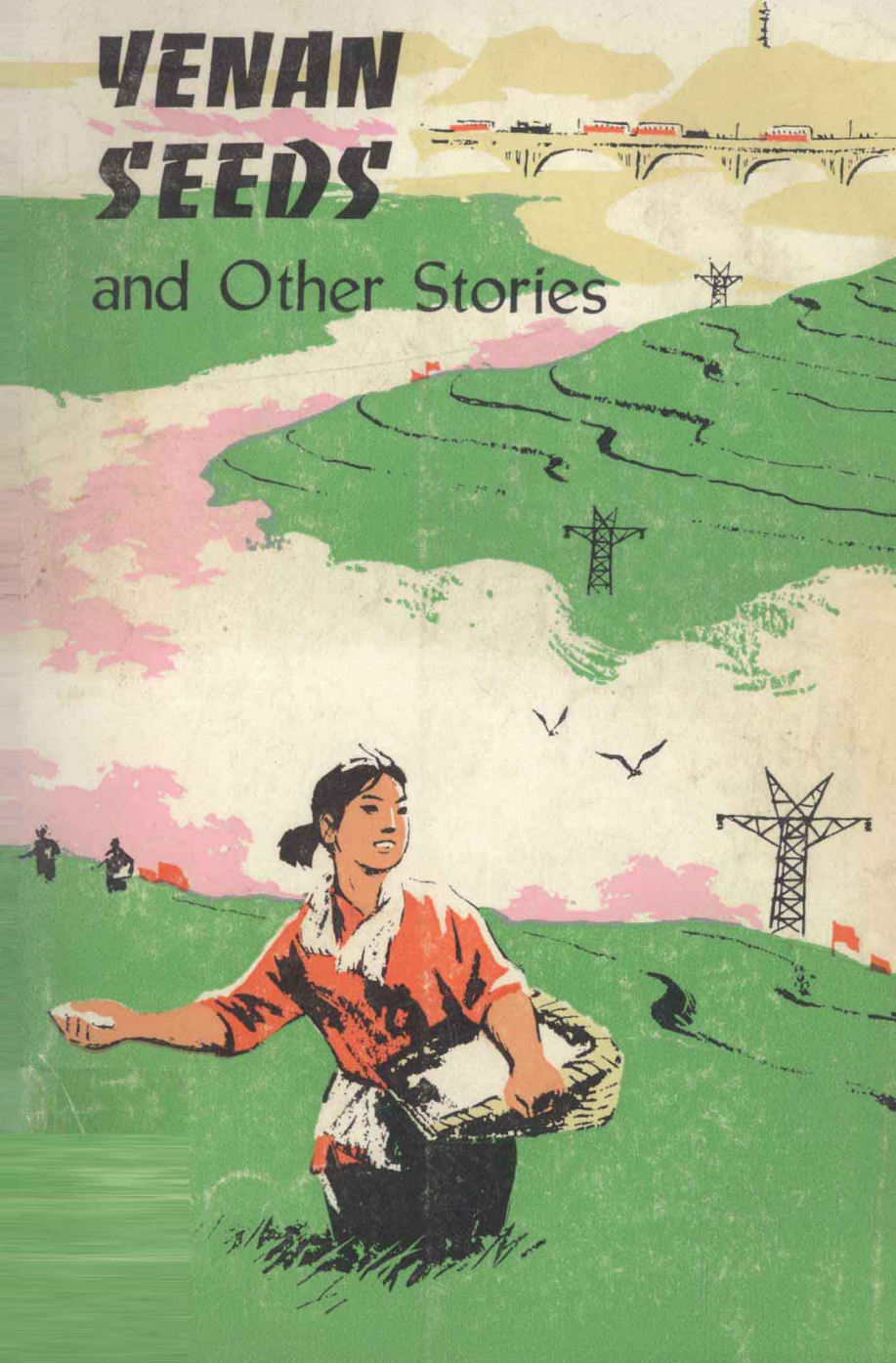


VENAN SEEDS

and Other Stories



Yenan Seeds

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Yenan Seeds

Hua Tung

A production conference on spring ploughing called by our county Party committee had been in session for three days. I was so busy that I had no time even to read the paper. After supper that day I picked up a county paper two days old and was immediately struck by the headline: "A Good Successor of the Poor and Lower-Middle Peasants." I began to read the story, which went like this:

Early one cold winter morning when rosy clouds decked the sky, the Chunfengyu Production Team of Hungchi Commune was busy cutting through the hills to open an irrigation canal. A sturdy-looking young girl was working with a crowd of young men, swinging the hammer and hitting the drill rod. She worked with such energy that her cheeks flamed and sweat dripped from her face. Her hammer hit its mark every time, and with each blow the rock split amid a shower of sparks. Suddenly someone shouted: "Danger! Run!" When the young girl raised her head, she saw on the hillside above her a big rock that had been split by two young fellows, about to roll down. It would hit a commune member of poor peasant origin named Wang Shih-chu, who was collecting broken steel rods. The young girl dashed forward and shoved Wang aside, but before she could get away the big rock crashed down and bowled her over. . . .

Who was this young girl who had incurred a serious injury herself to save the commune member from danger? She was one of the young people who had come to settle in the countryside on leaving school in the city. Her name was Chi Yen-feng. . . .

"Chi Yen-feng!" I cried out in surprise. Why, wasn't she the daughter of Commissar Chi, my old comrade-in-arms? I opened my drawer and re-read a letter I had received from him a month earlier.

Cheng Min, my dear comrade-in-arms and friend:

Imagine! It's twenty years since I last saw you. I was in Peking recently for a meeting and learned from an old colleague that you had been transferred to a new job. . . .

Remember my daughter Yen-feng—or Nan-nan, as we called her then—who was born amidst the roar of guns in the Huai-Hai campaign? She went to the very county you are working in three years ago, to become a member of a commune production team. Before she left I gave her some presents which you would recognize. I hope that she will conquer all difficulties and advance along the road pointed out by Chairman Mao just as we did after we left Yen-an. She hasn't written for a long time. If you see her, please see how she is getting along with her re-education. . . .

There could be no mistake! Chi Yen-feng must be Commissar Chi's daughter. But just to make sure, I phoned the secretary of the Hungchi Commune Party Committee.

"Yes, yes, Chi Yen-feng is a member of our commune! Didn't you read in the paper about what she did?" I could tell from the way he talked he was rather proud of having such a person in his commune.

"Yes, I read about it. How is she?" I asked with concern.

"She's in the county hospital. I've been to see her. She had a back injury, but she's already better. I was told that she could leave hospital pretty soon."

"Good! You must use her act to educate the young school graduates in your commune."

"Yes, we're proposing to the county Party committee that we do that. But, Secretary Cheng, won't you be

coming over soon to inspect our preparation work for ploughing?"

"Yes, I'll be over in a day or two. See you then." I rang off.

It was quite certain that the young girl who had dashed out so boldly in spite of the danger was none other than the Nan-nan who had been carried in a bamboo basket on horseback during the war.

I took up the paper with the intention of finishing the article, but I could no longer concentrate on it. The lines of print ran together before my eyes, congealing finally into a mass of clouds and smoke. The guns of the Huai-Hai battlefield boomed once again in my ears. It seemed as though I was back again in the days of the revolutionary war when Nan-nan was born...

In the autumn of 1948, our column was ordered to take part in the Huai-Hai campaign and advanced to the northern Kiangsu front from southern Anhwei. As comrade Fang Wei, the wife of our regimental commissar Chi, was pregnant and couldn't keep up with the troops, she stayed in Anhwei to keep up the struggle there. When we arrived in northern Kiangsu, I heard that Fang Wei had been surrounded by a Kuomintang landlord's armed forces when she was doing political work in a village. I went to break the news to Chi and found him bent over a map, pondering battle plans. He uttered a simple "oh." Then he straightened up slowly, his brows quivering a little. Looking out of the window, he said: "This was only to be expected. There are always sacrifices in revolution." And he bent over his work and went on with the battle plan again.

The Huai-Hai campaign lasted two months. Under the personal command of our great leader Chairman

Mao, we won a victory that shook the world. After the final battle in Chinglungchi district, I hurried back with Chi from the battlefield, which had still not been completely cleared, to our regimental headquarters. On the way, Chi hummed softly, unable to suppress the happiness and excitement of victory. As we walked, his attention was arrested by something and he stopped dead.

To our right, I saw Liu, a young messenger from the divisional headquarters, approaching in the company of a woman in civilian clothes. He was leading a horse loaded with luggage on one side and a bamboo basket on the other.

I looked closely at the woman comrade and cried out in astonishment: "Comrade Fang Wei!"

Apparently, Chi had recognized her first, for the corners of his tightly closed mouth had begun to quiver.

"Chi! Cheng!" she addressed us first. It really was Fang Wei. She looked lean and sunburnt, but on her face was a look of joy.

As she came up, Chi took her hand, grasped it tightly and said: "So, you haven't yet made the final sacrifice for the revolution?"

"No, the people in the base areas in southwestern Anhwei protected me. . . ." So excited was Fang Wei that she could hardly finish a sentence. Her eyes glistened with tears.

"Commissar Chi!" the messenger Liu saluted and said, "the divisional commander got news of Comrade Fang Wei four days ago and ordered me to escort her back here."

"Thank you so much, we've given you a lot of trouble." Pointing at the bamboo basket on the horse's

back, Chi asked: "What's in there?"

"Your daughter!" answered Fang Wei proudly.

As we drew nearer, we saw the bamboo basket was cushioned with a cotton pad on which lay a pale baby, sound asleep.

Chi looked at his child and his eyes became moist with tears.

"How old is she?"

"Three months."

"What's her name?"

"My pet name for her is Nan-nan.*"

"Why?" asked Chi.

"When the village was surrounded, the villagers gave me cover while I got away. I took shelter in the mountain gully where our troops used to be stationed. A few days later, the baby was born. I was in poor health and my milk soon dried up. Sweet potatoes brought by the villagers and pumpkins left behind by our troops fed us both. I thought that since she had tasted pumpkins so soon after she was born, her name should be Nan-nan." As she was speaking, she took a small packet from her pocket. "See, I've brought back some pumpkin seeds!"

Chi took the packet, looked at the big pumpkin seeds and asked me: "Cheng, do you remember these? They are the Yen-an seeds!"

"How could I forget them? Everything from Yen-an is deeply rooted in my heart!" Looking at the tiny face of the baby in the basket, I said: "This is also a Yen-an seed!"

* Pumpkin.

"Yes, you're quite right. She's a Yen-an seed. She must carry on the Yen-an revolutionary spirit!"

That must be why she was later given the name Yen-feng — the wind from Yen-an.

Now, more than twenty years had passed. From the past of the older generation to the emergence of the younger, from a baby in that bamboo basket on the horse to the description in today's paper, how much loving care must have been given to this seed before it put forth sprouts, grew up and bore fruit!

I decided to go to the county hospital to see her the next day.

2

The next morning, I went to Ward Four in the county hospital. I was just going to push open the door when a man in his sixties beckoned me over to where he was sitting in the corridor outside the ward. As I approached he asked:

"Have you come to see Yen-feng?"

"How did you guess?" I couldn't help feeling surprised.

"Are you a reporter?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I've met several of them here, some from the county paper and some from the county broadcasting station." The elderly man filled up his long-stemmed pipe as he spoke.

"So you think I look like a reporter too?" I asked with interest.

"Just about, only you look a bit old."

I burst out laughing, and taking off my cap to scratch my head, which already had quite a few white hairs, I said, "Then, I'm an old reporter!"

"Yen-feng's asleep. She's lost a lot of weight lately. Let her have a little more rest." His voice was full of affection.

"All right, we can have a talk." I sat down on the long bench and started to size this elderly man up. He wore a jacket lined with goatskin, his hair was silvery white but his ruddy face glowed. It was the face of a labouring peasant, well seasoned by wind and frost. He was smoking. A carter's whip was propped up beside him.

"Uncle, you are —"

"My name is Tien. I'm in the same team as Yen-feng. She's coming out of hospital this afternoon. I'm here to take her home."

"Uncle Tien, since you say I'm a reporter, let me get some information from you!" I wanted to take this opportunity to have a chat with him.

The old man smiled and said, still smoking his pipe: "I've already been pumped dry. A few days ago, when I came to see Yen-feng, I met a reporter — he was wearing glasses, that one — who had come to get information from her. I don't know whether he works with you or not. Since Yen-feng wouldn't tell him her story, he came to ask me about it. I told him: Don't just write about how she saved someone. Come to Chunfengyu and see more people. You should write about how she studied Chairman Mao's works, how she trusted us poor and lower-middle peasants, and how our words went deep in her heart and strengthened her. We used to

say: The pines towering up to a thousand feet do not grow in a day. Yen-feng, this young seedling, has been growing up on our soil in Chunfengyu Commune."

"Well said, Uncle Tien." I felt he was no ordinary person.

The door of the ward flew open and out ran a round-faced young girl with short plaits.

"Uncle!" she greeted Uncle Tien cheerfully.

"Are you quite well now, child?"

"Uncle, look!" She bent her back and stretched out her arms. "I could do thirty strokes in one stretch."

"Don't push yourself too far! Whatever you say, we won't let you use the hammer any more!"

"That won't do! Aren't you always telling me that a good knife can be ground, and a good smith tests his iron? If a knock from a stone makes me soft, am I still like the poor and lower-middle peasants?"

"You certainly know how to stump me with my own words," Uncle Tien said, pointing at the young girl with his long-stemmed pipe.

Listening to this conversation between the old man and the young woman, I knew this really was Yen-feng, or Nan-nan of all those years ago. She had her father's eyes.

When she turned around and saw me, she was surprised.

"Yen-feng, do you recognize me?" I asked, smiling.

"No. . . ." She gazed at me attentively, shaking her head a little. But when I took off my cap, revealing a scar on my forehead, she cried out: "Oh! you . . . aren't you Uncle Cheng?"

Not waiting for an answer, she turned, ran into the ward and brought back an old military knapsack from

which she took out something wrapped in red cloth. Opening it, we found a mimeographed copy of Chairman Mao's work, "On the Chungking Negotiations." My heart warmed at the sight of this little pamphlet. From between its pages she took out a photo yellow with age.

"Look!" She held it before me.

In the picture were several people, among them her parents and myself, wearing the armbands of the Eighth Route Army. The group photograph had been taken against the backdrop of Paotashan Mountain in Yen-an. In 1945, when her parents and I were about to go south with the troops, a reporter from the *Liberation Daily* had taken the picture for us before we left Yen-an.

"Hah, twenty-five or twenty-six years have gone by! We were as young then as you are now, but these days we're getting old," said I, half joking, half in earnest.

"A revolutionary's spirit doesn't age." Although we had just met, Yen-feng seemed quite at ease with me as if she knew me well. "Uncle, my parents often talked about you. Only they didn't know where you were." Having said this, she introduced me to Uncle Tien.

I grasped his hand and said: "We've already met!" Uncle Tien laughed.

I took the little mimeographed pamphlet from Yen-feng, stroking its familiar cover and much-thumbed page corners, my thoughts running wild.

"My father gave it to me before I came to the countryside, Uncle Cheng. I've kept it with me all the time." As she spoke, she turned the pages, took out a flat red paper packet and opened it, "Look!"

There were two pumpkin seeds inside.

"My father kept them for twenty years." Yen-feng, sitting between Uncle Tien and me, began to tell us the story of the precious gifts.

It was all so familiar to me but I felt it touched my heart! It had been a period sparkling with life, a period that could never be forgotten. . . .

In 1942, during the hardest days of the Anti-Japanese War, Yen-feng's parents and I were in Yen-an where Chairman Mao himself was. In order that we might conquer difficulties and overcome the enemy encirclement and blockade, Chairman Mao called on us to promote production by self-reliance. In the Liberated Areas, people carried out large-scale production campaigns with tremendous enthusiasm. Chairman Mao was busy day and night to save the Chinese nation from destruction. Although very much occupied, he himself took part in productive labour. We were stationed then near the Central Guards Regiment. In the autumn of 1943, this regiment gave our unit a small packet of pumpkin seeds, telling us that they were from the pumpkins planted by Chairman Mao himself. The next spring, we planted them on the mountainside. Our comrades tended the plants with special devotion and care, and in autumn we harvested many large, round pumpkins. The year after that, all the soldiers in our unit tasted these very special pumpkins.

In 1945, when Yen-feng's parents and I were preparing to go south with the troops, Chairman Mao gave a report, "On the Chungking Negotiations." He said: **"We Communists are like seeds and the people are like the soil. Wherever we go, we must unite with the people, take root and blossom among them."** He also said:

“Hard work is like a load placed before us, challenging us to shoulder it.” Commissar Chi kept the mimeographed copy of Chairman Mao’s talk in his knapsack and carried it around with him all the time. How often we studied it together!

We were sad to leave Yen-an. Everyone wanted to take something with him as a souvenir. Chi wrapped up some pumpkin seeds, saying: “Chairman Mao has taught us that we must, like seeds, take root and blossom among the people. I’ll take with me a packet of seeds from plants tended by Chairman Mao himself.”

Later on, when we were fighting a guerrilla war in southern Anhwei, we planted these seeds in the mountains. Then we went to take part in the Huai-Hai campaign in the autumn of 1948, before the pumpkins could be harvested. Later they became the food on which Yen-feng’s mother lived.

Looking at the mimeographed copy of Chairman Mao’s work, the seeds and the photo, I understood the profundity of the lesson which my old comrade-in-arms was passing on to the younger generation.

I wrapped all the things up and said to Yen-feng, “Your father’s gifts are full of significance!”

“Yes, he wants me to be a seed of the revolution!” answered Yen-feng with quiet firmness.

“Yen-feng has lived up to the expectations of the older generation of revolutionaries. She has tempered herself very well. Last month, at a branch meeting she was unanimously accepted as a member of the Communist Party. As her sponsor, I was very happy about it,” Uncle Tien said warmly.

Watching Yen-feng’s face, which was a bit pale from her stay in the hospital, my thoughts ran back to that

pale little face in the bamboo basket on the horse. . . .
How time had flown!

3

Amid loud cracks, a rubber-tyred cart drawn by a horse and two mules was moving rapidly along the highway to Hungchi Commune from the county town.

That afternoon, when Uncle Tien drove Yen-feng back to Chunfengyu, I decided to take a lift with them to Hungchi Commune so that I might have another talk with Yen-feng.

"You may get a bit shaken up on my cart, Secretary Cheng!" warned Uncle Tien, smiling at me as he raised his long whip.

"That'll be good for me. Sitting on a chair all day makes my bones soft. Go ahead. I'll hold tight, I promise," I called back.

In the sun, Yen-feng's face took on a better colour. I felt a deep satisfaction on seeing how the child of my old comrades-in-arms had grown up.

"Tell me, Yen-feng, what has impressed you most in these years you've spent in the countryside?" I asked.

"Most of all? I can't say at the moment." Looking at Uncle Tien's back, she added: "I'm very much impressed with Uncle Tien. You only knew how I tried to save someone, you haven't heard what Uncle Tien has done!"

The hoofs of the horse and the mules clattered on the gravel road and the cart shook gently. Yen-feng,

her eyes fixed on the way before her, began her recollections:

Three years ago, when Dad gave me these precious gifts, I thought that I was a Yenan seed and that I would surely put forth revolutionary blossoms. I came to Chunfengyu with several other Red Guards. We were in high spirits. The evening of our arrival, I told Uncle Tien, our host, about the presents. Doing farm work, I tried to pick the heaviest and most troublesome jobs and to put up a better show than the others. But before long I became down-hearted. Fatigue was one problem. Every night when I lay on the *kang*,* my legs and my back ached so much I didn't feel like moving any more. The other thing was that life seemed so monotonous. When I first arrived, everything was new and interesting. But now I saw the sun rising over the hills in the east every day and setting behind the western hills each evening. The thatched cottages and the *kang* were always the same at home, and so were the fields and rocky hills outside. A fellow called Tu, who was sent back to the village from outside, saw a lot of us young school graduates. Sometimes he mouthed things like: "It's good that educated youth should come to the countryside." But if no one else was around, he would show his "concern" for us by saying: "It's good that you should come to the countryside, but all that you have learned in over ten years at school is going to waste. What a pity that you have to stay here your whole life digging up clods of soil." His words

* An earthen or brick bed heated by flues, widely used in northern China.