

Chapter Two

1. Study Overseas

The traffic was frightening—the masses of people and the busy machines, streetcars and automobiles—moving aggressively in an endless stream. Unvarying pedestrians were bumped into, even on the sidewalk, by other people. To the swimming eyes of the young man from Taiwan, they seemed not so much to be walking but trotting. He wondered why so many people in Tokyo were busy.

On the way to the capital, he had stopped in Kyoto, where a friend of his lived. The people, streets, and sights of Kyoto, though pleasing and delicate, made sure that you went away knowing just how long the city's fragrant culture had been nurtured. Taiming loved Kyoto, the ancient capital. The people were too kind, down to the bus attendants, boarding-house girls, waiters at cafeterias, and department store salesclerks, all of whom behaved as though they were well educated. To Taiming, the poise of the city's young women was the greatest surprise.

"A wonderful country and a wonderful people!" This impression quickened his pulse.

Tokyo lacked peace. Even so, exhausting though the crowd

was, the people were generous. Every stranger whom Taiming asked for directions—and he did this more than once—responded knowledgeably and politely, never using the contemptuous tone that he would have heard in Taiwan, and the country bumpkin arrived safely at the lodgings of a certain Lan. This former classmate of Taiming's had been expelled from normal school just a few months before his graduation, regarding a trifle about which he had ended up clashing with one of the professors. Lan eventually came to see this as an opportunity to study in Japan. His dream being the usual one of becoming a lawyer or a high-ranking bureaucrat, he entered the law department at Meiji University.

In normal school, Taiming had always argued with Lan. A passionate person, Lan was fond of taking extreme positions on just about everything, whereas Taiming was something of a centrist on everything, so they never tired of debating each other. Although their worldviews differed, their rivalry united them. By chance, they sometimes agreed, but they had taken different paths and arrived there by different means.

As soon as Taiming arrived in Tokyo, his feet automatically took him toward Lan's lodgings.

Conveniently, Lan happened to be home, even though they had hardly maintained a correspondence—indeed, it could not be termed as such. But when they were reunited, it was as though they had parted only the day before. Lan, who had arrived just recently himself, nonetheless decided to act as Taiming's big brother.

"You think your ideas will go over here? I'm telling you, Hu, Taiwan is hicksville. Be prepared to start all over again. As a freshman."

Taiming did not mind this at all, but when his friend added, "By the way, I advise you not to tell anyone you're from Taiwan. They say our Japanese sounds like Kyushu dialect, so tell them you're from Fukuoka or Kumamoto," he felt as though obscene words had been whispered to him.

This suggested deception was a low blow to Taiming. His discomfort only increased at dinnertime when Lan introduced him to the young servant girl at the establishment who brought in the dishes and asked, not unexpectedly, "So where are you from?"

"Same as me—Fukuoka," came Lan's response like lightning. Taiming thus became an accomplice to Lan's lie, which now, painfully, extended to the accomplice himself. His cheeks reddened with shame. He would have liked to correct his friend but, considering his feelings, could not. The young servant girl stayed and served; Taiming ate silently, annoyed. He felt a chasm opening between him and Lan, not at all like the familiar one that had existed between them ever since they had become friends.

Lan, a good friend in most regards, readily allowed Taiming to stay with him while the newcomer sought lodgings. There were no rooms left at Lan's place, an inconvenience that Taiming did not regret, as he did not want to live with Lan's lie and, from the outset, had intended to identify himself as Taiwanese.

That evening, Taiming made himself comfortable and wrote a letter to his grandfather telling him of his safe arrival. When he was finished, he felt an urge to write to Naito Hisako, about whom he had not heard since she was transferred, but hesitated because of his less happy memories of her. To begin with, Hisako was nobody to him now. Why write to a stranger? Maintaining silence would be more natural. After this self-examination, he put down his writing brush. Then Ruie came to mind. He now sincerely appreciated her affection for him, but he didn't write to her either. The only way open to him now was to acquire knowledge; he had to break away from his past and work hard.

That night, in Lan's room, two pillows lay side by side. Despite the new gap between them, in Taiming's view, their reminiscences brightened the night. It was only at dawn that the reunited classmates slept a bit.

The next day, with Lan's help, Taiming began his search. He was fortunate enough to find a room only two days later, at the house of an army officer's widow, whose daughter and young son did nothing to disrupt the military atmosphere of order and calm. Taiming immediately signed the lease and moved in the next day. He had not concealed his ethnicity. But the widow showed no trace of prejudice or reservation.

As soon as he unpacked his suitcases, Taiming started studying furiously. Soon he also enrolled at a preparatory school, his goal being to enter a physics department, an uncommon aspiration for a student from Taiwan. Other than occasional visits from Lan, no callers disturbed Taiming. His environment was ideal. The family left him almost entirely to himself—almost, because the daughter, Tsuruko, looked after him in a most inconspicuous manner, watering the otherwise dry expanse of his everyday life.

On Sundays, when he was tired of physics, he lay idle, the notes being played on a koto waiting up from downstairs. The gracious, peaceful melodies resembled Tsuruko's beauty and modesty. Taiming listened absently and thought about Naito Hisako until he stumbled on the more bitter memories, which made him recoil, twist, and roll as though an old wound had been poked open. He scolded himself for seeking solace from a young woman who was even prettier than Naito Hisako and apparently far more sophisticated.

"No women! Study, study."

When Lan came by, it was to argue this or that as vigorously as ever. Once, however, he brought over a particular group's magazine, called *Taiwan Youth*, and recommended that Taiming join the staff. Flipping through it later, Taiming found all the articles to have an overly political tone. Their youthful vigor, particularly, was meant to drag the reader into a whirlwind of enthusiasm that he didn't think he could join.

Although he understood why young Taiwanese might be attracted to politics, Taiming thought he had a cause, too: the pursuit of knowledge.

If all youths plunged into politics and neglected knowledge, how thin the soil of Taiwanese learning would be! As Instructor Zeng had said, not only politics but also art and philosophy and science and business, all important fields, awaited the young. He, Taiming, would march unhesitatingly as a student of science, paying no attention to the political noise. That was the theory, but he was not comfortable with it. If, as Lan had once vigorously argued with him, the primary task was to eliminate the political restrictions placed on young Taiwanese, then politics, indeed, seemed to be the path that they had to take. Which was more important? It was usually at this point that Taiming's thoughts grew confused and entered a large maze.

Meanwhile, he refused Lan's insistent invitations to join the magazine's staff. He was sorry, but he had to study for exams.

Several months later, when Taiming entered a school of physics as its first Taiwanese student, Lan came to congratulate him, without forgetting to bring along a friend named Zhan. That it was the night of a happy day did not discourage the recruiting efforts of the activists, who tried out a variety of arguments on Taiming. Zhan, a sharp critic blessed with formidable powers of intuition, started by recounting the contradictions of Japanese-Taiwanese coeducation, going as far as to cite the co-opting mechanism with which the Han dynasty had neutralized the aristocracy's opposition. He went on to contend, with considerable clarity, that the adoption of regional limits, which regulated Taiwan's sugar-refining industry, was merely an excuse to prevent the natives from making money. In those days, "regional limits," which supposedly protected the sugar refiners by banning the sale to Company A of sugarcane produced in Company B's region, gave an unfair advantage to one of them and led to uncompetitive pricing. Combined with the three-year crop rotation system

ordered by the Edict for the South, the policy had cornered the Taiwanese, most of whose capital had been invested in the land. Taiming knew little about economics and did not fully understand what Zhan was saying, but he sensed the immensity of the contradictions. It certainly was irrational, but what could he do?

"It's knowledge that matters to me." This was Taiming's usual refuge. Irritated by his indecisiveness, Lan and his friend left angrily. The celebration was suddenly and unhappily over. Feeling empty, Taiming lay down on the tatami and thought about the hopeless abyss that separated him from Lan and others. Compared with their single-minded passion, his was perhaps a greed for peace. Underneath his feeling of emptiness stirred another, a dull self-hatred.

2. Flowers of a Strange Land

A new season began for Taiming, the comfortable one of formal study, of deliberate study. The room that he left so messy in the morning was always clean by the time he came home. From the alcove came the fresh fragrance of that day's arranged flowers. Tsuruko's gentleness spoke in this way, and he heard her.

His studies benefited from her unassuming presence which, like her flowers, colored and stimulated his life. Satisfied, he did not take any further action. His daily life was complete and full of hope.

Tsuruko's mother, the mistress of the house, was an understanding and considerate woman. Worried that Taiming did nothing but study, she suggested one day, "Hu-san, shouldn't you take better care of your body? Why not put aside your books for a moment, and take a walk—with Tsuruko?"

Such candor stunned Taiming, who had been raised according to Confucian customs. He thanked the widow in his heart but could not bring himself to do such a thing.

But one fall day, when the widow suggested that the three of them go to admire the autumn leaves in Tama, he did not offer an

excuse. That day's impressions were to become indelible. Covering entire mountains, the leaves were burning scarlet, endlessly enflaming one another. Taiming, who had grown up on Taiwan where it was always summer, at first thought they were flowers.

He nurtured an illusion of his companion: "She is the true Japanese autumn!" He was intoxicated. It was not as though he had exchanged meaningful words with Tsuruko. Still, the moment when her beautiful profile mimicked the scarlet of the flames that dripped on her was forever imprinted on the film of his soul.

Although the trip seemed like only a few days ago, it already was gray winter. Momentarily weary of projectile motion, Taiming was walking alone through a park when he ran into Lan. They had not seen each other since their awkward parting.

Not one to dwell on the past, Lan spoke first: "So how are you? Still a bookworm?" Seizing Taiming by the shoulder, he added, "Haven't seen you in a while. How about tea?"

In a nearby café, without being asked, Lan recounted the ups and downs of *Taiwan Youth*. It was currently facing a budgetary challenge.

"Oh yes," he seemed to have just remembered, "I'm going to an interesting place today. You ought to come." A lecture sponsored by the Academic Association of China did not particularly appeal to Taiming, but he was rather curious and so accepted. In the first place, disappointing a friend he had not seen for so long would have been most inconsiderate.

The lecture had not begun yet. The hall was full of clusters of youths who talked quickly in Mandarin, the Chinese spoken in Beijing. All the young men must have arranged beforehand to pomade their long hair down to the last strand and to polish their shoes to the point of wearing them out. They all looked alike—lanky, pallid, and somehow unhealthy.

Lan approached one of the groups and greeted the youths familiarly in Mandarin. They greeted him in return. Taiming felt

that he should introduce himself, too, but because he was not confident about his Mandarin, the words that he uttered were in the Chinese spoken in Taiwan.

"Ah, you're from Guangdong," one of the students said, mistaking him for a southern Chinese. "Allow me to introduce you to your compatriots." He came back with several: Liu was from Mei Xian, Di from Yangcheng, while Huang was a Jiaoling man, and so on. Taiming managed, albeit awkwardly, to introduce himself in turn. He did not say he was from Taiwan.

The lecture began. A very important person from China who happened to be in Japan hurled accusations from behind the podium. They concerned nation building and Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People—ethnic unity, democracy, and welfare—but Taiming, whose grasp of Mandarin was weak, did not find himself moved in the least. The rest of the audience was captivated and willingly repeated the slogans that the sponsor stood up to call out when the lecture was over. "For a new China!" "Down with militarism!" "Down with imperialism!" These, which Taiming understood, rang in his ears during the reception, a race in which students, Lan and Zhan among them, rushed to give their name cards and show their faces to all the important persons.

Lan approached Taiming and advised, "Don't miss your chance; go introduce yourself."

"No," he answered, not moving, "I'll pass." His attitude seemed to annoy Lan.

After the reception reached its climax, the important persons began to leave one by one, but the students, whose excitement had nowhere to go, remained standing around. They confessed their dreams to one another and complained about this and that.

Out of the blue, one of the young men strode briskly to the corner where Taiming sat alone.

"Hi, I'm Chen, nice to meet you. I'm a graduate of Waseda University and I'm also from Guangdong—Fanyu to be precise."

So sincere and unreserved was his manner that it rubbed off on Taiming. "Actually, I'm from Taiwan. My name is Hu Taiming and" (Chen's face changed color) "I guess I'm here to study physics."

With a different kind of frankness, Chen spat out, "Huh? Taiwan?" He sneered in disgust and, with obvious contempt, quickly strode away.

The news rippled forth—murmurs of "He's Taiwanese" and "He might be a spy." A heavy silence fell on the lecture hall, which was more than Taiming could bear. He stood up and silently sneaked out. Filled with hurt and anger, he stomped homeward. The streets were almost empty.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps behind him. A rough hand seized him by the shoulder and spun him around. It was Lan.

"Are you a fool?" Lan cried. "Don't you know what Taiwanese have been doing in Amoy? With Japan's backing?"

Taiming glared silently at Lan's face.

"Tyrol! Lan cursed and turned around. "Tyrol" was what the minister Fanzeng had called Xiangyu to his face two thousand years ago, to say that the lord was too stupid to work with. Curiously, this pejorative did not anger Taiming. Rather, it made him feel lonely, empty; again he felt the insurmountable distance between Lan's and his passions.

And that was it. Lan never came to see Taiming anymore, and Taiming did not seek out Lan. They did not see each other again until after the physicist had returned, diploma in hand, to Taiwan.

3. Homeland

Leaning on the balustrade, Taiming saw the port town of Chiling emerge from its perennial light mist. The shower, which looked like smoke wrapping the harbor, sometimes suddenly stopped, revealing the pier of the Hermit's Cave, which the ship eventually

rounded to glide into the inner bay. The faint bump on the horizon must have been Mount Chiling. The view of his homeland, especially the harbor, brought back to him the figure of Ruie—of Hisako, now an old memory—no less cherished. He saw Tsuruko under the scarlet leaves still on the trees in Tama, and her mother, a widow. Once, he had gone cherry-blossom viewing with the daughter alone, but the pink that enveloped the path was now as distant as that burning red. Tsuruko's profile lived on vividly with the leaves and the blossoms, but it was no more than the afterimage of a moment of youth, Taiming's youth, which seemed to be as ephemeral as the dream of flowers.

"My homeland . . ." He was surprised that everyone moved so slowly. Strangely disillusioned, he weaved his way through the throng of coolies.

Little by little as the train made its way south, the joy of coming home overtook him. How shyly the trees along the tracks welcomed him! By the time the carriage jolted to a stop at a lonely country station bathed in the morning sun, he was bursting with he knew not what.

Preceded by Ah-San and Ah-Si, who had come to pick him up, Taiming ducked through the gate to the enchanted yard and stepped into a barrage of firecrackers that continued for a maddeningly long time. As usual, the welcome overstepped the proper bounds.

"Fools! But am I even worth it?" Checked by this anxious thought, Taiming almost dreaded the festival that inevitably would follow.

His grandfather and all the rest were in good health. Although Taiming had assumed so, he could not be sure. So that was good to know.

Another, longer, volley of firecrackers awaited Hu Taiming at the public hall. Grandpa burned incense sticks and reported reverently to the ancestors.

"Study in Japan," Opium Tong said as though to himself. He continued, gradually raising his voice in what turned out to be a speech:

"Not one man has studied there in the entire history of our village. The exception, of course, is among us this evening. It is not an easy business, this studying overseas. The difficulty is fourfold.

"First, a wise son must be born.

"Second, and this is no less important, the son must also be decisive.

"Third, his father must be a man of property.

"Fourth, the father must be well educated as well. Money is not enough.

"And that is why Taiming's feat brings the highest honor to the Hu clan. What we inherited from our ancestors—the love of study, no, the determination to learn—that, ladies and gentlemen, is what has borne the fruit we enjoy today."

Taiming blushed and bent his head as the flatterers took their turn.

"District headman isn't what I'd call bad, but I say chief of police," Ah-San mused.

"Nonsense," countered Ah-Si. "What matters most to me is experience. First he should get a taste of field duty. Head detective."

In the brilliant light of the large red candles, which weighed two pounds each and lighted the hall's interior almost as brightly as the sun did the exterior, Taiming did not get a moment of respite from relatives, friends, and village dignitaries. The elderly women, forming a kind of chorus, regarded him with religious fervor, their throats emitting bizarre noises: "E-e-ooh, e-e-ooh." These absurd old wives, this chorus too, Taiming politely entertained. He was getting tired, but, just as an inchoate cry was rising in him, suddenly a band of musicians sauntered in, playing Taiwanese melodies, courtesy of the village dignitaries.

More firecrackers were set off. The spectators who crowded the courtyard pressed close to hear the free music. In the hall, the band was cheered loudly for playing favorites like "Maiden Liu" and "Puzzle Ring." But when a *kokyu* fiddle sounded the first sensual note of a mountain song, everybody fell blissfully silent. Uncle Xu Xin, an elder, insisted that the band play "Tea Picking," a very old number. To his great satisfaction, it was received ecstatically by the men, women, and children. But for the young girls at the windows, it was not the music but Taiming's face that they were interested in.

The feast, which had been scheduled for three o'clock, did not begin until six. Saké was passed around. The musicians ceased to interest the revelers, who now preferred their own voices. Ah-San sang a mountain song to the accompaniment of Ah-Si's whistling. In one corner, the young ones were busily engaged in kung fu matches. This persuaded Taiming's former classmates, who were not so young, to do the same in another corner. Relatives from the countryside were shocked by this, but the choruses of old women looked on with obvious delight.

Taiming's father and mother and brother were in high spirits, too. Hu Wenqing insisted on repeating that two of his three wishes—that his father reach the age of seventy, his son complete his studies, and this last person also marry—had been granted.

That night, exhausted by the feast and glad to be back, Taiming forgot everything and slept soundly.

4. Hopeless People

From the next day on, Taiming hunted for a job, with the help of various acquaintances. A little walking taught him that it was not going to be easy, and his aspirations shrank with every step he took. At last, he decided that he was prepared to settle on a high school teaching post. There was none. But surely he could not go

back to teaching at an elementary school! He would have been lucky if he could: in order to accommodate the numerous normal school graduates like Taiming, the public schools were having to retire old-timers. Many normal school alums had been glad to be hired as associate instructors. Banks and firms, meanwhile, were too busy tightening their operations to interview anybody. Sick and tired, Taiming sank into a gloomy despair.

Seeing him like this, the same people who had had such nebulous but high hopes for him decided that he was a disappointment. In the streets, some of them went out of their way to ask him innocently, "Taiming, share your plans with us—when are you going to become an official?" The venom of their sarcasm hurt him, but the subtle changes he sensed in others were equally painful. He lamented his fate. He had fallen into a hole.

One afternoon, he received a surprise visit from Lan and Zhan. Although neither Lan nor Taiming had forgotten their last encounter, they chatted as though they had missed each other, which was not so far from the truth. Lan and Zhan did not say so, but they seemed to be tired of political activism. A certain impatience was visible on their faces which nevertheless still bore a trace of beligerent youth ready to suffer any and all vicissitudes.

In fact, after the greetings, the first thing Zhan said, casually, was: "Hu, have you stopped dreaming?" When Taiming did not answer, Zhan went on derisively, "What's gotten hold of your mind is the moral principle of the mean. You don't seem to understand that this 'mean' makes you exactly that, in the sense of 'vulgar.' Well, you'll see some day."

It was Lan's turn next, and he raised his hand—along with the bag that it held—to emphasize his sarcasm. "So you're tired of looking for a job, eh? Poor you. Those sweet dreams—of rainbow colors!—all gone. Sure, they might have put up signs, *billboards*, 'seeking employees.' The lucky fools who get to hang them—and the unlucky fools who envy them! How many do you think there

are—I mean the lucky fools on our island paradise? Not many, and you think it's because they're talented? Oh, if you don't believe me, meet the fellows who've become district chiefs and section heads!"

Their objective was clear: to make Taiming give up and join their camp. Try as he might, though, Taiming could not see it Lan's way. The activists were obviously dissatisfied by his continuing hesitation, but they did not berate him as they had earlier.

"Well, think about it" was what they said before they left.

The next day, Taiming received an even less expected visit from an officer of the local police. Apparently, Lan and Zhan were wanted men, and the officer, who had been ordered to track their movements, asked for Taiming's cooperation. Taiming sent him away with not incorrect but ambiguous information. Here was another cause for a headache, and he felt an urge to sit down with his grandfather for a long chat. When he was upset, listening to Grandpa usually helped. When was the last time? Ah, so that was it.

Grandfather cited numerous sayings and classical examples to explain how difficult it was to become a bureaucrat. One had to wait at least three years to work for the state, it had always been said. As usual, Grandfather was a sensitive sympathizer, and his stories had a curious way of loosening the knots in Taiming's heart, but in the modern world, was waiting such a good idea?

As though Taiming's idleness were not enough, another misfortune befell the Hu clan: Opium Tong's son Zhida quit the police force. His sudden return to the village provided an excellent gossip item for the talkative. The news that spread from mouth to mouth was "Another Hu fired."

One day, as the first "fired" Hu was strolling along the dike, he overheard an exchange between two women who were doing their laundry in the shade of a tree.

"Now that he's fired," the first said, "no one will pour saké for him. We won't even give him water."

The other examined the shirt she was washing. "Did I tell you," she asked rhetorically, "he didn't return my mother's hello—his aunt's, you know."

"That Zhida, now that he's lost his sword . . ."

Zhida—who also had not been fired—was particularly disliked, but the resentment seemed to extend to authority in general. Taiming left. Former civil servants tended to be discussed in a special way.

For a few weeks, Zhida did not step out of his house, not even to see Taiming's grandfather. Then, unbeknown to his relatives, he disappeared as suddenly as he had returned.

When he reappeared, it was in crisp new clothes and as the most joyful man at the Hus' New Year congregation. He now was a prosperous lawyer's interpreter. In those days, lawyers were feared like gods, and so were their interpreters. At the public hall, Zhida lectured about the law, citing an array of verdicts, just as though the clan had assembled to listen to him, and in fact, the ignorant villagers were thoroughly impressed. Zhida was elated that the time was already ripe for a great idea he had in mind.

The next day, he gathered around him the heads of some of the branch families. The gist of his idea was that the ancestral rituals that the clan had so far entrusted to one family, Taiming's, be divided up and conducted separately by all the families. Putting a single person in charge placed a heavy financial burden on his family and invited corruption. The responsibility therefore should be shared, with each family conducting in its own name a designated portion of the rituals. Since this would mean that the land providing the funds also would be distributed, the representatives of the less fortunate families enthusiastically endorsed Zhida's plan. The others did not oppose it. Each family head volunteered to give ten yen to Zhida so that he could look into the legal aspects of this matter. They also agreed that Zhida was mature enough to shoulder some of the responsibilities.

A week later, Grandfather Hu received in the mail a document from Zhida requesting that the ritual responsibilities be shared by the heads of all the families: their signatures appeared at the bottom of the document. Grandfather Hu, who was only nominally in charge of the business, handed over the document to the real manager, his son Hu Wenqing, who went pale with cold fury. "It's the end of the world!" he cried.

Hu Wenqing had no idea how to respond to this unexpected tactic and sought the advice of his son, who was so well educated. But Taiming knew nothing about the law. He commented instead from what he considered common sense, that there was no reason to oppose what the majority requested, since the activities were meant to be communal. This answer did not satisfy Hu Wenqing. To break up the rituals would be sacrilege; what was at stake was not just the honor of the Hus but also their well-being. Taiming disagreed: the rituals were threatening to degenerate into mere form, and to cling to formalities, that is, to follow the letter and not the spirit, was a worse offense to their illustrious ancestors. The spirit or the letter? Father and son brought the question they could not settle to Grandfather Hu.

He was surprisingly calm about the whole matter. His simple answer was that the incident meant only that the manager's agent could not resolve such disagreements, which in turn meant that he, the nominal manager, lacked virtue. The request that he step down was opportune. He asked Taiming to summon the representatives, all fourteen of them.

They came. The patriarch began the meeting by rising gravely. He spoke with great candor to his fourteen nephews:

"When my father came to Taiwan, he had to lay the foundations.

"Many of his nights and days were indescribably difficult. Helped by my father-in-law, he left the Hus a fortune, an immense fortune. My brothers and I didn't keep up their good work but sat

on the fortune and slowly spent it down. I have many regrets but don't know how to make amends—to my forefathers, that is.

"To you, I apologize that I lack the virtue to manage even the remaining trifle. I am to blame for the trouble you have had lately."

The representatives, who had been preparing for a nasty fight, were chastened by the old man's words. Not even an awkward cough was heard. Some of the coconspirators already were ashamed that they had had anything to do with Zhida. The silence was broken by Opium Tong, who did not know that his son had originated the plan. Springing from his chair, he ridiculed the idea of dividing up land yielding a mere 150 bushels, as though he had not cosigned the letter. He could not understand why his fellow cousins were scrambling for just a little more than ten bushels each. Fine, you could consider the matter on the level of the four major branches: still, it would be no more than seven and a half each. What were they trying to do, heap more dishonor on their ancestors?

The others began to fidget. At this point Taiming's brother, Zhigang, burst out with the truth: "Come on, none of you wants this! No one thinks Grandfather is lacking in virtue! So far I've kept out of this, but I can't stand it any more. It's all Zhida's doing, isn't it?"

Opium Tong was dumbfounded. As he scanned the others' faces, his puzzlement turned into shame and anger. "That Zhida! I'll teach him this time!" With those words, he hurried home.

Opium Tong's scolding had no effect, and Zhida's cunning won out in the end. Far from repenting for his abuse of legal knowledge, he threatened to sue his cosignatories for breach of contract. Terrified by Zhida's confident claim that "they'll pay for it, five hundred yen each," they relented, one by one, until all of them had once again agreed to share the responsibilities. Opium Tong, who had stormed out so angrily that day, was the first to go

over to his son's side. When the supportive father thought about selling his portion of the spoils, which he assessed at a full year's worth of opium, he could not help offering to his son his skills of persuasion.

That was how the partition came about.

A ritual was held to notify the ancestors. Although the practices had been dwindling in scale for some time and were now little more than formalities, their virtual abolition, the cessation of that which had been handed down from generation to generation, cast a grave air over the patriarch and his nephews as they advanced to the altar to burn the five fragrant incenses. Grandfather Hu apologized to the ancestors that he lacked virtue; his tone was so pathetic that the others shuddered, too late. As he stepped back from the altar, he began to stagger. The representatives helped him out of the public hall. "It's all because of Zhida!" lamented Opium Tong, castigating his son at this late hour in a futile attempt to cheer up the sorrowing elder.

This tragedy of naive folk who had fallen prey to the plot of an upstart was gleefully discussed by the entire village. "The Hus have no partners left for the martial arts they've inherited, so they're sparing with the ancestors themselves." The misfortune that the gossipers found grandly entertaining, however, afflicted them as well. Emboldened by his victory against his own clan, Zhida took it upon himself to look into the sort of disputes that used to be settled by the village arbitrator. Every case that Zhida succeeded in bringing to court diminished the arbitrator's influence, and every dispute added to the coffers of the prominent lawyer and his wily interpreter.

Meanwhile, Taiming's grandfather was failing rapidly and stopped accepting invitations from other families. The Hu family had had absolute faith in the old man's goodwill and his principle that one must not let any circumstances cloud the spirit of compromise, so his decline cast a long shadow across the faces of the

Hu, both young and old. Although the elder tried to give the impression that he had calmly carried out the will of the majority, the partition had dealt him a heavy blow. When one day, out of carelessness, he caught a cold and took to his bed, the illness consumed him at an alarming rate. This time, there was no demon to defy.

Watched over by his close relatives, Taiming's grandfather breathed his last only a week after he took to his bed. His death left a hole in Taiming. To the very end, his grandfather was a warm, capacious man.

5. Ah-Yu's Sorrows

Taiming's days of unemployment lasted longer than the period of mourning. Worse, there now was talk of dividing up the Hu house itself. Taiming did not like the tradition of branching and argued that whatever there was to be inherited should be donated, say, to public works. But his mother, Ah-Cha, was not of the same mind and tried to teach her son the importance of money. She also insisted on the importance of branching out before her husband's mistress had any more sons. The mistress, Ah-Yu, wanted the matter to be settled while Hu Wenging was still alive and functioning. He had aged suddenly after his father's death, and everyone was nervous. Taiming's brother Zhigang also was pushing for the partition, and Ah-San and Ah-Si had installed themselves as his advisers.

In this swirl of interests, it was Ah-Yu's position that touched Taiming the most. If his father died, Ah-Yu would be helpless. She feared that Zhigang's greed might be given full rein and that he would not be beneath keeping everything for himself. Since she was a concubine and her sons illegitimate, she would not stand a chance. Given that she might have to live on the street with her two children, it was understandable that she wanted Hu Weng-

ing to settle the matter. Taiming pitied her and realized that he alone opposed the branching and was attracting animosity from all quarters. He finally gave in when Ah-Yu, in tears, pleaded with him. Although there was something ridiculous about her crying, the tears came from a simple heart that wanted life at all costs. The bloodless, formulaic idealism that he had been bandying about was utterly powerless before her frantic efforts to make her life secure. Taiming longed to be liberated from the whole troublesome business. He stayed out of the negotiations.

While they were being carried out, Zhigang argued that since Taiming had used the family's money for his education, the eldest son's portion, which customarily was large, should be even larger to compensate. His mother, Ah-Cha, to whom Taiming had entrusted his interests, would not listen to such nonsense. Opium Tong, Ah-San, and Ah-Si reasoned with her every evening for two weeks until she finally relented. The settlement was decided as follows: land worth 500 bushels as the traditional portion of the eldest son; land worth 250 bushels each as a pension for the father and the mother; with the remainder to be divided equally among Zhigang, Taiming, and Ah-Yu's two sons. Taiming opposed treating Ah-Yu's illegitimate children as half persons, but he was not so compassionate as to insist. After all, his own lot was at stake.

Relatives—Ah-Cha, Ah-Yu, and Zhigang's wife—sent them gifts for the happy occasion. Friends came to congratulate the birth of the three new households. Hu Wenging now moved officially into the back wing, formerly Ah-Yu's quarters and now the property of her sons. Zhigang took the left wing. He had schemed to gain access to his mother's pension, but she, not listening to him, took her daughter to move in with Taiming, who occupied the right wing. He was happy with the arrangement because it reminded him of his Tokyo days. Above all, it was a relief that they were done. He spent most of his time hiding in his study.

One afternoon, out on a long walk, he strolled toward the village café, a lone hut by a path that went straight through spacious rice paddies. By the entrance swayed a few red lotus blossoms: one of the places in hell is so cold, they say, that one's skin cracks and bleeds like these "flowers of toil." On a long bamboo bench by the flowers, peasants and young people were chatting. Seeing Taiming, they stood up to greet "Master Hu," the new landowner. They used to call him "Sir teacher," which he preferred.

The proprietress of the establishment, which served something that looked like grass, for two *sen* a bowl, begged the master to have a taste of this specialty. Oh, for him, she would not even charge the giveaway price of a mere fiftieth of a yen! Though neither hungry nor tempted, Taiming could not refuse. Observing her face fearfully to see whether she sensed his distaste, he took a mouthful. It was delicious. "When in the country, do what the country folk do," the peasants murmured in amusement. In those days, no man of standing would touch such foods. Taiming's unassuming ways endeared him to them.

"Master Hu, do you know why the ridge between your paddies is crumbling?" asked one of the peasants suddenly. Taiming knew that he could not mean this literally, since it had not rained for a while. Detecting an instance of that allegorical style of speaking of which these folk were so fond, he replied:

"I honestly don't know."

The peasant grinned. "It's because you let yourself be pushed around! We're furious you do. Your brother's no good, but Opium Tong and the rest are worse. And that Zhida's been pulling strings again. Five hundred bushels for the eldest son? Never heard of such a thing! Look at Ah-San, now he's wearing Western clothes—that's what I call imitation. And I'm not making it up if I said he pocketed eight hundred yen from Zhigang and five hundred from your mother!"

The peasant continued to offer unsolicited information, but

Taiming was not angry that his brother had taken so much. What made him sad was that he himself was living on inherited money.

Choking on this unexpressed self-loathing, he left the café and continued down the path. The paddies were green. The seedlings were now several feet tall. Alarmed by Taiming's footsteps, the frogs playing on the path hopped for their lives into the paddies. Taiming remembered that when he was young, his brother used to bring him along on frog hunts. First, they bundled together some bamboo twigs. Then they went after the baby frogs, beat them to death, and tossed the pulp to the ducks. Such happy days. . . . Zhigang used to be such a wonderful big brother, so full of life, so ready to protect Taiming from whatever might happen. Was he the same man who was plotting to enrich himself?

These thoughts were crossing Taiming's mind when the braver frogs that were warily crawling back onto the path hopped back terrified. Taiming looked up and saw a man in baggy Western clothes that hung loosely on him like a traditional robe. It was Ah-San. The man seemed unable to wipe his smile off his face as he walked toward Taiming.

Unexpectedly overcome by a sudden fit of rage, blasted by waves of hatred, Taiming hardly heard the other's greeting. Violent anger shook him long after Ah-San's ridiculous attire was out of sight. It was not the meddling with the inheritance that Taiming resented. It was the idea that Ah-San had lived off the Hu family all his life and was going to do so for the rest of it, too.

6. Put Out

When the long spring rains ceased, the fragrance of the new tea leaves blended with the singing of the young women who were picking them. At night, the leaves poured their fresh scent into the country's thick, lively darkness, which moved with the Chinese

violin's languorous tunes. Although the season was sensuous and young, Taiming ignored it. Ensconced in his study, tormented by suspicions about life, he sought the help of Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus, even Kant and Hegel. None of them answered his questions, but he could not stop wandering aimlessly from book to book, from *idée* to *idée*, day after day.

One morning, for the first time in many months, he set out for the nearby town. The villagers he saw on the way seemed to have forgotten who he was. Their apparent lack of interest put him at ease.

He was annoyed that his shirt fit too loosely around his shoulders. He had lost weight. He examined the wares in the market and joined the flow on the street. The crowd was large enough to carry him along.

"Hu!" a voice called out from behind him. "Wait!"

It was Trainee Huang, Taiming's colleague at the public school. Huang caught up, shook Taiming's hand, looked into his face anxiously, and asked, "Six years? Seven?" He was not as much of a clown now; in fact, he almost looked like a gentleman.

The friends could hardly stand still in the relentless waves of people, so they took refuge in a soba shop that opened out onto the market square.

"For old times' sake!" Huang ordered "Duck with Black Mushroom" and "Assorted Sauced Vegetables" for the table. He was in a good mood. Every cup of saké added to the eloquence with which he recounted the past several years. Shortly after Taiming, he too had resigned from teaching to try managing a sugarcane farm. Always good with people, Huang had flourished, admittedly under the thumb of the sugar refiners who exercised a local monopoly. But it was yielding profits, his little farm!

They caught up on people and past events.

Then Huang realized with a start that he had forgotten something. Changing his tone of voice, he asked belatedly, "And what have you been up to lately, Hu?"

Taiming told him the unpleasant truth. After a pause, he asked jokingly, "Mr. Huang, would you like to hire me?"

"You? Under me?" Huang laughed nervously.

Two cups later, Taiming brought the matter up again.

"Hey, wait, wait—you can't be serious. You're kidding me, aren't you? You're going to say, 'Ha, look at you, you're so drunk on success that you think I'd work under you.'" But apparently Taiming was not kidding. "Actually—" Huang said, sobering up, "well, I just lost my accountant. You'd be doing me a big favor if you worked for me."

Taiming immediately made up his mind: "I owe you one."

"I'm glad you weren't kidding," Huang said. The way he grasped Taiming's hands, he seemed to mean it. Huang's friendly squeeze brought tears to Taiming's eyes. To cast away petty pride, to labor among farmhands—it seemed a wonderful thing. The darkness in him was already brightening. Both of them had drunk too much that afternoon, and it was on unsure feet that they promised to see each other very soon.

7. Livelihood

Hundreds of parallel lines of plowed red soil formed a regular, striped pattern as far as Taiming could see. On the horizon was the trailing end of the Central Mountain range; in the opposite direction, a shining white thread attached to a faint patch of blue. The distant ends of some of the furrows looked like clusters of moving dots, which as he drew closer, turned out to be female laborers with bamboo hats. An oxcart loaded with fertilizer clattered past Taiming. As big as the farm seemed, it measured little more than four kilometers on each side. Taiming's accounting tasks kept him busy for only an hour a day, so he spent most of his time walking around the farm and chatting with the female farmhands. Sometimes he helped the women sort and pick the

cane. He worked both his mind and body until they were thoroughly tired, for he had the nights to recuperate in his quarters at the edge of the farm. His depression was giving way to more positive thoughts and feelings, and he recovered rapidly.

Huang, who was busy dealing with the outside world, entrusted Taiming with the farm's day-to-day operation. There was much to do: planting, weeding, fertilizing, replotting. In just a few months, Taiming's complexion made him almost unrecognizable; it was as though his blood had finally turned red. Meanwhile, the women worked for starvation wages of only thirty or forty *sen* a day and ate sweet potatoes for lunch. Taiming, who was paid four or five times as much—forty-seven yen a month—ate his midday rice with pangs of guilt. He was the best-paid person on the farm. Once when, out of his own pocket, he bought pomegranates and persimmons to share with the women, their joy was such that he decided to go to the fruit store more often. It was humiliating that his salary was exactly the same as his teacher's salary, despite the intervening years of study, but the recession had also reduced the average pay of high school graduates to a mere twenty-seven yen a month.

The women liked him. They sought his advice on various, including personal matters, and he helped them as best he could.

One of the workers was in an advanced state of pregnancy. Somewhat older than the others, who called her "Aunt Xin," she was like a big sister to them. Taiming advised her to take some time off, but the next day she was still working in the fields. She couldn't afford to stop, as she earned her son's rice by the day. Taiming gave up and assigned her to light duty.

One night, Taiming's deep, healthy sleep was interrupted by female voices. He jumped out of bed. At the window were three faces screaming at him.

Aunt Xin was having a difficult delivery. Her three favorite protégées had come to him for carrots "to stop her bleeding."

Taiming rushed to Aunt Xin's room, which was close to his. Many neighbors were already crowding the entrance.

"Don't fall asleep!" somebody was yelling inside.

Men were not allowed to enter. Aunt Xin's husband and little boy were fretting outside. Taiming walked up to the wall, made of woven bamboo, and looked inside. The baby had been born safely, but its cries were muffled by shouts from the "midwife," whom Taiming recognized as one of the older workers, not a midwife at all. She was commanding, begging, the pale mother not to fall asleep. Unable to stand the sight, Taiming asked what was wrong. The would-be midwife answered that the afterbirth had not come out and that there was no carrot juice to stop the bleeding. According to a superstition, Aunt Xin would die if she fell asleep now. Taiming's common sense warned him that a bleeding woman should not be shaken this way, but he knew nothing about deliveries, either. What they needed was a doctor.

He ran to the nearby police box to phone the local doctor, who lived far away. Taiming stood for a long time with the receiver at his ear, but the ringing never stopped. He returned dejectedly to the farm.

The husband was now pacing back and forth like a madman, and the little boy was screaming for his mother. How they all carried on! Taiming caught himself feeling a sort of anger, almost a hatred, toward these people. When he had offered to fetch the doctor, the failing mother had turned to him to gasp out between breaths, "No! No men! I'd rather die." Alarmed by her strange admission, he had said to himself, "It might be too late, anyway." These stupid customs had taken the lives of countless mothers and babies. At least, if a real midwife were present, Aunt Xin might still be saved! But these people thought that midwives were for ladies; they believed that mere peasants had no right to ask for such fancy services. So instead, they played it by ear, and when there were complications, as there were now, they just agonized, clung all the

more ignorantly to superstition, and stubbornly rejected modern medicine. The people who died were simply unlucky; they had been dealt a bad hand. "What a silly game! What a silly game!" he kept repeating under his breath. Aunt Xin died.

That her bed of pleasure had become her deathbed Taiming blamed partly on himself, for he had never offered his learning to these people. These crazy ideas, the tragedy of ignorance, taught Taiming that education was not just for children but also for these unschooled adults whom he had advised but not taught. He had still been too much the schoolteacher to see that there was no reason that systematic learning should not take place outside the classroom.

Every day, during the lunch break, in the shade of a large tree, Taiming offered crash courses in arithmetic, Japanese, and basic medicine and hygiene. The women listened attentively to the enthusiastic young man who, to his own great surprise, had a knack for teaching grown-ups. He became immensely popular. He was overjoyed at being an educator, and they soaked up knowledge as sand does water. For Taiming, every day was fulfilling.

Life on the farm was not all good, however. Autumn was off-season, and the workers went away. Bored, Taiming decided to look into the overall management of the farm. Gradually he realized the extent to which Huang had been lying to him: far from making a profit, the farm was bleeding money. The minor drought that year, which his friend had said would not hurt the farm all that much, was making matters even worse. The question was, how could Huang have lied so easily?

The suspicious overseer put the question to his friend at the earliest opportunity. Huang responded with hearty laughter.

"You're certainly no businessman!" he said, his eyes twinkling. "Think like a schoolmaster and you won't have a chance in this world. Well, I'll tell you: the sugar refiners have helped me out with a little money that doesn't appear in the account books you

saw. Twenty thousand yen. I'll tell you something else: it's not just this farm. If you made all our loans public, we'd have to declare bankruptcy on the spot. As it is, we claim that we're making money. Of course, some farms do go under and never repay that little loan to the company, but the company doesn't even notice. In other words, suck on the company like a leech to win your daily bread and feed and school your kids—that's my philosophy."

"I see," Taiming said, half to himself, so that is how the world works. He regretted having nagged Huang to raise his wages.

When Taiming expressed his regret, Huang shrugged and said—this time his tone was "philosophical" as well—"I'll pay them while I can, that's all."

"When we ship the sugar," he went on, "we *will* make a few thousand—so it's not hopeless. I do feel sorry for the peasants, though: they work and work for their commission as though it'll make any difference! Unlike me, they don't have any real security, so sooner or later they'll fall behind. One accident or long illness and they're finished. How they swallow the sweet words—and die of sugar. . . . Anyway, I wish it had rained more! If all this doesn't work out, we'll have to start teaching again!"

He roared.

8. More Wandering

Hard reality was encroaching on the pastoral setting. Halfway through the autumn, a political group hosted a day of lectures downtown. Afterward, a couple of speakers had a minor dispute with the detective in attendance. Taiming did not go to the event, but in the days following the skirmish, he too sensed the tension in the air. An arbitrator by the name of Liu, who was no stranger to the farm, came to see him. A little over fifty, this finely dressed country gentleman confidently waved his white fan as he walked into Taiming's office.

"How are you, Mr. Hu? Ah, busy? So you missed the lectures, ah ha." That was his preface to a detailed account of the lectures and the ensuing tension downtown. "The night before the lectures, which the group was so insistent on holding, a detective dropped by my place to ask me a favor. Mr. Hu, he was grinning the whole time he asked me to make sure the townsfolk didn't express their welcome too enthusiastically. When the same group landed in Xin-zhu, the people there apparently celebrated with a huge demonstration—firecrackers and so on. The authorities didn't want such embarrassing exuberance to be on display again. False modesty aside, I have influence in this district, so the detective, knowing that I do, contacted me beforehand to see if I could give him a helping hand."

As Liu smugly continued, Taiming grew more and more annoyed by the middle-aged man's self-image: a mere observer who was also a man of the world and not above collaborating with the authorities. What struck Taiming about Liu's story was that one of the speakers had been Zhan and that he was still in town. But Zhan was just a friend of a friend, and Taiming did not feel a strong desire to see him. If it had been Lan, Taiming would have gone downtown, but he had heard that Lan was in jail.

"Some people are so reckless," Liu was saying, "like one person in the audience. The poor fool couldn't sit still; he stood up and cheered, against police regulations. Who do you think stood up? That hunchback who makes shoes in the street. Ha ha! Well, nothing happened to him then. But they were waiting for him the next day in his favorite soba shop, you know, the one he goes to so happily for lunch, leaving his tools outside. He'll have to be satisfied with less food for twenty-nine more days."

Taiming frowned. The cynicism he was objecting to was not that of the police. Although Liu looked like a gentleman, he was not, according to what the women on the farm had told Taiming. It was rumored that Liu had gotten his job by hanging around the police headquarters and running errands for the detective's

wife. Taiming was now beginning to believe that it was not only in sexual matters that the arbitrator's character was in doubt. The more he thought about Liu's crudeness, the worse it seemed. The man left a feeling of discomfort in him.

Could it be, then, that Lan and Zhan were heroes? For the first time, Taiming truly thought so. Full of energy, heedless of danger, above all firmly principled, they had an outlook that was not merely different from his but larger, higher. How pointless and contemptible his own life was, how like Liu's! The balance he was achieving on the farm returned to the same old tortuous questions. But they did not alter his day-to-day behavior: he continued to help Huang run the farm as his loyal right-hand man, and life went on, winter, the New Year, spring.

April was a time of reckoning. A disturbing piece of news reached Huang. Firmly convinced that the solution to the farm's problems was to expand its operations, he had requested several loans from the company, and his plan had worked in that the farm was still in business. When Huang said "the company," however, he meant the head of its agriculture section. The news was that he had been transferred back to Japan. As Huang feared, his replacement refused to lend him another yen. When Huang immediately contacted the former head, he was sympathetic but could not help. Only some time later did Huang learn that the decision had been handed down from higher up and that a mere section head, old or new, could do nothing about it. The company's conclusion was that the one-time schoolmaster did not have enough real estate to be asking for such loans.

That spring, Huang's farm lost more than six thousand yen. All that the two full months of concentrated work since the New Year had achieved was to meet the deadline; the harvest itself, due to the lack of rain on the high, arid land, was a mere 21,120 kilos per hectare. With the low price of rice having pushed that of sugarcane down to 43.6 yen, the loss per hectare amounted to a staggering 150 yen. Huang's unofficial debt to the company as of

now exceeded 25,000 yen, which only reinforced his belief that he didn't have enough land. He meant to ask the company for more loans so that he could buy ten more hectares. Now, however, that seemed unlikely, and the end seemed near.

Feeling sorry for Huang and eager to return the favor he had never forgotten, Taiming offered to put his inheritance at his friend's disposal. It would just be to tide him over.

"Thanks, Hu," Huang said, "I appreciate your kindness. But in the name of friendship, I'll turn down your offer." He was not afraid of taking risks, but he was not going to take a chance with his friend's fortune. Taiming pleaded with him, but his friend's steadfast refusal actually seemed to suggest something else as well.

Taiming finally understood and also saw that Huang was trying to make it clear that his friend had no choice. "I guess you don't want me around anymore," Taiming said. "Well, I wish you the best of luck."

Another turning point came as he packed up and set off. As he looked back at the farm, his friend's farm, his beloved pupils, the farmhands, were following him. At the station, they waved their handkerchiefs until his train became a tiny speck in the distance. Bracing himself on the window sill, he waved back at the receding mass of women, "the women I worked with," he thought, "who taught me to teach them." He was feeling incredibly sentimental.

By the time the women, the station, the farm, and the town had dropped below the horizon, the train was thundering into a field of tall, waving trees of Australian origin. The distant sparkling sea, which he glimpsed now and then, seemed to be racing against the train.

9. The Call of the Continent

According to her brother Taiming, Hu Qiuyun was no more than a child, but while he was away, she had been happily engaged to a

medical school graduate—a son of one of her father's friends—who intended to practice. The Hus were too busy preparing for her wedding to notice Taiming's arrival home.

The town geishas occupied the time and energy of Hu Zhigang, who argued with his wife when he was not neglecting her. Taiming did not feel strongly about his older brother's sudden need to sample women and to seek concubines; after all, Hu Zhigang was not the first man to use a comfortable inheritance for such antics. It was none of Taiming's business. Although he felt sorry for his sister-in-law, he did not consider making this known to his brother.

There was nobody to talk to in the village, so Taiming decided to dust his late grandfather's books. Sometimes, handling one of them pulled at the grandson's heart, and he then flipped through the book and read a page or two, then another, sometimes reading the whole thing in this unmethodical manner. Grandfather's spirit lived on in the pages. Gauging by the number of notes, his favorite had been, at least at one point in his life, Tao Yuanming. Guided by his grandfather's hand, as on that long-ago spring day, Taiming step by step reentered the world of the fifth-century poet and of classical verse and spent many hours there. Immersing himself in literature seemed to restore his balance. Irritating as it was that his parents—and sister—did not stop nagging him to find a wife, he had no difficulty ignoring them. The incident that disturbed his modest equilibrium was much more direct.

One day, shouting incoherently, Ah-Cha came running down the path from the hill. Construction workers were digging up a corner of the Hu graveyard. Fearing the ancestors' wrath, she had attempted womanishly, bodily, and futilely to stop the excavation. A muscular man, the supervisor, charged at her and hit her on the cheek. She argued with him, but he did not understand Taiwanese and hit her again. He seemed to be telling her, "Shut up!" Weeping like a banshee, she came scrambling down the path from the hill.

Sugarcane farming was spreading to Taiming's village. This crew was the vanguard.

Taiming flushed as he listened to his mother. When she started repeating herself, he interrupted her and rushed to the scene.

The supervisor snorted at his arguments. "I have a black belt in judo, so keep those hands off me," he recommended, though Taiming had not made any violent gestures. "Property? What do I care? Bring your complaints to the company and the three lawyers on our payroll! Ah, you want my name? Kiano's the name, remember it!" Further conversation was useless if the black belt was going to menace him in such a way. Taiming disliked violence.

He trudged home. So incessantly did Kiano's malicious comments haunt him that night that he had trouble falling asleep.

Sleep did not help him. His mother, meanwhile, was already resigned to the development. "Ah, we didn't need this," she said, but reluctantly ate eggs and somen noodles to defend against the encroaching ill luck.

Her son, schooled in the new ways, could not leave it there, however. He might bring the business to court, but when had Taiwanese won such cases? It was immaterial that his side was right. It did not improve his chances in the least. If his mother had been seriously wounded—only then would he have had a chance, but only to get Kitano jailed. The company, untouched, would quickly bail him out. In the first place, his mother had not been injured. The company's legal experts were undoubtedly experienced in maneuvering around the question of private property. Indeed, what counterattack would they not use? His thoughts were like salt in his wounds. His mother seemed to have escaped unscathed, and Taiming seemed to be the only one the incident had been able to hurt. Across the study flew the book he was reading, followed by the cry: "And Tao Yuanming doesn't help!" The questions that Taiming had pondered on and off since his earliest days, the questions that seemed to disappear when he could not answer

them, were in fact always there, submerged in his memory, lying there calmly, waiting to be stirred up by fresh information, new turbulence. He began to dream of a place where he might breathe more freely: across the sea a continent beckoned wildly.

Qiyun's wedding was approaching while Taiming fumed and dreamed. He had always advocated simplifying the marriage ceremony but gave in to his elders, as was customary. Qiyun's opulent dowry, gathered with much hustle and bustle, included a dresser with three mirrors and a drawer in the modern style that she preferred.

On the day of the ceremony, the long procession of her possessions reminded relatives, friends, and local notables that the family's past was illustrious and its present state not so squalid after all.

At the hall, Opium Tong, representing the Hu clan, received the guests, while Taiming offered them drinks. The arbitrator Uncle Xu Xin—the one who asked the musicians to play "Tea Picking"—was present in a brand-new robe, his crest tacked on. As the guest of honor, flanked by other notables, he sat at the head of the table and drank heavily.

"They're fools," Uncle Xu Xin remarked, launching on a bout of criticism, loudly as was his custom, "fools swept up by the times—of which they haven't the faintest ideal! Politics, society, nothing has changed. The terms for them have changed, oh yes, but they're no more than euphemisms for money. Things are the same as they were in the old days, but we were more direct then and said: 'Money talks.' Look at the lawyers, political movements, et cetera, of our days and times. Money is still justice, and I've known that for a dozen years. A schoolteacher is worth two thousand yen."

He paused and looked around triumphantly. Twirling his cup with one hand and stroking his goatee with all five fingers of the other, he continued, "You remember how I used to say what

a waste of money school was. You also remember how people called me an old dotard for thinking so. Well, I guess I was tragically ahead of the times. Some fools haven't understood that yet. The other day, Dr. Hu's madam took a beating. Try and see what two thousand yen can't do: I say much more than what ten wise men who've studied overseas will ever do. Did I say two thousand? Five hundred's enough to get a head coolie fired. If you leave it to me, three hundred!"

Because he was the arbitrator, his audience had to listen to him and suffer through the alcohol-fueled polemic. Opium Tong alone was smiling.

Uncle Xu Xin was not finished yet. "But Taiming, you know your place and I respect you for that. I'll tell you what happened to one of my relatives, who graduated from law school. When he returned, he was persuaded to become honorary mayor. The position brought in no more than thirty or forty yen a month, which didn't even cover his 'expenses'—which, in plain language, was entertaining allies and befriending enemies. How his parents cried. They were nearly bankrupt by the end of his first term. Having been mayor, he could hardly become just a judge, and working for a wage was out of the question. That accursed little sinecure will force him to go around with a bowl for the rest of his life. But some fools have done worse, I mean the ones who joined political movements. For a while, they had a good time traveling and lecturing, but most of them are now languishing in prison—like your friend Lan, who came to speak here a while ago, and that other fellow Zhan. But I always knew regular public schooling was all one needed."

With this reassertion of prescience, his long speech finally came to a close. More saki was drunk, and everybody had a chance to impose his weaknesses on others. Opium Tong might have been expected to say a word or two, but the recession had gotten to him, and lately he had been quite subdued. Ah-San and Ah-Si likewise limited their participation to nods and ayes. Ever since

they had fallen to the rank of day laborers, the duo had become self-effacing in the company of gentlefolk. The chief host, Taiming, disapproved of the silliness of it all but played his part.

Qiyun's change of address having proceeded smoothly, Taiming was left alone with his mother who now, more than ever before, wanted a daughter-in-law but most of the time kept such thoughts to herself, knowing how little her son appreciated them. Bored, she visited her daughter often. Her son-in-law had just opened his own clinic and was friendly enough. Sometimes she came back with her daughter and the nice young man. Taiming disliked doctors, those sellers of distilled water, just as much as he disliked tax collectors, those pinchers of money, but he was forced to change his views the longer he chatted, and chuckled, with his sister's husband.

The latter once observed, "It's illness I'm after, not money. If I live long enough, I'll get to help, let's say, ten thousand people. Brother, I'm not trying to make ten thousand yen. But if I do help ten thousand people, I'll have made ten thousand yen." He was clever but not the way quacks were.

His sister happily married, Taiming sighed and settled back into his solitary life, or tried to. How could his grandfather have immersed himself in Tao Yuanning and ignored all else? Taiming envied him and fervently wished to turn into an old man. Why couldn't spring and summer and autumn and winter—all the seasons—disappear? He was still too young to immerse himself in Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi; his youth exuded hopes and ideals and made his idle existence into a titanic punishment. Cruel Lao Zi, whose idealistic teachings did not cool his rhetoric, stern Confucius, who spoke of a way but did not show him where it lay—whichever way Taiming turned, he was walking on a path of thorns.

Another New Year arrived. Under the evening moon, the tangerines in the backyard looked plump. Taiming wandered like a sleepwalker into the orchard. The new branch that had grown where he

had snipped off one on another moonlit night bore a shining gold fruit much fuller than the preceding year's. He remembered and pondered the words he had spoken to the moon then.

His mother called to him. She said a man named Zeng had come to see him.

The rumor was that Instructor Zeng, who had given the overbearing Japanese faculty a lesson and resigned, had gone on to attend one of the imperial universities and was now living on the continent.

Taiming went in immediately, with surprise, awe, and expectation on his face. Zeng had returned to the island to attend his father's funeral. He now was a university professor in China, and what he said about the country, which he had been observing carefully from various angles, sent tremors of fascination through Taiming. Instructor Zeng had been an attractive fellow and an able conversationalist, whereas Professor Zeng was a man, seasoned, broad, and deep. For someone like Taiming, who lived in seclusion on a tiny island and never came into contact with great men, seeing Zeng face-to-face was a strain. The giant strongly recommended going to China. Taiming felt his youth course through his body and, for the first time in months, did not regret it.

Zeng soon left Taiwan, but about two months later, Taiming received a letter. He tore open the envelope, unfolded the letter with fumbling fingers, and devoured the words. No doubt thanks to Professor Zeng's recommendation, Taiming had been invited to teach mathematics at a Women's Exemplary National High School.

"His friendship was genuine!" He thought of Zeng with infinite gratitude and trust. Taiming's dream was coming true: nothing stood between him and the continent but the sea, and he was quite ready. It was about time he left Taiwan behind him.

The village absorbed good news as quickly as it had the bad. Taiming's presence emerged from communal oblivion and was in the spotlight once again.

"An invitation to teach at a vocational school is the modern equivalent of passing exams for interior service, a great honor," Taiming's father commented. Hu Wengqing felt he was being deprived of his son and secretly feared for him, too. But he hid his sorrow and anxiety because he knew his son's happiness was at stake.

Taiming was planning never to come back again. Full of joy, he packed his belongings and visited all his friends and relatives. As though he had been reborn, he reacquainted himself with his native land in order to bid it farewell.

It was his mother's idea that they visit the town temple to ask for divine assistance. To prepare, she fasted and carefully bathed. She was so eager that when the day arrived, she even put on shoes, which she rarely wore. They all were going to town: Hu Wengqing was in ceremonial attire; Ah-Yu, though no longer a young woman, still dressed like one; Zhigang had a new suit on; and his wife wore a *hakama* skirt that she believed to still be in fashion. Qiuyun and her doctor husband joined them, making a party of eight.

In the center of the temple, Taiming's mother knelt on a cushion and bowed reverently on her son's behalf while his father made the offerings and said a prayer. Taiming planted an incense stick and piously brought his palms together.

In the courtyard, his mother bought a sacred charm. "Very, very lucky," it said.

The doctor suggested that they have a group photo taken. By this time, no one believed that cameras stole souls.

The party proceeded to the best-known service in town. Photos were taken on the second floor, they were told; they should take off their shoes first. With Taiming at the head, the group filed upstairs. When Ah-Cha had straggled about halfway up, a male voice thundered deafeningly, "Stop, you chink!"

A young woman in a beautiful red puffed-bow obi came running after Ah-Cha. With a scornful movement of her chin, she indicated, "You! No shoes!"

Ah-Cha hastily took off her shoes, which she rarely wore. It was the first time she had entered a building where shoes were not permitted. Taiming blushed beet red. He was embarrassed and mortified that he had gone upstairs first and had not made sure his mother obeyed the Japanese custom. He also was furious that the man had yelled at her so loudly and angrily. Taiming wanted to cancel the picture taking, but his father insisted, arguing that canceling it would bring bad luck. Bowing to his father's feelings more than to his authority or the superstition, Taiming stood in the center and tried not to look sullen.

No one mentioned the incident as they walked home. Qinyun's husband chattered spiritedly; the shrewd doctor felt called upon to liven up the family. Taiming was the only one who remained silent all the way home. Mount Cigao was draped in dark gray clouds. It was going to rain.

Taiming was worried about his mother, but the doctor read his mind and offered to take her in. She had been wanting to live with her daughter, so she had no objection. Hu Wenqing had a mistress to look after him; if something happened, their elder son was there. The matter was settled that very day.

Taiming felt truly ready to go, possibly for good. His plan had been to see as many elders and older relatives as he could, to receive a lifetime's worth of advice, but the incident at the photo shop persuaded him to hurry. He decided to apply for his passport.

When he went to the district headquarters, a good-looking young policeman who stood guard bowed deeply to him. Taiming was taken aback; he must have been mistaken for someone else. But when the young officer addressed him as "Sensei," the face of a child surfaced from the depths of his memory and became the handsome one he was looking at now. The guard left his post to introduce his former teacher to the district headman.

Hearing the reason for his travel, the generous headman promised that the application process would be particularly quick.

Taiming thanked him. As he turned to leave, however, the headman said, "Allow me just one more question. You've been educated. Shouldn't young men like you stay in Taiwan and contribute to our island's culture? China isn't heaven, either—I hope you're aware of that." Taiwanese culture and youth: Taiming agreed to some extent and said so. But he had made up his mind. The headman nodded gravely.

The passport was issued with the promised haste, but Taiming still had to wait. The brave journey to the continent and to success should begin on one of those days that the traditional calendar called auspicious. When the lucky morning came, Taiming went to the temple to burn incense and to pray to his ancestors for help. Where the ceiling intersected with one of the walls there hung a frame that would have borne the word PROMOTION if some of the gold leaf had not peeled off, in such a time-worn manner that Taiming felt proud of his ancestry. In the patio, firecrackers were going off.

Inside, in the presence of all the Hus, Opium Tong assured him that his promotion to the bureaucracy guaranteed three generations' prosperity. Ah-San and Ah-Si congratulated Taiming and seemed to miss him already, more or less genuinely. Amid the magnificent send-off ceremony, attended by numerous relatives and dignitaries, Taiming realized that if he failed this time, he should die instead of return. That is, he had to be prepared never to come home again, whatever happened. As the firecrackers reached a crescendo, he silently started for the gate.

"Happy promotion! Happy promotion!" was the gauntlet of congratulation that he walked through.

At the gate, Opium Tong said, "Taiming, at the mouth of the Yangtze River, there's a mausoleum, our family's largest and richest. When you become an official, please visit it. It won't hurt your wallet."

The spring wind formed billows in the robe of his father, who stood proudly among the others, but his mother looked sad. As

Taiming walked toward the station, he stopped time and again to catch a glimpse of his house one last time. He felt in his heart that he would like to put up another frame like the one in the hall.

His brother Zhigang, his sister Qiuyun, and her doctor husband accompanied him to Chitung, the misty port where it lightly rained on and off. On the wharf, Taiming looked toward his destination. He remembered the previous occasion when the woman had secretly come to see him off. He had never seen her since then, but the story was that she was living happily as the mother of two—or was it three?—with a well-to-do doctor for a husband. Hu Taiming, however, was still a bachelor. If he had married her, he might have found satisfaction and happiness living in the country. But he had not, and his recollections made him sad.

The warning bell sounded through the misty harbor. Zhigang carefully summarized the main points of his big brother's advice. Today he was the earnest protector Taiming had known as a child. Qiuyun fluttered her eyelids as she said good-bye, while her husband laughed and pointed out un sentimentally that Shanghai, though on foreign soil, was really no farther away than Taitung; that at any rate, it was much closer than Japan.

Taiming, who also was aware of this geographical fact, did not share his brother's and sister's feeling that he was traveling to the end of the world. Something else worried him, though, and as Taiming boarded the three-thousand-ton steamer, he repeatedly pleaded with his siblings that they take good care of their parents.

Waving handkerchiefs immediately blossomed along the wharf when the vessel began to pull away from it. Colored a splendid blue, Mount Chitung inched across the horizon until a dusk-colored veil fell slowly over it like a blanket. The outer seas rocked the steamer, and Taiming went down to his cabin to lie down.

When he appeared on deck the next morning, a stunningly blue sky greeted him, but no trace of Mount Chitung. The weather was perfect for sailing. Flying fish jumped in and out of the powerful

Black Current that arches from the Philippines to the Hawaiian Islands. The fish sparkled in the sunlight.

Taiming felt as sunny as the skies, and his heart beat to a light-hearted tune. He had not heard it for so long that at first he did not recognize his desire to compose a poem. But a couple of quatrains came to him in a flash and seemed to require hardly any revision except for the last line, "A continent of kinsfolk nears." Officially, though, he was on his way to a foreign people. As his passport said, Hu Taiming was a citizen of the Japanese Empire.

Unable to come up with a satisfactory alternative, he was leaning toward keeping the last line when he remembered the chilling fate of Shen Deguan and ruled out that option. The eighteenth-century poet and critic was accused of criticizing the status quo in a verse about black peonies: "This breed bizarre usurped the throne / Rightly of the vermilion." Meant to be a clever allusion to a Confucian saying, the lines were interpreted as a jab at the reigning emperor: the Qing dynasty had ousted the Ming, which bore the appellation "vermillion." Treacherous though the lines may have been, the poet protested that his intentions were not. He was executed anyway.

One after another Taiming recalled many of the anecdotes his grandfather had related to him regarding fatal slips of the pen. When an unintended offense could cost a poet his life, why cling to a word susceptible to similar accusations? Changing the last line, Taiming wrote, in pencil, the final version in his notebook:

O thoughts, I've aired you ten odd years
Beneath untruly eastern skies;
This fool so scoffed at all careers
Till a nasty fall was no surprise.
These waves that wash my wounded eyes
Will likely drown my orphan tears
Before we greet the paradise—
A continent for pioneers.

He read it out loud. His heart was smiling triumphantly, he thought; it extended infinitely, like the ocean. The way he used to think suddenly struck him as being funny. An infantile disorder! Laughter slowly welled up from the bottom of his heart. Vainly trying to suppress the ungainly display, bending over with his hands on the railing, he raised his face toward the horizon. There was the first sign of the continent.

Chapter Three

I. A Room with a View of Mount Zijin

To the east of Nanjing is a mountain that has, people say, a regal air. At sunset, the enshrouding purple mist seems indeed to be rising from the legendary gold that the king of Chu buried in these lands more than twenty centuries ago, to bring peace to his country. Come autumn, the mantle on Mount Zijin, or Purple Gold Mountain, is too gorgeous for words, and so too is the graceful line that links the peak to Lake Xuanwu.

Mandarin had gotten on Taiming's nerves, and he was gazing out the window on the second floor of the Zeng house. Taiwan's mountains were mere crags in light of this continental majesty.

Zeng and his family lived one flight above and never came down except at mealtime, so Taiming had the floor to himself after his teacher, who came for an hour every day, left. In the quiet, the lodger looked at Mount Zijin, and his mind wandered aimlessly. For almost a month, he had been living here—imprisoned, practically—because he did not understand Mandarin.

Zeng, who had invited him so enthusiastically and had even found a job for him, cautioned with curious persistence from the