

## The Chicken Blood Seal

Old Soong had been dead for three weeks and with every passing day I could feel more keenly the void he had left behind. I missed his prodigious erudition, his infectious passions, his quixotic beliefs and his engaging eccentricities. I missed our discussions on music, science and literature and our companionable sojourns to parks, tea-house and libraries. I even missed his infuriating certitudes and his occasional explosions of outrage. The rhythm of decades had been broken and nothing seemed capable of easing my sense of loss.

As time took the edge off my grief, I pondered the deathbed promises I had made. I recalled the solemnity with which Old Soong had handed me his “chicken blood” seal. He had acted like an ailing emperor relinquishing his symbol of power and I, his chamberlain, receiving final instructions on the succession.

The seal, a square shaft of bright crimson stone about six inches tall, was called “chicken blood” because it appeared to the Chinese as if it had been splashed with the blood of a freshly slaughtered chicken. Actually it was only soapstone, heavily impregnated with cinnabar. Therein lies its rarity and beauty.

“You must help my grandson to cope with these benighted times,” Old Soong pleaded. “Instruct him, as I know you can. Guide him on my behalf, and give him this seal when he comes of age.”

Old Soong had pressed those duties upon me because he had no one else to turn to. His daughter, Mei-Mei, had married some 15 years earlier and was living in America, while his only son, Sing-Yee, had fallen out completely with him ages ago. Death had left them unreconciled.

My own relationship with Sing-Yee, who happened also to be my godson, was civil but tenuous. Our original closeness had been eroded by my

efforts to mediate between him and his father. He was bound to take a dim view of any attempt to instil in his son the attitudes and beliefs of a father he bitterly resented and despised.

The impossibility of my mission was obvious for another reason. I am 61, whereas the grandson is not yet two. But when a friend lay dying, what promises could be too rash to humour him?

After racking my brains, I concluded that the best way of keeping faith would be to set down, as objectively as I could, the history of my relationship with the Soongs. It would never be complete or exhaustive, but it should at least provide the grandson with some impression of a grandfather he had no chance to know. If that ultimately causes him to ponder what his ancestor stood for or had aspired to, then my mission would at least be partially fulfilled.



I first came across Old Soong 35 years ago, towards the end of 1947. I had arrived in Hong Kong a few months earlier, filled with the notion that I, Ian Telford Middleton, might follow in the footsteps of Wade, Giles, Waley and the other giants of Sinology. To that end I had armed myself with a degree in Chinese from the School of Oriental Studies and an appointment as an Assistant Education Officer in the Education Department of Hong Kong.

A civil war was raging in China and the British wanted to keep Chinese politics out of the colony. I found myself assigned, not to teaching as I had anticipated, but to registering schools and teachers. It involved liaising with the Special Branch to vet the backgrounds of those seeking registration, to eliminate those with nationalistic or other undesirable leanings. The Special Branch was paranoid about subversion. Hence it ruled out anyone who had ever uttered a liberal sentiment. Our schools undoubtedly lost a good many independently-minded teachers as a result.

My superior at the time was an excitable man by the name of Eric Jones. He had heavy jowls, flabby lips and a large head set awkwardly upon thick, rounded shoulders. His boast was that he had spent 25 years in Asia without having to learn more than three words of any native language. He was a man to keep a safe distance from -- because, once agitated, he sprayed spittle during speech like bullets from a machine-gun.

I was summoned by Jones to his office one day and found him blustering before a Chinese young man dressed in a traditional long gown of fine beige silk. That flowing gown, even then already rather out of fashion, revealed a great deal about its wearer. It suggested pride, cultivation, individuality and easy circumstances. The contrast between the two could not have been greater.

“Middleton, this man doesn’t understand simple English,” Jones stormed. “Make clear to him he cannot be registered. He has no papers.”

I bowed and asked in the formal manner favoured by the Chinese literati: “May I enquire of the gentleman his honourable name?”

The man was slim and of above average height, with a lustrous head of hair. He had an intelligent brow and an engaging way of smiling. He returned my bow and answered in a pleasant, cultivated voice: “My insignificant surname is Soong.”

“My humble surname is Middleton,” I responded. “There appears to be a problem. If Mr. Soong will explain, perhaps I can be of assistance.”

“I seek registration as a teacher of Chinese history and Chinese literature,” he said. “The other gentleman is demanding documents on my qualifications. I fear I have none. I have been tutored privately and have never attended school. But I am versed in the classics and the major literary traditions. I am acquainted with dynastic histories, art and archaeology and am proficient in calligraphy, painting and seal-carving. I am prepared to undergo whatever examination considered necessary.”

I recognised the problem at once and attempted an explanation. “It is common for the Chinese gentry to educate their children through tutors rather than in schools. This gentleman appears to have been so educated. No doubt you will recall a similar tradition in some European countries. In Britain it helped produce the likes of Bertrand Russell. Do you wish the applicant tested?”

“We can’t waste time testing every crackpot who comes in here,” Jones fumed in an explosion of spittle. “I don’t care how he’s been educated. He’s no Bertrand bloody Russell! The fact remains he hasn’t got even a blooming School Leaving Certificate. So that’s that!”

Before I could assemble a form of words to soften the reply, the young man interrupted. “Please enquire of the gentleman how possession of a School Leaving Certificate qualifies a person to teach either Chinese history or Chinese literature. There seems no connection.

“As I understand the situation, the subjects required for a School Leaving Certificate are English, Religious Knowledge, History, Geography and Mathematics. English is not a suitable language for teaching Chinese literature or Chinese history to Chinese students. Religious Knowledge is irrelevant, for it is devoted to Christianity and ignores the main religions of China. History and Geography, as currently taught, are a farce. One is little more than a chronicle of distant European squabbles, while the other touches upon an empire from which most inhabitants wish to break free. As for mathematics, I am as competent as the next man. So how does possession of a School Leaving Certificate affect my ability to teach Chinese history or Chinese literature?”

I was much taken by the young man’s self-possession, for he seemed not much older than myself. He bestowed upon me a mischievous look as he watched me struggling to convey his sentiments. I realised then he had an understanding of English. But the full extent of his knowledge remained to this

day a mystery. Although he occasionally used the odd English word or phrase, I had never heard him utter a full sentence during our 35 years of association.

“This gentleman is suggesting that proficiency in School Leaving subjects is not necessarily a qualification for teaching Chinese history or Chinese literature,” I paraphrased.

“I see we have an agitator here,” Jones sneered. “All the more reason to deny registration. We can’t waste any more time on this. Just show him out.”

I was still fresh from England in those days and the peremptory attitude adopted by Jones struck me as uncivil and unsuitable for a public servant. So I said instead: “If Mr. Soong will be so good as to accompany me to my office, perhaps I can suggest a solution.”

The man allowed a conspiratorial smile and followed me out of the room. Back in my own office, I said: “I’m sorry about this but registration will not advance your objectives. The subjects you are interested in are not even taught. Under the Education Ordinance, not even the teaching of civics is allowed. That may appear strange but the government is anxious to avoid classroom debates on the rights and wrongs of the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion and similar events, particularly when a civil war is in progress. Children can be easily inflamed. No one wants to stir passions and create social instability.

“Having said that, it does appear that the Education Ordinance is silent about private tuition. As we say in England, there are many ways of skinning a cat. If someone were to offer private tuition in certain subjects, who is to stop him?”

An empathetic understanding passed between us and that was how our relationship began.



A few weeks later, I bumped into Soong in one of the antique shops along Cat Street. He was dressed in customary Chinese clothes and a pair of black cloth shoes. I had gone in search of such artifacts as my modest salary allowed. I was admiring some Chinese seals when Soong greeted me with elaborate courtesy.

“Mr. Middleton! What an auspicious encounter! May I presume Mr. Middleton is a connoisseur of seals? “

“No, far from it. They have fascinated me since my university days. They remind me of the signet rings the ancient Egyptians used to wear as symbols of authority. But I know very little about them. There are so many types of stones, so many styles of script, so much history and tradition, that I am thoroughly intimidated,” I replied.

“Everything can be mastered if there is the will,” Soong said, picking up one of the seals. “This stone is known as White Hibiscus because of its colour and texture. It is a product of Fukien Province. According to the side inscription, this has been carved by Au Kwan-Kung, an engraver of some renown who lived towards the end of the Ching Dynasty.

“Au has used the ancient pre-Han *chuan shu* script, a script much favoured by carvers because it is virtually impossible to forge. It is almost like a fingerprint. That is why many still use it today for seals meant for commercial and banking transactions. This stone is one of good quality, carved by an acknowledged master. A good collector’s item.”

“You can tell all that at a single glance?” I exclaimed, amazed.

“Every seal tells its own story, if one knows how to look.”

“I wish I had that skill.”

“If Mr. Middleton can spare the time, perhaps I can attempt a fuller explanation at my humble abode. It is but a short walk from here.”

I was so taken by the subject that I needed little persuasion.

Soong's home, a specious three-storey tenement house, was located a little way up the hill on Bonham Road. The house was furnished in traditional style, with superb blackwood pieces made by hand without using a single nail. They were not particularly comfortable to use, however, though they lent the rooms an air of austere formality.

The reception rooms were a veritable museum, filled with scroll paintings, calligraphies, artifacts and antiques. There were Ming vases, Guan celadons, bronzes and screens inlaid with semi-precious stones. The library housed showcases containing seals of different shapes and sizes. Their materials ranged from roots of old plum trees seasoned in oil to crystal and jade, from ivory and rhinoceros horns to precious amber-like stones known to connoisseurs as "field yellow". In one of the showcases a range of "chicken blood" seals stood on magnificent display. That was my introduction to that delightful stone.

Refreshments were served by a plump and cheerful maid with hair plaited into a long, fat queue. During the course of tea I was introduced to Soong's wife, Tranquillity, and his daughter, Mei-Mei, then only one year old.

After formalities had been completed and Tranquillity had withdrawn, Soong began an exposition on seals. He explained that seal-making, in its highest form, could only be done by scholars, because it required familiarity with calligraphy, etymology, principles of design, knowledge of materials, history and classical scholarship. A seal, to reach an acceptable standard, had to conform with what the ancients called the Six Laws, the Six Essentials and the Six Merits. Anything less left it at the level of mere craft.

"I hope I am not blinding Mr. Middleton with the dust of our culture," Soong said, as he went on to explain the five types of scripts in common use. "Seal-carving is sometimes called wielding the iron pen. It can be done either in relief or intaglio. The scalpel has to function like a writing brush. Experts

can tell at a glance whether a stroke has been well executed. I'm afraid the only way to reach an acceptable level is to practise and keep on practising."

Long before Soong had finished his explanations, I was itching to try my hand. I had a reasonable facility with the writing brush and I was anxious to improve my knowledge of all things Chinese. I therefore asked if he would accept me as a pupil. After much ritual protestation, he agreed. It was arranged that I would receive instructions one evening each week.



Soong began by testing my facility with the writing brush. He judged my characters below standard and assigned exercises. When I had made sufficient progress, he began explaining principles of design and how to cope with seals of different shapes and sizes. He then went on to describe how to handle material of varying hardnesses.

When I eventually got down to wielding the carving blade, I found Soong an exacting master. He was slave-driver, in fact. When a stroke was not clean and honest he would not spare my blushes. He was lavish with criticisms but seldom offered praise. If I executed a particularly pleasing piece of work, he merely grunted. Neither would he allow me to rest on my laurels. The moment I had attained passable competence in one skill, he started me on something else.



As the months went by and as my carving skill improved, Soong became more friendly. The weekly meetings were extended to include dinner with his wife.

Tranquillity greeted me warmly at the first dinner.

“Anyone interested in seals is always welcome in this house,” she said. “It is not often that my husband finds someone who shares his passion. Sometimes I think seals are more precious to him than his own life. We have a maid, but he never allows her to dust his seals. Only I am permitted to handle them. So once every few months I have to clean all his display cabinets myself.”

Dinner in Soong’s home became an adventure. The dishes were simple and of a type not normally offered in restaurants. My favourite consisted of thick slices of pork belly meat marinated with dried Chinese mustard greens, soy sauce, rice wine and sugar.

The seasonal soups accompanying the meals were also amazing. I enjoyed in particular one made with lotus roots, dried squid and lean pork and another prepared in a stockpot with frog meat and a variety of Chinese herbs. If it had not been for the Soong’s hospitality, my English reserve would have prevented me from trying out such unusual fare on my own initiative.

Tranquillity usually repaired to her own quarters after dinner, to allow Soong and I to go about our work.

When Soong and I got carried away and worked late, we fell into the habit of taking late night snacks at neighbourhood eateries. Our favourite was a congee and noodle shop called Suen’s. It had been operated at the same location by the same family for three generations and it reputedly served the best congees and shrimp won tons in all of Hong Kong. Soong and the owner appeared on intimate terms.

When I asked Soong how his interest in seals developed, he told me it had started at the age of 10 when his father, a collector of paintings and antiques, took him on an acquisition trip to Hangchow. The trip had been a reward for out-performing his older brothers in mastering the classics.

His father was normally a man of few words. But at Hangchow, under the spell of its celebrated West Lake, he seemed a different man. He enthused about the beauty spots that inspired poets and painters throughout the ages and talked incessantly about the different forms of art that had blossomed there.

He was particularly attracted to the compound of the West Lake Seal Society, located next to the old imperial palace, for it offered a breathtaking view of the West Lake and the surrounding hills. Scholars, artists, seal-carvers and kindred spirits gathered there to pursue their individual interests.

During a visit there they came across a small group of people admiring a “chicken blood” seal. Its owner claimed it had once belonged to the Ching Emperor Chien Lung, who was celebrated – among other things – for this fondness of seals. He had more seals carved for his personal enjoyment than any emperor before him.

The seal was indeed magnificent and when its owner allowed Soong to handle it he was overjoyed. He could not decipher some of the engraved characters, however, because he had little knowledge of seal scripts at the time. When the owner asked if he understood the epigram he had to plead ignorance. That embarrassed him. But the owner quickly set him at ease by saying boys his age could hardly be expected to master ancient seal scripts.

The encounter gave him a glimpse of the fellowship enjoyed by those with knowledge of arcane things. They seemed to live on another plane. He understood then why his father appeared so much more alive in Hangchow than when he was at home. He resolved there and then to enter that select circle.

Upon returning to Canton, he asked his father if he might learn seal-carving. His father was delighted and engaged an expert to instruct him. That was how his passion began.



In my own case, encountering Soong also led to a fundamental change in my life. He stimulated my interest in Chinese culture more than any of my former lecturers and tutors. Our conversations ranged widely, from religion to acupuncture, from music to engineering. One topic invariably led to another.

Once, when discussing seal-making techniques during the Han Dynasty, he unfolded a story about the first Han emperor's habit of wearing a seal with his ceremonial robes as a symbol of his authority. That practice quickly spread. Since wearing a seal required some means of attaching it to the person, the decorative grip at the top of the seal, known as the *niou*, had to be designed to accommodate a cord. An elaborate system then developed to govern the form of *niou*s and the colours and lengths of the cords.

Apparently the *niou* of an imperial seal of that time had to be carved in the form of a tiger and that of a minister or general a tortoise. The cord for the emperor had to be made of silk in five specified colours, with the length strictly regulated. Ministers and generals had to use shorter cords restricted to the colours of purple and white. Officials below a certain rank were forbidden to have seals altogether.

Such historical anecdotes were not only the kind of treats I enjoyed at the Soongs. Once in a while, I would also be privileged to hear Tranquillity playing the lute. Though she always played in her own quarters, her music reverberated throughout the house, lending it the enchantment of distance.

Once the first notes were plucked, Soong would drop whatever we were doing and send for wine. We would then drink and follow the plaintive notes from the silken strings. They somehow stirred vague longings in me, as if I were being transported back to another age, to a form of existence unthinkable in a city crowded with refugees. I suspected Soong shared similar feelings, for a faraway look usually entered his eyes whenever his wife played.



About 18 months after I had started my lessons, I discovered Soong had followed my advice about giving private tuition. He had secured the use of a room at a neighbourhood benevolent society and was giving free lessons in Chinese history and Chinese literature three afternoons a week.

That discovery heightened the disquiet I had been feeling for some time. Here I was, an Englishman, busily absorbing Chinese culture from one of the most learned men I knew, and yet I also represented the system that prevented the dissemination of such knowledge to his own people.

The untenability of my position was obvious. I knew that so long as the likes of Jones occupied key positions there was little prospect of reform. So I decided the only honourable course was to resign. I did so, and found employment as a feature writer with a magazine specialising in Far Eastern affairs. I have happily retained that position till the present. So in a very real sense Soong changed my life.

After my departure from Crown service, my relationship with Soong mellowed. I got the impression he had been anticipating it. Instead of calling me Mr. Middleton as before, he began addressing me more familiarly as “Old Mi”. I reciprocated with “Old Soong”. I visited his home more frequently and I made myself available one afternoon a week to assist in the private tuition.

Old Soong was elated by my participation. He thought me ideal for presenting impartial assessments of China’s contributions to civilisation. I was more than happy to undertake the task because the Chinese generally hid their light under a bushel. That, combined with the scant attention paid to Chinese culture in our schools, resulted in most Chinese having no idea how many of the things taken for granted today had been invented or discovered by their ancestors.

Many knew that gunpowder, the magnetic compass, paper and printing originated from China. But few realised that flame-throwers, rockets, the seismograph, the science of endocrinology, the first cybernetic machine and the circulation of blood were Chinese discoveries or inventions.



As our friendship deepened, I gradually learnt more about Old Soong's background. He was the youngest of three sons. Their mother passed away when Old Soong was eight. The family had been in the rice trade for generations. It began in Canton and gradually expanded to neighbouring towns. By the time his grandfather took over, it had become too widespread to be handled centrally. So the enterprise was broken up into autonomous parts, each run by a different branch of the family.

When his grandfather died, his father inherited three outlets in Canton. But his father was more interested in collecting art than in selling rice. He had an aversion to commerce, considering it unfit employment for a person of refinement. But the two older sons had no pretension to learning, so he left the running of the business to them.

When the war with Japan broke out in 1936, the brothers wanted to join the war effort, though Old Soong was only in his mid-teens. A family council was convened, presided over by the father. It was decided that Old Soong was too young to participate in anything. His task was to continue studying. He was thus dispatched to a small town in Szechuan Province, near the famous Omei Mountain, to be away from any conflict. His father's art treasures went with him for safety's sake.

As for his older brothers, it was decided that both could not abandon the family business. Lots were drawn and the eldest brother won the right to serve

his country. He joined the underground resistance. In order to protect the family during the Japanese occupation, he changed his name and moved away from home. With departure of the eldest brother, the father had to revert reluctantly to overseeing part of the business.

But fate was unkind. The eldest died in 1940 when ambushing a Japanese patrol. The second brother died four years later, in a road accident, while escorting a rice shipment through bandit country.

Old Soong offered to abandon his studies to take up the family business but his father would not hear of it. Instead his father sold the shops to another branch of the family and joined Old Soong in Szechuan.

The deaths of two sons had taken their toll and the father's health soon began to fail. Fearful of the extinction of his branch of the family, his father set about finding a wife for Old Soong. He eventually settled on Tranquillity and a marriage was solemnised in the customary manner.

Despite being selected through a matchmaker, Tranquillity proved ideal. She was well-educated, of a gentle disposition and expert in the womanly arts of embroidery, music and housekeeping. She quickly found rapport with Old Soong and became pregnant in less than six months.

But just as the war with Japan reached its end, civil conflict loomed. Old Soong's father judged that new fighting would be long and bitter. So he bought the Bonham Road property, placed a substantial part of the family's resources in foreign-currency deposits with an American bank and ordered Old Soong to move the family and the art treasures to Hong Kong. But before arrangements could be finalised, he died.

Shortly after arrival in Hong Kong, Tranquillity gave birth to Mei-Mei. By then Old Soong had begun to make a name as a calligrapher and seal-carver. His essays on Chinese literature also made occasional appearances in academic journals.

Despite being a native Cantonese and having a comfortable home, Old Soong regarded himself as little more than a refugee. The colonial atmosphere in Hong Kong grated on his sensibilities. The increasing bitterness of the civil conflict and the separation from literary friends depressed him. He felt the younger generation ill-served by an educational system designed to produce clerks and servitors rather than rounded personalities finding pride in their own heritage. So he decided to become a teacher. And that led to his encounter with Jones.



Some months after quitting government service, I was invited by Old Soong to a dinner to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival. Tranquillity had arranged a magnificent feast and wine flowed freely. Old Soong, in particular, was in an expansive mood. Towards the end of the evening, after Tranquillity had retired and other guests had departed, he confided in me that his wife was with child.

We were already in a jolly mood and the news gave us an excuse to celebrate far into the night. At some stage during those hazy proceedings I must have agreed to become a godfather – or what the Chinese called “a dry father” – should the child turn out to be a boy.

A boy was duly born and Old Soong named him Sing-Yee, which meant Sincerity. After the traditional dinner to mark the end of his first month of life, I also hosted a dinner to adopt him formally as my godson.

The years immediately following Sing-Yee’s birth were happy ones for the entire family. Everything and everyone in the house took second place to Sing-Yee. He was a bright, cheerful lad, with alert eyes and a ready smile. Unlike Mei-Mei, who had her mother’s gentle and retiring nature, Sing-Yee was

precocious and strong-willed. When he set his mind on something, no one could deflect him. He also had a way of ingratiating himself with others.

Mei-Mei developed very pleasingly, though she was not academically inclined. Old Soong was very indulgent towards her. He desired only that she should grow up like Tranquillity. He thus left her upbringing to his wife.

It was an entirely different story with Sing-Yee. Old Soong settled upon the boy as a repository of his fondest hopes and ambitions. One day, when I was bouncing him on my knees, I said: "You little rascal, you're going to grow up as smart as your father."

"No." Old Soong interjected immediately. "He has to be better than his father. There must be progress. I am too much of a bookworm. He has to be an enhancer of life, a warrior against everything that is wrong and evil in our society."

At the time I thought Old Soong was merely voicing the vaulted ambitions of every proud father. I did not realise till later how firmly he had pinned his hopes upon Sing-Yee.

By the time Sing-Yee was three, Old Soong was already teaching him the simpler Tang poems. The boy recited them with great skill and animation. A year later, Old Soong asked me to teach his children English.

I had no qualm over teaching Mei-Mei. She was already of an age when she should be in school, but I was worried about Sing-Yee. Following the child's introduction to poetry, Old Soong began teaching him calligraphy as well, even though the poor lad could barely hold a writing brush. Recalling how severe Old Soong had been when I was learning seal-carvings, I feared for the boy.

"Are you sure you're not overtaxing Sing-Yee?" I ask

"I am. But what is the alternative, my friend?" Old Soong replied with sigh. "Our traditional values are under attack. The family, the foundation of our society, is being destroyed. In China it is done in the name of a pernicious

ideology, with brother being turned against brother, children against parents, wives against husbands. Our thirst for educations, our respect for teachers, are being ridiculed as feudalistic. Intellectuals are being imprisoned and murdered. Books are being burnt. Crude slogans are being passed off as knowledge.

“Things are little better here. Capitalism is undermining traditional proprieties. Sharp practices and ostentation are replacing honesty and hard work. Greed and selfishness have become the order of the day. We are failing our young, allowing them to believe that anything that makes money is worth emulating. We no longer teach them to follow the examples of Wat Yuen or Ngok Fei. We no longer inspire them with the dreams we had dreamt over the millennia.

“Instead, we offer them lascivious movie actresses and gyrating pop singers as role models. We cut them off from their native culture, leaving them like fallen leaves tossed around by the fickle winds of fashion. Fallen leaves usually end up in the gutter. My son must have a better fate.”

Old Soong continued to rile against modern trends with mounting vehemence. The frustrations and hurt in his voice became almost palpable. I got swept up by the frightening visions evoked by his words. I visualised ancient traditions being drained of meaning, history and civilisations being erased, whole worlds being irretrievably lost.

I felt deeply affected. It was as if I had suddenly heard the death knells of a civilisation I had dedicated my life to studying. I recalled that the Roman Empire had been dying for a hundred years before anyone in Rome woke up to the fact. Would modern technology and mass communications, manipulated by communism or capitalism, eventually destroy what the Eastern Huns, the Mongols, the Manchus and others had failed to do? I shuddered at the thought.

I began to appreciate the impossible task Old Soong had set for himself. He was seeking, single-handedly, to propagate and defend his heritage. It was a hopeless and Promethean undertaking. Yet, a part of me wanted desperately for

him to succeed. So, in spite of my misgivings, I agreed to teach his children English.

Fortuitously, the lease on my flat was about to expire and, for greater convenience in discharging my new duties, I moved into premises less than five minutes' walk from Old Soong's house. The lessons went better than I had expected. Both the children took readily to the language, though Sing-Yee was by far the faster learner.



In the meantime, having absorbed as much of the principles and techniques of seal carving as Old Soong could impart, I devoted myself to practising on my own. Our regular evening meetings therefore took on a new character. They turned into amiable chats between like-minded companions on whatever happened to seize their fancy.

Since my work did not require regular office hours, I sometimes met Old Soong during the day, for refreshments at tea-houses or to do research at libraries. Late one evening, while we were having a snack at Suen's, Old Soong intimated that Tranquillity was again with child. We were both elated. Unfortunately, Suen's did not have a licence to serve alcohol. So we went to my apartment and drank far into the night. I jokingly offered to become a "dry father" again should he have another son.

But a freak accident happened some months later to bring a tragic end to such hopes. When Tranquillity was in the seventh month of her pregnancy, she climbed a step-ladder to dust the upper shelves of the display cabinets containing seals. Old Soong was away from the home at that time. The children were rushing about playing when Sing-Yee, on being chased by Mei-Mei, crashed against the ladder.

Tranquillity was on the uppermost step, holding some seals in one hand and a dust cloth in the other. When the ladder toppled, she went flying and landed on her neck, breaking it. The baby, another son, also could not be saved.

As the maid recount the tragedy afterwards, she had rushed in on hearing the noise and saw Sing-Yee standing over his mother's crumpled form repeatedly saying: "Mother, it's not my fault. Mei-Mei was chasing me."

Mei-Mei, on the other hand, was kneeling next to her mother and saying: "Don't move! I'll get the doctor. I'll pick up Father's seals."

It was as if cruel fate had suddenly snuffed out a light from all our lives. Mei-Mei was the most affected, for she felt utterly responsible. She moved around the house tearful and dejected, like a lost soul. Sing-Yee fell ominously defensive.

Old Soong tried to comfort them both but his efforts were not particularly successful, possibly because of his own pain and because he lacked his wife's easy rapport with children.

We all wept copiously at the funeral, except for Sing-Yee. He did not shed a tear. Perhaps he was too young to understand the full extent of the family's loss. He maintained a sullen silence and some family friends took that as a brave response to grief for a child and praised him accordingly.

The extent of Old Soong's suffering could not be readily gauged. Outwardly, he appeared in control. He mourned his wife in the accepted way, by dressing in white and leaving his hair unkempt and his beard unshaved. When the period of mourning was over, he retained the beard. That made him appear much older and -- with his flowing long gown -- more venerable.

It was only after his death that I discovered how much he was affected by the loss. His suffering found expression in a number of poems that he bequeathed to me. I could not help shedding tears upon the first reading of his elegies. They made me regret never having shared my life with a woman like

Tranquillity. She was like a beloved sister to me and whenever I thought of her the plaintive music from her lute seemed to pierce my soul.



While Old Soong was in mourning, we suspended our evening gatherings, though I continued to give English lessons to the children. But it was obvious that Mei-Mei was in deep depression. Something had to be done and I suggested to Old Soong she should be sent to school to take her away from the haunted surroundings of the home.

Old Soong was loathed to do so, for he had no faith in the educational system. But in the end he gave way and I was proved right. Mixing with other girls and attending regular classes gradually took Mei-Mei out of her gloom. She matured slowly into a serious young lady and, whenever possible, she assumed responsibilities around the home formerly shouldered by her mother.

When the meetings between Old Soong and myself eventually resumed, the meals preceding them turned out to be less lively with Tranquillity gone. The participation of the children further changed their character. We had to assume a degree of decorum to train the children in table manners.

During Old Soong's period of mourning, I had taken over the tuition of the students at the benevolent society. But as time went by, the numbers declined. In retrospect, it was inevitable. Students were increasingly reluctant to devote time to activities that did not assist them in finding employment or in gaining admission to universities. In spite of Old Soong's offer of free lessons in the neighbourhood, recruits dried up and the classes came to an end.

With the termination of the classes, I sensed a growing restlessness in Old Soong. He saw the general lack of interest as a further sign of the decline in Chinese values. He became more abstracted and taciturn. He poured his energy

into preparing tutorials and assignments for Sing-Yee. I became uneasy over his well-being as well as that of his son.

It was soon apparent the boy was losing attentiveness. He was almost nine at the time. So I took him aside one day and asked if something was the matter.

“Father allows Mei-Mei to do as she pleases but I have to work to a strict timetable,” he replied sulkily. “She can go swimming or play games with schoolmates. But I have to stay home and study. I have no friends.”

It was a cry from the heart. In order to soothe him, I said: “You cannot compare yourself with Mei-Mei. She is much older than you and she is attending school. You are more fortunate because you are being taught at home by your father. You may not realise it, but your father is one of the most gifted teachers to be found anywhere. You may have to work a bit harder but you will certainly be making better progress than your elder sister. You ought to be proud of that.”

I had not anticipated my remarks would lead Sing-Yee to start agitating to be sent to school. But they did. Old Soong was naturally opposed to the notion, though he eventually gave way in the face of his son’s persistence. Since Sing-Yee was scholastically far in advance of his contemporaries, he had to be put straight into a secondary school, among students three or four years his senior.

Putting him in school was like releasing a person from a sterile environment into one filled with germs and infections. Hitherto, apart from family outings, his life had been spent entirely at home. He thus had little experience of normal boyhood activities. Suddenly he found himself surrounded by youths accustomed to going to cinemas, watching television, reading comics, listening to rock music, smoking cigarettes, playing pinball machines, teasing girls and engaging in a range of other activities.

The temptation to plunge into such a novel and exciting world proved irresistible. It did not take him long to discover, however, that most of those activities were forbidden by his father. Furthermore, his father's assignments left little time for anything else. Inevitably, conflicts developed.

The most enduring conflict was over television. It simmered for years. Sing-Yee, supported to a lesser extent by Mei-Mei, wanted television. Old Soong did not approve. He dismissed television as opiate for the intellectually lazy and the socially handicapped. Mei-Mei reconciled herself to the denial, but not Sing-Yee. Being stubborn and wilful he took his revenge by perfunctory attendance to his father's assignments .

That upset Old Soong. He took it as a case of rebellion and handled it accordingly. But the more he scolded or punished the more Sing-Yee resisted. The boy began developing a dry, inner resentment against his father. I was alarmed lest that resentment be nursed into implacable hatred.

So I took Sing-Yee to tea in an attempt to mend fences. I suggested that being without television was not the end of the world.

"if television's not important, why do you keep a set in your house?" Sing-Yee retorted.

"I just use it to keep up with the news," I replied.

"There are things I want to keep up with too. My classmates talk constantly about what they have seen, about starships and voyages into space. They are all fascinated. I feel like a freak because I know nothing of what they are talking about."

"We can't all know the same things. There must be plenty of things you know about that your classmates do not."

"Yes, I know the origins of porcelain, the leading schools of painting, the classical structure of poems and other stuff that no one cares about. If I were to talk about them, my classmates would think me even more of a freak. Why can't I be like other kids? Why do I have to learn stuff I'm not interested in?"

I knew I could not properly explain Old Soong's ambitions to an 11-year-old boy, so I did not try. Neither could I find the words to tell Old Soong his son resented the life he was preparing for him. The problem seemed insoluble. I could only watch helplessly as the struggle of wills raged between them.

With both the children being offered English at their schools, my lessons became superfluous. So my contact with them became less frequent. But whenever I visited the home, I detected an undercurrent of tension between father and son that had not been there before.

Although Sing-Yee handled his father's assignments resentfully, he performed brilliantly at school. He was ready to graduate at the remarkable age of 15. Then a fresh conflict erupted. Sing-Yee had his mind set on studying business administration. His father vetoed it.

"Business administration is not an education," Old Soong declared. "It is chicanery. There are a thousand honourable ways of earning a living. There is no need to stoop to skulduggery to earn a profit. It is bad enough that so many of our students want to swallow those pills of commercial deviousness dispensed by academic charlatans. No son of mine needs them. I would rather see him an honest mendicant than a lordly predator in a commercial jungle."

But Sing-Yee was firm in his resolve. He defended commerce as legitimate. He pointed to patronage of the arts made possible by wealth generated through trade. He drew attention to the economic successes of the business ethos in America and the prosperity generated by similar means in Hong Kong. Old Soong remained unmoved, whereupon Sing-Yee threatened to apply for a bursary to attend university on his own.

Old Soong countered by indicating that under-aged youngsters could do nothing without parental consent.

Mei-Mei was troubled by the arguments. It hurt her to see her father and her brother quarrelling, for she loved them both. She had plans to study dietetics in America, which her father had readily approved. She could not

understand why Sing-Yee should be denied his choice. She stayed neutral nevertheless, to preserve relationships with both. She left for New York with a heavy heart while the conflict between her father and brother remained unresolved.

I was troubled by the continuous antagonisms also. I had sympathy for both positions. So I sought to broker a compromise. I urged Sing-Yee to take a degree with more academic substance first.

"What's wrong with learning about business?" Sing-Yee demanded. "Our whole society thrives on business. Father is just prejudiced and out of touch. He's living in the past. He only messes around with dead things -- dead philosophers, dead writers, bits of rock carved with names of dead men. He wants the world to stand still. He dresses like a clown in clothes nobody wears anymore. I used to be ashamed going out with him because everybody would stare at us. People must think him queer."

"I don't think your father is out of touch," I replied. "It's just that he doesn't like where our society is heading. He wants to show people -- and you in particular -- that there is far sweeter music to be heard than the jangling of cash registers."

"He scorns money-making only because grandfather left him enough to play around with. He squanders it all on relics and bric-à-brac. Has he ever done an honest day's work in his life? Has he ever earned a red cent? No! He just goes around mouthing homilies and telling other people how to live their lives. He's too mean even to provide his children with a television set. I don't want to end up like him. Grandfather's money will run out long before my time, so I have to plan my own future."

"I think you are doing your father a great disservice. Your father is far from being mean. He's the soul of generosity in many ways and he's been engaged in the most arduous of work -- weaving dreams and trying to live them. He is one of those rare enhancers of life, a modern Renaissance man. The so-

called relics and bric-à-brac are part of your heritage. They define what you are.

“Hong Kong is a great commercial and financial centre, so it’s natural for people to be attracted to business. But life is more than chalking up profits. Life is about finding answers to fundamental questions. Your father just feels that studying something more solid, in the sciences or in the humanities, will help you in that process.”

“Answers to fundamental questions come automatically when there’s enough money in the bank,” Sing-Yee said.

I was shocked by the boy’s cynicism at so tender an age. Nonetheless, I persevered. After much to-ing and fro-ing I managed to hammer out an accommodation of sorts. It was agreed that Sing-Yee would study history and economics as a first degree and in return Old Soong would support him thereafter to do a master’s degree in business administration. It was further agreed that Sing-Yee would be allowed to live in a hostel and to be relieved of further work assignments from his father.

Sing-Yee avoided the home, returning only during holidays. Even then he ate out most of the time, to avoid facing his father alone across the dinner table. He would sometimes take part in a meal when he knew I would be present. But not otherwise.

With Mei-Mei in America and Sing-Yee at the university, Old Soong became more moody. The crumbling of the hopes he had pinned upon his son was like a body blow to him. His scraggy beard and his thinning hair started turning grey. Loneliness and despair crept upon him and he seemed unable to re-ignite his intellectual fire. He became increasingly short-tempered. The servants often got scolded for minor infractions or berated for every slip-up. He also began referring to Sing-Yee as “your godson”, as if the lad had nothing to do with him.

His dark moods were compounded by the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in China. The killings by Red Guards, the torture or imprisonment of old friends, the vandalising of national treasures, all affected him deeply. When rioting broke out in Hong Kong itself, he shook his head wearily and said: “We’re finished, Old Mi. The new barbarians are coming. They’re coming sooner than I had expected. We’re in for a new Dark Age.”

I tried to shake him out of his despondency by reminding him that China had survived many catastrophes during its long history and no doubt would survive the present one. Such arguments calmed him a little. During that period I made a point of spending a little time with him each day. When the excesses of the Cultural Revolution began dying down he regained some of his former spirit.



Another development that helped to restore him was a request from Mei-Mei for permission to marry. After completing her studies she had found employment in the Food and Beverages Department of a leading New York hotel. There she had met an American Chinese working as an assistant manager. She intended to marry the young man, but wanted to bring him to Hong Kong to receive her father’s blessing first.

The young man was unexceptional and Old Soong gave his blessing. A wedding took place in the colony before the couple returned to live in America. Old Soong perked up at the prospect of becoming a grandfather.

While in Hong Kong, Mei-Mei took pains to urge Sing-Yee into reconciling with their father, but to no avail.



After completing his degree, Sing-Yee secured a position as an executive trainee in an American merchant bank. He continued to live at home. But one of the first things he did was to purchase a television set. Old Soong responded by insisting that the set be kept in his son's bedroom and that its noise should not disturb the rest of the house.

Things came to such a pass that father and son hardly spoke. Essential communications, like arrangements for the annual pilgrimage to sweep Tranquillity's tomb, had to be routed through either myself or the servants.

In order to cheer up Old Soong, I suggested collaboration on a book in English on Chinese seals, tracing their lore and development right back to the clay stamps used on bamboo strips thousands of years ago. The project engaged him and we set aside an evening every week to compile material and to plan the publication.

I also tried to preserve my links with Sing-Yee. As his godfather, I felt I had responsibilities. I wanted to mend the rift between father and son, to drain some of the bitterness poisoning their lives.

I had an occasional meal with Sing-Yee away from the home and tried, through our conversations, to touch favourably upon some of the intellectual and philosophic attitudes similar to his father's.

But Sing-Yee seemed altogether too absorbed with his career and the rewards that merchant banking had to offer. He was in his element when talking about hostile takeover, dawn raids, leveraged buy-outs, asset-stripping and break-up values. Such subjects left me rather at sea. It was a brave new world indeed he had ventured into, a world far removed from any familiar to his father or to myself.

My sense of bewilderment was compounded when Sing-Yee introduced me to a young lady named Elsa Lee. She was a petite girl with intelligent eyes and an enthusiastic manner of speech. She had been Sing-Yee's classmate at business school and was now an account executive with a well-known firm of Wall Street stockbrokers. The two were apparently going together. She, too, spoke in a strange new language, about "puts" and "calls", hedging operations, time premiums, "naked straddles" and market indices.

My time with them left me with the impression they were more interested in each other's trading and business activities than in each other's personal lives. I could not help wondering what had happened to that old jug of wine and book of verse favoured during my youth.

One evening, just as Old Soong and I were finishing dinner, Sing-Yee returned home. He had with him a small cardboard box.

"I'm glad I've caught you, Uncle Ian," he said. "Would you mind cutting some seals for me?"

"I won't be half as good as your father," I replied. "If you're satisfied with mediocrity, I should be happy to oblige. Are they for your own use?"

"Not really," he said, without so much as a glance at his father. "Let me explain. My bank is hosting a conference of regional managers. I've been asked to oversee the arrangements. I thought it might be cute if each participant got a seal engraved with his or her name, transliterated into Chinese, as part of the conference package. Being foreigners in the main, it would be something out of the ordinary, something they could display and talk about back in their own offices.

"I could then use imprints from the seals as name plates for seating arrangements at meetings and meals. It will be a terrible muddle, of course, when a bunch of foreigners try to make out their names in Chinese seal scripts! But that should produce a few laughs and break the ice. It's just a gimmick, to

liven proceedings. You will, of course, have to help me work out auspicious transliterations of their names.”

“Sounds a novel idea,” I said.

Sing-Yee then opened the box to reveal a number of seals. My heart sank at the sight. They were made from the most inferior stones, mass-produced for tourists. They did honour to neither carver nor recipients. I could see Old Soong glancing at them with disdain.

“Are you sure these are good enough for presentation to senior managers?” I asked.

“They’re foreigners,” Sing-Yee said. “They wouldn’t know one hunk of rock from another. They wouldn’t know the first thing about seal-carving either. If I package the seals nicely, tell them they had been engraved by a master carver and spin a few yarns about the doodads on top, they’ll lap it up. They’ll think they’re onto something really special.”

I was disappointed by Sing-Yee’s cavalier tones and by the manner in which he had involved me in his public relations scheme. I was therefore none too happy in accepting the stones and the list of names he proffered.

After Sing-Yee had left the room, Old Soong scoffed: “So an ancient art is to be debased into a gimmick for the amusement of foreigners!”

“I suppose he’s just trying to advance his career,” I said, lamely.

“Yes, advance his career by trading on ignorance and untruths, by perverting a noble art and by abusing the use of language! A *niou* is a *niou* and not a doodad. The whole thing’s an intolerable outrage.”

“Don’t take it too hard. I’m sure he means no harm. I warrant not one university graduate in 50 nowadays will know that the decorative grip of a seal is called a *niou*.”

“That merely reveals the parlous state of our educational system!” Old Soong retorted. “To call things by their proper names is a commitment to truth, a form of honesty. Once we allow a *niou* to be referred to as a doodad, we start

down the road to perdition. No doubt many in this town will prefer their greed to be described as ‘pragmatism’ or ‘a response to market forces’. Tyrants and dictators can then pass off their crimes as ‘mistakes’ or ‘errors of judgement’. Where will such perversions lead?”

Old Soong’s strictures seemed to be aimed as much at myself as at Sing-Yee. I accepted the validity of his criticisms by remaining silent.

A few moments later, Old Soong apologised for his outburst. “I’m sorry, old friend,” he said. “I have no right to interfere in what others want to do. It is just that nothing seems to be going as it ought to.”

He then told me he had received a letter from Mei-Mei that morning, with news that she had been found infertile. “There is no prospect of her ever bearing children,” he said. “She feels it is a kind of retribution for causing the death of her mother. I wish I could convince her otherwise.”



I spent the next couple of weeks working on Sing-Yee’s seals. I was so embarrassed over that frivolous scheme that I refused to put my name to the side inscription. Apparently the “gimmick” turned out a resounding success.

A few weeks later, Old Soong announced over dinner: “Your godson has changed his name. What his father had given him is no longer good enough. He now calls himself Victor Soong. I have seen it on letters addressed to him. Victor! What a ridiculous name! What shameless impudence! What forces has he ever led to triumph except those of ignorance over learning, of deviousness over moral rigour?”

I expressed surprise and pleaded ignorance. I was finding myself increasingly in the odd and uncomfortable position of having to answer for Sing-Yee’s actions, like some kind of counsel for the defence. But I knew it

was just Old Soong's way of expressing his hurt. So I allowed his outbursts to pass without challenge.

The next occasion I met with Sing-Yee I asked for a specimen of his business card and, sure enough, his name was given as Victor Soong.

"I see you have changed your name," I observed, tartly. "Didn't you like Sing-Yee?"

"It's not that, Uncle Ian," he explained. "Most of my colleagues are Americans. They keep asking me what Sing-Yee means. I feel like a fool telling them it means Sincerity. Sincerity Soong! It makes me sound like a second-hand car dealer from Arkansas. I'm sure they must laugh behind my back. I thought adopting a Western name would do away with explanations."

I was disappointed that Sing-Yee should feel the need to change his name for such a trivial reason. It was no use trying to explain matter to Old Soong. He would simply let loose another barrage of caustic comments.



Sing-Yee rose inevitably in his chosen calling. He had all the ingredients for success. He was hard-working, dedicated and ambitious. He had pleasing manners and a way of making hard-headed calculations beneath a smooth line of talk. Most of all, he had an instinct for making money.

Before long, he became the first Chinese to be made Vice-President in the history of the bank. That elevation received a lot of press attention. But Old Soong showed no sign of knowing or caring about it.

Shortly after his promotion, Sing-Yee moved out of the house. He told me he wanted to spend more time with Elsa and did not feel comfortable bringing her to the house.

At our next meeting, Sing-Yee told me he was seriously thinking of marriage and asked if I would officiate with Elsa's parents at his wedding.

That honour belongs to your father," I said. "I could not possibly usurp it."

"Father has never cared for me or what I want," Sing-Yee said. "He has failed me at every turn. He wants me to lead the kind of life he favours rather than my own. It would be hypocrisy to have him officiate."

"I'm sure if you set aside past differences and talk to him, you'll find that he cares a great deal about you."

"No. I don't want him there. I'm no hypocrite."

"Then I'm afraid I can't be there either."

Shortly thereafter, I received a telephone call from Elsa asking if I could arrange for her to meet with Old Soong.

"If the meeting is about what I think it is about, I don't want to hear any more," I said. "If I'm to be an honest broker, I want to be able to tell Mr. Soong I know nothing of what you want to see him about. You'll have to do all the talking yourself."

A meeting was duly arranged and I escorted Elsa to the house at Bonham Road. Old Soong greeted her with formal courtesy and Elsa expressed amazement and delight at all the rare and beautiful things in the house. Once the introductions had been completed, I sought to leave. But Old Soong bade me stay.

"Please feel free to speak openly before Mr. Middleton," Old Soong said. "We are like brothers. We keep no secrets from each other."

"It is very kind of you to see me, Uncle Soong," Elsa began. "I have come to beg a favour. Victor and I are getting married and it would be an honour if you could officiate at the wedding with my parents."

“I know no one named Victor, Miss Lee,” Old Soong said. His tone was matter-of-fact and without bitterness. “As I have only just made your acquaintance, it would hardly be appropriate for me to accept such an honour.”

“But I’m marrying your son, Uncle Soong.”

“I fear you are mistaken, Miss Lee. A son of mine would know the proprieties, and knowing them, he would present himself to make so important a request. Since only you are here to make the request, it follows that you cannot be marrying a son of mine. I’m sorry.”

Elsa was stumped into silence. When she rose eventually to go, Old Soong said: “It is kind of you to call on an old man. Please allow me to offer a small memento of your visit. Is there anything that takes your fancy in this room? If so, please take it with my good wishes.”

“Oh, everything here is so magnificent! I never knew all these treasures existed. But I can’t take anything. Everything here is too valuable and out of proportion as a memento.”

“It is the sentiment and not the value of an object that counts. Please indulge an old man and allow him to make a selection for you.”

Old Soong then took from a display table a 14th century Yuan vase in a superb blue-and-white design. In present it to Elsa, he said: “This vase has been in my family for a long time. My father once used it to explain to me the difference between a vase and a human being. He said the beauty of a vase was easy to admire because it was obvious to all, notwithstanding being empty inside. But the beauty of a human being would be hidden. His appearance would count for little. His real worth is difficult to discern. I hope this vase will provide you with many years of pleasure.”

Elsa thanked Old Soong and asked if she might be allowed to call upon him from time to time to pay her respects, notwithstanding his inability to attend her wedding. Old Soong readily gave his assent.

A short while later, Elsa and Sing-Yee were married, without either Old Soong or myself present. Sing-Yee took my absence as a slight, to underscore my siding with his father. Our relationship cooled further as a result.

After the wedding, Elsa made a point of calling on Old Soong every few months. Those visits gave my old friend a great deal of pleasure. Elsa somehow managed to develop a natural rapport with him. She was sensible and sensitive, and avoided all mention of her husband.

The more I saw of Elsa, the more I liked her. She was gracious in an unassuming kind of way, as befitting a daughter-in-law of the old school. I imagine she must have urged her husband more than once towards a reconciliation. But she met with no greater success than either Mei-Mei or myself.

Sing-Yee showed no sign during our increasingly infrequent contact that he regretted in the least his choice of career or his estrangement from his father. He simply prospered and went from strength to strength. Newspapers and magazines often carried interviews on economic and financial matters and the local banking community twice voted him “Banker of the Year”. He must have felt himself fully vindicated.



Meanwhile, Old Soong and I continued to work on our book. But progress was slow. Old Soong's interest seemed to come in fits and starts. He also became unduly punctilious, requiring everything to be cross-referenced and checked over and over again. I feared the book was turning into an academic tome.

One night, after working late on the project, we went to Suen's for a snack. Suen greeted us effusively. “Thanks to the Young Master, I shall soon

be living a life of ease, Master Soong,” Suen cried, by way of greeting. “That son of yours is a real genius.”

Old Soong was surprised and asked what it was all about. Suen explained that Sing-Yee had approached him with a proposal to buy the building in which he and his ancestors had lived and worked for close to a hundred years. It appeared that Sing-Yee’s bank was putting together a scheme to redevelop that whole area into a modern housing complex and to that end had made similar offers to the owners of adjacent buildings.

Suen said Sing-Yee had explained how the proceeds from the sale of the building could be invested to produce an income stream far in excess of what he could earn running a congee and noodle shop. In other words, he and his family would be far better off giving up their business and not working at all.

Old Soong was livid with anger upon hearing the news. Once we had left Suen’s, he let loose his spleen.

“Your godson has turned into a barbarian, a moral eunuch!” he exclaimed. “For some miserable fee he is prepared to destroy the livelihoods of innocent people, take away the pride in their labour, and deprive the public of wholesome meals the neighbourhood had enjoyed for generations.

“What will happen to the poor Suens? They will become utterly lost, with nothing to occupy their time. They will turn into idlers and parasites. And before long, their boredom will drive them into gambling or drugs. Society as a whole will pay the price.

“What is the matter with us? Can’t we see what is coming? Can’t we see these developers, bankers, industrialists and entrepreneurs for the scoundrels that they are? They leave a trail of slime and corruption wherever they go. They scar our hills, pollute our waters, poison our air and demean our lives. Yet we select them as representatives of the people, shower them with honours and erect monuments in their names. We must be mad.”

“I’m afraid that’s what progress means nowadays,” I said. “Such redevelopments are inevitable. If Sing-Yee had not masterminded it, somebody else would. The result would be the same.”

“If that is really where society is heading, then the quicker I quit it the better.”

Thereafter Old Soong turned increasingly morbid. He was determined to cut Sing-Yee off without a brass farthing. No plea by me for reflection could deflect him. Apart from a bequest to Mei-Mei, he arranged for all his money and for the proceeds from the eventual sale of the house to be set aside for charity. I helped with the arrangements for disposal of the family antique and art collections. Different parts of it were willed to the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, the Ashmolean in Oxford and the Sir Percival David Foundation in London.

When all the arrangements had been set in place, Old Soong remarked: “You know, old friend, there is something to be said for your countryman. Although some may have trampled upon my heritage, others do a sterling job of preserving it. But you must teach them to take the next step. Culture cannot survive inside a showcase. Culture must be lived, day by day. You must show them how to take the best of Chinese culture and make it part of world culture.”

I balked at the commission, pleading complete inadequacy.

Thereafter, Old Soong’s health began to deteriorate, as if he had finally tired of his losing battle. He went about the house listlessly and I could see he was losing the will to live,

I wrote to Mei-Mei and she returned for a number of visits. But the effects were momentary. It was left to a visit by Elsa, bearing the obvious signs of pregnancy, to perk up the old man. He suddenly became revitalised, as excited as a child looking forward to a present.

Elsa eventually produced a son. She brought the baby around several times. On each occasion Old Soong’s eyes misted over. He selected the best of

his “chicken blood” seals and told me he wanted to engrave it for his grandson. After the seal had been completed, he went gradually into terminal decline.

Mei-Mei and her husband returned for the funeral. Elsa was also there. Only Sing-Yee was absent. He was away in Geneva attending a banking conference.



On re-reading what I have written, I am conscious of many gaps in my narrative. Some of my recollections are also rather impressionistic. But how can complicated relationships involving so many people over such a long period of time be reduced to bloodless words? I’ve done my best and it will have to do. What remains is for me to find a reliable trustee and leave instructions for the “chicken blood” seal and what I have written to be handed over to the grandson at an appropriate time.

As I hold the precious seal in my hand once more, its brilliant splashes of redness seem to give forth a secret and enduring vitality. I have not gained renown as a Sinologist but I have lived a life far richer than I had a right to expect, thanks to Old Soong. I have become knowledgeable about Chinese seals in all their splendid diversity and I still have the preparation of a book on their lore to keep me occupied.

Old Soong had selected the pre-Han *chuan shu* script to work on his grandson’s seal. The characters read simply: “To go far is to return.”

As I ponder their meaning, I wonder whether the grandson will be able to decipher that ancient script. If he can, what meaning will he draw from the message? If he cannot, will those archaic and incomprehensible characters launch him on an intellectual and spiritual odyssey as magnificent as his grandfather’s?

I fear I shall never know.

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