

PROLOGUE

The taxi driver pulled up suddenly, jabbing his finger toward a side street and indicating that this was as far as my ride would go. I handed over a 20 *yuán* note and stepped out into a downpour. By the time he had screeched off, rain was needling its way along my spine, my hair was stuck to my face, and I was questioning my decision to meet up with colleagues from the China office in some random Beijing bar.

The side street was all silver and black, moonlight reflected in rippling puddles as far as I could see. There was no sign of any nightlife, but the driver had been clear that it was down this way. A crack of thunder urged me on through the rain, following the narrow road around a bend. Wearing glasses made it harder to see, but I could make out an orange glow up ahead. Shoulders hunched against the weather, I hurried toward it and burst in, expecting excitable chatter, music perhaps. But as the door closed behind me muffling the storm outside, a bell tinkled and then silence.

I removed my glasses, wiped them on my trouser leg, and put them back on as my eyes adjusted to the light. I took in a man behind a counter in the corner who nodded and went back to his book. None of the usual “*huānyíng guānglín*” to welcome a new customer.

This was not a bar. It was a bookshop. But not a bookshop like any bookshop I had ever been in. It was tiny, with shelves and shelves of leather-bound old books in shades of brown and red. There was something odd about it, but I wasn't quite sure what.

A head popped out from behind the tall stack at the back and said, in a Canadian accent, “Have you read the *Dádédǐng*?” “Sorry?” I replied, apologizing in the form of a question in the way we do when we're nervous. I had an undergraduate degree from the Department of East Asian Studies at a good British university, and a masters from another. I had a copy of the *Dádédǐng* back home, having been inspired to buy it years ago after a late-night drunken conversation on the meaning of life. But East Asian Studies was vast, and I had majored in Japanese, which had taken up a lot of headspace, so this most important of ancient Chinese texts had languished on the shelf.

While I was searching my brain for the details of the teaching and wondering why the stranger behind the bookshelf was asking me about it, he glanced over to the shopkeeper and said something in

rapid Mandarin. They both looked at me, then looked back at each other half- laughing, not unkindly, more out of pity. The shopkeeper shrugged and went back to his book.

“Hmm...” the Canadian man murmured, and wandered over to another bookshelf. As he traced his way along the spines, I realized that none of them had titles. That’s why the place felt so weird. His finger stopped at a small brown volume, not much bigger than my hand and about an inch thick. He pulled it off the shelf and handed it to me. “The *Dáodéjīng*,” he said. “I think you’d like it.”

I put my handbag down, conscious of the rain dripping off the hem of my coat and spreading into small patches on the floor. I stepped toward the man and took the book in both hands. It was soft to the touch, tied with a shoelace of leather. *I’ll open it backward then they’ll know I’m not just a tourist*, I thought, hoping to claw back a bit of respect for knowing that old Chinese books, like traditional Japanese books, work in reverse, starting at what a Westerner like me might know as the back. The text is written and read from top to bottom, with the lines of characters stacked vertically right to left. Ready to impress, I flipped the book over, held it in my left palm, and carefully opened the cover. But the inside was blank. Every single page was empty.

I looked to the others for an explanation a copy of the *Dáodéjīng* should be full of profound ideas, not blank pages but before I could say anything, the Canadian guy, who was now standing by the shop entrance, started quoting Confucius. “When a friend comes from afar, is it not indeed a pleasure?” Then he called a greeting over his shoulder, held his coat above his head, and disappeared into the wet black night.

The bell tinkled once more. Still the shopkeeper said nothing. Confused, I picked up a book from the display table in front of me and flicked through the pages. Nothing there either. I went from shelf to shelf, pulling books down, but to no avail. It felt like some kind of Zen *kōan*: a doorway to some important truth. But all the words were missing.

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