business from way back and so retained a sentimental attachment to it.

But another reason might have forced itself upon him because of

politics. Most of the supplies came from a large factory in Kwangsi Province, one of the five provinces designated by the Chinese for producing and exporting fireworks when the country began its export drive in the 1980s. H.C.'s political connections with Taiwan might have rendered it awkward for him to go directly to the mainland himself. So he sent his nephew there to negotiate, even though Li & Fung retained some fireworks connections with Taiwan as well.

What was curious about the factory at Kwangsi was that it produced fireworks for a number of different brands, both from China, Hong Kong and elsewhere. They were in reality identical products. The only difference between them was that the factory stuck on different labels according to the wishes of each individual customer. In that sense, it was a little disingenuous for Li & Fung to claim that the Black Cat fireworks were "The Best You Can Get".

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When H.C. spoke to me about his nephew soon after I had joined the company, he asked me to keep a close eye on Kwok-Hong. He said he had heard rumours that Kwok-Hong intended to leave Li & Fung to set up a trading business for himself.

"That's par for the course, isn't it?" I replied. "In the neoliberal capitalist world we're operating in, it's every man looking after and promoting himself. Mrs. Thatcher says there's no such thing as society. It's dog eat dog. Can't blame anyone for wanting to better himself or herself."

"But if Kwok-Hong goes, so would Rosetta. That could spell a wholesale reconstruction of the Handicraft Division."

"That's a possibility we will have to face should it arise. Unless you have solid evidence of some wrong-doing on Kwok-Hong's part, I don't know the man at all. If you have more than rumours, you could take action directly against him. You have been working directly with him for years. You don't need me to deliver the *coup de grâce*."

"It's not so easy for me; he's part of the family," H.C. replied.

All at once it occurred to me that I might have been invited into the company for an ulterior purpose. Was my role to be a buffer in an old family feud, the roots of which had been lost in the mists of generational relationships?

I recalled that years ago, when I first met H.C., he had hinted at differences of opinion with his eldest brother, Mo-Ying, who was at that time the chairman of the company. He had always been submissive and obedient, he told me.

His brother was now dead and H.C. had inherited the running of the family firm and its chairmanship. Was he trying to rid all remnants of his brother's progeny within the company in the interests of his own children? Was he attempting the proverbial Chinese gambit of "borrowing a knife in order to kill someone else"? I did not want to serve as another man's hired knife.

In theory, Kwok-Hong was under my wing and I owed him — just as I owed everyone else under my charge — a duty of care and protection. I recalled that I myself had been fired in 1954 from the *Hong Kong Standard* just because someone in the colonial government of the time did not like what I had written.

I was helpless then and without resources and had to accept my fate, notwithstanding that a principled friend, Leslie Sung, the Editor-in-Chief at the time, was willing to stand with me in my downfall. But I had deterred him from it as being only a pointless gesture.

Now, however, I could stand on my own two feet and I was not convinced that anybody should be fired just on somebody else's say-so. I needed proof of serious misdeeds before I would act against a person under my command.

So I said: "Well, you know the way I tend to think, H.C. We've been friends a long time and we trust each other. That's why we've had such a good horse-owning partnership. I will keep a close watch on Kwok-Hong's division and his activities in general. But I would need concrete proof of wrong-doing against Li & Fung before I can act against him. It will be no small matter, because Rosetta will have to become a casualty too. Perhaps also others in his division."

"Of course there must be unambiguous proof, if he is going to be sacked," H.C. said. But the tone of his voice and the way he expressed himself implied that I was failing in my first test of loyalty and obedience. I dreaded to think that our friendship might be under threat.

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Perhaps it is appropriate at this stage to make a small diversion, in order to explain through history why we Chinese are such a noisy people, addicted to the use of drums, gongs, cymbals and firecrackers on every conceivable occasion — at weddings, anniversaries, inaugurations of new businesses, festivals and even at funerals.

Our love for noise and clamour is rooted in a widely held Chinese superstition that evil spirits could be frightened away by noise. Hence, since ancient times, the discharge of firecrackers has been seen as a means of preventing evil spirits from marring auspicious occasions.

Originally, this was done by the throwing of segments of bamboo into fires. The oxygen trapped inside bamboo segments would heat up and explode, making a frightening sound. After the invention of gunpowder in the ninth century, firecrackers eventually took over that noise-making role.

It took the Chinese quite some time to stumble upon gunpowder, even though they had been familiar for centuries with three of its most important elements, namely, saltpetre or potassium nitrate, sulphur and carbon.

Saltpetre was in fact in great abundance in China from the earliest time, though it was completely unknown in the West till the Middle Ages. The Chinese, however, did not recognise it for what it was. It took quite some time for them to differentiate it from a number of other similar-looking chemical salts. Although the ability to liquefy potassium nitrate for use in dissolving otherwise indissoluble minerals had been apparent for some centuries, it was not till around 300 AD that a reliable way was found to identify genuine saltpetre from other ores.

It likewise took some time to purify sulphur, another important ingredient in the making of gunpowder. On the other hand, the carbon of charcoal had been to hand since ancient times.

Once the three basic elements had been brought together, it was only a matter of time before someone mixed them in the appropriate portions to produce gunpowder. Thereafter, its evolutionary use into fireworks came fast and furious. But, sadly, so too did its military applications.

The invention of gunpowder was a historical irony. It emerged not out of any desire by anyone to seek a better means of waging war or killing off one's enemies but rather out of experiments carried out by a bunch of old Taoists codgers seeking to find an elixir to immortality.

That search itself had been a fascinating one, involving a number of jolly mishaps and the singeing of some quite venerable beards. But those tales have already been amply and exhaustively told elsewhere so I will not

recapitulate them here.

I mention this in the present narrative only to draw attention to one of the many unintended consequences that can flow from all kinds of human endeavours. How could those early Taoist alchemists have foreseen that the repeated mixing of chemical elements to find some life-extending potion would unleash upon the world a substance capable of killing and maiming millions of people ever afterwards?

The West knew nothing about gunpowder nor its uses until late in the twelve century. That knowledge reached Europe via the Arabs trading with China. But the European nations were not much interested in using gunpowder for making fireworks and firecrackers. Their enthusiasm for the substance stemmed from its military applications.

A great many scientific and technological advances have been made since the invention of gunpowder. Unfortunately, man's ethical and emotional maturity have not developed apace with man's mastery of the sciences.

As a consequence, terrifying new weapons of mass destruction are constantly being unleashed upon a sleep-walking world. Political leaders have apparently been unable to curb such developments, let alone prohibit them. Some have even been egging them on, with reckless bravado and oblivious of the possibility for self-annihilation and total human extinction.

Even at my present age of 91, it is not the kind of possibility that can earn me a good night's sleep.

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Since I had promised H.C. I would keep a close watch on Kwok-Hong and his crew, I had to find a fair and unprovocative way of discharging my mission. H.C. had made no bones about his antipathies under the long rule of his brother, Mo-Ying, and I was well known in many circles as a horse-racing partner of H.C.'s long before joining the company. It did not take a genius to put two and two together and for rumours to circulate. Therefore I had to step warily.

After a while, I invited Kwok-Hong and Rosetta for a bite after work, on the basis it was all part of my getting to know divisional heads and their responsibilities.

The meal naturally got off to a shaky start. The air was thick with uncertainty and apprehension. I could not blame Kwok-Hong and Rosetta

for thinking I might have an ulterior motive in inviting them out or suspecting that I might be working against their interests. In actual fact, I was only trying to determine how well their division had been doing and whether H.C.'s instructions were being complied with.

I began by enquiring what H.C.'s instructions had actually been in general and regarding Black Cat products in particular.

According to Kwok-Hong, he had been asked to explore with the Kwangsi manufacturer the possibility of adding a little more gunpowder to Black Cat products being manufactured, so that they would go off with significantly louder than other brands.

But that proved impossible to do, Kwok-Hong explained, because the production lines were massive and the factory had no idea where its standard products would go until it started slapping designated labels onto them. If every customer specified his own requirements, production would be in chaos.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding reporting his failure, Kwok-Hong was told by H.C. to keep promoting Black Cat items as superior to anything else comparable on the market.

This turn of events had me worried. I had not bargained for any systematic misrepresentation to customers when I opted for a business life, even though such misleading promotion had been going on within the company for decades before my arrival.

Li & Fung had built up a brand and was charging a premium for the stuff. Its youthful consumers were also more than happy to pay extra for the goods they were getting. Like everyone else, they were free to spend their money any way they pleased, even if they were acting foolishly. Who was I to stand in their way of going about their enjoyment?

The tobacco barons had been lying about the potential health effects of smoking cigarettes for decades; big international banks had been consistently misleading their clients over their various financial packages; and car manufacturers had been fiddling for ages with the readings of the pollution gauges in their vehicles.

All governments, in any case, were accustomed to misleading their citizens every other day of the week by spewing forth a plethora of indigestible statistics over a whole range of everyday subjects. What would a little exaggeration about fireworks matter, especially when there was good money to be made? It was all bluff and advertising and sales pitches, standard practice accepted by all and sundry in neoliberal capitalist

societies.

The trouble with knowledge and experience is that once a person has discovered a truth it becomes very difficult for that person to unlearn it and feign ignorance. Truths somehow seep into his character and become part of his personality. He can neither plead ignorance nor turn a blind eye to them. Truths would remain there, just beneath his consciousness. I suppose I could behave like Pontius Pilate in the New Testament, by asking for a bowl of water to wash my hands. After all, it was really H.C. who called the shots where fireworks were concerned.

Faced with such alarming thoughts, I nudged Rosetta temporarily onto the more anodyne terrain of her relationships with her customers and their products. By the end of the meal, the atmosphere had begun to become more relaxed.

A week or so later, Kwok-Hong and Rosetta returned the compliment by inviting me for a meal after work. I accepted, because I thought it wise and prudent to build up an on-going and harmonious relationship with divisional heads. I was also uncomfortable about the not altogether straightforward role I would have to play.

The meal went more smoothly than the previous one and Kwok-Hong gradually unburdened himself during the course of dinner. He said someone had been circulating a false rumour about his intending to start out on his own and that was doing him no good. The gossip was completely without foundation. He was contented with his work at Li & Fung and he had every intention of sticking with it, if allowed. Likewise, his wife.

I could tell that he felt under a degree of unspecified pressure. I replied soothingly that the city was full of rumours and most people were too busy to pay much attention to any of them. Nonetheless, I accepted in my own mind he was sincere in his declaration of loyalty to the company from the way he had expressed himself. He did not appear to me at all the go-getter type. He came over instead as an honest and uncomplicated plodder caught in a situation that was way above his head.

I doubted privately if he would ever become a conspicuous success in running his own company, even if he tried, so it was better for him to stay where he was. He was certainly not as astute a businessman as his uncle, H.C. Fung, had been. Nor did he possess a fraction of the hustling gift of the gab commanded by his cousin, Victor Fung.

So I tried to put him at ease. I volunteered that, so far as I was

concerned, I would be quite happy to have him continue as head of the Handicraft Division and working directly with H.C. on fireworks as heretofore.

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Based on my conversations at the two dinners and a series of other observations on the culture and prejudices within the company, I told H.C. he might be quite mistaken about the veracity of the rumours he had heard about Kwok-Hong.

His nephew did not look to me a venturesome type. Moreover, he had no obvious motive for deserting his old family concern to start afresh elsewhere, unless he were pushed. He would, in any case, have to continue to get supplies of Black Cat from Li & Fung if he wanted to continue in the fireworks trade. An awkward prospect at best. By everything I had picked up, he appeared contented to stick with his existing position in the company.

After I had given my assessment, H.C. smiled knowingly and observed: "My dear friend, while a person can always listen to what people may say about themselves, he cannot actually look into the corners of their hearts. You must be more cautious if you want to succeed in business. Rumours don't circulate for no reason at all. There's no smoke without something smouldering somewhere. Continue to keep your eye open on Kwok-Hong and his outfit."

I reluctantly agreed to do so, though I remained unconvinced I would really find any misdeed of sufficient gravity to warrant recommending Kwok-Hong's dismissal. Indeed, I was beginning to feel sorry for a simple man facing forces arraigned against him by members of his own family.

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In 1983, after I had taken an extended holiday to many Chinese cities with Ip Yeuk-Lam and his family the previous year, H.C. asked me to join him and Kwok-Hong at an annual meeting of the the American Pyrotechnics Association. It was to be held that year at Scottsdale in Arizona, a town I had never visited before.

I met the request with a degree of ambivalence, however, since I had hitherto kept myself aloof from major fireworks customers, more than

happy to let them be handled between H.C. and Kwok-Hong. But on the other hand, H.C. might also have other more deeply-laid plans in mind. Was H.C. trying to tell me I ought to step up to the firing line and assume my full responsibilities in the trading arm? It was a fair enough request to make; I could only wait and see.

At Scottsdale, as Managing Director of Li & Fung (Trading), I was naturally treated as a new boy on the block. A great many members of the American Pyrotechnics Association wanted to make my acquaintance and to discuss means of augmenting our business relationships, little realising that it was H.C. who really called the shots where fireworks were concerned.

One of those who invited me for a cup of coffee was the chief buyer of a company in a southern American state. He was a regular customer of Black Cat products and was well known to Li & Fung. But he also bought other brands made by the Kwangsi manufacturer from other local dealers. He said he wanted to discuss some business matter with me. When he approached the substance of the discussion, however, he did so sideways, like a crab.

He began by saying what a fabulous city Hong Kong was. He simply could not get over the profusion of luxury items during his annual buying visits. French designer shoes, lovely jewellery, perfumes and other up-market stuff.

“My wife would go crazy over the luxury items available in your home town; armed with my credit card, of course,” he said. “She has asked me a dozen times to take her with me on my next buying trip but I’ve never found the guts.”

“Hong Kong’s not the kind of place any man ought to cut his wife loose with a credit card,” I observed. “When I had a wife, I never allowed her to use my credit card anywhere, and particularly not in Hong Kong. So I suppose that explains why I’ve become a bachelor again.”

“Things could be different if a man had some money tucked away somewhere, like some of the other traders I know. I understand juicy deals can be arrived at in your town.”

I supposed the chief buyer was referring to some of the shadier deals occurring in the trading business. Sometimes, when either an agent or a supplier was too anxious for new customers, they might arrive together at some kick-back arrangement for money to be passed back underhandedly to a buyer without the knowledge of his employer.

“Well, that depends on whom you are in contact with. We do have a free port and what is commonly called a free market system; we are a top global financial centre as well. So there’s no foreign exchange control and our taxes are extraordinarily modest. That means people can bring whatever money in or out of the place and both visitors and locals can play whatever markets they wish, stock and shares, commodities, foreign exchange or whatever, taking their winnings or losses with them when they leave.”

“I hear your city also has friendly bankers who do not ask too many questions.”

“You could say that. We remain a relatively open and tolerant society nonetheless, though — once in a while and against the odds — we do produce some real sticklers for the rule of law.”

“I hear people can open bank accounts with whatever name they choose and money can go in and out of those accounts without any fuss at all.”

“That is indeed a possibility. Banks don’t much mind if you want to call yourself ‘Miss Susie Wong’ or ‘Mr. Joe Blow’ or indeed, ‘Captain Hook’ for that matter. Our British colonial regulators also seem fairly lackadaisical over the whole process. Most of what they’ve left us are lovely bits of Latin like ‘*quid pro quo*’ and ‘*caveat emptor*’, over which our tongues sometimes trip over their proper pronunciations and their meanings.

“Some of our masters have even picked up the old Nelsonian knack of putting their telescopes to blind eyes. So that does mean we get away with a few things which might otherwise be frowned upon other administrations.

“For example, we have a number of stock exchanges, which make the people here the most obsessed of inhabitants over stock and shares anywhere in the world. They are attended by some 1,400 traders. The up-to-the-second stock prices are flashed on screens all over our town.

“Those facts are wonderful for corporations which want to cook their books or do some other kind of funny business, like share-price manipulation or some unobtrusive insider trading. This is also the ideal place for asset strippers, dawn raiders, vulture capitalists and pyramid sellers. And if anyone entertains the illusion that there is no linkage or collusion between our go-getting Hong Kong and the prim and proper Square Mile in London or the cocaine-snorting masters of the universe

making hay on Wall Street, he should think again.”

“Wow! No wonder some Western politicians have held up your free market system as a model for solving problems in their own societies. It sounds as if your town is not only famous for its custom-made suits but also for its made-to-order financial wet dreams.”

“What Western politicians have often overlooked is that free markets only work because the ordinary Joes here have also a certain kind of work ethic and a certain attitude towards hard slogs. Sure, quite a lot of foreign scammers and chancers do head our way. But we have some pretty smart local cookies as well.”

“To change the subject slightly, your Black Cat products are rather pricy, you know, when compared with some other available brands,” he said. He then rattled off the names of a few brands, including two being produced at the same Kwangsi factory which made Black Cat products.

I did not have the heart to reveal that Black Cat firecrackers were in fact no better in quality than some of the other brands he had mentioned, even though people had been willing over the years to pay a premium for Black Cat items.

“Well, we did invest a mint into brand identification,” I observed, rather smugly and with barely a sigh.

“Yes, our kids sure seem to keep asking for Black Cat bangers.”

“Good! That shows that our efforts have paid off. Get them while they’re young enough and they’ll stick with you forever.”

“Look, could we work out some kind of deal that would be beneficial to both of us? I could, for example, consider consolidating my purchases of Black Cat with Li & Fung together with those of other brands. It would make financial sense to deal with one party as both principal and agent instead of spreading things among so many different parties.”

“Consolidation will certainly bring greater efficiency,” I replied, pretending not to have grasped at all the full import of what he was driving at. “Li & Fung is always ready to accommodate your boss or yourself, in any way we can,” I added, leaving the next move completely up to him.

In actual fact, I knew precisely what the man was hinting at. He was a buyer, a mere employee and an agent of his master. He was indirectly seeking something on the side for himself, so that his wife could indulge herself on some long-postponed visit to Hong Kong.

The only trouble with that proposition was that it was quite illegal. Li & Fung had a long-established relationship with his employer, that of one

principal dealing with another principal. It was not the business of one principal to question another about how he might wish to conduct his affairs. If he wanted to dispose of his resources in a particular way, so that he could, for example, not have to disclose them to his own tax authorities or to his wife, that was his own business for which he would have to assume responsibility. No one could be expected to play his brother's keeper.

For an agent to attempt to dispose of his principal's assets in a questionable way was quite a different proposition for Li & Fung. His employer must first make his intentions clear. There was a duty of care on us. At least a confirmation of the other principal's intentions was needed to begin with.

That was where I had left the chief buyer. His boss had to first signify his agreement to what was being hinted at by his employee. Therefore the ball was in the buyer's court; it was up to him to get his employer to endorse what he wanted. Otherwise it could not be done legally. I was also averse to being suckered into a commitment on fireworks when I was not entirely familiar with the ins and outs of the subject.

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Since the chief buyer had approached me and his dubious proposition had an effect on the fortunes of Li & Fung, I thought I ought to report the conversation to H.C. When I did so, I gave the view that the only course open to the company was to seek the confirmation of the principal before proceeding.

But H.C. reacted more cautiously. "It's an excellent opportunity for growing our business," he said. "No need to formally test the ground on relationships yet; let's explore things a bit more first, to see what exactly is involved."

"But the ball is in the buyer's court," I said. "There is a wrong smell about the deal. We should not appear too keen to go along."

"I understand the technicalities," H.C. replied. "Just pass the matter over to Kwok-Hong. He has experience and a further conversation with the buyer might clarify exactly what he is after before we decide on what to do."

"All right, if that's the way you want to play it," I said, feeling

disappointed.

But even as those words left my mouth, I already knew I was adamant against bringing Kwok-Hong into the picture. An entire cascade of conflicting considerations was already rushing through my head.

For a start, we were all physically gathered in America, a country where the legal system was complex and confusing. Secondly, Kwok-Hong was part of my staff and I had a duty to protect him and not to steer him legally into harm's way. I knew that his English was less than fluent and that his choice of words far from subtle. I did not want him saying anything which might compromise or incriminate him. In bribery cases, it always took two to tango; there always had to be an offerer as well as a taker of a bribe. Kwok-Hong, in my view, ought not to be on the receiving end of any stick.

Besides, the benefits to accrue to the company, so far as I could make out, were quite limited, so the game was not worth the risks. It might all merely be an entrapment for a better deal. I was quite content to leave Kwok-Hong out of it and wait for the buyer to make a further approach if he was not merely fishing.

In the event, no further approach from him came during the rest of the conference and there the matter appeared to rest.

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After we had all returned to Hong Kong, I received a telephone call from H.C.

"Kwok-Hong tells me that you did not give him the information concerning the buyer's initiative at Scottsdale," H.C. said. He sounded a little out of humour.

"Oh, yes, I'm so sorry," I replied quickly, trying to pacify him. "It has been entirely my fault, not Kwok-Hong's. I met so many new faces at Scottsdale and had so many conversations that the matter quite slipped my mind. I'll send a telex immediately to the buyer as a follow-up."

"No need for that. I'll follow through myself."

I was thus left with the distinct impression that our friendship was under strain and that I had earned myself another black mark in the eyes of my employer.

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For about three years after the Scottsdale conference, Kwok-Hong and Rosetta continued to work satisfactorily at Li & Fung. H.C. seemed anxious to continue to call all the shots on fireworks and I happily left things to him. He did not speak to me again about rumours of Kwok-Hong's departure.

I therefore thought the animosities and tensions within the Fung family had run their course and that there would be no further talk of the couple leaving to start out on their own.

I got along quite well with Kwok-Hong and Rosetta as colleagues, although we shared little in common outside of work. Nonetheless, we got into a habit of going out for a meal together after work every so often.

Meanwhile the turnover of Li & Fung (Trading) was growing steadily. Indeed, during the eight years I was its managing director, the turnover multiplied roughly tenfold. However, much of the credit for that improvement depended mainly on the hard work of the staff in ensuring that the goods ordered by customers had been made to specifications and delivered on time.

A contributing factor was the sound marketing sense of the customers themselves in designing and distributing the type of goods desired by their mass consumers at reasonable and affordable prices. Their chains of stores grew apace and so did the size of their orders.

There has long been a maxim in the trading business that there is no accounting for taste. We were not out to elevate the world or to make it a better place. We were out to sell what people wanted to buy. If people wanted to buy rubbish, then we supplied rubbish.

The only claim I could make for myself was that I started a branch of Li & Fung (Trading) as a joint venture in Seoul of South Korea. I had met a Korean leather goods manufacturer by the name of Chung during a visit there with a British customer.

Chung and I had a conversation and both of us were struck by a ridiculous idea simultaneously. We were both Asians and close neighbours; yet we could not communicate with each other except through a borrowed European language! Out of that observation, the idea for a joint venture was eventually born. That project was successful initially but it also led some years later to my departure from Li & Fung. I shall deal with the circumstances of that move in a later chapter.

In the meantime, let me round off the events concerning Kwok-Hong

and fireworks.

One day I got another irate telephone call from H.C. “Why did you deliberately put Kwok-Hong in contact with garment buyers?” he demanded to know.

“I can’t recall having done so,” I replied, perplexed.

“He will try to snatch those buyers away with him when he leaves,” he thundered.

“You’re not on that old chestnut again, are you? I did not put him in touch with any garment buyer and there is no indication at all that Kwok-Hong is intending to leave.”

“You’re overlooking some facts in betraying the company.”

“If **that** is what you really think, then perhaps it’s time I consider leaving the company too.” I rejoined, because I had become irritated by the allegation made and the intemperate tone of H.C.’s voice.

There the conversation ended.

But on calmer reflection, I realised there might be — in a roundabout way — a little substance to H.C.’s accusations.

The facts were as follows: Li & Fung (Trading) owned a fully crewed pleasure craft which was used to entertain potential and actual buyers travelling around the many islands and isolated beaches in the neighbourhood of Hong Kong. I was in charge of allocating the craft to divisional heads. The cost for its use would be borne by the corporate entertainment budget and not be charged to individual divisions. It was a corporate perk and hence people had to apply to me.

When the craft was free, senior officers could also apply for its private use. I myself had never used the vessel because I usually preferred my pleasures at the *mah-jong* table or else in bed.

In any case, Kwok-Hong asked me if he could use the craft to entertain a single fireworks buyer who was in town one Sunday. I told him that the boat had already been booked by a garment divisional head for that day. However, since the boat was quite large and only two persons were involved from the Handicraft Division, I suggested that Kwok-Hong might have a word with the head of the said garment division. If the garment group was not large, perhaps two additional persons would not present a problem. That was how I had left it.

Apparently the garment people accommodated Kwok-Hong and H.C. got to hear about it. Hence his complaint.

Just for the record, Kwok-Hong and Rosetta remained with Li &

Fung long after I had left the company. And Kwok-Hong and Rosetta continued to be friends with me for years afterwards. It was from them that I subsequently learnt that Fung family elders had years ago, when H.C. was young, bestowed on him the nickname of “The Cripple” because of the limp occasioned by his boyhood polio. I presumed it must have been the over-use of that nickname by Mo-Ying that had partly given rise to the sensitivities and animosities between the brothers.

Kwok-Hong and Rosetta and I continued to have an occasional meal together whenever convenient. It was for me a useful means of picking up titbits of gossip about the Fung family.

www.davidtkwong.com