

西西：飛氈

Flying Carpet: excerpts

By Xi Xi

Translated by LAU Ming Pui

Lotus-heart Tea

蓮心茶

No one knew when old Mr and Mrs Chan came to Fertile Town, or when the lotus-heart tea shop opened. People only knew that for as long as Fertile-water Street had been there, lotus-heart tea had been there too. It had been there right across the street when the Fa Shun Family were still selling watermelons on Fertile-water Street. The shop had been run by the old couple all these years without any assistants. Needless to say, business was awful: even the flies were not attracted. You could hardly believe a shop like this could survive year after year.

Every morning in the kitchen, old Mrs Chan took a bunch of dried lotus seeds with the hearts still inside, and boiled them in an urn. No sugar, no liquorice, no dried orange-peel—just an urn of plain tea. In summer, when lotus leaves or lotus seedpods were available, a leaf or a seedpod might be added. After simmering for three hours the tea was ready to serve. Old Mr Chan ladled the lotus-heart tea into bowls, covered each bowl with a piece of square glass, and put them on the counter of the shop. Lotus-heart tea was bitter, and those who drank it could not help grimacing. Business was quiet, which allowed the droplets formed on the underside of the glass to fall back into the tea.

Published in 1995, Flying Carpet covers a hundred years of Hong Kong history. Xi Xi refers to the carpet in question as a doormat at the entrance to a big country. The writing of this novel was sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

This kind of bitter tea was sold on Fertile-water Street for years and years. The furnishings of the shop, the taste of the tea, the way the business was run, and the people who ran it remained unchanged. The old couple did not seem to be concerned about their business, and they stayed in the shop day in, day out. They maintained that lotus-heart tea was good. They always told their customers that although the tea tasted quite bitter, it quenched your thirst and was good for your health. They always said that their lotus-heart tea recipe was handed down from their ancestors, and the lotus hearts would link our hearts. You would not be aware of this when you drank the tea, but even after a long time you would still remember the tea, and this would call to mind our Fertile-water Street and Fertile Town. The tea itself was linked with the hearts of those who drank the tea, and such an attachment took time to develop. So lotus-heart tea had to be bitter.

No one understood the old couple's line of reasoning. Indeed, they got more and more uncommunicative, saying little to anyone. The shop became run-down and business declined day by day. Even Falay couldn't bear the sight of it. He was just a transient visitor, yet he lived in the attic of the tea shop, met the old couple every day, and often cooked with them in the kitchen. So Falay suggested that the old couple should change the way they did business. He thought just selling lotus-heart tea was no way to go about things. Instead, they should expand their market and sell a wider variety of products. For example, they could sell fried rice in lotus leaves, tasty candied lotus roots flavoured with osmanthus flowers, fresh lotuses, candied lotus seeds, and sweet red jujube soup with lily and lotus seeds. Once they got off to a good start, they could further extend their business. Since they were making fried rice in lotus leaves, why not make glutinous rice *zongzi* in lotus leaves, and glutinous rice dumplings? If they were going to sell candied lotus seeds, why not sell candied melons and coconuts? If selling fresh lotuses, why not consider chrysanthemums, gladioli, and ginger flowers as well? And if they planned to sell red jujube soup with lily and lotus seeds, then what about peanut paste, almond tea, sesame paste, and red bean soup?

Having been in Fertile Town for some time, Falay behaved more or less like a local, and knew the confectioneries there like the back of his hand. Indeed his suggestions were quite good—he was a businessman and he had a business mind. Yet when the old couple heard his suggestions, though they nodded and blinked, they did not take them up.

"There's just two of us, and altogether we only have four hands. What's more, we're too old," one of them said.

"And we don't know how to make glutinous rice *zongzi* in lotus leaves or fried rice in lotus leaves," the other one said.

Falay lived in the attic of the lotus-heart tea shop, and what kind of tea did



Medicine.
Collection of the Hong Kong
Tourist Association.

he drink every day? It was a kind of sweet tea which people of his homeland drank. He had brought with him a cup from his homeland. It was a small glass cup the shape of a gourd, and it rested on a saucer. Every day Falay boiled some water and brewed some red tea in his glass cup. When he drank the tea, he added some sugar and stirred the tea with a spoon. This sweet tea was Falay's favourite. But later, after he had lived in the attic of the lotus-heart tea shop for a period of time, and had seen the state the old couple were in, he gave up the sweet tea of his homeland, and went to drink a bowl of lotus-heart tea every day.

"You will remember lotus-heart tea in the future," one of them said.

"You will miss Fertile Town," the other one said.

Feather Dusters 雞毛撻子

Feather dusters always sold quite well. In Fertile Town, except for the foreigners, almost every family had a feather duster. Feather dusters had rather different functions when they came into the hands of men and women. Most of the time, they were teaching tools. For example, naughty children were punished with feather dusters every day. Burning with anger, a father would grab a feather duster and thrash his children; at times a mother holding a feather duster would charge along the street after her children. Feather dusters often displayed their powers in full view, yet sometimes people did not see them in action; their use was only implied. For example, a lady called Suk Ching was staging 'The Fertile-water Street Chalk Circle' in her room today. Kneeling inside a chalk circle, her husband had on his head a spittoon patterned with red flowers and green leaves. And menacing him from right over the spittoon was a feather duster. The lady was in a huff, and the feathers swayed every time she gave a puff.

The owner of the furniture store had never beaten his daughter with feather dusters, he had not even scolded her. Yet he was the most frequent buyer of feather dusters on Fertile-water Street. Every couple of weeks, he would buy a new feather duster. It was all due to the disaster in the street outside. Dyed-cloth Street, when Ip Wing Wah's family moved in, was already a nice street: it had pavements on both sides, and was paved with stone covered with asphalt. On both sides of the street there were shops where people lived upstairs; for shops like the Yik Fung Pawn Shop, the upstairs could be used as storerooms. Sometimes when the furniture store owner Mr Ip looked out of the store, he could see carts, handcarts, rickshaws, and bicycles passing down the street; from time to time, he could also see someone leading an ox go by. And the pavements were always full of people. Compared with the muddy country roads, Dyed-cloth Street allowed much freer passage.

Such a nice street, wasn't it already well-paved? Yet every six months another team of workers came. Drilling and shovelling, they made a trench which stretched a very long way, creating heaps of rubble along the street; grit was blown everywhere, the air was filled with dust and dirt. Poor Mr Ip, all the furniture in his store was covered with a layer of grit. Even in normal times, dust got in easily, and Mr Ip had to dust down all the furniture several times a day. Most of his time was spent dusting. Feather dusters were not rags, and people seldom washed them. After some time, the brightly coloured feathers turned muddy and sticky, like those of a chicken in a bog. The originally brown and yellow feathers turned grey. It was time to buy a new one.

The days when the street was turned upside down were also the days which gave Mr Ip his biggest headaches. He covered his furniture with dustsheets, leaving only one or two pieces uncovered, which he had to dust most diligently. Not until a customer came did he lift the dustsheets from the other furniture. Every time they started drilling and shovelling in the streets of the Fertile-water District, they would be at it for months, and the shopkeepers got very fed up. The dim sum in the restaurants were covered with dust, and the herbal medicine of the medicine stores was mixed with sand. As for the poor lotus-heart tea shop, business went from bad to worse when the roadworks began. They couldn't sell dust-and-sand tea, could they? The only thing the old couple could do was to put out only two bowls of lotus-heart tea, covering them each with a piece of square glass and then a piece of wet cloth, and to keep on wiping the crockery. In contrast, Fa Shun Kee was not so badly affected. As soda water was kept in airtight bottles, dust could not get in. However, the cats were now dusty and dirty, and they groomed themselves all day long.

One day, a piece of cardboard was found right near the trench, saying:

*Highways Department, what a friend!
Digging the roads for days on end.
Business drops, we'll soon go bust,
We're all fed up with sand and dust.*

When the streets were dug up, people were always complaining, yet when the roadworks were done, they were overjoyed. Strangely enough, though the digging was done to the road, it turned out that what people got was not only a smooth and broad road, but also something convenient and civilized. For example, after those roadworks there was no more flooding; another lot of roadworks marked the provision of tap water for every household, and labourers were no longer hired to get water from the far end of the street. Another time the streets were dug up and resurfaced, happiness came after suffering, as electricity was then available to Fertile-water Street and Dyed-cloth Street, and there were streetlights in the Fertile-water District.

Material not available due to copyright restrictions.

YAU Leung 邱良

Cheung Chau, 1994.

The Metropolis: Visual Research into Contemporary Hong Kong.

Nanny the Housekeeper **乳娘管家**

The streets were like a fish cut open, showing its lungs, liver, air bladder and intestines. Yet Ip Chong Sheng's nanny seldom complained; she just wiped the dust from her clogs more frequently. She still went out whenever she had time. She was only the nanny of the Ip Family, yet she was like the housekeeper. She often poked her nose into things that did not concern her, and the family was happy to have this industrious person to run errands. When other people's nannies had time on their hands, they would take a nap or do some needlework, make a quilted jacket for the children or take on the never-ending task of sewing the cloth soles of shoes. But not her.

When they wanted to buy firewood and charcoal, she would go and order fifty cattles of charcoal and ten bundles of firewood for the furniture store! The fuel was easily used up, because the Ip's was a big family and they used firewood for fuel. On top of that, apart from the regular meals, they often made sweet soups and baked cakes. As for the charcoal, hardwood furniture made of rosewood and mahogany and the like had to be polished with wax. First, the newly sanded furniture would be evenly coated with sappanwood dye. Then it would be heated and at the same time coated with beeswax. When the wood had absorbed the melted wax, it would be rubbed with a dry cloth and the wax left on the surface wiped away. Then the finished product appeared—the grain was beautiful and the colour tasteful. Even the 'knots' of the wood were sealed with wax. Once polished, even plain and dull wood would come up as glossy as silk, while rosewood would be lustrous like amber.

Needless to say, it was the nanny who rushed to refill the 'fire-water' (kerosene) lamps. She filled the lamp reservoir with kerosene, trimmed the wicks, rubbed the copper lampstands until they shone, and carefully cleaned the lamp-chimneys, which were pot-bellied like pregnant women. The smoke of the kerosene always blackened the thin and fragile lamp-chimneys. The nanny had broken a number of them and so had Mrs Ip. I have to buy some lamp-chimneys! The nanny would say, then she went out carrying little Ip Chong Sheng on her back.

All the shops nearby knew the nanny. She was a frequent visitor to the herbal medicine shop. She often bought liquorice olives, prunes and apricots; every couple of weeks she would buy some 'Tsing Po Leung' herbs to make soup, and chrysanthemums to make tea. When she had a headache or a fever, she would buy the 'Wong Lo Kut' herbal brew. Sometimes when she fell ill, she didn't bother to see the doctor, but just went to the herbal medicine shop, told the man her symptoms, and returned home with the medicine. She was friends with the people of the flour

shop, the rice shop, and the oil shop. She not only got to know the shopkeepers, but also the street-traders, especially the women who sold shredded tobacco, tea-seed bricks and 'Pao Fa' wood shavings. Tea-seed bricks were used as shampoo and 'Pao Fa' wood shavings were used to make hair glossy.

The road was hollowed out and strewn with heaps of rubble, and she had to pick her way along. She often said that her husband had contributed to the construction of this road, because he worked at a stone quarry, hammering and chiselling all the year round. Stone pillars were used for buildings, and the gravel was used to construct roads. When she saw the gravel, she seemed to see her husband. Though she missed her husband, she didn't like to see him too often. Why did she work as a nanny? Actually her family was not badly off and had no need to worry about food and clothing. On top of that, her husband was a foreman! She went out to work because of a quarrel with her husband. She did not want to have babies. But, as she told Mrs Ip on the quiet, it happened that he did, so what could she do? He said, A man gets married to have children. *

Material not available due to copyright restrictions.

YAU Chi Ming 邱志明

Shoes Repairer, 1992.

Horizontal scroll, ink and colour on paper, 30 x 67 cm.

Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition 1992.

Summer-Heat Disease 暑熱症

Falay only came to Fertile Town in winter, and perhaps this explained why he had never suffered from summer-heat disease. But for poor Mr Cross, summer always brought with it the summer-heat disease. Feeling very weak, he could not get out of bed; and on top of that, he suffered from fever and headache, and even vomiting. He was sick all summer long; not until autumn would he recover. Strangely enough, the locals never suffered from this disease; those who fell ill were all foreign people. Before the ice factory was set up, ice was imported to cure the foreign people of summer-heat disease. The man in the herbal medicine shop said that it was a question of acclimatization. The cure for it was to live in the same little houses, drink the same water, and eat the same food as the people of Fertile Town: in short, to live exactly as the locals did. If they did so for a few years, they need no longer worry about summer-heat disease.

How could Mr Cross lead the same life as the locals? He wore ties and jackets with lapels, he ate bread and butter, and he drank French wine. He obstinately adhered to his foreign habits; thus every year he suffered from summer-heat disease. The only way he communicated with the people of Fertile Town was through doing business with them. His partners were Fa Shun Fung and Fa Shun Shui, and together they produced soda water. To begin with, when Mr Cross came to Fertile Town, he bought a brick house by the seaside. Then he imported the soda water machines and bottles, and turned the brick house into a factory. The workers were all locals, and he himself was their instructor as well as their boss. Not long after the arrival of the machines, the factory hired a dozen workers; but before six months were out, all the workers had left. People were told that gold had been found in Star-Spangled Banner Country, and there was a special boat to take them there to pan for gold. Upon hearing this, all the workers in the factory rushed off, leaving behind Fa Shun Fung and his brother Fa Shun Shui. The brothers had previously sold fruit juice in front of their house in Fertile-water Street, and business was not very good but not bad either. One day, they heard that a foreigner was trying to recruit workers to produce cold drinks; thinking that they could learn some advanced ways of producing drinks and earn some money too, the brothers left their stall to the old folks and the women at home, and went out to work.

Though everyone rushed off to pan for gold, Fa Shun Fung wasn't the least bit interested in it, because he was a Buddhist. On top of that, his wife had passed away in childbirth, leaving behind two twin boys. Therefore he didn't want to leave home. As for Fa Shun Shui, seeing that his parents were getting old, and that his brother didn't care much about doing business so could not support the family, he

didn't want to go either. Now that all the workers had left the soda water factory, what could be done? The Fa family was a family of seven or eight, just the right workforce to produce soda water. Besides, there was no point in letting the machines stand idle in the factory. At first, the brothers suggested that the whole family should go to work at the brick house, but the old folks and the women said no. Finally, the brothers compromised and proposed to move the machines to their house. The machines didn't need much space, and their house was a two-storey building; they could live upstairs and work downstairs. On top of that, the house was conveniently situated on Fertile-water Street, which was ideal for wholesale distribution. In contrast, though the brick house was quite spacious, every time people wanted to go to the town centre, they had to climb up a slope.

And so Mr Cross and the Fa family formed a partnership: Cross was responsible for capital, machinery, the supply of bottles, the method of production, and wholesale distribution, while the Fa family offered the house and workforce to the business. At that time, the brothers' parents were still alive, and their three sisters were not yet married. Together with several uncles who were unemployed, they started their business and put up the 'soda water' sign. Mr Cross had already been here for three years, and had suffered from summer-heat disease three times. Spring had come, and Mr Cross began to worry about the disease. Little did he imagine that something would happen to cure his illness forever.

On the Peak lived a fellow countryman of Mr Cross, a very learned missionary. One day, he held a feast at home, inviting his fellow countrymen in Fertile Town. The merry gathering lasted for half a day, then the guests bade the host farewell. The host sent for some sedan chairs to take the guests downhill; but there weren't enough sedan chairs and the guests had to wait their turn. Surrounded by the green grass and trees of the Peak, Cross saw a picturesque footpath flanked on both sides by verdant woods. Being a music-lover and a reader of poetry, he had a romantic streak. He was suddenly in the mood for a stroll, and so he said that he would like to go for a saunter to admire the scenery. The tram station was not far away, and he could take the tram downhill.

All by himself, Mr Cross delightedly walked along the footpath. However, on his way, a mist rose upon the hill. Greyish white, the mist came like a curtain and it soon swathed Mr Cross. Surrounded by the thick mist, he couldn't see his own hand stretched out before him. Mist is by no means harmful, and soon clears of its own accord. If Mr Cross had stood there and waited for a little while, things would have been perfectly all right. But as there was a handrail along the path, he decided to move forward holding onto the handrail. He was pretty sure that he could arrive at the tram station without any difficulty. However, no sooner had he taken a few steps than he missed his footing and rolled down the slope.*