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A personal role in local politics

THE revels are ended.

The last "Happy New Year" greeting has been dispatched and it is back to work, sober work.

Looking forward into the months of this year, I feel this is the right point at which to examine my thoughts and feelings, by allowing my inner hopes and fears, ambitions and ambivalence to come into the open in all their confusion and then somehow arrange them back into order, so they crystallise into a reliable answer of what I should do in the arena of Hongkong politics, especially in these columns and why I should be doing it.

The language will be personal.

I do not apologise.

Indeed, I hope to get across the message that the question of what one's political role should be is a question that must be answered in personal terms and this question is becoming more and more important for us in Hongkong.

For a few years now I have been in one way or another taking part in public affairs.

I had begun accidentally.

I started a column by accident and I had gone on from one thing to another borne on the kind encouragement of friends and the immense excitement of a new vista suddenly opening, revealing to me the many things that urgently need to be done.

There was no premeditation or planning, no goals set for myself or others and no organisation.

I acted for myself and on my own.

I freely gave my time and energy to anyone who came with a reasonable request.

I took every offer I could.

I never asked what results have been achieved by such fits of indulgence.

Much of that has been enjoyable, but it has also cost me much.

For each time I put myself forward it was an effort.

Each time I had to fight my own feeling of inadequacies, my fear of exposure to the judgment of others, to the threat of failure.

The awareness of my vulnerability was at times almost unbearably keen.

How appealing it appeared then to retreat into the haven of a circle of sympathetic friends, to look only inwards into my own calm pool of light and keep the mundane world at a distance; how much safer to remain not only above the lure of fame and success, but above also any desire for achievement.

Yet each time I succumb to the desire for shelter, doubts would assault me, hard on the retreat.

Had I relinquished my part out of wisdom, or had I just shirked off cowardness and foolishness?

Which desire was the self-

indulgence — was it the footlights I missed, or was it self-pity convincing me I am too delicate for dirty politics?

My own feelings about myself may have been without any great influence on my determination on what I should do about taking part in public affairs — which includes writing this column — had the meaning of that participation been clearer than it was.

Had I been able to see with greater confidence the importance of striving towards a political goal; had I been able to say that participation has achieved anything more than marginal; I would have ignored my ambivalence, my crave for shelter and safety and concentrated on doing what I have to do.

But my ambivalence is reinforced by my lack of faith — not the lack of faith of success, which is unimportant, but the lack of faith in the cause.

For what is the Cause anyway?

It is no secret Hongkong is autocratically run by a small number of individuals.

That continuous public pressure has some effect on government does not alter this basic fact.

To the extent that this small number of individuals are outsiders to Hongkong or can dissociate themselves from Hongkong at any crisis, Hongkong is a colony.

Is the Cause then to destroy this concentration of power?

Or is the Cause to decolonise by broadening the basis of government?

These days, the latter is widely supported without any voice being raised about the former and yet it is clear any success regarding the latter can only be marginal if the former remains untouched.

Neither am I more clear-sighted than anyone else on the ultimate future of Hongkong.

Is the Cause one of keeping Hongkong a separate entity from China's communist regime, with British administration, until the people in Hongkong consider the time to be ripe to become part of China?

I have a vision of Hongkong being the leaven in the loaf that the new China is to be.

Hongkong has the people who know how the modern world works and have seen what life there should be.

They can bring the message with them as they spread over the land of China and their craving for that life and world will make them a moving force for progress and reforms in that nation, which will transform it into an open and prosperous society all free children of China will be glad to live in.

But given the regime, which has taken root in

J.C.M.P.

13 Jan 1983

China, this is a far-fetched dream.

The ultimate being imponderable, the Cause, then, must remain temporary and piecemeal.

Namely, for as long as Hongkong lasts, to continue to improve the life and livelihood of its people, to provide them with the education and training to make the best of opportunities.

Perhaps that is all that can be done and if so, I should pull myself together to do the little as well as I can.

Even in this marginal cause my contribution can only be marginal.

What I ought to do then is to concentrate my efforts in the direction where I can best serve.

What this direction is, is the subject on which I must come to a resolution at this point, when 1983 has just begun.

My first consideration is this column.

tious criticism, which is but the systematic method of trial and error, is the path to better things.

I hope to practise critical thinking in my column and by consistent practice, propagate the habit.

The tools of my trade are perception and articulation.

I have no secret source of information inaccessible to the public.

I have no platform and no support of any political or pressure group.

I am not a member of the celebrated Hongkong Observers, as some people believe.

I am, if you will, a total outsider, even if a passionate outsider sometimes.

What are my opinions or messages worth?

I can appeal neither to authority from above or from below.

I can only ask my readers to take them at face value, each as a piece of analysis and they must judge it by its internal coherence and decide whether it is sound or not.

I do not claim to tell them anything new.

Writing on this basis has its advantages and disadvantages.

The chief advantage, at least to me personally, is I do not have to worry about claiming more than I have the right to.

My premises are stated.

My arguments are all visible.

If I make a mistake or force a conclusion, my readers will be able to see it for themselves.

Objectively, the advantage is it is an independent opinion.

I have no interest to protect and no censure to fear — except the censure of shoddiness.

The disadvantage is that, again personally, the sense of isolation the independence brings with it, the constant paranoia that I am kept from important pieces of information because I am not an insider.

Some days I feel my most careful analyses are so many shots in the dark, wide off the mark and utterly worthless — some days this feeling is justified.

I was determined, at the outset of this exercise, to avoid giving forth what looks like an unshakably argued piece of reasoning, but to show you all the shakiness and tenuous state of my mind, without polish and without hiding my agonies, base or noble.

If the result is a gloomy, pessimistic picture, I hope this will not be taken as disillusionment or giving up.

Indeed if I harbour illusions I hope I shall be rid of them as soon as possible.

However, neither pessimism nor optimism has any place.

One makes endeavours not because success is probable, or because one can make heroic contributions; one does it because in spite of all the agonies, all the fears and all the obscurities, endeavouring to bring in a better world makes life more worthwhile.

At least, so I believe.

The Margaret Ng column



Time and again in my haywire career I have come back to writing and I accept now this is what I can do best and what is most compatible with my idiosyncrasies.

What worthwhile role can I try to fill in the column?

Unlike some of my readers, I make no claim I am the voice of the ordinary people of Hongkong.

I cannot claim to be their representative in the sense of being representative of their opinion or sharing their predicaments.

I am in a far more fortunate situation than the average man or woman in Hongkong.

At best and only incidentally, I am the voice of a minority.

I should be less than objective if I do not admit this and take this into account.

I do not aim at being representative.

Rather I aim at saying what needs to be said.

And I try to say it in such a way as to maximise its chance of being heard.

The role I see myself in is that of an interpreter, a messenger, someone who has some understanding of two separate worlds and speaks both languages to some extent, who can utilise this knowledge to bring about better communication between them.

The two worlds can be the world of the governing and the governed, the privileged and the underprivileged, or the Chinese and the expatriate communities.

There is also another role, which I think is no less worth striving for and that is the role of a critic — not only a critic of the Government, but also of prevalent thinking and attitudes among the public.

I perceive this as an important and positive role, because I believe conscientious