

The Yellow Papers [extract]

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A mouse scurried along the thick wooden beams and Chen Mu's gaze followed its silhouette until it disappeared behind the bunches of onions and garlic hanging from the ceiling. Beside him his mother slept, and the anger that had been festering in his belly ignited into hate. In the pre-dawn grey he could make out the shape of her cheekbones, the pale skin stretched dry and tight over bone before it darkened in the hollows beneath her eyes. She snored, her mouth open, and her stale breath sickened him. He wanted to kick her. Shake her awake and demand to know why she was sending him away to live amongst the barbarians. He was only seven, had never even been outside his village, and now she was sending him to the other side of the world.

She mumbled and turned, moaning and clutching her belly protectively even in sleep. A strand of saliva slid out of the corner of her mouth onto her hair, and pity replaced Chen Mu's anger as he remembered the blood and putrid mucus he'd seen in their shit-pot, and the way she moved, bent almost double, when she thought him asleep. Gently, he pulled up the quilt and tucked it snug over her shoulders.

In the main front room the silkworms' munching sounded like the pattering of rain on a roof. A papier-mâché box stood in a corner, on top of which lay the quilt his mother was making for his journey. She'd ripped open her own winter clothes to use the wadding within, and this worried Chen Mu – he knew wadding was expensive and he'd seen how each spring, when she unpicked their padded winter clothes in search of lice, she always painstakingly gathered every scrap of it after it had aired. He mulled over this as he watched the fat white bodies of the silkworms sway like tiny ghost-snakes in their trays. What would she use this winter if all her wadding went into his quilt?

He sighed. The silkworms needed more leaves and Chen Mu decided he'd go to the mulberry tree to pick some, even though this was women's work. It would be a small favour – he'd even make her a bowl of hot water on his return, in which he'd float a few slivers of garlic to help ease the pain in her belly.

A rooster crowed and a dog barked an answer, and he knew he must hurry if he didn't want the villagers to see him gathering the leaves. He rekindled the fire in the mouth of the oven, re-plaited his hair into a long queue then went to the back of the house to relieve himself.

Outside the whole village was so cloaked in mist that even stone walls seemed no more than shadows. He heard the throbbing of wings over the river and the soft lowing of

the village buffalo. As he squatted over the pit he thought of the events that had brought him to this day.

He'd been barely four when his father and older brothers had followed the great Tso Tsung-t'ang to the northwest provinces to help fight the Nien Fei. They hadn't returned, and in the drought and famine that followed, during months so hot and dry that men killed animals to drink their blood, his mother had sold his eldest sister to a brothel, and the younger ones as slaves to a rich landlord, even as they cried and begged for this not to happen. Chen Mu had been sent to work in the fields, and for three years now his mother had awakened him at dawn and he'd worked till sunset every single day, and though just a boy he worked as hard as a full-grown man so that the rice and small coins he was paid, together with the money his mother earned from the silk, enabled them to survive. And though his life had not been easy, still he'd been happy, secretly proud to now be the man of the household, to know that his mother didn't have to remarry, thanks to his contributions.

Then last winter everything changed – a teacher called Yung Wing had come to his village to tell the people of the golden prospects the Imperial Government was offering their sons. He'd reminded them of China's defeat in the two Opium Wars, a defeat caused not from lack of courage, but because of the superior power of the foreigners' weapons. But now their sons could learn the secrets of that power; the government was willing to send them to a place called Connecticut, and for the next twenty years they'd be given a stipend to study and be dressed in the satin gowns of scholars, and on their return they'd receive the same official rank and prestige as those who had entered the Imperial Service.

But none believed him. They didn't want their sons to go to America, even if what Teacher Yung said was true. They were all simple villagers – had been for generations – and they didn't care for their sons to leave the village. No one had even heard of this place called Connecticut, so they'd listened politely and nodded in agreement to all he'd said, until he asked who would be the first to send his son. No one had stepped forward, but as each villager returned to his work his mother had lingered and asked the teacher for permission to speak. When Chen Mu returned from the rice fields that evening, he already knew that the Widow Chen had pledged her son.

She was sending him away, knowing he wouldn't return until fully-grown, and since that evening the thought that she could not love him had festered like a cancer in his belly.

He heard the squeak of the shit-collector's barrow and pulled up his cotton trousers. Back in the kitchen he added a few more twigs to the fire and picked up the bamboo basket for the mulberry leaves.

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The sun was barely up and the mist had not started to evaporate when Chen Mu returned home, his basket full of fresh leaves glistening with dew. He was proud of having thought of this surprise for his mother, of starting the day's routine before her. It would be a small gift, something she may remember when he was no longer here – maybe even something that would make her miss him. He ripped the leaves into pieces and scattered them on the trays of silkworms.

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Chen Mu carefully carried the small bowl of hot water and garlic to the bedroom. 'Mā?' His mother opened her eyes and looked around, confused. She sat up and brushed her hair out her eyes. 'Here. For you. I fed the silkworms as well, so you won't—'

'You did what?' She thrust the bowl back into his hands and struggled out of bed. She slipped her bound feet into shoes and, clutching her gown around her thin body, tottered to the front room. Puzzled, Chen Mu followed.

She was frantically picking each piece of leaf out of the trays, brushing each silkworm off. Her long hair hung down the side of her face, and as she stumbled around the frame her whole body shook.

'Help me!' she snapped, but Chen Mu could only stare. 'You stupid boy, help me. How often have I told you to wait until the sun has dried the leaves? You know they'll die if they eat damp leaves. You stupid, *stupid* boy! Did you want to kill them all?'

Chen Mu let the bowl drop out of his hand and ran out of the house. Out past the beans climbing the bamboo poles, down the slippery cobbled street leading to the river. Of course he knew about the leaves – his mother had explained it again and again – yet he'd forgotten it all in order to make himself more important in her eyes. On the other side of the river a dog darted out of a courtyard and snapped at his heels, and he thought this fitting for it showed how unworthy he was – he didn't even deserve the respect of a dog. He knew now why he was the only boy out of the whole village to be sent to America – why his mother was sending him away. It was because he was stupid. Too stupid even for women's work.

Across the suspension bridge a man laden with woven straw shoes strung to a bamboo pole blocked his way but Chen Mu pushed on, wanting to escape this new-found insight that enfolded him just as the silk of the cocoon enfolded the worm.

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When he could run no more he lay on the side of the hill to catch his breath. Below him the village was still shrouded in mist, so that he felt he could be the only one alive in the world. He sat up and hugged his knees. Was he really so stupid? These past months his

mother had sent him to the village schoolmaster so that he wouldn't shame her in Shanghai, where he was to attend school prior to leaving for America. Day after day he'd met with the schoolmaster, and he'd recited from the *Trimetrical Classic* and the *Thousand-words Classic*, then applied himself to his writing; he'd only practised small calligraphy used for every day, for large calligraphy was an art which the schoolmaster thought him too ignorant to attempt. Even so he often struggled, and the schoolmaster constantly found fault where Chen Mu could see none, and he'd hit Chen Mu on the head with a wooden ruler to help the lesson sink in.

'Look, Chen Mu. Look at this stroke. It's meant to be as sharp as the blade of a knife, but you've made it as soft as a maiden's blush. Start again – from the beginning.'

And even when he thought he'd done well, still the schoolmaster found cause to complain.

'Your work has no music, Chen Mu. Hold your brush thus. Can you sense the pressure of the hairs on the paper through your fingers? The changing speed as you move it to form this character?'

But Chen Mu only felt the lifeless handle of the brush.

In the valley below the mist was evaporating and Chen Mu realised that if he didn't head back he'd be late for his last meeting with the schoolmaster. He was leaving for Shanghai this very morning, and he knew it would be considered rude if he didn't first bid the man farewell.

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He found the old man already in the schoolroom. He knelt and bowed his head to the ground four times, as was the custom. The schoolmaster acknowledged Chen Mu, then picked up a small box from his table.

'I wish you a safe journey, Chen Mu. You'll do well, if you fight against laziness.' He held out the box with both hands. '*Remember – without being worked, jade cannot be shaped into a vessel; without being educated, people cannot be shaped into virtuous citizens.*'

Chen Mu was surprised to receive a gift, and was embarrassed, for courtesy required reciprocity. But before he could say anything, the teacher waved him away. Outside, Chen Mu carefully opened the box. Nestled amongst folds of red silk was a brush-rest made of apple-green jade, carved into the shape of the sacred lotus plant. Carefully he took it out of its box and rested it on the palm of his hand. It was about seven centimetres long and four wide. On one side of the curved leaf, attached to the stem, was the conical seedpod on whose surface the tiny round pointed heads of the seeds could be seen. On the other side of the leaf was a lotus flower bud, its petals just barely peeking from the bud scales. The sculpted edges of the leaf were made to provide support

for three thin brushes. He knew the meaning of the lotus, for he'd seen it in temples and paintings – it meant rebirth and enlightenment.

Chen Mu held it up to the light and admired its translucency. He felt awed. With a brush-rest like this, he could become a true scholar – an artist even.

The high-pitched trill of a sparrowhawk jolted him out of his daydream. Time was passing and he must hurry. Carefully he put the little jade brush-rest back into its silken bed and closed the box.

He hurried through narrow streets flanked with blank walls, their monotony broken only by doorways into the courtyards beyond. From apertures in rooftops, smoke from cooking fires curled upwards to the sky. In the short time he'd been with the schoolmaster the village had come alive. Men and servant girls hurried back from market, their wicker baskets filled with eels or vegetables, whilst others haggled with merchants as he zigzagged past incense shops, fish stalls and grocery stores.

When Chen Mu arrived home friends and relations had gathered outside with his mother to say goodbye. His bag was at her feet.

'What's this?' she asked, putting out her hand for the box. Like Chen Mu she rested the brush-rest on the palm of her hand. Everyone exclaimed over the beauty of the gift.

'It has a bud,' Wang, the oldest man in the village, pointed out. 'That means potential. The schoolmaster must see something in you that we don't!' He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and his eyes crinkled in silent laughter. 'Potential's good ... if you can survive being skinned alive by the barbarians! They do that, you know, to boys like you!' Then he laughed his dry crackly laugh and pushed his way through the crowd.

The widow Chen placed the brush-rest back into its box and gave it back to her son. She handed him a small pouch tied with red string.

'Give me reason to be proud. And write often.'

Chen Mu guessed the pouch contained a few coins, but they had no coins to spare. It was then he noticed her short hair – she must have cut and sold it that very morning for the contents of that pouch, to be made into the padding rich women used for their elaborate hairstyles. Chen Mu was shocked – his mother was proud of her hair and had once told him his father always commented on its thickness and shine. And now she'd sold it for him. He knelt and bowed his head to the ground – never would he have imagined her doing such a thing.

Then the silence was broken by the faint call of the bell of the double-mast junk that would take him on the first leg of his journey, announcing its imminent departure. Chen Mu rose and, with the good wishes of the villagers ringing in his ears, picked up his bag and made his way to the river.