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FROM OUR AUTHORS

We are introducing here a special section dedicated to our member-authors and their published works.

The editors of *Comparative Civilizations Review* extend an invitation to all who write about the comparative study of civilizations and who would like a selection from their work to be published in the journal to submit their copy to Peter Hecht, Managing Editor, at peter.hecht@iscsc.org. The selection will be reviewed by the Editorial Board and, upon acceptance, scheduled for publication as space becomes available.

**The Sage, The Swordsman, and the Scholars**  
by Pierre Dimaculangan

This issue of *Comparative Civilizations Review* features an excerpt from a work by Pierre Dimaculangan. Pierre is the author of several books. He has been a member of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations for many years and was named the 2014 International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations “Outstanding Young Scholar” award winner at our annual meeting in Monmouth University.

*The Sage, The Swordsman and the Scholars: Trials of the Middle Kingdom*, Second Edition, by Pierre Dimaculangan is the first in a series of four books. Pierre’s expansive knowledge of Chinese history, along with his considerable writing talent, enables him to bring historical fiction to life for the reader. Pierre is also an accomplished digital artist and has personally done all of the cover and marketing art for his works. In addition to this book, Pierre has published the second novel in the series, *Clash of Alliances*, as well as the children’s book *Flight of Garu*. 
Pierre Dimaculangan

The Sage, The Swordsman and The Scholars

Trials of the Middle Kingdom

Second Edition

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol81/iss81/10
A FATEFUL ACQUAINTANCE

HE HIRED PENSIVELY THROUGH THE marshy and sparsely wooded landscape of the province of Guangxi. His head hung low, and though his body moved in a purposeful direction, his mind spun and wandered more than usual. He had just returned from the desert regions of the western edges of the Ming Empire after having hunted down a troublesome warlord who had long caused havoc and unrest in the region. However, the success of his mission no longer left him with the same feeling of satisfaction. A gaping hole in his heart nagged at his soul, and the possible meaninglessness of his deeds was becoming more and more apparent. Sun Xin was entering the tenth year of his wanderings in the empire yet, for all his accomplishments, he felt emptier than when he had first begun. Much had changed within him since he took the first step on his lonesome journeys throughout the Middle Kingdom.
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Over the years he had made friends and enemies, and forged fragile alliances with rivals if he had not already eliminated them. His greatest frustration however, stemmed from the questions that plagued his mind. *Does anything I do even matter? Are the pain and anguish worth the effort?* Though his personal crusade had entered its first decade, a sense of futility was beginning to grow with his every action. In fact, it appeared that the more he tried, the worse it became. It was not enough, yet his only chosen recourse was more and more killing. His heart grew as frosty as his blade.

So many years had been invested into his sword, but how much longer would he have to continue these quests? He was but three years from the age of thirty, and already the incessant fighting and endless roaming on every quest would, in time, leave little room for additional scars on his body. Reality was weighing more heavily on his mind than anywhere else. However, the utter hatred he carried for those he considered unworthy to be kept alive inspired him to continue the fight. Sun Xin was without a horse so he undertook his long and uneventful journey on foot. The lack of speed added to his frustration.

His thoughts and feelings continued to conflict as he cut his way through the marsh. He ignored the fact that he had just entered the misty dominion of the Crimson Moon Sect— one of the many bothersome rebel groups experiencing resurgence across the land. They were naught but deluded cutthroats who have deemed themselves worthy of a “righteous crusade”?

Away from the noise of his troubled soul, it was the rustling of leaves, the melody of a stream, and the whispers of the wind that produced the sounds of the forest in the morning. Even the locks of his long black hair danced to the left and right of his face. A
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melancholy song slowly entered in harmony with the music of the forest. Sun Xin played his flute to the rhythm of that flowing stream to calm his spirit and clear a clouded mind. Into the heart of the forest he strode under the rays of sunlight beaming between the trees.

The peace and the music were abruptly disturbed by the sudden, though expected appearance of the Crimson Moon Sect. Out from the undergrowth they leaped and stood before him motionless, hooded, and clad in black. The whole forest fell silent, leaving only the menacing sounds of their rasping breaths and the faint rattling of their chained sickles. The silence of the air was broken by the sudden whistle of a rushing arrow rapidly approaching from his rear. In one swift motion and a spin of the heel, Sun Xin drew his sword and slashed the arrow mid-flight. Together, the occultists attacked when his back had turned, but they were quickly dispatched by the masterful strokes of his blade; a deep thrust into the chest of the first followed by a diagonal slash across the belly of the second were enough to neutralize the threats. More arrows darted toward him, but he dove away from their trajectory. The bowman was obscured amongst heavy bamboo foliage so Xin made a mad dash to his position and cut the bamboo to reveal the shooter who then vanished in a plume of white smoke.

What was left of the bodies he had slain had seemingly vaporized into thin air. Empty. It was typical of the trickery practiced by the dark ones. He scoffed at their pathetic attempt to ambush him, but such was the nature of his journeys across the countryside.

“They never learn,” he muttered to himself.

He drew a sharp sigh, sheathed his sword, and tightened the chin strap of his broad-brimmed hat. He continued down a hidden trail
deep into the thickness of the forest. The foliage canopy eventually led into an opening revealing a small river valley. In the distance, embracing a mountainside engulfed by mist and mountain fog, stood a small homestead surrounded by colorful vegetable gardens. Gray smoke ascended from the rooftop eaves that gently curved up to the sky. A sign above the door post of the cabin read *Heaven watches over this home*. He had passed by the remote homestead before. It looked inviting and perhaps its resident would allow a weary traveler food and brief respite. It was in the moment when he approached the front steps of the cabin that Sun Xin suddenly staggered and struggled to keep his footing.

His vision narrowed and a terrible burn scorched the back of his neck. When he had felt for it, a crimson stain streaked across his palm. An arrow had, indeed, managed to leave its mark on him. He fell at the doorstep of the cabin and faded into unconsciousness...

He awakened with a start, though dazed, in a sweat, and inflicted with head pain. Half a dozen fine needles were embedded into the vital points and nerves of his neck and shoulder. He was greeted by a silvery-haired man noticeably older than he and wore on his face a peaceful and kind countenance. It was the hermit of the home.

"It was by no accident you have arrived to my humble home, Master Swordsman," he said while handing Xin a pitcher of water. "I hope those horrid bandits did not give you too much trouble. They have tried to enter my home before only to discover that this sign speaks the truth." He chuckled while pointing toward the sign outside.

"You mean to say that Heaven intervened?" Xin asked as soon as he guzzled a tankard of water.
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"Indeed, it was by the Will of Heaven that you have made it here," he replied with a satisfied grin. "You were in a slumber for three days since the poison needed to run its course. You, my friend, are quite fortunate. The poison you received was but a fraction of the intended dose."

"Did you really say 'Heaven'?" Xin muttered trying to shake off the disorientation. "You sound like my old master."

The hermit simply smiled.

Sun Xin was not sure how to react to the stranger who seemed to have saved his life, but his instincts dictated that he was at least trustworthy, and harmless most of all. His wounded neck was patched in herbs, but the burn remained. He should be grateful. He was not so sure of how to express it, not to mention that this was the first time anyone had saved his life in such a way.

The hermit was of average stature, though, rather taller than others of his ripe age and had a light beard encircling his mouth. He was neatly dressed and groomed for someone who lived in seclusion upon a mountain far away from any village or township.

"That is a very fine sword you carry, Wanderer," he commented as he cast his gaze upon Sun Xin’s straight sword. "I have yet to see any other such as yours, so ornate and fine. It bears the elegance and skill of a master craftsman. I certainly hope that it has not been misused in any way. A gentleman’s weapon should not be used for selfish gain," he said smiling as he plucked the needles from Xin’s body.

It had been a very long time since Xin had met a man who conducted himself with such peace. He turned his gaze to where the sword leaned against the corner.

"It is both a gift and a burden and my answer to those who seek
other times than peace. In this sword lies my purpose,” Sun Xin answered. *It is curious that a hermit would show interest in a sword,* he thought.

“Ah yes, I see, I see;” the hermit nodded.

Sun Xin stayed well after dark with the mysterious man whose name he did not even ask.

They talked over tea and hot stew until the moon peaked its arc across the night sky. Their conversation went to and fro discussing such things the ancient philosophers once pondered and taught.

“So tell me your story,” said the hermit. “Tell from whence you came that you would stumble upon my home, barely alive whilst brandishing a crossbow and a fancy sword that, um, I assume has tasted much blood.”

Sun Xin lowered his gaze and leaned against the bed frame. “The all me a ‘Youxia’— a knight-errant. But I am naught but a lone swordsman. For years I had been drifting through the lands serving as an independent agent employed with the League— er...” he stopped mid-sentence, being careful about what he would reveal. “I am under contract with an underground guild of learned men who have sworn themselves to protect the Middle Kingdom from the shadows. They only desire to help keep the peace, but are independent from the tiresome politics of the imperial bureaucracy. They’re not bound by the burdensome complications of law and war. Before landing here I was on my way to Guangzhou to meet with them.”

“Ah, so they are what you would call ‘glorified vigilantes’,” the hermit commented.

“More like unofficial secret police,” Xin corrected him. “Yes, their order is largely secretive, they operate in plain sight. I should
emphasize that I am no mere bounty hunter or sellsword, nor am I puppet hit man who couldn’t care less about the corruption of government officials high and low. I fight for a cause of the highest calling, and what I do is not for myself, but for the good of others.”

Sun Xin was quite surprised with himself. He had never been so quick to talk nor had he divulged such information so easily, especially with a stranger.

“And yet you seem largely dissatisfied. I can see it in your eyes. A conflict burns within your soul,” the hermit said.

“You would know of such things, hermit?” Xin asked redirecting his steely gaze to the face of his host.

“I have experienced much and received plenty. But I know nothing on my own other than that which has been revealed to me,” he answered plainly. “The cause of goodness is always like swimming upstream against the raging currents of a mighty river. Those who swim in it are becoming fewer. Evil, however, enjoys an easy route, and is practiced with little effort by countless followers. Pursuing the path of evil is like riding the downstream current of that river and it pulls you faster and farther with every passing moment,” the hermit changed his tone to a whisper. “... until you’ve drifted so fast and so far you can no longer turn back.”

“You’re telling me this because...?” Sun Xin questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Because I see your pursuit of right, or at least the enforcement of it, is genuine. But you tread a thin line as fine as the spider’s silk. One wrong step and you’ll be riding the river downstream and headed for a waterfall too?” chuckled the hermit. He nearly coughed from it.

“So you’ve got me all figured out, is that it? You don’t have to
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worry about me, ‘Uncle,’” muttered Xin with a hint of sarcasm. “I’d rather die than be anything like the criminal or rebel scum I have learned to hate.”

“That is exactly what I mean,” the hermit answered.

“Like what?” Xin said, this time his tone more terse.

“The hate. It will make you paddle downstream.”

Sun Xin did not answer. He grimaced at the reminder. It was a lesson his master had long instilled in him. But the very precepts of the sword art he wielded were left buried and forgotten in a deserted crevice of his hardened heart. It was a heart that now burned with a fiery rage that fueled his curse, a bloodlust and callousness to the sight of death. He considered himself to be a righteous man even though he had long discarded the sacred principles his master had bestowed upon him since childhood. He refused to accept it, but deep inside, Sun Xin knew the moral path he had chosen was one in which there would be no return.

The cost of his own humanity was the price he was ultimately willing to pay for the realization of his vision.

Mercy? Forgiveness? These were weaknesses that yielded no results for the swift eradication of evil! he kept telling himself. He believed his master was mistaken, even naive for adhering to such doctrine, and apparently so was this hermit.

The hermit reached for the tea pot. “Let’s shift to a more light-hearted topic, shall we? You were asking about the sign posted outside my door.”

The hermit spoke continuously of Heaven whom he called Shang Di, the “Lord of Heaven” whom the ancients once worshiped, honored, and obeyed.

“The Way is Heaven’s gift—a revelation and the transcendent
path of righteousness that humanity has been ordained to walk,” he proclaimed. “Through the Way all things were created. It is only through the perfect Way that the imperfect world can be saved.”

He made further mention of outlandish antiquated beliefs concerning the invisible things like the so-called spirits inhabiting the world. He also spoke of the machinations of darkness and the personification of it that worked furiously to lead men far from the knowledge of the Way, presenting in its stead a false path. “All such things,” he claimed, “would only become more evident in the days to come.”

The hermit sage shared his convictions of such ancient things with a doctrine that Sun Xin found unusually old-fashioned, overly superstitious, and riddled with dogma. He would usually ignore the crazed ramblings of such old men, but there was something about the hermit that Xin found intriguing. He was wise and collected as if he was completely sure about the truths of which he spoke.

“Such teachings have been forgotten or regarded as outdated belief neither practiced nor studied in its orthodoxy for more than two and a half thousand years,” said the hermit.

Still, it was intriguing and unusually frustrating for Xin to have to absorb. The hermit preached of Heaven’s will and the indispensability of impartial love for all people. Love, he said, was the cure for all the evil and injustice of man. It is, as he said, the supreme ethic that embodied the nature of the “Way”...

Whatever it was he meant by it, thought Xin.

On the other hand, Xin stubbornly stood firm in his convictions in the enforcement of law and in the administering of justice by force.

The hermit intrigued him. He was such a curious character
because he shared a wisdom that had been largely forgotten and strangely difficult to refute. In many ways, he reminded Xin of his old master for they were similar in their convictions and philosophies.

“You speak like a man from the age of sages, but I do not see any disciples?” Sun Xin inquired.

The hermit redirected his gaze to the floor. “I traveled from province to province telling others of my revelation, but there was no room in the hearts of the people. Those who would listen fear ridicule or even estrangement from their homes.”

“And what is your message?” Xin asked with a raised eyebrow.

Before the hermit could answer, the cabin rattled and shook. An obnoxious hammering and crashing suddenly plagued the house. Savage whoops and shrieks pierced through the nooks and crannies of the home and could be heard echoing across the valley beyond. It was intimidation in one of its more aggressive forms. The Crimson Moon Sect had returned. They seemed to have followed Xin into the hermit’s home and wanted his blood in revenge for their fallen comrades or for perhaps the priceless bounty that had been placed on his head. He quickly reached for his sword, but was stopped by the hermit.

“Stay your blade, Swordsman! They cannot enter here,” he snapped.

Xin started to protest. “They will break down your door and—”

“No, they most certainly will not.” The hermit said, this time in a low voice, almost a whisper.

Xin was most uncomfortable with the situation. He scrambled to his sword and gripped it tightly. His vision focused and his heartbeat quickened. The incessant banging on the walls and the door grew more aggressive, and he almost drew his blade before the hermit
stood firmly in front of him with both his hands resting on his cane, and he declared:

“I rebuke you, foul agents of the enemy! Be gone; you have no place here! This home belongs to Heaven! You have been warned!”

A mighty gust likened to a monsoon wind rushed through the interior of the cabin, causing the candle lights to dim to a near simmer. The air grew cold and the night fell eerily silent. As quickly as it began, the terrors of the night had ceased and the echoes faded into the valley. The cultists had fled deep into the black forest from whence they came. Sun Xin stood motionless and stunned, unable to comprehend what he had just witnessed. What sort of trickery was this? He sought an explanation, but was not sure what to ask first.

“What happened? What did you just do?” He questioned as he stood clutching his sheathed sword. The hermit sighed, but with a smile said:

“Well, you did ask me what my message was, and what you have just witnessed is but a small testament to that,” said the hermit. “Knowing Heaven is the great endeavor. Walking in the Way negates the necessity of sheer force. A sword may have its uses in the hands of the righteous, but it is not a staff which one should lean upon.”

Sun Xin was not fond of preachy philosophy. He merely smirked at the hermit’s answer. But nonetheless, he slept that night pondering the mysterious words of the hermit and nursing the toxic wound inflicted by the poisonous arrow.

The events of that night continued to bewilder him. Xin did not consider himself to be a superstitious man and he considered such spiritual teaching, for the most part, a hindrance to the progress of society. It most often served as an avenue for violent fanaticism. However, he felt something strangely different with the hermit even...
though he could not fully understand the meaning of his words. Was he some sort of sorcerer? He could not be, Xin thought. The hermit was nothing like the fabled wizards or mages in ancient times. How was it that he was able to stop the attack so quickly and effortlessly? His thoughts kept him awake for another two hours before he finally found sleep.

When morning had arrived, the sun cast rays of gold into the valley and its light beamed brightly through the open window. His sword leaned against the hearth, and the lion’s face engraved upon its golden hilt glistened against the morning light. He slung the sword across the back of his hip while flexing away the stiffness in his joints. He had grown eager to return to Guangzhou and already had spent too much time lying around in the hermit’s home. The old man was outside sitting silently by the stream possibly praying or meditating.

Xin joined him outside for breakfast. After a bath in the stream, he was presented with his robes—newly washed and neatly folded next to his dusted boots. After donning his mail vest and dark blue robes, he secured his hard leather bracers into his forearms and secured the tightening straps around them. The crossbow he slung behind his back. The sword he refastened to his hip. Finally, his trusty rattan hat now rested upon his crown strapped firmly around his jaw and chin.

“I must take my leave. My allies in Guangzhou are expecting my arrival very soon. Thank you most of all for nursing me back to health. I will also not forget your kindness, your words, or what I have witnessed last night. My name is Sun Xin,” he said with a slight bow and fist wrapped in hand—a salute and gesture of gratitude.

“I am Famin Jie. It was a pleasure to have accommodated your
stay. Safe journeys my friend. May your path lead you to the pursuit of righteousness,” he said with a bow as he exchanged the salute. The hermit set him on his way packed with provisions. Famin Jie was the hermit’s name and he would be sure to remember it.

He left the small valley with the words of Famin Jie still impressed into his mind and with the events of the previous night replaying through his memory. He found his way back to the old trails and roads, passing by farms and isolated communities. A small country temple not far from the beaten path was abandoned long ago, but provided shelter from a storm. There, Xin sat patiently on the floor, eyes closed with arms and legs crossed amidst the ghastly statues of a pantheon of deities for all whom the temple stood. They seemed to hauntingly stare at him as the rains poured and the wind howled. To Xin, such idolatry was vanity and mere illusion. Quite ironic that he found shelter in such a place. He scoffed at the idols adorning the walls of the derelict temple while he waited for the storm to subside and the thunder to fade into the mountains. It was curious, even to him, that he did not the harbor the same feelings for the teachings of Famin Jie. They were food for philosophical thought rather than objects of ridicule. He did not understand it, really. It did at least give him something to think about until the rains passed.

He continued his journey further south, walking at an accelerated pace through rice fields and lakes ornamented with lotus and water lilies. A procession of Ming imperial troops making its way toward the provincial garrison marched down a main road. It was headed by mounted commanders in imposing armor and winged helmets topped with bright red tassels. They were accompanied by haughty high-ranking government officials wearing brocade uniforms of bright colors. Their approach was heralded by the uniform rhythm...
of their pounding boots and the clatter of their weapons and armor. He walked to the side of the road and the soldiers passed him with a glare of suspicion that screamed “We’re watching you, vagrant. Tread carefully.” He had a healthy respect for most the imperial army and had no desire to engage them at any time. They had often proved to be as strong and skilled as they were intimidating. Sun Xin smirked as he recalled some of his past experiences.

Other travelers became more frequent as he neared Guangzhou. Many of them simply gave Xin a nervous grin and leaned to the opposite side of the road as they passed him by. Villages and towns became more frequent as well. The people would always take a brief moment from their daily activities to observe the strangers making their way through their town. Sun Xin had grown accustomed to their staring. People have become overly cautious of travelers carrying weapons. It was always in the smaller and more remote settlements where blending with crowds was impossible for the lack thereof. At least the chickens roaming about the streets paid him no attention.

It was not long until the silhouette of the walled city appeared in the horizon. It overlooked the sea which faintly sparkled in the hazy distance. Many great ships from various seas of the known world were docked at the harbor of Guangzhou, a city nestled beside the sea. A dozen other vessels anchored not far from shore. Columns of smoke rose from the shapely colorful rooftops of countless establishments. Across the districts, the streets sprawled with thousands of citizens like ants of a vast colony, and thousands more came and went through the monumental city gates. A large pagoda overlooked the districts majestically, casting a shadow that shaded many street blocks. Guangzhou— The Ming Empire’s gateway in the
South has stood for nearly one thousand five hundred years and has become a crossroads for the maritime world.

It was late into the afternoon by the time Sun Xin approached the vast city gates. They were guarded by light detachments of spearmen from the local Ming imperial garrison. They were posted on both sides of the gate keeping watch for suspicious and wanted persons filtering through the bustling crowds. High up on the walls archers and crossbow units were stationed. Past the gates, the city truly opened up before Xin. The streets were lined with vendors selling food and condiments of all sorts. Shops providing exotic fabrics, textiles and various garments, spices and herbs from all over the known world lined the stores on another street, and beyond were restaurants, herbal medicinal shops, offices, and large pavilions. Thick and thin crowds hurried about their business, buying and selling, meeting and eating. Craftsmen from the province had set up shop in the streets to peddle their wares. Olive-skinned foreigners wearing long surcoats of ornate embroidery walked past Sun Xin, but the light company of soldiers patrolling the streets paid them no attention.

“Even visitors from the desertous West have become common,” he thought.

Most buildings went up two and three stories and they riddled the street canopies with lanterns, flags, and various banners. Along the main avenue, a trio of musicians played their flutes and stringed instruments together in harmony with costumed dancers. Across from them stood a congregation of acrobats, jugglers, and street performers hoping to win the crowds for some coin. Further down the dusty street, Xin paused to observe the local outdoor performance of an opera. Many children ran about and the smell of street food filled the air.
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The city can truly be an overwhelming place; it was a sharp contrast to the province. It was festive, lively, and colorful, yet, suffocating, and exhausting. The districts divided the residential from the commercial, although they were, for the most part, thoroughly diffused. The heavy crowds were straining the sense of urgency he had developed since he left the hermit’s homestead. He dashed towards a nearby wall and used a combination of momentum and friction to scale it to the rooftop with ease. With a quick and steady pace he cut through the streets by gracefully leaping from rooftop to rooftop while being careful to avoid slipping from loose tiles. He launched himself from a ledge and watched the ground as it rushed toward his feet, his long scarf trailing behind him like the tail of a kite. He dropped into a dim alley and hit the ground with a roll swiftly and silently far from the awareness of the people nearby. He brushed the dust off his shoulders and secured the satchel strapped to his back. He casually continued to his destination on level ground. At the top of a broad and shallow hill, a large multi-storied structure stood mightily inside a walled courtyard complex.

A stately academy for music, literature, statecraft, history, philosophy, and martial arts served as the face of the League of Martial Scholars’ official headquarters and it stood loftily upon a hill at the edge of one of Guangzhou’s greener districts. A wide stone staircase led to the large red doors that stood in between the stone statues of mythical beasts. A prestigious sign hung attractively at the top of the door post: School of the Way of Culture. Many students from various walks of life attended the school seeking to gain skills and knowledge far beyond business and agriculture and it served as an attractive alternative for those who desired something different, even nobler besides passing the maddening civil service examinations.
in which many aspiring scholars dedicate their lives. The Academy also offered its students a means to a life of higher purpose other than civil service. The school was known for graduates who have proceeded into success in various disciplines. Throughout the empire, it was the only school of its kind. However, it was only a means to an end—a façade to continue the never-ending vigilantism of the political cabal that was the League of Martial Scholars.

The academy which the Scholars headed was alive with culture. There were many students at work, writing and studying, playing or composing music, and in another courtyard at the center of the academy grounds, one hundred students practiced combative art forms in unison training in the armed and unarmed fighting systems. After completion of their studies many of them move on to civil service examinations and become virtuous government officials. Others become writers, artists, architects, doctors, and musicians to name a few.

From among the students who attended the school, candidates of exceptional skills and unique backgrounds were carefully and secretly chosen to be initiated into the League’s mysterious brotherhood of warriors. Many have been given a chance to enter League’s inner circle as official Martial Academicians and were obligated to swear an oath of allegiance that indoctrinated them with a creed to uphold justice and defend peace through blade and brush. Wherever they may be or whatever path they choose in life, their oath would always stand.

Behind the main hall of assorted musical instruments, book shelves, and calligraphy brushes were several halls for study, dormitories, and quarters for martial and musical practice. The walls displayed a wide array of traditional weapons. Spears, sabers, various
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swords, and halberds decorated the rooms.

Sun Xin entered the school through the main gate which opened up into a spacious courtyard. At the center of the courtyard stood a heroic stone memorial of one of the Middle Kingdom’s greatest warriors, Yue Fei, who had valiantly led the armies of the Song Dynasty against the marauding armies of the Liao and Nuzhen nations in the north some three hundred fifty years earlier. The image of Yue Fei served as a powerful symbol and daily reminder of the meaning of loyalty, patriotism, and superior martial skill. For the likes of Sun Xin and the Scholars who fought for the people’s cause largely in secret, the story of Yue Fei served to remind them of the necessity of abstaining from the burdensome yokes of politics and the complications of government affairs. For Yue Fei, his timeless devotion and impeccable military record did not suffice to save him from being betrayed, imprisoned, and executed by the corrupt officials in the very government he swore to protect. The League of Scholars and those who associate with it therefore avoid corrupted politics and legalism in exchange for swift judgment founded upon a sacred written oath formulated in shadow many years ago.

Xin proceeded through the courtyard and entered the main office. There upon the second story of the pavilion he was immediately greeted by the Head Scholar of the League, Lu Guanying who also happened to be the school’s headmaster. He was a most superior combatant and was especially well-versed in nearly all studies offered in the school. He was also very knowledgeable of the teachings of the great Master Kong whose philosophical teachings allowed the Middle Kingdom to achieve unprecedented developments in society and government or the last two thousand years.
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There was also Tian Qiu the polymath, somewhat short and clean-shaven, but was a man of rare skills ranging from the philosophy of science to the application of mathematics. Where wisdom should have been however, there was but an abyss, an insatiable desire for knowledge—knowledge in which he took great lengths to achieve. He took great care to not make it so evident to his colleagues, though he could always be seen carrying with him a scroll or a set of books.

At the other end of the room was Shang Jian, a brilliant tactician and strategist unlike the Middle Kingdom had seen since the legendary Zhuge Liang of the Three Kingdoms era. He was a handsome man with effeminate features yet was exceptionally skilled in unarmed hand to hand combat as well as an erudite of the ancient Seven Military Classics. He had declined a coveted prestigious position in the capital in exchange for applying his abilities for a more profound, albeit secretive calling within the League.

With him stood Zhen Shu, the wealthy descendant of a long line of legendary master craftsmen and armorer. His family’s forge was renowned all throughout the Middle Kingdom for superb craftsmanship in weapons and armor. He was olive-skinned and muscular from the many years of forging iron and steel. Only the finest warriors of the Ming Imperial Army were able to obtain his fine work and a chosen few were gifted his special weapons and armor. Some of his pieces were bestowed to Sun Xin for his valiant efforts in enforcing the creed of the League. The sword hanging from his hip, the mail covering his torso beneath his clothes, and the hardened leather vambraces wrapped around his forearms were his very handiwork. Such were a few of the key members of the League, diverse, but joined for a single noble purpose whilst taking into
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account the cultivation of the mind of the scholar.

“Ah, Sun Xin you have finally arrived,” he said delightedly. Lu Guanying was a kind man with his years full of experience. He was strong-willed and in good health. A maroon cap covered the top-knot of his long silver-streaked hair. The rest of the members of the League stood to greet Xin’s arrival. Sun Xin greeted them with a salute, his left hand covering his right fist. They returned the gesture. He unfastened his cap and loosened his scarf as he looked around to survey the old familiar place. His connection with them gave him a sense of belonging, not that he felt he needed such a thing, of course.

“How was your campaign in the deserts of the Far West? What of your training in solitude?” Lu Guanying asked Xin since he had spent weeks abroad.

“I have not found peace in the field; there are only common thieves and bandit gangs that the army refused to bother itself with. I have, however, succeeded in destroying a bandit safe-haven in the northwest and had the pleasure of hunting down a notorious serial killer during my return journey.”

“Quite eventful, it seemed,” Tian Qiu commented. “May I ask whom it was you slew?”

“The Crossbones Killer. Have you heard of his rampage in the northwestern provinces? Prints of his face are on every notice board of every city and town there,” Xin answered. His arms were crossed and his posture was erect.

“Indeed,” said Tian Qu. “He was permitted to commit his atrocities for far too long. The Subprefectural and District Magistrates in that region would rather fatten themselves on pastries and politics rather than offer a bounty an experienced tracker would accept.”
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“Or have enough sense to coordinate with the bureaus at the capital to prompt an imperial response,” Shang Jian added.

“And it’s for such things that our organization exists,” continued Lu Guanyaing.

“Nevertheless, the Crossbones Killer is no more,” Sun Xin remarked.

“How did you do it?” they asked.

Sun Xin redirected his gaze downward. “I had been tracking him for several days. He didn’t make it difficult. He could not help himself from killing. Persons missing for weeks were turning up dead at every turn with each killing as gruesome as the last. The things he’d make them do to each other and themselves were nothing short of atrocious. He knew I was on his trail and thus led me to an abandoned outpost in the middle of nowhere.”

“Knowing it was a trap you had naught left to do but spring it,” said Zhen Shu.

“Naught left to do but spring that trap,” Xin echoed. “That abandoned outpost was a den or a mass grave where many corpses were hanged in display. He thought such a sight would have caught me off guard; he then proceeded to harass me with hit and run tactics. After I had become familiar with his attack pattern I cut him down. Before I landed the killing blow he smiled at me and said ‘b’fore long, your entire world will turn upside-down.’ I thought nothing more of it drove tip of my sword through his throat.”

“Surely the ramblings of a deranged psychopath,” Lu Guanyaing remarked. “I am truly impressed with this feat. Tis a great burden that has been lifted from society, but a crying shame for the victims we cannot resurrect.”

Xin switched topics. “On a more geographically political front,
now our troubles with Lin Xuan the Warmonger are over. I tracked him down at an inn near the desert and deceived him into thinking I was one of his henchmen. He and his trusted commanders will no longer be our concern. Word of his death spread rapidly across the region. The Menggu tribe of that region has disbanded their alliance with his men and the people are celebrating his elimination. The nearest army garrison mopped up the remnants of the forces there. The army now occupies his territory and is still clueless as to the cause of his death. Not even the governor of the province was aware of my presence there;” he said as he leaned back against the wall with his arms crossed. He paused for a moment.

“Upon completing my objective I found a map outlining the other nests where many of his followers reside in wait. Your Academicians can raid them to eradicate their presence from that province once and for all.” Sun Xin said plainly as he pointed at the map.

“Well done, Xin,” Guanying said nodding with satisfaction. The rest of the members of League murmured with excitement and approval of the mission’s success. They have been tracking Lin Xuan for many years and it was Xin who had finally removed him once and for all relieving the Ming Empire from a painful thorn in the flesh.

The government, however, will never truly figure out who killed him and that is perhaps for the better.

“That was quite a feat, but we must keep one eye open. The worst may be in the loss of the balance of power upon the death of the desert warlord. The region under his influence has surely been agitated. Get your fill to eat and rest a while,” Lu Guanying said as he tossed Xin a fat sack heavy with coin.

Though Xin was not a member of the League, he had long
earned his place among them. He was even requested to officially lead the Academicians, but better judgment or perhaps even pride prevented him from assimilating into their brotherhood. Still, Lu Guanying felt quite fortunate to have had such a skilled fighter and assassin to carry out the combative causes of the Martial Scholars. They have once said that if the enemy does not sway with words and civilized diplomacy, the sword was but the last tool implemented to enforce justice. Such was the creed of the League of Martial Scholars. Sun Xin’s first encounter with them went back some years ago, when the Academicians led by Shang Jian had been hunting the same target he had been tracking for many weeks. When Xin struck first blood on the target, the Scholars’ attention refocused on him. A professional relationship with the League and their brotherhood of Academicians had begun from that point forward.

Xin paused for a moment to recall his trek through the woods. “I was making my way through the outer edge of the dominion of the Crimson Moon Sect. During my scuffle with three of their scouts I was wounded by a poisonous arrow. Living alone in the mountain, there was a hermit like the sages of times past, who had nursed me back to health. When the evening had come, the occultists attacked the house and attempted to harass us with their usual terror tactics. The sage, however, claimed that he was under the protection of Heaven and so with one statement alone, the occultists fled into the night as if they had felt a power against which they knew they could not contend. I have never seen such power or authority projected from man before.” Xin and the Scholars stood in silence unsure of what to make of the story.

Headmaster Guanying broke the silence. “There are stories of a more fantastical nature circulating throughout the Middle Kingdom
since time immemorial. Many have merely neglected such news as myth or superstition but not even I can deny that dark activities have grown frequent of late. I do not find your encounter with the occult nor the resurgence of crime or even rumors of wars too surprising. We must stay vigilant and dutiful to the people within the borders of the empire. But tread carefully, Xin. These days charlatans abound and run to and fro,” he advised to Xin. “Even so, this hermit or sage has made himself a friend of the League.”

“I sense that something dark is on the horizon for the Ming Empire,” Tian Qiu expressed rather unexpectedly. “All of us, even among the Academicians could sense its approach though they remained largely silent about it.”

“Explain yourself,” said Xin in a rather commanding tone.

“Our information network spread throughout the districts and prefectures across the empire has fed the League with vital information that I find is of great concern. Middle Kingdom’s state of affairs grows dire. Our informants indicate increased hostile activity from many criminal groups and underground rebel organizations. Such news was troubling though no one could produce an explanation as to why. You’ve already personally experienced this truth with the Crimson Moon Sect.”

Shang Jian the strategist stepped in. “The rebel groups and secret societies have grown bold of late. Even the imperial government has grown anxious. We’ve heard that the bureaucrats of the palace in the capital are scrambling for solutions. However, we ourselves are unsure of what their spy agencies in the Eastern and Western Depots already know. Their lackeys in the Imperial Secret Police are largely untrustworthy and corrupt, most being mere pawns of the powerful eunuchs heading the Depots.”
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“The war ministers and officials can do little to initiate military action,” added Zhen Shu. “Most are occupied in defending the northern and western borders from hostile nomad horse tribes, enemies of the Middle Kingdom since ancient times. Furthermore, the rest of the troops have been allocated along the southeastern coasts to defend from marauding pirates from the island nation of Riben across the Yellow Sea. The cities’ prefects were ill-equipped to combat the rebel and bandit raids on the outlying provinces and cities. Military responses were less than satisfactory.”

Headmaster Guanying rubbed his chin in contemplation. “The League does not officially meddle in the military affairs of the empire and leaves such matters to the emperor and his court. Still, there might be a time when our involvement in war would become inevitable. There are, however, troubling reports from the neighboring provinces regarding the arrival of foreigners never before encountered in any of the seas. They’ve congregated in Guangzhou and are treating with high ranking officials who’ve bothered to come all the way from Beijing. The eyes of the League have been set upon them for some time now. I believe we are right to do so...”

Though their day to day routines have provided them with a feeling of security, recent unfolding events have changed that feeling to anticipation and anxiety.

Sun Xin did not consider himself to be a part of the cabal, but took pride as a lone agent with an alliance with those who shared his philosophical views of justice, punishment, and national security. The Academy had been a sort of home for a number of years now and was currently the only place where he could find respite and training for his body and mind.
PIERRE DIMACULANGAN

How he ended up with the League was a long story and he would never forget how Lu Guanying had bailed him out of a great demise while offering him a place amongst their ranks not so long ago. Sun Xin owed the headmaster much and he did his best to repay that debt by fulfilling his missions in the name of their cause and creed. Across the large courtyard, Xin entered a study and rested. To his wonder, the wound on his neck had almost completely healed. Now he felt as he had another new debt to the sage living on that small mountain. Famin Jie’s words and actions on the night he had spent in his home was one he would never forget. Sun Xin remained bewildered and awed at what he had experienced there. He had seen and heard many things, but he never thought he would meet a man whose words held so much power that even the darkest minions fled upon hearing them. In the back of his mind, Xin hoped that one day he would meet the hermit sage again.