

Mistress of Mao

Once Kitty had secured the right to a travel document, priority had to be given to introducing her to the widely scattered and generationally divided members of my family. At the same time, I also had to begin fulfilling — at least in part — my pledge to show her the hitherto unseen world outside of China. This included a quick trip to London to show her the tomb of Marx at Highgate Cemetery.

As for myself, I was also saddled with my travels on behalf of Li & Fung (Trading) which did not include Kitty, especially those to overseas offices. I had a special responsibility for visiting Seoul in South Korea since I had opened an additional office there and its staff was made up entirely of Koreans.

On top of those family and business commitments, I was dead keen to see as many of the hitherto unvisited parts of China as I could. Therefore, when Ip Yeuk-Lam suggested gathering a small group of friends and relatives for a cruise along the Yangtse River, before the projected Three Gorges Dam could change the river basin too much, Kitty and I signed up with alacrity.

The cruise ship stopped at a number of towns and villages *en route*, while a tour guide on board provided a running commentary while the ship passed sites of particular significance in Chinese history or literature. It proved truly enlightening to see the precise settings for historical battles and other happenings which I had previously only read about or imagined.

For the aforementioned reasons, it was only in September of 1986 that Kitty and I were free enough to consider inviting Kitty's eldest sister, Shu-Ching, and her husband, Gao Lin-Mao, to visit us as guests.

However, before that invitation was actually issued, something out of the ordinary happened. An unexpected announcement was made by the British Council and the University of Hong Kong to initiate a short story competition in the English language to be conducted within the next two months. Such a competition was quite unusual for a mercantile city with an unenviable reputation of being a cultural desert. Inhabitants and visitors alike took the place as one mainly for replenishing one's pocketbook or bank account or acting out one's fantasies rather than for nourishing one's inner life or improving one's intellect.

Once in a while, however, a transiting stage or musical group of some renown, heading home towards Europe after a tour somewhere else, might well put on a couple of tragedies by Euripides or concerts of Bach's cantatas or fugues to break its journey. Such performances in Hong Kong,

pricy though they might be, would provide local moneybags with an excuse for putting on their finery and pretending they were not entirely the money-grubbing philistines that they actually happened to be.

Curiously, the organisers of the short story competition made no mention of the nature of the winning prize, except to assure entrants that the winning entry would be published in the local English newspapers.

Their announcement, nonetheless, triggered something buried and long left unresolved in my own psyche. It sent my memory hurtling back to my ignominious attempts decades ago to make a few quick bucks or a decent living by writing short stories.

The first attempt happened in the second half of 1952, after I began a master's degree at Stanford University. Although I had been awarded a fellowship, the stipend was hardly sufficient to make ends meet. Being at the economic margins had been a recurring condition in my life since I was 12, when I was suddenly evacuated from Singapore to Australia as a refugee, together with my paternal grandmother, my siblings and their mother, because of the invasion of Singapore by the Japanese during World War II.

While doing my master's degree, I had to do a variety of odd jobs, like washing dishes, waiting at a cafeteria or mowing lawns, in order to get by. It was perhaps relevant to note that such work at the time had been set at the then minimum wage of 75 cents an hour.

It was under such circumstances that I bumped into a gentleman by the name of Robert North on campus. He was the editor of a quarterly academic magazine called *The Pacific Spectator* with offices in the Hoover Tower. We had known each other casually for some time. I had, during my undergraduate years, established a small reputation on campus for publishing feature articles and topical interviews with certain professors in the *Stanford Daily*, the student newspaper.

After we had exchanged salutations, Mr. North asked if I had ever considered penning short stories. He said his quarterly had started a section devoted to short stories by Asian writers. Because the independence of many Asian countries together with the outbreak of the Korean War, there was a burgeoning interest in Western academic circles for stories reflecting different aspects of Asian culture. His magazine would pay \$35 a story, if I felt like working in that genre.

My ears pricked up immediately at the mention of that sum. I would have to wash dishes or push a lawn-mower around for many hours to earn

that kind of money. Although I had never written a short story in my life nor had I ever given any thought to writing one, I nevertheless kept the door open by implying I had indeed occasionally tried my hand at it. Now that his magazine had provided an outlet, I would certainly try again.

Upon returning home, I sat down before my typewriter and mulled over the situation. A short story would essentially be no different from writing a news report, I told myself. Before entering Stanford, I had worked for over two years as a reporter for the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong. A news report was basically a concise narrative of what happened to whom, when, where and why. The only difference between the two was that one was based on an actual sequence of events while the other would take place in the imagination.

Upon reaching such a conclusion, I started fabricating a story about a merchant who had married a beautiful wife but it dawned on him one day that their lives were not blossoming because he had been regarding his wife as a lovely ornament and possession rather than as a human being. Of course I was without any experience of married life; I could only observe it among friends and relatives. I tried to draw analogies with what little I then knew about fine Chinese ceramics and decided to title the story "The Vase".

After a decent interval of two or three weeks, I went to Mr. North's office and handed him the story. He did a quick read, accepted it, and made arrangements for paying me \$35. I was as pleased as Punch, feeling I had pulled off a tidy return and passed some kind of test of creative acceptability.

It was not till the spring of 1954, however, that *The Pacific Spectator* published my story. By then I had completed my MA studies and was back in Hong Kong, where I had secured employment on a month-to-month basis as a night sub-editor at the *Hong Kong Standard*. I was also allowed to write an occasional editorial page article on a subject of my own choosing.

It had taken some time for the magazine to reach me but when I re-read in print what I had written several months ago, I was appalled. The story somehow did not seem at all convincing. The theme appeared contrived and not fully matured, while the main characters and their actions came over as unnatural and wooden.

Perhaps the magazine had arrived at the wrong time, when another trauma had occurred in my life. I had in fact just been summarily fired for writing an article which someone high up in the Hong Kong government

had deemed politically objectionable. Indirect pressure was applied upon the *Hong Kong Standard* to dispense with my services.

The coincidental occurrence of those two events reinforced my view that trying to make a living in Hong Kong with a pen was an unrewarding and precarious affair, unless one were resigned to writing jingles for some advertising outfit. I was also beginning to doubt whether I really had any writing talent that was in any way out of the ordinary. An old saw had it that those who could, do; while those who could not, teach. It came back forcefully to me. So thinking, I changed to the more steady and safe profession of teaching and registered for a job to teach English and modern European history at secondary schools.

I might have reconciled myself to that humdrum teaching life if I had not come across an account of an incident concerning Pablo Picasso, the most prolific and influential artist of the 20th century. According to that account, Picasso had an agent in Paris selling his paintings, drawings, sculptures, etc. while he lived in the south of France.

One day, that agent visited Picasso with a painting. He told Picasso he had found a buyer willing to pay a good price for it, if only Picasso would sign to authenticate it.

Picasso however refused to sign, dismissing the painting as a fake.

“But, *Maestro*,” the agent cried in amazement. “How can this be a fake? I saw you painting it myself!”

“Yes, I sometimes paint fakes,” Picasso replied.

Picasso’s remark was both thoroughly honest and revealing. It implied that great artists — be they painters, writers, musicians or whatever — existed to convey whatever they saw as truths — convenient or otherwise — to the wider world. To produce anything less than the truth because of laziness or carelessness or other private reason was to forsake their missions and to indulge in parodies or, indeed, fakes.

That thought gripped my consciousness for a time and then I began re-examining the circumstances under which “The Vase” was written. Had I been too cavalier over my own command of English words, to think that I could get by as a writer without accepting his duty to uncover truths? Or worse still, did I strike a posture for a mere 35 bucks? If so, to what depths could I not sink if I pretended to become a writer?

Pondering those questions, I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself. I decided that if I were to make amends, I would need to seriously engage with life and with art. If I earnestly want to write short stories, then a good

starting point would be to study the works of some of the acknowledged masters of the genre — Maupassant, Chekhov, O. Henry, Saki, Kipling, Somerset Maugham and several others.

As I read story after story, the deficiencies in “The Vase” became even more glaring. For that reason, I have avoided including “The Vase” in any of the subsequent collections of short stories published under my name. I also became increasingly humbled and amazed over how many human hopes and frailties, how many individual sorrows and joys, could be so superbly packed into the limited number of words in a short story. That challenge to do likewise grew on me.

After two years as a teacher, I had saved up enough money to repay my Eighth Granduncle part of the loan he had extended me to attend Stanford. However, instead of repaying him, I asked if he could extend the loan for a further year or two. I told him I wanted to go to London to try my hand at writing short stories. The West was reported to be increasingly interested in Asian culture and I intended to set out some of what I saw as truths and to debunk a number of the current myths. He readily agreed with my plan, probably because he pitied me for being already 28 and still bumbling around without a clear direction in life.

With my Eighth Granduncle’s further concession, I began working out a strategy for London. Like Dick Wittington of fairy tale fame, I had high hopes but not very clear expectations of London. Realising that my resources would be very limited and success quite uncertain, I took some precautions. I made arrangements with the *China Mail* in Hong Kong and the *Straits Times* in Singapore to accredit me as their London correspondent with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Such deals would be mutually advantageous, I persuaded them. They could claim they had their own correspondent in London without bearing the full cost for one. I would be there on the spot if they wished to pursue any timely British story. But they would only pay me by the column-inch used for any material I provided. I would in fact be, in the lingo of journalism, only a “stringer”.

For my part, I would be on the distribution list for British government press releases and be invited to press functions. In that way I might spot a happening with a Hong Kong or Singapore implication for an article. Thus I would augment my income in Britain.

Once those arrangements had been finalised, I embarked in 1957 on an Italian passenger liner for Genoa. The plan was to go across the

continent in a leisurely manner by train to Calais, and then to board a ferry to cross the Channel. The total journey would take well over a month. But once it ended, I could repair to that proverbial London garret favoured by struggling writers to pen whatever obsessed them.

And write I did, assiduously. During the following year I wrote more than ten short stories. Unfortunately, I managed to sell only one! The rest simply made the rounds of all likely publications and collected rejection slips. It seemed that the Western interest in Asian culture that Robert North had spoken about six years earlier at Stanford had still to take root in London. Or else the outlooks of those who sent me their pro forma rejection slips had remained too insular.

After a year, my funds were exhausted and I had no alternative except to seek refuge at my paternal grandfather's home in Singapore. Through the good offices of my brother Francis, I secured a job as night sub-editor at the *Straits Times*. Thus my second attempt to become a writer of short stories also ended in defeat and failure.

* * *

Therefore, when I learnt in 1986 that a short story competition would be taking place in Hong Kong, my memory naturally hurtled back to my impoverished years and my two ill-fated attempts to make money by writing short stories. Since my intervention into the foreign exchange market in Hong Kong in 1982, I was left with more wealth than I would ever need. Thus I had no further need or incentive to write more short stories for gain.

Nevertheless, I felt an irresistible urge to enter that competition. I did not know exactly why. Perhaps it was just the injured pride of a middle-aged man egging me on. Or perhaps I had harboured a subconscious thought that my writing still had some merit. Alternatively, I could just be seeking confirmation that stories which did not make the grade almost 30 years ago had been fairly judged and still did not make the grade today, laying to rest finally any notion of my writing ever rising above mere journalism.

For whatever reason which might be actually spurring me on, I rummaged in the bottom drawer of my desk and found the bundle of stories with rejection slips I had stored away since 1957. From that bundle, I eventually selected a story called "The Card Index" for entry into the

competition. It was a story of a henpecked history teacher who suddenly discovered that the prospect of committing murder was not altogether intellectually repugnant to him.

The impulse to enter a story for that competition was to determine ultimately how I would spend the twilight decades of my life. I will detail the various stages in that long and inevitable process in a subsequent chapter of these memoirs.

* * *

Before Kitty could get around to inviting her eldest sister, Shu-Ching, and her husband to visit Hong Kong as our guests, the wheels of Fate had already been set into motion.

A reply duly came back saying that her husband, Gao, was regrettably committed to working on a film for the next several months. However, Shu-Ching herself would be delighted to take up our invitation. Some time from October onwards would be ideal.

On receiving the news, I recalled that Chiu Bun had remarked during his stay how little time he and his wife had spent with their eldest daughter before she had been recruited away from home to undergo dance training in Peking.

I had always much enjoyed the company of Kitty's parents ever since I met them. They struck me as very pleasant and uncomplicated folk who were much closer to my own age. So I suggested that Kitty invite them to come again, since Shu-Ching would be coming alone. The parents readily accepted the chance for a mini gathering of the Chiu family in Hong Kong in October of 1986.

* * *

Of course, when I invited Shu-Ching to come, it was not merely to get to know her as a sister-in-law but also to find out how she got into the Cultural Division of the People's Liberation Army. The references to her having lived for a time in Zhongnanhai, the exclusive residential complex for China's top leaders located in the former imperial Forbidden City, possibly as a companion of Chairman Mao, was also likewise stirring my curiosity.



Shu-Ching and her parents in Hong Kong in 1986

* * *

When Chairman Mao stood up at Tiananmen on October 1, 1949, to proclaim the establishment of the People's Republic of China, he not only secured for himself a place in world history as one of the most successful political leaders in modern China, he also set the direction for the development of his nation for the foreseeable future.

Gradually political leaders from other nations began paying attention to what Mao had to say and how he sought to put his ideas into practice. By the time of his death in 1976, there was a thriving and veritable industry churning out commentaries and books about him and his policies.

I had only a moderate interest in Chairman Mao, except that he had been recognised as by many as one of the greatest modern Chinese leader.

I held neither a brief for nor against him. However, when I dipped into the material about him, I was usually left dissatisfied. They tended to be too ideologically coloured, either with too much praise or too many condemnations, but nearly always with inadequate hard evidence. He seemed too off-handedly labelled as this or that.

To compound that problem, Mao himself was a character of many parts, with his fair share of human flaws and talents. If he had been good at one thing, it did not necessarily follow that his words ought to be taken as gospel in some other subject, and vice versa. But his strengths and weaknesses appeared seldom to be objectively analysed and expounded. Perhaps I had approached the subject expecting a recent leader such as Mao to be weighed and assessed in depth, set in a proper historical, environmental and psychological context.

Let me give some examples of what I have been driving at. Mao had frequently been described as a military strategist and was known to have studied Sun Tzu's 13 essays on *The Art of War*, probably in a similar way to that a young Napoleon might have studied them when Jesuit Father J.J. M. Amiot's translated them into French and published them in Paris in 1772.

Much has been made of the Red Army's guerrilla tactics in escaping from the various Kuomintang encirclement campaigns and of Mao leading those forces on their epic Long March. That endeavour was no doubt epic, heroic and spectacular. But bearing in mind that the Red Army of that time was largely composed of illiterate farmers, ill trained, badly equipped and vastly outnumbered, what else could that motley group do other than to adhere to the principles of war set out by Sun Tzu more than 2,000 years ago?

That hardly qualifies any leader of the Red Army to claim to be a military strategist, any more than a French general during the Napoleonic wars could, if he had mounted an attack on an enemy in a line formation or a square one. The general would merely be following the standard rules of engagement prevailing at that time.

To be a true strategist, to my way of thinking, one would have to enunciate fresh principles of warfare in the light of new technological realities and circumstances of the era and to have them proven good for the foreseeable future. The character of war had been changing over the centuries because of technological advancements, from the Gatling gun to tanks and airplanes. Obviously, a military strategist who had merely talked

about waging war with muskets had to be considered obsolete.

During World War II, the distinction between combatants and civilians had already been erased by all parties through the carpet bombing of cities like Coventry and Dresden. Ultimately, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were wiped out through having atomic bombs dropped on them.

So, on that basis, could Mao be considered a true military strategist for the nuclear age? In November of 1957 he had led the Chinese delegation to a conference of Communist and workers' parties in Moscow where the subject of thermonuclear war came up. He created a sensation when he declared that the Chinese people had not yet completed the country's re-construction and that they desired peace. However, if the imperialists wanted war then it would be fought to the end. Even if half of the world's population perished, there would still be half left.

The statement implied that he was unafraid of nuclear war and the "paper tigers" of America's hydrogen bombs. One writer went so far as to interpret Mao's remarks as indicative of his indifference to human suffering.

Had Mao been using a hyperbole or merely indulging in a bit of bravado, knowing China's limitations in the face of nuclear weapons? Or could he be following the alleged Marie Antoinette's throw-away of "Let them eat cake." upon being informed of the people lacking bread? A person could well interpret the statement as a revelation of Mao's ignorance of the real effects of a nuclear and genocidal conflict.

But whatever unresolved questions Mao might have left in the air about nuclear weapons, he was at least not as twisted as American strategists like Herman Kahn who devoted his calculations to "winnable" nuclear wars. Such a "winnable" nuclear war, it seemed to me, would be a pyrrhic victory for humanity. It would amount to signing up to a suicide pact.

That possibility of nuclear conflict remains today the dominant issue facing the human race. This did not mean we should be leery or hesitant over technological and scientific progress but rather that we should re-emphasise the old Chinese intellectual habit of melding technological and scientific progress with ethical and moral progress.

After all, it would be relevant to remember that Sun Tzu had stated that kings and commanders should adopt a moral stance in war and that an enemy subdued without fighting was the acme of skill in warfare.

Unfortunately, since the ending of World War II, the inept and posturing political leaders of countries possessing nuclear weapons have managed to come up with nothing more than the prodigiously wasteful, unworkable and dead-end strategy of “Mutually Assured Destruction”. Instead of coming together to ban the existence of all nuclear weapons for good, they are even now busy updating the development of new generations of such weapons. Such moves are indictments of the unforgivable intellectual and moral bankruptcy of our times.

As nuclear technology spreads, more countries would want nuclear weapons for their own protection against more powerful foes. Sooner or later, some political leader with a suicide-bomber mentality would emerge to suck the world into a devastating nuclear war. Or it might happen by accident or by miscalculation. Our entire world would then end as it had begun — with one mighty and awful bang!

Yet some idiotic politicians are advocating the scrapping of such limited non-proliferation treaties that do exist instead of building on them. It boggles the mind of any sane citizen.

If Mao had been a military strategist of a significant calibre, he would have addressed the fraught issue of nuclear conflict and made some thought-provoking pronouncements on how to rid our world of the threat. But I have yet to come across any sound pronouncement by him.

* * *

Many writers on Mao also mentioned him as a poet and calligrapher. But that tells me almost nothing at all. For thousands of years, educated Chinese who have risen to occupy official positions have frequently indulged themselves in poetry and calligraphy. Some have left their marks on their culture; others have simply disappeared without trace.

For an ordinary Joe like myself, I would have been quite interested in knowing how experts looked upon Mao’s poetry and calligraphy. If those who have written about Mao had felt incompetent over offering assessments in those spheres, then they should have said they were leaving it to future experts to give their opinions. It would appear a disservice to both Mao and their readers to mention such subjects and then to leave them hanging in the air with a few superficial comments.

The history of Tao Yuan-Ming, the naturalist poet of the Jin Dynasty, is illustrative of this approach and of the long perspective taken in respect

of Chinese letters. Tao had resigned from a position at court to lead a reclusive life in the countryside, to farm and write poetry. His poetry was little known during his lifetime except within his own circles.

His work was not brought to a much wider public for more than 200 years, till the two leading Tang poets, Li Po and Tu Fu, discovered him and praised his work. Many more centuries were to pass before Su Tung-Po, the foremost poet and calligrapher of the Sung Dynasty, also highly praised him. Su declared Tao's work to be the paragon of authenticity and spontaneity.

Thus after the Sung Dynasty, Tao attained lasting fame as the father of reclusive poetry. Today, overlooked by his contemporaries, Tao had written poems like the following:

*“The sun sets, no clouds are in the sky,
No murmur of the world's dust.
The mountain air is fresh at the dusk of day.
The flying birds two by two return.
In these things there is a deep meaning;
Yet when we would express it, words suddenly fail us.”*

Today, it seems highly appropriate that Tao should be regarded as one of the greatest Chinese poets in history.

Because of the lack of detailed expert commentaries on Mao's poems — so far as I am aware — the common man or woman is left uncertain as to how representative they could be of his or her time. A thousand years from now, would Chinese children still be reciting Mao's poems as they would those by Tang and Sung poets or to copy in calligraphy his distinctive style of brushwork?

* * *

On a more frivolous note, let me turn to writers who have suggested that Mao was a womaniser. The basis for this allegation has historical roots, dating partially back to the 1930s when Mao and his third wife, He Zi-Zhen, a long-time Communist, were holed up together in the North China rebel sanctuary of Yanan.

Along came a left-leaning film actress by the name of Jiang Ching, bringing with her the casually bourgeois and easy moral lifestyle of the

acting world. Although Mao was around 45 then and married, while Jiang was about half his age, they soon ended up in a torrid affair. It was not absolutely clear who preyed upon whom as the two worked together. But the Communist elders with a civil war on their hands were greatly scandalised.

Eventually, a compromise was arrived at. Mao was given permission to divorce his wife and marry Jiang. This took place in 1938 on the condition that Jiang would lead no public political role as Mao's wife for the next 20 years. That pledge was largely kept before the two began living separately in 1973.

Thus Mao clocked up having had four wives — clearly more than the average man — but gossip about other subsequent sexual partners had not been equally well recorded.

Let me examine separately the possible components in that womanising reputation. Would the mere fact of having had four wives automatically turn a man into a womaniser? I doubt it very much. Nowadays married couples could change spouses almost as easily as they could change breakfast cereals.

During the time of my own paternal grandfather, he had nine wives. I had lived in his home in Singapore for a number of years and I have had close contacts with two of my grandmothers as well as a large number of his offspring by other deceased wives — that is, family relationships with many aunts and one uncle and their respective families. I can testify that neither I nor any of his circle of friends and relatives ever considered him a womaniser.

It was true that, apart from having had four wives, Mao had been rumoured to have had other sexual partners. But documented evidence has not been forthcoming. There should at least have been some sort of analysis of Mao's intellectual or emotional predisposition in this direction by those delving into Mao's life, instead of just repeating odd rumours.

For example, during the middle of the 20th century, there had been some intellection movement towards free love. A notable instance had been the relation between Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. To what extent had Mao been influenced by Jiang — who was also rumoured to have had a stable of her own lovers — or by the idea of free love or the development of the women's liberation movement?

After all, Mao was not an ordinary Joe. He had been heavily guarded at all times since becoming the Chinese head of state. He could not just go

to Majorca for a holiday fling or casually link up with some unknown woman he had met on the beach or in a bar.

Moreover, Zhongnanhai was and is very much like the White House in Washington. No one could go in or out without following a lot of security protocols. And where security protocols existed, there had to be records. Did those who merely repeated rumours search for confirming records? Where are the records now and who has them? Why has none surfaced in public so far?

If records could be examined, it might be established where Mao might fit into the womaniser scale compared with, say, Casanova or Don Juan. In the case of Casanova, at least he had left a memoir of his peccadilloes whereas, to my limited knowledge, Mao had left none. It has not therefore been possible to determine, for instance, where Mao would stand in relation to President John F. Kennedy or President Bill Clinton in the womanising league.

If a person were to believe half the stories circulating about Roosevelt and Madam Chiang Kai-Shek or Nehru and Lady Mountbatten, then he would no doubt realise that Mao would not be the last political figure to be distracted occasionally by a bit of skirt.

For future historians who might be interested in the sexual predilections of political leaders, I can at least offer the name of one woman who had sex with Mao and part of her story. Her name is Chiu Shu-Ching. She had been a dancer in the Cultural Division of the People's Liberation Army and she is my sister-in-law.

* * *

When I first met Shu-Ching in 1986, she was already 41. Yet she still looked very spritely and lithe after having given birth to two children. In the mornings, she would still limber up with dancing exercises in my home, using the back of a dining room chair as a barre for her stretches.

Playing host to Shu-Ching and her parents was like a very pleasant breeze so far as I was personally concerned. I went to work as usual each day, while Kitty took her family members to explore the host of shops and department stores in the city and the wide variety of cuisines available, as well as the standard tourist sights. I would only join them for the evening meals and on weekends. After dinner, we would return home to raid my liquor cabinet and to sit around my sitting room taking in some television

show or shooting the breeze.

Sometimes Shu-Ching and I nattered on after a fashion after her parents had gone to bed. She had acquired that refined way of speaking Mandarin common to Peking residents.

It was through those relaxed evening interchanges and some sly and seemingly innocent questions from me that I slowly pieced together, as best I could, a summary of a part of Shu-Ching's early life and her reported relationship with Mao. Perhaps I have even stumbled upon a glimpse of a hitherto unrevealed part of Chairman Mao's character.

* * *

Shu-Ching was born in 1945, the eldest of four children. She was an active and attractive child and displayed an interest in dancing at an early age. This gained the attention of a former dancer living in the neighbourhood and, out of neighbourly kind-heartedness, she taught her a few classical Chinese dances. The child became so fascinated by them that she practised them whenever she could.

In China, it was normal at that time for children to begin schooling at the age of eight. But since Chiu Bun was himself an educated man and since his wife had just given birth to a son that year, he began teaching his daughter some basic characters at the age of six. Among the first ones she was taught were "Long Live Chairman Mao!" — a standard slogan all children were required to chant at school and to learn to write. They also normally bowed before a portrait of Chairman Mao and wished him a long life before each day's lessons began.

Because of Shu-Ching's early acquaintance with written characters, she had stood out in school. She could write more characters than her classmates. But she remained more interested in dancing than in formal subjects.

When she was about ten years' old, the former dancer in the neighbourhood approached Chiu Bun and told him she had judged Shu-Ching to be a girl with a real love, talent and aptitude for dancing. If the child had set her heart on dancing, it might be best to give her a proper foundation at an early age. The problem was that no top notch teacher existed in Nantong; the most famous ones all seemed to have gravitated to Peking.

Chiu Bun replied that though his daughter was very young he had no objection to her following a dancing career. However, he was not in a financial position to send her to study dancing at the capital.

The former dancer said she understood the position. But if Chiu Bun would grant her permission to explore some possibilities, she would see what could be done.

The woman neighbour came back a few weeks later to report that she had been in touch with an old friend who was one of the leading women teachers in classical Chinese dances in Peking. She had a reputation for nurturing dancers with good potential for just a fee sufficient to cover the student's meals. She would be prepared — on the neighbour's recommendation — to take Shu-Ching into her home and studio for a year to really test her potential. The child would, of course, continue her normal schooling at the same time. If she made the grade in dancing, then the arrangement could continue.

As for the *hukou* regulations, which governed the movement of citizens from one place to another in the country, to which was also linked the medical, educational and other social benefits, Shu-Ching could be passed off as a child whom the teacher had undertaken to look after and bring up for a sick relative in Nantong.

And so Chiu Bun agreed to the modest outlay involved with sending his daughter to Peking to train as a classical Chinese dancer.

* * *

A year or so after Shu-Ching had arrived in Peking, the lady who had taken her under her wing took up an appointment to teach classical Chinese dancing at the Peking Dance Academy. The academy was the first professional dance school to be set up since the establishment of the Chinese People's Republic in 1949. It was located adjacent to Zizhuyuan Park and had been authorised to issue university degrees, although it was also affiliated to a secondary school for younger students.

Although Shu-Ching was enrolled only in the affiliated secondary school, she was represented as a relative of one of the academy's instructors. She was therefore allowed now and then to use the facilities at the academy. In that way she got to know some of the other instructors, notably Dai Ailian, who was also teaching at the academy at the time.

Thus she heard stories from teachers about famous foreign dancers

like Fanny Elssler, Anna Pavlova and Lola Montez and gained insights into what each had contributed to dancing and the different types of music accompanying their dances. Those tales inspired her to master her own dance form, in the hope that she could one day become just as famous.

Soon after she had turned 16, her teacher told her that the academy had been asked to put on a show for senior government officials. It was rumoured that Chairman Mao himself might attend. Everyone went into a frenzy. Because Shu-Ching herself had developed such a fluid and enchanting style in classical dances, it was decided to include her doing a solo number in the show.

The performance duly took place and it proved a great success. Chairman Mao was indeed in the audience. A few days later, word came unexpectedly that Shu-Ching had been asked to go to Zhongnanhai to dance for the Chairman again.

* * *

Shu-Ching was rendered almost speechless with excitement. She did not know what was expected of her nor how she should prepare herself. Ever since she could remember, she had been taught to love Chairman Mao, to obey his every command and to wish him a long life. Now she was being asked to dance for him. She had hitherto only seen him at a great distance, like during National Day rallies, when countless tens of thousands raised their fists and cheered him. He had appeared like a god, worshipped by the entire nation.

Now, suddenly, she found herself singled out to dance for that godlike figure. What did it mean? There had been dozens of other dancers at the concert, not to mention the tens of thousands of admirers of the Chairman at every mass rally. The Chairman could have picked anyone of them to entertain him. Why did he pick her? Did it mean that the years she had put into training in classical dances were paying off? Had her dancing impressed the Chairman? The very thought filled her with pride.

Her mentor had seemed just as proud on learning that her *protégé* had been spotted. But she sounded a warning and gave some advice.

“You’ve come a long way since you came to me in Peking and I have every faith in your skills. Otherwise, I would not have pushed for your inclusion in the show. Now that the Chairman has spotted you, there is one thing that you must always bear in mind. A command performance is an

opportunity. You have to do your very best to please him, because one word from him can make or break forever your dancing career. Never forget that, but at the same time keep calm.”

* * *

When Shu-Ching and her troupe of accompanying musicians presented themselves at the entrance of Zhongnanhai, their papers were checked before they were escorted to a building known as the Chrysanthemum Library. There their documentations were checked again before being assigned to guarded quarters. They were eventually provided with food and drink and told to make themselves comfortable while awaiting a summons. But everyone was too on edge to relax. The musicians tuned their instruments while Shu-Ching went through some of her moves.

However, they were not summoned that day. When late evening came, they were told they were no longer needed and could go to sleep.

The next day the troupe was taken to a hall with fine curtains and exquisite ornaments and told to ready themselves for a show. A fair while later, the Chairman appeared together with his entourage. They took seats and upon a signal the show began.

When the music struck up, Shu-Ching bowed deeply to the Chairman before beginning her dance. Seeing the Chairman at close quarters for the first time, he appeared to her like a well-nourished elder in his sixties rather than like a god. Her repertoire lasted for close to an hour before she ended it with another deep bow.

The Chairman clapped and so did his entourage.

“You dance excellently,” the Chairman said, in his usual Hunanese-accented voice. “Congratulations! But you must not become too enslaved by our past. It is the impetus of the new that pushes every society forward, No doubt you will one day learn the new dances in honour of the Revolution. The future of our nation will depend on young people like you.”

Shu-Ching did not know what new dances he might be referring to. She had not been taught any. Perhaps a pair of baggy trousers would be called for instead of the flowing robes of the classical dances; possibly also the red scarf of the Communist Youth League and a clenched fist. Unable to visualise what the new dances might involve, she simply bowed again.

The Chairman must have made some gesture which she had failed to notice, because an aide quickly came forward to offer a glass container holding cigarettes. The Chairman helped himself to one and the aide lit it for him.

After blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, the Chairman said: "I would like to talk to this young lady for a while. The rest are excused."

The musicians were escorted out while another aide brought up a chair for Shu-Ching, placed within talking distance from the Chairman. His entourage duly rose and quietly dispersed.

* * *

The Chairman then asked Shu-Ching to tell him about her family.

"My father is working as a civil servant, a sub-manager in the Nantong office for allocating fuel oil quotas to government institutions and some private enterprises; my mother is from a farming family and is a simple housewife," Shu-Ching began. "My mother can speak only the Nantong dialect and cannot read or write."

The Chairman nodded, almost in approval. "Both in good health, I hope. Do they have other children?"

"Both healthy, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a brother of ten and a sister of three."

"Does your family find life in Nantong agreeable?"

"Yes, Mr. Chairman."

"What about fellow citizens in the town? Is life continuing to improve for them?"

"I do not know, Mr. Chairman, because I've been in Peking for more than five years. I've only been back to Nantong twice during that entire period, for just a few days on each occasion during the Lunar New Year holidays."

"Why not go back more often? Did you not miss your family?"

"Oh, yes, I did. But my family does not have enough money to pay for my travelling expenses. It has already been helping me with fees and living expenses."

The Chairman frowned and his mood appeared to darken.

Shu-Ching became afraid she might have given the wrong answer. She did not discover until much later that the shift in the Chairman's mood had nothing to do with her answer. It had been due to an extraneous

political matter of which she was entirely ignorant.

The truth was that the Chairman's mood had been vacillating over the last few days because of criticisms made by some Party elders concerning one of his policies. He had initiated the Great Leap Forward movement back in 1958, because he had wanted to accelerate changing China from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. One of the aims and one of the slogans used had been to overtake Britain in steel production within 15 years. Farmers accordingly set up backyard furnaces to produce steel, to meet that target. But that turned out to be detrimental to their farming work. Moreover, the steel thus produced was far below standard. So agricultural production began to fall, setting the stage for the years of the Great Famine which was soon to hit the country.

But even before that tragedy was to occur, the Great Leap Forward had come in for criticism from some of the elders in the Party. Local officials, fearful of missing their production targets, began massaging their figures. Some of the elders saw this and began criticising the policy as flawed.

Indeed, on the days prior to Shu-Ching's arrival at Zhongnanhai, there had been yet another internal meeting and the Chairman had reacted petulantly to all his critics.

When Marshal Peng Teh-Hua voiced criticisms, the Chairman said: "You don't touch me, I don't touch you; you touch me, I touch you. Even though we had once been like brothers, that does not change a thing."

Thus the two old comrades fell out over the way to take the country forward. That confrontation had already soured the Chairman's disposition even before he had sent for Shu-Ching to dance for him. The shadow of that tetchiness had unaccountably resurfaced during his chat with Shu-Ching.

After a few more questions, the Chairman apparently lost interest in further questions. He stood up abruptly to signify that the meeting had ended. Shu-Ching was escorted back to the quarters assigned to her and to the musicians.

* * *

Throughout the following day, Shu-Ching and the musicians waited anxiously to be called to put on another performance. But no summons came. They therefore spent the time fidgeting in their quarters. They were

closely guarded and discouraged from wandering around at will.

The call for a further show came the day after that, to take place in the same hall. The Chairman appeared in a lighter mood and the show proceeded as that previous one. After the performance, the Chairman said he wanted to talk to Shu-Ching again and the musicians and the rest of the Chairman's entourage were dismissed.

"What made you want to take up dancing?" the Chairman asked.

"I don't really know," Shu-Ching replied. "It just came to me naturally as a child. I just felt like jumping around and dancing. When a neighbourhood lady saw me, she taught me a few classical dances. She said she had previously been a dancer. I guess it just continued from there."

"And what made you come to Peking?"

"The neighbourhood lady told my father that all the best dance instructors were in Peking and suggested that I be sent here to study. She also had connections with a good teacher here who was prepared to mentor me if I went to Peking."

The Chairman nodded. "I suppose your neighbour has been right. There are a lot of talented people here. My wife is always going on about cultural development in a new China. She has been sending people all over the country scouring for youngsters straight of limb and pleasing of visage to be trained in song, music, drama, dance and so forth, to become the cultural face of a new and modern China. I should put her in touch with you."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Chairman!"

"You're still a student, are you not?"

"Yes, but I will be finishing secondary school this year."

"What do you intend to do then?"

"Try to get a job as a dancer, I suppose."

"Have you considered joining the People's Liberation Army? It has a Cultural Division, making films and shows for the Army. It could well do with a person who could dance as pleasingly as you."

"I know the People's Liberation Army is prestigious but difficult to get into. I did not know it had openings for dancers."

"I will ask Marshal Lin Piao if there are suitable openings."

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That is very kind of you."

After a few more questions, the Chairman stood up and said: "Come with me." Shu-Ching obediently followed, as the Chairman walked slowly out of the hall and in the direction of his personal suite.

The two armed guards outside the suite snapped to attention on the Chairman's approach, saluted and opened the doors.

Once inside, the Chairman said: "I feel a little tired. I think I will take a nap. You must be exhausted too after your performance. Take a nap too."

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I can rest on one of the sofas here."

"No, it is more comfortable on a bed. I have a big one. Come with me. We can rest together."

* * *

Shu-Ching, in fact, felt quite physically worn out by the tensions, the preparations and the performances over the last few days. So she followed the Chairman into the bedroom. The bed was indeed a large one and the Chairman lowered himself onto half of it.

"You can rest on the other side," he said.

He did appear to Shu-Ching at that moment like a weary, harmless elder, so she obeyed. Within a few minutes she was fast asleep.

She had no recollection of how long she slept. But through the haze of waking, she became aware that the Chairman was caressing her and trying to remove her clothes. She became petrified. She was only sixteen and did not know what to do. She had never been touched by any man before, especially by one so powerful and universally adored as the Chairman. She remembered the words her mentor had given about her dancing career and her instincts told her she should pretend she was still asleep and that whatever was happening was not really happening. She therefore feigned sleep.

But the caresses of the Chairman and how his lips moved over the exposed parts of her body filled her with a tingling sensation she had never experienced before. Her heartbeat and her breathing were quickening uncontrollably and when she finally turned to face the Chairman her whole body seemed unable to do anything except to respond to him. That was how the Chairman turned her from an innocent and frightened girl into a woman.

* * *

When Shu-Ching's narrative reached this point, I shook my head and sighed. "What a pity I did not get to hear of your story 20 years ago, at the height of the Cultural Revolution." I said. "I could have made a handy bundle selling it to one of the Sunday tabloids in the West."

"If I had known you 20 years ago, I would never have told you my story, because you would not have been a part of my family then," Shu-Ching said. "Besides, there is nothing very edifying about any of it for those concerned. I'm now a married woman, with a husband and two grown-up sons. It would be best for the past to remain in the past."

"But Chairman Mao is a historical figure. There is such a thing as historical accuracy."

"Would you really have made much with my story back then? There must be millions of girls around the world being led astray by men or boys every day of the week. What was so special about it happening to a Chinese girl?"

"Ah, you have little idea of the appetite for sanctimony and celebrity scandals in the West. What befalls girls do not matter unless they happen to be Lolitas or Jezebels. But if you can pin it on a famous man then you're in the money. With Mao, I can imagine the headlines even today: 'Exclusive! True Confession! How Chairman Mao Stole My Virginity!'"

"Western newspapers are not as crass as that, are they?"

"You'd be surprised. If you were to write a book about your relationships with Chairman Mao today, I'm sure there will still be a lot of takers in the West."

"That would be a very stupid thing to do, after so long. Did you know, after Chairman Mao died in 1976, the government locked me up for several months?"

"No, I didn't. How come? What did you do wrong?"

"The government thought I was part of some Maoist clique, as it went after the so-called Gang of Four. I can laugh about it now, but at the time I was really scared. I didn't know what was going to happen.

"It was all politics, of course, and the irony was that I knew almost nothing about politics. I didn't know why Lin Piao was designated as the successor to the Chairman at one moment and then, a short while later, was accused of being a plotter for power. I didn't know anything about what Mao's wife, Jiang Ching, and her friends might be up to either. Everyone

around the Chairman seemed to want to get something out of that poor old man. But he and I never spoke about politics, only about personal things, dancing and developments within my own family. I thought that was what he wanted me to do, take his mind off politics and his own health problems.”

“Politics everywhere is a murky business,” I observed. “Presumably the government eventually gave you a clean bill of health?”

“More or less, I guess. I managed to convince my interrogators in the end that I was only interested in dancing and entertaining the Chairman with my skills. They confiscated a couple of poems the Chairman had written for me in his own hand and warned that everything that had transpired between us was now considered important state secrets. I was forbidden to disclose any of our goings-on to anyone, or I might be arrested again. I guess I must be committing some kind of crime now by talking to you.”

“Don’t worry. I’m now family. I won’t report you.”

“And you won’t be writing anything about what I have recounted? My sister tells me you used to be a journalist.”

“If I write anything about you, it would not be published within any timeframe which would possibly cause trouble for either of us.”

* * *

Shu-Ching and I sat in momentary silence in my sitting room for a while, each nursing a drink selected from my liquor cabinet and each pursuing a slightly different chain of thought.

Eventually, I broke the silence. “Tell me,” I said, “how do you remember the Chairman now, after all these years? What stands out most about him in your recollections?”

“A lot of minor things, I suppose. When we ate together, for example, he always enjoyed those spicy Hunanese dishes. But they were too hot for my taste, so he would laugh and declare that I would never make a good revolutionary if I could not eat chilli. I suppose he was right about me in that respect. He was always kind and understanding towards me too, regardless of what else might be on his mind.”

“No one seems to have touched on those more human qualities about him in the articles and books I’ve come across.”

“Perhaps the writers just never knew enough about him. I also did not know what he often thought or did. For example, I did not know why recruiters from the People’s Liberation Army sought me out after I finished my secondary school and suggested that I take some entrance examinations. Was that a routine in place for all who had finished secondary schools or did the Chairman arrange it?

“I took the examinations and passed. Or maybe I didn’t. But I was enlisted into the army in any case and after a while I got assigned to the Cultural Division and was allowed to participate in some dancing programmes. Was that all arranged as well? I never knew and I never asked.

“While I was with the Cultural Division, I met Gao who was already working there on films. We fell in love after a time and considered getting married. Was that arranged too? I don’t think so. But I did not know how to break the news to the Chairman and to get his permission. When I eventually did ask, he was very understanding about it. He said it was time for me to marry and start a family. Gao and I duly got married in 1970.

“After I had my first son in 1971, the Chairman continued to ask me to talk to him every now and then about my family affairs and how my boy was developing. He even asked me to bring my 13-year-old sister, Xiao Wah, to Peking to see him, so that he could determine whether she was growing up to resemble me.

“He was not a well man, you know. He kept smoking too much, in spite of problems with his lungs. He had other health problems too. Towards his final years, there was something infinitely sad about him, which went beyond just ill health and the ups and downs in the fortunes of the country. It struck me he was finally coming to terms with the reality that the human span had its limits, regardless of how many great tasks remained undone in the world.”

“Yes, a rather sorrowful conclusion for an ambitious man to reach towards the end of his days,” I said. “We are all brief candles. How history will judge our puny efforts is something we can never know, for it can only be made long after we have gone.

“That’s the reason I always spend two or three hours wandering around the cemetery at Père Lachaise whenever I visit Paris. Have you ever heard of the place? The remains of many people who had once shaken the world are buried there. It is a humbling thought to realise that no matter how important you might have once been in life, upon death we all just get

the same tiny piece of dirt. Gives one a different perspective on life.”

“No, I haven’t heard of the place,” Shu-Ching said. “But Deng Xiao-Ping, the Paramount Ruler of China after the demise of Mao, had judged Mao’s decisions to have been 70% good and 30% bad. That has been the official Chinese judgement ever since.”

“It would be instructive to know how long that will remain the case,” I said.

* * *

Sometimes, when I shave myself in the mornings, I often have to look at myself in the mirror. When I do, I cannot help wondering how many people could look upon their whole lives with brutal honesty, and how many would conclude that his or her life had been 70% good and 30% bad.

All I know is that I am afraid to ever submit myself to such a self-assessment.