

Judith Caesar

Thunder Out of China

It was cold early spring and we were still in our padded clothes, which I hated because they made me look like a pin cushion. A few of the plum trees were in bloom in the public garden, though. I decided that some day when it was less windy and dusty, I'd like to stop by, but now most of my attention was occupied by not losing my hat, a bright red one with a feather in it that Xiao Wong had bought for me. Actually, she would have liked it for herself, but she was afraid of attracting too much attention and being criticized. She gave it to me instead, because it was natural for a foreigner to look outlandish. However, whenever she came to the foreigners' compound, I would coax her into wearing it. It was magic. Her plain little features became pert, jaunty, and almost pretty; she would smile at herself in the mirror and declare that she looked like a girl from Hong Kong. But then she'd take it off again and say with a laugh that she was too young to have a "rightist cap" on her already.

We were on our way to the People's Market, about a mile from the university, me holding my hat and both of us squinching up our eyes against the dust.

"I thought you had a class now," I said suddenly. "Should you be doing this?"

"The class not interesting," she told me. "Better to help you and practice oral English. I don't know how to say the name of the class in English. Hegel, Engle. Give me very headache."

Nevertheless, it wasn't good for her to be cutting class, and I didn't think she would take this risk just to go shopping with me. She had already been criticized by the class monitor for spending too much time with the foreigners, and for missing a political philosophy class she might be reported to the dean. She wasn't reckless. She weighed the risks of her rebelliousness with a sobriety and deliberateness that had a

chilling pathos—at least to me, thinking of other eighteen-year-olds. I figured in another block or so she'd tell me what she was up to.

And indeed, out it came. “You remember I tell you about Li Guo-Ping, the genius poet who come to talk with my father?”

Of course I did. Xiao Wong had had such a crush on him that she stayed up all night before the college entrance exam, writing him love letters when her parents thought she was studying, consequently failing the exam and only getting into the university at all because her father was a famous scholar who had suffered so much during the Cultural Revolution. And for all this Li, who was about twelve years older than she was, continued to ignore her.

“He comes again to Beijing. It very much trip for him. His village not even on railway line.”

Xiao Wong found the varying forms of the verb “to be” perplexing and dealt with this conundrum by eliminating them from her speech. Most of our conversations consisted of her trying to express herself and my trying to guess what she meant and phrase it in correct English. That was just as well, because I had been ill all winter and felt that there was nothing in my head anyway, except dust and correct English. She never seemed to mind that I seldom said anything on my own. In fact, it seemed part of my attraction for her, and this was a great relief to me. With all my other Chinese friends, I felt I had to be gracious when all I really wanted to do was wrap myself in a quilt and stare out the window.

“He writes many poems about politics. This not intelligent.” She reconsidered. “The poems very intelligent. The action not intelligent.”

Of course I understood why. In Beijing, political poems were all right as long as they were near the Party line. In the provinces, the local cadres were often confused about what the Party line was and so condemned all political poems, just to be safe.

“Couldn't your father do anything to help him?” I asked.

“My father doesn't want. I ask him wrong. I say, ‘My father, you are once more respected scholar. You can speak for him without fear.’ He became very angry and say, ‘How can I be respected scholar when my little girl teach me political history?’ I feel ashamed to speak on this again.”

I don't know why I liked Lao Wong, when he was such a mean old bird. I'd only met him a few times, and all we could do was smile politely at each other while Xiao Wong tried to interpret. I suppose I liked him for being so bitter. Other people just repeated slogans about the terrible Gang of Four and told pathetic stories about false accusa-

tions of rightist tendencies. Old Wong's rage showed an engaging complexity of character, even when it spilled out over Xiao Wong and her mother. It seemed real. And what made him angriest weren't the indignities but the loss of all the years of scholarship. I liked him because he said outrageous things, such as that Chiang Kai-shek was greatly preferable to Mao, and he'd kept saying such things for forty years, which was why he had spent most of that time in prison. If he didn't want to help Li now, it was from some more complicated reason than fear. I suggested as much to Xiao Wong, and she agreed.

"He say Li clever student but not great poet. Only so-so. Why take risk for so-so? I think very great poet but not in old style. So my father doesn't like."

"Are we by chance on our way to meet Li now and do you want me to do something for him? I can't smuggle him back to the States in my suitcases, you know."

When she didn't say anything, I knew I was right.

"And here I thought we were just going to buy some yogurt. Sometimes you can be a little weasel," I said with a laugh, and she laughed, too, both because I was laughing and because she didn't know what a weasel was.

She took my arm as we crossed the street to the market. She was much better than I was at dodging bicycles, but her solicitude made me feel like a barge being pulled by a tugboat. All the time I was in China, I felt that I ought to shrink five or six inches just out of courtesy.

The street into the market was full of heavy ruts where a water line had broken, and we had to cross on a plank. While we were waiting our turn, a crowd formed and began questioning Xiao Wong about me—an ordinary Chinese crowd, friendly, curious, and impervious to any concept that their staring and pointing might cause me any discomfort. One old woman with a weatherbeaten face and grey braids looked intently at my face and said something to Wong.

"Woman say you not bad looking foreigner. Pity you so tall."

Finally, it was my turn to walk the plank and I did not fall in the mud, to the mild disappointment of the crowd. Last autumn, my husband had skidded in the mud and fallen off his bicycle, providing the neighborhood with the most amusing comedy it had seen in years.

But Li was not waiting for us in the restaurant. As there were no vacant seats, we stood along the wall to drink the fruit juice that Wong had insisted on buying for me. Some college students offered us their chairs, because I was a foreigner, but when we refused they didn't insist. At other times, outside the capital, I had been pushed into bus

seats by earnest young people determined that I should have a good impression of Chinese courtesy. As we stood, Xiao Wong told me more about Li's poetry and what he was doing where he was. He had been one of the top students in Chinese literature at his university and a logical choice for a junior position on the faculty, as Chinese universities customarily hire their own best graduates. But he had privately circulated a poem he had written about the Tien an Min Incident, the mass demonstration against the Cultural Revolution that had surged out of Zhou En-Lai's funeral. The problem wasn't that he praised the Incident itself, but that he had said that the great revolution was when the heart revolted against hatred. This could be interpreted as a criticism of the whole Communist Revolution, first, because that was supposed to be the great revolution, and second because one was supposed to hate evil capitalists. Because the Cultural Revolution was over, he wasn't sent to prison for this, but instead of teaching at his university, he was sent out to teach high school in a small town, where his superiors distrusted him. And there he had stayed for six years, coming into Beijing only once or twice a year to visit his old professors and show them his work.

Xiao Wong blushed and her eyes sparkled at a man who had just come in, so I turned to get a look at The Poet. I could see why she had a crush on him. He was a handsome man, although he looked older than thirty; all Chinese intellectuals who were college age during the Cultural Revolution tend to look older than their years. He looked like a poet in the way the real poets seldom do: a little taller than the people around him, chiselled features, and light brown eyes. His hair fell over his forehead in a way that was just coming into style in China, and I later watched his habit of flicking it out of his face with a toss of his head. Even the lines around his eyes and his thinness — he looked thin even in his padded Mao jacket — didn't make him look any less a poet. In fact, they made him look like a Suffering Poet, which is one better. I began to have a crush on him myself.

I was curious to see how he would react to Xiao Wong. When she had written him all the love letters, he had been, she said, "very not nice." He had returned the letters to her on his next trip to Beijing, told her she was a silly schoolgirl who should be spending her time on her schoolbooks, and threatened to give the letters to her father if she ever did anything like that again. I was relieved that he smiled and patted her on the shoulder before he said hello to me. (That was his one word of English.) He did seem to like her as well as finding her a pest. The two of them began speaking in Chinese.

"He say we talk in park."

I wondered for a moment what became of my plan to buy yogurt and then didn't care anymore.

As we walked, Wong tried to explain to me what he wanted, and he wanted a great deal. In the first place, he wanted me to smuggle his poems out of China and have them printed or at least commented upon by Chinese-Americans. He was sure that if his poems were printed and praised in the West, the Party leaders would be embarrassed about his exile and allow him to return to Beijing.

I told them that I had no idea whom to contact about this.

"He say send them to Fei Jian-Xing."

I looked at her and she looked at Li.

"He say you must know of Fei Jian-Xing, very famous American writer about China. My father hear him speak at Beijing University, before Liberation. My father and Li say he the only American to understand China."

"A Chinese-American?"

She consulted with Li. "No. American-American. Write famous book about China."

I felt like we were playing Botticelli. Fei Jian-Xing was apparently a Chinese version of an American name, but how in the world could I tell what that name was? The three of us sat down on a cold stone bench and looked at a little artificial hill with its gnarled plum trees, while the dust swirled around us. We all had our scarves over our mouths to keep the dust out when we talked, and must have looked like a pack of bandits.

I began guessing. "Not Edgar Snow? Not Theodore White? Is he sure? Was Fei's book called *Thunder Out of China*?"

No. He knew of both writers and said they didn't understand China, but only repeated what they were told.

"Jonathan Spence?" I said hopefully.

No, they'd never heard of him, although Wong was sure that her father would have. We stared glumly at the trees. Then he said something more to Wong, which made her put her hand up to her mouth in the way she does when she finds something hard to translate.

"New England University," she said finally. "Fei teach there. Li remember my father tell him this."

"There isn't any New England University that I know of," I said, "And if he means a university in New England, there are hundreds of them."

"Li wants to know, do you know what plum blossoms mean."

I did and thought the implication was rather conceited. Plum blossoms symbolize the strength of life over winter's death, as he apparently considered his poems.

"Ask him why he has to make all his plum blossoms political if he really wants to get back to Beijing."

"I agree," she said quietly. "A few other-kind plum blossoms very helpful. But I ask."

She was quiet for a moment after his reply. Then she said, "He quotes our great writer Lu Xun," and gave me the quote in Chinese.

"That's not a lot of help, Xiao Wong."

Her hand went to her mouth again. "I don't think I can say in good English. Very beautiful. Meaning implied. I don't know how to say. What is the verb for bomb?"

"For bomb?" I echoed stupidly. "It is a verb. No. I see. You mean explode," I think."

Then she said, "'If you do not explode in the darkness, you die in the darkness.' You know the meaning?"

"Yes," I said. "And tell him I'll do my best to hunt down this Dr. Fei, whoever he is, and give him the poems, providing that I'm not arrested in the Beijing airport." This was a very remote possibility, since the luggage of foreign teachers was never checked.

She told him this and then turned to me while he looked directly at me for the first time as he spoke. "He says he very happy. It is a circle. Fei teach my father. My father teach Li. You teach me. You take Li's poems to Fei."

I was beginning to get cold and wanted to walk again, and as a compromise I stood up and waved my arms around to get some circulation back to my hands. The two of them stared at me.

"Sit down at once," Wong said. "People look."

"People look no matter what I do," I said somewhat sulkily, "so I might as well try to keep warm."

She discussed this with Li. "We will walk," she said decisively, and the two of them got up.

"Now there are other thing Li want and one thing I want," she said as we made our way along the winding dirt path. "He wants you send him famous foreign books not translated into Chinese. I translate for him." Then she added, seeing my look, "In four-five years when my English fluent."

She had already studied English four-five years and she still sounded like Tonto. Yet actually, it might be possible for her to develop enough of a reading knowledge of English to make a rough translation. Her

vocabulary was pretty good; it was grammar that had her flummoxed. I tried to imagine this future condition of fluency.

Li fumbled in his pockets and brought out his list. There must have been twenty or thirty books on it, most of the major texts of the modernist movement, including *Finnegans Wake*. I think they were offended when I laughed.

Botticelli began again, but I was better at it this time because the names were more literally transliterated.

“Lao Ren-su,” he intoned, and she repeated it.

“I got that part,” I said.

Then she said something in Chinese, and she blushed and said, “Sons and Boyfriends.”

“Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*.” I said. “That’s already translated into Chinese.”

She informed him of this and he laughed.

“He is very confident that he right,” she said, then added: “Too confident. He think he know all.” She liked being able to add these editorial comments on her translations, although she enjoyed it even more when it was her father that she was translating. Old Wong had once told her that the only advantage of her knowing English was that now she could sound ignorant in two languages.

“Va Si-Li Kan Din-Ski. Russian writer.”

“That’s a Russian painter, not a Russian writer. Please tell Mr. Li that although he’s a very nice-looking and intelligent fellow, I’m not going to steal paintings out of museums for him.”

“No. He say he write, Spiritual Art.”

I later found out that he was right. Kandinsky had written a monograph called *The Spiritual in Art*. Fortunately, I was right about Lao Ren-su already being translated into Chinese, and sent Li a copy of it from Hong Kong, although I never learned if it reached him.

And so on through the list. I finally borrowed a pen and paper to write them all down.

“And now for what I want,” Wong said, “before he go.” She reached into her bag and pulled out an ancient camera.

“I’m not even sure I’d know how to work that,” I said, “if you want a picture of the two of you.”

“No. You and Li. My two nicest friends, together.” She spoke with him about this and said, “He asks you to sit down.”

I smiled. He was proud of being tall and didn’t want a photographic record of the fact that I was a fraction of an inch taller. I still have the picture. I don’t look nearly as cold or grumpy as I felt, although my

smile looks a little strained, and he is standing above me looking into the distance with his hand in his jacket like a Chinese Napoleon. My hat looks quaint.

After the picture, he shook my hand again with a polite smile and then broke into a real smile and said something to Xiao Wong that made her giggle delightedly.

"What's so funny?" I wanted to know as he went back to Wong's house to look for her father.

"Nothing."

I looked at her.

"He make a joke. Don't be insult."

"I want to know what the joke was. What did he say, oh future translator of *Finnegans Wake*?"

"Refer to Lu Xun story. A character always imitate foreigner, wear foreigner clothes. Lu call him the imitation foreign devil. Mock him. Very funny. So Li say to us, 'Goodbye big foreign devil and little imitation foreign devil.'" She looked at me with concern. "Don't be insult. He just make joke."

Nevertheless, I was outraged, having just demonstrated, I thought, an admirable absence of both foreignness and devilry. It was a weird Chinese remark, I decided.

"It must be a lot funnier in Chinese," I grumbled.

"Very funny in Chinese," she agreed.

I had driven the two hundred miles to the state university still dazzled by the emptiness of the roads and the greenness of everything else. Even walking around the campus was a shock, people speaking English and wearing bright colors and moving their arms and hands when they talked. There was no dust and I wasn't tall anymore. It seemed like a different planet, not just a different country, and I didn't know who I was on it. I felt invisible, with no one staring at me.

I had an appointment with a young professor in the Chinese language department. Chen was a Chinese-American. I could tell because he looked like a Chinese but moved like an American and American English was coming out of his Chinese mouth.

"So what is going on in China these days?" he said breezily, motioning me toward a chair. "I read that things are loosening up a bit."

The concepts "loose" and "China" wouldn't fit into my head at the same time, and I stared at him stupidly.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" he said quickly. "I could ask Jackie to run over to the coffee lounge and get us a cup."

Finally I said, "I'm trying to think how to answer your question. This seems loose." I waved my hands to indicate the office or the campus; I wasn't sure which. "Girls wearing make-up seem very loose indeed. We need a point of reference for looseness before I can answer you."

A somewhat confused look came over his face—a handsome face, but squarer than Li's. His body was fuller, too, although he was far from fat. Li might have looked much the same if he'd had enough to eat for a couple of years. Seeing his confusion, I realized that the question really wasn't a question but just a friendly noise, and that I was doing what I used to laugh at the Chinese for doing in taking it so literally.

"I'm going through a little reverse culture shock," I explained. "Maybe you should offer me some lukewarm tea and stale peanuts." This wasn't going well. He hadn't been to China, so he didn't know about the endless meetings with Party officials and the ubiquitous cups of tepid jasmine tea.

"Well," Chen said, lifting the portfolio of Li's poems that I had sent him.

"Well?"

He shrugged. "It's really hard to say. They aren't bad, but they aren't traditional and they aren't quite good enough for one to be sure this isn't just a mistake. In Hong Kong or Taiwan, there might be some little literary magazine that would publish them. There are a few Chinese language publications in this country, but I don't think they print contemporary poetry. Very romantic story, though, about how you smuggled them out of China." He smiled a little condescendingly. "I hoped they'd be better."

"So did I."

He ruffled through the pages. "Oh, here it is. I did kind of like this one about the Tien an Min Incident. It has a kind of strength and sincerity to it. There's a nice allusion too, about heavenly peace, which is what Tien an Min means."

"I guess I'm glad it's a good poem since it ruined his life." And then I quickly added, "I hope that didn't sound too hostile."

He nervously lit a cigarette. "Oh, no, it's just that I really don't know what to say. I simply can't imagine it, you know?"

"Who is Fei Jian-xing?" I said suddenly.

"Who?"

I repeated it and he echoed me, and then said the name again with a different intonation.

"Oh, Fei Jian-Xing. Francis Johnson. Excellent historian. He wrote some first-rate books about China in the thirties and forties. He teaches at Yale. Or taught. He must be well into his eighties now, if he's still alive."

At last I had hit on something that interested him more than Li's poetry or my impressions of China. But then, maybe I was annoying him by acting as if he should care more about China than he did.

"Li wanted me to take his poetry to Johnson, because one of his professors heard him lecture and thought that Johnson really understood China."

"Really!" Chen was amused. Then he grew more serious. "It's funny, the influences people have, isn't it? You never know what you set in motion." He tipped his chair onto its back legs and looked dreamily out the window. It was the same look Li had in the picture, but nevertheless I wished that his chair would tip over on him and I suddenly felt a strange sympathy for the impulse that made Li call me a foreign devil, because I wanted to call Chen one. Yet I also felt like one myself, in part because I hadn't known that what looked possible from China would be impossible here. So Chen and I sat there, him acting like a cartoon of an American and me feeling like some strange kind of Chinese.

"I suppose it would be useless to try to contact him," I said at last.

He turned back to me with a smile, glad to have a chance to be upbeat. "Not if he's still alive and has all his marbles. Hell, he might get a kick out of it."

He glanced at his watch, stubbed out his cigarette, and collected his books. "Look, I've got to run. I have a class in just a few minutes." He handed me back Li's poems. "I've enjoyed our little talk and I'm really sorry I can't be of more help. Good luck!" He bounded out of the room.

Looking in the biographical dictionary, I discovered that Francis Johnson had died in 1979. I wrote letters to all the China scholars I could think of, but they either ignored my letters or were politely discouraging. When I took the poems back home with me, there was nothing to do with them, except put them on my bookshelf. I thought about it a moment, and then put them between *Thunder Out of China* and *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*.