

The Evergreen Tea House

Hong Kong, August 1965:

“How are you, Uncle Yue? Good of you to invite me for lunch.” Xavier Chu bowed as he spoke and felt slightly absurd. Nine years in America had stripped him of that Eastern habit and reverting to it seemed an imposition.

“Ah Seng!” Mr. Yue cried happily, half-rising and gesturing for Xavier to take a seat with one of his large hands. He was dressed in a traditional Chinese suit of grey cotton. “A pleasure to see you again, under happier circumstances. A meal’s the least I can offer the son of a dear friend.”

Xavier took a seat on the bench opposite his host and gazed once more into a face he used to see regularly at his father’s mah jong games. With its thinning hair, bushy eyebrows and broad, flat nose, it struck Xavier as too unrefined for someone owning the largest shipping fleet in Asia and countless other businesses.

The Evergreen Tea House, too, seemed like a throwback to a former age. It was set in a row of two-storied tenements, each with its own outdated charm. The marble cloud-patterned table top, set in a blackwood frame, had long gone out of fashion. Four identical booths, separated by high latticed wooden panels, flanked both sides of the room. The space between was occupied by three round tables each with six matching stools. A large brass spittoon stood next to each booth. Lazy ceiling fans made a pretense at ventilation.

“I’m drinking Dragon’s Well. Does that suit? If not, you can order something else. There are dozens to choose from, fermented, semi-fermented and unfermented, the very best of each kind.”

“I’m not much into teas. A Coke would be fine.”

Mr. Yue laughed. His laughter was good-natured, as he bared large discoloured teeth. “Have you not been here before?”

“No. Father did offer to bring me but I never found time before leaving for America.”

“Didn’t your father tell you anything about this place?”

“Nothing beyond his meeting you and other uncles here.”

“Ah Seng, you’re in for an experience! I’ll have to explain things then. See that old man sitting over there behind the counter? He’s Proprietor Ng, the owner. What do you see on the wall above him?”

Xavier turned his attention to a large black frame hanging on the wall behind the counter. It contained a passage in Chinese ascribed to an eighth century scholar, asserting that tea could temper the spirit, harmonize the mind, arouse thought, refresh the body and clear the faculties.

“Impressive claims,” Xavier allowed.

“Now look at what’s in front of the counter.”

There was a stand with three layers jutting out like steps. Each layer was lined with large, wide-necked glass jars with metal lids holding different types of tea. Cloud Mist. Pearl Tea. Kee Mun. Luk On. Kar Sow. Gee Sheng. They went on and on and Xavier, in spite of his years of university education, could make no sense of those strange and unfamiliar names. "I guess they don't serve Coke," he said, wryly.

Mr. Yue laughed again. "Try some of my Dragon's Well," he said, pouring a steaming cup. "It's one of the best Chinese green teas, full of cooling and refreshing properties. Strictly speaking, to be at its best, it should be brewed with water from a certain spring in Hangchow but that's being pedantic. How come you never developed a taste for tea? How could you have missed so much, Ah Seng? There are teas to aid digestion, to relieve stomach aches, to cure colds, to stimulate circulation of the blood. All the best ones are here. All fine pluckings, done before the Ching Ming Festival. Do you know the differences between the types of pluckings and when they take place?"

Xavier shook his head and blinked. He took a sip from his cup to hide his annoyance. He hated to have to admit ignorance. The astringent liquid seared his tongue.

"In fine pluckings only the bud and the top two leaves are harvested. In medium and coarse pluckings leaves are taken from further down. Leaves are at their most tender before Ching Ming. For green teas they have to be cleaned and steamed immediately to prevent fermentation. Then rolled and dried several times till they're tightly curled. The Japanese like to spread jasmine over the tea for fragrance. Some connoisseurs like to season leaves inside lotus blossoms. I suppose not having a taste for tea is better than drinking it like foreigners, with milk and sugar or lemon. What abominations!"

A waiter in a white jacket buttoned up to the neck and a pair of black trousers, came up to the booth. "Is Mr. Yue ready to be served?" he asked.

Mr. Yue nodded and the waiter shouted something unintelligible in a high-pitched voice towards the rear of the room. From somewhere an echo of the order came back.

It dawned on Xavier the room they were in was not enclosed, as he had originally imagined, but connected to the kitchen. It was then that he caught a slight whiff of food being prepared. Closer observation revealed that the wall behind the counter was an illusion. There were in fact two other parallel walls, each about six feet wide, set behind the first. They created the impression of a complete barrier but left an opening for waiters to fetch food from the kitchen.

"You might think me mean inviting you to lunch in a tea house," Mr. Yue said. "But this place is special. It serves the usual dim sum but for special customers it lays on the best and freshest foods from the markets each day. It means pot luck, of course. We'll just have to enjoy our tea and wait to see what we get."

Xavier pretended to sip his tea as he studied the novelty of the premises. On the wall of each booth was an underglazed enamel painting set in an intricately latticed redwood frame. They were pictures of individuals in ancient garb, enjoying tea in gardens or parlours. The picture in his booth showed a man and a woman holding tea cups.

"Do you know the people in the picture?" Mr. Yue asked.

“Haven’t the foggiest.”

“The man was Tsai Shiang, a famous Sung Dynasty calligrapher, and the woman a state courtesan named Chou Shao. They were both great connoisseurs of tea. Chou Shao was very knowledgeable and often bested Tsai Shiang with her knowledge of teas and tea drinking. Ah! Those were the days! Courtesans were beautiful and well schooled. They could play musical instruments and match couplets with the best poets. They served the needs of the intellect and the soul as well as those of the body. Where can such treasures be found today? It’s now all topless bars and Suzie Wongs. You know, Chou Shao was eventually released from her duties by a high official and she became a nun.”

“Paintings like that must be worth a pretty penny these days,” Xavier observed.

“I suppose so. But only to collectors. They used to be plentiful but have gone out of fashion. Nobody paints or makes them any more. I image our Marxist-Leninist comrades have already banned them as decadent art. They lose meaning in any case when people don’t know what they’re about.”

Xavier noted that all three round tables were apparently being shared and occupied in relays. As soon as some customers left they were replaced by others from a queue outside. The room resounded regularly with the cries of waiters placing orders and echoes of acknowledgement. When not serving food, the waiters did the rounds with large brass kettles of boiling water for replenishing teapots.

Xavier noticed, however, that all the booths, except for the one he was in, were empty. “They’re not making the most efficient use of the booths,” he observed.

“The booths are occupied,” Mr. Yue said.

“You mean they’re reserved?”

“No, they’re occupied. See that second booth on the other side? That’s occupied by your father.”

“My father! But”

At that moment a waiter arrived with a steamed red snapper and dishes containing stewed king eel and Chinese broccoli fried with slices of beef.

“Ah, stewed king eel! An unexpected treat! Let’s eat.”

“Uncle Yue, you said my father occupied that booth. I”

“Yes, Ah Seng. Don’t be like an American, always in a hurry. You telephoned me about a bill from this tea house. I will explain later. First, let us enjoy this splendid meal.”

Xavier ate in silence, his head in a spin. The food was the kind he normally fancied but somehow it seemed tasteless. He had spent the best part of an hour listening to inconsequential about tea and tea drinkers. If it had been about shipping he might have at least picked up a useful tip or two. He was anxious to get down to brass tacks. But Uncle Yue seemed determined to take his own sweet time. Was he toying with him? Was he trying to size him up as a business partner, now that he was head of Gold Star?

After the meal, a waiter cleared away the dishes and brought a new pot of Dragon's Well. He tipped the dregs into the spittoon next to the booth and poured fresh cups. Meanwhile, a steady turnover continued at the round tables but the seven booths remained empty.

Mr. Yue sipped his tea with relish for a while. Then, suddenly, more than a dozen people from the queue outside were ushered in. They made for the empty booths.

Mr. Yue looked at his watch. "Two o'clock," he said. "I guess none of the regulars is coming. That's exceptional. Normally at least two or three of us are here. Those lucky fellows will get their treats. Now we can go upstairs and I'll answer your questions."

Xavier followed Uncle Yue out of the booth and headed towards the wizened old man at the counter. Uncle Yue effected introductions and the two exchanged bows.

"My humble establishment is honoured by your presence," Proprietor Ng said. The rich baritone voice coming out of the proprietor's frail frame took Xavier by surprise. "My deepest condolences over the passing of your father," Proprietor Ng continued. "He was an exceptional man to whom my family and I are much indebted. I'll have tea sent upstairs."

It was only when Xavier turned from the counter that he discovered a flight of stairs behind the booths. He followed Uncle Yue up to a floor considerably larger than the one they had left.

The space was divided by a partially drawn red velvet curtain. A similar curtain had already been drawn over the windows at the far side of the front section. The only light came from a table lamp on a corner stand. A powerful air conditioning unit beneath the windows fed in a steady stream of cool air. The section contained half a dozen sofas of the type used in first class aircraft cabins, arranged in a semi-circle, with teapots and brass spittoons next to each. An armchair held a stack of neatly folded blankets. The arrangements reminded Xavier of a luxurious private cinema.

In the rear section there was a round table similar in design to the ones downstairs, except it was capable of accommodating at least ten persons. Matching chairs stood around it.

Mr. Yue led Xavier into the front portion and invited him to take one of the sofas. He took another next to him. A waiter arrived with a pot of tea. He poured two cups before retiring, drawing the second set of velvet curtains.

"No doubt you're bursting with questions," Mr. Yue said, teasingly. "You might be wondering why your father, myself, Uncle Kan and the others, all very wealthy men, should wish to continue patronizing a place like this. Fond memories, Ah Seng, and gratitude for the good fortune we have enjoyed since gathering here. Wise men do not forsake such places. First, some history.

"Before the war, I wasn't a shipping tycoon. I was just a fisherman with a boat. Uncle Kan, who was a plumber then, and I used to live in this neighbourhood. We came 'to drink early tea'. This place was a favourite haunt of bird-fanciers. They brought their birds along in handcrafted cages. Canaries, skylarks, mynahs. We enjoyed the birdsongs with our tea. It was like a morning tonic. We were fond of the teas and the dim sum here too.

"When the Japs came everybody landed in the shit. I got together with a few friends to find a way of keeping our families alive. One was a nightwatchman with connections in the

underworld, a brute of a man, full of courage and game for anything. He was known to us as Buck-toothed Fung.”

“I know Uncle Fung,” Xavier interjected. “My father introduced us in Taiwan.”

“Good, then I can skip some details. Uncle Fung introduced us to your father. He said your father was well-educated and full of ideas. He was certainly right. We took my boat and brought in food from China, right under the noses of the Japs. A dangerous enterprise but exceptionally rewarding. Not everybody survived. Nine of us did and, because of the foresight of your father, each of us found ourselves at the end of the war with a comfortable nest egg in buildings, land and valuables.

“See this ring?” Mr. Yue lifted his left hand to display on one of its thick fingers a stunning oval of green and translucent jade set into a gold ring. “I got it in exchange for just a scoop of soya beans. It has brought me luck ever since.”

Mr. Yue’s eyes took on a misty and reminiscing look as he recounted the origins and growing influence of his band of friends known popularly as the Evergreens.

It appeared that he and Uncle Kan had invited the others to the tea house for early tea after the war. Soon it became a regular thing. The floor where they used to meet was in public use then, dominated by bird-fanciers. The tea house opened, then as now, at 5.30 a.m. and the friends gathered at around six.

Their exploits during the occupation had turned them into brothers, with few secrets among them. A nod of the head was all that was needed for business to be transacted. No hassle with lawyers or pieces of paper. They all had dreams. Some wanted to start factories, others to found utilities or to engage in commerce. They wanted to become both respectable and rich, though none had enough liquidity to start what each wanted.

They knew little about bank financing and mortgages then. The obvious way to raise cash was to sell assets. Uncle Fung was all for selling everything and getting out with the money. He had Kuomintang connections and was afraid of the Communists.

Chu Tung-po, on the other hand, wanted them to hang on to what they had and to wait. He said the civil war was likely to continue for a good many years because the Americans were supporting the Kuomintang. Whoever won would be left too weak and with too many internal problems to take on the Brits, at least for a good while. He said land and property prices were bound to rise once former residents started returning to Hong Kong, not to mention the rich from China escaping the civil war. Most thought his arguments made sense. Only Uncle Fung disagreed. He sold out and headed for Taiwan.

Uncle Yue paused and Xavier noted that the older man had a real knack for storytelling. His tale was providing increasing insight into how his father’s mind worked.

After a moment Uncle Yue continued. He recounted how a suggestion was made that, while waiting for land prices to rise, the group might continue with smuggling in supplies to meet market demands. Uncle Yue still had his boat and there was always money to be made with a daring crew. Capitalism and free enterprise were all the rage. However, most of the group no longer wanted to run risks, even though the dangers were in fact much less than during the Japanese

occupation. Only two wanted to chance their arm. Uncle Yue and one other. They made money hand over fist and were able to advance money to the others to get them started.

Chu Tung-po turned out to be right about land prices. Within a year the million people flooding into the colony sent prices soaring. But still Chu didn't want anyone to sell. He said conditions were not ripe. Many sites had been acquired for a song. Or for a few bags of beans or rice, to be more precise. Most were war damaged. Many had been taken over by squatters or were being used as rubbish dumps. Clearing them prior to sale would cost money. Chu told everyone to sit tight. He got each to form a company to hold their properties.

At last, when Chu judged the time right, the group selected one of its member to test the water. Before beginning, the group determined a minimum acceptable price. When the lot came up in the public auction, the other seven bid up the price. That created a perception of high demand and nudged prices up. That, in turn, boosted the value of their holdings. Any excess arrived at over the minimum price agreed was shared out equally among all.

Each had to bid correctly, so as not to push the price beyond what outsiders might be willing to pay. Getting it wrong meant one of the group being stuck with the winning bid. In those circumstances the seller would privately refund the buyer the difference between the sale price and the minimum agreed price. The whole thing worked beautifully. It might be said that the group was responsible for starting Hong Kong's first post-war property boom.

Mr. Yue paused again to enjoy his tea.

"Sounds like my father masterminded a bidding ring! Was that legal at the time?"

"Don't rightly know. If you looked closely, everything in this town could be illegal, including this tea house."

"This tea house?"

"Yes, it hasn't got a separate fire exit, as required by law, but that doesn't prevent it from providing a service people want. It just means working out an accommodation with those enforcing the law. It was no different then. We were looking after our own self-interest. We didn't ask too many questions. We found the liquidity we needed to specialize and branch out. Construction, financing, trading, insurance, warehousing, stockbrokering. I concentrated on shipping, Uncle Kan on property development, and so on. Your father wanted to test himself against everything. He had genius but also seemed wrapped up with deeper, more non-business considerations none of us fully understood."

Genius and non-business considerations. That sounded like his father all right, Xavier thought.

"We continued to meet here for early tea," Mr. Yue continued, after a few sips of Dragon's Well. "As we prospered, we began attracting attention and envy. Financial journalists, stockbrokers, commodity traders and gossip columnists discovered our meeting place and descended upon it. They eavesdropped on our conversations. No doubt they paid some of the waiters to pass on anything they picked up. We couldn't risk our discussions being overheard. Yet we didn't want to abandon the Evergreen. We struck a deal with Proprietor Ng. We wanted him to reserve the upper floor exclusively for our use during early tea. In return we paid him one and a

half times what he normally earned from using it for the morning trade. The arrangement didn't please the snoopers. Nor the bird-fanciers who got restricted to the lower floor. But it cemented our relations with Proprietor Ng.

"That relationship deepened two or three years later, by accident you might say. Uncle Kan and I often lunched here, with friends and family members. The place was conveniently close to both our offices. On a number of occasions, however, we turned up to find the place full. That annoyed us. We thought it reasonable that Proprietor Ng should reserve a booth or two for regulars.

"We raised the subject at early tea. Most thought it a good idea, except your father. He said in business one must ensure all parties made a profit. Otherwise relationships turn sour. Although we were regular customers, it would be wrong to place Proprietor Ng at a disadvantage. It was inevitable, your father said, we would lose the Evergreen quite soon. Tea houses were disappearing as buildings got knocked down for redevelopment. No new tea house was likely to be established because it was patently more profitable to sell other things than to run a tea house. The question was whether we could be reconciled to the loss.

"None of us was. The Evergreen was like a second home to us. We had made our fortunes here and our luck might change if the tea house disappeared. Your father laughed at our agitation. Some of us were angry he was treating the matter so lightly.

"After we had calmed down, he chastised us, demanding to know what we had done to preserve what we claim to value. Had we explained the benefits of tea to our children, encouraged them to drink it, schooled them in the subtleties of the 'after-taste', or had we merely stocked our refrigerators with fizzy drinks for them to help themselves? New beverages were being advertised massively but none had been tested on human beings over centuries like tea. Some might actually be harmful to health. Instead of promoting tea drinking we were turning ourselves into accomplices in the brainwashing of our children. None of us should be against change, he said, but change did not necessarily mean progress. We had to help our children make informed choices and not to allow them to follow fads."

Xavier picked up his cup of tea and made a pretense at drinking it. The words sounded like a rebuke delivered by his father from the grave. It made him self-conscious of his ignorance about tea and tea-drinking.

"Your father left us feeling more than sheepish," Mr. Yue went on. "Then someone suggested buying the land on which the Evergreen stood, to allow it to continue. Your father shook his head. He said buying the premises, far from preserving the tea house, would only hasten its demise. It would make it easier for Proprietor Ng to retire. If he did that, we would be left with a tea house which none of us knew how to run.

"Incentives for Proprietor Ng to continue were needed, your father said. The first step would be to acquire the land on either side of the Evergreen. Once that had been secured, we could put it to Proprietor Ng that circumstances had turned him into our partner. Sooner or later we would redevelop the adjacent sites and we would then need his property because it straddled ours. When that time came he could name his own price. In the meantime, he could watch his asset

appreciate steadily with Hong Kong's building boom. He and his family would do well to continue with the tea house because no one, apart from ourselves, would want a site incapable of redevelopment by itself."

"Did everyone agree with the plan?"

"Ah Seng, when your father comes forward with a proposal, it is usually so sound that none of us would disagree. In this instance, your father was also emphatic that we shouldn't be seen as predators or bullies but to present Proprietor Ng an obviously good deal. To that end we guaranteed Proprietor Ng's profits by each of us taking up permanently a booth on the ground floor for lunch. It did not matter whether we actually came for meals. We would each simply pay Proprietor Ng for four meals every day, since each booth accommodated four. He could bill us quarterly or half yearly. That would work out at only a few thousand dollars per month. Since every one of us was already a millionaire many times over, that was neither here nor there."

"And that accounts for the bill landing in my father's office long after he had passed away!" Xavier said.

"Correct. Your father had insisted on two further rules. First, meals might or might not be eaten. But, if eaten, they must be in the company of the payer. In other words, wives, children or friends could not turn up by themselves to demand meals charged to us. That would confuse both Proprietor Ng and the waiters. Second, if any of us did not turn up by two o'clock, then the meals paid for could be offered to the public at a discount, with the proceeds split equally between Proprietor Ng and his staff. That kept the staff happy and accounted for the daily queues outside. That also accounted for your father's booth being left empty till two o'clock."

"That explains the queue and the rush at two o'clock!"

"Precisely. The bill also covers one other item which crept in some years later. As we grew older, someone suggested it would be wonderful to have a place to nap for half an hour after lunch, before returning to our offices. Since we already had an arrangement over closing the upper floor during early tea, it seemed logical to extend it to lunch as well. That's why there are sofas here instead of tables and chairs. The bills cover all three arrangements. Your father's passing has affected us so much that we didn't rearrange anything. We miss him terribly and that's not just out of sheer sentimentality. Nothing seems the same without him."

"Thank you, Uncle Yue. I'm sure my mother appreciates your sentiments. May I thank, through you, all the other uncles for being so considerate and helpful at the funeral. I don't want to sound presumptuous, but would you and the other uncles object to my taking over my father's place? I want to learn from all of you, though I have only met some for the first time during the funeral."

"You've hardly touched your tea, Ah Seng," Mr. Yue said.

"I'm not thirsty."

Mr. Yue drank from his cup, emptied the dregs into the spittoon and poured a fresh cup. He remained silent for a while. Then he said: "It's premature to speak of taking your father's place. You're still in mourning. Your father's passing has reminded us of our own mortality. It would be unseemly to raise the subject at this stage. Your presence among us would also raise

larger issues. We all have sons. None of us has brought them into our circle. It's obvious the younger generation must take over one day. But most of us find it difficult to speak as freely if youngsters were among us. We've been through so much together that we can communicate without words. It won't be the same with our sons present."

"I understand. I'm sorry I raised the matter."

"Ah Seng, leave this with me for the time being. We can talk about it again. Give me a chance to sound out one or two of the others. Meanwhile, I suggest you pay your father's bill. I don't think anyone can object to your lunching here. You might ask Proprietor Ng if you could take over your father's arrangement for a booth at lunch. Future bills can then be made out in your name. That doesn't mean you can join us for early tea or afternoon naps, mind you. But it'll give you exposure before the other uncles, allowing them to get to know you a little better. It might even convert you into a tea drinker!"

"Thank you, Uncle Yue. I'll do as you've suggested. Do you mind if I ask your opinion about something else?"

"No, unless it's going to land me in a libel suit!"

"Do you think my father's death was accidental?"

Mr. Yue paused for a long moment. "Deaths are never accidental," he replied. "They are fated. We all have our appointed hour. For some people, death can be a release, eagerly awaited. For others, a mere passage into another existence. For a very few, death produces consequences. Some lives can only be fulfilled through death. Your father's might be one of those. But this is not the time to go into such abstruse matters. We must leave. The tea house closes at 3.30. Proprietor Ng and his staff have already worked for ten hours. It won't do to detain them further."