

程乃珊：父母心

Why Parents Worry

By Cheng Naishan

Translated by Janice Wickeri

“ISN'T DINNER READY YET, Mrs Zhang? We're going out tonight.”

Mr Zhou, master of the house, sat comfortably at the head of the table, issuing instructions to the family amah, Mrs Zhang, relishing the privilege of being the boss. For eight hours a day at the office he played the role of compliant underling, but when he closed the door of his own home, he became resident despot.

“Not ready yet? Well, no hurry, no hurry!” He pronounced a reprieve.

Zhou wielded real power at home. Just look at the way his casual reprieve succeeded in upsetting Mrs Zhang, who had served in his house for twenty-two years. Experience told her that the real meaning of this pronouncement was “What the hell's keeping you? Hurry up!” Mrs Zhang was, after all, a competent worker, otherwise the Zhous would not have kept her on all these years. She never had a moment's rest, always a full complement of two dishes and a soup to be prepared, and in the midst of all the commotion she never forgot to set aside a portion from each dish before adding the sugar—Mr Zhou's precious Ah Ping didn't like his food sweet.

As she was bringing the food to the table, Mr Zhou drew a letter from his pocket. Even though she couldn't read, Mrs Zhang could tell from the writing on the envelope that it was from her son Fusheng who lived in the countryside. She watched with signs of impatience as the master, with exasperating deliberation, cleaned his glasses and methodically opened the envelope.

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“Dear Ma, Cuilian insists we get a sewing machine and it’s got to be a Butterfly brand from Shanghai or nothing. She says she won’t join the family otherwise! Heavens, these country girls really have a lot of nerve” (This from Zhou, not the letter). “And that son of yours too, as if his mother’s living a life of ease in Shanghai. You mustn’t spoil children too much, Mrs Zhang. You should buy some nourishing food for yourself with the little you manage to put aside. ‘Cows eat grass, ducks eat grain, and children, too, are provided for’ . . . ‘Ma, you have no idea how well Cuilian and I get on; she, she even let me touch her hand’ . . . ha ha ha . . .” The master laughed so hard he had to take off his glasses and wipe his eyes, even the missus was doubled over with laughter. Mrs Zhang hurriedly set out the food and fled red-faced into the kitchen.

“There’s no taking the country out of countryfolk; a daughter-in-law can be had for the price of a sewing machine. It would break my heart if our Ah Ping had been born into a family like that,” the wife said pityingly, looking at Mrs Zhang’s prematurely aged figure. But the husband blew her feeling of superiority clean away with a soft nasal “hunh”.

“Our Ah Ping *was* born into the wrong family, just a few steps more and he would have made it into my second brother’s downstairs. Even if he’d been born into my sister’s over in Hongkou he’d have been better off. Look, in just the last six months their son and daughter have gone off, one to Chicago, the other to Los Angeles. Who knows, they might be guzzling Coke and congratulating themselves right now saying, ‘If I’d been born into a family like Ah Ping’s it’d break my heart.’ And my eldest brother, his own nephew same as the others, what would it cost him to put up the money for one more to go overseas? No wonder they say Americans are the biggest skinflints around, with the least family feeling. Three letters and not one answer.”

His wife interrupted: “Whose bright idea was it to break with him so completely? In the beginning he wrote four or five times, and not a word from you; you, straight as an arrow, handed the letters over to the leadership. Your second brother wasn’t such a die-hard.”

Zhou cut her off impatiently: “That’s enough, what’s done is done.” What was it today? He only wanted to shut out the world and lord it over the household, but even here there was no peace. His wife was less and less obedient and there were fewer and fewer times when “his word was law”. But the most frightening thing was that he himself felt that he was often too clever for his own good. In this case, for instance, he had definitely been too inflexible toward his eldest brother.

But had it all been so simple? Who would have dared to be tarred with the “American” brush during the fifties? And as for his second brother, it was precisely because Zhou *wasn’t* similarly guileless that he’d escaped having a Rightist’s cap slapped on his head. That in itself had been no mean accomplishment. People with shaky class backgrounds like his ought to tuck their tails between their legs and tread lightly. What’s more, his persistent circumspection, his—in his wife’s terms—“hidebound attitude”, was all for the sake of Ah Ping, that only child of twenty-two years of wedlock! Holding that little red body to his bosom twenty-

two years ago, he had uttered a silent prayer to heaven: he would do right by the boy—this life he had created, his own flesh and blood, his son! In fact, long before his son had been born, even before Zhou had got married, he had made personal sacrifices for him. There was the girl he'd almost married, his first girlfriend. She was too delicate and it had worried him—perhaps he would never know the joys of fatherhood—so he had grit his teeth and broken off that fairy-tale romance. Never in his wildest imaginings had he thought that, having settled on a wife who was a sound sleeper with a healthy appetite, twelve uneventful years would pass before finally (thank God) his son, in his own good time, arrived.

It was inconceivable to him that his son should be so like himself. An exact replica, as if life could be duplicated after all. Was there really such a thing as “reincarnation”? If he could be reborn, there were so many unfulfilled dreams: first of all, he would plan a carefree childhood for himself. His own childhood had been a vista of unbroken grey; looking back was excruciating.

He came third in a family of four. A third child is doomed to receive very little affection from its parents, who generally dote on either the eldest or the youngest. His father began as a fitter and later opened his own ironworks employing about a hundred workers in the Zhabei section of Shanghai. He made a lot of money but spent all his days managing the business; moreover he was both stingy and harsh with his wife and family. How Zhou had envied the little American boy his own age who lived next door—Peck, the son of a minister. He had such a great pile of toys and picture books and such loving parents. Little Peck often skipped along holding onto his parents' hands as they went on outings. Zhou had never known such pleasure himself. What he envied Peck most was his metal construction set; the box even held a little screwdriver and a little wrench; with these you could build a little house, a tank, a crane . . . he used to dream all the time what it would be like to have a construction set like that. It would make him the luckiest boy in the world!

If there *were* such a thing as reincarnation, he would choose a new profession as well. In the beginning, perhaps inspired by that construction set, he had wanted very badly to study architecture, but his father was adamantly against it. In those days, the most useful thing to learn was how to make money. He'd had to go against his own inclinations and study business. Yes, he'd had many disappointments in his life . . . Of course, reincarnation was impossible; he could only make up for it all the second time around, through his son.

When his son turned four, Zhou could hardly wait; he bought him a construction set. It had cost three *yuan*. He had never imagined how cheaply his childhood dream could have been realized! The disappointment was that his son took no interest in the toy. In less than three days, the little metal pieces had been scattered about and some were missing. His son had too many toys already; the new one didn't mean that much to him!

Ah Ping had been born during the famine years of the early sixties and though later (thank God) such things as milk powder, honey, orange juice, cod liver oil—the lot—were available in the shops, the prices were frightfully high. Zhou's monthly salary of 100 *yuan* plus his wife's 65 *yuan* was fairly good but it wouldn't

stretch to buying such expensive goods. Luckily, however, he was the sole beneficiary of the fixed interest payments on his deceased father's assets amounting to 400 a quarter. His eldest brother had gone abroad to make his way long ago, his second brother had been dubbed a Rightist and the Zhous naturally refused to have anything to do with this "traitor"; his younger sister had married, and married daughters are like spilt water—it was only right and proper that the money should revert entirely to him. But came 1964, a time of political turmoil, the preliminary "four clean-ups" campaign¹ was underway, and for the sake of his son, he grit his teeth and let the money go. His son was glittering crystal to him; he could not bring himself to sully the boy. And Zhou did all he could to ensure that Ah Ping had no contact with his uncle downstairs, that their family had nothing to do with that Rightist. How could he have done otherwise? He even put up a swinging door on the landing, a blatant indication that one half didn't know how the other half lived. For his son's sake, he could even go the whole eight hours at work without speaking a word. After all, popular wisdom says: misfortune issues from between the lips! He had no friends in his workplace, no bosom buddies, his son was all he needed. Even today he was still perfectly happy to be one of the obedient masses, despite the fact that the leadership had undergone more changes than the revolving figures on an old-fashioned paper lantern: from "rebel factions" to "workers' propaganda teams" to "military representatives", right back to the original leaders from before the Cultural Revolution. He had been a law-abiding citizen all along, whether in the very beginning during the mass criticism of "capitalist roaders" or later in the attack on the Gang of Four. He had always made his views known to the Party branch in writing, in his regular, straight up and down characters. Of course, from time to time he found it very hard to live with his own behaviour. But what else could he do? He was doing it for his son

The door opened with a bang. His son was home, a package held aloft in one hand.

"Dad, Ma, my friend Li got a pair of blue jeans for me, from the smugglers in Wenzhou, forty *yuan*."

Forty *yuan* for a pair of cotton trousers! Zhou's heart did an involuntary flip-flop.

But his son turned the pants over with an air of importance and patted the copper label riveted to the back pocket: "Look, genuine Bull Dog brand from the US." He couldn't have known that the old man would be more familiar with the brand than he was. Zhou knew that brand from the late forties, but in those days most people thought skin-tight blue jeans undignified, and only foreign sailors and dandies wore them.

"Times have changed. In those days even Klim milk powder was being peddled on the street, nowadays you have to have foreign exchange notes to get it." His wife was shaking his absolute authority again.

¹In 1964, the "four clean-ups" campaign, part of the Socialist Education Movement intended to purge capitalist influences through an emphasis on improvements in politics, economy, organization and ideology, was carried out on a limited scale before being broadened into a nationwide campaign.

“Pants like this are pretty expensive in the US—it’s synthetic fibres that are cheap over there. Since I can get these for *renminbi* now, I don’t mind paying a little more. Then when I go to the States, to some party, I won’t look like such a hick”

From his son’s tone of voice one would have thought his father had an endless supply of money.

“How many times have I told you, I’m sending you to the States to study, not so you can go to parties.”

“Don’t be so strait-laced, Dad, you enjoyed these things once yourself, you’ve done them all, so why take the official line with me?”

What was this? When had he “enjoyed” them, “done” them?

“Stop pulling my leg. Grandpa was the boss, and you were just like the rich son in the movie ‘Midnight’, weren’t you? Drinking, dancing”

Kids today, all they know is what they see in the movies, what do they know about life? In spite of the dangers, when Zhou was young he had squeezed onto a third-class train compartment and travelled all the way to Chongqing in order to get into a free, government-supported university. With the Sino-Japanese War raging, all communication with his family had been cut off, even food had become a problem. Like his classmates, he had to work-study, relying entirely on his own efforts to finish. But that period of his life had done a great deal for him. Now people were always impressed with his capabilities, weren’t they? But in his heart he knew it wasn’t because he had been born clever; he owed it all to that difficult, solitary life in Chongqing!

“Enough, what’s the point of trotting out all these old chestnuts? Compared to those kids who do nothing but smoke cigarettes all day and don’t study, our Ah Ping is pretty good.”

There was something in what his wife said. Though Ah Ping was an only child, he was obedient and had never dared to go his own way. This pair of forty-*yuan* pants now; if his father said a simple “no”, he wouldn’t dare buy them. But once his father nodded grudgingly, the son bolted down a few mouthfuls of rice and went to his room to try them on.

His son was twenty-two years old, he wanted to look good! Twenty-two years, gone in the blink of an eye. Before Zhou had been able to make careful arrangements for the boy’s future, he had grown up. If the truth be told, he’d had his son’s future planned out the moment he was born—he would be an architect and realize the unfulfilled dream of Zhou’s own youth. But the child had been born during hard times and the Cultural Revolution came along before he’d had even a basic education. Thanks to Zhou’s own years of watching his step, the family had slipped miraculously through a breach in that devastating “Great Revolution”. But one worry plagued him day and night from then on: that his son might be sent down to the countryside.² Like most people, Zhou made his preparations for this eventuality

² Refers to the practice of sending educated urban youth to rural areas to learn from the peasants by participating in manual labour.

early. In those days, because of the 'Great Standard-Bearer'³, work in theatre troupes was particularly sought after. One could avoid a great deal of back-breaking labour that way, so Zhou bought a violin for his son, even broke his habit of not getting involved with other people and asked someone from the "Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy" symphony orchestra to find a private teacher for him . . . but his son had no interest in the violin and though he studied for some time, his playing assaulted the ears like the squawking of chickens being slaughtered. By then, however, Zhou had seen the light: he had discovered that the key to a child's future lay not in proficiency in a particular skill, but in whether or not he had connections. He began to make friends widely, and because Mrs Zhang was an excellent Wuxi cook, his table was soon graced by several illustrious guests wearing red badges and military uniforms. Unfortunately, after all this scheming, as he was waiting for the right moment to ask that his son be put on the list for Jiaotong University or Tongji University, everything changed again and the examination system was reinstated.

It wasn't bad to base acceptance to university on an exam grade, and at least he didn't have to curry favour anymore. Luckily his son was only in Form Three, there was still time to start over. And the boy tried to make a good showing. At first he had the silly idea of wanting to study Chinese; his father had to give him a good talking to. What future was there in pushing a pencil these days? Naturally science and technology were better bets. If Zhou hadn't allowed himself to be ordered about by his own father, would he be spending his days totting up profits on an abacus now? And though his son had failed the university entrance exam three years running, each year he came a little closer; in last year's exam he scored only three points below the passing grade. Soon Zhou's greatest desire would be realized. But nowadays things could change entirely from one week to the next. Before he knew it, sending one's children abroad to study had become *the* thing to do and Zhou was plunged into remorse once more. Why had he been so inflexible, why had he cut himself off so completely from his elder brother? Now there was no going back. In no time, second brother's two kids had gone abroad with elder brother acting as guarantor. At that point, he just had to brazen it out and write elder brother a "humble pie" letter. His elder brother had readily accepted his apologies, writing back happily about brotherly affection, but when he got to the main point—the matter of Ah Ping's going to the US as a self-supporting student—he began pleading excuses. He was already paying for two, he couldn't manage to support another. After that, he simply stopped writing. What a blow that had been! The letter Zhou had sent three months ago was still unanswered. It seemed as if his brother was purposely trying to provoke him.

To add insult to injury, his younger sister's daughter had flown off to the US with her fraternal uncle's support. In the depths of his despair, Zhou had decided to seek help from his younger sister's in-laws. The ties between them were somewhat remote, but at least they *were* related and it was the only device left him.

³Jiang Qing, undisputed arbiter of the arts during the Cultural Revolution.

That man, brother of his brother-in-law, happened to be in Shanghai just now. He was anxious for Mrs Zhang to serve dinner so that afterwards he could go to the hotel for a little visit with this distant relative, and strike up an acquaintance. In desperation, he had even spent 120 *yuan* on a piece of rare wild ginseng!

"Actually that 70-*yuan* piece they had in the shop didn't look bad either." His wife was thinking of the ginseng, too. Women never see beyond a few pennies.

"These people are experts, they can spot the difference at a glance. Besides, we have to act quickly for Ah Ping's sake. The policy could change at any time. In a few years it might not be possible to send him."

"Where is it you're sending Ah Ping?" Mrs Zhang had been clearing away the bowls and chopsticks, head bowed. Hearing the words "not possible to send him", her heart suddenly sank, but she was instantly aware of the fact that she was exceeding her bounds, so she quickly bowed her head again and busied herself with clearing the table.

"To America." Zhou didn't begrudge her concern; it was obvious that Mrs Zhang would hate to see Ah Ping go. Her affection for Ah Ping was a source of great satisfaction to him. "The child has grown up, we have to let him see the world, broaden his horizons!"

"America." Mrs Zhang racked her brains. To her, America meant American imperialism. Her whole notion of America stemmed from skits performed by land reform teams just after Liberation: long noses smeared with white powder beneath top hats. "Is it very far away?"

"Of course, hundreds of thousands of *li*." Zhou was growing impatient. Pushing back his chair, he rose to get ready to go out.

With the whole family out of the house, the rooms were wondrously quiet. This time belonged completely to Mrs Zhang. Having finished the washing up, she lay down on the plank bed in her small room and stretched out her aching legs. These few moments of freedom were so precious she hated to let them slip away in sleep.

"Ma, Cuilan says we've got to have a sewing machine" Her son's words sounded again in her ear. She propped up her tired body and fished a handkerchief-wrapped bundle from under her pillow. Inside were twelve ten-*yuan* notes. Still a bit short. Besides, you needed a coupon to buy a sewing machine. Where would she get the coupon? Right, she'd go to Mrs Hu, the one she went to the market for everyday, she thought her son had some kind of official position in the Commerce Bureau. She pulled herself out of bed. If not for that spend-thrift son . . . !

Fusheng had also been born in 1961, during the hard years. Another mouth to feed. It had seemed that soon none of them would be able to make it. But providentially, that same Zhou family which had once employed her mother-in-law sent a letter saying they were looking for a wet-nurse, thirty *yuan* a month plus room and board, and she could leave her ration tickets at home. The job was a windfall, a gift from heaven. With many regrets, she dragged herself away from her piteously screaming infant son. She realized then the heavy price this "heaven-sent" job would exact.

Only someone who's done it can know what it's like to be a housemaid. The food is too cold or too hot, too salty or too bland. You're at the mercy of someone else's fussiness and can't answer back. And you have to keep your wits about you. You'd better get things straight the first time; the more you have to be told, the worse it gets. She went home for her first visit after three years. All the girls in the village envied her city complexion and were only too anxious to follow her to Shanghai. But her mother-in-law, who had been a servant herself, patted her shoulder in sympathy. When she picked up the skinny, sallow, undernourished-looking son of hers, her heart contracted with grief, and she didn't want to leave. But her son was still small, if she wanted to raise him to manhood, she'd need a lot of money! To make up for the wrong she'd done her child by selling her milk as a wet-nurse, she came home every time laden down like an ox with packages big and small. As the years passed, her son did in fact grow up, from a sallow and skinny boy into a strong, sturdy youth, a typical able-bodied worker. But Mrs Zhang was beginning to realize that the possibility of retirement was becoming more and more remote. The older her son got, the more money he needed. There was no lack of people eager to make a match for the boy, for her reputation in the village, though unfounded, was hard to shake: everyone thought she had pots of money stashed away in Shanghai.

Money—whether you had it or not, you had to worry about your son. It was the same for her boss, Zhou, wasn't it? Night and day he grappled with the problem of sending his son overseas. The ways of the world certainly were unfathomable. *She* wanted nothing more than to be near her son each day. America must be so far away. Ah Ping a) couldn't cook, and b) couldn't do his laundry. Could he survive, separated from his parents all of a sudden in a foreign country, living among those blue-eyed big-noses? If he caught a cold or had a fever, who would he go to? Mrs Zhang knew only too well what it was like to be far away from home! Though the Zhou's house was bigger and brighter than her place in the countryside, though the bathroom was fresher and cleaner than even the public clinic there, though you didn't have to fetch water or gather firewood, and though it was a thousand, ten thousand times better than her place, it was still not home. In the same way a foreign country was somebody else's home, wasn't it? Even if it was the best place in the world, it belonged to those blue-eyed big-noses and Ah Ping would have to put up with a lot. He suffered from heartburn, too, and he had to have a hot water bottle tucked up in his quilt in the winter, but he always forgot to fill it before going to bed. He needed his amah to do it for him. Who would look after him over there? They wouldn't bother unless it was their own flesh and blood! At that, Mrs Zhang's nose began to twitch as if she were about to cry. Enough, enough, you can't even take care of your own child, what business you do have worrying about someone else's? If his parents can bear to see him go, what more do you have to say about it? Right now your son's sewing machine was what mattered. You work until you drop, no peace of mind till you're dead and gone! She fixed her hair and tapped timidly on Mrs Hu's door.

Zhou's wife snapped on the light indignantly, without interrupting her stream

of rebuke, "Might as well have thrown that 120-yuan ginseng root into the sea. Your sister's brother-in-law is good at faking poverty. Did you see that fur coat his wife was wearing? Our Ah Ping could study several years on what that cost! He just didn't want to help."

Zhou slumped on the sofa, utterly exhausted. To comfort himself he said: "You can't blame him, they worked hard for their money. Besides, coming back to China to visit is a matter of prestige for these people—fur coats, diamond rings—overseas they probably wear themselves out for it, same as our Mrs Zhang. The people in the village think she's struck it rich in Shanghai, otherwise why does her prospective daughter-in-law keep asking for things; yarn, sewing machines . . . forget it!" He sounded discouraged. "Asking someone for a favour is the same as asking to be humiliated." Now it looked as though his son wouldn't be lucky enough to go abroad. With this thought Zhou found himself caught once again on the horns of his dilemma: if only in the beginning he had . . . This was his very greatest regret. In 1948 when his elder brother was leaving China he had wanted Zhou to go with him; they'd make their fortunes together. But Zhou had been knocking about Chongqing for eight years already, he really didn't want to do more of the same in some foreign country. If only he had made up his mind to go with his brother then, he wouldn't have to worry over his son now!

"Hey, a letter for us!" His wife bent to retrieve the letter that had been pushed under the door. It was the one they'd been waiting for. In the upper right-hand corner of the snow-white envelope, two red and blue lines spelled out the letters U.S.A. But . . . hang on . . . it wasn't elder brother's handwriting, and the street name on the envelope was out of date; still the old one from before Liberation. No wonder the postman had written "trial delivery" on it. The return address read: Peck, Massachusetts, USA. Who was Peck? The addressee, character for character, was clearly Zhou himself. Never mind, these days it was always a good thing to have an overseas relative or friend fall into one's lap. A yellowed photograph slid out of the envelope: a little foreign boy in a sailor suit and a little Chinese boy in his long gown. He remembered now, it was Peck, the minister's boy! The letter said Peck was coming to Shanghai with a big tour group to have a look at his former home, and wondered whether his old friend Zhou was still living in the same place . . . Could this be a dream? Zhou tugged fiercely at his hair, painfully straightened his shoulders and called urgently to his wife. Over and over he impressed upon her that she was not to let the news out, particularly not to second brother's family downstairs. This foreign good will was his alone to enjoy. As his wife assented to his every instruction, Zhou sensed that his tottering authority had been shored up once more. It never occurred to him that the letter had been slipped under his door by his second brother to begin with, that the postman had left it in the mailbox downstairs first.

"Get him to bring us a colour TV. Foreigners don't have to pay duty."

A colour TV—women couldn't see any further than the tips of their noses, but Zhou had excellent vision. Here was Ah Ping's salvation. Peck was a minister now, with a Ph.D. in theology. For ministers as for Buddhist monks, virtue was the foundation of everything. What's more, the church had always praised and

encouraged education—there was hope. “Is that English Bible we turned up in our last housecleaning still around?” he asked his wife.

“Are you planning to pray?”

“Idiot! Peck is a minister! As the saying goes, you have to speak to people as a human and to monsters as a monster.”

Everything went more smoothly than Zhou had ever imagined it would. Owing to the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm which Zhou had down pat, Revd Peck was already very well-disposed towards him. During the three days the man was in Shanghai, Zhou hosted two banquets for him: one an imperial-style banquet at the Dahua Guest House, the other a meal at home. He spent over 200 *yuan* on the two, a true instance of “a thousand gold cash for a single smile”. Zhou’s calculations had included the expectation that Revd Peck would bring some gifts with him. But wouldn’t you know it, Peck turned out to be terribly stingy. The first time he came to Zhou’s house he brought a bunch of fresh flowers—those wouldn’t last long. The second time, he was empty-handed. Enough, all these were trifles after all, the crux was whether he was willing to shoulder Ah Ping’s expenses. So, choosing his moment, just as Revd Peck was savouring a succulent slice of sea cucumber, Zhou raised the matter with him. But foreigners are really “wet behind the ears”, as they say in Shanghai, you could tell from the Reverend’s next remark:

“... your universities are state-supported, why spend your money to send the boy overseas to study?”

How could he explain? In any case, if other people’s sons get their share of a good thing, mine isn’t going to be left out. Besides, if his son went to the States to study, he might be able to get a green card and stay there; that was the best way to do it and the real reason why so many went overseas to study at their own expense. People look at such things differently now; your son might be a war hero or a model worker, okay, but that can’t compare with a son who did you proud overseas. The worst-case scenario, of course, was that by some chance your son might not do well in the US. But he could always come back and talk about how rotten and corrupt the capitalist system was, how he had abandoned a life of affluence to return to the Motherland, and his future would be assured all the same. In any case, he would have acquired a patina of gold. No matter how you put it, you couldn’t go wrong. But of course one couldn’t say such things to an American.

“Revd Peck, we grew up together, you ought to understand that my childhood was extremely unhappy. My father didn’t do all he could for me; he didn’t fulfill his responsibilities as a father. And now my son...” Zhou weighed his words carefully and his fluent English lent them even greater impact. He wasn’t just pulling words out of the air on the spur of the moment; he was speaking from his heart. Perhaps he really did love his son too well. Such sincere love elicited an involuntary sigh from Peck.

“All right then. Let me go home and talk it over with my wife. But, Mr Zhou, don’t you feel you’re doing too much for your son? For ‘Earthly fathers discipline us for a short time at their pleasure, but He disciplines us forever.’ We mustn’t try

to do every single thing for our children, rather we should seek the Lord's will in all things”

Disagreeable cleric! How could he start preaching at this critical juncture? Never mind, strike while the iron is hot. They had to close the deal now.

“With a servant of the all-loving God as his guardian, my Ah Ping will certainly be even more blessed.” Zhou hurriedly cut off Revd Peck's sermonizing and instructed Mrs Zhang to bring the dessert. But the ever-efficient Mrs Zhang wasn't paying attention this time. She could be seen standing off to one side, serving tray in hand, lost in thought.

“Mrs Zhang!” Zhou was a bit put out, maybe she was getting old.

“Mr Zhou, you ask that foreigner how cold it gets over there in the winter. Ah Ping suffers from heartburn every winter, doesn't he? He's like that here in Shanghai and this is the south; well, does it count as north or south over there?”

Oh, these country people—Ah Ping's future hasn't been settled yet and here she is talking about north and south as if he already had his air ticket in hand! This was the one disadvantage of having an amah: it was like introducing a spy into your midst. He waved an impatient hand at Mrs Zhang: “This doesn't concern you, hurry up and get the dessert, and whatever you do, don't talk about this all over the place, especially downstairs.”

“Revd Peck, what songs are popular in the States now? Who's number one now that Elvis is dead? Have you been to Disneyland? I want to go there as soon as I get to America. And I want to learn to disco, real American-style disco . . .” His son was babbling away, racking his brain for things to say to Revd Peck. He was doing quite well. After all, Zhou had hired a private tutor for him at three *yuan* an hour. If not for his foresight, his son's English wouldn't have been up to snuff, and all his efforts would have been in vain.

“But, young fellow,” Peck was patting Ah Ping on his frail shoulder, “America is more than Disney and disco; it's a battlefield. And with your physique, I'd say you're too weak to go to war. You'll need to learn to wash cars, mow lawns, paint houses—you'd better prepare yourself for a hard life.”

“A hard life.” The common expression in Chinese was “eat bitterness”. “Eat bitterness, work hard”, the phrase seemed so familiar to Zhou, he'd heard it all the time during the “down to the countryside” period, and now it had an inauspicious ring to it. As if Ah Ping wasn't going to America to study, but was being shipped there like the black slaves. Maybe it was just an impression created by Peck's begrudging the few dollars needed. If he thinks he can scare me off so easily, well, he doesn't know who he's dealing with!

Before Revd Peck departed from Shanghai, Zhou made a special trip to a handicraft shop and spent 460 *yuan* on a pair of exquisite jade carvings as a present for him. The foreigner had been there three days and Zhou had spent altogether 800 *yuan*, the entire sum he had saved for his old age. But he comforted himself with the thought that 800 *yuan* was equivalent to 400 US dollars. That meant he had already paid back 400 dollars. The man couldn't ignore that.

Revd Peck was as good as his word, entirely worthy of his calling. All the formalities had been carried out within two weeks and he had produced thirty

thousand dollars to guarantee Ah Ping, but his letter said that in reality he could only put up twelve thousand dollars for tuition and expenses. Furthermore, Ah Ping would have to pay the money back within two years after graduation. Peck enclosed a lawyer's contract which Zhou was to sign and send back for the record. These Americans did nothing merely for the sake of friendship. The jade carvings, the banquet, not a word about any of it. But anyway, everything was set.

Due to the large sum of money guaranteed and the fact that Revd Peck was a prominent seminary professor, the American Consulate in Shanghai processed the visa quickly. As Zhou cautiously examined the passport with its visa stamp, he felt there was nothing more in this world to strive for.

"The weather over there . . . , " Mrs Zhang interjected timidly.

That's right. These last few days he'd been so busy shopping, buying gifts and finding a tailor that he had forgotten whether the climate over there was northern or southern, so he got out a map and looked up the coordinates of Massachusetts.

"Send this along with Ah Ping. His old hot-water bottle cover is worn out, and it seems there won't be anyone overseas to mend it for him. They don't care, if it's not for one of their own. Better take two and be prepared." Mrs Zhang handed him two hot-water bottle covers sewn of flannel. In the lower right hand corner was an exquisitely embroidered ox head. Ah Ping had been born in the year of the ox. Mrs Zhang's eyes were red in the lamplight; she had been crying again.

Wasn't taking such countrified things to the US ridiculous? But Zhou was moved by Mrs Zhang's sincerity. "Don't feel bad, Mrs Zhang, once Ah Ping finds a good job over there, he'll send you a hundred *yuan* every month for your old age."

"All I want is for him to remember to write to me." Mrs Zhang squeezed out a smile and as her tears began to flow again, she fled into the kitchen. Send a hundred *yuan* a month? Ridiculous. As if the streets were paved with gold in America, waiting for Ah Ping to come and take it. The villagers thought of her the same way. All they knew was that once in a while she sent forty or fifty *yuan* home. Only heaven knew how she scrimped for that money! A few years ago her son had seemed to be such a good boy. He would see her off at the bus station as if he couldn't bear to part with her. "Ma, I promise I'll get more work points in the future so you won't have to leave home anymore. I'll support you." Those few words had sounded so sweet to Mrs Zhang. She really couldn't wait for her son to grow up. She'd find him a wife, then she could retire and enjoy her old age. But her son became less sensible the older he got. He wanted this, he wanted that, making a laughing stock of them both. When it came time to choose a wife he paid no attention to his mother's wishes. Now Ah Ping was leaving. Did life have a purpose any longer? Whether Ah Ping did well out of going away or not, Mrs Zhang would never take a cent from him. What a sin!

In the other room, Zhou was fiddling with the hot-water bottle covers Mrs Zhang had made while going over in his mind the things that remained to be done, when it struck him that the two intricately-done covers looked extremely attractive in the pale lamplight, unique, like handicrafts. They were after all genuine hand-

made articles. He had a sudden inspiration: why shouldn't his son take several more along to give as gifts to cement friendships? Foreigners were sure to like that kind of thing.

"Mrs Zhang, if you have time, make a few more hot water bottle covers to last Ah Ping awhile."

"All right!" Mrs Zhang agreed readily and immediately donned the apron she had just taken off. She was about to go to see Mrs Hu to settle the matter of the sewing machine, but no matter how pressing her son's needs, Ah Ping's were much more urgent. His days at home were numbered, and before long he would be alone in a foreign country with no one to answer when he called. Poor Ah Ping! She was glad to have a chance to do a little something for him. She'd wanted to help all along, but hadn't known how and had felt badly about it. Her own milk had nurtured Ah Ping and she would have no peace of mind until she had done something special for him before he left.

A tailor had been found, gifts bought, guests feted—money had trickled away like water. In less than a month, the savings Zhou had toiled half a lifetime for were all used up. In the end even the money for the air ticket had to be scraped together.

But Ah Ping finally did get off.

"What day will Ah Ping get to America?" Mrs Zhang anxiously asked red-eyed Mr and Mrs Zhou just back from seeing their son off.

"At 8:00 a.m. on the 19th."

"You mean the 20th, don't you? Today is the 19th." Mrs Zhang corrected him cautiously.

"No, the 19th, you wouldn't understand." Zhou contentedly stuck his feet into the felt slippers his wife brought him. As his son's going abroad had proceeded more and more smoothly, Zhou had recouped his authority at home with increasing rapidity. "It's called a time difference." He wasn't going to explain it to her; country people know nothing. But such simplicity is good: nothing to worry about, no extravagant hopes, no more problems once your son is of marriageable age; at worst you have to worry about buying a sewing machine. "Say, how's that prospective daughter-in-law of yours? Still not willing to make do? Now that she's let your son fondle her hand, who knows what she'll do next? That girl's too greedy."

"You can't blame the child." Mrs Zhang didn't feel it was right to criticize the daughter-in-law she hadn't even laid eyes on yet, and besides it was hard for young women. If one didn't get a good husband and a few clothes and things for oneself at marriage, there would be no second chance.

"Umm, Mrs Zhang," Zhou cleared his throat, and steered the subject back to a matter he'd been considering for some time, "With Ah Ping gone, the two of us don't make much housework. We're ready to do it ourselves. You can probably go home and enjoy your old age, can't you? You'll be a grandmother soon!" He had spent all his money on his son. From now on, they would have to live like the woman in Maupassant's "The Necklace", hanging on to every copper.

Mrs Zhang was dumbstruck. Her mouth worked, but nothing came out and she went back into the kitchen. She had a letter from her son in her apron pocket right now. Mrs Hu had read it and told her that her son wanted her to buy a watch for his intended.

Zhou plumped up his pillow. His son would be in Japan by now. He was finally a success as a father. From this night on he could sleep soundly. When in the past twenty-two years had he *not* tossed and turned at night worrying about his son? He closed his eyes, but he didn't feel in the least like sleeping. He kept turning the figures over in his mind: five times six equals thirty. His son needed thirty thousand dollars for five years of study. Revd Peck had lent him twelve thousand. He still didn't know where the other eighteen thousand was coming from. His son was up to his ears in debt and he hadn't even got to America yet! How would he ever pay it all back? Oh Ah Ping, Ah Ping, you're thirty thousand dollars in debt . . . !

He sighed deeply and to avoid thinking about it, groped on the nightstand for a sleeping pill.

In the kitchen Mrs Zhang went garrulously on, "I beg of you, (this to Mrs Hu) find me a new employer! I'll baby-sit or take care of someone who's paralysed—it doesn't matter. For my son's sake, and while my old bones can still manage, I have to spend a few more years as a beast of burden! If I get a letter from Ah Ping, please forward it to my new job"

Into the night the neighbours' lights still burned and there was an unusual amount of activity. It was said that their daughter-in-law (new last year) had just given birth to a son and they were celebrating!