

Hall Gardner

Year of the Earth Serpent

Changing Colors

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“What is dyed in blue becomes blue, what is dyed in yellow becomes yellow. When the silk is put in a different dye, its color becomes also different. Having been dipped in five times, it has changed its color five times. Therefore, dyeing should be done with great care. This is true not only with silk dyeing; even a country changes its color in response to its influences.”

—Mo Zi

Chapters

| | |
|---|-----|
| Part I: Quest for Cathay | 11 |
| I. | |
| Shooting Stars | 13 |
| Suzhou Creek..... | 17 |
| Sin City..... | 23 |
| Shanghai Lily..... | 34 |
| Foreign Experts Dorm..... | 41 |
| Ping Pong Diplomacy..... | 44 |
| Little Green Book | 49 |
| The Scarlet Letter..... | 54 |
| The Journalist..... | 65 |
| Foreign Exchange | 73 |
| Kentucky Fried..... | 78 |
| Summer Palace..... | 89 |
| Mother Courage..... | 96 |
| II..... | |
| “Q’s” without “A’s”..... | 100 |
| Single Mystery | 107 |
| Café Contradictions | 117 |
| Five Vermin Six Parasites | 121 |
| Quest for Cathay | 128 |
| Chimerical Voices | 134 |
| III..... | |
| The Prof. and the Atomic Butter Battle..... | 136 |
| A Pyramid of Skulls | 149 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| T.V. Dinner Flashback | 156 |
| Goldfish | 162 |
| Strange Fruit..... | 172 |
| Carnyx War Horn..... | 176 |
| “The Revolution is Just Around the Corner” | 178 |
| The Art of Tea | 180 |
| Shoeless Doctors | 186 |
| Reporting Truth to Power | 193 |
| Juggling the Five Bizarre Creatures..... | 197 |
| IV. | |
| A Deep Drag..... | 199 |
| German Beer | 205 |
| Russian Vodka | 214 |
| Twelve-Tone Chords..... | 218 |
| Tale of the White Serpent..... | 223 |
| Drunken Ink..... | 227 |
| No Conception of Privacy..... | 232 |
| The Silkworm Factory Banquet..... | 235 |
| Taiping Heavenly Kingdom | 241 |
| Way to the Great Equilibrium | 248 |
| Sunday School Eschatology | 253 |
| Part II: Da Zi Bao | 257 |
| V. | |
| Dà Zì Bào (Big Character Posters) | 259 |
| River Elegy | 266 |
| MINZHU (Democracy and Freedom) | 271 |
| The Brave Intellectual | 280 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| A Plate of Chicken Feet | 284 |
| Mending Nine Dragon Wall..... | 290 |
| Wild Game Taste..... | 294 |
| Will the Real Barbarian Please Stand Up?..... | 298 |
| “Me...”..... | 301 |
| Just One Evening Scars the Soul..... | 306 |
| VI..... | |
| Wetback Seeing Eye Dog | 320 |
| Smell of Garlic Cloves..... | 325 |
| A Free Agent..... | 329 |
| Like a Toupée, Just for Cover? | 336 |
| Lotus Foot Metamorphosis | 345 |
| VII..... | |
| Sunflowers No Longer Turn to the Sun!!! | 350 |
| Rumors Kill!!! | 358 |
| Tears the Size of Bullets..... | 365 |
| Tie-Dyed in Blood | 372 |
| Part III: Can't Go Back | 377 |
| VIII..... | |
| The Secret Decree..... | 379 |
| Anonymous Letter | 382 |
| Hong Kong Escape | 388 |
| Silkworm Past and Futures..... | 397 |
| IX..... | |
| Oval Office Options..... | 404 |
| More than Obsessed..... | 414 |
| Can't Go Back | 417 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Apocalypse or Apocatastasis??? | 426 |
| End of History | 432 |
| Return to Malcolm X Park | 438 |
| <i>Revolution Then!!!</i> | 444 |
| X-Mas Tidings | 449 |
| Galvin versus Polo | 453 |
| The Year Comes to an Abrupt “End” | 465 |
| A Personalized Deluge??? | 476 |
| X | |
| Post-Mortem: Mental Aliens | 486 |
| Coda: When It Really All Began | 504 |
| Endnotes by the Great Editor, Historian | 512 |
| & Futurist of the Sky | |

Part I:

Quest for Cathay

1.

Shooting Stars

For months he had anticipated this jubilant moment. This moment when the dull blue page of his U.S. passport would be stamped by animated red Chinese calligraphy. The moment of his long-awaited escape from the overly opulent Overworld to the overly impoverished Underworld. It was his long-awaited escape from the daily monotony of the D.C. Beltway to another Civilization on the opposite side of the planet. It was the chance of a lifetime to work alongside the Chinese people-in-revolution. His hope to experience another way of life...

Waving, swaying, shapes of Chinese characters... fluid and alive... danced before him with their own kinetic energy. He could see the artwork in each painstaking stroke. He could feel the laborious effort of the vivid calligraphy as it expressed hidden meanings and emotions. The moving forms and symbols represented places and times seemingly light years away from his own sub-urban sub-existence...

It was with great conviction that he took his first unwavering steps onto Chinese soil—where he would pledge solidarity with the revolutionary goals of the People's Republic. The Red Flags with 5 golden stars evoked memories of the historic victory that shook the entire world almost 40 years before. The larger Star symbolized the role of the Communist Party. The four smaller Stars symbolized the strong alliance of the workers and the peasants with the urban and national bourgeoisie....

No bus service from the plane. Passengers had to traverse by foot the black tarmac sonorous with the blistering buzz of propeller craft and the ear-crushing roar of jets that soared upon take-off thousands of feet above the planet in radiant Oriental sunset glory...

He stood in line for what seemed to be forever... chain-smoking his last pack of well-fumigated *Made in USA* cigarettes... Combing his fingers through his goatee he carefully tightened the black rubber band... tucked his raven black hair down behind his collar. He feared that its length might attract attention. In no way did he want anyone to suspect him of something that he had recently abandoned...

No longer were there shadows around his intense blue eyes. No longer did his pupils dilate like flying saucers in outer space. No longer did he need to chew cloves and mint and spray cologne in a vain effort to cover the dank stench that clung to his clothes. After months of abstinence, he was able to bring himself... more or less... under self-control...

He waited to present his visa at customs. It seemed like forever. Then, in a matter of a few exhilarating seconds, his passport was stamped... brusquely... with a heavy thud. It was an even longer, but not unbearable, wait to find his backpack dumped upon the un-swept floor inside the airport building. Upon exiting customs, he saw his name... misspelled... in black letters on white cardboard... *Glavin Mylx*... The taxi driver then drove him to the legendary Peace Hotel.

He asked for a pack of cigarettes. The robot-like concierge automatically handed him what was once dubbed "toasted" Lucky Strikes. He turned those down and pointed in the

direction of Chinese-made cigarettes. Not understanding, the concierge fetched a pack of cattle-rustling Marlboros—cigarettes that had... once upon a time... been advertised as “mild as May”. He turned that pack down as well.

The concierge looked bewildered. The strange-looking foreigner with a ponytail and goatee pointed his crooked finger once again. At last, the man understood and selected the homegrown Chinese brand, *Chunghwa*. The foreigner winked and... unexpectedly... flashed his white card and paid in RMB, the People’s Currency.

He still felt the ringing in his ears. It was a dizziness now compounded by the incessant arterial pounding of his jet-lagged skull. Chain-smoking cancer sticks was the next best thing for him to relax....

Mr. Mylex H. Galvin had been invited to the People’s Republic as a guest worker by the *True Friends of the East Wind* (TFEW)—an American group which believed in the Revolutionary Cause of the People Republic. He was to teach English as a foreign language for two semesters starting in September with a potentially renewable contract. His package included a round-trip ticket, a brief visit to Shanghai before his journey to Beijing, a salary of roughly \$100 a month in Foreign Exchange Currency (FEC), free room and board in a foreign experts’ dorm, plus the extra benefit of free Chinese civilization and language classes.

Offered a “white card,” he was given the privilege to use the People’s Currency (RMB) instead of Foreign Exchange Currency (FEC)—the currency that most foreigners were required to use by law. With RMB, he could pay a much lower price than did the average tourist for most everyday *Made in China* products. There was no way he could refuse this golden opportunity!

The giant color T.V. tube glowed... monotonously luminescent... in front of the pale pink walls of his hotel room. A pre-teen boy, his face and body distorted by the screen's cathode ray vacuum tube, appeared on a stage. He was sporting a sparkling sequin cowboy outfit—complete with ten-gallon hat and a string necktie. The Chinese Billy the Kid not-so-unexpectedly drew his 6-shooter from out of his diamond studded leather holsters. He fired 6 bullets... *Bang!!! Bang!!! Bang!!! Bang!!!*... while simultaneously crooning in Chinese. Tipping his Stetson, he bowed for the audience to applaud...

Galvin couldn't believe his eyes or ears. The Wild West had made it to the People's Republic! 'Why would the Chinese people want to play, act, or even watch, such American-influenced kitsch?' He switched off the TV without checking out the other channels, took off his navy-blue beret, scratched the thick white scar that had been so hastily sewn up by the nurse and that snaked through the back of his scalp, and tried to clear his aching head...

In a moment of inspiration, he remembered the two-toned butterfly—with red speckles on the forewings and yellow speckles on the hindwings—that had greeted him as he first stepped onto the Chinese tarmac. He wanted to capture in a poem how the butterfly had appeared to flutter before the 5 golden shooting stars waving on China's Red Flag... how his fleeting encounter with this beautiful and mysterious creature represented an open invitation for him to play a role in the casing and uncasing of China's Colors... his opportunity to play a role in the People's struggle....

Yet almost as soon as he had jotted down a few lines of verse within the vibrant op-art spirals of his Anti-Marco Polo Travel Journal, he ~~scratched the words out~~ in frustration. Absolutely no inner moonlight madness revealed...

Suzhou Creek

Jet lag propelled him to lift off from the Peace Hotel very early the next morning. Few bicycles had braved the heavy traffic in the D.C. Cocaine and Murder Capital of the World. Here, however, in the car-less utopia of Shanghai there were thousands upon thousands of one-speeders with wide-rimmed tires. Almost all were uniformly black with tufted white deer tails and red reflectors. There were thousands dashing and darting and clanging by him. Everyone was physically attached to a two-wheeled vehicle... like an artificial third limb...

The pulsing rhythms of the throng enveloped him wherever he went. The women wore black cotton shorts and black knee-high nylon stockings with a thin skin patch of thigh exposed. The men wore black jackets and pants—so slim they had no waists at all. Their hair appeared wild and unkempt or puffed out in a truly permanent perm—almost ghoulish. The people tap-danced down streets with metal-tipped heels... *click... click... clicking...*

He hadn't even looked at his travel guide... taking pictures... jotting down notes. Along the route hundreds practiced Tai Chi in near silence at dawn with the sun and its rays arching their way through the fan-shaped leaves of ginkgo trees that had outlived the dinosaurs. Old women wore thick brown coats with straight gray haircuts chopped around the nape of their necks—as if a bowl had been placed on top of