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Cheongsam Misadventures

Abstract
I was therefore all ready for the grand conquest, envisaged as comprising a series of individual conquests, as my cheongsam and I cut a victorious swathe through the decks, corridors and glittering function rooms of the QE2 denizens.
SINGAPORE
and
MALAYSIA
Catherine Lim is a writer in Singapore. She has published seven collections of stories, three novels, and a book of poems. Two of her short story collections were used as literature texts in the G.C.E. O Level Examinations conducted by Cambridge University, College, Australia. Some of the books have been translated into Chinese, Japanese and Tagalog. Before she became a full-time writer, Catherine Lim, who holds a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics, was a lecturer in RELC (Regional Language Centre), Singapore, training teachers from Southeast Asian countries in the subjects of Sociolinguistics and Literature. To maintain her links with the academic and professional worlds, she continues to give lectures at seminars and conferences both at home and abroad. She is divorced and has two grown-up children.
I was therefore all ready for the grand conquest, envisaged as comprising a series of individual conquests, as my cheongsam and I cut a victorious swathe through the decks, corridors and glittering function rooms of the QE2 denizens.

Alas once more for the gap between proposal and disposal! Cheongsam misadventures they turned out to be, not the glories I had imagined.

The first was on the very evening after the story-telling debacle. The dress code was formal. I chose a bright red cheongsam with small green bamboo patterns, and delicate piping of exactly the same shade of green at the collar, sleeves and hem. A row of three green frogs sat demurely on my right shoulder. Bright red being a lucky Chinese colour that brings happiness and prosperity, I was hopeful of quickly securing the first the second. As if in answer to my wish, a very prosperous-looking gentleman suddenly materialised in front of me. I had not seen him before; it was possible that he had newly arrived on the ship. I was sitting in one of the plush green velvet chairs lined along the side of the ship, looking out at the ocean, in the half hour before dinner. The gentlemen was prosperous-looking by the one unfailing Chinese criterion: he had an enormous paunch. (This could be explained by the Chinese instinct to equate prosperity with eating. A large male belly meant food in excess and running over, to benefit others, including wives and concubines. It became a general symbol of happiness, peace and well-being, hence the representations of Buddha and monks as pot-bellied in well-known Chinese paintings and sculptures in no way contradicted their asceticism.)

Other criteria were fulfilled by the gleaming expanse of the gentleman’s forehead, the largeness of his nose, the length and fullness of his ear-lobes and the fleshy substance of his hands, all of which I registered within the first few seconds of his appearance. His large hands laid comfortably on his enormous tuxedoed girth, he surveyed me with intense interest, as if I were an alien on the ship. When he saw me look up at him, his large florid face broke into a smile.

‘May I sit here?’ he asked, indicating a seat next to mine. Then, as if suddenly realising he was unfairly imposing his own language upon an alien, he said, slowly and painstakingly, ‘You Chinese, Japanese? You speak some English, yes?’ I nodded. He looked at me with increasing
patronage. He pointed to the *cheongsam* and said ‘Nice dress, this. Yes?’ Then he pointed to himself and said, ‘I Charlie. From the United States of America. You know Ama-ri-ka? Yes? Where you from?’

I said, ‘Singapore, which, by the way, is NOT a part of China as some Americans still think. Yes, I speak some English. It is not my native language but an imposed colonial language which I suppose I speak well enough to communicate with any well-meaning gentleman on the QE2. And yes, I know the United States of America, but I fear my knowledge has been influenced by those TV programmes which you have been exporting to the world and which show the least commendable aspects of your culture.’

The gentleman stared at me. Then he looked away and exclaimed, ‘Jesus!’ pressing a finger to his forehead. Then he turned back to face me, exploding in a series of sharp barks of pure astonishment: ‘Hey, this is wonderful! You speak English real good, without an accent! Isn’t that something? Hey, I’m sorry. I was an idiot. A blundering fool. Please forgive me. I couldn’t place you, was why. In that dress. Marvellous dress that. Hey, I’m real sorry.’ He was genuinely contrite.

I could not resist, though, telling him the well-known anecdote about an American socialite who was seated next to a very silent Chinese gentleman at dinner, trying to make conversation with him by saying, ‘Likee fishee? Likee soupee?’ When it was time for the speeches, she was astonished to see the Chinese gentleman get up and address the gathering in flawless English. Sitting down again, the gentleman smiled at her and said, ‘Likee speechee?’

‘Likee Speechee! Likee speechee!’ echoed Charlie in booming enjoyment, almost choking in his laughter.

‘Isn’t that something?’ he said finally, wiping his eyes. ‘Hey, wait I tell my folks back home.’

As if to make up for his presumptuousness in doubting that I could speak his language, he now insisted on learning some words of mine.

‘What do you call this marvellous dress?’ he asked.

‘Cheongsam,’ I replied.

The word sounded strange to his ears. He tested it on his tongue gingerly, like some strange spice. Then he got ready to mobilise the full range of his vocal equipment for the task of properly articulating this most exotic word. It kept eluding him, tying up the poor vocal organs in a hopeless jumble of sounds that belonged to no human language. But Charlie would not give up, and at last came up with some semblance of the word.

‘Shawn-sam,’ he said, looking at me hopefully.

‘That’s close enough,’ I said quickly, not wanting to witness more of that fearful oral struggle.

‘Shawn-sam,’ he boomed, beaming.
He had on his face the pure delight of a small child who has at last mastered some intricate operation in a toy. Like a small child, he needed confirmation of his triumph, so he kept repeating ‘shawn-sam’. Gaining confidence, he wanted the word expanded into a sentence and asked me to teach him a full Chinese translation for ‘I like the cheongsam very much.’ With growing weariness, I did, leading him through a tedious practice session from which he emerged even more enthusiastic, repeating the sentence endlessly until I thought I would grow quite mad from it. By the time we went to dinner, he was still murmuring ‘shawn-sam’, like a mantra. His interest, so promising at the beginning, had become purely academic.

Then I realised I was witnessing a rare but very real phenomenon of form overtaking substance, of abstraction superseding reality. The good gentleman, caressing the name of the cheongsam, had become oblivious of its reality. Silky sinuousness and high slits had been left behind for a mere linguistic abstraction. I had never thought the cheongsam could be subverted by its own name.

The subversion was complete when the gentleman said happily to himself, ‘I’m going to write it down, so that I won’t ever forget it. Isn’t that something?’ And he pulled out a little notebook, opened it at a pristine page, took out his glasses, put them on and carefully wrote the word down with the full absorption of the research-scholar.

My next cheongsam adventure involved a very old gentleman, possibly one of the oldest on the ship. He was English, aged eighty-six, either divorced or widowered and clearly enjoying his freedom. He was one of those octogenarians who are interesting for the harbouring of a robust libido in a very frail body. Indeed, the vigour of this particular aspect of the gentleman’s constitution could only be guessed at by his exclusive choice of female company. Wherever he was – in the boat decks, the games decks, the shopping arcade, the restaurants, the lido, the function rooms – he sought to be close to the young waitresses, stewardesses, shopgirls, croupiers and the not-so-old female passengers. However, so much libidinal buoyancy in a general wreckage of sagging skin, spotted hands, knotty legs, rheumy eyes, wispy hair and quavering voice meant that a great deal of his life must be lived in the imagination only. In the imagination, he must have divested a long line of sun-bathing and sauna-frolicking ladies of their swimsuits and bikinis, and dancing or gambling ladies of their sequined gowns. By the way he studied the straps of swimsuits, the zips of shorts and sundresses, the buttons of shirt-fronts, one could tell that he was already happily engaged in the different stages of divestment.

Paralleling the intense life of the imagination was an equally obsessive concern about his health. I had never seen anyone who carried around so many bottles of pills which would appear from inside his jacket, shirt, coat, trousers at various times, the pills shaken out gently into a cupped
hand and popped into the mouth. I suspected that these were a desperate means to narrow the wide gap between the health of his body and that of his libido. I also suspected that in the event of a decision involving a conflict between the two, the health of his body would be the more important consideration. Having almost reached the Biblical ideal of four score years and ten, he was not about to squander it all away by some foolish adventure that would cause the old heart to fail. Meanwhile, with the help of the pills and frequent checks in the ship's hospital, this English gentleman whose name was Robert, was able to pursue a thoroughly enjoyable and unique life of double-barrelled pleasure: innocent open flirtation and not-so-innocent secret disrobing.

It would only be a matter of time before the *cheongsam* came within his amatory orbit. Which it did, three days after the disappointment of Charlie's misdirected zeal. He saw me in the QE2 Grand Lounge, after the cabaret was over and people were getting ready for the late-night dancing. He told me, with the bold confidence that only very old gentlemen could have towards much younger women they are accosting, that he had been observing me for some time, and that the pants and shirts I wore during the day were far less flattering to the figure than the *cheongsams* I wore in the evenings. He learnt the name easily but preferred to refer to it as 'your Chinese dress'. Over drinks, he talked freely, his eyes keenly taking in every detail of the *cheongsam* which on this occasion was pale pink with the three frog buttons of the same material. Now with the light colours, the contours of the *cheongsam* are made even more conspicuous, and no true *cheongsam*-wearer is unaware of this fact.

The free flow of talk was interrupted only by his twice reaching inside his jacket to pull out a bottle of pills. The first time he shook out a brown capsule, the second time, two little green pellets.

I ventured to ask what they were for.

'My heart,' he said. 'I must take good care of my heart.'

The heart being thus taken care of, he now proceeded to feed his eyes, which ran the whole length and breadth of the *cheongsam* with the connoisseur's expert scrutiny. Soon I became aware of a look of growing puzzlement on his face. I was myself puzzled until, by observing that he was craning his neck a little here and twisting it a little sideways there, I realised that he was trying to establish the various points by which the fortress of the *cheongsam*'s virtue might be stormed. There being no visible sign of hook, button or zip, the gentleman became exceedingly perplexed. Then his eyes rested on the frog buttons which he began to study intently. An expression gradually appeared on his face, accompanied by certain slight movements of his fingers that unmistakingly told his imaginary assault on them had already begun. His excitement on making the Great Uncovery was itself exciting to behold.

Now, as I had earlier mentioned, uncompromising tightness is the very essence of frog buttons which comprise small, firm, round heads of cloth
forced through the narrowest loops. No self-respecting cheongsam tailor would have them otherwise. The buttons, once done, defy even the deftest male fingers. If Alexander the Great had been Chinese, he would have had to cut through not one but three Gordian knots. The arthritic fingers of octogenarians therefore stand not a chance. By the time they struggle through to the third and final button, a combination of the physical exertion and the mental anticipation will have rendered the undoer unfit for anything else. Worse, the strain may prove too much for an old heart. Of course, all this can be avoided by the simple expedient of securing, from the start, the lady’s cooperative efforts. But for intrepid, committed disrobers like Robert, that would rob the exercise entirely of its pleasure.

All this must have going through the gentleman’s mind, for a thin film of sweat appeared on his brow. He wiped it with a silk handkerchief and took out another pill. I thought it was to fortify himself for the next round of assault but clearly it signalled defeat. He said he was feeling tired and would like to retire for the evening. The cheongsam beginning as libidochallenging, had ended as life-threatening. While alarmed by the fact that it seemed to be having a life of its own and was taking me along the most unexpected paths, I nevertheless accorded it the increased respect it deserved.

‘The cruise is not even half way through,’ I consoled myself, ‘and there may be happier outcomes yet.’

We were approaching Bombay. How could I have guessed that at this stage in the cruise, the cheongsam was to suffer its great humiliation?

Two days before reaching Bombay, the cheongsam caught the attention of a gentleman who, to my secret delight, was more elegant and younger-looking that either Charlie and Robert. Indeed, he came quite close to the image of the ideal gentleman whom middle-aged women on a pleasure boat dream of meeting - tall, slim, tanned, exuding confidence, with elegantly greying hair and equally elegantly greying sideburns. I was having a pre-dinner drink with someone I had earlier met, an Australian lady named Laura who, during the day, wore amazing T-shirts with slogans such as ‘Downunder, not Downandout’ blazing across the enormous expanse of the chest and in the evenings, dense black outfits with strange mythical animals in rhinestone. She wore only silver ornaments and her favourite ear-rings were a pair of long scimitars that flashed and slashed dangerously each time she threw back her head and laughed, which was very often. I noticed that the bartender, a reserved hollow-cheeked young Turk, twitched nervously each time the scimitars swung in his direction, probably conjuring some painful ancestral memory.

Laura had been to Singapore and Hongkong many times, she told me, enticed back again and again by the famous steamed chicken and roast duck, suckling pig and Emperor’s goose. Her greatest complaint was: how did Chinese women in the midst of the world’s greatest gastronomical
delights, manage to stay slim while their Australian sisters ballooned
within a week?

‘Won’t I need at least six of these to get into?’ she shrilled, pointing to
my cheongsam, and laughed seismically, spilling her drink.

The gorgeous-looking gentleman came in, looked around, walked
straight to our table and asked if he could join us. Now in the presence of
a promising gentleman, there was a distinct advantage in having someone
like Laura around. This advantage, which I confess I was quick to exploit,
was the effectiveness with which a very large figure, side by side with a
slim, cheongsam-clad one, could become its best advertisement. Advertise
me Laura did, not just by being there, solid and immovable, but by loud
declamations to the gentleman, as soon as he was seated, of the unfair
slenderness of Singapore and Hongkong women.

‘Don’t I envy them their slender bird-waists, their tiny ankles?’ she
decried rhetorically and added plaintively, ‘and just look at me! Is it fair,
I ask you?’

The gentleman gallantly complimented her on the vibrant red hair, then
turned his full attention on to the cheongsam. It was a green one this time
with sprays of purple orchids, and double piping of purple and green. The
frogs were also in purple and green, twisted around in an ingenious
blend. I had on a pair of jade ear-rings that were exactly the same green
shade of green and carried a gently scented fan of pale green silk (non-
functional, purely ornamental, as the ship was fully air-conditioned),
presenting myself as the very essence of Oriental-tropical exoticism. The
gentleman was clearly charmed.

He escorted me into the dining restaurant and after dinner, waited to
escort me to the lounge, to get ready for the evening’s show. During the
show, he leaned over to whisper the warning that he was going to
monopolise me for the after-show dancing, and maybe after that, for the
after-dancing midnight buffet supper. His soulful eyes hinted at a
monopoly well after the cruise itself. This gentleman who was called
Herman and who came from South Africa, said he looked forward so very
much to seeing the next evening’s cheongsam. The next evening I tried not
to disappoint him by choosing one that was the closest to peacock blue,
having recollected a small snatch of conversation in which he had extolled
that colour. It had daintily rose-like patterns and black piping. The frogs
were in severe black which gave them a dramatic appearance. The effect
was completed by a pair of long black bead ear-rings. Herman was
enthralled.

And just when I thought the cheongsam could claim unqualified success,
we reached Bombay. On board came a troupe of sari-clad women, like a
flock of brilliantly-feathered tropical birds. One stood out among them, a
statuesque dusky goddess who stunned everyone into attention when she
swept into the dining restaurant in a flame-red and green sari with a
gleaming gold border. The lady’s kohled eyes flashed challengingly, and from that moment Herman was smitten.

From *cheongsam* to sari was an easy step which Herman effected in exactly the time I turned my back to have my glass refilled, and the Indian Venus made her entrance into the bar. There she stood at the doorway, a tall imposing queen, this time in a deep purple sari, rich ornaments of gold adorning her ear-lobes, throat and wrists, one bare arm regally flung across her waist, surveying her new queendom with hauteur. I had hoped that she was travelling with a strict and conservative parent or better, a surly, possessive husband, but her bold entrance by herself in the bar announced that she was being shackled by neither and that like me, she was a solo traveller.

The *cheongsam* thus defeated, I tried to analyse the causes, that is, its deficiencies in relation to the sari. I found many, alas, so that I was forced to revise my earlier assessment of its power. For I had to sadly admit that worn by someone like this proud beauty from Bombay, the sari was alarmingly ahead of the *cheongsam*.

Firstly, its fluidity and flow, allowing the wearer the sway, turn, glide, slide, duck, pirouette, showed up all the formal stiffness of the *cheongsam*. Secondly, its baring of the midriff, a middle pleasure zone suggesting a greater pleasure on either side, immediately reduced the *cheongsam* side slits to a paltry promise. Thirdly, on a windy boat deck, its end could be drawn over the head and partially across the face, while the rest of the filmy stuff floated around the body. Now an Indian woman, face lowered, her large dark eyes peeping from behind this sari-veil which her fingers clutch tightly against the wind, is a definite male fantasy. By contrast, the *cheongsam* remains unaffected by oceanic breezes, except the lower part which flaps untidily about the legs, like some foolish trapped bird.

Lastly – and this must be the ultimate advantage – the sari claims an ease of disrobement the *cheongsam* never can. Unhindered by buttons, hooks and zips, the sari can be removed by the simple procedure of unspinning the lady out of it. Its great length of many meters allows for the pleasure of a full and vigorous unspinning with the added advantage of dizzying the lady so that she totters romantically into the unspinner’s arms. By contrast, the unhooking of the *cheongsam* collar, the demolition of the three sentinel frogs and the laborious unzipping at the side, add up to a mundane operation. Just as the presence of Laura’s large T-shirts had enhanced the appeal of the *cheongsam*, so now, by same Principle of Contrast, the dazzling sari had cast it into the shade.

I conceded defeat.

In my more spiteful moments, I imagined the gentleman in his ardour being frightfully entangled in the treacherous lengths and folds of the costume, choking and suffocating and myself whispering in malicious glee, ‘Who’s sari now?’
Months later I received a postcard from Laura, that exclaimed: 'Wasn't that a splendid cruise? Didn't your cheongsam just floor that gorgeous guy from South Africa?' and I wrote back, casting my sentences in the same breathless mode of the rhetorical question: 'Hadn't we, alas, overestimated the power of the cheongsam? Shouldn't I now try my luck with the sarong?'

So the second strategy was an equally dismal failure. I was in a wretched state indeed.