

THE EXACT UNKNOWN AND OTHER TALES OF MODERN CHINA

By

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The Exact Unknown

A casual affair with a student engenders inexplicable difficulties

As darkness fell the lantern's glow opened up like naked legs. Jingfang had clearly not come to my office for business. She was hanging out. Usually they don't start stopping by till later in the semester, after enough time to size me up in class, but it was only the third week. Okay, let's draw her out a bit. "I gotta go. How about lunch tomorrow at the Friendship Hotel?"

"Sure."

The famous Friendship Hotel was where the Chinese Government first housed its enemies, namely foreigners, who were needed for their technical know-how in the early decades after 1949. The Soviets helped build the massive complex. After the Opening Up in the 1980s, foreigners in Beijing grew too numerous to confine to one place and were allowed to settle in designated compounds elsewhere in the city, and in the case of teachers, on campuses in foreign guesthouses. Meanwhile the Friendship Hotel turned over most of its space to tourists, while a few businesses and schools, including mine, housed us in the Park of Elegance, the remaining compound for us "Foreign Experts."

I took her to a restaurant that served discounted Western dinners in the compound's Friendship Palace nearby.

"Shall we go?" I said as we finished up.

"Go where?"

"To my place, of course."

"Okay," she answered with hesitant surprise.

We detoured on the way to a shop in the huge building selling liquor. I picked out a bottle of Chinese vodka; it's hard to screw up vodka and Chinese vodka was actually not that bad. Winking at her, I said, "We can have a drink."

We sauntered past the registration office and up the stairs to my room on the second floor. The service staff had been lax about things lately and tended not to be present for registering domestic guests, as normally required. My old-school Chinese living room was furnished with two upholstered chairs rather than a sofa, which I had angled towards each other for more intimacy—couples being expected to sit politely side by side. I stuck the vodka in the freezer, and we settled down to chat.

A bright and curious student, Jingfang was pleasant enough company, but after an hour the conversation began to flag. She was showing no signs of wanting to leave, slumped in her chair rather than perched on the edge of the seat like the more timid variety of female guest. The afternoon needed injecting with purpose. "Have you ever had a vodka massage?"

"What's that?"

"A massage using vodka rather than oil. Would you like one?"

She laughed and said nothing.

"C'mon," I gestured. We went into my bedroom. It was furnished with two twin beds instead of a single large bed—again, the dour assumption that even at bedtime couples should retain their politeness. "You'll have to take off your clothes."

"All of them?"

"Yes, all of them."

I removed the silk comforter from one of the beds and invited her to lie down on the sheet. She lay face down without taking off her clothes. I pulled off her shirt for her, released her bra, and loosened her pants partway down. I got on top of her and dry massaged her for a few minutes until she was more relaxed. Her fingers curled around my calves.

"Hold on," I said, as I jumped up to grab the vodka out of the refrigerator. It was ice cold by now. Vodka doesn't freeze but only becomes viscous, the perfect lubricant for vigorous erotic massage. I peeled away the rest of her clothing, opened the bottle and emptied half of it onto her back. She screamed and jumped up. I poured the rest onto her front and furiously spread its contents over her body. The heady fumes from the alcohol knocked her

out of breath.

“What are you doing!” she gasped. As the cold went away, she burst into laughter. “It stings.” She held her legs tight together. “I’m a virgin.”

“You’re already a college senior and still a virgin? Oh, boy. Somehow I thought you wouldn’t be.” I sat on the edge of the bed and sighed. Here we go again. “So that means we have to perform the operation?”

“Don’t frighten me.”

“Not today. Give yourself time to think over the importance of your purity.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

It was now dark and we relaxed in bed with some beer. After a silence she said, “I like your music. What is it?”

“Turkish gypsy music. Before that it was Egyptian. You know, I have to tell you something. I sleep with a lot of women.”

“I don’t care.”

The next day my phone rang. “Can you talk now?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Something very strange happened. A man called and said he had a video of me having sex. He wanted me to do the same thing with him.”

“How could that be?”

“Did you tell anyone about me?”

“Of course, not. It must be an obscene caller. There’s no connection to us.”

“Could someone have filmed us?”

“Absolutely not. The window is covered with a curtain.”

I peeked into the bedroom anyway to check the view through the window. Just behind the wall of the Technology Institute across the alley was a two-storey apartment building whose window looked directly onto mine. But only my far bed was in the line of perspective; we had used the bed near my window. Any person trying to peer into my bedroom from the window opposite might have been able to see us sitting up on the bed but not lying down. And the translucent fabric of my curtain would have obscured our faces.

“Did he use your name?”

“No.”

“Then he couldn’t have known you. He would certainly have addressed you by name if he knew it. Did you talk to him?”

“I asked him who he was.”

“You should have hung up immediately. You see, he dials numbers randomly until he gets a young woman like you on the phone, catching you off guard. As soon as you hesitate, he knows you’re not a virgin. Well, you are still a virgin, if no longer completely so. If you believe his threat, he can blackmail you. But don’t worry. I guarantee you it’s impossible for someone to have filmed us. Let me know if he calls back.”

After hanging up, I thought more about the window and began to worry. It faced south and the sun pierced the room for a spell on its afternoon course. It was now late afternoon and the bed was still bathed in sunlight. Yesterday we had gotten going a bit earlier and it was hard to say exactly where the sun’s rays would have fallen during the brief flurry of activity with the bottle. Whatever had been illuminated could have been startling.

Extraordinary is the power of the sun’s vectors. Once I saw a woman in a white summer dress walking toward me on a street in Beijing. Her black triangle burned right through her panties and dress with molten beauty, courtesy of the sun. I mean, I noticed it even before I noticed her. She had no idea. And the female students on campus in those gauzy skirts far sexier than they realize. I don’t have to do anything. I just wait for them to swivel into the sun’s kiss and their groin lights up. I can see the flaps of the maxi pad folded under their panties. I can count their stray pubic hairs. They have no idea.

Thus I had to consider, at this point, the possibility that the sun had illuminated far more of us than I had first assumed. Not only could my bedroom show have been quite filmable once the sun’s timetable had been mastered, but again and again with my countless bedroom visitors over the previous year.

And this gave rise to a new concern: the video might not have originated from outside the building. A Chinese friend had once half-jokingly alluded to secret cameras fixed inside TV sets in foreigner-occupied hotels. This could be taken with more than a grain of truth. What if my bedroom had been rigged with numerous tiny video cameras? The idea wasn’t so farfetched, considering the dubious history of the Friendship Hotel. Yet organized surveillance had significant limitations. For what purpose would the State want to capture intimate footage of an innocent female in the embrace of a small-fry foreigner such as

myself?

I had no illusion Jingfang's anonymity was somehow assured because she had slipped into my apartment without registering at the entrance. Her identity might have been quickly ascertained, given the close relationship of the hotel and our school and the huge number of Chinese employed by the Public Security Bureau for the purpose of espionage, with nothing else to do on their hands. Or if only a rogue individual in the employ of the hotel had placed the camera, I guessed whatever content captured through so gross a violation of privacy to be largely useless. Not that this was much consolation. No motive was needed in any case. The ongoing recording of people in compromising positions is from the State's perspective quite necessary, if only because technology demands it. But whatever would they do with all the footage? Nobody ever residing in the hotel was important enough to have all that much to lose.

At least I was confident it was not the person who had called Jingfang that had filmed us. Except for a small problem. He called her again the next day, and the next, and every day after that. Though only once a day, the calls came at different times, and always when she was home. She regularly answered the phone; her parents—who in the meantime had asked the police to try to trace the caller—dared not. Each time the man reiterated his threat, and each time she hung up on him. We speculated he might be an unknown neighbor who had somehow gotten their number through another neighbor or acquaintance of the family's and waited to espy her whenever she came home. His claim to have filmed her having sex the very day she first got naked with a man was nothing other than a hoax and the most perverse of coincidences. The possibility that he happened to be a State spy or worked for the PSB and was privy to her Friendship Hotel visit occurred to me as well, but I dismissed this as too outlandish to obsess about, particularly as he never revealed crucial details such as our names in his phone calls.

I scoured my brain for other clues. They quickly dwindled, each one more unpleasant to contemplate than the last. Jingfang was among the better of my students, not the hardest working but naturally intelligent and creative enough to compete with the top of her class of 100. Her first paper in my writing course had envisioned a city made entirely of glass, intended to render the workings of both the government and residents completely transparent. The total illumination from every angle of all urban activity down to people's

intimate ablutions would wipe away crime, she proposed, if not individual's private thoughts. I was impressed. But now her utopian vision unsettled me, for if she had the imagination to conceive of the ideal surveillance state, she might also be able to concoct just the sort of scenario we were experiencing. What if, for example, she had wanted to gain the psychological upper hand by disarming me from the outset?

No, she was too spontaneously friendly for that. More likely, she was undergoing the upheaval so many young Chinese experience upon first romantic or sexual release, after years of pent-up frustration and not even close friends to confide in, given the culture's absence of sexual discourse. In other words, she was exploding with emotions, and these encompassed everything from passion to paranoia; her confused desires expressed themselves as projected anxieties. I have seen the extreme instance of this – when delayed first sex causes a woman to go mad. What convinced me this was probably not the case with Jingfang and it was my own paranoia that was to blame was her relaxed manner during our subsequent naked encounters.

The remaining possibility was that I was the one who had filmed us. I at first rejected this out of hand, as not even the weakest doubt needled my conscience. Occasionally I would exit my apartment wondering if I had failed to turn off the stove that heated my morning coffee, and the worry that I conceivably had not, despite my habitual fastidiousness, was enough to turn me around and march myself back to the hotel to reassure myself and prevent a disaster. Only upon taking a conscious snapshot of the burner off could I leave in peace. In regards to the impossibility I had filmed us, I was as confident as I typically was in not having left the burner on, which is to say more or less 100%. But what if I had not been fully conscious at the time, as from a mini-stroke, for instance? Or I was completely lucid at the time but my mini-stroke or some other significant loss of memory had occurred after the fact. But then how to explain the strange man who was calling her? Was he someone I personally knew and had confided in about the footage?

Months later, these questions had still to be resolved. Meanwhile, he kept calling everyday. Jingfang was always at home and could usually predict when the phone would ring. Her parents were glued to their seats in terror awaiting the brief communications and said nothing. The police still had no leads and were turning out to be useless. She continued to come over and was as lovely as usual in bed. But like the law of receding horizons, we

were stuck in the exact unknown. We kept trying but never managed to achieve full penetration.