

# **Yellow Crane Tower Reconstructed: Reading Li Bai in Translation**

(Critical thesis)

and

## **Old Outsiders**

(A novel)

by

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# Abstract

This thesis in creative and critical writing comprises two parts, both constituting an interrogation of a single poem – “Yellow Crane Tower: Sending Off Meng Haoran to Guangling”, by Li Bai.

The critical thesis constitutes a reading of the poem in multiple different translations, focusing on David Hinton, Wai-Lim Yip, Ezra Pound, H.A. Giles and Xu Yuanchong. It traces mutual appropriations between Chinese, Anglo-American, and cross-Pacific poetic traditions that draw from classical Chinese poetry, within the contexts of modernism, consumerism, imperialism and nationalism. This study focuses on the perceived “authenticity” of each translation. However, it remains ambivalent towards the concept: in its sceptical mode, it regards the interrogation of perceived “authenticity” as central to the deconstruction of authority as employed by competing historical powers. In its conciliatory mode, it recognises “authenticity” to be subjective, fragile and enduring. The study hence enacts a meditative practice of interpretive deconstruction and construction, returning always to the symbolic site of Yellow Crane Tower, resisting linear argumentation yet generating a host of possibilities for further study.

The novel *Old Outsiders* addresses the same themes and returns to the same poem. It is a satire set in Beijing, 2012. Its protagonist is an alcoholic English teacher bent on self erasure. He interacts with expats, hustlers, CCP cadres and migrants, yet the novel’s plot – involving information warfare, forced labour and organ harvesting – plays out largely beneath his notice. Instead, he ruminates on Li Bai’s poem, projecting himself into a fantasy of Classical China while his world disintegrates. He is ultimately a failed translator on multiple levels: he fails to understand his situation (translation as linguistics and cultural exchange); and where

he succeeds in transcending his own bounds (translation as metempsychosis), it is only to become trapped in the fantasy that first attracted him.

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**Yellow Crane Tower reconstructed:**  
**Reading Li Bai in translation**

## Glossary

The Hanyu Pinyin romanisation system is used throughout, except where an individual translator is being quoted or their personal understanding of a term or personage is being discussed, in which case their word choice is used (eg, “Li Po” is H. A. Giles’s name for the person I call Li Bai).

The abstract refers to the subject of this study as “Yellow Crane Tower: Sending Off Meng Haoran to Guangling”, an English translation. However, for the rest of the study, academic rigour and clarity requires the poem to be referred to in its Hanyu Pinyin form: “*Huang he lou song meng haoran zhi guangling*”. It is sometimes represented in the abbreviated form “*Huang he lou...*”; however, where necessary, I have taken steps to differentiate it from the similarly named Cui Hao poem “*Huang he lou*” within the text.

The following reference works appear in the citations as initialisations:

<i>Reference work</i>	<i>Initialisation</i>
Kroll, Paul W, <i>A Student’s Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese</i> (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015)	(SDCM)
Luo, Zhufeng (Ed), 汉语大词典 <i>Hanyu Da Cidian</i> (Shanghai: Hanyu Da Cidian Publishing House, 1991)	(HDC)
P’eng Ting-ch’iu (Ed), 全唐诗 <i>Ch’üan T’ang shih</i> (reprint of 1781 edition in 16 volumes) (Taipei, 1961)	(QTS)



## Gloss

This gloss of “*Huang he lou...*” is intended to supplement the reader’s understanding of the following study. The reader is advised to return to it periodically, after familiarising themselves with the translations presented. The Baxter-Sagart reconstructed pronunciation and Hanyu Pinyin romanisation systems used below are discussed in detail in “Romanisation as a Claim on History”.

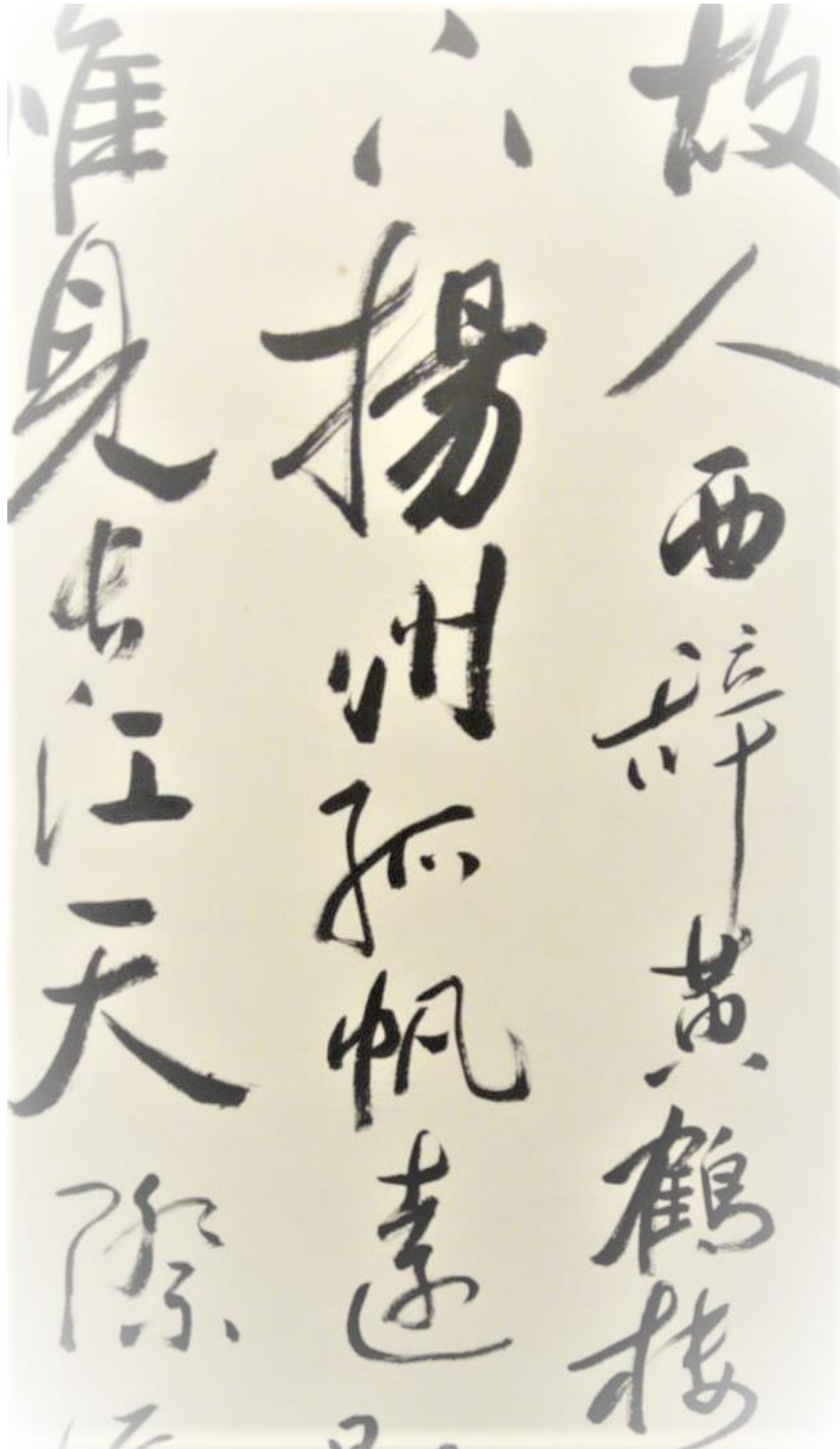
Traditional characters	黃鶴樓	送	孟浩然	之	廣陵
Baxter-Sagart reconstructed pronunciation	<i>hwang hak luw</i>	<i>suwngh</i>	<i>maengH hawX nyen</i>	<i>tsyi</i>	<i>kwangX ling</i>
Pinyin	<i>huang he lou</i>	<i>song</i>	<i>meng haoran</i>	<i>zhi</i>	<i>guangling</i>
Dictionary definition	(at) the Yellow Crane Tower. “Site in present-day Wuhan, Hubei Province, atop Yellow Crane rock on Snake Mountain. Tradition has it that it was first built in the second year of the reign of Wu Huangwu in the Three Kingdoms Period (223 CE); successive dynasties have repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt it.” (DCD 12:1012) The translation is my own.	“1. see off, accompany to a farewell spot someone who is leaving; send off. a. follow a departing person or object with one’s eyes.” (SDCM:431)	Meng Haoran “Famous poet of the Tang Dynasty, born in Xiangyang, Xiang prefecture, hence the honour name [‘Meng Xiangyang’]. (DCD 4:208)	“3. to go” (SDCM:603)	(to) Guangling or Yangzhou

故人	西	辭	黃鶴樓
<i>kuH nyin</i>	<i>sej</i>	<i>zi</i>	<i>hwang hak luw</i>
<i>gu ren</i>	<i>xi</i>	<i>ci</i>	<i>huang he lou</i>
“old friend (in closeness of friendship, not in chronological age)” (SDCM:141)	Although the character can mean (among others) “1. west, western, westward, westering”, (SDCM:486) context strongly suggests this indicates ‘the west’ as a point of departure	“4. bid farewell, take leave.” (SDCM:64)	(at) the Yellow Crane Tower

煙花	三月	下	揚州
<i>'en xwae</i>	<i>sam ngjwot</i>	<i>haeX</i>	<i>yang tsyuw</i>
<i>yanhua</i>	<i>san yue</i>	<i>xia</i>	<i>yangzhou</i>
“2. A general indication of beautiful spring scenery.” (DCD 7:175) The translation is my own. While the individual characters refer to mist and flowers (SDCM:526,167), this construction is more like a ‘binome’, or two-syllable word: “Binomes have been appropriately characterized as <i>Gestalt</i> constructions, comprising more than the sum of their parts, or as <i>impressifs</i> gesturing toward a certain imagistic effect but without a rigidly fixed semantic core.” (SDCM:xii)	The third month after Lunar New Year (SDCM:39 5,578)	“1. go down, descend; get off; decline, fall; condescend; retire, withdraw” (SDCM:49 2) Context suggests this indicates travelling downstream.	(to) Yangzhou

孤	帆	遠	影	碧空	盡
<i>ku</i>	<i>bjom (or bjomH)</i>	<i>hwonX</i>	<i>jaengX</i>	<i>pjaek khuwng</i>	<i>dzinH</i>
<i>gu</i>	<i>fan</i>	<i>yuan</i>	<i>ying</i>	<i>bikong</i>	<i>jin</i>
“2. alone, solitary, lone(ly).” Further flavour can be derived from secondary meanings of the word: “a. unaffiliated, unattached; disengaged. b. unique; aloof.” (SDCM:138)	“1. a sail.” Alternatively, and with a different (trailing) tone: “1. to sail.” (SDCM:104)	“1. distant, far, long off, in space or time.” (SDCM:577)	“1. shadow, produced by light (ant. 形 <i>xíng</i> , outward form). a. light-image, silhouette. ... 4. fuzzy, vague, blur(ry).” Alternatively, and unlikely in this context: “2. image reflected in water or in a mirror.” (SDCM:559)	The deep blue sky. 碧 is defined as: “2. a color midway between blue and green; can shade in either direction, depending on context; cyan-blue, bright light-blue, deeply saturated blue (esp. of sky or water, e.g. ~空 <i>bīkōng</i> , ‘the cyan void,’” (SDCM:18)	“1. use(d) up, consume(d), deplete(d), expend all of, exhaust(ed)” Further flavour can be derived from secondary meanings of the word: “2. reach the end of, end in, get through (to); complete, achieve; consummate” (SDCM:215)

唯	見	長江	天	際	流
<i>ywij</i>	<i>kenH</i>	<i>drjang kaewng</i>	<i>then</i>	<i>tsjeiH</i>	<i>ljuw</i>
<i>wei</i>	<i>jian</i>	<i>changjiang</i>	<i>tian</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>liu</i>
“2. marks affirmative exclusionary clause...: only, nothing but” (SDCM:471)	“1. see, look at. 2. perceive, perception; understand(ing).” Alternative definitions include: “perceive by sound; hear, listen to” and “encounter, experience” (SDCM:199)	The Yangzi River	“1. the sky, the heavens; celestial (as physical quality, paired with the earthly, <i>dí</i> 地)... 4. natural, not initiated by or deriving from humans; e.g. ~道 <i>tiāndào</i> , the Way of heaven, the natural course and structure of the world... 5. (Budd.) trns of Skt. <i>deva</i> , god, divinity, celestial being; divine” (SDCM:450)	“1. juncture, interface, connecting spot between 2 contiguous segments; abutment. a. seam; connection. 2. margin, border, boundary, limit” (SDCM:190)	“1. flow, drift, course, glide, run, stream.” (SDCM:27 7)



Detail from "Huang he lou song meng haoran zhi guangling". Hanging scroll, ink on paper. Private collection (author's own).

## Introduction: An Instance of the Exotic

Let's start with a story. Once, I was given a calligraphic scroll of poetry. It was a reproduction of the poem "*Huang he lou song Meng Haoran zhi Guangling*",<sup>1</sup> by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai. I judged the scroll to be a beautiful object. I wanted to know what its calligraphy meant (or so I thought), and decided to find English translations of the poem. I used *25 T'ang Poets: Index to English Translations*, a reference book that allows scholars to cross-reference English-language translations of medieval Chinese poetry with the original texts. The book is organised so that when searching for one Chinese poem, the first lines of its various English translations appear listed together.

*25 T'ang Poets* lists translations of "*Huang he lou...*" by eighteen scholars in twenty-seven publications. Excluding the reference notes, the first lines of these translated poems read as follows:

*At the Yellow Crane Tower there comes farewell to Meng Hao-jan  
I take leave of my dear old friend at the Yellow Crane Tower  
You have left me behind, old friend, at the Yellow Crane Terrace  
My old friend leaves Yellow Crane Pavilion in the west  
The Yellow Crane Pagoda looms on high; You leave it to the west  
You parted; leaving to the West the Huang Ho Lou  
At the Yellow-Crane pagoda, where we stopped to bid adieu  
At Yellow Crane pavilion in the west you parted from me  
My old friend, going west, bids farewell at Yellow Crane Terrace  
Out west my old friend bids goodbye to Huang-ho-lou  
You traveled west from Gold Crane Inn  
My friend bade farewell at the Yellow Crane House  
Old friend, bidding farewell to Yellow Crane Tower from the west  
Ko-jin goes west from Ko-kaku-ro  
My old friend is leaving for the east from the Yellow Crane Tower  
And so, dear friend, at Brown Crane Tower you, Bidding the West adieu  
My friend took leave of me here at the Yellow Crane Tower  
My old friend takes off from the Yellow Crane Tower  
My old friend goes away from the Yellow Crane Tower (1984:103)*

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<sup>1</sup> QTS 3:1785

This text is quite striking. The format enables (and directs) a quick, superficial comparison of translation strategies and styles across eras and traditions. Instantly, one can start making value judgements. Certain lines are more musical than others; certain images are more vivid; some lines make more sense than others; different tenses, perspectives, registers and modes are instantly identifiable.

But the text is more than just strikingly convenient for a researcher. Perhaps inevitably, since it is a concentration of poetic texts, this format also has a poetic effect of its own. Stephen Owen acknowledges this in his foreword to the book, where he playfully describes it as a “dangerous reference work that continually threatens to waylay the hard-pressed researcher” (vii).

I, too, was waylaid. In its poetic effect, the list seemed both incantatory and mechanistic, simultaneously magnifying (by repetition) and devaluing (by reproduction) the original intent of each individual line. Reading, I perceived each line to be a truncated, reiterative, and reiteratively *failing* effort to attain a form of metalinguistic reality beyond the words on the page. The constantly shifting sets of categorically related signifiers (tower, terrace, pavilion, pagoda, inn, house) seemed to enact the futility of language as mimesis, pointing to – but never lighting upon – an indescribable or unknowable reality. Scanning this multiplicity of translations, I not only asked which lines were most beautiful or musical; I returned again and again to the question of which was most authentic.

What exactly ‘authentic’ meant was unclear to me at first. But I could identify lines that *seemed* more or less authentic than others. In this, my response was conditioned by internalised aesthetic, poetic and philosophical precepts. Central to these, I would discover, were Modernist aesthetics in multiple interrelated forms.

The most obvious of these was the Anglo-American Modernist tradition of Chinese translation, which has become stylistically dominant enough to dictate the conditions on which translations of classical Chinese are popularly accepted. Robert Kern has demonstrated how the influence of Ezra Pound and his followers established the Chinese translation as “a virtual subgenre of the modern Anglo-American lyric, with its own special conventions, including unrhymed free verse, emotional reticence, and a concrete, imagistic style.” (1996:181)

Consciously or unconsciously, the conventions of this dominant hybrid construction, which I will ironically call the ‘Anglo-American Chinese lyric’, determined my evaluations of each line’s apparent authenticity. For instance, the Anglo-American Chinese lyric does not permit explicit emotional expression; thus “dear old friend” and “And so, dear friend” were rendered inauthentic in my mind. The lyric discourages direct address; “You have left me behind”, “You parted” and “You traveled west” were all disqualified. Lines that demonstrate rhyme, like “at Brown Crane Tower *you*, Bidding the West *adieu*” were likewise out. Compactness is also a virtue of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric. The shortest lines, “Ko-jin goes west from Ko-kaku-ro” and “You traveled west from Gold Crane Inn” corresponded better to my notion of authenticity than, for instance, the prosaic “My old friend is leaving for the east from the Yellow Crane Tower” and the conversational “And so, dear friend, at Brown Crane Tower you, Bidding the West adieu”.

Further, my idea of the authentically ‘Chinese’ lyric also enclosed another connected yet discrete concept of the ‘authentic’, one that is central to what Frank Lentricchia has influentially identified as the “mainstream of aesthetic modernism”: the unmediated encounter with ‘the thing itself’. Lentricchia identifies the “claim that the aesthetic world plumbs the nature of things” as central to Modernist aesthetics;

pivotal to this is “the prior ontological claim for a natural bond between signifier and signified, and between sign and thing.” (1980:119) The sense of authenticity being pursued here is a transcendent one, in which the artist is capable of overcoming the insularity of language to achieve contact with the world as it *is*, not as it *seems*.

Robert Kern has traced the incorporation into Modernist aesthetics of mythic notions of Chinese as an Adamic language (1996). Modernism’s hybrid precepts were then reapplied to the translation of Chinese poetry by figures like Kenneth Rexroth and Red Pine, as well as the original poetry of Hayden Carruth and Gary Snyder; indeed, it was in this context that Kern describes Chinese translation as a “subgenre” of the Anglo-American Modernist lyric. This tradition, as Kern has indicated, is rooted in the (ethnocentric) notion that the Chinese language (especially the written language), being Adamic, offers access to the world as it *is*, not as it *seems*. The Anglo-American Chinese lyric attempts to replicate this access, albeit in translation.

In stylistic terms, such fidelity to the authentic moment means a detachment from, and ultimate removal of, the observing ‘I’ in the effort to engage directly with the noumenal world, free from reflection or projection. The illusion of objectivity is thus paramount. Reading *25 T’ang Poets*, I understood “I take leave of my dear old friend” and “My friend took leave of me” to be less authentic than “My friend bade farewell”. Further, “Old friend, bidding farewell” achieved seemingly superior authenticity, by virtue of its telegrammatic objectivity.

The inchoate, emotional judgement I made in my reading of *25 T’ang Poets* was based on my reading (or consumption) of Modernist poetry, not any rich understanding of its history; it was dictated by style, and the affect produced by style. Further, that affect concealed contradictions inherent to the ‘authenticity’ I perceived.

My identification of the 'authentic' within the translations turns out to have been an identification of two different qualities, one (fidelity to the pursuit of the noumena) seemingly central to the other (fidelity to the conventions of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric). But while the conventions of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric promise accuracy or cultural verisimilitude (in that they purport to represent Chinese poetry, or a version of it at least), the pursuit of the noumena seems better served by ignorance than by knowledge. After all, the noumenal world is necessarily indescribable, since to describe is to mediate.

This seems to undermine the statement I made at the start of the investigation, that I "wanted to know" what the poem's calligraphy meant. Here, doubt sets in. Perhaps I didn't want to know what the source poem really meant; instead perhaps, I wanted to replicate the exoticism of my first encounter with the original scroll, perceiving only the potential for some primal form of communication in the artwork's beautiful yet indecipherable brush strokes. Perhaps I responded to translations that offered a repeat of that experience, and that response was to call them "authentic".

It becomes tempting, in this sceptical mode, to characterise the valorisation of ignorance implicit in the pursuit of the noumena as exemplary, as if it embodies a certain Orientalist myopia underpinning the Modernist understanding of Chinese literature and language. Indeed, the conventions of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric do not map perfectly onto the conventions of the medieval Chinese lyric from which it derives.

The Anglo-American Chinese lyric has drawn inspiration from a very narrow base of mainly Tang-dynasty poets, chief among them being Wang Wei, who is



renowned for the Buddhist quietism of his nature writing. However, the style and subject matter of medieval Chinese poetry extended far beyond this.

Poetry had an important socio-political function amongst the Tang literati: poetry writing was one means for advancement in court; indeed, it was a criterion for the selection of officials, and Stephen Owen has (half mischievously) advanced the reading of medieval Chinese poetry and poetics as fundamentally complicit with the imperial system (1985:27-31). Aside from its practical function, anthologists have characterised Tang poetry writing in less-than purely aesthetic terms as “an avocation, a personal accomplishment, or a means of self-expression”. (Liu and Lo, 1975:xv-xvi) Owen identifies the major mode of Tang poetry to be occasional, passed from friend to friend as a social gesture (or to a patron in a political manoeuvre), and very frequently memorialising a missed rendezvous or a departure (1996:371-374). Other modes include “a pure lyric form based simply on writing one’s feelings”; Daoist lyrics describing journeys through the heavens (often for Daoist patrons); Confucian-inflected narrative ballads treating history in moralising terms (often for Confucian patrons); and “poems on things” – that is, poems demonstrating the skill of the author by simply describing objects (378).

The absence of pronouns in the medieval Chinese lyric is often taken (thanks to the Anglo-American Chinese lyric’s mediation) to be an indicator of objectivity or universality. Irving Yucheng Lo does acknowledge the “frequent omission of the subject of a sentence in classical Chinese” (Liu and Lo, 1975:xiv). However, since the subject of a poem is implied by the context of that poem, he argues, the “non-inflectional nature of Chinese and the terseness it permits are matters of linguistic convention rather than poetics” (xv). Subjects are thus often implicit, readily identifiable by a careful reader, and could accurately be (re)inserted by a translator.

Further, as Stephen Owen has argued, the apparent terseness of the medieval Chinese language did not necessarily correspond to terseness of style as perceived by its contemporary readers:

*A gloss translation into English of a poem by Po Chü-yi may sound like the imagist avant-garde of the early twentieth century; but the same poem probably struck a T'ang reader as the most delightfully rambling loquaciousness. Within the general traits of the Chinese poetic language, there is a full stylistic range, from poems that move with easy clarity to truly ambiguous poems in which the reader is unable to grasp the problematic relationship between words. (1985:127)*

The meditative mode popularised by the Anglo-American Chinese lyric was therefore just one of many modes, styles and voices, employed to suit the intentions of each individual poem in the Tang poetic tradition.

Similarly, Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound's more fanciful claims for the universality of the Chinese written character, which were central to the appropriation of Chinese poetics into the Modernist aesthetic, are long recognised to be based on ethnocentric concepts of the primitive that gloss over the sophisticated history of Chinese etymology (Kern, 1996).

Yet it should be asserted that the conventions that dictate the Anglo-American Chinese lyric are not purely inventions, but selective exaggerations of real aspects of medieval Chinese poetry. Consider, for instance, the medieval Daoist tradition of *youxian*<sup>2</sup> or "roaming to transcendence" poems. Although the weird, intricately structured imagery common to this poetic form would seem to be utterly unrelated to the Anglo-American Chinese lyric, the pursuit of the noumena is a central and recurring theme within the tradition (Kroll, 2009). The Anglo-American Chinese lyric may be built on a separate philosophical and poetic foundation from that which it

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<sup>2</sup> 遊仙

purports to represent, but it would be churlish to insist that it cannot describe the same concepts – or concepts close enough to be functionally identical – or pursue functionally identical paths.

Further, it would be clumsy to draw the further conclusion, based on the Orientalist misinterpretations that pepper the history of the Modernist aesthetic, that the subsequent production of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric was a purely ‘Western’, ethnocentric, colonising venture. To do so would be to disrespect the power of the texts from which it derives, and ignore the contributions of Chinese scholars like Qian Zhaoming and especially Wai Lim Yip, whose (Modernist) Daoist theories of translation and poetics have explicitly attempted to break down arbitrary boundaries between ‘East’ and ‘West’. Jonathan Starling’s analysis of cross-Pacific poetics employs the term “heterocultural” to explicitly emphasise the hybrid, collaborative nature of their production. This is a good word to describe a good-faith engagement with a cultural heritage that has become shared through mutual, reiterative (re)appropriations and (mis)understandings.

Where does this leave my identification of the “authentic”? Again, on reflection, the perceived authenticity of each line proved to derive from fidelity to both a (highly questionable) verisimilitude and a pursuit of the noumena that could be defined as transcendental or escapist. No one factor was fundamental to my understanding of the “authentic”; the concept ultimately broke down into a set of contradictory precepts and impulses which yet *seemed* to cohere into a single quality. With its apparent coherence reinforced by the affect that it produced in me, this quality had acted as a lodestar in my reading response, directing that which I rejected as inauthentic, or dignified with the authority of the real.

\*

The encounter described above was slightly fictive, but my response to the poems found in *25 T'ang Poets* mirrored the real-world precedent of Eliot Weinberger's *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*. In this book, Weinberger compares a sequence of translations of Wang Wei's poem "*Lu cha*", evaluating them based on their alignment with the precepts of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric. The following study carries out a superficially similar process: I analyse and compare a selection of English translations of Li Bai's "*Huang he lou...*". In my reading, however, 'authenticity' is not regarded as a fixed value. Instead, its subjectivity, fragility and endurance are respected, and the precepts upon which perceived 'authenticity' is constructed are investigated; instead of ordering a hierarchy of texts based on my reading responses, I attempt to contextualise those responses, exploring the conditions that produced the text to which I am responding.

It would be hubristic and unnecessarily confrontational to call this study an 'un-reading' of *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, but I will concede that it frequently attempts to reverse the kind of canon formation that Weinberger's text enacts. It is a periodically sceptical reading, and that scepticism is focused on the notion of authenticity.

## Why authenticity?

Authenticity is a dangerous illusion. It is a signifier of value whose multiple valences are disguised by the fact that they always seem to be pointing backwards.

I must add some caveats to these controversial statements. First, I understand authenticity here to mean the possession of *original or inherent authority*. This conception of authenticity is only indirectly connected to the continuum of philosophical discussions (encompassing Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and de Beauvoir) of “authenticity” of self as an ethical value and/or response to existential crisis. It is more closely connected to the popular conceptions of authenticity that have accompanied these discussions – authenticity as a “pervasive *ideal* that impacts social and political thinking” (Varga, 2020). That this ideal has been central to Modernist (and Romantic) transcendence has been outlined above; the following chapters will demonstrate that it is central, as a marketable value, to certain experiences of consumer pleasure and nationalist essentialism – and sometimes (especially in the case of classical Chinese poetry translation) both at the same time.

Being a subjective value, authenticity is both fragile and recurrent. The pursuit of essential origins (and hence authenticity of essence) always ends at a conceptual horizon – the point at which a person is willing to apply the label “Chinese” or “British”, for example – and will succeed only as an expression of faith in the essence being pursued, not as an act of objective analysis. Since it is subjective, authenticity can be analysed out of existence – but only momentarily. In the long term, denying the existence of authenticity is as insupportable a position as denying the existence of beauty. Like beauty, authenticity recurs. It is an inescapable element of the critical and interpretive toolkit. The negotiation of “authenticity” can be

compared to the Buddhist “two truths” doctrine: recognising the provisional and empty nature of phenomenal reality does not make phenomenal reality go away.

Authenticity cannot be denied, but must be reckoned with – and challenged, where necessary, since it is liable to be marshalled in support of retrograde chauvinisms. Authenticity is inseparable from the original or inherent authority to which it refers. I understand this ‘authority’ in the Foucaultian sense, elaborated by Edward Said:

*There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analysed. (2003:19)*

Said’s understanding of authority prefigures my understanding of authenticity; I agree, per Said, that value systems and schema of knowledge, and the precepts on which these are built, are constructs whose impact on the world demands attention. In this light, the darker manipulations of authenticity become clear. As a signifier of antiquity, it can be wielded by nationalists in defence of contemporary inequalities; as a signifier of purity, it can be wielded by Fascists as an intimation of Utopia; as a signifier of ‘realness’, it can be wielded by essentialists of all stripes to delegitimise the perspectives and cultural output of those who fall outside the bounds of the ‘real’.

Authenticity is also a marketable value. In the age of globalised, algorithmically driven hybrid mass and social media, the question of the relationship between authenticity and truth has become urgently relevant. It is tempting to view the “post-truth” age, wherein individuals are enabled and encouraged to prescribe to whatever version of objective reality aligns with their personal beliefs, as a

confirmation of the narcissism inherent to the philosophical quest for authenticity of self (as identified by, for example, Christopher Lasch and Allan Bloom) (Varga, 2020). However, the “post-truth” age is not the culmination of a purely “Western” cultural-philosophical trend; instead, this paper follows trends in World Literature (cf Palumbo-Liu, 2012) to situate the destabilisation of ‘truth’ and elevation of ‘authenticity’ within the global exchange of otherness. The ill-defined label “post-truth” implies lost faith in a previously stable value; an alternative label, “contested-truth”, would better illuminate that the destabilisation of “truth” has occurred as a result of strategic international (postcolonial/liberatory, neo-colonial and nationalistic) efforts to promote alternative narratives to those that were previously hegemonic. Information warfare is international, and the relationship between truth and authenticity needs to be considered geopolitically.

Translation promises an ideal arena for such a consideration – especially the translation of a canonical or otherwise internationally marketed text. This is the rationale behind this paper’s choice of subject: Li Bai’s “*Huang he lou...*” has been a popular subject since the early days of Chinese-English poetry translation; beyond this poem, Li Bai’s own reputation is such that his image has been used as the host of the Epcot attraction “Reflections of China” at Walt Disney World Resort; and, as described in later chapters, the physical location of its setting, the Yellow Crane Tower, has become a famous international tourist destination. This popularity marks out “*Huang he lou...*” (in translation) as a site of internationally marketable and contestable authenticities.

My reading of these authenticities contains an inbuilt ambivalence. It vacillates between positions of scepticism and credulity, motivated by contradictory and complementary desires to deconstruct (in pursuit of “truth”) and reconstruct (through

seduction by authenticity). Further, while “Modernism” in many guises is a subject of this essay (due to the movements and historical events discussed), the above described ambivalence demonstrates a post-modern position: doubtful, playful, yet tied to the paradigms upon which history has been built and understood. In form, therefore, this essay comprises a vacillating series of readings of “*Huang he lou...*” in translation, where the reiterative deconstruction and reconstruction of perceived authenticity guides an analysis of the (Modernist) consumer and nationalist bases upon which we validate and invalidate the phenomenal world in the post-modern moment.



## Chapter summaries

The next chapter, “Modernism and the Commodified Authentic” continues the analysis of authenticity as a Modernist construction commenced in the introduction, featuring a translation by David Hinton and exploring the concept of the “commodified authentic”. This chapter acknowledges the allure of the exotic and transcendent that motivated the initiation of this project, contextualising the enjoyment of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric in terms of consumer pleasure.

“State History: Reading Wai Lim Yip” explores Wai Lim Yip’s appropriation of Modernist concerns into his conception of Daoist poetics, highlighting the essentialisms that underpin his poetic, and exposing its vulnerability to nationalist co-option. I situate Yip’s increasing popularity in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the context of the incorporation of traditional Chinese culture into the PRC’s state-promoted nationalist propaganda, hence bringing the consideration of “authenticity” into the post-modern, late-capitalist, neo-colonial present.

“Romanisation as a Claim on History” explores authenticity more broadly from the angle of romanisation systems. I demonstrate the (neo)colonial and nationalist connotations of different systems, focusing on Wade-Giles and Hanyu Pinyin. I explore the gravitational pull of antiquity as a source of perceived authority. In asking which romanisation systems should be regarded as most ‘authentic’, I aim to demonstrate the extent to which authenticity is a manifestation of “original or essential authority” mediated by competing historical forces.

“The Strange Case of H.A. Giles and Xu Yuanchong” analyses the similarities between the translations of H.A. Giles and Xu Yuanchong. First I focus on Giles’s domesticating translation strategy, situating his classicist allusions as an invocation of original authority that has parallels with Modernist conceptions of authenticity. In

this context I analyse Giles's mediation of the mythology of Yellow Crane Tower (a location central to "*Huang he lou...*"). Next I look at Xu Yuanchong's appropriation of Giles's translation strategy, situating it as a neo-classicist evasion of Modernism and reaffirmation of traditional Chinese culture, informed by debates about the dangers of "western Modernism" as defined in post-Mao, pre-Tiananmen China.

My conclusion reinforces the meditative (ie, reiterative, cyclic and incomplete) nature of the reading overall: it draws from each preceding chapter to present opportunities for further research, posing questions that I considered over the course of my research but did not have the option to pursue here. In the sense that it invites further examination of the same text that has produced the analyses in each previous chapters, and that it does not propose to settle on either pole of credulity or doubt, my reading ends where it starts.

## Modernism and the Commodified Authentic

As demonstrated in the introduction, the application of the value “authentic” onto a work of art is an investment into a constructed set of precepts whose internal consistency is by no means regular. It is an act of faith, not analysis. The same might be said about the application of any abstract, subjective quality: beauty, decorum, integrity. One thing that distinguishes “authenticity” from these other qualities is its centrality to the modern/post-modern experience in terms of consumerism.

Understanding “authenticity” to be an economically and politically interested construction, my reading takes into account Elizabeth Outka’s definition of the “commodified authentic” and its relationship with British Modernist literature.

Outka has outlined the commodification of nostalgic nationalism, originary authenticity and aesthetic purity within British consumer society from the Victorian era to the era of high Modernism. She regards the “commodified authentic” as a complex phenomenon that “does not imply a search for authenticity *per se* but rather a search for a sustained contradiction that might allow consumers to be at once connected to a range of values roughly aligned with authenticity and yet also to be fully modern.” (2008:4) The phenomenon thus includes both embracing the pleasures of authenticity (whether manifest as evocations of nationalist nostalgia, appeals to originality or images of aesthetic purity), and exposing its constructedness. These same ambivalent impulses came to be manifest in literary and artistic responses to modernity. For Outka, the commodified authentic is “a key trope for understanding not only commodity culture but the development of both modernity and literary modernism” (2008:5).

Being primarily concerned with English consumer experience, Outka’s theory of the commodified authentic does not map perfectly onto Chinese translation. Yet it

is relevant in a number of ways. For example, Outka regards the distinction between “high” and “mass” culture associated with Modernism as a reiteration of the same savvy marketing strategy that distinguished aesthetically pure items from their commercial competitors (2008:11). Her approach suggests a methodology that disintegrates distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘mass’ culture, illuminating how the relationship between poetry and poetics parallels the relationship between commodities and market cultivation.

It is therefore possible to see the reading response to *25 T’ang Poets* elaborated above as a cultivated consumer response. Weinberger’s *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* hence deserves interrogation not only as a work of literary criticism or comparative poetics, but as an example of market cultivation.

*Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* is highly partisan; it praises Modernists Gary Snyder, Wai Lim Yip and Kenneth Rexroth – and of course Ezra Pound, whose collection *Cathay* is recognised as central to the appropriation of Chinese language and poetry into the modernist aesthetic. Pound is pivotal in the book; pre-Pound translations are included only to provide an illustrative counterexample, and Pound’s personal rival Amy Lowell (and her collaborator Florence Ayscough) receive strong criticism. The book is published by New Directions Publishing, which has published co-author Octavio Paz, as well as all the poets listed above, and which includes an anecdotal founding story featuring Ezra Pound in its online promotional material.<sup>3</sup> Weinberger is the editor of the *New Directions Anthology of Chinese Poetry*, itself featuring the work of Pound, Rexroth and Snyder.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ndbooks.com/about/> - accessed Feb 27 2020

As these economic connections demonstrate, the way of reading that the book explicitly promotes – and the notion of authenticity central to that mode – is not economically disinterested. The book operates in the realm of the “commodified authentic”; itself a commodity, it cultivates a market by instructing its readership to invest in principles that validate other favoured commodities. That we might dignify this work as ‘canon formation’ instead of ‘marketing’ is testament to the effectiveness of its strategy.

Outka’s theory is relevant in that it describes the cultivation of experience that can be commodified. This illuminates, for example, Robert Kern’s close reading of Hayden Carruth’s “Of Distress Being Humiliated by the Classical Chinese Poets”, which illustrates the reproducibility of the transcendent experience specific to the Anglo-American Chinese lyric. Kern argues that Carruth’s poem articulates a journey towards, and attainment of, a state of mind epitomised by (and accessible via) a specific concept of Chinese poetry. According to Kern, Chinese poetry “becomes for Carruth an imagined site of serene, even sublime, transcendence of time and conflict, and alternative to the “impasse” of reality, as well as to the limitations of English.” (1995:x) The final image of Carruth’s poem marks the speaker’s arrival into this imagined site of transcendence:

[...] *Tell me again*  
*How the white heron rises from among the reeds and flies*  
*forever across the nacreous river at twilight*  
*Toward the distant islands.* (Carruth, 2006:96)

Kern reads this image as “a permanent, almost talismanic presence or reality for Carruth’s speaker, newly accessible with every reading” (xi). Carruth’s speaker is accessing a space and articulating a mode of being that is reproducible, shareable, and ultimately commodifiable, and as such invites a reading in terms of the

commodified authentic. In this reading, the speaker's relationship with the "talismanic presence" at the heart of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric mirrors the relationship between a consumer and that element of a commodity that has been cultivated as a site for the investment of value (here, transcendence in the form of aesthetic purity), to which the consumer returns through choice or compulsion.

This is not to downplay the power or self-consciousness of Carruth's poem, but to demonstrate the extent to which its structure mirrors the vacillations of the modern (and postmodern) interaction with commodified authenticity: "Tell me again" could be an incantation, a command or a plea. The ambiguity of the phrase mirrors the slippery dynamics of persuasion: does the speaker compel, or is he compelled? It could also be a recognition of constructedness, in that the power of the image comes from its telling, and retelling.

As a further example, here is David Hinton's translation of "*Huang he lou...*":

***On Yellow-Crane Tower, Farewell to Meng Hao-Jan  
who's Leaving for Yang-Chou***

*From Yellow-Crane Tower, my old friend leaves the west.  
Downstream to Yang-chou, late spring a haze of blossoms,*

*distant glints of lone sail vanish into emerald-green air:  
nothing left but a river flowing on the borders of heaven. (Hinton, 2008:174)*

This translation is exemplary. It is not flawlessly accurate: the word "glint" corresponds to nothing in the original text; nor does the "emerald-green" imagery (Romanisation as a Claim on History goes further into the problems of translating the confusing binome *bikong* 碧空). However, by weaving "haze of blossoms" unobtrusively into the second line, Hinton deals admirably with the troublesome shorthand binome *yanhua* (烟花), whose expanded meaning can be roughly glossed

as “a spring scene full of mist and flowers”. In form, the concision of the two couplets corresponds to the original. Nothing vital is removed; nothing foolish is added.

The poem is also exemplary on Modernist terms. That is, its imagistic, terse style conforms to the stylistic conventions of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric. No personal pronoun threatens to intercede between the reader and the aesthetic experience conveyed by the imagery. The impact is condensed into the single sentence that comprises the last three lines. Hinton replicates the parallelism (the balancing of verbal constructions in successive lines for poetic effect) that was a key element of Chinese medieval poetics: the key images bookending these lines draw the reader downward to transcendent oblivion: “Downstream... Distant... Nothing” correspond to “blossoms... air... heaven.”

Eliot Weinberger selected “On Yellow Crane Tower...” to appear in the *New Directions Anthology of Chinese Poetry* alongside a translation by Ezra Pound. This places the poem within the realm of the commodified authentic. I know this. Yet I respond to the poem. The lines have an irresistible draw; despite my scepticism, I am seduced by this image. I momentarily believe in the timelessness of the antique, despite my knowledge of Tang China’s historical situatedness, its own complexity and hybridity. My reaction, too, is part of the complex phenomenon of the commodified authentic. And as a reader and critic, I have nothing to gain from dismissing the poem’s affective power. As Outka emphasises: the commodified authentic not as a “*thing* to be unmasked and dismissed” but as a “*locus* of competing imperatives” (2008:14). Further, merely pointing out the constructedness of authenticity does not diminish its pleasures. Authenticity is fragile, yet it recurs.

## State History: Reading Wai Lim Yip

The following chapter explores a subtly different conception of “authenticity” that is just as economically interested as the “commodified authentic” described here, but which manifests in different ways. That is, authenticity as a marker of national or civilisational ‘essence’. This concept is closely related to classicist and Orientalist conceptions of the antique; it is also, as David Porter has elaborated, a facet of modernity. Porter has traced the development of the Modernist aesthetic ideal alongside corresponding notions of the Chinese ‘civilisational essence’. Earlier commentators on China like Oliver Goldsmith did not view the Chinese civilisational ‘essence’, if there was one, to be fundamentally opposed to those of western nations (Porter, 2015:28). However, over time the perceived aestheticism of Chinese culture was incorporated into notions of China’s essential nature. The identification of aestheticism with Chinese culture crystallised in the 1946 publication of F. S. C. Northrop’s *The Meeting of East and West: An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding*. Northrup, drawing on the authority of Plato and every subsequent thinker in the western tradition, identified the “root and basic unique meaning of Western civilisation” as being defined by the rational quest for abstract first principles. “Confronted with himself and nature, Western man arrives by observation and scientific hypothesis at a theoretical conception of the character of these two factors.” (1946:295) By contrast, the essential meaning of Eastern civilisation derived from contemplation of “the nature of all things in their emotional and aesthetic, purely empirical and positivistic immediacy” (377). Northrup supported this statement with the authority of China’s religio-philosophical traditions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Hence, while previous Modernist authors had praised the elevation of poetry that they had perceived in Chinese culture, Northrup established it as a



defining feature of Chinese civilisation, one which was fundamentally incompatible with Western civilisation, against which it is set in a neat binary opposition.

But, as Porter points out, the sensuality and aestheticism that Northrop saw in the 'essential' Chinese character actually correspond to western responses to Chinese visual arts:

*Paradoxically, it recalls... an essential component of the European response to chinoiserie or, perhaps, any manifestation of visual exoticism: a delight in the purely sensory apprehension of unassimilable, unintelligible difference. For Northrop, however, this form of aesthetic experience has been elevated from the status of a superficial response prompted by a superficial ornament to the essential defining feature of an entire civilisation. (Porter, 2015:35)*

Porter amply demonstrates the myopic, projective basis of Northrop's civilisational binary; but, as he states, the notion of fundamentally different (even incompatible) civilisational values persists in the intellectual mainstream. These are not limited to 'Western' representations of China. Countercultural critiques of 'Western' society continue to rely on the paradigm of rigid scientific abstraction against which the 'Eastern' model provides a positive counterexample. Chinese critiques of 'Western' society, too, have sometimes adopted this same model, regardless of its dubious provenance, demonstrating the mutuality and interdependence that such allegedly 'incompatible' binaries in fact foster.

Critic and translator Wai Lim Yip has a poetics that amalgamates translation theory, Daoism and Modernist poetics. He promises to overturn rigid distinctions between Chinese and 'Western' essences, yet his poetics of resistance paradoxically relies on essentialisms that closely resemble Northrop's own. As such, Yip provides an interesting insight into the way countercultural critiques of 'mainstream' society draw power from the cultural models that are their targets, and how abstractly formulated postcolonial theories of "resistance" in translation are as flexible or brittle

as the paradigms on which they are founded. This chapter thus also explores the potential for nationalist co-option of Yip's poetics. It demonstrates the state's conscious moulding of concepts like civilisational "essence" that underpin assumptions of authenticity.

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Wai Lim Yip's Daoist poetic offers an immanent vision of the "real world", free from logical and spacio-temporal mediation. Yip argues that classical Chinese poetry offers access to unmediated experience of nature due to the special qualities of the language. He distinguishes between "discursive" English (which relies on prepositions and other predicative particles to *pin down* the subjects of description spatiotemporally and in terms of utility), and "imagistic" Chinese, which enables objects to represent themselves, thanks to its lack of predicative particles. He follows Martin Heidegger's contention (more concretely elaborated by Benjamin Whorf) that linguistic structures determine ways of thinking and that cultures grounded in different languages are therefore incompatible. He argues that the application of discursive English grammar onto Chinese poetry is an act of linguistic and cultural colonisation, but offers resistance to this colonisation, and indeed liberation from the incompatible binary in which it is grounded, through the Daoist dissolution of the dualism between object (West) and subject (East):

*The Taoist worldview rejects the premise that the structure of phenomenon (Nature), changing and ongoing, is the same as we conceive it to be. All conscious efforts to generalize, formulate, classify and order it will necessarily result in some form of restriction, reduction or even distortion. (1978:18)*

Yip's poetic is essentially soteriological, in that it lays down the conditions by which salvation, in terms of liberation from the restrictions of consciousness and integration into the flux of "phenomenon" or "Nature", is to be achieved. Throughout his

publications, Yip approaches this possibility through translation, demonstrating the relative successes and failures of different translation strategies in achieving this goal. It is appropriate here, therefore, to replicate Yip's methodology. Analysis of his translation of "*Huang he lou...*" demonstrates this poetics in application, but also delineates its limitations:

### ***To See Meng Hao-Jan Off to Yang-Chou***

*My old friend takes off from the Yellow Crane Tower,  
In smoke-flower third month down to Yangchou.  
A lone sail, a distant shade, lost in the blue horizon.  
Only the long Yangtze is seen flowing into the sky. (1976:323)*

The second half of the poem cleaves closest to Yip's poetics as he represents them, thanks to the ambiguity of its action and thematic focus on emptiness. "A lone sail, a distant shade, lost in the blue horizon" is particularly illustrative in that it stands in for a sequence whose lack of predicative elements offers multiple interpretations. The following table compares the original and target texts of the third line. It uses Yip's own choice of translation, where appropriate, with omitted words in brackets.

<i>gu fan</i> (孤帆)	<i>yuan ying</i> (远影)	<i>bikong</i> (碧空)	<i>jin</i> (尽)
lone sail	distant shade	blue (sky)	(exhaust, disappear)

The relationship between the lone sail, the distant shade, the blue sky, and the single verb *jin* is not immediately apparent. Close reading makes it clear that the blue sky is a destination into which the lone sail and/or distant shade is disappearing. However, the exact relationship remains unclear. Options present themselves:

***The lone sail becomes a distant shade and disappears into the blue sky.***  
***The lone sail became a distant shade and disappeared into the blue sky.***  
***The distant shade of the lone sail disappears into the blue sky.***  
***The lone sail is a distant shade disappearing into the blue sky.***

According to Yip's methodology, every application of narrative, logical, prepositional or temporal order onto the nouns provided by the original text is an obfuscation, and an imposition of a foreign (specifically 'western') philosophical outlook. His own translation choice employs parataxis to avoid imposing any kind of hierarchy of sense onto the "lone sail" and the "distant shade"; the reader can thus allow the subjects' implicit relations to play out in their multiple complementary ways.

Accepting the subjectivity of reader response, this would seem to be the closest Yip's translations can come to demonstrating his claims for the "peculiar mode" of Chinese expression. Indeed, my above analysis mirrors the methodology used by Yip to advance his theories, most extensively in *Ezra Pound's Cathay* but also elsewhere throughout his work.

Analysis of other parts of the translation, however, reveals the limitations of Yip's theory in application. Take Yip's use of "smoke-flowers" for *yanhua* (烟花), the shorthand binome whose expanded meaning can be roughly glossed as "a spring scene full of mist and flowers". This is an allusion to Ezra Pound, who uses the same split-up word in his "Separation on the River Kiang". "Smoke-flowers" is a literal rendering of the characters *yan* 烟, meaning "smoke" or "mist" and *hua* 花, meaning "flower".

One might argue, per Robert Kern, that Pound created this split-up in an imagistic deconstruction of the source text, alienating its constituent elements to force a reconsideration and reenergising of the target language. But even accepting this generous interpretation of Pound's intentions and abilities, the choice arguably still glosses over the complex history of the Chinese language in favour of an ethnocentric primitivism (see the Introduction); importantly, it also ignores the

fundamentally allusive (hence historically situated, textual and crucially *not* atemporally imagistic) grounding of the binome *yanhua*.

That Yip would follow Pound here illustrates his exclusion of the allusive from the imagistic conception of “Chinese” poetry that forms the basis of his Daoist poetic. Allusion requires conscious composition; a poetic that views poetry as the unmediated representation of pure nature has no room for such discursive techniques. Similarly, Jonathan Stalling has observed that Yip’s translations of Xie Lingyun<sup>4</sup> replicate the technique of parallelism (the balancing of verbal constructions in successive lines for poetic effect) for which Xie Lingyun was famous; however, Yip does not address this technique in his commentary, since to do so would mean admitting the conscious ordering of imagery into his poetic (2010:142-143).

As the treatment of parallelism demonstrates, Yip’s stated poetic does not always manifest in his translations. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine how they could. Throughout “To See Meng Hao-Jan Off to Yang-Chou”, Yip retains multiple predicative particles, including definite and indefinite articles and the personal possessive pronoun in “My old friend”. These concessions illustrate the impractical rigidity of Yip’s poetic, by which success is judged on the extent to which a reader’s response to a translated text corresponds to an ideal response (ie, dissolution of object-subject dualism) to an ideal original text (ie, that which demonstrates the dissolution of object-subject dualism).

The political element of Yip’s poetics is more troubling. Yip’s paradigm of ‘Chinese’ resistance to ‘Western’ (linguistic) domination is rooted in an essentialism that ultimately reinforces the east-west binary from which he promises liberation; as such, his theories are particularly liable to co-option into nationalist narratives.

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<sup>4</sup> 谢灵运 385-422 BCE

Stalling finds Yip's increasing popularity in mainland China to be a mixed blessing: he notes that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) "is now positioned to exploit the essentialist tendencies in Yip's work to promote a Sino-centric paradigm not unlike the essentialist discourses [surrounding a nationalist interpretation of Buddhism] that underwrote Japan's imperial aspirations" (154).

Stalling is perceptive to question the CCP's utilisation of traditional Chinese culture as a facet of state power. The CCP has worked hard to integrate elements of traditional Chinese culture into its "thought management" efforts to promote a vision of China whose essential essence is defined by contrast with a fundamentally incompatible set of "western" values, and to which the CCP itself is, of course, indispensable.

The political specificity of the CCP warrants addressing here, since it challenges available models for addressing the relationship between cultural hegemony and political power. One might want to follow Edward Said, for instance, in addressing the role of civil society in guiding political society to produce structures of domination and colonisation. However, under the CCP, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has no civil society; every function that civil society would carry out is either directly controlled or dominated by the CCP. As such, the CCP's power, size and scope of interests is large enough for social scientists to refer to it as a "party-state". The CCP can seem indistinguishable from China itself; indeed, its political survival is predicated on that appearance. As of 2010 the party-state contained 80 million members (McGregor, 2010). The days of Maoist totalitarian control are past, but the CCP retains its capacity to control the daily lives of Chinese citizens using mass persuasion techniques honed in capitalist societies and democratic countries. Indeed, it has arguably enhanced it, thanks to Big Data analysis allowed by

advances in (for example) smartphone technology. From his position as a Harvard professor, F.S.C. Northrop did not have the capacity to disseminate his theories of civilisational differences, unchallenged, to the entire nation. CCP chair Xi Jinping can, and does, across multiple platforms, in the form of Xi Jinping Thought.

The CCP's theories of civilisational differences draw from Chinese history and traditional culture, although they have not always done so. The CCP under Mao Zedong was hostile to traditional Chinese culture as an element of its feudal past; following Mao's death, however, interest in traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, was allowed to grow. Following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the CCP faced a crisis of legitimacy. The post-Mao economic reforms meant that the CCP was no longer strictly a communist party, and the improving conditions that accompanied economic liberalisation fed the narrative that it would only be a matter of time before China embraced other elements of 'Western' modernity, including democracy. The CCP could not rule indefinitely by force alone; it needed to generate the consent to rule. The cultivation of nationalism that incorporates traditional – particularly Confucian – culture came about in response to this crisis; so far, it has helped to ensure the CCP's survival.

Anne-Marie Brady has demonstrated that the CCP's promotion of 'traditional' Chinese culture serves multiple purposes:

*The state-led revival of aspects of Chinese tradition is helpful in drowning out the Western liberal discourse in China. It helps to frame the public discourse in directions friendly to CCP interests. It also serves to stir up patriotism, and antagonism to foreign models. In China's external propaganda it is helping to construct a new image for China and build bridges with Overseas Chinese and Taiwan. (2012:71)*

The CCP's promotion of traditional Chinese culture is by no means entirely top-down. Like the New Labour government of Tony Blair, whose techniques it studied

and replicated, the CCP is guided by opinion polls and research carried out by social scientists, incorporating Big Data analysis (69). Ideas that are adopted often emerge from the populace – notably, the introduction of Confucian values into primary and secondary education was originally carried out by a local educator; after huge popular support, the initiative was expanded nationwide (71). Indeed, the work the CCP does strongly resembles marketing and consensus building done in democratic countries:

*In recent years China has deliberately borrowed from Western methods of mass persuasion and models for funding a cultural economy, at the same time as updating its traditional methods of control and content. China's modern-day propaganda is now market-friendly, scientific, high tech, and politics-lite. (1)*

Nonetheless, because the PRC has no independent civil society, the coercive power of CCP propaganda is unparalleled in multiparty democracies. One illustrative example is the extent and reach of Spiritual Civilization Offices (*Jingshen Wenming Bangongshi*). These offices supervise a broad range of activities in Chinese society, including social, cultural, and educational activities, public security, family planning, marriage guidance and social welfare (64). Their remit is not always explicitly political, but their strict alignment with CCP guidance means that their work is also never apolitical. Spiritual Civilization Offices are hegemonic; they exclude alternative social forces and define which activities are 'civilised' and 'uncivilised'.

The term 'civilised' (*wenming*, 文明) derives from the imperial understanding of who fit inside the Sinic world order and who did not. Although the modern understanding of the word has evolved, Spiritual Civilization Offices are just one example of a modern repurposing of traditional ideas that serves to conflate the



maintenance of the political status quo with the continuation of the essential 'values' of Chinese civilisation.

The Western other is frequently invoked as a model against which Chinese virtues shine. In foreign policy terms, 'Western' models of competition, interventionism and false moral superiority are contrasted with Chinese harmony, trust and non-interference (80). Domestically, 'Western' individualism is also a target of propaganda. Brady sees a paradox in the attacks on individualism as a Western quality at a time when mainland China is an increasingly individualistic, capitalist society. She argues that the embrace of Confucianism offers comfort in this newly individualistic, capitalist society. However, she notes:

*This has, paradoxically, taken the form of the appropriation, in an accultured society looking for its lost roots, of a Westernized, limited conception of 'Confucian values' mixed with the aspiration of the new rich to the outward sign of 'gentility with Chinese characteristics.'* (80)

The parallels to be drawn with Outka's conception of the "commodified authentic" are clear: in Victorian and Edwardian England, nostalgic nationalism offered comfort in a period of intense disruption. The model towns of Bournville and Port Sunlight, built to replicate a pastoral idyll located somewhere in the late Elizabethan era, allowed residents and tourists to enjoy a fantasy of early-modern rural life with none of its drawbacks (Outka, 2008). Beijing's reconstructed districts of Qianmen and Nanluoguxiang demonstrate a similar commercial repurposing of antiquity: residents and tourists not only invest in the pleasures available in these locations; their investment in the nation-state of China is guided by these districts' powerful aesthetic draw. A comparison of Qianmen with Bournville may situate the CCP's nationalistic repurposing of antiquity as a focused utilisation of marketing techniques that have existed for more than a century.



*Starbucks coffee shop in Qianmen reconstructed district, Beijing.<sup>5</sup>*

Viewed in the context of the “commodified authentic”, Brady’s observation that the version of Confucianism promoted by the CCP is a hybrid invention is neither surprising nor shocking (this is confirmed in great detail by the research of Lionel M. Jensen). Similarly, it is neither surprising nor shocking to note that Wai Lim Yip’s poetics is a hybrid creation that incorporates Anglo-American Modernism’s misrepresentations of China and answers “deep longings in the twentieth century Western reader’s approach to Chinese poetry” that correspond most directly to Western metaphysics (Owen, 1977:100).

Regardless of the hybridity Yip’s poetics, its potential for nationalistic co-option derives from its consistent, simplistic differentiation of “East” and “West”. John Timothy Wixted’s review of Yip’s *Diffusion of Distances* is a devastating critique of Yip’s scholarship that nonetheless highlights his strength as a polemicist: Wixted lists

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<sup>5</sup> Image licensed under creative commons. Accessed February 28 2020.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:STARBUCKS\\_in\\_Qianmen\\_Dajie.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:STARBUCKS_in_Qianmen_Dajie.jpg)

Yip's hypostatizing representations of Chinese (and often simply "Eastern") versus Western language, poetry and culture, where each on one side of a simplistic positive-negative binary (1995:177-179). Wixted also highlights Yip's selective adoption of postcolonial terminology to support his thesis: Yip refers to the West as "the hegemonic center" while omitting China's centrality to regional geopolitics (Yip, 1993:4), or indeed any geopolitics internal to the undifferentiated mass he refers to as "the East" (1).

Wixted, author of a post-Said riposte entitled "Reverse Orientalism", is implacably hostile to the postcolonial critique of Sinology. A more nuanced perspective might concede that, wielded uncritically, the paradigms of postcolonial criticism convert neatly into the chauvinisms that they should rightly be used to undermine.

In Yip's case, his defence of Chinese poetry is grounded in his experience of colonial subjugation at the hands of the Japanese in China and the British in Hong Kong. He regards Daoism as a "counter-discourse to the territorializations of power, an act to disarm and deframe the tyranny of language" (1993:25), and situates it historically as a resistance to the Confucian naming system of the Zhou dynasty. Yet the Daoism that he promotes – specifically *Laozhuang* Daoism, which draws from the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* – is itself a narrow, dominant strand of a heterodox religious and philosophical tradition. Rania Huntington and Jonathan Stalling have drawn attention to Daoist poetic texts that fall outside the *Laozhuang* canon (Stalling, 2010:148-149). One particular Daoist poetic tradition that has no place in Yip's poetics is that of "roaming to transcendence" (*youxian* 遊仙), a journey undertaken by enlightened immortals (*shenxian*, 神仙) through the various realms of the Daoist cosmology.

Paul W. Kroll's translations of Li Bai's Daoist nature writings present multiple examples of the spiritual journeys *shenxian* were understood to take in order to achieve higher degrees of enlightenment. These are not the self-effacing interaction with prepredicative experience of Yip's *Laozhuang*-derived Modernist Daoism. Instead, they are a meticulously mapped out series of transactions with celestial bureaucrats, who exchange seals and documents of progressively increasing value with the traveller on their journey through graded levels of enlightenment – which includes but is not limited to the noumenal realm (2009). They are imaginatively rich and laden with bizarre imagery. "The Strange Case of H.A. Giles and Xu Yuanchong", which deals with the textual presence of the Yellow Crane Tower, further explores the impact this "matrilineal" strand of Daoism might have on interpretation of the location of "*Huang He Lou...*", Yellow Crane Tower.

Yip's Daoist poetics excludes "matrilineal" Daoism. Properly speaking, he is of course guilty of the territorialisation of power that his polemics decry. Indeed, the polemical aspect of Yip's writing makes it all the more apt for nationalistic co-option. His statements against *baihua* (modern colloquial Chinese) expression in poetry can just as easily be read as essentialist rejection of foreign impurity:

*The situation is worsened by the intrusion of Western sciences, systems of logic, and forms of poetry. The baihua is being Europeanized (as the Chinese called it) in the process of translation (both journalistic and literary)..., introduction of Occidental syntax, adoption of foreign grammatical frameworks as bases for the Chinese sentence, and application of punctuation to regulate and clarify Chinese linguistic structures. (1970:xvii)*

Central to this statement is a suspicion of translation itself that anticipates the postcolonial translation theories of Lawrence Venuti and Tejaswini Niranjana. But while Venuti's later characterisation of translation as "violence" is an error of proportionality (since translation's role in a relationship of colonial or other socio-

economic domination necessarily remains subservient to the (violent) material specificities of that domination), Yip adds no socio-economic context, but speaks as if from *within* the realm of language, as if language were a *thing* that held inherent meaning, or could be stolen or defaced, not a collaboratively generated phenomenon whose constant adaptations reflect the changing demands made upon it.

Translations are not colonisations, at least in the sense that they do not replace the original. They are creative, hybrid additions to a work's literary legacy. As Jonathan Stalling argues, a translation should be viewed as "a supplementation of the sociolinguistic nexus of the original text, as opposed to its interlinguistic equivalent" (2010:134). Yet to treat translations as colonisations is just another facet of Yip's poetics that suits being co-opted into a narrative more grossly nationalistic than originally intended.

All of this adds important context to any consideration of "authenticity" in translation. As David Porter points out, theoretically speaking "everything is always already hybrid" (2015:35). That is to say, once again: authenticity is fragile. Tracing the genealogy of a culture or nation that forms the basis of some 'essence' always leads ultimately to a conceptual horizon: the point at which the observer is willing to identify a person, artefact or place as, for example, 'British', 'Chinese' or otherwise. As with the identification of the commodified authentic, the pursuit of essential origins can be regarded as an expression of faith in the essence being pursued and its difference from other essences.

Yet, fragile as it may be, authenticity recurs. The deconstructive critique of authenticity will always reach another, less conceptual horizon: the point where positive reality cannot be counterargued. In the context of commodities over which

nations compete, state power will most likely determine that horizon, just as state power determines the placing of a territorial boundary.

Further, concepts do not get argued out of existence due to the strength of rhetoric; academic ideas and ideologies wax and wane in popularity as a consequence of material factors that include institutional support and funding. Porter is right to highlight that hybridity's conceptual popularity depends on "current orthodoxy" (35); exigency could easily result in the adoption of new terms that suit a new socio-economic or geopolitical reality. The recent and continuing propagation of Confucius Institutes is unlikely to tip the balance in favour of 'hybridity' in the field of Sinology or Chinese-English translation. Since they operate directly under the auspices of the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language of the Ministry of Education,<sup>6</sup> co-ordinated by the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP, it would be a surprise indeed if they spent resources on research that undermined civilisational binaries on which state-promoted Chinese nationalism is predicated.

The next chapter explores a decision that every translator of Chinese poetry must negotiate: their choice of romanisation system. A translator's choice of romanisation system is an investment in a particular vision of history; when a reader perceives one system as more authentic than another, they are acceding to the mediation of original authority by one party or another. Focusing on the highly politicised history of Chinese language policy, the following chapter explores how this mediation can take colonial or nationalistic connotations.

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<sup>6</sup> The *Hanban* 汉办

## Romanisation as a Claim on History

In English translation of Chinese poetry, use of a romanisation system is inescapable, even if only to name the original author. Proper nouns are at the forefront of “*Huang he lou...*”, and require transliteration, not translation. In order to conform with standardisation trends and feel familiar to the widest possible audience, this study uses the Hanyu Pinyin romanisation system. Hanyu Pinyin has become dominant in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese (*Putonghua*<sup>7</sup>) in the PRC and overseas; in English-language Sinology, it is challenging the previously dominant Wade-Giles system. My use of Hanyu Pinyin warrants exploration, since although my choice was apparently decided by practicality, it was mediated by issues of implicit alignment with nationalist and colonial claims on Chinese history (and the resistances thereto), and the gravitational pull of antiquity.

Incidentally, one consideration that I gave less shrift than one might expect was which romanisation would give a more ‘intuitive’ guide to pronunciation. Sinologists still sometimes claim that Wade-Giles gives a better pronunciation guide for English speakers than Hanyu Pinyin. On the surface, this seems reasonable, since Wade-Giles was invented with English speakers in mind while Hanyu Pinyin was developed with the help of Romanian linguists and intended to be used within China and (as ISO 7098) internationally – primarily, that is to say, by non-English speakers. However, personal experience doesn’t bear out the assertion that Wade-Giles is more ‘intuitive’; romanisations are independent systems that require the consent of their readership to function; they manufacture their own sense of ‘intuitiveness’ through familiarisation. Hence, the question of which system seems more ‘intuitive’ masks the question of the scope and status of that readership.

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<sup>7</sup> 普通话

## Hanyu Pinyin

*huánghèlóu sòng mèng hàorán zhī guǎnglíng*

*gù rén xī cí huánghèlóu  
yānhuā sānyuè xià yángzhōu  
gū fān yuǎn yǐng bīkōng jìn  
wéi jiàn chángjiāng tiān jì liú*

Nationhood and language are intimately intertwined. Benedict Anderson's influential understanding of nationalism sees a common vernacular "print-language" as one of the prerequisites for the formation of the modern nation state. Such print-languages first formed without conscious direction, but the model of the national language subsequently became open to conscious adoption (2006:45). This was the case in China, where the transition from empire to modern nation state was accompanied and accommodated by ideologically motivated language reform.

Mandarin Chinese only became the official language of the People's Republic of China in 1956, with the promulgation of the Directives for the Promotion of Putonghua. Hanyu Pinyin was formally promulgated in 1958, although the lengthy consultations and research that brought it about predated the official promotion of Mandarin. Mandarin is not an 'invention' in the same manner as Hanyu Pinyin: it is a standardising amalgamation of existing forms and norms, intended to act as a 'common tongue' between the Chinese people; however, both Mandarin and Hanyu Pinyin were established as part of the same continuum of language reform programmes. Further, these language reform efforts were so radical in scope that, during its development, Hanyu Pinyin was seriously considered as a replacement for Chinese characters. It was not conceived as a mere pronunciation guide for foreign students of Chinese, but as paratextual technology, supporting the phonetic



standardisation of the new national language and anticipating later technological developments such as computerisation.

Although privileged as the national language, Mandarin far from the only language in China. Non-Han Chinese minorities speak dozens of other languages, including Mongolian, Tibetan and Uyghur. Nor is Mandarin the only language-dialect within Chinese: it derives from one of eight regionalects – specifically, that of North East China. The word ‘regionalect’, a translation of *fangyan* (方言), occupies a space between ‘dialect’ and ‘language’: since regionalects can be mutually unintelligible, they are not comparable to regional dialects in English (eg, Australian, American and British English); instead, they could be treated as part of a language family, like the Latinate vernaculars of French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish (DeFrancis, 1984:55).

Mandarin has its roots in *guanyu* (官语, official speech), the form of the north-eastern regionalect used almost exclusively by officials in Imperial China. Following the fall of the Qing dynasty, *guanyu* was promoted to the status of *guoyu* (国语, national language) at the 1913 Conference on Unification of Pronunciation. It then became the subject of rejuvenation efforts in the forms of the Literary Renaissance of 1917 and the May Fourth movement of 1919, which aimed to vernacularise the national language, replacing the Classical Chinese of officialdom with *baihua* (白话, clear speech), more closely approximating everyday speech.

Subsequent reform efforts were alternately redirected and stalled by the upheavals that took place in China in the first half of the twentieth century, but they were always driven by the complementary goals of mass literacy and national unity. During its period in power, the Nationalist Party of China pursued a language policy that “sought to achieve a single national language as the expense of the languages

spoken by the Tibetans, Mongols, and other ethnic groups and also the regional forms of speech spoken by Chinese in Canton, Shanghai, and other non-Mandarin areas.” (225) Nationalists supported the concept of the ‘*zhonghua minzu*’ (中华民族, the Chinese-speaking people), “envisaged as a single people inhabiting a unitary state which had as its ideal a single language spoken by all.” (224)

Following its takeover of mainland China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party continued to standardise out the minority regionalects. The creation of Mandarin was part of this effort, as a delineation of its constituent elements makes clear:

*[Mandarin] has been officially defined as the common speech of the Han nationality that takes Northern speech as the basic regionalect, Beijing pronunciation as the phonetic standard,<sup>8</sup> and model modern vernacular works as the grammatical norm... Vocabulary too was envisaged by the 1955 conference on standardisation as based on modern Baihua literature.* (231)

Hanyu Pinyin acts in support of the abovementioned ‘phonetic standard’ of Mandarin, since official policy stresses its use as an adjunct to characters in the promotion of Mandarin and literacy. (265) It is incorporated into the education system from primary level: “When [mainland] Chinese toddlers first learn to read and write Chinese characters... they learn pinyin at the outset in order to assist them with the memorization of standard, nondialect pronunciation.” (Mullaney, 2015:8)

Hanyu Pinyin has become a phenomenal success, in part due to the rising fortunes of the PRC. During the Cold War, the use of Hanyu Pinyin outside of China was “typically regarded as a political statement, or a deliberate identification with the Chinese communist regime”. (Weidenhof, 2005:390) The PRC’s accession to the

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<sup>8</sup> Beijing residents may recognise that this is a mis-statement. *Beijingshua* is a distinct dialect of Mandarin with aspects of pronunciation that violate the syllable structure of *Putonghua*. DeFrancis might be referring to the pronunciation favoured by officials.

United Nations normalised international relations, paving the way for international acceptance of Hanyu Pinyin. The system's present ubiquity now serves to mask the allegiance that its use demonstrates, but in the contested territory of Taiwan, its connotations are made clear. Unlike the PRC, Taiwan uses multiple romanisation systems, including Hanyu Pinyin, Wade-Giles, Gwoyeu Romatzyh, Tongyòng Pinyin, Yale, and “unsystematic English-based spellings” (391). As of 2004, the contested nature of Taiwan’s status was manifest in the conflicting use of multiple romanisation systems:

*The Taiwanese situation is... heavily politicized, with central and local governments often implementing different transcriptions, or using a variety of systems. In the Taipei subway system, for instance, in-coach digital marquees consistently use Pīnyīn, while signboards in the stations reflect a variety of transcriptions. (ibid)*

Mandarin is the prestige regionalect in Taiwan, so the use of one romanisation system instead of another is a largely symbolic gesture among speakers of a common language. However, the PRC’s internal promotion of Mandarin at the expense of minority regionalects also does not go unresisted. In Hong Kong, where Cantonese remains the majority regionalect, Mandarin has become a growing presence since the territory’s return to Chinese rule in 1997. The conflict between local and national identity plays out in the field of language: many Hong Kong locals are so threatened by the rise of Mandarin that they refuse to speak it as an act of resistance. “Language politics has become one of the key fields where the anxiety of mainlandisation (the growing influence of mainland culture) looms large.” (Tsang, 2015:84)

The weaponisation of the issue of regionalect in the rhetoric of national unity has a long pedigree. The slogan “force the South to follow the North” (ie, by adopting

their regionalect) was adopted by proponents of Mandarin from the start of the twentieth century (DeFrancis, 1984:228). Further:

*At the Technical Conference on the Standardization of Modern Chinese held in Peking in 1955, Wang Li, a prominent Chinese linguist, denounced Leonard Bloomfield as 'one of the most reactionary American linguists' for stating that the term 'Chinese language' actually refers to a language family made up of a great many varieties of mutually unintelligible languages. To deny that the Chinese have a common language, Wang said, was tantamount to denying that they constituted a common nation. (227)*

This controversy prefigures a more recent one in Hong Kong, where the website of the local Education Department described Cantonese as “a Chinese dialect that is not an official language” (and was eventually forced into an apology) (Tsang, 2015:98). The phonetic standardisation to which Hanyu Pinyin contributes can therefore be seen as serving a homogenised concept of Chinese nationhood; where disparate regionalects were previously united by common characters, national unity now demands homogeneity of pronunciation and grammar.

The prevalence of Pinyin-based input method editors (IMEs) in word processing reinforces this trend. Although the development and standardisation of IMEs has been mediated by capitalism and technology, and cannot be said to be entirely consciously ‘directed’, they arguably constitute a facilitator of nationalism analogous to the “print-language” identified by Anderson. Thomas Mullaney has written persuasively about the way in which the global dominance of the Remington shift QWERTY-keyboard typewriter had the effect of limiting the imaginative capacity of would-be linguistic inventors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, blending with common prejudices about China to create the often-invoked “comical monstrosity of the imagined Chinese typewriter” (Mullaney, 2015:65). As a paratextual technology, Hanyu Pinyin’s influence on Mandarin pronunciation has

already received attention (Weidenhof, 2005). Its role in shaping national and nationalist norms is worth similar scrutiny.

Does the presentation of an *ancient* text like “*Huang he lou...*” in the *modern* language lend that text extra authenticity by bringing it into the *lived* experience? Does the presentation of a *specialist* text in the *national* language lend that text extra authenticity by bringing it into the *collective* experience? Or does the national language gain authenticity from the ancient texts it represents (ie, demonstrating the antiquity from which nationalism draws strength)? Can these processes occur simultaneously, tautologically reinforcing one another?

## Wade-Giles

*huang ho lou sung mêng hao-jan chih kuang-ling*

*ku jên hsi tz'u huang ho lou  
yen hua san yüeh hsia yang-chou  
ku fan yüan ying pi k'ung chin  
Wei chien ch'ang chiang t'ian chi liu*

Where Hanyu Pinyin was created by official committees in Chinese public service, Wade-Giles was created by private individuals within British civil society. It was the joint product of two British sinologists who, sequentially, held the position of professor of Chinese at Cambridge University. The work carried out by Thomas Wade<sup>9</sup> was further developed by Herbert A. Giles,<sup>10</sup> and the resulting system was first used in Giles's *A Chinese English Dictionary* in 1892.

The joint moniker Wade-Giles gives the false impression that Wade and Giles worked together in a meaningful way. In fact, they were enemies and rivals – or at least Giles painted them as such in his published memoirs – and while Giles recognised the popularity of Wade's original transliteration system, being used as it was by the British consular and customs services, he considered it to be "very inaccurate" (Aylmer, 1999:14).

Wade-Giles was devised for English speakers hoping to learn Chinese – people who might have worked in the diplomatic service (like Giles), as a missionary (like Wade), or in trade, the pursuit of which was the basis of British Imperial interests in China. In short, Wade-Giles was created as a contribution to a body of knowledge that was created directly or indirectly in support of the interests of the British Empire.

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<sup>9</sup> (1818-1895)

<sup>10</sup> (1845-1935)

It would not be fair to say that Giles considered his system to be primarily a tool of the Empire. Giles was a prolific and pioneering scholar, with great academic curiosity and (not uncomplicated) affection for the country that was the subject of his study. Yet Giles worked in service of the British Empire even after his diplomatic career had ended, making unprompted efforts to improve British propaganda efforts in China during the First World War, for instance. And the complexities of his personal motivations would not be relevant to a teleological post-colonialist or Marxist reading of his actions: as a member of civil society, Giles contributed cultural leadership to political society. If Edward Said's challenge to self-serving Western representations of the Orient is to be taken seriously, the "taint" of "gross political fact" on knowledge of the Orient cannot be discounted entirely (Said, 2003:11).

However, the Saidian critique of Orientalism is no longer the state of the art in postcolonial criticism. One significant challenge to this view is the increasing recognition of the imperial nature of Qing China, and the ways in which modern-day PRC has inherited and consolidated an overland empire.

Shih Shu-Mei has highlighted the misreadings of history that result in critical failures to recognise the imperial nature of the Qing dynasty and modern-day Chinese state. Han nationalist readings of Chinese history promote a narrative of victimisation by aggressive, imperial foreign powers (eg, the Opium Wars, unequal treaties etc) set against a struggle for sovereignty against internal rulers (ie, the Manchu) and external aggressors. The aggressive expansion of the Qing dynasty that preceded the cataclysmic events of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are treated as irrelevant: they happened long ago, and were the responsibility of the dynasty's Manchu rulers. Shih posits that a "fetishization of western empires over other empires" has aided the Han nationalist view of Chinese history in obfuscating the

imperial discourses existing both within China and throughout the Chinese diaspora (2011:709).

Recognition of this imperial discourse does not negate the “taint” of “gross political fact” on Wade-Giles, but reinforces the extent to which Hanyu Pinyin carries that same taint. While the previous section focused on the use of Hanyu Pinyin to standardise Chinese regionalects, the imposition of Mandarin Chinese onto non-Chinese speakers has been a simultaneous process in the creation of the modern Chinese state.

Although the Qing conquered Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet, by the time the CCP took power, these assets had become semi-detached, semi-autonomous states. The CCP recolonised these regions (except “Outer” Mongolia). Although policy initially protected minority languages, the erasure of the Tibetan and Uyghur languages has become central to the suppression of independence and secession movements. Shih Shu-mei has highlighted the imperial nature of the colonisation of Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, as well as the cover that linguistic-nationalist standardisation provides for these ventures:

*The Qing was a self-consciously multilingual empire, whose official languages were Manchu, Hanyu, Mongolian, Tibetan, and sometimes Arabic and Uyghur. The linguistic colonization of Tibet and Xinjiang was initiated only with the proclamation of the People’s Republic. (712)*

One central thrust of Shih’s argument is the continuity between the Qing and the PRC: China *is* an empire (as it was before), but its colonial discourses have been obfuscated, formerly by Marxist anti-imperial rhetoric, and latterly by Confucian-inflected nationalism (both of which perspectives have proclaimed imperialism to be a Western, oceanic practice). Further, linguistic colonisation, once a *fait accompli*, provides post-facto legitimisation of itself: a homogenous nation state would



theoretically have fewer internal tensions than a multilingual, multiethnic empire. The 'Sinification thesis' integral to Han nationalist readings of history (ie, that external aggressors-turned-rulers have historically always ultimately subsumed their identity into the Chinese culture they first conquered) encourages this notion by glossing over the internal differences and tensions within even Mandarin-speaking Chinese society.

Recognising the (incomplete and non-balanced) imperial/colonial equivalencies between Hanyu Pinyin and Wade-Giles raises important considerations of context: the colonial connotations of either (or any) romanisation system ultimately depend on the context in which they are used – that is, translating which author, from which epoch, in which regionalect or language, for what purpose. In the case of "*Huang he lou...*", there are no points of tension at which colonial connotations could be amplified to a level requiring attention: the poem is from the Tang dynasty and its political specificities do not map to the present day without real reaching.

The colonial connotations of these systems are merely connotations. Connotations are peripheral. They do not apply universally. Linguistic colonialism in Xinjiang does not have a *direct* impact on a decision to use Hanyu Pinyin in translating a medieval Chinese poem. This choice, then, is connected with the choice of where to draw a line between (insensitive) pragmatism and (paralysing) sensitivity to the unhappy historical and present-day realities of force and coercion.

One salient argument comes to light here: a translator who really cared about the plight of the colonised peoples of Tibet, for instance, should dedicate their energy to translating the literature of the Tibetan language, not Mandarin Chinese, and especially not the work of already canonical authors whose output is linked to the

promotion of Han-centric nationalism at the expense of China's colonial subjects. In choosing to do this, the signal ethical decision takes place long before the choice of Romanisation system.

Thus, although one might ask whether Wade-Giles carries connotations of inauthenticity as a foreign imposition, the ethical impact of such connotation feels especially weak. However, there is another affect created by Wade-Giles's position as a superseded, perhaps untrustworthy system that is worth investigating.

Does Wade-Giles carry a temporally displaced authenticity, located in an earlier epoch, in the same way that "Peking" and "Jehol" conjure the imperial seats of power in ways that Beijing and Chengde do not; and the early modern English of the King James Bible carries intimations of the (spatiotemporally distant) holy lands that modern, accessible translations lack? Or, conversely, does it merely suggest the quaint fraudulence of a surpassed age, recalling the eccentricities of pre-standardisation translations like Thomas Percy's *Hau kiou choaan*?<sup>11</sup>

The following section further explores the relationship between antiquity and authenticity by considering the use of the Baxter-Sagart system for Middle Chinese reconstructed pronunciation instead of Hanyu Pinyin or Wade-Giles.

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<sup>11</sup> The novel by Mingjiao zhongren (名教中人, a pen name), *Haoqiu zhuan*, 好逑传, circa 1683 CE.

## Baxter-Sagart

The language being spoken in China between 220 CE and 907 CE is now generally described as ‘Medieval Chinese’ (Kroll, 2015:x). This was the language in which Li Bai wrote “*Huang he lou...*”. Neither Hanyu Pinyin nor Wade-Giles can claim accuracy of pronunciation of Medieval Chinese literature. Indeed, one interesting way in which Chinese language policy intersects with antiquity is the established argument that Cantonese sounds closer to middle Chinese speech than Mandarin, based on analysis of the *Qieyun* rhyming dictionary of 601 CE. Marginalised Cantonese speakers can bolster their linguistic legitimacy by claiming to speak a more authentically *Chinese* Chinese than their dominant northern neighbours. The possibility arises therefore to represent “*Huang he lou...*” using a Cantonese romanisation system – for instance, in Yale Romanisation:

*wòhng hohk làuh sung maahng hóuh-yìhn jī gwóng-lihng*

*gu yàhn sāi chih wòhng hohk làuh  
yīn fā sāam yuht háh yèuhng-jāu  
gū fàahn yúhn yéng bīk hūng jeuhn  
wái gin chèuhng gōng tīn jai làuh*

Is this Cantonese romanisation more authentic than either of the Mandarin ones since it derives from an older, less adulterated form of Chinese? If so, it is possible to go further in pursuit of authenticity. Although no definitive romanisation system for spoken Medieval Chinese exists, speculative romanisation systems have been devised, based on rhyme tables, which attempt to reconstruct how the language *might* have been spoken. The most appropriate system for this poem is Middle Chinese reconstructed pronunciation, which is based on the language represented in the *Qieyun* rhyming dictionary (2015:xii). The most up-to-date version of Middle

Chinese reconstructed pronunciation available now is the Baxter-Sagart system used in the 2013 *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction*. Here is a reconstruction of “*Huang he lou...*” based on the Baxter-Sagart system:

*hwang hak luw suwngH maengH hawX nyen tsi kwang ling*  
*kuH nyin sej zi hwang hak luw*  
*‘en xwae sam ngjwot haeH yang tsiuw*  
*ku bjom(H) hjwonX ‘jaengX pjaek khuwng dzinH*  
*ywij kenH drjang kaewng then tsjejH ljuw*

The vast majority of readers are alienated from this transliteration. The pool of people who understand how the notation relates to (speculative) pronunciation is very small; for everybody else, it is of little more than curio value. Does Baxter-Sagart romanisation gain any form of authenticity because it is known by so few? Does its exclusivity suggest a privileged access to knowledge or truths denied the masses? Or does it produce an exotic otherness disconnected from any conception of authenticity? Further, what is the relationship between its (speculative) accuracy and its authenticity?

Let’s start by further delineating accuracy and authenticity. I have included the Baxter-Sagart reconstructed pronunciations in the gloss at the start of this study. This choice is justified: a gloss is intended to provide an accurate guideline for translation, and “*Huang he lou...*” was written in Medieval Chinese, not modern Mandarin or Cantonese. Pronunciation is just one of multiple ways Medieval Chinese differs from either modern language.

But a gloss is not a translation. What if I had elevated the Baxter-Sagart reconstruction by choosing to write this study about “*Hwang hak luw...*” instead of “*Huang he lou...*”? “*Hwang hak luw...*” represents the end point of a retrospective progression analogous to philology. It is not the earliest form of the poem, but the

closest to the way it *might have* sounded at the moment of first utterance. Elevating it to translation status would have constituted an implicit rebuke to notions of authenticity formed by national consensus or academic continuity, an iconoclastic favouring of (reconstructed) origin above all.

As Lionel M. Jensen and David Porter have described, since the Jesuit missions, Western efforts to systematise Chinese language and culture have taken a consistently iconoclastic approach. Porter has analysed the ways Western thinkers from the Enlightenment to the Modern era viewed Chinese culture through a lens that pitted originary legitimacy, exemplified by Confucianism and notions of the Chinese ideograph as the primal (and perfectly rational) written language, against the ‘illegitimate’ confusion of the Buddhist (and Daoist) cannon, and the connected prospect of a chaotically engendered, impossibly difficult, sprawling language.

The self-reflexive and self-interested nature of such representations has been widely commented on: the Jesuit appropriation (and, according to Jensen, construction) of Confucianism was key to an accommodationist strategy for proselytism, and Porter has analysed its subsequent elevation by Enlightenment thinkers in the context of European religious instability and succession dramas: Confucianism’s tolerant paternalism offered a vision of good governance that satisfied a longing among seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophical circles for “a model of continuity, stability, and authenticity that could not be found at home” (2001:10). A corresponding denigration of Chinese ‘Buddhism’ as confused and decadent formed the background to later attacks on the aesthetic craze of chinoiserie, and its vision of China as a “bacchanalian fantasy of a pleasure garden of the senses” (12).

The subsequent systemisation of knowledge about China that came to be known as Sinology was guided by this same impulse towards originary legitimacy, which necessitated clearing away ‘false’ representations of the country that happened to be natively popular. Edward Said, to whom Jensen and Porter are indebted, identified philology as a paradigmic predecessor to the Orientalist project; philology’s precepts have been central to Orientalism’s self-reflexive and self-interested representation of an inchoate, confused Oriental other whose connection with originary grace can only be bestowed through the careful research of the western Orientalist.

It is important not to read this as an indication that philology is a fundamentally ‘western’ or imperial invention. Chinese philology has an ancient prestige of its own, dating back at least as far as 100 C.E., when Xu Shen<sup>12</sup> completed his dictionary, the *Shuowen Jiezi*<sup>13</sup>. But Said and Porter have demonstrated how a philology can take on, and subsequently reinforce, the prejudices and precepts of the society from which it derives. Lionel Jensen has characterised philology as “less a science than an aesthetic that apprehends the world through a veil of specific sentiments and values” (1997:228). Fundamental to this is the privileging of original authority: the construction of authenticity from antiquity, which can serve colonial and imperial as much as nationalist ambitions.

The conflicting connotations of using Hanyu Pinyin, Wade-Giles or Baxter-Sagart demonstrate in miniature the dilemmas faced by any translator in representing a medieval Chinese poem: how to mediate conflicting contemporary claims on the ancient past; whether a translator could ever conceivably occupy some neutral zone, exempt from the gravitational pull of authenticity and antiquity; whether

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<sup>12</sup> 许慎, c. 58 – c. 148 CE

<sup>13</sup> 说文解字; “Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters”

they should want to. Of course, Lawrence Venuti has amply demonstrated that such neutrality, or “transparency”, is not only impossible, but that the illusion of translatorial transparency is in fact a political position in its own right (1995).

I know this, but still I am drawn to the ideal of the neutral translation. I want to hold all of the competing visions of history at arm’s length. The appeal of such a position is not limited to the act of translation; it can be contextualised in terms of present-day socio-economic and political pressures. In the era of the information economy (and information warfare), in which cultural and economic capital derives from fractured, economically interested notions of the authentic, the ideal of escaping an inescapable dialectic of competing narratives holds a soteriological promise similar to that offered by Wai Lim Yip’s poetic.

Aside from such anti-instrumentalist fantasising, the illusion of neutrality can also be central to political survival. This is especially true in historical moments of hyper-amplified political discourse, where the power of connotation can be greatly magnified, and the mapping of the past onto the present is no longer regarded as “reaching” but an urgent political concern. The following chapter addresses the subject of intellectual evasion and survival, against the backdrop of a far more devastating information barrage: the Cultural Revolution.

## **The Strange Case of H.A. Giles and Xu Yuanchong**

The connection between Ezra Pound and Wai Lim Yip is one example of the way in which mutual (re)appropriations and (mis)understandings inform developing and interdependent notions of cultural or civilisational "essences", which in turn form the basis for conditioned readings of authenticity into a translated text. A seemingly less intuitive connection exists between two other scholars: H.A. Giles and Xu Yuanchong.

H.A. Giles is the earliest English-language translator of "*Huang he lou...*". His translation, entitled "Gone", first appeared in 1898. Xu Yuanchong, who is a professor at Peking University, published a translation entitled "Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower" in 2014. No mentor relationship existed between the two men, nor were they joined by any stylistic or philosophical tradition, like Pound and Yip. Yet Xu's translation shows the clear influence of Giles's own work, as the following chapter will demonstrate.

Although Giles's translations were popular with their contemporary audience, they quickly came to be regarded as stylistically outmoded. Later critics have attacked them from a political angle, arguing that Giles's domesticating translation strategy (whereby he weights his translations to the expectations of his domestic audience and plays to their domestic tastes) fails to engage with the source text on its own terms and constitutes a form of cultural colonisation. Xu's choice to model his own translation strategy on Giles's would thus seem doubly counterintuitive, especially given Giles's status as a British diplomat – that is, an envoy of an aggressive, imperialist power.

This chapter suggests Xu's otherwise mysterious choice should be situated in the context of the period in which he established himself as a translator, post-Mao



China, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. In this period, the "Confucian modernity" described in "State History: Reading Wai Lim Yip" had not yet been developed as an effective counter to Western liberal paradigms of modernity. Further, in the popular discourse of the era the term "Modernism" was a subject of public debate for the first time since liberation; however, it was popularly conflated with politically suspect models of Western modernity. It is possible to see Xu's choice to adopt a pre-Modernist translation model as an evasion of the potentially dangerous dual concepts of "Modernism" and Western modernity.

## H.A. Giles

### **GONE**

*At the Yellow-Crane pagoda, where we  
stopped to bid adieu,  
The mists and flowers of April seemed  
to wish good speed to you.  
At the Emerald Isle, your lessening sail had  
vanished from my eye,  
And left me with the River, rolling onward  
to the sky. (1898:66)*

"Gone" appeared in H.A. Giles's *Chinese Poetry in English Verse*. This collection was a work of sinology intended for popular consumption: its academic features, manifest in its 55 footnotes, support its confidently inaccurate, romantically imagined translations. Giles took great liberties with the original texts, and this is evident in "Gone". Take, for example, his treatment of the title. There is crucial information in the original poem's title: it identifies the piece as an occasional poem, describes the action (ie, sending of Meng Haoran to Guangling) and the locates it in a specific setting (ie, Yellow Crane Tower). Giles removes this information, substituting in something that seems instead to communicate the emotional import of the poem. In short, "Yellow Crane Tower: Sending Off Meng Haoran to Guangling" might be a poem about a specific occasion; "Gone" sounds like a poem about loss.

Even if this title change could be justified as a simplification, removing superfluous information that is repeated later on (and it cannot, since Giles removed the same information from the text of the poem), this new title also rebalances the poem as a whole, elevating the status of the final image (ie, Meng Haoran's disappearance) to thematic primacy.

This rebalancing of focus is most likely unintentional, since Giles's approach to translating titles in *Chinese Poetry in English Verse* was whimsical and erratic. He frequently changed the titles of poems, or invented titles for untitled works, to suit his interpretations of their meaning. His translation of Cui Hao's<sup>14</sup> poem "*Huang he lou*"<sup>15</sup> or "Yellow Crane Tower" is entitled "Home Longings" (57). The second stanza of the original "Yellow Crane Tower" does indeed feature the poet's longings for his distant home; however, Giles's radical retitling draws undue attention to that stanza (ie, away from any sense of a location that is characterised by absence or loss). For an untitled, anonymously written poem that is generally known by its first line "*Sheng nian buman bai*"<sup>16</sup> or "A lifespan does not total a hundred years", Giles provides the thematically connected but misleading title "Carpe Diem" (20).

Giles's collection features a number of other poems of parting, with "At Parting", "Farewell by the River" and "A Farewell" being some of Li Bai's own (59,65 and 70). There is also a "Goodbye to Mêng Hao-jan" by Wang Wei<sup>17</sup> (56). It would therefore seem reasonable to suppose that the title "Gone" was chosen in order to create variety for the reader and avoid confusion – if not for the fact that Giles gave another poem in the collection the exact same title, "Gone" (18). This poem, "*Luoye ai chan qu*"<sup>18</sup> by the Emperor Wu of Han<sup>19</sup>, records, as Giles acknowledges, "the loss of a favourite concubine" (200); it has no historical connection, and only the broadest thematic one, with the Li Bai version of "Gone".

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<sup>14</sup> 崔颢, 704?-754 CE

<sup>15</sup> 黄鹤楼

<sup>16</sup> 生年不满百

<sup>17</sup> 王维, 699-759 CE

<sup>18</sup> 落叶哀蝉曲

<sup>19</sup> 157-87 BCE

There are compelling material reasons for weaknesses in Giles's work. In Giles's era, British Sinology was underfunded and underappreciated, and the resources available to any scholar or student were scanty (Barrett, 1989). Giles was the only Chair of Chinese at Cambridge, for example, and the post was remunerated at a rate of £200 per year; it was only thanks to his Foreign Office pension and the revenue from his publications that his dedication to research was feasible (Aylmer, 1997:4). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why a considerable proportion of Giles' memoirs are dedicated to listing his struggles with tardy, miserly and recalcitrant publishers; it certainly helps to explain the volume and variety of his publications. In addition, the transformative impact of the advances in information technology – including the paratextual technology of standardised romanisation systems outlined in the previous chapter – cannot be overstated; what might be easily achievable for an interested amateur now would have taken a scholar like Giles (and his amanuenses) far more effort and time.

One key non-material factor in this error is the personality of Giles himself. Throughout his life, Giles made controversial decisions and defended them stubbornly. His diplomatic career was set back by this undiplomatic trait, most notably when, as a judge in the Shanghai Mixed Court, he got involved in a brawl with his Chinese counterpart (Motoño, 1996:23). He was a vocal controversialist, downplaying, for example, the severity of female infanticide in China (Aylmer, 1997:6). Giles was remembered in Cambridge University more for his "irascible behaviour" than his academic achievements (Pollard, 1993:103). His memoirs, which were intended for publication, serve as a list of his publications and an account of the political, editorial and pecuniary controversies that surrounded them. The adversarial spirit that Giles brought to every encounter is thus put on full display in these

memoirs, which he evidently saw as an opportunity to settle old scores; his foreword was appended by the epithet “Autobiography is an unrivalled medium for telling the truth about other people.” (1997:8) The text, which is often drawn from clippings that appear to have been cherished for years, if not decades, frequently seems little more than a litany of slights received, as well as the *bon mots* fired off by Giles in rejoinder. The overall impression is of intellectual heedlessness, of the sort that makes the poem’s title seem like an in-character error.

However, other errors in “Gone” illuminate how Giles’s translation strategy itself builds in inaccuracy. The third line, for instance, contains a glaring inaccuracy: the insertion of the “Emerald Isle”, which image does not exist in any other version of the poem. There is a possibility that the “Emerald Isle” is a garbled version of the nearby “parrot island/shoal” (*yīngwǔ zhōu*, 鸚鵡洲) to which Cui Hao refers in his “*Huang he lou*”, set in the same location. However, Giles’s own translation of that poem does not mention any island; in “Home Longings”, the original “fragrant grass [is] luxuriant on Parrot Shoal”<sup>20</sup> becomes “From the flowers on the west comes a scent-laden breeze” (57).

Another possibility is a misreading of the word *bìkōng* (碧空). As indicated in the gloss, in medieval Chinese *bì* can refer to a colour “midway between blue and green”, with the exact tone depending on context – and in the context of the two-morpheme word *bìkōng* it is closer to blue. However, *bì* also means “jade” (SDCM:18), and a translator lacking historical knowledge, and falling back on their senses, is more likely to skew towards the green end of the spectrum, since jade is commonly green. Assumptions about the Chinese language have a role to play in

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<sup>20</sup> My translation. The original reads 芳草萋萋鸚鵡洲, *Fāng cǎo qī qī yīngwǔ zhōu*

this, too: a translator who cleaves too tightly to the view that Chinese is monosyllabic will not respect that *bīkōng* is a complete two-morpheme word (ie, not an object with a modifier), and will be more inclined to disregard the word’s unintuitive blue colouring.

In whatever way the connection was made, it is possible that Giles’s reading of *bī* (possibly along with knowledge of Parrot Shoal) resulted in his production of the “Emerald Isle”. Another likely factor is prosody: both “Emerald” and “lessening” are dactyls, mirroring one another in the third line, as the following table of comparative stresses indicates:

		Dactyl-trochee			Dactyl-trochee						
	Iamb-anapest			Iamb-anapest							
x	x	/-x-x	/	x	/-x-x	/	x	/-x	x or /	x	/
At	the	Emerald	Isle	your	lessening	sail	had	vanished	from	my	eye

Sequential combinations (which could be characterised as dactyl-trochees or iamb-anapests) energise the third line with a *galloping* rhythm. This rhythm emphasises the images of both the “lessening sail” and the “Emerald Isle”. However, while the “lessening sail” is a key image (corresponding to “*gu fan yuan ying*” in the original), the “Emerald Isle” should not be – yet the rhythm promotes it regardless. This looks a lot like the cart drawing the horse: without “Emerald Isle” there is no rhythmic coordination with “lessening sail”; the demands of prosody have resulted in the translator’s ‘filler’ image being upgraded to thematic equality with a key image corresponding with the original text. Not even the colour remains of the original blue sky.

Giles spoke up for the use of rhyme in poetry. His memoirs address implicit criticism by George A Moore in a 1918 review of a different author’s collection of

translated poetry. Moore hoped “that the English literary conscience will, like the French, become some day possessed of the belief that verse cannot be translated into verse”; further, he looked “upon all attempts to translated verse into verse as an amateurish adventure.” (1918:4)

Two of Giles’s rebuttals were that “the English general reader likes rhyme and abhors blank verse”, and that “Chinese poetry is almost all rhymed, and it may fairly be said to be all lyrical” (Aylmer, 1997:40). Giles leaned towards a reader-led domestication strategy, wherein a shallowly conceived fidelity to rhyme trumped fidelity to meaning.

Twelve years before publishing *Chinese Poetry in English Verse*, Giles included the following aside in his travelogue, *From Swatow to Canton (Overland)*:

*Yet Chinese poetry has but few charms even for the most enthusiastic student. Crowded allusions and forced conceits are apt to pull upon an ear accustomed to the bold flights and generous sentiment of Western song; though upon an educated Chinaman the effect is all that could be desired... But as a rule Chinese poetry is hard reading, and does not repay the effort. (1877:28)*

It should be remembered that much of Giles’ travelogue was written in an ascerbic, worldly and detached mode, at one point explicitly quoting Mark Twain in support of a comical observation about the natives (17). Nonetheless, these comments on poetry can be regarded as an exaggeration of a perspective that would have influenced the opinions Giles expressed in more sober works – that the weight of Chinese literary history and density of its literary language were formidable obstacles to English translation.

Giles published *Chinese Poetry in English Verse* a little over a decade after making the above declaration. In the intervening years, Giles had evidently

undertaken the onerous task of studying the original poems – the aforementioned “hard reading” – in order to spare his readers the effort; conscious of his role as a mediator (the “patient student” as expressed in his prefatory poem), he adjusted the end product for the tastes of his readership. The 1883 preface to his collection of prose translations *Gems of Chinese Literature* elucidates the thought process behind these adjustments:

*...with due regard for the requirements of a general public, impatient of long strings of unpronounceable names and of allusions which for the most part would be shorn of all meaning and point, I have eliminated these, wherever it was possible to do so without obscuring... the leading idea of the text. (1922:ii)*

The heavy-handed erasure and substitution of original elements is part of the domesticating strategy, by which a form that was freighted with history is severely trimmed in order to suit a reading public to whom that history was little more than an exotic curiosity.

Another aspect of this strategy described in the preface was the expansion of “extreme grammatical terseness” and the compression of “redundancy of expression” (*id*). D.E. Pollard sees these comments as evidence of Giles’s belief “that the general public has a right to expect a translation to conform to its customary standards for a good composition”, and further demonstrating “the primacy of reader orientation in Giles’ concept of translation: the reader’s tolerance, convenience and established aesthetic play a determining role in the shaping of the translation” (1993:120). Giles himself was happy to relay in his memoirs the extent to which readers appreciated this domestication strategy, listing the further translations into French and Italian, as well as the three composers who saw fit to put his poems to music (1997:40). Contemporary critic James Dyer Ball’s praise of Giles’s 1901



*History of Chinese Literature* confirms that Giles's strategy worked for much of the contemporary critical readership:

*Steeping himself in the sense of the original, he 'Englishes' it... We have not here in these translations a Chinese tricked out in Western garb, looking foreign and ill at ease; but the spirit, the life of the Celestial has been, by a touch of genius – by a species of metempsychosis – by the turn of a mental wheel of transmigration of the spirit of literature – transferred into the body of a European style, robed with well-fitting language and grace of manner. (Minford, 1999:11)*

Later critics have taken a less sympathetic view of Giles's approach. Robert Kern sees Giles's stylistic choices as evidence of a failure of imagination or sympathy – that is, he says: "...a refusal or inability to take Chinese poetry seriously as a reflection of non-Western modes of experience." Kern argues that non-Western modes of experience are "either filtered out of Giles's translations or transformed by his use of a Victorian or Tennysonian idiom." (1995:172) Kern's assertion that a Victorian or Tennysonian "idiom" is necessarily more of a "transformation" of the original Chinese than the style of any other era is theoretically shaky (in that it presupposes static ideals of target language, target readership and source interpretation), but as demonstrated above, the "Tennysonian" rhymes that Giles employs do distort the meaning of his translations.

But one blind spot in Kern's analysis is the socio-economic function of Giles's writing. Kern overestimates the extent to which a poet's choice of style is an expression of their own personal "mode of experience", and underestimates the shaping role of the readership to which that poet is economically bound. Therefore, instead of saying Giles was unable or unwilling to leave his own cultural sphere, it would be fairer to say he was unable or unwilling to take his readership out of their own cultural sphere – as Pollard acknowledges. This consideration casts an

interesting light on another “distorting” element of Giles’s translations: his reliance on non-Chinese classical references, including largely Roman (but also Greek and biblical) allusions.

Giles’s titles often have a classically allusive flavour. Apart from the abovementioned “Carpe Diem”, examples include the Latin “Amari Aliquid” (1898:17), “Sic Transit” (34), “Dum Res et Aetas” (88), “Spretae Injuria Formae” (143), “Ut Melius” (145), “Omnes Eodem” (181), “Apologia” (182) and “Integer Vitae” (194). Further, “Neaera’s Tangles” refers to Greek mythology (120) while biblical references include “Ichabod” (42) and “Against Idols” (44).

In the same continuum, Giles also invokes Renaissance authors. He references William Shakespeare in “Music Hath Charms” (152) and “Twixt Heaven and Earth” (162) and quotes the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian poet Tasso in “Solo Chi Segue Ciò Che Piace, è Saggio” (87).

These titles provide a frame of reference (for the educated reader) that renders Chinese antiquity as comprehensible, familiar and malleable as the Greco-Roman antiquity at the base of European classicism. This strategy is further demonstrated in the collection’s prefatory poem, which dramatises the appropriation of the source text from which the translations derive in heroic, classical terms:

*Dear Land of Flowers, forgive me! – that I took  
These snatches from thy glittering wealth of song,  
And twisted to the uses of a book  
Strains that to alien harps can ne’er belong.*

*Thy gems shine purer in their native bed  
Concealed, beyond the pry of vulgar eyes;  
And there, through labyrinths of language led,  
The patient student grasps the glowing prize.*

*Yet many, in their race toward other goals,  
May joy to feel, albeit at second-hand,  
Some far faint heart-throb of poetic souls*

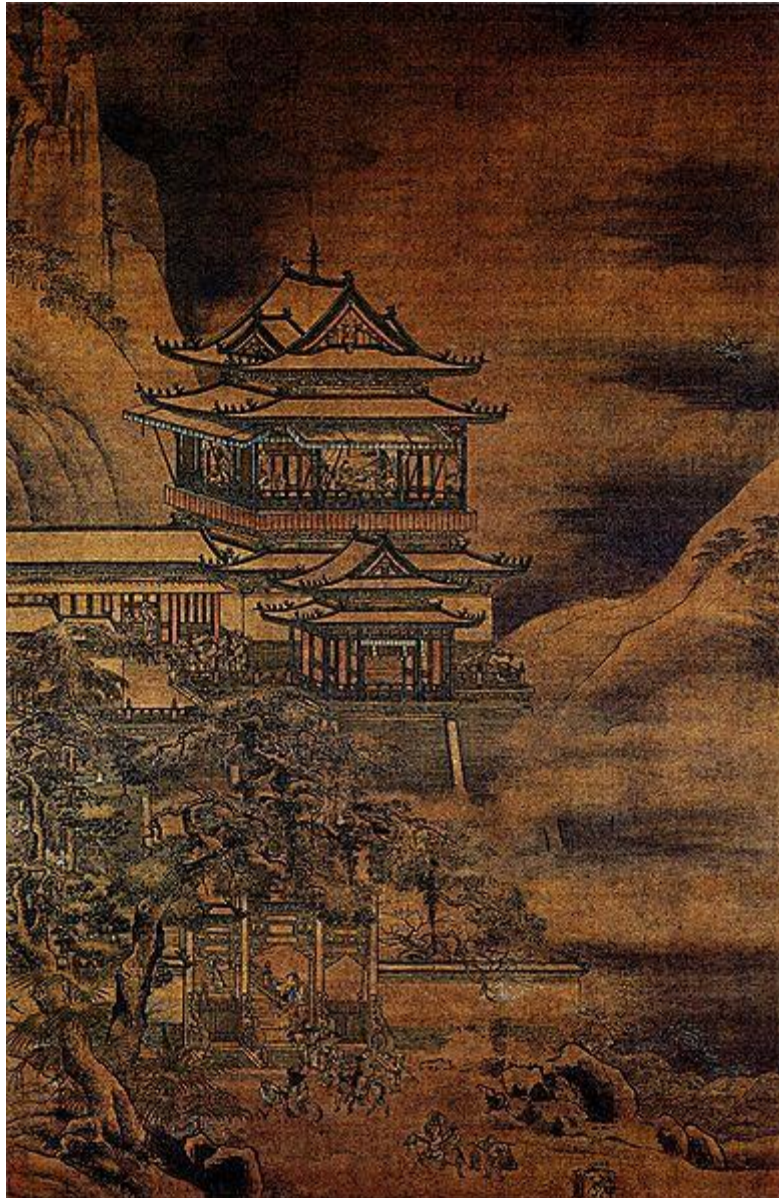
*Whose breath makes incense in the Flowery Land.* (1898:1)

Accompanied by the familiar tropes of Oriental passivity, mystery and timelessness in the tradition of Oriental tales (cf Ballaster, 2005) and Edward Fitzgerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Kayyim*, this poem's narrative of adventure and theft virtually invites a Saidian reading. Indeed, it resembles a lyrical enactment of the Orientalist discourse, with its focus on the scholarly-piratical act of representation, overshadowing the putative subject of that same representation; through his heroic self-promotion, Giles seems to fit the mould of the Orientalist who "is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says" (Said, 2003:20).

Yet it is also interesting that Giles inserts himself into the narrative via Greek, not Chinese, classical allusion (the "labyrinth" of the Minotaur myth), and through a form that indirectly recalls another (western) classical and Renaissance convention, the invocation of the muses. It is worth considering the effect of these classical allusions. Giles's translations may read "inauthentic" to me because I have invested in a modern (and Modernist) concept of the authentic. His readership was not conditioned to look for the same "authenticity" as I am; but his classicism was a comparable invocation of original authority with a comparably cultivated readership. And since Giles made a career-long effort to counter negative stereotypes of China and Chinese culture, his merging of classical western and Chinese antiquity could be viewed as a deliberate, universalising strategy, implying a Chinese classical tradition parallel to the western one, with attendant literati parallel to that readership.

The power and limitations of Giles's classicist bias manifests in his use of contextualising footnotes throughout *Chinese Poetry in English Verse*. While the footnotes primarily provide context for difficult (eg, allusive) elements in individual poems, one effect of this systemisation of knowledge is the magnification of connotations shared by two or more poems. These paratextual additions thus create interlinked, mutually illuminating clusters binding poems together. In the case of "Gone", the footnotes explain the allusive significance of one of the central images in the poem: its location, Yellow Crane Tower. They do more than simply explain, however. Giles's footnotes align Yellow Crane Tower's mythology with a quasi-Faustian concept of modernity, whereby the tower is a site of multiple losses, symbolising the separation of the modern observer from the mythic past. This interpretation of Yellow Crane Tower's mythology demonstrates a conception of modernity that dovetails neatly with the Modernist pursuit of transcendental experience explored in previous chapters.

Yellow Crane Tower is a complexly allusive site with a rich and lengthy physical and textual history. A preliminary overview of these complexities, especially in the context of Li Bai's relationship with the tower, is therefore necessary before looking at Giles's footnotes.



Huang he Lou (黄鹤楼) by An Zhengwen (安正文, *Ming Dynasty*). *Hanging scroll*.  
Colour on silk. Length 162.5 cm, Width 105.5 cm. Located at the Shanghai Museum

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<sup>21</sup> This is a reproduction of a picture in the public domain. Accessed February 28 2020.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HuangHeLou\\_by\\_An\\_Zhengwen.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HuangHeLou_by_An_Zhengwen.jpg)

## Yellow Crane Tower

Yellow Crane Tower has existed in 13 sequential physical forms since it was first constructed in the Three Kingdoms period. Its present-day manifestation, in the metropolis of Wuhan, has embraced and commercialised its literary heritage; it is open to the fee-paying public, has a floor dedicated to visiting literary figures and regularly hosts literary events connected to Chinese classical poetry and culture.

The present-day tower's website dedicates a page to the contested origins of its name.<sup>22</sup> These are further elaborated among fourteen legendary stories concerning or featuring the tower on another page.<sup>23</sup> The site divides name-origin theories into two categories, "*yinxian*" ("because of the fairy") and "*yinshan*" ("because of the mountain"). It refers to two (mutually exclusive) founding myths that form the basis of the *yinxian* theory, before glossing the philological research that underpins the more historically accurate *yinshan* theory, according to which Yellow Crane Tower was originally named "Yellow Swan Tower", after Yellow Swan Mountain, but the meaning changed because "swan" and "crane" were originally homophonous.

The website elaborates the *yinxian* myths in some detail. According to one, a mysterious, well-dressed stranger appeared at the tavern of a wine merchant named Xin, and asked for wine. Mr Xin obliged, without requiring payment, and the stranger went on to enjoy his hospitality for a year. When the stranger finally decided to settle up, instead of paying, he used a tangerine peel to draw an image of a yellow crane on the tavern wall. If anybody clapped their hands and sang a song, the crane would dance along. Thanks to the dancing crane, Xin's tavern prospered for ten years. At

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.cnhhl.com/index.php/list-84.html> Accessed on July 29 2019

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.cnhhl.com/index.php/list-85.html> Accessed on July 29 2019

that point, the stranger returned. He played his pipe, drawing down from the clouds the same yellow crane that had been painted on the tavern wall. He then departed on the back of the crane. To thank and commemorate the magical stranger, the tavern keeper donated the silver he had earned in two of his ten prosperous years to build Yellow Crane Tower.

The other *yinxian* myth states that the immortal (and god of construction) Lu Ban<sup>24</sup> built the tower for the immortal Lü Dongbin;<sup>25</sup> after completing the tower, Lu Ban also left Lü Dongbin a wooden crane which was capable of flight. Lü Dongbin flew off on the crane, providing the tower's name. Both of these immortals are legendary versions of real figures, operating in a space outside of historical time; the fact that the historical Lü Dongbin was born long after Yellow Crane Tower was generally agreed to have been founded does not act as a barrier to the myth's inclusion on the website. Indeed, the site elaborates a syncretic, non-critical attitude towards the (internally) contradictory myths surrounding the tower. Relying on an extended construction metaphor, it describes the *yinshan* theory as a foundation upon which the *yinshan* theories provide decoration, satisfying what it claims to be a general desire for beauty and spiritual transcendence. It goes on to elaborate: "The two kinds of theory both have their own function. In the past, they coexisted without being mutually exclusive, and complemented each other. From now on they will inevitably illuminate one another, coexisting forever."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> 鲁班, based on a historical person who lived circa 507–444 BCE

<sup>25</sup> 吕洞宾, based on a historical figure who lived 796 CE-1016 CE

<sup>26</sup> My translation. The full Chinese text concerning the relationship between *yinxian* and *yinshan* reads: "因山得名的说法为黄鹤楼得名奠定了地理学基石, 因仙得名的说法却令赏楼者插上了纵横八极的想象翅膀, 满足了人们的求美情志和精神超越需求。两种说法各具功能, 以往并行不悖, 相得益彰, 今后必将彼此映照, 共存于永久。"

One might feel tempted to challenge this uncritical presentation of contradictory paradigms; indeed, the commercial motivation underpinning the website's please-all presentation of a ticketed heritage site cannot be ignored, nor can the propaganda role of such sites be discounted, especially when aimed at overseas Chinese and Taiwanese tourists hoping to reconnect with an inclusive, non-threatening version of their cultural heritage (Brady, 2012:70). In this context, the message of apparently contradictory ideas being reunited, just as they had been in a harmonious past, inevitably reflects on cross-straits relations.

However, the critical impulse to disentangle the contradictory strands of syncretic religion and myth should not go unchallenged. As elaborated earlier, there is a risk, in attempting to do so, of replicating the overt chauvinisms of the Orientalist project – that is, playing the role of the rational interloper rediscovering the 'original' meaning of a cultural artefact on the behalf of the benighted natives.

That said, for the sake of accurate scholarship a positivist understanding of the tower's history cannot be discarded entirely. When Li Bai wrote "*Huang he lou song meng haoran zhi guangling*", a poem entitled "*Huang he lou*" featuring an immortal ascending to the sky on the back of a yellow crane had anecdotally already been inscribed on the wall of the tower. Pace the tower's website, this immortal could not have been Lü Dongbin, since the author of "*Huang he lou*", Cui Hao<sup>27</sup>, was long dead before Lü Dongbin was born. This is not to categorically deny the ability of the immortal Lü Dongbin to transcend the confines of time and space, nor to assert a hierarchy of *yinshan* over *yinxian*, but to narrow the focus to Yellow Crane Tower as Li Bai might have known it.

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<sup>27</sup> 崔颢, 704?-754 CE



Cui Hao's "*Huang he lou*"<sup>28</sup> represents a point where the tower's mythical history and medieval literary resonance intersected. The poem was, as Wei Shang has noted, "recognized as definitive, exerting a shaping and conditioning influence on poetic representation of that locale for generations to come" (1999:4). Indeed, Li Bai was anecdotally reduced to silence when he encountered it inscribed on the wall. However, he went on to produce a string of poems centring on Yellow Crane Tower, including "*Huang he lou song meng haoran zhi guangling*", which Wei identifies as an "oblique dialogue" with Cui Hao's contribution. "In one poem, Li Bai imagines that he has smashed Yellow Crane Tower to pieces; in another he envisions it reconstructed, with a freshly painted wall – an invitation to him to inscribe a new poem on it." (*Ibid*)

Wei's analysis demonstrates the ways in which Yellow Crane Tower was as much of a storied location in the Tang dynasty as it is now; it was then a site of physical and textual reconstruction, and of contesting myths, both personal and collective. Paula M. Varsano's analysis of the medieval Chinese concept of *guwen* (古文) or "ancient writings" is also relevant here. Varsano identifies that *guwen* served as a poetic-political frame of reference for contesting perspectives that nonetheless made a claim on antiquity. Varsano characterises the pursuit of *guwen* style as:

*a quest for the perfect blend of two apparently contradictory modes of knowledge: shared wisdom gleaned from a socially unifying body of texts transmitted from ancient times, on the one hand, and the 'ancient' practice of independently exercising one's own intelligence and moral judgment, on the other. (14)*

This analysis reveals the extent to which medieval Chinese poets' appropriation of and homage to 'ancient' styles and themes was itself a mediation of antiquity in

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<sup>28</sup> 黄鹤楼

service of contemporary needs. Yellow Crane Tower's antiquity made it a prime location of contest, and the act of parting at Yellow Crane Tower, and recording such parting in a poem, represented a textual intervention on the part of Li Bai. It was a personal appropriation of collective literary culture, which ultimately resulted in Li Bai's own reputation becoming intertwined with the tower; in that it added to the tower's literary-mythological corpus, it was as much an act of invention as later interpretations and translations of his own work.

## Gone

In *Chinese Poetry in English Verse*, “Gone” is linked by Footnote 19 (which acts as a landing stage), to Footnotes 8 and 17, and subsequently to two other poems: “Carpe Diem” (Giles’s translation of an anonymous, untitled poem known by its first line, “*Sheng nian bu man bai*”, or “A lifespan does not total a hundred years”<sup>29</sup>), which refers to the mythical Yellow Crane that gave the tower its name; and “Home Longings”, Giles’s translation of Cui Hao’s “*Huang he lou*”. Footnote 17 – which is attached to the poem “Home Longings” – reads as follows:

*The Yellow-Crane Kiosque still stands on the banks of the Yang-tze, the River par excellence, near its junction with the Han river at Wu-ch’ang Fu in Hupeh. See note 8. Li Po at one time thought of writing a poem on this theme, but he gave up the idea as soon as he had read the lines by Ts’ui Hao [Cui Hao]. (1898:201)*

In this note, Giles situates “Home Longings” and “Gone” physically, and indicates Li Bai’s personal relationship with the tower (as described above). The cluster of texts surrounding the note serves to expand on this idea, positioning Yellow Crane Tower as a site of retrospection and introspection, as well as the subject of competing poetic ambitions. Giles’s arrangement of the collection reinforces the fact that Cui Hao’s “*Huang he lou*” predated Li Bai’s effort, and had an authority that Li Bai felt unable to overcome: “Home Longings” precedes “Gone”; from “Gone”, the web of footnotes must be traversed backwards in order to understand the context of Li Bai’s contribution to the Yellow Crane Tower corpus.

The content of the connected poems feeds into the overall web of themes. Retrospection is foundational to “Home Longings”, a poem in which nostalgia for the

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<sup>29</sup> 生年不满百

author's distant homeland is mirrored by a sense of lack associated with the loss of the mythical, magical Yellow Crane. Personal nostalgia is tied to a more general (and modern), conception of a disenchanted world:

### **HOME LONGINGS**

*Here a mortal once sailed up to heaven on a crane,  
And the Yellow-Crane Kiosk will for ever remain;  
But the bird flew away and will come back no more,  
Though the white clouds are there as the white clouds of yore.*

*Away in the east lie fair forests of trees,  
From the flowers on the west comes a scent-laden breeze,  
Yet my eyes daily turn to their far-away home,  
Beyond the broad River, its waves, and its foam. (57)*

Giles's notes identify the "mortal" who once "sailed up to heaven" as the mythical "Wang Tzū-ch'iao"<sup>30</sup>, a "prince of the 6<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C., who studied the black art to such purpose that he rode up to heaven on the back of a crane" (200). This figure is found in the poem "Carpe Diem", in a role that mirrors that of the bird in "Home Longings", by representing a magical, mythical power located in origin myths from which the modern poet is excluded:

### **CARPE DIEM**

*Man reaches scarce a hundred, yet his tears  
Would fill a lifetime of a thousand years.  
When days are short and night's long hours move slow,  
Why not with lamp in search of pleasure go?  
This day alone gives sure enjoyment – this!  
Why then await tomorrow's doubtful bliss?  
Fools grudge to spend their wealth while life abides,  
And then posterity their thrift derides.  
We cannot hope, like Wang Tzū-ch'iao, to rise  
And find a paradise beyond the skies. (20)*

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<sup>30</sup> Wangzi Qiao, 王子喬

Wang Tzŭ-ch'iao is Giles's equivalent of the Lü Dongbin figure, but the context in which he appears owes something to Marlowe and Goethe: there is a Faustian aspect of the speaker's desire to transcend the flow of time, as is made explicit in the reference to "dark arts" in Giles's note. The web of footnotes means this colouring then reflects back on "Home Longings" and "Gone". Indeed, within this textual-paratextual cluster, the footnotes permit the reciprocal flow of multiple connotative values; in this context, the Yellow Crane Pagoda in "Gone" becomes a site of multiple losses: it is the site where Li Po parts from his old friend; it is where Li Po's poetic ambitions are thwarted; and it is a monument to the magical powers enjoyed by the ancients but denied to the modern, and hence the disenchantment of the world that marks the advent of modernity.

Giles's footnotes have a thematic coherence that transcends the weakness of the individual translations. Coherence does not mean accuracy, here: it corresponds to his ability to systematise knowledge in an authoritative way – that is, mastery of field, in a Saidian sense – which includes a judicious choice of what to include and exclude from the representation.

It is useful here to compare Giles's approach with the footnotes produced by another translator, Shigeyoshi Obata, to explain the Yellow Crane Tower mythology. Shigeyoshi Obata's published *The works of Li Po, the Chinese poet* in 1922. Compared to Giles's work, this anthology is an exemplar of scholarly responsibility and self-consciousness. It includes a scholarly preface, an introduction detailing Li Bai's life, explanatory notes, a bibliography that lists previous translations of every poem in his collection, and three translations of near-contemporary (ie, Tang and Song) biographies of Li Bai. Obata's preface contextualises his collection by glossing

the work of the translators who preceded him. He praises Giles's "dextrous renderings" but notes that his "Victorian" style has dated the work. The preface also states what Obata viewed as his contribution to this continuum: clarification of a field full of confusion. It describes Chinese poetry as "an uncharted sea for adventure" for Western scholars:

*The romantic explorer who comes home from it may tell any tale to the eager and credulous folk. Not that yarns are wilfully fabricated, but on these strange vasty waters, dimly illumined with knowledge, one may see things that are not there and may not see things that are really there. (vii)*

In rectifying the "romantic" errors of his predecessors, Obata's paratextual choices seem more curatorial than explanatory: he offers primary sources and alternative prior translations for cross referencing. He positions himself (somewhat disingenuously) not as an expert, but as an interested outsider, stating: "I am a Japanese. I pretend no erudition in Chinese literature." (ix) Obata's approach anticipates Saidian critique of the irresponsible exercise of academic authority characteristic of Orientalist scholarship. Here is Obata's version of "*Huang he lou*...":

### ***On Seeing Off Meng Hao-Jan***

*My friend bade farewell at the Yellow Crane House,  
And went down eastward to Willow Valley  
Amid the flowers and mists of March.  
The lonely sail in the distance  
Vanished at last beyond the blue sky.  
And I could see only the river  
Flowing along the border of heaven. (1922:68)*

This poem is accompanied by explanatory notes. Obata identifies the Yellow Crane House as a historical location and offers two explanations for its name, neither of which quite correspond with the myth offered by Giles. The first simply reads: "Once

upon a time a dead man of Shuh, traveling on the back of a yellow crane, stopped here to rest. Hence the name of the house.” (1922:68) The second reads as follows:

*There is another interesting story just as authentic, according to which: there stood here a tavern kept by a man whose name was Chin, to whom one day a tall rugged professor in rags came and asked very complacently, “I haven’t money, will you give me wine?” The tavern keeper was game; he readily offered to the stranger the biggest tumbler and allowed him to help himself to all the wine he wanted day after day for half a year. At last the professor said to Chin, “I owe you some wine money. I’ll pay you now.” So saying, he took lemon peels and with it smeared on the wall a picture of a yellow crane, which at the clapping of his hands came to life and danced to the tune of his song. The spectacle soon brought a fortune to the tavern-keeper; he became a millionaire. Then, the professor left, flying away on his bird, whither no one knew. The grateful tavern-keeper built the tower-house in commemoration thereof, and called it the Yellow Crane House. (68)*

Importantly, Obata does not present one Yellow Crane Tower founding myth as more accurate or authentic than any other: he states that both are “just as authentic”. This approach throws Giles’s classicist domesticating translation strategy in sharp relief, demonstrating the extent to which his presentation of Chinese mythology required the erasure of elements that did not cohere to his vision.

Obata’s regarded Giles’s style as out of date in 1922. Proponents of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric tend to point to Giles’s translations as a counter-example, using his distorted rhymes to cast the spare objectivity of, for instance, Pound’s translations in a positive light. To varying degrees, Robert Kern and Wai Lim Yip conflate Giles’s style with his political specificity as a representative of the British Empire, as if his poetry gave form to a kind of mental or experiential trap. Yet Giles has a present-day Chinese champion, in the form of Xu Yuanchong.

## Xu Yuanchong

A century after the publication of *English Poetry in Chinese Verse*, Xu published *Selected Poems of Li Bai*, which includes the following translation of “*Huang he lou...*”:

### ***Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower***

*My friend has left the west where towers Yellow Crane  
For River Town when willow-down and flowers reign.  
His lessening sail is lost in the boundless azure sky,  
Where I see but the endless River rolling by. (2014:39)*

In striking contrast to the conventions of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric, this poem rhymes. Indeed, as with Giles’s work, it seems that the imperative to rhyme results in distortions of the original imagery.

In the first line, the source text’s Yellow Crane Tower becomes the “Yellow Crane”, which “towers”. This change might conceivably be intended to bring the mythical yellow crane’s physical or textual presence to prominence. However, the verb “tower” implies great height, substance and size, and a physical connection with the ground; ultimately, it implies being like a *tower* (not a crane). Further, while its textual significance might abstractly ‘tower’, such metaphorical interpretation is weakened by the fact that the rest of the poem operates in the material realm. The fact that there are both external and internal rhymes at work (“crane” rhymes with “reign”, “towers” with “flowers”) suggests that prosody is driving meaning here. Another version of this translation exists, with less provable provenance:



### ***Seeing Meng Hao-ran Off At Yellow Crane Tower***

*My friend has left the west where the Yellow Crane towers;  
For River Town green with willows and red with flowers.  
His lessening sail is lost in the boundless blue sky;  
Where I see but the endless River rolling by. (Wu Chunrong, 2015:30)*

It is unclear which of these versions is the ‘final’ translation, and that question is not relevant here. The versions use the same rhymes, but in a different order; in both, the determination to rhyme and to use the word “tower” as a verb create distortions and omissions in the second line. As with the “Emerald isle” in Giles’s “Gone”, prosody determines meaning here. There are other resemblances to the translations of Giles: throughout the collection, Xu employs archaic-poetic vocabulary like “O”, “o’er” and “behold”. His diction, too, has an artificially ‘poetic’ flavour: objects and descriptors frequently precede action verbs when the rhyme scheme determines they should. One illustrative example is his translation “Farewell beyond the Thorn-Gate Gorge”:

*Leaving Mount Thorn-Gate far away,  
My boat pursues its eastward way.  
Where mountains end begins the plain;  
The river rolls to boundless main.  
The moon, celestial mirror, flies;  
The clouds like miraged towers rise.  
The water that from homeland flows  
Will follow me where my boat goes. (2014:13)*

“Where mountains end begins the plain”, “clouds like miraged towers rise” and “water that from homeland flows” are all – like “where towers Yellow Crane” – reversals of spoken diction; these phrases signal ‘poetry’ as understood before the Modernist adoption of natural speech patterns. In terms of Chinese-English translation, Xu’s style is a return to pre-Pound models: his rhyme-forc’d diction and

archaic vocabulary constitutes the kind of language that the Pound sought to do away with.

Xu has analysed and praised Giles's translations, and advocated for his method of translating rhyme for rhyme. English-language evidence of this is found in essays written by Chinese scholars whose translation strategy has been modeled on Xu's own (Wu Chunrong, 2015; Wu Fusheng, 2014). A significant Chinese-language source is Xu's *Fanyi de Yishu* (*The Art of Translation*). Although reprinted in 2006, this book is largely made up of essays written in the early 1980s. The book's 1982 foreword narrates how Giles published translations of Tang-dynasty poetry early in the twentieth century. Xu cites praise for Giles's work, including by Lytton Strachey, but admits that his translations were not accurate. He states that sinologist Arthur Waley, among unnamed others, subsequently decided to abandon old-fashioned rhyme and adopt a freer style of poetry translation. Xu states that this began a period of prose-style translations. He singles out the then-recent *Sunflower Splendour: 3,000 Years of Chinese Poetry* as representative of the non-rhyming translation style, and attacks its translations as having only a formal likeness (*xingsi*, 形似) to the source text and lacking strong poetic flavour (*shiyi*, 诗意). Xu then advocates restoring Giles's tradition of translating rhyme for rhyme. He states that following Giles's model while correcting the inaccuracies that plagued Giles's own work would represent a step forward for translation (2006:1)<sup>31</sup>.

The translations in *Selected Poems of Li Bai* do indeed follow Giles's rhyme-for-rhyme model while avoiding replicating Giles's errors. In this light, it is tempting to read Xu's use of "lessening sail" in "Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower" as homage to the "lessening sail" in Giles's "Gone".

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<sup>31</sup> My gloss.

What does it mean for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chinese translator to take Victorian Orientalist H.A. Giles's translations as a model? It seems like a retrograde step, an exclusion of the translators that followed him – from Ezra Pound to Wai Lim Yip to David Hinton – along with the conventions of the Anglo-American Chinese lyric: imagism, grammatical terseness and objectivity.

It may be a step too far to call Xu Yuanchong's translation style a direct rejection of Modernism. However, the discourse surrounding literary "Modernism" in China that was prevalent in post-Mao China – when Xu published the above foreword – adds context to his stylistic choices. As "State History: Reading Wai Lim Yip" outlined, the CCP's integration of traditional, especially Confucian, values into its propaganda work arose out of its own crisis of legitimacy following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. This crisis of legitimacy was rooted in a question that had been asked since the overthrow of the Qing dynasty: what form of 'modernity' was China to accept in its drive towards modernisation? Did modernisation mean a wholesale acceptance of western models of modernity *in toto*, or could desirable elements be cherry-picked (eg, in the form of the "four modernisations" of industry, agriculture, technology and science, and national defence), while excluding elements that threatened the hegemony of the ruling elite (eg, variously capitalism, democracy and social liberalism)? Seen in the light of the decline and collapse of the USSR, by 1989 the CCP's increasing adoption of capitalist economic models was conflated in the popular imagination with an expected emergence of civil rights and an eventual move towards democracy; in short, the wholesale adoption of 'Western' modernity, as imagined. After the Tiananmen Square massacre, the CCP worked to construct an alternative, "Confucian" model of modernity which, in concert with economic

growth and expansion of geopolitical power, has shored up its legitimacy both domestically and overseas.

But in post-Mao China, before the CCP developed softer and more savvy means of cultivating consent, the anxieties surrounding ‘Western’ modernity came to define the terms of a debate concerning a domestic literary movement, *Menglong* poetry. *Menglong* poetry was the first post-liberation literary movement to be regarded as “modernist”; but this label proved dangerous, due to its easy conflation with Western models of modernity. In the debate over the merits and dangers of *Menglong* poetry, the term “Western modernism” often came to stand for “Western individualism”, itself a proxy for either intellectual liberation or bourgeois capitalist disloyalty, depending on who employed the term. *Menglong* poetry was suppressed, and an example was made of one poet, Xu Jingya,<sup>32</sup> who had called too enthusiastically for openness to foreign models. Xu Jingya’s forced public self-criticism formed the background to Xu Yuanchong’s choice to model his translations on H.A. Giles, raising the possibility that Xu was positioning himself carefully in an academic field that had become freighted with political danger.

The *Menglong* movement emerged during China’s post-Mao economic reforms in the late 1970s. The word *ménglóng*<sup>33</sup> is variously defined as ‘dim’, ‘hazy’, ‘shady’, ‘misty’ and ‘opaque’; the monicker was applied to poetry “to suggest a kind of poetic quality detached from clear-cut political messages.” (Chen, 1991:143) The *Menglong* poets’ work was produced in reaction to the prevalent poetic forms of Mao-era China, which were primarily propaganda, aptly summarised as “direct expression of positive emotions for politically sanctioned themes in simple metric

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<sup>32</sup> 徐敬亚, born 1951

<sup>33</sup> 朦胧

systems and folksy language” (Donald, 2010:994). Chen Xiaomei has defined it as “hymnal” poetry (1995:71).

Production of *Menglong* poetry was possible only thanks to the easing of certain ideological and economic restrictions following the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution; nonetheless it was not produced in conditions conducive of free expression, and the chilling effect of the Cultural Revolution was still keenly felt. Hence its reliance on metaphors and suggestion was “as much political necessity as aesthetic deliberation” (2010:994). Indeed, to a certain extent, *Menglong* poetry held evasion at its core: its aesthetic was based on abstruseness, on not saying anything that could be interpreted politically, yet still *saying*.

However, in an era of histrionically expressed and internalised political consciousness, with a prevailing thesis of “the unity of life and art” (*shenghuo yu yishi de tongyi*<sup>34</sup>) that left no room for the concept of “art for art’s sake”, the *Menglong* poets’ efforts to distance themselves from any political statement was in itself a politically significant statement. Inevitably, *Menglong* poetry came in for criticism, and its evasive abstruseness was subject to political interrogation. As Chen Xiaomei states: “To its detractors, *menglong* poetry seemed unfamiliar, strange, incomprehensible, and hence decadent, bourgeois, and ‘Western modernist’.” (1995:70)

This last label stuck, and the claim that the *Menglong* movement aimed to infuse Chinese poetry with Western modernist poetics was widely accepted by both supporters and critics. Competing definitions of ‘Western modernism’ were invoked by both, but Chen argues that “both *menglong*’s advocates and its detractors ‘misunderstood’ Western modernism in fundamental ways.” (70) Supporters and

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<sup>34</sup> 生活与艺术的同意

critics portrayed both *Menglong* poetry and 'Western modernism' as "self-expressive" when neither movement could be simply defined as such. Neither movement was monolithic: some early examples of *Menglong* poetry resembled the socialist realism that was standard of the Mao era, (71) while its primary influences came from Classical Chinese poetry (72). Simultaneously, the modernism of Pound and T.S. Eliot, with which *Menglong* poetry was linked, was not understood to be "self-expressive" outside of China; indeed, as has been demonstrated, the Anglo-American Chinese lyric that is Pound's legacy is understood to hold self-erasure and ultimate objectivity at its core.

The discussion of "modernism" engendered by the emergence of *Menglong* poetry grew to encompass other modern or purportedly modern literary movements and authors, including Italian futurism, Kurt Vonnegut and William Burroughs (He Li, 1983:44). By 1983 some hundreds of articles had been published on "modernism" in journals such as *Literary Gazette*,<sup>35</sup> *Poetry Monthly*<sup>36</sup> and *Contemporary Trends in Literature and Art*<sup>37</sup>.

'Western modernism' was misunderstood in this debate, but this misunderstanding was by no means naïve. The term was used as a proxy in what Chen Xiaomei defines as the Occidentalist counter-discourse:

*"...a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others."* (4)

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<sup>35</sup> *Wen yi bao*, 文艺报

<sup>36</sup> *Shikan*, 诗刊

<sup>37</sup> *Dangdai wenyi sichao*, 当代文艺思潮

Chen views Chinese Occidentalism as “marked by a particular combination of the Western construction of China with the Chinese construction of the West, with both of these components interacting and interpenetrating each other.” (5) The concept is hence a response to Saidian Orientalism that recognises mutual appropriations and mutual subjectivity across a constructed civilisational binary.

Chen differentiates the outward-looking imperialism of the Orientalist discourse from inward-looking Chinese Occidentalism, being “primarily a discourse that has been evoked by various and competing groups within Chinese society for a variety of different ends, largely, though not exclusively, within domestic Chinese politics.” (5) Its most gross manifestation is in the familiar guise of official nationalism, whereby “the West” is evoked as a counter other whose identity deviates from the official orthodoxy being promoted. However, Chen also views Occidentalism as a manifestation of intercultural “misunderstanding” (in an anthropological, not epistemological sense) that can provide a vital critical lens on domestic power structures, since it provides space and latitude for the deconstruction of officially sanctioned readings and ways of reading:

*To “misread” a foreign Other is for many a way of exposing a kind of ideological impress on “truth” in one’s own literary and cultural traditions, or a kind of political impress on a “proper” or “correct” understanding of such “truth.” (98)*

Chen reads the debate on “Western modernism” as being framed largely in terms of “individualism” in a domestic context. It can consequently be regarded as a displaced debate over the place of the CCP in cultural expression. Socialist realist, revolutionary verse held ‘the people’ (ie, the CCP) at its heart; ‘self-expressive’ poetry thus represented a threat to the centrality of the Party.

Not all discussion of “Western modernism” centred on “individualism” alone. The arguments glossed a *People’s Daily* article pseudonymously written by “He Li” (合理, “reasonable”) also cover the material background to Western modernism – which He Li reasonably argues to be incompatible with contemporary Chinese realities – and the merits of indiginization and the maintenance of Chinese literary traditions. However, He Li also focuses on the alleged modernist elevation of individual experience in literature, as distinct from the use of literary “types” common to socialist realism. As a section title, He Li poses the rhetorical question: “Are we to adhere to and continually pursue the rules that govern art, or are we going to negate them?” (1983:52) The “rules that govern art” are socialist realism; they are conflated, in He Li’s argument, with the rules that govern socialist society, so that the rejection of “objective” narrative techniques is elided with the rejection of “objective existence” in society:

*Artistically, the basic premise of modernism is the negation of realism. It opposes writers dealing with objective existence and encourages them rather to concentrate on the Self and the internal world of the individual... [Modernism’s] deep-rooted anti-traditionalism inevitably leads to a wide-sweeping rejection of accepted artistic maxims. For example, it denies the importance of plot, character and scene-setting – all crucial elements of narrative art. Its further rejection of typical types leaves the reader with nothing more than an ‘anti-novel’. It is clear that the Modernist world view is one that is diametrically opposed to that of Marxism. (1983:53-54)*

Chen Xiaomei’s thesis that “Western modernism” was used as a proxy within largely domestic arguments is amply demonstrated here. There is no real reckoning with any specific ideas and personalities connected with Modernism; instead, He Li conjures the familiar stereotype of the individualistic, bourgeois artist whose self-centred work alienates the honest proletarian readership. “Dealing with objective existence” means reckoning with the artist’s place in society, which means accepting



the primacy of politics over art, which means reaffirming the place of the CCP in the life of the artist.

In 1983 Xu Jingya published his essay “*Jueqi de shiqun – ping zhongguo xinshi de xiandai qingxiang*”<sup>38</sup> or “A Volant Tribe of Bards – A Critique of the Modernist Tendencies of Chinese Poetry”.<sup>39</sup> This was the most daring of the tracts written in support of modernism, praising the influence of western poetry on the July 4 literary movement and calling for the use of “critical learning from foreign modernist poetry” to create a “truly diversified and pluralistic poetic structure” for future poetry. (1983:65) It provoked a furious response. Xu Jingya was attacked in *Literary Gazette*, *Poetry Monthly* and *Contemporary Trends in Literature and Art*. (Chen, 1995:77) In 1984 Xu Jingya was obliged to write a self-criticism, published in the *People’s Daily*, entitled “*Shike laoji shehui zhuyi de wenyi fangxiang*”<sup>40</sup> (“Keeping the Socialist Orientation of Literature and Art Constantly in Mind”). The self-criticism addressed the political errors he made in “A Volant Tribe of Bards”, including having “blindly recommended Western modernism in the arts”. (1983:66) The psychological pressure to which Xu Jingya was subjected in the preparation of this document echoed the coercion employed against political enemies during the Cultural Revolution, as he described within the text of the confession itself:

*It was only after the subsequent help I received from organizations and comrades at various levels, especially after several large-scale forums and serious, conscientious, practical, realistic, word-by-word, paragraph-by-paragraph, point-by-point analysis and criticism, that I began to realize the seriousness of the matter. (67)*

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<sup>38</sup> 崛起的诗羣—评中国新诗的现代倾向

<sup>39</sup> This title and subsequent English quotes translated by Ng Mau-sang.

<sup>40</sup> 时刻牢记社会主义的文艺方向

Xu Jingya's self-criticism was written against a background of intense and coordinated psychological pressure, deployed at multiple personal and institutional levels. Xu Yingya is explicit about the "pain and shame" that he went through as part of what he characterises as a necessary, corrective process. The self-criticism includes a warning to foreign observers not to interfere with the "normal order of things in the literary and artistic life of our society", and ends with the following admonition: "Perhaps [foreigners] will never be able to understand the weapon of criticism and self-criticism as it functions in our revolutionary literature and art." (67) Self-criticisms are the domain of Aesopian language, and this statement could be regarded as a recrimination, an apology and a farewell. It is also a frank recognition of the alterity of terms: regardless of the multitude of global understandings of 'Western modernism in the arts', Chinese political reality recognised only one, and it could not be permitted on Chinese soil.

If we take seriously Xu Jingya's admonition and try to understand the coercive power of 'criticism' in an authoritarian state, we must recognise that it presented at that time a compelling material reason for a Chinese academic to either follow the politically correct line on modernism, as laid out in He Li's *People's Daily* article, or avoid the subject altogether.

Perhaps the *Menglong* debate was a factor in Xu Yuanchong's apparently strange decision to embrace H.A. Giles as a model for translation: where English translation of Chinese poetry is defined as pre- and post-Pound, Giles is the eminent figure on the pre-Pound side. Championing Giles could be regarded as a means of sidestepping Pound and the potentially dangerous debate then surrounding his legacy in China. Importantly, in Xu's foreword, he mentions Giles, Lytton Strachey and Arthur Waley (Waley did indeed advocate abandoning Giles's translation style,

but he did so only after his exposure to Ezra Pound's non-rhyming translations). Ezra Pound is not mentioned in the foreword. Given the acknowledged contemporary lack of exposure to the history, theories and personalities of western Modernism, it is possible that Xu was simply unaware of Pound; it is possible, also, that he chose to omit Pound from his text.

\*

In the Introduction, I narrated an encounter with the multiple translations of "*Huang he lou...*" listed in *25 T'ang Poets*. This encounter was predicated on the question of which translation appeared to be the most 'authentic'. The translations of H.A. Giles and Xu Yuanchong would appear low down on my own hierarchy of 'authenticity'. I perceive both to be archaic, in a manner that I do not associate with the real. This perception reveals much about the extent to which my poetic and aesthetic sense is predicated on Modernist sensibilities that condition what I accept and reject.

Exploring the conditions that surrounded the creation of Xu's strange anachronistic style raises the possibility of an alternative set of paradigms, one in which I (like Giles's Victorian readership, for instance) accept as poetry only those verses that rhyme. It goes against my present poetic sense but I concede that it is entirely possible. Considering the immense coercion unleashed against Xu Jingya in 1984 forces me to recognise that the acceptance or rejection of paradigms of thought owes more to external, material forces than to the inherent value of any idea, and further that it is entirely plausible for massive human effort to be invested in a project with so apparently absurd a goal as reorienting somebody's poetic sensibilities. Considering the strident yet confused nature of the post-Mao debate over "modernism", itself a minor echo of the Cultural Revolution's cacophony, reminds me of the chaotic and arbitrary nature of the transmission of ideas, and the

corresponding tenuity of the conceptual links by which we attach ourselves to the continuum of human experience we call history.

I do not enjoy this recognition. In this moment, I want to believe that ideas are real, that they have a more-than atomised, more-than momentary existence. I have no desire to revel in the conditional nature of phenomenal reality. In my continual vacillation between deconstruction and reconstruction, I have swung back towards reconstruction.

I return to my list of translations. Perhaps among them I will find further interesting literary and historical concurrences with which to build a web of connections to the original authority the trauma of atomisation compels me to seek.

## Conclusion

My reading of “*Huang he lou...*” will never be complete. It is a meditative practice, with all the circularity of such. It returns only to itself. With every fresh iteration of “*Huang he lou...*” I build a fresh Yellow Crane Tower only to tear it down again.

Nonetheless, should I or anybody else wish to continue the research started here in more practical directions, the following lines of inquiry have been opened.

In the Introduction, I stated that the encounter with *25 T'ang Poets* created an impulse to identify authenticity because my reading habits had been conditioned by my understanding of Modernism. I wonder whether the special structure of *25 T'ang Poets* could be understood to provoke this response, regardless of a reader's conception of historically situated Modernism. That is to say, could there be something like an ahistorical, repeatable 'Modernist moment', unconnected with the conditions that brought about historical modernism but provoking the same intellectual interests that defined it? And could this ahistorical, repeatable 'Modernist moment' be rooted in a recognisable, repeatable systemisation of knowledge: that is to say, are certain (reference) texts 'modernist' regardless of function or historicity?

“State History: Reading Wai Lim Yip” outlined Yip's soteriological aesthetic, focusing on the inconsistencies of his reliance on sometimes clumsy essentialisms. While I remain sceptical about his claims of cultural superiority, I see clear parallels between his effort to transcend fixed binaries and my own impulse to seek translatorial neutrality (however impossible that may be). A (re)reading of “*Huang he lou...*” that tied itself more explicitly to Daoist, Zen or Buddhist paradigms would help to locate and elaborate this soteriological impulse. Such a reading would slide, however, into the realm of devotional writing; to be more than superficially done, it would require a commitment to religious principles that I am not prepared to make.

The chapter's concluding comments on Confucius Institutes are a natural invitation for further research. Whether and to what extent the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language of the Ministry of Education (and hence the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP) influences the research direction of Confucius Institute-funded scholars is an urgent question to answer.

The structure of "Romanisation as a Claim on History" means that each section already invites further research by explicitly asking questions about the roots of perceived authenticity in romanisation systems. Further, the chapter's discussion of the role of Hanyu Pinyin in the formation of national identity invites more specialist research into the role of information paratechnology like IMEs – and the bodies that develop them – in the evolution of language and national identity. The extent to which an algorithm is arguably directing the linguistic habits of a population raises interesting questions about artificial and collective intelligence corollary to questions being raised about – for example – search engines.

In the context of voices from the margins of Chinese identity (including speakers of minority languages and regionalects, and dissenters against Han nationalism or CCP hegemony), Shih Shu-Mei invokes the concept of the "Sinophone" as a means by which critics can question hegemonic conceptions of national identity.

*Sinophone studies disrupts the chain of equivalence established, since the rise of nation-states, among language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality and explores the protean, kaleidoscopic, creative and overlapping margins of China and Chineseness, America and Americanness, Malaysia and Malaysianness... (2011:710-710)*

Shih's Sinophone concept is applied geographically, across different ethnicities in different land masses. Perhaps the concept could be applied temporally, to different historical epochs, and thus critique dominant Han-nationalist readings of Chinese history. Such a reading of Li Bai's work could reveal, for instance, the influence of overlooked cultural phenomena like the "matrilineal" strand of Daoism described in other chapters, resulting in a broader, more inclusive vision of Chinese history.

In "The Strange Case of H.A. Giles and Xu Yuanchong" I introduced just a few of the historical, literary and mythological associations of Yellow Crane Tower. The potential for further research is very broad. An on-site investigation of the location could result in a more in-depth analysis of its functions as a combined social, commercial and heritage site. It may shed light on Chinese attitudes towards reconstruction of historical sites (such as I touched upon in the description of Qianmen in *Modernism and the Commodified Authentic*), and hence make for fruitful comparison with, for example, Elizabeth Outka's exploration of Victorian and Edwardian Britain's relationship with antiquity.

Physical interaction with Yellow Crane Tower would make for a richer reading of "*Huang he lou...*". It could open up a more historically accurate understanding of the function and meaning of the poem to Li Bai and his friend Meng Haoran. Or it could result in an overlaying of more contemporarily relevant concepts. I would like to imagine that both readings could coexist, as inventive reconstructions analogous to Li Bai's own intervention with the tower.

In this chapter, I also provided a speculative background for Xu Yuanchong's seemingly counter-intuitive decision to adopt a rhyme-for-rhyme translation strategy. Further research (in the form of interviews, for example) could provide concrete confirmation or refutation of the arguments advanced in that chapter. It would be

interesting to understand Xu's position in Peking University, the conditions of his hiring, teaching and education in the post-Mao era, especially given Peking University's centrality to the Cultural Revolution and the later pro-democracy movements that culminated in the June 4 massacre. Even if Xu's choice was not primarily motivated by self-preservation, the conditions that allow for the publication of his works are worth further research: to what extent are his translations really meant to be read by English-speaking foreigners? To what extent are his publications the manifestation of the state-sponsored promotion of culture as soft power?

The chapter also opens the doors for a re-evaluation of the legacy of Ezra Pound in China. After the initial shock and outrage surrounding *Menglong* poetry, the movement came to be accepted in the PRC. Indeed, thanks to Ezra Pound's promotion of his ideogramic method, "Western modernism" came to be celebrated as something not foreign and threatening, but as something that had value because it was, at root, Chinese.(Chen, 1995:89) Pound became a figure whose engagement with Chinese culture was only superficially myopic, whose translations were only superficially inaccurate, and who, despite or even by virtue of his ignorance, had an instinctive understanding of Chinese culture and poetry.

Pound's appropriation of Confucian philosophy into the Cantos, and the subsequent Chinese reappropriation of Pound's legacy, creates an interesting parallel to the (re)appropriated Daoist poetics of Wai Lim Yip. My own distaste for Pound's politics and the paranoid rendering of history underlying Pound's work discourages me from engaging closely, but a study of Chinese nationalist readings of Ezra Pound would be valuable, and appropriate to an era of increasingly open national chauvinisms.



Lastly, Chen Xiaomei's concept of "creative misinterpretation" bares comparison to Harold Bloom's "creative misprision", the perspective that poetic influence "always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation".(1975:30) Indeed, Chen's and Bloom's "misinterpretations" could mutually illuminate one another in interesting ways, not least to the extent that Chen's cross-cultural perspective offers a way out of Bloom's strict adherence to an uncritically presented "Western" canon, while the universal aspirations and mythological framing of Bloom's paradigm for (modern) creativity as cross-generational conflict offers the means to undermine the cosy notions of national cultural inheritance and (static) accepted norms on which establishment attacks on *Menglong* poetry were based.

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## **Old Outsiders**

## Prologue

This is not Beijing. No, not that web of smog-hazed light rolling over the wing as your vessel banks into its final descent – that distant thing is not Beijing. That's just light in your eyes. Blink it out. Wipe the crud from your tear ducts. Arrivals: backlit hoardings of blue skies and green grass and slogans in a code you hope never to understand; sharing your ride in, the Peace Corps kids who won't admit to being missionaries and want to know, now you've arrived, when do you plan on going home? They say you look lonely. They tell you it's jet lag. You're waiting, they tell you, for your soul to catch up with your body – and you know you must ditch those bozos and run.

You move fast – it's your habit – but the city itself is built on treacle. Cars carve glacial routes through spacetime. You can wait on the third ring-road between Xijiekou and Andinglu for forty-five minutes, sucking in fumes and cigarette smoke.

Ten lanes wide, and paralysed. You can wait on the second ring between Xizhimen and 'vibrant' Gulou for four hours, listening to crosstalk on the radio and sucking on a can. You can wait on the fourth ring between Wuhu Bridge and Huixinxijie Beikou, admiring the Olympic Village with its world-famous Birds Nest Stadium and sucking on a can for six weeks and four days. There's a lot of exaggeration here, you see. More hyperbole here than anywhere else. Especially when you're sucking on a can, which you are almost always doing. You enjoy beer. Enjoy a can of Plabst Blue Ribboon. American Blue Ribon. Pranks Blunt Ribbon US Ale. Enjoy a Parb BR, a PRC-B. Enjoy a can of fake from a factory out in the smoggy-Fragrant Hills. This bitterness is not the taste of Beijing.

Three foreigner haunts: Sanlitun pleasure district, 'vibrant' Gulou, and Wudaokou. They are not Beijing. The middle-aged Johns are in Sanlitun pleasure

district, awaiting rotation back to The Real World and big-time promotion, C-suite actualisation promised. In Sanlitun you see what might be a turf war or a race riot – whatever it is, the Nigerians are getting the worst of it today, hemmed in on three sides by Chinese wide boys, adopting a defensive formation, retreating into a nightclub whose door they might brace. Yes it might be a turf war, but it feels like a race riot. Things become race riots so easily here – says some guy at the bar – and isn't it refreshing?

Didn't you see the fracas on Ghost Street? The Tibetans?

"Shut the fuck up about Tibet, Chad."

The beggars of Sanlitun are syndicated. They look after their own. They rough up their children and drag them by the hand through the soggy drunks. The beggars of Sanlitun are professionals with nineteenth-century deformities. You watch a woman try to stop an albino from beating a one-armed man with an iron pole. The woman has no tongue. She makes the sound "ooh, ooh, oooooh," and you think this carnival is all for you. You've really got to the meat of things, and here is the base complicity underlying all: mouths eating mouths.

But you're wrong. This is not Beijing. Where even is Beijing? You know you can find it on a map. The place is the size of Belgium and holds twenty million mouths, you should be able to find it, somewhere in this petrified forest. Beneath this shroud of small particulate matter.

Forget it. Stop searching, start earning. The money is everywhere, here – it's like... well, it's like the Internet, man, it's there, coming out of the sky, you just can't see it. Reach out and grab it. Sell your language, sell your shiny white face; sell the dream of you, whatever that is, for these people who vastly outnumber you and in whose home you reside, on sufferance.



“Do you like China?” the taxi driver asks. Yes, you assure him, you like China, speaking back to him the words he spoke verbatim (because repetition is how you learn language, repetition). But it may well be that you don’t like anything at all half as much as your can of Perhaps True Ribbon and the second, third, fourth ring-road unspooling underneath your seat at night. And when the driver hits the brakes on an empty road, you wonder what ghost he saw beneath the streetlights; it’s only when you prod him at the next junction that you realise he fell asleep. Was dreaming, momentarily, with his hands on the wheel and his feet on the accelerator.

‘Vibrant’ Gulou is where you go to slake off the Sanlitun grease, don’t you know. Gulou is trendy: alleyways and hútòngs and courtyard homes, refitted boutique hotels and bars with repurposed Qing Dynasty beams and stools and indoor plumbing in the Western style, haughtily cramping the large intestine in the Western style. The foreign residents wear beanie hats and red trousers like hip economic colonisers of any metropolis – Williamsburg, Peckham, Shibuya, City Bowl – and it’s not so different really, because they’re drinking cold-press coffee and eating Mexican-Korean fusion in a reconstruction of a consumerist dynasty that never existed and where the migrant labourers who operate the demolition sites still sleep outside in the summer on beds made of cardboard boxes; still micturate and defecate in the public squat-drops, they do, only now amid the ash and sputum on the tiles can be found empty cocaine baggies and cans of Pap’s Blue Gibbon.

You could be anywhere. You could be in a storage facility with a slide projector and a case of beer, bickering with your own shadow. You could be in a taxi right now. Take the second ring to Dōngzhímén. Take the fifth ring to the Fragrant Hills.

Somebody once wrote that the M25 London Orbital was built to contain The Vampire, Margaret Thatcher. Beijing has eight rings to contain its beast. Eight

concentric rings of power emanating from the centre, which is a vast nothing nowhere noplac called the Gate of Heavenly Peace – Tian-an-men – where plainclothes agents lurk under umbrellas beside the crowd-control barriers and where nothing, nothing ever happened that you need to worry about and what happened, if it ever happened, happened differently from how you thought it happened, tourist.

This is not Beijing.

This is taxi time. No seatbelt. Cigarette smoke and tea leaves slopping in a clear green flask, and ten lanes of traffic keeping you centred, never really moving yet sliding sideways into elevated cloverleaf junctions that come out of nowhere, a storage facility in your own mind where dreams lie dormant. Your driver has nothing for you but contempt. He spits impatiently, smokes, taps against the steering wheel his overlong pinky claw – a talon signifier of dubious privilege: I Do Not Perform Manual Labour For You. This contempt you relish as a buffer for your own unlovely self. Because this is not a city for the sensitive. Not for the nice. It's shut up and get rich: no aid workers here; NGOs will be met at the station like any other petitioner.

Charity cases will be met at the station and given nationalist instruction. Prosperity and the nature of the economic miracle. This fruitful partnership of corporate thrust and government heft is called 'nationalist state capitalism'; it's not technically Fascism.

Or maybe it is. Fuck you. Shave your head, stop writing poetry, move to Beijing. You'll make yourself here, which is to say the walls are malleable here, you can bend the city to your will-to-power, your own immersive dream-to-power – and only in moments of waking panic you remember that this statement is false.

Car crash. Another taxi – driver drunk or tweaked out or sleeping, otherwise dreaming – departs the four-leaf clover and hits the expressway beneath. By the time your circuit leads you past the spot, the car has been pulled to the side of the road. Beijing-Hyundai joint-venture crumple-zone. The driver – dead, therefore responsible – has been pulled to the side of the road where he lies, eyes open and face uncovered, neck cocked at a funny angle as if appraising the traffic flow, yourself, your warm can of Crabs Blue Ribbing.

Telling you, get over it, pal. This city does not want to hear you work it through. This city does not want you to talk about it. It doesn't give a shit about your personal pronoun or the struggle of your people; it doesn't think this is time for a conversation. This city cannot envisage any healthier mode. It does not think you have a problem.

And you say to the driver, *Siji! Tingyixia'r che ba. Wo bu shufu le. Yao xia che ba!*

And he says "What the fuck are you talking about? We can't stop now. Do you know where we are?"

## Death by Misadventure

Gregory Rainer used to think of himself as a person, with all the complexities of personhood, experienced as an unfolding from moment to moment, precarious, contingent and beautiful; but since he moved to Beijing he had come to understand that he was a white man. And that was fine. It was easier this way. Greg was twenty-four, young and stupid. Younger and stupider now than ever before. He felt like he was moving backwards. That was fine – he was earning money. He thought death by misadventure was more romantic than drowning.

In Beijing, Greg was always waiting for people to ask what he was running from, but people were too canny to ask it out loud. Perhaps they assumed it was his Britishness, something about being British. Some great shame. That was fine too. People who weren't British assumed you carried that identity like a burden, an all-encompassing guilty white weight, and if you didn't feel that way you were in denial, of course, which only made you more British. Fine. This made it easy to drink with the non-British, who gave Greg nicknames like "Johnny English" or "Imperial Aggressor".

It was harder when he met another British person. Like a cockatoo pecking a mirror. Greg had only one British friend in Beijing. His name was Ryan Hunt, although Greg had to suppress the urge, born out of oblivious moments, to call him by a different name.

(And it was funny, because it wasn't like Ryan looked like Caspar. Perhaps it was a deeper resemblance. Ryan's hair was perhaps the colour of Caspar's hair. Although Greg couldn't bring himself to scroll through any photographs of Caspar to confirm this. No point in being maudlin. Not here.)

Greg met Ryan Hunt because they both worked for the Beijing University of Forestry. They lived in the same stairwell of an apartment complex they called Happiness Mansions (although neither were sure of its real name), in Wudaokou district. They'd arrived in the city within days of one another, both without a word of Chinese, and took language classes together for months.

Greg felt like he understood Ryan from the moment they met. This was not true. Still, they became friends quickly. They drank together in places where white men drank together. Places with fraternity hazing boards on the walls. Places with names like *Laowais*, which meant "old outsider", which meant foreigners in the worst sense: spendthrift, indolent, aggressive people on borrowed time. Greg and Ryan drank in *Laowais* with the *laowais* and the people pretending to be *laowais* and the people who didn't know whether they were *laowais* or just pretending. They drank in places with names like Propaganda. Black Element. Moral Hazard.

Ryan was clever. Clever clever. In their language classes, he led from the beginning. By the end of the elementary course, Greg had become an impediment to Ryan's progress. Ryan would do extra homework assignments, and talk with their teacher after class, using words they hadn't yet officially studied – frankly unofficial words – and smile complacently at Greg and suggest a beer later, perhaps. At that point, they took different routes: Ryan took an advanced business-Chinese speciality, while Greg started – and never quite finished – a course in Classical poetry. Empty mountain. Jade flute. I am alone again.

This was the thing about Ryan: whenever Greg was apart from him, he could imagine him doing clever, careful things. Saying thoughtful things that made sense of the world. But whenever Greg met up with Ryan in person, Ryan would disappoint him somehow. Instead of being clever and thoughtful, he could come off boastful and

crass. Instead of funny, boorish. And Greg, disappointed all over again, saw the hints of the ideal Ryan in the material Ryan – but not more than hints. And he had to admit the reality that Ryan was familiar in every way and simultaneously completely foreign; that the person he thought he saw in Ryan wasn't there. It was an uncomfortable recognition. As if Ryan were a doll that had been dredged from the foot of a weir, but had endured the rush of water, and emerged virtually unchanged, by some suspect miracle.

Ryan told just about everybody who would listen that he planned on becoming a journalist. But he was going about it all wrong. He kept pitching stories about corporate complicity with state surveillance to lifestyle magazines like *That's Beijing*. Or he would compile a list of the high-value branded footwear shopping opportunities in Sanlitun district and send it to the *Paris Review*. He wrote lengthy letters, adopting a lunatic persona, ranting about Mao-era grain policies or the inability of Beijing residents to conform to the superior London system of standing on the right on subway escalators. Ryan received very few replies to his pitches, and all of them professionally polite, designed to deny the correspondent the attention he so clearly craved. Sometimes he would feature details from his personal life in his letters: what he'd eaten for breakfast in the past week, where he got his hair cut, the colour and consistency of his turds.

What this subterfuge meant, whether there was some underlying argument, Greg didn't understand. From a distance, he could believe there was a point to the foolishness; when they were together, it was harder to maintain the pretence.

Chinese people sometimes got Greg and Ryan mixed up, which Greg found comforting, although he didn't see the resemblance, personally. Ryan kept his fair hair longer (as Caspar had done, incidentally, although that was not something Greg

preferred to dwell on), while Greg shaved his hair off entirely, like a monk, or thug. Greg wore whatever could be purchased cheaply, while Ryan sometimes wore a shirt and tie, and polished his shoes. He looked like a young conservative on campus. When Greg was apart from Ryan, he told himself that this was camouflage. Or play. Nobody with morals *really* wanted to look that way.

Greg received emails sometimes, from relatives, asking him how he was feeling.

Greg didn't reply. He felt tempted to lie, to tell them Beijing was too big and exciting for feeling. There was too much on offer for consumption, here, to worry about petty things like emotions. But the reality was, he was often too hungover to feel. Feeling was a stage in a physiological process that had to be delayed until the next day (or the next day, or the next). He was so consistently hungover, in fact, it was as if he'd moved into a realm beyond feeling. A great tense blankness. And that was fine.

And then there was the prescribed notion of grief that his concerned relatives skirted around in their letters, with its named phases and treatments. Greg felt grief was a noble thing for those that needed it and deserved it. But he was not one of those people. He had not lost a child or a parent or a sibling. Just a friend. His friend, Caspar, who was dead in England. And he had a new friend now. Just like the old one, if he stood at a distance and squinted. If he allowed the fluid on the surface of his eye to blur his vision, as if he were looking into a water tank, at the aquarium perhaps, surrounded by shrieking children and scents of tropical algae. Or in a deep-sea submersible, alone.

\*

Frederick Gustav Plumbe, “pronounced plume”, was the head of foreign languages at the Beijing University of Forestry. He was Greg’s first contact in Beijing. It was Plumbe who hired him and met him at the airport. American, probably. A wiry-haired caucasian with a magician’s goatee. Over the course of a two-hour taxi journey, Plumbe first described the layout of Beijing in some detail, then segued into a description of a place called Chang’an, apparently the ancient capital of China, some millennia back.

To the jet-lagged Greg, it was inexplicable: Plumbe made the transition with no forewarning, as if the two cities were essentially joined, like Buda and Pest, not a thousand kilometres and two thousand years apart – or as if they overlapped in some other way that was significant to adepts some occult field. So as they passed block after block of unfinished concrete developments, Plumbe described shining marble arches to the Silk Road, caravanserai, green-eyed maidens playing pipes, and immense pleasure gardens where live music and sweet scent hung in the air and where waterworks fed by fresh bubbling streams powered ingenious automatons: a jade turtle that dispensed wine; a golden crane whose wings flapped open and shut.

Chang’an, Plumbe explained, was constructed in accordance with geomancy, the practice of magic via architecture. According to geomancy, the centre of power was not directly aligned with the geographical centre of a site; hence, in Chang’an, the Emperor’s palace was built *just* to the north, *just* to the west of the city’s centre. This was where the energies collected, wound together, and were manifested – via the Emperor – to the betterment of mankind.

Greg started wondering what he’d let himself in for, working under this kook. The heat hit him then, and he felt strange and lost, and Plumbe’s beard suddenly



seemed less fraudulent than genuinely satanic, as he pointed out of the taxi window and announced: “Wudaokou.”

The name meant ‘Crossing Five’, Plumbe explained, because there was a railway crossing there. But the residents called it the Centre of the World because the rents were so extortionate. It was not the centre of the city. Far from it, Plumbe explained: Wudaokou sat on the northwestern shoulder of the fourth ring road, in what in any reasonable city would call its suburbs. Plumbe still fondly remembered when the place had been largely fields. But according to geomancy, so far as Plumbe had determined, Wudaokou was in fact the centre of all the energies in Beijing. And since Beijing was the capital of China, the economic axis on which the planet now rotated (once again and rightly), it could be determined that the joke held a hidden truth: Wudaokou was indeed the Centre of the World.

There was a railway crossing in the Centre of the World, a metro station and a crossroads, at which they were snagged for forty-five minutes, watching the massed pedestrians navigate the clogged road and snaking aisles of street vendors.

That was in 2008. Greg would remember it vividly – not the faces in the crowd, but the words, pronounced like hexes in Plumbe’s mid-Atlantic drawl: *automaton*, *alchemy*, *mechanical bird*.

\*

Ryan detested Professor Plum, “pronounced plum”. Plumbe hated him right back. It was an academic thing. A pissing contest. The two first clashed when Ryan and Greg were still *Fresh Faculty Face* on the staff noticeboard. The teachers were at one of their luncheon meetings – lengthy affairs that were perhaps the only mandatory event on their schedule – and Ryan pointed to one of the decorative items in the restaurant, an unusual-shaped rock displayed on a plinth.

"I heard shaped rocks are really big in China," he said.

"I heard rocks are big everywhere," some wag said. It was that kind of atmosphere. Everything was a great joke.

Ryan laughed generously. "No, seriously," he said. "I heard they're really big money. Like *big* money." He was smiling now, obviously enjoying the attention of the others, who were warming to him because he was charming and clever.

"There was a man, out in the Mongolian desert. He found a rock shaped like a chick hatching out of an egg. He sold that rock to a trader for five hundred *yuan*. Then that trader sold it to a collector for, like, a billion *yuan*. And ever since, there have been people walking through the desert scouring the ground, looking for another rock like that one."

Professor Plumbe did not join the laughter.

"Explain to me, Master Hunt," he cut in, "one more time, so I may be clear. The first man to detect this extraordinary stone – presumably some kind of simple-peon type – he had the foresight to trade his find with a merchant – perhaps a travelling tinker?"

"Um," said Ryan. Plumbe's tone was light, but something in the twist of his goatee signalled danger.

"Tell me, Master Hunt, exactly how much did he sell it for?"

"Well I don't know for sure..."

"You don't know. For sure."

"Not with certainty, no, but like, five hundred *yuan*. Sure. Five hundred *yuan*."

"Sure," Plumbe repeated, archly.

"Sure."

"And the wily trader – what price did he manage to fetch for it?"

“An um. A billion *yuan*? It’s not a specific, um...”

Ryan was blushing by this point.

“A billion *kuai*,” Plumbe said, casually throwing in a word that Ryan hadn’t yet learned. “A billion. A full *yi* in *renminbi*. Excuse my rusty *math*, but I would place that at... one-hundred fifty-seven million dollars, give or take.”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s not like I can verify any of these details...”

“Oh, you *can’t*?”

Greg, spectator, was laughing overloud at this point.

“Well, Master Hunt, I must say, of all the versions of that story I have heard, yours is by far the most exaggerated. Five hundred to one billion – is that a *two hundred million*-percent markup? Again, excuse my *math* if I am out.”

Plumbe pronounced the word ‘math’ as an educated American should. He did not say ‘maths’. He had not gone to a *comp*, followed by *uni*. He studied *math* at *college*. It was *non-elective*.

“Now, I wonder, if our mission as educators is to empower our students to see through the fog of misinformation and rumour with which they are bombarded *daily*, might not our first task be to sharpen our own critical thinking skills?”

Ryan laughed. Then he stopped laughing. He looked at the other diners, whose expressions told him to button up: this was to be expected if you tried to upstage Plumbe at luncheon.

“You’ll excuse me if I can’t recall the ancient classic from which your tale has been dragged and reinvented for the Twenty-First Century. But perhaps if you had read up on your history before you came out here, Master *Hund*, you would have been able better to identify the ancient in the modern. This is Beijing, my boy. A lot of what seems old and quaint is completely modern (you have no doubt seen the

reconstructed districts in the centre of the city); but conversely, a lot of what appears modern is in reality *perfectly ancient*. The second ring road, you may have noticed—

“I know about the second ring road,” Ryan interrupted. “It used to be the city walls. That’s why the subway stations are named after gates. *I know that.*”

Plumbe cleared his throat. There was a long silence during which people played with their chopsticks.

“Please,” he said eventually, in the voice of a father barely maintaining his patience with a slow-witted child, “don’t *you* talk to *me* about China. Not now. Maybe in ten, twenty years, but not now.”

Forestry luncheons were always like this. The dishes they ordered, the cigarettes they smoked, the very air they breathed was a contested academic field. It was an endless dick-waving competition. And safe in this forest of wagging dicks sat Plumbe, his intentions obscure.

Ryan did stop talking about China to Plumbe. In fact, he stopped talking to him altogether. An uneasy truce prevailed. But it was a cessation, not peace, in a cold war: one day, one would destroy the other.

\*

When Greg dreamed of England – as he could not help but do – he didn’t dream of rolling hills or thatched roofs. He dreamed of the spaces between the flyover and the railway tracks. The path down by the waterworks. He dreamed of electricity pylons emerging out of alders. He dreamed of the old tower by the channel.

The channel had been cut out of the common to meet the river. It was meant to syphon floodwater away after heavy rains, so that the river could stay in its banks, and its picturesque locks and pubs and bridges and yacht clubs could operate

without the threat of flooding. The real river was beautiful in an English way, but the channel pulling all that dangerous water away was beautiful in another way.

Concrete and moss. A pumping station. The channel itself was eight metres deep, its banks sheer, cut by earthmovers then shored up with concrete and steel. You could swim there. But it was treacherous. The water was green and cold, then black, in the depths, where the branches of flood-wrecked trees poked tentatively upward like the blackened boughs that rear from bogs in illustrations for children's books about petrification, fossilisation, the age of strange beasts.

There was an old bunker that should have been disgusting and sinister like other old bunkers but wasn't. The roof had caved in like a popped blister, and it was overgrown with trees whose interlinked roots had formed a new, soft roof: a canopy. This was a place you could inhabit. It was a den, or a place that was always on the cusp of being a den. All it needed was some outdoor furniture, a cold box, a clearing. You could imagine the fairy lights that would hang between the branches. You could imagine a battery-powered stereo, ghetto-blaster style, and the right music coming from it. You could imagine a good set of friends. Good-looking friends. Girls! In his dreams, Greg saw these parties, which he and Caspar had planned, but which never materialised.

They'd spent hours planning parties, that summer. It had been a return, in a post-uni, pre-career hiatus, to an earlier, lazier, wiser mode of being. An adolescent form of play, dignified as an activity. What are we going to do today? Let's plan parties. Between planning parties, and talking, and drinking, they swam. Caspar was a strong swimmer. Greg was not.

But it was Caspar who went under the water, one afternoon, and didn't come back up again for four hours.

And some Beijing evenings, Greg looked at the high-rises and thought of petrified trees, and wondered about the murky suspension in which Caspar had hung, for those four hours, alone.

Caspar used to say careful, interesting things. He wasn't clever clever, but he was wise, and curious. Greg recalled this as Ryan complained to him about Plumbe's unfair bullying tactics, his academic snobbery, his old man-ness. He wondered, what kind of person would Caspar have become, had he come to Beijing? What in him would have been revealed? As Ryan's complaints descended into a general whinge about not being able to buy fresh butter, Greg thought fleetingly of how difficult it was – how painful – to remember Caspar as a friend, with all the complexities of friendship, experienced as an unfolding from moment to moment, precarious, contingent and beautiful. It was easier, he thought – drinking deeply and letting Ryan's words roll over him; taking in Ryan's clumsiness; squinting until he could see Caspar; opening his eyes again and seeing Ryan, who was now complaining about Chinese fiscal policy and liberal capitalism's lack of centre – it was easier if he just remembered him as a white man, like himself.

## Jenny and Winnie

Greg supplemented his university income with private tutoring. Among the students who came and went, two stayed in his life. They called themselves ‘Jenny’ and ‘Winnie’, although – of course – those were not their real names.

‘Jenny’ was a woman with a mind deep and slow. She had chosen the name ‘Jenny’ because it sounded like it could be a Mandarin word, and when she pronounced it, it was with a halting cadence imposed by that connection which made her sound like a talking clock: “Hello, it’s *Zhēn’ní*, how are you?”

Greg first met Jenny in Autumn 2009, when she approached him in the Black Cat Cafe, a Western-style place full of language teachers, foreign students and missionaries. It was in Wudaokou, above a strip of bars.

Jenny wanted to pass the IELTS examination so she could emigrate to Australia, where she had studied and worked. When they met, she’d failed the IELTS examination twice. A trial lesson was organised and as it progressed Greg quickly realised the scale of the task – the feast – that lay before him. With the first ¥400 in his pocket and two further weeks of classes planned, he returned to campus and announced to Ryan that he’d caught a whale.

Ahoy there, said Ryan. Avast ye. Fetch up the harpoon.

Jenny had a face that exaggerated the size of her eyes, which she would open childishly wide when she was confused. This was not to say she was cute, or ever tried to be; she made no effort to augment her eyes with paint or lenses. She was not *kawaii*, she was her own thing.

But those eyes gave their classes the flavour of a bedtime story sometimes: an inappropriate story, full of uncomfortable suggestions that would leave the listener wondering and worrying into the black night. She was easily cowed. She blinked and

stuttered when Greg drilled her on grammar – which was frequently, in his own brutal style, striving uncompromisingly for a version of proper English he had invented since arriving in China.

“I will have a try.”

“Can you have a try? You can try, or you can have a go. Which do you want to do?”

“Have to try.”

“You can try, or you can have a go.”

“I will try.”

“Good. Or?”

“I will have to go.”

Jenny was concerned about the environment. She talked about the air in Beijing, which was frequently visible – literally visible, like a comic book miasma enclosing the streets with dotted lines. Viewed from their window across a single two-lane road, Wudaokou overground metro station resembled a house on a mountain ridge, or a dwelling on the foggy far bank of a great river.

“Visible.”

“Air should not be *visible*. What should air be? What is the opposite of visible?”

“Unvisible.”

“No.”

“*Invisible*.”

“Good. Make a full sentence.”

It was always like this. A grind. Jenny clearly dreaded the classes, but Greg enjoyed them. Dissecting English with Jenny was a salutary process. It lent clarity to



the world, unravelled knots of logic and revealed simple truths: air should be invisible; children should be happy; people should not love their cars so much.

Jenny believed that modern attitudes were destroying the health of the people in China. This opinion was popular enough. For Jenny, however, it was not an abstract problem. That selfishness and ambition damaged the fabric of society was obvious beyond mention; Jenny's special contention was that they damaged the fabric of the body itself. Individualism caused cancer. Ambition caused headaches. Greed caused corns.

Jenny's fashion sense leaned towards modesty and pom-poms, so there was little evidence of the moral state of her own body. But in idle moments, as she reached for conjunctions and verb tenses, Greg would speculate that tucked beneath those layers of matronly polyester, she was good.

He tried not to speculate. The libido was a burden.

"What are modern people like?"

"Modern people are *fet*."

"What makes modern people so *fat*?"

"Modern people are so *fet* because they do not take exercises."

"Ah, now—" and Greg rapped the table, pleased to have found a sticky wrinkle to press out, "to do exercise or to get some exercise means to run around or play some sport and get healthy. Exercise is a non-count noun, like water."

Jenny, eyes the size of teacups, made notes. As Greg explained them to her, all intangible nouns were 'non-count nouns like water'. They could have been non-count nouns like rice or bread, but he suspected that water was Jenny's element. Hope was a non-count noun, like water. It flowed. It rose and fell and eddied and

stalled and spiralled to the silt. The same could be said for money, for love, for dreams. Jenny was submerged.

“Now,” Greg continued, “to do an exercise is to do a task. So exercises are specific actions. Sometimes they are physical exercises, like all the children do in the school next to my house while somebody shouts at them with a loudspeaker every single morning.”

“It seems like you don’ like that.”

“I don’t like it. It wakes me up.”

“At what time?”

“At eight o’clock in the morning!”

Jenny’s eyes were the size of dinner plates. “You should be wake up at eight o’clock in the morning! It’s *healthy*.”

“Let’s not get into that.”

“Wait—”

Greg watched her eyes turn inward as she formed the sentence she wanted. It was a long gestation. Greg was familiar with the process: the halting, aborted utterances; the overlong silences and frozen gestures (a raised finger, a hand to the temple); the heavenward sighs and glances; the rising panic at the possibility of losing the words entirely – and the final look of placid exhaustion when the sentence was birthed, sticky and squealing and ugly as hell: “What time do you ujuually ghit the ghay?”

Greg sighed. Jenny blinked at him. ‘Usually’ and ‘hit the hay’ were tongue trainers. Leisure treasure pleasure. I have a huge happy horse. But Greg suspected that until the day they parted, Jenny’s aitches would remain Spanish; her throat would never buzz out a voiced palato-alveolar fricative. The prestige dialect that

Greg had learned from the BBC and upheld with crystallising certainty as the World Standard would remain out of Jenny's grasp.

"Let's not get into that," he said. "An exercise is a task. You might say, 'the children do exercises in the morning'; you might say, 'this is a useful exercise'; you might say, 'I don't want to do this. This is a fruitless exercise.'"

"...a fruitless exercise," Jenny said then, scribbling away. Then, her eyes as wide as windmills, "what is *fruitless*?"

\*

Jenny liked to describe animals, and the animals she liked describing best were what she called sea creatures. As an exercise she once described a walk she took across a bridge that spanned a bay somewhere in Australia. It was one of the indeterminate, dream-like spaces that she would conjure up through her uncooperative English: a bridge without origin or destination, empty of traffic, lit without shadow by a mythical, unshrouded sun. She described looking down into water that was both clear and blue. There she saw a shoal of manta rays – she couldn't describe them at first: they were like birds underwater; like hats; like a *pil-low*. Eventually she gave up. She could not describe them, except to confess that they were her favourite things, absolutely.

And as he listened, and warmed his hands with coffee, Greg could perceive the peace and wonder that she felt, and he judged that there must have been some recognition also, because Jenny was a deep-sea creature at heart: slow and gentle, sheltering in low currents while waves crashed above.

She had been converted to some form of Christianity in Melbourne. Now, she said, she was no longer afraid of death at night. The church she had joined gave her community in that city, which – despite the focus on family life and peace-and-quiet

of which she spoke with approval – was essentially a dangerous place for her, a source of undefined wickedness. She prepared a presentation on the city and its facilities; she listed its shopping districts and described her former home; she described in detail the subterranean walkways that were not always well lit and the metro stations that ceased operation at midnight and sat in lonely shadow until the morning time.

In Beijing, too, the church seemed to give Jenny community. Here it was in clandestine house churches, with missionaries and pastors that Jenny regarded as heroes. And her enthusiasm touched Greg, who was inclined to agree that if ever there were heroic Christians, it was those who manned the safe houses for North Korean refugees, guiding them along the underground railway that stretched from Jilin province to Yunnan's southern border. Those missionaries Greg judged heroic.

As for other missionaries, the entitled Americans who hassled students in the language schools and proselytised over-loudly in the Black Cat Cafe despite (and this infuriated Greg) the widely known proscription against it – they were twats and their religion was idiocy.

But for Jenny, whose simplicity was troubled by cold eddies, Greg recommended religion. He wished on her a husband from the church – some potato-faced dolt who would not trouble her. He wished on her the things he disdained for himself: security, ignorance and virginity. Not literal virginity but the other kind: the dull confidence that arose from absolute opacity of self. He wished on her bright plastic kitchen surfaces, pastel-drawn prospects and declawed natural life.

And Jenny brought Greg income. Every class was two hours; every hour was ¥200. She drained her parents' savings and her grandparents' savings. She retook the IELTS exam fortnightly. She tried and tried and failed, and failed, and failed. For

two years the results had remained unchanged. Greg recruited other teachers: three more vampire lampreys attached themselves to the slow-moving host. Jenny was their running joke; their source of shame; the means of maintaining a lifestyle unattainable at home.

\*

‘Winnie’ was not easy like Jenny. Greg felt Jenny encouraged his well-intentioned condescension. But Winnie encouraged nothing; or that which she encouraged, Greg couldn’t interpret. The signals were off. Winnie was older than him, tactile, intelligent and bored; she was married; she was an art teacher at a school somewhere. Somehow, she was rich: the huge, plushly upholstered car she drove to their classes was clearly beyond a teacher’s salary.

There was a slang name for BMWs: ‘*bié mò wǒ*’ – ‘don’t touch me’. On cold or hot days, from the outside, the whir of the *biemowo*’s air conditioner easily drowned out the sound of the engine; but the inside of the cabin was quiet, whatever the weather. A sealed chamber of murmurs, hums and whispers.

In their first classes, Winnie claimed to be interested in learning what she called ‘travelling English’. Yet the elementary lessons soon bored her. She could already complain about hotel rooms very well.

Next she wanted to improve her conversation. Just general conversation. She asked Greg about his life. Greg responded with anodyne descriptions of his working days: classes taught, the frustrations presented by certain students. Unwilling to provoke or offend, or indeed to generate any kind of interest, he used neutral terms. Sanitary language.

Then when he asked her about her own life she would respond in kind, describing the classes she taught: how the students disappointed her by not

listening, or not doing their homework, or making a mess. Then Greg would rub his eyes and correct her tenses or idioms or whatever and after making careless notes she would refuse point blank to repeat the corrected sentences. These exchanges would leave the two of them equally bored and frustrated, inadequacy hanging between them.

Greg was sure she'd cancel after the first few weeks. He hoped for it: he had other, easier classes. But Winnie clung on. And soon enough she came up with another idea: she wanted to study literature. Poetry and short stories. They read Kazuo Ishiguro together. Chekhov in translation. They read whatever Greg fancied – the books he read for pleasure when he wasn't at work or drunk. He stopped dreading their lessons. Winnie paid him in bi-monthly instalments, the money folded in red 'double-happiness' envelopes meant for wedding gifts. She told him to grow his hair, so he would look like Kyle McLachlan. She had her own sense of humour.

Winnie would give Greg little gifts. Sweets, cakes, seasonal objects. In October 2011 she gave him a plate-sized moon cake filled with fruit, nuts, and pork; he left it on his coffee table as a conversation piece. It stayed there until Christmas. She would feed him when he was obviously hungover. Scold him first, then buy him a cake and some tea and push it towards him without a word.

Greg always accepted in a sideways manner, as if keen to get back to the lesson. He knew that every gift would eventually require some form of return: perhaps she would ask him again about his life, his opinions of something other than school and the English language; perhaps she would ask him again if he had a girlfriend. Greg would then demure, or lie, or otherwise coyly give her emptiness.

\*

Late in a taxi one night Greg realised what disturbed him most about Winnie. He was travelling back to Wudaokou with Ryan; they'd been drinking in 'vibrant' Gulou. The conversation had focused on one of their favourite nightclubs (Lantern or Disc or Ramekin or something – all nightclub names referred to a single amorphous non-count noun, shimmering with unresolved anxiety). This club had recently been raided. The police blockaded the exits and drug tested everybody inside. Every customer was obliged to urinate into a little plastic tube; those who couldn't urinate drank water, and waited until they could. Passing the drug tests could take hours. Those who failed were removed to one of four large coaches stationed outside, requisitioned from a package tour company.

It was a lucky miss, both Greg and Ryan agreed. Only by chance, they'd stayed at a different bar that night. The latest crackdown on foreigners certainly was intensifying. 'Vibrant' Gulou was perhaps becoming a little too colourful for certain powerful figures. Bribes were being paid in insufficient quantity, or to the wrong people. Who the powerful figures were, the right people and the wrong people, neither Greg nor Ryan had any idea.

This familiar topic soon bored them, and Ryan directed his attention to the taxi driver. He was a bad driver. He couldn't use the accelerator properly. Instead of teasing the pedal to maintain a smooth cruising velocity, he would periodically put his foot right down for a burst of speed before disengaging entirely. The result was a nauseating oscillation of speed. Ryan declared it to be the motorist's equivalent of Cheynes Stokes breathing.

"What's that then?" Greg asked.

Cheyne's Stokes, Ryan told him, is a breathing cycle that terminally ill patients go through, wherein they start with a big, deep breath; then take progressively

weaker and shallower breaths; until they are barely gasping at all, and in each pause the patient's family believe – hope, pray – that they have finally been released from their suffering; until the patient fills their lungs again with a big breath and the cycle starts again.

“When somebody starts Cheynes Stokes breathing, you know they're on their way out. It happens because the body can't regulate respiration properly; the rhythm indicates that something is fundamentally wrong. Which is the way I feel about people who don't know how to accelerate properly.”

They laughed. Ryan continued, confident the driver couldn't understand: “There must be something wrong with him, you know? Something missing. How old is he, forty? How can he have reached this age, and working as a *driver* no less, without understanding the different grades of fast and slow?”

“Where did you learn that, Cheynes Stokes breathing?” Greg asked.

“Oh, it was research for one of my articles. I was looking for a metaphor for the final days of liberal democracy.”

But after they'd finished laughing Greg looked at the back of the driver's head and felt ashamed. The man's hair was spiky and evenly short. He may not have been forty. He could have been the same age as the boys who smirked behind him, but a wedge of Beijing-inflected masculinity separated them entirely. A plastic flask of tea rocked gently in the well besides his seat, internal eddies drawing thin green leaves up to the surface and back again. The driver's fingernails, resting on the steering wheel, were long and grubby – those of the little fingers longer and grubbier than the rest.

Greg thought of Winnie. Winnie had small, strong hands and an ungente way of using them that seemed inappropriate for an artist or a teacher. She dropped



things; she slammed them onto the table. When he imagined her teaching her painting classes, she was always slapping the hands of recalcitrant children. However, it was not the violence of her hands that disturbed him so much as their thoughtlessness. Winnie's hands seemed stupid. They did not know what they did, when they grabbed his arm too tightly (to prevent him from crossing a road); or absently ripped a piece of paper to scraps; or burst a sugar sachet so that granules scattered across the tabletop.

\*

Winnie had a brother who called himself 'Kelvin'. He was far younger than her, and so constitutionally different that Greg had at first misunderstood the nature of their relationship, toying with the idea that they were lovers or partners in some shady venture. Kelvin was one of Greg's official university students. He was a spiv and a braggart, but Greg found he had a certain charm. It was the charm of greed worn openly, as if it were a vulnerability.

He was awful, though. Greg enjoyed listening to the other teachers complain about Kelvin's crudeness, his lazy sneakiness – even when it was common knowledge that they accepted his bribes in exchange for passing grades. It was Kelvin who first arranged Greg and Winnie's classes. Greg imagined he was profiting somewhere along the line but never worked out exactly how. Sometimes Kelvin would drop in at the end of one of the classes and Winnie would take him on some private assignment of their own. Always her brother, never her husband.

One summer day as Greg was leaving campus to teach Winnie, Kelvin had hailed him from across the road.

"Oh, hey buddy! You going my way?"

He spoke a fluent, improper, American-accented English, to which he frequently added freshly learned profanities. To learn it, he had skipped his university English classes (including Greg's) and devoted his energies to US sitcoms and English-language pornography, which he accessed using VPN software of the kind that was distributed on data sticks and arose from the democratic resistance that subsisted, just about, in Hong Kong. Kelvin usually wore an oversized basketball vest and a wide, stiff cap, like the American frat boys in the language schools. Today, however, he was dressed in a white gee with a black belt, open wide at the chest.

"I'm going to the Language University," Greg told him. He didn't teach Winnie in the same cafe as he met Jennie. Like a proficient philanderer, he kept the locations of his meetings strictly separate.

"Great, let's walk together. I wanna rap with you."

They waited at the northwest gate for the lights to change or the mass of pedestrians to reach the point where it could take over the road. Kelvin started to talk to Greg about ultimate fighting.

"You ever watch it on cable?" he asked. "It's awesome!"

Greg didn't watch it. Kelvin listed a number of names of ultimate fighters. Greg didn't recognise them.

"You know, in China," Kelvin said, "we have a lot of ancient traditions."

"Tell me more," said Greg, rolling his eyes.

"Do you know *gongfu*?"

"Yes, I am aware of it."

"You practise it?"

"Oh, no."

"I'm a motherfucking badass in *gongfu*."

"Yeah?"

"I teach *gongfu* to junior school kids. I have a school up in the, uh, Oil University."

"The Petrochemistry University?"

"Yeah buddy! You should come and see it. These kids are—" Kelvin indicated height with his hand "—only this big. But *believe*, these kids are motherfucking badasses also."

"Nice," said Greg.

"Do you box? 'Queensbury rules'?"

"No."

"I tell you it's a shame you don't box. There are so fucking many kids around here and their parents all want them to do sports after school. I have too many kids in my class. I can't control the little fucking kids. I could do with another teacher, you know? Actually, you don't have to teach boxing. I was thinking about growing the business. These kids, their parents all want them to learn fucking English too."

"I won't teach kids."

"Not even—"

"Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"Because they're awful."

They walked in silence for a while.

"You know, in *gongfu*, the Chinese are the best," Kelvin said.

"I don't doubt it."

“But in ultimate fighting, we’re no good. The best guys are always European guys. You know why? It’s because the Europeans are so fucking *aggressive*.”

Greg said nothing.

“You know, we Chinese – we’ve been civilised a lot longer. We live in these big fucking cities for 5,000 years. That’s why we don’t have so many hormones.” Kelvin held out his forearm in a martial, controlled gesture. He indicated its light smattering of hair. “See that? My arm is bald. My face is fucking bald. And when I sweat, I don’t stink. It’s because I got less hormones. Oh, hey! How do you make a hormone?”

“Stop.”

“You don’t give that bitch any money. You know what I’m saying?”

Kelvin followed him the cafe where Winnie was already waiting. Winnie didn’t seem surprised to see the two of them together. Greg ordered a cup of tea; he watched the server fill his mug from the spitting steel nozzle on the coffee machine. The pre-class hot drink was ritual: a gathering of energies and evaluation of hangovers. As he was carrying the mug to the milk counter, another server dashed past him, jolting his arm. Freshly boiled water spilled over his hand.

Greg was in no position to put the mug down quickly; and it would not do, to scream and throw it to the ground. Suppressing the fury that accompanied the pain, he advanced to the counter, carefully deposited the mug beside the milk and – gazing at the stinging, already purple skin of his hand – allowed a growl to exit his throat. It came out louder than expected.

If he’d dropped the mug, people would have understood. As it was, Greg’s performance was considered unusual. The staff stared at him, alarmed. A supervisor emerged from a back room, and Greg explained in adrenaline-addled Mandarin: “I by attendant was pushed; I by tea was scalded.”

The assistance he was given was tempered by unease. Ice, water and paper towels were proffered and accepted without eye contact. Kelvin and Winnie seemed embarrassed as he sat with them afterwards.

"What happened?" Winnie asked.

"That girl scalded my hand."

"*Scalded?*"

"Burned with water."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"I did not know what happened," she said in a scandalised, elated voice. "I thought – I thought you were going to *fight* with them."

Kelvin said nothing for a while. He seemed to be thinking.

"You know," he said eventually, "you can burn with ice? I got burned with ice once. It was Professor Plumbe. I help him out with some business – you know, like I do – and he fixed me up some money change. But when he paid me, that money was cold. Frozen ice cold, like a fucking brick. Froze my motherfucking fingers off."

Winnie rolled her eyes.

"Serious, bro," Kelvin said to Greg, "I got a burn!"

Winnie mouthed a word at Greg: *rumour*.

"Well," Greg started saying, "I'm not sure we would use the word 'rumour' in this—"

"*What do you know?*" Kelvin snapped at Winnie, in Chinese. She dismissed him with a wave of the wrist. "*What do you know?*" Kelvin repeated. Greg rubbed a melting cube of ice over his hand. He'd never felt more certain the two were brother and sister.

"You know what they say?" Kelvin continued, once again in English, "Professor Plumbe keeps his money in the freezer. Doesn't trust the motherfuckers, the banks."

Winnie mouthed the word: *rumour*.

Kelvin pursed his lips. "How much you think he got in there?" he mused out loud. "What's it all for?"

\*

What happened between Greg and Winnie didn't come out of nowhere. It started in Summer 2011, when Kelvin was trying to recruit Greg into his Gongfu school. Greg was trying to grow out his hair. Winnie said the new style made him look like Kyle MacLachlan. They were reading short stories in their classes, and having a hard time of it. After abandoning *Signs and Symbols* as indecipherable, Greg ended up lending Winnie a copy of *To Room Nineteen* to read instead. It was a provocative choice, with a punishing vocabulary list. Astonishingly, however, she finished reading the story before they even started class. It must have taken hours. And when she arrived for class that day, she looked somehow changed. Defeated, or sweetened. Her hands hung limp by her side.

Greg asked her how the story made her feel. She said, slowly, that it made her feel sad. She felt sorry for the middle-aged woman whose husband cheated. It was even more sad that the woman would spend her days alone in a hotel room, not even cheating on him in return. However, she didn't understand it completely—

"That's why you must practise with the vocabulary you learn," Greg interjected. He felt keen to assert some pedagogical authority. Some distance.

"No," Winnie said, "I do not understand the story because the main character had children. I did not have children."

"You *have not had* any children."

"I have not had any children?"

"Yes. We use the present perfect tense. Because having children is a life-changing event."

Greg took his pen and sketched in his notepad. He drew a horizontal line, extending from the left-hand side before splitting into two parallel branches.

"Here is a life-changing event," he said, pointing at the crux. "After the event you *have* done it or you *have* not. There are two different timelines. Here, you have had children; here, you have not."

"I have not had children."

"You have not had children."

"I argue with my mother because I have not had children."

"That's a sentence," Greg said.

They went through a vocabulary list. Winnie kept looking like she was about to cry, and after a while Greg excused himself and went to spend some time staring at his phone in the toilet. He came back ready to cancel the class, but Winnie had apparently collected herself in his absence.

"Greg," she said, her voice perhaps a little too level, "Kelvin tell me you don't want to teach in his class. Is that right?"

"That's right. I don't like to teach children."

"You don't like children?" she asked.

"No. It's not that. I was a teacher's assistant, once. In a kindergarten. It was terrible. They used to run circles around me. I couldn't control them for a second. One day, I caught one of them climbing a high shelf."

"*Shelf?*"

Greg mimed.

“Ah, shelf.”

“It was dangerous. So I grabbed him, right, and put him back on the floor. But another kid, she saw me do that and thought it looked like a fun ride, so *she* climbed the shelf, and I grabbed her and put her down – but by then all of the kids wanted to play. They climbed, I grabbed them, put them down, and all the while the next kid was climbing, and while I was getting them off the shelf, the first kid was running back to join the queue. A queue of little children getting ready to climb the high shelf. It was like a nightmare! But it was a nightmare I created myself, I suppose, because your greatest fears manifest—”

“What?”

“It was like a nightmare.”

Greg mumbled for Winnie, jerkily pretending to shift invisible infants from left to right. Winnie laughed.

“How did it end?” she asked.

“It never ended!”

She looked quizzical, then laughed, squeezing his wrist. Greg felt a sense of slippage, knowing that he had given more than he intended; more than he could take back. And Winnie’s mood was transformed after that. She became positively chipper. Her hands snaked across the table, scattering papers, rapping his arm as they continued through the list of vocabulary they were pulling from the story: intelligence, abstinence, constellation; wistfulness, wellspring, fidelity; faithfulness; ouroboros.

As she made notes, she snuck glances back at Greg.

“I have serious question,” she said eventually. Greg steeled himself, pursing his lips into a teacherly frown. “Why does your beard black while your hair is brown?” she asked.



Greg considered this.

"Lots of Europeans have beards that are different from their hair. In England, lots of people have red beards."

"Really?"

"My hair used to be blonde. I was born with blonde hair and blue eyes."

"Really? But your eyes are brown now."

"Lots of Europeans are born with blue eyes."

"How?"

"We're a magical people."

More slippage.

Greg got back to work, listing words: balanced, fidelity, caravanserai. He could see that Winnie had stopped even trying to make notes in the margins; she was still using her pencil, but it looked a lot like she was drawing pictures.

Soon she waved him quiet again.

"I have another serious question. Why does your beard—" she rotated her finger in a spiral, looking for the right word to say. "Go round?" she finally ventured. Greg didn't understand. So she traced the spiral directly on his cheek – a smooth circular scrape of her fingernail into his skin.

"Oh, you mean why is my beard so swirly?"

"Swirly," she repeated, "yes."

"I don't know why my beard is swirly! Is it strange to have a beard that's swirly?"

"I don't know," Winnie said. Her eyes were as wide as Jenny's at that moment. "Swirly, swirly, swirly," she said. She reopened her copy of *To Room Nineteen* to write the word down. Greg saw what she'd been drawing in the margins: picture after

picture of his face, the cheeks and jowls decorated with elaborate pointillist spirals of facial hair.

Perhaps pointillist wasn't the right word. Winnie's pencil moved with too much violence to be pointillist. The effect was colder and more vicious. Like eddies of November wind in a field of stubble: dried stems and blackening blades.

That night, Greg dreamt of sex. No words, no face, no romance: a pure electric distillation of breath, and warmth, and – conjured from the hot air – a wet, willing cunt that kissed the tip of his cock, then, with a sweet sense of suction, cushioned the length of the shaft all the way to the base. He had awoken possessed and brought himself to climax before the tingling motes of dream left him. Then he had lain in a state of quietude, wondering the name of the succubus that had visited him. Whether he would meet her again. When.

\*

Greg started idly imagining screwing Winnie. He imagined becoming her kept man. He could see Winnie treating him to meals in expensive restaurants, laughing too loudly at whatever he said, her eyes roaming over the other tables as she did so. He could imagine her hands knocking expensive tableware aside as she seized his wrists.

She had (so he reckoned) a large bed with a mahogany headboard; and above it, bouncing rhythmically against the wall, a photographic portrait of her husband.

He called him 'Mr Winnie'.

He pictured him as he pictured all party cadres: marginally overweight in a white cotton shirt and charcoal slacks, a heavy set of keys hanging off a retracting cord mechanism affixed to his belt. Glasses and black hair. No face to speak of.

A disturbing possibility.

\*

The next escalation was in December 2011. It was one of those truly hungover days. Greg had been drinking fake tequila and spent the morning hugging the pillow and shuddering with nausea and fear. By one in the afternoon the shakes were gone. At two Greg left his flat and went downstairs. Winnie's *biemowo* was waiting outside the gates to Happiness Mansions. She'd promised to take him Christmas shopping. Although Christmas wasn't a holiday, Greg made sure to cancel his classes every year. He and the other teachers would sit in one of their flats, eating home-cooked mashed potatoes and drinking until they passed out. When he'd told Winnie a version of his plan she seemed to take pity on him; she offered to help buy gifts for his family back home, who surely missed him.

He climbed in and she turned off the English-language podcast she was playing. She wouldn't start the car until he'd taken off his puffy jacket and she'd tapped him on the hand – just once, not over-hard. She seemed cheerful.

"I have surprise for you today," she said.

Greg stretched out into the generous legroom and allowed himself to be driven to an art supply store a few blocks away. Although the building was modern, the interior could have been transplanted from some ancient workshop. It was full of gigantic paintbrushes. Winnie immediately started negotiating with the owner – whom she apparently knew well – while Greg looked over paintings of landscapes, rendered in Classical style as waxy protuberances between clouds. When Winnie was finished she handed Greg a bundle of fine paper in a range of colours, flecked with hemp fibres, fabric thread, and gold.

“Ancient process,” she pronounced to him. He found the words oddly stirring. He asked the price and knew what she would say – that they would sort it out later. There would be a reckoning.

From the supply store she tugged him into a framer’s, where she made enquiries and he hung about, looking at folksy images of striped cats. Then she grabbed his arm, too hard, and they followed the proprietor into a back room stacked with dozens of freshly framed paintings and prints. The proprietor pulled out a long, narrow frame for Winnie to appraise. He meant her to look at the frame, but she wasted no time in ripping the protective plastic from the front of the picture.

“I made this,” she said, in English.

The picture was in black ink, diluted in varying concentrations. Six horses ran through white spume with a slate-grey cloud above. The marks of the brush were clearly visible: jagged strokes of black, and blotches where the ink had been allowed to pool and spread. The signature in the corner was fouled, characters running into one another where water spilled.

Greg had seen enough hotel foyers to know that horses in surf was a traditional theme. As such, he understood the painting to be a commercial item. A demonstration of skill, perhaps. He thought it looked slightly underdone, actually – with their messy black muzzles dripping into the shadowy water, these horses were too wild for his taste. He saw the patterns of their coats but didn’t identify them. He didn’t know that one was dappled grey while one was roan; and one, marked with red spots that escaped all but the closest attention, had the rare pattern known as flea-bitten. He understood only that the picture was a gift for somebody; and to imagine that person, that moment of receiving, raised a painful upwelling of

sentiment in him. He felt. He fought it – the hazy mirage waves of feeling – by pressing his thumbs into his palms, telling himself he was hungover.

Winnie watched his face and waited. Her eyes flickered; her lip moved. He mumbled something complimentary, but she was already complaining to the proprietor about the frame. She used her thumb to measure out clumsy widths, then thrust it in his face. The proprietor didn't seem put out; it was all part of the negotiation, perhaps. Winnie ignored Greg until they were out on the street again.

Four pm. The sun was low and the temperature was dropping below zero, but pools of meltwater still sat in the unshaded places.

"Now you buy me coffee," she said. There was a cafe across a busy main road; she held his hand as they crossed. To keep him from breaking away, perhaps. Running into the path of a car like a thoughtless child.

Greg made a show of paying for the drinks and the cakes, and carried them with dignity to the table where Winnie waited, mashing at her phone. They ate sweet cakes topped with pork floss, and Greg expected Winnie to talk, but she didn't. She would look at him, then look away. She might sigh as if to speak, then merely run her hand across her face; and over time she paid him less attention, until she only looked out of the window, as if tuning in to an inner voice.

Outside, as she led him to the car, they passed a man beating a woman on the street. The woman was shrieking and holding onto the man's legs. Both were drunk, and severely underdressed for the cold. Winnie's grip tightened on Greg's arm; she pulled him past and when afterwards he drew in breath to speak to her, he found he too had nothing to say.

Back in the car she gave him his own Christmas present. She presented him with an ornately decorated tube. Inside was a scroll. When she pulled it open for him

– too quickly, so that the paper creased – he saw it was covered in calligraphy. The characters had been rendered in the same hasty flourishes as the horses: certain lines were slender twigs while others took root in black clumps. She read it out to him; the sounds meant nothing, but the cadence seemed familiar. Then she tore a piece of gold-flecked paper from Greg's bundle. He watched her slowly write out a translation. The nib twice pierced the surface of the paper.

**Yellow Crane Tower / to send / Meng Haoran / to go / Guangling**

Old friend / west / to leave / Yellow Crane Tower,

Fresh spring scene / March / to go / Yangzhou.

Lonely sail / distant shadow / blue sky / finish,

To see only / Yangzi river / horizon / flow.

(for / *Gu Reigu* [Greg] / from / *Yang Wei* [Winnie] / originally by / Li Bai)

That did it. Something popped – a lightbulb, in the back of Greg's skull – and warmth flooded down his spine. When he opened his eyes again Winnie's skin was glowing and the lines that defined her face seemed to have pulsed together into a symmetry. Beauty. He wanted her. He wanted her stupid clumsy hands on him. He wanted to be folded and crushed.

She asked him why he was crying. Then her lips were pressing against his, for just a moment. Soft. Brine on his cheeks. Hot breath. Coffee sour. Pork floss sweet.

"It's not you," he murmured, but she didn't hear him, or if she heard him she wasn't listening, or if she was listening she couldn't understand. And that was okay.

The wave came over them. Eddies played over their skin and tugged at their hair. It passed.

In the tender aftermath, she started the car for home.

## Tower

The spring mists fill the valley, porcelain white.

Flowers and reed-tops punctuate the blankness like preliminary sketches.

Gulls call. It is crisp.

The poet walks the riverbank alone, between two invisible presences: the cultivated fields where still-drowsy insects click and the river with its slow, doglike lapping. Although the sun is not yet formed, the mists are ablaze in the east. The smell of the mud is high.

He walks. Time and distance pass. But the vapour never lifts; the sun never emerges from its pale yellow webbing. If there are boats on the water, they are still; no voices carry through the mist.

A shape rears out of the white ahead of him: a tower, broad and tall and close. Its antique eaves drip condensation and moss grows up its stonework in green smears. Standing before the tower, shivering in its shadow, is the poet's friend.

The two embrace. They exchange solemn words and gifts of paper, secreted in the sleeves of their padded spring robes. They hold hands together in silence for some time, eyes locked, as if they are trying to record the details of one another's faces before the mist takes them.

Then they part. The poet moves first, and decisively, sweeping up the stairs to the tower door and into the darkness within. His friend tarries a while, as if lost, before walking slowly down the bank. A sailboat is moored on a rickety jetty. Gingerly, the friend climbs aboard, and starts to cast off. Midway through, he pauses. He looks up at an open window set in the tower above. First, the frame is merely dark; then the poet appears, gazing down at him.



His friend casts off and pushes away from the jetty. The breeze starts to ripple the sail. Framed by his window, the poet pulls a hog-hair brush from his sleeve and a cake of ink. He moistens the bristles on the dripping stonework and scrapes the ink cake with spiral swirls until the brush has drawn blackness into its centre.

The poet stares down at the boat, at his friend, at the mist above and beneath and around. He pulls paper from his sleeve, and starts to write.

# 《黄鹤楼送孟浩然之广陵》

李白

故人西辞黄鹤楼

烟花三月下扬州。

孤帆远影碧空尽

唯见长江天际流。

## Happiness Mansions

Greg had the handwritten gloss in his pocket as he approached Plumbe's apartment door two weeks later. Plumbe had called him the night before to decline his invitation to the Christmas party. This had been expected. He had gifts for all the teachers, he said, but couldn't travel because of his health issue. Health issue unexplained. Could Greg swing by and pick them up? Of course, Greg said, no problem.

Perhaps, Plumbe added, it would be good for them to have a chat anyway.

All Forestry staff lived in Happiness Mansions: behind its gate and high fence, the snaking concrete structure hid many folds. The teachers' flats were largely interchangeable, since every flat in Happiness Mansions followed one of two designs – which were mirror images of one another – and the university had furnished them all through the same supplier.

Visiting a neighbour, Greg often got the suspicion that there was a confederacy of furniture. Objects would become unnerving. They might swell with pathos, becoming suddenly laden with memories connected with identical furniture elsewhere. Greg sometimes cut visits short, impelled to leave by the silent resentment of his own furniture, sitting lonely in the darkness two stories above, say, or across the hall. He could hear the voice of his abandoned sofa: *isn't it time you headed back? When are you coming home? Isn't the sun setting?*

Greg would leave, but not always back to his own flat. Sometimes he would hide in a restaurant instead: most likely a cheap noodle place, with strip lights and cigarette smoke and music, where he could savour the silence of the wipe-clean plastic chairs.

So Plumbe's door was a mirror image of Greg's own door, but with a pair of red paper scrolls hanging on either side, signifying fortune. And behind the door, in the

mirror image of Greg's own living room (but with walls lined with bookshelves and heavy curtains over the windows), waited Plumbe.

Greg knocked. From behind the door came the long, slow creak of an upholstered chair. He heard Plumbe sighing and shuffling slowly to the door, then sighing once more before the unlocking routine: one, two, three, four clunks. Then the door swung open, and here was Plumbe, giving Greg his stern look; or perhaps his appraising look; or perhaps his despairing one.

Plumbe asked him to come in. Sit down. The room held a distinct and complex smell: most immediately, old papers, gathering must and mould; then tea, from the dregs in mugs scattered around the room; then, emanating from his bedroom, some kind of faded spice; and underneath it all, rising from the poorly-plumbed drains, was an ozone reek.

"You don't look well," Plumbe announced, after lowering himself into a comfy chair opposite Greg, "Englishmen rarely thrive outside of their own temperate zone, no matter how much they complain about the weather there. You should eat lots of oranges." Plumbe's eyes narrowed. "Have you lost weight?"

"I've been running."

"Not in *that*, I hope." Plumbe didn't need to indicate the sulphurous haze outside the curtained window. "Any benefits of exercise – and that is assuming you don't get hit by a car or one of those silent scooters of death they have – I assure you any benefits would be *gravely undermined* by the consequences for your lungs. In days like these you are best off staying inside, and with your doors and windows determinedly shut."

"It gets in between the cracks," Greg said.

Plumbe did not respond. Sensible people did indeed keep their doors and windows shut; they also sealed their apartments and ran air filters twenty-four hours a day. Plumbe had no air filter. He slept on a bed of bamboo clinkers and drank water directly from the tap. His resistance to pollution was entirely moral.

"I've seen these *frat boys* running up and down the avenue like they're still back at *Yale*," Plumbe continued. His mid-Atlantic accent drawled contemptuously over the word 'Yale'; Plumbe was a Harvard man. "If we were being poisoned only invisibly, there might be some excuse for it. Youth!" He shook his head. "Greg, you must promise me you will not run around out there in the road, in that smog."

"I go to the gym," Greg said.

"The gym? Pshaw!"

Plumbe moved the conversation forward by pulling a canvas tote bag out from behind his chair. The bag looked heavy; it clinked in a promising way.

"Gin, rum, vodka and *schnapps*. I trust you will have a very merry Christmas." Plumbe pronounced '*schnapps*' with a hearty Germanic rasp; he also pronounced the 't' in 'Christmas'.

"You are welcome to come," Greg said.

"Oh, please. Thank you but no. I'm sure I couldn't keep up with the conversation."

Greg evaluated this comment. He tried to locate it on the scale that ran from joke to slight to outright insult. "This is, uh, a generous gift," he finally said.

"Well, Greg, perhaps you can help me in return. Will that make you feel better?"

Plumbe didn't wait for a reply, but settled back into his chair with undisguised pleasure, and Greg knew that he was in for it today. He would receive the full performance – what Ryan called 'the Professor Plum Revue'. Plumbe had evidently

been looking forward to this. Perhaps he was lonely. People got lonely around Christmas.

"I like to think I am approachable, Greg," Plumbe opened. He made a gesture, pressing his thumbs against his forefingers and holding them before his chest. Greg recognised the gesture, but he didn't know why; it was soft, disingenuous; it conjured an English vicar, backfooted by modernity, trying to seem reasonable in an institutional multi-faith chaplaincy. "I am aware that the 'hands-off' approach that I favour may be seen as an indication that I am uninterested in your work here. All of your work, here in the department. The fact is, my position is quite the contrary. I am very interested in how you are doing, and what you are doing; if you had any problems or questions, I would like to imagine that you'd come to me.

"You can come to me, Greg. But. But don't come to me *first* – I would not want to be the first point of contact for discussing people's problems. I am not a counsellor. And especially not those personal problems that your generation seems to think should be aired in public at the first opportunity. No. Believe me, I do not want to know. I don't care if you call me old fashioned. I am not a *domestic rag* here to sop up your *millennial issues*. I am not an *agony aunt*.

"Don't talk to me about sex, Greg.

"Don't talk to me about who you're *rooting* these days. Don't talk to me about the *travails* of the promiscuous set in an atomised society, how that makes you *feel*, your *bunga bunga* parties, or sex-texting or whatever it is your generation are doing now. I don't know, *penis pictures* on your telephones, I don't know or want to know!"

Plumbe took a moment to compose himself. When he started again, he'd regained his earlier pastoral tone. He put his hands back in the trendy vicar pose.

“However, if you had a genuine problem that you realised was appropriate for discussion in a professional context, I’d like to think you’d bring it to me.”

Greg nodded. Plumbe put his hands down again, satisfied that the gesture had achieved its purpose.

“Correspondingly, Greg, you need to understand that the space that I give you here – all of you, remember – is not an indication that I am uninterested in what you are doing. You shouldn’t feel like I am prying into your work. Quite the opposite. There are already plenty of other people doing that.”

Plumbe lay back further into his chair. He luxuriated in his chair. His eyes ranged over the posters and scrolls adorning his living room.

“How best to put this?” he mused. “Your job is very public. More public than you realise. In fact, I have concluded that in order for you – all of you in the faculty – to operate effectively, it’s best that you don’t realise exactly *how* public, how *exposed*, you are. Let me put it another way: the ceiling above you is very low. I see it as my job to give you... if not the reality, then the illusion of space above your heads.”

“Illusion?” Greg said.

“It’s a benign illusion, Greg. Look. Say, for example, one of your students took offence to something that you said. Let’s say – heaven forbid you should do so – let’s say you mentioned a topic like the Dalai Lama in your class.

“I know that you would never do this, Greg.

“Anyway, let’s say that one of your students wanted to advance his career in the Chinese Communist Party; well, he could do that very easily by denouncing a teacher who had been sharing or even alluding to uh *inharmonious* opinions in class. He could denounce you. He would take his complaint to the appropriate party official

here on campus. Do you know who the appropriate party official for teacher denunciations is, here on this campus?

“Heavens, Greg, do you know how many of your students are signed up members of the CCP? You could ask them if you wanted – it’s no secret! It’s a way to get ahead, for them. The best way. There is no other.

“*In* goes your denunciation,” said Plumbe, gesturing as if he were inseminating a cow, “*into* the machinery of Party bureaucracy. You are monitored. You are discussed in terms that you would find quite alienating, were you given the opportunity ever to hear them. The results of these secret deliberations will emerge, in some way, some day – or perhaps they won’t. You *might* lose your job. The entire department *might* be defunded. Your friends *might* become the subject of, uh, unwelcome interest.

“Or perhaps not. Perhaps nothing will happen at all! The denunciation might have been dropped – dismissed, maybe, or even simply mislaid by some bungler in the relevant *bàngōngshì*. Or not forgotten, but put on hold. Paused, awaiting further information. You will never know.

“So, as I say, Greg, the ceiling above your head – above all of our heads, here – is really very low. And although of course I want you to have your eyes open (it is imperative that you keep your eyes open, Greg), once somebody becomes aware of the proximity of this machinery, working overhead – once he is aware that he has become the object of its attention – then it becomes *very* difficult for him to operate as a Professor.”

Plumbe shook his head. He adopted, for a second or two, an attitude of sullen resignation, his hand under his beard. The Thinker. A moment later he was active again, his eyes alight.



"But here I am!" he declared, thumbing his chest. "Your ally in the school. Your champion. I speak for you – on more occasions than you realise, Greg, and in a wider variety of fora than you could imagine – and even as I do so I provide as best I can the *benign illusion* of space above your heads. So that you can teach. So that you can do the work you have come here to do."

"I haven't been talking about Tibet in my classes," Greg said.

"Nor ever would you!" Plumbe said. "You must have been here for three years, Greg. My most longstanding teacher. You know why you're here and you know you can best accomplish our aims by not getting yourself deported like some young fool!"

They observed one another. Greg thought about the way Plumbe had been holding his hands earlier, while he had been trying to be approachable. Why was it so familiar? He wondered where Plumbe had got it from; whether he had practised in front of a mirror.

Greg wondered, as he often did, whether he was the intended final recipient of Plumbe's speech. He wondered then whether there was an intended final recipient, on earth, for Plumbe's performances; whether every performance – and he had seen many over the years – was merely rehearsal for the real performance, tremendously important and much – perhaps eternally – delayed. He wondered then, in a slight departure, whether every performance of Plumbe's that he saw were merely the earthly manifestation of an ideal performance, extant of its own will and impinging from the abstract into the realm of matter; then, wending back, whether every performance was signalled to an intended recipient who was not visible but was in fact listening intently and with the machinery of reward or punishment at hand.

"You know why you're here," Plumbe repeated.

"I know why I'm here," Greg said.

Plumbe blinked.

“Am I to understand that you will be taking on Ryan’s classes again next term?”  
he asked.

So this was the meat of the matter.

“You knew,” Greg said.

“I hope he is paying you well. I suppose I should be pleased that Master *Hundt* is applying himself to something other than uh, soccer and warm lager. Who would I be to insist he teach the hours he’s paid to teach?” He sighed. He dismissed his pique. “And this way, Greg, he won’t be able to put his foot in it on *my* dime. At least I know that while *you* have his classes, you won’t start sounding off on democracy or Taiwan or Xinjiang or Tiananmen or the *other* thing, God forbid. You wouldn’t do that.”

“You aren’t angry,” Greg felt obliged to say.

“Oh, Greg.” The Professor sighed. He sighed so often, and so expertly! He sighed as if he’d spent his youth practising to be old.

“Three years, we have worked together. Three years, we’ve seen other teachers come and go. Your classes are valued and you are much discussed. I *like* you, pal. We *all* like you.”

An expansive movement of the hands. A return; a legalistic folding. He was a lawyer now.

“I don’t know how you spend your time outside of class and quite frankly I prefer not to. We all have our own ideas of recreation. We all know what we need to feel financially comfortable. If you see fit to earn money by teaching extra classes here at Forestry, then that’s fine by me. And it’s certainly preferable to you

contracting with that *rogue* Kelvin, whom I have seen mooching around outside your gate.”

Greg lowered his eyes meekly. “And Ryan?” he said.

“I assume that Ryan will take advantage of the visa and the accommodation that we have provided him, and write whatever little articles he sees fit to write, and leave us by the coming September. I only hope he is using an alias.”

“He is.”

“What is it?”

“There are loads. I don’t remember.”

“Shame. Do you happen to remember what he’s working on now?”

“Nothing I would want to read,” Greg said. Then, as a special treat just for Plumbe: “He isn’t a serious writer.”

\*

Plumbe’s flat was a mirror image of Greg’s own. Greg watched Plumbe disappear into a room that would be an inverse version of his own bedroom, only dustier, and filled with files and books. Plumbe was fetching some teaching materials for Greg, which usually signalled that the performance was coming to an end. Beside the bedroom door was the door to the kitchen. Another mirror room – although Greg suspected Plumbe had fewer dishes in his sink, less broken glass generally.

The freezer in Greg’s flat contained ice cubes, gin, and dumplings; he wondered what Plumbe’s freezer held. He wondered whether it really held frozen Yankee dollars.

“I’ve been given a present,” he called through the closed bedroom door.

“Fancy that!” Plumbe’s voice called back. “A thank you gift. In anticipation, perhaps, of an excellent grade?”

"It's a scroll, actually, hand-written. A poem. I have a rough copy of it here. It's called... well, I think it's called 'Yellow Crane Tower Sending Meng Haoran to Guangling'."

"Sending Off Meng Haoran *from* the Yellow Crane Tower *to* Guangling," came the reply.

"Oh. Really?"

Exasperated sitcom sigh.

"Yes Greg, *really*."

"It's hard to know who's going to or from where," Greg said to the closed door. "There are very few prepositions. Everything could be everywhere, for all I know."

The door jerked open and Plumbe reappeared. "Welcome to the wonderful world of classical Chinese poetry," he said. Then he stood for a while, scratching his beard. "Well, well," he said. "Li Bai."

"Li Bai?"

"The author of the poem you were given."

"I quite like it actually."

"I could have guessed."

"What do you mean?"

"Li Bai was a famous drunk."

Plumbe passed the clinking tote bag pointedly to Greg.

"Really?" Greg said.

He processed what Plumbe said. He located it on the scale from joke to slight to outright insult. He decided what to do next.

"I was wondering whether you had anything about him, or by him," he said. "I'm interested in reading more. Whatever papers you might have. Back there."

Plumbe had a smile he used when one of the staff members evinced an interest in Chinese history or culture beyond dumplings and karaoke. The smile of a patient and subtle Jesuit who had sparked an impulse towards grace in spite of – perhaps even in some befuddling tricky way *because* of – heathenish custom. It said, *I – long-suffering Prof in deprived school – have reached you. After years of my tutelage, you are finally getting SERIOUS ABOUT CHINA.*

He produced that smile now.

“Of course, my boy,” he said.

He shuffled back to the bedroom.

Greg slipped into the kitchen (yes, it was like his own, only cleaner, with less broken glass). The freezer door opened easily. The compartment slid out without any squeal of ice; no shards fell to melt incriminatingly on the tiles.

There was stacks and stacks of cash. Dollar bills.

Greg ran his finger across the frozen brick of notes. The surface was ridged and rumpled and cold. He held his face above it, as if surveying an aerial map of some distant northern tract, a region of austere promise from which it would be impossible to return.

\*

Plumbe closed the bedroom door behind him and sighed amid the dust and scent. The bedroom contained a single bed with a thin, narrow mattress, and a wall of crooked filing cabinets appropriated from the university. He extracted the papers he wanted and dropped them on the bed. He stood beside the window, and hooked his finger, and pulled open a gap in the curtain. He gazed through this gap into the shaft between this fold of the building and the next. It looked as though the sun was

setting. His thoughts were not mysterious, but mechanical, and they rolled with the certainty of a fairground ride into a tunnel of weightless black.

\*

By the time Plumbe returned, Greg was by the living room door, ready to leave. Plumbe held out a pile of papers and old books. "More teaching material," he said, "this folio for your own edification."

Greg reached out, but Plumbe retracted his hand.

"Translation," he said quietly. "Translation, so. Some people ask: are we not *always* translating? In our interpretive processes, they say, from moment to exalted moment are we not translating the strange into the familiar, the familiar into the strange?"

Greg bit his lip and waited.

"The answer to this question, Greg, is *no*. To descend briefly to the verbal level of our colleague Ryan, it's *bollocks*. It's fucking bullshit, man. Translation is about *linguistics*; it's a serious field of study, not an opportunity for navel-gazing. Or it should be. Still, that's not how certain types have treated it. Do you know how many times this poem of yours has been translated? You'll be surprised to learn."

Plumbe riffled through the papers, back and forth, not really looking at the pages but fanning the air and breathing it in through dilated nostrils, inhaling the aroma of musty paper, tea and spices; that ammoniac smell, rising from the drains. Greg blinked. His eyes watered.

"Traversing the landscape of these translations you may come to understand, like other great thinkers before you – like myself, I mean – that every translation is simultaneously opaque and translucent. A good translation *seems* translucent. You, fool novice, believe that through and beyond it you can see the silhouette of the

original, like a broad mountain ridge, far away. But the translation is actually opaque. That is not a mountain, my boy: it is a pebble, held in place with resin. *Das ding an sich*, this translated poem *as it is*, in fact stands *between* you and those distant mountains, *die dinge an sich*, between yourself and mythic history, beauty, nature, oh-so-sweet release.

“Would a perfect translation, you might ask yourself, sweet ignorant child, provide perfect translucency? Would it open up a window from this world into that sublime realm, that transcendence, that thing, whatever it is, that you desire most in this odd little life of yours?”

Greg was by now nervously fingering the lock mechanism of the door, but Plumbe blocked the outswing with his foot.

“The answer is no. Don’t waste your time. My own survey of translations led me to the conclusion that each author’s work is interesting only to the extent that it represents the overriding interests of the day. In short, Greg, *piracy* and *rapine*. Material interests are inescapable, and material interests are built by force. If you want to work for me, you need to remember that.”

“Uh huh,” said Greg.

“Does Ryan keep time with other Brits? Does he see Americans? Czechoslovakians? Japanese?”

“Everybody, he spends time with everybody.”

“Does he meet these *everybodies* I.R.L. or online? Does he attend clandestine seances in dilapidated basements? Does he uh *chat* with his pals on the World Wide Web?”

“I, I really can’t tell you.”

“Hmm.”

"I don't know."

Plumbe finally handed him the papers. He twitched.

"I only wanted to warn you, my little shark pup, to moderate your expectations when it comes to all this poetry stuff. Translation will not, uh, *heal the shattered psyche*."

"What?"

Plumbe leaned in close. "You can't uncrack an egg, Greg," he sing-songed. "The rat ate the cheese, the cow kicked the bucket, and the house that Greggry built came tumbling down."

He removed his foot from the door. He exhaled, close. Ozone.

"If you are looking to put it all together again, Greg, you're going to need a stronger adhesive."

\*

An itinerant knife sharpener was standing outside the gates to Happiness Mansions, scraping together a pair of resonant blades. There was a pattern to these scrapes, punctuated by pauses, like the call of a wood pigeon in the evening time. Greg passed him as he wandered back to his flat. Climbing the stairs he called Ryan to warn him that Plumbe was on his case. Ryan didn't answer so Greg left a message.

"Ryan, Plumbe knows I'm teaching your classes. He doesn't care but he wants to know what you're doing with your time. He asked me who you're spending your time with. I told him I don't know, I'm not worried about who you spend your time with. And I shouldn't be worried, yeah? It's not like you spend your time playing poker with Nazis."

He hung up and let himself into his flat, which was a mirror of a mirror of a mirror. He didn't turn the light on. At that moment, he couldn't bear to look at his



furniture. He walked in darkness through echoing domestic space and into the bedroom. He deposited Plumbe's gift sack on the floor and pulled out a bottle of something, unscrewed it and drank. Better. He found the bed by touch and considered turning a light on. Soft light would be easier to manage. A table lamp, viewed through a window at night. The bedside lamp was unplugged for some reason, and he fumbled with the electric adaptor under the bed, momentarily plugging in the television, which blared out a split second of what was either static or a thousand men in white shirts, applauding.

The light made a bedroom appear, and Greg found the bottle again – not quite where he'd left it – and drank. Real tequila. He turned the TV back on. It was advertising tanks. On another channel, a general was hosting a panel show. Next, a special song celebrating the role of the Himalayan border guards. Yes, Greg recalled, he was still in Beijing. He watched an anchorman discuss the latest Japanese threats to the Diaoyu Islands – found himself arrested, especially, by the way he was holding his hands – he drank deeply–

And then–

Then he was staring at the bottle in his hand, experiencing a sudden access of emotion.

What was this?

The way Plumbe had held his hands while he was trying to seem reasonable – just like the anchorman on TV – the trendy vicar pose, so familiar–

*Tony Blair*, he thought. *He was channelling Tony Blair, of course – the trendiest vicar of them all.* Plumbe had never visited Britain; presumably he'd been designing to appeal to Greg, who'd been born there, and had been young under New Labour.

That was it: June 1997. Election night. Tony Blair and his clique dad-dancing beneath a blizzard of confetti. It was victory night for Cool Britannia, and all the celebrities were there, riding the buzz. ‘Champagne socialists’ was the word the pundits used, and they scoffed but they smiled as well – because it was fine, yeah, it was forgivable, a little excess was acceptable, they were on the right side. Our side. The song that was playing was called *Things Can Only Get Better* and it was true, things could only get better and they would only get better, because progress was an irresistible historical force. What did progress mean? Progress meant Californian freedoms: free speech and free minds. The ennobled quest for internal truth. Progress meant an endless Summer of Love. Progress was cool.

For a long moment Greg tasted the feeling. He tried to distinguish its elements. There was moral pride: the sense that decency was finally getting a go. Yes, reason was prevailing, aided by its friend technology, and there was this new thing called ‘the Internet’ and it would set everybody free.

Oh and there was the energy of youth and the pleasure of innocence – the promises not yet broken, all of that – but underlying it all, a more basic pleasure. The atavistic pleasure of victory. We were winning. There was a Democrat in the White House. Russia was on its knees. China was a blank space on Greg’s mental map. The Tories were out. We were in. Us, not the others. Our people, not theirs.

\*

The feeling peaked and trailed off. A brief illumination: heat radiation from a distant supernova, long dead. Now the cold was reasserting its presence.

Greg was left with the recollection that he had once been a vegan. He was unwilling to accept the memory. Preposterous. But it was true: a young vegan called

Greg had existed, in vaguely hippyish clothes, endeavouring to minimise the worldwide suffering caused by his personal economic choices.

Then, he recalled, had come a slide: towards broad vegetarianism, to pescatarianism, to lapsed pescatarianism, to the state of being lapsed, pure and simple. The progression from eating a few, choice, processed products, to being able to tease meat from the bone but unable to countenance skin, to fully fledged omnivoracity. Hair and tendons and cartilage and bone; ventricles and valves and membranous skeins; skin pocked with hairy pores.

Greg was a monstrous mouth. It was the spirit of the age.

At least, that was how Ryan justified it. Ryan once sent a list of everything he had eaten in a week to the editor of the *Financial Times*, under the title “Donkey Sausages Zeitgeist”. Ryan said it was important to taste everything. You have to get a nibble of everything, he asserted, before you could work out what was still good, and what was turning, and what was rotten through and through. It was a case of journalistic integrity.

Of course, Ryan was playing poker with Nazis. Right now, probably. He wasn’t answering the phone because he had another playdate with the Genghis Khan Krew.

The Genghis Khan Krew had nothing much to do with Genghis Khan. They were a cadre of young Americans, white *laowais* living around the Wudaokou district, whose acquaintance Ryan Hunt had made at poker games in the district. Greg named them the Genghis Khan Krew after hearing Ryan’s introduction: “Young Republicans, Tea Partiers and worse – politically somewhere to the right of Genghis Khan.”

Ryan had come back to Happiness Mansions after one of his Sunday afternoon games, flushed with excitement at having discovered these specimens and eager to

share his gossip. “It’s extraordinary,” he said, “the range of characters you can meet in this city. *Confirmed* fascists. Right out in plain white sight. They all met each other online.”

The group had first formed over an online first-person shooter called Reich Assault, where they teamed up to lay siege on Stalingrad whenever they could. The siege was ongoing and had taken a terrible toll on their social lives, which was one of the reasons why they’d started meeting I.R.L., over poker.

Ryan described young men with fashy haircuts who couldn’t maintain eye contact. He recounted shit racist puns. He waxed rhetorical on the absurdity of rugged bootstrappy individualists taking refuge from the creeping socialism in their homeland (“‘Obamacare’, they call it; ‘Barack the magic Negro’, they call him”), in a *communist country* – or at least a country that most of the world still *thought* was communist – and maybe that was the point, *eh Greg*, the popular misunderstanding of the nature of Fascism?

Greg had agreed, unsure. Ryan sounded out another article that never came to being. It was going to be called “Adventures with the Genghis Khan Krew”. Greg contributed by suggesting the second ‘K’.

Afterwards, Greg meditated on Ryan’s arguments. The thrust, he decided, was that China had its own fascism; that Chinese and American fascism corresponded with one another; like twin stars, orbiting one another; like mirrors, reflecting back one another’s worst fears and secret desires. If he could understand the draw of Chinese fascism to American fascists, Greg supposed, Ryan might touch something essential in the nature of both.

The reality of what Ryan was doing, as ever, didn’t match Greg’s expectations.

One day Ryan was scheduled to play poker with the Krew and invited Greg along. Greg accepted, for curiosity's sake. The game took place in a Wudaokou frat bar with paddles on the walls. The leader of the Krew was an older man named Banner. That wheezy, obese type of middle-aged exile who kept his own oversized beer stein behind the bar. Banner was a proud Texan. Greg heard him explain multiple times that – where *he* came from – nigger meant 'messy person' and slavery only ended because it was economically unsustainable. Practically welfare.

He claimed to teach English to kindergarteners. Perhaps this was true, or once had been: Banner mother-henned the poker game from start to finish, and his clutch of angry-young-white-men hung on every word. He had an avuncular tone, and a pedagogical way of *enunciating* lengthy items of vocabulary and *spacing-out* short ones that enhanced his pronouncements on strength and identity and Darwin.

One topic that came up again and again was how Democracy Had Failed. Everybody knew it, ever since 2008. Banner kept saying, "look at India," and the other poker players would parrot it. Look at India. India was the big fuck-up. Dirty India was the messy, crowded, inefficient place that proved that Democracy Didn't Work. Dirty Democratic India was falling behind, while autocratic China was Winning. Dirty Democratic Dark-Brown India would fall to pieces any day now. Look at India.

Greg – up to this point a silent spectator, never committing more than his blinds in the game – felt compelled to raise an objection. He tried to recall some of the other things in India's history that might account for its problems; but he found his education was limited in that regard. What had he ever been taught in school about India? And before he could really develop his argument, Banner waded in with his big play.

It was a simple enough trick. He asked everybody in the Krew who believed in democracy to put their hand up; then he asked the same of those who didn't believe in democracy. Greg was outvoted, twelve-to-one. Young men laughed. Young men asked him if he was 'butt-hurt'. The consensus of the Genghis Khan Krew was that Greg had to accept the result of the poll, since he was the Big Fat Believer in Dumbocracy. Ryan, the fearless explorer of the ideological underdark, voted against him.

\*

Greg drank. He wondered what Winnie was up to. He remembered the things Ryan told him, about what he was going to do to make his name as a journalist. He was going to *blow the lid off it*. Off what? The whole thing. The whole caper. Get himself deported. Ryan would get drunk and high and talk about getting to the root of things. Mouths eating mouths.

He would say, *the thing about fascism is that you can be honest, morally. You can let it all hang out. If I were a beastly person – I know we're all beastly people really – but if I were a really grotesque person, in my soul, I could be a fascist and not worry about what people thought.*

He was playing. But it hurt Greg to see Ryan diminishing himself with these fools. Greg knew the GKK were radioactive. With every minute Ryan spent with them, he pushed himself further into moral hazard. It had been going on for months.

Greg's phone buzzed. It was Ryan.

"What's up, bitch," Ryan said.

Greg groaned. He could hear raised voices and laughter in the background. Shit-kicking country music.

"What's up, biiiitch?" Ryan repeated, this time in a funny voice.

"Why do you have to talk like that? You always talk like that when you're with them. Why would you want to sound like that? Like a bully? What, are you going to bully me now?"

"What's up," Ryan said, with a certain tone.

"You're with the Krew right now."

"Yup."

Gret told himself it was all an act. Ryan couldn't say what he wanted to say. He was just being a prick in front of the boys.

"Did you listen to your voicemail message?"

"Nope."

"Listen to your fucking voicemail, Ryan. I'm trying to look out for you."

"Okay, mum."

Greg sighed.

"Why couldn't you be a noodle guy, Ryan? Why couldn't you get into tea? You could have set yourself up as some harmless foodie, gone around the best restaurants in Beijing, written articles about hand-pulled noodles and sauce, and people would have actually read your writing and found it useful. Who knows, you might even have got paid."

"Whatever."

"Tell me you're doing something worthwhile, Ryan."

"I am."

"Good. Tell me it's worth losing your job."

"It is, bitch."

"This is infuriating. It's like talking to a child. It's like I don't know you."

"I know."

"I'm going now."

"Byeeee, muthafuckaaa."

\*

Greg read the materials Plumbe had given him. The poem that Winnie gave Greg was called "Yellow Crane Tower: Sending off Meng Haoran to Guangling". That was the translated title, at least. The real title was written in a different language more than a thousand years ago. Different translators named the poem different things. And it got more complicated from there.

In most versions of the poem, its author was called Li Bai. But in others he was Li Po. And Li Bo, and Li Pai. And Li Taibai, the Householder of Qinglian, the Wine Immortal, Rihaku, Li Bhaek. The spelling of his friend's name changed too – Meng Haoran was also Meng Hao-jan – and sometimes they met at the Yellow Crane Pagoda, or Kiosque or Building – a structure whose exact function was unclear, and which sits on the banks of the Long River, or the Yangzi, or the Changjiang, or the Yang-tze. They met at this place in spring and said goodbye, and part.

But names were names and the substance they masked, whether meat or clay, remained the same whatever you called it. And while every different historian or translator added their own layer of interpretation or prejudice to the story of Li Bai's life, the basic plot remained the same: Li Bai was a drunk. Sure, some commentators disapproved on moral grounds, while others envied his freedom or emphasised the ceremonial or spiritual aspect to the debauchery; but all experts agreed on the bare fact that he was a drunk. He was the author of the lines *life is an illusion, so I drank all day*.



The period of Li Bai's life that produced Greg's poem was called the Road to Chang'an. Li Bai was travelling towards the Empire's capital, hoping to break into the Emperor's court, and discover the destiny that awaited him. But nobody was certain exactly what route the "Road to Chang'an" entailed. The maps were poor and covered in strange loops; sometimes the route seemed to double back on itself. Sometimes the Road to Chang'an involved lengthy sojourns with one noble household. Sometimes it resembled little more than a series of binges at the expense of rich patrons and literary pretenders.

At some point he met his friend, Meng Haoran. Meng Haoran was an old, shy man. A retiring type. This shyness rendered his own career in the court of Chang'an a failure: when one day the Emperor entered the room unexpectedly, Meng Haoran dived beneath a couch to hide. He was a man who preferred to disappear.

Or such was the rumour he promoted, some experts insisted, to spin his failure in court as meekness, not weakness, in the same way that Li Bai attributed his poetic skill to drinking wine, so that his incredible alcoholism might seem romantic and clever, not wasteful, or stupid.

Li Bai told people that wine was an elixir of sorts, like those the immortals drank that made them capable of flight and far vision. They called him the Wine Immortal. He sang for them.

Greg remembered when the prospect of writing poetry, and singing it out loud, seemed reasonable and beautiful and good. He allowed himself to remember Caspar's name, the unusual spelling of it, suggesting continental otherness of the sort that would allow him to say, "let me read you a poem I've written," and be taken seriously. Let me read you a poem. Let's go for a swim.

The evening settled into the night, and then it was bedtime. Greg wondered what Winnie was up to. They didn't have their next class lined up yet and he wasn't sure whether to message her. He recalled their kiss in the cabin of her big car. He masturbated. Floating in post-cum static, his consciousness slid into the memory of the frozen banknotes in Plumbe's apartment. Running his hand over them. Cold on the tips of his fingers. The rilled texture of frozen fibres. The possibility of a signal crime – not for greed or malice, but as a one-way ticket to somewhere so far distant that the very concept of return would, by necessity, be erased; where he could have done with all this nonsense of the unlovely self; and lie down in the cold; and dream.

## Tower

One spring morning in the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang, Li Bai or Li Po or Rihaku or Whathaveyou wakes up early and rides with his retinue to a tower by the banks of the Long River, the Changjiang, the Yangzi, the River at the Centre of the World. The building where he dismounts is called the Yellow Crane Tower or Pagoda or Hall. His friend Meng Haoran or Meng Hao-jan is waiting at the foot of the tower.

Li Bai dismounts with an flourish and Meng Haoran greets him formally. The pair climb the stairs, arm in arm. Li Bai is the younger, and white-haired Meng Haoran the elder. Both men are poets, noblemen and scholars, and it is a fine morning.

The master of the house guides them to a dining chamber set out for a light repast. Li Bai takes a low seat resting on a mat of faded blue brocade; Meng Haoran's mat is red.

Servants scatter before them. Employees of the tower bark at one another in dialect, while the pair's manservants attempt to interpret. They argue about Meng Haoran's luggage. Meng Haoran, being essentially uninterested in material trappings, leaves them to it.

"So, you go to Guangling," Li Bai says eventually. "And you leave me here bereft."

"I regret that business pulls me from you."

"Regret nothing. You are looking forward to enjoying the hospitality there."

Meng Haoran smiles.

"You are a man of the world, old friend," he says, with a twinkle in his eye. "But really I prefer the solitude of the hermitage, where nature can speak to me unsullied by the gibbering of women and the barking of dogs. As well you know."

Li Bai laughs. "Wine!" he calls to the master of the house. "Ten thousand cups of wine!"

Meng Haoran nibbles on a small spiced pie. "Perhaps fewer than that. I must sail soon. And besides, I am not the Wine Immortal. That is your moniker, and well earned. If I tried to drink as much as you, they would have to carry me into the boat."

"Ha ha! I would carry you myself. It would be an honour."

They drink. They eat. Soon they speak of poetry.

"What I most admire in your poems," says Li Bai to Meng Haoran, "is your sense of quiet. I feel as though you transport me to a world of contemplation. And I see many pearls of wisdom in your words that derive from your diligent practice of Buddhism."

Meng Haoran smiles meekly. They clink their bowls of wine together.

"What I most admire in your poems," says Meng Haoran to Li Bai, "is your spontaneous and unaffected expression of noble emotion, and your innovative descriptions. You carry me with you on fantastic journeys of the mind. And your astute study of Daoism flavours your work with mystery."

Li Bai grins broadly. They clink their bowls of wine together.

"Will you take my scrolls?" Li Bai asks. He indicates a hardwood box beneath the window. "There are a dozen poems in it that I have written for you alone."

Meng Haoran nods. "It would be an honour," he says. "I will recite these poems to every person I meet in Guangling – and beyond!"

Li Bai smiles. He drinks another bowl of wine. "Will you write?" he asks.

"Of course," his friend replies. "And you?"

"I will write immediately. I selected this dining house because of its impressive view of the river. When the sad time comes for us to part, I intend to observe your

departure from up here. I will compose for you a suitable send-off, and entrust it to the next packet-boat. When it reaches you, it will sweeten the pain of departure.”

Meng Haoran says nothing, but looks, through the ornately framed window, at the view of the river beneath them. Gulls circle and dive above the surface of the water. Their calls fall through the clear air.

When Meng Haoran turns back, it is slowly, gingerly – the action of an old man with stiff muscles – and Li Bai detects the glimmer of a tear forming beneath his friend’s bushy brow. The pair clinks their bowls of wine together one last time.

**GONE**, by Li Po

At the Yellow-Crane pagoda, where we  
stopped to bid adieu

The mists and flowers of April seemed  
to wish good speed to you.

At the Emerald Isle, your lessening sail had  
vanished from my eye.

And left me with the River, rolling onward  
to the sky.

*Herbert A Giles*

## Black Cat Café

Jenny was sorry she hadn't bought Greg a real Christmas present. She was having trouble finding the money to pay for her English classes, now that she was sitting an exam every week.

"Don't worry," she told Greg, with a winning smile, "I can still pay *you!*"

"Okay," said Greg. He wanted a drink.

"And anyway, commercials are not the Spirit of Christmas," Jenny continued, "the Spirit of Christmas is the Holy Spirit and Peace on Earth."

"The 'holy spirit' is a religious concept," Greg said.

"Yes!"

Greg flinched.

"But the 'spirit of Christmas' is more like an atmosphere," he persisted. "Like, if you are going to have a party, you want everybody to have a good time together. You want everybody to *get into the spirit* of it."

"Get into the spirit of it."

"But it can be more than just an atmosphere," Greg continued. "The spirit of a time or place can be a shared set of ideas or values. So we have the phrase, 'the spirit of the age'. The spirit of the age is what everybody in one place is thinking and talking about at once, all together. And even though each one of these people may think they're experiencing their own thoughts as individuals, really their thoughts, words and actions can only ever be understood as extensions, iterations or manifestations of that guiding spirit. And even though we have the phrase, that a tree that doesn't bend in the wind will break, which means the spirit of the age shouldn't be resisted, any kind of meaningful resistance is arguably impossible."

"Get into the spirit of it," Jenny breathed, pushing her pencil over the page.

“Although the existence of state apparatus to isolate and punish members of society that do resist the spirit of the age suggests that it is not so monolithic a construct as the previous somewhat simplistic, if romantic, statement suggested.”

“Can I say, ‘get into the spirit of Christmas’?”

“You certainly can.”

“Greg, will you get into the spirit of Christmas?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Jenny smiled. Greg quailed.

“Actually,” he admitted, “I’m going to have a party.”

“I like parties!”

“Are you going to have a party?”

“Yes. Well... *although* it is not a party, *however* I feel like it is a party. I am going to my church. *Although* it is a house, *however* it is a church. We are going to have a midnight *mess*.”

Greg giggled.

“Same here,” he said.

\*

In one of his pitches for an article that would never get written, Ryan had described the crossroads outside Wudaokou metro station ‘red hot real estate’ for street vendors, who were drawn by the district’s huge student population. He’d gone on to praise the vendors’ ‘essentially Chinese entrepreneurial spirit’ in the face of ‘essentially Chinese bureaucratic hostility to entrepreneurialism’. It’s unclear whether Ryan himself knew when he was joking.

It was true that the area would bloom periodically into an impromptu open market. The manifestation followed mysterious rhythms. Some days the



thoroughfare would remain clear. Some days, an undersized band of vendors would be chased away by the municipal security forces almost as soon as they arrived. But occasionally, following the transmission of some occult signal, a horde of vendors would appear, creating a warren of goods-laden electronic tricycles that spilled from the station entrance to the square, down the pavements, up against the crowd-control barriers and into the intersection itself.

The carts displayed an astonishing variety of synthetic and biological desirables. There were clothes, shoes, hunting knives; air masks decorated with the faces of endangered animals; teddy bears; beads; books; baby turtles in jars and fish in bags; electronic novelties; dogs and cats; fake Tibetan artefacts and real Tibetan artefacts, and glittering plastic fingernail extensions with crisp polyethylene wrappers, snapping in the wind. There were food carts: corn, fruit, roast yam and chestnut, candied haw, fried sausage, skewered lamb, and spiced broth with lotus and seaweed and pork and crab and tofu.

Greg's first encounter with Wudaokou's vendors produced a kind of shame in him. He had started feeling embarrassed, as a consumer, for the paucity of his appetites. Britain, he began to conceive, was a mean place. Britain was coffee in paper cups; it was cold pasties out of motorway service stations. It could never match the diversity displayed before him here, by chancers with fingerless gloves and desperate eyes.

That peasant wonder had since been replaced by irritation. The vendors blocked the intersection: when the market manifested, what was already a busy thoroughfare became impassable. Greg and Jenny were coming to the end of class when they realised that the street outside was clogging up. They watched through the steamed-up first-floor window as foot traffic outside reached a standstill.

“What do you think of the street vendors?” Greg asked.

“I pity them,” Jenny said.

“Don’t you think it’s annoying when they get in the way? I mean, I know nobody likes the *chengguan* – and I hear they’re pretty brutal when they clear them out – but how else can you get the traffic moving?”

Jenny wrinkled her nose. She said the vendors came from poor villages and should be commended for striving to improve the conditions of themselves and their families; she didn’t use those exact words and the pronouncement took ten minutes in total, including notation and eye rolling and exasperated groaning.

Eventually she just started talking in Chinese. Greg couldn’t disallow it – class was basically finished. He gritted his teeth and endured the tables being turned. He could follow most of what she was saying, until she dropped her voice for some reason, and he got stuck on a word that she pronounced particularly quietly.

“You say we have to *rén* them?” he asked.

“*Rèn* them,” she whispered. “Falling tone.”

“What does *rèn* mean?” Greg asked. Before Jenny could answer, however, he was already looking the word up on his phone.

“We should bear them,” Jenny said.

“No, that’s not right. We wouldn’t say in English that we should ‘bear’ them. That sounds silly.”

Jenny made a face. Greg wondered whether anybody else in the café could hear them. It was quiet. Gypsy jazz was playing over speakers, in keeping with the boho-Parisian chinoiserie of the décor.

Finally he found the character.

“Ah,” he said, loudly, “we should *tolerate* them.”

"We should toler-ate them," Jenny said.

"*Rèn*," Greg told her, "means tolerance or forbearance."

"For-bearance," Jenny said, very quietly, as if it were a taboo word. Her eyes ranged the room.

"Yes," Greg told her, "that's what *rèn* means."

"We should personify compassionate forbearance, and orient our hearts to the revelation," Jenny pronounced, flawlessly.

"What?"

"Do you have bears in England?"

"Um, I uh... I think I see where you have got confused." Greg tried and failed to generate the focus to continue. He ended the lesson with vague sounds and gestures. Jenny paid up promptly.

\*

Greg was usually careful to leave the location of any class separately from his student. After accepting payment he spent five minutes in the toilet. The cubicle was cold; its small window was left open to dilute the acridity of its overflowing ashtray. The place felt like a monastic cell to Greg. Even the blobs of sputum on the floor seemed meditative: evidence of quiet times, thought without speech.

Greg analysed a handmade sign that had been pinned to the cubicle door. Beneath the elaborate Black Cat Café letterhead, a hand-written message warned customers against 'flushing papers'. Underneath, someone had added a cartoon of a spy in a fedora and trenchcoat stuffing files into a toilet bowl. Inspired by this collaborative creativity, somebody else had added the legend, 'FUCK JAPAN'.

Above this sign was a new poster, advertising a computer game called Defence of the Eastern Realm; a ninja panda bear faced off against a venerable sage with the ability to fly.

There was something striking about this poster. Greg realised that he had seen it before. Many times, most likely. He'd always ignored its contents, but he realised that it had been designed to appeal to somebody. It was like poor Winnie's horses. He wondered how this poster worked. A panda and a sage in a halo of electric fire. He wondered what code it communicated, to those in the know.

\*

Greg headed down to the street-level exit. His heavy puffer jacket swished with every step down the narrow staircase; putting on his gloves, he was decided it was early enough to head to a bar.

But Jenny was still there, at the foot of the stairs. She was staring through the glass door at the crush of people outside. The vendor colony had annexed this side of the road, right up to the café door; it was going to require aggression just to get out. Jenny, who had no aggression whatsoever, was stuck. She seemed locked in a reverie, her face close to the window, gazing at the scene outside.

"I don't want to go out there," Greg heard her murmur, in Chinese.

He hovered for a while behind her, quietly. She was wearing a long white down-filled coat with a hood and large pink pom-poms on the togs. A lock of hair was hanging out of the hood, beside her right cheek; Greg watched it smear against the condensation on the pane as she looked from side to side. This irregularity did not bother him. He felt no compulsion to reach out and flick it away from the glass.

He merely observed the lock of hair stick in twisted sprays to the mist on the pane. He did not need to bat it away. He wasn't angry. No desire to hurt anybody, hit anything. This was a noticeable absence: a sweetness; an aftermath quiet.

*Forbearance*, he thought. *Rèn*.

Eventually he revived himself.

"Would you like me to go first?" he said, in a gentlemanly tone.

"Waa!" said Jenny. She span around. Greg smiled pleasantly but she forced the door open and pushed outside as if he were chasing her. He flushed. He huffed. He would have waited, but a pair of Yaleys appeared on the stairs behind him. Greg followed Jenny outside.

There was a square of frozen earth outside the café entrance that had once held a tree. Now it was a dump for vendor refuse: heaps of greasy papers, skewers and meat. To Greg's left, a man with fingerless gloves was frying a wokful of stinky fermented tofu. As the vendor stirred it, it sent a spray of steam up into the frigid air, its funk somewhere between silage and dank cannabis smoke.

To Greg's right, a woman in an old padded cotton jacket had parked an electric cart stacked with English-language books on leadership and money. *Habits of Effective Beasts*. *Steve Jobs*. *Leadership Secrets of Genghis Khan*. *Tundra Frigonomics*. *Smash Your Success*. *Destroying It*. A passer-by knocked a biography of George W Bush to the ground; the vendor returned it to the pile upside-down. Her hand was bandaged, her fingers clumsy. It was cold.

Greg walked through the rubbish pile without resentment. This was Wudaokou, after all. He'd given up on feeling indignant towards litterbugs when he'd first seen a vagrant overturn a rubbish bin onto the pavement to screen for recyclables. Now, he

himself enjoyed littering, knowing that he was playing a vital role in a delicate ecosystem.

Ahead of him, Jenny lifted the skirt of her down above the last kebab stick and slipped into the file of pedestrians beyond. Greg followed.

Shortly thereafter, chaos overwhelmed them both.

\*

It was like this. First, two things happened at once. Then, so many things happened at once that it was as if no one thing were happening at all: nothing or perhaps everything. Vortex. As if, after two perfect spheres collided, a thousand splinters exploded across the junction. And afterwards, since there was no report of the event, in any newspapers, on the TV or online; and since nobody succeeded in sharing any footage of it, it was possible to believe that nothing really had happened. It had all been an illusion. But it seemed pretty realistic at the time.

\*

Blue flashes illuminated the smog in the street off the south side of the junction. The vendors looked towards the light and saw striped pick-up trucks.

“*Chengguan lai le*,” somebody called, and suddenly the first complete event was happening: the municipal security forces had arrived to clear the street.

After the arrival of the *chengguan* had been registered by the outlying vendors, and communicated to the main body that was blocking their escape – and stock was already being reloaded onto carts, evasive manoeuvres already being attempted – the second complete event occurred.

Out of the shadow of the elevated metro line crossing the junction’s east exit emerged a towering, improbable form. It could have been an ancient hay wain, but it carried bales of used polystyrene packaging. The load of foam blocks extended far

out over the wheelbase of the vehicle – a venerable petrol-powered tricycle – and upwards almost to the beams of the metro line above.

Perched at the front of the trike with one gloved hand on the accelerator grip, the driver was wearing a cap and resting a cigarette on his lips like a straw of grass. His expression was of perfect unconcern as he trundled through a red light into the intersection. The vision of bucolic serenity was completed by the presence of a youth, lounging on the peak of the polystyrene load, complacently doing something with his phone.

*“Chengguan lai le!”* somebody called.

The cart was punched side-on by a southbound truck.

It was a powerful impact, although well cushioned. The stack teetered sideways, and its structural integrity started to fail: it deformed; it rippled and twisted; cracks and crevasses appeared between the white stacks of pallets – into one of these the complacent youth disappeared, the phone flying out of his outstretched hands. The stack hit the tarmac and exploded like a lightbulb. Whole pallets, and fragments of pallets, and a spray of tiny white plastic planetoids flooded the intersection, blocking the vendors’ escape route.

That was the second complete event.

After that, fragments.

\*

*Chengguan lai le!*

Greg was struck on the back by the book cart, whose owner had reversed to avoid the nose of the vanguard *chengguan* vehicle, which speared into the crowd like a shark into a bait shoal. Somebody shrieked – another person shrieked – and a girl wearing a polyester panda hat crossed her hands across her chest and a

Hokusai crest of boiling oil lapped over the edge of the tofu vendor's wok and glistened in a flash of blue light. Vendors started to wade into the knee-high drift of polystyrene, hauling their wares behind them, and somebody's puppies howled, joining the hooting of horns from cars blocked on all four sides of the intersection, and the vanguard pick-up became so hemmed in that its passengers – frustrated young men in green uniforms and white trainers – couldn't open their doors, but wound down their windows and started hollering orders with all the authority their young voices carried, all six of them, a concentrated mass of furious, pasty, scantily whiskered faces.

Then the violence started. Greg watched a trapped commuter lose his temper and overturn a juicing cart; the commuter was then inaccurately struck at by the juicer, who – in classic comic-book style – landed his punch in the eye socket of the panda-hatted girl, before the scene was overtaken by a wave of movement, the mass forcing Greg into the polystyrene scree, and the swell raised and crashed in a sizzling cross-surge of froth, bodies disappearing into the whiteness and reappearing upended, a hand or a foot or a face gasping for air. Somebody was screaming. Somebody couldn't breathe.

Now Greg was standing again, spitting polystyrene. Now a second *chengguan* pick-up unloaded its crew, who set about seizing carts and beating vendors with batons and Greg was pushed and tussled briefly with somebody who might have been Jenny, then lost her in the vortex, and looked but couldn't find her white down coat with pink pom-poms, nor her eyes, which might have fallen on him briefly after the impact, as the rancid tofu oil slopped over the side of the wok into the frozen earth where once had been a tree.

\*



As the crowd metastasised north, into and through the polystyrene scree, Greg followed the progress of the bookseller. She was nimble on the flat, capable of squeezing the tricycle through narrow passes; but when she had to lift one of its wheels onto the curb she ran into trouble. Her bandaged hand was a liability. So while the stronger, more aggressive vendors were muscling their way out, she was being left behind.

The *chengguan* eventually singled her out.

She was in a shallow drift of polystyrene waste with an open escape route ahead when the first officer grabbed her cart. He could slow it, but not stop it; for a while, the bookseller simply towed him. Then the officer called one of his mates, who seized another corner, and between them they brought the cart to a halt.

The bookseller had started shouting at the moment the officer laid hold of her cart. She spoke quickly, shrilly, in a non-Beijing dialect; Greg couldn't understand a word she said. Now she jumped off the cart (a sudden lurch backward, more comedy as the second officer tumbled into the drift); then she pushed from the front, directing all her weight through her good arm while her injured hand waved in the air.

There was a brief tug of war. The boys won.

The bookseller pulled one of the officers' hands off the back of the cart. He pushed her and she fell. Standing over her, ready to unbutton the baton looped in his belt, the officer noticed a nearby foreign student, filming him on his phone. The foreigner was a youthful, good-looking white man with blonde hair and a hoodie that said 'Yale'. He brandished his phone with self-righteous certainty.

"Mind your own business," the officer said, in Chinese.

The bookseller remounted the cart. She managed about two metres before three sets of arms again seized it, and Greg turned away. He could still hear her protesting. Perhaps she was crying.

Greg felt adrenaline now. It made him feel cold, and small, and far away. He found himself remembering a nature documentary he had seen at an early age. One clip in particular: a wildebeest struggling to free itself from the weight of a lioness that had fastened itself by the teeth to its neck. He remembered the way in which the wildebeest's eyes remained wide open throughout the encounter, staring vividly into a locus of space not far from the camera while the lioness bore her weight down upon it; while it fought; while its struggles became weaker – even at the point of extinction.

What was it about those wide-open eyes? Was it desperation they held? No – something more basic: pure wild terror; adrenal reflex; or just the mirrored blue emptiness of the space into which it stared.

Greg was sure it was a blue space, although – since the clip was one of the first he ever saw – he was equally sure that he'd watched it on a black-and-white set. He must have coloured the image afterwards: the tawny lustre of the lioness's fur; the foam-flecked chestnut brown of the wildebeest's pelt; yellowish teeth; vivid gore; the blue irises aimed at a space – a blue space, just up there... just out of frame...

In his adrenalised state, Greg wondered which details he would remember later, which details he would change. Was there blood seeping from the bandage on her hand? Was the officer really wearing sunglasses? Did he really hold a baton in the air above her? Did a gust of cold wind lift a coil of white plastic particles from the surface of the scree, send it spiralling up about the officer's body to create –

fleetingly – a comic-book aura of power? Was this farce happening at all? How to erase this?

\*

Greg drew himself out of the crowd, using techniques of lateral aggression honed on the Beijing metro. He pushed people too hard and it made him feel better, more in control. He swore and gritted his teeth. He looked for Jenny but couldn't find her, then braced his back against a crowd-control barrier and waited for the scrum to disperse.

The *chengguan* had seized enough carts to fill the beds of both pick-up trucks. But they'd bitten off more than they could chew. The *chengguan* specialised in fast strikes and running battles; Greg had seen them chasing dispersed groups of vendors up and down Chengfu Road. Now they faced a cornered enemy that outnumbered them ten to one. They weren't equipped for a riot.

The rearmost pick-up moved quickly, and was soon hauling its load of seized carts back down the road to the south, parallel with the elevated metro line. The first truck, however, was snared up in the crush, and vendors started pulling goods and equipment back off the bed. The pick-up stopped, bucked forward and back, and reversed in a tight arc as more vendors converged to reclaim their seized wares. By the time it was free of the crowd, the bed of the pick-up was half empty, trailing an ugly tail of conjoined and twisted carts. Steel corners raised sparks as they scraped along the concrete; wheels span uselessly in the air. Somebody called Greg's name.

\*

It wasn't Jenny. She was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Greg was disappointed to see Kelvin waving at him from across the street. He stood on the northwest corner of the intersection, behind the last drift of splintered polystyrene, as if on the bank of a

filthy river. For some reason, he was dressed in a flat-rimmed baseball cap with black, lensless glasses, a bicoloured baseball jacket, and blue jeans. He looked like a Korean exchange student. He motioned Greg over, grinning.

The crowd was dissipating, but the quickest route across was still through the scree. The chunks of polystyrene creaked and squeaked and rolled beneath Greg's shoes, provoking a kind of nervous prickliness. He winced as he walked. He tried not to think of nails being pulled back from fingers.

A regular police car had pulled up near the bookseller's cart, and a blue-uniformed officer was now standing beside the foreign student who'd been filming with his phone. The officer was talking into his radio. The student was blushing hard, glaring indignantly at passers by, less outraged by his arrest than by the indifference of the crowd. He locked eyes with Greg for a moment, demanding racial sympathy. But Greg turned away. There was, Greg judged, something complacent about the demand. The student would be boasting about this, later. He would be telling Ole China stories with other Yaleys, similarly tall and blonde and good looking, just as soon as he was back on safer shores.

Greg's foot nudged something solid beneath the debris. A book. He reached down and drew out *Tang: Economic Secrets of the Golden Age*. The front cover showed a classical Chinese painting of a mountainous landscape with a wide blue river, teeming with colourful sailboats. He pocketed the book.

Then he felt around a bit with his foot. Perhaps there were more books down there. He cleared a little spot in the polystyrene.

He found a pom-pom.

The pom-pom was pink and clean, freshly fallen. It was attached to a length of soft cord that terminated in torn stitches. Spiralling around the length of the cord was a single dark hair.

Greg froze. This pom-pom was the same size as Jenny's. The one on her jacket.

Was this pom-pom the same size as Jenny's?

Greg pictured Jenny making her way across the road. He saw her as he'd seen her from the foot of the café stairwell, facing away with her hood up. Pom-poms dangling. Could she have come here? Could she have fallen?

He pictured her following the space left behind the bookseller's tricycle, the polystyrene ahead of her a white blur. A lone figure in the snow.

Greg felt the coldness returning – the sense of being far away, flung adrift. He barely resisted as waves of pedestrians jostled him to the north side of the road.

"Bro! Bro!" Kevin was barking, his grin less sure than before. "Bro! How's it hanging, bro?"

"Did you see all of that?" Greg asked.

"That was a real royal rumble," Kelvin affirmed.

"Yeah – no – were you here the whole time? There was an, um..." Greg looked for his words, "...vendor, here, with a book cart. She was fighting with the *chengguan*. That guy over there was filming—" Greg turned to see the foreign student being ushered into the back of a police car. "Did you see a woman in a white down jacket with pink pom-poms?" he asked. He showed Kelvin the pom-pom in his hand.

"No, bro," Kelvin shrugged. "I was upstairs in this Korean joint. I just saw you out here street fighting – thought I'd come down. Best you get outta the street bro."

Greg took out his phone. He called Jenny but there was no reply: four flat ring tones, then a click and a pre-recorded message: a soothing female voice saying “*Duì bù qǐ*”; then, in a slurred American accent, “Saw-rry”.

“It’s probably nothing, bro,” said Kelvin, “let’s get outta here.” He lit a cigarette. “What, you lost your girlfriend, hey? She probably give you the slip.”

“I’m serious, Kelvin.”

Greg called Jenny again. Kelvin took the pom-pom from his hand and grimaced at it. “Seriously, bro, that could be anybody’s pom,” he said, as Greg listened to the ringing, “Look all the trash round here. Your girlfriend’s probably just pissed with you. Let’s get outta here.”

Click. *Duì bù qǐ*. Sorry.

Greg stared at the overturned trike whose load had spread across the tarmac. It had been pulled up onto the pavement where it lay like a scuppered hulk. He realised that he hadn’t seen the trike driver since the crash – nor the youth from on top of the pile. “I don’t see any ambulances...” he muttered, mainly to himself. He wasn’t panicking.

He wasn’t panicking but he felt cold and far away, standing on the bank of the river as the light faded, water drying cold on his bare skin. No. He looked down. He was clothed. Bundled up, even. He took off his gloves and examined his hands. They were dry. It was winter. He was in Beijing. Kelvin eyed him over his flaring cigarette end while he stood, stranded, watching the moving crowd. Perhaps half a minute passed. Kelvin started to clap his hands together. He seemed alert, but distracted.

Greg’s phone beeped. A message. From Jenny.

Hello! Why did you call?

Greg let out a long breath.

"See, I told you it's nothing, bro, it's all good," Kelvin said. "Hey, like I say, pal, I'm up in a Korean place upstairs. You wanna grab a cold one? Sure look like you would use it. I'm just finishing up a business meeting, no problem, you can kibbutz."

"You're with a friend?" Greg said.

"A business partner, but no problem, you can kibbutz. We're nearly done anyway."

Kelvin indicated the tall corner building beside them. Its first four storeys were given over to restaurants and bars, and resembled a tiered pagoda, with upturned eaves traced in neon flourishes, and dangling red lanterns. Above and behind the façade, a residential tower reared into the smog. Midway up was a neon sign in roman letters: Golden EnterPrize Plaza.

## Golden Enterprize

Perhaps it was relief; perhaps it was the green-tinted lobby windows, which gave the light an underwater aspect, as if the dust motes hanging in the air were slow settling flecks of harbour silt; but as soon as Greg entered the lobby of Golden EnterPrize Plaza, he knew he'd crossed a threshold into a new realm. The heavy manual doors clunked shut behind them, blocking out the sounds of the junction. It was quiet. Greg asked Kelvin to wait while he composed a message for Jenny.

Jenny, I'm glad you are okay! You were right next to me and then you disappeared! Did you lose your pom-pom in the crowd? If you did, I think I found it. I can bring it to our next class. Greg

He sent the message, Kelvin ground his cigarette butt out on the tiled floor, and they took a lift to the third storey.

The lift moved with venerable slowness. The enforced proximity and silence eventually compelled Kelvin to pull *Tang: Economic Secrets of the Golden Age* out of Greg's jacket pocket and study it.

"Tight book, bro," he said, patting the volume back into place as the lift door opened.

The bar was called CHEEMA Bar. It was large, and empty, and decorated with posters advertising Chamisul *soju*, Hite beer, and that same online fantasy game, Defence of the Eastern Realm. There was the scent of *kimchi*.

Kelvin led him to an enclosed booth on the southeast corner, with tinted windows overlooking the intersection and metro station. An incomplete residential



development emerged from the haze behind the elevated metro line. Yellow-painted construction cranes stood motionless beside the black-eyed tower blocks.

A man was waiting there, with his back to this vista, and an untouched bottle of Hite on the table before him. Kelvin's business partner, presumably. He had a pale, thin face and hostile eyes. He was squarely middle aged – at least twenty years older than Kelvin, or indeed any of the bar's other clientele of Korean exchange students. Perhaps this was why he projected such awkwardness: he sat bolt upright in a starched cotton shirt, his hands poised above the surface of the table with the painful deliberateness of a ballerino.

Awkwardness. Threat. Greg felt a recurrence of the physical sensitivity he'd experienced crossing the squeaky polystyrene scree. Bent nails, ground teeth, cracking knuckles.

The man didn't seem surprised to see Greg. He pointed to himself with a thumb whose nail had been pared back to the quick.

"Chen Xu," he said.

Kelvin ushered Greg towards a seat and started clicking his fingers for service.

"I'm real sorry," Kelvin said, once he had ordered and sat, "Chen Xu don't speak English so good."

"No problem," said Greg. He pointed to his own chest and said his name. Then he completed a practised series of gestures: a broad nodding of the head; a vacant smile; a shrug, with open, empty hands. Regret, humility and goodwill.

Then, in accordance with some misplaced social instinct, Kelvin did the same. It was an unusual performance. Chen Xu watched the double act impassively. His skin was clammy, like fish flesh. Perhaps he was sick.

"You don't mind me joining you?" Greg asked Kelvin.

"Oh, no problem. We're done rapping."

"It's *kibitz*, by the way, not *kibbutz*."

Kelvin blinked slowly.

"Same same," he said.

"So how do you know each other?"

"Chen Xu is a teacher," Kelvin said. "He busts his ass at the same job we do."

"Ah" Greg laughed, "so you're telling people you're a teacher now, Kelvin."

"I bust my ass teaching *gongfu* to forty little fucking kids a week, Greg."

"You're still a student. You haven't handed in your dissertation."

"Oh fuck. You been rapping with Professor Plum about that?"

Greg hadn't been rapping with Professor Plum about that. All the staff knew that Kelvin hadn't written his dissertation, since Kelvin had already offered three teachers a significant sum to write it for him, just like his other essays.

"His name's *Plumbe*, pronounced *plume*," Greg said.

"Why you so uptight today, Greg?"

"I'm shaken up! I was just in a riot!"

Kelvin expelled air between his lips in an unimpressed manner.

"Well," Greg conceded, "near enough a riot." Out of the window, he saw that a band of senior citizens with red armbands had materialised and were sweeping the polystyrene bits to the side of the road.

"I know why he's uptight," Kelvin told Chen Xu, apparently forgetting that the man didn't speak English. "It's cos of that piece of tail he likes to hook up with in the Black Cat Café. He tell me she went missing. I think maybe she ran away."

"I found her pom-pom on the ground," Greg explained to Chen Xu. Absurdly.

"What's the matter, bro? She not giving it up to you?"

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Lack of pussy make a man uptight,” Kelvin said authoritatively.

Greg flinched. “You’re talking about a student of mine, Kelvin,” he warned.

“Since you’re claiming to be a teacher now, you should know the limits of a student-teacher relationship.”

“You sound like Professor Plum!”

Kelvin wasn’t wrong. Greg was in fact paraphrasing a lecture Plumbe had given him on his first day of employment at the university, between opening up his new apartment and showing him the location of the gas cock.

“Whatever. I teach a student at the Black Cat Café every week.”

“He’s gone red!”

“I am not blushing.”

“Yes you are. It’s easy to tell cos you’re white.”

“I teach a student at the Black Cat Café, although I don’t know why I’m even talking to you about it, because really it’s none of your business!”

“You teach my sister. That’s my business.”

Greg didn’t say anything. He was thinking about the words he’d said and the tone he’d used to say them. He didn’t always like his teacher voice, which did sound uncomfortably like Plumbe’s. Greg didn’t always like the things he taught. The version of English he was pushing – an English he had never spoken before, staid and defensive. He didn’t like to hear Plumbe talking through him.

“You like that café? Black Cat Café?” Kelvin asked.

“It’s fine. The coffee is expensive.”

“Maybe should be careful. There are some real characters there, bro.”

“You mean the missionaries?”

“Yeah.”

“They leave me alone.”

“They come in the student dorms sometimes, man. Giving out uh, papers. Crazy papers. My tenants told me.”

“Well, they leave me alone,” Greg said. And then, after a beat: “You have tenants? In the university dorms?”

“Yeah. I got this uh *initiative* going on. I got keys to a couple of rooms, you know, and set up a couple bunk beds. I rent them out for a week at a time – sometimes a night, if you know what I’m saying. Sometimes just for a couple hours in the afternoon, if you know what I’m saying, and you can have the whole room to yourself. Eh, Greg? I charge pretty reasonable, especially since I laid out for them beds myself and I have to split it with the uh, whaddayoucallem, the *janitors*.”

It took a while for Greg to work out what this meant. “Jesus Fuck,” he blurted out eventually, “you’re subletting broom cupboards.”

“What?”

“You are subletting broom cupboards.”

It struck Greg that the reason he couldn’t always deal with Kelvin appropriately was that he disbelieved in Kelvin. That wasn’t to say he didn’t believe Kelvin’s words. He didn’t think Kelvin was lying about the broom cupboards, or anything else – at least, not lying in any deeper sense of the word. But Greg disbelieved *in* Kelvin. His disbelief was fundamental, corresponding to the totality of Kelvin. Each individually credible but ridiculous part of him, from his Korean get-up to his preposterous faux-bro mashing of the English language, combined to a whole that Greg ultimately refused to countenance.

It struck Greg that the totality of Kelvin was vast and absurd. A marvel. A shadow with the texture of a man, glimpsed in fragments.

“Uhhh... yes. *I am subletting broom cupboards,*” the marvel said, pronouncing the new vocabulary carefully.

“That’s not something to put on your CV, Kelvin,” Greg blurted. He found himself turning to Chen Xu for moral support. “This guy!” he said.

But Chen Xu ignored him, motionless, gripping the top of his beer bottle.

*Amphibian*, Greg thought.

“Listen,” Kelvin said, “I’m responding to a need. I took the initiative. Got bros living ten beds to a dorm in that place. Know what that’s like in summer? Everybody eating pork and cabbage dumplings for dinner. And not just the guffing, Greg. Bros gotta bust a nut, Greg.”

Greg didn’t give this pearl of wisdom the attention he might. He was looking at the beer bottle in Chen Xu’s hands, keeping the white blur of Chen Xu’s face in his peripheral vision. He was trying to remember the name of the albino newt that inhabited the shrinking lakes on the Mexican plateau.

“Long summer nights, Greg,” Kelvin persisted. “No-one sleeps. Ten bros in one dorm busting their nuts.”

Axolotl. That was it, Greg realised: Chen Xu reminded him of an axolotl. A slimy white newt thing that came from the bottom of a canal. Greg recalled learning that there was something wrong with axolotls, as a species. They were mutants of some kind.

“Got their girlfriends way over in the girl dorm,” Kelvin said in a wistful voice. “Can’t get to em. Can see em going in and out the shower block, Greg. Can’t get to em. Girl dorm janitors are strict, bro.”

An axolotl is a perpetual juvenile. If it is given a certain growth hormone, it will transform into a regular salamander. But if that never happens (and why should it?), an axolotl will never really grow up. It will remain a blobby white tadpoley *thing* with its bulbous helmet and a ruff of external gills.

“Well I bust my ass for my bros! I’m providing a service! You’re welcome, have a nice day!”

Perhaps Kelvin expected laughter. But Greg was still thinking about axolotls and Chen Xu. It pleased him to think he’d recognised a fundamental fault in the man. That would explain the animosity he felt: instinct. His base brain had detected an intrinsic flaw in the man, the exact nature of which he would one day discover.

Yes, perhaps Chen Xu had been born without eyebrows and had to draw them on every morning. Perhaps he had a fleshy curtain over his arsehole that had to be cleaned with a special tool.

Or maybe – better – there was something psychologically wrong with him. He looked like a creeper, Greg thought; perhaps a peeper.

Greg drained his beer bottle.

“You ought to put a camera in there, Kelvin,” he said. “Make some movies and sell them – or how about pay-per-view?! That way, it pays for itself twice over. You can make a real return on that outlay.”

Kelvin considered this proposition while signalling for more drinks.

“Nah,” he said eventually. “No-one wanna see those pasty asses bobbing up and down. No talent in Forestry anyway. The babes are all in Material Science.”

“You are the worst human being I have ever met,” Greg said, grinning at Chen Xu. Then he got an idea. “Hey – have you considered blackmail?”

Kelvin smiled.

Then Kelvin said: "Hey bro, so you been rapping with Professor Plum. So did you uh, find out anything more about what I told you? About uh, Professor Plum's freezer?"

Greg failed to respond fast enough.

"You did, didn't you? You seen it. It's true!" It was Kelvin's turn to smile at Chen Xu. Greg got the unsettling impression that Chen Xu knew exactly what they were talking about.

"He's gone red! I told you before, you can't hide it! How much has he got? Bet he got mountains cash."

"I haven't looked," Greg said unconvincingly. Then, just as he was looking for a distraction, his phone went *ding!*

Jenny had sent him a message.

I am okay. I was sorry I lost my pom-pom. Can I get it back today?

Greg frowned. This was stupid. Why should she need to get a pom-pom back so quickly? It seemed unusually bold, too, for Jenny to ask this kind of favour of him. He made an effort to appear very busy in front of her. The beer in his belly told him he wouldn't go back out this afternoon just to return her pom-pom; he didn't want her to know he'd been drinking. He didn't want to stop drinking.

Sorry Jenny, I'm busy today. Shall I bring it to our next class instead?

"What was this meeting you were having today?" Greg asked Kelvin, seizing the initiative.

"Meeting?"

"You've been having a meeting?"

"Meeting with my pal Chen Xu!"

Kelvin placed his hand on Chen Xu's manikin-rigid arm.

"And you say Chen Xu is a teacher, like, um, *us*?"

"Chen Xu busts his ass at the Academy of Policemen, down Xizhimen."

So that explained it. That was the defect. Greg congratulated himself on his excellent instincts.

"Oh!" he said, loudly and clearly, "YOU TEACH POLICEMEN! HOW FASCINATING." He wondered exactly how much Chen Xu could understand. He was definitely listening carefully, even as he pretended not to speak the language.

"As a policeman, I wonder what you think of what just happened out there?" he asked.

"He's not a policeman," Kelvin said.

"I'm sorry, but he does *teach* the police, right? He understands policing?"

Kelvin spoke quietly to Chen Xu in Chinese. "Hey bro," he said eventually, "Chen Xu teaches policemen. But he's a doctor. He is a uh *social scientist*."

Chen Xu nodded minutely. Evidently he knew *that* word.

"Well," Greg said, "as a social scientist with, I'm guessing, quite a lot of knowledge of policing, I wonder what you think of what just happened out there?"

Chen Xu seemed to shrug.

"He don't speak English!" Kelvin said.

Bullshit.

Greg jabbed his finger at the window pane, pointing at the intersection below. Unnervingly, Chen Xu didn't follow his finger. He continued blankly to look at Greg, like an untrained dog.

Or – Greg realised, with creeping unease – like a very well-trained dog indeed.



There ensued a standoff of sorts. Greg began to feel weirded out. He understood that he'd slipped into a battle of wills, but that he had to pretend it wasn't happening. Something told him he absolutely should not make this policeman feel like he'd lost face.

But then, Greg found himself thinking, there was his own face to consider. And inevitably Greg remembered the Genghis Khan Krew. He remembered being outvoted by fascists. That fuck Banner. Chen Xu was not the GKK, but Greg could feel the connection. He understood why he was revisiting this humiliation. If Banner was some wannabe demagogue, Chen Xu looked like a real enforcer. Here he was: an obvious candidate for the iron fist beneath the velvet glove. The true hand of the state.

Greg pictured Plumbe, yesterday, seated in his armchair, hands extended before him like Tony Blair. Tony Blair was not Greg's favourite politician. But Greg recalled fondly the best New Labour lie – that was, the promise of a centre, a fuzzy, tolerant centre, a unifying whole around which Britain – he remembered Britain now – could be united. And because Greg had been young under New Labour, and because he was white and well supported by the welfare state, he had this fond notion of Britain, reasonable Britain, where policemen were bobbies in funny hats. Fascists were strangers. An exotic breed found elsewhere. There once had existed a vegan child of Cool Britannia who would have jumped on any opportunity to Fight Fascism (Abroad). As foolish as this vision was, its loss was painful to recognise. And here he was, in Beijing: a Big Fat Butthurt Barely Believer in Dumbocracy. It stung. In Greg's heart a terribly important war was being reenacted, with costumes and powder, and he was outnumbered, and fascists were calling him weak. Chen Xu

was the Gestapo if the Gestapo had won; and how could he allow himself to be faced down by so obvious an archetype of lawful evil?

But a voice told Greg to differentiate. It said that wannabe American Fascists were not real-life Chinese policemen; it said that shadowboxing with imaginary Gestapo was not the same as picking fights with real-life Chinese policemen; said his valences were skewed – what was he, prejudiced against Chinese policemen? Had he missed the fact of Britain and its scummy British crimes?

The voice also asked, was it not the case that Greg no longer believed in the Tolerant Centre?

It was probably the case, yes.

The voice asked, did this mean Greg didn't believe it existed (or indeed had ever existed), or did it mean he no longer subscribed to it, morally?

Of course I subscribe to it morally, Greg told himself. Of course I believe in fuzzy ideas like liberal democracy and tolerance and multiculturalism, *whatever they are*, the general principle of being decent, of course.

So, the voice continued, it followed that Gregory Rainer did not believe in face. He was enlightened; he was Westernised and feminised; he was pliable, soft; he was a *librul bedwetter* who didn't believe in face.

*Anyway, the voice said, just look at him. He's practically levitating. He knows gongfu. He could launch himself across the table and snap that pointing finger with a single judo chop.*

*Snap-crack!*

Greg blinked first. He looked out of the window. A second police van had pulled up at the intersection. The foreign student was led out of the first vehicle and into the van. He was saying something. His face was flushed beneath his blonde hair, but his

gait was deliberately casual, as if he were following a suggestion, not complying with an order. He looked like Ryan. No. He just looked like a white man.

Ryan, Greg thought, bounced off the surfaces of things. Ryan didn't engage with the problems of the world. Nor, Greg had to admit, did he himself. Greg no longer could define the words 'globalisation' or 'colonialism' or 'moral relativism'. Or he understood them in a base way, as slogans, corollary to the red banners hanging over the motorways. Something to be roared at night after the bars chucked you out. An angry city loves angry men.

The only word for which Greg knew the definition off by heart was fascism.

*A hegemony of private enterprises backed by state power reinforced at every level by nationalism, traditionalism, mystical syncretism, chauvinistic notions of purity of identity.*

That was it. Was it? Or something else? The word "fascism", he recalled, was devised with Western nations in mind. It didn't map perfectly across the world. It was going to have to be stretched for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Greg considered the plasticity or elasticity or malleability of the word fascism. He considered the tangibility of the word – something in which, he felt sure, Ryan believed wholeheartedly and exclusively. Ryan had contacted these specimens the GKK as if to prove the fungibility of fascism, to prove that it was a substance or a species or a measurable phenomenon, which he should have known already if he'd thought it through, but which revelation he seemed to insist was original research, and valuable. Valuable, to spend your evenings with Nazis!

Yes, Greg thought, yes, we live in a fascist state. No great revelation, this. But what to do, once you've established that fact? How to spend your time? Which restaurants to go to? Which bars to frequent? Have you been to the Great Wall yet?

Have you seen the Forbidden Palace? Have you been to the Square of the Gate of Heavenly Peace?

“Perhaps I should be more specific,” he said. “What is the relationship between the regular police and the *chengguan*? What do the police think when the *chengguan* make a clusterfuck like that out there? I’ve noticed that the police here don’t get too involved in the nitty-gritty of street-level management.”

Nothing.

Greg pressed on, despite himself, the pitch of his voice rising as his throat seemed to close up.

“In fact, just the other day I saw a man beating a woman on the street near here. His wife perhaps. His girlfriend? It was just across the road from the police station – and I assumed the law would get involved at some point. But no. What does it mean, when you can beat your wife right next to the police station? What then are the police for?”

Chen Xu said nothing. He seemed to be vibrating. Perhaps it was the internal tension required to maintain that pose. Perhaps it was rage.

There was a muffled *ding!* Microwave ready.

☹️ My cherished pom-pom is very precious to me. Will you a good friend?

Greg laughed out loud. Too much! Jenny was going too far. He never thought she’d stoop to this. And she hadn’t even thanked him for picking up the pom-pom. A firm answer would nip it in the bud.

Sorry Jenny ☹️. I really am busy today. I promise I will bring it to our next class.

Greg pretended to do something with his phone after he'd sent the message. Trying to clear his head. Kelvin and Chen Xu had already started a low-volume conversation without him.

His phone dinged again.

*Can we next class tomorrow morning?*

Greg drafted and deleted several replies, then composed the final word on the matter.

*Tomorrow is Christmas Day! I thought you were going to get into  
the Christmas spirit ☺☺?! I am busy on Christmas Day but I  
promise I will bring you your pom-pom at our next class on  
December 29 ☺☺☺☺*

He sent the message and slid his phone into his pocket, resolved not to answer any more messages. Kelvin and Chen Xu had finished their conference.

"Girlfriend trouble?" Kelvin said.

"It's nothing. Sorry. And... sorry."

"Look," Kelvin said, "I don't know what you think of those bozos in Zhongguancun station, Greg, but you shouldn't get the wrong impression 'bout Chen Xu. He's a scientist."

"Is that so?"

"I don't think you wanna offend him, man."

"No? No. I guess not."

"He want me to tell you something."

"Okay."

"He's gonna say it, I'm gonna tell you."

“Alright.”

Chen Xu spoke. He talked quietly, but loudly enough for Greg to hear. Greg picked up certain words and phrases; he understood enough to determine that Kelvin’s interpretation wasn’t wild invention.

Kelvin said Chen Xu wanted the name and number of the man Greg saw smacking his bitch, his woman on street. If Greg brought him the name, he’d *dark-place* the man. But without a name there was nothing he could do and he couldn’t answer for the Zhongguancun police. And Chen Xu hoped Greg wasn’t lying. Chen Xu hated lying.

Then Chen Xu’s flow became idiomatic, and Kelvin got confused, but explained regardless that treating symptoms alone could not cure the body as a whole; and then he got caught up on a slew of unfamiliar words – interior corridors; no, something like subterranean tunnels; passageways, like underwater rivers, with blood – but reemerged into clarity to say the *chengguan* fight symptoms on the street, while Chen Xu goes after ideological causes in line with abstract theory of pacification. It means directing the hearts-and-minds of the people, Greg, getting hands dirty in culture, Greg. Assault rumour.

Although if he wanted, Chen Xu could take down this whole block. *Knock it out*, Kelvin asserted, listening carefully and nodding and staring into the middle distance now. With one telephone call, Kelvin said, Chen Xu could take it down; but that was Chen Xu’s business, not Greg’s. Because this was his country, not Greg’s.

Then the policeman started working himself up. His voice got louder, but Greg could no longer pick up the words being said. He watched Chen Xu’s hand grip the Hite bottle tighter and tighter; as pressure whitened the skin, the outsized, scarred knuckles grew redder and redder. Martial artist’s knuckles. Brick busters.

Kelvin wasn't interpreting now but listening, grimacing. He cleared his throat. He seemed embarrassed.

"He er, wanna know why you don't like China," he said, wincing. "I know you like China, Greg, he's just bustin' your balls. I'll talk to him. He's not really cross, Greg. Don't worry, bro."

But Chen Xu didn't want his message to be diluted. He shouted over Kelvin, directing his noise straight at Greg, and in one of those moments of perfectly unreasonable clarity, Greg understood exactly what was being said. Not the Chinese words coming out of his mouth, or the faltering English phrases Kelvin was trying to insert, but the language underneath, delivered directly into the fleshy portals of his soul.

White noise. Grinding. The creaking and crunching of plastic. Deep cold.

## Wang Wei

Every country in the world is at war with every other country. The war will never end until there is a winner. That is the meaning of the word zero-sum. The war is invisible. Or so you would think, if you didn't know about the Internet.

The Internet is the brain of the world. It is made of different countries that are at war with each other. War drives innovation, infrastructure and employment so there's work to be had. Good work. I, Wang Wei, do good work for our country. Every time you say the right thing online you get five *jiao*. Paper money has a Mao Zedong on it. So people call what we do the Five Mao Club, when they're taking the piss. But they shouldn't take the piss. It's war. Every time you say the right thing online it keeps your country safe.

Every country has a name, and a will, and a want. Every country is an individual. An individual can be well or sick. A sick individual is someone who lets themselves be overtaken by microbes. Eaten up and rotted. A sick individual gets eaten, first by the microbes, then by the other individuals. That is the law of the world, which is a village, which is a closed ward, which is zero sum. So think of the Five Mao Club as like an immune system. Keeping the microbes at bay. Keeping the other individuals from tearing apart this individual. This country.

Do you love your country yes or no. Yes, I love my country how can I help. This is what you do. Sit in the gaming café. Happy Lucky Gaming Club just by Wudaokou. Smoke them if you got them. Get some convenient noodles. Relax, brother.

Remember this fact: the Internet is the brain of the world, is a village full of individuals, is a squirming pile of microbes trying to eat you up. You cannot eat the



microbes. So you will confuse the microbes. You will redirect the microbes. Set the microbes eating the things you want.

Log in to your accounts. There are many of them. They have names and private names. Here are the private names. Idiot. Angry Man. Mr Whatabout. The Optimist. Traditional Parent. The Doubter. Sympathetic Cautioner. Patriot.

**Idiot's** job is to not understand. To make stupid jokes.

**Angry Man** bullies women. Especially women who lie about men, and who deserve everything they get.

**Mr Whatabout** says, what about the foreign imperialists.

**The Optimist** doesn't like complaints. She thinks things are on the up and up. But.

**Traditional Parent** wishes things were the way they used to be, before western individualism.

**Doubter** is too clever to believe dangerous rumours and watches out for the sneaky tactics of liars.

**Sympathetic Cautioner** understands, but wants you to be careful. And.

**Patriot** wins every argument. Ever.

Are you logged in. Do you have convenient noodles and *Zhongnanhai* cigarettes. Now get into those comment sections. Get into those socials. Start sharing that content. Give it the spin it needs.

Here is news about that train crash. The bad one in Wenzhou where the train went off the high track. Okay what do the gang have to say? **Mr Whatabout** remembers how there was a high-speed train crash in Germany in 1998, and what does that say if such a precision-oriented people can't keep their trains on the tracks. High-speed rail is a big step forward and teething problems are to be expected. He's

got newspaper articles to share. **The Optimist** would like to remind everybody that no country in the world will have the extensive high-speed railway system this one will have, once the tracks are completed. Imagine being able to travel to Urumqi in exotic Xinjiang in just 12 hours! Follow this link! And as for those complaining about the rescue operation, the recovery operation, the hasty, panicked evidence burial operation, **Traditional Parent** is upset people won't just let the authorities get on with their jobs. Everybody thinks they're an expert now. Everybody thinks their opinion is important. Individualists will stop the country from working together properly. Why can't people listen? And now there's the video, the train hanging off the viaduct like a segmented broken great white worm. There's the diggers and the dozers burying the smashed-up sections of train. What's that falling out of the window? A suitcase? An arm? **Doubter** doesn't believe it. He sees signs that the video is faked. He's highlighted the suspicious bits. A bulleted list of questions that he wants whoever's spreading these lies to ANSWER NOW. It just goes to show, says **Sympathetic Cautioner**. You might get pulled into sharing something you think is real but it isn't. There are so many foreign bad actors out there – you could mean well but end up supporting them by sharing their lies. Then where would you be?

**Angry Man** is SICK AND TIRED of people using a NATIONAL TRAGEDY to advance their own personal agendas. He is telling people PERSONALLY. He is MAKING A POINT of sharing their details with other ANGRY MEN. And **Idiot** keeps saying there's a man who runs the train company can't keep his own train in the station. So to speak. GIFs of trains going into tunnels. He's saying there's a naughty man whose career is about to be derailed. He's been giving out tickets to ride. So to speak. And **Patriot** sweeps everybody aside and asks, DO YOU LOVE YOUR COUNTRY? And whatever **Patriot** says next, you'd better say yes, because saying

yes means you love your country, and you'll go along with anything, any of this nonsense for the country that you love. **Patriot** is unanswerable. **Patriot** is an OP mega plasma sword with antimatter poison mods on top.

That's how it works.

Of course, not everybody operates the way I do. The Internet is a crowded room. Lots of the voices in there speak in earnest. Lots of people speak with only one voice, and they love their voice as much as they love their country. Many people speak for their country who do not belong to the Five Mao Club. Sometimes it's these people who seem shocked that we should get paid to do what they do freely out of love. They get upset by our tactics. Sometimes they think that we've told a lie. They find it shocking.

Please don't think it's shocking, what we do. This crowded room is full of lies. Every country in the world is at war with every other country, and if you let them, they will fill your space – headspace, ear space – with lies of their own. We at the Five Mao Club are believers in a central truth. We hold it all together. What would you do?

But then. Sometimes I feel strange.

Nobody asks me why I wear so many masks. Nobody asks me anything much. For nine hours a day I hose down plates in the Black Cat Café and after work I push through Wudaokou intersection and I descend these stairs. Here in the Happy Lucky Gaming Club I, Wang Wei, dissolve into a dozen minds. I speak my minds. They speak for me.

But then.

Sometimes I feel strange.

I see foreigners on our streets and I feel strange.

Foreigners are old outsiders. Old because they are familiar. You look at them and you see yourself. When you spend time with foreigners you lose some of yourself. They take it away with them. They are thieves. They are a problem, the *laowais*.

What do the gang say.

Once this country was weak, and the *laowais* were imperialists who took what they could get from it. So says **Patriot**. Now this country is strong, says **The Optimist**, and the streets are still filled with *laowais*. Yes, now this country is strong, says **Traditional Parent**, but people are foolish. Women especially. Most especially the women who fall for the *laowais* who – says **Angry Man** – come here with no skills looking for easy money.

**Angry Man** and **Idiot** are good friends, and when **Idiot** asks, **Angry Man** can describe the perfect *laowai*. He does so now: tall and blonde with a tubular nose and red beard, baseball cap, drunk as shit, arrogant, yes, swaggering alone down the wrong alleyway. He insults an old auntie, or pisses on someone's doorstep, or – best of all for **Idiot**, whose desires are base – he corners an innocent girl (“Oh, no, sir, please! I’m just trying to take some steamed buns to my grandmother’s house!”) and pushes his fat red paws between the buttons on her blouse so that they... *pip papp popp* off... and roll on the floor with the basket of steamed buns and her warm white breast plops out, like so – *like so*...

**Angry Man** is there, with all his brothers to back him up. What a shit kicking there is: that pale skull splitting open beneath boot, staff, hatchet blade.

Yes **Angry Man** can describe a perfect *laowai*; but **Doubter** find the perfect *laowai* hard to locate in Wudaokou. Real *laowais* were slippery. Real *laowais* float

around unfixed: all at once effeminate and vital; boisterous, haughty, perverse and gentlemanly; exotic and familiar.

I, Wang Wei, might pin one down, sometimes: I catch one in the act, groping his Chinese girlfriend or laughing at some indigent and **Angry Man** says: *look, see, this is the problem with the laowais. This is why we need reasonable controls.*

But **Sympathetic Cautioner** says, there's a difference, surely, between *laowais* and foreigners. A difference between foreigners and imperialists. Sometimes a foreigner is a *laowai*. Sometimes a foreigner is just foreign. And what is it like, to see the world through foreign eyes? And who are the imperialists, now that we are rich?

SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP says **Patriot**. The microbes will eat you up. The ants the worms the wolves the Internet is in my head and I am fighting for our country's survival. The *chengguan* are decent boys who fight external symptoms of malaise. I am a decent boy who treats the illness from the inside out. I am in the blood. A person. A legion. I. We.

Wake up. This is the Happy Lucky Gaming Club. Smoke them if you got. You hungry? Eat, bro.

This crowded room is full of screams. Everybody knows the Internet is mentally ill. It will fall to pieces without our help. Like doctors, we are helping. Like soldiers, too. We are helping.

I press the service button. I see the silhouette of the food trolley rolling up the aisle against a background of gamers' screens. Each screen flickers and ripples. Each holds frozen a punch, a kick, a sword blade's swing. Everybody is playing Defence of the Eastern Realm. I purchase convenient noodles. The manager adds hot water from a vacuum flask. DotER is still loading in my other screen. I post some

messages about trusting the government. I think about the difference between *laowais* and foreigners. I feel like I'm at the bottom of a well.

Now DotER has finally loaded, and my avatar is waiting patiently for me. His name is Wang\_Wei\_1989. He wears a colourful antique robe; he bears a powerful gauntlet and a broad-headed staff that fires magical sparks; he stands on a craggy pass in the North Range of the Eastern Realm, between wisps of mist and wind-crabbed trees.

Above him soars a mountain peak so tall it seems to kiss the sky; below him lies a chasm black with depth; and nearby him moves a large rodent, snuffling around in a jerky, repeated circuit. No shadow, no depth.

Every country is at war with every other country. The war is happening on the Internet. I, Wang Wei, do what I can to help. And when I get tired, I retreat to the Eastern Realm. Wang\_Wei\_1989 does not know **Idiot**, or **Traditional Parent**. Wang\_Wei\_1989 has never met a *laowai*. Wang\_Wei\_1989 does not need to worry about feeling hollow. **Patriot** does not shout at him. **Idiot** does not fool him. He is opaque. I, Wang Wei, am jealous. I wish I did not echo so.

Today's quest is the Midden of the Mountain Rats. I will earn the credits I still need to buy Wang\_Wei\_1989 his next item: the Robe of Deflection. His current Robe of Longevity is fine, and nice to look at, but it's still an amateur robe; the Robe of Deflection means veteran class.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 approaches the rat. He smites it, with a swipe of his staff.

I move him into a narrow gully that stretches up towards a murky-looking cave.

Singly, then in clumpy packs, rats emerge from the rockface ahead of Wang\_Wei\_1989. He raises his staff, and starts sweeping them aside. I watch. Each blow lifts them up into the air, and when they land on the dusty path again they do

not bounce or roll, but sink directly through the surface, disappearing cleanly from the realm as if they'd never been meant. Neat and clean.

I, Wang Wei, smile. We all smile.

## Golden Enterprize

Greg was at the urinal, vaguely surprised. He wondered how long he had been in the toilet. He thought he'd come in to use the squat drop, but here he was at the urinal, dick in hand, like any other john. Surely too early for a blackout. Perhaps he should eat something. He washed his hands and dried them and stared at the Defence of the Eastern Realm poster above the dryer. On it, a man wearing a long silk robe was descending through layers of mist and trails of magical power to deliver a roundhouse kick against an armoured Hun. The tagline underneath was in Chinese. Greg couldn't be sure whether it read 'Defeat the Past to Defend the Future' or 'Defend the Past to Defeat the Future'.

When he got back to the booth, Chen Xu was gone. The atmosphere had improved. Kelvin had taken Chen Xu's space and ordered fresh beers, along with a plate of snacks: little bowls full of spicy pickled radish, peanuts, and tiny dried fish, whole, with silvery, staring, desiccated eyes. He didn't act as if Greg had been away for a long time. Perhaps Greg hadn't.

"Listen," he said, "what you doing tomorrow? You gonna get into the Christmas Spirit?"

"I suppose so."

"You wanna get a slap-up old-school Christmas dinner, bro?" Kelvin placed a pair of tickets on the table. They were labelled 'Beijing Aeronautics University International Friendship Conference 2011'. "It's gonna be dope. We're gonna have a uh exclusive high-class dinner, and a show! All the high rollers gonna be there. Players, Greg. Incredible networking opportunity. And here's the kicker—" at this point Kelvin spread his hands wide in an effort to encapsulate the grandeur of what he was about to describe "...a *tombola*."



“A tombola?”

“Get this: every ticket has a lotto number. After the high-class show, a real pretty lady reads out the winning numbers – and who knows, Greg, is she maybe gonna read out your number?”

“Is there free beer?”

“Yes.”

“Count me in.”

They spent a quiet minute. Kelvin did something with his phone, prompting Greg to half-retrieve his own. He stopped himself, and instead spent some time looking out of the window. The junction below had been cleared. Polystyrene, vendor’s carts, police cars, milling crowds: all were gone. As if a magic hand had made a circle and erased them. Even the foot traffic looked more orderly than usual.

The sun was setting, illuminating the haze on its way down. As in the lobby, the greenish tint of the windows gave the sunset an underwater feel. Greg thought he would like to come back to this bar on a sunny day (whenever that might be); he could see how the aquatic ambience could be relaxing.

Axolotl.

“Where did you find that charmer?” Greg asked.

He didn’t need to name Chen Xu. Kelvin knew.

“He works with my bro-in-law on a few projects.”

“I thought you said he was a teacher.”

“He *is* a teacher. Like me. We have many the same interests. In fact, he does *gongfu* as well. He’s a real badass, maybe as good as me, I don’t know.”

Then he looked at Greg with concern in his eyes. “Professional relationships are important, Greg,” he urged. “I don’t know why you joke around with him like you

did. He don't like to talk about what you talk about. These are sensitive subjects, Greg. It's a good thing he likes you."

"Likes me? Are you kidding?"

Kelvin shrugged. "Maybe I didn't translate that good he said."

"I could see his face, you know," Greg persisted. "Is that his face when he likes something?" Then he did an impression of Chen Xu, gripping his beer bottle above the table and sucking his cheeks into a grimace. He didn't know why he did this. He was intoxicated, relieved; he could feel his self billowing out into a space that had previously been tightly packed. Kelvin laughed, which encouraged him.

"He looks like a judge at the county dogshit fair," Greg said.

Kelvin giggled. "Dog shit," he hissed, good-humouredly. Then: "What is a 'county fair'?"

"It's like a competition for farmers, to see who has the biggest vegetables and the best sheep."

"Or the best dog shit."

"That's right. That's the basis of the joke. Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

They drank for a while in peaceable silence. Greg finished the dish of pickled radish, then gave the dried fish a sceptical once-over.

"Greg," Kelvin asked quietly, "What is a 'clusterfuck'? Is it like a *gang bang*?"

"Um," Greg said. "Sure."

"Oh man." There was a lengthy silence as Kelvin struggled with a moral dilemma. He plainly had something he wanted to say, but was afraid – even ashamed – to say it. It was quite touching, in a way: the beer had lent a childlike openness to his expressions. Eventually, he could hold back no longer.

"I was watching some AVs the other day. You know, on my phone. I saw a video of a bunch of old dudes," he said, slowly shaking his head. "They were having a uh *clusterfuck* with these old hoes. But Greg – they were so *old*, these dudes. It was disgusting. They were all wrinkly and... and their dicks, Greg: their dicks were *blue*. I watch it – it made me sad. Made me wonder what I'm busting my ass for, now, if all I can look forward to is..."

Kelvin sighed. He seemed to be on the verge of something – a realisation, or revelation that was only just eluding him. Greg realised that he, too, was on the verge of something. Against all reason, he was becoming friends with Kelvin.

Eventually, Kelvin understood what he wanted to say, and said it: "I believe in family values, you know, Greg? That's why I bust my ass to make the money I do."

"Right."

"So I gotta warn you, Greg. My sister – she's got a thing for you. And she's married, Greg. We are both men of the world, I know. But you should be careful, bro. I don't know what you think you gonna do, but it better be the right thing. For your ass."

## Tower

A servant supports Li Bai's foot as he swings off the back of the horse. He's already wobbling. Meng Haoran stands at a distance, looking elsewhere.

"Food," Li Bai says.

"Greetings," Meng Haoran says, bowing.

"Yes of course. How thoughtless of me. What a misstep. Greetings. I hope you are well."

Meng Haoran only smiles graciously. And despite his being so much older, it is Meng Haoran who takes Li Bai by the arm as they walk up several flights of stairs. They stop on a floor that contains a tastefully decorated chamber set out for a light repast.

Servants scatter before them. Servants bark at one another in dialect. Servants remove their shoes.

"So, you go to Guangling," Li Bai says eventually. "And you leave me here bereft."

"I regret that business pulls me from you."

"Regret nothing. You are looking forward to enjoying the hospitality there."

Meng Haoran blushes. Li Bai leers.

"You are looking forward to the hospitality, which only improves when the sun goes down. The strings of lanterns, like pearls, which lead to one famous house, eh?"

A servant places a few bowls of titbits before them. Li Bai prods a few of them experimentally. He hums a familiar tune. Then, his voice still low, he starts to sing.

*"There is a house by the river, where the cock crows all night. There is a house by the river, where the wine flows like a cataract..."*

One of the serving girls, recognising the low ditty for what it is, giggles. Meng Haoran glares at her.

Louder now, emboldened, Li Bai continues:

*"There is a town by the river, where the green-eyed girls know the ooooooIIldest soooooongs. There is a house by the river, where the peonies bloom early..."* The song dissolves into a hiccup, a giggle, a coughing fit.

"Please fetch water," Meng Haoran asks the hovering maitre d'.

"Wine," croaks Li Bai.

Meng Haoran sighs.

"Wine!" Li Bai repeats. "Ten thousand cups of wine!"

Meng Haoran nibbles on a small spiced pie.

"They will call me the Wine Immortal," Li Bai announces, to a serving boy. "I will live forever." The boy, ten or so and terrified, bows.

"Wine, my friend, does not allow you to live forever," Meng Haoran says. "It is not an elixir, like the ones you were seeking on that mountain with that priest..."

"Some wine tastes like an elixir," Li Bai says. "Not this stuff, though. Drink up!"

"How much did you pay that priest? How much for his secret recipe?"

"He doesn't teach you his secret recipe."

"Then what does he do? What did you pay for? A certificate stating that you are an adept?"

"I am an adept. I am as the certificate says."

"Dissolute Daoist."

"Boring Buddhist. Cheers."

They drink. They eat in silence. The calls of gulls echo up from the river as a flock takes sudden flight.

"The hawk has fallen," Meng Haoran states.

Li Bai gazes at him, his eyes wide.

"How do you do it?" he asks.

Meng Haoran smiles, not fully understanding. Li Bai continues: "You just wrote a poem – just then. Or you could have done, if you'd written it down."

"Ha."

"Will you take my scrolls?" Li Bai indicates a hardwood box that two servants have unloaded from the hired mule and hauled up the stairs and placed nearby.

"There are a dozen poems in it that I have written for you alone."

Meng Haoran nods.

"And will you tell people about me?"

Meng Haoran nods.

Li Bai smiles. He drinks another bowl of wine. "Now," he says, his cheeks already flushing, "I will prepare for you a final parting gift."

He fiddles with the straps of the box until a servant opens it for him, then pulls out a sheet of blank paper.

"Fetch ink," he slurs, "a grindstone, and a brush."

**ON SEEING OFF MENG HAO-JAN, by Li Po**

My friend bade farewell at the Yellow Crane House,

And went down eastward to Willow Valley

Amid the flowers and mists of March.

The lonely sail in the distance

Vanished at last beyond the blue sky.

And I could see only the river

Flowing along the border of heaven.

*Shigeyoshi Obata*

## Christmas Day

The Beijing Aeronautics University Hospital Hotel was a vast cube with a marginally less vast cube hollowed out of it. The intent of the design was to make bold use of negative space, in emulation of the many novel architectural statements dotting the city. It looked like a humungous black chair that fell over.

The taxi pulled up. Ryan paid the driver and Greg carefully deposited their empties on the pavement for collection by the destitute. A four-pack of beer. They'd travelled three blocks. Some cold and uncomfortable-looking women dressed as air hostesses ushered them into the foyer.

"Remember," Greg said, "we stay here for lunch and free drinks, and then we get back and cook for the Christmas party. I've got a bird to put in the oven. So we don't get too pissed here."

"Aye aye, Cap'n," said Ryan.

In contrast with the brutalist exterior, the inside of the hotel was decorated to evoke the classical past, with stands of bamboo in carved stone bases and wooden lattices with complex symmetrical patterns hanging on the wall. Hidden speakers simulated running water.

A polite young man with white trainers guided them into a dining hall. Alongside an expansive buffet, featuring a section dedicated to festive western fayre, they spied a self-service lager pump. Loaded up with refreshments, they found seats and started getting festive.

Greg told Ryan about his meeting with Plumbe. He told the story as Ryan would prefer it told, as an encounter with an old fuddy-duddy, a representative of the



superseded class of Orientalists. He impersonated Plumbe's voice in a way that Ryan particularly enjoyed. He didn't mention the cash in the freezer.

Then he told Ryan about Jenny's pom-pom. He showed him their correspondence. He was surprised she hadn't texted again today.

"It's weird," he concluded. "I thought I knew her pretty well. This didn't seem like the kind of thing she would go nuts about."

"I don't know. She's a dark horse, that one," Ryan said. Ryan had taken a sceptical attitude towards Jenny since she'd cancelled a tutoring agreement between them. According to Jenny's confused account, he had tried to interview her for a story, or hit on her. Likely both.

"In a way, it's a good thing I didn't have time to teach her," Ryan said.

Sure.

"There was something else odd she said," Greg said. "At the end of her class, she started quoting the Bible, or something. But it didn't sound anything like any part of the Bible I've heard."

"She's probably in some wacky evangelical church."

Greg tried to remember what she'd said. "Forbearance," he managed, "and revelation."

"Revelation? That's end-of-the-world stuff. Nice. Maybe she's in a cult!"

"Nah..."

"You'd be surprised. Did you hear about the Orient Fire? That story blew up a few weeks ago – shit, *that* was dramatic incident. Let me tell you."

Ryan told Greg about Orient Fire. The story started when a family of four walked into a cinema, at a screening of something-or-other, and started making a lot

of noise during the film. Not just ordinary noise, apparently. Singing or speaking in tongues or whatever it was that the spirit moved them to do that day. Weird noise.

One man there asked them to quiet down. But they didn't quiet down. Instead they focused on this man. They started abusing him, calling him names. Demon. They were disrupting the film even more. The man decided to move seats, but the family followed him, cursing him and hissing and howling in a bestial way, as if they were possessed.

In the end, the other filmgoers decided they'd had enough, and kicked out both the family and the man, since apparently he'd been provoking them somehow. Or maybe he realised that the only way the others could enjoy the film was if he left. Maybe he thought he could reason with this family.

They followed him into the bathroom and beat him to death.

"The whole family joined in," Ryan said. "Little kids. Blood all over. They got caught, since they weren't trying to hide what they were doing. In the station, not only did they claim Jesus told them to kill the man – because he was a demon – but it also transpired that none of them were actually related. A so-called family of four: two adults, two children, all from different families in different provinces. And they were members of Orient Fire."

"You missed a trick there, Ryan," Greg said.

"Didn't I just. And the thing is, it was a story I could write and publish. This is the kind of morality tale that gets actively promoted: a nice little horror story illustrating the dangers of deviance. It was everywhere! If Jenny's in Orient Fire, you should be careful. Fuck – *she* should be careful! They're on the proscribed list now. The leader, the new Jesus, fled to America. There's been a bit of a crackdown.

Roundups for re-education. You can guess what that means. But really, it's not that big a thing. It's not like 1999. Not like Falun Gong."

\*

Ryan had gone for more beer. Waiting, Greg looked at a painted scroll hanging on the wall behind their chairs. A night scene in the classical landscape style, with the title "The Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup". In the background, shadowy mountaintops and gullies emerged from swirls of bluish mist, along with stretches of delicately rendered bamboo forest. In the foreground, a group of bearded men in antique dress progressed between the thick bamboo stems. They walked single file, left to right, with jolly expressions and slightly abstracted eyes; they carried gourds spilling silvery liquid.

A finger appeared in Greg's vision, huge and pink and fuzzy, with beery aroma. It pointed to a central figure, an older man with long white hair leaning out over a stream with one arm hooked round a nearby bamboo trunk, monkey-style.

"There's your man," Ryan said. "That's Li Bai."

Greg looked again at the figure. His expression was particularly crazed, eyes set beneath bushy brows and focused on the water beneath. The stream held an uncertain reflection, a cluster of brush strokes that might have been the man's face or the bamboo leaves behind him, or even a milky fragment of the moon high above. The man was eyeing this reflection with something like intense thirst, an effect reinforced by the claw-like position of his long-nailed hands, poking out from voluminous sleeves. At the base of the bamboo trunk from which he swung, a broken wine vessel rested beside a stack of empty bowls.

"Oh," said Greg, "So there he is."

He recognised him. Of course he didn't recognise him.

“They used to say he could drink a thousand cups of wine in one gulp,” Ryan said. “There was a legend that he tried to embrace the reflection of the moon, while drunk, and drowned. Not true, of course. In the end it was the booze that got him, I expect. Cirrhosis of the liver. Still – it’s not a bad painting, this. Lots of symbolism that I understand.”

Then Ryan started pointing out the parts of the painting that he understood. Greg nodded along. There was a lot to understand in art, he supposed, recalling Winnie’s horse painting.

“It’s not your typical hotel lobby kitsch,” he said.

His phone went ding. It was the first of a series of messages from other teachers, all of whom wanted to know when they should bring their contributions to the pot-luck Christmas dinner to his flat. After consultation, Greg and Ryan agreed that people should start coming over from three pm. It was now two. It seemed conceivable, if they used their imaginations, that they should be able to finish lunch, take in a show and the promised tombola, travel back to Forestry and roast a chicken in an hour.

Greg fetched himself a plate of food from the buffet. He avoided the dry grey western fayre and selected Shanghai soup dumplings in stacked wooden steamers.

“Aren’t you eating anything?” he asked, after sitting.

“Oh, no,” Ryan said. “I’ll eat later. Saving myself for the main event.”

Greg looked doubtful. The teachers’ pot-luck dinners were not gourmet; his own contribution was still sprawled like a kerbside indigent on the bottom shelf of the fridge, waiting for somebody to detach its head and feet. Besides, he suspected Ryan had started sniffing coke since they arrived at the hotel. In pharmacological

terms, they were starting to uncouple: while Ryan was increasingly sharp edged, Greg was feeling fuzzy.

“What are you cooking?” he asked Ryan.

“Oh, I’ve been putting together some mashed potato. *Kartoffelbrei*. What they call *tudou ni*. It’s not just Professor Plum speaks other languages, you know.”

After taking a long look at Ryan’s pupils, Greg took a soup dumpling and placed it in a deep ceramic spoon, shaped like a tugboat or breaching whale. He pierced the skin of the dumpling so that a clear broth spilled out. First, he lifted the drained dumpling to his mouth; then, after savouring the filling, he poured the broth between his lips. It was good.

“Shanghai dumplings are good,” he said.

Ryan was uninterested. He was looking again at the painting behind them. “Hotel kitsch,” he said, rubbing his nose. “Reminds me of a piece I pitched the other day. About the way consumer ubiquity affects our value system.”

“Hmm.” Greg swallowed a chunk of meat and dough. He slurped down a tugboat-full of broth. “Tell me more about how consumer biquity value sist.”

Ryan told him. It was complicated and boring. It involved the word ubiquity. Greg bit into an imperfectly drained dumpling and scalded his tongue with broth.

“Serves you right, philistine,” sniffed Ryan. “I had good intellectual sources to back me up. Coleridge. Charles Lamb.”

Greg cooled his tongue with lager. He swilled fatty chunks of meat around his mouth.

“I think I’m going to have an affair with Winnie,” he said.

“You dirty sod.”

“She gave me a present, you see. A poem thing.”

“Righto. I’ll try not to get in your way.”

“I’m not sure whether I believe in love or whether it’s just—”

“Sex.”

“Sex yes but also like something else I need. Like, reality.”

Ryan peered at him.

“More drinks then,” he said. He went.

Greg gazed at the wall hanging. The peaks of mountains emerging out of the mist. The rock faces weren’t jagged; they were depicted instead as layered heaps of icing – bulbous, teetering, almost dripping in overhangs above the drop. Several mountains dissolved entirely at the base, so that they seemed to rear out of the mist like primeval aquatic beasts. Others were cut off crossways by swathes of fog, only to reappear below in unexpected places, like misaligned wallpaper, before closing into valleys full of shadows and the moonlit gleam of rivers.

When Ryan finally came back he looked like he’d wanged enough gak up his nose to induce levitation.

“I’m going to tell you about sentimental art,” he said. He looked like he could fry eggs with his eye beams. “I’m going to tell you about Kitsch. Let me explain phenomenology to you. Let me explain the Nuomena, the Kantian *Ding an sich*...” Ryan was a tesla sphere redefining the world with every lightning charge, but Greg was barely listening. Sleep was coming.

He shut his eyes. Beer and dumplings settled in his belly. With his eyes shut, Greg could see the mountain range more clearly. He saw an impossible place – a jumbled mosaic of cliffs, passes, sheer rock and tenacious saplings. Pavilions and waterfalls. He traversed this landscape with a sense of levity, not so much floating as

repelled by magnetism, hovering above his own shadow, a cavernous shadow buzzing with suspicions.

\*

*Li Bai wakes early and rides with his retinue to the Yellow Crane Tower. After dismounting and greeting and walking hand-in-hand suddenly he's gripping his companion Meng Haoran by the arm and holding on tight, thinking I've been here before, all of this has happened before.*

*And although he can dismiss the feeling, the words he's spoken hang eerily doubled in the air between his friend and him, and he keeps looking at the grain of the antique wood that panels the stairway and forms the lintels beneath which they pass. Each furrow and whorl he recognises. He has seen this wood before.*

*Meng Haoran sits him down on a stool resting on a matt of faded blue damask, and snaps at the staff in their own dialect. Serving boys bring water. Meng Haoran holds the water vessel to Li Bai's lips, but the poet resists. Meng Haoran draws in close and speaks softly to him.*

*"You're hungover this morning. Drink water."*

*Li Bai seals his lips and pushes back like a stubborn child. The water smells foul: not stale or brackish but something other, something alien and metallic that his body rejects. He opens a single eye and peeps out at the window, where a gull (that he has seen before) is hovering in the sky (that he has seen before). It is a shocking blue sky, blue as the eye of a blue-eyed Turk – and who was it called his mother a Turk to his face? Nobody. He'd killed for less. But then, who whispered in the ears of the prefect that he was no Han? Who called him a Turk when his back was turned?*

*And beneath that insinuating sky he has seen before lies the inevitability of the river he has seen before, dotted with the throbbing too-bright cheerful gossiping sails of those cuntish little sailboats.*

*“Wine,” he moans, between half-closed lips.*

*His companion’s face falls.*

*“Don’t you think you should have a little water?” he asks.*

*“Wine,” Li Bai repeats. “I must have wine. I am not myself. I will not be myself until I’ve had a little wine.”*

*Meng Haoran sighs and snaps his fingers at the staff. A gourd materialises before Li Bai’s eyes, swaying back and forth in a servant’s arms like a magic totem. The wax stopper is snapped off – he had certainly heard that before – and the scent of strong liquor reaches his nostrils in tantalising wafts. A bowl is produced, and the glorious amber liquid is flowing out the neck and into the clay vessel and any moment now it will flood his tongue with the crackling of fireworks, yes – any moment now, clarity will come—*

\*

Greg opened his eyes and with a staticky pop the world reset. Kelvin and Winnie had arrived.

It was easy to spot Kelvin. Greg had texted Kelvin earlier, asking about the likely dress code for the conference. Kelvin had suggested fun Christmas jumpers and reindeer horns, of the sort that the vendors sold outside Wudaokou station. And here he was, so attired, in a sea of black suits. The incongruity of the image was enough to make Greg question – for the first time – his and Ryan’s own choice of fun Christmas jumpers and reindeer hats.



Kelvin's cheeks were radiating good cheer. Winnie was walking a good distance behind him, in a disconcerting cocktail dress.

"What's up, my niggas?" Kelvin said. He attacked the hands of Greg and Ryan with an urban combination handshake that met fierce resistance. "Ho ho ho, motherfuckers!"

He reverse-seated himself on one of the chairs, smiling broadly, then said, "I didn't know Santa Claus was such a pimp!"

Greg remembered why he'd resisted making friends with Kelvin for so long.

"You know – ho, ho, ho-" Kelvin counted down his fingers, then looked up again, narrowing his eyes with suspicion. "Hey, a 'ho' – that mean a 'bitch', right?"

Winnie pulled up a chair near to Greg, but didn't sit. She eyed the knitted jumpers of all three men with dismay.

"Kelvin, where's my American literature essay?" Ryan asked.

"What? You playin!"

"I'm not. Where's my American literature essay?" His eyes were fixed on Kelvin, his jaw clenched, his expression beyond serious. Kelvin quailed.

Greg knew Kelvin had contracted his contemporary American literature essay out to another teacher, who was expecting to crap out 500 words of Chinglish about *The Sound and the Fury* over the next weekend. He knew Ryan knew this too. This was all just bullshit. People being the worst versions of themselves.

"It's Christmas Day, bro," Kelvin stammered.

Greg decided it was a good time to go refill his glass. Winnie grabbed his arm as he left.

"Season's Greetings, Greg," she said, carefully. She smelled strongly of floral perfume. Her free hand kept pulling at a long jade necklace around her neck – pulling it taut and dropping it; hooking it with her thumb and pulling it taut again.

"Merry Christmas," Greg said stiffly. She waited for him to say something about her appearance. He failed.

She made a disbelieving laugh. "You didn't even shave," she said. She dropped the necklace and for a moment he felt sure that her hand was about to snake out, reach for his jowl, tug at the spiral of hairs growing there.

"You are drinking," she said.

"I am," he said. And then, to change the subject, "Have you done your homework?"

"I don't like it," she said. "I don't like that story, *Dreams*. Just a man and is in the woods. He's a prisoner? Yes, and the guards are taking him. So what? He talks about a dream. He's going to have a family, be happy. But the guards think it's not true."

"Do you think it's untrue, what he's saying? Do you think he won't be happy?"

"Yes, I think so. I am afraid of that he won't be happy."

They stood before the buffet and Winnie extricated her arm from his. He put a piece of coca-cola chicken on his plate.

"What's wrong with that?" he asked. "Why can't he just be unhappy?"

Once again she laughed, disbelieving or disturbed, and gripped his wrist.

It was becoming a relationship-defining gesture, Greg realised.

He posited a disengaged but benign alien observer videotaping their conversations, all the classes they'd had over the last year, and playing them back at high speed. This would be the gesture the alien observer would see again and again:

a disbelieving exclamation, a hand on the wrist. From this, the observer would derive its own unknowable conclusions.

What if, Greg thought, by some fluke of fate he were to spend a year, or a decade, or even the rest of his lifetime with Winnie? And one day on his deathbed think back at all the times he had provoked her to laugh with dismay and grip his wrist?

He would try to communicate this, but be unable to talk through his breathing tube. And she'd laugh with dismay and grip his wrist.

"How is it good?" Winnie persisted, "Is just a man in woods feel sad because he can't get what he wants. So what?"

"The thing is, Winnie, in that story the man is not in the woods. Read it again. He is in the marshes, dreaming about the woods. The trees are invisible!"

Winnie looked unimpressed. "So I read wrong," she said.

"Um, no!" said Greg. "What I mean is—"

"I think yes. I think maybe it's shit story and I read it wrong."

Greg's turn now to be surprised, to be ever-so-slightly dismayed, to reach out to where her arm hung by her side. Tan skin, hairless, indenting the satiny red fabric that covered her midriff. Soft. Floral smell.

He did not reach out. But he did ask her, "Why did you choose that poem to give me? The Li Bai poem?"

"I like it. I thought you will like it. Do you like it?"

"I do. Who is Li Bai to you?"

"He loved nature. And making friends. And drinking!"

"Would you call him a romantic?"

Winnie blushed. "Greg," she said. Her hand pinched his arm.

"Wait," Greg insisted, "there are two meanings of romantic. One refers to love. The other means being interested in nature, and freedom."

"Yes! That is Li Bai. He only ever does what he wanted to do. And he sits on the mountaintops and drinks wine all day. And I thought, that is what you do..." As she said this, a flicker of doubt crossed her face. "So it is, uh, *romantic*," she murmured. More doubt.

"Did you read much classical poetry at school?"

"Yes. We had to. Everybody hated it. I think maybe you will like this poem, though, Greg. I think... I *thought* very carefully. I thought about you."

"I know you did. Thank you."

"I like you."

"I like you too," Greg said, trying not to sound like Cary Grant.

"Oh, Greg," Winnie said, kneading his knuckles with her slim, dry fingers and taking a deep breath before diving in. "Will you go away with me? I will treat you. We will go somewhere beautiful."

"Fine."

"I can make you happy. It doesn't have to be, uh, *romantic*. No pressure. No serious."

"Fine."

"Just a good time, Greg, fun—"

"I said fine! Let's do it. Let's go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? *Ei... hao de*. Okay!" Her cheeks flushed as disbelief became desire. "Okay!" she said. She was close to him now, pressing her whole body against his, rubbing her hands in spirals against his Christmas jumper. "Okay, Greg..." she said, indifferent to the attention of the other buffet users. He tried to prise her off him.

"Surely we need to be careful," he hissed. "We're in public now, Winnie. Let's keep it secret. We can go away together tomorrow. Try not to hold my hand all the time out here in the hotel."

Whatever Winnie was about to say next was cut off by the recorded booming of a large gong. A diminutive woman in an air hostess's outfit started addressing the diners from one of the doorways. Greg heard nothing, but shortly thereafter people started moving out of the dining room. He checked his phone. It was 3:30. Did he have to be somewhere?

"What next?" Greg asked Winnie. Her cheeks were flushed.

"Entertainments!" she whispered, her tone conjuring a nineteenth-century circus extravaganza with elephants and dancing bears. "*A tombola!*"

"Oh my," said Greg, wondering how he was going to get out of it. "I suppose I'd better go fetch Ryan."

\*

Before they went to get Ryan, Winnie insisted on filling a plate with satay chicken skewers for Greg. Foodstuffs to line his stomach.

"Please," he said, "it's embarrassing. You're not my mother."

"What?"

"Nothing. Fine. Thank you."

They made their way back to the wall hanging, but neither Ryan nor Kelvin were there.

From somewhere nearby, Greg heard a laugh he recognised. It was a wheezy, yukky laugh, a childish titter corrupted by smoke and age. He handed the chicken platter to Winnie and followed the sound towards an alcove, partially concealed by

plastic bamboo stands. He felt Winnie's hand gripping his elbow, as if she were holding him back.

But in the alcove, around a wide table, Greg found Ryan and Kelvin drinking with Banner. The fascist Texan, leader of the Genghis Khan Krew: pockmarked cheeks and stubby fingers and all. He even had his oversized beer stein with him.

Greg chewed on his chicken satay skewer. It tasted bitter.

Banner had stopped laughing now; he was lighting a cigarette. Ryan and Kelvin, too, had stopped laughing, and they were waiting for Banner to speak. After exhaling a long plume of acrid smoke, as Greg drifted forwards, Banner spoke.

He spoke about something called the Body Show. A travelling exhibition. He described it as *fascinating*. He described bodies – human bodies – soaked in a kind of plastic. *Plastination*, it was called. It meant the bodies didn't rot, and you could arrange them in any position you wanted. Like dolls. He described that when you went in the exhibition space, you saw a man with all his veins out – all spread out, like a crown; and there was a woman with a baby inside her – you could see that little baby's head underneath the, the *pla-centa*; and there was a man riding a horse, but the horse was just a skeleton, like he was Lord Death, riding down the halls. They even have a couple engaged in coitus. Doing it. Like Adam and Eve. She was on top, reverse cowgirl of course, for the best view. Both corpses were skinned, so you could see their muscles, you could see the fat in her tits, you could see how the, the *penis* was just a big purple tube, and you could see all the, the *labia*, and they'd opened up the *vagina* so you could see it all going in. All the way in. He described it as the purest pornography he'd ever seen.

Greg was spellbound. So were all the other boy-men gathered around Banner. Greg felt like he was there, in some corporate exhibition space, stepping between

stands. Taking in the spread and offered secrets of the plastinated dead. In reality, the only corpse he'd ever seen had been Caspar's. And Caspar had not been stripped and laid open. He'd been dressed and powdered and cared for and held one last time by the people who loved him. He'd been shaved. Because the contraction of the drying skin reveals hair follicles in a way that led to the widespread belief that hair and nails keep growing after death. They didn't. They were dead. The entire body was dead.

There was a crack and a tinkle, and chicken satay skewers stained the carpet. Winnie had dropped her plate.

Banner looked up. He peered at Greg, then behind him, where Winnie cowered with embarrassment.

"Hi there, Greg," Banner said.

Ryan and Kelvin had turned around now. Greg recognised Ryan's half-guilty grimace. A young scholar caught with a smutty book.

\*

"What are *you* doing here?" Greg asked Banner. He spoke louder than he'd expected. He didn't look Banner in the eye.

It was Kelvin who answered.

"Lotsa cutting-edge dudes here, bro, like I told you. Lotsa tech guys, lotsa money guys." He shrugged, like it should be obvious: "It's a tombola."

"What the fuck are you talking about, 'cutting-edge dudes'?"

Greg meant the words to come out light and jokey, but they didn't seem that way once he'd said them, and Kelvin blinked and blushed. Greg knew Banner was staring at him, but couldn't force himself to look the man in the eye.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” he said to Ryan, instead, “but I’m an English teacher. And you’re an English teacher. And this specimen at least *claims* to be a kindergarten teacher.”

“*Specimen?*” Banner said, in a falsetto imitation of Greg’s accent.

Ryan snorted.

“Fuck you, Ryan,” Greg heard himself say. “Whose side are you on?” He could feel Banner’s attention like heat on his cheeks, but he still couldn’t look at him; and this inability – this weakness in him – was infuriating.

Ryan snorted in a different way. He sniffed. His nostril was powder-ringed.

“Mr Banner’s doing some legit development for us,” Kelvin said.

“What the fuck’s he developing, shapes and colours? He’s a fucking kindergarten teacher, isn’t he?”

Now Ryan was laughing with him, not at him. And like that, the balance had shifted: the power was on Greg’s side, and it was the easiest thing in the world to turn and look a man in the eye. He did: he turned, and looked Banner in the eye – but Banner was looking past him, at Winnie. His expression was hard to read.

Winnie’s fingernails were digging into Greg’s arm.

“Yeah,” Banner said, “I’m just a kindergarten teacher. Kelvin here fixed me up with a ticket to the ball, is all. And I’m grateful. I sure am.” He blinked, frog-like. He drank from his stein.

There was communication going on here. Banner and Winnie and Kelvin and Ryan: the inhabitants of this plastic bamboo grotto were familiar to each other in ways Greg did not understand. Nor did he want to understand. If he could hold this little tableau at a distance, that would be fine. Hang it on the wall.

“Whatever,” he said.



He finished his beer and gestured at Ryan, who got up with his own empty glass.

Winnie followed them halfway across the room, then stopped. Then drifted off, to inspect the wall hanging.

“What the fuck, Ryan?” Greg said.

“I’m sorry. If that’s what you want me to say. I understand that you might be cross with me. Are you cross with me?”

“I just don’t get it. He’s an *actual* Fascist. And you were laughing along with him at me. Again.”

“I understand. But have you considered that I’m doing research?”

“What are you writing, a guide for *Time Out*? ‘Scumbags You Can Meet in Shitty Bars’? ‘How White Supremacists Enjoy Chinese Hospitality’; or ‘Wankers Make Tits of Themselves at the Expense of Their Cuntish Beliefs’ – how do those titles suit you?”

“I promise you, once the story comes out you will understand. I’m going to make something good out of this, honestly. Really worthwhile.”

“Do you know what I was just thinking?” Greg said, feeling adrenalised and lucid and ready to talk, “I was remembering the shit you were saying about fascism, about fascism being fundamentally honest, that it would allow you to be morally *honest*, or honest about the fact you have no morals. But it’s not about honesty. It’s about feeling. It’s about feeling bad. A person who is unendurable to themselves, who is swamped, positively *swamped* with negative affect, who has fear oozing from his pores, who can’t see through the blood spilling out of his eyelids, that person must certainly find a suitable receptacle for his projections, an *other*, I mean, who might take the burden of all this *evil* we feel.”

“Are you crying?”

“And so you get bigotry and racism and all the nasty ways we fuck each other up, back in England, over in America. And you have those keyboard warriors who do the online race war shit. But... what if you don’t want to do that? What if you don’t care about the flame wars, you’re not going to take up some special cause, or you’re too short-sighted to even notice the cracks in your *own* society, you need something physical, something real, a place that you think will realise your... your darkest dreams and sweetest nightmares? Move to fucking China, mate. Move to fucking China.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Plastination. Fucking plastination. I know what the Body Show is, Ryan. It’s a modern-day fucking freakshow. But there’s nothing new about plastination, really; medical schools, anatomy lessons; there’s always been something icky about it, something unfair and voyeuristic about peering at corpses.”

Greg nodded. He remembered the patches of Caspar’s skin where they shaving had been imperfect. Stippled black beard hair. A gale in a field of burnt stalks.

“And importantly, Ryan, there’s nothing especially *Chinese* about plastination. China is bigger and more diverse than plastination.”

“You don’t need to defend it, mate. It’s not yours to defend.”

“But what I’m saying is, someone like *him*, he deals in nightmares.”

“Yeah.”

But just as suddenly as Greg had found his words, he lost them again.

“He’s bad,” he managed.

“Yeah.”

The current of lucidity that had lifted Greg had dropped him. He felt again the dumplings in his belly. The beer. His argument would have to remain unfinished. He had other important work to do.

“Fuck, man.”

They each took a breath.

“What’s the time?” Ryan asked eventually.

“Um... Five. The Christmas party is two hours ago.”

“Well we’d better get a drink.”

\*

Winnie watched with alarm as the drinking accelerated. Greg and Ryan lingered by the beer tap, downing draught after draught as stewards ushered the guests towards the entertainments. By the time Greg swayed through the double doors and into a banquet hall, the sun had set, and a strange filter had come down over everything. Winnie tried to hold Greg’s hand but he shook her off. He felt lightheaded, hollow, greasy somehow. The tide had gone out, and a thousand slimy things lay exposed to the air.

The curtains were red velvet. An MC was spitting out jokes in an abrupt and hearty *Beijinghua*. His cheeks were flabby and bathed in sweat, and his belly stretched the fabric of his buttoned up shirt. Plosives farted out of the tannoy speakers like distant explosions.

They located the last available seats. Greg sat between Ryan and Winnie, while Kelvin manned the aisle. As soon as they sat, Winnie wrapped her hand around Greg’s arm.

“I’ve been here before,” Ryan said, “in some other life. A worse one.”

"We've all been everywhere before," said Greg, with the sincerity of the utterly shitfaced.

"Oh, fuck," Ryan said.

The MC exited the stage with a flourish of quacks and barks, to be replaced by an absolutely tiny contortionist in a skintight snake-hide unitard. The crowd applauded as she presented the outline of her pudenda from a variety of different perspectives. Greg felt uncomfortable.

"Are you seeing this?" he hissed at Ryan.

"What? A display of discipline and training?"

"I can't stop looking at—"

"Shhh! All these people are trying to enjoy a family show. Just try not to let on that you are a pervert."

"*You* are the pervert!" Greg whispered, and found himself gripping Winnie's arm. She responded warmly. The performance came to a close and, as applause peaked, he hissed again at Ryan: "*You* are the pervert. I'm a cool guy with nothing to prove."

The MC returned and proceeded to tell a long story that involved a lot of sound effects – mainly car noises. These he provided himself, blowing air through his teeth and bubbling his saliva like a child in the playground.

Greg got the giggles.

"Shhh!" Ryan said eventually. "You are being culturally insensitive. This a serious and popular form of storytelling. This man probably works on the radio. He probably has a big house."

This did not help Greg to stop giggling. Winnie was looking dismayed but was not laughing. She'd already disentangled her arm and shifted away from him. She was staring intently at the MC.

"Neeeeeeowm," said the MC. "Kkkkkhrk! Dugga dugga dugga!"

"Look, if you can't control yourself, why don't you just go and get us some more beers?"

That seemed like a brilliant idea. Greg only had to push past Winnie – who flattened herself against her chair – and then past Kelvin to reach the aisle, and then just push past a row of eight or ten strangers to reach the exit.

Back in the dining hall, Greg encountered more serious resistance. The obliging and sympathetic staff that had served him earlier in the day had been replaced by insolent and resentful doppelgängers who had no interest in giving him any more beer. In fact, the crafty changelings claimed, the beer tap had been taken away. Greg demanded to speak to management immediately.

"I wish I could speak to the president!" he said, in Chinese. Then, threateningly: "I will apologise for this!"

Eventually an air hostess, no longer cold and uncomfortable but in fact deeply glamorous and highly appealing, told him that she could sell him some bottled beer. He felt very much inclined to oblige her (in anything!), until she quoted a price so insultingly high that he threatened to go outside and buy his beer elsewhere.

She told him that he could go outside, but perhaps should wear a coat, since it was now -7° centigrade, and further he wouldn't be allowed back inside with any beer bought elsewhere.

He thought for a while, then told her that he just felt like a walk outside, and promised not to buy any beer while he was out there.

“You are a beautiful grandmother [on my father’s side], I will obey you,” he said, in Chinese.

“Go out and drink piss beer in the cold you disgusting drunk,” she replied, in Chinese.

Greg took himself to a corner shop and purchased four cans of B&W American Ribbon. These he secreted into the upper halves of his stretchy lycra-blend socks, so that they resembled – he realised, in a moment of clarity – a swollen pair of gonads, if gonads were worn on the ankles in the manner of spurs or the foot-bells worn by Morris dancers in their English country rites. Then he realised that his fingers were no longer functioning properly, and surmised that it might be very cold indeed, so he made his way back to the hotel. His disguise went unchallenged by the staff in the lobby, who were hiding.

The entertainment was still occurring, at full volume, so nobody heard him open his first can, but the eight or ten strangers he pushed past on his way back to his row were unhappy to take the first blast of its over-carbonated contents. No matter. He hobbled down the row and took his seat between Ryan and Winnie in the manner of a secret agent. He wondered fleetingly whether he wanted to die. He offered Winnie a beer and squeezed Ryan’s hand. That was a bad move. He offered Ryan a beer and squeezed Winnie’s hand. Better. He wondered, again and less fleetingly, whether he wanted to die.

“The saddest thing,” he told Ryan, “is that I keep talking to you and expecting somebody else to reply. And I can barely even admit to myself, no matter how much I drink, that the love I had for this friend I lost in England was, and remains, a significant part of my life; and that grieving his loss has sent me spinning into the arms of inappropriate substitutes – including yourself, a person to whom I would

never normally utter the word love, since you reside in a kind of adolescent stasis, a mode of being that I find repellent and infectious and that I know is degrading me. Of course, I know it is unfair of me to judge you so harshly against somebody you have never met, and that you only superficially resemble. Yet, when you hold your head a certain way, and the light is just so, I can see him. When you speak, the words he would have said are just behind yours. And the fact is, I want to degrade myself. Because I believe I caused his death.”

“I don’t understand a word you’re saying,” said Ryan.

Greg blinked.

“Do you think,” he tried again, pronouncing every word as clearly as he could, “do you think Plumbe is a secret agent?”

“Professor Plum is a lunatic. He plays spy. He plays colonial consul. He aggrandises his life by imagining that he is part of something truly profound, when really he’s just playing out his own fucked-up psychosexual program loops. Walter fucking Mitty.”

Greg considered this opinion queasily. He watched as a magician came onto the stage and started pulling handkerchiefs out of his sleeves, his pockets, and his hat; then his earholes and his arsehole; then his eye sockets, a gaping wound in his lower abdomen, a hole in his chest, slits in his lower back.

“Is this really happening?” Greg asked.

Ryan looked at him quizzically.

Greg concentrated on looking at his shoes until music and applause signalled a change. A well-dressed, heavily made-up woman in a sparkly *qipao* hauled a trolley onto the stage; on top was a wire barrel with a rotating handle. She took the microphone and started working up the audience.

The tombola, it seemed, was about to begin at last.

*Ding*, went Greg's phone.

He fumbled with his trouser pocket and spilled beer on his lap. Winnie tutted, appalled, before attempting to feed him a chicken satay skewer.

"Listen," he hissed at Ryan. Ryan signalled that he should swallow his food before he tried to speak.

*Ding*, went Greg's phone.

Greg burped and apologised and Winnie squeezed his arm in a vacant manner, momentarily diverted from the tombola woman's barrel-twirling patter. The woman opened the wire cage and retrieved a coloured plastic ball. She read out a number on it. At the end of the row, Kelvin started sorting furtively through a stack of tickets.

*Ding*, went Greg's phone.

The man sitting in front of Greg asked him to silence his phone. Winnie *tssked* at the man and studied her tombola ticket. Greg looked at her for a little while. She looked beautiful and far away. He made another effort to retrieve his phone, but had difficulty keeping his chair upright. Luckily, his neighbours were sympathetic to his desire not to fall on the ground; there was, as he remarked, a synergy of interests.

"*Jiu jiu san?*" the tombola woman was asking the crowd. Somebody stood up and cheered. Everybody else reluctantly clapped. Greg had his phone in his hand now and was being encouraged to sit down again. Before he did, he spied the massive form of Banner, slouching down the aisle and between the red curtains.

"*Si er er?*" the tombola woman asked. Nobody stood up. Nobody cheered or applauded.

Greg remembered that he was holding his phone. He remembered that there were messages on it. It was getting hard to hold everything together.



“*Si er er?*” the tombola woman asked again. Kelvin riffled through his stack at furious speed.

Greg finally opened the three new messages on his phone. They were from Jenny.

LONELY & MEET 2NIGHT?

MEET ME 2NIGHT 4 KISSING

& BRING MY POM POM

Greg blinked.

“*Si er er.*” the woman said.

Greg stared at his phone. He felt as if an inter-dimensional sphincter had opened up and pitched him somewhere weird. The walls rippled and tilted – not with the familiar ferryboat yawing of drunkenness, but like mucous membranes expanding and contracting – and he shut his eyes on it. There was no room for this information. He did not want this.

He deleted the messages.

Kelvin had stood up. He elbowed Winnie out of the way and pushed a ticket into his hand. He said, “YOU HAVE WON A PRIZE!”

\*

Frederick Gustav Plumbe was walking home to Happiness Mansions with a shrink-wrapped stack of toilet rolls and a sack of groceries when he saw a taxi pull up and Ryan and Greg spill out onto the pavement, along with a heap of gift-wrapped parcels.

He did not need to be especially observant to see that they were very drunk indeed; he did not need to be particularly discreet, either, to stay unobserved within listening range, and to hear everything they were saying.

## Tower

"I see you are yourself again," says Meng Haoran.

The old man peers at Li Bai through bushy white eyebrows. He is chewing, in his bovine way, on one of the sweetmeats he favours. An entire repast has appeared between them: fine food on fine platters, deposited by careful servants. Through the window, Li Bai can see that the sky is unchanged. He sees the merry sailboats and the birds circling the fishermen. He drinks a sip more of the wine in his hand.

Li Bai recalls getting up early in the morning to meet his friend here, at Yellow Crane Tower. He recalls faltering on the stairs; being assaulted by doublings. He recalls analysing the grain of the tower's wooden beams and finding them at once familiar and strange.

He cannot account for the experience; it feels like somebody else's memory, not his own.

"Old friend," he croaks, his mouth as dry as if he hasn't spoken for hours, "you've read of the sage who wakes from a strange dream, and wonders whether he is a man who has dreamt he was a butterfly, or whether he is a butterfly, still sleeping, dreaming that he is a man?"

"Many times."

"And what do you think the story means?" Li Bai asks.

"I don't know, my friend. I am a Buddhist. You are the Daoist. I should have thought that knowledge would have come with the diploma you purchased."

Li Bai clears his throat. He swallows his pique.

"No matter," he says. "I will doubtless discover more of the sage's meaning with further close study and practice."

"No doubt," says Meng Haoran. "I am glad you're feeling better, all the same."

\*

They eat. They drink. They discuss the usual things: poetry, food, proposed changes to the national examination for Imperial officials. By the time they reach that natural lull in conversation that should precede a well-timed parting, Li Bai feels quite recovered.

Meng Haoran clears his throat.

"I leave you now," he says, "with well wishes, and a warning. You are on the road to Chang'an. A happy road, paved with ambition, but also expectation."

"I know what you are going to say."

The older man looks put out. "What am I going to say?" he asks.

"That ambition is a chain that will keep me trapped in the physical hell."

"Naturally, that is true. I was going to get onto that. But I see you are too clever to be taught by such a fuddy-duddy as myself."

"Don't huff."

"Fine. Allow me to give you some practical advice. In the city of Chang'an, all is not what it seems. It is beautiful place, yes. The white marble gate to the silk road, with its caravanserai. The cosmopolitan districts, with their representatives of every vassal state in the world. And yes," he adds with a knowing smile, "the green-eyed maidens playing their ethnic pipes in the pleasure gardens. But remember: many noble families vie for power in Chang'an. It is the heart of the Empire. The Emperor's viziers, eunuchs and courtesans include many that you should fear, young man—"

"Yes, yes," says Li Bai. "But what about the parties?"

Meng Haoran falters.

"The parties..." he mutters, narrowing his eyes.

"The parties," Li Bai says, smiling. A servant passes him a small bottle of supermarket own-brand vodka. He drinks, and stands, and approaches the window, and gazes out over the river.

"I dream of the most fantastic parties, everywhere I go. I dream of colourful lanterns and kind people and smiles. I dream of music. I dream of people from across the realm, dancing together. This is what it means to me, my journey to Chang'an. And yet."

The poet pauses. He bites his knuckle. He considers the strange falling that he felt as he mounted the stairs. He reaches for his vodka bottle and finds a ceramic bowl of fine wine. He drinks.

"My dreams confuse me. I wonder whether they are not mine, but somebody else's. Sometimes this upsets me. But sometimes, I think this is right. I see, in my mind's eye, a deep wet lake of dreams, all the dreams, distilled into an elixir. I want to drink of it. I want to swim in it."

Meng Haoran nods. He smiles. His smile reveals, beneath his wrinkled skin, a young face.

"Let's go for a swim," he says.

**SEEING MENG HAORAN OFF FROM YELLOW CRANE TOWER, by Li Bai**

At Yellow Tower in the west  
My old friend says farewell;  
In the mist and flowers of spring  
He goes down to Yangzhou;  
Lonely sail, distant shadow,  
Vanish in blue emptiness;  
All I see is the great river  
Flowing into the far horizon.

*Yang Xianyi*

## Beidaihe

Greg awoke surprised. He was in the living room. The lights were on, and globbets of Winnie's moon cake were sprayed across the floor and walls. There was other evidence – baking trays half-filled with homemade comfort foods: mashed potato, roasted squash and macaroni cheese, yellowing and drying. Bottles everywhere. Cigarette ash.

Evidence. A party happened here. How? When?

He had no time to interpret this. He threw a few clothes in a day bag and leaned against the bathroom wall beneath the shower. He brushed his teeth until the foam he spat was blood-flecked; still, he could smell alcohol on his breath. Alcohol exuded from every gland and pore.

His phone told him *DING!*

Winnie was waiting outside.

Greg found Winnie's *beimowo* close to the entranceway. She made a face and held her nose when he opened the door. She was wearing a gigantic pair of sunglasses. Greg thought she looked, in her fury, like Imelda Marcos.

"I have been waiting half an hour," she said.

Greg complimented her on her grammar.

"I don't think you are funny. For how long did you drink for?"

"There are linear infinities, and quantum ones," Greg started. Then he shrugged.

Winnie manoeuvred the car to the north-west campus gate. The junction was choc-a-bloc, and Winnie had time to take her hands off the wheel and berate Greg properly.

“I am angry about you. I want to treat you and you can’t even get out of bed to meet me, even though I have been waiting for half an hour. Even though *I have been driving* for an hour to get here! Even though *I have been spending* money on gas and treats for you...” she trailed off. She was nailing the present perfect continuous tense today.

A gap opened between two cars ahead, into which Winnie neatly wedged the nose of her *biémòwǒ*, to the surprise of some pedestrians attempting to cross. There was a general chorus of beeping, to which Winnie contributed with little enthusiasm.

“I have been worrying about you,” she said. “You drink like this – you are going to die.”

She performed a U-turn that succeeded by virtue of its careless ferocity. They set off. They spent a peaceful few hours on the Beijing ring roads, listening to soft rock on the radio. Winnie swung between lanes, executing outrageous manoeuvres in a manner that encouraged swift acquiescence from others. Huge buildings rose and fell beside them. The ring road twisted into raised junctions and dived beneath overpasses. Everything felt smooth. Perhaps it was the superb car, responding calmly to every one of Winnie’s impulsive jerks at the wheel, smoothing off the edges with its expensive suspension.

But after they joined the eastbound Jingha Expressway, nausea set in.

The tower blocks started to bubble and sway. They were more distant from the road now, spread out on an expanse of bone-dry earth. Greg shifted in his seat. He adjusted the seatbelt – which had started strangling him, apparently – then removed it entirely.

“What is the matter?” Winnie asked.

“Do you have any water?”



There was a case of bottled water under the seat. Greg clawed at the plastic cover for a non-linear infinity before extracting a bottle, then twisted the cap off wrong so that water spilled over his belly and crotch. He held a mouthful of water on his tongue, willing himself to be able to swallow it.

“Oh, fuck,” he gurgled, “pull over.”

They stopped on a verge of dry earth and cinderblocks. Greg crawled some distance from the car and let the water leave his mouth. It stained the sandy brown earth the colour of rich loam. He considered vomiting, and spat a few strands of saliva from his lips. He considered the organic compounds that promoted viscosity in saliva. What were they called? Some types of saliva were more sticky than others. Take what was dangling from his lips at this moment, for example – very sticky. Virtually defying gravity: globules rolling lazily upwards back towards his mouth.

Was sticky saliva more alive? It behaved as though it were. A living extension of himself, hovering between lips and ground. He considered the spirals of molecules that constituted the liquid reality of his own flesh; a microcosm of nuclei, held at relative distances by electromagnetic forces; he considered deoxyribonucleic acid, the endlessly self-replicating double helix of information, of which his own body was merely a present manifestation and vessel for future transmission.

Winnie had told him he was going to die.

Greg took a hearty slug of water and was gratified to see it all come rushing out again and onto the ground. He vomited for a while longer, then crawled back to the car and apologised and curled up, shaking, dusty and stained. He tried to tune in to the vibration of the powerful engine beneath him.

It really was a superb car. It thrummed and growled and buzzed. It would take him away.

\*

A headache woke him up an hour or so before sunset. Winnie had taken off her Steel Butterfly sunglasses; they were facing East, driving into their own shadows. Winnie's eyes on Greg were cold.

"Go on," Greg said, through a mouth of gunk, "hit me with it."

"I'm in SHIT with you!" Winnie spat. "Shit piss fucking you! I have been driving for SEVEN HOURS! What do you have to say to me? No words! Sleep all day!"

Greg apologised.

"Shut up! You soun' like you say before— fucking English—" And then she switched to Chinese and told him that he had obviously done this kind of thing before and she didn't know whether it was okay in England, with English girls, but it certainly was not okay with her because she'd made a lot of effort to have a nice trip away, and eating lunch in a car park with a passed-out limp-dick drunk was not her idea of a nice trip away, and was that what they called a nice trip away in England?

Greg pretended to understand less than he did. They were quiet for some time. Greg arranged himself on his seat, trying to smooth down his hair in the mirror, brush some of the ash off his trousers.

"Where are we?" he eventually asked.

"Hebei province. We are not far from Beidaihe."

Greg looked out of the window. Bare earth stretched out on either side of the road. In the distance he saw half-completed tower blocks.

"What do they grow here?" he asked.

"I don't know," Winnie replied. Then she raised her hand to her temple, as if remembering some new piece of vocabulary. "I, um..." she said, "*I don't give a fuck.*"

Greg watched a gust of wind blow a grey cloud into the air.

“Will it look nicer in the Spring?” he asked.

“I don’t give a fuck,” she pronounced again, very clearly.

“Will it look nicer where we are going? In, uh, Beidaihe?”

She sighed. “Yeah. Beidaihe is nice. Once upon a time, foreign missionaries have been going on vacations there. Then the Russians. Then the Japanese. Now is the government have their summer vacations there. Big conference. They have been taking their girlfriends there, too. For uh *illicit liaisons*.” She smiled grimly as she said this, manually gear braking with a series of violent thumb flicks.

\*

It did look nicer where they were going. The part of the city that approached the seafront had a holiday feel: the streets were wide and planted with trees, and the buildings had faux-wooden facades and steeply tented roofs, like dachas or alpine lodges. They passed a number of hotels and seafood restaurants with fish tanks outside, insulated with thick greying strips of fibreglass wool.

Winnie checked her phone with increasing frequency, then made a decisive U-turn and pulled into a set of guarded gates between whitewashed walls. The property reminded Greg of a downmarket sanatorium. Cedar trees were spread across a sandy expanse of scrub and crab grass, and beneath the boughs of these trees were visible, in pairs and groups, single-storey white cabins.

They pulled up beside a modest reception building, and Greg remembered that he’d forgotten his passport. But Winnie didn’t even scold him. She told him to wander down to the beach while she dealt with everything; she would meet him down there.

So he grabbed a bottle of water and trotted back down the drive towards the water.

He crossed a road and came to a fenced-off beach. Between the chicken wire, he saw that the beach featured sand and a rock, the sea, and an inflatable rabbit the size of a truck. Entry was ¥10, payable to a teenager in military uniform and white trainers, who was looking glum in a wooden guard box. Greg paid the fee. The guard raised the barrier then went back to doing something with his phone.

Greg stepped off the concrete onto the pale, soft sand. It was not yet dark. The wind off the sea felt wonderfully cool, and as he slugged his water, Greg could imagine that his headache was abating. He passed the rabbit, which was rocking in its stays. Beneath some printed red banners, the rabbit was a light green colour that seemed to glow in the evening light. Its ears crinkled and snapped, buffeted by the wind. The rabbit was completely unexplained. It pleased Greg to leave it that way. He approached the rock.

Since it was a romantic evening, many couples had paid entry to the beach in order to stand on its feature rock and scream at the sea. This, too, pleased Greg. He had absolutely no interest in knowing what it meant. He considered taking his shoes off and running his toes between the sand. Then he realised that it was snowing.

It was peaceful.

No – it was more than that. Greg was tempted to say it was blissful – but that could well have been relief from nausea. He knew not to trust that sensation; experience told that he was in the grips of a formidable hangover. He would likely get the sweats tonight. Booze fever.

Still, it was possible to ignore the feeling right now. It really was peaceful. He allowed himself to drift.

He had been here before, he thought. Whether in his dreams or his wishes, he had visited this shore. He had looked out onto this cold ocean of grey green, and

known that beyond it lay something still colder. Beyond the sea, and the northern peninsulas. Korea, Kamchatka. Beyond the muskeg, the taiga, the tundra, the floe: north of magnetic north lay another realm. True North. Where ice looks like rock and rock looks like ice. The sky and the ground look the same. All blue. Where the railway lines ran out and all the planes crashed and the litter of suitcases and shoes froze to the ice rock blue.

He inhaled cold ocean air and exhaled. His penis started to swell. Desire was a substance, he thought, that washed up on northern shores in lumps, like ambergris. If he turned around, he knew that he would see Winnie. He turned around. He saw Winnie. She was wrapped up in a scarf and hat; her cheeks had turned red; she was smiling.

\*

They ate in a Russian-styled seafood restaurant not far from the beach. At Winnie's request, a sieveful of crayfish were lifted, blue and squirming, from the tank outside the entrance. Fifteen minutes later they were a healthy boiled pink with a coating of chili oil, and they sat in a dish between the two of them. Wearing a pair of transparent polyethylene gloves, Winnie broke their shells to pieces with her hands, sucked the flesh from their legs and the brains from their chitinous chambers. Greg had noodle broth.

"Why was that rabbit such a gross colour?" he asked her. "The inflatable rabbit on the beach. Why was it green?"

"It's jade colour," Winnie said. "This year is the year of the rabbit. We will soon send a rocket to the moon."

"Um, right."

She rolled her eyes. “So it’s a *jade rabbit*. We have a myth in China that in the moon there is a jade rabbit. So the rocket to the moon will be called ‘Jade Rabbit’. So the rabbit on the beach is jade colour.”

“Oh. Actually, I think I did–”

“Like how in England you sent rocket to the moon called ‘Beagle’, like the funny dog. But it was shit.”

Winnie forced the flesh of a crayfish out from between a fissure she had opened in its armour.

“Mars,” said Greg. “We were trying to go to Mars. And it was named after one of Charles Darwin’s ships, not just a dog. You know Charles Darwin?”

Winnie licked her fingers.

Piqued, Greg complained about one of the details of the poem that she had given him – a particular word that apparently meant ‘green jade’, but which was consistently translated as ‘blue’.

Winnie shrugged. “In that combination it always means blue,” she said. “Chinese is very ancient. It doesn’t make sense. Western people,” she continued dismissively, “like logic.”

“Yes. English is a logical language,” Greg lied.

“Anyway, jade can be different colour.”

They eyed one another. The conversation was falling into familiar bullshit.

Greg remembered the fantasies he’d entertained about their relationship. Correct, it seemed. This was the kind of restaurant he’d imagined; soon Winnie’s behaviour would become forced and anxious. She’d start paying more attention to the other tables than to him. Predictions had a habit of coming true. He remembered again the scene at the kindergarten, the children in his care climbing the high shelf

for kicks, his nightmares drawing strength from his fear, manifesting in the outside world.

*I am a magical creator, Greg thought. I am a Picasso of shit.*

Perhaps now she'd say that westerners were selfish. Something like that. Perhaps he'd say that China was dirty and loud. She'd bring up the Opium War, the Treaty of Nanking, the Eighth Allied Army, the Century of Humiliation. Tibet, he'd say, out loud, at last. Xinjiang. Falun Gong.

Then they'd really get to it. She'd say that western medicine cured symptoms but misunderstood causes, that westerners paid the price for divorcing body from mind, that they'd lost touch with tradition, that their arrogance was a manifestation of their lack of history, that they were upstart barbarians whose liberal affectations were either a complacent manifestation of privilege or a profoundly misguided social experiment, or both. He would say that China was a stagnant autocracy without innovation, that corruption was the inevitable product of authoritarian rule, that the supposedly radical CCP had replicated the Imperial bureaucracy in almost every way.

Blah blah blah, he'd say.

Blah blah blah, she'd say.

"Winnie," he said, uninterested in whatever declaration he was about to make – sick of himself, in fact – hopelessly bored and wishing that he could be another person if only for a moment. He felt the sense of circumscribed fate that he'd experienced in the banquet hall of the Beijing Aeronautics University Hospital Hotel.

*We have all been everywhere before.*

Consciousness was global, he thought – no, it was beyond global: consciousness was intergalactic, consciousness was universal. But he could not for

one moment think himself outside of the constraints of his skull. Hundreds of thousands of light years away, vast civilisations were rising and falling; an infinitude of concurrent lives were colliding – some of them here, in this Russian-styled Sichuanese restaurant, in this arid northern seaside town, off-season – lights were flashing on and off in the void as connections were made, and lost; and he himself, bored of himself, was slurping noodle broth and saying to his sometime student, possible lover, bored conversational partner, “Winnie,” he was saying–

\*

*How I hate the way he says the word ‘Winnie’*, Yang Wei thought. She had selected the name carefully. ‘Winnie’ was neither popular nor unpopular, and was old, which was important to the English (although not to the Americans). It meant ‘white one’, which suited her meticulously maintained skin tone, and she had been assured that it was appropriate for a woman. But the way Greg pronounced it made her feel like she’d made the wrong choice. He seemed to stumble over it as if embarrassed. Sometimes he seemed to sneer it out.

Perhaps he was going to correct her English again. She recalled the sentence she’d said: ‘Jade can be a different colour’. She rolled it around her mouth, trying to detect the flaw. She was pretty sure there was one. Should she say ‘jades’? Should she use ‘different’ twice?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. English, she felt, made her stupid.

She could prove to him that jade could take different colours. In Chinese, she could describe very eloquently the range of colours and opacities that jade could take, from milky white to crystalline turquoise.

In Chinese, this description would lead on, naturally enough, to a story.



When Yang Wei was eight years old (she could have told him, in Chinese), her grandmother took her to a plant market in her hometown. She couldn't now remember exactly where the market was. She hadn't returned to Wenzhou more than four times since she married, and it had changed a great deal since then. Probably, the market no longer existed. However, she remembered sitting in Grandma's lap, breathing petrol fumes in the back of the motorised tricycle ridden by the manager of their building. She remembered the relief of arriving at the plant market: the wide gravel pathways between stands, a roof of green-tinged glass, and the smell of geraniums soothing her nausea.

Alongside the plant stalls, there were others selling statues and decorative rocks. Amid these, they'd come across a stall operated by a man with a mousy face and a brown, whiskery moustache. The mousy man sold objects that resembled landscape paintings but were in fact cut, polished specimens of striated rock. The larger ones were framed and displayed on the stall walls, but there were also smaller ones, cut from semi-precious stones like jasper and jade: variably translucent tablets about the size of a notebook. These were displayed in boxes with clasps and velveteen inlays.

One of these was Yang Wei's treasure. She recognised it as such immediately. It contained an astonishing landscape. The strands of stone displayed – far more clearly than if they'd been painted by a human hand – a cataract falling between tall mountains, and a pool flowing into a broad river, bound by a greenish, wavering riverbank. There was a boat on the river. A jetty. A man on the jetty. There were clouds above, and currents below.

It was enthralling. A work of art more beautiful than any manmade thing she saw before or since. It drew her in as if by mastery of its own gravitational field.

It was the first thing Yang Wei ever stole.

It happened like this: she ran to get Grandma back from the next stall, so that Grandma would buy it and give it to her. She did this casually at first, expecting Grandma to recognise immediately that the object was her due. A perfect present.

Grandma didn't seem to get this. Yang Wei had explained, slowly and kindly; then crossly; then insistently, wheedlingly, tearfully – before a certain look on Grandma's face warned that her strategy was unwise. This was Generous Grandma, on her mother's side, but she had her limits. And Generous Grandma used her hands more often than Mean Grandma.

Worse, when she brushed her crocodile tears away, real ones welled up to replace them. Yang Wei realised that her strategic display of outrage had become real, and the keenness of the injustice was growing on her. This object – this beautiful thing – was already hers, according to the order of things as they should have been. It was her mineral soulmate. To give her the stone now was only to rectify an error in the natural order.

All of which made it feel particularly unfair when Grandma then slapped her hand and accused her of stubbornness and acting up; and this further injustice certainly didn't stop her crying.

Panic set in. She realised she was on the verge of a full-blown tantrum at the age of eight.

The mousy man with the brown whiskers fixed it. Despite Grandma's protests, he went and fetched Yang Wei a stick of candied haw from a street vendor. This quieted her – the kind act, and the sticky sugar coating, and the half-savoury sourness of the haw. She would never be able to enjoy that flavour again.

She snuck back to the stall half an hour later and slipped the polished rock out of its case and into her pocket, before running back to join Grandma, who was trying to persuade the building manager to buy peonies instead of cauliflowers.

Yang Wei had been planning to tell Greg about this stone for some time. A version of the story had been forming in English – key words and phrases circulating like newly memorised vocabulary. Her treasure. Her leisure pleasure treasure. Peony. Jasper.

Yet at this moment, she faltered. Looking at Greg now, at his pale wedge of a face, she felt repulsed. She wouldn't tell him this story in the language that made an idiot of her.

*Leisure, pleasure, treasure, she thought. Geranium and loam. I knew then I would be an artist and a thief, and I would never eat candied haw again.*

What was the difference, she wondered, between a language exercise and a story? What was the difference between a language exercise and an intimacy, a declaration of love, even? The more she learned of her second language, the more she had become convinced that to think was to speak, either out loud or in your head. What else could it be?

To say I love you was to use the words 'I love you'. What else could it be?

Yang Wei listened to English-language podcasts on her commute. About travel and foreign lands, mainly. From one of these she had learned that immigrants often felt like they had split into two people when they spoke and thought in two different languages. She had learned that this schism could be quite severe – that people could become strangers to themselves.

It was a disturbing thought.

Strangest was the time when the immigrant started dreaming in her new language. That was the point when the deep dark hidden part of the mind started to re-manifest itself in new terms, the terms of the new language, the cuckoo language.

That was an image that frightened Yang Wei more than anything else: the dreamer passing through translated landscapes, strange to herself. Yet she found it oddly hard to countenance. At base, she probably couldn't believe in it. A cold uncurious part of her knew that there was only one language, really, underneath everything.

She recalled the night she got engaged. Her engagement present stood on the windowsill, and the window was closed, and the room was hot and she woke up screaming at four a.m. She'd dreamed of her own body, moulded from tubes and strands and wax-melt curtains of coloured glass, brittle but flexing, scraping against itself, moving.

She wondered whether Greg dreamed in Chinese. She doubted it. Greg only rarely spoke in Chinese. He was complacent, like lots of the *laowais* in Wudaokou, getting by on their English.

Or was he?

She reconsidered the statement. She wondered what language he dreamed in.

Then, suddenly despairing, she wondered whether she had anything more to give him than her one story, whether she had anything more to take from him than his body – which she desired – the way his flanks showed when he stretched his arms, a flash of downy white. The way he looked like Kyle McLachlan from the 1990s, when the light was just so, and he tilted his head a certain way.

No, she thought, there was more to him than that: he was good, she felt sure, in ways he did not know. He was capable of saying beautiful things. There was a

version of him, behind the laddishness, the cruddy *laowai* boyishness, that wanted to be kind, and gentle, and open. The cruddy *laowai* boy-ness was a mask Greg wore, like the mask her brother wore, like the mask her husband wore.

Or was it?

Just because you want it to be true, doesn't make it so.

She thought about her husband. She thought about the appalling company he kept – that grotesque Texan *laowai*, those pasty-faced droogs who accompanied him on all those trips out west – and she wondered what kind of a trap he'd managed to get himself into. She wondered how closely her idiot brother was embroiled in it.

\*

"Another silly word in that poem is *yānhuā*," Greg was saying. "I looked it up. The individual characters mean 'smoke' and 'flower'. But then the compound together means 'firework', which is charming, I think."

He didn't expect Winnie to respond; she seemed lost in her thoughts. Nor was he really thinking about what he was saying. He was watching Winnie's fingers absently break the legs off a crayfish. He was trying to pin down how old she was.

"Anyway, *yānhuā* doesn't mean fireworks in the poem, though. I looked it up. It means 'a bright and beautiful spring day with blooming flowers and atmospheric mists'. Ha ha!"

Winnie pulled a tail off a crayfish with a wet snap. Greg flinched. Impulsively he signalled a waiter and ordered beer.

"I told you," Winnie said, "classical Chinese is like another language. I only learn it because I have to take examination."

Beer came and Winnie watched Greg drink it.

"That poem," he said, shaking his head.

"I thought you like it."

"I do like it. I just don't understand it. I mean, sometimes it seems so strange and new, and other times it just seems like old tat. I mean: a man is seeing his friend off. They are both famous poets and they are at this famous beautiful building, the Yellow Crane tower, and to top it off it's a bright and beautiful spring day with blooming flowers and atmospheric mists. It's a good thing it wasn't raining that day, eh, Winnie?"

Winnie asked him in Chinese if he would please get to the point.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude. It just doesn't ring true. Didn't people like Li Bai write poems like these for their friends all the time? Like, isn't it a little convenient that the day Meng Haoran was leaving just happened to be so fresh and beautiful? Don't you think it might be a bit clichéd?"

"Clichéd?"

"Predictable. The same as before. Boring."

"Greg. This poem twelve hundred years old."

"But like, what if it wasn't a beautiful Spring day?"

"When you go away, what kin' of goodbye you wan'?" She asked the question slowly, her accent thickening as she did so. Consonants disappeared from the ends of words. As if she had given up, or she was deliberately trying to provoke him. "Is shitty day. Smog fuckin everywhere. I say goodbye Greg in broken dow bus. He's bit of a *prick-kuh*."

Greg laughed until noodles came out of his nose.

\*

"Why did you want to become a teacher?"

"I never want to become a teacher. I wanted to paint."

"What happened?"

"Parents."

"Why did you want to paint?"

"I like beautiful things." Winnie looked at the remaining pile of whole crayfish. Her hands clenched and extended, as if she were channelling her energies or mastering some elusive pain. "I have a collection now."

"Do you even need to work now? I mean, doesn't your uh... doesn't *he* make enough money for you to just paint if you want to?"

"Greg, I am not a housed wife."

"That's not what I meant."

"I have an *own* life *of my own*," Winnie insisted.

Some English teachers, Greg reflected, encouraged their students to make their mistakes into virtues of their own style. *Own your errors*, they taught. An empowering statement. He knocked back his beer and asked: "Is your husband in the Party?"

"Oh, yes," she said, with a dismissive wave.

"What does he do?"

She seemed not to hear.

"Does he come here? For Party conferences and... whatever?"

She looked at him for a long time as if he were being particularly simple. Then she sighed and eviscerated another crayfish, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Yeah, he come here," she said. Then, as if rebutting an accusation: "His job very busy, you know? Very stress. It's not just easy for Party people. Everybody think Party people are making money *hand over fist*. But is not simple. They work

hard. They have conferences and courses. China is very big, Greg, and Party people have to control *everything*. Tough job.”

“I hear there are rewards,” Greg said. She smiled, wry, unshocked.

“You have to think about, Greg,” she said, in a confidential tone, as if briefing a neophyte, “is the man above you. Your team leader protect you, sets your limits. How much money you can make, *outside* your salary. Is a small salary, you see, so everyone expects you to make extra. And no one can say you done wrong if you did only as much as your team leader. Team leader is living in a house like *this*—” She indicated a point on an invisible bar chart. “...you better to live in a house not as good as *this*. Team leader is driving *that* brand car, so you better to be driving that brand car, but an older one, and *for sure* not a better one, or you watch out – you get caught, and no more Party! They throw you out!” she crowed, getting carried away.

“Then they throw you in jail. Worse, maybe. So is tough, Greg. A complicate situation.”

Then something odd happened to Winnie. Something, somewhere in her, detonated. The implosion was perceptible only through the shockwaves that rippled across Winnie’s features. As if she crumbled, yet did not: what had been knowing and solicitous in her expression became fearful – vacantly fearful – yet nothing concrete had changed.

What she said next seemed to come from a different voice. She spoke slower. Her pronunciation was clearer. Even her syntax improved, as if the phrases that she mouthed out had been rehearsed long before.

“I think things will change next year,” she said, “with the new government. A new president, maybe someone better than Hu Jintao. Maybe the new government have policies that will put a stop to this, this, this...” She rubbed her hands together.



Her clear, crackling gloves stuck together with red grease and flecks of meat.

“...slipping,” she eventually said. “A return to *traditional values*. People feel lost.

Everyone says. In China now, we got wealth but so what? We lost our moral centre.

Everyone says, is money the only thing we want? Lots of people seeking. Need someone to guide us in moral right direction. Do you understand?”

Greg wasn’t sure he did. He wasn’t entirely sure who was asking the question.

“What kind of traditional values to you mean?”

Winnie searched the crayfish husks that littered the tablecloth for an appropriate answer. Blinking.

“Filial piety?” she finally offered. She was using her own voice again, as if she’d just woken up.

“Come on,” Greg said.

Winnie covered her eyes.

“I know, I know, I know,” she murmured. When she removed her hands, smears of chilli oil smudged her eyebrows.

“We are not supposed be greedy,” she said. “We are not supposed to take for us selves. We supposed to defeat desire. There is all this beautiful things, and we are supposed to just look at it.” With her gloved finger, she traced a line. The line moved from a point in the middle distance towards her eyes – so close that Greg was worried she’d rub chilli oil into her eyes – then down towards her heart, where she released it with a dismissive wave.

“Just supposed to look at it, enjoy it, let go,” she said. “This is Buddhist teaching, Greg. Very ancient teaching. But here we are. This is twenty-first Century. Get rich with us or go to jail! Ha ha!” She sighed, sated or complacent or just vacant, and settled into her chair. Then she plucked Greg’s beer from his hand and downed

the remains in one. “Look. My husband told me – he told me joining party is like jumping in a river. You can’t go against it. Only go with it. If you swim well, go with it, you move forward. But look up: you see the sky is very dark. About to collapse. Can’t do anything to keep it up. Keep swimming.”

## Cabin

The cedars formed silhouettes against the floodlit scrub. The whitewashed cabins looked particularly institutional in their islands of light – not quite sanative, however. There was something anachronistic about them, too. Greg felt like he could have stumbled across them in the Italian Alps or the Black Forest, or indeed Bialowieza, or any other primeval forest on the European Plain in the first half of the previous century. It was disturbing.

Winnie guided him up a causeway of concrete steppingstones to a pair of semidetached cabins with doors set intimately close. Cabins Three and Five. There was no Cabin Four. Greg steeled himself for the moment of intimate contact, but Winnie caught him off guard, pressing the key to Number Three in his palm while letting herself into Number Five.

“Goodnight, love,” she said, and squeezed his hand particularly hard, and closed the door on his face.

There followed an inevitable period of prevarication. Greg checked his cabin and found his day bag inside. He paced around outside for a while and raised his hands to knock and drew his breath to speak. Eventually he shut himself in his room and removed his shoes and decided to feel relieved at being left alone.

The interior had a distinctly retro vibe. Everything was either dark brown or magnolia. The walls, for instance, were clad in dark wood, while the floor tiles were magnolia. Ceiling fan, chest of drawers, bed frame, clock: dark brown wood finish. Ceiling, sheets, tea kettle, toilet cistern: magnolia.

By the bed was an old television set in faux-wooden moulding. Greg turned it on and watched an army general in full parade dress tell a series of jokes to an appreciative studio audience. Then Greg turned it off.

In the silence that followed, Greg realised that he didn't want to be alone. It wasn't simply that he wanted to sleep with Winnie. His body was about to run out of alcohol to process. He'd been too drunk for too long not to expect consequences. Sweat and creeping fear. Booze fever.

Already the décor was starting to work on him. It was like the set of a 1960s French film in which intolerable crimes occurred without mention. He turned the light off, but decided that this placed him in a far worse type of film. So he turned the television on again and watched Japanese soldiers tumble to the ground before a volley of machine-gun fire. He turned it off again.

He turned the light on and off again. He started feeling really weird.

Eventually Greg settled on keeping the bathroom light on and half-closing the door, trying not to imagine anything lying on those tiles. He downed two bottles of water and curled up in bed. He awaited sleep or dreams, whichever came first.

\*

There were strangers in the room. They were operating his brain for entertainment. Words passed through him. They came and went at fantastic speed, establishing their momentary connectivities before dissolving again into the flood: object, subject, tense, mode; context, pretext, subtext; orator, auditor, critic.

There were strangers in the room. They were discussing time travel.

If a single word could be taken from a random page in a history book, say, and understood perfectly, in the entirety of its implications, but only for a moment; and if in the next moment another word could be selected at random from a different book and understood equally perfectly; and in the very next moment another; and another; and another – why, if this impressive feat could be accomplished, the strangers said,

time travel would be unnecessary. One would simply swing from point to point of a matrix of – but Greg's attention lapsed.

He was racing. There were strangers in the room. The strangers did not stop.

## Wang Wei

At twelve midnight, Beijing Time, the pogrom started. At that time, Wang\_Wei\_1989, a Level 49 Immortal Mage with 26,000 credits to his name, was standing above the Vale of the Eastern Realm on Server 29.9B. He had just cleared out a nest of simurghs to collect their eggs for speed elixirs, and paused on an overhanging crag, looking out at the gorgeously rendered river below and the dozen cataracts that fed it, all glittering in the uniformly radiated light of a perfectly blue, sunless sky.

The Vale of the Eastern Realm was essentially a canyon, threaded by a river that was fed by waterfalls and flanked by emerald green floodplains. The equivalent of a mile or so in length, the canyon was shaped like a string of pearls, with periodic choke points created by rock formations which fell across the floodplains like partially collapsed folding screens.

Wang\_Wei\_1989's newly purchased 12,000-credit Robe of Deflection fluttered in the omnidirectional breeze, emanating waves of force; his Superlative Gauntlet (8,400 credits) gripped his Staff of Righteous Cleansing (4,600 credits); and a world away, in Wudaokou's Happy Lucky Gaming Club, Wang Wei was scratching the damp fabric surrounding his scrotum, transmitting the sour smell of smoke-stale ball sweat onto his fingers, before lighting another cigarette.

Down in the Vale of the Eastern Realm, a large force of avatars materialised. The force appeared across the river from Wang\_Wei\_1989: a black mass, bristling with weapons that he couldn't immediately identify, since avatars at that distance were rendered in low definition. He could see, however, that upon appearing, the mass spread out, methodically filling the space between the riverbank to the sheer rock that marked the western boundary of the playable world.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 did not immediately identify what this meant, although he was surprised and impressed by the speed of the manoeuvre and the size of the raiding party.

He summoned a cloud and rode it towards the action.

Midway across the river, Wang\_Wei\_1989 realised the full scale of the raiding party: thousands of well-armed warriors and sorcerers at what looked like fearsomely high levels. Having spread out, they were now standing at attention, apparently awaiting orders in a remarkably disciplined manner.

The party was larger than any he'd ever seen – perhaps, he realised with wonder, it counted as a horde. His first true horde.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 started to feel uneasy.

The floodplain stretching out before the horde was broad and flat and green. Its greenness was made more intense by concentrations of a plant named greengrass. Greengrass was plentiful in the Vale of the Eastern Realm, and was generated nowhere else. For this reason, distributed evenly across the valley's floodplains were thousands of avatars, engaged in the solitary pursuit of reaping it.

These were a strange, meek people: the peons of the Eastern Realm. They were every one of them Level One Wayfarers, carrying no equipment but their sickles, which they used ceaselessly, raising and lowering them in a mechanical manner, so that a hypnotic clanging music rose out of the greengrass plains at all times. Every bushel of greengrass harvested could be exchanged for half a credit in a tavern or krepost, the nearest of which was a wearisome three-minute trudge away.

Reaping greengrass was mind-numbing work, and a miserable means to make credits, and it was surprising that so many avatars spent their time in that manner.

Some in the Eastern Realm spoke darkly of the peons being fanatics, or penitents, or even well-disguised bots. Certain factors reinforced these rumours. They never spoke, for one. They had unexpressive names like lk45n\_90 or FOE\_ji\_32.

Still, the peons were largely left alone. That they were harmless was no guarantee of protection; avatars on a spree frequently saw fit to slay a few dozen, if they happened to be in their line of sight. But there were meagre returns for killing peons, and no quests specifically rewarded their murder. They were neutral and constant, the song of their scythes an apparently natural complement to the wavering stems of greengrass.

The horde advanced. It moved south, steadily, and Wang\_Wei\_1989 listened as the song of the scythes was replaced by another rhythm: the busywork of steel and plasma, and the prerecorded screams that accompanied it. He saw that, as the horde moved through the tall grass, no peons were left in its wake. The depopulated greengrass glowed an especially vibrant emerald green, as if scrubbed clean.

It was a massacre.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 rode his cloud close enough to the horde for the name tags of each individual avatar to become visible. Then he realised the awful truth: alongside each romanised name was a flag. A Japanese flag. They were Japanese.

The fucking cunts were back at it.

Again.

*Do you see what I see?*

It was Zhang\_64, a fellow member of the Five Mao Brotherhood. Wang\_Wei\_1989 replied immediately.

*I see them. The 4king*

*Japanese devils*



What are they doing here?

What do they always do?

They are acting in accordance  
with their perverted nature

What are we going to do?

Fight. What else?

We could crash the server

Ha ha. You think I can watch  
my countrymen being cut  
down and not retaliate? I'm  
going to fight. Call the other  
brothers together.

Remember, we Chinese have  
the advantage of numbers.

They can't kill us all.

Together, we can overwhelm  
them

Okay.

Ba3trds.

Ba3trds.

I'm going in

Don't worry, brother, I've got  
your back

Wang\_Wei\_1989 left his cloud, and dived.

Before he closed with the nearest warriors, he unleashed what should have been a devastating salvo of ranged attacks – here, however, the destructive energy dissipated amongst the mass of bodies. Undeterred, he went at his enemies boldly with his Staff of Righteous Cleansing, distributing critical hits left and right, switching to a Heroic Double-Handed Flail once his plasma had depleted. A skilled melee tactician, he laid diversionary smoke spells and confusion traps about himself between every few thrusts. He issued his 3,000-credit Cowing Battle Cry, and watched waves of energy emanate across the battlefield.

Three minutes later, Wang\_Wei\_1989 was no longer of the realm.

It took Wang Wei perhaps forty seconds to log back in, but Wang\_Wei\_1989 was slain again two minutes later, and in the two hours of gameplay that followed, he never beat the three-minute record. The invaders were too many, and too strong.

Wang Wei spent longer and longer buffering in the logon page, as his brothers answered the alarm and logged in to defend the Eastern Realm. But somehow they never raised enough of a force to do more than slow the progress of the Japanese horde, which swept south down the western bank, then north up the eastern bank, then back round again and again, clearing every avatar from its path.

It was a time of crisis. Every time Wang\_Wei\_1989 was annihilated, Wang Wei could resurrect him up to only a proportion of his former glory. He ran through his credits very quickly, topping up the core attributes that were degraded in each resurrection. Soon he was selling Wang\_Wei\_1989's possessions: first his trinkets, then his spares, then his least-used potions.

The Staff of Righteous Cleansing went. So did the gauntlets and the flail. Finally, he traded in the Robe of Deflection, reasoning with himself that his countrymen had made as great sacrifices for their nation in the past – if not greater. Now was not the time to hold back.

But Wang\_Wei\_1989 was defeated again and again.

By 1:30 Beijing Time, Wang Wei was weeping openly, his throat hoarse from screaming at the screen. Shouts and yelps penetrated his headphones: most of the gaming club patrons had joined in the patriotic defence.

The Happy Lucky Gaming Club had the atmosphere of a bunker. The evening shift at the Black Cat Café had just ended, and waiters and kitchen porters lined the walls, witnessing what was occurring on the screens. The reek of war was in the air: cigarettes and sweat and instant noodles. Wang Wei had smoked two packs, but could eat nothing. His stomach was racked with pains, and nausea crept through his body.

He'd long since burned through the credits that the sale of Wang\_Wei\_1989's robe had brought him. Then, an hour ago, somebody had announced that Eastern Realm Credits were being sold for Bitcoin. One of his offline kitchen supervisors, leading defence efforts from the rear, had fetched a spare bank card reader from the café and marched up and down the aisles soliciting donations for the troops.

"Come on, brothers," he'd cried out in a stentorian voice, "Four thousand credits buys a Neutron Bomb! Four hundred credits buys a sword! Give what you can, let's see how many bitcoin we can muster!"

When Wang Wei overheard another patron call this a swindle, he'd exploded with rage at the traitor. Two kitchen porters had to hold him back, and when the

supervisor had grandly retrieved his own bank card from his wallet and donated the ¥50 he'd been saving for a day out, Wang Wei wept tears of gratitude.

But the bitcoin was gone. Donations were drying up. The supervisor was doing what he could to drum up support, but the patrons – low-level employees all with outrageous rents to pay here in the Centre of the World – avoided his eye.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 was reincarnated in rags. He wielded nothing but a feeble short sword. For some time now he'd been aiming only indirect and fleeting attacks at the Japanese horde, staying out of range for as long as possible before darting in to try and pick off the odd weak-looking soldier.

Since he wasn't always slashing and parrying now, he had time to send messages to the Japanese avatars.

Mainly, he called them can'ts.

He wanted to call them cunts but he couldn't. An automated system disconnected players who employed uncivilised language, so an alternative vocabulary had sprung up in the place of traditional curse words. Occasionally the developers would catch wind that a certain word was being used as a proxy, and that word would get banned. So *faggots* became *f4ggots* became *f4ggets* became *fr4ggets* became *fr0ggets*. The intent remained the same.

Wang Wei looked up the worst words that existed in Japanese, and worked them into the code. He called them perverts and pornographers and animals and devils, and little girls. He hoped out loud for another tsunami, regretted that more villages hadn't been swept away, drew moral conclusions about the flow of radiation presently leaking into the Sea of Japan.

Sometimes the Japanese avatars replied. Sen-Ka-Ku islands is JAPAN!!! they might say, or so enjoy stamping out ant people!!! or Hey pal! Remember Nanjing? Grandpa does ;-) or Hey pal! Maybe you got a little Japanese in YOU?!

As it happened, the attackers were not all Japanese, as Wang Wei discovered when he received the message I KOREA! GO 4K YOURSELF!!. There were Korean flags, Vietnamese flags, even what appeared to be Mongolian flags in the mix. It was a mongrel mob in the tradition of the Eight Nation Alliance, but two things united the attackers: they only attacked Chinese avatars, and they only spoke to Wang\_Wei\_1989 in Chinese – however broken or nonsensical their messages were.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 zigzagged ahead of the horde, dodging projectiles. Plasma, gunpowder and antimatter ignited and burst in the air around him. Arrows flew. The barrage of noise was familiar to him by now: a cycle of identical grunts, cries, clinking steel and tramping boots. An endless mantra.

The sunless sky was starting to dim, and the valley had fallen by degrees into a directionless shadow. Wang\_Wei\_1989's poor raiments did not protect him from the nearby explosions, and he was being forced further and further ahead of the mob. Before him, a curtain of rock cut across the floodplain; where the stone kissed the river, a forlorn-looking band of Chinese warriors had gathered to make a stand beside an ancient, half-ruined tower.

Time and time again the tower had been torn down by the invaders, only to be rebuilt as ancient and timeless as ever, its snaggletoothed shingles and streaks of moss and weedy tufts in place. It made a poor defensive bastion, and usually took a matter of seconds for the invaders to demolish; if he waited, and survived long enough, Wang\_Wei\_1989 would see it fall again.

To his right, however, he perceived that a narrow path cut diagonally up the ridge and into the heights overlooking the valley.

Clunk, chink, scream. The sound of the massacre had a hypnotic power. Chink, scream, grunt. Grunt, clunk, grunt.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 perceived, in a moment of clarity, that the sound represented a code. Yes, he thought, it was a code: composed of simple elements in varying relationships, yet describing something of immense complexity.

If he could solve it...

An arrow flew above his head, and he hurried forward again.

At a safe distance, amid the chiming greengrass, the strange train of thought re-established itself. Perhaps, he thought, the sound of battle was a mantra, like the song of the scythes that it inexorably superseded. But unlike the simple invocation of the peons, it was a mantra of terrible and inscrutable purpose.

If he could determine it...

Wang\_Wei\_1989 wondered, as a glitch stilled then shifted the ground on which he ran, tearing the press of nearby grass stalks neatly in two for a fraction of a second, Wang\_Wei\_1989 wondered—

A missile hit him. He had no elixirs left to cure himself, and now he was almost dead once more, despite having been reborn into the world all of a minute since. He could only run, and hope for luck.

He passed a peon, hacking away at the grass. He returned to the questions which had been haunting him for hours: why did they not run or fight? What was wrong with them? Were they so intoxicated by the sound of their sickles that they didn't care about the death creeping towards them?

The tower was a dash away – but at the last moment, Wang\_Wei\_1989 cut right and made for the path. He passed three or four more peons on the way there, their heads bobbing as they raised and lowered their scythes.

The last one, he spoke to.

*Why are you not running? Why are you not fighting?*

The peon didn't answer. It had a short and simple name, Wang\_Wei\_1989 could see: fg78\_C. Suddenly inspired, he tried something else, despite his sure sense that there would be no response.

*fg78\_C, why do you not fight beside us, as our brother?*

The peon stopped reaping.

Its sickle fell to its side – glitched, rather, as the peon jumped unnervingly from a kneeling to a standing position. The glitches were becoming more and more common. Something was failing.

He waited for the peon to speak. It didn't. Its eyes gazed out, unblinking. Its mouth held the half-open gawp that defined all unmodified Level One Wayfarers.

Mindful of the approaching horde, Wang\_Wei\_1989 moved round the peon. He was startled to observe it rotating to follow him, spinning on its central axis like a lollypop.

So it wasn't a bot. It was watching him. Perhaps its chat function was off for some reason.

*Was it trying to communicate with him by some other means?*

Too late. The horde was upon them. Wang\_Wei\_1989 turned and fled before the peon was cut down with a mace; he ran up the path that cut into the canyon walls.

Since the horde was focused on the tower below, nobody followed him. The sunless blue sky turned to moonless black as he climbed. His torch flickered on automatically as the light failed. He extinguished the dangerous light. Small bushes grew on either side of the path's upper reaches; in the growing, glitching darkness, they appeared as clumsy blocks of grey green, swaying in and out of form.

At the top of the path, and in darkness, Wang\_Wei\_1989 turned back to view the valley. The Vale of the Eastern Realm was illuminated now only by flame: the torches of peons, like fireflies in the fields; the conflagration of the horde, like wildfire. And, occasionally, smoke-flowers of magic.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 walked out on a promontory of rock and watched the flames advance. As the horde reached the bottleneck at the tower, the individual pricks of torchlight flowed together like a phosphorescent shoal, defining the valley contours in light. He could hear the faint mantra of grunts and cries; even now, he had to recognise that the whole thing was beautifully rendered.

The tower fell. Wang\_Wei\_1989 heard again that cracking timber, that tinny whoosh of lumber displacing air, that gulp, that gasp, that groan.

## I SEE YOU

Wang\_Wei\_1989 wheeled around. There was another avatar on the promontory, also standing with its torch unlit. It was huge: as wide as it was tall. Wang\_Wei\_1989 hadn't recognised it at first, because he'd assumed it was a rock.

Dressed in barbaric armour, heaped with furs, the avatar rested a Three-Handed Battle Hammer on the rock beside it. It resembled a statue more than a man, a boulder more than a statue. It wore a horny helmet, and a plain black cloth covered its face. Its name was Rihaku\_MegaLOLz.

You are a Japanese



## CORRECT

The message came with the gravitas of a death sentence – silently, of course, yet in that silence recalling the slamming of steel doors.

*If you are going to kill me, get it over with*

The avatar remained immobile. Wang\_Wei\_1989 vacillated. He approached, ready to deal the beast whatever pathetic blow he might be able to impart. He knew it could crush him with one stroke, if he provoked it.

Still, he found he couldn't bring himself to do it.

*Can't*, he said, instead.

A huge glitch tore through the valley, transforming the lights below them into white trails that seemed to sketch an incomplete glyph before disappearing again into the flux. The avatar shuddered, rose and fell, as if tensing and relaxing: breathing, and releasing a sigh.

## WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Wang\_Wei\_1989 considered the question. What did he want? He wanted to kick the foreign devils out of the Eastern Realm, of course.

But was that what he really wanted?

Shameful as it was for Wang\_Wei\_1989 to admit, while he wanted to fight, he wanted more to sleep. In fact, he longed for rest. He had been born and reborn into battle so ceaseless that he could no longer understand what it was for. He'd lost everything he'd earned over his time in the realm: his levels, his riches, his abilities. Once, he had harnessed clouds for sails. Now he could barely think; and of the disparate and scattered thoughts that galloped through him, rage was the only common currency.

He had fallen so low. He was so tired.

But before he rested, there was something else he wanted: to know why he'd been put through this trial. And something about the gargantuan entity standing before him now indicated that it might tell him. It seemed to promise answers: perhaps even (and this was surely a fool's hope) *truths*. Despite the screaming of every patriotic fibre in his body, Wang\_Wei\_1989 wanted to question the avatar. He believed – he *hoped* – that it would tell him things about the raid on the Eastern Realm.

But it went beyond that. In his exhaustion, Wang\_Wei\_1989 hoped – he *knew*, with the certainty of a marathon runner rounding his final corner – that the avatar would reveal to him graver realities, about the world and about his own place in that world, of the sort that would give him bitter nourishment before he took his final sleep.

So, finally, steeling himself for unpleasant answers, he asked.

Did you organise it, the raid?

I DID

Why are you doing this?

FOR THE LOLS

Ten thousand lightyears away, Wang Wei slapped the monitor of his computer with the ball of his thumb. The gaming club manager shouted at him.

Wang\_Wei\_1989's face was unchanged.

Can't, he said.

The avatar Rihaku\_MegaLOLz turned away from him to watch the fires. The scythe of lights beneath them rolled throughout the bottleneck at the bridge and into

the valley beyond, leaving only blackness behind. It was like watching a radar, immensely slow, playing in reverse.

Then the entire realm seized again: it glitched and froze – and restarted, as it always managed to do. It would never stop, Wang\_Wei\_1989 realised, with a lurch of nausea. Rebirth and battle, and senseless screaming. Clunk, chink, scream: reboot, repeat, forever.

WE GOT SICK OF THE  
NIGELS

Clunk, chink, scream: reboot, repeat, forever.

What do you mean, nigels? We  
are CHINESE, not nigels! Fuck  
you!

I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU  
CALL THEM. WE CALL THEM  
NIGELS. THEY SPEND ALL  
DAY HARVESTING  
GREENGRASS, OR MINING  
BLACKGOLD, OR PICKING  
BERRIES.  
THEY ARE SUCH FROGGETS.  
THEY NEVER ADVANCE.  
THEY NEVER COMPLETE

ANY QUESTS. THEY DON'T  
EVEN REPLY IF YOU TRY TO  
TALK TO THEM  
SEE: EVEN NOW, THEY  
COULD EXTINGUISH  
THEIR TORCHES AND HIDE  
IN THE GREENGRASS  
FROM THE RAIDERS. BUT  
THEY DON'T EVEN BOTHER  
TO DO THAT.  
THEY ARE SO G4Y.  
THAT IS WHY WE CALL  
THEM NIGELS.  
THEY ARE POINTLESS,  
AND WE HATE THEM.

Deep in the bowels of Wudaokou, beneath ten thousand layers of steel and small-particulate smog, Wang Wei spat on the computer screen.

Wang\_Wei\_1989 managed a single, glancing blow on the avatar's gauntlet. It dispatched him from the world with a flick.

\*

Qin Muha was disconnected. He stretched, cracked his knuckles and massaged his eyes. He was eight hours and twenty-four minutes into a fourteen-hour shift. His

water cup had been empty for six hours but he could not get up to go refill it.

Cheerful military music was playing from tannoy speakers situated every eight metres or so along the walls of the room, which had once been an assembly hall, but now resembled a vast open-plan office.

The kapo had turned the music up several times since the strange raid had started, announcing each time that the targets for the shift remained unchanged. He was a man who got angry when his morale was low; Muha was certain that he would find an excuse to smack someone around before the shift ended.

He wasn't going to make a fuss about his water.

Muha massaged his eyes again, then grabbed the mouse quickly, before the men working on either side of him could decide he was slacking off. He logged in to Defence of the Eastern Realm. His avatar's name was fg78\_C; it had been bequeathed to him by the previous occupant of his chair, a fanatic from Changchun who had been transferred elsewhere after the latest round of medicals.

Muha waited to be logged back on. By the time his sickle appeared on the screen, gleaming in painstakingly rendered torchlight, he was eight hours and twenty-six minutes into a fourteen-hour shift.

And four years and two-hundred and forty-seven days into a sixteen-year sentence handed down for the sale of toxic cooking oil.

## Cabin

A change in the atmosphere woke him. The electric lamp was off, and cool blue sunlight filtered through the French window. Winnie was standing there. A cold gust lifted the curtains as she slid the window closed. She was wearing a sleeping outfit – tracksuit bottoms and a T-shirt – and carrying a clear flask of green tea. Her feet were bare.

“Cold in here,” she said. “Why you leave the window open?”

She crossed the room, her balled up feet leaving crescent-shaped tracks of condensation on the tiles. She clanged the flask on the bedside table. Tea leaves sloshed.

Greg was very much aware of the fact that she wasn’t wearing a bra.

It was a black T-shirt with an illustration of a mountain range on it. Yellow moon in a black sky. Beneath the fabric, her breasts would be warm and pale. Beneath her skin, her heart would be beating. She was a living thing, warm and close to him, her breath visible in the frigid air. His erection was urgent.

“Get in,” he said, pulling back the cover a little.

She got in.

\*

They fucked all morning, then went out for Sichuan hot pot. After lunch they retired to the cabin beneath the beeches and fucked for a couple more hours. Greg did his best to memorise details, knowing it could be a long time before it happened again, but ultimately the only distinguishing aspect of the lovemaking was the number of times Winnie bit or scratched him. It was like pinning down a cat. Overall, it was good.

That night, Winnie opted to return to her cabin to sleep. Greg had the whole bed to himself. The sheets were cool and smelled like human endeavour. They enclosed him, and he slept dreamlessly.

The next morning, as they walked to the car, Winnie held his arm distractedly. She barely kneaded his muscles and didn't once correct his route. He waited in the car as she checked out, and in silence they exited the driveway, leaving the white walls and cedars behind.

Before heading back, they visited a nearby section of the Great Wall. Winnie meant to drive them to Shanhaiguan, where the Great Wall met the Yellow Sea, but got lost, and was directed by an untrustworthy local towards a different reconstructed section, in a semi-agricultural valley nowhere near the coast.

The entry fee was apparently outrageous, but Winnie covered it while Greg mooched around outside the entrance, looking over the vendors' wares displayed on the pavement. There was a limited range of locally grown produce on sale. Greg paid too much for a bag of dried apples that proved both mealy and sour.

Entry paid, they wandered up some reconstructed stairs onto the parapet, and followed it up the side of the valley. On either side of the wall, grey-brown fields were interspersed with industrial buildings.

"Which side was the barbarians?" Greg asked. It felt like the first thing he had said in a day. He found it hard to enunciate his words, and Winnie found them hard to understand.

The reconstructed stretch ended before the peak of the ridge. After the last tower, the wall continued as a ruined trail of stones. Greg encountered a group of western tourists who obviously resented being conned into visiting.

"This is the *real* wall," one of them told him, pointing at the ruin beneath this feet. "*That* wall is bullshit."

The tourist started trying to climb onto a parapet above him, but it collapsed and he had to dance backwards to avoid falling rocks. He turned back and pointed an accusing finger at Greg.

"That's a fake fucking wall," he said.

As he walked back Greg realised that the bricks of the reconstructed wall were something like cinderblocks. They were made of some kind of soft, dark material; sections were already wearing away, so that the pavement warped inward like an old feather mattress.

"These people have nothing," Winnie murmured as they made their way downstairs and back to the car. "This place is a *kēng*."

"What's a *kēng*?"

"Means 'hole'. I think you will use the word 'tourist trap'. Like, where you think it will be one thing, but is another. Not worth it."

\*

She got the phone call when they were almost back in the city proper. It was night. They were snarled up in traffic where the Jingha Expressway terminated at Happy Valley amusement park. The phone started ringing. The screen displayed a number, not a name. Winnie bullied the car through several lanes and pulled over before answering.

"*We?*?" she said. Her voice was unsteady.

She got out and shut the door. Past the rows of slowly moving traffic, Greg could see the up-lit faux-rock façade of Shangri-La Zone, set against the orange glow of Beijing and foregrounded by the LED lights cascading in sequence down the



front of a nearby restaurant strip. Zrads and zrads. He watched Winnie pace up and down. He changed the radio station a few times, experimenting with the volume controls.

When Winnie got back in the car she brought with her a gust of frigid air. Greg could see she'd been crying. That would be the end of that, then.

**TO SEE MENG HAO-JAN OFF TO YANG-CHOU, By Li Bo**

My old friend takes off from the Yellow Crane Tower,

In smoke-flower third month down to Yangchou.

A lone sail, a distant shade, lost in the blue horizon.

Only the long Yangtze is seen flowing into the sky.

*Wai Lim Yip*

## Luncheon

A deep-fried carp dominated the lazy Susan. Doubly eviscerated, bones scraped, its fins overspilled the dish and channelled red caramel onto the glass. The table held thirteen other half-empty plates. The remains of a cold selection, in dark rice vinegar: smashed chunks of cucumber with crushed garlic and chilli, sweetened peanuts and boiled spinach, and hunks of raw radish, which would repeat on breath and belches of diners for hours to come. Then the remains of pan-fried pork and celery dumplings; deep-fried diced aubergine, potatoes and sweet peppers in a thick, sweet sauce flavoured with garlic and ginger; and blistered green beans with pork mince seasoned with soy sauce and Sichuan pepper. Then rice.

The teachers had guzzled all of these, while hot; then picked away at the cooling scraps; then slid their chopsticks through the coagulating sauces in lazy circles; then stopped. The teachers were sated, sleepy. They'd moved on to beer and cigarettes. Plumbe presided over the head of the table with a pot of chrysanthemum tea and a pile of documents.

"Gentlemen!" Plumbe accompanied the word with a pedagogic clang on the tabletop. "The history of Western Civilisation. I was thinking, Master Rainer, that you might take Numbers through Kings, then digress into Proverbs. I prefer myself to give the good news via Peter, Paul and John—"

"No."

"No? 'No', Master Rainer?"

"Please, Professor Plumbe—"

"Call me Gus."

"I won't teach the bible!"

Greg was exasperated to hear himself say this again, and to hear his voice crack again as he did so. This had happened so many times before. The first time Plumbe had suggested he teach the bible Greg had reacted with enough outrage to pretty much guarantee that Plumbe would repeat the trick just to see whether he could get the same response.

He chortled now, radiating good humour. Plumbe hadn't touched a drop of beer, but his cheeks were ruddy and his smile was broad. He embodied the yuletide patriarch.

"I like to see you in such fine fettle, my friend. It cheers me. It warms me through and through, in this sadly heathen corner of the world, to see that you have been so thoroughly energised and invigorated by the Nativity. Oh, glad tidings to all men—"

"Look, we've been through this for years. I won't teach bible studies in a literature class."

"But you're so well qualified!"

"I don't know why you bring it up every time, I'm not sure what you get from it—"

"All of these fine minds you see assembled before you. Every one of these products of uh *modern* education is perfectly willing to provide the fundamental background to Western philosophical and literary thought to their students, as required by the syllabus. The Bible. Only you, Gregory, Greg, *Greggy*, who is by far and away the best qualified to teach the Word of God as Revealed through Our Lord and Saviour on Earth, refuse to do it."

"You can't fucking make me."

"Oh, such fury! He must think himself indispensable to our team! What could it be that has brought this newfound strength to our colleague Greg, that he can

breathe his righteous fire upon us like this? What revelation has he encountered?  
What recess of hidden knowledge has been unveiled?”

Greg breathed; in and out.

“*It must be a Christmas miracle...*” Plumbe sang. Then, broadly directed at the table: “Y’all know that he’s a missionary at heart.”

“Look,” Ryan said, “I’m enjoying this as much as everybody else, but Gregg has a point. I don’t understand why we teach the bible at all.”

Plumbe turned on Ryan as if he’d been waiting for this all along.

“Hermeneutics, my dear Master *Hund*. How to approach a text. We may take fourfold meaning from any biblical text: the literal, the moral, the allegorical and the anagogical. Let us take a simple fable in the style of the Holy Book – if Brother Gregory does not find it too offensive. Hmm... let me think...”

Plumbe gave the impression of really *thinking*. He creased his brow and rigged up a grimace and rubbed his ruddy nose. Then he rapped the table BANG again, and begun.

“On the festival of the Nativity a venerable sage was journeying home, and lo, did he encounter dismounting from their hired chariot two acolytes of low status. Call them novices. Novices Rainer and Hunt. These novices had been drinking heavily of wine and consuming heartily of mysterious spices and their steps did waver and their speech was most profane. And unwary.”

Plumbe winked.

“Saith Novice Hunt: ‘Will you lie with this woman although her years are perhaps twice of yours?’

“‘I will do it,’ saith Novice Rainer, ‘For I have suffered a drought of many seasons and I tire of scattering my seed upon the stony ground of my apartment

floor. And besides, twice of mine in years is surely a falsehood, she might have forty winters, on the outside.'

"Will not the dugs of this crone be haggard, as a grape that hath dried upon the vine? For it is not true of any woman born of man, that her *talents* must *wend* towards the fundament as the full-headed corn doth droop toward the earth?'

"Doubtless,' saith Novice Rainer, 'Still I must lie with her, for my plums are swollen and my rod is—'"

"That's enough," growled Ryan.

"My lesson is not completed, Master *Hund*. Let us apply the process of exegesis to this simple tale. Fourfold truths: literal, moral, allegorical and anagogical. Let us start with the literal truth. It is a historical fact that two of my employees were so comprehensively inebriated on Christmas Day that they staggered around campus – their own campus – *our own campus* – making a display of themselves that couldn't possibly be ignored even by the most disinterested of observers – and when it comes to your private lives, gentlemen, I am *studiedly disinterested*. Your sordid little intrigues do not fascinate me. I do not care a whit. No.

"But but it is a historical fact that you two were loudly and boorishly discoursing about *private* matters; *profane*, *downstairs* matters; and using gestures for the benefit of the linguistically disqualified – of whom there were plenty. In case you didn't get it, I'm talking about our hosts, the Chinese, on whose patience we are permitted to remain here."

"And where were *you*, you old fucking Polonius? Hiding behind a tree?"

"This is China, Ryan. Do you expect to do whatever you want and get away with it? Somebody is always watching. Which brings us to the moral interpretation of the story. Can anybody here tell us whether this story has a moral?"

The teachers had a lot of that they wanted to share with Greg and Ryan.

"Walls have ears," somebody said.

"Watch your mouth," somebody said.

"Don't shit on your own doorstep."

"Adroitly put, boys," Plumbe concluded. He turned on Greg and Ryan. "Do you understand your role here, gentlemen? You are ambassadors of the West. You think you are in... I don't know, *San Francisco*... You think this is the *Summer of Love*. You think we couldn't crush you like we crushed those *hippies* in nineteen-sixty-nine—"

Plumbe stopped himself. He reset his face. Traces of Santa Claus started to creep back in from the edges.

"And what about the allegorical interpretation?" he continued brightly. "Why, we have an almost free reign here; we can say anything we want, within Reason. Let's see. *The Fable of the Novices and the Sage* speaks to me of archetypes that have repeated through the ages: the learned patriarch discovers the sins of his sons, and rebukes them, thereby elevating their spiritual consciousness, before restoring to them his Christian forgiveness. It is *stern love*, children, and necessarily so. There can be no love without *the rod*."

Ryan groaned.

"As for the anagogical interpretation... Well, perhaps you are not ready for that yet. Come back to me when you are ready. The readiness is all, eh Ryan?"

"You are so full of shit," Ryan started—

"HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO KEEP YOUR FUCKING JOB YOU INCONTINENT LITTLE SQUIRT," Plumbe started—

But then there was a knock on the door.

\*

The lunch party occupied its usual spot, a glass cubicle abutting the main dining area of the Immortal Flavour Tower. Also as usual, curtains had been drawn, shielding them from the curiosity of other diners. The knock sounded on the glass door beyond the curtain; it reverberated through the cubicle.

“Come!” hacked Plumbe, blinking and swallowing.

The glass door poked through the curtain and a familiar face looked in. It was Mr Hu, head of the foreign language department at the Beijing University of Forestry. Plumbe’s boss.

Greg liked Mr Hu, a suave man with a dry manner and an interest, above all, in keeping things moving smoothly. Behind him, through the glass door, Greg could see the other diners. Some of them were alarmed. Some were amused. Once again, the *laowais* were making a scene.

Mr Hu’s table was evidently right next to theirs. It held a gaggle of portly, white-shirted glad-handers: officials that Greg assumed came from high up the Forestry hierarchy. Party people, most likely. They peered through the door with sullen eyes. Several bottles of premium *báijiǔ* adorned their lazy Susan.

“Ah, Professor Plumbe?”

Mr Hu to save the day. Slim – aside from his neat little Beijing belly – fine-featured and exceptionally smooth, he propped the door open with his arm raised, signalling a comic-book *knock knock*. In his other hand, he carried a bottle of *báijiǔ*.

“I hope I don’t interrupt your dinner, guys.” His accent in English held a slight mid-Atlantic twang, like a friendly android. “I see you here and I remember, you celebrate Christian Christmas only recently. How could I forget a present?!”



Plumbe took a second or two to fold his face into a neutral expression and blink it back out into a smile.

“Mr Hu, that is most solicitous of you,” he said.

“Er – *sol-i-ci-tous*?”

Mr Hu stumbled over the word masterfully, his expression a mask of blank wonder. Plumbe chortled.

“Ho ho ho, Mr Hu – I’m sorry. I mean you are most welcome. What is this, some brand of *máotái jǔ*?”

“You know it? Then you know how much I pay. How embarrass! It is not the dearest one.”

Mr Hu mimed at hiding the label of the bottle. Plumbe laughed, delighted. He was practically clapping his hands.

“My dear Mr Hu! We would not say ‘dearest’. Oh! No – ho ho, the *dearest* bottle – ha ha! We would say ‘most dear’, or ‘most expensive’. Oh, Mr Hu, join us for a toast please.”

Plumbe drew out the chair personally, all bonhomie. Ryan glowered. Greg slid a plate and set of chopsticks over to Mr Hu. For the sake of form, Mr Hu lifted some vinegared peanuts and spinach onto his plate. Then, without anybody needing to bang the table or scream at the staff, a row of glasses materialised in front of him. Just one example of the Hu magic that kept the department running. He twisted his bottle open and poured an evenly proportioned row of shots. His fingers were long and slim; it was possible to imagine spilled crumbs and puddles of sauce disappearing beneath his outstretched palms. He rolled the lazy Susan to distribute the drinks.

“Greg,” Mr Hu said, his voice low and neutral. “I have some business with you.”

He pulled his phone out and studied a document for a while, giving Greg time to adopt the poker face their interactions required. “Some students. Lin Zhaowei, Liu Bin, Zhang Xuelin...” Greg pretended to recognise the six names he read out.

“...they tell me they submit essay in uh 2009.”

Greg maintained his face, cupping his hands on the table in a pose of respectful, professional attention. “I see,” he said. “When in 2009?”

“Uh... summer.”

“I see.” He nodded.

“They submit essay in Summer 2009. But now, um, they have no grade yet. I fear their grade is, uh—”

“*Lost?*”

“Yes, lost!”

“How unfortunate! I wonder how that happened?”

“Yes, it is an unfortunate accident,” Mr Hu agreed.

“And whose students are they?”

“Yours.”

“And what are these students’ names again?”

“Lin Zhaowei, Liu Bin—”

“Ah – their, um, I’m sorry Mr Hu, what are their *other* names?”

Mr Hu studied his phone again, manipulating the document with a slim forefinger.

“Apple, Cherry, Bright, Teddy... Elita, and...” The final name Mr Hu pronounced with a taunting flourish: “*Champion.*”

“Ah,” said Greg. He did not corpse. “Perhaps you could email me their student numbers.”

“I have done it already, Greg. Last week and uh some month before it.”

“You emailed me *months ago*.”

“Yes, thank you: *I emailed you months ago*.”

“Oh dear. It’s a shame we’ve been having so much trouble with the Internet recently.”

“Yes it’s a shame.”

“By when do you need me to locate these essays?”

“The students, they are waiting to graduate since uh Summer 2011. They ought to graduate by now, but they are need their grades from your class.”

“And what class was that?”

Mr Hu laughed.

“How about, UK Culture and History?” Greg offered.

“That sound about right,” Mr Hu said. He held up his glass of *báijiǔ*, prompting the entire table into a toast.

“The students, they will pass,” Mr Hu told Greg, *sotto voce*.

“Yes,” Greg replied, “they will pass. *Gānbēi!*”

They knocked their glasses together. In a sign of deference to Greg’s status as an honoured guest, Mr Hu was scrupulously careful to keep the brim of his glass beneath that of Greg’s.

“*Gānbēi!*” said everybody, clinking their glasses together. Greg shuddered the liquid down. It awoke the uncomfortable memory of returning home the night before, and confronting the mess of the Christmas party. Somebody – himself? – had

drizzled a whole bottle of *báijiǔ* in a trail that led from bedroom to front door; presumably he'd planned on burning the place down.

\*

The flat might have benefited from burning down. The door was open when he got back, and Greg considered the possibility of burglary. But he had no such excuse. The most imaginative burglar couldn't have produced the disarray inside. Alongside the detritus of any ordinary party – bottles, cigarette butts and food –there was also a fantastic range of consumer goods, whose provenance had been a terrifying mystery, until Greg realised they were his prizes from the tombola.

There were eight or nine different brands of earphone, each with their own crisp plastic wallet and instructional booklet and pleatherine tag. There were selfie sticks packed in polystyrene noodles. There were sealable insulating travel mugs decorated with photographs of himself – incredible it seemed for such things to exist, until the memory manifested of Kelvin cheerfully coaxing him into a series of poses against the backdrop of a fake bamboo forest, somewhere deep in the lobby of the Aeronautics University Hospital Hotel.

There were umbrellas. Animal masks. Most impressively, occupying the centre of the room in the manner of a conversation piece, was a folding electric bicycle, wrapped in ribbons and gluey bows and mis-assembled in a useless knot, the chain entwined with the seat, deep within an agglomeration of gears and wires, packing material and mashed potato.

On the surfaces, an accumulation of desiccated slimes. The partygoers sure had thrown a lot of food around. Somebody – most likely himself – had spread Winnie's mooncake over everything. The centrally controlled heating had stayed running while he was away, keeping the smears consistently warmed through.

Thankfully, the flat was very arid: dry crusts covered moist innards, like cowpats, and where the sauces weren't thick enough to retain liquid they'd crisped into something like slug trails.

After tossing a few things about the place, Greg had made the shameful phone call, arranging for the woman he called his *aiyi* – his auntie – to come fix everything. She'd come this morning, his stout uncomplaining *aiyi*, and although Greg pretended to be on his phone to avoid contact, he'd still seen her expression.

What he read in her eyes was not the reproach he'd feared, but something even worse: the profound disappointment of aunts, articulating the questions: *Are you still just a boy? Are there no women in your life? Not even on the distant horizon?*

He'd wanted to tell her, yes, there *were* women in his life, he'd really fucked a woman only yesterday, he was a great fucker; but he didn't know how to say it in Chinese in quite the right register for the occasion; or in any language, for any occasion; and part of him knew he was missing something vital; enacting his own regression from person to man to sniggering teenage IDIOT; and by that stage he'd locked himself into his bedroom and curled up, foetal, on his stripped mattress.

\*

Plumbe's mouth was moving. He had a glazed look in his eyes. Like Father Christmas in decline. He was talking to Mr Hu but looking through him at Greg. Then he was eating peanuts but looking at Ryan. He spoke to Mr Hu in Chinese, then yawned, and gazed at the wall. Mr Hu nodded. He cleared his throat and spoke to the table.

"Friends. It come to our attention some students may spend class time talking about computer games. Please, try to avoid wasting everybody's time with this."

Plumbe nodded vigorously.

Ryan snorted.

"Yes, it seem silly," said Mr Hu. He winced, as if the very idea of computer games was embarrassing to him. "But please, we try to keep the computer game issue outside our classroom. Thank you so much for consider this request. Enjoy your productive afternoon."

Then Mr Hu was gone. The door clanged shut behind him.

Plumbe was slowly shaking his head. "Kids these days," he said. "Don't you agree, Ryan?"

Ryan rolled his eyes at Greg. "Kids these days. A very intelligent statement."

"They don't know the real world from the unreal."

"Perspicaciously put."

"And of course they are always online, aren't they."

"Are they not."

"Wasting their talents on fantasies."

"Indeed."

"When I think of the waste. The colossal waste of it all. So much talent, so much potential, spent in pursuit of *fruitless* tasks."

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by computer games. Starving, hysterical, naked..."

"Are you being funny with me?"

"No. Of course not."

"Huh."

Plumbe's jaw went slack for a moment as he tried to remember something.

"What is the name of the..." he muttered.

He looked older than he was in this moment – as if he were a senior, having a senior moment.

“The name of the game?” Ryan jumped in, smirking at Greg.

“Yes,” Plumbe persisted, “what is the name of the game the...”

“The kids these days?”

“Yes, what is the name of the game the kids these days always uh seem to play, something like *Defending the...*”

“Defending the...?”

“*Protection of the...*?” Plumbe's forehead creased. His lips wobbled with the effort of unaccustomed pronunciation. He hummed. He haaaad. He scratched the top of his head.

“*Donghua fangyu*,” Ryan pronounced, flawlessly and with relish.

“*Donghua fangyu?*” Plumbe repeated. He fluffed the tones. Ryan smirked.

“Defence of the Eastern Realm,” he said. “The kids these days call it D.O.T.E.R. except they pronounce it DotER, you know, like dotard.”

“Eh?”

“Of course it's very easy for somebody in your position to dismiss the value of these kinds of products. And in a sense even calling them 'games' is devaluing, because they perform such profoundly interesting functions. But since they operate in the realm of the information economy, and I suppose the transition out of the steam age was already challenging enough for your generation, I shouldn't find your dismissive attitude surprising.”

Plumbe blinked. “Yes, yes, very good Ryan.”

“You understand how in the information age, information warfare is as effective, if not more so, than conventional warfare?”

"I'm not too sure I do understand."

"You remember when they invented the trebuchet, professor, and the proponents of traditional catapults such as yourself resisted change for as long as you could, but your castles kept getting knocked down, so in the end you had to go with it?"

"But Ryan, this is all very interesting in theory, but I don't understand why anybody should take action against..."

"The party acted against DotER because they recognise the value of information warfare in the information age."

"What are you talking about, Ryan?" Greg said.

"DotER. They took it down, Greg. It went down overnight on Boxing Day. And the next day all the posters and the billboards went down too. Remember the posters? Venerate the Past to Execute the Future? And now there's nothing left – you can't even look it up online. It's as if the game never existed."

"Information warfare," Plumbe repeated, slowly.

"Yes, information warfare!" Ryan asserted.

Then he stopped. He looked at Plumbe as if seeing him for the first time. Plumbe didn't look senile anymore. He looked sharp and dangerous, like he knew all about DoTER. And the information economy. And warfare. Ryan opened his mouth and closed it. He stared at the lazy Susan.

"And what, my dear boy, is information warfare?" Plumbe was rolling a crystal of sugar between his thumb and forefinger.

"Hacking," Ryan said. His throat sounded dry.

"Hacking?"

"Yeah, hacking. I don't know. Stuff like that."



"I genuinely thought you were about to teach us something there, young man."

"Yes. I suppose I reached the limit of my knowledge earlier than I anticipated."

"Since you know so little about the subject, I imagine it won't be hard for you to avoid the subject of computer games in your class."

"No. I suppose not."

Plumbe beamed. He pulled open a binder full of schedules and module outlines.

"So, who will take Socrates? Master Rainer?"

"Sure," Greg said.

"You may find it somewhat *enlightening*, with regards to your present line of research. You are still reading up on that poem of yours."

A statement, not a question. Greg blinked affirmative.

"Plato, Greg. The Ideal. You may think our what-you-call Bible Studies serve no purpose; in concert with the Greeks, however, you will see that a careful reading of the Bible complements our syllabus very well. I am talking about Ways of Reading."

Here Plumbe broke off to shout for service. He used the same piratey Beijing accent that Ryan adopted so that the word came out as a throaty sneeze:

*"Fuwuyua'er!"*

"The noble heathen Plato directs us to look beyond the sensible world towards the Ideal realm that shapes its forms. *Fuwuyua'err!* In so doing he provides us a most admirable and practical hierarchy of values that dovetails neatly with the hermeneutic processes we have derived from our extensive study of the Holy Texts: literal, moral, allegorical, anagogical interpretations, in ascending order of value.

*F'WUYUA'RRR!*

“The Man of the West looks beyond the surface of the material world to the forms that constitute its fundament; the patterns devised by the divine creator. Will somebody please shout out the door for more tea before I scream myself hoarse; I swear they intentionally neglect us. So Greg, as a Man of the West, when you read a story – or, say, a poem – the first thing you will do is look for metaphors. You might ask, *what is the symbolic meaning of a river? What is the symbolic significance of a yellow crane?*

“But if you take a reader from a different uh *tradition*, they might read the same story or poem from a completely different perspective. They might make no effort to move past the literal meaning; they might read the poem as if it described accurately the world around them, in the manner of a street sign or pharmaceutical contraindication. But you, Greg, never will. No matter whether you shave your head or move to San Francisco, you will never escape your inheritance...”

Plumbe continued to opine about the important differences in reading traditions across different civilisations, emphasising the impossibility of ever achieving what he scoffingly called ‘cross-cultural communication’, but by then he had lost Greg’s attention.

Greg was snagged on the fact that when Plumbe said ‘what is the symbolic meaning of a river’ and ‘what is the symbolic significance of the Yellow Crane Tower’, he’d used the exact words that Greg had entered into the search engine on his computer, last night.

And winked as he did so.

\*

Winnie had called last night. Greg hadn’t given her any reading homework, she said. She was wondering...

"Are we still doing this then?" Greg asked her. As soon as he said it, he regretted his tone. There was anger there. He remembered being scalded with hot water in that cafe all those months ago. He remembered the words he'd used. Burned with water. He remembered Winnie's fascination.

"Not this week," she said, sounding uncertain.

"And not next week either?" Greg said.

"No."

"Maybe not ever?"

"Maybe. But Greg. Is not..."

"It's not me, it's you?"

"Um."

"It's okay Winnie," he sighed. "I remember you said, nothing serious. So nothing serious."

"Is serious, Greg..."

"No, it isn't. Don't worry about it."

He listened to the sound of her breath, crackling on the telephone.

"*Wǒ jiāojíle...*"

"What?"

Crackling.

"Winnie?"

"Nothing."

She said the word 'nothing' the way Jenny usually said it: 'nah-thin'. It brought a lump to Greg's throat. He remembered Jenny. Jenny's messages. Was she okay? He was going to have to break it off with her. He could do without the money and something was going badly wrong.

"You want me to send you something to read?" he asked. He had to work to make his voice sound normal. His throat hurt.

"Uh. Yes. Something to read."

"And we can talk about it when we meet again."

"Yes."

"Whenever that is."

Greg sighed. Astonishingly, he was weeping. He couldn't fully understand or control it. It wasn't about Winnie. It wasn't even, he realised, about Caspar.

"Could you tell me," he said, flicking brine from his cheeks, "about that poem you gave me? I want to know whether you chose it for any particular reason."

"I tell you, Greg."

"I don't remember."

"Is no big deal, Greg. I just think you like that poetry."

"And you like the poem, especially?"

"Yeah..."

"But not, like, it means everything to you."

"What? No?"

"And you didn't see into my heart? You didn't see into my heart and recognise that poem? And pull it out like you were pulling out a piece of something precious? Like you were pulling out my heart and giving it back to me?"

"*Shénme?*"

So he asked her the question in Chinese, and it took a while, and the answer was no.

They hung up on one another politely enough, Winnie seeming more mystified than upset. Greg had even offered to send her something to read, as if they would be staying in contact. He stared at the scroll. He started thinking hard about poetry.

And then, thinking hard about poetry, he had gone back onto his computer and entered the following words into his search engine:

- [10:36] "What is the cultural significance of 'river' in China?";
- [10:41] "What is the symbolic meaning of the Yellow Crane Tower?";

and

- [11:01] "wet Asian pussy fucked hard"

\*

He got the deep shame flush; there was nothing he could do about it. He poured himself another shot of *baijiu* and stared at the tablecloth. It was made of plasticised paper. A remarkable material; since it had the qualities of both paper and plastic, stains both spread through it and sat atop it, depending on the ratio of oils and water in their composition. Beer sat on the top in mercurial droplets; chilli oil permeated beneath.

From 'cross-cultural communication', Plumbe had managed to provoke a heated argument about race. It might have been more heated, had he not succeeded in staffing the faculty entirely with white men; this point nobody was willing to bring up, since Plumbe was likely to regard it as in his favour.

No one was paying any attention to Greg, at least.

He reflected that he'd been using a virtual private network when he made his searches in the morning. These programs were distributed on data sticks, originating in Hong Kong, where they were viewed as important in the fight for freedom for

information, or freedom generally, although Greg was feeling increasingly unclear about the relationship between information and the physical world. Anyway, VPNs were absolutely necessary for freedom of pornography.

Could he still be monitored online despite his VPN?

He felt not. It was possible. He had absolutely no idea.

Why had Plumbe winked? Had it even been a wink? Recalling it now, he couldn't be sure it wasn't a spasm. He couldn't visualise it clearly; something was off; it could just as well have been that the skin covering Plumbe's face had folded in on itself, cramming into the ocular cavity while stretching over the edges of his jaw.

The skin of the world was so thin. Greg excused himself. He pushed through the curtain, exited the cubicle, and stood blinking in the restaurant proper.

There were still a few diners, although the place was thinning out after the lunchtime rush. Mr Hu's table had been abandoned. Greg counted five bottles of expensive-looking *moutai jiu* upended on the lazy Susan; he wondered whether the cadres had headed to one of the KTV joints downstairs, with rouged hostesses and subterranean VIP rooms.

It was past mid-afternoon. The windows of the restaurant overlooked unfinished tower blocks. No lights shone from them: they reared up in the darkening haze like masses of black kelp. Greg knew he wasn't far from Wudaokou. When he left the building, he'd see the Golden Enterprize Centre and the terrace that housed the Black Cat Café and the raised metro line and the heaps of abandoned bicycles and the labyrinth of street vendors and that incredible crush of people. But this window faced the opposite direction, and the brightly lit junction was a distant romance. Greg was utterly underwater.

Reflected in the glass, staff in Mao jackets and white trainers moved between tables, carrying dishes and urns of tea. The décor was idiosyncratic: while the ceiling was office-style painted cork panelling, the walls had been covered with a rich red cloth and examples of Qing dynasty architecture had been installed about the place. A plastic waterway threaded a route from the lobby to the kitchen, brimming with ceramic frog demons and live fish.

They always came here for lunch. Plumbe and Ryan always fought, in their adolescent way. They were mutually opposing poles in a dialectic of perpetual idiocy – that was the kind of thing Ryan would say. Plumbe would disagree. Greg could hear both of their voices in his head. He remembered Ryan once holding forth on the Qing artefacts. They had most likely been recovered, he declared, from the *hutongs* in the centre of the city, which were being demolished at a shameful rate. He had seen several examples of hipsters employing them to decorate their houses, down in ‘vibrant’ Gulou.

“Please,” Plumbe had admonished him, “before you start to tell *me* about China, remember that I was here when this district was fields, and the night-soil man came every morning...”

\*

After entering her client’s flat and pocketing her fee, the woman whom Greg called his *aiyi* emptied every bottle she found in the living room into the sink, scraped the biggest chunks of mooncake off them, then ferried them down to a safe spot at the foot of the stairwell, where a recycling merchant would collect them, as arranged. She scooped the non-recyclable waste into three large plastic laundry sacks and slung them into the tricycle-mounted waste bin outside the common doorway. She heaped the plastic goods and the broken bicycle in the balcony. She tackled the

mucoid substances coating the floor and furnishings with a scraper, then took a brush to the floor. She scrubbed the hard furnishings, then skinned the sofa and easy chair, and placed coarse fabric hides in a basin, which she filled with warm water and stain remover. She shifted every item of furniture to the south half of the room, then methodically brushed and mopped the north half. While the floor dried, she moved into the kitchen, and emptied and wiped down the sink. She filled the dirtiest pans with hot water, then washed a sinkful of crockery, then dried it, wiped and dried the cupboard interiors, returned the crockery to the cupboards, washed another sinkful of crockery, then left it to drip dry while she returned to the living room. Here she moved every item of furniture into the clean, dry, north half of the room, then swept and mopped the south half. While the floor dried, she removed the hides of the sofa and comfy chair from their stain-removing solution and transferred them into the washing machine. Then she replaced the drip-dried crockery in the cupboards, transferred a plug of gunk from the sink into the kitchen bin, swabbed the sink, and set to scrubbing the pans. Then her phone rang and she spoke to her cousin for fifteen minutes. Then she finished scrubbing the pans and set them out on a mass of kitchen paper and wiped down half of the kitchen surfaces. Then she went into the living room and scraped and dabbed items of mooncake off the wall, before replacing all of the furniture in its original arrangement. Then she dusted the back of the television. Then she swept and mopped the corridor that led to her client's bedroom (which, it seemed, she was not to deal with today since he had locked himself inside), before going into the bathroom and emptying the mop bucket into the toilet, flushing it twice, and using the showerhead to hose the bucket down, as well as the sink and the toilet and some sections of the wall, which she also tackled with a scraper. Then she used the scraper to dry the tiles, directing the greyish flow of



water into the shower drain, which was flush with the floor. Then, after extracting a clot of hair which she flushed down the toilet, she emptied a sachet of caustic powder into the shower drain and left while it filled the bathroom with a bitter haze. She spent some time on the balcony texting her cousin, then took a dustpan and brush to the accumulation of loess dust that had been whipped up from the degraded farmland of the central plateau, followed the Yellow River towards the coast before being channelled north by winter wind to the great winking metropolis of Beijing, and finding its way into the enclosed balcony through a partially open window, which the woman whom Greg called his *aiyi* also wiped down with a damp cloth that she then cleaned and rinsed and ran again over the windowsills and framework. Then she washed her hands and took the sofa covers out of the washing machine and hung them over a pair of clothes horses in the corridor. Returning to the bathroom, she saw that her client had exited his bedroom, leaving a trail of oversized *laowai* footprints through the damp spots in the corridor.

These she mopped with a semi-dry mop head, before packing up all of her cleaning materials.

Then the woman whom Greg called his *aiyi* went to the bathroom – which was quiet and warm, with a challenging chemical aroma left over from the drain cleaner – and dislocated the toilet seat by squatting on it to produce a turd of such satisfying length, heft and consistency that she felt its absence like a ghost tail wagging behind her as she walked home.

\*

“I’m glad you asked to speak to me, Greg. It shows me that you understand the seriousness of your situation.”

The other teachers were gone. Greg had stopped Plumbe in the lobby of the restaurant. The windows looked out over Wudaokou intersection. It was dark now; the view was of streetlights and plumes of vapour rising through the frigid air. Inside the lobby, a large ceramic Buddha sat in a litter of banknotes, beneath a varnished and mounted slice of petrified wood and not far from a freestanding piece of metamorphic rock, eroded into the shape of a stooping woman. The considerable expenditure that these objects represented was undermined by the reek of ozone. The smell might have come from the row of unclean fish tanks beside the window, where carp and turtles bobbed in progressive stages of suffocation – or rolled on their backs, free (at last!) from suffering. Or perhaps it emanated from the adjoining bathrooms, which had been plumbed without gas traps.

“You might think I want to chastise you for your indecencies. And I do. But that would serve no educational purpose. I am going instead to give you some direction.”

Greg looked at his shoes.

“Be paranoid, Greg. Look *beyond*. Read the signs. They point to another world, lying beneath this kibble of verbiage. A world more terrible and true. I have been watching you and I have given you fair warning. I told you to stay away from Kelvin. A clown he may be, but he is connected by marriage to a powerful yet precariously positioned clan. When the powerful fall, Greg, they never fall alone.”

For the first time since Greg had known him, Plumbe touched him. He laid a surprisingly heavy hand down on Greg’s shoulder and let its weight lie on him, like a stone.

“What do you want from me?” Greg asked.

“I want you to tell me what Ryan is writing about.”

"I don't know. And anyway, if you've hacked my computer, why don't you just hack his?"

"What?"

"You hacked my computer and recorded my searches."

"I did not."

"You've been spying on my internet."

"Greg, I am sixty-five years old. I assure you I am perfectly computer illiterate. Of course *somebody* is monitoring your internet use – of that you can be certain. Only, that person is not me. Has Ryan ever spoken to you about the article he's writing?"

"Not directly."

"Listen, Greg. I am your friend here. I am not monitoring your computer. I have no interest in your research. I am worried about our colleague Ryan."

Plumbe lifted his hand off Greg's shoulder. He twiddled his beard, rolling a skein of black hair together and allowing it to pull apart.

"Things are moving in the department," he said, with a sad smile, "and as much as I would prefer to maintain the status quo, we are likely coming to a juncture where inaction is no longer a workable option."

\*

Home again. Drunk again. Staring at the scroll on the wall, trying to ignore the messages emerging from his freshly washed furniture, Greg received a text from an unknown number.

Hello! It's Jenny 😊. I am sorry I lost my phone ☹. My new phone number is this. Can we move tomorrow's class? More convenient to have it on 31. Thanks 😊 😊

Greg drafted his reply so quickly it was almost unconscious.

Jenny - as I have reminded you half a dozen times, we arranged  
weeks ago to have class on the 30th

Then, spurred a feeling that he did not recognise as shame, his language centres autogenerating the phrases 'nip it in the bud' and 'short, sharp shock', he added the following:

I CANNOT have class on the 31st. I am losing patience with you!

He regretted it immediately, of course. He was trying to work out the appropriate emoji to follow up with and soften the blow – perhaps a winky face with its tongue out – when Jenny's reply arrived.

Sorry 😞. See you tomorrow

\*

Greg leapt to pick up his phone when it buzzed again ten minutes later. It was Ryan.

"I'm getting fired," he said.

"Shit."

"It's alright. I've got till the end of term. Paperwork, I think. And Plumbe's put the kibosh on my story."

"Shit."

"It's alright. I – well, just believe me that it's alright." He sounded calm.

"But what was your story about?"

Ryan pitched a pretty plausible mid-length article about corruption in primary education. The principal of a school connected to Forestry University was accepting bribes to admit children into her kindergarten. He had reliable sources, in the form of staff members at Forestry, one of whom described handing over half a month's

wages to the principal in person. The principal – who drove a big black *biemowo*, of course – had allowed the money to be placed in a fat white envelope, on her desk, in her plushly upholstered office.

Ryan had been planning to emphasise the human-interest aspect of the piece: the knowledge of complicity with a corrupt system, offset against the instinct to provide for one's own children. That timeless compromise shit that transcends cultural barriers and gets to the root of what it is to be human and responsible to the world. He was going to compare the scene outside the school to the packs of Americans waiting outside K-Mart on Black Friday – really twist the knife there – make it about privilege and degeneracy hand-in-hand, highlighting by contrast the human spirit stepping in where the state fails or neglects its citizenry. That had been the plan.

“So anyway, my corroborating witness pulled out,” Ryan told him, “she won’t let me use her name, and she said that even if the story came out without her name on it, her daughter would be expelled from the school. Not just her daughter; all the children of the people in her work group. Apparently the word is out that somebody in the work group has been talking to a journalist. Then Professor Plumb gave me a call.”

“I didn’t tell him anything.”

“Of course you didn’t. I didn’t tell you anything.”

“It wasn’t me!” Greg insisted. “I didn’t know anything about that. I thought you were writing about something else maybe.”

“Look, it’s alright. Plumb’s made his move, and I’m still here for a couple of months. I’ve still got time.”

“For what?”

Crackling.

Sighing?

"Ryan, are you alright?"

"There's one thing," Ryan said. "I got a text today. Banner's dead."

"Banner?"

"The Texan, Banner."

"Great!"

Greg had spoken before thinking. He bit his lip now, wondering whether Ryan would take it badly. Then he heard Ryan chuckle down the phone.

"You fucking prick, Greg."

"How did he die?"

"Stroke, apparently. Last night. He was in the middle of a poker game and started coughing, and kept coughing, and his veins, like, popped, and he died."

"Gross. Fitting."

"No sympathy from you. Well. He was a prick but he probably had a mother."

"That fucker sprang out of a moist fissure in the earth."

"Either way, I don't like it," Ryan sighed. "Not like this. It doesn't work for me..."

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing right now."

## Tower

"This tower is very old," Meng Haoran comments. "I've wanted to visit it for many years. I'm glad to see it before I leave."

"It doesn't look so old," Li Bai murmurs. "Although it looks very familiar..."

"I believe they rebuilt these stairs recently. I dined with the housekeeper last night and he told me all about it. Apparently, every time some local lord wants to improve his standing with the ancestors, he throws some silver at the tower."

Li Bai runs his ink-stained fingertips over the grain of the most recently installed wainscoting.

"Beneath that panel," Meng Haoran tells him, "the stonework is far older. Perhaps two hundred years."

"But I thought the tower was ancient? *Ancient* ancient?"

"Indeed, ancient. But it gets rebuilt and rebuilt. I doubt that there's an original rock here."

"Ha," Li Bai said, as they continue their journey up the stairs, "carpenters laugh at poets, because they write out their artistry on fragile paper. And masons laugh at carpenters. And the rain laughs at all of us."

They arrive at a chamber with a broad view across the river. The sun is searing away the early-morning mist, and waterfowl are just emerging from the reeds.

"You seem morbid," Meng Haoran remarks.

"My head aches."

"Are you still not sleeping?"

"I sleep. But my dreams are strangers to me."

Servants are laying out their travelling mats and stools; servants are opening their picnic hamper; servants are ushering out a pair of monks who had been resting in the corner.

Li Bai shut his eyes. He smells cold damp and old birds' nests. He imagines the original tower, underneath all of the layers of renovation, rebuilding and redecoration.

"When they built this tower," he says, "what did they imagine would be done with it? Do you think they imagined parties? The most fabulous parties?"

"The location has a long and varied history," Meng Haoran starts, but the younger poet interrupts him.

"They were imagining the parties they'd have. Stone by stone they built it up, dreaming of parties. And when they finished it, they filled it with food and wine and servants and guests and music..."

"Likely, yes, they had a celebration."

"And everybody stood around, waiting for the party to begin."

He took a long draught of the bottle of supermarket brand vodka in his hand.

"And while they were waiting, they talked about the parties that they used to have, when they were young and stupid and beautiful. They talked about the wine they drank. They talked about the love affairs that seemed always about to come to fruition. They talked about the way the light was, at the best parties. They described a perpetual dusk, dotted with tealights, flickering like fireflies. Such music. Dancing in bamboo glades. And as they described it, they drank stale wine and ate cold food and talked about making improvements to the tower to allow for better parties, maybe next season, next year. They consumed without thinking, waiting for the party to start, but before they knew it the food was eaten, and the wine gourds were dry,



and they were older than they had ever believed was possible, and the tower was dust.”

Meng Haoran blinks.

“What, old friend?” he says.

Water starts cascading down one of the walls, pulling down plugs of plaster, like scabs, revealing woodwork, stonework, plain air.

“You are leaving,” Li Bai announces, “and I wish I could come with you. But instead, perhaps I can follow you halfway downriver with a poem.”

**SEEING MENG HAO-JAN OFF TO KUANG-LING**, by Li Bai

My old friend, going west, bids farewell at Yellow Crane Terrace,  
Among misty blossoms of the third month, goes down to Yang-chou.

His lone sail's far shadow vanishes into the azure void.

Now, only the Long River flowing to the sky's end.

*Paul W Kroll*

## Jenny

Jenny was more than unwell, Greg thought. She had shrunk. She was huddled in the quietest corner of the Black Cat Café, wearing sunglasses. Hideous mountain-biker wraparounds. She barely moved when she saw Greg, waving a few fingers warily, as if afraid someone might bat her hand down.

"What's wrong, Jenny? Are you sick?"

"I have headache," she said.

"You shouldn't be here if you are sick," Greg said.

"I'm sorry."

"You look really bad."

"I'm sorry. I'm not sick. It's headache. It's, uh..." She moved her hands in a reduced version of the gesture she made when she lost a word.

"Migraine," Greg said. "A very bad headache is called a 'migraine'."

"Yes," Jenny said. Gingerly, she wiped a drop of brine from beneath the bottom rim of her sunglasses.

"I'm sorry," Greg said. "But if you have a migraine you should be at home resting."

"You wanted to meet. You were angry with me. At me. With me?"

"Fuck."

Greg saw Jenny flinch behind the sunglasses.

"I'm a prick," he said. "Please go home. And um, you don't need to pay me for this."

"It is okay," Jenny said, in a miserable voice. "I have IELTS on thirty-first. I have to preparation my English." Her voice broke as she said this last word, and she brushed another tear from her cheek.

"Fuck," he said.

Wince.

"I'm really, really sorry," he said. "The only reason I insisted we have class today is that I got frustrated with your other messages."

She looked at him blankly. It struck Greg that she was in the middle of a full-blown nervous breakdown. Perhaps that explained what she'd said.

"How long have you had this headache?" he ventured. "Did you have a headache when you sent me those earlier messages?"

"I never send you messages."

"Jenny," Greg said with professional seriousness, "you sent me half a dozen messages. Lots. You kept trying to move class forward. And you were going on about *this* thing—" he pulled the pom-pom toggle out of his pocket and dangled it in front of her. She barely seemed to register it. Then Greg saw Jenny's jacket on the back of her chair. One of the pom-poms had been replaced with a noticeably larger, metallic blue one.

"Then there were the other messages..." Greg started.

"I never *sen-t* you messages."

"You sent me messages every day – look." Greg showed her his phone, scrolled slowly down the correspondence. She read it carefully, and her expression became alarmed.

"I cannot send you messages," she said. "My phone I lose on Christmas Eve, on Wudaokou." She pointed through the window towards the space where the near-riot had taken place. "I only get new phone yesterday. So I can't sent you those messages!"

"Then who did?"

"Someone found my phone?" she hazarded.

"What? Someone who spoke English and knew who I was?"

"You told them who you was."

Greg checked. It was true – he had given his correspondent all the information they might need in his first text.

"But *why*? Who are these fuckers? What do they want with me?"

Jenny spoke very slowly. "I don't know," she said.

"I'm fucking going to call those cunts."

"Don't!" Jenny shrieked. It was loud enough to turn heads. An athletic Harvardite gave Greg a look.

Jenny spoke quickly, under her breath, in Chinese. She told Greg that there were criminal gangs who sometimes did this. They tried to lure people into traps, and rob them if they thought the victim was rich. They were very dangerous and wicked and he should never try to contact them. There were even people in the police force with connections to these gangs, so there was no point in taking it to the police. So don't, she told him. Don't.

"Okay," Greg said. "Okay. I won't. We'll just drop it. Why don't you go home? Sleep it off. We can meet tomorrow if you like. Whenever."

\*

He encountered her again as she stood at the bottom of the stairs. She had her hood up over her hair, her glasses down over her eyes. She looked like an agent heading to an unsafe rendezvous. She looked like she didn't want to be seen by anybody at all.

\*

Greg was bitterly hungover the next day. Jenny was once again waiting for him in the quietest corner of the café. She looked marginally better. Less troubled. Her arcs of movement had grown by noticeable increments.

“You look better.”

She might have smiled. “I have been sleeping a lot.”

“Good. Well done. You said that just right.”

“I have been practising.”

“Great!”

Coffee came for Greg; green tea for Jenny.

“I know coffee isn’t good for me,” Greg felt impelled to say. He did an apologetic little chuckle. “But I need it!”

Jenny said nothing.

“Uh,” said Greg. He was floundering, unexpectedly, as if he’d strayed a single step off the path and somehow hit quicksand. He was sweating, and the sweat smelled of alcohol. His throat felt swollen. “Let’s um... what kind of uh food do you eat, when you are sick?”

“Yesterday, I eat kind of soup. No. I *drink* soup.”

“You can eat soup, it’s okay.”

“Okay.”

“What kind of soup? Chicken soup?”

“Yes.”

“Is it uh, your mother’s recipe? We have this thing in the West about your mother’s chicken soup. Your mother’s chicken soup is supposed to make you feel better. Although, my mother never made chicken soup, so maybe I just saw it in a

film; maybe we don't really have that thing. Maybe it's an American thing. Maybe it's a Jewish thing. I don't know. Um. Is it your mother's recipe?"

"Yes."

He waited for her to make a full sentence. She didn't.

"Did your mother make you some soup?"

"No."

"Oh."

"My mother does not see me."

"Oh."

"We have argument because I Christian."

"Right. Shall we do the prepared oral presentation? *My Favourite Sea Creature?*"

Jenny had prepared her presentation – although, she explained, the animal she'd chosen didn't live in the sea. It lived in lakes and rivers, so she was sorry; but all lakes and rivers ran into the sea anyway; and the sea ran into the sky, so what was the difference?

"Um," said Greg.

This sea creature, Jenny started, was called a water nymph. A water nymph is a kind of brown, grubby beetle with lots of legs.

Ugly and stupid was this water nymph.

"The water nymph was ugly and stupid," Greg interrupted.

Yes, yes, the water nymph was ugly and stupid.

She lived underwater, eating worms. How disgusting. And worse, in her heart she was a coward. She was afraid to leave the muddy cold water in which she lived. She knew that one day she would have to leave the water, but she was afraid of

what might be waiting out there in the light above. She didn't have any imagination. She'd come to think that nothing could be better than sitting in the muddy water eating worms. She thought worms were the best kind of food anybody could eat; she thought the muddy water made her the cleanest she could ever be.

Then one day a wise fish with a long white beard told her the truth.

The fish said that when she left the water, the first thing she would do was go into a brown sticky cocoon called a chrysalis. It was an ugly thing, a dark dead-looking thing, but going into it was not worse than just going to sleep. Just like falling asleep. And one day, soon after going to sleep, she would wake up again and climb out of the cocoon as a beautiful bright dragon. She would have beautiful wings and use them to fly about in the sky and the moment she got out into the fresh air she would forget all about the stinky brown water that she used to call home.

When she heard this story, the water nymph was no longer afraid. She was ready.

Jenny smiled. It was the end of her presentation. Greg looked at the list of errors that he had noted down as Jenny spoke. He had nothing to say.

Greg had heard this story before – in primary school, or junior school, or secondary school perhaps. Perhaps he had heard it in every school he went to, narrated by earnest converts with moustaches or dowdy skirts. Then again, one more time, at an age when he thought he was free from having children's stories preached to him. Caspar's memorial service came back to him. The shaking shoulders of Caspar's mother. The back of Caspar's father's head, six rows ahead, shaking gently from side to side.



Greg's pen had bored a hole in the page of his notepad before he realised how furious he was. He put the pen down very carefully, bunched and unbunched his fists, then excused himself in a high, tight voice.

\*

The cubicle was as cold and bitter-smelling as ever, with as much sputum on the floor as ever – the same monastic solitude. Somebody had scrawled FREE XINJIANG on the toilet paper sign, and some words in what looked like Arabic. These had been almost obliterated by multiple different pens; they were visible only as an etching in the surface – a scored shadow between planes of reflected light.

His hangover hit, hard. Greg breathed in and out and shut his eyes and tried to find centre. He tried to imagine a world without words. It didn't work. In fact, it seemed to have the opposite effect. A stream of words moved up through him, as he sank to his knees and positioned his head over the toilet bowl. Some of the words may have been his own but a lot were not. A lot of what was burbling through him this morning was Ryan's words, which he must have absorbed at some beery hour before oblivion took him last night. Words like 'information warfare'. Chunky phrases like 'the illusion of the authentic'. Full sentences, swimming with import, like: 'The doctrine of the Two Truths will only become more relevant as we ascend to the realm of information partisanship.'

He puked. It all came out.

*Information warfare is the leveraging of culture to fortify or attack power structures. It's not just hacking, or spreading fake news stories. It's far more fundamental than that. Look at history. Information warfare is controlling history. It is controlling the rules by which we dignify certain things as authentic, and dismiss*

*other things as false. This country has five thousand years of history. That statement is true. It is also false.*

Image: Ryan sitting in a bougie Gulou *hutong* bar with repurposed Qing beams and furniture, drinking a bottle of North Korean beer.

*That's why the game was so interesting. Defence of the Eastern Realm. Manipulate the Past to Vouchsafe the Future. Do you get it? That game was a shortcut to the primal zone where nationalism is born.*

Image: Ryan sitting on a padded matt beside an elaborately patterned window looking down on a bright morning view of a river, a shoal of green islands, gulls, parrots...

*All games contain a Skinner box at heart. A Skinner box is a box with a single button. If you press that button, sometimes a peanut comes out of the box. Not every time, but sometimes. If you press the button once, you might get a peanut. If you press it five times, you probably will. Probably. Give a Skinner box to a monkey and they're guaranteed to press that button all day. I played DotER. Its Skinner box was pretty strong. But there was something else to it. Something kind of weird. It gave me this pervasive sense of... well... community. Perhaps that's too positive a term. Everyone around me was like me – but I was also like everyone else. It felt like a shortcut to the zone where a kind of tribal identity is born.*

*Lets say the game was designed to correspond to all the little receptors in the players' heads–*

Image: Ryan wiggled his fingers around. It was like the game Greg used to play, where he'd fold his hands together to make shapes that told a story: this is the church, this is the steeple; open the doors and here are the people.

Wiggle wiggle, went Ryan's fingers. Here are the people.

And Greg remembered that he was on the floor of the toilet cubicle, that he'd been throwing up and having memories. The vital force of the images receded and the volume of the sounds reduced. Greg regained control. He merely remembered.

"Once you're locked into using certain stimulators, and your response is pretty much conditioned, a good game can make of you what it will. We know that first-person shooters train people to become soldiers. It's not so out of the question that a game could train you to be a partisan in another kind of war. A culture war, for example."

"Are you talking about the Genghis Khan Krew?"

"I am."

"They played Reich Assault, right?"

"Yes, but that stuff was kind of niche and clumsy. That's not what interests me. It's Banner. Banner was working on DotER."

"I knew he wasn't a kindergarten teacher."

"I wanted to know what he was doing. I thought it must have been quite spooky but I didn't realise how spooky until I got to that fucking funeral today."

"Banner's?"

"Yeah."

"That was quick."

"Might as well have been biological waste. Up the fucking chimney."

"You don't miss him, surely," he said.

Ryan shook his head but wouldn't look Greg in the eye. His expression was distant. He kept kneading the wet mush that had once been the sticker on his beer bottle.

"He was a turd. Don't get me wrong, Greg, I didn't like him. But sometimes it was like he was trying to get me to hate him. Going out of his way to be offensive. Some people are like that. Some people who are truly evil, are also students of the human condition. Like Nazi doctors. Bad comparison maybe. Maybe I only say that because he was always going on about Nazi doctors. He was always making these statements like *the ends justified the means*. I was going to work that shit into the story I was writing. I know you've guessed he was a big part of it. The real story, not the school one. That was a clever diversion. I'm so smart. I don't know what to do. I'm not sure who to talk to next. There were some real characters at the funeral. Talk about secret policemen: they couldn't have been more obvious if they'd been hiding behind newspapers with slits cut out for their eyes."

"You got pictures?"

"Ha, yeah."

Ryan pulled out his phone and handed it to Greg. Greg made an effort to be careful with it, but focus was difficult. With a rubbery finger he scrolled through photographs of an institutional interior with plastic plants and people in cheap suits. Some of the GKK he recognised, pouting in poorly fastened neckties and krew kuts; there were a few more mature-looking Chinese mourners, looking distinctly out of place. One in particular, standing aside from the crowd, had a familiar pallor to his face, a familiar sneer and upright posture as he looked into the middle distance, uneasily at parade rest.

That one in particular, Greg might have met before.

\*

Back in the cubicle, back in the tilting NOW, Greg rocked back on his heels. He knew exactly who the man had been: it was Chen Xu. Chen Xu the secret policeman, the

horrible axolotl from CHEEMA Bar. Greg tried to remember what Ryan had told him after sharing the photograph; or whether he'd said anything to Ryan. He couldn't. It was a blank from there on in. A black hole.

He stood up. He wiped his lips and flushed the toilet and ran cold water over his face. He called Ryan. No answer. He sent a message.

*Can you call me, mate?*

Greg felt afraid. He felt oddly sentimental too. He wished – he *wished* – he would fuck up a little less often. This upswell of regret encompassed Jenny: everything that she had told him today, and how he had responded. His anger was dispersed.

He made a silent commitment to listen to Jenny. He doubled that commitment. Then boldly he resolved to go further – he would actively broach the subject of her faith. He usually steered Jenny away from religious themes with a bare minimum of tact; but today he would ask, and he would listen. He would get to the centre of things.

\*

Jenny was waiting at the table. She'd been looking over Greg's notes and practising the corrected vocabulary. She seemed ready to repeat her whole story a second time.

Greg cut her off.

"Tell me about this church you've been going to," he said.

Jenny checked their neighbours. She scrutinised Greg. In her expression – even with her eyes hidden behind the sunglasses – he saw a desire to trust him so raw it was painful to see. Trying not to feel unequal to the situation, Greg adjusted his features. He tried to approximate a confidential smile.

"It is the Shining Light," she whispered.

"Okay. What is it called?"

"It is secret. No – sorry – it is *a* secret."

"You can say either," Greg said. "Secret can be an adjective or a noun. A secret is a secret thing."

"A secret is a secret thing."

"Um."

"Our pastor – her name is secret. She has a secret."

"Okay. Is she a house pastor? Do you meet in a house?"

"I love her."

"You don't love her. You like her. You might say, *I like her very much*, but you wouldn't–"

*"I love her."*

Jenny's lips quivered with vehemence. Greg felt once again out of his depth.

*"She fights demons."*

"Do you mean that as a–"

"She kills devils."

"Devils? Do you mean–"

*"Gǔizi! Gǔizi, Gu-reggu!"*

"Ghosts?"

But Jenny had given up using English for now. She leant in and hissed at Greg in Chinese; she told him that she had witch's blood and that only the shining light could cleanse the taint of sin.

"I think you mean ghosts," Greg said.

\*

The name that 'Jenny' used with her family members on the phone, her colleagues at work, and herself in the mirror was Qiu Yuxin. This was the name given her on the day of her birth, in deference to her paternal grandmother. The last time Qiu Yuxin saw her paternal grandmother was in 1996. The woman was dead now, probably.

But in 1996, when Qiu Yuxin was ten, the village of her father's birth had been relocated off the hill that gave it its name. A new road was being constructed through the district. It was a straight concrete road, raised above the surrounding wetlands by a causeway of mechanically rolled aggregate. Along both sides, parallel rows of large multi-storey houses were being built. They had electricity, running water and plumbed toilets. They had spaces for livestock and machinery. They had built-in wood-burning stoves, and wide concrete balconies overlooking the fields and the fishpond.

The village was relocating to these new houses. The old houses back on the hill were all higgledy piggledy. They had been built of brick in a big muddle between the trees, ignorantly facing all different directions. The whole village had shared six spigots and nobody had owned a flushing toilet. However, in the new houses on the road, everybody would be able to find everybody else just by walking up or down the road. Each house was numbered.

Yuxin's uncle called to tell them that her grandmother was refusing to come to the new road. It was an embarrassment, he intimated. Everybody had moved into their fine houses with TVs and ceiling fans, and grandma was living in a brick hovel with no lights, porting her water from the buffalo spigot, since they'd sealed up the taps in the old village.

What kind of a son would let his mother live this way, while there was a house waiting empty on the nice road, and the cousins were all fussing and tutting about it, and the Chens down the road were already talking up a land deal with the committee, most likely, knowing the kind of people they were?

Wouldn't they come visit, so that Dad could talk some sense into Grandma, and Yuxin could spend some time with her cousins, whom she'd never met, before they all concluded that living in the city had given her airs? Couldn't a son find the time for his mother?

The train journey took twenty-two hours. They lodged in their uncle's house, which was full of empty bedrooms, and seemed even larger than the other houses on the road. This was perhaps only fair, given the amount of hard work Uncle Li did for the committee. He talked a lot about land, and Party policy, and the local elections – and about the Chens down the road.

Uncle Li's house was the only one to have an upholstered couch in the living room. It was cream naugahyde, plastic-wrapped to protect it from sunflower husks and cigarette ash. By contrast, some of Yuxin's other cousins kept motorbikes in their living rooms and spat on the floor, even when Yuxin was visiting.

On the third day, they took her to visit Grandma.

Yuxin went first with Cousin Senlin. They would meet Dad at the old house, after he'd finished some errand for Uncle Li. The path came off the new road's causeway, down to the lake and up into the copse on the hill. In the few months since relocation, plants had started to colonise the spaces between the old houses. Vines sealed alleyways; saplings grew boldly in the middle of paths. Villagers too had come on scavenging trips: the glass was gone from the windows and tiles had been reclaimed from most of the roofs.



But as they got further into the old village, Yuxin was surprised to discover that Grandma wasn't the only person living there. She saw smoke coming from a couple of chimneys, and heard chickens clucking from within buildings – not only outhouses, but the shells of human homes, converted into coops. The village was still alive, it seemed – only it was an animal village now, Cousin Senlin said. He told her to watch out for snakes.

Grandma's house was deep in the warren, hemmed in by walls and willow trees. Cousin Senlin told her she'd been there before, but she couldn't remember it.

Senlin remembered her though. He was two years older than Yuxin and never smiled, even when he was excited about something.

They weren't far from Grandma's house when a strange thing happened. A cable hanging between two houses had been pulled loose, so that a loop hung in the middle of the alley. It looked like a doorway, suspended in the air. As they passed, Yuxin pressed against the wall to avoid the wire. Cousin Senlin hopped right through.

The loop swayed – he must have brushed it.

"Be careful!" Yuxin said. "You'll get a shock!"

Cousin Senlin looked her like she was an idiot. "There isn't any electricity in these wires," he told her.

"How do you know?"

"The electricity comes from a box on the road and they turned the box off. None of these houses have electricity."

"But Grandma lives here!"

"She just lights a fire for light. She drinks water from the buffalo spigot."

"Grandma doesn't drink buffalo water!"

“Water is water. It comes out of the pipe. It doesn’t matter if it’s meant for buffalos or people.”

He gave her that look again. Like she’d spent too long in the city, getting a soft brain. Like he’d seen her type before, helpless city types, and they were nothing new to him. Senlin himself was an expert in physical processes. He had a box full of dried-out frogs on a shelf in the utility room. A year or so back, the rains had failed and the frogs that lived in the lake had dried up into green-brown crisps. He kept them in boxes full of rice to stop them – so he told Yuxin – from fleshing out again and coming back to life.

Cousin Senlin made as if to touch the hanging wire with his finger. Yuxin squealed. He stopped. He did it again and she shuddered against the wall and he stopped again.

But this time he wasn’t teasing: he really couldn’t make himself touch it. His face showed scorn, but his eyes were wide. Yuxin’s fear had rubbed off on him, conjuring something he didn’t have the force of will to dispel. She’d electrified the wire.

Cousin Senlin took a twig, and prodded the wire at arm’s length. The hanging doorway wobbled. Then he hooked the wire and swung it forward. Yuxin giggled nervously. The wire emanated evil energies.

Her cousin held the stick above his head and pulled the loop as taut as the cables would allow. It sagged and shifted overhead. The cable scraped along the top of the alley wall in spastic increments, like an autonomous, forward-creeping *thing*.

Yuxin shivered with fear and delight.

The wire creaked. It pulled against the tension. It crept along the brickwork, exuding malignancy.

"It's a snake!" Yuxin cried. Cousin Senlin jerked the stick. A length of wire slipped over the wall all at once and it was a snake – a sickly, lazy, half-dried-out snake like one of the frogs in Cousin Senlin's box – and the snake slumped itself over Cousin Senlin, who shrieked louder than Yuxin ever had in her life, and kicked his legs and twisted away.

When he got up, Yuxin could see tears in his eyes. He punched her in the arm, really hard. They sat on opposite sides of the alley, glaring at one another over the fallen spool of wire, until they heard Dad's voice, calling for his daughter.

\*

Grandma's house only had one storey. The walls had no plaster, and the mortar between the bricks was all crumbly. Grandma had kept the glass in her windows, but nobody had washed them in ages, and brown dust swirls filtered the light. There was no plastic-covered couch. There was no television. Yuxin and her father sat on wooden stools and Grandma immediately put some pots onto a brick stove in the corner.

The stools were positioned around the ashes of a fire that had burned away on the tiled floor. The surrounding brickwork was blackly underlined by a grid of soot, and Grandma's clothes smelled stale and smoky. Her skin was parched and dried and crinkled up in a hundred different ways. She handed them piping hot glasses of tea that tasted of smoke, and spoke only to Dad; and if she looked at Yuxin at all it was only sidelong, and without warmth.

Dad told Grandma that she shouldn't light fires on the floor. It was covering everything with soot – and what if she choked? She had a stove – what did she need to light fires for?

Grandma said she lit them for light in the evening times, now that there was no power.

What did she need light for? What was she staying up after dark doing all night?

Grandma said she did what she did and she liked to have a fire lit when she did it.

Dad said he'd buy her an electric lantern with batteries. She wouldn't need to spend the evening choking in front of a fire.

Grandma said she didn't want one.

Dad asked, what had Grandma done with the spectacles he got her?

Grandma said she didn't need them. She could sew and knit and mend everything in her house by touch.

Dad said this is what he meant in the first place, why did she light the fire then?

Grandma said nothing. Dad said nothing. Nobody said anything for a while.

Yuxin stung her hands lifting the tea glass to her lips, then scalded her tongue, then returned the glass to the concrete floor with an overloud chink. Every time she went 'slurp', her father gave her a look.

Grandma handed them both bowls of rice, flecked with grit. Then she wandered into a dark pantry and fetched out a big jar of what looked like pickled tofu. Her tiny, callused hands shook as she twisted the lid. Dad didn't offer to help. Eventually she popped it open, with a fermented fizzing sound. She got some chopsticks and placed two oily cubes on each bowl of rice.

Yuxin saw that the 'tofu' had tiny white bones.

"This is Grandma's own pickled fish," Dad told her. "It's a flavour that you will never forget. Nothing beats your mother's cooking."

The fish chunk was salty and sour. Bones prodded the roof of Yuxin's mouth and stuck between her teeth. Dad ate his pieces with gusto, spitting the bones on the floor, and Grandma refilled his bowl. Then, even though Yuxin had only got halfway through her first chunk, Grandma refilled her bowl too. Now she had three-and-a-half glistening white cubes chilling her rice.

"The girl doesn't like it," Grandma said.

"The girl likes it fine," Dad said.

Yuxin had never before heard him refer to her as 'the girl'.

"The girl's fussy and finickity," Grandma said, "she's turning her nose up at her grandmother's food."

"The girl eats slowly."

"The girl is plain. You should feed her up, otherwise she will never get a husband."

"She's ten years old. We don't worry about finding her a husband yet. She works very hard at school."

"Your brother tells me she is slow."

"She works very hard. We take her to lots of after-school classes. She's learning English."

"I don't know why you didn't try for a son. They would have let you."

There was a long silence. Yuxin worked on her second chunk of pickled fish. Quite suddenly, she was sniffing. It seemed that tears had rolled down to her chin. She put down her bowl and wiped her nose and eyes on the pink dolphin handkerchief she kept in her pocket. Then she picked up her bowl and started eating again.

"That was quick," said Grandma.

Dad didn't say anything. Yuxin wanted him to look at her but he didn't.

"You should find her a husband in Dashi County. The boys from Dashi County know how to treat a girl."

Dad flushed. Grandma continued: "It's no good looking for a man here. This village is full of little-pale-faces and *Chens*."

The name 'Chen' she spat.

"We live in the city now. She won't want to come back here. What for?"

"The cities are full of rightists and saboteurs."

"Times have changed."

Grandma spat into the ashes. She had not eaten a morsel since they arrived, only sat watching them eat, gripping a blisteringly hot glass of tea in her hard hands. The light through the window started to fade. Sunset was coming.

Yuxin began to feel a great coldness welling up from somewhere deep beneath her. It was a sad coldness – terribly sad. It throbbed up through the concrete, through the three-legged stool, through her legs and her spine. She felt acutely the fear of small, dark places. She wanted to be anywhere else but in this darkening shell of a house, with these strangers who were her kin.

They sat stiff-backed as shadow crept up and ate their features. They seemed desiccated, mummified, like the frogs, like the snake; like their skin was crisping and folding around them, merging with the ash on the floor.

*Who was that?* Yuxin found herself wondering. *Who was that who burned on the floor, and why did they leave so little ash?*

Yuxin jumped and made a startled 'oh' sound. She reached out and gripped her father's hand. He squeezed it back, the pressure building slowly, as if his body were slowly coming back to life.

“She feels it too,” Grandma said. “She’s not so slow after all.”

They all three got up and stretched their limbs. Dad stamped on the spot.

Without a word, Dad went out and fetched some wood for the fire. They built a pyramid of branches enclosing rush kindling. Grandma lit the rushes and they watched the flames. Grandma waved the box of matches at Dad.

“I need more of these,” she told him. He nodded.

The fire seemed to keep some of the cold feeling away, but Yuxin still felt skittery. She looked forward to getting back out of the woods and onto that big straight road with its bright electric lights. Dad seemed to sense this. Perhaps he felt it too.

They didn’t stay much longer. Dad didn’t press Grandma about moving to one of the big new houses. Perhaps he’d never meant to. Before they left, Grandma showed Yuxin the shrines.

There was one set against the wall of the room they were in. It was an alcove in the brickwork containing a laughing bald Buddha made of gold-coloured plastic. At his feet, Grandma had placed various gourds – some brightly coloured, some striped or flecked.

There was a little bowl of sand containing the remains of a dozen burned-up incense sticks. Grandma held up an improvised rush torch so that Yuxin could see the details. The Buddha face contorted in the dancing light: gleeful, sad, contemplative, wicked. Grandma handed her an incense stick. Yuxin lit it from the torch and held it between her palms as she had seen others do, in other places, then poked it into the sand in the bowl.

Incense smoke trailed upwards to merge with the wood smoke hanging below the ceiling. It was completely dark outside by now; the firelight filled the living room with a wavering glow.

Now Grandma beckoned her through the doorway into the pantry. There were no windows. The rush torch illuminated shimmering glimpses of jars and sacks and root vegetables.

Then she saw it.

There was an altar built into the wall on the other side of the Buddha shrine. It did not contain a laughing Buddha. Inside, painted in red and black and dull gold, was a wooden devil. Its eyebrows were creeping black caterpillars. Its eyes rolled in the firelight. Its lips blubbered dirty jokes and curses as the torch swayed. It writhed. It hissed. It beat against the altar that trapped it, running its shadow fingers up and down over the restraining walls.

There was a tabletop beneath the devil, with a bowl full of sand and charred incense sticks, and the full head of a pig, smiling up at the black ceiling.

Yuxin groaned. Grandma didn't seem to notice. She ushered Yuxin onward, towards the thing. Grandma handed Yuxin an incense stick, and her face was a smiling mask of leather, and with trembling hands Yuxin forced herself to hold the incense stick against the flame and press it into her palms, and she shut her eyes and pretended to pray and found that she couldn't bear to open them again and see that the devil face was talking to her and she could hear the words it said in her grandmother's dialect through her grandmother's throat like a chittering of insects.

\*



Dad had an electric torch. He shone it dead ahead as they walked between the empty houses. He shone it straight and true so that no shadows danced. He held Yuxin's hand tight.

He said, "I love you. You must respect your grandmother, but don't listen to what she says all the time."

They passed the snake wire which was just a pile of plastic and metal. They passed roosting hens which cluck-clucked briefly then settled back into calm. They passed young trees pushing new branches through windows that were only windows, not great black eyes.

"I love you," he said. "You are beautiful. I will protect you."

They followed the path out of the woods and off the hill, and the new road was lit up all grand up there ahead of them.

\*

At least that was the way she usually told herself the story. There were other versions. In some, there was no devil. In others, there was not even a Buddha, or snake, and the great cold that rose through her in her grandmother's house was just a breeze from out the window. In one version, there were other things that Cousin Senlin said and did in the abandoned village that seemed simultaneously inconceivable and terribly important.

In one version she left the village a few days later, and grew up and forgot all about him like the other villagers, then one day while she was grown, pursuing a grown woman's ambitions in Beijing, Cousin Senlin forced himself out of a hole in the world to appear behind her, grabbing her arm with a cold calloused hand and saying *Do you know what they're going to do to you?*

And a blue light started flashing. And people started shouting “The chengguan are coming!” And it seemed a car was crashing and so many things were happening at once it was as if nothing were happening at all. In the corner of her eye she saw her English tutor getting knocked sideways. Then only struggle.

A wave of movement in the crowd threw her into Cousin Senlin, and she was actually grateful not to fall, so grateful that she followed willingly as he wrenched her out of the scrum, although her coat got ripped and somewhere in the twist and crush her phone was lost.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him.

He spoke in dialect that she’d almost forgotten. He said something like he was here to save her.

“What?”

He’d come to Beijing – he explained more clearly, rolling his eyes – to work. He’d come to learn English. He’d been waiting by the intersection in his free time, looking out for her, since he heard she lived nearby. She was lucky he’d saved her from the riot.

Cousin Senlin was all grown up and his clothes were cheap and dirty. He smelled bad. He wasn’t looking her in the eye.

She must have been feeling grateful though, because she went with him to his residence, not far away, somewhere in back of Happiness Mansions.

She stood at the threshold and looked in. It didn’t look like a real apartment; it looked like a cupboard. A broom closet maybe. There was no kitchen, just buckets and bottles and the alchemical smell of a spirit stove. A sleeping bag lay beside a pile of used junior-school English textbooks. They must have been near a school,

because the sound of children's voices was echoing in the tiny open window. The chanting of poetry.

*What are you doing here?* she asked.

He was working and learning English, he repeated. It was so expensive to live in Beijing. It was a such a pain in the ass for a migrant worker. The landlord here didn't ask for ID. Come in.

*What kind of work?*

Work work. Come in.

His hands, dirty, shaking with cold or some other energy, pointed to the sleeping bag and the dog-eared children's books. *This will be your life now*, they said. His breath reeked. She stood at the threshold of his tiny room. She did not enter.

\*

Yuxin recognised a difference between the stories she remembered, and the stories she told to herself; and between the stories she told to herself, and those she told to others. She knew that at any one moment there were dozens of stories – hundreds even – alive and glowing in the space surrounding her, not all good, not all nice but all within reach or reaching out fingers at her and if she could believe in the best of things (as she tried so hard to do in her daily devotions), then so too were possible the worst of things, the very worst, and even as he led her to that dirty room in back of Happiness Mansions, Cousin Senlin had already pocketed her phone. He'd been messaging her English teacher all week, for reasons she couldn't understand. And if he could do that, he could do anything – could have done anything to her. Anything was possible.

*Do you know what they are going to do to you?* he'd said.

So many stories laid claim on Yuxin's flesh, and the adjudicator in her heart kept declaiming: if the best of things, then also the worst. If Heaven, also Hell. Everything in between.

It was when she considered this sickly aura of possibility that Yuxin most craved the company of her pastor, whom she loved, and who carried a golden light that cut through confusion and fear, and whose voice made Yuxin leap for joy and roll on the floor and know certainty as her words passed through her unchallenged – whose voice, whose words, whose electric presence made Yuxin know the ecstasy of submission as she prayed and chanted and sang, rising with steady purpose up like a wave, the big wave, up and over and carrying (oh), and then: leaving her washed up on the cold northern shore of clarity, where this is this and that is that.

Yuxin saw that her English teacher was waiting for her to talk. She knew she would have to tell him something. She thought about what he might expect to hear her say; what might prevent him from asking any more questions.

What Yuxin then told Greg – in that halting, simpleton's English that made her 'Jenny', not Yuxin – was the same thing that lots of people said. She had heard men and women say it to one another in that very cafe, in fact: since the Rise of China, people had economic prosperity, but no spiritual life. And the old beliefs were not so attractive to everybody.

"I've heard that before," Greg said. He looked a little disappointed, a little relieved. "Do you have any other reasons? Any personal reasons for your uh choice of faith?"

Yuxin rolled her eyes. She thought a while. She began to dissemble.

\*

Greg learned with interest that Jenny's grandmother had been a witch. It wasn't the shocking childhood secret he'd feared; still, he was carrying out his resolution to listen, to be receptive, to care. Jenny's grandmother had been a jobbing witch, something like a wise woman in a medieval village. Paid to cleanse houses of devils.

"Or *ghosts*," Greg prompted. "Ghosts, ghosts, ghosts."

"Ghos', yes, *ghos'*..."

But, Jenny claimed, her grandmother was corrupt, and used her powers in ugly ways, and for profit, and passed on her evil to the younger generations. It had been this way for years, in the rural county that her father came from.

Her new pastor, on the other hand, fought demons every day, but let none corrupt her. Her religion was new and bright and conducted in earnest by souls as troubled as Jenny was. They met in an apartment, apparently.

"But what do you believe, exactly? Is it the standard Christian stuff?"

"What is standar' Christ-ian stuff?"

"I was taught that story you told, about the water nymph that doesn't know that it's going to turn into a dragonfly. I was taught it at school. We were taught all sorts of metaphors for heaven."

"You hear it too!"

Outside the cafe window, dusk was coming on: neon signs and electronic billboards were asserting themselves against a sectioned plane of darkening blue. Reflections from inside the cafe were becoming pronounced. Greg was unaccountably affected. He checked his phone. Ryan hadn't replied. He wondered what Winnie was doing right now.

"The sun is setting. Do you ever get sad when the sun is setting?"

"Sometimes. I get sad *when the sun is set-ting*."

Great muddy clouds drifted into the darkening blue plane, like weeds deep underwater. Greg spoke.

“There’s this word, *tian*, in the poem I’ve been reading. It is sometimes translated as ‘heaven’ and sometimes as ‘sky’. Now, I’ve been doing research. I know that the oldest translators were missionaries, you see, and when they started translating Chinese, they were looking for ways of making Christian concepts fit in China. So because they wanted *tian* to mean ‘heaven’, they translated it as so. And I know that it doesn’t mean heaven, but the line ‘the great river, flowing into the sky’ reads better – more *romantic*, you know – as ‘the great river, flowing into heaven’. But I know also that this is an insult – a grave insult against your people. If you have people. Do you have people?”

“My *people*?” Jenny whispered.

“Still, still, I must never assume that I don’t want to put myself in the same position as these missionaries. Opium, missionaries and gunboats. I’m sure they taught you in school. I *hate* missionaries.”

Jenny looked upset.

“I mean, I hate *white* missionaries.”

Greg looked around the Black Cat Cafe. Language partners, young and hopeful. Ruddy-faced Americans. Bearded types with cloth-bound bibles. All of them talking out loud. It was an unbearable location to endure, he realised. He thought about his flat in Happiness Mansions, how in it his furniture was sitting alone in the darkness now, asking when he was going to come home. It was clean there now. His *aiyi* had swept everything up and wiped it all down.

"I hate white men," Greg said. "I hate all these white men everywhere. Everywhere I go, I feel like I'm looking in a mirror. I just want to disappear. I don't want to be here anymore. Wherever I am."

Jenny blinked. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Poetry," Greg said, desperately.

"*Tian* means Heaven."

"Oh," said Greg.

"In Heaven, we will be dispersed among the worthy. We will be consumed by burning fire."

"Oh," said Greg. "Right."

## Tower

“It is interesting,” Li Bai says, “that you would choose this tower as the location for our parting meal, old friend. You are familiar with the old myth of this tower’s creation.”

“I am.”

“Please, humour me. Tell me the story as you have heard it.”

Meng Haoran considers for a while, stroking the beard that adorns his long, serious face.

“The story concerns a man who drank an elixir of the type that are popularly sought after, and succeeded in turning himself from a man into an immortal. At the moment of his translation, he leapt upon a yellow-coloured crane and flew off to join his immortal brethren in the sky. At the spot where he left the earth was constructed this tower.”

“Good. That’s how I heard the story. And you told it well.”

“Thank you,” says Meng Haoran, chewing on a morsel.

“Some months ago I met a man who told a different story about this tower. In this man’s account, there was once an innkeeper living nearby. One day, at his inn, there appeared a poet dressed in rags. The poet said, ‘I have no money. Will you give me wine?’ And the innkeeper agreed.”

“Ho! A likely story.”

“The innkeeper generously offered the poet a large bowl, from which he could drink as much wine as he pleased all day long. And so the man did – for many months. It is a wonder he didn’t drink the innkeeper’s barrels dry – I can only assume that he didn’t share my own appetite for wine.”



“None do.”

“Indeed. The day came, then, when the poet told the innkeeper that he was ready to pay for the wine that he’d drunk. And here’s what he did: he took a lemon rind and daubed on the wall the image of a crane. Then he showed the innkeeper that by clapping his hands, he could bring the yellow crane to life. The crane would dance to whatever tune the innkeeper played. Now, many thousands of people were drawn by this novelty, and each curious visitor requiring food, drink and accommodation, soon enough the innkeeper was the richest man in the land. In gratitude, he built this tower.”

“Well told, my friend,” says Meng Haoran, pulling at the white hairs of his beard and smiling gravely. “But I fear this is a drunkard’s tale.”

“It is indeed!” Li Bai replies. “Drink up!”

For some time they eat and drink in silence. The calls of gulls echo up from the river as a flock takes sudden flight. Li Bai checks his digital watch.

“I do not mind,” he says, “that you mock my search for the elixir of immortality. The pursuit of alchemy has taken me on many strange diversions.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“I told you, I don’t mind. In fact, your words have afforded me the opportunity to reflect on something. I have been thinking that you and I are opposite in certain respects. Complementarily so, I mean.”

“Naturally.”

“I seek fame and success in the world. I make no secret of it – you know I am on the road to Chang’an, where I will meet the Emperor. You know my past. It is not ignoble, but I admit that our line has fallen under a shadow. So: I have come from

obscurity seeking the light – while you, my old friend, perhaps finding the light too blinding, seek obscurity.”

“Ha! A neat inversion.”

“I will become successful in Chang’an – I feel it. And I will become very famous. They will call me the Wine Immortal. And I will live forever.”

“Wine, my friend, does not allow you to live forever.”

“True. But my fame may last forever, even if I am not immortal. Whereas you, my old friend: I see you forever disappearing.”

“You see me?”

“In my mind’s eye, I see you. I see the sail of your boat, disappearing into the horizon.”

“I feel that you are already preparing a poem,” Meng Haoran says. He is seated in a position conducive to digestion, his pale fingers stretched over his kneecaps.

“It’s true,” Li Bai says, draining his bowl of wine.

“You know,” Meng Haoran says, “I heard another version of the Yellow Crane myth. A strange one. There are people who tell a different story. These people – they live in a village on the other side of the river, some way past those hills. These people say that the tower marks the spot where a dead man, who was riding on the back of a yellow crane, stopped to rest.”

“A what?”

“A dead man.”

Li Bai puts down his wine bowl and stares at the older man, his eyebrows creased into a questioning ‘V’, like the outspread wings of a great black bird, the shadow of which is even now crossing the floorboards beneath the open window.

“A *what?*” he says.

**ON YELLOW-CRANE TOWER, FAREWELL TO MENG HAO-JAN**

**WHO'S LEAVING FOR YANG-CHOU**, by Li Bai

From Yellow-Crane Tower, my old friend leaves the west.

Downstream to Yang-chou, late spring a haze of blossoms,

distant glints of lone sail vanish into emerald-green air:

nothing left but a river flowing on the borders of heaven.

*David Hinton*

## Punishment

Greg was halfway back to Happiness Mansions with a plastic-wrapped stack of toilet rolls under his arm when he first saw Kelvin. Over his unseasonal Italian-style sports jacket, Kelvin had his arm in a sling. A bakelite cast covered his nose. The device was strapped to his face with a black band.

Greg waved. Kelvin blinked behind his nose: Groucho, lopsided.

A narrow road separated the two of them. A truck started reversing out of the lane, and they were forced to wait, opposite one another, until it completed its manoeuvre.

The truck had an open bed, loaded up with greasy plastic barrels. From the top of one of the barrels – half-full, left unsealed – rancid steam spilled out into the cold air. Greg knew the barrels contained used cooking oil. He knew it was collected from restaurants and skimmed from the wastewater in the sewers. He preferred to assume it would be refined and sold as a recycled fuel oil; he suspected, based on persistent rumours, that it would be refined and sold back to the restaurants as cooking oil.

They watched the truck. It reversed into the road without warning, causing some expensive-looking cars to halt and beep. The knot of traffic took a while untying. Fortunately, it was very cold and the vapours slipped swiftly upwards and away, so the smell wasn't unbearable.

"What's up, Kelvin," Greg said eventually, "you get hurt training?"

"Unh. Yeah. You should see this other guy."

"You should see *the* other guy."

"Unh. Yeah."

An unaccustomed silence fell between them. Kelvin looked from side to side. Eventually Greg hoisted his toilet rolls and stepped across the alleyway. He patted Kelvin's arm as he passed.

"Happy New Year!" he said.

"*Shenme?*" Kelvin asked.

A few metres down the road, Greg looked back.

Kelvin was running, skipping over puddles of melted ice, his phone in his free hand.

\*

Greg wasn't surprised when a big black *biemowo* pulled up in front of him minutes later, blocking his way into Happiness Mansions. Nor was he surprised when the passenger door opened and Kelvin hopped out.

"Get in the car, motherfucker," he said.

Greg understood.

"Is it time for my punishment?" he asked.

"I say get in the motherfucker car fucker!"

Kelvin opened the back door for him. Inside was a portly little man wearing a black leather jacket, who scowled at him. Mr Winnie, Greg presumed.

Greg gestured to Kelvin with his toilet rolls. He made to put the pack down on the pavement.

"Take them in the car, dick. They get ruin with snow!"

Greg wedged himself into the back seat with the stack of toilet rolls on his lap. Kelvin shut the door and got in beside the driver. The man beside Greg – Mr Winnie – tapped him on the shoulder. He indicated that Greg should put the toilet rolls in the footwell. Greg did so, and Mr Winnie punched him in the stomach.

It wasn't a very hard punch, and Greg's down jacket absorbed some of the impact, but he had the good sense to go *oof* and look shocked. He even doubled up a little. Mr Winnie punched him only once more, then seemed satisfied and signalled to the driver to move on.

The driver nodded and grunted like an ordinary taxi driver. His hair was cut short on the back of his head. A flask of green tea sat beside him.

They didn't drive far. The car reached Wudaokou intersection, pulled up just outside the Golden EnterPrize Centre and Kelvin got out. He opened the doors and they exited: Greg with his toilet rolls, then Mr Winnie, with his chubby fingers pressed into the pockets of his inadequate pigskin jacket. Mr Winnie seemed keen to get inside, but Kelvin held him back.

"HEY DICKHEAD," he shouted suddenly, at the top of his voice, "HOW YOU DARE FUCK MY BROTHER HIS WIFE!"

Heads turned.

Kelvin carried on, switching between English and Chinese. He called Greg a cocksucker. He called him a dirty foreigner and a pervert. He said he'd fucked Winnie in the ass. He accused him of being a scrounger and a drug addict who couldn't get a girlfriend at home and so came to steal what rightfully belonged to others here. He held Greg by the collar and cuffed him, then pulled the hood of his padded jacket down over Greg's eyes and yanked him about on the pavement.

Greg felt a number of blows to his torso, kidneys, shoulders. He guessed Kelvin was inviting Mr Winnie to hit him again. He heard voices raised around them; they said bad things about him in Chinese. There was, he imagined, a crowd around them by now; it was a real scene.

Somebody who was neither Kelvin nor Mr Winnie hit him. Greg took it. He raised his hands over his head and hunched with his elbows over chest. He knew it was very important not to fight back. He was twisted and prodded and hit. Someone called him a cunt. He was developing a keen understanding of the cost of his privileges in this country.

Then there was a spinning and a tumbling, and the cold air and noise and hands on him were suddenly gone, and Greg knew that he was in the lobby of the Golden EnterPrize Centre. He pulled the hood off his face and took in the peaceful green light. Kelvin and Mr Winnie were with him, looking flushed. Kelvin was carrying the toilet rolls now. Their polythene wrapper remained intact; the rolls were white and dry behind mud-stained plastic. Through the spinning doors, which the driver was holding shut, Greg could see angry people waving mobile phones. The event had been comprehensively documented.

"We are not done yet," Kelvin told him.

\*

There was a breeze up on the roof. Mr Winnie blew on his hands and stamped his feet, and his keys bounced on their chain. They were hooked to his belt, of course. Kelvin left the toilet rolls beside the service door and shoved Greg out onto the tar.

Greg stood between four huge black A/C vents. Turned at their tops, they resembled cowed penitents; they faced resolutely away from him, leaking steam.

Kelvin paced around a bit. He removed his jacket. It was a process he completed in stages, first removing his sling and then slipping it back on, resting his injured arm on the door handle in the meanwhile. He hopped up and down on the spot; he started jabbing with his good arm. Greg realised he was limbering up for his beating.

He wondered whether he should warm up, too. He decided it would be inappropriate.

Mr Winnie lit a cigarette. He held it between his thumb and forefinger while he smoked it. His Beijing belly filled out his jacket in a neat little mound.

Greg felt like he was in something scripted. All the players were there: fat cadre, dirty *laowai* – and whatever it was Kelvin was supposed to be. The unreality only intensified as Kelvin started to hit him. The blows had all the appearance of being expertly thrown. They came from the side of his hand, from his knee or his white-sneakered foot; as he delivered them, he made little sounds like “Ya!” or “Ha!”; afterwards, he’d look at Mr Winnie for approval.

It hurt, of course. Especially when the blows impacted the bruises that Winnie had left on him. But Greg knew deep down that nothing was going to get broken; even when blood started gushing from his nose, he knew that nothing serious was going to get broken.

And he played along. It was easy enough to cry when it was obvious that crying was required. He whimpered wretchedly after each blow and even spent a bit of time retching in a foetal position. His stomach joined in with the pretence and supplied a cold, drawn-out wave of nausea. And when Kelvin picked him up and carried him to the edge of the building to look down at the car park six storeys beneath, Greg’s bladder obliged him by emptying. There was the warm; there was the cold, creeping along his leg.

Yes even when he could feel the sucking void beneath him as he hung from Kelvin’s single arm – while Kelvin was saying something ridiculous like “Can you fly, mother fuck?” – Greg disbelieved that he would fall.

Terror was for later: cold flashes, expelled in a barking laugh; a twitch; dreams.



But on the day of the event, Greg's main impression was of participating in a collaborative performance of outraged masculinity. And since he'd brought his punishment on himself, he was complicit. Greg never thought of the word 'victim'. Or if he thought of the word 'victim', it was never in reference to himself.

After a while it was finished. Mr Winnie had smoked two cigarettes, and was feeling the cold. Kelvin put his jacket back on carefully, repeating the procedure with the sling and the injured arm. He picked up the toilet rolls and held the door open for Greg. He looked glum.

\*

"What you want, bro, beer? Maybe something stronger, eh?"

The troupe had relocated the performance back to their window booth in CHEEMA Bar. Mr Winnie was sitting in the seat that Chen Xu had occupied a week before. Kelvin was sitting too close to Greg.

"We could get some that *soju* shit. I don't like it myself. No flavour, man. I like Chinese wine. China makes the best wine. Really strong stuff, you know? How you say, put some hairy on your chest, bro. And good for men, if you know what I mean. Not that you need that, bro, if you know what I mean. I know *you* know what I mean," Kelvin chortled.

Mr Winnie told him to shut up, in Chinese.

Beers came. Kelvin sniffed and became quiet. Greg inserted the head of a beer bottle between his swollen lips and poured the liquid in. It was hard to swallow.

Mr Winnie said something. He said it quietly, to Kelvin.

"How much you charge Winnie for her classes, bro?"

"Um," said Greg, "thwee hundwed *kuai* an hour."

Kelvin told Mr Winnie. Mr Winnie said something back.

"Now you gonna do it for *free*, bro."

"What?"

"You gonna teach Winnie for free."

"You wan me to cawwy on teaching her?"

"Yeah bro. For free."

"Um. Otay."

Mr Winnie nodded curtly. He put his unfinished beer down, ate a little silver fish, and left.

It was quiet. Kelvin was sitting too close to him.

"Well," he said eventually, "I'm gonna off to get you some new clothes bro. I think you pissed yourself bro. It's a bit embarrassing."

"Hm," said Greg.

"Wait here."

Kelvin left. Greg hooted for *soju*. Soon the bottle appeared before him. He poured the clear liquid into the top of his beer bottle. Greg drank peacefully for half an hour or so, watching the traffic swirl and stall and flow around Wudaokou intersection.

"Gimme your coat bro."

Kelvin was back with a few tote bags. Greg removed his coat, which was ripped in several places, and noticed that his muscles had started to seize up.

"You need massage," Kelvin remarked. "I can do it."

"No!"

"Whatever, bro," Kelvin said, backing up. "Jeez."

Greg gave Kelvin his coat, dumped everything in his pockets onto the tabletop, and went to the bathroom to change. He didn't look at himself in the mirror. The new

clothes were made of some kind of plastic; they were soft and crinkly, and made a swooshing sound as his legs brushed against one another. He looked quite sporty, he reckoned, as he limped back to the booth.

He looked at his phone. Ryan hadn't replied to the message he sent him earlier in the day.

"You know, bro, I do you a real favour back there. My brother in law, he was pissed, man. He wanted to kill you. I chilled him, dude. I mean, you lucky really. You one lucky *laowai*."

Greg shrugged. It hurt. Kelvin pouted at him under his Groucho nose.

"I dunno man," he said, "I kinda feel like you owe me."

The pout morphed. The eyes creased. Sad.

"I don't *want* to do this Greg. I don't like it. And you know Greg I save you. I stopped people hitting you outside. And you *know* I didn't hit you hard. You don't know how hard I can hit, bro. Like, like..." Kelvin cast around for a suitable example; he soon found one. "Like, I could punch through this wall there. I channel my you-know energies, Greg. *Qi*, we call it. What kine wall that? No kine wall. Bup—"

Kelvin sniffed. Kelvin breathed hugely. He started to cry.

"I don't want do this, Greg," he said, miserably. "You know I didn't hit you hard."

"No, you didn't."

"You know I get you all those presents at the *tom-bola*."

"Yes, you did."

"So in way, you owe me, Greg."

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"How much money you got?"

Greg laughed. Kelvin snorted.

"You shouldn't fucked my sister man," he said.

"No."

"Bros before hoes man."

"Yes."

Kelvin's face folded in and then out again. He mastered himself. He channeled his Qi. Then he picked up Greg's old coat and walked out.

\*

Plumbe was in Greg's apartment when he got back. Greg wasn't at all surprised.

Things were moving quickly now.

"I like your threads, man," Plumbe said, in a soft West Coast accent. "Sporty."

"Who the fuck are you, really?"

Plumbe laughed. He patted the space beside him on the sofa. Greg sat on the easy chair opposite. Then he stood up, and carried his stack of toilet rolls into the bathroom, and put them in their place on a shelf above the sink. Then he went back in.

"I wanted to talk to you about our colleague Master Hunt," Plumbe said. "I am becoming... shall we say... increasingly *concerned* for his wellbeing."

Plumbe looked pleased with his choice of words. He did the trendy-vicar nipple twist.

"As you may know, and despite the best efforts of our government, the scourge of drugs remains present in our capital. I fear that our colleague has fallen victim to their dubious charms. I do not see the attraction myself; and in a country where the sanctions against addicts are *very rigorous indeed*, I imagine that it is only the most self-destructive of what-you-call *personality types* who indulge. I have cherished my suspicions about Master *Hund* for virtually as long as he has been working here.

Now, I fear, a crisis has come. You see, Greg, Ryan has been running about the palace with his doublet all unbraced. He surprised me in my chambers.”

Plumbe’s eyes flickered coyly. Greg felt a lump in his throat.

“He had a confession to make. About that story of his. His journalism... thing. There was that story about the school, of course; I already knew about that and wasn’t surprised to see the school authorities taking steps to correct him in that regard. But it transpired there was another story. A fantasy, I realised quickly enough, that he had concocted about a computer game. I suppose he came to me because he wanted my help. He too must have realised he was coming unhinged – with all his talk about this *Defence of the Eastern Realm*.”

Plumbe pronounced the words carefully and with relish, then treated Greg to a broad smile. Teeth, uneven and caffeine stained, the better to bite you with.

“It was all nonsense, of course. Paranoid nonsense. He must have been up for days and days, poor lad. It’s funny just how psychotic cocaine can make a boy. He’s sleeping now. Would you like to see?”

Greg shut his eyes.

“Where?” he asked.

“In his room. Would you like to see?”

“What good would that do?”

“I just thought you might like to see.”

“I believe you.”

“Oh, *come off it*, sweetie.”

Greg shrugged. His shoulder twinged.

When Greg opened his eyes again, Plumbe was standing. It was a funny thing, but he had never noticed before just how tall Plumbe was. The ceiling seemed to bow around his crown.

“Come and see.”

Greg’s muscles ached as he followed Plumbe out of the apartment and up the well-lit double flight to Ryan’s flat. Plumbe opened the door with a single finger; wind whispered beneath the door jamb. Ryan’s flat was a mirror version of Greg’s own flat, just a little disordered, with a few books and papers on the floor. Here was the sofa and the easy chair. Here was a coffee table dusted with white powder. Down the corridor was the door to the bedroom. Plumbe held it open, but didn’t go inside. His body crowded the corridor. Greg willed himself to walk under his outstretched arm.

The bedroom was a mirror of his own bedroom. Of course it was; they all were. Here was the window, the computer and the closet. Here was the bed.

The duvet was stretched over a form in the bed. At the head, between a pair of pillows, Greg could see a tuft of fair hair.

“It’s funny,” Plumbe’s voice said softly behind him, “I have lived here in China for so long that I’ve started to find white people strange. I mean their *racial* profile, if you will excuse my political incorrectness. I’ve begun to think we *honkies* all look alike. Isn’t that funny? In my idle moments, I imagine that there are perhaps only eight or twelve types of Caucasian face. The descendants, no doubt, of a tiny band of forest dwellers some thousands of years ago. Sometimes I like to classify these types: the horse-face type. The piggy type. The goatish type.

“Ryan’s type is very much like yours, Greg. As alike as rats and mice, say. You could be cousins. I mean, not to a white person. But to somebody that is not attuned

to our, shall we say, *unique characteristics*, certainly. Aren't you going to get any closer?"

"No," Greg said. It was cold in the room. The ghost of a hand was holding him by the nape of his neck.

"Aren't you going to check that he's breathing?"

"No."

"It could be a *mop* in there, for all you know."

"I want to go now."

"Aren't you even a little bit curious?"

"I want to go home. Let me go home. Please."

"Good boy. I will deal with this problem for you. We can settle our debts later."

Plumbe waited by the door and Greg screwed himself up to walk under his arm again. When he was passing close by him, close enough to smell the stale sweat in his cardigan, the ozone on his breath, Plumbe spoke again. His voice was bassy; vibrations passed through Greg's skin, his closed eyelids.

"Go home, Greg," Plumbe's voice tickled. "You're tired. You are feeling sleepy, I can tell. If you know what's good for you, Greg, you'll go straight to bed. Perhaps it'll all be better in the morning. And Greg: whatever sounds you hear outside your door tonight, it would behove you to keep your door locked tight."

## Tower

Meng Haoran looked officious and tired in his patched robe. The light coming through the window had a thin quality, as though reflected off painted parchment. The guards at the door looked unhappy, as if they had been marching many hours, and they had many hours left to march.

“Are you hungry?” Meng Haoran asked. “Have you eaten? Would you like a cup of tea?”

Li Bai shook his head. He kept his hands hidden beneath long sleeves.

“In a sense, this is just a formality,” Meng Haoran said.

Li Bai nodded.

“I’m sorry,” Meng Haoran said, “do you need some time?”

Li Bai shook his head. Meng Haoran unrolled a scroll before him and studied the script painted across it. He clicked his tongue and shook his head.

“Let me just tell you what you told me, first,” he said. “This afternoon you were on the property of Solent Paper Mills. Trespassing, as you admitted. And it was at this time that you drank some vodka. Would you say that you got drunk?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. You were in the abandoned building beside the canal.”

“It’s not a canal.”

“Sorry?”

“It’s not a canal. It’s a river.”

Li Bai gestured towards the window, as if he expected to find an idyllic riverside scene. But there was only mist. He looked back at the guards at the door. He hiccupped.



"You were in the unoccupied building beside the canal and you were drunk," Meng Haoran proceeded. "You, and Caspar Guest. Anybody else?"

"Just us."

"Just you two. And you were just *hanging around*, in your words."

"Yes."

"What does it mean, hanging around?"

"You know, hanging around. Not doing anything."

"Not doing anything?"

"Talking. We had these plans. We were going to have this party."

"A party in the unoccupied property?"

"We always dreamed of having this party, and everyone was going to come and see it. We'd put lights up and make everything glow. We'd choose our own music. So that the old tower would be something real."

"Real?"

"Our place."

"Your place? The unoccupied building on Solent Paper Mills' property?"

Li Bai didn't say anything. The studio lights were hot. His make-up was starting to drip. It was starting to look foolhardy. Misjudged.

"So you and Caspar, this friend of yours, you go and *hang around* in an abandoned building. That's what you do."

"Why are you acting like that's strange?"

"I'm not saying it is. I need to establish the norms. What was normal, for Caspar. Whether he was doing something normal, on the day that he died. Or whether he was doing something unusual, on the day that he died. Do you understand?"

Li Bai didn't nod. Meng Haoran sighed. He stared at the wall behind Li Bai's head as he spoke.

"I'm aware that you probably have some feelings. And I can work with that."

Li Bai didn't nod.

"We all have feelings. I have feelings."

A gust of wind slammed a door, somewhere else in the tower. Somebody laughed. Somebody cursed. Somebody started shouting in a dialect Li Bai didn't understand.

"When did you decide to go swimming?"

"I'm not sure."

"What parameters?"

"The afternoon."

"In the afternoon you decided to go swimming. Who got in first?"

"I jumped in."

*I leapt in, ecstatic, dreaming of parties.*

"Did Caspar follow you?"

"Yes."

*We had the same dream.*

"What happened then?"

"We swam."

"When did you miss him?"

*Every day.*

"Miss him?"

"When did you realise he was missing?"

"I got to the island..."

*Where green parrots roost.*

"The spit of land."

"I turned around to look for him and he wasn't there."

"What did you do then?"

"I swam."

"You kept swimming?"

*I'm drowning.*

"I swam alone, because he wasn't there anymore."

"When did you decide to look for him?"

"The afternoon. The evening."

"What time?"

*I didn't matter what time. I knew then. I didn't want to stop swimming because I knew then.*

"You tell me."

"We received a 999 call at 19:34."

"That time."

Meng Haoran shook his head. He rolled his big scroll back up then pulled out a smaller one. Attendants swooped by to tie and untie official ribbons, to set the brush bristles, to grind the ink, to coat the seal in bright red pigment.

Meng Haoran took a brush and signed his name. He pressed the seal on the page beside it. He held it up for Li Bai to see.

"We are treating Caspar's death as an accident," he said. "Death by misadventure. What this means is that, legally, nobody is at fault. But I want you to understand, young man, that just because you're not legally at fault, doesn't mean you're off the hook. Of course, there's nothing I'm going to do to you, as an officer of

the law. But *this...*” here he spread his hands as if to take in the whole scene: the drab room, the guards, the mist-obscured window, Li Bai’s cheap raiment, still damp in places. “*This* is not good. This slippage is not good. You’re going to have to wake up at some point. You’re going to have to recognise the concrete reality of what happened.”

**SEPARATION ON THE RIVER KIANG**, by Rihaku

Ko-jin goes west from Ko-kaku-ro,  
The smoke-flowers are blurred over the river.  
His lone sail blots the far sky.  
And now I see only the river,  
The long Kiang, reaching heaven.

*Ezra Pound*

## **Denouement**

January 2012 was cold. It featured four luncheons in the Immortal Flavour Tower. Plumbe announced the termination of Ryan's tenure at Beijing University of Forestry at the first; at the second, his replacement arrived. This new Ryan was a promising young Republican from a family in pulp mills and related industries, whose conversation usually extended to the great potential in China for pulp mills and related industries.

The Party congress was coming up in the Autumn. It was a big one, this year: a new party chairman and a new premier would be announced. By all accounts, the decisions as to who would take the posts were being made at this time. The teachers started to talk about politics a lot. It seemed there were several potential candidates lined up to replace the current leaders; by and large, the teachers hoped for a leader who would continue the business-friendly policies of the present government.

Greg kept his own counsel. Sometimes Plumbe would talk ominously, and use the words 'closed box' and 'black hole', and Greg would excuse himself from the cubicle and spend some time staring out of the window in the lobby, breathing in the ozone reek of the fish tanks, counting the specimens, living and dead.

Ryan's body was discovered at the foot of an A/C vent that ran the height of the Golden EnterPrize Centre. It was determined that he'd entered the vent on the roof, perhaps by climbing or perhaps by being lifted bodily into the cowled aperture; he'd made a rapid descent into the darkness from there.

Videos started to spread online of a young white man being assaulted by a middle-aged Chinese man in a leather jacket and a young Chinese man wearing a nose splint and a sling. The most widely circulated still from the footage was of the

young man tugging the *laowai* off balance, pulling on the hood of his coat, while the middle-aged man punched him from behind, his face fully exposed to the camera.

The middle-aged man was identified as a prominent cadre. His name was Wang something; Greg continued to call him Mr Winnie.

The coat that the *laowai* was wearing was determined to be the same as that which enclosed the semiliquid remains of Ryan's torso, down at the bottom of the A/C shaft.

Mr Winnie was publicly ejected from the CCP. This action removed his immunity from the murder prosecution that was widely predicted to ensue. The takeaway in the *Global Times*, repeated across the country, was that three men entered the Golden EnterPrize Centre that day, and only two men came out.

Reports began to leak about the young *laowai*. Much was made of the fact that his blood contained traces of both cocaine and morphine. There was speculation regarding his dissolute lifestyle in the pleasure districts of Wudaokou, Sanlitun and 'vibrant' Gulou. There was, as ever, moral condemnation. A citywide crackdown was announced. It was a generalised crackdown: foreigners, smokers, street vendors, double parkers, perverts generally. Checkpoints were set up. Buses were requisitioned in anticipation of round-ups; they idled in the alleys off Wudaokou, awaiting their manifests of deportees.

Shortly before she was charged with fraud, the character of Mr Winnie's wife came under the spotlight. It became known that she lived separately from her husband. It became known that she enjoyed the company of young men in China and abroad. The state-run papers produced outraged editorials; but their staid account of her failings could not match what was said about her online. She was a cougar. She was a fox. She was mutton dressed as lamb. She was light fingered and

acquisitive, a paragon of the corrupt princeling class that had infiltrated the ruling elite. She was desperate and sad. She was barren.

It fits, Greg thought. Everything fits the frame.

Plumbe called a special assembly. Greg didn't attend. Plumbe told the teachers that the errors of one bad actor had put the entire programme at risk. They needed to be especially vigilant in their work from now on. They needed to be clean in thought and behaviour, and wash away the spot, the taint, the sin. He slammed the table a lot.

As a more lighthearted aside, he noted that Master *Hund* had been sniffing up the wrong tree – or cocking his leg on it, more accurately. He'd been a little terrier who decided that he wanted to play with the crocodiles. His fate proved that God – who saw all and knew all from the vibrating centre of his web of perception – had a sense of humour. Furthermore, it was the fate that awaited all dilettantes, armchair Sinologists and sex types – indeed, all fundamentally unserious people – here in China, Beijing, Wudaokou, the Centre of the World.

\*

What happened to Kelvin was unusual. According to the more clued-in geopolitics websites, he was caught trying to cross into Wa State, Myanmar. From his seat in the Happy Lucky Gaming Cafe, Wang Wei worked to shape the narrative.

**Sympathetic Cautioner** advised commenters to avoid discussing the motivations of the separatist administrators of Wa State; **The Doubter** poured cold water on the notion that such separatist administrators had patrons in Yunnan or Beijing; **Patriot** suggested that Wa State's ambition to become a first-level administrative division within China was laudable and logical; **Idiot** called it a pipe dream.



Whatever the motivations of the separatist administrators of Wa State, they promptly delivered Kelvin up to Beijing. A week later he was all over the TV, improvising off a prepared confession in a blank little office space.

Commentators everywhere later described Kelvin's televised confession as the high point of the whole Hunt Affair. It was reality TV at its best. And, as they said, it marked the point of no return for Mr Winnie.

In a much-satirised account, Kelvin described meeting his brother-in-law for the first time shortly before his sister's wedding. They formed a business relationship almost immediately, drawing on Kelvin's finely honed entrepreneurial instincts. Although only vaguely described, their ventures apparently focused on real estate and hospitality. For five long minutes, Kelvin described the large black *biemowo* he'd bought with his earnings in exhaustive and utterly fraudulent detail.

Following this digression, Kelvin returned to his written confession. He read out the words 'professional criminal characteristic' directly from the sheet, stumbling over them as if they were the title of a junior-school essay. Visibly puzzled by the phrase, he went off-script again: since he was a family member, he stated, Mr Winnie shielded him from the immoral and illegal activities in which he was involved. So he had little to say about his professional criminal characteristic. But if he had to say anything about his professional criminal characteristic, he'd say Mr Winnie was a man with a short temper who couldn't handle the rumours about his wife, and that was the summation of his professional criminal characteristic.

Kelvin looked off-camera, and there was a quick jump cut. In the next sequence the light was subtly different, and Kelvin's expression was completely blank.

Speaking directly into the camera now, Kelvin reported being shocked and disgusted to discover that his sister was sleeping with one of the foreign teachers in

his own university, where he was scheduled to be valedictorian, thanks to his extraordinary grades and general popularity.

Now Kelvin was a man of the world, he said deadpan, but he could not tolerate the humiliation of his brother in law by this dirty foreign pervert. He was a believer in family values after all. And so when Mr Winnie asked him to help teach the malefactor a lesson, his response – one which echoed through the microblogs and social media accounts long afterwards – had been: “Don’t worry brother, I’ve got your back.”

He had, however, underestimated the fury of the cuckold.

On the roof of the Golden EnterPrize Centre, Mr Winnie’s long-suppressed anger had exploded. He ordered Kelvin to beat Ryan, which he had done expertly and in accordance with his martial arts training. But Mr Winnie complained that he wasn’t hitting Ryan hard enough; then he had kicked Ryan savagely, to the point where Kelvin was concerned that Ryan would get a concussion. Mr Winnie was out of control. He paraded around the rooftop with his top off, bearing his fists and growling and foaming at the mouth.

Kelvin had added a few sound effects to this bit, in the style of the professional radio storytellers.

Then Kelvin’s narrative took a disorientating flash-forward, and he described Mr Winnie holding the weakened and slurring Ryan bodily in his arms, threatening to feed him into the mouth of the A/C vent, beyond which was a sheer drop to the basement, seven storeys below.

Kelvin described how Ryan pleaded for his life; how he apologised and grovelled and offered up all of his ill-gotten money, which he had earned by fleecing

honest, hard-working language students (often the object of his lecherous designs), and which he kept stored in his freezer at home.

*I am guilty of many crimes, Ryan had said, but I don't deserve death. Don't throw me into this dark hole. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. I don't want to die.*

But, frenzied beyond pity, Mr Winnie had popped him over the ledge, then pried his bruised and stiffening fingers off the lips to which they clung, and a great hollow *whoosh* like a huge man sighing, like a *giant* sighing, told that the body had fallen.

The practicality of Mr Winnie even reaching the top of the A/C vent – let alone throwing a fully grown man into it – was discussed; it was sometimes noted that in his subsequent courtroom appearances, he was always flanked by tiny, bird-boned guards in loose-fitting uniforms, who made him appear tall and muscular in comparison.

The other points of discussion included the unprofessional aspect of Kelvin's confession, including the unusual leeway that he was given: he was allowed to digress into multiple tangentially related subjects, including the immorality of massively multiplayer online gaming and the practicalities of gaining muscle mass for European body types. This was a deviation from the standard, carefully controlled, televised confession; did it contain hidden messages, in its shambolic form or eccentric content? Had it been engineered somehow to undermine the prosecution of Mr Winnie? And, given that the confession connected to an already scandalous series of events, what was the function of having so much of the CCP's dirty laundry aired at one time?

Kelvin would never provide an answer to these questions. Immediately after the release of his confession, he disappeared into the machinery of state. No formal charges were ever reported to have been filed against him; he simply went away.

Greg faintly expected to be drawn into the frenzy himself: his connection with Ryan might come out; he might be interviewed, detained, cautioned or even bribed. But he wasn't surprised when none of this happened. Weeks of leisure followed.

He spent a lot of time at home. Incommunicado. He spent time looking at Winnie's scroll. The gold-flecked paper was becoming dirty. Brownish lines traced the movement of his fingers around the calligraphy; certain words were gaining a muddy penumbra.

Lonely Sail. Distant Shadow.

Time did strange things. Sometimes he did not leave his flat for days. His *aiyi* came and went. He would listen to her through the door while she scoured the pans and skinned the furniture.

He learned about Li Bai's Daoist magic – he'd been an alchemist, intent on discovering the elixir of life, which would turn the drinker into an immortal who would be able to fly and do great feats and live forever.

He recalled the *Zhuangzi*: "Am I a man who has dreamed of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being a man?"

He recalled Li Bai: "Life is an illusion, so I drank all day."

He considered drinking more heavily and more frequently; indeed, he considered the beautiful freedom of watching the morning light play through the bare branches of the trees that lined the avenue outside his balcony, watching the sun rise from a camp chair with a bottle of *baijiu* at hand, but the light never seemed right for it with this haze, he just couldn't imagine the January street scene resembling a bright sweet fresh spring morning full of blooming flowers and mists, and he didn't know whether his body could withstand much more. He closed his eyes and opened

them again and saw that he was in the same room of the same apartment in Happiness Mansions, with the same scroll hanging before him.

It looked like the same scroll, only somebody had hurled some liquid at it, obliterated the patterns of ink, and in the place of that carefully strung network of meaning there was a dark and darkening blob, a gigantic shadow rising from the depths, an imminence, a leviathan; and then the scroll would be back again. The same scroll, just as it had been before.

Five times he crawled out of his flat to meet Jenny in the Black Cat Cafe. She failed her latest IELTS exam, and he stopped charging her to meet him, gave up trying to correct her language and invited her instead to tell him stories, stories about anything at all.

The stories she told were fables or parables, with simple moral messages about reward, punishment and hope. He listened with wide eyes, like a child, watching her mouth move and wanting to believe.

One afternoon she told him the story of the Yellow Crane Tower.

“Once up on a time, before the Good Word of Our Lord come and when people still did magic, there man who change to immortal. Like a ghost but not. Not a *devil*. Immortal! He climb up on back, he *was climbing up* on back, he *climbed up* on back of a yellow crane bird. An fly away. So they build tower there where he fly away.”

She knew she had made a mistake here so she tried again, nodding as she did so, her eyes fixed on the faux-Chinois light fixture overhead: “An fly away, an *flied* away, *and flew away*.”

Then, at the end of January 2012, Jenny disappeared.

\*

Things went faster after that.

You see, there were lots of poems written about the Yellow Crane Tower. When Li Bai and his friend Meng Haoran said goodbye to one another at the tower – that is, when they chose to do so in that very spot – it must have meant something beyond that simple goodbye. Listen, just listen: My old friend leaves the west from the Yellow Crane Tower. There was no further description there; the description – more, the *meaning* of the location was in the name. Just to say the words “Yellow Crane Tower” was surely to invoke a host of words, traditions, fables even, yes. It was, Greg thought, really a signifier of defeat. The best-known poem about the tower was not by Li Bai. Somebody else – a certain Cui Hao – had already written the poem that defined the tower, by all accounts a simple yet haunting quatrain that centred on the assertion that the immortal had already departed, which reference back to an unobtainable antiquity must have echoed with Li Bai’s own sense of having essentially arrived too late at the tower, missing the boat so to speak, since his own efforts would always be judged against this first famous work. This double sense of loss must have produced a poignant irony within him. Sometimes Greg lost words. He would search for them and then forget that he was searching. Sometimes he would repeat himself.

No word from Jenny. Just these fucking messages from her old number in crude English *can we meet? I waiting for u* and Greg spent time waiting in the Black Cat Cafe, waiting in their old spot drinking Irish coffees until one day for some reason they said they didn’t want him to come there anymore *women buyao ni zai zhe’r*.

Will u b my gr8 white hope?

So he stood outside by the crowd control barrier at Wudaokou intersection and the people flowed around and past him. He looked into the windows of the towers

above, within which human beings were seated mainly although sometimes standing also and walking around. The thing about *baijiu* is that it really fucks your sense of self, but never in the way you want it to.

Li Bai must have felt that he was late to the party, that he'd missed the boat. He'd written other poems about the tower, which Greg attempted to read, but his own translations came out as a gobbledygook of anachronisms and jargon. But his – Li Bai's – his double sense of loss, based on the fact of being born in an age after magic, first, and after the great poets had already left their greatest marks on the edifice that is posterity – no! No! It was in fact a triple sense of loss, since he was at this significant site this monument to inadequacy and cowardice, he was there to say goodbye to his old friend whose presence will be missed greatly despite his flaws his mistakes his hubris his incredible misuse of privilege his idiocies utter.

Hey tourist don't u want 2 save my life?

Greg came to understand that he was on administrative leave. Teachers came to the door and spoke to him and he found that they all said the same thing and that he was repeating himself again. *White ghost*. The doctor told him that he should eat only rice porridge, or failing that avoid spicy or fatty food, or at least stop eating ice cream *dui ni duzi buhao*. But he wouldn't stop drinking. One afternoon he woke up and his eyes in the mirror were yellow.

Defeat, loss or absence: there was significance in the Yellow Yellow Let It Mellow Crane Tower, that was for sure. Double loss embodied by the tower, triple loss when we factor in the friend departing, and when we add in the last element, the river, why the river must surely represent time, Old Fucker Time with his beard and his dirty mackintosh, rubbing away at the world: the great river flowing into the sky.

Will u b my white knight? The Princess in The Tower.

Observe the changes in what is visible: a lonely sail first, a distant shadow next; and a form dissolving into the great blue sky, blue like the light reflected in the eye, the eye of a prey animal such as the natives claim roam the mountainous wildernesses just visible from the top of the tower, old friend, if you will follow me.

“Where are we going?” Meng Haoran asked.

“For more drinks!” Greg replied. They met headwinds on the fourth ring between Andingmen and Batong, but spent the southern slide to Niujie with the wind on their backs and leapt ashore with fresh cans of Hags Brew Ribbon, calling *Trim the ring-pull fingers, and away!*

The taxi, left unmoored, drifted downstream.

Greg blinked in the darkness, momentarily alone.

Then a switch was thrown and the plaza was magnificently floodlit, crowded with exotics and street performers and curious beasts, and the flickering electric light lit Greg’s robe as if from within, animating the delicate Yellow Crane motif so that the birds seemed to flitter and buzz like trapped butterflies.

“TO THE TOWER” somebody called, and Greg grabbed the hesitating Meng Haoran, pulled at the elbow of the aged Meng Haoran, escorted the shy and retiring Meng Haoran up the warmly lit steps and into the cavernous maw. Lobby staff tried to stop them, gibbering in their low vernacular.

“Hush your mouth, sweet sister on my mother’s side, we are here to talk about poetry, not pantries, not pants, not *penis pictures*. A carafe of strong wine for myself, and an urn for my friend.”

An unfortunate scene ensued. Soon the poets were running between bamboo stands, fording streams, arm in arm, climbing the banks of steep bluffs that seemed intent on shaking them off, like the flanks of some mossy giant.



"Where are we going?" Meng Haoran asked, breathless.

"To the tower, for more drinks!"

"But we never left the tower," Meng Haoran said, and Greg saw that he was right. They were in a dimly lit stairwell, where through a narrow window he could see a view of the river below, streaming with light, roaring, in fact, howling like a tongue of flame in a furnace.

"We must climb," Greg said, between gulps of strong wine, "a distance dangerous and high. We are climbing, old friend, to the boundary of the sky."

It was dangerous and high indeed, he reflected, as his taxi mounted another clover-leaf and the Shangri La Zone reappeared all frazzled in the smog. Since the cracking of this humpty-dumpty world left spilled the range that lay before him, he reflected, no man had taken this route through these mountains. This was not Beijing. Birds. Collapsed ladder-steps with buried bones. Barbarians lined the streets of Sanlitun pleasure district. Above their foreign gabba gabba, Greg heard Meng Haoran whisper: "Don't look down. This pass is particularly dangerous."

He looked down. He cried out. Sank to his knees.

Here AT LAST was Vortex. A fractured self-repeating geometrical soup disgorging and absorbing form in cycles describable only momentarily: spiral, heart, swastika, star; clunk, chink, scream, reboot.

And above it – O GLORY! a vision in sweet clear relief against the nauseating flow – there flew the YELLOW CRANE itself, its wings spread wide, bobbing like a mobile above the chasm cot. Its glory-streaming feathers barely rustled, barely flickered, as if instead of flying ten thousand metres high it were sunk in deep water, shouldering aside cold currents with the blind sharks and manta rays. Yet as Greg watched, he perceived that the great bird was struggling to rise further. Its huge

shoulders were straining, yet it faltered: its wings could not grip the slippery triple-distilled up-here atmosphere.

“This is a high and dangerous pass indeed,” he told his companion, Meng Haoran. He awoke in a stairwell feeling pale and fearful, with a cloying sense of having been laughing with his good friend Ryan, who was dead, but he couldn’t remember any of the jokes they shared.

The local shop started refusing him the strong stuff. The shopkeeper offered weak bottled lager. He made a shape with his gloved hand: *level out, level out*.

Then another gesture: *please*.

\*

*You’re close now. Your ridges scrape the boundary of Heaven. Observe inverted trees and the cataracts screaming, lonely passes, fierce tigers and long snakes. Dangerous and high. Climbing to the sky. Press your hand on your heart and sigh.*

Greg blinked. Greg yawned the burbling cosmos out the back of his head.

“Dude, get out of the road.”

Greg recognised a ruddy-faced Nordic-type emissary of a barbarous land. YALE. He recognised a paint-coated crowd-control barrier, the sound of a train passing overhead. He recognised the damp lintel of the window looking out on a view of the Long River, teeming with river folk in spring time, the silhouetted back of his old friend Meng Haoran standing with his hands folded behind his back – dependable Meng Haoran, who would no doubt have some words of comfort to impart regarding the confusion which had lately been overtaking Greg’s life.

“Turn around, old friend,” said Greg’s voice.

He expected his friend to turn around, but he didn’t. The old poet’s attitude remained fixed.

"Turn around," Greg said. "Turn around, please. Turn around and say something. Make a joke. Let me see your face. Your smile. Say something. Please. I'm sorry. Please."

\*

*Long ago, at the Yellow Crane Tower  
(Yesterday, Wudaokou intersection)  
An aeon deep, lost amid the flowers,  
My old friend receives his stage direction:  
Go east with painted boats past Parrot Shoal—  
Cross with care. The big trucks ignore the lights.  
Bigger fish shoulder the fry aside, roll  
momently in the current, their eyes' whites  
Flashing in gloom. It is morning. Noon. Dusk.  
We have been drinking all our lives. And now?  
Beneath the metro, with the pungent musk  
Of chou doufu and piss, from the boat's prow  
You wave. Goodbye. The traffic closes in.  
Green grass bows. A flicker. A dorsal fin.*

\*

One night a section of Happiness Mansions burned down. Greg watched the smirking firefighters run up and down, porting breathing equipment and heavy lengths of hose over the tarmac. The flames emerging from the empty eyes where glass windows had been were greater, yellower, more voracious than Greg had imagined flames could be. He knew them to be sentient and full of hate, a demon of

appetite, these flames reflecting on his own window pane. It made him choke up crying and for about thirty seconds he felt something like relief.

\*

The next morning he knocked on Plumbe's door. It was like his own door, only not.

Plumbe-like sighing. Sinister granddad. The smell of tea and ozone as the opening door created eddies and smog whooshed in and dust billowed out. Plumbe made an expression with his face. Prognosis negative.

Sit, my boy. You look terrible. You smell terrible. You must feel terrible.

Greg sunk into a dusty armchair that wanted to pull him to the bottom of the sea and hold him there forever. When are you coming home. He refused tea. He refused anything that Plumbe could stick his poisons into. His tongue moved sluggishly. A baffled interpreter.

Here to talk about teaching.

But you don't need to worry about that now, my boy. You're far beyond worrying about work. Think of yourself as a retiree, Plumbe said. The problems of the world are no longer your concern.

Here to talk about poetry.

Ah, well, that we can do.

The poem. Ask – what does translator want to do? What looking for?

Close your mouth, you're drooling.

Everybody trapped inside own body. Mind. Language a closed system, new signs defined only negatively. The other is a shadow of the self. But the poem, shows us a horizon, looks so bright and pure. Translator hopes to cross horizon. Where the river meets the sky. Every time I read one I think: this is it. This is the final version. I'm there. Escaped. But isn't. Still here.

Did I not warn you, young man, that translation was a cul-de-sac?

But listen. I want to learn. Befuddled convert, me. China.

Plumbe's skinface registered confusion. Jittering of spiny teeth. Bubbles towards surface.

Teach me more. Can you find? In your notes room. Bed. Back there, through door. You go.

A snapshot of Plumbe frowning at him remained after the man had sighed and pulled himself from his comfy chair and trudged off to the bedroom.

Now Greg moved. Through kitchen door. Like his own kitchen but. Here was the freezer. The outer door opened silently but the drawer beneath SQUEALED. No matter. Act now.

Here was money. Uninteresting.

Here was red-bound passport, blue-bound passport, more. Blah blah blah.

Here: cold on his hands, crisp like ancient parchment, white printer paper.

The Paradox of the Global Right:  
virtual identities and the formation of the latest world order

Ryan Hunt, December 2011, Beijing

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DEVIN Banner is not your typical kindergarten teacher. An obese man with an abrasive manner, with a penchant for heavy drinking, smoking and ribaldry, his employment as a teacher of small children only makes sense in the context of private

English tuition - and even in the Wild West of English teaching in China, a figure like Banner represents the grislier end of the expat talent pool. Yet the parents of the students attending Happy Futures After-School Club, which features Banner's name on its roster, may be relieved to learn that he hasn't worked a day in the past two years there. They might be more disturbed to discover what Banner's day-to-day activities actually involve - and the political aspirations that have guided them.

Banner calls himself an influencer. But he doesn't use his online presence to promote fashion lines. His influence, he claims, is going to redefine global politics in the years to come - and for the worse, he gleefully claims, "as far as liberals are concerned". What kind of future does Banner envisage? He promises a return to the traditional values espoused by American paleoconservatives - but driven, Chinese style, by a powerful state. Fascism, in short. Only - and here is the irony - Banner sees such a return to nationalism occurring worldwide, and with the internet driving its spread.

The toxicity of Banner's bar talk - and he is truly a demagogue of the Bierkeller - means that determining his methodology can be challenging. Yet beneath the cant and racist jokes, certain themes repeat themselves in Banner's rhetoric: We live in a knowledge economy. Ideas are property. We are engaged in a culture war. History is soft power. Art is theft.

In order to further his political goals, Banner is working to leverage the latent power of online populations. How, exactly? This reporter can reveal that he started his experiments in the world of online gaming, and that in so doing he has discovered an ancillary revenue stream: the manipulation of cryptocurrencies.

"You have discovered it."

The voice came from the end of the kitchen. Plumbe filled the doorway. His mandibles were folded in front of his chest.

"Ryan's," said Greg. He waved the sheaf of cold papers.

"Yes. Ryan's. Ryan's little story."

Greg pulled his knife out of his pocket. It looked small. He held it out anyway.

"You kept it," he said. "Stupid. You kept the evidence."

Plumbe rolled his eyes.

"Oh, dear boy, there's no sense in getting dramatic. Ryan's little story never constituted evidence. It was interesting and I will admit showed some promise; but overall, a C-grade effort I'm afraid. We might say, he approached the theme but never got to the *meat* of the argument. I kept that as a keepsake. The real evidence has been *definitively* liquidated."

"Real evidence?"

Scary smile. Funky vicar. Jazz hands.

"Why, the testimony that Banner was collecting," Plumbe said.

Greg had nothing to say. Plumbe enjoyed the moment.

"I will teach you. I live to teach. I always enjoyed teaching you, my mentee. There's something wide-eyed and virginal in you – at least, there used to be – and I must confess that I hoped to protect it. Part of me always wished for you the simplicity I would never accept for myself. A pastel life for my Gregg. Declawed nature. It is too late now, and you are caught up in all these machines, but please know that I regret doing what I have to do to you. Sincerely."

Greg held his knife closer to his body. Plumbe's hands were no longer folded on his chest. He was no longer at the door. He was all the way inside the room now.

"Where does the lesson begin?" he said. "I should not have to reiterate by this stage in the curriculum that I work in intelligence."

"You're a spy."

"You said it, kiddo. I'm a spy. A spook. I'm one of the men in black suits who keep the whole organisation ticking along. Banner, too. Or, almost. Not entirely inside the staffroom but not exactly outside of it either. An associate. A substitute teacher. He had set up a little joint venture with the PLAC. The PLAC, you should understand, is my little organisation's dancing partner over here. Quite the studious bunch. Very driven. Banner was developing his rather interesting game, DotER. A what-you-call *massively multiplayer* online game."

"Something the past to something the future."

"We didn't much *like* what he was doing but we found it interesting. The data analysis side of things at least. The human resources end of things – this was not so exciting. He was using prison labour, which was neither here nor there for us..."

"Prison labour?"

"Slaves, yes. Some among us thought it a bit backward. Thought work can increasingly be automated, you see. I don't have time to get into the details right



now, it was... rather complicated... and I really am sixty-five, you know. I don't know the nitty gritty of neural networks and cryptocurrencies. But here is the condensed account: Banner was running data farms out west. He was playing the rubes for Bitcoin and data. He was selling data to his PLAC handlers and sending just a little our way. Some of this our *Puer Aeternus* Ryan knew, and he put it into his charmingly worded little report."

Plumbe was moving forward again. Ancient evil. His tentacles drifted over the tiles.

"But, Greg," he whispered, "Ryan never knew that Banner was also collecting testimonies. He had access to the shop floor, so to speak. The prisoners. He was surveying them about their crimes, their conditions, the blood tests they were being given."

"Bullshit."

"Yes! Yes! That's what we thought! Surely not Banner! Not *that guy*! I mean, that guy was *gross*. And after all the liberal pinko hand wringers we've processed out of here, it's *der Reichsjugendführer* who's threatening to jam the works?

"There's a lesson here, young man, in keeping your valences flexible. Let me walk you through my own avenues of thought. I considered two possibilities. The first was that Banner was pretending. That his political perspectives were a façade from start to finish and beneath his encrusted toadlike exterior a liberal heart bled all along for the unjustly treated. O, that this were the case. It represents such an extension of the possibilities of the human condition, does it not? O, split self! Means and ends! Mother Night!

"Sadly, I doubt this is what happened. Occam's heuristic suggests Banner was first and foremost a partisan in information warfare. Remember what Ryan felt

constrained from explaining to us at our last luncheon together: information warfare doesn't mean telling *fib*s all the time. Sometimes it calls for truths, judiciously deployed.”

“In short: just because I’m telling the truth, doesn’t mean I’m not fucking with your head. The allegiances one holds in the domestic culture wars do not apply internationally. You'd be surprised by the kinds of allies a partisan must make in pursuit of his goals. Banner had enough contacts in the hard right, the kind of people for whom the defence of religious liberties aligns with their own theocratic goals; the kind of people who might take something like the persecution of house Christians or Falun Gong, say, and use it to their own advantage and push for a harder line on China.”

Plumbe was closer yet to Greg. He was filling the aisle. Looming.

“Means and ends, my boy. Bad people do good things, sometimes. Not that it matters that much, since the PLAC got Banner first. That was regrettable. If we'd caught Banner, I do believe his scalp would have been enough. But since it was the PLAC that groused him out, and the PLAC that overran the game and poisoned his special beer stein, certain parties being already intent on eliminating Banner's partner – for reasons of their own, no doubt – we at the agency found ourselves on the back foot.

“Understand: Banner was ostensibly our associate. Those secret reports of his looked an awful lot like muck-raking of our own. We found ourselves obliged to prove our commitment to the status quo. So we struck a deal with somebody I believe you've already met. You drank with him, over in CHEEMA Bar.

“What Chen Xu told us was that we needed a white face. Somebody plausible. Plausibly young, ambitious, foolhardy, complacent. This white face was going to

stand in for imperial aggressors and foreign interlopers generally; he was going to prove the corruptibility of this country's flawed but indigenously created and fiercely guarded system only by external threats. He would be caught, and punished.

"A pity about Ryan. I rather enjoyed his writing. He was off, of course, fooled by Banner's smokescreen, but he had a good sense of fundamental truths. A good rhetorician. A pity about Ryan. Never forget, however, that it could easily have been you."

"What about Jenny?" Greg asked.

"Eh?"

"Come on," Greg said, "what about Jenny? Where are you keeping her? What about the messages? What do you want from me now?"

He faced Plumbe as he spoke, and realised too late that he'd made himself vulnerable.

Plumbe moved surprisingly fast. The knife was swiped from Greg's hands, the freezer drawer scraped shut. Greg stumbled back. His head hit something, the tiles on the kitchen wall, like his own tiles on his own kitchen wall, the concussive shock a bubble falling within him to shatter on the floor with the ice from the freezer.

Plumbe's hand had hold. Shoulder pinned. Away skittered the knife.

Now Plumbe was waving a needle. Point jabbing at Greg's face.

Greg struggled. Wiggled. He had no strength and he was pinned.

Here was the needle, spitting clear fluid.

Now it was out of Greg's sight.

What was that feeling? Pressure on Greg's flank. Had the needle gone in?

Plumbe seemed to relax. He stepped back a little.

“Jenny?” he said. “I know no Jenny. One of your students, I suppose. Although you might have learned her real name, if you cared about her so much.”

He stepped back a little more, shaking his head.

“Kids these days. I don’t know. I tell you there was a time when this district was all fields, and—”

He stepped back a little more. He slipped on a chip of ice. His eyes went wide. Prtfall.

Out shot Greg, even before his supervisor had hit the floor. The apartment drifted downstream as he crossed it. The stairwell was a whirlpool.

Had the needle really gone in?

Surely not. He was feeling fine.

Surely not. He was feeling good.

He was feeling fucking great. Halfway down the stairs Greg realised he was floating. It was wonderful. If only black spots hadn’t started welling up in the corner of his vision. If only his feet didn’t keep scuffing the ground.

At the external entranceway he turned to see Plumbe surprisingly close behind. Limping, though. Advantage. And the cold was refreshing. Greg swallowed a quantity of dense phlegm and swayed and willed himself forward. He rose towards the gates out of Happiness Mansions. He forced cars to stop. They skidded on the ice. There was shouting.

“Greg! Greg, my boy, where do you think you’re going?”

So reasonable in tone. As if he were one of those ironic dog owners in a leafy green park in a London suburb on a shimmering gorgeous Summer afternoon. Greg found it hard to keep his focus. His nerve ends had turned into swaying leaves, butterflies, fronds of orgasmic potential. Focus. Move along.

Here were crowds. He started shouting. It didn't matter what he said: make a scene, get surrounded. Trust on the kindness of strangers.

Here was the shopkeeper who refused to sell him liquor. Speaking loudly and slowly.

Try to say, *help me*, in Chinese.

Now Plumbe's face loomed forward. His goatee crawling off his chin.

Greg screamed. The shopkeeper pushed Plumbe away. The crowd actually forced Plumbe back.

Thank you, strangers. Try to say, *thank you*.

Blue lights flashing. Emergency vehicle. Black engine thrumming. *Biemowo* coming. And another thing, flapping downwards: the approaching bird, great-winged Yellow Crane, swooping down to carry Greg away.

\*

You're close now. Cling to my back. Observe the changes in what is visible: lonely sail; distant shadow; empty blue; nothing but the great river, flowing into the border of the Heaven sky. Warm your hands in my down. So we can see – we can visualise, children (the fat fraud Banner with his crawling face and winks and nods) – we can see the movement from concrete form (sail) to abstract form (shadow) to the void from which all form emerges (blue blue blue) and see presented in the following line the key to the understanding of this tableau, the vortex the flux the swirling flowing–

When he woke up he did not know where he was.

## Li Bai

It was not a building he recognised. It was a very fine building. Li Bai supposed he was in the home of one of the local lords who had also been attending the feast last night. He could only guess they'd jumped on their horses and ridden here, most likely seeking more wine. He'd indulged in such coltish freaks before. Yes, he must have scampered off for more wine and fallen asleep in this other lord's residence. That would explain how bad he felt this morning.

Still, it was a very fine building, very fine indeed. The walls were spotlessly white and plastered so smoothly that not a single bulge or joint was visible beneath. The windows were huge, evidently glazed with the most fantastically clear horn – or perhaps even crystal, considering the way they let in the early dawn light – and hung with some clean, crisp fabric the likes of which he'd never encountered before.

Was he in Chang'an?

No. Surely not.

How could he be in Chang'an? Had he jumped on the back of some fantastic bird and been carried through the sky? Had he finally hitched a cloud as a sail, as he had been threatening to do? He must have been incredibly drunk last night. Perhaps alcohol was the elixir he'd been looking for all along. Perhaps through drunkenness one could open a portal in the visible world and travel wherever you pleased, even to the capital, with its marble towers and pleasure gardens with music and sweet scent in the air...

But this place stank.

It was a smell the poet had never encountered before, even during his expensive mountaintop sojourn with the alchemist. It was acrid like vitriol and metal oxides, yet aromatic like bitter herbs. It produced overwhelming sense of cleanliness,

as if scrubbing the very lungs that breathed it in. If this was Chang'an, then the Emperor's alchemists had attained unimaginable knowledge.

Where was the Emperor? Was the Emperor near?

Li Bai re-examined his room. It was fine, but he noticed now that it was not gaudy. There were no hangings on the wall, nor pictures; the single, narrow doorway was unadorned. The impression was of a monastic cell.

Had Meng Haoran persuaded him into some Buddhist retreat? Li Bai recoiled at the thought. Perhaps he'd gotten drunk enough finally to accept the old man's invitation, to renounce wine and women for the dubious pleasures of chopping wood and fetching water.

He tried to move. He couldn't. He tried to call out. He couldn't.

He wasn't tied to the bed, so far as he could tell. No, it was weariness that pressed him to the bed: a soul-sick weariness. Now the poet started to feel other sensations: the aching of his head, the nausea that teased cloyingly at his belly.

He tried once again to cry out, and this time emitted a thin moan.

Some minutes later, a white-clad novice boy – no, a woman! – entered the room. She spoke in a dialect that Li Bai did not understand. Her face was masked but her eyes flicked from side to side as she worked to operate some unusual apparatus.

"What are you doing, woman?" Li Bai tried to ask. "Where have you taken me? I need to return to the Long River. I have to get to the Yellow Crane Tower. I arranged to meet my friend there this morning..."

## **A FAREWELL TO MENG HAORAN ON HIS WAY TO YANGZHOU**

You have left me behind, old friend, at the Yellow Crane Terrace,  
On your way to visit Yangzhou in the misty month of flowers;  
Your sail, a single shadow, becomes one with the blue sky,  
Till now I see only the river, on its way to heaven.

*Witter Bynner*



## The Tower

Some years ago, a man walking in the Inner Mongolian desert came across an unusual stone. It was shaped like a chick hatching from an egg. The man took the stone home, and later sold it to a merchant for five hundred *kuai*, thinking the deal a good one. The merchant, meanwhile, went on to sell the stone to a collector for an undisclosed sum, rumoured to rest between twenty and five-hundred thousand *kuai*. Yang Wei had heard the story told multiple times. She never learned the true sum paid. The stone had been omitted from the audit carried out as part of the prosecution for embezzling and solicitation of bribes that ultimately resulted – it being a crackdown year, and inauspicious in other ways besides – in the execution of the final collector.

That prosecution had been carried out by Yang Wei's husband when he was a younger man, still wooing her. The hatching-bird stone, which sat on her mantelpiece still, had constituted an engagement present.

House arrest was as Yang Wei had expected, in many ways. Her friends had fallen away within a week. And rightly so: Liu Wei understood that self-preservation was the primary directive; as she plotted and schemed and meditated on the means of continuing her existence, she could not begrudge others doing the same.

Time went slowly. The Internet was switched off and the house contained few books. Greg never had sent her anything new to read.

The wall around Yang Wei's *siheyuan* in 'vibrant' Gulou was tall enough to shield the ground and first floors entirely from view. The gate, which opened wide enough for two *biemowos* to pass side-by-side, stayed shut now, guarded by youths

in army-issue boots – well-made boots that amplified their stamping manoeuvres when they changed shifts.

Auntie Lao didn't come anymore, so Yang Wei had to do the cleaning herself. When she ran out of washing up liquid, she had to order more herself, adding it to the shopping list she gave to the liaison officer on Mondays.

The district was full of upmarket foreign stores, but the liaison officer always managed to bring the most basic Chinese brands to her doorstep. It was as if he travelled back in time to get them, back to the Eighties, returning with some state brand of chemical crud. He was trying to teach her a lesson. Once, he claimed not to know what Italian noodles were.

Solitude. Spring Festival passed and the air outside filled with firework smoke. Yang Wei remembered Greg having talked about that word, *yanhua*, and how strange it seemed to him. Smoke flowers. A bright spring day filled with mist and freshly opened blooms. The recollection brought her to her feet, sent her moving from corner to corner, from room to room, without settling, like a dust mote.

The house was so big.

This house. This embarrassment. Her husband called it a *siheyuan*, but it was nothing like the four-walled courtyard homes that surrounded it. It was a blob. Utterly tasteless.

There had been a German architect, you see. She'd been fishing for a contract for a departmental headquarters – Yang Wei forgot which corporate organ, or where. Her husband had leveraged influence, and the German architect found herself designing two buildings: the headquarters, and this house. Yang Wei's *pied a terre*.

Yang Wei liked the word *pied a terre*. She had learned from one of her English-language podcasts that it was in fact a French word, and something of an innuendo.

This was, she understood, because the English considered the French to be a licentious people. Hence, a *pied a terre* was where an Englishman might act like a Frenchman and fuck a shop girl.

But Yang Wei had never brought any boys back here.

The property had a courtyard, like its neighbours, but the buildings enclosing it were bulbous and outsized. Most of the anomalies – the absurd portico, for example, and the misalignment of the lintels with the windows – came about as the result of disputes between Yang Wei and the architect. Looking back at it, Yang Wei was sure the architect had been right on every point. But she'd found the serious, unshaven woman insufferable at the time, and invented problems to trip her up: fruitless quibbles, stupid additions. Now she was living with the consequences.

The worst addition Yang Wei had insisted on had been the tower. It stretched two storeys above the rest of the house, wearing its pagoda-style awning like a pompous hat. Yang Wei had more than once overheard disappointed tourists ask whether this *thing* was the Drum Tower that gave Gulou District its name.

From the top of the tower, in a room her husband named his 'study' and filled with crates of liquor, Yang Wei would peer over the wall and observe the path along the nearby canal. Apparently it was thawing. One night she watched a drunk try his luck on the surface of the ice, only to slip through, down into the frigid water, while his friends shouted in their language and flapped their arms.

Why did they drink so much, the tourists?

Then one day the liaison officer told her that she wasn't to look out of the tower window anymore. People could see her. She was giving people ideas.

She didn't know what he meant by that.

Anyway, then the liaison officer disappeared for a few weeks and she had to bribe a guard to collect her shopping, and although he brought the high-quality goods she liked, he also acted with her as though he expected to be invited into the house any night now.

And after she *had* invited him into the house, and he was on his way out again, swaggering through the little inset door in the gate with his boots unlaced, he told her: *you have a reputation*.

She reported the guard as soon as the liaison officer returned. He was dismissed.

She was still alive.

\*

Chen Xu arrived in the middle of a Spring dust storm to update her on the progress of her prosecution. The blanket of loess had rendered the sky blood-orange. He stepped out of his state car while the guards pulled the gates shut.

She asked him in for tea. He went straight through, occupying her lounge in his odd upright manner. She folded herself onto the sofa opposite. The hatching-bird stone sat on the mantelpiece between them.

"They will seek life imprisonment for you," he said.

"Life?" she laughed.

"Life imprisonment," the policeman confirmed.

"Life?" The laughter was gone. "I had thought a fine, six months or a year at most—"

"Life imprisonment."

"Imprisonment? But I thought after I had paid your fee... Not house arrest...?"

“Not house arrest. Imprisonment. In a prison. For life. Until you die. Please try to get used to the idea before you speak to me again.”

Yang Wei tried to get used to the idea.

“What can you do for me?” she asked, eventually.

Chen Xu did something like a smile.

“Let’s drink,” he said. “Your husband kept *moutai* in the tower, did he not?”

Yang Wei hurried up the stairs, past windows that framed the same unchanging view of the dust storm. At the top she realised that she’d left a window open, and the dust had come in. A soft layer of loess was spread across every surface. The attic room looked suddenly ancient to her, a tableau of wine crates beneath ruddy wooden beams. That could have been an antique waterway out there, hidden in the billowing dust, with sailing boats and fishermen sheltering beneath rustic eaves. The effect was enhanced by the packaging of the *moutai*, a premier brand with the slogan ‘Taste of Classics’, in which her husband had shares.

When she got downstairs she noticed that the hatching-bird stone was no longer on her mantelpiece.

And then, for the first time since they’d locked her in, she was sobbing.

“Calm down,” said Chen Xu, impassive on the lounge. “Try to calm down.”

She calmed down. She tried to calm down.

“Look at this,” he said, when she was seated again, and no longer shaking, with the *moutai* bottle on the floor by her feet.

He placed a tablet on the coffee table, displaying a gallery of portrait photographs, laid out like a high school yearbook. The portraits were of women. They wore identical blue clothes and tied-back hair.

“Have you heard the rumour?” he asked.

"What rumour?"

"That every woman in this gallery is facing the death penalty."

"What? Is that true?"

Chen Xu nodded.

"It can't be a rumour if it's true," Yang Wei said. "*Rumour?* I don't understand."

"It's a rumour."

"How is it a rumour?"

"It's a rumour if I say it is."

The policeman tapped the glass surface of the coffee table, firmly and concisely, so that the whole table sang and was silenced in one moment: clang. Winnie looked at the tablet again.

"Death penalty," she whispered. "What did they do, these women?"

Chen Xu shrugged.

"Do you want to know?"

Yang Wei shook her head. The action turned into a spasm. Her shoulders rocked back and her head rolled involuntarily on her neck, as if an invisible hand were kneading her spinal column.

She was yawning. She wasn't tired. She knew that dogs yawned, sometimes, when they were frightened.

"These women are facing death without the chance of commutation," Chen Xu said. "Rumour has it, the sentence will be carried out within two weeks. Listen to me. Pay attention now. Do any of these women look like you?"

"*Why?*"

"It's important. Do any of them look like you? Any similarities? Look. *Look.*"

Yang Wei forced herself to look at the photographs. She tried to be objective in doing this: not to see the faces as a whole, but to focus on details – the vertical and horizontal strokes that described jawline, cheek structure, hairline, nose – which she might usefully compare against her own.

And there were two or three women, she thought, that looked a little like her. One had her nose. Two had her eyes.

She pointed them out to Chen Xu, her finger gently brushing the surface of the tablet. Three fingerprints: her, her, her.

“Good,” he said. He had opened the *moutai* bottle and poured himself a drink in one of her leftover teacups. He drank it. “I heard another rumour.”

“What are you offering?”

“Offering? Offering nothing. I have scuttlebutt. Tales and fibs. I just told you I heard a rumour.”

The policeman gave one of his nowhere stares. Winnie recognised the stare without ever having seen it before. She recognised it the way a fish occasionally recognises water. The policeman wanted her to know that *he* was the one controlling the narrative.

“Okay,” she said. “Tell me a story.”

“Rumour has it, you would like to procure one of these women to act as your stand-in. She would take your place in court and suffer your sentence.”

“Impossible.”

“Absurd, I know. Yet they say many things about you, Ms Yang. Many unkind things and also fantastic things. They say you think you are untouchable. They say you think you will live forever. And maybe you will. For a woman with your resources, they say, compacting such an arrangement wouldn’t be impossible.”

“How much would I have to pay her?”

“You wouldn’t pay her. Why would you pay her, to save her life?”

“What would I have to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just a rumour after all. I don’t listen to rumours.”

Chen Xu looked around the room, as if bored by the conversation. He gazed at a scroll on the far wall, then a landscape painting. He poured himself more *moutai*.

Yang Wei recognised this too. She felt as though she’d been here before. In different circumstances, certainly, but still: here. In negotiation with this type.

Yang Wei examined the photos again. Each photo had two labels, she realised: number and blood type. Yang Wei checked the blood types of the three women that looked most similar to her. What she saw troubled her.

“These two women are O-Positive,” she said. “And this one’s O-Negative. But I’m A-Positive. None of these women have my blood type.”

“That is not a problem.”

“But what if they get tested? What if the prosecutors realise this woman isn’t me?”

“There will not be any tests. I guarantee it.”

“Then what do the blood types mean?”

“The blood types correlate to price,” he said.

It was like a sudden drop from height. Yang Wei understood all at once. Just as immediately, she did not want him to explain further.

He explained further.

“These two women are O-Positive, which is the most common blood type. A person with O-Positive blood can donate blood or organs to many, many other members of the community. Which is great. But you see, *this* young woman is O-



Negative. O-Negative donors are what we call 'universal' donors. They can donate blood, or other things, to almost any patient in the world. You can guess the value this has to me."

\*

Chen Xu woke himself up laughing more often than he woke himself up screaming. He dreamed no dream of greater vividity or clarity than the regular one of his first execution. January 1987. Just outside Baotou. Mongolian desert – like no other desert, so utterly indifferent to your attention.

It was minus 15 degrees celsius. Brisk. But the world was unadorned with frost. Only the stillness of the red earth seemed to express the extent of the cold, the loss of thermal energy.

Ice formed beneath the exhaust pipes of the chug-chugging military lorries; ice formed where the drivers slopped their tea leaves out of the cab window, where the infantrymen spat, where the single curious mutt micturated, having followed the convoy from the edge of its territory, two miles behind.

The prisoners wore heavy cotton jackets and gloves and, until the last minutes, hats. The guards wore thick gloves, but the triggermen wore only thin, white cotton ones, of the sort used to direct the traffic, and kept on blowing their hands to keep their fingers from seizing up. They would brace their rifles awkwardly between the knees as they did so, which clumsy action was an offence against the regiment's reputation that was tolerated only because of the important work the men were doing.

The prisoners were lined up against a low boundary wall.

Chen stood at the north end. At the south end, past the line of human beings, stood an unpainted brick outbuilding with a closed enshadowed door; no windows; eyeless with an open mouth.

The guards helped the prisoners to kneel down, facing the wall. They did not push them; they *eased* them down like brothers in arms, like cousins, old friends. Chen was struck not only by the gentleness of the guards, but by the easy complicity of the prisoners. They wanted to help; they were sorry to be so clumsy – only, you see, these cords were binding their hands and feet. The guards positioned them; the guards manoeuvred their heads like barbers making ready to razor the back of the neck.

That warm electric buzz, the feeling of attention to the nape of the neck.

The prisoners complied. Nobody was crying. Everybody was very brave. Big boys.

Now came the time for the triggermen to play their part. No shaky muzzles. No casual shots from the hip. Each rifleman assumed a braced stance and sighted the rifle as if the target were a hundred metres distant – not a foot away, hair being lifted, tousled by a crisp cold breeze.

Then perfect stillness.

The dream always ended before the report and the cotton-muffled thuds, but Chen Xu knew what came next: the cold earth did not yield to the prisoners, but moulded their carcasses to its own contours. The blood that pooled at the foot of the wall did little to soften the earth. The bodies were swiftly removed, and the blood soon froze like the tea and expectorate beside the trucks.

The dog ran for the road the moment the shots were fired.

Chen dreamed this dream often and often remarked to himself how its contents must have been altered over time. He knew for a fact that no execution was without its crybaby – frequently, to his chagrin, in the form of one of the executioners. Prisoners shook and sobbed and wet themselves – although they rarely resisted or pleaded. Call it pride, or face, but their ultimate complicity was almost always guaranteed.

This was what the dream had come to represent to Chen Xu: the malleability of people. This was why the dream left him so serene, on those happy mornings when he woke, erect and remembering. The dry, red, unforgiving earth; the human beings.

\*

Chen Xu, who suffered from the nightly suspicion that he did not exist, that he was a slander, an outrage, a figment sparking through the brain of a deep-sea beast, smiled broadly.

“What weaklings call the vicissitudes of fate, you and I call negotiations. Myself, because I have power, and you because you have money. But what is money, if not power? We are not so different. Perhaps that is why I don’t find the rumours about you so distasteful. So, they say, you believe you are immortal. I don’t sneer at this. I say: so what? Why not? When the evil hour comes, who says you shouldn’t be able to negotiate with death itself?”

The policeman’s smile seemed fixed, painted on. Yang Wei wondered whether Chen Xu practised smiling into a mirror. She wondered whether, if she watched closely enough, she would perceive cracks in the work where his laughter lines should be.

“When death came to your door,” he continued, “you welcomed him in, like so many other men, for a cup of tea. Let’s talk things over, you said. Let’s work things out.”

“That’s not exactly how it happened,” Yang Wei started.

Chen Xu clanged the table again.

“Death came into your sphere and you redirected it, Ms Yang. With my help. I see you are angry now but in a minute you will be happy again. Come outside with me. And be quiet. We needn’t bother the guards.”

Yang Wei followed him out the front door. She hovered just outside the porch as he opened the car boot and retrieved a piece of aluminium hospital equipment. Dust fell around him as he unfolded the apparatus and set it on the gravel driveway. A wheelchair.

He beckoned to Yang Wei, then opened the back door of the car.

Lying on the leather back seat was a pile of a person, all limbs and fabric. The clothes were pale and institutional. Only when Chen Xu hauled the body out by the armpits did Yang Wei recognise Greg.

“I need you to untape the drip from the headrest,” Chen Xu whispered. He waited while she did so, patiently holding the body in his arms, as if he were the parent of a sleeping child, finally home after a long night drive.

Greg’s skin was yellowish in patches.

Beneath the nightshirt, his midriff was bandaged; beneath the bandages, blood.

\*

“He was days away from death when I found him. Total liver failure, from weeks, if not months, of drinking. The doctors said we were lucky. Very lucky. And then, of

course, we had our wonderful system already set up, to get him what he needed in time.”

Greg had been installed in a downstairs room with his drip sellotaped to the bedside lamp. Heaped by the door was a sack of sanitary dressings and pills in unmarked freezer bags. Yang Wei and Chen Xu were back in easy chairs, with the tablet and the *moutai* on the coffee table.

“You should know that, with time pressures, we were unable to find your young friend a perfect match. His new liver is unfortunately smaller than his old one used to be. Smaller, yes, but perfectly healthy. Quite adequate. Yes, it’s incredible, what we do. We bring life from death. A fundamental renegotiation of principles – just like what you do.”

Yang Wei recalled a news segment on mobile execution units. They were vehicles, less like ambulances than RVs, great big RVs, on permanent holiday tours of prisons and work camps. Inside, they were clean and spacious, with an operating table and cold storage facilities. The staff it were all doctors – not soldiers, the presenter had emphasised. The doctors were proud of their work. They were happy to be interviewed about the advances they’d been making, bringing life from death on a daily basis. Treating the body of the nation.

Chen Xu pushed the tablet towards her.

“I don’t know why you’re not more happy to be doing what you’re doing,” he said. “It is in your power now to save another life.”

Yang Wei knocked back a teacupful of *moutai*. “Just choose,” she murmured, grimacing.

“One more consideration before you do,” Chen Xu said. “Price.”

She nodded, numbly.

"You will excuse me if I speak in business terms now." Chen Xu selected the three similars that Yang Wei had already indicated and pulled them up until their faces filled the screen. His fingernails were pared right back to the quick. He pointed at the first two.

"These two prisoners, whom you've already identified have O-Positive blood, constitute to me and those I represent a set of assets saleable at O-Positive prices. The compensation for relinquishing this material would therefore constitute the sum I lay before you."

He took a small roller-point pen and a tiny reporter's notebook out of a pocket, then wrote out a calculation in front of her. His workings were detailed. The sum was high.

"However," he continued, "this third prisoner, the one whose nose has a remarkable resemblance to yours, constitutes a set of O-Negative assets. She is a universal donor, you understand, and that premium is reflected in the total sum."

He wrote out another calculation on another sheet of reporter's notepaper. The sum was considerably higher than the last.

"Do not assume that I am skinning you, Mrs Yang," Chen Xu said, tapping the table with his little pen. "These figures represent the totality of a nexus of interests, from the guards to the doctors to the prison administrators to the hospital CEOs to the generals to the foreign pharmaceutical representatives. When it comes to these prisoners, my cut is but one of many."

\*

Up in the tower, in the darkness, Yang Wei watched the revellers amble down the canal-side path. There was dust on her hands, dust on her bare feet; her French

designer dressing gown would be ruined. From nearby she heard the rolling thunder of the Drum Tower, marking the ancient curfew hour for the tourists.

The object she was looking for was in one of several storage boxes hidden beneath the *moutai* crates. It was down amongst the old printed photographs and the trinkets that her mother had considered valuable. Eventually her fingers found it: a cold hunk of mineral, unyielding in a soft velvet sack.

She excavated it and pressed it to her breast in the darkness. It chilled her. Then she pulled it out of its sack and peered at it. If she turned the light on, she knew, she would see the whorl and grain of mixed-colour crystals, running into one another. She would see veins of stone between the crystalline layers; the chaotic swirls produced by heat and pressure, deep underground and long ago.

But now, in the gloom, she saw only what she meant to see: A landscape. A mountain range, and a river. A tower and a boat. Two men in white robes.

Her treasure.

\*

There were lots of things Yang Wei and Little Wang didn't have together. But those who sneeringly called theirs a 'modern' marriage weren't quite correct. What they shared was *things*. Rocks, sculptures, *objets d'art*: things. The hatching-bird rock and the landscape tablet were two of a small set of totemic objects that came to mind immediately when Yang Wei was obliged to think about her marriage. Objects distributed between their properties, on display and in cupboards. These objects bound her to her husband. She wasn't sure of the exact nature of the common denominator linking the objects in the collection. She did not interrogate it. If anybody had told her that the hatching-bird rock constituted a gauche and callous gift, seized

as it had been from an executed man's estate, she would have said *no, you don't understand, this is between us, it's not about some dead man.*

But on further questioning, she couldn't have explained how exactly it was 'between us'. She would have been unwilling to try.

Still, there was the fact of the objects. That was something.

From childhood he'd been known as Little Wang, and she never called him anything different. Little Wang suited him. He was a small man. Cheap, really, in a bald way that Yang Wei enjoyed. As if it constituted a vulnerability. As if to be loud and fat and to get into arguments over the bill were to be honest in some fundamental way. He reminded her of her shithead brother. That probably helped.

Little Wang was a mayor somewhere. He ran his provincial fiefdom with efficiency and utter acquisitiveness. He channelled money into domestic enterprises and foreign real estate. Joint-venture factories in the Special Economic Zones; then houses in Vancouver, Paris, Singapore. He toured the overseas properties on his computer and his phone, via online brochures and the photographs sent back by the contractors to their endless redecorations.

While Little Wang was playing mayor out west, Yang Wei stayed in Beijing. She traded art. She was astonishingly good at it; after a few exceptional transactions, she discovered that she held more capital – although considerably less liquidity – than her busily hustling husband. Nonetheless, she stayed in her teaching job. The work she'd first approached so listlessly had become a comfort. Every year she turned down the promotions offered by nervous administrators, whom she suspected of plotting to manoeuvre her out. It wasn't her personality, she felt sure – it was her presence. The terrifying weight of her wealth. She came to understand that wealth



made her a fulcrum: the world around her could only ever be so far from swinging into chaos.

She asked Little Wang to collaborate on the construction of the Gulou *pied a terre*, and he threw money at it cheerfully enough, excited to own a *siheyuan* in the historic district. But when he continued to call the place a *siheyuan* after construction was finished, it was as if he couldn't see what was right in front of him, this abortive pile with its patchwork of styles; and perhaps this myopia infuriated her because some frustrated part of her wanted him to be jealous of the lovers she took. Maybe somewhere in her was a painted odalisque, craven and envious and beseeching her cruel master.

Maybe. Maybe not. Frankly, it was a little late to investigate that, now that his execution was certain.

Anyway, he rarely visited in the last few years. They'd spoken on the telephone a lot, though. It was still nice on the telephone.

She'd learned the details of the DoTER caper slowly, since Little Wang generally spared her the details of his business deals, and he didn't see it as anything special, at first.

He was working with some foreign partners, he told her one day. It was a joint venture, foreign technology and domestic labour – the usual win-win scenario. But this one was online only and involved data analytics. She'd turned down hearing more.

They met in a spa one day. Little Wang was treating some business partners to the usual pleasures of a Beijing junket and invited her to join. They dined in the buffet area while the C-suite enjoyed intimate massages upstairs. The buffet was all-you-can-eat luxury; freshly scrubbed flab in floral pyjamas.

Their table was by the window and he pointed across the road to a huge electric hoarding that displayed a martial arts master in mid-flight, brandishing a fearsome magical staff. The slogan read: "Defence of the Eastern Realm: Fight for the Past to Vouchsafe the Future!"

"That's ours," Little Wang said.

"It looks like a film."

"It's actually a computer game. People from all across the country can join together and play. Maybe all across the world, if it takes off."

Yang Wei smiled. She didn't like computer games.

Perhaps a little provoked, Little Wang explained further.

"Actually, DoTER is more than just a game. The profit margins are very low for games that are just games *per se*. You can only sell so many copies. In the data age, the money is in analytics."

"You sound like a brochure," she teased.

He chuckled. "I have been making a lot of elevator pitches recently," he admitted. "But it's true. Data is everything. Whatever functionality an application has, in order to profit, it must also collect data. So DoTER is essentially a data harvesting machine in the skin of a game. We have a whole team, a whole office full of people just looking into ways of monetising that data."

"What kind of data?"

"Well there's online data, and offline data... Personal data..."

Little Wang looked a little lost.

"What next," Yang Wei said, "Silicon Valley?"

His eyes gleamed, and she regretted having teased him. Her husband was serious. He was visualising, she realised, palm trees and blue skies and corporate

campuses full of energetic professionals. Despite everything she knew of her husband, there was something sweet about his enthusiasm in that moment. She couldn't remember seeing him so excited about a project.

Then his business partners waddled in.

Yang Wei's first hint that something was off came in the form of the foreign partner, a gigantic *laowai* who introduced himself as a Texan in ropey Mandarin, and whose skin resembled scrambled tofu. His name was Banner, and he kept trying to look at Yang Wei's tits through the openings in her pyjama top.

He didn't look like a Bill Gates or a Steve Jobs. He filled his buffet plate with pork belly and laughed like a dog and drank six pints of German lager over the course of the conversation. By some contrivance he was drinking from a beer glass that was twice the size of everybody else's.

A couple of weeks later Little Wang made one of the confessional calls he made sometimes, after particularly alcoholic business dinners, when he would hector and boast and suddenly weep and never afterwards admit to remembering the conversation. Yang Wei wasn't surprised when he started complaining about Banner. The man had dirty habits. He wouldn't stop talking politics. He spent budgeted money on unreceiptable hospitality. He kept going over Little Wang's head.

"I can do it clean," Little Wang said, seemingly out of nowhere. "I can do it straight. I understand the new technologies, and new economic models. I tell you, everybody knows you need connections in this country; sure; this is China. But there's a difference, you know, between playing the game and cheating. I'm not a cheat."

"I know you're not a cheat," Yang Wei told him, thinking at that moment of the line of Greg's lower back and hip, the flank that got exposed whenever he stretched.

“I’m not a cheat,” Little Wang repeated.

But it was hard to reconcile that statement once Yang Wei learned what the DoTER caper really involved.

There was data analytics, somewhere along the line. It was all tied into some crackpot scheme of Banner’s to uproot things back home. He called himself an ‘influencer’. He wanted to ‘use the online world to effect an offline revolution’. ‘Augmented democracy’, he called it. It meant he spent his time online, inciting angry young men to do horrible things.

However distasteful Banner’s long-term goal might have been – and Yang Wei took little interest in the internal affairs of foreign nations – the short-term goal of the DoTER project was nothing more than a cheap con. It was three card monty. Chicken shit.

It went like this.

Banner used an online troublemaking collective based in Romania to stage raids on Chinese players under the Japanese flag. The Chinese players would mount a furious defence against their historic enemies, and that would mean spending a lot of in-game credits to replace lost equipment and boost lost abilities. In-game credits, importantly, could be bought for Bitcoin. Real currency.

This was where Little Wang came in. He was running an in-game credit mining operation as part of the con. His task, it transpired, had been to develop a program that could impersonate players in the game. These artificial players would carry out menial tasks like reaping ‘greengrass’ or mining ‘blackstone’ to build up a supply of in-game currency. The currency would then be traded with real players for real Bitcoin, selectively, based on an exchange rate that would vary according to the frequency and timing of false-flag raids.

Hence, somehow, profit.

It wouldn't have been so bad if Little Wang had held up his end of the deal and developed a program. Perhaps in another circumstance he could have done: offices and equipment were rented; positions were staffed. But not for long. Maybe it was too onerous a commitment for somebody with no development experience, or maybe it just turned out to be unfeasible. Out of weakness or business rationale, the decision was made to use camp labour instead.

Oh, Little Wang had interests in a few camps, of course. *Way* out west. They already supplied factory labour and some other apparently lucrative revenue streams. So now, selected prisoners would spend their work shifts mining in-game credits using randomly assigned avatars, virtually gagged and monitored by supplementary software.

Banner had been happy with this arrangement.

Of course, of course, of course.

When did Yang Wei learn about this? First there had been that phone call she took on the hard shoulder on the way back from Beidaihe. A short call from a stranger. *Don't answer your phone if your husband calls you. You and he don't talk any more – do you understand?*

Then, that same night, Chen Xu came to the door.

"Your husband is finished," he said, pulling his mittens off and knocking dirty snow onto her floor.

"And who are you again?" she asked. But she'd already guessed. If she hadn't already heard of Chen Xu, and what he did, she knew enough about how things worked to recognise the type of functionary he was.

In keeping with her expectations, he tore her life apart in a matter of hours.

The caper had gone south, he explained. The raiders had overrun the defences, the value of Bitcoin had skyrocketed, gamers were rioting in internet cafes across the country.

They'd crossed a line, he said, by allowing the Japanese invaders to prevail. Up to this point the project had been viewed with warm interest. Its utility as a propaganda exercise had been discussed with some enthusiasm. The moneymaking aspect had been treated tolerantly; the prison labour, par for the course.

But no longer. Because – and this was more than government policy, this was fundamental philosophy – You Don't Let The Japanese Win. No government official would put his name behind such a national humiliation as had just occurred, and Little Wang's rivals were setting long-planned protocols into action. He was finished.

And so was she – if she didn't act.

"Think of it this way," Chen Xu had said, "the ship is sinking. There are lifeboats, but not enough for everybody. Some people can be saved, though, if we get the logistics right. It's all a question of cost."

She pondered that question now, squatting on a dusty wine crate in the tower top. A sudden gust lifted ribbons of fine sand about her. Loess, it was called.

A question of cost.

## Li Bai

The view is of a river, winding between green banks. A fresh spring breeze blows between ornamental latticework. Somewhere in the distance, a crane flies: a striking white with black wingtips. The sails on the river are gay colours; the flowers on the banks are in their first bloom; mist subsists in hollows, and in the shaded river bends, where the water is shallow and becalmed.

“Isn’t it marvellous,” Li Bai says, in perfect Middle Chinese, accompanied by English subtitles, “the analogy between poetry and consciousness?”

Meng Haoran blinks white eyebrows at him. He seems frozen, a cup of wine halfway to his lips. There is an unrolled scroll of fine paper on a mat on the floor, alongside a bowl of ground-up ink and a boar-hair brush.

“The content of a poem is not tremendously important,” Li Bai continues. “Not in detail. But it should describe something very far away. A fantasy. Nostalgia is how we pull our consciousness through the dust. Our weary ‘I’s. We recite the poem again and again, with variations, and we say things like ‘poetry is the pearl on the grit of experience’, and we congratulate ourselves for being clever. We manage to do the terrible things we must do.”

Birdsong enters the window on a gust of fresh wind.

“Our weary ‘I’s,” he says. “Do you get it? It’s a pun. Isn’t it funny. Now I sometimes wonder whether musical similarities create special connections between words. Homonyms: I, eye, aye, ay. Is the ego a point of perspective, a nod of assent, or a cry of pain? Bear, bear, bare. For-bare-ence – do you see the look on a paid woman’s face as she opens her robes for you? Suppose there is a part of your mind that understands only music; and it creates a musical matrix, a non-symbolic network

between words. And this matrix is utterly untranslatable. Even when we are using the same language, it is something we can never share. We can communicate the outward meaning of words, more or less; but our individual rhapsodies remain impossible for other people to understand. You will never hear my music – nor I yours. Ultimately, you see, we sing songs only for ourselves. We are just small mammalian bodies, holding onto ourselves, singing in the shower.”

“The shower?” says Meng Haoran. He glances outside. “It isn’t raining.”

“Excuse me,” says Li Bai. “I’m drunk.” A cloud falls across the sun; the room is cast into sudden shadow.

“Undoubtedly,” Meng Haoran says. “But I trust you to hold your liquor, old friend.”

Li Bai blushes. He tries to remould his expression into that of a bold knight. But he cannot stop himself from talking.

“I keep having this dream,” he says. “I dream the blackest night. I can perceive nothing: neither the river nor the mountains – nor indeed the ground on which I stand or the sky that lowers itself upon me. No compass, no time. The dream might last ten thousand years, or the space of a single breath. I don’t know. I cannot know. There is no ‘I’ to know. No point of perspective, no nod of assent, no cry of pain. I don’t exist.

“By and by, in this dream, an awareness emerges of certain things. Points of light appear in the blackness, so that it resembles the night sky: above, below and all around the space I would occupy if I existed. And these stars – for want of a better word – are communicating. They are talking about what games they plan on playing next. One star says, ‘I will be a famous poet’; another says ‘I will be a child with an incurable disease’. One will be a prosperous clerk, but only for the three months



following the death of his wife; another will be the adulterous ghost of that wife, sporting with the immortals as worms pull her carcass apart. One will be an adventurer in the far West during the minutes it takes for a savage bear to take his life; another will be that savage bear, but only for the first moons of its simple life, as it follows its mother through the deep woods in search of forage. One will be a slave in a labyrinth of iron, toiling at the pulleys and levers of strange automatons as days and night pass unnoticed, since the sun has been replaced by buzzing white fire.

"Next it strikes me that it is my turn to choose an avatar and venture back into the game. And then I wake up."

"My friend," says Meng Haoran, "you have been granted a great insight."

Li Bai bursts out crying.

"Then why do I feel so wretched?" he sobs.

"Enlightenment is no guarantee of happiness," Meng Haoran replies. "You have been given a vision of the process by which souls are transferred between corporeal bodies. Metempsychosis, my friend."

"Have I? It seems to me that I have seen a vision of cruelty and suffering." Li Bai's voice is breaking. He sniffs.

"Indeed, the physical world is a realm of suffering."

An unmanly rivulet of mucus and brine runs down Li Bai's swirly black beard.

"Why are the stars so *cruel*?" he gulps.

"I cannot answer that question. All I can do is encourage you in your duty to reduce that suffering, by whatever means possible."

"My duty."

"Yes. To reduce suffering."

"How on earth do you expect me to do that?"

“Try singing a nice song. You could write a poem for me if you like.”

**AT THE YELLOW CRANE TOWER, TAKING LEAVE OF MENG HAO**

**JAN ON HIS DEPARTURE TO KUANG LING**, by Li T'ai-Po

I take leave of my dear old friend at the

Yellow Crane Tower.

In the flower-smelling mist of the Third

Month he will arrive at Yang Chou.

The single sail is shining far off – it is  
extinguished in the jade-coloured distance,

I see only the long river flowing to the  
edge of Heaven.

*Amy Lowell and Florence Ayscough*

## The Tower

Greg sometimes wondered whether he would be hungover for the rest of his life. After the jaundice first faded, he'd still spend hours laid out by nausea. After he recovered enough to sit, then stand, then shuffle about, waves of dizziness would return to floor him; he'd sink slowly to the ground, like a mime pretending to be a very sick man. He'd vomit tiny quantities onto the shag. Perhaps the meds weren't right. Perhaps the organ wasn't a perfect fit.

He refused to wear Mr Winnie's clothes. They didn't fit him anyway. He wore Winnie's dressing gowns. He padded through the house like an actor in a period drama – and when the liaison officer comes to lecture Winnie about her shopping, he scampered up the stairs of the tower like a concubine in purdah.

Between his relapses, Winnie and Greg spend a lot of time holed up in the downstairs bedroom, fucking. Not making love but fucking, obeying a not-quite joyless compulsion. There was no internet, of course – what else was there to do but rub their swollen genitals together? Deoxyribonucleic acid was their entertainment: saliva and plasma and mucus and blood. The original cable.

Yet every time he rolled off, pulled out, fell back spent onto the musty sheets, he felt even less real than the time before. As though he were skating along the surface of consciousness like a specialised insect.

This uncertainty had nothing to do with the new liver. Greg knew the body's cells died and were reborn every few days (or something like that). He knew the self was constantly transforming, psychically and physically alike, so it made no difference whose liver was cleaning whose blood. He didn't believe in vengeful spirits or cosmic justice. He wasn't afraid of ghosts. Generally also he was developing this idea – and it came on with special certainty at the onset of each orgasmic spasm –

that it made no difference which organs performed what function, where: saliva and plasma and mucus and blood traced a crooked ladder back through history. All the way back to the beginning. Whatever that was.

And he couldn't entirely shake the doubt that after the big wave crashed he might wake up – really *wake up*, at last – back in Happiness Mansions with a bottle in his hand. Or on a high mountainside. Or the deck of a boat, looking up at the Yellow Crane Tower as it slowly receded from view.

\*

Sometimes he retched so hard he felt certain his wound would reopen and the wretched stolen thing in his abdominal cavity would slip out like an ox tongue, raw, slathering gore over his belly.

\*

One day while he was up in the tower, hiding from visitors, he heard a flat voice from downstairs that he recognised. Chen Xu was there. Greg crept a little way down the steps.

“Would he like to come down and meet me?” He heard Chen Xu ask, in Chinese.

“No,” Winnie replied.

“I think your brother would like to speak to him. He liked him, your brother.”

Winnie refused.

Greg slipped a few steps back up the stairwell and squatted, listening in with his robe pulled up modestly around his knees. He had adopted the modes of the courtesan. He heard the sound of a video call. Kelvin's voice, tinny through a speaker. Winnie giggling, suddenly girlish. He imagined the pale Chen Xu sitting

beside her like a sinister uncle, holding up a tablet displaying the glitchy moving image of her fuckhead brother.

Chen Xu as a retainer; an old Imperial eunuch.

Greg listened while Winnie asked Kelvin what the food was like where he was. Kelvin said it was dull. Winnie asked him what he was doing. Kelvin said, nothing; it was too hot outside; it was boring. *Hao wuliao a.*

He was looking forward to seeing Winnie again.

One day, she was telling him. One day soon.

\*

Greg realised he hadn't been quite right about Kelvin, that afternoon in CHEEMA Bar, when he identified him as the shadow of a person, viewed in fragments. Or he'd been right, but mistaken about the scale of things. For, as he now understood it, the fragments that occasionally constituted Kelvin were merely one part of a far, far larger body. Sometimes those fragments made up Chen Xu – sometimes Plumbe – sometimes those unrecognisable facets of Greg, such as he had been and such as he was now – but they were all one thing. One terrible thing.

If he listened carefully enough, Greg could hear the rumble of its breath. If he looked out the window in the evening when the smog was gone, and saw the high clouds moving faster than they should, he recognised the belly of the beast, sliding over the city in pursuit of its own purpose.

To distract himself from this dangerous nonsense, Greg populated his mind with figurines. Ryan and Kelvin and Banner and Chen Xu. He wrote down what they did and what they knew. He told impossible stories. He considered the question of complicity.

\*

There were questions he asked Winnie and questions he back. Of the questions he asked, she answered some. One afternoon he asked her to assure him that his own complicity in the affair was minimal. He asked her to assure him that he was only collateral.

“Coll-atral?” she repeated.

“Collateral means additional but subordinate.”

“Subordinate, yes.”

But, she reminded Greg, she’d saved his life. Greg, not Ryan, was meant to go down the tube at the Golden EnterPrize Centre. It had taken organisation and money to extricate Greg from the plot. She never used these words, of course. She only spoke about Chen Xu, who pulled the levers that shifted the subterranean rails, in exchange for one or other of the priceless *objets d’arts* that lined the walls of her strange, cumbersome house.

“Why did you save my life?” Greg asked her.

“Because I love you,” she replied. But he didn’t believe it and he could see she didn’t either.

He wanted to ask her, *why haven’t you saved your husband’s life?*

He wanted to ask her, *why don’t you ever talk about him?*

\*

She wanted to ask him, *why don’t you want to go home to your family?*

She wanted to ask him, *why don’t you ever talk about them?*

\*

Winnie slept with a rock under her pillow. It was a polished stone tablet with a multicoloured pattern of crystals whose arrangement, if Greg squinted and the light

was right, gave the effect of a blurry landscape painting. Perhaps there was a river in it. One afternoon she came in to find Greg looking at it.

“What’s this?” Greg asked.

He was speaking with her in Mandarin by now. Captivity had done wonders for his fluency.

“It’s nothing,” she said. Her voice was tense. “Just a stupid little thing.”

“You know,” Greg said, “I wanted to ask you. About that poem you gave me, last year...”

“Oh, not again,” she said. She had snatched back the stone and dropped it in its velvet sack. Her eyes were hard. “It was just a stupid little thing. It doesn’t mean anything.”

One day Greg found ink and papers in a cupboard and started encouraging her to paint again or draw or write, or whatever verb it was you used to make calligraphy appear. She was unwilling, of course, and even when boredom drove her to start working again, she would do it in private, stopping if ever Greg walked in on her, glaring at him until he left.

What was she working on, Greg asked.

Nothing, she told him, nothing. Just some stupid thing.

He didn’t need to say out loud what he imagined it might be. What he didn’t dare dream. It surprised him, the intensity of his hope that she would dedicate a new scroll to him. He found it hard to situate or justify his desire.

Naturally, Greg’s unspoken hopes infuriated Winnie. Several times she explained that it didn’t matter what poem she painted on a scroll. She copied them out of a big book, for one thing, and she didn’t think about them when she copied them – didn’t even think very much about the style of her calligraphy if it could be



said to have a fucking style. She tore up a sheet of paper to demonstrate that it was all shit to her. She could have given him anything that day, she said, chosen any poem, any collection of hieroglyphs on a fucking scroll, scrap of wallpaper, toilet paper for your arse. Her gift meant nothing.

“What is this shit?” she demanded, pointing at some priceless mounted scroll her husband had procured for her. “So boring. So fucking old. And you with your *poetry*. What, are you a faggot? Don’t you get it? Can’t you just fuck me?”

In moments of clarity, he knew it was never going to work.

He understood, furthermore, that Winnie was very, very rich indeed. And he began to understand – better, perhaps, than she did – exactly what that meant. Saving Greg’s life was something she did; condemning Ryan was something she did; and they were freaks of will, as easily achieved as buying a new *biemowo*, or popping off to Beidaihe for a dirty weekend with your tutor.

It was in her hands. He should have seen it in those clumsy hands all along.

Greg understood that, as a gesture, saving his life couldn’t override the enormity of the losses she’d suffered and inflicted in the past month. In still more lucid moments he perceived about them the fog of profound shock; he listened, and heard the ringing in their ears: the muffled background noise of their aftermath. It wouldn’t last forever. A day would come when they’d be unbearable to one another.

\*

One morning Greg recalled that gesture Winnie made so often before, that dismayed laugh and gripping of the wrist that he predicted she’d be doing for the rest of their relationship. She hadn’t made that gesture since he woke up in her house.

With this knowledge in mind he asked her to kill Plumbe.

"I know you can do it, if you want to," he said. "Not personally, but you can set somebody to it. It would be a lovely thing to do for me, a real gesture, knowing what he did to Ryan. Honestly, I'm a little surprised you haven't done it for me already. And you know he has money, so you wouldn't have to sell anything. It makes so much sense, sweetheart, and it practically pays for itself."

She looked at him disbelievingly. She laughed and gripped his wrist. The earth lurched, nauseated.

\*

Greg never saw the money. It was absorbed into Winnie's survival fund. But Ryan's report on Banner was discovered and delivered to Greg. And other notes of Ryan's, stupid half-written reports on life in Beijing that he was sending out to editors. Apparently Plumbe found it all, and decided he wanted to keep souvenirs. Plumbe was the kind of person who would expound on the root of the word "souvenir". Plumbe could have traced the French root, the Latin root; could have found the definition: a remembrance, a memory, arisen from below. But he never would, now, because as Chen Xu told Winnie and Winnie told Greg, Plumbe pronounced "plume" was dead, dead, dead.

\*

But what about Jenny?

The question woke Greg in the middle of the night and he in turn woke Winnie, roughly. Winnie didn't understand.

"I don't know *Zhen-ni*," she said, wincing, rubbing sleep from her eyes, trying to push his hands away from her.

"What was she in this?" he demanded, in English. "More collateral?"

"Coll-atral...?"

“Leverage? Was she leverage on me? Is that why you stole her away?”

“I never steal...” she started.

“Stole,” he shouted. “You never stole. Steal, stole, stolen. I steal, I stole, I have stolen. What have you done?”

“Fuck off, *Gu-rei-gu*.”

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? Make a sentence.”

“The guards will hear...”

“You think I care?”

But he was crying. He did care.

Greg didn’t accuse Winnie again, out loud; but his suspicion that she’d somehow wronged Jenny only grew. He had nothing but intuition to base it on. It seemed to emanate from within him, making him raw and Cassandra-like in the vulnerable moments when the sun was setting and the beast started its daily migration. Something wounded and aggrieved in Greg said Jenny had been wronged. If only he could remember her real name.

\*

What would it mean to drink, now? Greg was informed of the medical opinion, via Chen Xu, that to drink alcohol now wouldn’t just constitute self-sabotage – considering the delicate state of the fresh new liver in his tummy – but would be a grave insult to the surgeons who sacrificed so much to give him another chance at life.

He dreamed, however, of wine. Vats of wine. He dreamed of ancient stoneware pots, filled to the brim with pungent liquor, which he lifted above his head and poured like a benediction over himself. He dreamed of a broad, still lake of wine, with vapours dancing upon it in chaotic patterns. He floated on a rowboat, and when he

leaned over the edge, the timbers creaked warnings and the hull yawed beneath him until he was balanced above the surface, with the minutest shift in weight or pressure capable of pitching him (oh imagine it) *right into the drink*.

The face he saw reflected in the water beneath was his own – just like his own, only paler, as if pieced together out of moonlight: pale skin beneath a black, swirly beard.

In the daylight hours he sat in the tower in his robe and sorted through the *moutai* collection. Ordering things. Opening bottles to inhale their fragrance. Judging pungency; taking a mouthful and rolling it over his tongue; imagining the burn trickling down his throat.

Technically, he could leave at any point; he'd been accused of no crime. And it was true that he still fantasised about northern shores. North of North. Cold places where the roads run out and the rails run out and the aeroplanes all crash. Sky. Rock. Blue.

Considering this fugitive vision – connecting as it did with his memory of Winnie on Beidaihe beach, and tempting ideas of closure and release; suggesting as it does that a single moment of cathartic revelation might dispel the illusion in which he dwelled; as if he might talk with Winnie, really talk with her, late into the night, laughing for the first time in weeks and being open for the first time in living memory; as if he might say *here, say understand now how I read in the poem you gave me an image of sublime erasure that corresponded to the intensities of my first experience of love and loss, platonic or romantic I can't quite be sure, but ultimately cataclysmic, by chance but with the hallmarks of design, since it corresponded to the drive for self-annihilation that is the kink at the base of my soul*; as if in response Winnie – laughing Winnie, forgiving Winnie – would share with her own connection to the

poem she gave him, the formative trauma behind which would correspond to his experience in such a way as to make their romantic and sexual union seem inevitable, and which would explain the fact of her giving it to Greg, that fucking poem, would explain too the polished stone she kept under her pillow; as if she would step out of the room and return with the stone in her hands and say *take it, this is my new gift to you* – considering this fugitive vision, Greg suspected that he was not fully awake.

He had been accused of no crime. What if one morning he got up and left?

What if he blinked away this wasteland like so many floaters in his vision?

What if he simply woke up?

No. Waking up was impossible. This moment was real. *This* was the final level, after every other layered stage had fallen away. The final boss fight.

Greg was standing at the foot of the tower on a bright spring morning. The air felt crisp and clean. A big black *biemowo* was waiting for him to climb in. A leopard-spot pattern of raindrops rested on its paintwork, reflecting in cursive the sunlit lip of the perimeter wall. Birds called. Every sensation spoke its own crisp, immediate presence: this was real.

At last.

Winnie was there. Her feet were bare. Greg smelled her hair. He smelled the oils emerging from her pores. She pressed her hand in his and he felt the warm pulse of her heartbeat.

“Remember the conversation we had last night,” she said.

“I will never forget.”

She slipped him a canvas bag containing a wrapped item, cold and heavy, before bestowing a kiss on his forehead and stepping back indoors.

He waited, his fingers on the chrome handle of the car door, until Winnie reappeared in the top window of the tower. There she was. She pressed her palm against the glass. Greg waved and opened the car door. He slid into the back seat, and the engine thrummed through his loins.

Greg unwrapped the tablet the moment the car started the journey that would carry him all the way to the airport. He scanned the marks that resembled a riverbank, a tower, a boat, the sky. He identified all the colours, one by one. He ran his finger over the polished surface of the stone, tracing the striations beneath the surface, feeling the resonances of the crystalline structure of it, *der thingness* of it. This was real. This was it: the final interpretation. After a long, lonely walk through corridors of illusion, he had achieved reality.

Then he came.

And they rolled apart from one another, and lay in the darkness of the bedroom, smelling semen and plasma and mucus and blood. Smelling sweat and saliva. Panting. Not talking. Waiting to try again. Perhaps the alchemy would work this time.

\*

Time kept passing. Mr Winnie was executed by lethal injection. But the case against Winnie seemed to be snarled up on something, going nowhere for weeks on end. Greg wondered how long it would be before he slit her throat with one of the paring knives, picked out the best bottle of *moutai* in the tower, and drank until his scars bled afresh.

He would do the drinking in the bathtub. It was a gigantic thing, imported from some over-mortgaged Victorian pile, and it blocked the door to the huge, yet somehow pokey bathroom. It suited Greg to bathe in his robe, staring at the slug of

his penis and the half-translucent, sodden silk with its blue-white patterns like replica china.

It suited him to imagine Winnie's lifeless body and his own, traced with light, elevated in sublime non-action. And policemen: dozens of policemen in sturdy boots, crawling over the crime scene, trying to find some way to make things right.

## Detective Meng

The pupils of Forestry Primary were reciting old poems. Detective Meng couldn't hear the words they were chanting, but he recognised the rhythm beating through the walls, forty or fifty voices in unison:

*BOOM boom BOOM boom BOOM BOOM BOOM!*

On and on it went, in see-sawing couplets. The inspector remembered studying old poems back at school. They'd done it exactly the same way: by rote, to the same rhythm. He couldn't remember the poems, though, and the noise was only making his headache worse. A stray gust of wind picked up a few clear words Meng vaguely recognised:

*Old... West... Yellow Crane Tower... Smoke... Three... Down to Yangzhou!*

He flicked his cigarette out and wound the window up. Across the road, beneath the gateway to the residential development named Happiness Mansions, Detective Li was signalling him. Meng beckoned her over. Let her do the legwork – she was young; she wouldn't be retired next week. Besides, it was raining.

"What have we got?" he asked, after she had eased herself into the passenger seat.

"His name is Qiu Senlin. And the young woman he's been keeping in his flat is his cousin." She checked her tablet. "Qiu Yuxin. She's been there for a month. Only it's not his flat. It's a closet, sublet from some slum landlord."

Detective Meng didn't dye his white hair. This, and the scent of the tiger balm that he habitually spread on his chest, enhanced the avuncular air that many people perceived in his features. Colleagues, witnesses and suspects alike were apt to be



disarmed by this craggy-faced, unhandsome man. It was possible to believe that he was a reliable type. Perhaps even kindly.

“Sex stuff?” he asked.

“He says he hasn’t touched her. She won’t talk about it.”

Detective Meng produced a whistling sigh through his nostrils.

“He said he was trying to cure her. Apparently she’s not well. He used the word ‘therapy’. She rejected her family, he said. Got involved with... strange ideas. Strange people. He came all the way up from his village in Hunan to find her. Tied her up for three weeks. You should see the bruises on her wrists.”

“She talk?”

“Not for hours, and then only to me.”

Meng nodded. Detective Li was capable of playing auntie, for needy witnesses and foolish suspects. She had a frank-sounding voice and a sturdy, cushioned body; she could look ten years older than she was. It was only when you studied her eyes that the illusion fell apart. She had a shark’s eyes.

“It seems he made her terrified of the police,” She continued. “He told her that if she escaped and went to the police, we would arrest her. For belonging to a proscribed church.”

Beneath his bushy white eyebrows, Detective Meng’s eyes were very still.

“He told her... a lot of rumours.”

“Rumours?”

“Nasty rumours.”

“What rumours exactly?”

Li pursed her lips.

“I don’t spread rumours,” she said.

“Not even ones we’ve all heard before?”

“With all due respect, Detective Meng, you’re coming to the end of your honourable career—”

“And you’ve got it all ahead of you.”

Li shrugged.

“Maybe,” she said.

“Maybe. Depending on the cleanliness of your record. You think I’m going to snitch on you for answering a question?”

“Maybe.”

“*Maybe!* Officer, what did the perpetrator tell the victim?”

“That if we found her, she’d get treated like one of the Falun Gong.”

“What does that mean?”

“Executed. He told her we’d cut her liver out and sell it.”

“And you believe these lies?”

Li said nothing. Meng belched.

Li shrugged and scrolled down through the notes on her tablet. On her lap, Meng noticed, was a ziplock bag containing two mobile phones. One was encased in a yellow rubber cover, shaped like a bird.

“What’s that?” Meng asked.

“Evidence. Look. There’s a complication. He told her we’d arrest her for belonging to a proscribed organisation.”

“And?”

“And I found literature. On her phone. Proscribed literature.”

Meng squeezed the pressure points on his wrists. His headache was worse. Li gave him a shrewd look.

"You should stop drinking now," she said. "Before you've got nothing else to get up for in the morning."

The children in the school started chanting again. BOOM boom BOOM boom BOOM BOOM BOOM. Li cleared her throat.

"Give me the phone," Meng said. Li slipped it out of the ziplock bag and handed it to the older detective.

"Detective Meng," she said, as he gazed at the phone's rubber case, "I haven't completed my interview with the girl."

"What's left to determine?"

"There is the question of this literature..."

"Do you have a case against this man, this Qiu?"

"Very clear. We have CCTV footage showing the girl climbing out of the window and crossing the gap to the neighbour's flat."

"Where was she?"

"On the sixth floor."

Li leaned forward, her raincoat creaking, and rubbed a window in the condensation on the windscreen. She pointed through it, up to one of the balconies. "Right there," she said.

"She must have been terrified," Meng said.

Detective Li stared hard through the window. The car was a resonant chamber; it contained the sound of their breathing, the soft patter of raindrops.

"Isn't that where the foreign professor lived?" she asked, after a while. "The old American who died in the fire."

"That was on the other side of the complex," Meng stated. "You'd recognise it from the flame marks."

"But there are flame marks here."

"Different fire."

"*Aiya*, this place is a maze..."

Detective Meng pulled out a flask of green tea and poured himself a cup. He offered some to Li, who refused.

"I haven't completed my interview with the girl," she repeated. "There is still the issue of the proscribed materials."

"What do you want to determine?"

"If she is in a proscribed organisation..."

Meng hissed.

"Send her home," he said.

"What if we need her to make a statement?"

"No! We don't need her to make any more statements. The case goes forward without her. Kidnapping is kidnapping, why should we need to go into details? She's suffered enough. Send her home!"

Detective Li looked at him. He understood her meaning.

"Send her *somewhere*. Take her to the train station and buy her a ticket. She has *some* ID, surely? And bring the boy to my car. I want to get a look at him."

"One last thing," Li said, toying with the tablet in her lap. "It might look irregular not to have the victim on hand."

Meng raised a curly white eyebrow.

"Sir," Li continued, "I think you've made the right decision. But – it is *your* decision, isn't it?"

Of course. Meng snatched up the tablet. He took the stylus and signed, clumsily, through the rainproof cover.

“Thank you, Detective,” Li said. She unlocked the door, half-opened it, then looked back at him. There were those cold, unironic eyes; absolutely nothing of the *aiyi* about her now. “I’ll miss you when you’re gone,” she said.

\*

Qiu Senlin didn’t look like a lunatic. His clothes were cheap and his face was dark, just like any other migrant labourer – but he smelled particularly bad. Sour. Even through the protective glass.

He sat quietly in the back seat, his hands bound.

“Did you rape her?” Detective Meng asked, after starting the car.

The boy shook his head minutely. His eyes stayed fixed on the footwell.

The rain started coming down more heavily as Meng manoeuvred the car around. They left the chanting schoolchildren behind. The windscreen wipers made that soothing sweeping sound. Wiping everything away.

“I saved somebody’s life last week,” Detective Meng said. “He was going to throw himself off a road bridge in Zhongguancun. I coaxed him away from the edge. I told him to think about his family, his country, how selfish he was being. I got him to pull himself together. Saved his life.”

He tapped the rearview mirror, where the boy’s reflection sat in darkness.

“Are you listening, boy?” he said. “I do good. Which is why I don’t like the fact that you’ve been spreading rumours about the police. You made your cousin fear us.”

The boy said nothing.

“What did you tell her, to make her so frightened of us?”

Nothing.

“Are you frightened now? Are you frightened of me?”

Nothing.

“You should be.”

The rain eased up, then came down again in a renewed torrent. There was music in rainfall. There was rhythm.

“Do you think I’m going to cut your liver out?” he asked. “You think I’m going to carve you up?”

Lights changed. Pedestrians scurried between the cars.

“I’m not the cannibal, boy. I’m not the vampire.”

Detective Meng straightened his spine and puffed out his chest, the way he did when he wanted to make a point to fellow officers.

“Let me tell you something: I’ve been working thirty years on the job and I’ve yet to meet a fellow police officer who is a vampire. Where are the monsters, hey, boy? Where are they?”

Detective Meng sigh-hissed at the mirror. The boy said nothing, looked at nothing. Meng eased the car onto the main road. Vehicles were honking, and jockeying for place on the slip-road to the Airport Expressway – but without enthusiasm, it seemed. It was a cold grey day. Planes were slouching through the sky.

“Our job is important,” Detective Meng continued, “and people need to trust us, so we can carry it out. If people can’t trust the police – well, where does that leave us? Where does that leave society?” With his free hand he massaged the hand on the wheel. He tried to find the pressure point again, but it was difficult. “Lies and rumours make monsters,” he said. “When you tell a lie that big, it infects everything. It spreads. It’s insidious. You get people doubting, double-checking the past, double-checking the world around them. That’s why the truth’s important.”

The car drifted towards the intersection, slow as an unmoored boat. The rain came down hard, and Meng first set the wipers onto fast, then turned them off entirely, allowing the broad stream of rainwater to flow over the screen. The road swam in his eyes. It looked both far away and long ago. There came the sustained beep of a car horn, from somewhere close by and closing in, pitch doppler-downshifting from *weee* to *wuuur*. Meng braked, carefully, and pulled to the side, allowing the black shadow of a *biewomo* to cut ahead, a black shadow with a white face inside, a figure peering out from inside, a ghost or an old outsider, cutting through his lane to the slipway to the airport.

