

## Awakening

### Taiwan, July 1956:

It hit Chu Wing-seng suddenly, while travelling in the hotel limousine with his father to call on Teacher Tam. The traffic was moving on the wrong side of the road! How strange he had not noticed earlier! His hang-overs must be to blame. From that moment, other differences between Hong Kong and Taipei manifested themselves. Streets signs appeared only in Chinese, in white characters on green backgrounds, instead of bilingually, in black on white. Names resonated with Eastern evocations. The Road of Philanthropy. The Road of Benevolence. By contrast, streets back home glorified departed imperialists -- Connaught, Wyndham, Pottinger and Wellington.

Flags fluttering over buildings and monuments were red, with a blue upper left quadrant setting off a white sun. There was not a Union Jack in sight. Gone were red pillar-boxes and cricket pitches. Money no longer carried the head of a foreign woman with an ungainly crown. No doubt Christmas and Easter meant nothing except for their commercial aspects and English was no longer the common language.

He realized with increasing alarm that he was in another part of China, possibly under false pretences. He had come on a permit issued for "returning overseas Chinese". But neither his nationality nor his instincts conformed. He was a British subject, a citizen of a fracturing empire, drilled into different habits and patterns of thought. He even thought in English rather than Chinese! Was that another bit of Pavlovian conditioning? When did it begin? Had he already turned into a yellow-faced European?

He heard the voice of his father cutting into his reflections. "It might be an idea to tell you something about Teacher Tam before we arrive. He was from Kwangtung originally, now relocated here. He's a great collector of antiques, which he intends to bequeath to a reunited China. But that day seems decades away. He lives in a villa with his wife, spinster sister, four sons, their wives and -- at the last count -- ten grandchildren. One or two grandchildren are around your age. The sons followed different disciplines but have all ended up as teachers. Father and sons call themselves 'the five voices in the wilderness'.

"Came from a family of officials. Got a viceroy and two provincial governors in the family tree. Studied for the imperial examinations like his forebears, but also immersed himself in English. By the time he was ready, the examinations had been discontinued. When the empire itself disappeared, he became a teacher. My father -- who was well acquainted with his father -- persuaded him to teach me English. I was eight. He was thirty-three. He taught me for ten years."

"Ten years? That's hell of a long time to be studying English!"

"Wasn't just English. He taught me many other things. Made me soak up history, literature and philosophy. Like Socrates, he stressed that the unexamined life was not worth living. Left me hankering after a scholar's life instead of selling crockery."

"Why didn't you do that? You could have become a teacher."

“Family obligations. English was needed for the export trade. Letters of credit, bills of lading and all that stuff. My father sent me to Hong Kong in 1936 to open a branch. Teacher Tam left Canton shortly before then.”

Father and son continued in desultory conversation during the rest of the journey, about the former family business and how Taiwan fell into foreign hands, first Dutch and later, Japanese.

They arrived eventually at the entrance of a villa in a tranquil valley. “You can see that in keeping with Chinese tradition the villa is located to the west of the plot, with the garden and its pond at the centre,” Chu Tung-po pointed out.

Chu Wing-seng noted that verdant hills formed a backdrop. Oaks, cypresses, bamboos and cherry trees were in abundance. A lotus pond stood in the garden, like a mirror reflecting the peacefulness of the surroundings. Traces of valley mist and sounds of tumbling water enhanced the setting.

“Present these to Teacher Tam,” Chu Tung-po said, as he handed his son a bag containing two bottles of Armagnac brought over from Hong Kong. He then ordered the driver of the limousine to wait.

An aged gate-keeper bowed greetings. “The Master is expecting the honoured guests,” he said, as he led them through a forecourt into a reception hall, formally laid out with traditional blackwood furniture. It was dominated by a portrait of a bearded man in the official robes of a provincial mandarin. Chu Wing-seng presumed it to be a picture of the father of the host.

Teacher Tam appeared almost immediately. He was of medium build and completely bald. He wore a wispy, white goatee. Otherwise he might have passed for someone younger. He greeted the visitors warmly while a servant served tea.

“For a teacher to be visited by a student of eminence is an honour indeed,” Teacher Tam said, with a loud chuckle, as he accepted the gift from Chu Wing-seng. “For him to bring along a son is a double honour. For a humble teacher’s partiality to Armagnac to be remembered as well is honour beyond expression.”

“A student’s indebtedness to his teacher can never be repaid,” Chu Tung-po replied, continuing that vein of ritual banter favoured by Chinese scholars.

“It is I who must beg forgiveness for my many deficiencies. Your commercial successes resound throughout the Four Seas. A worthy teacher would have rendered his students incapable of becoming tycoons.”

“Teacher Tam has delivered me from an even worse fate. For that I shall be eternally indebted. It is the bent of my character that has been deficient. Like Confucius, Teacher Tam has urged me to find pleasure in water and virtue in hills. But I failed to heed such wisdom and allowed myself to be caught up in the trammels of worldly things. I must seek the forgiveness of my teacher.”

“Each man has a choice. Each must be drawn by his heart’s desires. Eternal truths are always there to be grasped.”

“Easier said than done. A couple of wrong moves and one soon finds oneself trapped by obligations towards others. One is sometimes tempted to throw it all up, but conscience makes cowards of us all.”

“I see you have not forgotten your Shakespeare. To be affected by conscience is to be a step closer to wisdom. Too bad all my sons are at work. They relish discussions of this type,” Teacher Tam said. Then, turning to Wing-seng, he added: “And you, young sir, are no doubt weary of old men’s chatter. I’m afraid my grandchildren are at school. You’re stuck with us, I fear. I can deliver you to the women of the house, if you so prefer. There are enough of them around.”

“Oh, no, Sir. I’m honoured by the opportunity to learn from Teacher Tam,” Chu Wing-seng replied. But in truth he thought the exchanges stilted and pointless. “My Mother has often told me to emulate your masterly calligraphy. My Father has spoken of your renown as a collector of antiques. Might I be favoured with a sight of your treasures?”

“Ah, it is indubitably true that a tiger never sires a cur! It is rare these days for the young to be interested in calligraphy and antiques. I hope the bits and pieces I have managed to salvaged do not disappoint. Please excuse me while I turn off the alarm.”

Teacher Tam disappeared from the room for a moment before returning. Then he led his guests into a small courtyard through a set of latticed side doors. Matching doors stood across the courtyard. Between them lay a small rockery against a connecting wall.

The remaining side of the courtyard took the form of a six-foot wall topped with an opening shaped like a cherry blossom. Above that opening, four moulded characters proclaimed: “The Fragrance of Antiquity Lingers Forever.”

“Walls and doors,” Teacher Tam remarked, as he led his guests towards the second set of latticed doors. His black cloth shoes made no sound. “Foreigners mistakenly think they’re for privacy and separation of spaces rather than for generating depth and mystery.”

He nodded towards the cherry blossom opening and said to Chu Wing-seng: “Gardens are beyond. You are no doubt aware that in archaic script the characters for ‘garden’ and ‘circle’ and ‘universe’ are all interchangeable. Isn’t that worth pondering, young sir? Have we lost something by being too precise and clever?”

“That’s a thought, Sir,” Chu Wing-seng said, politely, though he knew nothing of archaic characters nor what his host was driving at. The gush of words sounded like babbling pedantry.

Chu Wing-seng followed Teacher Tam and his father into the study. He had never seen a traditional Chinese study before. It was bright and spacious. A large redwood writing desk took pride of place and upon it rested the usual paraphernalia for writing -- an ink slab, a thick stub of ink, a sheaf of brushes in a blue and white porcelain container, a matching brush rest and a flower-shaped rinsing dish in a pale green crackled glaze. There was not a fountain pen or ballpoint in sight. It was like stepping back in time.

Books in both English and Chinese were everywhere, on the desk, in bookcases, on shelves, on chairs. They jostled for space with vases, candy dishes and ashtrays on side tables. Some were opened while others had pieces of paper sticking out as markers. Two scrolls of

calligraphy hung from one wall. The characters were too cursive and impressionistic to decipher. A large blue porcelain bowl, entwined outside by a four-clawed dragon in relief, stood on a low stand beneath the calligraphy. It held a collection of rolled-up scrolls. A black lacquered folding screen, decorated with golden chrysanthemums, stood at one end of the room.

Teacher Tam folded back the screen to reveal a steel-plated door. "A requirement of the insurance company," he said, apologetically, inserting a key into the lock. "Sometimes I wonder why I bother. What good is money if a masterpiece is destroyed? Insurers are Philistines. They fear children breaking things. Art should be freely accessible. My grandchildren have to see my collection under strict supervision."

Behind the steel-plated door was a large room with barred and shuttered windows. Air-conditioning gave off a steady hum. There were a number of illuminated display cases filled with porcelain plates, dishes and stemcups, bronze incense-burners and ceremonial wine vessels, lacquer vases and covered boxes, ivory seals and ornaments, jade teapots and wine pitchers. Between the display cases hung a number of landscape paintings.

"There are a few items from the Imperial Collection over here," Teacher Tam said, leading the way. "That," he added, indicating an elaborately decorated red lacquer vase, "carries an inscription by the Emperor Chien Lung. That is supposed to enhance its rarity and value. Quite frankly, Chien Lung did not always have the best of taste. The workmanship of the vase is in fact third rate. But for those not knowing any better, the praise of an emperor obviously counts for more than the opinion of a lowly bookworm."

"Product endorsement," Chu Wing-seng observed, "like a Wimbledon champion singing the praises of a brand of tennis racquet."

"Ah, so that is what they call it nowadays," Teacher Tam said, nodding.

Chu Wing-seng wandered slowly around the room. Some of the objects were beautiful enough, though he couldn't see why celadon bowls and dishes should be worth so much. He figured many could be mass produced for a song and few would notice the difference. What was the point of keeping a dish worth tens of thousands under lock and key when a million reproductions could be sold for ninety-nine cents each? They would probably sell even faster if images of Mickey Mouse or Popeye the Sailor were added.

He stopped in front of a landscape painting extensively covered with red imprints of seals. There were in excess of twenty. He had never seen so many on a painting before. He was trying to divine the reason when Teacher Tam came and addressed him.

"I should be interested in your opinion on the Southern School."

"Southern School? I fear I know nothing about it, Sir. I was just surprised by the large number of seals on this painting," he replied.

"This is by a Ming master and the seals are those of successive owners. At the top one of the previous owners had added a poem of comment. That is the seal of the painter and that of his studio. That one belonged to a minor poet, a friend of the painter's and the original recipient of the painting. Now, that is the seal of a former Secretary to the Board of Rites. That is my great-

grandfather's seal, that my grandfather's and that my father's. It is fascinating to try to trace previous owners through seals. It is like unravelling a puzzle."

"Which is your seal, Teacher Tam?"

Teacher Tam laughed and stroked his goatee. "I'm too ashamed to place mine among such illustrious company. I haven't even identified all the previous owners yet."

"Teacher Tam spoke just now of the Southern School. What exactly is it? What does it represent?"

"It is a style of landscape painting reputedly started by Wang Wei in the eighth century. You mean your father has not yet acquainted you the rudiments of painting? More than twenty years ago I presented him with a primer by Wang Kai known as The Painting Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden. Has he not shown it to you?"

Chu Tung-po, who had caught Teacher Tam's comment, quickly intervened. "My fault, Teacher Tam," he said. "I have allowed myself to become preoccupied with other things."

"Other things? What is more important than the upbringing of children?" Teacher Tam replied, severely. "To bring children into the world is to assume a responsibility for their development. That cannot be delayed or set aside for what you call 'other things'."

"I've been negligent. I have Wang Kai's primer still and I shall see to it that my son becomes acquainted with it."

In order to spare his father further embarrassment, Chu Wing-seng spoke out. "Father did speak on occasion about knowledge of painting being important in the make-up of a cultivated man. But, frankly, people lead such busy lives nowadays that there is little time for scholarly pursuits. There does not seem to be much variety in Chinese landscapes in any case. They all appear much the same. Trees, mountains, rivers, mists and so on, with people appearing as afterthoughts. Why can't Chinese artists be more innovative, do something different?"

"They are innovative and different," Teacher Tam said, "though originality is often not uppermost in their minds. On the face of it, they may appear much the same. But would a truth not remain a truth for all eternity? An artist, glimpsing a truth in nature, would naturally try to capture it. Successive generations of Chinese painters have followed that tradition of getting as close to nature as possible. Hsieh Ho, the fifth-century painter, spoke of capturing the chi or life-spirit in paintings. Tung Yuan, the Sung artist, had sought to distil what he called 'the very truths of Heaven' in mountains, trees, rocks and streams.

"Artists in other cultures may have different aims. You do not see severed heads or scenes of rape and pillage in our paintings. Those misfortunes are considered too ephemeral to be worthy of attention. The aim is to find a path to Nature and its mysteries, to lead mankind away from materialism and conflicts.

"One of the Six Principles of painting codified by Hsieh Ho is to copy and perpetuate the old masters. The assumption is that old masters have caught something of the deepest truths in nature. Therefore painters often state quite plainly that their works have been executed after the style of so-and-so. That might account for the impression of sameness you mentioned."

“I see,” Chu Wing-seng said. But he did not see. Teacher Tam’s gushing exposition struck him as pedantry and humbug. It was like the Buddhist obscurities peddled by his mother. He lived in a commercial and scientific age. Knowledge had to serve some utilitarian purposes and not be accumulated for antiquarian amusement. He could not understand why his father should waste his time calling on such an old codger.

After the visitors had finished viewing the antiques, the older men spent a further period reminiscing over tea. It bored Chu Wing-seng.

The visitors eventually took their leave and as the limousine carried them back to the hotel, Chu Wing-seng said: “What a to-do Teacher Tam makes of paintings. Are you going to make me study that manual?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” Chu Tung-po replied.

“That stuff is a waste of time. I couldn’t read the characters in the scrolls in the study. Too flowery, not like the scrolls in your study.”

“Ah, my son, you are missing so much! There are many types of calligraphy. Some are not meant to be read but felt. Absorbed. It’s art, it’s rhythm, it’s movement. It isn’t copybook writing. In calligraphy you ignore the meaning of characters and concentrate on the vitality of brush strokes. Great calligraphers, like painters, try to lead viewers to the essence of nature, which is movement.”

After having endured Teacher Tam’s expositions, Chu Wing-seng was in no mood to hear another spiel on calligraphy. He deflected his father by closing his eyes and pretending to doze.

It had been an altogether unsatisfactory day, Chu Wing-seng thought. The sense of alienation experienced during the drive through Taipei had been exacerbated by Teacher Tam’s long-winded erudition. What had any of that ancient babbling got to do with him? Mere curiosities. He was a British subject, armed with a British passport, about to embark for a new life in America. The imprisoned antiques did not represent his heritage any more than the Magna Carta or a haul of Roman coins. They elicited neither reverence nor emotional satisfaction.

He realized suddenly the enormous debt of gratitude he owed to his colonial education. It had stuffed him with useless information about distant European squabbles, about Drake and the Spanish armada, Wellington and Napoleon, Wolfe and Montcalm. It was all utterly forgettable. During that dreary process his expatriate teachers had expunged every attachment to race, nation and culture. In teaching him about self-interest and the survival of the fittest, they had set him free, free from the ethical considerations weighing upon his father, the religious imperatives shackling his mother, the cangues of tradition restraining Teacher Tam. He could shake off all that rubbish like raindrops from an oilskin cloak. What was freedom, after all, but the shedding of inhibitions and restraints? And, until a man was free, how could he know what he might be capable of?

The British had also given him a language that was more creative and ambiguous than Chinese, one he could slip in and out of and exploit its peculiarities. He saw himself as the

prototype of modern man -- savvy, quick-witted, amoral, contemptuous of the past and focused on the future.

Certainly, even if the heavens fell, he would see that neither his mother nor himself would ever have to queue for a few taels of worm-infested rice. He would owe allegiance to nothing but money and serve no master except himself. He would be like the Rising Star, flying any flag that suited his convenience. If international capitalism was to become the new imperialism, he intended to be among its leaders. In a month he would be off to America. There he would begin his preparation for the conquest of the world!

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Two days later, Chu Wing-seng was awakened at dawn by a knocking on the door. He opened it to find his father standing there, fully clothed. "What's the matter?"

"Have to fly to Japan,"

"Want me to go with you?"

"No, you can't. You haven't a visa. Can't wait for you to get one. Shouldn't be away more than four days. I've spoken to Uncle Fung and . . . ."

"You're not going to leave me with Uncle Fung!"

"Relax. You don't have to spend time with him. He's got a distant relative in Taipei, job-hunting. About your age. You'll have some company to see what we had planned, Fa Lien, Sun Moon Lake and so on. Hotels all paid for."

Chu Tung-po took out a wad of banknotes and handed it to his son. "This should be more than enough for fun and incidentals," he said. "If you need more, ask Uncle Fung. I'll settle with him later. If I'm held up, I'll get word to you from Japan. You must then make your way on schedule to Kaohsiung and take the Rising Star back to Hong Kong. Understood? Now go back to bed."

Chu Wing-seng nodded and watched resentfully as his father disappeared down the hotel corridor.