

The Academician



The Southern Swallow

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Edward C. Patterson

Sample Chapter

Southern Swallow
The Life and Career of Li K'ai-men

Book I

The Academician

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First Kindle Original Edition, December 2009

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Chapter One

The Corpse of Pao Chin

1

A bigger fool the world has never known than I — a coarse fellow with no business to clutch a brush and scribble. I only know the scrawl, because my master took pleasure in teaching me between my chores. Not many men are so cursed by a scholar and saddled with the baggage of literary aspirations. Still, what I know, I know. What I have seen, I have seen; so what I scrawl is no more than a witness and a guess on how things grew along my path, which was his path after all. Now that he raises his spectral cup in the Dragon's Pool with the Other, I can do little but sit on the riverbank, boiling the fish soft for my toothless repast and serve destiny with these recollections. Better men have managed it, so I am doomed to failure. So we begin with a flourish of the brush — with a big Nan and a giant Ya, my master's pen name — Southern Swallow. Then, we commence with . . . an ending. In fact, without an ending, this story could not begin; and it began at Su-chou inside the Superintendent's official residence.

2

A gadfly buzzed in the courtyard watching the Superintendent work. The place seemed deserted. While the city market hummed just over the *Ya-men* wall, the great official appeared engrossed in his industry — perusing memorials destined for his superior in Yang-chou, a critical eye, who examined every character for proper usage. Perusing every document, from petty requisition to execution warrants, served the Superintendent's best interest, although the gadfly buzzed.

Xin Ch'u, the chief clerk of the *Ya-men*, took his ease in the doorway behind the sandalwood screen. It was stifling indoors, yet he knew that to make his presence known to the Superintendent would immediately enlist his aid on the papers at hand. It was better to stall here in semi-shade and watch the official toil. There would be plenty of tasks for Xin Ch'u's staff, but why suffer the imposition now? Xin Ch'u's several chins ran wet. His fan gave him scant relief. As he watched, he saw an inviting bowl of wine on the Superintendent's desk. It would be tepid, and might even heat his blood, but Xin Ch'u longed for it. His own larder was far off, at least a quarter hour's walk, so Xin Ch'u hoped that if he presented himself before his liege-lord that he could avert the tasks if not preempting some of the glorious wine. He fluttered his robes, airing his soaked vestment, and then prepared to enter the courtyard like a man lost in the summer heat.

Then, he heard the gadfly. So did the Superintendent, who gazed up from the scrolls. His brush outlined the fly's trajectory as it buzzed about the desk, landing on the ink block. Xin Ch'u halted, still unseen by his lord. The Superintendent fluttered his hand across the block, his fingers flicking the air. He did this three times, and then rose slightly from his chair. He grasped his chest. He choked, and then sprawled across the desk. A slight man, he brought no harm to the desk.

Xin Ch'u observed these things calmly. He pressed forward slightly until he heard the gadfly's buzz. It hovered over the Superintendent for a short spell before nestling in his ear, perhaps to sing a last song for His Excellency. A slight smile blossomed on Xin Ch'u's lips. He walked around the desk, scanning the man and his workload. There was little doubt of the condition, but still if a mirror could be clouded, the guards must be summoned — the doctor would be fetched and the courtyard would fill with a plethora of assorted busybodies, all seeking news and . . . well, the spoils of death. That wouldn't do, not for Xin Ch'u. He sneered at the Superintendent's helpless form, and waited for a last ditched burble or fart. None came, so the chief clerk reached down for the glorious wine and drank the bowl dry.

“Dead,” Xin Ch’u said. “What a bother. Another one dead.” He looked about for more wine, but saw none. “At least this one has not left posterity to complicate things.”

Xin Ch’u was a hefty man— quite able to lift the Superintendent from the desk and carry him to a more dignified locale. However, the chief clerk’s instincts were focused on the importance of him being in charge. He poked around the table for various small riches — an ink plate, a fine brush and a lovely vermilion sealing pot. These quickly vanished beneath Xin Ch’u’s robes. He continued to probe, even to the Superintendent’s hair comb, when suddenly he spied something shiny. A silver ring on the dead man’s middle finger just beneath the gadfly that had rested on the knuckles and sucked on death. The ring was simply set with an emerald at its crest. It was a handsome reward for the clerk. A few twists and Xin Ch’u pulled the signet over the Superintendent’s long fingernails. It was heavy in the hand, much heavier than it appeared on the finger. The clerk slipped it on, and then quickly cast a glance about the courtyard assuring that no one watched. Safe. Xin Ch’u raised his hand to the fading light.

“Brilliant,” he said. He sneered, gazing down at the man who was his overlord. “More brilliant than you were, Pao Chin. This is my reward for diligence. I had forgotten that you had such a treasure.” He had spied it once at court, but mostly it hid under robe sleeves, or bent to the angle of the brush. Xin Ch’u raised it higher. “Now, as I look at it in a better light and on a better finger, I will not think much of you, Pao Chin.” *I do not think anyone will ever think much of this man*, he thought. The Superintendent had been grafted on the scene. Everyone knew that the clerks ran the *Ya-men*, and everyone recognized that Xin Ch’u ran the clerks.

Someone was coming. Xin Ch’u slipped the ring from his finger and into the larder hidden beneath his robes. He assumed a pose of alarm. Less so when he saw it was his lieutenant, Mao Fei. Mao squinted as the sun’s Western decline now cut across the courtyard. He shaded his eyes, sniffing like a dog. He walked like a scarecrow if a scarecrow could walk.

“Xin Ch’u, is there anything amiss?”

Xin Ch’u sighed. “Nothing is amiss, Mao Fei. Pao Chin is dead, that is all.”

“The superintendent is dead?”

“Dead,” said the chief clerk.

Mao Fei circled the body. He prodded it with his fan as if he were waking the man from a late afternoon snooze. When Pao Chin failed to arise and dance the harvest fling, Mao Fei smiled. He may have even given a chuckle, but it was hard to tell with the man. He was as creaky as a hinge. “This is most inconvenient,” Mao Fei said. “Most inconvenient, indeed. But are you sure he’s dead?” He prodded some more, but was really looking for loot. His pouty, thin lips showed disappointment. He probably knew that if he had come upon Pao Chin as he collapsed over the desk, he would be more the richer and Xin Ch’u as barren as Mao-tien’s old ox.

“Most assuredly,” Xin Ch’u confirmed. “Pao Chin is dead.”

Mao Fei blinked. “But how did it happen?” He peered under the table. “Did he perform the death ritual?”

“Do you see any blood?”

“None.”

“He was working, as he always has, and then there was a . . . gadfly.”

“Gadfly? He was killed by a gadfly?”

“I suppose so. I mean, he waved it away and must have strained his *ch’i*, because he just slumped across the desk.”

“And the fly?”

“Survived. I saw it on his . . . well, I saw it.”

“You let it live?”

Xin Ch'u shrugged. "I have done many things in service to this *Ya-men*. I shall not become the minister of fly swatting."

He thought on this for a moment, and then began to chuckle, his chins shimmering in the golden light of sunset. Mao Fei cackled. It was a rare moment in the comradeship of these men. They had served in many capacities in this place — served many lords, but never considered being on insect patrol, until now. Alas, too late, because Pao Chin was dead.

3

Pao Chin is dead. Or I should say, was dead. Well, that would mean he is alive, but he is dead. I can most assuredly state that case. Pao Chin died and that is a good thing for this story, because without his death, my master would not have taken his place as the Superintendent of Su-chou. Timing is everything, or so I have been taught through this fateful existence I lead. With death comes vacancy. Vacancies must be filled — opportunities gained.

My master, the revered scholar Li K'ai-men, had just passed the regional examinations for office. He had attained the highest possible grade, a distinction aided with much vigilance by your humble servant, who filled his soup bowl and empty his piss pot during the interminable days he was pocketed in the examination cubby. But he did well. More than well. First place. He was marked to receive an immediate post, a position sufficiently grand for such an achievement. So Pao Chin's end became . . . Li K'ai-men's beginning.

I was a young pup then, attending my master's every whim. What did I know? I, K'u Ko-ling, son of K'u Fei, a lowly son of the soil from Gui-lin. All I knew was what my master taught me. He showed me how to mix the ink, to prepare the brushes, to boil the soup, to pay the whoremistress, and . . . and I loved to spy on that. I could tell you much, and probably will, but everything in its time and place. Little did I know how much I would learn in service to a great scholar and a man of high governmental rank. I probably learned more than half of the piss-ant bumblefuck sons of scribblers that roam the land from town to town with petty services and warrants. I had warrants of my own. But all in time. Everything to its time and place.

My master, Li K'ai-men, was to be the Superintendent of Su-chou. What an honor that was. He would rule over an important district. First appointments are usually a shit-hole in An-hui or a cold, ball-chilling hut on the Yen border, but not for my master. He drew the bastard plum — Su-chou.

I think that Pao Chin's death was for the best. The gods were good that day. I did not know the man, nor would he have known me. Yet, I feel so intimately grateful to him for passing on to his ancestors that I could swell with joy when I think of his life, long and healthy, fat and greasy, sated and mated until the end. Never was there such a well deserved or well timed death as his.

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Author Edward C. Patterson has been writing novels, short fiction, poetry and drama his entire life, always seeking the emotional core of any story he tells. He has currently 30 published books. He is known for spinning magical and fantasy yarns grounded in history and favors epic tales revealed in books series. His flagship works are The Jade Owl Legacy Series, The Southern Swallow Series, The Farn Trilogy and the Nick Firestone Mysteries.

In many of Patterson's novels, he combines an imaginative touch with his life long devotion to China and its history, having earned an MA in Chinese History from Brooklyn College with further postgraduate work at Columbia University. This background is the cornerstone for The Jade Owl Legacy, The Southern Swallow Series and Master Wu's Bride, works drawing on Sung and Ming Dynasty History and Culture. History has played a major part in the coming of age tale Little Vin at Dreamland.

Patterson's military experience is reflected in such works as Surviving an American Gulag, The Road to Grafenwoehr and Pacific Crimson - Forget Me Not. His gay life-way and work in diversity is reflected in his novellas No Irish Need Apply, Cutting the Cheese, Bobby's Trace and Mother Asphodel; and in larger works - Turning Idolater and Look Away Silence.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Patterson has spent over five decades as a soldier in the corporate world gaining insight into the human condition. He won the Year 2000 New Jersey Minority Achiever Award for his work in corporate diversity and is a proud U S Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. Blending world travel experiences with a passion for story telling, Patterson's adventures continue as he works to permeate his reader's souls from an indelible wellspring.

His novel No Irish Need Apply was named Book of the Month for June 2009 by Booz Allen Hamilton's Diversity Reading Organization. His Novel The Jade Owl was a finalist for The 2009 Rainbow Awards.

Edward C. Patterson is the proud founder of Operation eBook Drop which, in its heyday, distributed over a million eBooks to deployed Armed Forces members from over 2,000 independent authors. He has guest blogged extensively and has appeared on the Bobby Ozuna - Soul of Humanity Show. He is also proud of his Cherokee heritage, knows seven languages (including Cherokee) and is a contributing member of the ACLU.

“The little voice from between the lines can become a lion's roar, one listener at a time.”

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