



By MARIO PRODAN

The author needs no introduction to the readers of his charming essay "Collector Beware!" (June 1942). He is a well-known art dealer and connoisseur of things Chinese and lives in Peking. His article is a new attempt to lift the veil from the enigmatic Chinese people. It differs from other attempts in that, where many authors would have used a whole book, Mr. Prodan presents his conclusions in the form of brief conversations with an imaginary—or perhaps not quite imaginary?—Mr. Seraphim Wu.—K.M.

MR. SERAPHIM WU is a miniature big man. That is to say that he has the proportions of a well-built, tall man condensed to five feet. He wears gold-rimmed glasses, behind which his eyes dance comically, tragically, languidly, precociously, or demurely, according to the dictates of his quick will. His voice is a very pleasant baritone with a fantastic range. From a gurgling chuckle that is born in his eyes he can unleash a symphony of laughter with the overtones of a hurricane and the undertones of a tolling cathedral bell. His personality is gigantic, a locomotive clad in velvet. Mr. Seraphim Wu is easily the most important man I have ever known.

I got to know him as a curio dealer who, though still relatively young, had already handled some of the finest objects ever to leave China. His great knowledge of his country's art, his impeccable taste in all matters, his fluency of expression (in Chinese, French, and English) attracted me to him immediately. I sought his company, drew him into conversation, fed him preposterous ideas, and found myself fascinated by his reactions. He noticed this and one day, quite frankly, asked me what I was up to. I told him that I was trying to get to know his individuality and, through his articulate self, the people amongst whom I had chosen to live and who were becoming

more bewildering as I got to know them. He replied: "Individuality is a more or



less deep, more or less limpid pool into which some things are mirrored. Therefore, Mr. Pu, it would be good if you considered your estimate of my individuality as a reflection of my pool in your pool, and no more."

I have often diluted my avidity for conclusions with this thought. At the end of this ramble I may have succeeded in putting before you my Mr. Seraphim Wu. Your judgment of him will, perforce, matter little to Mr. Wu; but it may be that, if you decide to adopt his "pool theory," you are granted an unusual glimpse of your own self.

ONE day Mr. Wu came to my home for lunch. He is very fond of European food and has discriminating culinary tastes. His recognition of good vintage is immediate. Having been educated in a Jesuit school (where he acquired his odd name) and having traveled extensively in Europe and America, when speaking to Mr. Wu one is often forced to abandon the feeling of speaking to a Chinese. At table, for instance, his light conversation and demeanor is in the

very best European manner. He will seldom devote his entire attention to his neighbor and will always encourage general participation in one subject. His manner is gracious, but not obviously so, his restraint edgeless; in a word, a most agreeable guest. His presence as the only Chinese visitor did not embarrass him in the least. Indeed, embarrassment is an impossible state of mind for Seraphim Wu.

He attracts the ladies immediately and, a most natural compensation, is regarded with suspicion by the men. There was one man at our lunch party who could not have been a greater negative to Mr. Wu's positive. He was tall, convinced, ruddy, and seldom has a name fitted a man so snugly and smugly: Birthright. He was going to indulge in a bit of showing off at the expense of our unusual guest. Tennis and swimming had been over now for months, and he was beginning to miss his gallery. I think he was the only one at the lunch party not to realize his unfortunate choice.

Birthright took the opportunity of Mr. Wu's taking a second helping to remark, in the clumsiest of all attempts at polite facetiousness, on the interest Mr. Wu showed in his food. Himself an enthusiastic consumer of roast beef, he said, he was not blaming Mr. Wu, considering that Chinese food was what it was. Mr. Wu looked at him calmly and replied: "Chinese food caters only to a subtle palate, Mr. Birthright, roast beef to a gaping stomach. European food, when it is as deliciously cooked as this, is as pleasing to the taste as a delightfully simple chant is to the ear. But Mozart is very pleasing to the ear too, if you have the response in you to understand it. Do you like Mozart, Mr. Birthright?"

It was terribly obvious that no one liked Mozart less than Birthright, which he had to admit.



AFTER the other guests had departed, Mr. Wu and I retired to my study, with cigars. Sinking into the easy chair opposite mine, Mr. Wu gave me the impression of a large cat. Small and wiry though he is, he possesses the power to relax that gives him the round, silky look of a feline creature at rest. He looked lazily around and seemed at peace with his surroundings. A fire was in the grate, and the whistling northwest wind, unconvincing herald of spring, seemed far removed.

"I envy you your smooth, noiseless, gracious family, the pleasant circle of friends that you entertain in your home, and the orderly arrangement of your life," he finally said, moving his head gently up and down as one does to express approval.

I knew Seraphim Wu well enough by then to realize that this was his painless way of introducing a subject that would eventually show up my and my people's way of life.

"One's way of life is a matter of choice, Mr. Wu, and I am perfectly satisfied with mine. I am not surprised that you yourself have not adopted it, though monogamy is, I think, essential to harmonious home life." I said this simply. It was never necessary to inflect or emphasize an innuendo with Mr. Wu: he knew I was referring to his three wives and half-a-dozen concubines that were making a constant bedlam of his private life. His affairs were the favorite subject at curio dealers' banquets.



Mr. Wu's life seems to have been a constant skipping from stone to stone over the rapid stream that was his pas-

sions for wives and jewel-jade. They were his constant pitfalls. It must be explained that the latter passion amounted with Seraphim Wu to a form of aesthetic gambling. A jade block as large as a chair may in its innermost heart harbor a section no bigger than a pea of a color and translucence to fetch three or thirty times the value of the whole block. On the strength of this dubious possibility Mr. Wu made two and lost three fortunes. He was not very lucky.

"Oh, I would have, I would have chosen your exact formula had I not been forced into a greater issue sooner. It is as simple as that: I was not gifted with the sentiments of service and devotion to one person for ever and ever, and when I discovered this I allowed myself shamefully to slip into the ways of my people."

"My dear Mr. Wu," I said, "what you really mean is that you have chosen the way of your people because you cannot bear the thought of slavery to one woman and that, in spite of the inconveniences of such an arrangement, you are quite satisfied with your choice. We will have to do away with polite circumlocutions in our conversations; otherwise they will become a great strain on my simple European directness. Promise to be direct with me, Mr. Wu, will you?"

"I will try to," he said, with his melodious chuckle. "Well then," he continued, more feline than ever, "when I returned from my European education I assure you I was like you. It is difficult to escape the white man's enthusiasm for himself, for his ideas of right and wrong and for his 'go ahead and change the world' attitude. All that I had and more: I was going to change my people, who to me seemed obsolete; I was going to inject into them my own infection. I worked at it with enthusiasm, I joined three movements and actually founded a fourth. In the process of this I learnt to know and appreciate my people. It was then that I became conscious of my reversion to type, and for the last twenty years I have grown more and more like my own race again.

"You will say that it is the line of least resistance, and I have often suspected it. But I do have a battery of arguments that prove to me that there is more to the urgency of the change than that. Is it the line of least resistance to sacrifice an orderly home to the desire for personal freedom? You Europeans use that word a lot, but to me your interpretation of it has no meaning. What good is it to you to have the freedom of reading a particular newspaper and saying what

you will of your ruler, when all the time you are a slave, moral and physical, to one woman, when all the time you are leading the thwarted life that a man is not meant for? For the male is by nature polygamous.



"There is no better proof of that than your office secretary doing a job she hates, yearning for a man, a child, a family, because your wars and hard social conditions cause there to be too few men to go round. And then, to myself, I am the best testing-ground for this notion. I really believe that in my attraction towards the different and changing type of the other sex there is more than just a whim for change. I am really confident that there is a physiological power that urges me, a natural law of eugenics that compels me in that direction, seeking, by the process of elimination, that particular union that will bear the best progeny for an increasingly powerful mankind. And I do not feel myself to be particularly different from my fellow men. You would all be like that too if you had no self-made laws about it that may, in some unfortunate cases, have knocked the original impulses out of some of your men. We are made"

I reached out my arm to stop him. A noise in the next room made me do it. Was it my wife? Had she heard? I took the cigar out of my mouth and said, possibly a little too loudly:

"I disagree with you entirely, Mr. Wu. I believe that men and women were born apart but in pairs, and when they find each other, as they most often do, they live happily together for ever after."

This must have sounded silly and not at all to the point to Mr. Wu. But then it wasn't meant for Mr. Wu; and women don't care too much for husbands who are always to the point.

WE had arranged to meet at the north entrance of the Forbidden City and together to visit that part of the museum that housed the few fine paintings that had not been removed by one or the other of the war lords.

After we had passed through the great vermilion gates and crossed the wide and austere flagged court that betray the great dramatic sense of approach of the old Chinese architects, the first paintings we saw were eight enormous scrolls that covered the whole length of one of the pavilions. They were portraits of eight imperial ponies that had been painted by Brother Giuseppe Castiglione, S.J., commissioned by the Emperor Chien Lung. I lingered in front of these life-like reproductions and was pleased with the subtle perspective with which the artist had endowed his work and the gentleness that he had so well succeeded in giving the animals. I was aware that Mr. Wu was impatient to proceed to the further halls containing the Sung and Yuan works. I was enjoying myself and did not wish to be urged away. Before proceeding alone, Mr. Wu told me that he would wait for me in the next pavilion. I was piqued at this, for I had desired to share the enthusiasm I had for my countryman's art with Mr. Wu.



I lingered longer than I had intended to, and when I joined him among his Sung and Yuan I gave them a more perfunctory scrutiny than I would

have otherwise. The truth was that I did not understand Chinese painting, and this visit with Mr. Wu was in the nature of a Cook's tour through that, to me, fantastic realm. Mr. Wu was not to be aware that he was to act as my cicerone, although I have a notion that he knew this.

Mr. Wu seemed not to notice my behavior. He was gazing at the works with that aspect of detachment from his surroundings that a man has when speaking on the telephone. When he had finished he smiled at me and accompanied me into the open.

The northwest wind had ceased; it was mid-April, and Peking's sky was the bluer for its frame of white marble courts, *sang-de-boeuf* walls and the shining imperial yellow roofs of the Forbidden City. We sat in the bright sunshine, on the steps of one of the halls. In front of us was the vast expanse of a marble-flagged Field of Mars.

"You did not enjoy Castiglione's ponies, Mr. Wu." I knew that it was I who had to broach the subject. He would never have done so.

"Not today," he said. "I was in the mood for something more elusive and therefore enjoyed the Sung and Yuan immensely."

"I am glad that even you find them elusive. It means then that my utter coldness towards them has some justification."

"Indeed. There is a justification also for Mr. Birthright's predilection for roast beef, for Mr. Birthright has not even managed to refine the taste of his senses. When you have refined the tastes of your mind, you will, it is quite probable, appreciate Chinese painting." Mr. Wu had by then acquired the habit (from me, no doubt) of being as direct as I pleased. I thought he was a bit brutal this time, though.

"Probably!" I said. There was no more I could say: he was repaying me in my own coin.

"Mind you, not that refinement is the Golden Fleece. Unless, of course, one is in quest of understanding the Chinese painter," said Mr. Wu.

"Surely it is the other way round: refinement and depth in a subject are the result of understanding!" I was going off at a tangent, seeing that Mr. Wu had put me in my place.

"You are quite right, Mr. Pu. You must first understand something before you like it—or dislike it, for that matter. Do you understand Chinese painting?" Mr. Wu really had a kindly twinkle. How did he manage it?

"No, I suppose I don't," I said. Why did I have to say it flauntingly? There was nothing to flaunt about.

Mr. Wu had stretched his legs and was admiring his neat silk-covered ankles, his black satin-shod feet that were like those of a small, nervous woman.



"I will tell you about it then," he said. "The Chinese painter, you must realize, is more of a poet than a repro-

ducer. His intentions are entirely different from those of a European. In his infinite capacity for introspection, beauty that Nature alone can procure seeps through his consciousness. The essence of this process he then places on record. He may have seen one landscape or many of them a day or a month before. The recollection of his own feelings for them are set down with the mechanical means of brush and color, which he has thoroughly mastered. Thus his own inner self, through which that beauty has seeped, is established on the silk as well as his own conception of the world, of Nature, of the Infinite. The majesty of a wind-swept peak, the insignificance of a human being, the loneliness of a solitary pine, are put down as his particular self feels them, not as he sees them. Very often he intends to portray his sense of the Infinite. He may employ various ruses, as using form only to accentuate space, just as the strident *er-hu*, our Chinese violin, is meant to accentuate the

drama of the ensuing silence. The artist's appeal is made to our poetic sense, to that which is in us, not to reproducing faithfully what is outside of us.

"And another thing, your powerful nudes are an assertion of man over Nature, when they are not a direct appeal to your senses or a portrait commissioned by a rich patron. The little, lost fisherman of our landscapes is a man in harmony with Nature. For that is our ideal and our endeavor.

"Our art is inextricably involved with Nature, bowing to the consciousness of its perfection. Our early porcelains were considered great works of art. The greatest compliment paid to a certain potter of the Sung period was that his objects, when placed in the forest, would pass unnoticed by man or animal as part of the natural surroundings.

"Sometimes I think that it must be due to this very same innate subjection to Nature that we have lagged so far behind in technical development. We have not dared to believe that we could subjugate Nature. I think this has been a good thing for our people. When Egypt was harvesting splendor and later degeneration from an accommodating Nile, China was (and still is) struggling with two devastating, unchained rivers. Who has survived the better?

"Our attitude to Nature is propitiatory, yours defiant. When we discovered the compass, silk, and paper, we accepted the whole with gratitude, as a gift. Another of our discoveries, gunpowder, was used until recently in firecrackers to amuse children. When you discover something, you feel you have wrested it from Nature who, as a monstrous joke, makes you use your inventions against yourselves.

"You see, Mr. Pu, all these things you have to understand, nay, feel before you can begin to appreciate our painting. It is not at all simple," said Mr. Wu.

It wasn't at all simple and, actually, it was rather disconcerting at the time.

But the next day I took a trip into the hills on my motorcycle. The exhilarating

speed of the wind and the singing of the motor swept away all the doubts of the previous day. Here was I, astride a



contraption that allowed me to travel faster than any Chinese would probably ever have traveled had it not been for a scattered number of European inventors. With the gathering of speed, my pride in my race augmented, and with the augmentation of my pride in my race, my speed increased. I have never been able to find out what made the front tire burst. I was kept in hospital for two weeks, and it cost me four front teeth. Today I appreciate Chinese painting a good deal more than I did three years ago.

I enjoyed going for walks with Mr. Wu. Though a dynamically energetic person, he had an unlimited faculty for real leisure. Walking with him gave one that feeling of relaxed contentment that our age of bustle is rapidly making a rarity. He possessed an intimate knowledge of Peking and its different moods. The decadent drama of the Lama Temple, the austerity of the Hall of Ancestors, the joyfulness of the *Nan Hai* (South Lake) with its polychrome-roofed pavilions took on a keener aspect through his company.

His conversation, when he did converse—for during long periods he could be peacefully silent—was varied, simple, and informative. The account of his talks set down here is actually quite unfair to his real personality. It sounds as though he were constantly falling over himself in an endeavor to make sweeping statements and more or less profound and annoying observations. This is not at all the case. Such observations were in all cases the result of serious provocation on my part. Knowing my taste for

pronouncements “with a punch,” he cheerfully obliged. No doubt he considered my passion for directness and finality as a proof of my mental clumsiness and lack of refinement, but I was not going to miss exploiting my great discovery of a Chinese whom I had persuaded to say what he *really* thought.

We were walking together, one late summer day, in the old Winter Palace of the Emperor. We bribed the caretaker and were allowed on the upper story of the gallery that runs along the length of the North Lake. It was from here that the Emperor and his retinue used to admire the intricate figures of ice-skating virtuosi who performed on the frozen lake.

On that particular summer day, what one saw of Peking from up there was trees and almost only trees, with here and there a glittering tower or gate pushing its proud bulk through the green. I remarked on the strangeness of this city that seemed utterly treeless when walking in it and populated only with trees when viewed from a height. Mr. Wu explained to me that this was due to the fact that the trees were all inside the private gardens, which were surrounded by high walls so that the trees could not be seen from the street.

“Our strong sense of ownership extends itself even to one of Nature’s most gracious gifts. We want to make the trees surround us and live intimately with us and do not intend to share them with the multitude. The trees in your parks and public gardens belong to all, and therefore to none.

“I know, your parks are open to rich and poor alike, and it all fits in perfectly with your sense of duty to the less fortunate, a sense of duty that today has become law. But with us it has always been otherwise. In my scheme, pity is a weakness in the man who feels it and an inducement to weakness in the man who accepts it.

“Regard the tree as a test of Nature to man. If you are of the strong, you

will acquire the tree and surround it with a wall so that you may share its pleasures with whoever you yourself choose. If you are improvident and stupid you will cut down the tree before having planted another and very soon you will be without one. If you are extravagant you will want many trees and, being able to take care of only a few, they will all die for want of proper care. In the same way, your tree will die if you are unkind towards it, and it will grow strong if you treat it soberly, intelligently, and with interest. *For Nature, who has established our basic standards, has also given us our code of conduct.* Strength is needed to accept it, and we do not all have it." Mr. Wu was obviously working up to a climax.

"You make me feel as though we were all living in primeval forests," I said.

"I know, I know, Mr. Pu. What you mean is that we are not animals but are endowed with strong reasoning power, and you are right. But as long as we react first to hunger, fear, and sex, and only much later to intellect, we are not free from Nature. Your own Europe—

advanced, intellectual, Christian—reacts to greed on one side and fear on the other with unavoidable finality, whilst intellect cries out for the utter necessity of understanding.

"We have not built dams behind which our people have found a haven, we have not discovered serums, antitoxins, incubators to maintain the life of our children. But we have given more life and more children, letting Nature decide her inevitable selection. You have an expression: The phoenix rising out of the ashes. With us that phoenix rises every year, for destruction is rampant, through floods, famine, locusts, and wars. And that phoenix is Youth, Youth that has survived fire, floods, famine, and war, Youth that produces Youth, steeled, eternal, urgently straining to burst forth anew, as Nature wills it."

The tone of Mr. Wu's voice was even, his deportment as serene as ever. He was looking straight at me and behind his gold-rimmed glasses I could see into his eyes. An unusual smoldering was in them. Seraphim Wu was revealingly proud of being Chinese.

