Ah Sheng 阿盛

MY CLASSMATES

同學們*

translated by Darryl STERK 石岱崙

Ever since graduation, Nosey Pao has been keeping tabs on the fifty-three students in our class. By his reckoning, fourteen are teaching, three putting food on the table by selling insurance and nine doing their time in the military; there are seven in sales and two in business; five are unclassified (including one girl whose marriage was "arranged" by her unborn child) and five unproductive (they haven't yet got their feet on the ground); the other eight are whereabouts unknown, D.O.A. undivined, among them a fugitive, a man "wanted" for writing checks as casually as the chanteuse Fong Feifei signs autographs for her fans.

Chao Chien aspired to be a writer. He talked about it all the time, telling us how after graduation he was going to put his nose to the grindstone and write an explosive magnum opus instead of finding a job. From freshman year on, he often

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penned submissions for the school newspaper with titles like "Pale Poinsettia by Moonlight." Just the other day, I ran into him in the trendy Hsi-men-ting district in Taipei. He was carrying a 007 attaché case, his face ashen. I asked him if he was still writing. The way he looked at me, it was like I was quizzing him on ancient history. I invited him to lunch but he said he was busy: he had to go meet a client. "Doing business is hard," he said, "about a million times harder than writing."

Liu Kung-pin and I are neighbors. After graduation, he set up a stand selling leather wallets and whatnot in the Shih-lin Nightmarket. He slept during the day and came out to do business at night. He told me later that too many people knew him and he was too thin-skinned to haggle with his acquaintances. So he switched to selling meatballs in Ta-chih; after ten days he was out over seventy dollars. Now he rides his motorcycle in all directions selling generic stereo equipment, earning a 20% margin on each sale. Every time he returns he reports how many units he's sold. He says he earns more than a university professor, and that seems right to me. I'm always telling him to save money and take a wife; but he says once you're rich there are women *everywhere*. Last month he brought home one of his stereos and it broke down in two days. He started swearing about how these stereos were such crap. But the next day he went out selling them just the same.

Chang Tou is also working in sales in Taipei: his products are books and honey. From what he says, his mainstay, what pays his salary, is books; honey is just the family business, a sideline. But he sells a lot of honey and not very many books. He says no matter what you're selling you've got to consider the customer. For a woman in her thirties, you say honey is skin-nourishing and wrinkle-removing. For a middle-aged man, you

say honey aids the digestion and won't go to the midsection. If it's a student, you've just got to guarantee it's the real thing. Most students will buy a bottle "to see how it tastes." He ended up selling so few books that his boss let him go; but he simply switched to selling encyclopedias for another company. A couple of days ago he brought round a set of encyclopedias for me to look at. When I refused to buy he called me a blockhead. I ended up purchasing two bottles of honey: he gave me his personal guarantee that it was unsweetened. But I didn't eat any. I gave it to the proprietress of the variety goods shop across the way.

As for Ma Nan-ping's profession, Nosey Pao and I have been trying unsuccessfully to pigeon-hole it. During the day she works as a receptionist at her father's company. She goes in when she wants and it doesn't even matter if she doesn't show up: there's already a company secretary. When she gets to work she and the secretary will have a heart to heart about Sakyamuni sitting under the Bodhi tree or Chuang Tzu dreaming about being a butterfly. In the evening she goes to English class, saying she wants to study in the United States and marry an American or overseas Chinese "while she's there." Nosey Pao pointed out that her plan contradicted the traditional teachings. She retorted that this had nothing to do with Buddhism or Taoism. One time, Nosey Pao went to visit her and she was hunched over her desk writing modern poetry. The two lines he stole a glimpse at went like this:

Smiling, the shadeless Bodhi tree
Bites free the funereal frieze of the boreal breeze.

To this day I have no idea what it means.

Lu Yi-jung is recently a bride; she didn't attend our graduation ceremony. As soon as final exams were over, amid the

chirping of the cicadas, she became a true June bride. She didn't send out wedding invitations, either, for fear that we would laugh at how she was already "showing." A couple of classmates in Taipei sent her a decorated banner emblazoned with "a 'show' of strength." I hear she was apoplectic when she opened it. Last week I received an invitation to her one-month-old baby shower: I was a bit worried, until I saw a note that said "no gifts S.V.P."

Ta-hu—Tigris magnus—is in the army. For his send-off party, we treated him to dinner at Beautiful Shih-lin Restaurant. Wiping away tears and snivel, he confessed to scoring eighty on the intelligence test. He'd made it twenty-three years without discovering he was a "slow learner." It was hard to take. Later he wrote me regretting that he hadn't made the most of his university experience:

Though our four years of college now has vanished like a dream,
I can't forget the good times we had in the halls of academe.

This is his rewriting of the famous couplet.[1] Tiger is still not used to getting up at five-thirty in the morning: "The bugle sounds, I sit in shock, remembering the good old days, when I would be reclining on my comfy couch just like the wise Chu-ko. The tears well up: Ah Sheng, do you know how it feels?" I wrote him back, saying, "Let's be good little guys, for early to bed, early to rise will make us healthy, wealthy and wise." In his next letter he gave me a piece of his mind. The end of his reply went, "At mid-autumn, the year's eighth month, on

[1] The nostalgic Tiger's model was a couplet from a poem by Du Mu (803-852):
Awakened now a decade on from my Yangchow reverie, 十年一覺揚州夢
I've won me naught in the painted chambers but ingrate infamy. 贏得青樓薄倖名

Phoenix Hill, the grass grows long, the flowers bloom, the warblers fly: could Ah Sheng be the only one without a heart?" [2]

At the end of last month, Little Miss Hua-kan got promoted to director; she's found a knack for selling insurance. When I asked her the trick of the trade, she said the most important thing was "thick skin." This came as quite a shock, because in school, nobody had thinner skin than her. She'd blush with embarrassment if a boy came to speak to her, and if someone "stood sentry" outside her dormitory, she'd ask a roommate to buy meals for her to avoid going out herself. Someone gave her the nickname "little white flower." But in a few short months since graduation she's changed completely! Her office is close to where I live, so she often comes over to chat. "Survival of the fittest," she told me one time: "No success without struggle," as if she was going out on a war campaign. I just nodded. She went on to cite a series of anecdotes about historical figures like Liu Bang, Han Xin, Zhu Maichen, etc., to elucidate the "way of thick skin." Her analyses left me speechless. Her conclusion at the end of this spiel was that, "majoring in Chinese has its advantages: history holds many practical lessons." I remember: that's exactly what the department chair had said.

Of the five "unproductive" "ne'er-do-wells," Huang Pai-hsiao's fate has been "bleakest." Exempted from military service for being too slight, he was spending his days in misery, no will to live. A while before graduation, his girlfriend had broken

[2] Adapting part of Qiu Chi (463-508)'s "Letter to General Chen Bozhi" (與陳伯之書), anthologized in the *Wen Xuan* (文選), in which Qiu Chi was trying to evoke nostalgia for the southland in the heart of the turncoat general. Southland is Jiangnan, south of the Yangtze, in the original; Tiger's letter substitutes Phoenix Hill or Fengshan, Kaohsiung County, the location of the Chinese Military Academy.

up with him and he had tried to kill himself. But his method, I hear, was two sleeping pills. He wrote the suicide note but couldn't get to sleep; so he took two more. When he finally woke up his father berated him for days. After that, whenever he came to see me he would complain about women. He'd put up a number of scrolls, one of them teaching that, "So much money buys you so much honey. . . ," another that, "Woman, thy name is money." I told him he was going overboard. He said I didn't understand women. I advised him to choose a career. He said something about great men being late bloomers. I got him a job selling pianos, but after five days he'd already gotten into arguments with six people, two of them colleagues, the rest customers. Not long ago, he came over breathless, in a fit of excitement, saying he was going to be helping out on a political campaign. I don't know whether or not he ended up going.

Lee Ming-hui is, like me, teaching Chinese at a private junior high school. He claims to be a man of mettle, but there's one thing that scares him and it isn't ghosts: correcting student essays. Before marking, he sits and meditates, silently repeating the mantra, "Getting angry is unhealthy; I will let no child be left behind." Then he sets to work, correcting mistakes until he can't stand it anymore, whereupon he slams his fists, throws his pen and hollers "the absurdity!" One day, he showed me something one of his "star students" had written; hand on breast, he swore that this composition was the best the world had ever seen or ever would see. I read it without expressing any opinion, and then showed him something by one of my own "proud disciples," which went like this: "As modern learners, if we don't have the indomitable vigor of Steve McQueen we'll look as dumpy and down in the dumps as Donald Duck." He couldn't stop laughing and admitted that he was comparatively lucky.

Chiang Pei has become a starlet. That was a surprise. Some classmates said she'd started out at a large company as a secretary, where one of the managers took a liking to her. She's got good looks and a sweet voice. At school, Nosey Pao had wracked his brains over her, until he found out he was seventh on her "list" and gave up hope. Well, after a month on the job, Chiang Pei found her manager expressing his "purest love" for her, which scared her half to death. She didn't go to work the next day and found a teaching job instead; but then the person who recommended her asked for "a little something" as a sign of gratitude. She lost her temper and left. Her next job was at a big restaurant, but—maybe it's true that oftentimes beauty's a curse—some chairman of the board made it clear she was the one for him. That time she quit without even waiting for the paycheck. Three months after that, someone found out she had "gone professional" and become a singer. I hear she is quite popular. Nosey Pao has tried many times to get me to go see her perform, but I won't: aren't we all just passers-by here in Taipei, going with the flow and making a living? Why embarrass her? I don't imagine her family knows what she's doing.

Old Kuang's situation is the most unusual. He is working as a janitor in a food processing factory. He's the only university graduate we know of in the janitorial line of work, which is why we've listed him as unclassified, professionally speaking. He wipes tables, sweeps the floor, and also serves tea. He says the job was not easy to get. The owner asked him his educational background. He lied, saying he went to university by night school. That's the only reason he got hired. He works seven days a week, with no holidays, for 3,800 NTD a month. Since graduation, he's sent out thirty-two resumes. Of the twenty-seven notices he's gotten back, twenty-four were from insurance

companies. One of the other three even clearly indicated that only a high school graduate was wanted, that university graduates would be "regretfully declined." Two evenings ago he came over and I treated him to plum wine. By the time I saw him off he'd drunk two bottles. As he was leaving he kept muttering: "If only Ida known I never woulda gone to university."

The classmate who's had the greatest variety of jobs is my old buddy Nosey Pao. First a market inspector, next a customs clearance agent (for three days), then an editor at a magazine. After a week on that job, he told me the boss wasn't progressive; he wouldn't listen to recommendations for reform. So Nosey made up his mind to quit and go into real estate. The new boss told him to make the houses out to be the acme of perfection; but Nosey was just too inexperienced, unwise in the way of the world, and told the customers the truth: "It's not a great location, it's true, but the market is only a little over three hundred meters away; yes, it's not very high up and sooner or later it'll flood, but not too badly—I assure you, we at Class Act Realty will do our utmost to make sure. . . ." Ten days later he was out of a job. Now he sends out resumes every day. He's promised me that as soon as there's something promising I'll be the first to know.

At graduation I sat next to classmate Chen Ming-tung! In school he'd always claimed to be a sales manager at some trading company. He bragged to me he was going to buy a 1.6-liter Ford in a few days' time. Six days later the story broke. Chen had already made his getaway. Nobody knows what's become of him. I sometimes wonder how he got that Ford off the lot. My guess, based on four years of experience being classmates with him, is that his check bounced.