

## Walking on the Edge of the Knife

By Silang Huang

In a warm spring with the silver song of larks, I stepped into a bus during the early morning rush hour in Shanghai on my way to an English training institute, smiling to the bus driver, a weary middle-aged man in his white uniform frowning with his heavy-lidded eyes and dark circles, glancing at my hands which put coins into the machine next to him for the fare with no smile and eye contact in return but an indifferent attitude to me, one of the routine passengers of his bus. I felt embarrassed by his reaction at that moment, and then looked around the bus, attempting to find a seat to start my morning reading. I didn't expect that such a coincidence would happen on the same bus as I found a seat with a rigid but fashionable office lady in her neat and tidy black and white suit sitting next to it, and I showed my smile again to greet her when she removed her eyes from her CBN Newsweek, a financial magazine and stared at me gloomily due to my sudden appearance next to her. She just simply ignored my smile and removed her sight back to the latest stock index figure on the magazine as if it was the only thing that mattered to her. Inside the bus, it was crowded with people on their way to work. I looked back to the apathetic bus driver with his passionless hold on the steering wheel, and glanced around those silent working people who looked like they had no passion or pleasure on their face at a new page of a brand-new day except dark circles under their eyes and fancy outfits even though it was a warm and sunny morning in spring after a long period of chilly winter. I held in my hands a book, *The Artist*, *George O'Keeffe*, a biography of my favorite avant-garde painter who has spurred me with

her courage and determination of challenging the mainstream. I started to wonder why these people became so distressed that their jobs, surroundings and lives seem to give no passion to them. If their jobs and lives gave no pleasure to them, why they didn't change them instead of living their lives with doom and gloom when the sun rises from the horizon every day?

Every action needs a motivation. Make a living, have a bigger house, own a decent car...these seem to be the common topics of the Chinese society currently and become the main motivation and purpose of doing a job to a majority of people. When facing the reality and ideal, people always succumb to the reality of living: giving up their seemingly unrealistic dreams, making a living and devoting themselves to the treadmill that repeats every moment in every single day.

Currently, most of the general society, our parents, the elder generation in China impose their mindsets about the purpose of studying for fortune and better living environment on the young generation, for they want their offspring not to relive their parents' past suffering from long-term poverty, which occurred due to the political disorders of China (the Japanese aggressive war against China and civil war between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party etc., which happened in the twentieth century of China). These periods of unrest trapped China in long-term poverty due to economic depression, thus leading to scarcity of food, water and a stable accommodation for the average Chinese people even until the 1970s. In that time, education was the only way for the poor to escape from extreme poverty, for gaining knowledge can offer opportunities for them to get a lucrative job whether they enjoy it or not, thus extricating themselves from poverty. This mindset has deeply rooted in most Chinese people's minds and affected even the current generation even if China is no longer a

country that is trapped by poverty.

Constant theme of making a living and the increasingly competitive society deprive many people's dreams and passions toward life since they are doing jobs they dislike and pursuing nothing spiritual but practical and material, just as it did to the apathetic bus driver and the office lady with rigid faces. When job and learning become merely the medium of gaining fortune and satisfying one's material need, the true meaning of work is distorted: People do their jobs just for making a living rather than for their interest, thus functioning like a machine just working for productivity without any emotion. I can't imagine that people who have no affection, interest or passion toward their work can devote themselves fully to have their job well done.

When we were children, we probably had many whimsical ideas about our surroundings with unlimited curiosity, for everything is new to our perception, and we may once have dreamed to be an artist, musician, astronomer, writer...etc. However, with the growing knowledge and economic pressure even as we grasp our books about Georgia O'Keeffe, we gradually lose our curiosity, fantasy and dreams; instead, we accept the reality is cruel, perilous and competitive and risks as few as possible. Who endowed us with this dominant mindset that making a living has a priority rather than interest and passion in looking for a job? When did we start to give up our unrealistic dreams and ideas instead of insisting on and sticking to our interest even in the cruel reality? These questions kept hovering in my mind with the moving wheels of the bus; I recalled the memory that first time I heard the metaphor which initiated me into the mindset that education should lead to financial security: "A book holds a house of gold;" (书中自有黄金屋 *Shū zhōng zì yǒu*

*huángjīn wū*); my Chinese teacher introduced it to instill the mindset of the economic purpose of studying to my classmates and me.

“Pay attention to the blackboard!” My Chinese teacher pointed with her hands to the board behind her, roaring to students in the class while preparing us for “A book holds a house of gold” by first teaching one of the most famous classical Chinese articles, the “Analects of Confucius.” In the face of the furious teacher and Confucius’ phrase, “Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous” (学而不思则罔，思而不学则殆 *Xué ér bù sī zé wǎng, sī ér bù xué zé dài*) on the blackboard, the whole class still remained in silence and paid no heed to the contents which the Chinese teacher had written. Some students who sat next to me held a cell phone with their hands under the table, probably texting to their friends; other students who sat next to the windows of the classroom were attracted by the bustle and rustle of the city outside the window instead of keeping their sights on the “Analects of Confucius”... etc. Most of them sat at their chairs with their books opened but with the absence of interest in the knowledge and meaning of their books. In the face of these situations, the teacher tried her last effort to inspire the students with this ancient wisdom by asking two questions: “What does Confucius mean about learning in this phrase: “Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous?” And what is the true purpose of learning? Please think about it carefully and then tell me in the next class!” I assumed that the teacher wanted us not only to recite this phrase proficiently, but also to understand its meaning by heart.

However, I think the situation matches to the phrase very much, because in the class most of the students maybe had no idea of why they were studying this ancestor’s valuable

thoughts which were proposed more than two thousand years ago, so they just showed their indifference to these thoughts and simply memorized them for the exams. This kind of learning--just memorizing knowledge without thinking about what you're learning---means nothing because you don't understand any of it and it is perilous according to Confucius' "Analects." It will enable us to easily accept other's points of view, follow other's instructions or misunderstand a thing since we lack rational thinking concerning the things we heard. This kind of learning applies to many students in my class since they don't have interest in knowing the true meaning of these tedious but meaningful, profound phrases or knowledge. But our teacher did not intend to deepen our understanding of the analects, rather only to prepare us for the exam which requires us to know it, at least the literal meaning of this knowledge, so we just mechanically memorized it without true understanding of the underlying meaning of these phrases or knowledge, thus missing the real purpose of Confucius' "Analects" about learning by absorbing these phrases and applying them to reality. Yet if you think without learning, then it will endanger you because it hinders you from having a broader and more holistic view toward a thing since you may make a wrong judgment and false assumptions due to the lack of knowledge just like the bus driver and the office lady's wrong judgements about pursuing only a promising future with enough money while doing their tedious but stable jobs continually. They should have thought about and predicted their future before they decided to do their current jobs, yet without learning and understanding much of themselves and their jobs, they didn't expect that they would feel so exhausted and distressed by their jobs since they don't enjoy doing them but prepared themselves just for making a living. They neglected the long-term effect that their unpleasant

jobs would make on them; instead, they are obsessed by the vision of short-term profit and gain. Learning without thinking and thinking without learning will endanger us in our decision-making.

The perilous memorization started to play an important role in a negative way when my Chinese teacher finally introduced the phrase, “A book holds a house of gold” (书中自有黄金屋 *Shū zhōng zì yǒu huángjīn wū*). As I did always, I stepped into my classroom with my Chinese textbook another day; however, a line of words on the blackboard stopped my steps and captured my attention. “A book holds a house of gold.” I curiously gazed at these words in front of me, wondering why a book can hold a house of gold. Suddenly, my Chinese teacher stepped into the classroom. She looked at the whole class, faced the students with her rigid face, and then she said, “Do you have an answer for the questions I asked in the last class: “What does Confucius mean about learning in this phrase: “Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous?” If you didn’t figure it out, try to think about this phrase on the blackboard!” No one raised their hands in the classroom, including me, for probably we all didn’t know what learning truly is at that time. I felt my teacher had predicted the current situation; the phrase on the board seemed to provide the answers of the purpose toward learning. “In books, we can find our house of gold! Everyone should have the goal of a house of gold in their minds. And working hard on your academics with endeavor, time and effort can lead you to a better job, better living environment and better future. These should be inside your house of gold! But few of you focus on your textbooks during classes. How can you compete with others for a better job position without a better transcript in the current society?” The teacher said this seriously with her hands holding the textbook—just like a

cardinal preaches to his believers the absolute truth without doubt with a holy bible in his hands.

Our minds seemed suddenly hit by the brick thrown by the Chinese teacher; we started to be assimilated by her, and her preaching gradually occupied us with the illusion of the house of gold. She kept saying, “You are here because you look forward a promising future. Just like this proverb said, you can gain your fortune by reading, studying hard. That is why you need to focus on the textbook and the classes for the sake of your future! Look at those skyscrapers in CBD; if you want to wear a nice suit and tie and get a position in there in the future, you’d better push yourself hard from now. First, let us start by staying focused on our textbook!” The illusion of working in the CBD with well-paid decent job and the superiority that will result from this deluded many students in my class, thus becoming the motivation of learning with whether pure memorization or deep understanding. I believe that the illusion that a book is a house of gold guaranteeing fortune had blinded the bus driver and the office lady, leading them to choose to succumb to material pursuit by doing their unpleasant jobs and living their lives with boredom.

Chinese elder generations always use the phrase “A book holds a house of gold” (书中自有黄金屋 *Shū zhōng zì yǒu huángjīn wū*) to encourage youngsters to study with endeavor for gaining a good job with good salary in the future, just like my Chinese teacher did. The literal meaning of the phrase “A book holds a house of gold” is a good book is as valuable as a house full of gold. However, many people distorted the original meaning of this phrase, gradually endowing this phrase with an image that studying from a good book can generate fortune as much as a house of gold, and house of gold becomes the main purpose for learning

to more and more people. The echo of the distorted “A book holds a house of gold” said from the teacher hovered in my mind like a spell, appealing me to find out what is in *my* house of my gold. For most of the students, if they don’t have a clear purpose of studying, the house of gold will easily captivate them since most of the Chinese people in modern times are attracted by decent jobs, fortune, fame, and material pleasure. The way of perilous memorization leads most of the Chinese students to lack critical and rational thinking toward the knowledge they have learned and the opinions of others, causing them to have no clear purpose in studying except blindly accepting other’s perspectives, such as those of their parents or teachers. The main responsibility of teachers in China currently becomes to teach students to learn how to earn their fortune by taking advantage of knowledge from the textbooks instead of leading students to find what their interest is and what precious things reside in their “house of gold” (purpose of learning) other than financial fortune by truly understanding the profound meaning of books, not just mechanically memorizing them for exams.

A book is a medium for people to acquire information, knowledge, wisdom, but more importantly, it enables us to think deeply and reflect on ourselves when studying and reading, thus leading us to cultivate the way we think critically and independently through discovering, hypothesizing and proving the theory hidden in books. When we are reading, we may be curious and guess the purpose of why the authors wrote about the story, theory or analysis, and we may have disagreement with them. So we start to connect their thinking and apply it into our lives to see whether it is true or not. After these processes, we get our conclusion from the book we read and assimilate this knowledge through independent thinking, which



makes us judge a thing with less bias and more reason and logic. From forming our independent way of thinking in analyzing a book, we can clearly discover what our lives are for and what way of living we should pursue instead of being deluded by other people's mindset.

More than one thousand years ago, the Emperor Zhao Hen of the Song Dynasty wrote the phrase "A book holds a house of gold" (书中自有黄金屋) *Shū zhōng zì yǒu huángjīn wū*) to encourage and inspire his subjects to study hard and to devote themselves to their country with their knowledge and intelligence so that they could gain power, fame, fortune from being an official under the feudal royal court. Yet in that feudal society of the Song Dynasty, Emperor Zhao Hen encouraged obedience in subjects and officials so that his power could be fortified. Independent thinking of people would lead to objections, disagreements with the emperor's absolute, indisputable reign and thus would endanger the monarchy in feudal society. The Emperor Zhao Hen noticed the profound influence of reading books, which enabled people to better serve their emperor and their country with their knowledge gained from books; therefore, he used the "golden house" as a stimuli to lure people to study with their might, but meanwhile he discouraged creative, independent thinking of his subjects by depriving their opportunities of being an official in the royal court even though their ideas might have been superb and transcendental in the selection examinations of royal officials from our points of view. Therefore, pure memorization of knowledge became the best way to learn and attain power and fame in that time, causing the spirit of obedience to be gradually bequeathed to their offspring and it still has influence on the modern Chinese society today. This phrase has affected many generations of Chinese people from Song dynasty till now.

However, this mindset of “house of gold” has hindered students from discovering what their true interest is and what is truly in their own “house of gold” from reading books, eventually leading them to follow the mainstream by the assimilation from their parents, teachers or societies and pursue a life without doing what they really love but pursuing fortune to make a good living even though doing tedious jobs without passion and interest, like the indifferent bus driver I met every day and the rigid office lady with her financial magazine in Shanghai. There are few people willing to take risks for challenging the mainstream of the society, so they conform to the common belief that learning is for getting a job and doing a job is for making a living. However, the autobiography of the painter, Georgia O’Keeffe let me see an inspiring example of a courageous woman who followed her heart, challenged the mainstream and was willing to walk on the edge of the knife for her interest in painting.

As I recalled my memory of my Chinese teacher’s preaching of the house of gold, the bus stopped at the Bund, the financial center which embodies opportunities and fortune in Shanghai for the Chinese youngsters. Most of the working people went off the bus with hurried fast steps at this stop, heading to their routine jobs and stepping into the offices in those skyscrapers in Bund without a smile or passion on their faces except their fancy suits and cosmetics to disguise their tiredness and boredom in their lives. The flow of young people quickly filled up the space of those fancy offices in the early morning Bund; people started their routine working lives for their house of gold inherited from their teachers, parents and the society’s guidance.

I removed my sight back to my book, *An Artist, George O’Keeffe* in my hands, turning away from the rustle and bustle of the Bund. George O’Keeffe is an artist who didn’t follow

the mainstream of society; she went to Santa Fe, a city, small but rich in natural landscapes and Native American culture in New Mexico, forgoing a high-paid salaried job as a commercial artist in New York City. Most people at that time didn't understand her choice. The book tells her life of being an artist in Santa Fe instead of pursuing fortune and fame in the rustle and bustle of New York City. Instead, living in a small adobe house as a loner in a desert area, named Ghost Ranch in Santa Fe, George O'Keeffe found her golden house in living in nature, thus inspiring her passion in creating numerous famous watercolor paintings.

When a reporter once asked O'Keeffe why she chose to live and work in Santa Fe not in New York City, the most glorious, luring place ever in the world, she answered bluntly: "I am walking on the edge of the knife, doing the things I enjoy. Because I only live once! What if I do fail and fall off, so what? I won't regret what I did with my passion and interest" (qtd. in Lisie 436). There are few people in modern times who dare to walk on the edge of the knife, giving up a well-paid job and choosing their jobs by interest instead of salary. The knife means risks and challenges; if we want to pursue the things we truly like, we have to bear the risks that we may get hurt by the blade of the knife when we fail. Walking on the edge of the knife like George O'Keeffe requires guts, passion and an independent attitude not easily affected by others' mindsets. The illusion of the house of gold once prevented me from discovering the true purpose of learning. But as I grew up witnessing more and more Chinese young people trapped in their own mindsets and prisons with distress and exhaustion for pursuing the "house of gold" they don't like, I gradually noticed the need to look for my own house of gold in books, and I try to be a person who dares to walk on the edge of the knife like George O'Keeffe even if it goes against the mainstream of the society and is doubted by

others, thus hurting me by the blade of knife. Maybe there will be more persons like George O’Keeffe who aren’t scared by the blade of Chinese social conformity if they attain the courage of breaking away from the stereotyped mindset of the society’s simple pursuit of fortune and discover their real “house of gold.”

#### Work Cited

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Georgia O’Keeffe, “Ladder to the Moon” 1958  
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