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Dear Colleague:

I saw "The Last Emperor" last week, with ambivalent feelings. First, the cinema was packed, and it pleased me that so many Madisonians were eager to pay homage to my ancestors. But what a disreputable lot they were. I also experienced temporal disorientation. The movie seems to depict a distant and exotic past. Yet it overlapped with my own life. You remember the scene in a European-style club in Tientsin? The deposed emperor was there, in his role as Western playboy, with two official wives in tow. Well, as I sat there in the dark watching this scene, it occurred to me that I was a toddler at that time and that I also lived in Tientsin.

"The Last Emperor" was, I thought, good theater. Pu Yi himself, however, had only minor historical importance. One consequence of seeing this film is that a minor incident in history has become grossly exaggerated in my historical consciousness. The film induces me to reflect on my own personal past--what I can recall from it. Again the big events fade, including the air battle over Shanghai in 1937 (shown in the movie) which I witnessed. What do I remember? Well, this: a slab of sparkling ice in the shape of an ashtray next to my cot. While Pu Yi crooned over the piano in one neighborhood of Tienstsin and I slept in another, my nannie filled an ashtray with water and put it out on the windowsill to freeze; she wanted to make a toy to amuse me with. I shall carry this image to my grave. I may even think about it as I draw my last breaths. Curious how worldly successes do not stick in the memory. They are absolutely useless in critical moments of one's life.

I strive for honor* and feel frustrated when it doesn't come my way. Once in hand, the honor very quickly loses its value for me. In striking contrast, I do not strive for an ashtray made of ice, but once it enters my consciousness it remains. Why?

Best wishes,



* Let me be honest: I do not (at least not consciously) strive for honor. I do have, however, the desire to speak and be more or less understood. Perhaps that's the same as honor.