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The District Office

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I was recruited in one of the last two general recruitments to the Colonial Service, those of 1972 and 1973. After 1973 there were, it is true, several dozen new expatriate appointees to the administrative service of Hong Kong but these were all people who were sent here on the independence of other colonies or who had come from the home civil service on special terms. The last two general recruitments in which all the universities in the United Kingdom were circularised for people who wished to apply for a post in the Colonial Service were in 1972 and 1973. I was thus recruited in 1972 as one of the very last in a long line of service: I was at the end of an era.

My service in the Hong Kong Government was short – only 24 years – and not particularly distinguished. I can say little on the development of policy or the thinking and attitudes of the Administration at its higher levels. Clearly, therefore, the workings of Government at a high level are not what I am here to speak on. I believe that there are two things which I can talk on which might be of value. First, I think something on what we were taught as young Administrative Officers in this period might be of interest. How were we encouraged to view the society in which we found ourselves, and how were we encouraged to view ourselves and our Service? How did we in fact view the Colonial and Administrative Services? What did membership of those Services mean to us? What did it all look like and feel like when viewed “from below” in the early 1970s? Second, I would like to say something on what it was like to work as a young District Officer, something about life “at the front end” of the Government. Being a District Officer was still, in the 1970s, as it had been for so many decades, the single most typical of all possible junior Administrative Officer postings, and I thus felt it might be interesting to provide a description of what it was like to be an

expatriate District Officer at that period in Hong Kong.

It must be emphasised that the officers who taught us how we should think and how we should look at the world in which we found ourselves were not only the senior expatriate officers, but included the senior Chinese officers that we worked with as well. By 1972, half of the Administrative Officer grade were Chinese and by definition they were then all senior to me since, as a new appointee, I was the most junior in the Service. I learnt at least as much from my senior Chinese colleagues as I did from my senior expatriate colleagues as to what was expected of a Colonial and Administrative Officer in 1970s Hong Kong. The view of the world that we were taught and which we came to espouse came to us from our seniors, both Chinese and expatriate, but I cannot remember any significant differences in how we were encouraged to view ourselves and the Services of which we formed part by either group.

In any discussion of the attitudes of the Colonial Service in Hong Kong in this period, the question of racism must be addressed. Outsiders always seem to assume that racism – which I take to be a belief, or assumption, that one race, culture, or set of traditions is better than others – is an inevitable part of any colonial system. Beliefs of this sort always come up when you talk with outsiders about the Colonial Service. I do not, however, believe that there was any racism in the Service in this period. None of my 1972 colleagues found any incidents of racism within our Service. We never came across any racial feelings, no hint was given to us by those senior officers that racism played any part in the Colonial Service in Hong Kong, and neither did we feel, nor were we given to understand, that there was any significant division between Europeans and Chinese within the Service, or within the Government as a whole.

What we *were* taught was that European culture and Chinese culture, while equally valuable and valid, were different, and led to different bureaucratic strengths and weaknesses. We were taught very clearly that Hong Kong was, by an accident of history, uniquely blessed by having the best of two worlds, a bureaucracy with both the strengths of Western culture and the strengths of Chinese culture, and

where Western weaknesses were off-set by Chinese strengths and *vice versa*. We were taught that, because of our colonial situation, we were almost the only place in the world with a genuinely cross-cultural Government and that this led to nothing but strength for Hong Kong. We also came to understand that the ideal situation within Hong Kong was for a department where the departmental Head and the Deputy were one European and one Chinese (it making little difference which was the head and which the deputy), since this allowed a genuinely cross-cultural office culture to develop in the simplest and easiest way. Inter-racial friendships and marriages were if anything positively encouraged.

It was true that we were told that we, as junior expatriate officers, had to be flexible, that Chinese officers often found Europeans to be abrasive, loud, noisy, impolite, and to smell bad, and that we should therefore be sufficiently humble to ensure that we were, on the one hand, open to Chinese bureaucratic and cultural strengths and, on the other, that we shut out of our minds the problems arising from these inter-cultural problems. We were told to avoid being "too European", i.e. too loud or boisterous, and not to be too demanding. We were told that we should expect that if we asked a direct question of our staff we would probably not get a direct answer; that we should expect the answers to questions we posed to come trickling in over the next few weeks, possibly from third parties, and that we had to be open to getting our information indirectly in this way. We were told we should not expect in-principle political stances because this was contrary to Chinese cultural desiderata. We were clearly given to understand that it was for us to bend so that the Chinese who we were working with could meet us: we could not expect them to bend to meet us. We had to develop so as to work sensitively in a Chinese cultural milieu, without losing contact with our European cultural standards and strengths. My Chinese colleagues, I understand, were similarly advised to avoid being "too Chinese", and to be flexible towards European cultural peculiarities.

On this issue the final point that I want to make is the one I made at the beginning: racism formed no part of our bureaucratic

culture. Multi-culturalism, however, lay at the heart of our self-image. I remember being told by a very senior expatriate colleague once that there was nothing wrong with the British government and bureaucracy that the importation of a few thousand Chinese senior bureaucrats would not put right. That an Anglo-Chinese bureaucratic culture was immensely valuable; something to be positively upheld and defended; was taken as axiomatic by our seniors, something self-evidently right and correct.

Another point which needs to be discussed is dedication – dedication to Hong Kong. We very quickly learnt when we arrived in Hong Kong that all our seniors felt that service as an Administrative Officer was a life-long thing, a matter of dedicating oneself to the people of Hong Kong and their needs. The Administrative Service was not just a job, but a vocation. Anyone who viewed it as just a job was unworthy of his or her position, and the sooner the Service could rid itself of him, or her, the better. All of the 1972 intake, I believe, quickly found that this was their instinctive view as well: certainly, all our seniors quite clearly expected such a commitment as a matter of course. The commitment which was expected, and which we freely offered, was to do what was best for Hong Kong, without fear or favour. We were in Hong Kong to do the best we could for the people of Hong Kong, and for no other purpose. This sounds rather priggish, but I never had any doubt that this was a commitment very genuinely held by those senior officers who taught us. I have now left the Service, but the feeling of dedication to Hong Kong, I find, still remains.

There was thus a deep commitment to the welfare and needs of the people of Hong Kong in the Service. There is, however, a major implication in this and this also was made clear to us from the beginning. In any issue, what is best for Hong Kong may well differ from what is best for London: we were taught that, without equivocation, in such circumstances the duty of any Administrative Officer was to fight for Hong Kong and its people. There are people who constantly, and often rather shrilly, say that colonial Hong Kong had no real independence of action, but had to do whatever it was told by London, and to support the aims and wishes of the

government in London – nothing could be less true. During the 1970s and 1980s London had almost no discernible influence on the way the system worked in Hong Kong, and London's wishes affected the Service very slightly – and not at all at junior levels.

We were thus not appointed to do London's work, and anyone who tried to put London's wishes and needs first would not have got very far in the Hong Kong Government. The Government had in fact installed a number of bureaucratic rules to make sure that junior officers could not be influenced by London, or, indeed, even be in contact with London. Junior officers were not permitted to contact London direct; any necessary contact had to go through their Head of Department and the Head of Department was required to contact the Colonial Secretary where the slightest doubts arose that this might be a sensitive matter. But as far as possible all junior and middle ranking staff were more or less completely cut off from London, quite deliberately, so that there could be no problems of divided loyalties. There were only a very few places in the Government where this did not happen. When I was in charge of the Visits Office, I was required to contact London about three times a day, and I was given special privileges to do so, but only on the mundane issues of the arrangements for visits. Apart from this posting to the Visits Office, in the first twenty years of my service not only did I never contact London, I never had a file that crossed my desk in which there was any evidence that London had been involved. At the very highest levels of Government I believe there was more contact, and doubtless more pressure, but even so it is clear and it was made clear to us when we came here, that the Hong Kong Government worked for the people of Hong Kong; first, second and last. Hong Kong was, throughout the first fifteen or sixteen years of my service extremely self-assured, independent in action and thought in almost all areas, and was staffed by officers to whom it was a tenet of faith that London was much more likely to be an enemy than anything else.

We were also taught about certain bureaucratic virtues which were particularly encouraged in Administrative Officers: the ones that come to my mind are efficiency, loyalty, thrift, honesty and intelligence. We were taught these were the prime bureaucratic

virtues of Hong Kong. They were what Chinese people demanded of their government servants. What was “best for HK” was to embody these virtues. Efficiency meant providing the necessary services quietly, effectively, on time, on budget, to meet the reasonable demands of the sensible part of the population. I remember very vividly once I asked one of my District Leaders what he felt about a government system that had so many foreigners in it. He said that when he went home and turned the switch on, if the electric light came on, and at the end of the month the bill was satisfactory, why should he waste his time thinking about how the electricity company managed its affairs – he then added, “what is the difference with the Government?” I believe that this view, that the Government is there essentially to provide services and infrastructure, and is acceptable to the degree that it does so efficiently, is a very widespread Chinese view in Hong Kong. It differs sharply from the basic Western view that Government is all about power and politics. I have no doubt that this deep difference in attitude in part underlies some of the cross-cultural problems that we have had in the last ten to fifteen years.

Loyalty was to both the Service and the people. It did not require blind obedience to seniors in post but loyalty to a vaguer and broader entity, i.e. the people of Hong Kong at large and the Service at large. I remember in my first two months I was called to see Sir Ronald Holmes who was then the Chairman of the Public Services Commission. He said to me, “Never forget that your duty as an Administrative Officer is to give your honest views, it isn’t just to say ‘yes sir’, it’s to say ‘no sir’ when you have grounds.” He went on to say, “You will never be harmed by doing this.” Alas, I think he was a little bit optimistic in this, but nonetheless what he said was at least a widely believed ideal, that Administrative Officers were there to speak their mind honestly and to give their loyalty, not in blind obedience to their seniors but to the Service as a whole, and to the people of Hong Kong, the people you were serving.

Thrift was another virtue and one that I subsequently came to find has been a marked feature of British Colonial Administration throughout the Empire from the 1830s until 1997. Strict financial controls to keep the money spent to the minimum consonant with

efficiency. This is something that I think all Administrative Officers find has entered the very marrow of their bones by the time they have done a year's service. Cost-conscious and thrifty efficiency is something I think that nobody who works for the Hong Kong Government can forget for a minute, this need never to spend 99 cents if you can get away with spending 98 cents. This is something which was particularly strong in Hong Kong, probably because the Chinese population demanded thrift as part of its concept of efficiency. If you were not spending as little as you reasonably could then you couldn't call yourself efficient and the services were not being provided at the optimum level.

Honesty is something which was also considered to be a bureaucratic virtue, at least in theory, although it could get people into trouble. Honesty and frankness to those above you, honesty and fairness to the people you were serving, a willingness to listen, but also an ability not to hear what people wanted you to hear but not to remember. Other virtues required of all Administrative Officers, and which were seen as intimately connected with honesty, were tact (something, alas, which I lacked almost entirely), good manners (which I am not strong on), and graceful behaviour (which, alas, I don't have at all). Even if the practice did not always reach the ideal, nonetheless, honesty with grace of this sort was always held up as at least a theoretical ideal.

Chinese people have for a thousand years and more expected sharp intelligence in their public officers and despise the plodder, the blinkered or the lazy. Administrative Officers were thus expected to be intelligent, hardworking and sharp. You needed to hear things only once, and were somehow lacking if you had to ask for it to be repeated. The term is not heard so often nowadays, but those of us who are politically incorrect remember Administrative Officers were "The Heaven Born", in Hong Kong just as much as in India where the term was coined. If Administrative Officers are "The Heaven Born", then they have to show themselves to be up to the high standards the term implies. The people whom the Administrative Officers served certainly expected them to behave as if they were "The Heaven Born", able to do anything, and to answer any

questions. Some of the political problems which the Government has faced in recent years, in fact, have, in my opinion, stemmed from Government servants being unable to achieve the very high standards the people of Hong Kong instinctively demand of them.

Another feature of the Colonial and Administrative Services in Hong Kong was that responsibility was thrust on Administrative Officers here at a very young age. When I arrived, the ten people in the 1972 batch were (as I remember it) numbered 41 to 51 on the Administrative Officer list. Thus, there were only forty people senior to us in the Administrative Officer grade and about the same number in senior grades of the Administrative Service: under a hundred in the Service as a whole. Yet the Government was expanding very fast, and had been for over a decade. The result was that new Administrative Officers were being given highly responsible posts very early. We had to do three years of probation before we were confirmed but, as soon as we were confirmed, we might find ourselves, as I was, as a City District Officer, or in a responsible Secretariat post, and at six years seniority you could expect to be posted as a District Officer or a Principal Assistant Secretary in the Secretariat, and thus a member of the Directorate ranks. Responsibility was thus thrust on Administrative Officers while they were still in their middle twenties. Neither did young Administrative Officers have much back-up. When I was City District Officer I had an office stuck in the middle of what one senior colleague called "Red Indian Country" along the Lai Chi Kok Road, with no one to call on if things went wrong. Not only was I sent out there, I was sent out there being told when I went that this office was in a state of total collapse, having had no substantive head for the last four years, "You will have to sort it out." Most young Administrative Officers (including myself), of course revelled in this lack of supervision and control, but the lack of advice and back-up could lead to trouble when things went wrong. Certainly, though, our seniors made it clear that we were expected to be highly intelligent, utterly trustworthy and incredibly competent, so that we could be safely left on our own after even so very short a period of service.

There were two linked concepts which were very important to

Hong Kong. These were the concept of co-operation between Government and people and the concept of consensus democracy. The 1967 riots had made it abundantly clear that the Government in the 1950s and 1960s, while it had gone to great lengths to listen to Chinese elite groups, was not sufficiently in contact with the grassroots. It was agreed that something had to be done about this. What was done was to try and build up systems in which the Government could hear what ordinary grassroots people were thinking and saying and doing. This led to the establishment of the City District Offices, to an increase in the number of District Offices in the New Territories, and to major changes in the way the New Territories District Offices operated. It also led to a huge expansion in the number of consultative committees that Government ran and some changes in the makeup and workload of those it already had. The assumption was that most Chinese people felt happier in a situation where there was indirect, but close, contact between Government and people. The concept is, perhaps, easier to express through a concrete example. If you had a Government Public Housing Estate block and you established a Mutual Aid Committee within it, by election involving mass meetings, so that eventually a consensus appeared, and a Chairman widely accepted by all the residents was chosen, then, if the Government subsequently went to that Chairman, he could tell the Government exactly what the people in his block were thinking and feeling, and this was entirely acceptable to the residents of the block. By extension, if you had in a District say 50 or 70 or 150 such Chairmen, or other "District Leaders" of a similar type, and you went to them to ask them the same question or to find out what their views were on a particular issue, you would be getting a very close measure of contact with grassroots opinion, but avoiding any system of political parties or adversarial democracy.

As a City District Officer in Sham Shui Po and again as a District Officer in Shatin, a very high percentage of my time was spent in forming and managing Mutual Aid Committees and there were very few days in which I did not spend a good deal of time in contact with their Chairmen. Every week, without exception, we had to draw to the attention of Government at the most senior levels

whatever it was that the people were saying and thinking. Comments from every District Office were consolidated and written up in a summary which was distributed to every senior Government official. These summaries were treated with the greatest of respect and attention.

When our staff went round to speak to Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen, and Secretaries of Mutual Aid Committees, or to some other grassroots "District Leader", the normal course was to let the "District Leader" raise whatever he wanted first. This allowed Government to have a feel for what was at the top of the minds of the residents. If one or two subjects were coming up all over the territory in these discussions, then Government would know that this was a matter that was genuinely significant to the people. After the "District Leader" had raised all the issues that he felt were urgent, then the staff of the District Office would ask for comments on specific questions on which Government wanted to know the views of the people. With many dozens of District Office Liaison Officers and their assistant staff doing this for several hours every day, Government could, and did, get a very clear and detailed idea of popular opinion in Hong Kong.

Another new development which was introduced into Hong Kong after the 1967 riots was the appointment of a broader range of people to Government consultative committees, not only elite businessmen, elite social workers or elite educationalists, but people from the grassroots – in many cases Mutual Aid Committee Chairmen and similar "District Leaders" who had shown themselves in discussions with the District Officers to be intelligent and sensible. By the middle 1970s, grassroots figures started to be appointed to the Legislative Council, after proving their worth on consultative committees.

This whole system of consensus democracy, based on co-operation between Government and people could only work if the District Offices had the trust of the "District Leaders", and the people those "District Leaders" represented. We, as young City District Officers, were constantly told that we were "Government's eyes and

ears". We were, we were told, not Government's hands. It was not our job to try to "sell a line", i.e. to try to get a specific Government policy or position agreed by the grassroots residents within our District. It was for other Government Departments to try to get the people to agree that their line was the best: our job was just to say what the ordinary people thought, and what their reaction to those proposals was. Sometimes, when the grassroots residents clearly misunderstood what Government was trying to do, we would try to explain, but only with great circumspection. Had we tried to induce people to agree a Government line, our credibility with the residents would quickly have disappeared. No one would have believed that we were genuinely trying just to reflect their thinking to Government.

This consensus democracy system could also only work on an assumption that Government was willing to change its policies if they were found to be widely unacceptable. No "District Leader" would have been willing to continue to provide District Offices with the views of the people if it was clear that those views were routinely ignored. Particularly during the late 1970s, this willingness to adjust policies in light of grassroots opinion did in fact occur. Although I cannot provide any examples to confirm this, Government in this period was willing to bend its policies, or to amend or change them, where they were unacceptable or where there was a wide degree of opposition, until the proposal was one that the ordinary public could live with. The implication is that Government accepted that it had to work to achieve consensus, and to avoid taking positions which were likely to be widely unpopular.

Singapore is, as a matter of practical fact, also run on a consensus basis, and so have most territories with predominantly Chinese populations. It has always seemed to me that the system is one which meets a number of Chinese cultural desiderata, and that it is one which works extremely well with a Chinese population.

At the time the "consensus democracy" system was at its height, i.e. in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Legislative Council had a reputation for being a "rubber stamp" body because it would meet for an hour or two once a week and it would pass everything on the nod.

There would only be formal speeches, every word of which had to be handed in a week beforehand. In fact, however, what happened during this period was that a vast amount of work was being done out of sight, behind closed doors, in the committees of the Legislative Council. In these committees Government's proposals were rejected time and time and again until the Legislative Council Unofficial Members were satisfied that the proposals did meet a basic consensus position, that is, one which would be widely acceptable. It is politically incorrect to say this, but I at least am satisfied that the late 1970s and early 1980s were by far the best administered period in Hong Kong's history, one where the actions of Government were closer to the real wishes of the people than at any date before or since. It was a system that worked extremely well, partly because we had very good senior officials, willing and able to adapt their proposals to achieve a consensus position, partly because there was a genuine feeling of dedication and commitment to the people of Hong Kong among the officials who were making the system work, and partly because the way we were working was in fact very acceptable to the majority of the people of Hong Kong.

So much for how the Colonial and Administrative Services in Hong Kong in the 1970s viewed their roles: the rest of this paper discusses the specific question of the role of the District Offices in this period. The modern District Office system was, as I have said above, set up after the 1967 riots and their main duty was to improve contact between Government and the grassroots. In the 1970s there were two different sorts of District Office – the City District Office in the urban area and the District Office in the New Territories – the main difference being that the City District Offices had nothing to do with land or planning. I was a City District Officer in Sham Shui Po, where I had 2 Assistant City District Officers, 8 Liaison Officers and a team of about 20 community organisers. What did we do? We did some things which took up a great deal of time, but which tend to be forgotten nowadays. One of these was for the District Officer to take sworn declarations as Commissioner for Oaths, for free. At times this could take an immense amount of time. In the 1970s, a lot of schools would urge their pupils to take their School Certificate or "A" Level results straight round to the District Office, to take out a

sworn copy of them against the possibility of the original being lost. Come August we would have quite literally hundreds of youngsters queuing up to do this every day. At times my staff would have them marshalled into groups of 20 or so and they would bring them up the stairs so that the oaths could be sworn en bloc. On one occasion I had to do well over 200 “sworn copy” statutory declarations in one day.

Most of the time of the District Officer, however, was spent in forming, managing and servicing Mutual Aid Committees (MACs). When I was in Sham Shui Po about half the Public Housing Estate blocks in the District had MACs and by the time I left something less than two years later, we had managed to increase that to about three-quarters. Our aim was to establish MACs wherever they were feasible. This work with grassroots groups was very much an every single day, every single night, every weekend kind of work. I remember that, when I left Sham Shui Po I went back over my diary to see how many Sundays I had managed to stay at home during the previous year and found that out of the 52 Sundays I had been at home for 5. Otherwise every single Sunday I was out officiating at some District function – mostly either connected with a Mutual Aid Committee or some other grassroots group.

It must be stressed that the Mutual Aid Committees were more important in those days than they subsequently became. In recent years there has been a decline in enthusiasm, and in efficiency and effectiveness. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, there were so many problems that the District Office could see and so much work for the Mutual Aid Committees to do – clearing up dirty back lanes, getting the building re-wired, providing better security, improving neighbourliness, and setting up youth groups or a football club, and so on – that there was a huge amount of enthusiasm. The District Office was besieged by buildings that wanted Mutual Aid Committees. Whenever we went into a building to form an MAC, there was at that period almost always a widespread enthusiasm to have one set up. The Police and the Social Welfare Department also worked very closely and enthusiastically with the District Offices in the formation of MACs. The Police hoped that the then newly-formed Police Liaison Officers would be in constant contact

with MACs and their leaders, and that this would improve co-operation between the Police and the people, making the Police more acceptable to the grassroots residents, and, at the same time improving crime reporting. The relationships between the Police and the grassroots residents did indeed improve immensely through the close contacts which developed with the MAC leaders in these years. The Social Welfare Department wanted to improve contacts between its local offices and the grassroots, and this, too, was successful to some degree.

Unfortunately, once a building in which an MAC had been established had been put into proper order, the filth had been cleared away, the new electric wiring had been put in place, perhaps a gate had been put on the front door, possibly a watchman had been appointed and it had ticked over for a couple of years, everybody forgot what it was like before the MAC was there. As a result, over the last fifteen years the MACs have become less important. Nonetheless, it is essential to remember just how critically important they were in the 1970s and early 1980s, and what a vast amount of the District Officer's time was spent in forming them and maintaining them.

District Officers also dealt with disputes, although not very many in the urban area.

District Officers were also used, I used to say, as "Government's performing monkeys". We were always available, to put it metaphorically, to run up a stick and do a little dance on the top. When any significant "District Leader" wanted a public statement that they were of acceptable social status and character, they would invite the District Officer to a function. The District Officer usually had no option but to go. If he refused to go, then he would offend that "District Leader", and the group he headed. They would "lose face" within the District. Thereafter there would be hurt feelings. The "District Leader" might thereafter refuse to co-operate with the District Officer. Yet the District Officer could not function without the continuing co-operation of all his "District Leaders". So people would get married, or their children would get married, or it would

be their 60th birthday, or their football team had just won a big game – an invitation would come to the District Officer and the District Officer would have to go. Deputies or other subordinates would usually not be acceptable. The amount of time that was spent on this sort of “social function” was immense. This was true in the New Territories (NT) as well. When I was posted as District Officer to Shatin in the NT, the bulk of the work was still as it was in the City District Office, still very much to do with MACs, contact with grassroots and establishing systems whereby Government and the grassroots could be in mutual contact. In Shatin at the time when I was District Officer there were one or two new families who had never ever had any contact with Shatin in the past moving into the district every five minutes of the working day, day after day. In these circumstances it was the view of Government that it was the Mutual Aid Committee system that was the best way of providing an instant framework into which these new people could fit, and thus to stop the New Town becoming a sink of crime or a mass of directionless people with social problems because they did not know anyone else in the town. As a result, we tried to establish MAC within the first two months of a new building being opened. With the town developing as fast as it did this was not a simple or easy task. We were forming MACs in Shatin at the rate of about one every 10 days and since each of those MACs required at least 3 mass meetings together with a visit to every single household, this was a tough programme, particularly as the District Office only had about six community organisers to do all the work.

At the same time, the New Territories were different from the urban area, because, as well as the newcomers for whom we were establishing MACs, we also had the old traditional District Officer’s duties of contact with the indigenous villagers. Somehow in the last six to ten years the indigenous people have become rather forgotten. Government is no longer very clearly or closely in contact with them. Every time I go to some function in Shatin leaders of the indigenous community will come up to me and say: “DO, you were the last DO: we don’t even know the name of the present one.”

Part of the reason for the drop in status of the indigenous people

is the attitude towards the rural population held by most urban Chinese. Many urban Chinese despise the villagers. Unfortunately, it tends to be that the better educated the urban Chinese is, the more he or she despises the villager. There is a tendency among the urban Chinese to assume that only the cultural practices of well-educated urban Chinese are genuinely Chinese. Villagers are, therefore, "backward", "primitive" or "crude", at best "old-fashioned". Their culture is "debased", their dialect "uncouth". The villagers are, all too often, dismissed as unfit to be spoken to, unworthy of any time spent on them. This "cultural colonialism" by which the well-educated Chinese elite regards anyone with different Chinese cultural practices as second-class and thus unworthy, has, over the last few years, become steadily more and more in evidence in the New Territories. In the last 10 years almost all the District Officers have been well-educated urban Chinese with a marked reluctance on their part to have much to do with the indigenous people of their districts.

However, in the time when I was District Officer it was made abundantly clear to me that one of our main duties was still the traditional duty of caring for the rural population, that we were definitely still the "Mother and Father of the People". As District Officer, I still had quite a few villagers who came to me to ask me to deal with their personal and family problems. Some of these problems were family problems; others were land problems, yet others were connected with village politics. In many of these disputes it was clear that the villagers trusted the District Officer absolutely to do right, even where the right course was possibly not entirely in accordance with the law. One example I can give is where Government resumed a large area of village land for part of the New Town Development. We found that the village had never bothered to register changes in title. The land was still registered in the name of the ancestors who had farmed there in 1898, when the British came to the New Territories, most of whom had died fifty or sixty years before the resumption. In almost no cases could the villagers prove their descent. When asked how the village could have allowed its affairs to get into such a mess, the answer given was that the villagers did not see the need, "The District Officer would always make sure we were treated right." And the District Officer had to do just that,

deciding who was to receive compensation, and in what percentages, whether the villagers could prove their case or not. Luckily, the villagers agreed with the District Officer as to what was a fair distribution! En route to this happy conclusion, the District Officer had to make decisions about the validity of, for instance, posthumous adoptions which might have taken place forty years earlier, and whether shares should be left for villagers who had never returned after the War, and who might or might not still be alive – all very contentious, but still a real part of the District Officer's duties in the late 1970s.

Finally, the New Territories District Offices differed radically in the late 1970s and early 1980s from the City District Officers in the urban areas since the NT District Offices retained responsibility for a good deal of work in the Land and Planning Department. The Lands Department was only extended to the New Territories – in 1980 and before that the District Officer was the land authority. This meant that it was the District Officer who had, for instance, to pay out all the compensation cheques for land resumed. It was the District Officer who had to coordinate clearances, the District Officer who had to coordinate the initial work of getting roads into development areas, it was the District Officer who had to sell land, and who had to agree to the terms on which land was sold. The District Officer chaired the District Clearance Co-ordination Committee, the District Planning Committee, and the District Land Committee. It is worth repeating about the youth of Administrative Officers in these posts – I personally was just 30 when I was posted to Shatin – and had no planning or land training or background. I knew less about the administration of land than the babe unborn when I got to Shatin, although I knew a lot more about it by the time I left there! It has been to a large extent forgotten that twenty years ago in the New Territories the District Officer was still the land authority. Even more it has been forgotten how much work that involved!

Planning was an important part of the District Officer's duties then as well. There was a Project Manager in the New Town Development Department, whose job was to manage the

development of the New Town, including its planning. However, the District Officer, since he was the land authority, in practice, had the effective power to veto almost any planning decision, by using the argument that he would not provide the land for projects he objected to. Nowadays such a cavalier attitude would not be allowed (the District Officer did not really have the power he arrogated to himself), but it was common then. I am satisfied that the various planning projects which the District Officer was successful in fighting for in my time in Sha Tin were well worth the effort – they include the provision of car-parks in the Town Centre, the inclusion of hotels in both the Town Centre and on the south side of the Shing Mun River, and the retention of a railway reserve along the south side of the Shing Mun River.

Thus it was generally a rather strange life that expatriate Administrative Officers led as District Officers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. You were very much on your own. The New Territories Administration had a minute headquarters – there was very little real capacity to advise or assist District Officers. The District Officers were out there on their own, and, certainly, we revelled in the freedom usually. At the same time, this was the period in which the Departments in the city were getting more and more interested in the New Territories. Time and again District Officers were pushed to the very edge of what was acceptable, because it was the beginning of the period where people in the city were beginning to ask why the indigenous people should get special treatment, and why the New Territories should not be brought under “standard” bureaucratic controls. Just a few years after my time in Sha Tin the District Officers were forced to become less independent. Let me, however, give one example of the sort of “going to the edge” I have in mind. On one occasion there was a village that was to be removed. In 1918 this village had rebuilt itself. The villagers continued to live in the 1898 houses until the new houses were ready. Then the people moved into the new houses and pulled the old houses down. This meant that the houses after 1918 were built “off-lot”. The villagers had never bothered to register this change in site: “The District Officer would never see us wronged...” However, when the Government came to resume the village, some clever spark in the

Secretariat said that Government could avoid paying compensation to the villagers for their houses, because they were “illegally built on agricultural land”, and that they thus should be treated as squatters. I said this was unconscionable and they said, “Ah, but it’s the law.” So I looked at the law and the New Territories Ordinance said (it hadn’t been amended from when it was enacted back in 1903, and the section in question had never been used since about 1912), that the District Officer had the right to amend the Block Crown Lease. I therefore amended the Block Crown Lease in question. I put a line through the relevant sections of the Block Crown Lease and re-wrote it, showing the lots on which the houses now stood as House Lots, and the lots on which they had stood in 1898 as agricultural land, and said, “Right, now that is the legal position, so pay the compensation.” The Attorney General’s Chambers said the action was outrageous, but it was legal, and they did pay compensation. No one would dare do it today, alas.

I should, perhaps, say something about money because one of the things that bedevilled all District Officers both in the City and in the New Territories in the late 1970s and early 1980s was the vast amount of work they were required to do, especially liasing with grassroots groups, and the minute sums of money they were given to do it with. In Sham Shui Po I was required to have a big New Year’s Party for all our “District Leaders” – about 600 people. I was given \$700 to do it. Even in 1977 you couldn’t do it, and I said I couldn’t do it, and I was told, “You’ve got to do it.” So I had to send all my staff, down to the clerks, to go round Kowloon to find the very cheapest biscuits that were capable of being bought anywhere. The District Leaders got nothing more than a heap of these incredibly cheap biscuits and one glass of a very bad punch that was made of the cheapest ingredients I could find. We decided after a long discussion that we had to hold this party at 2.30 in the afternoon, when everybody would just have finished their lunch and nobody would be hungry. Subterfuges like this were forced on District Officers all the time. Luckily, as well as poor biscuits and very poor punch, the “District Leaders” got “face” as well, or the whole system would have broken down!

Another area which was a constant problem because of wildly inadequate funding was the Local Public Works system in the New Territories. District Officers had funds which were supposed to be used to build playgrounds and access roads and bridges and all sorts of things for rural communities that didn't have adequate facilities, and to maintain them subsequently. Alas, the fund for Sha Tin had not been increased since the establishment of the District. In my time as District Officer we had enough money in my Local Public Work vote to put up either two or three signboards or maintain one playground a year. In previous decades, when the Vote had been more realistic, my predecessors had built something like 40 playgrounds. Now, since we could not maintain them, they were all in ruins. Not surprisingly, local residents would always complain, saying, "Why doesn't the District Officer do anything?" The problem basically arose because the District Offices were a long way away from the Secretariat, and nobody really cared, apart from the City and New Territories Administration headquarters, and that headquarters did not have the money to do anything much about it either. I would have dearly liked (alas, it would have been called corruption) to have squeezed some of the big developers that were making hundreds of millions of dollars out of Shatin to give a few thousand dollars for the Local Public Works in Shatin out of their profits. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s the District Offices did immensely valuable work, but did it on a shoestring.

The old consensus democracy system in Hong Kong was, as I have said above, generally satisfactory. There were, however, some systemic problems: the system did not work a hundred percent perfectly. The problems were not specific to Hong Kong, or even to the British colonial experience; many were common to all bureaucratic systems. One of these problems is the drive for efficiency which tended to make smooth passage a virtue in itself, which in turn led to the "don't rock the boat" syndrome, which in turn often became a "three wise monkeys" syndrome. Senior officers were often judged on the smooth operation of their departments, junior officers on how little trouble they caused, and thus inertia could become prized over innovativeness, and flexibility over principle. Abuses were sometimes overlooked rather than causing

waves by stamping them out. This risk was always understood and good senior officers would try to avoid it, but many senior officers would close their eyes to abuses, until they became scandals, and then blame other people for them. This is in no way a problem specific to Hong Kong; it happens in all bureaucratic cultures.

Another systemic problem arose from the reverence for high intelligence. In some senior officers this led to a self-admiration attitude which could lead to quite massive arrogance, not, I may hasten to add, of a racial character, but a deep arrogance which despised everyone or everyone junior to themselves. This problem arose with both expatriate and Chinese senior officers, it was in no way more of a feature of the one than the other. Self-confidence was, and is, a bureaucratic virtue, since the system could not have worked as efficiently as it did without this, but many senior officers came to believe that they were infallible – that their intelligence was so great it was perfect. This happened quite often. More seriously, this arrogance towards juniors was often tied to excessive adulation of their seniors. The tendency to despise those below you goes with the tendency to excessively admire those above you. Sometimes at the very top of the system, officers could arise who would surround themselves with a group of yes men whose sycophantic advice, since it always coincided with the Big Man's views, was regarded by the Big Man as very good and better than any other advice. This has happened, I'm afraid, quite regularly and, within the last several decades, at least two or three Chief Secretaries have fallen into this trap. It led to situations where an individual officer "fitted", and could do no wrong, or did not fit and could not do anything right. However, this should not be pushed too far. Criminal irresponsibility and corruption were most unknown, inside administrative Service within at least the last three decades or so. The Hong Kong Government was, in the 1970s and 1980s a remarkably clean government at the top and in most middle management levels. I personally was never offered a bribe, nor in any case was ever any bribe hinted at, and the same, I believe, goes for all the other Administrative Officers who were appointed in my year. We hear a

lot about corruption in the Hong Kong Government in the 1970s, the Godber* years, but corruption was almost always in lower ranking positions and in certain departments only. Among the Administrative Officer grade, criminal abuses were very rare. It was a very clean government.

In general, the Hong Kong Government of the 1970s and early 1980s was a good place in which to be an Administrative Officer. The ideals of dedication to an efficient, honest, intelligent and hardworking service deeply imbued with a genuine commitment to the people of Hong Kong were real and deeply felt. The idea of consensus democracy was real and a great deal of effort was put into it. We believed in it, we worked very hard for it, we made sure that the Governor and the Colonial Secretary, the Secretary for the New Territories and the Secretary for Home Affairs really did know what people were thinking and saying. Morale in the service was very high in this period. Officers generally believed in what they were doing and could see it succeeding. Relations between the Government and the people were excellent. The Government, in my opinion, was in closer contact with real public opinion than either before or after. I do not believe that Government is now in contact with public opinion in anything like the real way it was in 1980.

Today it is the politically correct line to say that everything today is so much better than then. Only those officers and District Leaders who knew the old system do not agree – and they tend not to speak up. Civil service morale, especially in the Administrative Officer grade is, I believe, very poor today, as it has been throughout the whole of the 1990s. Morale is certainly poorer than it was twenty years ago. The ideal of a long term commitment to serving the people

* Editor's note: The Godber Affair was a major incident in postwar Hong Kong which led to drastic changes in the corruption-control system. In 1970 an investigation was launched into the case of Chief Superintendent Peter Godber who had amassed financial assets greater than his official salary. Godber escaped to the United Kingdom leading to a vigorous public outcry. In 1974 the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), which had considerable power to deal with cases of public and private corruption, was established.

is dying away. If Government starts appointing people on three-year contracts the last flicker of it will disappear. The ideal of co-operation between people and Government is disappearing or has perhaps already gone, being replaced with an "us-and-them" attitude. The Government's system of consultative committees is no longer working. The committees are becoming mere political wagons, and no longer genuinely bring the voice of the people to the ears of Government. In the place of consensus democracy we have a Legislative Council whose hysterical posturing and vapouring cause most senior officers privately to blush with shame. In place of striving to find out what is best for Hong Kong we have at present a politicised ballet to find out what will merely maximise press exposure. I seriously doubt that there at present many people at the centre of Government who really stop to think what is best for Hong Kong, and far too many who are interested only in what seems best for themselves. The huge benefits of a cross-cultural bureaucratic system have been almost lost. The Government is stuffier and slower, and there is a lack of innovation now – certainly it has less innovativeness now than in the 1970s or early 80s. Many senior civil servants bewail the changes, but see no way out. I believe, in other words, that the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s was the period of the all-round best administration Hong Kong has ever had, and I am proud to have served in it.

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