

## **The Fortunate Failure: A Triptych of the Senior Wordsmith**

by Yuan Changming

### **I. The Fox in the Stone**

In the humid, historical air of Jingzhou, our common native place, we lay spent. As Hua stirred, I felt the sudden, familiar urge to bridge the gap between our physical intimacy and the "biological stillness" of the page. In the dim light, she looked like a mum blooming on a foggy morning—an enchanting fox spirit from the folk legends of our youth, a sight for my sore eyes that snapped my soul into her hand.

"I want to take a picture of you like this," I blurted out. "So you can see how you look when you're most beautiful."

She refused. A photo, she claimed, was "hard evidence" of an infidelity she was currently masking as a high school reunion. She waved her head, her long neck throwing shadows against the headboard of our hotel room.

"So, only I have the privilege to feast my eyes on your foxiest looks?"

"As long as you're happy," she whispered.

Later, we walked toward the Qu Yuan Memorial Park. Standing before the ten-meter granite statue of the literary giant, I paid homage to the man recognized by the UN as one of the world's three greatest cultural celebrities. I told Hua that our ancient fellow native Qu Yuan, the first and greatest romantic poet in Chinese history, was the only poet for whom a national festival—the Dragon Boat Festival—had been celebrated for more than two thousand years.

"This is de facto China's Poet's Day," I said. "It proves that among all nations, only we Chinese have paid such a high price for poetry."

"No wonder you wanted me to come here," she replied.

I told her of the three Yuan brothers, Ming Dynasty poets from my foster-hometown of Gong-An. I confessed my belief that their "poetic genes" ran in my blood, a secret I had guarded even from my doctoral supervisor at UBC.

When we returned to the hotel, I felt a surge not to touch her, but to conceive her into a book. I have archived our "Honeytime" in a foreign tongue—one 'silver romance,' two hundred love poems and a novel trilogy published in English—making her an ever-present 'fictional' character in my works. Ironically, she remains an English illiterate and shows little interest in literature, totally unaware that she lives in my prose as a real person rather than a persona.

"Don't write about our intimacies," she threatened, reading my mind. "Or I'll sue you."

"I call you 'Hua,'" I defended, my tone shifting to a self-protective crouch. "It's just another way of making love. Like masturbation, it is a forgivable sin."

## **II. The Accounting Error**

After retirement, as my health slipped from "manageable" to "subject to peer review," I began examining my life with the rigor Socrates once advised. The problem was that the examination produced a spiritual accounting error.

By every visible metric, I had achieved my "Canadian Dream." Growing up in an isolated and impoverished Chinese village, I had executed a flawless upward trajectory through geography and linguistics, eventually settling in a wealthy Vancouver enclave. I had survived two disparately different socio-political systems and found both wanting. English, once my primary antagonist, became the language of my doctorate. By all biological laws, it should have remained a foreign frog in my mouth, yet I had tamed it into a sturdy, prolific tool.

Relatives saw a high-performing asset. Friends admired a discipline indistinguishable from a pathology. I would have graded my life an A. And yet, I considered myself a catastrophic failure.

Financially, the reckoning was poetic. At the height of the tech bubble, I bought Nortel at the precise moment before it revealed itself as an elaborate accounting prank. I watched half a million dollars—my life savings—evaporate with the speed of a fiber-optic connection. I sold my first house to meet margin calls, convinced that the same discipline that had conquered the Great Leap Forward back in China could outwit a Canadian

telecommunications firm. Intelligence, I learned too late, was no hedge against randomness.

My emotional portfolio fared worse. I cultivated friendships with the care of a botanist tending a rare, disinterested fern, only to find that time is a solvent. Most performed a slow-motion ghosting act. My wife suggested, with a gentleness bordering on pity, that I simply "cared too much"—a diagnosis usually reserved for tragic heroes or the deeply annoying.

Even love was a write-off. I had loved three women with a level of imagination better suited to the stage. None, even Hua, returned a love that followed my strictly logical expectations. I realized then that I was holding a grudge against the laws of reciprocity. I was looking for an explanation for something simpler and more humiliating: that I had never written a true masterpiece.

I was not a failure because I had invested poorly. I was a failure because I had mistaken life for a brokerage account, believing a high deposit of "feeling" guaranteed a payout. Yet, given how many others have far less capital to burn in the first place, I decided I was grateful to be such a fortunate failure.

### **III. An Other Version**

In 2009, when my elder son got married and moved to California, I looked forward to a grandson. I held the traditionally minded hope for a male heir—someone to carry the proud name of a family that had produced only sons for three generations.

To my surprise, the mere mention of this wish offended my daughter-in-law, a feminist-minded woman who saw my tradition as a threat. A few years later, they adopted Teddy. Though he shared no genetic connection with me, I gave him all my grandfatherly love. I placed my "Sovereign" expectations upon him. He was cute, curious, and learned fast.

But in 2016, when our biological granddaughter Katie was born, Teddy's behavior shifted. He grew increasingly anxious and sensitive to sound. Even the fluttering of leaves caused him to vocalize loudly. He seemed to have too much to say to the world, or was too eager to make his voice heard.

As the years passed, whenever my son and his family visited, Teddy's listless behavior and meaningless utterances began to disrupt my writing. Inside the house, he destroyed my peace of mind. Outside, he led me wherever he wanted to go, taking control of my time. I told my wife that if they brought him again, I would move out. But I never did. I forced myself to be tolerant. After all, he was my only "grandson"—the only extension of my lineage, however self-deceptive.

As Teddy aged seven times faster than I, he reached my age this year. While no one knows who will die first, I am certain my patience has run out. It is not that he isn't my true descendant; it is that he is too true a canine version of me—an unwanted author, barking at nothing all day long.



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