

The water brought with it a man floating facedown. He neared the ship and rubbed against it. Nobody clamored to lift him out of the water; the continent was a cold place. In the timeless flow of history, he was worth no more than a handful of dust, no more than a corpse.

But wasn't the magisterial river flowing backward? So it was, carrying the nameless man toward—Shanghai.

"So long, continent," Taiming said once more. Dusk was setting on the international city.

## *Chapter Four*

### *1. The Gloomy Homeland*

Looking back on them from his homeland, the years Taiming had spent on the continent were but a passing dream. He was relieved to be back in Taiwan, but at the same time, from the moment he got off the ferry in Chilung, a burdensome feeling weighed on him wherever he went.

The excessive, meticulous inspection by the harbor police and customs surprised him. Although he had nothing on his conscience, he cringed in their fine net. He actually trembled when he faced the detective on duty.

Because Taiming had become accustomed to the continent's freeness and openness, its happy-go-lucky atmosphere, it was as though he had suddenly wandered from a wider place into a dank, narrow alley. It was suffocating.

This feeling boarded the train with him at Chilung station. In Taipei, where he got off, he noticed a swarthy man with razor-sharp eyes. The man followed Taiming like a shadow to the bus, to the coffee house, wherever he strolled. The shadow came along to the Ximen market when he went shopping. Was he being

followed? There was no other explanation. Discomfited, he cut short his stay and decided to head straight home.

Since he had not sent word of his homecoming, there was no greeting party at the beloved old station. When he dropped by the luggage area to pick up his belongings, however, the station-master had an unpleasant message waiting for him. Taiming had to visit the police before going home. There was a branch office at the station.

Troubled, he did as he was told and identified himself to a uniformed officer. Apparently, he had nothing to fear. Treating Taiming with the utmost courtesy, the officer asked him a host of questions regarding China, but hardly any about himself. After the interrogation, Taiming was allowed to leave for home.

The villagers were aware of the turmoil on the continent and were especially pleased to welcome back their native son. He was the only person from the village ever to have crossed the strait. The mere fact of his safely making the round trip excited the villagers and generated a lot of admiration. It only added to their enthusiasm that Taiming had been an instructor at an advanced school, which is to say that he had held a high post in the civil service. The next day, starting in the morning, an endless stream of friends and relatives came by to his house to hear him talk about China.

He was already getting tired of receiving these guests when the local police officer came by in the early afternoon. They had lunch together. The visit made the heavy feeling that he had had since Chihlung—the sense that he was being hounded—even less bearable. Everything seemed to be closing in on him, blocking his way out, depriving him of air. Had his country in fact become a less comfortable place? The policeman nattered on until he was satisfied, apparently not noticing Taiming's anxiousness, and then left.

Thus, not everything was as Taiming would have liked it in the countryside, which now was his again. But his village had

changed a lot and felt new and more alive. The main street was much wider and flanked by full-grown eucalyptus trees. Down this avenue, a bus—a beaten-down old model but nevertheless a bus—bumped along four or five times a day, leaving the scent of civilization in its wake. There also seemed to be more young people, none of whom Taiming recognized by face. But when he asked who their parents were, he remembered.

Each of the members of the Hu clan had had ups and downs marking the passing of half a generation's worth of years. Opium Tong had been dead for three years now, and Ah-San had been alive until just a year ago. Ah-Si had kicked his opium habit and had moved away with his son-in-law. Cousin Zhida no longer could make a living as a lawyer's interpreter and had become a perennial idler; nobody paid any attention to him anymore. Strangely enough, Taiming's father's medical practice was thriving. Hu Wenging was old but healthy, and with fewer and fewer doctors practicing traditional medicine, the demand for his services had risen proportionately. Doctor Hu's second wife, Ah-Yu, for whom the insecure status of mistress was in the past, now seemed every bit the brave woman that a mother ought to be; at least, she no longer wore gaudy makeup. And some people in the village had persuaded Taiming's older brother to become the local arbitrator. Hu Zhigang was now a busy man of influence.

The village's inhabitants had changed in accordance with the divine providence that replaces the old with the new. Only the main hall of the Hu house was still unchanged in all its timeworn splendor. Taiming entered the shrine for the first time in many years, offered incense sticks to his ancestors, and prayed for the repose of his grandfather. His heart was full. Cobwebs now covered the gilded letters that had always been peeling off, and the metal sections of the memorial tablet shone with a sad pallor. The last time he had been in the hall, he had been preparing to leave

for Jiangnan, China, ready to die there, and praying to his ancestors to watch over him. He felt remorseful and guilty that he had had to give up the idea.

It was in this remote village and under such circumstances that Taiming wondered what step he should take next. Hu Wenqing warned his son not to take his credentials as a bureaucrat too seriously, prestigious though they were. But what was tormenting Taiming was simply that he did not have anything to do from day to day. After a few days spent at home, dissatisfaction, emptiness, and loneliness made him restless.

He had not yet seen his mother because she now was living at her son-in-law's with her daughter, Qiuyun. Before he came home, his plan had been to ask his mother to live with him and to remain with her in peace and happiness, but now that he was back, he realized that perhaps she might be better off with his sister. Before arriving at a decision, he had to see how Ah-Cha, his mother, was faring. Although Taiming knew full well that he soon had to pay his regards, he was unable to muster the will to go out, and finally, while he was delaying, his mother and his sister came to see him themselves.

"Mother was waiting for you, didn't you know?" Qiuyun reminded Taiming when she saw him, forgetting to welcome him home. "You take it too easy, brother. That goes for the rest of you, too."

Ah-Cha was staring at her son's face so hard she could have bored a hole in it. "Taiming is back? This must be a dream. . . . Ah, I'm glad we made that trip to the temple," she said. Then she rubbed her teary eyes over and over.

Taiming noticed that his mother had brought a basket with her which contained a chicken and some incense sticks. A guardian deity or the clan's ancestors were about to receive word that her son had returned safely. Meanwhile, Qiuyun had arrived with a carrying cloth in which was wrapped a jar of peanuts. Taiming

could not observe all this without feeling a lump in his throat: his mother's sweetness touched him deeply. He wanted to bury his face on her lap and weep his heart out there forever. Seeing how much sadness his endless traveling had inflicted on her, he was full of contrition.

That evening, Hu Wenqing and Zhigang were present as well in what they told him was the first family feast in a long time. Until then, Ah-Cha had been careful not to cross the threshold of the former concubine's section of the house, but that night became the exception, so badly did she want to be with her returned son. Although Hu Wenqing was visibly satisfied with the family reunion, Ah-Yu, considerably, did not sit at the table. Even though she and Ah-Cha were not enemies, there was inevitably some awkwardness between them. Taiming thought of the understanding his mother had shown for so many years and found her a bit pitiful.

The banquet was merry. His beloved peanuts in hand, Taiming spoke of the continent's scenery and manners. When the others demanded to hear about places he had not been to, such as Suzhou and West Lake, he could not paint the pictures to their satisfaction. But when the talk turned to Shanghai or to Nanjing, his eloquence entertained them greatly. Hu Wenqing, in high spirits, remarked that he would give anything to see all that for himself. Ah-Cha was brimming with joy seeing everyone trying to speak at once.

When Zhigang began to brag about his renovated room with Japanese tatami, Qiuyun, a mother now but no less mischievous, interrupted, "Brother, promise to go with me wherever I go."

"Why?" asked Zhigang.

"Aren't you an arbitrator? They say trains stop just for you."

The sarcastic remark drew a mild chastising glance from her mother. Zhigang, laughing embarrassedly, said, "Don't be silly, all that is history; we don't enjoy such privileges nowadays. Well,

I guess people do let me get on first when the bus is crowded. But that isn't granting too much to a holder of public office, is it?" This restrained answer silenced his little sister.

In any event, for the first time in a long time, merry laughter was heard from the Hus, who put aside all grudges that day, late into the night.

It was decided that for the time being, Taiming should live at his sister's husband's Extended Benevolence Medical Clinic. Qiuyun's husband, Dr. Lin Yuedong, was a young idealist, and his charitable, affordable practice was popular with the area's peasants, who called it simply "the new clinic."

After settling in, Taiming began to help him out on the administrative side so as to have something to do. Most of his work turned out to be playing host to the many guests, perfectly healthy, who came by to visit. Taiming finally realized that there was something suspicious about the visits. For indeed, the Extended Benevolence was being visited by the police—the local officer, sometimes even a special agent—who found a reason to pop in almost daily. Only after some time did Taiming see that their business was with neither the clinic nor its doctor but with Taiming himself. The casual visitors from the police would be inordinately curious, for instance, about a letter sent to Taiming from China.

So frequent were these visits that eventually he and the officers assigned to him took to chatting with the ease of friends, though they did stop short of sharing their innermost feelings.

"If you ever go on a trip, you have to notify us, OK?" the special agent requested, always incidentally.

One day, Taiming did have a reason to travel, to the southern reaches of the island. Recalling the agent's warning and assuring himself that his conscience was clean, Taiming resolved to report to him first as requested. But when he found the familiar face at the special service bureau, he was told that the brief trip was of

no concern, that in fact, he would not have had to come in at all. Cracking jokes all the while, the agent showed barely any interest in the itinerary.

Taiming could only laugh at himself then. But once he had left, he realized that the agent was quite serious about keeping him under surveillance. While he was waiting for the train that would take him farther south—he was already as far down as Pingtung, having changed at Kaohsiung to the Pingtung Line—he left the station for a brief stroll, to kill time. As he was looking at the tropical plants in the town's park, he felt for an instant a burning gaze on his back. Startled, he turned around and saw a man quickly hide behind a tree. Taiming's heart leaped in his chest. The man looked exactly like the one he had shared a compartment with that morning. Suddenly anxious, Taiming hurried back to the station and was the first to board when the train arrived. The man he had recognized also climbed into his carriage. In fact, everywhere Taiming went, the man followed tirelessly like a shadow.

He was being tailed after all. The special agent had pretended not to care about Taiming's travel plans and had responded to his visit with small talk, but he had also sent this man to watch him. It would pay to be careful.

Taiming made a mental note to himself: "From now on I will have to try to live inconspicuously." After returning home from his trip, he stopped going out, and, almost always staying inside, became a reclusive bookworm. When the world finally seemed to start forgetting about Taiming's existence, the annoying visits from the special agent also became less and less frequent. "Good, I can relax a little now," thought Taiming. But it was around this time that he heard talk of young Taiwanese men on the continent being deported one after the other back to Taiwan and being swiftly imprisoned. The ominous atmosphere of the time was like a harbinger of war.

## 2. In the Shadow of War

Finally, what had to come had come. The crack of a single gunshot at Marco Polo Bridge ignited the smoldering coals that had gradually been burning brighter.

There was a welter of opinions concerning the implications of the event, including the optimistic view: "It's no different from the Manchurian Incident; it won't develop into an all-out war." People tried to remain unconcerned, an outlook that was more prevalent in the elderly. As the fighting progressed from northern China to Shanghai, this optimistic theory lost adherents. While people held their breath waiting, a full-scale war unfolded as Japan and China collided again and again. And now it was about to spread like wildfire. Taiming, meanwhile, absentmindedly observed this historical about-face.

As the war progressed, Taiwan also was quickly designated for fighting.

In both the countryside and the towns, talk of the war was on everybody's lips, and raised flags seeing off soldiers going to the front and departing civilian military-workers were everywhere. Community-spirit mobilization movements had begun, and lectures on these movements were being held in every corner of the countryside. Not only the heads of households but also housewives and even sons and daughters were mobilized for each of these meetings, where they were required to listen to lectures given by village heads, school headmasters, arbitrators, and others.

One afternoon, Taiming left for a meeting with the owner of the rice dealership next door. The meeting that day was about raising money, and everyone was called on to hand over every cent they had to "scourge the atrocious enemy, China." The speakers, including the village head, denounced as unpatriotic all those who were hoarding gold. Although their arguments threatened those

not handing over their gold, the arbitrators knew exactly who had it anyway.

After the meeting, Taiming started home with the rice dealer from next door. As the two slowly made their way, groups of three or four people poured out of the meeting hall and walked in front of and behind them. They could hear the animated conversation between two ladies walking in front of them. What appeared to be a middle-aged woman was cautioning a young bride.

"My ring? I have never worn it, so I will be all right. . . ."

"Oh no, the arbitrator was at the wedding."

"But won't it be spared as a wedding memento?"

"... If they find out, you're in trouble."

They noticed Taiming approaching them from behind and, surprised, stopped talking and, suddenly lengthening their strides, started walking as fast as they could. It seemed they had mistaken Taiming for a civil servant. Taiming felt rather miserable, and the rice dealer murmured to him in Taiwanese:

"Developing new mountains and selling old fields."

This was a saying that warned against selling good paddies for new ones when they haven't been cultivated yet. Taiming only nodded gently, remaining silent, but the rice dealer continued with another:

"Long whips don't reach the stomach or back."

This meant that whips that were too long were useless. Taiming caught the meaning and asked, "Not worth the effort?"

The rice dealer, noticing that Taiming had grasped the meaning, said, "So, Master Hu, you *do* speak the language well, as I suspected. China is a vast land with more than four hundred provinces. Even if each region resisted for only a year, the war would last for eighteen years. It can be aptly compared to chasing a rat around a large room: if you aren't efficient, you will tire in the process of chasing and never catch it." He continued talking, expounding on the rise and fall of China. He seemed to have an

education in the classics and enjoyed using words rich with connotation hinting at this education.

"The third arbitrator was arrogant, calling this a holy war and labeling people as unpatriotic, but where exactly is the justice in Japan's actions?" he said, venting his daily frustration.

Taiming, having nothing to say in reply, walked silently.

The demand to hand over precious metals had given rise to an untimely panic among the women. Even Taiming's younger sister, Qiuyun, and elder brother, Zhigang, argued over whether or not to hand over some earrings. Since becoming an arbitrator, Zhigang had been an avid war supporter and so was very enthusiastic about handing them over. Also upon becoming an arbitrator, Zhigang had remodeled his house into a Japanese-style abode, constructing a household Shinto altar, and even a tatami-mat room, which was very unusual in the countryside. Such devotion was also evident in his visits to the shrines with his wife, both of them in Japanese dress. When the Manchurian Incident broke out, as if driven to a frenzy by the war sentiments in town, he made a fool of himself by becoming a pawn of the Japanese. Because he wanted to improve his record as an arbitrator, when it came to handing over precious metals, he urged his entire family to give theirs up. When his sister hesitated in handing over her last remaining earrings, he crushed her youthful feminine feelings by coercing her with threats like "What if the police search the house?" and "I'm going to tell them!"

At no point in the argument were there any feelings of affection or family bonds on display. In the end, Qiuyun, in tears, had to hand over the earrings.

One day, when Taiming and the rice dealer were chatting at the rice shop, three Japanese wearing government-cleek hats strutted in. Two or three peasants, who had been taking a break, stood up, saying to the Japanese, "Please, take our seats," and then disappeared quietly.

The three Japanese were obviously rice inspectors. The peasants had just been decrying the "heartlessness" of the rice directives. The dealer of the store was flustered in greeting the untimely and unwelcome guests. His son, who spoke Japanese very well, could usually be counted on to attend to the guests, but today, of all days, he was out, and the inspectors were visibly displeased by his absence. The son always knew what to do, so when he was there to welcome them, things went smoothly with the officers. The rice dealer apologized to the officers in his rudimentary Japanese for his son's absence.

The inspectors turned on him angrily. "What? He's not here? But you knew that today was inspection day!" They burst out forcefully, "We'll inspect anyway!"

Panicking, the rice dealer followed after them. Bags of rice were lined up in four or five rows and piled high in the rice storage container. Leaning against them, the officers looked from the bags to the rice dealer's face and back again, pointing the sharp end of the rice-sampling implement into the bags with malice in their movements. Finishing this, they then moved off into a corner of the storeroom and began muttering quietly to one another.

Suddenly, facing the entrance, they yelled for their coolie, "Hey, come here!"

Their coolie approached, bringing a bamboo sieve. One of the inspectors suddenly thrust the rice scoop into a bag nearby and then poured out what he had scooped into his palm, proceeding to inspect it. He then purposely threw the rice violently back into the sieve so that it would end up scattered around the place. The rice bounced off the edge of the sieve and landed all over the ground. Trampling the rice with the soles of their shoes, they continued their inspection, plunging their scoop into every single bag.

"Hey, there's stone in this one—you've failed the inspection. Wash it all again!" With this parting shot, the inspectors headed swiftly toward the front of the shop without even attempting to

inspect the remaining bags. Ashen faced, the rice dealer followed them and argued earnestly about something or other. He was expecting a loading boat soon, so if the rice didn't pass, he would be in serious trouble.

Taiming watched this unfold, his chest burning with righteous indignation. It was barbaric to order someone to rewash all the rice—of which there were more than a thousand bags—after having inspected only around ten and finding only one containing, by chance, a measly pebble. Now, having decided to call it a day, the inspectors did not go home but remained seated in the shop and drank their tea, which had gotten cold, with apparent distaste. They obviously had an ulterior motive. One of the inspectors caught sight of a wooden mortar lying in the garden and went over to have a look at it.

"It's camphor—good quality," he said, and, with a greedy look in his eyes, started stroking it with his hands.

"Camphor?" his superior officer echoed. With an effort, he stood up and went over to look at the mortar. Laughing, he returned and said to the rice dealer, "Can we have that mortar?" He narrowed his eyes.

"Can we have it?" meant, of course, for free. Taiming felt sick watching this but thought that if the rice could be saved with just one mortar, then it was best to hand it over. He whispered into the rice dealer's ear that he should part with it. The rice dealer did not understand Japanese as well as his son did and was a rather inflexible fellow, but he finally agreed after hearing Taiming's advice.

The mortar changed hands, and the superior's face suddenly broke into a smile. "Hey, Pops, you're smarter than I thought," he said. With a complete about-face, he added, "But you'll have to wash your rice better from now on." He signaled with his eyes to his subordinates that the rice should pass the inspection.

The subordinates complied and went around stamping the second-class mark on all the rice bags without even inspecting them.

After this, the rice dealer entertained his guests with saké. Taiming tried to leave, but the rice dealer stopped him, and he ended up reluctantly joining them as an interpreter.

When the inspectors became drunk, one of them observed, "The worst beat is vegetables, and the best's sugar. Those sugar guys are not only treated to a feast, they can take home some sugar as well!"

"That's right. By the way, I like beer more than saké." The rice dealer had neither beer nor sugar. The inspectors were behaving as though they were at some bar café.

Taiming thought to himself, "How awful can these men be?" But they were the type who, even if Taiming had voiced his thoughts, would not simply leave. In the end, the inspectors found what they wanted at a place in town, where they drank themselves into a stupor, and went home on the last train.

Later that night, as Taiming lay in bed at home trying to fall asleep, he was kept awake brooding over the incident. If this really was a holy war, what were those inspectors up to, anyway?

### 3. Calls from the War Front

After a long absence, Taiming left his sister's house and returned home. His brother Zhigang was still thoroughly infatuated with the new regime and was assiduously trying to upgrade his lifestyle. For him the new regime meant installing a new bathroom containing a bathtub made of cedar that emanated a strong woody smell. Furthermore, because the interior of the house had been the traditionally deep Chinese red, he even had it repainted in more typically Japanese colors. The toilet had also been remodeled into a Japanese-style one.

Because Zhigang had not seen Taiming for a long time, he proudly asked him, "So, what do you think of my home?" Taiming thought back about the time when his sister, Qiuyun, had



angered Zhihang by harshly disparaging his assimilationist lifestyle and thus decided not to say anything particularly critical. Zhihang's pride became even more evident as he started giving Taiming an account of the pains he had endured to improve his way of life, as though he were delivering a lecture.

"Let's have something Japanese for lunch today," he said and served udon noodles. As he drank the soup, he asked Taiming, "What do you think of this soup? You lived in Japan, so you will have a discerning palate for this. Is it all right?"

Taiming considered recklessly hurting Zhihang's feelings but maintained his brother's mood by saying simply, "I've already forgotten what it should taste like, but this seems to be all right."

"It is, isn't it?" Zhihang responded, all the more satisfied. Observing his brother's simplicity, Taiming was filled by an indefinable sense of pity.

Taiming had not been home in some time, so he went for a stroll in the garden and walked to the public office. There now was a Shinto altar outside the hall as well as a Japanese scroll hanging there. However, the scroll somehow looked skimpy, unsuited to the large building. Taiming left the area and wandered aimlessly down the country roads, going wherever his feet led him, until he reached the town.

He noticed that as though by agreement, the women wore one-piece dresses and the young men were in the national uniforms. Taiwanese attire was considered, along with Chinese styles, to be "of inimical character." Drapers and tailors were doing a profitable business.

Whether he was at home or walking around, Taiming felt somehow empty. The enthusiasm of the zealous crowds in which he found himself failed to rub off on him, and eventually, his feelings of alienation spiraled into great loneliness. The look of hopelessness and apathy so apparent on his face was a cause for concern to his family, particularly his mother. But he could not

hide his feelings. When Taiming mulled over his private thoughts alone in his room, his mother would often slip in as silent as a shadow, speak his name in a voice full of kindness and warmth, and smile almost shyly. At times like these, Taiming knew what his mother wanted to say. She had recently begun to bring up a particular subject from time to time—a subject she had previously pressed Taiming about before he had gone to the continent. Concealing her motive behind a weak smile, she would chat with him, and after some hesitation, she would bring up, once again, the same old topic:

"Taiming . . ." and then nervously, "Have your thoughts still not changed? Why don't you take another wife?"

Taiming's mother knew about Shuchun and Ziyuan. But in her thinking, they were beyond saving because the war had spread throughout the entire mainland. Even if they were still alive and Taiming were reunited with them, it would not be shameful to have a concubine as well as a wife.

Taiming, however, felt an indescribable sense of resistance to his mother's tone when she suggested that he "take another." He did not doubt her genuine compassion, but she was just a foolish elderly woman adhering to the old customs. Taiming could not accept such out-of-date ideas. He had decided that until he knew his wife's whereabouts, he would not remarry. The decision was based on a sense of responsibility rather than love for his wife.

Thoughts of his wife frequently tormented him at night, but there was nothing he could do. He would tell himself that he could do nothing but wait, and attempting to alleviate his pain, he would pick up the Mo Zi he was reading. Mo Zi was much more actively antiwar than the pacifist Mencius; his arguments were extremely clear, and reading them gave Taiming a sense of contentment. Mo Zi opposed the tragic path of history and tried to stop it, but in times of war, his theories were little more than a single drop—an unpolluted drop—in the murky, torrential flow



of history. No matter how passionately Mo Zi asserted his views, by themselves they were powerless.

Closing the book of essays, Taiming thought about the common tragedy of all intellectuals. Mo Zi was present in the heart of all feeling people. However, the intellectuals of the past, no matter what the period, were always left behind by the passage of time as they helplessly flailed around. Perhaps they were no more than rootless floating weeds in the current. In the past, to avoid being swept along by the torrent of history, subscribing to the beliefs of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi or perhaps Tao Yuanming was an option, but this was no longer practical. In the current climate of total war, an individual was powerless. Whether or not he liked it, everyone was destined to be drawn into the vortex of war, under the supreme injunction of the state. The wisdom of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, the thoughts of Tao Yuanming—they had not the power to regulate modernity.

Taiming lay awake for almost the entire night, turning over these ideas in his mind.

The next day something terrible happened that changed Taiming's circumstances. An order that arrived out of the blue demanded that Taiming join the civil naval force and be posted at the war front. This was not entirely unexpected; by then, young Taiwanese men were being heavily conscripted for support units. Even so, holding the order, Taiming had no control over the complex emotions welling up inside him and making him tremble.

Feigning composure as best he could, Taiming entered his mother's room and explained the turn of events in a way so as to avoid frightening her. After circling around the issue, he told her the truth.

His mother's face suddenly changed color, and for a short time she said nothing. Then suddenly, at the top of her voice, she wailed: "Are there no laws in heaven?" She then began to weep loudly. Taiming did not know how to comfort his mother. All he

could do to ease her state of mind was to tell her that all the people who had landed at Bias Bay were still alive.

The date for his departure to the front finally arrived. A send-off party was held by the head of the town hall. Two other young men who had also been conscripted attended the function as well. All three were promising young native Taiwanese with exemplary academic backgrounds.

The proceedings started with the village head mounting the platform and giving a conventional send-off speech. Then it was the turn for the summoned to give their greetings. The other two took turns on the podium and told the crowd with great vigor and enthusiasm of their resolve to fight. But their words seemed forced and pitiful. Taiming shut his eyes and listened to them unfeelingly, as if he had nothing to do with it. Soon enough it was his turn to take the stage. He had wanted to avoid speaking, but the atmosphere in that hall did not offer this option.

So Taiming headed toward the podium with heavy feet. He thought he had nothing to say. But when he looked out from the podium at the audience, the countless faces crammed into the hall, he felt pressured to address them and mechanically opened his mouth to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen." His gaze surveyed the hall and stopped when it reached his mother sitting at the back, crying. The sight pained him greatly, but he managed to continue speaking calmly. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am very grateful to you all for this wonderful farewell. Forever in your gratitude, I will do my utmost at the front." With this he bowed and left the podium.

He felt it would have been dishonest to say anything more. The audience, expecting a longer, more rousing speech, were surprised by his brevity. The hall was momentarily silent and nobody clapped. Recovering, the crowd came to life and filled the hall with applause.

#### 4. Tragedy

No matter how much he wiped it away, sweat kept seeping onto his skin. The dull roar of the airplanes in the dazzling blue sky above made the heat even more unbearable.

Taiming had arrived in Guangdong as a civilian employee. Although it was a reasonably calm town, the residents seemed to be frightened of something, and their days were filled with fear. Not yet used to the weight of the sword he was forced to carry, Taiming uncomfortably wandered around the town and, when meeting with the townspeople, would feel an indefinable, speechless resistance from them. Underneath the residents' veneer of dutiful respect, Taiming sensed a hidden animosity. He wanted to break down the barrier somehow and be honest with these people, but with his halfhearted attitude, it would not be possible. So instead, he withdrew even further into himself, thus fortifying the barrier of oppressive silence.

One day, walking across town, Taiming saw, at the foot of a bridge glistening under the ferocious sun, a well-built man who was tied up with thick wire. At the time, while order was certainly being returned to the town, there still were frequent cases of arson, robberies, and acts of terror. The man at the bridge was probably a perpetrator of such a crime. In the scorching heat, he fixed his imploring eyes on the passersby. There were marks on his skin, obvious evidence of a painful struggle to free himself. The Chinese people passing by pretended not to see him. Next to the man stood a notice on which was written an indictment charging him with robbery. The sign was in Chinese and in stark black ink and included the threat that all those who carried out evil acts would meet the same fate. Sadly, the indictment reflected none of the goodness in the man's face. Taiming felt sorry for him.

"Poor man . . . if he stays like this, he'll dry up and turn into a mummy," he thought, unable to look into the man's eyes.

The man happened to notice the sympathy in Taiming's eyes and started moving his mouth in an attempt to say something. His words were almost incomprehensible, probably because he had little strength remaining: "You must be from Hubei or Shandong. You're not from here, at any rate."

From the accent, Taiming could guess where the man was from. He was overcome with pity, and, looking around to make sure there was no one in sight, he quickly unfastened his drinking flask and poured some water into the man's mouth. With a look of infinite gratitude, the man gulped down the water noisily, relishing every drop. There was no time for words.

At that instant, they heard a voice yell suddenly. It was a Japanese soldier. Taiming thought he was in for it, so, flustered, he grabbed the flask and began to run away. He could not, however, bear to leave the man as he was. After making a quick decision, he took out of his pocket a container with mouth refreshers in it, emptied it, and stuffed them all into the man's mouth. He then walked away.

Taiming realized that the man would probably die of starvation, thirst, and heat and that his own small act of kindness would not save the man in the end. Yet the water and mouth refreshers had enabled the man to enjoy a little respite before his imminent death. If there was any comfort at all for Taiming, it was in these thoughts. Even after returning to his lodgings that evening, the man's look of utter gratitude remained fixed in Taiming's mind.

The next evening, Taiming decided to take a walk outside by the river to get away from the oppressive heat. Three soldiers having a drink on the grass invited him to join them, asking him if he were in the civil force. They were a friendly group, so Taiming joined them, taking a seat on the grass. As the alcohol began to take effect, the talk turned to women.

"The women around here are so chaste," remarked a middle-aged soldier. He continued, talking about his unsuccessful attempts to rape the women in rural Guangdong on his way home from fighting. "She wouldn't do as I said, so I had to pull out my sword and wave it around. She fell to the floor when she saw that! I thought, 'Got you now,' and as I was about to go about my business, the damn bitch ran away. She was so fast! One minute my catch was there, the next it was gone." He still looked quite disappointed.

Another soldier, licking his lips enthusiastically, now started giving an account of his own experience. "Well, I was successful. It was during a patrol mission in central China. We heard a rustling in a cornfield, so we went to see what it was. Thinking it suspicious, we went slowly and quietly. We heard voices. The voices of young women. Immediately my heart started racing. We jumped out to see more than thirty women and children. Upon seeing us, they quickly scattered like birds. Two young ones didn't get away. They were shivering with fear, and we made them, you know . . . aah, my best experience ever. Afterward, though, my buddy thought we might get in trouble, and so, bang! He shot them from behind. It was cruel and heartless, you know, after they had given us so much pleasure."

Taiming felt himself sobering up as he listened. Even these soldiers, who were easygoing and amicable, had a barbaric side to them. Although he thought he had figured them out, Taiming revised his opinion of them.

Unaware of what was going through Taiming's head, another younger soldier, not to be outdone by the middle-aged men, responded to the previous story. "When we entered Nanjing triumphantly, the refugee shelters were swarming with girls from Jinling University. We had our pick. They were all so white and succulent, much better than the women from around here. But all of us in my battalion, which arrived first, were young, and we didn't touch them. The battalion that arrived afterward, though,

had many older men in it, and apparently they had a feast on the girls. We were so foolish to let that chance get away!"

"Oh well, first in best dressed. For three days after the city fell, we were up to our eyes in it, but it all ended when the MPs arrived. Honest men will always be fools."

Taiming had heard enough. "Thank you for the drinks," he said, and made a hasty exit. Walking away, he thought, "What on earth is war? What is it for?" Conjuring up images of the numerous incidents like the soldiers' stories—inhumane incidents concealed by the shadow of war—Taiming was driven to frenzied distraction.

A few days later, Taiming's battalion arrested eight men on suspicion of anti-Japanese terrorism. This was a mere formality, however, because once they were arrested, their fates were sealed. Nonetheless, the men were interrogated, and Taiming's job was to interpret. They seemed valiant men of unfailing conviction. No matter how much they were threatened, they remained undaunted as if they had already accepted their death sentences.

The cross-examinations yielded no hard evidence. The interrogating officer became increasingly impatient and, rather than sticking to facts, was swayed by his emotions. The principal reason for the men's arrests was merely that they had been found with oil on their hands. The interrogating officer asserted that the oil must have come from a gun. Taiming, however, argued that it may have been machine oil and that therefore another detailed investigation was necessary. To no avail.

"Shut up! This comes from higher up." The officer desperately wanted to execute the men on the grounds that they were anti-Japanese terrorists. There was no longer any point in Taiming's stating his personal opinion, so he was silent. The officer then bubbled over: "Right, the interrogation is complete. I announce the death penalty." Taiming listened to the sentence in despair, stricken with grief.

The arrests of "anti-Japanese terrorists" continued, and the path to execution remained unchanged. After routine interrogations, the death penalty would be announced. In effect, an arrest meant execution. Taiming interpreted for all the interrogations, and gradually, he began to feel immensely burdened. The convicted were composed in death, and Taiming felt oppressed by the noble courage they displayed as martyrs for their country. Whereas these men faced death unperturbed, Taiming was anguished, his conscience wracked by guilt.

Then one day, something happened that truly had an impact on him. Ten terrorists belonging to the Volunteers for National Salvation were arrested. The commanding officer was a handsome, fair-skinned youth who could have been only eighteen or nineteen.

His attitude during the interrogations was even more exemplary than the others.

"Affiliation?"

"Volunteers for National Salvation."

"Who is your leader?"

"I don't have to tell."

"What are you?"

"Company commander."

"What's your rank?"

"Major."

"Your academic background?"

"Normal school."

"How many subordinates do you have?"

"..."

"Where are your headquarters?"

"You won't get anywhere with this. Go ahead and kill me."

With that, the commander grinned. His attitude was remarkable for its fearlessness.

It was finally decided that the executions would be performed that afternoon. A total now of eighteen prisoners, including those who had been sentenced the day before, were put on a truck. Another truck containing armed troops followed. With their black barrels gleaming eerily in the sun, six submachine guns were pointed at the prisoners at close range.

Taiming rode with the executing officer in a separate passenger vehicle, following them to the execution grounds on the outskirts of town. The midsummer sun beat down on the asphalt, making the road to the execution ground shimmer. At last, the convoy arrived at the site. The prisoners were pulled off the truck one after another and lined up. A large ditch had been dug beforehand: it would become the prisoners' grave. Presently the prisoners were made to kneel in front of the hole.

The time for execution had come. The prisoners looked into the face of death calmly, not even fidgeting. Extending their necks, they awaited the moment in silence.

"Hie!" came the sharp cry, slicing the surrounding air.

Reflecting the shine of the midsummer sun, the blade of a Japanese sword glistened as it danced in midair. At that instant, a sharp thud was heard; a head came off a body and tumbled into the pit. The decapitated body then crumpled and followed the severed head into the hole. A gurgling noise came from the point where the head was severed, and dark red blood spurted out, staining the ground a deep red. As the executions continued, Taiming started getting the chills and had to struggle not to pass out. By the end, his entire body was shivering relentlessly.

The last prisoner to be executed was the commanding officer.

"Hey, you, the civilian!" he called to Taiming sharply.

He wanted to be shot rather than beheaded, so Taiming translated his wish. The request was rejected on the grounds that it would be a waste of ammunition.

"I see," the prisoner said simply, and let it drop. Then, undaunted: "This is my last request. Let me have a cigarette."

This wish was granted. Taiming lighted a cigarette and held it in the prisoner's mouth, and the prisoner took a deep drag, exhaling the white smoke.

When he had finished the cigarette, he said decisively, "I don't want a blindfold—I'm a soldier." He then intoned, "Man conceives the deed and heaven sees it through; in eighteen years another decent man—"

"Hiel" a cry reverberated before the prisoner could finish. His head was separated from his body and rolled into the ditch with a thud. His body then collapsed. At that instant, Taiming became dizzy. He thought he felt a gust of cold wind across his face, and he could feel himself faint.

"What a weakling," somebody jeered from somewhere behind Taiming. He could remember nothing after that.

That evening, he went to bed with a high temperature of 104 degrees, incessantly murmuring some kind of nonsense and slipping in and out of consciousness. A week passed and he did not recover. Finally, he was sent to the army hospital.

A severe psychological shock was the trigger for Taiming's collapse. A succession of unfamiliar experiences in the region to which he had been deployed, plus severe mental anguish compounded by physical fatigue, had already strained Taiming's mind and body. The executions he witnessed were too much for his already weakened state, and once he collapsed, he could not get back up. Seeing that his condition was not improving, the doctor gave up and decided Taiming's fate with a simple pronouncement: "He must be sent home. He is no longer of use here."

So one day, Taiming was sent back to Taiwan. The boat home traveled noiselessly down the Zhu River on a quiet, windless day. Taiming, now a bit better, gazed at the city of Guangzhou as it

disappeared out of view. In reality, his stay at the front had been brief, but to Taiming, it had felt like ages. Peaceful days lay ahead for him, but the clouds of war still loomed over the world. His own peace would not be real, since he could be easily drawn back into the vortex of war. He was worried.

##### 5. Convalescence

After returning to Taiwan, Taiming initially sought refuge at the Extended Benevolence Medical Clinic, which was run by his sister's husband, Lin Yuedong. Having been medically discharged from the army, he felt somewhat reticent about returning to his homeland, where he had many acquaintances, and preferred to spend some time quietly convalescing alone.

His spirit ravaged and exhausted by his unusual experiences, Taiming gradually began to improve amid the sights and sounds of his tranquil homeland. Physically, however, he was still not himself, nor could he decide what he wanted to do. Besides, even though the Extended Benevolence Medical Clinic was quiet, with the comings and goings of its many visitors and patients, it could hardly be considered repose for one's nerves. After a short stay at the clinic, Taiming returned home to his village.

The person who rejoiced most at his homecoming was his mother, Ah-Cha. Having regained the son whom she had given up for dead, she swore that come what may, she would never part with him again. She also resolved that once he recovered, she would follow through with her previously aborted plan to see him wed. Her one and only hope was to have her son get married so that she could spend her twilight years in happiness and peace.

For some time after his return, Taiming savored the atmosphere of his village and the affection of his family, but as his condition improved, he gradually became bored.

One day, he made a visit to Zhigang's arbitration office. As it happened, Azuma, the deputy village headmaster, and several others deemed to be local intellectuals had stopped by and were deep in conversation. All of them, including Azuma, had taken Japanese surnames. Azuma's name had originally been "Chen," but he had removed the left part of the Chinese character, leaving the Japanese-sounding "Azuma."

Taining's brother, Zhigang, had similarly changed his surname to the Japanese-sounding "Furutuki" by dividing the Chinese character "Hu" into its two components and reading them separately. By addressing one another as "Mr. Azuma," "Mr. Furutuki," and so forth, the men indulged their pride in being citizens of the Japanese Empire. At the same time, this move was another expedient way to advance their careers.

When Azuma spotted Taining, he began to extol in his inherently affable manner the distinguished accomplishments of the Hu clan and of Taining himself.

"By the way, Taining," he ventured, "why don't you follow your brother's example and change your name, too?"

Taining did not respond.

"I must admit," Azuma continued, "that after changing my name, there have been some inconveniences. For example, when we go out to the provinces, I've sometimes had the unpleasant experience of having some obtruse department head introduce me to the governor by saying, 'This is Mr. Azuma, formerly Mr. Chen.' But if you consider the matter calmly, you'll see that this is just an unavoidable consequence of our being in a transitional period. It is by passing through this painful transition for our descendants that we'll become distinguished Japanese."

"I don't think Mr. Hu fully grasps the urgency of the problem," chimed in one of the men there, discerning that Taining gave little sign of being persuaded. "But think about how it will be

when your child enters middle school. Then you'll see the reason for the urgency. Even the most conservative among us then can see the necessity of changing our name."

The man was alluding to the fact that on the entrance examination, the number of passing students who had not changed their name was very low and that even if they did manage to pass, the school would eventually force them to change their names anyway.

As Taining listened to their discussion about changing names, he suddenly remembered what had happened to Sorai, an eighteenth-century Japanese Confucian. Inordinately enamored of Chinese culture, Sorai had changed his name to a Chinese one, only to be censured by a later generation of Japanese scholars. If one can never be anything other than oneself, then one can hardly expect a name change to yield a new personality. In the case of the group here, who were motivated by expediency and self-interest, Taining sensed in their taking new names an ulterior motive that revolted him.

At the time, a ditty ridiculing name changing was popular among the lower-grade students at the public elementary schools.

Flies in the outhouse and red sea bream  
Red sea bream done change their name  
The arbitrators think they're the same  
Flies in the outhouse and red sea bream  
Flies in the outhouse and red sea bream  
Red sea bream, red sea bream

Chanted in a singsong manner, the ditty mocked the fact that during rationing, families with Japanese names or who spoke Japanese were granted special favors, including rations of red sea bream.

Taining could not bring himself to laugh at the satirical spirit that had reached even the children's hearts, and whenever he

heard these mocking words, his face stiffened with a mixed feeling resembling a tearful smile. He also remembered the sight of Zhigang's wife trying to greet guests with the inept Japanese she had learned at the district school, before scurrying off with embarrassment to her inner sanctum.

"Flies in the outhouse and red sea bream," Taiming muttered to himself. "Then our efforts to become loyal Japanese citizens are nothing more than a cartoon?" It all disgusted him.

This reminded him of another intolerable situation. His mother, Ah-Cha, had recently started raising vegetables near their house in an attempt to become more self-sufficient. Elated by her initial attempts, she extended her plot, with Taiming's help, to the adjoining area. In addition to the vegetables, she also planted about thirty banana saplings, which took root in the newly cultivated earth and flourished with each passing day.

One day, Taiming was gazing untiringly at the banana trees, whose growth he had so painstakingly nurtured, when a threatening voice summoned him from behind.

"Hey, you! Did you plant those?"

He turned around to find an inspector from the Irrigation Association, the same man who used to be a police sergeant. When Taiming answered in the affirmative, the man replied in a dictatorial tone that the valley was under the administration of the Irrigation Association and that any unauthorized cultivation or planting was prohibited. The valley in question was indisputably the Hu clan's property, and Taiming calmly pointed this out. The inspector, however, obstinately insisted that the Irrigation Association naturally had control over all waterways, which would include any water flowing in the valley. He also insisted that even the trees along levees were its property.

At the time, the association's general method, which was to claim that anything related to water could be taxed, had become the target of intense public criticism, and this tendency had

become even more pronounced with this man's arrival. Armed with this pretense, the man was trying to tax Taiming's bananas. In order to rationalize his own unjust demands, he brandished his duplicitous legal knowledge in an attempt to coerce Taiming into submission. That was the association's favorite trick. Listening to him, Taiming became incensed and launched into a sharply worded counterattack. Faced with the well-reasoned rebuttal, the inspector seemed to think, "Good heavens! This one's more formidable than an ordinary farmer!" and muttering to himself, he retreated for the day.

A notice from the Irrigation Association, however, arrived some days later. Concerning the abolishment of the pond and a special water tax, the notice demanded that in order to increase production, the pond had to be filled in and turned into a rice field. The designated special water tax would be seventeen and a half yen. Taiming let out a groan. If he had to pay the special water tax twice a year, it would amount to thirty-five yen! It was doubtful whether the plot would yield even a thousand pounds of unhusked rice per year, which would bring in only 92.53 yen at the official price. When he considered that in addition to the regular water tax, more than a third of it would be subject to the special water tax, he couldn't see the point: after adding in the cultivation costs and land taxes, it would be cheaper to purchase a new field altogether. Moreover, the pond was not merely a fishpond but was built because they needed a reservoir to supplement the irrigation.

If he eliminated the pond, four or five acres of the lower fields would be turned into parched earth at the mercy of the weather. The directive was an unjust demand that clearly ignored the circumstances of the concerned party. Taiming resolved to go to the Irrigation Association to get to the bottom of the issue.

The Irrigation Association occupied a majestic two-story building, more splendid than the local district headquarters. The entire facility had undoubtedly been funded with the unjust taxes exacted



from the sweat and blood of the masses. With trepidation, Taiming pushed open the door and entered. A young Taiwanese clerk approached him, and Taiming briefly explained the situation. The clerk took a high-handed attitude from the outset, asserting that increasing production was a matter of great national urgency and that they could not afford to make allowances for individuals' circumstances. He added that those failing to cooperate were traitors. The words were different, but the peremptory tone that Taiming had grown to abhor was the same. Pawns of the Japanese, Taiwanese were extorting exorbitant taxes from other Taiwanese, all under the guise of a national emergency. As things stood, Taiming didn't think he could afford to leave, but he could see that he wouldn't get anywhere with the clerk, so he mustered up his courage and requested an interview with the director.

A discarded provincial district headman, the director was a genial, hearty gentleman, slightly over fifty. In contrast to the young clerk, he appeared to be a man of some understanding. Taiming turned to him and explained in detail how matters stood with the land and the pond. His argument unfolded in a logical elucidation that would have gained anyone's assent. The director nodded along as he listened and showed some signs of compromising: the program for increasing production, he said, had an eye to the future, so that even if the pond currently could not be converted owing to the conditions of the land, Taiming still had an obligation to pay the water tax. Taiming, however, extended his criticism to the crucial matter of the association's methods, which seemed to rub the director the wrong way, for his attitude suddenly hardened. When Taiming retracted the comment, the man then began to insist on eradicating the pond at any cost. Getting on the man's wrong side was a mistake, but Taiming didn't believe he had said anything wrong and preferred not to distort his beliefs just to placate the director.

In the end, the argument turned emotional.

The director went so far as to say that in order to implement their policies, they would be justified in turning the fields into a wasteland. Such a flagrantly outrageous remark left no leeway for negotiation. Taiming stood up and started to leave. Apparently pressured by such determination, the director called Taiming back and became conciliatory, saying that if only Taiming paid his water taxes, he could leave the pond as it was for another year or two. What cunning! If those were his demands, he could have said so from the beginning, but this must have been the bureaucratic mentality. Taiming was all the more disgusted.

When he left the Irrigation Association building, he noticed a row of seven or eight attractive apartment buildings at the back. They were the lodgings for the Irrigation Association employees. From the interior of the complex, a phonograph record was blaring a vulgar, Japanese pop song that was current in the cafés. So this was what became of the money culled from the blood and sweat of the people—all in the name of irrigation!

Taiming felt an undefined indignation well up in him with the thought, and when he raised his eyes, flaring with that indignation, he saw white clouds scudding to and fro across the peaks of Mount Cigao, which basked in the faint winter sunlight. The clouds appeared full of turbulence.

#### 6. Mother's Death

One year of war was equivalent to a hundred years of peace. Everything continued to change at an intense pitch and pressure never encountered during peacetime, and the various Taiwanese customs that had taken root in history and tradition were no exception. The Yimin temple festivals, which fell on the twentieth day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar, were the first to change. Even the Fangleiao Yimin Temple Festival, at which tens of thousands of frenzied participants from fourteen villages gathered each year to sacrifice

well over a thousand pigs, was abandoned, and the Taiwanese theaters, no longer giving performances, were shut down as well. The old lunar calendar was replaced with the new solar one, and Taini-  
ing's family fell in step with the other villagers in welcoming a solar New Year that seemed more like a wretched state of emergency. The celebrations were mere formalities, devoid of emotion. Taini-  
ing's mother was dissatisfied, and when the old lunar New Year arrived, she furtively made her sweet cakes with lingering attachment, and  
worshiped anew her ancestors and the goddess of the sea.

Another change was that when the rice-planting season arrived, amid vociferous cries for increased production, the authorities' enforcement of programmed planting intensified. There seemed to be no end to the number of farmers who were called to the police department and raked over the coals for noncompliance. Those summoned were forced to kneel on a concrete floor for more than an hour or were slapped across the face. Even so, the problems between the farmers and the district patrollers and officials did not diminish, for even when a farmer strictly imple-  
mented the intensive planting methods, if the rice was not planted in the standard intervals of twenty-one centimeters by twenty centimeters, the officials would complain.

For instance, there was the case of an old farmer who had tilled the same fields from childhood until the age of seventy and who knew from experience the most appropriate planting methods for maximizing each field's harvest. The man continued with his methods, but then an inspector appeared, measured with his ruler, and reprimanded the man for being out of compliance.

Trying to make his point, the old farmer explained that his methods, deduced from experience, were sound; that because the conditions for higher and lower fields were different, you couldn't just plant by the manual; that if you planted too closely together in poorly ventilated hollows, you risked infecting the emerging rice plants with blight; and that the stalks wouldn't grow thick if

the plants weren't spaced at the appropriate intervals. Taini-  
ing happened to be translating and felt that the farmer was making excellent points, but the officials turned a deaf ear to everything the old man had to say.

"Unacceptable!" one of them yelled. "You absolutely have to follow the regulations. Replant everything. If you don't like it, come to the district headquarters tomorrow."

His comment ended with a threat. Regulations were all they knew, and reality was irrelevant. They couldn't rest content until they forced everything into their mold of regulations, even if this lowered production.

"Son of a bitch!" muttered the old farmer, out of exaspera-  
tion at their intransigence, and clicking his tongue in disgust, he tossed his spade aside, raised his whip, and drove on his oxen with a "giddyap!" The oxen cruelly trampled row after row of the painstakingly planted rice seedlings. Nothing could be done in the face of an official's order, but when Taini-  
ing considered how painful it must have been for the man to plow up the seedlings that he himself had taken the trouble to plant, he couldn't help feeling sorry for him. When the officials saw what the old farmer was doing, they finally were satisfied.

"OK, let's get going," they said, taking their leave. But even they seemed to feel ashamed of themselves. "Old people are so stubborn," they explained, trying to curry favor with Taini-  
ing. "You young folks are much more understanding."

The strict crackdown soon had every rice field in compliance with the vertical and horizontal standards of an orderly dissected go game board, and the authorities were pleased. Although the transformation did not seem to increase production, the authori-  
ties adhered to their theoretically projected production targets and blamed the farmers when the actual harvests did not reach those goals. Although the excessive demands were enough to over-  
whelm the farmers, an even more intense demand for increased

production came crashing down on them: Taiwan was suddenly assigned a quota of five million bushels of rice, and a campaign to raise production commenced.

Farmers had a proverb that said, "April, May, and September, not one friend do we remember." This meant that in farming villages, the drain on the economy during those months precluded human kindness. After farmers planted their crops and paid the necessary expenses, the custom was to live frugally while irrigating and weeding the fields in anticipation of the harvest. During April and May, every field glittered with green as far as the eye could see, and those months were filled with the hopes of the impending blessings, but they also were a financial struggle. On top of that, good and poor harvests were at the whim of nature, so farmers were extraordinarily anxious about the weather. Constantly praying to be spared from storms, they eagerly awaited the harvest. These were the farmers who were suddenly struck with the demand for huge contributions of rice.

Before the official announcement, the towns were rife with rumors, but the details remained unknown in the concerned farming villages. For this reason, the farmers—who were certain to be the principal victims—remained in the dark. But as the various rumors filtered out of the towns, the sense of dread began to descend on the farming villages too.

One day, Taiming was weeding in a peanut field when several local farmers came up and started gossiping about the rice contribution campaign.

"You can't buy rice in town anymore," one of them said. "All the rice shops are empty."

Their opinions differed as to whether the supply would fall short or whether rice could be bought in other areas. That a crisis was imminent seemed inevitable. That evening, Taiming's mother told him about the recent outbreak of sweet potato thefts in their village, and convinced that this, too, had a connection to

the rice shortage, Taiming related what he had heard in the field that day.

"That's bad news," replied his mother. "But listen, Taiming: when your grandfather was alive, he always used to say, 'Every year, prevent hunger; every night, prevent theft.' He hated leaving rice outside and always stowed it away. And in the evening, he always checked the outer gate. And most important, late in life, he always used to store away more than enough rice to see us through any emergencies. Your mother developed the same habits thanks to him, so we'll be fine."

Then she told him about the great famine that struck China during the life of his grandfather's grandfather. Riots had broken out, and wherever they saw smoke, the mobs were sure to attack. Taiming's great-great-grandfather, however, had anticipated the famine during that year's harvest and had made provisions for April, May, and September. He had cleverly warded off the danger by hiding the unhusked rice in clay bricks that he piled up against a wall, so that even the many marauders never found it. Even though Ah-Cha was talking about famines in the past, she seemed anxious about the present, and she broached the subject with her son.

"But Taiming," she said, lowering her voice, "I wonder how things really stand now."

Taiming tried to reassure her by explaining that although there were crop losses in Korea and northern Kyushu, the Japanese government would never invite famine in the way that ancient China had. This explanation did not seem to assuage her fears.

The next day, Zhigang, the arbitrator, returned from a meeting on the rice contribution quotas and communicated the results to the villagers: rice rations would be one-third pint, and all remaining rice and unhusked rice would have to be turned in. Those who refused were traitors and would be severely punished. The communiqué threw the village into a panic. After

racking their brains, they decided to contribute some of the rice and hide the rest. Pandemonium broke out as some villagers ground their rice into powder, others made it into sweet cakes, others made steamed dumplings, others buried it in the ground, and still others hid it in ponds. Such behavior was necessary to ensure the security of one's family. Taiming did nothing, but Ah-Cha used various methods to hide unhusked rice just as the other villagers did.

A few days later, search parties finally started making their rounds to the various districts. Composed of police officers, district officials, and Youth Corps members, the parties searched house by house.

When the search parties arrived in Taiming's village, the villagers were filled with trepidation and silently prayed to the goddess Matsu and the Yimin spirits. The more brazen ones, however, moved their rice to the forest or a bamboo thicket, posted sentinels, and then feigned ignorance. Ironically, only those carrying out such large-scale plans of concealment managed to escape the snares of the search.

The search of Taiming's house didn't turn up anything at first, but just as they were about to leave, the district official stopped.

"That pile of sweet potatoes looks suspicious," he said.

When Ah-Cha turned pale, one of the Youth Corps members ran over and started rooting through the pile.

"I've got something! I've got something!" he yelled excitedly. All eyes turned in his direction as he proudly raised high for all to see the gasoline can that he had ferreted out. The can swung heavily, and no one doubted what it contained.

"Damn traitor!" the official viciously cursed in local dialect. And with that, the party closed in triumphantly to claim the seized gasoline can. Having recovered from her initial fright, Ah-Cha suddenly became emboldened like a cornered animal.

"Bandits!" she sharply cursed in a soft but scornful voice.

The expression of the youth with the can underwent a sudden change, less from indignation than the momentary confusion of having been caught off guard.

Leaving things as they were, they carried off the gasoline can in silence, and the district official whispered a few words to Zhigang, the arbitrator.

That evening, Zhigang paid them a visit, and reprimanded his mother severely. Taiming couldn't bear to stand by and listen.

"Brother, it wasn't Mother who concealed the rice," he said, protecting her. "It was I. You shouldn't scold her." Nonetheless, Zhigang persisted in his tongue-lashing, so Taiming instinctively retaliated: "So how do things stand at your house? Haven't you concealed anything?" Zhigang was struck dumb by the question; obviously, he was hiding rice, too. As arbitrator, however, he had escaped being searched. His concealment of rice, which took advantage of his privileged position, was far more immoral than the actions of ordinary people. Muttering to himself, the exposed Zhigang beat a hasty retreat.

"You idiot! Pawn of the Japanese!" Ah-Cha scathingly cursed as she watched him go. Her eyes were filled with tears, for she had never used such invective toward her own son.

Beginning on the following day, Ah-Cha took to her bed. For a couple of days she still got up and around, but after that, despite having been such a hard worker, she spent most of her time lying down, saying that she didn't feel good. Unexplainable signs of decline became obvious. When the ears of rice began to hang heavy on the stalks, Qiuyun, the sister who had married into the Extended Benevolence Medical Clinic, paid a sympathy call, a mysteriously acquired sack of rice in her arms.

"Oh, you look so pale!" she said as soon as she saw her mother. She was shocked at how emaciated her mother had become. Taiming had been by his mother's side constantly, so the change had not been so discernible to him, but to Qiuyun, who had not

seen her for some time, the decline was obvious. In fact, Ah-Cha was soon only a shadow of her former self, and by the time the rice was ready to be harvested, she couldn't get out of bed; it was as if all the fatigue of her long life had hit her at once. Lin Yuedong, from the Extended Benevolence Medical Clinic, exhausted every means at his disposal, but even then, Ah-Cha did not improve.

One night, she called Taiming to her bedside.

"The harvest will begin soon, Taiming," she said, "I'm so relieved."

In a voice steadier than expected, she talked about how to secure provisions and other matters, but before long, her condition got worse, and she fell into a coma. Although she occasionally called her dearest son's name, she never fully regained consciousness. Yuedong attended her devotedly until the end, but there was nothing he could do. Her long life ended in the way a decayed old tree falls.

### 7. Persecuted Youth

The death of Taiming's mother further eroded his already dwindling zest for life. He had no desire to see anyone, and the pastoral lifestyle that had once been his soul's comfort now seemed enshrouded in a dreary hue of gray. Even after the hundredth-day memorial service, he was loath to leave his study. The lethargy persisted, and in due course, the old year passed into the new.

After Ah-Cha's death, Ah-Yu became increasingly attentive to Taiming's personal affairs. Her son, Zhinan, had already grown into a fine young man, worthy of joining the Youth Corps. Her unaffected goodwill eventually found its way to Taiming's heart, and he sometimes intervened on her behalf to resolve various disputes that arose between her and a tenant farmer, a man who took advantage of his landowner's weakness by inundating her with problems. In the man's defense, since the mandatory rice quotas

were put in place, many tenants were insisting on lower taxes or were returning land to the owners. In general, everything had been turned on its head, so that now landowners were pleading with their tenants.

On the evening of the first full moon of the year, Ah-Yu said her prayers to Tian-gong and extended a dinner invitation to Taiming as an expression of gratitude for all his assistance. Taiming felt at ease with her and accepted without hesitation. Taiming's father, Hu Wengqing, also was there.

Hu Wengqing had aged noticeably, but he was as lively as ever, and once he had had a few drinks, he began arguing in favor of Japan's expansion into mainland China. Taiming could not agree with his father's argument: like many proponents of the policy, his father had fallen for the Japanese propaganda and assumed that such expansion meant reconstruction of the continent. Taiming, however, was keenly aware of how things stood in China and could not approve. Leaving that aside, he was nonetheless happy to see his father so full of vim and vigor in his old age.

As she served the meal, Ah-Yu gazed happily on the scene of father-son harmony, but before long, she became unusually agitated. When Taiming asked what the matter was, she answered that her son, Zhinan, had still not returned from a Youth Corps assembly. The assembly had taken place during that morning, and the other neighborhood boys had already come home; only Zhinan remained missing at this late hour. In particular, she was worried that something horrible might have happened to him, given the rumors circulating about the violent methods of the Youth Corps leaders.

At nine o'clock, Zhinan finally returned home, his face white as a sheet. When they asked what had happened, he explained that he had been urged to enlist in the army, had incurred the displeasure of his teacher by refusing, and had been kept in detention until now.

Because Zhinan had refused to volunteer for military service, the youth-training leader had become distraught, dragged him to a classroom, and abused him mercilessly. Zhinan was forced to kneel on a concrete floor and given a lashing, but he did not relent. When the cane cracked against his back a second time, Zhinan whirled around ferociously, wrenched the cane from the teacher's hands, and snapped it in two in front of his eyes, finally escaping through the window. That was all the resistance he could muster.

Zhinan's behavior, however, sent the entire school faculty into an uproar. The teachers turned out in full force to apprehend him, so even the obdurate Zhinan could not do anything but resign himself to his fate and meekly accompany them to the office.

In their fury, the teachers became emotional and cursed Zhinan with foul language, thereby throwing the office into chaos. Zhinan's pale face turned to stone as he endured the invective, and with a firmness surprising for a boy, he asked, "Could someone please explain to me *why* we call it *volunteering*?"

He spoke with composure, and not surprisingly, the words had the effect of dousing the incensed teachers with a barrel of cold water. At that point, the principal could no longer ignore the situation. He restrained the teachers and saying, "You can come with me," took Zhinan to his office. Then, after carefully trying to cajole him in honeyed tones, he finished with, "Well, think about it for a while," and walked out, leaving Zhinan by himself. In the principal's stead entered the headmaster, a Taiwanese who had been Zhinan's homeroom teacher.

"Zhinan," he said, "I'm not going to say that your idea is wrong, but the spirit of the times won't accept it. It would be better if you just gave in and signed the forms." He explained in detail the school's policy and the ways of the world: those who were working were forced to volunteer by their superiors; those who weren't working were rounded up by the local police; and Youth Corps members were handled by the schools. The world

might look simple, but it wasn't. The government's policy was to promote conscription by manufacturing a groundswell of power, even if they had to use deception.

"I'd never tell you to do something that wasn't in your own best interest," he continued, with artful persuasion. "There's going to be a lot of trouble, so you'd be better off listening to what I'm telling you. After what happened today, even if you volunteered, you wouldn't necessarily be inducted. The school wouldn't have the courage to recommend you, and if you're not a first-rate model youth, well then . . ."

In the end, Zhinan trusted him and signed the application. When Hu Wenqing and Taiming heard the story, they were choked with anguish. Ah-Yu buried her face in her hands and sobbed with a mother's grief.

## 8. Reunion

For Taiming, all sighs and sounds were depressing beyond words, and to escape from such stimuli, he became even more reclusive, seldom venturing from his study. But the tense developments of the times nonetheless reached his ears: first, when spring moved into summer, he was hit with the reports of the sudden outbreak of war between Germany and Russia. The German army had quickly conquered the Balkans and forced France to surrender and now was apparently pushing forward into Russia with unstoppable force, all the while expanding its previous operations against Britain. The world seemed to have entered an age of destruction.

For some reason, Taiming could not sit still and left his study in search of someone he could confide in, yet there was no one he could turn to. Every sight and sound was a reminder of wartime: the public elementary school students singing war songs as they gathered the hay; the rather forlorn-looking village, bereft of its young people off on voluntary labor, with only the elderly,

women, and children left behind; and the topics of conversations on the street. People talked only about how with the rationing, one seldom ate pork nowadays; that Japanese or Japanese-speaking households received special rations of sugar and other sundries even when production was low; and of how incredibly tight things had become now that the government's list of rationed supplies had been extended to include more than twenty items, including pigs, ducks, geese, straw, jute, shell ginger, castor-oil plants, hay, bamboo, wood, chinaberries, handkerchief-tree fruit, cotton-rose bark, and scrap metal, to say nothing of sweet potatoes and rice.

"I guess everything belongs to the government," said one man, self-mockingly. "First, they take our children, and before long, they'll be coming for our wives."

Taiming again began to want time to think, and deciding that a change of mood required a change of scenery, he resolved to impose once more on the Extended Benevolence Medical Clinic. One day, he left.

It was his first trip by train in a long time. The bright coastal scenery was refreshing as if his eyes, having grown accustomed to the ubiquity of mountains, had been washed clean. Just as Taiming momentarily lost himself in the coastline landscape, a voice roused him.

"Hey, I thought it was you! It's been a long time."

Standing in front of him was a middle-aged man. It was Lan, the former classmate with whom he had stayed in Japan. All vestiges of his youth gone, Lan had the face of an established middle-aged gentleman. Taiming hadn't seen him since before leaving for China, so he invited Lan to the Extended Benevolence Medical Clinic.

Qiuyun welcomed her brother and his friend and was delighted to entertain them.

Lan had now settled down working as a lawyer after years of political activism, jail terms, and extended travel. Although the

former acerbity was gone, glimpses of his wit still were apparent when the talk turned to politics.

"Did you know that nowadays the nonsense that it's preferable to live in idleness than to die with honor has become quite popular?"

Prefacing his argument in this way, Lan expounded his views on current affairs. He criticized the thinking of the Taiwanese in the pro-Japanization camp, saying that they had forsaken their own history and rejected their own traditions in their yearning to become Japanese, and were working only for the welfare of their offspring; consequently, little Japanese clones were sprouting up like mushrooms after a rain. Not only that, Japanized writers and critics were popping up, too. But even if Taiwan managed an external form of Japanization, what would be done about the lingering race question?

"Undoubtedly," Lan lamented, "politicians would say that if it comes to that, you can't become a true Japanese without a complete blood transfusion."

He then turned his lance on the state-controlled economy.

At the time, both Taiwan and the Japanese mainland had tightly managed economies, but in Taiwan, the policy was also a clever excuse for strengthening Japanese protectionism. The executives and high-level staff in regulated companies always were Japanese, and since most of them were bureaucratic old-timers, the companies seemed like nursing homes. Moreover, there was a theory that more and more Taiwanese were being sent farther south, to make room for Japanese to immigrate to Taiwan, where sanitary conditions had been established. The pro-Japanese camp took advantage of the trend and was on the rise. This was the so-called live-in-idleness doctrine, certainly one lamentable manifestation of a disappearing race.

Taiming, however, had a different view of the subject: admittedly, the Japanization movement was a policy that weakened the



Taiwanese, but although they appeared emasculated, such was not the case; only those blinded by the lure of fame and riches had been corrupted, and the majority of Taiwanese, especially the peasants, were as sound and uncorrupted as ever. Although they had neither knowledge nor learning, their lives were firmly rooted in the earth. The outlook on life that sprang from this experience had a healthy dimension not easily manipulated by propaganda, and as long as they had their feet on the ground, they would never waver. Conversely, those in the apathetic pro-Japanese camp were easily swayed, largely because their actions were driven by physical sensations. They were rootless weeds floating in the wind, and although they appeared powerful, they were not; the slightest breeze would sweep them away.

After going to bed late that night, Taiming's thoughts turned again to China. Opportunists were numerous on the continent, some recruited during the Sino-Japanese War and others voluntarily presenting themselves. They appealed to the people using every trick in the book, but the people were not fooled in the least; they astutely saw through their opportunistic leaders, who were betraying their comrades for the sake of fame and riches. At this point in his reflections, Taiming felt as if a ray of light had shone through the darkness. Although he could not define that light, he knew that it contained a promise of hope.

"The darkness of the present day is a predawn darkness," he said to himself, "and in due course, it will pass."

This was the conclusion that Taiming finally managed to reach. He felt an invigorating vitality permeate his body, and when he suddenly woke up, dawn had already broken with a streak of light in the sky.

## *Chapter Five*

### *1. War Between Japan and the United States*

They say that spiritual and physical well-being are closely linked, and this was certainly true of Taiming's health. Curiously enough, after his chance meeting with Lan, Taiming's ideological anxieties began to give way to growing hopes. It was a vague feeling, but it was as if a beam of light had penetrated his feelings of despair. The past was the past, but the anticipation of the unfolding future brought a bounce to Taiming's heart, and his health began to improve noticeably.

At the same time, the climate grew more and more oppressive for Taiwanese intellectuals and young people, and Taiming's immobility made him impatient. He dreamed of returning to the mainland, but this dream was thwarted by the troublesome process of obtaining a passport. Companies on the island were so constricted by regulations that they were virtually paralyzed, and conditions were such that even long-standing family businesses had to be abandoned because of the regulations. The heavy weight of the war made its presence felt more keenly every day.