

# SCHOOLMASTER

## NI HUAN-CHIH

*by Yeh Sheng-tao*



*Schoolmaster Ni Huan-chih*

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## *Preface*

This novel was written in 1929, which is now twenty-nine years ago. It has in the past been translated into two foreign languages, Japanese and Russian. Since then the Foreign Languages Press has discussed with me the possibility of having it translated into other foreign languages in order to make it available to a wider public. I expressed my agreement. I was naturally pleased to think that this modest effort of mine would be able, by being translated into other languages, to gain access to the minds of readers in other countries.

A writer may also be a literary critic. But I am not such a one, and I know full well that I have not the makings of a literary critic, nor have I ever had any ambition to try my hand at literary criticism. So I cannot tell my readers in other countries anything about this early work of mine from the standpoint of a literary critic. Yet I believe that if a reader reads a work in a frame of mind of sincere sympathy and strict discernment he will come to certain conclusions of his own which are in fact a personal literary criticism, and this kind of "personal conclusion" is the most valuable of all. A writer is more anxious about this "personal conclusion" of the ordinary reader than about the criticism of professional literary critics. At least, that is how it is with me, I don't know about other writers. And now I have the same concern about the personal reactions of readers in other countries.

If my readers in other countries have a general idea of historical events in my country in modern times, they will certainly be aware that the size and rapidity of the changes in China during the sixty years and more since I was born are unprecedented in history. If we look at things as they are today we see that what was once a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country has now become a young and vigorous socialist republic

whose population of six hundred millions has been welded into a corporate unity of unequalled strength and solidity, possessing a power of an incredible immensity such as is released by splitting the nucleus of an atom. To describe this change, to express it, is a task which China's historians and literary men must undertake. It is a task of the utmost importance whose purpose is not only to know the past but also to enlighten us as to the future.

When I wrote this novel I had in mind such a task as this. But I was working on too small a scale and all I wrote about was a very small number of intellectuals who were caught up in the current of the times, and how they lived and thought and felt. In addition to this I possessed insufficient skill, and all I could do was to describe them with a few simple strokes, like an artist making a rough sketch in a notebook. And in a rough sketch there are always some unsuccessful strokes — that is, lines drawn insufficiently accurately and lacking in vitality. If one were to ask how much of my task I have completed, I'm afraid the answer would be only one part in ten thousand. I have always felt ashamed on this account, and I will not now conceal this sense of shame from my readers in other countries.

There is a Chinese saying used to describe friendship: "Mutual understanding between mind and mind," in other words, the establishment of friendship depends first on our being able to exchange ideas rather than on our being able to meet face to face. Let me express my earnest respects to those who are interested in reading this novel of mine; I hope that through this novel I shall be establishing with you the friendship of "mutual understanding between mind and mind."

Yeh Sheng-tao  
February 16, 1958

## Chapter One

The sky was now quite black above the Woosung River.<sup>1</sup> The clouds were piled up thick and heavy, and the fields by the riverside and the scattered peasant huts seemed to dissolve in the darkness. Here and there on either bank of the river tall ginkgo trees reared skywards, and the fitful wind that churned and flooded in from the south-west tugged at the bare, twig-spiked branches till they looked like black wraiths with tossing, tangled hair.

The river was empty except for a south-bound boat covered in with a low mat awning. It met the wind head-on, and the water swirled gurgling round its stem. At the stern were two oars, one on either side. A young peasant couple pulled together on the starboard oar and a hunchback in his forties on the other. The weather was raw, and their hands as they rowed were encased in wadded mittens. All three had their heads turned slightly to one side as they stared over the top of the awning into the darkness ahead. The oars were not so light and easy to handle as they were when there was no wind and when the water was smooth, and at every stroke they had to strain with their shoulders against the oar and thrust at the deck with one leg to get more purchase. The biting wind cut about their faces, found its way in under their collars and reached every inch of their chests and backs. They were silent except for the harsh snoring of the breath in their nostrils.

On a little table in the cabin stood a lighted red candle, and, as the wind stabbed in through the cracks in the plank door at the front, the flame would trail downwards like a falling petal, causing the grease to gutter copiously down one side of

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<sup>1</sup> Woosung River — in the south of Kiangsu Province, rising at the lake Tai Hu and flowing, among other places, through Soochow and Shanghai.

the candle. The yellow light from this red candle lit up everything in the cabin. Against the rear partition was a makeshift bunk of planks and bedding with a young man of twenty-five or six lying on it. Though born and bred a fenman, he seemed to be afflicted with congenital sea-sickness, for he had only to set foot on the swaying deck of a boat and at once his stomach would feel as if it had come adrift and his head would begin to reel. To make things worse, they were making this journey against a head-wind, and from the moment he had come aboard at one o'clock that afternoon until now he had been stretched out on the bunk and had not sat up once. Naturally enough, he did not feel anything all the time he was lying down. His short-sighted eyes were lazily half-closed, and a cigarette drooped from the corner of his mouth. From the way the wisp of blue smoke curled upwards from the lighted tip it was obvious that he was not smoking. His slightly hollow cheeks, now red with the cold, his well-set nose, the even texture of his eyebrows, his oval, gold-rimmed spectacles — all these combined to give him the air of a young gentleman.

Sitting in front of the bunk and leaning on the little table with one hand was a younger man. His limpid eyes stared fixedly at the candle-flame as he thought of his future. — Actually, it would be nearer the truth to say that he was having vague feelings about it than to say he was thinking. He felt that the dreary life he had been leading was now over and done with, and that by making this journey up river in the teeth of the wind, cooped up in a tiny cabin, he was writing *Finis* to the last chapter of that life. And what awaited him at the end of his journey? The kind of career he had always wanted, a really satisfying career, and the companionship of a colleague who shared his own ideals and aspirations. It was all he had dreamed of come true. And it was all as inevitable as the fact that this evening's raging wind and overcast sky would (if not tomorrow, then the next day, or the day after that) eventually give way to a pleasant, smiling morning.

Our first journey to a strange place always seems particularly long, and this, coupled with the continual pitching and swaying hour after hour, presently had its effect on the second

young man: in a sudden fit of understandable impatience he switched his gaze to his recumbent companion and asked: "Aren't we nearly there yet?" Despite his impatience, his manner was as open and good-natured as ever. His thick eyebrows were drawn slightly together, a sign that he was in the habit of thinking hard about things; his full, rounded forehead, topped by tousled but not untidy-looking hair, caught the candlelight.

"You sound worried, Huan-chih." The young man on the bunk removed the cigarette from his lips with two fingers and slowly opened his eyes. "Pity it has to be a head-wind the first time you come this way. If we'd had the wind behind us we could have hoisted all the sail we've got and we'd have been there by four o'clock. But like this —" He paused, raised himself slightly and turned the other way. He closed one eye and applied the other to a gap between the boards that formed the partition to see if he could recognize any familiar landmarks, but apart from the black, shadowy shapes of a few trees by the riverside he could see nothing but an expanse of darkness. He now rapped on the plank door leading aft and asked, "Ah-tu! Have we passed Taotsun yet?"

"Just going past it now," replied the young peasant from outside. In his voice was a hint of the patience with which he battled against the fierce south-west wind.

"Hm, two more miles, once we're past Taotsun; we'll be there in an hour and a half at the outside." As the young man on the bunk said this, he lay down flat once more. Noticing that there was very little left of the cigarette in his hand, he stubbed it out without more ado, then drew the end of a coverlet up over his legs.

"Another hour and a half?" Huan-chih glanced at his companion's left wrist. "What's the time now — half past six? It'll be eight o'clock by the time we get to the school."

The man on the bunk swung his wrist up and held it squarely in front of his face, then held it to his ear and listened for a moment. "Seven minutes after half past six now."

"In that case I suppose Mr. Chiang will have gone home again by the time we get there," said Huan-chih.



"I don't think so. He realizes the wind's against us today. He's sure to be waiting for you at the school. He can't see you quickly enough! The only reason I came to meet you today was that he was so insistent. Otherwise, it would have been better to wait a day or two until this wind had died down, I should have thought."

This seemed to disturb Huan-chih, for he said rather hesitantly, "I do hope he won't be disappointed with me, Shu-po. Though I do want to put all my heart and soul into this job: because he's doing me a great kindness and also because it's the one thing I'm really interested in."

"You two seem to have a lot in common," said Shu-po with a sidelong glance at Huan-chih.

"Eh? You mean —"

"I mean you're both idealists, and in that respect you've got a lot in common."

"Well, that's because we're both in education. Now a carpenter, for example, when he's making a table or a chair, doesn't need any high ideals; nor does a bricklayer, when he's building a wall: all he's got to do is to pile one brick on top of another. But in education, what you're doing is training *human beings*. Now, what ought you to turn these human beings into? And how should you set about training them? — That's where idealism is absolutely indispensable." As Huan-chih's clear voice rang out, it seemed as if he were proclaiming the gospel of Mr. Chiang as well as his own to the world at large. He was constantly coming across people who shied away from anything smacking of idealism and who, on hearing his arguments (which he himself did not consider particularly idealistic), dismissed them as being "castles in the air" or "divorced from reality," and this always made him feel unhappy, as if he were smarting under some great injustice. Now that Shu-po had brought up the subject of idealism, even though he had not been scornful about it, Huan-chih had felt called upon to attempt a vindication.

"Chiang's views are much the same." Shu-po closed his eyes, then went on, "You remember I was telling you about the

paper he wrote on his ideas about education? Well, that paper is the embodiment of his ideals."

"Do you remember what he said in this paper?" Huan-chih's eyes were alight with enthusiasm.

"He starts off by drawing a distinction between 'inherited character' and 'acquired character,' then he talks about the child's acceptance and rejection of education, and after that he talks about the real meaning of aesthetic and physical education — oh, I can't remember it all now, all twenty-odd pages of it. The point is, he wants all the teachers to read it, and he's particularly keen on getting your advice on it first. You'll see what I mean presently: the minute you step ashore he'll whip out his manuscript from the pocket where he always keeps it and show it you. You see if he doesn't!"

"He sounds very enthusiastic about it!" said Huan-chih with heartfelt admiration. For a moment he relapsed into a state of abstraction as he tried to picture to himself what Mr. Chiang was like: his appearance, his deportment, his character, his tastes. He fancied he had caught a clear picture of him for one fleeting moment, but the image immediately faded and left only a vague impression. Yet, when all was said and done, in an hour and a half he would be meeting the subject of his speculations in the flesh, and the thought of this, quite naturally, both comforted and thrilled him.

The wind seemed to be blowing harder, and the gurgle of the water round the prow had taken on a sobbing note; the candle-flame still trailed downwards and the grease ran right down and collected in the bowl of the pewter candlestick; the boat itself pitched and swayed more violently than ever, a sign that the three people in the stern were making more strenuous efforts than usual.

Shu-po drew his knees up slightly and threw back the end of the coverlet from his legs, then said with a shrug of his shoulders, "Things never turn out the way you expect them to. Back in the days when you first became a schoolteacher you were always writing to tell me that it was the dullest job going and that the sooner you could get out of it the happier you'd be: isn't that so?"

"Mm, that's true," Huan-chih admitted gravely, suppressing his feelings of reassurance and excitement.

"And now, only a year or two later, you're saying that teaching is the most interesting of jobs and that you'd like to make it a career for life."

"I think I wrote and told you," said Huan-chih with a smile of elation, "about this colleague I met; about the way he forgot himself — forgot everything — and devoted himself wholly to the task of serving the child and projecting himself into the child's world — oh, I just can't tell you. I've nothing but respect and admiration for him."

"I suppose he changed your ideas about the hatefulness of teaching as a job, then?"

"Naturally he did. Though the decisive event that sets our feet on a particular path need not be anything startling. For instance, the only reason I'm so fond of reading books on philosophy is that I once picked up a copy of *Three Great Greek Philosophers* for three coppers on a kerbside stall; and the only reason I have leanings towards socialism is that five years ago I happened to come across a newspaper article on the British Socialist Party and Labour Party. Well, what I got from this colleague was the necessary impetus. I thought to myself: why should I look elsewhere for a full and satisfying life? This colleague of mine thought that his own life was full and interesting enough, so surely I, who was after all a teacher just the same as he was, surely I could make my job as rewarding as he found his? Yes, I could, I could, I was quite convinced that I could. And as my outlook changed, everything else changed: the pupils thronging round me were no longer scruffy brats; the classroom with its four dreary walls was no longer a soul-destroying prison. When I left those children two days ago, it really distressed me to think that I'd never be with them again." Huan-chih paused, and his eyelids met as he tried to recapture some delicious, half-remembered moment.

"What's the difference?" asked Shu-po, smiling. "You were a teacher there, and you'll be a teacher here, just the same; you had pupils there, and you'll have pupils here, too;

though the pupils here may be more engaging still, for all I know."

"That's what I think, too." Huan-chih sat up straight and stared ahead of him in utter absorption, as if he could see through the doors leading to the middle cabin and the front cabin, then through a couple of miles of pitch darkness to the school where he was going to teach, and to all its pupils.

"You can never have too many like Mr. Chiang," he said regretfully, as his thoughts went from the pupils themselves to their good fortune in having in Mr. Chiang a headmaster who took a real interest in education and who devoted himself to research on the subject. Huan-chih himself had worked under three headmasters so far, and knew at the very least a dozen or so more; but was there a single one of them who had any interest in education? And as for any of them doing research on it—! They were in it, without exception, for earning their livelihood and nothing else; they regarded the teaching profession as something of the same order as being a tax-collector. Even he himself regarded teaching as a means of winning one's daily bread, but he believed that there should be more to it than just that: if you were only in it for a living, then you might as well face up to it and set about finding a job as a tax-collector instead of being a schoolteacher. Now this Mr. Chiang, by all accounts, was in a different class altogether from all the other headmasters he had known, and, although he had never met him, he had long since formed the opinion that here at last was a man after his own heart, a man such as one does not meet every day.

"He has to find something to occupy his mind," said Shu-po, quite casually. "He's got a bailiff to look after his land, and people to run his shops; he never goes anywhere because he doesn't like the trouble of travelling; so, rather than sit around at home waiting for dyspepsia to catch up on him, he prefers to find an outlet for his ideas by becoming a headmaster and amusing himself with the children."

Huan-chih glanced quickly at Shu-po; the words "amusing himself" annoyed him, and it struck him that Shu-po's four or five years of idleness at home had given him a jaundiced

eye. Back in the days when they had been at school together they had been in the habit of speaking their minds to one another, and this habit had survived. "What do you mean, 'amusing himself'? You imagine we teach for the fun of the thing?" asked Huan-chih.

"Ha ha! You do take it seriously, don't you?" Shu-po's laugh was a cynical one. "It's just a matter of using different words, that's all. You call it research and service; I call it amusement. Doesn't it work out to the same thing in the end? If Chiang had to change places with me, the last thing he'd do would be to take up schoolmastering. Just look at what I have to do: I have to see to every fiddling little detail at home, besides wearing myself to a shadow chasing up the rent on a couple of acres of farmland. It doesn't leave me with time to do anything else, believe me."

As Shu-po said this, it seemed to Huan-chih that he had suddenly become middle-aged: experience, acumen, worldliness were all deeply etched around his eyes.

"Of course, he's doing himself a good turn at the same time —" Shu-po went on quietly.

"What!" interjected Huan-chih in surprise.

"He's got two sons and he wanted to give them a good education. He couldn't find a school that was good enough for him, so he became a headmaster himself. Now he can arrange things to suit himself, and the two sons do very well out of it."

"Oh, you can't call that doing yourself a good turn," said Huan-chih, obviously relieved. "He's not only doing something to his sons' advantage; he's doing something to other people's sons' advantage at the same time. In actual practice, anything at all done for the public good involves a certain amount of self-interest of this kind; if by doing yourself a good turn you do other people a good turn at the same time, then you're not just acting in your own interest, but in the public interest."

"Oh, I'm not suggesting there's anything wrong with the man," Shu-po hastened to explain. "I was just stating the fact — and a fact it is — that that consideration did have

some bearing on the business. — The candle's nearly finished; you'd better put another one in."

Huan-chih took a red candle out of the table drawer, lit it and stuck it in the candlestick. He blew out the stub he had taken out, and immediately the acrid odour of burning grease pervaded the little cabin. The flame of the new candle was still low, and as the two men looked across at one another, each saw the other's face as through a mist.

"Whew! We *would* have to run into a head-wind!" Shu-po muttered to himself as he hunched up his shoulders and fished a cigarette-case out of his pocket. . . .

By the time the fresh candle was two-thirds gone, the wash of the water round the bows of the boat was no longer a gurgling sob, but a lively chatter like the flow of a brook. The wind was now blowing in through the cracks around the dead-lights on the port side, and the candle-flame was bowing towards Huan-chih.

Shu-po, who had been half-dozing for a while, suddenly noticed that the sound of the water had changed. He sat up, rapped on the door and asked Ah-tu, "Are we in the creek now?"

"Just turned in. You can see the upstairs lights at the school now." Ah-tu's voice was much more leisurely and easy-going than it had been the last time he had spoken.

"I'm going out on deck to have a look!" In a sudden flush of excitement Huan-chih pushed open the door leading forward and in two strides he was out on deck. He was met by a violent gust of wind which struck him full in the face like a giant hand and took his breath away. Suddenly, the cold gripped him and made him clench his teeth.

When the gust of wind had passed, he began to snuff the fresh, almost fragrant country air and found it extraordinarily soothing to the spirit. The scattered barking of dogs came from a distance, now louder, now softer, as one answered another. The banks had closed in on the boat, and the black shapes of the leafless trees by the waterside slid past with swaying branches. About a hundred yards ahead a dark row of buildings stood silhouetted against the sky. One tall building

dominated the rest, and its upstairs windows were ablaze with a welcome show of lights, which were reflected upside down in the creek in a dancing, wriggling trail of light splashed across the water.

"Well, here I am! And now the curtain goes up on a new life!" With this thought in his mind, Huan-chih stared fixedly at the lights in the building. In a moment, their brightness seemed to expand until it blotted out his whole field of vision. The boundless darkness dissolved, and his whole being was bathed in that grateful blaze of light. . . .

## *Chapter Two*

Ni Huan-chih's father was a clerk in a money-changer's who later rose to manager. He was honest and straightforward — qualities which hardly fitted him for such an occupation. His wife was a gentle, submissive creature, but highly strung: when her housework was done she would put on a frown and lapse into an unaccountable mood of depression. Their life was not, of course, one of affluence, but thrift on his part and industry on hers kept them well out of harm's way.

When Huan-chih was born, his father was already in his forties, while his mother was still under thirty. His father, though he had risen to manager, thought he had not made much of a success of his own life, and was determined that his son should have a chance to really get ahead in the world. Business, of course, was out of the question. This was still in the days of the old examination system,<sup>1</sup> and there were quite a number of people in the city who had in a short space of time made a spectacular rise from poverty and obscurity to

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<sup>1</sup> The system by which the rulers of China in the imperial period selected government employees by examination. In those days official appointments were open only to the *literati* and the only road to such an appointment was through the examination hall.

positions of authority. Why should his son not hope to achieve the same success? When Huan-chih was four or five years old, his father entrusted his education to a private tutor who wrote an elegant hand and had an excellent reputation; he was not prepared to teach Huan-chih the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic and leave it at that.

When at ten years of age he began studying literary composition, he earned continual praise from his tutor. When his father saw the red-ink circles of commendation on his son's essays, a hint of a smile would play round the corners of his mouth and he would twist his short moustache and shake his head and say that the teacher was being too generous in his marking; in other words, he was very pleased. Before two years had passed he could write expositions of classical passages and essays over three hundred characters long. Then the old examination system was abolished, to his father's great disappointment. Fortunately, he got to hear of a school which served the same purpose as the old examination system but in a different way, and arranged for Huan-chih to take the entrance examination. He passed.

School life was just like stepping into a new and spacious world. Lining up in teams for physical training, raising one's voice in delicate or full-throated song, watching the dissection of animals and plants, getting to know in the English reader many stories which he had never heard before, reading poems in the books of Chinese literature by men of long ago other than those one met in the commentaries on the Classics and the traditional expositions: all these things completely intoxicated Huan-chih. He recited poetry with his school-fellows, engraved seals, and browsed around the second-hand book-stalls. For good measure — but behind his father's and teachers' backs — he gambled, drank and went riding. He could never bring himself to think of his future and what his parents expected of him; all that he was aware of was that his life at present was as agreeable as he could wish it.

One day, during his third year at the school, his father suddenly said something which came as a complete surprise to him. It was this: he still had over two years to go before he finished



at the middle-school; if he simply left school when the two years were up he could not hope to get very far; if he went on with his education, his father was going to be hard put to it to find the money to keep him at school. The best thing to do would be to leave school at once.

His reason for saying this was not that he had abandoned hope of making a career for Huan-chih, but that he had discovered an even more convenient short cut to success than the school: the telegraph-office. It was a job for life, with regular, assured pay-increases, and with a starting salary better than that of a manager of a money-changer's shop. In addition to this, there was a special allowance if one was posted away from home. If that wasn't a steady, first-class job, what was?

After further reasoning along these lines (which we need not go into here), his father came to the point and said he wanted Huan-chih to sit the telegraphists' examination. He added that a third-year student at a middle-school should be able to pass it without any difficulty whatsoever.

Huan-chih was annoyed and immediately retorted that the job wasn't worth having. He had never been inside a telegraph-office, though he had seen a model of a telegraph-transmitter in the physics and chemistry laboratory. It consisted of two pieces of apparatus looking like toys and connected by electric wires. You pressed a key on one of them and the other one buzzed; press-press-press on this one, and you got "buzz-buzz-buzz" on that one. He had never given the matter more than a passing thought, but he did feel in a vague sort of way that earning one's living at this "buzz-buzz-buzz" business must be a shame and devoid of any promising future.

His father had not expected to meet with such a rebuff, and was rather hurt. He pointed out that all jobs were there to be done and that the question of whether they were worthwhile or not did not arise.

Huan-chih so far forgot himself as to blurt out that the reason he considered the job not worth having was that it required no mental effort and was rather mechanical. What was more, it wasn't a job which would enable one to benefit the greater part of mankind. If you were looking for a job, he said, you