

Chapter 23

Leisurely Life of the Petit Bourgeois

What constitutes the best way for a person to live? It's rather interesting. The ancient Chinese saying, "With thousands in wealth, one rides a crane to Yangzhou," offers significant food for thought. "Thousands in wealth" indicates limitless money, but why not ride a horse, take a car, or fly a private jet? Because only immortals can ride cranes, ultimately arriving in Yangzhou. Yangzhou is famous for its beauties and

delicacies. So, with endless money and a god-like existence, one would naturally enjoy a carefree life in Yangzhou.

The West also has an expression for enjoying life, summarizing a conversation between two people:
- "Brother, you are truly fortunate to live your life surrounded by fine wine, beautiful women, and music every day. If you had to give up one of these, which would it be?"
- "That's impossible. Life would be dull without any one of

them."
- "This is a hypothetical question; you must answer."
- "Then, I'd give up music."
- "What about fine wine and beautiful women? If you must give up one?"
- "That would depend on their vintage."

It wasn’t until after seventy that I began to enjoy my own days. At this age, discussing the enjoyment of beautiful women would be a bit pretentious, so knowing "fine wine" is my forte. Unless drinking someone else’s, I seldom spend money on grape wine myself, thus, I'm

aloof about "vintage" issues. The finest liquor I drank was around 1980 in San Diego, the southernmost city in California, where a friend owning a Chinese restaurant not only drove us to visit a nearby Mexican city but also gifted me two large bottles of Moutai. I am not exaggerating; as soon as the bottle was opened, its aroma filled the room. Pouring it into small glasses perfumed the entire room.

I once heard an anecdote, possibly concocted by admirers of Zhou Enlai, stating that during Nixon and

Kissinger’s visit to Beijing, Zhou hosted a banquet with Moutai. Like vodka, the Moutai was brought to the table in ice buckets. Staff filled the glasses; Zhou Enlai stood up and downed his drink in one go. Nixon and Kissinger followed, unaware of "Moutai." Moutai’s alcohol content exceeds 50%, but it tastes extremely mild. Four, five, six, seven glasses later, Zhou Enlai still kept pace. Nixon and Kissinger returned to their hotels drunk, and before leaving Beijing, they specifically instructed their aides to bring several bottles of

Moutai back to the United States.

I don’t know if this anecdote was praising Zhou Enlai or hurting Moutai’s reputation. Regardless, since then, Moutai has been in high demand. At that time, the Chinese government didn’t understand the importance of "branding." It takes decades or centuries to build a brand, but destroying one is easy. With high prices and huge demand for Moutai, there are certainly more orders than supply. Unable to meet orders, the original Guizhou factory likely sold lower-quality

products or improperly aged ones. After 1990, I bought Moutai in the U.S. Although probably genuine, the quality had declined drastically. Many once-superb spirits like Wuliangye and Yanghe Daqu also seemed to degrade—a pattern I often attribute to a bias of mine.

In recent years, during visits to Beijing, I drink "Erguotou," bought from the subterranean level of the Eastern An Market on Wangfujing Street. While cheaper Erguotou is available in Beijing shops for twelve yuan, the ones at Eastern An

Market cost forty yuan per bottle. Why do I mention this? As a petit bourgeois, I hear rumors about rampant fake liquor on the mainland, and buying fake liquor could harm oneself. Self-preservation is the first lesson of a petit bourgeois.

Starting in Taiwan, drinking Johnnie Walker once felt satisfying. In recent years, Chivas became popular, and I followed suit—following trends is part of a petit bourgeois mindset. TV reports frequently mention seized fake alcohol in Taiwan, making me cautious

about liquor purchases. When returning from abroad, I diligently buy duty-free cigarettes and liquor, often stretching the customs limit by sneaking in an extra bottle. If I must buy locally, I order from a specialist foreign liquor shop, getting a case delivered straight to my home.

From the above examples, it’s clear that I am not born a noble, nor do I possess the proletariat's boldness of drinking freely. After turning seventy, I began living the petit bourgeois life. "Petit bourgeois" involves more than

drinking, gambling, and watching TV shows—it’s a crucial mindset. Taiwan's petit bourgeois population grows steadily. From our balcony, almost every visible scene represents this mindset: all balconies are enclosed with iron bars, extending outwards for even a few extra potted plants. This habitual extension has led to tragic deaths during local fires. In Seoul, Korea, despite visiting briefly and observing unimpressive cityscapes compared to Taiwan, their apartment units uniformly lacked iron windows—are there no thieves

in Seoul?

Parking in Taipei is notoriously tricky. Nearby, there's at least three underground parking lots charging reasonable rates by the hour during the day and monthly rates at night. Affluent petit bourgeois will spend millions on luxury cars but begrudge daily parking fees. After work, cars circle the alleys seeking free parking spots instead of resorting to street parking on yellow lines, making ceaseless rounds worse than city rats.

The petit bourgeois is a wholly

selfish class, reaching mastery in self-preservation. Regardless of adversity, they maintain an elegant appearance, especially under oppressive political conditions. Previously, I read an article discussing the petit bourgeois, citing statistics that historically, great revolutionaries come from either the aristocracy or the proletariat, never the petit bourgeois. Indeed, they don’t need to revolt. When circumstances turn unfavorable, they simply bow deeper to the aristocracy and exploit more from the proletariat to sustain their

comfort. For the petit bourgeois, the world needs no "truth" or "justice"—their personal interests are the truth, as well as justice. Capitalist societies praise the "middle class" as the bedrock of societal stability. This rings true! No one dares to revolt. Those in power rest easy, and society stabilizes, albeit at the expense of the weak and poor.

The petit bourgeois lives with intense caution; my liquor-purchase habits exemplify my inherently petit bourgeois mindset. Additionally, any opportunity to gain more at

others' expense is relished. Another example: in the U.S., finding mahjong partners is difficult, so I play online games. I also found online casinos—with slot machines, blackjack, baccarat, and dice games available. Learning that "fun" mode was possible delighted me. Opponent casinos would gift me with five thousand dollars in chips, enabling me to win up to seventy thousand. Despite being tempted to "try the real thing," I staunchly believed that playing for real would never yield the same generous results, and I wouldn't fall for

their lures.

A Few Years Ago In Taipei, There Was a Popular Doggerel: "Don’t Get Angry"

In it, the saying goes: "He gets angry, you don't; getting sick from anger, no one will substitute." This represents a classic petit bourgeois philosophy. There's too much injustice in the world, and protecting one's health is paramount. Getting angry for others and harming oneself isn't worth it. The news reported a drunk youth in Taiwan who, wielding a

motorcycle lock, attacked the old, weak, women, and children he encountered on the street. Everyone fled, but he ignored the strong men and walked away leisurely. He wasn't holding a gun—were there no heroes like in Water Margin? When it's time to act, why wait? It's true, Water Margin’s 108 heroes were either of the proletariat or the aristocracy. The petit bourgeois would never participate in life-risking rebellions even if threatened.

The saying goes, "A tiger travels the world to eat meat; a

dog travels the world to eat shit." At seventy, I began to adopt the petit bourgeois lifestyle, but old habits die hard, and I sometimes revert to my proletariat ways.

Time flies, and it's already March 2003. March 20, 2004, is crucial for us Taiwanese as it’s our presidential election day. Meanwhile, March 20, 2003, is significant for Americans because their troops entered Baghdad, Iraq's capital. At the time, I was staying with my daughter in San Francisco. Mentioning this war, the United States,

ignoring the United Nations, invaded Iraq. The war went unexpectedly smoothly, and Iraq was fully occupied in less than twenty days. The U.S. lost just over ten soldiers, mostly from plane crashes or accidents. They found no nuclear, chemical, or so-called "weapons of mass destruction," nor even a trace—only Hussein’s capture remained. Shouldn't America be satisfied? Apparently not.

On Monday, May 26, around noon, I watched TV and flipped to a local San Francisco station broadcasting a live

Memorial Day program. It’s an annual U.S. public holiday on the last Monday of May, honoring fallen soldiers. A woman holding a child tearfully spoke to the camera about her husband killed in Iraq, her grief, and her hatred for Saddam. In an emotional close-up, an onlooker was shown wiping away tears. I couldn't explain why, but a sudden anger flared within me. I turned off the TV with a snap and told my daughter I wanted to return to Taiwan. Look, people always advised me against getting angry and to take care of my health, but I

couldn't help it when encountering such injustice.

What did the TV just show? It was accurately "inciting patriotism." In China, similar shows frequently aired on the Central Channel Four. Patriotism, inherently unhealthy, was long warned against by moralists and religionists. Human emotions vary between good and evil: compassion is good; hatred is evil. Patriotism is a narrow, hate-filled sentiment. My youthful hatred for Japan wasn't innate; it was stirred up through education. Inciting

patriotism is far simpler and more immediate than declaring truth and justice.

Didn’t Americans say there's no free lunch? The U.S. occupation of Iraq was indeed a free lunch—a stolen country, oil fields, business monopolies, and finally Hussein’s capture. Isn’t this what's meant by free? Why such emotional incitement? Such patriotic fervor? Some nations like Palestine and Israel, surrounded by hostile Islamic neighbors, or China with its "century of humiliation," and even our aspirationally

independent Taiwan have reasons for patriotic propaganda. But America? What wrongs has the world’s unparalleled superpower faced? There's no force capable of wronging the U.S.

America, unlike its close allies Britain and Japan, which are nation-states, is a global village. Solving the "terrorism" issue by inciting hatred against other global villagers is the most foolish approach. It requires wisdom.

Indeed, this spoiled my leisurely petit bourgeois days.