

The Third Friday: Tales of Patience

Tale the Fifth: The Customs Post

IN OCTOBER 1920 a small party were stopped at the Ancient Lotus Pond Palace at Paoting, a customs post between the Kiangsu and Hebei provinces. (Because this happened a hundred years ago, I'm saying the Chinese names and places as they were then said in English: Peking instead of Beijing, and so on.) The party consisted of Bertrand Russell, the radical philosopher, his lover Dora Black, and their interpreter, Chou Yuen Ren.

Chou was a scholar who, like Russell, had lectured at Harvard and he was a member of the Progressive Party, so he'd been given the job of taking them round and translating for them during their year in China.

Mr Russell (he insisted that Mr Chou must not use his title, the Hon Bertrand Russell) had arrived in Shanghai two weeks earlier. Chou met him there, finding a tall, fit man in his late forties, elegantly dressed, witty but always very courteous and polite. Russell stayed briefly in Shanghai to lecture on scientific topics, and then on logical and ethical philosophy, with Chou interpreting.

They found that they liked each other, partly because they had Harvard acquaintances in common and partly because they shared a sense of humour.

Chou also translated Dora Black's lectures, which were more political in content.

But when they reached the customs post at Paoting, they found that they'd have a long wait before they would be allowed to proceed to Peking, where Russell was to be based. Documents had to be sent for, from Shanghai and Peking.

There was an inn next to the Ancient Lotus Pond Palace, and the three of them settled down to wait it out. The inn was an ancient wooden structure with low, well-smoked ceilings and small rooms with extremely hard beds. But the fire was roaring and the food and wine were good.

After dinner that first evening Russell said, "I expect that the inn pays the customs post to delay us. They would not have many guests any other way."

But an old man at a corner table said, "Chinese Customs, like Chinese customs, are not corrupt. They merely take a detached view of the passing of time."

Russell stared. When they'd entered he'd thought they were alone. The stranger was a man of some antiquity, with a Mandarin moustache that reached halfway down his chest, his head bald except for an impressively long queue. He wore long robes, the inner garment white and the outer robe terracotta-coloured. Russell gestured for the man to join them, and offered a cup of their warm huangjiu, the yellow wine made from rice and other grains.

The old man got up and approached. He looked closely at Russell. "Greetings. I feel, somehow, that I should know you."

So, since the man spoke English, Russell introduced himself, Miss Black and Mr Chou, and pulled out a chair so the man could sit. He took his place and accepted the cup from Russell. "Thank you. My name is Li Dan."

Chou started, and looked closely at the man, frowning. But Russell only said, "And have you been here very long, Mr Li?"

The old man chuckled. "Oh, two thousand years, so far. No, more. Or so it feels."

Russell smiled. "I hope we're gone before it feels that long. I have a course of lectures to give in Peking."

"Ah! A scholar? You look the part!"

Chou said, "Mr Russell is a philosopher. As, I think, are you?"

"In my small way. You have come to the Middle Kingdom to teach, Mr Russell. That is well. Still, I hope you will also find things here to learn."

Russell said, "I believe I will. I am already learning a very different concept of time from that which prevails in what we call the West."

The old man laughed. "But our slower time is useful for contemplation. And for composition. You might find it well to use the time to write, while you are here. In Peking you will see things are very busy." He shook his head. "Most un-Chinese."

Chou said, "That is probably the best plan. For my part, I am working on the book of another English mathematician: Lewis Carroll. And translating his *Alice in Wonderland* into Mandarin."

Miss Black said, "How extraordinary! It too has a scene in a waiting room. With nonsensical rules, and puzzles to solve before one can proceed and enter Wonderland. I hope your countrymen find your version congenial."

Mr Chou smiled and thanked her. Russell poured himself more huangjiu. Then he turned back to the old man. "And you, Mr Li? You are in the throes of creation?"

"More of collation, perhaps. But I am assembling a book, using the work of many writers who came before me, to encourage detachment, and pointing out the futility of much of human action."

Russell laughed. "And this customs post certainly drives that lesson home! The futility of action, I mean."

The old man joined in his laughter, but then became earnest. "It teaches the most important lesson of all, then. Detachment and quiet is the only way to pass tranquilly through life. A Venetian I met once told me that my doctrines were rather like those of a Western philosophical school he called the Stoics. So perhaps all human ideas can be found everywhere. Another thought I shall no doubt have plenty of time to consider. And you, Mr Russell? Have you a project?"

"I intend to write about China. However, I've been here for a little over a week, and I fear it might be a little presumptuous were I to start writing quite yet. However, I have a work in proof on the way we perceive the world and what we think it to be. And that takes me to the question of the nature of the mind

itself. I'm taking the opportunity to revise it, because," he shook his head, "dear me, it needs revising."

The old man laughed again. "That is a topic that literally has no end. I think you will be revising for as long as you live. Which I trust shall be a long, long time."

He finished his cup, and courteously refused a refill. "As Confucius, the Stoics and the Epicureans all said, everything in moderation. Even talk. I must take my bed. Mr Russell, it has been a pleasure. And Miss Black, and you, Mr Chou."

As he left, Mr Chou said, "Lao Tzu?"

The old man turned and smiled. "I gave you my name. Lao Tzu is, I am told, the title of a great sage. And I am not that." He raised a hand in farewell and benediction, and left.

In the morning he was not to be found. They thought he had perhaps gone for a walk. But although they were there for many days, they did not see him again. But after ten days had passed their clearances finally came through. As they were preparing to leave, the innkeeper approached Mr Chou with a small and elegant wooden box. He spoke in very imperfect Mandarin, and even Chou had difficulty understanding him. But he said Li Dan had left it for the foreign guests, and gestured with the box towards Russell, which was clear enough.

Russell took the box and opened it. It contained a little pile of papers sewn together at one edge with a thin and desiccated strip of leather. He said, "I daren't touch it. It seems to be of great antiquity."

Chou stared at it. He seemed utterly shocked, and he had turned very pale. "This paper is a type mainly using bamboo, which gives it longer life. Even so, it should be behind glass."

"But what is it? I assume it is a gift from our guest at dinner last week."

Chou shook his head. He was badly shaken. "It is the Tao. The Tao Te Ching. Written two and a half thousand years ago by Lao Tzu. Who was born Li Dan."

"The name our guest gave," said Miss Black.

"Indeed," said Russell. "It is an extremely generous gift. I do not believe that men can live even for one thousand years, let alone two or more. But if our friend was playing a prank on us, this makes it a damned expensive one."

Chou said, "The legend is that the Tao Te Ching was written while Lao Tzu was waiting for clearance at a customs post. I also do not see how we could have encountered the sage. Though in my bones I think that we did. But I shall just have to - " he frowned, trying to think of the phrase, "keep an open mind."

Russell used a pen, very carefully, to raise the papers so he could look at them from the side. "About fifty pages," he mused.

Chou said, "The Tao is only about 5,000 characters long. I should say that it was not written, originally, on paper. Paper was invented in the first century BC, during the Han Dynasty, while the Tao was written three hundred years before that. So while this appears to be very old, it is not as ancient as the Tao itself."

Russell mused. "This should remain in China, I think. I will give it to the National Peking University."

Chou said, "That would be an extraordinarily gracious thing to do. This book, if it is what it appears to be, is literally priceless."

Russell coughed. "Well, they can repay me by providing us with a comfortable bed."

"They will give you every honour you could think to ask for, I think."

Russell put the lid back on. It fitted snugly. "The legend that Lao Tzu wrote this while waiting for Chinese customs clearance: that at least is false."

"Oh?" Chou frowned. "How so?"

Russell indicated the box and its precious contents. "Because it is so damned short."