

# A SMALL TOWN CALLED HIBISCUS

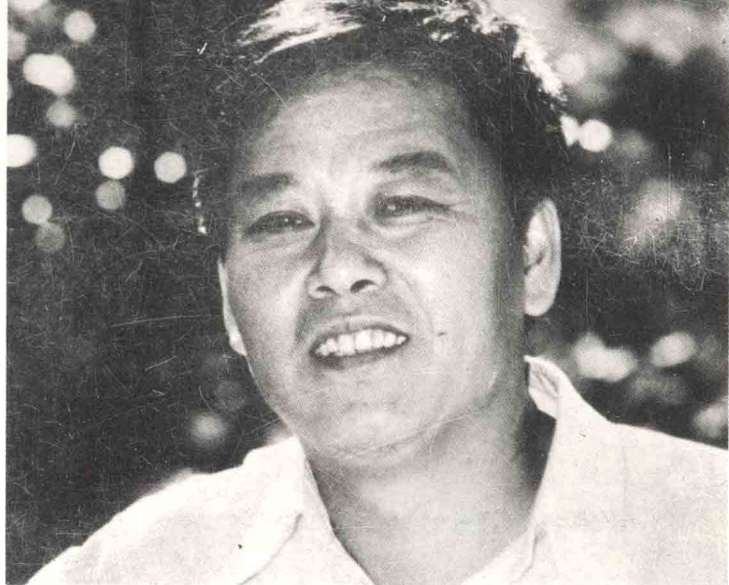
GU HUA



Panda



Books



*A Small Town Called Towncus* is one of the best Chinese novels to have appeared in 1981. Its author Gu Hua grew up in the hills in the Wuling Mountains of south China. The novel presents the ups and downs of some people in a small mountain town there during the years in the early sixties, the "cultural revolution", and after the downfall of the "gang of four". He shows the horrifying impact on decent, hard-working people of the gang's ultra-Left line, and retains a sense of humour in describing the most harrowing incidents. In the end wrongs are righted, and readers are left with a deepened understanding of this abnormal period in Chinese history and the sterling qualities of the Chinese people.

Panda Books  
First edition, 1983  
Copyright 1983 by CHINESE LITERATURE  
ISBN 0-8351-1074-5

Published by CHINESE LITERATURE  
Distributed by China Publications Centre (GUOJI SHUDIAN),  
P. O. Box 399, Beijing, China  
Printed in the People's Republic of China

# CONTENTS

Translator's Preface	5
Part 1	
A Small Town in the Hills (1963)	13
Part 2	
The People of Hibiscus (1964)	66
Part 3	
The Nature of Men and Devils (1969)	129
Part 4	
The New Mood of the People (1979)	202
Postscript	250



## Translator's Preface

HUNAN, this hinterland province larger than France, is essentially a region of hills and mountains apart from the plain around the Dongting Lake. It has a very ancient civilization. During the Warring States Period (403-221 BC) the kingdoms of Yue and Chu had their distinctive cultures here, and in subsequent centuries the central authorities found it hard to control its independence-loving people, owing to the difficulties of communication. Hunan has produced a great many talented writers. Outstanding among its twentieth-century authors are veteran woman novelist Ding Ling, Shen Congwen, and Zhou Libo who won fame after Liberation. Since the 80's a group of talented younger writers has emerged. One of them is Gu Hua, whose style is somewhat influenced by Shen Congwen.

In the thirties and forties Shen Congwen wrote brilliant idyllic stories and essays about west Hunan, conjuring up its countryside, folk customs and old way of life, to dispel the illusion that this was a "bandit area" shrouded in mystery. (see Panda Books *"The Border Town and Other Stories"* and *"Recollections of West Hunan"*) Now Gu Hua is doing the same for south Hunan, a good example being his long story *A Log Cabin Overgrown with Creepers* (see *"Chinese Literature"* 1982, No. 12). However, his work has an added

significance, as readers will see from *A Small Town Called Hibiscus*.

Gu Hua, whose real name is Luo Hongyu, was born in 1942 in a village of about a hundred households at the foot of the Wuling Mountains in south Hunan. His father, a small KMT functionary and accountant, died when Gu Hua was five, leaving his elder brother to support his mother and four younger children. Like other village boys, Gu Hua went barefoot, minded water-buffaloes, gathered firewood and carried charcoal to market. At the same time he attended the primary school in the little town of Jiahe.

Jiahe, so cut off in the past from the outside world that the local dialect is incomprehensible to people from elsewhere, was known as a centre of folk-songs, notably the cycle of songs to "accompany the bride" sung before a girl left home to get married. And Jiahe had an excellent middle school at which Gu Hua studied. Because he showed a flair for writing and won prizes for composition, he was put in charge of the blackboard bulletin; and if classmates failed to hand in contributions he would improvise poems to fill up the space. He read all the literature that he could lay his hands on, and longed to see something of the outside world. As his brother could only allow him one yuan a month as pocket-money, he failed to realize his dream of saving up fifteen yuan to hike to Chenzhou, the administrative centre 130 kilometres away.

After finishing junior middle school Gu Hua taught for a year in the Jiahe primary school. He then entered a technical school to study agriculture, after which he spent fourteen years, from 1962 to '75, in the Agricultural Research Institute in Qiaokou, formerly a waste land,

where he learned to grow rice, vegetables and fruit and repair farm implements. There he married Yujuan, a lively, pretty fellow worker. And there in the early sixties he wrote his first short story.

In those days it was not easy for unknown writers to get into print. Editors would first investigate their political record and class origin. However, after some of the Party cadres in Chenzhou vouched for Gu Hua, his first story *Sister Apricot* was published in 1962.

At Qiaokou, Gu Hua took part in the various political movements of that period, including the Four Clean-ups Movement and the unprecedented "great cultural revolution". He recalls, "Ingenuous and stupid, I followed along blindly. I was criticized from time to time, but never got into big trouble. However, I saw my contemporaries, colleagues and friends playing different parts as they were tossed up or down by tempestuous movements, and that distressed and revolted me. A few years ago I even felt that life was a kind of Vanity Fair...."

The heads of the Agricultural Research Institute encouraged Gu Hua's literary leanings and gave him time off to indulge them. In 1970 he went for the first time to a forestry station in the mountains to write. In 1975 he was transferred to the Chenzhou Song and Dance Ensemble to give him more time for writing.

After the fall of the "gang of four" his dream of travelling to broaden his horizons and see more of life came true. In 1980 he became a member of the Chinese Writers' Association, attended a writers' conference in Beijing, went to lectures on literature and met many well-known authors. In his spare time he wrote his prizewinning *A Log Cabin Overgrown with Creepers*,



published in 1981, as well as other short stories. He resolved to write a novel about characters he knew in a small community which could mirror the turbulent age. Although he feared he was hardly up to this, he received encouragement from the editors of the Hunan People's Publishing House. And when the young writers taking the literary course were given a month off to do some writing, he went back to the forest in the Wuling Mountains and wrote a first draft of over 100,000 characters, which he tentatively entitled *A Remote Mountain Town*. In August he went back to Beijing to continue his studies, and in September handed in his incomplete manuscript. He expected it to be put on the shelf. Instead he was very soon told by the editors that they approved of it. They kept him in Beijing to revise and complete the novel. He was most impressed by the concern of these editors and older writers who encouraged him and made constructive suggestions.

It was Qin Chaoyang, an eminent literary critic, who changed the novel's title to *A Small Town Called Hibiscus*. And it was published in the monthly *Modern Times (Dangdai)* 1981, No. 1. It created a furore, for readers all over the country instantly related to it. To a great extent this was because it made a breakthrough in tackling a new theme. It is a devastating denunciation of the ultra-Left political line which prevailed in China from the late nineteen-fifties till the fall of the "gang of four". By presenting the ups and downs of seven or eight major characters in a small town in Hunan during this period, it shows us a microcosm of all China in those twenty stormy years. Gu Hua pulls no punches but writes forcefully with profound understanding based on first-hand experience. He exposes horrors,

travesties of justice and the ultra-Leftists' denial of human kindness as well as other traditional Chinese virtues. At the same time he writes not with bitterness but with wry humour, which is how most Chinese who went through those terrible years tend to describe their experiences today. So this heart-rending novel also has many laughter-evoking scenes.

As early as '66, the first year of the "cultural revolution", Gu Hua in his remote agricultural research institute sensed "something rotten in the state of Denmark". Increasingly he grew more and more aware of the dangers of the ultra-Left line and the cult of the individual. To have voiced this at the time, of course, would have landed him in gaol. Then in 1979 the Third Plenary Session of the Party made a preliminary summing up of the Party's mistakes. The first genuine criticism of Leftism made by the Chinese Party, it marked a major historical turning-point, the start of a nationwide righting of wrongs and of condemning the cult of the individual. This reinforced Gu Hua's convictions and provided them with a theoretical framework. It also gave editors the courage to publish *Hibiscus*.

This novel has its detractors. A few local cadres complain that Gu Hua has treated them shabbily. Yet the record shows that grassroots cadres who resisted the lunacies of the ultra-Left line very quickly lost power and landed themselves — and their families — in serious trouble. Others object: Why make a positive character like Gu Yanshan, "the soldier from the north", an impotent drunkard? And would it not be more edifying, more effective in pointing out the dangers of ultra-Leftism, if the cadres who followed this line

were portrayed as impeccably moral instead of leading loose lives like Li Guoxiang and Autumn Snake Wang?

I think such critics are still influenced by the idea of a clear-cut distinction between "goodies" and "bad-dies", black and white, which for so long was the bane of Chinese writing. In this country too many stories, plays and film-scripts have been written to formula, describing stereotyped characters in stereotyped situations. How refreshing it is, then, when Gu Hua shows us real flesh-and-blood human beings with weaknesses as well as fine qualities. His characters are brilliantly drawn and convincing.

In 1982, *Hibiscus* was one of six novels to receive the first Mao Dun Literary Prize.

When Gu Hua heard that Panda Books intended to publish *A Small Town Called Hibiscus*, he induced the Cultural Bureau of Chenzhou to invite my husband Yang Xianyi and me, as well as one of our editors, to visit south Hunan for a week to absorb something of the local atmosphere. It was a fascinating experience. We visited a primeval forest in the mountains and the forestry station below it where Gu Hua wrote most of *Hibiscus* and where he gathered the material for *A Log Cabin Overgrown with Creepers*. We discovered that the little town Hibiscus is a composite of three places. Its natural setting is Qiaokou, where a jade-green river, East River, flows gently past the orchard where Gu Hua sowed, grafted and pruned tangerine trees at the foot of the Wuling Mountains majestic in the distance beyond green foothills. The flagstone street is based on Old Street in Jiahe, where Gu Hua went to school and his family still lives. And the size of

Hibiscus at the start of the novel is approximately that of his childhood village.

As with the setting, so with the characters. Gu Hua does not write about real people in real life, as a number of Chinese writers tend to do, but invents characters on the basis of his observation of many individuals in different periods of recent Chinese history.

Gu Hua's output is impressive. By the end of 1981 he had to his credit two novels, four novellas, and over thirty short stories and essays, as well as songs. He is not a fast writer, however. He revises all his work four or five times, paying careful attention to technique and style.

A word now about this translation. An English translation is almost always longer than the Chinese original. As Gu Hua's narrative moves at a brisk pace, to convey this in English I have, with the author's permission, made certain abridgements, telescoped some passages, cut down on mixed metaphors which the Chinese delight in, or shortened lists of names or events such as the Three Anti or Five Anti Movements which would require footnotes or need to be paraphrased to make them intelligible to foreign readers. For instance, Gu Yanshan tells the children of Hibiscus stories about famous drunkards of old, listing six heroes and their exploits in their cups. I have retained one only, Wu Song who killed a tiger, who appears in the novel *Outlaws of the Marsh*.

Owing to the limitations of my English, now out of date after over forty years in China, I have failed to convey the raciness and earthiness of Gu Hua's language, which draws heavily on Chenzhou colloquialisms. I hope some younger sinologists will before long

make new translations to do justice to his graphic, pungent style.

Gu Hua says: What times we have lived through! There cannot be many countries whose writers have such a wealth of material at their disposal. He is planning to write another full-length novel about the years of turmoil.

*Gladys Yang*  
1982

# Part 1

## A Small Town in the Hills

(1963)

### The Local Customs

THE small town of Hibiscus lies in a valley bordering the three provinces of Hunan, Guangdong and Guangxi. From of old travelling merchants have spent the night here, gallant men have gathered here, and troops have contested this strategic outpost. A stream and a river flow past it, converging about one *li* away so that it seems like a narrow peninsula. South of the ferry lies the way to Guangdong; west of the stone arched bridge, the highway to Guangxi. In some reign or other a local magistrate, wanting to display his benevolence or to have his refinement recorded in the district annals, had hibiscus trees planted along the banks of the jade-green stream and river, to beautify the place with flowers and green shade. He also sent labourers to dig a lake in the marshland at the foot of the back hill. Here lotuses were planted, fish were raised, the lotus seeds and roots accruing to his yamen. Whenever the lotus or hibiscus bloomed, this plain in the Wuling ranges seemed rich and verdant. The roots, trunks, flowers and bark of the hibiscus all had medicinal value. The lotus, apart from yielding

seeds and roots, had big leaves as round as green gongs, on which dragonflies alighted, frogs poked up their heads, and dewdrops rolled. When picked, porters travelling some distance wrapped up rice and vegetables in these leaves; cakes could be steamed in them; they also served as covers for pedlars' loads or the bamboo basket of women going to market, or as hats for the boys minding buffaloes. . . . Hence the names Hibiscus River, Jade-leaf Stream and Hibiscus Town.

The main street of Hibiscus was not big. Paved with flagstones it was wedged between a dozen shops and a few scores of houses. These buildings were so packed together that if one shop stewed dog-meat, the aroma filled the whole street; if some child fell and knocked out a tooth or smashed a bowl, the whole street knew of it; neighbours often overheard the secrets girls confided to each other and the jokes between young married couples, then regaled the whole town with these tit-bits. If brothers fell out or husband and wife came to blows, the whole place was in a turmoil as all rushed to intercede. On days when there was no market, people fixed up long bamboo poles between their upstairs windows and those across the street, to sun their clothes and bedding. The wind blowing from the hills made these flutter like flags all the colours of the rainbow. And the clusters of red peppers, golden maize cobs, pale green calabashes and gourds hanging from the eaves formed bright borders on either side. Below, people came and went, cocks crowed, cats and dogs padded to and fro — it was a distinctive sight.

It was a neighbourly little town: at every festival the townsfolk treated each other to food and drinks. On the third of the third lunar month they made cakes;

on the eighth of the fourth month they steamed rice flour and meat; on the Double Fifth they prepared sticky rice dumplings and realgar-and-mugwort wine; on the Double Sixth some families had early fruit or vegetables; on the Double Seventh some had early rice; for the Mid-autumn Festival they made mooncakes; on the Double Ninth they picked persimmons; in the tenth month there were weddings; on the eighth of the twelfth month they made sweet rice porridge, and on the twenty-third saw the Kitchen God up to heaven. . . . Although the ingredients used by each household were much the same, clever young housewives introduced variations to give a distinctive flavour, and loved to have their cooking praised by the neighbours. Even on ordinary days, if some household had prepared fish, flesh or fowl, they were bound to give the neighbours' children a little, so that they would skip home to show it off to their parents. Later, their mothers would bring the children over to sit and chat for a while, as an expression of appreciation.

Though Hibiscus Town was so small, on market-days thousands of people gathered there. The main market was held on the flats by the river behind the town where a long pavilion stood, left from the old days. It had stone pillars, wooden beams and a black-tiled roof but no walls. Opposite it stood an old stage blotched with grease-paint. Just after Liberation, they kept up the old tradition of holding nine markets a month, on every day with a three, six or nine in it. From eighteen counties in three provinces came Han merchants, Yao hunters and physicians, and Zhuang pedlars. There were two markets for pigs and buffaloes, stalls of vegetables, fruit, mushrooms and edible fungus,



snakes and monkeys, sea-slugs, foreign cloth, daily necessities and snacks. . . . The place swarmed with people, rang with a hubbub of voices. If you looked down from the back hill on fine days, you saw turbans, kerchiefs, straw hats; on wet days, coir capes and umbrellas of cloth or oiled paper. The people seemed to be floating on a lake. Whether cold-water vendors or brokers many of them made their living from these markets. One poor fellow in the town was said to have built up his fortune by collecting the dung from the two cattle markets.

In 1958, the year of the Great Leap Forward, as everyone had to smelt steel and boost production, the district and county governments restricted village markets and criticized capitalist trends; so the Hibiscus markets were reduced from one every three days to one a week, finally to one a fortnight. By the time markets disappeared, it was said, they would have finished with socialism and entered communism. But then Old Man Heaven played up and they had bad harvests, on top of which the imperialists, revisionists and counter-revolutionaries made trouble. It wasn't so bad their failing to make the great leap into communism; but instead they came a great cropper, landing back in poverty with nothing but vegetable soup in the communal canteen, and nothing in the market but chaff, bracken-starch, the roots of vines and the like. China and all her people developed dropsy. Merchants stopped coming to the market, which was given over to gambling and prostitution. Fighting, stealing and kidnapping spread. . . . Then towards the end of 1961 the county government sent down instructions to change the fortnightly market into one every five days to facilitate trading. However, so much dam-