

董橋：這一代的事

## This Generation

By Dong Qiao

Translated by Jon Solomon

### Cold Rain Outside the Study Window

FATHER WAS SITTING on the couch by the window in his study, holding a cup of freshly-steeped Iron Bodhisattva tea. The white steam wafting out of the cup was a veil of sadness, half-obscuring his weathered face. The dense bamboo thicket outside the window accentuated the emerald-green bamboo leaves splashed over the blue velvet couch cushions. The contrast revealed an unusual flair for design. Because it was twilight after a rainfall, the occasional croaking of frogs in the lotus pond by the courtyard only intensified the silence in the study. Standing by the red sandalwood desk just a few steps from the couch, the eighteen-year-old youth holding his breath did not need to look up to remind himself of what was written on the scrolls hanging on the wall to his left:

*Southern clouds, portents of the future  
A thousand folds of purple  
Dew on the flowers, gathered fragrance  
An endless field of orchids*

and the couplet behind the bonsai stand on the right:

*To preserve virtue is the only way to carry on the family line  
To abide in the world is but to be forthright and sincere*

Carefully-arranged on either side of the south-facing lattice window stood a pair of ebony and glass bookcases. When I was young, whenever father went out, I would secretly leaf through all of his old books and paintings. I prided myself on being able to reproduce them all with my eyes closed: Song-dynasty flower and bird

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scenes, Ming landscapes and Qing rubbings of inscriptions in stone. The lamp on the wall was like a dream; focusing my gaze on that thicket of assorted calligraphy brushes in the blue-and-white porcelain brush-holder on the desk, I thought of my childhood, and for no particular reason, I began to loathe the Qing calligrapher, He Shaoji. Father took a sip of tea and said: "The first thing you're going to do when you get to Taipei is to go see Uncle Song, understand?"

"Yes, Father."

"China is in great difficulty—all the more reason to lead a simple life and concentrate on your studies."

"Yes." The sound of the frogs grew more and more raucous; outside the window, the cold rain began to fall again.

### Raising the Bamboo Curtain

Pattering on for two days straight, the cold rain tinged the university campus in Tainan with the pale shades of a light-colour ink painting. Holding a black umbrella, Su Xuelin hurried in her uneven limp to deliver her lecture on the *Chu ci*.<sup>1</sup> The tiles on the roof of the Humanities Building rattled with the voice of the instructor lecturing about Dr Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People; Romeo and Juliet's star-crossed fate was discussed in a Peking accent. The military tutor, facing a begonia-leaf-shaped map of China on the blackboard, stirred up whiffs of gunpowder, blood, and sweat. With a history of English literature under his arm, Prof. Feng Junlai led his students on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. The American missionary sang his requiem over and over again for the author of *Leaves of Grass*. Her face cuddled up to Hemingway's hairy chest, the English lady discussing *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* failed to hear the bell at the end of class. Neither evening meals of pork-chops on rice topped with a sunny-side-up egg, nor late-night snacks of mung-bean soup with "casket-boards"<sup>2</sup> could fill up the Sartrean Existentialism in our stomachs. Françoise Sagan's smiles floated merrily in the waltz rhythms of the Old Capital Dance-hall, yet at the break of dawn, they precipitated themselves one after another into the soy-milk bowls of the *Literary Star*.<sup>3</sup> Neither Hu Shi's *Complete Works* nor all of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao's writings could open the door of China's modern history more than a crack, but those farewells exchanged outside the girls' dorm at eleven o'clock—that's what *really* raised the bamboo curtain of Chinese culture! Throwing down his copy of Chiang Kai-shek's *Soviet*

<sup>1</sup>An anthology of lyrics dating from the third through second centuries B.C.

<sup>2</sup>"Casket boards", loaves of bread stuffed with minced pork, are a local specialty of the Tainan area.

<sup>3</sup>The *Literary Star* was a liberal magazine published during the early 1960s by a group of prominent intellectuals in Taiwan.

*Russia in China* after lights-out, the tutor next door would snore his way back to Shandong to visit his ageing mother. As I tiptoed out behind the dorm to wash up, I could hear the janitor, a demobilized soldier named Old Wu, in the toilet, talking to himself in a rasping voice: "Sonofabitch, the carbine's busted again."

### A Present for Lenin

"Damn you, England!" John Osborne's indignant shout failed to shatter Alice's Wonderland. The English had all hid under Queen Victoria's crinoline, scavenging the crumbs of eighteenth-century bread in order to allay their hunger. Walking on tiptoe, not daring to make a peep, they were deathly afraid of rousing their venerable ancestors, who surely would have despised them as good-for-nothings. London is one vast silent library: skin colour, family background and social status are classified according to type like the books on the shelves, with all the divisions clearly marked. Nobody has to get too sentimental: "dear," "sweetheart" and "darling" caress your face with kisses 'til it's covered with lipstick, all for a two-pounds-ninety-nine-pence business transaction. In 1979 when the Left criticized the government's budget cuts, his Lordship the Minister of Finance let loose and denounced his critics as being "out of their tiny Chinese minds". The essential spirit of Western culture is: "In God we trust, all others pay cash." Within the context of such transcendental thought, Westerners have become anti-communist merely in order to prove a set of philosophical theories, and pro-communist only in order to nitpick at some conventional political formulas. Unlike the Chinese, they are unaffected by bouts of homesickness, and lack even a drop of passion to motivate them. In 1922, Armand Hammer, now Chairman of the Board of Occidental Petroleum Company, presented Lenin with a bronze statue of a monkey seated on a pile of books, contemplating a human skeleton. One of the books was Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. A few years ago, when Hammer and his wife were in Moscow planning the construction of a trade centre, Brezhnev heard that Madame Hammer disliked spending long periods in the Lenin Suite of the tourist hotel, so he immediately presented them with an apartment. It so happened that on that very day, a South Korean schoolmate of mine at London University asked me: "How do you say *han zei bu liang li* 漢賊不兩立 [an honourable Chinese cannot co-exist with 'foreign bandits'] in English?"

"Sorry, I don't have the time to think about it. I'm going back to Hong Kong the day after tomorrow."

### Hong Kong, Stable and Secure Hong Kong

One of the manifestos of Dadaism declared: "There are no more painters, no more musicians, no more sculptors, no more religions, no more royalists, no more

imperialists, no more anarchists, no more socialists, no more bolsheviks, no more politicians, no more proletariat, no more enemies, no more police, no more nations, no more dreaming fools; no more, no more, no more, no more, no more"—that leaves only "unconscious" governments and "party-giving" news agencies.

### **General, You Can Do It Like This**

In the coffee shop at the Chiang Kai-shek Airport, I struck up a conversation with a major-general about the prospects for Taiwan's reunification with the mainland and the future of Hong Kong. He said: "Reunification? You mean, we've just wasted the last thirty-five years?!" There was no wind or rain; the plane took off on time.

## On Taste

THE CHINESE CHEMIST Zhang Zigao 張子高 was well-known as a collector of antique inksticks. He amassed a collection of nearly one thousand sticks, many of which were priceless pieces from the Ming and Qing dynasties. He wrote many articles on the authenticity of antique inksticks, and together with three other collectors, Ye Gongzhuo 葉恭綽, Zhang Jiongbo 張綱伯 and Yin Runsheng 尹潤生, he compiled a *Guide to Four Private Collections of Inksticks*. The characteristics of good ink—light viscosity, fine colouring, and appropriate ageing—are naturally related to the concerns of colloid chemistry. Zhang Zigao studied chemistry, and later specialized in the history of chemistry. It is hardly surprising that he said: “Collecting inksticks is not only my passion, it’s also part of my research in the history of chemistry.” It is rare indeed that career and interest actually match each other so well. The famous Chinese architect Liang Sicheng 梁思成 (1901-1972) was similarly blessed. He maintained that any study of ancient Chinese architecture must emphasize “seeing”, rather than relying solely on books and pictures. In his own lifetime he travelled widely. In his *Essays on Architecture in Peking and Its Environs*, Liang mentions how he and his wife, Lin Huiyin 林徽音 (1904-1955), discovered three tiny Buddha images on the north and south cliffs of Xingzikou Gully during a trip to the Western Hills in 1923. In spite of seven hundred years of wind and sleet, the Southern Song-style carvings etched in flag-stone were still faintly discernible. “Although very small,” Liang wrote, “they still manifest a kind of transcendental solemnity. Set off against the clear, azure sky, they give the weary traveller a mysterious sensation of joy and beauty.” When an architect possesses this kind of appreciative sense, Liang Sicheng called it “the intent of architecture.”

“Intention” is not so easily communicated through words. It is as subtle as a natural propensity or innate sensibility, and always implies an air of “good taste”. It is a purely subjective feeling. Mysterious and impossible to quantify, bewitching the senses in the same way sight and sound do, artistic “intention” is virtually impossible to explain rationally. The same is also true of the English words “sensibility” and “taste”, both of which connote a spontaneous reaction to people, things or events, without the conventions of any formal system. In her “Notes On Camp”, Susan Sontag points out: “Taste has no system and no proofs . . . Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proofs, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea . . . .” This is precisely what Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1610)<sup>1</sup> had in mind when he wrote: “Taste: that which is not easily achieved by most people. Taste is like the scenery on a mountain, the flavour of water, the brightness of a flower, or the poise of a woman. Even the most articulate cannot put it into words; it can only be understood through intuition.” In this, Yuan is right. However, he mocked

<sup>1</sup>Yuan Hongdao was a poet and critic who campaigned against the antiquarian, imitationist tendency of the late Ming.

the way people covet a reputation for taste and seek the semblance of it; how they debate about calligraphy and painting, dabble in antiques, and act in an aloof manner; how they value the esoteric for its own sake and abandon the beaten paths of this dusty world as though distanced from it. Yuan remarked that such people merely skim the surface of true taste, and necessarily fall prey to the disease of intellectual snobbery. As far as taste is concerned, that which comes naturally is inherently deep, whereas that which is acquired through learning is generally shallow. Single-minded pursuit of the trappings of high culture will almost certainly lead to a dead end. The deeper one delves into reason, the farther one gets from true taste. Eventually, one becomes so precious that one literally prices oneself out of the market. Susan Sontag saw this quite clearly. She upheld that the hedonism of seeking the sublime in the vulgar was also "good taste": "It makes the man of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion." For the same reason, the highest realm of the traditional Chinese "music, chess, calligraphy and painting" aesthetic emphasized mature control. True, Zhang Dai 張岱 (1599-1684?) was fond of temples, beautiful servant-girls, catamites, new clothing, gourmet food, fast horses, decorated lanterns, fireworks, theatre, instrumental music, antiques, birds and flowers. Though his state of mind differed from that of scholars with great erudition, he was certainly not vulgar to the core or without creative inspiration. Otherwise, after the fall of the Ming dynasty, why would he have retreated into the mountains to write? George Bernard Shaw said that it was because Caesar possessed both common sense and good taste that he never in his whole life showed any originality, much less moral courage. Shaw's remark should not be taken literally; he was just being sarcastic about the way Westerners use taste as a way to judge a person's spiritual attainments.

Taste is of course inseparable from spiritual attainment. The pity is that mass, commercial culture has commodified moral integrity and cultural cultivation, regarding them as "ready-mades" to be recognized only by the label and not by the content. At this point the act of "tasting" is farther removed from taste than the moon. When Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929) recommended Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1889-1969) to Cao Yunxiang 曹雲祥, the President of Qinghua University, Cao asked: "Where did Chen get his Ph.D.?" Liang responded: "He doesn't have a Ph.D. or an M.A." Cao asked again: "Has he published anything?" Liang answered: "No, he hasn't." Whereupon Cao said: "Since he doesn't have a Ph.D., and hasn't published, it'll be difficult . . . ." Greatly incensed, Liang said: "I, Liang Qichao, don't have a Ph.D. either, and although you could say I have an impressive list of publications, all of my works aren't worth even a few hundred of Mr Chen's words!" (For a record of this event, please refer to *A Biographical Sketch of Chen Yinke* by Huang Yanfu 黃延復.) From this event, we can see that Liang Qichao's knowledge and breadth-of-mind was different from Cao Yunxiang's: the former understood taste, while the latter lacked it. The reader who understands this difference is sure to smile.

Only those who can see through the strange phenomenon of a utilitarian society and smile to themselves can both thoroughly understand the essence of

“modern taste” and gain a foothold in the marketplace of commodified values, while still being fulfilled by their own tastes. When modern man looks at Boyi’s<sup>2</sup> principled refusal to eat Zhou-dynasty grain and his subsequent death by starvation on Shouyang Mountain, he really *should* laugh; only the truly stone-hearted would fail to laugh. In this exquisite push-button age of ours, people who lack this sensibility are bound to be lonely. All types of taste are of equal value; the key lies in “cleverness”. In the United States, there is a writer named Dan Hurley who specializes in writing one-minute stories. He has one short piece which tells the story of a man who was down-and-out for much of his life. Each new job was a new failure. Finally he resolved to give up the pursuit of success, and devoted himself to cultivating a loser’s ideology instead. He opened a restaurant; the sign on the door read: “Warm Beer & Lousy Food”. Much to his surprise, it was an instant success. Everybody said that he was natural and sincere, a real card. Customers flocked to the restaurant in droves, and from then on his fortune was made. In terms of sensibility and taste, one could say that here was a person who was thoroughly enlightened, like a Buddha on the highest path: pressed by circumstances, with a million worries closing in, he experienced a sudden burst of inspiration. He neither indulged in narcissism, nor drifted with the tide. As a result, his livelihood was assured and his character left unsullied. He understood the meaning behind the old saying: “When a person writes characters on the inside of a paper window-screen, the view from outside is best.”

Although common wisdom has it that, “A flower cannot be without butterflies, nor a rock without moss”, in the final analysis, “For a city-dweller, paintings can be mountains and rivers and bonsai arrangements gardens.” For modern man, however, a city-dweller both in mind and body, it is especially difficult to develop a sensitivity to high culture. Nonetheless, by pursuing knowledge, it is more or less possible to escape from this fortress mentality. Knowledge can be either ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, authentic or imitation; one need not be rigid in one’s approach. Though knowledge may not always prove useful, it can add zest to life and alleviate the spiritual ulcers created by the rules and regulations of a bureaucratic system. Zhang Zigao abandoned himself to the pleasures of antique inksticks, Liang Sicheng revelled in mountains and streams, and Zhang Dai had a passion for extravagance. Call it the pursuit of “knowledge” or “taste”, what is actually revealed is their infinite sympathy for humanity. William Empson’s “urban pastoral” is a further example of this idea. The definition of taste can always be adapted to fit the circumstances.

<sup>2</sup>fl. circa twelfth century B.C., during the fall of the Shang dynasty at the hands of the Zhou.