

# LUST & PHILOSOPHY

A Novel

By  
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## Chapter 1

China, Beijing, Haidian District. Beijing Foreign Studies University lay along the northern bend of the West Third Ring Road before the expressway veered eastward to become the North Third Ring Road. You could not find a more nondescript neighborhood in an already blank metropolis. You were not even in Asia; you were in something called a city. No lush greens in this austere university district, with tenement housing for campuses behind walled compounds manned by teenage guards in ill-fitting uniforms.

BFSU was split into two facing campuses across the elevated expressway. I lived on the west campus. A pedestrian underpass crossed over to the east campus where I taught my classes. Except for intersections and u-turn bays, the space under the expressway was requisitioned for public parking, turning the structure into an endless monolith. A university bisected by an expressway, where one would expect a commons: I had once sought some dour symbolism in this, until attributing it to the haphazard urban inventiveness that the Chinese excel in.

Flanking both sides of the expressway was the lower Third Ring Road for local traffic, a generous sidewalk on each side. I frequently walked north along the west sidewalk on the way to the Suzhou Street subway station, the Haidian bookstore district, and the computer district of Zhongguancun, with its megastores and restaurants. We need only be concerned with the first ten minutes of this walk, the roughly 700-meter stretch from the west campus to the busy intersection at Suzhou Bridge (an expressway overpass, not a water bridge).

The route offered a cross-section of urban society coming and going from a

hodgepodge of shops and businesses. Let's start at the campus gate and work our way along the length of the austere stretch.

The gate's right post has been manned informally for years by a woman of indeterminate age, her complexion the same hue as her clothes, doing a brisk business in unregistered SIM cards, standing or squatting on the same spot from morning till night like some sentry's ghost. We pass the BFSU Hotel and its admittedly serviceable seafood restaurant to a two-story business complex housing a private translation school competing with that of the campus, a bakery, an eyeglass clinic, a cellphone service center, a ladies handbag boutique, a small supermarket (high-fiber wheat bread, canned sardines in tomato sauce, the crisp images of pubic hair on "nude art photography" books displayed in the window), a popular café called the Stairway To Love with curtained booths inviting student couples to make out in semi-privacy, a Shandong-style restaurant with waitresses in snug lavender cheongsams, a flower stall, a knickknacks shop stocked with the miniature toy animals Chinese girls like to dangle from their cellphones and backpacks, a Chongqing-style eatery, a small clothing shop. At the T-intersection of Weigong Bridge, a driveway to a business plaza, followed by a shabby residential building housing a professional photo service, a tattoo shop, a beauty salon, a post office, and a tobacco shop.

Crossing a restaurant street – and in the evening the smoky chestnut roasters and fruit peddlers parked deliberately in our path – we encounter the only attractive structure on the stretch, a slickly renovated building lined with opaque glass tiles and encircled by a mock classic Suzhou garden, the headquarters of an architectural firm; a China Construction Bank leases out the building's north wing. Then looms the Beijing Television Station tower. A large military affairs building is next, with street-front space occupied by a bakery, a twenty-four hour convenience store, a beauty salon, a Malan fast-food noodles shop, a Hangzhou-style eatery, a budget cosmetics stall, a cluster of cheap clothing shops for women, a liquor shop, and a state-run train and plane ticket booking office. A swank hotpot restaurant next to the entrance of a transient hotel. A bookshop sharing a photocopying service and a women's clothing stall; another cheap clothing shop; a lousy Xinjiang Muslim

restaurant; a tobacco-liquor shop, yet another women's clothing shop, a northeast-style (Manchurian) restaurant, and finally, on the corner of the Suzhou Bridge intersection, a pharmacy.

The urban surface was relieved in the warm months by a canopy of Chinese Scholar trees, of the locust tree family and the dominant street tree in Beijing. Not a particularly attractive walk, but I'd grown to like it out of habit, or if nothing else, my obsession with Cookie.

I first saw her one spring day at this spot on my way to afternoon coffee near People's University. Walking ahead of me was a woman with intensely voluptuous hips in tight faded jeans and jean jacket. I had to satisfy my curiosity as to what her face looked like and overtook her just as we both arrived at Suzhou Bridge. I am relieved when the face is plain, despairing when the body is matched by beauty. She was indeed attractive, with dark heavy-lidded eyes; around thirty. Something earthy about her, as if spawned of this very neighborhood, yet not unaware of her allure. She gazed ahead oblivious of my glance. I continued on without looking back and dismissed the painful specter from my mind.

I see exquisite women all the time. I would go mad if I tortured myself on every occasion whether to try to talk to them or not. We want to relax when going about and instinctively avoid drama and other sources of tension, cultivating our protective shell the more freely to lose ourselves in thought, to meditate in peace on our daily walks. It's not forbidden to stop and confront someone of course, but one needs a set of guidelines, a decisive criterion for the exceptional circumstance.

For me, it's the difference between a nine and a ten. Here's an example of a ten. One day a year or two before the present events, a beautiful woman with plump hips and breasts caught my eye, working in a liquor shop adjoining the basement supermarket in the Modern Plaza shopping center across from People's University. I won't describe her in any more detail; it's enough to say she was a ten. Had she been a nine, I would have been envious, mildly distraught perhaps, and continued on my way. But because what I was now dealing with was not a nine but a ten, I found myself halting in my tracks. I entered the supermarket and slowly made my way to the imported wine aisle while getting my bearings. For it was already established

that my routine on this day had been disrupted by a momentous event. I would have to make a go at her.

Exiting checkout, I sauntered over to the crucible. It was one of those liquor shops with exorbitantly priced bottles of imported “XO,” which the Chinese in publicity stunts in the 1990s would smash against marble surfaces to show off their wealth. The wealthy of today were no longer quite so vulgar, but luxury cognac was still purchased at thousands of dollars a bottle solely for the cultivation of business relationships in the form of *guanxi* gifts (price tag attached) that circulate from recipient to recipient as a symbolic currency without ever being opened and tasted.

I started out at the far end of the shop and worked my way towards her. They also sold some Chinese wines. I asked her why they didn’t sell any imported wines, like the one I had just bought in the supermarket. I’m sure I was too nervous to process her response, but she was amenable to small talk and I requested her cellphone number. She laughed and wrote it down. A few days later I called and she agreed to meet at a nearby café.

She made it to the café. I learned she wasn’t a regular shop assistant – a relief, as service workers in China are invariably unskilled migrants from the countryside who worked long hours seven days a week for paltry wages. Pretty waitresses and salesgirls were not worth the effort, as they could hardly find the time off to ever manage a date with you. Yanyuan had her own business as a liquor wholesaler and was at the shop monitoring her sales during the busy Spring Festival season. She was twenty-seven, with a boyfriend in the army. They seemed to have money; her chauffeur drove me back home. I didn’t completely give up hope, as she visited an art museum with me a week later and even agreed to stop over at my place. When she sat down on my sofa, her hip flesh expanded into me. I put an arm around her while we paged through an art book. She sat stiffly and soon left. I may have been a bit hasty, but I had to take things as far as they could go without delay to release myself from the agony of being with a ten under merely polite circumstances.

There had only been a handful of tens over the years. They didn't generally work out, though with Jianchun – another wistful case – things played out with a bit more drama. She was a primary school English teacher of twenty-four enrolled in an

English writing class for working adults I taught years ago at Capital Normal University. It wasn't just her beauty and generous figure; she was an intractable, intolerable enigma. Her apparel conveyed a provocative feminine purity. While the other students dressed in dowdy clothes, she always wore a silk blouse and skirt slit up the sides, even in the coldest weather. She must also have worn a sheer bra, as the dark disks of her areolas were visible through her blouse. She was – or pretended to be – deathly shy and not only refused to speak up when called on but disappeared as soon as class ended and even during the breaks, to forestall any approach by me it seemed, of which I had never given her the slightest inkling unless through unconscious signs. Likewise, she always arrived a few minutes late to class.

When female students had no interest in me beyond my role as a teacher, which applied to almost all of them, they were relaxed in my presence, as they should be. I was no more threatening to them than if I had appeared on an educational TV program. But there seemed to be something up with Jianchun in her prickliness. She unnerved and agitated me. I was able to snag her in the penultimate class of the semester. She had mentioned Bach as one of her interests in an autobiographical composition I had assigned. Could she, I ventured, give me a list of famous works of Chinese classical music I might buy on CD? The following week after class she came up and presented me with the list. I didn't like to get forward with students but this was my last chance, and on the pretext of discussing music I asked for her telephone number. She thought she might have some time in a few weeks. I couldn't wait and called her the next day. She seemed pleased to hear from me and we made a date at the National Art Museum for the following Monday.

She was waiting for me outside the locked museum gate; I had forgotten it was closed on Mondays. I proposed the Wufu Teahouse, a fifteen-minute walk away. Upon arriving, I had her sit next to me. She proved more talkative than expected in this cornered state, divulging scenes from an adverse childhood. When she was five, her father had discovered her mother in an (evidently unconsummated) affair, beat her and kicked her out. She told me about her uncle, a government press editor in high standing whom she had idolized since childhood. One day when she was

seventeen, he invited her for a walk and took the occasion to fondle her. She was vague on particulars, spoke in ellipses. Presumably the breasts. Violating her genitals should have elicited a stronger response from her mom than merely telling her to get over it. He did promptly apologize and never tried it again. But it wounded her.

I suggested the burden wasn't worth carrying around for seven years and she should stop trying to forgive him. A tear ran down her cheek. I wondered if her uncle hadn't really done something worse. Her leg was resting against mine and her fingers fluttered under the table and brushed me as she talked. I put my arm around her. The heavy bosom of this beautiful woman who hid from me in the ladies room during class breaks was now mashed against me. An odorless stench, a chemical steam bath, a heavy voltage flew. Only my reluctance to appear deplorable like her uncle arrested my claws from her breasts. She agreed to a date the following week. The next morning she called to cancel, without giving a reason, and declined to meet again. I saw her once more a few weeks later by the school gate. We nodded politely. That was it.

The situation wasn't entirely hopeless. Granted, she may truly have had no interest in me and resolved to cut off contact to avoid misleading me. But it was not altogether out of the question that she hoped to hear from me again. In fact she may have been trying to seduce me with her dress and avoidance tactics all along, or was struggling with these contradictions all at once. A stereotype (with some truth to it) holds that Chinese women put up the hardest of fronts only to crumple after a few pokes. She might have been remarkably easy to get into bed, even after the next phone call. Considering this rare ten was possibly within such close reach, it must seem inexplicable I gave up so easily.

We try to connect when we meet people. You can almost always find some common ground with a stranger. Perhaps you have nothing to go on but a liking of spicy food or a hatred of the president. The mutual attempt at simple human friendliness is often enough. Without that minimally shared effort, the presence of another is intolerable. You might as well be enemies. Now, what kind of cruel irony threw an enemy my way in the guise of a ten?

I tried to add up Jianchun's positive points but wasn't having much luck. I could handle her being uncommunicative in class and neurotically shy; her complaining of the cold weather during the fifteen-minute walk to the teahouse; her ordering expensive tea she neglected to so much as taste (and I was paying for); even her refusal to smile, which I fancied stemmed not from dullness but a dignified retaliation against socially enforced humor. I would have been able to deal with all of this had there been at least Bach to fall back on. When I raised the matter, however, she seemed ignorant of ever having mentioned the composer. Not the slightest interest in music was forthcoming and she changed the topic. The repertoire of topics was confined to her marriage expectations. And at last I could see she was capable of expressing a viewpoint on something: she was, as expected, a "traditional girl" who believed in marital fidelity and a stable household.

Could it really be for some people that such was all there was to life? Did "fidelity" and "stable household" qualify as hobbies? I didn't bring it up but I guessed the prospect of sex must have loomed as a humorless business in her mind: the initial scream and the blood, followed by the requisite threats to ward off the proverbial disaster of unsanctioned sex and secure the marital lock on life.

This was still the nineties, before the Chinese edition of *Cosmopolitan* and other women's magazines introduced sex education to China; and it would have been the eighties when her uncle's assault had taken place. Chinese women could be as sexually free as women anywhere in the world. At the other extreme, unfathomable ignorance. Jianchun was probably subjected to the old lore fed to girls in order to scare them that you had sex only once in your life, on the wedding night, resulting in the birth of a child (you might have a few more goes at it if it weren't for the one-child policy). Another piece of wisdom imparted to daughters was that only bad women had big breasts, which grow larger after being touched by boys. Just when they were growing to their substantial size, Jianchun's breasts had encountered avuncular fingers. Yet perhaps the act was enough to confirm guilty suspicions she was still acting out in her strange mating dance with me in the classroom.

Whatever her intentions, or lack of them, I grew more unsettled with each new facet of her personality. Above all I feared she might be mentally unstable, and for

whom marriage was therefore an urgent recourse, as she wouldn't have to work and I would be her family's insurance against any future medical provisions, or in the worst case, her being committed to an institution.

My final news concerning Jianchun came a few days later when a married classmate of hers I was friendly with phoned me to ask if I had "forced" her. What? Jianchun had hinted to her about some unfortunate goings-on with an unnamed foreign man (who turned out to be a fellow teacher of Jianchun's before my turn). This led my friend to worry I had brought her over to my place to ruin her. I reassured her nothing of the sort had transpired, and Jianchun didn't even seem to like me. So much for the only ten who had ever seemed fleetingly within grasp.

Still less of a need to mention Cookie again either, except that I saw her a second time later the same day. Now here's the thing. She wasn't coming back from the other direction but was once more walking north, starting from a point further south. Wherever she had been headed after lunch, she had returned to somewhere near the campus. Thus I could presume she had some daily business in the area – a job, studies, or residence. It was early evening and I had also come back to the campus and was now on my way to get something to eat.

I recognized the spectacular buttocks from behind. She was with a female companion this time. They had just reached the corner of the restaurant street where the migrant fruit sellers gathered in the evening until the police departed and they moved their carts over to the more crowded area before the campus gate. As I was looping in front to make sure it was Cookie, she turned her head away toward her friend. I had to circle all the way around her to catch up with her face. She could not have failed to notice the awkward foreign man ogling her now. I kept moving in a single motion past them and up the restaurant street. They were parting and her friend followed in my direction while Cookie continued on down the stretch.

Positioning a stranger on the street doesn't necessarily involve insurmountable difficulties. I have been imposed upon countless times from out of nowhere by people of both sexes for myriad reasons. Therefore I too may impose. In theory it should be easy and effortless to address a stranger, because it happens fast. Immediately thrust into the result, you have a strong chance of not coming off badly



and receiving a civil response. Some people are so flattered by your attentions that it can start a friendship. I thought of Hermann Hesse's haunting words from *Steppenwolf*:

All girls are yours....The stream carried them towards me and washed me up to them and away....I gave myself up to them without defense.

In practice I need to summon up the requisite courage. A moving target requires quick thinking, and I didn't have the luxury of preparation time that I had with a stationary target like Yanyuan in the liquor shop. Now I had a pitch. Even if she had not recognized me, the point is I recognized her and what a wonderful coincidence it was to see her twice the same day. Did she live in the neighborhood? I might have said something like that. But instead I headed up the restaurant street. The only explanation for doing so must have been fear of what I most desired.

I forgot about her.