

鄭赤琰：釣魚政治

The Politics of Fishing: Two essays

By Zheng Chiyan

Translated by Don J. Cohn

A Tale of Tangled Lines

ONCE UPON A TIME two anglers named White and Red went fishing in Hong River. The waters of this river flowed quite swiftly, and since there were very few ideal fishing spots along its banks, they were compelled to take up positions very close to each other, a situation in which disputes might easily arise. So they divided up the available space between them, Red taking the upstream portion and White the downstream.

In a matter of moments, White had a fish on his line. So overjoyed was he that he began to dance and leap about and shout and hoot at the top of his voice, though of course he never stopped casting provocative glances at Red. When Red, whom luck had temporarily abandoned, observed his fellow angler's self-satisfaction, all his pent-up anger threatened to boil over. And when White noticed Red's anger and the fact that it was flavoured with a good pinch of jealousy, he decided to delay reeling in his line and thus allow his catch to play about in the river, as a way of irritating Red.

But then Red felt several strong jerks on his line. His elation at that moment need not be described. He had already said to himself thousands of times: No, the grass *isn't* greener on the other side of the fence! Now, capitalizing on his good

Zheng Chiyan is a lecturer in the Department of Government and Public Administration, Chinese University of Hong Kong. He started writing in the early 1960s and has published a great deal of fiction, prose and political commentaries. These essays are taken from The Politics of Fishing (Hong Kong: Ming Pao chubanshe, 1987).

fortune, he danced and leaped about, shouting and hooting at the top of his voice. After carrying on like a mad ape for a while, it suddenly dawned on him that something was amiss. Upon closer examination he discovered that the fish he assumed he had caught was actually White's fish, which had got itself tangled in his line. Glancing in White's direction, Red noticed the peculiar way his line was going taut and slack in turn. In the meantime White was also aware of the fact that Red's line had gotten tangled around his fish. Of course Red wasn't going to help White out of this predicament for nothing, and so he plotted his revenge. Feigning ignorance of the entanglement, he proceeded to tug on, whip around and reel in his line like a man possessed. This nearly drove White to distraction, since he was sure that this would result in his fish being separated from his hook. In order to save his catch, White adopted a policy of "easing up" and began paying fastidious attention to every movement of Red's line. Hardly one to be taken in by such tactics, Red sought to taunt White even further, so rather than simply reel in the fish, he too adopted a similar policy of "easing up". As a result, White's only alternative was to start reeling the fish in himself. While they struggled in this push-me pull-you manner, the poor fish was yanked back and forth, up and down, and in every-which direction. This pointless conflict went on for quite some time, and White's central nervous system seemed to have come under Red's control. The "final solution" was in Red's hands, for if he suddenly decided to give the line a fierce yank, both of their lines might break and the fish would get away altogether.

Having reached a stalemate, White and Red started to negotiate. White felt that reason was on his side, since the fish had been caught within the bounds of his sovereign territory; had they not divided up the available fishing grounds in the beginning? But Red found this explanation unsatisfactory and claimed that where the fish had been caught and who had caught it was irrelevant. He stated that since the fish had become entangled in his line in his territory, all the other fish in the vicinity would be scared away; secondly, he said that only if he agreed to cooperate was there any possibility of landing the fish; and thirdly, the fact that his line had become entangled with White's line prevented him from doing any more fishing. How could their differences be resolved? If two people went fishing at the same time at the same place in the same river, each desiring to catch something, wasn't some form of cooperation necessary? Red argued that it was only because he didn't throw stones and behaved in a patient and orderly manner, that "stability" on the river was ensured. Otherwise, all the fish would panic and no one would have the slightest chance of catching anything.

White found all this talk quite unpalatable, but whose fault was it that the fish had gotten caught in Red's line in the first place? White reckoned that if he made too much of an issue out of it, it would only bring more trouble upon his head, so he swallowed his pride and accepted Red's conditions; most significantly, he agreed to share the fish with him.

At this point our little fishing expedition took a fundamental strategic turn, and the earlier antagonistic relationship between Red and White became a Red-White alliance. Had the two anglers not started out with mutual grudges, they would have entered into cooperation with less risk to themselves, but because their

Material not available due to copyright restrictions.

Illustrations courtesy of Ming Pao chubanshe.

relationship was coloured by resentment from the start—a factor neither of them could ignore—they were faced with a situation of continued tension.

According to common sense, when one of them reeled in his line, the other should play his out, and vice versa. But the two of them persisted in reeling in and playing out their lines simultaneously, so when they both let their lines out, there was no one to reel them in. And when one of them reeled his line in, the other simply refused to give an inch. It soon reached a point where they were only frustrating each other's efforts, and it got so bad that they no longer seemed to be speaking the same language: when one of them claimed the line was straight, the other said it was crooked. They went on bickering in this fashion until there was no more trust between them; each believed that the other was plotting against him, and claimed that the other was not acting according to the rules. But at the same time, they realized that this would lead nowhere.

So Red and White once again sat down for a talk to figure a way out of the mess they had gotten themselves into. It didn't take long for them to realize that they had no common system by which to coordinate their actions, even for the simplest fishing manoeuvres, such as reeling in and playing out the line. Red didn't like the speed at which White was letting out his line, and insisted that Red should set the standards. White then blamed Red for the careless way in which Red's line had become entangled in his own. *He* had caught the fish in the first place, White

contended, so his line should have the upper hand in this situation, and whenever White relaxed his line, Red should respond by tightening his to the same degree. White warned Red that if he continued to interfere with his line, the fish might get away. Red said that his reel was rather crude and old fashioned, and that his line frequently got caught up in the gears, and that this made it difficult for him to respond readily to White's movements. White then complained that Red's line was of a heavier gauge, and that his own line couldn't withstand the pressure exerted upon it by Red's line. White suggested that Red should synchronize the movements of his reel with his own, or else Red's line would cause his to break. Red contested this, claiming that his line had entangled itself around White's line, so White had no alternative but to do as he said. Thus regarding the question of cooperation, it was Red's opinion that White should be subordinate to him and adjust his line according to Red's. But White countered this, stating that they should examine the question of cooperation in the manipulation of the line from the fish's point of view. He said that since the fish had taken his hook in the first place and had remained attached to his line, as long as Red did not interfere, the fish should obey White's commands.

While the two of them continued their seemingly endless argument, the fish swam about nervously in the river. Neither man seemed to be able to trust or rely on the other. Without such trust, the river became increasingly turbulent, making life difficult for the fish, and so it began an extended struggle to escape. At the same time the fish started giving off danger signals, which were immediately picked up by the other fish in the vicinity, and they all fled in a panic.

Red's line remained entangled with White's, while the question of their cooperation remained unresolved.

Sharks

IN DESCRIBING how horrible something can be, the Chinese often use the expression "to turn pale at the mere mention of a tiger", which suggests just how formidable tigers can be. The fear of tigers is something deeply rooted in the Chinese psyche, and has many colourful manifestations in Chinese politics, culture, and literature. Confucius' famous statement, "despotic government is fiercer than a tiger" is just one example of this phobia in a political context. The original story goes that Confucius was passing through a remote village and came upon an old woman crying bitterly. When he asked her the cause of her misery, she replied that three generations of her family had been eaten alive by tigers. Taking pity on her, Confucius suggested that the woman move to a place where there were no tigers, since staying where she was meant putting her own life at risk. Much to Confucius' surprise, the woman replied that she preferred her remote village, despite the fact it was plagued by fierce tigers, because there were no wicked officials about, and that she preferred the company of tigers to that of men of that ilk. When she finished speaking, Confucius turned to his disciples and said, "You see, gentlemen, despotic government is fiercer than a tiger."

Shuihu zhuan, basically a novel about popular uprisings against the government, contains numerous unforgettable episodes in which popular heroes chop off the heads of evil officials. But the most memorable incident in the novel is the classic description of Wu Song killing a tiger. Here of course the tiger symbolizes the more brutal sort of officials.

Though Chinese people through the ages have produced some wonderful portraits in art and literature of tigers as terrifying beasts, they seem to have overlooked the fact that the most terrifying creature in the world is not the tiger but the shark. Can there be any disputing this point? Although tigers are always depicted as the epitome of ferocity, with a little training they can become house pets, perform in circus acts, and even act as watchdogs in their owners' homes. But I strongly doubt that anyone has ever succeeded in training a shark to perform like those other denizens of the deep that become star attractions in public aquariums. In its natural habitat, a tiger will not attack a man unless it is threatened, say by a person appearing suddenly nearby. Actually, tigers are afraid of people and rarely attack without provocation. Zoologists say that unless a tiger has sampled human flesh and has developed a taste for it, it will always be afraid of humans. In the case of an older tiger, however, if a human proves to be easier prey than its normal fare, it may attack. Sharks act in exactly the opposite manner. A shark of any age will attack any person who comes within its range, regardless of whether it has tasted human flesh before. And the ferocity of its attack would put a tiger to shame! This particular characteristic of sharks has been depicted from early times in Western art and literature, and even the most popular book ever written, the Bible, makes mention of it. In recent years Hollywood has done an excellent and, judging from the record-breaking box office receipts, immensely successful job of depicting shark behaviour in the movie "Jaws". One testimony of sharks' ability to raise gooseflesh

is the way "Jaws" cleared most of the beaches in Europe and America; they suddenly became as deserted as if an atomic bomb had gone off.

The shark in the movie always signals its attack by swimming around in circles with only its back fin visible above the surface of the water. Having stirred up a goodly amount of anticipation and fear in this manner, it then takes a sudden dive and seconds later some innocent swimmer disappears, soon to be replaced by a pool of blood, which quickly spreads out over the water, serving up a grim reminder of the bloody confrontation that has just taken place. And then just as you're thinking it's all over, the poor victim surfaces again, screaming in agony, whereupon the shark's back fin reappears as well, and then sinks out of sight for a second attack; in seconds the victim's upper torso is no more.

This scenario is no exaggeration; in many respects sharks are indeed more terrifying than tigers. Besides the fact that they cannot be trained in any way, their sensitivity to the smell of blood is unmatched by that of any other animal. Sharks can pick up the scent of blood with the same sensitivity radar picks up sound waves, even at a distance of several miles, and will appear at the scene in no time. I'll give one example. When I was deep-sea fishing in Mexico once, I managed to catch a couple of five-pounders. Within a half hour, though, the few drops of blood that the fish had shed in the course of struggling at the end of the line had attracted about a hundred sharks, which started circling around our fishing boat. From then on, not a single fish anyone caught escaped them; every fish we caught was bitten in half, and as a result we had to cut our expedition short that day. We had never intended to go shark fishing in the first place. After changing our location five times we still were unable to get away from them. The captain of our boat said that once

Material not available due to copyright restrictions.

sharks smell blood, there is no getting away from them. Hemingway's description in *The Old Man and the Sea* of the way the shark gnaws away viciously at the old man's catch, leaving only the bones, is extremely accurate. Without a doubt, tigers are vastly inferior to sharks in their sensitivity to the smell of blood.

Sharks are also about a hundred times nastier than tigers, and it's this characteristic that makes it impossible to domesticate them. Some scientists once performed an experiment on a shark in its natural habitat. They put a piece of juicy raw beef close enough to the shark for it to smell but out of its reach. Rather than give up and go away, the shark actually became enraged, and finally rammed the side of the boat and chewed off a piece of the deck. Scientists still debate whether sharks will capsize a boat in order to attack a person on board. Some claim it is possible if the creature is sufficiently enraged.

Sharks are superior to tigers in another way; they enjoy the natural advantage of being *less* intelligent than tigers. Most people believe that one of the main criteria for evolutionary survival is a high degree of intelligence. But this is incorrect. The shark is an ancient animal which has evolved very little over the millennia, and its intelligence remains extraordinarily low. Sharks are emotional beasts, almost totally lacking in the capacity to reason, so they perform their "honourable" deeds entirely without remorse. A tiger's fear of *homo sapiens* derives from its awareness that human intelligence is superior to its own, and thus it will eschew confrontations with humankind and refrain from rash acts. Ostensibly sharks don't reason in this manner, and are probably incapable of such basic thought, and so none of their actions are premeditated. They'll gulp down anything and everything, be it people, fish, or tin cans floating in the water. If you don't accept the theory that a low IQ is an asset to getting ahead in life, try applying it to the people around you. The point should be immediately evident, so I need not elaborate upon it here.

If we accept the fact that sharks are more vicious than tigers, as people in the West seem to have done a long time ago, the question arises: why hadn't Chinese people discovered this before? Why are there no Chinese artistic representations of sharks as terrifying creatures? My own answer is that this stems from China's long-time ban on seafaring and contact with foreign countries. The laws connected with this ban were quite strict and anyone caught infringing them would be accused of treason and punished by decapitation. Since no Chinese dared to go near the ocean, how could the Chinese people develop shark phobia? This ban was only lifted about a hundred years ago, and though numerous tragic incidents of sharks attacking people have been reported in the newspapers since (particularly in the last thirty years, when a large number of people have been eaten alive by sharks in Hong Kong waters while fleeing from China), there has been no attempt to express the blood-thirsty viciousness of the shark in artistic form. Perhaps this can be attributed to the way Hong Kong's highly commercialized society breeds a certain insensitivity to the arts in its citizenry. If Confucius had a time machine and could observe the way people today risk being eaten alive in the seas by creatures many times fiercer than tigers, simply to get to Hong Kong, he might come up with a new chapter for his *Analects*: "A despotic government is fiercer than a shark." In fact I'm sure he would. □