

THE LEGEND OF THE T'SING T'SU MOUNTAIN

Almost two thousand years ago, in a small southern province of China, a child was born who displayed artistic skills at a very early age. When he was 6 years old, birds tried to alight on the flowers he painted. When he was 12 years old, masters came to watch him paint. When he was 20, he himself was a master. He worked hard, his fame spread, and he received many commissions. He grew wealthy, took many concubines, but remained devoted to his art. By the time he was 40, it was declared that he had no equal in all of China, and that all the masters who had ever been his rivals were long dead. This man's name was T'sing.

There is a mountain in the northern province of T'su which at that time was called the painter's mountain. For many centuries, every great painter measured his mastery by painting that mountain. With its towering height, its sharp angles, its deceptive shadows, no one but a master could hope to paint it well. And only the best of masters could paint it beautifully.

Every great master of painting measured himself against other masters by painting the T'su mountain. In fact, it was considered

cowardly of a master if he did not travel to the T'su province to try and paint the painter's mountain. So as T'sing neared the age of 50, he knew that when people praised his art, they silently asked the question, "But can he paint the T'su mountain?"

When he reached the age of 50, T'sing set out for the province of T'su. He did not hurry, and did many paintings along the way. After many months, he reached T'su, only to find that the mountain was enshrouded with clouds, mist, and rain. If he could not view the mountain, he could go inside the temple where the best of the great paintings of the T'su mountain were kept. He spent many days looking at these paintings, admiring them, aware that it would require all his skill to execute a painting equal to the ones he was viewing.

The weeks went by, and the rains continued to enshroud the painter's mountain. He complained to the keepers of the temple, and they assured him that this was most unusual. Never had the rains hidden the mountain for such a long time. More weeks went by. T'sing grew frustrated. The weather was turning cold. Finally, in disgust, he packed up his things and left for home, cursing the mountain he had come to paint.

At home his reputation was unsullied. He had tried to paint the mountain, but the storm gods had been capricious. This was not his

fault. He continued with his work, did many great paintings, and became the wealthiest man in the entire province. Still, he knew that his reputation would never be complete, he would never be remembered as one of the greatest of masters, did he not paint the T'su mountain. So at the age of 60 he again journeyed to the painter's mountain. And once more he met with the same frustrations. The rains were even more persistent. The cold wind penetrated the temple, and he could scarcely even enjoy looking at the great paintings by the old masters. Several times, shivering with cold, he set up his tools, hoping that the clouds would lift and he could paint the mountain. But again he was frustrated. The keepers of the temple merely shrugged their shoulders, said that conditions had been this way for months, and nothing was to be done. T'sing was rude to his servants as he set out for home. He was getting old, and was not sure he could ever again venture such a long journey, only to risk the same frustration.

This time when he returned home there was a bitterness within his heart. He had hoped to create a painting worthy of the old masters. A painting, judged worthy by the keepers of the temple, would be kept there alongside the other great paintings of the T'su mountain. T'sing had wanted his name to be spoken within the walls

of that temple. He knew it was his pride that made him feel this way. So for a time he stopped painting and meditated until he overcame his pride. He then took up his painting, and for a while, forgot about the painter's mountain. But as he neared his 70th year, he began thinking of the mountain again. And once again he thought of painting the mountain. This time, it was not pride that bestirred him. Rather, he was beginning to feel that at last, in his old age, he had learned to paint as he should. His portraits seemed to live. His thick, dark forests enchanted little children. He painted a large tiger, and people believed they could smell it.

At the age of 70, assisted by a great number of servants, he again undertook the long, difficult journey to T'su. And once again, the storm gods were wicked. The rains were terrible, the fog made one's bedclothes damp, and the old man shivered inside the temple, waiting for the rains to cease. During the early morning hours, the rains would let up for a while, the sun would shine through, one could see parts of the mountain, here a broad flank, there some trees protruding above the mists, but one could not view the mountain in its entirety, much less paint it.

T'sing could endure it no longer. As he went to bed one night, he resolved that he would leave the next day.

That next morning, when he arose, the rains had stopped. Eagerly, while the servants still slept, he gathered his painting supplies and hurried outside. The sun shone through the clouds, and he could see more of the mountain than ever before. Maybe, if he were lucky, the clouds would lift and this day he could paint the mountain.

He began painting, but soon realized it was futile. The sun was coy. A sharp ray of light would illuminate a cliff for a few minutes, and then the mists would roll in. On another of the mountain's flanks, he would spy a dense forest, but then it would be swallowed by shadows. Next he would see a vast field of huge broken boulders, but then the mists would reclaim the view. He painted furiously, capturing as much of the mountain as he could, and as for the rest he painted fog, shadows, mist, clouds, and shades of gray and darkness that enshrouded the mountain he wanted to paint. The clouds grew heavier, a cold wind began stirring, and he knew it would soon begin raining. He made a few last angry strokes with his brushes, and then threw them in their box. He hurried back inside the temple, threw the painting in a corner, and turned his ire on his servants who were still sleeping. Rousing them like cattle, he drove them out into the storm, and with fury in his heart he set out for home.

When he returned home, he meditated for a long while. Pride had left his heart a long time ago, but this anger was a much more powerful demon. It was nearly a year before he regained his old composure, began smiling again, and took up his painting.

During the next few years, he became an even greater master. If he painted a young woman, men went to their knees when viewing it. Children fled from his painting of a tiger. The governor's young wife died, and the man could not find solace. T'sing painted a small portrait of the dead woman from memory, and when it was given to the governor, he was consoled. A few years after he had reached the age of 80, T'sing painted a small bird that seemed to tremble and quiver, as if about to fly. This was T'sing's favorite painting, and he kept it in his room where he could look at it every morning on arising.

But one night T'sing went to bed not feeling well, and when his servants came to fetch him the next morning, they discovered a very changed man. His hands were stiff, his legs were weak, and he spoke with difficulty. From that time on, T'sing could not paint. But his eyesight was still keen, and he felt cursed that he could not paint this world that he could see so well.

Word came to his province that one more painting had been allowed to remain in the temple at T'su. T'sing felt sad on hearing

this. No painting of his would ever make its home in that temple. His name would never be spoken there.

It occurred to him that he could again make the journey to the painter's mountain, this time not to paint it, but to simply admire it. If the storm gods again were present, at least he could see the new painting. And if he died while making the trip, well, a man of his years would soon enough be welcoming death anyway.

Although very feeble, and often ill, he made the journey with the aid of his many servants. When he arrived at the T'su mountain, there it was, clearly visible. It was so beautiful he almost wept. He sat looking at it for several hours, his keen artist's eye measuring, admiring, embracing. As night came, he entered the temple and immediately went to bed. He would glance at the new painting in the morning, and then spend the remainder of the day viewing the mountain.

The next morning, he arose, was fed by his loyal servants, and then, by the keepers of the temple, was taken to view the painting. As he drew near, he at first thought that his eyesight had failed him in the night, for now he could scarcely see the painting. But as he drew nearer, he saw something different in this painting. The splendor of the mountain he had viewed the day before was muted. Here the far

reaches of its peak seemed to stretch away to infinity. A single bold stroke of the brush showed the side of the mountain, and then clouds obscured the rest, so that one felt its massive strength even behind the obscuring clouds. And there, above a cloud on the other side, was a bird, so one knew the mountain was at least that high, but where did fog and boulder meet? Here and there, shadows played with rock, mist embraced stone and then covered it, pointed peaks were softened by white clouds, harsh stone merged with gray fog, narrow shafts of bright sun glimpsed forests of the darkest green.

T'sing had never seen a painting so lovely. Here was the great mountain, not perfectly revealed, but almost hidden by the clouds, the mist, the shadows. Yet, one saw more of the mountain because of all these other things. This painting contained a massive silence, a calm patience, and space that was both infinite and intimate. In beholding this painting, T'sing felt as if he were looking into his own soul. For the first time in his life he realized, and could accept, that his soul was not something clear and translucent, capable of being distinctly revealed to the perceptive observer. Rather, his soul had its secrets, its mysteries, and its silence. He realized that these things, too, are precious, lovely, beautiful. They must be given their due.

One of the young keepers of the temple said softly, "It is

considered the best painting ever done of our great T'su mountain. Yet no one knows who did it. The painting was found in a corner one morning, and no artist has ever claimed it."

A very old keeper of the temple stepped forward. To all who were present he said, "No artist has yet claimed this painting as his own. And until now, no one has ever yet named the artist. But now I can name the artist because I myself watched him as he worked on this painting. Here. This man," he pointed to T'sing, "did this painting many years ago. I saw him do it, with my own eyes. And then, in a state of great anger, he left our temple, refusing to sign his name to his masterpiece."

T'sing continued to gaze upon the painting—his painting. He was almost overcome with sorrow and with gladness. Sorrow because, when he had painted this mountain, his anger had prevented his appreciating its beauty. Gladness because, despite his anger, his artistry had nevertheless asserted itself, and had succeeded in painting the mountain's beauty.

"Now," the old temple keeper said, "painters come here hoping to paint the mountain when there is a storm. They say the mountain is more beautiful when it hides its nakedness."

The painting by T'sing was regarded by all as the greatest

painting ever done of the T'su mountain. It came to be known as the T'sing T'su painting. In the years that followed, it was claimed by many that T'sing's painting had made the T'su mountain even more beautiful than it had ever been before. So the mountain then came to be known as the T'sing T'su mountain.

Both the T'sing T'su painting and the T'sing T'su mountain were destroyed in the Dragon's Tail Earthquake at the end of the 13th dynasty, during the Year of the Red Sun.

***** POSTSCRIPT *****

This little story has had a most unusual life in terms of its conception, gestation, and birth. What also is unusual: I know the dates of all these aspects of its life. The conception occurred on February 21, 1980. I was talking with a fellow named Fred Watts in Columbia, Missouri. He was a counselor in the mental health profession, possessing a Master's of Social Work (MSW), and he specialized in substance abuse counseling—especially alcoholism. We would cross paths about once a week, and later would work in the same building for several months. On this date, he and I were conversing and he was discussing the difficulties involved with getting across to clients certain conceptions which govern their life, and how to do this in a clear way so these conceptions or strategies could help them. I took a somewhat different view, putting forth the idea that sometimes life goals work best when stated vaguely rather than clearly. In the course of propounding this idea, I set forth the exact analogy which later would form the core of "The Legend of the T'sing T'su Mountain." This idea was born from mine own brow; I am quite sure I never gained it from reading, or from conversation with someone else.

And why am I certain of the date? Because I have kept a daily appointments calendar for about 3&1/2 decades now. I keep all these old calendars because they can be quite valuable in helping locate dates of events which occurred years ago. I am able to pinpoint this one because I

know what else I was doing on the date I had this conversation with Fred Watts.

It occurred to me back then to write that idea up as a short story, but always having more to write about than I've the time for, I let the idea drift to the back of my mind, unaware that there it would slowly gestate toward healthy and happy completion.

This completion would be concretized at one writing on October 18, 1995 (more than 1&1/2 decades after the conception!). I was writing a letter to a friend who is a priest. Our letters often were long (sometimes comprising a length of over 200 pages) and in the course of writing that letter, it occurred to me to illustrate a point I was making by writing out this story. Initially I set it forth pretending that I was copying it from an ancient source. But at the end of my letter I confessed that I had made it up.

So if the letter itself required several evenings to write, the short story required but one evening, and it was written under considerable duress: At that very time I (a happily married, and monogamous, man) was being stalked by a female reader (estrual admirer), who was phoning me constantly, and whom I was constantly but uneasily avoiding. Plus I was dealing with the very unhappy emotional aftermath of having fended off unwanted, aggressive, and ugly sexual advances from a man I had considered a friend. And not least, I was suffering from an odd infection with a considerable fever—perhaps it was a cold—that was affecting my whole body and especially my right eye, causing it to be swollen almost shut. Already blind in my left eye, this made for a considerable handicap with my writing, although this did not constitute quite the impediment it might have caused for other writers since (as has always been my habit) I was typing with my eyes shut.

So this story's conception happened spontaneously and briefly, its gestation was lengthy—over 15 years, and the writing of it was rather instantaneous and brief. I wrote it in one sitting, and (most unusual for me) I made no changes in it whatsoever after I wrote it. It would be mailed off, sequestered in the body of that letter, completely unaltered.

When, in late 2013, I considered making this little short story available to the public (at my wife's urging, I should note), I read it over and was tempted to polish it slightly. But there was its unusual genesis, the fact that I had written it at one sitting, and the fact that I had made no changes back then. All this coalesced into a conviction that I should leave this story intact, i.e., allow it to retain the form it had the day it was born. Why, at this late date, should I do plastic surgery on my healthy child who has remained healthy and now is almost 20 years old?

So thus it exists—resides and persists—in its pristine, unaltered state.

(And, if I may be allowed to put modesty aside, I daresay that this simple story does succeed at being profound in its own humble way.)

Also, for what it's worth, or isn't worth, perhaps mention should be made that this story won "First Place" in the "St. Louis Writers Guild 2013 Short Story Contest," the prize being awarded spring of 2014. This contest, which my research suggests has considerable prestige, was begun in 1920, was won by no less a luminary than Tennessee Williams in 1935, and as of 2013 it was awarded to a writer whom a few people are kind enough to consider a luminary.

In truth, I entered this contest only because my wife, Abbe Sudvarg, wanted me to. I myself care not one bit about prizes, and I am sure I advance no disrespect toward anyone by stating that winning this prize gave me neither satisfaction, nor pride, nor vanity. As a matter of fact, the formalities around this prize took too much time away from my creativity, which in my authorial identity is the only thing that matters.

***(Written October 18, 1995.)
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