House&Home

A reader doubts his existence . . .

David Tang

Agony uncle

When I read the nonsense in the letters written to you, I do wonder whether you make them all up, or whether people like this really exist?
As this is written by you, I have not made it up and therefore you are likely to be writing nonsense, according to yourself.

Anyone who overspends in a group that is "going Dutch" is going against the spirit of an evening out shared by friends. It is grossly inconsiderate because some of the party have obviously got less money than others, and it's hard enough finding a restaurant that suits all pockets and tastes. So I would say that the repeat offender is not being a good friend.
It might have escaped your naivety that it is usually those with less money who order the more expensive items in a group "going Dutch", as they know it is an opportunity to get better value for money. So are they being inconsiderate by making the richer pay more? Robin Hood would disagree with you.

When I was at university, all of us who went out together were fairly broke. So there was little discrepancy between our means and we never argued about splitting the bill. Once we went to the Italian restaurant Sale e Pepe in Knightsbridge. We knew we couldn't afford its prices but it was a beautiful restaurant with beautiful people, so as young men we wanted to soak ourselves in beauty. When the bill came we were rather surprised by its size because we thought each of us had been abstemious. So we demanded a recount. When the manager returned, the bill was revised upwards — they had left out a couple of drinks and a pudding! We were really irritated for being too clever by half.

Am I too old to accept the beauty of fake candles? I was not impressed by these "plastic flames" when I visited an outdoor restaurant at Mandarin Oriental Paris this summer.
Yes, you are too old. If you want to feel younger then you have to embrace newer inventions. In any event, what does the source of the light matter if the light is good? When I look at "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose" by John Singer Sargent, I don't have to ask where all the lights are coming from. I just see warmth and serenity from the alluring glow of the lanterns.

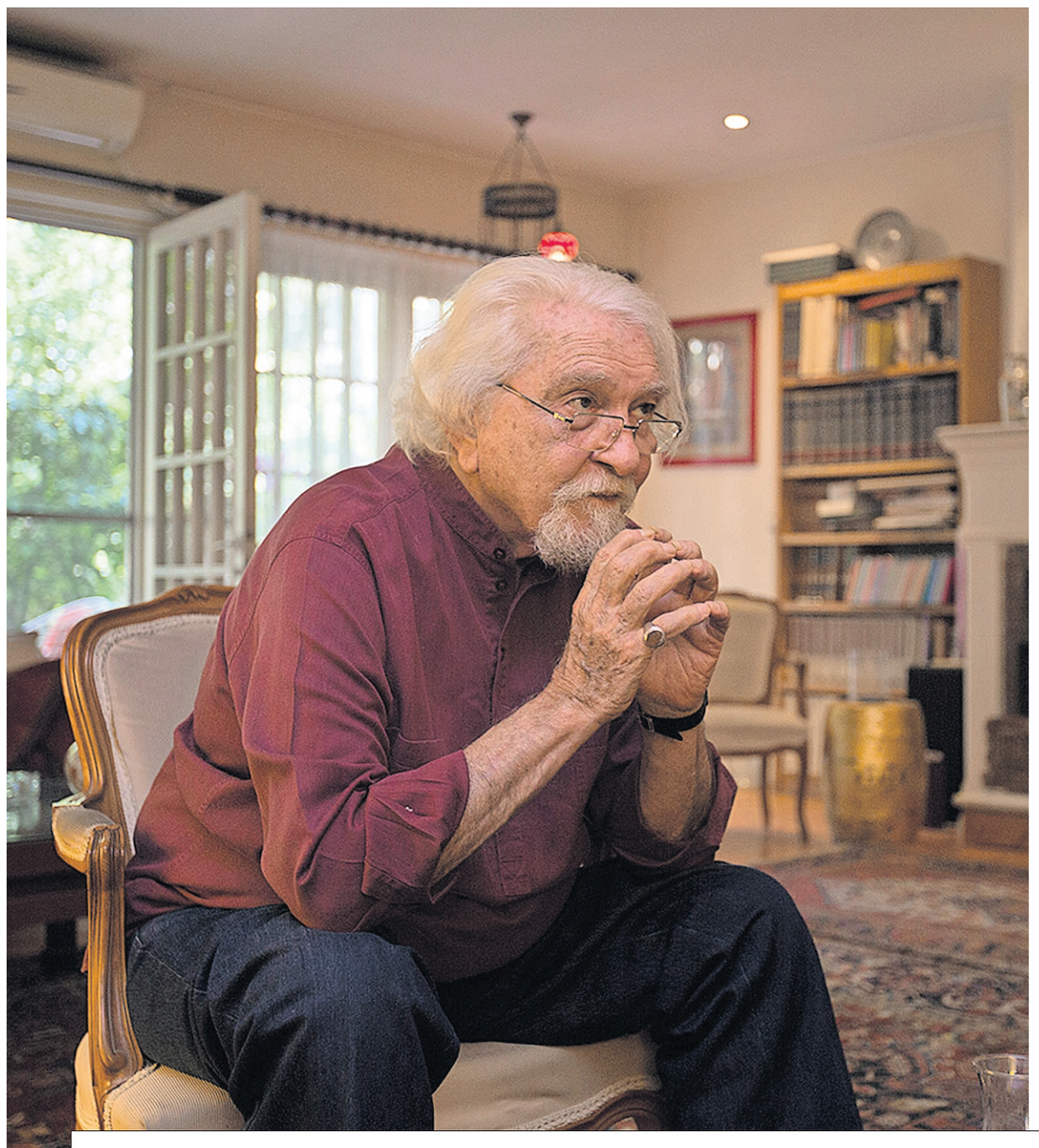
Talking of flames, there is a piano piece by Scriabin called "Vers la flamme" (Toward the flame). The music is choked in a cacophony of frenzied sounds: urgent, violent and dramatic. It had a rather devastating effect on a young pianist from Hong Kong, who confessed that listening to it made him realise he hated both his mother for forcing him to learn the piano and his father for not turning down his radio. This young man became so hateful that he murdered his parents. I know this is a gruesome tale, which happened only this year, but it shows what a fake flame can do.

As a proud and happy life-long resident of Johannesburg, I can't understand why you don't want to visit. You must review and update your bucket list. We have the best climate, the friendliest people, wonderful hotels, proximity to amazing game parks and a great spirit of Ubuntu (helping others).
But how about your city crime index of 83.86 per cent, as opposed to your safety index of 16.14 per cent? Does your spirit of Ubuntu include robbery and burglary?

It's usually those with less money who order the more expensive items in a group 'going Dutch'

I don't think I can agree with you about the title of Quintin Hogg's book being irregular. Surely it is a quotation from Edward FitzGerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. The full quatrain, which I'm sure you know, goes something like this:
Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint and heard great argument
About it and about, but evermore
Came out the door wherein I went
Quintin Hogg's title seems to me just right for a spiritual biography, though I haven't read it.
I am aware of the provenance of the title. But in your anxiety to be erudite, you misquoted the quatrain: FitzGerald translated it: "Came out by the same door wherein I went." The omission of "same" is important in the interpretation and Hogg's title. Unlike you, I have read the autobiography but it is more about Hailsham's ministerial life than his spirituality, which he misleadingly promised in his foreword.

To post comments and questions, please visit ft.com/life-arts/david-tang or email david.tang@ft.com



Photographs: Ebrahim Mirmalek

At home | Daryush Shayegan, the Iranian academic and polymath, talks to the FT's *Scheherazade Daneshkhu* about his school in England, exile in Paris and the cultural cross-pollination of east and west

'Everyone has a western identity'

Daryush Shayegan, one of Iran's best-known intellectuals, is holding a 900-year-old bronze bird in his Tehran home and explaining that the object is so delicate that were it to fall, the metal would shatter like glass. The exquisite artefact hovers over a tiled floor in his 80-year-old hands, making me anxious. But he appears nonchalant, eventually plonking the bird down against a white wall for the photographer, before disappearing into the kitchen to make tea.

Shayegan is a polymath with a breadth of knowledge encompassing both east and west. He was brought up in Iran, attended boarding school in England, studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, literature in Switzerland and was professor of Indian studies and comparative philosophy at Tehran university between 1968 and 1979. He has written 17 books — mostly in French — covering Hinduism, Sufism, Islamic societies, Persian poetry and cultural schizophrenia.

His big idea — the dialogue of civilisations — was conceived under the rule of the Shah and then appropriated after the 1979 revolution by Mohammad Khatami, the reformist former president of the Islamic Republic.

Two desks face each other in the study overlooking the garden. A computer stands on one but he spends most of his time at the other, confessing that he still likes to write with pen and paper. On this desk lie papers on Charles Baudelaire, his favourite French poet, and the subject of his latest project. "It's about his work and his influence in Europe because, as Walter Benjamin says, he's the first European poet."

'Persian society is in a post-Islamic situation. The young generation has plural identities'

Shayegan has six languages, including Turkish, Sanskrit and German, and he speaks English with an old-world, upper-class accent. "I've always been zigzagging," he says of his life, as he shows me around his apartment. It occupies the lower-ground floor of a three-storey house in an affluent area of northern Tehran. Here, at 1,500 metres, the tree-lined streets rise steeply towards the Alborz mountains that face a frenetic city with a serene grandeur.

The street was quiet in the mid-afternoon heat when I arrived. Across a walled front garden, Shayegan, who sports longish white hair and a goatee beard, greeted me at the door of his building before leading the way down a few steps to his apartment.

A tribal Persian Bakhtiari carpet lies in the hallway, where a Buddha sits on a wooden chest. The hall opens into a wide, split-level reception room. A glass dining table for 12 occupies the upper level, while in the seating area below, four cream-coloured sofas are draped with deep-red Indian fabrics and cushions. Tibetan thangka paintings hang on the walls; the tiled floor is mostly covered by an antique Heriz carpet, and more Buddhas are dotted around on tables and on the mantelpiece, along with a collection of small Chinese vases.

Shayegan bought the apartment from a friend soon after plucking up the courage to return to Iran 24 years ago, after self-imposed exile in Paris following the revolution. He had left in a hurry and feared for his library. "I lost a lot of things but I was able to recuperate my books when I returned, which was the main thing."

The reception room is one of three rooms facing the garden, where greenery and a pool twinkle invitingly. Shayegan has sole use, calling it "a little oasis in the desert of ugliness". With a resigned sweep of his arm, he indicates the noisy construction of high-rise blocks of flats nearby, a ubiquitous sight in Tehran, where the population keeps growing and land prices keep soaring.

A large walnut tree provides shade over a patio with six chairs and a table. There other trees, including a pomegranate, as well as cypresses and a pine, jasmine, bougainvillea and geranium pots. Several colourful Indian lamps hang from the trees. When they are lit up at night, "it's beautiful; it becomes a magic garden," says Shayegan.

Next to the reception room is a small television room with a samovar for tea and two paintings by the late Sohrab Sepehri, an old friend who was one of Iran's best-known contemporary poets and painters. Back in the main room, Shayegan recounts stories about his English boarding school, where he was struck by the boys' poor spelling and the teachers' *sang-froid*. "When George VI died, I remember my teacher saying: 'Too bad, life must go on'."

He moved to Switzerland to study to be a doctor, but "I realised I had no vocation for medicine so I switched into literature and philosophy". His parents could not have been too pleased, I interrupt to mention the staging this year at London's National Theatre of *Dara*, a play about this 17th-century Mughal prince who took an enlightened, rather than sectarian, view of Hinduism and Islam. Dara's defeat by his fundamentalist brother, Aurangzeb, arguably changed the course of India's history leading it towards partition, rather than unity. Shayegan, who wrote his doctorate on Dara, is delighted.

Our meeting takes place a few weeks after the agreement struck with the west over Iran's nuclear facilities. Shayegan is optimistic about the future of Iran but less so about the Arab world. "I think that Persian society, on the whole, is in a post-Islamic situation already," he says. "The young generation has accepted the reality of plural identities — when I talk to them, they say 'we are western and we are Persian'."

Does the current situation in the Middle East show that Samuel Huntington, the US academic, was correct in the 1990s in predicting future conflict as "a clash of civilisations"? Shayegan says: "There is only one universal civilisation in the world. All you have to do is travel, you see the same hotels in China, in Vietnam, in Russia. But he is right that there are — how should I say? — areas of resistance in the world."

Does this mean that western culture has won out? "All civilisations have their area of sensibility, for example a Chinese way of being, a Japanese way of being and a Persian way of being but [these] are only limited. When Marco Polo travelled to China, he met different worlds — that is no more. Almost everyone has a western identity. Soon we will have a mental internet," he adds, citing *Future of the Mind*, the recent book written by Michio Kaku, the physicist and science populist.

At this point, I realise my tape recorder has stopped working. But we are almost at the end of the interview and I help take the tea glasses back into the kitchen. Here hang two landscape photographs taken by Abbas Kiarostami, the celebrated Iranian film director, also a friend. A framed poster of Van Gogh's "Café Terrace at Night" is one of the few western pieces of decoration.

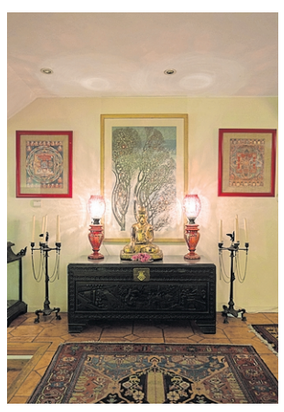
As I type up my notes, I come across something Shayegan said that is missing from the tape. It is particularly fitting from a man espousing a dialogue of civilisations: "Tolerance is accepting the other and taming your ego."

Buddha statue in the sitting room

Books and family photos

Sitting room

Garden and pool, with Indian hanging lamps



Above: Daryush Shayegan in his Tehran apartment

Below: a Buddha statue next to decorative lamps in the hallway

Chinese vase from the Qing dynasty

Favourite thing

Shayegan hesitates between a vase from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and a bronze bird from the 11th-century Seljuk era, but plumps for the 900-year-old bird, when pushed. "I feel a connection to it, as though it somehow contains Iran's soul." Despite their sentimental and actual value, the two sit exposed each on a coffee table, vulnerable to being knocked over. Shayegan says he does not want to "hide" them in a cabinet, "because I want to see them always in front of my eyes".