

Chapter 42

Some Speculations on the Diffusion of Culture
Moon Pearl Undergoes an Audition

So it happened that The World's Greatest Tenor came to Nakri Agricultural Research Station in Qinghai Province.

Everyone at the station knew he was coming, of course. There are no secrets in China. The Bureau of Foreign Affairs in Beijing had directed inquiries to the Bureau of Culture, which had sent them to the authorities of Qinghai Province, who passed them to the county, who notified the station. Under normal circumstances it might have taken several years for the necessary documents to be transmitted and the responsible cadres alerted; but the Bureau of Culture was in the gift of a powerful general, who had arranged for his own niece to have the position of First Secretary, and the niece's husband and the general both stood to make a very large personal profit from a complex trading deal being negotiated for some radar equipment manufactured by Marconi, a British firm, and it was known that Cinelli's mission was under the patronage of the British royal family, and so matters were expedited.

When Secretary Ma got wind of it, he frowned.

"That slut we got from Beijing has more than one foreign friend, apparently."

"Yes. She's a trained singer."

"Don't I know it. You talked me into giving permission for her to use the auditorium in off hours. Her mother's! What a racket. The first time

she let loose, I thought they were slaughtering a pig in there. I was going to put a stop to it. Just as well I didn't, perhaps."

Secretary Ma was sitting with Branch Secretary Zhang in the latter's office. Branch Secretary Zhang had just got all the notification papers from the county, and had called in Secretary Ma to discuss the matter. Of course, neither of them had ever heard of The World's Greatest Tenor up to this point.

"It seems they want to audition her."

"Do they now? Well, get her in here. Let's find out what it's all about."

Branch Secretary Zhang got up and went outside, to send one of the workers to find Margaret. When he came back, Secretary Ma was sipping tea from a covered cup on the desk.

"She came to us from some kind of conservatory, didn't she?" he said, while the other was getting back to his desk. "What is it, exactly? That stuff she sings?"

"Foreign-style opera. That's what she was being trained in when she disgraced herself."

"Foreign-style? I didn't know the hairy devils *had* opera."

"Well, it seems they do. Especially in Italy, apparently."

Secretary Ma frowned, working on this. Then his face lit up.

"Italy! Of course! Marco Polo!"

"What?"

"Marco Polo, you know. He came to China in, what was it? The Yuan dynasty, I think. Took our national culture back to the West. Noodles, he gave them noodles. And porcelain. That was the beginning of their civilization, such as it is. He was Italian."

"You think he took back opera, too?"

"Of course! How else would they get it? They got everything from us, you know. Paper, gunpowder, electricity, everything."

"I suppose you're right. And then they developed their own styles, like our local and provincial operas. Interesting."

Secretary Ma was leaning back in the armchair, reflective.

"My grandfather was a great opera fan. Zhejiang style, of course. He could sing all the parts, *sheng* and *dan*," [male and female both].

"And you yourself, Old Ma. Do you know any opera?"

Secretary Ma shook his head. “Never had the chance. Too busy making revolution. The Party frowned on it, anyway, until recently. You?”

“Not a word. I couldn’t tell Sichuan opera from Beijing style.” Branch Secretary Zhang pointed to his ear hole. “Tone deaf, I think. Never bothered with music at all. Though my father could play the *erhu*.” [Two-string fiddle.]

There was a knock on the door. It was Margaret. She flushed on seeing Secretary Ma, but came in and stood by the desk.

Branch Secretary Zhang tried to put her at ease. He indicated his bed. “Sit down, Comrade Han.”

“It’s all right.” Margaret remained standing. She had resolved, on seeing Secretary Ma, that she would not be intimidated or provoked by him. At the same time, she did not care to meet his cold eyes, and so fixed her attention on Branch Secretary Zhang.

“We shall be having a visitor,” said Secretary Ma. “A foreigner. From Italy. A certain. . . what’s his name, Old Zhang?”

“Oh, I don’t recall. These foreign names . . .” Branch Secretary Zhang turned over some papers on his desk. “Here. Feinachengzou Xineili. I shall never be able to remember it.”

Margaret was staring at him, her mouth open loose in amazement.

“You know this person?” asked Secretary Ma.

“Of course! Who doesn’t know him? He’s famous all over the world. He was in China three years ago. In Beijing and Shanghai. He sang in front of Comrade Deng Xiaoping at the Great Hall of the People.”

Secretary Ma thought he had a dim memory of the event, from some radio news program. “Of course,” he said, “we know all about that. But why does this person want to see you?”

Margaret stared at him. “He wants to see me?”

“Certainly. Wants to audition you. So it says here.” Branch Secretary Zhang flicked at the papers on his desk.

“Another one of your foreign *friends*, I guess,” said Secretary Ma with a sneer.

Branch Secretary Zhang addressed her. “Have you met Mr. . . Mr Fei? Did you meet him in Beijing?”

“Yes. He came to our institute. Several of us sang for him. Just short pieces. . . to show off the work of the institute.”

“Hm. I guess you made a big impression on him,” said Branch Secretary Zhang.

“I suppose so,” murmured Margaret. She thought the way Branch Secretary Zhang had expressed himself had left an obvious opening for Secretary Ma to say something demeaning or insulting, and braced herself for it. However, he passed up the opportunity, apparently deep in thought.

“All right,” said Secretary Ma at last. “You’ve been around foreigners, you know how to act. At least in principle.” He gave her a withering look. “*Neither humble nor arrogant*, that’s the rule. Just be polite and stand up for our socialist spiritual civilization. You understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Teach it to the kids in your classes. Make sure they know, in case they meet him. This guy is obviously a big watermelon and we don’t want to fuck up with him.”

“All right.”

“So far as this audition is concerned, there’ll be an interpreter with you at all times, so you won’t be getting up to anything. Don’t even think about it! The interpreter will be reporting to me afterwards. Does the foreigner speak Chinese?”

“I don’t think so. No, I’m sure he doesn’t.”

“Can you speak Italian?”

“Not really. Only to sing it.”

“Good. Communicate through the interpreter. I shall want a written report from you too after he’s gone.”

“All right.”

“That’s all. Go back to your duties.”

Margaret left. “Well,” said Secretary Ma. “We’d better lay on some kind of reception for this devil. If he wants to audition Comrade Han, I suppose he’s going to take her away with him. That’s no loss, anyway.”

“She’s a good teacher,” said Branch Secretary Zhang.

“That’s as may be. She’s a loose woman, and a bad example to our youngsters. We all know why she was sent here. And no sooner got settled than she was opening her cunt for that Tibetan troublemaker, fuck his mother. The one Public Security let off the hook.”

“He got re-education,” pointed out Branch Secretary Zhang. “Five years.”

“Five minutes, I would have given him. Round the back, up against the wall, a bullet through the pan. You can’t be soft with these splittists. We’re a unified country now, stable and secure. You start letting people like that run wild, we’ll be back to the twenties—warlords and bandits.”

“All right. But this visitor, now. Where on earth shall we get an Italian interpreter?”

“That’s for Province to arrange. We can’t be expected to provide that. We have enough language problems here, trying to get these Tibetan sheepfuckers to speak Chinese.”

“We’ll give him a banquet, of course.”

“Hm. Better get that chef up from Xining. The one the Japs liked so much. Shit! How are we supposed to pay for all this?”

“Shall I ask Province to make an allocation?”

“Yes. And ask them what’s in it for us. Other than, we get rid of a whore. First Secretary in Culture is Old Yang’s niece. If everything goes well we’re entitled to some recognition. Some decent transport, at least, and a generator or two. Who knows? Maybe a factory. We should make the most of it, anyway. It’s not often we get the attention of Beijing.”

* * *

And so when Cinelli arrived, there was a big reception. He came in a car from the pool at Provincial Bureau of Education (Qinghai Province had no Bureau of Culture, only a Minorities Bureau). The car was a big black Polish model, covered with dust from the journey. It pulled up in the courtyard in front of the administration building. Standing there in a line to meet it were Secretary Ma, all four Branch Secretaries, the principal of the school, the director of the metal stampings factory, the Minority Representative to the unit’s Party Committee and the C.O. of the nearby army base with his aide-de-camp.

First out of the car was an official from Province, followed by a stooped, scholarly-looking Chinese of at least seventy, with silver hair and thick glasses. Province opened the back door for the visitor, who bent

double to get out. When he was on the ground and straightened up they saw the size of him.

“Wa!” Murmured Branch Secretary Jia. “What a giant!”

The visitor spread his arms wide in a gesture of greeting, making himself look even larger, and favored them with a huge white smile, seeming huger and whiter for being surrounded by his black beard. He said something in his own language in a strong clear voice, wearing a sincere expression, then turned to the scholarly old fellow.

“Mr Xineili thanks you for your kind welcome. He apologizes for putting you to so much trouble.”

This made everybody feel good. Such courtesy! None of them had ever seen a European before. There had been some Japanese businessmen in the county the previous year asking about raw materials, but never Europeans. Everyone had a vague idea that Europeans were big, ugly, cruel and arrogant. That was how they were always shown in historical movies. Well, this one was certainly big, but none of the other adjectives fitted. Clearly he was a Friend of the Chinese People!

Secretary Ma stepped forward to shake the foreigner’s hand.

“Welcome to our unit,” he said. “We warmly welcome you!”

“Welcome! Welcome! Warmly welcome!” murmured the reception committee.

Another foreigner had got out of the car after Cinelli. Now the big man turned to him and said something in their language. The interpreter craned forward, but either did not catch what was said, or did not think it worth translating. This other foreigner had a long, gloomy face on a bald head, and did not look very well.

“If the guests will follow us, we will offer them some refreshments,” said Secretary Ma.

This was translated. A careful observer might have noticed an expression of weariness and resignation pass briefly across the face of Cinelli’s companion at hearing the word *refreshments*, but Cinelli himself grinned again, obviously delighted.

“He says it is wonderful to be in a country where people understand the importance of good food.”

Everybody laughed at this, and they all went inside. They did not

proceed direct to the dining-room but allowed the guests to rest from their journey first, as was proper. The resting took place in the administrative building's reception room, where two rows of armchairs had been set up facing each other. The foreign guests sat in the center of one row, Secretary Ma facing them, with the rest of the reception committee ranged on each side of both rows, in order by rank. There was some small talk about China, Italy, travel. Then Cinelli, in that direct way foreigners have, asked right out to see Margaret.

"He says that his main purpose here is to see Mistress Han," said the interpreter. Instead of saying *Comrade Han* he used a very old-fashioned form of address, and kept his eyes on Secretary Ma when he had finished speaking, as if daring him to correct the archaism. Secretary Ma stared right back at him. An old intellectual, obviously. Sent away in the Anti-Rightist Campaign, struggled in the Cultural Revolution, probably hated the Party in his secret heart. Secure in his insolence here, clinging to these foreigners for protection. Fuck all intellectuals! Bum suckers of the foreign devils! And no chance of getting a report out of the bastard, of course. Secretary Ma smiled across affably at the foreign giant.

"Comrade Han is one of our best teachers. She is utterly devoted to her duties. Right now she is teaching a class. When the class is finished we will send for her."

Cinelli looked a little puzzled when this was translated for him. He turned to his companion and made a small shrugging movement, then quickly smiled back at Secretary Ma.

"Mr Xineili has many important commitments. He must get back to Xining tomorrow. If the audition can be arranged this afternoon." (It was now two o'clock.)

"We shall take care of everything," said Secretary Ma. "In the meantime, perhaps the guests would take a light snack, and then an hour or two's sleep. Obviously they had no opportunity for a mid-day nap while traveling. After the nap they will be shown the work of the station. Then there will be a banquet in their honor, in the evening. After the banquet Comrade Han will sing for them. Everything has been arranged . . ."

The two foreigners went into a long conversation in their own lan-

guage. Cinelli, to judge from the hand gestures, was somewhat impatient, the other was soothing him. At last the interpreter spoke up.

“Mr Xineili says he does not have this habit of a mid-day nap. He would prefer to take a snack, then see Mistress Han directly, so long as it does not interfere with her duties. After that he will look around the station. He hopes this will not be too inconvenient for you.”

Secretary Ma fumed. What kind of people were these, who didn’t take a midday nap? Stupid foreigners! They were guests, they should submit to the host’s arrangements! It seemed they really were arrogant, after all.

Smiling, he nodded to Cinelli. “Everything will be just as you wish. What an honor for our unit! Such a famous guest!”

So it was that at three p.m. Cinelli and Rocco, with the entire reception party, entered the auditorium. Margaret was sitting on a chair on the stage. She stood up as soon as she saw them coming in and watched their progress down the aisle and up onto the stage.

“Signorina.” Cinelli made a deep swooping bow. Then he stepped forward, took her hand, lifted it and kissed it. How pale she looks! he thought.

“Bienvenuto,” said Margaret in a small voice.

Cinelli shouted with laughter. “*Brava!* Your Italian is excellent! Let’s speak Italian. It’s very tiresome to use an interpreter.”

The girl put her hand over her mouth in embarrassment. “No, no. I . . . really can’t speak well. . . only the librettos.”

“Ow is your English?” asked Cinelli, switching into that language.

“So-so. But I can understand you.”

“Hexcellent. And these gentlemen?” He indicated the reception party, who were standing around grinning with simulated pleasure.

“The ones from this unit, no. Not a word. The others, I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry. The interpreter knows only French and Italian, and Romanian for some reason. Splendid! We can converse without being understood. But Signorina, you do not look well.”

“I have been ill. But much better now.”

“Are you well enough to sing for me?”

“Oh, yes!”

“You sang for me before, do you remember?” His eyes were on her,

and his smile, not the overpowering smile she remembered but a peculiar half-smile, all tenderness and warmth. “You sang ‘Vissi d’arte’. I ’ave never forgotten. A ’eavy piece for such a young singer, but you carried it very well.”

“I remember.”

“Well, that’s why we are ’ere. We are forming a company. Young singers, from all nations. To sing in England, under the patronage of the royal prince. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then you will sing ‘Vissi d’arte’ for me again, yes?”

“I’m not sure I can remember all the words. I don’t have a libretto for *Tosca*.”

“I ’ave a vocal score.” Cinelli nodded at Rocco, who was carrying an aged brown leather briefcase. “We are fully equipped.” He indicated a large cassette player the interpreter had brought in from the car.

“But the tempo? How can I keep time?”

“I will be your conductor. Just watch my ’and.”

“I . . . really. I have had no time to rehearse.”

“I shall make allowance. Do you still do your exercises?”

“Yes. They let me practice here. Sometimes, if the weather is good, I go up into the hills and practice. The air is dry, but much cleaner than Beijing.”

Cinelli nodded, beaming, turning to Rocco to share it. “A real singer! Even in such a place!”

“But . . .” Margaret looked around at the officials and secretaries. “Must I sing in front of these people? They all despise me.”

Cinelli turned to the interpreter, addressing him in Italian. “Do these people know we are talking English?”

“I doubt it.”

“Please don’t tell them. Explain that in our tradition an opera audition is a very private thing. As few people as possible should be present. Myself and my secretary, yourself if they insist, and Signorina Han. Tell them politely, but make it clear that I insist. I will tour their accursed pigsties and foundries, I will play the guest perfectly, I will be interested and interesting. I will eat as much of their food as they care to place in

front of me. I will even sing for them, God help me. But on this I must insist. Can you phrase that in an acceptable way?"

The interpreter's face twitched in the effort not to smile. "I can. Don't worry."

When the others had all gone, the interpreter left the stage and took a seat at front center of the auditorium. Rocco had set the cassette player on the chair. It was a Chinese model, brand new, that Cinelli had bought in Beijing just for this purpose.

"Now, Signorina. I want you to stand 'ere. Give 'er the score, Giovan. I shall conduct from down there . . ." He indicated the aisle where the interpreter was sitting. "When you are ready, just tell this gentleman and 'e will start the tape."

Margaret was in a state of acute nervous tension. She had no confidence in her voice at all, and wondered what Cinelli would say when he had heard her, how he would frame his disappointment. She knew she sounded harsh at the best of times in this thin Tibetan air, and that this was not even the best of times, for she had been tormented for some days past by her colitis and the old back problem both. Yes, she had kept up her exercises as best she could; and had diligently sent tapes to Professor Shi, who had responded with criticism and advice; but solitary training is a poor substitute for companionship and direct guidance. Yet after all (she reflected) whatever happened she would be no worse off. Her fate was whatever it was, and she could only live it out to the end without complaint. What a foolish thing was hope! These reflections calmed her. She sank back gratefully into the passive fatalism which (it seemed to her now) was the solvent of all pain. Thus she sang, without artifice, without any expectation, her mind still and her heart empty. Which, under the circumstances, was the best thing she could have done.

She nodded to Rocco. He sounded a small pitch pipe two or three times, then pressed a button on the cassette player. The music began at once. Feeling the music, allowing it to enter her, Margaret closed her eyes and composed her features into the expression of a woman in mental anguish, seeking out the words to make a questioning complaint to Heaven. It was one of Professor Shi's axioms that the voice should follow

the face and body, bringing to words what expression and posture had first suggested.

After a slight breath problem in the first phrases, Margaret got through the whole piece without vocal difficulty. The music continued for a few bars beyond the end of the aria. Cinelli waited it out, his eyes still fixed on her. When the last note had sounded he nodded sharply to Rocco, who pressed the stop button on the tape machine.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you.”

Margaret thought he might say something else, but he just stood there, apparently quite at ease, regarding her with that odd half-smile.

“Is it . . .” Margaret struggled to get back into English. “Am I . . .” Overcome with nerves, she covered her face with her hands. “Oh! I am terrible! My voice. . . I am no good, I know!”

With remarkable speed for one of his size Cinelli had come up on to the stage, right up to her. He pulled her hands away from her face. For all his bulk, he was surprisingly gentle. His face, when she looked up, was full of concern.

“You are a perfect Tosca.”

He spoke softly but very clearly. Lifting both her hands to his lips, he kissed them lightly. Somehow there was nothing salacious about this at all. His own hands were plump, smooth and soft. Margaret could smell him—an exquisite perfume, which somehow suited him exactly, softening and civilizing his massive presence.

“Will you come to England to sing for me, Signorina?”

“Yes, yes.” She spoke without thinking. How could she refuse him? “But is it really possible?”

Now he smiled: the wide sunny smile that had made such an impression on her in Beijing two years before, now lighting up the dingy hall, dispelling all doubt and fear.

“Possible? *Possibilissima!* My dear. . . Eh, scusi, these Chinese names! I’ve forgotten. . . You are . . .?”

“My name is Yuezhu. It means ‘moon pearl’. In English I am called Margaret.”

Cinelli nodded. “Good, good. Well, my Margherita, my little pearl. Soon you will be singing for the next King of England.”

He let her hands go and stepped back, his eyes still on her, still smiling. For the first time in all those months, Margaret felt the cloud of hopelessness lift a little. It was possible! How could you doubt this man?

“Go back to your duties. We will arrange everything.”

* * *

When she had gone, Rocco burst out laughing. “Signor Tenore, for this we traveled to the end of the world, to the last place God made?”

Cinelli beamed at him, quite unperturbed. “You do not like her voice, our little pearl, our Perlinetta?”

“It is not for me to judge, Signor. But she has many faults.”

“What, exactly? What are her faults, my critical friend?”

“How many do you want?” Rocco spread out his fingers to count them off. “She attempted the first three phrases in a single breath.”

“And was only defeated by this thin mountain air. At sea level she can accomplish it beautifully, I assure you.”

“She attacked that last A flat like a brigade of cavalry.”

“The exuberance of youth. Better a spirited voice that can be tamed than a dull voice into which no life can be breathed. What else?”

“Her rubato is absurd.”

Cinelli laughed, waving this away with his hand. “You speak of rubato under these circumstances? Fault of the conductor!”

“Her pronunciation. ‘Feee seee dayaaa taaay . . .’ Ecccha!”

Another wave. “No worse than a German’s. We shall send her to the Jew to learn phonetics. Then what?”

Rocco abandoned his counting, and spread his hands in protest.

“Signor Tenore, do you really believe her to be world standard? The strength of voice is there, I grant you, and the range, at any rate in potential. But control? Legato? That last allargando . . .”

Cinelli was waving now with both hands. “Giovan, Giovan, listen. How long does it take to make an opera singer?”

“How long? Why, ten, fifteen years.”

“Yes. Ten years, at least. Ten years of daily practice. Of singing and listening. Of criticism, listening patiently to criticism. Absorbing it, com-

ing to terms with it, weighing it, judging it, learning from it or discarding it. Ten years! Of memorization, of building a repertoire, cultivating an audience, getting to know the agents, the managers, the producers, the singers. Ten years flying coach to sing Puccini in damp half-empty houses in Birmingham, Stuttgart, Columbus-Ohio. Now . . .” Cinelli leaned forward, jabbing with a finger to make his point. “Now, my friend, let us conduct an experiment in thought. Let us take a fellow from the street, a perfectly ordinary fellow. As it might be, you. Let us take you, *paesan*’, and put you through that ten years’ training. What will be the final result, in your case?”

“In my case?” Rocco laughed. “Why, you would end up with a third-rate baritone.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You would be no better than fifth-rate. Why?” Cinelli thumped his chest. “Because you have not the soul of a singer. It is just not in you.”

“I freely admit it, Signor Tenore. And now you want to tell me that this poor girl *does* have the soul of a singer.”

“Beyond any doubt. I will be even more precise: she has the soul of a bel canto coloratura soprano.”

“Coloratura? Oh, really! With that technique? The legato . . .”

“Legato, rubato—any fool can learn these things! She will perfect them in a year. Sufficiently, at any rate, to command a couple of roles and to sing on stage. In five years she will have the beginnings of a repertoire, and will have sung at three or four big houses. In ten years she will be a bright new star with forty roles, and everyone will be talking about her. After that . . .” He lifted up his arms, and turned his face to heaven. “. . . a diva! A coloratura of the first rank!”

“Eh, eh, Signor Tenore, I must protest! Her voice, my friend, her voice! She screeches!”

“That is their tradition. They are taught to screech. Have you never heard Chinese opera? Fascinating, fascinating—a lifetime’s study in itself. But yes, they screech. Never mind. We will train it out of her. Of better yet, we will *almost* train it out of her! Leave her with a *little* screech. Yes! You know, the world is full of good sopranos. To capture an audience you need a little. . . what’s that English word? *Ghimacchi*?”

“*Gimmick*, Signor, *gimmick*.”

“Yes, yes, a *gimmick*. We will leave a trace, an occasional trace of that screech. She will be the soprano who screeches. Her audience will anticipate it, rejoice in it, treasure it! It will be like Maria’s wobble.”

Rocco sighed. “I see it is no use arguing with you.”

“None at all! I have found a perfect little pearl in this dungheap. Do whatever must be done, Giovan. Visas, travel documents, whatever she needs. Let us get the poor girl out of this godforsaken place. If nothing else comes of it, we shall at least have done that.”

“Aha! So you admit this girl may not succeed!”

The big man spread his arms in a grand Italian shrug. “Who can see the future? Who can predict success? I know her voice. I do not know her spirit, her courage, or her luck. These things, time will tell. But, Giovan, whatever her future may be, this girl is one of us, one of our fellowship, a sister. She belongs to our art. Singing, singing, doing her exercises here, in this place! Climbing these stony mountains to sing unrestrained! She is a singer in her deepest soul. We must do what we can for her, no? The rest is up to her, and her destiny. Here this afternoon we have seen a lark, a poor starved beaten lark, singing in an iron cage. We shall open the cage, Giovan. We shall set her free!”