The Night I Learned About Karaoke

Wendy is on the phone. “We've got a reservation at the Quantum Limit for ten o'clock. It's half disco; half karaoke. Cover is $170. Can you make it?”

Wendy Hsu is a small, pretty Chinese American who studies Cantonese at HKU. We got to be friends after I tried to pick her up one day on the elevator coming down from the Language Centre. Wendy's got a smile that incites, and a personality that is very natural, open, and unpretentious.

She has the assertive independence I associate with women graduates of Ivy League schools, but even when she's working hard to be acerbic she's unable to mask a fundamentally kind and generous nature. Wendy's just a genuinely friendly person. The day after I met Wendy, she brought home-made cookies by my office; she has also offered to introduce me to all her girlfriends, which marks her as either a very kind woman or a very poor judge of character. Wendy's manner is warm and sexy in a fairly intimate and physical way. People frequently assume she is my girlfriend, which sometimes causes confusion. Particularly when I'm out with both Wendy and her husband.

Wendy's husband Philip is a lanky Jewish Southerner. He has a quiet air of self-confidence which is very comfortable to be with. Philip is the sinologist of the pair. He's followed the standard route of serious Chinese students: time in Mainland China, a certificate from Tai Da's elite IUP program in Taiwan, and so on. Philip has pretty obviously been around in the East. His law firm has recently posted him to Hong Kong on what is probably a very cushy expat arrangement.

I have been out with them before, but tonight's the first time in my life I've ever been to a karaoke club. Karaoke, as I am to discover, is really quite interesting.

I arrive at the Quantum Limit around ten. The Quantum Limit is a very swank nightclub in one of the deluxe hotels overlooking the harbour in Tsim Tsa Tsui. As soon as I reveal that I'm in the "Philip Party," a phalanx of bowing, servile personnel lead me through the disco to the karaoke bar in the back room.

Wendy and Philip are at a table, poring over the song list with their friends Howard and Katarina. Howard is a handsome Korean American med student who is studying Cantonese on a Rotary Scholarship boondoggle. He is splitting the misery of third year med-school rotations into two pieces by spending an intermediate year in the East; Howard is not a stupid guy. Katarina is from Norway, and looks pretty much as you would picture her given that information. She works in a clinic for pregnant teens or something; because she's with Howard, and sitting on the other side of the table, and leaves early, I never really get to know her.

The song list is enormous. All the songs you would expect to find on the song list of a Hong Kong karaoke bar are there: "My Way," the Whamm! song "Careless Whisper," the theme song from the movie "Ghost." Schmaltz to the max. There's also a complete section of Korean songs that Howard is intently scoping out. When you find a song you like, you write it down on a slip of paper. A waiter instantly materialises and whisks it away. Some time later you look up to see another waiter politely handing you a pair of cordless mikes. Your chosen selection comes blasting out on the sound system, and the words appear on video monitors all over the bar.

At the moment, some random Cantonese couple is singing some random Canto-pop love duet. They are sort of trying to croon soulfully to each other, but it doesn't quite come off, since they are both staring at two different video monitors, intently following the bouncing ball. They are very serious about what they're doing, and they're pretty bad.

As the microphones rotate amongst the patrons in the bar, it becomes clear that most of them are quite serious about their singing. They probably have home units and practice assiduously in private. I cannot for the life of me figure out why this is considered a good time. Basically, it sucks.

Over at our table, however, we are definitely having a good time. Alcohol is being consumed, we're snickering at the other singers (which is terribly unsporting) and laughing and joking and generally fooling around. Wendy points two tables down to what is clearly the power table in the bar. “We wanted that table, but they said it was reserved for VIP guests.”

I scope out the VIP guests: An older guy, definitely the alpha male of the group, a young guy — his son? — two young, pretty women, and a few entourage types. The old guy is really into karaoke, and is incredibly bad. Bad beyond belief. Right off the scale. Loud, overwrought, completely tuneless. He works the mike, gives a little introduction to the song as it comes on, stands up and gestures at critical moments — it's breathtaking.

Shortly after his songs are over, the Big Wheel heads over in our direction. With this event, unbeknownst to me, the whole evening goes click! and rotates to a new setting. It's obvious the Big Wheel is bombed out of his mind. He introduces himself to us in 95% unintelligible English — he's a Chinese Canadian businessman — and asks us where we're from. Although he is possibly the drunkest person with whom I have ever had a conversation, he is not stupid: he knows where Georgia is, calls me a rebel, and starts singing “Oh, Susannah.” “Oh, Susannah” is, in fact, primarily about Louisiana, but it is pretty red-neck, and, besides, he knows all the words, which is fairly impressive.

The Chinese Canadian Big Wheel's minders appear, pry him off us, and steer him back to his table. While I am watching him paw his, uh, date, a waiter pops up and offers us all free drinks. At first we think it's the Big Wheel's treat, but it turns out the drinks are on the house. Big Wheel is the owner's guest for the evening. The owner is embarrassed that he's been bugging us, and is buying us drinks to apologise. One of the bar staff explains that the Big Wheel is extremely rich, and, by implication, untouchable.

However, we haven't finished the round of drinks before the Big Wheel is back. His timing is unfortunate: right before he returns, a waiter appears and hands me the microphone. I had originally thought that the Beatles' song “Money” would be an appropriate salute to Hong Kong, but I had not foreseen that I would be singing it sitting down with a standing B.W. collapsed over my head. This throws off what I am sure would otherwise have been a sterling performance.

By the time I'm finished, there are hordes of concerned entourage types milling about trying to rescue us from B.W. Lots of strained, fixed smiles, embarrassed looks, behind-the-hand apologies and explanations. We aren't really upset, although Howard keeps unsuccessfully trying to paint a pissed-off expression on his face in the hopes of cadging more drinks out of the owner. B.W. may be obnoxiously drunk, but he's friendly and not at all mean-spirited. In fact, we all think the whole thing is uproarious. As it turns out, it's also tremendously useful.

Tremendously useful because, shortly after B.W. heads off to the dance floor with his, uh, friend, the owner comes over to talk to us. The owner is the guy I had originally thought was B.W.'s son. He's not in his twenties; he's in his forties. He loves it that we underestimated his age; we are immediately his friends. It helps that beautiful, sunny Wendy is the one telling him all this, in Cantonese. After apologising again for his guest, he gives us his card and tells his staff that whenever we come back, our second drink is on the house. Mark Lai is a nice guy, friendly in a boyish, happy kind of a way. He is Chinese, from Thailand, has a green card, but spends most of his time in Hong Kong. He sits down with us, tells us his philosophy of life, and shows us pictures of his wife and son, who are currently parked in Toronto. “I love my son more than my wife,” he confesses. He proudly taps his son's photo, “I love my wife, but this guy!” Mark says to us that if we return to Hong Kong, he hopes we will come back to the Quantum Limit. We tell him we all live here, and, again, the evening goes —click— up one notch. Once Mark knows that we aren't tourists, he treats us even better. He stops apologising for Clyde, his guest; in some mysterious fashion, we have been included into the set of Clyde-keepers.

About this time, who should surface but Clyde himself, freshly rejuvenated from yet another intense session of power-booting back in the men's room. He bends over to talk to us, loses his balance, and ends up sitting on the floor at my feet, where he seems quite comfortable. Mark semi-carries Clyde back to his table and sits down next to a pretty woman I had accosted earlier in the evening. Great, I realise, I've been coming on to the owner's squeeze. Wendy, Howard, and Philip are all laughing and giving me hell about it. Meanwhile, Clyde, Mark, and party are diving back into the Hennessey X.O. It's amazing, I expected Clyde to pass out two hours ago, but the guy just won't say die.

Oops. It's my turn on the mike, again. Fuck.

I plow through “You've Lost That Loving Feeling,” with Wendy and Philip helping out on the “wo–oh–oh–ooohs.” Alas, no Kelly McGillis shows up to be swept away by my imagination and originality. There is, however, a striking 5' 10″ woman who's been sitting next to our table for quite a while. Her silk blouse is not translucent; it is transparent. She is wearing the blouse over a black camisole, and a pair of tight jeans over some outrageously long legs. Her face is not beautiful, but the rest of her is truly fine. All night she's been sitting at the bar, smoking, and occasionally singing songs in a fashion that blatantly marks her as a non-amateur. Her mike handling, vocal phrasing, intonation, and facial expressions are those of a professional entertainer. About an hour ago, I saw her dancing, where, again, she displayed the moves of a professional. Just head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd out there on the floor. She looks like the sort of woman who could wring me out and hang me up to dry. Definitely Trouble. I ask her to dance.

About ten minutes after she nukes me, in comes her boyfriend. He is a big guy, long hair in a ponytail, and is wearing an expensive, hip Nepalese vest with jeans — note that jeans are not very common in this bar. I notice the staff do not ask him for the cover when he glides in.

Great. I've just tried to pick up some triad member's girlfriend.

Well, it could have been worse; I could have been successful. About the time my friends have stopped pounding on me for my latest *faux pas*, back comes Clyde. We are now Clyde's friends, so he wants to take care of us. He points at one of the men sitting at his table, and blurrily tells us, “See that guy? Hong Kong CID. Anti-triad group. You have a problem, he take care of you.” Clyde's message is of such importance that merely repeating it four or five times is not enough. So Clyde weaves back to his table, gets the guy's attention by wrapping both his hands around his head and face, and induces him to come back to our table.

Again, the bar staff rescue us from Clyde, but he's done us another favor: the cop stays and talks to us. Sure enough, he's in the anti-triad group. A couple of his buddies join us. They are all packing guns in discreet holsters. The guns make me a little unhappy, since these guys are completely blotto, and they seem a bit too eager to show you where they've got their iron hidden out.

By the way, guns in Hong Kong are a big deal: non-cops are not allowed, under any circumstances, to legally own one. I grew up in the South, and am reasonably comfortable with firearms. Hong Kong yan, however, react in a major league way to the things. A gun in Hong Kong is a serious power statement.

The number one cop, Steve, and I talk about this week's triad assassination. The current top kung-fu star in Hong Kong is the PRC national champion, Li Lienji. Li's most recent movie has just been voted best HK picture of 1991; his most recent manager has just been perforated by two guys with silenced automatics. Steve tells me that Li's manager was running a HK/Europe drug-smuggling operation, and had crossed his Belgian partner. Furthermore, the Sun Yee On had been pressuring him to loan them Li Lienji for a triad-financed movie and he'd refused to cooperate. There's a Chinese phrase for this, "killing the chicken to scare the monkey," and it means "to make an example of someone."

In any event, I am relieved to hear that there is, or at least, was, someone in Hong Kong with even more talent than I at stepping on people's toes.

We all exchange cards with Steve. When Steve sees that I am a professor at the most prestigious university in Hong Kong, the evening goes, a final time, —click—. For the rest of the evening, Steve is my press agent. He buttonholes everyone in Mark's party, points at me, shows them my card, and tells them I'm a professor at HKU. He calls me Professor. People defer to me. I am treated with respect. It's amazing.

Mark seems to have a lot of friends in the police force. Plainclothes, upper-level anti-triad friends. I have my wits about me enough to realise that it would be very useful for someone in the water trade to have a lot of cop friends. Mark looks simple and friendly, but if he were anything but a shrewd, perceptive man, he would not be a wealthy Hong Kong businessman.

By now, it's pretty late — four o'clock, maybe. The bar is shutting down. Mark comes over, says everyone is going out for breakfast; c'mon let's go. We go. On the way out to the elevator, Clyde is essentially depending upon Howard to maintain a vertical profile. He repeatedly explains to Howard that (1) he's not gay (2) he's just happy (3) his girlfriend was tired, so she went home because she has to work tomorrow. Tomorrow is Easter Sunday. I think I know why Clyde's, uh, girlfriend ducked out early; I was watching her face earlier when she was with Clyde. Clyde feels so happy he gives Howard a kiss on the cheek, and returns to his litany.

I don't actually think Clyde is very happy.

I end up in the elevator with Mark's mistress, Anna. I mend my fences with her by introducing myself and asking her, “You are Mark's friend, yes?” Having thus established that I'm not chasing after her, we get along famously, and Anna, Mark and I share a cab over to the restaurant.

In the cab, Anna tells me she met Mark when she was eighteen, and that she really, really loves him. The last five years, she adds, have been very special and wonderful. Mark, of course, is taking all of this in, and he sprawls back in the taxi, looking happy and content. I ask Anna what her last name is; Mark answers it is “Lai.” “My last name is Lai, so hers is, too. [split-second pause] She's my wife.” At this, Anna looks very, very happy; she throws her arms around Mark and pillows her head on his shoulder.

Watching her, I think that being a mistress means learning to live with uncertainty.

As the taxi pulls up to the restaurant, Anna whips out a $10 bill. I protest, but, with typical Chinese politeness, Anna and Mark shut me down. Anna's got the jump on me anyway: I'm sitting on my money, and Anna's bill is under the driver's nose. Mark points out that it's really his money, anyway, a fairly direct but informative statement that I reflect upon as we all pile out of the cab. In particular, I'm thinking about some of the words from my earlier Beatles cover this evening:

> *Your lovin' gives me a thrill,*
> *but your lovin' won't pay my bills.*

The Beatles were brilliant musicians, but I don't think they understood very much about life in Hong Kong.

The restaurant turns out to be closed for the night, so we end up walking to a nearby Japanese place. As we walk, Mark offers to introduce me to important businessmen in Hong Kong. I wonder if he can help get my papers into TOPLAS, but thank him all the same. One of the younger cops, Yip, starts talking to me. He tells me how rich Mark is and how you can make a lot of money in Hong Kong if you can spot your opportunity. Yip points to his own car by way of illustration. It's a BMW. According to Yip, you can make a million dollars [snap fingers] just like that. I look at the BMW, and think about a million bucks, and reflect upon the challenges and rewards of police work.

At the Japanese restaurant, the staff — at 5:00 am — eagerly and deferentially usher us in, and we proceed to have one of the two biggest sushi feasts of my life. Sake bottles come to the table in groups of ten. Huge platters of sashimi, California roll, kappa and negi maki, and steamed tofu just roll into our private room. We are having a ball. Over in the corner, Philip, Mark and one of the cops are playing a Chinese finger-counting drinking game. Clyde is alternately passing out, talking earnestly on the phone in the corner, and dragging people into karaoke duets. When Clyde invites you to sing a duet with him, he takes no prisoners; it's an offer you can't refuse. Unfortunately, some jerk is sitting in front of the TV that shows the lyrics, so you are basically flying blind. Wendy, true to form, helps out Howard and me by relaying the lyrics to us from her vantage point, a line at a time. Twice, I see people start to initiate drinking contests with me, but no one has the balls to try it with someone my size, and they never follow through. Steve, however, is still toasting me, and calling me "Professor," so I nonetheless soak up a fair amount of extremely good sake. I notice that the man on my right, a spooky, quiet guy with a hatchet face, has two small characters tattooed on his wrist. I lean over, and, whispering, ask Howard what they are. Howard glances right, swallows, and says, "Death."

Wendy leans over and tells me that Steve was lying in wait for her when she got out of the ladies' room back at the club. Part of his come-on included a statement of intent to come by and visit her, and the phrase "Do you know who I am?" Suddenly, Steve no longer looks so friendly, and, as I catch sight of those tattooed characters again, out of the corner of my eye, I start to feel a little like Daniel in the lion's den.

During the whole sushi party, I've been taking pictures of everyone. No one is upset about this, which seems like a good sign. My camera smells like beer, due to an unfortunate accident on Clyde's part. I silently hope the boys at Nikon had drunken oafs like Clyde in mind when they spec'd out the 801S.

Anna has been elected to pick up dinner. When the bill comes, I am watching her. It's a strange thing: as Anna pays, she does not look very happy at all. Kind of grim; a forced smile. Philip and I later back-figure that she forked out about $2K US for breakfast. However, as Mark pointed out with respect to the taxi fare, it's his money — or in this case, his gold card. So what's up? Philip's analysis: mistresses tend to count the pennies much more carefully than their sugar daddies, particularly on funds not directly spent on themselves. Philip, as I've mentioned, has spent a lot more time in the Far East than I have.

Philip is fading, so we thank Anna for breakfast, shake everyone's hand, say goodnight to Mark, and walk outside into the bright Easter Sunday morning. I am wide awake, alert, sober, feel great. We are all too freaked out to just go home, so we walk over to Philip and Wendy's place to compare notes.

At the apartment, Wendy serves everyone OJ, and we start our debriefing. Howard won't shut up about the sushi. It turns out that the restaurant, Su Shi Ya, is the most well-known Japanese restaurant in Hong Kong. "Famous people eat there. I've been wanting to go since I came to Hong Kong, but couldn't bring myself to spend the money." We all sit around and try to figure out just how the hell all this managed to happen to us. Howard's theory is that Mark was trying to impress Clyde, Clyde took a shine to us, and that was that. Philip and I tend more towards thinking that we just got swept along in the current of Chinese hospitality. I think it all happened by differential elements: Wendy charmed Mark, we were good to his friend, I am a professor at HKU, earning me major face, and we closed the bar down, so we were there when the call for breakfast went out.

I tell Philip that it's certainly one of the wildest nights I have ever had. Philip tells me if I had spent any time living in Taipei, I would have had a lot of nights like this. It occurs to me that it is incredibly useful in the East to be an exotic, interesting, desireable American. Just the thing to add a *soupçon* of cross-cultural sophistication to any gathering, large or small. Lucky us.

Wendy says that when we went from the Chinese restaurant to the Japanese one, Clyde's summary was "Ah, the Japanese! The Japanese!" Meaning: "A contemptible people, but I understand them, and, fortunately, have plenty of what motivates them." Howard tells us he was a little worried how all these Chinese people would react to his being Korean. "But then I accidentally said something negative about the Japanese and then they were all my pals." Howard looks a little embarrassed, and adds, “I grew up in America. I don't hate the Japanese.” He pauses. “I think it would cheapen my father's hate.”

I don't hate the Japanese, either. But after an evening with their latest cultural export, karaoke, I'm starting to reevaluate my feelings on the subject.

Howard and I say good-night/good-morning to smiling, alert Wendy and her very sleepy Philip, and grab a taxi for Pokfulam. Howard gets out at his residential college at HKU, and I continue on to my apartment, where I shower, and sleep for a long, long time.

Olin Shivers
Hong Kong
April 18, 1992

Postscript:
If you are familiar with Hong Kong, you may not recognise some of the names and locations in this story. At least, I hope so. Following the events of this story, I later obtained information leading me to believe that some of its principal characters are triad members. So I've changed some of the names and relocated some of the places. Barring these cosmetic bits of dissimulation, this story remains completely factual, exactly as I wrote it Easter Sunday afternoon, 1992.