

**The Enigma of Development:  
Building a Reflexive Point of View Across Remote Contexts**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis singles out point of view (POV) as the governing technical choice in creative writing. As such it integrates creative practice with an essay on the theoretical basis for a POV across remote contexts. The methodology follows Mikhail Bakhtin's call for a new story telling position through an enquiry into Western literary history, Classical Chinese novels and Gao Xingjian's partitioning of POV by narrative angle.

## **Part One**

**Chapter one** establishes the importance of POV to motives in my own creative work and sets out the case for Bakhtin over normative theorists, calling for a reconfiguration of POV to withstand contextual aberrations arising from cultural or historical differences, or from the boundaries of what Bakhtin refers to as Small Time *presentism*. Further, it argues against Tzvetan Todorov's generic view of the novel as a property of discourse, an ahistorical constant, by considering Bakhtin's meta-historic survey of Western literature with periods of intensified novelistic discourse in given contexts.

**Chapter two** considers POV in the separate context of Chinese literature focussing on the historiographic POV taken in Classical Chinese novels, namely *The Four Great Works*. Comparisons are drawn between these and Western short story cycles noting forms given in Andrew Plaks' *Chinese Narrative* (1977) and aesthetics in François Cheng's *Chinese Poetic Writing* (1982). Critical contemporary concerns arising between Classical and Modern Chinese are addressed with reference to essays by Xi Chuan, Yang Liang and Henry Zhao.

**Chapter three** begins with reflexivity as an inherent property of what Bakhtin identifies as discrete double voicing and draws parallels with the bi-polar unity of Daoism and its Chan

(Zen) hybrid, consulting Victor Sōgen Hori's studies of capping phrases and contemporary techniques in the fiction, drama and essays of Gao Xingjian.

## **Part Two**

Creative enquiry takes the form of a novel, *Interesting Times*, (working title: *The Enigma of Development*), in which a first person protagonist's narrative alternates with third person short stories embedded in a historical schema. The novel depicts economic development through the construction of a power station, following a schema of short story settings in one location from pre-industrial salt making to sophisticated intellectual piracy, indentured peasant labour to chaotic collateral debt finance. These short stories alternate with chapters from the linking protagonist whose narrative encircles the whole from the rural location of his family's ancient English heritage. With the cognitive ground of one POV set against that of the other, the resulting novel is intended to create an interpretive domain for the reflex between the two, in this case a cyclical relationship between exploiter and exploited, interchangeable as subjects and objects.

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# **PART ONE**

If there were no “that”

There would be no “this”

If there were no “this”

There would be nothing for all these winds to play on

Zhuang Zou

## CHAPTER ONE – Point of View across Remote Contexts

My research interest in fiction stems from a contemporary world distinguished by globalised capitalism, that is, a world in which characters from a multitude of diverse cultural settings communicate with a frequency that is historically unprecedented and subject to homogenising cultural influence. In this world my creative conscience, the point of view<sup>1</sup> of my ‘self’, is inseparable from the question of who speaks for ‘the other’. Though my writing is drawn to this question I recognise that at least some of this impulse is an ontological response, a matter of philosophy that leads away from creative writing if not actually inhibiting it. With this in mind, this section of the thesis seeks a methodology for the POV in a novel reflecting the increasing complexity of international literary contexts and in particular for the novel *Interesting Times*.

*Interesting Times* is set in a third world peasant economy subject to historically unprecedented economic growth after Deng Xiaoping proclaimed, ‘It is a glorious thing to be rich.’ The novel is conceived as a recurrent cycle of short stories set in respective phases of economic development. In each story one protagonist’s gain becomes another’s exploitation. With this in mind, throughout the writing of *Interesting Times* I have used a working title, *The Enigma of Development*.

In this chapter we will address POV through Bakhtin’s works on novelistic discourse, justifying these as better aligned to our purpose than, for example, Gérard Genette’s Narrative Discourse or Wayne Booth’s Rhetoric of Fiction. At this point it may be helpful to present the options of narrative POV in terms of their respective strengths and weaknesses. Third person narratives are presented exclusively from the POV of ‘he’ or ‘she’,

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter abbreviated to POV.



notwithstanding degrees of subjectivity from 'strongly internal' where the author claims to interpret a third party's internal thoughts to 'wholly external' where the author adheres rigorously to the 'show, don't tell' maxim. Second person narratives addressing the reader as 'you' have an effect of immediacy that, while powerful in the short story, is less readily sustained over the length of a novel. First person narratives presented exclusively from the POV of the 'I' narrator incorporate varying degrees of intimacy or distance. The 'I' narration POV has the advantage of immediately establishing the focus of the story with the opportunity for philosophical reflection and a chance to influence reader empathy. These advantages are outweighed by the fact that a first person narrator must not only be present in each scene, but their perceptions derive from a local setting that may have either little relevance to a wider outside world or, by asserting a wider knowledge than the reader, may come to feel like being addressed by a megalomaniac. Irrespective of any partitioning in terms of these pronouns (or their respective plurals) the choice of viewpoint for a particular narrative is constrained by perceptions available to the narrator or central character, if any, through their overall position in the narrative which in turn determines the form of a novel.

Bakhtin does not uphold a formal principle for the novel by itself but demonstrates that the form is a mutually determined development around the protagonist: 'the principle for formulating the hero figure is related to the particular type of plot, to the particular conception of the world, and to a particular composition of a given novel.'<sup>2</sup> Irrespective of protagonist, in *Forms of Time and of Chronotope in the Novel* Bakhtin offers a comprehensive catalogue literary forms by the definitive term, chronotope:

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<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin, M.M., 'The *Bildungsroman*' and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)' In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p10

We will give the name chronotope (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.<sup>3</sup>

In his catalogue of literary forms by chronotope Bakhtin devotes a separate section to certain liminal figures, namely the *rogue*, *clown* and *fool*, and their position relative to a central narrative.<sup>4</sup> These figures personify a narrator’s POV, developing as *mise en scène* episodes in themselves to create ‘their own special little world, their own chronotope.’<sup>5</sup> By introducing these figures the author overcomes a dimensional problem through their capacity for overhearing, spying or eavesdropping where previously the position of the author in relation to the material was one of prosaic everyday reality that Bakhtin compares to that of publishing a laundry list, ‘a manuscript by “nobody-knows-who, written for nobody-knows-who and who-found-it-and-where nobody knows”’.<sup>6</sup> Instead the author’s optimal storytelling position is realised through the agencies of rogue, clown and fool where an author would otherwise be intrusive:

The novelist stands in need of some essential formal and generic mask that could serve to define the position from which he views life, as well as the position from which he makes that life public.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel’ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p84

<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel’ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p158,159

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel’ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p159

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p161

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p161

In his catalogue of literary chronotopes Bakhtin devotes a separate section to these otherwise flat characters, stressing their metaphorical significance:

Their very appearance, everything they do and say, cannot be understood in a direct and unmediated way but must be grasped metaphorically.... their existence is a reflection of some other's mode of being.<sup>8</sup>

Bakhtin further identifies the figures of rogue, clown or fool as essential to literature in the Middle Ages and 'enormously significant for the later development of the European novel,' being the means of conveying central narrative observations from an otherwise liminal POV so that 'the way was prepared for an utterly new way of seeing and of portraying time in the novel.'<sup>9</sup> For all its significance this type of figural viewpoint persists with little modification through Goethe and on to the modern novel, as implied in the title of Bakhtin's essay, 'The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)'.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately Bakhtin regards the significance of these figures, whether rogue, clown or fool, as indirect to the extent that their appearance, their words and actions, may only be understood metaphorically, thus placing their figurative role effectively at the centre of the narrative. They perform a role in the structure of the novel rather like that of anonymous human figures sketched into the foreground of an architectural drawing, roles that exist only to mark the scale of the structure as whole: 'Their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist.' Nonetheless, their introduction into the content of the novel enables the author to adopt the implied or pseudo-viewpoint from which

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p159

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p166

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin, M.M., 'The *Bildungsroman*' and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)' In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006)

the picaresque novel and its derivatives emerge. However the problem with a liminal POV of this kind is that being no more than that of a persona, an actor's mask, these figures contravene Bakhtin's dialogism in developing the relationship between protagonist and context, character and environment.

For *Interesting Times* on the other hand, the use of a schema as organising principle becomes the means by which a character is included in the work along with protagonists as diverse as a Chinese salt farmer clinging to his heritage, an American engineer profiting immensely from software or an English financier profiting inconceivably more, each have remote formative environments connected by a single location in various stages of development. If we accept that a character's language will be affected by environment then this influence is known as the Whorf Hypothesis.

The Whorf hypothesis has two forms. In the Strong hypothesis, language *determines* thinking, implying that some thoughts expressible in one language will not be expressible in a second language. In the Weak form language *influences* thought, a theory that has been tested mainly by studies of the effects of language on memory and perception. Eysenck and Keane cite examples<sup>11</sup> of Hanuxoo people in the Philippines with 92 different names for rice and hundreds of camel related words in Arabic. Inuit and Sami language have many words for snow, whether compound words or root words. Although the Thai language has little need of a word for snow it has over two hundred 'heart' related words in a culture rooted by Theravada Buddhism disciplines for concentration or 'overcoming' mind.<sup>12</sup> Whereas significant differences among languages may influence thought, 'a more plausible

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<sup>11</sup> Eysenck, M. & Keane, M. *Cognitive Psychology: A Student's Handbook* (London: Psychology Press, 4th edition 2000)

<sup>12</sup> Medhidhammaporn, Phra, *Sartre's Existentialism and Early Buddhism* (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1995) p99

explanation is that different environmental conditions affect the things people think about, and this affects their linguistic usage.’<sup>13</sup>

Aside from any conclusive linguistic evidence to the contrary, the reciprocity between environment, thought and language remains integral to characterisation if only as a matter of craft. The implication here is that for every protagonist there is a back-story that reflects the environment in which their respective character was formed. With this degree of complexity back-story quickly takes over from exposition, loading the reader with narrative demands of non-linear time, multiple characters and perspectives. Depending on the knowledge that the reader brings to bear on the work, this can be a problem for interpretation.

Given a Whorfian reciprocity between character and setting, we may consider how this manifests in the language of an integrated character and setting that cannot remain unaffected when that same character ‘develops’ in another context. Placed in another culture for example, the language of a previous context will be subject to a phenomenon Bakhtin refers to as stratification. This stratification does not occur simply between contexts or even along a single dimension. Language may stratify in terms of class, gender, dialect, age or profession. Operating in reverse it becomes an assimilation of the words if not voices of others, a process Bakhtin refers to as hybridization. Literary theory itself is not immune from stratification. For example, in Tzvetan Todorov’s analysis of stratification, ‘social classes do not play a role different from that of professions and age classes: it is a factor of diversification among others.’ While Todorov’s somewhat anti-Marxist qualification may now appear dated, the

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<sup>13</sup> Eysenck, M. & Keane, M. *Cognitive Psychology: A Student’s Handbook* (London: Psychology Press, 4th edition 2000) p387

unique context of each Bakhtinian utterance takes account of such contextual slippage, being further refined by separate temporal contexts of understanding: ‘small time (the present day, the recent past, and the foreseeable [desired] future) and great time (the infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies).’<sup>14</sup> At the end of his working life Bakhtin is in a position to conclude that critical theory is itself subject to stratification, being conducted within a necessarily small time context of understanding:

Analysis usually fusses about in the narrow space of small time, that is, in the space of the present day and the recent past and the imaginable – desired or frightening – future... abstraction from the self in ideas about the future (the future without me).<sup>15</sup>

Being in small time then, discourses do not necessarily share the same cognitive ground or mutual context of understanding. In discourse contra discourse therefore, we have examples of what Bakhtin considers to be the assimilation of ‘word mummies’, words that by themselves may be inert or dead but that are ‘eternally living and creatively renewed in new contexts’.<sup>16</sup> Among Bakhtin’s literary archaeology, his essay *From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse* unearths novels from antiquity that situate pretensions to ‘absolute originality’ as strata in a history of critical straw man arguments. On the other hand, his subject matter leaves him exposed to counter-charges of sweeping generalization. Ultimately Bakhtin’s meta-historical approach indicates a quality in novelistic discourse that defines

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<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences’ In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p169

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p167

<sup>16</sup> Examples here might include the romance as against the novel as in Margaret Doody’s *The True Story of the Novel* contra Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*.

itself by overcoming the contextual problems of small time enclosure, the same quality that Bakhtin discerns in the genre's name:

The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process.<sup>17</sup>

This last qualification raises the problem of establishing a POV for diversity in a narrative situation whose primary characteristic is dynamic change. It follows that the narrative POV must itself be dynamic in some way, a reflex between the developing narrative situation and POV.

In Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky, that novelist's 'new' era of rapid economic expansion among isolated communities is seen as a precondition for a particular kind of novel for which Bakhtin seeks a reorientation in the position from which a story is told. This position is of contemporary significance given the resemblance between globalization and the economic forces at work in Dostoevsky's era, portrayed as an epoch when Russian capitalism was a catastrophically abrupt development for a multitude of diverse worlds and social groups:

Capitalism destroyed the isolation of these worlds, broke down the seclusion and inner ideological self-sufficiency of these social spheres. In its tendency to level everything ... capitalism jolted these worlds into its own contradictory evolving unity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p7

<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas 1984 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p19

While Bakhtin is far from explicit in locating the author's position, he is clear on his rejection of narrative models contained in a single context of understanding: 'My attitude towards structuralism: I am against enclosure in a text.'<sup>19</sup> The limitations for a single instance of contextual meaning are simply that it cannot be revealed or even commented on except by 'the aid of another (isomorphous) meaning (of a symbol or image) [to achieve] a *relative* rationalisation of the contextual meaning.'<sup>20</sup> Ultimately this is an altogether different paradigm from that of empirical science. Bakhtin distances himself from structuralist propensities to neglect context by the fact that 'outside the forms of language there exist also *forms of combination* of these forms.'<sup>21</sup> This is a reflection of the significant claims Bakhtin asserts for the novel as 'not just those of another literary genre, but a special kind of force, which he calls "novelness".'<sup>22</sup> His perception of remote contexts as unified in the emerging idea approaches that of creative consciousness itself where: the novel is that discursive site where heteroglossia, the struggle between 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' forces is most clearly rehearsed.'<sup>23</sup> In this scheme the novel becomes an aggregation of narratives or 'forms of combination of forms' that are problematic in a way that the short story is not. Charles May points to more robust characteristics in the shorter form, citing Nadine Gordimer in a survey of specialist short story writer opinions:

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<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences' In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p169

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p160

<sup>21</sup> Todorov, T. *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1984) p57

<sup>22</sup> Clark, Katerina and Holquist, Michael, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press 1984) p276

<sup>23</sup> Clark, Katerina and Holquist, Michael, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press 1984) p276



Gordimer suggests that the strongest convention of the novel, its prolonged coherence of tone, is false as to the nature of what can be grasped as reality in the modern world. ... Short story writers deal with the only thing they can be sure of – the present moment: “A discrete moment of truth is aimed at-not the moment of truth, because the short story doesn’t deal in cumulatives.”<sup>24</sup>

But what if it did? The possibility of ‘composing’ a novel from a POV hybridised through a cycle of short stories set across remote contexts is an enticing one. For the moment our consideration of POV remains within the constraints of one aspect of grammar or another in which case it will be necessary to investigate, as we will in Chapter Two, how differently it manifests between one language and another.

Across the disparate range of world literature, Torbjörn Lodén’s study of Gao Xingjian divides the canon between those works characterised by thematic preoccupation and those by perspective and method. Lodén places Gao Xingjian among those for whom ‘...it is the writer’s perspective and his method, and not so much the theme, that are part of a modern world culture transcending the boundaries of traditional national cultures.’<sup>25</sup> In doing so Lodén obscures the authorial intent behind what he sees as thematic in the work of others, notably V.S. Naipaul. Contrasting Gao’s *Soul Mountain*<sup>26</sup> with Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival*,<sup>27</sup> Lodén considers the major theme in the latter to be ‘the encounter of Western and non-Western culture.’ In short whereas *content* characterises Naipaul’s novel it is *form* in the

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<sup>24</sup> May, Charles E., *The Short Story – The Reality of Artifice* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1995) p123

<sup>25</sup> Lodén, Torbjörn ‘World Literature with Chinese Characteristics: On a Novel by Gao Xingjian’ in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001) p258

<sup>26</sup> Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004)

<sup>27</sup> Naipaul, V.S., *The Enigma of Arrival*, (London: Picador 2002 first published 1987)

case of Gao Xingjian. However, the globetrotting arrivals that Lodén observes in Naipaul's enigma are also a matter of perspective and method, focussing from a POV that draws fastidious attention to setting as a reflection of identity. Firstly Naipaul recounts the physical arrival of his 'self' and then, from the POV of a 'second self,' his identity as a writer. In the second of five stories forming *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul claims that to write the preceding story 'it was necessary for me to have lived a second life in the valley and to have had a second awakening to the natural world there.'<sup>28</sup> This dialogical aspect of identity is also present in Wayne Booth's implied author and Bakhtin's self-authoring. For the moment we may note similar explorations in Gao Xingjian's fiction where one POV simultaneously adopts two aspects separated by what he refers to as narrative angle. The second life to which Naipaul refers is the second life of the writer juxtaposed to the first, to the life of an otherwise unexamined self whose POV could pass for naïve realism if not for an inner dialogue between the two. Naipaul's 'enigma' is that POV has two aspects that do not share the same space at the same time or, in Gao's case, a narrative angle subtending two perceptions from the POV of one protagonist narrator. This dialogism between writer and self is given exhaustive treatment in Bakhtin's architectonics where the enigma of Naipaul's dichotomous arrival opens out temporally as the 'constant exchange between what is already and what is not yet.'<sup>29</sup> The false dichotomy of Naipaul's arrival is captured as *Zadanie*, Bakhtin's project of authoring the self or the 'process of becoming'.

Wayne Booth models this second self in terms of authorial position and identity. By so doing he opens the way for complications, notably those contesting proprietary meaning in the narrative transaction between author, image and reader. Far from consolidating a firm storytelling position Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* disassembles authorial identity by

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p103

<sup>29</sup> Clark, Katerina and Holquist, Michael, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press 1984) p65

simultaneously positing both the existence of, and transmission through, the additional figure of an implied author:

It is a curious fact that we have no terms either for this created “second self” or for our relationship with him. None of our terms for various aspects of the narrator is quite accurate.<sup>30</sup>

Booth’s abstraction introduces unforeseen complications because this ‘second self’ is created not by the author but the reader. In Bakhtin’s terms, ‘When we try to imagine the primary author figuratively, we ourselves are creating his image, that is, we ourselves become the primary author of the image.’<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin does not address POV in isolation but, in accordance with his dialogism, it becomes a reciprocal process between ‘the position from which a story is told’<sup>32</sup> and the material to which it is oriented. In adopting a POV across different contexts of understanding, in Bakhtin’s words ‘social groups which had not been weakened in their isolation,’<sup>33</sup> such reciprocity is barely conceivable without circumstances similar to those that Bakhtin finds in the polyphony of Dostoevsky’s era. These are summarised here by citing widely from *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*:

Bakhtin uses the term polyphony to describe ‘a passionate clash of ideological voices ... ideas which were just beginning to ripen, embryos of future world views’ as heard by Dostoevsky in an epoch when Russian capitalism was a catastrophically abrupt

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<sup>30</sup> Booth, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) p73

<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘From Notes made in 1970-71’ In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p148

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas 1984 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p7.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, p20

development for a ‘multitude of diverse worlds vividness of these individual worlds as ‘objective preconditions for the polyphonic novel,’ rejecting the monologically conceived plot as binding ‘finalized images of people in the unity of a monologically perceived and understood world,’ and denying the presumption of ‘a plurality of equally valid consciousnesses, each with its own world.’ Bakhtin envisages a Heteroglot novel where, ‘The position from which a story is told [...] must be oriented in a new way to this new world – a world of autonomous subjects.’<sup>34</sup>

What is required then is to locate POV in relation to the other, developing world and in the polyphonic novel this requires a judicious selection of material. For all that Bakhtin esteems Dostoevsky’s characters for their heterogeneity, ‘a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses,’<sup>35</sup> the polyphonic novel can appear somewhat scattered or, in Todorov’s words, a ‘monstrous assemblage of the most heterogeneous matters and the most incompatible principles of form-giving’<sup>36</sup> Taken to extremes then, the POV in a polyphonic novel may develop what Paul Ricoeur describes as, ‘a sort of oratorio for reading.’<sup>37</sup> However Bakhtin’s dialogism anticipates a response to this at the other, monological extreme among literatures of solitary incarceration as in Brian Keenan’s forced self-reflexion in *An Evil Cradling*. Keenan’s account of five years in captivity can appear ill-formed given its lengthy preamble. However this singular POV is explicitly oriented towards its only subject matter: formative experience. The forced imprisonment of a POV becomes suspended in a kind of atemporal verticality, sustaining

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p7.

<sup>35</sup> Todorov, T. *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1984) p103

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p103 and Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas 1984 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p6

<sup>37</sup>Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 2 trans. McLaughlin, Kathleen and Pellauer, David (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) p97

itself in a dialogical relationship as inner speech, the least attenuated, the most compact and barely developed of narrative possibilities, taking the form of *dialogue* as fundamental to all language. In his Voloshinov texts Bakhtin makes a separate supporting case (from the Marxist argument) for the dialogical nature of inner speech at the level of personal psychology. Here Voloshinov/Bakhtin observes that when we are confronted with a problem ‘it immediately assumes the form of questions and answers, assertions and subsequent denials [thus] our consciousness seems to be divided into two independent and contradictory voices.’<sup>38</sup> This authorial inner dialogue is not to be confused with the kind of undifferentiated schizophrenia induced by Wayne Booth’s narrator:

“Narrator” is usually taken to mean the “I” of a work, but the “I” is seldom if ever identical with the implied image of the artist.<sup>39</sup>

Here Booth is not addressing a person but an abstract image and an implied image at that. Booth not only personifies his abstraction but positions it as an intermediary in terms of distances between participants in the process of generating meaning. In fact he offers five permutations of what he refers to as ‘distance (more or less) [on] any axis of value’ between the following parties:

- *narrator and implied author*
- *narrator and characters*

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<sup>38</sup> Voloshinov, V.N. ‘Literary Stylistics: the construction of the utterance’ In *Bakhtin School Papers*, trans. Noel Owen (London: University of Essex 1983) p118,119 ‘The dialogic character of inner speech.’

<sup>39</sup> Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) p73

- *narrator* and ‘the *reader's* own norms’
- *implied author* and *reader*;<sup>40</sup>

Finally, ‘The *implied author* (carrying the reader with him) may be more or less distant from *other characters*.’ If this was an empirical model it would first be necessary to specify the assumptions on which it rests. Without them Booth’s model lacks dialogical relevance to any wider context. In short it is a monological assertion. Having posited his model Booth proceeds to legitimise it by applying a utility test, that is, applying his own criterion for the relative success of a narrative transaction as a measure between *implied author* and *reader* where:

From the author's viewpoint, a successful reading of his book must eliminate all distance between the essential norms of his implied author and the norms of the postulated reader.<sup>41</sup>

It is less than clear how a non-linear, multi-axial distance could be evaluated with any consistency across perspectival relationships in the overall transaction between author and reader. From his first essay, *Art and Answerability*, Bakhtin develops architectonics as the ‘mutual answerability that art and life must assume,’ a principle of dialogism that maintains the unique correspondence of each utterance with its context. In other words each utterance is dialogically oriented ‘toward a social horizon, composed of semantic and evaluative elements [so that] every utterance necessarily falls within one or more types of discourses determined by a horizon,’<sup>42</sup> where horizon may be taken as a boundary set by stratification.

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<sup>40</sup> Booth, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) p157,158

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p157

<sup>42</sup> Todorov, T., *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1984)p56

For the purpose of storytelling then, Bakhtin's methodology incorporates utterance in the author's terms, the hybridised single voice of the author who, 'when creating his work does not intend it for a literary scholar and does not presuppose a specific scholarly *understanding*...' <sup>43</sup> With this in mind, arbitration on the ownership of meaning, or Booth's dimension of qualified success, becomes an irrelevant contrivance.

For the development of meaning by parties inclusive to the work (listeners, readers, viewers), each critical evaluation itself responds with a context-sensitive utterance, 'a reaction to another reaction, a valuation of another valuation.' <sup>44</sup> These valuations may be nested in forms of combinations of forms, drawing in more remote contextual meanings to a process of exchange and evaluation that can itself be nested in a super-abundance of combinations, dependent on how they are bracketed, enclosed, contextualised.

Booth's distance between contexts, (whether of time, intellect, morality or emotion, all cited as examples of Booth's distance by Gerald Prince) <sup>45</sup> cannot be rendered as a single linear dimension without the highly reductive problems that entails. Here Bakhtin objects to the enclosure of text (and therefore meaning) that follows where author and reader are presented as identical images of one another, mirrors reflecting ad infinitum an ideal listener of complete understanding:

Precisely this kind of listener is postulated in the work. This, of course, is neither an *empirical* listener nor a psychological idea, an image of the listener in the soul of the author. It is an abstract ideological formulation. Counter-posed to it is the same kind of abstract ideal author [who] cannot introduce anything of his own, anything new,

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<sup>43</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences' In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p165

<sup>44</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' (ca. 1920-23) in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, trans. M. Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas 1st Edn 1990) p231

<sup>45</sup> Prince, Gerald 'Dictionary of Narratology' University of Nebraska Press 1989 p22

into the ideally understood work or into the ideally complete plan of the author. He is in the same time and space as the author ... and therefore he cannot be *an-other* or other for the author, he cannot have any surplus that is determined by this otherness.<sup>46</sup>

In the absence of an empirical reader then, certain abstract formulations of narrative theory contribute nothing to our understanding of POV. For example, closely related to POV we have the apparently simple example of *perspective* which Gerald Prince defines:

Along with distance, perspective is one of two main factors regulating narrative information.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand Prince defines *distance* as:

Along with perspective, one of two major factors regulating narrative information.<sup>48</sup>

The authorities cited by Prince for this solipsistic pairing are Gérard Genette and Willie Van Peer whose use of visual spatial terms carry a presumption of objectivity. Prince cites the authority of Genette and Van Peer for a framework of optical terms, implying a universal rigour to their construction that does not necessarily follow outside their cultural context.

Using Booth's own words, 'The closer we look at the concept of distance the more complicated it appears.'<sup>49</sup> Despite this near retraction Booth does little to refine the loose terminology equating narrative POV with the apparent objectivity of vision. In the case of

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<sup>46</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences' In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p165

<sup>47</sup> Prince, G., *Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1989) p72

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p22

<sup>49</sup> Booth, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) p123



perspective it has been a convention in European art since the Renaissance for one type of spatial framework with a culturally specific relationship between POV and vanishing point. The deployment of such visual terms can be disingenuous or naive as in Christopher Isherwood's opening stance in *Goodbye to Berlin*, 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.' At the other extreme Sue Vice goes so far as to ask whether or not the twofold impression of reality in film, constructed without words or a narrator, can be polyphonic. Quite apart from the camera's point and shoot selectivity, rudimentary photography is commonly used to manipulate focal depth of field 'to film women as flattened out iconic figures, whose presence interrupts the narrative trajectory,'<sup>50</sup> this as opposed to a deeper field in which male figures are comprehensively involved with the narrative situation. Robert Stam applies Bakhtin to film theory<sup>51</sup> to consider the dialogical aspect of visual meaning in terms of *representational adequacy*, where involvement in a spectacle increases in inverse proportion to the 'representational adequacy' of the medium: we imagine we see the double of reality precisely because there is a lack to be filled. Notwithstanding this contribution, Dorrit Cohn lists the application of visual spatial terms that have 'traditionally pervaded the language of critics and theorists of fiction: window and mirror, microscope and telescope, lens and X ray, perspective and focalization, reflection and transparency... panopticism, panoptic vision, panoptical narration.'<sup>52</sup> Though Cohn refers to these as 'standard ocular images'<sup>53</sup> the geometry of optics has a systematic rigour that can be problematic in discourse. For example the simplicity of a Euclidean triangle may be perceived inconsistently when, against the cognitive ground of a previously flat earth, the

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<sup>50</sup> Vice, S., *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1997) p141

<sup>51</sup> Stam, R., *Reflexivity in Film and Literature from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press Studies in Cinema 1985)

<sup>52</sup> Cohn, D., *The Distinction of Fiction*, (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press 2000)  
Cohn refers to the 'chaotic and perverse linguistic usage' of optical terms applied to fiction. p163

paradigm shift of spherical trigonometry becomes, in discursive terms only, another POV. In conclusion, ‘The filmic image is as little genuinely objective as any textual entity.’<sup>54</sup>

There remains the question of orientation that Gérard Genette regards as a four-way partitioning of POV in terms of omniscience, first-person participant, third-person subjective and third-person objective viewpoints. Each ‘quadripartition’ of this single POV has separate story-telling merits reflecting different levels of understanding, different aspects of a single POV. For Genette to identify POV is essentially to deliberate over who speaks and who sees, ‘a confusion between the question *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator?*’<sup>55</sup> Eleven years after French publication of Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, his *Narrative Discourse Revisited* acknowledges the pitfalls of visual spatial constructs: ‘My only regret is that I used a purely visual, and hence overly narrow, formulation.’<sup>56</sup> Genette’s modification in terms of mood promotes a series of neologisms with which he develops four related categories: zero focalization, homodiegetic narrative with internal focalization, heterodiegetic narrative with internal focalization and exclusively external focalization. Genette does this with the intention of avoiding, ‘the too specifically visual connotations of the terms *vision*, *field*, and *point of view*.’<sup>57</sup> Whatever benefits ensue from Genette’s modified terminology, they do not change the fundamentals whereby his ‘less visual’ focalization continues to partition POV in four ways resembling narrative angles or stances, essentially different angles of grammatical inflexion with respect to the author’s material. On the other hand, in the case of uninflected language a significantly different narrative can be presented as in Gao Xingjian’s essay, ‘On

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<sup>54</sup> Vice, S., *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1997) p141

<sup>55</sup> Genette, G. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press 1980 first published in French, Editions due Seuil, 1972 ) p186

<sup>56</sup> Genette, G. *Narrative Discourse Revisited* transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1988 first published in French, Editions du Seuil, 1983) p64

<sup>57</sup> Genette, G. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press 1980 first published in French, Editions due Seuil, 1972 ) p189

Fiction and the Techniques of Fiction',<sup>58</sup> to be considered in Chapter Three. In his *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette appears not to know of Gao Xingjian's use of narrative angle in a POV without partitions as he calls for an example of it that he describes as 'pure transfocalization, where the "same story" is told successively from several points of view but by the same heterodiegetic narrator'<sup>59</sup> For present purposes Genette's most significant contribution may arise from his whimsical summary of the 'quadripartition' of POV where he adds: 'Here Borges would no doubt introduce a fifth class, typically Chinese: that of narratives written with a very fine brush.'<sup>60</sup> A more fruitful circumspection might consider the influence of Borges' failed eyesight on the shaping of his stories nonetheless Genette comes close to designating a fifth class of narrative partition in the irregular cases of his *paralepsis* (giving less information than is necessary in principle) and *paralipsis*, ('giving more than is authorized in principle in the code of focalization governing the whole').<sup>61</sup> Whereas an example of the former would be crime fiction where the reader is denied sufficient facts to ascertain the author's line of reasoning, in the case of *paralipsis* the POV would be omniscient. In either case Dan Shen refers to such instances of authorial omniscience as *transgressive focalization*, for which he chooses an example frequently cited for its rigorous external focalisation namely Ernest Hemingway's short story 'Hills Like White Elephants'.

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<sup>58</sup> This 1982 essay, *Tan xiaoshuoguan yu xiaoshuo jiquiao*, would be barely intelligible as a hard translation. It is paraphrased by Gao's target English translator Mabel Lee: 'Pronouns as Protagonists: On Gao Xingjian's Theories of Narration' in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001)

<sup>59</sup> Genette, G. *Narrative Discourse Revisited* transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1988 first published in French, Editions du Seuil, 1983) p66

<sup>60</sup> Genette, G. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press 1980 first published in French, Editions due Seuil, 1972 ) p188

<sup>61</sup> Genette, G. *Narrative Discourse Revisited* transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1988 first published in French, Editions du Seuil, 1983) p195

Genette's *Narrative Discourse* carries four entries<sup>62</sup> for 'Hills Like White Elephants' variously given as 'an example of external focalisation, of purely objective narrating,' 'a recording pure and simple, without selection or organisation.' Further, Gerald Prince takes up the same Hemingway story for his *Dictionary of Narratology* citing Genette's chosen example of POV with external focalisation:

'The perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented. [...] It may emanate from a focal point situated in the diegesis but outside any of the characters (any thinking or feeling being); it thereby excludes all information on feelings and thoughts and is limited to registering the characters' words and actions, their appearance, and the setting against which they come to the fore (External Point of View: "Hills Like White Elephants"). According to this narrow definition (inspired by Genette), Point of View ("who sees") should be distinguished from voice ("who speaks"): it is not equivalent to expression but institutes the perspective governing expression.<sup>63</sup>

Genette classifies the story in terms of his 'dramatic mode,'<sup>64</sup> a peculiar category given Hemingway's choice of metaphor, his precise focus on particulars of the setting and the studied anonymity of his protagonists. Nonetheless Genette's reading becomes subject to secondary discourses as with Dan Shen's example, "He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. *They were all waiting reasonably for the train.* He went out through the bead

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<sup>62</sup> Genette, G., *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1980 first published in French, Editions due Seuil, 1972 ) p166, 187, 190, 198

<sup>63</sup> Prince, G., 'Dictionary of Narratology' (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1989)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p187

curtain.”<sup>65</sup> Shen’s observation becomes a fulcrum with which to lever the question, ‘What is the force of the word reasonably?’:

The term, coming out of the male protagonist’s mouth toward the end of the narrative, seems to carry his implicit criticism of what he takes to be his lover’s unreasonableness. However, readers at this point may be well aware of the man’s own selfishness and incapability of understanding his lover, and may therefore treat the term as pointing ironically to the man’s own egoism.<sup>66</sup> [sic]

Shen identifies ‘reasonably’ as transgressive focalisation, a matter of emphasis where ‘a solitary infringement of, or deviation from, the norm, is seen to take on much more weight and prominence than in a context where inside-view is frequent or commonplace’. In itself Shen’s conclusion may be correct overall but his case appears to be determined more in response to Genette’s ‘paragon of external focalization’ than by reading the story. Under these circumstances we might consider the narrative transaction between author and reader to be unsuccessful. In this respect Wayne Booth applies a criterion for the relative success of a narrative transaction in terms of the distance between his *implied author* and *reader* where: ‘From the author’s viewpoint, a successful reading of his book must eliminate all distance between the essential norms of his implied author and the norms of the postulated reader.’<sup>67</sup> Notwithstanding Bakhtin’s aversion to incorporating a postulated abstract reader in the work, Booth’s model of the narrative transaction is such that the exact position of the author and

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<sup>65</sup> Dan Shen, ‘Breaking Conventional Barriers: Transgressions of Modes of Focalization’ in *New Perspectives in Narrative Perspective* Ed. Willie Van Peer and Seymour Chatman (New York: State University of New York Press 2001) p167 Shen’s italics included.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p168

<sup>67</sup> Booth, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) p157

narrator is complicated by questions of meaning, its origin and the mutual significance (completed utterance) of its interpretation:

In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical.<sup>68</sup>

In this dialogue over questions of meaning, Booth's participants are adapted by Seymour Chatman to calibrate the overall narrative transaction:

**real author->|| implied author-> (narrator)-> (narratee)-> implied reader ||->real reader<sup>69</sup>**

This model assumes a linear transmission of information between relationships that are perspectival, between parties that are not necessarily in successive communication with one another. For example the relationship takes no account of para-textual information, of publicity, knowledge of the author, the publisher's premise or other means whereby the permutations of information transfer between any two parties can be interpreted with precision. In considering how many ways the non-perspectival relationship between any two figures can be connected. In the above model there are sixty possible permutations of two from the set of five which quickly become unworkable even before the addition of one other character increases these to 360. According to Booth, a reading of all this is to be measured in terms of distance (more or less) on any axis of value and therefore progressing

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p155

<sup>69</sup> Chatman, S. 'Story and Discourse' in Keen, Susan, *Narrative Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2003) p33

asymptotically in Bakhtin's immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings.<sup>70</sup> With respect to the Hemingway example cited by Genette and Shen therefore, are we to accept that a passing knowledge of the rise of fascism and the Second World War is excluded from reader norms?

In making their case, Genette, Prince and later Shen transpose the story from its setting to a reference free abstraction that, for a moderately informed reader, is both *hors du text* and *hors du histoire*. As if the titular metaphor of Hemingway's story is not striking enough, he takes an uncharacteristic interest in the underside of this particular iceberg, devoting the entire opening paragraph of an otherwise short, short-story, exclusively to setting:

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun.... It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.<sup>71</sup>

Given the care with which this POV is oriented within a very specific setting on the Ebro, not to mention Hemingway's sudden enthusiasm for railway timetables, we might well ask, 'Who speaks?' It is not easy to conceive of these lines as an introduction to Shen's tale of male egoism, a reading that owes rather more to his interpretive knowledge of Hemingway than anything in the text. We may recall that a condition for the operation of Hemingway's theory is that, apart from writing sincerely, the *writer* must have knowledge of these omissions, that they must be a deliberate, informed, choice and not forced on the writing by ignorance.

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<sup>70</sup> This progression is also consistent with Daoist cosmology: The One gives birth to the Two; The Two gives birth to the Three; The Three produces the myriad creatures.

<sup>71</sup> Hemingway, E., *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press 1996 first published Finca Vigia 1987) p211

Among Hemingway's omissions<sup>72</sup> one might note the unreasonable conduct of Spain's pre-Franco military dictatorship, Mussolini's apotheosis as *Il Duce* and Hemingway's contemporaneous novel of First World War Italy, 'A Farewell to Arms.' Hemingway, the male egotist of Shen's stratified reading, is clear on what the girl herself has seen:

Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro.

Far away, beyond the river were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

In this carefully specified setting Charles May observes a series of oppositions and precise timings on which he finds something of an understatement, claiming that 'the conflict gradually reveals itself to be a profound difference in world view.'<sup>73</sup> Hemingway's experience as a World War One ambulance driver provide much of the background for his late novel, *Across the River and Into the Trees*, and his vision here is prophetic. For an informed reader the Battle of the Ebro represents a withering end to the Spanish Civil war as Republicans held out for an end to appeasement, a battle that in itself came to be regarded as a microcosm for the rise of fascism and the early use of blitzkrieg tactics on civilians. In his teleological emphasis on transgressive focalization, Shen neglects the mild example of a bamboo curtain with an almost anthropomorphic sense of purpose, 'hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies' and recurring five times in a short-story, a bathetic irony for the 135,000 dead over four summer months. With this in mind it takes a particularly

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<sup>72</sup> Chronology: Mussolini PM 1922; adopts honorific *Il Duce* 1925; 'Hills Like White Elephants' published 1927; 'A Farewell to Arms' published 1929; Aviazione Legionaria : Italian expeditionary bombing 1936; Nazi Condor Legion's terror bombing, Guernica 1937.

<sup>73</sup> May, Charles E., *The Short Story – The Reality of Artifice* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1995) p65



narrow reading to make an issue of focalization for this particular setting at this particular point in history.

With regard to POV a simpler question arises the practicality of suspending disbelief where a narrator has an unconventional ability to penetrate the consciousness of an other and to relate their thoughts. Shen raises this as an afterthought in which he observes that ‘attention tends to be diverted to the fictitious nature of the narrative, and the illusion of verisimilitude is likely to be shattered.’<sup>74</sup> More consequentially the prevalence of reductive models, rather than refuting Bakhtin, simply displaces a constructive engagement with his case. From Saussure onwards, structuralism ignores the power of combinations of literary forms by its enclosure of linguistic forms for analysis. By contrast, Bakhtin consistently directs our attention towards the inconceivable bigness of language. Wayne Booth comes close to saying as much in his introduction to Bakhtin’s book on Dostoevsky’s poetics:

It is not linear sequence but the touch of the author at each moment that matters. What we seek is what might be called the best *vertical* structure, rather than a given temporal structure and its technical transformations. If Bakhtin is right, a very great deal of what we Western critics have spent our time on is mistaken, or trivial, or both.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Dan Shen, ‘Breaking Conventional Barriers: Transgressions of Modes of Focalization’ in *New Perspectives in Narrative Perspective*, ed. Willie Van Peer and Seymour Chatman (New York: State University of New York Press 2001) p172

<sup>75</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas 1984 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) pxxv

Considering that it is in this work that Bakhtin calls for a new story telling position, further enquiry into POV will have recourse to literary history on the grounds that ‘no theoretical problem can be resolved without concrete historical material.’<sup>76</sup>

In literary history the critical polarization between epic and novel is considered by Massimo Fusillo to be one of ‘the great dualities on which Western identity is constructed.’<sup>77</sup> Fusillo prefaces a survey of this duality with Hegel’s view of the novel as the modern bourgeois epic for ‘a world already prosaically ordered [lacking] the *primitive* poetic general situation out of which the epic proper proceeds.’ This understanding is followed by György Lukács in as far as the problem is not in the text but in the world outside for which: ‘The novel is the epic of an age ... in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.’ Irrespective of Lukács or Hegel, we will demonstrate that ultimately both forms can be brought within Bakhtin’s understanding of the novel’s capacity for genre inclusiveness.

One year after publication of Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, Erich Kahler’s *Inward Turn of Narrative* (1973) traces literature as a history of consciousness from the epic to the novels of Sterne and Fielding. Kahler begins by opposing novel to epic in terms of fact and fiction, mythologies in which ‘great epics condensed around historical events and migrations [representing] complex collaborations and reshapings of real happenings’<sup>78</sup> from a tribal past. At length the epic and novel opposition comes to resemble a process of Darwinian selection, mutating out of the epic in various schools of contention between fact and fiction, high and low, ancient and modern or free discourse and form. Flaubert implies a process behind

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<sup>76</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘The *Bildungsroman*’ and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)’ In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p19

<sup>77</sup> Fusillo, M., ‘Epic, Novel’ in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) p32

<sup>78</sup> Kahler, Erich *The Inward Turn of Narrative* transl. Winston, Richard & Clara (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973 first published in German 1970) p9

literary history that conflates chronology with formal selection which, 'as it is mastered, becomes attenuated: it becomes disassociated from any liturgy, rule, yardstick; the epic is discarded in favour of the novel, verse in favour of prose.'<sup>79</sup> Flaubert's words were written within months of the publication of *Moby Dick* and some years before Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, not to mention Joyce's *Ulysses*, suggesting closer parallels with the writer's personal development than with literary history. Given the continued co-existence of epic and novel their respective developments cannot be reduced to a simple genealogy.

Bakhtin's dialogism, the progenitor of novelistic discourse, does not fall neatly into any one part of his catalogue of literary forms:

During its germination and early development, the novelistic word reflected a primordial struggle between tribes, peoples, cultures and languages – it is still full of echoes of this ancient struggle. In essence this discourse always developed on the boundary line between cultures and languages'<sup>80</sup>

In short, novelistic discourse existed across many contexts of understanding and before the written word. Rather than confine the opposition of epic and novel to a narrow epoch, Bakhtin establishes their internal relationships between time, distance and material with respect to POV. Bakhtin's historiographic approach, is described variously as 'a history of large-scale cultural transformations,'<sup>81</sup> as 'philosophical anthropology'<sup>82</sup> and by Fusillo as 'a

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<sup>79</sup> Fusillo, M., 'Epic, Novel' in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) p46

<sup>80</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p50

<sup>81</sup> McGee, V., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) pxiii translator identifies Bakhtin's 'history of large scale cultural transformations' cf French *mentalités*.

<sup>82</sup> Todorov, T. *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1984) P94 'Philosophical Anthropology'

metahistoricist perspective [delineating] a new genealogy of the novel.’<sup>83</sup> Whereas Bakhtinian thought is rich in neologisms with which to embellish existing analysis, his methodology is historiographic. As such the difficulty lies in ‘the demand that his way of thinking makes on our way of thinking, to change the basic categories that most of us use to organize thought itself [...] in European epistemologies where an impulse to atomize topics into easily classifiable and therefore analyzable fragments has become a norm for all other forms of cognition.’<sup>84</sup> It is against this norm that Bakhtin pushes far reaching literary histories beyond the limit of Aristotelian formulations that have long been ‘so deeply embedded as to be almost invisible.’<sup>85</sup>

The conceptual difficulty this presents is ‘not a dialectical either/or, but a dialogic both/and,’<sup>86</sup> obliging Wayne Booth to set aside his own train of discourse where ‘any effort to deal with “objectivity” in the western sense, like mine in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, will not serve as a reply to Bakhtin’s case.’<sup>87</sup> However the difficulty is presented not so much by Bakhtin as by the novel itself where: ‘The utter inadequacy of literary theory is exposed when it is forced to deal with the novel [in which case] the existence of novelised genres already leads theory into a blind alley.’<sup>88</sup> Tzvetan Todorov refers to ‘a certain malaise’<sup>89</sup> associated with Bakhtin’s obsessive regard for the novel as a forum for integrative voices, intertextuality and heterological scope, claiming these to be ahistorical categories. Although non-temporal, it does not follow that these categories are either omnipresent or manifest evenly throughout

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<sup>83</sup> Fusillo, M., ‘Epic, Novel’ in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) p34

<sup>84</sup> Clark, Katerina and Holquist, Michael, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press 1984) p6

<sup>85</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Epic and Novel’ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p8

<sup>86</sup> Clark, Katerina and Holquist, Michael, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press 1984) p7

<sup>87</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas 1984 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) pxxiv

<sup>88</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Epic and Novel’ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p8

<sup>89</sup> Todorov, T., *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1984) p85

history as Todorov's logocentric interpretation suggests. At this point it will be more helpful to emphasise the co-existence of epic and novel in terms of their respective POV rather than historicism. At its simplest, according to Bakhtin epic distance separates a POV in contemporary reality from the singular world of the ready-formed epic.<sup>90</sup> Bakhtin points to the grandiloquent language of official bureaucracy growing out of an idealised past in 'expressions of the dominant force and truth [as] formulated in the valorized-hierarchical category of the past [outside] the zone of familiar contact for the distanced plane.' This historical inversion, as Bakhtin refers to it, is particularly apparent from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages among high literary genres persistently evaluating time through tradition and hierarchy 'to the detriment of a contemporary reality'<sup>91</sup> Epic distance is not a dimension of space or time but a relationship between material and POV. Whereas the novel 'is determined by experience, knowledge and practice (the future)'<sup>92</sup> the epic idealises time by introducing epic distance. By this means narrative material remains on a different temporal plane from a POV rooted in contemporary reality under which circumstances the position from which a story is told becomes irrelevant:

...within this time, completed and locked into a circle, all points are equidistant from the real, dynamic time of the present [independent of] an actual historical sequence; it is not relative to the present or the future.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p13

<sup>91</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006 p20

<sup>92</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p20

<sup>93</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by C. Emerson and M. Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p19

Bakhtin identifies three basic characteristics of the novel's representation of time and space and therefore, its POV:

1. Its stylistic three-dimensionality linked with the multi-linguaged consciousness realised in the novel.
2. The radical change it affects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image.
3. The new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its open-endedness.<sup>94</sup>

Taken together these characteristics destroy epic distance, transferring images from a distant plane into the inconclusive events and possibilities of the present, unfinalised self by shifting POV onto common ground with the 'other': The present, in its all openendedness, taken as a starting point and centre for artistic and ideological orientation, is an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man.<sup>95</sup> Except that, according to Bakhtin, 'The distanced images of the epic and the images of familiar contact can never meet on the same field of representation.'<sup>96</sup> But this forbidden contact does take place, as indeed it must given the novel's genre inclusiveness. A significant example is Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* in which biblical figures if not 'genres themselves, become upon entering the novel an object of representation within it.'<sup>97</sup> Bulgakov's novel can be seen as the 'precursor of that international tradition of magic realism to which Marquez, Kundera and Salman

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<sup>94</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p11

<sup>95</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p38

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p28

<sup>97</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p49

Rushdie have all made contributions,<sup>98</sup> adopting a POV *incorporating* epic distance,<sup>99</sup> including it in his own reality in a manner that recalls Wayne Booth's endorsement of Bakhtin for a tentative vertical structure to POV. With this in mind then, the next chapter will develop the possibility of a POV that simultaneously affords more than one aspect by considering a tradition outside Western literary history.

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<sup>98</sup> Curtis, J.A.E. *Manuscripts Don't Burn: Mikhail Bulgakov, a Life in Letters and Diaries* (London: Bloomsbury 1991) pix

<sup>99</sup> In the novel's opening dialogue, although the poet Bezdomny has written an ill-received, anti-religious poem portraying Jesus 'in very black colours' Bezdomny is lectured on his 'fundamental error' for accepting the very existence of Christ. Before the lecture concludes, Bulgakov's POV shifts for the purpose of introducing Mephistopheles in contemporary guise – 'that power which wills forever evil yet does forever good' - proceeding by 1930s allusion to Pontius Pilate's judgement. By the end of the novel Pilate is granted release from his purgatory across an epic distance of 2,000 years.

## CHAPTER TWO – POV and Chinese Literature

To locate a new story telling position avoiding theoretical pitfalls it is not enough to give an exposition from within a single critical framework. Bakhtin himself is clear on the matter of creative understanding as opposed to duplication from an existing POV:

In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture.<sup>100</sup>

This is consistent with Bakhtin's architectonics, namely that we cannot see our real exterior, that 'mirror' images do not help and that we can only be understood by other people because they are located outside of us and, of course, because they are *others*. Instead of mirror image, what is required is an excess of seeing achieved by adding in a perspective borrowed from the POV of the other being contemplated. Put simply, one cannot both utter and listen, observe and be observed. This became the underlying concept in constructing a reflexive POV for *Interesting Times*. It has formal parallels in Chinese literature both at the level of micro-poetic form in yin yang couplets and the macro hyper-reality of very large narratives in Chinese novelistic works. Central to these are a series of Ming Dynasty novels known as *The Four Great Works*, written on a scale resembling Bakhtin's 'great time' albeit with little regard for unity. For critical purposes the ideal methodology would incorporate a different

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<sup>101</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir*' In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p7



cultural reference, control group or significant other in which novelistic discourse proceeds irrespective of any epic precursor. In this respect China recommends itself as one of the few countries without an epic. However the Chinese language has no past tense and no word for novel, given that all fiction falls into the category of *xiaoshuo*, literally small talk. As such, Chinese fiction is incommensurate with the great time of official dynastic history<sup>101</sup> or great knowledge of *the way* in Daoist philosophy. Indeed these literary contexts are so disparate that Andrew Plaks is sceptical of linear translations for the Western term novel where ‘the grounding for structural patterns is oriented less to a unilinear narrative flow, and more toward the evocation of a kaleidoscope of shifting perspectives.’<sup>102</sup> Across these disparate contexts is a research problem that David Damrosch frames as follows:

...a specialist in classical Chinese poetry can gradually, over years of labour, develop a close familiarity with the vast substratum beneath each brief Tang dynasty poem, but most of this context is lost to foreign readers when the poem travels abroad. Lacking specialised knowledge, the foreign reader is likely to impose domestic literary values on the foreign work, and even careful scholarly attempts to read a foreign work in light of Western critical theory are deeply problematic.<sup>103</sup>

When François Cheng writes of Chinese poetic language as the ‘semiotic order *par excellence*,’<sup>104</sup> the inference is that any target language, English included, is of a lower semiotic order. By themselves, the ideograms of Chinese have been likened to white dwarf

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<sup>101</sup>106 Or for that matter the social engineering of Mao’s post-Yanan teleological history.

<sup>102</sup> Plaks, A., ‘The Novel in Premodern China’ in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) p196

<sup>103</sup> Damrosch, D., *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003) p4

<sup>104</sup> Cheng, François, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, transl. from the French by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton. (Indiana: Indiana University Press 1982 1<sup>st</sup> Edn) pxiii

stars, having more mass and luminous intensity than their size permits. But this is to obscure the interpretive power of their formal combinations. On the one hand they are highly mobile<sup>105</sup> because, ‘where the syllable is the basic unit, there is no gap between the level of the signifiers and that of the signifieds [sic], each syllable always having a meaning.’<sup>106</sup> On the other, in the act of apprehending the static significance of an individual symbol, the reader-viewer must intensify perception in order to understand the linguistic-graphic network of linking structures in Chinese poetry. The links themselves extend between symbols bristling with connections through homophones, oppositions, ellipses, tonal schemes and allusions not to mention the high art of brush and ink calligraphy.

To this problem of cultural context, the writer Bó Yáng applies his metaphor of *The Chinese and the Soybean Paste Vat*, presenting Chinese culture as ‘hermetically sealed, like the vat, and anything from outside that gets dropped inside is likely to change drastically.’<sup>107</sup> In this regard Bó Yáng addresses the same paradox confronted by Daoist philosophers since Zhuangzi, of simultaneously regarding two separate contexts of understanding that are otherwise mutually exclusive. In this respect it may be helpful to consider the ‘timeless flux’ of Daoist philosophy as an ongoing suspension of judgement, that is, adjusting to the context of each utterance. The contextual challenge this presents to Western narrative theory is such that Andrew Plaks cannot begin his definitive *Chinese Narrative Theory* without confronting the great wall of whether or not ‘the Western term “narrative” as a classifier for diverse literary materials provides a valid critical tool of analysis.’<sup>108</sup> With regard to the solipsistic relationship between POV and use of the term perspective it remains at best subjective and

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<sup>105</sup> Cheng, François, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, transl. from the French by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton. (Indiana: Indiana University Press 1982 1<sup>st</sup> Edn) p46

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, pxiii

<sup>107</sup> Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, transl. R.W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan (Ithaca: Cornell University 1991, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn 1994) p309 n10 [for the purpose of addressing cultural perspectives at a lecture in New York, 1981]

<sup>108</sup> Plaks, Andrew H. Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P310

highly sensitive to context. Bearing in mind the viewer oriented perspectives of traditional Western European art, the relationship of an individual POV to the material of the work could be considered culturally specific. Since the European Renaissance, conventional perspective in art has used a vanishing point behind the pictorial plane, emphasising the position of the observer. Reverse perspective on the other hand places the vanishing point in front of the pictorial plane. In the latter perspective it is the pictorial 'alterity' that is emphasised outside the viewer's position, projecting 'parallel' lines that appear to converge from a background of panoramic 'otherness' surrounding the 'smaller' observer. Reverse perspective is also known as Byzantine perspective on account of its use in orthodox icons where, sensitive to iconoclasm, the observer's POV is 'surrounded' by theological creation. Whereas these visual frameworks are a local opposition, specific to Mediterranean art, 'a special characteristic of Chinese landscape painting is its many-point, instead of one-point, perspective.'<sup>109</sup> Under the influence of European artists between the Renaissance and Cubism, Western art has located the viewer at a point whereas Chinese artists take the viewer on a journey. Inside Bó Yáng's 'vat' is an undifferentiated poetics of the *mao bi*, of the brush, of poetry-calligraphy-painting consolidated over millennia in a network of dynamic possibilities. Whereas the choice of a one dimensional vanishing point establishes perspective in Western composition it is horizon that governs Chinese perspectives. 'The composition of a Chinese landscape must have one of the following three kinds of perspective: 'distant perspective: level and distant perspective, deep and distant perspective, high and distant perspective.'<sup>110</sup> In each case the first act of composition is to select a horizon with which to divide the work in two planes, a practical convention by which multiple perspectives are built up. In a Western frame of reference such as Booth's arbitrary

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<sup>109</sup> Wu Yangmu *The Techniques of Chinese Painting* (Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers 1996) p109

<sup>110</sup> Wu Yangmu *The Techniques of Chinese Painting* (Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers 1996) p109

distance in Chapter One, the extraordinary aesthetic vitality these multiple perspectives generate can appear as haphazard realism. The framed picture of traditional European one point perspective is not only incompatible with the multiple perspectives composed around the Chinese horizon but the loose semantics of psychological imagery combined with rigorous geometry is misleading. Once a scroll has been framed, whatever its perspective, it is no longer a scroll.

In fiction this paradox of contextual perspectives has two implications. One is that under a Western reading the multiple perspectives of major Chinese novels take on an episodic if not haphazard form. The other resembles Nadine Gordimer's reservations on the novel and its prolonged coherence of tone, in this case the absolute fixation of a single narrative stance as false with respect to what can be grasped as modern reality. This second feature lies open to creative development as Gao Xingjian exploits by his use of narrative angle. Pending a detailed examination of this in Chapter Three, at this point it will be helpful to briefly consider the simple 180° reflex of his short story, 'The Temple'.

The story is well under way before Gao explains, 'What I want to tell you about is the Temple of Perfect Benevolence: ... But the name of the temple is not really of great importance.' This preamble sets up a conceit between Manichean contexts of the narrator's honeymoon and the lost half of permitted leave due to (apparently hostile) industrial politics. One reading might follow the author's concluding lines regarding 'the Temple of Perfect Benevolence that we visited on our honeymoon, and which I wanted to describe for all of you.' But such a mimetic reading would neglect a series of carefully observed minor obstacles, carefully observed in each case and immediately discounted as irrelevant to their story – their cancelled holiday entitlement, past single life freedoms and years of personal hardship hinted at in 'catastrophic years in this country [...] but I won't go into that either.'

Taken together these discrete asides accumulate a separate aspect to POV, becoming an untold but discernible story of revolutionary turmoil summed up as ‘so many problems’ that, in the manner of a traumatised penitent, the narrator seeks reassurance that there is nothing wrong with the story he has chosen to tell, that it is innocent despite his compulsion to self-criticism, that he has chosen the correct story: ‘We’ve had so many problems, and we’ve troubled all of you with them ... There’s nothing wrong with what I’m saying, is there?’ Like the multiple perspectives of Chinese art, these two narratives may not be ‘viewed’ simultaneously. By juxtaposition, they form two aspects of a single POV or as Bakhtin would have it, the intersection of two narrative planes. The relationship between these aspects is an interpretive characteristic that we shall address in terms of reflexivity. In the meantime, as with Bakhtin’s genealogy for the Western novel, the starting point for any enquiry into Chinese narrative must be its historiography.

Historically Chinese culture displays strong hierarchical characteristics that Henry Zhao refers to as ‘a pyramided structure that presents itself as a rigid generic hierarchy of discourses,’<sup>111</sup> with Confucian scripture and official dynastic histories in a position of absolute authority. Among these Andrew Plaks identifies the following<sup>112</sup> quasi-generic narratives:

Official historiography

Chronicle historiography

Unofficial historiography (geographical compilations fictionalised biography)

Fictionalised history

Quasi historical hero cycles

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<sup>111</sup> Henry Zhao, ‘Historiography and Fiction in Chinese Culture’, in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) p69

<sup>112</sup> Plaks, Andrew H. Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P319

Supernatural hero cycles

Exemplary, fantastic, or anecdotal fiction

Mimetic or "domestic" fiction

Whatever shape the hierarchy, over the two thousand years since Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, fictional writing came to be regarded as 'leftover history,' 'unofficial history,' 'rustic history,' or 'uncultivated history' (*yushi, waishi, yeshi, baishi*).<sup>113</sup> Ultimately the role of historiography is so essential that all other prose fiction is classified as *xiaoshuo*, literally small-talk, the Chinese word for novel. In this respect the poet Xi Chuan perceives the stratification between Classical Chinese and the vernacular that became Modern Chinese as a social one where 'fiction is ultimately a thing of the brothels and back alleys, and naturally would have the vernacular as its language.'<sup>114</sup> Another further aspect is that fiction was never to the taste of an elite in pursuit of success in the classics based Imperial exam system.

Whereas Henry Zhao dwells on an opposition between history and fiction, Plaks stresses their common purpose for structuring human experience: 'the final justification for the enterprise of narrative [lies in] the transmission of known facts.'<sup>115</sup> In such a scheme there is no opposition between history and fiction so that every narrative is 'in some sense a faithful representation of what did, or what typically does, happen in human experience – that is, that the facts in question are true.'<sup>116</sup> In a Western context it is difficult to look beyond the shared etymology of history and story, particularly given the axiom that narratives, at least Western narratives, are firmly in the past. When addressing a trend for present tense fiction,

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<sup>113</sup> The Novel, Ed Moretti vol.1 p196 'The Novel in Premodern China', Andrew Plaks

<sup>114</sup> Xi Chuan, 'Chinese Language as a Neighborhood' in 'Chinese Writers on Writing' ed. Arthur Sze (San Antonio: Trinity University Press 2010) p263

<sup>115</sup> Plaks, Andrew H. Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P312

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p313

Dorrit Cohn feels obliged to cite authorities as various as Thomas Mann, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Paul Ricoeur and Robert Scholes for the purpose of framing narrative as tautologically past tense:

- “Stories must be past, and the more past, one could say, the better for them in their quality as stories, and the better for their narrator, that droning wizard of the past tense”.
- “Common sense tells us that events may be narrated only after they happen.”
- “Every story is told in the past for the voice that tells it”.
- “It is a formal feature of narrative texts – a part of their grammar – that the events are always presented in the past tense, as having already happened... narrative is past, always past”.<sup>117</sup>

By contrast to uninflected Chinese, it is as if the English in which Cohn writes compels her to find the necessary authoritative ballast to steady Western sensibilities where the issue is seldom a question of tense but rather *whose* past. This shift of emphasis has led to a significant devaluation of historiography in Western literature according to Plaks:

The primary emphasis on the structural and rhetorical manipulation of the *factor* has led recent critics to either disregard historiography entirely, or else to treat its literary

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<sup>117</sup> Cohn, Dorrit, *The Distinction of Fiction*, (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press 2000) p96

function in terms of models of narration derived from epic, romance, novelistic forms.<sup>118</sup>

The problem arises instinctively in a Western context whether separated by Naipaul's contexts of place or time, the unreliable narrator of Cohn's 'dissonant' narratives or simply as Wayne Booth's 'second self'. Chinese literary history, already thick with classical allusions, is bound more closely with social concerns than Western literature in which context for example it is inconceivable that a social movement like the Cultural Revolution could begin with criticism of a minor play, *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*.

With classical China's history of cultural isolation, instances of heterological intensity such as Bakhtin identifies in Hellenic, Roman and Renaissance Europe may appear irrelevant. This is not the case. To some extent linguistic interaction is regulated by the one constant between all histories namely geography. This generalisation is a necessary introduction to the disparity of centripetal forces in respective Western and Chinese literary histories as evidenced by the hard won historical lessons of China's founding unity. Each Balkan mountain village, Aegean island or peninsula with its independent demos of epic and folk lore is distinguished by a history far removed from that of a continental empire founded on Han unity. Under these circumstances Chinese unity has a persistence that, being axiomatic, does not readily translate. For example Zhang Yimou's film *Hero* has a scene relating to *Qin Shi Huang's* enforcement of standard script in which the spoken Chinese, *xia tian*, literally 'under heaven' appears in English subtitles as 'our land' – the target language of an island. It is inconceivable that a similar anomaly could arise among languages facing each other through Phoenician traders navigating between the more centrifugal linguistic forces of the ancient Mediterranean. On the other hand, without the convenience of a centralising national

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<sup>118</sup> Plaks, Andrew H. Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P313  
The italics of *factor*, an artist who models or forms statues and reliefs in any plastic material, are Plaks'.



epic it has proved more difficult for the middle kingdom in all its serial incarnations to come to terms with its legacy as ‘the largest space-time entity in all humanity’.<sup>119</sup> It is against this extra-Western context that, in Henry Zhao’s words, ‘Historiography was understandably regarded as endowed with the power of superior meaning above all the other genres’.<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, if Bakhtin’s heterological considerations are valid, the influential works of Chinese literature could not be achieved without some evidence of heterological inter-animation. There is some evidence for this. The major Chinese works of historiography, poetry and the great novelistic works were in each case written during periods of expansion and contact with the outside world namely the Han,<sup>121</sup> Tang<sup>122</sup> and early Ming<sup>123</sup> dynasties. Whereas these examples coincide with periods of significant heterological contact, they do not altogether account for the removal of distance between POV and contemporary material in the manner suggested by Andrew Plaks, namely that ‘historiography replaces epic among the Chinese narrative genres.’<sup>124</sup>

The absence of a Chinese national, or rather imperial, epic work is exemplified by the content and tragic impact of the television documentary *Heshang: Deathsong of the River*, first broadcast on China Central Television in 1988. Notwithstanding the drastic consequences the series is credited with, later being blamed by Premier Li Peng for inspiring

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<sup>119</sup> Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader’s Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, transl. R.W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan (Ithaca: Cornell University 1991, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn 1994) p97

<sup>120</sup> The Novel, Ed Moretti vol.1 p69 ‘Historiography and Fiction in Chinese Culture’, Henry Y.H. Zhao

<sup>121</sup> The Han dynasty’s four centuries saw Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* become the standard model for three thousand volumes of the official *Standard Histories* compiled and maintained across subsequent dynasties recording five thousand years.

<sup>122</sup> Li Bai and Do Fu, China’s two greatest poets, lived during the Tang dynasty expansion along trade routes to the Silk Road, to Vietnam and India from where the Buddhist texts began their long standing influence on Chinese culture.

<sup>123</sup> The enormous novelistic volumes collectively known as *The Four Great Works* were written when the early Ming court sent out tributary fleets under the Muslim-Chinese Admiral Zheng He, on missions throughout the Indian Ocean to east Africa and south east Asia.

<sup>124</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P314

dissent in 1989, Su Xiaokang's intention was to establish a new story telling position in Chinese culture. The title page of Heshang's first edition transcription describes the work as:

A reflection on the destiny of China's ancient culture.

An exposition of our tragic national psychology.<sup>125</sup>

This six part documentary initiated a controversy that Richard Bodman compares to the Death of God controversy in the West, introducing the transcript as 'one of the more creative, maverick and controversial works to emerge from China since the founding of the People's Republic.' In an article that reads like a Bakhtinian manifesto for the novel, its principal writer Su Xiaokang set out his intentions for a new form of documentary under the title, *Arousing the Whole Nation to Self-Questioning*:

[a form] that should break with the tradition... abandon the inflexible framework of time and space ... so that the frame (*huamian*) becomes the recreation and expression of thought and no longer ... the passive form in which the narration explains the frame... for the purpose of distinguishing ourselves in point of view and content [to] break away from the old concepts and patterns of the worship of our land, history and ancestors, so long taken for granted... and experiment with revealing the ancient Yellow River civilization of the Chinese people as well as its modern fate from a point of view of self-conscious reflection.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, transl. R.W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan (Ithaca: Cornell University 1991, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn 1994) p90

<sup>126</sup> Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, 'Deathsong of the River: a reader's guide to the Chinese TV series Heshang' trans. by Richard Bodman and Pin P. Wan. Cornell University New York 1991 P95

In its self-conscious removal of what must be called historical<sup>127</sup> distance, *Heshang* radically updates early Chinese Modernism by confronting contemporary reality after the Cultural Revolution and struggling to increase heterological interaction between Yellow River culture and Su Xiaokang's blue cultures of maritime exploration, beginning with Marco Polo's Venice, 'a village that had only recently graduated from catching fish and evaporating salt.'<sup>128</sup>

The Chinese stance to history is exemplified by her controversial response to *Heshang* if only for its *Hai Rui* impact on events leading up to June 1989, events blamed by many on Su Xiaokang's 'exposition of a tragic national psychology'. Nonetheless despite the absence of a national epic, the pre-existence of Chinese novelistic discourse correlates with previous findings on heterological inter-action as a stimulus for Chinese novelistic works. Where Chinese historiography does replace the epic, it is evident in those epochs where the limited Chinese experience of heterology affects her literature. For the novel this is evident in the Great Works of the early Ming dynasty, arguably so in early twentieth century modernism and self-evident in the novels of Nobel laureates Gao Xingjian and Mo Yan, written in China's open door era.

In comparing Chinese and Western narrative, drama provides a cross-cultural benchmark in that both traditions conform to the adoption of a linear pattern in presenting events from beginning to end. According to Plaks, 'The majority of traditional dramatic works culminate in a final scene of reconciliation or reunion.'<sup>129</sup> By contrast, no such benchmark applies to the Great Works with their meta-historical settings from which their protagonists fade before long drawn out endings even begin, a kind of epochal diminuendo to history and

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<sup>127</sup> In a Chinese context we cannot refer to this as 'epic distance'.

<sup>128</sup> Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, transl. R.W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan (Ithaca: Cornell University 1991, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn 1994) p164

<sup>129</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P339

characteristic of these very large narratives. In support of this cross cultural correlation Plaks cites Qing drama critics addressing ‘the precise issue of artistic unity in literary form, in terms that are strikingly similar to those used by Aristotle.’<sup>130</sup> In other words, the apparent divergence of narrative form is distinguished less between cultures than between the novel and drama.

Whereas critical appraisal of the Western novel imposes external structural devices to measure thematic unity, such schemes are not universal values. In Chinese aesthetics ‘the notion of artistic unity was never canonised as a central critical principle.’<sup>131</sup> Problematic as this may appear, it arises primarily from conceiving of the story as a narrative arc atomised within the context of this or that proscenium as against a historiographic POV. Rather than arbitrate here between a consciousness of history or a history of consciousness, in contemporary Chinese the poet Yang Lian unrolls the possibility of history as synchronous in his scheme of a POV in perpetual contemporary reality:

Because tenses don't change in Chinese, words are rewritten as ‘another renewed history’– my own, individual fabricated history. The Chinese language can enable history to exist in the present tense.<sup>132</sup>

But *whose* history? The question presupposes a Western paradigm based around the identity of Plaks’ *factor* as opposed to Mao Zedong’s dictum that history must be made to serve the present. Whereas Bakhtin points to a hierarchy of times permeating Western literature from antiquity to the early modernism, Chinese is thick with idioms<sup>133</sup> derived from parables of an

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, P332

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, P331

<sup>132</sup> [http://yanglian.net/yanglian\\_en/talk.html](http://yanglian.net/yanglian_en/talk.html) accessed 13 July 2012 Selected part of What We Gained from Exile, a dialogue between Gao Xingjian and Yang Lian

<sup>133</sup> The Old Man of Sai (sài wēng shí mǎ), an old frontiersman whose neighbours moods alternate wildly while he endures patient stoicism through wild swings of fortune – he loses his mare; the mare returns with a wild

ideal timeless patience<sup>134</sup> across generations.<sup>135</sup> Personal experience suggests an urban myth of the Westerner whose arrival in a remote Chinese village excites local interest to the point where the mayor organizes a reception in the village hall on the evident presumption that one is the first foreigner to arrive in the village. Both as an urban myth and from personal experience, it is left to the oldest man to explain, apparently from memory, that a foreigner passed through earlier; by the name of Ghengis Kahn, grandfather of the Yuan dynasty. The point here is that the personified Western ‘experience’ of history lies in Bakhtin’s small time category. As such it is not commensurate with, does not share the same narrative plane as, a Chinese historiographic POV. However with respect to Yang Lian’s point, historiographic distance is not directly equivalent to epic distance and can be overcome in the novel through extraordinary historical contexts such as the interesting times of Bulgakov’s earlier example.

It is not self-evident that the very large narratives of Chinese literature are in fact novels rather than novelistic works. The scale of their material is unrolled by a series of episodes in the basic chronotope of adventure time, a prolonged accretion of detail that is not sustained with any intensity and, at its extreme in *The Four Great Works* of the Ming Dynasty, is arguably not a novel at all.<sup>136</sup> Andrew Plaks suggests there is such a form as a ‘non-Western’ novel, claiming ‘the genre of full-length prose fiction that flourished in old China ... as the Chinese “novel” would appear at best a misunderstanding of literary taxonomy’.<sup>137</sup> The earliest sources for the Great Works derive from a highly developed professional story telling

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stallion; his son breaks a leg taming the stallion; the army pass by enlisting every able bodied male except his invalid son. Similarly, a *Lame Tortoise Goes a Thousand Miles* (bo bie qian li), in which six stallions lose themselves in argument while the tortoise reaches Shangri la on its own.

<sup>134</sup> The Foolish Old Man (yú gōng yí shān), concerns an old man digging away at two mountains that separated his home from the nearest town. When asked by a passing sage what he was doing and how would he do it, his answer was ‘I have sons.’ It is the premise behind Song Gong in the fifth short story of *Interesting Times*.

<sup>135</sup> The title of Lao She’s novel *Four Generations Under One Roof*, the story of a family living under Japanese occupation, is an ironic reference to an idiom based on the Confucian ideal of happiness: *Five Generations Under One Roof*.

<sup>136</sup> The generic Chinese term *xiaoshuo* (small talk) covers all fiction, there being no Chinese word for novel.

<sup>137</sup> Plaks, A., ‘The Novel in Premodern China’ in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) p207

class that flourished in growing metropolitan centres of the Sung Dynasty.<sup>138</sup> However these oral references may be omitted by the multiple recensions that ultimately transmit the story in novelistic form.

The Four Great Works include *The Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *Dream of Red Mansions*. Their subject matter is vast, including the origins of Zen (Chinese Chan) Buddhism; dynastic episodes of ‘interesting times’ reflecting the fragility of the state and the warlordism of a failed state, in each case subjects that defy a Western POV if not the Western novel itself. Set down by ‘the organising and transforming genius of a single authorship,’<sup>139</sup> their transmission is comparable to the works of Plutarch, Seneca or an Elizabethan chronicler as transformed by Shakespeare. Similarly the Great Works are conceived on a scale that stretches credibility beyond that of a single authorial POV, having more in common with biblical recension, being determined by pre-existing stories, coherent by their subject material, organised into a single work on a cumulative scale that could not be conceived of other than from a historiographic POV. Their authors are referred to by Gao Xingjian in his Nobel lecture as ‘the four geniuses who wrote China's greatest novels.’<sup>140</sup>

To convey their overwhelming sense of historical perspective, Andrew Plaks puts them beyond mimesis, comparable in scale to ‘ever higher powers of magnification [in] unstinting pursuit of objective “truth” ... to a point at which concrete reality reaches the limit of sensory perception.’<sup>141</sup> On this scale the question is less a matter of *whose* story than *how much* story constitute an incontrovertible historiographic reality, a self-regulating POV. Plaks makes the case for ‘a special kind of reading’ of works on the scale of *Sanguozhi yanyi* (The

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<sup>138</sup> Dudbridge, G., *The Hsi-yu Chi: A Study of Antecedents to the Sixteenth-Century Chinese Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970, reprinted 2009) p7

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., Pix

<sup>140</sup> Gao Xingjian, ‘2000 Nobel lecture delivered in December 2000 at the Swedish Academy, Stockholm’ in ‘*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*’ (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p35

<sup>141</sup> The Novel, Ed Moretti vol.1 p206 ‘The Novel in Premodern China’, Andrew Plaks

Extended Meaning of the History of the Three Kingdoms, a recension of historiographic folklore commonly known as *Three Kingdoms*),<sup>142</sup> for a reading that will reach ‘beyond the external recounting of noble and base deeds into the interior dimensions of delusion and self-awareness.’<sup>143</sup>

From its opening line, ‘The Empire, long divided, must unite; long united must divide, thus it has ever been,’ itself an example of Chinese bi-polarity, there can be no ordinary reading of a million words in which the motivations of 132 major characters are subsumed in the strategic objectives and statecraft of a century of warfare. In addition to the six beginnings and six endings within what Mao Tsung-kang perceives as the grand beginning and the grand conclusion, ‘the entire work is composed overall with cross-reflections from beginning to end, interspersed with major points of key significance’<sup>144</sup> invoking cycles of cross reference that leave the reader constantly open to wider inferences. Images of the shifting alliances and battle fronts between protagonists on two sides entail a third party to be absent, often for long passages of mimetic and diegetic time. Against this ellipsis of cognitive ground, the reader inevitably makes inferences on the part of the ‘absent’ third party to the conflict between those two parties depicted in the text. This cognitive ellipsis accumulates an extra-temporal aspect empowering a unique interpretation that only the empirical reader brings to the text, operating in the manner of Robert Stam’s representational adequacy.<sup>145</sup>

At the start of this chapter we indicated that, by contrast with the small time mimesis of Western novels, *The Four Great Works* embody a historical time resembling Bakhtin’s meta-historical ‘great time’ albeit by disregarding any contrived patterns of orthodox fictional

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<sup>142</sup> ‘Three Kingdoms’ Beijing Foreign Language Press, attr. Luo Guanzhong

<sup>143</sup> The Novel, Ed Moretti vol.1 p207 ‘The Novel in Premodern China’, Andrew Plaks

<sup>144</sup> Plaks p75 [Peter Li citing Mao T. ‘How to read the Three Kingdoms’

<sup>145</sup> Stam, R. ‘Reflexivity in Film and Literature from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard’ UMI Research Press Studies in Cinema, Ann Arbor MI 1985, p34. Of Representational Adequacy: ...involvement in a spectacle increases in inverse proportion to the ‘representational adequacy’ of the medium.

unity. *Journey to the West* features the historical figure Xuan Zang, the translator credited with classical China's only foreign import, namely the Buddhist sutras. *Outlaws of the Marsh* features the rise of a warlord band against a background of corrupt officialdom with the induction of 108 outlaws joining the band episode by episode. With scant regard for conventions of characterisation or unity, their reiteration of biographical episodes builds a separate narrative plane, a historiographic POV on feudal corruption. Against this apparent formlessness it should be noted that writers from Donald Barthelm to Gao Xingjian consider formal unity, plot and characterization as outmoded, if not specifically Western, conventions. With this in mind the Great Works are more readily appreciated for their focus on texture, a particularly close reiterative combination composed of narrative topoi that Plaks identifies as 'complimentary bipolarity' and 'multiple periodicity'.

Complementary Bipolarity is 'the ubiquitous patterns of waxing and waning, or ebb and flow... what Levi Strauss describes as the "binary oppositions" in primary experience.'<sup>146</sup> In the Great Works of Chinese narrative this flux of mutual displacement takes on a discernible pattern, a ceaseless alternation from pole to pole perceived in the passive/active, female/male, dark/light, metaphysical formulations of Yin and Yang.

Multiple Periodicity is a measure of various 'conceptual schemes originally derived from the seasonal cycle but eventually abstracted to apply to sequences of five, 12, 64, or other numbers'<sup>147</sup> as for example the numerology based chapter schemes of *The Four Great Works*. It would be inaccurate to describe these forms as topoi in as far this would imply stasis and therefore at odds with the 'ceaseless flux' of their Daoist operation. They combine more subtly as 'models of formal relations to draw upon plotting a full-length narrative canvas.'<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P335

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, P335

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, P335



Without the conventions of a narrative arc these cyclical relations stand in sharp contrast to the determinative position of the 'end' in a Western novel.

The Daoist concepts from which these forms derive have prehistoric origins in the divinatory hexagrams of the *I Ching*, The Book of Change, whose detailed commentaries precede Qin unification. Plaks cites frequent references in these commentaries to 'ceaseless alternation' and 'cyclical recurrence' in nuanced patterns of change observable under a historiographic POV from which:

It is already evident to the reader familiar with Chinese cultural forms [with respect to] a view of phenomenal flux underlying the Book of Changes, philosophical Taoism, Yin–Yang and five–elements cosmology, Sinicized Buddhism, and hence Sung-Ming Neo-Confucian metaphysics - in other words, the logical underpinnings of the entire literary civilisation.<sup>149</sup>

With this in mind the elusive patterns that exist are more apparent and hold more significance from a POV with bi-polar aspects, revealing a narrative figure similar to Zhuang Zi's Paradox.<sup>150</sup>

The forms that bipolarity and periodicity offer run to myriad combinations and repetitions encapsulated by critical metaphors such as 'call and echo,' 'shadow projection' and 'laying an ambush.' Plaks suggests that the Chinese critical focus is primarily on the texture arising from these figures and their combination such that, when subject to nuanced repetition, they are not perceived as a form so much as a texture of specific relationships that he terms figural

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<sup>149</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P335

<sup>150</sup> Zhuang Zi's paradox or 'the butterfly paradox' in which the philosopher, on waking from dreaming that he was a butterfly, asks himself whether it is possible to distinguish between waking from the dream of a philosopher as butterfly or from the dream of a butterfly as philosopher. In Kantian terms this is to switch cognitive grounds.

recurrence. Of particular interest for a reflexive POV is the formal relationship A *zhong* B, where *zhong* translates as middle. This relationship reflects a Daoist principle of natural cycles in which things change into their opposites, particularly when taken to extremes. In Daoist symbols it is represented by the black yin dot in the middle of the white yang half and vice versa by the white dot in the middle of the yin half. According to Plaks the formal feature A *zhong* B ‘grows out of the closed-circuit restlessness of bipolar alternation... the sense of presence within absence or strength within weakness’<sup>151</sup> and bears a formal resemblance to Zhuang Zi’s paradox within the context of very large narratives. The closest equivalent Western term for this cyclical interdependence of mutual interaction, commonly applied in biological growth, is enantiodromia, literally running in opposite ways: the tendency of things to change into their opposites, especially as a supposed governing principle of natural cycles and of psychological development.<sup>152</sup> In Daoism the law of enantiodromia applies where things at their extremity tend to change into their opposites, as with the figural recurrence of six beginnings and endings between contending states in *The Three Kingdoms*.

This texture of figural recurrence presents a problem for any reading, specifically a Western reading anticipating a linear development rather than cyclic, even circular flow, or the flux characterised by A *zhong* B. This is particularly problematic given the open ended complexity that figural recurrence offers for interpretation of the Great Works:

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p336

<sup>152</sup> Oxford English Dictionary

Anyone who has devoted the countless hours required to read through these very long books soon becomes aware that the close texture of narration is woven out of the incessant repetition of barely differentiated characters and events.<sup>153</sup>

Further, compared to the finely drawn character driven narratives of a Western individualistic POV the adoption of stock figures and motifs accommodated by a historiographic POV may appear unimaginative. Rather than perceive figural recurrence as esoteric or structurally weak, we must consider how this might operate for a native Chinese speaker at ease with the density and layering of meaning in Chinese poems to the extent of accepting that contemporaneous readings, even two successive readings, will differ. This is implicit in the cyclical aesthetic principle behind circular concatenation where an ending leads directly to the beginning and, not to be confused with the static ‘framing’ of narrative, is a dynamic principle exemplified in Tang dynasty *chiieh-chü* quatrains.

Arthur Cooper makes a synaesthetic comparison of the *chiieh-chü* as ‘at once like a little sonata-form and like the composition of a painting,’ with Chinese names for the lines that he translates as follows:

- 1 ‘Raising’ - introduction of the theme
- 2 ‘Forwarding’ - development
- 3 ‘Twisting’ - introducing a new theme
- 4 ‘Conclusion’ - (often circular concatenation)

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<sup>153</sup> The Novel, Ed Moretti vol.1 p191 ‘The Novel in Premodern China’, Andrew Plaks

To European sensibilities, sonata form anticipates finality in a conclusive resolution. Cooper does not see the last line as ending but as ‘concentrating the senses on some often painfully sharp detail [exploding] into what students of Chan (Zen) Buddhism in the West call by its Japanese name of satori, Awareness.’<sup>154</sup> In the event that no such experience emerges the reader’s eye returns to the top line, retracing the poem through a flux of other connections anticipating the timeless cyclical form that emerges under the brush of a Li Bai, Do Fu or Wang Wei. François Cheng paraphrases classical references to ‘the quasi mystical pursuit of *tzū-yen*, “word eye,” the one keyword that illuminates the entire poem at once.’<sup>155</sup> What Cheng appears to have in mind is some sort of epiphany of simultaneous poetics, this at the level of the quatrain, the most common stanzaic form in European poetry.

To a non-native mainland Chinese reader then, formal combinations within the seemingly haphazard episodes of all but the best examples are far from obvious:

The degree of cleverness and wit lavished on this aspect of composition takes some rather baroque forms [so that] it is no wonder that lesser practitioners of the Chinese novelist’s art generally fail to observe these compositional patterns, producing narratives with a sense of structural anarchy sharply contrasting with the careful contrivance observed in the “extraordinary books”<sup>156</sup>

Plaks is particularly resistant to simplistic criticism of the Great Works as episodic collections of oral tales, justifying this by analysis of the numerology behind their chapter-based structure. For example the half way point of *Journey to the West*, fifty of its one

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<sup>154</sup> ‘Li Po and Tu Fu’ by Arthur Cooper, Penguin 1986 p83

<sup>155</sup> Cheng, François, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, transl. from the French by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton. (Indiana: Indiana University Press 1982 1<sup>st</sup> Edn) p7

<sup>156</sup> The Novel, Ed Moretti vol.1 ‘The Novel in Premodern China’, Andrew Plaks p190

hundred chapters, is marked by crossing the 'River of Communion with Heaven' whereas in *The Three Kingdoms* chapter fifty is marked by the strategic 'Battle of the Red Cliffs'. More discrete rhythms of narrative sequence are measured in ten chapter units, a conventional summary pause perceived as wavelike cycles punctuated by abrupt redirections that, in a Western reading, convey 'a sense of structural anarchy sharply contrasting with the careful contrivance observed in the "extraordinary books".'<sup>157</sup>

It follows that the narrative understanding of human experience in these works is not patterned on any 'great man' theory of history. On the contrary, the perception of stock figures<sup>158</sup> and motifs considered by orientalists as evidence to be a lack of imagination is a bias which Plaks is quick to adjust:

It is less a case of disinterest in human motivation than an implicit understanding between the narrator and audience that the causes of human behaviour usually need not be spelt out, or are better off left unstated. The circumstances themselves are seen to be the cause of any given action.<sup>159</sup>

This may explain the different understandings of character but it neglects the long established Western expectation of shape, particularly where the use of stock figures and motifs might be expected to lay form bare. In large works, flat characters have the merit of being easily recognised and remembered. E.M. Forster notes a dearth of flat characters in Russian novels 'where they would be a decided help.' Had Forster read the Chinese Great Works he would have appreciated a set of readily available bamboo bookmarks, one hundred and thirty two of

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, p190

<sup>158</sup> Forster E.M. *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold 1974 first published 1927)

<sup>159</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) P348

them for *The Three Kingdoms*, each separately illustrated with a major character. Between interminable pages of banquets and homilies in the Great Works, in Plaks' words 'idle chitchat,' events are embedded in a Daoist matrix of redundant non-narrative passages of static settings, speeches and digressions. Nonetheless it is with this in mind that they offer a less authorial style of diachrony than a Western reading might expect and with their recurrent development comes awareness of a wholly unanticipated experience approaching a mimesis of historical time:

In the greatest works of the tradition we can observe in this same redundancy polyphonic interweaving of threads of narrative material designed to bring out fine nuances of meaning through subtle cross reflection between individual occurrences.

This rich texture of significant repetition – what I have termed “figural recurrence”<sup>160</sup>

But here Plaks imposes a linear frame of reference on the POV of a longer term, cyclical historiography – a grasp of history as stasis rather than flux, a correlation perhaps between Frances Fukayama's notorious 'end of history' thesis and what Gerald Prince refers to as the 'special significance'<sup>161</sup> of narrative endings in the determination of meaning. Whereas both these cases imply an equivalence between end and outcome in the interests of formal unity, Plaks observes that Aristotle's notion of unity has been somewhat stretched beyond its original context where it applied only to brief dramatic forms.<sup>162</sup> Therefore because we are not imposing the external device of a unified shape or narrative arc, the historiographic POV in Chinese novels can be read as depriving them of structure and rendering them episodic.

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<sup>160</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., 'The Novel in Premodern China' in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006)

<sup>161</sup> Prince, Gerald, *Dictionary of Narratology*, (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press 2003 first published 1987)

<sup>162</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) p330

Where this is brought to the text by the expectations of a Western reader, the recurrent configuration in these works reads like a short story cycle in their accretion of a separate narrative on a different plane. Forrest Ingram identifies a similar epiphany of poetic simultaneity in the Western short story cycle:

Central to the dynamics of the short story cycle is the tension between the one and the many. When do the many cease being merely many and congeal into one? Conversely, when does a “one” become so discrete and differentiated that it dissolves into a “many”? Every short story cycle displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole.<sup>163</sup>

Ingram does not place these dynamics on a continuum of narrative scale but rather points to their reflexivity, facing ‘both ways’. His words could apply equally to the recurrent configuration of Chinese Great Works on such a scale as to render any definition of POV as at best superficial being in Plaks’ words beyond mimesis. Nonetheless among the antecedents of *Journey to the West* for example, although Glen Dudbridge adheres to sources rather than developing the wider ‘forms of combinations of form’ that Bakhtin’s novel possesses, Dudbridge affirms that ‘in spite of the variety of episodes ... one thing remains clear, the story is unquestionably conceived as a cycle...’<sup>164</sup>

Until now we have focussed on fiction written in Classical Chinese. When locating Modern Chinese as a heterological response to the outside world we would be mistaken to

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<sup>163</sup> Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p19

<sup>164</sup> Dudbridge, Glen. *The Hsi-yu Chi: A Study of Antecedents to the Sixteenth-Century Chinese Novel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970, reprinted 2009) p42

consider the language of its Classical precedent as devoid of heterological influence. In ‘Chinese as a Language in a Neighborhood’ the mainland poet Xi Chuan observes: ‘For Chinese to be an independent language, or else to be a language contiguous with other languages, is for us a matter of different significances.’<sup>165</sup> In global terms Modern Chinese is self-conscious, barely awakening to its circumstances. The side of Classical Chinese that encountered the linguistic other has been subject to politicised discourse of unprecedented intensity to the point where its modern equivalent is another language less than a century old.

We may question whether Modern Chinese and Classical Chinese can be the same language, as Xi Chuan does, going so far as to ask why the poems of Qu Yuan (243-278 BC) can be translated with confidence ‘only to become a pile of trash in Modern Chinese.’ In Bakhtin’s terms the answer is that ‘languages interanimate each other and objectify precisely that side of one’s own (and of the other’s) language *that pertains to its world view*.’<sup>166</sup> Xi Chuan’s world view confronts this linguistic inter-animation or heterogloss in similarly Bakhtinian terms: No language does not carry at each instant, a cultural memory symbiotic with that language, and this is the angle from which we observe the modern world.<sup>167</sup>

In heterological terms, the two languages stratify sharply between the Classical of an administrative elite educated chiefly by dynastic histories versus an agricultural society the speaking the vernacular that became Modern Chinese.’ As Xi Chuan puts it, ‘Modern Chinese cannot simply return to Classical Chinese and has, put plainly, become a “foreign language” with respect to Classical Chinese.’<sup>168</sup> Xi traces this development in broad terms

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<sup>165</sup> Xi Chuan, ‘Chinese Language as a Neighborhood’ in ‘Chinese Writers on Writing’ ed. Arthur Sze (San Antonio: Trinity University Press 2010) p261

<sup>166</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse’ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p62

<sup>167</sup> Xi Chuan, ‘Chinese Language as a Neighborhood’ in ‘Chinese Writers on Writing’ ed. Arthur Sze (San Antonio: Trinity University Press 2010) p266

<sup>168</sup> Xi Chuan, ‘Chinese Language as a Neighborhood’ in ‘Chinese Writers on Writing’ ed. Arthur Sze (San Antonio: Trinity University Press 2010), p269



from the writing of vernacular Chinese to the influence of ‘European coloration’ and thence to Modern Chinese where it became, and still is, subject to collectivist and ideological struggles. Rather than deliberate over a century of violently contested prescriptions against linguistic otherness, Xi Chuan observes that ‘the ancients never asked themselves such questions, because Classical Chinese had nearly no neighbours. It did not need a linguistic other to help it know itself.’ On the other hand the nuanced vagaries of Classical Chinese allow for such interpretive power that Xi Chuan confesses to instinctively turning to English translations for clarity when looking for references in the ancient *Book of Change*. But it would be a mistake to regard this anecdote as symptomatic of any wider convergence or centripetal movement in modern Chinese. In the absence of a linguistic other it is questionable whether or not Classical Chinese could have continued to thrive in its own context of understanding without the inherent bi-polarity of Daoist metaphysics shaping its calligraphy, its poetics, its historiography and therefore its narratives. Xi Chuan’s narrative poem, *Exercises in Thought*,<sup>169</sup> confronts the POV of Western individualism through the figure he most closely identifies with it, namely Friedrich Nietzsche: Nietzsche said, ‘Re-evaluate all values,’ so in that case let’s re-evaluate the value of this toothbrush.<sup>170</sup> Starting with this admonition to *Re-evaluate all values*, Nietzsche’s vacuous conjecture is played out *reductio ad absurdum* to conclude: ‘a person shouldn’t find that many truths, so as not to let the supply of truths in this world exceed demand.’<sup>171</sup> In short, Xi Chuan’s poem confronts the multiple perspectives and strata of his (modern) language as complicated by all that its borrowed Western grammar<sup>172</sup> entails. The heterological implications of this confrontation

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<sup>169</sup> ‘Exercises in Thought’ In *Jade Ladder: Contemporary Chinese Poetry* ed. by W.N. Herbert and Yang Lian (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books 2012)

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p301

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p303

<sup>172</sup> Gao Xingjian’s lecture, ‘The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation,’ delivered at the Modern Chinese Literature conference, Aix-en-Provence, 3 November 1996. His 2000 Nobel lecture, ‘The Case for

do not fully emerge in Chinese literature until after the relative isolation of the Cultural Revolution by which time much of classical form has been lost or too much neglected to withstand direct comparison with Western literature. There is however an exception in short story cycles.

The cyclic *pattern* of Western short stories in which Forrest Ingram refers to the “many” as integrated in “one” is indistinguishable<sup>173</sup> from the *texture* of figural recurrence in the Great Works composed of the cyclic figures Andrew Plaks refers to as ‘complimentary bipolarity’ and ‘multiple periodicity’. We have observed that whereas Chinese critics do not concern themselves with aesthetic unity, ‘the special kind of unity a short story cycle has are the dynamic patterns of RECURRENCE and DEVELOPMENT.’<sup>174</sup> (Ingram’s emphasis)

The Modern Chinese from which Xi Chuan surveys its heterogloss neighbourhood has a brief written history. In this respect he cites a letter from Qu Qiubai in 1931 bemoaning the state of the Chinese language and, in a heterological fascination with the merits of foreign literature, the benefit of translation compared to the constraints of Classical Chinese:

The excesses of the feudal Middle Ages tightly enfeather the living language of the Chinese people... under which circumstances, the creation of a new language is a task of extreme importance.<sup>175</sup>

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Literature,’ addresses the same problem beginning: ‘It will be hard for Western writers to comprehend the magnitude of the changes in the Chinese language – the language used in literary creation – that have taken place over the course of this last century.’

<sup>173</sup> Ingrams’ *pattern* comes closest to Plaks’ *texture* when he refers to a cyclic rather than a linear principle: ‘Cycles are made by establishing “such relationships among smaller entities as to create a larger whole” without at the same time destroying the identity of the smaller entities. Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p20

<sup>174</sup> Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p20

<sup>175</sup> Xi Chuan, ‘Chinese Language as a Neighborhood’ in ‘Chinese Writers on Writing’ ed. Arthur Sze (San Antonio: Trinity University Press 2010) p264

Qu's correspondent for this manifesto is Lu Xun who, subsequently credited with popularising vernacular Chinese fiction. Lu Xun's role in this is now subject to grudging reservations on his 'grab-ism' (*nalai zhuyi*) and, in Gao Xingjian words, the ensuing 'bring-it-in-ism':

The morphology and syntax of Western languages have been brought into the modern Chinese language through Chinese translations of Western works, especially through a vast quantity of poorly executed "hard" translations... and thus over time caused written Chinese to become Europeanised.<sup>176</sup>

In what Julia Lovell refers to as 'the most famous conversion in modern Chinese literature,' it was not Western modernism or colonialism that brought about Lu Xun's epiphany but his studies of Western medicine in Japan. When fellow students laughed at an extra-curricular slide of a suspect Chinese spy beheaded by a Japanese before a passive crowd of Chinese spectators, Lu Xun abandoned his medical studies to diagnose his country's intellectual health. In his own words, 'I reinvented myself as a crusader for cultural reform.'<sup>177</sup>

In the preface for his first stories,<sup>178</sup> Lu Xun recalls a lugubrious existence copying ancient inscriptions in a hostel opposite a tree from which a woman hanged herself. He writes of a visit from the editor of *New Youth*, who challenged his preoccupation with calligraphy

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<sup>176</sup> Gao Xingjian, 'The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation.' Lecture delivered at the Modern Chinese Literature conference, Aix-en-Provence, 3 November 1996. in '*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*' (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p105

<sup>177</sup> Lu Xun *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: the Complete Fiction of Lu Xun* transl. J. Lovell, (London: Penguin Books 2009) Pxxvi. This anecdote exemplifies Bakhtinian concepts in operation: Lu's heterological encounter between Japanese and Chinese resulting in his adoption of a POV shifted into the plane of contemporary reality.

<sup>178</sup> Written between 1918 and 1922, anthologised as *Outcry*, also translated as *Call to Arms*, published in 1923, twenty years after Lu cut off his queue.

exercises and to whom Lu Xun responded with the parable of the iron house.<sup>179</sup> At the editor's suggestion of waking a few suffocating inhabitants to destroy the house from inside, Lu responded with the first stories to be published in vernacular Chinese including *Nostalgia*,<sup>180</sup> *Diary of a Madman*<sup>181</sup> and *The Real Story of Ah-Q*,<sup>182</sup> stories in which the POV is typically that of a third person protagonist overwhelmed by rituals that have worn out their meaning. These stories had the effect of stimulating debate on the confrontation between the stimulus of foreign literature and contemporary reality as portrayed by Lu Xun. In as far as the epic POV is separated by absolute distance, we might see the *Outcry/Call to Arms* stories as Lu Xun's destruction of historiographic distance; his adoption of a POV on the same plane as contemporary reality with respect to subject material. In each case Lu Xun overcomes the Chinese equivalent of epic distance by choosing a POV close to that of Bakhtin's novelistic leap forward, that is, a POV location where 'contemporary reality and its concerns become the starting point and centre of an artistic ideological thinking and evaluating of the past.'<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> The house has no ventilation, its occupants are locked inside asleep, unaware that they are about to die of suffocation but rather than making them aware of their danger it may be kinder to leave them anaesthetised to their end. The lesson is that to escape, some of those sleeping inside must be woken.

<sup>180</sup> *Nostalgia* is an autobiographical sketch of his youth, caught between wrote-learning pedantry in the classroom and the lively folk customs outside, a story Julia Lovell associates with Lu's father forcing him to memorise schoolbooks of dynastic history.

<sup>181</sup> *Diary of a Madman* is a lost manuscript story with a preface written in Classical Chinese to introduce the vernacular of the title diary that Henry Zhao refers to as 'a powerful manifesto of modern Chinese fiction to denounce the institution of traditional Chinese culture. The meaning-power of fiction no longer lies in its successful emulation of historiography, but in its subversion of the latter's cultural dominance.' [Henry Zhao, 'Historiography and Fiction in Chinese Culture', in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) P93]

<sup>182</sup> *The Real Story of Ah-Q*, a mock biography, the protagonist's name is chosen for its resemblance to a blank face with a queue. Lu Xun satirises Ah-Q's agonising over the 'correct' means to fit his narrative into the blank pages of historiographic form, his ancestral home, his feudal status and robust sense of merit vis a vis the mediocre aspirations of aspirants to 'at least the lowest rung of the official examinations.' The historian Arthur Cotterell considers Lu's target to be the classicism of the Imperial examination system culminating with the supreme irony of 'the execution of Ah Q, failed bandit and revolutionary, by means of an imported machine gun.' [Cotterell, Arthur, *China: A History*, (London: Pimlico 1995 first published 1988) p257]

<sup>183</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p29

In short, by adopting a POV in his contemporary reality Lu Xun offers a non-Western example of the novel's genre-inclusiveness and its ability to surmount epic, or in this case historiographic, distance. In his deliberations over the Chinese engagement with Western discourse,<sup>184</sup> the title of Lu Xun's essay, *Upon Gazing in a Mirror*, could itself be a translation for the architectonics of Bakhtin's *Art and Answerability*.

Since its beginnings with Lu Xun, we might ask why the encounter between Modern Chinese language and modernist fiction has until now offered little for Western readings. Lu Xun's later work becomes increasingly polemical, retelling classics to serve the political pragmatism of his epoch to the extent that his standing has subsequently become ambiguous. In Julia Lovell's words:

He remained, throughout his life, pessimistic about the relationship between writers and politics, predicting (accurately) that the revolution would obliterate literature. By the time of his death from tuberculosis in 1936, he was rowing furiously with the party's cultural apparatchiks. But even decades after Mao started removing the sting from Lu Xun, official discomfort with the writer's dissident tendencies remains. In 2007, the beginnings of a Lu Xun withdrawal from Chinese school textbooks...<sup>185</sup>

Thirty years after Lu's work was adopted for Cultural Revolution slogans, campaigning against 'the four olds' of culture, customs, habits and ideas, Lovell detects the beginning of a withdrawal of Lu Xun from Chinese school textbooks. Shifting historical contexts have resulted in an ironic 'festival homecoming' of meaning in Lu Xun's last work, a paragon of

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<sup>184</sup> Shu-Mei frames these deliberations in the question: 'Can a discourse borrowed from the West be truly liberating without implicating its users in its epistemological and power hierarchy?' Shu-Mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China 1917-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2001) p15n

<sup>185</sup> Julia Lovell, 'China's Conscience' *Guardian* 12 June 2010.

genre inclusiveness breaking Bakhtin's forbidden contact between 'images of the epic and the images of familiar contact ... on the same field of representation.'<sup>186</sup> In 'Bringing Back the Dead', one of a series of classical legends that Lu Xun chose to rework, Zhuang Zi is portrayed as a curmudgeonly old wizard confounded by his own paradox in the matter of life and death. Given the present withdrawal of some Lu Xun works from the Chinese school curriculum, his grab-ist response to modernism may only serve to reaffirm Zhuang Zi's ineluctable butterfly paradox in which case we should find evidence of heterological operation to be present in a contemporary context. With this in mind we will briefly consider a singularly rapid turnover of literary trends over a particular 10 year period.

We have already noted Xi Chuan's contextualisation of Modern Chinese as a recent phenomenon. Regarding the novel, it is only in the period following China's open door policy that modern Chinese fiction begins 'distancing itself from the immediate social need of entertainment and edification [winning] the right to develop in its own direction.'<sup>187</sup> According to Henry Zhao the New Wave Fiction that emerged immediately following the post-Cultural Revolution required a kind of heroism for 'an affirmation of individual values strongly contrasted with the absurd extremism of collective pressures brought to bear on them by cruel political campaigns.' In the overall period between the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen protests Zhao divides New Wave Fiction into three sub-genres: 'Stray Youth Fiction (*Shiluodai Xiaoshuo*), Roots Seeking Fiction (*Xungen Xiaoshuo*), Avante-Garde Fiction (*Xianfeng Xiaoshuo*),' all concurrent manifestations of the relationship between individual and society. From these contemporary movements Zhao notably omits Scar

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<sup>186</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Epic and Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans.by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p28

<sup>187</sup> Zhao, Henry, *The Lost Boat: Avant-garde fiction from China* (London: Wellsweep Press 1993) p10

Fiction (*Shanghen Xiaoshuo*)<sup>188</sup>. Stray Youth Fiction does not directly compare with the Western counter-culture fiction that it resembles but is rather ‘a nihilistic defiance of any value system.’<sup>189</sup> In the Roots Seeking Fiction that evolved from 1986-87 ‘younger writers went “outside’ the mainstream Confucian culture to isolated pockets of minority culture still untainted by civilisation [sic]; or ‘sideways’ to Daoism.’<sup>190</sup> Zhao emphasises avant-garde’s temporal aspect where it is likely to become passé unless it is sustained by contextual considerations such as Zhao applies to Chinese writers with ‘a socio-cultural mode of literary discourse, and/or a particular author-reader relationship.’<sup>191</sup> Ironically we have to set aside Gao Xingjian’s much later Nobel citation (2000) to put him in this context, emerging as the most significant writer among them if only for the relevance of his fiction across the full scope of these sub-genres, having something in common with each.

The closely observed socio-ontological analysis informing Gao’s play ‘Fleeing’, the notorious ‘Bus Stop’ and his essay ‘no isms’ stand out against the background of Stray Youth fiction, a sub-genre that Zhao regards as ‘not so much a protest against society but a nihilistic defiance of any value system...the negation of everything, even the significance of their own existence... the impossibility of society’s embodying any values.’<sup>192</sup> Roots Seeking Fiction is ‘a more dramatic episode in the development of contemporary Chinese fiction’<sup>193</sup> according to Henry Zhao. It finds its apotheosis at the beginning of *Soul Mountain* in the narrator’s search among the non-Han minorities of the upper Yangtse, often alluding to pre-

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<sup>188</sup> Perry Link notes that following Beijing publication of Liu Binyan’s *People or Monsters?* in 1979, ‘in the winter of 1980, when the top leadership decided that scar literature had served its purpose in discrediting the Gang-of-Four and was now beginning to undermine its own rule, the central Propaganda Department sent word down its hierarchy that the masses were getting tired of the baleful tales and wanted more writing about heroes of the Four Modernizations. But to judge from all available direct evidence of popular preferences, no such shift actually occurred.’ Link, P., *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000) p89.

<sup>189</sup> Zhao, Henry ‘The Lost Boat: Avant-garde fiction from China’ (London: Wellsweep Press 1993) p10

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, p12

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, p15

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, p11

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p10

literate tribal idylls in a wistful register that is nonetheless in keeping with the inspirational landscape. With respect to POV over all these sub-genres then, whereas we can agree with Torbjörn Lodén that perspective and method define Gao's work, in modern Chinese it has overcome epic/historic distance to write the most significant novel by which 'literature has passed from the stage of reflection to the stage of pluralistic research.'<sup>194</sup> In Gao's self-professed *timeless flow of language*, his narrative perspective reveals those possibilities that Bakhtin once anticipated in a putative vertical chronotope:

Only under conditions of pure simultaneity – or what amounts to the same thing, in an environment outside time altogether – can there be revealed the true meaning of 'that which was, and which is and which shall be': and this is so because the force (time) that divided these three is deprived of its authentic reality and its power to shape thinking. To "synchronize diachrony," to replace all temporal and historical divisions and linkages with purely interpretative, extratemporal and hierarchicized ones.<sup>195</sup>

In formal terms we can see this as a reflexive cycle in the circular concatenation of Classical Chinese poetics and Zen literary practices inspiring Gao Xingjian's contemporary short stories.

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid, p11

<sup>195</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p157



### CHAPTER THREE - Reflexive POV and the Fiction of Gao Xingjian

Gao Xingjian begins his published lecture on 'Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation,' by explaining, 'It will be hard for Western writers to comprehend the magnitude of the changes in Chinese language.'<sup>1</sup> As a Chinese writer of French citizenship, Gao is well placed to grasp Bakhtin's Architectonics where it comes to the limits of understanding another culture. For example, according to Bakhtin a Chinese study of May Fourth modernism, 'would be merely duplication and would not entail anything new ... the reader's understanding must be located outside the object of their creative understanding in time, space and culture.'<sup>2</sup> Gao's lecture was not delivered in his native Chinese but in French, the subject of his university study, with its heavily inflected grammar of pronomial declensions, which may explain his claim that 'human awareness of language begins with the emergence of pronouns.'<sup>3</sup> Whatever their origin, in *Soul Mountain* this observation is the basis for partitioning POV as inner speech, running dialogues at the level of personal pronouns. This POV has consequences that transcend narrative conventions, leading to an apparently fragmentary structure. In his essay 'On Fiction and the Art of Fiction,' Gao develops his ideas on outmoded Western concepts, replacing them by what Mabel Lee refers to as '*A New Form of Narration*'<sup>4</sup> (Lee's italics). We shall consider the impact of Gao's theories on characterisation and plot through Lee's essay 'Pronouns as Protagonists: On Gao Xingjian's

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<sup>93</sup> Gao Xingjian, 'The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation.' Lecture delivered at the Modern Chinese Literature conference, Aix-en-Provence, 3 November 1996. in '*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*' (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p104

<sup>94</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Response to a Question From Novy Mir' In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p7

<sup>95</sup> Gao Xingjian. 'Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*' and May 1991, Stockholm (lecture presented at the East Asian Institute, Stockholm University) in *Gao Xingjian: the case for literature* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p96

<sup>96</sup> Lee, Mabel 'Pronouns as Protagonists: On Gao Xingjian's Theories of Narration' in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001) p250

Theories of Narration,'<sup>5</sup> noting briefly their correlation with short story cycles. Regarding character, Lee translates Gao's words as follows:

Fiction does not need to portray characters; characters can be simply implied meanings. With this type of characterization, the central concern of the work is the writer's own understanding and perceptions of life rather than true-to-life sketches of social life.<sup>6</sup>

Within Chinese literature this is not such an extravagant claim. Andrew Plaks points to characterisation as specific to Western literature on the grounds that 'it is precisely the assumption of a logical conclusion to the observable fluctuations in human behaviour that gives rise to the notion of character *development* in narrative.'<sup>7</sup> This correlates with short stories in Western literature where 'characters do not usually develop in the kind of single continuous process one finds most often in novels.'<sup>8</sup> Although not all Western novels are driven by character, in the case of those driven by plot Lee restates Gao's position as follows:

In Gao Xingjian's analysis, the plot is a structure derived from a relatively primitive knowledge of social life, that is, a cause-effect relationship. Cause and effect are a linked circle, but the world is not circularly constructed; nor is it simply linear so that the writer can keep narrating until a point is reached where the story comes to an

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<sup>5</sup> Lee, Mabel 'Pronouns as Protagonists: On Gao Xingjian's Theories of Narration' in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001)

<sup>6</sup> Lee, Mabel 'Pronouns as Protagonists: On Gao Xingjian's Theories of Narration' in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001) p244

<sup>7</sup> Plaks, *A Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) p341

<sup>8</sup> Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p22

impasse and two lines of development occur. This structure is still such that the two lines finally have to join and to re-form a circle, that is, the conclusion.<sup>9</sup>

Again this has consequences for narrative conventions where, without implied cause and effect, the connections of a plot may weaken to the extent they break down leaving an apparently incoherent narrative that, by the criterion of a well plotted novel, lacks unity. However, given that in Chinese culture 'the notion of artistic unity was never canonised as a central critical principle,'<sup>10</sup> the unified plot may also be regarded as a specifically Western device. Nonetheless between Classical Chinese novels and Western short story cycles there are similarities in the kind of unity that Ingram regards as a precondition for the latter genre, a rogue unity in which 'the many are one and the one many... the *claritas* of the whole perceived as a function of the *integritas* and *consonantia* of its parts.'<sup>11</sup> In summary then we should note that plotting and character development, already at odds with Chinese Great Works and the Western short story cycle, are rejected by Gao Xingjian as outmoded narrative conventions. His succinct dismissal of cause and effect requires sharper definition for an understanding of what we will term reflexivity.

In the statements 'John looked at himself,' or 'Janet hurt herself' the subject and object are identical, in which case the verb linking them is said to be reflexive. In making narrative connections through cause and effect a reflexive relationship can be problematic, weakening links that would otherwise be presented to determine unity and coherence with respect to the whole. Confronted with this Janus faced reflex between subject and object, the reader may perceive two aspects from a single POV, a reflexive POV for which we find evidence in both

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<sup>9</sup> Lee, Mabel 'Pronouns as Protagonists: On Gao Xingjian's Theories of Narration' in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001) p245

<sup>10</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) p331

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 1971 p44

the ‘special kind of unity’<sup>12</sup> of Ingram’s short story cycle and Bakhtin’s architectonics where the parts become whole except that ‘in themselves they remain alien to each other.’<sup>13</sup> This paradox, or reflex, in which the reader is obliged to suspend judgement while facing ‘both’ ways operates at the core of what Ingram regards as ‘the central dynamic of the short story cycle, its tension between the one and the many, the necessary double tendency of short story cycles to assert both the individuality of its components and their binding within the whole.’<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin demonstrates a similar reflex for the hybrid voices of a novel in that they ‘cannot be unfolded into logical contradictions or into purely dramatic contrasts’.<sup>15</sup>

Returning specifically to Gao’s fiction then, we find reflexivity in the relationship between two aspects of a single POV, aspects subtended by what Gao Xingjian refers to as narrative angle. At its simplest, Gao’s short story ‘In an Instant’ takes the form of a gestalt in a particular kind of framed narrative whose subject is either a man reading a book, or whose object is the same man’s impressions from what we ourselves are reading ‘in an instant’. Like the familiar Gestalt image perceived as either symmetric facial profiles or a vase, both interpretations are equally valid and, like the reflexive verb, each reading is an *act* of perception, an interpretation between subject and object to the extent that successive visions or readings may, like a Tang dynasty poem, appear to contradict. Again, like the Gestalt perception of either vase or facial profiles, such readings are not hybrids but rather instances of perception from a reflexive POV. We have already noted Gao Xingjian’s rejection of plotting and character development as outmoded narrative conventions. We will now

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<sup>12</sup> Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p20

<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Art and Answerability’ in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, trans. M. Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, (Austin: University of Texas 1st Edn 1990, published in Russian 1919) p1

<sup>14</sup> Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p19

<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Discourse in the Novel’ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p356

consider how in his fiction these have been replaced by a nuanced language of self-observation, effectively a pronomial grammar for Voloshinov/Bakhtin's inner dialogue.

Mabel Lee prefaces her essay, 'Gao Xingjian on the Issue of Literary Creation for the Modern Writer,' with this untitled and unmediated caveat:

Notions of the self and an other are born in the same: one cannot exist without the other, and furthermore the existence of a self and an other inevitably is a political situation. In endeavours of academic enquiry, aggressive one-way applications of the self/other paradigms can create blindspots which lead to ignoring, obscuring, or distorting substantive differences and similarities within both what is denoted as self and what is denoted as other.<sup>16</sup>

Lee could equally have cited Bakhtin on the monologic quality of abstract polemical language as a false unity 'opposed to the realities of heteroglossia.'<sup>17</sup> She presents the deeply reflective quality of Gao's fiction arrived at through an awareness of bi-polarity in Chinese metaphysics, combining studies of capping phrase practice with theories on contemporary fiction, initially within the short story form. The fact that capping phrase practice is presently better known by the Japanese term *kōan* reveals a communication difficulty that Bakhtin would refer to as a 'second context.'

In a dictionary context, definitions of a *kōan* such as that in Webster's (in zen, a nonsense question asked of a student to bring the student, through contemplation of it, to a greater

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<sup>16</sup> Lee, Mabel 'Gao Xingjian on the Issue of Literary Creation for the Modern Writer' in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001) p21

<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Discourse in the Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p270

awareness of reality)<sup>18</sup> can be misleading with respect to the capping phrase practice in which kōans are used in the tendency of the definition to obscure the rather greater contextual meaning that attaches to kōan study. Whereas the dictionary definition may not be incorrect, as Victor Sōgen Hori states in the opening to his book of capping phrases for kōan practice, ‘Standard images like “do not mistake the finger for the moon” remind the Zen practitioner not to confuse the label with the labelled.’<sup>19</sup> As a process in just one Rinzai monastery, a novice presented with a kōan responds to it by embarking on what is effectively a process of literary research:

...when a monk has passed a kōan the Zen teacher will instruct him to bring a “capping phrase” ... The monk selects a verse or phrase that expresses the insight he has had while meditating on the kōan. He searches for this capping phrase in one of the several Zen phrase books that have been especially compiled for this purpose. If the monk continues into advanced stages of the Rinzai Zen kōan curriculum ... writing assignments can consume considerable amounts of time during the later stages of a monk’s stay in the monastery.<sup>20</sup>

To address the abstruse legacy of capping phrase practice as a second context in Chinese literature we must first be clear about the intercultural context of this thesis. The problem is raised through communication philosophy as one of what Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon refer to as Utilitarian Discourse.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Webster’s College Dictionary (Macmillan 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn1997)

<sup>19</sup> Victor Sōgen Hori, ‘Translating the Zen Phrase Book.’ Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture 1999 p3

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p3,4

<sup>21</sup> Scollon Ron and Scollon Suzanne Wong, *Intercultural Communication*, (Oxford: Blackwell 1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 2001) p150

In contemporary academic and business communication, Scollon and Scollon point to the inherent ideology of Utilitarian Discourse where its C–B–S style, that is ‘Clarity’ and ‘Brevity’ and ‘Sincerity’, is held as inseparable from notions of quality. Whereas Utilitarian Discourse precludes the existence of certain Chinese literary games, Gao is familiar with the latter as genres in a classical tradition that esteems communication by allusion and highly developed guesswork approaching telepathy. Scollon and Scollon refer to instances of this in contemporary Japanese communication where ‘it is believed that the most important things cannot be communicated in language, that language is only useful for somewhat secondary or trivial messages’<sup>22</sup> in contrast to direct transmission (*ishin denshin*), a long established tradition that Scollon and Scollon claim to be derived from Zen Buddhism.

In Gao’s use of language, his critical essays demonstrate a deeply reflective position regarding his use of language, a position informed by French inflection and uninflected Chinese. He nonetheless adopts a stance of pragmatic scepticism towards his own subject on the grounds that he has ‘yet to find a good writer who has benefited from the guidance of theorists. They either stipulate rigid models or create fashions.’<sup>23</sup> This scepticism comes close to Bakhtin’s methodological reservations where ‘the subject of research becomes the researcher himself’<sup>24</sup> or in Gao’s words, ‘a case of a theorist’s constructing his own theory and giving it a name.’<sup>25</sup> Gao develops his scepticism further, partly because what he refers to as ‘traditional philosophy’<sup>26</sup> comes to an end with Wittgenstein and more fundamentally because he makes a clear distinction between logic and language:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p152

<sup>23</sup> Gao Xingjian. ‘Literature and Metaphysics’ Yale University Press 2006 p94

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences’ In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p169

<sup>25</sup> Gao Xingjian. ‘Literature and Metaphysics’ Yale University Press 2006 p97

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p89

[language] does not obey the objective concepts of time and space that belong to the physical world. When the discussion of time and space is imported into linguistic art from scientific aims and research methods, that linguistic art is entirely reduced to trifling pseudo-philosophical issues.<sup>27</sup>

Notwithstanding that Gao's position is incompatible with the visual spatial conceits constructed by Western theorists in Chapter One, we are at a disadvantage on the subject of capping phrases, having previously observed that much study of Tang poetry is lost in translation outside Professor Cheng's 'semiotic order par excellence'.<sup>28</sup> Whichever side of Bó Yáng's soybean paste vat we approach from, capping phrase practice is a sophisticated study of its own, a second context in Chinese that purports to lie outside the literary canon of its own culture:

A special transmission outside of the scriptures;

No dependence upon words and letters;

Direct pointing to the soul of man;

Seeing into one's own nature.<sup>29</sup>

Of course Bakhtin does not comment on Buddhism but from within Western culture he points outside to discrete double voicing that is necessarily elusive 'without knowing the background of alien discourse against which it is projected, that is, without knowing its

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p90

<sup>28</sup> Cheng, François, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, transl. from the French by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton. (Indiana: Indiana University Press 1982 1<sup>st</sup> Edn) pxiii

<sup>29</sup> Following widespread disputes as to Sanskrit source and Chinese target translations when Buddhist teaching was introduced to China, the first patriarch Bodhidharma summarised Chan Buddhism in this quatrain.



second context.<sup>30</sup> An utterance in another culture then may sometimes be so remote as to be, for all utilitarian purposes, ineffable. In order to proceed we might have recourse to a literary device, in this case analogous to Hemingway's theory of omission. Also known as Hemingway's iceberg theory for its ostensible balance between what is visible and what is implied under the surface, Hemingway's theory is more of a writing style than a theory. Charles May's authoritative work on the short story links Chekov's sense that 'in short stories it is better to say not enough than to say too much' with Hemingway's theory of omission, namely the latter's conviction that a writer 'may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them.'<sup>31</sup> By relating the question of 'How much is hidden?' to its bi-polar compliment, 'How much is revealed?' Here a meaningful response requires suspension of judgement (an abhorrence of prejudice) in the course of a reading so that the overall transaction becomes less of a rhetorical riddle than a reflexive process not dissimilar to the epistemological subversion that Victor Sōgen Hori confronts in his attempts to translate capping phrases:

The Zen meaning is expressed in the ambiguity of the conceptual and experiential, in the deconstruction of precise but false dichotomies, in the undercutting of an epistemological standpoint that constantly presupposes a subject of experience intentionally directed at an object.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Discourse in the Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p374

<sup>31</sup> May, Charles E., *The Short Story – The Reality of Artifice* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1995) p63

<sup>32</sup> Victor Sōgen Hori, 'Translating the Zen Phrase Book.' *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 1999 p57

If this is a true representation of Zen meaning then it is unlikely to be conveyed through Utilitarian Discourse. We have seen in Chapter One that the problem of extracting discrete meaning from a short story becomes contentious when ‘standard ocular terms’ are applied. Although philosophical terms exist in Zen their potential for empty intellectualisation is such that according to Professor Hori ‘such technical terminology is said to “stink of Zen”.’<sup>33</sup> Hori’s problematics correspond with those of Bakhtin where, with regard to ‘exact’ science, ‘the intellect contemplates a *thing* and expounds upon it. There is only one subject here ...in opposition to the subject there is only a *voiceless thing*.’<sup>34</sup> For Hori the same problem is expressed as a ‘one-sided judgement in which the party being judged does not get a chance to answer back.’<sup>35</sup> Sōgen Hori proceeds to emphasise the problem of translating contextual meaning to the extent of claiming that one cannot begin to talk sensibly about Zen capping phrases ‘without the prolonged series of monastic exercises whose first lesson is to make the monk step back from the kōan.’<sup>36</sup> In short, without direct experience of this contextual understanding, capping phrase practice remains a ‘second context’ *within* Chinese language and culture.

For present purposes then we may do little more than note that capping phrases reveal the confusion of categories arising from our use of language. We will however observe how Gao Xingjian removes the partitioning of POV to convey the stories underlying this confusion. In Hori’s words: The study of capping-phrase practice makes explicitly clear that Zen seeks not freedom from language by rejecting it, but freedom in language by mastering it.<sup>37</sup> Put another way, whatever happens in the monastery our response to the sound of one hand

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p51

<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences’ In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas 1986 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p161

<sup>35</sup> Victor Sōgen Hori, ‘Translating the Zen Phrase Book.’ Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture 1999 p51

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p51

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p90

clapping resonates equally with those faculties exercised in reading Gao's fiction. In making this assertion we should note Gao's observation that whereas language must conform to strict distinctions in tense voice and mood in Utilitarian Discourse, this is not the case in Chinese:

...to stress all these layers in Chinese – past, present and future tense, direct and indirect speech, condition, supposition, possibility and reality – would make the writing very clumsy. The ancient Chinese language does not distinguish between tenses and what emerges in classical poetry could be called a psychological state that transcends time and space.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand what emerges in English begins with the confusion of contextual identity between 'I' and 'me'. In this respect the juxtaposition of carefully set bi-polar contexts in Gao's short stories may perform a similar practice to revealing the false dichotomies behind every day perception. At its simplest, Gao's POV can operate like a reflexive verb linking two ill-defined pronouns. At its most comprehensive, Scollon and Scollon's direct transmission requires a reflexive POV with bi-polar aspects to render meaning more profoundly than extended Utilitarian Discourse. From the POV in Gao's fiction then, we are not led to solve his narrative question on the last page but to cohabit a psychological domain distinguished from visual conceits of distance, perspective, time and space as a volatile cognitive reflex between narrative planes.

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<sup>38</sup> Gao Xingjian. 'The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation.' Lecture delivered at the Modern Chinese Literature conference, Aix-en-Provence, 3 November 1996. in '*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*' (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p111

The six stories in Gao Xingjian's English language anthology *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather* (BFRG) each feature a POV with more than one aspect or, bearing in mind the absence of source language inflection, more than one 'narrative angle'. Gao chose five short stories from seventeen previously published in Taiwan under the title *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather* as the best examples of what he strives for in his fiction. The sixth story was a later addition to the English language anthology only and published in a concluding position that emphasises reflexivity in the collection as a whole. In considering Gao's BFRG stories we will firstly address two examples that are simplest to present, namely 'In an Instant' and 'The Temple', stories whose POV is oriented to material organised in the form of a Gestalt and mirror image respectively. Secondly, and rather more complex, is the reflexive technique in the three later stories featuring more complex bi-polar configurations written two years after the first group in 1985. These are, 'In the Park', 'Cramp' and 'The Accident' where the reflexivity of each story's POV demonstrates the enantiomorphic A *zhong* B, in as far as they have bi-polar aspects that each turn in on themselves, following the circular concatenation of Chinese poetics. We shall consider these three together as a means of introduction to the multiple perspectives of Gao's 'de-partitioned' POV in the title story for a particularly close reading on the grounds that it exemplifies Gao's experiments with narrative angle, bringing them to fruition as the multiple perspectives that effectively remove Genette's quadri-partitioning of POV and provide the experimental basis for *Soul Mountain*.

Among the first group 'In an Instant' uses virtuoso writing in the frame of a Zhuang Zi-like paradox: do we have the image of a man reading *a book* or the man's total experience (including intrusive surroundings) of reading *the book*? The piece reads as a projection of inner dimensions in which Gao claims to 'evoke visual images, including images of the

mind,<sup>39</sup> in this case framed by opening and closing images of the man with his book. Like the familiar Gestalt image that is either a vase or two symmetrical profiles, the reader's perception oscillates between two separate but coexistent cognitive grounds. 'The Temple' uses a POV with two aspects for what is essentially a journey narrative. One aspect is the happiness of the occasion, namely a honeymoon. The other aspect remains curiously untold, being suffering marked by potentially digressive ellipses that, as the narrator constantly reminds us, are not part of the story. By repeated allusions that are never explicitly stated the other aspect accretes a narrative of its own so that the ellipses invite our interpretation precisely because there is a lack to be filled, operating as Stam's representational adequacy.<sup>40</sup> The separate narratives could be considered as a 'twist' except that the twist is present throughout, beginning with the honeymooner's holiday entitlement being halved by their works supervisor through a series of minor obstacles to reach the temple and concluding with its juxtaposition to a vegetable patch<sup>41</sup> manure pit that recalls their 'years spent shovelling manure with our production units in the countryside.'<sup>42</sup> In short, 'The Temple' invites a unifying interpretation between separate contexts told from a reflexive POV with two separate aspects, one explicit and the other its complimentary 180° reflection of the protagonists' happiness. 'The Temple' is the earliest story of the anthology, offering a reflexive interpretation in a context nested between two narrative aspects. With this in mind we will return to 'The Temple' after developing the use of a reflexive POV in the more complex topoi of 'The Accident', 'Cramp' and 'In the Park'.

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<sup>39</sup> Gao Xingjian. 'The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation.' Lecture delivered at the Modern Chinese Literature conference, Aix-en-Provence, 3 November 1996. in *Gao Xingjian: the case for literature* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p113

<sup>40</sup> Stam, R. 'Reflexivity in Film and Literature from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard' UMI Research Press Studies in Cinema, Ann Arbor MI 1985, p34.

<sup>41</sup> An allusion to Shen Congwen's critically acclaimed, if controversial, short story 'The Vegetable Garden'.

<sup>42</sup> Gao Xingjian, 'The Temple' in *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather*, transl. Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p14

The narrative angles juxtaposed in these three stories are more intricate than the mirror and Gestalt examples. In each case the material is arranged in bi-polar configurations but with the double aspect of the story telling position located differently in each case: stratified as in 'The Accident', cyclic in both 'Cramp' and 'In the Park' where inner speech is dialogised between past memory and present setting.

In 'The Accident' the entire opening paragraph consists of four words and an ellipsis telling us the incident has already taken place: 'It happened like this ...' [sic]. There follows a forensic observation of a father towing his child in a buggy as he cycles in front of a bus, apparently in an act of suicide. The accident becomes an object of speculation in snatches of unmediated dialogue until a street washing truck flushes away the last traces of blood. Only then does the narrator raise the question, 'But who is the deceased?'<sup>43</sup> at which point the mimesis stratifies into direct authorial speculation, sustained in a protracted fade-out until it ends where it began:

The sum total of all these factors had hastened his death, so this misfortune was inevitable. I have been discussing philosophy again, but life is not philosophy, even if philosophy can derive from knowledge of life... However, what is related here is simply the process of this traffic accident itself, a traffic accident that occurred at five o'clock, in the central section of Desheng Avenue in front of the radio repair shop.<sup>44</sup>

The third person POV of 'Cramp' is that of a singular unspeaking swimmer and so closely intradiegetic that the observations could be written in first person. Its opening leaves no doubt as to motivation: 'Cramp. His stomach is starting to cramp.' However a brief

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p73

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p75

retrospective to ‘a young woman in a red swimsuit’ reveals, ‘He had gone straight into the water without looking back, thinking that the woman might be watching him [and later] That woman, it’s all because of that red swimsuit of hers.’<sup>45</sup> In time he is so far from shore that he can no longer see the woman and barely recognises tree tops on the horizon that now divides him from her. His penultimate action is to vow that ‘if he can return to shore ... he won’t even go into the sea again.’ It is dark by the time he reaches dry land and walking along the beach he sees two boys jump into the sea naked, leaving a girl calling out to them from the shore while they ‘prance about’ in the surf. Again cyclic, the story ends where it began, alluding to the frustrated communication between man and woman:

The girl screams out, but it is only the crashing of the waves that responds. In the faint light reflected on the sea surging up to the shore, he sees that the girl [...] is supporting herself on crutches.

The story ‘In the Park’ appears to be an unmediated dialogue between two estranged lovers who have arranged to meet in a park where they played together as children. But the dialogue is conspicuously free of tags and it becomes clear this is dialogised inner speech as in Volshinov/Bakhtin’s earlier interpretation. Embedded in this are twelve mimetic observations of a young woman, apparently waiting for her lover, and close enough to hear sighs of the jilted woman’s growing distress. After the dialogue’s lengthy exchange over the failure of ‘their’ childhood relationship that did not develop beyond the times ‘they’ played together ‘in the park’, the lines debate what to do on the distressed woman’s behalf and whether or not ‘they’ should try to help her at all. As the light fades, the dialogue grows

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p48

increasingly petty as past differences are replayed in the present until ‘they’ can no longer see the woman. Finally they hear, ‘a sob, one that couldn’t be stifled,’ just before asking a question that might avoid the distressed woman repeating the narrator’s experience: “Do you think maybe it’d be best if we urged her to go home?”

In these three stories then, Gao disregards the arc of Aristotle’s story telling by changing what he terms the narrative angle to turn the narrative onto itself. The reflexive ‘self’ becomes the story in as far as ‘I’ and ‘me’ occupy the same narrative POV but since they cannot share the same aspect, the stories benefit from a heightened awareness of the reflex between these narrative aspects. In grammatical terms the reflex is between subject and object so that the subject swimmer leaving the red swim-suited woman of ‘Cramp’ is turned to the object aspect of a girl left on the shore. The third person subject of ‘The Accident’ becomes an object of speculation as the narrative aspect turns into the philosophical conjecture we understand as direct authorial address. The fragmented memory of the subject ‘In the Park’, divides further in the widening gap between the subject of the present and the object of the past – ‘I’ remember that she left ‘me’. Here we should bear in mind that Chinese pronouns, being uninflected, must be oriented precisely in Chinese syntax. On a larger scale, ‘The absence of an Aristotelian-like argument in Chinese philosophy reveals some important aspects of Chinese discursive structure...’<sup>46</sup> Rather than qualify these stories in relation to an Aristotelian primacy, we can see them as demonstrating what can be achieved independently of culturally specific traditions running through the Western novel. Andrew Plaks makes a similar point through the otherness of Chinese narrative:

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<sup>46</sup> Henry Zhao, ‘Historiography and Fiction in Chinese Culture’, in *The Novel*, Ed Moretti vol.1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) p87



When we speak of unitary structure in narrative, what we generally have in mind is a discernible *shape* – a model – that informs the aesthetic perception of the narrative piece as a whole.<sup>47</sup>

As Plaks points out, Aristotle's notion of unity was originally applied 'only to relatively brief mimetic forms: the tragic drama and epic verse.'<sup>48</sup> By escaping the finality of Aristotelian enclosure Plaks parallels the same novelistic discourse as Bakhtin's architectonics:

The very concept [of novelistic discourse] has been oriented toward the specific "official" genres and connected with specific historical tendencies in verbal ideological life. *Thus a whole series of phenomena remained beyond its conceptual horizon.*<sup>49</sup>

As we have seen in Western notions of an objective perspective, literary concepts are commonly 'visualised' - unless perhaps in the metaphysical inquiries of Jorge Luis Borges who, we might note, was visually impaired for most of his career. Nonetheless, given the complex topoi of Gao's stories it may be helpful to summarise with a visual recapitulation of their shapes:

'The Accident' as bi-planar diachrony (between lived experience and philosophy) where the overhead mimetic POV at the beginning stratifies into a diegetic abstract, a philosophical dead-end that leads back to the tragic facts of the original accident.

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<sup>47</sup> Plaks, Andrew H., *Chinese Narrative*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) p330

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p330

<sup>49</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Discourse in the Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p269 (my italics added)

‘Cramp’ as a Möbius strip, polarised so that the beginning and end of a linear narrative are joined like the one sided-Möbius strip of a never-ending circular concatenation.

‘In the Park’ as a kleiner jar (one continuous surface) for the eternal past constituted entirely of unmediated dialogue that reads like inner speech, an ongoing loop of dialogue between past memory and present solitude replayed through circular concatenation. These topoi demonstrate how a complex bi-polar form can be rendered from a reflexive POV to evoke the more discrete second context of Chinese literary games and Zen tradition.<sup>50</sup> We have already introduced the nature of capping phrase practice that, by its skilful orientation of allusive language that ‘categorically denies any *philosophical* conclusion.’<sup>51</sup> In this respect the interpretation of Gao’s stories, like the interpretation of kōans, remains closer to the realm of experience than that of text. By their bi-polar reflexivity and circular concatenation, each story suspends judgement, inviting a lingering interpretation that precludes what would otherwise foreshorten the timeless flux Gao claims for his fiction, a claim that does not readily fit in Western critical frameworks.

In Bakhtin’s class of literary form, the chronotope, we find that an emphasis on one dimension abrogates meaning in the other. For Gérard Genette the chronotope tends to be conditioned by visual spatial dimensions as in his supplementary *Narrative Discourse Revisited* where, as noted in Chapter One, he retracted his earlier, ‘a purely visual, and hence overly narrow, formulation... in the question of ‘Who sees?’ and ‘Who speaks?’<sup>52</sup> Applying this to multiple focalisation he claims:

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<sup>50</sup> In their presentation of direct transmission (*ishin denshin*) Scollon and Scollon allude to strong Zen influences. Given its ‘un-asking’ disavowal of epistemology by Zen, it will be necessary to trace the genealogy of its practice as a conjunction between literature and theology, between Chinese literary games dating back to the early bi-polarity of Daoist metaphysics and the much later theological translation of Sanskrit sutras.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p5

<sup>52</sup> Genette, G., *Narrative Discourse Revisited* transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1988 first published in French, Editions du Seuil, 1983) p64

I know of no example of pure transfocalisation where “the same story” is told successively from several points of view but by the same heterodiegetic narrator. That would, however, be more interesting, for the presumed objectivity of the narrating would, as in movies, accentuate the effect of dissonance among versions. That challenge remains to be met, the sooner the better.<sup>53</sup>

It may be no coincidence that Genette’s *Narrative Discourse Revisited* saw French publication in 1983, the same year as Gao’s essay ‘On Modern Fiction and its Relationship with the Reader’). In the year that Gao demonstrates what is possible in modern fiction, Genette calls for a heterodiegetic but shifting POV within the same story, effectively Gao’s exploration of ‘different narrative angles and methods’.<sup>54</sup> Where the Chinese writer and the Western theorist differ most is perhaps in Genette’s naive presumption of ‘objectivity ...as in movies’<sup>55</sup> [sic].

For a more temporal consideration of the chronotope Paul Ricoeur conceptualises a fictive present in which characters each unfold their own time in a framework that includes a past, a present, a future and Ricoeur’s further distinction of quasi-presents. On these, Ricoeur imposes conditions for his ‘Games with Time’ relating to ‘the study of verb tenses in narrative fiction [that] has placed us several times in the midst of an interplay of interferences between the time of the narrator and the times of the characters.’<sup>56</sup> However finely drawn Ricoeur’s rules may be they need not apply in the atypical language of Chinese fiction.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid,p66

<sup>54</sup> Gao Xingjian. ‘Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*’ and May 1991, Stockholm (lecture presented at the East Asian Institute, Stockholm University) In ‘Gao Xingjian: the case for literature’ Yale University Press 2006 p95

<sup>55</sup> Genette, G. *Narrative Discourse Revisited* transl. Lewin, Jane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1988 first published in French, Editions du Seuil, 1983) p66

<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur, P *Time and Narrative*, Vol.2 trans. McLaughlin, Kathleen and Pellauer, David (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) p98

By contrast with Western critical authority, playfulness has been a feature of Chinese literary history for more than a millennium before capping phrases became a distinct genre. Outside of Ricoeur's sensual analysis or Genette's quadripartition, the continuity of conscious thought in Gao's narratives, his self-professed *timeless flow of language*, reveals possibilities for the synchronised diachrony Bakhtin anticipates. From the heterological surge of the Renaissance, Bakhtin cites the example of Dante in forging 'an image of the world structured according to a pure verticality'.<sup>57</sup> Setting aside the question of whether the Dantesque world is theological rather than authored, it rests on a formal device for arranging complex material on one time plane whereas Gao Xingjian's timeless flow of language builds a vertical world of temporally undifferentiated consciousness complete with all faculties of memory and imagination. Projecting Gao's fiction against the discourse of Genette and Ricoeur we understand that it may be his method that fulfils the new story telling position Bakhtin calls for. In this respect, similar to Yang Lian's historical self-authoring and Mo Yan's 'eternal past of memory',<sup>58</sup> Gao makes the following claim:

It was not until I wrote the story "Buying A Fishing Rod For My Grandfather" that I began to understand that in Chinese reality, memory and imagination are manifested in the eternal present, which transcends grammatical concepts and hence constitutes the *time-transcending flow of language*.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p157

<sup>58</sup> Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, transl. by Goldblatt, Howard (London: Minerva Books 1994 first published in Chinese 1987) p11

<sup>59</sup> Gao Xingjian. 'Without isms'. 15 November 1993, Paris (originally presented as a paper at the Past 40 Years of Chinese Literature conference) in '*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*' (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p69

It is in this more technically developed story with its POV configured in multiple perspectives that Gao Xingjian's formal experiments find the all round expression that features in *Soul Mountain*, a Chinese solution to the vertical construction posited by Bakhtin and endorsed by Wayne Booth: It is not linear sequence but the touch of the author at each moment that matters.<sup>60</sup> To be clear about where Gao diverges from orthodox linear narratives we have to dispense with plotting on the grounds that conventional narrative connections are over-simplistic, returning to Gao's short stories intent on finding the means whereby they offer a second context. By this we understand a context that may be remote from reader knowledge but presents an otherwise complimentary aspect through its reflexive POV. More simply this is not unlike the reflexive shot of cinema, depicting horror on the face of a witness though showing nothing of the incident itself.

Within Chinese, the effect of grammatical partitioning is readily apparent where the ellipsis of pronouns offers heightened interpretive power at an ontological level. With this in mind the fiction of Gao Xingjian has, to use Bakhtin's words, a 'background of alien discourse' against which we project our interpretation without any knowledge of the second context to which it refers:

And yet we look at world literature from a tiny island limited in time and space, from a monotone, single-voiced verbal culture. And, as we shall see in what follows, there do exist such types and variants of double-voiced discourse, whose double-voicedness is very easily exhausted in the process of their perception.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Booth, W from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas 1984 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) pxxv

<sup>61</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Discourse in the Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p374

To demonstrate this we will examine Gao's BFRG story 'The Temple' more closely as a particular example of double-voiced discourse where the two aspects of its reflexive POV complete the set of knowledge required for interpretation.

Predating all the other BFRG stories by two years, 'The Temple' the reflexive aspects of its POV are apparent from the first word, a pronoun and the least stable of pronouns:

We were deliriously happy: delirious with the hope, infatuation, tenderness and warmth that go with a honeymoon. Fangfang and I had planned the trip over and over, even though we had only half a month off.<sup>62</sup>

The opening aspect of the POV is that the author-narrator(s) are not just happy, but 'deliriously' happy from the first. The reflex aspect opens on a negative encounter with their works supervisor who halves their leave entitlement, itself half wedding leave and half work leave. Having introduced the story in total, but with half of it missing, Gao persists in using 'we', the unstable, indirect form of first person plural. The bi-polar compliment *within* Gao's narrator pronoun is his thinly sketched bride Fangfang. Her name may be the diminutive of Fāng (fragrant; sweet smelling) but it also has the near homophone fǎng (to imitate; copy OR resemble; be like). Apart from the ostensible love interest that serves to shorten psychological distance and permit a closer reader empathy, the bi-polar aspect of 'we' creates a second context for dialogised inner speech. But who is speaking? In all of Gao's experiments with pronouns this story is the only one that uses 'we', that is, by itself a story telling position with two aspects. But even here the narrator(s)' direct address is self-reflexive, in this case requesting our benign interpretation if not approval:

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<sup>62</sup> Gao Xingjian, 'The Temple' in *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather*, transl. Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p3

We've had so many problems, and we've troubled all of you with them ... we are repaying you with our happiness. There's nothing wrong with what I'm saying, is there?<sup>63</sup>

Following the paradox of a story that is both an accretion of dark digressions and a honeymoon, Gao ends by drawing our attention to the temple with its yellow tiles and a title that more than once he is careful to name for its idealistic aspiration and equally careful to claim that the name is not important.

Set against this background bi-polarity Gao foregrounds a steady trickle of detailed motif in the one monological aspect of the story: the yellow tiles of the temple's traditional flying eaves:

From a distance:

'... the glazed yellow tiles sparkling in the sunlight caught our eyes.'<sup>64</sup>

Approaching the hill:

'...at the top was the old temple, its glazed tiles sparkling in the sun.'<sup>65</sup>

From across the river:

'We could see tufts of weeds growing between the glistening yellow tiles.'<sup>66</sup>

The appearance of a local man brings tension until he looks up towards the temple:

'... squinting, he studied the weeds swaying among the shiny tiles.'<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Gao Xingjian, 'The Temple' in *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather*, transl. Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p8

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p6

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p11`

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p12

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p15

From close up:

‘... a floating cloud [...] created the impression that the temple itself was tilting. A broken tile at the edge of the eave looked as if it were about to fall. Probably it had sat that way for years without falling.’<sup>68</sup>

When Fangfang notices the broken tile ‘hanging there precariously’ she says, “It would be good if it fell. Otherwise it might injure someone...” but her complimentary narrator is content to note, “It might be a while before it does fall.” Here Gao alludes to a second context of Yellow River culture, itself a controversial subject at the time. Gao writes that it is ‘we’ who want to tell the reader about a temple, ‘only’ about a temple except that beyond the carefully configured bi-polar POV is an allusion whose name is ‘not really of great importance’. Nonetheless he emphasises it by foreshadowing, stating and ultimately concluding with the singular phenomenon of the temple itself:

What I want to tell you about is the Temple of Perfect Benevolence: “perfect” as in “perfect union” and “benevolence” as in “benevolent love”. But the name of the temple is not really of great importance.’<sup>69</sup>

Despite Gao’s claim a whole page is given over to juxtaposing his description of the Temple of Perfect Benevolence with more famous touristic examples. There follows a prolonged passage of intimate consideration between the newly-weds before the next authorial interjection, ‘So let’s go back to the Temple of Perfect Benevolence’<sup>70</sup> and finally the self-reflexive irony of the last line, ‘Well, that’s the Temple of Perfect Benevolence that we

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p19

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p5

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p12



visited on our honeymoon, and which I wanted to describe for all of you.’<sup>71</sup> The temple proves to be run down with bricks missing where they’d been carried off to build nearby pig pens, an allusion to their use as conventional accommodation for *stinkers* as intellectuals were known during the Cultural Revolution. In our cursory introduction of the story it was noted that the Temple (of Perfect Benevolence) was juxtaposed to the manure pit of a vegetable patch<sup>72</sup> recalling their ‘years spent shovelling manure with our production units in the countryside.’<sup>73</sup> Having arrived at the objective correlative of title we have to ask what his subject is here, the Temple itself or the vegetable patch? Their honeymoon or their unpleasant memories? Put another way, what object does the story confront? Can a story have the POV of both subject and object and if so does it matter which is which? Like novices in a capping phrase game, Gao has the narrator(s) ‘turn the spear’ on our love interest by presenting two contending sets of allusion without giving precedence to one or the other. One answer is indicated by allusion to ‘The Vegetable Garden,’<sup>74</sup> a famous if controversial short story by Shen Congwen.

Shen’s story is rich in symbols provoking different controversies in different times. Covering three generations, it takes us from the Imperial Bannermen of the Qing dynasty through the nationalist revolution of 1911 to a young third-generation couple representative of the post May 4 era. Its symbolism includes the family name of its protagonists, *Yu* meaning Jade and associated with enduring life-force, whereas the cabbages heaped into piles in the garden have associations that Jeffrey Kinkley relates to a putsch Shen witnessed where

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p21

<sup>72</sup> An allusion to Shen Congwen’s controversial short story ‘The Vegetable Garden’.

<sup>73</sup> Gao Xingjian, ‘The Temple’ in *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather*, transl. Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p14

<sup>74</sup> Kinkley, J., *Imperfect Paradise: short stories of Shen Congwen*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 1995)

‘human heads were stacked in piles like a mountain.’<sup>75</sup> The story incited heavily polarised criticism both for its lack of optimism when published in 1929 and forty years later during the Cultural Revolution when its significance redoubled as, according to Kinkley,<sup>76</sup> Chinese intellectuals identified with Mrs Yu’s words: “For people like us, more knowledge means more trouble!”<sup>77</sup> After the young couple are executed, apparently for membership of the nascent Communist Party, the linking matriarch Mrs Yu, with her ‘faded beauty’ and ironic family name, rises on the anniversary of her son’s execution feeling that she had lived long enough: After willing the little property she had left to her workers, she took a silk scarf, made a noose, and hanged herself. This ending has earned harsh criticism at different times from different factions since first publication to the extent that it is difficult to conceive how a critical evaluation could be made with any consistency. In Gao’s allusive story, he locates the vegetable garden with its manure pit and associated bad memories beside the temple itself with its glittering yellow tiles, an image to which the story consistently returns. In the capacity of each story to suspend judgement, we must acknowledge this same capacity has withstood prejudicial reading and finalised opinions embedded in the *isms* that Gao has written against<sup>78</sup> and that Jeffrey Kinkley identifies in Shen’s story as reflexive in all but name:

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p306

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p306

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p313

<sup>78</sup> Gao Xingjian. ‘Without isms’. 15 November 1993, Paris (originally presented as a paper at the Past 40 Years of Chinese Literature conference) in *Gao Xingjian: the case for literature* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006)

The Vegetable Garden' has many layers of meaning. One can read it as a story that does not ignore but frontally addresses China's quickly developing generation gap, showing two ways in which the gap can be resolved: with love or with executions.<sup>79</sup>

The reflex between these two readings could not be more starkly bipolar. At the time Gao wrote 'The Temple', Shen Congwen had been living alone in a small windowless room since the Cultural Revolution. Every day he walked half a mile to eat with his wife in her flat and did so right up until shortly before his death when, unknown to Shen, he became the leading candidate for a Nobel nomination.<sup>80</sup> According to Perry Link, Shen Congwen's circumstances were 'legendary on the intellectual grapevine during the 1970s,' known idiomatically as Shen's 'room without scenery'.<sup>81</sup> Gao Xingjian would certainly be familiar with Shen's circumstances which, according to Professor Link, were sufficiently well known to feature in a film set alluding to Shen's windowless room.<sup>82</sup> After the film appeared the Deng Xiaoping administration launched its 1981 campaign against bourgeois liberation following which Gao wrote his *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather* stories, first among them being 'The Temple'. After the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, the two aspects of 'The Temple' form a second context by their juxtaposition. The second context is hidden, as it were, in plain view.

Applying Kinkley's critical verdict on the bi-polar ending of Shen's story, Gao's journey to 'The Temple' could similarly be read in two ways. But as Gao's narrator explains, after all

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<sup>79</sup> Kinkley, J., *Imperfect Paradise: short stories of Shen Congwen*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1995) p306

<sup>80</sup> Lovell, Julia *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2006) p134,137

<sup>81</sup> Link, Perry 'Evening Chats in Beijing: Probing China's Predicament' Norton, New York 1992 p102/103 Professor Link takes his title from a series of essays by Deng Tuo published in 1961 and 1963 as 'Evening Chats at Yanshan', considered an anti-socialist attack on Mao's use of literature along with 'Hai Rui Dismissed from Office'.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p103

they have witnessed, it is nonetheless 'The Temple of Perfect Benevolence' that he wanted to tell us about. Similar to Shen's story, 'The Temple' has many layers of meaning. It differs most strongly in that, although indicating two ways in which China's historical development may be resolved, Gao's use of the first person plural maintains a separation between two narrative planes. Although both narratives are present for resolution there is no implicit rejection, as in 'The Vegetable Garden,' rather an affirmation concerning, 'the Temple of Perfect Benevolence that we visited on our honeymoon, and which I wanted to describe for all of you.'

In the *act* of reading Gao's *timeless flow of language* we experience simultaneous aspects of memory and imagination. It is with this understanding that Gao begins the title story, 'Buying A Fishing Rod For My Grandfather.'<sup>83</sup> The formal experiments of this more technically developed story use multiple perspectives to configure the vertical POV that ultimately finds expression in his novels. By adopting multiple perspectives based on one pronoun or another Gao solves the problem of a vertical construction posited by Bakhtin and endorsed by Wayne Booth.<sup>84</sup> Addressing the everyday reality of memory and imagination requires that we abandon preconceptions of linear temporality. Initially Gao's aspect is a conventional retrospective on his hereditary 'old-home' through the memory of his grandfather. On the journey to deliver the rod that heritage is revealed as desiccated by environmental pollution, industrial development and urban migration that has changed it beyond recognition. His grandfather's surroundings survive only in the alienated memory of a 'you' narrator whose story is almost over before the narrator's present reveals itself as a reminiscence of 'him' as the grandchild, the same narrator-self who by now is estranged from

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<sup>83</sup> Gao Xingjian, 'The Temple' in *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather*, transl. Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p69

<sup>84</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas 1984 10<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) pxxv

his present narrator-self and now swallowed up by an armchair in front of televisual trivia. Throughout, the story is rigorously mimetic with respect to what is presently understood, namely buying a fishing rod with the motivation to give the rod to his grandfather. Being a journey, the narrative is otherwise a chronotope of the road except that it begins and ends with the fishing rod itself, the persistent motivation to buy the rod on behalf of his grandfather who 'never saw a fishing rod like this even in his dreams.' From this compulsion, memory and imagination continue to unfold until the rod's accidental destruction by a visiting nephew is enough to remind the narrator that his grandfather is no longer alive.

Gao's method consists of removing the 'partitions' of his POV to use pronouns consistent with the psychological reality that Classical Chinese, with its higher order of semiotics, was capable of rendering. His fishing rod becomes an objective correlative past events with the present foreground, vivid enough to objectify memories of more significance than anything present. Whereas manipulation of time is by no means unique, Gao's particular method is. For example where Dante is able to bring emperors, popes and Judas Escariot onto a single narrative plane he does so by making use of a theological eternity. In his short fiction Gao realises the nature of memory and imagination to transcend time by capping the otherwise inflected partitions of POV. Before considering the application of Gao's method to the novel *Soul Mountain*, we will briefly consider a particularly explicit example of reflexivity. It occurs in his one-act, one-actor play *Monologue*, one of the dramas which form the majority of his literary output and from which his short stories have effectively been an outgrowth. *Monologue* explores performance itself as a reflex by reconfiguring Berthold Brecht's alienation effect, an effect originally native to Chinese theatre before it became known as the

fourth wall. Wayne Booth refers to the alienation effect of Brecht's Epic Theatre as an attempt to 'break the bond with tyrannical reality.'<sup>85</sup>:

The Chinese performer does not act as if, in addition to the three walls around him, there were also a fourth wall. *He makes it clear that he knows he's being looked at... The actor looks at himself.*<sup>86</sup>

Here Booth asserts a critical imperative for empathy in order to dismiss Brecht's plays as 'of a non-Aristotelian kind, plays which are not based on empathy, as only an extreme form of what many artists have sought.'<sup>87</sup> Gao's plays are more overtly non-Aristotelian. At the start of *Monologue* the Actor lays a piece of rope on the stage to demarcate his position from the audience and announces his intention of building a wall that will separate them:

Actor: (*He says to himself*) I want to place a piece of rope (He raises his head and faces the audience) and draw a line here. You are on the outside of the line, me on the inside.

(*He faces the audience*) I want to build a wall along the rope (He bends over and makes gestures as if he is really constructing a wall), thus separating you – the audience, and me – the actor.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p122

<sup>86</sup> Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) p122 n7 from Brecht's 'Chinese Theatre'

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p122

<sup>88</sup> Kwok-kan Tam, 'Drama of Paradox: Waiting as Form and Motif in *The Bus Stop* and *Waiting for Godot*'. Ma Sen, 'The Theatre of the Absurd in China: Gao Xingjian's *The Bus-Stop*. in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001) p134

By making it clear that he knows he is being looked at and engaging the audience, he alludes to the transparent fourth wall of classical Aristotelian ‘realism.’ The actor extrapolates this relationship through a self-reflexive monologue until the ‘transparent fourth wall,’ which he advocated at the beginning, will prevent his act from being seen, a capping phrase conundrum that Gao resolves with a kikan-like<sup>89</sup> response and strident demands that the wall be pulled down.

The play received little critical attention despite publication in the same volume as a controversial trilogy that earned the Western absurdist tag for its comparison with Beckett.<sup>90</sup> Deep in the ‘second context’ of China’s post Cultural Revolution politics, the Minister for Culture *He Jingzhi*, pronounced Gao’s plays to be ‘more *Hai Rui is Dismissed from Office* than *Hai Rui is Dismissed from Office*. It is the most poisonous play written since the founding of the People’s Republic.’<sup>91</sup> It is to this criticism and ensuing persecution that Mabel Lee traces the thematic substance of *Soul Mountain*, events during which the novel was commissioned by a sympathetic editor on the strength of the experimental methods used for ‘Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather’.

In *Literature and Metaphysics*, Gao justifies his story telling position in opposition to literary conventions of long standing to repeat his claim that ‘what are generally called plot and characterisation are just popularly agreed-upon concepts.’<sup>92</sup> With this in mind developed his pronomial method for the novel:

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<sup>89</sup> The kikan response is specifically non-verbal. Its most famous example is the enlightenment of Rinzai who waited three years before asking directly for the essential truth only to be given twenty blows with a stick. Wood, E., *Zen Dictionary* (Rutland & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle 1988 first published 1972).

<sup>90</sup> See Kwok-kan Tam, ‘Drama of Paradox: Waiting as Form and Motif in *The Bus Stop* and *Waiting for Godot*. Also Ma Sen, ‘The Theatre of the Absurd in China: Gao Xingjian’s *The Bus-Stop*.’

<sup>91</sup> Gao Xingjian. ‘Wilted Chrysanthemums’ November 1991, Paris in ‘*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*’ (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p146

<sup>92</sup> Gao Xingjian. ‘Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*’ May 1991, Stockholm (lecture presented at the East Asian Institute, Stockholm University) in ‘*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*’ (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006)p94

It allowed me to observe the psychological levels of human language, which are in fact well-suited to this type of structure, because human awareness of language begins with the emergence of pronouns.<sup>93</sup>

Beginning with the word 'self' it remains unclear what the term applies to, being a complex single word used variously as a noun, as a pronoun, as an adjective or taking a prefix or suffix to become a reflex derived from discrete *episodes* of past experience – that is, narratives. To quote *Soul Mountain*:

I don't know if you have ever observed this strange thing, the self. Often the more you look the more it doesn't seem to be like it, and the more you look the more it isn't it.<sup>94</sup>

At this point we might remind ourselves of the orthodox grammar by which a narrative is partitioned in that whereas first person POV has immediate access to feelings, the third person POV is no more than a pseudo-partition of imagination. But these positions do not exhaust possibilities. The poet Fernando Pessoa makes his exploration of the self through the POV of heteronyms, an approach that is by definition unsystematic compared to Gao's use of pronouns, a method sufficiently rigorous to be a transferrable convention and summarised by Mabel Lee as follows:

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<sup>93</sup> Gao Xingjian. 'Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*' May 1991, Stockholm (lecture presented at the East Asian Institute, Stockholm University) in '*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*' (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p96

<sup>94</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p150



‘In *Soul Mountain*, the protagonist “I” is the author who has fled the capital and is carrying out research on human society at the fringes of Han civilization. ...The protagonist “you” is on a quest to visit *Soul Mountain*. The author distances himself from this protagonist by calling him “you,” hence enabling him to observe as a bystander, like a fly on the wall, his own behaviour and thoughts as well as that of the people “you” encounters. By the creation of “you” the author is given immense freedom to explore [...] his own past.’<sup>95</sup>

With this in mind we will examine *Soul Mountain* for the nuanced cross-reflections and significant repetitions, or complimentary bi-polarity and figural recurrence, perceived as ‘texture’ in the Great Works.

Each chapter of the novel is embedded in the schema of a river journey, in this case the Yangtze. This juxtaposition allows the narrator to refract his inner dialogue through a series of contexts flowing from the diverse non-Han minorities among the upper Yangtze confluences to the coast. The journey has significant parallels with the Daoist *Tao Te Ching*. Both have 81 chapters, or verses, and given that the narrator of *Soul Mountain* adheres to a river course that ‘by settling where none would like to be, comes close to *the way*,’<sup>96</sup> both reveal something of Daoist metaphysics. The ensuing inner dialogue also corresponds to Bakhtin’s Architectonics as the ‘constant exchange between what is already and what is not yet,’<sup>97</sup> Bakhtin’s project of authoring the self as a dialogical exchange in response to Gao’s mountainous kōan:

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<sup>95</sup> Lee, Mabel ‘Pronouns as Protagonists: On Gao Xingjian’s Theories of Narration’ in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001) p237

<sup>96</sup> Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* transl. Lau, D.C. from Chinese 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (London: Penguin Books 1980 first published 1963) p64

<sup>97</sup> Clark, Katerina and Holquist, Michael, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press 1984) p65

But where will I find this Lingshan? (*Soul Mountain*) It seems to be something you have experienced but even more so it seems to be wishful thinking. But where is the boundary between memory and wishful thinking? How can the two be separated? Which of the two is more real and how can this be determined?<sup>98</sup>

Like the actor in *Monologue* confronted by his own fourth wall, Gao challenges the authenticity of a POV partitioned between the intimacies of an ‘I’ narrator and the free ranging imagination of a third person narrator. Unlike an actor, Gao cannot wear one or another persona. As the author narrator, by definition he cannot answer his question of whether memory or imagination is more real without changing his intradiegetic POV. This is exactly what he does in Chapter 72, adopting an extradiegetic self-reflexive stance for a dialogue between the third person narrator ‘he’ and a ‘critic’ whose first line is, ‘This isn’t a novel!’ At this point we may conclude that the critic has read the novel, in which case we have reached an ending of some kind with a further ten chapters unread. These must be understood in relation to their particular situation in the novel, that is, an ending as perceived by the critic in Chapter 72.

In *Literature and Metaphysics* Gao records the difficulty of writing Chapter 72, not necessarily for the reasons that Torbjörn Lodén and others claim for it as the key to the whole novel. Aside from its explanatory content, the characteristic circular concatenation is evident from the opening and closing lines. The body of the chapter takes the form of a protracted dialogue, the customary unmediated lines of inner speech, in this case between the voices of

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<sup>98</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p304

writer and of critic.<sup>99</sup> It is different from other chapters in being overtly intradiegetic. In this respect it relates to the whole of the novel in the manner of Ingram's paradoxical unity as the tension between the one and the many, the same coherence functioning between the fragments that Gao's critic considers to be disorganised:

START

“This isn't a novel.”

“Then what is it?” he asks.

“A novel must have a complete story.”

He says he has told many stories, some with endings and many without.

“They're all fragments without any sequence, the author doesn't know how to organize connected episodes.”

“Then may I ask how a novel is supposed to be organized?”

This is a leading question that, when it comes to specifying POV, goes no further than Bakhtin's call for a new story telling position. Given the extraordinary self that is Gao's subject material, it is a question we might ask every day. In responding to Gao's critic we may recall Nadine Gordimer's verdict on novel being ‘false as to the nature of what can be grasped as reality in the modern world’.<sup>100</sup> In other words, maintaining its ‘prolonged coherence of tone’ requires partitions that are false with respect to the nature of ‘self’. Gordimer's caveat on the specious authenticity of the novel is in sympathy with Gao's estranged self, the ‘he’ narrator confronted by the critic with a prescriptive model for the novel:

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p452

<sup>100</sup> May, Charles E., *The Short Story – The Reality of Artifice* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1995) p123

“You must first foreshadow, build to a climax, then have a conclusion. That’s basic common knowledge for writing fiction.”

He asks if fiction can be written without conforming to the method which is common knowledge.<sup>101</sup>

There follows a self-reflexive exchange as to the nature of the novel as a whole, of novelistic discourse in general and of Gao’s in particular. Until now the search for meaning, the quest for *Soul Mountain*, has been to answer the narrative question that runs throughout the novel: ‘Where will I find this Lingshan?’ The critic-self has no capping phrase with which to respond but ‘shrugs his shoulders and departs’, leaving the solitary narrator to feel ‘confused and uncertain’ about what is critical in fiction:

Is it the narrative? Or is it the mode of narration? Or is it not the mode of narration but the attitude of the narration? Or is it not the attitude, but the affirmation of an attitude?<sup>102</sup>

A series of similar questions follow as solipsistic pairings that extrapolate metaphysics, love, sex and theology, into more assertive statements resembling ‘un-capped’ capping phrases until:

... it is impossible to arbitrate this as truth about the fallibility of experience which is only a crutch about falling if one has to fall about revolutionary fiction which smashes

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<sup>101</sup> Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p452

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p454

superstitious belief in literature about a revolution in fiction about revolutionising fiction.<sup>103</sup>

The significance of Chapter 72's criticism is 'capped' in its last line: Reading this chapter is optional but as you've read it you've read it. This appears to be a mere solipsism but it permits two things. Firstly it identifies the end to the novel's mimesis as Chapter 71 and secondly it opens the remaining ten chapters to a reflex between memory and imagination. At its simplest, the extension of this apparent ending is a device consistent with the 'fade-outs' that Andrew Plaks indicates as characteristic of the Great Works. With ten chapters remaining the self-authoring journey that ended in Chapter 71 has been critiqued in Chapter 72 but still leaves the narrator free with the persistent question of memory and imagination in the next chapters. After the journey's mimesis, Chapter 72's last sentence is consistent with the relationship between fragmentary aspects of the narrating 'self' that Gao has established a precedent for extra-diegetic memory and imagination. Only with the departure of the 'critic-self' is the narrator free to pursue his narrative question, 'Where will I find this Lingshan?'

In Chapter 73 the narrator has reached the coast. His journey is over but he is invited by an anonymous woman to dine with her for the purpose of writing her evidently moving story. By now tired from the journey and his imagination exhausted, Gao's fatigued narrator cannot summon enough interest to write the woman's story, even before he suffers food poisoning from the cooking with which she enticed him.

In Chapter 74, now without the river to follow, the narrator learns of another mountain. It is the last of many along the way but this one nameless and its exact location subject to dispute. An anonymous man and woman describe Daoist ceremonies at a Temple accessible

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p455

only by a narrow mountain path. Although there is disagreement between the man and woman as to details the narrator is careful to note that, 'Both have tertiary education, are sound of mind, and don't believe in ghosts and spirits.'<sup>104</sup> Climbing to the top of the mountain, the 'you' narrator shuffles along a path in the dark towards a dim light from behind a door in the cliff where he is given a bed for the night by an old man in Daoist robes. That night, 'you' lie awake wondering about the bells and the chanting that might be from the ceremonies 'you' have been told about. But in the morning there is no sign of the imagined incense tables, curtains or ceremonial tablets. There is, on the other hand, a huge mirror facing the entrance 'you' came in by. Going down the mountain at the first bend 'you' meet a naked child sobbing on the path with no sign of its parents. 'You' pick him up and carry him but your arms become numb with fatigue and a sense of aimlessness that becomes the abiding narrative. As 'you' speculate on this relationship with the child, the initially deepening identification that 'you' have with it begins to turn, you curse it and then you realise: 'It is yourself you are cursing!' 'You' sneak back along the mountain road to where 'you' found him, put him down and run off 'in broad daylight, like a fugitive criminal. You seem to hear sobbing behind you, but don't dare look back.'<sup>105</sup> These two chapters take on special significance both in themselves and by their juxtaposition.

The reflexive POV operates clearly between the narrator's separate aspects: his fatigued imagination in Chapter 73 and his Möbius strip memory of the child in Chapter 74. In the eternal present of Chinese poetics the narrator must contend with the past and the future, that is, with memory and imagination, aspects of a POV that according to Bakhtin 'cannot be

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<sup>104</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p465

<sup>105</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p469/470

unfolded into logical contradictions or into purely dramatic contrasts.’<sup>106</sup> As in Ingram’s ‘special kind of unity’<sup>107</sup> or Bakhtin’s architectonics, the parts become whole except that ‘in themselves they remain alien to each other,’<sup>108</sup> a dialogical reflex rather than crude opposition. With this in mind we shall now consider the end of the mimetic journey, immediately prior to the critical encounter of Chapter 72, as a significant example of complimentary bi-polarity.

In Chapter 71 the narrator leaves Mount Tiantai<sup>109</sup> for the very same town where Lu Xun’s obsequious revolutionary was captured and executed in *The True Story of Ah Q*. As he does so, he quotes from Lu Xun’s poetry, “I spill my blood for the Yellow Emperor.” It is a line the narrator explains he has come to doubt, claiming to prefer Xu Wei’s poem, “The world is a false illusion created by others, what is original and authentic is what I propose.” Nonetheless he immediately questions the validity of Xu’s own claims to either originality or authenticity. From setting the lowliest of Lu Xun’s low characters, Gao ascends the foothills of these ironies to the summit of Imperial lèse-majesté where, on top of Kuaji Mountain we reach the stone stele commemorating Yu the Great. This historical figure, the first Chinese emperor with a recorded genealogy, began his reign with a summons to aboriginal tribes for a troop review and promptly executed one chief executed for arriving late. The chapter includes a string of myths, animist metaphysics and anthropological conjecture on Yu’s origins, including the bare fact that Yu is a direct descendent of the Yellow Emperor himself.

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<sup>106</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Discourse in the Novel’ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p356

<sup>107</sup> Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p20

<sup>108</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. ‘Art and Answerability’ in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, trans. M. Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, (Austin: University of Texas 1st Edn 1990, published in Russian 1919) p1

<sup>109</sup> Tiantai Temple is the first wholly indigenous Chinese Buddhist Temple as opposed to those schools founded on poor Sanskrit translations of the sutras.

Inside the tomb Yu's epitaph is written in a secretive tadpole script that has defied interpretation until now:

I look at it from various angles, ruminates for a long time, and suddenly it occurs to me that it can be read in this way: history is a riddle,

it can also be read as: history is lies

and it can also be read as: history is nonsense

and yet it can also be read as: history is prediction<sup>110</sup>

There follows a page full of similar assertions - history is ghosts, antiques 'and even rational thinking', experience, proof, cause and effect, analogy - before reaching the conclusion: 'Actually history can be read any way and this is a major discovery!'<sup>111</sup> This trope is cited in its entirety by Lodén for his comprehensive assertion of the novel as projecting an image of Chinese history. He summarises this under a forceful piece of Western hermeticism: 'The kind of scepticism that this view of history manifests may be seen as a plea for plurality and a warning against orthodoxy.'<sup>112</sup> Lodén backs up his *sui generis* scepticism with a series of extravagant tautologies regarding subjectivity, complexity and the monopoly of truth, claims that are self evident – but not in the text. Ultimately there is a strong scent of Zen in Lodén's summing up where 'The formulation of this scepticism seems informed by the insights of Buddhist philosophy but also by quantum mechanics and modern psychology.' In short this is a Western reading that, by focussing on the one chapter as an episode, omits the texture of

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p450

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p450

<sup>112</sup> Lodén, Torbjörn 'World Literature with Chinese Characteristics: On a Novel by Gao Xingjian' in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 2001) p271



cross references that permeate Gao's novel in the manner of the Great Works, the reflex between pronomial narrators compiling the partition-free self of the author. It is an assertion that fails to identify the chapter's carefully structured bi-polar compliment.

Journey over, the yang ascent of Chapter 71's mountainous history has its bi-polar compliment in the numerically significant Chapter 51 with its strong yin themes that exclude any mention of the word history though it would clearly be convenient to do so. It is purely fabula, a list of episodes from a long and venerable past at a fulcrum of events half way down the Yangtze. Not only has this been the location of so many strategic turns in Han Chinese history and therefore also in *The Three Kingdoms*, but the references to these events appear under the same chapter number as the most significant battle of *The Three Kingdoms* with its eight trigrams strategy and historical protagonists, to whom the narrator refers directly, fighting here in the same place. For a more penetrating reference Gao uses the *objets trouvés* of a nearby tourist stall as a device through which to refract their mainstream Daoist significance, proceeding to elicit pre-literate shamanist concepts from which he extrapolates the form of his inner language:

Mankind's earliest concepts are derived from totems, afterwards these came to be linked with sounds to form speech and meanings... At that time, the individual did not exist [...] At that time, people did not have an awareness of being oneself, knowledge of the self came from an other [...] After this, the 'I' also discovered that he was to be found in large numbers everywhere and was a separate existence from oneself, and it was only then that the consciousness of 'you' and 'I' became secondary.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p307/308

Fundamental notions of self are unpacked in primitive Neolithic notions of the other before social relationships develop notions of its struggle to survive among the richness of (other people's) historical allusions. This notion of the self's struggle to survive among the sounds, meanings and totems is profoundly Bakhtinian, an architectonics of early literacy that parallels Bakhtin's study of pre-novelistic discourse where 'languages interanimate each other and objectify precisely that side of one's own (and of the other's) language *that pertains to its world view*.'<sup>114</sup> The problem here is that in the case of complimentary chapters yin and yang are mutually exclusive. Gao's POV cannot be that of one chapter or the other. Neither can it lie in one without the other. By definition the narrator's search for Soul Mountain cannot be fulfilled: I am perpetually searching for meaning, but what in fact *is* meaning?<sup>115</sup> What he does find at the end of Chapter 51 are the disintegrating pages of a county gazette which lists detailed entries for the coming and going of emperors and courtiers, forgotten tribes and warlords, shifting boundaries and place names, the ravages of late Ming troops and the desertion of local villages before ending with this indented trope:

Most of the people have settled here from other provinces and the name is constantly changing [...]

Do these villages and towns still exist?

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<sup>114</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p62  
Previously quoted in connection with Xu Chuan's deliberations between Classical and Modern Chinese languages.

<sup>115</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p308

After this long barren list one may be inclined to pursue a different question however it is unmistakably a history, albeit in the form of a scant analect. The preamble of historical irony leading to it is weighed down with references to Mount Tiantai,<sup>116</sup> to great man history and *anonymous* female heroism. Among the folk tales and Daoist allusions Gao identifies a man as the first ancestor, names him as Fuxi and immediately reinstates the Chapter's predominantly yin theme: 'However the bestowal of life and intelligence to Fuxi must be attributed to a woman.'<sup>117</sup> If the compendium of dry fabula in the gazette signifies a yin chapter then its bi-polar compliment lies at the end of the mimetic journey and the conclusion to the meta-historical trope of Chapter 71:

and: history is absolutely nothing

even: history is sad sighs

Oh history, oh history, oh history oh history

Actually history can be read any way and this is a major discovery<sup>118</sup>

Among numerological references the most incontrovertible is also the most discrete: the number of lines in the faded gazette is 81, the same as the number of verses in the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu.<sup>119</sup> As to authenticating the relationship between these chapters, in the

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<sup>116</sup> Tiantai Temple is the first wholly indigenous Chinese Buddhist Temple as opposed to those schools founded on poor Sanskrit translations of the sutras.

<sup>117</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p307

<sup>118</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p451

<sup>119</sup> In Chinese numerology 81 has special significance as the product of 9 times 9, being the square of the highest yang number. This is reflected in the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu as delimiting what can be sensibly articulated:

The way that can be spoken of

Is not the constant way;

whole novel there are only these two with similarly indented tropes namely the questionable towns and villages of Chapter 51 and the paeon to history in Chapter 71.

The yin yang reflex between complimentary chapters such as these has much in common with the ‘special kind of unity’ Forrest Ingram finds in short story cycles where, it may be recalled, the reader has forty three questions to answer before ‘the *claritas* of the whole’ can be perceived as ‘the *integritas* and *consonantia* of its parts’.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, when Gao Xingjian asks if we really have observed the self when it ‘will gradually separate from the self you are familiar with and multiply into many startling forms.’<sup>121</sup> The myriad implications of Gao’s self-observation subvert any finalised judgement of ‘history’ as a word-handle for human affairs even as we share the narrator’s discovery that his habitual understanding of others is both ‘superficial and arbitrary.’<sup>122</sup> Whatever Gao’s self-imposed critic makes of the novel, his use of narrative angle may full fill the very story telling position that Bakhtin hesitates to identify. It is certainly a long way from the unstable model posited by Wayne Booth and Seymour Chatman.

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The name that can be named  
Is not the constant name.  
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;  
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

<sup>120</sup> Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p44

<sup>121</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p150

<sup>122</sup> Gao Xingjian, , *Soul Mountain* first published as *Lingshan* in Taiwan 1990. Transl. by Lee, M., (London: Harper Perennial 2004) p151

## Conclusion

For such a fundamental concept as POV the width of references in this thesis is indispensable if problematic for the space available. In the relatively brief epistemology of narratology any enquiry would be less than secure without a historical approach such as that of Bakhtin. In David Lodge's words, 'almost nothing of interest was written on the subject of narrative theory between ancient Greece and twentieth century Russia.'<sup>123</sup> An understanding of literary alterity then requires a benchmark outside of the Western tradition in which case Chinese literature recommends itself through the degree of separation for its origins, untainted by epic tradition. Subsequent to these initial enquiries then, it becomes possible to consider a cross current between Western and Chinese poetics in the form of story cycles. For the POV in the accompanying novel *Interesting Times*, we find a measure of support in each case from Bakhtin's dialogism, the marginal role of unity in Chinese narratology and Ingram's Janus faced POV in the short story cycle.

Whereas the accompanying novel was conceived from the outset as a schema of short stories these were not set in construction but arose in the course of adapting *discursive* development to material associated with *economic* development. The novel owes much to previous readings of the very large Ming dynasty novels, to Conrad's work (to which Neville Marlow's name alludes) and to short story cycles. As it stands it would not have been

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<sup>123</sup> Lodge, D., *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge 1990) p7

attempted without the Great Works of Classical Chinese. Having considered these at length they offer an insight into cyclical relationships as the basis for a novel which, in the case of *Interesting Times*, could be applied to the contenders in the relationship between exploiter and exploited during an historical era of unprecedented development. To conclude Part One of this thesis we will follow the circular concatenation of Chinese poetics by returning to the origins of the novel, its opening intention and its written development before locating it with respect to other contemporary work.

There is an apocryphal workshop dictum that if one starts by writing about universals, one ends up writing about a brick in the wall of the shed at the bottom of the garden, therefore start by writing about the brick. What is important here is the inference that creative writing is a transition of interest in either direction. To this end the novel was first envisaged as a cycle of motives alternating between the universal and the particular. With the choice of material it was understood from the outset that an engagement with construction could be challenging. Given the place of construction as a universal human activity for settled society, the paucity of texts in that setting suggests the challenge has not been met. In this case, whatever the difficulty might be with respect to characterisation it is no different from other novels in being driven by motivation which for *Interesting Times* is the pecuniary interest without which there would be no Western expatriates in the Chinese setting. An incidental benefit of this material arises from the inexorable sequence of construction, a scheme without the need for an authorial meta-narrative. A concomitant difficulty is the POV. To overcome this, linking chapters were written in first person intending them to be transposed later into third person, a common working practice for the purpose of selecting detail with the immediacy of first hand observation. As the draft developed I was increasingly drawn to the first person POV on the grounds that the 'I' narrator POV of the linking character, Neville

Marlow, would face the alterity of the short story scheme more squarely than any mediated third person POV. During early drafts this idea drew increased support from readings of Bakhtin with the particular notion of small time experience set against the great time of a large scale historical schema. This method afforded two aspects to a POV whose differential (Gao's narrative angle) may read as historical experience rather than authorial plotting. Successive drafts were written with the intention of providing a reflexive domain between schema and first person POV in which narrative connections can be made without demanding the reader bring arcane knowledge to the work.

In aspiring to convey the sweep of a historical epoch, similar to those of the Great Works but in one tenth of the word count, we might consider where the novel in this thesis stands with respect to more contemporary works. In this respect Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain* is of interest for the formal correlation that both novels share, incidentally following the same epochal course Bakhtin sets for novelistic discourse, namely that it always *develops* 'on the boundary line between cultures and languages'.<sup>124</sup> With this observation in mind we should note that Gao Xingjian's Nobel citation and his experimental fiction originate in the heterological ferment created with China's open door policy, a time of major developments in Chinese narrative including the surrogate 'epic' *Heshang* and 1980s 'New Wave Fiction'<sup>125</sup>. Gao does not declare his intention to be a new story telling position. He nonetheless achieves this in as far as he devotes a whole chapter of *Soul Mountain* to the question of what constitutes a novel and how it should be written. Notwithstanding his early experiments with short stories in themselves, his method involves scaling these up in a full

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<sup>124</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel' In *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas 1981 16<sup>th</sup> Edn 2006) p50

<sup>125</sup> Zhao, H. 'The New Waves in Recent Chinese Fiction' from *The Lost Boat: Avant-garde fiction from China* (London: Wellsweep Press 1993)

length novel that, in the case of *Soul Mountain*, juxtaposes the schema of a river journey with his own, variously partitioned POV.

Both the construction development of *Interesting Times* and the river journey of *Soul Mountain* employ schema with a challenging width of cross-references that, in the latter case, warrant further study by themselves. As a feature this is not original but is acknowledged under the influence of the great Ming Dynasty novels which also juxtapose cycles of small time stories against large scale schema. We have noted the challenge these works present where, rather than narrative connection through cause and effect it is their *texture* in Andrew Plaks' reading, also identified as *pattern* in Ingram's story cycles, that the reader perceives in the plethora of cross references woven into a novel. The patterned texture of *Interesting Times* with its somewhat alien cross cultural material, construction material at that, inevitably challenges an orthodox Western reading of narrative connections through cause and effect. As for *Soul Mountain* we have previously noted Western hermeticism with respect to its cross-referenced 'texture' where Torbjörn Lodén uses a block citation from Chapter 71 to support his view of the novel as an image of Chinese history, this while omitting altogether its reflexive cross-reference in Chapter 51. Fifteen years after English language publication of *Soul Mountain*, little if anything has been made of the direct numerical correlation between its eighty one chapters and the eighty one verses of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Qing*. We may for example note the latter's allusions to water and rivers being closest to *The Way* itself, in other words the yin of a river journey juxtaposed to the male writer's yang. On the other hand, within this scheme of juxtaposition Julia Lovell perceives an excess of romanticism to the extent of claiming that 'Gao's voice can sound baldy naive.'<sup>126</sup> Other critical reviews of Gao's work suggest that readerly challenges are common, not least in mainland China where

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<sup>126</sup> Lovell, Julia *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2006) p168



it has been lumped together with the work of other exiled Chinese writers and compared to ‘airplane food, a totally flavourless international mixed platter.’<sup>127</sup> Some criticism misses the point concerning Gao’s ongoing struggle with Modern Chinese, in particular his striving for extended syntax. For example Lovell reports one claim that, ‘The level of Gao Xingjian’s language in [*One Man’s Bible*] is that of a high school student.’<sup>128</sup> Evidence for this tension appears in Gao’s essay, ‘The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation’<sup>129</sup> where he asks if ‘a more fluid form of communication can be found by respecting the inherent structure of the Chinese language, instead of bloating it with the tenses of Western languages?’<sup>130</sup> Much criticism emerges through the politics of what Lovell refers to as the Nobel Complex so that ‘the marginal position of Chinese work in the world literary economy determined that Gao’s prize would become a contentious political issue.’<sup>131</sup> Gao himself recalls a statement from the writer Wang Meng who, on reading his essay on modern fiction made the prescient declaration, ‘This will cause a war at the gate of the Ministry of Culture.’ Given this reception one might ask, as Plaks does of Chinese narrative in general, whether the form that Chinese literature once classified as ‘small talk’ is in fact any kind of novel at all. It is this question that Gao claimed to have been his most difficult challenge in writing *Soul Mountain*, devoting the whole of chapter 72 to an answer. The prospects then for an engaging read of any novel with similar formal trajectories to those of *Soul Mountain* are somewhat daunting.

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<sup>127</sup> Lovell, Julia *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2006) p144

<sup>128</sup> Lovell, Julia *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2006) p176

<sup>129</sup> Gao Xingjian. ‘The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation.’ Lecture delivered at the Modern Chinese Literature conference, Aix-en-Provence, 3 November 1996. in ‘*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*’ (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p111

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p111: ‘Psychological analysis in contemporary Western literature must conform to the strict distinctions in tense, voice and mood of European languages. Contrastingly, to stress all these layers in Chinese – past, present and future tense, direct and indirect speech, condition, supposition, possibility and reality – would make the writing very clumsy. The ancient Chinese language does not distinguish between tenses and what emerges in classical poetry and could be called a psychological state that transcends time and space.’

<sup>131</sup> Gao Xingjian. ‘Wilted Chrysanthemums’ November 1991, Paris in ‘*Gao Xingjian: the case for literature*’ (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2006) p142

In the case of *Interesting Times*, connections between remote contexts become tenuous as the scheme develops, similarly slender connections to those Professor Lodén omits from the course of Gao Xingjian's river journey. A successful outcome would be Ingram's 'epiphany of critical understanding [in which] without contradiction, the many are one and the one many... the *claritas* of the whole perceived as a function of the *integritas* and *consonantia* of its parts.'<sup>132</sup> In summary, the intention for *Interesting Times* is that the cycle of stories accretes in terms of Ingram's 'recurrent development' (Plaks' figural recurrence) to the point where Ingram's 'pattern' (Plaks' texture) is implicit in cycles of exploitation portrayed through recurrent economic developments. How far has this been achieved?

Whereas the choice of inciting incident may be open to criticism on the grounds of subverting reader expectation, the reflex between the inciting incident and its compliment in Tiananmen Square is in keeping with Plaks' 'bi-polar complementary'. The point is that although the reader may be challenged to make narrative connections across remote contexts without the customary channels of cause and effect, this challenge is present whether reading a Ming Dynasty novel, the river journey of Gao Xingjian or the construction schema of *Interesting Times*. As to the effectiveness of a reflexive POV this requires an empirical reading in which case, to paraphrase Gao Xingjian, reading this part is optional but as you've read it you've read it. More conclusively for this thesis, is its diptych pairing of critical theory with creative writing are themselves reflexive aspects.

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<sup>132</sup> Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: Loyola University 1971) p45

The way that can be spoken of

Is not the constant way;

The name that can be named

Is not the constant name.

The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;

The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;

But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its manifestations.

These two are the same

But diverge in name as they issue forth.

Lao Tzu

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## **Part Two**

# **Interesting Times**

A novel by James Macfarlane

## ONE

Neville Marlow

All fathers are liars. For mine every day was a circle of deceit, pausing at sunset for him to stare across the fields like a captain with no ship. But he knew more about Marston farm than any sailor could tell of the sea. Us Marlows, he told me, had lived on the estate before the Lord Lieutenant's family bought, fought, or as some have it, won it at cards. If ever the Lord Lieutenant strolled beyond the terraces and topiary of Priors Marston the Old Man would doff his cap and lower his head as if he'd lose the tithe cottage otherwise. But the way the Old Man told the story we were the first people to live here and could trace it beyond the tithe deeds of 1415 to the Domesday book. Marlow, being them as first drained the marsh, earned their name from the Mer Laue, Norman French for the place and those as lived here. And before that there's the Mere Laf, a proper old English name for land as gets worked after a pool is drained. Whatever his stories, it gave no shame to be of the same family in the same place encircled by the same seasons in exchange for the right to live in that cottage. But I've little trust in such talk about things long gone.

This morning I couldn't tell whether it was pines or palm trees combing the wind beyond. I was in my Shangri-La until the chirrup of a blackbird brought me back to the sound of somebody at my boxes down in the parlour. I was off the bed and at the head of the stairs in five steps, looking down in the blue light coming through the bags over the windows. I kept to the inside of the stair, avoiding the tread creaks by taking the steps two, three at a time,

leaning on the opposite wall, same's I did as a lad. I stopped on the bottom to lift out a spindle from the broken banister and turned toward the parlour, holding it in front as someone stepped through a column of sunlight towards me. I took that swing and at once I felt relief as if I put an end to this. It's not like a story. It happened now. There was this noise like splitting a log and then a warm weight across my feet. I pulled a bag off the window for some light and there she was on my parlour floor with her masses of wheat hair parted by a bloody crease. My first thought was I had not done this. I couldn't. I had to help. I needed bandages, water. I wet a cloth at the kitchen sink but then the cloth was filthy. A hot drink is good for shock. I called out to ask if she wanted tea and filled the kettle anyway. I was in a hurry to light the stove. Lost the matches. Found them. The ring pulsed blue flames, shrank and went out. I opened the kitchen door and went round by the lean-to. It was in a bad way, in need of a skim and touch up but I'll have to do that along with daubing the wattle and the botched window frame. I took off the regulator, the gas bottle clanging like a bell when I connected the spare then went back to the kitchen, re-lit the stove and put on the kettle. I had to be quick but the gas bottle was empty. The spare bottle.

So I went out to get the hand barrow. I needed a new gas bottle 'cos I'd used the spare. I'd just put the empty bottle in the barrow then the kettle whistled so I went back in and made tea. There was something else to do round by the New Barn but I had to get going for the spare gas. I left by the kitchen door, pushing the barrow along the back path through the copse by the bird pens. Bramble thickets have grown up through them, higher than my shoulders but you'd expect that. The shit I cleaned out there every day and never enough. I threw the gas bottle over the style, lifted the barrow more carefully then headed for the bridleway to Priors Magna. The wheels were louder in the sunshine, squeaking like partridge chicks on their first day. I came to a field of heavy headed wheat stretching the length of the

sky. It was further than I remembered, pushing the barrow round the edge to the bridleway. I should've gone by the front lane but I had to hurry and there was that business round the front. Now this wheat blocked the old bridle path across the Knightly Way. It came up to the fence, ploughed and sown right up to a field of flat cane-like stuff on the other side. I had to turn the barrow round and pull it, trampling the crop along the edge.

When I reached the towpath the going was quicker. After the Long Reach they'd built new houses across the canal, the edge of town now I suppose. Widened the road too. Dual carriageway with furious traffic near the truck park. I walked for miles between great blocks of warehouses without seeing anyone but a mechanic in green overalls. A robot stock-picker was jammed on his truck dock. It was easier going down towards the railway station. There was a building I used to like there, white tiled like a cinema but someone had it boarded up. On the other side of the railway was a line of new houses, blocks of four and six, wall to wall for half a mile like plastic coops. There used to be factory bays here, a straight half-mile of black ridge-roofs four stories high. At this end the paint bay used to blast thinners and red lead primer out the vents. Safe as houses it was, long before I was borne, before the war, before I was christened after the Prime Minister of the day. One hundred and seventy nine bays stood three nights of air raids and still standing after the town hall was flattened. Anyway I was in a hurry for the gas and I don't live round here no more.

The depot was the same yard I used to get the coal and pink paraffin from. They helped me load a full bottle and I headed for home pulling the cart behind me. Across the railway I passed this place clad in white tiles, the offices of Swift Precision Tools if you please. A place for the prize-winning schoolboys, 'Swifties,' guaranteed a clean job in this picture house of a place while I learned to creep by.

Over the railway a gang of schoolboys burst on me, swearing and play punching. I thought they were late for school the way they ducked through these doors but they were gone into a shopping mall, built over the stockyard by the rail junction that once had the biggest signal gantry in the world. When I was a lad one of the Old Man's labourers had this sepia photograph of the gantry with forty eight men on it, each standing by a signal like sailors manning the rigging of an old ship. He would hold up this picture, laughing while he pointed to one of the men on the gantry saying, 'That's me that is. Ha ha ha.' His name now, it was on the tip of my tongue, but he laughed a lot and looked after the hedgerows and coppicing. I meant to cut through by the Grunthorpe Farm but it was changed to a pub now with a garden of plastic toys. Used to have more arable than stock with three barns where I'd join the kids from a dozen families living and working there. We'd play tumble-down among hay bales piled as high as a house. Them in the big house spoke with a funny accent that I came to realise was no accent at all beside the mangold wurzeled vowels of the Old Man's speech. I could have cut through the farm before but as I had to go around the road metal pressed into my shoes and my ankles creaked. Along the road by the truckstop used to be the MCC green where the gentlemen of Marston Cricket Club played without the slightest concern for the world beyond the boundary, not knowing that one day a storm drain would cut through their stumps to carry the run off from acres of warehouse roofs. They'd put traffic lights on the old drover's road, a right of way since Roman times. Thirty years ago I came along the canal here with Ivy after a dance in the next village, coming back along the towpath later to stuff my pockets with early sloes. The men who took a pride in hauling the coal and bricks here must have been sure their bigger broader barges would always be working this reach, unlike the narrow boats. It seemed to me the navvies might have raised the towpath yesterday and not three centuries ago.

I tried to hurry along but with every truck that boomed past me the air was sucked from the road. Long after I left the trunk road I'd gone the length of the field without seeing the bridle path. I crossed the ditch so's I could see over the hedge. A harvester as big as a barn was clearing a mat of stubble, cutting and baling like a factory on wheels with lights all ablaze at one in the afternoon. I couldn't see a gamekeeper. No Setters to sniff the air and set off the last hare or partridge and no handlers, no guns, no people. Not a sound in the whole wide afternoon except the growling harvester.

I strained to make sense of it, my eyes turning over and again to this copse sticking up from a knoll. It was the same leafy green pillow as our copse except for a line of stone above the tree-tops, as if someone had dropped a brick on it. The she oak and cedars by the manor, the green Yews by the Saxon church if not the Church itself left me dazzled but the rest had changed beyond my recognition. There should at least be some meadow, some colour in the flowers, some wetland between the bottom field and the river. But there was no bottom field. No river. Was it piped in? From the other side of the road I could see clear across the county to the flag on Priors Magna steeple. I must have gone beyond the bridle path and the three fields that used to be here. They don't do hedgerows the same. No chamfer to the edge so I fell up to my knees in ditch water before I got back on to the road. When I did find the bridleway it ran just across the hedge and no further. Inside the field it had been planted over with this thick cane-like stuff, more like crystals than grass it was, every blade the same, ploughed and sown right across the path. I was shuddering trying to get going, to push myself along where someone before me had the same problem, trampling the crop the other way so's it ran against me. I hauled at my barrow like an old sailor, stopping now and again till I saw the farmhouse. Dear me it was rough. I'd forgotten the tin roof they put up after the thatch rotted through and rats got in. It was rusting through at the patched flashings and



boltholes where the rain gathered. But I was in a hurry as I came round by the front wall and that business hit me like an axe.

Right behind the New Barn was a glass marquee, a greenhouse affair with nothing at all inside but a blue swimming pool. I looked towards the New Barn and saw a great fortress of a place, all glass and dressed stone. I walked round the back into a courtyard with stables that had nothing to do with horses. Outside one of them was a glossy black car, big and heavy like a tank with no gun. Instead of a number plate it had a name, KIRBY. Round the front men were laying flagstones and had left a string line right exactly where the New Barn used to be.

## Two

### Do the Right Thing

Francis Kirby had stopped grieving by the time he met Arnold Saint-Clair. ‘One has to move forwards,’ he said following his late father’s pragmatism. It was this plain speech of his father’s that recommended him to clients like Saint-Clair took it to be an incapacity for selling to advantage. It was also the reason he’d been passed over twice for a seat on the main board. Among the associate executives Kirby was the only one not to laugh when the family’s last banking scion claimed to have bought his knighthood like an honest man. Before their bank went public he might have been an associate partner with the old regime, serving as if he would one day join the senior partners in the private dining room, eating Dover sole with a pair of silver forks. Being considered harmless helped him survive the takeover better than most. But after the funeral he confessed to his wife that, whatever her expectations, a seat on the main board would never be his. He was more than a little disorientated then, to be summoned to meet the saviour of British industry, Arnold Saint-Clair, on the same day the executors discharged his father’s will.

The proposal for raising Saint-Clair’s capital was an enigma so thin that he put a call through to legal for the rest of it. He was told he must sign a confidential disclosure agreement before he could read the full enquiry, begging the question of what secrets to avoid before they could be kept. Kirby’s legal advisor, a bombastic Scot who insisted on referring to Saint-Clair as Sinclair, made it clear that professional discretion would not be enough.

Saint-Clair was known to be guarded with the press, shy even with his employees, but after their last AGM it seemed he found his shareholders had proved a diverse and vexatious lot.

Kirby's father had met Saint-Clair in the course of rescuing his own employer, long before the industrialist grew his messianic reputation. Kirby was still at school when he first heard of the man, chiefly through his mother's irritation with Kirby senior for sitting too far into the night on business and to a lesser extent through anecdotes from his father on Saint-Clair's leadership. For years his father would talk of that meeting as if it was some marvel of nature he had just witnessed the night before. At every opportunity, and there were many of them, Kirby senior had a paean of kitchen table praise for Saint-Clair's latest acquisition, each one a chance to relive their only encounter.

"Inventory you see Francis," his father said through a mouthful of toast, "begins with stationery cluttering up the desk drawers then the office not to mention the stock room for an entire factory." Saint-Clair ran through the lot from bulldog clips to green pens, hex-bolts to red hermatite, enough surplus to last six months although a local supplier could deliver the next day. Kirby had an abiding image of his father sitting round the table with England's last industrialist, decoding heavyweight overheads and itemising every job description for ratios of surplus nouns to verbs. Since then his unspoken observation was that the few hours his father spent discussing office stationery with twenty colleagues were a hundred between them all that would never appear on Saint-Clair's time sheet. Then the hundreds more listening to his father on how Saint-Clair told him in person about 'saving the shareholder's money' while strolling round the building searching for lights to switch off, a mission he judged more worthy of a school prefect than a great, or indeed lesser, industrialist.

The white hot technology of his father's lifetime had long cooled down in company outbuildings, their bricks laid by Bolton and Watt, design vectors unchanged since Faraday's

generators and the same thermodynamics turning Charlie Parsons steam turbines to whizz across the Atlantic in Samuel Cunard's liners. The names were of such significance to table conversation that it was Francis' fair assumption they were personal friends of his father. The more Kirby heard the less he was inclined to follow his father's example. His choice of profession met a show of paternal indifference unless some newsworthy event opened the play for Kirby senior's considerable talent for irony, his specialist subject being the oxymoron of a banking product. 'It's not as if *they* can offer you a seat on the board,' his father said more than twice, cornering Kirby into the defence of a flawed world.

When Kirby sent off his proposal for the issue of corporate bonds he received a curiously open ended reply for a first meeting, not in their London office but Geneva, a bizarre combination of private banking with corporate finance in which he saw none of the tricks with which Saint Clair impressed his father. Why the CDA? Why Switzerland? Why the insistence on Genevois privacy? The questions were becoming a formidable list even before his flight was delayed, an extra two hours in the business lounge contemplating the future, the past and a journey more like a trip to Elsinore than a Geneva bank. Kirby prepared as best he could, fortified by public speaking confidence tricks, notably his legal colleague's sketch of 'Sinclair' as a cartoon figure smirking behind a desk holding his empty word balloon between filigree fingertips.

In the offices of a private bank off Belle Air they gathered round a walnut table the size of a barge, their proceedings reflected in a Louis Quinze chiffonier whose waxy patina suggested that since 1789 the most important activity in their salon was the fastidious polishing of furniture.

Saint-Clair was smaller than his reputation suggested, slight with thin wispy hair, not so much grey as colourless and self-contained but for hints of a smile that never managed to break out. Even the name was a constraint, squeezing one diphthong into the crisp consonants of both barrels. Kirby was reminded of a school prefect who saw to it that he received a thrashing – from others - for some misdemeanour he no longer remembered. At the sight of those crab legged fingers scuttling across the balance sheet Kirby chose not to mention his father's meeting and besides, he was struggling to follow Saint-Clair's projections. From what he had seen there was to be no increase in assets. In fact despite the huge additional cash flow the assets on the balance sheet would be reduced, transferred to one subsidiary or another by leverage that Kirby had yet to grasp. Such as it was the business plan revealed little, an aggregation of aggregations, narratives rather than numbers behind an alchemy of higher returns on fewer assets. Kirby tried and failed to connect Saint-Clair's obsessive secrecy with the person his late father so respected. He watched Saint-Clair tracing the columns as though he could read numbers through his fingertips, turning pages and pausing as if about to smile before using Kirby's name with more warmth than their relationship merited, unless Saint-Clair too remembered his father. In a lucid moment it occurred to Kirby that Saint-Clair, a man who planned every encounter in detail, might remember his father only too well.

A week after Saint-Clair's takeover his father's company cut a swathe through staff and space, taking with it surplus inventories and overheads of business rates, heating and lighting. Half the site was no longer needed. Even treasury was re-engineered so that each Friday afternoon a briefcase of cash, cheques and securities was sent up to London where, for fifty two weekends of the year, their deposits leveraged capital to levels of unheard efficiency. In

the end the takeover itself cost nothing. In one move Saint-Clair paid for the lot, employing an elderly planning officer from the local council to develop the surplus acres and sell them off at a premium for an out-of-town supermarket. But Saint-Clair was not so careless as to rely on council jobsworths or grocers for collateral. The subvention granted to him out of public money to protect jobs would have paid for the lot by itself except the grant was made on the understanding that jobs were safe for five years. To follow through on his business plan Saint-Clair had to wait the full term before writing off the grant, closing the factory, using the proceeds to buy out Albion Engineering and bring the business under one letterhead. Kirby senior retired before the closure, by which time his admiration of Saint-Clair was that of a doting imbecile in a rest home.

Kirby's filial visits were at least dutiful. After a more or less standard opening, each one recycled his father's past obsessions - 'Well dad which is it today? Regulating fuel? Overspeeding?' If Kirby sat he was soon struggling to keep awake in the same stuffy air recycled from one visit to the next. In time he learned to remain standing, inspired by the view of a stately bank of oak and chestnut crowns dappled with Scots pine and slate green cedar while his father resumed work long past on some detail of Whittle's jet engine. The nurse, a token professional among a surly bunch of carers, did little to lift his father into the present. In her small talk she told him that his father used to work here as part of the war effort with someone called Frank Little. Kirby smiled at her and said nothing. They found his father in an armchair by the window, looking out over the grounds of the same converted country mansion that once housed Frank Whittle's secret project, defying war office careerists as much as gravity to send a jet propelled idea into the sky.

By the following day Kirby's concentration was failing him. By the fourth his patience was gone as they poured over open ended issues in what Kirby's mother would have said was a mutual appreciation society. He heard his strategy summed up as undeveloped and watched Saint-Clair lean forward to thumb through Kirby's draft prospectus, running thin white fingers down the subtotals to aggregate the case for what he referred to as core business. But Kirby could not follow the summing up. He tensed as the company secretary made his presentation on the revisions to their articles of association. Kirby stared at the secretary's paperwork looking for a connection between the lists of regional subsidiaries. As far as he could gather most of them would have to close. His thoughts raced, splitting the globe in three parts and stringing them together as one eternal working day connected by nothing but will power and brass plates: the Cayman Islands and Costa Rica, Singapore and Hong Kong, Monte Carlo and here in Geneva, each one paired with its strategic alternative in the same time zone. Every day their working capital could be moved from one time zone to another, increasing the effective capital threefold with no need for the bond issue he came with.

"It's not as if I've anything to add," said Kirby, his father's irony speaking through him and convincing with it. "But why the finesse with corporate bonds? You could go ahead and do this without the trouble of shareholders. In fact why bother with equity at all?"

Saint-Clair broke into an unrestrained smile. "Why shareholders?"

For one brief moment Kirby wanted more than anything to be back in that stuffy nursing home listening to his father's memories of the megalomaniac opposite. He stood up, overcome with grief and threw out his arms to send the prospectus skidding down the table while he roared at the top of his voice, "Why indeed?"

By the time Kirby reached his north London home a new future was clinging to him like a wet blanket. He clenched his teeth at the sound of his wife's coloratura phone voice reverberating throughout the house. He listened but she was already ahead of him, chatting over the results of his performance with exceptional good cheer.

“Absolutely. And passed over more than once. But this time rather robust they tell me so now he's on the board we can go ahead with my plans for Antibes.”

He missed the end of the call before she joined him in their emergent kitchen, their fourth in twelve years and already echoing with the white ambience of a prize-winning morgue. He tried to explain why he had lost his temper but she shut him up with an uncharacteristic peck on the cheek.

“A seat on the main board,” she said with a patronising cadence that reminded him of his mother. “Of course they made you a director. They have to after you put up such a fight. How else can you do business with men like that?”

Kirby poured himself a half tumbler of Scotch and drank to his father.



### Three

Neville Marlow

I can hear a lovely voice saying we all learn through stories but there's scarce one that doesn't skimp over more lies than learning. The Old Man was still talking about 'us Marlows' the day I learned his stories were not mine. I learned that the day they came to build the New Barn when their Leyland truck came growling up the lane weighed down with girders. The Old Man said they wouldn't get through the mud. At six years old it seemed to me a new kind of man climbed out and threw sacks under the wheels to prove him wrong. These men set to work with tools I never saw using words I never heard to build the whole thing by themselves, a New Barn that the Old Man had talked about as long as I could remember. They unloaded the steel by hand. You never see that now. A couple of A-frames either end, each man pulling with a mind to the other and they had the steel off in a day. Call a spade what you like but they could shovel earth to within a teaspoon on one side of a string line or another. I'd never seen a level gauge before; ratchet spanners either and they knew how to ease a hard dig round boulders or tree stumps with a joke. Then shovelling and shuttering, setting the bolts, pouring the concrete and fixing the angles with a theodolite. It was as if for the first time in a thousand years a circus had arrived, just for me. Every day I'd be up and washed before anyone else, off to see what they would do next and to hear about places they'd been: Devon, Yorkshire, Wales and twice in Scotland for a lad called Ronny. First time I saw chocolate was when Ronny broke a piece from his own bar for me. I don't remember the Old Man laughing but I still remember how the light poured off Ronny when

he made the others laugh easy. When the church flew the flag of Saint George after Easter my father said it was English but Ronny told me it was French. He said after William the Conqueror it was all the same with knights whether they were English knights or French knights, the same language but different crosses for the crusades. The English wore white for Whitsunday and the French wore red crosses until one of Shakespeare's Henrys went across there to be king of France as well as England. The Old Man grit his teeth but Ronny said this was common knowledge in Scotland where they all know their history but can't keep it to themselves. It never occurred to me that my circus would move on. I went stone cold the day I heard Ronny talk about their next job.

The morning they were leaving I got up specially early and climbed inside the chest where they'd packed the anchor bolts. It stank of sisal and was so cold that although we only travelled to the Derby peaks, it was enough. They called the police and when my father learned they were coming back Marston way in a week's time he suggested I wait and return with them. Even in a circus there are cages to clean and they saw to it I did my share. I wasn't happy but Ronny spoke to me as if he had a special secret I should know. Said he'd be a millwright if he had the chance again. That way you can choose he said, tool-room or travelling. He told me to get an apprenticeship and a proper job. What could be more proper than his?

What with washing in pump water every Saturday for half a century the Old Man had this swarthinness to him so's I couldn't tell if he was purple with rage or dirt when he beat me. When we were connecting to the water main a gang of twenty or thirty labourers arrived and I was not allowed beyond the gate. I climbed the beech tree to watch them working stripped to the waist, singing while they dug up the farm road and hoisting cast iron pipes into position with voices raised at each pull. I'd catch the Old Man looking dark at me from under this cap

of his. It never left his head unless he was doffing it to the estate manager. 'Getting ideas,' he'd say, as if the only place for them was at the end of the elms leading to the Lord Lieutenant's manor. I knew I'd have the better of him one day and told him I'd leave but he never even looked at me. As if he knew some law he said there'd been Marlows here since Agincourt as a Marlow held the tithe in 1415 when the cottage was built. He'd have been as happy back then among the serfs and villains as he was being a tenant. That's the way it's been with the manor at Prior's Marston, doors like a fort, ceilings like wedding cake, a maze in the garden and terrace with stone pineapples on the balustrade. From the time he went out in the morning he worked the same fields as the Wessex peasants that dug the strips you can still see there, working quiet all day until at night he'd burn Mercian logs from Cawston Woods, the same Cawston Woods as in the Domesday book.

After the New Barn went up everyone except me seemed to have left for better things. The work changed. There used to be a dairyman lived next to the milking parlour with his family. Opposite them was the head stockman with his boys. When they used horses for the arable old Archie ran the stables with his daft brother looking after the hedgerows and coppicing. The gamekeeper had me cleaning out pens and carrying feed to the pheasant and partridge behind the copse until they'd been let loose for the Lord Lieutenant's guns. There'd been enough people here to field two football teams but after the dairy was refitted it came down to a tractor, mother and me with, of course, my Old Man and his dogs. Anything else he leased from Prior's Marston. I thought he knew nothing. I told him I was going to see a bit of the world. I hadn't even seen the sea. 'The sea?' he says like I swore at him, 'I never seen the sea. What's the point?' I'd never have stuck the Albion Works if I hadn't found myself arguing against him every step of that five mile walk through leaf mould and mud, just to catch a bus to the factory gate by half seven. It was fetch this and carry that between

welding, filing and marking out. But there were good things like using a vernier. Bad ones too. Fooling around with sealant, you know, red and green depending on hot or cold, a brush of hermatite in your arse turns solid pretty quick. Boys ended in hospital more than once after a joke with a compressor hose but it learned you not to get lippy. And night-school at the end of it, long hours after long days and all that a privilege. I met Ivy before my time was out, but I suppose I already knew where I was going. Every other week I'd see this fellow come into the repair shop at the far end of the works and to me he always looked happy. I began to look out for him, seeing which lads he spoke to when he came round with a stack of turbine blades to edge. I mostly saw just the back of him because he worked away but whenever he came round with a spline to mill or a jig to fab I'd be there. In those days they had that many sets put in over the coal fields that every other village in the Vale of York had cooling towers going up, and a journeyman had to travel.

There was so much to learn I thought it would take the rest of my life. It was eight years before they let me lay down a line myself. You start the centre with your piano wire, keep an eye on the thermometers and the tell-tale threads for cross winds and check the tether three times a day. 'Always use your own piano wire,' my journeyman said, 'Else you've no way to know the sag.' Turbines this size have forces in them a near mystery, like old starlight. Their maths is loaded with assumptions and purging the sums was my job. New wire has a different template. It doesn't follow what we built, laying out casings as thick as your thigh and growing by the inch with the heat stress. You pass separate steam through warming vents just to start up and after that they still need two weeks, 24 hours a day running up to speed at full load for enough to light 15 million lamps and that never without some clever clogs at my shoulder to remind me that a day late cost a million pounds.

One day a rep from an instrument company called. I thought I was helping when I explained my work to him. What they told me was the job would be easier with his lasers. I gave him some training and six months later I packed my tripod and level, cleaned the lenses, wiped down the vernier gauge with light oil and signed it into the same store I got them from twenty years before. I was out of a job.

## Four

### Dream Tide

The roller had sunk in its own ditch after Liu's sons left for Shenzhen. They had not thought to put the boards underneath. Worse, they had left without calling on Liu's neighbour Xianzhi who had been an uncle to the boys since they were babies. But Xianzhi himself should have paid a visit by now. He was one of the few fishermen this side of the Long Wo who still salted their own fish and already Liu's salt bins were filling up before the rains. Liu leaned against the four man roller, pushing and pulling to start a rocking motion until he gathered enough momentum to pull it out. He took his spade, scraped and dug back the soil then winced as though electrified. A lifetime in brine had cured the feeling from his hands, except when the derma cracked through skin tough as a rock oyster. He shook four loose rags, wrapped his head and shoulders with two of them, his hands and his arms with the others and set off along the causeway pulling his roller.

In that glittering expanse everything was a furious glare, a white-hot aura pulled tight over the delta by the sun. He was like a fly imprisoned in a light bulb as he pulled the roller from his ancestral hut to his patchwork of pans where he spent the morning walking it up and down, preparing to flood the bed. A little before noon he paused in mid-turn and looked out to the white skyline trembling at the known edge of his salt pans. The tide had slackened and he needed three more passes before he could open the channels for sea water to trickle down

from the top bund. He picked up his shovel from the end of the pan and set off to reach the outer bund before the tide turned.

Heading towards the sea was a relief, always cooler. It used to bring dreams of owning a boat, of spending the day in a fresh breeze with his sons the way the fishermen did, enjoying a smoke while their nets did the work. His dreams had strength then. Without them the walk had become a wide empty space leeching his joints dry in salt and sun.

Before he could get down to the tidal lagoon he had walked a quarter mile past bund walls that were all his, each one dug and re-dug, trenched and trenched again when rained out, flooded over or crumbling to dust. A windmill marked the shallow ledge of rock along the tidal ponds. It had stood there before the salt gabelle's charter was renewed by the Ming dynasty, turning paddles to lift water from the lagoon to his smaller bunds, channelling brine out among the pans. Already the rigging was loose again despite the days spent sewing sails and replacing the booms after the last typhoon. Xianzhi asked why he did not get a pump, a stupid question that only a man free from the ebb and flow of tides could ask. There was less water in the great river than there used to be. Sometimes it all came down at once, flooding the pans with silt and washing out his bunds so that he had to dig them out and roll the pans all over again. From up on the mill Liu had seen dredgers out in the channel, their buckets clanking away, driving the River Dragon deeper so that it no longer appeared except in anger.

The lagoon was draining by the time he reached it. He dug in a piece of slate to stem the outflow and hurried back to finish the rolling, breach the bund and let the water in. He pulled the roller home along the causeway, rested it on the boards then collected two rakes and a broad shovel, put them in a barrow and headed for the upper pans. He tapped the crust in four places. It broke with a satisfying click and he set to. It was good wholesome work

raking the salt into pyramids, finishing off the sum of his efforts. After each glistening white pile was shaped and tamped he had a moment's relief, free to move on. At such times his better memories became strong and the dreams he wished for could be true if only his sons were there to share them.

He raked over eight piles, each a metre high and was starting on the ninth when he saw a ripple on the causeway, a figure wriggling like an insect caught in syrup. Ten minutes later he recognised his step-daughter and carried on raking his salt flowers.

They'd been paid good money to look after the girl. Then one thing after another the money stopped, his wife passed away and his sons left. Liu never thought of her parents until he saw the vixen spirit behind those Jing eyes. Then one day when she was old enough to bleed those same three in the morning four in the evening people turned up announcing that her parents had been found and took the girl with them. In a year the girl was back offering to help. With her eyebrows scrubbed smooth as clam shells and inked black it was hard to tell what she wanted under that paint. She had come with that other look as though she was tired all the time or had grown up too quickly. His sons joked that if her new friends cared about her they would buy a television for them.

By the time he reached his door she had water on for his tea. On the crate beside jerry cans of fresh water she had emptied out a bag of tea, some pork, bananas and the sweet dumplings he liked. Her greeting was formal, as though she wanted something. When she pointed to a box beside the far wall, asking what it was, he straightened up telling her it was a house gift from his sons.

“They brought it from Shenzen when they came for Spring Festival. It's a television.”

“Why is it in a box?”

“It needs electricity. That will come. Maybe next year.”



“A chariot with no horse.”

“Don’t insult them. Don’t dare. What is spring festival without family? They came to visit me. They made the effort, all the way from Shenzhen.”

“I had work.” Her words fell like stones.

“They have honest work,” he said, lowering himself on his squat stool.

She brought him tea.

“They asked for you. Do you know they wanted to see you?”

“What about you father? They want you to visit them. You could go if you were not tied to this place. You can sell it. You must apply to the Land Registry for ownership, otherwise you might lose it. All you have to do is sign here and here.” She held the papers towards him.

“Why? My sons will soon have earned enough to come back here to live. It is they who will put this to rights.”

“But you have worked this land for twenty five years. You are entitled.”

“Twenty five? My ancestors have made salt here for centuries. Everyone needs salt. Nothing is more valuable. In my father’s day salt was the only good money. Bank notes were fit only for burning at the altar. The Nationalists printed their worthless paper in Beijing and the warlords printed theirs but salt is salt and that’s the way it’s always been. The salt gabelle is old as Qin and when my sons return all this will be theirs. Do you doubt me?”

The stove hissed as she turned up the heat, filling the shack with clouds of aromatic ginger and roasted sesame. Later when they had eaten and the silence between them was less yang she asked to see the television. He picked up the box and pawed at it with stubby fingers, their nails long ground to the quick. She knelt close by, waiting for his frustration to pass

before she took the box, slid a long red nail under a tab to open the lid and lifed out a small book. She turned a few pages and pointed to a diagram.

“Father you can use a battery. Do you see?”

“What do I need a battery for?” And where would the likes of you get such a thing?”

“I may not be able to bring it myself but this is important,” she said holding the Land Registry papers in front of him. “You don’t need to sign now but please think about them.”

“I told you before. That is for my sons. It is their heritage.”

That night he did not sleep. The girl’s cunning had unsettled him until he got back to work in the morning but even then he was on edge. Whether it was the rigs tapping away out there on the horizon, the clanking dredger or the River Dragon’s distress, some gut feeling led him back from the upper pans to check the sluice. He saw the rainbow sheen on the water and broke into a fast shuffle but already a gobbet of black oil was swilling down the trench. He dropped a slate in and set off to get a shovel. With a few diversions he had re-trenched around the polluted water, separating it from the other pans by a small bund. He gave up on the last of the tidal water. He would either have to dig out the whole area or come back in darkness when the next tide turned. Turning from the sea Liu walked to the shallower pans crusted with sweat and salt, almost longing for the monsoon to break and wash the filthy air, even if it meant losing much of his stock. The shoreline he knew had become a bank of brown fog, like a yellow fever corpse with piling rigs for ribs. Nowadays when the evening breeze set in off the heat soaked land, it carried the sound of pile drivers to him throughout the night. His sons told him they were building a highway over the old road that would carry more cars in a day than in all the China of their youth. He was thinking of this when an intense red light appeared on the shore, hovering as nimble as the Celestial *He Xiang* until

he saw the car thundering towards him over the causeway. He'd not seen many 'fire chariots' this close and certainly not like this police car. It sailed comfortably past his salt stock and came to a halt in front of his shack, shining like green glass. Its wheels had tyres like black flesh with mirrored hubs to drive away evil spirits. The driver swung open the door wearing sunglasses and holding a cigarette between his teeth, more like a *Chiu Chao* gangster than a policeman.

"Qim's father?" asked the policeman.

Liu nodded.

"She asked me to bring this." The policeman flicked away his cigarette as the boot lid opened.

Liu peered in at two car batteries standing on wadded newspaper.

"What are you waiting for? Take them."

"What are they?"

"Batteries. Qim tells me you need them."

Liu carried each battery inside and stood them beside the television box. When he stepped out again the policeman was at the other side of the yard, looking across the flats as if criminals might be hiding out there.

"So this is where she grew up." He spoke as though to himself, adding, "How far does the tide come?"

"It stops beyond the windmill out there. All the water has to be pumped you see."

The policeman nearly choked on his smoke. "And you've been here long enough. You have been here twenty five years. Haven't you?"

Liu nodded, watching the policeman unwrap sunglasses from his ridiculous jug-ears and the way he said one thing while obviously thinking another.

“You must take care you are not cheated. Builders you know, there are lots of them now and they all want land. I know people who can help. Maybe they’ll give you electricity next year.” He said this as if telling a joke then walked round the shack once more and got into his car. “Anyway it’s not just your daughter who is busy,” he said, wrenching the car’s wheels round to leave the causeway churned up.

Every year before the rains Liu would rally his boys to carry salt by the barrow load, three miles down the bank to Xianzhi’s. With rain flooding the salt pans his work slowed up just as the fish came into a feeding frenzy so that Xianzhi needed all the help he could get. They would sit together under the cool of the salting shed on the back wharf of Xianzhi’s stilt house, telling stories while gutting the fish, salting and dressing them on curing racks strung out over the dock. At the time he was too busy to enjoy their work. Now, walking alone down the same track those days came to him pregnant with the fun of children, his boys running ragged chases after each other and jumping naked into the water.

He paused to adjust the papers in his sleeve before stepping out on the walkway, his feet ringing flat notes from the planks. The house did not look right close up. Extra rows had long ago been added on either side of the longhouse to accommodate four generations, one short of Confucian happiness in five generations under one roof. But the posts above the wharf were empty. The nets were gone. The curing racks lay stacked to the side where the salting shed should be. A young woman came to the door and waved, calling him inside. Surely his friend could not have a daughter this age? Inside there were little children, grandchildren of the same age his sons were in those work sharing visits Liu recalled so vividly. In this house even the grandchildren could read, to judge by the two kneeling in

front of open books. Xianzhi held a crying baby, cooing to it with a cradle song until he saw Liu and passed the baby to his mother-in-law.

“Old Liu! We haven’t seen you since, well, last year. And what happened to those sons of yours? Too busy to visit uncle Xianzhi I suppose.”

“Where are your nets?”

“Sold. I sold the lot with the boat. One of the sea gypsies is coming to collect it later this week when he has the rest of the money. Come in and celebrate.”

Liu’s chest fell.

“Don’t look so hurt,” said Xianzhi, “ I have a new job. Next week I start on one of the factory ships sailing out of the port. Foreigners are building in the New Economic Zone and at least one of their factories will need fish to process.”

“But you can sell them fish already. Why sell your boat?”

“That’s for dreamers. Too small. Anyway I’ve had enough of all that careening and re-stuffing the caulking. The engine was worn out too, and those fuel lines, I was sick of getting water in them.”

“But you can do that when you please.”

“What for? To go out all night for a few catties of bream and the occasional kingfish? The new boats supply Japan. I will be paid every day whatever the catch and they plan on ten thousand tons a year. That’s two hundred a week. Imagine!”

The numbers drove away Liu’s last clear thoughts about the papers in his sleeve. He was speechless.

“You look as though you’ve worn the same face for five lifetimes,” said Xianzhi.

Liu paled and said nothing.

“You never gave up that idea did you?” Xianzhi said quietly. “Don’t look so. Once a month when I come back ...”

“Once a month? But what about your wife? Your family?”

Xianzhi waved away the concern. “It’s just as well you never had your own boat or the two of us would have starved long ago. When I come back I’ll pack some boxes with ice and as much fish as you want.”

“Me? I don’t know anyone to sell it to.”

“Help yourself to the racks out there and set up by the roadside. Grandmother can lend you a hand. You know all that salting up business. Just let it cure and take it up to the port road. Hundreds pass by to the city markets. When the highway gets here there’ll be thousands. They all like a bit of salt fish.”

Xianzhi expounded the merits of salting, of different types of fish for different seasons, whole cured and filleted.

“I hear,” said Liu shaking at the sound of his own voice, “I hear that land has become valuable here. People are selling it for a fortune.”

“Who told you that?”

“A friend of Qim’s.”

“If you can prove you’ve been working it for twenty five years. There are plenty of crooks going round paying a few dollars to sell for thousands, perhaps tens of thousands in time.”

“You’ve been here long enough. Why don’t you try?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Xianzhi laughed, “Take a look around. You can’t have title over the sea.”

“But you have this house here. There are ways. The new highway will cross the bay.”

“Below the tide,” said Xianzhi pointing down at the stilts. He began explaining how pressed cuttlefish used to be popular and was about to look out his old press when his mother in law came in carrying a huge bowl of rice.

Liu could heft his own weight in salt and fish with a pole across his shoulders. Selling it was another matter. He now had to start the day fretting over how much stock to prepare for the week ahead. By noon, with the sun at its highest he was back at his real work repairing the salt pans until the farmers began leaving the city market. Liu had to be on his way to the two boulders by the roadside where he set up his stall. Sometimes he was late. Breached walls and collapsed ditches were not to be abandoned for a jaunt to the roadside. Day by day the highway drew closer. The piling rigs disappeared. Suddenly the horizon was alive with dozers, graders and yellow trucks as a broad sweep of ground alongside the road was flattened in one day, clear of brush and boulders. The old road grew busy, re-routed between empty oil drums and tape. In the morning it was choked with trucks of produce that came back in the evening loaded down with timber, cement and hardware for the village communes. The dusty loess of the earthworks was off limits to Liu. The boulders on which he stacked his board of salt fish had gone to the crusher. One day a customer who had been among his first regulars said goodbye, explaining that his commune was pooling resources between three villages to buy a decommissioned army truck for their produce. By the time the viaduct was complete, so few customers stopped that at the end of the day Liu felt he carried back more fish than he brought. But one thing lifted his spirits. *Tian gao huangdi yuan* his father used to say, the mountains are high and the emperor is far away. But Liu was now more powerful than the emperor. On television he had seen the leaders in Beijing driving forward the New Economic Development Program. Twice he'd seen Shenzhen and

each day now he watched for news of the work finishing, of the day when he could expect his sons to return.

She switched off the television, took his cold hand and knelt beside him, pushing and pulling in a rocking motion. In a few minutes she rose, took a handkerchief from her bag and wiped her face. She then took out a notepad and wrote to her eldest brother. Each son at the funeral was struck by his father's appearance, not that seeing him washed and dressed in his first western suit required imagination. It was the peaceful look on his face that set them wondering as if their father dreamt of slipping out between the tides in his magnificent white coffin the size of a small boat.



## Five

Neville Marlow

They say light bends but that's around stars. As for people there's lasers in our blading shop would slice right through them. When I left the Albion they gave me this present, a reclining chair that I could never sit in without the idea I'd never work again. But I made plans, lists for the garden, roses, a few bags of horse manure and my name down for an allotment. In a month the list was done except meanwhile my proper job was going wrong. Premature failures. I could have told them before but by then I was spending whole days across from the works in The Railway Tavern. So many had been laid off by then that when Alan Douglass came looking for me there was more engineering talent in The Railway than round the Boardroom table. They'd tried everything, replaced the pedestal bearings, checked tolerances and that against a design proven over twenty years. After another three failures our chief engineer was carpeted in the Board block but the bearing maker took the blame. When it happened a fourth time tests were made, Albion's numbers proven and the bearing maker called in. They refused compensation, charged for tests and threatened court action. Millions were spent before the writ was served and Douglass came to me for answers. I had been his journeyman after all. The foundation beams might have been level but what about their support underneath? What happened as the build progressed and heavier loads were added? Did the floor deflect? And what about the sag template? The deflections worked in for thermal compensation? The laser might be level but what did it rest on? Douglass sighed

more than once as I asked what he called 'the right questions' but in Tate's New Business Strategy there was no room for answers. We used to call this Tate fellow Napoleon, not on account he was little but he carried on like he meant to run Europe by himself. He had this idea to assemble everything in the works and ship it complete except that one by one the machines were failing. Blades were coming off, slicing through the casing like butter and whizzing on out the building. One landed fourteen miles away. If they played safe following the old ways and built it on site it wouldn't have happened but there weren't many left as could do it. And by the time they put one of his modules together it'd be too heavy for the roads. That's how I got to be far beyond the Old Man's ignorance with a view over the sea like I was wearing someone else's spectacles. It strained my eyes to look down two hundred feet and see it moving all the time. I couldn't turn away from that shifting pattern of soft waves curling round the headland and the breakers churning out of sight below me to some rhythm I never caught until a black point would break the surface, then three, five more until the water was pocked with rocks as if to tear open anything that came near. It sent me daft as a walk among the stars. My new work-mates already had the local knowledge to get us out to this sea-food restaurant a few yards from some headland rocks painted with this gold and white face like one of their temple gargoyles. The place was newly opened. Even before the highway was finished they'd set up by the roadside with a sign in English that read, 'Kan Ting'. The place had no electricity and kept its meat fresh at the door, fish in tubs of water and live chicken in cages. Our lads chose a bucket of fish, half a bucket of prawns and three chickens, 'Without the feathers.' Someone joked about headless chickens and why Douglass wasn't making things happen and how long before the job turned sour. They were people I'd never worked with and I don't think they knew each other before Tate brought them together. They were straphangers, contractors dropped in like paratroops and disappearing once the job

is done. I was thinking about their New Strategy when I heard a squawk and thud from the hut then this sea sucking roar. I stood closer to the edge for a better look at these waves pulling the sea from the cliffs then disappearing under the ledge below. The noise drowned out every other sound until a crack of spray shot up high enough to taste the salt. Back at the table my new colleagues were ragging the waitress, poor little thing without a word of English. She took our orders and they asked her for well never mind that. She smiled at me this way I'll never forget, carrying two buckets of water, one with fish in the bottom and the other half full of prawns. Someone made chicken noises and she brought round a cage with three in it, still flapping and feathered. After she went off with our orders I went back to the edge looking down a two hundred foot cliff at this thing the old man couldn't see the point of but they shouted at me to come and eat, sit down or jump. I turned and saw her watching them as if to check what they thought of this spread she'd laid out like a banquet on bare boards. Too busy troughing they were. When someone said, 'Beautiful isn't it,' I thought they meant the sea. This lad with fancy manners and a silly moustache kept the girl waiting, grinning at her a while before he stuffed a wad of notes in her palm and closed her fingers round them. But the way she smiled. You know? At me.

## Six

### Seagulls

The car swung round craters easily without the medieval detritus of the village, the stray donkeys and water melons. Three years had passed since Alan Douglass first came along this road, so many black faces crowding against the windows, the din growing sinister as beating on the panels took rhythm, rocking the car on its springs while he hung onto the headrest. The driver crashed the gears, the tires zipped in a pothole and they swerved as five, maybe six villagers were knocked aside before they picked up speed and were out of it. That same morning the army paid a visit, a full colonel. Nice manners over a coke followed by a three minute chat with the driver in their language and next day they drove through an empty village with no one, not a living thing in the way since. All those twelve hour days chasing ill-defined plans, chiseling budgets and squeezing suppliers under the weight of four hundred million dollars and now: he was leaving. After that first trip through the village three years had passed and he thought of nothing else the whole way to the aerodrome, even as the Beechcraft taxied out to the airstrip. 'Fly in, do your stuff and just fly out again,' his foreman used to say. An hour later he called home to his wife from the international terminal. She was in the middle of putting the girls to bed when he told her that he would be two weeks late because he was returning via China. It would not be for long because, as he said, they have a Joint Venture to look after the bureaucracy. With his wife's cynical cadence fresh in his ear he straightened up and headed for the departure gate.

The Joint Venture representative was not at the airport to meet him. By luck his colleague Nigel Tate had come in from London, although for a flight weary moment Douglass could not remember his colleague's name except as *Napoleon*, a nickname earned several times over on the way to becoming Director Designate.

"You make your own luck," said Tate ushering him into the cab. Those who knew Tate by sight presumed it was his stature that earned the soubriquet. Those who worked with him knew better. For Douglass, any trust was outweighed by ambition or, as he recalled from his journeyman's advice: you can't trust a short man 'cause 'is brains is too close to 'is arse.

"I want you to exclude everything," Tate was saying. "Right now they want a power station but later they'll come demanding brass knobs on it. That's when we make our real money."

Douglass was there for 'a few technical questions' as Tate put it, in the interests of a one hundred and fifty million dollar down-payment. As far as Douglass could tell he had arrived in another village, this one with ten million cyclists sharing the same road, apparently without factions or genocidal army officers. They turned off the boulevard to avoid the river of bicycles, ten and twelve deep on either side, while Tate talked about his New Business Strategy.

"There's 150 million dollars as soon as we start but they need help deciding where to build. Anyway there's no money for us in concrete. It's in whatever we license and that can all be bought in."

Douglass turned to watch a cart-driver whip his mule into high strides, its nostrils lathering as it heaved a load of bricks to cross ahead of them. The traffic was thicker still around the markets where a little man rose on the pedals of his long cart, struggling against the weight of half a dozen green churns of night soil. Tricycle carts loaded with bones and cabbages got in the way, slowing the cab to the pace of the hand barrows that men pushed among open stalls

laden with pink half butchered carcasses. The place was already saturated with chaos when a live pig overturned its cart, kicked its legs free of the burlap truss and bounded in front of them to disappear in the market. They drove along narrow lanes of single brick houses, squeezing in so many lives without running water and courtyard toilets for six families apiece. For their 150 million dollars Tate had a list of questions that he wanted Douglass to answer, reassuring him that Chang Yin their JV representative would look after the paperwork, 'Government permits, visas and that sort of thing'. Meanwhile Douglass turned to watch a beautiful girl step through an arched doorway holding a chamber pot in both hands.

They pulled up inside the gates of a five-storey concrete stucco building, drab with pollution and forecourt of lawns without grass, kerbs round hard earth. Inside it smelled of coal dust and garlic as they walked through corridors lined with broken cupboards from which box files and papers spilled. It was as if they were strolling through a derelict school before its demolition. The security guard showed them into a room with damp distempered walls where tired men and a woman sat smoking in the tight space around a slab of shiny conference table. Among them was the Joint Venture representative Chang Yin, distinguished from his mainland compatriots by a dark tailored suit and fussy tie. He introduced himself like an expert, presenting a business card with a long job title that included the words 'capital' and 'director.'

The power company team, led by Director Wang, included one woman and two engineers of whom one had a wart on his jaw from which grew jagged hairs like tiny forks of lightning. One engineer had studied in Arizona and the rest of the team were introduced as economists. Douglass began his presentation by unfolding a drawing of the turbine case, solid steel as thick as a man's thigh that would crack without diverting steam through special channels to

warm its thickest flanges. He pointed to the barring gear lever, as high as a goal post and used to hand crank the rotor blades for days during a gradual release of super heated steam until the rotor could turn by itself. For two weeks the speed would steadily increase until 900 megawatts of steel was spinning at three times the speed of sound, hot enough to expand by inches over its length and with that Douglass had finished his presentation. The engineers waited for him to continue. The silence thickened until Tate leaned forward demanding a decision. It was as if the air had been driven from the room taking a billion dollars with it. The Arizona graduate explained that important decisions needed time. The smallest Chinese engineer unfolded a piebald drawing, half of it a tortoise shell of contours and the rest blank where the contour lines panned out over the salt flats, a tidal location where the turbine hall would be mostly in the sea. One engineer poked at grid lines while the other hissed through a ponderous explanation of alluvial soil. When an argument broke out between the woman and her colleagues, Chang Yin explained they had long term plans: room for expansion, new offices, a sea terminal to bring in fuel and by evening nothing more could be said. They looked to Director Wang for guidance. But these matters were outside his jurisdiction. He groaned, took the cap off his pen and announced the meeting was over.

The following morning another drawing was torn as various hands unfolded it on different planes. It showed an alternative location heavily shaded by mountainside contours at the north end of the bay where the foundations would be solid rock. Tate brightened until the Chinese engineers explained more fully.

“Explosions are necessary to begin. Permits are needed and explosions are not accurate. There will be changes that need many months of hand drilling.”

Tate put his head in his hands. An engineer lit a cigarette and coughed. A glassy silence set in, broken by someone’s intestinal chortle and Director Wang leaned forward as though

he'd been waiting 5,000 years for the opportunity. He spoke slowly for ten minutes without interruption before Chang translated, "You need someone with contacts at the ministries, someone to apply for permits, licenses and visas. You are obliged by law to employ a Government Liaison Officer."

Douglass found himself in a hotel like a multi-storey truck stop before he had the chance to make a call to his wife. She was happy, her voice chiming like music after taking the girls to their new school. Then she asked when he'd be home. When Douglass hesitated between Tate's plans and what she might want to hear she seized on his uncertainty, anger in her voice so that before Douglass put the phone down he already planning what to say to Tate.

Downstairs Tate was sat reading in the corner of the ply-wood panelled lobby. Douglass turned down his offer of a drink, waiting for the moment to ask about his return flight while Tate offloaded his frustration with Director Wang and his Government Liaison 'fast one'.

"That dozy old so and so knows more English than he lets on. Contacts at the ministries indeed. We've eighteen bloody volumes to get through then they foist this liaison officer on us, nothing more than a bloody driver. If we don't have them by the end of the week there's only one person to blame and I'll make sure everyone knows it," Tate said into his gin. "If you get into any more of your engineering tutorials we'll still be here at Christmas so here's the plan."

Douglass decided not to ask about his flight.

For two weeks their meeting began the same way every day until one morning Tate announced that he was leaving, that his visa had expired and, because Director Wang already knew this there would be repercussions. On a schedule he traced lines through the quickest sequence of work to complete construction in five years time - if it began that day. After that there would be penalties rising to seven million dollars a day. Director Wang sat motionless



throughout the smoky ultimatum, his thin baggy eyes closed to any trauma, his complexion ghost grey from a generation forced to survive on boiled bark and roots. Occasionally Wang took the top off his fountain pen and twice he leaned forward to put meticulous little wicket fence marks on paper but otherwise his wood-cut features remained constant as the click on his quartz Rolex.

Tate stood for effect. “As you know I come here every day with this question. Also as you know my visa expires tomorrow. Now for the last time, and I want this minuted, can we have a decision?”

Wang’s pen lay on the table untouched as Tate pushed back his seat, collected his case and left. Two engineers and six economists lit cigarettes and resumed questioning Douglass. An hour later they were still discussing the gland steam when the door burst open and Tate stood red faced in the doorway with his Burberry over one arm.

“I have to be at the airport. Where is Zhang?”

Director Wang crossed to the window and pointed to towards the gatehouse where Zhang could be seen, back towards them playing cards with the security guards.

Since Tate left him with the small matter of technical questions Douglass had not been face to face with a native English speaker for two weeks. Douglass looked down from an empty floor into a courtyard maze of kerbs that had once been lawn borders. Since the JV rep explained they had been without grass after Mao condemned flowers and lawns as bourgeois, Douglass had a vision of Director Wang forcing college lecturers onto their hands and knees to pull out grass blade by blade. Douglass had become responsible for their new office in addition to what Tate referred to as ‘your’ shambles. Memories of his last job took on a new luster as the violence and disease were forgotten. Back there it was seven thirty and the day

of the official reception commemorating the outcome of three years work. One of Tate's old boys from the board block would be there dithering between breakfast and a heavy diplomatic lunch. Seagulls on the consulate lawns or, as his foreman remembered more clearly: they fly in, squawk a lot and eat our food then shit all over us as they fly out again. Each night after his meeting animated Chinese voices would rise up from the courtyard from two youths who peppered their conversation with engineering and English companies the way English boys discussed football. The taller boy was a student intern related to Director Wang. Each night as he waited for Tate's phone call, Douglass would hear them speak English as a kind of code for peddling contraband before the evening shift of workers passed through at which point the smaller youth would break off, making hand to hand exchanges among the line of workers, a parcel, some notes, money perhaps before the youth would skip aside and be gone. While he watched, he saw the round shouldered figure of Director Wang watching him in turn from the window opposite. After that Douglass tended to shy away from the window until late one evening he heard a clink of glass. As far as he knew there was no one else in the building. He walked round the corridors past frosted glass panels and empty offices until, by the light of a desk lamp he saw the stooped silhouette of Director Wang, unbending to raise a bottle and throw back his head like a pantomime drunk. The horror and the horror, as if he'd caught a mirror image, a black void within himself where the warm glow of his family should be.

Tate's daily directives trivialized his situation, the challenge of furnishing empty offices on the next floor from the other side of the world. He wasted a whole day across the city in a dusty warehouse stacked with export furniture while Zhang discussed 10,000 Yuan of furniture over a three hour lunch with the manager. Frustrated, he returned to work and was crossing the courtyard when the two English speaking youths approached him. The taller introduced

himself as Wang Hong, son of Director Wang. His friend Lin, a boy elfin good looks, was interested in work. Asking if Douglass was ‘the wordsmith,’ he seemed disappointed to learn he was talking to an engineer.

“Is it a good visit?” asked Lin.

“A shambles,” said Douglass, checking his watch ahead of Tate’s phone call.

The youth grinned. “How much do you earn?”

“It’s different in different places. You speak English then?”

“If you’re going places you have to speak English.”

Douglass nodded. “And you are going places?”

“Yes. Are you hiring?”

“Eventually.”

For another week Douglass thought no more of the encounter until late one night when he was startled by Lin appearing in the doorway, his canvas shoulder bag bulging with contraband while his gaze flitted across the empty office.

“Hullo. I am Forest.”

“What kind of a name is that?”

“A given name.”

“Then who is Lin?”

“I am. Forest is my western name.” He took a notepad from his bag and drew a mark like a crow’s foot. “A tree,” he said before adding a second crow’s foot, “A forest. In Chinese Lin is Forest.”

“So what do you do?”

“I am a fixer,” said the boy, his almond eyes searching for trust.

“And what do you do?” Tate repeated.

“Why don’t you have any furniture?”

“It’s coming. Comrade Zhang is arranging it.”

“I get a good deal on copiers.”

Douglass waved the boy away and returned to his drawings.

“Don’t you think I speak good English?” asked Forest.

Without looking up Douglass asked where he learned.

“I learn every chance I get. I have Hong Kong friends. I watch films. Did you apply for a fax? You need a permit.”

“Thank you. Zhang is looking into that.”

“Zhang has good guanxi. He knows the police.” The boy tightened his lips and asked quietly, “When can I start?”

“Who said you have a job?”

“You told my friend eventually. He is the Director’s son. I don’t need as much as you pay Zhang. I need, I have to speak English. Without connections everything is difficult. I have connections.”

“I have more connections than I know what to do with,” said Douglass unraveling a roll of drawings. “What’s so special about yours?”

“Do you know guanxi? It is not a word in English...”

“Listen I already have help,” said Douglass firmly, “But just for one week. I need an office. Here’s the list. I need a phone, desks and all the things that go with it. Can you do that?”

“Yes. What about the animals?”

“Animals?”

“For the shambles.”

“Shambles?”

“Yes. You said you will have a shambles.”

Forest reached into his bag, took out a wad of paper that had been a dictionary and pointed to the entry for shambles, ‘a slaughterhouse; an abattoir.’

“I just want a bloody office, an office with the furniture on this list.”

Douglass’ voice croaked under the strain of increasingly open ended questions from his clients. Turning to the ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ of his plans, he explained a critical path of construction activity, the sequence that would see the job through to completion in the shortest possible time, and succeeded in focussing interest by pointing out the cost of over-running. But the sequence had changed. Since he arrived, the turbine foundations were so late that other works should also have begun. He flattened the schedule along a thin line showing excavation was due to start on the raw cooling water, a mile long culvert big enough to drive a truck through. Wherever they built the turbine the intake would be in the same place. This work could start tomorrow. He could almost smell the waxy paper of his plane ticket until interrupted by angry voices from the new offices.

Upstairs the air smelled of glue and sawdust as five men knocked together furniture as if preparing a military campaign. Douglass was baffled by the cacophony of hammering, the zip of cardboard cartons, whirring power tools and above it all the sheer venom of Zhang’s voice as he waved a finger within an inch of Forest’s nose, cursing the boy until he saw Douglass and left, throwing a look of red-faced contempt as he went by.

Douglass turned to Forest. “Well?”

“You said you needed an office for your Mr Tate. He is the wordsmith yes?”

“But where did you get all this?”

“I have good guanxi.”

“How did you buy it?”

“No problem. They are my friends. Look. You pay a lot for Mr Zhang’s guanxi. Now you pay this.” Forest turned over Zhang’s 10,000 Yuan list of furniture and wrote on the back, ‘950.’

Douglass chewed his lip. “We’ll have three thousand people here but one way of working. What if they all used their friends?”

Forest frowned.

“Do you understand?” Douglass shook his head and asked Forest if he could drive.

When Douglass explained that he wanted to buy presents, peace offerings for his wife and daughters Lin promised to help.

“The best place,” said Forest, “is near my old home.”

They headed out from the city, crossing a dry river bed through loess flats scarred by earthworks and yellow machines that looked like they were preparing for war. Massive piling rigs sent up dust clouds blow by blow while gangs of chalky people stood round like attendant insects, their rows of pile caps stretching off in the distance like a grid of cemetery obelisks. A few miles on the first steel frames had been fixed and newly clad buildings were taking shape beyond blocks of working factories of braggart architecture and beam geometry clashing against glass facades as new buildings finished within weeks of each other like some bizarre explosion. A truck purred slowly along the roadside dropping off mature trees one by one from the back while gangs of peasants followed, planting them by hand. Corporate sculptures sat like paperweights on green baize or spouted fountains in concrete forecourts

with uniformed guards standing to attention beside the flags of Germany, Thailand, Britain and Korea. Despite the heat precise green lawns were sprinkler fresh under the flags of an American cosmetics plant and a Japanese electronics firm.

“This is NEDA,” said Forest.

“Neda?”

“You know the free trade zone? New Economic Development Agency Mr Douglass.”

“I see.”

“Do you know the shape of China? On the map?”

“Too irregular.”

“Maybe. We were taught that in the Qing dynasty China was like a dead leaf, eaten round the edge by silk worms. Now China is shaped like a cockerel, she eats up the worms.”

Between a Korean car part factory and a glass building with Chinese and American flags they turned onto a rough track leading to an expanse of wasteland.

“My village is over there,” said Forest, pointing to a huddle of low single brick houses with a yard where shrieking children played. They stopped at lines of lock ups and trading stalls with people clustered round like aphids.

A man in a dirt brown suit came towards them and snapped three syllables. He had skin like old iron and his eyes, deep-set for a Han, followed them from the moment they entered the market. Forest turned away saying that many foreigners came here, as if this explained everything, and waved towards a stack of TVs and fridges, boxes of music, computer and video discs, a stall piled with Italian leather belts, bags and logo studded accessories, strangely garish in the hands of gnarled peasants.

“Copies,” said Douglass raising an eyebrow.

“Look at the labels.”

“Labels can be copied,” said Douglass pressing the perfect double stitching of a soft ‘Italian’ leather bag until a grimy old woman barked at him.

“How much is this?” asked Douglass, whose airport browsing put it at eighty dollars. Forest argued with the stall holder but apologised to Douglass when he could not bargain below five dollars. “It is only because they see me with a foreigner. Inspectors make it difficult. They have a contract from Europe. One mistake in a thousand and they refuse to pay. There is no money even when nine hundred and ninety nine are perfect.”

“Tell her I’ll take two.” said Douglass.

The stallholder’s eyes twinkled as she took the money.

“She wants to know how much in America,” said Forest.

“Tell her five dollars,” said Douglass, picking up a delicate scarf from a heap of silks to let it fall, floating like a sheet of warm air.

“Chinese silk from Italy?” Forest laughed. “Can I ask a favour?” he said reaching in his pocket and, as if unfolding a conspiracy, opened out a Bank of England twenty pound note.

“I have good guanxi but can I ask you for a dictionary? With this?”

“That’ll buy four dictionaries.”

“But I want the Oxford English Dictionary. The big one.”

As Douglass handed back the money, the iron-skinned man shouted at him through toothy stumps, repeating ‘niao fen’ as some kind of insult. Since they clearly knew each other, Douglass asked who the old man was but Forest had turned white and would not speak until they left the development zone.

“He is a kind of uncle,” said Forest. “He asked where you come from so I told him.”



Tate seemed to study the drawing with its crimson approval stamp already signed off in Chinese. Something was wrong.

Douglass slapped down the drawing, “You said we’d have 150 million as soon as construction starts? Then I’d have my ticket home, right?”

Before Tate could answer Zhang came staggering in under the weight of a suitcase.

“Fifth final draft,” said Tate, “and engineering has overrun. I’m afraid a lot of our work will have to be done here if we’re to follow our NBS strategy. Engineering has overrun.”

“Under-resourced,” said Douglass. “You can’t expect people to grow rice one week and build to international standards the next. You can turn on tap water without a thought but here it’s been standing so long there are enough bugs to wipe out a battalion of legionnaires. And that’s tap water. Wait till we bring in the heavy loads. Some will have to come by sea. Then there’s the rainy season. You’ll have to get the steel in before ....”

“Don’t give me your problems,” said Tate. “I want you to break out a separate package of work to get started. Then see if we get the down payment.”

Douglass saw little of Tate who busied himself visiting local suppliers, taking Forest along as interpreter and returning as porter to carry boxes of test pieces and engineering samples: blue black titanium, stellite blades, pipe sections and castings still rough with fettling sand from the foundry. Douglass was not a design engineer. There just to answer a few technical questions, he had become a one man engineering department expected to supply drawings on demand whenever Tate needed information for his new suppliers. On one occasion Douglass did not have time to split a set of drawings and handed over the whole system. The next time he saw them Tate was waving the drawings in his face, threatening to fire him if he let them out of his sight and ranting about intellectual property. Only later did he notice Zhang’s

unbearable smugness since the boy disappeared. The last time he saw Forest he'd been woken by what sounded like a gang of joiners outside his room and found him stacking brand new Lavarsa travel cases along the corridor, stuffed with contraband software and NEDA souvenirs for Tate. The soapy smell of soft Italian leather was still with him next day when the cases appeared in his office wrapped in black bags and cargo tape with a customs bill declaring 'Engineering Samples' consigned to N. Tate Esq as unaccompanied baggage. Forest took them to the airport as soon as word came through that the down-payment had been made. He had not been seen since.

In preparing an orderly handover for his successor, Douglass had Zhang drive him out to where the new site office was to be, half way between the mountains and the sea. The last wisps of morning were steaming off the forests where a dark red scar had been blasted from the mountainside.

To the south the sun burned white above the salt flats, stinging Douglass' eyes. He wiped his tears and listened while an elderly Chinese ganger struck up a song, leading forty men in digging the soak-away trench with picks and bamboo baskets. The sludge tank, a shiny plastic moulding, was chocked up at the edge of the sewage pit like a giant bath toy. Douglass signalled where to place the spoil and checked the sand was level. Already he could see his legacy as the idiot who left six hundred gallons of shit buried half a mile from whatever location they eventually chose. He left them slinging the tank and returned to find Zhang asleep with his feet up on the dashboard. On impulse he grabbed his liaison officer by the shoulder and demanded to know what had happened to Forest before recovering himself in the faced of Zhang's wide eyed shrug. In silence they took the road to the Development Zone and the waste ground between the Korean plant and Forest's village. Beyond a few

remaining stalls the whole expanse had been cleared and already the first piling rigs were being off-loaded.

Zhang frowned. "Why here? There is nothing."

"I want something for the family," said Douglass. "You can help by asking after Forest."

He bought clutch bags for his daughters and was counting silk scarves to put in them when a man came hobbling towards them, the iron-skinned man, his limp new and his face bruised yellow and purple. He made straight for Zhang, bar-tight with anger and shouting as a crowd gathered round fifteen to twenty deep. Douglass stepped in to take Zhang by the arm but the old man turned on him shouting repeatedly, "Niao fen." Douglass put his hands up to protect himself and saw the man's eyes brim with tears before Zhang pushed in, knocking the old man to the ground. They ran for the truck and drove off breathless as far as the highway before Zhang opened his mouth as if he might explain.

"Where is he? You know what happened." Douglass raised his voice.

Zhang kept his eyes on the road. "That old man. He said you are bird shit."

"But he knew Forest. Was he trying to tell me what happened to the boy?"

"Mr Douglass you do not know China."

"I know you. And he knows what happened to Forest."

"Not now he doesn't. First you came. Then the police. He says you are so many, like niao fen you are white and you fall out the sky."

Except for two volumes of an impractically large dictionary, Douglass had cleared his desk and was ready to phone his wife. Her voice quickened as she spoke about television coverage of the British trade delegation visiting Beijing with Tate there in person to complete the contract signing. She told him Tate had won his promotion and there was talk of a

mention in the Queen's birthday honours. "Tomorrow," said Douglass, "for sure." He then gave her his flight number and said goodbye. After a last look round he picked up the dictionaries and took them to Wang's office. He was putting them on the secretary's desk when he saw the China Daily. It carried a single front page photograph of premier Zhao Ziyang shaking hands with a British junior trade minister in front of minor dignitaries while the unmistakable bug-eyes of Nigel Tate looked on. Douglass put down the paper and looked up to see Director Wang stood in the doorway watching. Douglass held out the dictionaries towards Wang in both hands.

"I thought perhaps you might pass this on. It's a gift for your son's friend Lin."

Wang made no sign of acknowledgement. Douglass looked at his watch and was preparing to leave for his flight when Wang handed him the newspaper, pointing to a column headed

*Piracy Crackdown:*

Following an official visit to Beijing a spokesman for the British Trade Minister welcomed an undertaking by the Chinese government to take action against intellectual piracy. Xinhua news agency reports progress in the current crackdown on counterfeit luxury goods and software. In the south eastern New Economic Development Zone, once notorious for the production of pirate goods, officials report that two hundred counterfeiters and criminal gangsters were rounded up and taken to the local football stadium for execution.

## Seven

Neville Marlow

Every day was blue sky green sea silver sand with me on an empty site, three times as big as it should be. I had no work but spent each day sitting outside the cabin some fool had set up half a mile from where the first turbine pedestal should've been laid while this old Chinese would do his shadow boxing before setting the Construction Brigade to work. They'd already dug half a mile of trench big enough to drive a truck through but we had no kit to make use of it. Though there's no more hours in one day than another each late one costs millions. At the end of the job it's the likes of me the as gets their arse kicked by the string pushers. At the start I'd the weight of a billion dollars on my shoulders and nothing but time on my hands.

Our logistics engineer Mike Pearce never stopped complaining about it, as if he could talk it off his desk. Chinese Customs wanted proof that Chinese money was sent out the country for their power station and not opium, guns or mistresses. Pearce had spent a week looking for the interpreter and the next two dragging me along between offices to explain this or that piece of kit, what it did and where it fitted. I never trusted Pearce even before he grew this fussy moustache. We had to travel three hours on switch-back mountain roads and graded trails before rattling down this riverbed to the main highway. On the way our driver would take us to his favourite fuel stops, gossiping over tea with other drivers about the road ahead. I couldn't eat the food and besides, I noticed we always had plenty of fuel in the first place.

Half our time we spent waiting for the interpreter, half in these roadside dives and another half racing round to find the correct office. I'd to stand by with an explanation for the user certificates while he'd argue his way through the meetings.

On yet another day of blue sky, green sea and silver sand Douglass came in with his face pale and lardy as if carved from soap. Said our interpreter wasn't coming back. Thieving or something. Our new interpreter Wang Hong was like the boy before but more serious, his eyes near shut as he looked round at every single thing in the office, the files, the wall chart of red line delays, the drawings, the mail boxes, the English cottage calendar and coffee stained mugs.

"How much of this do I need to know?" he said.

"Ask him," I said looking at Douglass, "He'd the same question when he was my apprentice."

"What did you tell him?"

"All of it," said Douglass, "Use your own piano wire and pull it tight."

The boy looked at him without expression then Pearce piled in to ask how he was supposed to cope with three different Customs offices.

"Four," said Douglass.

"Five," says Wang Hong, "Six if you include airfreight."

Douglass sent me and the lad outside while he talked 'priorities' with Pearce.

Farm boys can't lie in. Every morning I'd be first in for breakfast, bacon like insoles, eggs fried like they're plastic wrapped and tea that tasted of stale spices. A few smokes before Wang Hong turned up then we'd be off.

The Customs office once handled trade for the British quarter so that walking up the steps I felt I'd been there before. It was a block of stone from an English quarry, crusty with Greek

ornaments and a domed ceiling where, through a century of tobacco stains, I made out the same plasterwork, the same mouldings of English roses, the same egg and dart cornice on the ceiling of the bank my father used on market quarter-days. Along the wall there were the same booths, still with inkwells, blotters and steel nibbed pens, thin and light as chopsticks. I picked one up and dipped it in ink like I did in school and it won me back fifty years. Meanwhile the Customs officer pushed our papers back across the counter as Pearce raised his voice above Wang Hong's translation. We were at the wrong office. It took another two days to discover the right office, relocated to a suite of temporary cabins on the edge of the new business district where Pearce learned he was only partly mistaken. Our turbines were arriving as a mix of bulk cargo and containers but Pearce's application had no tariff code for containers. Although most of our kit was in bulk the rest would have to be re-submitted at another office, the same building we'd gone to days before.

Next day Wang Hong was in the office ahead of me, flopped on a stacking chair and looking at his feet the way my eldest son used to. I told him things were going badly. He scowled as if his face was moved by wires when I said the construction delays were putting the job at risk and his people would have to hurry and decide the final location.

"Your friend Mr Pearce. He talks to people different. Differently. Is it different or differently?"

"What do you mean differently?"

"There are people who can help but he is like a young person. He does not control his mind."

I explained his frustration and asked why one job had so many offices.

"There was one office before foreigners came. How many do you have in London?"

The foreigners he meant were Portuguese from four hundred years ago. As to offices, I told him London was a big city.

“Our city is the same as London but only at night. In daytime, two million more.”

I'd seen it for myself, two million souls every day bringing in their chickens, piglets and night soiled vegetables - the cross-eyed boy struggling with a cartload of watermelons, the ancient worthy with his hand on a pyramid of cabbages as if selling his grandchildren, the girl in indigo pyjamas with her box of tomatoes polished like jewels. But seeing isn't understanding. As if talking to himself he told me about the great river, from its first bend out of Tibet down to the International Settlement, a free market opium enclave with no Chinese law, a tax haven undercutting Chinese crop prices and driving down Chinese wages. He spoke about farmers who couldn't feed their children, selling them as indentured labour to work thirteen hours a day in foreign factories where they slept under the machines for a few months before dying of malnutrition. Under the Nationalists he said the canals were dragged every day for foundlings, 30,000 nameless corpses a year even before the Japanese came. People killed for human meat and fattened dogs with the remains. I thought he'd finished until he turned on me saying that I must have known such things.

“But Lin must have told you about such things.”

“Who's Lin?”

“He worked here before I came. He said he knew you.”

“Oh. You mean Forest.”

Like an engineer, he pulled out a piece of paper and sketched four little lines crossing in a star-shape. He called it a tree, *mù*, and drew another exactly the same beside it.

“More trees make *Lín*,” he said, “*Forest*, his English name.”

When I asked about his own name he said it was a good name when he was born.



“It means *Red*. Do you know of Zhang Tiesheng?” he said looking at his feet. “Zhang was a student who became famous across China, a Revolutionary Hero because he submitted a blank sheet of paper in his exams. A year later he was tried for counter-revolutionary activity and sent to a *Laogai* workcamp for fifteen years. How is that possible? If I studied French the text books were full of stuff like, ‘What are the reasons for the failure of the 1848 Paris Commune?’ One student passed when he wrote that the Paris Commune failed because it did not follow the exemplary conduct of Dazhai village commune. Dazhai was a legend. You can’t argue with legends. People came on tours from all over China to ‘Learn From Dazhai’; so many people that they built a new hotel for them and a delegation arrived from Albania. But I never learned French.”

“You learned English though?”

“My first English textbook read, ‘Good day. Are you from a working class family?’ Is that what people say in England?”

Whatever English people said I’d begun to forget out here.

The next blue sky blue sea morning Wang Hong was in before me. Straight off he asked me, ‘How do you build a power station?’ I didn’t think he was serious. I told him a bit about steam, the dead steam and live steam, super-heated steam and pure steam with no bubbles. ‘Why do you need your own piano wire then?’ he asked. So I told him. I told him how dangerous it was with all that power in one place. Once it’s running it isn’t so easily stopped. If it trips out there’s enough power in the tail of the steam to shoot a blade through inches of steel to land eight horizons away. When it happened to me the blade went fourteen miles. Instead of babbling on I took a piece of paper and sketched a catenary wire with some dimensions, told him what draughts and humidity do, how it sagged and how it had to be

checked, why your own wire sags less in the heat while a new one stretches and needs adjusting three times a day.

“But why do you need your own piano wire?” he asked again.

“You won’t know till you turn the turbine over yourself.”

My day off was cursed by their blue sky and silver sand watching the shadow boxer shoot survey points. Did I say the site was three times bigger than it needed to be? It was so big Douglass bought us bicycles, all glitter paint and knobby tires they were, a boyhood dream I never saw the likes of. I set off towards the sea under ficus trees with fat green leaves and waxy white flowers of a soapy tropical scent. I’d soon left the site behind and cycled on through the paddy fields where a line of farm girls in straw coolie hats were knee deep in milky water, planting rice. They unbent from their work and waved, laughing at me with smutty giggles as I reached the new highway, part complete, tyres purring along the asphalt through a jungle alive with the buzz of insects I never saw, the whoop and warble of birds I never knew. I had four smart black lanes to myself all the way out to the Long Wo headland from where I could look back across the bay at the hills running down to the soft green of new paddy and further up, much further than I imagined, a red gash in the mountain where they first meant to build. The air was alive with waves of heat washing up from the black top between fingers of a cool sea breeze that drew me on till I found myself at that restaurant, drenched in sweat and croaky with thirst. I leant my bike against a line of bricks that someone was making a bad job of turning into a wall and turned to see the back of her head in the window for a moment before she came out quivering under the weight of two five gallon jerry cans slung across her shoulders from a carrying pole. She must have seen me before this old woman came out wiping her hands on a rag and talking roughly to me. I

thought of the fish I'd had before and put my fingers to my mouth, making an oval with cupped hands and moving my wrists up and down. "Fish," I said. "Fish," she said quickly like it was an insult and went back inside.

I lit a cigarette, listening to the rhythms of their kitchen chopping and the girl's cement shovelling. There was a thrash of wet fish in sizzling oil and soon the old woman came out with two bowls, one of rice and one a fish surrounded by dark juices with red and green chillies and onion, the kind of foreign thing I never touched but all I'd had that morning was a cup of tea. The fish fell away in shiny flakes but I couldn't taste aught for chillies, more of a feeling than a flavour. I'd eaten what I could when the working rhythms stopped. The girl shouted at the old woman then she asked me something.

"Delicious," I said, guessing like.

She came round the wall, smiling with teeth like rice grains.

"Dee lish ee yes," she said.

"Deelishyus," says I. I said it again, her way then mine and she laughed.

"You," she says pointing.

"Me?" I says, pointing at my chest.

She fumbled in her overalls and pulled out a bundle of grey papers that turned out to be a book.

"Yu-u," she said, her tiny hands crusted with mortar as she held the dog-eared pages out to me. It was a dictionary. She looked up at me, pointing at a word as though her life depended on it. 'Fish' was *yu*.

I spoke my name with my hand on my chest and we started this game, pointing in turn, 'You, me, fish.' I pointed and she copied, 'Ni, wo, Yu-u.' 'Fish' was always 'Fiss.' She couldn't say 'Neville' without splitting the word, 'Neh foo,' or 'Nae fool.' 'Qim,' she said

her name was, tongue against teeth but as I couldn't get it right I called her Kim. The old woman interrupted us and I got a surprise when Kim shouted at her in a voice loud enough to cross the bay. With this sidelong look she went back to laying blocks while I lit a cigarette. The mortar had dried out. She poured on more water, breaking the dry edges with her calloused little fingers but she couldn't get moisture back in the mix. The bricks were uneven, all sixes and sevens. I looked round and saw a tarpaulin covering a pile of sharp sand. First I tore some tarry cords from the tarpaulin, tying them together to make a line then I pushed a chopstick in between the bricks at either end of the wall, tying the line between them before I picked up her bamboo trowel to scrape away the dry mix. I pulled the string tight and laid fresh mortar along the wall, enough to put three bricks in place, tapping them into line against the string and continuing until I reached the end. I could feel her eyes on me as I reset the string for the next course. We got working together, playing these word games as we went. We laid four more courses before I pulled up a table for laying the top ones. I'd lost track of time before we had a straight job. But it wasn't finished. I split down a piece of bamboo until it was small enough to point the seams, then seeing how she dangled a foot over the side I put an arm round her waist and carried her legs away to set her down.

I felt as though I'd done something wrong by the time I'd cycled back to our office, still feeling the sensational lightness of her in my arms. Douglass was there waiting to tell me I was going home for two weeks leave before the rush came. He also said that Wang Hong had come looking for me before he left for Beijing.

## Eight

### Night Thoughts

Director Wang lay with his head on a book. He had fallen asleep as the sun went down and now the floor of his small flat was a pool of blue moonlight. His pillow was one among eighteen volumes of an English language Power Station contract stacked around his table. Also on the table was an empty bottle and two letters, one transferring land deeds north of the authority's new power station, the other citing ownership of land to the south. The owner of this land was a cousin of the mayor, one of the most influential cadres in the province. Wang rubbed his eyes, farted and moved to the window where moonlight etched a touch of frost to every line on his face. On the floor was a letter from the English contractor claiming two and a half per cent of one billion dollars for each month of six months delay. Wang picked it up muttering, 'Words, words, words.'

He searched for another bottle without success then went to the hall where there was a cupboard he could never quite close. Inside were boxes, shoes, a saw, a hammer and small tools under a rail jammed tight with clothes. When he tried to part the clothes he caught a glimpse of green brocade at the back. He took a stool from the kitchen, returning to climb up and reach over the hangers into the far corner where he his fingers touched a cold Mao Tai bottle only to push it out of reach. He stretched further, ready to close his hand on the bottle, when it tilted and fell. Wang leaned, the stool tottered and he grabbed a handful of green brocade as he tumbled backwards taking books and more books with him, a double wall of

them in Cyrillic script. They were operation manuals, the tools by which he won authority, hidden through all the troubles since Khrushchev's revisionist split.

Wang lay still where he fell with page corners jammed against his ear and a stench of cow gum from the bindings. He gave a long articulate moan then climbed back on the stool, removing books in layers from the back so that he could reach down again and again as the bottle fell further. Half way down the wall his hand caught on a board. He lifted the board off pillars of books on either side of a concealed space then reached in, closing his hand round a cold cylinder until he touched the carving on it and pulled his hand away as if bitten. He almost smiled before he reached in again, the lines on his face softening as he lifted out an empty brush pot turned from a single block of Shandong wood fish stone. From memory he recalled exactly what was written on it, 'form', but the bare light bulb showed he remembered wrongly. Four characters in rhythmic scholar script were cut into the purple stone, *mei jia mei na*. – nothing added nothing taken. He took the pot to the kitchen and switched on the light. On the wall there hung a calendar from the English company. Five months earlier he opened it at a photograph of a white butterfly flitting over a cornfield spattered with red poppies. It had not been turned since. Director Wang held the pot as if would catch the butterfly then raced round the table clearing away rice bowl, glasses and ashtray, stacking the contract volumes on the floor and returning to the cupboard for as many scrolls as he could carry. The first was covered by a grid of black hyphens, *heng* strokes for which the brush turned five ways to avoid any mare's tail ends. He studied the lines as if he'd met an old friend, lines of musical fastidiousness representing the character one, *yi*. Another page was covered by his name character, three *heng* strokes tied vertically like a capital 'I' struck through. A line for heaven at the top, another for the earth beneath and the son of heaven in the middle. Or Wang between Police Chief Tian and the Mayor: criminals

to one side, cadres the other, all of them signatories on whom his authority would depend. He was caught in open ground between two armies. However the site developed there were huge extra costs: all that rock to excavate on one side or more piling on the other. Already some contractor in the Mayor's clan had blasted a great rust red scar in the mountain before the southwest villagers were to receive eviction notices. Whoever stepped off this particular tiger would have to be agile.

Inside the next scroll Wang was a grid of practice diagonals, *pie* strokes, the most yang, and *na* strokes, the most yin, consistent except for uneven tops bent like a row of tin tacks. This was one of elder brother's old games. Male and female strokes braced each other in mutual support to form *ren*, the character for 'people'. 'One is unity,' his brother would say adding a *heng* stroke to make the five pointed star, *da* for great, 'And unity of the people is greatness.'

Wang's earliest memory was of walking with his brother down Peace Street in cleaner air under a brighter sky when someone behind them screamed. A gang of blue uniformed boys about the same age as his brother, well nourished and sure of themselves were haranguing a girl they had cornered in a side alley. 'Chinese girls wear Chinese clothes. Big nose girls wear big nose clothes. You should not be outside your brothel unless you wear a qi-pao.' A heavy pock-marked fellow lunged at the girl as she tried to slip past. She shrugged him off but he caught her handbag and broke the strap, scattering the contents on the pavement. As she knelt to collect her things another boy picked up a small tube, saying they'd teach her a lesson about 'Chinese virtues'. She cursed as two boys caught her arms and twisted them back, pinning her helpless while another painted red lipstick round her mouth in a ridiculous opera mask arch. Wang's brother warned him not to move then walked straight up to the biggest of them and said something before his left arm let fly in a single whip that knocked his opponent to the ground. The retribution was savage. His brother escaped, but not without

a permanent scar over his left eye that he caught only because Wang distracted him by following down the alley to help. This was young Wang's first encounter with the 'New Life Movement' launched by Chiang Kai-shek's wife Soong Meiling who campaigned for Chinese virtues with a slogan from her American missionary friends, 'Except a man be borne again he cannot see New Life.' On a state visit to Mussolini's Italy her husband had picked up another idea from its more famous practitioner, announcing at every Chinese railway station, 'This train has run on time.'

In those days their father would ask them to repeat the rules of calligraphy, 'There are no changes when you are using the brush, whether in the past or in the future.' Later his brother would repeat, 'The rules of calligraphy,' with a hint of disrespect and then teach Wang how to read force and proportion into each stroke, rhythm and weight, thick and thin, nothing added, nothing taken away and nothing changed from the original, the written idea. Inside the calligraphy sheets Wang found his brother's scrolls, paintings he could recall by name. 'A tender shoot tipped in red: No need for many colours in spring,' 'Three friends of winter,' and 'Home, ten thousand miles away, reappears in a dream.' They were school exercises for putting ideas in painting like a poet with verse. He found a favourite for which his brother won a prize, 'Water flowing through wilderness, no one crosses.' The better students painted birds undisturbed on the water near an empty boat. On one a crane stood beside it. Only his brother would have put a ferryman in the boat, sleeping with hands behind his head while a two string fiddle lay idle in the stern. These scrolls were in the *Xie Yi* style, the 'Write Ideas' school after their ancestor Wang Wei who for fifty years stamped his scrolls 'Painted by Wang Wei' before he carved a new seal: 'Written by Wang Wei'. Elder brother would dismiss their difficulty saying, 'The work is done before brush touches paper. Look beyond the brush to the force of the character, the original face.' Wang knew this force as the Chan



mind doctrine Westerners believed came from Japan or California. Whereas it was there in his brother's *Xie yi* talent, Wang came to regard his own calligraphy as no more than hard practice.

Elder brother changed with adolescence. In their last summer together they explored the Long Wo, a blunt peninsula where the coastal massif rose in mountains that drew water from the sea mists to nourish slopes by torrent gullies the year round without rain, hence the 'Dragon Lair' of its name. From bright rocky headlands to dark creeks they discovered the maze of trails between hanging valleys that once made the place a refuge for bandits and pirates. And for revolutionaries. That summer Wang's art grew equally well in both writing and painting. By autumn he was laying out 'mountain and water' paintings in deep distance perspective with fine Gongbi brush work while his brother chose the flat or high perspectives more suited to Xie Yi, claiming that inspiration could not be sustained through what he referred to as 'all that bourgeois technique.'

For a long time Wang looked up at the calendar butterfly. There were tears in his eyes when he rose and went to the cupboard, reaching below the remaining scrolls for a heavy block that felt like bullion. It was an ink stone, once a black gooey mess and in their family since the Ming dynasty. His brother told him there was a figure carved in it. After seven scrapings and overnight soakings the features of Lao Zi emerged through six centuries of layered ink, seeping into a basin of black dragon clouds. He had scrubbed more vigorously until a vein of green slate seemed to grow from the stone, Lao Zi ascending to immortality on the back of a crane, its tail feathers ablaze with details fresh in every barb and quill as though cut yesterday. His brother had been furious.

He pulled out a thick roll of felt and untied the ribbons sending bamboo mats and wood blocks, brushes and little paper parcels all over the table. From the parcels he unwrapped

some ink sticks, discarding those with cracked edges where the glue had dried unevenly. He chose an unused stick of lacquer soot, the blackest of black, then put two drops of water on the stone. Holding the stick upright to avoid flaking the edges, he ground in slow small circles until the familiar perfume of charcoal flowers leached out of the ink and into his memories.

He took a clean white sheet of Xuan paper, smooth as soy milk and siezed to prevent the ink clouding. Using the back of his hand, he flattened it against the felt and placed a red wood paperweight at either end. He sorted through his brushes, discarding soft rabbit fur for a wolf hair brush, prized for its resilience. Loading the brush he kept it plumb with thumb and index finger uppermost on the shaft, wrist concave, palm cupped for control, he rotated the brush five ways through a single stroke, adding lines for heaven and man before tying them to earth. Already he felt the discomfort his father dismissed, 'Man was not made to hold the brush, the brush was made for man to hold.' He painted the page with two rows of *heng* strokes then sat back to consider his work. Childish. Scarcely one the same as another, the returns strained, thickness varying through the stroke. Uneven pressure. The concentric cones of the brush, a stiff centre with long outer hairs around the reservoir, had long dried out. Too stiff for a constant flow. Squeezing it against the stone he repeated the exercise. Another row was more assured as the brush hairs softened and began to work with one another. He could almost feel his father's authority. He continued writing, working his brush with rhythm, weight and proportion until he could fill a whole page while following his father's words, 'Lines form the man as the man forms lines.' During one of their lessons his brother whispered that it was really the other way about. The memory set him off in search of the work his brother painted that summer, a scramble that sent scrolls tumbling across the floor like pine logs. There were no painting by his brother but he did find one of his own

based on a poem by Liu Chang Qing. It used near far perspective turning about the Dragon Lair waterfall. Low rocks by the sea were rendered solid with a wash of boneless painting, more solid than the dragon scale brushwork of ridges and mountains so that waves seemed to swell and fall back, drawing the eye down in an undertow of blank ocean. To balance the piece an almost superfluous spectator had been introduced beside the waterfall, a witness in three strokes. Small streams proceeded below the falls, breaking up among paths to run on as one texture, implied in hundreds. If the eye was not drawn up through mountain paths, it ran down through the falls to the sea and back through mists, flying colours washed over lightly brushed dragon scales, establishing a solid mountain. The key to the piece was there in the first strokes where the perspective turned between the hermit and the falls stood the evergreen pine of incorruptible aspiration. The last strokes were of course lines from Liu's poem:

Evergreen pine    changes colour after rain,

Myriad flowers    reveal Chan essence

Before the novice can cross the mountain

to river-source                  reach journey's end

Find cottage    abandoned by the sage

Weeds grow thick, about the open door.'

Good even now and his own work. But not on that strange empty day when he laid it, still damp, before his brother. 'Why add obsequious calligraphy?' his brother asked, 'That was thirteen hundred years ago. If you continue to follow the way of the ancients, you become a slave of the ancient.'

His brother grew unbearably distant after the Blue Shirts appeared from Nanking. Wang was already shut away at school but seeing them march in the street he was impressed as any boy would be by uniforms and conviction. When he asked his brother there were no answers,

just a sullen kind of withdrawal. 'Do not talk about what you see,' said his brother as if to a grown up. 'If anyone asks, the Blue Shirts are the only patriots to defend us.' But when communist guerrillas attacked the Japanese base on the delta the KMT breached the flood defences, drowning forty thousand villagers and making sure the only patriots were those of Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalists.

His brother had become a double agent inside the KMT, his identity withheld from party lists to safeguard his cover when Chiang's nephew Wei Kuo returned from training in Europe, the Nazi invasion of Austria, to rejoin his KMT units. Nine hundred and forty thousand peasants were murdered in pursuit of sixty thousand 'Communist Bandits.' When the Imperial Japanese army met resistance behind their front line they applied his Axis strategy to the delta, 'sanko seisaku', the three alls, 'Kill all, burn all, destroy all.' Working for the party, his brother saved hundreds of lives including US airmen before the fascist alliance established a 'model peace zone'. The war was over before his brother could explain his commitment to the party, love at first sight as he put it, but inside the peace zone with the party apparatus destroyed his actions went unrecognised.

The brush remained Wang's greatest pleasure for years until rumours from Shanghai swept the city like autumn rains. They were still rumours until cycling home from work one day he found the road blocked by raw adolescent power, the first wave of Red Guards blocking his way in a slogan chanting phalanx. He dismounted from his bicycle and fell in with the crowd moving to the square at the head of Peace Street. People pushed towards the new dais elevating the Chairman's statue. Ten or twelve dignitaries were standing along the edges, university professors, an artist, writers, all with stony guilt on their faces and dunce caps on their heads. It seemed revisionists were to be found everywhere. Wang was about to return to his office when he saw his brother pushed to the front.

Of all the people to be damned for Confucianism his brother was the least likely. Wang listened as charges were read of elitism in the arts, of the four olds and of his indulgence for *wen hua* bourgeois culture while peasants struggled for literary emancipation. Seeing his brother stubborn refusal to any acknowledgement Wang made his way through the crowd to step onto the dais, a pine among bamboos.

“Comrades,” he began slowly, “For guidance in the arts we must study the thoughts of Chairman Mao. I know this man and his mistakes. Though he is of the same family as myself, he is undoubtedly lacking guidance. For this I must accept the blame and be more vigilant for those who are not mindful of the leadership of Chairman Mao thought. I ask that you too be mindful of those reactionaries who have insinuated the arts of our motherland with western elitism and forms that are not even Chinese.” He proceeded to elevate his brother’s art, ridiculing western painting as a commodity, elitist and routinely forged, inherently decadent. It was, he said, unpatriotic to criticise one whose life’s work had been to reinterpret the Chinese people to themselves and quoted his brother’s words on enslavement to the ancients. Wang guaranteed a period of corrective study when his brother would submit work for criticism, struggle to eradicate feudal tendencies and work to reflect the revolutionary achievements of workers and peasants.

In the months that followed Wang was denied all contact. The few reports to reach him offered some relief, if a little puzzlement. His brother’s submissions were regarded as model work. A year later guards called on his brother again, a different unit this time, their armbands emblazoned with the words ‘Rebellion Team’ in the agitated calligraphy of Mao Zedong. The rebels occupied the offices of the first wave of Red Guard Workers and Student units and turned them out chanting, ‘Attack with words! Defend with weapons!’ The leniency shown to his brother by earlier units now condemned him to the rebels. After an all

night meeting they arrived at dawn to take elder brother from his apartment and interrogate him for links to local cadres, now a revisionist clique themselves. Once more on the dais, his brother refused to go on his knees until rebel adjutants bent his arms back and upwards, forcing him into the aeroplane position. They fastened a heavy wooden collar board round his neck with a sign reading, 'I am a counter-revolutionary.' Wang saw the first swipe of the tormentor's belt buckle bounce off his brother's face like a straw from a blunt sickle. From twenty feet he heard it click against the jawbone while his brother held up his head as if this was a tested veteran tactic. It was an unsuccessful one, enraging his tormentor into one swipe after another without pausing for effect. Wang could do nothing while his brother turned the show into a demonstration of his tormentor's weakness. The blows had already begun to slacken by the time the kneeling figure convulsed sharply, caught in the throat by the buckle pin puncturing an artery from which blood pulsed as if from a hose. His brother fell forward while in his last few minutes a letter was read over him demanding that he report next day for further self-criticism.

Three nights passed before Wang could sneak back to remove the corpse. He waited a further week before visiting his brother's apartment. It stank of excrement and fear. Their father's cupboard of red wood and gold lacquer had been broken up, smashed for evidence of counter-revolutionary complicity. Torn books lay scattered among loose pages, jars had been swept from shelves and smashed against the wall, their contents rotting where they'd spilt. Among the heap of debris a torn painting caught his attention. It was some alien concept of the Long Wo in *gongbi* style with particularly fussy brushwork on the falls. But cocooned in scaffolding was a dam under construction, picked out in tiny stiff strokes with red flags flying from every pole, rigid and lifeless. It was like perfect work from a wilful child except Wang could not piece the fragments together. There were so many. And they did not fit together.

Everywhere lay pieces of the ‘model work’, the same picture repeated over and over as if to order.

Studying his own long lost painting of Liu Chang Qing’s poem it was not as fine as Wang first thought. The calligraphy began with a touch of stiffness, obsequious practice just as his brother said. But in the concluding line, ‘Fragrant grasses, bar the idle gate,’ the last three characters each had the same ‘goal post’ radical for ‘door’ and three different meanings within them: doors opening on ‘merit,’ doors blocked by ‘plant’ and finally nothing, the door lying open, all words gone.

He painted, pigments flowered in water and clean lines sprang from a more pliable brush. He looked at the English calendar once then added his own twenty character poem.

Bitter thoughts drive off sleep  
Seek brother find old words  
Meaning flows hand to eye  
New lines drive off words

The pool of moonlight had evaporated and with it, thoughts of big brother. He stood up and went to the calendar, tore off the last five months and put them in his garbage pail. Then he cleaned his brushes and stood them in the Shandong pot by the sink. He stacked the eighteen contract volumes on the table as if he knew exactly what to do then looked at his watch. There was time for a couple of hours nap before he went into the office. Lieutenant Tian might get his money but everyone would see where it came from if the land stood empty.

## Nine

Neville Marlow

There was no one to meet me at the airport so I took a train and walked from the station. I was carrying someone else's case. It belonged to one of the new engineers who'd probably taken mine by mistake along with the presents I bought for the family.

"So you're back again," says Ivy, "And how long is it for this time?"

I made light of it, asking if she'd any jobs lined up for me. That weren't clever. She wanted a conservatory. That meant a new doorway, blocking the old one and turning the kitchen around.

"It's alright for you traipsing off to them hot countries. I'm the one as has to stop here and run the home on my own with two boys to look after."

"They're not boys any more Ivy. David is twenty one this year."

"I'm twenty three," said David.

"What if you are? You've had no father for twenty of them. And you know where that's led."

We set the table in silence while potatoes boiled and cabbage steamed the kitchen, all the while hoping that no one would mention Simon or that we hadn't heard from him in three years. David looked pleased to see me, asking what it was like 'out east' and even suggesting we go for a drink. When I said 'The Railway,' he told me about a Purple Parrot – the new name for the pub - then Ivy had to get in.



“Don’t I give you enough?” she shouted at him, “Are you so short you have to con your beer money from him?”

“It’s ‘is money anyway,” David shouted, slamming the door and thudding upstairs.

The Railway had been done up like an office, all chrome and glass and almost closing time when I got up to leave without a sign of my son. I walked it off by taking a turn past the Works where I used to follow 14,000 men through the gates as a boy. There’d been talk of a facelift now that the work was outsourced from the half mile of factory bays. But they’d gone. All one hundred and seventy nine of them that had been there since before I was borne, before my namesake became Prime Minister and before I lay awake listening to the bombers droning over our copse on their way to this spot where the red bricks of the Albion Works were camouflaged in three kinds of green and stood three nights of air raids when the town hall didn’t.

Next morning I lay awake while downstairs Ivy emptied the cupboards of pots and pans, jars and baking tins, banging them about as she spread them over the worktops and the floor. I may not be good at sleeping but I like to have the choice. Downstairs it was hard to believe she fitted so much junk into her life. She had me boxing it up to store in the garage with other boxes she’d dumped on my work bench. She’d broken my calibration set, a baize lined cedar box of precision metrology blocks that nobody uses anymore. The missing pieces had fallen in a box of photographs, family snaps piled up since christenings, since the new camera and her sister’s wedding album underneath, constellations of family faces smiling from pages of black card, stars against the firmament of a bygone family life. I went dizzy bending down to re-pack them and pushed the box into the dry corner of the garage, wondering when I might see them again. There was two weeks for to fit in Ivy’s job and I had mapped it out for

measuring, for the door to block up and for the new space I had to open. By the time I set off for the builder's merchant David still hadn't come down and being alone I wasn't prepared for the memories that came tumbling out along the way: the department store where Ivy chose our wedding presents being turned into offices, the warehouses built over my boys' playing fields and the precision toolmakers closing down, Swift, where only the smartest grammar school boys got their start. By lunch time I'd picked out the plugs and screws and was on my way back from placing an order for the timbers when a flashing blue light appeared from nowhere. A police car overtook, signalling me to pull over. A very young constable came to ask if the car was mine. I couldn't tell him the registration number because of course it's usually David driving. Anyway the policeman lost interest.

Over the next two days I got stuck in with a hammer, chasing out the brickwork and moving the cupboards ready for the new door. It was near a week before I got to speak with David. He wasn't bothered about the police and I couldn't tell if he'd done aught wrong. I'd done as much as I could and suddenly it was my last night at home before I found the wherewithal for taking Ivy out.

We chose a new restaurant she'd heard about over in Grundthorpe but once there she just sat looking round the place like it was a show. She had nothing to say. I found it difficult to talk about her things here, things I knew nothing of. It was a quiet candle lit place serving fussy food to people who whispered to each other like they were in church and I wouldn't have mentioned it except for an incident on the way back.

As we were passing through Grundthorpe there was this car tail-gating me all the way until we cleared the speed limit. It pulled out to overtake then cut back sharp, forcing me onto the verge. Ivy shrieked at me for being an old fool, for being selfish for having no thought for others, then a blue light started flashing and this policeman came striding back, shone a torch

in my face and made a kind of apology. When I reached for Ivy that night she turned away muttering that I couldn't even take her out for a bite to eat without landing the family in trouble.

After the return flight my shoulders were sore, bunched like a workhorse in harness. I took a shower and I'd no sooner lathered up than someone ran the washbasin leaving me a thread of cold water, sticky with soap. I stepped out covered in nothing but the soap and this lad holds out his hand as if he couldn't see my problem.

"So you're Neville," says the lad, "We meet at last. I see you got your luggage. You know they lost mine. For two days I had nothing but the clothes I arrived in. They got it mixed up with a case of Chinese trinkets someone left in the lobby."

I asked if he'd mind passing my towel, suggesting he'd be the new controls engineer. You can tell by the way they just make you want to unplug them.

"How did you know? I hope you're going to teach me some of these tricks you're famous for."

I cleaned up, gave him a bundle of home newspapers and left for the site. I could hear Pearce calling from half way a mile away at his yard. His lay-down was still empty but all Pearce could talk about was our accommodation and what was wrong with it. A tinder box he called the place, with foam mattresses, shared rooms and nothing like the four star equivalent in his contract. He had a long list but the place was alright and, notwithstanding my roommate, I said so. After all the place had been a private lodge for VIPs, party leaders and the like. 'Four star equivalent, he said again, ready to quit if they didn't give him what he called a hardship allowance. I didn't see as it made much difference. He couldn't take Chinese money out the country and there was nothing in the yard to show he'd be missed.

His list had grown long before I remembered their spicy tea, the cellophane breakfasts and no cheese. I was remembering a lot worse when Douglass came over with that look of his, knowing your words before you've thought 'em.

“You said this traffic permit was sorted?”

Pearce said that it was, explaining that he'd checked with the haulier that morning before the first five low loaders left the port. I knew that Pearce hadn't been stupid enough to rely on the highway being ready. Before the trip home he was making endless calls to check the long way round, checking viaduct load limits, overhead cable clearances, road widths and bends with all the paperwork he'd need to send hundred ton loads by the old road. Even if he did spread it round a bit he knew his job, but right then Douglass didn't think so.

“I just had a call,” Douglass said, “telling me they've been stopped because we don't have a valid permit.”

So I had to travel all the way back with them behind the mountains and that long valley down to the old port. We were still a mile off when I caught a glimpse of them, their familiar casings like five fat children of ours under a foreign sun and framed by spidery bamboo fronds. Douglass gasped as if he hadn't breathed during his months of sitting around with local officials from the traffic police to the Mayor and the local Party Secretary, pushing them to get the highway ready. Then I saw the two police cars drawn across the road onto the bridge.

Our man Zhang went to speak with the truck drivers over a cigarette then came back with their permits.

“No good,” said Zhang, sounding pleased with himself, as we watched the low loader backing up the road.

“They're using this to make up time,” said Pearce. “They're just playing games.”

“And you haven’t won a single point,” said Douglass.

The driver of the police car wound down his window, adjusted his sunglasses and held out the permit. It was valid but only for the dry season, now officially over though it had yet to rain. Ground conditions support twenty tons less in the wet and the monsoon was due.

## Transforming Song Gong

Song was driving in his new recruits when the nail pickers' charge-hand called out to him. Inside the fence-line men were stripped to the waist picking over old timbers to find nails for scrap. None of their tents had been struck. A man at a standpipe was holding his bloody leg under the tap using both hands to squeeze splinters from his shin.

“You don't remember me do you?” the charge-hand called to him, “You gave me my first job when I arrived.”

Song did not know him. But everyone knew old Song with his face whorled like an old briar root. Recognising the man's northwest accent he nodded and said, “When a man comes all the way from Gansu he is not easily forgotten.”

The nail picker grinned. He pointed at the lines of tents, their canvas sagging under the weight of grime, and asked what happened to their cabins. Song Gong had seen the cheque passed for accommodation before the takeover but said nothing. Song told the chargehand to put the scrap timber on their night fires and pick out nails from the ash then headed for the site office.

There was a Hu Corporation logo in the window of a weathered shack still bearing the pre-takeover signboard for ‘Construction Brigade Number 10.’ Inside the office stank of foul water lying under the boards, their damp timber flexing as Song crossed the threshold.

“Have you eaten?” Song asked the young manager. His greeting sounded old fashioned.

“I always have a big breakfast Old Song. There’s plenty food nowadays but you never know when you’ll have a chance to eat with all this going on. Yesterday I was dragged off to the hospital when one of our guys coughed up his guts and died. They told me it was TB but they were wrong. I suppose you want me to check in this new bunch of yokels.” Jiaying got up to see the men outside crammed into the truck like a parcel of bamboos. “What am I going to do with that lot? They’re either old men or kids.”

“Those who are old have skills. The others I can train.”

“So that’s how you move mountains. ‘The transforming spirit of Song Gong!’” The younger man laughed at his parody of the mythical Yu Gong, the story by which Confucian children learn patience. To the sage who questioned his labours with a pick and basket in removing the mountain that cut off his village, Yu Gong’s answer was, ‘I have sons,’ and five generations later there was a road to market. Song let the joke hang, his silence echoing to those sinister chants from the sixties, ‘Transforming China in the spirit of Yu Gong.’

“Look at this fancy drawing cabinet we got,” said Jiaying turning away, “Just four of my guys to offload it but the big noses needed a fork lift.”

Song had seen Jiaying and his men work on it for a day while from the same truck the foreigners unloaded six cabinets, complete with drawings, in ten minutes. He asked Jiaying if he had the drawings.

“For the northern highway? I haven’t had time to unwrap them,” Jiaying said pointing to a stack of parcels on the floor.

“Did you meet our new owners?”

“Yes but I didn’t say anything. You don’t know these Hong Kong folk. I just listened.”

“Is it true the owner’s widow is coming too?”

“I think she’s been here already. As I said, I just listened. Madame Hu, Tiger lady,” he said punning her name with the cat.

“What is she like?”

“Like a tiger. A wounded tiger.” He lit a cigarette and blew smoke rings as if he learned the trick in Hong Kong rather than rural Guizhou. “She’s vindictive. You can see it in her eyes.”

“I mean is she beautiful?”

“To look at. But not in her heart. If you want a good looking woman, take that policeman’s daughter. Now that’s beautiful.”

“The one who came here the other day with her father? From the Northern Prefecture?”

“That was her uncle. Her father is police Lieutenant, Tian.”

“But she is so young.”

“Yes,” said Jiaying, “and that fool is sending her away to some fancy school in Hong Kong.”

“Where’d he get the money for that?”

“Better not ask. You’ve been along the perimeter. A bit short don’t you think?” said Jiaying, tapping the side of his nose.

“The fence line? But the village, the farmers, they’ve been moved on.”

“Anyway old Song how is your work?”

“Horse and tiger. We have more westerners.”

“How will your ears cope? They believe everything happens if they stand around shouting while we work.”

“We had our time remember. All slogans and trouble, no work and plenty hunger.”

“But they are a peculiar lot.” Jiaying frowned. “Different from the Russians.”



“No. Not at all like Russians. Have you seen the woman?”

“I think western women are quite beautiful in a way,” Jiaying said in the manner of an expert.

“They’re interesting but have you actually seen her? Big nose, big feet and a voice like a diesel engine.”

“If I was with a woman who had a deeper voice than mine I couldn’t get it up. You’d feel like a turtle, eh?”

“But they have beautiful skin,” said Song, staring into space.

“That is true. Superb skin. That is why they never look old.”

Song nodded agreement while Jiaying chain-lit another cigarette, leaning back in his chair as if to consider the matter.

“You can hurt your back doing that,” said Song.

“What? Screwing a western woman?”

“Leaning back on your chair. The legs can break.”

“Not this one. We got three of them from an American contractor. They shipped everything in across the Pacific. Only Americans can make this kind of thing. Look at the quality.”

“Do you think they imported it first and brought it with them later?” Song suggested, recalling the offices in the Development Zone that he had fitted out with identical furniture from a factory in Shanghai. “They do some strange things.”

Jiaying threw a derisive look. “It’s not right putting a man your age on that causeway job. You’ll be dead before its done.”

“Nothing new under heaven.”

“That’s what happens after a lifetime in construction. You’ve all that experience but nothing to show for it. Well that’s not going to happen to me I can tell you. I had my squad working on Hu’s new offices. Have you been there?”

“No not yet. I hear they’re down by the old port,” Song said. “Doesn’t make sense does it? A big company like that.”

“They have glass walls in the offices. Bullet proof glass.” Jiaying seemed to be musing on their deeper significance when the phone rang and immediately he shot upright in his chair.

Song heard a woman’s voice speaking Cantonese and none too gently.

Jiaying put his hand over the receiver and whispered, “It’s her. She wants to know why I didn’t tell her the land out there was sold to the Power Authority. I already told her there is plenty of land. Now she says it’s worthless except for growing rice!” He rolled his eyes and made a face as though he’d eaten something unpleasant. The phone voice rose, hot with expletives. There was less eye rolling when he covered the phone to ask Song if he knew the northern perimeter, “She’s asking if you surveyed a building there?” Jiaying turned red then paled. “Yes he’s here. Yes, yes I’ll bring him.” His hand shook as he put the phone down. “She didn’t know you were listening so don’t say anything. And no questions. She’ll have enough for both of us.”

They drove to the highway by an ochre dirt-track past the hundreds of Song Gong’s workers who came that way every day, packed into open trailers pulled by farm tractors. Many came from the village to the south, many more came from outside the delta to live in shanties built of re-cycled packing timber. That morning the municipal authority’s bulldozers had begun levelling shacks and village houses alike before the next phase of construction. Just months ago Song had stood here looking up at a section of highway prickling with the bamboo scaffold erected by his hand-picked crew. Now the road cleared the treetops in one

span, a clean black ribbon of highway all the way in to Red Flag Road and the crystal office towers rising downtown. Jiaying turned off for the old port, rattling over cobbles between the derelict go-downs until he pulled up outside a row of shop houses, ground floors shuttered and silvered glass panelling along the entire first floor. A tinfoil voice at the door intercom asked who they were.

“We have an appointment,” said Jiaying, “Madame Hu is expecting us.”

There was a buzz, a click and they were at the bottom of a stairway with cold air pouring down on them. At the top another solenoid clicked and they stepped into an office the size of a small warehouse smelling of timber and glue. Another solenoid clicked just as Jiaying’s head bounced off a glass partition. A desk-bound man in a dark suit beckoned them to come forward then rose to show them through a plate glass chicane past plump sofas and into another office. A small woman of extraordinarily precise couture sat behind a desk holding a telephone under her chin while she made notes. As soon as she saw them she finished her call, dismissed the dark suited guard with a nod and came round to look closely at them. One moment she smiled at Song as if she recognised him and next she was examining him the way a careless man might look at a woman.

“You must be Song Shifu,” she said using the old fashioned honorific. “Sit down.”

Song dipped his head, unsettled by her manners, by the soft mass of sofa and mostly by an idea that they had met before. He was still trying to place her when her amanuensis returned with tea and suddenly she was asking him about an orphanage. If anyone else had asked he might have thought of the ramshackle huts used by the city’s welfare department and racketeers but for her to describe them as an orphanage, she must know far more than he realized.

“Jiaying tells me no one knows the area as well as you.”

Song struggled to rise from the sofa holding onto his Maoze cap with both hands. “There is a track. If you follow it there are broken buildings. Some are old with stone walls built by foreigners.”

“What else?” She rounded on him, hard edged with the trace of an accent that could have come from any peasant girl north of the river. “You’ve been there Song. You know the place. What else?”

“It has been closed a long time. All is in ruins.” He explained the place was good for nothing, that the land was too rocky and looked twice at her as he stopped short of telling her more. The orphanage had been there since the foreign priests left but, he guessed, she had no need to know that.

She took a sheet of paper and sketched three looping curves to outline the shore, focussing their attention by adding a circle. “The expressway will run here opposite the Long Wo. We need land from the Municipality, here and in the next province.”

“That’s where we’re setting up camp,” said Jiaying.

“I am not interested. Right now I want to be sure you know where it is.”

“Yes, I know,” Jiaying interrupted.

She raised a hand for silence. “Do nothing more than this. I want Song to visit this place and tell me how we can use it.” She swept a warning finger across her lips before adding, “No one must know of your interest. Do you have any questions Song?”

He had nothing but questions and knew better than to ask. She was evidently muddying the water to catch her own fish. As they were leaving she came through the glass chicane, calling after him in a coy little voice. “Song Shifu. You will be there tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Be there by noon!”

Outside they both checked their step as a car rattled slowly over the cobbles, a glossy black Audi prowling otherwise empty streets.

“She likes you,” said Jiaying.

“What makes you say that?”

“The fox spirit in her eyes. She was careful not to offend you.”

“I must have met her before.”

“You old goat. You were too busy thinking about it to notice.”

“Why is she so interested in this place? Why didn’t you tell me Jiaying?”

“Does it matter? She will get what she wants. A beautiful woman like that and rich.”

Jiaying made his tiger pun again.

“Tiger lady indeed. Drive down here,” Song pointed over the railhead bridge, “Let me introduce you to a little pussy cat I know.”

They pulled up opposite an apartment shop in a standard block of flats, a kiosk formed by knocking out the ground floor window and enclosing it with a ramshackle partition. It sold everything from newspapers and cigarettes to hot water for tea and air for bicycle tyres. Song pulled the air hose coiled by the window, a bell sounded inside and a compressor started up.

“Come on Buck. You’ve engineers waiting here.”

From inside some fluent cursing was interrupted by a hacking cough. “Alright Song, alright. Just because you’ve brought visitors.”

They entered by an unlit close cluttered with salvage and household junk. A frail figure appeared in the doorway silhouetted by a bare light bulb. Buck studied them at leisure, taking a fierce draw on his cigarette before motioning them inside to a room with a bench along one wall, squat stools round a Chinese chess board and a four-square block of old

newspapers on which sat a tiny black and white television. The only light came filtered through the yellow grime of one small window.

Buck, after the male rabbit, had kept his milk name and had so little flesh on him that the slightest expression was enough to pull his skin white against his cheekbones. Wearing a khaki dirt-white singlet and darker shorts he sat puckering his lips on the bench with one leg tucked under him. “So tell me Song, which poor farmers have you been exploiting?” Buck laughed showing black teeth rotten to the gums.

“That’s rich from you. Where are the girls?”

“You’re too early. There’s only the mahjong circle.”

“Call them in and let’s have a drink,” said Song.

Jiaying frowned.

“Not drinking?” asked Song.

“I don’t like mahjong,” said Jiaying.

“The last time the mahjong circle played mahjong must have been twenty years ago.”

“It’s the tiles,” said Jiaying, “The clicking gets on my nerves.”

“It wasn’t the tiles,” Buck told him, “I couldn’t stand the squabbling.”

A plump woman entered with a tray of tiny glasses and a bottle of white grain spirit. She joked about Song’s virility when he asked her to leave the bottle. Buck sipped tea from a stone cup, studying Jiaying before he called for noodles, “Northern food,” he said making fun of Jiaying’s Guizhou accent, “No donkey meat here.” Buck paused in the middle of lighting another cigarette as laughter and girls’ voices sounded as they let themselves in at the door. Jiaying helped himself to two shots in quick succession and asked, “How long has this been going on?”

“A little over three hundred years,” said Buck, his face a paper mask.

“His grandfather was one of the ‘Fists of Harmony’,” said Song. “He is a direct descendant from the Hung League and Coxinga himself.”

Jiaying earned their ridicule when he said he had never heard of Coxinga. Song explained to him that Coxinga was the first leader of the resistance against the Manchu, the son of a pirate and a Japanese prostitute. Coxinga had drawn supporters to his base on the Long Wo peninsula from his parents’ allies, pirates, bandits, minority tribes and Japanese mercenaries living along the coast. Even Jiaying had heard of the resistance movement, at least the rump of it, whittled to 128 fighting monks in the Shaolin monastery. When the monks were betrayed their last five survivors formed the Hung League, dividing themselves in sects based on a three way split to escape detection, the triad of Man, Heaven and Earth. Already set apart by their Fukien language, their *Chiu Chao* dialect adapted the pirate guild codes of their roots, splitting and replicating under cover to shape the triad alliances penetrating Cantonese society. Now half a century older than the Qing dynasty, Buck’s clan had long neglected Ming restoration in favour of what they did best, raising money.

Buck invited them next door where four women sat on squat stools cleaning vegetables while two young girls languished on a large PVC couch watching television. One of them came and stood in the doorway. She had wildly crossed eyes so that neither man could tell whose attention she wanted until she slipped her arm under Jiaying’s, looking at him first with one eye then the other while she rubbed the inside of his thigh with her leg.

“Hello Old Song,” said the girl on the sofa without taking her eyes off the television, “You want me?”

Buck snapped and immediately she jumped up to close the door. He then gave a questioning nod towards Jiaying in the next room.

“He’s new,” said Song Gong. “From Guizhou.”

“Do you trust him?”

Song shook his head. “He has to trust me. Number Ten Brigade paid him for a one thousand man barracks. He’s put in some old tents with a stand-pipe for three hundred. And he pockets the scrap cash.”

“You?”

“I never get the chance you know that.”

“You don’t look for the opportunity.”

“And how are your opportunities old friend?”

“I have no friends,” said Buck, his bones showing through jaundiced cheeks.

“Don’t say that. You have helped many people over the years. The old ones next door and Qim. You were very good to Qim.”

“Ah!” Buck picked up a bowl and spat, “Don’t talk to me about that one.”

“Why?”

“You of all people, playing the stupid old man. You only made trouble.”

“I thought you found her another job.”

“I did. But now she has a foreign devil she talks to no one. When he’s gone, no one will talk to her.”

“I heard about the foreigner.”

“You had your chance Song. As for that bastard in the city hall he wants to play the sage and come back as something better in his next life. If he is not careful he’ll be leaving this miserable one soon enough.”

“Your friend in welfare?”



“He’s drinking poisoned wine to quench his thirst, keeping in with the Mayor and his cronies. Says it’s not the money anymore. Why do you think I have only those two next door?”

“Your conscience.”

“Ha. I tell you he wants to win honour and medals for ‘the people’. And do you know the first thing that happens? The people lose money that’s what and not just anyone. The people who kept him going all those years when he had nothing coming from the government, nothing of his own and nothing for those kids they offer to foreigners who can’t fuck.”

“Is it not good if they close an orphanage?”

Buck sneered. “He’ll make more out of that than this whole business. They have property right where your expressway will come. It may be glorious to be rich but that land is priceless.”

“My expressway? The foreign priests’ mission?”

“It was the fortress of my ancestors remember.”

“So you are interested?”

Buck scoffed. “We don’t get involved. Why buy the deeds if we own the landlord?”

“Who does own the deeds?”

“You’re not as patient as you were,” said Buck. “He planned to sell the land to foreign developers like that power company but after all those years he owes many favours.”

“So who owns it then?” Song asked.

“Sometimes Song, you are an open book. His department sold the land and the developers paid. But after the foreigners go, who knows?”

“What can a cadre do with land?”

“The river finds its course. Look at Lieutenant Tian investing in his next generation. Ha. Ha. What a spoilt little princess his daughter is. If he put his name to land it would be a quick way to the labour camp. But he knows the value of it. The corrupt Lieutenant must have money to keep his daughter pure! Ha ha ha!” Buck laughed louder still as Jiaying entered. “So, the Guizhou Donkey has run out of tricks,” he said, quoting the fable of the first donkey to arrive in Guizhou with its strange voice and a kick that kept the local tigers at a distance, for a time.

Song began the day as always, stretching through his Qi Gong exercises: thread the loom, single whip and this morning, extra *dan tian* breathes to settle bitter thoughts. He then went to the mess tent for a bowl of congee and sat on the bench facing Jiaying’s cabin across the camp. Before he finished a policeman arrived, an officer, intent on talking to Jiaying while pointing to the tents, to the trench latrine and the queue at the stand pipe. Jiaying was talking quickly, making short jerky movements with his head to one side until the policeman marched off. Song was still eating when Jiaying came to confront him.

“You haven’t upset anyone have you? I mean in the police?”

Song shook his head.

“Suddenly the police want our camp permit. It’s just that friend of yours. You know?”

“Your police friends have been round about forty years. Buck has *guanxi* that goes back three centuries. And you should have a permit.”

“I don’t want trouble. Just fix me a camp will you?”

Song checked the time. He had three hours before noon and a thirty minute trip ahead. He wrapped some cooked rice in a palm leaf and put it in his bag with a fresh jar of Guan Yin tea. He kicked the tires, checked the fuel and as he put his head under the bonnet to check a weeping gasket, he looked back and saw Jiaying still watching him.

The narrow road to the north was a journey back in time rather than place, before he learned how ridiculous country folk sounded when they arrived in a city of millions and began comparing it with some one-street village. His own arrival in the delta was a fragile one as a stowaway in a coal train that, like most production quotas at the time, was half empty. When the train slowed down over the stockyard bridge he dropped over the side, tumbling all the way down to the riverbank where some homesick Russians found him unconscious. They didn't need to ask where he'd come from. His hunger was eloquent enough. You didn't need an explanation when you fled a village of four hundred families where three hundred and forty starved to death. Besides, the commissar building their power station was more concerned with Soviet goodwill and than counter-revolutionary propaganda from an eight year old boy. As it was, rumours of five million dead proved inadequate beside the forty six million who failed to make it across the Great Leap Forward. At first the Russians treated him as something between a pet and a mascot. They put him in municipal care, coming back to see him on day trips that they turned into festivals with bread, ham and fruit, sometimes even a chicken. Then one October night they disappeared taking all their plans and drawings with them leaving factories across the country abandoned, first hand evidence of malignant Soviet hegemony.

A mile north Song crested the rise into the next bay and in twenty minutes he was driving along between a stony field that had once been the Nationalist parade ground and the stone walls of an East India Company fortress built over *Chiu Chao* arsenals. At the far end the raised stone dais stood in good shape as though ready for a new round of speeches and beyond it were the orphanage dormitories converted from barracks and stables. Instinctively he parked out of sight behind the high roofed assembly hall that had been the foreign

missionaries' temple. On a quick estimate he calculated a month, two at most, to set up a new camp then he scrambled up a rocky path to follow the contour of the hillside above the trail he had come in by. He was looking for a clearing with a wooden shingle dacha and found a mound of verdant debris in its place. One corner was overgrown by creepers and the rest had been stove in by two palm trees, long blown over in forgotten typhoons. He kicked away the mulch from a solid Soviet plinth, stumbling over the palm trunks to reach the spot. Just as he remembered the bay rolled out before him, dashed by sea dragons racing in off the wind darkened sea. Further north the bay hung under a precipice and southwest the dragon-back of the Long Wo mountains fell away to a horizon bitten by the toothy islands of its offspring. Looking over the palm crowns to the fallow paddy below he saw a wispy grey line further down. It had to be the perimeter fence except that it took a line far short of the survey pegs he knocked in three years earlier.

He was still drinking in the scenery when the cliff edge to the north seemed to throw a red ochre curtain into the sky. Moments later a muffled tearing noise came rolling round the bay as several hundred thousand tons of mountain fell into the sea. Already the excavators were rip blasting their way down the coast. He rubbed his ears, thinking his hearing played tricks until he saw a black Audi come down the trail. The car stopped on the other side of the schoolhouse with its roof just visible through the soiled windows. He heard the driver walk towards the barracks from where a glance past the hall would give the driver full view of Song's truck. The footsteps didn't falter but just before the driver passed out of sight, Song recognised the policeman who'd spoken to Jiaying that morning. Song heard the car door click, the engine start and at last he breathed freely as the car rumbled south past the parade ground.

Madame Hu demanded to know if he'd seen anyone.

"I think I was followed." With his cap in both hands Song gazed at her jade ring and added, "A police officer came down the track."

"What did you say?" She asked, smiling faintly.

"A policeman. I hid out of his way."

"But you were there at noon?"

Song nodded.

"The idiot." Her fox spirit flashed. "He was to show you the boundary. Did you see anything else?"

"Work on the coast road looks ready to start."

"And more. My stock value depends on it and I won't let a stupid policeman stand in my way with ideas above his station. Foreigners have parted with a great deal of money for just some of that land. I suppose you have to find out sooner or later that he wants paid for what is not his. Nothing is too deceitful against a man like that!"

Song held onto his cap while she sat contemplating her arched fingertips.

"I try to be a good engineer but," he said quietly. "I am certain you will let me know what is in my interests."

"Certain! I'll let you know for certain. You'll finish that causeway out there, you'll build a camp for the road crew and if you don't make a mess of things the way you did today then once a month you will sit down with that policeman. If you're lucky you will still have a job at the end of it. Be lucky Song."

Song shuffled towards the door like a culprit but she shrieked after him, "Here! I will see that Jiaying leaves his office for you at eight o'clock. Let our friend Tian see you have this

packet and when he has shown you the boundaries you can let him have this... this rent,” She gave him an envelope from her desk adding, “It is all he will get until I have the deeds.”

In the fetid stink of the cabin Song held the envelope under his grizzled nose and sniffed, fresh soap and cedar, a parcel of erotic mania. Again he squeezed it against its contents, tossed it in the air to feel the weight and held it to his nose as if he could smell through the gloss. He put it down again but picked it up seconds later as if it would burn the desk. He held it to the light but could not see through it. Once more he slipped a pencil in at a corner flap, this time lifting it far enough to see pages of what looked like a small thick book. With the light at his back he made out the blue green whorls of Chairman Mao on a one hundred Ren Min Bi note. The envelope was filled with them.

By eleven o'clock Tian had still to appear. Song spent the time calculating how many years he could pay for the whole of his old Construction Brigade squad with the envelope's content. The crisp step of dress shoes sounded, first on gravel then stepping around the mud through which his workers trudged six times a day. He saw Tian's immaculate red and green cap in the doorway, the slightly tarnished shoulder braid and service medals of the kind Song had admired when worn by older men in harder times.

“Where were you yesterday?” Tian asked without looking, as if the room was empty.

Song's pulse quickened to the same erratic beat of a child driven mad by a diet of bark and coal. It was on the tip of his tongue to say it was the job of the police to know but instead he apologized and asked to be shown the boundary, the same one he had pegged out three years earlier.

Tian kicked the table aside then sat down and opened a briefcase. Inside was a single drawing which he tossed on the table. Song unfolded it, an original Deed Plan issued by the

northern prefecture. But Song's survey points were missing. Without them there was nothing to indicate the wedge of land left vacant after the village to the north was cleared or the paddy fields that now lay outside the perimeter fence.

Tian waved the brief case in his face. "Well? This was full when I came in. It's empty now."

Song bent over to put the fragrant envelope in Tian's case.

"If you have any questions they are for your company and not me," said Tian getting to his feet, "I will not speak to you or recognise you anywhere outside this office and I expect the same from you. You will meet me again next month when the same arrangements will be made but next time you will not sit here watching as I come in. If there is any alteration to these arrangements the deeds will be difficult to make use of." Tian paused on the doorstep. "Your Hong Kong friends will no doubt have something to say if you neglect my arrangements."

As soon as he heard the car door close Song took out a draughtsman's scale, flattened the drawing and plotted a new 'Right of Way' for the highway passing uphill from the dacha. On the way to the Hu office, he called in at Railway Brigade Number Fourteen where a comrade printed off three copy plans for him. Song delivered the original to Hu's secretary and headed for the docks. It was here that men used to gather along the low granite wall for half a mile with cards hung round their necks, waiting for work like beasts. Some were labelled by their trade, most could write only 'Hard Worker.' Today there was no one. Song turned around for Red Flag Road and the railway station where an officer in the same uniform as Tian stood on the concourse. He parked at a discrete distance and walked back, straining to see the arrivals board over the heads of young people who seemed taller than they used to be.

Penned into a corral at the side of the concourse were migrant peasants from the countryside caught without a residence permit and held there by the police.

Beneath the station's domed basilica the waiting room was black with people struggling for directions, for baggage and the search for relatives or agents. A train from Song's home province had come in fifty minutes earlier. Seeing another northern train due he made his way along the elevated walkway to platform twenty-seven, reading faces as he went. A squad of over fifty young men disembarked, each with a kit bag carrying all they possessed. They were in good humour and already had work, with fares paid for them before they left home. Back out on the concourse Song watched the police corral sleeping peasants inside the fence where they lay one against another like so many bundled rags. A young boy among them rubbed his eyes, watching open faced as Song approached. Keeping one eye on their policeman, Song leaned across the fence and gave fifty Yuan to five of them, shrugging off an old man who pushed through to demand money for himself. Song then spoke to the policeman.

"I have a truck broken down on Red Flag Road. Do you know where I can get help to unload it? I need maybe five people," said Song looking at the refugees.

"Six," said the policeman.

Song passed fifty yuan to the policeman who let them pass, six including the old man and each one fifty Yuan lighter.

It was dusk by the time the crew jumped down from the truck and set to work turning pallets into bunks in the stable block where most of the roof was intact. One man built a fire while Song lashed three short branches together for a tripod and suspended a clay pot of rice from it. They ate in silence round the fire and sat staring into the coals afterwards telling tales of home.



That night Song slept like a monk and woke like a soldier two hours later. He had forgotten how damp the air could be when it rose straight off the sea and shivered under his blanket until first light when he went outside to pace the ground in lines known only to himself. With the early dawn he took his copied plans and ticked off the lines before starting his qigong. He changed the routine, Taming the Tiger, Crane among Cockerels, channelling qi through his sinews but his concentration was weak and his energy unbalanced. He set the boys to work cutting timber for benches then gave the old man a survey staff to help him fix levels and lines. Song explained he was laying out drainage while between traverses he worked in the lines paced earlier that morning and as yet not printed on any drawing. With the team busy he returned to his makeshift barracks, listening to the rhythm of saws and shovels while he unfolded his drawing to add dimensions then hid it among the dry rafters above the door.

After he saw a new Mercedes outside Jiaying's merchant Song did not even need to check the receipts. On one hand the first truck loads of ballast were not even half full and on the other Jiaying was talking up the scope of the camp by three or four times what he needed.

"Of course each man must have his own bunk," said Jiaying. "And fixed toilets. And I can't start work on the road until we have a safe water supply." He waved his hands in the air laying out cabins for three hundred men with a canteen, showers, toilets and a water tower big enough to carry six days supply.

"Where did you get all this from?" Song asked.

Jiaying was indignant. "These are the laws."

"And when did you start paying attention to them?"

"We have to work together on this. So you save a few Yuan building the camp, we lose everything if the Labour Bureau shut us down."

“The same Labour Laws that applied to the Construction Brigade? In that case you’ll need some heavy plant. A blade for a week, a back hoe to grub out and a truck for the spoil. But first of all I need your drawings for the road, the ones they’re going to work with.”

“Help yourself,” said Jiaying pointing to brown paper packages.

As soon as Jiaying left Song searched the drawings until he found two that showed the road passing through his parade ground. He unfolded them, taped them over his copies and re-traced the road to follow the layout he measured that morning then using a razor he scratched out the print leaving only his new survey lines. In minutes his paperwork was complete. In a month his squad of migrants had re-roofed the stables, plastered the walls and were ready to move in one hundred and fifty metal bunks for three hundred men on double shifts. When he was finished with Jiaying’s heavy plant he paid the driver to leave him a grader and backhoe for ground works of his own. A quarter mile from the camp he drove the backhoe up from the road to the remains of the dacha, stabilised the ground and dug a leech field. He brought in the trusses his crew had made for a roof with wide eaves just the way he remembered it: shade in the heat and shelter in the monsoon. From a skip of waste and reject fittings he salvaged a pair of undersized double doors, scratched chipped tiles and bath fittings, taking pleasure in scraping away at the timber, screeding the floor and painting, work he had done 10,000 times before but never once for himself. Nothing stood in his way unless the sound of blasting came to him from the encroaching expressway when he would pause at the thought of his month end appointment with Tian. He could not unpick why Madam Hu should squander so much on a few hectares of land or, as the temptation grew, what could go wrong if one day he left with the money burning under his shirt. With Jiaying’s camp finished his work on the causeway made it difficult to complete the dacha. And Madame Hu no longer gave him the monthly package, leaving that to her sartorial secretary who handed it to him

stapled and taped as if Song was not to be trusted. With Tian's arrival Song would hide to watch him pull on his white gloves and hear him wheeze as he passed close enough to smell his bei jiu breath. Afterwards he could still feel where the packet had been, like a tumour under his shirt and when he sought relief at old Buck's. Their talk dwelt on the foreigners and resentment at the money they threw around on the sea gypsy girls of the Long Wo so that each encounter reminded him the highway was coming closer and each week brought his plans closer to discovery. The girls teased him as their own Yu Gong who would never see the fruits of his labours. One of them mentioned Lieutenant Tian, boasting of a friendship that might win her the chance to work in Hong Kong. Another told his fortune using old Qing coins to cast hexagrams.

"Yu Gong!" She said, calling him by his nickname, "You are caught between two armies, one on the high ground and the other on the low. Here..."

"Mind your own business," he snapped and dozed off listening to the gossip about Qim and her rich foreigner. He woke beside an empty Mao Tai bottle with Buck's death's head face above him.

"You have patience Song. Hold both sides by touching the edge. Think of Su Weidao and keep everything secret, specially your patience."

Only later did Song realise that Su Weidao was not another of Buck's contacts in the municipality, but the Tang minister who famously survived his Empress by subterfuge, plots, counter-plots and purges.

Song, already anxious ahead of his next drop, was forced to make an unexpected visit to the head office when a supplier demanded cash for an urgent delivery. In the port quarter he'd known for years, decades. The whole round the Hu offices had been cleared, open ground except for three charcoal grey S-class Mercedes from the Mayor's office. He came through

security to stand at the head of the stairs watching Madame Hu in her aquarium office suite chairing a meeting with a group of dark suited men. Without hesitating she left her seat and came out to meet him.

“Good morning Song Shifu! What brings you in again so soon?”

Even to himself he sounded like a peasant as he explained himself and the awkward supplier insisting on cash and, like a peasant, he panicked when her amanuensis interrupted him with a call from Song’s problem supplier. She took the call, evidently the means by which she had him summoned.

“Yes I asked you to call but it’s all right,” she said looking at Song, “he’s here now.”

Song followed her into a closed office where she opened a safe and took out a thin envelope with which she played cat’s cradle, turning it in her fingers by the edge.

“Tell me Song have you seen Lieutenant Tian? I am concerned for his welfare. But you know we women have to swallow a lot in business.” She cut him a withering look that he recognised, a flash of gimlet eyed anger exactly like Qim.

“You have plans but I can trust you Song can’t I?”

She slipped a card inside her envelope and passed it to him, her eyes sparkling.

“I want you to make a special collection. A week earlier. I think tomorrow is a good day. Tomorrow will be a very good day.”

Song realised two things: that tomorrow would be a very bad day for someone and this woman was Qim’s mother.

He had fallen asleep on his feet while waiting for Tian. Seeking relief for his hangover he had moved to the shade of the office when an inside door slammed. It seemed he had missed Tian’s arrival but five minutes later he was still waiting for the lieutenant to come out. Song

put his ear to the wall and heard the swish and click of files as someone searched through the paperwork in a hurry. Pushing open the door Song reached for the office guillotine and began unscrewing the heavy blade until, just as the nut came away in his hand, a familiar voice came from inside.

“Make up your mind whether you are coming or going.”

He put down the blade and looked round the door to see Jiaying rummaging through his files.

“So you’ve been to see the Tiger Lady. You could have told me. Anyway, even if you knew what was coming it doesn’t matter now she’s sold out.”

“Sold out? Sold what?”

“Everything. She sold her husband’s business.”

“But they still need workers. It’s not as if you and me are bought and sold.”

Jiaying slammed the drawer, dumped files on more files and swept them into a sack. “That’s exactly what she has done. You’ve a few months maybe before our new bosses find out. Take care or you’ll get a working holiday in a Xinghai labour camp if not a one way ticket to the football stadium. Well my friend, no more holding the edge. I’m off.”

Song watched him go then took out thin envelope from the desk and was on the point of following Jiaying with Hu’s envelope under his shirt when he heard Tian’s car. He put back the envelope and slipped out round the corner as the Lieutenant came trudging over the gravel. Through the window he glimpsed Tian holding a drawing in sweat-shaded white gloves. Song held his breath for as long as it takes to open a letter until suddenly from inside there came a fit of cursing. Tian staggered outside, his face a map of rage as he confronted Song with a fist clenching and unclenching a piece of photograph. “She cheated me!” Tian shouted, “She cheated me!” With the policeman gone Song went back inside. On the floor lay the envelope among pieces of torn letter and the drawing Tian had brought, the contour

plan that Hu had paid so much for, the original, signed and stamped by the Director of Planning for the northern prefecture, Tian's brother-in-law.

Song snatched the old drawing from the flat file, laid it under Tian's approved highway plan and with one laid over the other he taped them against the window pane. He traced lines for the highway using the daylight shining through them so that the officially stamped drawing now showed the highway built against the mountainside and well away from his plot. Job done, he gathered the torn pieces of Hu's letter in the envelope and left with it in his pocket.

Qim was glowing when she came to look at the dacha with her foreigner, a wizened little man no older than Song himself. She followed the foreigner from room to room as he picked out faults here and there. Inspection over, the foreigner left him a list of repair work to make good and a soapy brown envelope with about ten years salary as deposit for the new dacha.

Later when Song pulled out the deposit, along with it came the envelope that Madam Hu had played cat's cradle with. In it were the torn papers that Tian had left on the office floor. Song turned it upside down and shook out flakes of paper, trying to reform the original. The pieces did not quite fit. From what he made of its good if girlish script it was a personal letter to 'Auntie', thanking her for all the help she'd provided since her niece arrived in Hong Kong and for helping her father out with his troubles, '...so that he need never know the mistakes his daughter made.' He was trying to piece together two separate letters of which neither was about land or money. The second letter was addressed to Tian. All he could read of it was '...difficult for a woman to make her way in business...' and '... see that I helped your daughter with her education in the way your family helped me...' Holding the envelope by its corner he shook it firmly and out fell two pieces of a torn photograph, enough to see Tian's daughter performing fellatio with extraordinary enthusiasm.

## Eleven

Neville Marlow

We spent three days putting together a plan to lighten the loads enough for their bridge.

“Think we can do it?” Douglass asked. I needed a month or two to set up at the port and two weeks to strip down each unit. But that was working full time. Even if the highway opened tomorrow I’d spend a third of each day travelling. And we’d be chasing parts to rebuild at the other end. I made a list. Douglass rolled his eyes when I asked for assembly drawings, forgetting we no longer did assemblies since everything was modular. He took out one of those forms, wrote ‘Strategic Costs’ and added everything he could to my list: logistics, a clean room, lifting tackle, security, more engineers, an office and workshops in a warehouse with enough space for a crane, probably two. We left him at one in the morning phoning for extra money, more than their New Business Strategy ever saved, and next morning Douglass came in to breakfast telling us to get moving.

Our partners found three warehouses at the port for us to choose from. One had doors so small we didn’t even look inside. One had wide enough doors but a roof-space too low for our crane jibs. Inside the dock gate we found a filthy place with railway lines and rutted floors that was due for demolition in six months. The plan was to take the roof off at one end for the cranes, screen off a clean area at the other and move the parts between. After twenty years of work with little to show for it everything now depended on me and how I did my job. In a month we had set up, craned in the first turbine and stripped off enough fittings to send a

truck-load to site. We were late by Douglass' plan but still too early for re-jigging assemblies, revising drawings, re-scheduling plans, for new workshops and sub-assemblies. All this needed extra engineers, extra visas and offices. We needed more people and already there was a shortage of accommodation. There was no such thing as a cheap hotel with a foreign residents' permit but our Hong Kong partners found a couple of shop houses and had them converted in two weeks. A girl showed us round, explaining there was no lobby because they needed a security booth for their foreigners' permit. She was the only person there who spoke English and we never saw her again after she took our bookings. We were left in the care of this old guard with his red arm band. He'd sit there like a post until you crossed the threshold then, as you'd struggle through with your cases he'd call out 'Room Number' as if we were reporting for corrective labour. The rooms smelled of garlic and old engine oil. Mine had a small wardrobe and a bed from which I'd look up at an awesome stain of rusty plumbing, oil or blood and spreading all over the ceiling in the time I was there. Breakfast lunch and dinner came with rice, short unpolished grains thick with starch and sticking to the bowl in one lump like a gooey pudding. The only one thing that came without rice was tea. But once we moved to the port we were due a hardship allowance. Pearce's moustache bristled at the news, an extra ninety dollars a day pocket money and more in a month than a university professor earned in a year. Pearce was right pleased with himself though I don't know why. The currency was restricted. Six thousand a month extra that we couldn't take home or use to buy anything worthwhile.

Douglass' office was like a medieval court besieged by petitioners. Once a week I was on site as an honoured guest discussing progress. When a new section of the highway opened I came by the headland, looking out for her painted rock and the Kan Ting but without a



glimpse of her. Then one day we came whipping round the headland and I saw two cars outside, one of them a police car.

Next day I found myself with another 5,000 Renminbi in my hand and nowhere to put it. There was already twenty or thirty thousand in the office safe and no room in my old Vernier case for the rest. I was making more pocket money in a day than I got in one month as a lad and no better idea what to do with it. Pearce found things. He went off to the silk market but he came back with a pair of Italian shoes. The following weekend he went back for a pair in Alligator skin and came back showing off a pearl necklace. Another time he bought a camera, exactly the one he'd set out for, only to find it was the same camera he had at home but with a new number. We found a shop that sold nothing but whisky and came back with a bottle of fifty year old that we'd half finished before I understood it cost £500. I spent a bit in the new hotels, marble and fleck wallpaper places with a lobby piano I'd listen to while Pearce got on with his bargain hunting. Sometimes we'd pass a factory gate at the change of shift, just like the Albion Works when I was a boy except instead of thousands of men in boiler suits streaming through the gates there were as many young girls milling around in uniforms like pyjamas. I always kept a look out for Qim among them because on my last visit the windows of her Kan Ting were shuttered and the tables stacked on the terrace. When I'd seen the door ajar and someone working inside I was about to knock when the door swung back and the old woman stood there glaring at me as if I'd eaten her children. 'Where Qim?' I asked and she launched into this rant. I understood 'foreign devils' but when I asked again she shouted in English, 'Here not. Finish.'

At the next meeting Douglass assigned me to work with Paul, the lad who took my case when I was on leave. He told me young Paul was 'highly regarded' in the board block back in England. I was on my way to strip the generator when I met the lad carrying a roll of

drawings under his arm as though to impress me. He got talking nice enough then he'd be dropping these names of colleagues, people I'd only heard of. Some he'd call 'a good man' and others I had did know were, he said, 'going nowhere'. He talked of his short life so much I felt I'd wear out before he could add any more to it. I knew every generator made in the past thirty years. I could tell him every detail, which job, every revision and when it was introduced. The thing about generators is they're a bomb. They get hot, so hot that air won't take away the heat fast enough so we fill them with hydrogen and, because that's dangerous, we put in two hundred instruments that check everything all ways. I walked with him the length of a casing that was prickling with these instrument bosses when Paul takes out his drawings and unrolls them like a field marshal. "What are these?" he asked and when I told him, he comes back with his know-all, "Why so many?" I was always having to tell him to keep his sweaty hands off or they'd rust the steel but he was our expert on controls and that meant listening to him witter on about his university, his fun, what he thought of Chinese girls, his ambitions and then talking about the Long Wo as if the place was his.

Zhang had told me that while local people looked down on peasants, the peasants looked down on everything to do with the Long Wo peninsula. Officially nobody lived there. People were banned from settling the outlying coast since Admiral Zheng was recalled to Beijing by a court eunuch, jealous after he came back with stories of his voyage round the world. Since then only sea gypsies, smugglers and pirates had lived there. Local people, civilised people as the driver put it, lived in cities. In the past when the delta regularly flooded, the Goddess of the sea was offered a king to subdue the local river dragon in time for the first full moon after the rains. Of course Paul had a story to explain it all: fertility rites, a test of fire and water to choose the Dragon King for a night with the virgins of the

village before, as he put it, before the ultimate sacrifice. A bit like our green man in Marston I suppose.

Rather than lie staring at the stains above my bed I'd take myself up to the roof where I could see over the city, the rundown shop houses and hutongs around us, the new business district sprouting up river and ships on a thin strip of sea beyond the eastern rooftops. In a couple of months the nearby shop houses were gone and I had a clear view out to sea. One hot and heavy night I was watching shrimp boats trawl the horizon under a line of black clouds marching up the delta when at once I felt water. You couldn't call it rain. The first drops fell in splashes the size of a cup and suddenly the close air burst open as bolt after bolt of lightning split the clouds and there was this ease, this softening of my nerves, my neck, my shoulders. This was the monsoon, a new season, washing the sticky dust out of the air for new start.

We were to have a day off to celebrate, that is, we worked six days that week instead of seven and we were off to celebrate the full moon with some locals. After showering I combed my wet hair over the thin patch, dabbed on the aftershave Ivy gave me for Christmas and put on a white sleeveless shirt that looked like my school uniform. By the time I'd wound my way round all those bays and parked up, the sun was setting. I took in the last of the light, lilac above, rose pink behind the hills and across the bay a deep green reflecting the mountains. I made my way up the bank through jungle stinking of growth and rot as if I walked under giant mushrooms rather than trees. It sent me dizzy, as though breathing the air of another planet, warmer and damper with shrieking and chattering that had to be monkeys, shrill insects like buzz saws and a bird that flitted from side to side across my path singing two sliding notes as it went. From the top of the path I could see an enormous tree below me with branches that spread like roots in the air and flickering candles picking out the

silhouettes of beef-eating Westerners and the willowy boat people, Jing they called themselves and most of them women. Pearce and Paul were there ahead of me at a table of newcomers. A match flared as a girl bent over their table setting candles and I saw Qim laughing. She came towards me and I meant to give a casual hug like people do but I stumbled on a root and fell against her, her cheek on mine and her hair swinging across my arms like a priceless luxury. Pearce called us to his table and when I suggested drinks Paul says, 'She works in this place you know,' whatever that meant. She gave my order to another girl and explained how important the festival was for their village with all the changes coming and their young men away in construction up the coast. Her eyes glittered as she spoke of their festival, warning me not to pass ahead of the musicians or move the wrong way round the tree. 'Look for the flame in the water,' she told me and, 'Do not touch the girls' flowers.' Paul laughed like a crow. She laughed herself, called me a fish and fetched this floral contraption, offering it to me on the tips of her fingers like something special. Each leaf was woven into another, sealed with wax and wired to a lotus on a posy of the small flowers I'd smelt all night. It was perfect. Close up the scent sparked a blaze of memories: the apple loft, ferns and roses, green peaches and, like a dart from the past, the boxed soap my mother kept on her dressing table. I leaned forward and suddenly a terrific explosion threw back the darkness all round, a racket of foreign rhythms bright with cymbals and gongs enough to frighten off evil spirits. It scared me witless and she left. Girls were running in all directions as music came out the darkness. After a bit I saw the musicians crouched over their instruments as this procession of torchbearers came up from the creek. The cymbal rhythm grew louder, filling the darkness while the players came on ahead of the procession as if they could see by their music. I couldn't stop my ears or look away. Behind them came this crone and two files of torchbearers, one either side of the girls carrying their fruit and

flower offerings. They circled round the tree following the musicians in a kind of shuffle as if unsure of their path. Three times they circled then started inland, their torches threading up the hill like stars until they disappeared over the top leaving a flicker of light behind them on the underside of the trees. A shrill note sounded and the crescendo stopped except for a thin reed holding all their music in this one note. I ran to catch up and reached the top of the hill in time to see the girls in their circle of torchlight and me away outside it. I had missed the path. There was a roaring in my ears like falling water and by the time I caught up the music was everywhere around the hills, a natural theatre with me cut off from their show, stuck on the other side of a pool. The torches were staked along the waterside where the girls knelt waiting with their offerings, looking up to the mountain where the topmost trees were already catching moonlight from beyond the rise. At the first silver sliver of a full moon the torches went out except for one held by the crone and the single note of music stopped. One at a time the girls came forward holding out their flower lanterns and kneeling to light them as if their life depended on it. When the moon had risen clear of the trees, each girl made their way to the pool and placed their offering on the water until the reed note stopped leaving only the sound of falling water. One by one the lamps joined a flotilla bobbing round the pool until they were caught in a current that swept them back to the middle, stringing them out in a circle. Nothing went downstream but some lights were drawn in under the falls and put out. Then one of the lights passed clear behind the water and for a while I could see the flame behind the falls before it too disappeared, stirring murmurs from the crowd of *Hai Long Wang*. I'd have done anything to know what I saw, anything, but maybe it was the girl. And what would my boys think then? I decided to leave and came back all the way down, past the drum lanterns, the big tree and on down to the deserted stilt village by the creek. The water was blue-black, a mirror cracked by the tree-line reflected opposite. A patch of ripples

caught the moonlight offshore as I stepped onto the boardwalk, clunking along the planks past the stilt houses to the end. Voices drifted down through the whirring and whistling of frogs and insects and I thought I heard my name called, sharp, as if I'd done wrong. The music had stopped. It was cold. I stood up and was about to go when I saw two different reflections of the moon. I looked up at the stars then back to the water and the smaller reflection. Cupping my eyes I saw a glow, movement, maybe not a reflection at all. The thing had been drifting away from me towards a row of fishing sampans between the pier and the bank. I put a foot on the first sampan, letting it bob under me while I worked my way from boat to boat. One of the flower offerings had come down on the current, just within reach and another one behind with its light still glowing. I leaned out to catch the thing and the sampan lurched, tipping me into the water. And I don't swim. I was desperate to get a grip. I held only the flowers. My head hit something then I was clawing at the side of a boat unable to grip. The edge was too high. I struggled, reaching out for this mooring pole, sinking until my feet touched the bottom and I sort of bobbed my way to the shore still holding the offering. I splashed along in the shallows to the pier getting my breath back on the way when I heard a pebble skip down the bank. I could see nothing. My first thoughts were that the lads would roast me for getting excited over some flowers, but I'd have heard if they were there. I saw movement by the trees and sensed her eyes on me when I came up the bank still holding the leaf lamp. She stepped out barefoot into the moonlight. I put down the lamp and she spoke in English, as if to someone else, "No good. No good." Then she was gone.

After I was back at work the pressure on us to get power on made those Nan Ao rituals seem like so much Morris dancing. With load shedding and blackouts across the city you knew

what was coming so that even before we'd split the generator casing it was on national news. That is we were national news. Only when their Director of Power was in Beijing talking to VIPs about building more megawatts did we realise the delays would be blamed on us. Because Tate saved money on English engineers, Douglass had to spend tons more at the other end of the job. We didn't think it wasn't our problem until then. First they couldn't decide the location and then they had a causeway to build. Without the causeway to bring in fuel nothing would be complete. Tate had glanced at the job and struck out the causeway from our contract for the tens of thousands of dollars a day needed for coffer dams, barges and floating cranes. His idea was that no one could blame us if we were late because the local Construction Brigade would be later still. They would take the blame.

As for us, it was another month before I spent as much time putting things together as I did taking them apart. I'd gone to check on the gang pouring concrete for our first pedestal block when I found a laser set up right where I'd rigged my piano wire. It was for training. There weren't the men to do things my way anymore Douglass said. Instead of his usual Trafalgar duty style he was caught between Napoleon's business strategy and the 'bloody causeway'. We saw the shore black with people. Some were in a line filling sandbags, a hundred others were digging by the roadside and hundreds more lashing bamboo together while yet another thousand were driving poles into the sea, rigging a bamboo scaffold. In a week a piling rig arrived on this truck they parked by their sandbag ramp. They rolled the rig off the truck on scaffold poles, down the ramp and across the beach. Engine started, with the first puffs of black smoke they were driving piles and right away a second rig arrived. In a few weeks the Construction Brigade had planted a forest of bamboo poles stretching out to sea for a hundred yards and beyond them a slender bamboo grid all the way to the marker buoy at the end of the terminal. Since then a whole village built out of packing cases and drift wood had grown

around their construction camp. There was a bamboo flume where kids filled plastic bottles with water. There was even a shop, a ply-wood hut stacked to the eaves with cans of cooking oil, crates of tinned food, bottles and plastic buckets.

After I'd done complaining to Douglass about his laser he suggested we visit the lads who'd gone to Nan Ao for the day. We set off bowling along between the sea and the last few paddy fields where a line of folk were bent over their last rice harvest. I noticed the coast road was breaking up and couldn't understand why there were so many cars until I came out on the path above the big tree. There were tables spread throughout the clearing with lights strung through the branches, electric lights with this generator grinding away. Down among the tables I heard voices in more languages than I recognised: Germans from the car plant, Italians commissioning a new hotel and Americans in force for a record breaking micro-chip plant. Our people were sat scowling like they'd just been laid off until Douglass came to chivvy them along. He bought drinks and cracked a few jokes while I found myself looking out for Qim. Next thing I knew two hours had passed and Douglass was leaving. I should have gone with him. I had no intention of staying until I saw a flash of purple pink sarong disappearing behind the huts and I chased after her like an untrained pup. I was alone when I reached the corner with nothing there but the boarded huts, the trees and a thicket of azaleas. Hearing children play in the water below, in a few steps I was looking down on the bark roofs of stilt houses clinging to the bank like a pile of dead leaves. Rather than turn back I took the path leading uphill until I heard the swish of a branch at the far end of the bank top. From there I saw movement among the bushes further up and took a short cut through the undergrowth to come out above the path. It was well trodden, leading up and back on itself through bamboos as big as scaffold poles. I climbed up a long way up and had to stop for breath at a fork in the path, listening above the roar in my ears for some clue. I chose to go



straight on over clear ground to the next tree where the path would switch back into the mountainside. Pulses popping and chest wheezing, I stopped to listen and heard a twig snap. A flash of purple led me to push uphill through the bamboos where I thought I had reached the path but the ground dipped ahead of me towards a thicket of lighter bamboos and I lost the path. The bamboos barred my way but the path had already taken me over the ridge onto ground that was extraordinarily soft and damp. When I saw palm leaves fluttering on the next ridge I plunged into the thicket, pushed aside the canes and forced my way in. There was a sudden fall, a branch snapped and another whipped my face as I went crashing down the slope grabbing at leaves that cut and stung until I was frantic to keep hold of something, anything. My head took a battering and I wrenched my arm but all at once I had a grip that swung me out in brilliant sunshine, into this space with rocks and dirt flying past into the waterfall pouring sixty feet below. I needed all my strength to hang on and would have done nothing but that except I didn't understand what I'd just seen. As I was about to shoot out beyond the waterfall and the rocks below I'd a vision of these polished limbs, a moment all the sweeter for being my last as dozens, maybe twenty naked women washed and played in the pool below. At first it was a voice then a whole chorus. The girl who'd seen me stopped soaping her breasts and set the others shrieking while more rocks and stones showered past me. A clump of ferns went tumbling past like a shuttlecock all the way down into their pool as I scrambled on all fours, grabbing at branches slippery with spray and digging my toes into the side. The forest loam on that side had no grip. The branch overhead was out of reach. The other side gave onto open space and a rock face washed by spray. Up where I'd come from the trees were already in danger of falling away when this bamboo pole came swinging out towards me as if to knock me down. It hit the rocks then hung there while this voice, her

voice, called down. I gave the pole a tug, tested the weight then leaned back until I could plant my feet on solid rock and walk up.

A week after my fall they were going to knock down our digs as soon as they got us out. She said she would help me. I could still hear the 'click' of the fifty dollar note leaving my hand as she set off to buy a foreign resident's permit for this other place, a bed-sit in a terrace of houses built a century ago for Western factory managers. A bit of a dump but it had its own bathroom, a ticking mattress and four walls that were more grime than paint, all for thirty dollars a month. I was putting away money faster than ever. After Sunday lunch we'd talk without saying much in pidgin English and baby talk. Most of the time I just lay there like a British lion looking at her beside me in crisp white panties like icing on marzipan. There was a vicious scar on her arm that she never explained without losing me in a long story between an orphanage, her tribal home at Nan Ao and a salt farm up the delta where she'd lived as a little girl. With the new road coming the Kan Ting took her on but its business was over before it began because they couldn't pay for a license of some kind. I liked to listen, I liked to watch her eyelashes, long like a baby's and then out of nowhere she'd ask, "What you want?" I wanted to know her. I said so, lying back where the mattress bulged with my travel wallet, my air ticket and a wad of Renminbi. One day when she asked again I closed my eyes and dreamt up an answer that just kept on.

"You know what I'd like? A little house with trees, a bit of garden and a view. Yes a view, a view of the sea." Then I asked her for chicken from the Uighur barbecue at the end of the street, forty *fen* and tastier than the International Hotel's twelve dollar club sandwich with Chopin. She closed the door behind her and I nodded off.

I had thought it was the end after their festival with me in the water and her saying, ‘No good,’ the way she did. It was bad luck. It was bad luck me touching her flower boat. It was bad luck because I’d left her. It was bad luck following her to the bathing pool, taboo for a man to be there at all. But she led me down the path to the sampans and cast off in the very boat I’d fallen from, flicked the oar and had us ghosting out over the water like we was sailing into a painting except the sunset was behind us. She took us out to the headland, just beyond where I’d stood at the Kan Ting looking down on the sea. We came ashore in *Hai Long Wang* bay, its sand blue white under the moon. I passed a lifetime on that blue beach with its sand warm between our toes and these phosphor blue comets in the bay where turtles were coming in from the sea to lay their eggs. It was a dream to last a lifetime but when I woke she was sitting on the end of the mattress with this smile.

“You have 5,000 Renminbi?” She asked. I reached under the mattress, counted out enough for the airport and gave her the rest, about 15,000.

## Twelve

### Saving a Place

Lao was still glowing after a night out with his station comrades when Lieutenant Tian summoned him to the Senior Officer's floor. He had been there four years earlier, around the time the Director of Welfare poisoned himself and the sergeant told him to stop 'picking flowers in the emperor's garden.' It was the first time Lieutenant Tian had spoken to him, an interview that proved more of a chat than the interrogation he expected. Of course he enjoyed work. And guard duty was better than traffic. But he did think about his career. He also thought about Qim. They'd both come through the same orphanage though he couldn't remember Qim in that dump, certainly not as she was now. When they walked out together men would look at her as if he did not exist. Their work shifts did not allow them much time together and the cadet dormitory was no place to go. Sometimes she came to meet him at the station before her work but he did not like that. Less often they met on his nights off at the back of the Jin Hua club where she worked. But he couldn't quite let go, screwing against the wall directly below the big window while the high hats cackled away between noisy toasts in the banquet room above. He tried to remember who first mentioned Qim in that interview before Lieutenant Tian spoke of stability in marriage then quickly moved back onto work. In a few months they bought a marriage license and applied for an apartment. Things were difficult with Qim earning more at that Jin Hua Club than he did at the station. He had not wronged her. It was just a mistake to tell her about Tian's monkey trap catching the

villagers by their own greed. They received nothing unless they signed phantom deeds, hush money for papers with the buyers' names and prices blank. Tian paid them no more than a commission for the sale of their land, the land they gave to him in good faith. But why should she have been upset with him? It was not Lao but her oafish step-brothers who came back from Shenzhen to swindle her.

He struggled to compose himself as his sergeant came out scowling, leaving the door open enough to glimpse Lieutenant Tian deep in worries, waiting for him behind an enormous black desk. Lao could not grasp what exactly was going on after Tian's light hearted introduction, the talk of staff changes, his lines of reporting and plans that involved Lao in the security of the country. The Lieutenant wanted assurances of confidentiality before he came to the point with a few sharp questions. No, Lao had never been to the capital. No, Lao did not know anyone in the capital. No, and Tian looked pleased with this in particular, Lao did not have any family links to the capital. By the end of it Lao stood frowning before that desk, more puzzled than ever given that Tian already knew he was an orphan.

"You see," said Tian raising his chin, "I have good guanxi in Beijing. They have asked me for candidates I can put forward for special training. If you put your name down for a sergeant's post I can let them know we have an ambitious young man here who is interested in promotion."

Lao listened open mouthed as Tian unfolded a deal he would never have dared to hope for, a deal that made no sense until he found himself holding the air ticket.

News of his promotion went round the station fast and not without that unsettling joke about a 'send off' from the top floor. The sergeant brushed away his unease by taking him aside to caution him against what Westerners call paranoia, or, as the sergeant showed him in the office dictionary, *presumptuous vain thinking arrogant madness*. His colleagues would

not be laughing now if they could see him with his new uniform in the airport lounge sharing drinks with two Senior Officers sending him off like old friends.

“How long is that now since you joined us Lao?” asked Tian.

“Eight years.”

“I’ll bet you never imagined you’d be on your way to Beijing with a promotion, ah?”

The sergeant spoke for Lao, “I was the lucky one who got him in his first week. If it wasn’t for you sir he’d have been gone after that row between the Director of Welfare and the Mayor at the Jin Hua Club.”

“It’s not my fault if some rocket cadre topped himself,” said Lao, his face reddening. “Anyway the deal went ahead didn’t it?”

Tian put a hand on the Sergeant’s stiffening arm and said softly, “No one knows what you are talking about Lao. Remember where you are going. Some day you might need our help.”

Lao nodded.

The Sergeant groaned. “I told you he can’t be trusted. Let him smell drink, he’ll turn red and blab.”

“That’s enough, both of you,” said Tian. “It’s a condition of this assignment Lao that you keep our confidence. You understand we recommended you because you can be relied upon.”

The sergeant smirked. Tian checked that Lao had his letter of appointment, his boarding card and the number of his departure gate then, to celebrate Lao’s first ever flight, he called for another round of drinks.

“And cigarettes,” said the Sergeant, “He can’t go ten minutes without one.”

The sergeant came back carrying a tray of cigarettes, two glasses of water, a 90 proof Mao Tai for Lao and already it was time for a last toast.

“To friendship and good fortune for Lao in his new post.” They drained their glasses.

Lao wanted to use the toilet but the two officers were saying goodbye and all of a sudden the plane was boarding.

When the ground staff stopped him Lao did not hold back. He lifted his chin and told them he was on business for the Public Security Bureau.

“Just open your case please sir,” said the girl, a little thing with porcelain skin but no respect. When Lao complained she told him everyone made sacrifices on the long march to economic prosperity. He would have had more to say but there was the flight, his first flight ever and he wanted to savour every moment. Besides, after a drink his face would turn bright red if he didn’t stay calm. Clutching his boarding pass Lao strode off to find gate nine, a good number, an auspicious number. A frog faced girl at the gate demanded he put his cigarette out. Yet another barrier and again they wanted his baggage inspected and his papers checked.

The flight was full, in transit from the south west. Most passengers were already seated but the aisle was blocked by foreigners in the business section, poking around in overhead lockers without a thought for anyone behind them. Lao squeezed through looking for the number shown on his boarding card and at last fell into his seat. He had just clipped his belt when a girl in a fancy western suit spoke to him, in front of everyone on the plane, telling him, in his new uniform, that he was in the wrong place. More than a hundred people must have seen the incident. He told her she was the one who was mistaken, told her his seat number and waved his ticket under her nose to back it up. The girl apologized, unlike the hostess who smelt of soap as she pulled his arm, guiding him into the seat behind as if he was a criminal. In fact the numbers overhead were wrong and he told her so. Each was one place ahead of the seat referred to.

Across the aisle was yet another girl wearing a beige linen business suit with a very short skirt. He watched her until the hostess put an elderly foreigner in the aisle seat beside him. Last year he could direct traffic all morning without seeing a girl like that but here in all this excitement half the passengers were women who looked like they flew every day. He looked

out directly over the gleaming wing across the runway to a row of aging khaki fighter planes, mothballed with canvas hoods over the cockpit and engines. It seemed bizarre that anything so fantastic could look dated. He wished he had gone to the toilet before boarding and distracted himself with a glossy foreign magazine and a card with an official notice for emergencies showing action stations and escape routes. He was still studying it when the safety demonstration was announced. The girl in beige carried on reading her magazine as if the drill meant nothing, even when the steward was demonstrating how to use an oxygen mask. The soapy stewardess stuck her head out between the curtains screening the big nose area at the front. She looked directly at Lao but did nothing about the girl ignoring the safety drill. An electronic gong sounded and signs lit up to forbid smoking and enforce the wearing of seat belts. He really should have gone to the toilet before that last drink.

The foreigner beside Lao was leafing through the China Daily, snatching the pages as though he hated them. In less than a minute he had thrown it aside for a magazine, the same magazine Lao had except this copy had Chinese script. He took out his copy again and this time it fell open between pages of Roman script alongside Chinese. Perhaps the foreigner was not so clever. Lao tried not to think about his bladder and read about the career of a pilot who won the airline's model employee award until a demonic whine sounded from the engines. They began to move, backwards so that he strained to follow the manoeuvre until the tug was uncoupled and at last they were taxiing in the correct direction. Three lines of bright lights tapered away to the end of the runway, quivering under the exhaust of an aircraft taxiing ahead. Lao forgot about his bladder and sat back.

The engines had slowed right down as if they were still standing at the terminal. Take off was overdue. In two minutes that seemed an hour, Lieutenant Tian's words came back buzzing his ear. He really had been wasting his time. Connections were what he needed and



the Lieutenant had gone out of his way to organise them. With this posting he could put his past behind him, those miserable years in the orphanage, being kicked around as a cadet, traffic duty and waiting on VIPs. He looked up to a small panel overhead with a pair of air vents, light switches and a button with a cartoon stewardess. He had to use that toilet. An idea took hold, growing until he just had to lift his arm into the cool air. After a moment's hesitation, when he did press it a roar sounded louder than anything in his forty minutes of flying experience, sending shivers through the cabin. The engines whined, the engines growled and the plane moved. He saw the wing lurch, bending fit to snap under its own weight as the whole contraption connected him to the back of his seat, shooting forwards with such force that he understood at once how fifty tons could fly. The runway shot past in a blur until at last he rose up into a new perspective where once distant objects joined together in the whispering air and the rumbling stopped. He was flying. He had now done what thousands of others had and at a glance he saw all the places that he'd ever been, up the coast to the bandit mountains, over the horizon, far out to sea and the dragon toothed rocks outside of Long Wo Bay until the plane banked inland through the murky brown air over the delta.

The beefy foreigner beside him paid no attention to the thump and he guessed the landing gear was being tucked away as they levelled out and turned north for the capital. An electronic bell sounded and behind him someone was climbing out of their seat, clearly with the intention of getting to the toilet ahead of him. For a moment Lao had taken his eyes off the sign overhead. Now the light was out he clutched at his seat belt and struggled to his feet, climbing over the foreigner to reach the aisle but not before the newcomer had passed him. Lao made a lunge to catch up and slipped in ahead just as the man reached the toilet door.

Inside was a dim cramped space with one of those western sit-on toilets surrounded by a strange technology studded surface. He fumbled with one hand to raise the lid while the

other reached in his pants. Small, shrunk out of reach after the airborne excitement, it did not fall out as it usual. He had taken his other hand off the seat when, with his bladder unable to hold on and his purpose half-out there came a warm gush over his hand, his trousers and the fallen seat, splattering the confined space. He rummaged through cabinets of towels, tissues and seat covers. He found packets of cotton wool wadding and tore them open by the handful to soak up the mess. He'd never seen sanitary towels before. In their de-laminated state they took on unwieldy proportions as he pushed one after another under the lid. They would have filled the bowl had he not taken a step back, triggering the floor mounted flushing mechanism. Lao's ears popped when he heard the whoosh of pressure under the seat, as though everything had been sucked straight outside. Buttocks clenched, he lifted the lid to find a pulpy mass blocking the bowl. He watched as a sharp scented blue liquid drenched the lot, spilling over the rim with astounding speed so that he jumped back out the way, stood on a floor button and reset the flush tank pumping with fresh vigour. Lao checked his uniform and stepped outside. The soapy stewardess looked at him without a shred of respect as he padded down the aisle, wet feet slapping on the carpet. He assured her there was no problem as he struggled into his seat, catching a brief glance between foreigner and stewardess. It reminded him of the uneasy rumours that came with his promotion and the sergeant's spoiling words at the airport.

From the moment they put that ticket in his hand he had not thought of anything left behind. There was serious money at those banquets but he never asked for more than a chance to get out of traffic duty. Now everything was a future without Qim. In those days she was the one who longed to work in Beijing while he waited with the other drivers, hanging around till dawn outside the Jin Hua club while she entertained leaders of industry, cadres and Japanese capitalists. He tried but they had rowed with loud venomous words

about her father and his worthless salt farm. The old man had to use it or lose it but she'd been absurd, so protective that neither she nor her step-brothers had any benefit. Now he was the one to get on and make connections. *Tan wu de* was all she said, small gains for big losses. With that ticket any misgivings evaporated like mist from the river. Tian was like an old friend. He even said he'd keep a sergeant's place open for him if he needed it. Who could say where this might lead? Meanwhile there would be an associate at Beijing airport to greet him. And what then? A drinks trolley came tinkling down the aisle with the same glittering constellation Tian had offered him in the departure lounge. Lao helped himself to a double Mao Tai then sat back slumped against the window.

After two more hours the flight had changed. He felt the fragile aluminium tube bank unevenly, threatening to disgorge him if the contraption itself did not drop out the sky. He was a tiny speck with twenty million people far below in a city he knew nothing of. The speed with which he fell ill had him fighting to get to the toilet only to find it occupied. He spotted a second door in time to open it and retch in the bowl. Wiping his mouth he stood up, his skin in a cold sweat, his stomach heaving. He closed the door, scared to his marrow and as he turned to sit down he saw a jug-eared policeman in the mirror wearing a new uniform smeared with vomit. His sweat turned cold as he sat head in hands, his stomach cramping to empty his bowels any which way. Was it Tian or the Sergeant who called Qim a six-month mistress? He lit a cigarette for comfort and drew deeply. His past was coming apart fast and unravelling him with it. Was he in a monkey trap of his own? Facts did not fit but he couldn't face them now because a klaxon was shrieking fit to burst.

The flight had long since taxied to a halt when two soldiers came on board carrying machine pistols across their chests. Words were exchanged with the stewardess before they lowered

their pistols and walked up the aisle. A week later the China Daily carried a report on the incident:

Security Police today arrested a man in connection with a public safety incident on board a flight to the capital. The arrested man, Police Sergeant Lao, was already under observation for alleged bribery and corruption, offences with which he has since been charged in addition to endangering public safety. An airline spokesman said the arrested man had been abusive toward passengers and behaved aggressively towards ground staff, refusing to extinguish his cigarette on a no smoking flight. Beijing Assistant Director of Security thanked provincial Director Tian for his assistance in smashing the spread of corruption.

## Thirteen

Neville Marlow

London was not as small as I thought. Looking down on a railway, Euston and the Post Office Tower I remember it was the highest building in the country when I said I'd take Ivy and the boys to the top. Now its closed. I picked the wrong queue at immigration and got stuck behind this old geezer with his stomach over his belt, holding hands with a little Asian girl half his age while he argued with the desk about advice the consulate gave him for his new wife's visa. I'd just passed out the green lane when I got a whack on my shoulder and turned to see this young brute squinting at me as though his life depended on it.

"Dad!" he says, "You're looking so, well, fit."

I hadn't expected anyone. I asked if he'd heard from his brother and if Ivy was happy.

"Happy? Yeah, same as ever," he said, adding that she had a couple of wins at the bingo. He did his usual head scratch and nose rub then out of nowhere he asks, "So what is it? Have you been working out? Got yourself a housemaid?"

My own son had me surprised, my own son so full of life and questions that all I could do was put him off asking, "What's the matter? Couldn't you sleep?"

"For about five hours, then I had to get up in the dark to come down here and meet you. Your plane was half an hour late."

I could hear Ivy from the doorstep before David told her I fell asleep on him after he'd gone 'all that way'.

"Blimey, look at you," she says to me, "You're healthy anyway. Must be doing you some good out there for all your complaining."

I gave her a peck on the cheek, a bottle of perfume from the plane and took myself upstairs. While I laid my head down, exhausted, she came wheezing up the stairs for some other perfume bottle. I lay there with my head heavy as though drowning in wax. I couldn't move while she went on talking to herself about how I'd bought this perfume before and how she had enough anyway and when I woke an hour later she was still going on about how I'd bought her this before, that it was a different name but the same scent, that she couldn't find the other but no matter because she didn't use it. Somewhere behind her David was calling, reminding me I'd asked to be woken. I opened the curtains on a leaden lifeless winter afternoon then ran a bath while greasy smells floated up from the kitchen. As soon as the water ran warm Ivy shouted that there was not enough for a bath and washing up at the same time. I pretended not to hear and said it was breakfast time for me. I only wanted bacon and egg. I lowered myself into that hot water like I did as a lad having his Friday night bath, my eyes closed deep in the warmth with everything brighter and the memory of her sighing "'s up to you" when I said I'd leave some day.

The water was cold when I woke. Searching among the soap and bottles she stacked like a doll's warehouse I couldn't find anything I knew and came out smelling a bit floral. I stood up too quickly, sending my old world into a black spin so that I came swaying out onto the landing, retching on the heavy kitchen smells.

"Your dinner's been on the table for an hour" she says, holding a piece of fruit cake big enough for four. "I hope you don't expect me to do anything with it."

“I can’t be doing with all this,” I said looking at this pile of grey meat.

“You like roast beef,” she says like it’s up to her.

I wanted to do my best while David reminded me that we had to meet one of his friends who’d been tramping around in the far-east. Before I could apologize she was in there with, “You’re impossible.” Can’t argue with that eh? David set a new time to meet and was out the door while she carried on shouting, more to herself than to me, ‘I don’t know why we have anything to do with you,’ and that sort of thing.

The Railway was empty. I’d been there two hours listening to the landlord tell me how the town was changing when David came in all angry with, ‘That wanker Dobbys.’ His friend hadn’t shown up and I can’t say I wasn’t glad. Things had picked up for David since he landed a machining job, precision stay at home work though he had to travel to Birmingham every day for it. He sipped his pint between talk of tool controls, lathes and the milling machines I used to work with. But I’d missed his point.

“We were scared of you then,” he said recalling the first times I was away, reminding me I’d been less a father than a man who came their house with these stories. He remembered me saying, ‘Nowt sae queer as folk,’ as if I’d been a Yorkshireman and told me his regrets over ‘all that stuff with the police’ though I never did get to the bottom of it. Through all this he was rummaging in his jacket until he took out this bit of newspaper, beaming like he held the Magna Carta. It was an advert for a job setting up machine tools and the like in Korea.

“I got the job.”

It was all I could do to whisper, “But you’ll never be home son.”

“Sure but what do you think? Dad?”

“I always told you,” I said, though I don’t know as I really said what I thought, “I always told you about respect for your friends and the people you’re with right now. Right here. Look at me. Why do you think I still come back here after thirty years?”

“Well it’s not for friendship dad. Take a look round.”

The place was empty so I don’t know what he meant. By the end of the week he was packed and gone. Must have been painful to Ivy. After tea by ourselves the night he left I put my hand on her shoulder.

“Well Ivy old girl, it’s just you and me now.” She said nothing and did nothing so I didn’t try. Next weekend when my taxi came I looked back and saw her through the window in front of the television, a plate of fruit cake on her lap. I’d just seen how unhappy she was. But how could I tell her?

For the second time in two weeks I was met at the airport, this time with the sight of Qim putting everything else behind me. My blood grew hot. My legs were weak and all the way back in the taxi I was about to come in my pants. By the time we got to the flat I couldn’t get the key in without dropping it, couldn’t turn the lock without jamming it and couldn’t open the door quick enough. I was like a colt in May and her all sweetness and marzipan. I woke after a twelve hour sleep, slack as a pat of butter and just as comfy. I lay there watching her, the way she ran a hand through her hair and flicked it over her shoulder and I knew something was up. She wanted to surprise me and wouldn’t say more than to be ready for Sunday.

When a Hu Corporation pick up arrived for us I was surprised to see the walnut faced old shadow boxer from the Construction Brigade driving it. She introduced him as Song Gong and we drove all the way to site then kept going, north. But there was nothing up there. The



road was no more than a track scraped off the hillside by running a grader along it. The first monsoon would see it washed away. We followed a side road all the way round on itself until the jungle fell away on either side of this ramshackle hovel like a tropical scout hut, in fact three huts, set together round a sort of 'H' shaped courtyard. Qim and Song Gong stood aside while I took the steps, treacherous slabs on loose bricks that would be washed away with the road. The timbers had been given a thin coat of white paint in one pass showing every brushstroke over the coarse board beneath and already stained with rust where the nail heads showed. When I pushed the board they showed even more. The front door hung ajar on uneven hinges and inside there was nothing, no partitions and no ceiling, just a bare concrete floor spattered with cheap paint. I wanted to leave. Whatever was going on I did not want to know but the old man broke the silence and when I heard her explaining that Mr Song wanted to know my thoughts, something snapped. She wanted me to buy it. They were in it together.

"Tell him it needs too much work before he can think about it," I said trying to let them down gently. She sucked her lip and gave me a look of concern. "A lot of work," I said, "Just tell him westerners would not be interested. I went inside, keeping out the way while they talked. The place had been an office at some time to judge by the array of electrical sockets. Except for an extra coat of paint and a ceiling the other units were no better, split in two rooms with a bathroom and a squat toilet. Old man Song was barking away when she called me. "Dah-ling," she said and I don't know where that came from, "Mr Song is worried you don't like the house. Mr Song say he can do more for good price but he not know what you want."

I wanted to shout that I didn't care about the price. His or hers. But it wasn't her fault I never had anything worth getting angry about. It got worse when I turned away. She was

telling me about the big garden Song had spent so much on. She said he knew westerners liked a big garden and she said he'd spent money on the house too. I opened the front door meaning to get away and stood there speechless at the view like I could breathe through my eyes. Beyond the bare red earth I looked out over trees and palm crowns onto a bay of white horses whipped in from the deeper blue sea beyond. I heard my voice as if it was someone else's complaining about the rough floors, the moving walls, the toilet and the rain that would wash his garden, my garden, into the sea along with half the mountain. As I told them all this the air grew brighter with a bank of pink and purple bougainvillea propping up the terrace I was going to rebuild. I could almost touch the glossy white clapboard walls and I knew exactly the terracotta tiles I would lay on the veranda. Most of all I saw the sea from right where I was going to live.

## Fourteen

### Prodigal Logic

Tyner yawned when his *TIP* logo came up on the screen as it had every day for the last two thousand. In all that time he barely slept, working while the thin walls of his apartment rattled with conflicts and copulation on either side. He put together his programmable logic, no longer noticing that the takeaway food cartons piling up in the kitchen smelled dangerous and as for a night out, he hadn't opened the door of his mouldy Chrysler for a month. After five years deep in his computer he imagined that sleep would be easier once the offer came through, but his dreams proved as unsettling as his nightmares. The deal brought visions, a penthouse, an underground garage for his Testarossa, an upstate ranch house for weekends and a boat in the Caribbean with an island to sail it round. He even dreamt of sharing it all with someone other than Calvin. Everything was bound to change after a hundred million dollar buyout.

Calvin was not his usual rounded self for their meeting. He drew up a list of charges, stabbing at each deduction with a manicured fingernail as though for punishment.

“In the first place the deal was ninety two million, four hundred and eighty six thousand, two hundred and twenty three dollars. I told you forty per cent commission is standard for Acquisitions. Then there's six million for the product licence. No certificate, no sale. And don't forget these numbers exclude installation.”

Of the money that so disturbed Tyner's sleep, one third was gone already and his partner accused him of being defensive. They spent the morning repeating the same facts in different orders. In one set of options the agent took the package as it stood, and more commission with it, paying outside consultants to do the installation. In the option Tyner wanted they took on the installation themselves, holding back two and a half million of the agent's fees.

"I thought we agreed. Let them take the risk."

"What for? All they do is fly out, plug in and play."

"And what if it goes wrong?" said Calvin reaching across the desk. "There could be hijacks or another revolution. You could be arrested or mugged before you get to the airport."

"Where's the problem? I buy a plane ticket, go over there and load the files."

"You're forgetting the penalties. It's a hundred thousand a day if you miss the deadline."

"At that rate I can lose a whole month without paying them a cent more."

Calvin could not be persuaded to take it on without some typically fussy preconditions. As well as digging out the Safety Study and verifying control algorithms one last time Tyner would build a mock-up of the panels, rehearsing the installation and wiring before he left. Calvin notified the takeover company, arranged the travel, spent a day choosing a butch aluminium case and making sure it carried a complete set of import papers along with the software package.

By the time Tyner was stretched out in business class above the clouds the job was half done. They landed, he was first on the transfer bus, and arrived in the baggage hall just as his case popped out on the carousel. Seeing the mob pushing through Customs, he edged to the side until a throat racking cough startled him. A leaden ball of spit shot past him, flecked with blood where it fell. A wooden faced Customs officer took a hand out his pocket, directing Tyner to a table. He lifted clothes, dropped them and pointed to the software. The

officer pulled out the system discs, betraying a flicker of pleasure. Tyner reached for the paperwork. The officer took it with everything in the case and disappeared behind a screen. In a few minutes he was back with a senior officer.

“Mr Tyner,” said the new officer.

“Pauling. The name is Tyner Pauling.”

“You must complete this form.”

Tyner bit his lip and reached in his pocket. “I can’t leave it here,” he said slapping the table with his hand on a twenty-dollar bill.

The officer looked from Tyner to the money, his almond eyes darkening. He seized the note, crumpled it in a ball and threw it on the ground.

“Please complete the form,” he said. “We have to run a few checks. You sign this receipt. You go.”

“But I need it.”

“Tomorrow. Bring your receipt.”

Tyner filled out the details adding a note of the discs and serial numbers.

There was no one in the arrivals hall to meet him as Calvin had arranged. He phoned the site, asked for a Mr Douglass and waited. The girl at the other end introduced herself as Lucy, told him that Douglass was not in and asked him to call later. He explained that he had been travelling for over a day. There was silence then a background voice talking about yesterday. Tyner suggested that Mr Douglass had forgotten to send a taxi.

“Mr Douglass not in,” said Lucy, “We send car yesterday.”

Tyner had to wait two hours for their driver, a Mr Zhang who drove as though he had never heard of the Communist party and treated the road as his own private property. They turned

off the airport road into a sea of bicycles, old fashioned things with thin wheels and fat sprung saddles gliding along through grainy brown smog like a sepia photograph. His driver held down the horn, plunged in and the cyclists moved aside, closing behind them like the wake of a ship. Men in boiler suits, some office workers, a child perched on handle bars, a woman in a flowing dress with a broad hat and lace gloves, they came streaming in from row upon row of doll's house shacks with scarcely room to walk the lanes between. At the end of the block was a small garden park in which people were practicing Tai Qi, playing with grandchildren, dancing or smoking and chatting while their caged birds sang. A bicycle repair man in a Mao cap sat on the kerbside over a basin of punctured inner tubes. They wriggled like a tub of eels as he snatched them out the way of the car and carried on under a collection of frames and wheel rims hanging from the tree above. Traffic bunched out on all sides as they came to a halt at a water tower. Two stationary steam locomotives were decked with red flags and belching clouds of smoke. A thousand bicycle riders passed them, clunking their way over railway sleepers. Through the steam and smoke came the silhouette of a tractor hauling hay until a withered old stick of a man emerged from the last wisps of smoke pedalling a load the size of a house. The tractor was a tricycle cart with a filthy tarpaulin holding a heap of plastic bottles for recycling at a rail-side yard of where garbage was sorted into useful heaps. Two small yellow taxis went hurrying through the smog as if to some brighter future before Tyner realised they were on a railroad crossing.

An eight-lane boulevard took them half a mile on before they were halted by a policewoman on points duty. She moved like a mannequin, eyes left above her mask, half turn and signal until a passing cyclist caught her eye then a moment's remonstrance before she sent the offender to take his place at the kerbside, hanging his head while he lifted up a white flag with writing on it that might have read 'Enemy of the people'. Meanwhile traffic

broke across the junction from right and left in one opportunist stampede to jam the whole intersection. They were stuck at a single junction, grid-locked on a point. While they waited, stuck at a single junction, grid locked on a point, Tyner's driver took the opportunity to open a jar of green tea that looked and smelt like pondweed. A police car arrived. Two men with megaphones waded among the bicycles, flailing arms as though treading water and half an hour later the traffic began to move. At the next junction a mule had been hit and lay bleeding in the road, still harnessed to a spilled cartload of broken bricks. Its driver argued fiercely with a policeman while the animal's hooves pawed the air, still trying to pull its cart despite the open wound through which bowels spilt across the road like strings of waxy pearls. Tyner shut his eyes. Half an hour later he woke in yet another country where the arc of a new highway swept down to a tropical bay with a monolith of a building standing on the shoreline as clean as a block of American cheese.

At the gate he showed the security guard the papers that Calvin had prepared for him and was directed a suite of cabins. A Chinese receptionist with bad teeth and a home-cut bob kept him waiting. He would have complained except that when he looked through his itinerary it showed he was a day late in arrival. Calvin had not included the change of date when allowing for the journey time.

Their Construction Manager Douglass came to meet him, a man driven by fierce blue eyed energy. He had a firm handshake and spoke warmly of how he was glad to meet the real thing instead of the usual consultants. Douglass left instructions not to be disturbed unless it was urgent. They adjourned to an office and before he sat down they were interrupted by a call from Japan. Douglass apologized. After the call he explained everything was now a priority and Tyner sat back in a hundred million dollar glow listening to anecdotes of failure, wrong spec numbers, failed payments, lost deliveries. In minutes when another call informed

Douglass that an engineer had been admitted to hospital he said he wanted the diagnosis, not logistics. A call from Beijing was put on hold and suddenly Douglass's anecdotes featured Tyner. What exactly had he sold them for that money? How did it fit into the deadline? Who might bear any penalties? Tyner felt ready to lie in order to protect himself against this blue-eyed radiation. He cleared his throat to explain the customs incident and showed Douglass the receipt with an assurance that he would have his case in the morning. "Just so long as we turn over the generator at month end," said Douglass and called in their controls engineer. Paul was young, almost the same age as Tyner and carried everything his craft could use: a bandolier of screw drivers, bright yellow safety boots, a squawking walkie-talkie with winking green lights and a constant red on his test meter. He did everything in quick bird-like movements, including shaving to judge by the dried blood on his chin.

"So this company we're paying a hundred million for is yours?"

Before Tyner could say 'overheads' Paul was walking away down the fence line ahead of him. Over the fence men were chipping away the earthworks, a thousand of them labouring away with picks and bamboo baskets as if a town had been put to work in a chain gang. The heat left Tyner breathless, blinking at tents where men slept among jagged piles of scrap, an open canteen sharing the air with flies from the foul water alongside. A man with a body like copper wire filled a bowl from a standpipe and splashed water over himself while a line of naked men squatted behind him waiting for their turn.

"Night shift," said Paul as if this explained everything.

Tyner stopped below the four storey high access doors and peered inside just enough to see the huge turbine casings lying there like some recumbent Gulliver under the arc lights. Above them the building disappeared in three hundred feet of darkness while under the glaring lights he sensed fear of the nine hundred million watt creature he was about to waken.



He had lost sight of Paul, now far ahead, running up a steel gantry outside the block of offices that formed the entire end wall of the building. Half hidden forms came out of the darkness as Tyner puffed his way up past an arsenal of pressure vessels and girders trying to catch what Paul was shouting to him.

“No lift.”

Above him he could see Paul through the grating but he could not see any grating under him for the caustic brightness of the turbine floor with its tiny figures and the turbine casings lying far below like some recumbent Gulliver. Paul leant on a scaffold rail outside the control room overlooking the scene that Tyner’s *TIP* package would control. Paul pointed out a pipe rack running over some salty stains on the concrete below. He explained there had been a setback the week before when a fitter was killed, making off pipe flanges when a welding rod fell through two hundred and twenty feet of grating to pierce his hardhat.

“He was finishing up too, due home tomorrow. Come on we’re in here,” said Paul disappearing through a portal in the concrete wall. Until this moment Tyner imagined himself at a control desk surrounded by clean well lit mimic panels a whole room dedicated to the status of every switch, pump and valve, a theatre that his program would eventually replace. He would sit down saying something like, ‘Ready when you are.’ But not in this hole. Here and there a bare bulb lit passages with coil upon coil of technicolour cables suspended in bunches from the ceiling and piled on the floor, a turmoil of men cursing shadows with Chinese or vernacular English, it was hard to tell. The place was a living blackness, as if he’d fallen inside the nest of some alien insect burrowing among PVC tree roots. If this was the control room Tyner wanted nothing to do with it. He backed out onto the platform, shut his eyes and clung to the rail. Paul called his name. Everyone inside was calling something.

“You’ve nothing ready,” he said when Paul joined him.

“It’s not going to happen in there. You can use the local controls down there beside the Turbine but we have to rig jump wires and patch out the auxiliaries first. There’s still one piece of kit to arrive and we can’t wait so as soon as you download your puzzle package we’ll be ready. Next Friday?”

Back down on the Turbine platform the Lilliputians became full sized maniacs rushing past with some fragment or other of the machine. Again Tyner lost sight of Paul until he reappeared on the gantry bridging the Turbine, waving his arms and shouting like some mad orator, “We can run everything from here. This will be your control room.”

On the gantry was a desk with a bank of switches, a screen and a row of low panels along one side, a repeat of the control room desk for emergencies.

“Just as well you’re here. I’m the only one who understands how complicated this has gotten.” Paul looked at him sideways, pointing to an empty space where some Chinese fitters arguing over a drawing.

“That’s where our titanium chiller will go. We have that crane standing by. As soon as it gets here we bolt it down then everyone will be looking to your box of tricks.”

“But you can’t guarantee any of this,” said Tyner.

Paul pointed down at a gang of forty men hauling cables, their shirts shining with sweat.

“We have a guarantee from these people working twelve hours a day seven days a week. But when you’re up all night commissioning some valve that’s got it’s wires crossed you won’t really care.”

“I’m telling you it’s not my problem,” Tyner insisted.

“It will be if I close the bars on a billion watt short circuit. What do you expect for your hundred million dollars?”

“Give me four hours, once you’re ready,” said Tyner staring the length of the Turbine at the prospect of controlling a small atomic bomb.

The next day Tyner’s picked up his software case. Paul’s cables were not ready. With Tyner at the local panel and Paul in the control room they worked all day and late into the night, voices squelching over the walkie-talkie as they looped out the main controls. In all that time Paul never complained about the work but he did seem more interested in a trip to the beach that he was missing out on. The work continued with little sleep and a deadline that was fast becoming unlikely. Part of Tyner’s problem was that the mock-up he rehearsed with had used full-sized panels like those in the control room, but were twice the height of the low level ones he was connecting on the gantry. That meant he had twice the possibility to cross wires and found himself re-thinking every action, double-checking tags, making a note of each temporary cable and marking the corrected block for each connection. It was work saturated with error checks, work he could do in his sleep. It was also work that he could not stop doing when he slept. Worse, in a less than guarded canteen moment he boasted that he could talk to machines, earning himself the nickname Doctor Doolittle.

The day before switch-on Tyner waited for the final connections confirming that any faults were either gone or patched out. At the far end of the hall the picture window of the control room shone with an obscene glow and little gems of light. The radio squawked. In fifteen minutes the local panel would be live or, as Paul put it, ready for them to go to the beach. Tyner began loading discs, frowning as he prepared to call up the systems. But his program would not load.

“It’ll be here tomorrow,” said Paul after half an hour. “Let’s go to Nan Ao, you said yourself it’ll take four hours to load.”

The trail to Nan Ao wound followed a shoreline of turquoise coves, white sand and black rock with slopes rising steep into the thick forests above them. Each bay seemed to be missing a resort hotel. Instead they left the pickup and walked over the ridge to a cool space below a big Banyan tree overlooking the next bay. Beside it was a corrugated iron shack with a clattering generator and a veranda decked out with a string of bare lamps like candles in the sun. A group of westerners sat arguing round a plastic table while at the side of the hut children watched television. Someone called for more beer and two girls came out in cotton shirts that scarcely reached their thighs. Tyner sat by the tree, leaned back and closed his eyes as cable tags seemed to glitter inside his eyelids. He fell asleep, dozing until the generator sputtered and stopped leaving them surrounded by the insect hum of the forest. He opened his eyes to find a little girl beside him with full lips and eyes that twinkled as if she was about to tell him the funniest joke in Nan Ao. Paul ordered more drinks and Tyner put money on the table. The girl smiled broadly, her small knuckles whitening when she gripped the glass. She asked Tyner his name but when she could say no more in English he found himself falling through layers of silence, barely recognising the westerners around him as colleagues. He heard their voice concerns that featured himself more than he expected, people threatened by company acquisitions and asset stripping among huge sums of capital or, as their logistics expert Pearce said of it, all that money 'sloshing about' for the likes of Doctor Doolittle. Pearce put on a classy English sulk about Chinese Customs, claiming they were acting against him personally because they cleared every shipment except the one he wanted and complaining about Douglass who, in Pearce's opinion, only came to Nan Ao to show he could be human. 'One drink then off back to the wife and kids.' He nodded at the little girl beside Tyner. 'So who's this you've got?' he said to no one in particular, sliding his

hand up the girl's thigh and keeping it there. Suddenly he rolled his eyes and cursed as Douglass came into the clearing.

"Another sunny day," said Douglass taking them in with a nod. He bought drinks all round then asked Pearce when the chiller was arriving.

"Should be next week." Pearce shifted in his seat. "You know how it is. I'm down there every day."

"Let me put it another way Mike. There are twelve hundred and sixty people on this site that know exactly how it is. There's another twenty million up the delta and as soon as they know there'll be another billion people waiting to hear from you. What do you think I should tell them?"

Pearce avoided the question by speaking of other people's preparations for the last item to arrive.

"So everything's ready. I can go ahead with this banquet?" Douglass asked and rose to leave saying, as if he had just noticed the girl on Tyner's lap, "You seem to be settling in alright."

On the day of the celebration banquet Tyner was half way through reloading the software when his programme stuck. A quick check behind the panel revealed his temporary connections were wrong, wired according to his ill-matched mock-up. Paul came by then took an early lunch while Tyner re-wired and re-loaded. He was still struggling to call up his system when Paul dropped by to call him away to the banquet. There was no time for more checks.

"If I were you," said Paul, "I'd keep quiet, come back early and re-load."

The banquet hall was set up in a windowless hall with a ring of tables round a plastic resin fountain that sounded like a leaky tap in a garage. Douglass showed Tyner to the top table beside some grim cadres, their interpreter and an elder of the Power Authority, Director Wang, who looked as if he ran a library. A fussy waitress shifted beer in front of them and Tyner drank. She topped up his glass and brought a tray of shot glasses. They raised their drinks for the toast, then lowered them in customary humility as Director Wang led a bottoms up chorus, *Gan Bei!* Tyner tried to follow Director Wang's slow and earnest English as he spoke about the Chinese alcohol. It left the impression he had just sucked flames through petrol and he could not understand more than one word at a time of whatever Wang meant to say.

"Trust," the interpreter intervened, "Director Wang says trust is important for drinking." Wang's explanation included a list of poets, generals and famous Chinese drinkers until the point was lost with the arrival of savoury toasts and tempura vegetables. Tyner attacked the nearest plates, emptying them before the odd textured dishes that followed, jellied flakes of ham, crabs, chilli beef and small white meats like beans, each dish toasted round the table with shots of white spirit that by now seemed to melt the food in his mouth. Tyner was draining an extra glass when the interest of the table turned to a man in kitchen whites carrying something towards them.

"A snake! It's a snake," said Tyner.

The cook presented the creature to them at eye level, holding it in a pair of tongs. Waves of polished brown scales rippled along its flanks. Its insect tongue flickered and smart beady eyes surveyed the diners as if they were on its menu.

"It's not poisonous," said Tyner, "Is it?"

"Very poisonous." Director Wang said with enthusiasm, "Very delicious."

The cook brought another pair of tongs up behind the snake, gripping it a couple of inches from the tail while the waitress stood by with a cup and shears. While the cook held the snake vertical she snipped off the tail tip and caught the blood in her cup. In a few minutes the cup was half full and the creature limp. With the precision of a lab technician the waitress divided the blood between glasses, except for Tyner's. Seeing he kept a hand over his glass she asked a question to which he nodded agreement. Snake blood was not for him. With the snake gone she added equal amounts of spirit to each glass, curdling the dull red liquid into a flaky pink snowstorm before leaving the table to a burst of applause. In a moment she was back with another cup, this one holding a tiny amount of clear liquid, which she placed in front of Tyner. Adding a few drops of white spirit turned the glass emerald green and Tyner threw it back in the now customary style. The liquor shrank his throat, parched his tongue and took away his breath leaving a shrill green warmth in his gullet that made him queasy. The cadres smiled, nodding approval. Later he remembered Director Wang looking at him over a pyramid of dishes, complimenting his choice. Then came a marvellous rush on his senses. He no longer followed the conversation. When the cadres laughed he asked why. Wang explained they were discussing economic plans and the future significance of Tyner's work.

*"Qi lu wang yang,"* they repeated.

"Like a lamb at the cross roads. So many paths." Wang explained that Yang Zi had used the words when a single lamb could not be found despite turning out all the villagers of a district to search.

"So this Yang Zi works for the Power Authority?" Tyner asked.

"He died two thousand years ago but when we have one objective and many paths we are like his lamb among cross roads."

“It’s like... I don’t know what it’s like.”

The cadres laughed. Tyner also laughed and forgot what he’d been asking when a dish of brown stew arrived. He would have eaten more except that the interpreter told him they were pleased to see a westerner enjoying Chinese food like the pig’s ears, duck tongues and the snake although this one was very chewy. His complexion paled to lard and then as green as his glass of snake bile. Some alien organ under his ribs threatened to burst his gut as he rose from the table with his hand over his mouth, spewing through his fingers as he fell toward the tinkling fountain.

Tyner walked past the nail-pickers with his head down. Inside the turbine hall the engineers were up on the mezzanine clustered round the control panels. The screen was already showing his *TIP* logo. Four hours later it was still showing his logo when the first error message came up. Later that evening Calvin broke the news in an extraordinarily calm voice. But his idea of a virus was preposterous.

“Sure they got problems,” said Calvin, “And if they haven’t they’ll invent some.”

“But it’s in their interest for us to fail! Their stuff is late. They’re using us as patsies.”

“Let’s be clear. It’s not working. Anyway now that you can’t install the software it’s not a delay anymore it’s damages. And that’s millions. They can buy us out just by writing off our debts.”

“But you handle the contracts. How come suddenly it’s my fault?”

“What can I say? There’s a virus. It’s not easy when they tell me you’re whoring on the beach and throwing up at their banquet.”

The doors burst open as a posse of engineers came in arguing about a one hundred million dollar virus. Above the noise Pearce could be heard saying that it would make no difference



where the controls were run from. “They’re like syphilis. Every piece of software that Customs checks gets a virus.”

For a long time Tyner sat at the control desk with his hands on either side of the keyboard before he entered a command to format the drive removing every trace of his programme then, with a hollow smile he made his way down the gantry past the salty stains on the concrete.

## Fifteen

Neville Marlow

Gliding along these broad avenues between shiny metal factories you have to look harder for poverty or bicycles never mind the old dignity. It looked as if a big child had laid out some building blocks but didn't know what to do with them. I don't know what she made of them flying their company banners between her five star flag of China and those of Japan or the US, Germany, Britain or Korea. I have to push myself to remember any paddy fields here. When I asked she had nothing to say. At home I felt like a father trying to introduce her to the outside world. Even the garden was beyond her. She didn't know what I was talking about until we stood together on Song's old foundations and I could sketch it for her, a pyramid opening out to the veranda from the new front door with a couple of loungers either side and a terrace with steps leading down to the rye grass lawn that she seemed to think of as English paddy. It looked nice but you couldn't eat it. 's up to you,' she said. We had no power or water, no drainage or kitchen but once I had the water flume I dug a pit to leach the sewage then got stuck into contouring my garden. After a lifetime setting out machines within a thousandth of an inch I had a digger scraping land by the ton and thinking, 'This is what I want. This is how I want it.'

It wasn't easy for us getting the ditches dug and the timber roughed. One time I came back from work and thought I found her hiding a letter but when I saw she had my garden sketch I used it to draw in the plans I had. The new hotel let me have enough off-cuts of teak to cover the veranda and a pair sun loungers they rejected for a few scratches. I bought terracotta flagstones for the terrace and the broad steps laid down to the new lawn. In a couple of months we could sit looking out to sea with nothing between but palm crowns and the first blossoms of purple pink bougainvillea beyond anything my father could have imagined.

After work I'd come home to drop on the lounge and she'd come out with her sandals flip flopping on the veranda wearing little more'n a sarong, ice tinkling in the gin she'd pass to me before taking off my boots and fetching a basin of water to wash my feet. She'd work my legs all the way along, my arms, my neck and shoulders, easing away the knots through and up to the crown of my head with a last flourish that lifted my scalp. Then we'd go inside. She did everything for me she did, everything, and with that you can do anything. I found ideas coming one after the other but she didn't understand. Like what it meant to have pineapples in my garden, a real version of the ornaments cut in stone on the terrace of Priors Marston manor, a fruit the old man used to bring to the table in a tin as a Christmas treat. I chose exactly the place, one to either side of the steps with their spiky leaves spiralling down to the fruit. The local lads she brought in for weeding and drudge work already thought big noses were stupid and to prove it here was I, a rich foreigner, working as a peasant in his own garden. They told her pineapples took more work and water than any other plant and all this for just one fruit at a time. But I could take my pick, leaving the spade work to them while I was out there pruning, dead heading or checking for bugs or disease. I'd be in the garden until dusk with the evening bird song filling the jungle. I got to know them, listening out for that bird that flitted across my path the night of the full moon festival, hearing its two sliding

notes bouncing round the mountains as if it was meant just for me. I'd spent twenty years looking to come home from a day's work and set to in my own patch of green. It came on quick, like catching up lost time until I got close on my target to have something blooming in my garden all year round.

I used to invite the lads over for a barbecue but after couple of weekends there were folk inviting themselves from all over. They'd turn up like they needed a warrant and then stand gawping across at the Long Wo, the causeway and the new hotel over the bay. Alan Douglass came with his wife. She always was sort of superior but I would have liked her to be friends with Qim, specially before the troubles. Anyway she had friends among the ex-pats and never came back.

Villages, whole communes up the delta were now in the new industrial zone. The international hotel had already grown shabby and they were re-commissioning factories for products that didn't exist when I was last home. I knew more people here than I did in England. Ex-pats were pouring in to work on the airport extension, more factories, highways, hotels and precincts. People from America, Korea, Japan and Germany, they all paid me a visit sooner or later. The newest hotels were a bit grand. Gold plated bath taps, hardwood doors and full lead crystal chandeliers in the lobbies. The construction manager for the latest hotel came to me ranting about a fitter who stood on a broken tile in a new bath, writing off a five thousand dollar spa. When he offered it to me I told him it drew more power than the lawn mower engine I used to generate all the electricity in the house. But ideas came like footsteps and when this American from the micro-chip plant told me the authorities condemned his emergency generator as unsafe, he said he'd rather give it away than let some crooked bureaucrat get their hands on it. So I went over with a truck and brought back my own little power station, a pair of generators complete with fuel tank, spares and tools,

enough to power a commune never mind my five thousand dollar spa. But if the bath wasn't running there was more power from one idling generator than I could use in the whole place. So I extended the lights onto the veranda and round the garden. I built a lean-to out the back, lined it with insulation, installed a chiller and set up a cold store with a bypass duct to send cool air into the house. I didn't need it but like I said, my plans came like one foot in front of another.

I had this idea to grow vegetables out the back. On the day I came back from work with sketches and sizes marked out ready for raised beds, the gardeners had left. I was early but there was no one there. She would've said if she was going to town, unless there'd been an accident. I walked around with my boots like mallets on the teak veranda, wondering where on earth she could be.

In the front room my things were collected to one side, British papers stacked by the magazine collection. Everything was neat, everything tidy. Her stuff was gone. In the bedroom the last wash lay pressed and folded on the bed, all of it mine. I had a lot of clothes. They were so cheap that I was going to buy extra suitcases to store them. But none of her clothes were to be seen. The little vanity box was missing. I looked in the cupboard where my cold weather clothes hung beside the suits and a row of dress shirts. There was nothing there of hers. The spare bedroom was empty; the kitchen spotless. There was nothing to show that she'd ever been here. I went back to the veranda and began again, darting from room to room for a trace of my girl and angry at the sound of my own footsteps. My head was spinning as I bent down to take off my boots, thinking how she must have been fed up to the back of her little white teeth with all this.

I sat looking out over my Shangri-la, remembering old Song Gong that I'd bought the place from, vanished without a trace and with the work finished, like a reflection of myself.

Whatever I'd done, what if I left? What then? Within a year creepers would choke the bougainvillea, the lawn would be overgrown and trees would root under the terrace, throwing a new canopy over the lot. After the first Typhoon blew under the flashings the walls would soak up rain like blotting paper. The house would rot through. She'd been gone a day and already there was no place for me here.

All round me were little projects that already needed more attention, the paintwork, swollen timber cracking here and there, the sludge tank vent I should have put in at the start. The sun was setting on my turmoil of half-realised dreams, flaring neon pink against the palm crowns as the evening chorus came on, filling the jungle and the mountains behind. Earlier than usual I heard the two noted bird call that first came to me the night of the full moon festival sounding 'What now.' I'd since discovered that what I heard was a pair, each bird singing a note for the other. I remembered Qim explaining this to me just after she received a letter from Beijing. When I asked who it was from she used it to explain her language through the postmark by sketching a man in the shade and showing me the characters, *Bei* for north like a man in the shade of a tree, the north side. I forgot to ask about the letter inside.

With nightfall the birdsong slowed to a halt, the insect drone took over and with it, a complete darkness in which I remembered my stash of dollars. Whenever I bought them on the black market, four or five thousand at a time, I would hide them in the switch cupboard behind the kitchen door. I put the lights on to check and found the cupboard blocked by a package she had put together, wrapped in newspaper and tied with string. I slid it out the way and reached in to find the envelopes still there, folded exactly as I left them. I took out the packets and was checking the notes when I heard someone on the back steps and she was there in the doorway looking at me holding this money. I got up and put my arms round her, speaking into her hair while I held her close. Then I felt her hand gently push me away.

“Today is special day,” she whispered.

I winced, caught between a burst of joy and the far off explaining I’d have for my sons, for David anyway, about a little brother or sister.

“Whatever you want,” I said. But there was something else.

“I have question,” she says when all I wanted was to hold her. “Today is twelve months. You want me stay, I happy. You want me go, I go. I stay twelve months now.” This was her way of explaining that by staying here for another day she’d have marital rights as a twelve month wife. She pointed at the box by the door, the box I’d moved aside. All her belongings were already packed.

“’s up to you,” she said as if I could do anything I wanted.

## Sixteen

### Achilles and the Tortoise

For some reason the old stores office was a half mile cycle ride from the 'new' New Office where Pearce had set up the *Holistor* system. He received a small fortune for two weeks work to install the package and four years later he was still looking after it, the holistic logistics and storage system of its day. As he said to Douglass when he arrived:

"I have everything you need to know, who ordered what, the day they requisitioned it, when it's needed, the system number, the plant number; I know the payments made, the packing notes, the airway number, the payments due and whether it's shipped or duty paid."

In short the right equipment in the right place at the right time. When he set up the system up and had it running in two weeks there was nothing on site to prove him wrong. Now that 'everything' had arrived it took two weeks to find anything else.

Pearce had made his updates, run his backup and was cycling back to his office before the heat rose. He made himself a coffee, took out his personal files and for the fourth time that week he checked the trust prices for earnings he had tucked away in Maga Investments. Maga had done well but not enough to match the expectations Pearce had pushed ahead of him, like the frothy bow wave of a tug towing a barge. Now it was coming to an end he had taken out his CV to revise his latest achievements when Paul interrupted.

"Douglass wants to know about this bloody chiller," said the controls engineer.

"Don't we all," said Pearce without looking up. "It's only due this week and let's face it you're not ready."



“Even if you had it here now I’ve still got another month’s hard graft.”

Pearce shrugged. “Everything has slipped.”

“It’s not as if Douglass hates you,” said Paul apropos of nothing, “he just wants to cut off that silly moustache.”

Pearce finished updating his CV and blew fiercely through his moustache as he prepared his report for Douglass. Despite six years of boarding school baiting he found himself vulnerable to the psychometric torpedoes Douglass fired at him. Pearce was on record as criticising the Construction Manager, to anyone who cared to listen, for a failure to appreciate what he described as his ‘holistic approach’.

Before Pearce could add new data he was interrupted by three engineers, one looking for a spare instrument, another changing a wrongly specified transducer and yet another to replace a stolen pump motor. It was lunch time before Pearce got back to the report, twenty four facts beginning with a drawing number and ending with a site location. For Douglass’ benefit he added a note, ‘Crane on order,’ to demonstrate that he was keeping ahead. He then set about ordering one. The crane booking needed a firm date and more shipping checks. Pearce added Customs clearance for a pro forma invoice, a packing list, bill of lading, import certificate, dates for ex-works, in-port, free-on-board, customs clearance and due contract date, checking each item against the predicted arrival in his yard. He added copies of the more essential papers and went back to work on a stack of problem papers that accounts had passed to him. He phoned the invoice clerk, telling him to cancel payment on a batch of faulty meters, to hold payment on a short spares delivery and passed the rest, taking the opportunity to ask the clerk when the payment for the chiller had been made.

“The cheque has gone,” said the clerk.

Pearce heard a nano-pause and asked the question again, this time wanting to know exactly when the money had gone into the supplier's account.

"You'll have to ask them," said the clerk. "Ask purchasing,"

After a quick lunch he came in to find the expediting report back on his desk, crossed through from corner to corner with two parallel lines and one of Douglass's torpedoes, the words 'Whats this?' written between.

Pearce put all his other papers to one side, got on his bike and cycled the half mile to the new New Office.

"It's all here," said Pearce holding up a thick file with the report on top.

"This is not the bloody publishing industry," said Douglass, looking at Pearce as if he was too tired to be angry. "I asked you when it will be here and you give me this fucking encyclopedia."

Back in his office there was a message from the buyer, 'Cheque received. Will start manufacture as soon as funds clear.'

Pearce's headache was becoming almost audible, tense hyper-sonic whine of a billion dollars going nowhere. He swallowed hard and told Douglass about the late payment.

"You mean late delivery," said Douglass.

"Ultimately yes. We could try bringing it forwards. You know, pay them a premium to work extra hours."

"You mean you haven't tried?"

When Pearce did try he shortened the delivery by two weeks. He did not mention the fifty per cent surcharge.

Pearce asked the shipping agent who the haulier was and whether or not a heavy load permit was needed. He wanted to know the moment their truck left the factory gate, when it

arrived at the dock and every detail down to the name of the ship that carried it. But the agent already knew.

“It’s the same ship every two weeks. By the time your load leaves the factory it will have sailed. The return voyage is two weeks later.”

There was one other vessel sailing, a week later to Shanghai from where the chiller could be sent on by rail. But with a day or two at the railhead and five more clearing customs, the agent could do nothing to improve delivery. It would arrive the same day as by the direct route.

“Then make it Shanghai. We’ll have to clear faster.”

A week before the works test was due Pearce ordered an early payment.

“Cannot,” said the buyer. He explained that money could not be paid outside China’s closed economy without evidence that some kind of purchase had been transacted, a copy of the test results at least. And there was more. Pearce’s moustache bristled like an unruly caterpillar as lowered himself into his swivel chair.

“An export what? It’s just an application right?”

They threw words about like stones for half the day before Pearce put the phone down and began applying for a Japanese export license. He used his best private school manner to make another call, several Wan Chai floors above his buyer to a Mr Chang who explained what was needed for a the license, a list of eighteen documents to be accompanied by translations, stamped and signed by attorneys for the certification of everything from mapped plant locations to three years of trading accounts, engineering drawings to organization charts, and all under cover of a particular form of letter. Stapled documents were not acceptable.

By the time Pearce collected the papers from the attorney he had not slept for nine days. He still needed a meticulous cover letter stating what the unit was for, that it would never be used for any other purpose, that it would not be used for weapons of mass destruction and never be replicated or transferred to a third party. It still needed a signature from Douglass.

“Just a formality,” said Pearce slipping the letter on Douglass’ desk.

“Ex-works tomorrow?”

“On the way.”

Douglass scanned him with polygraph eyes.

“They use it in the nuclear industry,” said Pearce, “Titanium spec and triple sealed.”

Pearce took the letter with a steely taste in his mouth and his sphincter twitching.

The missing unit was a tune that everyone knew but each whistled their own way. A mechanic wanted its revised flange drawings, an electrician was missing details of its power connections and when Paul came for the latest wiring diagram he found it necessary to add that he did not want any more toffee nosed guesswork. Pearce ignored this latest interruption to take a call from the agent. The ship had docked in Shanghai.

“Should be ready to clear in the next two or three days,” Pearce announced.

Next morning the agent called again, telling Pearce the unit was free on the dockside and later that day reported it was at the railhead ready to go. With everything back under control Pearce made plans to leave early and catch up on his sleep when he took another call, this time from the local Customs Office intent on making an inspection.

Two customs officers arrived, serious young men with hair over their ears and neat leather jackets that would have been fashionable in a seventies television series. Pearce made a show of hospitality, setting up a desk with Long Jin tea, hot water and regular visits from the canteen manager. By mid morning a low loader truck should have arrived from the rail head.

By lunch time they were still waiting. In the afternoon Pearce took them out to inspect the void where the chiller would fit. Pipe flanges were lined up waiting for connection, cables were ready coiled beside the crane with its driver asleep in the cab. The officers went back to their desk for fresh tea and an animated half hour on the phone. Pearce tried several times to interrupt their Chinese conversation through his interpreter before the customs men left. They could not say whether or not the unit was on its way but the railhead truck at this end had not loaded. The train itself had not arrived. Despite their phone call to Shanghai customs, the local inspectors could not or would not say if it had left Shanghai.

Douglass caught up with Pearce on his way to the old New Office.

“You didn’t say you shipped it by rail.”

“We’d have been two weeks late otherwise,” Pearce lied.

“You do realize there’s nothing moving by train? This isn’t just Tiananmen.”

Pearce sent the crane away and spent the night waiting for a phone call to confirm that their London insurance included cover against acts of war and civil unrest.

## Seventeen

Neville Marlow

One night after another I didn't sleep so much as collapse for a couple of hours, exhausted under the weight of a billion dollars. Every night should have been better but in the morning it was all there: the controls wonky, the boiler steam too wet, instruments blown, couplings rattling and spares running out faster than Pearce could replace them. But none of it was new. I used to deal with this all the time before their new business malarkey, the Global Business Strategy as Arnold Saint-Clair called it after the take-over.

While I got on with my snag list Pearce was ranting about the students who were holding up his deliveries from airports, docksides or goods yards up and down the country.

But it wasn't that simple. The air was thick with rumours of hi-jacked trains, blocked roads and government offices barricaded. When Pearce's chiller was five weeks late Douglass got me a copy of the foundation template to set the bolts, the pipework, the instrument cables, all run in place and a crane on standby. We had it picked straight off the truck, bolted down and connected quick enough to recover four of the five lost weeks so I was surprised to see Douglass getting himself worked up.

I was coming down off the gantry after a job well done when I heard my name shouted like it belonged to someone else. Then I saw Douglass striding along the turbine floor towards me. "A word," he said right stiffly, asking me for a promise of secrecy. I followed him all the way to his office without a word between us until he shut the door like he had to announce capital punishment. We're in danger, he said, of slackening our operating

procedures and suggested I check the manuals for Standard Operating Procedures 43.7.5. Now details like that are over my head but I'd been around enough to know section 43 was for close-outs.

"I don't want a fuss," said Douglass, his palms down for calm. "I don't know what your plans are but come and see me when you've thought it through. In fact whatever your plans are come and see me, at my place."

He waved at the files and once he'd left I pulled out section 43. It did deal with close-outs, section 7 for 'Cessation of Work' and the first line of 43.7.5: In the event an emergency evacuation should be called for...

Douglass had a place in a neat row of villas that had sprung up in the commuter belt. I was relieved to see him answer the door himself and glad Mrs Douglass was not at home. The place had an empty feel with none of the trimmings I'd expect his wife to surround her family with. There were no pictures on the walls, no rugs or vases or the local knick-knacks ex-pats usually pick up. He had the World Service on short wave, drifting in and out while he spread CDs over the dining table, packing them into four or five red wood boxes, each a yard long. He explained these were 'tobacco boxes' his girls used to store all the pirate CDs they brought back from the market they knew as 'smelly alley'. His wife had bought these antique boxes to store them before she discovered they were made to carry the paraphernalia of opium smoking, since when she referred to them as tobacco boxes.

"Pirate opium in, pirate CDs out," said I watching Douglass pace the room.

"I'd offer you a drink Neville but you might be better keeping a clear head. I don't want the panic I had on my last job. I have my family to think of. I've asked to get out. It so happens the girls are away with their mother but as you see I'm preparing for bad news. The

thing is if we do anything before the word is official then we lose the contract, the close-out money and we lose twice as much again in penalties. If we wait for an official 'get-out' we can claim insurance and lose the penalties but by then it may be too late."

I might have reached a different decision if I'd gone back to Kim that night. But I didn't. I learned that Mrs Douglass was already in Beijing with their daughters visiting a friend of the family. Douglass had phoned the embassy each morning for the past three days but heard nothing from his wife. He got up to make a cup of tea but the phone rang before he could find my sugar. He looked at his watch, cursing as he picked up the phone. It was his daily call from Tate.

"I can't tell you. What I need is a decision... I know, but the embassy say the same thing every day, exactly the same. They don't want to be seen taking sides... I know about insurance damn it. But are you going to add my girls to the claim if they get caught in the crossfire?... Yes of course I'll call the embassy tomorrow."

I'd never seen him like this. He threw down the phone and sat with a hand to his eyes as though in pain.

"He won't pull us out unless we're insured. I get this every day, the same every day exactly the same. But I just told you that didn't I? I need a beer to clear my head."

We went through to the kitchen, a showroom of a place with enough marble to line a small quarry. On the fridge was a dotty array of alphabet magnets, postcards and family photos stuck there by his children. Douglas handed me a beer and one of the postcards, a Chinese fortress on the Great Wall.

"Do you know this Jiayuguan? The strongest fort on the Great Wall and built with special bricks and mortar. They put rice paste in the mortar and it lasts longer than anything we use today. Every single brick was fired for twelve days at 1250 degrees. The man who built it



calculated he needed 637,429 bricks but the court eunuchs wanted to know how many he had allowed for spares and breakages. Instead of telling them where to go he asked for 637,430, one extra brick. When the job was finished he left one unused brick lying on the wall. That was 700 years ago. So Neville, I don't know what you've planned but you're going to need more than an extra brick."

I had no plan. I never thought I'd need one until I arrived on site next morning to find two PSB men talking to our security guards and my mind was made up for me. I reached Douglass's office in time for his call to the Embassy. He had his evacuation letter ready in front of him with lists of data on sabotaged transport, labour unrest and stupid headlines.

"I know this by heart," said Douglass picking up the phone. I've re-written it so many times in the past three weeks. What they're going to tell me is, 'Her Majesty's Government has no special guidelines for British subjects in the People's Republic of China.' Anyway here we go."

He set the letter between us and made the call on conference. The phone rang for a long time.

"*Wei?*"

"Is that the British Embassy?" asked Douglass.

"*Dui, dui.* British Embassy."

"Can I speak to the consul?"

"*Mei you.* Everybody gone."

"Then who are you?"

"No one. I clean office."

Douglass ended the call and took his 43.7.5 letter to the copier where he set it to run two hundred prints.

## Eighteen

### Opening the Gate

Wang Hong would have to let his cousin wait while, for the fourth time, he phoned about the job. He put the phone down again when a Miandi cab lurched through the gates and Ang came out shouting at him to hurry. Another surprise mission. Wang asked if they were going far and was told, 'I'll let you know when we get there.' The slack suspension of the Miandi swung more loosely than ever with Ang's present urgency until they approached Jianguomen and the Second Ring Road. Ang cursed the bicycle jam and reached for the watch he kept in his trouser pocket. Asked why he never wore it Ang explained that because it was fake the police would ask where he got it. 'No watch, no questions.' But this watch was no fake and this time when Wang Hong asked, Ang told him the police would want to know where he got the money for a Swiss watch. 'It keeps the rocket cadres happy to see nothing on my wrist.'

They sailed past the Universities on Qinghua West, forcing bicycles aside in the rush through amber lights. Ang told him to be ready as they neared the bright stones of *Yuánming Yuán* scattered where they'd lain since they were smashed by the Western Alliance for freedom to trade in everything, specially in opium. More fresh to Wang Hong's mind was the histrionics of his school teacher about the treaty indemnifying imperialists for their burning and looting. Beyond the Old Summer Palace they turned down the lane between a scrap yard and a stock pile of coal briquettes, coming out on open ground that had once been the Gardens of Perfect Brightness. A truck with a rust red container was parked facing the

road with its engine running while four men passed crates hand to hand into three waiting vans while a man with eyes like a snake watched them from the trailer. A door slammed, a van pulled out and the snake eyed truck driver waved Ang to take its place.

“Sixteen crates!” Ang shouted at Wang Hong, “And hurry.”

Wang Hong darted back and forwards between Ang and the container. Twelve crates were enough to fill the back of the Miandi. The other vans had loaded and were driving off. “Mother’s cunt hurry,” Ang shouted and the next crate hit the ground spilling hundreds, thousands of tiny cellophane packets among the stones. Wang Hong froze, calculating whether he was loading \$500,000 or \$5,000,000 or \$50,000,000 worth of microprocessors. A whack on the ear returned his attention to Ang, who crouched down to grab handfuls of chips as the snake-eyed man snapped, ‘Miss one and there’ll be trouble. You know?’ The trucker bolted the doors and drove out the yard, his empty container thundering over the ruts. Wang Hong stooped to pick up more fallen packets while Ang cursed the case maker for the splinters in his hand. The sound of an approaching police klaxon made them pause.

“Fuck your mother. If you’ve left one of these!” Ang made a gun of his fingers, pointing at the side of his head. Wang Hong found three more packets and three more again. He kicked a rock, found seven more and crammed them into his pockets while he ran.

Wang was squeezed in among the crates so that he could see nothing outside except for Ang’s neck and a little patch of sky above it in which, as they were passing Qinghua University, sheaves of white paper appeared floating in the air as they were thrown from an open window. Beads of sweat broke out on Ang’s neck when they were held up at the ring road. Another police klaxon sounded and another close by, ringing off the high buildings round about. Hong twisted himself hard against a box to see Ang scowling in his mirror as he crunched the gears and turned down a slip road just before an unmarked Audi passed them

by with a red flashing light. Ang cut through back streets of an area Wang Hong should have known, but lost track of until they came in from west of Beijing Normal University. He studied an eight character poster hanging from the science block, 'They Who Are Worthy are Dead. They Who are Unworthy Still Live.' The brushwork was stiff and self-conscious, attributes his father never let pass without comment.

"Trouble," said Ang as they crossed under the Second Ring Road and came to a halt on Chang An Avenue.

Wang Hong looked over the boxes into Tiananmen Square where a knot of people were gathered by the Martyr's Monument. Huge funeral wreaths surrounded a portrait on the terraces, a portrait as big as Mao's from the Gate, and a banner down one side read, 'The Soul of China.' Here and there people lifted funeral banners high while higher still floated weather balloons with the words, 'Hu Yaobang Will Never Die.'

"Must be his funeral," said Ang.

"In Zhongnanhai? I don't think so."

Wang Hong twisted round towards Zhongnanhai. Hundreds of people were gathered in front of the leaders' compound in, surging towards it like paddy under a squall.

"Someone will get hurt."

"They've no bayonets," said Ang, "The PAP usually have fixed bayonets."

They drove on in silence to the yard. Ang racked the brake, pulled the gates shut and threw him the keys to the roller shutters. While Ang went to phone Wang carried the crates to the back of the warehouse, hiding them behind the racks of old stock; phones, cash registers and old typewriters to the right, TV's and radios to the left. Passing back and forwards with the crates he could see Ang through the office window, his head bobbing by the desk lamp as he made his phone calls. Wang Hong put away the last crate and waited by the door, listening to

Ang's talk about money, about storage and about the unarmed police at Zhongnanhai. Wang knocked and immediately Ang clapped his hand over the phone.

"Go get some noodles and we'll talk."

Wang Hong obeyed without thinking and came back from the corner stall with a bag of noodles and an omelette to find that Ang meant the food for him.

"I've spoken with Li Lieh," said Ang. "He needs you here on guard. There's a sleeping bag. I'll get a mat."

"Here?"

"I can't risk leaving this lot. Besides, who'll miss you? Lock up the doors."

By the time he was alone it was too late for Wang to phone his cousin. He took out a business card and made his fifth attempt to call *Bitel*. While the phone rang on he thought he'd made a mistake until he remembered the time difference. Before he figured it out the ringing stopped and a voice told him he was through to *Bitel* Corporation. It asked how it could help. Wang Hong read the name on the card, recalling the interview and resenting the sound of his own voice when he asked for Kurt Schreiber.

"You're a little early. Let me try his desk. Who shall I say?"

These foreign sounds, the foreign syntax, smooth as glass and showing nothing, least of all how important this call was. The ring tone stopped and a voice, a man's voice was asking how he could help.

"Hullo. I am Wang Hong. You might remember me."

"Sure Hong. Say, what's goin' on out there? All that stuff in Ten an Men?"

"I'm not really involved."

"That's too bad. It sounds exciting."

"I wanted to know about the job."

“Didn’t you get the letter?”

Schreiber said he’d have a word with ‘those people in HR’ to explain the hold placed on local recruitment. “But not to worry. It’s just a matter of time before we have you back for an interview.”

“But, I had an interview.”

“Sure. A first interview. But let’s see what’s happening with these restrictions. We got an exciting project coming for the new wafer technology. Reckon it’ll be ten microns thinner. We just gotta wait till it’s off the restricted list.”

The hard office floor was no worse than his cousin’s kapok mat but the empty space was unbearable. He had to share the solitude as if his father was right there beside him at peace after a life caught between two armies. He felt the pit of his grief open up on their last conversation when he made the old man happy with news of his successful interview, or what he thought to be successful. He had his degree and a TOEFL score of 603 but what had he achieved? Sometimes he wished he’d never mentioned the interview but now he was glad he lied. ‘Of course I got the job.’ How could he have said anything else? His shoulders ached from turning over in search of sleep, thinking about the letter *Bitel* had sent, probably to his old University mailbox and he could not lie still knowing now there was at least a letter. He could see it in his pigeonhole, as if he could show it to his father but he was grieving again, and again, and each time as if for the first time.

He woke perplexed by the warmth of his loins and months without sex. He washed himself in the back of the workshop and helped himself to Ang’s tea. His grief made no sense in the daylight. The day promised endless testing of processor chips until the phone rang then stopped. He heard it again, realised it was an ambulance, and another ambulance travelling

fast. The students. So much for boycotting lectures. His thoughts turned to Ma Li, her dim spirit and mostly her warm body. She barely scraped 500 though she majored in English, one of a thousand applying to work in Beijing's first International five star hotel. They turned her down twice before she got her job, a strange choice given her views. When Wang Hong said as much she could not hide her irritation, asking, 'Why do you read those books?' Their words, foreign words, came from sounds she told him. Whereas their language is an approximation, a noise, Chinese characters meant precisely the same now as they did three thousand years ago. She did not understand when he said, 'You're right there.' He suggested she must have found it difficult to study for a degree in English. But he was wrong.

"No difficulty. My father is in the mayoral office and works closely with the Director of the Institute."

All that fumbling in the Girls' Dormitory used to make his balls ache, a creamy panting that left him unfulfilled and her a distant, selfish lover. But what a relief it would be. To press his body against her, slip his hand inside her pants, between her lips, over her chest where those wrinkled berries would pop like rubber under his fingers. He had not spoken to her since she finally got her job. He looked up the hotel number and dialled. They kept him waiting. She answered in English.

"It's me, Wang Hong."

"How are you? How is your new job?"

"Not started yet. They've an embargo on new technology. I've been asked to hang on until they build the technology for silicon wafers a fifth the size."

"So you don't have a job. What have you been up to?"

"I've some part time work. Pays well."

“Not that Taiwan guy? The one who wanted to set up; what was it he called it? A test facility.”

“It’s the same company. But not him.”

“You told me the management was crooked.”

“Who isn’t nowadays? Anyway they pay well.”

“Not if you spend the next ten years in a work-camp.”

“No, it’s going fine. Listen I was wondering if you’d like to come out tonight? We could go over ...”

She interrupted, slack voiced, conserving her energy ahead of the Soviet visit with so many foreign journalists booking conference facilities.

“When can I see you?”

“Let me know about your job and we can celebrate. Oh, how is your cousin Bo?”

He’d forgotten how dull she could be in spite of that huskiness in her voice.

He felt aroused once the phone was down and went back to his workshop where he masturbated quickly. Before his last convulsion he heard Ang’s Double Happiness van rattling outside the gate. He wiped himself and went to the doorway.

“Feeling strong?” said Ang, making straight for the warehouse. “Li Lieh says that with those students keeping them busy the Public Security Bureau won’t have time to worry about this lot. We’re moving it now.”

“Don’t you want to test them?”

“No time. They’re good. The best.”

Ang counted a stack of flat packed boxes and made up the consignment as he was told, twenty processors in each with 120 boxes in total. It took hours to pack. Ang’s paperwork took longer. Together they loaded the van and headed east past the bus station for the Tianjin



road, turning off just before the line of trucks at the checkpoint. The consignment was for Liánhé Electronics in a new building on a new industrial park. They had two flags out front, one for the company, the other the five stars of the People's Republic and an S-class Mercedes waiting under them. As the white gloved security guards directed them to the rear of the plot a girl in sunglasses and a leather cat suit came out to be met by her chauffer opening the Mercedes door.

"You've no chance," said Ang.

"What does she do?"

"Do? She doesn't have to do anything. She's the Mayor's daughter and Liánhé need a JV partner."

Ang made a show of carrying the boxes to goods receiving, returning with receipts for more than 800,000 Yuan. Wang Hong could think of nothing else all the way back to the depot. There Ang took out a bankroll of one hundred Yuan bills, inches thick. He counted out eight of them. "That's more than you'd get in Taiwan." Again he counted the eight bills, this time holding back three and giving Wang Hong the rest. "More than your university professors get in a month."

"What about the rest? Last time you were short. I was only paid half."

"Didn't Li Lieh see to that?"

"No."

"Then I'll have a word for you," said Ang as he left.

Wang Hong smoothed the bills, studying the leaders' portraits as if they might be counterfeit. Mao, Zhou, Liu Shaoqi and Marshall Zhu De, all so very stiff except perhaps for a mocking smile from Liu Shaoqi. Surely that had to be fake?

His cousin Bo shared a flat behind the Central Academy of Fine Arts off Wangfujing Dajie, east of Tiananmen. Almost bohemian if not bourgeois, the street attracted actors and artists and its scholar trees had an easy elegance, more Suzhou than Beijing. Close to the old foreign legations, Wangfujing was once known as Morrison Street on account of the foreign journalist who lived at number ninety-eight while recording the agonised cadences of the Qing Dynasty for the Times of London. Now sixty years later, Wangfujing could well be McDonalds Street on account of the golden arches flourishing there.

Bo and his partner Yan perplexed Wang Hong, partly because he was uneasy with a pair of turtles but mainly because of his father's high regard for Bo as the son of his beloved brother. Bo seldom left the flat and spoke only in English or excellent French, never Chinese though he could quote word for word from speeches made by leaders of the Cultural Revolution. Mostly he was silent for weeks at a time, apparently on the verge of saying something important. It was like being in the company of a simpleton unless Yan was there in which case Bo's small watery eyes would follow his partner about the room as if heaven was about to fall. Yan differed enough to be another species, slim, bright and spotty, insisting despite the evidence that Bo had a brilliant mind. He was a researcher with New China Radio and had just won a position on the editorial panel. The job suited him, so articulate and adaptable that his real opinions were a mystery. He could not sit still in company but carried on like a boy, cutting across conversation with a cruel wit if anyone was foolish enough to take his words at face value.

Bo could not look anyone in the face. He would busy himself for hours in miniature calligraphy, using a one haired brush under a gantry of magnifying glasses to write poetry invisible to the naked eye. But the slightest disturbance and his consciousness would implode. A cough or a door click at the wrong moment and his chin would drop, his chest

collapse and send his shoulders curling inward. Left to himself he would sometimes bark short inexplicable commands, 'Down, down,' or 'Stand up,' followed by hideous tearless sobs. One night Wang Hong heard his cousin telling someone over and over again to put on a dress and through Bo's open door he saw his cousin declaiming with raised hands, his face twisting like a demon torturer. The demon was gone before Wang Hong realised his cousin was in the room alone. Bo was a ghost, another of the sixties children who climbed on each other's backs to reach the heavens and, having fallen back to earth, were condemned to wander forever in between, children without a childhood.

Inside the flat Wang Hong paused and checked the rack. Yan's shoes were gone. At the end of the hall stood Bo, a phantom in singlet and shorts, arms hanging loose from his shoulders like an oversized jacket. Wang Hong helped himself to tea and rice porridge, thinking his plans aloud. Bo seemed to care but who could tell? The mention of going to the University to check his mailbox could send Bo flattening himself to the wall in a panic.

It was dark by the time Wang Hong took the number 22 bus to see what was happening along Chang An. His bus joined the boulevard and stopped. After a quarter of an hour without moving he left the bus and cut down the underpass to the subway. At the far end two columns of PAP appeared and suddenly, three students were running towards him as if their life depended on it. He ran back the way he'd come while the armed police chased the students off towards the Great Hall. The last he saw, one of the students had been brought down and the armed police were laying into him with their belts Red Guard style while the student's curses rang from the walls. Wang Hong ran. He kept running until he found himself on the other side of the Square and south of the Great Hall, coughing red dust and diesel fumes. He would have turned back if not for the letter but when he saw a Miandi cab trawling the opposite kerb he waved it down and asked for Beijing Normal University. They had long since crossed Chang An before he realised how far the driver had taken him off the direct route. Wang was already short of money and at times like this the

University was not a regular fare. With the sound of the PAP beating echoing in his ears he couldn't bring himself to ask exactly where they were going but sat with a hand on the door in case they stopped and turned him over to the PSB or worse, one of their plain clothes thugs. Seeing the driver's bulging rheumy eyes watching in the mirror he recalled how often his provincial accent put him at a disadvantage in Beijing and made up his mind to pay no more than ten Yuan. All the way north across town the driver spent more time looking in the mirror than at the road ahead until at last Wang Hong recognised the University gates. As they pulled up Wang Hong had ten Yuan in his hand ready to argue but the driver waved him away.

“Tonight students travel free.”

The gates were hung with white paper mourning flowers and posters of Hu Yaobang, once Chairman and General Secretary of the Party, Deng Xiaoping's heir. The campus was the same old place but busy with so many students who were already strangers to him. He heard the noise of many people, like a party without celebration, a party of angry people who from time to time burst into applause. He quickly made for his old dormitory, cutting by muddy paths across the grass free lawns. In his mailbox he found a dozen crisp edged envelopes but his name was not among them. There was a lip to the front of the box. In the bottom he found scraps of old notepaper, a dead cockroach and two damp letters. One had red white and blue edging, a foreign airmail letter addressed to him and slight for all its promise. He read, 'Dear Hong. Thank you for attending our recent interview for the position of Graduate Trainee. We regret to inform you that due to circumstances beyond our control, second round interviews have been postponed indefinitely. Should circumstances change we will of course be in touch. Meanwhile we would like to take this opportunity to wish you every success in your future career.' He read it again, mistrusting each word as he searched for what the letter really meant. 'Dear Hong.' Like the Englishman Tate who spoke to him because of his father. 'Call me Nigel,' he'd say using Hong's name like family, using his

family like friends. Business surrounded him. Corruption surrounded him. Nepotism, extortion, and imperialism, the whole rotten lot surrounded him and even so he had told Schreiber he was not involved. He was like the Englishman Neville, building power stations all his life but unable to say, 'This is how!' He had an hour before the last subway and made for the *sanjiaodi*, the open triangle where people left messages, sought friendship, sold textbooks and posted opinions under pseudonyms: 'Enlightened of Guizhou', 'The Poor Sage of Long Wo' and some comedian distancing himself from Yellow River myths as, 'The Blue Sailor of Beijing'. There was paper everywhere. And posters. Some honoured Hu Yaobang. Most read 'End Corruption' and 'Boycott Lectures,' 'Abolish the Puppet Students Association' and 'Support the Autonomous Federation of Students.' One addressed the ex-Vice President for Electricity, making fun of comrade Li Pengski, Premier and graduate of Moscow University. Wang Hong had mixed feelings as Li Peng had been good to his father. In the crush of students around him he was caught against the boards while they pushed in shouting above one another, reading aloud to those behind who could not see. Further back they were making a pile of newspapers using the People's Daily. Someone began a speech as the papers were set on fire and the speaker read the headline, 'Maintenance of Social Stability is the Prime Concern.' Someone else made the laughter stop with a speech about the foreign companies who would not come knocking at their door but were queuing up outside the Xinhua Gate to meet the children of officials who would smooth the way for their Joint Ventures. The words, the oratory, the feelings, they could all have been his except for the silver clarity of the girl's voice.

*'Yixiaocuo! Yixiaocuo!* The People's Daily claims we are 'one small handful.' I know I am. And with every student in Beijing I say we will not be spoken for by one small graduate of Moscow University. The same newspaper is manipulating reports of turmoil, comparing

us to the turmoil before Deng Xiaoping's Four Principles. What is the meaning of these principles? What purpose do they serve if our Leaders spent the last ten years debating them? If they must spend yet another ten years on the same question then let us have real dialogue. Our Leaders in Zhongnanhai are praised when the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress notes the decline in 'Social Ethics'. But when Liu Binyan and Wang Ruowang criticise the abuse of power they are expelled from the Party, expelled first and then jailed. Our Leaders claim that Hu Yaobang was a 'loyal Communist fighter' and 'a great proletarian revolutionary' but, they say, not a Marxist. That is because they do not like his ideas. In ten years of aimless debate we have seen the children of our high ranking cadres inherit the seats their fathers warmed for them. We cannot allow another ten to pass without direction. Our Leaders have shown the Four Principles cannot be implemented without a fifth: Democracy! Democracy now to end corruption.'

The girl was magnificent. Democracy was something Wang Hong was unsure of, something for Taiwan, but he knew what corruption was and this girl could end it. With her he would be sure to try. Her voice promised love, lust and freedom, possibilities that coursed through him until loud cracks like rifle shots sounded nearby. As he turned to run, a shower of glass splinters burst on the flagstones and he looked up to the second floor windows where people were throwing down little bottles, *Xiaoping*, punning the name of the retired leader.

Plans were gathering pace as more students arrived with funeral banners. Marshals attempted to organise the crowd using megaphones, calling without success for them to form ranks for a march on Martyr's Monument, Tiananmen Square. There was chaos until another student raised an enormous pole with the Red Flag of the Youth League, the official Party Youth League, swinging it above the heads of the crowd as if to bless them. As though it was a signal they marched off four abreast with marshals alongside, hundreds of them shouting

the slogans no one dared to write, 'Oppose profiteering!' and 'Down with corruption!' Over a thousand of them were heading off campus until they found the gate locked by University Security guards who were now lined up across the exit. The security supervisor quoted University rules that gates had to be locked at night. In the whole time that Wang Hong had been a student they'd never been locked before. The front ranks began arguing with the guards. A young Uygur student grew angry, asking who gave them the right to obstruct a funeral tribute and who paid for their education? His words became a chant, 'The People pay for the University. The Students will give their lives for the People.' Their chanting grew louder, the rhythm firmer until they rushed the gates. Like an enormous spring, winding up the energy all round him Wang Hong was swept along with the crowd before they were pushed back. Some students had been hurt. There was a standoff as a group of elderly men appeared, preparing to talk with them. Wang recognised the Dean of the Engineering Faculty among very old men who claimed to be University Governors. One of them spoke of a crackdown, recalling what happened to the China University of Science and Technology students in 1986, warning that action outside the campus would mean an end to Zhao Ziyang's reforms, the same reforms begun by Hu Yaobang. While those at the front listened, the rest could not hear. The chaos was palpable until one clear fact emerged with news carried from Zhongnanhai that students had been beaten by the People's Armed Police. The student marshals appealed for calm while the rumour spread. 'Where is Wang Zhiyong?' one of the marshals called, appealing for anyone who knew to come forward. From outside the gate students returning to campus hoisted a bloody shirt on a pole, shouting that Wang Zhiyong was in hospital. The protesters roared. The guards opened the gates and stood back as two thousand students poured through. Marching on to the People's University the procession mustered below the dormitory windows while the marshals called for a show of

support from the students but there was no answer. They had already left and were streaming downstairs to join them.

The movement was unprecedented, three thousand exhilarated students marching on as far as the Second Ring Road intersection. And then the police were waiting for them, the police vans, ten at least and who knew how many more by the underpass? The student front ranks might have hesitated but they did not stop. A student megaphone clicked and howled, 'Comrade policemen. We are here on behalf of the Beijing students mourning Comrade Hu Yaobang. Please allow us our rights to pass through. We have wreaths to lay for the funeral.' The officer in charge put one hand in his pocket, raised his megaphone in the other and said they had orders to stand there. When he added that they would do just that there was a moment's pause before three thousand students passed through police lines chanting, 'The people's police love the people.'

Two hours later the students turned onto Fuxingmenwai, marching in ranks of ten with marshals on either side and couriers on bicycles relaying messages between the front and rear of the column. For the first time in his life Wang Hong was acting for his interests, his freedoms and marching with his kind on the home straight to Chang An and Tiananmen. He spent the night outside Zhongnanhai gate with the rest of them shouting, "Li Peng come out!"

At cousin Bo's flat the next morning Wang found the door bolted from inside. He knocked, waited and knocked again as the door flew open and Yan appeared in a yellow silk robe.

"Nice of you to visit," he said turning his back, "Any news about your job?"

"There isn't one. *Bitel* are postponing their investment."

"How honest. So you'll be postponing your departure?"

"I don't know. Where's Bo?"



“My, what’s this? A show of affection. He’s sleeping if you must know but he’s been positively catatonic since you disappeared. You should take him out once in a while. He needs exercise as much as affection.”

When Wang suggested taking him to Tiananmen Yan asked if he was mad. “You’ll set him off again on one of his rants and we’ll have Jiang Qing’s words of wisdom replayed over dinner for a week. And by the way, if you are going along to Tiananmen you should know Deng Xiaoping is not, apparently, afraid. Shameless pragmatist. A bit like you really. ‘Not afraid of public reaction, international opinion, or the shedding of blood.’ Here.” Yan pointed at him with a rolled up newspaper open at the caption, ‘We must take a firm stand against turmoil!’”

“Is that The Daily?”

“Certainly is. The People’s Daily; voice of The Party.”

He scanned the editorial, ‘a well planned plot ... confuse the people... real aim... to reject, reject, reject. This is a most serious political struggle that concerns the whole nation.’ Wang Hong asked Yan if he agreed.

“The People’s Daily says it is.”

“But they’re following the tracks of an overturned cart.”

“If you can see that you know enough not to be crushed under it. Your cousin is terrified for you. Do you know that?”

Wang Hong shook his head.

“I don’t think you understand. You’re the only family he has. In his condition, every time you disappear you’re not coming back.”

“He might have saved your life Yan but I have to make a start on mine.”

“Indeed. That might be more of an imperative than you think.” Yan smiled. “We’re moving. I’ve a new job.”

The ten computers sent back from Liánhé Electronics were already on the workbench being stripped before Ang came in with instructions to ‘see what you can find.’ Wang knew exactly what was wrong. The processor in the first tested fine. He replaced the casing and left the unit running but *she* was unforgettable, La Liberté in jeans, inspiring Wang Hong to every possibility except work (again he decided to put screws back in the casing instead of the tea tin). When a Mercedes arrived he put the radio on for a more manageable distraction as Ang went out in the yard to meet the newcomers, Li Lieh and his Fujian *Chiu Chao*. Again the radio broadcast the same report. ‘Several hundred people created disturbances at Xinhua Gate,’ said the woman with a voice like birdsong reciting a commentary on, ‘How we should mourn comrade Hu Yaobang’. The voice said nothing that did not anger him until someone outside laughed louder than the radio and he went to the far end of his workbench where he could follow their conversation more closely. They were deadly serious but said nothing about their faulty chips and when their talk of money turned to matters of secrecy he could not follow them. He turned up the radio, took out a multi-meter and went back to work on the computers. The memory address was fine. The processor was fine. He left them running and in twenty minutes they were all at seventy degrees. Another unit overheating. He opened up the other units and left them running. All were in working order but too hot. What did they expect? You could not bump up the power for every new model without compensating for it.

After the Mercedes left Ang was unusually busy, dipping into the safe between calls as more of his time was taken up with chasing errands for Li Lieh. He no longer kept a roll of

bills in his pocket but throughout the day he would dip into the safe as one visitor or another came into the yard. The only stock to move was the ten computers on Wang Hong's work bench from where he kept watch for a chance to talk about his wages. He would have left by now except for the money he was owed. Previously, if asked Ang would say Li Lieh was too busy and give him a few Yuan. The one thing Ang did tell him, emphasising it with a vivid curse, was to keep out of Tiananmen Square.

The campus had changed again. Wang Hong recognised the student marshals chatting with University security guards at the gate but all the posters, the flowers, portraits and funeral tributes had been removed. The campus PA was belting out the same People's Daily editorial, 'a well planned plot ... confuse the people... real aim to reject the Chinese Communist Party, reject the Socialist system, reject ... serious political struggle that concerns the whole nation.' By the time he checked his empty mailbox the broadcast was already repeating itself as a mindless loop. The clutter of posters and papers in the triangle had all been removed, all the posters taken down. Despite the warnings students were already gathering in strength, outraged and certain of their purpose as they pasted up new *dazibao*. Leaders were agreeing the order of speakers, office bearers and security measures but when the speeches began there was no sign of Sun Suyin.

'We are not afraid of public reaction,' shouted the platform speaker and the crowd responded an octave lower, 'We are not afraid of public reaction,' and a mocking response, 'We are not afraid of international opinion.' Quoting Deng Xiaoping's words brought laughter before the last whisper of caution was blown away by a storm of applause for demands that the editorial be retracted. As the speeches moved to sum up he saw Suyin approach with a box of papers, passing out pamphlets to couriers a sheave at a time then handing out the last copies by herself. Wang Hong pushed in, trying to catch her eye as he

reached for a copy from her hand. In a split second she had moved on leaving him with the words dancing on clean paper, everything they needed, everything they called for, everything to make a start, to disband the official student body and join the Autonomous Student Federation, to boycott lectures and rally for an oath taking ceremony before the march. The words were as good as deeds by the time he took the oath. This would be an orderly protest and, whatever awaited them, a patriotic one.

The demonstration he joined was well planned, organised, intent on marching through the city. Part of the plan was to avoid the Square, avoid provocation, but the decision was already made for them. Reports came in of police blockades waiting ten rows deep. The municipal government had issued warnings that anyone offering them food or money would be prosecuted for a criminal offence. News came that the Autonomous Student Federation had mobilised across the city. Demonstrations had already begun and messages of support had been sent by students in every province. They marched chanting ‘Long live the people!’ until they reached the ring road, their way blocked by an impenetrable police phalanx.

“Go back to your campuses,” called the Police megaphone, “The road is blocked. If you come any closer, we won’t be responsible for the consequences.” A forest of student hands waved copies of the People’s Daily chanting, “We oppose turmoil. We must oppose slander. Let the people hear the truth.” More students came forward, packing the lines opposite the police to shout even louder slogans at the PSB agents taking their photographs. A student marshal climbed the nearest lamppost, looking out as if he detected a bad smell. He called out the police formation to the marchers: a front phalanx twenty rows deep and behind it another phalanx lined up so that a breach in the first was unlikely to get any further. But still the students pushed forward, causing some to stumble and fall. Girls lost their shoes, ankles were sprained, people were carried off to the side exhausted by the heat. Thousands of

newcomers joined the marchers from the rear as the song went up, 'Our troops march towards the sun, treading the soil of the motherland...' pushing repeatedly into the lines of police, nervous police, fingering their handguns as radio reports came in one after another of student protests coordinated across the city.

At midday the students withdrew for food and rest leaving the police lines exactly as they were. Wang Hong watched Sun Suyin going among the girls, cultivating hope and a new strategy with a word of encouragement here and there. Negotiating positions were revisited by the leaders, calling for official recognition of the ASF, political reform and calling for all students to take an oath of adherence to the rule of law. The boys remained seated, watching while Sun Suyin led the girls to the front, arms linked chanting, 'Raise police incomes! The police protect the people!' Policemen smiled. Behind the girls a Uygur student raised the enormous flag of the Party Youth League as the police line relaxed and the girls withdrew before one great push behind the flag made a breach in the police line. Immediately students charged to widen the gap, swarming through until the police phalanx collapsed. The lines of next unit faltered and broke. Students poured through, mingling with the police to exchange missing shoes, police hats and sun hats. Behind the police lines spectators who were crowding the flyover cheered on the marchers, handing out snacks, bottles of water and Coke. Men ran down the embankment to join them, strong angry men wearing armbands like the AFS students but spelling, 'Autonomous Workers Federation.' They brought food and news that fifty thousand students were protesting around the city with People's University students breaking through the police cordon at Xinhua gate. When the front of the protest moved off the girls raised a new chant, 'Ma-ma. We've not done anything wrong.' Women among the spectators began to cry. An outside broadcast unit with a satellite dish had set up on the other slip road, a foreign news company with a Westerner asking, "Anyone here speak English?"

As Wang Hong crossed the central reserve to reach them a scuffle broke out between Marshals and an angry young student haranguing a reporter from the People's Daily and accusing him of being Li Peng's spy but their cries were lost under ten thousand voices thundering out new meaning in the revolutionary song, 'Without the Communist Party There Would Be No New China.'

The apartment was silent until a cyclist passed down Wangfujing calling out slogans from the march. Then the whimpering began and Wang discovered his cousin cringing in a corner. Sharing the space confined Wang's every movement as he crept about the apartment trying not to startle his cousin. He made tea, looking up from the sink into a promising blue sky until he felt Bo's gaze and turned to catch him averting his little pin bright eyes.

"What do you think cousin Bo?"

Bo turned the colour of pork fat. His jaw hung open, gagging as though he would have to vomit his words. Whether it was the blue blank sky or the collective pull of Tiananmen that drew him Wang decided that Bo's monsters might appreciate the open square.

"What do you say we go down to Tiananmen? Your friend Yan doesn't think Zhao Ziyang will see that editorial withdrawn. He says there's too much Deng thought in it.

We can support them if we just 'come out' like everyone else. And look at that sky, it's a beautiful day."

"Le ciel detest que le ciel detest."

"Je ne comprends pas."

Bo shut his eyes and said in English, "Heaven hates what it hates."

The last time Bo stood in Tiananmen the will of one billion people was embodied in one. And all that chanting. He blinked repeatedly then began humming old revolutionary songs, calm wordless singing until some girls from a southern university joined in as if they were having a party, restoring the past in words fresh with irony: ‘We can soar to heaven and pierce the earth because our Great Leader Chairman Mao is our supreme commander.’ A gang of boys joined in, ‘When sailing the seas we need a helmsman.’ Their performance brought Bo out in a fit of prayer-like muttering, reciting the words of fallen leaders, Lin Biao, Jiang Qing, Mao himself, speeches memorised by millions. Bo lifted his arms to heaven, oblivious to the attention as he found his voice:

We have done the right thing and we have achieved much. Red Guard fighters, the direction of your battles has always been correct. We have battered the Capitalist Roaders, the reactionary bourgeois authorities, the bloodsuckers and parasites. Let us clear away all pests and smash all obstacles.

The words were Lin Biao’s, at least the words of Comrade Lin before his plot to shoot, bomb and burn the great helmsman, all at the same time. Bo broke into song again, this time with the crowd joining in until someone recognised Lin Biao’s words and shouted for Bo to stop.

“Get that madman away before the PSB arrive.”

“They’re already here you fool.”

For just a moment Wang Hong scanned thousands of faces, people happy to ‘come out’ flashing victory ‘V’ signs and smiling. In that moment Bo was gone. An alarming pulse hammered in Wang’s head as he strained for a glimpse of his cousin in a sea of grins. His search took him beyond Mao’s mausoleum, drifting towards the Martyrs’ monument like a lamb at the crossroads before he arrived at a line of students queuing at the Defence Headquarters. While Beijing students called for courage most of the queue were provincials

needing support with food, money or dry clothes. Some were quiet and fearful of the consequences while others spoke of heroism in the provinces where comrades had taken action on the railways.

“The whole country is affected.”

“It shows we can stop the railways anywhere.”

“In the end human bodies will not stop a train.”

“But it’s symbolic.”

“It’s turmoil.”

“And that’s reactionary. Zhao Ziyang says ‘historical issues should be handled in a lax manner ignoring the details’.”

“That kind of history mocks us. Our pride and grief have become the same thing.”

“Have you forgotten Liu Shaoqi? When this lot took power Liu’s wife was still in jail and it’s taken years for Deng to rehabilitate her. Even now there’s another hundred million cases still active.”

For the second time that afternoon Wang heard the former President’s name, the first when Bo spoke in Chinese for the first time in many years: ‘I know turmoil. This is not turmoil.’ They were Bo’s last words before he disappeared.

Wang Hong was kept waiting for more than an hour before he could explain his lost cousin to a student with thick framed glasses who asked him to write down his message and told him they’d put out a broadcast over ‘The Voice of the Movement’ PA. At that moment the loudspeakers were broadcasting news that a high ranking cadre, as yet anonymous, would visit the hospitalised hunger strikers. On the other side of the tent, HQ leaders were heating a debate on the hunger strike and why, despite this latest news, it had to continue. Quieter voices wanted to bring it to an end.



“We have nothing to lose. Look what happened to the students from China University of Science and Technology.”

“They’re here.”

“I mean the 1986 CUST students.”

“Exactly. If we quit now it’s *qiuhou suanzhang*. They’ll settle accounts after the harvest.”

“Come on. Yan Mingfu offered himself as hostage.”

“So what? Now is the time to hold out for our demands.”

“But he sympathises with us. He said so. We should take what he offers.”

“Yan Mingfu is not the government.”

“But he visited the strikers as a representative of the government.”

“They’re double voiced. At the end of all this whoever is left will be the government.”

“Exactly. If the government agree with him then why don’t they come right out and say so? Why don’t they accept our movement is patriotic and not turmoil?”

“He’s only the Director of the United Front Work Department.”

“Then he’s at least doing Zhao Ziyang’s bidding.”

The PA message calling Bo to the HQ was almost over before Wang Hong recognised it as his. The broadcast resumed with a list of hunger strikers taken to hospital until Sun Suyin’s name was read, prompting still hotter arguments. As Wang turned to go a student Marshal made signs to him, pointing at his eye to suggested that Wang was being watched. Wang shrugged, knowing that when these events were over the face of every student would be on a photographic record, complete with name and crime number. There were roars of applause when the PA announced that an official report on Zhao Ziyang’s talks with Gorbachev had conceded errors in socialist construction. Louder still were the jeers at Zhao’s appeal for an end to the hunger strike. Flags and banners waved in response, ‘Resign Now Why Wait?’ ‘Retire Old Man Government!’ Another banner read, ‘Sell Benzes Not Bonds’ and a

Teachers' Federation banner, 'When Students Fast, the Hearts of Teachers Ache.' The loudest cheers came when the broadcast was ending and two thousand C.U.S.T. students unfurled their banner, 'CUST Breaks Its Silence'. A delegation of one thousand journalists held a banner proclaiming, 'We Did Not Write That Editorial,' but no one was interested in speaking with journalists whose papers would not print what they wrote. Besides, now that Gorbachev's address had been cancelled there were foreign journalists with nothing to do. Hundreds of their satellite dishes were ready and aimed at the world with nothing to broadcast. A knot of foreigners had gathered round the Beijing College of Fashion students with a banner that read, 'Increase Government Transparency, Clothe the Politburo in Bikinis.' A girl stood on tip-toe to kiss her boyfriend on the cheek and broke away as a camera flash caught her unaware. A photographer shouted in English, 'Do that again!' Holding a camera to his eye the photographer flicked his grey pony tail over his shoulder and told his translator to direct them. 'Just as you were but so as I can get Mao in the back,' he said waving for the boy and girl to come together in line with Mao's portrait on Tiananmen gate. The songs and chants grew louder, coming together in their strength to sing *The International* in one momentous celebration: the seventieth anniversary of the 1919 student protests, the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution, the centenary of the Second International, the seventieth anniversary of the Third International and the fortieth of the People's Republic of China, brought together in one great anthem rolling off the sky for the students of 1989. It was also the thirtieth anniversary of the Lushan Conference ending the Great Leap Forward, the twentieth of President Liu Shaoqi's death.

The pony-tailed photographer was standing near Wang Hong when he asked, of no one in particular, "So how did all this get started?" They were watched by the same plain clothes man Wang had seen earlier, now holding one of many leaflets purporting to be the Hunger

Strikers' oath. Wang Hong picked up a flier himself and was moving to confront the man when a scuffle broke out. 'Get the knife,' someone shouted and two marshals held a tearful boy by the arms while a third tried to convince him that disembowelling himself would not help their cause. Wang drifted towards the line of ambulances that were on standby by for the hunger strikers and had crossed the square before he looked at the pieces of torn leaflet he was holding.

*The government is our government*

*Who will shout if not us?*

*Who will act if not us?*

Another piece had the last lines:

*May the pledge that we write with our lives clear the sky of our republic*

*Through death we await a sweeping and eternal echo*

Lead limbed and alone among seven hundred thousand people he did not recognize the haggard, mirthless face reflected in an ambulance window as his own. Suddenly the rear lights came on as the ambulance reversed away from the line. Government security people directed another ambulance to move out as a group of photographers gathered round, all of them Chinese. At once a group of student marshals broke off their conversation with the police as two vans approached at speed. The doors of the first pulled back as eight security men poured out and their chief immediately commanded them to guard the second van. Two four-pocket cadres emerged, men of such gravity that not one scintilla of charisma escaped them. From behind them came Li Peng, pushing past to reach the chief of security and Wang found himself pressed back against the ambulance. From inside came snatches of a familiar voice so altered by emotion that it was barely recognizable. "We demonstrated and lay across railroad tracks when we were young too, and took no thought for the future. Your

demands will be dealt with ... I am sure in time... corruption and reform... even the issue of whether your protest is patriotism or turmoil...” The familiar voice was bidding farewell as younger voices asked for autographs and the security chief with whom Li Peng had spoken approached the nearest cameramen. ‘No shots of Zhao Ziyang,’ said the security chief, drawing his fingers across his throat in a cutting sign. ‘In the event of a leadership change it could be inconvenient.’ Li Peng stepped into the camera lights as the man with the fragile voice emerged from the ambulance. It was Zhao Ziyang himself. As though something had just occurred to him he paused on the running board and said, “We have come too late.”

## Nineteen

Neville Marlow

I left too much unsaid on my way to Beijing. The little time I had was spent talking to the lawyer so's everything would be left to her, proper legal like with Zhang as a witness though she didn't seem much reassured. I took a cab to check the hotel where Douglass' wife had booked in but I didn't have the heart to call back and tell him that she hadn't been seen since the curfew to keep Westerners off the streets at night. The police were no help but the hotel confirmed that she twice asked at the desk for directions, once to Peking University and once to Tiananmen Square. She could've phoned if she was at the university but as there was no telling what would happen in Tiananmen Square I decided to go there first. I left the English speaking hotel desk with directions for the Qianmen gate south of the Square and immediately the *whirr* and *muhrr* of Beijing accents was beyond me, squeezed onto a bus between so many black haired folk that I'd no room for a thought of my own. The locals looked pleased to see a big nosed foreigner and swept me along with them when the bus emptied at Qianmen.

I'd never heard such a noise or seen the like of those flags and banners flying high across the square with TV satellites sprouting among them like mushrooms in an orchard. I hadn't a clue where to begin as I picked my way among youngsters from all over China, Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongching and Harbin, pausing where I could make anything of their accents. A giant red flag brushed my head, flying from a pole so long that it needed three men to steady it. A voice from some cheerful southern girls had me by the ears until an awful braying

interrupted them. A heavy, pasty faced man in his thirties was singing with his arms out and his head thrown back, bawling with a desperation you wouldn't expect in a man that age. The singer ignored them, ranting like a god or a madman with his arms raised to the sky. The girls sang with him before some boys joined in and soon everyone was singing along until, as quickly as it all started up, they were arguing and shouting at them man to be quiet. Among the shushing and tutting, a sour faced little man with jug ears watched closely, all but taking notes as a young lad pressed a bottle of water into the singer's hand. When the lad spoke I recognised Wang Hong, the Director's boy, startled him when I called out his name. He flashed an awkward grin, apologising for the rambling man, his cousin Bo, who'd been ill for a long time and seldom left home.

"He speaks good French," said Wang Hong. "And English. But until today he hasn't said a word in Chinese for twelve years."

His cousin's voice was flat, as if reciting production quotas, with this funny Russian accent. He brought his face close to mine smelling of fear and garlic. At first I thought he wanted to practice his English but suddenly he had me by the wrists.

"I can still hear them," said Bo staring towards Tiananmen gate.

"But what is it?" asked Wang Hong following his gaze beyond the tents and banners.

"The Beijing Student HQ."

"The Martyr's Monument."

"The hunger strikers' ambulances."

"Where is Stalin?"

Wang Hong explained that Bo wouldn't know Stalin's portrait had been removed from the Tiananmen gatehouse the year before. There was only Mao's portrait.

"That's history," I piped up but my words sent him into a fit.

“If that’s history then Liu Shaoqi must blame himself for the dogma he used to build the great wall of Mao Thought.”

I was embarrassed. I suggested I might visit the Great Wall and prepared to leave. I gave Wang Hong my address while he wrote directions to the Eastern Bus Station for me in English and Chinese I asked him to keep a look out for Mrs Douglass.

“Everyone visits Badaling,” he said, “I would go to Simatai. Besides the folk there are very poor. They need visitors.”

“I thought only about making money when I came here. Now you are making history.” I wanted to say something meaningful. It was all I could do to reach out and give him my address but the mention of Badaling set his cousin off.

“Do you hear them now?”

He turned to face the great gate then grabbed my collar and roared in my face, “If you build walls you must have bricks and more bricks and you must keep adding bricks for a thousand years. How many do you have?”

“No more bricks,” Wang Hong said, taking his cousin’s hands off me, “We will use our own piano wire.”

As I left a bizarre statue came bobbing along above their heads, a model of the Statue of Liberty. Banners about freedom and happiness parted to let it pass while students waved victory signs and applauded the ranks of young men following. They had tape over their mouths and headbands with slogans, some in English that read, ‘Nothing by mouth.’ I set off wandering through the square on my own vaguely looking for any Westerners who were not journalists. It was dark by the time I asked the way to the hotel and although I got the direction right it was slow going what with my way blocked by barricades of broken trucks and buses. Despite the late hour there were still thousands on the street, people living on the

street, eating or chatting while their children played among the barricades as if they were in a swing park. The parents smiled when they saw me and the teenagers burst out cheering every time I passed their barricades.

Back in my room I lay on the bed thinking what I would say to Douglass. I must have slept a couple of hours before the phone woke me. Douglass had called me unprepared. I told him about the road blocks but he was phoning because he'd had a call from his wife.

“She says there are hundreds of thousands, not just students in the square but along the main roads. She says there must be a million involved.”

Because the crowds made it difficult for her to move between the hotel and the campus she had stayed with their friends at the university and didn't understand what the fuss was about. Cycling back to the hotel that night she met so many crowds of people cheering her on that she had to dismount at every barricade, this blond English memsahib defying the curfew with her daughters. She'd known nothing about the curfew until she got back and phoned her husband.



## Twenty

### Long Shadows

Bo heard the chanting, raised his eyes and looked up at the sky for the first time in twenty years. In those times people opened their mouths to chant more often than eat. There was so little food that the leaders in Zhongnanhai ate together like it was a village commune, just as they had done since Ya'nan. Bo had gone ahead to the canteen with the posters but the place was deserted except for a cook who helped clear a space before Bo sent him outside. But the cook wouldn't leave and stood by the door saying he had to be ready for his 'master', as if anyone still spoke that way. When Bo told him things were going to change, the cook spoke of the law. But the law wasn't going to save him – he was working for Liu Shaoqi. The law was not even going to save President Liu. After seventeen years of stagnation everything would change - old thought, old culture, old customs, old habits – everything would be new. All that stood in the way were the Capitalist Roaders in Zhongnanhai. When Bo said they had come for Number One the cook made a grab for his posters, spilling the glue pot so Bo beat him and carried on beating. The cook was in shock, holding his hands up for protection while he explained his duties and why Liu Shaoqi always worked at night. It was a habit from pre-revolutionary days - or an old man with old customs, old thoughts and Bo with his posters, beating the cook with a glue pot until half a dozen rebels came in ahead of the Work Group. They looked from Bo to the cook, his bloody head smeared with pig bone glue. When Bo explained the cook was lackeying for Number One Capitalist Roader, working in secret at night and the man went down like a draft ox to a pack of wolves. Across the courtyard the tinny megaphone of Jiang Qing's bodyguard called out the charges, his voice an octave above the responses chanted by fifty Red Guard Rebels who spilled through the

door bringing Liu with them. The old man's dignity was curiously out of place. They brought in his wife and a summer dress that she'd worn on a trip to the West, forcing her to change into it then and there to question her as the bourgeoisie they had come for. They made her climb on the table alongside her husband while they walked round it reciting crimes from the few posters Bo managed to paste on the walls. Mao and Lin Biao had abandoned everything in Zhongnanhai to the guards, leaving the President of China and First Lady to stand one legged on Bo's table. Hours later they separated Liu from his wife and children to be struggled against for three weeks, taking turns day and night to confront them with their crimes. When they were brought together again their arms were tied behind their back to haul them up by the wrists and drop them repeatedly on their knees as they did with other class enemies. Each time they fell a guard pulled back their heads by the hair to photograph the shame on their faces, unaware that his own turn would come within the year. Liu was already an old man. He had diabetes and insomnia but his pills had already been taken away before they knocked out all but seven of his teeth. He couldn't chew, couldn't eat, couldn't walk and he couldn't cry until his children were brought back. Ting-ting was fourteen when they brought her back to stand watching for two hours while her parents were kicked and punched in the face. It was the last time they saw each other before the children were sent away to different provinces without money or food, beyond help. Any human being who fed them would have been charged with aiding active counter revolutionaries and face the same treatment. Two of the Liu children got by selling their blood until the hospital turned them away. It couldn't take black blood contaminated by reactionary parents. Their son Liu Yuan was put in solitary at Number One prison, deprived of food and light until he got TB. Ten years later the new leadership in Zhongnanhai spent two years negotiating his release by which time Liu Yuan couldn't walk and died three months after his release. Another son Liu

Rongbin was taken to Mongolia, beaten to death and left on a railway line with a suicide note. His grandmother refused to give evidence that her daughter was a spy and died under interrogation. First Lady Wang Guangmei was bleeding from a bad head wound when she fell off Bo's table. She was put to work carrying boulders across a room and next day carrying the same rocks back. She knew nothing of her family but her husband was dying. Even with help he needed two hours to get dressed for interrogation. By now it had become Jiang Qing's problem. She had made a historical error. If Liu died he was still in the party, still President. She had to destroy what he stood for. At the September rally when she realised it had gone too far, she explained that she was in charge of the most important case in China and announced that Liu Shaoqi deserved death by one thousand cuts, ten thousand cuts. She brought in a specialist medical unit to look after him while she sent fifteen work teams into the national archives, each team five hundred strong. In all their search of two and a half million documents they could find no incriminating evidence. Their investigation needed confessions and nobody was volunteering for them. Bo was assigned to work with the medical school while every University in the country was emptied of lecturers and Professors who were suicided if they couldn't denounce American spies in the Liu clan. Jiang Qing drafted a motion to remove Liu Shaoqi from office at the eighth Party Congress and with three days to go, crying and dribbling, unable to swallow from the tube fed through his nose, Liu almost got away. His nervous system had collapsed and his veins had shriveled up like wire so that it was impossible to get a needle in for the drip feed. Jiang Qing kept her doctors dancing round his bed night and day until the Congress could expel him from his own Party. It was forbidden to tell this to ex-President Liu Shaoqi. For six weeks Jiang Qing held back the news so that a recording of the verdict could be played to him on his birthday.

Bo left Beijing with a list of names, black elements, relatives of Wang Guangmei escaping revolutionary justice under cover of enlisting with the volunteer militia for Viet Nam. A letter of introduction from his Jingangshan Red Guards assigned him to the south just days before they were attacked by units from the Congress of Red Guards. Bo left the HQ for the Defence of Chairman Mao, got on the train and ten days later he was in Guanxi, unaware that his comrades in the Jingangshan faction had been smashed by arson attacks and spears sharpened in the Qinghua University workshops. Their interpretation of the slogan, 'Attack with words, defend with weapons,' had become famous in far off Chongching among 200,000 workers who stopped building tanks, planes and RPGs to fire them at each other. By the time Bo arrived in Guilin, the word from Beijing had passed ahead of him. But factions in the capital bore little relation to those of a small town distinguished by its scenery where local Red Guard units now expected support from the Rebel Congress.

Bo was met by Sister 7, a young girl who, as he could not help noticing, was barely old enough to bleed. She had soft good looks and serious ideas that challenged Bo to keep his distance. While passing by the willows and plane trees of the Li River on their way to the Red Guard Grand Alliance HQ, Bo discussed tactics for the pursuit of Capitalist Roaders. The soft peaks of limestone about them were as beautiful as the feudal painters rendered them but Bo barely noticed, telling himself that peaceful mountains and clear rivers meant nothing as he listened to Sister 7 relating how the cadres of the local *Dapai* Faction had abused their power. When her village asked for help during the famine they waited till after the harvest then sent a work party of six cadres. The cadres announced that bad elements had been profiteering by hoarding rice and when they found 30 pounds of it stored in Sister 7's house, her family's remaining stock for the year, they took her father outside saying they would make an example of him. They tied him up in front of the schoolhouse, forcing everyone

onto their knees to watch as they beat him unconscious. While this was going on they went from house to house until they had confiscated all the rice in the village. Those who protested were lined up and forced to their knees to be dictated against. This time instead of carrying out the punishment themselves the cadres ordered neighbours to demonstrate their solidarity by beating class enemies for them.

As the girls told her story, Bo tried several times to pursue his own tactical questions but found that Sister 7 could not see beyond her own struggle. When Bo challenged her, she explained that the *Dapai* faction did not engage in class struggle except by persecuting her own *Xiaopai* faction. Her young face hardened as she explained her struggle to protect her village against class enemies like those who beat her father.

At the Red Guard Alliance HQ Bo handed in his letter of introduction from Beijing and asked to see Wei Guoqing to whom the letter was addressed. 'Then you'd better go straight there,' said the Alliance cadre, pushing back the letter as if it had turned to red hot coals. They drove Bo to within a block of the 'Office for the Political Education of Peasants' and left him to introduce himself. Four men stood guard on the compound gate, each holding a brand new type 56 assault rifle. Their armbands showed they were members of Wei Guoqing's United HQ of Proletarian Revolutionaries, the faction that Sister 7 referred to as the *Dapai*. From Beijing, Wei's revolutionary direction was never in doubt. He had never been complicit with the old Municipality. Wei Guoqing was from the Zhuang minority, the same tribe as most of the peasants in the province and was newly appointed as Political Commissar of the region. He had an exemplary revolutionary record, a Long March veteran, serving with distinction as an officer against the Japanese and commanding an artillery unit against the French over the border at Dien Bien Phu. At sight of Bo's letter two of the guards

escorted him to a top floor office where they showed the letter to a small shrunken faced man with hollow cheeks and two black lines where his eyes should be.

“From Beijing eh?” said Wei taking the letter but not reading it. “We had a man here from Beijing when the five year plan forecast five hundred million tons of grain. As I recall the final figures were never confirmed, but then eight hundred million tons was never going to be enough. So much profiteering. The rail trucks we sent to the city would arrive a quarter full while we made our porridge from ground bark and our bread from sorghum husks. Since we took power from the bad elements and rich landlords, their children are now the cadres who sit on the heads of the peasants. We now actively seek out counterrevolutionaries.”

Bo explained his work dictating against Capitalist Roader Number One and the urgent need for his follow up. When he had finished the little *Dapai* commander answered, ‘Liu Shaoqi is one person’ and closed his hand over the unread letter, making a fist of it as he asked if Bo knew they had permission to use the army. It was well understood that Mao forbade the PLA from interfering. But Bo had seen Wei’s guards flaunting their new type 56 rifles. He was in no position to ask where this permission came from since his link with the *Jingangshan* Red Guards in Beijing was no longer a strength. It would take just one challenge to put his life in danger and, since he had met first with the *Xiaopai* faction, he would face that challenge sooner or later. Wei introduced his adjutant, making a show of counter-signing a pass from the compound’s security guards who, it was said, would guarantee Bo’s safety. He was shown an office where he was to report every morning, supposedly with access to the files he needed to seek out a line of Liu’s maternal relatives and at the same time help Wei’s adjutant with their own preparations for a trial.

The adjutant had lists with accusations and counter charges, lists by family connections rather than class crimes, sorted for criticism, ‘targets’ to be dictated against. Before his first

week was over Bo realised that the quickest way to get a file was to add a name to the 'targets' list identifying it with the 22 April group, founders of Sister 7's *Xiaopai* faction. Wei Guoqing's adjutant singled out a particular file, 'Serial murders,' he explained, 'committed to cover up for profiteering and counter-revolutionary activity. Bo had to re-read the file when the adjutant pointed at the file photo of a sour faced girl, assuring him that Sister 7 had trained with the militia as a marksman. It was how she earned her name. Like many girls who followed madam Jiang Qing's example they were often the first to go in after a struggle session, in Sister 7's case four times with a knife and three with her rifle in targeted assassinations.

After a long day's work on his list of names Bo found he was unable to sleep for more than an hour or two without waking up for his own nocturnal self-criticism. His purpose had been clear enough in Beijing but he had allowed himself to be sidetracked by a girl, though perhaps not the girl in the file. Whether or not he had been side tracked the names he had were too important to be caught in a scrap between local factions. He would have to take his problem to a higher authority but to whom? Wei Guoqing? His adjutant? In the morning he studied his list then burned it when he was sure he had memorised the names. It dawned on him that after a month spent pouring over files, these names were all he had and without something to show for his work his position was questionable. It was becoming difficult to concentrate, to pull together the threads of guilt. The offices were unbearably quiet as if he was in a waking dream. He went to take a look in the adjutant's office but it was empty. The other offices he passed were also empty, down the corridor too and on the floor below, all the offices were empty. He was the only person in the building. He went outside listening to his own footsteps, walked fifty yards and was thrown off his feet by an explosion as the whole front of the building was blown away. He got to his knees facing the gatehouse where the

guards were staring at him as if he'd made some terrible mistake. They could only mutter a few words as though apologising for an inconvenience, saying that Wei Guoqing and his cadres had 'gone ahead,' as if that explained everything. Meanwhile outside the compound a column of Wei's trucks were already lined up, their engines running and ready to pull out for reprisals. Evidently Bo was meant to stay behind under the rubble as a victim of counter-revolutionary *Xiaopai* sabotage. If he wasn't quick enough the guards would see to it that he did. He chose to hide in plain view, striding the length of the convoy to the lead truck where he climbed in and introduced himself as if it was the driver's duty to take him along. Bo easily engaged the driver in conversation, exchanging old news from Beijing for the driver's boasting of the latest plan to finish off the *Xiaopai*. By the time the call came over the radio for the convoy to pull out Bo knew they were on their way to pick up names on a list, names that he himself had added.

On the way they were passing a village school when some men came rushing out to cheer on the convoy. Their leader waved so wildly that he appeared to have three arms except that one of his sleeves was from a different shirt. At the *Xiaopai* compound there was a long line of children kneeling by the wall while opposite two hundred parents were kneeling under guard in aeroplane position. There was no sign of Wei Guoqing or his adjutant in the hot sun but the children were drenched with sweat out of fear rather than the heat, too scared to raise their heads. A *Dapai* guard strolled up and down in front of them cursing their parents until a steaming kettle was brought to him. The guard stopped in front of a little boy who lay with his face pressed hard into the dirt. The guard asked his name and called for the boy's parents to be brought over while he poured scalding water on the child's head. At last the parents were taken to the trucks and the convoy pulled out, heading for the river. Another convoy of trucks was there ahead of them, drawn up along the river bank with armed men waiting



beside them. They opened the tailgates and lined up the names one behind the other in rows along the top of the bank to be dictated against for their crimes. The guards started to beat these people with poles, stabbed them when the poles broke, smashed stones on their skulls and pushed them into the river where, if they still showed signs of life, they were machine gunned in the water. Many died shouting the only thing they had left, 'Long Live Chairman Mao!' The guards lining the bank in their hundreds chanted more loudly. Downstream the water became a ruby soup fanning out on a gravel bank where grounded bodies were rolling over and over. Bo put his hands deep in his pockets and wandered off to get away from the noise, aimlessly following the river until one of the victims raised a feeble arm. Without thinking he called out and stood watching as a girl crawled towards him through the shallows on her hands and knees. Before she got to the bank six men had rushed past him. The leader turned her over, put a foot on her stomach, slid a vegetable knife below her ribs and pulled as though opening a zip. 'This is how you do it,' said the man, pushing with his foot until her liver popped out. While the girl lay gurgling he looked up at Bo, knife in one hand, liver in the other. "We've had many Class Enemies sent here for re-education," he said leering at Bo. "Do you know what we do with Class Enemies in Guangxi?" Bo recognised the man who had cheered the convoy on their way past the school, the three armed man, and understood what he must do to prove he was not a class enemy. In Tiananmen Bo heard the chanting again and looked up at the sky for the first time in twenty years.

## Twenty

### Against the Wall

For two weeks Wang was confined to guarding the depot. From time to time he slipped out unnoticed to search for Bo, otherwise he had no work. One afternoon he was called out to Liánhé Electronics for a 'Product Launch' where they kept him outside their meeting, waiting while they discussed finance in private. Called in to discuss quality control, he sat opposite Li Lieh trying to read English upside down, notes about hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese dollars for something called 'CAD'.

Before they left Wang was collected five prototype computers for testing back at the depot. When he set up the first one on his test bench and found it was an empty casing stuffed with cash. Ang cursed him for taking the wrong machine, moved a pallet load of cartons into the back office and shut himself away in a fog of methyl fumes from an old wax printer. Since then Wang had been on guard duty, fretting over back pay and sneaking off to Tiananmen Square when he had the chance. He would wait until Ang had locked up before climbing onto the warehouse roof, ready with the alibi of maintenance work, cleaning vents or unblocking gutters. On the day of their visit to Liánhé, Li Peng had come on the radio to announce that because 'a tiny, tiny minority of individuals are using the turmoil to reach political goals' he was going to take 'resolute and determined measures' to restore 'normal order'. From what Wang Hong had witnessed at Liánhé that meant deception and corruption was the preferred order.

One afternoon Wang had his feet up on the bench reading a French novel when Ang marched into the workshop. Ang handed over nine one hundred Yuan bills and gave him the

rest of the day off with a warning to keep away from Tiananmen. But it was out of the question to stay away. Between the blaring rock music and idiot dancing, the poetry and hair splitting debates there was a faint promise of change. It was a promise he wanted to see kept and that involved him in climbing over the roofs to leave work in secret.

Sneaking back into the depot was not so easy. He had to be quick. One glance then turn into the courtyard, splash round the broken drain and climb. He always forgot to hold his breath against the stench before giving the pipe a tug, testing his weight to shimmy up three storeys past a loose bracket grinding away in the cement. There he had to reach across to a vent, ignoring the drop as he clambered onto the ledge, crawled along the gutter and stopped above the warehouse roof, checking the gap between the buildings where he could be seen from outside. On the morning he got his back pay he checked the street was clear and was about to jump onto the warehouse roof when a man walked into view down on the pavement. The stranger turned, pausing to look back at the depot as if waiting for Ang to unlock the gates. As soon as the stranger was gone Wang jumped down and crept to the edge on his belly. Looking down he saw the same little man with jug ears who stood by listening to Bo's rant in Tiananmen. Wang slid back from the edge, ran across the roof and down the access ladder. At the bottom he jumped clear of the pallets he'd set against the wall to climb out and looked round the corner into the courtyard. The gates lay at broken angles, wide open and smashed off their hinges. A bonfire had been lit in the middle of the courtyard where it ashes still smouldered. The office was empty and the roller doors of the warehouse lay open. Everything had been cleared from the shelves except a few pallets and a roll of packing board.

He went to the bonfire and gave it a kick, sending up a little storm of ash from some torn papers smouldering underneath. One fragment read, 'Give up the Four Basic Principles,

drive out Marxism-Leninism, annihilate the Communist Party,' another '... expel the Dengist gang!' Yet another was headed, 'Chinese Alliance for Democracy.' He was piecing them together when a voice behind startled him.

"So the sick dog returns to its vomit. Against the wall. Turn out your pockets."

Wang did as he was told, dropping coins and keys, recalling the worn address fob to Bo's flat as it fell.

"And the rest."

"That's it," said Wang letting go of nine one hundred Yuan notes. The man nearly knocked him off his feet scrambling for the money.

"The jacket?"

Wang pulled out a comb.

"All of it. The inside pockets."

"I've nothing there," said Wang pulling out a knot of tissues. Then he recalled the contraband micro-chips.

"Come on. Out with it."

Wang sighed, glancing to the corner of the warehouse. "There's over a thousand dollars worth," he said pulling out the blue cellophane packets and scattering them one by one.

"That's American dollars."

"Move aside."

Wang did as he was told until, as soon as the man bent down to gather the chips, he sprinted to the corner of the warehouse, took a step on the pallet and sprang onto the ladder. He swung there a moment, kicked the pallet away then climbed out of reach from the man and his curses. Across the roof he pulled a leg muscle scrambling up the wall. Above the courtyard he reached across the ledge with all his weight on the one leg and was about to grab

the drain pipe when his leg buckled and he fell towards the pipe, pulling out the bracket from the concrete. He slipped down to the next safe fitting, shimmying the rest of the way until he could jump the last few metres but this time his leg gave way and he fell by the drain, rolled over and ran off limping towards the market crowds.

Wang arrived at Bo's flat keyless, breathless and his jacket stinking of the sewer. He put his ear to the door and heard the radio tuned to China Radio International. The announcer was again attacking student leaders, this time as puppets of an all out movement against communism, the 'Chinese Alliance for Democracy'. There was banging and scraping inside as the announcement continued, "Today the State Security Bureau in Beijing legally detained Taiwan KMT agents Wang Changhong, Qian Rongmian and Li Lieh." Wang flinched as he turned the handle and pushed. The door was unlocked but he could not open it against a stack of boxes inside. The radio continued, "All of those arrested confessed their crimes of meddling in the turmoil. Other cases have arisen across the country. They have only one goal: to annihilate socialism." He was trying to force his way in when Yan appeared, pulling away at the boxes, his face pale and angry.

"Where is he? Do not muddy the waters. Where is he?"

"I've been looking. He was in the Square last time we spoke."

"Are you mad? The first time in fifteen years and you took him there."

"It did him good to talk. To clear his throat, you know?" Wang saw from Yan's bared teeth that he'd done something terrible.

"How could you know? Ah!" Yan broke down crying and threw his arms around Wang. "I am nothing without him. How could you understand?" Yan sobbed and pushed him away then took off Wang's soiled jacket and went to clean it.

Wang thought of the key fob and was still wondering whether it could be traced when Yan returned with the jacket. "I'm sorry. All these boxes have to be ready for the removals and you arrive in this state. You're scared and I hate it. Fear and hate – Bo would tell you they are the same. My first memory is my parents' fear. And I hated them for it, hiding me away in a loft among the eaves. We never left the house after my uncle was dictated against. I used to envy the neighbours enjoying themselves with such spirit. I didn't realise I was listening to a feast in an abattoir. So many in one generation of that family. They survived the famine with bitterness and help from my uncle, a lot of it. He lent them money and rather than repay the debt they slandered him as a black element, a landlord, and produced his loan note to prove it. You'd have thought our house was safe across from the school but they held the struggle sessions in front of the yard. From up in the eaves I could look out between the half tiles and see what my parents were scared of. Every session ran its course but after a time they were quicker. The crowds didn't wait. Once the person dictated against lost their spirit it was like a signal: accused, judged and sentenced in minutes then a feast in the yard by the school cookhouse. They'd pile forward, knife and bowl in hand for a share. No one dared bury the remains for fear of meeting the same end. Abandoned skeletons were left turning putrid until the dogs lost their fear. I remember one dragging a trail of intestines across the schoolyard. I'd been hiding for weeks when they came for my parents. Dozens of times I'd seen it but after my mother fainted she was taken away from the struggle session. I'd never seen that before. Bo played a trick, a dangerous trick. He stood up to them. He claimed my mother was a suspect relative of Liu Shaoqi's wife and demanded she be kept alive for questioning. He could do nothing for my father. I listened to them feasting and drinking from the loft where my mother had told me to stay hidden no matter what happened. People came to ransack the place for valuables but they were drunk and after they left the

first person to come was Bo. I wasn't supposed to come down but he called me the way my mother did. He called out to that my mother was ill but he would take care of us. He convinced them to have her taken to hospital until she was fit to stand trial. At the hospital he hid me in a cupboard at the back of the dispensary until the cadres came back for her. Whether or not she was a relative of Wang Guangmei they certainly didn't want anyone from Beijing meddling in their business. Bo brought me here and looked after me well enough until he was arrested. After you moved in I thought you could help. You know? He even joked about the past. If I'd been in Beijing he said they would have had me shot and sent my mother a bill for the bullet. But you must find him. You must help. I leave in eight hours."

There were fewer students in the square, most of them provincial factions with nowhere else to go. With his search for Bo every faction had someone whose face had grown familiar, someone with sightings that fitted Bo's description or heard the name but none of them his cousin. He paused in his search as a young Mongol re-tuned a short wave radio to Voice of America before the jamming resumed. VOA were programming ten hours a day on the protest. Students around the radio flashed victory 'V' signs on hearing that donations were pouring in. Ten million Hong Kong dollars alone since martial law. Americans had donated over a million and support was still coming with reports that all the main routes into the Square were barricaded. The radio picked up a KMT statement on the Taipei station, "The recent student movement on the mainland demanding freedom and democracy has already kindled the long-accumulated dissatisfaction our compatriots feel towards the violent government of the Chinese Communist Party. Our government and people should be more active and take more initiative in finding ways to help them, so that the mainland can reach democracy and freedom more quickly." The radio hummed with a jamming signal until the

same announcer continued on another wavelength, calling for donations to 'send love to Tiananmen.' A cheer went up for KMT plans to raise T\$100,000,000 for an 'Institute for Economic Reform in China'. 'Zhao Ziyang's Think Tank,' said a wag before the signal was lost again.

For the crowd by the monument their dwindling support wavered between reluctance to abandon sacrifices already made and disappointment with the Beijing student leadership. While Wang always took the chance to speak with students from his home province, the Gansu students nearby were more critical, condemning the Beijing leaders for each new development. They claimed provincial students made the greater sacrifices while Beijing AFS leaders were not making their case. Beijing students were returning to their classes and numbers were down. One of the early day Beijing leaders had written an article for the Beijing Daily, 'Tiananmen, I Cry for You,' attacking the leadership for its schisms and lack of solidarity. After Chai Ling, the General Commander of the Tiananmen Square Command, had taken a stirring oath passionate oath in front of a hundred thousand students 'to devote my life and my loyalty to protect to the death Tiananmen Square,' a provincial faction had since tried to kidnap her. She had stepped down in favour of her deputy Feng Congde and in her place a polystyrene goddess of democracy was planted opposite Mao's portrait. Rumours that rock star Hou Dejian was to go on hunger strike were barely noticed beside the exciting prospect of his farewell concert. Students from western China accused their Beijing comrades of Han ethnocentricity at a time when far off provincial students were intensifying their struggle. An angry Gansu speaker almost spat the title of a newly published book, 'The Sexual Practices of Muslims.' A Gansu truck driver had been killed in protests over the book but as someone pointed out, a thousand Beijing students had protested over the same publication. The Gansu faction leader gave an angry speech after twenty thousand protestors



in their Lanzhou capital had fought with the government injuring 115 soldiers. Order Number 607 had been issued through the Railway Ministry specifically to stop support from reaching the capital by train. In Qingdao six trains had been cancelled when hundreds of students lay across the tracks. In Hubei an overloaded train could not move for the two thousand students who crammed into it. Six hundred Jilin students were holding a sit-in, negotiating on board while in Mongolia the last five trains from Hohhot had been impounded under Order 607. After the same order was used to cancel trains from Ningxia and Shaanxi the station had been taken over, occupied by four thousand students. The Autonomous Federation of Zhengzhou Students had organised a 'Block-the-Army' group and a 'Dare-to-Die Brigade' was on its way from Henan. In all this Wang Hong's search for his cousin drew little sympathy. He was like a ghost, drawing suspicious looks, even outright hostility when a wild haired hunger striker tore off his gag to ask what was so special about one man when the fate of millions was at stake. Everyone had their story to tell the state, even the state. No one was listening any more, not even the state.

Wang Hong was being watched. He felt nothing remarkable in surveillance perhaps but a difference, a waft of scent maybe or a graceful movement that made him turn his head. A woman of about thirty was looking straight at him. She had full curved lips, a nose like three small petals and high pencilled brows.

"Do you remember me?. You came to my house. At Long Wo bay." She lowered her voice, "I was with a foreigner." He could barely make out her words as she told how the Englishman had left her a house and money but the day after he'd gone cadres came to turn her out. She took a handkerchief from her home-weave bag and an envelope of photographs.

“Have you seen this person? Name Lao,” she said, quickly adding that Lao was a relative. The photograph showed a young man in his early twenties, an old picture but undoubtedly the jug eared man from whom Wang Hong had escaped.

“I don’t know your friend Lao,” said Wang Hong handing back the photograph. “I too am looking for a relative,”

She frowned intensely. “I am Qim.”

When Wang told her he had met Neville on his way to the Great Wall she frowned differently. Evidently the possibility that Neville might be in the country had not occurred to her. She scrambled in her bag for another photo, this one showing her in front of a cascade of bougainvilleas in the Englishman’s Long Wo garden.

She wrote on the back, ‘Martyrs Monument Tiananmen - every day at noon’ and asked him to pass it on to Neville.

“Let him know I am here. Please. I am waiting.”

At the moment she left a Uighur student began a fierce speech on patriotism. The patriot was still talking when Wang felt a touch on his shoulder and looked up to see two student security marshals. One of them, his face devastated by acne, asked Wang for his identity card and seeing it was out of date, asked him to follow them through the litter and sludge round the Monument to the General Headquarters for the Defence of Tiananmen Square.

Nearby a tent-full of voices were arguing about money for cooking pots. A woman spoke of their accounts saying, “Even if we pay everything these outside students ask for, it won’t stop them coming back for more...” More exchanges followed concerning the buying of materials and somehow, of buses and trucks to build a wall. It was the first time he heard their plans, building their own ‘Wall of the Communards’ to follow the martyrs of the Paris Commune, and it troubled him. His marshal explained there had been many attempts at

sabotage and infiltration, "One mistake is all the Government needs." Before Wang Hong could ask 'what for' the meeting in the tent broke up. A girl with pale papery skin came out struggling to her feet behind a stone faced committee member. She had gone before Wang Hong recognised her as Sun Suyin and for a second time the young committee member was asking who he was.

Sensing danger on a new side Wang Hong said nothing.

"What are you doing in Beijing?"

"Studying," said Wang before correcting himself. "I'm a graduate now. So what do you want?"

"You've been asking questions round every provincial faction here. We would like to know why."

"I'm looking for my cousin."

"Why do you ask them?"

"Them? Who are they?" Wang's voice rose as he told of his cousin's trauma, the cultural revolution, caught between Red Guard factions, of Lin Biao the hero one morning and insurgent by the afternoon and at the end of it only four people to blame for forty fucked up years. He spoke to his audience from the heart until he realised they were just waiting for him to finish.

"Who was the woman you were talking with?"

"All I know is she's from my province."

"What did you tell her?"

"She was looking for some guy."

"We know. She comes here every day looking for a man we know to be a plain clothes PSB agent. The point is why would she think you knew him?"

“Listen I came for my cousin. I left messages for him on your PA. You can check.”

“Have you any idea how many people come here looking for cousins? The PSB have already named and photographed every person here.” The senior marshal pushed away the table and stood up. “Give him back his *hukou*.”

The acne blighted marshal apologized, explaining that the leadership was entering a difficult phase and adding that Wang’s cousin would not be forgotten. “I too have a cousin who never came back after re-education. But if you want to help, we need volunteers for the barricades. There’s thirty Yuan a day.”

Wang drifted east across the Square, taking refuge in the Museum of History with its images of the Taiping Rebellion, the Zhou dynasty and Zhou Enlai, all on display. The 1919 students, the French Revolution, the Second International, the Third International and the founding of the Republic were there but nothing on the Lushan Conference, the Great Leap Forward, Liu Shaoqi’s death, his cousin Bo or the 1986 students that were now somewhere in some Qinghai labour camp. He was leaning his forehead against the glass when again he had a premonition of being watched. From behind him came a girl’s voice.

“Strange we can only talk about this to foreign reporters.’

He saw Sun Suyin’s reflection in the display glass and wanted more than his life to say something of significance, to mean something to her himself. “When Zhou Enlai’s May the fourth comrades were thrown in gaol for their protest march, Uncle Zhou went on hunger strike.”

“Now we protest to Li Peng, his adopted son.”

“Only history has these ironies.”

“It was the women who made the difference, demanding the right to be given the same treatment.”

“It is always the women who make the difference.”

She gave him a withering look. “All we wanted was to see the Governor and present a petition. How can that be accounted a crime?’ These are Zhou Enlai’s exact words.”

His desire had the better of him. He faced the cabinet, stepping closer to the glassed in litany of facts. “Have you noticed? There is no history after 1949.” He saw the ghost of a smile in her reflection as he turned, almost close enough to feel her breath. A group of tourists entered the room. Behind a cabinet of Hmong artefacts somebody giggled and Ma Li appeared.

“Wang Hong! What a surprise. Why haven’t you called?”

Suyin’s reflection had gone. He ran outside but she was nowhere to be seen. He picked his way among the debris, the drizzle and the sagging banners. There was an hour to go before he had to meet Yan. There were no buses so he took a long detour on the subway to Wangfujiang where, at the end of the street, he stopped dead at the sight of onlookers crowding the door to their flat. Men came out one after another carrying boxes to an unmarked van. He recognised the boxes but the van was brand new and had no number plates. He was about to ask them where his cousin was when a uniformed PSB officer came out with a clipboard, checking off the boxes as they were loaded into the van. The officer slid the doors to, the van drove off and some elderly spectators discussed the arrest of two homosexuals as the crowd began to melt away.

Wang Hong wiped coal dust from the bottle and passed it back to his new landlord. The plum wine was cheap. It was strong too and already Wang regretted telling the boiler-man about Qim, cheated out of everything Englishman had left her as if Wang himself had betrayed their relationship. Every time he sneaked off to Tiananmen she was waiting there at

the Martyr's Monument. When he told her what he was doing she laughed and called him 'Marquis of the Barricades' but she had been a great help collecting cable with him to reinforce the road block.

"To you Marquis!" said the grizzled boiler-man raising the bottle, "And our Communards!" But the man had many contacts among the party officials in the flats above. It was the boiler-man who explained the army would never come so far inside the ring road. Already they had disobeyed the leadership and Deng Xiaoping had upset too many veterans when he promoted his cronies after that war with Viet Nam. In any case, sending the army this far into the city would provoke the party bigwigs upstairs.

Several times Wang was about to interrupt the boiler-man. He listened in silence, except to decline the bottle, weighing the facts before he spoke.

"Some people were killed last night. A jeep crashed onto the pavement and when four PAP men were discovered in it there were hundreds of people out on the streets."

"The PAP wouldn't get this far."

"They were plain clothes. The jeep had no license plates and it was full of military kit: uniforms, maps and phones."

"Maybe. But while you were asleep there was a big march for solidarity. They stopped an army bus before it reached the ring road, punctured the tyres and came back with helmets and boots. The soldiers gave their uniforms away and refused to go any further."

"Of course. A bus won't get past this barricade."

The boiler-man took a long drink. "Anyone can park a trailer and turn over a bus, but stringing that cable through it; where'd you get an idea like that?"

"Piano wire."

"Ha. Like music?"

“Yes. Always use your own.”

“You’ll see Marquis, tomorrow when the good ladies of Muxidi walk down Changan with food for their darlings the army will still be out at Shijiazhuang.”

“You know they took a vote in the Square. 220 to leave and 160 to stay.”

“What’s a few hundred? There’s twenty million here and a billion of us across country. Here, you need some of this.” His new landlord opened another bottle, bought with his 30 Yuan allowance for the Defence of Tiananmen.

“When I came off my last watch one of those Hebei ragamuffins told me there’d been a fight among the police. They’re on half a shift longer than usual. I reckon there are twice as many plain clothes devils hanging round the cross-roads.”

The burner clicked off and from outside a grumbling diesel deepened to a roar. They looked at each other and rushed upstairs into the night. People were running from all directions to get through a gap at the side of the barricade and spread out on the other side defending it. Wang climbed over the truck chassis to get on the overturned bus. A full column of trucks was coming down Fuxingmenwai with an escort of half tracked Armoured Personnel Vehicles turning off the ring road. At that moment the pedestrian light at the crossing turned green and below it stood jug-eared Lao with his cronies, pointing straight at Wang Hong. He would have gone back down to the boiler-room except that to leave the barricade would be to retreat, to leave the other young men who’d joined him up on the bus. He jumped down to follow them as they ran off to meet the column. The deep roar of the lead APV shook the ground under him, its tracks battering the road and sending loose stones flying among a handful of boys running alongside. Protestors surrounded the vehicle, bringing the column to a halt and shouting for them to leave their vehicles, to come out and support the people.

The APV did not move. Wang Hong pounded on the front panel, its company insignia thinly painted over. A hatch flew open and an officer pushed out up to his waist. Wang Hong stood back at the sight of the revolver. But when the officer waved the gun above their heads, Wang's only thought was that this was wrong and he must seize the weapon himself. Grabbing hold of an access rung he swung himself onto the apron plate, attacking with his words. "Who sent you here? Do you have orders to act against us? You are an officer in the people's army but if you act against the people, how can you be following the people's government?"

The officer blinked, his face olive green under the street light. He lowered his revolver, ducking back inside as the APV radio squawked. Wang had a clear view down the column to the ring road where something was happening on the flyover as two men jumped down onto an army truck underneath and a third stood on the footplate shouting at the driver while he turned the truck mirror aside. At that moment the APV officer re-emerged to announce he had orders to pull out. There were shouts of, "The people love the army, the army loves the people," and the chant was taken up all along the boulevard. Meanwhile at the rear of the column the men from the flyover were busy swinging rope handled ammunition boxes down from the truck. The truck driver opened his door and hung there a moment before running off up the embankment.

An hour later Wang was napping by the barricade under a blanket until he was woken by a student running past, with a cloth held to his face and shouting, "Do not rub your eyes!" More people came running with scarves and handkerchiefs to their mouths as if an epidemic of toothache had broken out. Behind them a green army bus packed with soldiers was turning while a PLA squad ran towards it carrying two heavy bundles in blankets. A crowd surrounded the bus and began to rock it. The bus jerked forward, stopped and started,



mounting the pavement to drive off. A student ran back to the barricade and climbed on the bus waving an army helmet in one hand and a victory 'V' sign in the other. From far off came the scream of a turbine engine and the student jumped out of sight as the squeak and rattle of tracks from sixty tons of T54 tank was heard coming up Fuxingmenwai. There was a firm pop before the bus chassis lifted and dropped in a flash illuminating three ridiculous boys and an adult torso. Debris fell all over the street with a noise like irregular rain but the barricade held. The street lamp at one end of the barricade buckled slowly and fell. Wang Hong ran to the side of the road and before the lamp hit the ground a circuit breaker snapped open, tripping out a third of the lights. Tank tracks squealed through the dark and the jagged end of the bus burst into relief in the silver spot light of the oncoming tank. A cone of white light lurched up over the barricade, rising through the smoke until the truck chassis gave way underneath and then falling as the tank came on with the gimballed barrel of its gun pointing straight and level towards Tiananmen Square.

It happened too fast. There were calls for the People's Army to defend 'us' and calls to defend the wall, everyone running and Wang Hong following, linking arms with them across the street in a chain three deep as a gun carrier headed straight towards them, its light picking out pale astonished faces. He shut his eyes as the carrier passed through them without slowing, making the ground tremble as his shoulder was wrenched to the left. When he next looked the carrier was wedged against the bus, its tracks snagged by the cables. A soldier lit from behind by the carrier's searchlight struggled to push magazine belts aside and get his shoulders into the harness of its mounted heavy machine gun. Meanwhile behind the barricade small flames began to flicker. The soldier was drunk or insane, sweeping his gun across the face of the buildings round the intersection as though under an air attack. Wang Hong kept his head down as bullets struck the road. One hit the manhole beside him,

whining as it span over his head. It had been fired from behind. Those inside the barricade were defending themselves with Norinco automatics taken from the abandoned trucks. The flames behind the barricade flared up as two Molotov cocktails sailed through the air in a graceful arc, smashing against the side of the gun carrier and sending a sheet of flame across the road. Another hit the mounted gun spilling liquid fire over the frightened soldier. Civilians fled, trying to run back through the gap at the edge of the barricade, too many of them, trapped on the wrong side as a few shots became a volley bringing people down right across the street. Wang Hong crawled under the crushed chassis as men in shirtsleeves and women in dresses were shot running away from their own soldiers. He saw a man's head burst like a melon, spattering blood over Qim as she ran for safety. She clutched her leg and fell, clawing the ground to drag herself thirty yards to the barricade. Space opened up all round her as people ran for their lives and she lay still. She was hit twice more before a short man with jug ears ran towards her, waving at the soldiers, shouting himself hoarse that he was Public Security.

## Twenty Two

Neville Marlow

The little iron gate I made, the flagstones I laid and the border I dug were familiar like an old tune but I'd forgotten the conservatory round the back. Ivy appeared in the kitchen window all dried up and sore without a flick of recognition. The inside door was locked but she'd left a letter on the mat, a recorded delivery letter addressed to me. I knocked and waited a respectable time before taking myself off.

I sat in the Railway, homeless and jobless among young Polish workers from the new houses on the Albion site and drank a sweeter pint of English bitter than I could remember. My special delivery letter was not, as I expected, something to do with China. It was no more'n a thin page from a lawyer about an address I recognised but couldn't place. They wanted to know if I was 'normally resident' there. Until then it never occurred to me the Old Man left me anything and least of all his precious tithe, agricultural rights that entitled his family to carry on living on the old farm at Prior's Marston.

My old home, or at least my father's home, hadn't changed much except the front wall was in ruins and I was now an intruder. The thatch was long gone and whoever put the tin roof on hadn't grouted the flashings so that in places it was rusting through. Inside, flecks of daylight were shining through the chimney breast and patches of daub had fallen off the wattle exposing the hazel rods woven by some Plantagenet serf. The place was clean enough if a bit musty in the kitchen where the mildew smelled like coal dust. Seeing work aplenty and more

on the way I found a spot on the wall by the beech tree so's I could breathe easy a while and listen to the wind in the leaves shushing my worries to a rustle. But I should have been worried. The company had already fired off a quick insurance claim in China that included sending my belongings from Shangri-la. They were due in a fortnight so I got myself a sleeping bag and shut out the drafts by putting polythene over the windows. When a truck arrived with a shipping container I thought the driver was lost but his papers had me down as the consignee. Everything in it was for me, wrapped, packed and slotted in like biscuits in a box. Pots and pans, cutlery and clothes, tools and toiletries, things that were hers by rights, things I'd used for breakfast, dinner and tea, bed sheets and garden tools, the old compressor, the little generator and the unused spare, all individually wrapped. They'd charge me if I didn't empty the lot soon enough. So I went hard at it all afternoon until the light began to fade then I had to pull out some cable from my old workshop kit, rig up a string of task lights from the generator and get stuck in. Time was I'd clear half a dozen forty footers before lunch and I'd have had this lot sorted out too but for that letter.

I'd been unpacking box after box, mostly Chinese things turned strange to me, when I came on a box of old British newspapers and magazines I kept there to feel at home. Under them were my old pay slips, bills, bank statements, used tickets and letters, one from my son David and an unopened Chinese letter. It had the Beijing postmark that Kim decoded for me and was dated the fourth of June. Inside was a photo of her in our garden looking ever so serious. On the back was a message in Chinese with the words 'heaven' and 'gate' but I couldn't read the letter. My unpacking came to a dead stop. I sat there on the wall remembering those last minutes when she turned to me with that distant look. "sup to you," she seemed to tell me, pearning the silence with her eyes. At least I knew I'd done right by finding a lawyer to leave her the house and some money. I put the photo in my pocket, put the rest with the rubbish

and tore up the letter but my timing was a mess. After that it was another week before I emptied the container.

I was still pottering with the contents a month later, putting clothes upstairs, moving tools around the outhouse, opening crates of little treasures I bought for Ivy and unwrapping enough porcelain to run a restaurant. One morning I was standing in the parlour, a bit perplexed by these belongings from another life, when a new letter arrived. I read half a page of the lawyer's 'obligations' advising me that 'our client has purchased the Priors Marston estate (less the Manor house)', asking if I was 'normally resident' and if so for how long.

Straight away I got ready to visit the lawyer at their London office. My preparations left me feeling that a great deal of me had yet to step off the plane. I was out of place among the Portland stone and plate glass of the capital, in such a daze that when I crossed the road I had to ask myself what side the traffic drove on. Though I found the office easily enough I could do no more than listen to the woman in a black dress and pearls telling me their client was interested in developing what she called 'the farm property,' adding 'we are obliged to check that you no longer have a continuing interest in the estate.' When I had nothing to say she asked why I wanted to know and so politely that it put more of an edge on my teeth than you could cut with a bastard file.

Back home there's nothing worth opening my eyes for. Nothing matters, nothing as real as memories. Come the grey afternoons I'm tired, come the night I can't sleep and come the morning I've to face these fields with every blade the same and not a flower head to be seen, the hedges gone and the chalk stream where I guddled trout by the meadows is long dried out. When I remember the farm hands, the stockmen, the dairyman, stable-lads and keeper I've nothing but change for its own sake. These memories flare up at night, racing after one another as I lie there hoping for some sense in them until the wind gets up in the beech, like a

mirror to your ears so's you hear whatever you've a mind to, palm trees or my father's stories, they're all so close as makes no difference.

I pulled together a string of jobs, gathering deadwood, cutting back elders and clearing brambles to plant vegetables in the richer ground under the old game pens. To fix up the wall I looked out a barrow, some sand, cement and trowels. Once I had the idea I'd be at it before dawn until one morning while I was mixing mortar the sunrise brought a bit of a breeze in the beech. The rustling picked up with those high pitched dog-ear sounds that promise you might hear something special in it. I thought I did. And two or three times more before I made out a 'beep' like an electric alarm and over the wall from me was a young woman in a green shooting jacket, hugging her camera close under masses of wheat coloured hair. She was about thirty with skin like a poster picture, healthy the way that don't come without generations of good eating and a lot of boarding school sport. Before I could open my mouth she'd stepped over the wall and come to ask, 'Do you live here?' She had one of those accents and a voice like she swallowed honey between each word. I told her of course I lived here. Told her my name too though I wasn't sure it was a good idea at the time. She asked how old the place was and did I know its history and how long had I lived in it and who was here before. She said she hoped I didn't mind her taking photos but they were for some magazine that might follow them up with a story if I was interested. I'd about told her all I could when the wind got up some more, tossing her hair about and crashing through the branches so's we couldn't hear.

She came back just two days later, chatting away as if she'd been gone two minutes and asking about what she called my 'interesting times' in China. She made a joke out of it. She said that she knew nothing about Chinese except what her father told her, that it used the same word for crisis and for opportunity. She told me she wrote stories. 'But why?' I asked

her. Stories are all in the past. When she said that everything we learn comes from stories I said she was a string pusher. But explaining that to her meant telling stories. I told her about my time in Yorkshire but she wouldn't hear about the miners. I told her about peasants in China, about my Shangri-La by the sea. She didn't interrupt so I couldn't stop. I kept on about the old port, the colonial quarter, the hard graft and dizzy new buildings, the sea and the full moon at Nan Ao while she watched me with these pale blue eyes until I was done. At least I thought I was done when she said, 'I wouldn't have thought.' But she never said what she thought. She had something in mind as she looked about and, as though thinking aloud rather than seeking my opinion, asked what it must be like to spend your life in 'the Heart of England'. But it's more than my life. It's the place I come from with five hundred years behind it.

She visited me every other day after that so that I found myself saving up things to tell her, things she'd be interested in though I'd little interest myself - unless she asked - and then she'd have me talking for hours. The way she listened had my words falling into place. She made them important. I could have forgiven her anything but after six months she stopped coming. After six months I suppose she'd heard it all.

I'd have been fine if I'd never met her. I went on perhaps a year without seeing anyone, unable to sleep for the nightmares about home, whichever home, about my sons, about boxes, about my sons in boxes, nightmares that shook me wide awake. One morning I slept a good two hours before the purr and whisper of a turbocharged engine had me thinking I'd nodded off at some airport. Down by the New Barn I saw a black car with two men standing beside it looking across the top field toward Cawston woods. One of them wore stiff new tweeds like a uniform from the city. He swept an arm across the field, the woods and the wall as if conducting some kind of military campaign. The other man, a streak of misery in a black

suit, kept straight lipped except for the smile he'd fasten on whenever the tweed man turned his way. They were not about to share their plans with the likes of me so I kept out of sight until they sailed off down the road in this black Range Rover with fancy plates.

A week or more later I was mixing mortar to catch up on rebuilding the front wall when I saw movement by the Barn. For a moment I thought it might be Liz come for one of our chats, but it was one of the fellows from the Range Rover, the dark suited one with the slick smile. Behind him a couple of lads struggled with a theodolite case and a roll of drawings. This time it was Smiler who did the arm waving over the same landmarks picked out by the man in city tweeds. In no time he had sliced up the old dairy, the stables, the top field and the road itself between a chop of the hand and an occasional glance at the drawing. They spent the rest of the morning knocking in survey pegs, or rather the lads did, while Smiler went back and forwards to the car. Next day the two lads came back in an old banger and setting up the theodolite using a fussy lot of time to shoot their lines. They were long gone by the time I found the planning notice they stuck on the wall, an 'application for extension to agricultural residency and associated outbuildings' made out in the name of the Maga Corporation. They meant to rebuild my home with plans 'available for inspection at County offices.'

A week later when the surveyor came knocking at the door with a drawing I told him, I said, I live 'ere and that's the way it is. That's what I told Smiler when he asked about trees that might 'upset the layout,' as he put it because, 'As you know Mr Marlow, we can't build on agricultural land.'

I couldn't say aught as'd make any difference to him but I went down the council to see where exactly they would build. The jobsworth behind the counter had to lean back a long way to see down that nose of his to where I stood. When I asked for the drawings he took



one look at me and assumed I had in mind an application for a loft extension five miles down the road.

‘So you meant the actual estate itself,’ he tells me as if it’s me made a mistake. My new friend lifted his chin to ask if I was sure, reminding me just how angry an Englishman can make you. Then he says, ‘It’s of special architectural significance.’

‘Don’t you mean agricultural?’ I says.

‘That is also true,’ he says as if to a fool. ‘It’s privately owned but leased back through the Maga company. That way it’s held in trust as agricultural land.’ He wouldn’t tell me who owned the company but let it be known they weren’t interested in farming. Again I asked to see the drawings. There were three of them with the planning application. One laid out the fields to show the missing hedgerows. Another diverted the farm road right across our front wall. A third showed everything on a large scale with a dotted line running through our land and a note referring to a separate application.

‘Big isn’t it?’ I said.

‘It’s of major significance. An architect like Lord Wheeler wouldn’t put his name to any small project.’

‘But there are trees here. Some of them should be listed.’

‘Indeed. But the architect isn’t going to make a mistake like that. Anyway it’s covered in the schedules.’

When I asked for the schedules he told me how difficult his job would be if he had to go back into the archives for every document. He was gone a while fetching a pile of drawings that, once I’d found the general layout, showed what really connected the separate applications.

The road was there but the names were different, exactly as the lawyers’ letter. A block of hatched lines marked an area covering the front wall, the New Barn, the old dairy and the

copse with an elevation showing a fortress of a place set over the New Barn. It faed the fields with balconies across the front and a terrace spreading over half the copse.

‘Excuse me,’ said I trying not to sound uppity, ‘But I can’t find any trees listed.’

He looked at me tight lipped before he ‘supposed’ he could look out an ‘environmental impact statement’ then he left me alone with a batch of drawings titled ‘Existing Agricultural Buildings.’ The ‘General Arrangement’ had two areas marked off, one covering the stables with a note, ‘To be refurbished as garaging’ and the other my home, ‘To be retained pending further planning application.’ The margin notes showed revisions made just days after the surveyors’ visit. But the original drawing was a year old, about the time Liz Kirby first came visiting with her camera. The name subdividing the farm and fields was ‘Maga Corporation’ but there was a different name applying for the copse buildings, ‘F.P. Kirby’. Before I could find out more the planning officer came to tell me that an environmental impact statement was being prepared and my trees would no doubt be included.

## Twenty Three

### Moving Quickly On

Each morning the first thing Francis Kirby did was to take off his gold Rolex and put it in his desk drawer. He was known to have said that time is not money. It's what you have other people take care of while you make money. During meetings he would keep his sleeves rolled back from his bare wrists as if to encourage his staff to keep the time for him. Throughout his success in restructuring the British industrial sector, his early entry into Asia Pacific joint ventures and latterly his sell off to the giant Maga corporation, he set the order of the day with his PA every morning and let nothing change its course. It came as a surprise then, to be interrupted not once but twice by his PA's own assistant asking him to take a call from some provincial magazine.

Kirby had two targets for this particular day. One was to close out the contract with the Hu Corporation negotiating team who were only now due to arrive after a full year of proofing amendments through Kirby's Hong Kong associates so that at last he could sign off on a coastal leisure development in southern China. The capital value, for all its considerable cost, was negligible beside the secure cash flow it offered for years to come. In the past he would have funded the start-up then sit back waiting for the returns but since his company's acquisition by Maga, one sniff at those assets would see to it they were used at a whole other level, securitizing future cash flow and selling it on. Maga's clients would pay the real costs up front, the site acquisition and finance charges from which Kirby took his cut, then the real money would roll in to chase what Maga presented as an opportunity to invest in an upmarket leisure development for China's future. Foolproof as the scheme was, without risk there

would be no scent of opportunity to attract investors. Accordingly Kirby commissioned a risk mitigation plan from his friend Sir Nigel Tate on the four year schedule, five at most, and to offset unforeseen acts of god, war or civil unrest, he diversified interests into agricultural land. The second target for Kirby's order of the day was to sign off the agricultural land deal, a forgone conclusion for Kirby who, as the new owner of the Marston Estate to be leased out by Maga, had interests on both the private and corporate sides. The sector was not a big current earner but guaranteed to increase over the term of the lease as food prices increased. Finally there were unforeseen benefits with exemptions from inheritance tax on agricultural land providing tax efficiency for Kirby's afterlife.

Since the Maga acquisition, whenever Legal came on the phone from their Finsbury Square fortress it seemed they were the ones telling him the big picture, pushing him to close the contract and explaining to him they could not make a start on the real money without it. But Kirby himself was the one who first calculated, with the multiples they traded on nowadays, the real money was to be made offering collateralised debt secured on the project for at least two million a day clean profit on top of the deal itself. What Legal wanted, what they demanded, was Kirby's assurance that he'd have the Hu Corporation deal closed, with full power of attorney, before the New York Stock Exchange opened.

At present there were two blemishes on Kirby's lifetime accomplishments. One he perceived as a shift from respect to tolerance now that his impending retirement was widely known. The perception had grown in recent talks with Legal and now, if this morning's interruptions were anything to go by, reached as far as his PA's assistant. The other blemish was that after a lifetime accustomed to hearing his name come up in financial news from the Americas to Asia. The last thing he wanted now was to draw attention to either his retirement or his purpose built mansion on the Marston estate. It was precisely with this last

point in mind that he had insisted his PR hungry architect Lord Wheeler sign a Confidential Disclosure Agreement as to identifying Kirby as his client. Despite Kirby's prudence Lord Wheeler had also capitalised on his work, winning a biennial architectural prize for the Marston house that only increased speculation over the ownership of the property, if not its tax efficiency.

Kirby left his office preparing his itinerary for the taxi driver who'd been booked to attend the whole morning and apportioning the blame for his delay to those interruptions by bottom feeding press sniffing out a story about Marston. Half way down the concourse he heard his name spoken by the commissionaire at reception, pointing him out to a tiny Chinese woman in a beige suit and an ankle length brown leather coat. Kirby introduced himself and seeing the Hu Corporation logo on her case he suggested the rest of the negotiating team join them in his office when they arrived. But the woman pointed at her card.

"Nishi Hu?" asked Kirby reading beyond the logo for his first indication that Nūshì Hu was anyone other than a formidable Hong Kong taipan of whom his J.V. negotiating team from the old days were in awe.

"Newshì Hu. Please call me Madam. Nishi is, another meaning."

"I was expecting a call once you were ready."

"Once? But I am here Mr Kirby."

"Indeed. The original proposal is over a year old now."

"I have it waiting. Please."

Kirby found himself dismissing his taxi to join Madam Hu in her own cab, sharing it with a battered cloth covered trunk big enough for her to fit inside. Madam Hu explained that it held two sets of the contract documents as he requested. Kirby hesitated, realising that he could have, should have, had them signed in the convenience of his own offices. But this was

a small matter. He knew the boiler plate text by heart and had already initialled all but a few revisions for the retentions and performance bond. As they sped along the embankment he sat back and introduced her to the subject of English weather, suggesting that she was lucky as it was mild for the time of year and explaining that this was known as an Indian Summer. She asked him why and, stuck for an answer, he turned his attention to the contract while she twisted an apple green jade ring round her finger. They were approaching the Dorchester down Stanhope Gate when she asked, "Can you give me a hundred pounds?" Kirby rolled his eyes, took out his wallet and handed her two fifty pound notes. She took it and got out the cab leaving Kirby to pay the fare and then follow her up the stairs carrying the trunk, just in time to see her tip the concierge with his one hundred pounds.

As if he wasn't already familiar with the layout

Kirby stood in the middle of the lobby, looking about him as if lost in this familiar layout. By the time he caught sight of her she was headed in the wrong direction.

"Do you want me to arrange a conference room?" he called to her.

"We go to my room."

They took the lift to the top floor where he followed her out and down the corridor. A door opened at their approach and a Chinese who might have been her butler or amanuensis showed them into a suite overlooking Hyde Park. She gave the man her coat and rapid Chinese instructions which did not stop until he had taken the trunk from Kirby, removed four boxes of the volumes with their familiar blue bindings and then laid them out in two sets of fourteen volumes, each open at the signing page. Kirby saw his own initials on the corners as she flicked through the amendments, each of which she had marked with dainty red tasselled cards. She passed the General Agreement to Kirby and one by one as each volume

was signed off her amanuensis breathed on the corporate stamp, rolled it on a crimson ink pad and pressed down on the signatures as if certifying a Chinese work of art.

With three volumes to go there was an embarrassing pause while Kirby thought of checking for unseen subcontracts, for work let out to others. Madam Hu's trunk was empty.

"The subcontracts Madam Hu. Do you have them for me?"

"That you do not sign."

"I understand but the contract stipulates that I am to have sight of any subcontracts you might have placed. I'm entitled to know any other interests," said Kirby tapping the Contract, "Anything over half a million I believe."

"sup to you. I did not want to trouble you."

At that moment Kirby's phone rang. When his PA tried to tell him there was a story breaking at his Marston house he lost what patience he had left.

"I told Wheeler we'd stick to his CDA. No television, no journalists, no disclosure."

Madam Hu stood up. Business over they shook hands and her amanuensis helped Kirby with his two boxes of contract volumes.

When Legal came on the phone he told them the risk was negligible and referred them to Sir Nigel's report, a copy of which he'd already provided them with.

"Fine plans but no bloody title after that deal you made with a Hong Kong brass plate. Ninety per cent of the assets belong to their mainland subcontractor."

"It doesn't matter."

"With a fucking great power station smack in the middle of it? Your CDO's are worthless. As well as clearing up any demolition there's so much toxic waste it'll be five years before anyone can lift a spade."

“Other people can worry about that. The collateral debt is already sold. It’s five years before anyone expects to start recovering it and by that time we’ll have moved on.”

Francis Kirby had said all he had time for and was about to put the phone down when three people interrupted him, his PA, her assistant and a worried looking man in between them.

“Mr Kirby. This man is from your daughter’s magazine. He has some bad news for you.”



## Twenty Four

Neville Marlow

Nothing is the way I remember it except the smell of earth like a damp dog and the last trees with beech nuts scrunching underfoot. Even time isn't the same since the first full day I stood up to grab at my mother's skirts. Compared to then even my first day at school was a thousandth part of that small life since when I've strung out my time in ever smaller fractions, days that run on in a blizzard. My father's time had four seasons to every year as I remember. They were like the sea, always changing but always the sea.

I never got much done here after I saw their plans. Within a month the trees were dying off and I found the copper nails someone had knocked into the roots. Before the end of the year they brought in an excavator, knocked down the Barn, carted off the beams and took a back hoe to the foundation block, the one with the bolts from the box I hid in as a lad. They broke through the water main. They turned off the electricity and when I asked they said it was a two hour job for jointing cables but here I am with the power never back. They waited till I was in town before they took a JCB to my wall and dug footings for their own, a new wall across the Right of Way that's been there as long as Marston if not since the Romans. I told them you can't build over a Right of Way. They agreed with me. They knocked it through, put a gate in for the Way and padlocked it. It's been padlocked ever since. They put guards on the place, two of 'em, bald and angry. I had bags over the windows to stop 'em looking in at me. I was getting things sorted when the gas went out and I needed a new bottle. Otherwise you forget see. I had to go into town and not be stuck without no gas never mind

electricity. You get scared. But when I saw the blue light flashing I thought they'd found him out.

Working out front by his big house I think of my trip to the Great Wall and the crowds I saw in front of the Forbidden City. Wang Hong the Director's boy helped me out when his cousin had me by the wrists and wouldn't let go, telling me about some old man who wouldn't eat and couldn't walk or cry. 'This Liu Shaoqi,' he kept saying as if everyone knew what he was talking about. What can I say about their Great Wall? It had two sides. On the way there the bus drove through one of those factory towns that makes one thing, snazzy clothes this one. Deeper into the country I passed a hillside terraced with stony fields the size of your front room, useless land that you couldn't run a plough across but somehow they managed. I looked back and saw this woman who'd got herself a new business suit from one of their factories, a peasant woman in a bright red suit up to her knees in a furrow hauling at the traces of a wooden plough. When we stopped there was this one street village with nowt but baked yellow dirt that you couldn't get a spade in. A gang of kids came round trying to sell me little red books, marbles, post cards and a dog eared guide book before a big fellow cleared them off with a clip round the ear. As soon as they'd gone he was trying to sell me the same stuff. And that wall. What can you say? It's a wall. It had two sides. Like this English one I'm trying to get done. It went on and on.

It's as if I'd never been gone the way I'm struggling to build this wall, as if I never left here or Yorkshire, as if the strikes never happened. Before I learned to string a wire properly they used to rib me as a farm boy. The miners told me that in the old days when they went on strike for a decent wage his Lordship told them the mine belonged to him to do with as he liked. So the miners asked how he'd come by the mine and they were told his Lordship's father gave it to him. As to how his father came by it, that went back in turn all the way to

the First Earl who, according to his Lordship, had ‘jolly well gone out and fought for it.’ ‘Well,’ said the miners, ‘We’re going to fight you for it.’ Maybe they lost but meanwhile that village by the Great Wall has grown a bit.

I told them what they asked, I said, ‘Neville Marlow, born here on the twenty fifth of October.’ They said I got that from her book of stories and asked how I felt about that. I said that once stories are told they can’t be undone. They said her stories were about an Englishman named after the Prime Minister and born on Saint Crispin’s day in a house built the year of Agincourt. They said I must’ve been angry and I said no but I had called her a string pusher, a person who talks a lot but can’t read a drawing. I said you can undo a string line but not a story. They said everyone knew her father, that he was clever the way he sold off the Albion works and he lived here. All I know is he bought our cottage and wasn’t going to work the land or pay tax. Not even if he died. The likes of him tell stories that never happen, dressing up space with words like ‘freedom’ or ‘human spirit’ or ‘us’ and ‘them’, five hundred years of stories hiding more than we’ll ever know. I said all fathers are liars a moment ago. It’s not that they lie but they tell stories. The trouble is they’re all history and that’s what gets us in the end. When they told me I killed her they turned out my pockets and got a hold of Kim’s photograph. They wanted to know what the Chinese writing on the back was about.