

Life and Death in Su-Ao

Su-Ao, Taiwan, February 1985:

The Pine and Bamboo Tea House was a working class establishment and Xavier Chu entered it like a tourist who had strayed off the beaten track. He noted at once it was not in the same league as the Evergreen. No porcelain paintings of famous tea drinkers or framed quotations extolling the virtues of tea hung from the walls. Its tables were of unvarnished pine and its stools uninviting. Two large earthenware tubs with stalks of listless bamboo offered an excuse for its name.

Xavier eyed the customers enquiringly. He had on a charcoal grey Cashmere overcoat to guard against the sharp winter chill and his stylish clothes drew curious looks. He took a piece of paper from his pocket to check the name and address given by Mama Mui. Both were correct. At last his mission was drawing to a close. The need to make another clandestine trip to Taiwan was a bother. But at least he would soon discover what had befallen Fei-Fei and his son.

An aged waiter with a shaven head and fingering a discoloured dish rag approached. He ushered Xavier to a table and asked his preference in tea.

“Whatever’s convenient,” Xavier replied, settling himself onto one of the stools. It was indeed as uncomfortable as he had imagined.

The waiter shrugged, disconcerted by the unorthodox reply. He disappeared, to return quickly with a teapot in one hand and a large brass kettle of boiling water in the other. He placed the teapot on the table, lifted its lid and poured boiling water into the pot from a considerable height. Not a drop was spilt. He then filled an earthenware bowl with hot water, took a handleless tea cup from a stack, sloshed the cup in the water and placed it before Xavier.

“Does the gentleman wish to order food?” the waiter asked.

“Not just yet.”

The waiter shrugged again and left to make his rounds of other tables with his brass kettle.

Xavier stared at the wet cup. He could not bring himself to pour a cup of tea let alone to drink it.

Presently three men in worn cotton-padded suits entered the tea house. The first thing Xavier noticed was their height, several inches taller than himself. Then the similarity in their tough, rough-hewn faces. It marked them as siblings. They had an air of primitive dignity. Their complexions suggested constant exposure to the elements. It was difficult to determine their ages, however. Fei-Fei had informed him she was the eldest so he calculated they must all be younger than himself. Yet they looked older. They headed straight for his table.

Xavier stood up and smiled on their approach. “You are . . . ?”

“The gentleman is Mr. Chu, is he not?” one of the men said in Mandarin, with a strong trace of local dialect. “We are the younger brothers of Fei-Fei. I’m Kee, that’s Tsai and that’s Kun. We received a message you wanted to contact our family. May we enquire the reason?”

“Please be seated and partake in some tea,” Xavier responded, in his own inadequate Mandarin.

The men took the three remaining seats at the oblong table. They brought with them the smells of the sea and of honest toil. Xavier tried to do the honours by rinsing cups in the bowl as the waiter had done. But the hot water scalded his fingers. His guests looked on with indifference. He filled the rinsed cups, including his own, with a dark liquid from the teapot. “Please, take some tea” he said, and lifted the cup to his lips. The tea tasted strong and acrid. He did not know its name and disliked its flavour but swallowed some nonetheless.

The three men did likewise. The hands holding the teacups were strong and callused.

“Would you care for something to eat?” Xavier asked.

“There’s no need for ceremony,” Kee replied.

The shape of Kee’s eyes reminded Xavier of Fei-Fei’s but they were frosty and unfriendly. He had little experience dealing with such dullards. They seemed unimpressed by either his status or his wealth. He had tried to prepare for the meeting but could not think of a convincing explanation for wanting to contact Fei-Fei or her family.

“Is Fei-Fei well?” he asked, unsure how to get things started.

“She no longer lives in our village,” Kee replied. “She has retreated to the mountains.” He was apparently the eldest of the three and it fell to him to be the spokesman.

“She’s married, I supposed?”

“No, she never married.”

“What a surprise! She was such a beautiful girl.”

“She told us someone promised to marry her and take her to America. But no one turned up.”

The statement flustered Xavier. He reddened slightly. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m supposed to be the man she was waiting for. I should have come a long time ago. But there was a misunderstanding. I thought she did not care for me. So I went to study in America. We lost touch. I didn’t have her address. It has taken me a long time to re-establish contact.”

“She said a certain Uncle Fung undertook to get a message to you.”

“I didn’t get any. If I had, I would have come right away.”

The three brothers looked at one another, as if weighing the veracity of the explanation.

“How did you meet our elder sister? At the hotel where she worked or elsewhere?” Kee asked, after a pause.

So the family was unaware of Fei-Fei’s activities at the Starlight Rendezvous, Xavier thought. His mission was now more difficult. He would have to tread warily. “Yes,” he said. “I met her at the hotel restaurant. Please take me to her.”

“You the one who got her in the family way, then abandoned her? According to the friend who brought her home, ruffians beat her for refusing an abortion. Was that your doing? You

afraid she might lay claim to your family fortune, sully your family name? It's wrong to take advantage of an innocent girl. We're an honourable family."

"I have never for a moment the honourable standing of your family. Neither did I send anyone to beat her. That was the last thing I would do. I love her. All this has been a terrible misunderstanding."

"Why seek to see her after twenty-eight years? Haven't you done harm enough?" Kee's voice was as chilly as the winter weather.

"Please let me see her. I mean her no harm. I'm here to make amends. I'll explain everything in front of her."

"Too much time has passed. Our elder sister is at peace with her son. Leave them be."

The waiter turned up to replenish the teapot. "You gentlemen care for some food?" he asked.

"Not now, not now!" Xavier snapped, waving him away. "Can't you see we're busy? We'll order later."

The waiter made a wry face and moved on.

"Please! You don't understand. I love Fei-Fei. I've always loved her," Xavier said, beseechingly, in a low voice. "I'm very rich. I'll make it up to her and to your entire family. I'll put things right. Anything you want. Just take me to her."

Kee shook his head, in a gesture of finality.

Xavier looked appealingly to the other two. "I can make all of you rich if you would only allow me to see Fei-Fei," he said.

"Perhaps we should allow him to meet Elder Sister," Kun said. He was the youngest of the three and was speaking for the first time.

Kee held up a hand immediately to silence him.

"Now, there's the voice of a practical man!" Xavier said, with an ingratiating smile. "There's something in it for everybody. What harm can be done by allowing me to see her? It'll clear up old misunderstandings."

"You really want to see our elder sister?" Kee asked, after a weighty pause.

"Yes, certainly. I've been longing to see her for years."

"The journey is long. At least half an hour by car just to get to the bottom of the mountain. Then a long, steep climb. You sure you're up to it?"

"Yes."

Kee nodded and the four men rose from the table as one. Xavier left a generous sum on the table. He felt a sense of accomplishment. He had surmounted the first hurdle. Though he was dwarfed by the three men, he felt in command, like Alexander or Napoleon at the start of a campaign.

Outside, Kee hailed a taxi and gave directions. It dropped them at the bottom of a flight of uneven granite steps where a big sign indicated they led to the Temple of the Goddess of Mercy. The steps were about twelve feet wide and four feet deep. The human traffic was heavy.

Those proceeding upwards were laden with incense, joss sticks and offerings while those coming down wore expressions of having unburdened themselves. Kee led the way. The others followed in ragged procession.

It took more than three hundred steps to reach the temple. Xavier was already sweating and out of breath. He unbuttoned his overcoat to reveal a blue blazer and grey hopsack trousers beneath. The fragrance of incense and the sound of chanting to the beat of wooden clappers filled the air. In the temple courtyard fortune-tellers and palm-readers were conducting a roaring trade. Worshippers and supplicants were rattling fortune sticks and tossing hexagram tokens out of tortoise shells. Along the edges of the courtyard there were stone benches and at the far end a small pavilion. A number of elderly women sat taking the breeze.

“This is our elder sister’s favourite temple,” Kee said. “The easy part of the journey is over. From here on there are no more steps, only a winding path. Do you wish to catch your breath?”

Xavier shook his head. He could do with a rest. His throat was parched. He wished he had drunk more tea, foul-tasting though it had been. But he had no wish to display physical weakness before the three brothers.

The path beyond the temple was narrower and paved with gravel. Human traffic was replaced by flies and insects. The path branched off here and there to woodsmen’s shacks or allotments for flowers or vegetables. Twenty minutes later it narrowed further and became plain trodden earth. Rugged woodland, with oak, cedar, cypress and fern, loomed on either side. Signs of human habitation petered out. The party was reduced to proceeding in single file, with Kee in the lead and the other two brothers making up the rear.

After a while Xavier slowed to a stop and drew several deep breaths. Insects brushing against his sweating face annoyed him. He took off his Cashmere overcoat and found that it had picked up bits of twigs and bramble. He no longer felt in control. He extracted a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket, removed his spectacles and wiped his face. The pale blue shirt beneath his blazer was already stained with sweat.

“Whatever made Fei-Fei come to live in such a remote place?” he asked.

“For solitude,” Kee replied.

The brothers waited patiently, unbothered and expressionless. Xavier felt a twinge of unease but there was no alternative to resuming the journey.

After another twenty minutes, the group came across a young man sitting on a boulder by the side of the path. He was a good-looking fellow in his twenties, muscular and tanned. He stood up on the group’s approach.

“Preparations ready for our guest?” Kee asked.

“Yes,” the young man replied, gazing at Xavier.

For a fleeting moment Xavier imagined the man might be the son of Fei-Fei.

“He’s . . . ?”

“My eldest son,” Kee said. “He’s alerted Elder Sister you might be coming.”

Xavier nodded and the group continued along the path, leaving Kee's son behind. "How much farther?" Xavier asked, after another ten minutes.

"Not far," Kee replied, without turning round.

About a hundred yards on, Kee stopped. "We can go through here," he said, indicating a barely discernible track leading off the path. "It's a short cut."

Xavier hesitated. The track appeared to rise more steeply than the path and was even more encumbered by undergrowth. His leg muscles were twitching from fatigue and he felt fried by the sun in spite of a stiff breeze. But he could think of no face-saving way to ask for a rest or even to call the whole thing off. So he struggled after Kee, step by agonizing step, scuffing his earth-caked Bally shoes. Sweat poured down. His collar turned damp and tightened. His overcoat seemed like a burden, hampering his progress. He was also losing track of time. It seemed the closer he got to his destination the slower time seemed to drag. Kun was following more closely on his heels than previously. He resented the man's nearness and his rough scent of toil.

After what seemed like an eternity of effort, he found himself in a small clearing. The scene from that vantage point was breath-taking. The sea stretched into infinity. The lush green hills in the foreground reaching out on either side to embrace a bay. A waterfall bubbled down a hillside in the middle distance. Far below, the yellow roof of the Temple of the Goddess of Mercy poked out of the surrounding greenery.

Xavier doubled over, his hands pressed against his knees, sucking in great gulps of air. He was just about all in and didn't care that his overcoat was trailing the ground. But his trained developer's eye noted the site's potential for holiday villas and profitable building. He took off his blazer as well and wiped his face again. He immediately felt the cold wind on his sweat-soaked shirt and shivered.

"Much farther to go?" he panted.

"Almost there," Kee said.

After a while Xavier saw he was at the corner of a clearing. A small mound of earth, half-hidden by shrubs, was marked by a tiny headstone engraved simply with the characters: "A mother and child." At the foot of the mound lay fresh joss sticks, candles, paper offerings and a box of matches. The remnants of previous offerings were also visible. He was taken aback. It was obviously an illegal burial site. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "I've come to see Fei-Fei."

"There rests my Elder Sister. Her child too," Kee said. "Don't you want to pay your respects?"

Xavier's head spun. He felt shattered. The bundle of clothes fell from his hands. He had spent weeks on secret arrangements, bypassing government regulations and controls. He had rekindled memories of love and hope. He had dreamt of another son and a more splendid life. All that to end with a mound of earth on an unfamiliar hill? No, he could not accept that without proof. It had to be some kind of trick.

"You mean she's dead?" he cried. "When? How? You've tricked me!"

“No. Our beloved elder sister lies there. She was badly injured when she came home. The doctor thought the child she was carrying might be injured too. He wanted her to abort, to be on the safe side. But she refused. She was convinced the father would come and she wanted a child to show him. She suffered terribly while waiting. In the end both she and the child died.

“Before she passed on, she said she wanted to be buried here. We had been here once, during an outing, when we were children. She loved the spot and the view. Burial here is not allowed. But we buried her just the same.”

Xavier looked from the mound to the impassive faces of the three brothers. The account rang true. He could visualize Fei-Fei behaving that way. The pain of that double loss was more excruciating than any he had ever experienced. But, though his private hopes had been crushed, his business instincts had not. They now took control.

“Look,” he said. “Let’s approach the situation rationally, one issue at a time. If Fei-Fei is dead, then that loss is as much mine as yours. If she likes it here, I’ll buy the whole hill. I’ll build a mausoleum in her honour.”

“You haven’t paid your respects,” Kee interrupted, pulling Xavier up short.

Xavier wasn’t sure what he ought to do. He had never accompanied his mother to the tomb of his father during Ching Ming Festival. He had no idea of the proper procedure. He also felt ridiculous in his shirt sleeves, sweating and dishevelled. Eventually he squatted before the mound, lit candles and joss sticks and planted them where the burnt out stalks were. He bowed his head three times before the mound and was about to rise when Kee said:

“You said you would explain everything before my Elder Sister. Now’s the time. How did you get her into such a situation? Who was responsible for hurting her?”

Xavier rose slowly and turned to face Kee. He realized he was not in a position to explain anything. The truth was irrational, bizarre, unlikely to be acceptable to the brothers. It would only fuel their fury. The truth was that she was a whore, controlled by triads, plying her trade at the Starlight Rendezvous. He had embarked on this mad quest because there had been the possibility of a child who might be his. He could not entrust Gold Star to sickly Ah Yuen. That boy was simply unfit to conquer and rule. The women in the family had undermined him, stuffing his head with mushy ideals. But how to explain all that to three stupid fishermen?

The only solution was to buy them off. Blood might be thicker than water but money was thicker than blood. He had established that as an empirical truth, again and again during the course of his rise in the world. Had he not crossed a few palms a short while back to save Little Ho from execution? With that in mind he went over to his blazer and extracted from one of its inside pockets two thick wads of American banknotes. They were damp with his own sweat. He took them to Kee and held them out.

“Look,” he said, in a businesslike tone. “I have brought this money for your family. If it’s not enough, I can get more. I don’t want bad blood between us because of Fei-Fei. She was dear to all of us. Quarrelling isn’t going to bring her back.”

Kee stood with arms folded across his chest, staring dully at Xavier. “You should not have come,” he said.

Xavier went from one brother to the next, holding out the American dollars and urging them to take them, but they remained as silent and as unresponsive as Kee. Their eyes appeared cold and reptilian. Or perhaps like the eyes of dead fish. He came back in front of Kee and set the banknotes on the ground. Every man had a price, he thought, and I will buy you silly clowns yet.

“All right,” he said, addressing no one in particular. “You’re smarter guys than I had figured. You want more? I’ll give you more. Just state how much you want. I’ll write a letter and one of you can take it to a bank in Taipei to get the money. I’ll stay with you till the money’s safely in your hands. Then we’ll call it quits. No police, no nothing. No need for violence. All right?”

None of the three responded.

The thought dawned on Xavier then that the brothers wanted more than money. They seemed to be poised around him, cold, menacing, lethal. He needed to mollify them. He noticed his father’s magnificent Piaget watch with the black dial on his wrist and he immediately unstrapped it and held it up to Kee. The gold casing glittered in the sunlight.

“Look,” Xavier said. “This is an heirloom from my father. It’s quite rare. It’s worth a small fortune. Take it as a goodwill present from me. Just name whatever sum you want. Violence won’t bring Fei-Fei back. Nothing can change the past.”

Kee remained unmoved. Xavier took a couple of steps towards Tsai and proffered the watch again. Tsai, who had barely uttered a word till then, suddenly exploded.

“You think you can buy everything with money, you miserable piece of turd?” he shouted. With a brush of the hand Tsai sent the watch flying into the undergrowth. “You said you wanted to spend the rest of your days with my Elder Sister. I’m going to grant your wish!”

Xavier recoiled several steps, stumbling first across his discarded clothes and then trampling upon the lighted candles and joss sticks before the small mound.

That mishap seemed to infuriate the brothers. Kun walked towards him menacingly. Xavier was unable to retreat. His legs could no longer move.

Kun unbuttoned his padded jacket and took from around his neck a pendant. He held it out towards Xavier.

Xavier recognized at once the jade pendant with the hole in the middle he had given Fei-Fei.

“You’re soft and stunted, without a touch of manliness about you,” Kun said, his mouth twisted into a sneer. “I don’t know what my Elder Sister ever saw in you. You’re unworthy of her. Yet she thought only of you. On her deathbed she made me promise to return this should you ever come. She was concerned you might need this bi for your soul to ascend to heaven. But there’ll be no heaven for you. Only the lowest level of hell! I’ve worn this pendant for twenty-eight years to keep alive my hatred for the man who brought ruin and death to my sister. Now at last you’re here. I can see your pathetic face. Take it! I’ve discharged my promise.”

Xavier shook his head. Tears poured down his face.

“Pathetic!” Kun said, placing the pendant on top of Fei-Fei’s grave before he edged inexorably towards Xavier. His brothers also closed in.

A confusion of images rushed through Xavier's head. They were of his mother and Fei-Fei. His mother hugging a baby in the rain, leading him to school by the hand, crying over an old pei-pa, clutching her chest in pain. Then Fei-Fei in the throes of love, her moans, her cries, and finally with a dead child.

"No! No!" he cried. Then a dark patch spread quickly down from the crotch of his grey hopsack trousers.