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Cover picture  From the photograph-album of Rewi Alley: “After tiffin, Henli, August 1930,” Kathleen Wright Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand
KU HUNG-MING: HOMECOMING (Part 2)*

Lo Hui-min 駱惠敏

III

Ku Hung-ming made his first appearance in print soon after his arrival in Foochow. This was a poem in English inspired by what is known as the Wu-shih-shan 烏石山 incident involving the Church Missionary Society of England at that port.¹ Though trivial in origin like so many such incidents, this one succeeded in so exercising the minds and emotions of the Foochow inhabitants that, driven by frustration at their government’s failure to rectify the wrong done to them for a quarter of a century, they finally took the matter into their own hands. Stirring at the time, this episode is now largely forgotten. A brief summary of the whole affair may help to elucidate what this literary exercise of Ku’s was all about.

Wu-shih-shan, so called on account of the gigantic black boulders that adorn it, is one of the larger and more striking of the twelve hills which the builders of the first walled enclosure of Foochow included within its confines. The decision to include the hills within the crenellations had the effect of making Foochow into one of the most contorted of the irregular walled cities commonly found south of the Yangtse (in strong contrast to those of the North China plain, of which Sian and Peking are notable examples). Rising from the city’s south-western corner, Wu-shih-shan forms, with P’ing-shan 屏山 along the city’s northern limits and Yu-shan 于山 (or Chiu-hsien-shan 九仙山) inside the eastern gate, an irregular triangle on account of which Foochow came to be known also as the ‘City of Three Hills’ 三山城.

Towering some sixty metres over the city’s parapets, Wu-shih-shan commands a panoramic view of Foochow and its surrounding districts, from the distant north-west where the River Min 闽江 breaks free of the chains of mountains, bringing life to the vast plain that spreads around the city’s southern flank, and flows from there towards the south-east, finally disappearing among the hills below Pagoda Anchorage (Lo-hsing-tao 羅星島) some eleven miles away.

¹ The first part of this article appeared in East Asian History 6. As explained there, it is presented in draft form in the hope of eliciting from readers suggestions and additional information. Only notes required for textual clarification are included here; detailed notes will appear in the book.

¹ This poem was first published in the Hong Kong Daily Express, long since defunct, and no copy could be found in newspaper collections in Hong Kong or other major centres. Judging by the short note that introduced the poem when it was reprinted some forty years later, it first appeared in late 1879. This seems to be confirmed by another poem, “The days that are no more,” which is published below on pp.82–3, in which Ku tells us that having returned from the Continent to Edinburgh in the summer of that year, he remained there for some three months before setting sail for China, a voyage that normally took around six weeks at that time.
Figure 1
Map showing the course of the River Min flowing past Foochow and Pagoda Anchorage to the sea

2 The Taoist priest Ch’en Yuan-ch’eng 陳園成 was in charge of the Tao-shan-kuan temple. For this whole case see FO228, Foochow Archives, Public Record Office, London, for those years, which are more factual and reliable, as far as I can judge, than official Chinese sources such as Ch’ing-ch’ing wai-chiao shih-liaoi, edited by Wang Yen-wei and others (which is full of emotive rhetoric) or indeed than scholarly compilations relevant to the subject such as Wan-Ch’ing chiao-an chi-shih 晚清教案記事, edited by Chi’i Chi-chang 威其章 and Wang Ju-hui 王如繪 (Chi-nan: Tung-fang Ch’u-pan-she, 1990).

The picturesque character of of Wu-shih-shan and the spectacular vista from its summit made it a place of pilgrimage even before the city walls were completed. Buddhist and Taoist temples, variously sponsored, duly appeared, attracting poets and scholars as much as religious followers. Many such visits are recorded by inscriptions in large, engraved vermilion characters on the face of the boulders, celebrated landmarks in their own right, that border the stone path all the way to the peak. The oldest surviving inscription was penned by the well-known T’ang calligrapher and poet Li Yang-ping 李陽冰 in the eighth century, some three hundred years before Chu Hsi 朱熹, the Sung Neo-Confucian philosopher, established his abode in Ku-shan 鼓山, some distance outside the wall in the city’s eastern suburb—itself a favourite summer resort of missionaries and other foreign residents of Foochow and elsewhere in China until as recently as 1949.

In imperial times the hill would be thronged with young scholars from through-out the province during the triennial provincial examinations, when temples were turned into lodgings and places of study for the aspiring candidates. Each autumn, a certain day was declared a public holiday, at which time the residents, led by the city’s chief officials, would ascend the hill, from whose heights kites of all shapes and colours would be flown by way of celebration. Before long this welcoming landmark that beckoned visitors from afar became also a symbol of auspiciousness to the local population, who believed that under and through the hill ran dragon-veins (龍脈) that nourished the whole district and on whose unimpeded flow the fortunes of the city and its surrounding area depended.
This harmonious scheme of things was abruptly disturbed when, in 1851, the Revds W. Wilton and H. O. Jackson of the British Church Missionary Society, having arrived from London the previous year to set up a station in Foochow, succeeded in persuading the Taoist priest in charge of the Tao-shan-kuan Temple 道山觀 on top of the hill, allegedly with a bribe, to lease to them “a single tenement of Chinese construction” together with some adjoining land in exchange for a dwelling the Mission had within the walled city and with an additional annual rental equivalent to £3.6s.3d.²

No sooner did this transaction become known than the incredulous city rose up in fury, for Wu-shih-shan with all its temples, they claimed, belonged to the whole community. Priests and monks were merely caretakers employed by the people and had no right to dispose of any part of it. The agreement reached between the Taoist priest and the missionaries was therefore deemed invalid, and the provincial government was asked to straighten out the matter with the British Consul at Foochow.

Unfortunately for the local people, the Taiping rebellion that had broken out in the meantime soon spread to the greater part of the country so that Foochow also came to live in fear and uncertainty (though it eventually escaped the fate of towns and cities in the middle and lower Yangtse River region). It was thus considered an inopportune time for the Chinese government to become embroiled in a dispute of this nature with a foreign power like England. The outcry of the Foochow residents fell therefore on deaf ears.

Fully cognisant of the dilemma the Chinese were in, the missionaries not only ignored their protests but took advantage of their difficulties, and proceeded to incorporate over time a number of surrounding orchards and gardens into the disputed ‘rented’ property, ringing these around with walls and constructing within them large edifices, so that “in place of the single and plain-looking tenement spoken of, one house of European aspect, large and conspicuous and resembling somewhat a church without a spire and another also European in appearance but of less pretension” came into existence, according to Charles Sinclair 星察理, the British Consul at Foochow who, while a junior official at the consulate, had been instrumental in helping the missionaries to conclude the original disputed transaction.³ “These buildings, the large white house in particular,” he commented, “form a prominent mark in the landscape, frowning down on the city below and looking

³ Charles Anthony Sinclair (1818-97), joined the British Consular Service and arrived in China in 1843, the year after the signing of the Treaty of Nanking. He served at four out of five of the first ports opened by that treaty (the exception being Amoy), but had the lengthiest connection with Foochow, where he first arrived as Interpreter in 1850. He helped conclude the purchase by the church missionaries of the Tao-shan-kuan property the following year, when he was Acting Consul. He became substantive Consul there ten years later and continued at the post without a break until 1877, returning there in 1880 until May 1886. He thus had a first-hand knowledge of the case from beginning to end. Quotations here and throughout this article are from Sinclair’s reports in the above-mentioned consular archives, and no more explanatory notes will be given to the narration of this case. See Lo Hui-min and Helen Bryant, British diplomatic and consular establishments in China, 1793-1949, vol. 2, Consular establishments, 1843-1949 (Taipei: SMC Publishing, [1987]).
Figure 3
Map showing the twelve hills inside Foochow city, with the three that form the triangle (P'ing-shan in the north, Wu-shih-shan in the south-west, and Yu-shan for Chiu-bsien-shan in the south-east) giving the city its other name, 'City of Three Hills' 

4 In this scheme a large new western-style house near the foreign settlement in Nant'ai 南台 as well as a substantial sum of money for its improvement, were offered in exchange for the Wu-shih-shan site.
5 For more on Wade see below, pp.79–81.

across the plain on the opposite side of the hill. Thus the unpretending habitation was converted into mighty-looking houses.”

To the inhabitants of Foochow, the looming foreign structures were not just an eyesore but an evil influence that seriously threatened the feng-shui 風水 of the city, and they blamed them for the natural disasters—fire, flood and plague—that had devastated the city in recent years.

Serious though the matter was, it was allowed, for one reason or another, to drag on in spite of intermittent protests and complaints, as days turned into months and months into years, for nearly three decades—until 1877. In this year Ting Jih-ch'ang 丁日昌, then governor of Fukien province and a man known for his diplomatic skills, finally succeeded in devising a scheme aimed at removing once and for all this source of a potential international clash.4 His proposal was timely, since the inhabitants had recently became once again agitated by a rumour that the Revd John Wolfe 胡約翰, the then head of the Mission, was in the process of adding further extensions to what his predecessors had illegally constructed, on land that was not even included in the disputed first transaction.

Ting’s proposal was warmly received by Sinclair, now Consul, who considered the terms “extremely generous” and urged their acceptance by Wolfe. With the support of Sir Thomas Wade 威妥瑪, then British Minister in Peking,5 the Earl of Derby, Britain’s Foreign Secretary, was asked to impress upon the London Board of the Church Missionary Society the advisability of seizing this favourable opportunity to settle the long-drawn-out and highly vexatious issue.

To the surprise and displeasure of Wade and Sinclair, however, Wolfe, who had earlier shown himself to be amenable to Ting’s proposal, flatly turned it down. So inflexible was his attitude that Wade, skilful and tough negotiator as he had proved himself to be in his parries with Li Hung-chang 李鴻章 that had led to the Chefoo Convention only the previous year,6 warned him that unless a negotiated settlement on the matter was reached soon, he would have no alternative but to suggest to the Chinese that they seek a ruling on the dispute in the British Consular Court, the outcome of which, he feared, might be less favourable than what Ting had offered. As the British authority directly concerned, Sinclair also cautioned Wolfe against going ahead with his building plans without first obtaining his approval, while the Foochow community leaders, hoping to avert an otherwise inevi-
table confrontation, indicated that if Wolfe agreed to desist, they would buy back from him any unused materials as well as compensate the mission for the expenses so far incurred in the project.

So headstrong and arrogant was Wolfe, however, that he went ahead regardless, ignoring not only the repeated Chinese complaints but also the British Consul’s warning, until the population became so incensed by the explosions of dynamite blasting away the sacred boulders to clear the site that Sinclair, unable any longer to ignore the Chinese entreaties, finally agreed to meet the local officials on the disputed spot to verify for himself the Chinese claim.

News of this brought a large crowd to the scene, including community leaders and students from a nearby highschool who persuaded the Chinese contractors to down tools and abandon the building. They were confronted by the mission head who, with the support of his employees, sought to eject the protesters physically. In the heated exchanges and scuffles that followed, wooden window- and door-frames were set alight by the agitated crowd and the fire, spreading quickly, soon burned the half-completed extension to the ground.

This outbreak badly weakened the Chinese case. It certainly alienated whatever sympathy Wade and Sinclair may have had until then for their cause. Faced with the clamour and with pressure from missionaries and others in China as well as in England, the two had no alternative, as protectors of British life and property at the port, but come to the aid of the mission, however they may have deplored in private its attitude and behaviour. Thus, as the accused turned accused, the conflagration which the local Chinese officials had failed to prevent was allowed to confuse and distort the original issue.

At the suggestion of Ting Jih-ch'ang, who was hastily recalled to Foochow from his new post in Kwangtung to deal with the case, the Chinese government accepted all the British demands,

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**Figure 4**

Map of Foochow showing the irregular walled city in the upper part and the foreign settlement of Nan-t'ai south of the river.
exorbitant and unreasonable though they were. Not only was monetary compensation for alleged losses paid in full, but punishments ranging from demotion to dismissal and exile were meted out to various officials and community leaders accused of failing to prevent the incident. The British claims having been disposed off, however, the Chinese proceeded to lodge their original case against the missionaries, seeking their ejection, with the British Consular Court.

This Chinese move caused Wade to panic. For though the idea of a legal solution to this dispute was originally his, having got to know the case as it developed, he was convinced that the Court, faced with the evidence, could only arrive at one verdict, one which would not merely damage the standing of the mission but could adversely affect Britain’s greater interests and prestige in China. He therefore frantically set about shuttling between Peking, Foochow and Hong Kong in search of a formula to bypass the legal proceedings. But since Wolfe refused to share his wider considerations, Wade’s efforts were a waste of time and further delayed a definitive resolution for which the Foochow population, though sceptical of foreign justice, were eagerly awaiting, their feelings suppressed to a barely audible murmur. The atmosphere of the place remained so tense, however, that another popular outburst threatened to overwhelm the city at the very moment Ku Hung-ming arrived in Foochow.

IV

It did not take Ku long to grasp what had taken place and he quickly adopted the grievances and impatience of the local inhabitants. Indeed, he must have felt bewildered as he came to hear the whole story, for how could such behaviour have possibly been tolerated?—and the perpetrators were none other than missionaries, men of charity and messengers of God, most of whom were among the better-educated foreigners in China. Where was ‘fair play’, that cardinal virtue school-children in England were taught at an early age and which had formed a natural part of his own upbringing from the time of his arrival in Scotland in his early teens. It was a virtue he took for granted, identified as it was with the country he had left only weeks before. Had he been misled? Certainly, looking across from the distance of his brother’s house in the foreign settlement of Nan-t’ai to the charred remains of what the British Consul had described as “the mighty-looking house resembling a church without a spire frowning down on the city from the top of Wu-shih-shan some three miles to the north,” Ku Hung-ming could see no sign of fair play and even less of the charity and benevolence with which the house of God was associated. Instead, what he saw was the monstrosity of chicanery, injustice and bullying that now hung over him, just as it had hung over Foochow for more than a quarter of a century, mocking
his naiveté and the misguided faith in what he had hitherto embraced without question and had even regarded with admiration. Unable to bear this egregious slight, Ku Hung-ming let his ill-repressed passions surge forth:

Ye would have the offenders taught the right
And chastised; for your wrong requital must
Follow for a hundred warships' might
Is at your back: Ye seek but what is just,
Yet revered Sirs, methinks, ye were not sent
To teach the creed of justice and of chastisement.

Ye speak of Britain's might to 'venge your wrong',
We know that creed of nations—'Might is right',
That Britain with her iron ships is strong.
But it beseems you ill, methinks of might
To speak, who follow Him your Lord, who said
"My Father could send angel legions to my aid."

Indeed ye make me muse in doubt if ye
Be led by that same Spirit from your home,
Who led those fishermen of Galilee
To seek scorn, sorrow, shame and death in Rome;
Indeed ye reverend Sirs, ye make me doubt,—
Your Lord once spoke of graveyards whitened from without.

Think ye, could ye see those Galileans now
Ye'd know them for your fellow workers they,
With labour-hardened hands and sun-burnt brow,
Or like the Levite ye'd pass on your way;
They might, I fear, mistake your stately home
For the imperial palaces of ancient Rome.

Ye preach a self-denying life, and yet
That rich man's viands, beneath whose table fed
Lazarus, were, methinks, not costlier than is set
Daily on your board as God-given Bread,
We know not if the creed ye come to teach
Be true or false—we know ye live not as ye preach.

We want no priests to help us in our need,
Priests we have shaven and unshaven both;
We want no mumblings of an outworn creed,
But science we want and knowledge for our growth,
And Rulers with unselfish hearts and just,
To sweep you from our land as whirlwind sweepeth dust.6

Whatever its literary merit, this poem marks an important stage in Ku Hung-ming's chosen path towards "becoming again a Chinaman." It certainly shows that if he was ever an "imitation Western man" when he first returned
to China, as he would have us believe, he had emerged from
the Wu-shih-shan incident a completely different person
within a remarkably short time, though not to the extent of
becoming a xenophobic “patriot,” an extreme to which his
upbringing in the European humanistic tradition prevented
him from going, even if the last three lines do seem to presage
not only May 4 patriotism but that of the extreme nationalism
of those in Hankow, Kiukiang and Nanking in 1927.

With this drastic transformation, however, a number of
characteristics that would soon be identified in the perception
of many as uniquely his own manifest themselves for the first
time. None was more prominent or would mark him out more
sharply for the rest of his life than that which he described to
G. E. Morrison, The Times correspondent in China, soon after
they first met in Wuchang:

You know that when I write, I always write with my heart as
well as with my head. But unless my heart is moved, I cannot
write. Horace says “Indignatio fecit versus.” But when I look
at the present state of things in China, I am even too disgusted
to get up even indignation.  

This he reiterated some years later to a German friend,
replacing the Roman poet with Goethe perhaps by way of
extenuation rather than justification, and conspicuously leaving
out the ‘head’: “In one sense I am like Goethe,” he said. “I
write with all my heart or, to speak properly, with my heart’s
blood. For that reason, when I do not feel strongly, I cannot
write. In fact when I feel strongly, I would get sick or even die
if I do not get the feeling out of me in some form,” even
though by so doing “I of course endanger my bowl of rice. But
between duty and my bowl of rice, I think the bowl of rice
must go.”

These last words, if seemingly defiant, were not lightly
spoken, for by then Ku Hung-ming had experienced enough
of deprivation on account of ‘duty’ to know what such hard­ship
entailed, hardship of a kind which would become more
acute as the years went by.

Ku did not of course abandon his rice-bowls wantonly.
Quite the contrary, he always tried his best to hold onto what
he had, but time and again his best proved to be not good
enough; his ‘indignatio’ being what it was—his single indis­pensable source of creativeness—remained beyond his power
of control, just like the spirit that inspired the ‘knights-errant’
(游侠) in early Chinese history, the ‘loyal ministers’ (忠臣) of
the imperial period, and to some extent the protesting ‘patriotic

Figure 5
Facsimile reproduction of excerpts from Ku Hung­
ming’s letter to Morrison, 10 July 1903

My dear Dr. Morrison,
I am very sorry indeed
to learn from your kind
letter that I have received this
year your lovely 20th birthday.
I hope however, you will
not allow yourself to be
too depressed, but will
make a brave fight for
health. I am not always
I am not in a position
to quire you any help.

You know that when I write, I always write with my heart as
well as with my head. But unless my heart is moved, I cannot
write. Horace says “Indignatio fecit versus.” But when I look
at the present state of things in China, I am even too disgusted
to get up even indignation.

You know that when I write, I always write with my heart as
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to get up even indignation.
youth’ (愛國青年) of more recent times, and indeed, as he would later discover, the adherents of 'bushidō' (武士道).

The difficulties that lay ahead—to be dealt with in a later chapter—were certainly far beyond the imaginings of the confident twenty-two-year-old full of ambition to do 'great things'. This ambition, an extension of his decision to "become again a Chinaman," did not, as he seems to suggest, come to him overnight, but was more the result of a prolonged gestation in his mind, and finally became more focussed in his questioning of the pretension and premises of the proselytising Protestant missions. He did not regard the missionary question as a mere diplomatic or political one, though since this Protestant movement, bursting onto the scene as it did in the wake of the industrial revolution, supporting and supported by the colonising governments, as the vanguard of these nations in Africa, South America and Asia, their activities inevitably had serious political ramifications. And indeed, had Britain taken more seriously the warning of two relatively enlightened Chinese statesmen of the time, Prince Kung 恭親王 and Wen-hsiang 文祥, and done something about it,⁸ the Boxer uprising of 1900 might have been prevented, even though the missionaries, who had played such an important role in the high noon of imperialism, were not the only cause of that outbreak. However that may be, Ku Hung-ming considered the missionary question to be fundamentally a cultural one, since it was on the undermining not only of the religious beliefs but of the very foundations of the civilisations of the colonised that the success of these missions inevitably depended. Hence he urged that the Chinese, instead of countering poison with poison by buying Western weapons and gunboats, should resort to their own superior and more effective, if neglected, weapons to deal with not only missionary pretensions supported by brutal force but also other acts of aggression. This moral sentiment characterized the whole Confucian teaching, as encapsulated in Confucius' remark: "If in government you depend upon laws, and maintain order by enforcing those laws by punishments, you can also make the people keep away from wrong-doing, but they will lose the sense of shame for wrong-doing. If, on the other hand, in government you depend upon moral sentiment, and maintain order by encouraging education and good manners, the people will have a sense of shame for wrong-doing and, moreover, will emulate what is good"?⁹ This sentiment Ku found echoed in his mentor, Thomas Carlyle, in the latter's depreciation of European societies' dependance on police to maintain social order in their development. It was imperative for the Chinese not only to consollicate and expand this teaching for it was their great strength, but also to interpret and disseminate it for the benefit of humanity as a whole. In taking upon himself the mission to do this, Ku Hung-ming was more than responding to the appeal made by Leibnitz (1646–1716) some two centuries earlier.¹⁰ He took as his guide in this mammoth endeavour the dictum yu-chiao wu-lei 有教無類, or, as he translated it, "among really educated men there is no caste or race dis-
tinction,”"11 that underlined the very essence of the universality of Confucian teaching.

To his great surprise and disappointment, however, no-one rallied to his aid. He encountered indifference if not actual obstruction from his own people from the very beginning. It is significant that, while chastising foreigners for not extending a hand to help him, merely offering, instead, “cantankerous opposition” (a largely misleading accusation, as will later become clear), he accepted with resignation the unhelpfulness and derision of the Chinese on the grounds that “as a Europeanized Chinaman I cannot naturally expect any help from my countrymen.” This indifference cannot entirely be explained by the fact that practically all of his more important writings were in foreign languages, making his views inaccessible to most Chinese who only learnt about him, second-hand, through rumour and speculation until the very mention of Ku's name conjured up in the mind's eye of most of them the image of an incurable eccentric, even of a man mad beyond their comprehension. As a result, in spite of the fact that he lived in the midst of bustling crowds of his countrymen, this gregarious and outgoing character remained estranged and ostracized and actually confessed to a foreign friend: “You do not know how lonely I am amidst the gaieties in Shanghai.” Indeed, the whole time he was in the country he had no Chinese ‘friend’ with whom he achieved the kind of closeness he enjoyed with some of his foreign intimates of all kinds and nationalities. This was not for lack of effort on his part, although his failure in this regard still requires some explanation.

Whatever the cause or causes may have been, nothing illustrates the fate of this prophet-turned-internal-exile more symbolically and poignantly than the fact that he was to die a neglected pauper forty-nine years after his first arrival in China in the arms of a foreigner, an Italian naval physician named de Giura, who happened to be president of the Fascist Society in Peking and the translator into his native language of the collection of Chinese short stories, Liao-chai chih-i.12

Likewise, Ku's very first friend when he arrived in China was a foreigner, an Englishman by the name of Herbert Allen Giles (1845–1935). At the time Ku met him this future professor of Chinese at Cambridge and well-known Sinologist was still a junior British consular officer, though he ended up presiding over something of a dynasty with a China connection lasting for over a century.13

Giles deserves a fuller mention here not so much for his achievements but for his long and unusual connection with Ku Hung-ming.

Twelve years Ku's senior, Giles joined Britain's China Consular Service after attending Charterhouse and the University of Aberdeen. Sent to Peking as a Student Interpreter in 1867 at the age of twenty-two, he worked his way up the bureaucratic ladder for the next thirteen years from Third to First Assistant at widely-dispersed consular posts in no less than ten Chinese cities, from Taiwanfu to Hankow and Canton to Tientsin, with Peking and Shanghai as well as Amoy and Tamsui in between. In February 1880 he was finally
promoted to a vice-consulship and posted to Pagoda Island to take charge of the sub-consular station of the Foochow Consulate, within easy reach of the provincial capital on the River Min where Ku resided.

Despite their age difference, the two became immediate friends on meeting, aided no doubt by their common interest in Chinese studies. This link proved strong enough to hold together these two men of equally fiery temperaments for almost their whole lifetimes, except for a break that occurred in the Boxer year when Ku Hung-ming was seized by another burst of 'indignatio' so serious that he dramatically cut his link with one of his oldest friends.

Obviously one cannot take what Ku said in a letter to the other great friend of his life some forty years later literally, that “In one way I consider you and Dr. Giles as two of my pupils in China,” though it is quite possible that “it was I who gave you both the inspiration to appreciate the beauty of our literature,” since Giles’ proficiency in Chinese at the time they met was such that his first book of translation, namely the *Liao-chai chih-i*, had already appeared, and the *magnum opus, A Chinese-English Dictionary*, that bears his name, to be published twelve years later, would almost certainly have been well advanced.

Giles was apparently impressed by Ku's personality as much as by his erudition—probably more in Western than in Chinese learning, describing him, among other things, as having "contributed many brilliant articles and poems to various Anglo-Chinese journals and [having] displayed a remarkable knowledge of the literatures of France, Italy and Germany, not to mention those of England, Ancient Greece and Rome," making himself the first in a long line of distinguished foreign scholars and writers to recognise Ku’s gifts and accomplishments. So admiring was he that he included Ku and Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙, the only two people without an official rank, in the handful of living Chinese worthies in his pioneering *Chinese Biographical Dictionary* that covered 2,579 personalities from legendary figures at the dawn of Chinese civilisation to men and women still living in the year of the book’s appearance in 1898.14

Signal as this honour was, it is quite incomprehensible that every vital piece of information on Ku Hung-ming’s life in that short biographical entry, such as his name, his courtesy name, his ancestral origin, the year and place of his birth, and the duration of his all-important connection with the famous scholar-viceroy Chang Chih-tung 張之洞, etc., are incorrect. Though lapses of this kind may have been due to carelessness and were obviously not intended to mislead, it is nevertheless surprising to find a scholar known for being “a keen controversialist who always dealt ruthlessly with all that he considered false scholarship in Chinese studies” erring in this manner.15

It is not known whether Ku Hung-ming ever actually saw the book, though he cited his inclusion in this dictionary, possibly out of unusual modesty, as evidence of Giles’ "bad judgement." But such mistakes, puzzling as they are, do not justify questioning the closeness of the friendship between

14 *A Chinese biographical dictionary* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1898).
15 Samuel Couling, *The Encyclopaedia Sinica* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1917), entry on "H. A. Giles."
The following quotation from Ku, and the one before, are from "News," as noted above.

the two or their mutual respect. In that same letter to a friend quoted above, in which Ku Hung-ming, as was his wont, candidly launches into a disquisition on the value of friendship and human relationships in general, he certainly testifies vividly to his warm appreciation of Giles as a human being and scholar, and in so doing reveals a great deal about himself—the justification for quoting him at some length:16

I think the two most warmhearted Englishmen I have known in China are yourself and Dr. Giles and this fact explains to me why you both, out of all the sinologues of our time, are the two men who have got beyond the philological knowledge of Chinese and can appreciate, you the moral beauty and Dr. Giles the intellectual beauty of our Chinese literature.

You may think I am paying you a compliment ... but you remember the field days we used to have, before breakfast, in your bachelor quarters in Hongkong ... . In the same way as you and I had our field days in Hongkong, Dr. Giles and I, soon after my return from Europe, used also to have our field days at the Pagoda Anchorage in Foochow and we continued to be very great friends until the Boxer year.

Dr. Giles then wrote me a letter in which he said some very nasty things about my liege lady the Empress-Dowager. In my then fanatic Boxer fury, I wrote and told him that he was not a gentleman, but a thorough cad to say such things of a great lady when he, as a Chinese scholar, ought to know better. I told him never to write me again and if he did, I would burn every letter he sent me as soon as I saw his handwriting on the envelope without reading it.

Then for sixteen years we had never corresponded. But two years ago when I completed my cycle and celebrated my birthday, passing my past life in review, I thought of old friends and remembered that the first intimate English friend I had in China was Dr. Giles.

I particularly remember a touching piece of his warmheartedness at the time of the Sino-Japanese war. He had heard that I had married a Japanese wife and had a son, but was very poor. He then sent me £2 of good English money to buy something for my son. I was so touched with this kindness of a friend that, as soon as I got the money from the Post Office, I went straight to the Bank and bought two red gold sovereigns with it, to leave as a heirloom to my son in remembrance of an old friend. I kept these two gold sovereigns even after my Japanese wife's death, until the early days of the Revolution when I had to sell all my Japanese wife's jewellery and these two gold sovereigns were the last to go.

You may think two sovereigns a very small sum to make such a fuss about, but like Confucius, I judge of a man's action not by what he does, but how he does it, and just as this little gift of Dr. Giles touched me then, so the kind interest you now take in my [son] Ascanius touches me in a way which I cannot express to you without appearing to be sentimental. When you get back to England, should you see Dr. Giles you can tell him what I am now telling you.

But to return from the digression. Thus in my 60th birthday, remembering all these things, I sent Dr. Giles the Birthday address you remember written
by my friend Mr. Wong Feng-ying 汪鳳瀛 17 ... and received from him a most beautiful letter, perfect in feeling as in good taste, showing himself, notwithstanding our violent quarrel, to be still the dear old friend of my youth ... .

Confucius says “If I cannot get men of equitable temperament to do with, upon my necessity, I would choose fanatics and bigots.” Fanatics do make progress and there are certain things which bigots will not do. 18 Now Dr. Giles is the fanatical type and therefore he has made more progress than you (a bigot) but his fanaticism, always furiously taking sides no matter right or wrong, makes him a person, as we say in Scotland, “guy ill to life with.” 19 Indeed because of fanaticism, Dr. Giles with all his learning and scholarship has remained a muddle headed Englishman to this day. The last lecture he gave on the Republican Heroine of Chekiang 20 ... for wrongness both as regards the character of his heroine as well as regards the interpretation of the recent history of China, was something outrageous and for some moment while reading it, I felt as if I wanted to quarrel with him again.

VI

Shortly before Giles’ appearance on the Foochow scene, Ku Hung-ming’s poem on Wu-shih-shan appeared in the Hongkong Daily Express in which, while censuring the missionaries for their un-Christian behaviour, he warned, by extension, the British government against its ever-present and ever-threatening ‘gun-boat diplomacy’. This poem attracted the attention of all people, of the British Minister in China, Sir Thomas Wade, who lost no time in seeking out its author. Having found the young, disaffected ‘colonial’, however, instead of upbraiding him for his impious, disloyal sentiments, the representative of British imperial power in China invited Ku to join him at the British Legation in Peking as his private secretary. Ku Hung-ming seems to have been pleased by this mark of Wade’s appreciation, and his respect for Wade’s fairness and integrity is shown in the short note with which he introduced the poem when it was reprinted in a Peking newspaper some forty years later:

Through foreign newspapers in Hongkong and Shanghai the missionaries called for punishment and vengeance (following the Wu-shih-shan incident); but the British Minister acted with fairness worthy of the British people; they sent the British judge from Hongkong to adjudge the case. The judgement of the British judge after hearing the case was that the missionaries had, wrongly and even shamefully, by bribing the Taoist priest, misappropriated the land belonging to the Chinese people.

Wade was indeed all that Ku said he was but much more, a fact of which Ku Hung-ming was obviously unaware, or he might have made his stint of working with him much more fruitful, if not more durable and beneficial to both countries, in the three years that remained of Wade’s term before he retired in July 1883, since the two men apparently shared much the same aims.
Wade was fifty-eight years old and had already spent forty years in China when he met Ku Hung-ming. Born in 1822, the son of an army officer, he went from Harrow to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he continued to develop his school-boy interest in the culture and languages of distant lands when China, then very much in the news, caught his imagination. So strong was his urge to go there that he cut short his Cambridge education and, with a lieutenant's commission purchased for him by his father, set sail for China in time to take part in the first Opium War. He was fascinated by Chinese culture and had a particular interest in the language, in which he had already made remarkable progress even before setting foot on Chinese soil by teaching himself on board ship from England. As soon as the war was over, however, he sought a position that would advance his studies rather than his military career, which he found uncongenial.

He resigned his commission to take up a clerkship in the Hong Kong government, an action frowned upon by his superiors in London as unsound and thus questionable for one seeking a career in China. But Wade persevered and with a certain degree of luck, coupled with his linguistic skills and the indulgence of successive local superiors, he managed to make some progress in official life and a great deal in his studies, becoming one of the best linguists in the British establishment in China. With his increasing command of the language and understanding of the country he grew more confident and assertive, and began to take an active interest in all matters pertaining to Sino-British relations; he soon came to disapprove, in particular, of Britain's gun-boat policy that was ever staunchly supported by two powerful lobbies, the traders and the missionaries, a policy Wade considered to be both expensive and in the long run ineffectual, if not counterproductive. In his opinion, it was of crucial importance for the two countries to achieve a durable and equitable relationship, something that could only be done through an understanding of each other's culture and mutual concessions, in place of confrontation. Such thoughts, which a wiser man mindful of advancement in his career might have kept to himself, Wade considered it imperative—indeed, his duty—to voice, if necessary over the head of his immediate superior, to the highest authorities—a privilege he had asked for and been granted by his local head. Whitehall was horrified. Never before had they had to listen to such heretical nonsense, and Wade and his local chief were severely taken to task for their irregularity and audacity. Though temporarily silenced, Wade’s spirits were not dampened by being reminded of his lowly position, even though his livelihood was threatened. But he managed to hold on, largely because of his linguistic skills which actually enabled him to advance in his career. His position, however, was greatly strengthened and finally made secure by his connection with the eighth Earl of Elgin, son of the Lord Elgin of Parthenon-marbles fame and with dubious Yuan-ming-yuan associations of his own, who, in spite of the belligerence that marked his two China missions, shared Wade’s views regarding
Britain's gun-boat policy and the need for a durable and equitable relationship between the two estranged countries. The trust Elgin and his brother, Frederick Bruce, the first British Minister in China whom Wade served both as Legation Secretary and Chinese Secretary, placed in this scholarly and far-sighted diplomat; and the support they gave him, were pivotal in the emergence of Thomas Wade as the most far-sighted British Minister in China in the history of Sino-British diplomatic relations—until, that is, the arrival of Sir Miles Lampson in Peking as late as 1926. Sent to clean up the debris accumulated over the past hundred years, he was instrumental in seeing the two countries, with the help of another World War, establish a completely new basis for their relationship, one for which Wade had worked hard, but failed, to achieve in his lifetime.21

If the similarities and overlap in the personality, temperament, aspirations and experience of these two men help to explain Wade's interest in Ku Hung-ming, nothing is known of the kind of work Wade expected Ku to assist him with, how long Ku stayed in the British Legation, or when and why he left. His apparently brief stay was probably due to no more than its being "uncongenial," as Giles later described it, when he had to set aside the ideas and projects that were occupying his mind for a repetitive and for him unproductive daily routine. But whatever the reason, it was not, as has been alleged by one Chinese writer, the result of Wade's "arrogant and imperialistic attitude," a facile explanation to which many other commentators, when writing about Chinese-foreign personal relations, have often resorted when working in the absence of evidence. The truth is that Ku Hung-ming apparently still retained a warm regard for this Englishman more than forty years after they had first met, though he may not have realised that in Wade, as in Giles, he had encountered in his first short sojourn in China two foreigners who, on account of their studies of Chinese language and culture, were unusually sympathetic, and whose joint names, by the time of Ku's arrival in Foochow, had become a household word for all those having something to do with China through the Wade-Giles system (a modified form of which is used in this article), a method for the transcription of the Chinese language that originated with Wade and was brought to fruition in Giles' magnum opus, his Chinese-English Dictionary, first published in 1892 while he was in his last year in China as British Consul at Ningpo. It was probably no coincidence that this work appeared in the very same year in which Ku changed the rendering of his name into English from 'Kaw Hong Beng' to 'Ku Hung-ming', the form by which he eventually became so well known; and he later made the Wade-Giles system the subject of a public lecture he gave in Peking in which he urged its universal adoption for the transcription of Chinese, along with strict adherence to the traditional order of personal names with surname first.

Whatever it was that brought to an end Ku's stay at the British Legation, Wade and he seem to have parted friends. The following poem serves as a

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21 For a better understanding of Wade and his career see the excellent, scholarly study by James C. Cooley, Jr, of the University of North Carolina, T. F. Wade in China, pioneer in global diplomacy, 1842–1882 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981).
reminder of the connection between two men, composed as it was by Ku on his way to Peking at Wade’s invitation. The melancholy undertone of the poem may simply reflect Ku’s disillusionment and disorientation as he faced an unknown future:

Not without thoughts that ache with memories
Of foreign seasons and of days and nights,
Of other skies, ... I look back, and, amidst
Faces familiar in my infant years,
But now grown alien to my travelled eyes,
Accustomed to foreign sights, I muse
Upon the scenes and faces in a land
Now far away, of many years ago.

I saw her first
When we drove from the railway station where
Her father met me come a long, long way
From my old home, and pointing to a house
Where grew two hawthorns by the iron gate
He said: That’ll be your home for many a year
To come. Clad in a winter cloak of red
A little girl—she might be ten years old
And more was standing at the iron gate,
Underneath the grey budding hawthorn trees,
And as our carriage neared, I looked
And Margaret was laughing merrily.

Six winters past, my school and college days
Were o’er. The night before I left the house
Where grew two hawthorn trees by the iron gate
Before an open space of green and sky,
We had a merry party at the house.
My college comrades chaffed; I was in love
With Rosabelle, the Flower of the North,
The merry party laughed. I looked, alone
Margaret was not laughing merrily.

The carriage stood outside the iron gate
Underneath the grey, leafless hawthorn trees
Before an open space of green and sky.
Sick at heart at the gate, I turned and wept,
But Margaret said, “You’ll soon be back again.”
Three summers more, again I reached the gate
Where two hawthorns then in blossom grew
Before an open space of green and sky,
I stepped from out the carriage, turned and looked,
And Margaret was smiling happily.

The autumn came. Against the old gate
Underneath two grey wind-blown hawthorn trees,
Before an open space of green and sky,
The carriage stood. “Farewell! Remember me.”
Poor Margaret was weeping bitterly …

When this poem was published for the first time, some forty-two years after it was written, Ku Hung-ming inscribed, with a Chinese brush, the opening four lines in the original Latin of Chapter 3 Book 1 of Ovid’s *Tristia* on the newspaper cutting he sent to a friend. It was as if by then he already had a premonition that, like the Roman poet, who for not greater a crime than *defuit una mihi symmetria prisca* (in which Ku confessed similarly to have erred) and for his controversial work *Ars Amatoria*, was banished to the barbarian frontier where, in spite of his poetic power that changed the shapes and destinies of gods, men and beasts, was powerless to alleviate his own fate, languishing instead in debilitating loneliness until he died there without ever setting eyes again on his beloved city, he, Ku Hung-ming, too, would never ever see his Rome, nor Ascanius, his son, found an Alba Longa on Chinese soil:

Quum subit illius tristissima noctis imago
qua mihi supremum [tempus] in urbe fuit
quum repeto noctem, qua tot mihi cara reliqui
labitur ex oculis nunc quoque gutta meis.

*When steals upon me the gloomy memory of that night
which marked my latest hours in the city
when I recall that night on which I left so many things
dear to me, even now from my eyes the teardrops fall.*

VII

So far no evidence has been found to locate Ku Hung-ming’s whereabouts or identify his activities in the few months that passed between his departure from the British Legation in Peking and his reappearance some time in the middle of 1881. That he should have gone to Singapore after so much fanfare surrounding his first attempt at “becoming again a Chinaman” must, even for himself, have been very much of a let-down; instead of cooperating with a distinguished China scholar with an unusual understanding and sympathy for the country, he ended up working as a clerk for a minor British empire-builder, however the position of ‘Chinese translator’ in the Colonial Secretary’s Office of the government of the Straits Settlements in Singapore might be regarded by the local Chinese. It is true that this post, serving as it did as a link between the colonial government and the local Chinese community, was full of opportunities, as his wealthy cousin, the opium-farmer Koh Seang Tat 高尚達 had proved with a similar post. Indeed, it might have been through

22 A phrase attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, which appeared in an essay entitled “Literature and science” by Matthew Arnold, who translated it as “the antique symmetry was the one thing wanting to me.” This article can be found in the *Complete prose works of Matthew Arnold* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), vol.10, p.71.
him that Ku Hung-ming landed this job, though with his qualifications and linguistic skills, rare in the colony at that time, he could not have remained unnoticed for long, quite apart from his family’s close relations with successive colonial governments with many of whose senior officers they were on friendly terms. The Colonial Secretary at the time was in fact none other than Sir Frank Swettenham who knew well that same cousin (though he apparently deplored his uncouthness). A family friend, too, was the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Frederick Weld, whose overruling of the objections of Singapore opium-farmers was responsible for the extension of Seang Tat’s operations from Penang to include the whole of the Straits Settlements and later Hong Kong. Any of these could have met Ku Hung-ming, such a colonial circle being then relatively small. Regardless of who was responsible for Ku’s appointment, this lowly position was the highest gazettable post then available to ethnic Chinese, though Ku Hung-ming might not have viewed it in the same light as the local population, knowing, as he did, that while any of his college friends or any British school-leaver, for that matter, would be eligible for a cadetship leading to a fully-fledged career in the colonial government, the best he could ever hope for was to hold the same relatively low position for life. This inequality of opportunity, which would never have crossed his mind during his school and university days in Scotland, could not but have struck him hard, and he may have regretted leaving Peking, where he might have made better headway in the mission he had taken upon himself.

Indeed, the fact that after nearly three years of apparently shiftless roaming he should have ended up in this position in Singapore must have made him feel he had come to a dead-end, one he had not so much chosen as he was driven into. Thus, by the time he met Ma Chien-chung 马建忠 (1844–1900) there can have been little attraction for him to remain in that environment. There, though, he was at least at one remove from the pressure of his family in Penang where he might otherwise have gone. It is somehow symbolic, therefore, that while working in Singapore he should have been staying at the foreign ‘Strand Hotel’, something of a last outpost of European culture which he was coming to regard with increasing ambivalence; there he was literally stranded among people with whom he was familiar but had little in common. It was perhaps this isolated, cast-off feeling that sharpened his receptiveness to Ma Chien-chung, whose appearance in the same hotel in 1881 must for him have seemed heaven-sent.

Figure 6
Portrait of Yen Fu aged twenty-five, taken in France in 1878
That Ku Hung-ming’s appointment in Singapore as Chinese translator was never gazetted may simply mean that he quit the job even before it was officially announced. Such an act would have been quite in keeping with his character, as we shall see on more than one future occasion. It certainly heightened for him the importance of his encounter with Ma Chien-chung, which he regarded as a turning-point in his life.

Ma, an able man of many parts, is now chiefly remembered as the compiler of the first modern grammar of the Chinese language, the *Ma-shih wen-t’ung*, and for his role in the suppression of the Korean rebellion of 1882. He might have achieved greater things had he not died prematurely while serving as secretary and interpreter to Li Hung-chang, China’s representative, at the time, in the Boxer Settlement negotiations. Thirteen years Ku Hung-ming’s senior, Ma Chien-chung came from a family near Shanghai converted to Roman Catholicism in the seventeenth century during the first wave of Jesuit missionaries to China led by Matteo Ricci. He was educated, like his two older brothers, by Catholic priests in Shanghai and knew French and Latin from an early age. But he had also received a solid traditional Chinese education, a fact that distinguished him, in Ku Hung-ming’s opinion, from most of the other foreign-educated students.

Ma Chien-chung joined the service of Li Hung-chang, then Viceroy of the Metropolitan Province of Chihli, probably through the intervention of his second elder brother Ma Chien-chang (better known as Ma Liang or Ma Hsiang-po). This brother, though considered by Ku Hung-ming not to be as clever as his younger brother, enjoyed a greater fame as the co-founder of a number of modern schools in Shanghai as well as Peking, the better-known being Chentan and Futan Colleges, that eventually evolved into the present-day Futan University in Shanghai. His centenary birthday celebration in 1939 was something of a national event, a bright spot in the pre-dawn darkness of China’s war of resistance against Japan. In 1877, the year Ku Hung-ming graduated from the University of Edinburgh, Ma Chien-chung was selected, on the occasion of the appointment of Kuo Sung-t’ao as China’s first ever foreign envoy, accredited to England and France, as one of a small group of students to be sent to study in Europe. In the same group was Yen Fu, who went to Greenwich Naval College but emerged to become China’s first purveyor of modern European social and political thought. He thus came to play an opposite role to that of Ku in what turned out to be an unsynchronised exchange of ideas between China and the West for which Yen was hailed by the Chinese as a mind-opening pioneer while Ku was viewed as a brilliant but stubborn man rather than a selfless, indefatigable warrior ready, for the ultimate good of his country, to stand up against the tide of the times—although both shared a place of honour in the official records of the dying days of the dynasty in which they were active.
Ma Chien-chung went to l’École de Sciences Politiques in Paris where he studied political economy and international law. His academic success, which he lost no time in reporting to his patron Li Hung-chang, apparently caused some fuss in the French press, no doubt owing partly to the novelty to the French of a foreigner conducting a public disputation in their language. While still studying, Ma Chien-chung also served as a guide and interpreter to Kuo Sung-t’ao, whenever the Chinese envoy visited France. From his reports to his patron as well as in his writing, Ma showed himself to be among the more serious and able of the students sent abroad from China. He also took the trouble to get to know something of the people and institutions of the country he was in, apart from trying to obtain as solid a grounding as possible in his chosen subjects. His limitation, noted also by Ku Hung-ming, was that like many of his better fellow-students seeking knowledge useful to their country he too sought nothing more than the obvious ingredients for ‘power and wealth’, reflecting the characteristic material predilection of his people which, seemingly dormant, only blossomed with the first breeze of Western capitalism.

In 1879, at about the time Ku was finally leaving Edinburgh, Ma Chien-chung returned to the service of Li Hung-chang and it was as he was passing through Singapore on a mission for Li the following year that, as already mentioned, he and Ku Hung-ming first met. It was on this same trip that he also made the acquaintance of Koh Seang Tat in Penang. It is interesting to note that while recording in his diary his encounter with this wealthy cousin of Ku’s in some detail,28 Ma made no mention of Ku Hung-ming, though for Ku the encounter was so momentous that he could still, more than forty years later, remember the occasion vividly.

On his way back from India, Ku Hung-ming recalled the incident in one of the few pieces of his writing that provides a glimpse of his life: 29

Ma Kien-chung had come ashore to stay one night in the same hotel. We got into a conversation in the Reading Room, and, after dinner, I asked him to come into my room and have a glass of wine.

We first talked of Europe and then of China. We both talked in French because then he spoke Mandarin very badly. I found that, although he spoke French quite fluently, he had a very superficial knowledge of French history and French literature. He also could read Latin, but he had read, it seemed to me, only the Latin books specially prepared for pupils in the Roman Catholic schools. Of the pagan Latin literature, I found, he knew absolutely nothing. I happened to have Tacitus’ “Life of Agricola” lying on my table. He took up the book, looked into it, and, incredible as it may seem, asked me who this Tacitus was?

But although Ma Chien-chung knew little of European literature, he had a very good knowledge of Chinese literature. “The only book of real Chinese literature which I then had just learnt to admire and enjoy was the Liao Chai Chih Yi, translated by Dr Giles as Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio,” Ku recalled.30 Ma Chien-chung told him, however, that this book was only “belles
lettres” and not “real literature,” and advised Ku to read the *Tang-Sung Pa-chia* or *Eight Great Essayists of the T'ang and Sung Dynasties*. He also recommended as one of the masterpieces of Chinese literature the collected memorials of Lu Chih, a T’ang statesman. So struck was Ku Hung-ming by what Ma Chien-chung had to say that he treated it as gospel and would later relay it almost word-for-word to more than one foreign scholar in the same self-righteous tone as Ma’s. “My meeting with Ma Kien-chung was a great event in my life,” Ku continued,

for it was he,—this Ma Kien-chung, who converted me and made me become again a Chinaman. Although I had come back from Europe for more than three years, I had not yet then entered and did not know the world of Chinese thought and ideas, and therefore was just as silly and imbecile as the Republican Chinese today, choosing to remain an imitation Western man. In the course of our conversation, Ma Kien-chung asked what I was doing in Singapore. I told him what I was doing. “Mais c’est incroyable,” he said,—it is incredible that a man like you should be content to be a petty clerk (petit commis) in a foreigner’s office and, I assure you, after you have worked

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**Figure 9**
An unsigned and undated portrait of Su Tung-p’o

**Figure 10**
Signature and seals of Su Tung-p’o

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51 The eight are Han Yu (768–827), Liu Tsung-yuan 柳宗元 (713–819), Ou- yang Hsiu 歐陽修 (1007–72), Su Hsun 蘇洵 (1009–72), Su Shih 蘇軾 (1036–1101), Su Che 蘇轍 (1037–1113), Tseng Kung 曾鞏 (1019–83) and Wang An-shih 王安石 (1021–86). Though their fame is based on their essays, particularly Han Yu who heads the list and one of whose most important essays on Confucianism entitled “Yuan-dao” 原道, Ku Hung-ming translated into English, many of them also excelled in other literary genres as well as calligraphy. The most versatile talent was undoubtedly one of the three Sus in the group (a father and two sons)—Su Shih, better known as Su Tung-p’o 蘇東坡. He excelled in calligraphy (as did Liu Tsung-yuan), but also in painting (see Figure 12), and, more remarkably, in practically all genres of poetry. His well-known elegy, reputedly in his own hand, is partially reproduced in Figure 11.

A selection of the essays of these eight masters were collected together with the works of great essayists from other dynasties, from Chou through T’ang and Sung to Ming, in a popular Ch’ing collection entitled *Ku-wen kuan-chih* 古文觀止. This compilation Chinese children from early primary school onwards were made to learn by heart, whether in a Hokkien village or a Malayan jungle, a Shanghai school or a Szechwan youth-refuge-camp, as many can testify.

52 Ku had been back in China for more than two but less than three years.
Figure 11
A rubbing of one of Su Tung-p’o’s best-known poems in his equally well-known calligraphy—his Red Cliff Elegy (Chih-pi fu 《赤壁賦》) on the Yangtse, a short distance down-river from Hankow. It celebrates the famous battle fought there in 206 AD during the Three Kingdoms period, when one of China’s most maligned historical figures, Ts’ao Ts’ao 曹操 of Wei 蟠, was defeated.

Figure 12
A painting by Su Tung-p’o in 1094, when he was fifty-eight.

there twenty years, you will still be only a petty clerk. For although you have de-nationalised yourself (vous vous êtes dépaysé), to become a European,—Europeans, Englishmen will never look upon you as one of them.”

This Ku Hung-ming already knew too well, but linked as Ma’s remarks were with his comments on upholding Chinese culture, they struck Ku forcefully and precipitated him into action:

Three days after my meeting with Ma Kien-chung I sent in my resignation to the Colonial Secretary’s office, and, without waiting for an answer, I took the first steamer to my old home in Penang. There I told my cousin, the head and senior member of our family, that I was willing to let grow my queue and wear Chinese clothes. There you should have seen the great joy of all the members of my family at this announcement of mine—the women members even went to the length of shedding tears and weeping for joy at this renegade member of the family, as they had hitherto regarded me in my European clothes, coming back into the fold of Chinese nationality.
This experience, Ku Hung-ming commented,
should disprove once and for all the unfounded belief of stupid ignorant
foreigners that the wearing of the queue has ever been regarded by the Chi­
inese people as a badge of Manchu servitude. It is true that the words ‘pork’
and ‘mutton’ were the outcome of the Norman conquest of England, so the
wearing of the queue was also an outcome of the Manchu conquest of China.
But ‘pork’ and ‘mutton’ are now pure English words.

In the same way, he argued, until the Revolution of 1911, the queue was “the
symbol, the flag of Chinese nationality.”

Reminiscing as he was in 1922, forty years after the event when China was
ruled by the ‘half-baked’ returned-student Republicans he despised, Ku
Hung-ming’s account was obviously loaded, and very much a reflection of
his views at the time he was writing. One wonders whether the “joy” of the
members of his family at the announcement of his decision may not have
contained a certain element of derision as well. He also gives the impression
that the Kus in Penang were a closely-knit family in the best Confucian
tradition, a picture unsupported by the evidence. His relatives and acquaint­
ances might indeed have found someone wearing Chinese clothes and
speaking the Amoy dialect as they did more congenial than someone in
foreign clothes quoting chapter and verse in the original Greek and Latin. But
with their practical Chinese outlook they could only have looked with
disapproval and alarm at his impulsive decision to relinquish a position of
security for what had made their ancestors migrate towards the end of the
eighteenth century to escape a perilous existence in China. Knowing Ku
Hung-ming, it would not have been beneath him to make the trip to Penang
to announce his decision as a gesture against philistinism, and one should
not completely discount the report of a local gossip-writer that Ku’s relatives
and acquaintances were in fact quite horrified by his announcement and
mocked him, and that angered by this, Ku vowed that they would one day
hear of his fame, and that not until then would he return.

As it turned out, Ku Hung-ming would never return to Penang, though
but for his name, his family, with all its lights and shadows, would never have
come into the purview of anyone beyond local gossip columnists and would
most probably have been completely forgotten by now.

Subsequently, with the benefit of hindsight, Ku Hung-ming made out that
he knew from the start exactly what conversion to being a ‘Chinaman’ would
really mean, whereas when he made his first inroad into the country by way
of Foochow he would in reality only have had a vague and romantic notion
of the eventual ramifications of his transmogrification. Unlike many overseas
youths since his time, however, who, motivated by little more than misguided
enthusiasm, have thrown away everything they had to return to China, he had
experienced difficulties and deprivations there and witnessed miseries at first
hand that forced him to abandon temporarily his life’s mission to return to
Singapore. Following his meeting with Ma Chien-chung he became not

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Figure 13
A stone rubbing of the Three Sus
unlike many migrants who persist in maintaining the delusion that the impoverished and oppressed homeland they have just left behind is the very embodiment of the highest ideals from the safe distance of their new domicile, and even glorify their ethnic cuisine, making thereby a virtue out of their poverty. With his literary gifts and exceptional imagination, Ku Hung-ming created for himself a picture of his people and their civilisation which could only ‘exist’ in wishful thinking. It is indicative of how unusual he was that he should have held steadfastly to his ideal of the ‘real Chinaman’ to the end of his life, even in the face of all the contradictory evidence and experiences.

IX

It would appear that Ku Hung-ming left Penang immediately after the leave-taking described above, but he did not travel fast or far. Towards the end of 1881 he was found in Hong Kong by Archibald Ross Colquhoun, apparently anxious to find employment.

Colquhoun, a noted traveller and for many years a correspondent in East Asia for The Times, developed while working for the Indian government a belief in the trade potential of the Chinese provinces bordering British Burma. With the encouragement of the Indian authorities and the financial support of certain members of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, he had arrived in Hong Kong in late 1881 to begin a journey across the southern provinces of Kwangtung, Kwangsi and Yunnan to Burma, surveying a route for a railway to link British India with China. In planning his trip, Colquhoun had not reckoned with the difficulties of procuring local support staff, particularly the kind of qualified interpreters indispensable for such an expedition. John
Newell Jordan, later British Minister in Peking and at this time a Student Interpreter and Pro-Consul in Canton, was keen to go but prevented from doing so by his official duties. Another volunteer, Stewart Lockhart, Ku Hung-ming’s classmate from Edinburgh who was posted as a cadet in the Colonial Service to Hong Kong and was at the time studying the local dialect in Canton, was ruled out for the same reason. Anxious to avoid the approaching rainy season, which would have endangered the successful completion of his expedition, Colquhoun had no alternative but to resort to Ku Hung-ming when another possible candidate from Shanghai failed to turn up, though he had misgivings from the start about his early enthusiasm for the job. Duly engaged and given a separate compartment to himself with his own servant, Ku Hung-ming sailed on 4 February 1882 with Colquhoun and his assistant, Charles Wahab, a cook and another servant, on a large ho-tau or river-boat, up the West River in the direction of Po-se 百色 on the Kwangsi–Yunnan border, the terminus for water navigation and the starting-point for the overland route towards Yunnan and Burma.

By this time, Ku seems to have acquired on top of a working knowledge of Cantonese and Mandarin a reasonable reading ability in Chinese, though the Liao-tsai chih-i he was reading at the time he met Ma Chien-chung was probably in the Giles translation rather than the original.
Whatever his linguistic qualifications, Ku did not turn out to be as co-operative as Colquhoun had expected. Apparently always with a book in hand, his understanding of his role soon led to strained relations with Colquhoun, and as their boat was approaching Po-se after a voyage of thirty-five days Ku Hung-ming suddenly declared that he would go no further. His announcement was followed by the resignation of the cook and another servant lent to Colquhoun by the British Consul in Canton, who, though poor in English, knew Cantonese and Mandarin and was therefore indispensable for Colquhoun, who had not a word of Chinese. It has been claimed by at least one Chinese writer that Ku Hung-ming threw up his appointment because, as a proud scholar, he found the arrogance of his foreign employer intolerable. But Colquhoun should also be given a hearing. His version of the incident, published the following year, mentions Ku Chong-beng-kaw, as he spelt it) by name, but even had he not done so, it would not have been difficult to recognise Ku from his description.33 “On returning to the boat after three hours spent on my visits,” Colquhoun says of their first day in Po-se,

we found no breakfast had been got ready, although it was past one o’clock. The cook had gone to market, so the boy said. For the last two or three days I had been receiving these little signs which, added together, made strong evidence that our Chinese servants were inclined to be less subordinate than was right or pleasant. This was doubtless owing to the fact that Mr Hong-beng-kaw had thrown up his appointment.

This most unfortunate event was partly the result of the misconceived idea which Mr Hong-beng-kaw had formed regarding his duties, but mainly, I think, from his disinclination for the Yunnan journey. Our mutual relations had become so strained that, notwithstanding every effort on our part to treat him in every way as one of ourselves and with all consideration, he took offence, or made pretence of so doing, and declined to go further than Pose. This was, at the time, a terrible blow to me.

Soon after leaving Canton it had become apparent to us that he had little conception of the duties which reasonably might be expected of him. He had no idea of the subordination which is by no means incompatible with friendliness, but which is an absolute necessity on any expedition like ours. There was a regrettable absence of all energy, and we soon discovered that he was (however pleasant a companion, and here I wish to do him all justice), from want of zeal and go, totally unfitted for the work on which we were engaged. The fact is, I believe, that he had been delusively attracted by the hope of vague adventure, and the novelty of travel in strange lands. The early enthusiasm which he had evinced (an enthusiasm whose buoyancy had caused us misgivings from the first) was gradually dissipated, and left no trace behind.

As we neared Pose, the end of our water journey and the commencement of our march, the realities of the work before us were forced on his attention, and the hardships, and possibly dangers, of the journey through Yunnan and the Laos countries (regions bearing an evil repute, as regards climate and
security of life) became more and more apparent and distasteful to him. The result was that, just before reaching Pose, he declared his inability to proceed beyond that town, and his desire to return by the very bo-tau in which we had made our journey up the river.

When a man has lost all his interest and all heart in an undertaking like ours, it was useless to persuade him to remain. Here then was a cruel position to be placed in. Neither of our interpreters was willing to go forward and our servants seeing this, and getting an inkling of the life before them, were showing symptoms of insubordination, which were far from reassuring.

Our hearts sank within us, and we were placed in one of those untoward dilemmas which are so depressing, and which make it so hard a matter to put on a brave face. We screwed up our courage to the sticking-point, however, and tried to look completely indifferent. In such a state of affairs, it was far from unlikely that all our servants would strike. It was not to be expected that they, who could not speak a word of English, would attempt the journey with two Englishmen who could neither of them speak a word of Chinese. Determined not to be foiled, we gave out our intention to proceed alone, and commenced making preparations.

Mr Hong-beng-kaw showed no signs of compunction at abandoning us, with no means of interpretation, and seemed to look on the journey of two Englishmen unattended by any interpreters, from Pose to Yunnan-fu, as one might on a pleasure excursion up the Rigi!

While trying to write without any bias in this matter, it is impossible to avoid the reflection that his European training had failed to teach him one trait on which we pride ourselves, never to abandon a comrade. Few Europeans similarly placed, even if they had been badly treated, would have—could have—had the courage to turn back. His indifference, and complete want of feeling in the matter, was a revelation to us of the Chinese character.

The show of determination on the part of Colquhoun and his assistant succeeded in winning over the servant loaned to them by the British Consul in Canton, who changed his mind and consented to go on with them, feeling a little ashamed, Colquhoun commented, no doubt with thoughts of Ku Hung-ming, "though by no means a very educated man." With this servant-interpreter, Colquhoun and his party duly left Po-se and eventually successfully completed their surveying expedition. Before leaving Po-se he wrote a letter of explanation in the same vein to the man through whom he had made the acquaintance of Ku Hung-ming.
The publicity following on an incident such as this could not have helped Ku Hung-ming’s prospects of employment, particularly since vacancies in the kind of jobs that were open to him were limited, and possible employers, mostly foreigners, though widely scattered from Peking to Hongkong, Singapore and Penang, belonged to a small, closely-knit society through which news travelled speedily. Colquhoun’s account of his expedition, *Across Cbrysé*, which contains his description of the incident, was published with astonishing speed, as books were in those days. This volume found its way into the libraries of clubs in treaty ports and colonies in the East early the following year, including that of the North China Branch of Royal Asiatic Society in Shanghai of which Ku Hung-ming was for many years a member. Nothing, indeed, is known of what Ku did for a living for the two and a half years from the time of his return from Po-se to when we next hear of him. He certainly recalled this period of his life bitterly. With nothing to go back to in Malaya, he seems to have spent a great deal of his time, as he implied in a letter to an old friend from his Edinburgh days some years later, on “the pavement of the great roaring world of the Treaty Ports or even of the Great Island Forepost of the British Empire in the Far East,” surviving as best he could on the uncertain charity of relatives, friends, or even casual acquaintances.

Ku would appear to have lost all sense of direction when, back in Shanghai, he came to hear again of Ma Chien-chung, who had, in a sense, been indirectly responsible for his present plight. At the time Ku Hung-ming returned from Kwangsi, Ma Chien-chung was setting off with another expedition at the other end of China—to Korea, where, aided by Yuan Shih-k’ai sympathetic, he succeeded in kidnapping the Taewongun Yi Ha-ung 李昰應, the father of the Korean king and leader of a rebellion which the Chinese expeditionary force had helped to suppress. As a reward, Ma Chien-chung was appointed to one of the most coveted of jobs, that of Assistant Managing-Director of the Government's China Merchants Steam Navigation Company 輪船招商局 headquaters in Shanghai. Ku Hung-ming later recalled a proposed meeting with Ma Chien-chung, which, had it taken place, might have resulted in a very different story from the one we now attempt to reconstruct:

Three years after my meeting with Ma Kien-chung in Singapore [Ku recalled] I went to Shanghai to look for a job. While there, I made the acquaintance of a very well-educated full blooded negro from America who had been educated in France. He was engaged as Adviser to the China Merchants Steamer Company in Shanghai in which Ma Kien-chung was then Managing Director. One day this African gentleman told me that he had spoken about me to Ma Kien-chung who said he remembered me very well and would like very much to see me. By appointment then, I called at the China Merchant’s office. The African gentleman at first told me that Ma Kien-chung was just
then engaged with some visitors, but, after waiting for about half an hour, the African gentleman came to tell me that Ma Kien-chung could not see me, asking me to come another day. Then, although at the time I was stranded in Shanghai without a cent in my pocket, yet with the pride of the Scotch penniless lass with a long pedigree, which had been instilled into me in Scotland, I told the African gentleman that if Monsieur Ma Kien-chung should want to see me, he must come to me in my Chinese hotel!

Ku Hung-ming did not or could not wait long enough in his Chinese hotel for Ma Chien-chung's call. He did not see Ma again until the Sino-Japanese war, in 1894, when he went to Nanking with Chang Chih-tung, who was taking over as Acting Viceroy of Liang-chiang from Liu K'un-i on the latter's appointment, in place of Li Hung-chang, as Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese army then facing the invading Japanese forces in North China. Ma Chien-chung was then the Managing-Director of the China Merchants Steamship Company in Shanghai. According to Ku this position had always been "a spoil of office under the Pei-yang warlords and under the patronage of Li Hung-chang. But now after the Japanese war, Li Hung-chang's prestige and power had waned and the Pei-yang warlords were tottering. My chief, the Viceroy Chang Chih-tung," Ku continued,

was rising to take the place of Li Hung-chang. Ma Kien-chung, who as a member of the Pei-yang Oligarchy had secured this 'big plum,' the Managing Directorship of the China Merchants Company,—felt insecure in his position. He therefore sent the brother-in-law of my nephew, Huang Kai-chia, known as Jack Wong, one of the 120 returned students from America, especially to see me in Nanking. Jack Wong told me that if I would use my influence with my chief, the Viceroy Chang Chih-tung, and help to make Ma Kien-chung's position secure in the China Merchants Company, Ma Kien-chung was willing to give me a sinecure position in the Company and pay me tls. 500 a month. In answer to this, I asked Jack Wong to tell Ma Kien-chung from me that if he could use his influence with Li Hung-chang and help me to get the Custom's Taotaiship of Tientsin,—which I may say here, was a still 'bigger plum' of the Pei-yang Oligarchy, I would give him, not 500, but 5,000 taels a month!

When, after this, Ku Hung-ming went to Shanghai, Ma Chien-chung asked Jack Wong to invite him to dinner. "I found him now after nearly twenty years very little changed in appearance," Ku recalled. "He was, I thought, punctiliously polite, and more cordial to me than ten years ago, when I went to his office, but could not see him. He apologised and said it was an unfortunate contre-temps.

"Mais," he then added, "vous êtes fier comme un Écossais,—you are as proud as a Scotchman." "Yes, perhaps," I answered, "but what did Tzu Kung, the disciple of Confucius say? "To be poor and yet not servile; to be rich and yet not haughty: what do you say to that?" 34

"But I did not mean to be haughty," he said, "I was engaged at the time, and, when afterwards I asked about you, I was told, you had left Shanghai."

34 The disciple of Confucius was Tzu-kung. What is quoted are his words to Confucius (Analects 1.15): 子貢曰: 貧而無谄富而無驕何如。
Instead of answering, Ku Hung-ming quoted him the following poem:

He indeed gave a padded cloak
In pity to Fan Shu shivering with cold,
But he knew not the world’s foremost gentleman,
Taking him for a common cloth-coat man. 35

Behind this short poem is a story which Ku Hung-ming retold at great length, explaining, as if to make sure his readers had not missed the point, that in quoting these lines he was drawing a parallel and expressing his disappointment with the behaviour of Ma Chien-chung who, when Ku was poor and without a job, would not receive him, yet would later go to the length of sending an emissary all the way to Nanking to ask a favour of him now that he was a man of position—the Secretary of a Viceroy. 36

During the course of the evening Ku Hung-ming would surely have reminded Ma Chien-chung of their first meeting and told him of the significance of that meeting for him. But he did not record their conversation, nor how the dinner ended, or indeed whether they ever met again. But even if he spoke with his typical directness that verged on rudeness to Ma Chien-chung’s face, he remembered Ma always with warmth and spoke of him in the highest terms more than twenty years after Ma’s death. He contrasted him, the product of a Roman Catholic education, with Yung Hung 容闳, the first Chinese graduate from an American university and “a typical product of American Protestant education,” whom Ku also knew and considered just another “half-educated imitation western man.” Ma Chien-chung, on the other hand, in spite of his Western education and Roman Catholic upbringing, remained “at the bottom a Chinese,” and “a truly well-educated man, one of the two who could be considered as Chinese literati among all the returned students.” 37

Ku Hung-ming did not name the other. Could he have meant himself—though in a mood of uncharacteristic modesty left this for his readers to deduce?