

Untold Adventures of Bao Huang

From China to the Tutsis of Congo

Jay Ghee

Novel – Adventure - Pearls of wisdom

This novel recounts the extraordinary adventures of young Bao Huang, who suddenly discovers hidden abilities that will change his destiny. As a result, he is pulled away from the tranquillity of his peaceful life and drawn into the African Great Lakes region—rich in potential, yet constantly troubled by conflict and tribal wars.

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Chapter One

Bao, only son of Dr Yi Huang—nicknamed “the dreamer”—picked up two sachets from the long table in his father’s dispensary. They contained dried herbs and roots—weekly medicine for elderly patients who could no longer travel.

That morning, Bao decided not to use the scooter, avoiding the noisy, overcrowded main avenue, its pavements overtaken by market stalls and hundreds of bicycles and scooters parked haphazardly. Instead, he chose to walk via the narrow “Breast-Brush Alley”, which, as the name suggests, was too tight for two people to pass without touching.

People in this country were generally small in stature, and most women had small breasts—giving you an idea of just how narrow this winding alley was, barely a hundred metres long. Bao stepped into it at a leisurely pace. It was early, and the alley was still empty. But suddenly, after a short bend, he found himself face to face with Madame Yu-Min—arguably the largest woman in the district—known for her sharp tongue, cutting gossip, baritone voice, foul breath, and exceptionally large bosom.

...Bao froze. He looked at the wall on the right, then the left, then the grey-blue sky far above the tall buildings. He quickly calculated how much further he had to go past Madame Yu-Min.

At 24 years old and a few grains of rice more, Bao was taller than most boys his age. His paternal ancestors hailed from northern districts near India. He had the distinct advantage of youth, but also the hereditary burden of his race’s courtesy. Turning back wasn’t an option—but perhaps there was a compromise, a way of passing without any awkward body contact.

“Well, boy? Are you going to let me through?” said Madame Yu-Min sharply.

“I’ll try,” he mumbled, wondering how to avoid the dragon. A local proverb popped into his mind: “A woman’s tongue is her sword—and she never lets it rust!” He knew he needed to speak little and act fast. He pressed himself against the right-hand wall, rose onto his tiptoes, stretched as tall as he could, and emptied his lungs to slim himself down. Madame Yu flattened her back against the opposite wall.

“If you touch me, I’ll slap you!” she barked.

Neither dared move first. They eyed each other like ceramic dragons. Bao advanced slowly, measuring the few centimetres between himself and a slap—or worse, her terrible breath. Madame Yu-Min made a show of sucking in her belly and chest, but had little room to shrink. A caged canary on a nearby balcony chirped a few notes. Bao took the moment of distraction, slipped past, lightly brushed against her chest, and bolted with a laugh—just barely dodging a sweeping slap.

“Scoundrel! Rascal!” she shouted, watching him disappear.

After delivering the medicine, Bao wandered through alleyways cluttered with stalls selling fruit, vegetables, poultry, spices, rice sweets, and soy drinks. He smiled at everyone, though he rarely spoke more than a few words. Unlike his childhood friends, he had never been chatty. An instinct told him, “You’re always better off keeping quiet unless you must speak.” He listened closely, exuding presence rather than dreaminess. He spoke little of himself, and it was well-known that secrets told to him never travelled further. If someone asked, “What did he say to you?” Bao would reply, “I don’t remember.”

Dr Yi Huang had set up a small table in the gallery, crowded with scooters, in front of his shop. He sat facing Mr Bei Taoyung, a tall, lean old friend who stood a full head taller than the doctor. Bei’s ancestors were from the northern mountains of Manchuria. He was lanky, skinny like a fishing rod with a football at one end. Bald and shiny-headed, he sported a thick but short white beard, giving him the air of a hermit. That day, he was suffering from terrible knee pain and leaned on a walking stick. Dr Huang placed his fingers on Bei’s wrist and read his pulse.

“Bei,” he said, lifting his fingers, “health depends a great deal on what we’ve consumed and stored over the years. The problems stem from emotions and eating habits. You’ve had your share of stress, haven’t you?”

“You can’t live the life of an adventurer without enduring all kinds of pressure!”

“Stress builds acidity in your organs and blood. That’s why your knees hurt. You must cut out acidic fruits, vinegar, condiments, coffee, and wine.”

“I’m aware. I don’t even crave those things.”

“You know that you know what you know!” the doctor laughed. “That’s what being aware means. Your body’s smart—it tells you what’s wrong.”

“So my body knows what I don’t?” Taoyung replied with a wry smile. “My humble knowledge suggests to prepare some herbs to restore your acid-alkaline balance...”

“Thank you, Yi ! They say that if nothing hurts when you’re our age, you’re probably no longer alive!”

Bei Taoyung was an old wanderer and one of the doctor’s closest friends. They practised Tai Chi and Qi Gong together each morning at dawn, along with five others, in the Confucius temple park, five hundred metres away.

“Come back in a week so we can see how your healing’s going. I’ll give you an acupuncture session too. You know, sometimes we make a burn with Moxa to prolong the effect on certain meridian points—even lifelong, for major chronic problems!”

“I’ve got enough scars already!” the old traveller groaned. “No need for more!”

Bao returned from his errands.

“Good morning, Mr Taoyung,” he said.

His father’s old friend greeted him with a smile, then asked the doctor privately, “Still no interest in traditional medicine?”

“None at all! My son says his memory isn’t good enough—he’d make a poor doctor! For the first time, the long Huang line of doctors will end!”

They went inside the shop, where the doctor laid large sheets of Kraft paper on the table. Behind him stood a towering wall cabinet full of herbal drawers.

“I get it,” said Taoyung, glancing at the cabinet. “So many drawers! How many exactly?”

“Two hundred,” replied the doctor, opening one. “That means two hundred herbs, leaves, roots, mushrooms, insects, and dried barks, which we combine according to the patient’s illness. Altogether, there are nearly 4,000 medicinal plants in our pharmacopoeia—a legacy of centuries of observation by our ancestors.”

“No wonder your son’s hesitant!” exclaimed Taoyung.

“Two hundred are enough. They cover 70% of known illnesses.”

“Your drawers are a treasure trove!” said Bei Taoyung.

“In every sense,” Huang replied evasively.

“You must have Siberian ginseng in there—rare and expensive?”

Dr Huang didn’t want to reveal the secrets of his drawers, so he turned the conversation back to his son.

“Nothing seems to excite my boy. You’d think he had no feelings. I have no gold to pass on to him. It’s time he chose a career!”

“Passing on your knowledge would be worth more than a few gold coins! There’s nothing wrong with not being excited in advance about future possibilities. Before my many trips across Africa, people would say, ‘You must be thrilled and nervous?’ I’d always answer, ‘Why should I be? For a possibility? A plan? A dream? No, I don’t live life in advance. I’ll be

excited and amazed when I see it, not before. It's the present moment that matters. Perhaps your son's a bit like me?"

Dr Huang laughed. "To start with, he sleeps too much!"

"Don't they say, 'The first thirty years you can't wake up, the next thirty you can't fall asleep'?"

"Then he can't be like you!"

"I sense a kind of wisdom in him..."

"Am I Bao's biological father, and you his spiritual one? Then try convincing him to take over my practice! I'm ready to retire."

"Retirement isn't withdrawal, or else you become rigid..."

"Of course. You're old when you grow stiff—physically and mentally."

"That's why we say there are young old men and old young men..."

"I'll always have something to keep me from stiffening. And I'll help Bao!"

"It's your practice—not his. You can't choose his path. My father also had a good business—a few rice paddies on a hill—and he wanted me to take it on. I refused and went adventuring. I've got scars all over, broken bones, and probably some odd viruses in my blood, but I don't regret a thing."

"You don't look like it! And your hatred of authority is legendary, Bei! You're a free thinker! Just never get involved in politics..."

Taoyung shrugged and grimaced.

"No risk there! That's the realm of oversized egos!"

He watched as his friend opened drawers, taking pinches from here and there to make seven identical piles on the table.

"I've travelled a lot, and I can tell you—our people inherited a unique body of knowledge. And where else on Earth do doctors get paid to keep us healthy, and not paid when we fall ill? Nowhere!"

Dr Huang smiled, carefully closing the packets and placing them into a large plastic pouch.

"You treat those drawers like they contain treasure," said Bei.

"Who knows?" the doctor replied vaguely.

A new patient had just arrived.

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Bao kissed his mother, who was preparing fritters and rice and soy milk for breakfast. He took some bowls and chopsticks out of a cupboard. The family home consisted of a long and narrow ground floor in a five-storey building, built entirely of concrete thirty years earlier, to withstand the earthquakes that were frequent in this city. A small, dark living room opened onto an old-fashioned kitchen. A spiral staircase led upstairs, where there were two bedrooms and a tiny bathroom. This had neither a

shower nor a bathtub, like most in the old buildings. You took a shower by spraying water all over the bathroom!

On the ground floor, the kitchen opened onto a large rice paddy, one of the last plots of land the property speculators had never managed to get their hands on. At the centre of the field stood a giant banyan tree where the family would sometimes sit to eat their meals, take a nap, or meet with friends or relatives. The rice had now been harvested, the field drained, and ducks were eagerly rooting around in the mud for food.

"Mei and her two children are coming to eat with us this morning," Mrs Huang told her son. "They love my fritters. You like your cousin and her children, don't you, Bao?"

"Of course, Mum. She's always cheerful, and so are her kids."

"A cheerfulness that might be a bit forced," Mrs Huang murmured.

Half an hour later, they were seated under the banyan tree enjoying the fritters. Mei was a schoolteacher and had two children, which had only recently been permitted. In view of China's overpopulation, the authorities had imposed a strict one-child policy per family. Severe penalties punished those who disobeyed. But now that population growth had stabilised, families were allowed two children.

Mei was of a cheerful and talkative nature. Bao remained quiet, smiling and making faces at the children. After a while, the children, though still seated, seemed vaguely restless. Bao pointed out a small parrot in the banyan tree, but that didn't calm them down. Then he imitated the sound of ducks. The children seemed more interested in the dishes on the table. "My little ones," suddenly exclaimed Mrs Huang, "I'm neglecting you! You'd like more fritters, wouldn't you?"

"Oh yes!" they reacted happily.

"You're so well-behaved, and of course you'll have more! I made plenty..."

Politeness dictated that a child should never ask for more than their share and must wait for the host to offer additional food. Civility and respect for elders! A child, like any adult, was expected to show self-control and not let their emotions show. In local culture, losing face is a serious fault.

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Three months passed like a gentle breeze. The hot season had begun to bead its moisture over the city lying in the plain. Bao helped his parents, cleaned the dispensary, delivered medicine, and ran errands for his mother. But he still showed no interest in traditional medicine. He spent considerable time in the surrounding mountains or under the banyan tree, contemplating nature and the sunrises and sunsets. The rice field was now filled with water, creating a multitude of magical mirrors dotted with young rice shoots. The dazzles over which the scattered clouds raced

across the sky captivated him without him even seeking them, without idling in daydreams. Letting his gaze drift over the brown water mirrors near the banyan tree, he smiled, thinking of one of his father's favourite sayings:

"He who sees the sky in the water sees the fish in the trees."

Bao had a dog of uncertain breed, short-haired, named 'Timid,' and a cat white as snow he had named Rosa. Dog and cat had grown up together and were inseparable. As soon as Bao got on his scooter, Timid would jump at his feet, and Rosa would climb onto his back. That's how they moved through the crowded city streets. When Bao parked his scooter, dog and cat would lie down on the floorboard and doze off while waiting for him.

He hadn't taken 'Breast-brush Alley' again since his encounter with Madame Yu-Min. But one early morning, he had to pass through that route and entered it with apprehension. It was clear, so he went in. About twenty metres in, a shadow surprised him, silhouetted against the sun winking its morning light from behind a building. Bao stopped, unable to make out the person in front of the blinding sun.

Then suddenly, it was like another sun shone forth. A big smile lit up the face of a young woman, beautiful and naturally simple.

"Hello!" said Bao. "Will we pass, or won't we?"

"I'm going to block you" the young woman replied.

"It won't be a bother, I'm used to it," he said, only realising afterward how flat his answer sounded.

"Show me then?" she asked.

"I press my back to one wall, and you against the other. We slide past each other..."

"That's fun...!"

"You're not from around here?"

"No, I'm visiting my aunt, Madame Yu-Min."

"Oh! She's your aunt!" he exclaimed with a hint of surprise. "Not exactly the easiest person to come across...or to get along with!"

She burst out laughing.

"Is she scary to you?"

"She threatened to slap me if I touched her..."

"And did you pass without touching her?" she asked mischievously.

"No! But I ran...really fast!"

He then realised they had passed each other, and that she had breath as sweet as young rice shoots, a scent of mango, and jet-black eyes full of joy.

"Thanks" she said, laughing as she went on her way.

He hesitated, wanting to speak to her again, but she had vanished into the rays of the sun.

Bao stayed a moment, gazing and smiling at a shadow, keeping that lovely scent with him, like the perfume of a caress. That smile never left him all day. He then remembered what his father had told him the day puberty began to itch: "When luck smiles on us, we meet friends; when it turns against us, we meet a pretty woman."

He dropped off his father's errand, then took the avenue that ran alongside the great temple dedicated to the goddess Matsu. He arrived at the scooter parking lot for university students. It was an alley nearly 300 metres long, where hundreds of scooters were perfectly lined up, tightly packed one against another. He spotted a scooter lying in the middle of the alley. A young woman, slight and frail, was pinned beneath the vehicle, unable to lift it or get free. He rushed to help her.

"Don't move" he said. "I'll lift your scooter. Are you hurt?"

"Thank you!" she stammered. "I don't think so..."

He carefully lifted the bike and parked it. The girl was no longer a teenager, but looked as delicate as imperial porcelain.

"Are you arriving or leaving?" he asked, helping her up.

"I am leaving. I forgot some books at home."

"Do you feel up to riding again?"

"Oh yes, don't worry. Just help me start my scooter! Thank you so much..."

She got back on the scooter, thanked him again, and three seconds later, sped off down the road as if nothing had happened.

In this city, thousands of petite young women covered themselves to avoid the sun's rays. They rode their scooters at great speed, with ease and skill. At red lights, they could barely touch the ground with the tips of their toes. But their agility made it seem as if they were born on their bikes!

A little further on, in a vast shaded park, Bao stopped to watch several groups of people practising Tai Chi Quan, Qi Gong, yoga, and other exercises. A man had strung a cable between two trees and was trying to walk on it. He kept falling and getting back up again, with remarkable patience. Some walked their dogs, leash in one hand and a plastic bag in the other to pick up the droppings.

Bao watched all these early morning people going about with their activities. He kept smiling, for the face of the girl from "Breast-Brush Alley" lingered vividly in his mind.

Later, after returning home, he lay down beneath the banyan tree. "If I start thinking only about her," he told himself, "it will only cloud my

mind. She'll haunt my dreams, day and night, with the procession of puppets from my imagination. Then will come the excitement, the obsession, the waiting, the longing, and the creation of the wildest scenarios! And for what? To imagine the unknown, the impossible, or the merely probable? Why feed my imagination with fantasies? I must forget her instead of inventing her. I must be content with the present rather than dream of a 'maybe' tomorrow. I'll see her again if it's meant to be. For now, I turn the page!"

He fixed his gaze and all his attention on a hedge of yellow-stemmed bamboo, then on the delicious shade spilling from the banyan and its thick foliage, trembling with the activity of little green parrots. Their playfulness amused him, and he laughed at their joy, fully absorbed in the present moment, enchanted by the here and now.

His mother called from the kitchen: "Bao, can you do some shopping for me?"

He took the path cutting across the large rice field and entered the kitchen. His mother handed him a list of things to pick up, repeating the usual safety advice she gave every time.

"Don't rush, my boy. And be careful of the fools on the road!"

"Yes, Mum! I'm taking my two protectors with me"

He put on a brown leather jacket, too warm for the season but useful to fend off Rosa's claws. The back of the leather was scratched and marked by them. The animals stood up, watching him with excitement.

At the dispensary, the doctor asked his son: "Could you buy me some dried cicadas from Nankin? I've run out and need some for young Kaelan's potion."

Bao nodded and stepped out into the gallery-porch cluttered with scooters, bicycles, and furniture. He noticed preparations underway for a new celebration honouring a god from the Chinese pantheon. Shopkeepers were placing small braziers by the roadside to burn imitation banknotes. The smoke would speak to the gods, showing the devotion of the givers. It was believed for generations that such offerings could ensure health and prosperity.

Bao grabbed his scooter. Timid and Rosa were already settled on the footboard, their eyes filled with excitement as they stared at him. "Rosa! That's not your place. Come on, jump off!"

The cat leapt onto his shoulders and clung to his neck... The scooter started, then sped off down the avenue with its unusual passengers, well-positioned to enjoy the thrill of wind and speed!

Upon his return, Bao parked the scooter under the porch, not far from the little table where his father was reading Bei Taoyung's pulse. He greeted his father's friend, who now walked without a cane.

"Bao, my friend Taoyung would like to make you a proposal. He wants to show you a bit of the region."

"I'm enjoying my retirement, and we can take the train tomorrow morning," said Taoyung. "I'll show you three unusual places. We'll spend the whole day sight-seeing. Are you up for it?"

"Sounds good," Bao replied naturally.

"Come to my place tomorrow at 7 a.m. We'll go to the station on your scooter. It'll be a long day full of discoveries."

"Alright," said Bao. "I'll be there on time."

The next morning, Bao parked his scooter in front of Taoyung's home. The latter was waiting, dressed in a loose traditional outfit and a small red silk cap. He carried a backpack and climbed onto the scooter's rear seat.

"All set! Let's go. But not too fast! I need to preserve what's left of these old bones that survived the storms!"

Old age was deeply respected in this country. It was common to see young people carrying elders or strolling with them through parks in the cool morning air. The traffic was heavy and noisy. The central station had several parking lots where hundreds of scooters were lined up side by side. The attendant gave them a small ticket with a number to help them find the bike upon their return. Taoyung stopped by a street vendor and bought two portions of sweet brown rice wrapped in banana-leaves. "Our breakfast!" he told his young companion.

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A colourful and bustling crowd filled the large hall of the station. It was a real human anthill, with people rushing in every direction in seemingly chaotic disorder. Bao and his companion passed through the gates and headed for one of the 20 platforms.

"There's our train," said Taoyung. "Let's go find our seats!"

Young passengers were dragging large suitcases through the corridors. After stowing them away, they took their seats, pulled out a cell phone or laptop, and immersed themselves in the magical world of the internet.

"We're off on an adventure!" said Bei Taoyung.

"I suppose this trip is nothing compared to all the adventures you've already lived through?"

"Of course, but every departure is always a path to something new. The fear of leaving home is the greatest obstacle to the joy of discovery. We love to cling to the false security of what we already know!"

"Are there some risks?"

"You take a risk every time you cross the street..."

"I wonder what makes people run around like that? They look like mad, badly programmed robots! Chasing what? Going where? Doing what?"

"Some are driven by a search for distraction or escape, others by ambition, the desire to succeed or to feel validated through work and money..."

"Work no matter what..." murmured the young man.

"I won't bore you with talk about work, even though your parents are a little worried about you. I'd just like to ask you one question. Has your father ever spoken to you about his drawers?"

Bao made a slight grimace of irritation.

"He's often tried to teach me the names and properties of plants..."

"Nothing more?"

"No! Why do you ask?"

The old man hesitated for a moment, his gaze caught by the anxious crowd passing by outside.

"I have the feeling he's hiding something in there," he whispered.

"Something valuable..."

"That's his business," Bao replied, clearly eager to drop the subject.

A whistle blew! The doors closed and the train lurched forward with loud jolts and screeches. Some passengers were still searching for free seats. Bei Taoyung remembered the trains of his youth, before he left for Africa. The passengers used to be merchants, peasants carrying a few goods for the market, or workers with their tools, dressed in greasy or dusty clothes...

"A real change," he muttered. "The first stop will be in an hour," he added.

"We'll be passing through a huge modern city that sprang up like a mushroom in just a few years. Brand new, filled with endless skyscrapers. We won't stop long. But this first stage will show you where a third of people look for life's answers: ambition, the pursuit of success, escape into work, the hustle and stress. The race to succeed and climb higher! It's the city of technology, where everyone works to make gadgets that meet the demands of the modern world. Everyone wants to be better than

their neighbour, to make a lot of money. Greed and the desire for what-should-be are the fuel behind all the energy spent there.”

After passing through plains shimmering with water from the rice paddies, through small towns with concrete houses adorned with silver stainless steel railings, and bridges crossing the dried beds of rivers, the train entered the mushroom city. Its buildings were covered in bottle-green or lead-grey glass panels.

“All this oppresses me,” said Bao. “Some friends told me about it. But honestly, it’s not for me... All the people who work here must be very intelligent?”

“Intelligent? No, I don’t think so! Intelligence isn’t the same as knowledge. They probably have excellent memories and strong intellectual skills for technology. But capacity and memory are not intelligence.”
“Isn’t that contradictory?!”

“Look at them—worried, stressed, consumed by the desire for success, and therefore subject to jealousy, envy, and perhaps hidden frustration and anger. Intelligence is the ability to see the whole movement of thought, to see all the motivations of the self and what it seeks or hides. Without denial, without escape!”

The train emptied of many passengers. It didn’t take long before it set off again.

“You travelled and lived in Africa for a long time,” Bao said. “Are people intelligent on that continent?”

“They often have excellent memories. That’s why those with wealthy parents study law or medicine. But in general, they’re consumers, not producers.”

“What do they consume?”

“Up until now, it’s been mostly wild game and whatever the Europeans came to plant or develop. But there’s little game left, and the European colonists have been dispossessed and driven out.”

“But I’ve heard that our country controls a lot of mines and ports there?”
“The continent is very rich in minerals, precious metals, and fertile land. Our leaders send our workers and engineers there to extract the underground wealth our factories need.”

“So there will be a lot of our fellow citizens over there?”
“It’s a subtle way of creating and maintaining jobs!” said Bei Taoyung, watching the train pull away and the track disappear behind them.
“I don’t like that city!”

“I don’t doubt it, Bao. I only showed it to you on the way to two other sites that should enlighten you.”

Bao thought to himself that his father’s friend was quite a talker, probably due to having lived through so many adventures. That, at least,

justified the flood of words he poured out so easily, like a river in flood, full of energy and silt.

But Taoyung wasn't like those chatterboxes who just blow hot air and love the sound of their own voice. His country's culture would have made him lose face for that. In the past, during his travels, he used to smile when he met people who believed it was their duty to teach the world and impose their opinions or beliefs. Taoyung simply liked telling his stories to those who wanted to hear them. For him, it was a way of opening windows onto a picturesque and exotic world. He too often saw boredom and emptiness in young people's eyes. He wanted to tell them: "Break free from this life of false security, this rigid, oppressive, unhealthy life, and go discover and fulfil your potential. The world offers so many opportunities!"

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An hour later, the train approached mountains covered with betel palm trees. As they climbed higher, they passed coffee plantations, and higher still, it was tea country—the land inhabited by certain aboriginal tribes. The two travellers took a bus that dropped them off at an enchanting site visited by thousands of pilgrims. In a large parking area, Bao counted over twenty large tourist buses. As one left, another arrived, spilling out clusters of visitors heading towards a temple hidden behind a grove of tall bamboo with yellow stalks.

"You're about to discover where the second third of people spend their lives," said his travel companion.

A wide avenue lined with pine trees bustled with a motley crowd moving in both directions.

"This is what interests them!" he said, pointing to a giant laying hen made of wicker, straw, and brightly coloured wood.

Bao stared at the colossal poultry, sitting on its nest, and wondered what such a bird—larger than the Huang family's entire home—was doing in a place of worship.

"Any idea?" asked Taoyung.

"No! A hen here, a temple over there... What's the connection?"

"We're at the Temple of the Golden Egg-Laying Hen!" exclaimed the old man with a mischievous smile. "The thousands of pilgrims who come here each week do so for one reason: to ask the gods for wealth! They firmly believe the gods will answer their prayers and reward them for burning a little incense and leaving a few red apples or other fruit on the altar..."

"After ambition for work, ambition for luck," replied Bao.

"Exactly! But the monks also serve a very good lunch. The restaurant is

deep in the forest, and it's lovely. I can even lie down for a short nap before we visit our third site."

Two hours later, the travellers boarded a local bus to climb higher into the mountains via a dangerous road of narrow switchbacks skirting deep ravines. An unusual building, some twenty stories tall, appeared on a plateau offering a splendid view of the Nan region. They were dropped off along with a few young monks near a gate that resembled that of Buckingham Palace in London!

Bao looked in amazement at the immense park, extremely clean and well-organised. A giant spear-shaped structure cast a shadow of disdain over the small five-storey rectangular buildings behind it. The immense tower, clad in pink marble, soared to a point against the cloudy sky.

"This is the Tchpao Temple! It's the result of the energy and ambition of a single man," said Taoyung. "An old Buddhist abbot with a grand vision who brought it to life by combining the talents of a military leader and a businessman. He managed to secure massive donations from new tech millionaires. Of course, in exchange for promises of rewards in the next world!"

Bao was mesmerised. He walked, mouth agape, along perfectly maintained avenues lined with giant bonsai-shaped trees, lawns more beautiful than any English golf course, and imposing granite or marble statues placed with great taste.

"Hundreds of young monks and nuns live here," said Taoyung. "They sleep in the hen coops out back. In addition to cleaning and maintenance, they practise all the trades needed for total self-sufficiency. Here, you'll see what occupies a large portion of humanity. While others seek lives filled with pleasure and sensory delights, these people understand that money doesn't bring happiness. They prepare here for eternal joy, the bliss of enlightenment, the ultimate blessing. Let's go inside!"

Bao had never seen the grandeur of Egypt's or Rome's palaces, but what he saw that day would remain etched in his memory forever. They entered the first hall through a massive double door made of richly decorated tropical wood, as tall as three stories of a modern skyscraper. Inside, in each corner, a visibly angry colossus held up the ceiling on its shoulders. The floor and walls were covered in marble. A heavy silence reigned.

"The famous Colossus of Rhodes in ancient Greece couldn't have been taller than these," murmured the seasoned traveller.

Next, they entered a long hallway lined with an army of large statues legendary figures carved in rare wood, collected from across the country.

"This collection is worth a fortune," Bei whispered.

"I never imagined so much luxury could exist," thought Bao.

"A third of humanity spends all its energy preparing for the afterlife!

Here, people also live for tomorrow—but a tomorrow imagined by the mind.”

“Is that a way to escape the reality of the moment, the hardships of life?”

“In a sense! We’ve arrived just in time for meditation. The public isn’t allowed in the upper halls, but I know one of the older monks guarding the doors. He’s an old schoolmate. Let’s go see him!”

They took a lift to the eighth floor. The plump, ruddy-faced old monk, dressed in a grey robe, sat behind a tiny desk near a double door. He greeted his childhood friend with a broad smile. Bei bowed deeply and embraced him. He introduced his young companion, and after a brief aside, the monk led them to a hidden door. They carefully entered a small observation booth from which they could see, through a darkened window, the vast meditation hall. More than 300 monks in fawn-coloured robes sat on cushions directly on the floor in perfect lines. The atmosphere was one of military discipline—like a parade of immobile soldiers awaiting orders from their leader, seated at the back of the hall, flanked by his two officers. The abbot wore an orange and gold robe. His assistants were dressed in ivory-coloured robes. The monks meditated like this for an hour in absolute silence.

In front of the abbot, beautiful vases filled with tall white and orange lilies were lined up. Behind them, on the back wall, hung a gigantic photo of the abbot for every monk to admire at will. Noblesse oblige!

Some windows had been opened. Bao saw a white feather drift in through a nearby window. The breeze made the downy plume dance through the hall and land on the nose of a very young monk. Surprised, the boy opened his eyes and went cross-eyed staring at the intruder. No one else noticed what had happened. Only Bao saw it.

Suddenly, the young monk burst into irreverent, loud laughter. A subtle wave of surprise rippled through the room, and a stern, scandalised look crossed the abbot’s face. But the monk seemed entirely detached from the solemn atmosphere of order and silence. He kept laughing uncontrollably, tears streaming down his cheeks. His laughter was wildly inappropriate in that monastic atmosphere of order, silence, self-control, discipline, and seriousness. He had done nothing less than desecrate the sacred!

The abbot did not look kindly upon this behaviour. He had built his monastery on a foundation of strict rigidity. With a discreet gesture, he summoned two monks to grab the troublemaker under the arms and drag him out. It did nothing to stop his laughter—in fact, it only got worse.

The two travellers left the observation booth quietly. Once back near his friend, Taoyung asked:

“Does this sort of ridiculous behaviour happen often?”

“Very, very rarely!”

"What got into him?"

"We'll have to ask him. Perhaps... it was enlightenment—who knows?"

"Well, we'll continue our visit now. Thank you for your courtesy."

With hands joined, the men bowed deeply in mutual respect. Then, the two travellers visited the museum halls and several temples illuminated by the magical light of modern technology. No expense had been spared. But the Buddha temple on the upper floors was not open to the public. Inside was a giant Buddha statue over 20 meters tall, covered in gold and precious stones.

As they exited through the colossal doorway, Bei asked his companion: "Do you have a good sense of this place? Do you understand how traditions and desire can condition the human mind?"

"Indeed, you are helping me to enlarge my horizon. I'm discovering a lot. Thank you, Mr. Taoyung."

"What fascinates me about the humanity we encountered today is that almost no one asks themselves what we're doing on this Earth, and even fewer question desire and ambition. The vast majority blindly accept and follow a monotonous life to which they add a bit of entertainment and distraction. They have absolutely no desire to reach a deep understanding of existence."

"Do they have the time? They seem in a real rush to live..."

"Look over there, on the bench—there's our impertinent monk!"

The bench was shaded from the sun by the trimmed foliage of a tree shaped like a poodle: vivid green balls joined by the thin limbs of branches and trunk.

"A fine example of arboreal manicure to bend nature to man's desires," Bei suggested.

They approached the young monk, who was still wiping away tears. His face had taken on a serene quality, as if lit from within by a gentle light. He looked at the travellers and offered them a contagious smile. "Hello, Mr. Taoyung," he said.

Surprised, Taoyung asked him: "How do you know my name?" "I don't know it. I see you, and I see your name—and everything else." "What do you mean, 'everything else'?"

"You're 'transparent,' and I can see your whole life. Your adventures in Africa, and your accidents... When people look, they only see the surface of things. But when perception passes through the eyes without a 'looker,' a penetrating vision reveals the emptiness inside things." "I'm flabbergasted!" the old man exclaimed.

"Someone must have told him about you," Bao said. "Hello Bao," the monk replied. "Not at all! I never saw you before either. But now I see you, your name—and everything else..."

Bao turned to his companion:

"Did you arrange this show for me, Mr. Taoyung?"

"Not at all, my boy! I'm just as astonished as you are."

Then, turning to the young monk, he asked: "What happened up there?"

"I don't know," he answered. "How can you explain it in words? I suddenly saw a carnation in a hand without a body, leaning over a dazzling white cloud. Everything blended together, then only a feather remained, and then nothing! Nothing at all... Neither me, nor you, nor anyone.... Nowhere... And even 'nowhere' had disappeared!"

"We're going to have to lock him up," Bao muttered.

The monk burst into genuine laughter.

"Lock up who? Lock up what? The body? A fine illusion! Can you lock up a shadow? Lock up the mind? Try locking ants in a birdcage instead!"

Then he pointed to the Tchpao temple:

"Over there—I was locked up! And I didn't even know it. Imprisoned in tradition, the past, and a mind tortured by discipline, I couldn't see through the one who was imprisoned!"

After a brief pause, he added: "Will they ever understand that we must free ourselves from the illusion of a separate self? Since the self doesn't exist, letting go of what never existed requires no effort—only understanding. In reality, there is no self that can disappear. There's only an illusory self, mistaken for the real one... How simple!"

"But who is this 'we'?" asked Taoyung.

"We're trying to open a door that never existed. There is no goal; we just have to realise this. Life can only be understood through our own life, not through books or others' teachings. Life has an inherent purpose: to fulfil itself within us. Many think they have a soul inside a body, but actually, 'we are the bodies of a single soul.'"

In this exquisitely clean setting where human hands had shaped a garden worthy of Babylon, the three men stood frozen in contemplative silence for a moment. Then the young monk added: "Bao, always remember—we choose nothing. I didn't choose the feather! It chose me. Do what you must in each moment, and your life will be filled with peace and joy."

The two travellers struggled to accept the monk's words. What unsettled them even more was the powerful vibration he seemed to project. He added:

"When we seek with a 'self,' as I did since I was a teenager, we only find what we imagine. The search for more leads to less until we understand the one who's searching!"

"That makes sense... but it's mind-blowing!" exclaimed Taoyung. "Can I really believe that this random event transformed your life?"

The monk ignored the question. He was looking at Bao with eyes that radiated an almost unbearable fire. Bao couldn't hold his gaze. It burned with an unspeakable energy.

"Bao," he said, "from tomorrow your life will no longer be the same! Everything will change for you too..."

"We'll see," Bao replied evasively.

"I see it," said the monk. Then he added: "And you, sir, take good care of your old bones. They'll carry you for another 40 years!"

"You're joking? That would have me eating roots at 110...What will I look like?"

"What you look like doesn't matter. Live the moment! Each present moment."

"Good advice from such a young man! Thank you!"

Bei Taoyung turned to Bao.

"Let's not forget our return journey. We can't miss our train."

"Safe travels, gentlemen," said the monk, rising and bowing deeply.

"You are the sun of my sun..."

On the return journey, the two travellers remained deep in thought for a long time. As they neared their town, Bao finally broke the silence.

"I doubt much of what the monk said. But what struck me most was the extraordinary energy he radiated. It felt like he was trying to communicate through that energy, more than through his words!"

"Well, I understand you. It's probably the energy of detachment, of non-dependence. Everyone we encountered today was obsessed with desire, with the urge to possess. Some want to possess success, recognition, validation, the latest gadgets; others seek wealth, property, and perhaps also a spouse; and others still want to possess ultimate happiness in another life, in Heaven or Nirvana."

"Isn't that a natural quest for any human being?"

"Then we end up being possessed by what we possess," replied the old man. "I followed that path too. But one day I realised: the less I own, the better I feel. When the desire to possess no longer possessed me, I overcame the fear of loss and all the anxieties and conflicts of ambition and wanting. When that wanting faded, I met detachment, and it showed me the royal road to peace and joy."

"But what are we, if we have nothing?"

"Back then, I feared having nothing; I feared losing my identity and sought a false sense of security by constantly asserting myself. But it was a constant battle—a struggle that wore down body and mind. Now, detached from all things and all people, I can give freely to everyone,

without preference, and I can enjoy the bliss of each moment."

"How can someone be happy with nothing?"

"It is to be truly rich to have nothing to lose,' as the saying goes. When you're detached from everything and hold no preference, life immerses you in indescribable abundance and creativity."

"So that's why the monk radiated that vibration—that energy that surprised us. How could we possibly understand what happens in another's body and mind? It was a very unusual encounter! Only time will tell whether he could truly see the future and into people... As for the rest—that's life's role!"

"And anyway, who cares?" added Bao, shrugging his shoulders.

Chapter 2

That night, Bao had a strange dream.

"Two monks were sitting in the refectory of their monastery. One was very young. The other was very old. "I wonder what Nirvana tastes and smells like?" asked the young monk.

"It tastes and smells like your soup," replied the elder."

The next morning, Mrs Huang was surprised to find her husband still asleep when she woke up—he hadn't gone out for his usual Tai Chi practice. She called out to him. He didn't move. Suddenly, she realised he had passed away peacefully in his sleep, without warning—just like his father and grandfather before him.

*

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