

Kao Yun-lan



Annals of
a Provincial Town

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
PEKING 1959

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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Printed in the People's Republic of China

Preface

Chang Chu-kun¹

Comrade Kao Yun-lan's novel about the famous Amoy gaol-break has received one of the warmest welcomes in recent years. National periodicals like the *Wenyi Bao* (Literary Gazette) and *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (China Youth Daily) praised it highly. It has been adapted for the stage and made into a film. Series after series of picture stories, based upon it, have appeared.

Annals of a Provincial Town has won such wide acclaim not only because the author builds his tale around a revolutionary exploit that thrilled the nation, and because his plot is intricate and exciting. Most important is the positiveness of his theme and his fine character delineation.

The ten years following the sell-out of the revolution by the Kuomintang in 1927 were years of misery for the Chinese people. China's capitalists sided with the counter-revolution. The petty-bourgeoisie vacillated. Only the proletariat and its vanguard, the Chinese Communist Party, stood firm. Preserving and expanding the revolutionary forces, they organized the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, and established soviet governments in many parts of China's vast land.

On September 18, 1931, the Japanese imperialists invaded China's Northeast. The Chinese Communist Party proposed ending the civil war and forming a united front

¹ Vice-Mayor of Amoy.

to resist Japanese aggression. But Chiang Kai-shek's reactionary government ignored the people's pleas and continued to attack the soviet areas and the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army.

In 1934, determined to come to grips with the foreign invaders, the Red Army broke out of the fifth "encirclement and annihilation campaign" attempted by the Kuo-mintang, and began its 8,000-mile epochal Long March north. Early in 1935, the students of Peking University staged a huge demonstration protesting against the Kuo-mintang government's supine cowardice. The following year was marked by the Sian Incident, when Chiang Kai-shek was arrested by the troops of his warlord allies, who wanted to fight to protect their homes in the Northeast; he was saved from execution only by the intervention of the Communist Party.

Overwhelming public pressure finally forced the Kuo-mintang to put an end to the civil war, in 1937. The whole nation quickly entered a new era of resistance against Japanese aggression.

Annals of a Provincial Town describes the courageous revolutionary struggle of the people of the seaport of Amoy, led by the Communist Party, during the ten-year period between 1927 and 1937.

Amoy has been a port for many years. Today it is known as the "Heroic City" in the front line of China's coastal defence. But during the hundred years preceding the formation of the People's Republic it was a typically semi-feudal, semi-colonial town.

Towards the end of the 17th century, a branch of the British imperialist East India Company set up a branch in Amoy and began to bring large quantities of opium into China. In 1842, the Manchu government, having been defeated in battle by the British, concluded the Treaty of Nanking which opened five cities, including Amoy, to "free trade."

The imperialists came swarming in. Kulangsu, just across the bay from Amoy, became a private concession under the joint control of the British, Americans, Japanese, French, and Dutch, etc. with its own banks, docks, warehouses, post-office and police. Consulates established in the "treaty ports" by the imperialists were actually headquarters for expediting the oppression and enslavement of the Chinese people.

But the Chinese people refused to submit. For over one hundred years, the citizens of Amoy fought ceaselessly against imperialist aggression. The uprising of the Short Sword Society which won half a year's freedom for Amoy in 1851 and the wresting back of the Haihoutan section from the British in 1922 were two of the larger-scale battles.

By the time the First Revolutionary Civil War started in 1925, Amoy had its own branch of the Communist Party. The chairman of Amoy's Trade Union Federation, Lo Yang-tsai, was a member of both the Party's Special Committee for Southern Fukien and the Amoy Municipal Party Committee. He led twenty thousand union members in a series of strikes against imperialist and capitalist exploitation, winning victory after victory.

Imperialist goods flooded the Amoy market, imperialists controlled the Custom Office. In 1926 alone, imports exceeded exports by over 25 million ounces of silver in value. The Japanese were strongest in the city; some of the most powerful foreign firms were theirs. They also ran newspapers, schools and hospitals. Chinese rascals who acquired Japanese citizenship got away with all sorts of outrageous conduct.

British companies like Asiatic Petroleum, Butterfield & Swire, Hongkong & Shanghai Banking Corp., and British-American Tobacco Co. controlled the oil, transport, banking and cigarette trade. American gasoline and automobile imports became more profitable than the opium smuggling and trafficking in human labour of an earlier period.

Chinese compradore companies adopted foreign names and became foreign corporations. Many compradores, scoundrels and gangsters adopted foreign citizenship.

The imperialists kept their grip on the people through the warlords, gangsters and feudal clan leaders. Every street, every section of town, had its local bully, grafting and extorting. On the sea and on the docks, the three big clans ruled. They waged bloody battles, often costing dozens of lives at the least provocation.

Amoy had all the other attributes of a corrupt city too—it was full of prostitutes, cheats, beggars and gambling dens, and crawling with contagious diseases.

Amoy, nevertheless, was the centre of the Party's work in Fukien Province. A network of Red Army guerrilla bases spread through the outlying counties. In 1932, the year after the gaol-break, Commander Lin Piao's East Route Army, under the personal leadership of Chairman Mao, liberated and held Changchow, only fifty miles from Amoy, for forty-nine days. This greatly encouraged the people of Fukien and had a profound effect upon the Chinese communities in the Malay Archipelago.

An enemy-occupied island surrounded by a sea of revolutionary bases, Amoy was also the foundation pillar of our revolutionary underground. Time and again the enemy tried to topple that pillar, but they never succeeded.

The big gaol-break took place in May 1930. (In the novel, the author stages it in 1935.) Fukien's secret provincial Party committee had been exposed on two different occasions, and many comrades had been arrested, including the secretary of the Amoy Municipal Party Committee, Liu Tuan-sheng, and the secretary of the Fukien Provincial Communist Youth League, Chen Po-sheng. The enemy was preparing to execute them.

Deciding to attempt a rescue, the provincial committee designated Lo Ming, Wang Teh (today, the first secretary of the Canton Municipal Party Committee), Tao Chu (at present the first secretary of the Kwangtung Provincial

Party Committee), and three other comrades, to plan the break, and put Comrade Tao Chu in charge.

The gaol-break was remarkably successful. More than forty comrades, including Liu Tuan-sheng and Chen Po-sheng, were saved. Not one of our men was even wounded, and we wiped out over twenty of the enemy. The people said: "The Communist Party is wonderful. It can come without a trace and leave without a shadow."

The commandant of the Kuomintang naval garrison in Amoy had to be transferred. The political influence of the break was enormous.

Kao Yun-lan did not take part in the gaol-break, but he was present in Amoy when it occurred. This stirring event and the gallant men who participated in it made a profound impression on him. He considered it was his duty as a writer to set it down on paper. During the next twenty years, the urgency of his desire grew increasingly acute.

In a letter to me in 1952, he said: "I wish to devote my life to writing the story of this bold epic to commemorate my old comrades, teachers and friends whose heroism has thrilled me to my very soul."

Kao Yun-lan kept his promise. Beginning the novel in 1953, he completed it in 1956, adding the finishing touches just an hour before he died.

Annals of a Provincial Town was Kao Yun-lan's first and last novel. Like all good literary works, it has its shortcomings. Because the author did not take part in the gaol-break personally, and lacked adequate revolutionary experience, it seems to me that his descriptions of the revolutionaries and their Communist Party leaders, as well as the political and organizational leadership of the Party, are not full or well-rounded enough. Secondly, I feel that he did not sufficiently reflect the political atmosphere in Amoy on the eve of the big gaol-break and certain of the related major historical events and revolutionary activities. Of course a novel is not a history, and

so these shortcomings do not detract much from the merits of the novel.

The Amoy of *Annals of a Provincial Town* is no more today. No longer is it a colonial city controlled by imperialists, Kuomintang espionage agencies, gangsters and ruffians. Like many other places in China, Amoy is in the process of becoming a modern industrial metropolis. And the courage and determination of the citizens of Amoy in their retaliation against the provocations of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang armies on Quemoy and their stand in the face of the American military threat in the Taiwan Straits has won them title of "The Heroic People."

January 1959

LIST OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Ho Chien-ping	<i>a young school teacher</i>	何劍平
Li Yueh	<i>a compositor</i>	
Wu Chien	<i>a newspaper editor</i>	吳堅
Chen Szu-min	<i>a school teacher</i>	陳四敏
Wu the Seventh	<i>a native healer and master at arms</i>	吳七
Yao Mu	<i>a gaoler</i>	
Liu Mei	<i>an artist</i>	
Chao Hsiung	<i>chief of the Political Security Bureau</i>	
Crocodile	<i>head of the Detective Squad</i>	猴. 魚
Lin Shu-yueh	<i>wife of Chao Hsiung</i>	
Lin Shu-yin	<i>her sister</i>	
Ting Hsiu-wei	<i>a girl student</i>	

I

Our elders often told us—the interior of Fukien Province for years had been ravaged by soldiers, officials and kidnappers, and torn by strife.

Refugees from all parts of the province constantly poured into Amoy—a small city on an island off the coast that had been opened up as a “treaty port” less than a hundred years before. Vagabonds, robbers, prostitutes, sneak-thieves, beggars. . . . As earlier arrivals died by the roadside, new batches arrived to take their place.

In 1924, when Ho Chien-ping was ten and living in the interior with his family in Tungan Township, a fierce struggle broke out between the Ho clan and the Li clan.

The clans had been bloodily feuding for generations. This clash occurred because plague wiped out a number of people in the Ho clan. The Ho's maintained that the clan temple which the Li's had just erected had disturbed the geomantic “pulse” of the Ho's ancestral home. The heads of both clans—hereditary landlords and gentry—played on the superstitions of the country folk to stir up trouble.

The leaders of the Ho clan made a deal with the local officials and established a “Peace Preservation Corps.” The leaders of the Li clan formed an alliance with a bandit gang and organized a “militia.” But officials or bandits, they were all cut from the same cloth. Both groups seized conscripts, commandeered food, extorted money, and worked hand in glove with the landlords. When the big dragons clashed, the little fish were injured in the battle.

Chien-ping's father, Ho Ta-tzu, a stone-mason famed for his terrible temper, was assigned to a “dare-to-die”

squad. In a savage engagement, he was fatally stabbed in the chest by Li Mu, and was carried home. As he lay dying, he ground his teeth and raged, "I must live! I can't die yet! I have to get my revenge! . . ."

That night, his younger brother, Ta-lei, hurried through a heavy rainstorm to see him. Ta-lei was twenty, a powerfully built young peasant with a hooked nose like a hawk.

"Li Mu! . . . Li . . . Mu! . . ." Ta-tzu's breath was nearly gone. His feet were already cold and his eyes stared in a terrifying manner.

Tears ran down Ta-lei's cheeks. To his dying brother, he vowed:

"As sure as the Lord of the Heavens is above, I shall kill Li Mu and avenge Second Brother! May lightning strike me dead if I don't! . . ."

Before the words had left his mouth, an enormous clap of thunder split the sky and shook everyone in the room.

Having heard his brother's vow, Ta-tzu closed his eyes. This simple, unfortunate stone-mason, even as he breathed his last, still didn't know for whom he had laid down his life.

Li Mu, equally simple, when he heard that the stone-mason had died, was scared silly. In the middle of the night, taking his wife and fourteen-year-old son Li Yueh, he fled to Amoy and moved in with his uncle's family. The uncle was an honest old type-setter.

Later, Ta-lei and his nephew Chien-ping pursued their enemy to Amoy. They lived with the family of Ho Ta-tien, eldest brother of Ta-lei and the boy's deceased father.

Ta-tien was an old lacquer worker. He and his wife had been married for thirty years, but they had no children. When they saw their ten-year-old orphaned nephew for the first time, tears came to their eyes. Chien-ping became as precious to the old couple as the flesh of their own hearts.

Ta-lei made contact with a neighbourhood bravo and waited for an opportunity to strike. The clap of thunder that boomed out the night he vowed vengeance still reverberated in his ears; sometimes it shook him leaping from his dreams.

Honest Old Tien frequently remonstrated with him. "Why must you? All this killing — when will it end? 'Be good to all and have malice to none'. . . ."

Ta-lei paid no attention. One day he took Chien-ping out for a walk. They came to a small street. Pointing at a one-storey house in a lane, Ta-lei said, "The man who murdered your father lives in that house. I've been waiting here for him every night for the past nine days. But he doesn't dare to come out. . . ."

Suddenly, Ta-lei pointed at a boy in the lane. "Look, there's Li Yueh! Go over and hit him!" Ta-lei broke off a branch from a tree and handed it to Chien-ping. "Go ahead, don't be afraid. I'm here!"

Chien-ping remembered how his father had been killed. He took the branch from his uncle, rushed at Li Yueh and struck him a blow on the forehead.

Blood spurted from a gash in Li Yueh's temple. Chien-ping stood aghast. He had just missed the other boy's eye. Li Yueh didn't cry. He doubled up his fists and was about to charge when he noticed the black mourning band on Chien-ping's sleeve. Recalling that it was his father's knife which had made an orphan out of Chien-ping, Li Yueh hesitated. He looked coldly at Chien-ping a moment, then turned and ran away.

Ta-lei was delighted. He walked over and patted his nephew on the shoulder. "You've got guts! See, he's afraid of you."

After that day, Chien-ping didn't meet Li Yueh again for a long time.

When Li Mu learned that Ta-lei had trailed him to Amoy, he fearfully hid in his house all day. A shadow

seemed always to be lurking behind him. Sometimes it was Ta-lei; sometimes it was his victim, Ta-tzu.

Not long after, Li Mu disappeared. People said he had crossed the sea. This was followed by another rumour that he had perished on an uncultivated island off Sumatra, in Indonesia.

But Li Mu had not died.

One day a commission agent had arrived in Amoy harbour on an American steamship. He visited Li Mu's uncle. On hearing about Li Mu's situation, he expressed the deepest sympathy. The evening the ship was to sail, he generously bought a ticket for Li Mu, saying he could find a job for him in Hongkong. Here was an opportunity to get out of Ta-lei's clutches; Li Mu was grateful beyond words. When the ship reached Hongkong, his benefactor told him that someone else had already taken the job. He advised Li Mu to stay on the ship and go to Medan, in Sumatra, to "dig gold." On board were more than two hundred other passengers from Canton and Swatow, who said they were also going to "dig gold." When they reached Medan, Li Mu discovered that he and the other "prospectors" had all been indentured by his "benefactor" as plantation labourers.

They were herded by armed overseers to a tangled jungle. From then on, Li Mu was like an exiled criminal. He was completely cut off from the outside world, and Heaven ignored his cries. Day after day he slaved under the lash, clearing the jungle, planting tobacco. The land belonged to a joint Holland-American business concern. It was worked by seven hundred indentured labourers who had been tricked into coming by the company's agent.

The tobacco was converted into piles of American dollars and Dutch guilders which the bosses, "gentlemen of culture," spent in riotous living in New York and The Hague, while the poor cheated slaves eked out a miserable two guilders a month in the murky overgrown wilderness.

Li Mu spent all of his coolie wages on drink.

He ran away twice the first year. But each time he was brought back and terribly beaten. He was forced to continue the ceaseless, gruelling labour. . . .

Eight years of this work changed the stalwart Li Mu into a thin stick of a man, hunch-shouldered, weak in the legs, half deaf, his right arm paralyzed so that he couldn't even lift a hoe. Finally, they kicked him out. Or perhaps we should say, they were kind enough to leave him his life.

A local Chinese, also named Li, paid his passage back to Amoy.

Li Mu had never dreamed he would be able to get home again. His son was already a grown man; Li Yueh had married and was working as a first-class compositor. Li Mu alternately wept and laughed to see him; he wasn't sure how he felt.

The next day Li Yueh brought a young man to meet his father. He shouted in Li Mu's ear, "Pa, do you remember him?"

Li Mu looked the young fellow over, and shook his head. Li Yueh smiled.

"He's Chien-ping, Pa. Don't you remember?"

"Chien-ping?" Li Mu again shook his head and sighed. "My memory's so poor now."

"Pa, he's Ho Ta-tzu's son, Chien-ping."

Li Mu trembled all over. Throwing himself on the ground he pleaded, "Spare me! Spare me! I—I—"

Startled, the young men hastily raised him to his feet.

"The thing is past, Uncle Li," said Chien-ping, his voice loud with emotion. "You see, aren't Li Yueh and I good friends?"

Li Yueh gently helped his father to his room. When he returned he said to Chien-ping, "The old man has lost his nerve. It's the life he's led. The first half of his life he was pushed around by landlords and officials; the

second half he was pushed around by foreign capitalists. I don't think he'll last much longer. . . ."

Indeed there were not many days left for Li Mu. Shortly after the Rice Dumpling Day of the New Year, leaning on a stick, he was tottering along the street to enjoy a little winter sunshine. Suddenly, someone blocked his path. Li Mu looked up. Before him was a man in an expensive serge suit; he had a hooked nose; two gold teeth flashed in his mouth.

"Ha, so I've found you at last!" the man said with an evil laugh. "Do you know who I am?"

As soon as he heard the man's voice, Li Mu began to shake. His stick dropped from his nerveless hands. In his hysteria, he seemed to hear the cry, "The Heavens will avenge!" Then he was punched hard in the chest; blood flowed from his mouth and he fell senseless to the ground.

After he was brought home, Li Mu revived, but he was unable to rise from his bed. He kept muttering to himself, "The Heavens will avenge! The Heavens will avenge!"

A broken ship cannot withstand heavy seas. The shock Li Mu had received was much more devastating than the blow in the chest. In less than three days, he breathed his last. Just before he died, he said to Li Yueh:

"We ought to thank our ancestors. At least these old bones won't be buried in foreign soil. . . ."

The day of the funeral, Chien-ping was one of the leaders of the procession. Ta-lei rushed to see Old Tien, fuming with indignation.

"That worthless whelp! It's an insult to our ancestors! I avenge his father, and he goes to the enemy's funeral! Where are his principles? . . ."

II

How had these two young men of feuding families become friends? Let's go back a bit to the time when Chien-ping and his uncle first arrived in Amoy.

Chien-ping the boy had been disappointed on learning that Li Mu had disappeared, for that meant he would be unable to take his vengeance. But to Ta-lei the news was very welcome. He was secretly pleased to be relieved of his vow; at night the sound of thunder would no longer disturb his dreams.

Chien-ping was then in the sixth grade, primary school. Old Tien's lacquering work was not regular. He was unemployed six or seven months out of the year. Their financial situation grew steadily worse; Chien-ping could afford only wooden clogs for shoes. When the rich students teased him, he gave up the clogs and strode about proud and free in his bare feet. Nor did he care that they laughed at his patched clothes. He was not ashamed of his poverty.

In his second year of middle school, Chien-ping was unable to raise the tuition and had to quit. At home, he hungrily pored over the proletarian literature then circulating widely. His mind was filled with pictures of revolutionary heroes.

Soon there was not even food in the house. Chien-ping got a job in a wine-making establishment as an apprentice. But after a few days, the master punched him, and he angrily returned the compliment. He was promptly fired.

Not long after, Chien-ping found employment as a sales-clerk in a drug store. The boss was always creating remarkable new medical formulas; his advertisements appeared in all the local newspapers. Only recently he had concocted a worthless potion, which he gave a fancy name and grandly introduced in the pages of the press as a wonderful monkey gland remedy discovered by a German professor — it could make the weak strong and bring the dead back to life. Chien-ping was ashamed to take the customers' money.

Strangely enough, his fraud of a boss was very much respected. Everyone praised him for his philanthropy. Besides growing sleek and fat on the gains he milched