

顏純鈞：蛀空的心靈

## A Heart Eaten Out

By NGAN Shun Kau

Translated by D.E. Pollard

It was an early spring day, clear after recent rain, with a slight chill in the air left by a departed cold front. I had gone to the park on the Peak with my family, and we were attempting unsuccessfully to fly a kite in the very feeble wind. Just next to us an expatriate young mother was hugging her child to her, and not far away a crowd of young people were playing a boisterous game. In the midst of all this, for no apparent reason, I thought of Shuyao.

Shuyao and I grew up in the same place. He was more than ten years older than me. He had plump cheeks and a bow-shaped mouth, which gave the impression of a permanent smile. Actually his face was at times a picture of misery, but that mouth of his belied his real feelings. It made us feel that he had a naturally cheerful disposition, and would come up smiling whatever hole he got into.

I knew Shuyao had studied art at college—reputedly the Hangzhou College of Fine Art—and had learned oil painting from a teacher from the USSR. Hangzhou College is one of the top art schools in China, and how Shuyao, coming as he did from a backwoods town in south Fujian, managed to get in to such a prominent institution in those days is still a mystery to me.

When Shuyao was coming up to graduation he was classed as rightist, and was sent down without a degree. And so this lover of art was chased away from the temple of art before he had set foot in it. He had been fixed up to marry a beautiful girl from his hometown, but that young lady beat a retreat when she heard he was now a rightist.

At that time many a happy marriage was similarly nipped in the bud, and it being so commonplace, nobody particularly sympathized; even Shuyao himself referred to it with only a smile in later days. His mother very soon found him another girl. She was a village maid with country manners, but he could not afford to be too choosy. Shuyao confessed that the bridegroom could not be found on their wedding day because he hid himself away when the bride stepped over their threshold.

Yet later events proved her to be indeed a good and considerate wife, who stood by him through hard times, raised his children, and over the years managed to make a home of which he could be proud.

Shuyao had to abandon his romantic illusions after he was married. His family depended on him to pull them through the period of destitution, so he worked as a pedicab driver, out on the road every day looking for passengers in all weathers. He developed a strong pair of legs and acquired a crook to his back and a dark tan to his skin. With his eyes screwed up against the weather he always seemed to be smiling. In truth he was never very resentful about the privation they suffered then.

In between ferrying passengers in his pedicab he went to the odd temple to touch up some wall paintings. The money was not great, but to some degree the work satisfied his longings. Stodgy and wooden and garishly coloured though the figures were, miles away from the Soviet style of oil painting in their rusticity, yet the job still called for a kind of craftsmanship. Working every day with line and colour made good to some extent his shattered dream of being an artist.

After the Cultural Revolution his rightist classification was rescinded, and the government apparently made him some monetary reparation and offered him a post besides, but instead of taking the road north again he went south: leaving his wife and children behind, he made the long trek to Hong Kong. At first he intended to follow again his calling of artist, and did some trial painting for a commercial art dealer. The dealer gave him a model painting to copy, but as Shuyao painted he could not help measuring the commercial picture with an artist's eye, correcting some inconsistencies and making some adjustments to its composition and tones. He thought he had made a crude work presentable, but the dealer thought otherwise: he took up a pallet knife and slashed it to ribbons.

In this unfeeling world even art is not allowed a human touch: commercial art is merely production. As long as the goods suit the requirements of the dealer, whether they are art or not is neither here nor there. Shuyao would not make that concession, so whenever he finished a painting he shook his head in disgust.

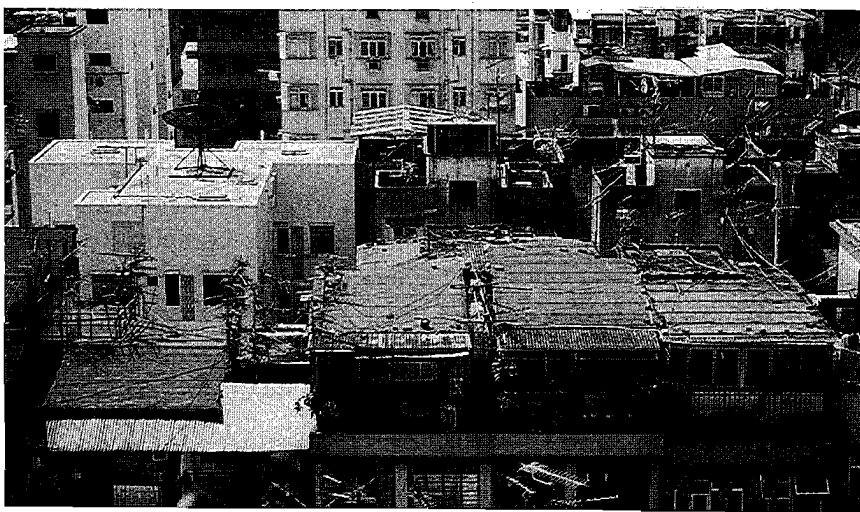
Later on he went to work as a delivery man for a transport company. The toughening he had got pedalling a pedicab stood him in good stead: he stood out

like a tower of steel. Naturally his boss thought well of him. That difficult patch in the life of the washed-up artist may be said to have paid dividends.

Work as a delivery man did not bring him good luck. He was knocked down by a goods van in a busy shopping street. His old mother saw a circle of onlookers on her way back from the vegetable market, but as they were crowded too closely together for her to squeeze in, she went off home, not knowing that the man lying on the ground with a broken leg waiting for assistance was her own son.

At that time I was proofreader for a newspaper. I worked till late at night, but my afternoons were free. He once phoned me after he came out of hospital to ask me to go back to the hospital with him for a checkup. The bone in his leg had not properly knit at the time. To get from where he lived in North Point to the hospital in Western we had to take a long bus journey, and then walk up an incline. I still have no idea how he made it up the slope on his injured leg. He relied on his stick as far as he could, but when I eventually had to support him, his body felt like a dead weight. He gasped for breath as he climbed the slope, half leaning on me. Yet in spite of the cross he bore he still smiled, saying that he would be able to throw his stick away after another trip or two.

His leg started to mend quite quickly, probably thanks to the muscle strengthening exercises he carried out relentlessly at home. I believe they caused him a lot of pain, but Hong Kong people 'have time to die, but no time to be idle'. He could not put up with sitting around at home and very soon found a job, this time with a ginseng merchant. He was the odd-job man, doing the cleaning and making deliveries, and acting as watchman at night. His leg ached every few days, but the greater pain was heartache: his heart was gradually being eaten out.



Photograph by the editors.

He had very few complaints when I spoke to him, apart from about the job being boring. He said he was brushing up his English, in the hope of improving his job prospects. As for painting, he smiled ruefully: it did not look as if he would get anywhere. When youthful dreams evaporate they leave behind a scar; rather than scratch it till it bleeds again, it may be better to leave it in peace, until it is burned to ashes along with the rest of the body.

His financial situation seemed to improve. His wages from the ginseng shop were never very high, but when business prospered he got a substantial bonus at each year's end. He was able to send a daughter to study in America, build a house in his hometown, and buy a flat in Hong Kong. His wife and sons came to Hong Kong, leaving two daughters in China.

The children all made good progress, went to college and found occupations. Shuyao spoke of them with unconcealed pleasure. He had not made much of his own life, but endless possibilities seemed to have opened up again on account of the children.

After a lifetime of struggle that had used up all his vitality, to find a blaze of glory in the next generation was perhaps a fair recompense.

Later on I moved house and in the confusion forgot to give him my new telephone number. In Hong Kong it is hard to keep your head above water. If you get round to seeing friends two or three times a year, you chat with them about nothing important, and all the while become more estranged. The demands of life pull people apart, and indifference becomes a habit. I thought of Shuyao occasionally, said I hadn't been in touch with him for a long time and must see how he was getting on, but as soon as the daily grind got too much to cope with, I couldn't wait to get home. I saw to only those matters that urgently needed seeing to. How could I be expected to find the time to renew old friendships?

It was only after the event that we heard he had fainted and been kept in hospital with heart trouble. He was already back home when we went to visit him. He was as cheerful as ever, and played down the whole affair. According to him the hospital and his family had got worked up unnecessarily. Indeed as we sat talking with him, we found he was more relaxed and talkative than usual.

His parents were both very old and rather senile. Since he, his wife and his son had to go out to work and at the same time look after the old folks, they were all under great strain, as was evident from their exhausted look. When we enquired about his parents, he pointed to their tightly closed bedroom door, and said they were asleep. We had heard that the old folks, no longer being in their right mind, urinated and defecated all over the flat, and it was true that there was a peculiar smell in the air. We guessed that he did not want us to see the state they were in. Yet he still wore the completely guileless smile of old, his resonant voice bespoke

healthy lungs, and he seemed to be both content with life as it was and looking forward to better to come. So there wasn't much we could say to him, besides reminding him to apply for assistance to the Social Welfare Department.

Life is no picnic. Everyone journeys on carrying his own burden; no one can carry it for you, whether it is light or heavy. My only thought was that Shuyao was no longer an artist. That chance would never come again.

Later still I learned that he had been diagnosed as suffering from liver cancer. On getting that news he had upped and left for Xiamen, without letting us know. He sought treatment in a Shanghai hospital, but returned to Xiamen when it proved of no avail. He had bought a maisonette there to retire to. It turned out to be his last resting place.

Xiamen was not his home. He knew very few people there, unlike in Hong Kong. The reason he chose to spend his last days on earth there was that he had decided to face death alone. Given that his death was to be as stressful as his life had been, he did not want others to share the strain. Rather than cause grief to his friends, and let his enemies crow over him, it was better to slip away quietly. I imagine that was why he was determined not to stay in Hong Kong.

In this way an ordinary man closed his last chapter, taking his leave of the world quietly, solitarily, with no fuss. When I contemplate his fate, it is not so much pain I feel as regret. This good friend had an artistic soul, but because of the hostile and unfeeling world he found himself in, the heart was eaten out of him. He left none of his works behind. Given a different climate, given a different lot, he would have had a claim to fame.

He was a humorous man, able to take himself lightly, friendly and loyal. When the conversation turned to those who had let him down he only sighed, to signify that he did not expect the world to be perfect. As long as one was able to take life as it came, he saw no point in grouching and groaning.

Liver cancer kills you quickly but, it is said, with excruciating pain. The creator does not have to have a reason for tormenting man. Yet if a man's heart is already eaten out he will be numbed to suffering. I like to think that Shuyao did not suffer much as he left this world.

As I write this piece, the New Year festival is over and another spring is outside my window. Shuyao's adversities make me think of the adversities of our whole race. Coping with everyday adversities has been the way of survival for us Chinese for a century past. We have got used to these adversities, have got used to putting on a smiling face in adversity. If our hearts continue to be eaten out as every day passes there will be no end to our adversities. \*

# ***POETRY***

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