Though the Candles Flicker Red

Jonathan Tel
Jonathan Tel’s collection of stories, The Beijing of Possibilities, was released last month. China Beat ran an earlier selection, “Year of the Gorilla,” in March 2009. Tel’s previous publications include Arafat’s Elephant and Freud’s Alphabet. You can learn more about The Beijing of Possibilities at the website of Other Press.

By Jonathan Tel

Blame it on the Olympics. The authorities are trying to clean up the city, give it a new face. Let’s fool tourists and athletes into thinking it’s always been like this. Street performers of all kinds, they’re swept out of sight. Not that they vanish, they relocate to the outskirts, beyond the Fifth Ring Road. Now, as I set off to work, making for the number 13 subway line, I’m importuned by calligraphers and contortionists, fortune-tellers and acrobats, and a living statue in the guise of a terracotta warrior poses on the traffic island. You can’t just walk by these people as if they don’t exist.

There’s one busker who’s been here since New Year. He’s staked out a spot in the underpass near the station. In his late fifties, I’d guess; gray hair and glasses; on colder days he wears a Tianjin-style ribbed jacket. Just another migrant from the provinces, I’d supposed, chancing his luck. He arranges an inflatable red cushion on the ground and sits cross-legged, the instrument balanced on his left thigh. He plays the erhu, always the same slow, mournful tune. I must have tipped him a dozen times before we finally had a conversation. ‘Tough out there,’ I said — words to that effect. It was April, dust season; the north wind blowing from beyond the Great Wall. ‘Not so bad,’ he replied seriously, ‘I get bigger tips in lousy weather.’ To my surprise he was addressing me in Beijing dialect — throaty, with exaggerated tones, the way the old-timers speak. I had some minutes to spare, and was in no hurry to go out into the billowing dust. ‘How was spring in the old days?’ I asked, ‘More dusty? Less?’ He drew the bow against the strings and the python-skin resonator amplified the sound. I dropped a five-yuan bill in the instrument case. Once again he performed his tune for me, and then he told me his story.

His name was Chen Wei. His father had taught composition at the Beijing Conservatory and his mother’s father had owned a department store; during the Cultural Revolution the family was in
Category 4, the lowest level. In 1970 Chen was sent to be reeducated at a commune in Shanxi Province. ‘It was hell,’ he said. ‘We were supposed to “learn from the peasants”, but you can’t learn anything when you’re hungry all the time. We could never fulfill our quotas. We intellectuals were told to hoe the weeds, but nobody told us what was a weed and what was a sprout.’

‘Did your comrades help each other?’

The bow made a discord. ‘Intellectuals – every man was out to save his own skin.’

‘And the peasants?’

Chen snorted. ‘They called it the Three Togethernesses. We were supposed to live with the peasants, and eat with them, as well as take their advice. But let me tell you: the rule was we had to save our shit for manuring the fields, but the peasants kept sneaking into the latrine and stealing the intellectuals’ shit.’

‘But you’re here today …’

In a softer voice he said, ‘It wasn’t all bad. My commune was in the foothills, near a bamboo forest. Shanxi is beautiful in the spring, you know ... After a few months I moved in with an elderly peasant couple who were different. They looked after me, gave me medicine when I was sick and made sure I had enough to eat, anyway.’

He looked up expectantly. I offered him a cigarette, which he lit, cupping the flame in his palm. I put another yuan in his case, and he told me about that family.

They lived in a one-room hut, the way their ancestors had always done. They farmed wheat and cabbages and they gathered wood-ear mushrooms. Their son, Dandan, almost died during the famine years of the late fifties and early sixties. He pulled through, and though he never grew tall he became strong. They loved him above everything and he gave meaning to their lives. But when he was older, a difficulty arose. How could husband and wife make love with the boy curled up next to them on the brick sleeping platform? In summer the couple sneaked out into the woods like young lovers. But in winter and in the rainy season, that was hardly practical. When Dandan was seven, they strung a blanket down the middle of their hut, and told their son that from then on he would have to sleep on his side of it. Even so, he could surely overhear. They found errands to send him on, telling him to collect kindling, or claiming they could hear a wild dog nearby and ordering him to shoo the flea-ridden nonexistent beast away. But it was frustrating, never knowing when the boy might come back, and always having to keep as quiet as they could, suppressing their joy.

By the time he turned ten Dandan was active and curious – beginning to be interested, the parents noticed, in girls himself. The problem was only going to get worse. The wife confided in her mother, who came up with a solution. The mother’s brother played erhu; he agreed to teach Dandan. The boy, though he had no great musical talent, was persuaded to go along with the plan. Now, twice a week in the late afternoons, he sat on his side of the blanket and practiced. ‘Louder!’ the parents would call, ‘Play it louder!’ He only ever learned one melody, a traditional one, ‘Though the Candles Flicker Red’, but this was sufficient. The music was jerky, out of tune, riddled with mistakes – no matter. Once more the parents enjoyed a satisfactory love life, and the child grew into a vigorous and happy adolescent.

When he was seventeen, Dandan was recruited into the army, and sent to a base near the Korean frontier. His parents were content he’d found a place in life, an honorable career. There was every prospect he’d be promoted. Who knows? One day their little boy might command a brigade. Of course the parents were lonely without him. Still, they imagined the compensation would be that they now could make love whenever they wanted, in any way they wanted, as vociferously as they dared – the entitlement of the humblest peasant as much as that of any general or lord. But to their dismay, in the absence of the plaintive music of the erhu, their love making lacked a dimension.
It was the following spring that Chen arrived in their commune. At first the couple didn’t know what to make of him, a comical and pathetic figure in thick glasses who couldn’t tell a beet leaf from a poisonous shoot. But it was the husband, Luo, who intuited that the young man might have a hidden talent. He struck up conversation one morning when the two of them were squatting at the latrine.

‘Tell me, Young Friend, I mean, Comrade, can you by any chance play an instrument?’

Chen was puzzled and guarded. Was he being tested on his bourgeois background? ‘What if I can?’

‘I’m rather fond of music myself.’

‘Well, as a matter of fact I studied the cello. The piano too, of course, and I’m competent at violin and viola, and the mandolin as well.’

Luo understood none of these exotic words. ‘Yes, Comrade, but can you play the erhu?’

Chen declared – no more than the truth – ‘I’m sure I can turn my hand to any instrument.’

The two men pulled up their trousers, and Luo spat out his cigarette butt. ‘Come to my home, Young Friend, this afternoon at five. My wife would like to meet you.’

Chen was welcomed. He was introduced to the wife, Shao. He was served tea and a hawberry treat. The three sat side by side on the sleeping platform, the stranger in the middle. The couple showed him the instrument left behind by Dandan. After just a few minutes of experimentation – though he’d never held an erhu in his life – he was able to produce notes on it, chords, whole melodies: ‘Happy Birthday’, segueing into ‘Rely on the Helmsman While Sailing the Sea’, and the opening bar of Beethoven’s Fifth.

Then Shao leaned forward, her eye-sockets deep and her teeth gleaming in the light from the grate. ‘Comrade, do you know “Though the Candles Flicker Red?”’

‘Sing it, and I’ll play.’

The woman hawked into the fire. In a hearty voice, a little cracked, she sang. The music filled the little hut.

Chen nodded curtly. He took up the instrument and played the tune back – richer and more shapely than they’d ever heard it before. Luo and Shao turned to one another and shared a smile.

At their age, the couple were not embarrassed to explain their dilemma, though Chen blushed. There and then, the blanket was drawn across the middle of the hut. Chen took up his position, playing the simple, wistful tune over and over again, with as much volume as he could. Meanwhile, on the other side, moans and shrieks of joy.

It was agreed: Luo and Shao invited Chen to lodge with them. They would help him with extra vegetables, also herbal medicine if he needed it, and give him what advice they could. In return, every Wednesday and Saturday from six to seven the young man made music.

So Chen survived in the commune in Shanxi province, while other exiles did not; and thirty years later he regained his Beijing residency permit. He was back now where he’d come from, getting by, using the talent he possessed.

This is what the old man told me in the underpass during the dust storm. Others had gathered close by – a sword swallower and a man who did tricks with string, and a one-legged ‘want-rice’ was plucking at my sleeve. I gave the musician an extra ten yuan. I could delay no longer: I had a train to catch.
‘Old Chen,’ I said, addressing him with respect. ‘One last question, please. Given your experience and ability, why do you always play the same tune?

He adjusted his instrument, settling it lower on his thigh, and gave me a sneaky smile. ‘Oh, there’s nothing like this tune! This is the only good ‘un!’ – as with parted lips and half-closed eyes once again he began to play. And I had to admit, listening to the familiar melody, there was something in what he said.