

MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE



Du Pengcheng

Defend YANAN

Yanan

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Chapter One

Yanan

1

THE Lüliang Mountains were still a mass of snow and ice in early March 1947. A howling north-west wind swirled in across the white misty peaks. The dull yellow rays of the sun shining through the bare branches of the trees cast mottled reflections on the snow. In the frigid ravines, big icicles hung like a curtain from the sides of the cliffs.

Long lines of soldiers, mounted men, animals laden with small cannon, moved across the mountain-tops and through the valleys, directly into the cutting gale. Men stuffed handfuls of snow into their mouths as they marched; some sucked small icicles chopped from the cliffsides with their bayonets. The soldiers had slept out in the snow the previous night; their grey cotton-padded uniforms, frozen stiff, crackled with every step they took.

This was a column (equivalent to an army) of the PLA — the People's Liberation Army. It had left central Shanxi Province under orders and was pushing west as fast as it could travel. Like the people's soldiers on every front, from the day the People's Liberation War began, these men had been fighting steadily for over eight months without a let-up. The battle they were hurrying to commence was going to prove much crueler than any they had previously

taken part in, and would be fought in much more desolate surroundings.

Rifles seldom leaving the men's shoulders, the horses never unsaddled, the column had been proceeding at a forced march for ten days. Now it had reached the east bank of the Yellow River.

On either side of the river rose towering cliffs. To the men who gazed up from the river's edge, the sky seemed a long stretch of fluttering ribbon. Perhaps if you stood on one of the cliff-tops the clouds would sail past your face; if you put out your hand you could touch the frozen blue heavens. In the chasm, the turbid yellow water churned huge chunks of ice and pounded them thunderously against the precipitous crags lining both banks. The river emitted a chill that was stifling as a fog. It crept into the marrow of your bones; it penetrated your very blood vessels. No wonder the old boatmen in these parts said you had to wear fleece-lined coats here even in summer!

The advance units of the column had assembled at the mouth of the gorge where it met the river, and began preparing to cross. Five or six American-made fighter planes, marked with the insignia of Chiang Kai-shek's KMT (Kuomintang) army, wheeled overhead, diving and strafing. Rifle fire and the smell of powder, added to the roar of the river, gave the impression that the battlefield was just ahead. The men were quiet, tense.

Chen Xingyun, brigade commander, rode his horse at a fast trot out of the mouth of the gorge, then reined sharply when he found the Yellow River in front of him. The big, sleek, chestnut stallion shook the sweat from its body, pricked up its ears, and whinnied at the sight of the tumbling water. Flicking its tail, the horse swayed its head and pawed

the ground with its front hoofs, as if it would clear the river in one leap the moment Chen slackened his reins.

Brigadier Chen jumped from his mount and handed the animal over to the messenger who had been following behind him. Walking forward a few paces, Chen cast a practised eye at the surrounding mountains. Then, with hands folded across his abdomen, he stood gazing at the turbulent waves.

Regimental chief of staff Wei Yi and battalion political instructor Zhang Pei walked out of the gorge to stand beside him.

Wei Yi and Zhang Pei made an interesting contrast. Square-faced and bushy-browed, the dignified Wei Yi was a credit to the big men of Shandong with his height, solidity and broad shoulders. Zhang Pei was a head shorter, frail, his face thin and pallid. The political instructor had been wounded in eight different engagements and had lost a lot of blood. He was not very strong. From the look of him it was hard to believe that he had been through ten years of battles.

"The number of times we've crossed this river, in one direction or the other! The Yellow River is our old friend." Chen spoke in the cheerful, direct tone of voice that Wei Yi and Zhang Pei were accustomed to hearing from him.

Wei Yi shrugged slightly. "The fact that we've had many meetings with the Yellow River is nothing to get annoyed about."

Chen laughed. "Who said it was?" He turned to Zhang Pei. "You're still the same. Never have much to say."

"My habits are hard to change," replied Zhang Pei, "and my progress is slow."

"Nonsense! You've got a fine disposition. The men in your battalion probably consider you a sort of mother. Right?"

Zhang Pei smiled. "I'd be happy if that's how they really felt about me."

"We've been driving ahead, day and night," said Chen. "Can you take it?"

"I've got no kick coming. I have a horse to ride. It's the men who have it tough."

The brigadier knew the answer very well, but he asked anyhow. "Wei Yi, does Zhang Pei ride that horse during the marches?"

Wei Yi was embarrassed. He hunched his shoulders a trifle. "He always gives it to one of the men with bad legs."

Chen frowned. "I'm tired of having to keep talking about this!"

Zhang Pei knew the reason for Chen's dissatisfaction. Half a month before, the political instructor had still been lying in a hospital bed. His chest wound had healed, but his health was very poor. When he heard that the army was going to fight on the west side of the Yellow River, Zhang Pei began pleading that he be allowed to return to his unit ahead of time. The day before the column set out, he arrived back at the battalion. During the past few days of forced march, every time they met Chen had said, "You're in rotten shape. Why were you in such a hurry to return?"

The five or six enemy planes, circling above the river, dropped a few clusters of small bombs, took a strafing run, then screamed up into the clouds, out of sight.

"Every minute counts," said Chen grimly. "The situation is serious in the north-west. Extremely serious."

He said that in other places the enemy had been forced to take the defensive. In Shandong and in the north-west provinces they were trying to retaliate with what they called "concentrated attacks on important points." They were attack-

ing. in Shandong with several hundred thousand men. "... Here in our north-west," Chen said, "the enemy has mustered over 300,000 troops, and is using two-thirds of them on the front lines. Warlord Hu Zongnan is moving north up the Xianyang-Yulin Highway and to its east with 150,000 men, with Yanan as their objective. In the west, Ma Hongkui and Ma Bufang, warlord allies of Chiang Kai-shek, are driving on our East Gansu Area and the Sanbian Area. In the north, Kuomintang troops in and around the city of Yulin are getting ready to attempt to take Suide and Mizhi — both county seats. ..."

Wei Yi and Zhang Pei observed the granite cast of Chen's features. That was how he always looked when they were about to launch an offensive.

The brigadier stared at the forbidding mountains on the other side of the river. "Comrades," he said in a low, heavy voice, "a real test lies ahead of us."

"Defend the Central Committee!"

"Defend Chairman Mao!"

"Defend Yanan!"

The shouts of the men blended with the boom of the Yellow River waves into a mighty roar. A roar like a sudden storm in the middle of the night — with thunder and lightning and wind and rain.

Brigadier Chen, Wei Yi and Zhang Pei looked back. In the mouth of the gorge the troops were holding battle rallies.

Standing before one of the companies was a man who was evidently its commander. His chest distended, waving his fist in the air, he was shouting, "We're going to cross the river right away, comrades. This very minute, the enemy is attacking Yanan. Yanan, comrades, the place

where our Party's Central Committee and Chairman Mao have been living for more than ten years. . . ."

The eyes of the men fastened on the mountains west of the river. Several soldiers stood up, then sat down again. They seemed to want to say something.

"Who is that?" asked Chen, pointing at the speaker. "Ah, of course, Zhou Dayong." He looked at Wei Yi and Zhang Pei. "Yes, we must keep explaining to the men the significance of this Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region campaign whenever there's a chance." He thought for a moment, then went on. "The road ahead is hard. But we must make this especially clear to the men: The Central Committee and Chairman Mao are here in the north-west directing our battle personally. That is the surest guarantee of victory! All right, then. Start organizing the men for the crossing immediately. I'm going to see whether the general has arrived yet."

The wind blowing in from the desert beyond the Great Wall filled the air with fine particles of yellow sand. It billowed the clothing of the soldiers moving up into the mouth of the gorge and struck their faces with stinging force.

Waves whipped up by the gale pounded against the cliffs, flinging a drenching spray.

The river bank became crowded with men, horses and pack animals preparing for the crossing. There was a clamour of men shouting, animals whinnying.

Unit commanders rushed about getting things ready. Liu Yuanxing, First Battalion C.O., waving his cap, yelled to his messenger:

"I want the commander of First Company. Bring him here, on the double!"

The messenger was off like a streak. Two or three minutes later, he came trotting back with Zhou Dayong, whose Mauser pistol bounced on his hip as he ran. The young commander steadied it with his left hand. Reaching Liu, Dayong drew his heels together and saluted, then stood calmly waiting for orders. Well-proportioned, with broad shoulders, a bit over medium height, Dayong had a square face and a pair of stubborn eyes flashing beneath wide black brows.

"These Lüliang Mountains are cold," said Liu, rubbing his hands together. "And the banks of the Yellow River are even colder."

"Jump up and down a few times, commander," said Dayong. "That'll put fire into your veins."

"Too old for tricks like that. Now if I were your age, and had your iron constitution, I could jump into an icy pit and never fear the cold!"

Dayong laughed. "You're only thirty-four."

"I've still been eating ten years longer than you, comrade."

Liu looked across the tumbling waves at the enemy planes savagely diving and strafing beyond the opposite bank. "Sons of bitches. Do they think that will stop us? Dayong, your First Company will lead the crossing."

"That's the order we've been hoping for." Dayong's eyes gleamed.

The battalion commander glanced at his watch. "It's now two p.m. Brigade C.O.'s order is — the whole brigade must be across before dusk. All right. Bring your company here at once."

"Right." Dayong saluted and turned to go.

"Not so fast. After your company gets across, set up anti-aircraft positions on the mountain-top opposite us." Liu pointed at the planes. "Those wretches are scared of their own shadow. Give 'em a couple of bursts from your machine-

guns and they'll really fly high. Ah, see there? The boats have come. Go and bring your men up here in a hurry."

2

AFTER the column crossed the Yellow River it travelled west in the direction of Yanan.

The troops continued marching straight through the night. The next day, the 18th of March, they were pushing through Yanchuan County. Although 60 miles from Yanan, the place had the atmosphere of battle. Officials of the local people's government were shipping the contents of the public granary to safer places, so that nothing would be left for the enemy. Women and old men were caching all useful household and farming equipment. Children stood as lookouts at crossroads and entrances to villages. Armed with rifles and red-tasselled spears, squad after squad of local self-defence units marched down the road — evidently on the way to carry out their manoeuvres.

The PLA men hurried on. Messages written on walls of little temples, on sides of cliffs, caught their eye. Said one:

Commanders, soldiers, and service personnel of the border region armies. You are about to take a most glorious stand. The eyes of all China, of the people of the whole world, are upon you. The Chinese people entrust you with their most important hopes. Now is the time to put into practice all that Chairman Mao and Commander-in-Chief Zhu De have taught you!

The flames of war are beginning to burn in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, Dayong, commander of First Company, thought to himself, very agitated.

The region was about 250 miles from east to west and 300 from north to south. Dayong had seen almost every city and town, every valley and stream, in this mountainous area. He and the local peasants had been through some hard days together. He had helped them spread fertilizer and gather crops in the Wuding River valley. On the banks of the Yan-shui, they had told him tales of the Land Revolution in north Shaanxi.

Yanan and north Shaanxi were as dear to him as his native village. When he was a child no taller than a rifle, he had followed the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army on its famous 8,000-mile Long March that ended in north Shaanxi. Later, the Red Army had been reorganized into the Eighth Route Army and, like many other Red Army fighters, weeping, he put his beloved cap with its red star into his knapsack, and went off to fight the Japanese invaders. In the past ten years, he and many of his battle companions had been in and out of north Shaanxi and the city of Yanan several times.

Today, he was again heading for Yanan. But this time was different, for now the flames of war were burning here, they were licking close to the home of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. The thought was painful, infuriating, unbearable. Though he had faced death often and had seen many tragic things in battle, nothing had ever shaken and angered him so intensely. It was like coming home to his ancestral village and finding bandits murdering his own mother!

On the morning of the 19th as the sun was rising behind the eastern hills, the column entered the long valley leading to Yanan, 35 miles due west. A thick pall of dust hung in the valley, for it was crowded with peasants — walking, in carts, astride little donkeys. Women carried children on their backs, old ladies bore bundles and live chickens, old men shouldered

farm implements, bedding, clothing. . . . No one spoke, no one looked at anyone else. It was as if they were all strangers. Once in a while, some turned their dust-covered faces to look back at the sky above Yanan. Everyone was plainly exhausted and distressed.

The peasants were all very upset, but the moment they saw their own army arriving they became calm and sat down by the roadside. They were sure that the PLA would finish off the enemy as quick as a flash, and that the fighting would end and peaceful days would return once more.

Mothers carrying children beamed. The peasants broke into excited conversation.

"Ah, just look at our men and horses — so many! There's nothing to fear any more. Those White army soldiers — may they be struck by five thunderbolts! — can't come here now."

"Everything's all right. You see — several hundred thousand of our troops have come from east of the river."

Several hundred thousand? Dayong thought. There are only about eight thousand of us altogether!

He had run across this sort of thing often in wartime. People frequently invented good news or believed reports however contradictory and ridiculous they might be, as long as they were optimistic.

"Is the enemy far from here, neighbours?" he called as he marched.

"Far? Some folks say they've already reached our Yanan City. The way I figure, they're probably about seven miles to the south."

"Huh! Blind talk! Comrade, the enemy are at least 10 or 12 miles from Yanan."

"Yanan . . . it looks bad, very bad."

This divergence of reports among the peasants showed how confused the situation was. Dayong felt depressed.

"Neighbours," he said, "we heard you left the danger zone long ago. How is it you've only come this far?"

A dozen voices tried to answer at once:

"No one likes to leave his home and bit of land, however humble they may be."

"A poor man treasures his shack more than the rich love their gold and silver mansions."

"It's hard to say now. The comrade who's the head of our township government kept urging us to move every day, to settle in some place far away where it's safe. But we thought — our army will never let the Whites take Yanan. Anyhow they'll finish them off in a couple of days, then we can come back. But today everything's so mixed up. It's hard to say."

"When will the fighting end? How are we going to live?"

Dayong's face was dark. He tried, as he walked along with them, to make the peasants understand why it was necessary for a long campaign.

The road was so jammed with refugees, the column was unable to move forward. At the order of the brigade commander, the troops in the lead swung off the road to the right to march along the river. The rest of the column prepared to follow.

Dayong halted beside a big cart on which a boy of eleven or twelve, who had been wounded by enemy strafing, lay groaning. Beside the boy lay a woman who had stopped breathing. Peasants said she had been killed by enemy planes which strafed them a few miles back.

Dayong stood rigid, his right hand clutching his leather belt, his left hand tightly grasping the wooden holster of his Mauser. His face was stony, expressionless. The blood seemed frozen in his veins; his heart felt like it was being twisted by a pair of pliers. Several paces away, Wang Cheng-

de, First Company's political instructor, noisily expelled an angry breath.

Dayong's eyes shifted from the cart to the faces of the PLA men. All the men were looking straight ahead, as if they couldn't bear the tragic scene on the cart.

An old lady stood beside the cart. The dead woman and the wounded boy were her relatives. She stared at them dazedly. Everything was blurred to her, like in a dream. Her gaze drifted to the stern-faced soldiers. Again she looked at her dead daughter-in-law and injured grandson. The merciless flames had already crept to Yanan; they were already burning about her head! War had already destroyed the home she had struggled so hard to build, with sweat and blood, drop by drop.

Tears rolled from the old lady's eyes.

"Son," she said bitterly to Dayong, "you must tear the dirty hearts out of those murdering White bandits!"

"Don't you worry, old mama," said a PLA man, "we're not going to let them take Yanan no matter what happens."

Dozens of children trooped among the soldiers, taking the men's hands, asking all sorts of questions. One child about seven, standing on a mound, wrapped his arms around Dayong's neck and said:

"Uncle, I've brought my school bag along. Our teacher said we could have races in a couple of days, uncle."

Dayong turned around and took the little boy's face in his hands. He gazed into the child's eyes for a long, long time.

Suddenly, from the head of the column the bugle blared an air-raid warning. All the buglers down the line passed on the call. An agitating call that sent shivers through a man's heart. Three enemy fighter planes, without even pausing to