UNCLE KAO

BY

OUYANG SHAN

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
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FOREWORD

This story might have taken place in any one of the thousands of little townships in the liberated areas in the early forties. Actually the scene is laid in the Shensi-Kansu-Ningsia Border Region in 1941 — the famous anti-Japanese base governed by the Chinese Communist Party. It is perhaps better known to the outside world as the region where Yenan is situated. At the time this story tells about, it was being attacked and blockaded by three separate forces: the invading Japanese army, their puppet army, and the Kuomintang.

Those days are already part of history. Nowadays things have changed enormously, here and all over China, both materially and spiritually. The change is immeasurably for the better, and Uncle Kao and all my other characters have changed too.

The supply and marketing co-operative, as I depict it here, is a thing of the past. Today there are flourishing supply and marketing co-operatives all over China, but the new conditions, the new needs of the times, have changed them too.

But despite all these changes, I still stand by my Uncle Kao. He is not an imaginary figure. He may not be a nationally important leader, nor is he perfect, but he is honest and lovable, a man of heroic stature, who grew out of a poor and barren soil.

His enemies — poverty, disease and backwardness — were not only the enemies of his fellow peasants and countrymen, but were within him, too, in his very blood and brains. He had to struggle against his own

inadequacies as well as against the material difficulties of that time.

And the difficulties were not only in him or inherent in the situation. There were plenty of downright rascals on the one side — local gangsters, ne'er-do-wells of one sort or another, and, on the other, difficulties caused by the backwardness of some of the local government workers — narrow and doctrinaire in outlook, conservative in their way of working, bureaucratic, or shallow and conceited would-be intellectuals.

But Uncle Kao, with the backing of the Communist Party and the people, managed to overcome all enemies, within or without. Though his exploits with the co-operative already belong to a bygone period, and are now very out of date, his spirit will never be out-moded, but needed for ever. And to this day I can see him in my mind's eye, erect and immovable as a green pine tree, the symbol of China's countless peasants.

I feel very honoured to have this book translated into English, and hope that through it I can share with you, my respected friends abroad, my affection for Uncle Kao and all he stands for.

Ouyang Shan

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Chapter One

WHAT THE PEOPLE WANTED

This is a story about the Jen Valley consumers' co-operative, about events that took place in 1941. The land reform had been carried out there and the peasants had been given land, but many adjustments still had to be made. At the front battles with the Japanese were daily taking place, and attention was all focussed on the war. The big "get your ideas straight" campaign to help people shed old-fashioned, selfish, unsocial and otherwise undesirable traits had barely got going, and lots of people with political jobs to do still had deep-rooted ideas that ran counter to the revolutionary currents. To look back at what happened then and compare it with the present seems strange, but in those days such a story as I have to tell could have been written about almost any village.

The village in Jen Valley was not a big one — only about twenty to thirty families lived there. It was called Jen Valley because most of its inhabitants bore the family name of Jen. Life there was considered to be fairly good. Most of the families lived on the sunny side of the valley, and for twenty *li** round, the village was famous for its trees, its livestock and its pretty girls. Just outside the village was a cart track which was always alive with people coming and going. At one side of it ran a stream of clear water, and from the village itself a panorama of trees, grazing sheep and

*A *li* is about one-third of a mile.

cattle, loaded mules and donkeys on the road and rosy-cheeked girls washing clothes in the stream could be seen. There was a local ditty about Jen Valley at the time which runs:

Jen Valley, Jen Valley's a marvellous place
With tall trees, and grass for the cattle to graze.
The girls of Jen Valley are tender and true. . . .
There's one fly in the ointment, and that's Jen Chang-yu.

Jen Chang-yu was the chairman of the Jen Valley consumers' co-op. He was turned fifty, a little short man. He often looked ill, but his round eyes glittered like pieces of quartz. He had joined the Communist Party in August 1936 and had been sent back to Jen Valley to work. By the time my story opens, in August 1941, he had been there five years. Although he was a man of no special ability, and tended to take the short-term view of things, at heart he was kindly and had never caused any real trouble. He worked whole-heartedly to run the co-op for the people, by sticking strictly to the "directions" passed down to him.

In 1936 the total assets of the co-op had been valued at 120 dollars. Five years later they were worth 7,200. Jen worked this out to his satisfaction as being a sixty-fold increase. To him it was obvious that co-op work was a part of government, and that his job was a government worker's job, and he knew that the land had been given to the people by the government. He was so sure of this himself that he often wondered why there was so much grumbling about the co-op. For after all people who had previously not had even a rag to their backs now had both food and clothing, not to speak of many other benefits, from the revolution!

The fact remained, however, that people did not feel the way he did. Percentages meant nothing to them. They worked out the co-op's assets in terms of millet

—the usual method of calculation in those days of wartime inflation. By this reckoning, the total assets in 1936 were worth five piculs* of millet; each year thereafter the local government collected five piculs of extra millet from the villagers to enable the Jen co-op to carry on; that meant a theoretical total of twenty-five piculs of millet after five years. But in fact the total assets after five years were only worth twenty! On top of that, no dividends had been paid in the whole five years, and a dollar's worth of share capital was only worth eighty cents now. The people thought even this would not be so bad if only they had been allowed to withdraw their shares, but this they could not do. They went further, as a matter of fact, and really wanted the co-op to close down, but the government wouldn't allow this either. Indeed, in July 1941 the share capital was again to be increased by five thousand dollars. They wouldn't have particularly minded subscribing this sum between them, if as members they could have bought goods there cheaper than the prevailing market price or if the co-op had given credit, even for short periods—say two or three days. But what happened really? The co-op's goods were still dearer than anywhere else, and had to be paid for on the nail. Consequently everyone was asking why the term "increase in share capital" was used at all! Why not just call it a plain "revolutionary duty"? They ridiculed the co-op in fact, and coined a name for it —the "catch-'em-alive society."

Early one August morning, when the sun's rays had just begun to catch the village, Jen was driving a dozen or so sheep to graze in the valley. Half-way up a hill he sat down on a rock by the path. Sucking meditatively at his pipe he gazed idly towards the foot of the hill, at his co-op. A donkey with a load of hay, mov-

*A picul is roughly one hundred and thirty lbs.

ing very slowly, followed by a peasant, was coming out of Jen Valley. Jen hailed him.

"Brother Ying-tsai!"

The peasant acknowledged the greeting with a nod and a grin, but continued on his way. Jen called out again, "Hey, Brother Ying-tsai, paid up your share capital yet?"

The question annoyed the peasant. "Of course not!" he retorted. "Where d'you think the money's coming from?" He went straight on, muttering to himself. Jen knew he was cursing the co-op. After he had disappeared from sight, Jen thought to himself:

"You didn't want the co-op, nor did I. It was the government that wanted it. Why blame me? No, that's wrong. You can blame me. We've got democracy now. If you feel like cursing anybody, you're free to do so.... You're not satisfied with the co-op? Why didn't you say so, then, at the township meeting, and have it closed down? But if you don't pay up, then you don't want to abide by government orders, eh? Ask your conscience, open your eyes and look at the co-op. Five big rooms, a sales department and an eating room. What's wrong with that?"

Jen gazed down at the co-op at the foot of the hill and continued to think. The row of buildings, equivalent to five Chinese "rooms," were built west of the cart road at the entrance to the valley. The front gate faced east and opened on to the road. On the other side a sandy stretch ran down to the stream. Beyond the stream were more sandy patches and a planted field. Half a *li* beyond the land gradually climbed a hill where nobody lived. On both sides of the co-op, west of the road, were a few other buildings. Jen knew very well that these were mills, little general stores, and noodle shops, all belonging to private owners. Behind the co-op was a flat piece of ground, untidily strewn with broken jars, worn-out

saddles, bits of mouldy rope and a heap of bricks. At one side was the sheep-fold, and behind it more than a *mou** of maize. This field ran up to where Jen was sitting grazing his sheep.

The more he looked, the more Jen loved this scene. Unconsciously he spoke aloud. "What a fine co-op! Why isn't everyone satisfied with it?"

The sun climbed higher and higher, until it shone brilliantly on the co-op roofs, showing up the places which had been patched with lime, and turned the wisps of smoke from the chimneys golden red. Jen continued to talk to himself:

"That roof needs doing again. No, better wait till all the share capital has been collected. Then we can use tiles."

It was a fact that the co-op buildings were somewhat shabby. The walls were no longer dead straight and there were cracks in them. Nevertheless, as far as Jen was concerned, the co-op was the most handsome structure for twenty *li* around. It was built of the best material, the layout was the most satisfactory possible, and the workmanship incomparable!

From where Jen sat he could not see what was going on on the terrace in front of the co-op. It was a sizable terrace—about twenty feet long and sixty feet wide. As a matter of fact, there was quite a bustle there: the salesman and vice-chairman of the co-op, Kao Sheng-liang; the book-keeper, Chang Ssu-hai; the buyer and store-keeper, Lo Sheng-ming; the cook, Liu Kuan-fu; and the odd-job boy Lo Yu-cheng—all of them trotting to and fro.

The building itself was divided up. The middle section of the row was unpartitioned, so that there was a space of two rooms for the shop. At the northern**

*A *mou* is one-sixth of an acre.

**Over large parts of China directions are invariably given by compass points. In this case, from the front you face east; south is right; north, left; west at the back.

end was the store-room, on the right of the shop was a restaurant, and the cook and the odd-job boy lived at the other end. The shop had a black varnished counter stretching the length of one and a half rooms, with a bench on either side. Along the rear wall were three shelves for goods, and against the south wall an oblong table and two stools. On the shelves lay two or three bolts of coarse cotton cloth and cut lengths of red, brown and green cotton and silk. Besides that there were a pile of locally-made paper, some packets of matches and cartons of cigarettes, several packets of water-pipe tobacco, and some bundles of incense-sticks and yellow joss-paper. Otherwise the shelves were empty, save for a layer of dust everywhere as thick as a copper coin.

Squatting on the floor was a big, sun-tanned man of forty-five or so. He had a sort of oblong face, a lopsided mouth and chin and a moustache. He was large-boned, with muscular hands and legs. Despite the wrinkles on his face he did not look his age, and his eyes shone like jewels. He was arranging the contents of a pair of nested boxes. A thin young man of about thirty stood by the counter looking at him, who said:

"Are you going up or down the valley today, Uncle Kao?"

"Up," answered the older man tersely.

Over in the restaurant the cook, Liu, was squabbling with Lo, the store-keeper and buyer.

"Buy it or not, as you like," snorted Liu. "I've already said my say. The customers will be coming any minute now and there's nothing to cook. I don't care what you do!"

"Better give up then," Lo retorted. "Do you think I'd care? What can I do when people demand cash down and won't give me any credit?"

The tall fellow with the crooked mouth stood up and walked over to the restaurant to take a look. He noticed that both the cooking pots and the meat racks were empty. There were only a few cucumbers and some leeks on the chopping board. With a sigh, he went back and continued to pack up his goods. The thin young man spoke again:

"Uncle Kao, if you can't collect more, at least collect a thousand dollars or so to keep us out of real trouble. If we go on like this, the co-op will go broke and we shan't even have anything to eat."

Kao Sheng-liang still said nothing but went on sorting out his goods. He put needles, thread, silver ear-picks, ear-rings, wooden combs, lutes and brass spoons in one layer, cloth and paper in another. In the lowest layer of one of the boxes he put account books, little abaci, writing brushes and ink-blocks. The topmost layer consisted of a shallow tray and lid. He put the lids on and then tied them up. Only after he had stood up and tested the rope did he answer, with a smile, "Oh well! Very soon there'll be rain, and then the house will fall down. It's too bad we've got no money for repairs. I must have talked to at least a hundred people and they all say it'd be better to close the co-op."

The young man forced a smile and shook his head. Then he sighed.

"Oh well," he said, "whose idea was it to start the co-op anyway? As far as I'm concerned, I certainly made a mistake. When I took a job in the co-op in 1937 I certainly got my food all right, but with an allowance of only a couple of dollars or so a month, I couldn't even buy a bit of new cloth. And me with a family to keep! It's true that the government got someone to work my fields for me, but it hasn't been much help. We've never made ends meet. It seems

as if everybody looks down on us co-op workers. Ai! I wonder who wanted to start the co-op!"

"You're wrong, you know, Chang," said the crooked-mouthed one, waving his huge hand at the young man and trying to put him right. "You're wrong! That's not the whole story. There's nothing the matter with co-ops, you know. It's the way we run this one that's wrong. You can ask a hundred people and they'll all tell you that it's not a bad thing to have co-ops. But they'll also tell you that if you throw money into the river it will float, at least, whereas when you put money into this co-op it sinks. What does that mean? It means that our method of running the co-op is wrong."

While Kao was speaking, Jen had returned. He heard what Kao was saying, and it annoyed him.

"Time for you to start now, Kao," he said. "Today you've got to cover at least five villages. Sell some goods if you can, but make sure you do what we agreed to last night. Bring back all the share capital. Maybe you'll have to do a lot of talking, maybe you'll have to call meetings. But you've still got to get back today. As for tomorrow, we'll see. What we're going to eat, or whether or not we should go on running the co-op, well, let's leave all that to the district authorities."

Jen meant to stop at this point. He raised one hand and slapped his aching arm, lowered his eyes and turned away from the other two. But he saw that Kao made no move, and, indeed, stood as still as a stone, so he added, "You and your 'good methods'! I'm tired of hearing about them. What you're really suggesting is getting some merchants to come in and pool their money in order to make more and then divide up the profits among themselves. What's that but a partnership business? It's not a co-op! But anyway, we'd better discuss it tomorrow."

Oblivious to anything the others felt about it, he made off to the restaurant, still slapping his arm.

Chang, the book-keeper, had expected them to quarrel, so he had quietly slipped out of the way. As he went he mused:

"Sending Uncle Kao out to collect the share capital is like sending a dolt to collect taxes. He won't be able to collect a coin."

But then, he thought, it might be just as well if he wasn't able to collect anything. Then the co-op would have to wind up and he could go home and do something else.

Kao, the vice-chairman, was left sitting in the doorway of the shop. He made a wry face and looked northwards, stroking his straggling moustache. He was so angry that he could not speak. He waited long enough to smoke a pinch of tobacco in his small-bowled pipe and then went off quietly, the boxes hung on a shoulder pole. He crossed the terrace and set off south along the cart road.

Watching this tall chap and the way he swung along with the two boxes, you would have thought they were empty, and you would never have guessed that the bearer was a man of forty-five. His muscular arms swung forwards and backwards, and his feet trod the ground rhythmically. He had on an old black cotton coat and trousers and cotton shoes. A big straw hat, pretty well worn out, hung on his back. He was a trifle bow-legged, with thick calves. His large head matched his frame, but was terribly crooked towards the left side. His ears were large and thin and his wiry hair was short and sparse. When he spoke his voice boomed like a huge brass bell. His speech was clumsy and blunt, and when he lost his temper it was obvious that he had no cunning. In general, he gave the impression of being neither easily cheated nor easily pushed around.

Truly, our old comrade Kao Sheng-liang, respectfully called Uncle Kao by the local people, was a rather unusual character. An ordinary peasant who had joined the Communist Party, he had not completely changed. For the most part he was a Communist, but he was also still somewhat of a peasant. He still looked and moved like one, with his big frame, his rather crooked legs and clumsy movements. Though he could not read much, his knowledge of the revolution, of farming, trade and business was extensive. For all his size, his personal ambitions were small. His rather ugly face belied his heart of gold. He was quick-tempered but was careful too. His language was blunt, but his heart was as soft as a woman's, and as responsive as a child's. In some things he was radical, in others conservative. He did not believe anything he had not seen for himself, but at the same time he could not bring himself to give up completely ideas of gods or ghosts.

Without noticing it Kao had already covered about three *li*. All the way along, maize, millet, sorghum, melons, fruit trees and beans were in full growth, green and sturdy. Tidily dressed people, white towels knotted round their heads, were on the road, on foot or on mule back. A cheerful atmosphere prevailed. Kao met many old friends and acquaintances, who greeted him heartily. But there was one young lad, about sixteen, who took a look at him and seemed undecided whether to greet him or not. The next moment he had passed. Kao thought he recognized the boy but could not immediately recall him. Then he realized that the boy had turned round and was following him. After a few minutes Kao decided to slow down, giving a cough. He turned round and found himself looking into the boy's eyes. There was a brief pause, and then the boy spoke: