



# TO THE EDGE OF THE SKY

A Story of Love, Betrayal, Suffering,  
and the Strength of Human Courage

ANHUA GAO



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TO THE EDGE  
OF THE SKY

**This book is dedicated to my parents**

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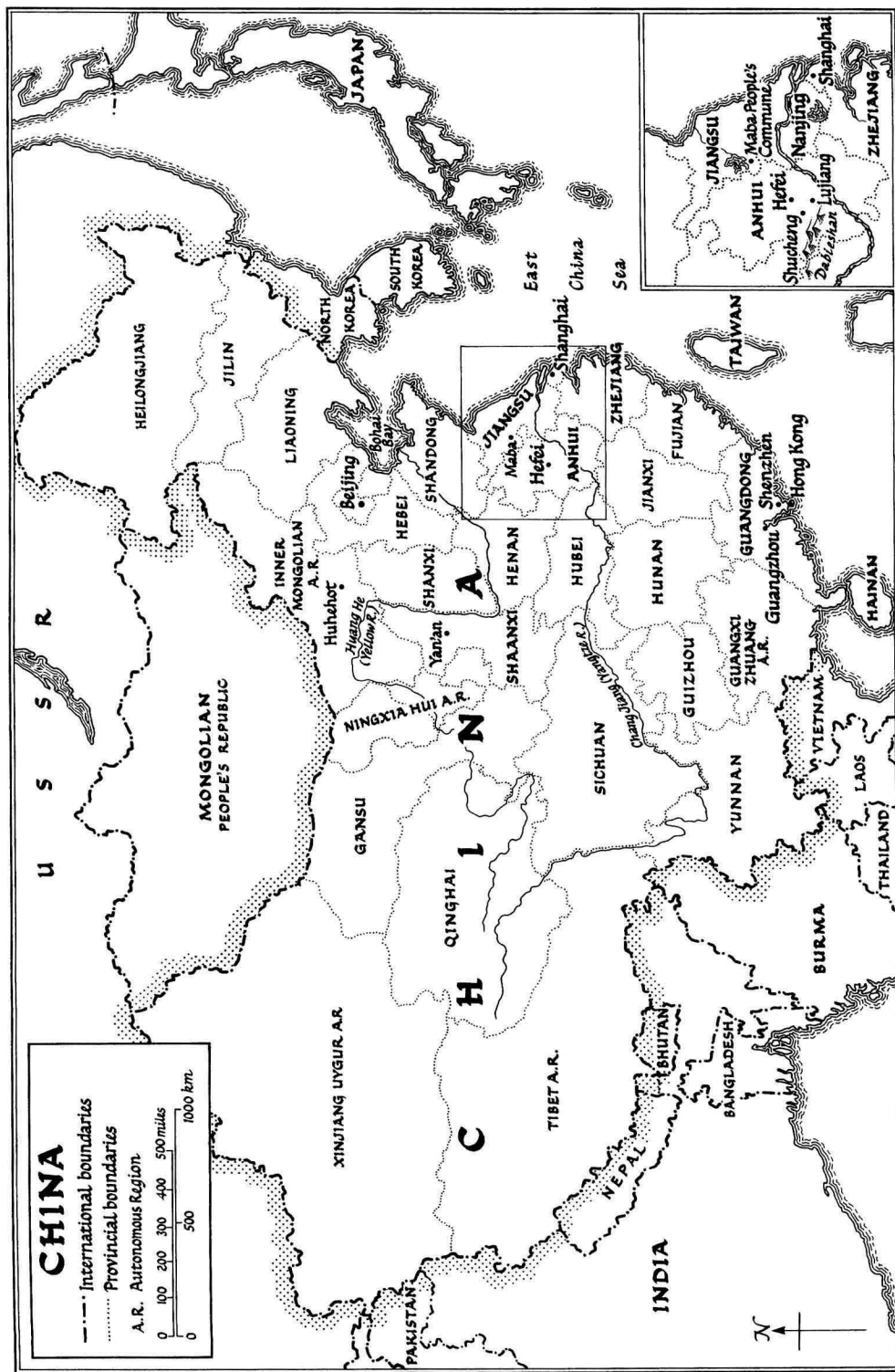
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All photographs are from the author's collection except for nos. 11, 18 and 28, which are from the Hulton/Getty collection





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As the Chinese saying goes: 'Good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil.' I hope my book has done everybody justice.

Anhua Gao  
Folkestone, England  
September 1999

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## I. My Parents

Black clouds scudded across the sky that windy afternoon in October 1926. The sounds of battle from the civil war between the warlords were temporarily silenced by the severe weather as the monsoons neared the end of their annual visit. A young man of twenty sat on the south bank of the swollen Yangtze River, staring blindly at the yellow, roaring waters. He had been sitting in the same place without moving for most of the day, trying to make sense of what had happened to him. For one brief moment, he thought of throwing himself into the noisy, rushing waters but instantly dismissed the idea. It took a different kind of desperate courage to kill oneself.

Towards dusk, he rose to his feet. 'I will not give up!' he shouted. 'You will never defeat me!' He raised his fist towards the big sky. 'Under such a large heaven, I will surely find a way. You will see.' With these words, he walked up the steep bank and turned towards the vast greyness of Nanjing to have one last look at the city where he had placed all of his hopes and dreams. Then, with a firm step and head high, despite the rain hammering down, he walked along the riverbank, around the city, and headed south.

That young man was my father.

Gao Dao-pang, my father, was born on 9 February 1906 into the rich, landowning Gao family of Shucheng County in Anhui Province. In those days, the name 'Dao' was given to all children of Father's generation born into the Gao family as their middle name. This instruction was in the ancient writings of the family tree. The reasons for this have been lost in the mists of time, but tradition, particularly in the more important families, was strong in those days. Anhui Province is famous throughout China for the number of scholars and calligraphers born there, and through the centuries the Gao family had spawned a good share of them. The family was well known in the country town of Shucheng, which nestles at the foot of the Dabieshan mountain range, some 500 kilometres north-west of Nanjing.

My father had an elder brother, two younger sisters and two cousins. They were happy childhood playmates but all of them went in terror of

my grandfather, who was the head of the Gao family. He was a tyrant and quick to punish every minor offence, real or imagined. The children regularly suffered severe beatings, followed by isolation and withheld meals.

At the age of five, my father was sent to a private school and it soon became evident to his teachers that he was a natural scholar. Nothing seemed beyond him, and soon after joining the school, he was being taught how to write with a Chinese brush. Although it is a difficult art to master, it wasn't long before he impressed everybody with his extraordinarily beautiful writings. By the age of ten, Father was writing articles for the local newspapers and for a provincial paper. He wrote one article about the First World War, criticizing both sides for the way they treated the ordinary soldiers. It was highly praised and he was given the title: 'A ten-year-old child bearing the whole world in his chest.'

My grandfather was pleased to have such a brilliant son. It solved one of his biggest worries. He needed his heirs to manage the vast family estate and business interests, such as a food shop, otherwise everything would be taken over by another branch of the family. Now he need worry no more. Or so he thought.

With the conceit of youth, Father thought he could do greater good for his family by not staying in the same small place, and if higher education was his way out, then that was the route he would take. But although he daydreamed about life in the wider world, getting there wasn't easy. It was considered disloyal for a son not to obey his father, and he was a filial son. He was in torment. He wanted to leave the town but duty compelled him to stay. However, my grandfather's attitude when Father asked him to discuss the problem helped to make up his mind.

Grandfather wanted Father to manage his shop, but Father said, no, he wanted to see the outside world. This was too much for my grandfather. How dare his son answer him back! He beat Father with his fists and then with a thick stick. 'I should have given you this, and this and this, as soon as you began to have these ideas.' Every 'this' was a stroke of the stick until the boy could take no more. The old man was shouting, 'You will not dare to disobey me again!'

Father rebelled. He twisted away from Grandfather, then grabbed the stick and broke it over a chair. 'I am a free man! I will not be your slave!' he said. The old man stared in disbelief. This could not be happening. He had absolute power. Nobody dared to disobey him.

My father hurried towards the door. 'I want to do better things with my life than manage your shop. I am leaving and I will never, ever come back!' He stormed out of the room, hugged his mother and left his home. He had a few coins in his pocket and only the clothes he was wearing. At the age of thirteen years and eleven months he was on his own and on his way.

It was late January 1920 when my father hurried away from everything he knew and loved. There were tears running down his face and his throat hurt. It was particularly hard to leave his mother. She had always been the one to comfort the boys after their father had beaten them for some minor transgression. It was she who secretly brought food when their father forbade them their meals, and shielded them from him. Happiness was his mother. Terror was his father.

He began to make plans. At school he had made friends with two older boys. He had helped them with their work and, although much younger, had coached them for examinations. They both passed and, as a sign of their gratitude, they became blood-brothers to my father and pledged lifelong friendship to him. Soon after leaving school the two older boys had moved to the city of Hefei, the capital of Anhui Province. Father remembered this and decided to make for the city and find them. However, having never left his town before, he did not know that Hefei was 300 kilometres away. As he walked, with the cold and tiredness creeping into his bones, he wished he had not been so impetuous. The memory of his mother laying hot food on the table and her smiling face almost made him turn back. Only the thought of having to kow-tow to his father kept him moving onwards.

Ten degrees below freezing is not uncommon in January and that first night he almost froze to death in the open. From then on, he always found cover, however poor, to sleep under. There was the constant problem of finding food – he became an expert at stealing their food from under the snouts of pigs. He also learned which berries on the trees were acceptable to the stomach and which were not. Birds assisted there: if they ate them, so did he. He found he could go for days without eating much but needed water regularly. He sucked icicles and scraped the rime off the grass and the trees, but it wasn't enough.

Then came his first piece of luck. One evening, as he was crawling into an old temple for the night, his knee hit something hard. He squinted in the gloom, then shouted with joy. It was an old army-style metal water-bottle, cork intact. When he shook it, he heard liquid sloshing

around so it had no leaks. Even better, it had a leather strap so he could carry it over his shoulder. He learned that seemingly small things can have great value.

As days became weeks, and weeks became months, life improved for him. He wandered from cottage to cottage, and village to village. Winter became spring, then summer. There was work to be had, enabling him to earn a little money as well as his keep.

One day, Father met a young goatherd of about his own age. As my father walked by, the two boys looked at each other and smiled. Shyly the goatherd invited him to sit for a while and share his small meal. Then he drew some milk from a nanny and offered it to my father. Father remembered that milk for the rest of his life, and I remember him telling me the story: his words brought the scene so vividly to life, I could almost taste that milk myself.

The goatherd was named Sun Zong-de, and the two boys talked all afternoon until it was time to take the goats back to their pen for the night. My father was invited to stay until morning, and a lifelong friendship was born. Zong-de's parents asked him in for the evening meal, then bedded him down under the long kitchen table. He felt part of the family almost from the first moment he stepped inside the door. The next day he accepted an offer of work and decided to stay for a few days.

The 'few days' stretched into autumn, winter and early spring, when he was drawn again to the road. In February 1922, after promising always to keep in touch, he set out on his travels once more. Zong-de waved until he was out of sight.

My father had spent the long cold winter months teaching his new friends to read and write. Zong-de was a quick learner, and was reading newspapers and books by the time my father left. It is strange how life works out: those winter evenings struggling with thousands of Chinese characters would prove to be the making of Zong-de and the saving of my father.

About five weeks after taking his leave of the Sun family, Father was passing through a small village when he saw a scholarly-looking old gentleman writing big characters with a brush on a long strip of red paper. In those days, only a very small proportion of the population could read and write. Many families proclaimed events such as weddings, funerals, the birth of a son or any local festival, especially the Spring Festival, or Chinese New Year (which is as important to the Chinese as Christmas is to Christians), by hanging long scrolls bearing lucky words

in front of their doors. Writing scrolls could be a good business for an educated person.

My father went over to offer his services. At first the people standing around the old man would not accept that he could write. He was young, he was dirty, he wore a shabby jacket made from a goatskin given to him by Zong-de. His hair was long and he looked hungry. He said, 'Let me have a try. If I can't write well, I will not charge you any money.' The villagers agreed to see what he could do and from then on his good handwriting ensured that he was self-sufficient until he arrived at Hefei.

My father couldn't find his schoolfriends in Hefei, although he kept a good look-out while writing his scrolls. He rented a room and spent his spare time reading. He was so moved by a book by the famous educationalist Tao Xin-zhi that he decided to write to the author, expressing his theories on how to save China from the warlords. To his delight, Tao wrote back complimenting him on his ideas and making a few observations of his own. They exchanged a few letters, then Tao sent a parcel of books to my father, and through their correspondence he encouraged Father to be a patriot. He put into words what my father had been thinking and feeling. 'Be concerned about the happenings in China and strive for a better future for all of our people.'

Father spent several years in Hefei, working on the scrolls and saving money. One day he heard that his blood-brothers were now based in Nanjing and were officials in the Kuomintang (Nationalist) government. He was overjoyed and set out the following day for Nanjing. He was certain his old friends would help him find good employment. A blood bond was sacred, as strong as if they were true brothers, perhaps even stronger. My father travelled as fast as he could. The weather was bad that year and the monsoons were severe, so the journey took him many weeks until at last he walked through the ancient city wall into the heart of Nanjing.

He found the building where his blood-brothers were working and thought that, at last, his travels were over. His friends would help him find a good job and a better future. Not so! As soon as they saw Father in his shabby clothes, the two men shouted at him to go away. Father refused, so they called a guard and had him removed. The next morning Father waited outside for them to arrive, thinking that perhaps they were not allowed to speak to friends during working hours, but when they saw him they shouted at him again to go away. When he didn't, they picked up stones and threw them at him. This drew the attention of the



passers-by, some of whom joined in. He was chased down the street by urchins, shoppers and beggars. He ran round a corner and into the main square. Only the sight of a platoon of soldiers training there stopped the swelling crowd from pursuing him any further. He had been hit several times by bricks, stones and other missiles. Rotting vegetables and dung stuck to him and blood was running down his cheek from a head wound. It started to rain again.

He checked his belongings. Knife, old metal water-bottle, money. Money! Where was the money? He searched the ground around him. Nothing. It had been tied to his belt in a pouch, which had gone. Then he remembered. Two urchins had caught up with him and clung on as he ran. He had pushed them off but now it was obvious that one was having a lucky day. He could hardly believe what had happened to him. 'Nanjing! You can keep it,' he said bitterly.

He was in poor spirits as he went out of the city and down to the Yangtze River. It had taken him years to save that money, which had represented security. What would he do now? He had spent four long years looking forward to this day, and even his blood-brothers had let him down. He was going nowhere and he had nothing to go to. He thought of suicide but recalled a passage from one of the letters written to him by Tao: 'No matter how difficult it is, you can only dedicate your life to your country. It is your duty. Follow your own conscience at all times, and never give up.' He turned, and started his journey to the south.

My father reached Guangxi Province in the spring of 1927. The Communist Party seemed to be everywhere. He had witnessed the Communist 'Peasant Committee' confiscate land from the rich landlords, divide it up and give the peasant workers a section each for their own use. He repeatedly heard the names of Mao Tse-tung and Zhu De as he went on his way. The poor people talked of little else. At last they had hope that their miserable lives might change. They could dream of better times instead of the grinding poverty they endured under the rule of the landowners.

He began to develop a certain respect for Zhu, Mao and the Communists. He admired their stand against the old feudal system and their concern for the poor, but he had no desire to join them. The fledgling Red Army, formed by poor peasants headed by Zhu and Mao, was not like a regular army, more like bandits, so he kept well away from them.