## XXXVIII. The Philosopher

W. Somerset Maugham

It was surprising to find so vast a city in a spot that seemed to me so remote. From its battlemented gate towards sunset you could see the snowy mountains of Tibet. It was so populous that you could walk at ease only on the walls and it took a rapid walker three hours to complete their circuit. There was no railway within a thousand miles and the river on which it stood was so shallow that only junks of light burden could safely navigate it. Five days in a sampan were needed to reach the Upper Yangtze. For an uneasy moment you asked yourself whether trains and steamships were as necessary to the conduct of life as we who use them every day consider; for here, a million persons throve, married, begat their kind, and died; here a million persons were busily occupied with commerce, art, and thought.

And here lived a philosopher of repute the desire to see whom had been to me one of the incentives of a somewhat arduous journey. He was the greatest authority in China on the Confucian learning. He was said to speak English and German with facility. He had been for  many years secretary to one of the Empress Dowager’s greatest viceroys, but he lived now in retirement. On certain days in the week, however, all through the year he opened his doors to such as sought after knowledge, and discoursed on the teaching of Confucius. He had a body of disciples, but it was small, since the students for the most part preferred to his modest dwelling and his severe exhortations the sumptuous buildings of the foreign university and the useful science of the barbarians: with him this was mentioned only to be scornfully dismissed. From all I heard of him I concluded that he was a man of character.

When I announced my wish to meet this distinguished person my host immediately offered to arrange a meeting; but the days passed and nothing happened. I made enquiries and my host shrugged his shoulders.

“I sent him a chit and told him to come along,” he said. “I don’t know why he hasn’t turned up. He’s a cross-grained old fellow.”

I did not think it was proper to approach a philosopher in so cavalier a fashion and I was hardly surprised that he had ignored a summons such as this. I caused a letter to be sent asking in the politest terms I could devise whether he would allow me to call upon him and within two hours received an answer making an appointment for the following morning at ten o’clock.

I was carried in a chair. The way seemed interminable. I went through crowded streets and through streets deserted till I came at last to one,  silent and empty, in which at a small door in a long white wall my bearers set down my chair. One of them knocked, and after a considerable time a judas was opened; dark eyes looked through; there was a brief colloquy; and finally I was admitted. A youth, pallid of face, wizened, and poorly dressed, motioned me to follow him. I did not know if he was a servant or a pupil of the great man. I passed through a shabby yard and was led into a long low room sparsely furnished with an American roll-top desk, a couple of blackwood chairs and two little Chinese tables. Against the walls were shelves on which were a great number of books: most of them, of course, were Chinese, but there were many, philosophical and scientific works, in English, French and German; and there were hundreds of unbound copies of learned reviews. Where books did not take up the wall space hung scrolls on which in various calligraphies were written, I suppose, Confucian quotations. There was no carpet on the floor. It was a cold, bare, and comfortless chamber. Its sombreness was relieved only by a yellow chrysanthemum which stood by itself on the desk in a long vase.

I waited for some time and the youth who had shown me in brought a pot of tea, two cups, and a tin of Virginian cigarettes. As he went out the philosopher entered. I hastened to express my sense of the honour he did me in allowing me to visit him. He waved me to a chair and poured out the tea.

“I am flattered that you wished to see me,” he returned. “Your countrymen deal only with coolies and with compradores; they think every Chinese must be one or the other.”

I ventured to protest. But I had not caught his point. He leaned back in his chair and looked at me with an expression of mockery.

“They think they have but to beckon and we must come.”

I saw then that my friend’s unfortunate communication still rankled. I did not quite know how to reply. I murmured something complimentary.

He was an old man, tall, with a thin grey queue, and bright large eyes under which were heavy bags. His teeth were broken and discoloured. He was exceedingly thin, and his hands, fine and small, were withered and claw-like. I had been told that he was an opium-smoker. He was very shabbily dressed in a black gown, a little black cap, both much the worse for wear, and dark grey trousers gartered at the ankle. He was watching. He did not quite know what attitude to take up, and he had the manner of a man who was on his guard. Of course the philosopher occupies a royal place among those who concern themselves with the things of the spirit and we have the authority of Benjamin Disraeli that royalty must be treated with abundant flattery. I seized my trowel. Presently I was conscious of a certain relaxation in his demeanour. He was like a man who was all set and rigid to have his photograph taken, but  hearing the shutter click lets himself go and eases into his natural self. He showed me his books.

“I took the Ph.D. in Berlin, you know,” he said. “And afterwards I studied for some time in Oxford. But the English, if you will allow me to say so, have no great aptitude for philosophy.”

Though he put the remark apologetically it was evident that he was not displeased to say a slightly disagreeable thing.

“We have had philosophers who have not been without influence in the world of thought,” I suggested.

“Hume and Berkeley? The philosophers who taught at Oxford when I was there were anxious not to offend their theological colleagues. They would not follow their thought to its logical consequences in case they should jeopardise their position in university society.”

“Have you studied the modern developments of philosophy in America?” I asked.

“Are you speaking of Pragmatism? It is the last refuge of those who want to believe the incredible. I have more use for American petroleum than for American philosophy.”

His judgments were tart. We sat down once more and drank another cup of tea. He began to talk with fluency. He spoke a somewhat formal but an idiomatic English. Now and then he helped himself out with a German phrase. So far as it was possible for a man of that stubborn character to be influenced he had been influenced by Germany. The method and the industry of the Germans  had deeply impressed him and their philosophical acumen was patent to him when a laborious professor published in a learned magazine an essay on one of his own writings.

“I have written twenty books,” he said. “And that is the only notice that has ever been taken of me in a European publication.”

But his study of Western philosophy had only served in the end to satisfy him that wisdom after all was to be found within the limits of the Confucian canon. He accepted its philosophy with conviction. It answered the needs of his spirit with a completeness which made all foreign learning seem vain. I was interested in this because it bore out an opinion of mine that philosophy is an affair of character rather than of logic: the philosopher believes not according to evidence, but according to his own temperament; and his thinking merely serves to make reasonable what his instinct regards as true. If Confucianism gained so firm a hold on the Chinese it is because it explained and expressed them as no other system of thought could do.

My host lit a cigarette. His voice at first had been thin and tired, but as he grew interested in what he said it gained volume. He talked vehemently. There was in him none of the repose of the sage. He was a polemist and a fighter. He loathed the modern cry for individualism. For him society was the unit, and the family the foundation of society. He upheld the old China and the old school, monarchy, and the rigid canon of  Confucius. He grew violent and bitter as he spoke of the students, fresh from foreign universities, who with sacrilegious hands tore down the oldest civilisation in the world.

“But you, do you know what you are doing?” he exclaimed. “What is the reason for which you deem yourselves our betters? Have you excelled us in arts or letters? Have our thinkers been less profound than yours? Has our civilisation been less elaborate, less complicated, less refined than yours? Why, when you lived in caves and clothed yourselves with skins we were a cultured people. Do you know that we tried an experiment which is unique in the history of the world? We sought to rule this great country not by force, but by wisdom. And for centuries we succeeded. Then why does the white man despise the yellow? Shall I tell you? Because he has invented the machine gun. That is your superiority. We are a defenceless horde and you can blow us into eternity. You have shattered the dream of our philosophers that the world could be governed by the power of law and order. And now you are teaching our young men your secret. You have thrust your hideous inventions upon us. Do you not know that we have a genius for mechanics? Do you not know that there are in this country four hundred millions of the most practical and industrious people in the world? Do you think it will take us long to learn? And what will become of your superiority when the yellow man can make as good guns as the white and fire them as  straight? You have appealed to the machine gun and by the machine gun shall you be judged.”

But at that moment we were interrupted. A little girl came softly in and nestled close up to the old gentleman. She stared at me with curious eyes. He told me that she was his youngest child. He put his arms round her and with a murmur of caressing words kissed her fondly. She wore a black coat and trousers that barely reached her ankles, and she had a long pig-tail hanging down her back. She was born on the day the revolution was brought to a successful issue by the abdication of the emperor.

“I thought she heralded the Spring of a new era,” he said. “She was but the last flower of this great nation’s Fall.”

From a drawer in his roll-top desk he took a few cash, and handing them to her, sent her away.

“You see that I wear a queue,” he said, taking it in his hands. “It is a symbol. I am the last representative of the old China.”

He talked to me, more gently now, of how philosophers in long past days wandered from state to state with their disciples, teaching all who were worthy to learn. Kings called them to their councils and made them rulers of cities. His erudition was great and his eloquent phrases gave a multicoloured vitality to the incidents he related to me of the history of his country. I could not help thinking him a somewhat pathetic figure. He felt in himself the capacity to administer the state, but there was no king to entrust him with office;  he had vast stores of learning which he was eager to impart to the great band of students that his soul hankered after, and there came to listen but a few, wretched, half-starved, and obtuse provincials.

Once or twice discretion had made me suggest that I should take my leave, but he had been unwilling to let me go. Now at last I was obliged to. I rose. He held my hand.

“I should like to give you something as a recollection of your visit to the last philosopher in China, but I am a poor man and I do not know what I can give you that would be worthy of your acceptance.”

I protested that the recollection of my visit was in itself a priceless gift. He smiled.

“Men have short memories in these degenerate days, and I should like to give you something more substantial. I would give you one of my books, but you cannot read Chinese.”

He looked at me with an amicable perplexity. I had an inspiration.

“Give me a sample of your calligraphy,” I said.

“Would you like that?” He smiled. “In my youth I was considered to wield the brush in a manner that was not entirely despicable.”

He sat down at his desk, took a fair sheet of paper, and placed it before him. He poured a few drops of water on a stone, rubbed the ink stick in it, and took his brush. With a free movement of the arm he began to write. And as I  watched him I remembered with not a little amusement something else which had been told me of him. It appeared that the old gentleman, whenever he could scrape a little money together, spent it wantonly in the streets inhabited by ladies to describe whom a euphemism is generally used. His eldest son, a person of standing in the city, was vexed and humiliated by the scandal of this behaviour; and only his strong sense of filial duty prevented him from reproaching the libertine with severity. I daresay that to a son such looseness would be disconcerting, but the student of human nature could look upon it with equanimity. Philosophers are apt to elaborate their theories in the study, forming conclusions upon life which they know only at second hand, and it has seemed to me often that their works would have a more definite significance if they had exposed themselves to the vicissitudes which befall the common run of men. I was prepared to regard the old gentleman’s dalliance in hidden places with leniency. Perhaps he sought but to elucidate the most inscrutable of human illusions.

He finished. To dry the ink he scattered a little ash on the paper and rising handed it to me.

“What have you written?” I asked.

I thought there was a slightly malicious gleam in his eyes.

“I have ventured to offer you two little poems of my own.”

“I did not know you were a poet.”

“When China was still an uncivilised country,”  he retorted with sarcasm, “all educated men could write verse at least with elegance.”

I took the paper and looked at the Chinese characters. They made an agreeable pattern upon it.

“Won’t you also give me a translation?”

“Traduttore—traditore,” he answered. “You cannot expect me to betray myself. Ask one of your English friends. Those who know most about China know nothing, but you will at least find one who is competent to give you a rendering of a few rough and simple lines.”

I bade him farewell, and with great politeness he showed me to my chair. When I had the opportunity I gave the poems to a sinologue of my acquaintance, and here is the version he made[[1]](#footnote-1). I confess that, doubtless unreasonably, I was somewhat taken aback when I read it.

You loved me not: your voice was sweet;

Your eyes were full of laughter; your hands were tender.

And then you loved me: your voice was bitter;

Your eyes were full of tears; your hands were cruel.

Sad, sad that love should make you

Unlovable.

I craved the years would quickly pass

That you might lose

The brightness of your eyes, the peach-bloom of your skin,

And all the cruel splendour of your youth.

Then I alone would love you

And you at last would care.

The envious years have passed full soon

And you have lost

The brightness of your eyes, the peach-bloom of your skin,

And all the charming splendour of your youth.

Alas, I do not love you

And I care not if you care.

1. I owe it to the kindness of my friend Mr. P.W. Davidson. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)