



WU YUN-TO

SON OF THE  
WORKING CLASS

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**The Autobiography of Wu Yun-to**

**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS  
PEKING 1956**

TRANSLATED BY  
HUANG PIN-CHANG  
AND  
TANG SHENG

WOODCUT ON COVER BY  
LI HUA

*Printed in the People's Republic of China*

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## CHILDHOOD

I was born and brought up in a mining district.

Our native village, as father told us, was in Hupeh in Central China. We were extremely poor; we had no land, hardly even a roof over our heads. My grandparents died early, leaving father, an orphan boy, to drift from place to place, working sometimes as an apprentice to shopkeepers and sometimes as a coolie to make a bare living. At Pinghsiang, a Kiangsi mining town hemmed in by hills, my father finally settled down as a bookkeeper on a very small salary.

The Pinghsiang coal-mine was then the largest of its kind south of the Yangtse. The miners used to call it Anyuan Hill. Dense woods grew on and around the hill, while tall chimneys, towering over the hillsides, day and night belched thick smoke which left a coat of grime on the vegetation far and near.

We lived in a shanty near a pit-head at the foot of the hill. As a boy, I looked upon the mine as a mysterious place. I heard all sorts of tales about it. The older people said that there was treasure hidden in it — happy would be those who could get it. Others said that down the mine perpetual darkness reigned; the day when the sun shed its lustre into those dark

caverns would see an end to the sufferings of the poor. These sayings roused my curiosity, and I wondered whether I could some day go down and find out the truth for myself.

Mother, however, always warned me: "Little boys," she would say, "mustn't go down the shafts. If you do, you won't be able to get out again."

All this puzzled me no end. All day long I used to loiter about the coal-field, wondering what on earth all the strange objects that met my eyes everywhere were. I was as inquisitive as a young bird out of its nest for the first time. Small as I was, I badly wanted to have a clear understanding of the things around me.

Along the road not far from our house, tubs used to pass full of coal on their way from the shaft to be washed. I liked to imitate the workers, and often got up to all kinds of pranks. Sometimes I helped the workers push the tubs, puffing and blowing till the sweat poured off me. Sometimes I clambered on to the empty tubs without being noticed, smearing myself all over with coal-dust and grease. Once I saw a steeple-jack climbing a tall chimney, to clean it or something, and nothing would satisfy me but to have a go too. I did it, too, right to the top, gingerly feeling for each rung, but only at the cost of a torn jacket and a face thick with soot. When I got home, mother was furious at the state I was in, and father scolded her for not being strict enough with me.

One day father bought a duck and tied it to a post in the shed of our compound. I happened to hear

my older brother say that ducks could swim and wouldn't sink in water, so I decided to try. Without mother's knowing it, I took the duck in my arms, ran to the pool near the pit-head and threw it in.

This pool was a cement affair, filled with hot water from the power station. From a big, long pipe water gushed out and fell with a thunderous roar into the pool. The moment the duck touched the water it gave a wild squawk, scuttled out and started dashing all over the place looking for a safe spot. Father soon found out what I was doing. He dragged me home and gave me a sound thrashing. I couldn't see the justice of that, and couldn't help asking: "What have I done wrong? I only wanted to know whether a duck could swim or not?"

One evening, father came home from work with a new satchel and a primer. Calling me to his side he said, "You've hung around long enough. A proper naughty boy you are. You're seven this year and old enough to go to school. Tomorrow you'll go to Old Master Hu's."

I could hardly contain myself for joy. I had long envied my brothers who were at the primary school. But father wouldn't let me go to the same school as them.

"You need somebody strict over you," he said. That's what he thought of me.

The next day mother helped me on with a new jacket. When everything was ready, she asked Auntie Chang, our neighbour, to take me to the old master's house.

Seeing that a new pupil had come, Old Master Hu hastily put on a long gown and sat down pompously at a table, waiting for us to pay our respects.

"Kotow to your teacher, quick!" said Auntie Chang.

"Why? It's not New Year yet."

Without another word, Auntie Chang caught hold of me and forced me to kotow three times to my new teacher.

I soon found it very dull and boring at Master Hu's. I recited the Chinese classics, but didn't understand a word of it. The master never explained anything, and when I asked a question, he simply stared me into silence.

The pit-head was surrounded by a wall. As I passed by it every day on my way to school, I could hear the humming of machinery inside. Somehow or other, I could not help hanging back for a few minutes, wondering all the time what the machines looked like and why they made such a queer noise. I felt strongly tempted to go and see for myself.

One morning, my satchel slung over my shoulder as usual, I set out for Old Master Hu's. I didn't go to school that day, but went up the hill, hid my satchel among the dense leaves of a tree, and hurriedly ran to the mine. Dodging the guard on duty, I managed to slip in through the gate.

Making straight for the rumbling sound of the machinery, I found myself in the blower room. There I saw a huge air compressor, its big wheels gleaming as they whirled round at speed. I walked towards

the railing that fenced it in and gazed at it enraptured.

Suddenly I felt someone gripping my arm.

"What are you doing here, sonny?"

Startled as if from a dream, I turned round and saw one of the workers standing over me. His smiling face, however, put me at my ease.

"Tell me, sir," I asked, "where is the man who makes this thing move? I can't see a sign of him."

"Eh, what's that — the man who makes the thing move?" repeated the workman, evidently puzzled by my question. As he spoke, he wiped his oily hands with some cotton waste and patted my shoulders. Then it dawned on him what I meant.

"You stupid," said he, with a grin. "It's not a man that makes the machine move, but steam. Understand?"

When he saw I was a bit disappointed, he added sympathetically, "Never mind, sonny, you'll understand when you grow up. If it needed a man to push it and make it move, it wouldn't be a machine. A machine is something men make to work for them."

From that time on I looked upon machines as the most wonderful things in the world. Working day and night, they never seemed to get tired or hungry. What struck me even more was that there were workers who made the machines and made them do all kinds of work. How wonderful it must be to be a worker like that! The idea thrilled me and it became the dream of my life to become a mechanic.

I loathed more than ever sitting in Old Master Hu's cold, dreary study, chanting my lessons, as it

were, without understanding a word of them. I longed to be by the side of the machines. Every morning I hung my satchel on a tree and embarked on new adventures, returning home every evening at the usual hour with my little head stuffed with new things. I was obsessed by machines, lingering by them in the day-time and dreaming about them at night. It didn't take long for mother to find out what I had been up to, and she again asked Auntie Chang to take me to Old Master Hu's.

"What have you been doing these days?" asked the old master.

"Seeing machines," I replied.

"Time you knew better then. I'll teach you." And he gave my right ear a vicious tweak and held it so tight that I could not free myself. It hurt so much that I held on to his legs and swung round him.

"What's wrong with looking at machines?" I said to myself. "Why should he go for me?"

I was so angry that I could not eat anything when I returned home that evening.

"What's the matter with your ear?" asked father.

"The master pinched me."

"What for?"

"For playing truant," mother interposed.

"I didn't run away from school," I said, feeling that mother wasn't being fair. "I went to see machines."

"So you went to see machines instead of going to school," said father. "Serve you right!"

My swollen ear ached all night, despite mother's

efforts to soothe it by applying a cold towel. I slept on my left side, and never gave a sign of the pain I was in. The next day, father himself took me to Old Master Hu's.

"Master Hu," said my father, "I know this boy of mine is very naughty, and you must be strict with him. But when you tweak his ears, tweak them both. Doesn't look nice, going about with ears of two different sizes, does it?"

"All right," said the old master in a cold, placid voice. "Tell him not to come again, that's all."

From that day I stopped taking lessons at Old Master Hu's. As it was in the middle of term, I couldn't go to school anywhere else. Mother was rather worried.

"If you keep on like this, I don't know what'll become of you," she used to say.

"Don't worry, mum. I want to become a worker, and make and work on machines when I grow up."

So I went on spending my time round the pit-head, hanging about the electric loco depot, tub yard, power station, blower room, boiler room and the winch room. Sometimes I hung about the workshops all day long, even forgetting to go home for meals.

My father had an old friend named Mao, who worked in the repair shop. He had been a turner for years. One day, I pleaded with him to show me round the shop.

"All right," he said, "but promise you'll be a good boy."

"I promise. Take me along, please."

Inside the repair shop, I saw rows of lathes, planing and drilling machines and many other kinds of machine tools, all of them quite different from anything I had ever seen before. Overhead cranes carrying heavy loads moved to and fro. Not only were all the repairs done in this shop, but they made stuff as well. I had seen blowers and generators before, but couldn't make out why they twirled the way they did. Here in the repair shop, I could see how the machines worked. As the lathes turned, they pared and trimmed the billets into shiny spare parts. In the forging shop, I saw cranes moving red-hot steel from the furnace to the steam hammer to be wrought into shape. When the hammer fell, sparks flew off in all directions. It looked like a display of fireworks, only far more beautiful to my eyes. It was fascinating to see the steel becoming so pliant and obedient. I couldn't help wondering if I should ever be able to work at these machines. I wished I could grow faster and become a worker too.

On one side of the shop there were workers sharpening cutting tools on the emery-wheel. It only took a few minutes. At once I remembered an unhappy incident which made mother so angry: I'd blunted a kitchen knife trying to make a toy gun. Now I could easily sharpen it and make her happy.

The next day when I went to the workshop as usual I had the knife hidden inside my clothes. I waited till there was no one near me and took it out. But when I held it against the emery-wheel, it jerked out of my hand and missed my foot by a hair's



breadth. The shock made my hand tremble, and for a moment I stood there dazed.

Mao saw what had happened. He came over quickly, picked up the knife and had it sharpened for me.

"You mustn't play with the machinery," he said sternly. "If you don't behave yourself, I won't let you in again."

I was ready to pipe my eye. Then he stroked my head and said, "It's all right, sonny, but you're still too young...."

I had a great respect for Mao. People like him, able to control the machines at will, must be different from ordinary people. How many more years would it take me to be as clever as he?

Soon I got to know all the workers. They gave me small hammers, chisels and files. I treasured their presents, for I could see they hoped that one day I'd grow up to be a worker like themselves.

That autumn, I entered the primary school set up by the missionaries for the miners' children, and was put into the first form. Every day I went to school with my elder brothers, but somehow or other I just couldn't forget those machines.

Every day before classes we had prayers. Most of the boys could not stand them. So we knocked a hole in the wall of the back yard of the school, and used to slip out to play during prayer time. When it was time for classes we crept back again. Unfortunately this was found out. One day, the teacher responsible for discipline lay in wait for us by the hole with a