

My Childhood

Kao Yu-pao

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Editor's Note

My Childhood is the first part of an autobiographical novel written by Kao Yu-pao, a soldier-writer from a poor peasant family. Born in Liaoning Province, Northeast China in 1927, Kao Yu-pao had little more than one month of schooling before he was sent to mind pigs for a landlord. Under the cruel oppression of local despots, landlords and the Japanese army of occupation, Kao's family could not make a living on the land and had to flee to Talien (Dairen) in the hope of doing better there. They found the situation in the city under Japanese occupation was even worse and they had no alternative but to return to their own village empty-handed. Life became extremely difficult after they returned home and Yu-pao had to hire himself out as a labourer to keep the family alive.

Liberation came to his village in 1947. Deeply affected by the land reform policy of the Party, Yu-pao joined the Chinese People's Liberation Army, determined to wipe out the feudal landlords and the reactionary government. In the army his long-cherished hope to study was realized. Through his own diligence and the help he received in the army he made rapid progress and began learning to write in 1951. Since 1958 Kao Yu-pao has been studying in the Department of Journalism at the China People's University in Peking.

This book not only portrays the untold suffering of the Chinese peasants in the old society, but shows the great significance of the Chinese people's revolution and its inevitable

victory. In old China Kao Yu-pao could hardly keep his body and soul together and had no chance to become a writer. But, apart from giving him political and economic emancipation, the revolution enabled him to write an excellent novel based on his own life. The author has a great talent for expression, which enhanced by his rich experiences in life and strong class feeling lends a magnetic power to his novel.

* One cannot but be impressed by a story so truthfully and vividly told.

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Chapter 1

The Devils Are Coming

ON a great mountain east of the city of Fuhsien, in the province of Liaoning, some peasants who were busy with their spring ploughing, suddenly saw a number of men and women running towards them through a mountain pass. The peasants ran to meet them and asked, "What's the rush? What has happened?"

"Oh, trouble has come!" said one of the refugees. "Get away while you can! The Japanese devils are out to fight guerrillas on the other side of the Great Stone Bridge, but they've found none there and they'll soon pass through here on their way back to Wafangtien. They're killing and burning all the way and committing all sorts of crimes. They have already kidnapped lots of our people. Get away while you can!"

The peasants were alarmed as they watched the crowd of panic-stricken refugees; then they stood gazing at each other, at a loss to know what they should do.

Just then, two men came out of the Taiping Village administration office; one walked with a stick and the other was quite bald-headed. The pair went up to the group of peasants, and on seeing the fleeing refugees,

the one with a walking-stick opened his oblique eyes wider, and the old bald-headed fellow parted the three petals of his hare-lipped mouth and they both burst into a triumphant guffaw. They spoke almost simultaneously: "It'll soon be all right now. When the imperial army comes it'll be fine for us."

Seeing that the one with the walking-stick was the fiendish *pao* chief¹ Chou Chang-an and the bald-headed fellow behind him was Wang the Red Eye, the peasants all became very worried and began to back away in fear.

Chou Chang-an lived at Huangchiatien and was a fiendish *pao* chief under the puppet regime. He had once been dubbed "Chou the Evil Eye"; for he was a perfect brute, and when he glared in displeasure, his eyes had the fixed stare of one who had just hanged himself. Everyone in this neighbourhood was afraid of him. He was a rich landlord and a thorough scoundrel. His father, nicknamed "Chou the Old Skinflint," was even worse. This Old Skinflint hired about half a dozen farm hands every year. But, owing to some underhanded trick of his the farm hands were never able to go on working till autumn. Each year their health would invariably break down before then and they would have to quit their job. However, when they went and asked him for their wages after the autumn harvest, not a single cent would he ever pay them.

¹ Under the Kuomintang regime and the Japanese occupation, village households were grouped in *pao*, the members of which were held mutually responsible.

"You left before you finished your work," he would say, "why should I pay you anything? How dare you make such demands! You can take the case to the imperial army authorities if you like. I'll take the consequences."

But, though their year's toil was all for nothing, none of the farm hands ever dared to seek redress anywhere for fear of dire reprisals from both father and son. In this way the Chous had been lording it over everyone in the village and when the Japanese devils came; then Chou Chang-an became the *pao* chief and an even worse scoundrel.

Wang the Red Eye, whose real name was Wang Hung-yeh, had been a cattle dealer and was a great miser. He was dubbed the Red Eye because his eyes seemed to flash fire whenever he saw hard cash. For the sake of his own gain he would never hesitate to send otherwise useful cattle to the slaughter-house, and consequently many of them had been slaughtered because of him. He was hated by all, and was also known as Wang the Hangman. When he came to Sun Hamlet and settled down there, he became friends with the fiendish *pao* chief Chou Chang-an. Since the Japanese occupation of China's Northeast following the Incident of September 18, 1931, he had grown quite rich and had bought some hundreds of *mou*¹ of good land. Since then he no longer dealt in cattle, nor did he till the land

¹ 1 *mou* = 0.1647 acre.

himself, but he just rented it to peasants, lived on the rents and led a life of ease and comfort at home with his wife and daughter. He was always eating, drinking and making merry with the *pao* chief and heaven only knew what mischief they were capable of plotting together.

That day, when the two were talking together excitedly, the son of the *pao* chief, Little Mischief, came along with his satchel in his hand and a great black dog at his heels. The boy wore a brimless hat on his inordinately big head and was dressed in the best of clothes. He went up to the fiendish *pao* chief, threw down a letter in front of his father and said: "Here's a letter for you! I looked everywhere for you! But you just had to be away out here!"

"Who is the letter from?" the *pao* chief asked when he had picked it up.

"Why don't you find out for yourself? Haven't you eyes of your own?" retorted Little Mischief, jerking his big head to one side. He turned on his heel and was about to go when his father asked again: "Where are you going?" Slung the satchel over his shoulder, Little Mischief turned round and said: "Why, I'm going to school, of course!" So saying, he went off with the great black dog at his heels.

Then Wang the Red Eye suggested, "I say, *pao* chief! Maybe this is a letter from your younger brother?"

Having finished reading it, the *pao* chief gave a loud laugh and exclaimed: "I've said all along that my

younger brother must be acting as a guide for the imperial troops during this campaign against the guerrillas, but you didn't believe me. Look, this letter explains it all."

When Wang the Red Eye saw that it was in fact a letter from Chou Chang-tai, he was so delighted that he clapped his hands together, patted himself on his bald head and replied: "Ah! This really is a letter from him, then! Tell me right away what he says in it, will you?"

The *pao* chief smiled and answered: "He says that the imperial troops, having brought their campaign against the guerrillas to a successful close, are now on their way back to Wafangtien and will be passing through here tomorrow. He tells us to make thorough preparations for their reception."

"Why, that's exactly what we ought to do, to be sure, ha-ha-ha-ha!" rejoined Wang the Red Eye, laughing loudly.

"Now, my friend," said the *pao* chief, "you, as chief of Sun Hamlet, mustn't make me, *pao* chief of Taiping Village, lose face. Because the imperial troops have never yet set foot in this valley of ours, that's why we should make careful preparations to receive them beforehand. Those you need to see are the paupers in your hamlet — they don't even have the Japanese flags made yet. It won't do to welcome the imperial troops without them. You'll have to go today to hurry them up about the flags. Tomorrow, each household must

send one person with a flag to take part in the welcome rally. I'm chief of the first *pao* so I'll head the group, who are to gather in front of the village administration office. I'll go with them and you are to come, too. But go first and tell them about the flags and then come over to my place quickly to talk about getting the feast ready. The private soldiers must be given a good time too. Now, this isn't a joke. If the job's well done, both you and I'll gain something by it; if not, you'll have to take the consequences! I must go now to report to the head of the village."

Sun Hamlet was a poverty-stricken little village, consisting of some thirty or forty households. The Wang family was the only rich one, the rest being mostly Wang the Red Eye's impoverished tenants. In the second house at the east end of the hamlet there lived a poor family — the Kaos — the head of which was named Kao Hsueh-tien. It was a tumbledown house with three rooms. The family tilled nine *mou* of land, but kept no livestock other than a pig. As for the land, only six *mou* yielded some grain; the other three, situated close to the river, had hardly brought them anything during the past four or five years. The small amount of grain the Kaos harvested every year was scarcely enough to pay the taxes, so that the family, consisting of seven members, were compelled to lead a hand-to-mouth existence. What made matters worse was that, the grandfather had fallen sick and he had seemed so seriously ill during the first few days that

a plain unpainted coffin had already been bought just in case. The entire family was worried to death. Lately, however, the condition of the old man seemed to have improved a bit. He was lying on the *kang*,¹ coughing, when a woman came into the room carrying in her hands a bowl of broth made of medicinal herbs. She was a little more than thirty years of age, but she had a thin and sallow face. She went up to the old man and said: "Will you please sit up and take the medicine, Father?"

The old man, taking hold of the bowl, was about to drink the concoction when a boy of five or six came running in, crying: "I'm so hungry, Mother! I want something to eat! Let me eat this!" So saying, he reached out for the bowl of stewed herbs in his grandfather's hands. Sister Kao hurriedly pulled the boy to her and held him in her arms, saying coaxingly: "This is medicine for your grandfather, Yu-tsai! Father has gone out to borrow some grain. Wait till he comes back, then I'll cook more rice than usual and let you eat your fill. . . ."

Suddenly, someone was heard shouting outside the house: "Let the inmates of every household listen carefully! The *pao* chief has ordered that those households which haven't made the Japanese national flags already are to make them without delay! Tomorrow morning

¹ *Kang* is the raised platform—like brick bed of North China villages. In winter, it can be heated from outside the house.

each household is to send someone, and they must each take a flag with them. They are to go with me and the *pao* chief to greet the Japanese imperial troops. Those who don't go will be sent to the imperial army for punishment!"

When Sister Kao found that it was Wang the Red Eye who was shouting the order about the flags, her heart skipped a beat and then remained still for a moment. The old man, who was sitting on the *kang* drinking the medicine, put down the bowl and asked: "What's the hamlet chief shouting about?"

"It's about the *pao* chief's order to make Japanese national flags. The Japanese troops are coming tomorrow! . . . Oh, Heavens! What am I to make a flag with?"

Thereupon, the old man said indignantly: "The Japanese troops be damned! If we have nothing to make a flag with, then don't let's make one!"

"But it won't do not to make one," said Sister Kao. "The hamlet chief has just said that if we don't do it we'll be sent to the imperial army for punishment."

She was very upset. Putting Yu-tsai down, she went to the outer room and began rummaging for some cloth among the pile of rags at the head of the *kang*, cursing the *pao* chief all the time. But she simply couldn't find a piece of cloth large enough! She was at her wits' end when a girl of about thirteen or fourteen came in from the courtyard, asking: "What are you looking for, Mother?"

When Sister Kao saw that it was her daughter Yu-jung who had returned with a basket of wild herbs, she said, "Oh, Yu-jung, dear! Haven't you heard that every household is to make a Japanese national flag? But what are we to make one with?" "Yu-jung, my dear," she added, after a moment's thought, "do you happen to know where the flour bag is? Try to find it and let's make one out of it."

As Yu-jung turned to go and look for the flour bag, her mother asked once again: "By the way, Yu-jung, how is it that Yu-pao hasn't come home yet?"

"He is looking after the pig on the hill. It hasn't eaten its fill yet."

"Good gracious! Looking after the pig all alone on the hill, where the wolves are! You'd better go at once and look for him!"

"Have no fear, Ma! Yu Chih-cheng who lives in the eastern court, Chou Yung-hsueh who lives in the back street and other boys of our village are all there on the hill. Second Uncle is also there working in his master's field. There is no call for alarm." When she had finished saying this, she took out of her basket some twenty or more cooked magpie eggs. "Mother," she said, "Yu-pao and Chih-cheng are cooking magpie eggs for food again. I ate some too. Yu-pao told me to bring these home."

When Yu-tsai who was in the inner room overheard his elder sister saying that she had brought some magpie eggs from his elder brother, he grew so excited that he

came bouncing out, snatched two of the eggs from his sister's hand and ran outside to eat them and to amuse himself in the street.

Yu-pao's mother was not very pleased at the sight of the magpie eggs. "Who climbed the trees to get them, was it Yu-pao?"

Yu-jung nodded, saying: "Yes, it was."

"Yu-jung, my dear, whenever you go to the hills, you must look after Yu-pao and see to it that he doesn't climb trees. The trees there are so tall, it's rather risky to climb them!" She paused, then added: "Go and find the flour bag and get it washed. I'm going to the Yus' in the east court to ask Aunt Yu for some red dye."

On the East Hill a group of boys, who had gone there to cut grass and look after the pigs, were singing and playing together. These wretched youngsters were an inseparable bunch. Early in the morning they went to the hill to cut grass together; that done, they dressed themselves up with leaves and grass and began play-acting together. Often in the evenings they would go together to Uncle Chou Teh-chun, who lived in the back street, and ask him to tell them the story of "Huyen Ching in a Contest of Physical Prowess."

Among them was a boy of eleven or twelve who always had a sling for shooting birds stowed away in his left coat pocket, and a lot of pebbles in the right one, which would rattle away the moment he started to run. That day he had painted his face black with mud, and holding up the stick used for driving the pig, was

acting the part of Hu-yen Ching, while two other slightly older boys, Yu Chih-cheng and Chou Yung-hsueh, were playing the parts of Meng Chiang and Chiao Yu respectively. With tree branches for swords, the three were acting out the story of "the Contest of Physical Prowess."

They were playing in high spirits when a strongly built young peasant, about twenty-seven years old who was working in a field some distance away, was heard calling out loudly: "Yu-pao! It's almost noon. Go home with your pig. We're leaving, too." When the boy who was playing the part of Hu-yen Ching, saw that it was his uncle calling to him, he answered also at the top of his voice: "All right!" And he went with the rest of the boys to the river to wash his face. Then they parted, each going his own way; Yu-pao going home with his uncle.

When he had penned up the pig, he ran into the house and there he saw his mother cutting up a flour bag and his elder sister coming out of the inner room with a bowl of red ink in her hands. He was puzzled and asked: "Mother, what are you doing?"

"Why, we are making a Japanese flag. The Japanese troops are coming to our village tomorrow and. . . ."

Yu-pao's dark eyes flashed fire the moment he heard this. "Mother," he interrupted before she could finish, "we shouldn't make any Japanese flags! They are our enemy. Why should we go and greet them? Have

you forgotten how uncle was beaten up by the Japanese devils and had his arm broken last year when he was driving a cart to Wafangtien for his master?"

"Do talk a little lower, my dear!" pleaded his mother. "Chih-cheng's father of the east court has just returned from the Great Stone Bridge with bad news. He says many people there have been killed by those devils!"

"We'd rather die than go and take part in the welcome rally!" declared Yu-pao. "We shouldn't make any Japanese flags either!" So saying, he hurried over and snatched the flour bag from his mother's hands, thereby overturning the bowl of red ink so that half of it was lost.

His mother became so angry that she struck Yu-pao a blow on his back, exclaiming, "My goodness! Can't you speak a little lower? Wang the Red Eye of the west court is at home. If he should overhear us, and tell the *pao* chief, it would be too bad for us. One should obey the law and swim with the tide, as the saying goes. If they tell us to make a flag, dare we disobey? What can one poor family do when the whole of the Northeast is under the Japanese? The hamlet chief has made an order that tomorrow each household is to send someone to greet the Japanese troops. The *pao* chief will lead them and no excuses can be made at all. Father is away borrowing grain and probably won't be back today. Your sister is afraid so I've told her to go to your grandma's this afternoon to hide there for a

while. So, tomorrow you'll have to go and take part in. . . ."

"I won't go, Ma, I won't go and greet the Japanese devils."

"Now look, my dear! Don't make any more fuss! Suppose you don't go tomorrow, what shall we do if the *pao* chief comes round to ask why?"

"I know, I'll stay in bed tomorrow and when the *pao* chief or the hamlet chief comes to look for me, just tell him I'm ill."

"Suppose he says you must go?"

"Haven't you heard what grandpa once said? He said that even a mandarin won't order a sick person about. So I'll just lie in bed, moaning and groaning when he comes. He can't make me go."

In the end, seeing that he was adamant, his mother was obliged to let him have his own way.

The whole village was alarmed when they heard at lunch time that the devilish Japanese troops were coming on the following day and that they had been killing, burning and plundering all the way. This was reported by Yu the Fifth on his return home and that afternoon everybody was so upset no one was in the mood to do any work.

The whole village was busy burying things under the ground. All the women folk between fifteen and thirty years of age had already gone away to seek refuge with their kinsfolk and relatives in distant villages. Only a few older women still remained.