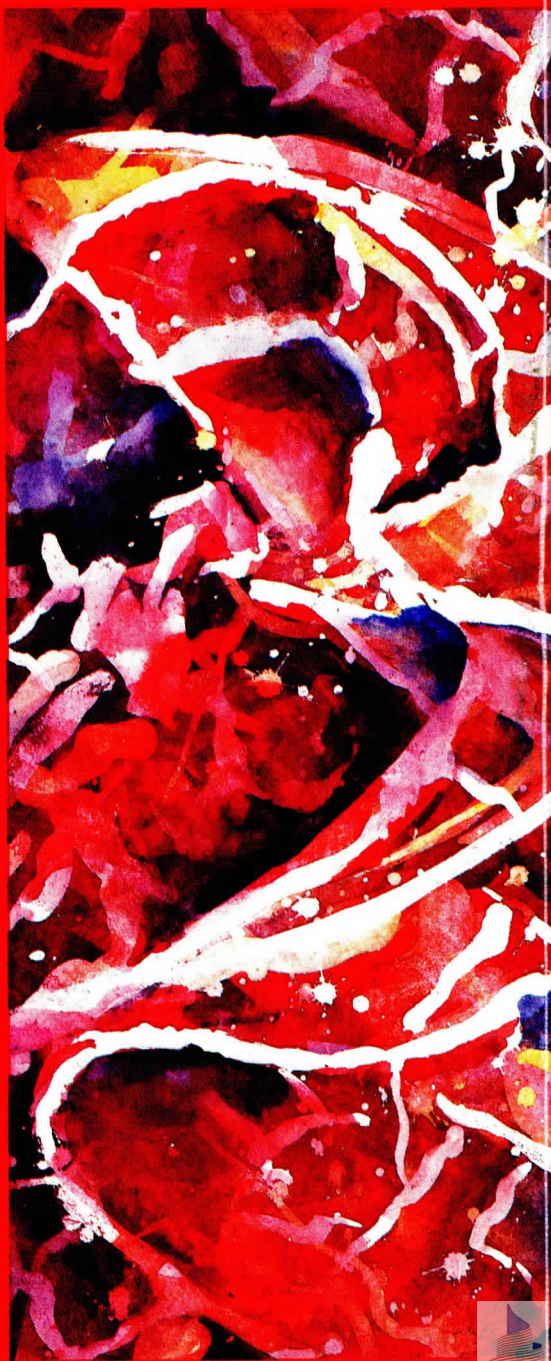


TURBULENCE

A NOVEL BY
JIA PINGWA

Translated from
the Chinese by
Howard Goldblatt



WINNER OF THE PEGASUS PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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In this dazzling, earthy novel Jia Pingwa presents an unforgettable chronicle of rural China, a world at once utterly alien and uncannily familiar. Focused on the area around Crossroads Township, a village on the Zhou River, *Turbulence* follows the lives of two peasants, Golden Dog and Water Girl, through the post-Mao years and sets their star-crossed love for each other against the political upheavals of China itself.

The rival Tian and Gong clans, emblematic of the bureaucracy that hamstring modern China, have risen to power through their unrelenting exploitation of the region along the Zhou River. Pitted against them is Golden Dog, a moral man in a corrupt society, idealistic, tortured with self-doubts, driven by a vision of an economic and cultural salvation blessed by the Three Elders: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De. This mercurial reformer winds through a fascinating cast of revolutionary cadres, bureaucrats, fortune-tellers, blacksmiths, farmers, and artisans, playing the Gongs and Tians against one another as he works his way up from leader of a shipping brigade on the river to journalist in Zhou City.

There Golden Dog struggles against the cynicism and corruption of the clans, using his position as a reporter to lash out against their abuses, often with harrowing results for himself and his friends. Despite his love for the saintly Water Girl, moreover, the two seem destined to be kept apart by the vicissitudes of politics and culture—she twice widowed and he pressured into an engagement with the seductive Yingying and, racked by guilt, turning at times to the lovely Shi Hua for solace.

Against the backdrop of the primal cycles of drought and rain, planting and harvest, love and heartbreak, birth and death, Golden Dog moves inexorably toward a final confrontation with the clans.

Part epic, part love story, part political parable, *Turbulence* places the reader in a world where the

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PUSTAKA PERDANA



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JIA



The Pegasus Prize for literature has been established by Mobil Corporation to introduce American readers to distinguished works from countries whose literature is rarely translated into English. *Turbulence*, by Jia Pingwa, was awarded the Pegasus Prize in Beijing in October, 1988, after an independent committee organized by the Chinese Writers' Association selected it from among the best novels written in China in the preceding ten years. The novel, which appeared in 1987, is one of more than a score of books Mr. Jia has had published in China. Two of his volumes have won the All-China Excellent Novella Award, and three of them have been adapted into films. Several of the author's books have been translated into Japanese and French, but this is the first to come out in English.

The chairman of the Pegasus selection committee was Tang Dacheng, executive secretary and acting chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association, and a well-known literary critic in China. Other members of the jury were Liu Zaifu, a scholar who specializes in the novels of Lu Xun; Ru Zhijuan, secretary of the Chinese Writers' Association and an author of short stories; Wang Zenqi, a writer of short stories, essays, critical reviews, and poems; and Xiao Qian, a journalist and writer of fiction who has lived in Great Britain and has experience as a translator both to and from English.

Turbulence presents the successes and discouragements of Golden Dog, a young peasant who becomes a tenacious journalist and a "watchdog" alert to the corruption and exploitation rampant in the bureaucracy of the unsettled period in China after Mao Zedong's death. Golden Dog works to expose the wrongs perpetrated by officials in the region along the Zhou River and to fight the inferiority complex that he has come to think is retarding his nation's progress.

His actions reflect the idea that China's salvation lies in applying to the present the wisdom of the Three Elders—Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De. The young reporter's efforts to restore one area of his country to a path that serves more than the interests of those in power and his attempts to find a stable footing for his own and others' lives occur against a figurally suggestive backdrop of natural conditions, including drought and flood. Among the personal inquietudes that Golden Dog must resolve are his relations with three women: with Water Girl, the woman he loves and who loves him, but with whom he only haltingly comes to terms; with Yingying, whose machinations make him her fiancé; and with the married Shi Hua, who seduces him but also delivers him from his peasant rudeness and in the end quite literally saves him.

Mr. Jia's novel has been translated into English by Howard Goldblatt, a gifted translator of contemporary fiction from the Chinese, most notably *The Butcher's Wife*, by Li Ang, *Heavy Wings*, by Zhang Jie, and *Red Ivy*, *Green Earth Mother*, by Ai Bei. Mr. Goldblatt is professor of Chinese at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

On behalf of the author, we wish to express our appreciation to Mobil Corporation, which established the Pegasus Prize and provided for the translation of this volume into English.

BOOK ONE





The Zhou River flows to Crossroads Township following the curves of the mountains all the way to the end, where it waters an average-sized basin. The town's main street, located on the northern bank, meanders along like the ass of a snake—no bumps, no hollows—from one end of town to the other and is bordered on both sides by black gates adorned with two large rings. The tall, narrow houses behind them are connected by eaves topped by roof tiles whose tips swoop up into the air like wings soaring above the water. The rear walls of the houses touch the rocky slopes and show several feet less from ground to roof than those in front; often there is hardly any exposed wall at all. Doors cut into the stone walls are crowned by creeping ivy, like sculptures. Clear water falls from a precipice to form a lake below. Townspeople connect lengths of bamboo to bring water into their kitchens through holes in the walls. When water is needed, they stick the hollow bamboo pipe into the hole, and when they're finished, they pull it back out. This was the first place in the mountains to have running water in the homes. The houses on the northern bank of the river are separated according to a design that has lanes running between every three or four of them and steps leading down to the riverbank, giving the vague impression of metal chains when the flagstones reflect the light from the sun or the moon. When you walk down the street, the Zhou River disappears from view, then reappears, the surrounding scenery constantly changing as you go on, as though you are walking through a storyland. The first time is always an experience like no other you've had before. A nonchalant glance down one of the small lanes brings Restless Hill into view. Naturally, there's a monastery on the hill, just one, rising high above the few houses dotting the hillside around it. The houses are set among bam



boo groves and lush green elms. Sturdy wooden fences in front are covered with edible wood-ear fungus; when guests drop by, the fungus is scraped away with a spatula, rinsed, and tossed into the pot for dinner. Sunlight reflects harshly off the lime-covered markers of grave mounds behind the houses. Here lie the people's ancestors. A channel running past the foot of the hill waters the emerald profusion of bamboo, willows, poplars, elms, and parasol pines. It's impossible to tell how deep the water is, and there's such an aura of mystery about the place that you feel as though you're in a fantasyland. Amid the green shadows, now and then you see rooftops: triangular, rectangular, sloping, a montage of uncertain shapes and sizes. Roosters crow, dogs bark, wisps of smoke curl up from chimneys. This is Stream of Wandering Spirits, the largest village on the Zhou River. Yet its entrance is unbelievably narrow, at the bottom of two cliffs connected by a stone ledge over which cascades a curtain of water whipped by endless winds. Some call it a sheet of gauze, others an impenetrable mist, but it always shimmers, blinding white.

The Zhou River fortune-teller, stone glass and compass in hand, surveyed an area of over a hundred li in circumference. His pronouncement: of the two cliffs that rise above the watery entrance to Stream of Wandering Spirits, the one on the left is a green dragon, that on the right a white tiger. The stone ledge between them is a threshold. Originally the birthplace of emperors, it is, alas, on the southern rather than the northern bank of the river. If it were on the northern bank facing south, it would be a sacred place. Of that there can be no doubt. Whether or not his theory was correct, no one overlooks the unique topography of Stream of Wandering Spirits. In reverence of the stone cliffs, the people dare not disturb a single pebble or a blade of grass, so the place teems with thickets of wild dates, whose needles are as thick as a man's hand. On still nights, heavy with the surrounding darkness, the central peak of the Shaman Mountain Range, far off at the headwaters of the channel, bears down on the river's surface, congealing the water into a vast stagnant strip; two red flares shine from the stone ledge between the cliffs. They are lanterns, their light rising and falling, like shimmering will-o'-the-wisps. A call—Coming home?—is met by another: Coming Home! Calls to the spirits, prayers for good fortune—somber, frightful sounds. Then comes the snarling of dogs, as mighty as leopards, from over here and over there, long into the night. But the sound isn't really snarling dogs; it's the cry of mountain birds. All along the Zhou River, for thousands of li, these birds are called mountain watchdogs. They can

be found nowhere else, only here, where they are cherished like pandas, yet are more sacred; for it is they that appear in various forms above doorframes, on beams, and on the sides of altars to “heaven, earth, gods, emperors, and ancestors.”

Today, at the first call of the mountain watchdogs a boat slipped out from the white-tipped reeds along the riverbank. Han Wenju lay drunk in the bottom of his boat, looking up at a drooping willow branch and the hazy yellow moon above it. The haze caught two turtledoves perching sleepily on the branch. Han Wenju’s hand shook as he tossed six copper coins onto the wooden planks, where they clanked around. He struck a match; three coins lay face up. The match went out. He struck another and picked up an ancient, thread-bound book, so dog-eared it was nearly falling apart. He found the page he was looking for. His brain was clouded, and he gave off the stench of alcohol when he said, “Another year of drought!”

Drought characterized the place. How strange are the ways of the world: there are cloudy skies and there are bright skies, there are full moons and there are crescent moons, but total satisfaction is an elusive dream. The people in the area around Crossroads Township conserved every drop of water in the Zhou River, yet for years there hadn’t been enough for the fields. In the summer you could see the peaks of the Shaman Mountain Range disappear in the clouds while here the sun beat down mercilessly, turning the fields into hot embers and stinging the people’s eyes. Ten li away the rain fell in buckets while the local residents could only glare in anger. “Raindrops fill the ditches of nearby furrows” was the despairing cry of Crossroads Township.

People frequently donated lamp oil to the Restless Hill Monastery. When there was plenty of it, the lamps never went out and the abbot used the excess for cooking, until even his spit glistened. Sometimes he went out to drink with Han Wenju on his boat. Drunk, his face was suffused with mysticism and his body glowed with spirituality as he intoned scriptures no one understood. He would climb to the top of a boulder beside the river and sit as if in a trance, leaning to neither one side nor the other the night long, and never once falling into the river.

Now Han Wenju was in his boat, drunk again. Awakened by the calls of the mountain watchdogs, he gazed up at the heavens and cast his coins in divination—another year of drought—before passing out again. In his stupor he spotted an old man walking slowly toward him, about five feet tall and gray haired, wearing a baggy black cassock and holding a twisted cane in his hand. Startled, Han Wenju asked the

stranger who he was. The old man answered, "I know the mysteries of heaven and have fathomed the ways of the world, I control the span of human life, I determine wealth and poverty. If a man chants the scriptures, he will reap limitless good fortune, but if he is a non-believer, all that await him are sickness and death, the wrath of officials and imprisonment, rapacious outlaws, the extermination of his livestock, a home in chaos, shattered illusions, unattainable aspirations, bankruptcy, evil spirits, plague . . ." Han Wenju prostrated himself at the bottom of the boat. "Are you the earth god?" he cried. The old man vanished, and Han Wenju sobered up. He thought about how the villagers burned incense and brought oil to the monastery but neglected the tiny Temple of the Earth God, behind Stream of Wandering Spirits. Was that why the earth god had come—to remind him of that? He scrambled to his feet, left the boat, and walked straight to the home of the painter at Restless Hill to bid him to start renovating the Temple of the Earth God the next morning. But the painter was asleep, and when Han touched the metal ring on the black gate, the effects of the alcohol hit him and he collapsed on the steps like a rag doll, where he slept until daybreak.

The Temple of the Earth God was restored, with incense glowing as brightly as in Restless Hill Monastery; afterward, Han Wenju and some of his friends tattooed mountain watchdogs on their chests. But none of that had any effect on the drought at Crossroads Township—which grew poorer every year. When local girls reached marriageable age, many preferred boys from far-off villages, determined never to wed the local boys, who could offer only lives of abject misery.

The poverty of Crossroads Township was well known, even in Zhou City. But no one could deny the auspicious nature of its location. The proof lay in the eminent personages from the Gong and Tian clans who had risen to prominence by bleeding others in a quest for wealth and power. Back in the 1940s the men of the Tian clan were boatmen, as they had been for generations. One year the Guomindang forces, having come to kidnap manpower for their side, surrounded the boats at White Rock Stockade, their bullets flying like locusts. The seventh son of the Tian clan, Tian the Seventh, alertly jumped over the side, plucked a hollow reed to breathe through, and made good his escape by swimming underwater toward the reeds along the riverbank. Tian the Sixth, on the other hand, was caught by the soldiers and dragged off. For three years no one knew if he was dead or alive, but during the fourth year he reappeared out of the blue as a liaison officer sent to Zhou City by the branch of the Communist

party in Northern Shaanxi, where he had fled when he escaped the Guomindang. As a member of the Communist party, he secretly began arming and organizing the boatmen, whom a bleak future had primed for rebellion. So on a starless, moonless night on the last day of the month, they sneaked over to White Rock Stockade and killed the chief of the security forces, Third Tiger Hou, on the river shoal. This sent shock waves through the area. At the time a band of local outlaws lived in an old fort on Shaman Mountain under the leadership of Gong Baoshan, a young man of proud martial bearing who was an indomitable and capable strategist, the latest in a long line of hunters. Victimized by the headman of Crossroads Township, he had torched his enemy's land. His impregnable mountain fort was defended by twenty-three Hanyang rifles, protected like liquid gold. Several times Tian the Sixth tried to recruit Gong for the revolution, but Gong invariably refused, fearing that his troops would be absorbed. He wished to operate independently. But eventually a unit of the Red Army passed by White Rock Stockade on its northward trek and sent an emissary up the mountain to try to recruit him. When the unit moved on, a small contingent of Zhou City troops from the Tian family went with it, while the remainder joined up with Gong Baoshan as guerrilla fighters, led by Tian the Sixth, with Tian the Seventh and Gong Baoshan as his deputies. Choosing Crossroads Township as their headquarters and fighting bravely, they staged a series of raids along the Zhou River from White Rock Stockade all the way to Zhou City, executing landlords and local tyrants along the way. They launched their raids after nightfall and returned to camp in the morning, bringing back straw bundles containing pistols and the riches taken from the wealthy, along with the bloody heads of their victims. As the revolution gained momentum, some of the boatmen along the Zhou River began singing a song that went, "Willow leaves are long, bamboo leaves are green. We fight our way into Zhou City, each soldier taking a student queen." One of the bloodiest raids on the city, with bodies strewn all over the ground, left Tian the Sixth a casualty. The command of the local security forces hung his head on the city gate to show its contempt, and after that the strength of the guerrillas began to decline. When Liberation came, Tian the Seventh became director of the White Rock Stockade military office, and Gong Baoshan the White Rock Stockade party secretary. The fates of the Tian and Gong clans were so intertwined during their armed struggle that Stream of Wandering Spirits became famous as a birthplace of cadres.

When relating this page in history, the people on the banks of the

Zhou River speak first of the auspicious location of Stream of Wandering Spirits. Naturally, this was before the fortune-teller had arrived at his theory of a “sacred place” that was the birthplace of emperors. And yet research showed that since the village abuts the steep and forbidding Shaman Mountain, it’s only natural that it be the birthplace of military heroes. The two cliffs at the mouth of the channel belong to the same range as Shaman Mountain, enveloping the village in their embrace and lending an aura of strength to the legions of military heroes. The village faces the Zhou River, which rather than flowing straight by, curves gently around it like an encircling bay; instead of offending the spirits, its silvery waters actually bring benefits. No wonder the corps of cadres settled in Crossroads Township, which had risen across the river to serve as a huge screen to protect the village and infuse it with the proper spirit. But since the people of Stream of Wandering Spirits are divided among ten surnames, all sharing in the auspiciousness of the location, why did only the Tian and Gong clans prosper? One explanation involves the placing of ancestral grave sites: When the mother of Tian the Seventh died, the clan was dirt poor, so the two brothers wrapped her body in a straw mat and carried it up the mountain for burial. Halfway there the ties snapped, so they buried her where she fell. By sheer coincidence, that spot was the region’s center of geomantic power. As for the Gong clan, a cliff suddenly gave way one day, crushing one of its ancestors, who was taking a break from his hunting. Since the Gong clan, too, was dirt poor, instead of digging him out they simply burned spirit money on the spot and went away. From that time on, many people carried their parents up Shaman Mountain, following the peaks in their search for the “dragon roost.” Each family made its own search, and each settled upon a different location, but none ever managed to produce a person of extraordinary talents: fathers followed in the footsteps of grandfathers, sons followed their fathers, one generation of peasants after another plodding behind water buffaloes, whips in hand, cursing heaven and aggrieved at the earth. Since they couldn’t take their anger out on the Tian and Gong clans, they vented it on their buffaloes with curses of “Fuck your old lady!” and “Screw your old man!”

Then in the 1950s a fellow named Golden Dog appeared.

Golden Dog, a native of Restless Hill, was poling a string of three rafts through the muddy waters of Whirlpool Shoals like a river dragon by the time he was sixteen. An ancestor, Heavenly Tiger, who had led the White Rock Stockade boatmen’s guild at the end of the Qing dynasty, had been drawn and quartered at Crossroads Township as a

result of a dispute with the court representative at the White Rock Stockade revenue office. After that, none of his descendants had been allowed to ply the Zhou River. When Golden Dog's mother was pregnant with him, she was dragged into the water by a water demon, rumor has it, as she was washing rice on a wooden bridge. The villagers scurried to her aid as soon as they heard the commotion, but she was already dead. An infant lay in her rice basket, which was floating in the water beside her corpse next to a piling. The moment the villagers fished the infant out of the water, the mother's corpse sank, and though they dragged the river for a distance of forty li, they never recovered it.

The strange circumstances of Golden Dog's birth led his father to believe the boy was possessed. He decided to place him in the monastery to become a Buddhist acolyte and to spend his life cultivating moral character and atoning for his sinful origin. But Han Wenju saw the dark mole on the infant's chest, resembling the tattoo on his own, and he insisted that the infant was the reincarnation of a mountain watchdog. Because the boy was therefore impervious to evil, there was no need to place him in the monastery. Han Wenju suggested that the child's name include the word *dog*, and when the family genealogy was consulted, it was learned that the infant belonged to the "gold" generation: he was named Golden Dog.

Golden Dog took to the water from childhood. When he went swimming with other children, he easily dived into the water from a height of ten meters. Restless Hill was sparsely populated, by families too poor to own boats, even tiny loach skiffs. So Golden Dog started hanging out at the ferry landing at Stream of Wandering Spirits, where he peeled taro for passengers on Han Wenju's boat. Once, the boatmen, annoyed with him for nagging them to take him along to Purple Thistle Pass, knocked him into the river, where he remained under so long that Han Wenju panicked: "Oh no, he drowned!" Seven or eight men dived in just as his head popped above the surface near the opposite shore. "Here I am!" he giggled. No longer did the people of Stream of Wandering Spirits underestimate him. Eventually, Han Wenju decided to take him to Purple Thistle Pass. But as the boy was sitting on the deck in front of the cabin, his father came, tied up his hands with his belt, and dragged him off. Golden Dog's father, a midget of a man, was an honest, friendly painter who was very strict with his son. He'd been hired to paint the words *Wang Xiang Ice Fishing* on the main beam of the ancestral hall belonging to the Tian clan when he heard that Golden Dog was out on the Zhou

River. Taking with him the gift of a bottle of rice wine that he had received from the head of the Tian clan, he went to see Han Wenju. With his hands clasped in front of his chest, he thanked Han for the attention he was giving the boy, before bringing an end to Golden Dog's work around the boat. Golden Dog, back home, could feel his father's eyes boring into him, so he set to work grinding black ink, mixing cinnabar, and crushing gold powder, and eventually he learned how to seal cracks with indigo, execute flowing brush strokes, draw the Buddhist swastika, even paint pictures of mountain watchdogs.

The Tian clan's ancestral hall was a stately building. As the clan grew, each generation set up house and built its own homes and compounds. Golden Dog and his father made a good livelihood out of it. Golden Dog's father could climb the scaffolds like a spider, and when he was up on a beam, he wrapped his legs around it, balancing precariously as he took out his brush, dipped it in whatever color he was using, and painted one careful stroke after another, smoothing the brush in his mouth until his lips looked like a comical rainbow and his spit was a riot of colors. Golden Dog worked below, preparing the paint. When he had a bowlful, he climbed the scaffold and handed it to his father. A member of the Tian clan, standing off to the side, once called out, "Golden Dog, do you know the 'four mucks'?"

"I know the four joys," Golden Dog replied. "Flags in the wind, fish in a school, an eighteen-year-old girl, a braying mule. But I don't know the four mucks."

"I'll tell you then. A scabby head, ulcerated hips, an old woman's cunt, and a painter's lips!"

Golden Dog shouted indignantly and flung the bowl of paint down from the scaffold, smashing it against the wall. His stunned father fell off the scaffold, and from that day on, he walked with a pronounced limp in his left leg, which made him seem shorter than ever as he hobbled down the road.

Golden Dog stopped going with his father on painting jobs. Instead, he took his woes down to the ferry landing and passed the time with the Zhou River, which flowed past, and Han Wenju, who helped him get drunk. He also liked being with Han's niece, Water Girl, who asked him if he thought the sun turned into two separate suns when it sank into the river. It was impossible to get Golden Dog to come home, no matter how his father summoned him.

On the thirtieth of the intercalary month, a moonless night, the villagers hung two red lanterns the size of bamboo baskets from the eaves of the Tian and Gong homes, the reflected light stretching far

out into the river. Golden Dog and Water Girl sat in the ferryboat, looking on enviously. “Look how big their lanterns are!” Water Girl said.

“Big?” Golden Dog replied. “I’ll make you a *really* big lantern!”

He went home and, without telling his father, took some brand-new window paper and made an enormous lantern, which he put in front of the Tian and Gong houses. It glowed brightly when he lit it, and he was in noisy high spirits as he compared the size and brilliance of his lantern with what the other youngsters had put up. When his father came out to quiet him, he yelled even more resoundingly, so his father slapped him, which he deeply resented. That night he went back to the ferryboat and asked to sleep there with Han Wenju and Water Girl. When he returned home on New Year’s Day, his father handed him kowtow money, but he neither took the money nor kowtowed to his father.

During the second year of the Cultural Revolution, the banks of the Zhou River were astir. Day and night people from the provincial capital and Zhou City came to White Rock Stockade, while those from White Rock Stockade went to Stream of Wandering Spirits and Crossroads Township, where the commune was located. Before long, murderous fighting erupted among the groups. It was like a bandit invasion. Birds and animals were slaughtered; “ox demons and snake spirits” of all classes were attacked. Golden Dog’s father stopped working, Golden Dog left school, and father and son spent their hours on edge at home. Afraid that his son might become restive, the painter bolted the door and said, “Golden Dog, everything’s topsyturvy out there, and we don’t want to stir up trouble, nor do we want to let anyone make trouble for us. People are all taking sides in the struggle, but we don’t want to take a position.”

Golden Dog cocked his head and glowered at his father. “Chairman Mao said, ‘Not taking the correct political position is the same as not having a soul.’ Who am I supposed to believe?”

“Believe me. I’m your father.”

“Does that mean I shouldn’t believe Chairman Mao?”

Pale with anxiety, his father went to the door, opened it, looked around, and then strode back, pinning Golden Dog up against the kang, where he gave him such a severe whipping that he didn’t dare say another word. That summer the area experienced a severe drought. There was no harvest in the hills, and the rice paddies beside the river were overrun by insects. When autumn came, Golden Dog and his father went into the mountains to pick wild vegetables and dig

duck garlic, which they ate after scraping away the poisonous parts. Those were frightful times.

Then the rains came and the Zhou River flooded. People living on the banks waded into the muddy water to grab floating firewood and cucumbers and turnips that had washed down from the mountains. Golden Dog urged his father to join in the scavenging, but because when they reached the riverbank they saw that there weren't any more good spots, Golden Dog said, "Let's go over to Awl Crag, Dad." Awl Crag was downstream about three li from Stream of Wandering Spirits. The crag stuck out over a backwater in the river. It was at least twenty feet deep when the river was low, very deep and very dark. Now it was six feet above the waterline and topped by a foot of foam. Sure enough, there was plenty of firewood and straw, with branches floating on top of the water. The painter tried to stop Golden Dog from getting into the water, but he had already stripped and was rubbing mud over his groin. Then he pissed, drinking some from his scooped hands and rubbing some over his navel. Before his father could stop him, he slipped into the water and dragged over a pile of dried kindling, then went back for a branch just as a platoon of soldiers came into view. They were fighting men on their way back from Crossroads Township, armed with iron clubs and hammers, all mean and scary-looking. The painter, who spotted them from beneath the crag, trembled, but he was able to call Golden Dog back, and they huddled, perfectly still, between two rocks in the crag. The troops were above them, their ghostly reflections dancing on the water below as they argued about its depth. "Even if we take this son of a bitch back to White Rock Stockade, he won't come clean. I say we send him to meet his maker with a granite skull!"

"Why waste a bullet?" another said.

An argument erupted, followed, it seemed down below, by a scuffle. In the confusion, they heard some pitiful moans above them.

Finally someone appealed to the platoon leader. "We fought all last night on the western front, and lost three comrades-in-arms. For every one of us they kill, we should kill two of theirs. I say we take care of this son of a bitch now."

"Do what you want," the other man replied. "But not here. We don't want anyone from the Tian clan at Stream of Wandering Spirits to see."

"They can't see," someone said excitedly. "Let's throw him in the cooker."

The reflections in the water stirred, and something came flying

over the crag. Golden Dog saw whatever it was hit the water and send up a column of water. As it floated on the surface, he could see a bulging burlap bag closed at the top. Instead of sinking right away, it swirled for a moment, then slowly settled into the water. The men on the crag looked down at the foamy water. “Spit in the water, everybody,” someone said. “We don’t want his spirit to come after us!”

Ptui, ptui, ptui, the sound of spitting, was followed by laughter as the men walked off. As soon as the reflections faded away, Golden Dog jumped up and looked at his father, who was wide-eyed, apparently dumbstruck. “Dad,” he said, “I’m going to see what’s in that bag.” He dived into the water and swam straight to the bottom, where he touched the bag. Whatever was inside was kicking and felt soft and fleshy. Was it an animal or a person? He lifted it up, finding it very light, and swam with it toward the surface. At first the water was dark, but it gradually lightened, although it was still murky. Something was keeping him from breaking the surface. A ghost for sure, he was thinking. You goddamned ghost, he cursed inwardly, I’m dragging your corpse out of the water. *What are you trying to do, come back to life through my death?* His head bumped into something hard, and his arm felt as though it had been bitten. When he realized he’d risen against some wood floating on the surface, which he couldn’t break through, he tied the mouth of the bag to his leg, stretched out horizontally, and began swimming away as fast as he could. He finally surfaced in the clear water at the foot of the crag and dragged the bag out of the water, which was ten times heavier than it had been. Finally he made it to one of the rocks.

“Why did you bring it up?” his father asked fretfully.

“I want to see what’s inside.”

“What do you *think*’s inside? When they fought at Seven Star Gorge, they dropped six into the cooker, all of them weighted down! Let’s not get involved. He’s dead. Toss him back into the water, and let’s get out of here.”

But Golden Dog opened the bag, grabbed hold of a corner, and dumped the contents onto the ground. It was a man, Tian Zhongzheng, Tian the Sixth’s nephew, who served as assistant director of the Crossroads Township commune. Some time back the painter had had a dispute with the Tian clan over a private plot of land, and Tian Zhongzheng’s ruling had been in favor of his own kin. The decision, which was not subject to appeal, incensed the painter, but he could only vilify the man behind his back. *Ptui! The assistant director of the commune doesn’t even have the integrity to deal fairly with the people. He isn’t*

qualified to be an official! Naturally, whether he was in the good graces of a painter or not had no effect on his career, but from that time on the painter kept a respectful distance from him. Now Tian had been thrown into the cooker—a tough way to go. But he was dead, and that was that. It was time to clear out. As Golden Dog’s father walked away, he addressed the official who had offended him: “Everybody has enemies, and everybody pays his debts. Go look for the men who did this to you! We dragged up your corpse, which is all the sympathy you deserve. You don’t expect us to take you home, do you?”

“Dad,” Golden Dog yelled, “he’s still alive!”

This stunned the painter. He stumbled backward, then put his hand under Tian’s nose to see if he was breathing. Yes, he detected some warm air. Father and son untied the rope and set to work rubbing the man’s chest. Tian Zhongzheng gradually returned from the dead, his breathing grew stronger, and he coughed up a mouthful of water. Golden Dog quickly picked him up by his feet and bounced him up and down. More water. Tian’s tiny eyes snapped open.

Tian Zhongzheng hid out beneath Awl Crag for the rest of the day. He was carried home secretly by his family in the middle of the night. Three days later another pitched battle at White Rock Stockade caused heavy losses on both sides, but everyone continued talking about the death of Tian Zhongzheng. His family fed the villagers’ ideas by going to Awl Crag to offer wine sacrifices and throw spirit money into the Zhou River; then they put some of his clothes into a white varnish-wood coffin and buried it. On the day of the funeral, the villagers looked on as the grieving womenfolk walked by, wailing bitterly, in full-length mourning clothes, their heads and faces covered by hempen hoods. When they moved to the side of the road and parted their hoods slightly, they saw Golden Dog standing off in the distance, his eyes staring blankly, his jaw hanging slack. After a momentary pause in the wailing, they really let loose, and under their breath they whispered to the pallbearers to hurry the coffin to the graveyard.

That night, Golden Dog and his father were awakened in bed by a gentle knock at the door. Tian Zhongzheng’s wife told them to light the lamp, while she covered the window with a sheet. Then she took three hundred yuan out of her bodice and placed it on the straw mat of the kang. “Worthy painter,” she said, “worthy nephew Golden Dog, my husband owes his life to you. Everyone thinks he’s dead, and now it’s up to you and us to make sure things turn out all right.”

Golden Dog's face darkened. "You must hold us in low esteem. If we saved his life, why would we do anything to harm him now?" The look on his face showed he felt he'd been insulted.

The embarrassed woman quickly explained herself, smoothing things over. The painter picked up the money, handed it back to her, and asked her to take a message to Tian Zhongzheng: Golden Dog and his father belong to neither faction; they use their mouths only for eating, not to spread idle talk. As for saving his life, what's done is done. We're not keeping it in our ledger that we saved his life, and he shouldn't keep it in his.

A year passed, and the fighting abated. As soon as everyone's weapons had been confiscated, Tian Zhongzheng came out of his basement, where he had been hiding all that time. His hair had turned white, and the skin on his face was as delicate and fair as a woman's. The people of Crossroads Township were beside themselves. How had he escaped death? they asked. He just smiled and said nothing. Golden Dog and his father kept quiet too. When, finally, peace returned to the area, Tian resumed office. Golden Dog, who had graduated from school and returned home, was the same old Golden Dog. He went into the mountains to collect firewood and down to the river to catch fish and turtles. But his father could no longer keep him from going out on the boats. When Golden Dog saw Tian Zhongzheng, if he had anything to say, he said it; if not, he just passed him by. He neither looked down on him nor put him on a pedestal, preferring to take the self-respecting, independent course.

One day, as Golden Dog and Han Wenju were roasting fish on the boat, the neatly dressed Tian walked up to the riverbank on his way to the commune. "How's your father?" he asked Golden Dog after boarding the ferry.

"He's fine."

Tian opened a foil-wrapped pack of cigarettes and handed one each to Golden Dog and Han Wenju. Golden Dog tucked his behind Han's ear. Han then passed out strips of the roasted fish and asked Tian, "How did the commune director's hair get so black?"

"I dyed it," Tian said.

"I doubt that," Han replied. "That's just how the world is: with all its twists and turns, no matter how topsy-turvy it gets, the chosen people continue to live on delicacies while little bastards like us still eat buckwheat noodles. After what you've been through, you're bound to have a bright future."

Tian Zhongzheng was won over by neither the strips of fish nor the flattery. He kept his eyes on Golden Dog. “How old are you, Golden Dog?” he asked.

“Sixteen.”

“A boy of sixteen should know what getting married’s all about. Who has your father got picked out for you?”

Golden Dog just shook his head. A pole had been erected on a boulder on the riverbank, and the boat slipped noisily out into the middle of the river on the cable fastened to it. Since it was dusk, the sun was setting into the river’s lower reaches. As sky and water drew together, two red balls began to merge into a dazzling whole.

“Aiyai!” Golden Dog exclaimed, “there really are two suns in the world!”

Three years later, in the winter, the call came for Golden Dog to join the army. He couldn’t wait to join the fighting, his fear of dying having been supplanted by the dream of heroics. But he wound up in a place called Heavenly Waters, in Gansu province, where he cooled his heels for five years, starting out as a squad leader before being transferred to headquarters as a communications clerk. Since there were no battles to fight, he decided to seek admission to a military academy, hoping that someday he’d be a magnificent military officer. He was studying for the examination when the demobilization order came and he was discharged. In five years he’d seen a part of the outside world, but now he was back on the Zhou River where it all began.

But the Zhou River had changed.

The Zhou Prefecture almanac records that the source of the Zhou River is in Yang Family Channel, on the southern slope of the Qin Range, where there’s a spring the size of a finger beneath a desiccated tree. Flowing into a riverbed that stretches far, the well has not dried up. Its output travels downward and picks up water along the way, through Shaanxi, Henan, and Hubei. At Hubei’s Jun County it merges with the Han River to become a proud and mighty river. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, this long body of water was plied by commercial traffic from Xiangfan all the way to Zhou City, but the vicissitudes of the times produced changes and the river began to shrink as stone-paved highways on its banks widened. River traffic gradually disappeared.

When Golden Dog had left the area five years earlier, only shuttle boats, gander skiffs, ducktail skiffs, and loach skiffs plied the river; the banks of the upper reaches were well forested and accommodated several reservoirs. But as the quantity of water decreased, the duck-

tail skiffs from Purple Thistle Pass sailing up to White Rock Stockade began to go no farther. The only boat at Stream of Wandering Spirits was now the ferry manned by Han Wenju that crossed from one shore to the other. All the other boats were beached on the river's shoals, buffeted by the wind and baked by the sun as they rotted and lost their nails to children who sold them to the scrap-metal dealer.

People abandoned their lives on the Zhou River when they were given plots of land to work. Blessed with several years of good weather and plenty of rain, they produced harvests that brought a measure of stability to their lives. No one had lived here so peacefully, so contentedly for hundreds of years.

Golden Dog's father got even shorter as he aged. The Restless Hill Monastery, whose main worship hall had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, was rebuilt, and new icons were put in place. So the old painter climbed up onto the main beam and painted colorful designs. The quality of his painting was inferior, but an aura of solemnity surrounded his work. Every time he was overcome by the difficulty of his job, he gazed down at the Buddha, so serene, so dignified and majestic, and mumbled a prayer: Merciful Buddha, I'm painting this for you, so please look after Golden Dog, help him get married and start a career!

But Golden Dog remained a bachelor.

Everyone was concerned about Golden Dog's failure to wed—everyone but Golden Dog himself. His only anxiety was a lack of spending money. Once people solve the problem of necessities, they begin thinking about self-indulgences. All the young people learned to smoke, drink, buy pocketbooks, and hang out. Golden Dog's activities were no longer restricted to Restless Hill; in Stream of Wandering Spirits and Crossroads Township, he had plenty of friends with whom he went out nearly every night to drink and have a good time. They talked about good times and making lots of money, even discussed national affairs and things like the United Nations. Every few days they'd go to White Rock Stockade or Zhou City, totally neglecting their responsibilities. Once this became fashionable throughout the area, it affected all the villages on the banks of the Zhou River. Han Wenju, who lived at the ferry crossing, tapped Golden Dog on the head with his pipe and said, "Golden Dog, you rascal, you've turned all the young men around here into a pack of wild animals!"

"Uncle Han," Golden Dog defended himself, "you're getting old, and you don't have many years left. Do you want us to suffer through decades of poverty like you did?"

“How can you talk like that? Do you call this suffering? Back when we were sailing to Purple Thistle Pass . . .”

“I know,” Golden Dog interrupted. “You spent all your money on that girl in the house at Purple Thistle Pass. So what good did it do you? Now you don’t have a wife to warm your feet!”

Han Wenju wasn’t upset by the comment. He looked over the side of the boat into the rapidly flowing water that was forming a line of eddies. He was thinking about the past and about the big-breasted girl. He laughed.

He looked up and spotted a girl walking gracefully toward them. The sun was shining on her face, and for Golden Dog the real sun ceased to exist, replaced by the sun that was her face, a sun with a nose and a pair of eyes that drew people toward it. “Water Girl,” Han shouted, “come over and help your uncle chew out Golden Dog. The no-good cur is baring his fangs again.”

Water Girl boarded the boat and opened the lunch basket she’d brought. In it were some noodles with cabbage and bean curd. “Uncle Golden Dog,” she said, “how can somebody who’s been a soldier abuse an old man?”

Golden Dog sniggered. He watched as she pulled the ferryboat for her uncle, two white, dainty hands on the cable, one over the other, making her bracelets tinkle. “Water Girl,” he said, “all the girls in White Rock Stockade wear wristwatches, but you’re still wearing bracelets.”

“If Uncle Golden Dog thinks I’m backward, he can buy me a wristwatch.” She laughed lightly.

Golden Dog teased her for calling him Uncle Golden Dog. Nearly every sentence had an *Uncle Golden Dog* in it, and it always made him laugh. Since her father had been born in an unlucky month, a fortune-teller had been brought in, who had told his mother that he’d enjoy peace only if he had godparents. Since it was customary to choose godparents on the day after the baby was born, early the next morning she carried him outside, vowing to ask the first people she met to be his godparents. Golden Dog’s father, who was four years old at the time, happened to be walking his dog that morning. He met up with them, and from that day on, he was the godfather of Water Girl’s father. But her parents died young, and owing to the difference in generations, she was expected to call Golden Dog *Uncle*. Like a dog atop a dung heap, he enjoyed his superior role.

When the boat reached the opposite shore, Golden Dog jumped

down. Water Girl looked at him with her fetching eyes and asked, “Where are you off to, Uncle Golden Dog?”

Seeing his reflection in her eyes, he said, “I’m off to White Rock Stockade. Can I get you something there?”

She took the bracelets off her wrist. “You can look up my granddad on South Street and have him take these to be polished. Tell him I’ll be by later to clean and mend his winter clothes.”

“Anything else?” Golden Dog asked her.

“No.”

She blinked, and his tiny reflections disappeared. The pair of silver bracelets fell heavily from her hands. With a smile she straightened up and went back to her seat. Golden Dog gazed at the arches of her feet, like the nimble paws of a tiny animal. He didn’t much like the curved openings of her white slippers.

Han Wenju pulled the ferryboat back to the shore it had left.

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