



BAMBOO
GREEN

LI LIENFUNG

**A Joss Stick
for My Mother**



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Preface

The articles collected in this volume were published between 25 January 1980 and 24 April 1981 in the Bilingual Section of *The Straits Times*. As such, they were written with bilingual readers in mind.

Since they were written for the bilingual readers, it would seem logical to print both the Chinese and English versions in the same book, the way it was done in the first volume *Bamboo Green*. However, it has been reported that some readers were dissatisfied with *Bamboo Green* because they, being monolingual either by circumstances or by choice, complained that they had been short changed, meaning they were made to pay for half a book which they had no intention of reading.

Thus, my publisher is now printing two books of this volume *A Joss Stick for My Mother*, one in English and the other in Chinese, which are to be sold separately, hoping that, while the monolingual ones will feel they have got their money's worth, the bilingual ones may buy both books for their linguistic references.

The financial aspect of this edition having thus be taken care of, it fails upon me to worry about the Chinese poems in this English edition. They were "translated" mainly for those readers who read some Chinese but whose knowledge of Chinese literature prevent them from understanding and enjoying the poems thoroughly.

Classical Chinese poetry is a special language within a language. It is not only different from English but is also different from Chinese prose. By its own word structure, using

mostly nouns and adjectives, it can imply and suggest moods as well as various shades of meanings, while bothering itself very little with grammar, such as verbs, tenses, pronouns, genders, etc.

Chinese poems are really more like abstract paintings, made up with apparently disconnected dabs of colours and shapes rather than with coherent or logical sentences. Its charm is totally foreign to English poetry writing. Any translation, disregarding this special word structure, may result in an excellent poem in English but it can hardly remain faithful to this and other qualities of Chinese poetry.

I did my best to be faithful to the poems, even at the expense of losing whatever little fluency of English I had. Thus, these Chinese poems were never meant to be poetic by themselves. They were meant for readers to see, know and feel what the originals were like in their own peculiar but special format.

In order to retain the original sequence of the words, the phrases and sentences are often awkwardly strung together. For instance, when a Chinese poet writes “comb head” (梳头), he means to “comb the hair on the head”, but in English, one ought to have said simply “comb hair”. At times like this, I beg the tolerance of those readers who may find “comb the hair on my head” a silly mouthful.

This way of translating by explanation, though awkward, is designed with the hope that the English readers may savour the full flavour of the form and structure of Chinese poetry as well as its meaning and emotion. I suggest that the reader first read the verse in English, examine the explanation so that he can grasp the complex emotional impact, and then skip all the peripheral English words, picking up only the ones placed immediately before the Chinese characters in the parentheses. If he repeats these essential words over and over, while recalling their said or unsaid meanings, he may come to appreciate how the poems are read by a Chinese-speaking person.

Take the poem “Twin River Grasshopper Boat” by Li Qingzhao. After the reader has fully absorbed the meaning of

the words as well as the implied meaning between the words, let him read only this:

Wind stopped, earth fragrant, flowers already ended,
Day late, weary, comb head,
Things are, people not, sensations ceased
Want speak, tears before, flow.

Heard said, Twin River spring still beautiful.
Also yearn paddle light canoe,
Only fear Twin River grasshopper boat,
carries not, moves much sorrow.

By doing this, I sincerely hope the reader will experience the same delight of having read the Chinese poems as they are meant to be read, with words curt but intense, building one image upon another, adding allusions to implied and unsaid meanings, while breaking free from the grammatical construction that is essential to the English language and Chinese prose.

I leave the rest for the readers to decide.

Introduction

As far back as I can remember, there has always been a light in my mother's study at night. My bedroom adjoined her study, and after she had tucked me in, she would leave the door ajar, so that I could see her at her desk while I was drifting off to sleep. Sometimes she would play Chinese chess with my father, or she would nibble at salted duck gizzard and sew, or perhaps sip at her Bamboo Green wine and read Tang poetry. Mostly, though, she wrote.

What she wrote about I do not know. It held a quality of the mysterious because it was done in quiet solitude, after we children were supposed to be asleep. Some poetry, may be, or else something quite pedantic, like her stock market accounts or laboratory reports. And of course, she wrote letters to her mother in China.

She had left her mother at sixteen, at the height of the Sino-Japanese War, to join her father in America and to study at a girls' college there. It was to be a turning point in her life. A tearful goodbye at the harbour, a three-week journey on an ocean liner, and finally a peroxide blonde waitress in San Francisco slapping a hamburger before her with a nasal, "Here, honey!" — and my mother was totally, irrevocably, desperately homesick.

She has not stopped yearning for China since.

My mother spent the next ten years of her life in America, in the process acquiring an American accent and a Singaporean husband (in that order, I think). Except for a brief visit on her

way from New York to Thailand in 1948, she did not set foot in China for almost forty years.

And yet, she stubbornly retains a deep sense of “Chinese-ness”.

For the overseas Chinese, China means so many things: ancestral roots, national pride, cultural identity. There is a fierce pride and a vague shame; a sense of belonging and an alienation. China is a homeland which has become a foreign country.

To her children, all born outside of China (in Burma, Hongkong and Thailand respectively), my mother tried very hard to impart a sense of what it meant to be Chinese.

And what was it? Red packets at New Year, paper lanterns at Mid-Autumn Festival, bowing before the family altar, smoked duck and steamed bread — these were the tangible things, the form without enough content. For content, my mother apparently believed that one had to master the Chinese language.

But the mere nomenclature labelling relatives, food and furniture in Chinese was not enough. We had to learn classical Chinese. And so, on weekends when our neighbours were playing dodgeball or netting shrimps in the pond, we sat memorizing Tang poems. There are three hundred of them in the standard anthology, and my brother and I had barely dented the surface before we felt that, if this was Chinese, it was a foreign language.

What, after all, is autumn? Why do wild geese fly south every year, and what does frost look like? Tang poetry seemed full of such things, and if chanted in the rhythmic cadences in which they were written, they sounded beautiful. Beautiful but foreign.

It was like being made to recite William Wordsworth’s “The Daffodils” in school, without ever having seen a single one of those yellow (purple? pink? blue?) flowers.

Chinese was as foreign a language to us as English.

On the other hand, we didn’t know the Chinese word for guava, or tamarind, or iguana. Such things surrounded us, as

children of the tropics, every day. They formed the natural fabric of which our world was made — and yet there was no easy Chinese word for them.

There is dysjunction in the Chinese language as it existed for me. It didn't have words for many of the familiar things around us, yet it was full of words for things I had never laid eyes upon. Whether we like it or not, many of us in Singapore have inherited the two linguistic mainstreams of the world, and must make use of both to feel complete.

No wonder then that my mother writes her Bamboo Green articles in both English and Chinese. Bilingualism for people like her is not an option; it is an emotional necessity.

Since she started writing for the Bamboo Green column in the Straits Times four years ago, she has not missed a single week. Often she has to write in what can be described euphemistically as distracting conditions. Her study, where she does her writing, is for all intents and purposes the family room. Invariably there is a TV blaring, several grandchildren underfoot or climbing up the bookshelves, friends of the family dropping by for a plate of fried rice and a chat, and the phone ringing. Doggedly, my mother is bent over her new Apple computer (acquired, she claims, with the fees from her Bamboo Green articles). Oblivious to the general level of noise around her, she types quietly away, distracted only when a grandchild or two crawls within punching distance of the DELETE key on the computer. Strangely enough, she never frowns in concentration, and she doesn't seem to need the headphones that she got as a birthday present, to block out the noise. Instead, she smiles to herself and once in a while breaks out into a loud laugh. She is enjoying herself.

Li Lienfung writes her Bamboo Green stories not just because she is dedicated to promoting bilingualism, but because she is having fun, too.

I think her own mother, my grandmother, would approve. *Popo* never spoke anything but her Hunanese dialect all her life, but apparently she read everything from *The Brothers Karamazov* to *Little Women* in translation. She was one of the

first women in her province to have an education instead of bound feet to recommend her during her matchmaking. Yet she was soft-spoken and shy. (That she placed first in her graduating class and didn't turn up for the prize award ceremony because she was too shy, has become a part of family mythology.) I do not remember much of *Popo*. She was bulky and soft and wore dark blue clothes. And she loved to tell stories.

In everything that my mother writes, there is the spirit of her own mother unobtrusively peeping over her shoulder. She used to write, late at night under her desk-lamp, long letters to her mother in China. Now that *Popo* is dead, my mother writes her Bamboo Green articles, trying perhaps to keep alive stories, memories and thoughts that would otherwise disappear.

My mother maintains, rather fancifully, that there are such things as 'genetic memory', which transmits a sense of one's historical past along with one's biological characteristics. (Then why did we have to sweat over memorizing Tang poetry, if it would all be transferred over effortlessly in DNA anyway? My mother said the question was childish.)

Genetic memory or no, I too feel that my mother is Chinese because her mother was Chinese. It is as simple, and as complex, as that. And, by the same illogic, I am Chinese because Mama is Chinese.

Yes, I have a daughter now. Her name is Shao Fung, or Dawn Maple. In the pre-dawn hours, when even my mother has gone to sleep, I breastfeed little Shao Fung in my mother's study. There is a nightlight there, illuminating a faded photograph of my grandmother. My daughter grasps my thumb and suckles, gazing at the tiny spotlight where her great-grandmother smiles vaguely into the darkness. Perhaps they communicate wordlessly. Or perhaps they even communicate in Chinese.

HO MINFONG

Appreciative Audiences

Performing artists, especially musicians, have always been popular with the people. Just look at the Cultural Diary broadcast by SBC and we ought to be convinced how often our orchestras, as well as piano and violin solos, are captivating our audiences.

But there are musicians unqualified to perform in public, who continue to practise their art for their own amusement, relaxation, self-expression, and occasionally for approval from others, if they are lucky enough to get any.

I shall tell three little jokes about such musicians.

In China, the summer weather was so warm that almost everyone in the village had come outdoors to be cooled by the evening breeze. In this relaxed mood, after a hard day's work, they would fan themselves while they gossiped, joked, and made up ghost stories to amuse the children. Sometimes, someone would play some instruments.

It was just such an evening when a travelling salesman came to the village and decided to stay for the night. He joined the folks outdoors, found himself an empty bamboo stool, sat down and took out his *er-hu*, a kind of violin which one must prop on one's knee in order to free the hands, one to finger the strings and the other to draw the bow.

He played as exquisitely as he knew how, but to his disappointment, though not to his surprise, the villagers stole away, one by one, until there was only the moon, the haystack, his *er-hu* and himself. No, not quite. He saw an old woman crouching in the shadows.

“Ah,” he said to himself, “I’ve got at least one person who understands the magic of my music.” However, being unaccustomed to such good fortune, he played another tune tentatively. He looked around to see if the old woman was still there. She was. He played one more melody, and looked for the old woman again. She remained!

Our travelling salesman was very touched by her untiring admiration. To show his gratitude, he played one tune after another, displaying all his talents until he had exhausted his repertoire. Finally, he stood up and took one respectful step toward the old woman.

“Grandmother,” he addressed her gently in the polite term customarily reserved for older women, “with everyone gone home either to sleep or to avoid my music, I’m deeply gratified that you, and only you, have sat here to share the glorious moments of my music.”

The old woman slowly rose and sighed. “Young man,” she said wearily, “I’ve stayed on only because you were sitting on my stool. Now I can go.” She snatched away the bamboo stool on which he had been sitting and disappeared into the shadows leaving our musician looking sadly at his *er-hu*.

Another travelling salesman was staying the night at a wayside inn. In his loneliness, he took out his flute and played a sad tune. The neighbour at his left banged on the wall, telling him graphically to stop making noise. Undaunted, he moved to the other end of the room next to the window, and continued playing on his flute.

As he stopped for breath, he heard a faint but distinct sobbing from the woman who was staying in the room on his right. “Could it be my music that moved her?” he wondered. “Why not play one more tune? If it isn’t my flute music that moved her, she will weep no more. But if it is...” his heartbeat quickened, “she will cry and cry.”

Thus, he lifted his flute and played with intensified melancholy. He thought he played so enchantingly that even the moon darkened, the stars dimmed, and all the insects outside his room

stopped chirping. He listened. There was no mistake. The lady next door was definitely weeping.

“I’ve finally found someone who appreciated my music,” thought the overjoyed salesman. “Such good fortune! I must go and find out what sort of person she is.”

He went out of his room to knock on the door of his neighbour. A middle-aged woman greeted him, still wiping her eyes with her handkerchief.

“Am I bothering you with my music?” asked the salesman with false modesty. “Is it my flute that makes you weep?”

“Oh yes,” said the woman, breaking into sobs once more. “It reminded me of my late husband at work. Ah, those were the happiest days of my life....”

“So...” nodded the enlightened salesman. Her husband must have been a musician as divine as he was. “What instrument did he play? Was it a banjo? An *er-hu*? Or a flute like this?”

“No, no,” said the woman, shaking her head. “His job was to kill pigs. You know how the pigs squeaked...”

Bang! Our salesman’s flute dropped to the floor.

In a countryside deserted by villagers, a travelling salesman was walking and humming a tune. Suddenly a man jumped out from behind the trees and brandished a sword at him.

“Don’t kill me, I beg you,” exclaimed the frightened salesman, kneeling down. “I’ve got an eighty year old mother waiting for my return, not to mention my wife and five kids. Please take my money, take my wares, but spare my life!”

“What do you take me for?” answered the angry swordsman. “Do you think I’m a highway robber?”

“Aren’t you?” asked the perplexed salesman. “Then why do you wave your sword at me?”

“I’m a woodcutter,” explained the woodcutter. Lowering his sword only to raise it once more, he added, “But don’t think I shan’t kill you if you don’t do what I wish.”

“Anything, anything you wish,” pleaded the salesman, once again frightened into a stammer at the sight of the waving sword. “Just don’t kill me.”

“You see, no one in the village would hear me finish one simple operatic aria,” grumbled the woodcutter. “They’re prejudiced because actually I’ve got a fine voice. So I’ve come to the decision that I’ll make one person listen to my singing even if it has to be done with force. Once you’ve heard me, you’ll know how beautifully I sing, but if you will not sit quietly until I finish, I swear I will kill you.”

“Is that all?” said the amused salesman, getting up from his kneeling position. He made himself comfortable on the stump of an old tree and arranged his bags of wares around his feet. “Go ahead and sing, I’m sure I can hear you sing through one aria. After all, I’ve got too much to lose, with an eighty year old mother along with a wife and five kids.”

So the woodcutter sang. After two minutes, the travelling salesman trembled. After five minutes, he went pale and his limbs were dripping with cold sweat. After the tenth bar, he kicked away his bags of wares, covered his ears with his hands and threw himself in front of the woodcutter.

“Please,” he begged, “kill me!”

These little jokes are really harmless because they have yet to prevent any amateur musician from performing.

The Wild Swan

Whenever there are heroes, there are also villains. In *San Guo Yan Yi* (三国演义) or 'The Romance of Three Kingdoms', there are so many heroes and villains that they have kept the stages of Chinese operas busy for hundreds of years.

If one is lazy about historical truth and prefers to rely completely on the interpretations of the author, then, without dispute, the arch villain of the book is Cao Cao (曹操). One incident about him that is most often performed by opera singers, and has been cited by many people as proof of his villainy is called 'The Capturing and Releasing of Cao' (捉放曹).

The story is quite simple. Cao Cao was wanted by the police for the attempted assassination of the dictator Dong Zhuo (董卓). He fled the capital but was arrested when he came upon a small city. There the officer in charge, by the name of Chen Gong (陈宫), asked him why he wished to betray a man who had granted him only favours. Cao Cao replied with a sneer, "Can swallows and sparrows possibly understand the soaring ambition of a wild swan?" (燕雀安知鸿鹄志)

Challenged like this, it was not surprising that Chen Gong promptly decided to throw up his own job so that he could keep company with a wild swan. He released Cao and rode off with him to seek asylum in the town where Cao Cao was brought up.

Three days later, they came upon a village where, in the woods, lived a man called Lu Bo She (吕伯奢) who happened to be a sworn brother of Cao's father. "We'll stay the night with him," Cao Cao resolved.

But Lu did not seem overjoyed to see them. In fact, he exclaimed, "I've heard you're wanted! How did you get here, anyway?"

The incident of capturing and releasing Cao Cao was hastily told. After thanking Chen for what he had done, Lu invited the two wanted men to stay the night, exactly as Cao had expected. He seated his guests in the living room while he excused himself to the back of the house for a long time. When he reemerged, he said, "I don't seem to have any good wine, so I'll just go down to the village to buy some. Please make yourself at home. I shan't be long." If Lu had seen any crime movie, he would have known that one should never keep a wanted man waiting without adequate explanation.

The longer the two men waited, the more suspicious they became. Finally, in their nervousness, they heard the sound of knives being sharpened. "It's not as if he is my real uncle," worried Cao, "and he did leave the house in a strange manner. I think it's only wise to investigate." Some people feel that Cao Cao was contemptible because he was not trusting, but why cannot it be said that he was only being cautious?

As they went inside the house, they heard one voice asking, "Shall we tie him down before we kill him?" This is one time the ambiguity of personal pronouns in the Chinese language is at fault, for Cao Cao would never have misunderstood the question if it had been spoken in English.

Alarmed, Cao drew his sword. "There's no time to lose. It's either them or us." They both charged in and killed everyone they saw, including the womenfolk. After the ground was littered with eight bodies, they came upon a pig already tied down by ropes, ready for the kill.

"A mistake!" wailed Chen. "It's all a mistake."

But Cao Cao was not the sort to brood over his own mistakes no matter how colossal they might be. He jumped onto his horse and galloped off, with Chen following closely. On their way, they met Lu returning and laden with vegetables, fruits and two caskets of wine.

"Why are you leaving?" asked the old man, "I've ordered

a pig to be killed for your dinner tonight.” Now the silly man told them of the pig! Why had he not said so before he left the house? Why had he not introduced his guests to some members of his family so that such a catastrophic misunderstanding would not have taken place?

Cao Cao spurred on and was already riding away when he suddenly turned around and pointed. “Who’s that behind you?” he cried out. The old man turned his head to see and was stabbed instantly from behind.

Chen Gong almost fell off his horse. “You shouldn’t have done that!” he screamed. “It was a sad mistake that made us kill his family, but now this! Why? Why must you kill him too?”

“Do you think,” expostulated Cao, “if he was allowed to get home and find his family all killed, that he wouldn’t lead a party of soldiers to hunt us down?”

“But how could you wrong a man who had never wronged you?”

Cao Cao’s answer has been used, time and again, as the epitome of his ruthlessness. He said, “I would rather wrong all the men in the world than be wronged by any one of them.” (宁教我负天下人，休教天下人负我)

Chen Gong, who was horrified by the selfishness of this answer, concluded that Cao Cao was immoral and therefore he left Cao’s company that night to serve another general who also aspired to be a wild swan. Eventually he was defeated and executed by Cao Cao whom he had once caught and freed.

Is there any moral to the story? Many people, especially the opera goers agree with Chen Gong that the slaughtering of the first eight innocent lives was forgivable because it was necessary for their own survival, only the last murder of Lu was despicable. But if killing is to be condoned because of necessity, then I do not see why there should be any difference between the first and the ninth death. For all Chen Gong knew, Lu might have arranged with the local authority to arrest them that very evening after they were drunk with the wine Lu had purchased and probably even doctored.

If killing under any circumstance is vile, then what Cao Cao

should have done was to escape the minute he imagined foul play and take the risk that he might not run fast enough.

But Chen Gong, of all people, had no right to accuse Cao Cao because he was there when the first blood was drawn. He could have stopped Cao Cao instead of helping the furtherance of the crime. Since he helped to kill the other eight lives, how could he be absolved from the last?

Perhaps it only shows that he was indeed a sparrow and never should have flown with a wild swan.

The Generous Husband

Among the villains in *San Guo Yan Yi*, there is a little man in the book so despicable that he turns my stomach at the mere thought of him. His place in history is negligible; in fact, he is so insignificant that his story is told using only nine lines in a 176-line chapter of a 120-chapter book, which amount to only 0.04% of the total number of words written. Yet, what he did was so horrible and so very contemptible to some, and so fanatically honourable to others, that he has left an indelible impression on many readers, arousing in them various reactions, including that of nausea.

It was his cottage door that Liu Bei (刘备) came one night to knock upon. Liu Bei was considered by the author of the book as the legitimate heir to the Han throne, which was then occupied by a young and ineffectual lad who had survived only because he was useful as a puppet to whoever held him hostage.

Liu Bei was of royal blood, but his claim to the throne was about as strong as that of Henry Tudor of England, since he was eighteen generations removed from the emperor from whom he was descended. But of all the factions of armed bands that were fighting among themselves for supremacy, he was the only one who had any link to royalty, so his few drops of blue blood had at least some propaganda value.

However, at this particular point in his life, he had just been defeated and lost the little city which he and his small army had used as their home base. In fact, he was running for his life, alone on his horse, until he was joined by one of his

advisers. The two of them decided that the only course left to them was to seek the protection of Cao Cao (曹操) who led a much stronger force at that time.

They had been running and hiding for some time, begging food wherever they went. One night, they came to an isolated cottage in a remote countryside; so they knocked on the door to ask for shelter.

When the owner of the cottage heard that one of his visitors was the famous Liu Bei, he was overwhelmed by the honour. He introduced himself as Liu An (刘安), a hunter by profession. The author wanted us to believe that Liu Bei had been so admired as the righteous champion to save the crumbling Han Dynasty that anything Liu An did for him was an act of patriotism: in this case, to serve him food. Not just any food, but food with some meat.

Being a hunter, one would think it would be easy for Liu An to find meat. Would not there be some scraps left over from a rabbit he had caught, a pheasant he had shot, or a tiger he had trapped? Even if he had no fresh meat, surely he must have some preserved ones, either salted or smoked, from the animals he had hunted. A farmer might find it difficult to secure meat if times were bad, but it would be extremely unlikely for wild animals in the mountains to disappear completely just because there was drought, flood or war.

So he cooked a meaty dish and brought it to Liu Bei. Unused to the appearance and odour of the food, Liu Bei inquired as to what kind of animal it had been.

"It's a wolf," answered Liu An, without batting an eyelid.

Since Liu Bei had never dined on wolf before, he accepted the unusual taste and ate enough to satisfy his hunger. The book did not say whether Liu An shared the meal or not, but it would seem only natural to assume that he joined his guests as prescribed by etiquette.

The next morning, presumably after they had breakfasted on the food left over from the night before, Liu Bei

and his adviser went to the backyard to fetch their horses. As they passed by the kitchen door, they saw on the floor the mutilated body of a woman, with the flesh from her thighs neatly carved out.

“What ... what ... what’s that?” Liu Bei asked.

“Oh that!” said Liu An, off-handedly. “That’s my wife — or my late wife.”

“But she ... why ... was she ... I mean, did you ...?” Poor Liu Bei was at a loss for words.

“To tell the truth,” explained Liu An, more embarrassed by the inadequacy of his food than by the source of his supply, “I couldn’t find any meat last night, so I killed my wife for your dinner.”

Never was cannibalism so graciously condoned and so gratefully acknowledged as when Liu Bei tearfully bid Liu An farewell, thanking him profusely for the delicious meal. Nor was murder so generously rewarded and so highly applauded as when Cao Cao, upon hearing the story from Liu Bei, sent Liu An one hundred taels of gold.

What makes the ancient concept of Chinese morality even more bewildering is that, in addition to the official endorsement of murder and cannibalism, represented by the actions of Liu Bei and Cao Cao, the author apparently admired Liu An as a filial son. He made Liu An say, when Liu Bei was leaving: “I would’ve followed you to battles but for the fact that I’ve an aged mother to support.” Perhaps he planned to marry again just to support his mother, in more ways than one, especially when there was a meat shortage, but would anyone dare to marry him?

From what Liu An said, we are supposed to deduce that to support a mother was even more important than to serve a patriotic cause. We can surmise that a mother was so sacred that she should never be harmed. But a wife, on the other hand, could be slaughtered for food when her husband was in a generous mood. In that case, how were the wife’s children to feel about the murder of their mother?

One could raise many questions for which the book

does not answer. For instance, had Liu An murdered his wife long before Liu Bei came and was using her body only conveniently as an after thought? Being a filial son, did Liu An also serve the same meat to his mother? And did she eat it? Did his wife have any children? If so, should they eat their mother or should they kill their father for revenge? And lastly, what did Liu An do with the rest of the body? Since meat seemed so scarce, then would it be extravagant not to preserve it by salting or smoking?

But the book did furnish one answer to housewives in those days of patriotism and generosity. What should they do when their husbands came to the kitchen to ask what sort of meat they had for their royal visitors? Answer: Pause not to consider the menu but run as fast as possible to avoid the butcher knife.

The Poems of Mao Zedong

I do not pretend to understand the political significance of *Mao's Thoughts*, but being “incurably romantic” as someone once called me to my face, I am far more interested in Mao's poems.

In the days before the end of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's poems were conspicuously displayed everywhere in China. I could not get into a hotel foyer without encountering his praise of Spring on one of those magnificently carved wooden screens. Nor could I eat a plateful of fried rice without raising my head to meet his poetic description of red flags. Whenever I waited for the arrival of a lift, I could study in leisure one of his poems on the wide panel next to the elevators. In one of the hotels where I stayed, there was such a panel on every floor, so I could honestly boast that I never had a dull moment in China.

Are they good poems? That is difficult to answer since everyone has his or her own standard. Mao's style, as befitting a man who set the world spinning, is original, forceful, extraordinary, and characterized by a strange but exciting mixture of classical and colloquial idioms.

I trust the number of poems Mao wrote in his lifetime must exceed what was printed in the book which I bought in Hongkong but which was published in Beijing. It is called *Poetry of Chairman Mao* (毛主席诗词).

From this book, I hope I am correct in saying that Mao's poetic creativity seemed to be neatly divided into two periods. The first, from 1925 to 1936, is what I think of as his *ci* (词)

period in which he wrote nineteen *ci* and only one *shi* (诗). In the second period, from 1949 to 1963, or what I call his *shi* period, he wrote eleven *shi* and only five *ci*. The years between the two periods are interesting not for what he wrote but for what he did not write because no poem at all dating from 1936 to 1949 can be found in the book. One presumes that he was kept too occupied by practical affairs of war to be indulging in poetic writing.

Of the five *ci* he wrote in his second period, one was made famous by his celebrated swim across the Chang Jiang (长江 or Yangtze River). The best I can do is to translate it loosely into prose, inserting the implied meaning between brackets. Grandiosely he wrote:

Having just drunk the waters of Changsha,
(I am now) eating the fish of Wuchang.
(Swimming) across the Chang Jiang which runs for
thousands of miles,
(I) scanned the sky above Hunan (until my eyes
reached) the horizon.
(I did not) care how the wind blew and the waves
tossed.
(It was) better than a leisurely stroll in a spacious
garden ...

Changsha (长沙) is the city on one bank of the Chang Jiang, more or less facing the city Wuchang (武昌) on the opposite bank, with miles of water between them; but the elderly Mao wanted us to believe that he swam that distance between two meals. Who else could write like this and get away with it?

The finished products of the second period, on the whole, lack the vigour and dramatic impact of those written in his first *ci* period, probably because Mao, after 1949, wrote as a proud victor whereas in his earlier works he was the aspiring leader of the Red Army who had yet to taste the fruits of success.

The very first poem in the book, written in 1925 when

he was a young man admiring the scenery of Shan River (湘江) in Changsha, Hunan (湖南), still retains what critics might have called “a bookish air” (书卷气). Mao would have been the first one to agree because in this poem he referred to himself as a man of books (书生).

He was as yet uncertain of his fate, as he emoted over the hills dyed scarlet by the autumn leaves and the river water of translucent jade green (万山红遍, 漫江碧透). He looked up and saw eagles spreading their wings in the wide sky (鹰击长空), and he looked down and saw fishes swishing their tails in the shallow water (鱼翔浅底). The two kinds of living creatures made him ask who had the right to decide which was to soar and which to sink (苍苍大地, 谁主浮沉).

In the second stanza he went on to reminisce how his friends, all of them intellectuals with whom he had rowed boats on this river, had angrily protested against the wrongs of the society and contemptuously dismissed dukes and dukedoms as mere filth and mud. In this poem, his desire for a revolution to seek equality was intensely suggested, but not as yet was he self-hypnotized by his search of personal glory.

By 1935, a good ten years later, when he was more seasoned by battles, Mao wrote a *ci*, which I think is perhaps one of his best. The original is as follows:

西风烈，
长空雁叫霜晨月。
霜晨月，
喇叭声咽。
马蹄声碎，

雄关漫道真如铁，
而今迈步从头越。
从头越，
苍山如海，
浅阳如血。

Reducing what he wrote into my crude translation, with my own interpretation of the mood added in, it reads:

“While the east wind blows fiercely, the wild geese call to one another as they fly across the sky, throwing their dark silhouettes against the dark gray morning moon. Oh that frosty moon! It shines on our marching army — the hooves of their horses beat unevenly on the ground breaking the silence of the morning, while the bugle sounds faltering as if it is sobbing.

“Do not let anyone say that the majestic fortifications are as strong as steel. With great strides, we shall scale all of them. As we scale them, we shall see the blue green mountains stretching as endless as the sea, when the rays of the setting sun bathe the earth as red as blood.”

However, his most impressive and probably the most self-revealing *ci* of all is the widely publicized one in which he compared himself with the best known emperors of past generations. It was written in 1936, the year before the Japanese invasion of China. It was also to be his last *ci* until his total victory in 1949.

北国风光，
千里冰封，
万里雪飘。
望长城内外，
谁馐莽莽，
大河上下，
顿失滔滔。
山舞银蛇，
原驰蜡象。
欲与天公试比高。
须晴日，
看红装素裹，
分外妖娆。

江山如此多娇，
引无数英雄竞折腰。
惜秦皇汉武，
略输文采；
唐宗宋祖，
稍游风骚。
一代天骄，
成吉思汗，
只识弯弓射大雕。
俱往矣，
数风流人物，
还看今朝。

Following the custom of traditional *ci*, the first stanza confined itself to the description of the scenery. He spoke of the river which ran for hundreds of miles and yet looked peaceful because it was frozen. The snow was flying all over the mountain ridges, inside and outside the great wall, making them look like many silvery snakes, all dancing.

It was in his second stanza that he was most daring and unconventional. He wrote: "The rivers and mountains are so very beautiful that they tempt countless heroes to compete for the privilege of bowing their waists to serve them. But it is a pity that Qin Huang (秦皇 , the first emperor of Qin Dynasty) and Han Wu (汉武 , the greatest expansionist emperor of Han) were both deficient in literacy, while Tang Zong (唐宗 , the second but the most accomplished emperor of Tang) and Song Zu (宋祖 , the founding emperor of Song Dynasty) both lacked charm. As for Genghis Khan, the pride of gods, he knew only how to bend a bow to shoot big eagles. They are all in the past. A man of true heroic proportion is yet to be found in our age."

There is no doubt, although it was not explicitly said, that "the man of true heroic proportion" was Mao himself. To anyone who is imbued with the traditional concept of modesty, Mao seems crudely boastful. But if we are to define poetry as the most direct expression of one's thoughts, then there is no reason why a man should shirk from speaking his mind as long as he sincerely believes it to be true. Events have proven that Mao's appraisal of himself was not only sincere but might even be justified since he did manage to conquer the whole of China.

What makes this poem particularly interesting is that Mao had unwittingly shown himself more as a contender of the imperial throne than as a leader of a socialistic revolution to abolish class distinctions. In this respect, I am sad to say that his ambition as expressed in this poem, was one of the key reasons that caused the Cultural Revolution. It was not the first time in history that the lives of innocent people were ruined just to realize the dream of one man to acquire "true heroic proportion."

The Silver Ingots

When the Chinese people are baffled by life and life's enigmatic problems such as life and death, happiness and misery, wealth and poverty, justice and iniquity, they often seek escape from their delirium by attributing the answers to fate or destiny, or what the Chinese call *tian* (天) or *ming* (命).

There is an English saying that God's wheels grind slowly but grind exceedingly fine, implying that all mortals, good and evil, are to be rewarded or punished eventually by God. Chinese folk belief argues that "good deeds will be rewarded, evils acts will be penalized, and if such is not the case, it's only because the time for retribution has not yet come" (好有好报, 恶有恶报, 如果未报, 时间未到). The English say that "God's will moves in mysterious ways", and the Chinese say "men's design cannot compete against fate's design" (人算不如天算), but the essential idea is the same.

It has been criticized that such fatalistic beliefs are merely an opiate to the mind because if people persist in relying on the supernatural to right the wrongs of society, then they will never take matters into their own hands and fight for equality. I agree. However, for the meek, these beliefs do help to take out the sting from their envy, quench the fire of their fury, and make their hardships and failures, trials and tribulations, easier to bear.

This kind of philosophy is most loudly proclaimed in the three collections of short stories edited by Feng Meng Long (冯梦龙 1574-1645) the titles of which can be loosely translated as "Waking up the World" (醒世恒言), "Warning the

World” (警世通言), and “Parables for the World” (喻世明言). These stories were written in a language similar to modern Chinese (白话) and are entertaining to read. They are also a source of information on the customs and lifestyle of the common people in China from the sixteenth century onward, since most of the stories were adaptations from folklore.

One story I find particularly amusing is the one about silver ingots. The story itself is rather long and somewhat tedious, beginning with how the hero Shi Fu (施复) returned a parcel of money to its rightful owner and then how, with each subsequent good deed, he prospered a little more until he was wealthy enough to build himself a big house. The climax, however, with a touch of comic opera, expostulates strongly of the theory that no one can ever work against fate.

In the course of cleaning up the debris left by the workmen who came to build his house, Shi stumbled on a buried treasure of silver ingots of various sizes and weights, totalling two thousand taels. Among them, there were eight small ones that were identical. Each of them even had a similar red cord tied around its middle.

The morning after his find, a stranger with white hair came to see Shi. Without much preamble, he asked: “Did you find last night a buried treasure of silver ingots and were there eight of them, each with a red cord tied in the middle?”

“Yes,” replied the much astonished Shi, “but how did you get to know about it?”

“I know,” answered the old man sadly, “because they used to be mine. Allow me to tell you what happened. I live in the village about ten miles upstream from yours. My wife and I run a small food shop. Whenever we managed to save up enough coins, we would exchange them for a silver ingot of three taels. Each time we acquired a new one, my wife would tie a red cord around its middle before she sewed it inside our pillow.

“Last night I had a dream. I saw eight little boys wearing white robes with red sashes around their waists. One of them rushed the others, saying it was time for them to obey their

orders to join the others in the house of Shi Fu. 'Who are you?' I asked.

"One of them pointed to his red sash. 'Your wife kindly tied this around me when I first came to you. Remember?'

"They looked so endearing that I blurted out my wish to adopt them as my sons since my wife and I have never been blessed with children. They only laughed and said, 'It's been destined for us to go where it's more prosperous than your house.'

"As soon as I woke up I told my wife, and we tore open our pillow to check. Alas, the eight ingots had disappeared! This is why I've journeyed down here to see whether my dream is true."

Naturally Shi was amazed. He invited the stranger for lunch and brought out the eight silver ingots for the old man to see. "Oh, ingots, ingots!" the old man fondled the shining silver with tears in his eyes. "How did you travel ten miles to come here when you don't even have legs?"

Shi wanted to return the ingots, but the old man refused categorically. "Oh no," he argued, "I know the tricks of Fate. If I should accept them against the wishes of Fate, I might meet misfortunes even more disastrous than losing them once again."

It was Shi's wife who suggested that they hide the little ingots inside some freshly made *man-tou*, (a kind of bun stuffed with meat or sweets) which they could present to the old man without incurring the displeasure of Fate. But when these *man-tou* were made and given to the old man, he objected good naturedly. "I've plenty of these things since I make them for a living. Why don't you keep them for your children?"

"But these *man-tou* have unusual stuffing," Shi insisted. Finally the old man felt it was only polite to accept, so he took the *man-tou* to the boat which Shi had provided him for his journey. Upon arrival at home, he gave the *man-tou* to the servant whom Shi had instructed to escort him. "I wish

I had money to tip you, but these *man-tou* are all I have. Give them to your children.”

When Shi saw the servant returning with the *man-tou*, he asked what had happened. The explanation made him shake his head and say to himself: “Poor old man, the little ingots are destined to escape him.” Believing it was Fate that had awarded the servant the ingots, he merely repeated the warning that the *man-tou* had rich stuffing so that the servant would not throw them away.

However, when the servant went home to his wife, giving her the *man-tou*, the wife fretted lest the rich food would harm their sons who were just then suffering from constipation. She went to the mistress of the house, Shi’s wife, put the *man-tou* on the table, explained her problem and begged for something light, such as candies, for her sick children.

That was how the eight little ingots made their return trip back to Shi.

If one believes in the story, then one has to conclude that fate, once again, triumphs over the plotting of men. But how many of us believe in this story rather than finding it amusing?

The Note

Chickens used to scramble over these dirt tracks, where coconut leaves crackled under my feet. As I walked, I remembered the laughter of the brown-skinned children playing hide and seek among these trees.

I used to come here.

My last visit was three months ago.

But now I look at the remains of what was once a kampong. All signs of human habitation had vanished, leaving only a few stark trees whose leaves rustled in the evening breeze. The half dismantled houses exposed the intimacies of their previous tenants: there were, here and there, discarded pots, torn rags, legless chairs, and the broken pieces of a glittering mirror. The soft rays of sunset glowed over the debris of a dead village.

It was quiet, except for the sound of automobiles racing down the roads which had crowded the kampong out of existence. I felt a sense of loss, but as I was never a living member of the community, my melancholia was not a deadening sorrow. I was suddenly caught by the wish to explore the ground which I had been able only to observe on my previous walks.

As I roamed aimlessly around the abandoned village, my eyes were attracted by a white spot fluttering between some dark green leaves. I went closer and found it to be a piece of paper tacked on a tree trunk which stood near the remains of a door. I looked at the paper. There were a few Chinese words scribbled on it.

“Ah-Jiang (強): I am moving tomorrow morning to Queenstown,” it said. The message was followed by the numbers of the block and flat, and the letter of the floor. It bore no date but was signed “Ying” (英).

The stillness of the kampong enveloped me. I wondered who Jiang and Ying were. From their names, one could safely conclude it was a note written by a woman or girl to a man or boy. What was he to her that she felt compelled to leave him this note, nailing it on the tree next to the house from which she was to move out the next morning?

Surely she must have known about the move long before the actual event took place. Why then had she waited until the very last night to inform him?

Only one answer occurred to me. She could not reach him by mail, by phone or by word of mouth. But then, why could she not?

He could not have been her brother or anyone related to her family, or a childhood friend who grew up in the same kampong, or a co-worker who saw her occasionally, because someone in her network of acquaintances could have been relied on to pass on her new address, and thus she would not have written this note.

Was he her lover? If he was, she would have more intimate knowledge of his whereabouts. Even a sailor whose ship was floating somewhere in the South China Sea would have left a forwarding mail address.

What if there had been a lovers' quarrel and the parting had been abrupt? But even so, her involvement with him would have made it possible for her to find him, such as at the flat he lived, the place he worked, or from the friends he knew. She would not have entrusted a message as important as this to be pinned on a tree where the sun could have bleached out the words and the wind could have swept it away.

Or, was he someone whom she met only once or twice, by chance, outside of the usual circle of family and friends, who had escorted her home and had said casually that he might call on her again, but never did? He was someone

whom she had liked enough to have waited hopefully to appear again at her doorstep — a hope that died every night only to be rekindled the next morning, until the night before her departure.

I imagined her on that very night. Her hopes were almost dashed. But being young, she refused to give up. “It’s not that he doesn’t care,” she comforted herself, “or that he has lied. Perhaps he has been sick, or too busy. His officer may have confined him to the barracks. Perhaps he has been sent abroad by his boss but will return soon. Maybe someone in his family died ... whatever the reason, he will come again. I know he’ll come again.”

But what if he should come only to find she had gone?

The thought struck her with panic. She could never tell him now that she had cared. Sleep eluded her as she tossed in her bed. She wrestled with the pain that she might never see him again.

She rose from her cot and searched among her belongings, already packed, for a piece of paper. Her fingers groped in the dark for some pencil stub. By the light of early dawn, she jotted down her message. Even then, she hesitated not knowing whether the note would compromise her maidenly pride. It was not until her father rushed her to get into the moving van that she hastily nailed it on the tree. As the truck sped away, she looked back at the note, with a sudden surge of renewed hope.

I stepped back a pace and wondered. Did he ever come? Did he come but give up all hopes of seeing her again, when he was faced with the sight of the ruins, without ever realizing there was a note waiting for him? Or did he simply forget about this girl whom he once smiled at and had spoken sweet words to? Anyone who had seen the message and understood it was meant for him would have taken down the paper. The fact that it was still swaying in the breeze must mean that either he had come but not found this note, or he had never bothered to come.

If so, was she still waiting for him?

My mind searched for a happy ending. Perhaps he did not come because he had met her somewhere, in a theatre lobby, or on the escalator of a shopping complex, and she had told him her new address.

But what if they had not met?

I walked closer to the tree and fastened the note more securely. Just in case, I thought. It would be sometime yet before the construction crew mowed down this particular tree.

Suddenly, as I headed for home, I realized that perhaps this was the best way to end a young dream. She would never know that he did not come, but would blame fate for having spoiled her chances at happiness. She would be spared the heartache of a broken dream.

And in due time, she too would forget.

The Oil Peddler

The Chinese concept of masculinity, especially in a love story, can be quite different from that of Western culture. Our modern youths, weaned on American movies and English rock singers, are probably ignorant of the virtues which their great-grandmothers admired in men.

Apart from sincerity, honesty, integrity, intelligence, ability and good looks, an ideal Chinese lover or husband must also be gentle and considerate. To illustrate this point, I will relate a story from one of Feng Meng Long's books (1574-1645).

Our hero is called Qin Zhong (秦重). The name is a pun because it shares exactly the same sound as 情种, meaning a person born with the capacity to love. He was a young lad who had been given only three taels of silver when he was evicted from his foster parents' home. With this money, he had to support himself by selling vegetable oil from door to door, carrying the two drums of oil on each end of his bamboo pole. He had been doing this for some time when one day, as he was selling oil outside a brothel, he saw and fell in love with the most famous and the most beautiful courtesan of the city.

Other men sniggered at his passion. Some, a little kinder, curtly informed him that at least ten taels of silver were required for the privilege of spending one night with her, not including the other incidental expenses such as food, drinks, tips and the presentable robe he must buy in order to enter the brothel without being refused on sight.

Ten taels of silver, to a man who had spent all his three taels on his oil drums, his bamboo pole, his humble lodging, and other bare necessities of life, as well as the deposit with which to buy oil on credit, was a king's ransom. Nevertheless, he began his penny-pinching in earnest. It took him more than a year to save up the necessary amount of cash, which he politely handed over to the Madam, who was both surprised and amused.

"Talk about the toad who wants a taste of the swan!" she laughed. "Don't you know our Mei Niang (美娘 meaning beautiful lady) is extremely popular and attends only the richest and the most learned men? Her schedule is far too busy for the likes of you. Why don't you take one of my other girls?"

But our hero was decidedly in love. "I'll wait," he said, with a determination that melted even the icy heart of the cynical Madam.

In due course, the Madam told him that she had found a way to fit him into Mei Niang's heavy social commitments. "But it'll have to be after she returns from the banquet," she warned.

Qin Zhong had himself cleaned from the hair on his head to the toes of his feet, by entrusting himself, for the first time, to the barbers in the public bath house. Then he donned his newly purchased robe. He was invited to wait in Mei Niang's room where a table with wine and food was laid out for him. However, there was no sign of Mei Niang.

After midnight, the celebrated courtesan returned, imbued with the wine her clients had forced her to swallow. She took one look at Qin Zhong and objected, "I'll be a laughing stock if I'm to take care of a man who sells oil from door to door!" But in spite of her protests, she was ordered to entertain Qin Zhong, whereupon she ignored him completely and drank wine by herself until she passed out. Her maids helped her to bed and left the couple alone.

Before the maids left, Qin Zhong had requested a pot of hot tea which he hugged to keep it warm. With the tea in

his lap, he nestled in a half-sitting position at the foot of the bed so as not to disturb Mei Niang's sleep. He just sat there, drinking in her beauty and happy just to be near her.

What happened next was not very pretty. Mei Niang woke up so nauseous that everything inside her stomach surfaced. Qin Zhong rose quietly to comfort her, to hold up her head, and even to use his very new robe as her spittoon. Still in a daze, Mei Niang sipped the tea which Qin Zhong had hugged to keep warm, and returned to her drunken sleep.

Qin Zhong folded his dirtied robe, hid it behind the door, and went back to the bed to look at Mei Niang who was moaning from the discomfort in her stomach. He sat next to her, on the bed, holding her head in his lap so that she could rest easier. His fingers soothed her forehead to relieve her pain. In this position, which was most awkward for him but quite restful for her, she slept on.

When she next woke, it was almost dawn. She vaguely remembered what Qin Zhong had done for her, but when she questioned him, he merely told her to go back to sleep and get more rest.

She did, but as memories of the night gradually came back to her, she woke up again. She remembered how she had felt frustrated at the banquet, being the plaything for so many men, that she had drunk more wine than she should have. She remembered how she had drunk more wine when she returned, out of disgust for the kind of life she must lead, only to find there was another client for her to entertain in her very own bedroom. She remembered how nauseated she became and how a pair of strong arms had held her while giving her warm tea to steady her churning stomach. She remembered how the gentle fingers on her forehead had calmed her nerves and made her sleep.

She opened her eyes and looked at the young man who was cradling her head in his lap. For the first time, she saw him for what he was, gentle and considerate. She saw him as a man whose passion for her had made him skimp pennies for more than a year, and whose love for her had made him so

considerate that he did not force her in anyway, even though he had paid for her service.

That was the beginning of a happy love, ending eventually with Mei Niang's marriage to Qin Zhong when all other obstacles were cleared.

That this story has long been popular in China seems to confirm that gentleness and consideration are among the qualities demanded of an ideal lover. But can it also be argued that there is a want of these qualities in most Chinese men to make these qualities so rare that they can be admired only in stories? Who knows? Every man will have to answer for himself.

Half Day of Leisure

I have had this scroll on my wall for so long that I cannot even remember how I came to own it. It is a simple piece of rice paper, two feet by five feet, on which are twenty-eight large words written with black ink, in a calligraphy style that is often described as “fleeting cloud and cascading stream” because of the way the brush effortlessly flows and carries over from one word to another.

However, it is not the beauty of the calligraphy that makes me look frequently at this scroll. What I see is the poem itself. All the twenty-eight words are so simple and easy to understand, that even a Primary Three pupil from a Chinese stream school will be able to read most of the words. In fact, it has long been included in *A Thousand Poems* (千家诗) which was used as a beginner’s textbook until one hundred years ago.

To read it is easy, but to appreciate it is another matter. This poem was written by Li She (李涉 c AD 800) of the Tang Dynasty. In it, the poet tells a very simple fact, but creates a subtle philosophical mood of a mature mind.

I will write out, in English, the meaning of the poem, with the corresponding Chinese characters arranged in their original sequences, poised directly behind their English counterparts. The rest of the words are only implied by the poet but ought to be readily understood. By doing so, I hope I can pass on, to some extent, the brevity and the sophistication of the verse.

Every (终) day (日) I was numbed (昏昏) by the
 worldly affairs,
 As if I was drunk (醉) or in a dream (梦), or
 somewhere in between (间).
 Suddenly (忽) I heard (闻) that spring (春) is
 about to end (尽),
 So I forced (强) myself to go up (登) the moun-
 tains (山).
 That is why (因) I happened to walk across (过)
 the bamboo- (竹) lined
 Courtyard (院), where I met (逢) a monk (僧)
 with whom I chatted (话).
 Thus I could once again (又) be blessed (得),
 In my listless (浮) life (生), half (半) day (日) of
 leisure (闲).

I must admit that the above version is far from poetic.
 Perhaps a more detailed explanation on the word associations
 may enhance the appreciation of this poem.

To translate “every day” for “终日” does not do
 justice to the original. In the Chinese language, one seldom
 says “终日” in conversations because it is a term reserved
 mostly for literary usage. “终” means “entire”, or “whole”,
 or “the extreme”, thus “终日” means “the entire day”, or
 “the whole time,” or “everyday from dawn to night”. It
 stresses the feeling of a person being caged by time.

“Numbed” is another word that falls short of “昏昏”
 because it conveys a physical insensitivity that is only part
 of the original meaning. It does not have the emotional
 lethargy or the mental apathy of the Chinese words “昏昏”
 which literally means murky, dark, shadowy, unclear, and
 sometimes dazed and drowsy. Thus, the first line, simple as
 it is, spells out the mood of the poet who is, like most of us,
 so stunted by our civilized society that he is indifferent to
 the comings and goings of seasons, even spring, the most
 beautiful and lively season of all.

The word “强” can mean “strong” but it can also mean “against one’s wishes”. Here, by describing his decision of going up the mountain as “强”, the poet has emphasized his procrastinating frame of mind which does not welcome any change of habit, even if it is a pleasant one.

The change of mood comes in the third line, when he mentions his encounter in the courtyard. It reads as a simple statement of fact, but for those who are familiar with Chinese temples hidden away in high mountains, the scene is poignant. The poet has evidently avoided the huge halls where Buddha is being worshipped and a great deal of noisy activities being carried out by the bustling crowds. Instead, he wanders alone into the living quarters of the monastery where the monks have planted luxuriant clusters of bamboo trees. Immediately we see the green bamboo leaves, which are particularly verdant in late spring. While standing in that hushed courtyard, drinking in the silence and tranquillity, he meets a monk. What they talk about is of no consequence. What is important is that the poet, by composing this line at this time, has entered into a different lifestyle.

The word “浮” in the concluding line, meaning literally “floating”, is much favoured by Chinese poets. It is used to describe clouds (浮云) which change as swiftly as fate does, and to designate the duckweeds on a pond (浮萍) which disappear down the water without leaving a trace. When it is coupled with “life” (浮生), it suggests the transiency of existence. Used in this line, it reflects the change of mood in the poet, showing how he has come to regard as transitory the life and the worldly cares that have enslaved him.

By “leisure” (闲), the last word of this poem, it does not mean a period of rest, of doing nothing between a series of work. It means a complete change of one’s way of living. When the poet says he has been “blessed by half day of leisure”, he is saying that his return to nature, as experienced in his third line, has spiritually washed him clean of his worldly dust, and has revived his awareness and his sensitivities.

This poem is one of the better known ones, especially

the last line which is so famous that a joke has been made from it: A high government official decided that he must copy the example of this poet and visit a temple in the mountain; so he sent word to the monastery to inform the monks of his coming. That was two months prior to the day he finally arrived at the temple. He found himself standing at the bamboo-lined courtyard, talking to a monk, just the way it was described in the poem. He sighed with great satisfaction and quoted: "Ah, to be blessed with this half day of leisure!"

"It's all very well for you, Your Excellency," replied the monk. "But did you know that all of us have worked for two months, planting bamboos, repairing the courtyard, cleaning the paths, wiping the windows ... just to serve you with this half day of leisure?"

Such is the magic of this poem. It hangs very well on my wall.

Tongue In Cheek

Stories of murder and rape are not the sole properties of our twentieth century culture. The following tale, retold from *Pai An Jing Qi* (拍案惊奇), edited and written by Ling Meng Chu (凌蒙初, 1580-1644) had all the ingredients of a TV thriller.

There once lived a happily married couple. The husband was a scholar whose job as a resident tutor to children of wealth demanded his frequent absence from home, leaving his young and beautiful wife, Madam Wu, very much alone. Madam Wu, in the role of a traditionally virtuous wife, seldom stepped out of her house, presumably trusting her one and only maid to buy all the groceries, to dispose of the garbage and to carry out all other prosaic tasks outside the house.

However, she did once venture out as far as her doorstep when a temple procession passed by. She thought it would be harmless just to get one tiny peep at the excitement on the street, but unfortunately, it was during that one peep that she was seen by a young man about town whose immorality was matched only by his wealth. Po was his name, and his passion to possess her overcame any scruples he might have had.

Of all people, it was to a nun that he went for help since this nun seemed to be the only one who had access to Madam Wu.

“I’ll lure her to my temple,” promised the nun who loved money more than she did Buddha, “and I’ll get her into a state where you may do whatever you wish with her.”

But it was not easy to lure Madam Wu into the temple.

Finally the nun found the weak spot in her defence: if the childless Madam Wu was to come early, before breakfast, to the temple in order to offer the first incense of the day to The Merciful Buddha, she would be granted an heir. Madam Wu, who had been married for several years and was thus under the society's pressure of begetting a son, fell for the trap.

The nun deliberately kept Madam Wu occupied with so many rituals and ceremonies after the first incense was burned that the poor woman, who had eaten nothing the whole morning was dizzy with hunger. When the nun was at last informed of this want of food, she pretended that she had not prepared for such a contingency and thus had only some cakes made from glutinous rice to serve the good lady. What she did not say was that this glutinous rice had been soaked repeatedly in strong wine, making them extremely potent as an anaesthesia, a recipe I have never tested for its validity. Madam Wu ate more than one cake, washing them down with tea, and was instantly immobilized. It was in this helpless state that the rape took place.

When she woke up from her stupor and realized the violation that had been done to her person, Madam Wu hurried away from the temple, too humiliated to say one word.

Being a virtuous woman, her first impulse was to commit suicide as customs dictated, but our heroine had more sense than to yield to an unreasonable convention without putting up a struggle. At least, she promised herself that she was not going to hang herself or drink rat poison until her husband had been informed of the cause of her suicide.

Her husband listened silently to her woeful tale. "Now that you know the shame I've brought to your good name," she concluded tearfully, "I'll die to cleanse it."

The scholar was such a fair-minded man that he deserved a wife as sensible as Madam Wu. "You're but the victim," he replied. "Why should you die for something for which you are not responsible?"

After many tearful embraces and mutual assurances of

love, the husband vowed revenge. "Since it's a disgrace we don't want anyone to know, we'll have to think of a way to get even without being directly involved," he said. A plot was hatched between the two of them.

The next day, Madam Wu sent her maid to ask the nun to come to her house. Feigning shyness and secretiveness, she indicated that she might as well sin again.

The nun, who had laid many traps for many good women, never thought it was possible for herself to walk into a trap. She suspected nothing, and gladly arranged for another tryst, only this time, the meeting was to take place in Madam Wu's own house.

The young man, Po, was vain enough to believe himself irresistible to women. He felt it was most natural that Madam Wu should want to see him again. Madam Wu allowed him to come close enough for a kiss, then she bit with all her might. Half of his tongue came off!

Does anyone wonder that Po, minus half of his tongue, should run out as fast as his legs could carry him, with blood dripping from his mouth, looking like a vampire? In the meantime, Madam Wu had spat out the broken end of the tongue which her husband took as he ran to the temple where the nun lived. He banged on the temple door loudly. When the nun asked who it was, he shouted: "I am Po."

Once he was admitted, he strangled the nun. Then he pried open her mouth and pushed in the bitten end of the tongue.

Dawn came and the body of the dead nun was discovered. The police officer in charge found the planted evidence and concluded that the murderer had originally attempted rape, but when the nun resisted him by biting off his tongue, he killed her. To solve this crime all that the detectives had to do was to find a man who had lost half of his tongue.

But Po knew nothing about what had happened at the temple. He was promptly arrested and brought to trial. The most damaging evidence against him, of course, was that

bitten off tongue fitted perfectly with the other half still in his mouth. The testimony of neighbours who overheard the shouting at the temple door confirmed his guilt. He was given the death sentence. Since he could not speak and probably could not write, there was no way he could defend himself. Thus was vengeance accomplished.

Before we decide whether this revenge is fair or not, I think we ought to remember that before and during the nineteenth century, practically all rape victims in China must die, either by their own hands or by that of their husbands or fathers. Not every woman could be as fortunate as Madam Wu to have such an understanding and unconventional husband. Therefore, anyone who raped or helped to rape a woman was in fact killing that woman. With this knowledge in mind, is not the death sentence justified in this story?

A Hundred Flowers Bloomed

One of the novels I loved in my early teens was called Jing Hua Yuan (镜花缘), or to be a little flippant, ‘The Mirror and Flowers Connection’. The first half of the book is a travelogue of fantasy lands. Walt Disney would have had great fun transforming it into a full length cartoon if he had read it. In between travels, it also praises the ability, not merely the beauty, of women and even demands equal rights for them.

Strangely, the author was a man. Even more extraordinary is that this man, Li Ru Zhen (李汝珍 , 1763-1830) lived almost two hundred years ago when the status of women was very low. For him to defy the conventions of his day took great courage and foresight.

The style of writing is often stilted and at times irritatingly pedantic when the author was showing off his knowledge on phonetics, on history, on geography, on astronomy, and even on herbal medicine, and not all of them correct, judging by today’s standards. But, on the whole, the book is enchanting and amusing, especially when it satirizes the hypocrisy of men.

The beginning of the book, almost like a prologue, is an endearing mixture of history and fairy tales. It says that Empress Wu Ze Tian (武则天), who reigned between AD 690-704 in her own name but was virtually a ruler even before her husband died, was happily drunk one wintery night. She was in such an expansive mood that she impulsively wrote a

decree, commanding all the flowers in her imperial garden to bloom the very next day.

Of course it was against the law of nature for flowers to bloom in severe winter, yet what were the fairies of these flowers to do when the Empress on Earth had spoken? Was not the Empress on Earth as omnipotent as God in Heaven? So the hundred fairies, each in charge of one kind of flower, went into a frenzy, debating whether they should or should not obey. These fairies did have a leader, namely, the Goddess of a Hundred Flowers, and normally she was the one to issue orders on when and where to bloom, in accordance to the seasonal changes. But alas, she was away from her office, playing chess in some cave. After all, it was winter and no flower was scheduled to bloom, so she must have thought it was as good a time as any to take a holiday.

In her absence, the fairies did not know what to do. Some voted to please the Empress and so they blossomed profusely. The others resisted, waiting for the Goddess to return. As there was no sign of the Goddess of a Hundred Flowers, and as the deadline imposed by the Empress drew nearer and nearer, even those who had hesitated changed their minds. One by one, they opened their tender petals without even going through the budding process. On the morning when the Empress woke up, her imperial garden looked as glorious as if spring, summer and autumn were all combined into one.

The Empress on Earth was elated, but not the God in Heaven! In his fury, he told the hundred fairies that since they chose to obey the authority on earth while ignoring him, they must be expelled to become mortals. Not just any mortal, but female mortals in a world ruled by men. So they were born, mostly to parents in China, but quite a few were sent to various outlandish countries.

In the early days of the communist regime in China, when Mao Zedong encouraged “a hundred flowers to bloom, a hundred birds to sing,” I thought he had borrowed a gesture from Empress Wu.

The first half of this book, following the prologue, relates the travels of three men in search of these hundred girls, not that they knew before hand that it was their mission to do so. The three men, one of them a scholar and the other two a trader and an aged sailor, sailed from China and landed on many strange shores. In one country, the people all had two faces; one in front showing their superficial and hypocritical expressions for others to see, and the other at the back, usually covered by a cloth, registering their ugly inner feelings, such as anger, spite, hate, resentment, envy, etc.

In another country, people fought to behave like gentlemen. Buyers insisted to pay higher prices than was asked for, while sellers refused to sell because the price offered was too high. One country in particular excited my youthful fancy: People there had no bowels! They had only one straight tube beginning at the throat, thus disposing food as soon as they ate only to be hungry again. Compared to the varieties of people the three tourists had seen, Gulliver would be ashamed to boast of his experience!

The most celebrated country they visited was called The Female Kingdom (女儿国), in which the females ranked higher than the males, exactly opposite to the world that the author lived in. Women were the scholars and teachers, governors and civil servants, tradesmen and labourers, while the men were required to stay home to take care of the children. It was in this country that one of the trio, the young and handsome trader, caught the roving eye of the Queen, only she was called King. She had him abducted by force to her palace and ordered the sort of things done to him which the Chinese men used to do to their womenfolk.

He was first congratulated on his good fortune to have been selected as the latest concubine. Then he was made to change into skirts and blouses. His beard was plucked and his face was smeared with thick cosmetics. He was denied any activity outdoors for fear of spoiling his fair complexion. Worst of all, the bones of his feet were crushed and then bound tightly by layers and layers of cloth so that they could

appear small, dainty and attractive. These few chapters are the most famous portion of the book, appearing in abridged version in many modern textbooks. In his description of the humiliation and suffering of the kidnapped trader, the author aroused the conscience of Chinese men and made them aware of the cruel tortures they had inflicted on their women.

Eventually, all the hundred girls were located. Their fate, once again, was tied up with Empress Wu's decree, for it was her royal wish that an imperial examination, just like the ones for men, should be provided for women. That all the hundred girls should pass the examination was a foregone conclusion. The rest of the book degenerated into merely another novel about wars, marriages, and such mundane affairs. I do not think I ever finished reading the book. Or, if I did, I certainly cannot remember any of it with pleasure.

Love of Money

Since greed is a universal phenomenon, so are jokes making fun of misers. The Chinese, with their usual ability to laugh at themselves, are no exception. I will only tell three well-known stories since they have been repeated often enough to be considered as folklore.

Mr Huang invited Mr Li to lunch. On the table were four dishes. One was a bowl of beancurd simmered in soy sauce. Another was beancurd sauteed with red chilli. The third was also beancurd, sliced and deep fried. The fourth was raw and uncooked beancurd, covered with finely chopped green onions and sprinkled over with a mixture of sesame seed oil and soy sauce.

“I love beancurd,” explained the host with a sincerity that could have persuaded a tiger to eat a banana. “It’s not only tasty, but it’s more nutritious than meat. Do you know, the animal protein in meat is harmful to your health? All that cholesterol! But the protein in beancurd, well!”

“Well?”

“You see, it’s a vegetable protein,” Huang eagerly inched forward. “It has no fat, no cholesterol, and is much easier on digestion.” He heaved a sigh of gratification. “I love beancurd as much as I love my life.”

Li was impressed. When it was his turn to give a party, among the invited guests was Huang, he specially ordered a dish of beancurd for his friend, in addition to the usual courses of beef, pork, chicken, shrimp, etc. But when they sat down to dinner, Huang ate gustily all the meat protein.

Surprised, Li asked: "What happened? I thought you love beancurd as much as you do your life?"

With his mouth full of chicken, Huang replied: "Ah yes. But when there is meat, who cares about life?"

Then there was this old man who had built up his fortune by being thrifty all his life. Now he lay on his dying bed with his dearly beloved family gathered around him.

Picture him in his bed. Since those were the days of yore, his bed was a four poster with draperies all around it to keep away the chilly night air, except on one side, where it was parted like stage curtains so that the patient could be seen. Next to his bed was a small table on which stood his bowl of herbal medicine and an oil lamp burning with two wicks, so as to make the room a little brighter. His sons knelt around him, waiting and watching.

The dying man had no more strength to speak. He looked at his sons sadly and then lifted two fingers. It was clear that this was something to do with his dying wish. What was he trying to say?

"Father," asked the eldest son, "is it because someone owes you two thousand ounces of silver that you want to make sure we will get the money back? Tell me who he is." The old man shook his head ever so slightly.

"I think I know what he means," said the second son, pushing away his elder brother. "Father dear, is it because you have bought two hundred acres of land that we do not know of? Tell me where they are and I will secure the title deeds." The old man closed his eyes wearily, but his two fingers remained extended.

"Let me try," urged the youngest son, forcing himself forward. "Father, Father, is it because you have buried two urns of gold and worry that we do not know where they are buried? Tell me the exact spot and I will dig them out." The face of the old man contorted with pain, but his trembling fingers still showed "two".

Finally the mother stopped weeping and looked up. She sighed and parted the waiting sons. "I know, I know," she said to the old man, patting him on the shoulder. Then she

turned around to her sons. "He thinks you have all been too extravagant and you must stop it." Then she lifted one of the two wicks from the old lamp. The old man smiled faintly, relaxed his fingers, and died with contentment.

The following story has many variations but the theme remains essentially the same. It is said that there was a Mandarin who happened to lunch in a countryside inn. He ordered the cheapest item from the menu, which was a bowl of noodles, costing him only twenty cents. His manservant, being human, also felt hungry, so he begged his master for a bowl of noodles. Since the request was made in front of the other customers in the inn, the Mandarin had to give the manservant the necessary twenty cents for the noodles.

When they were on their way back to the city, the manservant who was riding on a horse, went in front of the sedan chair in which the Mandarin was being carried.

"Silly old fool!" scolded the Mandarin. "What do you think you're doing? You're raking up all that dust to make me cough!"

The manservant immediately reined back his horse so as to trot along with the sedan chair.

"You impudent fool!" shouted the Mandarin. "How dare you have the audacity to ride side by side with me? Do you think you're my equal?"

The manservant, his face turning pale, held back his horse so he rode behind the sedan chair in his most obsequious manner.

The Mandarin turned his head around and screamed, "You lazy bone! Do you think you can take life easy by hiding behind my back?"

The manservant jumped down from his horse and knelt on the dirty road. "Your Excellency, since it is wrong for me to ride ahead of you, wrong for me to ride alongside with you, and wrong for me to ride behind you, please tell me where I should be?"

The Mandarin snapped back, "I don't give a damn about where you ride if only you will return me my twenty cents."

Does anyone want more silly jokes?

Revenge by Insults

When it comes to flinging verbal insults, the cursing Chinese male is most remarkable for his sense of history, — not because what he says has more historical value or is based on substantial historical truth, but because he always winds up in a quarrel, no matter how he begins it, with abuses on other people's ancestors.

The vulgar and foul-mouthed variety, either fulminated in dead seriousness or muttered as a cliché at some slight provocation, are insults that are directed at the chastity of other people's mothers, grandmothers, or great grandmothers. What he claims he can do is indeed a heroic feat, not to say impossible, considering how the great grandmothers are usually dead in their graves. Some people even insist, for the sake of emphasis, that they have or will have cuckolded all the great grandfathers of his opponent for the past eighteen generations. Luckily these threats usually apply to the paternal line, so only eighteen women, over a span of roughly four hundred and fifty years, are victimized. If they should mean all grandmothers of both sides of the family tree, as they sometimes expansively imply, then my calculation tells me that a total of 1,048,572 women would have committed adultery just by one single curse. No wonder China is over populated.

This kind of illogical expletive is no more ridiculous than what an English speaking man, when he stumbles on a chair in the darkness, swears to do to that chair: a certain biological act which only some species of animals are capable

of doing. Both the Anglo-Saxon and Chinese expressions are ludicrous if one does not stop to ponder on the injustice they do to women, not to mention chairs.

An indirect way of saying the same thing is to claim family relationships. "You're my son!" a Chinese may shout, but to the English orientated person who hears it, the words do not sound malicious at all because he has never been conditioned to realize that, by being so addressed, he is disgraced through the insinuated misconduct of his mother.

A similiar insult is to cry "you're my younger brother-in-law!" In the Chinese language, there are two kinds of brother-in-law: he who marries one's sister, *Jie Fu* or *Mei Fu* (姐夫 or 妹夫), and he whose sister one marries, *Xiao Jiu* or *Da Jiu* (小舅 or 大舅). Calling the other person "*Xiao Jiu Zi* (小舅子)" or "he whose younger sister one marries" can be derogatory since the term suggests that the speaker has bedded the other's sister without the benefit of matrimony. But if one should banter this sentence around in English, one must take care not to use the loosely defined "brother-in-law" because it can be taken to mean *Jie Fu* (姐夫) or "he who marries one's elder sister", and that will be like calling himself a pimp for his own sister, or that he is pouring insults on himself. People who hurl insults of this kind may not even know whether the other person has any sister, but it gives them satisfaction to be so verbally gratified.

Insults of these kinds reveal the sick mentality of a male dominated society which allows, even encourages, such verbal rapes to be applied as balms for the bruised male ego. The famous Ah-Q, created by the novelist Lu Xun (鲁迅), is always muttering to himself, after he has been humiliated, that so and so is his son or his *Xiao Jiu Zi* or younger brother-in-law. Revenge is thus "subtly" accomplished, and his ego soars.

It is even more "subtle" when real history is thus interpreted. I can think of three cases in which kings and emperors are targets of such self-deceptive revenges.

The earliest one is Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇, reigned

246-210 BC), the tyrant king who conquered six nations to unite China. It is not unreasonable to conclude that such a conqueror would be unpopular with people from the vanquished nations. Since not everyone had the courage to assassinate him or the ability to restore the nations he had toppled, the only recourse which remained was to dig into his parentage. "He's a bastard!" whispered the people.

Perhaps the charge was true, but then, perhaps it was not. History did record that Qin Shi Huang's father, when he was a prince, was held as a hostage in a neighbouring nation where he befriended a business tycoon, who, in turn, presented him with a young and beautiful woman. This woman was undoubtedly the mother of Qin Shi Huang, but, aha, who was his father? I sincerely do not believe anyone could possibly know the answer, perhaps not even the mother, given such dubious circumstances, but the people, including some historians, insisted that this young woman was already made pregnant by the business tycoon before she was sent to the prince. They discounted the possibility that the prince could have had pre-marital relation with his wife because they preferred to reduce, by one whispered word, the all powerful conqueror into a despicable bastard. Was revenge ever so easily achieved?

The next king thus bastardized was Shun Zhi, (顺治 , reigned 1644-1662), the first Emperor of Qing (清), who was only a youngster when he followed his Manchu uncle into China and was proclaimed Emperor. The conquered Han people in China hated the invaders. Some took up arms to revolt, and some battled with their paper and pens. The less courageous ones took refuge behind their favourite game of insulting ancestors.

They claimed that the mother of Shun Zhi had taken a lover who was in reality the father of the king. Naturally this lover just had to be a man of Han blood. How the common people knew of this secret when the royal family of Manchu remained ignorant was never explained. What was more important to them was that their own shame of defeat

was wiped clean by slinging mud on the victor. "What the hell!" one man nodded to another sagely. "It was a man of Han who sired the king. So, you see, we aren't really conquered by the Manchus. It is we who have conquered them by cuckolding their king and by giving them a half-blooded Han Emperor."

The people's collective ego took an even more imaginative shot at Qian Long (乾隆, reigned 1736-1785). By that time, the Manchu ruler was more readily accepted by the people since his reign brought stability and prosperity. They identified themselves so much with their Emperor that it would have been insulting themselves if they denounced him as a bastard. So, they made him into a pure blooded, one hundred per cent Han.

The story, which has been repeated numerous times in novels, tells how a son was born to a high government official by the surname of Chen (陈), and how this son, a few days old, was brought to the palace for the Prince to admire. Luck would have it that the wife of this Prince had also just given birth to a daughter. When the child was returned to the house of Chen, it had turned into a baby girl. A switch had been made! This is how a son of Han sat on the throne of the Manchus. Another victory won.

What a relief that Singaporeans no longer swear and curse and solve their historical vendettas in this particular fashion! Or, do they still?

The Dead Who Walked

Hearing stories of the supernatural was one of my childhood delights. For some reason, they were always told on summer nights when my mother and aunts sat on the verandah, sipping their cups of tea leisurely. We of the younger generation, after having exhausted ourselves from catching fire flies and crickets, would gather around them for our after-dinner thrills.

My mother who had a large collection of ghost stories could send delicious shivers down our spines. But being a true Confucian who adhered to the principle of “while knowing nothing of life, how do we expect to know anything of death?” (不知生，焉知死), she denied us all our excitement by insisting either these stories were not her personal experiences and thus unreliable, or by giving us factual dissection of the circumstances and thus furnishing us with rational explanations.

I could not have been more than ten years old when I first heard about *gan shi*. It was my brother Yen who first brought up the subject. “Tell us about *gan shi*,” he said casually as he lay down on the floor where we and our cousins congregated.

“Who told you that?” asked Aunt Lei, sharply.

“From Uncle Zhang.” Zhang was a distant cousin whom my family had brought to Shanghai from our village in Hunan where he was not wanted by anyone because he was too old to be useful, too poor to be respected, and too independent to be made a pet of. My uncles felt sorry for him and had taken him to live with us. His status was never clear. He

lived and ate with the servants but was assigned no work, and yet we were told always to respect him and to address him as “uncle”.

“What did he say exactly?” asked my gentle Aunt Mei.

“I couldn’t figure him out,” Yen wrinkled his nose. “Something about he might soon need a *gan shi*. But when I asked him what a *gan shi* was he just looked glum. Mama, what is a *gan shi*?”

My mother and aunts exchanged looks. Hesitatingly, Mother said, “Well, *shi* is a dead body, a corpse (屍). To *gan* (趕) is to drive. A *gan shi* is a person who drives a group of corpses, like the way a shepherd drives a herd of sheep.”

“Mama, you don’t make sense,” complained Ming, my elder sister. “Sheep can run and get lost, so a shepherd is necessary to make them behave. But dead bodies can’t run or get lost.”

“But they can,” smiled Aunt Lei, “if a spell is put on them. A *gan shi* needs only to write certain magical words on pieces of paper which he pastes, hangs, or pins on the legs of the corpses which can then be controlled by him. He can tell them when to lie down and when to get up, when to jump forward or backward, to the left or to the right.”

“Why do you keep on saying ‘jump’?” complained my cousin Xing.

“Because their legs are too stiff to bend,” teased Mother. I nestled closer to her for comfort.

“Oh come on, Mama!” cried Ming. “Don’t tell me you’ve seen them!”

“No one is allowed to see them,” explained Aunt Mei. “If one does, the spell is broken.”

“And I suppose the dead bodies will then flop down and refuse to jump anymore,” sneered Xing.

“No,” Mother shook her head. “When the spell is broken, the corpses are turned into a kind of vampire, strangling whoever sees them.”

“Do you mean,” Xing looked at the faces of his elders, “you all believe, actually believe, in this nonsense?”

"No," said Mother laughingly, "I can't say I believe it. I've never even heard their warning bells which they say the *gan shi* rings before he comes. But I know a man who claimed his brother had seen how it happened."

"And he survived it to tell the story?" asked Xing sarcastically.

"Don't make fun of them, Xing," said Aunt Lei. "Surely there must be some truth in it when mothers in Hunan are known to hush their babies by saying the *gan shi* is coming."

"For your information," Mother frowned, "*gan shi* is quite famous in China. People from other provinces are always asking us about it. Of all things to be famous for!"

"Do you know," Aunt Lei asked suddenly, "if you happened to enter an inn with no door-sills (门槛), you better get out fast? Because an inn with no door-sill is specially designed so that the dead bodies will not trip."

"Why don't they just jump over the door-sills?" asked Yen. "You did say they could jump, didn't you?" But no one paid him any attention.

"I'm sure you're making it up!" laughed Ming, uncertainly.

"Not really," said Aunt Lei, "we're only repeating what we've been told. They say only some people in Hunan know how to make these spells which are taught only by fathers to sons."

"Let me tell you what we really think," Mother sighed. "You see, we people from Hunan are mostly small farmers, hardly ever with land large enough to support all the children, so the younger sons are usually forced to look for jobs outside our village, even in other provinces. Some are poor teachers, some are labourers, and many become soldiers. You must have heard of the Xiang Jun (湘军 or Hunanese Army)? Naturally a great many of them die, especially the soldiers. But being stubborn Hunanese with instinctive love for their villages, these people have only one wish when they die: to be buried back at home. So what is to be done when they are dead but far away from their home villages?"

“Put them in coffins and ship them back,” advised Xing promptly.

“But what if they don’t even have the money to buy coffins?”

We children looked at one another.

“One theory is that some of these bodies are in fact brought back,” said Mother softly, “but without coffins. They are piled into a hand-pushed cart, probably only with lime as preservatives. Tags are wrapped around their legs to specify their destinations, which is probably how the story about paper with spells originates. But a cartload of dead bodies in various stages of decomposition is too gruesome a sight for anyone to see, so the cart can be pushed only in the night and hidden in the day in some special inns. Discretion is necessary, but this discretion is eventually exaggerated out of proportion into supernatural tales.”

As the explanation was reasonable, no one pursued the subject any longer, but I was nauseated at the thought of “dead bodies in various stages of decomposition” being pushed in a cart. It filled me more with distaste than horror.

Shortly after our conversation on *gan shi*, Uncle Zhang was given a ticket on a steamer to go back to his village in the care of another relative. I missed him for a while, and then, eventually I forgot him. It was only years later that I understood the connection of his sudden departure with his mentioning of *gan shi* to Yen. Was the poor man worried lest he should die and be driven home by a *gan shi*? Once I understood, I did not think of *gan shi* with horror or distaste, but with infinite sadness.

How Long Can a Road Be?

It was long, long ago when I first came to Singapore. Those were the simple happy days when every street allowed two-way traffic and cars could turn at any street corner provided it did not smash head on into another car.

I was being shown Singapore and was naturally interested in street names. At one point, I knew we were on a street called Cantonment, but suddenly, without our turning left or right, the street sign read Outram Road. I was curious but I had learned never to argue with street signs.

Before my amazement had worn off, I discovered that although we were still following the same road, we were travelling on a road called Kim Seng. When did Outram become Kim Seng? I withheld my question since my friend at the wheel was busy making a crossing, but the question got stuck in my throat because, after the crossing was made, it was no longer Kim Seng but Irwell Bank Road.

Since I had always had trouble pronouncing words with 'r' and 'l', especially when they were put together, I hesitated briefly. By then, the street sign indicated that we were on Patterson Road. "Thank God," I thought to myself, "at least Patterson is an easier word for me to ask my question with."

"This is Orchard Road," waved my friend at the road in front of us. "It's the busiest section in town, so I'll drive straight through to avoid the traffic." She said "straight" and she drove "straight", but to my consternation, the road after the traffic light was now Scotts Road. I looked back at the Patterson Road we had just driven on, but my friend, who was

used to Singapore, did not even notice my confusion since she apparently found nothing strange in a road changing its name just because it crossed an intersection.

When Scotts Road reached what I later learned was Newton Circle, our car swerved ever so slightly to accommodate the gentle curve of the road but was still heading the same direction. The road was now called Newton Road. By that time, I could not make up my mind to be surprised or not, but I almost wept with relief when Newton Road was cut dead by Thomson and we did make a turn to set on a road with a different name.

Nowadays, I am an old hand at this. The other day I was giving instructions to a newly arrived friend. "Have you got your pencil?" I said over the phone. "Now, write it down. You're on Bukit Merah Road and want to get to Bartley Road, right?"

"Yes, yes," answered my friend gratefully.

"Okay. You go along Bukit Merah until you get on Queensway ..."

"How do I get on Queensway? Do I turn left or right?"

"You don't turn at all. The street signs do it for you. You just follow your nose and drive." I could hear a snort from the other end of the phone. "Driving on Queensway, you'll come to Holland Road."

"Okay, now do I turn left or right?"

"No, you go straight, crossing Holland Road."

"I see, I keep to Queensway."

"No, you keep straight on the same road, but it'll be Farrer Road."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"But if I'm to get to Farrer Road from Queensway, surely I must turn at some point?"

"No, you don't. You leave that direction signal alone. When the traffic light turns green on Holland Road, you just drive straight on, and you'll be on Farrer Road."

A long silence. Then, "Oh yeah? What comes next?"

“Now, you drive on Farrer Road until you see an overpass for cars in front of you. That’ll be Bukit Timah.”

“Now do I turn?”

“Of course not. You go straight, right under the overpass.”

“Good,” sighed the voice over the phone, “I keep to Farrer Road.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” I started to laugh. “You’ll be on Adam Road.”

“Listen friend, don’t pull my leg.”

“I’m not pulling your leg. I’m not even pulling your car. I’m telling you that once you have made the crossing, Farrer Road is called Adam Road.”

“Are you sure it isn’t Eve’s Road?”

“Don’t get sarcastic with me. Do you want to get to Bartley or not?”

“All right, go on. I’m writing it all down. So I’m on Adam, now what?”

“So you will take the Lornie Road.”

“Turning left or right?”

“You don’t turn at all! Look, I’m trying to lead you from Bukit Merah to Bartley along the easiest way without turning. There are other ways, you know, but then you will have to turn all the time, and you’ll get lost, what with our one-way traffic and all.”

“You mean you’re doing me a favour?”

“You bet I’m doing you a favour. What I’m telling you is a straight line without any turns. Well, not a straight line exactly, but a straight road.”

“Just get on with the directions, please.”

“You were on Adam, right? Then you drive on, without turning, and you are on Lornie Road. Don’t worry about it, Lornie Road will come on you so gently that you won’t even notice it.”

“You mean I’ll be on the same road even if the names have changed?”

“Now you’re getting the hang of it! On Lornie Road, you

keep going and it'll be soon called Thomson." I paused to reflect. "Come to think of it, it's rather funny, you know. Thomson is ever so long, and it curves right there to become Upper Thomson and yet this curved section is actually a straight line with Lornie ..."

"For heaven's sake, just stick to the directions, please."

"Actually, there isn't much more. Once you've passed Thomson Road, probably even without knowing it, because it is very short, you will be on Braddell Road."

"No turning to get to Braddell Road?"

"Right."

"I turn right?"

"No! I mean you were right to say you don't turn. You keep on driving on Braddell Road until you get to Bartley."

"Where do I turn to get to Bartley?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that you don't turn? Braddell Road and Bartley Road are the same road with different names, that's all."

A long pause. "I've news for you. I'm not going. It's too long."

"God! How can you say it's too long?"

"It stands to reason. Any street that has eight changes of names must be long."

"You're just not used to our ways. Do you know from Holland Road to Orchard Road, we have to pass Napier Road and Tanglin Road, and it takes only a minute?"

"And without any turns?"

"So smooth and straight that one doesn't even notice the names are different. Trust me."

"All right," hesitation still lingered in his voice. "But one road with eight names! I'll bet it is long enough to go around Singapore three times!"

"Names have nothing to do with the length of the road," I said. "We like them short and sweet."

An Exercise in Bilingual Scrambling

One day, a few of us who visited cinemas only infrequently were attracted by a movie advertisement in the Chinese newspaper. The name of the theatre was 银都 (Yin Du) which meant “Silver City or Silver Metropole” in English, but none of us, including the waiters and waitresses at the restaurant where we lunched, knew where it was.

“Let’s look it up in the telephone directory,” suggested someone. It did seem to be the most sensible thing to do, but to our misfortune the restaurant possessed only a directory in English. We, being resourceful and bilingual, the way Singaporeans were supposed to be, thought 银都 must be called in English Silver Capital, Silver City, or at least something silver. So we cheerfully flipped the pages and found to our delight one theatre by the name of “Silver City” which, by the way, was the only theatre with the word “silver” in its English name.

Confidently we drove to postal area 1438, anticipating the joys of our rare afternoon treat. That turned out to be one of the silliest mistakes we ever made in our lives! We found the Silver City without any difficulty, only it was not showing the movie we wanted to see for the simple reason that it was the wrong theatre. Deflated, dejected, and completely baffled, we looked with disgust at the name of the theatre where our quest ended. It was called 银国 or Yin Guo, which meant literally “Silver Nation”, not “Silver City”. We walked away feeling somewhat betrayed by our bilingual education.

As soon as I reached home, I searched for my bilingual

edition of the street directory and turned to the page listing the names of theatres in both English and Chinese. To my surprise, the theatre 银都 which we wanted to go to, was named “The Liberty” in English. To this day, I have not figured out any reasonable connection between liberty, freedom, fraternity, or even the Bridge of Eternal Love with anything silver.

How was this theatre named? Which came first, the English or the Chinese name? If it was named in Chinese first, then its English name should have been “Silver City”, and if it was named in English first, then its Chinese name should have been “自由” (Zi You), meaning “Liberty”. But why call 银都 “Liberty” or vice versa?

Does bilingualism mean that we are to speak two languages to mean the same thing, or are we to scramble our languages until they have completely unconnected meanings?

I looked over the list carefully and compared their English and Chinese names, and I must admit that, like Alice, it got “curiouser and curiouser”. I have not the faintest idea how the cinema industry works, and I certainly do not wish to offend the goodwill of their owners who, after all, kindly furnish us with comfortable air-conditioning, easy sofa chairs, and a two-hour escape from our mundane world. But I do wish the people responsible for naming the cinemas will do so with some consistency between their Chinese and English names so that moviegoers will not travel a long way to find the wrong theatre the way my friends and I did.

Logically, there are two ways we can name a theatre bilingually. One is by direct transmission of sound from its Chinese name to English, or vice versa. The other is by translating its corresponding meaning from English to Chinese or vice versa.

For instance, Lido, by calling it “丽都” in Chinese is excellent, since “丽都” is read “Li Du” in Hanyu Pinyin and means “Beautiful City”, which not only enables us to match it immediately with its English name but also suggests that the theatre is gorgeous to sit in. Paramount is another

wonderful example. Its Chinese name is “百乐门” or is read as “Bai Le Men” in Hanyu Pinyin. The Chinese name retains the original English sound while implying that it is “A Door That Leads to Hundred Delights”.

However, for Galaxy Theatre to be called “牙力丝” in Chinese is beyond my understanding. In some dialects, I suppose, “牙力丝” can be read to sound like Galaxy, but it is “Ya Li Si” in Mandarin. Can anyone speaking in Mandarin read “Ya Li Si” to make it sound like Galaxy? As far as its meaning is concerned, it suggests only a tooth (牙 or Ya) strong (力 or Li) enough to pull a strand of silk (丝 or Si). The name would have served better for dental floss. Surely it could have been named “银河” (Silver River), “星河” (Star River), “星云” (Star Cloud) or something appropriately astrological.

That leads us to the other method of naming a theatre, that is, by translating its meaning. Some of the best examples are Jade being called “翡翠”, Pacific “太平洋” and Prince “太子”. One may have to do a bit of translation to know how the English and Chinese tally, but there is little room for mistakes.

But some theatre names are really confusing to a bilingual Singaporean because they neither keep to the same sound in the two languages nor translate the meanings in any coherent way. I can't understand how Orchard Theatre is named “国宾” (Guo Bin) which means “Guests of the Nation” in Chinese. Does the owner expect our foreign VIPs to hold a picnic in the Orchard, or does he want us Singaporeans feel like “guests” in our own “nation”?

While I can accept, to some extent, that any place belonging to a queen is a joyous palace, thus the name of Queens Theatre is translated to “乐宫” (Le Gong), meaning “Happy Palace” in Chinese, I am mystified by the fact that Republic Theatre is named “金国” (Jin Guo) which means “Golden Nation”. I hope the owner is not insinuating that all of us who live in this island republic are worshippers of gold, although he may not be far off the truth.

The meaning of the word “Metropole” is, unless I am mistaken, a large city, so why is the theatre by that name called “金华” (Jin Hua) which means “Golden Luxury” or “Golden China”? Frankly, “Jin Hua” reminds me more of a piece of the famous ham known in China as Jin Hua Ham (金华火腿) than a large city. Perhaps it was originally meant to be called “京华” (Jin Hua) which would have meant “Capital of China” and thus still be a metropole. But the name “京华” has already been taken by another theatre whose name in English is Keng Wah, probably so named long before Hanyu Pinyin was encouraged in Singapore. If so, we can understand the disappointment of the owner of Metropole, but why must he insist on “京华”? Why not pick something like “大城” (Da Cheng, meaning Big City) to be consistent with its English name? Or, if he likes the name “金华” (Jin Hua), then why not call his theatre simply Golden China?

Plaza is a word meaning a large public meeting place which, in Europe especially, is where vegetables and chickens used to be sold, fairs to be held and public executions to take place. So why is the theatre by that name called “光辉” (Guang Hui) which means more or less “Bright Glory” in Chinese? For that matter, I am always mixing up the theatre Plaza, with its Chinese name of (Guang Hui), with the theatre “辉煌” (Hui Huang), meaning loosely “Glory of Glories”, and whose English name, by reasons only evident to its owner, is The Premier. Both names in Chinese are so abstract, so vague, and so involved with light, brilliance and glory that they come to mean the same thing to me. I might have remembered it better if The Premier was allowed to be called “光耀” (Guang Yao, which to the world is pronounced as Kwan Yew) instead of “辉煌” (Hui Huang).

If the owners of these two theatres are reluctant to alter the Chinese names, which I must admit are really glorious, then why not keep up their images in English by calling them The Splendour, The Magnificent, The Brilliant, or such superlative names?

Actually all these names are perfectly legitimate by themselves. It is only when they are applied to the same theatre with completely different meanings and sounds that our bilingual citizens begin to wish that they had learned telepathy instead of two languages.

My questions can go on forever, but since I know perfectly well that no theatre is going to change its name just to please me, I may as well stop asking them. But I do have a suggestion. If more theatres are to be built, why not honour our Garden City by naming our cinemas with botanical names such as roses, orchids, frangipani, or even banana, coconut and palm? Then we will certainly know which theatre we are going by looking at its logo and dispense with languages altogether.

Empty Rooms ...

The type of Chinese poetry known as *ci* (词) began as lyrics to songs sometime around the late Tang Dynasty which ended in AD 907, but its development as a literary expression did not reach its zenith until the North Song Dynasty in the eleventh century. Most of the *ci* written up till AD 970 were merely eloquent phrases with no genuine feeling.

Then came the poet-king Li Yu (李煜 AD 937-978) who is better known to readers as Li Hou Zhu (李后主), meaning “Li the Last King”, because it was he who lost the kingdom his grandfather founded. No one will ever dispute that, as far as kingship went, he ranked at the very bottom of the list, but as a poet, he reigned supreme! His early poems, written in the happy days when he was still a prince and later a king, were charming and pretty, but they were mostly frivolous rhymes about his women and his merry making.

Then his fate changed. So did his poems. What Li Yu wrote after he was taken prisoner, away from his native land, broke the convention of his day and lifted the composition of *ci* from display of shallow sentimentality to revelation of deep emotions.

Li Yu was born the same year his grandfather became king. He lived for 24 years as a prince and 16 years as a king. For 40 years he knew no misery other than losing a wife whom he quickly replaced. He was served by his royal concubines, flattered by his courtiers and entertained by his musicians. After he lost his throne, he lived only three more years and was said to have been poisoned by his captors.

It was in these last three years of his life that his poems soared to a new height. Ironically, the bitter fruit of his personal tragedy was to become one of the greatest achievements in Chinese poetry. One wonders what would have happened to the development of *ci* had he not suffered.

Let us start with one of his early poems. He wrote about a girl; some said she was his first wife who had just finished her evening toilette and was dabbing herself with a little rouge and some lipstick, moistening her lips as she did so. When she sang, her mouth was like a red cherry. Then he went on about the sleeves of her robe, the wine in her cup, and the languid way she leaned on her bed. She chewed some red silk thread which she passed on, with a smile, to her lover. The choice of words, the arrangement of phrases, and the setting for a coquettish mood were all expertly done, but what real feelings were there?

Of course, not all his poems were about flirtatious women. One of the best in this period is this:

The courtyard is still, (深院静)
The rooms are empty, (小庭空)
The washerwoman is beating her laundry on her
stones,
Making staccato sound every now and then,
Just like the cold wind which blows into my room
every now and then, (断续寒砧断续风)
The evenings are long, but what can one do if one
cannot sleep, (无奈夜长人不寝)
Except to count the sound of stone being beaten
While watching the moon creeping up the bamboo
shaded window? (数声和月到窗拢)

That was the extent of his sorrow which, poetic though it might be, was at best borrowed from others. In this poem, he was imagining a woman who heard the laundry being beaten on the stone. The thought of laundry made her think of men's clothing. What with the cold wind and the creeping moon, she could not sleep because she longed for her lover.

This poem is usually praised for having created a touching scene of a lonely wintry night, but my reaction is more of cynical indifference than ardent admiration. I have always wondered how the poor washerwoman was feeling doing washing so late in the night or so early in the morning, and in winter, at that? I am more sympathetic with her who must soak her hands in the icy water and get her fingers frostbitten than the woman sleeping snugly in her warm bed.

His father, Li Jing, (李璟 AD 916-961), the second king of his dynasty, was an aggressive ruler as well as an accomplished writer of *ci*. Both father and son were imaginative, sensitive, and expert in the use of word tones, but both were limited by their own personal experiences as long as they remained kings and lived in luxury. Although the father was held in high esteem as an excellent craftsman of poetry, his words failed to touch the hearts and souls of his readers.

For instance, the following poem written by Li Jing the father, is rather similar to the ones the son wrote in his early period. Let us look at the original poem before we do the translation-explanation.

菡萏香销翠叶残，
西风愁起绿波间。
还与韶光共憔悴，
不堪看。

细雨梦回鸡塞远，
小楼吹彻玉笙寒，
多少泪珠无限恨，
倚阑干。

Now, we will try it in English:

The lotus flowers have lost their fragrance,
Their green leaves have wilted,
And the west wind sadly wrinkles the surface of the
water

As it glides gently over the emerald pond.
Who else but I have aged and grown as haggard as
these lotus?
I dare not look at myself.

Listening to the drizzly rain, I dozed off,
But he cannot come to me even in my dream
Because he is stationed so far away.
My little room on top of the stairs grows icy
With the lonely tunes that flow out from the jade
flute.
How much more tears must I shed
And how much endless regrets must I suffer
As I lean on the railings of my window?

The above poem, in its Chinese original, is more poetic than my prose can convey. For one thing, personal pronouns are hardly ever used in Chinese poems. For another, the poets are allowed to scramble their words in ways that will be considered unacceptable in prose. These two factors combine to render to Chinese poems an illusive mood that can be intensely felt but cannot be explicitly explained.

For example, the “unbearable to look” (不堪看) in the above poem seems to have been spoken by a woman who has been waiting for her lover for so long that she feels her beauty has faded. It can also mean “I dare not look at myself.” Upon reflection, it can have a host of other meanings, such as “Can he bear to look at me when he returns?” or “Who can bear to look at a haggard face like mine?” Furthermore, although the speaker seems like a female, the line is also applicable to any male who happens to look at the lotus in the pond, because the gender of the person is never clearly specified in the poem.

The line about the room being “icy” in my prose explanation sounds rather confusing. Part of the confusion is due to the fact that the original line, if judged as prose, is ungrammatical. Word for word, the line can be translated

as “small upstairs blow thoroughly jade flute cold” (小楼吹彻玉笙寒). It does not make sense even in Chinese.

Strictly speaking, 楼 is “stairs” or more often “upstairs”, but stairs or upstairs of what? A house? A tower? Whatever it is, being “small”, it conveys a sense of height and loneliness. “Blow” is ambiguous: Is the wind blowing or is someone blowing on the flute? Besides, how can “upstairs” blow anything? We may also ask why the flute is cold? Because it has been laid on ice for too long? Or is the poet referring to the music from the flute as sadly cold?

One cannot explain adequately the mood or the multiplicity of moods, but one does get a shivering sensation from this line. Once this mood is achieved by this ungrammatical but poetic line, the sentence that follows it comes into sharper focus. The room being cold, the music being sad, and the person being lonely, we can now visualize he or she stepping close to the railings of the window, looking at but not seeing the faraway horizon, as if in a daze, while tears of regret slowly and silently streak down his or her cheeks.

The poems the royal father wrote were all good poems. They have been well known to readers for centuries. But none of them can compare to the poems Li Yu the son was to write as a prisoner.

The Poet-King:

A River of Spring Waters ...

Li Yu (李煜) or better known as Li Hou Zhu (李后主) was a genius, but his early poems were restricted by his lack of suffering to achieve any emotional depth.

However, after his kingdom was lost and he was captured to be taken away from his own country, his poems became so sincerely emotive that they have since stirred the hearts of millions, who feel his words have crystallized their own thoughts, moods and inner feelings. I will try to preserve some of the beauty of the poems for those readers who know Chinese well enough but may not be accustomed to reading poetry, by inserting its Chinese characters after the corresponding English words, in their original sequence.

Spring (春) flowers (花) have bloomed,
Autumn (秋) leaves (叶)* have fallen,
But when (何时) will all these changes of seasons
end (了)?
Past (往) events (事) are so vivid in my mind
That can anyone wonder why I still remember (知)
so much (多少)?
The little (小) bower (楼) where I live
Was chilled last (昨) night (夜) again (又) by the
East (东) Wind (风),

* Some readers have pointed out that this word should be “moon” (月) and not “leaves” (叶). What I have quoted here follows the version which is not traditional but which many literary researchers believe to be closer to what the poet actually wrote. For details, please see “The Poet’s Word” on page 71.

Making memories of my former (故) country (国)
unbearable (不堪)

For me to look back (回首) on my past,
As the moon (月) shining brightly (明) around
(中) me.

The intricately carved (雕) railings (阑)

The jade (玉) tiles (砌) of my palace
Should, even now (今), still (犹) be (在) there,
Only (只是) the lovely faces(朱颜) must have
changed (改).

Someone asks me (问君) how I can (能) have
(有) so much (几多) sorrow (愁)?

My sorrow is like (恰似) a whole river (一江) of
spring (春) water (水)

Which rushes torrentially down from the melting
snow,

Toward (向) the east (东), it flows (流) and
flows ...

The poignancy of this poem is beyond my translation. To begin with, the rhythm and cadence of the phrasing and word tones, which is melancholy and yet pleasing to the ears, are lost in my prose. Then, limited by my attempt to make the translation easy to read, I have narrowed the implications of his words by adapting only one simple and straight forward meaning. Actually, such is the magic of Chinese poetry that the meaning of the lines or between the lines can be interpreted in more ways than one, and can even arouse more than one emotion at the same time. Chinese words in a poem are like an abstract painting with only shapes, lines and colour, leaving much to the reader's own capacity to appreciate.

For instance, the first seven words of the poem conjure up different imageries and cause different word associations in different people. Some see them as they are, spring flowers and autumn leaves, and no more. To me, the mention of flowers and leaves without any elaboration, followed by the dramatic

twist of his own terse question of “when will they end?” (何时了) sets the hopeless tone of this poem. What he sees in the flowers is that they bloom only to fade, and what he sees in the leaves is that they unfurl only to wither. In these four words, I see him watching numbly the changes of the seasons and counting the seemingly endless days he must spend in captivity. And yet, there is a slight caress over the words as if the poet dare not let go of his memories.

Similarly, by using such phrases as “carved railings” and “jade tiles” in the second stanza, the poet evokes a picture of his elegant palace, especially the garden with lawns and lakes, for it is usually bridges on the lake that have railings and the lawns that have tiles laid on them for the laughing young girls to step on. But this gay and enchanting scene is veiled, as if a grey gauze has been pulled over it, by his melancholy knowledge that he can never hope to see it again. Timidly he assures himself that they must still stand as they once were, but in the next sentence he brings himself back abruptly to reality by asserting that the faces of the people must have changed. How “changed”? Are they still alive? Are they now smiling to their new masters? Or have they stopped being young and gay? Or “changed” in the sense that the garden is now peopled by strangers whom he does not know?

The last lines in each of the two stanzas are probably among the most quoted verses in Chinese literature. They deserve to be discussed separately.

The last line of the first stanza, coming after a simple sentence stating that the wind has chilled the place he now lives in, is like a knife stabbing into one’s heart. It sums up his desolation, his remorse, and his fears and doubts. The words themselves are simple. “故国”, in his case, is the kingdom he has lost, but the term also means “my former country”, or “the country I have left behind”, and there is a loving endearment in these two words that they do not have in English. “不堪” in Chinese is a flexible idiom that possesses various shades of “unbearable”. One can criticize another person as “不堪”, and it will mean a character that is vulgar, base and vile. If it is used for looks, it will mean “haggard”; if for

health, “feeble”; if for age, “senile”, etc. It can mean “I cannot bear to think or feel”, or “it is so and so that I cannot bear”, or even “I cannot tell what I cannot bear”. In my translation, I have singled out the memories of his country that he cannot bear, but the poet has never specified what it is. We only know whatever cannot be borne is connected with his native land. Does he regret his failure? Does he cling on to his past and long for its return? Does he feel lost, not knowing who he is and what he is? “回首” (turning my head) is double edged. He can be metaphorically turning his head to look back on his past, and he can also be turning his head to stare, in vain, at his home and country. The poet seems too wearied to explain. He merely stands under the moon, a king without a kingdom, a man without a future.

The last line of the second stanza, answering himself how much sorrow can he possibly have, says at its face value only that his sorrow is as endless as the river water. So from what does this line derive the power to stir the imagination of all those who have read it? I think it comes from the words “one”, “spring” and “east”. Chinese poems often use “river water” (江水) but very seldom “one river” (一江). The word “one” emphasizes the image of the whole and entire river. The word “spring” calls to mind the fast flowing currents and rapids which curve, swirl, beat on the shores and flood the countrysides. To say it rushes toward “east” is to stress that it runs its complete length, since practically all rivers in China flow eastward to meet the sea. But any water which has run into the sea will still be water, and by this simile, the poet is saying that his sorrow will forever be sorrow, even when he ceases to be.

It is poems like this that make me wish that everyone will study Chinese.

The Poet's Word

A friend of my nephew came to me the other day with a puzzled look on his face. "Why," he asked, "did you say autumn leaves instead of autumn moon?" I did not know what he was talking about. Autumn! Do we have autumn in Singapore? "It is 'autumn moon' in our textbook," he added. "Besides, your punctuation is wrong." Then it dawned on me that he was referring to the poem I tried to explain in "The Poet King".

"I'm glad you've asked me," I said, "because there wasn't enough space in that article for me to go into it. But I warn you, the explanation is tedious and may bore you."

"Try me," he replied, with determination.

"All right. Let's start with the punctuation. You said it was wrong, but may I ask what you use as a standard? Li Hou Zhu (李后主) never used any punctuation mark. All those graphically beautiful commas, semicolons and exclamation marks came to China only with the introduction of western culture. Chinese books up to the nineteenth century were printed in rows of words of uniform length with no punctuation whatsoever."

"Then how did people separate their sentences?"

"By the inherent meanings in the sentences, if one was a scholar," I smiled. "For purposes of teaching, I remember my mother used to separate the sentences by marking with quills whose ends had been cut off to form slender tubes. When they were dipped into red dye and then pressed on books, these quills formed perfect little circles to mark the

endings of sentences. But these circles did not come with the books, neither were there punctuation marks as we know them today.”

“You mean none of the old poems had any punctuation?”

“Right,” I nodded. “So how does one judge whether the westernized punctuation put on a classical Chinese poem is right or wrong? Each represents only the interpretation of modern editors and readers.”

After digesting this bit of information for a while, he asked petulantly, “What about ‘autumn leaves’ and ‘autumn moon’?”

“I can understand your insistence on ‘autumn moon’ because that was what I learned when I was at your age. But since then, I’ve read more books on the interpretation of poems. I regret that my own limited background prohibits me from doing research, but I feel I can at least keep up with what the scholars have found.”

“Research?” he sounded surprised. “On the words of a poem?”

“Yes indeed. Not just on Li Hou Zhu’s poems, but on all poems. Scholars have battled over poems written by poets like Du Fu (杜甫) and Xie Lingyun (谢灵运) and others. After all, printers could have made mistakes and the person who copied down the poem after hearing it from other people could have made mistakes. So scholars are always comparing different editions to look out for different versions, and when they do, they try to ascertain which version is more likely to be the poet’s own.”

“Are there many different versions?” Disbelief was in his voice.

“So many poems have debatable words that I don’t know where to begin!” I exclaimed. “Let me just give you one example. You must be familiar with the famous Nian Nu Jiao (念奴娇) written by Su Dong Po (苏东坡)?”

“Of course,” he said, proudly.

“Well, there are different opinions for three of the lines. In the fifth line, while describing the rocks, it is 乱石崩云

(exploding clouds) in some books, and 乱石穿空 (piercing sky) in others. The sixth line, about the waves, reads as 惊涛裂岸 (breaking the shore) in some and 惊涛拍岸 (beating the shore), or even 惊涛掠岸 (flirting the shore) in others. As for the fifteenth line, both 强虏灰飞烟灭 and 檣櫓灰飞烟灭 make sense, but was it 强虏 (strong enemies) or 檣櫓 (masts and oars) that the poet meant to have been destroyed by the fire and turned into ashes?"

"I don't know," he sighed.

"Neither do I. No one knows for certain unless one can find the poem in the poet's own writing. The scholars can only examine the various editions and judge by all the external circumstantial evidences, as well as the suitability of the words as they are fitted into the poem. This brings us to your 'autumn moon'."

"Oh yes," he cried, his face brightening up.

"Popular books usually print this line as 'spring flowers autumn moon' (春花秋月) which suggests strongly of happy times when one is serene enough to appreciate the beauty of flowers and moonlight. If so, how do they fit with the following words of 'when will all these end?' (何时了). Does it mean that the poet, in his captivity, was wondering when were his happy days to end? Surely he would not ask that! It is far more likely for him to ask when was his suffering to end. Therefore 'spring flowers and autumn moon' does not convey the sadness or the helplessness of a captive.

"Another version, less popular, has been considered as more appropriate. I shall show you only one of my sources. This book is *A Collection of Selected Chinese Ci* (中国历代词选) edited by Luo Qi (罗淇), published by Shanghai Book Store in Hongkong as one of the volumes in their *Chinese Classical Literature Series* (中国古典文学丛书). Here, take the book and read for yourself. See how the poem begins with 'Spring flower autumn leaves'."

He read aloud the poem and the footnotes I pointed out to him: "This poem was written in January 977, one year after Li Yu was captured and taken to Song Court. Li Yu was

captured in January 976, exactly one year ago. Therefore, the first words of the poem, reading ‘spring flowers and autumn leaves’ (春花秋叶) signifying the passage of one year, is more appropriate than ‘spring flowers autumn moon’, which can only be taken to mean happy times. As we all know, ‘one leaf falls and the world knows autumn has arrived’ (一叶知秋). The feeling which autumn leaves stir up is one of sadness, of weather turning cold and of the end of a year. Combined with the ‘spring flower’, it suggests the passing of one year, not the passing of happy times.”

“Now, do you understand,” I asked gently, “why I prefer ‘autumn leaves’ to ‘autumn moon’? There are two other reasons. ‘Leaves’ (叶) is a more suitable pair word with ‘flowers’ (花) than ‘moon’ (月) is, and thus a poet of Li Yu’s calibre would have liked it better. Then there is the association of autumn. Although the moon changes its shape every month, it does not wither or die in autumn. But autumn leaves have a special melancholy which is not felt in any other season. If you have ever seen autumn, you’ll know what I mean.”

“*Ye* (leaves) and *yue* (moon),” he mused. “The two words do sound alike, don’t they?”

“I think they do. Perhaps this is why one word somehow came to substitute the other, making us unsure which one was really written by the poet.”

He thought for a while. “What about *yin* (𠄎) and *jin* (今)? The textbook says it is 𠄎 (should) but you’ve used 今 (now)?”

“It’s the same story,” I said wearily. “Read more books and you’ll find there are even more versions than 𠄎 and 今. When I have to make a choice, I feel 𠄎 (should) sounds as if the poet-king is doubtful whereas 今 (now) makes him certain of the preservation of his palace. Try to feel the effects of the two words with the following line of ‘only the faces have changed’. With *yin* (𠄎), he is saying ‘I suppose my palace should still be there, only the faces I know have changed’. But with *jin* (今), he is saying ‘I know my palace

is still there, only the faces I know have changed'. You will agree with me that the word *yin* (僅) dilutes the emotional appeal of the word 'only' whereas *jin* (今) enhances it. Besides, the word *jin* (今) is not my own invention; I merely made a choice from the available versions."

"Oh, it's all so complicated!" he kicked at a chair.

"This poem was written a thousand years ago," I laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "Cheer up. We should be grateful that they've been preserved so well instead of lamenting over the differences in printed editions."

Qi Baishi:

His Paintings

It is my considered opinion that, in the last hundred years, the Hunan province of China has produced three very important personages: Mao Zedong, Qi Baishi and I. There is no need to introduce Mao, and my importance is evident only to myself; so it seems only logical that our attention should turn to Qi Baishi (齐白石), the grand old man of modern Chinese paintings.

My only qualification in talking about this giant of many talents is that I have been a long-time admirer of his. I fell in love with his painting the first time I saw one. It was a picture of plum blossoms, but it looked different from any painting of plum blossoms I had ever seen. The branches were a few zig-zag strokes done in black ink, bold and simple, and the blossoms were just blobs of varying shades of vermilion. The whole painting was starkly bare, doing away with all that I regarded as frivolous. I was to learn later that other painters before Qi Baishi had also painted in that style, but to me at that time, it was a revelation to find that the soft hair of a brush could render such steel-like strength and that those irregular dabs of watery dye could suggest the frailty of flower petals.

It was, and still is, for his paintings that Qi Baishi was internationally acclaimed as a genius. But in his own evaluation, he credited himself firstly as a poet, secondly as a seal engraver, thirdly as a calligraphist, and only lastly as a painter. What made him judge his own paintings less accomplished than his other talents? To understand him, even only slightly,

we need to know something about his paintings, his life and background, his prose and his verses, and his personality, all of which made up the total man.

During the ninety years of his life, Qi Baishi painted subjects ranging from portraits and landscapes to flowers, birds and insects. His style used to be meticulous in details, but as he became gradually influenced by some of the Ming and Qing dynasty painters who employed broad strokes, a technique known as “写意”, or “painting only the essence”, he developed and created a new style all of his own. Most of his paintings consist of only a few lines, but with these seemingly effortless lines, he could make any flower look fresh and any animal come alive. They were the results of long years of studying his subjects, of practising his brush strokes, of experimenting the mixing of colour, not on the palette, but on the brush itself, and of suffering the frustrations of endless trials and errors.

His paintings have been praised as revolutionary, vigorous, creative, etc., but it is most revealing of his style that two words of opposite meanings, “abstract” and “realistic”, are both applicable because it is not just a flower he painted but the essence of that flower which he succeeded in putting on his rice paper.

His earliest source of income as a painter was from portraits of dead people, which required a flattering likeness. It was bad enough to paint someone living who demanded repeated sketching until he was satisfied, but it was worse to paint a corpse whom, as Qi Baishi recalled: ‘I didn’t even know what he looked like with his eyes open,’ and still made the sketches accepted and paid for by the bereaved family who wanted the deceased to look alive and handsome.

As a result of this enforced training, Qi Baishi could paint realistic portraits if he wanted to, but he seldom did so in his later life. He would use people in his paintings to illustrate a point, but he was reluctant to paint a portrait for any specific person. His figure of a man painted in 1941, titled “What’s Inside”, shows a bald, bearded man squinting into a gourd



“What’s Inside”

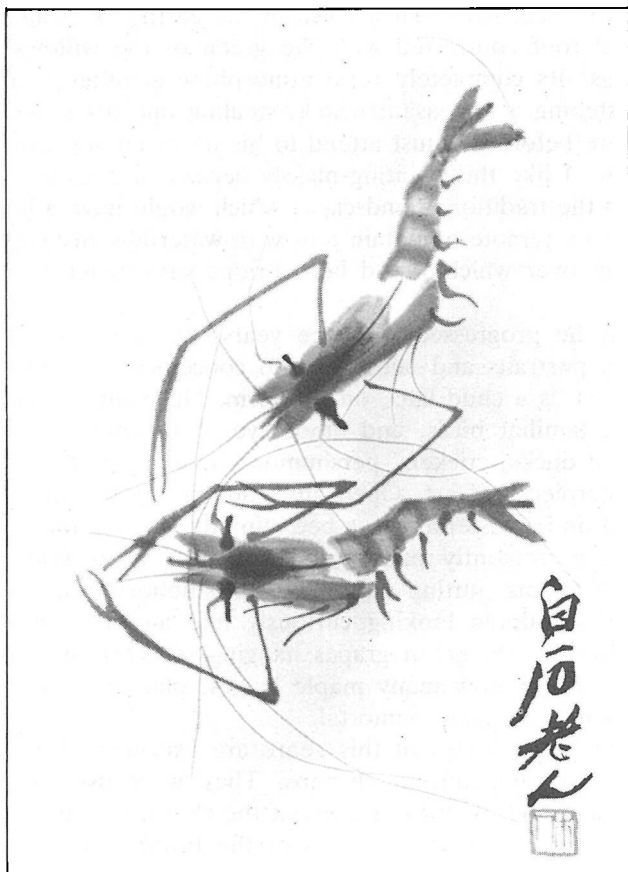
he was holding. To anyone who is familiar with the common Chinese saying “Don’t know what medicine is being sold in the gourd”, meaning “Who the hell knows what he is scheming”, the curiosity and suspicious fear on the man’s face are superbly mingled.

Qi Baishi also did his share of landscapes, such as mountain cliffs, lakes with sailing boats, and others. I, who have never been very keen on Chinese landscape paintings, am rather fond of his ‘Listening to Orioles Singing around an Old Hut’. One window of the simple hut is pushed open to show the vague figure of a man, presumably listening to the orioles singing in the willow trees around the house. The rest of the painting is farmland, with thousands of rice seedlings

planted in neat rows. The brown of the earth, rocks and the thatched roof contrasted with the green of the willows and seedlings. Its completely rural atmosphere signifies that the man listening is a peasant who is stealing one brief moment of leisure before he must attend to his never ending work on the farm. I like this painting mainly because it does not conform to the traditional landscapes which would have a hermit sitting on a remote mountain top, with waterfalls gushing into a stream over which would be a bridge surrounded by pine trees.

As he progressed with the years, Qi Baishi gradually gave up portraits and landscapes to concentrate on what he knew best as a child back on the farm. He painted common flowers, familiar birds, and other everyday subjects such as chickens, ducks, crickets, persimmons, loquats, making them all masterpieces of art. Open any book of his paintings and you will find a wisteria with a bee humming among the purple flowers, a dragonfly pausing on top of a lotus bud, two bamboo shoots jutting proudly and stubbornly from the ground, a tadpole looking curiously like an old man with mustaches, or six green grapes hanging serenely on a vine. No one knows how many maple leaves, plantains, cuckoos, balsams he had made immortal.

All his paintings of this genre are excellent. Take, for instance, his magnificent shrimps. They were usually done in monochrome, with the bodies of the shrimps in light grey. It would be just a few touches of the brush, and yet they looked almost transparent. Slightly darker grey lines were thrown over the bodies, almost carelessly, and somehow by doing so, the shrimps seemed to have soft sectional shells. Dabs of heavy black were placed where heads and eyes should be. The tails, claws and tentacles were added. And suddenly the shrimps came alive with their heads fat with roe, their eyes staring, their feet crawling, their tails twisting, and their tentacles extending over the paper to give a total effect of life and motion. He must have drawn thousands of shrimps in his life, but none of them ever lacked vitality.



Vitality and life in every shrimp ...

I could describe his other paintings, but paintings really should be seen and not talked about. When we look at his paintings we cannot help but ask: "How did Qi Baishi become what he was, a painter with the soul of a poet and the realism of a peasant?"

Qi Baishi:

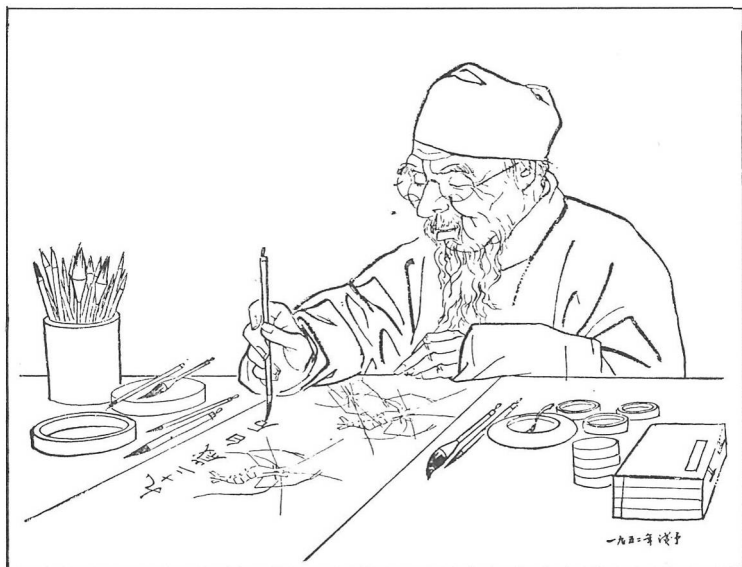
His Life

Perhaps the reason why Qi Baishi appraised his other achievements as superior to his painting on which his fame rested, was because the talent of drawing came to him naturally while his other accomplishments were all acquired after a great deal of hard work.

He was born in 1863 to a poor peasant family. A sickly baby, he was always carried by his mother on her back until he was four years old. In the winter, he was tucked snugly inside his grandfather's coat as they cuddled next to the kitchen fire. He recalled later how on the cinders, his grandfather scratched out words with a twig for him to learn. By the time he was eight, he had exhausted the limited vocabulary of his grandfather.

With the meagre savings his mother earned from gleaning the remaining rice grains from stalks that had already been thrashed, he was given a brand new brush and an unused pad of writing paper, which qualified him, tuition free, to attend the one-room elementary school where his maternal grandfather taught.

He quickly finished his first textbook, *The Thousand Poems* (千家诗), and just as quickly he used up his pad of writing paper with drawings of old fishermen, chickens, shrimps and whatever familiar scene he saw in his daily life. However, his school days lasted only eight months because food was so scarce that his family needed him to dig weeds and taros which they baked on the cow-dungs he gathered. He was then not more than nine years old.



Portrait of “Old Man Qi Baishi”

As he grew older, his responsibilities increased. His duty, among others, was chopping wood which he must take to the market to sell. By the time he was 15, his father gave up all hopes of making him into a proper farmer because of his frail health. Twice he was apprenticed to carpenters who built houses, but because he was too delicate to do heavy work, his family had to find him a third teacher, also a carpenter but a furniture maker. This time, Qi Baishi seemed to have found his vocation because he proved to be excellent in wood carving. After three years of apprenticeship, when he was nineteen, he became a full-fledged carpenter, capable of earning money as his wages.

But he never ceased to draw. In those days, a furniture maker had to live in the house of his client until all the commissioned work was completed. As it was his habit to draw for his own pleasure every evening, his drawings were much admired by the servants of the house. One day, after

he had been a furniture maker for eight years, the servants at the house where he worked told him that he was "as good as Mr Wu, the master's brother-in-law". They must have shown his drawings to Mr Wu because shortly afterwards, he was summoned to appear before the man who was to change his life.

Mr Wu was not only kind but urged him to study the art of painting as well as read the classics, such as poetry, philosophies, histories, etc. "You can study while you learn to paint," explained Mr Wu, "and you can sell what you paint to support your family and yourself." Qi was welcomed warmly into Mr Wu's circle of scholar friends, some of them volunteered to teach him to read while Mr Wu instructed him on the techniques of brush paintings. For the first time, he associated with people who shared his interest and showed him how to broaden his horizon. His career as painter, seal engraver, calligraphist and poet began.

He started mainly by painting portraits, but his need for money was so urgent that he would accept any commission that was demanded of him. For him, there was never the soul searching doubt whether art should or should not be for the sake of money. He thought of himself as a craftsman, so he sold his drawings in much the same way he sold his furniture, only he found painting "much easier, quicker, and less laboursome". He spoke like a true proletarian.

Although he was now communicating with intellectuals, his hands never stayed idle. He picked up the skill of mounting his own paintings on to silk scrolls because "it saved money". After a well-known artist rejected his request to carve a seal for him, he took the knife which he normally used to pare his toe nails to carve his first seal. Before long, seal engraving also became a source of income for him, and his skill in this art form reached a new zenith with his own improvization and ingenuity.

He worked and studied tirelessly. When he reached forty, he was advised to travel; it was believed this could improve his landscape painting. He left Hunan five times and

each time he returned, but when he was fifty-six, he was forced by the civil war of 1919 to escape from his village. He settled down in Beijing where he lived till his death. By then, his income came mostly from selling his pictures which he had a set price, so much for a peony, so much for a cluster of grapes, and so much for a frog, etc. I was told that a client once begged him to add one more bee to the finished picture, and Qi Baishi quietly replied: 'That will cost you another two dollars.' Like the true peasant he was, he never minced words when it came to honest money he felt he had justly earned.

Yet, for a man who set more store on money than on his art, he showed great strength of character during the nine years of Japanese Occupation when he refused to sell his paintings or seals to the enemy. In 1939, when his savings was exhausted and he had to sell some of his works in order to survive, he put signs of conditional refusal on his front door, one of which read: 'Old Man Qi Baishi will not receive any callers who need an interpreter.' It was said that he sold as few paintings as possible. He could not be held responsible if those paintings were later bought up by the Japanese who admired him more than any non-Chinese.

When the war ended, he was invited to Shanghai for an exhibition where he sold some two hundred paintings which made him bundles of money, but the inflation was then so rampant that by the time he returned to Beijing, he could not even afford to buy ten bags of flour with his earnings. One can imagine how he grieved over this experience.

One of his last works was the "Hundred Flowers and Hundred Doves of Peace" painted in 1975. It is a huge painting, but I personally do not feel it is up to his usual standard, possibly because it was a commission he could not refuse. I only hope that he was paid for each flower and for each dove! Knowing the way the Chinese government worked, it is more likely that he was showered with honour more than with money. Shortly after this painting was completed, he died on 16 September 1975, at the age of ninety-four.

He was a man who had lived under four different political systems, namely, Qin dynasty, Republic of China, Japanese Occupation and People's Republic of China. Through it all, he rose from a carpenter to become one of the most admired artists of our day. What did he think and feel about the world he lived in? We will have to turn to his writings for some of the answers.

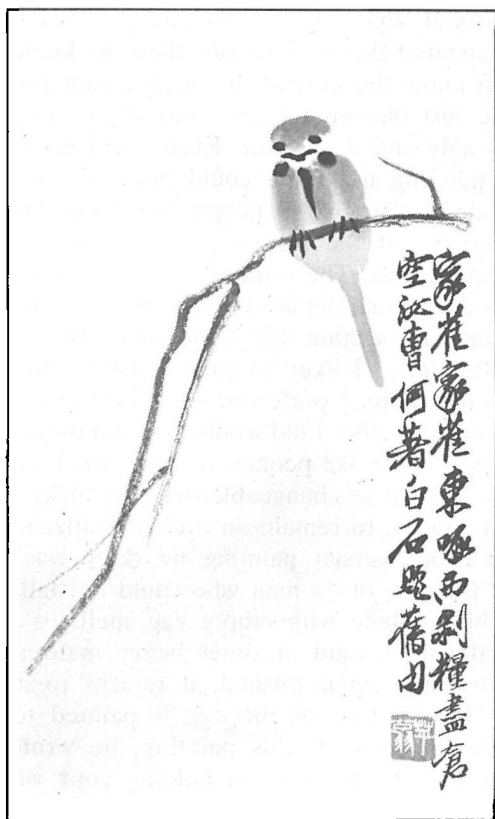
His Writings

Qi Baishi was rather proud of his writings, a pride, if not justified, is at least understandable considering how late in life did he acquire the use of written words.

Strictly speaking, his prose is only passably good, but his poems, especially the ones he wrote as comments on his paintings, are much more interesting because they usually underlined his thoughts and feelings. What I respect most is his indomitable spirit in speaking the truth. He never pretended to be what he was not. In spite of the pride he felt for his writings, he had never asked to be judged as a learned man, but as the peasant-carpenter-artist that he was.

He made this attitude very clear in his preface to his collection of poems, when he explained why his experience as a refugee from the civil war had goaded him into exploding with verse: "... stifling any sound while hiding in tall grass, sleeping on dew-covered ground, breakfasting under the shades of pine trees, I shared my food with green ants and black flies, and kept company with wild wolves and field rats. After one year of such existence, I was as skinny as a piece of wood, the only difference being that I had two eyes with which I could see clearly the disastrous world when I turned my face around.

"... (later) I made a meagre living (in Beijing) by selling paintings and engraving seals. Working with a brush or a knife kept me busy during the day, but rest would not come to me in the night when a hundred kinds of sad thoughts pressed down on my pillow. Who and what were responsible for



“Sparrows, sparrows ...”

making a man in his twilight years to leave behind his parents, wife, children, and causing him never to see his relatives and friends again? The frustrations and rage I suffered poured themselves out ... My poems were what I felt instinctively. Never had the leisure to write long essays, or time to ponder on the choice of words, or the mood to look up reference books (to find classical allusions) ... Like the insects who moaned the coming of winter, I merely sang out what sorrows I could not bear ...”

Who and what were responsible for his sufferings? This was his repeated theme. I do not think he knew or analyzed enough to know the answer. Ideology meant nothing to him. Mostly he just blamed whoever was in the government that he found ugly and distasteful. Even when he was discussing his own painting habit, he could not resist making cynical remarks about them. "All people like to change. Changing one's mind is not the prerogative of a government official in deciding policies. The same is true with my painting habit. I liked to draw portraits after I was twenty, beautiful women when I was approaching thirty, and landscapes after I turned thirty. After forty, I liked to paint flowers, birds, plants and insects. Some years I preferred plum blossoms, and one out of every four paintings I did would be plum blossoms. Another year I happened to like peonies ... This year I am in favour of tuberose ... I am so changeable that it is lucky for the world that I am content to remain an ordinary citizen."

One controversial painting he drew was a "Bu Dao Weng" (不倒翁), or "a man who could not fall", a common toy in China. Made with empty egg shell, its lower half is weighed down by mud or other heavy material so that no matter how the egg is pushed, it returns to its upstanding position. The outside of the egg is painted to resemble a person. At the side of this painting, he wrote this poem: "Wearing your black hat and holding your white fan, you look exactly like an officer of the law. If I should suddenly break you into pieces, I am sure I cannot find a heart anywhere inside you."

He had reason to be bitter with authorities. His life mirrored probably the most turbulent hundred years of modern Chinese history. Born just a few decades before the end of the Qing dynasty when corruption was beyond reform, he helped to smuggle information for the revolutionists to overthrow the feudal system only to suffer the numerous civil wars in China. With the Japanese Occupation in 1939, he had to undergo the additional indignation of a conquered people, but by the time war was finally over, his integrity

which he maintained by not selling to the enemy was rewarded by inflation which wiped out his hard savings. He was eighty-five years old when the communists took over China. What did he think of the new regime? Probably no one will ever know.

That he was respected and repeatedly awarded with medals by the new government is certain, but why, as some people outside China ask, did he paint again, in 1956, the same "Bu Dao Weng" which had been painted once before in 1923? At the same time, people inside China insist that his sarcasm was directed solely towards the former government under which he first painted it. I think he would have hated



Bu Dao Weng

to be tossed between political opponents like a ping pong ball, so I shall honour him by thinking that, in both cases, they were whimsical portraits of men he disliked, with no ideology attached.

Like the poem on his “Bu Dao Weng”, his attacks were usually veiled and indirect. Take his painting of a yellow-headed sparrow which sat smugly on the end of a small branch. The reason the sparrow looks smug is because the frontal view of its face is shown with its beak drawn by two almost horizontal lines which meet at the middle but tilt slightly upward on both ends. It looks wonderfully like the smile of a man who had just licked his last mouthful of shark’s fin. The comment Qi Baishi wrote on this picture is: “Sparrow, sparrow, you peck east and you peck west. When all the grains are gone and the barns are empty, what are you and the likes of you going to do?” Whom did he have in mind? Since this painting was done after the Communist regime took over China it is again debatable. What is not debatable is that this painting applies to all those “sparrows” who toil not but feed on the harvest of other people, regardless of their ideology.

Another example of his simple but direct political thinking is his drawing of a *zai-xiang* (宰相, the highest official in the imperial government) who is napping contentedly with an empty wine dipper thrown nonchalantly on the floor. The poem on this painting says: “This *zai-xiang* retired with no money in his pocket because he would rather be a bandit than to be corrupt.” The implication is that armed robbery harms only a few victims but corruption on a high level can injure all the populace. This painting was said to have been painted in 1948 or 1949. Perhaps his comment can be taken as a criticism as well as a declaration of hope.

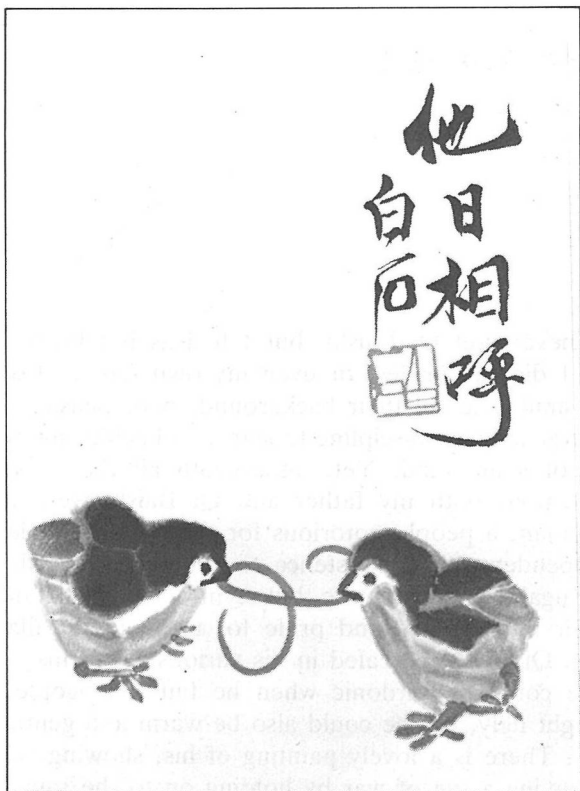
Qi Baishi seemed to be a bitter man in the writings we have quoted, but he was too gentle, too realistic, and had too much sense of humour to hate people all the time. We shall know more about the tolerant, tender and warm side of his personality by probing deeper into his other works.

Qi Baishi:

His Personality

I have never met Qi Baishi, but I feel as if I knew him as well as I did my uncles, or even my own father. There are certain similarities in their background: poor peasant family, strong urge and self-discipline to learn, and achieving eventual success of some kind. Yet, underneath all their veneer of sophistication, both my father and Qi Baishi were farmers from Hunan, a people notorious for their stubborn desire to be independent, their resistance to conform, their down-to-earth frugality, their gentle but cynical sense of humour, and their intense love and pride for their home village, all of which Qi Baishi revealed in his various art forms.

He could be sardonic when he taunted people whom he thought ugly, but he could also be warm and gentle in his humour. There is a lovely painting of his, showing two little chicks having a tug of war by holding on to the same earthworm. Both of them stand firmly, with their bodies lowered to the ground while their feet seem to push forward so as to pull back with their utmost strength. The brown earthworm is held tautly between them while its two ends wriggle in the air. On this painting, he wrote four simple words: “他日相呼” or “Say hello on other days”, meaning he expected these two little chicks to be friends once their fight was over. It is tenderly amusing, reminding one of a loving grandfather reprimanding his bickering grandchildren. To interpret it as the artist’s hope that all fighting factions in China should make up is also reasonable, but I feel the acerbity of his other political attacks is not displayed in this painting or poem.



“Say hello on other days”

He mocked others, but he also mocked himself. On the self-portrait of a young woman painter who was not satisfied with her own likeness, he wrote: “Twenty years ago, I was as young as you are now. Twenty years later, you will be as old as I am today. So why bother about mere looks? The years to come will never be as good as the year we now live in.”

But when it was a matter of work, he was serious and earnest. It was he who wrote: “Those who learn from me will live, but those who imitate me will die,” by which he encouraged other young artists to learn his techniques but

warned them against following him blindly without exploring their own abilities to create their own styles.

Like the true peasant he was, his nostalgia for his village never ceased even after he moved to live in Beijing. On one painting, he wrote: 'This kind of wisteria is brilliant in colour and sweet in fragrance, worthy of admiration when planted in quiet courtyards and famous gardens. Back in my home village, we call it Bad-Odour-Yellow-Vines and dig up its roots to be smoked into tea leaves. What a pity when a plant is grown in the wrong place!' Do we detect a faint moroseness in these words? Like the wisteria, people of equal qualities but born to families of different social and financial backgrounds would be met by entirely different fates. His was not a complain but the sad and realistic observation of an old man who had seen but had not accepted the world's inequality.

He experienced the bitterness of this inequality early in his life. When he named his house "The Pot", he gave this explanation: "When I was young and loved to write, my grandmother would sigh and say, 'For someone so fond of learning as you are, it's a pity you've been born to the wrong home. The proverb says: Wind blows every three days, rain falls every four days, but when does anyone ever see writings being cooked in a pot? We've no rice for tomorrow, what are we going to do, my child?' Fifteen years later, when I came home with my first wages from portrait paintings and bought her wood and rice, she said, 'Who has ever dreamt that it is indeed my grandchild's painting that's being cooked in the pot?' Now I am sixty-one years old, and I am still selling paintings for a living. So I am naming my house 'The Pot' because the paintings hanging on my walls are the rice being cooked to support my remaining years, only my heart pains to remember I no longer can have my grandmother to share my meals with."

With another childhood memory, he asserted the pride of the peasant in being self-reliant. He drew a picture of a "one-legged stool" which possibly can be found only in Hunan. Being one legged, it is cheaper to make and easier

to be carried than the three-legged variety. On this painting, he wrote a poem: “This stool has only one leg. When one lets it go, it falls down. Who will help it to stand? It stands upright only when a person is sitting squarely on top of it. In a world like ours, the only people who have the fortune to use it are the boys who tend swines and the girls who collect tea leaves.” It is obvious that he meant the stool to be symbolic. By saying it could stand firm only by sitting squarely on top of it he implied that only the peasants who toiled in the fields were capable of doing so.

His seal engravings are even more illustrative of his personality than his poems and paintings. It was the custom in old China for a scholar to own more than one seal which bore his various names so that he could stamp them on his papers, depending on their different purposes. Qi Baishi engraved many seals of this kind, but he also carved many others to express his thoughts and feelings. Since the surface of a seal is limited, the designs for the calligraphy must be compact, and thus the choice of words must be concise. Besides carving out his names such as ‘Rich Man of 300 Seals’, he also engraved phrases that revealed the essence of his personality.

One of his many seals bore only eight words: “Poetry is riding on a donkey in the snow”, which seemed to me to have grasped the sudden burst of inspiration. Like a flash one sees in a dark night, this phrase illuminates a fleeting moment but its brilliance lingers on. Perhaps this is why he prided himself more on being a poet and seal engraver than being a painter.

On another seal is carved ‘House of Borrowed Mountain’, a term he well liked and used often. But why “borrowed”? Because he lived next to a mountain which he could look at and appreciate its beauty, but the mountain did not belong to him. So he simply “borrowed” it. It was typical of his personality that he was realistic, honest, unpretentious, and had a self-mocking sense of humour.

My favourite is the seal with only three words: “穷不死”

for which I have no adequate translation because the phrase is such a common one that it means different things when it is applied on different occasions. Literally, the words are “poor (but will) not die”. It has the defiance of a poor man who will not succumb to adversity. It also describes the courage and pride of a poor man who is confident of his willingness to do any hard labour.

I have written only briefly on his paintings, his life, his writings and his personality. It is as if we have been allowed only a glimpse of this giant. There is so much more about him that we do not know and probably will never know.

Perhaps he is like his paintings. They look so simple and yet we feel they are beautiful. At the same time, we do not know exactly why they are beautiful. Qi Baishi seemed like a simple man, and yet we know he was profound. At the same time, we do not know exactly why he was profound.

Li Qingzhao:

Her Life

The Li “family” has the honour of producing three of the greatest poets in Chinese classical literature. The first was Li Bai (李白 AD 701–762), the second was Li Yu (李煜 937–978), and then came the magnificent Li Qingzhao (李清照 AD 1084–1155?) of Song dynasty. They are often referred to as “The Three Li’s” although they were not even remotely related.

The first difference between Li Qingzhao from the other two Li’s is that she was a woman. The second difference is that while the other Li’s might have shaped their fates had they really tried, Li Qingzhao was completely at the mercy of events beyond her control. Born in 1084, she was forty-two years old when the Jin people (金人) invaded and ransacked the capital of North Song around 1126. It is believed that she lived there until sometime around 1155; so we can say that she was one of the millions who were directly and ruthlessly affected by the barbaric invasion.

Of her contemporary poets, there were Su Dong Po (苏东坡 1036–1101) who died before the downfall of the North Song dynasty, and Lu You (陆游 1125–1210) who was only an infant at the time of the invasion and too much a southerner to have suffered the ravages of the war. As for Xin Qiji (辛弃疾 1140–1207), the well known patriot, he was brought up in the same northern city where Li Qingzhao called her birthplace but later crossed the Yellow River to join the fighting forces of the South Song. Although he was plagued by the cruel suppressions to take up arms, he had not suffered

the pathetic flights of the refugees between the years of 1126 and 1130 since he was born many years too late to have seen them. In this respect, Li Qingzhao was the only great poet who actually lived through that period of turmoil.

And yet, Li Qingzhao was not and could not be considered as a patriotic or political poet. She occasionally wished in her poems to re-occupy the lost territories and she also attacked the Song government for its inefficiencies and appeasements, but on the whole, her poems were expressions of her own moods. It is ironical that of all the poets who could have recorded the social conditions of the times which history considered crucial, Li Qingzhao was aware only of her own fate. It is possible that she was so stunned by the shock of seeing her country in ruins and her people in rampant sufferings that she could not fully grasp what was happening around her or the pains of those whom she had come into contact, a phenomenon quite common with survivors of great catastrophes.

She was completely uprooted by the invasion and the wars that followed. Her home life had been happy and tranquil until circumstances drastically changed her fortune. With both of her parents coming from aristocratic and scholarly families, Qingzhao was brought up in an atmosphere of culture and letters. In 1101, she married a man whose father was high enough in the government to occupy the rank equal to that of prime minister today. The marriage was an indisputable success. They lived blissfully, reading and collecting rare books and manuscripts, helping and understanding each other in their intellectual pursuits as well as in their marital relationship, in spite of their occasional separations caused by his duties as a minor civil servant.

In her epilogue to her husband's book, written after his death, she tells of an endearing story of their married life.

“Often, after dinner, we would retire to our study named ‘Home-coming’ to brew tea. We would point to the stacks of books on the shelves and

compete to see who could name the source of a certain quotation as exact as to what line of what page in what volume of what book. The prize of the contest was the privilege to be the first one to sip the tea. Sometimes, the winner would laugh so uproariously that the cup would tip over and the tea would be spilled, resulting in having nothing at all to drink.”

It was indicative of her lifestyle that the name she chose for herself was Yi An (易安), meaning “easy to be pleased”.

However, the world around her was rapidly disintegrating. The Jin people captured the two Emperors of North Song in 1126. In the following year, when the new Emperor of South Song ascended to the throne, she crossed the Yellow River to join her husband, who had joined the new government, leaving their precious collections of books behind, which were eventually burned by looters. In 1129, when she was forty-five years old, her husband died of illness. By then, the Jin invasion had spearheaded even to the south banks of the Yellow River, and Qingzhao became once more a refugee, following hard upon the heels of the new Emperor who fled further south. Whatever remained of their books was irretrievably lost.

She was continuously on the run, retreating from one city to another until 1141 when finally a disgraceful peace treaty was signed with the invaders. But by that time, Qingzhao had no place which she could call home. She shuttled between friends and relatives until, unknown and uncared for, she died, probably at the age of seventy-one. The oblivion she had sunk into was so deep that no trace of the time and cause of her death could be found.

There was a period of a few months in 1132, when she was forty-eight, that she might have remarried and divorced shortly afterwards. Many scholars, especially those of Qing and Ming Dynasties, who demanded fidelity and chastity in

women even after the death of their husbands, defended her honour by insisting that the second marriage never took place and that it was all a part of the smear campaign against her. Modern scholars, especially the editors of *The Collection of Poems by Li Qingzhao and Notes on Their Revision* (李清照集校注), published by the People's Literary Press (人民文学出版社) in Beijing around 1979, argued that her second marriage was not only possible but probable, basing their arguments on documental evidences.

The debate on her remarriage seems to me rather trivial. The only relevance of her remarriage, if it really took place, is that she must have been very lonely to have taken a second husband, and that she was even lonelier and more isolated after her divorce. Loneliness is perhaps the key word to the understanding of her poetry.

Many collections of her poems, some as long as twelve volumes, had been published in her lifetime. The book known as *Sprinkling Jade* (漱玉集) was among the more famous. She wrote both types of poetry, the *shi* (诗) and the *ci* (词), as well as prose, and was highly regarded for her calligraphy and even paintings. But none of these was preserved except a few poems, some compositions in prose and fragments. As far as *ci* is concerned, *The Collections of Poems by Li Qingzhao and Notes on Their Revision* listed only 43 *ci* as authentically her own works, (excluding two fragments), 14 that might have been written by her, and 29 as mistakenly attributed to her.

We shall take only two of her poems and study them.

Li Qingzhao:

Twin River Grasshopper Boat

The poems of Li Qingzhao can be appreciated only on a strictly personal level. There is nothing in her writing that reflects the sufferings of the masses, partly because, being a woman, she did not have as many opportunities as a man might have in observing and studying the people around her, and partly because her sensibilities were so engrossed with her own grief that she had little left to spare for others.

Her lack of social consciousness, however, freed her from all conventional pretensions to concentrate on her personal sorrow. We can find fault by saying she could only write about women in sorrow and no more. At the same time, we can also praise her by saying that no other poet before her had ever portrayed women's sorrow as vividly as she had done.

Men have been composing poetry about women ever since words have been invented. Sometimes they even wrote the lines as if they were spoken by women, but even with understanding and sympathy, they could not rise above their masculine outlook: after all, they were men masquerading as women and could not have known how it was to be a woman.

But Li Qingzhao was a woman. She knew how it was to have lost her husband, her fortune, her home and her youth. With no family to call her own, she was lonely and must have been very insecure in a man's world. It was in such moods that she felt compelled to write her poems. There is a resignation to her sorrow, a sense of rejection at being abandoned and discarded by life that only an aging woman can feel so intensely. However, for almost a thousand years, readers of both sexes

have responded to her poetry with loving tenderness because the intensity of her pathos has made her poems no longer the voice of one lonely woman but that of all lonely people. In being true to herself, she has succeeded in being true to life.

The two poems I have chosen were both written in the later years of Li Qingzhao's life when her art had reached its zenith, or what the Chinese will describe as “炉火纯青” meaning “the fire in the furnace has turned pure blue”. The first is a *ci* (词) written to the *diao* (调) of Wu Ling Chun (武陵春). It was written in 1135 when Qingzhao was fifty-one years old. The Twin River mentioned in her poem was then a scenic spot, so named because one river came from the east to meet another coming from the south. Presumably she was living somewhere in the southern province of Zhejiang (浙江), near the town of Jinhua (金华), north of the Twin River.

The original poem consists of forty-six words divided neatly into two stanzas of almost equal lengths, rhyming at the end of every line except that of the first line in each stanza. The last six words are sometimes read in two lines of three words each.

The wind (风) has stopped (住) blowing.
The earth (尘) is made fragrant (香) by the
 flowers (花)
Which have already (已) ended (尽) their lives.
The day (日) is late (晚) and I am too weary (倦)
To comb (梳) the hair on my head (头).
Things (物) are (是) still the same,
But people (人) are not (非),
Making all sensations (事事) ceased (休) to exist
 for me.
I want (欲) to speak (语), but my tears (泪),
Before (先) I open my mouth, already begin to
 flow (流).

I have heard (闻) it said (说) that, at the Twin
 (双) River (溪),

Spring (春) is still (尚) beautiful (好),
 How I also (也) yearn (拟) to paddle (泛) a light
 (轻) canoe (舟),
 Only (只) I fear (恐) that the Twin (双) River
 (溪) grasshopper boat (蚱蜢舟)
 Carries (载) not (不) and moves (动) not,
 If it is loaded with so much (许多) of my sorrow
 (愁).

The very first line describes a precise moment in time. The poet catches that moment by employing magically the word “fragrant” (香). It is not uncommon to see wind blowing the petals off flowers or petals strewn over the earth. But by saying the earth is made fragrant by the scent of the petals, the poet is emphasizing the freshness and softness of the petals and suggesting how recently they have been blown off the flowers. There can be no doubt that she is also talking about herself, a flower that has been robbed of its petals when they are still tender, fresh, young and fragrant.

Since the wind has blown off the petals, the flowers can have no other alternative but face their death. So the poet adds the three little melancholy words “flowers already ended” (花已尽), which mark the first note of resignation. The flowers are not yet dead, but to the poet, they have no more future. She is thinking of herself who, like the flowers, is not yet dead but neither does she have any future.

In the second line she brings herself directly into the picture. Combing one’s hair (梳头) has always been associated in Chinese poetry with applying cosmetics to make a woman pretty, but the poet says the day is late so she is too weary to be bothered. The lateness of the day (日晚) is obviously symbolic of the lateness in her life. At her age, she may still have some incentive to preen herself if she has someone, not necessarily an admirer but just people she knows, to look at her, but she laments in her celebrated third line that all the inanimate objects have remained more or less the same but

the people she loves are no longer with her (物是人非). To her, sensations of all kinds have ceased to matter (事事休).

The resignation is sadly and frankly confessed. She has no more life force left, no more urge to live, not even the wish to die. How often have we also felt like that? Under such circumstances, even if she had anyone to talk to, her tears would flow before she could speak. A poet who writes like this has burrowed herself deep in her lonely solitude.

Yet, the second stanza abruptly changes with the faint hope brought on by having heard that spring is still lingering on at Twin River. Suddenly, the poet becomes her former self and yearns for a light canoe on which to paddle down the river. For a brief moment, she seems to be imbued with life, reminding us of those petals still fragrant with youth. But just as swiftly, she realizes that no matter how fresh and soft the petals may be, they are lost forever to the flower, as the joys of life are to her. She graphically tells us this realization by fearing that the light canoe, named grasshopper boat on the Twin River, will be unable to move under the heavy load of her sorrow. In fact, the boat may even sink. Through this metaphor, she implies that her sorrow is so heavy that it is beyond the endurance of the boat or the woman.

This sudden yearning to be in a canoe and the equally sudden resignation to her sorrow makes her loneliness even sharper than the beginning of her poem because the readers detect the spark of life still left in the old body, much like the petals which can still make the earth fragrant. If she is really and totally dead as she says she is, she would not have felt so deeply. It is when she can still yearn for life, only to be defeated by her weight of sorrow, that her loneliness sinks to an unbearable depth.

The second poem I have chosen portrays even more directly the fears and loneliness of the aged.

Li Qingzhao:

To Seek, To Seek

The second poem of Li Qingzhao that I have chosen is considered great both for its emotional depth as well as for its technical excellence.

Li Qingzhao was one of the greatest craftsmen of word tones. This *ci* (词), written to the *diao* (调) of *sheng sheng man* (声声慢), exhibits her skill in using repetitive words, an innovative and difficult feat to accomplish in a *ci* where every word calls for its own tone.

The sound of the first seven sets of repetitive words are: *xin xin* (寻寻), *mi mi* (觅觅), *leng leng* (冷冷), *qing qing* (清清), *qi qi* (凄凄), *can can* (惨惨), *qie qie* (戚戚). Musically, they have been compared to the sound of pearls of various sizes being dropped into a jade bowl. If they are translated word for word, they will read: "Seek seek, search search, cold cold, bleak bleak, dreary dreary, cruel cruel, misery misery." Gertrude Stein could not have done better in baffling readers and still achieve a more poetic mood. Difficult though it is to make sense out of these words, they cry out the helplessness and emptiness of her solitude, as if she has been sobbing and her voice is faltering.

These repeated words are like the shattered fragments of a broken mirror, with each piece reflecting a different angle of the same image. Taken together, they form a kaleidoscopic pattern suggestive of a whole design. I may as well admit that they make any literal translation almost impossible, thus I have added a great many words in between her repetitions to render the sentences coherent even though they

cannot faithfully convey the melancholy aroused by the unconnected words in Chinese:

To seek (寻) and seek (寻)
To search (觅) and search (觅) for what I know
not I have lost.

It is cold (冷), very cold (冷) ...

It is bleak (清), very bleak (清) ...

How dreary (凄), how very dreary (凄),

When it is cruel (惨), so very cruel (惨) to suffer
Such misery (戚), such lonely misery (戚)!

When the weather has turned just (乍) warm (暖)
but is still (还) chilly (寒) at times (时候),

It is most (最) difficult (难) to take (将) care
(息),

Even if I should drink three (三) glasses (杯) or
two (两) cups (盏) of weak (淡) wine (酒),

How (怎) can they be expected to rival (敌) the
chills when it (它) is late (晚),

And the evening comes (来) with its wind (风)
blowing so hard (急)?

The wild geese (雁) fly over (过也) my head,
Making me realize how sharply (正) they can
sadden (伤) my heart (心) by only (却) being
(是)

My old (旧) time (时) acquaintances (相识).

All over (满) the ground (地), the petals of yellow
(黄) flowers (花) are piled (堆) and stacked
(积).

As they are withered (憔悴) and torn (损)

Now (如今) they will have (有) whom (谁) to
think they are worthy (堪) of plucking (摘)?

Watching (守着) by the window (窗儿) all alone
(独自),

How (怎生) can I bear (得) to see the night
turning black (黑)?

The leaves of Wutong (梧桐), as if to add (更) to
my sadness,
Are accompanying (兼) my tears by dripping small
(细) drops of rain (雨), which,
Till (到) yellow (黄) twilight (昏) comes,
Will drip (点) and drip (点), splatter (滴) and
splatter (滴).
At this (这) moment (次第),
How (怎) can a little (一个) word like "sorrow"
(愁字) be borne (了得)?

The first seven pairs of words, in the original version, like the melancholy plucking of lute strings, do not really say anything sensible except to create a dramatic and musical effect.

Having displayed such mastery of word-sounds, the poet goes on to describe the time of the year as having suddenly turned warm but still with a touch of chill. This, she says, is the time when it is most difficult to take care. Does she mean it is difficult to take care in the physical sense, that one can perspire and can still catch a cold? Or, does she refer to the autumn weather when she feels doubly sad to see flowers fade, the way a woman ages? It is undeniably more lonely for an old woman to watch fading flowers and think of the fruits they might bear, which she herself no longer could. Thus, it is a most disturbing time to achieve tranquillity.

She drinks a few cups of weak wine out of boredom, but she asks herself mockingly how the warmth brought on by the wine can rival the bleakness of the late evening wind? This sentence has often been quoted because of its lilting cadence, its poetic imagery, as well as its poignant and multiple meanings. On its face value, she is talking about the wine which cannot ward off the chills. But when one reflects upon this line, one sees what she really means: "How can any occasional warmth derived from friends and relatives keep away the loneliness one must face in the late years of one's life?"

As she sits sipping her wine, she looks up, sees the wild geese flying over her head and feels suddenly a sharp pain because she says the birds are her old acquaintances. This line may seem puzzling at first, but when one realizes the migration of the geese is from north to south in autumn, one understands that these birds are flying from her hometown to where she is. Thus they are her old acquaintances; and they make her homesick just by looking at them.

Further more, the wild geese migrate from north to south only once a year, so the sight of the birds reminds her that she has aged by another year. Also, since they have been her old acquaintances year after year, to her they are as close as those people who have shared her youth with her, thus their departure hints at a deeper loneliness within her, that of a woman who is left behind after all her loved ones have gone.

Another hidden meaning is in the flying formation of the wild geese which has always been thought to resemble the Chinese character “人” (person) and thus have always been identified in poetic minds with travellers or letters from home. How can she not feel a stab of pain to see the flying formation which, like old acquaintances, used to awaken in her the yearning to be with her husband during their short separations when he was alive?

Sadly she lowers her head, and what does she see but the piles of torn and withered flowers on the ground? She idly wonders who will think them pretty enough to be plucked. She is, of course, referring to her own unworthiness as an old woman. The piles of flowers are seen from her window, by which she sits numbly for a long time, all by herself until she begins to ask how she can bear to wait for the evening to turn dark? In other words, how can she endure the loneliness until death engulfs her?

Deepening her mood of desolation is the sound of drizzling rain falling on the broad leaves of a Wutong tree which stands outside her window. It is as if her tears have been falling, like the rain from noon to “yellow twilight”, and still will not stop. Here Li Qingzhao skillfully describes

the continuous sound with another set of her repetitive words. Not only *dian dian* (点点) means “dot by dot” and *di di* (滴滴) means “drop by drop”, but they also sound like the dripping of the falling rain which of course strongly suggests her falling tears.

Thus she sits quietly and listens to the rain. How much longer is she going to sit and listen, to wait and to shed the tears of an aging and lonely woman? It occurred to her that she might write a poem to tell about her sorrow. But she had been so steeped in sorrow and trying so hard to avoid facing it that she could not bear even thinking of the word.

In moments like this, how indeed can a little word like “sorrow” be written, voiced, whispered and be borne?

Was Wu Song a Hero?

The Tiger Killer

Do our values change with time? In the old days before I was born, the phrase *hao han* (好汉) had the connotation of a hero. But nowadays, right and wrong have so many shades that it is difficult for anyone to be sure what is heroic and what is not.

There is a novel that specialises in *hao han*. This book, *Shui Hu* (水浒), for reasons best known to the translators, was translated into English once under the title of “All Men Are Brothers” and another time “Water Margin”. Since I am strictly monolingual when it comes to reading Chinese novels, I shall continue to call it *Shui Hu*. In this book, one hundred and eight *hao han* were grouped together for purposes that can be much debated on.

Let me first analyse the *hao han*. “*Hao*” (好) generally means good and “*han*” (汉) means a man, but these two words put together do not mean “a jolly good fellow”. The term has different shades of meaning to different people at different times. To some, a *hao han* is genuinely a hero. To other, a *hao han* is a man who performs heroic deeds but does not necessarily perform the deeds for heroic reasons. And yet to others, a *hao han* is simply a term bandied around to mean “a man who is strong and virile”. Mao Zedong once remarked that “unless one has climbed to the top of the Great Wall, one cannot be called a *hao han*.” He evidently did not use the term to mean a hero, but with his usual poetic bravado, he used it to mean a man who had the strength, the endurance and the luck to have ascended the wall. In the mountain

resort where I was taken to as a child, there was a very long flight of steep stone steps, with no break in between for anyone to rest, and that flight of steps was named Hao Han Hill, implying if one could mount them, one was a *hao han*.

Thus, the term *hao han* does have very many meanings. But in *Shui Hu*, there is a strong tendency to equate *hao han* with “hero”, and many young readers are led to believe this interpretation the way I was once led to think. The author did not delve into the lives of every one of the one hundred and eight *hao han*, but concentrated on a few whom he had made so vivid that they became household names in China. The tiger-killing Wu Song (武松) was one of them. But was he really a hero?

Wu Song, a young man in his early twenties, was involved in a street brawl during which he mistook the man he injured as dead. So he ran away from his hometown for about a year, until he learned that his victim did not die. No longer afraid of prosecution, he decided to return.

Approaching his hometown, which was at the other side of the mountain, he entered a wine shop for food and rest. The proprietor of the shop stopped serving him wine after three cups, explaining that his wine was very potent, but Wu Song banged the table and made such a nuisance of himself that the proprietor eventually allowed him sixteen more cups. Satisfied, Wu Song left the wine shop to climb the mountain, but the proprietor rushed out to warn him not to do so alone at night, since a man-eating tiger had been sighted in that area and nearly thirty men had already been swallowed up. Wu Song, being a *hao han*, merely laughed and dismissed the warning, suspecting that the proprietor had warned him only to keep him as a lodger for extra money.

When he came to the foot of the mountain, he found that there was indeed an official notice posted on a tree, prohibiting travellers and tradesmen from crossing the mountain unless they were in a large group and made the trip in broad daylight, but he was more afraid of returning and being laughed at as a coward than of facing the tiger itself.

Wine, weak or strong, when drunk in sufficient quantity could furnish anyone with false courage. It is difficult for us to say whether Wu Song's courage was real or false, but I am quite certain that had he been sober, he would have had more sense than to risk his life in such a bizzare manner.

As luck would have it, the man-eating tiger was hungry that night. The poor beast jumped out from behind the bushes and pounced on Wu Song, never dreaming that a mere man could, by sheer strength and expert martial art, ride on its back and drum its head with his fists until it died. Even though we are told by modern wild-life experts that a man-eating tiger is usually maimed or sick and thus it is forced to abandon its usual pattern of prey and turns to attack human beings who are relatively helpless, still we must admire a man who could kill a tiger with his bare hands regardless of how weak the the tiger was.

Once the tiger was found dead by the other hunters, Wu Song was hailed as a hero. In this case, calling Wu Song a *hao han* is definitely heroic in my understanding of the term. The magistrate not only awarded him the promised reward but also engaged him as some sort of city policeman. Wu Song shared the reward money with other hunters who paraded him on the street, draping red silk over his shoulder, the usual accolade for a hero.

But guess who should be living in this town but the hero's own brother? I really do not understand how genetics work in Chinese novels because Wu Song and his elder brother, called Wu Da (武大) meaning Wu the Elder, were born of the same parents, and yet, while Wu Song looked every inch a tiger killer, Wu Da was as short as a dwarf, timid, weak and ugly. The only explanation I can think of is that Wu Da must have been born with oxygen deficiency which stunted his growth and retarded his mental development. He made his living from peddling a kind of thinly sliced unleaven bread which he baked himself. The people around town nicknamed him "The Three-Inch Nail" which was obviously derogatory, but just how derogatory is a matter of speculation.

About a week after Wu Song was acclaimed and had settled in the police barracks, he heard someone calling him from behind. Turning around, he was pleasantly surprised to find his own brother.

"What are you doing here?" he cried. "I was just about to go home to find you!"

"Ah" sighed Wu Da, "you don't know what it was like for me to hate you and to yearn for you at the same time. When you were living with me, I was always getting into trouble because of your drinking and your street fights, and I hated you. But as long as you were there to protect me, no one dared to bully me. After you were gone, especially after I was married, people bullied me so much that I had to move to this city to live. It was then that I yearned for your presence."

"So you're married!" laughed Wu Song. "Take me to your home so that I can pay my respects to my new sister-in-law. I'm very pleased that you now have a wife to take care of you and look after you."

Wu Song picked up the bamboo pole that was used for carrying his brother's bread, and went cheerfully to meet his sister-in-law; little did he know that his brother's wife was to bring them death and disaster. Everything seemed normal when he was taken to the house where a beautiful young woman opened the door to greet him.

Why should a beautiful young woman marry a dwarf like Wu Da? Did Wu Song behave like a hero to his sister-in-law?

Refusing a Woman

Why did Pan Jinlian (潘金蓮), the beautiful young woman who opened the door to admit Wu Song, marry a dwarf like Wu Da?

According to *Shui Hu*, and not *Jin Pin Mei* (金瓶梅) which is usually banned as pornography although its expurgated version in Chinese and its unexpurgated version in English translation are both readily available in the market, Pan Jinlian was sold to a local rich family as a serving maid. When she grew into a beautiful young maiden, the master wanted to seduce her, but she always saved herself by seeking the protection of her mistress. It took real courage, I think, for her to refuse because in those feudal days, if she had consented, she could have been made into a favourite concubine and be given silk, jewels, any kind of material security for the rest of her life, and her children could be rich and prosperous. She might even be given the power to rule over a vast household. But Pan Jinlian was too romantic a dreamer to think she could not find love.

The rich man was so frustrated and angered that he took his revenge by marrying her off to the ugliest and the weakest man he could find. He had the legal right to do so since she was only his property to be disposed of. The man he picked was Wu Da.

Did Pan Jinlian know what kind of man she was to marry? Even if she did, no one could have helped her to avoid the marriage since her only protector, her mistress to whom she was probably a constant threat, would also be anxious to get rid of her. Her mistress would have no reason to feel

guilty since Pan Jinlian was given quite a good dowry and was legally married as a wife, not as a concubine, to an honest man. What more could a servant girl want? But for all we know, since the author did not choose to elaborate on this point, Jinlian might not even know whom she was to marry until the marriage had taken place.

The marriage dashed all the romantic dreams of Pan Jinlian. Being young and beautiful, and no longer hidden in the rich man's house, she was pursued by the idle men about town. They gathered around her house and chanted: "What a marvellous piece of mutton to have dropped into the mouth of a dog!" It was because of this kind of harassment that Wu Da had to move away from his hometown to live in the city on the other side of the mountain.

When Wu Song was taken to meet his sister-in-law, he saw only a woman whom he must respect as if she was his own elder sister. But Jinlian fell in love with him immediately. Or, was it only lust? Who could tell how she really felt? We only have the author's words for her state of mind. "If I had married a man like him," thought Pan Jinlian, "my life would not have been lived in vain." She invited Wu Song to live with her and her husband, persuading him that a woman's care was far superior than the service he could get at the police barracks. When Wu Song moved in, she was, in the author's words, "as happy as having found gold ingots in the middle of the night."

From then on, she took good care of Wu Song. She cooked and sewed and always greeted him with warm smiles and loving concern. She also flirted with him but Wu Song, brought up in a society in which a man could visit a brothel every night but must not look twice at a sister-in-law, did not even suspect that Pan Jinlian had anything else in mind but sisterly affection.

A month or so passed. Nothing happened. One day, it was snowing outdoors and Wu Da had not yet returned Jinlian decided this was the day that she would seduce Wu Song. She lit a charcoal brazier to warm Wu Song's bedroom

and prepared food and drinks. When Wu Song returned, she offered to take off his wet hat for him, but he politely declined. Then she told him to make himself comfortable while she went downstairs to lock the doors and to bring up the food and drinks.

“Shouldn’t we wait until my brother has returned?” asked Wu Song.

“Who wants to wait for that man!” she pouted. Then she poured out a cup of hot wine and gave it to Wu Song. “Please drink this to get rid of the chills.” Wu Song, not yet suspecting anything, drank it. She poured out another cup and offered it to him. “Please drink one more to make a pair,” she urged him. The word “pair” was the usual flirtatious word, but Wu Song drank it without making any fuss.

The room being very warm, Jinlian loosened her blouse and revealed slightly what she ought not have revealed. “I was told you’re so romantic that you’re keeping a singer somewhere,” she teased, “is it true?”

“No, it’s not true. I’m not that kind of man,” Wu Song answered.

Jinlian had by then drunk several cups of wine herself, and her small talk grew increasingly suggestive. Even Wu Song began to understand. Trying not to respond, he lowered his head and stirred the fire with the poker.

“Aren’t you feeling chilly?” asked Jinlian, leaning closer to squeeze his shoulder. “You’re wearing such thin clothes.” Wu Song said nothing. Taking the silence as an encouragement, Jinlian grabbed the poker from his hand to stir the fire herself, saying “You don’t seem to know how to stir up a fire, so let me do it for you. Let’s hope that it’ll always be as hot as the fire.” Her using “fire” as a double meaning for lust was so obvious that Wu Song had to suppress his anger.

Mistaking again his silence as consent, Jinlian put down the poker and poured another cup of wine but drank half of it before she handed it to Wu Song. “If you feel the same way as I do, please drink this half cup of wine as a pledge.” Having two persons drinking the same cup of wine was part

of a wedding ceremony, so there was no way for Wu Song not to know what she meant.

Wu Song snatched the cup and spilled the wine on the floor. "I'm not a beast, so don't be so shameless!"

Events had turned so suddenly for Pan Jinlian that her face became red with shame, anger and rejection. "I was only having some fun by joking with you. How dare you take me seriously!" She pulled away the table, picked up the tray which carried the food and drinks, and stormed downstairs.

She must have cried her heart out because when Wu Da returned, he found her eyes red and swollen.

Anxiously, he asked her what had happened.

"It was that brother of yours!" wailed Jinlian. "He saw me alone in the house and started to flirt with me by saying all sorts of dirty things."

Wu Da did not believe it, but when he went upstairs to see his brother, he found Wu Song putting on his hat and cloak. Without a word, Wu Song left the house.

"What am I to do?" worried Wu Da.

"Good riddance!" shouted Jinlian. "He's too ashamed to face you. Let him go! And don't you ever dare ask him back to my house! Neither will you visit him! If you do, give me my divorce paper." In those days, only a husband could divorce a wife, a wife could not demand a divorce. But there was no need for any divorce paper. Wu Da was so hen-pecked that he dared not disobey his wife even when Wu Song came back with two soldiers to remove his belongings.

Things might have worked out differently if Wu Song had stayed in town, even if not in his brother's house. But he was sent on a mission that was to take him away for a month or so. What was Pan Jinlian to do in his absence?

Did Wu Song behave like a hero to a woman who was starving for love? Could he not have refused her a little more gently? Should he not have taken the time to convince Pan Jinlian of her own husband's virtues instead of rejecting her so rudely that he broke her heart as well as robbing her of her pride? Shouldn't compassion be a trait of a hero?

Killing for Revenge

Things might have worked out differently if Wu Song had not been sent away from town. Then again, it might not have.

His sister-in-law, a young and healthy woman of twenty-three, was passionate and in need of love. To expect her to stay chaste was like hoping an unsnuffed cigarette butt would not start a forest fire. All she needed was that little lighted cigarette butt. It came in the person of Ximen Qing (西门庆), a rich playboy.

To make a long story short, we shall skip over the courtship since it has nothing to do with the question of whether Wu Song was a hero or not. What did matter was his expected return to town which shortened the life of his brother because it was the fear of Wu Song's retaliation that pushed Pan Jinlian into murder.

Wu Da learned about the adultery from a boy who sold pears. He was told that the rendezvous always took place in the house of widow Wong who lived next door. By pre-arrangement, the boy wrestled with the widow so that Wu Da who was not much bigger than the boy, could try to break down the bedroom door. Ximen Qing, being much stronger, flung open the door and kicked right at Wu Da and wounded the cuckold husband. With the help of the widow, Pan Jinlian carried Wu Da back to his own house where he lay in bed for five days without any medical attention.

Finally, he called his wife and told her, "My life is in danger. You know that if I die, my brother will never forgive you or your lover. You may as well take good care of

me so that I can live. In which case, I promise you that I shall not breathe a word of your wrong doings to him."

Jinlian made no answer but went straight to widow Wong's house where she reported to Ximen Qing. When he learned the identity of the brother, he trembled as if he had been dropped into an icy hole. "I've heard he is the fiercest man in town. What are we going to do now?"

"It depends on how you two feel about each other," widow Wong commented coldly. "If you're happy at having enjoyed each other, but wish to stop now, then you must separate as of today. When Wu Da gets well, I'm sure the whole thing will be hushed up. If you want to be happy with each other all your lives, then I have another plan."

"I want to live with Jinlian for the rest of my life," replied Ximen Qing. "Please tell us what you've in mind."

"It shouldn't be difficult for you to get some arsenic which Jinlian will put into the medicine Wu Da is going to drink. Once he is dead, cremate his body. Then even when Wu Song returns home, he can find no evidence whatsoever."

The lovers agreed it was the only solution. For Pan Jinlian to have committed the murder was inexcusable. It was true that the idea of murder was planted in her head and encouraged by her lover. Nevertheless, it was she who gave her husband the poisoned medicine. She could have withheld the arsenic at the last minute, especially when he was so grateful at the sight of the medicine that he thanked her for saving his life. No one could argue that she was innocent.

At the same time, picture a passionate woman who had resisted security and comfort only to seek real love, but suddenly found herself robbed of her chance at happiness only because she was already married to a man whom she did not choose and whom she had loathed. If the laws and customs of the society permitted her to have a divorce, the murder would not have been necessary. The crime was inexcusable but it was inevitable because the world she lived in gave her no choice.

So the murder was done and the body cremated. When

Wu Song came back, he did not believe the story Pan Jinlian told him about his brother having had a heart attack in the middle of the night, but he could not find out any clue from those he inquired because they were all afraid of Ximen Qing who was known to be very influential with the city officials.

Only two persons helped him. One was the boy who told him of the foiled attempt to catch the adulterers. The other was the official coroner.

“I know what you want to ask,” said the coroner, placing a bag on the table. “That day when I was on my way to inspect the body of your brother, Ximen Qing invited me to drink some wine and then gave me ten taels of silver but he did not explain why. When I did see the body, there were blood stains in the nostrils and around the lips that had not been wiped clean. I suspected foul play but I had no plaintiff and Ximen Qing is too powerful in this city for me to accuse him, so I pretended a fainting spell to let my assistant take over. But I did go to the cremation where I picked up a few pieces of bones which turned black when soaked in vinegar, a sure sign of poison. Here are the bones,” he unwrapped the bag, “and the silver, with the date and name of victim written on a piece of paper. These are your proofs.”

Wu Song went to the magistrate with his bag of bones, but the case was thrown out for lack of evidence since everyone in the city hall had been bribed. It was then that Wu Song decided to take revenge in his own fashion.

He bought food and drinks and a stack of paper and invited all the neighbours to attend a dinner he said he was giving on behalf of his sister-in-law for the help she received from them during his brother's funeral. The neighbours all came, most unwillingly, anticipating violence, but Wu Song was so insistent that they did not dare stay away. Wine was served and everything was normal until Wu Song suddenly asked if any of the guests knew how to write. When a scholar was pointed out, he was told to pick up the brush to record down what was to come.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Wu Song announced. “Only debts are to be paid. Only revenge is to be extracted. I only want all of you to be here as my witnesses.” Then he grabbed Pan Jinlian in one hand and widow Wong in the other. “Confess!” he commanded.

Both women denied at first, but Jinlian was so frightened by the dagger Wu Song waved in front of her face that she finally told her story. Wu Song looked up and shouted, “Brother, watch how I revenge your death!” He took his dagger and slit open Pan Jinlian, then pulled out her entrails to place on the altar. Then, with a clean sweep, he cut off her head, while the neighbours watched with understandable awe.

He wrapped her head and marched down the street until he found Ximen Qing whose head was also soon severed. With these two heads and the confession written down on the paper which he had specially bought, he gave himself up at the city hall. Because Ximen Qing was dead and no longer a source of bribe, and also because Wu Song was respected for having punished an adulteress, he was not given the death sentence. Instead, he was given only forty strokes by the wooden club, then exiled to a hard labour camp two thousand Chinese miles away.

Was Wu Song a hero to have taken the law into his own hands? If he did not do so, what kind of justice could he have expected with the city officials all corrupted? But since he had killed two people, what kind of justice was it that he did not have to pay with his own life? If Pan Jinlian was justly punished for the murder of her husband, then should not Wu Song also be punished the same way for having killed her and her lover? Why did the society, especially the readers of *Shui Hu*, forgive Wu Song just because his motive was revenge? Was not Pan Jinlian’s motive for murder also a kind of revenge against the law and custom?

These are difficult questions for us to answer or even to debate. I am inclined to agree with other readers of the book that, under the circumstances, Wu Song could still be regarded

as a hero because he was prepared to die when he gave himself up.

But later, when he killed again, could revenge be accepted as an excuse? Was he still a hero when he killed wantonly, especially when those he killed were mostly weak and defenceless?

Was Wu Song a Hero?

The Wanton Killer

The theme of the novel *Shui Hu* (水浒) is that some men, originally law-abiding, could be forced into becoming bandits by the combined circumstances of unjust laws and corrupted officials. Wu Song was supposed to be one of the shining examples, and in making him one, the author intentionally or unintentionally convinced his readers that Wu Song was a hero.

The series of misadventures that happened to Wu Song after he had revenged his brother, revealed his increasing bestiality until the final senseless slaughter he committed which removed any trace of sympathy I had for him.

We shall pick up the story only upon his arrival at his labour camp although some gruesome events took place before he got there. He was informed by the other prisoners that, unless he bribed the jailers, he would receive the customary hundred strokes with wooden clubs which were mandatory for all new prisoners. Wu Song, with no money, refused.

When he was taken to the warden and the hundred strokes were ordered, Wu Song replied with bravado, "Go ahead and beat me! If I should flinch only once or even utter even one groan, you can give me a hundred more strokes. I'll show you why I'm called a *hao han*."

A young man with a bandage on his head whispered a few words to the warden, and Wu Song was pronounced deliriously ill and thus spared the hundred strokes. He was sent back to his cell without knowing why. Instead of the

harsh treatment he expected, he was given good wine and delicious food, even hot water to bathe and wash his hair in. This unusual and mysterious hospitality lasted for days until Wu Song found out that all of it had come from the young man with the bandage.

"I'm the warden's son," explained the young man. "I have opened a restaurant in the Happy Forest (快活林) not far away from here, with the help of some eighty to ninety strong prisoners from this camp. We provide food and wine to the hundred or so hotels, some thirty gambling joints and pawn shops. Because I'm good at martial art, all of them must buy from me and share their profits with me." It was obvious that his business was what we call the protection racket.

"But recently," continued the young man, "an army Drill Master came here, bringing with him a man by the nickname of Jiang the Door Spirit (蒋门神). Jiang was so strong that he defeated me. Together with the Drill Master, he took away my business. I wanted to lead my gang of prisoners to fight them, but the Drill Master had the regular army behind him. I am hoping you'll fight him for me."

Wu Song never paused to consider the morality behind the request. For a little kindness received in the form of food, he sold himself to help in the exploitation of the people. To Happy Forest he went and kicked Jiang out of town only because he happened to be stronger. The protection racket was once again ruled by the warden's son who treated Wu Song as an honoured guest instead of the prisoner that he was.

Two months later, some soldiers came and extended an invitation from the colonel. (I am translating the ranks loosely for the sake of convenience.) There was no reason for Wu Song to refuse the summon, especially when the colonel was a superior of the warden; so he went to town with the soldiers and was pleasantly surprised by the kind reception he was given.

"I've heard of you being praised as the best *hao han*," said the colonel. "Will you serve me as a personal attendant?"

“I’m but a prisoner,” said Wu Song, kneeling down. “I’ll be grateful if you’ll allow me to hold your whip and follow your spurs.” From that day on, he was specially favoured by the colonel and was often asked to the living quarters to share some wine and food. Wu Song began to rake in bribe money when other people found that the colonel listened to him even regarding official matters. This money he kept in a bamboo basket hidden under his bed.

All went on smoothly. On the night of the mid-autumn festival, the colonel invited Wu Song to join him and his wife for the moonlight party in the garden where they drank and listened to a young girl sing pretty songs. The colonel was so pleased that he even promised Wu Song that the singer would be given to him as his wife.

That very night, after he had retired to his own quarters, Wu Song heard some one shouting, “A thief! A thief!” When he rushed towards the sound, he saw the singer, who had been promised to him as his wife, pointing at the garden. But after he had searched in vain in the garden, he returned to the house only to be tripped by ropes. As soon as he fell down, he was seized by several men, crying: “We’ve caught him!” In spite of his protests they tied him up and searched his room. In the bamboo basket under his bed, they found silver utensils from the colonel’s household.

It was a trap, of course. For a prisoner on probation to turn burglar was punishable by death, and the colonel sent him to the magistrate, demanding the death sentence. For a while, it looked as if Wu Song was to be executed.

But the warden’s son, whose protection racket was once again lost to the Drill Master and his men, realized that the colonel who was bribed by the Drill Master, had in turn bribed the magistrate. Also with bribes, the warden’s son made the magistrate aware that the money the magistrate received was less than what the colonel had taken from the Drill Master. As a result, the magistrate was so annoyed that he withheld the death sentence. Instead, Wu Song was given twenty strokes and again exiled to another labour camp.

When Wu Song left town, the two guards who accompanied him were met by two other armed men. Their intention to kill him was so apparent that Wu Song tore open the wooden scaffold around his neck, grabbed a sword and killed all four of the men.

With his pent up fury, he went back that night to the colonel's house where he first killed the night watchman and then two serving maids who stood outside the room where the colonel, the Drill Master and Jiang the Door Spirit were celebrating. He went inside the room and promptly killed his three enemies. Up to now, the number of persons he had killed was ten. Even assuming that revenge was a justifiable excuse to murder, surely he could have stopped at this stage.

But he did not. He killed the two servants who were sent upstairs to fetch the colonel. Then he blood-thirstily killed the colonel's wife. Finding that his sword had become too blunt to cut off her head, he went to the kitchen to search for a sharper one. In the kitchen, he found the singer and three other women servants. He killed them all. The total score of people thus mercilessly killed was nineteen. He was so proud of himself that he used his victim's blood to write on the wall: "He who killed is Wu Song the tiger killer" (杀人者打虎武松也).

After that, he escaped and eventually joined the bandits.

Could a man who killed so wantonly be considered a hero? What could possibly justify his killing of the colonel's wife and the five women servants? How could a man be a hero if he could not control his lust for killing or if he could not differentiate right from wrong, the innocent from the guilty? What kind of hero was he when he helped to exploit people and took graft money?

In the final analysis, Wu Song was only a beast whose murderous appetite was not satisfied until he had killed everyone he saw. He did start out in life as a hero by killing a tiger, but in the end, he had become a blind tiger himself who knew nothing about heroism. That is why I have grown to distrust the word *hao han*.

Guan Gong:

The Three Brothers

There are all sorts of temples in China as well as in Singapore, that have nothing to do with Buddhism or Taoism. One particular kind is called Guan Di Miao (关帝庙), meaning The Temple of Emperor Guan.

But he whom the worshippers so generously “crowned” emperor was not even royal enough to be a king. The closest he came to kingship was when he helped his sworn brother Liu Bei (刘备) to become king when China was splintered into three kingdoms at the end of the Han Dynasty in the third century. His given name was Guan Yu (关羽), but to anyone who hears or tells his stories, he is invariably known as Guan Gong (关公). The word “Gong” is not an official title or rank but rather a term of address used in affectionate respect. In the case of Guan Gong, the throaty vowels of the words vibrate like the beating of drums that seem to characterize the heroic nature of the man.

He was so respected by Luo Guan Zhong (罗贯中), author of the *San Guo Yan Yi*, that the term Guan Gong was applied right in the first chapter, which was a reverent treatment no other character in his book received at such an early stage. In fact, it was mainly this admiration that inspired the populace to regard Guan Gong either as an immortal hero or as a demi-god. If Luo Guan Zhong never wrote so glowingly about Guan Yu, I think the man would have been gobbled up by history the way millions of unsung heroes were.

Why was Guan Gong so admired? In looks, he was handsome. Whether he stands in a temple or sits in a poster

hanging on the walls of grocery stores, he is always shown as a tall and dignified man with red face and slanting elongated eyes, his silken beard long enough to flow to his waist, wearing the armour commonly seen in operas, and holding a fierce looking sword that has a handle over three metres long. But it is not for his appearance that he is being worshipped. He is held in awe as the personification of faithfulness, loyalty and unbending integrity.

However, I must confess that Guan Gong is one hero for whom my admiration varies according to my age and mood. It is with mixed feelings that I talk about him because I can see his weakness while retaining much of my old fascination. Sometimes, when I am in a rational mood, I feel it was foolish of him to place his personal feelings above that of political realities, but at other times, especially when I am frustrated by the modern utilitarian concept, I wonder if he was not that much greater to have followed the dictates of his heart.

There are three important episodes in his life that I think is essential to the understanding of his character. Since what we know of him come mostly from *San Guo Yan Yi*, I too shall limit my discussion of him to the materials gleaned from the book.

The first episode is his meeting with and the subsequent swearing of "brotherhood" to Liu Bei and Zhang Fei (张飞). This took place in the first chapter of the book. Guan Gong was a fugitive from law because he had killed a man whom he felt was exploiting the people. At a wine shop he encountered Liu Bei, an aspiring political leader who had as yet no follower, and Zhang Fei, a simple man of superhuman strength. The three of them took such a liking to one another that they went to a peach orchard of Zhang Fei's to become "brothers of different surnames" (异姓兄弟).

The oath they uttered had become the standard vow of any initiation ceremony among secret and non-secret societies in China: "Prosperity we will share when fortunes are good, but we shall also share dangers and hardships when times are

bad. Although we cannot ask to be born on the same day of the same month of the same year, we wish to die on the same day of the same month of the same year.” This sentiment was so noble and beautiful that it had caught the imagination of those people who must rely on the loyalties of their associates when the jurisdiction of the law failed to protect them. In feudal China, both the common people such as tradesmen and labourers, as well as the bandits, the gangsters, or the revolutionary parties understood that such reliance on their fellowmen was more important to their safety and well being than standing alone on the side of the ineffectual law.

The book simply stated that Liu Bei was the eldest, Guan Gong came second followed by Zhang Fei. It struck me as curious that the ages of the three men just happened to be directly proportional to the complexity of their minds. Liu Bei was beyond doubt the most crafty one in devious political intrigues, and he would just be the eldest. He must have been aware that there was a great deal to be gained by being the eldest since seniority automatically assumed leadership. In those days when the birth certificate was not yet invented, it was probably easy to add a few years or a few months to one’s age.

To give the devil his due, I suppose Liu Bei, with his remote blood relation to the Han Emperor and his political acumen, would have become the leader eventually, but it certainly made things a lot easier at the beginning when he had only these two young and brave brothers to fight his battles for him. For one thing, it added status when he, as an unknown leader of a small band of army, was sitting in conference with leaders of other factions much larger than his, to have his two glorious brothers standing behind him, arms akimbo, and staring down anyone who dared to slight him. For another, whenever there was an enemy to be cut down, all he had to do was to turn around and ask: “Which brother of mine will chop off this man’s head for me?” Yes, it was very convenient to be the eldest.

Once, after a defeat, which they had many in their

early days, Zhang Fei felt so guilty when he was blasted by Guan Gong for having escaped without taking care of the two wives of Liu Bei that he unsheathed his sword to slit his own throat, but Liu Bei immediately embraced him. With real tears streaming down his face, Liu Bei said, "Wives are like one's garments, but brothers are like one's arms and legs. When a garment is torn, it can be mended, but when an arm or a leg is broken, it cannot ever be replaced." Liu Bei was one of those leaders who could spin persuasive phrases to win the hearts of men whom he relied on to fight his battles and to establish his kingdom. It is ironical that for a man who loved his arms and legs so much that he was the only one of the three brothers who owned more than three "garments".

Women's liberation was set back a thousand years by this famous remark of Liu Bei's, because what he said did make a strong impression on his naive brothers and influenced many males in the following generations to regard their wives as dispensable. However, I must make it clear that Guan Gong did not frown upon women. Although his wife was never mentioned, we know he refused to sacrifice his daughter for political reasons. When the powerful King of Wu wanted to seal their peace treaty by having their children marry, Guan Gong cried, "Is a daughter of a tiger to be married to a son of a dog?" The treaty was broken off. Over and over again, he was to prove a poor politician but a human being with a heart.

The famous poster titled "Oath Taking at the Peach Orchard" (桃园结义), which one finds frequently in houses of all descriptions, either of respectability or of ill-repute, crystalizes such fraternal spirit. The man with a white face is always Liu Bei. The black-faced one with a short stubby beard that seems to explode into all directions is Zhang Fei. Guan Gong is always tinted with pink as if only his blood was red and pure.

The trio represent the spirit of "brothers with different surnames" between whom mutual trust is essential. Those who hang the poster on their walls are not necessarily men who

are defiant of law. Businessman especially look upon them with esteem because, to them, a deal without a written contract must be honoured the way the three brothers kept true to their vows.

But one asks why, that out of the three brothers who all proclaimed their love so loudly, it was Guan Gong who is singled out by the people to have a temple of his own?

Guan Gong:

His Loyalty

The reason why it is Guan Gong, but not Zhang Fei the lovable soul or Liu Bei the skilful schemer, who is worshipped in temples is partially due to the fact that he was the first to be killed, thus immediately relieved him of the obligation, according to their vow, to die with his brothers on the same day of the same month of the same year. Perhaps I am being cynical, but certainly their loudly proclaimed wish to wage revenge enabled the two surviving brothers to prolong their lives much longer than they would have if they were to keep true to their oaths.

Seriously, his early death made it possible for the author to write a very touching scene which endowed Guan Gong with a new dimension. It was said that Guan Gong's spirit, headless, appeared in the sky to an old friend of his who was a Buddhist monk, demanding "Give me back my head!" The monk serenely replied: "Yes, you want your head back. But what about all those heads you had cut off?" Guan Gong was instantly enlightened by this buddhistic wisdom. Instead of asking for revenge, he atoned for his past sins by helping others in need. It was because of his help to the people after his death that made him seem a saint in the eyes of those who erected a temple for him.

However, what made Guan Gong truly admirable was not the supernatural tales but his deeds in life that epitomized his loyalty to his brother, his compassion to his enemies and his obligations to old friends. I shall relate two episodes which will illustrate these qualities of his.

Early in his career, Guan Gong suddenly found he was left with the responsibility of safeguarding the two "garments", that is, the two wives of Liu Bei when their army disintegrated under the attack of Cao Cao (曹操). Both Liu Bei and Zhang Fei had fled; their destinies were unknown. Guan Gong could have fought his way out, but in doing so, he would have to sacrifice his two sisters-in-law. It was in this vulnerable position that an emissary from Cao Cao came politely to ask him to surrender.

Cao Cao's admiration for Guan Gong dated back to the time he and Liu Bei were still allies, when a formidable knight from the enemy had reduced all their warriors to trembling masses of flesh. Only Guan Gong, who was then merely an unknown archer with a rank not much higher than that of a corporal, dared to volunteer. While the others jeered at his audacity, Cao Cao poured out a cup of hot wine to pledge his faith in Guan Gong. "I'll drink it when I come back," replied Guan Gong. Drums rolled, soldiers shouted, and Guan Gong thundered back to their camp, throwing the severed head of the foe down on the ground. The wine held in Cao Cao's hand was still warm. How could Cao Cao not admire such a hero? Now that Guan Gong was made indecisive because of his sisters-in-law, Cao Cao realized that this was his god-sent chance to recruit this great fighter.

Guan Gong, however, agreed to surrender only if his three conditions were met: One, he was not surrendering to Cao Cao but to the Han Emperor whom Cao Cao served. Two, his two sisters-in-law were to be housed in an establishment to which no one might enter without Guan Gong's permission. Three, he would return to his brother as soon as he had news of him.

Cao Cao agreed to all these terms, somewhat reluctantly, but he was confident that he would, given time, win Guan Gong's loyalty if he was as smart as or smarter than Liu Bei. In due course, Guan Gong was made a duke, given great loads of gold ingots and numerous bolts of brocades and silks. He was even presented with ten beautiful girls for his private

pleasure. But Guan Gong never touched the gold or silk and gave the girls to his sisters-in-law as serving maids.

Once, Cao Cao noticed that Guan Gong was still wearing his old and tattered green robe, so he had a splendid new one made specially for Guan Gong who accepted it but would only wear it underneath his old one, explaining: "My old robe was given me by my brother. To wear it is like seeing him. I shall never discard the old in favour of the new."

Of all the presents he was given, the one he thanked Cao Cao for most profusely was a fast horse because he said: "Now I can get to my brother so much sooner with this horse when I find out where he is."

Cao Cao really tried. To build up his friendship with Guan Gong, he gave a small feast every three days and a big banquet every five days. But nothing corrupted Guan Gong. When a letter came at last from Liu Bei, saying: "If you wish to have my head cut off to please your new master, I shall gladly let you have my head." Guan Gong was ready to leave. It was typical of Liu Bei to write such a letter, hypocritically offering himself to be the sacrificial lamb knowing fully that Guan Gong would never betray him.

Cao Cao, as sly as Liu Bei, calculated that Guan Gong was too much of a gentleman to leave without bidding farewell, so he refused all visitors by feigning illness. This tactic delayed Guan Gong for a few days, but gentleman though he was, Guan Gong was no fool. He hung the seal which represented his dukedom on the beam of his house, locked up the untouched gold and silk and ten girls in a room, placed his two sisters-in-law into carts, and left in the dark of the night, followed by only twenty odd of his old comrades-in-arms.

When Cao Cao learned of Guan Gong's departure, he realized there was no way to stop him, so he played his next best card by keeping Guan Gong's good wishes. He led his warriors, whom he forbade to carry any arms, and went chasing after Guan Gong. What a dramatic moment that was when they met! Guan Gong had heard the horses behind him, so he ordered his men to push the carts ahead while he alone

faced the pursuing party on the narrow bridge, sitting on the horse Cao Cao had given him and holding his long sword in his lap ready for battle. Cao Cao explained that he only wished to present a new robe as a parting gift. Without dismounting, Guan Gong picked up the robe with the tip of his sword, casually threw it over his shoulder, thanked Cao Cao politely and rode off without a backward glance.

A lot more happened. Guan Gong had to kill six knights to pass five city gates before Cao Cao's order of allowing him to leave caught up with him. After that, he was free to ride until he came upon a city which Zhang Fei had taken over by force. Being Zhang Fei, not only did he not offer his own head to advance Guan Gong's career, but came right out to accuse Guan Gong as a traitor. I find his reaction much more sincere and honest. Just then, a knight of Cao Cao, who had defied his master's order of not bearing arms because he wanted to revenge his comrades whom Guan Gong had killed in passing the five city gates, was seen fast approaching. "Prove your faith," shouted Zhang Fei, standing on top of his city gate, "by killing this man before I'm finished with my three beatings of the drums." Guan Gong turned around and killed the man even before the first beating of the drums ended. He was forgiven, and the three brothers were eventually reunited.

In this episode, Guan Gong's behaviour was beyond reproach. It was not by following any ideological line or blind patriotism that compelled him to be faithful and loyal. He did only what his heart told him to do. Forsaking his old comrades was not only violating his fundamental principle but was also painful to him. It is this kind of loyalty which everyone wishes to receive from his friends although not everyone is prepared or willing to give.

Guan Gong:

His Compassion

The third episode of Guan Gong's life has all the ingredients of drama. It may not be an effective piece of political propaganda, but it certainly has suspense, pathos and magnanimity.

This episode occurred when Liu Bei had already carved out a niche for himself in the southwest part of China, mainly with the help of Zhuge Kong Ming (诸葛亮). Guan Gong was still a great fighter, but so were many others who had been lured by Liu Bei's proclaimed benevolence.

War broke out, as they were wont to do in those days, between Liu Bei and Cao Cao. On the eve of the battle, Kong Ming, who knew just about anything and everything, had already outlined his plan to annihilate the huge army of Cao Cao. One by one, the knights received their assignments, but none was given to Guan Gong who waited with increasing agitation.

"Why aren't you using me?" Guan Gong finally exploded.

"Ah, general," sighed Kong Ming, "I do need a man for the final kill, but I dare not risk you because you are indebted to Cao Cao and may let him escape."

"I've never denied that Cao Cao has been kind to me, but I've already repaid his kindness by killing two of his worst foes. There is no reason I should show him any mercy."

"In that case, write out a military pledge," said Kong Ming. Such a pledge meant that anyone who failed the duty he had willingly undertaken must pay with his own life.

Guan Gong signed the document without hesitation but not without rancour. He challenged Kong Ming: "But what if your calculation goes wrong and Cao Cao does not come the way you think he'll come?"

"I'll also write a military pledge," replied Kong Ming.

After Guan Gong took five hundred infantrymen with him to wait at the Hua Yun Dao (华容道), a narrow mountain pass, Liu Bei questioned Kong Ming's wisdom in sending Guan Gong, but the latter only smiled: "I've been looking at the stars and I know Cao Cao's death is not yet destined. Isn't it nice for us to give your brother a chance to repay his emotional debt?" One has to take Kong Ming's words with a grain of salt.

The next day came and the war waged on. Cao Cao's army was divided and destroyed. He escaped with only three hundred soldiers and knights, who were all so exhausted that they could barely lift their feet to climb up the mountain path leading up to the Hua Yun Dao.

Suddenly, in front of them appeared Guan Gong with his soldiers, brandishing their broad swords. The shock of seeing Guan Gong at this moment was so devastating that none of Cao Cao's men could move. "What else can we do but fight to death?" asked a desperate Cao Cao.

"But how?" murmured his knights. "Even if we aren't too scared to fight, the men and the horses can hardly stand up."

One adviser whispered to Cao Cao, "We all know Guan Gong is a man who vanquishes the strong but never harms the weak. I'm sure he'll let us go if you personally and humbly ask him this favour."

Cao Cao had no choice but to gamble on Guan Gong's generosity. He inched his horse forward, bowed and asked cordially, "How have you been since we last met?"

Guan Gong, always the gentleman, also bowed while still mounted on his horse. "I'm under orders to await your arrival."

"But look at us," pleaded Cao Cao. "We're all hungry,

fatigued and wounded. None of us can fight anymore. Please, for the sake of our old friendship, let us pass.”

“I’ve not forgotten your friendship,” answered Guan Gong, “but I cannot put private feelings above my official duties.”

“Do you remember, when you left me, how I ordered no one to stop you? I’ve always respected you as a man of honour, surely you will not ill-treat us now?”

Guan Gong’s weakness was that he did not have the stony heart of a politician. When he saw all the soldiers of Cao Cao lying on the ground, moaning and groaning and some even weeping, he was so moved by pity that he pulled away his horse and waved to his men: “Let them pass.” Cao Cao and his men rushed through the narrow passage. Guan Gong instantly realized the gravity of his action. He turned back and shouted “Stop!” The men froze. Having had a chance to live made death now even more painful to face. They all knelt down, wept and begged. Their shame and disgrace was too much for Guan Gong. Sighing deeply, he allowed all of them to escape, knowing full well what this pity of his would cost him.

When he returned to his own camp, Kong Ming left the banquet table where he and the other knights were celebrating their victory. “Here comes the General who had accomplished the utmost!” exclaimed Kong Ming in deliberate cheerfulness. Guan Gong gloomily said nothing. “Why do you look so displeased?” continued Kong Ming, with feigned surprise. “Is it because we have not come sooner to welcome the conquering hero?”

It must have been worse than death for Guan Gong to hang his head and answer: “I’ve come for my death penalty.”

“What? You mean you have allowed the enemies to escape?” Kong Ming pretended alarm. “What else can we do but execute you according to the military pledge you signed?” Guan Gong did not resist when he was arrested and pushed on to the executioner’s block.

Naturally he did not die. Liu Bei, as prearranged,

intervened by saying to Kong Ming: "Please pardon him because if you kill him, it means you'll have to kill all three of us."

Did Guan Gong anticipate his pardon? Would he have acted so magnanimously if he thought he was to die for his magnanimity? Was he really prepared to give up his own life for this deed of mercy? Or, did he know he could have afforded this magnanimity because he would have been forgiven in spite of his military pledge? No one can be certain of the answer.

Being an extremely proud man, even knowing he did not have to die, his failure in carrying out his duty would have shamed him so painfully that he would not cherish life. Therefore, I do not think he would have sacrificed himself had he taken time out to deliberate his decision. I believe he acted impulsively. When he saw the pains of the defeated and allowed his wounded enemies to flee, he forgot about his own life and honour and did not think of what his failure would cost him. Right there and then, because he could not bear to harm the weak and the helpless, he reacted simply by listening to his heart. As a man, he was superb.

But, as a general, who should have considered the success of the war above his own sentiment, he definitely made a mistake. In allowing Cao Cao to escape, he had made it possible for Cao Cao to invade again and kill many of his own comrades. Should he not have thought of that? Was not his impulsive compassion actually a fatal weakness?

I used to think him a hero for his merciful act, but as I grew older and more rational, I condemned him as a traitor to his own people. However, having been disillusioned lately by so many wars in which politicians totally ignored the lives of the people — the aged and the weak, the women and the children, all of them innocent and defenseless — for the sake of their own power struggle, I have turned around again to admire Guan Gong for the simple compassion which made him lay down his arms. Which is more important in life? Power or compassion? The issue is debatable.

But the common people had already made their choice. They erected a temple in memorium of a man who was above politics, above the power struggle, who vanquished the strong but would never harm the weak. Are not these qualities of a godlike man even if he was a dismal failure as a man of the world?

The First Two Visits

To emphasize the importance of unity, the Chinese have a colloquial saying: “When three smelly cobblers put their heads together, they can be as smart as one Zhuge Liang” (三个臭皮匠，一个诸葛亮). From this saying, one can see how Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮 AD 181-234) is regarded by the common people as the pinnacle of wisdom.

This popular image of Zhuge Liang does not coincide completely with the real man in history. To many of us, he was a tragic hero who had to deal with circumstances which even his wisdom could not control. The admiration of Zhuge Liang can be best summed up by the last four lines of the famous poem written by the Tang poet Du Fu (杜甫).

“Three (三) times he was visited (顾) upon by the king-to-be, who frequently (频) bothered (烦) him with affairs of the state (天下事).”

“To repay the trust of his master, he served two (两) royal generations (朝) in the founding (开) and administration (济) of the kingdom and gave them his old (老) minister’s (臣) heart (心).”

“That his last military campaign (出师) was not yet (未) triumphant (捷) but his body (身) should already (先) be dead (死).”

“Will forever (长) make (使) heroes (英雄) shed tears (泪) all over (满) the front of their robes (襟).”

The above reference to his military campaign echoed the famous petition Zhuge Liang wrote to the young king entrusted to him by his old master-friend. Before he was to

march for a war whose outcome he was not certain of, leaving the kingdom to those whose capability and integrity he could not totally trust, he wrote in his petition advice on various political issues. Then, he concluded: "All I can offer now is to work to the best of my ability until my body, bent under the heavy load of responsibilities, is completely exhausted and death terminates my usefulness to my king and country" (鞠躬尽瘁，死而后已).

These eight Chinese words have carved deep in the minds of all those who have read his petition. Even as recently as in the 1960s, Zhou En Lai was said to have quoted them when it became increasingly apparent that he was the target of the cultural revolution and yet he must labour on with death hovering over his shoulder. To understand fully the tragic implication of these words, one must know the life history of Zhuge Liang.

The populace, however, is more aware of the heroic than the tragic side of his life. They know him through the historical novel *San Guo Yan Yi* (三国演义) written by Luo Guan Zhong (罗贯中). It was not as if the author had presented an incorrect version, but he did exaggerate the humour and talents of Zhuge Liang until the young and gay scholar-adviser overshadowed the old and sad politician-minister. However, the note of tragedy was planted in the book for those who are sensitive to feel it, especially in his narrative of the Three Visits, a well-known historical incident that Du Fu also mentioned in his poem.

Before Zhuge Liang appeared, Liu Bei and his two sworn brothers had muddled along without achieving any territorial gains. They needed an expert military adviser, but when they finally came close to finding one, this man only wanted to play a word game, assuring Liu Bei that if he could invite either Sleeping Dragon (卧龙) or Fledgling Phoenix (凤雏) to work for him, he would be able to realize his ambition. Shortly after, a man by the name of Xu Shu (徐庶) came and helped Liu Bei to win a few battles. But since he had left his old mother unattended to, it was easy for Liu

Bei's enemy to kidnap her and to forge a letter commanding her son to abandon his post. Xu Shu rushed to comply with her wishes, without even stopping to examine if the letter was genuine or to question whether his mother might yield to pressure. The mother was so infuriated when she found he had fallen for the trap that she promptly hanged herself.

Before he left, however, Xu Shu recommended Zhuge Liang whose alias, he said, was Sleeping Dragon because he was tilling the land of Sleeping Dragon Hill. He even went personally to persuade Zhuge Liang. "What!" said an indignant Zhuge Liang, with a flourish of his wide sleeve to show his displeasure. "Are you offering me as the sacrificial lamb?"

Meanwhile, Liu Bei was visited by a mutual friend of Xu Shu and Zhuge Liang. Using this man, the author provided two hints of the tragedy that was to come. Upon learning of the recommendation by Xu Shu, this man said, "Xu Shu can leave if he wishes, but why should he urge Zhuge Liang to spill out his heart's blood?" Then, as he was leaving Liu Bei, he looked up at the sky and sighed: "Sleeping Dragon will find in Liu Bei a true master, but alas, his career is not to be helped by time."

Liu Bei was anxious when he made his first visit to Sleeping Dragon Hill. In the tranquil countryside, they heard some farmers sing a song of such philosophical depth that he asked them who had written the song. "Why, Mr Sleeping Dragon, of course," they answered. The song strengthened Liu Bei's belief that Zhuge Liang was no ordinary man.

He and his entourage dismounted at the thatched cottage, but all they could find was a young boy to whom Liu Bei gave his official titles so that he could be announced. But the boy replied impatiently, "I can't remember all those long names! Besides, my master is not home and I don't know when he'll be back."

Leaving word that he had called, Liu Bei turned toward home. As he rode on, he encountered a man whose countenance was so sagely that Liu Bei asked if he was Sleeping

Dragon. He was not. But his being a friend of Zhuge Liang encouraged Liu Bei to make his second visit.

Reports came to Liu Bei that Zhuge Liang had returned. When he informed his brothers of his intention to call again, Zhang Fei complained, "Why should you go to him? He's but a peasant! Let us send for him."

Liu Bei only scolded Zhang Fei for being disrespectful. As they braved the snowstorm on their way to the village, Liu Bei was struck by the wisdom of the songs he heard coming from a tavern. Was any of the wise men the Sleeping Dragon? No, they answered, they were his friends. The respect Liu Bei had for Zhuge Liang increased.

At the thatched cottage, Liu Bei found a young man nestled next to the fire while singing another song of philosophical wisdom. Liu Bei waited patiently until the singing came to an end, but he was dismayed to find the young man only a brother to the elusive Zhuge Liang. This time Liu Bei left more than his word. He warmed the frozen ink by blowing on it and wrote out a letter of admiration.

As he left, he saw a man coming from the opposite side of the narrow bridge, riding on a donkey and followed by a boy holding a casket of wine. What impressed Liu Bei most was the poem recited aloud by the man. "This must be the real Sleeping Dragon," he exclaimed as he jumped down from his horse and bowed deeply.

"He is my brother's father-in-law," smiled the young man who had followed them to the door.

"But ..." hesitated Liu Bei, "that wonderful poem ..."

"Oh that," chuckled the man on the donkey, "I read it when I was visiting my son-in-law."

It was a very disappointed Liu Bei who rode back to camp. As he looked back at the thatched cottage with snow flying around him, he wondered whether he could catch a glimpse of the Sleeping Dragon on his third visit.

The Last Visit

Liu Bei, whose royal descent could be traced to the family tree of the Han Emperor as a first cousin, seventeen times removed, was respected by his contemporaries as the “Royal Uncle”. Remote though he was from the direct line of succession, he was still regarded as of noble blood.

Therefore, his attempts to visit Zhuge Liang, a man he knew only by name, was irritating to his two brothers. They thought Zhuge Liang was pretentious and arrogant because he made no response to their two courtesy calls. As they watched with distaste, Liu Bei prepared his third visit which was to take place the following spring when the snowstorm would have subsided. To make sure his sincerity would charm the gods into favouring him, Liu Bei ordered his soothsayer to choose an auspicious day and went on a strictly vegetarian diet for three days prior to the departure. Then he bathed and dressed himself in his freshly laundered robe scented with herbs.

“I think,” observed Guan Gong, “Zhuge Liang knows his empty fame is bigger than his real talent, and that’s why he’s avoiding you. Why are you dazzled by his cheap tricks?”

Zhang Fei went even further in his disapproval. “There is no need for you to go,” he urged. “If he doesn’t come on his own, I’ll just take a rope, tie him up and bring him over here.”

But Liu Bei, whom I have always thought a hypocrite, wanted the world to think he was humble so that the news of

his humility would travel. He must have argued that even if this particular performance of his should fail to lure Zhuge Liang, it would eventually attract others who might be just as talented. Either way, he had nothing to lose. Therefore, after restraining the rudeness of his brothers, they set out on horses to visit the thatched cottage for the third time.

He dismounted about a kilometre from his destination so that he might, like a pilgrim, continue the rest of the way on foot. As he walked, he met the younger brother of Zhuge Liang walking towards him.

"My brother has returned last evening," the brother casually answered Liu Bei's polite inquiry. "I think you may be able to catch him today." Having said that, he continued his walk, passed the visitors and disappeared among the hills behind them.

"Such rudeness!" grumbled Zhang Fei. "One would have thought the least he could do was to lead us to his brother."

They walked on until they reached the cottage. The same young boy opened the door and said, "The master is home today, but he's taking a nap."

"Then please don't disturb him," requested Liu Bei. He ordered his brothers to wait outside the gate while he softly stepped into the garden, walking as quietly as possible. From the garden, he could see the slightly elevated living room where a man was lying on a couch, but since he did not wish to wake up the sleeping man, he stood solemnly in the garden, with his two hands folded in front of him.

After a long wait at the gate, the two brothers came inside to investigate, and were furious to find their noble brother standing as meekly as if he was an obedient disciple of the sleeping man. "Let me set fire to this house," fumed Zhang Fei, "and we'll see how quick he wakes up."

Liu Bei hushed his impatient brothers and commanded them to return to their posts at the gate, fearing that the commotion might have annoyed the sleeping man. But the man only turned and changed his sleeping posture. The boy

thought it might be time to disrupt the sleep, but Liu Bei held him back, playing up his humbleness for all its worth.

Another hour passed. Then the man sleeping in the living room slowly stirred, leisurely reading aloud a poem in the relaxed tempo of the rustic life. He then turned to the boy and asked whether anyone had called. When he was told that Liu Bei had been waiting for a long time, he rose and complained, "Why didn't you tell me earlier? Now I must change into something more befitting to receive guests."

Another long wait.

When he finally emerged, he looked tall and slim in his attire, with a complexion as perfect as white jade, wearing a dark silk cloth as a headgear. He looked so unburdened by worldly worries that he seemed, to Liu Bei, as free as a god.

They had a long conversation. Liu Bei urged Zhuge Liang to come out of his seclusion to work for the people. Finally the wise man consented. Pointing to his map every now and then, he analysed carefully the balance of power between the existing war factions and told Liu Bei what he could expect to accomplish. "In the north," he said, "Cao Cao (曹操) is holding the Emperor as a puppet, in whose name he commands the huge and powerful army. He is advised by his numerous counsellors and assisted by his countless warriors. You'll have to leave the northern states to him since he has the advantage of legality (天时) over you.

"In the south, Sun Quan (孙权) whose authority over this region has been in his family for three generations, is well fenced in. The topography of his territory is ideal for defence. You'll have to leave the southern states to him since he has the advantage of land strategy (地利) over you.

"The advantage you have over them is your harmonious relationship with your people (人和). With their help, you must first occupy this city," he pointed at the map, "as your home base and then move on to further expansion by taking the territories on the west. When that is done, the world (meaning China) will be divided into three equal parts like the legs of a tripod. If all goes well in our kingdom, then

we can think about the reunification of China under Han Emperor.”

By allowing Zhuge Liang to predict correctly on the future, the author attributed to him a prophetic wisdom which justified the judgement of Liu Bei in persistently paying him three visits. But the long narrative also underlined the reluctance of Zhuge Liang to give up his life as a hermit. It was as if he had hoped that his unwillingness to respond would dissuade Liu Bei from making further visits and leave him alone. But his aloofness did not work. The deep appreciation Liu Bei demonstrated for him was to bind him tighter than any iron chain could ever hope to do.

The author made Zhuge Liang's reluctance very obvious by making him say to his younger brother as he was leaving home: “I'm not allowed to hide among these peaceful hills because I must repay the Royal Uncle for his confidence and trust. Please go on tilling the land so that one day I may return.”

But why should Zhuge Liang be reluctant? The same prophetic wisdom made it easy for the readers to understand. Since he was prophetic, then he must have known what the future had in store for him. He would have known that, although in the process of making his master one of the three kings, his name would become a household word as the wisest man ever lived, but he was also to be tormented by disappointments, regrets and frustrations when he was old and lonely.

Above all, he would have known that the young king whom he must support was not to be worthy of his support. He was reluctant and yet he was compelled by his obligation to his master-friend to carry on. That was what made Zhuge Liang a tragic hero. The three visits to his thatched cottage was merely the beginning of that tragic heroism.

Big Qiao and Small Qiao

Zhugé Liang (诸葛亮) was to be assisted by many of his colleagues who, older though they were, admired and trusted him so implicitly that they carried out his orders without question. However, he was at his most magnificent when he first joined Liu Bei and worked almost single-handedly in the launching of the Battle of Red Cliffs (赤壁之战). This historical event was so dramatically narrated in *San Guo Yan Yi* that to do it justice, we should savour as much of the details as time and space allow us.

When it was known that Cao Cao (曹操) and his huge army were marching down from the north to attack the territories held by Liu Bei and Sun Quan (孙权), Zhugé Liang realized that Liu Bei's troops were too small in number to stand against the mighty force of Cao Cao. His hope of survival therefore hinged on whether or not Sun Quan and his people of Wu would rage war against Cao Cao.

Meanwhile, the advisers around Sun Quan were divided into two opposite factions: the ministers who advocated peace, which in effect meant surrender, and the warriors who urged war, with the argument that their northern invaders, being unaccustomed to naval warfare, could be beaten once they ventured into the waters of Wu. Zhugé Liang, who anticipated this deadlock, used some flimsy pretext to visit the capital of Wu so he could be in a position to sway the yet undecided policy.

Sun Quan was indeed vacillating between his ministers and his warriors, but his doubts were dispelled by his step-

mother who was also his maternal aunt. "Don't you remember" she said, "how my late sister used to repeat the advice left by her eldest son, your late brother, just before he died? 'When there is a difficult decision to make, consult Zhang Zhao (张昭) if the affair is internal, and consult Zhou Yu (周瑜), if it's external.'"

Sun Quan immediately sent for Zhou Yu, who was busy training the navy on Lake Po Yang (鄱阳湖). As soon as he arrived at the capital, but before he could see Sun Quan, delegates from both factions called on him to influence him. But he would not make any commitment. After the delegates left, he met Zhuge Liang, introduced by Lu Su (鲁肃) who was shabbily treated by the author of *San Guo*. Instead of portraying him as the wise man he must have been, he was caricaturized as a kind-hearted but foolish pawn used by both Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu in the game of chess they were to play.

Zhou Yu, to test Zhuge Liang's reaction, baited Lu Su who was a close friend of his. "We should obey Cao Cao," he said, "because he is acting in the name of the Emperor. Besides, his army is invincible. If we try to fight him, we shall only lose; whereas if we don't, we may at least enjoy some semblance of peace."

"How can you say that!" cried Lu Su indignantly. "You, of all people, who were entrusted by our lord's late brother as the protector of this realm! How can you turn coward at a time like this?"

While the argument raged on, Zhuge Liang merely listened with an amused smile while keeping his hands crossed serenely inside his sleeves.

"Why are you smiling?" asked a curious Zhou Yu.

"I'm smiling at you, Lu Su," replied Zhuge Liang, "because you evidently don't know what's good for you. Look at Zhou Yu! He knows what's good for him. It's only sensible to surrender."

"You see," said Zhou Yu to Lu Su, "even the wise Zhuge Liang agrees with me."

“Of course I do,” nodded Zhuge Liang. “Surrendering to Cao Cao means safety for your wife and children and perseverance of wealth and rank for you. Why should you worry about the fate of your liege lord when it’s the will of god that his regime should fall?”

“Are you suggesting,” spluttered Lu Su, “that my lord should suffer the humiliation of a peace secured only by the disgrace of kowtowing to the enemy?”

“Actually,” mused Zhuge Liang, “I know of a way to avoid this shameful surrender. You can persuade Cao Cao to withdraw without your fighting one single battle, losing one single man, or giving up one single inch of land, if you’re to present two girls as gifts to him.”

“And who may the two girls be?” asked Zhou Yu.

“The loss of these two girls to the nation of Wu is as insignificant as a big tree losing a leaf or a storage bin losing a grain of rice ...” Zhuge Liang wanted to elaborate further but he was cut short by Zhou Yu.

“Will you tell us who the two girls are?”

“Well, I was told that Cao Cao has built himself a luxurious pavilion called Tong Qiao Tai (铜雀台) in which he has housed all the beautiful girls he can find for his personal gratification. But he is still waiting for the arrival of the two most beautiful girls, known as Big Qiao (大乔) and Small Qiao (小乔), the daughters of an old man named Qiao (乔). If you can find this old man, buy the girls from him and send them to Cao Cao, there’ll be an end to your war with no disgrace to your lord.”

“Do you have proof that Cao Cao has said so?” asked Zhou Yu, his face darkened with suppressed fury.

“Yes, I think I do. As you know, Cao Cao has a young son who is an excellent poet. He has written an ode to celebrate the completion of the pavilion, in which he specifically mentioned the girls by name.”

“And do you remember the exact words?” insisted Zhou Yu.

“It’s such a lovely poem that I know it by heart. Let

me see, yes, here is the line: ‘... embracing the two Qiaos from Southeast ... (攬二喬於東南兮).’”

Zhou Yu jumped up. “How dare the old bastard insult me like this!”

“It’s not an insult,” consoled Zhuge Liang. “Even the Han Emperors used to marry their daughters, the royal princesses, to barbarian chieftains for the sake of peace, so why should you feel insulted at the thought of giving away two girls of no rank?”

“You really don’t know, do you?” scoffed Zhou Yu. “Big Qiao is the widow of my lord’s late brother, and I am the husband of Small Qiao.”

Zhuce Liang feigned embarrassment and shock, apologizing profusely for his unforgivable blunder. “Ah, I speak such outrageous nonsense! You really ought to punish me with death.”

“Never mind,” said Zhou Yu, calming down. “I had already decided to fight Cao Cao even before I left Lake Po Yang, but your mentioning the two Qiaos made me more firm in my resolution.”

That was how the Battle of Red Cliffs was launched, according to the novel *San Guo*. Zhuge Liang played a trick on Zhou Yu by distorting the meaning of the poem, which should read: “... connecting the two bridges at the southeast ...” (攬二橋於東南兮). But since the word “bridge” (橋) sounded the same as the surname of the girls (喬), and the word “攬” could mean “embracing” in the romantic context, or “connecting” in the architectural context, and since the realm of Wu was in fact situated southeast to the territory of Cao Cao, Zhuge Liang’s play of puns convinced Zhou Yu of Cao Cao’s greed.

It is extremely unlikely that Zhou Yu, in real history, was so easily misled, but the readers of *San Guo Yan Yi* prefer to believe that their hero, Zhuge Liang, really took advantage of the coincidence between the names of the two Qiao girls and the bridges praised in the poem. This is the stuff romances are made of.

The Visit of a Schoolmate

The Battle of Red Cliffs would have made dull reading if the author of *San Guo* did not pepper it with the personal duel of wits between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu.

Luo Guan Zhong (罗贯中), author of *San Guo*, used a technique known in Chinese as “knocking sideways” (旁敲侧). His ultimate aim was to show how superior Zhuge Liang was, but instead of saying so directly, he concentrated mostly on how wise and capable Zhou Yu was, and thus, by comparison, how much wiser and more capable Zhuge Liang must be. This human conflict was made more acute by his dwelling on the jealousy Zhou Yu suffered. Not that Zhou Yu would admit, even to himself, that he resented Zhuge Liang out of personal rivalry, so it was always in the grandiose terms of national security that he justified his recurring wish to remove, even to destroy, Zhuge Liang.

Thus, while preparations were being made for war, Zhou Yu asked Zhuge Liang for a favour. “Since you’re familiar with the terrain where Cao Cao is storing his grains,” he said, “will you kindly lead my soldiers to attack that supply depot?” Zhuge Liang answered that he would gladly do it.

However, Zhou Yu confided in Lu Su that his real purpose behind this request was to get Zhuge Liang killed since he knew the mission was extremely dangerous. Lu Su went to check if Zhuge Liang was aware of this intended malice. “Do you think you’ll succeed?” he asked with concern.

“Of course I will,” teased Zhuge Liang. “I’m not like you

who can fight only on land, or like Zhou Yu who can fight only on water.”

This boast of Zhuge Liang was told to Zhou Yu whose quick temper immediately flared up. “Tell him he’s not to go. I’ll show him that I can fight on land by taking that depot myself.”

Lu Su passed the cancellation of order to Zhuge Liang who replied with a wry smile, “I know Zhou Yu wanted me killed by assigning me that impossible task, so I retaliated by making him mad. Perhaps you ought to remind him that his original estimation of Cao Cao was correct and that it’ll be just as fatal for him to go as it was for me.” Hearing this from Lu Su, Zhou Yu was more determined than ever that Zhuge Liang, being a threat to the welfare of his nation, must be removed.

At the war front, after a few skirmishes which were won by the navy of Wu, Cao Cao blamed his two recently appointed admirals, Cai Mao (蔡瑁) and Zhang Yun (张允) for the poor quality of his fighting force.

“But that’s not our fault!” argued Cai Mao. “None of our sailors are well trained for naval warfare. With your permission, I propose a vigorous training programme before we engage in further battles.” The training programme turned out to be so vigorous that it was carried out even at night, with lights blazing for all to see. One of those who saw it was Zhou Yu who had come on a private reconnoitering trip. “I must get rid of these two admirals,” he said to himself, “before they can improve their navy.”

Just then, a man under the employment of Cao Cao said he was sure he could persuade Zhou Yu to surrender because he had grown up with Zhou Yu. His name was Jiang Gan (蒋干), and he asked to take with him only one young boy as a servant to show that his visit was based purely on friendship. What a foolish man not to realize that schoolmates could grow up to be strange friends!

Zhou Yu welcomed Jiang Gan warmly, saying: “Surely you aren’t here to speak on behalf of Cao Cao, are you?”

Jiang Gan said he was not. "In that case," continued Zhou Yu, "let's have a happy reunion."

All the officers of Wu navy were invited to share the banquet in honour of Jiang Gan. "This is a very close friend of mine," announced Zhou Yu. "Although he comes from the north side of the river, he's not sent by Cao Cao. Here, take my sword," he turned to one of his officers. "If anyone should speak on anything other than friendship, you have my order to cut him down."

Jiang Gan was not in a position to object. The dinner seemed to put Zhou Yu in such a genial mood that he drank excessively. Therefore it was no surprise to Jiang Gan to see his friend vomiting after the party was over and they had returned to Zhou Yu's sleeping quarters. "You must share my bed the way we used to do," insisted Zhou Yu before he passed out in a drunken stupor.

Naturally Jiang Gan was not going to waste this opportunity. He rose stealthily from bed and searched the papers stacked on Zhou Yu's table until he came upon a letter written by Cai Mao and Zhang Yun. The gist of the letter was an explanation on how they had been pressurized against their wishes into surrendering to Cao Cao whom they hated, and how they were delaying the navy from combat until they could cut off the head of Cao Cao and bring it with them as gift to Zhou Yu. An excited Jiang Gan hid the letter in his sleeve and was about to search for more when he heard Zhou Yu muttering incoherently in his sleep: "You just wait and see, and I'll show you Cao Cao's head." When Jiang Gan tried to ask him for more information, Zhou Yu turned over and slept on with occasional broken references to the head of Cao Cao.

Just before dawn, an officer rushed into the tent to wake Zhou Yu up who responded in a daze. "Who's that man in my bed?" he asked, and then added in remorse, "I was never this drunk before in my whole life! I hope I didn't say anything I shouldn't ..."

"Sir," whispered the officer, "there's news from north of the river ..."

“Shh,” Zhou Yu hastily stopped the officer. He called his friend by name but Jiang Gan made no reply. Noiselessly, the officer and Zhou Yu stepped outdoor to confer, whereupon Jiang Gan followed and listened from inside the tent. It was difficult to make out the whispered conversation, but he did hear the phrase: “Both admirals Cai and Zhang think no action can yet be taken.”

Finally Zhou Yu returned, but Jiang Gan was snugly asleep and made no answer when his name was called. Seemingly relieved, Zhou Yu also got into bed and slept. Jiang Gan thought to himself: “It’s not going to be safe for me when Zhou Yu wakes up and finds his letter missing.” Thus he quickly rose, got dressed, called his servant boy, and escaped to Cao Cao’s camp where he related the events of the night before. As a climax, he handed over the stolen letter.

The assassination plot was such a personal insult that it robbed Cao Cao of his usually keen judgment. He sent for the culprits and told them icily that he wanted his navy to attack right away.

“But we aren’t ready yet!” protested the admirals.

“Ha!” Cao Cao sneered. “By the time you were ready, my head would have been cut off and sent to Zhou Yu as a gift!” He turned sharply to his guards and snapped out his impulsive order: “Kill them!”

He realized he had made a mistake only after he thought over the circumstances of the matter, but it was then too late to restore the lives of his best admirals. Instead of admitting his error, he informed his officers that the death sentences were necessary because the men had ignored his military command.

Zhou Yu was proud that no one seemed to have guessed the part he played in the execution of the two enemy admirals. That was why he thought, when Zhuge Liang congratulated Lu Su on the success of Jiang Gan being utilized, that a rival who could see through him so easily would be dangerous for his country. He knew he would have to try again to kill Zhuge Liang.

Arrows To Be Borrowed

Now we have come to the story of how Zhou Yu set a trap to kill Zhuge Liang during the preparation for war, prior to the Battle of Red Cliffs.

When Zhou Yu told Lu Su of his resolution to kill Zhuge Liang, Lu Su pointed out that the world might think it unjust. Zhou Yu promised that he would do it in such a way that no one could possibly complain it was unfair or unethical.

At the military conference on the following day, Zhou Yu politely asked Zhuge Liang, "As you know, we shall soon engage in a naval battle. What weapon would you say is the most important in such a warfare?"

"Arrows," answered Zhuge Liang promptly, knowing exactly why he said it.

"How right you are!" exclaimed Zhou Yu. Then he added ruefully, "But I'm sorry to admit that we don't as yet have enough arrows. May I ask you to undertake the job of making one hundred thousand arrows? I wouldn't ask you this if it were not official business; you do understand, don't you?"

"Surely," nodded Zhuge Liang. "When do you want them?"

"How about in ten days' time?"

"With Cao Cao coming soon upon us," frowned Zhuge Liang, "ten days may be too late."

"Well, how soon do you think you can make them?" asked Zhou Yu, not without some surprise.

"Three days," stated Zhuge Liang resolutely. "I'll give

you your one hundred thousand arrows in three days' time."

"One doesn't joke with military matters," said Zhou Yu sternly.

"Would I joke about such a serious business?" asked Zhuge Liang innocently. "I'll sign a military contract to guarantee the delivery of the arrows within three days. If I should fail to do so, let me be punished accordingly."

Zhou Yu was delighted with the turn of the events. He called his clerk to have the contract written, which Zhuge Liang duly signed. Wine was called for, and both men drank to seal the agreement.

"It's too late to begin work today," calculated Zhuge Liang, sipping his wine. "On the third day from tomorrow, you may send your soldiers to collect the arrows at the river bank."

"It's an impossible job!" protested Lu Su to Zhou Yu after Zhuge Liang had left them. "Do you suppose he is fooling us?"

"It doesn't matter one way or other," smiled Zhou Yu. "He volunteered to sign the military contract which will mean sure death if he cannot deliver the arrows within three days. Nobody forced him. If he fails to make the delivery, no one can blame me for ordering his death, and if he can, fine, I'll get my arrows. But I really don't see how he can. Why don't you go and find out what he plans to do and keep me informed?"

Lu Su went as he was told. As soon as he saw Zhuge Liang, the latter complained plaintively. "See what a mess you've gotten me into? I told you not to tell Zhou Yu that I knew about his setting up the death trap for Cai Mao and Zhang Yun. I knew his jealousy would drive him to harm me, but you wouldn't lie! Now you see how he wants to get rid of me by making me fail to deliver the arrows? You must help me this time, otherwise my death will be your doing."

"But you volunteered yourself!" retorted Lu Su. "You even hastened the date of delivery to three days. If you ask me, it's all your own fault."

“You must help me,” pleaded Zhuge Liang.

“What do you want me to do?” sighed the kind-hearted man.

“I want you to loan me twenty ships with enough sailors to sail them. The decks and both sides of each ship are to be lined with one thousand bales of straw. But this time, you must give me your solemn promise not to tell Zhou Yu. I’ll be dead if you do. You don’t want that, do you?”

Knowing what Zhuge Liang suspected was true, Lu Su only told half the truth when he returned to Zhou Yu, saying that from all he could see, no bamboo sticks, no feather and no glue had been requested. Secretly, however, he provided the ships, men and bales of straws for Zhuge Liang.

Strangely, nothing happened for two days. On the third day, Zhuge Liang sent word for Lu Su to join him. “I’ll show you how I get my arrows,” he said, motioning Lu Su to follow him into one of the ships which were tied together with ropes from stern to bow, forming a straight line. “We’ll drink while we wait,” he said lightly, and ordered the ships to sail up the river toward the camp of Cao Cao.

By late evening, a heavy fog descended upon them. It was one of the thickest fogs Lu Su ever encountered; one could hardly see beyond one foot in any direction. The ships sailed on, but after a while, judging by the sound, they had come quite close to the enemy line. Then, Zhuge Liang gave the command: “Beat the drums and make your war cries.” The men made such a din that Lu Su was quite alarmed.

“We aren’t armed!” he said. “What if Cao Cao should decide to attack us?”

“In this heavy fog?” laughed Zhuge Liang. “Not a suspicious man like he! Let’s not worry but continue our drinking. When the fog lifts, we will then head for home.”

Cao Cao did hear the drums and the war cries, but as predicted, he was too careful a man to be aggressive under such adverse weather conditions, suspecting the enemy might lure him into a trap. He decided defence was the best strategy. Within a short time, ten thousand archers were assembled to

shoot arrows toward where the drums and cries were loudest. Zhuge Liang swerved his line of ships to rest sideways so that all the arrows were shot into the bales of straw strapped along the decks and sides of the ships. After a while, he reversed his ships so that the straw bundles on the other side of the ships could also receive the arrows.

As the sun came out and the fog began to disperse, Zhuge Liang headed for home, but not before he told his men to cry out in unison: "Thank the Prime Minister for the arrows!" By then, Cao Cao, who was officially the Prime Minister to the puppet Han Emperor, realized the attack was a hoax. But Zhuge Liang had already left the scene since his cargo was light and the current of the river had accelerated his escape.

"I estimate each ship will give you five to six thousand arrows in perfect condition," said a satisfied Zhuge Liang. "Will you take delivery of them now?"

Lu Su was very impressed. "How could you have known that we would have such a dense fog tonight?"

"Can one be a military adviser and not know how to predict the weather? How else could I have promised the arrows in three days if I didn't know there would be this fog tonight?"

Modern readers may complain that the weather forecast they read in their newspaper are not as accurate, but then, who needs arrows in our nuclear age?

An Espionage Backfired

The Battle of Red Cliffs (AD 208) took place more than 1500 years ago, but the espionage and counter-espionage prior to the fighting read as if they were written for the war movies of today.

After Cai Mao was executed by Cao Cao, his two young cousins were recruited to spy on Zhou Yu, using their craving for revenge on Cao Cao as the excuse for their change in loyalty. Zhou Yu accepted them readily and assigned them to work under Gan Ning (甘宁), one of his trusted captains.

A few days later, at an assembly of all his warriors and advisers, Zhou Yu reviewed their food supplies, predicting that the war might last as long as three months. “What’s the use of talking about three months?” sneered Huang Gai (黄盖), a warrior much older than Zhou Yu. “We can’t win even if we’ve food supply for thirty months! I’d say that if we’re to win, we must win within this month. If we can’t count on a swift victory, we may as well go, with our lances dragging behind us, and beg for surrender.”

“How dare you speak of surrender!” exploded Zhou Yu. “Since my order from our liege lord is to fight, anyone who incites fear is to be put to death.”

“Who do you think you are?” shouted back Huang Gai. “Where were you when I fought shoulder to shoulder with the late father and late brother of our lord?” But his insolence only added fuel to Zhou Yu’s fury. He was seized and was about to be pushed out of the assembly to be executed when Gan Ning implored Zhou Yu to take into consideration the long faithful

service Huang Gai had given the Sun family. Since youth and lack of experience were sensitive issues with Zhou Yu, he ordered his guards to beat Gan Ning with clubs unless he left the assembly. Gan Ning had to leave.

All the fellow officers of Huang Gai knelt down, pleading that it would be unlucky to kill one of their own men before a battle was fought. Finally Zhou Yu conceded to reduce the punishment to one hundred strokes of the wooden club. Accordingly, Huang Gai was stripped bare, pressed to the ground and struck mercilessly fifty times. At that point, the officers present begged for a suspension of the other fifty strokes. Zhou Yu pointed a finger at Huang Gai and cursed: "These fifty strokes are just to warn you never to be insolent again. The other fifty will be kept in record in case you should forget."

Huang Gai was carried back to his own tent. Such a sore sight was he, with blood oozing from his many open wounds, that his friends who looked at him shed tears, but he remained silent, shaking his head sadly and sighing every now and then.

Lu Su complained to Zhuge Liang. "We who are his subordinates couldn't say to Zhou Yu what you, as a guest, could have said. Why didn't you try to dissuade him?"

"What? And spoil his plan?" smiled Zhuge Liang, and then added quickly, "please don't tell him that I've said so."

When Zhou Yu asked Lu Su what was the reaction of Zhuge Liang, Lu Su lied, "He too thought you were a bit too harsh on Huang Gai."

"Ha!" laughed Zhou Yu, "I've fooled him this time." He then proceeded to explain that the sneering remark of Huang Gai and the subsequent punishment were all prearranged to provide Huang Gai a legitimate excuse to offer his service to Cao Cao.

There were others who were not fooled. A specially close friend of Huang Gai called Kan Ze (阚泽) visited him. After telling the servants to leave them alone, he said, "I know both you and Zhou Yu too well not to have realized

that you suffered the clubbing for a purpose. Do you want me to act as a go-between?"

The next morning, Kan Ze disguised himself as a fisherman, and rowed in a small sampan to Cao Cao's camp. He was arrested and taken before Cao Cao to whom he described how Huang Gai had been cruelly and publicly humiliated. To revenge, Huang Gai had vowed to retaliate by fighting on Cao Cao's side. Then he presented the letter from Huang Gai. "I'll come with my men, weapons, food supplies and my ships," he wrote.

Cao Cao read the letter from Huang Gai carefully, not once but more than ten times. Suddenly he slapped the table. "You may fool others, but you can't fool me," he said coldly. "The punishment he talks about is just a device to convince me of his sincerity. A good trick, but not good enough."

"Poor Huang Gai," laughed Kan Ze sarcastically. "He's wrong in his assessment of your capability!"

"Do you dare to insinuate that I'm not capable?"

"How can you be considered capable when you can't even tell the difference between a genuine offer to join you from a mere trick?"

Just then, an officer walked in, whispered to Cao Cao and presented him with a letter. From the pleased expression on Cao Cao's face as he glanced quickly over the paper, Kan Ze thought with relief: "Good! The report from his spies has come. Now he'll have no more doubts."

The letter was indeed from the two young Cais. Since what they wrote proved the authenticity of the bloody punishment, Cao Cao was willing to believe Huang Gai. "Will you return to tell him that he is to give us advance notice before he comes so that we will not treat him like an enemy?"

"Now that I've left, it'll be dangerous for me to return," declined Kan Ze. He feigned reluctance until he judged it was time to be convinced of the necessity of the task. He rowed back in his sampan and reported to Huang Gai. "Now I'll

call on Gan Ning to work a little more on the two young Cais who serve under him," said Kan Ze.

Kan Ze visited the tent of Gan Ning whom he knew was watched carefully by the two spies of Cao Cao. When he was sure they had approached close enough to eavesdrop, he complained loudly: "I'm horrified that Zhou Yu should insult you in front of everyone the way he chased you out of the assembly." To this Gan Ning only smiled and said nothing.

As Kan Ze anticipated, the two spies walked into the tent. Kan Ze signalled Gan Ning with a look. Pretending he did not see the spies, Gan Ning spat out his words with bitterness. "Zhou Yu has no respect for any one of us!" he shouted, pounding the table with his fist. "How can I ever hold up my head again after he has treated me thus?" Keeping up with the pretense, Kan Ze rushed over to stop him from further revelation as if warned by the sight of the two visitors. Gan Ning turned, saw the spies, and visibly restrained his anger. He sat with his head hanging down his chest.

"Is there anything the matter?" asked one of the spies.

"How can you know the pain in our hearts?" Kan Ze groaned and heaved a long sigh.

"Have you thought of deserting Wu to fight for Cao Cao?" the spy asked, feeling very clever.

Gan Ning rose swiftly and unsheathed his sword. "Our secret is out!" he cried, "I'll have to kill both of you."

"Wait!" exclaimed the two spies. "We can help you."

The revelation elated all of them so much that they called for wine and planned together on what they must do next. They agreed that the two Cais must write to Cao Cao and say Huang Gai and Gan Ning would use flags of Green Dragon to identify themselves when they were coming for their surrender.

The two spies were never to know that their clever espionage had backfired on them until they were killed.

Only the East Wind Is Needed

The conclusion to the Battle of Red Cliffs is an anticlimax because by the time fighting starts, there is no more element of surprise. How could the navy of Wu fail to win with Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu behind them?

The arrows they needed had been supplied by Cao Cao. The two most competent admirals of Cao Cao had been tricked into death. The spies Cao Cao sent had been made use of to testify the credibility of Huang Gai's betrayal, and through them, a message had been sent to Cao Cao to say Huang Gai would come when the time was appropriate. All that could be done had been done.

But if all was ready, then why did Zhou Yu suddenly cough blood and faint on his horse when he saw wind blowing on his flags?

It was said that sometime before Zhou Yu's fainting spell, he and Zhuge Liang had agreed each to write a word in their palms so that they could compare their own proposed strategy without influencing the other. The word turned out to be identical: "fire". Fire was what both had decided as the best weapon with which to annihilate the enemy.

As part of his plan, Zhou Yu once again manipulated his old schoolmate Jiang Gan who volunteered to pay Zhou Yu another visit when Cao Cao wished to ascertain whether the intended surrender of Huang Gai was genuine. How Cao Cao, one of history's most crafty politicians, could have trusted this foolish man, is another good example of how novelists take liberty with facts.

As it is told in *San Guo*, when Zhou Yu heard of Jiang Gan's arrival, he was overjoyed. "God sends this man to help me!" he cried. Lu Su was told to make the necessary arrangements while Zhou Yu went out of his tent to meet his old friend. "You've used me most unkindly," said Zhou Yu accusingly. "I thought of you as a brother, and that was why I entertained you and even got drunk on your account. But how did you repay my hospitality? You stole my confidential letter to show to Cao Cao and caused the death of my two trusted allies! I really ought to kill you, but for the sake of our past friendship I shall merely put you under house arrest till I've won the war."

Before Jiang Gan could protest, he was led away on a horse and taken to a remote monastery where he was guarded by two feeble old soldiers. That night, in a dejected mood, he strolled alone near the grounds of the monastery when he saw a light shining from one of the small cottages. He peeped in and saw a handsome scholar reading aloud a book on war strategy. Jiang Gan knocked on the door and was met by the scholar who introduced himself as Pang Tong (庞统).

"Not the famous Pang Tong!" exclaimed Jiang Gan. "What are you doing in a deserted cottage like this?"

"Zhou Yu is jealous of anyone who is more capable than he is," sighed Pang Tong. "I'm staying here only temporarily until I can find someone who can understand my talents better than Zhou Yu can."

Jiang Gan immediately offered to introduce him to Cao Cao. "In that case," suggested Pang Tong, "we must leave before Zhou Yu finds out."

With the familiarity Pang Tong had of the hillside, they escaped easily and reached Cao Cao's camp. Cao Cao was impressed by the knowledgeable Pang Tong who, after a guided tour of the fortifications, waved towards the direction of Wu and swore. "Zhou Yu! Zhou Yu!" he cried, "your death is certain once the battle begins!"

Under the intoxication of wine that night, Pang Tong idly asked, "Do you have good doctors in your navy?"

“Why do you ask?” said Cao Cao, surprised. Before long, he was confiding in Pang Tong that the seasickness of his sailors had indeed cut down the efficiency of his navy.

“I know of a way to solve that particular problem,” advised Pang Tong. “All you need to do is to line up thirty to fifty ships, side by side. You connect all their bows with iron chains. And you do the same with their sterns. When that is done, you put wooden boards between the ships as bridges so that soldiers can walk as if they are walking on land. Connected like this, the ships will be as steady as a fortress even during a storm. And yet, they can still sail up and down the river with speed and ease.”

Cao Cao accepted what he thought was an excellent idea and rushed his blacksmiths to chain the ships. The work was finished in one night. The ships were really as steady as Pang Tong said they would be. Having accomplished what he had come to do, Pang Tong begged for permission to leave, pleading that he could be of more use in persuading others in the service of Zhou Yu to join him. With Cao Cao's blessing and gratitude, he departed. What Cao Cao did not know was that Pang Tong had been placed in the cottage by Zhou Yu for Jiang Gan to find.

The reason why Zhou Yu went to such lengths to sell the idea of chaining the ships was because, in this manner, the ships would burn so much easier and faster when they are attacked by fire. It would seem indeed that he had meticulously planned every step of his campaign.

If so, why did he suddenly cough blood and faint when his face was accidentally brushed by the corner of a flag?

Because he was reminded that it was the season of west wind. How would the fire destroy the enemies if the wind blew away from them instead of towards them? He was carried back to his tent and given medical attention.

Some readers are skeptical. How could Zhou Yu not remember what sort of wind would be blowing in that particular season? It was, after all, his homeland. But how else was

the author to write in order to make Zhuge Liang more superior?

Zhuce Liang visited the patient with a prescription on which he wrote two short lines: "Ten thousand matters have been taken care of. Only the East Wind is needed." These words have long been quoted by Chinese speaking people to mean that only one crucial item was needed before complete success.

Since Zhou Yu had done everything he could, it was now time for Zhuge Liang to perform the finishing touch. This part of the story has delighted many readers, especially those in their early teens, but it fails to charm those who have grown up. It seemed Zhuge Liang had learned some special magic by which he could create a wind to blow in any direction he wished.

He built a tall pagoda of three tiers, on which twenty-eight men stood on the first tier, sixty-four on the second, four on the third and twenty-eight on the ground surrounding the pagoda, all holding flags of various astrological insignias. On the top of the pagoda, he let loose his long hair and paced in bare feet following some intricate patterns.

As Zhou Yu waited with his navy ready for assault, the East Wind came upon them near midnight. Zhou Yu took time out from his preoccupation with the battle to order the arrest of Zhuge Liang. However, by the time his officers rushed to the pagoda, Zhuge Liang had already left under the escort of his own people. "I know Zhou Yu would harm me," he told his pursuers as his voice floated over the surface of the water, "so I've arranged to leave on my own." His lieutenant shot one single arrow which broke the rope holding up the sail on the pursuing ship, causing it to slow down while the ship being pursued hoisted its own sail and vanished as magically as Zhuge Liang had created the East Wind.

In the meantime, Huang Gai, having notified Cao Cao in advance, sailed his twenty ships with the flags of Green Dragon proclaiming his goodwill. When they were allowed to

come close, the soldiers on board the ships threw flaming torches into the enemy vessels which were tied together by iron chains. Fire engulfed the ships and smoke smothered the sailors. Arrows killed those who were not burned. Cao Cao, with the assistance of his faithful officers, hastily left the ships to get ashore and rode away on their horses. The Battle of Red Cliffs had reached its predictable climax.

Red Cliffs of Su Dong Po

In my early teens, while accompanying my mother from Shanghai to Jiu Jiang (九江), we passed a section of the Yangtze River that looked as if it would sandwich our ship between two gigantic slabs of rough red stones. “Some people say,” my mother told me, “this is the famous Red Cliffs where Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang defeated Cao Cao. I understand there are two Red Cliffs, one where the battle was actually fought and the other where Su Dong Po (苏东坡) thought the battle was fought. I don’t know which one this is.”

My geography is even worse than that of my mother, but to me, as probably to Su Dong Po too, whose knowledge of geography seemed no better than mine, there is only one Red Cliffs which, wherever it may be geographically, is the stage where the drama of Zhou Yu, Zhuge Liang and Cao Cao unfolded. To some extent, my fascination for these heroes can be attributed to my reading of *San Guo Yan Yi*, but I am also influenced by the poetic imageries of Su Dong Po who wrote two poetic essays and one *ci* on this subject, although the place he toured might not have been the Red Cliffs where the actual famous naval battle took place.

The two essays, titled Odes to the Red Cliffs, have been compulsory reading for young scholars for centuries. It was in the First Ode to the Red Cliffs (前赤壁赋) that he lavished his sympathy on the aging Cao Cao.

He wrote that as he sailed on the river beneath the Red Cliffs with his friends, one of whom played a sad melody on a flute. He sat up straight and inquired why the music was

so sad. His friend explained by quoting two lines from a poem written by Cao Cao:

The moon (月) is bright (明),
The stars (星) are few (稀).
The black (乌) ravens (鹊)
Toward south (南) do fly (飞).

What the lines conveyed was the autumn scene Cao Cao saw from his warship as he prepared for battle: an evening sky so high, so clear, so wide that the southbound birds appeared lonely as they were silhouetted against the moon and the stars. It created the feeling of great expanse with a gentle note of sadness as if Cao Cao saw, at that moment, his greatness as well as his limitations.

“Is not this one of Cao Cao’s poems?” The friend continued as he looked around, “And is not this the place where he was defeated by Zhou Yu? When he wrote this poem, his army had won two major victories and he was sailing eastwards down the river for more conquest. His numerous ships stretched out for thousands of miles, and over his head, the canopies of flags waved as if to block the sun. Just imagine how he looked! Drinking wine as his ship glided over the water, and composing this very poem with his lance resting over his lap. Was not he the greatest of heroes of his time? And where is he now?”

In other words, the music had a right to be sad. Cao Cao (AD 155-220) was 53 years old at the time of the battle (AD 208) which was one of the biggest defeats in his life. This defeat did not diminish his importance as the liege lord of the north. He was to win and lose more, but his days of unchecked triumphs were over. In the next twelve years, he coveted the throne of the Han Emperor, but he satisfied himself with being the power behind the throne. However, his son and heir threw caution and pretenses to the wind and dethroned the Emperor. This son of his survived him by only six years. Their dynasty of Wei (魏) came to an abrupt end in AD 265, terminated by Sima Yan (司马炎), son of Cao Cao’s capable

general. In retrospect, the Battle of Red Cliffs (AD 208) signified the highest point of his colourful career. After that there was only decline.

If the fortune of Cao Cao was on the decline, the stars of Zhou Yu (AD 175–210) seemed to be just ascending. At 33, he was then at his prime. All the gods seemed to smile upon him, showering him with youth, beauty, power, the trust of his liege lord, obedience from his colleagues, and the perfect opportunity to prove his capability and worth.

Su Dong Po wrote a *ci*, to the tune of 念奴娇, in which the focus was on Zhou Yu. The following is an excerpt of that poem:

We looked at the ancient (故) fortress (垒) on the
west (西) bank (边)
Which people (人) said (道) was (是) where in the
days of the San Guo (三国),
Zhou (周) the Young (郎) had fought the Battle
of Red Cliffs (赤壁).
From the remote (遥) distance of time, I imagined
(想)
How Gong Jin (公瑾, another name of Zhou Yu)
must have looked
At that year (当年)
When Small (小) Qiao (乔) had just (初) married
(嫁了) him.
How heroic (雄) were his looks (姿) and how
magnificent (英) were his bursting (发) spirits!
With him was one who carried a feather (羽) fan
(扇)
And wore a headgear made of silken kerchief
(纶巾).
They talked (谈) and laughed (笑)
While (间) the formidable (强) enemies (虏)
Were burned to ashes (灰) which flew (飞) in the
sky,
And to smoke (烟) which gradually vanished
(灭) ...

No one could have painted more vividly this picture of a vigorous young man, handsome and successful, loved and respected, enjoying the victory for which he had worked so hard. Yet, like all readers of history, Su Dong Po knew that this vigorous young man had only two more years to live. Like a comet, he was shining brightest at the time of the Battle. And like a comet, his brilliance shone only fleetingly.

Zhou Yu was not just an admiral who won the Battle. In addition to being a scholar warrior, he was also a talented musician with the nickname of “the young Mr Zhou who turns to look whenever a melody is out of tune” (顾曲周郎). This nickname grew out of his reputation of turning around or looking up, even when he was preoccupied, when the musicians misplayed a note. Some even say that the girls who wanted to attract his attention would deliberately play or sing out of tune just to get him to look at them. Reading these lines of Su Dong Po, one feels it is almost unbearable that such an accomplished man should die at the height of his career. How one wishes that the Battle of Red Cliffs could be eternity for him so that he could remain forever young, vital and happy.

He “who carried a feather fan and wore a headgear made of silken kerchief” was meant to be Zhuge Liang (AD 181-234), since the fan and the silken kerchief were his trademarks. He was even younger than Zhou Yu at the time, being only 27. He was to live another twenty-six years, but his fate was even more tragic than that of Zhou Yu, though less romantic. At least Zhou Yu did not die with the anxiety and the frustrating knowledge that he had left the nation to those who were incompetent.

Zhuce Liang lived to be 53, but before he died, he was to suffer the bereavement of those closest to him. He was to lose Guan Gong (关公) in AD 219, Huang Zhong (黄忠) in AD 220, Zhang Fei (张飞) in AD 221, Liu Bei (刘备) in AD 223, Zhao Yun (赵云) in AD 229, Ma Chao (马超) in AD 233, etc. With very few of the old guards left to assist him in his support of Liu Bei's son, he found his task as difficult as “teaching a dog to stand up” because the minute one let go of

one's hand, the dog would go down on his four and would never stand up on its own. For eleven years he carried out this thankless job until he died in AD 234 from illness. How he must have looked at the Battle of Red Cliffs as the most joyous event in his celebrated life, when his liege lord was wise and his comrades cooperative!

To Sima Yan, the man who usurped the throne from the great-grandson of Cao Cao, Liu Bei's son surrendered in AD 263, followed by Sun Quan's son in AD 280. It was as if the Battle of Red Cliffs had never taken place. As Su Dong Po began his *ci*:

Great (大) river (江) toward east (东) flows (去).
Its waves (浪) sifted (淘) through all (尽) the
people thousand years ago (千古), even those of
heroic (风流) proportions (人物)!

From Here to Disappear

Should anyone ask me who in my opinion was the greatest of all Chinese poets I think I would be so preoccupied by technical and aesthetic issues that I would not know whom to nominate.

But if I were asked: “Suppose you are to be isolated in the arctic region for a whole year and could take only the works of one Chinese poet with you, whose will you take?” I will answer without any hesitation: “Su Dong Po (苏东坡).” It is difficult to explain my reasons in a few short sentences, but I know from my past experience that his poems can make me less sad, less earthbound whenever I feel I am sinking into a melancholy mood from which I need to lift up my spirits.

It has been said that as a politician or an economist, Su Dong Po was one of those stubborn conservative scholars who failed to grasp the importance of the liberal reform encouraged by the Emperor of his days. But even assuming he was shortsighted in not supporting the reform, we can at least say that he had the courage of his convictions because it was due to his criticism of the programme that he was arrested, put in jail, then demoted and exiled to provincial towns in southern China as a minor official.

Born in 1036, Su Dong Po was 32 years old when he found himself in disfavour. For 18 years thereafter, he was moved from one small city to another, until he was pardoned in 1086, when he was 50, to be recalled to the capital. But he was again demoted and exiled eight years later. Pardoned again in 1101 at the age of 65, he was probably quite feeble because he died shortly after in that same year. No one could

claim that he was successful as a politician or that he had any reason to be happy, considering how he was banished from the imperial court for a total of twenty-five years. But neither did he seem to have suffered much. He indulged in his drinking as well as in his supreme confidence that he was capable of expressing himself freely with any kind of writing. He wrote prose and both types of poems, *shi* (诗) and *ci* (词), but his prose read like poetry while some of his poems read sometimes like prose. It was this ability to write both prose and verse that enabled him to blaze out a new trail in the field of *ci* for others to follow. Saying whatever he wanted to say in whatever manner he chose, he broke away from the tradition of polished words and elegant allusions, and for this, he was both admonished and admired.

Those who admonished him thought him often unskilful in his word tones and crude in his choice of words, but those who admired him hailed him as a leader in the application of *ci*, raising it to a much broader and higher level of development.

Out of his many famous poems, I shall only use the following for an example, mainly because it contains the unrefined words and phrases, which his critics sneered at, but which has also bridged the gap of nine hundred years between the poet and his modern readers, since they make the poem easier to understand and thus easier to appreciate. It was written in 1082, composed to one of his favourite *diao* (调) called 临江仙 :

After a night (夜) of drinking (饮) I, Dong Po,
(东坡) seemed sober (醒) but was also (复)
drunk (醉).

When I returned (归), I arrived (来) vaguely (恍)
and probably (佛) after midnight

When the night watchman struck three (三) strokes
(更) on his gong,

My house (家) boy (童), whose nose (鼻) breath-
ing (息) was

Already (已) as loud as if thunder (雷) was
roaring (鸣),
Ignored my knocking (敲) on the door (门) so
completely (都) that
He would not (不) answer (应) even my calls.
Having failed to wake him, I leaned (倚) on my
cane (杖) and
Listened (听) idly to the river (江) whose sound
(声) called out to me.

For a long (长) time I had hated (恨) this (此) life
(生) of mine,
Because no (非) longer could I (我) claim it
belonged (有) to me.
What (何) time (时) would I be allowed to forget
(忘) and discard (却)
The tedious management (营营) of the daily
routines?
The night (夜) was late (阑), the wind (风) was
calm (静), and
The ripples (谷纹) on the river were smooth (平).
They all lured me to sail away in a little (小) boat
(舟),
From (从) here (此) I would disappear (逝),
So to the river (江) and later to the ocean (海),
I would entrust (寄) the remainder (馀) of my
existence (生).

As it was the custom of writing *ci*, the first half describes the scene while the second half voices the mood. He begins casually with drinking, a pleasurable pastime of his, but his genius is displayed in the usage of the word “复” which can mean “also”, “again”, “repeatedly”, etc. By inserting this faintly ambiguous word between “sober (醒)”, and “drunk (醉)”, he leaves the readers to decide whether the poet had become sober after being drunk but then got drunk again, or he was

half sober and half drunk all the while, or he thought he was sober and yet he knew he was drunk. In any case, he has created the vivid image of a man who was mentally sober but physically drunk, at least pleasantly tipsy.

The rest of the first half is easy to understand since the words used are plain and simple. As a result, the event described also seems ordinary and has probably taken place frequently, thus he succeeds in emphasizing his customary loneliness and his docile resignation to unopened doors. The total effect climaxes in the last line which reads like a stage setting, as if a single spotlight has focused on this man who stands next to a humble hut on the river bank. He leans on his cane, tired and alone, looks around him and up at the sky, and with the lucidity which crystallizes only after being drunk, he wonders why and what he has been doing with his life.

Beginning with the second half, his assessment of himself suddenly becomes so sharp that he cries out his frustration, not because of the exile or thwarted ambitions, but because his life has been frittered away by the meaningless, nitty-gritty, “busy-ness” (营营) of his daily routine. It is a complaint we have all shared at one time or another: meals to be cooked, floors to be swept, beds to be made, bills to be paid, forms to be filled, licenses to be applied ..., so when will we be able to do what we wish to do? Not that we know exactly what can be called meaningful, but we do get this urge to “get away from it all”. This too is what Su Dong Po is saying. His idea of an escape is to take a little boat and float down the river and then be engulfed by the ocean, never to appear again.

There is an anecdote connected with this poem. The governor of the province, whose duty was to watch over Su Dong Po, became alarmed by the rumour that the poet had committed suicide after this poem was written. Since in the Chinese language, verbs are never affected by their tenses, the last line could be easily taken to mean “... from this I will

disappear” instead of “... from this I would disappear”. When the governor hurried to see the poet, he found Dong Po fast asleep from the drinking of the night before.

That was typical of Dong Po and one of the reasons why I love his poems so much. He could write blithely about suicide with poetic abandon, if not with relish, while he continued to live on matter-of-factly. However, his poem gives his readers this momentary escape, this fleeting illusion of freedom, with which they manage to recover the delicate balance between rationality and irrationality so that they can plant their feet firmly, once more, on the ground.

Feng Zikai:

Old Customs

The art of painting had been revered by Chinese intellectuals for as far back as the day ink and brush were invented, but the application of drawings as cartoons was unknown in China until daily newspapers were introduced around the end of the last century.

Although there must have been many famous cartoonists, the one I admire most was Feng Zikai (丰子恺, 1898-1975), who was also a music professor and renowned prose writer. He is a little like James Thurber, except that Feng never wrote fiction. His cartoons are usually simple drawings which look as if they were done with Chinese brush, rendering his style quite distinctive.

One of his earliest cartoons is a pensive sketch called "Listen" (Fig. 1), showing a man resting his chin on his right elbow while his other arm wraps around his head. The expression is one of resigned attention as if the person is trapped to suffer the whole length of some dull discourse. It seems to me that this sketch represents the attitude of the cartoonist as he observed and recorded the life around him.

I have, for the convenience of presentation, divided his works into six categories: (1) Old customs that intrigued the cartoonist, (2) activities of children, especially that of his own, (3) observations of farm life, (4) observations of street scenes, (5) book illustrations, and (6) drawings for which he quoted famous lines from poems as subjects. He was a prolific artist. Limited by space, I regret we could not reproduce more of his drawings on these pages.



Fig. 1

Almost all his cartoons of old customs bring to us some nostalgia and warm humour, such as the man carrying practically a whole fortress of bamboo racks to sell his Chinese dumplings, or the woman raising high her leg so that she can use it to help her wind the thread from her mouth to her foot while her hands are busy twisting the cotton fibre into threads, or the peddler holding his tray of sugared rice-cakes on his head while his right hand fumbles to see where he can leave the support for his tray. But two of my favourites are the street barber (Fig. 2) and the candy man (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2

In Fig. 2, the concentration of the barber and the completely relaxed enjoyment of his bare-backed client are both made aptly expressive by the few bold strokes, but one is also attracted by his other details, such as the basin of water, the folded towel on the rack on which dangles a leather strap for sharpening razors, the little slab of mirror, and the wheels under the cart so that the barber is free to come and go to practise his trade. Can anyone fail to smile at the exquisite delight of an extremely fatigued man having the wax picked out from his ears?



Fig. 3

To appreciate Fig. 3, our modern readers may need a little explanation. The man holding the fan-shaped waffle iron makes his living by selling some kind of candy which he bakes over the fire. It is winter, but he is so warm from his labour that he has stripped off his coat which hangs behind him on the wall. To promote his business, he has set up a small roulette table on his other stand. The roulette is run by swinging the horizontal beam, one end of which is held by the boy wearing the black jacket while the other end has a small string, weighed down by a metallic clip so that it will come

to rest on or between the bars marked on the round table. The bars randomly indicated how many slices of candy one can win, the first prize being sixteen as the title of this cartoon loudly proclaims. If the clip falls between the bars, which is more often than not, the little gambler gets no candy or at the most only one piece, depending on the price of candies.

It may seem immoral to lure children to gamble on candies, but the candy man needs his business and the boys need their adventures. Look at the boy who is just about to give the beam a twirl and see how his mouth opens wide with anticipation. There is a gentle humour in portraying the child as the man he will some day become.

Feng Zikai not only found children amusing but he understood and respected them. We will show more of his cartoons in this category.

Feng Zikai:

Young Children

The humour of Feng Zikai is probably best shown in his cartoons of children whom he loved with tender affection and understood with sensitive perception.

From his hundreds of cartoons depicting the adventures and misadventures of childhood, I have chosen the one titled “!?” (Fig. 4) as my favourite. The child has evidently, in his spirit of investigation, just taken out the second of two birds from the cage. One bird is still being held tightly in his right hand but the other on the table, alas, seems to be dead. The child looks bewildered, not comprehending what has happened to the lovely bird whose songs have intrigued him only a few minutes ago.

It never occurs to him that his fumbling grip has choked the life from the bird since he does not even know what death is. He only knows that he loves the bird, but how can he know that even love can destroy? The title is appropriately an exclamation followed by a question mark. Being too young to put his feelings into words, his astonishment is his exclamation, and his perplexity, his question.

I have seen the same frowns on the faces of my little niece and nephews. Once was when I found six silkworms neatly torn into twelve fragments by a little girl of five, who explained she only wanted to see what made them spin silk. The other occasion was when my nephew of four years old had resolutely plucked the two bulging eyes off my gold fish! It was because the children did not know what cruelty was that they could commit cruel acts in innocence.



Fig. 4

The humour is less macabre in Fig. 5. It shows the girl in the act of putting the fourth shoe on the leg of a stool, which already has three shoes on its other legs. The attentive expression on the child's face shows that she is totally engrossed in her nursing task, even looking at the stool sideways as if she wants to see how the stool feels, much the same way her mother looks at her when shoes are being put on her.

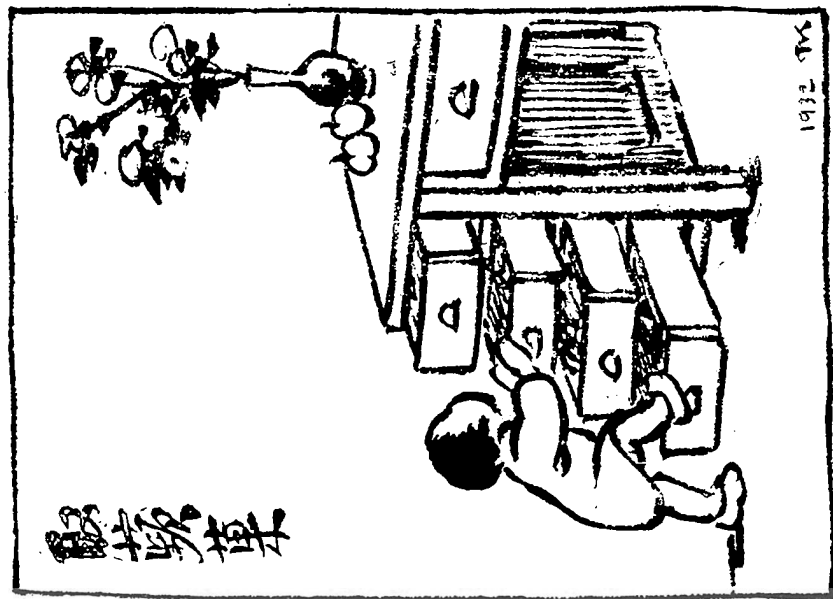


Fig. 6

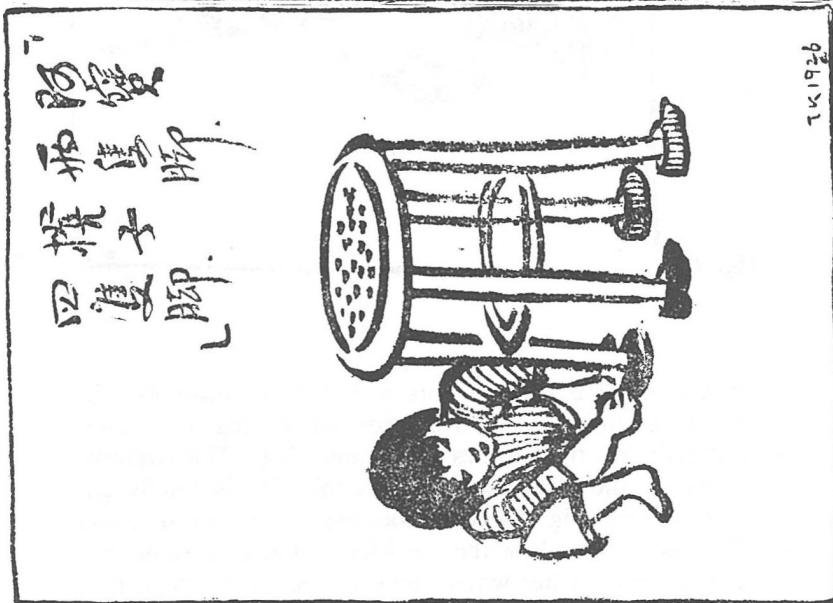


Fig. 5

阿嬤
西隻腳
梳子
四隻腳

阿嬤
西隻腳
梳子
四隻腳

The artist took this scene from real life, the girl in the picture being his own daughter. The title is taken from the triumphant cries of the child, whose name is "A-Bao", after she has succeeded in making her stool wear shoes. It says: "A-Bao has two feet, the stool has four!"

Feng also appreciated the mischievous side of children. In one cartoon (Fig. 6) is shown a little girl opening drawers of a desk, pulls out each one slightly more extended than the one above, forming a ladder on which she has climbed up just within reach of an apple on the desk top. Another shows a toddler, having squeezed out a large tube of toothpaste on the table, puckering his face at the taste of it. I like particularly the one of a little boy riding on an imaginary bicycle using two large round fans for his wheels. I can go on raving about his cartoons but they really must be seen to be admired.

Take the one entitled "Pulling a rickshaw" (Fig. 7). The boy in stripes holds under his arms the feet of another boy, imitating the rickshaw men he sees on the street. He is happy in his labour as we can see from his laughing and victorious face. The chair looks like a rattan one, which means it is quite light or light enough for a hefty boy of six to drag it for one foot or two. This is part of the reason he is so happy because his "rickshaw" is actually moving.

The boy who is his "rickshaw", however, realizes miserably that his head is about to land on the floor, a fate he is desperately trying to avoid by clinging onto the arms of his chair. I like this drawing because I can still remember how it had felt to pull and to be pulled. I suppose it was a game played in every household as long as when there were hordes of rickshaws to be seen. All we needed for play in our days was a little imagination.

Feng Zikai was an author of nearly a hundred books, some on music, some on art, and some were translated novels, but his short articles make the best reading, especially those on little children. In 1928, he wrote: "Lately my heart is completely occupied by four things: God and stars in the sky, art and children on the earth." From his writings, we also



Fig. 7

know him as the gentle soul who could happily spend a whole morning just to cheer a row of ants transporting one little grain of rice. He had the simplicity of a child, and it takes one child to understand another.

Feng Zikai:

Farm Life

In one of his articles, Feng Zikai explained how he came to name his home “Yuan Yuan Tang” (缘缘堂): “In 1926 ... I wrote out many words I liked, each on a separate slip of paper, and tossed them in front of Buddha’s image. Then I randomly picked out one word; it turned out to be *yuan*. I picked out a second, again it was *yuan*.” The word *yuan* in the vocabulary of Chinese Buddhists, to be very brief, implies that every chance encounter is predestined. The manner in which he was inspired to name his home as well as the name itself both highlighted his philosophy in life.

He took the same attitude in choosing subjects for his cartoons, especially those of farm life and street scenes. Whatever injustice and misery he saw and drew, he was protesting, but he was not rebelling.

Farmers and their women who raise silkworms live a strenuous life because the silkworms are voracious eaters and susceptible to infectious diseases. They must be provided with mulberry leaves constantly, day and night, and as they grow at varying speed, they must be separated continuously according to sizes. Their general conditions must be checked, and symptoms of sickness must be closely watched. The peasant women get no rest at all during the season.

Take the cartoon of the girl holding up a candle to inspect her worms (Fig. 8). We see only one tray, but as a matter of fact, she probably has hundreds or thousands of trays of worms that are not shown in the cartoon. Her hair is uncombed, her long trousers are folded up to her knees —

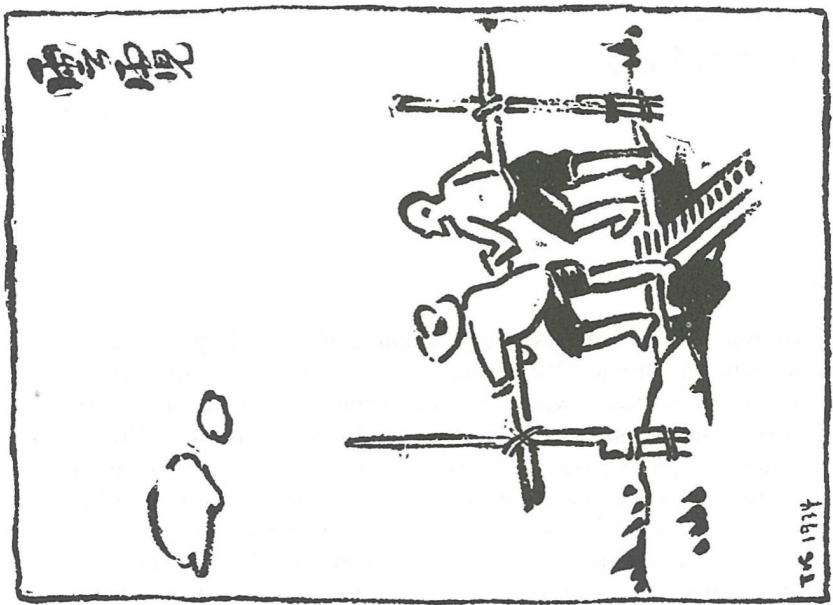


Fig. 9

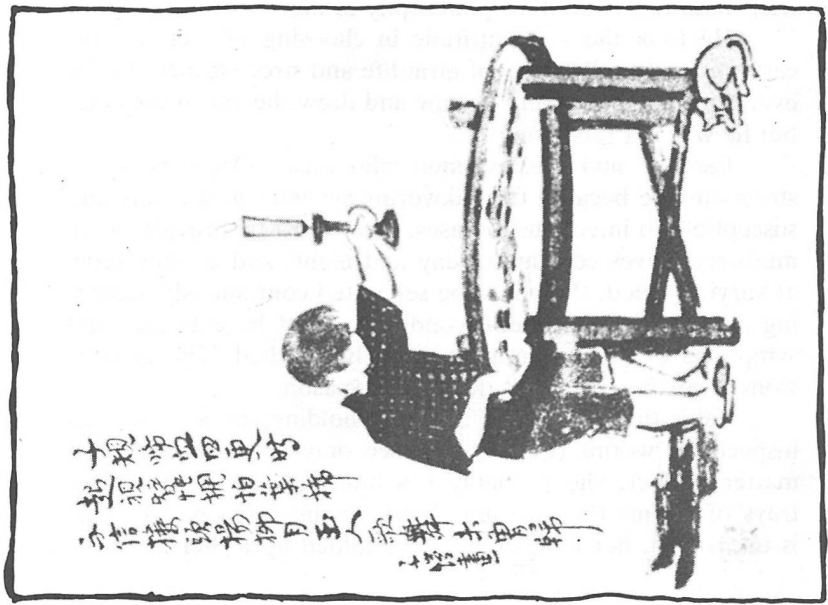


Fig. 8

the sure sign of a peasant woman in the midst of hard labour. She only has her slippers on, and she wears her overblouse sloppily as if she has no time to spare on buttons. A little cat, by contrast, is dozing snugly at the side.

At the corner of the drawing, the artist quoted a poem which sympathised with the girl who must wake up at early dawn to see whether the worms were too crowded or the leaves were sufficient, while women of leisure had not yet returned from their pleasure-seeking parties. Feng Zikai was protesting, but he was not rebellious.

The second cartoon of farm life I have chosen is entitled “云霓” (Fig. 9) for which my best translation is “Rainbow-cloud”. This kind of cloud reflects the colours of the rainbow and is said to bring rain. The artist described the circumstances under which he took up his brush: “It had not rained for two months People told one another in distress: ‘If no rain comes for another ten days, it will be drought ...’ They felt encouraged when they saw the rainbow-cloud at the far corner of the sky Unfortunately the clouds were scared away They had to continue to rely on themselves” The drawing is a graphic record of that event.

The farmers in the cartoon are anxiously looking at the sky where two small clouds are approaching while they tread on the wheels that are to draw up whatever scanty water into their parched paddy fields. One man feels so hot under the merciless sun that he has discarded his tunic; the other fears the sun so much that he keeps his hat on. The bare-bodied man is still stepping hard on the paddle, leaning on the bar for extra strength, but the man with the hat seems resigned to his fate.

Sometimes Feng Zikai gently teased the literary world by juxtaposing quotations from poems with scenes of real life. In the case of the farmers planting seedlings (Fig. 10), he borrowed a famous line from a love poem which lamented ... (since our parting, I am feeling sad whenever), in the morning breeze, the moon lingers over the top of willow trees as I stand at the river bank.” All the elements of the poem are in



Fig. 10

the cartoon: the morning breeze, the lingering moon, the willow on the banks, but the farmers are not wasting time moaning over their lost love.

In the drawing, the moon is seen descending, so we know it is early morning. Both farmers are wearing hats, suggesting they intend to work throughout the day. The paddy fields are covered ankle deep with water, since it is seedling transplanting time, so the willow looks as if it is standing on a river bank. The dancing willow indicates the presence of morning breeze. The cottages, at least I think they are cottages, look like black dots in the distance, giving the viewer the feeling that it is the bewitching hour when objects cannot be clearly seen. Again, it is a form of protest, but hardly a rebellion.

As a Buddhist, he had compassion, and as a Buddhist, he was resigned to life's injustice.

Feng Zikai:

Street Scenes

Some of the best cartoons Feng Zikai produced were the glimpses of life which he caught as he roamed the streets. Glimpses though they were, the cartoonist always utilized his insight of the people and his knowledge of their background to present them with poignancy.

For instance, there is one drawing called "The Guide" (Fig. 11) depicting a child leading a blind man by a stick. Any tourist will be moved by the sight of such a vulnerable pair struggling against the perils of the world, but it takes the sensitive eye of the cartoonist to evoke more sympathy by registering the sharp details. The child cannot be more than six years old and yet he has a sad face which looks older than his age. The blind man, probably the child's grandfather, wears a tattered old robe and hugs a partly hidden Chinese violin with his right arm, while his left hand grips the stick. His shoulders are slouched, as if he is weighed down by defeat, and his steps seem uncertain and feeble. The cap he has on, round like the shell of a half melon, is worn in China only by men of letters. That he wears such a cap shows he has never done and will never be able to do any hard physical labour. The violin he carries says he is too proud to consider himself a beggar, so he sells his music to those who are kind enough to throw him a coin or two. From what height has he fallen? To what depth will he continue to fall? After an unfruitful day, the two of them are returning to a place which they probably cannot even call their own.

During the thirties, poverty was prevalent in China.



Fig. 11

Many mothers had to give away their newborn infants. In Fig. 12, one such mother, seemingly young and healthy, is taking a last lingering look at her baby just before she is to push it into the receptacle of an orphanage. On top of the receptacle are written the helpful but impersonal words: "Infants to be deposited here."

Usually a mother had three choices in dealing with an unwanted child. She could suffocate or drown it; she could abandon it somewhere, hoping the child might survive long enough to be found and adopted; or she could walk a long

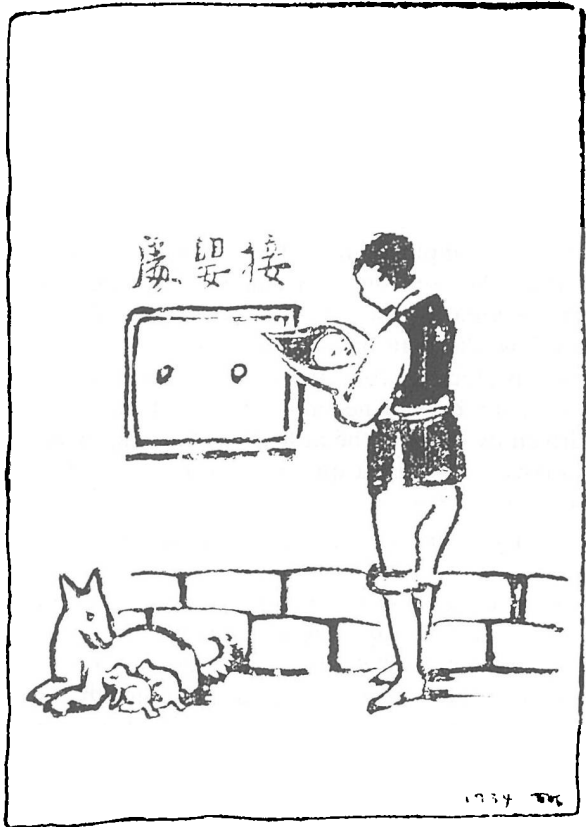


Fig. 12

and lonely journey to the nearest town that could boast of such a receptacle, as shown in the picture, where the child might have a better chance to live.

The mother in the drawing has chosen the third option. With her trousers rolled up, her jacket patched, she is a peasant who has trodden many fields in her bare feet to reach the orphanage. The cartoon has caught her at her most traumatic moment. The baby is still in her arms; there is still time to change her mind, but can she afford to do so? If she does not change her mind, the child will have a chance to live,

but can she, as a mother, bear the sorrow of never holding it again? If she does change her mind and keep the infant, will she ever forgive herself to watch it starve? How many tears must be splattering down the face of the sleeping child! Unperturbed, a bitch is sitting contentedly with her puppies who have plenty of milk to suck. Are beasts more fortunate than human beings?

Some young mothers travelled to the city seeking domestic employment to help those she had left behind at the village. We see such a woman in Fig. 13. She has come to a professional scribe to write her husband a letter. One can see how the man behind the make-shift table is comparatively well protected from the cold weather. Although he too is poor, for he will never have braved the weather if he is not driven by poverty, he at least wears a cap which can flap down to cover his ears, a quilted robe two sizes too big and a long scarf around his neck.

By contrast, the poor woman whose trousers have patches is wearing only a sleeveless jacket over her thin cotton tunic. She is hugging herself while humbly telling the scribe what to say, beginning with "A-San my husband ...". One wonders what else is she going to tell her man. Will she report that she has found a job and that money will soon be sent next payday to buy medicine for their sick child? Or will she beg him to be more patient as she is yet to find a family who wants her service? Or will she ask about those whom she yearns to see and to hug before her voice chokes over the names?

Being a stoic Chinese woman, she will never tell him the truth: that she is cold, hungry, homesick, lonely and wants to be back in the village. She will merely stand, trembling in her thin clothes, holding back her tears, feeling that much closer to home just because the letter is a link between her and her family.

It is, I think, in these street scenes so simple and pathetic that Feng Zikai reached the zenith of his art.



Fig. 13

Feng Zikai:

Illustrations for Books and Poems

Of all the cartoons drawn by Feng Zikai, the ones I like the least are his book illustrations.

When he could choose his own materials, Feng was master of his art, but when he tried to illustrate a story with which he could not entirely identify, his brush seemed to have failed him. What made his illustrations more difficult to succeed was that he had chosen the novels and short stories of Lu Xun (鲁迅). *The Biography of Ah-Q*, for instance, had been so widely read that readers had inevitably formed their own preconceived images of the characters, so there must be as many different images of Ah-Q as there were readers. If so, then how could any illustrator hope to satisfy all the readers?

Another reason for his failure is because his temperament and beliefs differed vastly from that of Lu Xun. As a Buddhist, Feng was compassionate and sympathetic about the woes in life, whereas Lu Xun was furious, frustrated and sarcastic about the injustices. Feng was a mild protester, but Lu Xun was a rebel. As a result, Feng did not know how to deal with the anger and ugliness found in the writings of Lu Xun.

For the *Biography of Ah-Q* alone, Feng drew about fifty pictures, but none of them coincided with my conception of Ah-Q. It is true that no one loves Ah-Q, who represents everything that is greedy, mean, cowardly, vain, boastful, gullible, ignorant, stupid ... and all that is distasteful. Yet, there are moments when one wants to weep for him because

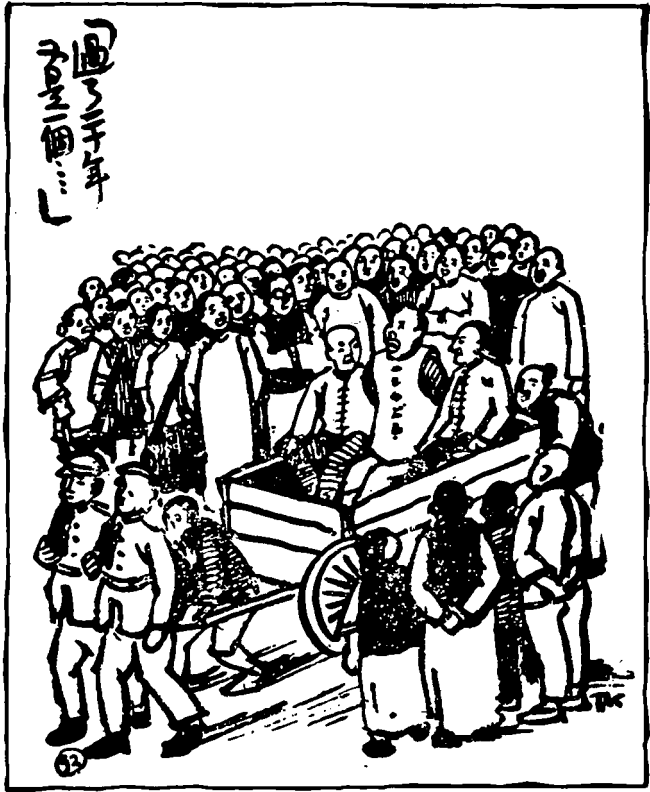


Fig. 14

he is a victim of that part of our traditional values that has grown rotten. Feng Zikai did not seem able to cope with all the complex feelings which the author must have felt toward his Ah-Q. Perhaps no cartoonist can.

I have chosen his sketch which shows Ah-Q on his way to his public execution (Fig. 14). According to Lu Xun, Ah-Q failed even to do this last act of bravado correctly when he thought he ought to shout something about returning in his next life the way his hero did, but he could not remember enough to complete the sentence. It was silly. It was also pathetic. But Feng only drew an impassive crowd watching

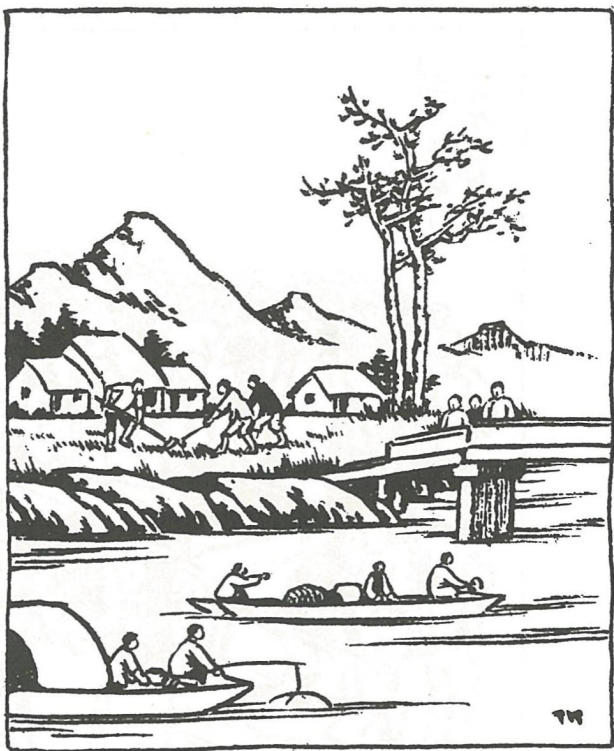


Fig. 15

a thick-lipped man in a cart. I must admit that I did not feel at all moved.

When the illustration calls for a rustic scene as in the story of *Village Opera*, also by Lu Xun, Feng could surpass the author in conveying the tranquillity and peace of the rural life in Fig. 15, farmers are tilling the land, the boats transporting cargo and people, some fishermen dropping or lifting their nets, and children watching on the bridge. One of the children is Lu Xun as a boy, but the trees, the cottages, the mountains, and the river banks belong to Feng Zikai.

Without any doubt, Feng had his limitations. He was not the kind of poet who wrote poems, but he had the soul of a poet which surfaced in his drawings. He excelled when



Fig. 16

he caught a brief mood and expanded it into a short story as in his cartoons on street scenes. But he was no novelist, dexterous in the handling of complex human emotions. Nor was he a stage dramatist who instinctively knew how to build up human conflicts to a tremendous climax.

His was the modern application of Oriental art in which the human being complemented Nature, but never dominated it. In his cartoons, it is how a man reacts to his surroundings that is the essence of the picture, not the man himself. See the man who looks back at the mountain from the other bank of the river (Fig. 16)? This picture appears on the cover of one of his books and many people feel it was probably one of his best.

The two lines on the picture are:

I (我) wish (欲) to cross (渡) the river (河)

But the river (河) has no (无) bridge (梁).

How I wish (愿) to change (化) myself into a
yellow (黄) crane (鹤)

So that I could return (归) to my home village
(故乡).

The man is a peasant travelling with a cloth bundle in his left hand and a wide brimmed straw hat on his back. He is looking at the mountain as the hint of a bird flies over the moonlit river. The man's face can hardly be seen, but his stance is that of a docile man, very oriental in his resignation, wishing in vain for what he knows is impossible. It is not merely an illustration for a poem. The cartoonist had expanded the mood of the poem by portraying graphically the hopelessness of the longing with the bird, the mountain, the river, and the resigned stance of the farmer.

It has been pointed out that Feng Zikai loved to make animals in his cartoons do what human beings could not do. For instance, in the cartoon where the woman is about to give away her baby, there is a bitch contentedly allowing her puppies to suckle. It is as if the dog is asking whose fault is it that the human mother cannot feed her child. In the cartoon of the girl tending silkworms, a cat can be seen napping under the table, serving as a reminder that all creatures ought to be resting. In this drawing of a man gazing at the mountain, there is again the bird fulfilling the dream of the man.

Although he did not do justice to Lu Xun's stories, no one could surpass Feng Zikai when it came to taking a familiar quotation from a poem and translating its mood into a picture. Some of the cartoons of this mode make us smile with understanding, but some others make us feel we want to burst out with tears. When a cartoonist can move his readers like this, his art leaves nothing more for us to say.

Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!

I like to tell a love story which many romantic readers still think of as true despite the repeated denials of historians.

It is true that Lu You (陆游, 1125-1210), one of the famous poets of the Song Dynasty, married his cousin, Tang Wan (唐琬), and it is also true that he later divorced her because of the pressure exerted on him by his mother. What we cannot know is whether he and his former wife were still very much in love after their divorce and their subsequent remarriages to others.

According to the romantic version, one day in 1156 when Lu You was 31 and already divorced, he went picnicking in the garden of a monastery, as was the fashion of those days for intellectuals to do so in spring. There he chanced to meet his first wife, with whom he could only exchange looks. Madam Tang, with the permission of her second husband, sent Lu You a hamper of food and wine.

When Lu You received the gift, he could only gaze numbly at the familiar sight of food he once knew so well. Impulsively, he wrote the following *ci* on the white wall of the temple:

I can see nothing but the vision of those pink (红)
and soft (酥) hands (手),
Preparing this huang-teng (黄滕) wine (酒).
When I finally looked up, all over (满) the city
(城)

Are spring (春) colours (色) while over the palace-like (宫) walls (墙), the willow (柳) looks green.

But how the east (东) wind (风) blows — so harshly (恶) that it has sliced

Our happiness (欢) and love (情) to such thinness (薄)!

Leaving me only with a (一) heart (怀) heavy with sad (愁) feelings (绪),

Caused by the last few (几) years (年) of separation (离) from you and the searching (索) of you.

It is all wrong (错), wrong (错), wrong (错)!

The spring (春) is like (似) what it has always been in the old (旧) days,

But the people (人), such as you and I,

Have only wasted (空) ourselves and become so haggard (瘦).

My tears (泪), stained (痕) red (红) by my heart's blood,

Soak (邑) the mermaid's (鲛) handkerchief (纱) thoroughly (透).

The petals of peach (桃) blossoms (花) have fallen (落)

And other visitors have left, emptying (闲) the areas

Around the ponds (池) and under the temple towers (阁).

My love is as everlasting as the mountains (山) in my pledge (盟) to you.

But although (虽) it is still in (在) my heart,

How can I tell it to you by brocade (锦) letter (书)

Now that it is so difficult (难) to deliver (托)?

It is no-more (莫), no-more (莫) no-more (莫)!

In the first half of the poem, Lu You said he was struck dumb by the sight of the hamper in which the wine was only too familiar to him. From the wine, he saw vividly the hands which prepared it. For a moment, he was lost in his memories. By the time he looked up, he saw that spring had taken possession of the city, with willows looking so green. But, he said, beautiful though the spring was, he remembered how harshly the east wind had blown, insinuating that happy though their marriage was, he remembered how his mother had forced them to separate. Now that they had parted for years, he knew by the longing in his heart that the divorce was all “wrong, wrong, wrong!”

In the second half, the poet described that, should he weep, his tears would be stained red by his heart’s blood and they would soak thoroughly his handkerchief. When he finally woke up from his daze, he noticed that the garden was deserted by other pleasure seekers. The fallen petals of peach blossoms implied emptiness of time, and the desolate ponds and towers suggested emptiness of space. His heart was just as empty. He stood alone, regretting how, in spite of his previous vows to be faithful to his love, he had abandoned her. He wanted to tell her this regret, but he knew it could never be done because he could no longer trust his words. All that had been between them was now “no-more, no-more, no-more!”

A poem written on the wall of a public place could hardly be expected to go unnoticed. Madam Tang came to know of it and was said to have written the following *ci* in reply, using the same rhymes:

In this world (世), sentiments (情) have always
been thin (薄), and human (人) relationships
(情) harsh (恶)

The rain (雨) bids farewell (送) to the yellow (黄)
dusk (昏) and falls upon the flowers (花) to
make their petals easily (易) fall (落) off.

The dawn (晓) wind (风) dries (乾) my tears
(泪), but traces (痕) of them remain (残).

Even if I wish (欲) to write you a letter (笺) to
 pour out my heart (心) and those matters
 (事) only you and I know,
 I can only stand alone (独) and murmur (语) while
 leaning (倚) on the railing (阑) of my window.
 To speak is hard (难), hard (难), hard (难)!
 As people (人), you and I have grown (成) apart
 (各), because today (今) is no (非) longer
 the same as yesterday (昨).
 My sickly (病) soul (魂) has been (尝) like (似)
 the swing (秋千) whose ropes (索) dangle.
 The bugle (角) sounds (声) cold (寒), telling me
 the night (夜) has very little left (阑珊).
 Fearing (怕) other people (人) may find (寻) me
 sad and ask (问) me why,
 I swallow (咽) my sobs (泪) to pretend (装) gaily
 (欢).
 To live, I can only pretend (瞒), pretend (瞒),
 pretend (瞒)!

Perhaps it is because of my difficulty in understanding some portions of the poem that I feel this second one lacks the genuine sorrow displayed in the first one. In the first half, the poet said human relationships had always been fragile. It seemed as if she had been weeping since the evening before, while watching the rain making the petals fall. And her weeping had not stopped even at dawn. Her tears had been so copious that the wind could not dry all of them. She too wished to express the sorrow in her heart, but she knew it would be most difficult to do so, as it would be against the laws of the society. Thus she stood alone, leaning on the railing, gazing blankly into the greying sky, and moaned that for her to speak was "hard, hard, hard!"

She faced reality squarely in the second half, pointing out that they were two different people and had gone their different ways. I must admit that I am not at all clear about

the line that closely followed. What did the poet mean by “秋千”? The proper word for a swing should be “鞦韆”, but it is often abbreviated as “秋千”, as it appears in this poem. Since “索” can mean “rope”, the three words combined may take to mean “the ropes of a swing”, but did they really mean that? The word “秋” can mean “autumn”, and “千” can mean “thousand”, therefore “秋千” can mean “a thousand autumns” and not a swing. In that case, “索” will not mean a “rope” but can be read by its other meaning of “to search”. Thus, the three words combined may mean “a thousand autumns of searching”.

As if that is not confusing enough, we still have the ambiguous word of “尝” which means “to taste”, “to try”, and even “often”. Putting this word in front of the other three uncertain words of “秋千索” can be taken to mean “my sickly soul is like the dangling rope of a swing”, but it can also mean “in my sickness, my soul has the sad experience of one who wanders in autumn nights with a thousand memories to seek.” But what exactly did the poet mean? All I can say is that better scholars than I have been puzzled by it.

The bugle which usually told time in those days sounded cold in the morning air, signifying day was soon to break and night had very little left. Sad though she was, having wept all night from dusk to dawn, she knew she must pretend that she had not been affected by his poem, thus she must act as if she was quite cheerful. From now on, she realized it was to be pretense all the time.

The line about “the night has very little left” is supposed to suggest that Madam Tang knew she had not long to live. According to some writers, she died shortly after the poem was written.

Historians are always merciless in killing romantic notions. Some say that Lu You did not write his poem to his first wife but to another woman whose identity is not known. Others say that the second poem was not written by his wife but by someone else who, with a dramatist’s insight, imagined how Madam Tang must have felt. Whatever really happened,

I am glad to say that this second poem has earned itself a place in literature because nearly all books, if they include the first poem by Lu You, invariably mention the second one in their footnotes and sometimes even print it in its entirety.

It proves, if anything, that people generally prefer a touch of romance to be swallowed with hard facts.

Mould a Likeness of You

To find a love poem in Chinese literature that is not dripping with tears is about as difficult as searching for a Walt Disney film that is not packed with music.

On the whole, Chinese poets loved sadness. Unless a poem was tinged with the grey tone of sorrow, it was not considered poetic. Thus, when they wrote about love, their sentiments were nearly always weighed down by grief instead of soaring high with joy.

However, the following is one of those rare ones that speak gaily of love. It was written by Zhou Bangyan (周邦彦, 1057-1121).

In the last few (几) days (日) since (来) we have met;

We've really (真个) been drunk (醉) with wine and love.

We know not (不知道) how, outside the window (窗外), the confusion (乱) of red (红) petals has already (已) piled to the depth (深) of half (半) a finger (指).

All we see, lying in our bed, is the shadow of flowers (花影) blown by (被) the wind (风), shaking (摇) as if they'll scatter (碎) on the window pane.

Holding (拥) snugly on to my mood, fresh as spring (春), dizzy as wine (醒),

When I'm just (乍) about to rise (起) I find I have
 (有) a (个) dearly loved person (人人)
 Endowed with (生得) such beauty (清楚),
 Who slithers (来) toward (向) me and into my
 ear (耳畔), whispers to ask (问道):
 This (今) morning (朝) — are we to say we're
 awake (醒) or not (未)?
 Her manners (情性儿), so languid (慢腾腾地)
 arouses (恼得) in me (人) again (又)
 The urge to get drunk (醉).

The poem is an interesting one. Its style is clever, its words colloquial, and its content sensual. My adjective for it is “cute” because it is rather shallow.

On the other hand, there is another poem, written by a woman, that is very different from the usual sensual but shallow ones penned by men. Its language is plain but direct, its emotion is subtle but passionate. The poet is known as Guan Zhongji (管仲姬) or “second daughter of Guan”. Her husband was Zhao Mengfu (赵孟兆, 1254-1322), the famous painter and calligraphist of Yuan Dynasty.

Either he was truly envious of other men who had taken concubines, or he enjoyed teasing his wife, he playfully proposed to take a mistress by writing the following poem to his wife to argue his case:

I (我) am (为) a Scholar (学士) of high repute,
 You (尔) are (作) a Lady (夫人) of noble rank.
 Haven't you heard (岂不闻) that Scholar Wang
 (王学士) had (有) his Peach Leaf (桃叶) and
 Peach Root (桃根),
 And Scholar Su (苏学士) had his Morning Cloud
 (朝云) and Evening Cloud (暮云),
 So even if I (我便) should take a few more (多娶
 几个) maidens of Wu (吴姬) and girls of Yue
 (越女),
 Surely it can't be said I'm over indulging (无过份).

After all, your (尔) years (年纪) are already (已)
more (过) than forty (四旬),
Why must you still monopolize (只管占住) all the
spring in the Jade Hall (玉堂春)?

In the above poem, the word “scholar” is a loose translation for “学士” which was the official title shared between the poet and the other men mentioned in the poem, whose concubines were named Peach Leaf, Peach Root, etc. The regions of Wu and Yue were famous for the beauty of their women, whose softly spoken dialect especially qualified them for the roles of courtesans. After he had presented his case with this poem, what did he expect his wife to do?

His wife, Guan Zhongji wrote the following in reply:

You (你) call me ‘thee’ (依), and I (我) you ‘thou’
(依),

How very (感刹) loving (情多) we are.

Our love (情) is deep in so many (多) ways
(处), as hot (热) as (似) fire (火).

Let’s take (把) a (一) lump (块) of clay (泥),

And mould (捻) a (一个) likeness of you (你),

Then shape (塑) a (一个) likeness of me (我).

And then we’ll bring (将) the likeness of us (咱)
two (两个)

Together (一起), to be beaten (打) until they’re
both broken (破).

We shall use (用) some water (水), to mix (调)
and combine (和) these fragments.

Again (再), we’ll mould (捻) another (一个) you
(你)

Again (再), we’ll shape (塑) another (一个) me
(我).

There, look at my (我) clay (泥) and see how
inside (中) it, I’ll have (有) you (你),

And look at your (你) clay (泥) and see how inside
(中) it, you’ll have (有) me (我).

I (我), with (与) you (你), will share ,
When alive (生), the same (同) blanket (衾)
And in death (死), the same (同) casket (廓).

I think the husband half expected this reply because, of all people, he must have been aware of the devotion of his spouse. If not, he would not have bothered to ask her. It is even likely that he was so proud of her love that he showed her poem to his friends, since there was no other way for it to have become public. And his friends, in appreciation, must have circulated it among themselves until it was passed down to us.

It is well worth the time and energy spent in circulating this poem for it is a masterpiece of simplicity. It does not defend her monopolizing the affection of her husband, nor does it bombast the immorality of polygamy. It simply speaks of a love so intense that it excludes anyone else. In doing so, the lady showed herself not only as an object to be loved but an equal partner in the act of loving.

To his credit, Zhao Menfu gave up any further plan of obtaining a concubine. Was ever a love poem more effective?

Confucius and Learning

Confucius, like many of us who are only ordinary people, had a great deal to say on almost every subject. However, considering how the world has changed in the past 2500 years since the time he roamed China on an ox cart, followed by his disciples, trying to sell his theories to kings and princes, it is amazing that most of his advice is still applicable today.

Basically, he was interested in the definition of a *Jun Zi* (君子) and in the benign politics of the ruling class. I cannot think of a corresponding word in English for *Jun Zi*, having rejected such terms as gentleman, nobleman, educated man, civilized man, cultured man. How can any one word, in a different language at that, be used to substitute what took Confucius four big volumes to explain? Perhaps it is more appropriate to assemble all the virtuous adjectives together, like compassionate, faithful, truthful, kind, intelligent, just, sympathetic, and whatever word anyone wishes to add to the list, and define them as prerequisites of a *Jun Zi*. As for his advocacy of benign kingship, I shall leave that laboursome task to modern economists and political philosophers to wrangle over their views and untangle their disagreements from their agreements.

What interests me, at this point, is what he says about learning and the process of learning which has little to do with *Jun Zi* or benign politics. The book of *Lun Yu* (论语) begins its very first line with: “Confucius says, to learn and to review frequently what has been learned — is not that a great pleasure?” (子曰，学而时习之，不亦说乎)。On another occasion, he says: “To review what is old is to know what is

new ” (温故而知新). To him, the act of absorbing knowledge is not sufficient, one must be able to digest by studying over and over again what has already been learned because it is only then that the mind will begin to search for what one does not yet know and hopefully will find new answers. His advice seems to have been heeded by Charles Darwin. How many years did Darwin take to compile his findings at Galapagos, and how long did he scrutinize his data and ponder over the process of natural selection before he, trained to be a clergyman, was certain enough to revoke the teachings of Genesis and arrive at his theory of evolution?

I support the Confucian principle of reviewing knowledge, but I am somewhat surprised that our teachers of *Lun Yu* often ignore the importance of the word “pleasure” included in Confucius’ advice. I do not believe the word is accidental. I think it is meant to be emphasized. If taught with pleasure, the student will learn with pleasure, and once he is excited by the pleasure of learning, his appetite for knowledge will be whetted. They can be led to learn and to analyze facts, to contemplate and probe theories, and to be eager to search on their own for more facts and more theories.

If anyone asks me which subjects in school do I consider a waste of time, I shall promptly reply: “Those I was made to memorize without understanding.” Of those I did not understand, geography was the worst for me.

I had the misfortune of having a geography teacher with a pinched mouth, who never troubled himself to make the cities alive with history and people, or to make the rivers real with descriptions of ships loaded with cargoes, or to explain the function of majestic mountains as natural boundaries between nations. All he expected from us was to regurgitate the size of populations, the length of rivers, the height of mountains, and other facts he thought vital, such as which railroads ran between what cities, where the coal mines were located, etc. If he had known how many grains of sand there were in the Gobi Desert, I dare say he would have made us memorize that too.

The minute I walked away from the final examination, I happily left all the answers behind in his classroom. I have, even today, a mental block against anything geographical. But what fun I could have had, with the whole world at my fingertips, seeing the maps not just as names but as places where people lived and events happened, understanding why continents drifted and how rain forests became deserts ... if only I had a teacher who had made geography more of a pleasure to learn.

By contrast, my geometry teacher started his first lesson by tying a piece of string between two sticks of chalk and drawing a perfect circle on the blackboard by fixing one chalk at a point and moving the other around it. Then he stepped back and admired his own handiwork, exclaiming enthusiastically, "Isn't that a marvellous shape?" We were fascinated. The next thing he did was to hold one of the same two pieces of chalk in his left hand while revolving the other hand in the air, keeping the string taut. "What does this look like?" he asked. "A ball!" we answered in unison. In five short minutes, he had made us interested in the concept of plane and solid geometry, and had us responding intelligently to the idea of radii, diameters, circumferences and loci. All through the course, he excited an imagination which we never knew existed. Not only did he give me a healthy foundation upon which to learn differential equations for my graduate study of thermal dynamics, but he also taught me to have an appreciative eye for the beauty in geometric forms.

Now that we have established, I hope, the importance of the word "pleasure" in learning, we shall move on to the process of learning itself. There is another quotation of Confucius, taken from his book called *Zhong Yong* (中庸), in which he explicitly lays down the five steps of learning.

1. To learn broadly (博学之). By the word "broadly" (博), he means we ought to approach as many subjects as possible with an open mind. Our intellectual horizon should be as wide as our time and energy allow us.
2. To inquire selectively (审问之). Perhaps liberty is taken

in translating the word “审” as “to select” since its meaning is, strictly speaking, “to judge”. Although we are to learn broadly, we must limit our time and energy to learn only what we can understand and what is useful to us at that particular stage of our development. In other words, what Confucius means is that we must judge for ourselves the priority and the relevance of our inquiries in order to profit from the answers.

3. To think carefully (慎思之). Here, the word “思” contains more meaning than “to think”. What Confucius tells us is that we should not merely accept pensively or toy idly with the information we have acquired. We must employ a systematic process of examining, probing, reflecting, inspecting and dissecting whatever has been told to us. Without this process of careful thinking, we may be led to erroneous conclusions.
4. To analyze clearly (明辨之). This is perhaps the most important step. After thinking carefully on the facts or theories we have acquired, we must analyze them with a clear (明) mind. We must try to be impartial, objective and discerning in our analysis. Are they truthful, reasonable or applicable? Then we will be able to decide for ourselves which portion to discard or to pursue further, and which portion we must lay aside until further information and facts can be gathered.
5. To work diligently (笃行之). Due to the ambiguity of the word “work” (行), which in Chinese can be taken to mean also “to walk, to carry out, to put into practice”, the meaning of the word “diligent” (笃) can be also affected to have more than one meaning. Therefore, there can be two interpretations of what Confucius says: “To study with diligence” and “to work with ethics”. In the content of our discussion, I think it means “to pursue studies with diligence”.

It is now up to our young scholars to accept or to reject these five steps of learning. It is as good a time as any to try applying these five steps on them.

Childhood Memories

With the refrains of Auld Lang Syne trailing behind us, it is now time for the Chinese community to change their ideas of New Year from the solar calendar to that of lunar.

For me, however, even as I begin my search for sugared coconut strips in Smiths Street, I am seized by nostalgic memories of the bustling preparations during my childhood in Shanghai, China.

Although we lived in the most modern metropolitan city of China, my family retained the peasant practice of curing our own meats, fish and vegetables in the winter when the weather was cold and dry. Therefore, long before the New Year was to arrive, our house was already a beehive of activities. Because ours was a multi-tiered family where many uncles lived together, the responsibilities for preparing various kinds of food were divided among our aunts. But we children, although we were not assigned any specific duties, were even more busy, acting as interested observers and unwelcomed supervisors as well as carefree critics.

We would run up and down the stairs, in and out of kitchens, and make endless fact-finding tours in the garden, asking numerous questions until our aunts and their servants begged us to “get lost”, but nothing could daunt our interest.

I do not recall what our family did with the meats since any pigs that were brought to our house were already slaughtered, bled, cleansed and quartered. We only recognized them when they turned up on the table. So it is understandable

that I should remember more of the fish which came to us still wriggling in the shallow water.

Fat with roe and as long as a metre, or so it seemed, the fish appeared as gigantic as whales to our childish eyes. I used to stand in awe to watch my Fifth Aunt, for all her frail appearance, whack her cleaver to chop the fish crosswise into segments of five centimetres each, bones, fins, scales and all. Some of the segments would be hung on the laundry line to be dried in the freezing wind, and some would be encased in wooden cubicles to be smoked, while some would be marinated in rice wine with paprika and salt. My Fifth Aunt, who was the commander-in-chief of the fish brigade, would be wearing her badge of honour all winter: her hands and arms were soaked crimson red from the paprika.

The fish heads and fish roe, however, were never included in the curing. They were boiled with a great deal of spices, including the vengeful little red peppers. The accompanying dish was usually a bowl of green plums that had been simmered a long time in syrupy water until the plums seemed to have disappeared. To eat these two alternatively was to subject our palates to all kinds of sensations, ranging from spicy and salty to sweet and sour.

Singaporeans who are used to this type of cuisine of multiple tastes may not think them extraordinary, but to us children in Shanghai who were accustomed to bland food, they were the memorable annual events, etched deep in our minds because of the tears, the beads of sweat and the burning throats.

The salting of the vegetables was the responsibility of my Eighth Aunt. She would kneel in front of a stone slab and knead the green leaves with salt until almost all the juices were squeezed out, filling the air with a tangy and inviting aroma. For those of us who volunteered to carry the vegetables to be sun-dried on the bamboo mats, or those who bribed her with promises of thumping her aching back, she would allow us to snip off a tiny portion of the leaves and nibble on it.

There were countless other jobs to be done. One was to grind the glutinous rice, since no respectable housewife would demean herself to buy the “yearly cake” (nian gao 年糕). Our cakes were different from those made or sold in Singapore. To begin with, we used white, not brown, sugar. Then the rice flour was cooked in lard, with thin slices of green plums, red dates, white lotus seeds, watermelon seeds, brown walnuts, and beige almonds thrown into the mixture. Lastly, when the cake had been cooked, some dried shreds of laurel, dyed pink, were sprinkled on top of the cakes for decoration as well as for fragrance.

Another important job was to fold silver and gold paper into the shapes of ingots with their two ends curved upward. Then they were stuffed into large red paperbags, on which were inscribed the names of our male and female ancestors who seemed to have kept, in death, separate bank accounts which they evidently did not have in life.

My mother, being the only intellectual among the womenfolk, was always requested to write the names correctly lest our ancestors should become paupers due to mistakes in remittances. In her laissez-faire fashion, my mother welcomed us children to help since we had many dear departed souls to support. She never batted an eyelid when we put the names of historical personages over the surplus of paper ingots. My sister once wrote out a bag to be burned to the account of Voltaire who, not being Chinese, probably never received it.

As the New Year approached, the household activities intensified. There were gifts of ham, wine, fruits, cakes, etc. to be sent and to be received. There was feverish cleaning to be done: on the walls and ceilings, in the drawers and cupboards, on the window panes, behind the doors, under the flower pots ... There were new clothes to be sewn, old garments to be mended, and everything to be ironed. There was the altar of the ancestors to be checked, repaired and cleaned.

There was also the tiresome job of taking out the best china to be washed and wiped. There were silver candle-stands and silver serving bowls and all things silver to be polished.

There were cedar and pine branches to be gathered, narcissus to be nourished, fire-crackers to be purchased, and neat little red packets to be folded and appropriate amount of money to be stuffed into them. Everyone had by then worked to a nervous pitch and yet it seemed that the work would never be done.

Only shouts of joy brought occasional relief as family members who lived far away had returned home just in time for the reunion dinner.

The dinner would not be served until all the food, dish by dish, was handed over from the kitchen to my eldest uncle who personally placed them on the altar which creaked under the increasing weight. Then, my uncle, as the head of the family, would kowtow to the ancestors, followed by his wife. She was followed by my other uncles and aunts, including my parents who were then followed by my cousins and other relatives until even the youngest baby had paid his or her respect.

When that was done, the food, now icy cold, would have to be sent back to the kitchen to be reheated. Then, and only then, would the climax of the ceremony begin: we ate.

Sitting among my merry-making elders, I would be too sleepy and too exhausted emotionally to swallow one morsel of food. But since it was the only time of the year that children were allowed to stay up to welcome in the New Year, I would stubbornly refuse all entreaties to go to bed. I knew that the part I liked best, the burning of the red bags full of paper ingots, was yet to come.

A big fire was lit outdoor on a huge bronze tray. The older generation ceremoniously ignited the currency for the more immediate ancestors, leaving those for the minor relatives to us children.

How clearly I can remember the blazing fire in the snow-hushed night! My shoes were damp from standing too long in the snow and my cheeks were numbed by the icy wind, but I stood with my eyes fixed on the flame. The pod-like fruit of the Juniper which we always burned together with

the paper ingots would pop suddenly in the silence. I inhaled the cold clean air and the piney odour of the burning leaves while I watched with fascination the silver and gold ingots shimmer in the yellow-orange fire.

Occasionally I would look up at the dark grey sky, cocking my ear to hear if there is any fire cracker in the distance. I held on to my mother's hand, feeling somehow secure and wanted because the whole family, including the dead, were embracing me with their presence.

It was at times such as this that my childish mind would wonder why New Year could not come more often.

Tomorrow I will go and buy myself a bulb of narcissus for Auld Lang Syne.

The First Fifteen Days of the Year

Some years ago, when fire crackers were still allowed in Singapore, I was awakened on the eve of Lunar New Year by their explosive sound. In my drowsiness, I thought that I was still a child and that my mother was standing next to my bed. Half smiling and half frowning, she called my name and coaxed me to get up. “Quickly,” she said, “you must come to pay your respects to your elders, and start your New Year right.”

The very first thing a child does in the New Year is to pay respects to and receive red packets from the older people. But unlike the local *hong bao* the emphasis of which is on wealth, as exemplified by the ritual chant of Gong Xi Fa Cai or “congratulating you on your prospect of becoming rich”, ours centred on health, as shown by its name of “money to suppress the years” (压岁钱). The origin, I suspect, rose from the superstitious fear of the Chinese peasants who worried that death might claim their children out of jealousy if they, the children, looked hearty and hale and had grown taller and stronger with the increasing years. Thus they gave money to “suppress the years” so as to fool death and other evils into thinking their children had not grown at all. Another explanation may be that the Hunanese people are so poetic that they prefer their children to stay young and innocent.

In every other respect, however, the two are exactly alike, except that, in my family, the distribution of *hong bao* was accompanied by dull lectures from our scholarly uncle on the morality and importance of hard work. We children bore

these lectures in good spirits, knowing there would be no more stern words for fifteen days.

What glorious days they were! Not only was school out and nearly all discipline suspended, but everyone, including the grown-ups, shared our lightness of heart. Although some shops closed for business only for three days, most of the professionals, such as carpenters and tailors, declined to accept any commission for the whole fifteen-day period. People behaved as if, for the first time in 350 days, they had a chance to take a deep breath.

As a result, the streets were deserted in spite of the unusual sight of burnt fire crackers piled on the snow, looking like thick red carpets over white marble. People stayed indoors partially because the weather was biting cold, but mainly because they found the mood of their families had suddenly become more harmonious and relaxed.

How could homes not be harmonious and relaxed when the women, dictated by the New Year taboos, were required to stop work? It is my personal theory that some wise women long ago invented these taboos. Since women in those days were given hardly any rest during the year, even after child-births, these wise women realized it was necessary to create a set of new rules which would force them to take their much needed respite before they would be burdened by chores for another year.

So they told their men that since every stove had a god, and since all the gods of stoves must go up to heaven at the end of the previous year to report on the merits and demerits of everyone in the household, it would be untactful to use the stoves in their absence. Considering the number of stoves in the world and how all the gods of stoves must stand in queue to make their reports in detail, it is not surprising that a minimum of fifteen days was required for their journeys to and from heaven. Thus the stoves were not to be touched except for cooking a few grains of rice or boiling a pot or two of hot water to make tea. The women, being realists, prepared sufficient food in the days before New Year so that no men would get hungry

enough to defy the fury of the gods, or of more importance, demand their womenfolk to cook. The children never complained; they preferred their feast of sweet tidbits, such as sugared water of lotus seeds and glutinous rice balls stuffed with sesame seeds to their regular meals.

The same taboo was proclaimed over other household duties. No sweeping was to be done for it might sweep away all the good luck. "What about those who had suffered bad luck?" I asked. "Wouldn't they want to sweep out their bad luck?" Alas, explained my aunts, bad luck could not be banished by a mere broom. One must try to keep the good ones in order to subdue the bad ones. Similarly, laundry was not allowed lest it might wash away the good health which kept sickness at bay. Sewing was prohibited because the needles and scissors might pierce, symbolically, the pupils of the vulnerable old members of the family and bring total blindness in the coming year. That was enough to scare any father-in-law from demanding his button to be sewn.

Thus, although the men ruled supreme for the rest of the year, the women came into their own in these fifteen days. They sipped tea, cracked watermelon seeds, nibbled on various sweets, put on their fineries and went calling on their relatives and friends with whom they laughingly caught up with last year's news.

Even gambling, which was frowned upon during the year, was not only tolerated but open to all, including children. I used to think my luck at dice was excellent even when I was not tall enough to reach the table, until my elder cousins protested that the banker cheated by allowing me to win all the time, regardless of whatever number I threw. After that, the game lost its magic and I returned to my beloved fire that was burning in the brazier.

A brazier was a large bronze tray, about one metre in diameter and fifteen centimetres in depth, supported by a square wooden rack of half metre in height. The coal, or charcoal, glowed under the ashes, bringing us not only an invigorating dry heat but serving us in many useful ways,

one of which was to roast glutinous cakes, tangerines, chestnuts, sweet potatoes, ginkgo nuts, and even apples and plums. The window would be left slightly ajar, keeping away the snow and wind, but permitting the fresh air to circulate in the room which was faintly perfumed by the fragrance of plum blossoms and narcissus which stood on tables at the corners of the room. How contented we were when we spent our evenings lounging around the brazier, raising our feet high enough to rest on the top of the wooden rack!

The best time was after a snow fight. Coming in from the cold and stripping off our wet quilted garments and shoes, we would sit in our light pyjamas with our feet next to the fire, transmitting comradeship by touching one another's bare toes. Sometimes we bent our heads low to search in the ashes for the food we had left buried there. Sometimes, holding books in our hands as if absorbed by our reading, we sank into deep exhausted sleep. But mostly, we swapped ghost stories and tall tales which usually ended with our childish squabbles and equally childish reconciliations. Life around the brazier was exciting and yet secure, rousing and yet tranquil.

And now I live in Singapore. From the child who received *hong bao*, I have joined the ranks of those who gave them away. Braziers are of no use here; anyone who feels cold can very well lie in the sun. Although there is no snow, I have the pleasure of planning part of my holiday in digging clams. Time and circumstances have changed, and so have the customs which are meant to be adjusted according to the needs of those who establish them.

One thing I do know. No amount of sweet memories can persuade me to give up fifty-two weekends and eleven public holidays, in exchange for a long vacation of fifteen days the way people in the past enjoyed. After all, a scattered 96 days of leisure is numerically, if not qualitatively, far more preferable to fifteen days of repose at the end of which I usually did not know what to do with myself, in spite of the fire crackers, the snow, the brazier and the *hong bao*.

Good Omens in Food

It was said that if an unknown animal was discovered, people from different racial groups would react differently. The English would want to catalogue it, the Americans would pass laws to protect it, the French would study its mating habit, the Japanese would photograph it. And what would the Chinese do? They would ponder on how best to cook it.

This trait seems to have been inherited by the descendants of the Chinese immigrants. When I took a Hongkong Chinese to visit the Bangkok Zoo, he pointed at the turtles and told me with relish which kind tasted best when steamed, fried or simmered with wine and soy sauce. In Venice, at St. Mark's Square I overheard a Chinese lamenting: "I'd open a restaurant if only I could ship these pigeons home to Singapore!" When touring a castle in Belgium, a Thai Chinese, at the sight of a white swan gliding majestically over a placid green lake, was heard murmuring: "I wonder if its meat is tougher than that of a goose?"

This preoccupation for food is probably the result of having suffered hundreds of lean years in China where the food production constantly lagged behind the population increase. With poverty came the understandable fear that tomorrow might bring even less food than today. Some sort of auspicious omens were needed to stoke the fire of hope for good fortune to continue. So what could be more natural than planting these omens in the very food they hoped to eat forever and ever, especially the food prepared for the New

Year which was supposed to forecast the future for the coming year?

For example, what does every Chinese household eat on Lunar New Year's Day? Answer: the glutinous cake called *nian gao* (年糕) which, by its straightforward meaning, is "the yearly cake" or "the cake to be eaten during the New Year". But there is a pun. The word "cake" (糕) has the same sound as *gao* (高), meaning "high" or "higher". So *nian gao* becomes "yearly higher" or "to be promoted higher, year after year" (年年高升), a phrase that pleases the school-boy no less than it does a bureaucrat.

Some eat glutinous rice balls stuffed with sugared sesame seeds and cooked with red dates, dried dragon eyes and white lotus seeds. This is a custom particularly popular in the region south of the Yangtze River. The taste is fine, but it is not its taste that the people value. One will never suspect that a simple dish like that is loaded with good omens until one examines their puns. Rice balls are called *tang yuan* (汤圆) because *yuan* (圆), which means "roundness", "smoothness" as well as "union", has the same sound as "丸" which means "ball" in most Chinese dialects. Thus, to eat *tang yuan* is to be blessed with "smooth life in which the family stays united".

The sesame seeds mixed with sugar inside the *tang yuan* bring more than harmony to the family because sugar is sweet and sesame seeds represent children. Having eaten it, no one can possibly fail to bring "sweet" children into this world. Even if one does not, one will still have the smooth tact to explain it to one's in-laws. But to have "sweet" children may not be enough, so lotus seeds are added to make sure that the "sweet" children are sons because in the Chinese language the lotus seed is known as *lian zi* (莲子). *Zi* (子) simply means "seed" or "son", but the word *lian* has the same sound as "连", meaning "continuous". Taken in total, *lian zi* suggests "连子", or "continuously begetting sons".

To go one step further, a red date in Chinese is *hong zao* (红枣). Not only is its colour the sacrificial red, but its name *zao* (枣) becomes a pun for "early" (早). What the wishful

diner hopes for is not only that sons should be born in sequence, but they should be born as early as possible.

But is one ever satisfied when asking for a favour? Now that the early arrival of sons is guaranteed by the dates and the lotus seeds, one wishes for them to be prosperous, valuable, precious, high ranking, etc. So a handful of dried dragon eyes are thrown into the concoction. Why? Because when the tropical fruit called “dragon eye” (龙眼) is dried, it goes under the name of *gui yuan* (桂圆), and *gui* is a pun for “贵”, meaning prosperous, valuable, precious, etc. All the ingredients for a happy life are now included in this one simple dish eaten the first thing on New Year’s Day.

But how does one make sure wealth will come? One does by eating the dark brown thread-like vegetable that looks like hair and indeed bears the logical name of “hairy vegetable” (发菜), with *fa* for “hair”, and *cai* for “vegetable”. Since this hairy vegetable is identical in sound with “发财”, meaning “becoming rich” in the second half of the famous phrase “*Gong Xi Fa Cai*”, no ambitious household will dream of starting the year without it. The rich throw heaps of it on their plates whereas the poor gingerly serve one or two strands just to console themselves. It never seems to depress anyone that this vegetable has become so expensive that one has to *fa cai* before he can afford to eat *fa cai* in order to *fa cai*.

The Cantonese, in their anxiety to bring promises of wealth through their food, dictate that a dish cooked with hairy vegetable and a foreleg of a pig must be served during the New Year. It matters little that one should find it too salty or too fatty; after all, one is not expected to like it as long as the wealth promised by the hairy vegetable appears on the table. But why the foreleg of a pig? Well, it is the equivalent of an elbow and a hand in human anatomy. An elbow is called “肘” (*zhou*) which the Cantonese pronounce exactly like the word “就” (*jiu*), meaning “readily”. The “hand” (手) is already there, requiring no pun. When we put all the associations together, we get the proverbial phrase “就手发财” or

“becoming rich as readily as lifting a hand”. That the two words “肘” (*zhou*) and “就” (*jiu*) cannot pass as puns in Mandarin is perhaps one of the reasons why the Cantonese people is widely claimed as one of the least inclined among all the dialect groups to learn Mandarin.

Another preparation of food that may baffle Mandarin speaking people is the *yu sheng* (鱼生), which a Cantonese must *lao* (捞 or “to scoop up”) in order to eat. The food and the manner of eating are equally important. *Yu sheng* is a plate of thinly sliced raw fish, arrayed with various other ingredients, each stacked into a little pile round the fish. Before one eats it, one must use the chopsticks to scoop up all the food and toss them around until they are well mixed. This particular action is known as *lao*. In fact, diners are to chant the magic word *lao* as they suit the action to the word.

Why does it bring good luck? Fish (鱼) always puns with surplus (馀) since they are both read as *yu*. The word *sheng* (生) means “raw” but it also means “lively” and is the first part of the compound word *sheng yi* (生意), meaning “business”. The motion of scooping up, or *lao*, is the very word in Cantonese slang used to describe a man who has many profitable connections and who knows exactly how to utilize these connections to create business.

Perhaps the next time a strange animal is being shown to the world, the Chinese should wonder how best to name it as well as how best to cook it, so that eating it will bring gourmet pleasure as well as excellent luck.

A Joss Stick for My Mother

Everyone loses a mother only once.

Some never feel the loss, either because their mothers have died in their infancy or they have been abandoned too early in life to have remembered what their mothers were like. Social scientists tell us that a great many people thus deprived of mother love are scarred for life. I believe in what they say. Poets, novelists and dramatists have made me weep copious tears on the theme of children losing their mothers. I do sympathize. I do try to understand. But I do not know how to imagine the suffering and trauma of orphans growing up without their mothers, because every dark corner of my own childhood memories is lit by my mother's bright smile and tender touches.

Some lose their mothers when they are still childless. To them, the death of their mothers is a genuine sorrow, a deep personal loss. But that loss is tinted with a certain amount of self-pity. No more mothers to tell their troubles to, no more mother to tolerate their mistakes, no more mother to scold them with affection, and no more mother to feel their foreheads when they think they are coming down with flu. If the death of a mother happens when a person is young or in early adolescence, the effect can be crucial to his or her adult life, either because the father remarries, or because of the eternal search for a mother substitute in the spouse he or she marries. I also sympathize and I try to understand, but I do not know how to imagine the frustrations and bewilderment of young people growing up without their mothers, because every cold corner of

my youthful memories is warmed by my mother's kind encouragement and wise guidance.

Some, like I, lose our mothers when we have already become parents. Our sorrow is outwardly calm and placid because we are now supposed to be adults who no longer run to our mothers when we are sad. But inwardly, our grief slowly increases as we feel day to day, month to month, the vacuum in our lives. As we grow even older and our children begin to leave us or have left us, we then understand fully and appreciate gratefully what we had made our parents feel in our own days of demanding independence. It is then when we wish to stretch out our hands and say: "Mother, what can I do to compensate for all the pains I have innocently caused you?"

My own mother died in China. I could not even attend the funeral. When I returned to Shanghai in 1975, her grave had disappeared under the shovels of the developers. There was no trace of her. It seemed to me that she had never died. I look at her photograph and she smiles back. I read her letters over again, and her handwriting is as lovely as ever, but her words now seem so much more poignant because now I understand much more how she had felt at the time of writing. Whenever I stay in bed and cannot sleep, I see her in my mind as memories of little and big events flash by.

There was the time I came home after six days of "imprisonment" at the school dormitory. Without much ado, I immersed myself in a novel while consuming a whole jar of walnut meat in less than fifteen minutes. "Couldn't you eat them just a little slower?" she asked with a rueful smile. "It took me six whole days to shell them."

There was the time I returned to my dormitory room and knew she had come and gone. She needed no note to tell me that she had missed seeing me because I tarried too long in the sports field, since her signature was everywhere. Sweaters were neatly folded, books were evenly arranged in rows, holes in the socks were mended, and all the dirty clothings

mysteriously replaced with clean ones. The cookie jar was full to the brim with my favourite biscuits.

Little events. Big Events. They come and go. How she gently reprimanded me for not writing more often! How could I understand that she had lived on my letters until I now live on the letters from my children? How could I understand her never shedding any tears each time we parted until I now know how a mother must hide her tears from her children? How could I understand her urgency in urging me to leave for school, for university, for a career, for marriage until I now value the happiness of my children more than that of my own?

After the death of my mother, I think I was shaken emotionally to the core although I kept up my normal behaviour pattern. I did not even wear mourning because long ago when she was teaching me *Lun Yu* (论语), she explained why she did not want me to mourn her by outward signs. The lines, which she pointed out for me, read thus: "When a person's father is alive, we have only his personality to observe (because he is not yet free to act by himself). When a person's father is dead, we can then judge him by his conduct (because he is now free to act upon his own). If a man does not deviate from his father's teaching for three years after his father's death, he can be considered a filial son."

In her usual half sad and half smiling way, she said: "It applies to mothers too, you know. If you wish to be filial to me, don't ever wear mourning because, in the first place, I dislike gloomy colours, and in the second place, wearing mourning makes it too easy for you to channel your grief. I want you to be reminded, by not dutifully wearing mourning, but by remembering my teachings for at least three years." She said it teasingly, and I was very young then. How strange that I somehow remembered her exact words!

I tried to remember her teachings. It was to poetry that I turned, a love she had passed on to me. When the need to communicate overcame me, I even wrote a few poems but none of them were any good. I shall now share one of the less

personal ones, which I have never shown anyone but to my sister, with those who have lost their mothers, not because it is well written but because it is honest.

My mother was the kind of Buddhist who hardly ever went to a temple to pray, and we had no altar or the image of Buddha in our house. But occasionally she would light a single joss stick and open her Buddhist Manuscript, and then we knew it was her moment in need of tranquillity. After she died, I burned my first joss stick. I have been doing so every time I think of her. The following *ci*, to the tune of 山花子, was written a few years after her death:

静守檀香一线完，
斜风轻送小铃谈。
举首观花烟直上，
抱娘唤。

年月未曾来入梦
晨昏无奈破书翻，
字里行间有母在
似还乡。

Quietly I waited for the single joss stick to finish its
burning,
Mild breeze swept by and made the roof-bells
whisper.
As I looked up and watched the smoke ascending
above the flowers,
Softly, I murmured: 'Mother'.

Years and months had passed, but never once you
appeared in my dreams,
To the old tattered books in mornings and evenings
I turned
Because among the lines and between the words I
feel your presence.
It's almost as if I've returned home.

If my mother could read this so-called poem, she would very likely say it was a good attempt and then proceed to point out its mistakes. But does it matter? I wrote it with love even though I did not write it very well.

In my own way, I am making up to her by carrying out her teachings: To love and cherish my children so that they may love and cherish theirs. And when I am gone, they may pass on this love my mother gave me.

This is the second collection of Li Lienfung's Bamboo Green articles that appeared between January 1980 and April 1981 in the bilingual section of *The Straits Times*. Written in the author's inimitable style, the articles give new insights into Chinese literature and paintings, bringing to the readers the delight of enjoying Chinese writings and paintings the way they are appreciated by one well-versed in the Chinese language.



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