Chao Tsu

BEFORE *the* DAWN

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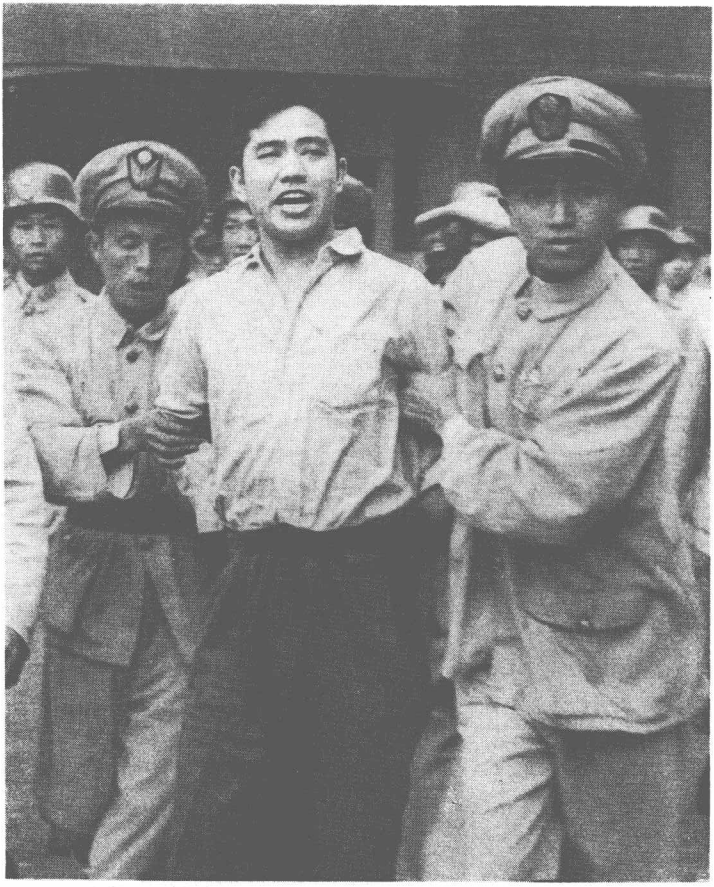
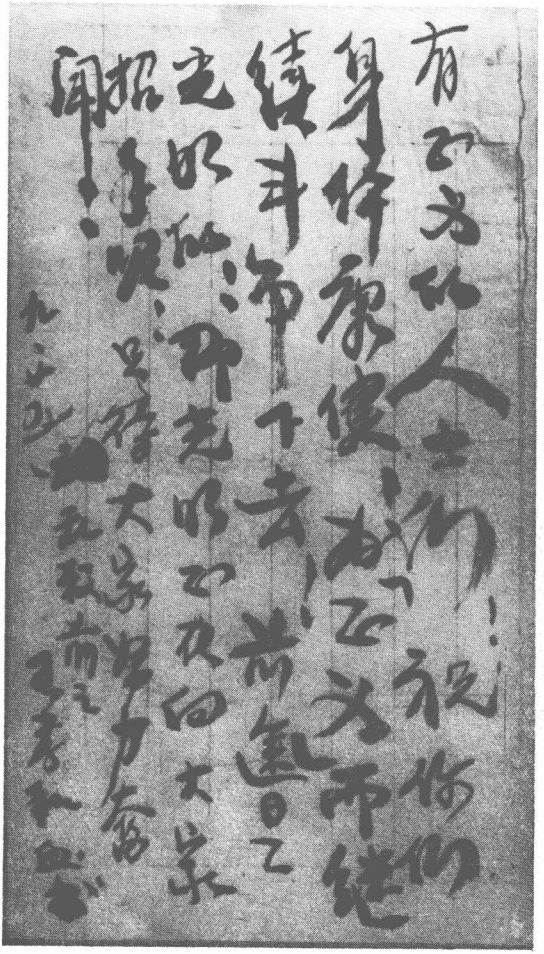
Wang Hsiao-ho in 1946



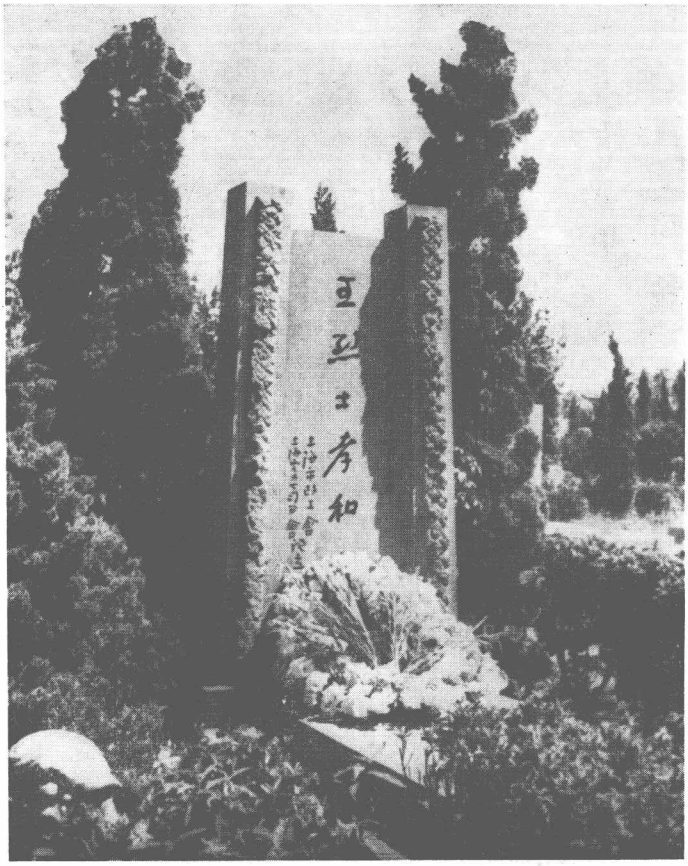
Shouting slogans against the Kuomintang a few moments before his execution



"Good health to you, the just-minded! Carry on the fight for the cause of justice! The future is bright! It's beckoning to you all! What's needed is for you to fight hard!

Wang Hsiao-ho,

September 25, before enemy butchery."



The grave in the Hungchiao Cemetery, Shanghai, where Wang Hsiao-ho is buried

A group of Young Pioneers listening to the story of his life, in the Working-Class Movement Gallery attached to the Shanghai Workers' Cultural Palace. The gallery contains historical documents related to Wang Hsiao-ho's struggle against the enemy, and his personal belongings

Wang Hsiao-ho's widow and daughters. The younger child was born after his death

CHILDHOOD

On February 4, 1924, a baby was born into the family of a poverty-stricken seaman in Hongkew District, Shanghai. The baby was Wang Hsiao-ho.

Wang Hsiao-ho was the second of four boys. The family lived in a little single-roomed shack. Somehow, they managed to sleep and cook in this one poky little room. In summer, it was dreadfully stuffy. Flies buzzed all over the place and bumped into your face. In broad daylight, rats ran here, there and everywhere.... There was only one parent at home — Hsiao-ho's mother. His father was at sea on a merchant vessel.

While Hsiao-ho was still young, his big brother and the elder of the two younger boys caught meningitis. There was no money to send for a doctor, so they died. The following year, the youngest brother was abducted away by a slave-trader. In a matter of some ten months, his mother had lost three of her children. Grief made her taciturn and she watched over the last child, Hsiao-ho, like a fool, not letting him out of her sight for a moment. Sorrow and anxiety began to tell on her. She turned quite deaf and could not hear unless you shouted into her ear.

Of course, she loved her only son all the more. When she was watching him, the tears would come to her eyes for no obvious reason. Sometimes she seemed to be un-

aware of them, for they streamed down her cheeks unheeded.

At fourteen, Hsiao-ho was a strapping lad, and could almost have been taken for an adult.

He had been studying for several years in a primary school when in the summer of 1937 the War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression broke out. He and his mother left Shanghai and went to her native village on the coast of Ningpo County. Here they lived with her brother in a house near Tungchien Lake, quite close to a harbour.

The people of this neighbourhood were fisherfolk, and had been for generations. Her brother and her sister's husband were no exception. Hsiao-ho's own father, Wang Fu-ting, had also been a fisherman when he was young.

For Hsiao-ho, who had been pent up so long in the small wooden hut in Shanghai, the open countryside came as a revelation. He would stand watching the boats — big and small — and the fishermen casting their nets over the foam-tipped waves of the boundless ocean, with a never-ending sense of wonder.

He was itching to go on the lake, or out to sea. But his mother would not hear of it.

Without her knowledge, he used to slip away to the lakeside. There he would help his uncle to air the nets, or swim and turn somersaults with the other children. At dawn, he liked to go there to watch the sun rise, all red and fiery, big and round, its dazzling light spattering the surface of the lake with myriads of golden stars. Row upon row of fishing boats lay moored close to one another on the far side of the lake, making a forest of masts and small buntings.

One night, everything grew as black as pitch, and a storm blew up. High waves rolled across Tungchien Lake, beating against the rocks. A howling gale carried up sand and stones, tore thick branches off the trees and shook the roofs of the houses at the foot of the rocky hills. Lights went on in every house, and the fishermen dared not go to sleep. They lay in bed, wide awake, as if waiting for the worst to happen. Wang Hsiao-ho was also awake. He got up and peeped through the cracks around the window to see if the storm was easing. But it was too dark to see anything in the darkness. So he lay awake, listening attentively and thinking hard to himself. After a while he turned to his mother. "Mum, what'll happen to the fishing boats at sea?" he asked.

His mother did not answer.

Another stormy night, in mid-winter, they heard someone pounding at the door.

His mother hurried to open it. A strong gust of wind blew in, and brought with it a man — his uncle.

It was the custom during the fishing season for the boats to go to sea for six or seven months at a time, not returning until the following March. Why should his uncle suddenly turn up now — and in the dead of night? He was as thin as a lath and his clothes were almost in rags. The sight of him startled them out of their wits. When he spoke, his voice was so faint they could scarcely hear him. "The boat capsized!" he panted. "I swam ashore. I lost everything! I've begged my way home."

They were aghast. It was indeed a narrow escape.

Dumbfounded, they stood staring at one another in silence. Hsiao-ho looked at the hefty stature of his uncle. His chest was sun-tanned to a deep bronze that

glinted under the lamplight. Here and there on his body were bruises and cuts from the rocks. How had he managed to make the shore against such waves? Hsiao-ho wondered. How strong and resourceful one would have to be to save oneself in such a sea, he thought to himself.

After that, he never let a chance go by of asking his uncle to tell him all about this adventure. Patiently, his uncle told and retold the story. But Hsiao-ho was never satisfied. He plied him with all sorts of questions, as though trying to commit every detail of the incident to memory so that if a similar thing ever happened to him, he could also save himself that way.

One day, his uncle took him to the wharf where the fishing boats moored. Dusk was falling and the surface of the lake dimmed and turned dark. The last sea-gulls were flying overhead, circling round and round, as if looking for somewhere to alight.

His uncle was out of sorts. He looked at the deserted wharf. Not a soul was around, only several small boats stranded on the beach.

"Oh, the fishing boats will soon be home again," his uncle said, as though talking to himself.

In the dusk, the evening breeze brought the sound of a woman's piteous voice to their ears.

"Come home! Come home!"

Looking back, Hsiao-ho saw a young woman carrying a lantern and a piece of bamboo cane, wailing mournfully as she walked along the shore of the lake. He lost no time in asking what it was all about. "What's she doing?" he demanded.

His uncle did not even look her way, only sighed.

"I know her voice," he said. "It's Liu Szu's wife. She's looking for her husband's soul. They were married hardly a year, when he lost his life for the profits of his master. The boat capsized."

Hsiao-ho gazed at the woman for quite a while, then asked, "What's the bamboo cane for?"

"Her husband was drowned, but they never found his body. She can't bury an empty coffin, so she'll put the bamboo cane into it."

The tears welled in Hsiao-ho's eyes.

"Doesn't the boat-owner do anything to help her, now her husband is dead?" Hsiao-ho demanded.

"Such kind-hearted people are yet to be born!" his uncle replied shortly. "These rich people grab a lot of wealth, but they're tight-fisted. Poor men's lives are not worth a cent, as far as they're concerned!"

Hsiao-ho fell back in deep thought. He could not understand why the rich should be so cruel. The scene he had witnessed left an indelible impression on his mind. It was a long time before he could forget the dark grey figure of the woman, with her bamboo cane and her plaintive cries. The memory of those cries was as terrifying as the sound of tidal waves in the dead of night.

In summer, Hsiao-ho prepared to go back to Shanghai to take up his studies again.

According to a time-honoured tradition prevailing in the Chinese countryside, his mother bought several pounds of meat as an offering to Buddha. She packed his things, his books in one bundle and a change of clothes in another. In still another she wrapped lots of native products — New Year cakes, dried fish and what not. As he was about to leave, she repeated time and again, "Now

you're going to be all on your own. Take good care of yourself."

But he was far too excited at the prospect of getting back to his studies to have room for sad thoughts.

"Don't you worry, Mum," he grinned. "I'll look after myself, I won't get lost."

So ended Wang Hsiao-ho's childhood. He returned to Shanghai alone.

HIS SCHOOLMATES

Many roads in the imperialist-ruled concessions of Shanghai were named after foreigners. Rue Corneille was one of them. By the side of this road stood a western-style two-storeyed building with an attic, neither new nor very large. At the gate of the building was a signboard reading Lichih English Language Professional School. In the spring of 1940, Hsiao-ho found himself in this school, in the third grade of the preparatory course.

One day, he attended school as usual. The second period of that morning was Chinese, taken by a teacher known generally among the boys as "Whiskers Chen." Chen had a grizzled beard, hence his nickname. He wore black-rimmed glasses and the same old dark grey gown all the year round. Usually, his lectures were delivered in a listless voice, and were as dry as sawdust. But occasionally he would change his tone. That was when he touched upon certain historical facts. At such moments, his voice would rise, his eyes shine and his beard tremble. Then his lecture became vivid and interesting. The atmosphere in the classroom would become quiet and solemn as the students riveted their attention on what he was saying, their eyes large with surprise.

Today Whiskers Chen talked about the Sino-French War from 1883 to 1885. He described the heroic way the Black Flag Army of the Ching dynasty had fought against the invaders on the China-Vietnam border. His voice

rose in excitement as he told the students how, even as the Black Flags were inflicting a tremendous defeat upon the French troops, the rulers in the rear were ignobly begging peace from the hands of the aggressors. "A rotten political set-up was the final cause of the national disaster," he said with a sigh, winding up his lecture.

The students gazed at him and gaped for more. He gave them one of his rare mild glances, and added, "Study hard and do something for your country when you grow up."

Suddenly the door of the classroom was quietly pushed open, and a lad entered, wearing an old cotton-quilted gown with several patches. Slowly and awkwardly, with his head hanging, he made his way towards his seat, evidently trying to steal in unnoticed.

Whiskers Chen, as a rule, never took much notice of those who came late and usually pretended not to have seen them. But today he was perhaps too excited to keep to his usual practice. "Why are you late, Tung Pao-ken?" he asked.

Tung threw a furtive glance at his teacher, but gave no answer.

Whiskers Chen took off his glasses and eyed the latecomer coldly. "In times like these, your parents must be making great sacrifices to enable you to study," he said. "Now you go about it in this way. Do you think you're doing a fair thing by your parents, your country?"

All eyes in the classroom swung round on to Tung Pao-ken. Tung hung his head and said not a word. Wang Hsiao-ho, who sat near him, saw the tears gathering in his eyes.