

# THE TRADERS

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*For my mother*

I.

How you do, my name is Cecil Po, I am 58 years in August.

For the long time, 19 years, my bookstall is at 182 Porridger Road, South District, Tandomon City, The Kingly Republic of Tandomon. Now it's big enough yes, but when it started it was just an alley space between a bad-smell coffee stand and the hairdressers' always full up with the Indo maids from the Atwells Lanes. But as time went by the coffee shop got shut down when another mouse tail got found again in the coconut *nian gao* (unluckily by the council official), and after Tandomon changed over to being poor, the maids went away and the hairdressers put up blocks, too. And so then I advanced into their spaces for during this time the other booksellers also got plowed by the bad econ and I purveyed much inventory very quickly and cheaply. And so if the front to my shop looks appearance-same from then, inside I now have three spaces run together on top by a catwalk upon which I learned to commove very fastly and without devoting too much thought. Ha!, and this name is funny to me for I do not regard cats so much for they bring me always bad luck.

But maybe you say I have bad luck, anyway. This might be true, too. Never I thought I go on being here twenty years. That would be like the jail sentence if you told me up top. I would have

been very low or maybe even strike you if you would say this, for back then I desired only the single thing and that was to lock up myself in the prison of being a notable writer. So to this task I devoted many many hours and many many years and overall I completed for myself several long books of careful pages. But like the child's story of the girl with the *Xiasi* dog that just turn up its nose to food, all my tries got rejected from the book people. I joke to myself that sometimes my tries were rejected so fast the stamp paste on the envelopes was not yet dry. Now all the paste is dried-up and all my writings sleep underneath my bedframe and I forget about them.

But maybe you say I am in jail, anyway. Then again maybe you are right. Day after day I spend moving these piles of old books to here and there, shuffling hurting feet and trying to look busy when the customers arrive so they don't think they have come into a cannot make it shop. And then they go away without buying not even the paperback and I have wasted my efforts for nothing. Other times they come in and ask me bushels of questions wanting this volume or that one for a cheap price, and when I don't have or it is too much they change to huffy and walk out with no words. Meantime my stacks grow taller because when the persons come in with their don't-want volumes and cannot get you to buy they leave such behind anyway since no one likes to toss books. So now I am trapped wherever I move by the stacks of Mr. Robbins and Mr. Sheldon and Miss Collins because I cannot throw these away either, and now they become even more like my jailers since I slave myself to find space for them and their fat bricks of rubbishy writings.

So this is my trade and my bookstall is named Gecko 88.

All the same I have survived for these many years running my business and luckily have not yet perished. So much is thanks to

my father, who though he is long ago passed, possessed a prime head in figuring and sums. He always instructed that a businessman should not stoop himself to selling products but instead trade his ideas. So I tongue-lash myself to always remember his words. And here I am lucky that my simple bookstall is not far off from the Ansleigh Secondary for Boys, which is here since before Tandomon was its own sovereign and still much the ace school. So twice a year before the college entering trials I fly a high banner adverting BOOKS FOR CRAMS! with a picture of cap and gown and a happy boy holding his paper, and I make sure every morning to litter the windscreens in the car parks by the school. And sure enough the next day the parents flood in like ants on the double to carry off my special-ordered sets on accountancy, maths, English literature, what have you. From this I harvest enough to float from term to term and have done so for twenty years next July.

Now I have a funny coincidence to tell you. Not all my books are rubbishy paperbacks or for schooltests. I have many solid classic volumes, too. Sometimes people collect books their whole lives but one day get tired of seeing them and want to sell all. I know this feeling of tiredness. Sometimes people die and their family don't care to keep their big dusty editions lying around and maybe think too, they must be valuable since the dead person went to the bother of collecting them. Now sometimes that can be true also so when this happens, no matter how I feel, even if too busy or too weary, I always make time to go look.

So one day I hear the low voice on the telephone asking me if I take away collections and when I say yes, I am informed this address in the Settlers Ward. It's the long-away trip and I don't make it for the few days but when I finally go I see much mourning going on because the dead man was a very old *Ah Pek* with

many children and grandchildren and old aunties still wailing away. One fat man with a chicken backside then takes me to a dark room where there is a beautiful knockout steamer chest and inside it is full up with this dead man's books. There are not so many considering how long this man lived but all the books are solid—many Londons and some Kiplings and Maughams all covered up in shiny black leather—and so after my looking I make up my mind to buy. Maybe I don't sell them so quick but I think of the type of book that is growing taller in Gecko 88 and consider that these kind are better to change the character in my store. On the way out, the *Ah Pooi* says to me that such books look like new since they only lie on the shelf because the *Ah Pek* cannot read English. But this is not so unusual; I know this before, too.

My big surprise is when I go lug these volumes home. Because I have been in the book trade twenty years next July, I am knowledgeable from front to back about all the types of volumes printed and can expertly tell you about every kind of writer and everything this writer publish. Even those who write only one book and quit, I know their names. It is like the trick with me if you want to try my memory. Go ahead and test anytime. But in this *Ah Pek's* pile I see two books with a strange name mixed up with all the Londons and Kiplings and Maughams and what have you. It is a fancy one too, like the barrister or council official. This notable writer is named Mr. Lawrence L. McLemore.

Now I never heard this guy. And so because this is strange for me I pick up the volume to look closer. But then it hits me like bricks that I spied this name this very morning when lazing over my *kopi-o* before my shop opens. You see, even though I no longer want to be the notable writer, I still habit myself to buy such digests to keep atop this world. (Ha!, so maybe I don't forget everything about myself.) I send off by mail and when they arrive

I arrange the tall stack by the register and when no customers arrive I read everything word-by-word going very slowly.

First off there is the *South-East Asiatic Literary Review*, which is very boss and very official with big pages half the size of my bed-table. It takes me sometimes a few weeks to scan everything here and I don't ken one hundred percent either but luckily it arrives in the box only every two months. Then there is *Serious Books Digest*, which is not so long and not so *cheem*, but also not so interesting, either, and I go through this one very quickly. Overall the best for me is the *Indo-Asia Book Journal* because it is not so upper and the writers there can be very mocking and put on a humorous face when they think the book is unworthy. Sometimes I feel sorry for the notable writer they scold about but then I think to myself, Man, you write and publish your book! You got no complaint anytime! You're lucky some important reviewer take the time to read your writings. And I drink more *kopi-o* and go on to the next scolding.

So I was finishing up this magazine in my thoughtful mind when I reached the back page where they place all the adverts. Now I like this part of the *Indo-Asia Book Journal* like a boy likes his litchi candy and sometimes I read it two or three times over. Always there is the funny mash-up of people selling or wanting things, holiday houses to let, high-drawer institutions pitching themselves to students, and some lonely hearts adverting, too. Particularly I am interested in what people try to peddle off as valuable and also what kind of persons promote themselves for company. Once the while I even think that I should reply myself to this person or the other but then I consider all the trouble that maybe lies ahead and I close the page.

But since it is an important book journal the editors always keep one row of spaces in this mix bag for the people to make requests

about the notable writers. As like, *I'm writing a historical account of Gabriel Fielding and would appreciate receiving information or anecdotes concerning his medical practice in prison* dot dot dot and what have you. Or, *I am seeking essays and short monographs for an edition on the feminine consciousness of Dorothy Richardson* dot dot dot and what have you. This space is always crammed up by the professors and lecturers from all the South East Asia schools, although what kind of information or anecdotes the local people can likely have about such writers makes me wonder. And never once do I hear the local persons busy at discussing the feminine consciousness of this author or that. Still these professors and lecturers keep asking, and now and again I even see pleas by the British teacher or the USA one.

And this is where I spy this writer's name. In this box halfway down the row is printed, *Currently seeking information about expatriate British writer Lawrence McLemore for a biography in progress. All personal correspondences and anecdotes welcome, particularly those regarding McLemore's experiences in SE Asia. All contributions will be acknowledged.* Then there's a postal box address for the USA in Michigan and after that this teacher's name and where he scholars: Prof. M. Mittman, Saylorville Junior College.

Ha, so there is where I heard of the guy! I hurry off to find the journal in the shop to confirm and when I do, I look at the book more closely. It is named *My Stolen Life* and is an old one, circulated in 1937, almost forty years ago. The HK publisher is called Rumble & Co. and though it went down in the Pacific War, on this occasion or that I still cognize some books from this concern. Maybe they even some have writers around that people are still admiring about. I then scan number two book by this writer, which is even older, printed in 1933, but looks just as shiny since no

one else looks at it, either. I leaf the book awhile, then glimpse the first page to check the title, which is *Footprint in the Water*, then close it and ponder awhile.

What kind of hell title is this, I think, for it strikes me strange that a notable writer that has important professors from the USA hunting after him should name his significant book like this. Next I start to laugh for such a thing reminds me of a children story or a naughty joke book I keep when young. Once the while I even sell a comic book like this to a boy who comes looking. And so now I feel ready to open up these pages and read some of the lines by Mr. Lawrence L. McLemore concerning what's on his mind since despite my quiet face, I like any good chance to break myself up.

But this becomes my mistake. Because when I get a few pages deep into the book I see it is one big mash-up. On one hand, there involves some big shot man who forgets his memory and gets twisted up with a *samseng* that knows the forgetting man from before and now goes to rob him but then gets hurt by a blade and dies. On the other, the forgetting man has a cheating *Ah Nia* girlfriend who also wants the money and runs off from him but then escapes a crack-up in a carriage and so switches her mind about the forgetting man, but then he's gone off to England or Horlan or wherever, and so she fling herself on a bed and cries for him and dot dot dot and what have you. I tell you this because despite its looks, this thing is a chore and after thirty, forty pages of this talking cock I tire myself out. The story turns and twists like bullshit and what one big event has to do with the other I am without clues and neither does Mr. Lawrence McLemore say either, and overall I waste a half-hour, maybe longer on this nonsense before I throw it aside.

And now my feeling changed. Not everyone like every book I know, but now I think this is a very rubbishy book and I start

to feel the dislike of Mr. Lawrence L. McLemore. Beside him Mr. Sheldon and Mr. Robbins and Miss Collins write like Mr. Shakespeare, or even Mr. Hemingway. At least they don't give me the mash-up stories with sentences that scatter all over the place like drunk butterflies and give me the hard time so I quickly suffer my pounding headache. How the world does this man publish this kind of thing, I ask myself, and why do important professors from the USA want to know about his life? My judgment says these books are the bust, no more worth it than a scratched-out drawing. I bet if you ask this man to write his own signature, he would *tua teow*. Yet for no reason he has two shiny books in black leather right next to Mr. London and Mr. Maugham, and the *Ah Pek* and all the children and grandchildren in the *Ah Pek's* house think he is just as notable and admiring because his name is sitting there on a high shelf to look at.

Now I start to feel myself provoked. I think of the books that lie peacefully under my bedframe that don't make it to the high shelf anywhere. All the years I write and write and send off to the John Sanderson Literary Agency, Inc. in HK but never get any soap there. They just rebound my requests faster and faster until they get tired and in the end don't bother to reply me anymore. Sometimes I think they have a smart secretary that does nothing but tear up the letters from people like me. And also the boss executive that arrows her to forget my calls. Once I even think I should circulate my writings myself (and I ticked all the notable writers who did this—Mr. Proust, Mr. Whitman, Mr. Crane) but maybe I got the lesser steel because after considering and considering, I rejected this idea. And so my books go back to sleep.

And now I recollect something else, too. Just lately the *South-East Asiatic Literary Review* printed the long windy theme that cataloged all the local estimable authors. This piece names off

every country and so goes through a long list—Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Burma, what have you. But when they come to Tandomon, the important editors leave it blank and say that no literature arises from that small country and so has none. Even Singapore not yet ten years old has a list of names and books.

What is this, I think. How do they know everyone in Tandomon who pens compositions? The important editors must be all super-powerful to know this. True, I never heard of any Tandomon notable writers myself either, but maybe like spiny lizards they all are laying under rocks like me. Maybe they also write to the John Sanderson Literary Agency, Inc. in HK and get their manuscripts torn up. Maybe likewise they got piles of writings underneath their bedframes *kooning* away. We are all not lucky enough to get approved by the significant book people, you know.

As I chew over this, my feeling changes again and something else strikes my thoughts. For maybe the trying writer in me is not all gone case and could be I still have some power to invent my words. Not used in awhile but maybe still there. Just the other day in fact, I scribbled the urgent reply to the important editor of *Serious Books Digest* who was complaining like devils that he failed to receive any of my subscription cheques. But because this is not the first grumble he sends me, I was much stirred and so my pen fired back the strong return. Unfortunately I needed to throw such away after reviewing my accounts, but all the same it was a powerful barking response he was lucky not to receive. Truth is, it became a surprise to me, too.

So why does all this thinking come to me now? Because as I sit in Gecko 88 holding this copy of this cannot read notable book and the beg from the USA scholar wanting more hungry information about the man who pens it, the new idea strikes me. For I think that if the Professor M. Mittman wants to hear so much

about Mr. Lawrence L. McLemore, I would be glad to tell him the urgent things to make his book truly intriguing. Tandomon, after all, is the far-off place from the Saylorville college and there is much a scholar like him needs to know about the life in these Asian parts, details that I can inform him, no sweat for me. And then if I do this I can get myself contributed as the notable Tandomon writer that once had the acquaintance with the famous *Ang Moh* author, so the next time the *South-East Asiatic Literary Review* wants to print the same story again they cannot say we all are lizards under rocks here. The next time the list for sure has got the one name, and now I think that maybe this even strikes the blow for all the Tandomon writers. This seems to me as everybody winning.

And the more I consider my urgent idea the more I decide it is affirmative.

So taking up my number one prime stationery and my best black biro, I begin to inscribe my careful note, like a boy chewing around the nut with the poison inside. It takes me just the few minutes and goes:

*Dear Professor Mittman,*

*How do you do? My name is Cecil Po and I am glad to know your acquaintance. Allow me the chance to reply to your placed advert in the Indo-Asia Book Journal for information concerning Mr. Lawrence McLemore for your significant book. I am now in Tandomon City, Tandomon but growing up as a young man I knew Mr. McLemore, who was deeply acquainted with my father and a friend of his for many years. Due to this, I have many distinct recollections of him and his life that I will be glad to provide you if you are so interested...*