

# Red-Braised Pork: Looking for Gates in a City of Walls

**Philip J. Cunningham**

**Abstract:** *My novel, excerpted here, is set in old Beijing, a city of walls in their contemporary incarnations. By old Beijing I don't mean so much the remnants of the Qing Dynasty capital described by twentieth-century writers. The story is contemporary but much of it is set within the confines of the Mongol Dynasty summer capital described by Marco Polo as Cambaluc, and celebrated by Samuel Coleridge in a euphonic fit of imagination in "Kubla Khan."*



## The outer wall of the Forbidden City in Beijing

Looking for gates in a city of walls in old Beijing in their contemporary incarnations.

My novel, excerpted below, is set in old Beijing, and by old Beijing I don't mean so much the remnants of the Qing Dynasty capital described by Lao She, Lin Yutang, David Kidd and other twentieth century writers as much as the old, old Beijing. The story is contemporary but much of it is set within the confines of the Yuan Dynasty summer capital Dadu, described by Marco Polo in somewhat fanciful terms as Cambaluc, and celebrated by Samuel Coleridge in a euphonic fit of imagination in "Kubla Khan."

The novel brings together a small cast of contemporary characters with imperial and imperious pretensions, including a Beijing princeling, a roguish pretender to power from the provinces and Huamei, the mercurial woman they are both willing to do almost anything for. Unable to decide who she'd rather settle with, Huamei tries to enjoy the attentions of both with disastrous consequences. The elite battle royale is observed by an American narrator who secretly fancies himself the next Marco Polo, but in the end strives to keep his head low and play the part of a person of no consequence in order that he not become a persona non grata.

The characters are fictional but the old imperial center of power is real enough, and

archaeological remnants can be found nestled in a district still defined by walled compounds, man-made hills and lakes. The epicenter of the old, old city corresponds with Beihai Park today, and it is there that the denouement of the novel takes place.



**A view of Jade Flower Island (Qionghuadao) as seen from a pleasure boat in Beihai**

If Beijing, famous for being built on a grid pattern, may be compared to a giant chessboard, key scenes my story take place on contiguous squares of alternating color. The Forbidden City, a fortress surrounded by a moat sits side by side with Zhongnanhai, a walled-in lake with elite residences on its shores. The key characters are like chess pieces in that some pieces zoom across the board on squares of their own color, while others enjoy less reach but greater range.

The unnamed narrator lives on a college campus which corresponds to Beijing Normal University, situated just inside the confines of the old Yuan city wall known today as *tucheng*. The nouveau riche tycoon lives in a fancy

walled mansion facing Houhai lake, the narrator's American friend lives in the hutong near the Drum Tower, and the princelings live in Zhongnanhai.

### **Echoes of History are an Unstated Subtext**

In my novel, Tiananmen Square, the only empty quadrant on the board, is the scene of a transgressive quest for speed in a red Ferrari. The square itself, which hardly needs an introduction, is famously used for choreographed acts designed to celebrate and commemorate state power such as massive military parades and rallies commemorating key anniversaries in the Chinese communist calendar.

On the distaff side, the same square is also known as a site of defiance. At very different times and for very different reasons it has been the scene of civil disobedience, challenges to power and the notable mass demonstrations of 1919, 1976, and 1989.

One of the interesting things about Beijing, now and then, if we continue to look at it as a game of three-dimensional chess for the moment, is how much of the action takes place in the same few "squares" near the titular lakes of Beijing, though the value and valence of each square changes over time. The Forbidden City is now a park, while Zhongnanhai, its garden annex is now the seat of power. The hand-dug Beihai Lake contains the man-made Jade Flower Island, once the beating heart of the Mongol-dominated city.

The Forbidden City is now open to the public while Zhongnanhai Park, which used to sport a public swimming pool, is now a forbidden zone. Beihai is a walled park requiring tickets for admission while Qianhai, Houhai and Xihai don't even rate park status but are open to anyone strolling by.



**Xihai, which lies close to remnants of the old city wall is the least touristy of the central lakes**

Then there is the leafy university campus, a prim and proper walled compound, a world apart from the bouncer-guarded VIP-only nightlife venues on the edge of the Sanlitun diplomatic district.

One of the Beijing architectural habits that seems to this observer rather constant over time is the obsessive tendency to restrict access and surround everything with a wall. Gates, walls, keeps, and compounds are key metaphors for moments of inclusion and exclusion in the novel.

In sync with the long tradition of guarded compounds, is the stark social segregation that goes with it. The Forbidden City, the citadel of the Manchus, who ruled China from 1644-1911 was closed off to Han Chinese and ancient Dadu was Mongol-dominated. Some of the finest walled parks and universities in today's Beijing were once estates of Manchu nobility. Ethnic minorities and foreigners have always had their ghettos, legations and diplomatic

districts, and Zhongnanhai, the citadel of China's communist rulers, is as tightly proscribed a power enclave as the Forbidden City once was.

The characters are incessantly looking to get out of the compound that currently walls them in, but more often than not they end up in a new compound with new restrictions. It's not architecture alone that thwarts the elusive search for freedom of the sort espoused in democracies. When the communists tore down the ancient, all-encompassing city wall of Beijing, things appeared more open than they actually were. Invisible walls remained and new boundaries proliferated.

As a student and tour guide in China shortly after the country's opening up to the outside world, I was alternately dismayed by the limits of the foreigner-designated zones I was expected to inhabit—the Friendship Hotels, the Friendship Stores, the foreign dorms and foreign dining halls—and delighted to transgress similarly restricted spaces with often surreptitious visits to hotels, shops, dorms and dining halls designated for the Chinese.

The *Foreign Exchange Certificates* which foreigners were expected to use in lieu of cash, like ration coupons and dining hall chits, were mechanisms of control which helped enforce separate and unequal worlds. I first got to know about the precarious lives of Uyghurs from Xinjiang when it came to changing FEC for RMB and purchasing illegal goods such as pirate cassette tapes and DVDs on the streets of Beijing.

Many of the sharp boundaries and social divisions of the early reform period faded after 1989, and while it seems ironic to say so, things got more free, or were less than adequately policed in the soul-searching years after that terrible crackdown on the fourth of June 1989.

The wily Deng Xiaoping was responsible for the

temporary tactical withdrawal of state intervention. The ultimate arbiter of power at the time, he was responsible for the brutal decision to open fire in 1989, and for the unjust arrests that followed, but he soon got boxed in the party conservatives who were lending him their support in their own quest to consolidate power. Deng's secretive "Southern Tour" in January 1992 bore imperial echoes of Emperor Kangxi's "nanxun" near the end of his reign and marked a return to a relatively unfettered process of reform and opening.



**The entry to a residential courtyard in the hutong near Houhai**

In the post-Tiananmen decade, the front door of political reform remained shut, but paradoxically it was an age of great laxity, a

world of back doors and wheeling and dealing that was quickly exploited by hucksters, tricksters, and strivers. The wannabe Gatsbys of China's nether world nursed fantasies of triumph and revenge against the indignities and injustice of the past. There was a lot of money to be made, but how much of it was legal, let alone well spent?

In my story, the provincial rogue who pursues the lovely but elusive Huamei is very much in the Gatsby mold. He breaks out of the prison-like confines of a rural work farm in Inner Mongolia, and, in cahoots with corrupt police, engages in blackmail while operating a string of lucrative entertainment venues. In keeping with Beijing's tacit segregation of types of people and types of activity, his flashy world of discos, karaoke joints and private clubs is situated on another square of the giant chessboard, namely Sanlitun, a zoned diplomatic district in the tradition of the old walled Foreign Legation, one of those hybrid areas in which Chinese and foreigners could mix relatively freely in the 1990s, at least up to a point, after which the rise of exclusive clubs created new forbidden zones.



**Houhai as viewed from Yinding Bridge looking west**

“The Lakes of Beijing” is the product of many years residence in Beijing at a time when the poles of my existence oscillated between moments of inclusion and exclusion, times during which I violated the norms of both journalism and academia by allowing myself to be an observer turned participant. Needless to say, one could not have had as freewheeling a time as I had in Beijing without occasionally skirting the law and violating prevailing norms of separate but unequal existence. It is precisely the enduring system of Chinese boxes within boxes that I wrestle with in this novel.

The story takes its geography seriously enough that most of the settings have real-world cognates, while others, especially some of the

more tawdry establishments, are an amalgam of iniquitous dens I have entered, if only as the guest of someone else or in my quixotic personal quest to do “ethnography.”

My characters, including the narrator, are fictional, but each of them came alive and took on lives of their own during the writing of the novel. I tried to let the dramatis personae run wild within the authorial limits of imagination, plot and narrative. Hopefully some individual idiosyncrasy shines through, for they are my tribute to the many amazing people I’ve known in China, and stand-ins for the grand cast of characters in the tableau vivant that is Beijing.

I have written two non-fiction pieces for the *Asia-Pacific Japan Focus Journal* that describe the difficulty, but not impossibility of going places you’re not supposed to go in the act of crossing guarded boundaries on the vast playing board of Beijing:

[Retracing Steps at Beijing University 1989-2019](#)

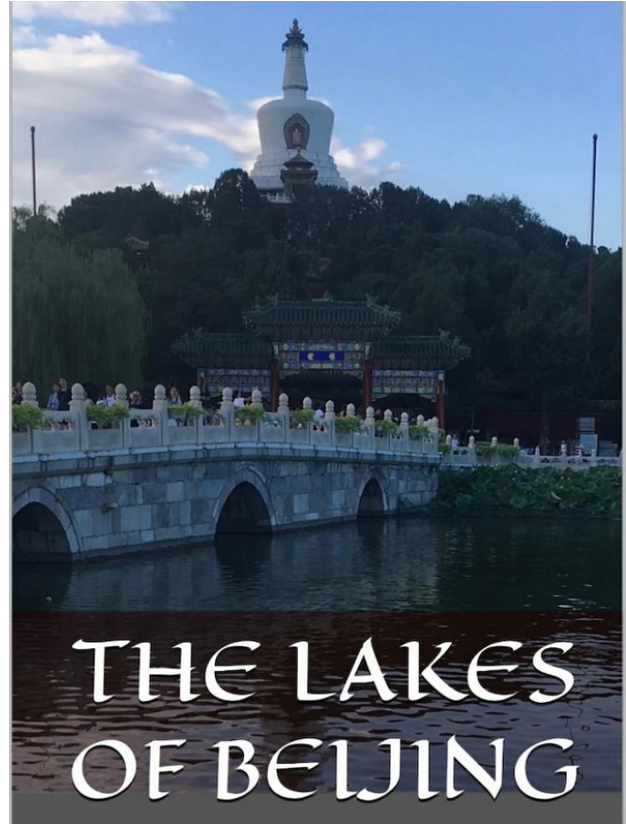
[Border Crossing into Tiananmen Square](#)



**Yinding Bridge (Silver Ingot Bridge)  
crosses the slender waterway linking  
Houhai to Qianhai**

The excerpt of the novel that follows starts and ends on the periphery of the old Forbidden City on an evening when the American narrator of the story is invited to dinner by a political scion known as the Crimson Prince. The middle-class American teacher from Long Island and the princeling, the heredity successor of a prominent political clan who played a key role in Mao's revolution, hail from antithetically different backgrounds and move in parallel worlds.

If the walls and moats and designated habitats in Beijing were as strictly observed in practice as in theory, the two would never have met, but there are cracks in the citadel and a fragile rapport between the two develops based on a mutual willingness to engage in conversation. The foreign teacher invites his well-connected student for private lessons in the "foreigners-only" compound of the Foreign Experts building on his walled campus while the princeling quietly reciprocates the gesture, offering a glimpse of his hidden world, one that includes venues such as the Diaoyutai State Guest House, an off-limits military installation, the Great Hall of the People and Zhongnanhai.



***The Lakes of Beijing is a work of the imagination describing things that may or may not have happened but could very well have happened in the "Swinging Nineties." The narrator and characters are contrived but the story is grounded in lived experience, the ancient lay of the land and the power geography of the guarded compounds, open plazas and picturesque waterways of central Beijing.***

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**An excerpt from "The Lakes of Beijing"**

**Philip J. Cunningham**

After word of Huamei's affair started to make the rounds, the last thing I expected was a phone call from her husband. And I guess the last thing he expected was for me to answer my own phone, because after getting me on the line, he parried with me as if I were hired help, some kind of office aide or operator.

My habitual practice of answering the phone in Chinese probably contributed to the confusion:

"Wei?"

"Hello Sir?"

"Wei?"

"May I, uh, er. Is this *Uni-ver-si-ty Fo-reign Ex-pert Buil-ding?*"

"You got it."

"May I connect to American English teacher?"

"Um. Speaking. Hello?"

"Hello?"

"It's me, if it's me you are looking for."

He never got around to introducing himself, but his voice was distinctive enough, and his grasp of English weak enough that I quickly put two and two together. The Crimson Prince was trying hard to be polite, but trying even harder to keep it in English, which was strange. After about five minutes of creative listening, I got the gist of his message.

If I didn't mind the inconvenience, and could, on short notice, arrange an opening in my busy schedule, it was requested that I join him for dinner at a small dining establishment near his home where he could practice English while we

enjoyed some regional comestibles. Agreed?

What the? Well, why not?

I thanked him, accepting the invitation.

My first impulse was to call Huamei, so I picked up the phone as soon as I hung up with him, but my second impulse, following closely on the tail of the first, was not to call Huamei, so I put the receiver down again.

The arrangement by which I taught English to her husband had been set up by her, and it wouldn't have happened otherwise, but there was no pressing reason why I had to consult her or report back to her every time he and I met to discuss our P's and Q's. In fact, my sole private student had missed so many weekly lessons in a row I had assumed our little tutoring arrangement was over for good.

I had fully expected my informal course in "diplomatic English" to collapse outright the day his wife's extracurricular exertions became public, so it stirred a mix of consternation and curiosity, and it was almost moving, to think he still wanted to meet.

Was he really looking to resume lessons? Whatever for? His English was going nowhere fast, despite my trying every teaching trick I knew. He was an agreeable but somewhat inert and otherwise indifferent student whose inability to make progress lent an almost surreal air to the pronunciation drills.

Every day was the first day of class, it was like starting over, over and over again. I never had to do much prep because he seemed to forget everything we went over in the last session, and I could easily fill the follow-up hour repeating the basic grammar patterns and tongue twisters that eluded him the first time around.

Not a bad deal for a penny poor instructor who wanted to clock some easy hours, but it

challenged my self-esteem as a supposedly professional teacher of English that he wasn't getting better at it.

At the university I had plenty of high-achieving students who advanced at warp speed, assiduously memorizing vocabulary lists and voraciously absorbing each day's lesson. I couldn't take credit for the fire that burned inside them, but it was nice to see them shine.

Likewise it wasn't fully my fault that my bright, competent and alert private student found himself so flummoxed by things unChinese that foreign words slipped away like water off a duck's back, but that's the way it was with him.

So why did he want to meet?

Might he have an urgent international conference coming up? His first trip abroad? If so, I could certainly prepare a customized lesson for survival English, not that the head of a high-level delegation buffeted with interpreters and security aides needed much English to survive.

But wait. Did he really say, "regional comestibles?"

His dictionary-derived request was clumsy but endearing, so I tried not to take it too seriously, but I was half-hoping we'd be eating in one of those provincially-themed banquet rooms in the Great Hall of the People. That was near his home, wasn't it? And I had gone to the Great Hall to eat with him once before but got turned away for security reasons. Maybe this time he filed a request for clearance in advance.

By the time I hopped on my bike and headed towards Zhongnanhai, I was beset by hunger, curiosity and consternation.

What was I getting myself into?

He had instructed me to wait by the Xihuamen entrance to the Forbidden City, an easy enough

location to pinpoint since it was the key western gate to the vermilion-walled palace, wedged in between mighty crenelated keeps and a serene palace moat. And as I well knew from riding my bike in the area, it was unexpectedly serene public promenade, mercifully free of vehicular traffic.

Why such a magnificent location should be so neglected by tourists and locals alike, I couldn't say for sure, but it was just the kind of rendezvous place that I liked. And it struck me that it served his purposes well, for it was close to the center of things but out of the limelight.

I got to the old gate early, parked my bike next to a bench overlooking the moat and loosened my shirt to let the sweat dry off. The sun was gone but the sky still glowed brightly. Dwarfed by the monolithic crenelated walls, a scattering of people could be seen in the shadows. There were couples strolling, some hand in hand, and the usual old men fishing. There were a few harried-looking tourist stragglers limping with exhaustion after exiting the Forbidden City which had just closed for the day.

When Mao's liberation army took over Beijing and tried to make a communist capital of it, the carefully laid-out architectural form and fengshui of the old imperial citadel was abruptly divorced from function. Walls became roads and gates became towers and bastions were cut down to ditches. Moats were filled in and sluice works abandoned. But they kept the old Forbidden City intact and they created a new Forbidden City in the adjacent gardens of Zhongnanhai.

I got up from the bench to stretch, admiring the stoic fishermen who could run idle lines contentedly for so long with so little return. I walked along the edge of the moat in the tranquil twilight talking quietly to myself as I improvised a simple vocabulary lesson for navigating a diplomatic banquet:



*Have you tried the hors d'oeuvres? No, too much of a tongue twister. In China, we have soup after the meal. Do you like Maotai? Please, have some more. The fish is excellent.*

With footsteps so hushed I didn't hear his approach, my private student padded over to me in his kung fu shoes and presented himself.

"Hel-lo Sir?"

"What?" I said with a shiver, abruptly turning around. "Oh, Hey! It's you. What's happenin'?"

"I am fine, thank you."

Seeing the good Communist in his baggy pants and indigo jacket, all nervous and earnest, I couldn't help but smile. Our rapport was fragile but the student-teacher dynamic was still intact.

"How do you do?"

"Oh, come on, now," I said. "No need to be so formal. Just say hi."

"Hi. How do you do?"

"I'm fine, thank you," I answered with a sigh of resignation. "And you?"

"Pardon me?"

"Nice to see you."

"Me?"

"You."

"You are fine?"

"Fine, fine. Thank you."

He cleared his throat authoritatively, putting the fledgling exchange of niceties out of its misery.

"*Fal-low me,*" he commanded in a soft, practiced voice.

I followed him.

Funny guy. He could use a word like "regional comestibles" over the phone, antiquated dictionary in hand no doubt, but he couldn't handle basic greetings without getting everything backwards.

We walked slowly in the gathering dusk, traversing the picturesque causeway and bridge over the old moat. When we reached the sparsely lit street, we turned left. We were headed south. Thanks to Beijing's grid-like layout, cardinal directions were easy enough to suss out, but our destination still remained a mystery.

I realized we were walking somewhere near the confusing juncture where the street changed its name from Beichang and Nanchang, if only because I had once gotten lost on this very stretch looking for the branch office of the Public Security Bureau. My visa troubles were eventually sorted out, and though I hadn't been back in years, I knew that if we continued straight south, we'd hit the Boulevard of Eternal Happiness, which, despite its symbolic scope and grandeur, had little in the way of food or entertainment. There were no cross streets to speak of, and not a neon light in sight. Hidden behind the thicket of trees and warren of brick and stone buildings to the west lay the hidden, forbidding compound of Zhongnanhai.

My guess was that we were going to be met by a driver and be whisked off to one of those low-key elite kind of places with the kind of understated luxury that the Crimson Prince seemed to like best. I had grown accustomed to being taken out and treated, encouraged to stuff myself, eyes, ears and belly, as a hanger-on in someone else's entourage.

What would it be this time? Smiling hostesses in Red Guard outfits, a private chef, a menu so heavy you needed two hands to hold it up?

What subtle, superlative delights awaited me?

I looked in futility for a car, his car, any car that might pass as the car that was to take us away on a journey from the ordinary to the extraordinary, but there was little traffic in these undisturbed precincts. Even the sky was obscured by the thick-leafed canopy that hung over the road.

We continued walking in an awkward silence, not quite side by side, but close enough. "*Fallow me,*" he intoned again, again in the same flat voice.

We worked our way past a row of low buildings and shops, most of them shuttered. I didn't know of any name establishments in the area, and the narrow, nondescript street was notable only because of its location. It was wedged between the old imperial palace and Zhongnanhai, which is to say between the old Forbidden City, which was open, and the new Forbidden City, which was not.

A curvilinear lakeside alternative to the dry straight lines of the fabled Forbidden City, Zhongnanhai was also an imperial compound, but built on a more human scale, more yin than yang. It was a place where emperors and emperors-to-be had once relaxed by the lake, penned poetry, met scribes and dowagers, dallied with concubines and sometimes languished under a very high-end sort of house arrest.

When the communists entered Beijing, they took over the neglected lakeside compound, put it under a comprehensive security blanket, and it came to represent their innermost sanctum of power. Mao was granted a deluxe imperial courtyard residence there, though he later traded it for a makeshift library and plain living quarters adjacent to a swimming pool.

I had grown so accustomed to being escorted into brash, grand and garish establishments with revelers lining up to get in that it came as something of a shock, if not a disappointment, when my host ushered me into a cheap looking street side eatery of the type you could pass every day without noticing. If it were not for the faint stench of spicy stewed meat, I wouldn't have deemed it a restaurant at all. Just a single square dining room adorned with a few photos, with one big round table by the door and three smaller tables on the side.

The tables were empty, not a person in sight, but there were signs of human activity, for the floor was sticky, the table tops greasy, and the entire joint redolent of fatty meat, tobacco and fiery liquor. Not a mix of odors I liked in ensemble or in isolation, but something savory was cooking in the kitchen, so it wasn't a total bust.

We sat down at a small side table without waiting to be seated. A waiter of sorts emerged from the kitchen where he had been too busy chatting with the cook to greet us and seat us, let alone wipe down the table, serve drinks or provide menus. When he finally shuffled over to our table, he exchanged a not overly deferential nod with my distinguished host, then pointed laconically to the menu on the wall which consisted of a few hard-to-decipher calligraphic scribbles. He pulled a dirty rag from his back pocket and gave the table a theatrical wipe before shuffling away.

"Do you like *hu-man* food?" asked my host, breaking a long silence.

“Human food?” I wasn’t sure what to make of the question. “Oh, I do. I really do have a strong preference for it. I simply can’t abide dog food.”

He paused, predictably confused. “Like Mao?”

Mao? I was even more confused. “Oh, you mean, like it’s a dog-eat-dog world?”

Our flailing conversation was rescued by the rumpled waiter who came back to take our orders. His white shirt and black slacks were wrinkled, his hair was messy, too, but he was so laid-back it made you feel relaxed if you could contain your irritation at the slothful service.

What a nice little dive, a greasy chopsticks kind of place with old wooden counters, but what was the good prince doing in a place like this? A show of proletarian solidarity? Or was he taunting me, treating a foreign nobody to a low-end meal where my jeans and sweatshirt would not be out of place?

Sticking to English had only muddled things, so I dropped the pretense of teaching him and pressed on in Chinese. Turned out the Crimson Prince meant just what he said the first time around.

Regional comestibles.

The cuisine was Hunan food. And I soon came to understand that this no-frills joint was known in this rarified quarter for its no-nonsense service, spiced up dishes and red-braised pork. The sons and daughters of the Chinese elite could get a bite to eat here without attracting a fuss. Play peasant for a bit, mix with the masses. The princelings who came here were slumming, of course, in the sense they were accustomed to meticulously-sourced food inside Zhongnanhai and fine dining in their private clubs, but the dishes here were said to be excellent even if the décor was somewhat lacking.

The Crimson Prince related to me how Mao Zedong complained about being penned up in Zhongnanhai, always surrounded by courtiers and security, so it had been arranged for him to step outside the palace and visit this very restaurant, though of course the place had been carefully swept in advance, and peopled with plainclothes police, some posing as customers, others supervising the kitchen.

“It’s like a reverse Potemkin village,” I said, reverting to English.

My host almost certainly didn’t understand the words I used, but surely he grasped the concept. Given the need for secrecy and stealth in his life as a third-generation successor to Mao, it was second nature to him that appearances should be deceiving.

Dinner was served.

The dishes were succulent, tasty and well-prepared. The gray-haired chef, momentarily freed of kitchen duty, stood by the table as we ate. He merrily claimed to have cooked for Mao, pointing to some faded photographs on the wall to prove his point. He was a bit full of himself, but a fine old soul who appeared to be on close terms with my host.

I was introduced as the English teacher of course, which was okay by me. The chef peppered our already spicy meal with some sharp-witted asides in Chinese about yin and yang and then lectured me on hot and cold humors, concluding with some dull bromides in English.

“You. Most-honored guest,” he said, looking at me.

“The food is excellent.”

“America beau-ti-ful country.”

“Well, thank you.”

The conversation quickly reverted to Chinese. Things warmed up and I kicked back and listened with interest to the princeling and the chef exchange tidbits of folklore and tales of famous banquets.

While they were talking, a party of five came in, three youngish men in fashionable jackets, two stylish women with their hair up. They were brash, loud and entitled. They obviously knew the place, but looked out of place, dressed to impress, not unlike the ostentatious partygoers I had seen at *Under the Sky* and other fancy clubs. They started shouting out their orders even before the chef got his apron back on.

They didn't like slumming it, not in the way my host did, and at one point, I almost thought they were going to get up and walk out. Their sports utility vehicle was parked right outside the door, engine still running.

The Crimson Prince kept his head low, not so much to hide his countenance as to indicate a lack of interest in the other table. I got the feeling he didn't like them, but I couldn't say quite why. Possibly they too were princelings, but princelings of a different stripe. Then again, they might even have been high society acquaintances of his unfaithful wife, which would account for his almost visceral discomfort and sudden silence.

The cosmopolitans at the other table were dropping big English words left and right, they had the showy, tell-tale bilingualism of returned students from abroad, so the idea of recommencing a lesson in rudimentary English was too mortifying for the Crimson Prince to countenance.

We got a few sideways glances, I assumed more on account of my presence than anything else, and I thought they were an okay lot. Under more ordinary circumstances I might even have gotten talking with them, one of the

gals was a real looker, and she was looking at me, but I sensed that my dinner host was ready to leave, and we did just that.

We left well sated, though not at all drunk, yet by the time we got outside, the mind of my dinner companion was so far away as to be incoherent. When we crossed the street I tried to jumpstart the conversation by reviewing a few terms of restaurant English.

"I liked the greens with garlic," I said, enunciating each word carefully. "The pork was succulent, don't you think?"

He didn't respond at first, but when we reached the sidewalk, he shot out a question.

"How do you say *hongshaorou*?"

"Red-braised pork."

"Bread-raised pork?"

I got distracted helping him with word order and pronunciation when he paused to exchange greetings with a couple of uniformed guards standing in the shadows. As we ambled on, he dropped the pretense of this being a lesson and turned to his native tongue. He was trying to tell me something, perhaps something of pressing importance, and I could not escape the feeling he was about to ask a favor of me as well.

Dinner may have been dress-down casual, but something heavy weighed on his mind and I was getting bits and pieces of it now. In his eagerness to unload, he harped on about this and that, all of it incoming in Chinese a bit too fast, a bit too softly for me to fully grasp. Something about someone doing something, something hard to understand, something significant and not without some consequences.

I was so intent on meeting him halfway, reaching out to decipher his rapidly delivered phrases that I didn't really notice where we were going as we ambled down a quiet alley that was graced by evenly spaced trees on both sides which flanked a row of low, windowless buildings.

Up ahead, there was a small ceremonial gate of some kind, but we turned away before confronting it, instead passing through a small passageway on the side. There were eyes on us, the kind of alert eyes I had come to recognize among the gatekeepers of the realm but crossing the line with the Crimson Prince was like crossing the line with Big Ten, you didn't have to worry too much about how you were dressed or who thought what if you stayed close in his wake.

We passed through another plain-looking gate and then filed past a large building on a narrow esplanade until we came to the edge of a body of water glittering in the moonlight.

"I want to go to America someday," the princeling announced in English.

"Really?"

"Yes, I do."

"Cool. Well, we've got our share of regional comestibles, I suppose you could say, but nothing compared to China, of course."

"Isn't it?"

"Where in America would you like to go?"

"I want to go to *you-sheng-mei-di*."

"Oh really?" I nodded, trying to keep the conversation rolling, but I didn't have a clue what he was talking about.

The word he uttered, if I got the tones right, sounded like '*superlative-victory-beautiful-land*.' What could that possibly be in reference to?

"Um, I was wondering, like, why do you wanna, why do you want to go, um, there?" I asked, fishing for more information.

"Half-dome."

"Half-dome? Wait, you mean, like what's-the-name of that, um that park, ah, Yosemite?"

"Yes, yes. *You-sheng-mei-di*."

It somehow moved me that he should want to cross the ocean to see a magnificent rock in my homeland.

Distracted by visions of the American West, I had kind of lost my sense of direction by then. My first impression was that we had somehow doubled back to the Forbidden City and were now looking at a section of the palace moat, a stretch of glittering water unfamiliar to me.

"Wow. Nice view."

"Does she talk to you?"

"You mean, ah, her?"

"Yes."

"Yes, she's a fine woman. I've known her since college."

"I know."

Maybe he did know about us after all.

“We were just students,” I said, hoping to put things in context, but he was on another train of thought.

“She is not happy.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I don’t know if, ah, hey, wait. Where are we?”

“Zhongnanhai.”

“What? You can just walk in here like that?”

“If you live here.”

“Oh. So this is where you and, ah, Huamei live?”

He winced at my mention of her name but quickly regained his composure.

“Other side,” he said, pointing to a cluster of residential buildings on the far shore.

“Wow. Interesting. Nice view.”

The surprise back door entry to the innermost sanctum of China’s elite had so taken me by surprise I was speaking English again.

“The lake is beautiful in the moonlight.”

The setting really was eerily magnificent, even

in the shadows. The moon was broken and hanging low in the sky, but bright enough to reflect off the wind-ruffled surface of the water, while a faint incandescent glow emanated from the curtained windows of the luxe apartment buildings on the opposite shore. But Huamei’s husband didn’t take me here for moon-watching or architectural appreciation.

He was mildly vexed, and vacillating, quietly tied up in knots. He wanted to, and didn’t want to, talk to me about the wife he couldn’t get around to mention by name. I got the impression it was important to him to be in the company of someone who was a friend of the woman in question, but he probably wouldn’t have been comfortable approaching any of her girlfriends at a time like this. I was kind of amazed he chose me, of all people, to hear him out, but perhaps he thought I could offer some insight, if only by osmosis. Then again, maybe it was more transactional.

Maybe he wanted me to act as a messenger.

But talking about Huamei with her husband put me in a bind. I didn’t want to betray her trust, nor did I want to vouch for or validate her relationship with Big Ten. I was disenchanted enough by her heedless passion that I was in no mood to defend her, either.

More to the point, did he know she was pregnant?

He asked if I had seen her recently and I answered quickly, and with a modicum of sincerity, that I hadn’t, but of course, the term “recently” was open to interpretation.

I was half-tempted to tell him the truth as I understood it, that she loved different people in different ways, but I held my tongue. I couldn’t conceive of him not knowing the basic facts about her outside dalliance already, but I was pretty sure he didn’t know she was pregnant because that’s when she disappeared. It seemed more prudent to keep it abstract, to

talk about the boy-girl game in general terms, to share with him my true conviction that true love could be truly irrational.

The glib English teacher in me was suddenly tongue-tied. It's far easier to dish out grammar and verse than exchange confidences. I refused to go into detail, for fear of hurting his feelings, her feelings and my own self-esteem as well. So long as I kept it in English, I could steer our talk in such a way that we could have a pleasant conversation without significant communication, and at a time like this, saying as little as possible was fine by me.

"Don't worry. I'm sure it'll work out."

"Work out?"

"You know. Things."

"It is difficult," he said with downcast eyes.

Seeing his discomfort, I pushed the conversation in a more impersonal direction, talking about recent news items, bilateral relations and the like.

"Hey, you know that recent US-China summit, in Washington? You think it made much of a difference?"

Brow furrowed with incomprehension; he gave me a rote answer.

"The general-secretary's visit was deemed a success," he responded drily.

Now we were both rudderless on autopilot.

"Well, I guess you could say that. He handled the student protest at that speech he gave on campus pretty well."

"What protest?"

"Oh, right, I guess that wasn't in the news here."

A pair of strolling security guards, quietly engrossed in conversation, went silent at the sight of me as they walked past. They exchanged puzzled glances but then resumed talking to one another.

The Crimson Prince turned away from the lake and started to nudge me slowly back the way we came.

"She gives me no telephone call."

"She doesn't? Since when?"

He then explained in very plain and easy-to-understand Chinese that his people had seen her with another man.

"Are you sure?"

I shouldn't have feigned ignorance. After all, the intelligence was not wrong, and what's more, he probably knew that I knew.

"Yes, I am sure."

“Oh dear. That sounds like ah, like a situation.”

His mouth quivered, as if ready to say something, but instead he pursed his lips and shut his eyes as if in pain.

He knew I knew. Now I was sure of it.

“Why, why, why, why?” He stopped in his tracks and held his palms facing upward. His meagre English vocabulary suddenly taking a forlorn Shakespearian turn.

“I don’t know, I really don’t,” I responded with an honest sigh.

At an instant like this, it was easy to forget that he was a prince, and this was his palace. Indeed, it was hard to see him as anything more than a hurt human being seized with self-doubt, standing on an unremarkable bit of pavement in the dark.

“You know what?” I continued. “I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but the truth is, maybe even she doesn’t know. These things, um, they happen. Happen all the time. To all kinds of people. Up and down, high and low.”

He shook his head back and forth in disbelief but said nothing.

“Yeah, I mean, it must hurt, it does hurt. I know. But I don’t know what to say.”

“But why?”

“The ways of the heart are a mystery,” I said, full of uncertainty myself. “I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

A bristling silence followed. We stared not at the glistening lake, the incandescent clouds or the cold effulgent moon, but at the ground, as if we were both afraid to take too hard a look at an unfeeling cosmos.

He was wearing black cloth shoes; I was wearing worn sneakers. He was upset, not inconsolable, perhaps, but weighed down and confused.

He cleared his throat. “Shall I call a car?”

“No, that’s okay. I came by bike.”

“Where is your bike?”

“By the gate. Xihuamen.”

He offered to put his driver at my disposal, saying the bike could be placed in the trunk of the car, but I insisted that I was fine peddling home under my own power which he answered by insisting that he walk me to my bike.

We exited through the small back gate using the same narrow passageway we had ambled in by. Again, I caught the watchful eye of people observing us along the way. Neither of us said a word until we were outside the maze and we had crossed the street.

Nothing more was said of Huamei.

We crossed the palace moat on a broad stone causeway and strolled along the narrow strip of public space adjacent to the imposing walls of



the Forbidden City. We talked using easy words, talking about little things, talking about nothing at all.

watch me wheel away.

And that was the last time I saw him.

When we said goodbye, and we did so several times, it was more than something out of phrase book. I felt a little sad watching him

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