

The Windonwesian

Chapter 8

To Be or Not To Be, An English Major



1976: *Shue Yan College was founded*

1998: *Professor Dawn Wong became the head of English Department*

2006: *Shue Yan College was recognised as Shue Yan University*

Fall 2026: Professor Dawn Wong retired from being the head of English Department

Spring 2027: Professor Roland Tales became the head of English Department

Early November 2027, in a lecture hall of Shue Yan University:

“So, this is why, Chinese words, deserve our focus, even for English majors.” Professor Dawn Wong is wrapping up his lecture. “They are logographs, each word has meaning! I especially like this one, ‘閒看門中月，思耕心上田’ 閑 is watching at the Moon, through the doors. And 思 is cultivating the land, on the heart! How wonderful! Now, it is November already. So, if you want ideas for your paper, you can find me, or find my TA Eric. I will be in my office waiting.”

“Now, we finish early today and have time. But I run out of things to say. Any question? Jonathan?”

I have a lot of questions, but I don’t really know what to ask. So I just sit still.

“Umm Professor Wong,” Alex sitting next to me raises his hand, “you said that all words have meaning, can that apply to English too? And...is there a meaning in your name?”

“I’m glad you mention it. Chinese logographs have unique meanings, because they are originally pictures. English, is alphabet, letters spell together, and the image is missing in English words. Now my name. You know me as Dawn Wong, or KY. In fact, I have a Chinese name, Wong Kin Yuen. My father gave me that name. He is ambitious. Kin, means to build. And Yuen, means the beginning. My surname Wong, is the Chinese word of King. My father named me Wong King Yuen, it means the beginning, of building a dynasty. One of my student heard of my name too, and he suggested an English name.” [Eric: “Timothy?”] “No, Tommy. He takes the idea of the beginning of something, and suggests Dawn! In fact I like my Chinese name better.”

“We still have time. So, let’s talk about how English department started, to end our lesson. English subject in universities is, the outcome of feminist movement. Back in the 16th century, women in the United Kingdom protested that there is nothing for females to study. In response, universities took reference from the department of Classical Studies, Latin, and came up with the English department. English might have been the least subject-like, of all subjects! Because there is no single disciplinary agreed by all. No one can confidently map its frontiers,” then he turns to Eric who is managing the

computer, “that’s why only man with no brain, would INSIST to reduce it into just LinGusiTics and LiTiTure”. Eric giggles a bit upon the last few rising tones. “So, that’s all for today. If you have questions just go to my office.” And the lesson ends.

When I rush back to my seat after consulting paper, Alex the AI is sitting still. His eyes flash with lights from within, pretty sure he has inserted the Internal Eye, holoscreen embedded in the brain and project screen on the lens.

“You revised notes?”

“Jotting, and done. And you?”

“Working on it,” I lay out my notes, preparing to type them into the computer, “what did Professor Wong say about the importance of Biosemiotics?”

“Bio is the biological science of lifeforms [Jonathan: wait, wait, slower, slower.] adapting to their environment, semiotics is the human sign system, basically humanities. Biosemiotics is the prime example of science and culture intersecting each other.”

“Phew! That’s long,” I exclaim.

“Quite easier if you can record people’s speech and turn them into words within milliseconds.”

“I am jealous.” I forgot that he has inserted a brain implant.

“Then insert the BABI.”

“Nah, rather jot them by hand so that I remember them better,” I focus on my computer.”

After a few seconds, Alex suddenly laughs and pokes me on the shoulder.

“No, not now!”

“C’mon, I find something funny!”

“Will I die without knowing it?”

“Watched the news headline of Ming Pao?”

“You got time to search news in such a short time?”

“Hey, I got superior brain.”

“What’s the news,” I sigh, turn to Alex and leave my computer alone.

“Old and New Shue Yan University English Department Heads

Bombarding Each Other with Angry Letters. Angry letters! Hahahahaha.

Letters can be angry too?”

“Glad to see you amused with actual human language. But letters are objects, ‘angry’ is an adjective of those letters instead of emotions.”

“Yes, in fact, the word ‘angry’ shall be rewritten as ‘angrily bombarding’ for the title to be grammatically correct,” Bobby (the windownesian/an alien) is suddenly vocal.

“C’mon, how well do you know the creative side of human language!”

Alex says jokingly.

“Leave Windownesian alone, he will never know human language,” I tease Bobby.

“Pity you guys being English Majors,” Bobby mumbles.

“Don’t take us seriously. Cut us some slacks. It doesn’t matter how accurate we are as long as we convey our message,” I want to ease the tension

“Cut some what?” Alex and Bobby speak at the same time.

“Oh God. Umm...our human way of don’t be so strict.”

“You are an English major, be careful of your English,” Bobby expresses with a tone of warning, and turns to his desk.

“You are going to tell me news, Alex?”

“Old and new department head, that must mean Wong and Tales,” his eyes flash, “yes it is. Shall I send it to you?”

“Just read the main points.”

“On 30th of October, Professor Roland Tales sent an open warning letter to former department head Professor Dawn Wong...o, blaming Wong for ‘being stubborn to keep Translation and Cultural Studies...oh accusing Wong for stating ‘it was not necessary to use standard English’... Oh Tales pointing out Wong ‘repeatedly shouting at me, something to the effect that ‘you don’t know anything!’...OH that letter is reportedly ‘a serious warning to your outrageous and unprofessional behaviour’...OOH, accusing the department for being sexist and racist for not accepting a white-skinned male as the department head...OOOH Tales judges that Wong is ‘hereby relieved of any responsibility’. Wow, such an agonizing piece of news.”

“Your comment?”

“Such a truly immature bitchy act.”

“Whose?”

“Tales. Well despite growing up feeding upon information, I as machine is not fully convinced by info alone. Professor Wong has taught us at least three years and I don’t believe in Tales completely. At least English majors won’t be convinced.”

“Atta boy! I mean I agree.”

“Yes.”

Then we are both silent until Alex notes,

“by the way, is the oxygen level low?”

“Right. I am not working in this environment. Bobby shall open some windows.”

We turn to Bobby, and he recognizes it. “Never.”

“That’s okay, I can move to the study room. See ya Alex. See ya, Windownesian.”

I walk down the grey stairs again and reach the teacher’s office on LG5, and knock on a door.

“Hello Professor Resnick.”

“Oh hi Jonathan. Please, take a seat.”

“Professor, may I ask about...”

“Your first draft looks great. I especially like how you compare the two films *Transcendence* and *Invergence* on the attitudes of the characters.”

“So, I can...”

“Just one thing, you don’t seem to say much about the Singularity.”

“That’s exactly why I am here. Do you recommend any book?”

“You can go to Vernor Vinge’s ‘Technological Singularity’ written in 1993, or Ray Kurzweil’s *The Singularity is Near*. Of which...” he is searching through his shelf and picks a 500 pages book, “is this thick.” Then he looks at me with a smile of prank.

“This,” I touch the book and give it a lift, “is not a book, it’s a pillow!”

“Yes I know! You can return it when finished,” Professor Resnick laughs.

Just at this moment, his office phone rings and he picks it up. “Hello? Oh...sure. Yes. Yes. Thanks Yeman,” and he hangs it.

“Quick, talk academic things to me!” He urges me.

“What else are we doing?”

“Sure, just...”

Someone knocks the door and opens it. It’s Professor Tales.

“Mister Resnick,” he probes into the room, showing a satisfying smile after seeing me holding an extremely thick book meaning Resnick is working, “just keep the door open.” Then he walks away, possibly to the next room.

Mike signals me to say nothing, then quietly walk to the door, and shut it silently.

“Wh...what’s happening?”

“Oh nothing, just the ordinary. Patrolling the office is just the second worst thing Tales is doing.”

“There is a first thing?”

“Cutting away Cultural Studies and Translation, alongside all the related courses.”

“He can do that?”

“He is the department head now. Technically he can do that.”

“But that’s...”

“Ridiculous, yes.”

“None of the teachers oppose him?”

“I am writing a letter to voice out my opinion. Should write a story about the fall of a department as well. Others, I don’t know, they might need their job. I don’t care about my job here. I can still be a writer and earn my living. Other lecturers may not think so.”

“Well I...”

“You have a book to finish. Focus on your study first, Jon. Perhaps one day, you may return to teach sci-fi. Bye Jonathan.”

I give a slight bow, and leave the room, not seeing Tales all my way to my dorm.

Soon I meet him again in his lesson.

“Alright, we have just gone through speech acts. Before we move on to the next section, do you guys have any questions?” Professor Tales is finishing his lecture.

“Umm...yes,” I ask, “you have talked about Searle's systematization and the Literal Force Hypothesis. Since the concepts are more or less the same, which one shall we refer to when doing analysis or exams?”

“Well...you will know which one when you read the questions of the exam.”

“So, I will be well informed by then?”

“Yes.”

“Now,” he looks at his watch, “since time is running out, let's try the first two questions in the class activity. The first one, the jury answers that ‘Guilty, your honour, we find this man guilty.’. Which speech act is this? Let's pick, Elison?”

“They are stating that the man is guilty, and umm [she searches for her notes] the word changes the world, so it is declaration.”

“Oh, so we are using Searle's terms now,” I cross out my answer.

“Yes, Elison, it is a plea and it is the word changes the world. So declaration.”

“Well,” I say, “I do think it can also guide the judge to pass judgment or send that man into jail. So, I think it can be directive.”

“Yes, that can be an answer too. How about you try the next one, Miko.

This is the comment of BGT judge Simon Cowell.”

“Let’s see, it write ‘oh oh it’s awful...not good not good. No offence but you better quit...’ I think it is expressive since it is quite strong language and emotional.”

“Yes, yes, correct.”

“I think it can be directives too, telling her to leave the competition.” I add.

“Yes, that too,” replies Tales, “so, that is the end of the lesson. We will go through the rest next time.”

I approach Professor Tales as he packs things. “Umm...Professor, can I ask about...”

“It’s may.”

“Sure. Professor May, can I ask about...”

“Sorry Jon, but I am in a hurry today. You can email me soon,” and he is away.

I am near the harbour in the late evening, plan to have a walk before Meander picks me up. As I wander by the water I see him, a white old man standing in the middle of the space, confusingly shifting sight between his surroundings and his cellphone (yes, a cellphone in 2027). Looks familiar.

“Oh hi Professor Tales, what a coincidence, what are you doing here?”

“You are?”

“Jon...”

“John who?”

“...nathan.”

“John Nathan?”

“Jonathan Wills, we have just had Pragmatic lesson a few hours ago.”

“Oh yea yea Jon. What are you doing here?”

“What are YOU doing here.”

“I am invited. By the way, do you know this address?” he shows his phone.

“Umm...this address...”

“Professor Roland Tales?” Meander walks quickly to us, “oh, you guys have met.”

“Miss Lee, glad to see you. You are here to show me the way right?”

“Sure sir. Come along, the programme is going to start,” she then whispers to me, “you guys planned to show up together?”

“It’s all coincidence,” I whisper back with Tales behind us.

As the previous programme counts down, all men are holding their breaths.

The director signals five, four, three, two, one, and start.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen, welcome to ‘The People’, guardian of your right to information and your voice. I am your host Meander Lee. Recently the English Department of Shue Yan University is facing fire, with the previous and current department displaying conflicts to each other. Today, it is with great

honour that we have in our studio, Professor Roland George Peterson Tales with us. Greetings Professor.”

“Greetings Miss Lee.”

“So Professor Tales, it seems that there is a huge unsatisfaction from you towards Wong in that open warning letter, you claiming him not using standard English, shouting at you, being racist and so on. So, what happened between you and Professor Wong? Can we get your side of the...tales?” [“nice pun” I gesture to Meander.]

“Well Meander, things go like this. Despite openly criticizing him, Dawn and I are just colleagues. Since I am new to the department, there are a lot of things I shall learn. However, as a scholar and a professor myself, I cannot stand his use of language. His grammar is completely inaccurate and he should have stuck to the standard as a professional scholar.”

“Right. I see what you mean here. On the issue of grammar, you mention that he have been wrong about the grammatical structure. Can you be specific about what is going on?”

“It’s he ‘has’ been wrong, Meander. But that doesn’t matter. What matters is that, he was the head of English department. As the leader of a department about language, one must master the language. And those who cannot speak English well are not eligible. He shouldn’t even teach in the first place. He shall step down from all his duties due to his misuse of language, as well as his

hostile attitude towards me, a white man. He even says that I know nothing!

How is he a department head being what he is? Right?"

"Well I guess I get your point. But what exactly is wrong in his grammar?

Is there a specific example?"

"There are way too many that I cannot pinpoint. It's just that, Meander, he is not capable of being a scholar, let alone professor."

"Wow okay. Just a note to our audience, we hope to acquire your voices and inquiries. Feel free to send us questions and opinions via our CloudSound The People 2027 one word all lowercase. Back on our topic. Umm...[she looks at the script, and Tales looks at his watch when she's doing that.] Let's move on to another topic. It has been known that Wong also commented on your plan of reforming the English department into studying only Linguistics and Literature. Professor Tales, can you tell us more about the reformation?"

"Wong knows nothing about English at the university level. As universities, we shall be teaching English, and improving English for our next generation. As you have mentioned, focusing on Literature and Linguistics is our approach, because they are essential for English majors. However, I shall note that these changes are just at its conceptualization. There are many things to deal with before making any decisions. It would be too soon to give a conclusive response. I would only say all are in progress."

"Well yes. But if improving English is the goal, why can't the school do that with the compulsory English class?"

Professor Tales looks at his watch, leaving the studio with awkward silence.

“Right. Oh, we have our first question. Sun Catherine asks ‘what are the benefits of the reformation other than to improve English?’ That is what I want to ask as well.”

“Good question. We are not only improving English, we are also responding to society's needs. Look, reports from our school indicate that thirty percent of our graduates would further study to be a teacher. Teaching Linguistics aids them to learn and teach English. Teaching Literature equips students to teach English in the future. Besides, since it has been known that a large number of local teachers immigrate, leaving a need for universities to train teachers.”

“Right. This is from Tommy Chan 67, asking ‘You are a part-time Law and Business teacher, what makes you the head of English Department?’

Umm...professor?

“Ah, my eligibility. Before teaching in Shue Yan University, I was an associate professor in Hong Kong Open University. I was also a lecturer in the Shue Yan University Department of Law and Business. I shall be clear that my process of being the department head has gone through sufficient procedures and my ability is well-proved. Being a Law and Business lecturer means that I have mastered writing in the business world, as well as amending my student's writings. I am more than capable of being a department head.”

“Oh sure. The next question is from Lun Face 007 saying ‘Dear Professor Tales, I am one of your fans. May I know if you have any recent papers that I can look at?’

“My previous paper ‘Teaching English to Adult Learners’ written in 2008 can be viewed in various libraries. Glad to know that someone admires me.”

“Well Professor Tales, I think it is time to end our programme. Thank you for joining us. Professor Dawn Wong will be our next guest. Would you like to leave a word Professor Tales?”

“No, I believe I have told him everything.”

“Well then. Thank you for joining us, Professor Tales. And thank you audience for tuning in. It has been ‘The People’. I am Meander Lee, signing off.”

I approach the set once the camera is off, but Tales walks away immediately without a word.

It is midnight when we return dorm. We both lie side by side on the bed.

Meander pokes me and says in a low pitch, “Jon, Jon, do you really believe in Tales? I mean, he is just talking about general things. He doesn’t even directly respond to my questions. It doesn’t seem right.”

“Meander,” I mumble out of dreary, “I have mid-term on a compo course tomorrow. I really need to sleep.”

“All I’m saying is, I have sat in Professor Wong’s lectures and despite his speech is hard to get, he has passion in his eyes. I cannot see passion in Tales’ eyes. He feels the same with all the bad politicians I have interviewed.” I am quite sure she has stated more, but I fall asleep and miss the rest.

On the next day after Professor Wong’s lesson, Alex returns dorm panting, operating his holophone.

“Hey you heard of it yet?”

“What?” I leave my notes alone.

“Our TA Eric is starting a petition towards Professor Tales, accusing him for diminishing the course into just Literature and Linguistics, messing up with Moodle and stealing the powerpoint of alumni.”

“Messing up with Moodle?”

“Remember last semester we had re-exam?”

“Don’t mention it. Okay mention it.” I express frustratedly.

“He leaked the answers prematurely, forcing everyone to have re-exam regardless of their initial results.”

“He did that?”

“That’s not the worst. His powerpoints in Pragmatics lessons are stolen from graduated students.”

“He what?”

“I have just met Eric, I quote his word. Notice how many memes and BGM are in his lecture? That is the unique style of an alumni. He actually knows nothing about Pragmatics.”

“Really? I think he teaches well, with all the class activities and Q and A.”

“Well, I have viewed the lesson recordings, notice he cannot explain about what’s outside the powerpoints? He teaches well not because he teaches well, but because you constantly reply to him.”

“So, are you joining Eric’s petition?” I ask Alex.

“Nah, that is for alumni only. But Eric says there will be a student version later.”

“Oh yea, tell me to help to sign by then.”

“Oh, Jon, speaking of help, can I have your student ID and signature?”

“What are you doing,” I hand him my card.

“I am running for the English Department student representative. I need 20 classmates to nominate me, and proceed to election among the department if I gain enough signatures.”

“And your opponent is,” Bobby rises from his seat, “Bobby Tataraka.”

“You are an English major?” both of us screech in surprise.

“Don’t you guys realise there is always a participant in Zoom?”

“Will your election manifesto include opening the windows?” Alex asks, and we both laugh.

“Very funny. Get your nomination McSheen, see who wins in the end,” in a tone of threatening, he turns back to his radio.

“Can you do the nomination process now?” I turn to Alex.

“Why?”

“Meander is hosting a programme tonight, I need to be there.”

“Sure mate. You don’t mind me taking this to scan?” I nod, and he disappears with my student ID card at the door. “I will give you a form later. See you soon.”

It is 30 minutes before ‘The People’. Just when I am ready to leave the dorm, Meander appears at my door.

“Wait, aren’t you hosting the interview with Professor Wong tonight?”

“That’s what I thought too.” She hangs her jacket by the door and rushes to my seat. “Martin is temporarily chosen instead. Director Cheung says that there would be a conflict of interest if I interview KY.”

“Well that’s ridiculous.”

“Of course it is. I once taught by Tales in his English Writing class and got an A, and me interviewing him is not a conflict of interest.”

“I know. And you don’t trust Martin right?”

“I trust him. I just don’t like them changing the host. I AM the deserving host.”

“Well, you can watch the broadcast with me.”

“That’s why I’m here.” she takes Alex’s seat. “Where are the boys anyway?”

“Not here. Grabbing votes perhaps.”

“In the evening?”

“Some student groups have gatherings at night. They may wish to get their vote from there.”

We switch Bobby’s radio to the channel, and listen to soft music the previous programme plays.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen, welcome to ‘The People’, guardian of your right to information and your voice. This is your host Martin Tai. Recently, there is a clash in the Shue Yan English Department. Yesterday, we had Professor Roland Tales joining us to talk about his recent interactions with Professor Dawn Wong. Today, it is our pleasure to have Professor Wong with us to share his side of the story. Welcome Professor Wong.

“Greetings Martin. Hello audience.”

“So Professor Wong, let’s cut to the chase. Professor Tales has been criticizing you in his open warning letter. As far as we know, you are the addressee of this infamous letter. What do you wish to say about this incident or Tales?”

“I understand that it would be a huge confusion, to the public. However, people who truly know the English Department, and university education as a

whole, would know, Tales is only telling his own tales. I will try to soften my words. Tales to me is, dogmatic. He is a man who likes to do things his way, and, force people to do it. You should realize that my tone, is rising at each line. To me, this is my way of speaking. But he will treat as wrong! This is how bad it can be.”

“So you are saying we only know part of the whole story. [Wong: right.] That’s why you are here, to give us more details. So, Tales in his letter states that you are not using the right grammar. Do you have any hint which case is he referring to?”

“It is just his obsession with standardized English. He might be talking about my exam question for last semester’s ecology class. In my exam questions, I asked the students to ‘Comment on the following statement’. He insisted that it shall be instead ‘Answer the following question’ since it supposed to be a question! When in fact, in the a-ca-de-mic world, we don’t answer a straight forward question, but to explore on different ideas! Another example he targeted might be ‘comment on the monkey in the short story ‘Tools of the Wild’ and her behaviours with reference to the relationship between human, technology and nature.’ Tales claims that a monkey is an animal so that pronoun shall be ‘it’. Nature shall be THE nature as well. This is where he proves himself not knowing anything since in ecology studies, animal and plants are active, they can do meaning-making! They are not objects but beings!”

[Meander: Damn I understand that well. Jonathan: Yea I taught you well.]

“Wow, I really should have sit-in some of your lessons to understand what you say. You mention standardized English, which is one of the items Tales point out. As a Professor of Hong Kong Shue Yan University, what do you think about standard English?

“You can read my article ‘An Academic and Theoretical Rebuttal of Standard English’ I just published last week. There is no so-called standardized grammar. Language, the way we speak, is just the explicit form of our lived experience. There is no absolute right, all are institutionalized and shaped by the world. To put it simple, you add s or es to third person subject-verb agreement, because your grammar book tells you to. In fact, what’s standardized depends on our own space and time. I’ll demonstrate. Martin, have you read some Shakespeare or King James Version bible?”

“I...er... haven’t read much. But my colleague’s friend is an English Major, so I read a bit...”

“Difficult to understand right? But those are the so-called standard English of that time. If Tales values grammar, then we shall not study Shakespeare! See, what is correct can be changed with time! It is all the form and event assemblage! Language is the form, human experience is the event. We are rooted, but we move!”

“I...sure wish to learn more but time is limited. So let’s move on. But before we do that, just a reminder to our audience. Shall you have any questions

or opinions, message us via our CloudSound The People 2027, one word all lowercase. Back on our topic. Tales also thinks that you hate white people. Would you like to comment on that?"

"All lives shall be treated equally and with respect. However, the world is not always that. In our world, there is always a hierarchy, white men are viewed as superior. Look, given the same capability, a woman and a man apply for professor, it is always the white man who gets it. As for whether I have opinion about white males, you need to know me well. I was born in colonized Hong Kong and saw the whites rule over. My godfather who took care of me after my father died, was a white man. In my wedding, I kneeled down before him and called him father. If my life was a tale then that is the climax. I am not racist or sexist."

Martin gives a howl and says "I do really need time to process. Now let's pass it to the audience. First is from Natasha 5509 asking 'Why do we also have translation and Cultural Studies as English Majors.' Professor?"

"In the Department of English in Shue Yan University, we have four streams: Literature, Linguistics, Translation, and Cultural Studies. English department is the outcome of feminist movement urging university courses for women to study. They took ideas from Classical Studies, therefore Literature. They also took reference from Latin, therefore Linguistics. But, there is never an agreement on what to study in English department. As for translations, we are living in Hong Kong, a bilingual city. We best experience English with

translating between Chinese and English. As for Cultural Studies, it does more than literature. We analyze texts including books and movies to explore the ideology of gender, race, class, and the nonhumans. Therefore knowing our world. English no matter as a language or as a culture, is best experienced with these four areas. It has been clear that Tales is diminishing them into only Linguistics and Literature, which is not a wise decision.”

“We have another question from George Wong. ‘Wouldn’t it be too far-fetched to study critical knowledge?’ I think he means English department with 4 streams is impractical. Professor, would it be too high-end?”

“So as Philosophy and Psychology! These subjects are not far-fetched, but very real. Passing down knowledge is one thing. Yet there is another goal of university education, that is to respond to the world. Our world is full of genuine issues. The stigma of gender, the suppressing to females, the phobia of LGBTQ, race discrimination, beating Asians for virus, looking down on blacks, overuse of natural resources, too much to cover. We study translation to experience the power of language and see what issues difference between source and translated text convey. We study Culture to know about females, ethnic minorities, animals and plants. They are the have-nots in our society. We must study them to be a responsible human. We view difference differently. In the end, we care about the development of our student and have to make sure, not only they have knowledge, but also making contributions in our own way.”

“That’s very inspiring. Next from Erikkkkk, ‘Is there any way those 4 areas help students improve English?””

“In the English department, we don’t learn English and its grammar, but we use English to learn Everything! See, Tales says we need to improve English so that we only need Linguistics and Literature. I agree. But if we need to excel at English, we need to experience it in discussing about real situations. Tales does not agree. That’s perhaps the source of our tension, of what to teach English Majors.”

“Wow. Now I am interested. I might need to find out how to apply for the English department. Well Professor, it has been quite a talk. Thank you for joining us.”

“The pleasure is mine, Martin.”

“And this is the end of today’s ‘The People’. Thank you for tuning in. This is Martin Tai, signing off.”

“Not bad Martin, not bad,” Meander comments, “but they should have sent me, so that there can be a better conversation.”

“Yea, you’re simply the best,” I reply, pretty sure that’s the right response.

“Indeed!” Alex exclaims, standing at the door.

“Shit happens Jon,” Alex says.

“I’ll leave you boys alone. Have to get dinner anyway,” Meander rises.

“It’s okay Meander, it has to do with you too,” Alex claims.

“Shit of which kind,” I ask.

“SLEQ. Look,” Alex displays his phone, “this is an email Tales sent to the entire English department. ‘Dear 242064, it has been noticed that your comment towards the course Eng 340 Interpretation contains inappropriate strong language, including several improper swear words. You are advised to be careful of your expression. We would not want to receive such comments again. Yours Sincerely, Professor R. Tales.’ What the fuck ar.”

“I thought SLEQ is highly confidential,” I utter.

“Not anymore, it appears,” exclaims Meander, who is quite sensitive to privacy.

“SLEQs are supposed to be anonymous comments towards courses taught. Now with this happening, how are we going to trust the school when giving opinions?” Alex roars.

“How fresh is this news?” asks Meander.

“Just an hour ago. Pretty sure the school will cover it sasp,” replies Alex.

“They cannot do that. Not on my watch,” Meander declares. And I think in my mind, “Here we go again.” Meander is those woman who won’t let unfairness and evil of the world be forgotten.

“By the way, where have you been, Al,” I ask Alex.

“Grabbing my votes, and got more than I need. I paid a visit to the English Society Chacarron, gave a speech, and they are with me.”

“What have you said?” Meander is curious.

“Well, just a few blasts of how bad a department head like Tales can be,” he answers.

“Great. I guess one day I might interview you as mister Alex McSheen, Student Representative of Hong Kong Shue Yan University English Department,” states Meander.

“Now, I should really get dinner,” she grabs her coat, “you’re coming?” she addresses me.

“I am.”

“Umm Jon, don’t worry Meander, I will only borrow him for a moment. How shall I prepare for the debate? I rarely speak publicly.”

“Don’t worry,” I respond, “If you can get Chacarron on your side, I see no problem. What I would say is that, watch the lectures of the previous actually good department head, you may get some ideas. I believe in you. Remember, you have superior brain,” I place a hand on his shoulder, “you are going to do better than Windownesian.”

Two days have passed and it’s Friday night. As usual, I meet up with Meander, Zedekiah and Athena and visit one of our families.

“Zed, have you thought it through?” I question Zedekiah at his doorstep. “What do you mean?”

“Rona is shot, your father must be furious, your mother must be in lament, not a good time to have visitors,” I remind him. (Note: Zedekiah’s sister was shot in a protest in a previous chapter)

“Which, is a few weeks ago,” reminds Athena, Zedekiah’s girlfriend, “besides, a warm visit might be good for them. Zed, I will ring the bell for you.”

Answering the door is Rona.

“Hey Rona!” Athena greets her.

“Oh hi Athena.”

They hug each other. “Ouch ouch, watch the wound.” “Sorry.”

“We bought you some chicken to make chicken soup,” Athena points to the bag Zedekiah is holding, “might help you to recover.”

“Oh you are a bit late. Mum had made dinner,” Rona turns to look at the kitchen. “This will make good use tho,” and she grabs the bag.

“Hey hey hey sis, let me take it,” Zedekiah walks in.

“Why are you crowding at my door, get in!” Rona says to us.

It is a typical family scene, the father is watching TV, the mother is in the kitchen, and the siblings are setting the table.

Dinner is quiet, for some reason it is normal for the Chans. I should know. Rona and Zedekiah constantly participate in protests. Their father Uncle Ben is angry and their mother Aunt Mary gets concerned whenever either one gets into trouble. Talking at the dinner table would surely trigger argument.

“So,” Zedekiah couldn’t take the silence and whisper lowly to me, “your roommates are running for Shue Yan University Student Representative?”

“How would you know?” I don’t remember telling him.

“They both approached me, to get my signature on their nomination.”

“Ah, Shue Yan University, very famous these days because of the English Department heads,” Uncle Ben articulates clearly.

“How do you know?” Zedekiah, Meander, Athena and I utter at the same time.

“Kids, I am not caveman. I have read the newspaper, and I have listened to ‘The People’. I know a thing or two.”

“I thought you don’t like the programme,” murmurs Meander.

“I can make an exception for my son’s friends,” he picks up a piece of broccoli.

“But how true are things?” Aunt Mary joins the conversation, “about the reformation, tension between the old and new heads, all of them?”

“Oh auntie you can trust me as a host,” says Meander, “I trust Professor Wong more than Professor Tales.”

“And Tales is sure to diminish the department.” I grab a drumstick.

“Wait, Tales? That Tales who is only a part-time teacher of another department and decide to change things once he becomes the department head? Is he reasonable?” mumbles Rona with a mouthful of food.

“Sis, please...” Zedekiah pleads his sister, knowing that she might trigger things.

“Well, all I know is that, he is not as eligible as he seems, and is able to make great changes and ruin the department, I would say the whole thing seems like a dictator.” Meander states.

“Exactly!” Rona continues, “that’s the act of a tyrant, unreasonably throned, and promote things most people against. He is a dictator. And he must be overthrown or else many would suffer!”

“Rona!”

“Ma, I don’t mean extreme methods. I mean in various peaceful ways.”

“You? Peaceful ways?” her dad is in doubt.

“Ba, violence is the last resolve. He is a scholar, of course we can start with debates, or anything that helps without harming others,” Rona suggests.

“Like the petition some graduated students are starting? I have signed,” I mention.

“Yes exactly! If policies would make a school not worthy of a school and allow knowledge to thrive, then someone needs to stop it,” Rona is already excited.

“But what if that gets you into trouble?” Aunt Mary says worryly, “you may not be hurt. But you boys are graduating. Would opposing the department head cost you your degree or worse? Think of the consequences.”

“Ma,” Zedekiah says, “I don’t mind. I decided to study English because I am confident that it will be fun to study humans and their stories. It isn’t worth a degree if our department head just diminishes it to boring courses. One shall do something about it.”

“You know, for once I agree with my kids. The government, or the decision maker shall be good so that the people can live well. If there are things wrong, we shall correct it. What I mind is just the violence part, hurting people when doing so. What do you think Athena?”

“I don’t know much uncle, so it would be wise to listen before speaking. I don’t know much about politics. But if it is just commenting a school, a responsible education system moves with time. If it is good for the school, then certain actions are considerable.”

On Monday before Professor Wong’s class, I accompany Eric to classroom as I coincidentally meet him.

“You know what,” Eric says, “Professor Wong always says that Shue Yan University has the best English Department because of him and his focus on interdisciplinarity.”

“Yea, I thought he is overexaggerating.”

“No he is not. Check the history. This school was recognized as a university years after Professor Wong became the department head. It is not coincidence, it is the achievement proved by history.”

“Yea. Wait, are they Professor Sun and Professor Tales?”

“Waiting for the lift to Pacific Cafe? Yes. Quite a common sight in this school. They always have meals together.”

“Wait, if the department head who plan to strip English department is always seen with the school decision maker, does that mean...”

“Come Jonathan, walk fast, I need to set up the classroom.”

When I return dorm after class, it is noon. Alex has been joining Zoom for that lesson. He is grooming himself for the public debate.

“Umm...seriously? White shirt red tie black jacket. Where did you get this suit? From the ex-ex US president?” I shout.

“Leave me alone.”

“There,” I unwrap him from his jacket and remove the tie, “you are just voting for the student representative, not president,” and hand him a black tie, “This will do. Where is Bobby anyway?”

“Perhaps borrowing a suit.”

“He has time? It’ll start in an hour.”

“God knows. Come, we better reach there early.”

The lecture theatre is filled with teachers and students, all waiting for the debate to start. On the front rolls there are Professor Wong, Professor Resnick, Dr Amanda Chan. Dr Jose Lam, and several recognizable doctors and TA on

one side of the hall. Academic vice president Professor Sun, Professor Tales and Dr George Wong are sitting on the other side. What's missing now is the opposing candidate, leaving the host Dr Eddie Poon circling the stage nervously. Right before the supposed start, the door on the left front opens and enters Bobby. He is in full business formal, wearing a red tie and a black jacket. He gels his hair upward. Other than that his hair is not gold, he reminds me of someone. He stands at the left stand placed for him, and the debate begins.

“Alright ladies and gentlemen, teachers and students. Welcome to the 2027 student representative debate. On my left we have candidate A Alex McSheen. On my right we have candidate B Bobby Tataraka. The first round of the debate, candidates will have two minutes to respond to the host's question. In the second round, we will have the candidates freely Q and A each other. Now, to begin with, each candidate has one minute to talk about his election slogan. Candidate B, you are first.”

“Thank you doctor. My slogan is ‘Make English Department Great Again’. This is the English department. We are learning English. We shall be learning English. And we need individuals who are keen in English and devoted to right grammar. I, am the one who can make our department great again.” The crowd clap.

“Mr McSheen, it's your turn.”

“Thank you Dr Poon. Professor Sun, Professor Wong, Professor Tales, dear teachers, and fellow classmates. I am Alex McSheen and my slogan is ‘Your Voice is My Voice’. As a student representative, I strongly believe that I have the duty to perform as the bridge between the teaching team and my classmates. To ensure that the ideas of my friends are well-received by my teachers and vice versa. Together we discuss, and contribute, to make our department a decent ground for education and collaboration. Thank you.” The crowd claps.

“That should be in our next question,” Dr Poon is searching among his cue cards “What do you think about the Department of English Literature and Language? Mr Tataraka.”

“As I have stated, we are the English department. English is our center. English is the international language used across the world. It is of most importance that we use this language correctly. We as English majors shall excel in reading, speaking and writing. That’s why we need Linguistics to aid in speaking and writing. That’s why we need Literature to aid in reading.” Professor Sun and Professor Tales clap.

“Mr McSheen.”

“Yes, yes English is important. But our department can do more than that. The first English Department was founded in 1828 by Professor Reverend Thomas Dale in London University. Legends has it this was in response to feminist complaining there is nothing for women to study. At the time they perform literature criticism, not just to read books, but also making comments on their

current events. English is, not only language. It is the department of arts, it is about humanities. In the end, we study humans. English Department can and shall achieve beyond language proficiency.” The crowd clap, several professors cheer.

“Final question boys. In what ways can you contribute to the department as a student representative? Mr Tataraka.”

“I shall take my duty to promote English Usage. As a representative, I do think we need more writing competitions and debates. I will be glad to promote the event to peers, hosting the events, and collecting responses afterwards. I am doing my part, to promote correct use of English.”

“Mr McSheen.”

“Yes, we need to promote English. But our department is not only about grammar, but a wide range of study. My insight is to let our work be wide-known. We need to advertise our department so that the outside world knows what we are doing. People shall know more about translation. People shall know more about top notch cultural studies. We need a middleman to publish the work of our scholars and distinctive students. We need to make good use of popular media, ASMR style promotion videos to let people know what we are doing. Shue Yan University English Department is wonderful, and we need to let everyone know it. We have been doing that, but we need more people to promote the department and its amazing work.” People clap loud for him.

“Next part of the debate is free style Q and A. You two have 15 minutes. You may begin when ready.”

“So Bobby,” Alex strikes first, “your slogan is to make English Department great again. Why is English department not great to you?”

“Simple answer Alex, the department is not doing what the department shall be doing. We are English Department, we shall use English correctly. If English isn't used wrong, we shall not study it. We have wasted too much time in Translation Studies and Cultural Studies.”

“So you are suggesting that we only need Literature and Linguistics?”

“Yes it is. We are English department, we learn English, we learn English language correctly.”

“But there we can learn more than language. Language is just our explicit form, English is a branch of humanities. We learn about humans. We have Translation Studies because it can go beyond the exchange of languages. When there are differences between source text and target text, we explore why. And the difference oftentimes comes from difference between languages and ideologies. We have Cultural Studies because we get to know about gender and race, something practical to us. Even our Linguistics courses involves sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, how language works in humans and how do humans view them. Yes, language is important, it is the medium. But through language, we learn everything human.” people clap

“Wouldn’t not learning the right grammar but humans be too impractical?”

Bobby asks

“On the contrary, learning the right grammar is redundant. See, I am implanted with a computer brain, and I can search information instantly, as well as auto-correct grammar if I want to. With these technologies being common, why do we learn grammar when everyone can search for it? Besides, even when missing an s, it doesn’t stop us from conveying our message. Bobby, have you ever read Shakespeare?”

“It is some of my most favourite books.”

“But it is hard to read and the language is strange. Thou liketh the texth not because the language is correct, but because thou liketh the message of the book. That’s what important to us English majors. We study the message, not the grammar.”

“One thing you are missing here Bobby, the nonhumans in the course too. Why do those deserve our attention? That is the most important part of being a human. It is the most essential part of this world. Look, even language has 2 aspects, metaphor and semiotics. Humans use language as metaphor. Nonhumans such as animals, aliens and AI have their own expression which can be treated as semiotics. A few years earlier these might just be academic talk. But today, we have nonhumans everywhere. Our former department head has heart implant, he is a cyborg. I am not entirely human, standing here is a computer brain in a human body. You Bobby, are not from this world right?”

[Bobby: right] Studying them...us, is moving with the world.” the crowd clap loudly, with Professor Wong standing and clapping.

Bobby is silent for the moment.

“It is a dialogue Bob, do you have questions for me too?”

“I admire all your theories. However, you shall be considerate to our classmates too. Last year, 30% of the graduates became teachers, mostly English teachers. How do we cater to their needs if we are not teaching English as English?”

“Then what about the other 60%? Just perfecting the grammar may not help them much. On the contrary, the English Department teaches everything, so that we care about humans and get inspired to contribute in our own ways. We don’t specifically train teachers, but provide knowledge for everyone. That’s how to benefit English majors.” And his speech ends with beeps of timer.

Everyone, almost everyone is standing, clapping, and cheering.

“This is the end of the debate of the student representative of English Department.” Dr Poon announces. “Now don’t forget to vote at the SYU website before tomorrow midnight.”

As the crowd disperse, I poke Alex and ask “How did you come up with such many ideas?”

He smiles, and replies “I listened to you, and reviewed Professor Wong’s lectures.”

The next morning we go to the TA office on the Research Complex to visit Eric and talk about our papers.

“So yea, I like the idea of analyzing Chinese Words in Tong Poem. You can work on your papers and construct an outline. By the way, congratulations Alex.”

“On what?” Alex is baffled.

“The vote,” he shows us his computer monitor, “I borrowed an account to get these data. Right now you have got 70% of the total votes out of the 50% who voted in the Department of English. It is a sure win.”

“See, I told you you will beat Bobby,” I congrat Alex.

“Right. But what shall I do as student representative? What should I do about Professor Tales now?” states Alex

“Well, it seems like we have all been wrong about Tales. Jonathan, remember we saw him and Professor Sun go breakfast that morning?”

“Yes. So what?”

“Well that confirms my suspicion. Tales is not the professor we shall target. According to school documents, it has been the plan of Professor Sun. The high leaders have been wanting to wipe KY away. Now that they have named Tales as the department head, they can finally act their wish.”

“Do you mean that the Academic Vice President Professor Sun is behind all of it?” I ask.

“How else do you think Tales, an associate professor of Open University, a part-time teacher of the department of Law and Business, just a few months new to the position of department head, can perform such a large change in the department?”

“He is a pawn all along?” asks Alex.

“As a TA I have seen some documents. All the proposals of reforming the department were written by Tales, but signed by Professor Sun. So yes, Tales is a pawn afterall. In fact, this is happening to several departments as well. Old department head is about to retire, and the registry hired unqualified persons to take over as pawns.”

We are both slient.

“This is deep state boys. Odin is not with us.”

On the next day, the result of the student representative election is out. Professor Catherine Sun announces that the election has been cancelled due to various reasons. The post of student representative will be held by the vice president of each department’s student society. Such news left the room silent. It is hard to make out Bobby’s reaction, but Alex is disappointed.

“After all these works, still it is not successful,” he blames.

“It is not a total loss. At least you get to voice out for the department. And remember, there are at least 35% supporting you.”

“Yea. That motivates me. Anyway, we must move on. Against all odds.

Against all thin air,” states Alex.

“Yea, from all the thin air.” I look at Bobby.

“Hey Bobby,” we speak at the same time, “can you open the window, we want some air!”

“No!” replies the windownesian.

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By The Sapient Sabre



