

Reminiscences

After Suen had settled his wife into bed, he returned to his study, troubled. He wished he could find a way to restore her to that delicate, slightly withdrawn student he had fallen in love with in London. It was heart-breaking to see her liveliness and vitality seeping away after losing Yun. She was only thirty-six, yet her skin had turned sallow and tired.

As he made for the table supporting his word processor, he noticed that his teacup had been replaced by a clean one. A small plastic box and a bowl of fruits had also been placed next to the tea cosy. Ah Loy must have returned, bringing back one or the other of his favourite snacks -- red bean rolls or egg custard tarts. He resisted the temptation to find out which immediately.

He resumed his seat before the word processor. His mind drifted back to his first encounter with Po-Chee in London sixteen years ago. It had been at a function at Hong Kong House, the hostel for Hong Kong students at Lancaster Gate. He had gone there nominally as a foreign correspondent to write a feature on the life of its residents. Po-Chee was then in her third year of law at the University of London. It seemed an aeon ago.

From the very start she affected him in a way no woman had done since Isabelle. Her slender beauty and child-like innocence captivated him. Her whole personality hinted at a certain vulnerability and that immediately engaged his chivalrous instincts.

He began wooing her assiduously and, after some initial hesitations, she responded. They went to every museum, gallery and theatre London had to offer. Before a year was out they had become lovers. After graduation, she began her articles with a firm of solicitors in High Holborn. One day it suddenly occurred to him that their blissful existence could not continue once she had finished her articles. She was

bound to return to Hong Kong to begin a legal career. In order to tie her to him, he proposed.

Po-Chee explained she could not marry without her father's consent.

He sensed at once he was in trouble. Although he was from a highly respected family, he was twice Po-Chee's age. Besides, he had not held a regular job for twenty years, since working as a reporter for the Hong Kong Herald and subsequently as a sub-editor at the China Telegraph. His status as a foreign correspondent in London rested upon a fiction. He was in fact an unsalaried stringer, earning a derisory fee for every contribution used by the publications he served.

Essentially, he was a man of leisure supported by inherited money. He might be a sometime scholar prowling the great round reading room of the British Museum library but his only achievement was a single volume of reminiscences about his former teachers. It had sold a hundred and three copies. Hardly the kind of son-in-law any status-conscious Hong Kongite would relish.

He saw clearly that the only way of winning Po-Chee was to persuade her to marry without parental permission. He marshalled all the arguments at his disposal. They had been madly in love for two years and had become de facto man and wife, sharing a fine town house in Radnor Place, near Marble Arch.

He stated over-modestly that he was not fabulously wealthy but did own their home in Radnor Place as well as a house in Bowen Road. He commanded a trust income sufficient to keep both of them in reasonable comfort. But, most important of all, he loved her and needed her. Only she could provide that divine spark to inspire him to begin the books he had been meaning to write for years.

Po-Chee eventually gave way before his entreaties. But she

stipulated that she must first consult a geomancer or fung shui expert before selecting the date for their wedding. He had never set any store by such practices but had accepted her condition.

Secondly, Po-Chee wanted them to return to Hong Kong after their honeymoon, so that she might establish a practice and be close to her father. He agreed to that too.

The formalities had taken place at a public registry. But early in their honeymoon, news came of the sudden death of her father. They had to cut short their holiday to return to the colony.

The passing of Po-Chee's father had been the start of a succession of misfortunes. Mourning for her father was barely over when Fernando da Luz, Po-Chun's husband, also died. Po-Chee then had to spend time helping her sister and her child through bereavement.

He had been aware of Po-Chun being cut off by her father, who had left everything to Po-Chee. But his wife's visits to Yaumati always caused her to return home red-eyed and out of sorts. With his wife remaining tight-lipped, he could only speculate.

In order to distract her, he suggested starting a family. Po-Chee duly became pregnant. Then, for no apparent reason, a miscarriage occurred. Nonetheless they persevered. A year and a half later a healthy boy was born. They named him Yun, which in Chinese meant a grace or a favour.

To spare both mother and infant from the disturbances caused by his nocturnal comings and goings, Suen decided to move back to the bedroom he had occupied as a boy.

The birth of Yun had been one of the happiest moments in his life. He had at long last fulfilled his duty to his ancestors. But he sensed that his wife was not as elated. She did not want to breast-feed the child any more after three weeks, on the grounds that she wanted to get back to

work. He was aware that some women suffered from post-natal depression so he refrained from persuading her otherwise. He simply took over bottle-feeding the child.

Taking time out to play the role of father had been rewarding too. It had been a joy to bond with Yun. After several weeks, he returned to his normal routines and passed the day-time duty of looking after the child to Ah Loy while his wife retained the evening duties.

It came as a terrible shock to be woken by a panicked Ah Loy one day and told that Yun had died during the night. The child was only four months' old. The doctor gave the cause as accidental suffocation.

The sight of Po-Chee's devastation put his own in the shade. Nothing he could say or do could console her.

He tried to deflect her from wild talk of Yun's death being a punishment inflicted by Heaven. But to no avail. She began suffering insomnia and migraines. Depression took hold. She became a nervous wreck.

He sent for Dr. Fu, the childhood physician to Po-Chee and her entire Leung family. The doctor prescribed various medications. But Po-Chee's condition did not improve.

He was at his wits' end. If he had helped to look after Yun for longer, to share the feeding schedules and nappy changes by sleeping in the same room, he might have noticed their son's breathing difficulties and saved him. Instead, after a few weeks, he had surrendered the chores of parenthood to others.

After Yun had been buried, he said to Po-Chee: "Darling, I'm really the one to blame. I shouldn't have moved out of our bedroom. At least we should have engaged a wet nurse or got Ah Loy to keep watch during the night. I had been utterly thoughtless. I'm sorry."

Po-Chee shook her head and gave him a wan smile. "No, it's

my fault, nobody else's," she said. "I'm being punished for sins I must have committed during a previous existence."

She said she preferred sleeping alone for a while. He reluctantly acquiesced, never anticipating it meant a permanent departure from the marital bed.

Seeing no improvement in her condition, he persuaded her to take a leave of absence of three months. They went on a month-long Far Eastern cruise. Some colour returned to her cheeks but he sensed she remained deeply unhappy.

After their return, he did his best to be attentive. Ah Loy helped with family herbal concoctions. Through some unspoken understanding, they retained their separate bedrooms, though each still occasionally invaded the other's bed.

But with various ailments dogging Po-Chee, Dr. Fu recommended seeing a lady psychologist, Dr. Ma, who had recently returned from North America. After several months of counselling, Po-Chee's health recovered slightly.

He was keen on a further attempt to start a family but he didn't have the heart to press his wife. There was no disguising that their relationship was no longer what it used to be. An emotional veil had dropped between them and the old fizz had gone. When they made love, his touches and endearments still made her shudder but he could no longer tell whether it was from pleasure or from the need to submit to a conjugal duty. As time went by, intimate contact became less and less frequent. Po-Chee seemed to be holding back confidences more and more. Neither of them mentioned the desire for a family again.

Suen sighed. What was the point of striving to understand the complexities of the world when he could not fathom the turmoil in the heart of the woman he married? Had he done all that he could for her? Man who was born of woman had but a short time to live and it would be filled with misery. How very true!

He rose from his seat, feeling the need for a fresh cup of tea. He was not yet peckish, so he still resisted opening Ah Loy's plastic box.

Good old Ah Loy, he thought, as he poured his tea. She was the only constant in his disjointed life. From his earliest boyhood, when he had raced along the verandah or larked about in the garden, either Ah Loy or his mother would always be on hand. His Grandma too. Both his mother and grandmother had long disappeared. Only Ah Loy still remained, outlasting them both. She would probably outlast him too.

His wife's visit had interrupted his musings. There would be no more writing this night, he thought, as he switched off his word processor and the overhead lights. The softer glow of the remaining fluorescent lamp on the desk at once transformed the room. Odd shadows emerged. He went over to the leather sofa with his teacup, set it on the floor and stretched out.

The ceiling met his gaze. It reminded him that his bedroom was directly above. It had been his since he was three. How strange that after more than half a century he should still be occupying it.

Each period of residence had been by a different self, inhabiting a different space at a different time. Each time he left and returned, from Kunming or London or Paris, it had been a different self taking possession of the same room. The one now occupying it was an unquiet soul, saddled with the responsibility for the death of a son and the slow demise of his marriage.

As a child he used to play after supper with his mother on the

gigantic bed she shared with his father. His mother was an outgoing woman, full of fun and high spirits. She often pretended to be a wicked witch, out to devour little boys who did not behave or finish their greens. She couldn't really scare him because he knew that witches were supposed to be foul-smelling, whereas his mother always smelt of sweet powders and perfumes. She had been a good tickler too. Her nimble fingers often reduced him to jelly. Then, in order to settle him before bed, she would tell him Chinese folk tales or read stories from Aesop's Fables.

He saw his father only fleetingly. During mornings, his idol would always be hurrying off in a smart business suit. In the evenings he would be rushing off to dine with buyers or suppliers or to join friends to play mah jong. Sometimes he would disappear for weeks, travelling to Singapore, the Philippines or the Dutch East Indies with principals from Holland.

His mother explained that his father was the compradore at a great Dutch trading house which the Lam family had served for three generations. When he grew up, he could follow in his father's footsteps, perhaps by first studying at Leiden. He might then enter service with the company and one day succeed his father.

There was a photograph of his father on his mother's dressing table. He appeared dashing and impressive, magnificently garbed in the graduation robe and cap of Leiden University. He longed to see his father actually dressed up that way but he never did.

He noticed other things. His mother kissed his father in a way that was different from how she kissed him. They also seemed to have a silent language of the eyes which excluded him. He had wanted to spend more time with his father, so that he could learn his secret ways and become an impressive man. But he never got the chance.

Before he was even old enough for primary school his plan

turned to dust. His father had to travel to Shanghai by boat to negotiate a contract, he was told. His mother was going along, so that afterwards they could holiday in Hangchow, a city celebrated by many painters and poets. He had kissed them before they boarded their coastal steamer.

The next thing he heard was that the vessel had been sunk by a typhoon in the Taiwan Straits. All on board had been lost. Not a single body had been recovered.

News of that disaster struck him like an abstraction. He had felt no immediate distress because he had no frame of reference. How powerful could a typhoon be? Typhoons visited Hong Kong every year and they merely broke a few branches in the garden, or rattled windows or, at worst, caused mudslides and floods. How could a typhoon sink that great steamer he had seen his parents board and snuff out over eighty lives? And why, of all the vessels at sea, did it have to be that one? His parents had been flesh and blood. How could they disappear without trace? It had to be a mistake. They must turn up before long, safe and sound and smiling.

He remembered his grandmother looking grave when she told him the news. She was an elegant lady, with greying hair done in a customary Chinese chignon. She had kept her voice soft and well-modulated as she spoke. "You must grow up quickly. You are the only one left in our branch of the Lam family. The honour of our ancestors and the continuation of the family line rest entirely with you."

"What about Auntie Soo-Leung and Cousin Hing?" he had asked, puzzled. Auntie Soo-Leung was his father's younger sister and Cousin Hing was her son, who was a year younger than himself.

His grandmother's face had remained impassive. Her eyes, however, were bright with restrained tears. She offered a thin smile. "They do not count," she replied. "Auntie Soo-Leung has been married into another family and Cousin Hing is not a Lam."

Further bewilderment was to follow. He was told he had to be the chief mourner at his parents' funerals. Because their bodies had not been found, tradition required that a suit of clothing and headgear belonging to each had to be placed in coffins in their stead. But how could they represent his parents? He couldn't figure out such silliness.

When the time came for ceremonies near the grave sites, he stood before the coffins dry-eyed and resentful, dressed in sackcloth. The whole situation, with funeral music, chanting monks, burning incense and endless bowing, struck him like some ludicrous pantomime.

His grandmother was not there. Her absence perplexed him, until someone explained that custom prevented her from being present. Ah Loy, with her long queue dangling behind her, stood stoutly beside him, holding his hand to keep him focused. She seemed the only solid and reliable person amidst the general chaos.

Relatives and foreigners he had never previously seen had gathered. He took the foreigners to be his father's colleagues in the Dutch trading corporation. They meant nothing to him.

After the ceremonies, a foreigner couple emerged like emissaries from the rest. The man was big and burly. He patted him on the back and mumbled something in an unfamiliar tongue. The woman stooped down and said in badly enunciated Cantonese: "You very brave boy, not crying."

It had taken some weeks for the passing of his parents to sink in. His grandmother tried her best to maintain his former routines, games around the house or garden and story-telling after supper. But nothing was the same without his mother.

Late one night, a frightening dream woke him. He ran into his parents' room for reassurances, as he had sometimes done in the past. But he found their room empty. He understood then they would never return.

He climbed on to their bed, hugged the pillows and wept.

The next day he gathered up all the pictures of his parents from around the house and displayed them in his bedroom.

He took care, however, to hide other manifestations of grief from his grandmother and Ah Loy. He knew if they saw him crying or acting strangely they would make a great fuss and end up weeping too. When he missed his parents particularly, he would wait till everyone had gone to sleep and then creep into their room, to take possession of their empty bed and to cry. He took to heart his grandmother's urgings that he should grow up quickly, so that he could bear his sadness like a man.

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Childhood illusions and juvenile dreams. How many had he entertained, only to have them end in ruin? Aristotle had said the young needed to be humbled by experience, made aware of the limitations in life. He had discovered that truth too late.

He rose from the sofa, picked up his teacup and headed for the snack box. Inside he found four egg custard tarts. He ate one, drank some more tea and sauntered back towards the sofa.

On his way, the corner of his eye caught Phirun's painting of Isabelle in the half-light. She had been the toast of Montparnasse. Artists had fallen over themselves to capture her voluptuous beauty. A few managed a facsimile but only Phirun really caught her spirit.

As he stood before the painting, it seemed its single eye was winking at him, bewitching him, reminding him of the wondrous escapades and indiscretions he had shared with its owner. He had loved that devastatingly beautiful farm girl from Iowa to distraction, enough to want to marry her against all odds. But other factors intervened. He lost her.

His unquiet heart recalled the times they had shared at the prime of their lives, the hot onion soup at the Halles at the crack of dawn, the existential debates in Left Bank cafes, the sucking of cannabis fumes passed between each other's mouths, the velvet evenings listening to French folk songs at the night spot in Rue Jacob, the love-making so intense they were in danger of losing their minds.

He wondered where Isabelle was now, what had befallen her. Her letter of farewell had been so sweet, so noble, so searing. She had sacrificed her own happiness for his sake.

The pain of his recollections suddenly became unbearable. He walked back to the sofa and stretched out. He closed his eyes in a desperate attempt to shut out that past. But the refrain of that jaunty folk song they had made their own kept running through his head.

“Après de ma blonde qu’il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,
Après de ma blonde qu’il fait bon dormir.”

It certainly had been, he thought, with a pang in his heart.

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Segments of the past kept swirling around Suen like pestering vagabonds around a tourist.

Eventually, he managed to divert his thoughts away from Paris to that day in 1939 when his grandmother told him they would have to leave Hong Kong for Kunming, a city in the southwest of China.

“Why, Grandma?” he had asked, baffled.

He had been studying English at an Anglo-Chinese primary school and was loving it. He loathed for it to be interrupted.

“You can continue studying it at Kunming,” his grandmother replied. “It’s a lovely city, three thousand years old. It’s near a lake, with

mountains on three sides. You'll love it. The important thing is to get you out of harm's way."

"What harm?"

"The war. The Japanese have been advancing south. They've taken Canton. Hong Kong may be their next objective. You're the only male left in the Lam family. I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

He remained puzzled. "Hong Kong belongs to the British. The Japs won't dare to invade."

His grandmother pulled him protectively by her side. "Can't place too much faith in the British," she said, earnestly, as if passing on a great secret. "Britain's in a difficult war in Europe. The Japs may spring a surprise. The main thing is to get beyond their clutches and the range of their bombers. Kunming should fit the bill."

"How long do we have to stay in Kunming?"

"Till the war's over."

"How long will that be?"

"Could be years. Hopefully not."

His grandmother's words raised other concerns in his young mind. "Who'll attend the graves of Pa and Ma during the Ching Ming Festival?" he asked.

"In war, sacrifices must be made. Ah Loy'll still be here."

That disclosure came as a fresh surprise. "Why isn't Ah Loy coming with us?"

"She has to look after the house. It's going to be boarded up, except for the back entrance. That way, curious people will think it's empty and in disrepair."

Being relatively obedient, he made his preparations. He removed the pictures of his parents from their sterling silver frames and packed them into a sturdy wooden box which Ah Loy had secured for him.

He also put in some snaps of himself taken with his mother, his grandmother and Ah Loy.

The journey to Kunming proved to be the first of many he was to make. It was to be almost eight years before he saw Hong Kong again.

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The long journey by train and road to Kunming had been arduous. But it allowed him to see at first hand the diversity, the vastness and the hitherto unimaginable poverty of China.

The people of Kunming were friendly and seemed much more absorbed than the residents of Hong Kong in the national struggle against Japan. His arrival at his destination coincided with the completion of a 717-mile road across the mountains, linking that town to Lashio in Burma. The road was vital for war supplies.

The mood of national endeavour quickly took hold of him. He too wanted to do something purposeful, like distributing patriotic leaflets or rolling bandages for the Red Cross. Even watching out for collaborators, spies and war profiteers to report them to the authorities.

His grandmother had other ideas, however. “Be patient,” she said. “You’re too young to be of much use to the war effort. You can best serve your country by getting educated.”

She enrolled him in an American missionary school run by a Reverend Adams, a great bearish man of forty with a freckled face and a disarming grin. The other teachers were also mainly Americans. Because the school charged only a nominal fee, it was extremely popular and it had to run both a morning and an afternoon session to meet demand.

Suen joined the morning session. He had never known Americans before. He found their accents less pleasing than those of his

former British teachers. But he liked their informality and their student-friendly ways. They encouraged extra-curricular activities, particularly in sport. The school library had a generous supply of books by Mark Twain, Jack London, Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and other American writers. He read as many as he could and his command of English progressed apace.

The pride that Reverend Adams and the other teachers took in both their religion and their country made an impact on him. They were in China, they proclaimed, to help its people to modernize and to learn about their Christian God. They pointed out that the American pilots had joined the Flying Tigers to help defend China.

The school placed great reliance on science and required students to attend at least one of the classes in physics, chemistry or biology. Outside the classroom it encouraged students to join Sunday church services. A selected few were also invited to the homes of teachers to celebrate occasions like Thanksgiving and Christmas. Suen quickly formed a favourable impression of both America and Americans.

Meanwhile, his grandmother saw to it that his Chinese education was not neglected. She engaged an elderly Cantonese scholar, Tutor Tseng, to instruct him in Chinese history, literature and culture. The tutor had a wispy grey beard and invariably wore a skull cap. He came to conduct lessons five afternoons a week.

Suen soon discovered that Tutor Tseng's family was Cantonese and had traded in forestry products. It had moved to Kunming to facilitate that business. But the then young Tseng had little interest in trade. He had set his heart on government service and had persuaded his family to allow him to study for the Imperial Examinations. Unfortunately, those examinations were discontinued before he was ready to take them. Disappointed, he resorted to giving private tuition to make a living. He had

already retired when he was approached to teach Suen. He agreed to accept the boy as his final pupil because he was a fellow Cantonese.

The tutor's regime was more exacting than Suen had been used to in Hong Kong. Although he had made respectable progress in written Chinese, the tutor nonetheless required him to complete six pages of copy-writing with the brush each day. The tutor would then circle in red the brushstrokes considered up to the mark.

Suen found those elementary exercises irksome at first. But as the number of red circles on his homework increased, he could not help noticing that his calligraphy had actually gained in strength and confidence. He started enjoying his assignments.

When Tutor Tseng discovered that Suen could recite a number of poems by Li Po and Tu Fu learnt from his grandmother, he added the standard primer Three Hundred Tang Poems to his teaching material.

Suen was delighted. He had frequently been enthralled by the cadences and strange wistfulness in Tang poems, although he had difficulty grasping some of their allusions to Buddhism, Taoism and historical happenings. The tutor's explanations quickly heightened his enjoyment of those verses. Their pervading sense of longing and impermanence affected him.

The full-day regime left him with an unconventional boyhood. Private lessons in the afternoons not only deprived him of the fellowship of other students but also prevented him from participating in sports. The best he could manage at the missionary school was to squeeze in a quick game of Chinese chess before rushing home for lunch.

The net result of that regime was that he made few friends. Books from the library, however, afforded consolation. They took him on magical journeys during evenings, along the Mississippi, through the dust bowl of America and into the frozen wastes of the Yukon. Tutor Tseng also

introduced him to a range of Chinese verses and couplets, all of which quickly found places in his heart. As a consequence, he considered himself more privileged than other students his age.

He worked his way through the Tang primer as assiduously as a silkworm munching through mulberry leaves. He memorized many verses and wanted to learn more. After he had gone through the primer, he expressed a wish to learn the entire body of Tang poetry.

The old tutor smiled sagely. “A worthy aspiration but hardly a practical one,” he responded. “According to the imperial edition of the Complete Collection of Tang Poems, the dynasty produced 2,200 recognized poets. At least 48,900 examples of their work have been preserved. Why limit yourself to Tang poetry? There are great poets in other dynasties. Poetry is but one element in the make-up of a rounded scholar. He must be competent in other arts as well, in calligraphy, painting and music. Common elements link them all. You have made good progress in calligraphy and poetry. Tomorrow we can start on painting.”

Tutor Tseng gave him a copy of the Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting which set out the basic rules of painting. He studied it over the following months while the tutor expounding on its principles.

“An ideal painting is not achieved on paper but in the mind of the viewer,” the tutor declared. “Just as calligraphy is an abstraction, not meant to be read, so a painting is not an imitation or a reproduction of reality. Empty spaces, as well as the usage of clouds, mountains, trees and streams, are meant to suggest the mysteries of the cosmic flux. They hint at rhythm and movement, leaving room for a viewer to get involved. In painting, as in poetry and music, it is often the missing elements -- the silences, the empty spaces -- which convey most. Sages and Taoists have long held that the things which can be spelt out are without importance.”

Day by day Tutor Tseng livened up his expositions with

anecdotes about poets and painters. He spoke of So Tung-Po's attachment to writing brushes made with the whiskers of mice and Li Po's drunken escapades.

The tutorials went from one subject to the next. As the years progressed, the lessons conducted on a one-on-one basis led to an unusual rapport between Suen and his aged teacher.

One day, towards the end of the fourth year of their relationship, Tutor Tseng spoke of Tao Yuan-Ming, the great Fourth Century poet. Tao had rejected official appointment to become a recluse. Wherever he went he carried with him a zither without strings. When queried about this oddity, Tao explained that he played mute music on the zither because there was no need for sounds when seeking the innermost meaning in music.

After the story, Tutor Tseng said: "You too should get more involved with music. But alas, I'm not competent to take you very far. I suggest your grandmother find a teacher to get you started."

Suen, by then thirteen years old, was keen to face this fresh challenge. But his grandmother thought his studies were already too heavy and music ought to be deferred till later. Meanwhile, he made steady progress at both at the missionary school and under Tutor Tseng.

But as his knowledge accumulated, he began feeling a vague dissonance within himself. He puzzled over its cause. Gradually, it dawned on him that his growing competence in two languages was pulling him towards two different approaches to life. The missionary school stressed action, deeds, utility and progress whereas Tutor Tseng dwelled on humility and self-development, inner tranquillity and living in harmony with nature. To choose between the two was like deciding to write with either a fountain pen or a brush. One was more efficient but the other resulted in more expressive and beautiful characters. He was attracted to both but not completely satisfied with either.

A deeper implication emerged. The Chinese system of rule by emperors had been replaced by a republican form of government following the revolution of 1911. That revolution had been underpinned by the ideals of Lincoln. Yet, following its success, the country was still lurching from one crisis to another, fuelled by corruption, provincial rivalries and warlordism. It seemed that all the bloodshed and upheaval had brought little improvement to the lives of ordinary people.

He tackled Tutor Tseng over this state of affairs and asked how the old rule compared with the new form of government.

Tutor Tseng cogitated for a while, stroking his wispy beard, before replying. “Forms of government do not matter if rulers are just. All systems operated by human beings have strengths and weaknesses. I’m not opposed to change as such but I fear recent developments have not been for the better. The old system at least allowed our civilization to endure for thousands of years. The new one is unlikely to last as long.

“Those who have been advocating one-man-one-vote often overlook the fact that democracy can exist without the vagaries of the ballot box. China previously had a form of democracy based on the intellect. It allowed the lowliest citizens to aspire -- through studies and the passing of the Imperial Examinations -- to the highest positions in the land. Successful candidates could gain offices in keeping with their attainments.

“They have also forgotten a number of the old requirements. Under the Imperial Examination system, a candidate had first to pass a test of character. It is perhaps unfortunate that present day ministers and bureaucrats are not required a similar test.”

The old man, with a complexion like ancient ivory, emitted a gentle chuckle. Suen gained the impression his teacher was privately visualising a procession of the cabinet ministers accounting in public for their integrity and character.

“No true scholar gets turned into a flunkey merely because of an official appointment,” Tutor Tseng continued. “His task is to protect the people under his care. If insufficient relief is provided during natural disasters or if taxes are too oppressive, it is his duty to make the situation known to the emperor. If ignored, he can withdraw his services. Tao Yuen-Ming, So Tung-Po and many others did just that.

“The most notable case was that of Wat Yuen some twenty-three centuries ago. He killed himself by jumping into the Mi-Lo River to protest against corruption at court. The Dragon Boat Festival held each year is in his honour. When too many resign their posts, even an obtuse emperor must realise that the affairs of state are not going well and that he is in danger of losing the Mandate of Heaven.”

A faraway look came into the tutor’s eyes.

“I was born too late to serve,” he allowed, with a tremor in his voice. “We seldom find anyone resigning from public office over a matter of principle nowadays. The real question to ponder is whether our present government is the best that five thousand years of civilisation can produce. That is the responsibility of the younger generations to come.”

Suen reflected long and hard on his tutor’s observations. The more he thought about them the more it seemed that a yawning gap existed between what he had been learning and the true nature of the world. Poets and philosophers constantly held forth on righteousness and justice, on truth and beauty. Yet all around him he saw corruption, injustice, war, poverty and ugliness. Why had mankind failed to make things better? He resolved to find the answer.

One day, news came suddenly of two Japanese cities being wiped out by American atomic bombs. He felt that an extraordinary and alarming thing had happened. Although that devastation caused the Japanese to capitulate, he feared the world would never be the same again.

The end of the war left him ambivalent. He longed to return to Hong Kong and to see Ah Loy again. But at the same time he did not want to interrupt the rhythm of his studies under Tutor Tseng and at the American school. Moreover, his stay in Kunming had nurtured in him a rising resentment against colonial rule. The war had been portrayed as a struggle for freedom and self-determination and it dismayed him to learn that the major powers had decided to leave Hong Kong and Macau in foreign hands. He could not understand such an outcome. He put it down to another flaw in the inept republican model of government in China.

As things turned out, his return to Hong Kong was considerably delayed. His grandmother decided that he should complete his secondary education and matriculation in Kunming first because the education system in the colony was bound to be in disarray following years of Japanese occupation. The good offices of Reverend Adam proved invaluable in arranging for matriculation tests to be conducted in Kunming.

Furthermore, the transportation system in China remained chaotic after the war. It was to be late in the summer of 1946 before Suen and his grandmother began their journey home.

Suen's parting from Tutor Tseng proved particularly wrenching. Each knew he would never set eyes on the other again.

"The years have passed so quickly," Tutor Tseng said, forcing a smile. "You have been the most receptive of my many students. You have the makings of a true scholar. I hope that what little I've been able to pass on will one day prove to be of some use."

"I shall be forever in your debt, Tutor Tseng," Suen said, bowing deeply. "Your instructions have been engraved upon my heart."

Neither could avoid a few tears.

Arrival in Hong Kong proved just as tearful. Ah Loy was standing at the door waiting for them. She was dressed as usual in an

immaculate white Chinese jacket and a pair of black trousers. The moment she saw him alighting from a taxi, she rushed towards him. As they fell into each other's arms, her face became wet with tears. It was the first and only time he had seen Ah Loy cry. He cried too and so did his grandmother.

Until that moment he did not fully realise how much he had changed. When he left, Ah Loy had been a head taller than himself. Now he was several inches taller than the servant. Ah Loy had also undergone an unexpected transformation. She no longer had that thick, magnificent queue he used to tug as a child. She said she had cut it off during the occupation to exchange it for food. She didn't want to grow it back again.

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Suen woke with a start. He had fallen asleep. Through the open French windows, beyond the parapet of the verandah, he could see dawn breaking. He felt like Rip Van Winkle. It seemed as if he had nodded off as a young boy only to wake and find himself in the autumn of his life. Time was running out too fast, he told himself.