

Dinner With Father

Hong Kong, April 1954:

Except for Sundays, when his father invited friends around for bridge or mah jong, and with their wives joining for dinner, Chu Wing-seng seldom ate at the great round rosewood table. Its fine grain and rich colour, fretted with intricate carvings and protected by glass, threw back the light of the enormous crystal chandelier hanging over it. A dozen upholstered chairs with similar carvings circled the table. But by some miracle, his father was dining at home on a weekend and he had to make the most of his opportunity.

Chu Wing-seng occupied a seat between his parents, as if he were some kind of link between them. His mother was dressed in a white linen suit. His father was in shirtsleeves. It occurred to him suddenly that the last time the three of them dined together his mother had also been dressed in white. Why? White was the colour of purity or of mourning. Was a message being conveyed? About what? There was always something strange between his parents, as if a mysterious undercurrent flowed constantly between them. He never managed to figure out whether that was caused by love or by a certain discomfort with each other's company.

As he waited patiently for the food to be served, his mind went over the questions about financial and business matters he wanted to put to his father. It would be a pleasant change from the boring topics woven around his studies, his scouting, his next set of examinations and his larger ambitions that formed the staple of conversations with his mother. There would also be respite from those worn out tales about the Lord Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, about a Chinese monk's journey to India to acquire holy scriptures, or about Zen masters using impossible parables to defeat the mind. He would have to avoid posing direct questions about making money to his father, however, because he knew his mother's temperament and did not want to upset her.

In front of him, the table was laid out with all the formal accessories. Personalized ivory chopsticks with names engraved in red. Polished silver chopstick rests. Little square dishes of sauces and condiments. Embroidered linen napkins, immaculately starched and ironed. A centrepiece filled with fresh pink flowers whose name he did not know. It was a far cry from the simple dinners eaten with his mother in the small alcove in her private quarters.

His mother's vegetarian dishes of tofu, mushrooms, beansprouts and stir-fried pak choy were the first to arrive. Then came the dishes of pork cooked with dried mustard greens, eggs scrambled with shrimps and Chinese broccoli fried with beef seasoned with oyster sauce meant for himself and his father. It occurred to Chu Wing-seng suddenly how ridiculous it was to have two Filipino maids serving three people seated at a table meant for twelve!

The meal proceeded in relative silence, except for Chu Wing-seng's occasional protest when his mother placed a helping of her vegetarian fare into his bowl. After a while, the questioning began.

What were the most important requirements for a stock exchange listing? Why had the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation restricted ownership of its shares to a maximum of one per cent per investor? When would the next Gold Star luxury housing project be completed?

Chu Wing-seng ate steadily as he listened to his father's unhurried replies. When he was into his second bowl of rice, he felt more venturesome. "There was a leader in yesterday's newspaper arguing that insider trading ought to be made a crime," he said. "What's insider trading?"

"The use of confidential or privileged information by someone to trade shares to their own advantage," his father replied.

"An example, please."

"Suppose Gold Star is in discussion to take over Company X. If the public knew, the price of shares in Company X would soar. If I had bought Company X shares for my personal account before making a public announcement, that would be insider trading."

"What if Mother knew about the talks and bought Company X shares?"

"That would be insider trading too. An executive must keep price sensitive information to himself. Can't share it, even with his wife."

Chu Wing-seng's eyes shone bright with interest. This was the kind of exchanges he had longed for, exchanges which opened the door to business practices. "An executive can't always keep things secret, can he?" he asked. "What if the takeover created so much stress you can't sleep? You might go to Dr. Chow for sleeping pills or tranquillizers. Dr. Chow would want to know why you've been stressed. Discovering the cause, he might decide to buy Company X shares. Would that be insider trading?"

"Dr. Chow wouldn't do such a thing. That would be unprofessional. If a doctor did it in those circumstances, it would be insider trading."

"What if the doctor's nurse saw the medical records and told her husband and the husband went out and bought Company X shares. Would that be insider trading?"

"That's more debatable. That gets into difficult areas of guilty knowledge, intent and proof -- the very reasons why insider trading has not yet been made a crime in Hong Kong. We live cheek by jowl. Gossip and rumours fly around all day. Hard to pin down who told what to whom and when. Even harder to prove. If the stock exchange thinks someone has been naughty, it gives him a public ticking off. A blot on his reputation. People criticize that arrangement as too cozy for those in the know. But there's no point having a law that can't be effectively enforced."

"Do the Evergreens ever engage in insider trading?"

"What do you mean? What are you driving at?"

"There was an article a while back hinting that you and Uncle Yue belonged to a group of entrepreneurs known as the Evergreens. The group was supposed to have made fortunes immediately after the war, through shrewd dealings in stocks and shares and in contraband goods. Did the Evergreens use insider information to score?"

"You should eat some more greens," his mother intervened, spooning a helping of fried pak choi into his bowl.

“I don’t want more greens, Mother. I’ve had plenty of broccoli already.”

“Pak choy is good for you.”

Chu Wing-seng felt irritated. Both he and his father knew it was his mother’s way of indicating they were approaching inappropriate territory.

The rest of the meal continued in silence. However, after the dishes had been cleared and tea had been served, his father returned to the topic of his own volition.

“Shouldn’t believe everything you read in newspapers, my boy. The war left many people in ruins. A few friends and I were trying to pick ourselves up again. We met for breakfast at a tea house known as the Evergreen. I’ve told you about it before. It was a wonderful middle-class place located near the boundary of the Central and Western Districts. It served delicious food and over forty varieties of famous Chinese teas. I would gladly take you there, if you can overcome your preference for flashy French food.

“Anyway, to continue. We went to the tea house to exchange gossip and to play the market. Got lucky. Just a bunch of hungry young men, not a secret society. We kept our ears to the ground, sniffing out opportunities. Couldn’t rely on insider information because we had no access to important people. One or two of the group might have done some smuggling on the side. Shortages and corruption were rampant in those days. Still a lot of corruption around. Everybody was on the make, including government officials charged with preventing smuggling. Most of us did well after a while, in stockbrokering, money-lending, construction, shipping and trading. Still meet regularly at the Evergreen, for old times’ sake.”

When his father paused, his mother stood up and excused herself. She had barely touched the tea.

After she had disappeared, his father said: “You’ll be going to university in a couple of years. I’ve left your upbringing to your mother, I fear. It’s time we talked a bit. Let’s do it in the study.”

His father flung an arm around his shoulders as they walked. Chu Wing-sen had sometimes been uncertain about his father’s love because his father was seldom around and had seemed such a remote figure. Now, as they headed towards the study, he felt his right to participate in worldly affairs was finally being acknowledged.

His father unlocked the door. He always kept it locked when he was not around, on the grounds he didn’t want servants banging into his antiques. The only other key to the room was kept by his mother, who opened it once a week for servants to clean it under supervision.

As his father switched on the light, Chu Wing-seng saw that the desk was cluttered with numerous documents and that boxes and crates were all over the floor. Some were still sealed and others had necks of vases and other ornaments sticking out of them. Otherwise, the room was not untidy.

His father took a chair on the other side of the desk. A miniature pine, gnarled and partly hollow, stood on a stand next to the desk. The plant, in a buff-coloured clay pot, was set among tiny rocks in mossy soil to resemble a mountainside scene. His father had once tried to explain the intricacies of creating miniature landscapes, or what the Japanese called bonsai, and

how a lifespan of fifty or sixty years was not uncommon for such plants. But he had no interest. Tending a dwarfed plant seemed a waste of precious time.

Chu Wing-seng saw his father gazing fondly at the twisted pine, more fondly perhaps than he ever remembered his father gazing upon him. The shrunken plant was a grown-up's toy, an irrelevance, he thought, as he watched his father fish a cigar out of a silver cigar box.

His father's attention seemed to drift towards two scrolls of calligraphy on the wall, as he lit his cigar and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. The scrolls had been executed by one of his father's former tutors, Teacher Tam. The text was by an anonymous Tang poet. It read:

“The bright moon shining overhead,
The stream beneath the breeze's touch,
Are pure and perfect joys indeed --
But few are they who think them such.”

Chu Wing-seng followed his father's gaze. Silly poem, he thought. No dynamism, meant for doddering old men on their last legs. His mother had often praised the brush strokes of Teacher Tam and held them up as a skill he should emulate. Who had time to practise with the brush these days?

A restlessness stole upon Chu Wing-seng as the silence lengthened. He cleared his throat to attract the attention of his father.

“Ah!” his father said, with a start. He ran a hand through his hair. “Your mother has asked me to talk to you about your education. Seems you're inclined towards studying business administration. No need to make that kind of a decision now. You still have two years to go. Something else might strike your fancy.”

“Nothing else will. I've made up my mind,” Chu Wing-seng replied, blinking behind his spectacles. The tone his father was adopting was not quite what he had expected. It was more father-to-son than man-to-man. He at once felt less at ease. He wished he were older, more of a match for his father.

“You sure you want to go into business?”

“Certainly. I thought you understood that. Wasn't that why you left those economics and business journals around the house? To encourage and stimulate me?”

His father laughed. “I brought them back to have them thrown away, without letting people in the office know. Just forgot to tell the maids. Never did more than skim them. Can't waste time on stuff like that.”

“To throw away? I don't understand! Why buy them for your staff and put yourself on the circulation list if you don't intend to read them?”

“To give staff the impression I'm reading the same fancy rubbish they are, so they don't start palming off borrowed ideas as their own. Business is mainly about commonsense and understanding human nature, knowing who is blowing smoke and who can be relied upon. I despair when so-called management gurus pretend it's a science.

“Have you noticed anything about the circulation lists? Doesn't my name always appear last? Everyone on a list has to sign off, together with a date, before passing the magazine on

to the next person. That obviously records how long a person has kept it. Passing it along too quickly suggests it hasn't been read. Retaining it too long creates an impression of lack of diligence. Keeps everyone on his toes."

"I see! That's brilliant! Splendid tactics!"

"Business isn't about smart tactics. It's more about not doing things one might regret afterwards. The ancients used to look down upon those engaged in commerce and barred them from ancestral temples. They had good reason. It's not easy for decent men to live in the real world. That's why your mother and I prefer you not to go into business. I've made sufficient provisions for you both. Making more money when you already have enough is pointless."

"It's not about money, Father. It's about achievement and proving your own worth. I've read your magazines. They talk about taking on all comers, becoming dominant, like De Beers in diamonds, Rockefeller in oil, J. P. Morgan in steel. I want to shake the world that way. I want you to be proud of me."

"Your mother and I are already proud of you. We love you. You're highly intelligent and can do whatever you want to set your mind to. No need to shake the world on our account. We would rather you study a subject which contributes to the betterment of the self and society as a whole."

"Not you too, Father! Mother always presses me to become some sort of do-gooder, a social worker, a teacher or a seeker after metaphysical truths. To her anything's better than business. But how can someone like you think that way? You don't expect me to spend my life auditing boring accounts or probing rotting molars, do you?"

His father blew more smoke into the air, watching them curl towards the ceiling before being snatched into the louvres of the central ventilation system.

"Life is ridiculous," he said, with a sigh. His voice had lost some of its crispness. His face became more serious. It was no longer that of a self-confident tycoon but that of a worried father not knowing how to handle his son.

"Your mother has from the very beginning been worried about your being sucked into Gold Star. I tried to nudge you in another direction. Wanted to send you to boarding school in Britain two years ago. Brits in Britain are quite different from the ones here. They're much more like us, placing the family at the centre of things, respecting scholarship, tolerating the views of others and displaying a strong sense of fair play. Like ourselves, they follow maxims like 'My word is my bond' and 'Death before dishonour'.

"But your mother wouldn't hear of it. She wanted you by her side. Understandable, I suppose. To allay her anxieties, I left your upbringing to her. Now that your ambitions have hardened in spite of her best efforts, she wants me to dissuade you from business. Not sure I know how. Have you read Mencius? Do they teach him at school?"

"No."

His father got up from his black leather chair and stepped over to a bookcase. He extracted a well-thumbed volume and placed it in front of his son. "Here's Mencius," he said. "You can borrow it."

Chu Wing-seng picked up the book, printed on yellowing rice paper and bound together by white threads. He turned a few pages. "It's in classical Chinese," he said. "I'll have difficulty with that."

"Yes, that's true. You'll need a tutor to take you through it. Pity I haven't an English translation. When I was a boy, I had tutors for both English and Chinese. The Chinese tutor concentrated on classics like Mencius and got me reciting them by rote. Made no sense at first, just parroting sounds. After I learnt the characters, however, meanings began to emerge. I can still recite all of Mencius, just like devout Moslems can the Koran.

"This is what happens in the First Book of Mencius. The sage calls on King Wei of Liang and the king immediately asks for advice on ways to profit his kingdom. Mencius chastises the king for dwelling on profits rather than on righteousness and benevolence. He points to the dangers of emphasizing profits because people obsessed with gain must ultimately plot usurpation. The throne, after all, represents the greatest source of profit in any kingdom."

His father paused, as if he were trying to recall his childhood lessons, and Chu Wing-seng did not know whether he should say anything. His father was beginning to sound like his mother and he wanted him to stop, to revert to the kind of topic at dinner.

At last his father spoke again. "Not easy to heed Mencius when both government and society extol enterprise, self-interest, profits and prosperity. Creating wealth is unquestionably good. But it can easily degenerate into greed. My own actions have sometimes caused distress to others, to people who had done me no harm. By the time I realized it, it was often too late. Too late for regrets."

"What have you got to regret, Father? You've created an empire. You've demonstrated that not only gweilos can create great hongs in Hong Kong. You've given them more than a run for their money. Perhaps one day you and the Evergreens can oust them altogether. This is our territory. Gold Star and the Chu name are already household words. What's there to regret?"

"Deception of the self and of others," his father shook his head and sighed. "Employing sophistry to justify dubious actions. Ignoring the well-being of others in the scramble for profits. Deceiving with inflated claims. The list is long. Not long ago a young man blamed me for the deaths of his parents."

"Who was he?"

"His name doesn't matter. He was a young man who cared."

"Must be a crank. You're not in the business of killing anyone."

"Not as simple as that, I'm afraid. I'm culpable to a degree. The young man's parents owned a neighbourhood grocery store. Gold Star came along with a supermarket. Drove their business into the ground. The old couple lost everything and committed suicide."

"Father, how can you be held responsible if people kill themselves? Just sore losers. In an open economy people have to take their chances. Survival of the fittest. The inefficient must perish, so that society can progress. That's the law of the marketplace, of economics."

"Is it? Is there no room for compassion, for kindness, for consideration of others? Are there no moral imperatives left? What of the Golden Mean? Are the teachings of Confucius

and Mencius to be forgotten like last year's pop songs? They spoke of sharing, of displacing selfishness and materialism, of devotion to duty, of an end to intrigue and conniving for gain. Forget all that and we begin to turn nasty and brutish."

"Father, you're a businessman, not a dreamer or a priest. Business is about making money. Has anybody ever seen a clause in any commercial contract pledging high moral or ethical standards?"

"More's the pity. But it's not too late for you. Go study a rewarding subject. There're plenty of careers outside Gold Star."

"This is cruel, Father! To tell me like this that you don't want me in Gold Star!"

Frustrated, angry, Chu Wing-seng tore off his spectacles and wiped his eyes with his hand. In his crushing disappointment it came to him that his father had judged him and found him wanting! His father had identified his weaknesses, seen through his deceptions and noted his failures of courage. He re-lived in a flash the fear experienced when tossing away the black and white snake on the Pokfulam hillside.

"You don't think I'm good enough. That's it, isn't it?" he cried. "All my life, I have wanted to follow in your footsteps, to become part of what you've created. You've never nurtured me like that stupid potted pine! You never gave me a chance. Now you want me out! I'll prove to you how good I am! I'll make it on my own! I won't be put off what I've set my heart on!"

"Ah Seng! Please! You've misunderstood. I know you're good enough! I know you can run Gold Star better than I can. You're very single-minded. That's why I'm afraid. That's why your mother's afraid."

Chu Wing-seng had read somewhere that attack was the best form of defence. His father had regrets, his parents had secrets, perhaps as guilty as the one he shared with Little Ho. He was not going to give up his ambition without a fight. So he attacked instinctively, with the first thing that came to mind.

"Father, if you and Mother don't want me in Gold Star, that's all right. But don't employ trickery against me, your own son. You and Mother are both the same, full of little secrets and deceptions. You don't even love each other. You're just putting on a show."

The Chairman of Gold Star sat up with a start. His cigar had gone out but he made no attempt to relight it.

"What in heaven's name gave you such a notion? I love your mother above all else. We may have our differences but no two persons in the world can care more for each other."

"I'm not a fool, Father. If this is going to be an evening for truth then let me speak it first. I've got eyes. You two are too considerate, too polite. You never argue or row like other parents. You don't stay together in a room for more than a few minutes. You sleep in different quarters. Sometimes you don't come home. What kind of marriage is that?"

"If Mother's so opposed to my going into business, why has she tolerated your activities? You told me yourself you've caused deaths. Why expect me to accommodate her wishes when you have not? What are the two of you hiding from me?"

“We are hiding nothing. We may not tell you everything, but that is not hiding. That’s privacy.”

Chu Wing-seng stared boldly at his father. “That’s not true. I can sense it. Mother never mentions her parents. Neither do you mention yours, except that they died in Canton during one of the rectification campaigns. You can go into endless detail about using fermented rapeseed husks for your stunted tree, adding charcoal to strengthen trunk and roots. But you never teach me masterstrokes in business or talk about how you and Mother met or what you did before the war.

“Now let me tell you a secret I’ve been puzzling over. When I was nine, I caught Mother crying in her room and cradling an old Chinese mandoline. I tried to comfort her but she wouldn’t tell me what the matter was. She just hugged me and in the end I cried too.

“The memory of that day has troubled me ever since. Why was she crying and holding an old pei-pa? Where did the instrument come from? I had never seen it before. She must have hidden it in one of the cupboards. Why hide it? What is its significance? Why have I never heard her play? She never explained anything.”

Chu Tung-po shook his head and sighed again. “Your mother used to play the pei-pa and I used to love listening to her,” he said. A remoteness came into his eyes. “She could pluck the most heart-breaking melodies from those strings. That was a long time ago, before you were born. The pei-pa you saw was possibly the same one she used to play.”

“Why did she stop playing?”

“I’m not sure. That is something for your mother to tell you, if she wants to. The only thing I can say is that what human beings strive for and what they achieve are two quite different things. If you insist on a business career, I won’t stand in your way. It will be a huge disappointment to your mother and me. I ask only that you mull it over. I hope that you will not regret your life twenty or thirty years from now, as I sometimes do mine.”