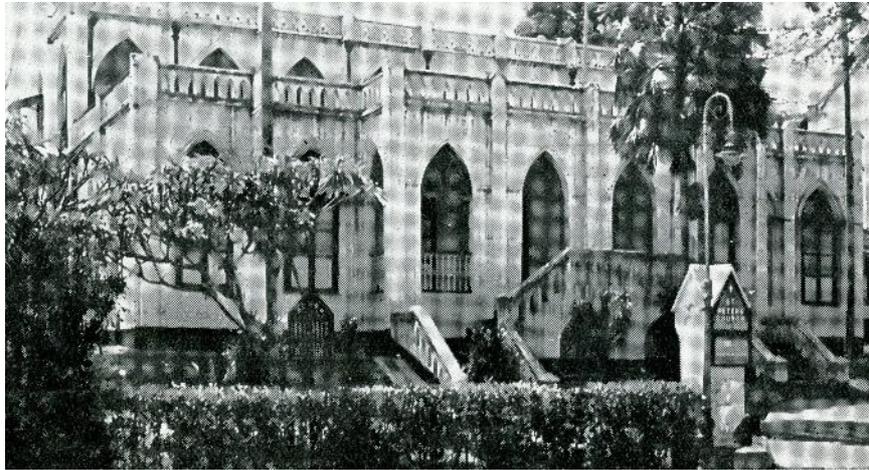
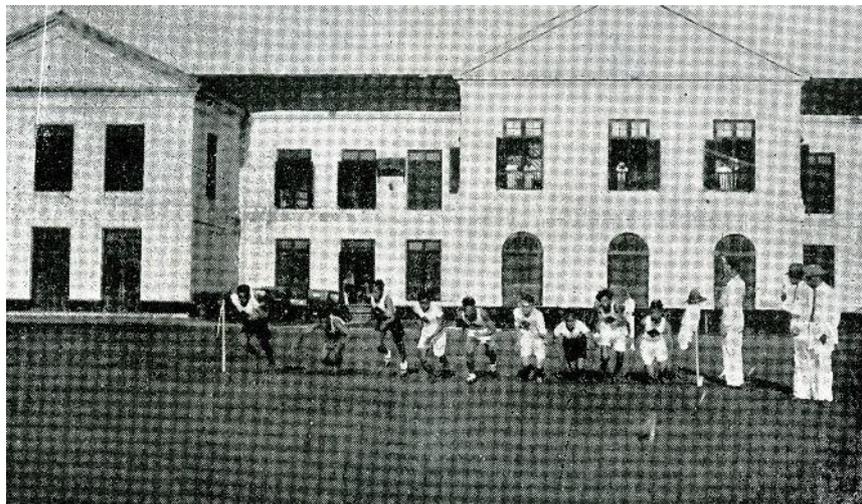


## A Mixed Education

I began my English education in 1936 in the primary section of St. Andrew's School, a Church of England school for boys founded in 1862 and organised along the lines of British public schools. Originally, it was located in the heart of the city at Stmsford Road but later shifted to expanded facilities at Upper Serangoon Road in 1940. The school had a secondary section as well, which enabled students in due course to sit for a Cambridge University School Leaving Certificate. Passing with appropriate grades in a required number of subjects would satisfy many universities overseas as matriculation.



The Central School block at St Andrew's at Stamford Road



Playing field and old school building of St Andrew's at Stamford Road

The primary school uniform consisted of a white shirt, a pair of navy blue shorts, white socks and a pair of rubber-soled white canvas shoes. Most students were of Chinese extraction, though not necessarily Christians. There was a sprinkling of Indians, Eurasians, Europeans, Jews and other ethnic and religious groups. So far as I can remember, no Malay attended because the Islamic faith prevented attendance at schools offering a different religious curriculum.

Although the evangelical intentions of St. Andrew's were not overtly stated, they stood at the heart of its mission. A subject euphemistically called "Religious Knowledge" was a central requirement. Its lessons concentrated on the New and Old Testaments without touching upon the other great religions of the world.

Notwithstanding the predominantly ethnic Chinese student body, neither Chinese history nor the Chinese language was taught at St. Andrew's. Presumably both the school and the parents of its students recognised that in a British colony English was the primary language for administration, commerce and preferment. The future of the young depended upon mastery of the language of their rulers.

For speakers of other languages and dialects, the studying of English had a beneficial side-effect. The forefathers of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements had arrived from right across South China's mixed dialectic belt. Thus they spoke everything from Hakka and Hokkien to Chiu Chow and Cantonese. While there was uniformity in written Chinese, the spoken tongue differed so markedly that two people using different dialects could hardly understand each other. English bridged that gap in communications.

When efforts started in China to standardise the use of Mandarin as a nation-building measure, attempts to follow suit in the Straits Settlements were left to individual choice. Parents could send their children to Chinese schools but increasing numbers were turning to an English education instead.

At St. Andrew's, the public school syllabus led to a British bias in substantive subjects as well. The diverse heritages of its students were given little attention. It was as if the glories of the British Empire put other histories and civilisations into the shade. Views of the world contrary to the Euro-centric ones were largely ignored.

It followed that students got large doses of Queen Boudicca and Hadrian's Wall, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, Richard the Lionheart and the Crusades, the Charge of the Light Brigade and the Boar War, Clive of India and Gordon of Khartoum. They were poured down young throats like purgatives, to rid them of whatever Eastern distempers which might linger within their systems.

As for literature and belles-lettres, the concentration was on Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, the Victorians and, later on, Shakespeare and the Romantics. The verses of Tennyson, Wordsworth and Keats invaded young Asian minds with images they could hardly apprehend. If they had no idea of what a Grecian urn looked like or how an oak might be configured after standing for 300 years, then those were put down to their backwardness and their need for enlightenment. If they ever suspected that their teachers probably knew as little about those objects as they, such notions were kept to themselves.

Students absorbed the avalanches of assertions and dates in much the same way as their forefathers might have learnt passages from the scriptures or the Chinese or Indian classics by rote, with minimal understanding of what the words actually meant.

Outside the classrooms, that process of cultural and religious reorientation continued through osmosis. Memberships were offered in a Boy Scouts troop, with its fine do-good aspirations, a company of the Boys' Brigade, complete with smart drills and stirring bugle calls, and a school choir belting out songs such as "Jerusalem" and "Onward, Christian Soldiers".

Sporting activities, too, took on sound British inclinations --

rounders, cricket, soccer, rugby, boxing, track and field. In the background, there would be intimations of even more sporting glamour in tennis, golf, rowing, lawn bowls and polo in the exclusive expatriate clubs from which locals, except for those providing services, were routinely barred. Glorious images of centre court at Wimbledon, Test matches at Lord's, the regatta at Henley and the 18 holes at Scotland's St. Andrew's came over as the preserves of well-heeled rulers rather than for those of common clay.

A person pickled for any length of time in such potent foreign vinegars could hardly avoid some alien tang seeping into his personality. After a few generations, if an unavowed collaborative instinct had not been inculcated into the collective consciousness, then at least a resignation to an inferior status would have taken root. Eastern good sense would suggest playing along with the legend of the White Man's Burden, notwithstanding everyday demonstrations that the men actually bearing the burden were of quite different hues.

It might be pointed out here that there were opponents to colonialism in British society. A parliamentarian by the name of Henry Labouchère mocked Kipling's poem with one of his own entitled "The Brown Man's Burden" and one of the verses reproduced below would give a flavour of what it was like.

"Pile on the brown man's burden,  
Compel him to be free;  
Let all your manifestoes  
Reek with philanthropy.  
And if with heathen folly  
He dares your will dispute,  
Then, in the name of freedom,  
Don't hesitate to shoot."

Of course such subversive literature was never allowed to reach the tender ears of colonial schoolboys.

Such an alien education suited the latter day tribunes appointed to

oversee the distant outposts of empire. Indeed, such a combination of truth and misinformation, myth and reality, benevolence and humbug, delighted them. To the imperial rulers' sophisticated way of thinking, natives were like children. Provide them with confounding toys and they would keep out of other types of mischief.

In the meantime, the system supplied a steady stream of semi-literates to serve as shipping clerks, bank tellers, stock brokers, police constables, tax inspectors, prison warders, underworld informers and others whom Marx and his cohorts had labelled "leeches on the capitalist structure".

\* \* \*

My first teacher at St. Andrew's was a Miss Tay, a dumpy Nyonya in her mid-forties. She had a penchant for dressing in the style of her minority group, which came in the form of a long blouse and a wrap-around batik sarong. A pair of fancy beaded slippers completed her outfit. Such attire did little to flatter her, however, for the snugness of the sarong squeezed her accumulation of avoirdupois into unsightly bulges.

A Nyonya is a woman of mixed Chinese and Malay descent. The corresponding term for a man is Baba. The Chinese strand dated back to the start of the fifteenth century, when the treasure ships of Admiral Cheng Ho called at Malacca to establish trading and diplomatic relationships between the Ming Emperor and that part of the world. Chinese settlers quickly followed, to exploit the economic opportunities offered.

A much bigger wave of Chinese immigrants came 200 years later with the collapse of the Ming Dynasty. From about 1661 to 1669, the new Ching Emperor ordered the evacuation of all population in the coastal areas of South China, ostensibly to deny support for the remnants of the defeated Ming forces. That development caused more Chinese to flee overseas, often to

Southeast Asia.

In Malaya, those waves of immigrants duly inter-married with the local population and developed what became known later as a Peranakan Chinese culture.

Their descendants adhered for a time to Chinese customs and spoke a mixture of Chinese dialects. But gradually both became modified by local practices and idioms. After Westerners began arriving on a significant scale, the Peranakans acquired additional linguistic skills, by studying English in the British colonies and Dutch and Portuguese in other annexed territories. Apart from becoming multi-lingual, many also converted to Christianity, in the belief that the religion of their masters conferred upon them some extra éclat.

As Western colonies in Southeast Asia expanded, the Peranakan men became much sought-after as middlemen and interpreters, providing communication links between colonial administrators, Chinese merchants and the wider Malay population. In time, they acquired sufficient prestige to elevate themselves into the local elites. Those in the Straits Settlements gradually attached more loyalty to their British benefactors than to their Chinese or Indian ancestries.

Thus, after centuries of genetic evolution and cultural reorientation, the dragon lady known as Miss Tay came into being and, as luck would have it, I and two dozen classmates fell under her iron rule during our first year at St. Andrew's.

Miss Tay had made it abundantly clear from the start that she brooked no nonsense. An uncompromising demand for obedience had been cemented into her intimidating stare. Her narrow eyes, the scowl on her abbreviated brow and the surly compression of her mouth underscored her attitude. She sent collective shivers down our spines. I, still fresh with memories of the caning I had received at the Chinese primary school, was more frightened than most.

Miss Tay taught everything from the multiplication tables to ABC with commendable competence. Her English grammar could rarely be faulted. Her spoken English, however, was accented and peppered with the superfluous “*lah*” so commonly used in the Straits Settlements version of the language.

In terms of sheer energy and dedication to her task, Miss Tay could hardly be bested. She ceaselessly patrolled the aisles between our small desks, armed with a wooden ruler. Should anyone be caught talking or not paying attention during dictation or while undertaking copybook exercises, she would rap the miscreant sharply on the knuckles with the ruler, using the edge rather than the flat to maximise pain.

“Concentrate *lah!*” she would snap, as she delivered the blow.

I somehow managed to complete my year with her without getting my knuckles rapped. By the end of that year, I had learnt sufficient English to dip into British comics like *Beano*, *Hotspur* and *Boy’s Own*, all of which were on sale at a newspaper and magazine shop operated by Indian vendors close to St. Andrew’s.

\* \* \*

It was during my second year that my English took off. Upon my promotion, my class teacher was changed to a Miss Fox, a slender and long-limbed English lady who was much younger than Miss Tay. She could have been no more than 30. She had a neat crown of auburn hair and her movements had that certain cultivated grace of an upper class lady. A whisper of eau-de-Cologne often followed in her wake. She apparently did not take well to the heat of the tropics for her face often appeared flushed, causing her from time to time to dab her upper lip with a white handkerchief made of Irish linen.

In spite of her many positive attributes, one obvious drawback could not be hidden. Miss Fox’s face was spectacularly ugly. It was not only long but

came with a protruding set of jaws and a top row of large, squarish teeth. Her neck, although not ungraceful, was also quite long. Those features combined to make her look extraordinarily like a horse. The class, with the kind of spontaneous judgements the young were apt to deliver, immediately fixed upon her the nickname of “Miss Horse-face”.

My sympathies went out to her. It occurred to me we might be birds of a feather. We were both ugly in our different ways. The unhappiness in her eyes suggested that it might not have been ugliness alone that had driven her to the tropics, to teach English to a group of often unappreciative alien children. Though I could not divine what those other reasons might be, I resolved to offer her such consolation as I could by becoming a model student.

Miss Fox’s exaggerated jaws did not detract from her skill in teaching English. She encouraged us, with more patience and sufferance than any other teacher at the school, to speak in that slightly superior way associated with the BBC. Every sentence had to be delivered with a straight face, with the merest hint of archness. No violence to the rules in Fowler’s was tolerated. Miss Fox, naturally, also tried to wean us from the ubiquitous “*lah*” and other local linguistic idiosyncrasies.

I had a gift for mimicry and I took to her way of teaching. She must have noted my keenness, for she went out of her way to polish my pronunciations and to augment my vocabulary. After I had been promoted out of her class, I had the good fortune to have her continue as the English teacher in higher classes for another two years. As a consequence my English improved beyond my own expectations. With it came an avid appetite to devour more British comics and books like *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* in the school library.

The books at home were by no means forgotten. I remained convinced that they held startling secrets and I was determined to find them. My initial choice, however, was a poor one. I selected one of the volumes of Gibbon, simply on the basis that its tooled leather cover looked impressive. Before long I found myself floundering over unfamiliar Roman names. The florid and dated prose did not sit well with me either.

My next attempt was a book by Samuel Smiles. Its title, *Self-Help*, attracted me. I was still very much at sixes and sevens at Blair Road, unsure of where I was heading or what was going to happen to me. I yearned to help myself, to find a direction. The title sounded exactly like what I needed.

One passage in the book quickly caught my attention. It read as follows: “On the whole, it is not good that human nature should have the road of life made too easy. Better to be under the necessity of working hard and faring meanly, than to have everything done ready to our hand and a pillow of down to repose upon. Indeed to start in life with comparatively small means seems so necessary as a stimulus to work, that it may almost be set down as one of the conditions essential to success in life.”

In my innocence, I had misread the message that Smiles was trying to impart. I thought I had stumbled upon some secret truth. Perhaps God *did* work in mysterious ways. All at once, it seemed possible that every setback I had encountered might in fact be a preparation for later success! I felt a little consoled.

It stood to reason that many other truths must be waiting to be discovered. But too many of the early volumes I found, like Kant, Nietzsche, Hobbes and St. Thomas Aquinas, were beyond my comprehension.

I figured my father or my grandfather must have read most of those books. Why had they not pointed out the ones I could benefit from or be guided by? Did they also think life ought not to be made too easy? Fortunately, I was not detained for long. I soon chanced upon several volumes of Sherlock Holmes

and the detective's deductive skills so mesmerised me that I ceased dipping into other books for a good while.

My other reading preoccupation revolved around the comics that I could borrow or exchange with my classmates, filled with heroes like Sexton Blake. The need to keep up-to-date and to be able to discuss their adventures during recess or after school became a matter of pride and standing. I gave up shooting marbles, spinning tops and kicking shuttlecocks with neighbourhood children in order to find more time to read. But still I found it impossible to read all I wanted.

I then hit upon a stratagem to get around the early sleeping schedules imposed by adults, which frustrated my ability to read much after dinner. I failed to foresee its deleterious consequences.

Before World War II, life was devoid of such distractions as television. Bedtime for children usually followed fairly quickly after dinner. This was especially so when the school bus had to be caught early. Lights were switched off once children had climbed into bed. The light coming through the barred window from a distant street lamp was too frail by which to read. Hence there was nothing much else to do except to go to sleep.

After I had been assigned a bed beneath one of the front windows, I hit upon a plan to read on the sly. I had somehow got hold of an electric torch. I had also been provided with a thin blanket, in case of the night turning chilly. What I did was to wake up during the night, after adults were safely snoring, cover my head with the blanket, switch on the torch and read till I wanted to sleep again. Through this unwise nocturnal routine, I quickly developed astigmatism.

By the end of my second year at St. Andrew's, my eyesight had deteriorated so severely that I could no longer read the writing on the blackboard. I required spectacles and a horn-rimmed pair was fitted. It made me look even more unattractive, at least in my own eyes.

Nonetheless, my command of English made significant strides. The acid tests came some years later, after my evacuation to Australia at the beginning of 1942. A constant comment made by Australian classmates was that I spoke like “a blooming pommie toff!” Later still, when I went to university at Stanford in California, many American students also remarked that I sounded more like an Englishman than a Chinese.

But that fluency in a foreign language had a down side. When I was about eleven, a Chinese teacher at St. Andrew’s by the name of Mr. Cheong once said in front of a class, probably with me specifically in mind: “It is not good for a man with a yellow face to speak like a man with a white one. He can easily lose his identity .”

It took a number of years before the full significance of his words sank in.

\* \* \*

Shortly after I started my third year at St. Andrew’s, my grandmother one day made an announcement that took me by surprise. She told me *Ah Yeh* had said my Chinese education should no longer be neglected. He had therefore engaged a teacher by the name of Tutor Tam to give me lessons at home, on three afternoons a week.

No one had touched upon my need to learn Chinese following my admission to St. Andrew’s. Mindful of my beating at the Chinese primary school, I also avoided the subject. We spoke Cantonese at home; that was about it. I imagine it must have been my sister, Helen, starting Chinese studies under a Mrs. Leung that triggered my grandfather’s concern over my lack of proficiency in our written language.

I was doing well enough at St. Andrew’s without really exerting myself. I was not topping the class but I was regularly within the top ten. My

school reports were handed to *Ah Mah* without either of us making too much of them. That was the way I liked things.

But the advent of a Chinese tutor must herald some marked change in my routine. I was not against change as such, for the Chinese poems I knew seemed to tug at me in a surreptitious way. I realised that in embracing English and Western culture so wholeheartedly I was missing out on a part of my own heritage.

Well before the tutor turned up, my grandmother had given me a slate ink slab, a thick black stick of ink, writing brushes of various sizes, a small porcelain water container, a supply of the renowned Anhui writing paper, plus a stack of the traditional children's copybooks for practising calligraphy. The copybooks contained the outline of simple Chinese characters in red, with each stroke numbered for execution in the orthodox sequence.

Such preparations turned me slightly more apprehensive, since they suggested the forthcoming regime might be more taxing than I had anticipated. I had never been taught to use the writing brush and no one at home used the brush either. I could not immediately grasp why I should be steered towards an old writing instrument. All the boys at school had dreamt of possessing some smart gold-plated fountain pen, though the vast majority still had to make do with cheap nibs and messy bottles of ink. Why was I being supplied with brushes? Maybe a fountain pen would materialise after I had mastered the brush, I figured.

Other more fundamental issues also entered my mind. Chinese dictionaries contained around 40,000 characters evolved from elementary pictographs. The monosyllabic nature of those pictographs had led to a literary language that was distinct from the vernacular dialects. Which dialect was I supposed to learn? I was not sure.

One of the difficulties with Chinese is that the written language is stylistic and stilted, devoid of slang and oral usages. From time to time, Chinese

scholars have attempted to modernise the written language but they have been opposed by those who had entered officialdom and gained high offices through the Imperial Examinations. Though only five per cent of those who sat for such examinations ever passed, the successful ones -- having attained power and influence -- naturally sought to cling onto an advantageous status quo.

Nonetheless, writers of popular novels had begun using the vernacular or *pak wah* to reach readers. When Hu Shih and Chen Tu-Hsiu led a literary revolution in 1917 to use the spoken language as a literary medium, they met with a wide popular response. In subsequent years, under Communist rule, things were taken a step further, when the characters themselves were simplified.

As a child, I had no knowledge of those issues bedevilling the Chinese language. I was simply concerned with what was in store for me.

My introduction to Tutor Tam was made in the reception room, at the odd-shaped table standing at its centre and it became the usual place for my subsequent lessons.

Tutor Tam did not look anything like the tutor I had imagined. He did not wear the flowing long-gown of a gentrified scholar. He wore instead an ordinary Chinese suit, akin to the ones favoured by my grandfather, with knotted cloth buttons all the way down the front. His feet were likewise shod in a pair of black cloth shoes. He did not come across as a person of particular refinement, being little different in his apparel from those of a broker or a journeyman in some pedestrian trade. He might also have passed for one of those impoverished letter-writers plying their skills at street-side stalls. His common touch was accentuated by his habit of carrying a folding paper fan with bamboo ribs.

He was of medium height, far shorter than either my father or my grandfather, and of unremarkable build, neither fat nor thin. As to age, he stood somewhere between my two elders. But his physiognomy was unusual. His head was over-sized, with a large domed forehead, full fleshy cheeks and heavy jowls. In addition, his whole face seemed to be squashed together at the temples,

bizarrely dividing it into two bulging sections, like a misshapen hourglass. His eyes and eyebrows were also out of the ordinary. The eyes began high in his forehead but drooped sharply towards their outer corners. The eyebrows followed suit, hanging over them like rickety roofs. They gave the man a thoroughly woebegone look. But, as if to compensate for the odd shape of the face and the distraction of the eyes, his nose and mouth were politely nondescript.

After my grandparents had withdrawn following the introductions, Tutor Tam said: “I understand you know a number of Tang poems. That is very good. Poetry is in the Chinese blood. It helps to cleanse our soul, to reconcile us to disappointments in life.” His voice was surprisingly deep and quite pleasantly cultured.

It occurred to me that Tutor Tam’s crestfallen look must have been caused by disappointments in his life. To be reduced at his age to teaching an eight-year-old boy the rudiments of written Chinese could hardly be considered a stunning success.

I was interrupted in my speculations by Tutor Tam asking me to recite one of the poems I knew. I did so, selecting at random one set in Soochow on a winter’s evening, filled with images of cawing rooks, frost in the air and the sound of temple bells tolling a late night watch.

After I had finished, Tutor Tam said: “Can you write it out?”

“I can only recite it,” I replied, shamefacedly. “I have been studying English the last couple of years. I know very few characters.”

Tutor Tam nodded. “Never mind. We can make progress together. Do you know how to use a brush?”

I shook my head.

“Well, let us first grind some ink and I’ll explain as we go along.”

He poured a little water and proceeded to grind on the slate slab as he held forth as follows: “Ink must be ground to a proper consistency. Too thin and it will

run on the paper. Too thick and brushstrokes may be hampered.” He then selected a brush, wetted it on the ink slab and demonstrated how the brush ought to be held, with the wrist resting firmly upon the table.

“A certain magic can sometimes be found in the wrists of greatest calligraphers,” he continued, “and it is your job to discover if there is any in yours. Before you can begin to write properly, however, you must adopt the proper posture, not sit with your legs sprayed out any old fashion and not with your back slouched over like an invalid’s. Sit up straight.”

He poked me with his fan to get me to sit in the way he wanted.

“Remember that a character you put on paper does not represent merely an object or an idea,” he said. “A well-executed character can be a thing of beauty in its own right. Fate may decree a man to spend his days writing menus in a tea house. But that is not sufficient excuse for his menus to be badly written.”

He then took a piece of paper and wrote a few sentences with fluent strokes. After finishing, he handed me the paper and said: “That is the poem you have just recited. Keep copying it out until you have memorised its characters. We can deal with meanings later on.”

I accepted the poem with both hands and placed it on the table in front of me.

Next, Tutor Tam picked up one of the copybooks. There were 12 simple characters outlined in red on each page. Within every outline a number indicated the sequence of strokes for the character. He read out the characters, which in essence made passing reference to Confucius and his disciples.

“Now write the characters as outlined,” he said, handing me the brush. “Visualise each character you are about to write before touching the paper with your brush. Concentrate on every composition, simple though each may be. A stroke, once made, should not be re-touched. Re-touching will immediately become apparent. In forming a character, it is essential to follow

the specified order for making the strokes. Keep practising till the sequence becomes second nature.”

I accepted the brush nervously. Small wonder so many Chinese remain illiterates, I thought, ruefully, when so much to-do was made over writing a few characters. Who could be blamed for turning their energies to other things? It also became clear to me why so few of my classmates at St. Andrew’s even bothered to study Chinese.

And yet, the poem written out by Tutor Tam, lying squarely on the table, seemed to glow with a shimmering beauty of its own. Though I could not read the thick black characters, they actualised a poem I had learnt by rote years ago. Each character appeared uniquely majestic and mysterious, fluid with a vitality and rhythm which appealed to something latent within myself. They spurred an urge to master those hieroglyphics.

That aim seemed more easily uttered than fulfilled, however. My hand moved the brush unsteadily. It was a poor showing, with the ink failing dismally to conform to the red outlines in the copybook.

Tutor Tam took my shambles with apparent unconcern. With a flick of his wrist, he deftly spread his fan to cool himself. He watched with indifference as I struggled, only interjecting a swift “No!” whenever I tried to amend a faultily executed stroke. When I had finished the 12 characters, he barely glanced at them. Instead, he said: “Write out ten more pages before the next lesson. They must be done with better concentration. Bones and sinews should reveal themselves in good writing.”

With that, I ended my first Chinese lesson. By then, I was left in little doubt that Tutor Tam intended to teach me the classical style of written Chinese and with Cantonese pronunciations.

At the next session, Tutor Tam asked if I could write out the poem he had set out in writing at the initial session. I replied that I thought I could and proceeded to do so. But I soon made mistakes in several characters over the sequencing of strokes. They were quickly spotted. Tutor Tam indicated the correct order in each case and ordered me to write each of those words 20 times as homework.

He then went into the provenance of the poem. The author was Cheung Gai. The poem reflected the mood of a scholar returning home by boat via Soochow after failing the Imperial Examinations. The atmospherics and setting had been built up with economy. The evening hour, the chilled air, the fishing boats moored near bridges, the distant sound of a bell signalling the night watch, the Cold Mountain Temple beyond the city walls. If there were ambiguities, he concluded, it would be up to the reader to imagine their interpretations.

Tutor Tam's explanations illuminated the poem in unanticipated ways for me. That became his pattern for dealing with other poems. His knowledge of poets and poems seemed encyclopaedic. He brought long-dead poets to life with accounts of their eccentricities, their longings, their hard drinking, their disdain for high office, and their simple yet stunning evocations with words.

I swiftly discovered Tutor Tam had a severely uncompromising side to him as well, which was reflected in his standard operational procedures.

First, he had an uncanny knack of identifying where I had augmented a stroke in my homework. He had to be a clairvoyant to know where I had gone wrong, when I could hardly spot the violations myself. Naturally, each mistake invited a penalty of writing out that character 20 times.

Secondly, I discovered that his fan could be turned into a very effective weapon. He could use it with great dexterity, hitting me on the head, shoulder, back or thigh, depending on the mistake made. The blows were never

vicious but quite sharp enough for me to sit up and take notice.

Thirdly, it was impressed upon me very early on that he would never tolerate any less elegant or less time-consuming way of writing than with a brush.

Finally, he would only move on to a new lesson when he was fully satisfied I had mastered all the characters previously taught. When he was thus satisfied, he would ask me to recite another poem I knew. He would then write it out and the process of learning all its characters and noting its provenance would begin all over again. After a few months, I managed to work through my limited repertoire of Tang poems.

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Tutor Tam then started me on a standard primer known as the *Three Character Classic*. The compiler of the classic was generally believed to have been Wang Ying-Lin, a scholar who had lived more than six hundred years previously, during the Southern Sung Dynasty. The book proved extremely popular and has been used ever since, both for introducing children to written characters and for enhancing their general knowledge about Chinese history and culture. Its statements, succinct and suitably rhymed in sets of three characters, enabled them to be read or recited out loud. They included many epigrams embodying Confucian moral exhortations.

As with poems, reciting by rote was one thing, being able to reproduce characters at an instance quite another. The standard rule of thumb was that if a person could master a thousand characters he ought to be able to cope with an ordinary Chinese newspaper. I realised that after mastering the two or three hundred words involved in the Tang poems, the further thousand-odd characters in the *Three Character Classic* would lift me beyond that threshold. I aimed for that goal with considerable enthusiasm.

Tutor Tam began by asking me to follow the text while he recited. He apparently knew the whole book by heart, for he declaimed with closed eyes, fanning himself dreamily the while and nodding his head in rhythm. After reciting about fifty of the short phrases, he stopped and reverted to the beginning, asking me to follow the text while joining him in reciting the passages two or three times. On completion, he began explaining the meanings behind the words.

His explanation of the initial passages pulled me up short. It came so unexpectedly that it knocked a hole right through everything I had hitherto been taught, by my maternal grandparents, by the classes in Religious Knowledge and by the Sunday school teacher at St. Matthew's.

I had believed in a vague way the misfortunes befalling me were due to man being born wicked and steeped in original sin. My misfortunes were therefore punishments for my inherent badness. The grace of God was the only way to attain salvation. There was no other way.

But the proposition Tutor Tam was holding forth was startlingly different. According to the *Three Character Classic*, the original nature of man was good. Differences arose only out of habits formed under different human circumstances. The whole foundation of my existence was being turned upside down.

That night, and on many subsequent nights, I wrestled with those two opposing propositions. Where did the real truth lie? The more I sought an answer, the more consequential questions pestered me like gnats.

To accept that I had been born bad seemed to explain all that needed explaining about my rejection by both my parents. It was something predetermined, predestined, beyond my control.

Any wicked desire that I entertained could be explained by my inherent badness. For instance, after watching one of those American cowboy films, the wish to be as quick on the draw as the hero and to be able to kill off

half a dozen baddies without batting an eyelid would possess me, in spite of knowing from Sunday school and the religious knowledge classes that to kill would go against the Sixth Commandment.

On the other hand, if I had been born good, then my rejection by others must mean I had turned bad somewhere along the line. How did that happen and when did it happen? How could I return to my original nature and become good again? My mind got bogged down so completely that I lost interest in all studies, both under Tutor Tam and at St. Andrew's.

Where Tutor Tam was concerned, I began to look upon his lessons with dread. I could no longer focus on fresh characters or on the sequencing of their strokes. I kept making mistakes, which not only invited blows from a nimble fan but also repeated requirements to write characters out 20 times. But because some defects were bound to be found among the 20 I had to do, further penalties of 20 got imposed. Afternoon lessons became a torture.

The truth of the matter was that I was so filled with dread over where my life was heading that I could no longer put up with the time-wasting and mechanical part of calligraphy. I had also not yet reached the stage when the essence and beauty of that activity could touch my spirit.

Nor had anyone explained to me the Taoist concept of original virtue that, I discovered many years later, had coloured Chinese thinking for thousands of years. I also understood then why my maternal grandparents had not told me about original virtue. It was because the Taoists were aiming their shaft at well-meaning people like them, who would destroy whatever spontaneous virtue there was in man by interfering with acts of charity and exhortations to be good. But at that early stage of my boyhood, I would have been unable to grasp such notions even if someone had tried to explain them to me.

Thus simple ignorance caused tensions to mount between Tutor Tam and myself. It so happened that around the same time a number of other combustibles got tossed into that smouldering fire of my dissatisfactions.

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The unresolved riddle of whether I had been born good or bad continued to nag at me as I approached my tenth birthday. My poor self-image seemed to grow more painful and unbearable with every passing year. Although I had sprouted to five-foot-three, I remained as thin as a rake, with a mop of stiff and unruly hair. In my own eyes, I looked hardly different from a victim of famine. I ate heartily enough but still failed to put on weight. I could virtually count my ribs when I took a shower. The de-worming medicines seemed to have produced no visible improvement.

At around that time, I had noticed an advertisement in newspapers and magazines inserted by an American body-builder by the name of Charles Atlas. It depicted a scrawny man lying on a beach, having sand kicked into his face by a muscular fellow, to the merriment of some pretty girls. I saw that as my destiny, another form of punishment for sins I could not even work out.

The headmaster of St. Andrew's at that time was the Reverend R. K. S. Adams, a big jovial Australian who was very keen on promoting sports in general and boxing in particular. In spite of the clerical collar he wore, his face impressed me with a certain pugilistic aura. It made me want to participate in that manly sport, not only to improve my physique but also to stand my ground against any bully. Unfortunately, sporting activities took place only during afternoons, thus clashing with Tutor Tam's lessons.

I was also attracted to the Boys' Brigade. Its members wore smart navy blue uniforms with a white cross band. I thought that even if my muscles were pathetic, I could at least hide them beneath a fetching uniform. Again, participation was ruled out by Tutor Tam's regime.

About a year earlier, I had made friends with the youngest son of the pastor of St. Matthew's. The boy's name was Yip Sai-Shan and he was a few

years older than I. He also lived along Blair Road, and he had taught me to play Chinese chess.

The chess pieces, with names like general, cannon, chariot and soldier, were so redolent with military and strategic overtones that the game hooked me immediately. The game's use of feints and deceptive moves, its need to anticipate an opponent's gambits several steps ahead, all seemed to reflect the deviousness of life itself. I thought if I could master the game, I might better cope with life. I therefore used to nip down to Sai-Shan's place to play whenever I had a spare moment. But those moments became progressively harder to come by because I was making too many mistakes that required characters to be written out 20 times.

Those punishment assignments distanced me from my classmates at St. Andrew's as well. We all had taken to reading British magazines dealing with weapons of war, like fighter aircraft, submarines, tanks, hand grenades and machine guns. We flaunted our knowledge of the latest weaponry during recess and after school. Because I could not keep up with my reading, I was left like a dumb-bell whenever we gathered.

Nor did I have much time for the veritable treasure trove of books found both at home and in the school library, like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and many others.

Instead I had to endure expositions on the three key relationships covered by the *Three Character Classic*, as between sovereign and subject, father and son, and husband and wife, when my own relationship with my father seemed nowhere near what it ought to be.

It was inevitable too that during the course of my tutorials I should begin to notice the laughter of the Malay boys playing outside in the street. Their yells and hoots invaded the reception room and I became increasingly conscious that they sounded happy whereas I was not.

My loss of concentration caused me to slouch and sit improperly on

the round, backless stool in the reception room. That earned me the receiving end of Tutor Tam's fan. I had to acknowledge my admiration for my tutor in that respect, however. He somehow managed to sit ramrod straight on a similar stool for hours, whereas I wilted easily.

In the face of a deteriorating situation, I began agitating for an end to my tutorials, advancing a host of arguments both real and fanciful. But my grandparents were not persuaded. So a stalemate developed, until things came to a head when I fell insanely in love.

\* \* \*

Why I fell in love while approaching the age of 10 or why I had picked on that particular girl, I can no longer say. Today, I am not even certain of her name. I think it was Lai-See or Lucy.

I had first encountered her years earlier, at Sunday school at St. Matthew's. She was possibly three years older than I. We were in different groups and she had seemed then no more than one of a number of awkward and forgettable girls. She could have dropped out after a bit, for I had no memory of seeing her for a spell.

One day, during my struggles to establish the goodness or badness of my original nature, I decided to attend a Sunday service with *Ah Mah*. It so happened I caught sight of a devastatingly enchanting girl across the aisle, in a pew parallel to the one I was in. On closer examination she was revealed to be Lucy.

She had blossomed into a raving beauty. She was now an apparition of loveliness, fresh with radiant fire. She seemed to embody not only total innocence but also every conceivable virtue. I took our fortuitous coming together as a kind of omen. She must have been sent from some heavenly sphere to illuminate the very issue tormenting me, I fantasised. I could not take my

eyes off her.

She must have sensed someone was staring at her, for she turned her head briefly in my direction. In a flash, our eyes met. Her angelic face lit up with a smile of recognition, dimpling her cheeks. After that moment, commonsense deserted me and madness took over.

It was a case of puppy-love, of course, but the days that followed seemed more earth-shaking and mind-bending than any poet could attest. Sunday service at St. Matthew's became *de rigueur* and keenly anticipated, much to the surprise of *Ah Mah*. Each time I ventured out I was breathless with excitement, just hoping to see her again. She did not disappoint. I did not dare to approach her, however, for her parents were always around. I simply waited for something to happen, not knowing exactly what. A sign, a word, some secret signal to make everything clear. I waited patiently and in silence for weeks, stealing glances from a distance, oblivious of the sermons being delivered or the hymns being sung.

Then one Sunday, well before the start of service, I happened across Lucy standing alone on the lawn outside the church. On an irresistible impulse, I approached her and blurted out: "Would you care to have an ice cream after church?" It was the only remark I could think of on the spur of that moment.

She bestowed upon me another warm smile, before saying: "I don't think my family would allow it." She was a shade shorter than I. Yet she sounded so terribly grown-up, like someone setting a child straight.

I felt more than humiliated and was left momentarily speechless. After what seemed an eternity, I retreated in a rout. But I managed to say before leaving: "See you inside."

For days afterwards, I cursed myself for so fatuous a parting remark. It should have been something with more dash and wit, something clever and memorable, like one of my father's repartees. Her voice, even in rejection, lingered magically with me. How to repair that damage, I kept asking myself.

How to talk to her alone again? If I failed to win her friendship, I might never learn the secrets I was convinced she could convey.

Before the next Sunday came around, I had devised a means for reconnecting with her. I penned her a note, telling her she was the most beautiful girl in the world and that I would like to be her friend. I put that note in my pocket and set out for St. Matthew's. My heart kept beating out wild and erratic tattoos while I waited for an opportunity to slip her the message without her parents seeing. But week after week, no opportunity presented itself. Hope thinned, as steadily as foliage on the approach of winter. My anxiety grew and I became jumpy with despair. Finally, after four weeks, an opportunity came and I passed her the missive. The result, however, was far from what I had anticipated.

It appeared that Lucy's parents had gained possession of the note. They reacted by approaching my grandmother the following Sunday. They told *Ah Mah* that both I and their daughter were far too young to be exchanging notes of any sort. They would be grateful if I could be stopped from communicating further with Lucy.

My grandmother relayed the injunction and I almost died of humiliation. I felt in my bones Lucy had not wanted us to be cut off just like that. But there was nothing I could do. I saw it as just another instance of the cruel hegemony of adults interfering with the lives of children. A tearing bitterness wrenched my heart.

I could not bring myself to attend St. Matthew's any more after that. Since the unpleasantness had taken place in a church, the thought that I might indeed have been born bad came to me. I slipped into despondency and self-disgust.

The episode involving Lucy should have alerted my grandparents to the fact that I was being pushed too hard with studies. But it took another unfortunate development before they agreed to end my lessons with Tutor Tam.

That next turn of the screw came in the form of a poorer-than-expected mid-term report from St. Andrew's. No one took me to task for slipping down class rankings or for getting some quite disastrous marks. Instead *Ah Mah* approached me one day and handed me one of my grandfather's silver pocket watches.

"How would you like a watch like this one?" she asked.

I put the watch to my ear and heard it ticking as regularly as a heartbeat. I then opened its shiny cover to study its second hand jerking its way around the face of the watch. The timepiece looked and felt very desirable. I nodded.

"Well, your *Ah Yeh* says you can have one, if you come within the first three places in your final exams," she said. "Can you do it?"

"Sure," I said, casually. It was not a goal I had cared to aim for but the prize seemed worth the effort. "But not if I had to cope with Chinese lessons from Tutor Tam as well."

"If we stop your lessons with Tutor Tam, you must promise to continue studying Chinese at home."

"Okay."

In that slightly messy fashion, my sessions with Tutor Tam came to an end. I quickly joined the Boys' Brigade. I also took up soccer and boxing, but without distinguishing myself in either. I did not much mind that I was abysmal in sports. If I had won anything, I would have had to make a spectacle of myself on Sports Day, going up to a podium to receive a shield or a cup from some oddly-dressed wife of a British colonial official. I would have been unable to keep a straight face if the lady in question had worn one of the more preposterous hats so many of them seemed to fancy.

If I am not mistaken, I think St. Andrew's is the only secondary school in Singapore today which still actively promotes boxing as an important character-moulding sport.



Views of contemporary St. Andrew's at Potong Pasir  
with its distinctive pink-coloured walls

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The moment my lessons with Tutor Tam ended, I switched with alacrity from a brush to a pen in practising characters. I abandoned the copybooks with the outlines in red too. Both had constituted acts of rebellion, I suppose, a totally perverse reaction to the unspeakable hurt I felt over Lucy. Writing characters now took only a fraction of the time previously taken. Words just flew from my pen. I began ignoring the strict order of their strokes as well, for it seemed easier to memorise characters in that rough and ready way. When I had more interesting things to do, I skipped doing calligraphy altogether.

Nobody took issue with the way I went about with my Chinese studies, however. For a while it seemed like an uncommon liberation. I could loiter on a football field all afternoon; I could play chess or read a novel without constrain. It felt heavenly.

I did continue in fits and starts with the *Three Character Classic* from where Tutor Tam had left off, going to *Ah Mah* or to one of my aunts for explanations on words I did not know or passages I could not understand. But none of them offered the same clarity as Tutor Tam.

Gradually, other enjoyable activities consumed more and more of my time and I allowed Chinese to become less and less of a priority.

One day, when I picked up the exercise book I normally used to practise characters, it struck me that something had gone amiss with my writing. The characters appeared emaciated and ill-formed, without any of the liveliness and vigour of those previously made by the brush. I realised on a sudden the nascent hints of vitality and beauty Tutor Tam had tried to cultivate in my brushwork had virtually perished under my nib.

It came to me at the same time that I was not at ease with myself. I was filled with too much restlessness, lost for want of a firm guiding hand. Someone like Tutor Tam had been necessary to keep me on the strait and narrow. My agitation to be rid of him had been a monumental error. My brain told me I ought to ask my grandparents to bring him back. But a lump of unseasonable pride I could not swallow stood in the way. There could be no going back. I knew enough about Tutor Tam's temperament to surmise he would refuse further dealings with a student so unprepared for serious studies. So my Chinese suffered and declined.

After several months, whenever I flipped through the pages of the *Three Character Classic*, I felt a wistful ache of regret. I was struck by the final phrases in that ancient book. The compiler had ended by observing that other men might leave their children chests filled with gold but he was leaving only a

single book.

That observation made a deep impression on me. The compiler might have left only a single volume, yet for hundreds of years children have been studying it and drawing inspiration from it. To leave such a heritage should be ambition enough for any man.