

The Erhu Player

by

David T. K. Wong

The doleful strains from an erhu arrested Hai as he crossed Leicester Square. He recognized the tune at once. It was “The Second Spring Reflects the Moon” -- a celebrated piece by a blind composer from Kiangsu. Hearing it reignited his longing for home. Though he was already late for work, he paused to listen to the music. How evocative it was! How it brought back images of Ling!

His mind hurtled back through time, dislodging kaleidoscopic fragments of memories. His childhood in Kansu, the silences of his parents, his father’s gift of a Chinese fiddle with two strings known as an erhu, the strictness of his old music teacher, the years at the Central Conservatory of Music and the sheer exquisiteness of falling in love with Ling. Then the terrible trauma of their parting, so terrible that -- even now -- he had to emit a gasp and steady himself against the metal railing of the square on remembering.

He grimaced. His head, shaved for economy and convenience, lent him the air of a young monk. Otherwise, dressed in a black T-shirt advertising Les Miserables and a pair of crumpled khaki trousers, he might have passed for a low-budget tourist taking in the sights of London.

As the music wailed on, his sense of loneliness intensified. He had no erhu for consolation. The one given by his father had been destroyed on that fateful night of long ago. Even if he had one, playing it could no longer be the same without Ling.

An indescribable weariness crept over him. He had been on the

run for too long. His asylum application had been rejected, possibly because of the vagueness about his flight from China. He did not want to explain how he got the fake documents, the air ticket to Belgrade or the harrowing journey across Europe in one container truck after another. Governments had a way of passing information to one another and he couldn't risk the one back home discovering who had helped him in his flight.

He accepted the subsequent order to quit Britain with indifference. Nevertheless, he needed time to plan his escape. So he appealed for the sake of buying time. Meanwhile, he had to reassure his mother of his well-being. That meant lying letters home about fictitious musical scholarships and phantom performances at Wigmore Hall.

Hai sighed, affected by the music. He judged that the player might be a fellow exile. A temptation to make contact stirred within him but he quickly suppressed it. He was already late for work and contacts entailed risks. It would be better to keep himself to himself.

* * *

Hai had been born late in his parents' marriage. He came into the world just before the start of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. He recalled an upbringing filled with incomprehensible silences. His father, a herbalist, and his mother were both uncommunicative. They discouraged questions, meeting each with a shush and a cuddle. Trying to figure things out for himself had been like trying to solve the puzzle of why the moon died every day only to be reborn every night.

He grew up watching the misfortunes of others, befalling them without apparent rhyme or reason, and began wondering if such misfortunes formed the natural order of things. It did not occur to him till

years later that his family would have suffered similarly if his mother's elder brother had not been the head of their town's Public Security Bureau.

Things began to change when he was about ten, after the death of Chairman Mao. Not long afterwards he was rounded up with other children at school and taught to denounce the Chairman's widow and her Gang of Four.

The most remarkable changes, however, came within the home. Books on herbal medicine suddenly re-surfaced, as if by magic, and his father began talking about medicinal properties in herbs and how they could be used to treat ailments caused by imbalances in a person's Yin and Yang.

Hai absorbed those pronouncements with fascination and quickly learned the curative effects of artemisia leaves, milk vetch roots and black hellebore. His father seemed pleased by the quickness of his uptake and yet, paradoxically, began to shake his head and emit deep sighs.

Another departure from the norm was his father's eagerness to recount stories about his own childhood. It was like being given glimpses into a new continent. The stories he liked best concerned the herb-gathering journeys his father made to remote mountains with his herbalist grandfather. One of their aims was to find that elusive prize of a ginseng root nurtured in the wild.

His father said that during one excursion he had heard the music of a ch'in, or Chinese zither, echoing through the hills. The music affected him in a way he could not describe. The sheer purity of the sounds brushed him with something magical, lying just beyond the edge of apprehension.

His father sought an explanation from grandfather, who dismissed the sounds as those of a hermit entertaining himself. His father insisted on locating the player, however, and grandfather humoured him for

a while. The music seemed to be echoing all around them so that neither could determine where it was coming from. They charged along ill-defined footpaths for the best part of an hour, until the music suddenly stopped. Grandfather then refused to continue, for fear of getting lost.

His father told him that when he became old enough to gather herbs on his own, he went back frequently to those mountains. But he never heard that music again. His excursions stopped after Liberation, because solitary journeys to remote places were viewed with suspicion. A few years later, the family's herbal practice was taken over by the state. His father often referred to his encounter with that music from a mysterious zither. The failure to locate the player apparently left him unfulfilled.

From the time he heard the story, Hai began detecting a sadness eating into his father. Perhaps it was actually a sickness, for he occasionally caught his father brewing herbal concoctions for his own consumption. In spite of that, his father grew progressively frailer. Since he did not know how to cure his father, he tried to cheer him up. One day he told his father he wanted to learn the zither.

His father responded by suggesting the erhu. "Zither music may be a tonic for the soul but it's too closely identified with intellectuals," his father said. "It might be taken as a hankering after a discredited age. Humbler fare is safer. Try the erhu."

His father thereupon bought him a splendid Soochow instrument made without a single metal part and found a retired musician to teach him. The teacher proved a taskmaster. He declared that music was not meant simply for entertainment but also for spiritual development. Music reinforced linkages with the past, he insisted, and required Hai to practise for at least two hours each day.

Before he could master the instrument, however, his father died. The old teacher offered to continue tuition without a fee. So he

persevered. After a few more years, to his own surprise, he gained a place at the Central Conservatory of Music in Peking.

During the intervening years, his uncle had risen within the ranks of both the Communist Party and the public security apparatus, securing at first an appointment in the provincial capital and, later, a more important one in Peking.

When the offer of a place at the Central Conservatory came, his mother urged him to accept. Worthwhile careers in provincial towns were few and far between, she explained. With his father gone, there was no one to teach him about herbs. In any case, the profession under state control was not what it used to be. It would be better to seek a career in Peking, especially when his uncle was there to keep an eye on him.

When he went to bid farewell, his teacher seemed deeply moved. "I have taught you all I know," the old man said. "You have the talent to go further, to bring out the very soul in our music."

"I owe everything to you, Teacher," he had replied. "You have put up with my inadequacies. I do not know how to repay you."

"Just fulfil your potential. That would gladden my heart. The journey to your goal is long. Persevere with what you have begun."

* * *

Hai scratched the stubble on his scalp, as memories tugged at his heart-strings. The old teacher had passed away not long after his departure for Peking, eliminating all hope of seeing him again. He dreaded now that the same might be the case in respect of his mother. Given the time difference between London and Kansu, his mother ought to be up and about already, tidying their crumbling house.

He could not recall anything out of the ordinary about his

native town and its huddled streets. The weather there was alternatively parched or freezing, according to the seasons. When the rains came, however, its earth gave forth a queer, life-giving smell. Memory of that smell now filled him with a thousand evocations of home! But to go back was out of the question.

* * *

When the erhu piece came to an end, Hai resumed his journey to his black market job in a Soho restaurant, washing dishes.

“You’re half an hour late,” the fat Chinese owner said testily, as Hai arrived. “I’m running a restaurant, you know, not a British train. We’re out of bowls.”

“Sorry, boss,” Hai muttered, with an apologetic half-bow, and made for the open courtyard at the back of the kitchen.

The yard was tiny, damp and smelly. Ventilation was hindered by a canvas awning stretching over half the area. Remnants of detergent frothed at the mouth of an open drain.

Hai rolled up the legs of his trousers, removed his shoes and put on black Wellingtons. He then slipped on yellow rubber gloves before tackling the stacks of dirty utensils.

His dish-washing job required him to sit beneath the awning, on a low stool between two large tubs. Soiled bowls and dishes were washed in one tub and then dropped into the other for rinsing. After rinsing they had to be stacked on a wooden stand to drain and dry.

Foods and gravies left standing too long often left stubborn stains. Since suds prevented a clear view of items during wash, Hai had to be on the lookout during stacking for any needing further cleansing.

He sometimes thought soiled bowls and dishes were like

human beings. While most could pass through the wash of life without ado, a few always had misery clinging to them.

The work was arduous. No sooner had one load been washed then another was presented. Hai's exertions soon added his own bodily tang to the smoky smells of the kitchen, the pungencies of food being cooked and the stench from the slop bucket. He had shaved his head to prevent those smells impregnating his hair.

* * *

“Study hard and make the most of your opportunity. Don't break your mother's heart by mixing with trouble-makers.”

Hai's uncle had uttered those words upon his arrival in Peking. They left him with the impression that the city, in spite of its obvious grandeur, was filled with criminals and hidden menaces.

His uncle explained later that he was referring to mischievous intellectuals and gullible students. A number were engaging in subversive activities, like listening to foreign broadcasts, promoting “yellow culture” and spreading slanders against the Chinese government. Such people had been placed under surveillance and associating with them should be avoided.

But Hai soon discovered an even more alarming type of subversion at the Central Conservatory. The instructors did not share his old teacher's attachment to Chinese musical traditions. They were keen for their students to experiment with Western pop styles.

They even advocated changes in the construction of traditional musical instruments. In the case of the erhu, silk strings were being replaced by steel ones and resonating chambers were being enlarged to enhance volume and projecting power. The latter was aimed at bringing

the erhu closer to the Western violin.

Hai saw little advantage in loudness for its own sake and could not understand why old ways should be jettisoned for no obvious reason.

What distressed him even more was the creation of jaunty new erhu compositions like “Happily Paying the Grain Tax”. He had lived closely enough to peasant communities to know that most resented paying taxes at all. Such tunes struck him as perversions. But as they had been officially sanctioned, he concealed his distaste behind the family habit of silence.

It was during one of his low moods that he chanced upon Ling sitting next to him at a student concert. She was a vision of wholesomeness, dressed in the white shirt and navy blue trousers common among university students. She had rosy cheeks and her hair was done in a pair of long pigtails. He overheard her commenting to a companion that she preferred the softer tones of silk strings in folk instruments. That remark caused him to shed enough of his inhibitions to remark that he, an erhu player, also preferred silk strings. They then introduced themselves and Ling asked if she might one day hear him play.

Ling was two years younger than himself and was a humanities student at Peking University. They got together one evening and he played for her. A friendship quickly developed.

There was an ardour about Ling he found attractive. It came out through the look in her eyes and the glow of her smiles. She seemed unafraid of offering opinions on every conceivable subject. Her forthrightness filled him with admiration. It contrasted with his own timidity and reserve. It occurred to him that their personalities complemented each other, like the bow and the strings of an erhu. What marvellous music might they not produce together!

That analogy tickled his imagination. A strange effervescence

began bubbling inside him. Whenever they met he became more prone to speech and flights of fancy. He had never experienced such sensations before. Could it be love? He gave rein to his fantasies and soon found himself occupied by images that were less than pure. They frightened him. They constituted the “yellow culture” that the guardians of Socialism had been raging against and he tried to suppress them.

Whenever he met Ling he confined his conversations to musical history and herbal medicine. Ling, on the other hand, held forth on foreign literature and philosophy, referring to books he had never heard of. She would muse about what people did in the age of Confucius or during the French and American revolutions. He felt out of his depth. But he listened, fascinated. He would have preferred her revealing more about herself. But apart from saying that her father had been a teacher and had passed away, she spoke little about herself or her family.

One weekend, several months into their friendship, they went for a stroll in Tiananmen Square. All around them were the great monuments to the past -- the Gate of Heavenly Peace, the Great Hall of the People, the Museum of History, Chairman Mao’s Mausoleum and the Martyrs Memorial.

During the course of their stroll, Ling suddenly asked: “Do you ever find yourself burdened by our past?”

“What do you mean?” he replied, puzzled.

“Well, look around you. We are smothered by layer upon layer of history. We are made conscious of all the blood split down the ages. Is that meant to weigh us down, to keep us subservient and with our noses to the grindstone? It seems wrong for the present to be imprisoned by the past. Wouldn’t it be better if we could set the past aside and start afresh?”

“Oh, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. Chairman Mao tried doing that with the Cultural Revolution and look where that landed us.

History and tradition are important for an old nation like ours. They tell us where we've been and remind us of past mistakes.”

“The Cultural Revolution went too far. We didn't have to destroy our entire heritage, only the stultifying bits. We could have experimented more, with the kind of free thinking in the West. I've been listening to broadcasts by the BBC and the Voice of America. They often have discussions on freedom and choice, openness and accountability. Even presidents and prime ministers in the West can be taken to task for wrong-doings. Wouldn't that be marvellous if that could happen here?”

Hai reacted with a start. His uncle's cautionary words came back to him. People who listened to foreign broadcasts were already under surveillance. He felt compelled to warn her.

“You can't believe everything you hear in foreign broadcasts. The government has warned us against them,” he said. “They are propagated by neo-imperialists to destabilize our country. People can get into trouble for listening. The Public Security people have ways of finding out.”

“We're students. Discovering the truth is our duty. We can't put our heads inside our shells like tortoises. We have to find out what's going on in the rest of the world, so that our society can develop. Actually, some of us have formed a group to discuss social issues. We meet once in a while. Would you care to join us?”

He felt trapped. Accepting Ling's invitation was bound to lead to trouble. The security forces might have already noted his associations with Ling. On the other hand, to decline would reveal him as gutless and unworthy of love.

“Yes, I'd be happy to join,” he said, eventually. “But not immediately. I'm way behind in a couple of term papers. I'll have to get them out of the way first.”

* * *

Hai tipped soiled water from the washing tub down the courtyard drain. Food particles had settled at the bottom of the tub. He scooped them up with a gloved hand and slapped them into the slop bucket. He used a length of hose attached to one of the taps in the kitchen to flush out the remnants before refilling the tub and adding detergent. He wished that painful memories could be as easily disposed of as leftover food.

He then fished the cleansed utensils out of the rinse tub for stacking. For good measure he emptied the rinsing tub and refilled it. As he was doing so, he imagined the swirling water in the tub to be a spring reflecting the moon, though he realized it was only a tub of water catching the reflection of one of the fluorescent lights in the kitchen.

* * *

Ling's coterie was filled with dreamers. Hai remembered their faces, aglow with candour and earnestness. Most were students, with the exception of a lecturer and a young man who wrote for underground magazines. They met in dingy rooms to listen to foreign broadcasts and to rile against the corruptions of the age. They demanded freedom, democracy, accountability. Passages from Byron, Patrick Henry and Lu Hsun, hallowed and ready-made, dripped from their lips. They penned proclamations, leaflets and tracts and circulated them surreptitiously. But the public, faced with job losses and the stresses of modernization, had little enthusiasm for abstractions.

Hai doubted whether their activities would lead anywhere but trouble. He recognized, too, that every gathering he attended led him

further into dangerous terrain. But he could not help himself. He brought his erhu along to give others the impression he was heading for some musical event. Sometimes, when Ling's friends tired of arguments, they would ask him to play a piece or two. Only then did he come into his own.

“When I listen to your music, it seemed so full of sorrow. Yet you seldom say anything. Why?” Ling asked one evening, as he walked her home.

“Because I have no solution to big problems. I can't even deal with the small ones I have. I cannot even deal with some of the things happening at the Conservatory.”

“That argues for more openness. We need a genuine Hundred Flowers Campaign, not one filled with trickery.”

He continued to attend the meetings, however, feeling in some muddled way that sharing danger brought them closer together. Indeed, Ling's habit of sitting next to him at gatherings suggested that she, too, might be holding out more than friendship.

* * *

In April of 1989, Hu Yaobang, the reformist ex-General Secretary of the Communist Party, died. He had been ousted by hardliners two years earlier but remained a symbol of hope among students and liberals. His admirers gathered at Tiananmen with poems, eulogies and floral tributes to mark his passing. Ling and some of her group went as delegates from their university. Hai went as an on-looker.

But the homage soon turned into a generalized demand for reform. Students were joined by civil servants, workers, housewives and ordinary citizens. Twelve youths launched a hunger strike for democracy at the northern entrance to the Great Hall of the People. Journalists and

television crews from all over the world swiftly gathered. The atmosphere became increasingly fevered. Security forces, however, made little effort to disperse the crowds.

Hai remembered those heady days as he scrubbed another dish and dropped it into the rinsing tub. But the official line soon hardened. The People's Daily declared the demonstrations a plot by miscreants and counter-revolutionaries to overthrow the Socialist system.

Ling and her friends responded with anger. More banners and posters went up, denouncing the authorities for such slanders. Ling made a speech, quoting Lu Hsun and asserting that lies written in ink could never disguise facts written in blood.

* * *

Gorbachev, the Soviet President, was due on a state visit. He was scheduled to be received at Tiananmen. Officials threatened to use the Liberation Army to clear the square.

Fearing for the safety of his friends, Hai went to his uncle to gain an insight into official thinking.

“Where have you been?” his uncle demanded upon his appearance. “You haven’t been for a meal in more than two weeks. Your aunt couldn’t find you at your hostel. We were afraid you might have had an accident.”

“I’m sorry. I was out and about. I should’ve sent word,” Hai replied.

“From Tiananmen, I suppose?” his uncle said, gruffly.

“Everybody’s there, including many of my friends.”

“Well, tell your friends to leave. They’ve made their point. It’s time to get back to their studies. Trouble is coming.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“They’ll find out, if they don’t leave.”

“They mean no harm. They’re just young people asking for more democracy.”

“Democracy! What do you know about democracy? It’s a system completely untried, neither in ancient Greece nor under the so-called Westminster model. Western countries have only plutocracies, where wealth form the basis for power and the ballot box is a confidence trick. If your friends think voting means democracy, then look at its miserable record. Imperialistic wars and human exploitation, Hitler and gas chambers, atomic obliteration, environmental depredation, perpetual armaments and wars, widening gaps between the poor and the rich, the triumph of greed over justice.

“The plutocrats have their eyes on China. They want to feed off our weakness, as they have done in othert parts of the impoverished world. Is that what you want? Have you already forgotten the Cultural Revolution? The first law in human society is order. With order, other things may be possible. Without order, there’s only anarchy and weakness. The present situation is an affront. We cannot allow our capital to be taken over by a rabble.”

Hai was taken aback by his uncle’s words. Up to that point, he knew little about politics and cared even less. All he wanted was a decent living, a quiet life and the enjoyment of music. He saw for the first time that his uncle was moved by convictions no less sincere than those held by Ling.

“Forgive me, Uncle, for causing you and Auntie to worry,” he said, respectfully. “I’ll call regularly in future. I’ll advise my friends to leave Tiananmen.”

When he next saw Ling, he told her about the rumours of

impending suppression and the official concern for order.

“The authorities are just trying to frighten us,” Ling responded. “If they want a peaceful solution, all they have to do is to promise reform and to tackle corruption.”

He could not bring himself to tell her that the warnings originated from his uncle, a senior official of the Public Security Bureau. He was afraid of being taken for an informer.

Far from dispersing the crowds, official warnings merely caused tens of thousands from all over the country to flock to the square. People camped there around the clock and students took turns maintaining nightly vigils. When it came to Ling’s turn he would accompany her. Sometimes, to relieve the tedium of the small hours, he would play his erhu and listen to its notes rising like forlorn cries from an urban wilderness.

The authorities responded by proclaiming martial law and ordering units of the 38th Army to clear the square. On hearing this ordinary people poured into the streets in their thousands and blocked all roads leading to the centre of the capital. The military convoys became marooned in a sea of humanity. Citizens, young and old, offered refreshments and flowers to the stalled troops and the soldiers responded by chatting with them. None made any attempt to reach Tiananmen.

The demonstrators were elated and Hai shared their happiness. The deployment of armed forces had come to nothing. The Liberation Army had demonstrated it was on the side of the people. Democracy seemed a step closer to being achieved. Students built a plaster statue modelled on the Statue of Liberty, erected it in the square and dubbed it the Goddess of Democracy.

Hai visited his uncle again, expecting to find him in a happier mood. No blood had been spilt. But his uncle was strangely sombre. When they sat down for dinner he attempted to lighten the atmosphere by

remarking on the restraint of the Army.

“The troops had not been properly prepared,” his uncle muttered grumpily. “They had been stationed near the capital for too long. Next time there’ll be no kid gloves. Tell your friends to leave or face the consequences.”

“Everyone wants China to become a better place, Uncle,” he countered. “How can anyone object to that?”

“A better place cannot be created through chaos. Can’t you see that? Some of our leaders are losing their grip. The mess at Tiananmen must be cleared up. Stay clear from there.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle. I’m in love with a girl who’s there. She has made speeches about freedom and democracy. I’m sorry I’ve kept this from you. So long as she’s there, I have to be there.”

“Youth! Love! How could you get involved with a hothead like that? Are you so infatuated as to have no consideration for your mother? You are all she has. I promised her I’ll look after you. What am I to tell her if?”

His uncle’s voice suddenly dropped, as if what he could not bring himself to utter words too awful to express.

“Tell Mother I love her and that I’ve lost my ability to remain on the sidelines,” Hai said. He stood up to leave, thinking he had offended his uncle.

But his uncle motioned him to sit again. His aunt began to cry. His uncle glanced briefly at his wife and then glared at him.

“You’re not engaged in a childish game, you know. Lives are going to be lost. When the crackdown comes, the prime targets will be people like your girl friend.”

“I know, Uncle. That’s why I must stand by her. Please forgive me.”

“I can have you detained right now, for your own good.”

“I will then have to confess I’m one of those accused of seeking to overthrow the government.”

His uncle stared at him in frustration. His aunt kept weeping and shaking her head.

“What am I to do with you?” his uncle asked, his voice thick with despair. “I have to protect you, for your mother’s sake. If things turn out badly, take your girl to an address I’ll give you. I’ll arrange for some papers. Come back in two days. Tell your girl nothing for now.

“There’s an underground organization which smuggles dissidents out of China. It has a cell at the address I’ll give you. We’ve had the place under surveillance for some time but have been holding off till we can net a really big fish. Tell people there Old Liu sent you. They may help you and your girl to leave. If you’re caught, we’ll be meeting under less happy circumstances. The future of our family is now in your hands.”

The weight of heaven seemed to press down upon Hai when he heard those words. He never expected to be saddled with such a great responsibility. His bowels knotted inside him.

When he next saw Ling, he suggested they should return to their studies. But Ling refused. She judged that the authorities were about to cave in. That left him with no alternative.

* * *

On the evening of June 3rd, some six weeks into the demonstrations, Hai was again with Ling on a night vigil. He took out his erhu and began to play “The Second Spring Reflects the Moon” while Ling dozed next to him. The air seemed strangely portentous. Then one of the

strings snapped, heightening his unease. He stored away his instrument and tried to sleep.

But sleep eluded him. His mind was filled with a sense of impending doom. He was still fully awake at four when the lights in the square suddenly went out. Those not already asleep stirred, uttering cries, curses and shouts.

“What’s happening?” Ling asked, woken by the noise.

“Don’t know,” Hai replied. “The electricity’s gone off.”

The sudden darkness unsettled the crowds. They became apprehensive though none knew that citizens were already being run over by tanks at Muxidi.

Half an hour later the lights came on again, to the rumble of heavy vehicles. Ling grabbed a megaphone and rushed up the steps of the Martyrs Memorial.

“Stay calm!” she cried. “The Liberation Army belongs to the people. The soldiers are our brothers. They will not harm us. Stay calm and stand your ground.”

Hai heard the first shots being fired. The rattle of bullets was quickly followed by screams and panic. People, rushing to escape, trampled over everything in their path -- tents, beddings, loudspeaker equipment and personal belongings, including his erhu.

Hai’s first thought was of Ling. He pushed his way towards the Martyrs Memorial only to see the megaphone falling from Ling’s grasp. A moment later, as if in slow motion, Ling tumbled down its steps. The screams, the mad stampede, the splutter of gunfire, all at once became peripheral to the central tragedy before his eyes. He fought his way to her.

“Ling! Ling! I’m here!” he cried, upon reaching her. She was lying at the foot of the monument, her limbs twitching. He cradled her tightly. He saw her mouth moved but no words came. Terror gripped him

as he saw a red patch spread across the front of her garment like a malignant growth.

A couple of Ling's associates found a plank, placed her on it and raced for a hospital. Hai ran alongside, clasping one of Ling's hands. His other hand was pressed firmly against her wound to stem the bleeding. And all the while he kept mouthing a half-incoherent string of endearments, assurances and pleadings.

By the time a hospital was reached, blood was bubbling out of a corner of Ling's mouth and the light of life had gone out of her eyes.

* * *

Hai stopped work and stared trancelike into the washing tub. His throat felt dry. Everything precious to him had vanished on that June night. All that now remained were the ruins of his own life. He had failed to bring joy to his father, to live up to the expectations of his music teacher, to protect the life of the woman he loved. He was now an exile, a wanderer, a man with no place to call home.

What was the point of trying to explain any of this to anyone, least of all to foreign immigration officials? Words had a way of being misinterpreted, of reaching the wrong ears, and of being turned into weapons. The safety of his uncle and his family and of Ling's former associates still in China depended on his silence. He desired only that his mother should pass through old age thinking he had achieved success as a musician in a distant land.

He deposited more dirty dishes into the washing tub. That very act seemed to illustrate again the starkness of the human condition. Men and women were like soiled utensils. They get tossed by Fate into the uncertain oceans of life, to flounder, to drown or to be cleansed.