

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

THE SCHOLAR
AND THE DRAGON
STELLA KON



STELLA KON was born in Edinburgh and lived many years in Malaysia. The Singaporean playwright, novelist, short story writer and poet is best known for her play *Emily of Emerald Hill*, arguably Singapore's most performed play. Since it was first staged in 1984, it has been produced by many directors numerous times in Singapore, Malaysia and at arts festivals in Hong Kong, Australia, New York, Hamburg, Berlin and Munich.

Kon is a three-time winner of the National Playwriting Competition and a Singapore Literature Prize Merit Award winner for her novel, *Eston*. In 2008 she won the Southeast Asian Writers Award. Her works have been studied in local and foreign universities and her latest interest is in writing musicals. Her paternal great-grandfather was Dr. Lim Boon Keng. On her mother's side she is a seventh-generation descendant of Tan Tock Seng. More information about the writer can be found on her website www.emilyofemeraldhill.com

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THE SCHOLAR AND THE DRAGON

STELLA KON



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To the memory of
Dr. Lim Boon Keng, 1869-1957

Introduction by Dr. Kirpal Singh

I WANT TO begin by quoting from a text message sent to me on 23 August 2011 by the author of this remarkable book: “I will feel happy if the story can bring the great pioneers of early Singapore to life in the imaginations of Singaporeans today.” In a follow-up text message, Stella Kon said, “I ain’t a historian.”

Both of these texts from our dear author highlight an interesting issue which has been debated and discussed for centuries: when is fiction also history? I assume that most readers will be familiar with historical fiction—that species of fiction which, contextually, has a specific historic setting. Fiction as history, though, is a little more complex and complicated—in such a genre, the author, like Kon, wants to educate readers primarily about the history of a nation, a community, a people, rather than use history purely as a setting to provide a dramatic interplay between and among characters. The distinction is a fine one and not easily grasped or understood; this notwithstanding, it does pose a real challenge to readers who prefer to think of fiction simply as fiction—that is, an imaginative work bearing little or no resemblance to people living or dead. In Kon’s text messages

we discern an uncomfortable attempt at trying to stay balanced: Kon wants to both re-present history while at the same time insisting that she is not a historian. Much of our delight in reading *The Scholar and the Dragon* comes, therefore, in our own glimpses of recognition (did we not read about that character somewhere in our history texts?) as well as in our relishing of the quaint customs, practices and traditions of a bygone era (to think that even here in little, colonial Singapore, Chinese men wore long pig tails as late as the early twentieth century.)

A second related point also needs to be both noted and appreciated. Our author, Stella Kon, is a descendant of one of the major characters in the book: Dr. Lim Boon Keng. Kon is his great-granddaughter and therefore, in the expressly spelt-out manner of the Confucian texts that constitute the background against which the different tensions between and among the characters unfold and locate, we sense a clear alignment of authorial perspectives. Fictional, or imaginative, bias is always taken as a given; but bias in a text claiming also to provide some sense of “real” history can often become suspect. It is reassuring thus to be told by Kon herself that in the dramatic conflict portrayed between Dr. Lim and Dr. Sun Yat Sen—or of their respective advocates and followers—sides, as such, are avoided so as not to mislead. In the spirit of narrative storytelling, truth to character does override truth to historic reality. Some may see this as odd, even paradoxical, but we do

need to make such allowances if we are to enjoy the tale without being constantly interrupted by remembrances of historic realities.

As we go through the book we realise yet another dimension; again related to our author. Kon is essentially a writer of drama, which is to say, she is best when capturing and rendering conflict, especially conflict through dialogue. It does not come as a surprise to any reader who knows Kon’s dramatic scripts that, so frequently, it is the “voices” of the characters which make the book entertaining and readable. Whether these voices are plain colloquialisms or direct imitations of received/accepted pronunciations and tonalities, they do give the characters a richness which otherwise would not be present. Take for instance, these lines which open the narrative:

“So this is Singapore city, boy!” said Boon Jin’s uncle. “Very big, very modern! You have nothing like this in old China, eh?”

Boon Jin and his uncle stood on the deck of a P & O liner. Uncle waved across the harbour, at a skyline of white domes and spires and columns rising against green masses of jungle. “Nothing like China, eh?” Uncle repeated again.

“No Uncle,” Boon Jin replied politely. He remembered the huge foreign buildings in Amoy city, where he had gone to school.

Didn't his uncle realise that China was rapidly entering the new age? But he listened respectfully to his elder relative, as a Confucian student should do.

"You will have to get used to modern ways Boon Jin!" his uncle continued. He looked at Boon Jin's hair, tied in a long tail down his back. "You're still wearing your queue, so old-fashioned! My son and his friends at the Anglo-Chinese School have all cut their hair in the Western style."

"I shall certainly do as you say Uncle, if my father approves," Boon Jin said.¹

This somewhat dramatic opening scene of the book actually helps readers understand that what is going to follow will mostly be some kind of working out, some kind of balancing of perspective between the old ways and the new ways, between the older generation and the younger generation, between life in China and life in Singapore. Boon Jin is caught right in the centre of this potentially explosive situation. As he grows up and experiences more and more of the life in modern Singapore, he harks back to the old ways of living he knew in old China. History does not always repeat itself, despite claims to the contrary. What it often does is to help shape the present and future, if the major players so choose. *The Scholar and the*

Dragon quite exquisitely explores the many choices that we are either given or create for ourselves as we move places, homes, feelings and loyalties. As in the book so in our time now, people confront difficult decisions almost on a daily basis, wondering how they should act and respond, what would the consequences be if a wrong choice is made, a wrong decision taken.

Values and attitudes go beyond the individual, leaving the individual sometimes in quite dire straits, torn between commitment and loyalty. Our hero Boon Jin is shown to be in such situations a lot of the time and as he makes his choices and takes decisions, so his life changes, frequently transforming his orientations, to the surprise (on a few occasions, shock!) of those around him. The gifted storyteller (and Kon is certainly one such) knows how to cleverly weave the inherent contradictions of a changing society to convey deep, inlaid emotions that do not seem to want to go away. Individual conduct is measured against the conduct of the collective which forms the community in which the individual must live if he or she wants to flourish. We are living witnesses to these undercurrents of change as contemporary Singapore goes into the throes of trying to become a vital, global city. A hundred years or so ago, the likes of Boon Jin contended with the major shapers of history, the likes of Lim Boon Keng or Sun Yat Sen. These two men were giants in and of their time and one of the more intriguing aspects of our book is the way in which Kon deals

with the obvious disagreements between these historically large figures. Dr. Lim Boon Keng, obviously the more westernised, was perhaps less given to revolutionary fervour than Dr. Sun Yat Sen, whose passion for homeland China in the end resulted in the Revolution of 1911 and set China on the path to progress and modernity. The debates surrounding the tremendous influence of these two men will, no doubt, continue and much might be revealed as time passes; but there is no gainsaying the fact that between them, these men determined the destiny of most of the overseas Chinese of their time. Both men were deeply admired for their knowledge and understanding of human beings, both had huge numbers of followers, both displayed extraordinary capacities for leadership and both left large legacies. It is to our author's credit that when we close the book we move away with deep impressions of and about these larger-than-life characters.

And so where does this leave our understanding, perhaps even our realisation, of the book's title: *The Scholar and the Dragon*? Who is the one and who the other? Or are we to appreciate that the book defies such simple (even simplistic) categorisations? Boon Jin's uncle's trusted employee belongs to an underworld gang which calls itself by some variant of the Dragon's name. My own sense is that while it is clear that the "scholar" appellation might easily be applied to someone like Boon Jin, the "dragon" appellation is more of a "tease".

If I am right, the "dragon" image/metaphor is multi-layered (the "scholar" image/metaphor is not): and hence the term "dragon" may be used to describe men of multiple capabilities. From this perspective, several of the characters in the book may be termed "dragons" without too much inaccuracy or fault. However, the label "scholar" has to be much more judiciously applied because it conveys and stresses the qualities of knowledge, understanding and wisdom. It is Boon Jin who is constantly thinking about his classical education with its overlay of Confucian thought and admonitions and it is he who is most conflicted in the book's narrative. As readers will observe, every chapter of the book begins with an epigraph, some sagely saying which is, supposedly, known to all who belong to the Chinese culture. Of course, it is also to be stressed that unlike China, the modern city of Singapore (even a hundred years ago) was already diverse with many British, Malays, Indians and Eurasians living side by side with the majority Chinese. Chapter Twelve of the book contains the following epigraph:

Man from his beginning was virtuous,
 Later corrupted by evil influence.
 By studying the Classic Books
 Inborn morality may be restored.²

The lines, the author tells us, are attributed to Lu Xiang

Shan of the 16th century. I did some research and found that the name is chiefly linked to a neo-Confucian philosopher of the twelfth century but whose ideas were forgotten for a long time till championed by another scholar-philosopher in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. So we do have to be cautious as we try to negotiate our way between and among the varied philosophies presented throughout the book we are reading. Lu attempted to be “universal”, offering humanity a way of looking at itself so as to become better, more civilised and more developed as moral, sentient beings. Not everyone fully comprehends the finer aspects of such a doctrine but I am assuming most readers will know enough to follow the thinking behind the epigraph: that through the reading of good books we can become more moral. This standpoint is, naturally, provocative and we must leave it to each reader to decipher and decide whether the embedded meaning(s) hold in today’s perplexing world.

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And so I return to the book’s title once more. Boon Jin fights a long, often lonely struggle to reach somewhere, to become someone. His story is not atypical; many a newcomer, migrant, learns painfully how best to manoeuvre and make good. Ultimately life is a promise with several bids and it is

not always that the highest bid(der) wins. We see in the book how everyone seems to evolve, grow up, mature—and perhaps none more so than the alluring Quek Choo, the sister of the man who is at once both Boon Jin’s copy and also a kind of doppelganger. I shall leave readers to track and trace the fate and fortunes of this gifted young woman, growing up in a man’s world but shrewd enough to recognise the vanity and frailties of the male ego. As expected, the book does end with our hero marrying the indefinable Quek Choo (who herself states that she does not quite fit into any of the categories which the men around her try to define her with) Modern in her thinking and behaviour (to the point where both her brother and her husband-to-be seem bothered) and robust in her articulations, Quek Choo reminds me of the many heroines in Chinese literature who enter the dodgy worlds of men, in disguise, and assume control and authority. Quek Choo may be said to be an early representative of the “nonya”, the curious mix of Chinese and Malay which forms the ancestry of many illustrious Chinese families of modern Singapore—a kind of prototype for Kon’s later Emily. Quek Choo might well be the “dragon” in disguise, breathing both fire and water, uniting mind with body and spirit. The mysteries of the dragon sometimes can escape the profound searching of the scholar.

The Scholar and the Dragon is a book which, once we start

reading, seems very reluctant to have us put it down before finishing. It does have what many call the “power to involve” readers. Each reader will take away different possible “lessons” from it (remember I do call the author an “educator”) but in the end the majority of us will agree that here is a nice, good illustration of the way in which history can be turned into engaging fiction. For a generation that does not, apparently, want to have too much to do with history as a subject, such a book may well offer the means to enter a period which laid the seeds of current nationhood.

Dr. Kirpal Singh, 2011

NOTES:

1. Stella Kon, *The Scholar and the Dragon*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2011, p. 1.
2. Ibid, p. 219.

THE SCHOLAR
AND THE DRAGON

The historical events of this period are fully described in Dr. Yen Ching-Hwang's book *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution*. This novel follows history very closely. However the names of several prominent Singaporeans who appear in it have been changed. For example, the house which I have called "Tintagel" is really the Sun Yat Sen Villa at Balestier Road, and Boon Jin, his friends and family are fictitious. Dr. Lim Boon Keng, the author's great-grandfather, is a real person who towered over his generation as he towers over this book.

—*Stella Kon*

1

On the sixtieth anniversary of the Wenguang Chinese Academy, all concerned with the institution wish to pay tribute to their founder Mr. Tan Boon Jin, the well-known Singapore philanthropist and educator.

Mr. Tan was born in China in 1890 and came to Singapore at an early age. He devoted much of the proceeds of his successful business ventures to the cause of Chinese and English education in Singapore. For many years he also contributed a regular column to local Chinese newspapers. His essays and other writings have helped to shape public opinion among the Overseas Chinese.

—*Commemorative volume of the sixtieth anniversary of Wenguang Chinese Academy, Singapore, 1980*

The migrant bird longs for the old wood
The fish in the tank thinks of its native pool.

—*Dao Chien, about 400 A.D.*

“SO THIS IS Singapore city, boy!” said Boon Jin’s uncle. “Very big, very modern! You have nothing like this in old China, eh?”

Boon Jin and his uncle stood on the deck of a P & O liner. Uncle waved across the harbour, at a skyline of white domes and spires and columns rising against green masses of jungle. “Nothing like China, eh?” Uncle repeated again.

“No Uncle,” Boon Jin replied politely. He remembered the huge foreign buildings in Amoy city, where he had gone to school. Didn’t his uncle realise that China was rapidly entering the new age? But he listened respectfully to his elder relative, as a Confucian student should do.

“You will have to get used to modern ways Boon Jin!” his uncle continued. He looked at Boon Jin’s hair, tied in a long tail down his back. “You’re still wearing your queue, so old-fashioned! My son and his friends at the Anglo-Chinese

School have all cut their hair in the Western style.”

“I shall certainly do as you say Uncle, if my father approves,” Boon Jin said. This reply was a little too clever, because Boon Jin’s father was extremely old-fashioned. He was descended from thirty generations of Confucian scholars, and you couldn’t get any more old-fashioned than that. Any suggestion of queue-cutting would have infuriated him.

Uncle knew this perfectly well. He blew out his cheeks and pursed his lips. “Boon Jin, in his letter to me, your father says that you are wild and disobedient at home; you have displeased him, and grieved your mother. You have run with bad company, and spoiled your chances of getting a good government job. He has sent you to me so that you can learn something useful, and perhaps reform your way of life.”

Uncle said this in his loud voice, not caring if anyone overheard his criticisms. Boon Jin listened, screwing up his eyes against the sun, staring at the bright city of Singapore.

It was the third of February, 1906. To Tan Boon Jin it was the second day of the second month in the thirty-first year of the Emperor Guang Xu. Boon Jin was sixteen years old. The only world he knew was the China shaped by Confucius, which the Chinese Emperors had ruled for three thousand years. He had no idea that six years from that day, the last of the Emperors would fall from his Dragon Throne.

Boon Jin only knew that it looked as though this strange

Southern Ocean country was going to be no better for him than China. However during the past weeks he had heard so many lectures on his bad character, that when Uncle stopped talking he could make the correct reply in soft tones.

“I have made grave mistakes, because of youth and ignorance. With a fortunate opportunity before me, I hope to amend.”

Uncle seemed satisfied with this. He talked jovially as he led Boon Jin to a small boat. They were rowed through the harbour, which was crowded with many steam ships and sailing ships, European craft and Asian. They approached a large white terminal building jutting out into the sea; they clambered out of the boat, across a space of green water, and climbed up slippery steps to the pier. So Tan Boon Jin set foot in Singapore for the first time.

Boon Jin looked round as he mounted the steps, excited to be stepping onto foreign land, though he showed nothing on his face. There was a long shadowy hall, crowded with men of many races in exotic costumes. The strangest thing to Boon Jin was that the colours of their faces varied so much, some dark and some very pale. Their languages hummed around him as he followed Uncle through the crowds.

Beyond the pier Uncle’s carriage waited, drawn by two stringy horses. Their driver was a dark-skinned man in a white tunic.

“Get in, get in. We’ll go to the house,” Uncle said. The car-

riage, after standing in the sun, was a hot leather-stinking oven. The shades were pulled down against the glare. Boon Jin could see little, and with his uncle watching he was not going to peer about. He sat back and listened to the sounds of wheels clattering and voices shouting. The hot air was thick with smells, of horse dung and human waste and river mud, and spices sizzling in oil.

The carriage stopped for a while; Boon Jin saw that it was beckoned on its way, by a tall dark man wearing a turban above a Western-style uniform.

“Is that a British soldier?” he asked.

“That’s not a soldier; he belongs to the Englishmen’s Police Force,” Uncle replied.

“They have police? They have laws and justice here?” Boon Jin asked. He knew that this country was ruled by the British; it had not occurred to him that they would have set up a civilised structure of government, with magistrates and law and order. But his Uncle misunderstood why he asked the question.

“Listen, boy. Even though this land is beyond the Chinese Emperor’s rule, don’t think there is no law and order here. You must behave better than you did at home. You got into trouble with the police in Amoy! You should have been thrown into jail for running about with those rebellious students. You were lucky you were not arrested. You would have been a disgrace to your family and your father would have disowned you. Instead

of disowning you, he has been so good to you! He has found you this opportunity to come to a new country, which is under a different law than the Emperor’s, so that you can make a fresh start here. You should be most grateful to your father, Boon Jin, instead of thinking of being disobedient.”

Boon Jin listened quietly as Uncle continued like this for most of the drive. Uncle’s tirade was less impressive than the lectures that Boon Jin got from his father, full of quotations and classical allusions so that he felt as though thirty generations of Chinese scholars were all criticising him together.

• • •

Uncle lived in a row of rich merchants’ houses in Neil Road. You can see those houses still, if Urban Renewal hasn’t got them yet, with steps going up from the road to the two carved wooden door-leaves, over-hung by a little skirt of green roof-tiles. There are flower-patterned tiles halfway up the walls, and phoenixes moulded in plaster on the frontage; the tall windows are closed by long shutters with hinged wooden louvres; when they are open, they are protected by elaborately-carved wooden railings. The houses go three storeys up, and a long way back, ventilated by open airwells.

The house was not so very different from houses in Kim Chiam town, near Boon Jin’s home in China. But the people

were different, when Uncle introduced him to the ladies of the house. His mother had coached him, before he left home, who his relatives were and how he should address them. There was First Aunt who was this Uncle's wife, and Second and Third Aunts; an older, formidable one was the Eldest Great-Aunt. There was also a girl of about fourteen who stared at Boon Jin boldly. Boon Jin's sisters of the same age would have died of shyness, if they had been allowed to meet a strange man.

They all wore batik sarongs and lace kebayas, which seemed totally foreign to Boon Jin. Their feet were not bound. "How are you, my great-nephew?" Eldest Great-Aunt greeted Boon Jin kindly and he had a shock to see that her mouth seemed to be full of blood; she was chewing what he later knew as betel-nut.

Boon Jin spoke to the older women. He used literary language to make the formal compliments. "Honourable Great-Aunt, First Aunt, Second Aunt, Third Aunt. My estimable parents convey their felicitations and compliments through their unworthy son. My honoured father regrets his deprivation of your august company. Grieving for this separation, he invokes heaven: may you have auspicious fortune, prosperous affairs and a harmonious household: all felicity and amity attend you!"

The formal speech seemed to impress the ladies and Uncle nodded with satisfaction. Then they actually introduced the girl. "Boon Jin, this is your little cousin Poh Nam!"

"How are you? Did you have a good journey?" she said cheekily.

"The celestial winds were auspicious and benevolent," Boon Jin replied. She giggled, as though he had said something funny.

One of the Aunts showed Boon Jin to the room which he would share with his cousin, Hock Joo. He started unpacking his belongings, thinking about what he had seen of this Singapore family. The first thing he had noticed was the way they spoke. His own family at home spoke Hokkien dialect in the way of educated people, with many literary words and phrases. But the people in his Uncle's household spoke like ignorant people; they used simple, rough words which only servants and peasants used at home, and other words which weren't Chinese at all.

"Hullo!" A young man about his own age came in. He wore European clothes, leather shoes, Western hair-cut. "Boon Jin?" he asked, and added something Boon Jin did not understand.

"Good evening," Boon Jin said cautiously.

"I said, I am Hock Joo, your cousin. Don't you speak English? You're a real China-simpleton, aren't you?"

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance," Boon Jin said politely.

"You do talk funny!" Hock Joo laughed. Behind him his sister Poh Nam peeped round the door and giggled loudly.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance," she mocked. "Why

do you use such queer old-fashioned words? You're like an old monk, a temple beggar!" She gabbled something to her brother.

Boon Jin kept quiet, hiding his anger and his contempt for their ignorance. He said to himself, that he must always remember to speak to his cousins in the way he spoke to servants and peasants at home.

A midday meal was served. The food was oily and spicy. The old ladies ate with their fingers and the younger people ate with Western instruments. Conversation was mostly in Malay and English. Boon Jin's cousins ignored him, but the eldest Great-Aunt spoke to him in good Hokkien, asking the usual things about how his parents were, how things were at home.

"My honoured parents are very well," Boon Jin replied.

"Does your father still supervise his business at the weaving shop?"

"My honoured father is occupied with his literary work. He has little time to attend to business," Boon Jin answered. This was not entirely true. The cotton-weaving workshop was doing badly, and Boon Jin's father had little to do there. But he spent his leisure time in the town, not at his writing desk.

"Your father is a government official, isn't he?"

"My father was an assistant to the local Magistrate; but he retired when my eldest brother passed his government examinations and was appointed as a primary school headmaster."

"And your older sisters are married? So you are the youngest

child! Your parents love you very much, eh? It must be difficult for your father to allow you to travel so far away from home. You should be grateful to him."

"Yes." Boon Jin looked down at the gaudy tiles. He never liked it when he was told that he should be very thankful to his father; and he felt guilty at resenting it.

Later Uncle brought Boon Jin to the centre of the family business, on the bank of the black, stenchy Singapore River. It was a large warehouse filled with tall piles of bulging sacks; amidst which were a battered desk, a shelf of ledgers, a clerk reading a newspaper, and a cat nursing two kittens.

"This is our warehouse where goods are stored. You are to start working here to keep the account books. You have not done such work before? You do not know how to keep the books? That's how much your fine education is worth then! Well we will not expect so much of you for a start. You will have to learn. Chua will teach you. Chua is my compradore. Chua, this is my young nephew, a scholar from the old country, come to learn how we make our living here!"

The man Chua was a typical Straits Chinese. He wore Western clothes in thick white cotton. His grey hair was cropped short. Through thick-lensed horn-rimmed spectacles he glanced sidelong at Boon Jin, and nodded and beamed at Uncle.

"A scholar, a scholar. Can he write characters? Of course he

writes characters. He will write letters for your office. He will be most valuable to you.”

“He is to learn to keep the books and handle the accounts,” Uncle said.

“He will keep the books. He will handle the accounts. He will learn all the business! Perhaps he will take over the business one day, eh? Perhaps he will be the Master here one day!”

“Maybe, maybe,” Uncle said, with a shrug and a smile.

• • •

Towards evening Uncle’s household grew very excited. The whole family, old ladies included, got into carriages which drove into town and parked along the seafront Esplanade. Boon Jin gathered that they were going to watch a grand procession which had been organised in honour of a visiting British Prince: Arthur Connaught, Queen Victoria’s third son.

As dark fell, brass band music approached. Large glowing lanterns came bobbing through the dusk, accompanied by men carrying flaming torches. On each lantern were painted portraits of Westerners: the Prime Minister of Britain and his senior ministers. Then with thudding drums and clashing cymbals came dancing dragons, twisting and turning all over the street. There were more lanterns and three pretty little girls dressed in splendid Chinese costume, their open carriage

decked with flowers and with the yellow dragon flag of the Emperor of China.

There was a brass band belonging to the Chinese Volunteer Company in quasi-military uniforms; there were representatives of many Straits Chinese clubs and social organisations.

Boon Jin was amazed to see his cousin Hock Joo marching along among a group of youths, with his face painted black, wearing a straw hat and a striped blazer. He grinned and waved to his family. He was strumming a banjo and playing Dixieland. “That’s Hock Joo’s band,” said an aunt proudly, “the Brighton Minstrels.”

Boon Jin, new in Singapore, did not understand just what he was seeing: the Straits Chinese of the British Crown Colony of Singapore, demonstrating their loyalties along with their sense of themselves as a community with its own identity. They brought their great procession, mixing Western and Chinese cultures, to greet Prince Arthur Connaught, whose brother ruled the British Empire. Those pictures of Cabinet Ministers which led the procession represented the Parliament of Britain. They were symbols of democracy.

Walking in the middle of the procession, heading the Straits Chinese British Association, was a man in good Western clothes with a little black beard. Though less than forty, he walked with the self-assurance of a man well-respected by others. “Dr. Lim Boon Keng,” Uncle told Boon Jin, as though everyone should

know who Lim Boon Keng was.

Everyone in Singapore did know. Lim Boon Keng was the foremost leader of the Straits Chinese. He was carrying an engraved silver box, and when they reached Government House he would make a welcoming speech to Prince Arthur, and present him with the casket on behalf of all the Straits Chinese. It must have been he who devised those lanterns, which were a salute to Britain and to democracy.

Thus Boon Jin witnessed the harmonious meeting of different cultures and loyalties. The day when British influence would be thrown off was decades in the future. Much nearer in time was the day when the Nanyang Chinese would haul down the yellow dragon flag for ceremonial burning. The aristocratic Chinese consul in his Mandarin robes, now among the honoured guests at Government House, would find himself hiding in terror from bloodthirsty mobs. The Old China he represented—the world into which Boon Jin had been born—would be completely swept away.

2

Three basic relationships:
 obligations of princes,
 obligations of subjects,
 obligations between men.

Observing these produces
 father-son harmony,
 husband-wife accord.

—*The Trimetrical Classic*

IN THE YEAR 1276 A.D. an ancestor of Boon Jin's had been the Emperor's Chief Minister. Ever since then the Tan family had been among the scholar-gentlemen who helped to rule China. In each generation the sons studied the classics, passed the government examinations, and took jobs as government officials. Each was expected to serve the Emperor and bring honour to the Tan family.

When he was very small Boon Jin thought the Emperor in Peking was the same Emperor that his ancestor had served.

His mother laughed when he asked about this and told him, “This Emperor is called Guang Xu. He is twenty-five years old, and he became the Emperor when he was a small boy like you. His wise aunt, the Empress Dowager, helped him to rule. When he sat on the Imperial Throne she stayed close by behind a screen, and instructed him how to rule.”

Boon Jin liked to think about the young Emperor as a boy like himself, in the big palace in Peking.

When he was a little older he was brought to his father in the writing room called the Jade Study and formally presented with his own writing brush and book, inkstone and ink: the “Four Treasures” of a Confucian scholar. He knelt before an altar, holding a stick of incense in his chubby hands, and made reverences to the Emperor, to Confucius and to his famous ancestor.

“You must study hard,” his father told him. “You must pass the examinations so that you can go to Peking and see the Emperor, and perhaps he will make you Chief Minister like your great ancestor.”

After this Boon Jin began studying the classic texts. He had lessons in the Jade Study with his brother Boon Huat, to get ready one day to take the government examination.

There were three sets of examinations. If one passed the first set of district examinations one went up to the provincial capital at Foochow; if one passed the provincial examinations,

one went to Peking, and the ten top scholars from the Peking examinations submitted essays to be read by the Emperor himself. At each stage of the examinations, nine out of ten students would be eliminated and only one would go on; the higher he went, the higher official position and honour he would receive.

Boon Jin’s great-grandfather had been one of those who succeeded at provincial level. When he came back triumphantly from Foochow, the governor of Amoy sponsored a big banquet in his honour. He was given a study allowance, and clothes and travelling expenses for his journey to take the next set of examinations in Peking. But he was not successful in Peking; he tried again every three years till he had failed eight times, and finally gave up and accepted a government position in Amoy.

Boon Jin was sure that his Eldest Brother would do at least as well as Great-Grandfather. Boon Jin heard Boon Huat discussing literary themes with their teacher, quoting the poets and improvising new verses. Boon Jin thought he must be the most brilliant student in the country.

Most of what Boon Huat discussed with the tutor was far over Boon Jin’s head, but he heard one phrase repeated many times—“Eight-Legged Essay”. He just about knew what an essay was. He imagined an important-looking scroll covered with flourishing calligraphy: it was stretched out flat like a ta-

ble, and had four stout legs on each side like the legs of a table.

He asked his father about it. His father, who usually did not pay much attention to small children, was pleased with the question and happy to explain at some length.

Briefly, there was this literary essay which had to be written exactly according to a prescribed pattern. It was divided into eight paragraphs; the paragraphs were called “legs”, just like “feet” in European verse.

There had to be two introductory paragraphs, the first one with two sentences and the second with three; then two central paragraphs on the main theme, then two sets of original verses—one short and one long—and two concluding paragraphs. The form was as strict as that, and what mattered was not what you said but how beautifully you said it. Good literary style and deep knowledge of the poets were what examiners wanted. Original thinking was not in demand.

Boon Jin’s father explained the form of the Eight-Legged Essay and wanted his son to try it out. Boon Jin was too young for this, and the day ended with Father losing patience and cracking Boon Jin’s hands with the heavy ruler.

That night Boon Jin dreamt he was being chased by an Eight-Legged Essay. The silk scroll was covered with black and vermilion characters: it was spread out like a table, it capered after Boon Jin on carved wooden legs and chased him along endless corridors. The black and red characters got up and

waved thick little arms, shouting, “Naughty boy! Stupid boy!”

So Boon Jin was very interested when one day his father came into the Jade Study shouting, “Kang Yu Wei has abolished the Eight-Legged Essay!”

“What! It can’t be!” the tutor said unbelievably.

“That wily bastard has poisoned the Emperor’s mind,” said Father, who under stress used language unfit for a Confucian scholar. “Look at the Imperial decree. No more Eight-Legged Essay in government examinations, and a parcel of other so-called “Reforms”—government administration reorganised and turned upside down, devilish railroads and factories to be built—no end to those damned modernisations!”

“How could Old Buddha allow it?” said the tutor. Old Buddha was the Empress Dowager, the young Emperor’s aunt who had ruled for him when he was small.

“What can she do to stop him? Since the Emperor came of age and started ruling for himself, he packed the Old Ancestor off into retirement, and now this devil Kang Yu Wei is his adviser, his teacher, his corrupting influence!”

Boon Jin was frightened by his father’s angry voice—he knew that one must always speak of the Emperor with the greatest respect. He crept off to his mother and whined, “Mother—Father is so angry, Father is scolding the Emperor!”

“You shouldn’t be listening to Father’s talk,” his mother said automatically. She thought it over and added, “I have told you

that the Emperor is young, a boy. He had some bad friends who made him do things that he shouldn't do. A boy should not have naughty friends, he shouldn't mix with bad company, do you hear that Boon Jin?"

This attempt to modernise China was the Reform of 1898. It is also known as the Hundred Days' Reform, because unfortunately it only lasted that long. After about three months the Empress Dowager, the strong-willed former concubine of the previous Emperor, gathered her supporters and seized power again. She arrested the Emperor's friends, locked him into his palace, and gave out an Imperial Edict that the Emperor was sick and she was Regent again. Politicians switched loyalties or lost their lives. The Reforms of Kang Yu Wei were thrown out.

The Empress Dowager was back in the driver's seat and meant to stay there. She kept her nephew under house arrest for the next ten years; said he was obviously too immature to rule for himself and she had to rule in his stead.

She didn't manage to catch Kang Yu Wei; he got away, minutes ahead of the head-choppers, and escaped to Japan. And students went back to writing Eight-Legged Essays for the examinations.

Boon Jin's mother, remembering that he had shown unseemly interest in grown-up politics, took care to explain to him that the Emperor had been a naughty boy who disobeyed his elders: now the Empress Dowager, his wise old Aunt, had

properly disciplined him, and she had set everything right.

Boon Jin went on with his young life. He remembered Kang Yu Wei's name: he thought that if Kang wanted to abolish the Eight-Legged Essay, he must be quite a good fellow after all.

. . .

Every day Boon Jin and his brother spent hours in the Jade Study, practising calligraphy, studying the Classic Books with their tutor, who was one of their father's cousins. Above them hung a large black and gold board, with four big characters on it. The great Chief Minister himself had written them there, and his calligraphy had then been carved and gilded: "Classic study, bright light".

Sometimes their father came in, more often he was out playing mahjong. Gambling is not recommended by Confucius, but Father played every day for high stakes, with his crony the local Magistrate. Father was an excellent scholar however. He could happily have sat down for a drinking party with Po Chu-I in the ninth century. They would have composed instant verses for each other, swapped beautiful specimens of calligraphy, and quoted the same Confucian classics, without much communication difficulty. The culture in which Boon Jin was being trained went back a very long way.

When Boon Jin was ten years old the trouble called the Boxer Rebellion swept China; but Kim Chiam district stayed peaceful. Boon Jin only understood that “bad rebels” were making trouble. His elders were completely confident that law and order would prevail. China had always known rebellions, rebellions had always been suppressed, and the age-old rule of the Emperors would continue.

True enough, after a couple of years the Boxer Rebellion was put down and the Empress Dowager, who had had to flee from Peking, was back on her Regent’s throne. But she had received some nasty shocks, and she began to realise that China had to modernise. Over the next few years, she started to introduce many of the changes Kang Yu Wei’s Reformers had wanted. Naturally, she presented them as her own ideas.

The changes in the educational system upset Boon Jin’s family a lot. First the requirements for the government examinations were changed; the famous Eight-Legged Essay was scrapped again and replaced by something called “Current Affairs”. A couple of years later, the whole system of government examinations was closed down.

Boon Huat was preparing for the government examinations the year that the examination syllabus was changed. “What’s Current Affairs?” he asked worriedly. “What textbooks do we use? Where do we get the model essays to learn by heart?” He had to read newspapers carefully, and Father was disgusted:

“Newspapers! Trash! Time-wasting rubbish, not fit for a scholar! Full of articles written in atrocious style, on subjects that change from day to day!”

Boon Huat did not do well in the examinations. He was given only a small post as a teacher in a local school. Father decided that Boon Jin should start going to the Geok Pin Academy in Amoy, which prepared students for the government examinations. He insisted that Boon Jin continue to write Eight-Legged Essays with the family tutor at home. But when the government examination system was dismantled, Father really thought it was the end of the world that his family of scholars had lived in for so many generations. There was no more hope that any of his sons would earn a high government position like the revered ancestor. In this despairing mood, he sent Boon Jin off to try to improve his fortunes in the Nan-yang.

There were other reasons too, why Boon Jin was sent away from home. Before we go back to Uncle’s house in Neil Road, more must be said about the two years that Boon Jin spent in school in Amoy.

• • •

One day Boon Jin told the Aunt whom he lived with in Amoy, “Auntie, I’ll be back late today, I’m going to our

study-group meeting.” He did not tell his Aunt that it wasn’t schoolwork they were studying.

After classes Boon Jin hurried to the hillside where the students were gathering. Below the hill he could see the big natural harbour which made Amoy Island, at the mouth of the Pearl River, the big market and jumping-off point for South Fukien. In the middle of the harbour among the shipping was the little island of Kulangsu. Nearer the school he could see the dockyards, thronged with Chinese labourers; among them flashed the white of Western sailors.

A boy called Teochew Hoon stood next to Boon Jin. “Look at the soldiers,” he said, pointing. A line of little red figures with rifles on their shoulders marched along the docks and tramped onto one of the steamships. “Damned foreigners,” muttered Teochew Hoon, and “Behaving as though they own the whole country,” grumbled Boon Jin. Saying bitter things about foreigners was fashionable among the students.

“What is the meeting for?” Hoon asked. “Has something special happened?”

“Something happened in Shanghai,” Boon Jin replied. “I heard that someone committed suicide...I don’t know why.”

“Fellow students!” an older student shouted, getting up onto a fence, waving a newspaper. “We have asked you to come to hear about the heroic sacrifice of a Chinese martyr! His name is Feng Xia Wei, a man who lived in the Philippine Islands.

He was angered by the American law that forbids Chinese to enter America. The American attitude is an insult to the dignity of our country. Feng could not tolerate their insolent behaviour. In front of the American Consul’s house in Shanghai, this hero Feng took his own life as a mark of protest.”

“Ahh,” went up a sigh from the students.

“Feng left behind a letter, which he addressed to all Chinese citizens, all his dear countrymen, the sons of Han! He urges us to join the boycott against buying American goods. Remember the blood of Feng Xia Wei!” The students listened to Feng Xia Wei’s letter being read out. They groaned with sorrow for Feng and roared with rage against the foreigners.

The Americans in Shanghai probably thought the fellow must be a madman, not a martyr, to cut his own throat for nothing; he was just crazy, to think he could hurt his enemies by killing himself. Maybe modern Singaporeans can understand, without entirely sympathising. But those Amoy students were emotionally moved and inspired when they heard about it. They resolved to aid the boycott. Brushes and paint were brought; Boon Jin and others with good calligraphy wrote slogans that they all suggested onto big posters.

“Don’t buy American goods”, “Struggle against foreign insults”, “Expel foreign intruders” and getting very daring, one long blue banner that said “Exhort Qing to expel foreign invaders”.

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