

Conversations

En Route to Taiwan, July 1956:

The sky was thick with the promise of rain as the 4,000-ton freighter, recently re-named the Rising Star, steamed at twelve knots towards Taiwan. It was flying Liberian colours. Apart from its cargo-carrying capacity, it featured four passenger cabins, two of which were occupied.

Chu Wing-seng, who occupied one of the cabins, climbed the metal rungs leading to a small sun-deck. He was glad he was not seasick. It was his first sea voyage. In fact, it was his first journey out of Hong Kong. He had been pacing the main deck for the last half an hour to take his mind off the gentle rolling of the ship.

On the sun-deck, Chu Tung-po, the other passenger, was standing by the starboard railing, gazing out at sea. A breeze teased a few strands of his hair.

“Love the sea,” the elder Chu said. “Gives a man room to think. That’s why I enjoy taking the pleasure boat out at night. You should try it.” His voice was wistful.

To Chu Wing-seng his father looked like a matinee idol in a white open-necked shirt, checked Bermudas and blue canvas deck shoes. An ultra-thin Piaget gold watch with a black face added a touch of class. Everything seemed to come so easily to his father. He drew admiration simply by standing there. He didn’t have to wear absurd horn-rimmed glasses.

Chu Wing-seng resented his own appearance. His clothes, though identical to his father’s, did not produce the same effect. His shorts reached below his knees like a clown’s. He was five inches shorter than his father and, at seventeen, he might never grow any more. Was he destined to be stunted, like that miniature pine in his father’s study?

“You said we had things to discuss,” Chu Wing-seng said abruptly, joining his father at the railing. Two white-breasted sea gulls circled above them, scavenging for food, and Chu Wing-seng felt as if he, too, were scavenging for his father’s approval. “Why have you asked me on this trip?”

His father turned and gave him a faint smile. “For a chance to talk before you leave home,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Your mother’s worried you might not cope in America.”

The mention of his mother made Chu Wing-seng wince. He loved her. Yet she always found ways to embarrass him. Whereas other mothers came to Parents’ Day in nylon stockings and high-heeled shoes, his mother would appear in plain, sombre cotton clothes, looking like a servant in spite of her beautiful face. She wore neither rouge nor jewellery. She would also try to hold his hand. It made him look a sissy. Even now, when he was about to enter university, she still fussed over him and watched his every move like a hawk.

“To Mother I’m always a little boy,” Chu Wing-seng said, grudgingly. “What about you? Do you think I can’t cope?”

“Well, the Confucians used to hold that a person embarking upon learning had to be thirty before he could stand firm and sixty before his ears became obedient to truths. It would not be until seventy that he could follow his heart’s desires without transgressing what was right. You have barely begun. Society is made up of all kinds of people, some more essential than others. We can always do with more doctors and teachers. On the other hand, we would probably be better off with fewer lawyers and currency speculators. You have many options. Why decide so prematurely on business administration?”

“Because I want to be like you, though you discourage me at every turn. So I might as well learn about business at university.”

“There are few things about business that can be taught in a classroom. Circumstances often dictate what a man has to do. Many of the things I did, I did for you and your mother.”

Chu Wing-seng detected a note of either unhappiness or regret in his father’s voice. “What are you talking about, Father?”

A Filipino steward appeared with two glasses of chilled lemonade.

“I didn’t order any,” Chu Wing-seng said.

“I did,” Chu Tung-po said. “Thought you might get thirsty pacing the deck.”

Chu Wing-seng accepted the glass gracelessly. Dusk was creeping in. The smell of rain suffused the air.

“Have you ever imagined what starvation might be like? Your stomach twists itself into knots, you know,” Chu Tung-po said.

“I’ve heard about famines. But Hong Kong’s passed that stage surely?”

“You can never be sure, if war comes again.”

“You think war will flare again?”

“No, but it does no harm to be on the alert. A stable situation can deteriorate quickly, like during the last war.”

“Tell me about the last war.”

“When the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor and captured Hong Kong in 1941 no one had any inkling what was in store. You were just a baby then. The occupation was really bad. The Japs rewarded collaborators with food but kept supplies at subsistence level for the rest. Trade in foodstuffs was disrupted and prices soared.

“The Japs also closed banks and froze accounts. Many businesses had to shut. People were left with only what they had in their pockets. Most didn’t have a bean to fall back on. The Japs also required all public transactions to be conducted in their new occupation currency. Violation meant execution. The exchange rate was set at four Hong Kong dollars to one of theirs. Purchasing power fell. Food supplies stopped coming from China because no one wanted Japanese occupation currency. You sure you want to hear about those miserable times?”

“Why not? I lived through them. Might as well know what really happened then.”

Chu Wing-seng was not particularly interested in the Japanese occupation. But he thought if he kept his father talking about the occupation his father would be prevented from going on about his choice of studies at Princeton.

“The Japs intended life to be hard,” his father said, reflectively. “They had a war to fight and didn’t want to feed civilians. They imposed rationing of rice, oil and sugar and limited the maximum amount of each item anyone could purchase at any one time to three or four days’ supply. Prices were also set at many multiples of the pre-war ones. Worse than that, each ration had to be purchased from a different depot, so you had to keep going from one depot to another.

“Queueing became a daily chore. Your poor mother! She got the worst of it. We had to queue separately to make the best of things but your mother refused to be separated from you. She carried you, day after day, in her arms or strapped to her back. I’ll never know how she endured all those interminable hours of waiting her turn, sometimes standing overnight. She refused to allow me carry you when I queued.”

“I never knew it was as bad as that!” Chu Wing-seng exclaimed. “Why haven’t either of you mentioned this before?”

“Your mother doesn’t like to be reminded of those times. So we never mention them.”

“Mother’s not here now. Tell me more.” Chu Wing-seng’s interest was now engaged. “How did you and Mother survive?”

“Sheer luck and the help of friends,” Chu Tung-po replied. “If you really want to know the details, let’s begin with the food depots. Their operating hours were erratic. So were supplies. Stocks often ran out before everybody could be served. Depots opened or closed according to whim. The choice then was either to remain in the queue overnight or to lose your place. Scuffles and arguments were common. The Japs met disturbances with rifle butts.

“Each adult was only allotted six taels or about eight ounces of rice per day! Babies like you weren’t even counted. The quality was abysmal, full of husks and sand. Unrationed food was simply too expensive for ordinary people.

“People soon got the message and fled. By the beginning of 1944 three quarters of the population had vanished. As the tide of war turned, the Japs became even more indifferent to the plight of civilians. They scrapped rations altogether and left people to fend for themselves. Those unable to flee were really up against it. The rich slaughtered their pets to stave off starvation. The poor hunted rodents and reptiles. Those who couldn’t hunt were reduced to eating roots and leaves. Malnutrition, tuberculosis and beri-beri became endemic. Corpses appeared in the streets with pieces of flesh missing, particularly buttocks. Cannibalism was whispered about.”

Chu Wing-seng shook his head in disbelief. “How appalling! One of my friends told me he had hunted reptiles with his father. I didn’t realize things got that bad. I didn’t eat any human flesh, did I?”

“No.” Chu Tung-po smiled reassuringly. “No human flesh for any of us. You’ll have to thank an uncle by the surname of Fung for that. You’ll meet him when we get to Taiwan. His nickname’s Buck-toothed Fung and he’s quite a character. His looks would frighten the living

daylights out of most people. He invited me to join a group of companions -- one of whom was Uncle Yue -- to sail to Chinese-controlled territory where food was cheap and plentiful.

"I told him I had no money, even if cheap food was available. He laughed. He said the middle class was hopeless. In good times it wasted money on Swiss watches, German cameras, French perfumes, silver cigarette cases, malt whiskey, heaven knows what. We all had a few such items at home. Selling them would produce the money needed to buy food, he said. The middle class in Free China was the same. People there were prepared to pay handsomely for baubles which enhanced their status. The dangerous part was making the trip there and back.

"I was desperate because I couldn't bear to see you and your mother wasting away. I gathered up the few items I had and joined the group. We made our runs after dark, through a gauntlet of Japanese patrols, pirates, bandits, treacherous seas and Allied air raids. Getting caught was something none of us wanted to think about. The initial run was a great success. Came back with rice, beans, Yunnan ham, dried shrimps, wind-dried ducks, sausages and other goodies. Each of us had enough to feed our families for weeks."

Chu Tung-po paused and took a drink of lemonade.

"I immediately began thinking ahead" he continued. The food could not last long. No one knew how the war might drag on. Having sold most of my disposable items, what had I left to trade with the next time? I had to find new things. So I experimented. I took some food and went around offering it in exchange for suitable objects.

"I was amazed by what was pressed upon me. People begged me to go into their homes to select whatever I wanted in return for a few miserable sausages or a couple of katties of rice. I was offered jewellery and heirlooms, exquisite embroideries and antique vases, jades and stamp collections.

"My former English tutor, Teacher Tam, whom you'll also meet in Taiwan, had taught me a few things about antiques. I knew some of the items were far too rare to be bartered away at provincial marketplaces. They needed to be kept for better times, to realize their true value. Hunger and suffering were immediate, however. People were living skeletons, surrounded by precious paintings and artefacts which could not dull their hunger. Some signed away whole buildings for a couple of sacks of rice."

Chu Tung-po paused again, as if troubled by his recollections. He then continued with a sigh.

"I wanted to help them. But I also saw the opportunity to become rich, so that neither you nor your mother would ever be in want again. I was learning about supply and demand and risk/reward ratios in the raw. I pointed out the opportunities to other members of the group and we decided to make our fortunes by continuing our runs.

"Your mother was unhappy, however. She was all for relieving hunger but did not think we should go after profit. She did not appreciate that other people were not like her. They would not risk their lives without the prospect of big rewards.

"We traded some food and gathered a fresh supply of items for our second run, everything from Movado watches and ebony cigarette holders to Church's shoes and fine British

suits. But we hit trouble. Pirates tried to board us one night. We resisted. Uncle Fung fought like ten men. I knocked some into the sea. One or two pirates might have been killed in the fighting. Eventually we chased them off.”

“You mean you all turned killers?”

“No! We only defended ourselves. Except for Uncle Fung, I don’t think any of us killed anybody.”

“You said you knocked pirates into the sea. You must have injured them.”

“Yes, I suppose. It was self-defence. A number of us got hurt too.”

“Did you continue with the expeditions after that?”

“Of course. Continued till the end of the war and for a while afterwards also. Profits were too good. No one wanted to stop.”

“Did you have to fight off more pirates?” The almost childish eagerness in Chu Wing-seng’s voice elicited a smile from his father.

“We were lucky. Had only one other run-in with pirates plus one attack by robbers. Both at night. Successfully fought them off, though one of our companions lost his life. The gods must have been with us. We missed the Japanese patrols.

“It’s one of life’s little ironies. Just when we were getting enough to eat, your mother turned vegetarian. She gave away part of the food to help neighbours. I traded surplus food for land and buildings. I was convinced that Hong Kong would boom once the war was over. I was right. So you see, being successful comes mainly from luck and opportunity. It has very little to do with mission statements or synergy or the rest of that business school rigmarole.”

“But you were still motivated by profit and you had to work out whether the rewards were worth the risks.”

“I suppose so.”

“And you all ended up rich?”

“Well, those who stuck together and followed my advice did. But not Uncle Fung.”

“Why not?”

“He took a different view. He wanted to live for the day. He feared he might not survive the next fight. Squandered his money on women and gambling. Also left Hong Kong too soon. When the Communist armies swept across the Yangtze, he thought they would over-run Hong Kong. Didn’t fancy his chances with his Kuomintang connections. So he headed for Taiwan. Great pity. Could have become rich. That’s why I’m inclined to be generous when he does a job for me or touches me for a loan. But I never expect any loan to be repaid. He’s not very good with money.”

“He’s a welsher then?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it that way.” Chu Tung-po paused, emptied his glass of lemonade and gazed into the sea. “I suppose he has human failings, like the rest of us. You can make up your own mind when you meet him.”

“So the Evergreens did get their start from smuggling, as the newspapers have been saying.”

“Since time immemorial, when a territory is under enemy occupation, circumventing enemy restrictions has been considered an honourable activity. It would be as true to say we got our start at famine relief. But I suppose describing it as smuggling sells more newspapers.”

“And this boat? Have you bought it for more patriotic business?”

Chu Tung-po laughed. “No, nothing like that. It’s just handy to have a couple of vessels at your disposal. One never knows when they might come in handy. Airports can be closed easily during an emergency, but the sea is always wide open.”

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The next evening the Rising Star docked at Kaohsiung. Buck-toothed Fung was waiting with a chauffeur-driven black Mercedes and three uniformed army officers.

“Elder Brother Fung!” Chu Tung-po cried and embraced his old friend.

Chu Wing-seng was surprised by the warmth his father displayed towards a known killer. He certainly did not look like his father’s other friends. Though no taller than his father, he was thickset and barrel-chested. He moved with the lumbering gait of a gorilla and probably had the strength of one as well. His face was misshapen and lopsided. The right half was squashed, leaving one narrow, cunning eye glaring an inch or more out of alignment. His ill-fitting Western suit seemed a throwback to the bootlegging thugs of the Roaring Twenties in America.

Yet, for all his ugliness and bulk, Uncle Fung appeared to Chu Wing-seng to be more comical than menacing. Four buck-teeth protruded over the man’s lower lip like some ridiculous miniature snow-plough. They fixed his crooked face with a simpleton’s grimace. His hair was close-cropped. Its greyness argued for a degree of respect.

“So this is Little Seng!” Buck-toothed Fung boomed, clapping a heavy paw on Chu Wing-seng’s shoulder and regarding him with his unbalanced eyes. “He seems not to have grown very much since I bounced him on my knees. Ha! ha! Looks a brainy type though, with spectacles and all. Must take after his father.”

Chu Wing-seng thought the patronizing tone an unwarranted liberty.

His father whispered something to his ugly friend and then handed him some documents. Uncle Fung in turn passed them to the army officers who then boarded the Rising Star. The new arrivals were whisked away by Uncle Fung in the Mercedes with a minimum of formalities.

“What was that about?” Chu Wing-seng asked in the car.

“Uncle Fung wanted a favour for some friends,” Chu Tung-po replied.

“You want me to explain the ways of the world?” Fung asked, teasingly.

“Oh, no, Uncle Fung. That’s not my concern. Just curiosity.”

“Yeah, imagine you’ve got plenty to be curious about at your age!” Fung laughed and slapped Chu Wing-seng on the thigh. “You stick with your Uncle Fung and he’ll show you some of the deepest mysteries of life.”

After they had checked into a hotel, Uncle Fung took them out to a superb dinner, during which the two older men steadily drank a pale green wine from Chekiang Province. The wine, made with fermented sorghum, glutinous rice and herbs, was potent. Chu Wing-seng confined himself to soft drinks. After dinner, he was surprised to see the two men engaging in a boisterous Chinese drinking game. He had never associated his father with that type of blue collar rowdiness. Nor had he imagined him to be so good at it, defeating Uncle Fung three bouts out of four.

The game was a simple one, rhythmic and fast-moving. The players faced each other, with a clenched fist and a glass of wine. Upon a signal, each chanted a series of numbers ranging from zero to ten. With every chant each extended a varying number of fingers. If a contestant shouted a number matching the sum of the fingers extended by both, his opponent had to empty his glass.

Buck-toothed Fung turned ruddy-faced to Chu Wing-seng after his defeats. “Do you play this game, my lad?”

“Of course,” Chu Wing-seng lied with bravado. Having watched his father he thought he could manage. He didn’t want to lose face by backing away from an ugly brute.

“All right then. Let’s see if you’re cut from the same cloth. No fizzy drinks in this. A man’s drink,” Fung said, planting a glass of the greenish wine before him.

Chu Wing-seng’s throat felt dry as he settled down to the match. He lost the first bout in record time and the fiery wine seared his gullet as it went down. His head began to swim. He expected his father to come to the rescue but he didn’t.

He had no choice but to redeem himself through another bout. He saw Uncle Fung re-filling his glass and heard him say: “You need more nimble fingers, my lad, a woman’s touch to loosen them up.”

The second bout went no better than the first. After the second penalty, the world spun and his head began pounding like a drum in a dragon boat race. He only had the vaguest recollection of his father carrying him to bed.

The next day they drove to Tainan and visited a range of temples -- Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, ancestral and a number of hybrids. Chu Wing-seng’s head throbbed with increasing agony.

The day ended with dinner and a further session of the fingers-guessing game. But this time Uncle Fung invited two young women to join them. The women were high-spirited and good at the game but each nevertheless was defeated by Chu Tung-po.

Then one of them challenged Chu Wing-seng. He felt trapped.

“Come on, my lad,” Fung egged him on. “Even if you lose, you win. These ladies can take care of you in ways you can’t imagine.” He laughed uproariously.

Chu Wing-seng took up the challenge and to his surprise he won the first bout as well as the second. Just as he was beginning to enjoy the game, he lost the next bout and the one after that. Again his father had to put him to bed.

The third day in Taiwan began much as the second for Chu Wing-seng, with an excruciating hang-over. When he met his father for breakfast, he was filled with dread over another evening of alcoholic punishment. He said gloomily: "How much longer do we have to run around with Uncle Fung? I don't think my head and liver can survive another evening."

"Sorry you got thrown in at the deep end," Chu Tung-po replied. "One has to learn when to pick up a challenge and when to let it pass. We'll be driving up to Taipei today. Over the last two evenings, proprieties have been observed, hospitality exchanged. Once in Taipei, we'll be on our own, with time to do whatever you wish. I still have some minor discussions with Uncle Fung but there'll be no need for you to see him again, unless you particularly wish to."

"Thank heaven for that!" Chu Wing-seng said. "Can't understand why you want to keep up with a brute like that. He's not at all your type."

"My type? Businessmen have to deal with all types, not just those with bespoke suits and clean fingernails."

"I see!" Chu Wing-seng opened his eyes wide and smiled across the table at his father. "You're teaching me something at last! If a man wants to get to the top, he must have villains like Uncle Fung to do the dirty work! Right?"