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ORPHAN OF ASIA

WU ZHUOLIU

Translated by Ioannis Mentezas

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a realization that he does not belong anywhere. He is the orphan of Asia. No other literary attempts that I am aware of portray such a vivid and detailed account of the bewilderment, anxiety, and humiliation of such a vehement pursuit of ethnic identity. The painful, emotional journey in this novel represents the experience of many of us in Taiwan. Accordingly, it is very close to our hearts, especially today during the stand-off between China and Taiwan.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Taiwan developed into a democratic reality, looking forward to international understanding of our efforts. With the beginning of the new century, this English version of *Orphan of Asia* will be an important contribution for an international audience interested in Taiwan's history and aspirations. I only pray that our future will be brighter.

Pang-yuan Chi

Chapter One

I. When the Flowers of Toil Bloom

The spring sun was warm on Hu Taiming's back as he kept count of the stepping-stones that studded the backyard path to the little hill, up which his grandfather led him by the hand. The path ran through a small woods, and nameless little birds chirped and flitted from branch to branch around them. Forever, it seemed: before he knew it, Taiming was short of breath and had lost count of the stones, and his grandfather was nowhere to be seen. Puffing, he caught up with the old man, who was waiting quietly for him at a level spot on the slope.

Grandfather had untied his long black bandanna to expose his head to the breeze. Taiming did the same and took off his bowl cap and wiped the sweat off his forehead. Although his head at the base of his pigtail itched, thanks to the breeze he soon stopped sweating.

The old man seemed ready for a smoke. He tied his bandanna back on, sat down on a rock, packed purple tobacco into his beloved long bamboo pipe and, after having Taiming light it for him, began, with relish, to make it hiss. The protracted hissing

was familiar to Taiming. It carried him into a realm of curiously nostalgic feeling like the enticing prelude to the unraveling of a long tale.

For a while the old man seemed far away in memories, but then he slapped the pipe bowl against the rock and remarked: "It's changed. When Grandfather was young, this place used to be a deep forest of huge pine and camphor and oak trees. . . . What's more, it was overgrown with wisteria and rauwolfias, and badgers and squirrels came by in broad daylight. Even brave men hesitated to come this way alone. But listen to this, Taiming, when your grandfather was around twenty, he used to come on this path alone."

Back then, the slope was the secret passageway of bandits and thieves. If a cow was stolen here, you knew you would never see it again. The scariest place of all was Dragon's Neck, at the top of the hill, where even if a person was killed by bandits, the authorities usually didn't investigate: the crime was assumed to have been committed by barbarians, whose lands were not far away. But one day the old man, still young and reckless, walked up the hill alone. Halfway up, a big gust of wind—unbelievably cold—hit him. He yelled and instinctively shielded himself, but something resembling a cloud of dust covered his already partly obstructed vision. Cowering, he could not move. When he finally steadied himself and looked at where he was standing, there a huge umbrella snake lay. Horrified, he stepped back and picked up a stone to defend himself, but suddenly! the snake was nowhere to be seen. He threw away the stone and stood for a while dumbfounded, so strange was what had taken place, which had lasted no more than a few seconds. Nothing else happened. A courageous young man, he continued on to his destination and did what he had to do there. On his way back, though, when he reached the same spot, the stone, which he knew he had thrown into the undergrowth, was sitting right in the middle of the path.

An unexplainable chill went up his spine, and he flew home, terrified and gripped with fever. His head was spinning, and his waist hurt as if his legs had dropped out from under him.

He did not doubt that he had met a "demon," but he purposely refrained from "exorcising" it. Day after day, delirious with a high fever, he cursed, "Demon! You decided that we would meet. Try another unlucky fellow if you want money, because I'm not giving you any!"

Although he tried to fight, the demon persisted. Grandfather's mother was worried and decided to ask a fortune-teller to appease the demon who, they were told, was Barefoot Bighead. A thousand sheets of gold paper, three hundred of silver, five sticks of incense, a pair of large white tigers, a bowl of rice, one of soup, and an egg were prepared and sent to a point exactly 120 paces from where Grandfather lay ill. The gold and silver sheets were burned. His fever was gone the next day. By holding out for a week, he had exhausted the demon's patience—so said the old man and laughed like a hero.

"Well, Taiming, shall we?" he said, finished with his reminiscences. He stood up with a yo-hō and started leading the way again. When they went over the Dragon's Neck, it was as though their field of vision had suddenly been brightened: in front of them were endless, eye-opening, fresh green tea fields, at whose far end lay the Central Mountains as clean as though they had been washed and completely erasing, as if it had been a daydream, the eerie legend of Dragon's Neck recounted just a moment ago.

From behind the trees came the songs of young women, the coarse mountain songs of tea pickers. They stopped singing when they heard footsteps; a certain expectation had made them keep still. When they found out who was there, they did not hide their disappointment: "Humph! An old man and a kid." Laughing lewdly, they exchanged obscene remarks.

"What an awful place," the old man muttered bitterly and hastened his steps, eager to get away as soon as possible. It is not the practice of gentlemen and scholars, even the cruder ones, to sing mountain songs. The old man, who loathed mountain songs as though they were reptiles, felt as though his ears had been polluted.

They walked down a broad incline covered with pine trees and eventually reached the Ladder to the Clouds, a school that faced a courtyard containing a banyan tree. Across from the study, with the tree in between, was a temple, one of whose wings served as a classroom. In the small room were as many as thirty or forty pupils. Their reading voices and the whole disorderly atmosphere of the classroom spilled over into the courtyard.

With Taiming in tow, the old man went into the dark building. The abrupt transition from the bright outdoors temporarily blinded them, but as their eyes got used to the dark, the details of the room gradually became visible. In the corner was a bed and, above it, a square ashtray on which a shaded light, an alcohol lamp, flickered tiny, pale flames. The same dim flames were reflected gloomily on leaves, a pipe, a tray, and other carelessly strewn implements for smoking opium, as well as on a skinny old man who lay next to them. Books piled high on a desk by the bed, a holder for a number of crimson brushes (although summer was still some time off, it also contained a dirty bird-feather fan, which stood out), a picture of Confucius on the wall straight in front of it, incense smoke that trailed like a piece of string—these thickened even more the room's cloistered, swirling air. The old man walked up to the bed and saluted reverently: "Master Peng."

The old man on the bed opened half an eye and seemed merely to stare at the other's face, then suddenly sat up and said, "Aha, Master Hu!" in an unexpectedly strong, beautiful voice. "It's been a long time."

Rising from the bed, Master Peng recovered his dignity, went to take a peek in the classroom next door, and uttered a word of

reprimand. At once the din of the boisterous students subsided and there was only a hushed silence.

Licentiate Peng used to be Old Hu's impoverished but brilliant classmate. Old Hu helped him in those days. If your work bore fruit and you finished as a top student, it was customary to visit the houses of the rich to receive congratulatory monetary rewards. Thus Licentiate Peng became rich, too, in a small way. But he quickly squandered the money to become poor again, as though to say, "This suits me better."

The only occupations for literati in the countryside were surveying, medicine, fortune-telling, and pedagogy. Like many others, Licentiate Peng chose to teach and became a master at the Ladder to the Clouds. He also remained a scholar, hoping to win a recommendation to the interior. But when Taiwan was placed under the administration of imperial Japan, the educational system changed, too. The ancient gateway to success was shut and bolted. With his dream of three decades crushed, Licentiate Peng devoted his life, without enthusiasm, to teaching at the local school at the Ladder to the Clouds. Rather than grooming talent, he was simply eking out a living. But when he spoke to Old Hu, he lovingly used literary words to bemoan the decline in the study of Chinese classics ("The way of the lords is no more," he asserted, "oh, my way has grown thin") and spoke formally even to Hu Taiming ("Thou art how old?"). When Taiming responded as his grandfather had taught him to, the master was overjoyed. Such was their fondness, and pride, for what had been lost.

Today the old man had brought along Taiming to entrust the boy's education to the scholar. Citing the distance the boy would have to commute, Licentiate Peng recommended waiting another year, but Old Hu wanted his grandson to begin studying the Chinese classics right away. Now that the village bookstore had closed, there was no place else except the Ladder to the Clouds. Moreover, the current state of affairs was such that the Ladder to

the Clouds itself could be forced to close any day, so one could not afford to wait until next year. Bowing to Old Hu's convictions, they decided that Taiming should enter school immediately as a boarding student, since commuting was not a possibility. Although it was not easy for the old man to give up his cherished grandson, sacrifices had to be made for the sake of scholarship.

Before they left that day, Licentiate Peng put 120 copper coins on a red string and placed the necklace around Taiming's neck. Thus it was that Taiming, in the cloth shoes his mother had made for him and with a brand-new bowl cap on his pigtailed head, entered the Ladder to the Clouds in April when the flowers of labor still smelled sweet.

2. The Ladder to the Clouds

Hu Taiming's education began with the three-character book: Repeat after the master. After a couple of times, study on one's own, and recite before the master three or four times a week.

The text, which proceeded in strings of three characters each and consisted of maxims regarding history, the humanities, and complex moral philosophy, was too difficult for Taiming. Its main purpose, however, was to teach characters, and because Taiming had learned some at home, he did not have much trouble with them. Although the class went smoothly, the kids at the Ladder got into mischief in their spare moments. Chinese chess and hide-and-seek, of course, but they also stole fruits and vegetables from the neighbors, mainly for the fun of it. There was no lack of theft-worthy fruits, peaches and plums in spring and longans in the summer, but the most numerous were the fruits of autumn: pomegranates, pomelos, and persimmons. Winter, too, offered tangerines. The kids' usual strategy was for their antics to coincide with Licentiate Peng's daily nap, which he loved above all else and always began at noon and lasted for two hours. The

expeditions sometimes became a problem for the neighbors, but the kids, whose mischief did obey rules of a sort, avoided the field right next to school. Although they could have stolen as much as they wanted from the absentminded old man who owned it, they chose instead for their exploits the field that belonged, say, to the old cat lady, a notorious miser. The more elaborate the measures taken to keep them out, the greater their pleasure in circumventing them, for it was not the end but the means—the process by which their cunning, carefully drafted plans bore fruit—that amused them.

Nonetheless, the kids were scared of Licentiate Peng, who used strict pedagogic methods, mercilessly spanking those who did not do well. Moreover, unlike most opium addicts, Licentiate Peng woke up unusually early. His water pipe, which filtered the smoke, began bubbling before sunrise, and the end of the bubbling meant that the rear gate was about to open with a creak: this was a signal for the boarding students to rise quickly, shine, and water the flowers. Lifting up, by flicking his waist, the hems of a robe that was as long as a mosquito net, Licentiate Peng would soon be coming down the stairs. Because he spent his life smoking opium in a dimly lighted room except when he was teaching, the master's almost fleshless face was a pale blue that betrayed no trace of blood even in the morning sunshine; his lips were dark blue, and his teeth, black. The nails on his left hand, in which he held his water pipe, grew uncut to well over an inch. Indifferent to all worldly matters except opium, mixing with no one, hardly ever exchanging any but pedantic remarks with his students, he still looked every morning at the flowers in the garden, his favorites being the orchids and the chrysanthemums. It was part of his daily routine. He had lived in this way for almost thirty years.

One day, Taiming had an accident. He was playing with several classmates in a meadow close to the school when a grass-eating water buffalo lazily accosted him. To Taiming, the buffalo was

just another familiar detail of his pastoral surroundings. Standing up, he reached for its horns with his hands in an innocent show of affection. But the moment his two hands touched the horns, a blast of black wind whished before his eyes, and his off-balance body collided with the earth so hard that he lost consciousness. The astonished buffalo had shaken its head and thrust its horn into Taiming's side. Taiming vaguely felt someone pick him up but then fell unconscious. When he came to, he was on a bed, and his parents were anxiously looking into his face. There was a dull, numbing pain in his side.

Seeing his mother crying made Taiming remember the accident he had had. He relived the terrifying instant, but only as a memory of a faint and receding past.

His father, seeing that Taiming had revived, said, "Everything is OK now. Don't worry." And looking over his shoulder, he added for the others to hear, too, "We've rubbed bile of bear on your wound and made you drink carrot juice. . . ." He was a doctor of Chinese medicine. Licentiate Peng, who also was at Taiming's bedside, uttered heartfelt words of relief.

When he saw Licentiate Peng, Taiming reflected dully, "So I must be in the Ladder to the Clouds." His father and mother had come rushing over the Dragon's Neck.

The next day, Taiming was carried away from the Ladder in a palanquin to convalesce at home. Because there were not many doctors of Western medicine, bluish green herbs were applied to his wound. Meanwhile, his mother prayed for his recovery almost every day, making promises to various gods and grinding incense sticks for him to swallow. Fortunately, the wound did not become infected, and Taiming recovered in due course, but the year was nearly over by the time he was on his feet again.

As Taiming's wound healed and the new year approached, everyone at home grew busier and busier. His mother was preoccupied with making, under a feeble lantern light, shoes for Taim-

ing and a hat for his sister. He hardly ever saw his father, who left home early every day and didn't seem to come back until late at night as far as Taiming could tell. His older brother was out until very late harvesting the sweet potatoes with the manservant; then the brother's wife processed the potatoes, steaming them and placing them in large barrels, hoping they would ferment well. Amid this bustle, only Old Hu had nothing to do. The children discussed sweet cakes, bragged about their new shoes, and counted the days until their pig would be slaughtered.

The Ladder was closed until after New Year's Day, and so Taiming, though fully recuperated, was still at home. His job was to change the water in the old man's pipe. Old Hu, who was happy to be talking to Taiming after so long, repeated as often as before that "manifest virtue is the way of great learning" and told him about his own experiences. Sometimes he also complained: "Taiming, Japan's time has come, and it's not all bad. We have fewer thieves and robbers, and the roads are wider. But your way to scholarship and government has been blocked. And how are we supposed to pay such high taxes!"

The new year came at last. Speaking ill of others was prohibited during "New Year's Greetings," December 25 to January 5 on the old calendar. Misfortune lay in store (or so it was believed) for anyone who was criticized during that period. Every New Year's Eve, Taiming's family slaughtered a pig to make a votive offering to the Son of Heaven. Around an altar set up in the middle of the yard, they placed candies, fruits, the five fragrances, alcohol, votive coins, and gold and silver sheets at the head; chicken and meat at the lower seat; a sacrificed sheep on one flank; and the pig on the other. Then, at around four in the morning, the whole family left the house to worship the Son of Heaven. Old Hu and his son, dressed in ritual robes for the Triple Address, prayed for the family's prosperity, making vows to the Son of Heaven and to gods ranging from the merciful Guan Yin to the warrior Guan Di, and

expressed gratitude for the past year's peace. On New Year's Day, starting in the early hours of the morning, firecrackers were set off everywhere, honoring the ancestors and gods. People forgot their work and abandoned themselves to the new spring until January 15 or so, with the men making their New Year's rounds and gambling and the women visiting their parents' homes and burning incense. The red planks with verses and the lively bursts of firecrackers, though nothing new, fanned their congratulatory spirit.

On the third day of the first month, Poverty Demon's Day, people usually stayed home and burned coins at the gate to drive away the demon of poverty. Shortly after noon, however, Licentiate Peng strolled in on a surprise visit. He stood for a while in the courtyard, admiring the poem on the red plank. When he was invited into the main building, he exchanged greetings with Old Hu, praised the tea cakes that were offered to him, and said, "Excellent. 'A yard of chicken and dogs? / Tour the enchanted garden. / The smoke that fills your path? / The mist keeps out the worldly.' Such ethereal lines come only to the most detached."

In response to the licentiate's praise, Old Hu requested meekly, "And your own, how does it read this year?"

"Terribly," the Licentiate warned: "Fresh dew does not blight the large tree, / But coats the ancient ladder to the clouds." He also wrote it down for the old man to see.

"Excellent. I am reminded of those brothers in ancient times who refused to be fed by a traitor who had turned against their lord—I'm talking about the young princes Boyi and Shuqi, who preferred to eat their own sandals and starve." But in a voice suddenly clouded with gloom, he asked, "Even so, will the Ladder to the Clouds truly guard its ways as the poem says?" Without really meaning to, he revealed his most recent concern.

"In that case—in the event that the Ladder to the Clouds is ordered to shut down," Licentiate Peng replied dolefully, "classical learning will perish."

Right then, Taiming, his brother, and their father came out to exchange greetings, and from the gathering rose a merry din befitting the new spring. After a while, Licentiate Peng started to yawn repeatedly: his last dose of opium was wearing off. Old Hu, who was as considerate as he was shrewd, caught on immediately and invited Licentiate Peng to come to the old man's room and, there, gave him the needed fix.

At that moment, the yard suddenly grew animated. A new guest had arrived, Old Hu's elder brother's son, who had not called on them for some time. A heavy smoker, Opium Tong had turned to ash every ounce of a holding that was worth six thousand bushels of rice when his family had established itself as a separate branch—thus his name, whose unmodified form was Hu Chuantong. Opium Tong was also a gifted conversationalist and instantly livened up the atmosphere.

Taiming absentmindedly compared the two unexpected guests, Licentiate Peng and Opium Tong. As he could deduce from the exceptional treatment shown to the first, Old Hu revered the scholar. But Taiming did not want a scholarly or bureaucratic career, regardless of what his grandfather thought; rather, he sensed only hell in such a life. Conversely, he was fascinated by Opium Tong's son Zhida, who spoke Japanese and was a police deputy. People called Zhida "Sir," and he certainly cut a fine figure, carrying expensive Japanese cigarettes, flashing a brilliant white handkerchief, and leaving whiffs of perfume everywhere he went. To soak such a handkerchief with one's sweat seemed terribly wasteful to country folk. The refreshing, peculiarly cultural smell of soap that Zhida left in his wake the villagers called the "scent of Japan." At a time when clothes were washed with soapberries and faces, with teaberries, the new soap smelled expensive and special. Taiming sensed in Zhida's frivolous airs the harbinger of a new era.

But Zhida was not especially popular with the villagers. His own family treated him like a stranger, and the rest of the vil-

lage paid him only the falsest respect. They bowed incessantly to his face, but while the scent of soap was still fresh—in fact, the moment he turned around—they denigrated him, and not just because he was part of the establishment.

Meanwhile, Zhida found it easy to talk to Old Hu, who had been to Hong Kong and Canton as a young man and knew something about Western culture. He called frequently on the old man. Soon, losing all sense of restraint, he began to advise him, “Sir, you ought to send Taiming to a real school. That’s how things stand today.”

Old Hu’s reply was always this: “However they stand, you can’t study the classics there.” Although Western culture impressed him in some ways, he did not have much use for it—and wasn’t Japanese culture merely copying it? His mind was full of admiration for the *Chronicles of Lu*, the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, Han and Tang literature, Song and Ming science, and the magnificent culture of ancient China, and he wanted this heritage transmitted to his descendants at all costs.

Not averse to his host’s insistent offer, Licentiate Peng, who had arrived on the third of the month, stayed on for four days or so. He might have stayed longer if Opium Tong’s friends, who had gotten wind of the Hu family’s largesse, had not begun to gather and horn in on the elders’ refined conversation. With the mood spoiled, Licentiate Peng said he was going home. Now, the villagers had nicknamed Opium Tong’s friends Tail Winders, for they were a bunch of sycophants. Well aware how awkward their position would be if Licentiate Peng left, they tried their utmost to persuade him to stay, but to no avail. Old Hu’s entreaties could not change the scholar’s mind either.

Although Meng Chang-jun of the Three Thousand Guests was the old man’s ideal, he had no desire to entertain the likes of Ah-San and Ah-Si. Once his former classmate took off, Old Hu withdrew, leaving his son, Taiming’s father, in charge. His son had a

reputation for being tough-minded and practical, so the uninvited lodgers, ill at ease, shuffled off on their own accord.

The lingering New Year came to an end. The moon had quietly been waxing, and it was now the fifteenth of the month. Various attractions were being prepared in town for the night of the full moon, the Flower Welcoming. The young girls, all dressed up, appeared, escorted by their parents, and there were plenty of young men. Besides being a great time to choose a bride, it also was one of the girls’ rare opportunities to step out of the proverbial “boxes” or homes in which they were guarded.

Taiming and his grandfather set out before sundown to attend the festivities. As they neared the town, the noise of drums and gongs and pipes and flutes whetted their appetite for an evening under the full moon.

The promise of special attractions had drawn such a large crowd that it was almost impossible for them to make their way through the streets, in which people from as far away as Taipei were packed. When the human wave rolled, the child and his grandfather could hardly stay on their feet; Taiming and Old Hu were carried to the center of the festival when it was reaching high tide, with interminable lines of torches and floral lamps swirling breathtakingly. Trumpeters, choruses, masquerade parades of giants and dwarves, and wizards and fairies in their best clothes were gently swaying on floats. It was theater adorned with flowers and antiques, and as the floats passed, Old Hu explained that the man who was murdering his wife had lived in Wu and that the barbarian’s lady bride, whose willow was dying, was Zhaojun. Taiming stood on his tiptoes and gazed, captivated, as a spectacular Lord Guan cut down six enemy generals. Last in the procession was a high platform decked with real singing geishas. Hoisting white paper lanterns, each with a large red dot—the Japanese flag—the policemen and young volunteers below were directing the traffic. It seemed as though the feverish crowd, pushing and

shoving to get a better look at the geishas, was gathering force like a tsunami, when suddenly more than a dozen bodies, squeezed out by the human wall, stumbled toward the procession.

"You stupid chinks!" yelled the officers and swung their clubs to chase away the intruders. Chaos ensued. Old Hu had been pushed out of the human wall—his legs had not been strong enough—and found himself in the middle of the melee. He was hit hard and crumpled to the ground.

Although he finally managed to stand up and get to a safe spot, he was unable to calm down and kept moaning, "What a disaster . . . what a disaster!"

Clinging to the old man, Taiming begged, crying, "Grandpa, let's go home, let's go home right now."

The incident thoroughly damped their high spirits. Forgoing what should have been a pleasant celebration, they left the town and trudged home in the moonlight, feeling as miserable as beaten dogs.

The incident had a tremendous impact on Taiming. The old man, too, looked downcast, his pride wounded. But as the days sped past while they visited ancestors' tombs and the like, their painful wounds healed. By the time the bright white narcissus on Taiming's desk was tinged with yellow and the once arresting red of the plank at the gate had faded, Taiming's long New Year vacation was over, and at long last, he returned to the Ladder to the Clouds. The school, which had lost many students, seemed completely different, desolate.

The public school's incessant recruiting had drawn away students who lived closer to town. Licentiate Peng showed no signs of being upset, apparently having resigned himself to the way in which things were going, and refused the public school's invitation to teach Chinese literature there. Oblivious to his own fate, he recited Tao Yuanming's poem of leave-taking. His water pipe still bubbled in the morning, and he continued to tend his flower garden.

It was not exactly clear why, but when the watermelons were beginning to ripen, Licentiate Peng accepted an invitation from a private school close to the barbarian lands. He departed as if he had no attachments. Although Old Hu was disappointed, he had no choice but to take Taiming back. The task of guiding him through the classics now was up to the old man himself.

3. The Old and the New

In the meantime, the tremors of the new civilization that was rocking their sluggish existence were beginning to reach Taiming's everyday life too. He realized this for the first time when his young cousins, who had come to celebrate Taiming's mother's birthday, played and sang Japanese games and tunes in the "enchanted" yard. Painfully aware that there was a world he did not know, he recalled Cousin Zhida's words and felt left behind. Taiming's father, Hu Wenqing, was beginning to repeat, like a chant, "Those who can't speak Japanese are as good as fools in the civil service today." Times were changing, and the grandson could not understand why Old Hu was pushing him to study the Chinese classics. Although Hu Wenqing had vague hopes for the new education, he let the matter slide because he had other things to do.

These things—like buying back the land that Old Hu had lost—seemed worthwhile to the son, in his capacity as a son, and did not hurt his own interests, either. He made mistakes, however, such as when he bought a plot without asking about third-party obligations. He also found out that some mismeasured tracts actually belonged to him but had been included in the adjacent property.

One day, because he was a doctor, he rushed to the site of an avalanche merely to sit and idly watch the efficient government physicians handle the situation. In another case, a single injection saved a patient that he had given up on; sexually transmitted

diseases, in particular, were beyond the capability of a doctor of Chinese medicine.

Hu Wenqing finally understood that real estate matters had to be settled according to a new, living, and practical science and that the sick were saved by Western medicine more often than by Chinese medicine. To begin with, doctors of Western medicine made so much more money! Thus, despite his interest in the new disciplines, he continued to entrust Taiming's education to Old Hu and those classics lessons; Hu Wenqing knew only too well his father's stubborn nature. Taiming thus became a small, rudderless boat drifting between the currents of two epochs.

An unforeseen development set him on course. Not far from the Hus' house was a lake; one day, the principal of the public school, who was fishing there, dropped by the house on his way home. He was warmly invited to tea, along with his interpreter Lin, who taught at the public school and whose conversation with Old Hu that day was only the first of many. Master Lin had a background in the Chinese classics as well as a knack for getting along with older people, and he finally managed to convince Old Hu to surrender his grandson to public education. Since it was common in those days to skip grades or to begin school without the proper qualifications in the middle of the school year, Taiming started at the beginning of the second semester. His view of the world abruptly widened, vast and vivid.

The school's bustling atmosphere was nothing like the Ladder with its restrictive atmosphere. The playing field and the classrooms were large and bright. Taiming lived in a commoners' dormitory which housed, in addition to Masters Lin and Horiuchi who occupied a corner of the building, five or six students, all of whom were about twenty years old, some already married. They all adored the quiet, sincere, and diligent Taiming. He advanced through school with flying colors.

Everything he saw and heard was new and wonderful. The place efficiently shattered the sorts of superstitions that Taiming had been taught; for instance, a camera did not rob you of your soul. Everyone was photographed without fear.

Taiming was not the only one who changed. When he returned home on vacation after a long absence, his family's pine woods had been reduced to a miserable state. Having heard the rumor that all forests were to become state property, the Hus had cut down their carefully preserved pine trees, citing a family emergency—but too hastily, it turned out, for the state had decided merely to monitor them, not to appropriate them.

Hu Wenqing was busy every day visiting the sick at their homes, and he gradually bought back the lands his father had lost. Although at one point, the Hu family seemed to be in decline, it now was showing signs of recovering its fortunes, its wealth and luck—or so said the villagers. As the Hus' financial condition improved, Taiming's father's short black tunics turned into flowing robes, at first made of cotton and, later, of the softest silk. Hu Wenqing looked very proud in his flowing patterned silk robes.

Under them, he nurtured hopes in his bosom for a certain young woman whom he had first seen on his way home from work. Her name was Ah-Yu.

Having somehow detected Hu Wenqing's secret, the parasite Ah-San whispered sweet, seductive words in his ears: "Doctor Hu, I don't blame the roosters for making so much noise. Ah-Yu has a pretty face, her skin's second to none, and what's more, she's obedient. She's certainly good enough to be your mistress. Ah, and no entanglements—she's got no family other than her mother. A man like you ought to have *two* extra beds—and you don't even have *one*! No sir, we won't have that."

"Really?" Hu Wenqing replied, grunting indifferently. But his heart was beating wildly with lust.

The palpitations of the doctor's heart were no secret to Ah-San, who gestured that he understood everything. With a knowing smirk, he added, "Don't worry, doctor, it'll turn out just fine. Just leave it to Ah-San. . . ."

Everything turned out just fine—for Ah-San, that is. The frugal Hu Wenqing began to support Ah-Yu, and brand-new furniture accumulated under her roof. Knowing, for the first time, the skin of a woman other than his wife's, Hu Wenqing was as happy as an idiot, oblivious to the fact that when he was not on the fancy bed he had bought for Ah-Yu, Ah-San smoked opium on it.

A greedy man, Ah-San was not satisfied with his cut for having played the go-between. He whispered into Ah-Yu's ear, "When it comes to money, you ought to get as much as you can, while you can. You think pigs know how to love? I bet you don't know how to squeeze so much money out of a pig that you won't have to work for the rest of your life."

Ah-Yu, who was the daughter of one of his relatives, called Ah-San "uncle." When she heard him say that, she thought, "Uncle has a point." Uncle also convinced Ah-Yu's mother that they should add another act to the unfolding drama.

Having completed the day's rounds, the unsuspecting Hu Wenqing visited his mistress's house. Dinner was served with chicken saké, which he loved, and Ah-Yu was more passionately deferential than ever. When he finished his meal, Hu Wenqing lay his pleasantly inebriated body on the bed he had bought for her, ready to wade into a bliss so wonderful that he could almost forget that it was, like the bed, expensive. Ah-Yu knew the routine well and would slip like a soft wisp of air into the reach of his voluptuous tentacles.

Moments of languorous bliss, not unlike the opium smoker's, flowed slowly. Then Hu Wenqing drifted into the sleep that beckoned him.

It was midnight when a knocking so violent that it seemed about to tear down the door woke him up. In between the thundering knocks, someone yelled, "You thief! Here's the cuckold! You tomcat, open the door so I can beat you to death!"

Shocked out of his wits, Hu Wenqing jumped out of bed. Ah-Yu tidied her disheveled nightgown and screamed in a voice pitched high with fear: "Oh, it's him!"

So completely unnerved was Hu Wenqing that his body shook like a dying man's. Between the knocking and bellowing at the door, he could also hear Ah-Yu's mother's pleading wails. For some reason, at this late hour, Ah-San also was around. "Wait, leave it to Ah-San! Let me handle it, I say!" he excitedly insisted.

Thanks to Ah-San's opportune mediation, Hu Wenqing survived the perilous encounter. Before he scurried home, he promised to pay five hundred yen as a settlement, wrote an IOU, and handed over as a guarantee his gold watch, gold ring, gold chain, gold-rimmed glasses, and all the other valuables he had on him. The next day, Ah-San brought Hu Wenqing the piece of paper, exchanged it for five hundred yen, and badgered him for a hundred more, this for himself—the doctor owed the schemer that much for the rescue, did he not? In just a couple of days, the whole village knew about it.

Having paid six hundred yen for a lesson he apparently took to heart, Hu Wenqing did not mention Ah-Yu's name for a while. But two months later, when Ah-San told him that Ah-Yu had been divorced by her husband, Hu Wenqing's desire revived. The lesson had been hammered in so deeply that he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her.

Through Ah-San, he asked Ah-Yu whether she would live with him as his concubine. She had no objections; instead, the problem was how to convince his own wife, Ah-Cha, to accept such an arrangement. He consulted Ah-San, who proved wise again.

One day, escorted by Ah-San, a fortune-teller who seemed to think highly of himself came to the Hu house. "Geography is absolutely crucial," he said, praising the house's location, "for the auspicious fortune of a place and its inhabitants." Said to hail from China, he spoke the dialect of the continent's southern marshlands, wore heavy black-rimmed glasses, and held a large fan. "And yet every person's life has its own laws, rhythms, and duration—what people call 'fate.'" Citing the story of the wise Kongming, the brave Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, and their lord Liu Xuande, who did not, despite the lord's virtues, prevail in the War of the Three Kingdoms, the fortune-teller warned against the folly of resisting fate. He added that death lurked on Master Hu's countenance, that he had probably suffered a severe bout of ill luck recently, and that he might have lost his life were it not for his ancestor's virtues, not to mention Master Hu's own good deeds. But the bad luck was far from over, and the only way to escape it was—the fortune-teller paused here and concluded in grave style—to have a concubine.

"I would like to examine madam's physiognomy as well," he went on. "It will round out our results." Elated, Hu Wenqing advised his wife to submit, which, obedient to her husband, she did. "Madam has the look of a woman affluent in old age, but she should not monopolize her husband unless she wants to jeopardize his well-being. His luck is expected to improve for just one year and flounder for five, during which time he will be extremely vulnerable." Finally, in a matter-of-fact tone, he declared, "It's fascinating how consistently Master Hu's signs cry out for having two women in his life."

If this was true, Ah-Cha had to consent. After all, it was not uncommon for a husband to keep a concubine, and she should not take it personally. Although Old Hu had a pensive look, he did not seem to mind all that much. It was Hu Wenqing's elder son, Zhigang, who opposed the plan. As usual, Ah-San knew how

to cope with such annoyances. Hu Wenqing followed Ah-San's advice and promised to add to the land that Zhigang, as the elder son, would inherit when he moved out. The promise immediately dispelled the son's fastidious objections.

That was how Ah-Yu joined the Hu household. Sustained in the face of changing times, such practices—so remote from the transformation that Taiming was undergoing—puzzled and alienated him during his infrequent homecomings. Sensitive to trends among the progressive elements of those times, Taiming had cut off his pigtail and wore his hair cut short. There was a hollow ring where the pigtail used to be, and the village's gossips nicknamed it "the limestone." The village elders, who believed it was unethical to damage any part of one's body, were scandalized, as though he had lopped off his own head. In fact, a traditional, private means of bringing justice against adulterers was to shave their heads.

Taiming, of course, had had his pigtail cut off voluntarily. The first time he went home with his new haircut, his mother Ah-Cha told him in a trembling voice that she tried hard to control: "Taiming, you won't meet your ancestors when you die." She wept. When Zhigang introduced him to others, he always snatched off his younger brother's cap, more for the fun of it than for reasons of etiquette, and his younger sister kept saying, "Gross!" In the streets, comments like "Hey little monk!" were hurled in his direction.

Ah-Yu usually stayed in the innermost rooms of the house and never emerged except for meals, but when Taiming came home, she offered to look after him as though she were his mother. On his part, Taiming resisted the familiarity of the stranger who had become a family member without his knowledge. A kind of rift separated him from the rest of the family. A vague uneasiness propelled him back to school as soon as he was through with whatever he had come home for. This unfulfillment fueled his desire to study and to know more.

4. Into Roiled Waters

Because Taiming was exceptionally honest, all the teachers loved him. His Japanese improved quickly as he helped Mr. Horiuchi (a bachelor) cook. When Taiming graduated, he sat for medical school exams, and when he failed them, he entered the teachers' program at the Department of Japanese. During his four profoundly influential years there, he became a man of the new kind of culture, however shallow his actual learning may have been. Some of his classmates left for Japan with high hopes of pursuing their studies further, but like most of the others, Taiming accepted his duties and was assigned to a school in the countryside. He dropped by his native village for a brief visit with his family.

His cap and suit were edged with gold, and a short sword hung from his belt; the civil officer's full uniform was quite a sensation in the village. As the firecrackers were set off at the gate, more and more friends and relatives gathered at his house for a welcoming celebration as elaborate as the feasts Taiming had known as a child. Seventy or eighty people were chatting in the hall by the time the drinks were poured.

Opium Tong stood up to make a toast: "Here is the first civil officer our village has produced. The learned men of old were not more honorable. To the glory of our clan!"

Everyone heartily welcomed this excuse to drink and feast. Taiming, a product of the new education, felt not only alienated but repulsed by the mindless spree. He cut short his stay and departed to fill his post.

From the desolate station where he got off the train, it was more than an hour's ride on the local sugar refinery's flatcar to get to his first workplace, K Public School. The student body consisted mostly of children from nearby farming villages, and the teaching staff numbered thirteen, including the princi-

pal. Two of the instructors were new, Taiming and a Japanese woman named Naito Hisako who had just graduated from a women's college.

The two went to the principal's office to introduce themselves. Even though his bald head made him look much older, the principal, who was Japanese, was not many years past thirty. The Taiwanese headmaster who stood obediently at his side was going on forty-five and looked as lackluster as his dirty uniform, whose gold lace had lost its color. The principal offered formulaic instructions, and when he was finished, the students were marshaled into the main hall to greet the new teachers. On the platform, Taiming was flustered by the innumerable gazes fixed on him. He did not remember a word he said.

As he left the hall, the headmaster said to him, "What energy, what eloquence!" Taiming sensed that he was being ironic and felt even more embarrassed.

It rained the next day. From the classroom quiet after dismissal, he gazed thoughtfully at the white petals, fallen from the oil trees, that littered the muddy brown dirt from one end of the playground to the other. He heard footsteps and turned around to find Headmaster Chen, Instructor Li, and Trainee Huang coming through the doorway.

Grinning, Headmaster Chen approached Taiming and said, "Hu! So what do you think?"

"Well, I'm not used to it yet. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Ah yes, that's how it was for all of us. You'll get used to it soon enough. By the way," he added, turning to Instructor Li, "the Cat is getting pretty nasty: he hosted a Japanese-only welcoming party for Miss Naito Hisako last evening. Did you know that?"

"He was calling for staff harmony just yesterday, after the entrance ceremony! 'Japanese-Taiwanese unity!' It's depressing."

Their conversation seemed to be directed to Taiming. Apparently, "Cat" was the principal's nickname, and the trio continued

their mean-spirited talk in a manner that did not become educators. Somewhat disgusted, Taiming turned his face to the window and pretended not to hear.

"Hu, what do you think?" the headmaster asked.

"Well, I'm pretty new here . . ."

Taiming did not have to clarify his position, for the trio immediately resumed enumerating their grievances against the principal and the other Japanese members of the faculty. Finally they said, "We're leaving, go home and get some rest," and filed out of the classroom.

This pungent whiff of the school's smoldering racial tension gave Taiming a sinking feeling. His mood darkened further upon reflection: he could not care less whether the principal had invited him, but it was *his* having been snubbed that had prompted the headmaster and company to air their latest grievances in his presence.

Three days later, after Saturday classes, Headmaster Chen came to Taiming's classroom to tell him, "There'll be a welcoming party for you this evening—just among us—so get ready." The headmaster seemed to think he was hatching some plot, and his clandestine, unabashedly retaliatory intent annoyed Taiming. The insinuating "just among us" had the peculiar overtones of an ideological cadre, and Taiming dreaded the prospect of clearer self-definition through successive meetings. Strife between the Japanese and Taiwanese faculty was bound to cast a dark shadow on the children. Considering this, he replied that he had to decline the honor, though he was grateful to the headmaster, who was being too kind. Headmaster Chen took this as a sign of Taiming's modesty and urged him to accept the invitation; preparations had already been made, and the welcoming party was to be held in Taiming's room.

The room had neither closets nor paper screens. The blanched surface of the six tatami spoke eloquently of his dull living conditions. There was nothing on the dirt-floored patch adjacent to

the room except a cooking stove and a water jug. Before Taiming moved in, the room had belonged to Trainee Huang's family of five.

At the designated time, Headmaster Chen and five or six instructors, one of them a woman, trooped into his room. Taiming fretted, too late, that he had no cushions for his guests. And yet—wasn't he supposed to be the guest?

They brought their own drinks and told him they had ordered food from a restaurant in town. The drinking commenced and continued with the help of the lady instructor, who poured. The alcohol had the effect of centering their conversation on the principal's antics. The Cat used the school's janitor as his personal servant, making him chop wood, prepare his bath, and run errands. The Cat also monopolized the occasions for formal, funded trips and preferentially assigned the rare paid leaves to his Japanese colleagues. The voluntary instigator of these verbal attacks was Instructor Li. The others nodded and assented, but only halfheartedly, and they did not seem particularly interested. As a matter of fact, the arrival of every new dish occupied their attention and repeatedly interrupted the attack. Taiming grew sadder and sadder that evening. It was not a welcoming ceremony but an excuse for an uncouth gathering for food and drink.

When all the dishes had been eaten and empty bottles littered the room, Headmaster Chen and the lady instructor went home. The four or five who remained were not yet satisfied and took Taiming out on the town.

The night breeze felt good against his hot cheeks, which still glowed from all the drinking forced on him. His inhibitions disappeared with the wind. He suddenly wanted to shove his thoughts, which had been gathering heat, in his colleagues' faces. In the strongest words, they lived by the trifles that dangled before their eyes, and their way of thinking was utterly

petty. What came out from Taiming's mouth, however, were fragmentary, unconvincing sentences that failed to express even a hundredth of what he felt.

"You're such a great citizen," retorted Instructor Li. The expression, borrowed from an occupation-era song that went "Be a great citizen," meant that Taiming was a lackey of the Japanese. "I'm afraid you're still too green," Instructor Li jeered some more. "The notes you took at school are useless in the real world. I wish it were that simple!"

They suddenly found themselves in a weird place, although it was sudden only for Taiming; the others had been steering him to this destination. With Trainee Huang at their head, the party went through a scarlet curtain that swayed seductively across one of the doorways. In the middle of the tidy room was a bed and over it hung a silk mosquito net, decorated at the top with what looked like a horizontal painting but was, in fact, Fuchou embroidery of a beautiful phoenix that seemed to be dancing. Relaxed, playfully muffled, but provocative laughter came from a lady in a high-collared dress who stood in front of the net.

Taiming made out a couplet on the hanging picture of a Xihu beauty that adorned one of the walls: "A brave recalls his once sweet one, a ginger stamen in the sun." He grasped the couplet's hidden message and felt rather satisfied with himself.

When Trainee Huang, who seemed to be well acquainted with the lady, tried to introduce Taiming to her, the new face Taiming surprised everyone by preempting him: "Nice to meet you, Miss Yingkui."

"Hu, how do you know her name? How?" Trainee Huang demanded, suspicious.

Taiming only laughed and answered that a good prime minister knows his people even if he never steps out of his palace. The woman, too, looked more than a bit puzzled that Taiming had guessed her name, so he proceeded to divulge his trick as well as

his erudition: the first line of the couplet on the hanging scroll began with the character "ying," the second with "kui."

Later, Trainee Huang started singing a mountain song, and their conversation gradually lost all vestiges of sophistication.

That night, in his dingy room, Taiming had trouble falling asleep for a long time after he went to bed. He thought about the suffocating atmosphere that had surrounded him ever since he arrived, about the sense of injury the Taiwanese faculty nursed against their Japanese counterparts, and about the sad melodies and lyrics that Yingkui had sung from *Lament of the Courtesan*. After a while, Yingkui's face became Naito Hisako's, and when he thought about Hisako, his youthful blood coursed quickly through his veins.

5. Hisako

The semesters that segmented teaching life came and went like whirlwinds, and the seasons hectically tumbled past. The watermelons, which had lined the grocer's storefront until just now, disappeared when you stole a furtive glance back at the summer vacation; the quick-handed grocer had replaced them with rich vermilion persimmons. Meanwhile, local government was reformed in the direction of greater autonomy, and the gaudy gold laces of the civil officer's uniform gave way to black frills. The short sword was recalled, although some people had grown attached to theirs. Taiming found the sudden lightness of his belt to be physically and emotionally liberating.

Autumn failed to dissipate the heat, but at school, Sports Day was coming up. In the playground, from which one could see the peak of Mount Cigao thrust into the azure sky, the students practiced their games and dances after school. The teachers in charge of dancing were Ruie, the only woman at Taiming's welcoming party, and Naito Hisako. As the head of the music department,

Taiming was busy every day, playing the organ accompaniment for the dances. Sometimes his mind drifted off the keyboard into a dream, and the children danced awkwardly to the slowly fraying rhythm until it became too difficult.

"Mister, you're completely off!" said Ruie, wiping her sweat unceremoniously and coming over to Taiming's side. She scowled at him, but the look in her eyes was more flirting than scolding.

"Ah! I don't know what's wrong with me," Taiming replied. He put his elbow on the organ, rested his chin on his palm, and looked far away. Ruie's breasts, which rose and fell with her heavy breathing, occupied a corner of his vision, so close he could have touched them. When Naito Hisako saw that Taiming was not about to start up again very soon, she blew her whistle, called for a break, and walked slowly toward her colleagues.

Ruie said to her pointedly, seeking agreement, "I say there's something wrong with our Mr. Hu." But her chiding remark was imbued with a protectiveness rooted in their assumed kinship. It was not that Taiming did not notice her persistent attempts, sometimes coquettish, to befriend him; rather, he was deliberately avoiding them. He felt sorry not to respond to her advances, but he could not help it. His heart was filled so completely by Naito Hisako that he could hardly think about anyone or anything else. Ruie's kindness and affection only annoyed Taiming.

Almost pushing him off, Ruie demanded to sit down at the organ. Taiming surrendered his seat grudgingly and thought, "If only that were Hisako just now . . ."

Naito Hisako began to dance to Ruie's organ accompaniment. Whenever Hisako bent her body to the swaying tunes of the "The Celestial Nymph's Gown," her gymnastically trained limbs flashed elegant arcs. It was incredible. As she turned, the hem of her skirt spiraled upward, revealing a couple of pistils, the whitest of legs.

"Ah! Ah, those white legs!" Taiming observed to himself. He felt dizzy and shut his eyes. The skirt did not spiral downward

under his eyelids, where the white legs went on voluptuously flexing more enchanting curves. The plump and fragrant legs of a Japanese woman—and how like a butterfly, how charmingly her hands hopped from breeze to breeze! He recalled the talent show at which Hisako had worn a white robe to dance the celestial nymph, when her glamorous limbs and their immaculate movements overpowered the packed hall, which grew quiet with pleasure. And on those rare occasions when she was walking around in her beautiful kimono, her obi puffing out at her back, Hisako's inexpressible allure also was not to be underestimated.

He opened his eyes. Hisako was still dancing unawares, but Taiming could not watch anymore. For the more she aroused him, the more depressed he felt and the deeper he slid down into the unbridgeable abyss that separated them, he Taiwanese and she Japanese.

He actually was sick, and thus chance intervened to augment his longing. That day he excused himself on account of a headache, and lying down on his back as soon as he tumbled into his room, he glared at the ceiling. He couldn't stop thinking about Hisako: "That she is Japanese and I am Taiwanese is a fact. Can anyone change that? No one can change it!"

The fact tormented him. If, if they did manage to get married, then what? He would be virtually helpless when it came to providing Hisako with the high standard of living that a Japanese woman naturally expected, and as a public school teacher he had no chance of becoming rich. The best he could hope for was to become a principal somewhere in the countryside, and that only after thirty years of hard work. A thorough examination of his options drove him to despair.

Taiming washed Naito Hisako in his pool of ideals. She was the spotless gown of the celestial nymph, the perfect woman, almost an idol. Curiously, the real Naito Hisako said things like, "I bet you've never taken a bath in your whole life, Mr. Hu, people on

this island just don't," and complained that he stank of garlic. But Taiming never ate garlic. She never tired of saying, "What can you expect of these people?" though not maliciously; it seemed more that she could not help but acknowledge her sense of superiority. Baozheng's party, to which both of them were invited for the old New Year, was the site of one of many telling scenes. When a whole roasted chicken (which still was in its original form) appeared on the table, Hisako leaned toward Taiming and whispered, "Are we barbarians or what?" Once she had a bite, she declared it delicious and started chewing like a pig, succumbing to the exquisite, artless taste born of that people's wisdom that she had just now ridiculed as barbaric. She never noticed the contradiction, namely, that her arrogance fed on ignorance. The heedless stupidity with which she gorged herself showed that she was just another woman.

Taiming was not unaware of this. It was just that her faults tended to fuel his passion rather than dampen it. "Then my blood is," he thought, "polluted after all. It's my karma I must overcome; the filthy blood of a man who made a concubine of a loose ignoramus courses through my body. . . ." For a long time that night, his inner conflicts kept him awake.

6. The Longing Lasts

Once Sports Day was over, the pupils began preparing for exams with the hope of entering normal school. Every pupil did everything he could, but each year the number of students admitted from a district was approximately one. The competition for the single seat was naturally stiff in a district that counted sixteen schools and more than twenty sixth-grade classes, but Taiming badly wanted the chosen one to come from K Public School.

The first step he took against these formidable odds was to make up a schedule that extended from daybreak to sundown and beyond. He offered Japanese and math reviews before school,

analyses of recent exam questions after school, and, at night, tutorial sessions in his room. It was not too long after he had begun living according to this punishing regimen that he learned, to his dismay, that some of the future examinees had failed to digest the fourth-grade, and even the third-grade, material. In this way, Taiming found out about the lower-grade teachers' negligence.

Hardly ever speaking to his colleagues, Taiming tackled his task feverishly, hoping to escape his unending longing for Naito Hisako. His colleagues did not think well of him for trying; some suggested that his real motive was self-promotion, and others derided what they called his misguided efforts. Instructor Li scornfully pointed out to him that nothing would change in the larger view, since there was a "natives quota" and Taiming was simply trying to rob another school of success in what was no more than a petty turf war. This suffocating atmosphere emboldened Taiming, who thought his colleagues were merely rationalizing their own neglect. "Wait and see," he challenged himself, "the exam results will be impressive." His eyes were bloodshot from teaching day and night.

One evening, a clearly prosperous, middle-aged gentleman visited Taiming in his room. "Though you are young, teacher," he began courteously, "you look after our children as though they were your own. What you have been doing for the test takers has reached my ears, and I am here tonight to ask a favor of a man I have long held in great esteem." A member of the town assembly, Mr. Lin was also considered a man of integrity.

He had three sons. The eldest had failed every examination for Taiwan's secondary schools and, as a last resort, had been sent to Japan. In his ten or so years in Tokyo, all he had learned was how to play pool and seduce waitresses. He, his eldest son, had come back bored and broken. The second son, who also had to be sent to Japan for schooling, joined a political movement and was never heard from again. Thereafter, Lin's hopes had centered on

his youngest son; he at least should study at a secondary school in Taiwan, within reach of his parents' watchful eyes. This son was attending K Public School and in fact was in the sixth grade, but not in Taiming's class. Ito-sensei did not offer extracurricular sessions. When Mr. Lin, bowing deeply, requested special tutorial guidance for his son, Ito simply refused. The assemblyman was well aware that the boy's abilities were wanting and that the requested transfer of responsibilities was irregular, but the boy was his son—and the father was desperate.

With the passion of a young teacher, Taiming responded to the man, his story, and his faith in Taiming. Granted, things might get complicated if he accepted another teacher's pupil, and Ito happened to be one of those who regarded Taiming as selfish. Nonetheless, Mr. Lin's fatherly love moved Taiming to do him a favor that appealed to his own, neophyte's, uncompromising sense of justice. His blood rose.

The deal concluded, Mr. Lin, with visible relief, turned to small talk. He looked around the room and said, "These lodgings are, if I may be frank, terrible. Don't they ever replace the tatami?"

"They haven't in three years, I've been told."

"Three years? If I remember correctly, the budget permits them to be replaced each year."

"I asked the principal last December. He said we're running low on money."

"Running low?" Mr. Lin repeated with rising irritation. "That's impossible—the principal, Ito-sensei, and the new lady all had brand-new tatami when I made my New Year's rounds. Outrageous! This is embezzlement." Mr. Lin fulminated at length against the principal and the Japanese faculty's arrogations before he finally left.

The pupils, though, were advancing quickly, repaying Taiming's efforts twice over with clear signs of mastery that he found almost overwhelmingly heartwarming.

Although Taiming felt like a satisfied warrior who has fought well and can tell himself as his lifeblood is draining out that he has served honorably and should have no regrets, his heart beat wildly on the morning of the exams. He was beset by doubts, an empty feeling that every step he had taken was misguided and pointless. Yet what could he do now but await the stern verdict?

The exam results surpassed all his expectations: one student qualified for normal school, and two, for secondary school. The total of three successful applicants was unprecedented for any public school, and the letters on the posting grew misty as Taiming's heart filled with a desire to thank someone or something. Someone tapped him on his back, and it was Mr. Lin, who squeezed Taiming's hands warmly in his and said with genuine feeling, "Mission complete! Congratulations!"

"Mr. Lin's son?" Taiming thought momentarily; then a chill shot through him. Too preoccupied with the overall results, he had not even looked to see how his pupils had performed individually. He looked down—his hands were still in Mr. Lin's—and said, "I'm sorry I failed you." These last words were barely audible.

"What are you saying!" chided Mr. Lin, now the consoling party. "Teacher, you don't know how much you've done. My son wasn't up to it, that's all." But his voice sank toward the end.

No one could deny that the exceptional exam results were due to Taiming's efforts, and he certainly was proud. He also turned shy when, both at school and in town, people talked about nothing else. One day, after school, as he was packing his things, someone sneaked up on him:

"Congratulations, Mr. Hu."

Taiming stiffened, electrified. The voice was Hisako's. It was filled with affection, however, and continued in the same uncharacteristic vein: "You must have worked hard. Really!"

Taiming examined his heart and found that it was open to her

praise. He sincerely accepted her kind words, and the two of them stood there for a while, saying little and feeling much.

A jovial, high-pitched cry shattered the conciliatory moment. It was Ruie. "Hu the Great! Congratulations! Wow, what a feat!"

"How predictable this woman is," Taiming groaned to himself. He could hardly speak now, for Ruie's enthusiastic manner always wore him down, but this weakness also made him long even more for Naito Hisako's company. Hadn't his immersion in work helped him overcome his longing? It had been only a temporary respite. How quickly his reserve crumpled before her, her face and voice. This was proof for him! He staggered home overcome by his futile sentiments.

By chance, Taiming's and Hisako's paths kept crossing. On his train ride home—the commencement exercises had been full of joy and tears—he ran into her. She suggested that he drop by her parents' house. The invitation, which Hisako probably offered to a colleague as an innocuous gesture of goodwill, meant so much to Taiming that he could hardly bear the weight of it.

Her parents welcomed the stranger heartily. It was lunchtime, and they offered him a Japanese-style lunch. Although the kidney beans and tempura did not strike Taiming as particularly unusual, the yam soup and sashimi did. "Please," Hisako urged girlishly as she drank the sticky soup, "it's so delicious, Mr. Hu, please try it." Taiming dipped his chopsticks in it but did not take more than a sip.

"Try a slice," Mrs. Naito prompted, indicating the raw fish he had been avoiding: "it's tuna." The slab of tuna that Taiming politely put in his mouth did not inspire him to linger over it, so he gulped it down, but it shot back up with a rush of nausea. He recovered in the nick of time; pretending to wipe his mouth, he spat the slice out into his handkerchief. Tears came to his eyes; this was the bittersweet taste of love. The good-natured Naito family did not notice Taiming's little maneuver, and they seemed not to

doubt for a moment that what was delicious to them also must be delicious to him.

He took his leave, and Hisako walked with him to the station. The new semester was not far off. She waved her handkerchief as the train sped toward his village. He was smarting from the tender wound of parting, and his gaze was turned for a long time toward Hisako, who was still waving her handkerchief.

7. At Home

Back home, not much had changed since the last time he was there. Ah-San and Ah-Si had not changed, and Opium Tong still smoked his namesake.

Grandfather was doing just fine, and his water pipe was still bubbling. Taiming wanted to have the leisurely conversations that they had not had for a long time, so he was puzzled that his grandfather treated him like an important guest. He felt better when Old Hu began talking, first about tea and then about the twenty-four obedient children of history. Evidently glad to have someone to talk to, the old man demonstrated how much he still loved to chat, and there was no end to topics of conversation. Licentiate Peng was still teaching in the wilds. Taiming's father, Hu Wenqing, was preoccupied with the family business: medicine, on the one hand, and adding to the Hus' fortunes, on the other.

Not much had changed, but there were subtle indications of time passing. Just as Ah-San's and Ah-Si's foreheads were slightly more wrinkled, the furniture and utensils in the Hu household seemed—was Taiming imagining?—darker with age. The ceremonial hall, where twenty years ago a few hundred Hus had assembled to celebrate, was now completely dilapidated and covered with the children's scribbling; the loosened gold leaf no longer read "sumnum bonum," and the candlesticks, heavy with the wax that had collected on them, sat on a dust-caked altar. Over

the years the Hu clan had scattered, with some members going to the southern and eastern parts of the island and resettling there. Others, like Ah-San and Ah-Si, stayed, but as hangers-on.

"Ah-San's and Ah-Si's world is disappearing," Taiming mused, captivated by the objective vision he suddenly had of the lives around him. Licentiate Peng was trying to escape reality, whereas Grandfather was trying to transcend reality. Hu Wenqing was overwhelmed by wrestling with reality. And Taiming—he was tired of chasing reality. What spurred him on was youthful ambition, hopes, and dreams, but, come to think of it, didn't it sometimes seem meaningless? He almost envied his grandfather's detachment.

When Old Hu mentioned the twenty-four obedient children, he also stated that having children was a person's filial duty and gently urged Taiming to marry. The old man, who had been pressing this idea for quite some time, saw his grandson's homecoming as a good chance to make sure the idea was realized. The custom was to arrange the marriage, which was sealed upon the first meeting—not a custom of which Taiming approved. To begin with, he could not take his mind off Naito Hisako, although the fact that he did not know what she thought about him was certainly a problem. No matter how much he loved her, he had no solid reason for rejecting the matches Old Hu might suggest to him. Taiming really did not know what to do, but Old Hu, who was just sounding him out, just left it there. He returned the conversation to the classics in a way that surprised the public school teacher. The new thinking had apparently found its way to Old Hu, who declared, "A thousand paragraphs written in the best civil examination style are no match for a single bomb. We've entered the age of science, Taiming. Literary dilettantism is not enough. The works that Confucianism long branded as heretical are being put to good use in Japan, even Shang Yang's idea of rule by law. Science is what the coming generations should take up."

This rekindled Taiming's respect for his grandfather, but the

young man did not have time for philosophical pontification: he was too busy thinking about Hisako. He was remembering her voice, her words, and her figure even while his grandfather was speaking.

The next day, Taiming was confronted by his brother. Zhigang was not an optimistic person; it was only after much delay and nagging by his wife that he finally brought up the issue of inheritance, which occupied his heart and soul. This was how things stood: although their father's mistress, Ah-Yu, was now a mother, she had not been properly entered in the family register. Although her son was not yet a Hu, Hu Wenqing was trying to remedy the situation. Thus it would be advantageous, in property terms, for Zhigang and Taiming to form separate branches immediately. They could do this successfully if they formed a common front.

Taiming recognized his sister-in-law's hand in Zhigang's plan and found it distasteful. Because Ah-Yu's son was also Hu Wenqing's, the child had to be treated like a brother. It was unbearable to watch a treacherous scheme being hatched behind Hu Wenqing's back while he, their father, carried on without suspecting. To participate in such a plan was unthinkable. Taiming lost his temper and burst out, "I'm single, so I don't need to inherit anything. If you want the property so much, brother, split it with father and leave me out of it." He stormed back to his room and felt miserable for having experienced at first hand the ugliness of family feuds. His indignation flared up when he recalled that Zhigang had also mentioned the tuition money reserved for Qiuyun, their younger sister, who was to enter a girls' school in a year. If Zhigang was going to be like that, Taiming would side with his father, to the bitter end, he swore. Of course, keeping a mistress was not good. It was their father's weak point, and Hu Wenqing would probably give in to Zhigang's demands if Taiming cooperated. Taiming could almost see the smirk on his sister-in-law's and the other faces that

would profit from the scheme. Even though keeping a mistress was not good, the child born of the arrangement was innocent. This thought made Taiming want to speak to his father, his poor father, whom Ah-Yu, Ah-San, Ah-Si, Zhigang, Zhigang's wife, and the rest surrounded only to attack him! Striding into Hu Wenqing's living room, where the father sat holding the baby, his mother close by, Taiming poured out his views in a torrent, not bothering to wipe away the tears filling his eyes as he spoke. Both parents were deeply moved.

The father's eyes also teared up. Hu Wenqing had recently been showing signs of old age and now looked at his son with infinite gratitude and trust. He held up the infant: "Your little brother. . . I'm counting on you." Taiming reached for the small, warm lump of life that laughed innocently at him, and it felt like a blood relation.

Besides having a difficult workplace, Taiming also did not feel at home with his family. He left for K Public School as soon as his father declared once and for all that the Hu property was not to be divided up until his death, effectively ending Zhigang's plan to branch out immediately. The beginning of the new semester was still some days away, and the school seemed lonely without Hisako. Taiming felt as though he had been exiled from life. He decided that he at least could visit Ruie, scurried down the dirt path to the apartment he believed to be hers, and waited nearby. He did not have the courage to knock. Back in his dingy room, dejected, he tried to forget everything by dropping into a lonely, shallow sleep, trying his best not to call out a Japanese woman's name.

8. Storm Season

A new semester usually brings fresh expectations and the kind of tension one feels when looking at a blank sheet of paper, but the semester that began that April was filled with a murderous ten-

sion more like the quiet before a storm. Some of the teachers had been transferred. Faculty meetings and morning assemblies, held routinely every day, were torments for Taiming.

At the faculty meetings, the principal regularly denounced the native instructors. He would begin with a cliché like "Those who have not learned the national language (Japanese) lack national spirit" and end by exhorting the native faculty members to make Japanese their language at home. What kind of educators were they if they couldn't educate their own families? These charges of low pedagogic morale hurt Taiming, who felt as though he were indeed their target. The faculty meetings also reviewed the reports on student conduct written by the instructor on duty for the week. It was reported, for example, that the bathrooms in the native pupils' homes were filthy, and it consequently was concluded that the native pupils were responsible for the filthiness of the bathrooms at K Public School. Investigations of family life were common, and Instructor Ito went so far as to conduct one on the basis of an irrelevant response by a student who knew little Japanese—understandably so, since he had just enrolled. Such excesses greatly hurt Taiming.

At one of the morning assemblies, the head of Taiming's class was summoned to the platform. Held responsible for a trivial incident, the boy started giving the facts in the best Japanese he could manage. The instructor on duty that week was offended by the boy's efforts.

"Stop talking back! Don't get uppity on me," he said. And suddenly he slapped the boy in the face, and the boy ended his explanation. His eyes were full of tears.

Perhaps out of remorse, the instructor added in a soothing voice: "You should say whatever you want to say." Much more than that is required to win over a boy who has just resolved not to "talk back" at all. He did not answer, and this offended the instructor, this time beyond all self-control.

"Stop sulking, you twisted brat!" he yelled hysterically. Violent slaps rained down on the class president, who started sobbing audibly. This was simply too much for the Japanese instructor. "A weakling won't make a good citizen!" he exploded.

Taiming felt as though he himself were receiving the blows. It was too much, he thought, as he watched the scene. He did nothing to stop it.

An aura of violence hung over the school for some time. Guardians and concerned townsfolk protested, but nothing changed until, finally, a pupil who had been boxed heavily on the ear was diagnosed with *timpanitis*. This stopped the beatings. The faculty adopted Trainee Huang's suggestion for a new type of punishment: instead of slapping recalcitrant students, why not make them kneel on the concrete floor? In some ways, this punishment seemed worse than beating. From then on, in the corners of K Public School's classrooms, one could always find the imploring gaze of pupils "under punishment," learning about the properties of concrete through their bodies.

At long last, Taiming began to harbor doubts about education, or at least about the methods that it seemed to require. Now that he thought about it, he had never been able to justify some things to himself. Why did they have to resort to beatings at K Public School when the local grammar school, which did not, also yielded results? And while the grammar school simply followed the prescribed guidelines, Taiming's school placed undue emphasis on agronomy. He had some suspicions about this but had no presentable reform plan in mind.

At one of the bimonthly meetings of the Critical Forum for Pedagogic Practice, it was argued that the native instructors were responsible for the terrible accent with which the public school students spoke Japanese. This set off a debate whose focus shifted gradually to the strained relationship between the Japanese and Taiwanese members of the faculty.

At one point, a tense silence fell over the forum. A single spark could have made it all end in disaster. It was then that Instructor Zeng, who rarely spoke on these or any other occasions, stood up to address the principal. There was a nervous look on everyone's face; the usually so gentle man looked frighteningly pale.

"You say the native instructors speak bad Japanese." His words reverberated, so still was the room. "But did we grow up speaking your language? Who taught us to speak it as we do? At the end of morning assemblies, Mr. Principal, I hear you say to the pupils, 'Dismiss.' I am not sure if our national language permits that usage. Do you mean to say 'Dismissed?' And for someone as insistent on correct pronunciation as Ito-sensei to brag that 'sahweens awe his powince's speshalees' . . . is his locution acceptable from an educational standpoint?"

The principal was as stiffly silent as a statue. Instructor Zeng continued, "Japanese-Taiwanese harmony. You repeat that phrase every time you open your mouth but don't seem to understand the principle behind it. Permit me to teach you by example."

He strode to the board where the small, rectangular planks that bore the instructors' names hung. The eyes of the persons whose names appeared there were pinned on Instructor Zeng as he stared at the thirteen planks. The principal's face turned blue.

"The Japanese names come first, but that must be a mistake. The order of name plates should reflect seniority and rank. This," he said, rearranging them then and there with no view to ethnicity, "is what Japanese-Taiwanese harmony means." He looked the principal straight in the eye and added, "If there is to be true harmony, Mr. Principal, there must not be any prejudice—no preferences."

There was no refuting Instructor Zeng's reasoned opinion. Neither the principal nor anyone else said a word. Instructor Zeng bowed and made his way through them, gently. The calm

yelping dogs. A stooped old woman came scuttling out to shoo them away from him. "Sir!" she greeted, turning toward Taiming and bringing her palms together, "Sir!" Her eyes glittered with a mixture of anxiety and reverence. Preferring, as with the farmers, not to elicit such a reaction, Taiming quickly explained who he was. "Ah, Mr. Schoolmaster, I thought you were an officer," she finally remarked with relief.

By this time, the news of Taiming's visit had spread to every corner of the residence. He was subjected to curious gazes that came from somewhere around the side entrance of the main building and belonged to housewives carrying infants and to children whose noses were dripping into their mouths. Taiming heard someone say, "That teacher doesn't have a sword." Still, they maintained their distance in awe and fear. After making sure the old woman understood how a pupil on summer vacation should keep busy, Taiming left.

Although this was the last home he had to visit, it was his turn to watch over the deserted school building. For a couple of hours before noon, he offered preparatory courses for students going on to secondary school, but he had nothing to do in the sweltering hours that followed.

Now and then, however, a student came by to visit his alma mater. Generally, those who were attending schools in Taiwan had a narrow worldview and a stagnant air about them, whereas those who were studying abroad, in Japan, seemed well informed and spirited. Whenever the latter discussed social issues and global events, Taiming belatedly regretted that his own knowledge was obsolete.

One day, a friend from his own alma mater, the normal school, came looking for Taiming in the classroom where he sat. The friend, Taiming's senior by several years, had completed his studies at Meiji University in Tokyo, moved to China, lived there for four years, and just returned. He said he was never going back.

The story shocked Taiming. This reliable source told him that wherever they went, Taiwanese were only Taiwanese—were made fun of, that is—and, in China, were even discriminated against, thanks to mounting anti-imperialist sentiments. As for his flirtation with scholarship, what did he gain but worrisome knowledge that he couldn't help thinking about, and these days there were no jobs because there was a recession. He seriously considered becoming a farmer. These confessions did not completely kill Taiming's desire to study abroad. As he listened, he told himself that he had to see it with his own eyes. He had to give it a try, he just had to!

Halfway into the summer vacation, Taiming learned from a messenger that Licentiate Peng had died. Old Hu, who had sent the messenger, was too old to travel to the frontier territory where his former classmate had chosen to spend his last days. Taiming was asked to represent his grandfather. Although the young man did not feel attached to Licentiate Peng, he was someone whom at one time he had called "Master." In any case, how could he not go when it was his grandfather's wish? "A master for a day, a father for life," he mumbled to himself as he packed and left right away.

It was a long journey to Licentiate Peng's study, which lay deep in the wild recesses of a mountain. Taiming first had to take a train, then a bus, and finally a tram. The last, of course, was not part of a commercial line; its real function could be found in the soot that covered the floors and walls of the empty carriage.

Just when the tram began the last leg of Taiming's journey, a haggard woman appeared from nowhere, with a baby in her arms. Although her eyes pleaded with the civil officer, her lips seemed to have been intimidated into silence by his uniform. "Get back from the officer! Get back, I say," the conductor yelled at her. She flinched, stepped back, but directed her now teary gaze right on Taiming.

"Fine by me. Let her get on," said the civil officer. Taiming was disturbed by the way he dispensed charity from above. The longer he looked at the woman who had gotten on and the longer he reflected on the manner by which the officer had let her, the sicker he felt about himself. The woman began, hesitantly, to excuse herself by explaining that the child had a high fever because of pneumonia and that the doctor's orders were "complete rest." It was as though the woman were silently objecting to Taiming's existence, and he squirmed under the weight of her accusation. He felt freed when she finally got off.

The tram rolled on, weaving through the valleys and rattling loudly between the echoing hills. Heavy cliffs curled up over the car like tidal waves, and crevices reached down to pools of blue water. A kite screeched overhead. The only human being besides the conductor felt the emptiness eat at his soul.

The conductor, however, was not the rough fellow that Taiming had thought he was; in fact, now and then, in a surprisingly warm tone, he offered stories about this or that bend. When the tram approached what he called Bullfight Gate, he told Taiming that barbarians loved to set ambushes there. A few dozen innocent men once perished in a single encounter. Not to be forgotten was the uplifting story of the police rangers, thanks to whom the region was now safe. They used to hold the line courageously in small detachments of one or two.

As they approached the coal mines, they began to meet several other trams, some containing miners. When the tracks began running parallel to a street, the conductor and his passenger were breathing the uniquely coarse air of a mining town.

It was almost dusk by the time Taiming stood in front of the dilapidated hut that claimed to be, in penmanship he recognized, "The Ladder to the Clouds." The desolate hinterland that surrounded Taiming and the hut was too depressing a resting place for one who had devoted his life to studying the ways of men.

It was too cruelly fitting a picture of a dying age. A thousand feelings came to Taiming as he stood before the sign and the familiar hand.

Nonetheless, Licentiate Peng's funeral was almost lively, having attracted quite a few relatives and former students. Most of the latter, who were not much older than Taiming, had grown up in or around the mining town. Only one of Taiming's former classmates was there, Li Qishi.

The burial took place at ten the next morning. The procession was led by a large banner announcing "The Late Retired Master Licentiate Peng," with many more flags carrying phrases like "A Dream Goes South" and "A Freed Crane Flies." It was neither unfitting nor insufficient for a master who had ended his life in a town like this that a number of miners stopped out of respect.

Taiming was the first to leave when the funeral ended. He ran away from the ghost of a prior age, its shell. There had been a time for Licentiate Peng, with its own efforts and sacrifices and achievements of cultivation; perhaps Licentiate Peng did not mind living continuously behind closed doors in a thought system in which he felt at home. That is that, thought Taiming, and now my time has come. The new age, blindingly bright, beckoned to him. When he snapped out of his daydream, the tram had already thundered past Bullfight Gate. On both sides, at breakneck speed, mountains and forests were racing toward the mining town.

10. Love and Confession

The laziness of the long summer vacation still hovered over the faculty room in the first days of the autumn semester; the most popular topics were swimming and fishing. Naito Hisako's sprightly face was as sunburned as a careless girl's, and Ruie's was as unchangingly pale as a melon.

One day, Taiming went with the principal on a visit to a household deep in a longan forest. The family was busy making articles out of bamboo. When the unexpected guests appeared, however, the entire family scrambled to welcome them.

Taiming, who had come to translate for the principal, squirmed when the head of the household and his family rushed out to buy beer and snacks in order to demonstrate their hospitality. The people in this hamlet made a living by selling longans, which they could do only every other year. They supplemented this meager income only slightly with bamboo crafts and stints as coolies. More often than not, pupils who did not have even the basic school implements came from this area. Knowing this, Taiming could not enjoy their hospitality, but the principal seemed quite indifferent to their circumstances. It was with reluctance that Taiming translated his superior's words.

On their way back, the slightly tipsy principal said half-jokingly: "I've been told you get along pretty well with one of our female colleagues. Is it Naito Hisako? Or is it Ruie? If you like, I can help you."

Astounded, Taiming gasped and blushed. He resented the principal's suggestive, furtive offer and was troubled by the hint of malice. The whole school must know if the principal was saying such things to him, and that was a problem. The Ruie matter did not bother him—they could talk as much as they liked—but Hisako had such a delicate place in his heart that he was vulnerable to the principal's jest. In regard to marriage, Taiming certainly dreamed of it but he also knew that at best, it was still far off. His tender feelings for Hisako, which the principal's teasing words worked into a painful frenzy even then, existed on a different plane.

One day later in September, Ruie hurried to Taiming's side. She said that Hisako was going to be reassigned.

"Did you know Hisako-san is going away?"

The earth sagged under Taiming's feet with those words, and in the next instant, the principal's insinuating look came back in a flash. Anger, sorrow, and love gushed up together from deep inside him and formed a single, confused conviction: "I must confess my love!" If he missed this opportunity, he would forever lose the chance to win Hisako. Having decided, he could hardly stand still.

Ruie's presence irritated him.

She walked home alone, Taiming having made up an excuse to stay behind in his empty classroom, which he filled with his furious thoughts. The petty principal was sending her away to tear them apart! Did she know that was the reason? And if she did, what did she think about his shameless action? He wanted to know how she felt.

Taiming was pacing the corridor when he caught a glimpse of Hisako and abruptly halted. She was sitting, pensive, at a desk by the window in her classroom. It appeared that she had packed up her things to leave for the day but could not, detained by her own thoughts. Taiming plucked up the courage to walk in.

She noticed his presence now. "Mr. Hu, I—" Choking on her own words, she was silent. Her manner seemed to show that she was aware of the principal's motives.

"Hisako-san. I know. I—" His words met resistance, too, somewhere in his overfull bosom. He managed, however, to blurt out, "Hisako-san, I have to talk to you. Are you free this evening?"

She started. Still facing away from him, she made a faint sound. It was only from the nodding of her shoulders that Taiming realized that she had responded in the affirmative.

"She too, she too!" He wanted to cry out with gratitude. She, too, seemed to feel as he did.

That evening, Taiming ate only half his dinner and left his apartment to disappear into the dark. He was headed to their meeting place.

It was almost completely dark when he arrived, but he discerned a dark shadow hiding under a tree to avoid being seen. Taiming suppressed his elation and went up to the shadow, to which he could say only, "Hisako-san. I'm glad you've come. Thank you."

The two figures walked wordlessly toward a lonely, dark place. Taiming was absolutely silent, and so was Hisako, who walked behind and away from him, her head bowed. But a hot weight seemed to pass from one bosom to the other and back.

Suddenly, an impulse seized Taiming. He stopped and turned around sharply. Within an arm's reach in the dark floated the faint white glow of Hisako's face. Her lips were parted slightly, and he could smell her heavy breath.

"Her lips . . ." Taiming felt weak. In enticing proximity breathed those lips if he wanted them. Were the fruits eternally forbidden to him, or—

"Hisako-san, how do you feel about me?" he could not help asking.

The silence that followed, seemingly endless to him, was in fact quite brief. Taiming struggled to quiet his trembling as Hisako spoke the following words, hesitantly but clearly: "I'm overjoyed, I really am, but. . . . It can't be. Because you and I are different."

Taiming did not have to ask what she meant by "different." She had not forgotten that they belonged to different ethnicities.

Taiming's shriek of despair could not be heard outside his heart. The verdict had been handed down. The ground under him sank, and Hisako was already far, far away.

11. The Wail of Youth

Winter came to both Taiming and the ground on which he was walking.

With that mild but irreversible rejection, she departed from his life. "How hollow are heaven and earth since our parting."

Taiming lived through days of unspoken sorrow. When he looked up, winter had withered all of heaven and earth. The cold winds that blew day after day were ash colored.

Each day, on his young man's legs, Taiming walked around the neighborhood as though he might stop breathing if he stood still.

White eularias waved their branches along the low embankment as far as he could see. A white heron rested on top of a hedge. It was a picture without substance. Unaware of Taiming's feelings, the farmers busied themselves with the season's work. They pushed their plows and urged on their water buffaloes. The workers piled up the plowed earth to form a kind of charcoal furnace. The fire was so red that Taiming felt sad.

He wondered, "Should I immerse myself in my duties, to forget? Or should I return to my country home?" From the depth of its sorrow, youth was already beginning to show signs of crawling out. Yet it was out of the blue that a particular ray of hope lighted up his heart: "I can study abroad. Yes. I'll forget the past, everything, and start over in Japan, from page one." His outlook seemed to widen.

12. Over the Waves

In the ceremonial hall, large red candles burned brilliantly in lined-up holders while next to them Taiming's grandfather, his long hair and ritual attire flowing, carefully lighted the five incenses. Opium Tong, Ah-San, Ah-Si, and all sorts of other relatives had gathered under one roof to send off Taiming with a feast. In the garden, gold and silver sheets went up in flames, and firecrackers popped as loudly as they were supposed to. No one in the village had ever decided to study in Japan. The commotion was unprecedented.

The gossips had not changed. "He'll be district governor when he comes back. In the old days, we'd have put another flagpole

right here," Opium Tong noted, pointing to a stone block and alluding to the era of classical examinations.

"District governor?" Ah-San questioned. "Uh-uh. Assistant chief of police."

But Ah-Si disagreed: "What, assistant chief? He ought to become an inspector. Then he'll get to head his own detachment."

Among these vicarious passions—the merriments of a party—Taiming felt lonely. After the banquet, his brother Zhigang, Ah-San, and Ah-Si, representing his family, escorted Taiming to the lonely railway station; the train pulled out a short while later. As Taiming watched the scenery of his home retreat, first slowly and then quickly, tender feelings for the past and anxious expectations for the future mingled in an intricate pattern of inexperience. The past seemed to be catapulting him into the future. His only solace was the dizzying allure of what might happen in the future.

It was sunny—usually it was not—in the port town of Chilung. A kind of send-off, it seemed. Taiming got off the carriage onto the crowded platform and waded through the crowds of people. When he finally reached the exit, he uttered a muffled cry, for whom did he see there but the unexpected figure of Ruie?

"Hey!" he exclaimed, "What brings you here?"

She smiled broadly. "You. I knew you were leaving. Aren't I clever?" Her tone was as sassy as ever.

Ruie's little surprise heartened Taiming. In fact, she had never seemed so dear to him. They decided to take a stroll in the harbor, since the ship was not supposed to leave for a few more hours. Unusually talkative, Taiming talked about his plans, and Ruie seemed to relish each detail as though entranced. She seemed now so unlike a country schoolteacher, and to Taiming's delight, her suddenly urbane air blended perfectly with the bright, modern scenery of the harbor. She was taking a day off from work.

"Here," she said when the time came, "nothing more than mementos, really." The homemade purse she handed him had

been woven of silk lace, and the bag for his pocket watch contained a charm of Guan Di. The woman's practical generosity was deposited in these humble but thoughtful gifts.

Ruie's eyes gleamed as she looked at him. Taiming had never seen such an impassioned look. So, here was a woman who, quietly and from afar, always favored me. The thought, so belated, was a heavy blow. Why hadn't he tried to get to know her? He didn't know what to say, not even to himself.

Their time was up. They walked to the pier and boarded the ship together. The deck was almost overflowing with clusters of people saying bon voyage. The parting moment would be any time now; Taiming and Ruie had much to say to each other, but neither spoke more than a few words.

When the departure bell sounded, Ruie walked down the gangway with the other well-wishers, who flowed out onto the wharf, and she stood there among them. From the deck, where Taiming could see her, she looked almost tiny. The ship pulled up anchor, slowly peeled away from the wharf, and was slowly tugged out to a distance from which Ruie's handkerchief, which she waved frantically, was no more than a speck.

"Good-bye, Ruie. Good-bye, my homeland." The raw sorrow welling up kept him on deck for a while. At some point the ship began slicing quickly through the water. Taiming watched the white wake extend farther and farther behind the ship. Far away behind him was Japan.