

Suze the Matchmaker

A couple of weeks after returning from the China holiday, I handed Suze copies of all the photographs Chia Chi-Pui had taken of Chiu Kit and Liu Hung, for onward transmission to the girls concerned. Then I left for one of those periodic palm-pressing pilgrimages to the corporate shrines of Li & Fung's major customers in North America and Europe. En route, I managed to squeeze in a couple of days for a side-trip to Vancouver, to visit my mother and my sister Mabel.

By the time I had finished my commercial rituals, I had been deprived of a decently-cooked Chinese meal for so long that upon arriving home I immediately availed myself of Ip Yeuk-Lam's standing invitation to lunch with his family on Sundays at the Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce club.

Yeuk-Lam, being an understanding friend, was also well acquainted with some of my other weaknesses. He had thus arranged a *mah-jong* game with our favourite partners for after lunch to assuage my other deprivation.

During the course of the meal, Suze reported that she had received a letter from Chiu Kit, thanking the various members of the tour group for the photographs taken with herself and Liu Hung.

"It was a very well-written letter," Suze remarked. "Surprising too, for it was couched in some of the pre-revolutionary formalities used by the young when addressing their elders. Showed good breeding. I had not expected that from someone born and brought up in the mainland after the revolution."

"Perhaps she was just making allowances for our backward and unenlightened condition," I chuckled. "How has her work assignment worked out?"

"Not terribly well, I fear. She's been sent to a weaving factory, working a night shift, from midnight till whenever the day shift was supposed to come on."

"Oh, dear, what rotten luck! But then, I suppose that's a normal assignment for neophytes. Somebody has to work the unsociable hours."

"Such a pity," Suze said. "Such a pretty girl too."

"Yes, a great pity," I concurred.

"She'd make someone a very good and attractive wife one day," Suze observed, with a sigh.

After the meal was over, the other participants, young and old alike, dispersed for their different Sunday programmes, leaving Suze, Yeuk-Lam and myself to chat among ourselves pending the arrival of the *mah-jong* partners.

Suddenly, apropos nothing at all, Suze said: "I feel so sorry for Chiu Kit. Such a bright and delightful girl. I wish there was something I could do, to give her a wider choice in life, rather than spending the best part of it in a weaving factory."

"When we met her, she had appeared satisfied with her assigned lot," I said. "She's from an entirely different world. If she were here, I'm not sure she would relish the uncertainties and risks associated with our choices."

"All the same, it seems such a terrible waste of her potential. Can't you think of some means of helping her?"

"What? How can I alter her situation?"

"Well, you did offer to marry her. You must have liked her enough at first sight to make such an offer"

I interjected at once. "Remember it was **you** who started out on the business of adopting her as a 'dry' daughter and bringing her to study in Hong Kong."

"Yes, I was taken by her beauty, her youth and her general cheerfulness. She was quite shapely too, you must have noticed."

"Suze, my offer of marriage was just a facile boast, made on the spur of the moment. By the time we got to the Ming Tombs she had forgotten all about it.

"Besides, I'm not a cradle-snatcher, you know. The last time I got involved with an 18-year-old, I ended up with a terrible marriage and the responsibility for bringing up three kids on my own. I'm not going to head down that path again. That girl's younger than two of my boys. If we were back in the age when parents selected mates for their children, I might have considered her for one of my sons. But for myself? No. I've only met her that one time, over a few short hours. To pursue a woman on so fleeting an impression would be almost as silly as chasing after someone whom one had just caught sight of crossing a road."

"In marriage, it is compatibility that really counts, not differences in age," Suze asserted. "As a teenager, she would be exactly like freshly prepared clay, to be shaped into whatever form you might fancy. There's

no time to be lost. You're single and on your own now, and you're not getting any younger. A lonely middle age is not a happy state to find yourself. You'll soon need someone to take care of you."

I shook my head. "I'm neither a potter nor a sculptor; and I'm far from being adventurous enough for such a lark. None of us knows anything much about the girl, apart from her being a leading light in her unit of the Communist Youth League. And you've all heard her say that girls in China are not allowed to marry till they've reached 20."

"That would fit in perfectly; it'll give you time to get to know each other better and to avoid any rash or precipitous moves. If you're so minded, Yeuk-Lam and I should be able to find a way for the two of you to meet again. What do you say?"

I shook my head again. Yeuk-Lam had a look of pure amusement on his face. What a rascally friend he was, I thought, finding delight in my discomfiture. He should have come to my rescue, damn it! I shall certainly exact my revenge at the *mah-jong* table!

Fortuitously, at that point Lo Yuk-Chuen, alias Sixth Eldest Brother, turned up for the *mah-jong* game. An exchange of salutations duly followed, causing the conversation to veer in a different direction.

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It was amazing, in retrospect, how innocent conversations with well-intentioned friends could play such havoc with one's disposition and sentiments. I understood their concerns well and appreciated them. They were fearful that my erratic playing-the-field style of romantic engagements might lead me into an empty and lonely old age. That was a prospect that I had not really pondered; my life had been too filled with more pressing exigencies.

After that day, both Yeuk-Lam and Suze had continued to nudge me about my precarious situation. Suze, in particular, mentioned Chiu Kit's potential as a suitable mate and sang her praises whenever given the opportunity. The two had apparently been engaged in a lively correspondence, like pen pals of old.

Life had certainly not turned out to be easy for the poor girl. She reportedly had to cycle for miles in the dark, under all weather conditions, to get to and from work. But why should that misfortune be any of my business?

Suze's references to her youth and malleability triggered an echo of the arguments that had been put forward by my ex-in-laws when I told them after a year of marriage to their daughter that it would be best if we both sought a divorce and went our separate ways. Our personalities had been so constructed as to clash.

But they had pleaded that Man-Ying was their only daughter. She was young and immature; I ought to give her another chance. I was much older than she and there was much that I could teach her. I had kicked around the world and was familiar with its devious ways. Their daughter, on the other hand, had led a sheltered and pampered existence. She should come to her senses once she had matured further, through assuming more family responsibilities. Why not try having another child, they suggested.

I had given way to their entreaties; very much against my own better judgement. And what did I get in return? A ten-year marital sentence with no hope for parole.

Every counsel of reason now was set against any involvement with another teenaged girl. Chiu Kit might be young and beautiful but I had not felt that spontaneous intellectual or spiritual fizz with her that I had experienced with Sharlee and Barbara and the Stanford girl with whom I had once danced on a certain Californian moon-night long ago. The memory of having written a poem to her in exchange for a gift of two volumes of plays by Sartre still loomed as fresh in my mind as if it had been yesterday.

Compared with them, what lay behind the youth and beauty of Chiu Kit? A barely formed personality that was impenetrable and unknown. She might well be just a Socialist version of Ping. At least with Ping, her terms of trade were open and up front. A budding paragon in the Communist Youth League was a different matter. Such a one sent forth only question marks.

And yet, there was something about Suze's urgings which appealed to my vanity. What if I could pull it off something like Professor Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion*? It would be interesting and challenging to discover how a product of a new Chinese Communist system would react to the material blandishments of a consumerist society.

Doing a Professor Higgins would be a tall order, however, going well beyond a simple matter of linguistics. What kind of Chinese history and culture had the girl been taught? Probably not much before the Long March and Chairman Mao's proclamation of 1949. And her exposure to

Western thinking would be in all probability quite limited, to just a few choice quotes from Marx and Lenin.

That would be par for the course for the younger generation in both China and Hong Kong. They had been so thoroughly blinded by unsatisfactory educational systems they must be almost beyond redemption. Could they recognise any truth adumbrated by Chuang Tzu or Mencius or Thomas à Kempis even if it hit them full in the face? Hardly. To expect them to develop a contempt for the vanities of the world and its ephemeral joys had to be too much to expect.

Lying beyond my own vanity were also certain middle-aged insecurities. It was one thing to go hunting for a wife in the 1970s for the sake of my children. But now that I was utterly unattached to children, a wife had to be a woman suited to my own temperament. Even if Chiu Kit proved malleable, getting her up to speed emotionally and intellectually would take far more time and effort than I had at my disposal.

Perhaps, buried deeper in my psyche, I also shared Suze's yearning for a daughter. I never had one. I had been quite disappointed I had never managed to build up much rapport with any of my sons. They had sibling rivalries and I had to play a disciplinarian during those conflicts.

It was also possible that I had absorbed too idealised a version from those ancient legends of daughters selling themselves into slavery or prostitution for the sake of giving a deceased parent a decent burial. Filial piety was becoming an endangered concept in these modern individualistic times.

In that context, having Chiu Kit as an adoptive daughter and carer — rather than as a wife — might make a little sense, if only it could somehow be worked through the bureaucracies on both sides of the border. Someone with her cheerful disposition would be a great plus should either my mother or my father decide to spend a spell in Hong Kong during the autumn of their lives. She could attend to them much better than I ever could. She would be a boon for myself too, should I suddenly be struck by another of those bouts of acute pancreatitis.

Her lively disposition would, in addition, provide some relief for my soul-destroying commercial preoccupations. Serving a colonial bureaucracy had previously enabled me to pretend to myself that I was working towards some larger social purpose. Now I had become just another money-grubber in a sterile and alienated city, it was disheartening to face the reality of serving only Mammon. Having someone to vent my

frustrations to would be quite comforting.

And, at the end of the day, when time came for me to shed my mortal coil, having someone sympathetic on hand would at least spare me the fate of passing on to the next world entirely alone. I could not visualise any of my sons being filial enough to return to fulfil that role.

Thus I tottered mentally through all those muddled motives and conflicting sentiments as I considered Suze's suggestion for engaging further with Chiu Kit.

But to cut a long story short, let me just state simply that at the first blush of spring in 1983 Suze, Yeuk-Lam and myself boarded a plane in Hong Kong to spend a long weekend in Shanghai.

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As the crow flies, the distance between Shanghai and Nantong, the home of Chiu Kit, was not very far. The two towns just happened to lie on opposite sides of the Yangtze River estuary. But the transportation infrastructure back then was such that it required at least a three-hour journey to travel between the two places.

During the first decades of the 20th century the people living in the two cities were also deeply separated by their histories, mindsets, culture, aspirations and attitudes towards life. The inhabitants of Nantong were generally stolid and conservative; those of Shanghai tended to be flamboyant, prone to taking risks and greedy for gain.

The origins of Nantong went back to the Spring and Autumn period in Chinese history, around 500 BC. Its minor city status was only upgraded in 958, to that of an independent prefecture. Its deep water port and its connection to internal navigation channels made it a vital centre for trade. Its inhabitants had long engaged themselves in agriculture, mainly rice and cotton. As a consequence they also had a thriving industry in textiles, particularly in its blue calico.

It became the birthplace of modern Chinese industrialisation late in the Ching Dynasty because of one of its local sons by the name of Chang Jian. Chang was the first scholar from the town to ever secure the top position in the National Imperial Examinations. He thus gained high office.

He was a sentimental and philanthropic man by nature. After acquiring fame and fortune, he never forgot his home town. He founded in 1899 the first cotton mills in Nantong. Thereafter he formed an industrial

complex which included the production of oil, flour, silk and wine. He also started schools and orphanages and homes for the aged.

His home town never forgot him either. By the time of the Revolution of 1911, the locals already commonly referred to their city as “Chang Jian’s Kingdom”. Some of his descendants had remained very much a power in that city ever since.

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Compared with Nantong, Shanghai was a Johnny-come-lately. Its history as a small fishing and agricultural village went back only about a thousand years. It was recognised as a city only in 1291, under the Yuan Dynasty, and it had no city wall till the Ming Dynasty, when raids by Japanese pirates forced it to build one.

It was only after the First Opium War with Britain and the subsequent establishment of foreign concessions that the city began to develop into an economic and financial powerhouse. At its height, the city was responsible for handling half the imports and exports of China.

Chinese weakness in the mid-19th century caused foreign powers to demand territorial concessions to further their trade in opium, silk, tea and other commodities. The British led the charge in 1845, demanding to establish themselves in an area south of the Soochow Creek, an old outlet for the overflow of seasonal waters from Lake Tai, and bounded on the right by the Whampoa River, one of the tributaries of the Yangtze River. The United States did likewise in 1848, seeking a slice north of Soochow Creek. France followed in 1849, securing an area squeezed between the British concession to the north and the old Chinese walled city on the south. Other powers made their own land grabs.

Although all the concessions remained technically under Chinese sovereignty — for the foreign powers continued to pay ground rent to the Chinese — none of those enclaves subjected themselves to Chinese law. They ran their own administrations using their own laws. Military detachments were brought in to demonstrate their power. Their merchants and priestly classes soon followed.

The protracted Taiping Rebellion between 1850 and 1864, and the bloodlust it engendered, complicated the situation and had enduring consequences. While the British and the Americans initially remained neutral, the French supported the Ching government. Although the foreign

occupied territories around Shanghai had been left relatively untouched by the fighting, they nevertheless had to accept the presence among them of a criminal and triad offshoot known as the Small Swords Society.

In 1861, the United States and most of the other foreign powers agreed to a British initiative to join their concessions together to form an International Settlement, to be administered by a Municipal Council. The French, however, preferred to retain control over their own concession.

By the 1880s, the British dominated Municipal Council had secured monopolistic powers to supply gas, electricity and water in the International Settlement, in addition to powers over taxation, road repairs and refuse disposal. It also regulated the sale of opium and the running of brothels.

But with growing prosperity, entrepreneurs, investors, refugees, chancers, fraudsters, criminals and soldiers of fortune flooded in. The size of the city grew rapidly, till it became about four times the size of the original walled city. By 1936 Shanghai — divided in rule and poorly run as it was — had become one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of about three million.

During the course of the city's expansion, refugees and immigrants from other Chinese provinces rushed in for a share of the perceived cake. They formed themselves into "native place" associations or guilds, both for their own protection and to exercise their collective power. This sometimes led to bloody results.

Immigration over all parts of the city operated haphazardly at best. That enabled another significant group of outsiders to flood in — the White Russians following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. They numbered around 35,000, rendering them the largest group of Europeans in Shanghai. They were relatively poor, however, and were looked down upon by the more imperialistic Europeans. Nonetheless, the Russian refugees did introduce to the emerging Chinese petty bourgeoisie certain aspects of Western culture, in music and ballet. A significant number of their women, however, had to end up as kept mistresses or courtesans.

Chinese intellectuals, revolutionaries, reformers and rebels also sought to pursue their individual agendas in the city, for they — like the criminal triads — saw jurisdictional grey areas suited to their purposes. They could settle scores with political enemies by whatever nefarious means they might choose.

The activities of the worst of those coming into the city, however, soon turned it into a grotesque and dystopian entity, where human lives

were cheap, assassinations and murders commonplace, bribery and corruption a given, and group loyalties as changeable as socks. Hand in hand with such developments were the rise of racism, narcissism, hedonism, debauchery, class struggles and the catering for every conceivable form of human vice.

For example, the highest ranking Chinese detective in the French Concession was a man known as Pockmarked Huang. He ran on the side an establishment called the Great World Amusement Palace, where opium-smoking, gambling and prostitution were freely available. He used as his enforcers members of the notorious Green Gang, a latter day triad offshoot of the Small Swords Society.

The head of the Municipal Police in the International Settlement admitted that triad members had infiltrated his force, so much so that he was powerless to intervene when mobsters stormed the Shanghai Stock Exchange and suspended trading till their demands for dues or protection money were fully met.

Following the Japanese victory in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-5, Japan also muscled into Shanghai, sending the largest military contingent among the great powers to be stationed in the International Settlement.

That development not only upset the political equations within the Municipal Council but also portended the arrival of the economic might of Japanese investors and industrialists. That, in turn, created new flash-points of tension between two ancient enemies, between the Japanese setting up new enterprises in China and the Chinese working in them.

Concurrently, Chinese patriots of various persuasions began using the city to propagate their differing versions for rejuvenating their country. The May 4th Movement had already erupted following the perceived unfairness under the Treaty of Versailles of handing over to Japan certain of the former German privileges and possessions in China.

While some Chinese advocated reforms, others sought a more radical Marxist solution for the ails of the nation. The Chinese Communist Party was formed in Shanghai in 1921 and their activists set about forming trade unions for the inevitable proletarian revolution to come.

In May of 1925, for example, a strike was called by Chinese workers at a Japanese cotton mill in Shanghai. Eight worker representatives were sent to negotiate with the management. Somehow a fracas occurred and one of the worker representatives was killed by the Japanese. When the

Municipal Council failed to prosecute the Japanese, mass demonstrations broke out. The Municipal Council police initially tried to dampen the demonstrations by arresting 15 of their leaders and holding them for trial.

That move only infuriated the wider Chinese community. There was no Chinese representation on the Municipal Council at that time; representation did not actually come till 1928. When the number of protestors increased and the atmosphere became more hostile, the British-led police panicked and opened fire, killing nine and wounding many others. Afterwards, the two British officers who had ordered firing on the demonstrators suffered no greater penalty than being asked to resign.

Those killings ignited the first major anti-imperialist movement in China, sparking strikes, boycotts of British and Japanese goods and large demonstrations in towns and cities all over the land. Shooting of demonstrators occurred in other places too, most notably in Canton, where 50 students and cadets from the Whampao Military Academy were slaughtered by British and French forces when they tried to storm the British and French Concessions on Shameen. About 120 others were wounded.

Strikes and demonstrations against the British also took place in Hong Kong and those dislocations lasted for almost a year. Within the first week, some 50,000 Chinese left the colony to return to Kwangtung Province in protest, almost turning the city into a ghost town. Trade and commerce fell by half and rents by 60%.

Meanwhile, the death of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen in March of 1925 caused General Chiang Kai-Shek to assume the leadership of the Kuomintang. General Chiang had his own plans for bringing the various warlords in China under control. He ended the cooperation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party and embarked upon his Northern Expedition to unify China in 1926.

Upon reaching Shanghai, he made an agreement with the Green Gang to massacre every Communist they could find. Thus began the White Terror of 1927, during which untold numbers of left-inclined people were summarily killed. It did not matter whether they were in the walled city or in the International Settlement, they were hunted down and murdered. Some were even barbarically boiled alive. Chou En-Lai, one of the leading Communists in the city at the time, escaped only by the skin of his teeth.

Many notable writers had tried to bear witness to some of those raw, greed-driven and demented segments of life in that sprawling and fractured

metropolis. Lu Hsun, the author of *The True Story of Ah Q*, had for a time headed a League of Left-Wing Writers and had declared that lies written in ink could not disguise facts written in blood. André Malraux had penned *Man's Estate* to reflect on some aspects of the White Terror. Later, Vicki Baum came along to write *Nanking Road* about another catastrophic episode which befell the city.

But the Kuomintang had a ready answer to the publication of material it considered unwanted. It passed a new censorship law in January of 1931 threatening to punish with life imprisonment or execution anyone producing literature deemed to “endanger the public” or to “disturb public order”. By February, 24 Chinese writers had been arrested and executed. For many Chinese at least, writing has turned into a very lethal occupation.

Today, there probably remains ten thousand haunting but untold stories about life during that turbulent period of Shanghai's history. Sadly, those who could recount them at first hand have long since vanished from the scene. Whatever might emerge in the future would only be reconstructions, done by academics and others at third or fourth hand. As Hu Shih, one of the leading intellectuals of the time, had observed: “You cannot write my poems just as I cannot dream your dreams.”

Meanwhile in Europe, the rise of Hitler brought tens of thousands of European Jews to seek refuge in Shanghai. The city's lax or almost non-existent immigration rules facilitated their move.

That exodus merely echoed the influx of Sephardic Jews centuries earlier. The timing of their arrival was a matter of some debate but the majority opinion seemed to indicate they settled in Kaifeng in Henan Province as early as the Tang Dynasty, for they had already built a synagogue there by 1163.

Indeed, those early Jews had become so well integrated by 1603 that one of them went to Peking to sit for the Imperial Examinations. While he was there he met the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci and that was the first time Westerners became aware of the existence of a Jewish community in China.

Those Jewish settlers progressively married with the local population and today their descendants have been absorbed into Chinese society. They now go by Chinese names and follow a paternal line of descent rather than the Jewish matrilineal one. They have also become physically indistinguishable from the Chinese. The only thing which set them apart was their non-consumption of pork.

Such periodic infusions of alien peoples into Shanghai brought about not only the emergence of a Chinese class of compradors, financiers and bourgeoisie but also a thriving Eurasian community.

By the time of the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Shanghai had already earned such a notorious reputation for decadence in the form of its Art Deco nightclubs, its shopping excesses, its gangsters overseeing drug-trafficking, prostitution, gambling and other human indulgences that the intervention of something as trifling as a war hardly altered its pattern of high octane living and sudden deaths.

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Given Shanghai's appalling reputation, Suze had to tread carefully in trying to arrange a rendezvous with Chiu Kit in that town. This was particularly so when Hong Kong itself was being destabilised by wild rumours over the return of the city to Chinese sovereignty.

Suze had initiated her reunion plan by suggesting in a letter to Chiu Kit early in 1983 that they might get together again after the Spring Festival. She indicated that her husband — and possibly one or two of the uncles the girl had already met in Peking — might be going to Shanghai on business. She would accompany her husband there for two or three days if it were convenient for Chiu Kit to join her.

Of course, neither Yeuk-Lam nor Suze had any real need to go to Shanghai. They were simply, for the sake of friendship, trying to prevent my middle-aged bachelorhood from deteriorating into a solitary and lonely old age. No doubt the possibility of giving a bright and endearing young girl from China more options in life had also entered their calculations. Suze had made no reference to me in her correspondence, except for that anonymous reference to "one or two of the uncles" previously encountered in Peking. She had left it to fate to determine whether anything would come from a further meeting between myself and the girl.

She had been quick to add in her letter to Chiu Kit, however, that she would never dream of asking a teenaged girl to visit Shanghai on her own. Therefore her invitation naturally extended to anyone she might wish to accompany her, possibly her elder sister and her husband.

The invitation was duly accepted and a timing agreed. Thus it came about that on a spring afternoon Suze, Yeuk-Lam and myself arrived in Shanghai to register ourselves into the Peace Hotel. Chiu Kit, her sister,

Siu Wah, and her husband, Yam Kwan-Lam, arrived shortly thereafter and similarly signed in.

Two inexpensive Japanese wrist watches Suze had brought for the Chiu sisters and a bottle of Chivas Regal whiskey for their father set off the reunion on a high note.

The Peace Hotel, located on The Bund in a Western-designed building of 1920s vintage, was run on foreign management lines to cater mainly for tourists and outsiders. In one of its previous incarnations during the Cultural Revolution, it had served as the headquarters of the Shanghai Commune.

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Seeing Chiu Kit again, after the lapse of half a year, turned out a little disappointing for me at first. Although the girl was as cheerful and outgoing as she had been in Peking, her appearance had altered drastically. Her two long braided queues had disappeared and had been replaced by a rather stiff and unfashionable perm. The loss of the queues somehow robbed her of her former allure of innocences. She explained later that she had to cut her braids because they got in the way of her duties at the factory.

Chiu Kit's sister and her husband made a very pleasant but otherwise unremarkable couple. Siu Wah was an attractive woman in her mid-20s who had a disposition as cheerful as her sister's. She was, however, more reserved and less outgoing. She had also begun to thicken around the waist following her birth of a son. Her husband was every bit the stereotype assigned to his peasant pedigree. He projected the dull endurance and persistence of an ox, combined with the docility and submissiveness of a cow.

After the Nantong trio had put their hand luggage away in their rooms, Yeuk-Lam suggested some refreshments in one of the restaurants in the Peace Hotel.

The restaurant exuded a distinctly Western ambience. Once we had been seated, the uniformed waiter handed us an afternoon tea menu featuring English goodies like scones with clotted cream. I realised at once the Nantong trio would be hopelessly out of their depth.

So I intervened to explain that foreigners had an outlandish way of ruining tea by adding milk and sugar. Unless they wished to give it a try, it

might be better for them to go for a soft drink, a fruit juice or a cup of coffee.

They asked what I was having. I said I would settle for coffee. When Yeuk-Lam and Suze indicated likewise, the Nantong guests said they would also follow suit. I said I would order some finger sandwiches and cakes which we could all share.

When the coffee came, it was served up in the small cups customary in Europe. Each cup came with a small spoon for stirring the milk and sugar offered in separate containers. After adding milk and sugar, Yam and Chiu Kit began taking their coffee using their small spoons, as if they were helping themselves to bowls of soup. Yam happened to be sitting next to me; so I put an arm out to deter him, saying that coffee could conveniently be drunk straight from the cup. He did so and the two girls duly followed.

It occurred to me then that the three of them had probably never tried coffee before. How ignorant many Chinese were of the ways of the outside world; years of self-imposed isolation had left them behind. I felt sorry for them and wanted to show them how the rest of mankind had changed — for better or for worse — during their country's determination to become self-reliant.

After our refreshments, we went for a stroll along The Bund. The long row of buildings following European and American designs stood as unhappy relics of a bygone imperialistic age. Shanghai remained a mere shadow of its glitzy pre-war self, however. Its former wickedness was no longer blatantly touted as before. On the other hand, its old air of menace and riskiness was also no longer apparent.

The pedestrians and the cycling traffic on the roads now consisted largely of Chinese, mainly garbed in their ill-shaped boiler suits of blue, grey or green. The Huangpu River flowing beside The Bund presented its usual miscellany of busy water-borne vessels.

The stroll enabled me to engage Chiu Kit in conversation. I asked how she was settling at work and she said the job was not onerous except for having to cycle in the dark to get to work. But there was the prospect of being able to apply for a change in shift after a year. The only other complaint she had was that her cotton gloves were too inadequate to protect her hands from cold while gripping the handle-bars of her bike during winter.

I promised to secure a pair of fur-lined leather gloves from Canada to send to her.

Later, I asked if she still had an interest in learning English. When she answered in the affirmative, I also promised to send her a Linguaphone set for learning English so that she could familiarise herself with some of the basics in her spare time.

The group thus explored the streets of Shanghai till it found a suitable place for a Chinese dinner.

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We began the next morning's activities by visiting the splendid Yu Garden, one of the largest and most prestigious constructions of its kind in Shanghai. The property was originally owned by the Pan family. One of its patriarchs had been a minister during the Ming Dynasty. When he was about to retire from public life, one of his filial sons decided to build the garden for his father's enjoyment during retirement. Thus its construction began in 1559.

But the building work got delayed for one reason or another. In the end, the costs for its elaborate features spiralled so much out of control that they ruined the family financially. The property subsequently fell into other hands. Eventually, the garden was opened to the public in 1961 and in 1982 was declared a national monument.



At the Yu Garden, from the right Siu Wah, her husband Yam

Kwan-Lam, Ip Yeuk-Lam, Chiu Kit and Suze Ip

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After visiting the Yu Garden, I suggested seeing the small Huangpu Park established in 1886 in the International Settlement by the British, because it had been the subject of repeated but not entirely accurate stories designed to stir up Chinese hatred against the British. It was alleged that the park had a sign specifying that dogs and Chinese were not allowed.

When I first heard such stories, I knew they could not be completely accurate. I had grown up among British people and I had no doubt that a strong streak of racism existed in some of them, for I had been a victim of it on a number of occasions. But I also knew that the British were capable of greater subtlety and would not express racism in such crude and blatant terms.

So I investigated the historical facts and discovered that they had been deliberately skewed for emotional impact. The park was originally simply called “Public Gardens” with the racism neatly disguised in the meaning of the word “public”.

The use of the park was governed by a set of ten regulations posted at the entrance. The first regulation stated: “The Gardens are reserved for the Foreign Community.” That effectively excluded all Chinese and no Chinese was indeed allowed in until 1928.

The secondary insult was delivered underhandedly in the fourth regulation which stated: “Dogs and bicycles are not admitted.” The overall effect was that dogs, bicycles and Chinese were all considered by the British of the time as belonging to the same category of things. But no sign had ever existed specifying unequivocally that dogs and Chinese were not allowed into the park, though the intention was abundantly clear.

Yet that fact did not prevent those with ulterior motives from repeating and propagating that inaccurate story, both orally and in print. Perhaps it had been from such incidents that governments and corporations learnt that the precise facts in any situation did not really matter. So long as an assertion was repeated often enough, some segment of the population would accept it as the gospel truth.

Because of the unfortunate associations of the Public Gardens with racism, its name was later changed to Huangpu Park.

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We ended the day with a leisurely meal in a Chinese restaurant that evening, when most of the talk turned on the efforts by Siu Wah and her husband to experiment with the wonders of capitalism. Siu Wah's provision store appeared to be flourishing, depending on a customer base made up largely of friends and neighbours.

Her husband's job working on a river boat enabled him to spot products like ginkgo nuts, edible fungi, dried mushrooms, dehydrated cole and varieties of wine available more cheaply in the remoter towns along the Yangtze River than in Nantong itself. He saw the advantage of buying such products and hauling them home for his wife to sell at a higher profit. Being a member of the crew, he could transport the purchases without cost.

Siu Wah expressed bewilderment over the evening of some of the changes brought about by the government's liberation policy and the seemingly endless ways for citizens to become rich. She said she had often been approached by others to invest her profits from the store into surefire ways of multiplying her gains. But she often could not fully understand how some of the suggested investments could make money more easily than she could with her provision store.

Yeuk-Lam and I took pains to urge her to be very careful over parting with her hard-earned money. Capitalist societies were filled with confidence tricksters with a smooth line of patter offering ingenious ways of getting rich quick. With the opening up to a more market-orientated economy in China, Hong Kong fraudsters were bound to prey upon the innocence of mainland investors. Scammers would be setting up Ponzi schemes or using some form of pyramid selling. We urged Siu Wah to be on her guard.

The next day, we spent the morning exploring some of the older parts of Shanghai. After lunch, we brought our reunion to an end by making our separate journeys back to our respective homes. It was one of the oddities of the technological age that a journey to Nantong, 65 miles away, should take longer than to reach Hong Kong 1,223 miles away.

* * *

After I had sent Chiu Kit a pair of fur-lined leather gloves and her Linquaphone set, we engaged in a steady exchange of letters. The missives were totally pedestrian and banal in nature. Mine enquired about the

chances of changing her shift, the progress in her English studies and how Siu Wah's provision store was thriving.

She answered at greater length than I had expected. I sometimes told her of encounters I had with Yeuk-Lam and Suze, whom I had teasingly referred to as her "dry" or adoptive parents. I also mentioned some of the destinations I had to visit during my various business trips.

In spite of the ordinariness of our exchanges, I could detect a warming friendship and a growing respect between the two of us. For my part, my interest rested more on my being an elder overseeing the progress of a likeable member of the younger generation. I had little inclination at that time towards any romantic conquest. My overall feeling was that I still did not know enough about her inner configuration to speculate on whether any meaningful future existed.

I had no idea of the contents of the letters being exchanged between Suze and Chiu Kit. I suspected that Suze must have sensed from them some warming in our relationship because one day, several months after the Shanghai visit, Suze casually suggested: "How about another get-together with Chiu Kit?"

To my own surprise, I replied: "Sure. Why not?"

And so it came about that Suze invited Chiu Kit for another long weekend rendezvous in the ancient town of Wushi, located only a short distance from Nantong. Chiu Kit accepted enthusiastically. She had been to that town before, though it had usually played second fiddle to the more celebrated Yangtzu River towns like Soochow and Yangchow. Its dull and rather laid-back reputation, coupled with the enhanced familiarity and confidence in Suze and myself, caused the need for a chaperon for Chiu Kit to be dispensed with.

Wushi nested on the shores of Lake Tai, the second largest fresh water lake in China. It was founded in 202 BC, allegedly because there used to be a lot of tin in the neighbourhood. Over time, however, the tin got mined to exhaustion and the town then took on a name which literally meant "No Tin".

But the town was crisscrossed with canals — including the Grand Canal — and its population continued to make a living through fishing, agriculture, silk production and as a water transportation hub for domestic trade.

Suze made arrangements for accommodation at a good lake-side hotel and then accompanied me on her own to Wushi. After meeting up with Chiu Kit, we spent the first day exploring the many delights of the Li Yuen Gardens. Their lotus ponds, rockeries, pavilions and winding walks lined with a wide variety of flowering plants and trees provided endless excitement for the senses as well as balm for the soul.

We had planned to walk along some of the shorefront paths hugging Lake Tai the following day. But right after breakfast, Suze suddenly developed a diplomatic indisposition. It required her to rest, she said. Through that device she created the opportunity for Chiu Kit and myself to spend more private time together.

We chatted in a desultory fashion as we strolled along some paths alongside the lake. Apart from the odd cluster of people practising slow motion *tai chi* exercises, the paths were quite sparingly used. As I gazed upon the vast stretches of the lake, seemingly infinite, I reflected on how difficult it was to gain what the Buddhists have called “the wisdom of the other shore”.

For the sake of making conversation as we walked along, I asked how Chiu Kit was getting along with her Linguaphone lessons. She readily confessed she was hardly making any headway. She was too shy, she explained. She did not want her neighbours to laugh at her for making those strange foreign sounds, especially when there was no one handy to tell her whether her pronunciations were correct or not.

Her statements alerted me to the pointlessness of encouraging her to study English in the first place. A fat lot of good that skill would do her in a weaving factory. It would only be meaningful if she were keen on further studies. She was in some ways bright as a penny; yet in others displayed no intellectual bent. However, she did express some interest in furthering her studies. But was that interest genuine? If so, she should be preparing for another crack at those university entrance exams. If she had some notion of studying abroad, how would she gain permission to leave the country and afford the expenses involved?

On the other hand, she had displayed every appearance to being reconciled to her station in contemporary Chinese life, to cycling in the dark to get to work, come fair weather or foul. Why should I disturb that almost blissful state of acceptance? To raise false hopes and unrealistic expectations for someone in her situation would be heretical or even

subversive and unkind. Too much awareness of alternative modes of existence would only unsettle a girl in her situation.

An uneasy silence had descended between us because I had been distracted by my own reflections. After a while, Chiu Kit rekindled the conversation. “You told me you were in London on business last month,” she said. “Did you go to the Highgate Cemetery, to pay your respects at the tomb of Marx?”

Her question took me completely by surprise. Paying homage to Marx had never crossed my mind. But I did not want to tell her that too bluntly. So I dressed it up by saying: “My schedule had been far too tight to fit that in.”

“What a pity!” she said, sounding disappointed.

I tried to salvage my lapse by saying brightly: “But I did manage to visit the Père Lachaise Cemetery when I was in Paris. Loads of notables buried there — writers, musicians, artists.” I then rattled off the names of Balzac, Oscar Wilde, Molière, Hugo, Gertrude Stein, Colette, Abélard and Heloise, Chopin, Rossini, Delacroix, Pissarro.

But she showed no sign of recognising any of those names. It came to me I had really wrong-footed myself again. The young in China, just like the young narrowly educated under British colonialism in Hong Kong, had been brought up on flawed doctrines and to worship false gods. How could I expect any of their generation to pay heed to thinkers or ideas which might enhance their lives when their schools had made no mention of them? Their thoughts had been too strictly channelled for far too long, their fates in one way or another had already been sealed. What a terrible waste of the human potential!

I recalled that when I had been a teenager, my own fate had been virtually sealed as well. I had been stuck in a dead-end job as a cub reporter, earning a wage totally insufficient to keep body and soul together. If my Eight Granduncle and Grandaunt had not come to my rescue by making me a loan sufficient to get myself to university at Stanford, I would not know where I might be today. In all probability, I would have ended up as an embittered hack, trying to make ends meet by ghost-writing speeches or company reports for some corporate bigwig deficient in his vocabulary.

Was there a moral in there somewhere? Was it time for me to do a good turn for some other deserving youngster? I was not enormously rich, but I was fairly comfortably off. My eldest son, Tien-Kuen, had just graduated and that ought to cut me some financial slack.

So thinking, I said: “Would you really like to see Marx’s tomb? I can take you there you know; to Paris too, if you like.”

“How?” Chiu Kit asked, quizzically.

“By marrying me.”

Chiu Kit chuckled. “You tried that line last year at the Ming Tombs; but I knew you were only joking then.”

“I’m dead serious now. But before you answer, I want you to consider all the ramifications very carefully. This is neither a joke or a simple matter. You and I belong to different generations, living in different worlds with different rules of conduct. I’m also 34 years your senior. A mighty effort will be required of you to adjust, if we were to marry.”

I had to struggle more than a little to get my sentiments across because of my sub-standard Mandarin. I tried to explain that I had lived through many experiences; the lessons learnt from them were not easy ones to unlearn or to pass on to others. There were, in addition, many things about myself which others might find mystifying. If there were things about me or what I was saying which she did not understand, the best move would be to stop me and ask me to explain more fully.

“I’ve been married and divorced,” I continued, “and I have three sons to show for it. Two of them are actually older than you and the third is only younger than you by a month. I hope that does not make you uncomfortable. They’re all being educated in North America now and it’s most unlikely you’d be meeting any of them any time soon.

“The rumours in China might be that everybody from Hong Kong was ruthlessly capitalistic and filthy rich. I’m not, but I do have a good income plus a Hong Kong government pension which I am entitled to for life. You can count on a reasonably comfortable life with me.

“There is something else I would like to say, although I don’t quite know how to say it. It is this: If it turns out to be just a marriage of friendship and convenience, I would not mind at all, though I would wish otherwise. Should you wish to go off to university somewhere after marriage, I’d be more than happy to finance you. Do you understand what I’m saying? Do you have any questions?”

As I tried to set out my case in a halting manner in my deficient Mandarin, the pace of our steps had slackened too. By the time I paused with my questions, we were practically standing still.

Chiu Kit turned to face me to study my expression, before breaking out in a broad smile. “My adoptive mother always said you were a good

uncle, reliable and responsible,” she allowed.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, perplexed. “What is your answer? Have you understood what I’ve said?”

“Shouldn’t we go back to the hotel first, to see whether my adoptive mother’s ailment has worsened or eased?”

So we made our way back to the hotel. During the journey home, Chiu Kit slipped an arm around one of mine. Her gesture seemed as ambiguous as her words. As we walked along arm in arm, I remained apprehensive and uncertain, not knowing whether our relationship had advanced or whether she had merely extended a touch of care for an elder.

When we reached the hotel, however, we discovered that Suze had gone off to do some shopping in the town.

I escorted Chiu Kit to her room. But upon reaching its threshold, we somehow clinched into our first kiss. By the time Suze got back, our futures had already been settled.

* * *

A couple of weeks later, I arrived at Nantong with two bottles of Hennessy XO cognac as a gift for Chiu Kit’s parents. I felt that regardless of whatever the new socialist form might be regarding marriages, Chiu Kit was still a teenager. I would more at ease if I were to do things the old fashioned way, by formally asking her parents for her hand.

I had booked into the Wen Feng Hotel and had invited all members of the Chiu family to a meal in the hotel restaurant. I was confident none of them had eaten there before because it was one of those places where the bill had to be settled in foreign exchange certificates rather than local currency. Since Chiu Kit’s elder siblings were living elsewhere in the country, only her parents and Siu Wah and her husband turned up.

Chiu Kit had briefed me before my visit that her father, Chiu Bun, was born in 1927, only two years ahead of myself, whereas her mother was three years older than her father. But her mother had come from a peasant family and had not had any formal education. She would not be able to converse with me either, for she did not know Mandarin. She could only communicate in her native village dialect.

Her mother turned out to be a very pleasant and homely woman, though showing her age more than her husband. Although we could not communicate without someone acting as interpreter, she made me feel

welcomed by offering me a timid smile whenever our eyes met.

Chiu Kit's father had been born in a village near Nantong where his father had owned a rice shop. Given such a family background, I imagined his education must have been the traditional Confucian type of his time. He had worked in the family shop until he was 17, before venturing into Nantong city itself to gain wider experience. He found work in a shop selling textiles and he married shortly afterwards. The couple produced their first daughter, Shu-Ching, in 1945, followed by an only son, Bing Hsin, in 1951, another daughter, Siu Wah, in 1958, and finally Kit in 1964.

Civil war then erupted throughout the country. After the Communist victory in 1949, Chiu Bun entered the civil service in a local branch of the National Bureau of Supplies.

During the course of his career he made two futile attempts to join the Communist Party. Probably because of those failures, after some 30 years in bureaucratic service, he still occupied only the lowly position of a sub-manager in charge of processing applications for petroleum product quotas in Nantong when I called on him in 1983.

* * *

From the moment I met Chiu Bun I knew he was a person I could respect and relate to. There was something in the genial and courteous way he greeted me which indicated he was a man unpractised in deception and guile. He was soft-spoken but he had his own definite points of view, to which — so far as I could judge — his family members deferred.



Chiu Bun and the author. taken in Nantong 1993

The Chinese meal at the Wen Feng Hotel proceeded with all the customary formalities of the occasion. Everybody ate heartily. Did a bit of drinking too.

After the meal, Chiu Bun suggested that we should both take a breath of air in the adjoining Wen Feng Park. It was clear he had things to say to me in private, so I accompanied him outside.

In the park, he began by saying that he was glad that his youngest daughter had chosen to marry me. He and his wife — after having heard what their daughter had told them about me and after meeting me in person — were confident that I would take good care of their daughter. I could certainly offer her a better life than she could possibly hope for within China.

But he hoped I would understand that in contemporary times, just as in periods of past history, a marriage was not just a simple matter between a man and a woman. The respective families might, willy-nilly, have also to be involved. After his daughter had left China, the rest of his family still had to remain behind. The country was in a state of political flux; nobody could tell what might happen in the future. The policy today might be the

opening up to the world but tomorrow, or perhaps the day after, another political line or a new mass campaign might be launched. It could well be aimed against someone or some foreign idea.

In order to protect his family from any unforeseen turmoil or any change in policy, he had to absolve his family from any involvement in the marriage between his youngest daughter and myself. He therefore proposed that all family members would write to their work and residential units declaring for the record that they had been adamantly opposed to any marriage between Chiu Kit and a Hong Kong bourgeois capitalist.

Each would further declare that he or she had done all in their power to dissuade Chiu Kit from such an unseemly liaison with a man so much older than herself. But the girl had proved headstrong and stubborn, possibly taken in by the sweet-talk and exaggerated material promises of a decadent capitalist roué.

I heard Chiu Bun out and then immediately agreed with his prescient and prudent line of action. I did not wish anyone to suffer because of my marriage. Chiu Bun and I shook hands warmly at the end of our conversation and in due course letters of opposition to the marriage between Chiu Kit and myself were sent by every member of the Chiu family.

Little did either Chiu Bun or myself realise the furore that would later be stoked by those letters.