
倪匡：舊貨巷故事二則

Antiques Alley: Two Short Stories

By Ni Kuang

Translated by Don J. Cohn

An Old Yixing Stoneware Teapot without Mark; Spout Missing and Handle Damaged

EVERYTHING on sale in Antiques Alley is second-hand, and thus whatever ends up there is either slightly damaged or incomplete in some way. Under these circumstances, the appearance of an old Yixing stoneware teapot with its spout missing and handle broken on a dealer's stand can hardly be considered an extraordinary event.

But despite the condition of this particular teapot's spout and handle, and its squat shape, a connoisseur can tell immediately from its lustrous dark chestnut surface that it is not only a masterpiece of craftsmanship, but that it has been lovingly cared for by a knowledgeable collector; only constant hand rubbing could produce such a wonderful glow.

Many of the people who frequent Antiques Alley are connoisseurs, and the Yixing teapot with its missing spout and broken handle gets plenty of attention from them. Every day at least one person picks it up and examines the bottom of the pot for the mark of a noted potter. Naturally if the pot had such a mark, despite all its other defects, and if the price were right, it would have been sold a long time

Ni Kuang is arguably Hong Kong's most popular writer. Best known for his martial arts fiction and science fiction, he has also written zawen, film scripts and numerous short stories. "Antiques Alley" consists of seven stories, of which two are translated here. It is collected in Ni Kuang: Short Stories (Hong Kong: Mingchuang chubanshe, 1987).

According to news reports, China banned the publication and sale of Ni Kuang's science fiction in the autumn of 1988.

ago. But alas there is no mark to be found, which consigns the pot to the ranks of the ordinary, and few people even bother to ask its price.

Every story needs a coincidence to be a proper story, and this story is no exception. One day, a middle-aged man stopped by the stand, picked up the teapot, and began to examine it carefully. The proprietor didn't bat an eyelash, since he had long given up hope of selling it.

At that very moment, two young couples appeared on the scene, laughing and joking and generally having a good time. One look at them and you could tell that they represented the essence of chic. People of their ilk were rare birds in Antiques Alley, and thus they attracted a lot of attention. But despite this they continued to amuse themselves, jostling each other, talking and laughing loudly, pointing here and there. They were obviously in search of adventure, and Antiques Alley was their chosen hunting ground, since everything here seemed quaint and old-fashioned to them. In addition, by their arrogance they gave one the impression that they had stumbled upon a community of troglodytes.

One of the young men led the way, pointing things out to his companions with exaggerated gestures and talking loudly enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear: "My god! Can you believe such a place still exists in our city?"

As he spoke he turned towards his three companions, but continued walking backwards, and was unaware that he was in fact on a collision course with the middle-aged man, who at that moment was holding the Yixing teapot up to the light to get a better look at it. The young man had just spoken the sentence quoted above and was making one of his typical exaggerated gestures, when his hand shot out and struck the teapot with a "pop", knocking it out of the older man's hand and onto the ground. The young man stopped dead in his tracks, turned around, and stared at the teapot. It had broken into two perfect halves, no more, no less.

The proprietor raised his head and looked at the young man. The middle-aged man turned his head and stared at him as well. A few passersby also directed their attention to him. The young man continued staring at the ground for a few seconds, smiled, let out an exaggerated "Oh!" and then, spreading his arms as if he were acting a part in a play, said: "Oh my, just look what I've done. I've destroyed a priceless relic."

His companions laughed out loud, but the proprietor, who remained a picture of gloom, continued to stare at him. Smiling from ear to ear now, the young man bent down, pointed to the two halves of the teapot, and said: "Do you mind telling me what it is that I have broken?"

The proprietor replied coolly, "It's an old Yixing earthenware teapot with a missing spout and a broken handle."

Still smiling, the young man said, "I'll pay for the damage, you don't have to get all upset about it. How much do you want?"

The proprietor took a deep breath and said, "That's a priceless antique. Pay with your life and you'd still owe me something."

Though visibly taken aback by what the proprietor said, the young man and his friends laughed again. Then the other young man, who could have passed for his double, pointed his finger at the proprietor and said with a smile, "If you're trying



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to put the squeeze on him, I think you're making a very big mistake. My friend here's a solicitor just back from studying law in England."

The proprietor didn't budge from the small wooden crate he was sitting on. His voice was as chilling as before: "You don't have to pay me a cent, so long as you repair it without leaving a trace."

The proprietor's disconcerting manner and the hostility of the small crowd towards the four young intruders upset the two young women. One of them said: "Give him something for it and let's get out of here," while the other, similarly frightened, added: "Maybe we ought to call the cops."

The young man appeared to be getting a bit hot under the collar now. He swallowed hard and said: "All right, then, you win, how much do you want for it?"

The proprietor looked up, showing the whites of his eyes with their tiny pupils, which in broad daylight were ghoulish enough to send a chill down your spine. He said: "I told you once, that's a priceless work of art."

The young man now raised his voice: "If I *really* wanted to buy it, would you have said the same thing?"

The proprietor snorted: "That's different. It isn't a question of buying that pot from me, but of compensating me for my loss."

The young man was enraged now: "Then I'll buy the goddamned teapot from you. How much do you want for it?"

The little crowd was now totally absorbed in the drama unfolding before them, and knew that the dispute would find no easy resolution. The young man's friends started glancing around in the hope that a policeman might come to their rescue.

And then, to everyone's surprise, the proprietor said: "All right then, give me three bucks for it."

At this point, people in the crowd started booing, so great was their disappointment about not being able to see the two of them come to blows. Smiling once again, the young man remarked, "That guy's got a good sense of humour!" He took out three one-dollar coins, put them on the ground near the other antiques, and picked up the two halves of the broken teapot. "Sold!" he said.

The proprietor remained silent, picked up the coins one by one and put them in a bamboo container he kept by his side, an odd-looking red and black object that looked like an antique of some sort.

The young man laughed loudly, turned and waving goodbye started to walk away.

Well, as I said in the beginning, every story needs a coincidence.

The young man turned to go, but had hardly taken two steps when he tripped on something and fell forward, stiff as a board, and went crashing to the ground face first. He threw out his arms in an attempt to break his fall, but he acted too slowly, and the broken teapot he was holding sliced almost entirely through his neck. The proprietor mumbled something to himself, but his voice was drowned out by the shouting of the crowd, so no one heard what he said.

A Ge-Ware Incense Burner with "Flying" Handles and Six Legs in Crackled *Fenqing* Glaze

"WITH A GOOD EYE and a bit of luck, you can buy priceless treasures for next to nothing at the most unlikely places in Antiques Alley."

Myths of this nature are fairly common, and there are also a lot of true stories to back them up.

Though there are several hundred stands and shops in Antiques Alley, they're not organized in any way, and so there's no reason to suspect that all the proprietors spread such tantalizing rumours. Nonetheless, such rumours have enticed numerous people to test their eye and try their luck in Antiques Alley. Doubtless the idea of acquiring a valuable antique for a song has an almost irresistible appeal.

In the Alley there's one rather unique stand that specializes in small ceramics. Instead of laying its wares out on the ground like the other stands, here they are displayed in a glass cabinet, which is something of an antique in its own right, since its framework is made entirely of wood. Ever since aluminum cabinets came into vogue, wooden cabinets like that have become extinct!

The proprietor of this stand is something of a character. He sits on a wooden bench behind his cabinet in exactly the same posture all day long, hardly moving at all, and is exceedingly fond of picking the wax from his ears. As he sits there keeping watch over his inventory, he works at his ears non-stop, using for the purpose a bamboo ear spoon which is stained a dark maroon from years of handling. First he cleans his left ear, then his right, after which he goes back to his left ear, and so on.

Because of this habit, he never holds his head straight up, and when he tilts it to one side and half-closes his eyes, it's hard to tell if his joy is derived from ear-picking, or from the novelty of watching the world go by at such an odd angle.

Most of the stands on Antiques Alley operate on a self-service basis; customers are free to pick up and examine whatever objects strike their fancy. But because this particular stand is equipped with a glass cabinet, it's impossible to get to the items on display from the front of the cabinet, so if customers wish to see anything they have to ask the proprietor sitting on his wooden bench to take it out for them. But because the proprietor always seems to be preoccupied with his ears, most customers—unless they're especially eager to buy something—resign themselves to examining the objects through the glass. The proprietor himself never does much in the way of trying to stir up business.

That afternoon, the three of them came once again. I say "again" since the three of them have been coming to this stand three days running; this was their fourth visit. The proprietor could recall what had taken place the first day. The middle-aged man, who bore all the marks of a connoisseur, had come alone that time. As he passed by the glass cabinet, he stopped dead in his tracks, a strange glimmer in his eyes. Pointing with two fleshy fingers at an item in the case, he said, "I'd like to look at that incense burner with the 'flying' handles."

"Flying" handles is the term used to describe tall vertical handles on ceramic

incense burners. There wasn't a wide selection of items in the cabinet, so the proprietor reached in with one hand and took out the incense burner, which was about the size of his fist, and handed it to the middle-aged man, who began to examine it with great care.

While the proprietor gave his ears a workout, the middle-aged man remarked somewhat ironically: "This is a very strange incense burner. It has six feet."

The proprietor responded with a "humph," and went back to his picking. The middle-aged man said: "What do you call it?"

The proprietor switched his ear spoon from one ear to the other and said: "It's a Ge-ware incense burner with six feet in crackled *fenqing* glaze."

The middle-aged man laughed out loud, which instantly drew a small crowd of curiosity seekers around them. Still laughing, the middle-aged man said, "Ge-ware? Ha ha! There isn't a dealer on this street who wouldn't make the same claim!"

People who run antiques stands in Antiques Alley generally have a bit more patience than the average person, so the proprietor good-naturedly laughed along with the man. But he never for a moment ceased picking his ears, and it was obvious that his smile and laughter were merely skin deep.

Though the middle-aged man had made fun of the proprietor, he continued to examine the incense burner quite intensely. "How much do you want for this?" he asked.

For a moment, it seemed, the proprietor actually held his head erect. "Three thousand dollars. No bargaining."

The middle-aged man laughed again, put the incense burner down and left.

The next day, the middle-aged man returned, this time with another man, and together they spent a long time examining the incense burner. Though the middle-aged man had asked this person along to give him advice, everything he said was pure rubbish!

"If it's authentic Ge-ware in *fenqing*, then three thousand is too cheap. Three-hundred thousand'd be more like it. If it's a fake, though, three thousand's an absurd price; I wouldn't give you three bucks for it."

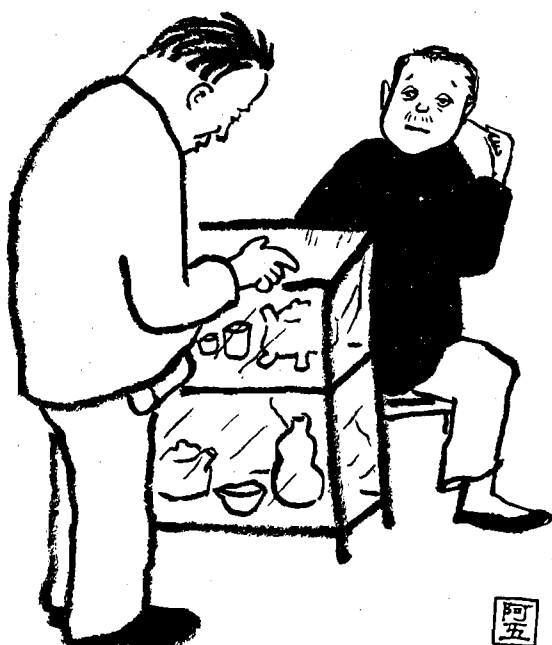
On the third day, the middle-aged man brought a third person along, whose judgments were somewhat more reasonable. His comment: "It's only three thousand dollars, so if it's a fake, so what? You might as well buy it."

The middle-aged man was hesitant. "I'm not worried about the three thousand dollars," he said, "It's just . . . you know, if it's a fake, it can be a bit embarrassing. How will I ever live it down?"

The middle-aged man was evidently a noted authority on antiques, otherwise why would he worry so much about damaging his reputation by making a bad purchase?

As usual, the proprietor remained a passive spectator, allowing his customers to make up their minds for themselves. The price had been set at three thousand dollars, no more, no less, regardless of whether it was real or fake; everything hinged on the price.

Let them take their time, the proprietor thought, I've got enough wax in my ears for a lifetime of picking.



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And then today they came for a fourth visit. When the proprietor noticed them approaching, he removed the ceramic incense burner from the cabinet and placed it on the counter.

The middle-aged man picked it up and began to examine it as usual. The three of them used a lot of technical jargon, like "spur marks" and "dripped glaze"; they sounded like real experts.

But when it comes down to distinguishing the genuine from the fake, the greatest expert is in the same boat as the rank amateur.

Ten minutes passed, and the middle-aged man said: "Please be frank with me, is this real or is it fake?"

The proprietor replied with a laugh: "You expect a little hole in the wall like this to give you a certificate of authenticity? My friend, you ought to know by now, what counts in buying second-hand goods is a good eye. Look, if you're not sure about it, don't buy it, 'cause if you don't, somebody else will."

These words had the effect of setting the middle-aged man's pants on fire, and he reached into his pocket and took out the three thousand dollars that had been burning a hole there for the last three days. "If you say three thousand, then three thousand it is. I'll take it."

In an unprecedented gesture, the proprietor put down his ear spoon and started to count the three piles of bills the man had handed to him. Before he had finished, however, the middle-aged man interrupted him: "There's a dirty spot here I don't seem to be able to rub off . . ."

Very casually, the proprietor said: "Don't worry about it, I'll give you another one . . ."

For a split second, they all froze, like a freeze shot in a movie. ◻