

The Legacy of Liu Pui

by

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Liu Pui sat at his ebony desk, silent, austere and immobile. Although the electric radiator at the foot of the desk had dispelled some of the coldness from the room, he sat with his hands thrust deep inside the broad sleeves of his blue cotton-padded jacket. He had been sitting like that since dinner, enveloped in a silence that conveyed the quality of thought. His eyes, dark and very intense, dominated his gaunt, hollow-cheeked face. They appeared tragic, insinuating some lingering sadness. His nose was sharp and unusually high for a Chinese. It lent his face a slightly foreign air and added severity to his appearance.

Behind him, a large collection of books, mostly in English, lined the wall. Their arrangement was without order. John Stuart Mill stood between Homer and Marx and the plays of Bernard Shaw kept company with the confessions of St. Augustine and the poems of Milton and Keats. At the opposite end of the study, to the left of the entrance, another collection of books was on display. These volumes were in Chinese and were imprisoned behind the glass doors of a large teakwood bookcase. They included the Four Books and the Five Classics, the poems of Li Po and Tu Fu, a number of Taoist scripts and the works of a few moderns like Lu Hsun the satirist.

Writing paraphernalia were on the desk. A thick round stick of ink rested like some black phallic symbol between a stone ink slab and an eight-inch high brush container of light green porcelain. Writing brushes stood like discordant stalks in the container. A thin pad of rice paper lay at the centre of the desk.



Unlike most Chinese, Liu Pui had not forsaken the writing brush for the convenience of the fountain pen. He liked to see his characters appear in bold forceful strokes rather than in thin emaciated lines. To him, the ability to form impressive characters was not just an affectation or a pleasant accomplishment. It was a necessity, a link with tradition as important as having an honest face. He therefore lost no opportunity in perfecting his brushwork. Even the editorial he wrote each day as an editor was used for practising calligraphy.

But tonight he made no attempt to begin his editorial. He was too conscious of a malaise that was at once anger, frustration and despair. The feeling had haunted him all day, since that morning's meeting with the Old Tiger.

The Old Tiger was his employer, an almost illiterate man who through shrewd and ruthless transactions built an empire consisting of three banks, five newspapers, two steamship companies, a dozen textile mills and a score of other ventures. His activities, coupled with his aggressive face and his growling form of speech, had earned him his sobriquet.

That morning's meeting came back to Liu Pui.

"There's too much clamour against the mayor," the Old Tiger had growled. "We've got to ease the pressure. There's too much at stake. It would be very inconvenient if he were to be removed from office. Besides, there are rules of conduct. The mayor is our friend and we must help our friends, must we not?"

The Old Tiger then let loose a gruff, cynical laugh which Liu Pui found more distasteful than the usual growl.

Working for the Old Tiger had not been pleasant for Liu Pui. It meant involvement in the sordid world of business, a world he detested at its best and saw mainly at its worst. It meant writing under orders, praising what ought not to be praised and decrying what ought not to be decried. It was sickening to have to avert his eyes from fake items planted to give the Old Tiger a few crucial hours to dump stocks or to make a killing on the gold exchange. And to think he had once held so many noble ideals! Had it all been sheer hypocrisy or had he been learning different forms of truth? The one his wife was fond of uttering was that rice bowls could not be filled with ideals.

Liu Pui at last took his hands out of his sleeves. His fingers were long and thin, almost like a woman's. He hesitated before selecting a brush from the container. He wanted to delay his editorial, to defer that act of prostitution he had submitted to so often in the past. The editorial demanded by the Old Tiger was not very different from others he had written. Yet, somewhere at the back of his mind a voice told him a crucial point had been reached. If he were to rescue his integrity, if he meant to fight at all for things he believed in, he had to do so now or else become irretrievably lost.

As he stroked his writing brush on the ink slab, he heard the clear, precise voice of his wife.

"Your editorial, is it finished?" Phoenix asked, as she entered the room. She was a small woman, with a round face and a pair of large, alert eyes.

Liu Pui looked up to see his wife coming towards him, pulling on a glove. Her brisk, efficient air reminded him of the Phoenix in The Dream of the Red Chamber. His wife, too, would make an excellent family administrator if they lived in a large extended family, he thought.

"No. Haven't begun," Liu Pui answered, putting down his brush.

"I thought if you'd finished, you could drop me at Madam Soong's on

the way to the office. I'm attending a show with her."

"Sorry."

"Never mind." Phoenix sat down on one of the two chairs set against the wall bracketed by the two phalanxes of books. The wall above the chairs displayed four scrolls of landscapes representing the four seasons. They had been done in the style of the Southern School.

Liu Pui loved those paintings. Their misty mountains and velvety seas seemed to capture the essence of nature, conveying something simple yet enigmatic. Seeing his wife against such a background made he wish that life could be like art, pure, unadulterated, without irrelevancies and daunting realities.

"The Old Tiger summoned me today," Liu Pui announced abruptly.

"Oh, he's returned? I thought he was still in Shanghai," Phoenix said. "What did he want?"

"The usual. He wants the mayor defended."

"Is the mayor really so important to him?"

"I imagine so. He could lose a lot of the city's business, not to mention the free hand in black marketing UNRRA supplies."

"Then I suppose there's no alternative."

"I could resign."

"Don't talk such foolishness!" Phoenix said, sharply. "One cannot go through life fighting for lost causes. You're no longer young. Difficulties in getting a good position are many. Inflation does not make things easier. Besides, there are the children to think of. Yu-ming will be ready for university next term and the younger ones have years of schooling ahead of them. They all depend on you."

Perhaps one could not go through life fighting for lost causes, Liu Pui thought, but one could not keep running away either. What had become of honesty, integrity, truth? Had they really become lost causes? During university he had been much involved in the May Fourth Movement and in demonstrations

against the West. He used to believe that the most courageous thing a man could do was to lay down his life for a cause. Now he knew it took more courage to live with it, to retain a hold on it in the midst of competing truths, uncertainties and doubts.

Just then Yu-ming entered the room. Yu-ming was Liu Pui's eldest son, a well-built lad of eighteen with close-cropped hair and a vigorously healthy complexion. His bearing was almost military and his Sun Yat-sen type of school uniform added to that impression. His features were not unlike his father's, although his cheeks were well filled and his nose was not so high and bleak.

"Father, I'm returning your books," Yu-ming said, as he laid a volume of Taoist quotations and two volumes of Chuang Tzu on the desk. "Shall I put them back in the bookcase?"

"No need," Liu Pui said. "You won't know their places." Then, remembering the purpose for which his son had borrowed the books, he added: "You've finished your essay on Taoism?"

"Yes. But I was critical and Mr. Hsu did not like it. I said China could never industrialize and become great if everyone believed in Taoism. We had a long argument. Mr. Hsu said I was too young to appreciate Taoist philosophy."

Mr. Hsu was an old Chinese scholar Liu Pui had hired to tutor his children in things Chinese. He wanted to balance what they learned each day at the American missionary school because he did not want them growing up like so many modern Chinese, with the ways of the West half-learned and those of China half-remembered. He sought to give them the best of both cultures, for he was convinced something wonderful could come from a fusion of the two.

"You should not show disrespect by arguing with your tutor," Phoenix said, severely.

"I can't help it, Mother, because I don't believe in the Taoist approach to life."

Liu Pui smiled at his son's comment. When he smiled he appeared benign. The intensity of the eyes softened and his features lost their austerity. There must be some truth in the observation that people turned to Taoism only in the twilight years of life, he thought. His reaction to Taoism thirty years ago had been much the same as Yu-ming's. He too had thought in terms of organization, efficiency, industrialisation and machines. Now he recognized the mania for what it was, a mad rush towards dehumanization and greed. How he longed for a return to sanity, a return to the Tao.

Aloud, Liu Pui said: "You're right in what you say but Mr. Hsu is right also."

"How can both of us be right at the same time?" Yu-ming cried.

"That's the mystery of the Tao."

A silence descended until Yu-ming broke it. "Father," he began and then hesitated. He darted a glance at his mother as if reluctant to share with her the confidence he was about to impart.

"What is it?" Liu Pui asked. His voice, too, was now full of gentleness.

"The student association has planned a demonstration against the mayor tomorrow. Everybody knows he's corrupt and should be removed from office. It would help to rally public opinion if you were to write an editorial on the subject, exposing the mayor and supporting the demand of the students."

"Yu-ming, I don't want you involved in this trouble," Phoenix interjected, before Liu Pui could reply. "You stay out of trouble. You're going to university next term. If the mayor's corrupt that's nothing to do with you."

"People like him are ruining our country," Yu-ming responded with all the passion of his years. "Each of us has a responsibility to protect the welfare of our country."

"That's for the government to decide. You will only get into trouble by holding a demonstration and nothing will change. If you don't believe me, ask

your father. He used to take part in all kinds of demonstrations. One time he demonstrated against the Treaty of Versailles and two of his friends got killed. He almost got killed himself. What did that accomplish? The Treaty of Versailles remained just the same.”

“They did what they thought was right. That’s the only thing a man can do.”

“Even a righteous man must know when to show his righteousness.” Phoenix looked at her watch and added: “I’ve no time to argue with you. I’ve got to go. But I forbid you to take part in this nonsense tomorrow.” With that she got up, bid them goodbye and left the room.

Left to themselves, father and son appeared lost for words. Their eyes met and an understanding seemed to pass between them.

“I’ll think about the editorial,” Liu Pui said. “Now I’ve got to work.”

Yu-ming nodded and walked slowly from the room.

Liu Pui picked up the volume of Taoist quotations absent-mindedly and began thumbing through the pages. What should he write, he wondered. What kind of legacy should he leave behind? A man should do what was right. But how could he know what was right? Was it right for the sake of his dependents to live so blatantly out of tune with his ideals? Or was it right to sacrifice the welfare of his family for something as insubstantial as integrity and pride? He wished somebody would decide for him and yet at the same time he knew only he could decide.

Then a passage from the book in his hand caught his eye. He read:

“After nature was lost, one talked of character;

After character was lost, one talked of kindness;

After kindness was lost, one talked of righteousness;

After righteousness was lost, one talked of rules of conduct;

Now, rules of conduct indicate the thinning out of the

innate honesty of man.”

Liu Pui read the passage again and thought for a moment. He then placed the book down on the desk and picked up the brush he had set down when Phoenix entered the room. He knew what he had to write.

The Legacy of Liu Pui has appeared in the **Pacific Spectator** in the United States, the **Malayan Monthly** in Singapore and in **Discovery** magazine in Hong Kong.