A CHINESE NOVEL

STORMY YEARS

Sun Li

Stormy Years

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
BEIJING

First Edition 1982

Translated by
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ISBN 0-8351-0996-8

Published by the Foreign Languages Press
24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing, China

Printed by the Foreign Languages Printing House
19 West Chegongzhuang Road, Beijing, China

Distributed by China Publications Centre (Guoji Shudian)
P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

Author's Preface

In the autumn of 1937 the Japanese imperialists invaded North China. My home was in the Central Hebei plain and I saw for myself how the people there, led by the Chinese Communist Party, rose up in their fury to launch the great resistance movement.

The people everywhere gave an immediate, selfless, stupendous response to the call for resistance.

The autumn and winter of 1937 were a period of mobilization and organization. The initial panic in the villages was overcome by systematic work of this kind. Then the people, all of one mind, pulled together and brought their strength into full play to inflict heavy blows on the invaders.

From its birth in 1921 the Chinese Communist Party exercised a powerful political influence in North China, and from this time on it had firm bases in the villagers. Before the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japan the Party had the foresight to strengthen the work in this region.

When my home town was invaded by the Japanese, the fine qualities of my people were clearly brought home to me. The eight years of the War of Resistance deepened my understanding of the Chinese peasantry's fortitude and capacity for hard work. With infinite courage, resourcefulness and optimism they threw themselves into the sacred War of Resistance. They had complete faith in their ultimate victory. Their confidence grew from day to day during the war.

The great War of Resistance Against Japan not only aroused our people and made them rise up, but also spread new ideas far and wide and brought forth a new culture.

This period deepened my love for my country and my people, their new moral standards and customs, each blade of grass of my home. All these had passed the cruel test of the war and triumphantly proved that they could not be overcome.

The profound impression all this made upon me pervaded and shaped my feelings.

So in 1950, when I was working for a Tianjin newspaper and had relatively quiet conditions in which to write, I knew more or less what I wanted to describe in my novel. Without any definite plan or carefully worked out plot, I set about writing, and the newspaper published each chapter as it was finished. The wartime happenings simply flowed from my pen.

Readers can see that the events of the first two dozen chapters seem to shape themselves. They are absolutely true to life, a faithful record of the life and feelings of people at that time.

Nothing has been exaggerated. Impressions from life combined and merged to make up the incidents of *Stormy Years*.

Let me repeat: The period of the War of Resistance deepened my love for my country and my people, for the work they did and the fine qualities they displayed.

Most of all I loved the splendid optimism they showed at all times. This deserves the name revolutionary optimism.

My story naturally reflects this spirit. For this was what made the deepest impression on me, what encouraged me most forcefully to write.

Owing to my limited experience of life and of writing and the lack of an overall plan, the construction of my novel is

weak in many places, its range is too narrow and it has many other faults.

I hope generous readers will help me with their criticism.

September 1963, Tianjin

Principal Characters

Mangzhong, hired hand, who later joined the People's Defence Corps

Chun'er, Mangzhong's sweetheart and chairman of Ziwuzhen's Women's National Salvation Association

Old Chang, hired hand, chairman of Ziwuzhen's Workers' Union and later village head

Old Wen, hired hand, who later joined the People's Defence Corps

Gao Qingshan, commander of the Seventh Detachment of the People's Defence Corps

Gao Xiang, political commissar of the Seventh Detachment of the People's Defence Corps

Qiufen, Gao Qingshan's wife

Gao Sihai, Gao Qingshan's father

Li Peizhong, head of Gaoyang County

Bian Ji, propaganda chief of Five-dragon Temple's Peasants' Resistance Association, who later joined the People's Defence Corps

Wu Dayin, Qiufen and Chun'er's father

One-eyed Tian, landlord in Ziwuzhen

Old Jiang, One-eyed Tian's underling

Gao Ba, brigand regiment commander

Su'er, Gao Ba's wife

Tian Yaowu, One-eyed Tian's son and bogus district head

About the Author

SUN LI was born in 1913 in the Hebei countryside. After finishing high school he went to Beijing but failed to find a steady job and had a hard time. During his wanderings from place to place he wrote some reviews and had a few poems published. Soon after the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japan he worked in an anti-Japanese base in the Shanxi-Qahar-Hebei area. In 1939 he was transferred to the Fuping mountain district, where he served as a correspondent and editor, taught literature and started writing stories. In 1943 he worked and studied in the Literature Department of the Lu Xun Academy of Art in Yan'an. There he wrote his famous short story *Lotus Creek.*

After the Japanese surrender he returned to the Hebei plain and took part in the land reform. Following the liberation of Tianjin in 1949, he became the editor of the literary supplement of the *Tianjin Daily.* He is now on the board of the Union of Chinese Writers, vice-chairman of the Tianjin Branch of the Writers' Union, and editor of the literary monthly *Xingang.*

Apart from his full-length novel *Stormy Years,* he has written a short novel *The Blacksmith and the Carpenter,* a collection of short stories entitled *A Village Song* and a selection of proses *Tales of Baiyangdian.* Some of his works have been translated and well received by readers abroad.

I

A great drought gripped the central Hebei plain all the spring and summer of 1937. That May the River Hutuo dried up and hot winds, laden with swirling sand, blasted the russet knot-grass and foxtails along its banks. Wild flowers opened at night to wither away the next day. Dry as it was, however, the peasants foresaw a bad flood later on in the year. But the rain held off right up to early July, when merchants from Beijing and Baoding coming home to spend the summer brought the villagers news of the Japanese invasion of northern China.

The peasants of Ziwuzhen used to rest at noon in the shade of trees on the big dike north of the village. Under a great elm at a curve in the dike two girls, sitting face to face, were spinning yarn. Judging by their clothes and appearance they were sisters, one in her mid-teens, the other in her late twenties. The elder was rather pale, her face somewhat care-worn. The younger, on the other hand, seemed bubbling over with optimism and enthusiasm.

The leaves above their heads were utterly still. Cicadas were shrilling. From time to time caterpillar droppings fell to the ground. Far off a covered cart came into sight and the girls caught glimpses of its red mudguards and wheels behind crops golden and green, some high, some low. Two large mules were pulling the cart at a spanking pace, swishing their tails in the broiling noonday sun.

The sisters turned to look.

"Someone's coming home," said the elder.

"Let's see if it's my brother-in-law." The younger sprang to her feet.

"Don't you miss our dad?"

"I miss them all, but missing them won't bring them back." She stood on tiptoe, straining her eyes, then sat down abruptly and picked up her spindle again.

"What a let-down!" she grumbled. "It's One-eyed Tian's carriage bringing that son of his back from Baoding. None of *our* men ever come back. I wonder if one of them will come this year?"

The cart bowled past them to the village gate and Old Chang, the carter, jumped down from one shaft to flourish his long, red-tasselled whip and called out a cheerful greeting. His young master, of whom nothing but one ankle in black silk hose could be seen, peered out to look at the girls, who bent their heads.

The sisters' name was Wu. The elder was called Qiufen, the younger Chun'er. The elder had married into a family at Five-dragon Temple.

Five-dragon Temple was a small village on the south bank of the Hutuo, where the river raging down from the southwest made a sharp, precipitate turn. The villagers had built a high dike reinforced with wooden piles at this bend, for it was a notoriously dangerous stretch.

Many a time flood waters had swamped the village. Sometimes they swept everything away, leaving only a gaping pit. Sometimes they silted the whole place up with sand as high as the roof tops. But the little village never gave in to the flood. As soon as gongs sounded the warning, all the men and women, old and young, rushed out to the dike. They battled to stop the breach with anything that came to hand, taking doors and window-frames, rafters and tiles from their

houses. Women lugged over cases, chests, tables and chairs, or even brought along their bedding and mats. One year, it was said, they did all they could, used everything there was, but still failed to stop the breach. Then five young fellows jumped into the angry waters and threw themselves into the gap, yelling to the others to shovel earth over them — and so the dike was saved!

The villagers built a large temple to these men who had saved their lives and property. It was called Five-dragon Temple. As the years went by, that became the name of the village.

This small village, seemingly so snug in the plain, was exposed to the fury of the elements. And life was so hard that for years there had been very little increase in the population or the number of households.

Each time their houses were washed away by the flood, without waiting for the waters to subside completely the villagers helped each other to bake bricks and tiles, fell timber and saw wood to start rebuilding. Foundations were laid more firmly, walls piled thicker, the new homes made higher than the ones swept away. They built no courtyard walls or outhouses, just single rooms facing south. From a distance the place seemed a cluster of little towers, for high steps led up to each door and entering a house from the yard was like going upstairs.

Qiufen's father-in-law, Gao Sihai, was a man of sixty. People in these parts were music-lovers, and while still in split-bottomed pants he had learned to play the flute, soon becoming an adept. The sound of his flute carried ten *li** or more, and the boatmen who heard it at night as they plied up or down the Hutuo forgot the hardships and fatigues of their

* One *li* is equal to half a kilometre or roughly one-third of a mile.

journey. His flute could draw the audience away from an opera. Buddhists or Taoists, who were chanting masses, were reduced by it to abject, crest-fallen silence.

Old Gao was not merely a fine flutist but an enterprising, cheerful character, the organizer of most village activities.

Ten years earlier there had been a peasants' uprising here. It spread from Gaoyang and Lixian until all the villagers brought out red flags and held meetings in the fields. That was the first appearance, stirring and splendid, of the red flag on this plain!

Gao Sihai, his eighteen-year-old son Qingshan and Qiufen, newly come to their house as a bride of seventeen, all took part in the uprising. Because of his courage, Qingshan became one of the leaders.

But in no more than a matter of days the uprising was defeated. One sultry day the peasant insurgents were forced back to the dike where, planting their red flag on Five-dragon Temple, they put up a last desperate stand, in the course of which Qingshan was wounded. That evening Old Gao got a friend to hide his son in his sampan and carry him to safety along with Gao Xiang, a middle-school student from their village.

Because of the confusion after the fighting, only two people saw Qingshan off. His father called through the window of the sampan:

"So long! Once safely away, you'll make shift somehow. Let those devils wait!"

He shoved the boat off, then turned back to help the peasants who had struggled and lost with them and now must bury their comrades shot down in the fields.

The other person seeing Qingshan off was his seventeen-year-old wife Qiufen. While father and son were talking, she stood a little way up the dike embankment. Black clouds from

the western hills had covered half the stars in the sky, and she was almost invisible in the dark. The sampan was nosing out into the river before she ran down, snatched a package from her pocket and tossed it neatly under the awning. Qingshan picked it up and leaned out to call her name.

Qiufen said nothing, just walked level with the boat along the dike. The storm broke. Raindrops as large as copper coins pelted thick and fast on the water. A northwest wind was helping the sampan along. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled. The lurid light illumined the girl distinctly as she rolled up her trouser legs, pulled a ragged length of sacking over her head, and followed the small boat for a good ten *li*.

Wind and rain beat down on the seeds of revolution, burying them deep in the earth to wait for spring, when storm clouds would gather again....

For nearly ten years there was no news of Qingshan. They did not know whether he were alive or dead. Then the student who had escaped with him was arrested in a factory in Shanghai. On his way to prison in Beiping the previous year, he had managed to send word that Qingshan had gone to Jiangxi.

All the land Old Gao owned was four *mu** on the flats. In a good year this gave him some black soya beans. He built himself a hut on the dike near the ferry, fixed up an awning before it, and sold tea and noodles here.

Qiufen made the noodles, the old man plied the bellows. He fetched water all the way from the village wells and sold it to passers-by, getting boatmen to bring him back cheap coal from Zhengding. In this way the two of them managed to make a living.

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* One *mu* is equal to one-fifteenth of a hectare or roughly one-sixth of an acre.

Qiufen grew vegetables round their hut. After dusk she put a lamp in the small window facing south to guide the boats. On a frame before the window she trained loofah gourds and the loofahs, when full grown, hung down through the thick leaves nearly to the ground. At the southwest corner, overlooking the river, she planted a row of sunflowers, ready to welcome wanderers far from home....

In winter and spring each year the river dried up and the ferry service stopped. Then Qiufen begged her father-in-law to water her plants while she went back to Ziwuzhen to help her younger sister spin and weave.

2

Ziwuzhen, just across the river from Five-dragon Temple, was very rarely flooded. Most of the rich loam east and north of the village was given over to irrigated fields which produced at least two and sometimes three crops a year. It was just the reverse of Five-dragon Temple with its sandy, alkaline flats and harvests so often spoiled by flood or drought.

All the landlords in Ziwuzhen had the surname Tian. The village head, known as the "boss" or One-eyed Tian, had lost an eye the year of the uprising, when he helped the county militia to hunt down the peasants. He owned nearly four hundred *mu* of good irrigated land and employed half a dozen farm hands. His large compound at the north end of the village included a threshing-floor and several courtyards. The family's living quarters on the left, divided into three courtyards, were hideous grey, brick buildings of fairly recent construction. By the threshing-floor on the right were the farm hands' quarters, the stable, mill, pigsty and poultry house. Poplars, weeping willows, peach, apricot and sweet cedrela

trees grew inside the mud wall, against which were stacked piles of wheat, millet and sorghum stalks accumulated over the years. Half a dozen large mules were tethered in the shade of the trees, and on the threshing-floor were several big stone rollers.

Young Mangzhong, one of the hired hands, was chopping up straw in the shade of a willow with Old Wen, the handyman. Fragments of straw were flying in all directions, and soon they had stacked quite a pile. A hen with feathered legs was pecking for food nearby. Suddenly her wattles flushed and with a few squawks she laid an egg, which was soon buried in the straw.

The cart lumbered through the gate and Old Chang, cracking his whip a couple of times, strode on to the threshing-floor. As he hooked his whip on to the cart, Tian Yaowu alighted and brushed off his clothes. Old Chang carried the young master's luggage into the inner courtyard while Mangzhong put down his chopper, ran over to unharness the mules and led them to the well outside to be watered. Old Wen started unhitching the harness.

"Don't put that away!" Mrs. Tian, dressed in white linen, had come out to make sure that nothing had been left on the cart. "Someone will have to fetch Peizhong back tomorrow. What other daughter-in-law gives herself such airs? She won't come back unless we send to fetch her."

She examined the nesting-boxes at the foot of the east wall and called to Mangzhong, who was leading back the mules:

"I told you to keep an eye on the hens. Where have they laid all their eggs?"

"It's too hot in those boxes," replied the lad promptly. "They look for somewhere cool. There's no keeping track of them."

"Always some excuse, haven't you! I want you to buy some meat now. When you come back you must search till you find all the eggs." With this parting thrust, she went back to the house.

A family reunion! Like a good son, Tian Yaowu gave his father and mother lengths of contraband Japanese silk bought in Beiping. He had other things, too, never seen before in these parts: a thermos flask, electric torch and safety razor. He spread out a whole set of law books on the table, having specialized in law at Chaoyang University in Beiping. In his very first year there he started apeing officials, wearing a long gown, short black jacket, silk socks and satin slippers, playing mahjong or bringing prostitutes into the hostel. The eve of his graduation coincided with the Japanese threat to North China, and the atmosphere in Beiping became tense. The December 9th Movement* made most students more realistic: some did propaganda work among the troops, others went home to the country to organize the peasants. Tian Yaowu took no interest in such activities, though, devoting all his energy to finding an official position. Failing in this, he had no choice after his graduation but to go home.

His father consoled him, saying:

"If you can land an official job, so much the better. If not, we can afford to keep you at home. I put you through college to learn how to draw up petitions and charges. As long as we can hold on to our property, we'll be all right."

That evening saw a small celebration too in the outhouse.

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* This refers to the patriotic demonstration held by students in Beiping under the leadership of the Communist Party on December 9, 1935 with the slogans, "End the civil war and unite to resist foreign aggression!" and "Down with Japanese imperialism!" After this, the Anti-Japanese United Front proposed by the Communist Party became the openly advocated policy of all patriotic people.