

# OUR SEVEN—THEIR FIVE

— *A fragment from the story of Gung Ho*

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## *Preface*

Turning over old papers connected with Gung Ho (sometimes called Indusco or CIC abroad), the movement for widespread industrial co-operation set up in China during the War of Resistance of 1937-45, I came across a short, unpublished manuscript written in 1943 when I was in the village of Shuangshihpu in the Chinling Mountains of Shensi. I had recently been in the crowded, sprawling city of Paochi at the Shensi-Kansu end of the Lunghai Railway, and also in famine-stricken Honan itself. The story could have been located at almost any of the refugee towns along the unoccupied portion of that railway in Shensi. The Wei valley called "Kwan Chung" through which the railway went was a Kuomintang-controlled region, and conditions there were about the same as anywhere else, with refugees ever streaming in from Honan and the enemy-occupied areas. In the Border Areas on its north flank lay the hard fighting Communist-led Eighth Route Army.

The story goes into some of the problems that almost any group of people organising for production were up against in that period under the old regime. In Honan there had been a famine in which between two and three million ordinary folk had died. The whole area was saddled with a Kuomintang army whose leaders were out on the make. A Japanese invasion was pressing in. There were droughts, floods and locusts.

The manuscript that is left to me is a tattered carbon copy with some pages missing, poorly typed with a worn carbon on thin, hand-made bamboo paper that is so fragile it almost falls apart as I try to go over it. Yet after all, it was done only twenty odd years ago, though now it seems to be of another age! All of the more dramatic incidents were based on actual happenings in the movement at that time, and all the conversations on those heard then. They are of that period, not this.

To understand the story better, a little summary is needed to explain exactly what "Gung Ho" was, for it was the kind of organisation which could still be useful in many parts of the world where people are in the throes of struggle for national and economic independence.

The idea was simply a movement for small industry, financing small groups of refugee workers and peasants for productive work to assist the economy of unoccupied areas, and uniting them together in groups under an overall organisation. How best to resist the enemy? This was the question of the day to which the movement gave the answer — fighters fight, producers produce by working together. As simple as that! The function of the agency set up to promote the movement was to arrange for finance and assist with technique, as well as marketing and supply. The area which it attempted to cover was the whole of unoccupied China, with its poor lines of communications, political differences and all the extemporization that war called for. Sugar had to be made into motor spirit. Hundreds of thousands of people who had forgotten the arts of spinning and weaving were brought together to make millions of army blankets. Consumer goods like soap, leather,

paper, and so on had to be made on the spot. Simple machine tools had to be made. Stress was laid on international assistance for the promotion agency, for when people gave material help they also gave political support. This kind of support was necessary to prevent Chiang Kai-shek from giving in entirely to the enemy. At the same time, the Chiang Kai-shek agents did their utmost to hamper the movement.

Workers from many of the occupied cities fled into the hinterland, and when they formed a production co-operative, it was rarely saddled with any bureaucracy. Everyone worked on production, those with other duties taking a little time off to do them. This was the general rule in the smaller units. Loans had to be paid off, consumer needs met. No big overheads could be carried.

When enough co-operatives were formed in a region, they formed a federation, operated a marketing and supply agency, and sometimes a Gung Ho treasury which could handle loans. The national currency was always unstable, finally running into a mad inflation, and this made things harder.

It was, of course, impossible to escape the effects of the general demoralisation in the Kuomintang areas, and some of this comes through in our story. The positive aspects, however, stand. People were organised on a co-operative basis in almost all unoccupied provinces. They did undertake responsibility, and they did produce.

The co-operatives were despite all their failings a tribute to the spirit of the ordinary Chinese worker and peasant who wanted to resist the enemy and gladly took this way to do so. They showed actually how little assistance was needed to get production going, when groups of people came together with the life wish strong

in them, determined to support themselves and produce what was needed.

In all countries where intensive farming is needed, it will become more and more important to decentralise cities so that the people can give back to the land what they take from it. Chemical fertilisers are but a partial answer. The industrial co-operative gives the decentralised unit economic strength. It does not allow for huge managerial overheads with a mass of office bureaucrats.

Today in China people increasingly organise themselves and go out of the great cities back into country villages to plant industry, help with agriculture, and raise the cultural and economic level of rural life. But now they do it with all the strength that society can give. Then Gung Ho was a movement working inside a decaying society with the aim of strengthening people's resistance. Today the movement back to the countryside is part of the whole policy of peace and construction of a land where the will to struggle for revolutionary change is still in the ascendant.

Rewi Alley

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# I

"Our seven — their five — makes twelve in all." The speaker looked around for somewhere to spit after this lengthy speech. He didn't find it, so spat on the mud floor and rubbed it in with his foot.

The room was cold and dark — a partitioned portion of a draughty family temple. The paper on the lattice window rattled in the wind which blew in through numerous holes and cracks. Two pieces of charcoal in a brazier on the floor provided a dull glow in the midst of a pile of ash which gave off fumes of carbon monoxide but very little heat.

The co-operative organiser, seated at a desk, would write a few words, and then run his hands up his sleeves, or press them tightly between his knees for warmth. His nose ran continually, and he kept blowing it against his finger into a cuspidor at his feet. Fu Ya-pin was the graduate of a middle school in Peking—where he had acquired spectacles and tuberculosis. Every now and then he took a mouthful of hot water with a loud sucking noise from a cracked enamel mug beside him. He had become disgusted with the life of a refugee student in Chungking. But unfortunately his education had not included any practical training. He would have joined the guerillas but did not feel sufficiently strong physically, so put his patriotic feeling into his Gung Ho work. He was desperately anxious to be a good co-

operative organiser, but was irritated at the slowness with which the members grasped the maze of forms it seemed to be his main duty to fill in. "Now," in his high falsetto voice he said, "all you have to do is to put your seals or thumb-prints under your names as we have written them, and then you can be registered as a co-operative society with the *hsien* government." He put down his enamel mug with a little smack on the table, filling the room with a slight official note.

The new members looked at each other. Did not all respectable people keep clear of anything to do with a yamen? The idea of getting a loan to buy some looms and cotton yarn appealed to them as did that of meeting together and having a chairman out of their own ranks. But the official end of things filled them with some misgivings. Silence fell, only broken by a "plop" as one of the men accidentally pushed his elbow through the paper on the lattice. The hole was immediately filled with children's faces staring in. Then the acting chairman came to life.

"Our seven will sign. We have already discussed this." He fished out from the inner lining of his clothes a small wooden seal. Those with him were all from the same village. The group of five were refugees who had landed in the city on top of a railway car on which they had ridden for many days, fleeing from the devastation that drought, locusts and the requisition of men and materials had caused in the east. There had been eight of them when they started out, but three had been crushed as the train went through a low roofed tunnel. Hearing about the organisation of workers' co-operatives they had come to the office to make inquiries. Fu Ya-pin had told them that to form a co-operative, they must



have at least seven people — but he had introduced them to the seven weavers who felt that even that number was not really enough. As a result the two groups had decided to try and work together. They agreed also that the name of their co-operative should be the "Honan Friends" and that they would concentrate principally on the weaving of canvas for the army.

After the seven had signed, the five simply followed on. Everyone was anxious to get the business over with, and to settle down to work. The acting chairman asked, "How soon can we get the loan to enable us to start?"

"I can't say exactly," replied Fu Ya-pin somewhat helplessly. "You see, the forms must go through the hands of many people. When they are all signed, we can get a cheque, go to the co-operative treasury to cash it, buy our yarn and machinery and start work. It may be two weeks—it may be longer, for it depends on many people. I will do all I can to push!"

"Now in the meantime how do we and our families live?" came the question.

"How did you live before?" said Fu Ya-pin. He was getting impatient, but he quickly added, "I think I can help a little. You will find when you join a people's organisation, help comes with it! The women's wool spinning co-operative needs some extra members. Your wives can go there and apply, and I am sure that some will be admitted. Then we have five other weaving co-operatives here, and you can work there for wages for a month. They are allowed to hire workers to twenty-five per cent of their number. Here are the addresses. And here is my card which you can show the chairman. You must do the talking yourselves. Since you are forming a co-operative and will be a part

of our future Co-operative Federation, they will be anxious to do what they can for you. You will quickly learn the advantages of the co-operative motto—'All for each'—but I hope that you will not be slow in learning the other part of the motto—'Each for all'. That is harder."

Delivered of this sermon, Fu Ya-pin felt stronger. His blood even circulated better. The prospective co-op members, however, had been preached at before, and most of what he said went in one ear and out the other. Some things, however, were firmly fixed in their minds. They would be a co-operative, there would be a regrettable association with the yamen, but eventually they would get their loan. In the meantime, they would have a way to live. Spring was coming on, and the children could go out after wild vegetables easy then to gather. On the whole, satisfactory. It was heartening to know they would be using their strength again. They filed stolidly out of the room. Fu went with them to the front door, and bowed farewell in the correct way. He really liked ordinary people, and wanted to show that he did not think himself superior. But at the same time, his high school education had forced him to believe inwardly that he was really made of other clay. This was a drawback that prevented too great intimacy.

As they went down the road, the group discussed matters. They knew a yellow loess clay cliff where several caves could be dug. Their own share capital was enough to pay four members to do the digging, and to get a refugee carpenter they knew to start building the wooden frames of the looms. The others would take the jobs Fu had suggested, and help support those working on the new co-operative premises. They all agreed to

assist on holidays or in any other free time. Then when the capital came, they would be able to start right away. The machine co-operative had already made the iron parts for the looms and would deliver them when paid for. The embryo federation's marketing and supply agency had promised them a portion of an army order, which while it would not pay much over interest charges, would at least provide enough food for a start. It meant, too, that they would be able to buy some yarn. Machine yarn was hard to come by since the cutting off of the great cotton mills on the coast and the price had been rising daily. But if an army order was obtained, it was sometimes possible to buy enough yarn to weave material for the ordinary market as well. The wives, too, could produce some native hand-spun yarn, even though the use of this was limited. People had become accustomed to buying their cloth woven in the Japanese and other great factories of Shanghai. When the market for raw cotton was good, farmers planted it. When everyone planted it there was a glut, and the price fell. Then planting stopped until it grew dear again. The price of the raw cotton was now about normal, for the cotton merchants had in collaboration with the Kuomintang officials, managed to hold it down, so that it would pay them to buy it and ship it through the Japanese lines for the bigger prices offered in the occupied territory. When they found the Gung Ho co-operatives to be competitors in buying raw cotton, they carried complaints to the Kuomintang officials and generals saying how the very idea of industrial co-operatives was communistic, and ought to be halted. But then again, even the generals needed woven cloth. So the co-operatives remained.

Things were not so easy for Fu Ya-pin. He was determined to get his new co-operative registered despite all opposition. He spent days seeing one small bureaucrat after another, pleading, pushing, getting angrier and angrier at the dead, heavy opposition he met that could only be softened by money. It was only on promising payment of "squeeze" after the co-operative started work that he was able to get all the forms approved, and the loan authorised. "Money should not be let out so cheaply," the accountant at the treasury complained. "Only ten per cent a year! Why none of the gentry or shops around would make a loan for less than that rate per month!" Fu swallowed hard but said nothing. He was learning not to talk back. Getting the group together in his office that night for a final discussion was not easy. Most were working long hours, the length simply depending on the strength of the worker to keep going, and were paid by piece work. At last he heard them coming over, first halting by the big earthenware jar in the front courtyard to pass their water, which fell in a heavy stream. Fu had wanted to have that jar moved and a privy built, but the men around would not hear of it. "We're not women! We've nothing to hide. Anyway the urine is valuable fertiliser and it's too difficult for the man who comes to take it away every day if he has to go into some corner through a door that's always falling down! You have too many foreign habits, Mr. Fu! You tell us to follow science. Our way is simple and scientific!" He was so glad to see them tonight however that he welcomed the sound of their using the jar that preceded them. It felt good to be able to announce the news that a start could be made

at last. So there was more than a hint of quiet exultation in his voice as he spoke.

They talked for several hours and then simply had to go and get some sleep, for most had to be at their looms by daylight, and it was the time of the year when dawn broke early. They had already agreed to leave four members, with some of the older children who could carry baskets to help them, to dig caves for both work and living. The leader of this little group was a Hankow man — Lao Wang. He was one of the five. With him were three of the seven. Lao Wang had a father and mother, a wife and five children, but his eldest boy, Little Wang, was living at another co-operative for the time being reeling yarn, to earn his food. He was already twelve years old, and could even write a little, having been at school for a year. His young brother, aged ten, slept with his father, the next two with the grandparents. The youngest was a baby in arms who stayed with the mother. When the first cave was dug, the Wang family moved in, as did the three Honan men helping. At the back of the cave the grandparents slept, and towards the open front, the others.

The first night there came a heavy thud. Lao Wang never really woke, so sleepy was he after a day's hard work. He turned over, pushed his son into place against his wife, and just slept on. None of the others even stirred. At dawn when they called for grandmother there was no answer. They peered into the back of the cave and saw that a great block of the ceiling had fallen in and the only thing in the cave was a pile of clay like a grave mound. Lao Wang's wife threw herself down wailing. The Honan men rushed off to get Chairman Chen. They knew how hopeless it was to dig the bodies

out though Lao Wang was furiously throwing off the earth to uncover them, while his wife screamed that he too would be killed by more falling earth if he did not come away.

When the co-op members came, it was decided that the cave was too unsafe even to timber. *Feng Shui* — the “wind and water elements” — was bad. Chairman Chen knew that any “bad luck” association would be poor for morale, so readily agreed. He together with the other members now helped to bring out the bodies and bury them respectably on the hillside. There was not enough money for coffins, so they covered the four corpses — two old and two young, with the torn and ragged quilt. Which for them in their bitter poverty was a real sacrifice to the dead.

Chairman Chen then acted quickly. He led the people further down the road to another valley, and there helped to start new digging, this time in a dry cliff facing south. Taking the blame on himself, he said that he should have known a wet cliff away from the sun was dangerous. There would be no trouble with this one, he felt sure. The next day he and the other members came at night with bits of timber they had borrowed from friendly co-ops, and timbered the new cave as it was dug. At the end of the first week, there was a small sum in ready money from available wages for buying more timber, and two members, Su and Yang, went into the countryside to meet the K.M.T. soldiers who daily went out to the hills to cut trees and haul them to the city for sale. The soldiers used to cut any tree they fancied, knowing that no peasant dared oppose them. The first group of soldiers that Su and Yang met were carrying some fine lengths of walnut. Behind came a

peasant expostulating. They had cut the tree in his yard, and it was one that brought the family a good income. But the soldiers were tired of his wailing and they cuffed him. Finally he simply sat by the road and cried. Su and Yang bought the timber rather cheaply, and after making arrangements to buy more the next day, set off back to the caves carrying it.

On the way they talked of the peasant, and felt sorry for him. Yet if they had not bought the timber, other people would have. Or else it would have been chopped up for the army camp kitchens, which was the official reason for cutting it. The Kuomintang troops of Tang En-po sat on the heads of the people with a ruthlessness that needed to be borne to be fully understood. Folk hated them bitterly, for all knew that Tang and his soldiers were taking advantage of the Japanese invasion, of the famine and the helplessness of the people, to loot as they wished. They, with the landlords and the big merchants, were the ruling class. The people were the serfs. The people included the refugee weavers, the local peasants and the army conscripts themselves. Bitterly these groups were learning that their interests were the same. They were also learning who was their enemy.

The new caves that soon took shape were warm and comfortable. Lao Wang had fallen into a stony silence, and seemed only to find release in working himself to a standstill. His wife went to the grave for several days to weep, but with two sons and a baby, people said that in these times she was not so unlucky. Though it was bad to lose the old people, really Lao Wang would now be better able to feed those who remained. Another of the co-operatives took in his ten-year-old to reel yarn,

so now he had only to care for his wife and baby. She would go out into the fields to cut greens, and boil some in a soup to be eaten with steamed red sorghum and the corn flour mixtures that were so much cheaper than wheat flour at this time, and which most ordinary people were glad to get hold of.

Such were the birth pains of the Honan Friends Canvas Weaving Co-operative.



## II

At last the great day came. The twelve men met in the organiser's office. The two apprentices—Little Wang and his young brother—poured boiled water into the cracked pottery and enamel mugs that stood in front of those sitting around the long office table. Organiser Fu was at the head. He had read out the constitution of the co-operative, paragraph by paragraph, and now called for the election of a chairman. There was no question of who it was to be. Acting Chairman Chen was immediately elected, and Fu got up, gave him his seat, then sat down among the members. Li Tsu-yi was elected treasurer, and the general discussion began. Fu was anxious to prevent any split between the seven and the five. At first the seven had sat crowded along one side of the table, with the five on the other. But with the elevation of Chen to the chairmanship, and Fu sitting with the five, six pairs of eyes looked across at a corresponding six. Fu had attended many such meetings, and had learnt not to try to dominate them. At times he would come in with phrases on co-operation, which, though they had been learnt by heart from one book or another, always seemed to fit. "Co-operation is meetings and accounts," he now said. They had been discussing book-keeping, and Li had said that when he was in the army, he had worked on accounts for some time. "But that was just making bad accounts look