



SOME-
ONE
TO
talk
TO

A
NOVEL

liu zhenyun

TRANSLATED BY HOWARD GOLDBLATT AND SYLVIA LI-CHUN LIN

WINNER OF THE MAO DUN LITERARY PRIZE

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SOMEONE TO TALK TO

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“Liu rigorously confronts major facets of contemporary Chinese society with judicious insight and shrewd indictments.”—*Booklist*

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SOMEONE

TO

TALK

TO

SINOTHEORY

*A series edited by Carlos Rojas
and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow*

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A NOVEL

LIU ZHENYUN

*Translated by Howard Goldblatt
and Sylvia Li-chun Lin*

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Carlos Rojas

Anytime you ask me something
I'll still give you a straight answer.
—Yang Baishun, in *Someone to Talk To*

Yang Baishun (a.k.a. Moses Yang, a.k.a. Moses Wu, a.k.a. Luo Changli) is a man of few words, which is to say he is not particularly good at “shooting the breeze”—to borrow Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin’s translation of a local Henan expression that Liu Zhenyun uses repeatedly in his 2009 novel *Someone to Talk To*.¹ Yang’s life, however, is characterized by a series of twists and turns that lend themselves perfectly to Liu Zhenyun’s elliptically prolix narrative style, which delights in tracing the complex interrelations of seemingly independent plotlines.

The winner of China’s prestigious Mao Dun Prize, *Someone to Talk To* is divided into two halves. The first half follows a tofu peddler named Yang Baishun, who repeatedly changes his name and occupation as the narrative unfolds. He eventually marries a widow, who subsequently leaves him to run off with another man (leaving her five-year-old stepdaughter with Baishun). While Baishun is half-heartedly looking for his estranged wife, his stepdaughter Qiaoling is kidnapped, whereupon Baishun immediately shifts his attention to a desperate search for the girl. The second half of the novel, meanwhile, is set seventy years later and revolves around a thirty-five-year-old man by the name of Niu Aiguo and his attempts to learn about his mother’s past. The two halves of Liu’s novel have a number of parallels, including the fact that they both feature a “fake” search that subsequently evolves into a real one. Wedged between the male protagonists of each half is the figure of Qiaoling, meanwhile,

whom we barely see in person but whose disappearance ends up haunting the remainder of the story.

The narrative style of *Someone to Talk To* and other works by Liu Zhenyun may be viewed as a postmodern twist on Chinese “linked-chapter” novels like the Ming dynasty classics *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. These linked-chapter novels tend to have a distinctive narrative structure that may be likened to a billiards game, in the sense that the main narrative typically follows one character through several episodes until he or she has an encounter with a second character (like a billiard ball colliding with another), whereupon the narrative line then veers off and follows this second character through several more episodes until the second character has an encounter with a third, who then becomes the new object of narrative focus.

In macrostructural terms, Liu Zhenyun’s *Someone to Talk To* adopts a version of this billiard-ball structure, in that the first half of the novel follows one character, while the second half follows a different one—who, it turns out, is related to the first in a somewhat mediated manner. In microstructural terms, meanwhile, Liu’s novel implodes this traditional narrative structure—and rather than following one figurative billiard ball until it bumps into another, the work instead features many passages that gesture elliptically to the complex chains of reaction produced when various narrative strands simultaneously ricochet off one another. The result is a work that closely tracks individual characters, while at the same time offering a wide-angled panoramic view of the network of the complex chain reactions that end up determining their fate.

Someone to Talk To is the first volume in our Sinotheory series, which will include theoretically informed analyses of Chinese cultural phenomena as well as translations of Chinese literary works that make theoretical interventions in their own right. In this novel, Liu Zhenyun explores the way in which social reality is shaped by the interwoven narrative threads by which we attempt to make sense of our surroundings. At the same time, however, the work also examines the role of dialogue in structuring people’s lives, together with the remarkable efforts people often make to find someone in whom they may confide.

Liu Zhenyun, who teaches literature and creative writing at Beijing’s Renmin University, is notable not only for a focus on the role of narrative within his works but also for the way in which his works have frequently played a critical role generating social narratives in their own right. Liu’s 2007 *I Am Liu Yuejin*, for instance, helped bring attention to the fate of the migrant laborers who increasingly pour into China’s cities seeking work. His 2003 novel *Cell Phone*, meanwhile, sparked a national dialogue about confidential (and poten-

tially explosive) private information that is frequently stored on people's cell phones and other digital devices.

Liu began writing fiction in the early 1980s, but his career really began to take off when the director Feng Xiaogang adapted two of Liu's stories (*Working Unit* and *Chicken Feathers Everywhere*) into a popular television series. Now one of China's most successful directors, Feng Xiaogang has adapted several of Liu Zhenyun's other novels into blockbuster movies—including *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016), about a woman who is falsely accused by her husband of having an affair; *Remembering 1942* (2012), about a famine in Liu's home province of Henan during the Sino-Japanese War; and *Cell Phone*, about a woman who discovers her husband's infidelity from text messages stored on his cell phone. In an interesting marketing maneuver, Feng Xiaogang's cinematic adaptation of the latter work, which was sponsored by the cell phone company Motorola, was released simultaneously with the original novel itself. *Someone to Talk To*, meanwhile, is also being adapted for the screen. The director is Liu Zhenyun's daughter, Liu Yulin, and the adaptation, which focuses on the second half of the novel, is scheduled to be released on November 11, 2017, which is "singles day" in China—fitting for a work that revolves around themes of loneliness and a continuous search for "someone to talk to."

Note

- 1 The original Chinese title, *Yi ju ding yi wan ju*, literally means "a [single] sentence is worth ten thousand sentences."

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PART I

LEAVING YANJIN

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Yang Baishun's father was a tofu peddler. Everyone called him Old Yang the Tofu Peddler, though in the summertime he also peddled those bean-starch noodles called *liangfen*. Old Yang and Old Ma, a carter from Ma Village, were friends, though their friendship did not make a whole lot of sense, since Ma was often unkind to Yang. He did not curse or hit him, nor did he cheat him out of any money. No, he just held him in low regard, something that normally would stand in the way of a friendship. But Ma found it necessary to be around Yang when he told a joke. For Yang, when the topic of friends came up, Ma was at the top of the list, while Ma never once claimed the tofu and liangfen peddler from Yang Village to be his friend. No one knew why this was, and people simply assumed that they were friends.

When Yang Baishun was eleven, Blacksmith Li held a birthday celebration for his mother. Li made ladles, cleavers, axes, hoes, scythes, rakes, shovels, door hinges, and other metal implements in his Prosperity Blacksmith Shop. Most blacksmiths tend to be impatient men, but not Li. It took him up to four hours to hammer out a rake tine, but his slow, methodical work produced wares that were second to none. Before quenching, he stamped the word *Prosperity* on all his ladles, cleavers, axes, hoes, scythes, rakes, shovels, and door hinges. He was the only blacksmith for miles around, not because others could not match his skill, but because they were unwilling to put in the effort. People with placid dispositions tend to brood a lot, and brooders never forget a slight. Customers

were always coming and going at Li's shop, and there was the danger that a careless comment would offend him. But the only person who could get under his skin was his mother, whose high-strung nature may have been the reason he was so unflappable. At the age of eight, he once took a slice of date cake without asking, for which she hit him on the head with a metal spoon, causing a wound that bled profusely. Most people forget the pain of an injury once it's healed, but he held a grudge against his mother from that day on. Unrelated to the wound itself, the grudge resulted from what she did after she hit him: she talked and laughed as if nothing had happened and went into town with friends to watch an opera. In reality, the grudge was not actually related to trip to the opera. But once he reached adulthood, they never again saw eye to eye on anything. Li was forty when his father died; five years later, his mother went blind. After taking over Prosperity Blacksmith Shop, he continued to tend to her daily needs, but he ignored all her requests. Most blacksmiths prefer a bland, coarse diet. So his blind mother would say things like "This food is tasteless. I want some beef."

"You'll have to wait."

Nothing would happen.

Or, "I'm bored. Yoke the donkey and take me into town, where there's something to do."

"You'll have to wait."

Again nothing would happen. He was not trying to provoke his mother; he just wanted to cure her of her impatience. It was time for her to slow down. He was also afraid that if he gave in to her demands, he would never hear the end of it. But the year his mother turned seventy, Old Li decided to hold a celebration.

"Don't waste your time celebrating the birthday of someone who won't live much longer," she said. "I'll be happy if you'll just treat me a little better." She poked him with her cane. "I wonder what you're up to with this so-called celebration."

"Don't think so much, Mother."

In fact, he was not planning the celebration for her sake. A month earlier, a fat blacksmith from Anhui named Duan had set up shop in town. He called his business Fatso Duan's Blacksmith Shop. Li would not have worried if Duan had turned out to be an impatient man. But he wasn't; like Li himself, Duan was unflappable. He too would take up to four hours to hammer out a rake tine, and that concerned Li. So he decided to show Duan what he was up against by celebrating his mother's birthday. It would be one way to show the newcomer that an out-of-town dragon should never try to outdo a local snake. No one else knew what was behind the birthday celebration. All anyone knew was that Li

had not been a filial son, and they assumed he'd had a change of heart. So on the day of the party, they came bearing gifts. Yang and Ma, both friends of Li, were among them. Yang, who had been selling tofu away from the village, arrived late. Since Ma Village was close to town, Ma was on time. Believing that the tofu peddler and carter were friends, Li left the seat next to Ma empty for the tardy Yang. Pleased with his attention to detail, he was surprised by Ma's objection.

"No, you have to seat him somewhere else."

"You two always talk up a storm, so that will liven things up," Li said.

"Will there be liquor?" Ma asked.

"Three bottles at each table, and no cheap stuff," Li replied.

"It's like this—joking with him when he's sober is fine. But as soon as he has a few drinks under his belt, he pours his heart out. It makes him feel good, and I wind up depressed." Ma added, "That has happened way too often."

Li realized that they were not best friends after all. For Ma, at least, if not for Yang. So his seat was moved to another table, next to a livestock broker, Old Du. Yang Baishun, who had been sent by his father to fetch water during the party, overheard the remark by Ma. The next day, Yang complained that he hadn't enjoyed himself at the banquet and carped that he'd wasted a good gift. His quibble had nothing to do with the food; he complained that he'd had nothing to say to Du, whose head smelled bad and whose shoulders were covered with dandruff. Yang assumed that he had been seated next to Du because he had arrived late. When his son told him what he'd heard, he slapped the boy.

"That's not what Old Ma meant. You've made whatever he said sound bad."

With his head in his hands, Yang crouched down in front of the tofu room while his son cried and said nothing for the longest time. Over the next two weeks he ignored Ma and refused to utter the man's name. But a couple of weeks later he was talking and joking with Ma again and went to see him whenever he needed advice.

Peddlers ply their trade by shouting, but not Yang. There are common shouts and there are refined ones. If you're selling tofu, then "Tofu for sale" or "Get your Yang Village tofu" are common shouts. For the refined variety, you need to make music and exaggerate your wares, like this: "This tofu, I ask you, is it tofu or isn't it? It is, but you can't treat it as mere tofu . . ." So what was it, this special tofu? It was touted as white jade, or pure agate. Not born with a silver tongue, Yang could not make up something like that; yet, though he hated common shouts, he tried out a couple—"Tofu fresh as can be, with none of this or that." But that just made him sound angry, so he chose a drum instead. By alternating between beating the skin and banging his stick against the sides, he was able to

produce a bit of variety. He was blazing new trails, substituting a drumbeat for a shout as he peddled his tofu. Something brand new. When the villagers heard the beat of a drum, they knew that Old Yang the Tofu Peddler was on his way. In addition to selling tofu in the village, on market days he set up a stall in town, where he sold tofu and liangfen, which he combed into thin strips with a bamboo grater, dumped into a bowl, and added scallions, some herbs, and sesame paste. He made a fresh bowl for each customer. Old Kong of Kong Village sold flat-breads filled with donkey meat in the stall to his left. And to his right was Old Dou of Dou Village, who sold spicy soup and cut tobacco. Yang beat the drum in the village and in town, a steady tattoo from morning to night. At first it was new; but after a month of that, both Kong and Dou had had enough.

“‘Thud, thud, thud’ one minute and ‘crack, crack, crack’ the next. Old Yang, you’re turning my head into liangfen,” Kong complained. “Peddling a little food isn’t leading troops into battle, so is all that noise really necessary?”

Dou, who was more excitable than Kong and less given to speech, simply walked up with a scowl and put his foot through the drumhead.

Forty years later, when Old Yang was bedridden from a stroke, his eldest son, Yang Baiye, took over as head of the family. Most strokes affect the sufferer’s brain and the ability to speak anything but gibberish. But Old Yang, whose mind was clear as ever, despite the paralysis of his body, had no trouble speaking. Prior to the stroke, he had been inarticulate and often got things all jumbled up; now his mind was clear as a bell, his tongue glib, his ability to keep things straight extraordinary. Spending all day in bed, he needed help for even the simplest activity, and this was where the stroke took its toll. His eyes and his mouth got the worst of it. He welcomed anyone who came into his room with a fawning gaze and answered every question he was asked deferentially. Before the stroke, he had lied as often as he’d told the truth; after the stroke, every word he uttered came straight from the bottom of his heart. If he drank too much water, he had to get up at night, so he drank nothing from afternoon on. Forty years had passed, and his old friends were either dead or busy with one thing or another, so no one came to see him. But then, on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, Old Duan, who had sold scallions in the marketplace, came to see him, with two boxes of pastries. Yang reacted to seeing an old friend after all those years by clutching his hand and weeping. He quickly dried his eyes with his sleeve when a family member walked in.

“Can you recall the names of peddlers in the market, from east to west?” Duan asked.

Yang's brain was working fine, but after forty years, he had forgotten most of the friends he'd worked near. Starting from the east, he was able to count up to the owner of the fifth stall on his fingers, but no further. He recalled Old Kong, who sold flatbreads filled with donkey meat, and Old Dou, who sold spicy soup and cut tobacco, so he focused on those two, passing over the others.

"Old Kong had a thin voice; Old Dou was excitable. He destroyed my drum. But I got even by kicking over his cauldron and spilling his soup all over the ground."

"Old Dong, the castrator from Dong Village, remember him?" Duan asked. "Besides castrating animals, he also repaired cook pots."

Yang knitted his brow as he tried to recall, but he had no memory of the man who castrated animals and repaired cook pots.

"How about Old Wei from Wei Village? The west end of the market, the one who sold raw ginger, always laughing, struck by one thing or another, but no one ever knew what."

Yang could not recall him either.

"How about Old Ma, the Ma Village carter; you must remember him."

"Of course I remember him. He died two years ago." Yang was relieved.

"Back then it was all about Old Ma with you. No one else mattered. Were you aware that while you called him your friend, he was always bad-mouthing you?"

Yang quickly changed the subject.

"How can you recall something from so long ago?"

"I'm talking about the overall situation, not an isolated incident. You spent your whole life trying to get on the good side of people who did not consider you a friend and had no use for people who did. Everyone hated the way you beat that drum, but I liked the sound. I bought your liangfen just to listen to you beat that drum. I'd have liked to talk to you, but you ignored me."

"Not true," Yang quickly replied.

"See what I mean?" Duan clapped his hands. "You still don't consider me a friend. I came today to ask you one question."

"What?"

"You've lived a long life. Have you made any real friends?" Duan added, "You never thought about that before, but how about now that you're laid up?"

Yes, Yang finally got it. After forty years, when Old Duan, who could still walk, knew he was paralyzed, he'd come for revenge. He spat an answer to Duan: "Old Duan, I was right about you all along. You're no damn good."

Duan walked off smiling. Yang was still cursing him after he was gone. Yang's eldest son, Baiye, walked into the room. He was in his fifties. As a youngster, he was always doing something stupid, for which he'd received many whippings from his father. Now, forty years later, his father was bedridden and he had taken over as head of the family. Anything Old Yang wanted had to meet with his son's approval. Baiye picked up where Duan had left off.

"Old Ma drove a cart, you sold tofu, so there was no need to have anything to do with one another. Why in the world did you do everything you could to make him like you when he refused to treat you as a friend?"

Old Yang had no trouble getting angry at Duan, but his son was a different matter. If Baiye asked him a question, he damned well better answer. He sighed.

"I had my reasons. I wouldn't have been afraid of him otherwise."

"Did you cheat him, or was there something he could use against you?"

"There was nothing he could use against me if I had cheated him, and no way he could blackmail me if he had something on me, because I could just ignore him afterward. He outsmarted me the first time we met."

"Over what?" Baiye asked.

"We met at the farm animal market. He was there to buy a horse, I went to sell a donkey, and we struck up a conversation. Whatever we talked about, if I could see a mile down the road, he could see ten miles. If I could look ahead one month, for him it was ten years. I did not sell the donkey, and from then on he had the advantage any time we talked." He shook his head and continued. "No matter what it was, he could always outtalk me, so I looked him up when I needed advice."

"I see. So you took advantage of him whenever you needed a fresh pair of eyes. But what I don't understand is, why did he have anything to do with someone he felt was beneath him?"

"Do you think there was anyone else who could see ten miles down the road and ten years into the future around here? Old Ma never had any friends either." He heaved an emotional sigh. "He shouldn't have had to drive a cart all his life."

"What should he have done?" Baiye asked.

"The blind fortuneteller, Old Jia, said he was slated to start a peasant uprising, like Chen Sheng and Wu Guang at the end of the Qin dynasty. But he didn't have the guts. He was afraid to go out after dark, which kept him from being much of a carter, if you want the truth. It cost him a lot of business." He was getting increasingly excited. "A gutless man like him thought he was better than me. Shit, I was better than him! He never treated me like a friend, but it should have been the other way around!"

Baiye nodded with the understanding that those two were fated to be friends. It was lunchtime by the time they finished talking about Old Ma. Since it was the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, they ate flatbreads called *laobing* and a meat-and-vegetable stew. *Laobing* had been one of Yang's favorites all his life, but by the time he was in his sixties, and had lost most of his teeth, they were off the menu. The stew simmered till the meat and vegetables were mushy; he softened the *laobing* by dunking them in the hot soup. As a young man, he'd always eaten *laobing* on holidays, but after his stroke, he was no longer the one who decided whether or not he could eat them. Baiye had already settled on *laobing* and stew for lunch before they started talking about Ma, but Yang assumed that the decision had come as a reward for his straight talk about the years he sold tofu and *liangfen*. He ate till his forehead was bathed with sweat. He looked up at his son and flashed him a fawning smile through the steam from the boiling pot. His meaning was clear.

"Anytime you ask me something, I'll still give you a straight answer."

2

Prior to his sixteenth birthday, Yang Baishun considered Old Pei, the barber, to be his best friend, though few words ever passed between them. When Baishun was sixteen, Pei was already in his thirties. Pei lived in Pei Village and Baishun lived in Yang Village, thirty *li* apart and separated by the Yellow River, which meant they saw each other only a few times a year. Baishun never set foot in Pei Village, but Pei came to Yang Village to shave heads. Baishun often thought of Pei, even into his seventies.

Pei had not inherited the profession of shaving heads. His grandfather had woven mats for a living and sold shoes as a sideline. His father was a donkey trader who went to Mongolia each season with a backpack and a whip to buy the animals. It took a month to make the trip from Yanjin to Inner Mongolia, and, fast or slow, a month and a half to drive the donkeys back to Yanjin. That meant only four or five round-trips a year. Once he reached adulthood, Pei followed in the footsteps of his father, who died of malaria two years later. Pei joined a group of traders, making the trip to Inner Mongolia and back with donkeys. Though he was still relatively young, he thought like a much older man and earned as much each year as his father had. Married at the age of eighteen, he started a family, as expected. Buying and selling donkeys kept traders away from home eight or nine months of the year, and that led to romantic dealings on the road. But they were all casual relationships, nothing that might threaten the family back home. The other men gave the women false names and

did not tell them where they were from. But Pei, the youngest among them, lost his head over a Mongolian woman named Siqingele, revealing both his real name and where he was from. Siqingele's husband was away tending a herd, so she survived by taking lovers, both for the pleasure and for the trifling bits of silver they left her as pocket money. She had another lover, a man from Hebei, also a donkey trader who traveled to Inner Mongolia, but he had left a phony name and address. Siqingele's troubles started when she got together with this man one fall. Her husband, who had been away for three months, returned to find her pregnant. Mongols don't much care about their women taking lovers to get by; though they are hot-tempered, thanks to all the beef and mutton they eat, they don't let a little sex get in the way. But pregnancy changes everything, since they would then have to raise another man's child. So women who take lovers need to keep an eye on the calendar. When the time is not right, they must forbear; the last thing they want is a little fun that leads to pregnancy. Siqingele had been careless with her Hebei lover, choosing the wrong time for him to enjoy himself. He had his fun, but her husband was livid and took a whip to his wife to get the man's name; she tossed in Pei's name in the process. So the Mongol left his wife and set out with his butcher knife, first to Hebei, where he failed to find the man he was looking for. Next he turned to Henan, heading straight to Pei Village in Yanjin, where he threatened to kill Pei. A peacemaker interceded, and Pei settled for thirty silver dollars plus the Mongol's travel expenses. But that was not the end of it. Pei's wife, Old Cai, tried to hang herself three times in three days, and even though someone always reached her in time, she was a different person after the attempts. She had been afraid of Pei before; now Pei was afraid of her.

"What are we going to do about this?" his wife asked.

"Whatever you say."

"Have nothing more to do with your sister," she demanded.

From lover to sister. Pei's head was spinning. Since his mother had died when he was only six, he had grown up under the care of his sister. They were extremely close, but Old Cai and Pei's sister were always at loggerheads. He knew exactly what was going on.

"She's already married, after all," he said, his head bowed, "so I'll break it off with her, starting today."

Cai was not finished.

"Do you plan to go back to Inner Mongolia?"

"Whatever you say," he replied.

"I don't ever want to hear the words 'donkey trader' again."

Pei had no choice but to put away his saddlebags and whip and give up the donkey trade. He now realized that the Mongolian husband had not come looking for him to settle a score or to demand money; what he'd wanted was to make Pei's life miserable. He may have been rough-hewn, but he'd managed that quite well. Siqingele's pregnancy was not Pei's doing, and it was his back luck to suffer what was intended for the Hebei man. Now that he could no longer trade in donkeys, Pei studied the craft of shaving heads with Old Feng from Feng Village. There was little to learn, and it took a mere three years to master the tricks of the trade. After apprenticing to Feng for two and a half of those years, Pei set out on his own to shave heads in neighboring towns and villages. Seven or eight years later, he had turned into a silent barber. His teacher, Old Feng, kept up a running conversation while he was shaving heads and knew pretty much everything that was going on in neighboring towns and villages. Pei hardly spoke a word while he worked; everyone agreed that master and apprentice could not have been more different. Though Pei hardly spoke while working, he often sighed, as many as four or five times per customer.

One day he went to Meng Village, where he shaved the head of Old Meng, a landlord who owned more than three hundred acres of farmland, worked on by a couple of dozen hired hands. It was nearly nightfall when he finished with the heads of Meng and his hired hands. Meng had a friend, Old Chu, a salt merchant from Luoning County in western Henan. He was passing through Yanjin on his way home from selling salt in Shandong and decided to pay Meng a visit. Since Chu's hair had grown long, he asked Pei to shave him. After a few swipes with his razor, Pei heaved a sigh; a few more swipes, another sigh. Upset by all that sighing, Chu jumped to his feet with only half his head shaved.

"Damn you!" he cursed. "Do you think I'm trying to get you to shave my head for free? I can't stand all those bad-luck sighs."

Pei just stood there, razor in hand, his face red from embarrassment, not saying a word. Meng rushed up to smooth things over.

"Good brother," he said to Chu, "he's not sighing, he's venting. It has nothing to do with shaving heads; it's just a bad habit of his."

Chu sat back down to let Pei finish the job after one last glare at the barber.

Pei had nothing to say on the road or at home, where his wife took charge of all ten household chores. Pei did what she told him to do and suffered a tongue-lashing if he didn't do it the way she wanted. Each time he felt like talking back, she brought up Inner Mongolia and the bastard child. That always shut him up. While there was nothing cruel about a tongue-lashing, joking

about it to neighbors was. Pei turned a deaf ear to such talk, and everyone in neighboring towns and villages knew he was henpecked.

One summer, Pei went to shave heads at a large village of four or five hundred households and worked on a hundred or so men from thirty or forty of those households. He did not finish until noon of the third day. On his way home with his barber kit, by the bank of the Yellow River, he ran into Old Zeng, a hog butcher from Zeng Village. Zeng was on his way to Zhou Village to slaughter pigs. Since the trades of both men kept them on the road, they met up often and always had a good talk. On this day, they sat beneath a riverside willow tree to smoke and talk about this and that. When Pei noticed that Zeng's hair had grown long, he said, "I still have some hot water, so why don't I shave your head while we're here?"

Zeng felt his scalp.

"I probably should, but Old Zhou is waiting for me to slaughter a hog." He thought for a moment, then said, "Go ahead, do it. This way the hog will live a little longer."

So Pei took out his kit, wrapped a smock around Zeng, and washed his hair with hot water. Then he took the measure of the man's head and started in with his razor.

"Old Pei, are we good friends or not?" Zeng asked.

That surprised Pei.

"That goes without saying."

"Since it's just the two of us, let me ask you something. You can answer or not; it's up to you."

"What is it?"

"Everybody in neighboring towns and villages knows you're afraid of your wife. That makes no sense to me."

Old Pei paled, then turned red.

"You know how women are. It's nothing. I just don't want to fight with her."

"I know she's held something over you over the past few years. I'll go ahead and say it. It's better to suffer a sudden blow than long-term pain. You'll never get out from under this way."

Pei heaved a long sigh.

"I understand what you're saying. I'd have taken that sudden blow long ago if I could have, but it didn't work."

"Why's that?" Zeng asked.

"Everything would have been fine if she'd had nothing to hold over my head. But now that she's had a taste of it, she'll never agree to a quick solution."

He heaved another sigh. “It’s all right though, because I have to think of the children. The problem is, where long-term pain is concerned, she can be unreasonable.”

“If it was me, I’d beat her if she wouldn’t listen to reason. Sooner or later she’d come around.”

“If it was only her, that would be easy. But there’s someone else who *will* listen to reason.”

“Who?” Zeng asked.

“Her brother.”

Zeng knew who he was. Cai Baolin, who ran a medicinal herb shop and had a large mole on the left side of his face. A smooth talker, he could argue a point to death; he was a man who could get a dead toad to pee, as the locals said.

“Every time we have a fight at home, she runs to her brother, who comes to have words with me. He’ll start with one little thing and end up with ten, each with its own logic. I’ve been married to his sister for more than a decade, and how many arguments do you think there have been? I’m no good at talking, so I lose every time.”

He sighed again.

“Everyone says it’s good to use logic, but it actually makes things harder. In fact, I’m not afraid of an argument. What scares me is that one day I might lose control, pick up a knife, and kill someone. Let me ask you, can you kill someone over a phrase?”

The butcher was so alarmed by the question, he broke out in a cold sweat.

“Just shave my head, Old Pei. I talk too much.”

Yang Baishun was thirteen when he met Pei. Before that he’d had a friend named Li Zhanqi, who was a year older. They were both studying *The Confucian Analects* at Wang’s private school. People become friends for different reasons—they might have similar personalities, or they might help each other out. But not Baishun and Zhanqi, whose friendship developed over their affection for the same person, Luo Changli, a vinegar maker in Luo Village. Luo was a stumpy, pockmarked man, the latest in a long line of vinegar makers. He owned a small brewery that produced two vats of vinegar a day, which his grandfather and father then hawked in nearby villages.

“Come buy your vinegar!”

“Here comes Luo Village vinegar.”

It was a small-scale business, but they earned enough to feed a family. Luo Changli did not care for the business, however, not because he had anything against vinegar, but because he liked something else better—being a funeral

crier. Both lines of work required calling out to people, but he preferred to do it at funerals. He would never let vinegar making come before presenting himself at a funeral. Since he was not interested in the family trade, he was terrible at it—his product was bitter, like dishwater, not sour, as it was supposed to be. Other makers' vinegar was good for at least a month, but his grew moldy fuzz after ten days. Strangely, it was bitter before the fuzz appeared but turned sour later. Ordering funeral attendants about, not hawking vinegar, was the kind of work he liked. A young man with a long neck like that of a chicken, he had a sonorous voice, not the thin shrill of most people with chicken necks. He never suffered stage fright; the larger the funeral, the more spirited he was. At a funeral, he would change out of his usual black clothes and don white garb as he stretched his long neck and shouted:

“Attendees, come forward. Filial sons, take your place.”

The white-clad filial sons would prostrate themselves and begin their laments.

“Attendees from Houluqiu, please offer your respects.”

Then, “Attendees from Zhangbanzao, please move up.”

Attendees moved forward in an orderly manner under Luo Changli's direction. Blessed with an indelible memory, he could recall a person's name after a single meeting in a crowd of people and never get it wrong. Seven days would pass between the time of the death and the funeral procession, and his voice never faltered. People referred to him as Luo the Funeral Crier, not Luo the Vinegar Peddler. Every family for miles around sent for him whenever there was a funeral, and Baishun and Zhanqi tagged along to watch. People attend funerals to pay their respects, but Baishun and Zhanqi went for the sake of watching Luo Changli. Of course, deaths were not a daily occurrence, so Luo had to make vinegar between funerals, which in turn created gaps in the boys' lives. They talked about Luo with gusto.

“Such a loud voice. You can hear him a mile away.”

“Remember that time attendees from Xu Village caused a problem by not knowing the rules? He was so flustered even his pockmarks turned red.”

“He's short, but he seems to grow taller when he shouts at a funeral.”

“I wanted to say something to him the last time he came to sell vinegar, but I didn't dare say a word.”

“How come no one has died around here lately?”

As their conversation heated up, one of them said, “I have to pee.”

The other one didn't have to pee, but to keep the talk about Luo Changli alive, he offered, “I'll go with you.”

Baishun's family lost a sheep in the fall of his thirteenth year. They had lost a pig before that. Having gotten drenched in rain the day before, Baishun was running a fever and had the shakes. Everyone in the family but him had gone out looking for the pig; he stayed in bed, hot one moment, cold the next. While he was still in a feverish daze, Li Zhanqi rushed over.

"Hurry," he said breathlessly. "Somebody just died."

"What?" Baishun was muddled from the fever. "Who died?"

"Old Wang from Wang Village. Come on, let's go watch Luo Changli."

At the sound of the name, Baishun's head cleared, his shaking stopped, and his fever retreated. He climbed out of bed and ran with Zhanqi to Wang Village, some fifteen li away. When they got there, they discovered that someone had in fact died in the Wang family, but that the funeral crier was Niu Wenhai, a cripple from Niu Village. Back then, a Yellow River ferry landing divided the county into East and West Yanjin. Where funeral criers were concerned, there were Luo of the East and Niu of the West, meaning those from East Yanjin would have Luo Changli as their crier and Niu Wenhai was crier for West Yanjin. Wang Village straddled the ferry landing, so confusion inevitably arose whenever one of their residents died. Some would hire Luo, while others hired Niu, which was what had happened on this day with Old Wang. The boys did not know what was happening.

"Something's wrong with Old Wang's family," Zhanqi said. "Why didn't they hire Luo Changli? Why go to Niu Wenhai?"

"Niu has a lousy voice and doesn't know how to stand or to sit. He'll ruin the funeral," was how Baishun saw it.

With the excitement gone, Baishun began to shake again and his fever returned. Zhanqi wanted to stick around to compare Luo and Niu to see just how lousy Niu was. Unable to wait for Niu to perform, the feverish Baishun managed to drag his shaking body the fifteen li back home. Everyone was home when he got back, and so was the missing pig. But a sheep had gone missing during the time he went to Wang Village to watch, unsuccessfully, Luo Changli perform. The pig had gone missing on its own, but the sheep was lost on Baishun's watch, a realization that immediately stopped the shakes. Without a word, his father, the tofu peddler, took off his belt. Baishun's brothers, Baiye and Baili, giggled with their hands over their mouths.

"Didn't I tell you to stay home to keep watch? Where did you go?"

Baishun knew he could not tell his father he'd gone to watch Luo Changli at Wang Village, so he lied.

"I went looking for the pig."

His father hit him with the belt.

“Li Bojiang said you went with Zhanqi to Wang Village to watch Luo Changli at a funeral.”

Li Bojiang was Zhanqi’s father. Baishun had missed the chance to see Luo Changli perform and only got to see Niu Wenhai, though that was not something he could explain, so he said, “Pa, I was shaking and running a fever.”

That earned him another lash from the belt.

“Running a fever? How did you manage to travel thirty li? Now let’s see if you have a fever or not.”

Another lash and Baishun now had seven or eight blood blisters on his head.

“My fever’s gone, Pa. I’ll go find the sheep.”

Old Yang tossed a length of rope at Baishun’s feet. “Rope it and bring it back. Don’t come home if you can’t find it.” Then he looked over at Baiye and Baili. “This isn’t about the sheep. He’s lying.”

He continued angrily, “You come up with all sorts of excuses when I tell you to do something, but you manage to run off at the mention of Luo Changli even when you’re running a fever. Am I your Pa or aren’t I?”

“Who’s in charge in this house?” He glared at everyone. Now that he was off on a tangent, Baishun snatched up the rope and went searching for the sheep. He looked and he looked, from the afternoon till evening, but still no sheep, just a few jackals along the way. Where had that one-eyed sheep gone, anyway? Like Ma the carter, Baishun was afraid of the dark, especially because there were still wolves around at the time, so he retraced his steps and headed back. From somewhere in the cropland along the road came the hoot of an owl, scaring him so much he broke out in a cold sweat. When he returned to the village and neared his house, he did not dare go inside, because, unless something even worse happened, it would be hard for his father to forget the missing sheep. If, for instance, Baiye or Baili lost a donkey, then their father would forget the sheep and focus on that. But how could he make his brothers lose a donkey? Baishun gazed at his house, where a lamp silhouetted figures through the window. In the tofu shed, their donkey was snorting as it turned the millstone to grind beans. Then the light went out in the house, and all was quiet, except for the donkey snorts and the turning millstone, but he still did not dare go inside. So he went to Zhanqi’s house, where he might be able to spend the night and ask about the differences between Luo Changli and Niu Wenhai. Li’s house was pitch black when he got there, so Zhanqi must have been asleep. His father was weaving baskets by the light of a sesame stalk torch, humming a little ditty as he

worked. That was a clear sign that Zhanqi had also gotten a beating. So he left and went to the threshing ground at the village entrance, where he planned to spend the night in a haystack. A night wind sounded like howling wolves as it blew across the treetops. Luckily, the sky cleared and a half moon crept into the sky at midnight. He began to shake again as he was assailed by hunger. When he finally fell asleep, it was a deep slumber, a dazed state in which he thought he heard the stampede of cavalry horses. At some point he felt someone patting him, and he awoke to see a dark shadow standing in front of him. He broke out in another cold sweat.

“Who are you?”

“Don’t be afraid.” The dark shadow bent down. “I’m Old Pei, the barber from Pei Village. I was just passing by.”

The moonlight helped Baishun see the man’s face; it was indeed Old Pei, who had shaved his head when he came to Yang Village. But they had never spoken.

“What’s your name? Why are you sleeping here?” Pei asked.

The question aroused all the boy’s pent-up grievances. Though this was the first time he had spoken to Pei, under the circumstances he felt like family, so he told the man everything—his name, his shakes and the fever, his trip to Wang Village to watch Luo Changli, whom he had failed to see, the missing sheep, the whipping from his Pa, and the fruitless search for the sheep that led him to sleep away from home. He even bent over to show the man the blood blisters. Pei let out a long sigh when the boy was done.

“I see. It had nothing to do with the sheep, but something else, something much more complicated.” Then he touched the boy’s head. “Aren’t you cold sleeping here?”

“The cold doesn’t bother me, Uncle. But wolves do.”

Pei sighed again.

“This is none of my business, but I guess I’m in the middle of it.” He took Baishun’s hand. “Come with me, I’ll take you somewhere warm.”

This was the first time in the boy’s life he had felt the warmth of someone’s hand. As a tall man and a short boy walked away from Yang Village, Baishun tried to find something to say.

“Aren’t you afraid of wolves, traveling at night, Uncle?”

Pei took a machete off his belt, sending its cold glint flickering in the moonlight. “I’m ready for them.”

The boy smiled. Hand-in-hand, they arrived at the eastern edge of town, where Pei knocked on the door of an eatery run by a man named Sun. No one stirred inside, but he kept at it until a light came on, followed by Sun’s curses.

“Who the hell is it? It’s past midnight already.”

But he laughed when he saw it was Pei, who often came by to shave Sun’s head. In addition to shaving, Sun liked to have the tiny openings below his eyelids cleared and Pei would use a strand of horsetail hair on him, to his great delight. So Sun let them into the eatery, where he started a fire in the cold stove before washing his hands and making two bowls of mutton noodles.

“The mutton was enough for three bowls, but I used it all for you two,” he said as he handed them the steaming bowls.

“Dig in.” Pei knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

Baishun’s face was bathed in sweat by the time he had polished off the noodles. He was crying when a rooster crowed, his tears dripping into the empty bowl.

“Uncle.”

Pei waved him off wordlessly. Decades later that bowl of noodles would still be fresh in Baishun’s memory, but he later learned that Pei had taken him to the eatery not because he pitied the boy but because of something else entirely.

It was a very long story: The day before the night encounter, Pei had gone to shave heads at Gong Village, a good-sized village with over two hundred families. But he had only a small clientele there, three families altogether, because Old Zang from Zang Village had a monopoly in the barber business there. Three families was still business, and besides, it wasn’t far, only five li, so he came once a month, never letting the small amount of work stop him. It had been a nice day when he went to the village, but it started to rain after he finished around noon. It was a light rain, but it did not show any sign of letting up.

“Why not stay for lunch?” Old Gong said. “I don’t want you getting sick from the rain.”

“It’s only five li. I can get home in no time.”

So he borrowed a coir cloak and hurried back to his village. When he got to the entrance, marked by a cowshed, he saw a young man standing under the eaves to stay dry. He ignored the youngster and hurried on, but then the young man called out to him, “Uncle.”

He stopped. It was his nephew, his older sister’s son, Chunsheng. Sixteen years earlier, Pei’s sister had married someone in Ruan Village, which was twenty-two li away. Her son, Chunsheng, now fifteen, had gotten up early that day to sell fabric in the county town and was caught in the rain on his way home, which was how Pei came to see him under the eaves. After the incident in Inner Mongolia ten years before, Pei’s wife had forbidden him from having any contact with his sister, so the two families had no more interactions. Yet sometimes, when

Pei went out on barber business, he secretly made a detour to Ruan Village to see his sister. Running into his nephew just outside his own village put him in a bind. Normally, he would have a few words with the young man before sending him on his way, but it was raining and he could not possibly walk off and leave his own nephew under the eaves. So he braced himself and took the boy home with him. When they got there, his wife was making dinner, flatbreads to go with fried eggs, a rare treat. Pei and his wife had three children, two girls and a boy. That day happened to be the birthday of their second girl, Meiduo, and Pei had insisted on coming home in the rain mainly because of her. When Pei's wife saw Chunsheng, she made the dough thinner. Not a particularly perceptive boy, Chunsheng treated his uncle's home like his own. And since he seldom got to eat flatbreads, he gobbled up a grand total of eleven of them, rolled with fried eggs. The rain had stopped by the time they had finished, so he wiped his mouth and left. Pei's wife flew into a rage, complaining about how he'd shown up for no reason and eaten more than a dozen of the flatbreads. Why had he only come when they were having flatbreads? How did his mouth know that's what she was making? Did he plan to eat them out of house and home? He'd eaten his fill, while her daughter, Meiduo, was still hungry and had begun to sob. Pei complained silently about his nephew, not because the boy had eaten the flatbreads but because he was so clueless. If he had stopped at nine, then he would have eaten just a few of them; if he had stopped at ten, then it would be ten, no more no less. But, he had to have eleven, which was now turned into more than a dozen by his wife's count. He was upset with the boy, who cared only about his belly and had given no thought to his uncle's situation. How could he not understand the huge difference the last two flatbreads made? Pei would not have cared quite so much if his wife's complaints had ended with the boy; but no, she then moved on to the boy's mother, Pei's sister. Ever since open contact between the families had ceased ten years before, Pei and his wife had not mentioned the sister once, but now a few flatbreads had gotten his wife started again. If his wife had said some things that usually bother a sister-in-law, he could have let it pass. But no, she had to call Pei's sister a slut. Back when she was single, Pei's sister had been rumored to have engaged in a dalliance with a traveling salesman, but even if it had been true, it had happened seventeen years before. That, however, was not the point with Pei's wife, who started with the sister's rumored past, continued on with Pei's bastard child in Inner Mongolia, and ended with a comment that everyone in Pei's family was depraved.

"You're a depraved bunch, so why look elsewhere? Why not sleep with your sister and be depraved together?"

That did it for Old Pei. Enraged, he gave her a savage slap; things went downhill from there, and Meiduo's birthday was ruined. The situation got completely out of hand, not because his wife had started a fight but because she went back to her parents. Early the next morning, her brother showed up. He came in, sat down, and began reasoning with Pei, which was the last thing Pei wanted. This brother-in-law had a unique way of reasoning—he talked in circles. The fight between the couple had originated with some flatbreads, but the brother-in-law ignored that; instead, he went back several decades, starting with Pei's parents, who had fought as a young couple. His father had been a simple person, so his mother was “the reasonable one,” though in fact she was not. If she hadn't died so early, the Cai family would never have agreed to marry their daughter to Pei. The brother-in-law talked on about the thousands of arguments Pei'd had with his wife since the day they were married. He himself had forgotten the reasons behind these quarrels, but his brother-in-law remembered every argument and every reason behind them; all the arguments and causes, like the endless thread on a magical needle, went on and on, longer and longer, until Pei felt that his head was about to explode. He had to credit the man for his fine memory. As he went on, the brother-in-law somehow turned Pei into Pei's mother, the unreasonable one, which caught Pei by surprise. From morning till noon, he rattled on before finally coming back to the issue of the flatbreads. But even then he could not stay on topic; instead, he brought up Pei's sister and the salesman along with Pei's Mongolian transgression. No one knew the truth about Pei's sister, but his own escapade was irrefutable. If it had been false, then his wife would have been wrong to make a far-fetched connection with the flatbread; but it was true and Pei was upset, not with anyone else but with himself. It would have been perfectly acceptable for him to hit someone who spouted a falsity, but it was wrong to slap his wife when he was upset with himself. By the time the brother-in-law had laid out all his ironclad logic, it was dark and they had to light a lamp. Pei, on his part, was becoming worried that he might go crazy from the brother-in-law's twisted talk. His only option was to pretend that he was persuaded he'd been wrong and to apologize to his wife and his brother-in-law. But his wife refused to let it go at that; she wanted to slap him back. So he turned his cheek to receive a slap from her, finally bringing everything to a conclusion.

Satisfied, the brother-in-law took his leave. Everything seemed back to normal, but that night Pei felt particularly unhappy as he lay in bed. How did all these unrelated matters—the flatbreads, the sister being a “slut,” Inner Mongolia, and his parents—get all tangled up? No one could say for sure that his sister

had been involved with the salesman, so how could he have let the brother-in-law twist the facts until they were somehow connected to his transgression in Inner Mongolia? How could one incident carry the consequences of two? Then it occurred to him that he had slapped his wife not because she had called his sister a slut but because she had insinuated that Pei ought to sleep with his sister. How in the world could his brother-in-law avoid that crucial comment and twist it into something else? He had slapped his wife and she had slapped him back; two slaps, but they were not the same. At the moment, his wife was out chatting with her friends, very likely joking about what had happened. With rage building inside, he climbed out of bed, picked up his machete to kill someone, not his wife, but his brother-in-law, and not just him, but his logic; not his logic either, but the twisted reasoning that had turned Pei into a different person. If he were to stay with this woman, they would surely have more arguments. It was clear that his nephew should not have eaten the eleventh flatbread, as it was clear that he would die from the twisted logic of his brother-in-law if it were to happen even a few more times. He could not complain if someone were to kill him, but it would be a great injustice if he were to die from twisted logic. With that incident in Inner Mongolia, he had been a scapegoat for the man from Hebei. That was bad, though not a great injustice to be blamed for someone else's fault, but it would be terrible if he were blamed for what he'd done. He set off in a murderous rage, which was how he ran into Yang Baishun. The boy's story about Luo Changli and the search for the missing sheep temporarily halted his desire for murder. A thirteen-year-old boy suffering the shakes had been forced to sleep away from home simply because he had wanted to see someone and had lost a sheep in the process. Was that twisted or what? How could he, a man in his thirties, go out and kill someone over a few flatbreads? If he carried out his plan, what about the three children back home? Everything in the world, it seemed, was caught up in twisted logic. So he heaved a sigh and took the boy by the hand to go knock at a door in town, the door to Old Sun's eatery, not his brother-in-law's house. Without knowing it, Baishun had saved the life of someone he had never met, the man who ran an herbal shop in town. His name was Cai Baolin; he had a mole on his left cheek and never passed up an opportunity to talk reason.

3

From the age of ten, Yang Baishun spent five years studying *The Confucian Analects* at Wang's private school in town. Wang's given name was Mengxi, also known as Zimei, in accordance with a practice common among scholars. His father, Wang Senior, a cooper in the county town, had a sideline of making tinplate kettles. Next to his shop was a pawnshop called Heavenly Peace, run by a man surnamed Xiong, whose grandfather had begged his way to Yanjin from Shanxi fifty years before. Upon his arrival, he had sold vegetables in the county town, before taking up shoe repair on the street. After the family settled down, he still could not rid himself of the habit of begging for food; over New Year's, he sent his children out to beg, even though they could afford to make dumplings by then. Practicing frugality had had its advantages. Old Xiong's father opened a pawnshop, which made it possible for the children to stop begging. In the beginning, they took in clothes and hats, candlesticks and clay pots, but people from Shanxi tend to have good business sense, so by the time Xiong's son took over, their customers mostly came to pawn houses or land, bringing in several dozen taels of silver every day. Xiong wanted to expand his business. Wang's cooper shop, located in the northeastern corner of Xiong's backyard, lent the yard a knife shape, with a narrow front and broad back. Xiong went to talk to Wang Mengxi's father about selling the shop, offering to buy a spot for the Wangs to build a new store. The cooper shop had three front rooms and Xiong would have been happy to build a five-room house and shop for them. With an

expanded storefront, the Wangs could continue the cooper business and start new enterprises if they felt like it. It was a good deal, but Wang Mengxi's father steadfastly refused the offer; he would rather be a cooper in a three-room shop than do something else in a new shop with five rooms. His objection had nothing to do with the Xiong family; it was just that he had a different way of looking at the world. He did not much care if something was good for him; but if it was good for someone else, he would feel that it must be bad for him. Given the inflexible rejection, Xiong knew he could not possibly talk him around and had to give up his plan.

To the east of the cooper shop was a grain supply shop called Prosperity, owned by a man called Old Lian. When the Wangs repaired their roof one autumn, they made the eaves too long, sending water down on Old Lian's western wall whenever it rained. The Lian house also had long eaves, which had sent rainwater down on the Wangs' eastern wall for over a decade. But the wind blew from the northwest more often than from the southeast, so the Lians felt disadvantaged, and elongated eaves led to a dispute. Unlike Old Xiong of Heavenly Peace, who was mild and reasonable, Old Lian of Prosperity was a hothead who hated to lose. On the night the dispute broke out, he sent a clerk from his shop to climb onto the Wangs' roof, where he took down the eaves, relieving the roof of half its tiles in the process. A lawsuit ensued. Ignorant of the ins and outs of lawsuits, Wang Senior wanted to show the Lians who they were up against. The suit dragged on for two years, making it impossible for Wang Senior to continue his business. When Old Lian resorted to bribery, Wang Senior followed suit, but the Wangs were no match for the Lians where money was involved, for Prosperity handled tons of grain each day. Old Hu, the county magistrate at Yanjin, was so ineffectual that nothing was resolved after the two-year period. When Wang Senior sold the three-room shop, Xiong of Heavenly Peace bought it from the new buyer, and Wang Senior had no choice but to rent a small place in Dongguan to start over with his cooper business. Instead of being angry with Lian of Prosperity, who had filed the suit, he was upset with Xiong of Prosperity, who bought his space. As he saw it, Lian was just the front man for the suit, while the Xions were the real instigators. But there was no way he could get back at Xiong now, so he made new plans.

When young Wang turned twelve, his father sent him to study in Kaifeng, hoping that after ten years of hard work, his son would become an official and be sent to Yanjin. When that happened, Wang Senior would continue his dispute with the Xiong and Lian families—a gentleman does not mind waiting ten years for his revenge. But even planting wheat takes four seasons from sprout to

harvest, and it would take tremendous patience waiting for Mengxi to grow up, make a name for himself, and become an official. Luckily, Wang Senior was a patient man. But a cooper who made a few basins and buckets a day could hardly afford his son's tuition and expenses. After holding out for seven years, he ruined his health and began to cough up blood; naturally, he could make no more barrels. After spending three months in bed, he knew his days were numbered, and he was about to send someone to bring his son back when Mengxi showed up on his own, his bedroll slung over his back. He came back not because he had learned of his father's illness; in fact, he had been beaten up in Kaifeng so badly that he came home with a swollen, bruised face and an injured leg. When asked about the culprit and the reason behind the beating, he would not say a word, except that he would rather stay home to be a cooper than go back to school in Kaifeng. The outrage over his son's failure and his own illness were too much for Wang Senior, who died three days later. But before he expired, he said with a sigh, "The whole thing was doomed from the beginning."

Wang Mengxi knew that his father was referring to the Lians and Xionsg, not the beating he'd suffered.

"Should we not have been involved in the suit?"

"I shouldn't have sent you to school." Wang Senior looked at his son's swollen face. "I should have let you become a murderous outlaw. That way, you would have been spared a beating and would have exacted revenge long ago."

For all intents and purposes, the episode was over. But after seven years of school in Kaifeng, Wang Mengxi was considered a learned person in Yanjin, for even Old Cao, who wrote petitions for lodgers of complaints, had only six years of education. After the death of his father, Mengxi became an itinerant tutor instead of taking up his father's trade, and stayed at it for over a decade. A slender man who sported a long robe and wore his hair parted down the middle, he looked well educated. And yet he was not only inarticulate but was a stutterer, a terrible trait for a teacher. Despite his accumulated knowledge, it did not come out easily, like dumplings in a teapot. During his first few years, he was usually fired within three months.

"Are you learned, Old Wang?" someone once asked him.

"Bring me pen and paper and I'll write you an essay," he said, red-faced.

"So, you are? Then why can't you explain things to us?"

"I just can't," he said with a sigh. "An impatient man talks too much, while a smart one treasures his words."

It mattered little how much he talked; he could not explain even the following phrase in *The Confucian Analects*: "The four seas may be impoverished,

but heavenly fortune is inexhaustible.” He kept trying to explain the meaning to the students, but after ten days, he still could not manage it, and vented his frustration on them.

“Do you know what Confucius meant by an inability to carve rotten wood? The sage was talking about pupils like you.”

After seven or eight years, he finally managed to settle down with the Fan family in town. By then he was married with children and had put on weight. Everyone considered his hire to be a mistake, for there were other traveling tutors, like Yue from Yue Village and Chen from Chen Village, both more articulate than Wang. So why, instead of hiring either one, had Fan chosen Wang, who might have been muddle-headed but who knew what he was doing? Well, Fan’s youngest son, Qinchen, was a bit on the slow side—not stupid, just not very bright. When someone told a joke during a meal, everyone else would laugh immediately, but he would not laugh until after they finished eating. So, Wang was slow with his tongue and Qinchen was slow with his thoughts; a slow brain was a perfect match for a slow tongue. That was why he was hired.

Wang gave lessons in Fan’s cowshed, transformed into a private classroom after adding a few desks. He made a plaque with the words *Peach Planting Studio* out of wood from a horse trough and hung it over the door. Fan Qinchen might have been slow-witted, but he preferred a crowd and refused to go to school with only him and the tutor. So his father turned it into a private school that admitted children from other families. All these students had to do was bring their own lunches. They came from all around. Old Yang, the tofu peddler, had no plans for his sons to be educated, but he sent two of them, Baishun and Baili, along when he realized what a good deal it was to have to pay only for food. He had wanted to send his eldest, Baiye, but the boy was fifteen, too old for school. Besides, he needed him to help grind the soybeans, so he gave up on the idea.

With Old Wang’s difficulty in explaining lessons, few of the students showed him any respect. Most were not interested in studying and simply sought an easy life by using the lessons as an excuse to shirk chores at home. Yang Baishun and Li Zhanqi, for example, wanted only to know who had died recently so they could watch Luo Changli perform. But as a conscientious teacher, Old Wang was often upset over the striking disparity between his understanding of *The Confucian Analects* and his students’ abysmal lack of comprehension. So he often stopped in mid-lesson.

“You won’t understand no matter what I say.”

Take, for instance, the famous phrase by Confucius: "How delightful it is when friends visit from afar." The students all thought the sage was happy to have friends come great distances to see him. But Wang insisted that the sage was not happy; he was, in fact, sad. If he had said all he had to say to nearby friends, wouldn't it be a problem if a friend came a long way to visit? But because he had no nearby friends, he treated the ones from far away as friends. These distant visitors may or may not have been true friends, and in that phrase the sage was simply venting his displeasure. As a result, the students called Confucius a bad sage, which made Wang shed tears of sadness. The impossibility of communication between pupils and teacher led to a high student turnover and attrition rate. Those who left did so because they could not understand their teacher, and new ones came because they weren't aware of the situation. With pupils arriving and leaving, Wang ended up with students from every town and village; some were related and attended together, an uncle and a nephew, say, or two brothers.

Wang had a habit of taking solitary strolls on the fifteenth and the thirtieth days of each lunar month. He would set out at noon, roaming the neighborhood with long strides and not greeting anyone along the way. Sometimes he followed the main road; at other times he strayed into wilderness and made a path of his own. He worked up a sweat, whether in the summertime or in the depths of winter. At first people thought he was aimlessly roaming, but he kept at it month after month, year after year, until it became a pattern. On rainy days, he remained cooped up inside till veins bulged on his forehead. His employer, Old Fan, did not pay much attention to his roaming at first, but began to notice Wang's outings after a few years. One day, when Fan returned from collecting rents in the villages, he ran into Wang at the gate as he was putting on a jacket to go for his stroll. Jumping off his horse, Fan realized that it must be the fifteenth day of the month.

"I see you out walking year after year, Old Wang. What's it all about?"

"I can't tell you, Master Fan. It's too hard to explain."

So Fan did not pursue the subject.

Later that year, on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival, he invited Wang to dinner. As they ate, Fan again brought up Wang's strolls. By then, fairly drunk, Wang sprawled over the table and sobbed.

"Someone is always on my mind, and I get so pent up after fifteen days I have to go out for a walk. I always feel better afterward."

Finally Fan understood what was going on.