

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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ARD-7.  
A New Leaf.

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366 Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

An invitation to a friend's farm for lunch the other Sunday proved to be the prelude to an interesting tale. My curiosity was immediately aroused, for I knew that my friend, Mr. Wong, was a townsman born and bred, and the idea of such a man, in Hong Kong at all events, taking to farming as a weekend hobby was, to say the least, strange. Moreover, as I have always supposed, the agricultural land of the New Territories - Hong Kong's "back garden" - belongs to the various clans and village communities which have farmed it for centuries, and is not in general available for investment.

After a leisurely breakfast off the steamed delicacies for which the tea-houses of South China are so justly famous, we collected another friend of Mr. Wong's, crossed the vehicle ferry and drove out into the countryside. The New Territories are within easy reach of Hong Kong, and are more extensive than most newcomers to the Colony imagine. They are divided by ranges of dusty, ancient looking hills, some of which rise as high as 3,000 feet. Most of the cultivated land is in the valleys, and as one approaches the Chinese frontier these broaden out into a plain, intersected by streams and ditches. The majority of the inhabitants of the New Territories seem to live in old walled villages. Here and there, on low bluffs or at vantage points overlooking the sea, one sees the weekend houses of people from the city.

Mr. Wong's farm was neither part of a village nor of the usual order of vacation houses. It lay in a broad valley in which small homesteads were dotted about between patches of shallow water. Having turned off the main road, we eventually approached the house by a narrow mud-track, bordered on one side by a neighbour's duck-pond. As soon as we drove up to the door we were greeted by Mr. Wong's manager, Mr. Kwa, as I shall call him, who was also to be the cook. At his side were two rather ill-favoured and tough-looking chows. Mr. Kwa seemed a gentle, unassuming man, slightly built, rather shy, but apparently pleased to see us. I gathered that he takes pride in his cooking and is flattered when Mr. Wong brings friends to try it.

Inside we were greeted by Mr. Kwa's wife, a woman of about forty. It was clear from her appearance that she was used to hard work, but she did not look like a peasant, and, like her husband, she wore faded city clothes rather than the denim worn by most countrywomen.

I was told that she had been responsible for entirely rebuilding the house after last year's typhoons - she had to do it singlehanded, as her husband supplements his income from the farm with a clerical job in the city. It was made of wooden planks, except for a small brick-built wing which served as a bedroom. To my surprise there was an electric lamp in the ceiling. The furniture was mostly old and rather battered Chinese blackwood, with a monstrous pair of baroque armchairs which one liked to think showed a Portuguese influence and were from Macao, but which were doubtless throw-outs from a hotel or club. Decoration was confined to a single framed Catholic picture, and a calendar with a picture on it of a charitable boarding-school attended by Mr. Kwa's son by an earlier marriage. The floor was apparently of beaten earth, and other rooms were separated from the main room by wooden partitions.

Apart from these details, my chief memory of Mr. Kwa's house is of swarms of flies and really superb food - some of the best that I have ever tasted. There were only three dishes - a rich soup containing beef, Chinese kale, young peas in their pods and the peel of mandarin oranges, rice fried with garlic and very thinly sliced Chinese sausage, and a large freshwater fish cooked with some spinach and ginger. The meal ended with tea and oranges.

After lunch I had an opportunity to look over the farm. It was entirely given over to livestock - not even vegetables for the table were grown. In two large runs there were about a hundred chickens. In addition there were two shallow duckponds, each about 100 yards by 50 yards, and a fishpond of about 40 yards by 20 yards. The poultry were all artificially fed and looked quite sleek, but the fish were left to fend for themselves, and in fact I did not see any. I was told that all the ponds in the area relied entirely on rainwater, so that they suffer from summer drought, and I imagine that the fishpond would need to be stocked each year.

In addition to the two chows there were some puppies which I think probably ought to be counted among the livestock, as I was fairly sure that they were destined for the table at Chinese New Year, which was not far ahead. Since slaughtering dogs for human consumption is a criminal offence I did not feel free to ask about it.

Mr. Kwa unfortunately spoke neither English or Mandarin, so that I was unable to ask him how it was that he came to be managing Mr. Wong's farm, but I was able to learn something of his

story from Mr. Wong himself on the way home. It emerged that Mr. Kwa was less a tenant than a sort of vassal, or a client (in the original sense) of Mr. Wong's, living on the farm under his protection and at his sufferance.

Mr. Wong had at one time been in the Hong Kong Preventive Service, which is charged with the prevention of smuggling, illicit distilling, the narcotics trade and other nefarious activities, on behalf of the Department of Commerce and Industry. Among the many gangs with which Mr. Wong had to contend at that time was one, the most powerful and successful, led by this same Mr. Kwa. Born the son of a farmer, Mr. Kwa had not had a fortunate career. He had been in the Kuomintang army, reaching the rank of captain, and he enjoyed the comradeship of army life. After the Communists gained control of most of China Mr. Kwa became a guerrilla for a while, and from that he drifted into the highly profitable smuggling trade between Macao and Hong Kong. He was successful enough to be able to set himself up with a shop which both served as his headquarters and masked his activities. He also had a larger and faster launch than any used at that time by the Government, and his exploits are still remembered in both the underworld and the Preventive Service with awe.

Mr. Kwa's first brush with Mr. Wong came shortly after an unusually violent incident in which Mr. Kwa and his gang had beaten-up some officers of the Preventive Service and thrown them into the sea, making a fast getaway in the launch. Mr. Wong was assigned to visit Mr. Kwa's shop with a posse of men when he returned, and he personally beat-up Mr. Kwa. It was apparently felt that Mr. Kwa had broken the ground rules of the smuggling world, and that an example had to be made of him. Thereafter the Preventive Service harried him mercilessly, under the direction of Mr. Wong. His shop was continually searched, he was arrested on the slightest pretext, fined, and sometimes beaten-up into the bargain.

Eventually Mr. Kwa could stand it no longer. He obtained an introduction to one of Mr. Wong's relatives, and with him went round to Mr. Wong's house, to sue for peace. Mr. Wong was rather surprised and also pleased at a turn of events which gave him so much face, and he agreed to help Mr. Kwa, a man twelve years his senior, to turn over a new leaf. Among other things he was to give up his old companions and his old haunts, and to make this easier, it was decided that he should take to farming in a remote part of the New Territories.

Mr. Wong heard of the farm through friends. It appears that the land had become vacant because it had been the subject of a fierce quarrel within the clan to which it belonged. As a result, for a single lump sum (this is quite a usual way of leasing land among the Chinese) Mr. Wong got a term of years for Mr. Kwa, himself retaining the title. Mr. Kwa is gradually, and in his own time, repaying the lump sum.

Now, some seven years after Mr. Wong left the Preventive Service, Mr. Kwa is still his devoted follower, not to say occasional cook. He was particularly grateful for Mr. Wong's having helped to get his son into boarding school, where he is sheltered from any remaining gangster influences and able to make a good start.

In return he was able to give Mr. Wong some assurance when the latter spent a year in England by keeping a protective eye on his family, in which he is the only grown man. More dramatically, Mr. Kwa was able to round up a group of his old associates to put an end to threats made to Mr. Wong by some of his neighbours after he had complained about their late-night mah-jong playing. (None of the old associates seem to have minded coming to the aid of their former enemy.)

Apart from this, I was told, Mr. Kwa had managed to keep well away from the old life, living on his remote farm.

Yours sincerely

Anthony R. Diles

Received in New York March 8, 1965.