

Anecdotes of an Advocate

In Retrospect

Peter M Whyte

(Dean of Students 1970-83)

January 2005



In a few weeks it will be 35 years since I alighted at Kai Tak Airport and made my way to the Hilton Hotel — a prelude to four days of intensive interviews for the inaugural post of Dean of Students at HKU.

Two events in that hectic week remain vividly in my memory.

The first is the dinner at the long-ago demolished Gloucester Hotel, hosted by Pro-Vice-

Chancellor Peter Thrower, at which the five short-listed candidates were entertained by a collection of senior staff and Students' Union officials. Perhaps "entertained" is not quite the right word. We were mercilessly grilled by the students on a wide range of highly political issues most of which centred on the Union's demand to have voting power on University matters, the views of the candidates being critically juxtaposed. The students were poised and courteous, their command of English excellent and their friendly smiles masking the deadliness of the cut-and-thrust game. After more than three hours I felt I had been through a meat grinder.

The second occurred on the fourth night. The Selection Committee, which included the Deans and Principal Officers (all of whom had interviewed individual candidates), had sat for most of the day and a tentative decision had been made to offer me the post. One test remained.

As I concluded my dinner at the Hilton I was called to the phone. Vice-Chancellor Kenneth Robinson's unmistakable voice asked, "Mr Whyte, would you be able to come up to the Lodge? Now."

Half an hour later we were seated on the veranda in comfortable cane armchairs, a beautiful, mild February evening inviting just the right balance between alertness and somnolence, a bottle of fine Scotch whisky between us, and the demands of official social life in Hong Kong the topic for discussion.

Two hours later, all light had gone from the sky, and all whisky from the bottle. I was still able to stand up and walk steadily to my taxi, although Kenneth, it must be said, preferred to sit. I wondered a little anxiously how he would feel the next morning. I could have saved my sympathy. At 7.15 a.m. the phone by my bed rang. The unmistakable voice spoke again. "Ah, Peter, could I meet you in my office please? In a few minutes."

No breakfast. A lightning-fast shower and a similar taxi, and I was facing Kenneth across his desk.

"Good of you to come last night", he began quietly. "You know, if you accept the offer which the Council is, I am sure, going to approve tonight, you'll be doing an awful lot of socialising, and drinking an awful lot of alcohol. I had to see how you carried yourself in that sort of situation, and whether you could keep your wits about you. I'm happy now to make the recommendation to Council."

Fait accompli. We settled down to discuss plans for the future. Never one to waste time on trivialities when there was work to be done, our VC.

Those early days in the mid-period of the Cultural Revolution were hairy ones, and scary. The goals to be achieved were mind-boggling. For example, the very first task I faced was given to me succinctly by Kenneth. "The Halls of Residence are not financially viable. You've got a year to turn them round, or we'll have to close them." I needed no crystal ball to predict the reaction of the HKUSU to either a fee rise or a closure. What at that point I could not know was that my uprooting of corruption in the Halls would meet as much resistance.

I had been fortunate in recruiting an Administrative Assistant, Miss Violet Tang, who proved invaluable in communicating with the minor staff and winning their trust. We tackled Lady Ho Tung Hall first. It was not long before we were able to demonstrate that although the girls paid \$4 per day for food, they were receiving meals costing \$1 per day. By the time we had made appropriate minor staff changes, over the voluble protests of the students, we were able to reduce their Hall fees and bring the Hall finances into the black.



We discovered that the Hall amahs slept on thin mattresses on a damp concrete floor. When I insisted that beds be provided the then Finance Office expressed astonishment at such a change to traditional conditions, but agreed to provide

the funds. Slowly, minor staff morale improved and the students accepted the changes to their traditional patterns.

However, for all the rough and tumble of those first few years, and the struggle to establish the true independence of my office from both staff and student pressures which ran counter to the gradual provision of an effective infrastructure for student welfare and leisure-time facilities, they were years of enormous productivity and years in which I developed a boundless admiration for the creativeness and vitality of student activism. Misdirected it was at times, I felt, and ill-informed at others, but rarely was it without both sincerity and enthusiasm. The negative pressure from the staff side was largely related to the eternal competition for a larger slice of the budgetary pie, and to a lesser extent, to the maintenance of personal power, the protection of fiefdoms.

As I look back from the present-day situation of extensive student facilities and welfare programmes, I wonder to what goals do today's students direct their passion for community growth and improvement which, in the 70s and 80s, so challenged and enriched my life, and taught me both humility and courage. It would give me great pleasure to know that those energies are still harnessed to a drive for the collective improvement of student life.



Taken in the Dean of Students' office in 1970, no doubt in the throws of preparing papers for Council.

Reminiscences of a Maverick

Violet Tang 鄧惠珠 (BA 1966)

Brisbane

January 2005

One year into my retirement from January 2004, I find my former prowess as an administrator to recall names of members of the University fast dissipating. From the shelves stacked with confidential box files, the in-tray of relentless paper work, the incessant phone calls, and the hectic meeting schedules, to myriad bird calls in the wee hours of the morning, the invigorating exercises in the park under the pristine blue sky, the migrating flocks of geese in V-formation, the gardening, swimming, and housework, the change of environment erases the involuntary tension, strengthens the sagging muscles, and relaxes the mind!

Before my memory lanes get muddled, perhaps I will amuse myself with some vignettes from my 30 odd years of working at the University.

Which is which?

Since mid-1970, I have had the delight of knowing or working with six Vice-Chancellors who are a mob of awe-inspiring elites. One is dapper, always gentleman-like, who talks to you like an old friend and who delivers impeccably erudite opening speeches on any topic under the sun. Another with his bushy eyebrows and well-creased handsome face commands respect like a mandarin in court, but nonetheless can melt you instantly with a few whimsical twinkles in his eyes. Then there is one who is ready to dance on his tippy toes when he throws a bright idea at you and he



Violet: After presenting the prizes at the Annual Performance of the Folk Dance Society the student chairperson is presenting her with a box of orchids.

has plenty indeed. The fourth is known for his accessibility and popularity who, if you ask and ask ever so nicely, may just let you sample his Lodge cuisine cooked by his own fair hands. The fifth stands out by his hand-in-one-pocket jingling some coins and his chairmanship of VIP committees is marked by total mastery of the subjects and expert facilitation of discussion of every item on the agenda. Last but not least is one who projects sheer stature by his diplomacy, steely firmness when warranted, immaculate diction, and finesse in composing university documents.

Husband and wife team!

In this day and age, husband and wife working in the same office is not a big deal. Not so in the 70s when such a practice was definitely not de rigueur. My automatic transfer out of the Dean of Students' Office cut short the joy of interacting with students and staff, as assistant to the Dean. The memory remains vivid of being summoned to see what should be done to red paint splashed over the intricately



dragon-carved handles of the Loke Yew Hall main door. That was during the time when the Cultural Revolution was still ongoing in China. There were innumerable meetings with the HKU Students' Union executives over issues such as student representation on university committees, student welfare and finance. My transfer to the Registry opened a new, and infinitely much wider, horizon of administrative work in the University. In retrospect, it was a blessing in disguise.

Blue Copies for Training

One of the many things I learnt, stationed in the Registry, was the blue copies, that is copies of written communication by an administrator who was willing to release them for circulation amongst colleagues, inclusive of those in the then Finance Office, for the purpose of keeping each other informed. It was a laudable and beneficial arrangement. Quite understandably, all administrators were motivated to contribute to the Blues as a way of letting others know just how hard they worked! The grave risk, though, particularly for junior staff whose mother tongue was Chinese, was being bled in public. Every time the thick piles of blue copies reached my desk after they had gone the rounds of senior administrators from the very top, I first

looked up, with haste, my own masterpieces to see to what extent they had been emasculated, in bright red: spellings, grammar, sentence construction, choice of words, tenses etc. It was, believe you me, not a joke to register the abysmal standard of my English. I would not however trade this humiliating experience for anything else. There was just so much to learn from the corrections, and even more from reading blemish-free prose of senior administrators who seemed to have an incredible knack for presenting complicated issues with ease or straightforward subjects in elaborate flowery language. As far as I know the Blue Copies practice has been discontinued, which is a pity.

Misery as Examinations Secretary

Imagine the tortuous manual process of entering all the examination papers for the entire student population — each paper comprising a 6-digit code — into individual time-tables of a set number of examination venues. There was no computer programme developed at the time sufficiently sophisticated to produce the timetables mechanically, on account of a number of constraints one of which was created by students' inter-faculty enrolments. The months of compiling the tables were taxing enough but they paled before the guts needed to reject the teachers' requests that their papers be examined as early as possible in May. My replies became increasingly terse as I repeated the reasons for not complying. Eventually one teacher addressed me simply as Violent! I earned the reputation of being so fierce that some wouldn't touch me with a bargepole! But there were softer and sombre moments. On one occasion, prior to the start of the examination, I invited students, examiners, and invigilators in Loke Yew Hall to observe a minute of silence for those who died on June 4th.

Committee Secretaryship

The rules I had to learn to follow as a competent secretary were:

- 1 serve the committee chairman hand and foot, which in practical terms involved keeping him fully briefed about every agenda item and providing him with chairman's notes — just in case he wanted to refer to some background information or to suggestions you were game enough to offer;
- 2 speak only when invited to and always carry the poker face of a non-entity; and
- 3 compose the minutes on the spot, or prepare them speedily for issue and execute the decisions promptly after the meetings.

The fun of being a committee secretary was to note mentally which member came prepared to the meeting, who was a convincing orator, or had diarrhoea of the mouth or constipation of the mind. When in the company of all-male members, be prepared not to appear shocked when four-letter words are dropped. Rule No. 2, from the days of Bunny Mellor, former Registrar, has gradually been phased out. Committee secretaries these days are not infrequently called upon by the chairmen to present an agenda item before the

discussion is open to the floor. When I was asked to do this the first time without prior warning, I nearly choked on my twisted tongue.

9-11

A delegation of five University members and one adviser was on official business in the States. We were in New York on the 10th of September. The day started off bright and cheery but, by the time we were ready to fly back to Boston for a final appointment, the weather turned unexpectedly ominous and all domestic flights were postponed. With no other forms of transportation available — not even car rental — we yielded to a driver touting for business. At considerable expense, five of us (the sixth taking an international flight to Hong Kong, so we thought at the time) crammed into the 20-foot long limo for the tiring ride. Shortly after 9 the next morning we saw, to our horror, replays on television of the collapse of the Twin Towers. Had we not been engaged that morning, it was likely that we would have been on one of the doomed planes flying west! With Boston airport closed, we decided to trek north in the hope of finding another airport that might be operating. How we eventually managed to exit from Canada — with many twists and turns — is an exciting episode that deserves a separate chapter altogether.

Upon our safe return to Hong Kong, I treated my colleagues to 13 (which sounds like “definitely live” in Cantonese) suckling pigs.

For all the hubris, inaccuracies, coarseness and whatnot, embedded in these reminiscences, I will say *mea culpa!*

DOUBLE FIRST

New Dean of Student Affairs –

Albert W L Chau 周偉立

First Chinese and alumnus Dean of Student Affairs

As of April 1, 2005, HKU has had a new Dean of Student Affairs, Albert W L Chau. Albert received his bachelor degree in industrial engineering in 1983 and Postgraduate Certificate in Psychology in 1984 from HKU. In 1987 he went to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, USA where he obtained his PhD in psychology in 1992. Albert is a Riccian.

Since 1992, Albert has taught in the Department of Psychology of HKU, first as Assistant Professor and now as Associate Professor. He has served as the Warden of University Hall since 1996, and Director of General Education and the Chairman of the Steering Committee of the Intensified Learning Opportunity Programme (ILOP) since 2002. He was Associate Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences from 2000 to 2002. Albert is also an elected fellow of the Hong Kong Psychological Society.

In addition to his research in cognitive psychology, Albert has been involved in a few research projects relevant to student development and services. These projects include hall education, design of classrooms, use of information technology among young people, and students' financial management.

Albert's top two priorities as Dean are to promote internationalisation and to establish a more humanistic, culturally diversified and intellectually challenging campus for students. He will focus on the total campus experience of students and integrate student services into learning. As an academic psychologist by training, Albert looks forward to working closely with his colleagues in the student services sector and benefiting from their valuable experience.

