CHILDREN OF THE DAWN

— STORIES OF ASIAN PEASANT CHILDREN —

by Rewi Alley

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PEKING, 1957

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PREFACE

During one's own time in China over the past three decades, when one has known so many young people and watched them develop from ordinary villagers into understanding technicians and administrators, stories of many lives stand out in one's memory. They relate to those whom many in the West would have contemptuously dubbed as just "coolie kids" — without thought of their potential value in a world of people.

To write of these, it is best to tell first about those known most intimately. It is not so easy to get the confidence of youth well enough to have them tell their early stories, however. In these days especially, when all face so different a life, it is a bitter thing, often done with difficulty and some tears, to look back and tell of it all.

Many of the village boys and girls I have known today are in positions of considerable responsibility. Many have struggled on gamely in spite of the poor health caused by bad conditions in their early years, playing their part in a humble, yet effective way in this new day of opportunity.

Those I have picked to write about are not the ones who have necessarily succeeded best, but rather those who fought hardest, and against the greatest odds. Their struggles have much meaning for the poor and oppressed in many another part of the world today. They are people of character who have fought an uphill fight and grown great in the fighting. They are tiny bits of brilliant mosaic in the whole grand picture of the six hundred million who are now

striding out of the musty tomes of history into the vanguard of the advancing peoples of the world.

Naturally, since I was closely connected for many years with the technical training centre that was located at Sandan in Kansu, I commenced by writing stories that concern youth I had known there. There surely are many others more interesting from even that one tiny place, but I have simply put down a few which have been told me casually and have left the biggest impression on my mind. Thinking back on them and on the others not recorded, I feel anew that certainly there is nothing the working class of the world cannot do when it sets out properly to do it.

To widen the scope of this book, I have included stories I have collected during my travels in some other East Asian countries. They are those from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Korean Democratic People's Republic and from the Mongolian People's Republic (Outer Mongolia), where the new day has made such terrific change.

Each of these countries has its own special conditions. First, there is Vietnam, so recently liberated from crushing colonialism. Then there is Korea with fresh memories of the vast struggle that took place over her land, where in the past young people were denied so much under a long repressive foreign rule. In the Mongolian People's Republic, the revolution is already thirty-five years old, and those who came through the early days of struggle there are themselves no longer that young, so the stories are fewer.

The youth of these lands whom I have known are stepping as ably and as gallantly into their birthright today, as are their Chinese fellows. For they, too, were once children who have struggled through the long night, and now seize with confidence the better way the dawn has brought to them.

Rewi Alley

Peking, November 1957

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHINA

HONAN GIRL

Sung Ching-lan is a sturdy lass. She can do many things and does them well — weave, tailor, dye, drive a truck or a tractor along with the best of them. She has a truck-driver as a husband and now a few children to look after, in between times on her present work in a hospital. Had she not been scarred with smallpox when young, she would have been a very good-looking girl, but as it is she has a strong personality and a good figure to commend her. She came to the Sandan school from a wartime orphanage when it was dissolved, and was a peasant refugee from Honan. The accepted leader of the girls who came with this group, she was an enthusiastic supporter of their rights as they saw them, and was more than a match for any jeering boy who would make light of any one of them. The year she came from Honan — 1943 — was one of the terrible ones of that bitter period. Honan was a land of famine. Dust clouds blew up from parched fields. There were locusts, there were bandits and there was the ever-advancing Japanese Imperial Army, with its puppets, its gangsters, and its incredible terror. Sung Ching-lan tells her own story, however. I have not done much in editing it, except to make the sequence of what happened a little plainer, for at times she took it for granted that the reader would know something of local conditions and would follow the events that are so clear in her own mind, but which are now almost forgotten by even those who went through those dark days. It is thus that she tells of her adventure out of Honan:

"My father was a handicraft worker in a city in Honan Province. We all lived from his two hands, though some of my cousins who tilled the eleven *mou* of land, which was our common portion back in the country at our original village, helped us a little with grain. Actually we could just make ends meet, never far from hunger.

"When I was thirteen years old, the Japanese Imperial Army came and occupied the city, so my father sent my mother with us to the home of an uncle in our native village. Most of the people in the village were relations, though we had other relatives in the city also. We were just ordinary poor-peasant children, not bothering with clothing in the summer, and in winter unable to have more than a single thickness of short tunic and pants.

"Things in the village, however, were not much better than in the city. One day a running-dog of the Japanese called Han Ho-chen, who was head of the *pao** in which we lived and also a cousin of my mother's, came to our house to see her. His manner was wild and rough, and he shouted at her fiercely: 'Give me two *tou* of wheat, sister, to entertain the Japanese soldiers with!' He spat on the ground a couple of times and then, without waiting for a reply, rudely commanded her: 'Now get up, you, and bring me the wheat at once!'

"My mother stood quietly by as he raved on, and then answered him steadily and reasonably. 'My foolish cousin, don't you know that my husband was arrested by the Japanese army in the city and made to look after their horses? He has been so badly beaten by them that he is still lying in our home there sick. His whole body is cut and bruised. Why should we comfort the enemy soldiers? Then again, you see that my children are all young and I am

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* *Pao* — a grouping of 100 families that were held mutually responsible by the Kuomintang regime.

going to give birth to still another, so how could I have any spare grain around?' And then she smiled appealingly at him, as we children stood by. But he did not even listen to her, simply bellowing, interlarding his words with the dirtiest language possible. 'This isn't the business of your one family only! I don't care whether you have grain or not in the days to come; what I want right now, at this moment, is that you produce grain from anywhere you like for me. Quick! Get along finding it! I'll soon be back for it, and if it is not ready there will be an end of you and every child you have, I can promise that!' — and with this he went away, his loose clothes flapping against his hawk-like figure.

"He did not stay away long, however, and on his return he brought with him a bunch of his gang of loafers. And a very nasty lot they were, too! My mother, not having her husband there to protect her, and not being of the village so much after her many years in the city, had evidently been singled out as the person to be made an example of, in order to frighten the rest of the villagers into submission. Whichever way it was, there he stood, staring at her with mad-looking, red-rimmed eyes, his limbs sprawled out as he leaned against a low wall, cigarette drooping from his hand, and screaming at her like some devil: 'Where's the wheat? Is it ready or not?' — and then my mother's calm, level answer 'Not yet,' and her reasoning talk with him, explaining why there was absolutely no grain to be found. His only response to this, however, was to get redder and redder in the face, finally yelling at her, 'Bitch! you don't know how well you've been treated so far! If you don't like to give freely, we shall simply take what we need!' — and with this they all swarmed into the room hunting for grain, throwing everything into a wild disorder. My mother fought back, trying to hold them off, shouting, 'If you take the little I have, you are just robbers. The Japanese have killed our

people. Why should you steal for them?' And for a while by the force of her words she managed to stay them, the gangsters hanging back shame-facedly, which made the *pao* head madder than ever, so that he shook his fist at her, spitting out 'She — tiger — she — tiger, heh! but we'll soon see who is the most fierce — tie her up — tie her up!' and with this, his gang tied mother's arms behind her and dragged her off.

"We children were terror-stricken and did not know what to do. Our relations came around saying: 'Don't make a noise, or you will be tied up and taken away, too!' They then hid us away in different places, while we didn't understand why, though everyone kept telling us not to cry or make any noise at all. The *pao* head did come back to look for us all right, as the neighbours had feared, finding my young brother aged eleven, hidden on the *kang* of one of the old disused cave dwellings dug into the cliffside. They took him away, and neither he nor my mother was ever seen by our family again. As night came on, I decided to take my two young sisters, one aged seven and one aged five, off with me to the city to find my father. Somehow I thought that as there was trouble for the family here, father must have known, and he would not be far away. Always it had been father who had solved every difficulty the family had gotten into in the past. Never far away in any crisis, he was. So when we got outside the village to where the river-crossing was, I shouted out 'Father, where are you?' several times, which alerted the *pao* men evidently sent to watch near there, for we heard footsteps coming down the track and men talking. We got into the water by some willows, and kept silent. They came down to the water's edge, and then said: 'Huh, the water is too high for three little rats like that to get over. We can pick them up around here at dawn sometime. Might as well go back and get some sleep!' And then another said: 'The *pao* head

will not be satisfied until he sees them all dead. Kill the mother and you must kill the whole brood or else later there will be endless trouble' — but after poking around and swearing a lot for a while, they went back grumbling up the rise to the village.

"Then I tested the water and found that in the most shallow crossing place it came up to my neck, though it was very difficult to keep one's footing going over the stones against the swift current. I took my sisters one by one over the ford, each in turn on my back, their hands clasped around my neck. With the youngest one it was most difficult as I slipped and was nearly carried away, but I found my footing on a shallow gravel spit and then managed to scramble out on the other side. In all, the river-bed was about sixty metres wide, shallow but with deep holes in many places, and when we had got to the other side and I put her down, she seemed more dead than alive. She had swallowed a lot of water and kept coughing it up. I wondered actually if it was possible for her to live. It was summer and the night was warm enough, though, and I and my other sister rubbed and punched her back a long time until she came to life again, weakly calling out for her mother as she came to. I was so happy to hear her cry that I wept. But I also felt that somehow we must revenge our mother. We must live to kill that devil! Through the night I carried her on towards the city. It was not so far, but we could not go very fast. It was also a problem to know how to find our father, though I knew that he must be trying to come back to the village to find us. We knew that the Japanese soldiers were in the city, and wondered if they had impressed my father again, and if he was yet well after his last beating by them. We met an old man, and asked him what was going on in the city, walking along with him for a while. But he was undecided himself and was not sure that he dared go in or not. We talked with him until

we got down to the river that ran past the walls, the dawn making the surroundings brighter every moment. As it was summer-time, this river was quite high, and frequently people were drowned in it. There had been a bridge, but it was destroyed by the Kuomintang soldiers when they retreated, so now we had to wait for someone to come over with a boat and take us back.

"We looked over to the other bank and saw a man walking up and down restlessly as though he was searching for something, and suddenly my sister cried out 'Papa-Papa' and he raised his head and looked across — and indeed it was our father. He had come down to the ford and was on his way to the village to find us. He borrowed a boat from a peasant and quickly ferried us over, we telling him the whole story as he did so. When we started into the city, he took my youngest sister from my back to his, and told us not to be afraid. My words cannot describe how badly he felt, for he just kept on muttering, 'Revenge, we must have revenge somehow — revenge, revenge!' and then from this time onwards, though he did not say the words again, we could see that he was thinking them, for his face would take on the same expression as it did when we told him of what had happened. In the days that followed we were to miss the pleasant voice of our mother calling us by name — her thought for us all and her sweet courage. And we all missed my brother who was so clever and who would make us laugh when things were hard, and who cheered up father so easily whenever he felt bad. The news we brought, on top of his treatment by the Japanese army, was too much for father. His health now broke down completely, and he died in a high fever one evening some twenty-three days later.

"One of his relations we called uncle now came in and took over the house and the little business. His wife was a big, grasping, unkind woman. She always complained

that we owed her money for burying father, and that we were lazy. She put us to work turning a little grinding mill that once was turned by a donkey which the Japanese had taken away. We turned and we turned, and sometimes were too tired to eat. After some time, our legs and arms became swollen, shining like glass, so tight were they. The two of us sat down together and said that we could not live in this way, and wondered how to get to our mother's people somehow, for they had always been kind to us.

"One day as we were talking like this, we heard a voice in the street outside calling us, so we quickly put down the pole which ran into the grinding stone, and went outside to see. It was our maternal grandmother who loved us very much. We threw ourselves into her arms and wept, and she wept also, for she had heard of our troubles and had come to rescue us. Fortunately neither my uncle nor his wife was at home just then, they always having some business outside. They hated my mother's people, moreover, and would not have let my grandmother see us, had they been there. Grandmother insisted that we go off with her, and we were only too willing, so we set off in what we stood up in — just short clothes of one thickness — on a cold autumn day, with the first November snow driving bitterly at us. We could not take the littlest sister, as she could not walk well enough, so we had to leave her.

"The neighbours must have told my uncle and his wife when they got home, for it was not long before we were overtaken by one of the local puppet policemen, who came striding along fiercely and commanded us to stop. He pulled out a pistol from his belt and waved it at grandmother, saying, 'You old rotten egg — you child-stealer — you are fooling these kids — get them back to their home, or I'll shoot you right here where you stand.' We did not quite understand what had happened, but my grand-

mother did and said in the same quiet, reasonable way my mother always talked in: 'Do you know what you are saying, fellow-countryman? These little ones are my grandchildren! How can I be deceiving them in any way?' The policeman looked a bit perplexed and replied, 'Now, you say you are not fooling these children, but why should their uncle say that they were stolen by an old cheat who wanted to sell them? The first thing to do is that all go back to their uncle now and then see what is to be done. Then see if you are a child-stealer or not!' But my sister quickly broke in with 'We do not want to go back! What can you do to us?' Then I tried to speak plainly and make him understand, saying: 'We cannot talk with our uncle. He is worse than a dog. He is not a normal man. He beats us and curses us. We certainly shall not go back! You had better shoot us here!'

"Then my grandmother took up the talk, speaking appealingly and softly: 'Old fellow-countryman, just do this one good thing. You have heard what these kids have said, what they want to do? They didn't have enough food to eat or clothes to wear. Their relatives used them as animals. There is still a younger sister of theirs left in that cruel house —' and then she began to weep quietly, showing the man the state of our bodies, marks of beatings, our arms and legs, with the shreds of clothing that did not half cover us. She told him that she had a way to get us to a place where we would be able to grow up, and not die in this winter as we would certainly do if left in the city under such conditions as we had been suffering. Finally the policeman, who had sat down on a stone slab, sighed and said, 'I was told that an old woman who stole children had taken these away, so I was ordered to get them back. Now I see that the real situation is different — that you are truly their grandmother, and that the children hate the idea of going back at all . . .' and he scratched his head