

The Trials of Mengzi

I inhaled smoke, feeling it warm my body like fire.

The telltale cough I tried to hide afterward alerted him to my presence. He swung his head toward the entrance, eyes wide, shoulders tense.

“It’s me,” I called softly, mostly so he would stop craning his neck to get a glimpse of his visitor. At that his posture relaxed slightly, though it remained guarded, his back still turned to me.

As usual I waited. This was our routine every Saturday — I’d walk two miles through the busy Qingdao metropolis, a ragtag blur as I sprinted through the crowds of weekend *xiao long bao*¹ vendors before embarking on the quiet, ruminative part of my journey in which I trekked through the narrow, winding road to the back door leading up to his thirteenth-story apartment.

The absence of spirits during the latter half of this journey ironically made me feel as though more were present: in the bush around the corner, behind the door when it creaked, in the empty spaces of my being. I fought them off one by one in preparation to confront all humanity’s vices. But this had the unfortunate effect of unsettling my psyche such that by the time the elevator doors opened on the thirteenth floor I sometimes hardly had the courage to knock, much less enter.

¹ Chinese steamed bun originating from the Jiangnan region in China.

On some days my indignation at my personal failings paled in comparison to my grandfather's wrath, and it looked like today might be one of those. With a shake of the head or a fist clenched in my direction I would know I was dismissed, and that dismissal stung, more so than any verbal rebuke or slap on the arm. Though he was always gentle — my grandfather had never been gentle with my mother or my aunt. Over the years I had learned to speak less of my weekly visits around them so as to not cast a shadow on their mood; when obliged, I responded with a single "Okay." They never pressed, and so I never caved, never offered resistance.

This seemed to sum up my relationship with everyone else I'd ever known: simple, uncomplicated, lacking in nuance. But I interpreted this fact differently from most others; everyone had a desire to feel interesting and complicated and have that *substance* be understood by someone else. Put under a microscope, it would be a physical manifestation of the ego, disgusting in all its glory. Speaking more when one could do with less — speaking at all in social settings — spoke to excess.

This was one of the rare things my grandfather and I agreed on when our topic of conversation inevitably arrived at the expectations of social relationships one dreary Saturday afternoon. In a flash of inspiration I had hastily translated Emily Dickinson's *I'm Nobody! Who Are You?* and stumbled over my words, a bumbling mess as I tried to describe how we were the two Nobodies in the poem. As an early teen I was consumed by the most obnoxious urge to be interesting and to that end carried poems by Dickinson and Brontë and Tennyson in my pockets that I'd transcribed late at night, as though any moment I could trip on something in the street and the contents of my soul would be laid bare. Passersby would walk by and think to themselves: *A*

woman of the world! without helping me up not because of their innate distaste for writings done in foreign scripts, but out of respect for the fact that an intellectual's crutch was his or her mind. It was perhaps out of a similar craving for validation that I'd handed my grandfather one of my messily scrawled notes and watched as he hummed with approval, eyes never leaving the page, that I realized two things at once: (i) my Chinese-born, Chinese-raised grandfather could read fluent English, and (ii) he must have thought I'd penned the poem myself.

That day had opened my eyes to the fact that as scholarly and patronizing my grandfather could be, he wasn't all-knowing. My grandfather liked to say that reading books was a lot like traveling to other countries and, being enlightened as he was, he had done a lot of both. So naturally I didn't bother to correct his assumption that I was capable of writing poems like Emily Dickinson. Some small part of me did, and still believed, that I...

... Well, I could.

After the most cathartic of my visits I would wonder if what I came for during these Saturdays was really to be seen by someone other than myself. Even now as I waited to be invited in, I wondered if I would simply cease to exist if the only person who had ever come close to seeing me were to suddenly disappear off the face of the planet.

He tilted his head in my direction. An acknowledgement. An invitation. A demand?

Silently, I made to approach his hearth. There a stake had been erected, presumably by His Honor. Made of used cigarette heads (and butts), it stood no taller than an inch and was clearly built with structural integrity in mind. I watched as he placed another cigarette in the ashtray and completed the structure on which man and animal alike had burned.

“Cao ni de!”

Goddamn it.

It had sparked back to life. The cigarette glowed in a moment of sudden clarity, its brilliance infectious as it sparked similar reactions in the other ones in the pile. My grandfather rasped, taking a deep breath before blowing out the dying flame.

His eyelids fluttered shut. With a cigarette in hand, it could only mean one thing.

“When you smoke, what do you think of?”

I had expected an answer, poetic and vague.

Instead he laughed, the sound broken and brittle.

The cigarette was an instrument and he was its unwilling master. And so I understood — he was allowing it to speak for him, distort his voice and in turn warp my perception of him. He smoked precisely because it was his relief from all thought of worldly things.

It was the great equalizer.

He was reminiscing about his past. My grandfather had once been a shipbuilder during the Second Sino-Japanese war; he had also taken to the streets in his youth to protest the Japanese invasion of China. A newspaper cutout in his bedroom dated December 11, 1937 depicted him and his classmates kneeling in demonstration with their heads bowed — quite unfortunate, if I had anything to say about it. I'd often wondered what his face would reveal: a young zealot's bliss at having shown devotion to his cause or an old man's solemnity etched in his features after witnessing such injustices?

Looking at the man before me, I struggled to reconcile his image with that of his younger self. After the war my grandfather had settled down with a woman eleven years his junior who worked at the same shipbuilding company — my grandmother. Around the same time she fell ill with Parkinson's disease was when he discovered that his company had been involved in illicit deals with the Japanese and provided them with supplies throughout the course of the war. His fury led him to resign in protest and turn to smoking as a coping mechanism. Later, when his letter of resignation got leaked to the press, he was heckled relentlessly in the streets and spent the majority of his days smoking on rooftops while watching the next generation of youth inquire as to the whereabouts of a certain Counter-Revolutionary Mr. Jiang. After things blew over, he kept his family afloat by doing odd jobs that required his talents. Translation was a particularly profitable avenue, as he would discover, and the greatest irony of his life began when he started learning Japanese to run errands for art connoisseurs doing business across Asia.

I debated whether to tap him on the shoulder to bring him back to the present but decided against it out of some sick, sadistic desire to let him remain in the past while I thought of my future. The gaokao² was steadily approaching and, being more inclined towards the humanities, I had opted to choose that route over the sciences. This meant I would be sitting exams in history, political science, and geography in addition to the mandated subjects of Chinese, mathematics, and a foreign language of my choice, which would undoubtedly be English once next fall came around and our decisions were finalized. If all went well and I attended and graduated from a top institution like Qinghua University, I could be a high school teacher or a guest lecturer at a mid-tier college, teaching literature or philosophy or history. It was a perfectly respectable post with steady pay and opportunities for career advancement. I'd made up my mind after careful consideration and was planning on telling my grandfather today.

“Fang Lei’s son.”

I snapped to attention, waiting for him to elaborate.

“Ni ren shi ta ma?” Do you know him or not?

The image of a tall, lanky boy with wiry glasses came to mind. And then that of a girl with a toothy grin.

“Dou Dou— I mean, Fang Yun’s older brother?”

² The college entrance exam taken by Chinese students in June of their final year in high school.

His sharp eyes bore into mine. “You and Dou Dou were playmates.”

“When we were children.” The truth was that though she and I had stopped seeing each other as often once we had left elementary school and gone our separate paths — me to the one of the highest-ranked middle schools in the province, and her to technical school.

“So you haven’t been in touch recently.” It was less of a question and more of a statement.

I nodded. Next to him, my presence seemed to physically shrink while his expanded. The shadow he cast on the wall towered over mine and consumed me entirely as he leaned in to take another cigarette. As he lit it with his lighter, the smoke coming out of his cigarette seemed to extend the boundaries of his being, imposing on my personal space and forcing me to lean back.

“Then this will be new information for you.” I struggled not to wince as he blew out another cloud of smoke. It was moments like these that I despised the most, when I felt the least like his equal but a thousand staircases beneath his stature.

“The Fangs’ eldest son is a *bien tai*³.”

“He’s a homosexual?”

“Yes. *Bao mu*⁴! Fetch me some tea.”

³ Directly translates to ‘abnormal’ or ‘anomaly.’ In this context, it is used to refer to a gay person.

⁴ A housemaid.

Our housemaid obliged. A few moments later she had set a cup of boiling hot tea in front of my grandfather with a quick word of caution and left. I thought, with an exaggerated sense of self-importance, that perhaps it was because she knew she did not belong in this conversation.

“So—”

“They kicked him out of the house last Friday. I saw them dragging his stuff onto the front lawn while the sister — Dou Dou, was it? — stood to the side crying.” His expression changed to one of momentary sympathy before hardening again. “Mattress and all. That good-for-nothing deserved to leave empty-handed.”

“You— you didn’t tell me until now?” In my bewilderment, it was the only thing I could muster.

He shrugged as if to say, *I don’t see how it matters.*

“I don’t understand. How did they know he was a—”

He cut me off before I could say the word again. “Caught him talking to some boy after school. The Fang boy, very socially awkward, that one. They decided to ask his teacher about why their recluse of a son was smiling and chatting with one of the most well-to-do boys in his year. That’s how they learned that those boys had been walking home together after school every day of the week! Asked to see the security footage and there it was — proof that they had been *involved.*”

“You can’t seriously support this. He’s barely eighteen! Didn’t you tell me how parents are responsible for giving their children a good upbringing?”

The battle lines had been drawn and we were now gearing up for war. As usual, he had fired the first shot and had now retreated behind lines, waiting for retaliation.

“You believe that homosexuality is a sin? Like what it says in the Bible?”

“Bah! None of that religious crap. Though if religion is a deterrent,” he mused, “then who am I to get in its way?”

“You make it sound like a choice. One doesn’t simply choose to be attracted to people of the same sex, just as how you don’t choose to be attracted to the opposite sex.”

“Even if that were true—”

“It is!”

“—It *is* a choice to put it into practice. If you are unable to resist certain unnatural urges, then you do not have the mental fortitude to be a part of society. Such people,” he gestured with his hand, “should not be its benefactors.”

“And how exactly is it unnatural?”

“It goes against biology. A man cannot have children with another man.”

“Not all couples consisting of a man and a woman reproduce. Are they less natural because of it? If society truly wanted to optimize reproduction, every man would have multiple wives. Or better yet, he could impregnate women whenever he pleased.”

If my grandfather was fazed by my brazenness, he didn't show it. “Goals have changed. Not every couple must reproduce — in fact, that would be counterproductive in many countries where a larger population cannot be supported.”

“So you admit it. Not every couple has to have children. That makes a homosexual couple and a heterosexual couple with no children equal in value, does it not?”

“But it is important that should the couple want children, they are capable of having them. A married couple cannot be truly happy without kids, for they are not a family and cannot function as a base unit of society without them.”

“That's only because they have to *look* happy and present a united front for the sake of the kid, even if they aren't!” I hated that he could do this to me, reduce me to an incoherent mess when I had just been making a point. “If I didn't have kids, would you hate me? If I married a girl, would you hate me?”

“Jiang Mengzi.” His voice was gentle — far too gentle. “What are you talking about? I could never hate you.”

“But unless you contributed something extremely significant to society, like winning a Nobel prize, I would go to my grave ashamed of the fact that you had not *done your part*. As your mother did, as your grandmother did, as every member of the Jiang bloodline has done before you.” A classic example of hypocrisy. “Do you know why I defied the tradition that children should always take their father’s last name? It is because I have— *we* have endured far too much suffering for our line to die out. The Jiang family name *must* endure. We *must* live unto the next generation, and the next, and the next. Don’t you see?”

“And Fang Gege isn’t even worthy of a bloodline anymore. They cut him off,” I laughed, not knowing where it came from, “Because he couldn’t continue theirs.”

“So I evoked in you a sense of pity for the boy. That, if nothing else, is something I have done right.”

I hated him. My hatred penetrated skin-deep and resided with the first and second-degree burns I’d acquired over the years just by being in his vicinity. Didn’t he know that words were powerful weapons? Didn’t he know that *his* in particular hurt? I turned away, unable to face the embodiment of everything old and archaic and evil in the world.

Some time passed before he coughed. In my stubbornness I refused to turn around and face him. It was only when he coughed again, and again, and again, that I realized he wasn't trying to get my attention.

“W-Water.”

I continued to ignore him.

Until he choked out, “Please.”

Shame washed over me. I kept quiet as I dragged my feet to the kitchen and filled a glass with room-temperature water, taking care to make sure it was only filled about halfway. After I placed it in his outstretched hands, I looked around for a coaster, eyes pausing on a piece of paper set on a nearby desk.

Numbly, I went to pick it up. My eyes scanned it in disbelief.

“This says you have lung cancer.”

His lack of a response was all I needed.

“No.” I scrutinized the page from top to bottom. I was hoping to find evidence to the contrary, *anything, dear God, please*— “No, no, no, no. No!”

I kept getting hit with numbers, numbers that were each more merciless than the one before it, numbers that described perfectly the human condition as it applied to my grandfather. At the moment, words were inadequate. When I could finally take it no more, I set the paper down right in front of him, content to let him spill the contents of his glass all over it.

The words poured out all at once. “Do my mom and aunt know? Why didn’t you tell me earlier? Is there any treatment? How expensive is it?”

“No on all counts.” He chuckled — which immediately turned into a cough. I rushed over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

What am I going to do without my sparring partner? My enemy? My friend? The only person I’ve dared wage war against for the past sixteen years?

“You thought we were at war?” He sounded amused. I shrank even further at the realization that I had thought out loud and buried my face in my hands.

He placed a hand on my chin.

“Mengzi.” His adoration was radiant; I wanted to bathe in this feeling forever. “My darling poet. My shining star. My brave girl. *The one who dared reach for the stars.*”

The next thing I knew he had grabbed my shoulders and was staring intently into my eyes. “You must promise me. To put your dreams down on paper so they will amount to something. To write something every day even if it is your catharsis — do it to purge your soul and keep it clean. To read and do it selfishly; not all the great ideas in the world need be accessible to everyone. And acknowledge me—” His voice broke. “Acknowledge me in your first novel.”

“Okay. Okay.” My mind was racing, trying to think of ways I could keep up with his demands. I couldn’t write, only regurgitate. All the books I read were considered low literature by anyone’s standards. I wasn’t the next Mengzi⁵ — I couldn’t be.

But Mengzi was an altruist. I’d remembered as much from my grandfather’s mentions of my namesake. He advocated that humans were, by nature, good and righteous and humane.

Governments that supported this notion and gave its citizens their rightful freedom would naturally flourish. And Xunzi, whose ideas my grandfather’s views aligned more closely with, came after him and argued that human nature was evil and any means of governance had to reflect this by imposing restrictions on the people.

It all made utterly no sense. But a sickening feeling in my gut confirmed my suspicions that this had all been in the works for a very, very long time. From naming me after the great Confucian philosopher and Sage to entertaining me in our weekly debates and knowing where to relent and

⁵A Chinese Confucian philosopher and Confucius’s successor who lived during the Warring States period.

when to push, he had earned my begrudging respect for his dedication to the part. And as wrong as it all felt, I knew that Mengzi's works would be the first place I was going to look to make sense of all this.

My grandfather's voice turned gentle. When he next spoke, it felt like a caress of the hand.

"Every great creative is lonely. This next part of your journey is one that you will be alone on.

The famous artist Michaelangelo told his disciple Antonio when he was nearing the end of his days, 'Draw, Antonio, draw and—'"

"—Do not waste time."

He nodded, satisfied. Outside a church bell tolled, signaling noon. Stagnant willow trees became reanimated with the incoming gust of wind. Weekend workers ran onto the street to find taxis in the midday rush, their lunch break having just begun. It was my cue to leave.

"C-Can I still come next Saturday?" My voice was so soft, so hollow. So inadequate.

In response he set down his cup of green tea and reached for another cigarette. He looked directly into my eyes as he lit it. I could see the very moment when he lost control and his eyes took on a maniacal glint; the rest of his body was being tortured, but his mind was in bliss. Sweat pooled at his forehead. His lighter accidentally made contact with his hair and he screamed, alerting our housemaid to rush to his aid.

He didn't want me to see him being consumed by flames, and so I left.

To my grandfather, Jiang Ben-Shan:

You were too good for this world.
