

The Card Index

Piao looked down upon Yin-yin lying spread-eagled upon their double bed. Her glossy black hair was spread like a dark halo around her head while her face registered a strange, wide-eyed look of surprise. There was something classical and beautiful about her features, Piao thought. With her clear brows, high cheekbones and fine pointed chin, she had what the Chinese would describe as a "melon-seed" face. But there was also something vaguely cold and mean about her. It was an impression conveyed by a certain hardness in her eyes and by the way her mouth pulled scornfully downwards at the corners.

She scorned him even in death, Piao thought. His gentle brown eyes blinked in disbelief behind his horn-rimmed spectacles. Could he really have killed her, he wondered, as he turned his back on the corpse and sat down at the foot of the bed. His wife's feet seemed to point up accusingly at him. She had small, dainty feet, with elegantly shaped toes. He noticed for the first time her toenails had been painted a brilliant red. They were quite attractive and he wondered whether they had only recently been painted or whether he had just been blind to them before.

Around his own feet lay what remained of his precious card index. He had kept his cards neatly housed in a series of shoe boxes for the past twenty years or more. Since his marriage they had been kept under the bed, much to the irritation of his wife. Now the shoe boxes were heaped in a sorry pile in a corner of the room, their contents spewed all over the floor.

They must be hopelessly mixed up in terms of sources, chronology and subject, he thought. He bent down and picked up a card at random. Upon it, recorded in his own neat handwriting, was an extract from one of the special chapters in the *Twenty-Four Dynastic Histories* dealing with relations with foreign countries. He allowed the card to drop back on to the floor and picked up another. This one contained an extract from *Geographia Universalis* by Sebastian Munster, published in 1540. Were such extracts from ancient tomes, no matter how laboriously acquired, really worth killing to preserve, he wondered, soothing out lovingly the creases where the card had been stepped upon.

Piao scratched his thinning hair absent-mindedly. He felt mildly surprised, even now, over his ability to kill. He turned his hands over and examined them carefully. They did not appear to be the hands of a killer. They looked frail and thin and wanting in strength, and yet they were the hands that had just taken the life of his wife. He did not consider himself a violent man, far from it.

All his life he had shied away from conflict. Indeed, if anything, he had been too ready to accept bullying, too willing to seek compromise. So what had made him break away from the established habits of a lifetime? He had once read somewhere that the more educated a person became, the more restricted would be his range of actions. He was not only educated but a school teacher besides, as were his father and grandfather before him. If that theory held true he should be almost incapable of violence. Could there really be more of a beast lurking within each man than moral upbringing and education could ever tame?

It had all happened so suddenly. That Sunday morning had begun in the usual fashion. After breakfast he had walked his twelve-year-old daughter and his ten-year-old son to Sunday school as had been his practice for years. He was not a Christian. Neither was his wife, but she had their children baptised to gain readier admittance to the exclusive missionary schools attended by the children of her rich friends and relatives.

He had not liked that conversion of convenience but had not objected, for the sake of matrimonial peace, and had not minded his weekly task of taking the children to and from Sunday school. At least the mile-long walk afforded him the chance to get out of their small flat and enjoy a smoke. He was fond of his pipe but normally smoked only at school because Yin-yin objected to smoking in the flat. If he felt a particular urge for a pipe at home, he would take a walk around the neighbourhood to gratify his need.

Upon his return from taking his children to Sunday school he had found Yin-yin in the process of cleaning their room and he had been shocked to see his cards scattered all over the floor and being trampled underfoot by his wife. For one traumatic moment he saw everything dear to him being defiled and threatened with destruction.

But before he could even express his anguish Yin-yin had assailed him in that irritable tone of voice to which he had grown accustomed: "I'm sick of your cluttering up the place with your junk! Sick! Sick! Sick! Do you hear? I've burnt half of your damned cards already. I want you to put the rest of them in the kitchen stove. I'm not going to have those boxes around to breed cockroaches any longer."

He saw her then as the tormentor who had demeaned his life, as someone standing for everything atavistic and unenlightened in society, and in one wild, uncontrollable surge of anger he had strangled her.

Reflecting upon his deed, Piao felt neither regret nor alarm, only a weary indifference mingled with a slight sense of the ridiculous. He would never be able to explain at his trial why he had killed his wife. It would have been different if he had killed her because he had caught her in bed with a lover. Then it would be a crime of passion, within the understanding of ordinary mortals, and no further explanation

would be necessary. But a killing caused by the destruction of some filing cards would be incomprehensible. How could he explain the meaning they held for him? How could people see them as he did, as his individual quest for truth and knowledge and fulfilment? He would never be able to explain to his children either. They would both probably think him quite mad.

He decided there and then that he would offer no explanation to the police. Let the prosecutor come up with theories on motives at his trial. He would say nothing. In the absence of a convincing motive, the court might yet spare him the death sentence. They might just lock him up. In that case, there might still exist the possibility of reconstructing his card index in the solitude of his confinement. The prospect gave his spirits a lift.

He had begun his card index while still at university. During his studies he had come across a reference to Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, trading a whole regiment of dragoons with the King of Prussia for a set of vases made during the Kang Hsi period at the famous kilns of Ching-te Chen. The fact that a foreign ruler could display such appreciation for a piece of alien artistry had caused him to ponder the strange interconnections of human destiny. It had left him wondering whether the destiny of Poland or Europe had been affected in any material way by that exchange. Certainly the Roman craving for Chinese silk, especially during the reigns of Hadrian and the Antonines, had altered the history of the Roman Empire. It had contributed significantly towards its economic and moral decline. If the Chinese had not from the earliest time regarded the manufacture of silk as a state secret and any attempt to take silkworms or eggs out of the country as a crime punishable by death, the whole history of Western civilisation might have been different.

The thought had occurred to him then that the traditional approach to history was thoroughly unsatisfactory. History segmented into the irrelevancies of reigns and dynasties might make for the narrow glorification of a particular race or nation but it would be less than adequate in recounting the broad flow of human destiny. It would not account for all the fateful twists and turns caused by fundamental breakthroughs in art or science or ideas. Nor the large and unpredictable consequences arising out of some spontaneous and innocent craving, be it for silk or spices or whatever.

How different the world would be if gunpowder or paper had never been invented or if Einstein's theory of relativity had never been enunciated. To trace the roots of each human advance and to present a world perspective of its effect would pose enormous problems of scholarship. But if someone could bring it off he might establish for himself a name more respected than that of Gibbon or Ssuma Ch'ien.

The attraction of the prospect gradually took such a hold on him that he wrote a number of papers reflecting that approach. They met with a measure of approval from his professors and that had been enough for him to start his card index.

That secret ambition, once whetted, grew into an obsession which stayed with him even after his graduation and marriage. He never told Yin-yin about it, however, for he was afraid of being ridiculed.

He knew she was not one to understand the stuff of dreams. She had come from a banker's family and her approach to life was coldly practical. Even before their marriage she had suggested careers for him in commerce or high finance. One had to make the most of one's connections, she had told him. But the pursuit of wealth held little attraction for him. His material needs had always been modest and he knew no career in the commercial world could offer as much satisfaction as his researches in history. So, uncharacteristically, he had stood firm against the pressures from Yin-yin and had settled, to her intense disappointment, for the safe but impecunious vocation of a history teacher.

He had every intention of making up for her disappointment by being a good and considerate husband. But philosophically they belonged to different worlds.

For him, to be able to trace the effects that Nisacan horses of Central Asia had on the destiny of empires would be like an exciting journey of discovery. Those horses had been so sturdy they could go into battle fully protected by heavy chain-mail and yet carry an armoured warrior. They had enabled China to check the advance of the Hsiungnu nomads and it had been the desire to obtain such horses that had caused Emperor Wu to allow regular trade to be maintained with Persia. Because alfalfa was such an important item in their diet, that had caused the grass to be planted in China. The horses had been so magnificent that even Alexander the Great turned aside from his preoccupations to see them. And so the tentacles of causation stretched out from the steppes of Central Asia to affect the affairs of nations far and wide.

But unfortunately, such dusty revelations, so painstakingly pieced together, meant nothing to Yin-yin. For her excitement took more the form of a new fur coat or a mention in the social columns for attending some gala function. But how much of that sort of excitement could a man afford on a teacher's salary? He soon discovered, like others before him, that love and good intentions were not sufficient to sustain a marriage. So gradually they became estranged and before long the nagging began.

At the beginning he made a point of not answering back, partly because he wanted to mollify his wife and partly because he wanted to buy peace through silence. But Yin-yin merely took his silence as a retreat and nagged all the more.

On one occasion, when he was deeply engrossed in making extracts for his card index from a book borrowed from the university library, Yin-yin had upbraided him with unusual vehemence.

"Just look at you!" she had scoffed. "The president of the Students Union who was going to set the world on fire! What a laugh! Can't you do anything except bury your nose in a book?"

"I'm doing something constructive. I'm trying to get a better understanding of history," he had replied.

"A fat lot of good that will do, when we cannot even afford a servant!"

On another occasion, in sheer bewilderment over another of Yin-yin's outburst, he had demanded in exasperation: "What do you expect of me? Haven't I been a decent husband? I've try to provide for the family as best I can. I haven't any of the traditional vices. I don't drink or gamble or take drugs or womanise. I don't stay out till all hours of the night like the husbands of some of your friends. So what more do you want? All I ask is some peace to read. Is that too much to ask?"

"Oh, you're just so dull! You really bore me. I don't know why I ever married you."

Only then did he realise that dullness constituted some sort of matrimonial failing. He accepted the indictment and thereafter kept silent more than ever. But the scoldings continued. Gradually he got accustomed to them, in much the same way one got used to a recurring noise. As the children grew up he found consolation in entertaining them with historical anecdotes of one sort or another, such as the story of conjurors sent to China by the Parthian king, Mithradates II, or that of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian persuading Nestorian monks to smuggle silkworm eggs out of China in hollowed-out staves.

Piao thus reviewed the odd fragments of his life with Yin-yin with a quiet melancholy. What a mess they had made of it. Even their love-making, that ultimate cement for poor marriages, had turned into a war of attrition waged with dry loins. If it had not been for the children, it would have been kinder to liberate themselves from each other. But he had never imagined liberation would take so unexpected a form.

Suddenly, Piao was shaken out of his reverie by the sound of Yin-yin's voice calling from the kitchen. "Where are those damned cards I told you to bring out? I still have to cook lunch, you know. I haven't got all day."

"Coming, dear," Piao replied. He gathered up a pile of his index cards lovingly and carried them to the kitchen, like a sacrifice.

The Card Index won the first prize in a short story competition organised by **Radio Television Hong Kong** and the **South China Morning Post**. It has subsequently

appeared in **PEN International** in Britain and the **Peak** magazine in Hong Kong and broadcast by **Radio Television Hong Kong**.