A Woman Soldier's Own Story

A Woman Soldier's Own Story

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF XIE BINGYING

Xie Bingying

TRANSLATED BY

Lily Chia Brissman & Barry Brissman

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW YORK

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Xie, Bingying, 1906–2000
[Nü bing zi zhuan. English]
A woman soldier's own story : the autobiography of Xie Bingying / Xie Bingying ;
translated by Lily Chia Brissman and Barry Brissman.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-231-12250-0 (alk. paper)
1. Xie, Bingying, 1906–2000. 2. Authors, Chinese—20th century—Biography.
I. Brissman, Lily Chia. II. Brissman, Barry, 1942– III. Title.

PL2765.I45 Z5213 2001
895.1′85109—dc21 2001023514

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are
printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Lisa Hamm
c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Preface to the New Translation of My Autobiography

Xie Bingying

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I COULD NOT UNDERSTAND WHY REBELLING against my parents was such a bad thing. I only wanted to be educated, just like my brothers, and to escape the feudal traditions of having my feet bound and my marriage arranged. I joined the Northern Expedition and fought the warlords partly to gain my country's freedom, partly to gain my own. This book describes the first thirty-two years of my life. It is the story of a Chinese girl who wanted to choose her own destiny in a country bound up in tradition and prejudice. I began the autobiography at the suggestion of Lin Yutang, who wished to publish it in *Universal Wind*, a magazine he edited at that time. I began writing it when I was in Changsha and I completed the first volume in the spring of 1936.

Many newspapers in Shanghai and Nanjing gave the book favorable reviews when it appeared, calling it a sincere and truthful description of a young girl's struggle to educate herself and to rebel against suffocating feudal traditions. In those days many young girls were in the same situation as I, but often they were not as lucky as I in gaining their freedom—yet they continued to struggle. As a result of their efforts, most modern Chinese women do not suffer the pain of bound feet, and many have escaped the shame of arranged marriages. Also, many now receive an education equal to that which men receive. All these are signs of human progress.

My father was a scholar from the last years of the Qing dynasty, and for thirty-seven years he served as the principal of Xinhua County Middle School. He respected the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius, loved his family, loved his country, and favored equality between males and females. My mother was a strong-willed woman whose motto was "No failure allowed, only success"—a spirit she transmitted to her children. As for my brothers, they were pleased when my autobiography was published and glad to have a female writer in the family. Even so, they disapproved of my having become a rebel and run away from home.

But all that was many years ago. I hope that now, at last, my parents are happy and at peace under the Nine Fountains.

My daughter Lily has worked closely with me to preserve the spirit and sense of my book as she has translated it into English. I hope that you, my new audience, will find in it many pleasures, both historical and literary.

San Francisco
AUGUST 1996

Introduction

Barry Brissman & Lily Chia Brissman

FOR MORE THAN SEVENTY YEARS XIE BINGYING WAS A LEADING Chinese writer. During that time the list of her published works grew to include a multitude of diaries, novels, short stories, children's books, travel books, and essays. But her reputation has always rested primarily on her autobiographical works, perhaps because they contain her most poetic and historically important writing and her most dramatic portrayal of women fighting to free themselves from the bondage of ancient Chinese tradition.

Xie Bingying lived through a period during which people of all classes in China were groping their way toward an uncertain future. After the Qing dynasty vanished in 1912, Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Zedong, and many others struggled to build a new China. Internal confusion and external threats unsettled the country. Warlords stepped in and filled the power vacuum in many provinces, including hers. And people everywhere were anguished (as they had been for years) about the humiliation that China continued to suffer at the hands of imperialist Japan and imperialist nations of the West.

This was also a period in which many young women were struggling to find a way to play more fulfilling roles in China's ancient society. Some young Chinese women, like Xie Bingying, did succeed in changing their

lives. Many others failed. Her autobiography, *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*, illustrates that women's struggle for equality is something that has been going on for a long time in both East and West.

Xie Bingying was born in 1906 in a small village in Hunan Province. Even as a child she resisted the traditional values of her strong-willed mother, for she was like her mother in willfulness. She went to school (with the help and encouragement of her sympathetic older brothers), but then broke off her studies in 1926 to join the National Revolutionary Army in its Northern Expedition against warlords who controlled much of China at that time. From the war front she sent back personal reflections to a Hankou newspaper, and these writings became her first book, *War Diary*, published in 1928. After the war she, like many other young Chinese women in similar circumstances, was ostracized by much of society. People who had once supported her as she marched off to war were now contemptuous of her modern lifestyle and considered her a short-haired radical. Penniless, she returned to her native village. There she attempted to dissolve the marriage contract that her parents had drawn up when she was a toddler—but her mother would not allow her to do this. In fact, her mother locked her up and kept her a prisoner in the family home.

Xie Bingying made three attempts to run away. All three failed. At last she was forced to go through with the ancient wedding ceremony her family had arranged, but she did so only as part of a scheme to break free of her family. The scheme worked. Her marriage was never consummated and Xie Bingying escaped to Changsha. From there she took a boat to Shanghai to begin a new life. All this she tells in the first volume of her autobiography.

In Shanghai, Xie Bingying lived the bohemian life of a poor artist, studying and writing. After several months she moved to Beijing, but rumors that she was politically undesirable eventually forced her to leave her teaching position there and to resign her editorial responsibilities at a women's monthly publication. She later traveled to Tokyo to study Japanese, for she intended to devote herself to bringing classics of Western literature to her countrymen by translating them from the Japanese into Chinese. Before she could begin her task, she was thrown into prison when Puyi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, visited Japan and she refused to acknowledge him as a legitimate ruler in China—an experience she recounts in a book called *Inside Japanese Prison.* She returned to China and in 1937, eleven

years after her first military experience in the Northern Expedition, she again went to war, this time to fight the invading Japanese. She organized the Hunan Women's War Zone Service Corps and led these women to the front lines, where they worked for months under terrible conditions to help the wounded and the dying. The second volume of her autobiography ends as she lies ill in a hospital, looking out the window toward the front lines where cannon fire touches the sky.

Her war experience was the first great adventure of her adult life, and it remained a source of excitement and inspiration to her as long as she lived. Even her bohemian life in Shanghai—those years of grinding poverty, of many lovers, of intellectual ferment, of new books discovered in the shops on Fourth Avenue—did not affect her as deeply as her experiences on the firing line. The death, excitement, camaraderie, hardships, patriotism, and idealism of war so lit her life that even as a woman of ninety she could be found inciting a group of American children to shout "Yi, er, san, si!"—one, two, three, four—as they pretended to march off to war through the imaginary hills of Hubei.

From 1938 to 1948 Xie Bingying published novels, short stories, and essays, plus the second volume of her autobiography and two other important autobiographical works, *New War Diary* and *Inside Japanese Prison.* During this period she worked at a number of jobs, including editing a literary magazine in Xian, editing a daily news supplement in Hankou, and teaching school in Chengdu. In 1938, when she was in her early thirties, she married Jia Yizhen, whom she had first met in Beijing at a student meeting. Their son was born in 1940; their daughter, in 1943. In 1945 Xie Bingying moved to Beijing to teach at Beijing Normal University. In 1948, shortly before the fall of the Guomindang, she left for Taiwan. In her diary for October 13, 1948, she writes, "Tonight is my last night in Beijing, and I feel unspeakable nostalgia. When will I ever return?" She could not have known that she would never return, either to Beijing—the city that had played so large a part in her life—or to mainland China. She traveled to Shanghai and from there took the boat to Jilong Harbor in Taiwan. Traveling with her was her five-year-old daughter—one of the translators of this book. Jia Yizhen, their son, and his son from his first marriage soon joined mother and daughter in Taiwan. Xie Bingying took a job as a professor of Chinese literature at Taiwan Normal University in Taipei.

She had lived much of her life in harsh conditions, often without proper food or clothing, and her first years in Taiwan also were financially difficult. Yet her generosity was spontaneous, natural, irrepressible. At the door of the family's small house in Taiwan arrived a steady flow of poor acquaintances and struggling students, many of them looking for meals, shelter, and moral support. She stinted nothing. What she had, she gave. From her earliest childhood all who had known her had been struck by her courage and her generosity, and these traits seemed to spring from her passionate nature. She embraced each passing moment with such enthusiasm that the future and all its dangers seem scarcely ever to have entered her mind. Often in her life she gave away, almost literally, her last penny. When outraged by injustice (which was often), she spoke against it without considering consequences to herself. When her country was threatened, she rushed away to war with the breathless enthusiasm of one who never ponders risks.

This same passionate style may explain her political and feminist attitudes, which were not always quite what they seemed to be. At first glance she seems to have been the quintessential political activist and feminist thinker, always in the thick of things, organizing student protests at school, marching off to war, participating in political rallies, giving speeches, writing in support of this cause or that. It is certainly true that from childhood on she spent much of her energy opposing feudal traditions unfair to women. It is also true that she was a conscious critic of the society, a person willing to do what even her brothers dared not do: debate with her parents. Her parents might be "as big as the sky," and the society might be bigger still, but she was seldom daunted by the odds. At every instant she was ready to let fly with all her outrages and enthusiasms. Sometimes she succeeded in changing things, sometimes not. Her clever tongue and clever pen got her into many a scrape—and out of many another. She was, in this sense, political, polemical, and practical.

Yet her nature was almost the opposite of political, something quite different. She knew this herself: "I was a lover of freedom and did not wish to join any party whatever, or to be swept into any political whirlpool. I utterly disdained those politicians who hung up a sheep's head to sell dog meat, and those opportunist revolutionaries who supported this party today and purged that party tomorrow."

A love of freedom and a terrible sympathy for each passing moment were the wellsprings of her nature. Though she spoke often of the necessity for army discipline, and though she talked of giving up reading Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (and other such romantic nonsense) in order to dedicate herself to the practical world of revolution, the truth is that she was not a practical person and she never gave up her romantic love of freedom. As a child in her village in Hunan Province, she *would* run outside with the boys despite the scoldings of her mother, and as a woman of nearly ninety in San Francisco she *would* still run excitedly for buses, laughing and waving her cane, despite the remonstrances of just about everybody. Her nature was to be passionate and impetuous, to focus on the pleasure or problem at hand, not on theoretical hopes or fears that might never materialize. The moment was always *now.* In the fight for women's equality Xie Bingying was less a tactician than an inspiration.

In 1957 Xie Bingying and her husband moved from Taiwan to Malaysia, where they both taught high school in Taiping. Their daughter went with them. After several years they returned to Taiwan and Xie Bingying resumed her post at the university. In 1974, when she was sixty-seven, she and her husband moved to San Francisco. For the next quarter century she wrote books and articles, edited and organized her own work, wrote a newspaper column for children called "Letters to Grandma," and carried on an extensive correspondence with students, journalists, and scholars from all over the world, many of whom came to visit her in their small apartment. Her husband died in 1988. Xie Bingying died in San Francisco on January 5, 2000, nearly seventy-two years after her *War Diary* had been published in Shanghai and had set her on a literary path she was to follow for the rest of her life.

A Woman Soldier's Own Story was her most famous book. The first volume was published in Shanghai in 1936; the second, in Hankou in 1946. Subsequently, the two volumes were combined and published in Taiwan, but the Taiwan edition omitted a number of passages that appeared in the original editions. Evidently, some passages were dropped because of aesthetic imperfections, others because they did not suit the political or moral climate in Taiwan. In our translation we have retained nearly all the original material, excluding only passages that seemed to us (and to the author) to be cumbersome. Ours is the first English translation of the entire auto-

biography and the last version in any language to be authorized by Xie Bingying.

Within the constraints natural to all translations, we have striven to stay close to Xie Bingying's text, for she wrote with a freshness of style that has captivated readers for more than half a century. Our aim has been to render her freshness in colloquial American English, for the most part. On occasion we have felt it right to let a little of her world's strangeness appear in her language, as a shadow on a paper screen. Xie Bingying lived in a society far more formal than ours, and often a hint of that formality is felt in the way her people speak. In those few passages where a formal and even rigid manner of speaking seems important, we have tried not to completely obscure it, for it represents the very thing that Xie Bingying struggled against all her life.

Xie Bingying's impetuous style, like her impetuous nature, is both disconcerting and charming. She is usually accurate in describing dates, people, geography, and events, yet her exuberant focus on each passing moment, and her emphasis on immediate feeling rather than wide perspective, often make her narrative as edgy and disorienting as life itself. Reading her autobiography is sometimes like watching live video shot by a camera that slides through the world on Xie Bingying's shoulder: new characters appear suddenly and act out brief scenes, then vanish; landscapes explode into view—mountains in mist or cities in flame—then quickly dissolve before one is entirely certain where Bingying has been or is going. We have tried to give readers enough notes and maps to keep them oriented, but not so many as to slow their journey or dampen Xie's spontaneous style.

Xie Bingying's autobiography is about the passing of the old and the beginning of the new, the story of one woman's journey from Old China into a new world. In her small way Xie Bingying was always an adventurer, always walking a little ahead of most of her comrades, her family, her friends, always wide-eyed for the next experience.

Several years ago at a friend's country house in Wisconsin she said she wanted to climb up the ladder into the children's tree house. Others thought this might not be such a great idea for someone nearly ninety. They tried to dissuade her.

"I can! I can!" she said.

And up she went.

Main Events in Xie Bingying's Life

1906	Born in the village of Xietuoshan, Hunan Province. Her father is a scholar, writer, and school principal. The youngest of five children, she has one sister and three brothers.
1909	Betrothed to Xiao Ming, son of a family friend.
1911	Learns from her father to read ancient literature and recite poems from the Tang dynasty.
1914	Undergoes the binding of her feet.
1916	Enrolls as the only girl in a private boys' school in the village.
1918	Enters Datong Girls School after threatening suicide if she is not allowed to attend.
1919	Enters Xinhua County Girls School. Receives from her second-oldest brother Chinese translations of works by the French writers Alphonse Daudet and Guy de Maupassant.
1920	Attends Xinyi Girls School in Yiyang. Is sent home for not complying with missionary school rules and for instigating a parade on National Shame Day. Attends Changsha First Provincial Girls Teacher Training School. Reads Zola, Tolstoy, Goethe, Dickens. Edits the school's monthly magazine.
1921	Her essay "Momentary Impression" appears in a Changsha newspaper—her first published writing.

1926 Encouraged by her second brother, reads books on revolutionary theory instead of romances and emancipates herself from the old society by joining the class of female cadets at the Central Military and Political School in Wuhan.

1927 Works in the propaganda regiment of the army led by Chiang Kai-shek during the Northern Expedition. Sends her dairies from this period to a newspaper in Hankou. (These writings later become her first book, *War Diary.*) Returns home after her military unit is disbanded, and there is imprisoned by her mother for refusing to marry Xiao Ming. Tries to escape but is forced to go through with the marriage ceremony.

1928 Escapes to Changsha and has the marriage annulled. Is suspected of being a Communist and is imprisoned. Teaches grade school in Hengyang. Goes to Shanghai and enrolls in the Chinese literature department of the Shanghai Academy of Art. *War Diary*, her first book, is published in Shanghai.

1930 Gives birth to daughter in Beijing; her lover, Qi, is imprisoned for political reasons. She is suspected of leaning to the Left and advised to leave Beijing.

1931 Makes first visit to Japan but is sent home because she attends a meeting of Chinese students protesting the Japanese invasion of China's northeastern provinces. Returns to Shanghai.

1932 Edits *Women's Light*, a weekly, and works in an ambulance corps in Shanghai after Japanese attack the city.

1933 Visits Longyan and Gutian in western Fujian Province. Founds a monthly literary publication, *Lighthouse*, in Xiamen. Moves to Changsha and begins writing *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*.

1935 Makes second visit to Japan, intending to study Japanese and translate world literature from Japanese into Chinese. Is imprisoned for three weeks for refusing to welcome Puyi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, on his visit to Japan.

1936 Sees publication in Shanghai of her ninth book, *A Woman Soldier's Own Story* (vol. 1).

1937 Suffers the death of her mother. Organizes the Hunan Women's War Zone Service Corps in Changsha and leads the corps to the front to nurse troops fighting the invading Japanese. Begins to write *New War Diary*.

1938 Marries Jia Yizhen in Xian. Publishes *New War Diary*.

1940 Gives birth to son, Wenxiang. Publishes *Inside Japanese Prison*. Serves as editor-in-chief for *Huanghe* magazine in Xian.

1942 Suffers death of her father.

1943 Teaches school in Chengdu. Gives birth to daughter Wenrong (Lily).

1945 Becomes chief editor for the supplement to *Peace Daily News* in Hankou.

1946 Establishes a day-care center in Hankou. Publishes the second volume of *A Woman Soldier's Own Story* in Hankou.

1947 Teaches at Beijing Normal University and at Huabei Cultural Academy.

1948 Leaves Beijing, moves to Taiwan, and teaches at Taiwan Normal University in Taipei.

1956 Publishes the Taiwan edition of her autobiography (a volume comprising most of the two separate volumes published in Shanghai and Hankou).

1957 Moves to Malaysia and teaches at Hualian High School in Taiping.

1960 Returns to Taipei to teach at Taiwan Normal University.

1968 First visits the United States.

1974 Moves to San Francisco with her husband and writes books, articles, and a newspaper column for children.

1988 Suffers the death of her husband.

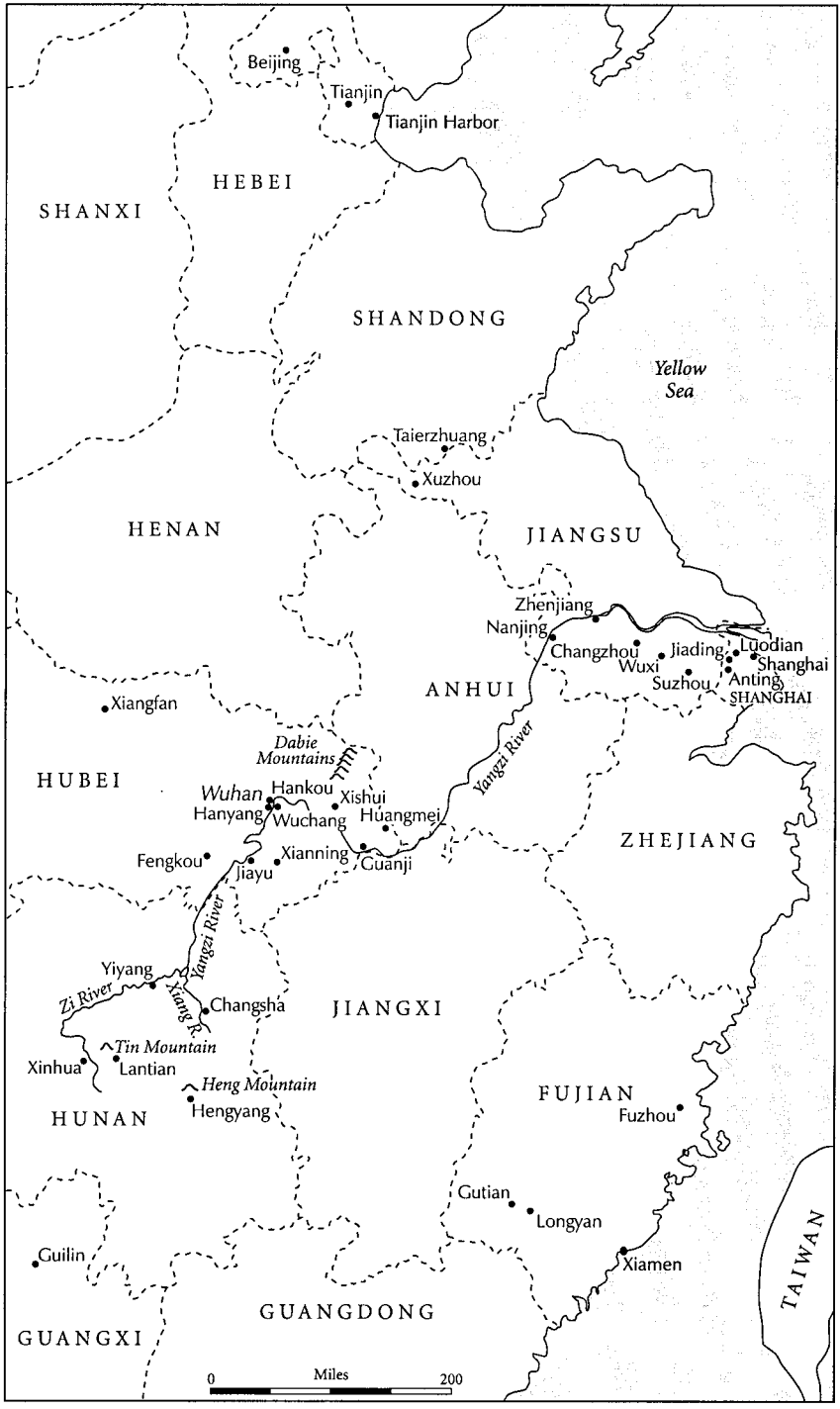
2000 Dies on January 5 in San Francisco.

A Note on Chinese Names

Chinese names in this book are transliterated using the pinyin system. Many pinyin letters are pronounced nearly as they are in English, but here are a few notable exceptions:

c = ts
e = eh
i = ee
q = ch
x = sh
zh = j

For example, *Xie Bingying* is pronounced *Shee-eh Bingying*. Big Sister *Tie* is pronounced *Tee-eh*. *Qi* is pronounced *Chee*.



Xie Bingying's China

Xinhua Area of Hunan Province

Xie Bingying's home village of Xietuoshan was in the neighborhood of Tin Mountain, not far from Lantian, on a stream running into the Zi River, and thirty-two miles from Xinhua over a road that crossed two high mountains. The translators have not been able to determine the exact location of Xietuoshan.

A Woman Soldier's Own Story

Volume One

PART 1 Childhood

THE NEW AUTUMN SEEMED ALMOST HOTTER THAN SUMMER. EVENING breeze blew gently through the torn paper window, yet my body was covered in sweat as Grandma held me to her bosom. Earlier in the day my mother had beaten me with a wooden stick. Now silvery moonlight revealed blood streaks on my skin and shone whitely on my pale and worried face.

My stifled sobs turned suddenly into loud crying.

"Crying will awaken your mother, and she will come again to beat you. Don't cry, my precious little Phoenix."

Grandmother spoke these scary words, patting me lightly to put me to sleep.

"I . . . I'm not afraid of beating. Why doesn't she beat me to death?"

I spoke loudly, almost as if I wanted my mother to know what I felt. But Mother, sleeping on the other side of the wall, kept her temper and made no sound.

"Precious, don't be naughty anymore," said Grandmother. "Your mother has suffered I don't know how much distress for your sake. Remember the time you put a copper coin in your throat and could neither spit it out nor swallow it? Your eyes rolled far up in your head and went white. All day long saliva gushed from your mouth as if you were suffocat-

ing. Your mother was filled with anxiety as she climbed seven miles up a high mountain to get the doctor. In front of total strangers she kowtowed like a crazy person, crying out, 'If only someone will save my child, he can have my life if he wishes it.'

"Later, you managed to swallow the coin and it fell into your stomach. Then your mother feared the copper would absorb blood and endanger your life, so she sent someone to Baoqing to buy fifteen or twenty pounds of plant roots for you to eat—and she constantly examined your feces to see if the copper coin had come out.

"And then there was the time you fell from a ladder while fooling with a swallow's nest in the rafters—you injured your face, stopped breathing, and your whole body turned icy cold. You were knocked completely senseless. Your mother cried streams of tears. First she called for the doctor. Then she knelt before the Goddess of Mercy and prayed by the bowl of magic water, saying, 'Oh, Goddess, please let misfortune descend on me instead of my precious Phoenix. I only ask you to protect her health and her high spirits. Take my life in exchange for all her misfortunes.'

"Precious . . . do you remember all these things?"

I stopped crying. Silently, I listened to Grandma tell my story.

"Alas, my sweetheart." Grandma sighed—a very long sigh. "You really are too troublesome—I just don't know where you came from. In the same month that you were conceived, your mother began to vomit everything she swallowed, even a single sip of water. If she ate so much as a single bean, she threw it up. Each day she felt lightheaded and her stomach ached. During the last two or three months of her pregnancy she suffered so much that she considered suicide, yet she always remembered that she had three sons and one daughter who needed her care, so her thoughts turned again to life.

"Finally came her fateful moment: you were about to descend to earth. Your mother told me that her stomach was so painful she could not even get out of bed. No use talking about eating—she could not even swallow water. For two days she tossed and tumbled in pain. Then suddenly your head appeared. I thought you would come out immediately, and my heart was full of hope. I stared, waiting to receive you as you were born. Unfortunately, I watched one whole day and one whole night, and still your little head full of black hair stayed at the same place. Your mother could not last much longer. To make matters worse, your father was not home. I was

alone and dared not move one step away from her. At last I asked your great aunt to go and get the midwife. Ah—this business of the midwife makes me angry every time I think about it. Already your mother had given birth to four children, and not one of them had required a midwife. Each had been born in an hour, at the most. But *this* time . . . who could have known that after three days and three nights you still would not descend? The midwife came, looked, and shook her head: 'No hope, you should at once prepare for the funeral.' That's actually what she said to us.

"Next your great aunt began to insist that the midwife must get the child out. 'No matter what happens,' she said, 'we must save the adult—it doesn't matter if we sacrifice the little child.'

"By then I was totally frantic. I had no idea what to do. Yet your mother was still clearheaded, and she sobbed to me, 'Mother, quickly go to the Nanyue god and promise incense on my behalf—if the child is a male he will return to burn incense when he is sixteen, and if it is a girl I will take her myself the moment she is twenty.'

"So I did what your mother said. I knelt in front of the Nanyue god and promised Blood Basin Incense.*

"As a result," continued Grandmother, "just at the moment of dawn there came a *WHAaa* sound and you descended to earth. Your voice was unusually loud. Almost everyone in the courtyard was startled from sleep. Your eyes were like two brightly lit lanterns, and your eyeballs were moving extremely quickly. A pair of little fists and two legs moved nonstop. Your great aunt sighed and said, 'Too bad it's a girl. If it were a boy he surely would become a big official—you see this lively pair of eyes?'

"At that comment your mother was most unhappy. She replied, 'Son, daughter, all the same.'

"From this you can see that your mother loves you very much, despite all the hardship she has suffered for your sake. In future, Precious, do not make your mother sad again. You should appreciate her hard work and her love."

I listened silently. I was only six.

---

*The superstition in my village was that if a childbirth was difficult, someone had to go before the Heng Mountain's Nanyue god and promise Blood Basin Incense. The child later had to return with the incense, wearing a red shirt, red pants, and a red scarf wrapped round the head.

Grandma feared I had fallen asleep. Actually, I was quite clear: on one side my brain played the sad scene of my mother's difficult delivery, while on the other side was deeply imprinted the scene earlier that day when my mother had beaten me with all her strength. A most curious feeling. Also, I had a suspicion that when Grandma told me what my great aunt had said just before I was born—that I must be sacrificed to save my mother—she really was describing her own words. But I knew that Grandma loved me very much, so I did not settle accounts with her.

Hah! But if Mother loves me so much, why did she beat me so hard? Isn't a child a person? Doesn't she have her own ideas? Must she obey an adult's every word? (These words ran round and round inside my brain.) Yes, I am a naughty child. I often anger Mother—she who manipulates everybody, men and women, young and old. She manipulates the entire village of Xietuoshan. But to catch up with me, naughty and strange little creature, this is Mother's most unhappy task.

Sometimes Mother's anger reached the limit and she told Father vindictively, "You take her away from me forever. This child could not have been born to me." Or else she would say, "I'll marry her off early and avoid trouble."

Pitiful child. By the time I was three, I had already been promised as a wife to the son of my father's friend. Who could predict the fate of this little life, already so carefully arranged?

GRANDMOTHER OFTEN TOLD the story of her marriage to Grandfather: "My own family was very poor, but when I came to your grandfather's family I found he was poorer still, with neither rice to eat nor two bowls to eat it from."

"How can that be?" I always asked her, whenever she told this tale.

"Be patient and I will tell you. Your great-grandfather had six sons. Your grandfather was the second of them. When the old man died, each son received one pound of rice, one bench, and one bowl. That was all the inheritance he left them. Your grandfather, like all the other sons, had only a single bowl. So after I came into the family, what were we to do?"

"Go buy one!" I said.

"Right. Your grandfather was an honest and hardworking farmer, and whenever he worked for others the boss treated him very well. He not only earned enough money to buy another bowl but every year was able to save part of his salary. When I came here to live with him I washed clothes and did hard labor for other people every day, so I was able to earn a bit of rice. Eventually we were able to buy farm tools. We borrowed money to buy a buffalo, and we rented several acres to cultivate. Ah! Speaking of farming reminds me of your father.

"Even when he was only a boy of seven or eight, your father loved to read books. Each day when he tended our buffalo he secretly carried a book along with him, hidden in his shirt. After reaching open country, he sat down to read it. No matter where the buffalo wandered, and no matter whose wheat, vegetables, or beans the buffalo ate . . . well, your father paid no attention. One time the buffalo got lost, and for a whole day your father was too scared to go home. He cried in desperation. On the second day a neighbor found the buffalo. When your grandfather asked your father why he had been so absentminded, he replied that he had forgotten about the buffalo because he was reading a book. Your grandfather then realized this boy was no herder: he was a born book idiot.

"So your grandfather agreed to send him to school. He said that if your father excelled in his studies, he could take the national scholars test. On hearing these words, your father became crazy with happiness. He read books all day and all night. On moonless nights he read by the light of lit pine branches, and sometimes he burned his fingers, scorched his skin—but he did not even notice.

"In the year 1903 he went to take the provincial scholars test. He did not have proper clothes for the journey so I made him a new set of outer clothes, and I gave him some of my own torn clothing to wear under them. Your grandfather carried your father's bundles of luggage for him, which was why shop people along the way paid no attention to your grandfather and treated him like a servant. Afterward your father became a scholar. Who would have dreamed that the old porter was actually the scholar's father? Ha!" Grandmother laughed.

I knew many tales about my father. I knew that he had attended Zhang Zhidong's Academy of Hunan and Hubei, and that his thinking was entirely sympathetic to that of Confucius and Mencius. I also knew that he preferred

studying the words of Song dynasty scholars. In the last year of the Qing dynasty he was one of six people invited to the capital to take a special exam in economics, sponsored by the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces, for a government post.* All the others went but not Father. He had high ethical standards and would have nothing to do with politics. He believed in traditional morality, including absolute obedience to parents. He was even more reverent than the philosopher Zeng Zi when it came to honoring his parents. Everyone liked being with Father, for he was easygoing and polite. To his children he could be stricter than the strictest teacher in all matters related to schooling and character, yet in his love for them he was gentler and kinder than Mother. Strange to say, he did not oppose new ideas, although his own thinking was quite old-fashioned. When my second-oldest brother wanted to study English in middle school, for instance, my father encouraged him and urged him to work hard. And Father always engaged new graduates to teach courses at the Xinhua County Middle School, where he served as principal for thirty-seven years.† Of course, he still enthusiastically promoted ancient literature and traditional morality, and that was why I, when still a child in my father's bosom, had already begun to chant poetry and read ancient literature.

As for Mother? She was a woman of great courage and character, afraid of neither heaven nor earth.

Her own mother had had no sons, just three daughters. Mother was the oldest of the three, so family matters fell entirely under her sway. At sixteen she married my father and quickly became famous in Xietuoshan as someone exceedingly clever. She was endowed with a talent for managing things and was brimming with notions about how a proper wife and a proper woman should behave. She believed absolutely in the notion that a female should be humble and should respect the male. She paid particular attention to the fine points of traditional manners, which were almost more important to her than her own life. She was Xietuoshan's Mussolini: whether at home or out in society, she was always telling people what to do. Almost

*The last full year of the Qing dynasty was 1911; the dynasty ended in February 1912.—trans.

†Middle school included grades seven to twelve.—trans.

everyone in the village, adult or child, listened to what she said. Community property was kept by her, for she never took advantage of anyone and she always worked enthusiastically for the common welfare. Village politicians could not get along without her. Whenever the members of the village council could not find a solution to a situation, they had only to invite her to speak a few words and all questions were answered.

She was strong and capable, born with an unbending and unwavering spirit. Everyone feared her and obeyed her—and not just in the village. Even in her own family she was the dictator, treating her children as an emperor treats slaves who must listen to her every pronouncement and obey her every order. One time my big brother took his wife to Yiyang, a town 170 miles away, to start his own little family. Unfortunately, he did not get Mother's consent beforehand. So Mother sent someone to find him and bring him back. She punished him by making him kneel on the ground with a large foot basin full of water on top of his head. Whenever he moved only slightly, the water spilled, and then Mother would spank his bottom. After many people tried to intercede for him, she finally allowed the foot basin to be set down. On another occasion my second brother wanted to divorce his mean, unfeeling, tiny-footed wife, but Mother slapped the table and scolded him loudly, "You thing! The idea of returning from your studies to try to pull such a shameful and immoral trick. Really. Don't you care about the honor of your ancestors? If you want a divorce, kill me first and then talk about divorce. So long as I am alive, I will not allow this loss of face." My brother knew her character and believed that if he got a divorce she would kill herself, so he suffered the bitterness of his marriage and did nothing. From that moment until the day he died from spitting blood, my brother remained utterly alone and never had a romantic relationship with a woman.

My sister was even more obedient. She was actually like a little lamb in front of Mother, and spoke in a whisper. She married someone named Liang at eighteen, and suffered the ill treatment of her husband and her in-laws without complaint. Whenever she came home she went out of her way to tell us how well her husband treated her, for she knew if she did not say this, our mother would scold her for not waiting on him. Many times I caught my sister crying in the toilet, and often at night I was awakened from my dreams by the sound of her sobbing. My youngest brother obeyed

Mother and Father, but he was stronger than my second brother. Sometimes he actually argued with Mother. He had ways of touching our parents' hearts so they would not oppose what he wished to do.

As for me?

Ah—I regret to say I was a completely rebellious child.

❧

I WAS MOTHER'S YOUNGEST. My sister, ten years older, was married off when I was eight. By then my oldest brother was already working as a teacher.

My other two brothers went away with Father each school term to study in the town of Xinhua. Twice a year, at winter and summer vacations, they came back home. Those were the happy times when we were reunited. During the winter Mother prepared lots of dried fish and dried meat and stored it away for their return. I always envied my brothers for the way she treated them as guests. As soon as we received a letter telling us that my father and brothers were on their way home, Mother became so happy that she could not sleep for one or two nights. She cooked up rice and dishes of food. She changed me into clean clothes and would always say, "Precious, don't get dirty. When Father returns he will bring you candy, and your brothers will give you many toys."

The journey from Xinhua to our home was thirty-two miles along a road that climbed over two high mountains. Father rode in a sedan chair and hired a porter for the trip, but my brothers huffed and puffed along on foot, wearing short shirts and straw shoes just like coal deliverers' children.

Mother always took my hand, and we stood watching at our gate from five o'clock in the afternoon until finally, at twilight, we could see the sedan chair coming in the distance.

"Precious, your father is returning!"

Then she ran back into the house to boil water and steep tea. Meanwhile, the little black dog and I raced three hundred yards to welcome them. By then Father was always walking, for he customarily got off his sedan chair about three miles from home, just at the place in the road where he passed near the homes of some elderly people and the graves of our ancestors.

"Father! Candy?" Like a little monkey going up a tree, I quickly climbed until my two little hands held tightly to Father's neck.