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## When Wendi met Rupert

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**Bruce Dover was there when a young, ambitious Chinese woman met an ageing media mogul.**

Rupert Murdoch without a telephone was like an

alcoholic without a drink. He would grow agitated, fidgety, desperately looking for a fix. Murdoch ran his empire by phone and at almost any time of his day - every day, 6am in the gym or midnight in his hotel room - there was an executive he could call somewhere in the world who was in the middle of their day and able to take a call from the boss.

So in late 1997 those of us who were in telephone contact with Murdoch at least once a week were more than a little flummoxed when his private secretary of some 34 years, Dot Wyndoe, advised that the boss would be unavailable for the next four to five days because he was going on a "walking tour of Wales". Murdoch taking leisurely walks in the country was hard to believe; Murdoch without a phone and not contactable was incredible.

By a strange coincidence, the very same week, Wendi Deng, who had been working with me in Beijing during the previous few months, advised that she had to attend a wedding in New York at short notice and needed some time off - just four or five days. She would take the Thursday night flight to New York but be back at work the following Wednesday morning.

The trips, of course, may have been perfectly innocent, but given the recent train of events, for the first time an inkling that something was developing between our ageing media magnate boss and the 29-year-old business development executive started to firm into something like suspicion.

I had introduced Murdoch to Wendi at a cocktail party at Hong Kong's Harbour Plaza Hotel just before the July 1, 1997 handover celebrations. As an introduction, it was pretty straightforward: "Murdoch, this is Wendi Deng. Wendi is working with us in business development in China." Wendi was a Yale MBA graduate who had been with STAR TV less than a year. She was tall, attractive, intelligent, vivacious and confident, and immediately had the chief executive's full attention. After the cocktail party, on the way back to the hotel, he remarked how "impressive" he found "the young Chinese women" present at the function. "Intelligent and full of enthusiasm ... they're the people who will change China and make it a superpower to be reckoned with. They should be running the country.

He went on: "I've found that as you get older, it's important to surround yourself with young people - full of new ideas, energy and enthusiasm. It rubs off on you, revitalises you." On

reflection, I might have missed the pertinence of this observation, and a similar prescient remark from Deng just a few weeks before. At a dinner party at the home of James Pringle, the then London *Times* Beijing correspondent, the conversation among the gathered women had somehow turned to the subject of eligible bachelors. Deng had roundly announced that her ideal catch would be "a richer, older man". It sounded almost flippant at the time but perhaps those of us present should have paid the remark significantly more attention.

None of us who worked and socialised with Deng was aware then that she had a past very much removed from that of the single, up-and-coming business executive which she now presented to the world. It was a surprise when a *Wall Street Journal* investigative report published some years later revealed she had already been married to an older, if not richer, man. Her first husband, Jake Cherry, was a middle-aged engineer and a married man when their relationship began. They had met a decade earlier when Jake and his wife, Joyce, were working in Guangzhou, China. Joyce tutored Deng in English. After a few months, Joyce departed for the US west coast with her two children while Jake stayed on to complete his work as a construction supervisor. It was Jake who suggested to his wife they sponsor Wendi in the US while she attended college.

In 1988, Wendi, aged 19, came to California, moved in with the Cherrys - sharing a bedroom with the couple's five-year-old daughter - and began her studies. Soon after, Wendi and Jake began a relationship. When Joyce discovered the two were seeing each other she ordered Wendi out of the house. Jake soon followed and moved into a nearby home with Deng, who had enrolled at California State University. Jake and Wendi married in February 1990. He was 53. She was 21. They were barely together for four months before Wendi moved out to take up with a young American named David Wolfe. Wendi and Jake divorced in 1992, four months after Wendi received her green card, enabling her to live and work in the US. In any case, having graduated with flying colours, she was on her way to one of America's most prestigious learning institutions - Yale.

Wendi was hardworking and eager to learn, but also ambitious and single-minded in her desire to succeed. There was no doubt she put in the long hours required to excel. She impressed everyone with her energy, good humour and wit. Wendi had an extraordinary ability to absorb information like a sponge, then process and regurgitate it. She wasn't afraid to ask questions. Well aware of her charms, she was flirtatious with the mainly male executive coterie around her at STAR, and a good number of them were actively vying for her attention.

Wendi was devoid of self-consciousness, which some colleagues could mistake for rudeness or brashness, but there was always a touch of innocence to her behaviour that was her saving grace. One notable flaw was that she often spoke too much when she might have done better to listen, or inserted herself into a conversation with a comment that was totally unrelated to the discussion.

Within a few months of starting work she had convinced the chief executive of STAR TV, Gary Davey, that she needed a more grandiose title on her business card, in order to be taken more seriously by her Chinese counterparts during her forays across the border. By mid-1997, she was proudly bearing a card from STAR TV anointing her vice-president - business development. Not bad for someone less than a year out of university and with no previous experience in the media. But she was undoubtedly a fast learner, to the point that I was trying to convince her to give up her

Hong Kong role and move full time to Beijing to support me in the mainland China operations.

Three months after the cocktail party Murdoch was back in Hong Kong, en route to Shanghai, where we had arranged meetings with some of the biggest media players. Our regular interpreter was unavailable so it was agreed that Wendi would accompany us to translate at the meetings.

We flew into Shanghai and checked into the historic Peace Hotel. Murdoch was keen to acquaint himself with the city, so in the early evening we set off to walk along the riverside. My mobile phone rang and I had to go back to work, so Murdoch and Wendi decided to continue their city tour on their own. Wendi took the boss's arm and guided him across the road ... The next morning, I trudged down to the hotel gym at 6am to find Murdoch and Wendi already there, pumping away on a pair of exercise bicycles. I remember noting that the two of them had struck up quite a remarkable rapport in a short time, judging by the laughter coming from their corner of the gymnasium.

Over the following weeks and months, it became apparent to both Gary Davey and me that Murdoch was having an ongoing dialogue with Wendi. Murdoch would sometimes sprout what we called "Wendi-isms" in our weekly conversations, and Wendi would parrot observations that Murdoch had uttered in our business discussions.

Few of us at this time had any inclination that the relationship between Murdoch and Anna - after 30 years of marriage - was in serious trouble and headed for the rocks. I got an inkling once, when in the back of a limousine on the way from Beijing Airport to the hotel Murdoch was having a "yes dear" conversation with Anna on the mobile phone, rolling his eyes upwards and frowning a lot. After the conversation had finished, he turned and said: "She wants me to slow down, spend time at home, go to all these silly functions ... Makes me feel I'm getting to be an old man or something."

So while the "walking expedition in Wales" set us all thinking, new events were about to make our jaws hit the floor. At this early stage, we'd realised that the boss had taken a shine to Wendi but it still required an enormous leap of faith to turn it into a romance between a 68-year-old prudish media mogul and a 29-year-old Chinese graduate.

In February 1998 Murdoch had agreed to make another visit to China. The boss, however, was being strangely reticent about his travel plans. First, Murdoch, who had always stayed at the Regent, wouldn't say where he was staying. No, he didn't want us to make a booking; yes, he'd look after it himself; and no, he wasn't sure which hotel it would be.

The Beijing meetings were set for Tuesday until Friday, so we expected Murdoch - whose schedule was always extremely tight and who never wasted a day anywhere if he could avoid it - to fly in early Monday, as usual. Instead, he announced that he would be arriving the Friday before and spending the weekend in Hong Kong "catching up on the paperwork".

As usual, he was travelling unaccompanied and with just his carry-on suit bag and an over-sized briefcase stuffed full of documents. When we dropped Murdoch at the hotel he again said there was no need to bother ourselves with having to "chaperone" him around the city.

He disappeared up the hotel lift with a parting remark that we would catch up Monday morning before heading off for the airport and our Beijing meetings.

The next day, I returned to the hotel to make sure everything was OK and was accosted by a rather exuberant concierge.

"Mr Dover, Mr Dover," he spluttered. "I just wanted to let you know the dinner cruise on the harbour has been arranged and the boat will be ready at 7pm."

Funny, I thought. Murdoch hadn't mentioned anything about a boat on the harbour.

"And the flowers that Mr Murdoch ordered, sir. Can I charge them to your room?"

From Rupert's Adventures In China, by Bruce Dover, published this week by Viking.

The many lives of a woman with drive

WENDI DENG was born in 1969 in the provincial city of Xuzhou, where she attended the Xuzhou No.1 Middle School before her father, an engineer, relocated the family to China's third-largest city, Guangzhou. She excelled at high school and was admitted to medical school.

Her life changed in 1987 when, at 18, she met and befriended an American couple, Jake and Joyce Cherry, who sponsored her application for a student visa and agreed to support her in the US. In 1988, she left China to attend California State University at Northridge, boarding with the Cherrys.

Within a year, Joyce Cherry accused her husband of having an affair with Deng and divorced him. Deng married Jake Cherry in 1990. He was 53, she was 21. They divorced in 1992, four months after Wendi received her green card, giving her permanent residency in the US.

After graduating, Deng was admitted to the prestigious MBA course at Yale, and graduated in 1996. She got a job with STAR TV in Hong Kong, owned by News Corp, where she earned a reputation for being smart, hard-working, ambitious, brash and flirtatious. In July 1997, Deng was introduced to Rupert Murdoch at a company cocktail party. Within months, they had begun a clandestine relationship. Murdoch was then 68, Deng 29, and Murdoch's 30-year marriage to Anna Murdoch had broken down but was still officially intact.

Deng and Murdoch married in June, 1999. For several years she was an influential informal adviser to the media baron but while she continues to be involved with News Corp's internet business in China, her influence now is primarily as the mother of their two daughters, Grace, 6, and Chloe, 4, and as a social ambassador and the mistress of their six homes around the world.