

SPRING SILKWORMS
AND
OTHER STORIES

by
MAO TUN

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
PEKING 1956

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TRANSLATED BY
SIDNEY SHAPIRO

COVER DESIGN BY
TING TSUNG

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Editor's Note

The thirteen short stories presented in this book were written between 1932 and 1943 by Mao Tun, one of China's foremost living authors. With the exception of *Great Marsh District*, which is based on a historical tale, and *Frustration*, with the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) as its background, the stories describe the changes in Chinese society during the turbulent years between 1927 and 1936.

That period found China in the midst of the Second Revolutionary Civil War. Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang, having betrayed the revolution with the support of the imperialist powers, particularly the United States of America, imposed a fascist rule of terror. Chiang Kai-shek and his gang ruthlessly oppressed the Chinese people and waged a civil war against the Communists in an attempt to end the revolutionary movement once and for all. At the same time, the imperialists intensified their political and economic aggression and there were endless battles among the various warlord groupings of the Kuomintang. As a result, workers and peasants in Kuomintang-controlled areas were increasingly hard put.

All over China the imperialist powers expanded their "spheres of influence." In 1931 Japan decided the time was ripe for a military adventure and invaded China's Northeast provinces. The Chinese Communist Party was the first to call upon the people to fight back. The entire nation was aroused. But the Chiang Kai-shek regime was more interested in its unpopular war

against the Communists and adopted a non-resistance policy towards the Japanese. The whole of China's Northeast soon fell into the hands of the aggressor. In 1932 the Japanese attacked Shanghai. Inspired by the nationwide anti-Japanese movement, the 19th Route Army of the Kuomintang offered a partial resistance which collapsed, however, due to the policy of surrender pursued by Chiang Kai-shek.

In 1933 the Communist Party proposed that the Kuomintang end the civil war and institute democratic reforms as a basis for a united effort against the invaders. In 1935 the Party called for the establishment of a national united front and led the students in Peking in a huge demonstration which demanded resistance against Japan to save the nation. Throughout the land the people's fighting spirit was stimulated by the efforts of the Communist Party and the programme it advocated.

Finally, in 1936, Chiang Kai-shek was compelled to end the civil war. In consequence, under the leadership of the Communist Party, the people were able to fight back resolutely when Japan, using the Lukouchiao (Marco Polo Bridge) Incident as a pretext, began its all-out war against China in 1937.

The book is divided into four parts, according to the time or content of the stories. In the first part, *Spring Silkworms*, *Autumn Harvest* and *Winter Ruin* comprise a trilogy depicting the collapse of China's rural economy under the combined depredations of imperialism and feudalism. They date shortly before the Japanese attack on Shanghai in 1932. *Epitome* introduces the unlovely family of a small town despot who, quite typically, combines the activities of official and racketeer.

The second part contains four stories. They reflect the impact of Japanese imperialism on people of different occupations. *The Shop of the Lin Family* inevitably collapses, crushed by war, the bankrupt countryside and

grafting Kuomintang officials. *Wartime* contrasts the attitudes of two classes of individuals in 1932 during the Japanese invasion of Shanghai—the fighting worker and the vacillating petty bourgeois intellectual. *Big Nose* represents the millions of homeless waifs who wandered through the streets of China's cities, cast-offs of a rapacious society. In *Second Generation* youngsters are already following in the footsteps of their fathers and mothers to join the political demonstrations for a free and democratic China.

There are three stories in part three, each portraying a different type of Chinese capitalist. *The Bewilderment of Mr. Chao* is a tale of a petty operator in the Stock Exchange, a little fish in the process of being eaten by the big. *A True Chinese Patriot* lampoons China's comprador bourgeoisie—agents for foreign monopolies—who waxed fat and pompous at the people's expense. *Frustration*, besides twitting a lady of leisure, depicts the disillusionment of small industrialists who moved their plants to the interior in the naive belief that Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang was going to build up national industry.

The fourth part contains two stories. *First Morning at the Office* gives a devastating picture of the fatuousness of Shanghai's commercial offices and the humiliations a woman white-collar worker had to endure. *Great Marsh District*, an imaginative account of the first peasant uprising in ancient China, is one of the many stories from history and folk tales which Mao Tun has written.

Mao Tun wields his acid-dipped pen skilfully and with vigour. Mercilessly flaying the sins of China's old society, he suffers and strives with the oppressed and exploited and thunderously calls them to action. In the stirring days between 1927 and 1936, the revolutionary forces fought on in spite of imperialist intervention and

Chiang Kai-shek's reign of terror. Mao Tun, as an active participant in the struggle, knew every level and corner of Chinese society. Here, in this cross-section of his best short stories, we find a remarkable introduction to the awakening of the Chinese people.

SPRING SILKWORMS

OLD Tung Pao sat on a rock beside the road that skirted the canal, his long-stemmed pipe lying on the ground next to him. Though it was only a few days after "Clear and Bright Festival" the April sun was already very strong. It scorched Old Tung Pao's spine like a basin of fire. Straining down the road, the men towing the fast junk wore only thin tunics, open in front. They were bent far forward, pulling, pulling, pulling, great beads of sweat dripping from their brows.

The sight of others toiling strenuously made Old Tung Pao feel even warmer; he began to itch. He was still wearing the tattered padded jacket in which he had passed the winter. His unlined jacket had not yet been redeemed from the pawn shop. Who would have believed it could get so hot right after "Clear and Bright"?

Even the weather's not what it used to be, Old Tung Pao said to himself, and spat emphatically.

Before him, the water of the canal was green and shiny. Occasional passing boats broke the mirror-smooth surface into ripples and eddies, turning the reflection of the earthen bank and the long line of mulberry trees flanking it into a dancing grey blur. But not for long! Gradually the trees reappeared, twisting and weaving drunkenly. Another few minutes, and they were again standing still, reflected as clearly as before. On the gnarled fists of the mulberry branches, little fingers of tender green buds were already bursting forth. Crowded close together, the trees along the canal seemed to march endlessly into the distance. The unplanted

fields as yet were only cracked clods of dry earth; the mulberry trees reigned supreme here this time of the year! Behind Old Tung Pao's back was another great stretch of mulberry trees, squat, silent. The little buds seemed to be growing bigger every second in the hot sunlight.

Not far from where Old Tung Pao was sitting, a grey two-storey building crouched beside the road. That was the silk filature, where the delicate fibres were removed from the cocoons. Two weeks ago it was occupied by troops; a few short trenches still scarred the fields around it. Everyone had said that the Japanese soldiers were attacking in this direction. The rich people in the market town had all run away. Now the troops were gone and the silk filature stood empty and locked as before. There would be no noise and excitement in it again until cocoon selling time.

Old Tung Pao had heard Young Master Chen—son of the Master Chen who lived in town—say that Shanghai was seething with unrest, that all the silk weaving factories had closed their doors, that the silk filatures here probably wouldn't open either. But he couldn't believe it. He had been through many periods of turmoil and strife in his sixty years, yet he had never seen a time when the shiny green mulberry leaves had been allowed to wither on the branches and become fodder for the sheep. Of course if the silkworm eggs shouldn't ripen, that would be different. Such matters were all in the hands of the Old Lord of the Sky. Who could foretell His will?

"Only just after Clear and Bright and so hot already!" marvelled Old Tung Pao, gazing at the small green mulberry leaves. He was happy as well as surprised. He could remember only one year when it was too hot for padded clothes at Clear and Bright. He was in his twenties then, and the silkworm eggs had hatched

"two hundred per cent"! That was the year he got married. His family was flourishing in those days. His father was like an experienced plough ox—there was nothing he didn't understand, nothing he wasn't willing to try. Even his old grandfather—the one who had first started the family on the road to prosperity—seemed to be growing more hearty with age, in spite of the hard time he was said to have had during the years he was a prisoner of the "Long Hairs."*

Old Master Chen was still alive then. His son, the present Master Chen, hadn't begun smoking opium yet, and the "House of Chen" hadn't become the bad lot it was today. Moreover, even though the House of Chen was of the rich gentry and his own family only ordinary tillers of the land, Old Tung Pao had felt that the destinies of the two families were linked together. Years ago, "Long Hairs" campaigning through the countryside had captured Tung Pao's grandfather and Old Master Chen and kept them working as prisoners for nearly seven years in the same camp. They had escaped together, taking a lot of the "Long Hairs'" gold with them—people still talk about it to this day. What's more, at the same time Old Master Chen's silk trade began to prosper, the cocoon raising of Tung Pao's family grew

* In the middle of the 19th century, China's oppressed peasants rose against their feudal Manchu rulers in one of the longest (1851-1864) and bitterest revolutions in history. Known as the Taiping Revolution, it was defeated only with the assistance of the interventionist forces of England, France and the United States of America.

The Manchus hated and feared the "Long Hairs," as they slanderously called the Taiping Army men, and fabricated all sorts of lies about them in a vain attempt to discredit them with the people.

Old Tung Pao, although steadily deteriorating economically, is typical of the rich peasants. Like others of his class, he felt and thought the same as the feudal landlord rulers.

successful too. Within ten years grandfather had earned enough to buy three acres of rice paddy, two acres of mulberry grove, and build a modest house. Tung Pao's family was the envy of the people of East Village, just as the House of Chen ranked among the first families in the market town.

But afterwards, both families had declined. Today, Old Tung Pao had no land of his own, in fact he was over three hundred silver dollars in debt. The House of Chen was finished too. People said the spirit of the dead "Long Hair" had sued the Chens in the underworld, and because the King of Hell had decreed that the Chens repay the fortune they had amassed on the stolen gold, the family had gone down financially very quickly. Old Tung Pao was rather inclined to believe this. If it hadn't been for the influence of devils, why would a decent fellow like Master Chen have taken to smoking opium?

What Old Tung Pao could never understand was why the fall of the House of Chen should affect his own family? They certainly hadn't kept any of the "Long Hairs'" gold. True, his father had related that when grandfather was escaping from the "Long Hairs'" camp he had run into a young "Long Hair" on patrol and had to kill him. What else could he have done? It was "fate"! Still from Tung Pao's earliest recollections, his family had prayed and offered sacrifices to appease the soul of the departed young "Long Hair" time and time again. That little wronged spirit should have left the nether world and been reborn long ago by now! Although Old Tung Pao couldn't recall what sort of man his grandfather was, he knew his father had been hard-working and honest—he had seen that with his own eyes. Old Tung Pao himself was a respectable person; both Ah Sze, his elder son, and his daughter-in-law were industrious and frugal. Only his younger son, Ah To, was inclined to be a little flighty. But youngsters were all

like that. There was nothing really bad about the boy. . . .

Old Tung Pao raised his wrinkled face, scorched by years of hot sun to the colour of dark parchment. He gazed bitterly at the canal before him, at the boats on its waters, at the mulberry trees along its banks. All were approximately the same as they had been when he was twenty. But the world had changed. His family now often had to make their meals of pumpkin instead of rice. He was over three hundred silver dollars in debt. . . .

Toot! Toot-toot-toot. . . .

Far up the bend in the canal a boat whistle broke the silence. There was a silk filature over there too. He could see vaguely the neat lines of stones embedded as reinforcement in the canal bank. A small oil-burning river boat came puffing up pompously from beyond the silk filature, tugging three larger craft in its wake. Immediately the peaceful water was agitated with waves rolling toward the banks on both sides of the canal. A peasant, poling a tiny boat, hastened to shore and clutched a clump of reeds growing in the shallows. The waves tossed him and his little craft up and down like a see-saw. The peaceful green countryside was filled with the chugging of the boat engine and the stink of its exhaust.

Hatred burned in Old Tung Pao's eyes. He watched the river boat approach, he watched it sail past and glared after it until it went tooting around another bend and disappeared from sight. He had always abominated the foreign devils' contraptions. He himself had never met a foreign devil, but his father had given him a description of one Old Master Chen had seen—red eyebrows, green eyes and a stiff-legged walk! Old Master Chen had hated the foreign devils too. "The foreign devils have swindled our money away," he used to say. Old Tung Pao was only eight or nine the last time he

saw Old Master Chen. All he remembered about him now were things he had heard from others. But whenever Old Tung Pao thought of that remark—"The foreign devils have swindled our money away."—he could almost picture Old Master Chen, stroking his beard and wagging his head.

How the foreign devils had accomplished this, Old Tung Pao wasn't too clear. He was sure, however, that Old Master Chen was right. Some things he himself had seen quite plainly. From the time foreign goods—cambric, cloth, oil—appeared in the market town, from the time the foreign river boats increased on the canal, what he produced brought a lower price in the market every day, while what he had to buy became more and more expensive. That was why the property his father left him had shrunk until it finally vanished completely; and now he was in debt. It was not without reason that Old Tung Pao hated the foreign devils!

In the village, his attitude toward foreigners was well-known. Five years before, in 1927, someone had told him: The new Kuomintang government says it wants to "throw out" the foreign devils. Old Tung Pao didn't believe it. He heard those young propaganda speech makers the Kuomintang sent when he went into the market town. Though they cried "Throw out the foreign devils," they were dressed in Western style clothing. His guess was that they were secretly in league with the foreign devils, that they had been purposely sent to delude the countryfolk! Sure enough, the Kuomintang dropped the slogan not long after, and prices and taxes rose steadily. Old Tung Pao was firmly convinced that all this occurred as part of a government conspiracy with the foreign devils.

Last year something had happened that made him almost sick with fury: Only the cocoons spun by the foreign strain silkworms could be sold at a decent price.

Buyers paid ten dollars more per load for them than they did for the local variety. Usually on good terms with his daughter-in-law, Old Tung Pao had quarrelled with her because of this. She had wanted to raise only foreign silkworms, and Old Tung Pao's younger son Ah To had agreed with her. Though the boy didn't say much, in his heart he certainly had also favoured this course. Events had proved they were right, and they wouldn't let Old Tung Pao forget it. This year, he had to compromise. Of the five trays they would raise, only four would be silkworms of the local variety; one tray would contain foreign silkworms.

"The world's going from bad to worse! In another couple of years they'll even be wanting foreign mulberry trees! It's enough to take all the joy out of life!"

Old Tung Pao picked up his long pipe and rapped it angrily against a clod of dry earth. The sun was directly overhead now, foreshortening his shadow till it looked like a piece of charcoal. Still in his padded jacket, he was bathed in heat. He unfastened the jacket and swung its opened edges back and forth a few times to fan himself. Then he stood up and started for home.

Behind the row of mulberry trees were paddy fields. Most of them were as yet only neatly ploughed furrows of upturned earth clods, dried and cracked by the hot sun. Here and there, the early crops were coming up. In one field, the golden blossoms of rape-seed plants emitted a heady fragrance. And that group of houses way over there, that was the village where three generations of Old Tung Pao's family were living. Above the houses, white smoke from many kitchen stoves was curling lazily upwards into the sky.

After crossing through the mulberry grove, Old Tung Pao walked along the raised path between the paddy fields, then turned and looked again at that row of trees bursting with tender green buds. A twelve-year-old boy

came bounding along from the other end of the fields, calling as he ran:

"Grandpa! Ma's waiting for you to come home and eat!"

It was Little Pao, Old Tung Pao's grandson.

"Coming!" the old man responded, still gazing at the mulberries. Only twice in his life had he seen these finger-like buds appear on the branches so soon after Clear and Bright. His family would probably have a fine crop of silkworms this year. Five trays of eggs would hatch out a huge number of silkworms. If only they didn't have another bad market like last year, perhaps they could pay off part of their debt.

Little Pao stood beside his grandfather. The child too looked at the soft green on the gnarled fist branches. Jumping happily, he clapped his hands and chanted:

*Green, tender leaves at Clear and Bright,
The girls who tend silkworms,
Clap hands at the sight!*

The old man's wrinkled face broke into a smile. He thought it was a good omen for the little boy to respond like this on seeing the first buds of the year. He rubbed his hand affectionately over the child's shaven pate. In Old Tung Pao's heart, numbed wooden by a lifetime of poverty and hardship, suddenly hope began to stir again.

II

THE weather remained warm. The rays of the sun forced open the tender, finger-like, little buds. They had already grown to the size of a small hand. Around Old Tung Pao's village, the mulberry trees seemed to respond especially well. From a distance they gave the appearance of a low grey picket fence on top of which a long swath of green brocade had been spread. Bit by bit,