12. Where Honesty is not the Best Policy

People living in Government resettlement estates frequently complain of the nefarious activities of "laan-tsai" "fei-tsai" and "ah-fei", names that indicate those ruthless characters who seem to have no social conscience.

Some tenants will whisper fearfully, "You will never understand how terrible our life is here." Others are just angry about it all. Who can blame them either way? But the angry ones are better than those who are fearful: with anger there is hope of action, but fear never solves this kind of problem, since crime flourishes on intimidation.

If the powers-that-be would investigate properly these outbursts from the people who are angry, or even the whispers from the frightened ones, they might begin to build the much-talked of bridge between themselves and the people whom they rule without understanding. The question is, however, whether the Government really wants to know the truth, or whether it is easier to pretend that the truth does not exist.

Every Urban Councillor who does ward duty (and some don't do it) knows that the commonest request at the ward office is for more space in the resettlement estates. Whoever designed the older Mark 1 Blocks may have noticed an urgent housing problem but did not seem to know the elementary fact that people usually marry and have children, lots of children: birth control was even less common
then than now.

One of the funniest cases of overcrowding I met (and it wasn’t funny for the people concerned) was that in which five bachelors had earlier been resettled in one standard room of 120 square feet: in the older estates this is the correct size for five people to use as a kitchen, living room, bedroom, sitting room and whatever you like all rolled into one. All five got married and brought their brides, who began to have children. In those days it was illegal to live with your wife and children in a resettlement room: at least this must be presumed from the fact that the wives and children could not be added to the tenancy card and technically they were not overcrowded because the tenancy card showed only five persons. Later, the policy was changed to enable men to add their wives and children and to ask for more space in cases of this kind. All went well until the building boom ceased and builders went bankrupt. Now and for the past two years there have been literally almost no rooms within reasonable distance to send the overflow families, and those who refuse to go to Ham Tin have a good point when they complain about transport to work. Bus services are only provided when the need has become so acute that the Company can be sure of a packed vehicle on every journey. So now we are back to the old policy that husbands cannot add their wives and children unless they are the householders (tough luck on four of five bachelors), or unless the young couple will go to an outlying estate. And when they agree to go to an outlying estate, they are usually told that their
application has been successful, but unfortunately there is at present no room of the correct size ready for them. By the time the rooms are ready, the policy may have changed again. So the merry-go-round goes on. No long-term planning, no certain policy, everything piecemeal to meet the current exigency, or rather, to dodge it.

Sometimes you will find a man selfish enough to ask for more than his allotted 24 square feet for an adult and 12 for a child under ten in his family. Who could blame him? Except that his next-door neighbour may be living in ten square feet with half that amount for his children under ten. It is all a matter of comparison, not of standards.

When Council houses were first built in Britain, someone wrote:

"The rich man lives in his palace grand
To rest him from his labours:
The poor man sleeps in his council house
With his feet in his next-door neighbour’s."

In Hong Kong, the rich man certainly lives it up in his palace grand, but as for the poor man, he doesn’t even have his feet in his next-door neighbour’s, for the very simple reason that there literally is no space for an extra pair of feet in the neighbour’s house! So his elder sons sleep on the common staircases or in the outer corridors; the remaining children sleep on the floor and cannot go to bed until everyone else has gone. That is one reason why so many school children look sleepy-eyed, don’t do their homework, are punished at school, and give up study.
The Government makes use of any refusal to go to an outlying estate to explain to the people living on Mount Elysium why people live in such conditions. They prefer to be overcrowded, the elite are told; and it makes good sense to them; they prefer to believe that flats are there for the asking as it saves an overburdened conscience for the luxury in which they live.

These changes of policy make good training ground for Government officials, who soon learn how to put an argument for every change of policy. One time we are given a dissertation on why this is good, and a few months later, another on why the same thing is bad. It reminds me of the war days when we were first told "Eat more bread" but when there was a shortage of bread we were told "Bread is not good for you, eat potatoes." One wonders if a Government servant in the end has any ability left to think out what is really good or bad for the population. Or does that really matter?

There are other problems involved in resettlement. When a tenant comes to ask for more space you give him the stock answer that you have been taught in the papers circulated: "Sorry, there are no vacant rooms of that size on the estate." The client almost shouts at you: "No vacant rooms? What about number so-and-so and so-and-so?" He will give you quite a list, and add: "But they're all being used illegally — sub-let, for illegal factories and storerooms, even for gambling and teddy-boy activities."
Before you think I am blaming all the Block Officers who are supposed to make regular checks on the use of the rooms, let me hasten to add that some officers at least are prevented from carrying out their duties, sometimes by rascals protected by officialdom, and sometimes just by rascals. If you report to the police the rascals will be told who reported them and your lot is even worse: you will be intimidated, or even beaten up. A really conscientious officer sometimes has a tough time too, with threats from the gangs that control illegal activities. Reports to the police have been so ineffective that in 1969 Resettlement Officers were instructed not to report common gambling activities such as tsi-fa, on the estates. It is always easier in Hong Kong to cooperate with rascals than to seek the protection of the law, which is more likely to protect the rascals against you.

A friend of mine tried it out to see how a report to the police worked. Seeing serious gambling activities going on daily in a building near his home, he phoned to the nearest police station, as all good citizens have been told to do. He gave his own address but used a Chinese name. He then watched from his window. Within a short space of time he watched how all the gamblers left, and when the police arrived there was nothing but table-tennis in progress. The next day a group of thugs arrived at his house to ask for Mr. So-and-So, the Chinese name he had used. Seeing he was not the Chinese they were looking for to get vengeance, they left. From whom but police could they have obtained the name and address of the informant?
Some of the rascals found on resettlement estates disguise themselves as decorators. One wonders if it was for this purpose that resettlement rooms were left without doors, windows and other interior decorations. The reason given is that these fittings get stolen, but it is strange that the same does not apply to low-cost housing. The unfinished state certainly provides a lucrative job for many so-called decorators who would not know the right end of a paint brush. Why should they, when they can make a good living by taking up contracts and farming them out to genuine decorators, while they can sit back like parasites — and heaven knows, we have plenty of parasites in Hong Kong. There is evidence that these decorators do more than decorate houses: they also set up hawker stalls and illegal shops in the estates, and collect huge amounts of money in rents and holiday tips.

If the authorities had known as much about the Hong Kong people as they pretend to do they would have arranged plenty of proper hawker bazaars in all resettlement estates, and in places where they would be patronized. I know that the powers-that-be will say that they have tried this in some estates and hawkers prefer other areas for their trade. That is simply because they never consult the hawkers to find out a likely place for hawking, and try to push them into corners where they occupy the most useless part of the land, and where shoppers are least likely to go. All cheap commodities in Hong Kong are sold from hawker stalls, as shop rents are too high: this is a good way to keep down the cost of living, and without hawkers,
workers' wages would have to be much higher to enable them to pay their share of the ridiculous shop-rents.

But plans for hawker bazaars were in the main neglected, and hawker bazaars "just grewed" like Topsy. Whatever the authorities fail to control (and the number is legion) very soon becomes the domain of the rascals. The latter are far better at assessing the needs of the people than the lawful authorities. (if colonial authorities can ever be said to be "lawful"). Rascals can turn anything to money. So they set up more shops and bazaars than the authorities ever built, and, protected by some men wearing the Queen's uniform (sometimes referred to as "yau pai ke laan-tsai, licensed rascals), they collect their unofficial rents, rates and taxes, not to mention tips for the holiday seasons. The revenue collected illegally in Hong Kong through lack of foresight or plain unwillingness on the part of the authorities to provide legal facilities, would probably give us all the schools and social welfare benefits we need so badly. Multi-millionaires from these rackets immigrate to Canada and other countries where they invest their ill-gotten gains, money that could have been collected legally and used for the welfare of widows, orphans, the blind and the handicapped.

I have mentioned that some civil servants are conscientious. There are even honest police. But in no case do the honest men get far unless they are prepared to keep their mouths shut, which very many do. Much of the inefficiency and low morale in some Government Departments is due to the
unfair promotion system, whereby confidential reports are often based upon gifts and gambling parties, rather than on talent and zeal. In certain departments it is commonly the subject of jokes that an honest man will be moved around like a pawn on a chessboard, and if he doesn’t resign in disgust, he will be sacked on the slightest pretext.

A City District Officer once made the revealing remark, which he no doubt intended all in good faith, that "If you don’t agree with the boss, you should not be afraid to say that you disagree with him." Had he heard that some people were afraid to disagree? The remark would probably go down well with the boss, but the implication is ominous.

There are some men I have met personally who disagreed with the boss and they landed out on their necks. I cannot speak of them all but some deserve mention here.

The first one to come to mind is well-known in Hong Kong, the case of Gerald Gillow. Gerald had served his Queen and country in the Second World War and had spent his life in colonial service. A person of impeccable character, he knew the meaning of fair play, and even believed in the mythical "British Justice". He was also proficient at his job—maybe too proficient for Hong Kong. He was offered and accepted a three-year contract as a horticultural expert in Hong Kong, and he believed that three years meant three years and that a contract was a contract. What he did not know was that Hong Kong was only a Colony without even a flavour
of what he called British, and not an iota of justice.

On arrival in Hong Kong he found things pretty neglected, and started making plans. It is common for contract officers to be invited to Hong Kong to make a show of changing old policies; the trouble begins when they take the job seriously instead of realizing that they are expected to be ornaments, saying a lot, writing a lot about progress, but doing little. As another contract officer once said of his Department, "I really thought I was brought here as an adviser, but now I realize that I am only expected to make plans but do nothing that costs money." If only contract officers were told this clearly before signing contracts: "Look as if you're doing something, talk as if you're doing something, but for heaven's sake don't spend any money," a lot of heartaches could be saved. Fewer would then go home as Gillow did, broken and disillusioned. In fact, honest men like Gillow wouldn't come in the first place if they knew this.

One thing Gillow never thought of was to treat the Chinese in Hong Kong as anything but human beings, so he was shocked to hear the language used in dealing with them in his department. When he protested, his contract was suddenly ended, without reason given. A Clause in the contract no doubt originally intended to safeguard the Government in case they by chance employed a drunkard or an immoral person, was wrongly used for disposing of an honest and upright man. There are drunkards and immoral persons on whom the Clause is not used because they are less "dangerous" than up-
right men. Gillow was given three days to quit his job, but this was later changed to three months, a clear admission that the Government could not justify its own vindictive action. Moreover, qualifications were later made to this clause at the demand of the civil servants' association indicating clearly that it had been abused. Nothing Gillow could do ever brought about an honest investigation by the Queen's Government that he had served so long and so well.

The facts of the case of Alan Ellis, a police inspector, are almost identical. Ellis came to Hong Kong as a young man, intending to make his career in the Police Force. He was soon awarded the Baton of Honour for his good work in training in his section. But he was from the earliest stage given to understand that in the Police one either rides on the wagon and enjoys the view (referring to corruption), walks beside the side of the wagon and sees nothing, or stands in front of the wagon to stop it and gets crushed. He began well by refusing the first bribe, a sum of $500. The usual game of chess began: he was moved from place to place as no division wanted this honest man who pointed out its shortcomings in failing to take action against drug traffic, gambling and other lucrative illegalities. He was dismissed without reason, in the same way that many others have been dismissed, both Chinese and British, in similar circumstances.

Another ex-policeman whom I recently met said, "If you don't want to ride on the wagon there is only one thing for you to do — resign." He himself
had resigned.

In both these dismissal cases, the reason for dismissal given long after the event was the same: "incompatibility of temperament". Does this mean incompatibility with the corrupt system? There can hardly be any doubt. I have met Chinese in the same position, and retell the story of one of them, in his own words. Names have been omitted for the safety of the person involved.

"I entered the Police Force in 19xx. After I had graduated I was stationed at ..... . In three weeks I discovered that crimes abound in the district. Being restricted in power by my rank, I could only report the crimes to my superiors. Each time my reports were rejected. So all I could do was that when I was on patrol I tried to arrest and drive away those who broke the law. Every time I did this someone would tell me, "Here everything has been settled." But I did not pay any attention to this and did only what was right. Every time I returned to the Police Station, Corporals xxx and yyy would say to me: "Give others a break. We all belong to the same family." But I still refused to pay any attention to such remonstrances. As a result my superiors were very dissatisfied with me and transferred me to ....."

(The story goes on to give details of the illegal activities he found being protected and how finally he was framed on a false charge leading to his dismissal from the service.) The story ends:
"But thinking back, I was still filled with anger at the whole business. I wrote a letter to the Anti-Corruption Branch and reported the whole incident. But the only reply I received was some questions concerning my financial circumstances at that time, and what had happened before my discharge from the Police Force. I replied that was not my intention, and that my salary in my new job was good. All I wanted was to expose to the Department the corrupt practices in the Police Force. But eventually nothing came of my report. All that I have written has been on my mind for years. I am willing to testify at any time and place."

I too tried to report this case to the Anti-Corruption Branch, but nothing came of my report, not even a reply. There is no doubt about it that the administration permits corruption to continue, and supports the dismissal of honest men.

Another policeman told me a year or two ago that he tried to muster a group of honest police, but he was warned to lay off. He was British, on contract, and he could scarcely wait until his contract ended. Another, Chinese, told me that some of the younger police hate to collect money, but they have no choice, while one Chinese policeman became a potential suicide when he discovered he had to take money from poor hawkers. An honest man has a hard time in the Police Force.

The so-called "Riot Enquiry" of 1966 did nothing to improve the situation; it simply confirmed to the dishonest police that they had the full support
of the Government for their illegal activities, and they could get away with the framing of honest citizens. Since then there has been a rapid leap in crime and a mushrooming of teddy-boy activities, many of whom operate with police protection.