

# *Ardwell's Overseas Adventure*



# *Ardwell's Overseas Adventure*®

(Previously titled Ardwell's Adventure)

*A Mystery By*

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This is a rewrite of Ardwell's Adventure.

The original was written for a trivia game and suffered readability issues. Hopefully this corrects those problems (not to mention correcting my poor editing the first time around).

My thanks to my wife and friends who had the courage to advise me of the error of my ways.

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# ARDWELL'S ADVENTURE

## *Book 1*

### *Chapter I - The Package*

The postman showed up at my door one bright and sunny Monday morning with a package; a package that I was required to sign for. My name is Ardwell, George Ardwell and I received this package and an accompanying letter by regular post; albeit a little late; in fact, six years late.

The letter was from a legal firm representing my uncle, a man I had never met. I live in Montreal, well Beaconsfield actually, a suburb of Montreal, and my uncle, although Canadian, to the best of my knowledge, hadn't visited Canada during my lifetime. He apparently left his job suddenly and headed to the Orient sometime just before I was born and was never heard from again. The man was

a mystery to me and my family. He was a man for whom, over the years, I had developed many a swashbuckling story. So any communication from this enigma in my life certainly piqued my curiosity. The letter accompanying the package advised me that I had been left an inheritance by my uncle and that, should I wish to claim it, I need only to locate it in accordance with the enclosed material.

Turning the package over in my hand I mused that the simplest approach would be to just contact the lawyer and get the necessary particulars to set me on my way. Unfortunately, on chasing down the legal firm that had sent the letter, I was informed that the firm, its buildings and all occupants, including the lawyer of note, had gone up in flames some two years previously; the first of many dead ends to come.

So I turned to the accompanying package which contained a manuscript from my uncle providing details that I used to start my quest.

Containing riddles, and I suspect, both errors of commission and omission I found it intriguing, fanciful and not just a little challenging. So join me dear reader, in my journey to unravel this mystery. The essence of the manuscript follows.

“My Dear Nephew:

While we have never met, I have, nonetheless, followed your career with some interest and if you are reading this, then you will know that I have left you something of great value and that it only requires that you locate it. In support of that effort I provide the following background.

In 1972 I found myself in dire straits and urgently needing to get to the Orient. I was destitute and out of gainful employment and an associate of mine

in Hong Kong was desperate for my help, so my only option was to sign on to work a tramp steamer heading out of San Francisco to Hong Kong. The steamer left in early December, bound for Hong Kong by way of Osaka. The trip was slow and not without adventure. We encountered high seas, storms, doldrums and weather that varied from cold to searing hot. The four week crossing felt like four months. All of the crew, except for myself and an elderly Chinese gentleman - Mr. Woo - were regulars and had done the crossing many times before. As the outsiders, Woo and I formed a mutual bond getting to know each other quite well. He was in the same straits as I - having to get home without money. It seems he was dying and wanted one last moment with his estranged daughter before the grim reaper hailed him.

About three weeks into our crossing, and a day out of Osaka, we found ourselves fighting 40-foot waves, freezing cold and torrential rains. Woo came

to me that evening, giving me a letter and asking that, should he not complete his journey, to deliver this letter to his daughter.

The next morning he was gone. We searched the seas for the better part of a day before abandoning our attempts to find him. Given the prevailing conditions, the continuing high seas and 50-degree waters, we could only conclude that he was swept overboard during the night and had succumbed to hypothermia and drowned. With heavy hearts, we abandoned our search and continued on to Hong Kong.

It was this event that, on the conclusion of my passage, began the long and arduous path ending in this manuscript. I would urge you to pursue this quest, as its value notwithstanding, it has consumed over thirty years of my life and come close to causing my death on more than one occasion.

Following, are details that should help you should you rise to the challenge to recover this treasure.

The trail begins in Hong Kong with Woo's daughter. Having disembarked the worse for wear I nonetheless took pains to immediately look her up. Woo's note accompanying the envelope indicated that she would be found at an apartment on the corner of Old Bailey and Staunton Streets, located not far from the Central Police Station and Victoria Prison in Hong Kong. Being near the prison gave me little comfort as good neighbourhoods rarely border local prisons, so I headed out with not just a little trepidation. In fact the area turned out to be far more presentable than I might have imagined. Also, being close to the police station gave me a sense of security that had I but known, should have, in fact, given me cause for concern.

The cab dropped me off at Woo's daughter's address about three hours after docking. Luck was

with me on that day as Ying, Woo's daughter, was home and received me with a graciousness I had not anticipated. An Oriental of unusual height, exceptional elegance and beauty, Ying carried herself with a demeanor that begged respect while still maintaining a sense of openness and approachability. Instantly taken by her manner, her beauty, and innocent curiosity at my appearance, I fear I was at a loss as to how I might approach the delicate subject of her father's death. I should not have worried. As I was to find out in the coming weeks, this amazing woman was able to rise to the occasion of any situation; in this case with but one sentence.

"I suppose you have come about the passing of my father, yes?" I will not belabour the trauma she must have felt or the sadness that swept over me for her loss and the loss of my missing friend. "Please come in." she invited.

Her condominium was not particularly impressive from the outside; however, the interior was quite a different matter. High ceilings, hardwood floors with Persian throw rugs, indirect lighting and muted colours all came together in an elegant yet comfortable and, as I was soon to learn, a surprisingly spacious package.

On entering, she led me to the living room where we sat in awkward silence for a few moments before broaching the subject of her father's death. We had spent the better part of an hour discussing his disappearance at sea when she turned to me and asked if I would please stay for dinner, as she feared I must be hungry and wanted to hear more of her father and his last voyage. Given the attractive and engaging company, the lack of decent food on the tramper and a complete void of any reasonable alternative, I agreed.

She set about making dinner in the kitchen leaving me alone in the living room with a glass of wine and a plethora of, apparently very valuable, objet d'art. She certainly didn't seem to have any trust issues. Twenty minutes later we were sitting down to a meal of Thai food the likes of which I had never encountered before but would be more than willing to attempt again. During the dinner, conversation strayed from her father and into more conventional areas. Rising to remove the plates after a luscious dessert Ying returned with a fine Cognac, indicating that she might have something further to discuss depending on my availability and inclination to pursue a pet project of hers. As the Cognac warmed my soul and I sat, sated from a delicious meal and enjoyable company, I felt myself starting to succumb to the excesses of my travel. Ying, sensing this, offered to put me up for the night and to continue her story the next day. Being short on

funds and alone in a strange city the choice was easy.

The following morning Ying proceeded to seduce me with her story, drawing me into a course of action that has brought me to this point in my life.

It seems that Woo's letter was a continuation of some puzzle that Ying had been working on for a number of years. The letter referred to a book recently found at, and maybe still was located in, Linyi City, China. This book was it seems an ancient text of 13 chapters wherein five indicators could be found in the first chapter that would help lead one on the path to the recovery of some rare and extremely valuable asset.

To be honest I found this sounding just a little too much like a buried treasure map for my taste but Ying did not, claiming that she was in possession of other information that was incomplete and in need of supporting material, which this book might

provide. She felt confident that this latest missive would lead to avenues of support for her investigations.

"Listen, while in my teens, my father and I had a game we played called 'The Quest'. He would provide cryptic clues for me to follow. These were usually, but not always, clues that would lead to some treasure or valuable artefact. The clues were never easy and were designed to sharpen my investigative skills. A single 'Quest' could last for months with new clues every day. These were not simple games, more often than not encompassing a high degree of complexity. All of this ceased when my father left. I was sixteen at the time and I have not seen him since; however subsequent to his departure, I have, on occasion, received various documents with clues in the fashion of our old treasure hunts, although, in these cases, I believe that it is my father's intent to provide me with information on actual, likely criminal, activity,

possibly leading to some financial reward. Because of these past correspondences I feel sure that there is relevance to this note. In fact, I should consider leaving for China in the very near future to try and confirm the content of my father's letter. You could join me if you wish."

At this point I should have concluded our talks and gotten on with the business that brought me here. 1973 was not an era in which an Occidental should be trying to travel within mainland China. Chairman Mao was in complete control and, even though the previous year US president Nixon had broken the East-West barrier by being the first non-Eastern Bloc leader to travel to mainland China since Communism, little had changed in respect of attitudes towards foreigners travelling within China's territories.

On the other hand, I was quite enjoying my time with Ying, and did not want it to end. If she wanted

to pursue this challenge and wanted me to join her, I was sorely tempted. Spending more time with her would provide an opportunity to get to know her better. And, if fortune was smiling on me it might even turn into a relationship, not to mention that the mystery had piqued my interest. Nonetheless, in the end I thanked her for the kind offer but refused, pointing out that I had a previous obligation and quite frankly my finances would not allow for such a venture.

She appeared disappointed at first, and then after a bit of thought she said, that, should I change my mind, she was prepared to cover all finances for the trip. As to my business, she convinced me that if it could wait for at least a month, and if I helped her with her investigations, she would help me with mine. So I rolled over without even a whimper. A choice I was soon to regret.

Having agreed to join her, Ying wasted no time in introducing me to the physical aspects of her mystery - her case as she called it. The source of some of her existing information was to be found in Hollywood Road Park, not far from her apartment, and she wanted me to see the origin of one of those clues.

So we left the apartment and headed out to Hollywood Road Park where Ying pointed out a plaque on one of the park's pagodas, which, translated, read:

“The connection of issues and objects that may seem unrelated creates the web of life. Those that listen may see, and those that see may obtain treasures and wisdom of great value.

Listen to the words of this Pagoda:

- The name of my park connects to a man,
- The residence of this man connects to a person

- The interest of that person will start you on your journey

My time has run out but I leave this for one who may see

And find the road to the riches and wisdom I have forsaken.”

“While I have read this plaque on many occasions, I know that never has my father seen it.” said Ying after showing me the plaque and offering the translation.

“And how would that be relevant.” I asked.

“When my father left I always felt that he was in possession of information that he wanted me to have but was afraid to impart to me. In my current activities, which are indirectly related to my father, I have suspected a connection to the pagoda information and certain criminal activity in Hong Kong. That my father's letter should state that it is a

clue to something of great value seems too coincidental to not be connected. Especially given the notes he has sent me since his departure. Surely if he was aware of the pagoda clues he would have referenced them in one or more of his past missives. Also, if it's not related, then it would imply that there is more than one activity involving great wealth afoot, and I can't believe that there are two separate, unconnected, major, criminal activities occurring in Hong Kong at this time, as Hong Kong is too small a community to support two master criminals. The dominant tong would see to that. Therefore, these are two clues relating to the same activity from two separate sources."

I can't say that I was entirely in accord with her logic. In fact I had trouble connecting the dots. The issues seemed too far removed from each other, and what logic deemed either or both activities to be criminal in nature? Hong Kong was a colony of

great wealth, much of it obtained legally. I felt it incumbent upon me to respond.

“Well Ying, I wouldn’t rule out a connection, however - while the world must possess many different treasures and certainly much unlearned knowledge - I am hard pressed to conclude that these two issues are necessarily connected or that one or the other is illegitimate wealth. In fairness, however, if they are not connected the worst case scenario is that we have two opportunities instead of one. The best case scenario is that they are, in fact, connected and your quest will be significantly advanced.”

I hoped I sounded as though I was speaking with authority, as quite frankly, I was beginning to feel a little bit of a third wheel and well out of my depth.

“Oh yee of little faith” responded Ying, “allow me to show you the light. Let us return to my apartment. I have, there, a parchment I found a few years ago

underneath one of the benches. It was in poor condition but I have managed to restore it sufficiently to feel confident that it ties these two issues together.” And with that she turned and headed back towards the apartment.

The speed with which she departed took me by surprise. In my hesitation I almost lost sight of Ying. Not a good thing as the apartment was the better part of a kilometre away and I certainly didn't remember how we got here. Picking up speed I followed about twenty metres back, taking in some window shopping along the way.

Ying had just turned the corner off Hollywood Road on to Old Bailey Street when I was approached by a Caucasian gentleman, maybe 50, the better part of 6 feet, dressed in the impeccable style of Bond Street, and exuding a strong sense of authority, maybe even military.

“Excuse me sir”

“Yes”

“A word, if I might.” says he, angling in to cut off my progress.

“Could we do this another time?” I responded, as the man was definitely making me nervous.

“I’m afraid not. Let me introduce myself: I am Peter Strahan of the Hong Kong police force. My superintendent has asked me to contact you. I understand that you arrived in Hong Kong yesterday on the ship ‘Belgian Reefer?’”

Seeing as he knew my tramper’s name there was little sense in denying it.

“Yes and I cleared customs and immigration without any problems. All my papers are in order. What is this about?”

“Please, we have no issues with your papers. It is the company you are keeping that causes us concern. Our interest is only in your safety sir. Miss Lee is well

known to us and has developed a reputation for keeping company with persons of nefarious character. You would be wise to keep your relationship casual and as distant as possible.” Strahan’s sincerity seemed real enough.

“I shan’t hold you any longer. Here is my card, please heed my words and feel free to call me if you are in trouble or have any concerns.” said Strahan passing over a simple yet elegant business card, from a clearly expensive gold case.

There was little I could say or do that wouldn’t make the situation worse so I simply responded: “Thank you; I will heed your words.” And with that I hurried round the corner to catch up with Ying.

“And what did dear Peter want?” I nearly jumped out of my skin. Ying had been waiting just round the corner out of sight of me and the inspector, clearly watching us both.

“He warned me away from you. Is there something I should know?” I replied, trying to regain my bearings.

“Come back to the apartment. We need to talk” and with that she turned and strode off towards her building.

Daylight was waning, I was stressed over the Strahan confrontation and I was tired. The stress was not just because of Strahan but also because of the unknown nature of events currently surrounding me. Ying seemed completely open and honest. Woo had been nothing if not straight forward with me and I didn't know Strahan from a hole in the ground - yet he also seemed sincere. And what was with the Miss Lee thing? Wasn't Ying's last name Woo? I felt I should contact the associate responsible for my being in Hong Kong in the first place as he might be able to shed some light on the people I was dealing with. Unfortunately I was in no position

to do so at the moment without arousing the suspicions of Ying or Strahan or both, and without more information, that could be dangerous. So I followed the only logical course open to me - Ying (a not unattractive course to follow I might add).

## *Chapter J J*

Arriving back at the apartment Ying pointed to a settee and said “Sit!” She then disappeared into the kitchen returning with a full bottle of Remy Martin XO and two snifters. Without comment she poured two very large portions.

“What is ...” I started, only to be stopped by a raised hand and stern look.

“This will take a while and I need you to pay attention as there is much you need to know and even more you need to comprehend. I am not the simple girl you might think I am. Nor am I the woman that Strahan or his boss believes me to be. It is because of who I am that I am sure my father’s letter and the message and plaque from the pagoda are connected.”

*“In 1960, when I was only 16, my father called me to his office where he sat me down and related a*

story. Following the Hong Kong riots of 1956 and the introduction of stricter laws to quell the rising tide of triads, much of the illicit business, that heretofore operated openly, went underground. It seems that my father had been associated with one or more of the 49ers (ordinary members of a triad) and a "straw sandal" (a liaison officer for a triad). It was the "straw sandal" who advised my father that he had best leave Hong Kong for at least five years and that he should do so within the next month. As my mother had passed a few years earlier and, for reasons he would not explain, he could not take me with him, he had made arrangements for a guardian and left me with a very sizeable bank account (which I was never to reveal to my guardian). With that, he said his good byes, gave me a letter of introduction to my guardian and instructions on where to find such guardian. In addition he handed me a passport and set of papers in the name of Lee saying that from this day

*forward that was my name. I was then told I had 3 days to pack my belongings and leave my father's house, as four days hence the new owners would be moving in and he warned me, in the strongest possible terms, that I should never meet, see, or be seen by, the new owners.*

*And that was the last time I saw my father.*

*While packing what meagre belongings I wanted to bring with me I came across a note from my father. In the note he advised me that he had left a message for me at our favourite pagoda in Hollywood Road Park. This being the parchment I told you of earlier. Unfortunately by the time I located it more than half the document had been destroyed. This is why I am so sure that the two items are connected.*

*My guardian was the Bradford family who were close friends of the Sutcliffes, recently relocated to Hong Kong from Tanganyika. He (Charles Sutcliffe) was an Englishman of stiff upper lip, and*

*stiffer back, with an underlying cheery disposition that belied his exterior persona. His wife Melba was a pleasant Canadian girl of not inconsiderable charm. I mention this as the Sutcliffes were to, indirectly, have a bearing on my future. Sutcliffe eventually became the commissioner of police and was Bradford's immediate superior. They both welcomed me with open arms and my life settled into a happy routine that I could never have hoped for after the angst of my father leaving.*

*While I was not part of the Bradford household (I had my own digs), the Bradfords were there any time I needed them and I always had the security of knowing that the commissioner of police (Sutcliffe) had my back should I ever need help. A year after attaining my PhD from the University of Hong Kong in 1969, I was called in by Mr. Bradford (representing Sutcliffe) who asked what I intended to do with my life (I had spent the previous year travelling and had only recently arrived home).*

*Without belabouring the details, Bradford convinced me that I should work undercover for them (the Hong Kong police) to help find and expose corruption within the police and other government organizations in Hong Kong. Charles, at that time, was in the process of setting up a special force to locate and eradicate corruption within the police.*

*So, at this point, I have a father connected to the old triads, who leaves mysteriously and sets me up with all the money I will ever need, an apparently honest policeman as a guardian (to whom I cannot reveal my wealth), a set of clues pasted to the bench of a pagoda and no explanation for any of it.*

*While I will not deny that my father may have been associated with illicit businesses (how else to explain the money he left me), I couldn't explain passing me off to a guardian who appeared to be totally straight, against crime, and more*

*importantly, was working with an organization that was mounting a campaign against corruption in Hong Kong. Without guidance, how could I do less than accept my guardian's offer?*

*In fact, in this position I hoped to have information imparted to me that might lead to helping me refine my researches into the pagoda mystery. No such luck. Bradford left me to my own devices and offered up no new information. Could he be using me to derive information that I had and he did not? There was no concrete basis on which I could attest to his sincerity in pursuing the criminal element. For all I knew, he could be the mastermind behind any and all such activity and wanted to use me to plug any leaks and set me, or others, up as scapegoats.*

*Faced with this dilemma, I decided to keep a low profile and develop my own information sources - outside Bradford and Sutcliffe's domain. Expecting that whatever the case might be, it would, in some*

*sense, be linked to the triads, I made an effort to infiltrate three of the triads that I knew to be extant in Hong Kong at the time. I gained access, at various levels, to all three within six months.*

*Unfortunately, to date, I have been unable to uncover anything of any real consequence. Admittedly there were a great number of minor crimes being committed - small robberies, minor extortions, numbers running, gambling and prostitution. Whatever I was looking for and whatever Sutcliffe was looking for were not minor crimes and it would have been folly to reveal my undercover identity for these issues.*

*While I have no proof at all, I suspect that Strahan and Strahan's superintendent, Peter Godber, are shady. I know he follows me and, yes, I do associate with "nefarious" people, as he would call it, but only in my role as a spy for the police. However, I can see his point of view. My associates are questionable, I*

*am Woo's daughter and I am, indirectly, related to the Commissioner of police. If he (Charles) is dirty then the superintendent is only doing his job. If the superintendent is dirty then I have a responsibility to find dirt on him and turn him over.*

*So far I have no compelling evidence either way.*

*I am sure that Strahan, Godber, Bradford, Sutcliffe, the pagoda and my father, as well as the letter you have brought me are all connected.*

*So you see. I am not who Strahan claims I am and I do have strong reasons to associate with 'nefarious' people and to believe that my father's letter is connected to the pagoda's revelations."*

"And that's my story. Believe in me or believe in Strahan - your choice."

Her story was compelling. It didn't take me long to make up my mind - I didn't know anything about Strahan or his superintendent, and while I knew

only slightly more of Ying, I had had a strong and credible relationship with Ying's dad. I couldn't see him putting me in danger if he knew his daughter was trouble, at least not without warning me.

"OK. If it's a choice of spending time with Strahan or you, you win hands down. I believe I will choose you." Say I with a bit of lost humour.

"Then let us start. Let's itemize the clues we have so far and let us extrapolate what these might mean."

What follows are the clues we perceived at that time:

- 1. The name of Hollywood Road Park connects to a man*
- 2. This man is connected to a residence*
- 3. This residence can help you find another person*
- 4. This person has a hobby that can help define our next move*
- 5. A book of 13 chapters in or from Linyi City will have 5 clues within its 1st chapter*
- 6. Clue 1 chapter 1*
- 7. Clue 2 chapter 1*

*8. Clue 3 chapter 1*

*9. Clue 4 chapter 1*

*10. Clue 5 chapter 1*

This was all well and good for Ying who had been pursuing this for some time but it was, quite frankly, all a mystery to me. Consequently I told Ying that there was little I could do to help at this stage. She would have to read me in on each of the clues bringing me up to date on what she knew for each case. She explained as much as she could and we decided it best to shelve this portion of our quest pending a resolution to the Linyi City book. I will say at this point that I was inclined to agree with Ying's assessment that the two items were connected.

And so we entered the next segment of our quest.

Ying wanted to go to Linyi city - which for her was likely not a problem - but not so simple for a round eye like me, especially given my stature of slightly

more than 6 feet, my head of blond hair and blue eyes. I reminded Ying of this.

“Don’t worry we can make arrangements that should keep you safe. We could dress you like a monk, shave your head and you could grow a beard. I bet even I wouldn’t recognize you. The hood on your monk’s outfit would hide your features and walking with a stoop would make you look smaller. Sitting whenever possible will accomplish the same thing.” Ying said.

“Look,” she continued “I know how to get us to Linyi City. We can sail to Lianyungang and from there it’s only about 100 kilometres to Linyi City. I can then make arrangements for a car in Lianyungang so your exposure will be limited to getting from the boat to the car and any moving about that we may do in Linyi City. If this makes you too nervous you can remain here and I will

make the journey into China on my own. I've done this before so I know I'll be safe."

I don't want you to think less of your uncle but I decided to stay rather than risk a trip to the mainland.

Ying wasn't happy but accepted it nonetheless. Having settled that, we headed out to obtain supplies for Ying's trip. It was about six p.m. and we took a shortcut through Shelley Street. Five minutes into our walk and about half a block down Shelley Street I had a feeling we were being followed. Mentioning this to Ying, she said that she was aware of our stalkers, which we had picked up just outside the apartment.

"Knowing that, you led us down this alley?" I asked, now just a bit worried. "Might it not have been wiser to take a more open route?"

“No, I came this way because it gives us the advantage.” She responded.

Now Shelley Street wasn't really a street. It was actually a walkway with two adjacent parts. One part consisted of a covered series of long sloping steps beside a sloping pathway. At the time, we were walking along the stepped portion of the street which was a couple of feet higher than the sloping pathway and separated from it by a 3 foot high wall.

Not long after my comment and about 100 yards along the walkway Ying turned to me and said “Listen carefully, they're coming. When I say ‘jump’, immediately jump over the wall onto the pathway, crouch down and go back the way we came.”

And with that she said “Jump!”

I jumped as instructed, she followed and the two thugs hesitated just long enough that by the time

they leaped onto the pathway we were behind them. Both were wielding knives. I watched in amazement as, in the dusk, and in the moment it took them to realize that we were not ahead of them, Ying pulled out an expandable whip stick lashing both assailants behind the knees and bringing them to the ground. Without hesitating she then whipped the knives from their hands to the accompaniment of cries of agony. Disarmed and in considerable pain the thugs fled.

Recovering from my shock and more than a little disconcerted I wheezed “Please tell me you know what that was about. .... And also, why didn’t you tell me you were a 007.”

“I’m no 007 but I am well trained. To answer your first question, yes I know what this is. When my father left, he left behind those who felt he had absconded with a large treasure and certain very valuable secrets and they have been waiting for

some years hoping that someone would approach me with news from my father concerning these missing valuables or secrets. This is all related to the corruption that Bradford and I are looking into. Had he stayed, my father would likely have died either at the hands of the triads or the police. The secrets he took with him are secrets that many have been hoping would eventually come home to roost so they could retrieve their ill-gotten gains and make sure that the secrets remained secret. Those who would benefit from this knowledge have been waiting for my father to contact me in the expectation that he would provide me with the information necessary to recover those valuables or impart their secrets.”

“It appears they believe you to be that emissary.”  
She concluded

And so it was that I decided that mainland China was the lesser of two evils.

Returning home Ying suggested, in an effort to keep me alive, that I stay in her apartment, grow a beard, shave my head and she would arrange for the provisioning of a ship to take us to Lianyungang, get my robes and pick up my papers (I didn't ask).

Within a week we were ready to travel. We exited her apartment by the rear entrance under cover of darkness - me in my robes and Ying disguised as an old and decrepit street beggar. We walked down to Graham Street where we met with a prearranged driver who took us to our ocean going transportation. Not wanting to attract attention the ship was located in an industrial area at the "China Merchants Wharf Pier" off Sai Ning Street: a wharf that primarily serviced ocean going transport ships but also accommodated the odd other boat. And Ying's boat was certainly an odd one. It was a Chinese Junk of current vintage, but a junk nonetheless.

“We’re travelling some 2,200 kilometres across open seas in this!?” I exclaimed, upon seeing the vessel that I was likely to be spending the next 12 to 20 days on.

Ying turned, cocked a hip, placed her hands on them, starred at me for a few seconds, and then responded. “You’ve seen what we’re up against locally but you haven’t seen what is to come in mainland China nor on the high seas. We need to keep as low a profile as is possible both leaving Hong Kong and arriving in Lianyungang, not to mention the image we project while on the high seas. These waters are infested with pirates. A regular old Chinese Junk is just one amongst a million and of little value to pirates so we will be left alone in this boat. One of greater elegance would attract the attention of harbour masters and pirates alike and possibly result in our arrest or death, so learn to love my little “píngdi fanchuán” (junk in English).”

With that I acquiesced and stepped aboard.

“Wow!”

What a difference between the exterior and the interior. The inside was one of understated elegance, all polished wood and brass. It was night and the interior lighting was low, exuding a sense of peace and tranquility - something that had been missing in my life for quite a while. I sank into a sofa along one of the walls and let out a long and satisfying sigh.

“So my little “píngdi fanchuán” is not so bad after all - eh?” said Ying with a self-indulgent smirk.

“I admit defeat. You are my master.” said I with a low bow.

“I will tell the Captain to cast off and return to discuss our travel plans. In the meantime remove that ridiculous robe, find yourself a drink and relax.” With that she left and went topside.

I didn't hesitate. I dropped the robe in a pile on the floor and moved over to the bar to prepare myself a stiff one. I found some Campari - which I hadn't had in a donkey's age - some tonic and some lime. I used this to create one of my favourite highballs (Campari and tonic with a squeeze of lime). Drink in hand I settled back on the sofa and took a long pull on my highball. For the first time in three months I was at peace - the world was shut out and I was ensconced in the warm and comfortable womb of Ying's "píngdi fanchuán". I drifted off into a daydream, luxuriating in the gently wafting waves and imagining our voyage to come.

I was jolted back to reality with the entry of Ying and a hearty "Up and at it my sleeping beauty. There is work to be done and plans to be made." And with that we were right back into the melee that had become my life.

Sitting at the main table we started to plan our journey. Ying suggested stopping in Taipei to replenish supplies and pick up some documents that might ease our passage into China. This leg was about 850 km. and would take 5 to 7 days depending on the wind and the seas.

The second leg of the trip would be about 1,350 km. and the more dangerous as we would be spending the better part of the trip in the East China Sea - an area contested between China and Japan and so encouraging greater scrutiny of travel than our leg to Taipei. For this leg I was to constantly keep my robe on while topside. We would keep a close eye on all traffic in sight. Even though the crew was trusted, Ying felt it would be best if, in addition, we each took turns keeping watch during this phase of our voyage.

So we set sail out of Hong Kong, hiding in plain sight amongst the thousands of other junks plying their trade.

We celebrated our first evening aboard with a Champagne (Cristal) dinner beginning with a spicy lobster pasta appetizer accompanied by a small green salad in vinaigrette dressing. This was followed by fillet mignon lightly draped in a cognac sauce with braised asparagus and chambray potatoes. We then finished off on roasted pears with Espresso Mascarpone Cream, washing it all down with a Louis XIII Cognac.

Life aboard Ying's little "píngdi fanchuán" was better than luxury penthouse living on New York's Upper East Side!